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GUNS, GRIEVANCES, AND GOVERNANCE: EVALUATING THE ECOSYSTEM OF ARMED BANDITRY IN NORTHWEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria is contending with a complex national problem arising from armed banditry, herdsmen terrorism, and various other kinds of insecurity, posing substantial challenges to the country's national security. This research investigates armed banditry both as an intrinsic manifestation of violence and as a trigger for the reformation of violent conflicts in the changing context of northern Nigeria. Utilising qualitative methodologies, including 31 key informant interviews and 6 focus group discussions across the three most impacted LGAs in Zamfara State, the results indicate that different types of violence are intricately intertwined with armed banditry, underscoring significant implications for understanding the dynamics and pathways of conflict in the area. While the government's anti-banditry initiative, utilising military surveillance and raids, is commendable, practical difficulties, particularly limited knowledge of the area's geography, have hindered its effectiveness. This highlights the significance of local vigilantes and community watch groups, who have enhanced geographical awareness. Nevertheless, these regional systems necessitate sufficient expertise, resources, and oversight to avert abuse and drastic actions. Implementing community-oriented law enforcement, bolstered by local staff and intelligence, appears to be the most feasible resolution. Thus, the research advocates transcending government-focused solutions in favour of community-oriented activities and discussions that address the enduring perceived marginalisation and exclusion of groups vulnerable to bandit recruitment.

Keywords

Armed Banditry, Bandits, State Responses, Zamfara State, Nigeria.

Resumo

A Nigéria enfrenta um problema nacional complexo decorrente do banditismo armado, do terrorismo dos pastores e de vários outros tipos de insegurança, o que coloca desafios substanciais à segurança nacional do país. Esta investigação analisa o banditismo armado tanto como uma manifestação intrínseca da violência como um fator desencadeante da reestruturação de conflitos violentos no contexto em mudança do norte da Nigéria. Recorrendo a metodologias qualitativas, incluindo 31 entrevistas a informadores-chave e 6 discussões em grupos focais nas três LGAs mais afetadas do Estado de Zamfara, os resultados indicam que diferentes tipos de violência estão intimamente interligados com o banditismo armado, o que sublinha implicações significativas para a compreensão da dinâmica e das vias de desenvolvimento do conflito na região. Embora a iniciativa governamental de combate ao banditismo, que recorre à vigilância militar e a incursões, seja louvável, as dificuldades práticas — em particular o conhecimento limitado da geografia da região — têm prejudicado

a sua eficácia. Isto realça a importância dos grupos de vigilância locais e das patrulhas comunitárias, que possuem um melhor conhecimento geográfico. No entanto, estes sistemas regionais requerem conhecimentos especializados, recursos e supervisão suficientes para evitar abusos e ações drásticas. A implementação de uma aplicação da lei orientada para a comunidade, apoiada por pessoal local e informações de inteligência, parece ser a solução mais viável. Assim, a investigação defende que se ultrapassem as soluções centradas no governo, em favor de atividades e debates orientados para a comunidade que abordem a marginalização e exclusão percebidas e persistentes de grupos vulneráveis ao recrutamento por parte dos bandidos.

Palavras-Chave

Banditismo armado, Bandidos, Respostas do Estado, Estado de Zamfara, Nigéria.

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Introduction

Nigerian public discourse has focused more on what is referred to as "armed banditry" or "rural banditry" in response to the shifting dynamics of instability across the Sahel. The growing prevalence of rural banditry, especially in the northwestern and central regions of Nigeria, has raised concerns among security professionals, academics, policymakers, and citizens who seek to identify its underlying causes and develop preventive and containment measures. Nevertheless, in the subject of armed conflict and security studies in Nigerian literature, armed banditry, also known as rural banditry, has been an elusive and understudied term despite its prominence. The majority of current evaluations of Nigeria's insecurity still focus on non-state armed groups like Boko Haram or other types of criminality like ethnic or religious violence (Ochu et al., 2023). This study makes a unique interdisciplinary contribution to the subject by focusing on armed banditry and the larger dynamics of insecurity in Nigeria. This study investigates how local populations in the northwestern State of Zamfara experience and respond to insecurity by integrating ethnographic data with theoretical and critical frameworks from geography, geopolitics, and African studies (Adu and Osadola, 2022). This method makes it possible to gain fresh perspectives on what rural banditry is, how it functions, and, most importantly, how it affects common perceptions of resistance, governance, and the role of the State in Nigeria.

The goal of this study is to thoroughly examine the development and patterns of armed banditry in Northwest Nigeria. Our overarching goal is to critically analyse the evolution of armed banditry in Nigeria's Northwest throughout time. In order to do this, the study looks at the trajectories of armed banditry activity by determining the spatial and temporal patterns of banditry activities, tracing the origins and emergence of armed banditry and comprehending the forces behind rising violence and falling poverty, critically analysing the various state responses to the incursion of armed banditry and how this helps to lessen or increase the impacts, and tracing the origins of armed banditry in Nigeria. In doing so, our research examines topics including the paths and characteristics of armed banditry, the State's role in the evolution of armed banditry over time, and how the aims and purposes of combating armed banditry frequently shift.

Literature Review

Armed banditry has emerged as a pressing and substantial threat to Nigeria's national security. Authorities and scholars have repeatedly recognised multiple factors shaping Nigeria's current security landscape. These encompass destitution, disputes between pastoralists and agriculturalists, the presence of warlords, regions lacking effective governance or ungoverned territories, transnational criminal syndicates, and the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) originating in the Middle East and North Africa. These dynamics have been emphasised by analysts and academics like Ojo (2020), Ojo et al. (2023), and Oyewole et al. (2022).

Comprehending the essence of armed banditry in Nigeria and determining whether to classify such entities as terrorism or organised crime is a considerable challenge. The group has adopted specific operational tactics from entities such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Ansaru; however, its initial formation was grounded in structured criminal endeavours motivated by economic gain. Nonetheless, a recent transformation has taken place in the entity's operations, strategies, structure, and organisational frameworks. Despite the Nigerian government's designation of the organisation as a terrorist organisation, the entrapment must be assessed in light of its present attributes. Characterising armed banditry requires careful examination (Azeez, 2020; Abdulrasheed, 2021; King'ong'o, 2022; Out, 2022; Ojo, Aina and Oyewole, 2024).

Osasona (2023) asserts that armed banditry constitutes a type of criminal behaviour akin to kidnapping, larceny, armed theft, and vandalism. Armed banditry, when analysed through the lens of organised crime embedded in the illicit economy, is chiefly motivated by financial rewards. Organised crime, often characterised as a type of criminal syndicate, typically involves the intentional devastation of properties, the perpetration of violence against individuals, and the coercive appropriation of victims' possessions. Armed bandits denote criminal organisations that violently seize assets, including cattle and currency, from civilian communities and perpetrate sexual violence. (Ojo et al., 2023)

Ojewale (2023) found that armed bandits exhibit a quasi-organisation marked by a coordinated command hierarchy, akin to that of global militias. These criminals predominantly function in countryside regions and utilise deadly weapons such as AK-47 rifles. Investigating rural affiliations, one might suggest that armed banditry is concentrated in areas devoid of robust state rule. This region demonstrates a scant governmental presence, highlighted by the conspicuous lack of police and other law enforcement entities tasked with maintaining order. In specific areas, informal governance is more prevalent, predominantly coordinated by conventional institutions. This environment serves as a refuge for criminal enterprises that enable unlawful activities motivated by greed.

In a similar vein, Obi & Iwuoha (2023) contended that armed banditry is motivated by the pursuit of economic assets by looting, robbery, intimidation, and violent assaults. Robbers utilise coercion or intimidation to strip individuals of their belongings. It has also included the process of obtaining and managing income sources, such as livestock, which are later marketed in other regions. The main perpetrators of armed banditry in Nigeria, as noted in scholarly works, are the Fulani, Hausa, Kanuri, and many other ethnic factions

that employ Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in their activities (Obi & Iwuoha, 2023; Ojo, 2020).

The discussion of the theoretical foundations of armed banditry in Nigeria highlights the significance of multiple perspectives. The interpretation of armed banditry in Nigeria, influenced by diverse perspectives including resource disputes, organised crime, political violence, and ethno-religious factors, remains a contentious issue. Some scholars rely on a single source for its origins, whereas others synthesise these varied perspectives to investigate its historical evolution and trajectory of transformation.

A leading hypothesis links armed banditry in Northwestern Nigeria to resource-driven disputes between Fulani herders and agriculturalists arising from competition for natural resources. Fulani herders in the Sahel region continually seek more fertile lands to sustain their livestock due to droughts caused by climate change. Host villages consist of stationary farmers; however, livestock encroaches upon arable grounds, resulting in disputes between the factions. Moreover, agriculturists cull livestock to safeguard agricultural produce, and nearby populations might engage in cow theft. Incidents frequently lead to discord between Fulani herders seeking to recover missing livestock and farmers whose crops have been damaged (Ojo, 2023).

An alternative strategy emphasises unregulated regions where criminal organisations proliferate due to insufficient governmental control. Unregulated territories are isolated regions where the indigenous population encounters an absence of governmental authority. Inhabitants of these areas are governed by unofficial powers. In this context, regulations are grounded in regional norms and traditions (Ojo, 2020). The struggle for natural resources in lawless regions has resulted in a novel viewpoint of armed bandits in Nigeria. Ojewale (2021) asserts that terrorist organisations partner with sponsors of armed banditry to infiltrate mining regions. It subtly underscores governmental participation in armed robbery. Ojewale (2021) observed that criminal organisations employ violence to forcibly remove local inhabitants, particularly in mining regions, alongside engaging in cattle theft to facilitate their activities.

The collaboration between armed criminals and the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) in northwestern Nigeria highlights the gravity of the struggle in assessing the relationship between terrorism and crime. Speculation exists over the partnership between armed marauders and the terrorist organisation referred to as ISWAP. This coalition might provide armed criminals in Nigeria with training, logistical support, recruitment strategies, and operational flexibility (Ojo et al., 2023).

Methodology

The research employed a multi-disciplinary methodology to deliver a comprehensive examination of armed banditry in Northern Nigeria. This includes historical and socio-economic evaluations, as well as qualitative techniques. With respect to the historical inquiry, we examined the relevant scholarly, policy-oriented, and journalistic literature. Nonetheless, due to the ongoing threat of banditry and the scarcity of empirical research on the subject, the review extended beyond peer-reviewed articles to include policy documents, grey literature, and significant news reports in outlining the evolution of

banditry in Nigeria. This was enhanced by an extensive examination of Nigeria's socio-economic environment through the assessment of key international indices and reports, with pertinent socio-economic factors related to banditry systematically outlined to ensure a thorough study.

The qualitative data-gathering initiative was conducted across the three senatorial districts of Zamfara State: Zamfara North, Zamfara Central, and Zamfara West. Consequently, Gusau (ZC), Zurmi (ZN), and Anka (ZW) Local Government Areas exemplify the three senatorial districts. The chosen LGAs of Anka, Gusau, and Zurmi have experienced the greatest impact from armed banditry in the State. A total of 31 purposively selected interviews were conducted with participants from various backgrounds, chiefly traditional leaders, agriculturalists and herders, village and district chiefs, security officials and vigilante unit leaders, journalists, as well as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and heads of IDP camps. The investigator frequented the distressed villages several times between June 2024 and February 2025 to observe and perform interviews. From January to March 2025, the researcher conducted six focus group discussions with individuals experiencing internal displacement or those personally impacted by armed banditry, as well as representatives from governmental and non-governmental organisations and journalists who reported on the situation in Zamfara State from January 2023 to December 2024. This was executed to provide immediate validation of the historical and socio-economic elements. This methodology of combining historical inquiry, modern socio-economic evaluation, and interview gathering has yielded a nuanced and comprehensive insight into the fundamental origins and evolutionary paths of armed banditry in Nigeria. It also allowed the research to advance beyond the current literature, which has frequently concentrated on merely one of these domains.

The qualitative material generated from the 31 semi-structured key informant interviews and 6 focus group discussions was transcribed verbatim, with Hausa language recordings translated and cross-verified for semantic accuracy. The qualitative corpus was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the systematic stages of data familiarisation, initial inductive and deductive coding, code collating, and thematic abstraction. An initial codebook was developed around core structural themes, including the historical origins of violence, local perceptions of pastoralist-farmer tensions, community experiences of vigilantism (notably Yan Sa Kai), and appraisals of state kinetic interventions. Emerging codes were constantly compared across respondent categories (IDPs, traditional rulers, community watch leaders, and state officials) to identify convergent patterns and divergent nuances. Direct interview transcripts and group discussions were subsequently triangulated against historical policy documents and secondary data to establish construct validity, while participant anonymity was preserved through anonymised identifiers.

Analysis and Discussions

Origins, Drivers, and Patterns of Armed Banditry in Northern Nigeria

Presently, there exist three discordant hypotheses concerning the evolution, progression, and essence of banditry in Northern Nigeria. The initial perspective saw banditry as an offshoot of terrorism and a perpetuation of the historical Fulani jihad in the twentieth

century, which predominantly aimed at agricultural populations in northern Nigeria. The Global Terrorism Index (2015) contends that the characteristics of terrorism in Nigeria are distinct from those in Iraq and Afghanistan. The terrorist operations in Nigeria resemble the tactics utilised by organised crime groups and gangs, focusing primarily on armed attacks including firearms and knives, as opposed to explosions, which are typical of larger terrorist entities. The Fulani militants, a terrorist organisation originating from Nigeria, were classified as the fourth deadliest terrorist group in 2014. This represents a notable elevation from their former position, as they were not previously classified among the most lethal factions. The number of fatalities attributed to the Fulani extremists surged from 63 in 2013 to 1,229 in 2014 (Gbadeya, 2025).

The second viewpoint presents a divergent and controversial narrative of banditry's development in the area. This perspective asserts that banditry constitutes a crime endorsed by the state with genocidal aims. The institution views banditry as a manifestation of violence bolstered by outside entities aiming to diminish community populations and facilitate the proliferation of Islam in northern Nigeria, particularly in locations lacking a majority of Hausa or Fulani influence. The viewpoint is primarily influenced by widespread discontent with the government's incompetence in handling the crisis (ACAPS, 2020). The third perspective, which appears to be the most dominant, links rural banditry to the mishandling of disputes between agriculturalists and pastoralists in Northern Nigeria. Findings from the comprehensive interviews indicate that rural banditry is intricately associated with the persistent strife between Fulani herdsmen and agricultural cultivators. This dispute could be shaped by overarching elements such as identity politics and intergroup dynamics, particularly the relationships between pastoralist communities and the Nigerian state. Transhumant herders are often perceived as hostile and deliberately armed to challenge unsuspecting agriculturalists. The farmers allege that they intentionally harm crops through their livestock. In contrast, the herders saw themselves as casualties of political marginalisation, devoid of representation in the Nigerian governmental framework (Ojewale et al, 2024).

Preliminary data indicates that the recent surge of armed banditry in Nigeria, particularly in the northern area, commenced in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This era was marked by domestic security issues and strife, including the ethnic and religious turmoil that ignited in the northern city of Kaduna in 2000 and the implementation of Sharia law in other northern states. Gettleman (2018) elucidates that "gang leaders commenced recruiting marginalised young men as assassins in the nascent conflicts concerning religion." Consequently, a connection exists between the involvement of youth organisations and political militia factions in the resurgence of violence in the North and the emergence of armed banditry in the area. This era, sometimes termed the initial phase of the Fourth Republic, was characterised by the dominance of retired military generals in politics and was associated with the rise of vigilante factions, political militias, and ethno-religious entities (Osadola and Emah, 2022). These factions of young individuals were either enlisted by politicians to promote their agendas or utilised as tools to compel the government to address the requests of these diverse interest groups. This led the political elite and security agencies to exploit these factions to stifle opposing groups or dissent in some regions of the nation. Nwokora (2015) notes that the established functions of the various factions within each regime have fostered a familiar trajectory for the employment of patronage systems, corruption, and violence to

consolidate and regulate state authority. These inclinations have perpetuated the existence of non-state armed factions in Nigeria, many of which ultimately engage in illicit activity.

Maiangwa (2018) contends that the interdependent connection between governance and the engagement of both State and non-state violent entities has led to the normalisation of violence as a means of communication and interaction within society. He observes that the prevalence of violence in Nigerian society, characterised by an increasing cultural tolerance for aggression and the government's exclusive control over its interpretation, has profoundly influenced the development and entrenchment of armed banditry in contemporary times. This historical investigation, as highlighted by Baba (2012), reveals the aggravating elements and origins of violence in the North, prompting an analysis of the emergence and timeline of political militias since the reestablishment of civilian governance in 1999, alongside the escalation of violence and banditry, to illustrate the North's standing within Nigeria.

Several factors influencing the progression of banditry in Nigeria include climate change, the increasing availability of weapons, and heightened competition for resources. Initially, advancing desertification in the northern territories has led to more frequent droughts, compelling herders, particularly from the Fulani ethnic group, to relocate southward in search of cultivable land for grazing (Gbadeyan, 2024; Gbadeyan and Osadola, 2023b). This has resulted in increased confrontations with stationary agricultural communities, many of which have established local militias to protect their territory from what they view as "intrusive" herders. These militias, originally established for community protection, have increasingly engaged in illicit activities and banditry.

A significant element thought to contribute to rural banditry in the areas is linked to the smuggling of small arms and munitions. The widespread availability of weaponry has attracted the interest of academics and experts, particularly following the conclusion of the Cold War (Adeleye and Osadola, 2022). Assessments concerning the quantity of criminal factions and outlaws in the Northwestern area have varied. A notable Nigerian scholar on banditry claims that there are around 120 bandit encampments in the area and that the bandits are armed with more than 60,000 AK-47 rifles (Rufai, 2021). A religious leader appointed by bandits to negotiate with the government claims that approximately 100,000 armed bandits exist in the north-western area (The Punch, 2019).

Additionally, a notable community leader from one of the six states affected by the crisis in the Northwest region claimed that an astonishing 30,000 armed bandits are operating independently in Zamfara State. Some groups have considerable armaments and sustain a coalition of individuals who collaborate with them in the security apparatus and the wider community. These groups are financially supported and have a deep understanding of the area's complex geography (GJF, 2021).

The worldwide spread of small guns is considered a catalyst for numerous adverse effects, including civil conflicts, organised crime, and the evolution of tiny insurgents into globally acknowledged terrorist organisations. This is illustrated by the occurrence of armed robbery in Nigeria's Northwest. The escalation of weapon acquisition among civilians pursuing firearms is progressively igniting an internal "arms race" in the area. Armed offenders obtain firearms to attack the Nigerian government and challenge its sole

authority over the application of force by state entities. Also, the fact that adjacent countries like Libya and Mali have been thrown into disarray as a result of civil wars during the Arab Spring has led to the spread of armaments and light weapons in the Sahel region as a whole. Northwestern states such as Kebbi, Zamfara, and Katsina have suffered the spillage of illegal weaponry streaming in from bordering countries, making it increasingly difficult to regulate the operations of armed bandits. It has also been suggested that some of the combatants who fought alongside Muammar Gaddafi in Libya migrated southward into the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin after his defeat, aggravating the development of armed banditry in these regions. The most recent empirical study, including ICG (2021), reveals that there is a fundamental shift in the character and patterns of armed banditry in Nigeria, with a notable increase in lethality and also in the number of recorded violent acts perpetrated by these organisations in the last two years.

Over time, there has been a fundamental shift in the modus operandi of the bandits in the amount of atrocities committed by them and the number of deaths of the public and ransom activities. For instance, in 2021 alone, there were over 1000 kidnappings for ransom issues as a result of armed bandits in North-west Nigeria, with increasing attacks on military sites, airports, moving trains, and local towns. Its dynamics have turned north-west and north-central Nigeria into an enclave of instability, posing major security challenges (Ojo et al., 2024).

According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), in 2021, the number of people murdered by firearms in north-west Nigeria alone from 2013 to 2021 topped 52,000, although a total of 105,000 guns were confiscated in this region within the indicated time frame (ICG, 2021). Notwithstanding Nigeria's strong weapons control regulations, the prevalence of illicit firearms has undergone a large growth. Gun violence has surpassed all other causes of death for the first time in recorded history, resulting in a drop in the average lifetime of the population in the region. This transition has been particularly evident in the central regions of Zamfara, Kebbi, and, to a degree, Sokoto (Gbadeyan et al., 2024). These predominantly rural and undeveloped regions have witnessed multiple occurrences of mass kidnappings for ransom, conflicts between herder and agricultural communities, and assaults on small towns by armed criminals. It is imperative for the Nigerian government to promptly implement strategies to thwart and incapacitate the operations of these audacious and elusive armed bandit factions before they become more entrenched and possibly amalgamate with larger insurgent entities like Boko Haram in the future.

Categorising Armed Banditry: Actors, Networks, and Modalities

Insights obtained from the field interviews indicated that nomadic Fulani herdsmen, political militias evolved into bandits, and regional criminal factions have emerged as the predominant categories of armed bandits in Northern Nigeria. The Hausa-Fulani, Nigeria's most populous ethnic group, primarily located in the North, have a considerable number of people engaged in pastoralism. A participant asserted that:

> *"The Fulani herdsmen have been involved in several clashes with local farmers over grazing rights and access to natural resources, resulting in the loss of lives and displacement of communities. However, in recent years,*

> *some Fulani herdsmen have become more organised in carrying out pre-meditated attacks on local villagers and, in some cases, engaging in cattle rustling."*

Researchers have noted that there are elements of politicisation and instrumentalisation of the Fulani ethnicity by the political elites in power, to the extent that the Fulani herdsmen are now perceived and categorised as the new face of terrorism in Nigeria (Muhammed et al., 2023; Gbadeyan and Osadola, 2023a). On the other hand, there were several State and non-state-sponsored militias created and armed to address specific political or ethno-religious goals in Nigeria. The most notable of these militias is established in the Middle Belt, a region known for its ethno-religious conflicts and its strategic location between the predominantly Muslim North and the predominantly Christian South of Nigeria. In the voice of one of the participants,

> *"These political militias have now transformed into armed bandit groups, targeting local communities for financial gains and engaging in organised crimes such as cattle rustling and kidnapping for ransom. There were also local criminal gangs that have been identified to be involved in various forms of armed banditry in different states. For example, the "Yan Sa Kai" in Zamfara State originated as a vigilante group established to support the State in providing internal security."*

Nevertheless, the lack of a legal framework for such entities and the endemic corruption in security institutions have caused "Yan Sa Kai" to progressively become one of the most formidable and important armed bandit groups in the State. These regional criminal factions are typically composed of local adolescents who experience disenchantment, a lack of agency, and an absence of affiliation or opportunity. It is broadly asserted that a sustainable approach to armed banditry in Northern Nigeria must confront the underlying elements that foster local criminality.

Correspondingly, the engagement of nomadic Fulani herdsmen in armed banditry within Northern Nigeria has recently drawn scholarly scrutiny (Ojo, 2023; Gbadeyan, Ola, Osadola and Ojo, 2024). The primary facet to grasp is the idea of Fulani identity, characterised by its complexity and variability. In present-day Nigeria, the Fulani are chiefly identified as cattle breeders, and their prominence on the roadways and in the remote regions of northern Nigeria is perpetually recognised. This is frequently termed the 'cattle Fulani' representation. Nonetheless, the Fulani have a more nuanced identity beyond only being cattle breeders. One should acknowledge that there are separations among the Fulani groups between those who regard themselves as indigenous and those who view themselves as newcomers. Native populations have historically been considered the 'guardians of the land' and predominantly engage in farming. This situation has transformed due to the influx of many Fulani individuals into different areas and the formation of a distinct relationship between Fulani herders and local farmers. Nonetheless, there exists a broad array of preconceptions and scepticism regarding the Fulani in Nigeria, which has at times caused these perceptions to infiltrate the academic realm. In Nigeria, Fulani herders have participated in confrontations with indigenous

populations and surrounding ethnic factions, notably within the Middle Belt and Northwest geopolitical areas.

Osadola and Gbadeyan (2023), asserted that the motivations behind these wars are far more complex than just racial or ethnic disputes. The scholarly community appears to be moving away from the historical "identity" rationale for the Fulani's engagement in banditry. A consensus among experts is that the primary impetus behind the Fulani violence, particularly in the Middle Belt, is the conflict for resources such as land and water between herders and local cultivators. Nevertheless, it is difficult to connect those conflicts directly to the wave of fatal attacks perpetrated by the Fulani herdsmen against rural communities. The shifting dynamics of violence perpetrated by the nomadic Fulani herdsmen have become a mounting apprehension for the Nigerian government and the international community alike. A transition has occurred from relying on a "essentialist" perspective grounded in historical Fulani identity to a more adaptable argument that highlights present socio-economic and political factors in interpreting the crime trends related to Fulani herdsmen. As per Adenuga et al. (2023), the pastoral Fulani community and their related organisations and militias were said to be responsible for 70% of the documented ethnic conflicts in Nigeria from 1999 to 2021.

Additionally, political militias have morphed into banditry, which has initiated a cycle of mobilisations, political violence, and the reinforcement of partisan groups that maintain societal fragmentation in Nigeria. In fact, a variety of socioeconomic hierarchies existed throughout the period when Nigeria's political parties were influenced by colonial powers. Consequently, Nigeria was bequeathed a heritage of schisms in belief systems, geographic identities, and ethnic groups. The political elite in Nigeria have acknowledged this societal predicament and have consistently rallied to mend those splits. They secure and enhance their own interests by interacting with, dominating, and influencing these divisions toward factional support. Fundamentally, the prevailing system in Nigeria endows the State with substantial power over the legitimate use of violence, encompassing both defence and policing. Established social constructs exist globally, regardless of the precise type being referenced. This is a result of the fundamental human repulsion of residing in unpredictability. Humanity has historically shown a preference for living in an orderly, distinctly defined social environment. This demand for a framework in human situations clarifies the social system, regardless of whether it is democratic or dictatorial.

In recent years, "local criminal gangs" have established themselves as the most widespread manifestation of armed banditry in Northwestern Nigeria. The formation of regional criminal gangs is linked to the collapse of law and order that began in the 1990s, resulting from the disbanding of a government-sanctioned vigilante force referred to as "Yan Sa Kai" by the northern authorities. The Yan Sakai's overzealous acts diminished its reputation, especially among the Fulani people who were profoundly influenced by the Yan Sakai's existence. Thus, there was an increase in violent confrontations between the Hausas and the Fulanis in the North West region. In response to the conduct of the Yan Sakai, the Fulanis formed an armed force called Yan Bindiga. The triumphant growth of regional crime syndicates is a definitive reflection of the inadequacies and prejudiced political objectives of rural administrative policies. This significant triumph has provoked a sense of trepidation among the "civilised" political elite; in the preceding two years, not

only has the prevalence of gang-related violence intensified, but reports of violent encounters between local gangs and federal authorities are becoming increasingly frequent, resulting in a more justified security crackdown and the establishment of a militarised police state.

Spatial Trajectories and Tactical Adaptations of Armed Bandits in Northwestern Nigeria

Armed banditry in Nigeria's northwest, particularly in Zamfara state, is marked by assaults on rural populations and transport, cattle theft, unregulated gold mining, disputes between agriculturalists and pastoralists, abduction, and various violent acts for ransom. The operational methods of criminals have evolved considerably in recent years, yet their activities have continued to be somewhat erratic and dynamic. In contrast to rebel factions such as Boko Haram, armed bandits appear to lack specific territorial claims and do not actively engage with the Nigerian government or its security apparatus.

Conversely, they have been persistently adjusting to the environment in which they function. Interviews with key informants indicated that bandits in Zamfara State have been fragmenting into smaller factions and adopting a more exploratory approach to their operations. Conversely, the insights acquired from prolonged activities in regions like Birnin Gwari have emboldened specific bandit factions to execute increasingly orchestrated and audacious assaults, such the abduction of tourists or the simultaneous invasion of little rural communities from many angles. The recurrent assault or application of a specific strategy in a region tends to engender profound anxiety and susceptibility among the local populace, hence complicating the recovery of that area. Such techniques may incite and intensify intergroup conflict over time. The interviews and field observations emphasised that contemporary banditry may not constitute a unified social or political force in itself. Nonetheless, there are presently numerous localised and minor civil disputes and struggles for resources, illicit economies, and authority among communities that are frequently exploited by bandits.

The distribution of armed banditry in northern Nigeria has undergone significant changes during the last ten years. During the 1960s and 1970s, criminal activity was predominantly concentrated in the north-western half of the nation, especially in Katsina and Sokoto states. Recent findings indicate a westward shift in armed banditry, with Zamfara state being the new focal point of violence and criminal activity. Ojo et al. (2023) contended that the Northern region encountered a minimum of 909 occurrences of armed bandit assaults, leading to the fatalities of more than 8300 persons from January 2013 to March 2022. Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara are the northern states most severely affected, with armed bandits in Kaduna State accountable for the fatalities of 1917 people during 342 assaults. In Katsina State, there were 208 assaults that led to the demise of 1416 individuals. Sokoto State recorded 54 assaults resulting in 644 deaths, whilst Zamfara encountered 275 assaults with 4,114 fatalities. Moreover, armed robbery in the northwest has led to the kidnapping of many individuals and the displacement of hundreds of thousands, as noted by Ojo (2023).

This change in hotspots reflects enduring "push-and-pull" dynamics in banditry, wherein security voids, diminished local governance, and rivalry for resources, such as land

conflicts or livestock theft, compel bandits to vacate one region and migrate to another. A participant in the interview, who is a stakeholder in the security industry, asserted that:

> *"The establishment of "firebases" by security forces in Katsina and Zamfara has also influenced the geographic spread of armed banditry. Such military encampments, which are intended to disrupt armed group movements, have effectively displaced banditry from traditional territories in Katsina and pushed activities further south and west."*

The significance of firebases in facilitating bandit relocation was evident in a recent strategic response by the Zamfara state government, which indicated that proximity to firebases was a primary factor in establishing new police divisions. The geographic distribution is influenced by the changing dynamics of opportunity frameworks for bandits and the endeavours of security forces to dismantle entrenched regions.

Investigations from the FGDs indicated that the bandits in Zamfara predominantly utilise the 'hit-and-run' strategy, a tactic historically used by guerrilla warfare and counter-insurgency factions globally. The strategy enables the factions to maintain pressure on the government and military through relentless, methodical assaults, complicating the State's ability to adequately address the complex issues related to armed banditry. The robbers generally choose routes including 'soft targets' like peasants, vehicles, security patrols, local defence personnel, and transit trains for their assaults. These objectives are typically seen as straightforward targets to assault and disengage from, facing little to no rapid and robust counteraction from the surprised security forces. The bandits deliberately target villages for their rural locations, which typically lack immediate security support or swift intervention by government law enforcement. It is important to recognise that the selection of victims often varies by geography and the kind of armed banditry, since nomadic Fulani herders are known to assault agricultural settlements due to resource disputes and divisions.

Lastly, however certainly not insignificant, another characteristic of the strategies observed in armed banditry is the inclination to plunder and ravage. The interviews and narrative descriptions uncovered in comprehensive discussions have consistently detailed the initiation and escalation of the bandits' attack, culminating in widespread plunder and destruction of victims' assets, provisions, and agricultural areas. The pervasive and marauding behaviours observed during each assault, which are distinctly centred on material gain, have significantly impacted tactical decision-making as the factions have tailored their methods to achieve the intended outcomes of destabilising the State's authority and governance.

The objectives of armed banditry in Nigeria often encompass people, affluent individuals, and essential infrastructure, such as transportation and energy resources. Western captives have likewise been seized, signifying a growing risk to global interests posed by the organisation. The motivations for such conduct include instilling fear and securing extensive media exposure, although they are chiefly driven by economic or material interests. In north-western Nigeria, bandits persist as a varied assortment of economically driven, non-ideological organised criminal factions involved in extensive

cattle theft, sexual assault, extortion, ransom kidnapping, armed robbery, looting, and the intimidation of motorists.

In recent years, an increasing trend of armed criminals has emerged, notably focusing on the theft from gold miners, especially in the State of Zamfara. This State has had a notable rise in artisanal gold production, leading to sporadic finds around the area. Since about 2009, a notable rise in the global value of gold has drawn many young men to gold mining. These folks have primarily been raised in several locations, including Anka, Bin Yauri, Maru, Malale, Gurmana, and OkolomDogondaji (ICG, 2020).

Fieldwork interviews indicated that bandits are drawn to the lucrative cash rewards associated with kidnapping, which serves as a swift and efficient means of acquiring significant capital for weapon procurement or power consolidation. These factions are probably driven by the opportunity to exploit inadequate safeguarding at mining sites and the prospective plunder to be gained. Nevertheless, these elucidations are perhaps more fitting for the conduct of structured and illicit armed factions like MEND than for the opportunistic behaviours of other "professional" offenders. Organisations like MEND and several separatist factions in the Niger Delta and Nigeria have successfully achieved their main goals, including securing significant financial resources through illicit means, while also fostering considerable public awareness and dissatisfaction. This has been accomplished through media-oriented endeavours, including political protests and a prolonged assault on the area's oil and gas infrastructure. This has resulted in considerable financial distress and the forfeiture of millions of barrels of oil from the global market. Although the overt objectives of organisations like MEND may seem politically driven, it is crucial to acknowledge that their activities have substantial economic consequences at both national and global levels.

Evaluating State Interventions and Counter-Banditry Strategies in Northwestern Nigeria

A comprehensive strategy is utilised to evaluate the present government's reactions to armed banditry in Northern Nigeria. Government responses to the intensifying violence perpetrated by bandits and other criminal groups in Nigeria's northwest have mostly fluctuated between kinetic and non-kinetic strategies. Despite the federal government predominantly employing military tactics, state administrations, constrained by federal oversight of security services, have sought to broker peace accords with bandits and other criminal groups. The divergence in policy effectively illustrates the discord between the Federal and State administrations in their attempts to combat banditry. The discord between these two levels of government in addressing banditry is evident in the case of the former governor of Zamfara State, Abdulaziz Yari Abubakar, who publicly denounced his constitutional responsibility as the State's primary security official.

Historically, the approaches of successive Nigerian administrations to combat armed banditry have oscillated between direct military action and efforts to pursue political resolutions to what fundamentally constitutes a social and economic dilemma. Nevertheless, as we elucidate in the subsequent paragraph, the rise of armed banditry as a significant security concern within Nigeria's national and international security framework has coincided with a profound shift in which the Nigerian State has forsaken

non-militaristic approaches to combat armed banditry in favour of a focus on counter-insurgency and military interventions. Primarily, in reaction to the Katsina protest movement advocating for the reclassification of armed banditry as 'terrorism' and the recent assaults on notable political and religious figures in the Northern states, Nigerian President Buhari has increasingly characterised armed bandits as a national security threat rather than merely common criminals, thus distancing law enforcement strategies from the interconnected transnational networks of arms, individuals, and finances that perpetuate banditry. Before his victory in 2015, Buhari and his political party faced allegations of employing appeasement tactics toward armed banditry orchestrated by influential individuals in the North West and North East concerning the incitement of political violence and electoral manipulation.

These military actions and reaction initiatives seek to restrain and weaken the armed factions, reduce their capacities and power, and disrupt and deconstruct their operational frameworks. It is proposed that Nigeria's counterterrorism military efforts have been significantly shaped by external sovereignty and national security interests. The United States government has provided significant training and support to the Nigerian military, perhaps to further its own geopolitical or security objectives in combating terrorism and mitigating instability in the oil-rich Sub-Saharan Sahel (Onuoha 2016). On the one hand, this burgeoning counter-insurgency strategy has achieved notable success in swaying local populations and constraining the operational capabilities of armed bandit factions in the Northern and Northwestern States. However, evidence indicates that appropriately calibrated and strategically directed military operations can effectively undermine the operational capabilities of armed banditry. Military operations have indisputably influenced outcomes, leading to the detention of many persons suspected of connections to herder-aligned paramilitary groups and criminal networks (CDD, 2015).

Furthermore, a considerable number of these persons have been neutralised, numerous forest encampments have been dismantled, and large quantities of weaponry and munitions have been confiscated. Moreover, the armed forces and law enforcement have effectively rescued a multitude of individuals who were before kidnaped. Notwithstanding these accomplishments, security forces have failed to eradicate a varied assortment of armed criminals. Despite the escalated endeavours, the existing resources including personnel, logistics, and equipment are insufficient to swiftly address assaults by armed factions.

Governors from the North-western states have also mobilised to address the rampant banditry. In 2019, the armed marauders and the Governors of Zamfara, Sokoto, and Katsina reached a consensus. The accord included the procedure for disarmament, the release of abducted persons, and the provision of amnesty to criminals. Despite a reduction in fatalities from August to November attributed to reconciliation efforts, there was a recurrence of assaults in 2020 (Dami, 2021). Notwithstanding official refutations, both the Nigerian federal and state administrations have consistently engaged in the payment of ransom to guarantee the safety of victims and facilitate their liberation (Mustapha, 2019). The consistent paying of ransom by Nigerian officials to save the lives of captives and ensure their release has led to mass abductions being a prominent method for financing criminal and extremist organisations (Lamidi, 2024). Nonetheless, this approach furthermore acts as an incentive for criminals to continue their unlawful

endeavours. In October 2016, a governmental peace initiative in Zamfara state culminated in a successful accord with militant factions.

Consequently, a transaction involving weaponry in exchange for development was initiated. In April 2017, law enforcement disclosed that over 1000 armed militants and criminals associated with herders have abandoned banditry and surrendered their firearms in return for financial assurances. This instance exemplifies significant concessions and policy measures enacted at the subnational tier. The initiative in Katsina state resulted in the seizure of 107 AK-47 rifles, 361 Dane guns, and 28,000 stolen livestock, all of which were monetised. In Kaduna state, a campaign led by the former Police Commissioner, Austin Iwar, effectively convinced some 1150 individuals from armed groups to willingly surrender their firearms and other weaponry (Lamidi, 2024). In exchange for amnesty, the individuals took a formal vow on the Quran and the Bible to discontinue their actions as outlaws and offenders. While these agreements initially fostered a phase of tranquillity, they ultimately disintegrated after approximately one year, resulting in an increase in assaults by the mainly herder-affiliated militant factions.

Alternative community-oriented strategies have been promoted and embraced. The national government and law enforcement agencies facilitated the formation of self-defence militias, referred to as "vigilante groups" or "civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF)," within local communities. In 2018, the governor of Zamfara State founded the CJTF, which included approximately 8,500 youths (Mustapha, 2019). These vigilante organisations collaborated with the military and various security agencies to collect intelligence, perform patrols, and ensure local safety. Nonetheless, their roles and actions have sparked debate. Human rights organisations have expressed apprehensions regarding purported extrajudicial executions, mistreatment of detainees, and violations of civil liberties. Moreover, instances of political manipulation and power conflicts have been noted in certain vigilantism activities. Positivist academics have indicated that arming local communities and entrusting self-defence organisations with the monopoly of violence will merely exacerbate insecurity and bloodshed. It is significant that there are demands for more extensive socio-economic and political measures to tackle the governance and development issues in rural regions where armed banditry is prevalent. The efficacy of community-oriented projects is significantly dependent on the dynamics of a clientelist framework, in which political elites frequently appropriate or create organisations to further their own agendas. These problems are fundamentally entrenched in the local power structures and the interactions between the state and society in Northern Nigeria. Conversely, communication and conflict-resolution strategies are essential to the secondary prevention of large-scale crimes and armed conflicts in the North.

In 2019, the Zamfara state government allocated approximately 8.6 billion naira (around $23.6 million) as an economic measure to combat armed banditry, establishing three rural grazing areas, one for Fulani pastoralists in each senatorial zone (Lamidi, 2024). Furthermore, the growing encroachment of agricultural land into pasturelands and livestock pathways has led to a notable rise in tensions with herders. Consequently, the government has resolved to annul all titles and agricultural land allocations issued since 1999, pledging to conduct a comprehensive review. The Zamfara administration has instituted a social intervention initiative referred to as the Zamfara State Social

Intervention Program. This program seeks to assist and provide alternative sources of income for herder-affiliated groups, vigilantes, and other armed personnel willing to relinquish their firearms. The beneficiaries of this initiative, targeting about 18,000 youths, were trained in a variety of competencies to prepare them for lucrative careers or to empower them to become independent business owners. The initial stage began in November 2019, with 8600 participants registered, according to Altine (2020) and Shinka (2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigeria has undergone a multifaceted national crisis with considerable geographical ramifications due to armed banditry and various other security threats. This research positioned armed banditry not merely as a catalyst for violence but also as a mechanism through which violent conflicts are being reshaped in the evolving context of northern Nigeria. We discovered that several manifestations of violence now converge in multiple ways with armed banditry, which has considerable ramifications for comprehending the spectra and pathways of violent conflicts in the area. The existing administration's anti-banditry initiative, which utilises military surveillance and operations, is praiseworthy. Regrettably, the anticipated alleviation has not materialised due to operational difficulties stemming from insufficient knowledge of the region's geography. This illustrates the significance of local vigilantes and community watch groups, who have a more profound understanding of the locality. Participants in these systems, however, require adequate training, access to essential resources, and vigilant oversight to avert dangerous extremes and misuse. The creation of community-oriented law enforcement, bolstered by local personnel and intelligence, is the most feasible route ahead. Therefore, to discover a sustainable remedy to mitigate the rampant armed banditry in the northwest, the subsequent recommendation should be pursued:

1. The importance of moving beyond purely state-centric responses and understanding banditry as a localised, albeit multi-scalar, security concern, the role of the co-option of state security resources in cases of well-armed and well-connected banditry, and the impact of climate change, particularly on rural economies and livelihoods, in the evolution and reinforcement of banditry. Instead, there should be effective community-based initiatives and dialogues that tackle the longstanding marginalisation and exclusion of many of the populations that have become fertile recruiting grounds for armed bandit groups.
2. Moreover, gun trafficking plays a crucial role in exacerbating the bloodshed caused by armed bandits in northern Nigeria. Ensuring security in the problematic region and beyond requires the essential monitoring of border communities involved in the illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). Simultaneously, the government should actively include individuals in the process of reorienting their values to cultivate ethical ideals and a deep respect for life and human rights.
3. Given the complex, multidimensional nature of banditry in Northern Nigeria, any effort to address the phenomenon should recognise the need for holistic, comprehensive socio-economic measures rather than placing greater emphasis on military solutions.

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