

CONFLICT SENSITIVE REPORTING OF TRANSHUMANCE IN THE MEDIA IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

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ABSTRACT

The quest for peace is a world-wide contemporary engagement as no community in the world is conflict-free. Each world community looks for ways of achieving peace in its territory with the ultimate goal of achieving world peace. The United Nations has instituted codes, protocols, conventions and sundry statutes geared towards sustaining peaceful coexistence among the people of the world in spite of ethnic, racial and religious differences. Yet, the quantum of conflicts pervading the globe in contemporary times, speak volume to the contrary. The Herdsmen/Farmers conflict in Nigeria has proven to be one conflict seemingly impervious to resolution because of its complicated nature and dynamics. Due to the nomadic nature of their trade, herdsmen are ubiquitous. They migrate to all areas where they find enough green for their cattle to graze. This unfortunately, does not discriminate on farmers' plants and produce. The resultant conflict often has in its trail, deaths of both men and livestock, destruction of farmlands, disruption of economic activities and utter social disobedience. A cursory look at the real causes and aggravation of these conflicts reveal a pointer to unbridled media reportage on the activities of the herdsmen which has inadvertently pitched emotions against certain ethnic groups in Nigeria particularly the Fulani. However, research reveals that there are about fourteen groups of herdsmen in Nigeria. This paper therefore looks at the media and its traditional role as opinion-moulder of the society, its role in exacerbating the relationship between herdsmen and farmers conflict in Nigeria and proffers some peacebuilding solutions to the seemingly intractable problem.

Keywords: Transhumance, Herdsmen, Farmers, Peacebuilding, Conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Transhumance can be defined as “a system of animal production characterized by seasonal and cyclical migration of varying degrees between complementary ecological areas and supervised by a few people, with most of the group remaining sedentary (Abass, 2012)”. It is a pastoral method of animal husbandry involving the seasonal transfer of herds and flocks along well-defined routes.

The movement of transhumant herds is usually from areas that are difficult, unbalanced and changeable, such as the Sahel and agro-ecologically vulnerable zones. Transhumance is a way of adapting to these harsh ecological conditions and making use of the ecological complementarities in other regions. For this course, grazing routes have been marked out through Nasarawa, Benue, Plateau, Kastina, Bauchi, Abuja, Sokoto, and Adamawa States respectively. Abass (2012) stated that only 270 of these official grazing lands are functional

and this leaves the transhumant herdsmen to fashion grazing lands and fresh water for their herds.

In Nigeria, the antecedence of transhumance practice across varied regions has left the nation with a cause for worry. There has been incessant conflict and clashes between transhumance herdsmen and local farmers which has resulted in the loss of lives, properties, and loss of crops which could have been useful for local consumptions. Fasona and Omojola (2005) reported that conflicts resulting from cattle grazing actually accounted for 35% of all reported crises in Nigeria between 1991 and 2005. Between 2006 and 2014, Olayoku (2014) revealed that there had been 615 violent deaths related to cattle grazing in 111 cases, out of a total of 61,314 violent fatalities which were reported by the press across the 36 states of Nigeria from June 2006 to May 2014. The statistics shows an average of 5 deaths per clash. Conflicts usually arise as a result of damage to farms and harvests, grazing in protected areas and loss of animals.

In 2016, there were series of instances that had claimed innocent lives and destroyed arable crops. Notable among these clashes were the multiple attacks on Coromo and Gassol local government areas of Taraba State in May, 2016 which left about 12 persons dead, about 18 injured and 13 houses were burnt. Also, in Ekiti State, a South western State in Nigeria, herdsmen attack was recorded at Oke-Ako in Ikole Local Government Area of the state which left two men dead and others injured. Still in Ekiti State, in March 2016, the student community of Ado-Ekiti Polytechnic reported the invasion of the herdsmen on the institution farm land, destroying pilot plantations, and research demonstration farms (Arogundade 2014).

Of great importance is the role played by the media in reporting these cases. A major responsibility of the media in the civil society is to transmit and disseminate information to the public. Also, it is the duty of the media to keep the public abreast of the various incidents and happenings going on around them. It is to this end, that it can be said that the media is responsible for creating awareness and enlightening the individual in the civil society. Thus, the media is the heartbeat of any nation as information disseminated has a functional or dysfunctional impact the masses.

In Nigeria, the media have been accused of worsening crises through biased, unfair and irresponsible coverage and reporting (Awogbade, 1987). The media aggravate conflicts and worsen crises situations in the society through their subjective approach, sensationalism and bias in the presentation of news and views. Ngige, Badekale and Hamman (2016) claimed that the media contributes to the worsening state of insecurity and violence in the country due to their pattern of reportage which is primarily targeted at maximizing profit by manipulating the audience. Best and Obateru (2012) disclosed that “news media are hardly impartial or totally responsible in their coverage of conflicts or crises such that they have been accused of fueling, rather than dousing crises situations.” It was further stated that the potential of the media is better explored in the conflicts they generate than in their real impact on people and events Biernatzki (2002).

Conversely, Azeez (2009) opined that conflict reporting puts the media whose responsibility is to inform the public objectively, fairly and accurately in a state of dilemma. As a result the

media is faced with a herculean task of reporting conflict without any form of bias. The way of conflict reportage by the media especially on transhumance conflict had raised questions on whether the media are not actually magnifying the threat and create public fear, or whether the media are actually doing the bidding of the transhumant terrorists who seek to gain publicity and whether or not the media are really objective and accurate in the way they report transhumance conflict and label the perpetrators (Biernatzki, 2002).

Transhumance Conflict in Nigeria

The nature of human communication allows for disagreements due to conflicting interests and opinions. The nature of human beings naturally allures, each individual will try as much as possible to ensure that his/her peace is not trampled upon. Hence, in the course of securing peace, individuals go the extra mile of adopting varied mechanisms, at times violent, and this degenerate into an uncontrollable conflict. Often time, many disagreements that transform into violent conflicts are issues that could be managed, but the inability of man to manage and resolve conflict within themselves leads to violence, thus, loss of lives, properties and national assets. One of such ill-managed situations is the transhumance conflict between the pastoral farmers and the agrarian farmers.

Relationship between transhumance pastoralist and agrarian farmers in Nigeria had been in existence and it has been more of a cordial or for economic benefit. Awogbade (1987) concluded that there exist a mutual and symbiotic relationship between transhumant herdsmen and agrarian farmers who have also taken to cattle breeding. Blench (2010) views the relationship between herdsmen and farmers as an economic exchange in which dairy products is exchanged for grains, access to local markets, and the provision of manure on arable land while the cattle consume crop residues.

However, an awkward reversal in the relationship between the herdsmen and farmers had led to series of violent conflict. Olayoku (2014), and Abugu and Onuba (2015) highlighted that factors such as climate changes, the migration further south, the growth of agro-pastoralism, the expansion of farming on pastures, the invasion of farmlands by cattle, assault on non-Fulani women by herders, blockage of stock routes and water points, freshwater scarcity, burning of rangelands, cattle theft, inadequate animal health care and disease control, overgrazing on fallow lands, defecation on streams and roads by cattle, ineffective coping strategies, ethnic stereotyping, and the breakdown of conflict intervention mechanisms are causative agents inducing conflicts. Blench (2010) had earlier pointed out the influence of social factors such as religion and culture as other factors that could instigate transhumance violence especially in the southern part of Nigeria. Though, the series of violent conflicts that had occurred in the country had not gone unnoticed by the policy makers, scholars, foreign observers and media practitioners. Of particular attention is the manner of media reportage in disseminating information on transhumance violence. A vital question is "what role do the media play in the reporting of transhumance conflict in Nigeria?"

Transhumance Conflict Reportage in Nigerian Media

Traditionally, the media is faced with the huge responsibility of enlightening the society at every circumstance and situation. This responsibility is enormous and has far reaching implications on governance and general social activities. Globally, the media is at the fore-

front of the fight against terrorism and enhancing peaceful existence of all human race. Being a global actor for peace and development, the media has the potential and can contribute effectively to conflict resolution and reconciliation.

However, Popoola (2012) claims that the media business thrives on the instances of conflict and insurgence as it affords media practitioners a ready-made material to exploit. In the process of conflict reportage, media houses increase their profit margins as they capture audience viewership. Hoffman (2006) claimed that the degree of relevance and attention in reporting conflict issues by the media determines the popularity and consequently its sphere of influence. Adamu, Hamid and Baba (2014) asserted that in reporting conflict, adequate coverage is no doubt demanded. Thus, the media owe the public an expedient responsibility not just to report such developments, but to adequately give such account. The core responsibility of the media which is the surveillance function empowers the media to bring to public consciousness impending dangers. This function places a demand on the media to cover, analyze and report significant developments within and outside a given society.

Galtung (2002) argued that most media outlets inherently or intentionally emphasizes and encourages violent conflict by its treatment of the issues. He stated further that media are often guilty of relying on elites' perspectives and their one-sided explanations for conflicts and responses to conflict, a reliance on stereotypes, and an absence of reference to root causes and to alternative solutions to the conflict. Shinar (2004) asserted that the media should place peacebuilding as an essential value and defined it as the lens through which to see and to report events and to frame information. In essence, it craves for media involvement in peace development.

The role of the media in conflict management and resolution has been described as enormous and dynamic. Though, the traditional role of the media limits its function to information dissemination and more recently, civil engagements. Beyond these functions, the responsibility of the media in development process, peacebuilding and crisis management must be enthroned. In this regard, Howard (2009) claimed that media can be a powerful force employed to reduce the causes of conflict and to enable a conflict-stressed society to better pursue conflict resolution. This media can achieve through conflict-sensitive, responsible, objective and articulated reporting. Howard emphasized that the media in its quest must avoid stereotypes and narrow perspectives on the causes and process of conflict. The media can contribute to a wider dialogue among disparate parts of the community in conflict, through improved reporting. It can explore and provide information about opportunities for resolution. The media must maintain its essential standards of accuracy, fairness and balance, and responsible conduct. In doing this, the media must be investigative, critical and analytical. The Nigerian media has been found inadequate especially with the reporting and handling of transhumance conflicts in different parts of the country.

The media is often criticized for its labeling and stereotyping element in reporting conflict and violence in the country. For example, there has been a constant misrepresentation and mislabeling of groups involved in transhumance conflict in Nigeria. Braukamper (1996) in Blench (2010) identified 14 groups of transhumance herdsmen in Nigeria aside the Fulani's. They include; the Arabs, Kanuri, Kanembu, Shuwa, and Touareg. Furthermore, the Bororo's

are also major actors in the transhumant grazing in Nigeria but they get rarely enlisted by the media. The dominance of the Fulani's, especially in the rearing of livestock and dairies had influenced the constant referral when transhumant conflict arises between herdsmen and farmers. Therefore, the Fulani's might have been justly and unjustly accused of perpetuating transhumance conflict in different parts of the country.

The Nigerian media have been rated below average in the discharge of its surveillance responsibility. Adamu, Hamid and Baba (2014) observed that the unabated trend of violent conflict in Nigeria is due to the ineffectiveness of the media in living up to their surveillance responsibility in their reportage of conflict. Unlike in advance countries where perpetrators of violence have the media as a checkpoint and also, the media through investigative journalism brings to the open the people involved in violent conduct. Okpara (2010) opined that the Nigerian media have not actually performed excellently in discharging their surveillance role, particularly in the Boko-Haram crisis. This according to Popoola (2012) avowed that the government's perception of the media can be described as unpatriotic and uncommitted to the national interest, peace and stability of the country. This disposition was informed by the inability of the media to provide comprehensive information that could lead to the arrest of all the members of Boko Haram. This can be particularly true of the Nigerian media as there have not been reports released yet on transhumant herdsmen that are involved in triggering violence conflict in different parts of the country. Rather, the media joins in the hasty generalization and categorization of groups as perpetrators of violent acts especially in the case of Fulani transhumance herdsmen.

It must be put in consideration that the nature of terrorist and insurgent groups seeks for state recognition and the media seem to be the easiest and cheapest means of getting recognized through its constant and frequent reportage of violent activities carried out by these groups. This observation coincides with Schramm's contention that media gives undue popularity to individuals and groups in the society. Sharifi (2015) argued that insurgents recognize that the media is a fast paced industry where interest in stories is lost quickly. This spurs them on to even more novel and gruesome attacks in order to keep their presence in the media, and by extension, in the public debate. This means that transhumant terrorists incessant attacks is guided by the motive to create or gain state recognition and the media is seen as an instrument through its indecisive reporting of attacks. Biernatzki (2002) disclosed that groups staging conflict recognize that their best route to public recognition is through appealing to traditional news values: drama, conflict and tragedy, as fueled by competition among the media.

The contemporary media in the Nigerian society is often accused of inciting violence through the spread of hate speeches and messages in form of advertorial, campaigns and news. This is particularly obvious in the conduct of 2015 elections as major political adverts were laced with hate messages. Arogundade (2014) while emphasizing the implications of hate speech and other forms of incitements, it was opined that the social obligations of the media during elections include the prevention of hate speech and violent rhetoric. It was also stated that the media is expected to make use of temperate language in its reporting; and refrain from airing pejorative comment.

Conflict Sensitive Reporting

Conflict sensitivity is act of sensing and identifying possible outbreak of violence. The role of media in conflict sensitivity entails the use of media reports to disseminate warning signals and alerts on possible occurrence of violence. It involves media practitioners joining the course to de-escalate violent occurrence. The Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage Section 5 (1.8) stipulated that “A journalist shall be conflict-sensitive and pro-actively report early warning signals of possible outbreak of violent conflict during elections”. It also behooves the media organization to work for the reduction of conflict and promote the common value of peace without compromising the duty to inform.

The media as opined by Galtung (2002), Shinar (2004) and Howard (2009) should undertake more developmental task which transcends the traditional role of information dissemination to the practice of true watchdog and surveillance. This would have the media join in the fight to ensure peace and resolve conflicts. This can be done by identifying major actors in conflict, understanding the roots of conflicts and giving equal attention to all parties involved. The media can also assist in providing information to security agents on possible leads to perpetrator of violent conflicts in the society. This would make the media assume the purported “Fourth Estate Realm” in the society.

Howard (2009) stated that the media can effectively engage in peace development by training journalists to have a better understanding of conflict and media’s role in it. It was averred that media can strengthen their reporting to avoid stereotypes and narrow perspectives on the causes and process of conflict. The media, aside from raising early warnings and awareness on conflict, can contribute to a wider dialogue among contrasting parts of the community in conflict, through improved reporting. It also can explore and provide information about opportunities for resolution.

Conclusion

In reporting daily occurrences, including the outbreak of conflicts, the media are expected to display a keen sense of objectivity. They must ensure balance and fairness in their reports; this implies that their report must be free from bias. To guarantee this, all parties involved must be given equal attention. Stories must not be one-sided. Facts must be separated from opinions. The media need revert to the concept of journalism in public interest to be able to discharge its proper role in times of crises.

Therefore, the study suggests that the media must commit its resources in proper research and investigative journalism in order to avoid misrepresentation, labelling and stereotype. Particular in the transhumance reporting where it has been highlighted that the Fulani’s are not the only ones involve in transhumance trade. So, the media must do more in identifying the particular group and not generalize. The media should recognize its responsibility for alleviating conflict by reporting accurately the activities and opinions of people from different sides to the conflict. Media organizations should develop initiatives that can bring about resolutions to the rate of violent conflict in the country. This is part of the social responsibility function of the media. This, would position the media as a key player in conflict management and resolution in a conflict-ridden state like Nigeria.

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