

CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: A PANACEA TO FARMERS AND HERDSMEN CONFLICTS

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Abstract

Conflicts between farmers and herdsmen have been a source of concern to all and sundry in recent times. There have been reports of violence and killings of different dimensions in the print and electronic media between farmers and herdsmen, especially in the north-east and north-central geo-political zones of Nigeria. The crises have resulted in the loss of human and material resources worth millions of naira, while people live in constant fear of attack and retaliation against their community. Secondary data was examined to analyze the causes and effects of the conflicts and the role of religion as a panacea in preaching love, peace, mutual understanding, and coexistence between the farmers and the herdsmen. It also opines that they should see one another as Nigerian citizens created by God but differing in terms of language and ethnic background. The paper therefore concluded that tenets of religion such as unity, forbearance, humility, and forgiveness should be preached among farmers and herdsmen. It is also recommended that the government rise to its responsibilities by providing adequate security and protection to its citizens, while community leaders and religious leaders should also see that peace reigns supreme in their domain.

Keywords: Conflicts, Farmers and Herdsmen, Religious Education, Panacea

Introduction

Violent clashes between farmers and herdsmen in recent times have been a source of concern for the country's security and stability. There have been reported cases of conflict and confrontation between farmers and herdsmen between the years 2000 and 2020. The media (print and electronic) is oversupplied with reported cases of clashes between the herdsmen from the north and the inhabitants of the Plateau, Kogi, and Benue states in the middle belt of the country and some parts of the eastern region (Abugu and Onubia, 2005). Though farmers and herdsmen have been known to live in peace and have a harmonious relationship, the opposite has been the case in the past decades, where there have been increasing incidents of violent clashes between them.

In fact, violent incidents have occurred in at least 22 of the country's 36 states. For example, in Adamawa State's Densina Local Government, 28 people are believed to have been killed, and approximately 2,500 farmers have been displaced and rendered homeless as a result of hostility between farmers and herdsmen in the host community. Nweze (2005) also stated that many farmers and herders have lost their lives and herds, while others have experienced dwindling productivity in their herds. This was supported by Ajuwo (2004) and Nweze (2005)

observations that, in Imo State between 1996 and 2005, 19 people died and 42 were injured in farmers' and herders' conflicts. In the Yakurr area of Cross River State, Nigeria, a series of squabbles between Fulani herdsmen and youths of the area have been reported to the police in the area. In the same way, a newspaper study of conflicts and crises in Nigeria between 1991 and 2005 by Fasona and Omojola (2005) found that farmer-herdsmen conflicts accounted for 35% of the major clashes reported by selected Nigerian newspapers. Another study of 27 communities in central Nigeria by Nyang and Fiki (2005) showed that over 41% of the households surveyed had experienced agricultural and related conflicts, with respondents recalling conflicts that were as far back as 1965 and as recent as 2005.

Olabode and Ajibola (2016) also reported that in 2016, over 200 people were killed and tens of thousands displaced in Benue and Kaduna States alone. On February 29, 2016, herdsmen armed with guns allegedly attacked several Agatu villages, killing about 500 villagers and displacing thousands (Micheal, 2017). In 2018, the number of reported cases of violent clashes between farmers and herdsmen increased in the north central states, particularly in Benue and Taraba, to the point where peaceful coexistence between farmers and herdsmen became a major concern for the state and federal governments. According to Ofuku and Isife (2009), twenty people were killed and approximately 300 cows were stolen during an outbreak of violence between farmers and herdsmen on the Mambilla Plateau in Taraba State's Sardauna area.

In the past, conflicts were solely due to the overlap of farmlands with cattle, where farmers grow crops along the routes. But in recent years, these conflicts have exacerbated, taking on an ethnic and religious dimension with little effort from the government or community leaders aimed at addressing them. (Source) John (2014) studied the predicament of the farmers and herdsmen, the true stories behind their conflicts, and how these can be resolved. His results showed the existence of one-sided reporting by the media, thereby aggravating the problems; research articles and interested parties were also biased in their assessments. Other studies showed farmer encroachment on cattle routes as the real cause and blamed the farmers for intolerance (Niformi, Mary-Juliet, Enuali, & Nji, 2014).

Causes of conflicts between farmers and herdsmen

Many issues have been raised as possible causes of conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in the nation. The rate at which drought and desertification are encroaching on the land in the northern states, especially Gombe, Bauchi, Bornu, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Yobe, and Zamfara, is on the increase. The herdsmen are now being forced, due to environmental changes, to migrate to the south in search of grazing land. Though the herdsmen have been migrating to the south or central states and back to the north without much problem until recently, they have chosen to graze their herds permanently in the south and central states. As a result of this, there have been conflicts and disputes over land and water use because the activities of the herdsmen are now affecting the farming activities in central Nigeria. Other researchers (Torah, 2006; Odoh & Chigozie, 2012; Abbas, 2012; Okoli, Eyinnia, Okoli, 2014) relate the causes of conflicts to global climate change and the contending desertification and aridity that have reduced arable and grazing land in the north, forcing herdsmen to move southwards in search of pasture for their livestock.

Crisis Group Africa (2017) reported that most of the 415 grazing reserves established by the northern regional government in the 1960s have since been lost. Only 114 were formally documented or demarcated, though, and the government failed to back these agreements with

legislation guaranteeing exclusive usage or take active measures to prevent encroachment. The effect has significantly led to the reduction of the grazing reserves, thereby forcing the herders to search for pastures elsewhere. Lokpobir (2018) pointed out that nomadic cattle rearing practices had become obsolete, and this was why ranches were a necessity to provide adequate food to the cattle and forestall unnecessary clashes. He further said that with ranches, the livestock would be healthier and more productive, while the herdsman would avoid unnecessary attacks and would also be able to give their children the opportunity to be educated.

Changing practices among both farmers and herders have also brought about strained relations. Farmers ventured to uncultivated land because of improved farm implements, improved seedlings which resulted in bumper harvest at the end of the planting season, cattle's of the herders on the other hand move or strayed into farms which have been cultivated. In this situation, there is competition and confrontation over access to land for farming and grazing, which eventually leads to conflicts (Crisis Group 2017). This was also corroborated by Iro (2010), who found that herdsman are also competing with large-scale agricultural schemes that narrow the grazing lands. The use of tractors, herbicides, and fertilizers has revolutionized agriculture in the country, leading to more and more grazing land being farmed extensively. As farmlands increase to the detriment of grazing lands, animals can easily veer into farmlands and destroy crops.

Escalating violent conflicts, poverty, inequality, and religious extremism, as well as economic losses and insecurity occurring in the northern part of Nigeria, have compelled many herders to move southward (Crisis Report, 2014; Muhammad and Ibrahim, 2015). According to Ofem (2014), in earlier decades, farmers and herders agreed on stock routes, sometimes under local government auspices, when disputes occurred over wandering stock or damage to crops. Such conflicts or disputes were resolved by village heads and herders' leaders. However, this system has crumpled, leading to the absence of effective dialogue and mediation mechanisms between farmers and herdsman, leading to violent conflicts. In most cases, both farmers and herders have lost confidence in the ability of authorities to mediate and conciliate. In order to seek redress or revenge, aggrieved parties turned to violence.

The Effects of Farmers and Herdsman Conflicts

The effects of farmer and herder conflicts on the nation cannot be overemphasized. The conflicts have resulted in untold hardship for the victims. Thousands of people have died and tens of thousands have been displaced as a result of farmer-herder clashes. Some estimates suggest about 2500 people were killed countrywide in 2016—a toll higher than that caused by the Boko Haram insurgency over the same period (Premium Times, 2017). In Benue, one of the hardest-hit states, Governor Samuel Orton reported that more than 1878 people were killed between 2014 and 2016. Tens of thousands have been displaced in Kaduna, Benue, and Plateau states, making the victims seek shelter in other poor rural communities and straining the already scarce resources in such areas. For women and girls, the impact is frequently magnified because the economic and social disempowerment renders them more vulnerable to sexual and economic predation. At times, the relatives of men killed in the violence often evict widows from their farmland, compounding their problems. Haro and Dayo (2005).

There has been a reduction in income and output of crops for farmers as a result of indiscriminate bush burning and destruction of crops by cattle, which led to either partial or total losses of crops for the farmer. The effect on crop yield therefore has a negative impact on the

affected farmers' income, with a broader impact on overall agricultural income. This tends to negatively affect the farmers' savings and credit repayment ability, as well as food scarcity and the economic welfare of urban dwellers that depend on these farmers for food supply, so farming and rural agricultural development are discouraged.

Above all, apart from the killings by the herdsmen and reprisal attacks on the host communities, some female farmers were raped, while others were maimed or injured. Cases of small arms and ammunition proliferation have been reported during the course of these reports, as farming communities and herdsmen saw each other as archenemies. This is contrary to the spirit of Nigerian tribes' and ethnic groups' integration and peaceful coexistence. When both the farmers and the herdsmen come into conflict and confrontation, the resultant effect is that both sides suffer; the only difference is the magnitude of the casualties. For instance, while the herdsmen carry their cattle to graze on the farmland, the farmers are heavily affected as the herdsmen's cattle destroy crops, farmland, and other agricultural products. When the farmers also attack the herdsmen, the cattle also suffer a devastating effect. In the long run, the crisis wastes a lot of human and material resources.

Christian Religious Education as a Panacea

Religion plays a positive role in preaching peace and living it out in an environment that is prone to violence. Therefore, the teaching of religious education is expected to inculcate in the people the spirit of tolerance and mutual respect for one another so that they will be able to put into practice what they have learned in their religious groups or affiliations in the face of any misunderstanding in the community. Values, such as forgiveness and reconciliation, in religious texts and teachings can inspire communities to change attitudes and actions at a basic level and transform world views at a deeper level to understand "others" in a conflict positively.

With the teaching of religious education, society is able to appreciate the diversity and interdependence of members of the different communities. The need for cooperation, justice, fair play, tolerance, honesty, and patience is what religion stands for; therefore, religious education is in a position to educate the community on the need to embrace peace and tolerance at all times. The decision of Abraham in Genesis 13:7–11 to settle the conflict between his herdsmen and Lot is a good example of how to resolve conflicts, which is a matter of give and take.

Religious education aims to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence, which are required to reduce intergroup conflict. The continued conflicts between farmers and herdsmen may turn into a religious and political crisis, which may be difficult to curtail. There is a need for religious leaders to teach the people how to embrace unity and religious tolerance for peaceful coexistence.

In the era of increasing conflicts between farmers and herdsmen, there is a need to teach young people to respect and appreciate the identities of others. The future of this country hinges on embracing each other regardless of our ethnic and religious inclinations. Since we are bound together by a geographic and political structure called Nigeria, it is better to appreciate one another despite our diversities. The teaching of religion enables people to think beyond their individual interests and religious and ethnic affiliations, thereby making them more tolerant and respectful of other people's values, views, and opinions. All human beings are created by God, and there is no ethnicity or religious bigotry with God, but we are all equal and going to be treated as such on the last day. Smock opined that when the community is engaged and exposed to scriptural references in the Bible relating to mandates for peace, the society will anonymously

condemn killing in the name of religion, ethnic, or tribal sentiments, as the Bible says, "Blessed are peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God." Mathew 5:9.

Religious leaders' intervention prevented their youths from joining the violent disturbance that erupted between Fokkos and Dambuash following the killing of a local paramount chief in Fokkus Bokkos Local Government Area of Adamawa State. Religious leaders focused on the content of religious texts, moral and spiritual discourse, such as "all men come from Adam and Eve," and reminded them that vengeance belongs to God, and used Jesus' life as an example of peace and forgiveness. According to Pali and Wadak (2001), religion regulates the individual's life in society, making it a better place to live. Christianity preaches about the sanctity of life, the integrity of every human being, and the nonviolent at all times, and it encourages people to treat others the way they want to be treated. The message of Jesus is characterized by a renunciation of violence, love for one's enemy, and blessing for those who champion peace without the use of violence.

Religious leaders are seen as extremely close to the communities in which they work; they are involved in their everyday lives and form personal relationships with them in which they are highly respected and enjoy a high status in the communities. Cornille (2013) reported that religious leaders are more respected than other leaders, and people trust them to the extent that they believe that when they don't do what they say, they are going against God. This makes it easy for religious leaders to resolve violent conflicts based on their wealth of knowledge, to the extent that members of society would shift some of their attitudes and behaviours following their religious leaders' advice. Furthermore, when violence erupts, religious leaders can gather their congregation and advise them not to fight but to pray for peace and to open the eyes of those who cause trouble.

The role of religious leaders in interfaith dialogue is another significant contribution of religion to peace. Blench, Selbut, Hassan, & Walsh (2006) agreed that when people witness cooperation between their religious leaders and those from the opposing community, it thereby makes them embrace peace and love. That is to say that participation in interfaith activities between religious leaders serves as a means of securing support and facilitating the completion of agreements and partnerships between farmers and herders, regardless of the indigenous-settler divide or farmers-herders' dichotomy.

Conclusion

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and religious nation; the diversity in language, culture, and religion should be a source of the country's unity rather than dividing it. Religion should be used as a uniting factor, bringing people of diverse language, ethnic, and religious backgrounds together. Religious scriptures and practices also provide guidance during difficult times and situations, and therefore religious leaders play an important role in peace-building by giving advice and counseling on how to be forgiving and patient and applying teachings from religious teachings. Their role in interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution cannot be overemphasized. Regular building initiatives should be organized to involve farmers and herdsmen in discussing issues they are facing, and religious leaders can be invited to preach peace and acceptance because religion can resolve disputes not only physically but also through oral sermons. Through this, there can be some behavioural changes, and at the end the warring parties will embrace peace.

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