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# **ETHNIC MINORITIES AND LAND CONFLICTS IN SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA**

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# ETHNIC MINORITIES AND LAND CONFLICTS IN SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA

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## INTRODUCTION

One central aspect of the national question within the discourse on Nigeria concerns the conflicts and disputes historically driven by struggles over land-based resources. Examples of such conflicts include that of Ife-Modakeke in Osun State, the Jukun-Chamba conflict in the Takum Local Government Area of Taraba State, the Tiv-Jukun conflict in Benue and Plateau States, and the Umuleri-Aguleri war of attrition over Otuocha land in Anambra State. Drawing on primary data generated from focus group discussions and oral interviews between October 2009 and March 2015 across locations with pronounced incidents of land-based conflicts in Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo States in southwestern Nigeria, this work examines the impact of economic considerations on ethnically motivated conflicts in the country over land from 1999 to 2015. It examines land conflicts in southwestern Nigeria—which have been occurring since the 1980s and stubbornly resurfaced in recent times—as a major economic and sociopolitical problem at the national and state levels. This study examines the following questions: How has land been connected with some of the historical conflicts across Nigeria? How has the character of the state in Nigeria affected the management of ethnically motivated land conflicts?

What does this case study suggest in terms of the resolution of land-based conflicts across the country?

This study argues that colonialism—through its policies and programs as well as the administrative structures and political systems put in place by the colonial state—not only changed the material conditions of populations across Nigeria by forcefully integrating them into the colonial and later global capitalist system (by compelling them to participate in colonial economic activities largely dominated by profit motive, thereby negating the autonomous development of the emergent postcolonial state), but also radically altered the complexities and directions of the land question. Hence Okwudiba Nnoli's assertion that colonial and postcolonial societies are characterized by struggles that do not originate in local changes in the prevailing systems of class relation and material production.<sup>1</sup>

The basis for interrogating the issues of ethnic minorities and their experiences with conflict in Nigeria hinges on the implications of such conflicts for overall national development. It is commonly understood that conflict-ridden societies generally have dismal records of economic development. As some studies have shown, the consequences of violent conflicts in Africa have been devastating for development and security. In 1996, armed conflict in Africa accounted for half of all war-related deaths worldwide. It also resulted in more than eight million displaced persons, refugees, and returnees.<sup>2</sup> Economic growth continues to elude much of the continent, as most of the heavily indebted and least developed countries throughout the world are also located there.<sup>3</sup> These details are not surprising given that countries engaged in war usually have decelerating records of socioeconomic performance, especially when compared with those enjoying peace and stability.

This essay is divided into five sections. The first conceptualizes ethnic minorities by examining the etymologies and genealogies of minorities generally, and provides a historical and theoretical basis for their emergence vis-à-vis the evolution of Nigerian federalism as well as the eventual form of the postcolonial state in Nigeria. The second section examines the contests over land-based resources in different parts of Africa and underlines the centrality of land in Africa's political economy. The third section discusses the colonial origins of the land-based conflicts across Nigeria; the fourth section examines land-based conflicts in southwestern Nigeria; and the final section concludes the study.

## GENEALOGIES OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN NIGERIA

Minorities have been defined as culturally and genealogically cohesive groups, occupying a position of numerical inferiority and actual or potential socioeconomic subordination vis-à-vis other segments of society.<sup>4</sup> Historically, the term minority is neither exclusive nor unique to any group in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Rather, in terms of its actual origin within the humanities and social sciences, it is associated with the events that led to the First and Second World Wars, in which concern for the fate of national minorities was considered crucial in the relations among Europe's great powers.<sup>5</sup> During this period, the extent of barbarism and violation of human rights in World War II were measured in terms of the repressive and punitive actions taken against such populations. However, since then, the term has acquired widespread international usage and has featured prominently in discourses and politics of decolonization in Africa and Asia—so much so that interpretations of the term now vary widely from one region of the world to another depending on the particular field of scholarly study, often conveying greatly differing meanings.

In Africa, ethnic minority conflicts have often been animated by resource competition, mainly because ethno-territorial constituencies have been the key beneficiaries of state allocation decisions. This is especially because such local or regional administrations constitute important agencies for distributing economic benefits and also because rival sectional elites find it expedient to mobilize ethnic solidarities in their competition for power and privilege. Similarly, expanded material opportunities and socioeconomic mobility facilitate the rise of new minority elites who are adept at expressing communal grievances in order to mobilize their communities in response to changing political situations.<sup>6</sup> The major resource over which such struggles have occurred throughout Africa is land. Although some studies have accounted for the root causes of land and other resource-based conflicts across the continent, few have examined their connection to existing claims of belonging and genealogy.<sup>7</sup>

One perspective emphasizes the disadvantages minorities suffer at the hands of the majority group in power, enabled by the political process through which existing majorities and minorities are governed and interact within the same political system. The other perspective underlines the monopoly on power by a dominant minority, which it achieves either by subverting democratic processes or, more frequently, by cultivating

aristocratic principles and relations of governance. Clearly, Nigerian history has been confronted by both these types of relationships between majority and minority groups in the exercise of power.

While dominance by majority ethnic groups has had special resonance since 1951–54, which marked the onset of the democratic processes accompanying decolonization, Nigeria’s prior history was distinguished by instances of dominant minorities exploiting majorities, over whom they exercised substantial power. Such dominance has left a mark on modern politics and has besmirched relations between former dominant minorities and those they exploited in the past. There was, therefore, an active relationship concerning these two forms of power distribution between minority and majority groups historically in Nigeria. Emergent realities in postcolonial Nigeria, however, have transformed powerful precolonial groups, such as the Bini and Ijaw ethnic groups—who once ruled several Igbo subgroups under King Jaja—into minorities. Such transformations also have changed the complexion of the land and national questions in important ways.<sup>8</sup> The present description of such groups as minorities is thus a creation of the British colonial hegemony, which aids understanding of how modern political exigencies were influenced and shaped by the colonial past.

In Nigeria, the term “minorities” was used initially to refer to newly disadvantaged entities that resulted from the constitutional reforms as part of Nigeria’s independence from British imperial rule between 1952 and 1960. During the constitutional changes that began between 1951 and 1954, the existing political culture was challenged by the regrouping of Nigeria’s twenty-four provinces into three political regions (North, East, and West)—each with central power over the provinces placed under it. This centralization of political power significantly impacted political participation.<sup>9</sup> The most serious impacts were: (1) the emergence of ethnic power blocs based exclusively on the dominance of the three major ethnic groups, namely Hausa-Fulani in the North, Igbo in the East, and Yoruba in the West; (2) allegations of majority domination by members of various minority groups within each region; and, (3) the differentiation of ethnic groups based on their access to power. Given their demographic advantage, Igbo and Yoruba became formidable political powers in southern Nigeria, while other ethnic groups—including the historically dominant Bini—became minorities. In the North, these developments coincided with the determination of Usman dan Fodio’s descendants to expand the boundaries of Fulani aristocratic control beyond the territories of the conquered Hausa,

Nupe, and Yoruba-Ilorin to Tiv and other ethnic groups, whom the Fulani did not conquer but may have attacked and harassed in the precolonial period. The resulting resentment and abrasive dominance of the newly empowered ethnic groups fueled turbulent southern politics. It also led to considerable turmoil in the North.<sup>10</sup>

The genealogy of the ethnic minorities question in Nigeria is linked with three distinct histories: Nigerian federalism's mode of evolution and the emergent state system itself, forced migration by the British colonial hegemony, and voluntary migration of various ethnic groups. Under forced migration, various ethnic groups within colonial Nigeria were taken to other regions as unpaid laborers to contribute to the construction of basic infrastructure, such as hospitals, markets, railways, roads, and schools. Although these groups may have remained in the communities into which they were relocated, they and their descendants have neither been accepted nor recognized by members of the indigenous communities as legitimate co-heirs. Voluntary migration, on the other hand, includes the global movement of ethnic groups in search of improved living conditions for themselves, their dependents, and their livestock. Despite living for several decades in these communities, members of the immigrant populations continue to be viewed as outsiders and returning to their ancestral homelands may not be possible.

Resolving these complications has been undermined by: (1) indirect rule and the politics of preference accorded to the "sons of the soil" in local administration since the colonial period; (2) regionalism, which developed in the 1950s and 1960s and favors citizens of one region over another; and, (3) the "federal character" principles included in the Second (1979) and Fourth Republic (1999) constitutions. These policies and practices have done little to improve relations among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria for more than a century.<sup>11</sup> As Claude Ake and Mahmood Mamdani have shown, colonialism was based on the entrenchment of near-absolute distinctions between the colonizers and the colonized.<sup>12</sup> Transferring such distinctions to the operations of the postcolonial state thus solidified historically fluid patterns of identity construction. Although the movement of Hausa-Fulani migrant pastoralists in southwestern Nigeria was primarily voluntary, that of other ethnic minorities was related more to Nigerian federalism and its associated contradictions.

Nigerian federalism is not the result of local initiatives, whereby each group

would see improvements while retaining their autonomy. Nor was it explicitly introduced as a mechanism for local development and self-rule. Rather, it came into existence as a product of colonial contradictions and developed from British administrative expedience that was designed to cope with the problems of Nigeria's ethnic pluralism. Its present structure evolved from the 1914 political amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria. Between 1914 and 1945, the governmental structure was implemented through separate departmental and political administrations that were only tenuously coordinated at the center.<sup>13</sup>

In 1946, Nigeria became a federation with a three-region structure. However, this was built on devolution or fissiparity—not accretion nor aggregation as were typical of Australia, Canada, Switzerland, the United States of America, and other older federations. As such, from its early years, Nigeria could not meet its major fiscal and political responsibilities. Rather, the system was structurally flawed and problematic right from the beginning.<sup>14</sup> Such historical imbalances include: (1) the correspondence of regional administrative units with the geography of the three major ethnic groups—Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba—which effectively regionalized the ruling classes; (2) the unequal size and population of the northern region, which includes 75 percent of Nigeria's total landmass and 60 percent of its population; and, (3) the majority-minority ethnic structure that led to a permanent state of instability and tension.<sup>15</sup> From the outset, these imbalances have been a critical source of controversy and a crucial determinant of the structure of federal power, especially in determining the degree of power at the federal and regional levels. In addition, the weakness of the federal government resulted in a tripartite conflict structure that was later aggravated by minority ethnic groups in their attempt to assert themselves.<sup>16</sup> It also threatened the legitimacy of the federal government and its ability to provide appropriate leadership that could meet the demands of nation-building.

To be sure, there have been other forms of ethnic majority-minority articulations in Nigeria, which vary depending on their contexts and dynamics. For example, the first Ife-Modakeke conflict took place between 1835 and 1849 and stemmed from the disintegration of the old Oyo Empire—a development that resulted in the massive displacement of people throughout the region.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, not all forms of migration that occurred under the framework articulated above were land-based. For example, Igbo migrant conflicts with indigenous communities in northern and western Nigeria were

the result of socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, land-based conflicts could be between members of majority and minority populations of the same ethnic group—such as between the Aguleri and Umuleri over Otuocha—or of two different ethnic groups, such as Jukun-Tiv conflict in central Nigeria. It is therefore important to note the conceptual and theoretical differences underlining these types of conflicts while empirically validating them using the data generated.

The previous accounts of the genealogy of ethnic minorities and their experiences with conflict in Nigeria have been compounded by two recent developments that have adversely affected land-based disagreement throughout the country—namely the Land Use Act and the structural adjustment program. The Land Use Act, promulgated by Nigeria's military government in 1978, provided the legal basis for taking ownership of small portions of land across the country and allowed the massive commercialization of land and entrenchment of private property rights—as the government privileged private and state capital—to the detriment of communal and lineage land rights in rural areas.<sup>18</sup> The structural adjustment program (SAP) not only accentuated conflicts, but also intensified land accumulation.<sup>19</sup> It opened up the space for intensified agrarian capitalism, which rapidly accelerated conflict through unregulated land grabbing in rural areas. This was manifest in the offering of incentives to agri- and agro-allied businesses as well as government guarantees of access to land at almost no cost. An example was the land development program during the Bukola Saraki administration in Kwara State in 2004, which gave large swathes of land in Shonga, central Nigeria, to white Zimbabwean commercial farmers displaced under Robert Mugabe's fast-track land reform. This led to a process of accumulation by dispossession, as the local farmers and peasantry in Shonga were displaced despite the development promised at the outset of the venture.<sup>20</sup> The next section expands on these issues beyond Nigeria and underlines the centrality of land in Africa's political economy.

## **LAND AND RESOURCE COMPETITION IN AFRICA**

As a fundamental and highly symbolic resource, land holds a unique position within African economies and societies. Many of the conflicts in colonial and postcolonial Africa have been due to the appropriation of communal and individuals' land by various authorities. Understanding the volatile dynamics between the competing uses of land and the ensuing—conflicting—claims to its access and control is, however, not very straightforward. Examining

land conflicts in Africa is particularly challenging as the contexts in which they take place are continuously changing, thus adding complexity to the issues in dispute.<sup>21</sup> Yet sustainable growth and development in Africa, as well as the continent's overall contributions to the global political economy in the twenty-first century, will continue to depend largely on the manner in which land, resources, and disputes over land are managed. The need for greater integration of systematic analyses on land and changes in land tenure systems, and their resulting insights, into post-conflict peacebuilding and state reconstruction strategies by various international, regional, and local actors, provides some justification for this study.

The problematic character of land as a source of conflict has been widely acknowledged across Africa. Empirical studies and theoretical treatments of the land question as a problematic byproduct of elite control in Africa have also been undertaken. Between 1988 and 2000, a strip of sandy land on the Eritrean border was the source of a war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which claimed the lives of at least seventy thousand civilians and combatants between the two countries.<sup>22</sup> The conflict in Darfur, western Sudan, which began as a civil war in 1987–89 between Arab nomads and other ethnic groups, included ethnic cleansing, indiscriminate killing, and mass slaughtering on both sides as a result of unregulated land grabbing.<sup>23</sup> The land question has been expressed in a variety of ethnic and racial conflicts in Zimbabwe.<sup>24</sup> Twenty years after independence, land has remained the most hotly contested area of policy reform in the country.<sup>25</sup> Over six million people live in rural areas in Zimbabwe without access to fertile soil and reliable rainfall; they lack water rights and have restricted access to the bulk of the country's natural resources.<sup>26</sup> Land has similarly been a major national issue in most countries in southern Africa as well.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, while escalating conflicts over land and other resources in Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria's Niger Delta region, Zimbabwe, and elsewhere in Africa are copious, they also underscore the perennial failure by both elites and the state to successfully address development and land across the continent. Consequently, the issues of ending conflict in Africa and reconstructing development in its aftermath have attracted the attention of much international activism since the 1990s. In countries like Mozambique and South Africa, the transition from war to peace has resulted in tangible economic and social improvements at the communal and individual levels. Yet, for every success, there remain numerous instances in which peace is tenuous, with conflict rapidly reoccurring. The common denominator in

those situations has often been the failure of post-conflict reconstruction to address the critical issue of land.

In Nigeria, struggles for the control and private ownership of land have often taken the form of controversial legal manipulation by elites. The increase in the control and private ownership of land has greatly accentuated inter-ethnic polarization, social inequality, and the number of landless people, particularly among the rural poor. These experiences have created scarcity and other distributive pressures on the land acquisition process. Aided by the corrupt and rent-seeking elite at the federal level, these situations have also driven various ethnic, regional, and religious communities to develop sub-national conceptions of ethnic citizenship, which has compounded conflict in Nigeria since the 1980s.

Since this time, armed agitation by ethnic groups has been familiar in Nigeria.<sup>28</sup> In August 1987, a venomous exchange between a wealthy Hausa-Fulani settler and a Bachama wage laborer in Tingno-Waduku—a village about eighty kilometers northwest of Numan in Adamawa State—led to two days of hostility between the two groups. Following these exchanges, Bachama youth loudly chanted a traditional war cry, which attracted both Bachama and Hausa-Fulani populations from nearby farms. Bachama fighters responded by capturing five Hausa-Fulani farmers, whom were subsequently held hostage in Waduku, the section of the town inhabited mostly by the Bachama. On hearing the news, the Hausa-Fulani community attacked Waduku, ostensibly to free their ethnic kin unjustly held captive. In the counterattack that ensued, two Bachama leaders—including the village chief, Ndewode K. Kleru—lost their lives. The following day, August 20, 1987, ex-Bachama soldiers in Waduku, whom were mostly victims of the massive demobilization by the Nigerian Army after the civil war in 1970, moved into Tingno and launched a reprisal attack in an attempt to wipe out all the Hausa-Fulani settlers. Members of the two groups fought for three more days using automatic rifles, dane guns, and bows and arrows, leading to many deaths and the destruction of property. This quickly spread and led to sporadic clashes in Fadama Gyakan, Tingno-Kogi, Rigange, and other neighboring villages. It took the intervention of a combined team of the police and a detachment of the Nigerian Army from Yola to restore law and order.<sup>29</sup>

At the root of this conflict were disputed claims over agricultural land in the area. Tingno-Waduku has experienced an acute shortage of land following

heavy demands on the available land as a result of large-scale farming, rural differentiation, and an influential community of Hausa-Fulani farmers and fishermen that have created pressure on the available land and water resources in the area.<sup>30</sup> Although the Hausa-Fulani have lived among the Bachama in Tingno-Waduku for more than seventy years, divisions between them have remained along old ethnic and religious lines. For example, the Hausa-Fulani call the Bachama infidels, unbelievers, and the Bachama share a similar opinion of the Hausa-Fulani.

In February 1992, a conflict took place in the Zango-Kataf area of southern Kaduna, in Kaduna State, between the Hausa-Fulani and Kataf communities, which attracted the attention of the federal government. At issue were allegations of discrimination against the Kataf by the Hausa-Fulani in the allocation of agricultural land, market stalls, and other business opportunities. The conflict reached its climax on June 15, 1992, when the Kataf began a two-day offensive against the Hausa-Fulani after a Jumaat prayer.<sup>31</sup> In the process, yam fields belonging to Kataf farmers were attacked, seedlings were uprooted, property was destroyed, and hundreds of Hausa-Fulani inhabitants were injured and killed. Guns, bazookas, and other weapons were freely used. The violence further spread to Ikara, Kaduna, Zaria, and other cities in the state. Such violent exchanges have also occurred in Kafanchan, Kagoro, and Lere since this time. Although these conflicts have been linked to ethnic and religious grievances, disputed access to economic resources, especially land and state power, has been a central issue.

## **COLONIAL ORIGINS OF LAND-BASED CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA**

Referring to the antagonism, contradiction, and struggle generated by colonial and postcolonial policies that sought to redefine pre-capitalist customary regulations guiding access, control, and ownership of land as a basis for preparing and presenting it for production, the land question has been wrongly assumed to be limited to former settler colonies in Africa. Algeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe have been widely cited as examples for justifying this position.<sup>32</sup> Continent-wide studies of such conflicts—as in southwestern Nigeria—have therefore not only been scarce, but also have devoted more attention to recent manifestations of the conflicts than their colonial origins. Apart from heavily biased accounts by local historians, nuanced and objective analyses of the role of European Christian missionaries and merchant companies—such as John Holt and

the Royal Niger Company—in the conflicts are yet to be made clear. With globalization, structural adjustment, and the intensification of identity politics, many such conflicts have both expanded and lingered, thus compelling an examination of the historical roots of land alienation and expropriation in Africa.<sup>33</sup> Drawing on archival research conducted between October 2009 and March 2015, this section speaks to the historical basis of land-based conflicts in southwestern Nigeria.

Following the abolition of the slave trade in the 1800s, the British encouraged legitimate trade throughout its colonies and empowered the Royal Niger Company to administer, levy customs, make treaties, and trade throughout the areas around the basin of the Niger River.<sup>34</sup> The company moved into southern Nigeria and rapidly established several settlement areas there. In pursuance of its mandate, the Royal Niger Company acquired land, established trading outposts, and promoted trade—especially of cocoa and palm produce—which had severe implications for the land question.

First, the concentration and focus on commercial and trading activities led to an unprecedented diversion from the production of food to that of cash crops, which created an artificial scarcity and competition for land—leading to intensive land grabbing by members of various ethnic groups. Lagos became a commercial gateway to other neighboring Yoruba communities, and the growth of commerce and trade drew the attention and interest of other European trading companies, such as the British John Holt and French *Campagne Française de L’Afrique Occidentale*, which rapidly established posts across the region. These trading companies were followed by European missionaries—notably the Roman Catholic Church and the Church Missionary Society—that created settlements across the region and beyond in order to penetrate communities. Importantly, unlike the trading companies, missionaries were more interested in spreading Western cultural values through educating native populations and converting them to Christianity.

Second, European merchant companies and missionaries brought about fundamental transformations in the population and physical structures of southern Nigeria. Trade encouraged migration and rapid urbanization in Ibadan, Lagos, and other major cities across the region. Most migrants were Hausa-Fulani migrant herdsman from northern Nigeria or members of Nupe and Yoruba communities, who became local traders of European goods or servants of missionaries and accompanied their European masters

to southern Nigeria.<sup>35</sup> By 1900, the region was under British colonial rule.

All foreign entities that converged in southwestern Nigeria demonstrated an insatiable hunger for land. Although they had similar reasons for migrating to the region—commerce, religion, and trade—they were not united in why they needed land. For example, colonial officials needed to usurp land ownership from traditional institutions to consummate their sovereign authority over the local population. Missionaries wanted land to build churches and mission schools to aid with the spread of Christianity and other Western values across the region. European merchants needed land to eliminate local middlemen, establish trading posts, and access a direct supply of palm produce. The local populations needed land for farming and habitation. All these groups expressed their demands in a way that prioritized the commercialization and privatization of land. Therefore, as increased economic opportunities and pressures led to migration and changing patterns of production and trade, both the colonizers and colonized struggled to position themselves advantageously with respect to the allocation and use of land and land-based resources.<sup>36</sup> Land alienation—expressed in the individual and state ownership of land—was the only way to achieve this. Thus, contrary to the dictates of traditional practices, the commercialization and privatization of land was enforced by colonial administrators as the overriding principle of land relations. Although resistance was brutally crushed by the colonial state, the resulting tensions—generated by clashing notions and contradictory frameworks of land ownership upheld by the postcolonial state—laid the foundation for lingering conflicts and disputes over land. Beyond Nigeria, this was also the case in Algeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.<sup>37</sup>

For example, for the purpose of material uplift between 1855 and 1891, traditional rulers in Ogun State granted some portions of land in Sagamu—a city in the Ijebu Remo Local Government Area of Ogun State—to the Royal Niger Company, which built its trading posts.<sup>38</sup> In 1898, portions of land in the Ibarapa Central, Iseyin, and Iwajowa Local Government Areas of Oyo State were also sold to the company. While similar situations occurred across Lagos, Ondo, and Osun States, each of the parties came into the deal holding steadfastly to its own notion of land ownership. Believing that land was a commodity, Europeans saw this as a firm transfer of ownership, but the local population viewed land as an inalienable, cultural asset. The local population, thus, believed these were temporary transfers of ownership to their European guests—a right they thought they would reclaim with time and understanding. Unfortunately, by 1900, when the British colonial

administration revoked the authority and power of the Royal Niger Company, the Niger Lands Transfer Ordinance of 1916 transferred its land titles to the colonial government. Section 2 of the ordinance effectively transferred all the land sold to the Royal Niger Company—registered as Number 110 in the Register of Deeds and mentioned in the First Schedule of the Ordinance—to the governor of Nigeria.<sup>39</sup> This ordinance led to different interpretations of its intention. Members of the local communities saw it as an invitation to exercise their suspended right of ownership. Hausa-Fulani and other migrant populations in these areas understood it as a long-awaited opportunity to claim part of the land owned by the state.

It should be noted that much of this land was left undeveloped and unoccupied by both the Royal Niger Company and, later, the colonial state.<sup>40</sup> The reason being that the company committed itself “not to disturb present tenants or their heirs who may wish to continue in personal occupation of their lands and houses” in the land agreement.<sup>41</sup> For its part, the colonial government did not take effective possession of much of this land after officially revoking the ownership rights of the Royal Niger Company, which laid the groundwork for the inherited land-driven conflicts in postcolonial Nigeria.<sup>42</sup> Land thus became the *prima facie* cynosure for conflict between members of opposing ethnic groups. As indigenous Yoruba farmers embarked on chasing away Hausa-Fulani pastoralists from their land, bitter and bloody struggles ensued. In seeking to stop their Yoruba aggressors, Hausa-Fulani pastoralists instituted several court actions. In the process, litigations and counter-litigations continued into the 1980s, most of which have elicited fatal clashes, thus undermining development and stability.<sup>43</sup>

## RESEARCH METHODS

In developing this study, data were obtained from primary and secondary sources. Qualitative data were collected from observations, oral interviews, and focus group discussions conducted with a purposively selected group of respondents of Hausa-Fulani pastoralists and Yoruba farmers across southwestern Nigeria. These discussions and interviews took place in October 2009, February 2010, January–February 2013 as well as January–March 2015. According to the 1996 state creation exercise, Nigeria is divided into six geo-political zones: north-central, northeast, northwest, southeast, south-south, and southwest. Each of these zones comprises six states, which make up the thirty-six states of the federation along with Abuja, the federal capital territory. Focus group discussions were conducted in: (1) Ado Ekiti,

Ijero Ekiti, and Oye Ekiti Local Government Areas of Ekiti State; (2) Agege, Ajeromi-Ifelodun, and Mushin Local Government Areas of Lagos State; as well as, (3) Abeokuta North, Abeokuta South, Ado-Odo/Ota, Ijebu East, Ijebu North, Ijebu North-East, Ijebu Ode, and Sagamu Local Government Areas of Ogun State. The Local Government Areas from which respondents were selected are those with the highest occurrence of ethnically motivated land-based conflicts. Discussions and group interviews were conducted with the assistance of two research assistants. All the participants were male. While the Yoruba farmers who participated were either Muslim or traditional worshippers, the Hausa-Fulani pastoralists were mostly Muslim.

Focus group discussions were homogenously conducted on the basis of the ethnic identities of the respondents, between Hausa-Fulani migrant pastoralists and indigenous Yoruba farmers. In order to assure the freedom of expression as well as ethnic homogeneity of the respondents, the focus group discussions were conducted as separate entities. In doing this, only members of one ethnic group were assembled for discussion, interactive interrogation, and questions in each focus group discussion assignment. The discussion groups comprised a minimum of six and a maximum of twelve participants. Sixty persons were involved in the focus group discussions—twenty from each of the three states, ten chosen from each of the two ethnic groups. While the focus group discussions were limited to members of the general communities within the two ethnic groups across the three states, oral interviews were conducted with thirty people at the Departments of Public Prosecution as well as the offices of the Attorneys-General and Commissioners of Justice at the Ministries of Justice in each of the three states. Ten senior government officials were also interviewed in each state. To complement the interviews with government officials across the three states, ten additional interviews with five Hausa-Fulani pastoralists and five Yoruba farmers were also conducted. This led to a total of sixty interviews. Questions were asked on: (1) their general experiences and knowledge of conflicts in the areas; (2) the role of land as a major cause of conflict and hostility in the areas; (3) the connections between ethnic agitations and the struggles for land among the people; (4) the influence of class, geography, and racial and resource imbalances in the struggle for land; (5) the impact of all these factors and influences in the articulation of citizenship in the region; and, (6) the roles played by the government at various levels in resolving land-based conflicts in southwestern Nigeria.

Our observations revealed that although the Yoruba are the aboriginal

indigenes in southwestern Nigeria, their interactions with the Hausa-Fulani pastoralists date back to the colonial era, during which some grazing reserves were provided by the colonial state across the country. From that period, interactions between members of these two ethnic groups have been characterized by unending accusations of encroachment on farmland by Yoruba farmers followed by the Hausa-Fulani's unyielding insistence on the right of way for them and their flocks. These experiences have been underlined by mutual suspicion, creating a tense and volatile atmosphere. Among other considerations underwriting the political economy of land in these areas, the perceived disregard for the value of Yoruba communities by the migrant settlers is the immediate trigger of conflict, not just competition inherent in daily material production.

The qualitative data generated were subjected to systematic content analysis. Among the many challenges encountered during fieldwork, mistaken identity and suspicion of the researchers posed a serious threat to our safety. To overcome these, we had to build and establish trust with the local populations within the two communities to allay their unspoken fears, thereby assuring our security in the field. These efforts were complemented with secondary data. Secondary data were drawn largely from literature on autochthony, citizenship, indigeneship as well as land and resource competition in Nigeria and Africa. These were added to data generated on court cases involving Hausa-Fulani pastoralists and Yoruba farmers across the three states between 1999 and 2015. This way the research methods were inclusive and participatory.

## **LAND-BASED CONFLICTS IN SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA**

In southwestern Nigeria, disputed access to land by natives and settlers has served as a basis for violent conflicts among members of the two major ethnic groups in the region. To the Yoruba indigenes, the Hausa-Fulani are migrant settlers who should neither own nor lay any claim to land rights in any part of their communities, which the Hausa-Fulani see differently. The resulting tension created by the opposing frameworks and perceptions of land ownership among members of these groups is at the root of the violent conflicts experienced in the region, especially between 1999 and 2015. Violent ethnic conflicts driven mainly by land-based disputes have occurred among members of the Arogbo-Ijaw and Ilaje communities in Ondo State, the Ife-Modakeke in Osun State, and the Saki-Iseyin and Hausa-Fulani in Oyo State. Other conflict areas include Ajegunle and Ketu Mile 12 within the

Lagos metropolis as well as Bodija in Oyo State. Between 1999 and 2015, a total of twenty-one violent ethnic clashes due to land disputes occurred in Sagamu, a metropolitan city in the Ijebu Remo Local Government Area of Ogun State.<sup>44</sup> The conflict, which erupted in Sagamu in July 1999, not only was ethno-religious in nature, but spilled over into Kano State in January 2000. This spiral effect extended further into Ibadan in Oyo State in April 2000, when Hausa-Fulani pastoralists killed a Yoruba man, after which an angry mob descended on Hausa-Fulani pastoralists in the Ibadan area and killed two beggars in Agbowo, a suburb directly opposite the gate of the University of Ibadan.<sup>45</sup> On the third day of the violence, violence in Kano State in northern Nigeria boiled over and led to yet another reprisal attack against members of the Yoruba community in the Sabon Gari area.

Various accounts exist regarding the number of violent conflicts between Hausa-Fulani pastoralists and Yoruba farmers in southwestern Nigeria. Between 1999 and 2015, a number of violent conflicts were recorded in the following states: Ekiti (twenty-one), Lagos (twenty-four), Ogun (forty-two), Ondo (twenty-one), Osun (fifteen), and Oyo (forty-one).<sup>46</sup> The immediate or recent presence of Hausa-Fulani migrant pastoralists in this region dates back to the early 1950s, at which time there were no pronounced conflicts over land. Conflicts at this time were based on allegations by Yoruba farmers of the vandalization of their farms by unguided cattle, after which the police mediated enforcement and the payment of compensation.<sup>47</sup> The 1980s and 1990s, however, witnessed intense land grabbing by members of both ethnic groups, and the significance of this period cannot be underestimated.

Since the 1980s, conflicts have forced a shift to a focus on ethnicity, the ubiquitous character of which now brings to the fore the frustrations experienced in the nation-building project.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, beyond Nigeria, the strong desire for nation-building across postcolonial Africa has largely been a totalizing, state-centered project, which ignored significant processes of identity formation in the precolonial and colonial periods—fundamental processes that are of continuing relevance today.<sup>49</sup> The transitory nature of the 1980s and 1990s—new constitutions, forms of political competition, ground rules, negotiated agreements, pacts, and settlements—should be taken into account when seeking to explain and understand such conflicts because transitional periods are replete with crisis and turbulence. These periods generate tensions and uncertainties through new opportunities for political access and competition, in addition to providing opportunities to vent frustrations and grievances and to seek redress, thereby encouraging

more intense political action.<sup>50</sup>

In Nigeria, the 1980s began with a civilian democratic regime, but ended with the onset of a widespread economic crisis. During this period, the price of petroleum collapsed in the world market and export earnings declined. The manufacturing sector also experienced a rapid decline in capacity utilization, while inflation rose dramatically.<sup>51</sup> These events forced the Nigerian economy into deep crisis, leading to deindustrialization, excessive pilfering of public resources, and a dependence on the petty commodity sector. The social contract between the citizens and the state came under considerable stress, while pressures for democratization intensified. The combined impact of the resultant economic crisis and the adjustment introduced led to the intensification of existing hostilities over land and other scarce resources, which clearly informed the politicization of ethnicity among members of different ethnic groups.

As a regressive corollary, this period was characterized by many disruptive conflicts involving the use of deadly weapons and marked the emergence of the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) in 1994 and other anti-robbery vigilante groups in Yoruba communities in these states. Lastly, it informed the building of formal diaspora associations and communities, the organization of ethnic nationality formations, and the appointment of traditional rulers by Hausa-Fulani settlers in the region. These developments were understandable given the pronounced decline of state control—especially in regard to policing and security—that characterized much of Africa in the post-Cold War period.<sup>52</sup> These considerations not only underline the constitutional and structural constraints of the state in Nigeria as a notoriously complex and divided federation, but also underscore the importance of studying the connections between ethnicity and land-based conflicts in this period.

The development of alternative governance structures by Hausa-Fulani settlers in southwestern Nigeria began in 1995 after the first pronounced conflict with Yoruba communities. These conflicts took place sporadically between 1990 and 1995, during which Yoruba farmers attacked and killed 112 Hausa-Fulani pastoralists in the region.<sup>53</sup> By 1995, representatives had been appointed at the local levels to represent members of the Hausa-Fulani communities.<sup>54</sup> Thus, although ethnic conflicts have been occurring since the 1980s, they increased after 1995 and again in the period marking the country's return to civilian rule in May 1999—after fifteen years of military rule from 1984 to 1999.

By 1995, following the appeal by appointed representatives, the federal government created what it called exclusive grazing zones for Hausa-Fulani pastoralists in Ajegunle in the Ajeromi-Ifelodun Local Government Area of Lagos State, Igbo-Ora in the Ibarapa Central Local Government Area of Oyo State, Gaa Salihu Igangan in the Ibarapa North Local Government Area of Oyo State, and Waasinmi Aiyegun in the Iwajowa Local Government Area of Oyo State. The federal government—with the assistance of the World Bank—also provided a few wells for these communities.

Containing vast expanses of land, these communities are surrounded by thick forests in which the pastoralists settle.<sup>55</sup> Most of the wells have, however, dried up due to poor maintenance and unmanageable demand pressures on water for both animal and human consumption. Given the arid nature of this region, the green pastures within the grazing zones are exhausted during most dry seasons, which presses the pastoralists to expand in the quest for food and water for their livestock. This movement, unfortunately, causes crop destruction in the neighboring communities, which leads to clashes with Yoruba farmers who see the pastoralists mainly as vandals.<sup>56</sup> There have also been allegations that Hausa-Fulani populations rob local homes in the evenings. As attempts are made at apprehending these thieves, the Hausa-Fulani populations accuse members of the Yoruba community of victimizing them based on their minority status, which leads to further conflict as well as numerous deaths.

While there have been several violent exchanges between the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba, they have rarely made it to the court of law. Members of these communities attribute this to the unnecessary delay that accompanies the operations of the modern system of justice in the administration of disputes, leading them to resort to “jungle justice” through the deployment of self-adjudication and self-defense. Consequently, between 1999 and 2015, only a few cases have been handled in the courts in the region.<sup>57</sup> Human lives and property have, however, been lost in the process. More than 5,500 people of Hausa-Fulani descent were killed by members of the Oodua People’s Congress and other local vigilante groups in Oyo and Saki in Oyo State between 1999 and 2015.<sup>58</sup> Within the same period, pastoral communities in Abeokuta North, Ado-Awaaye, Ajegunle, Eruwa, Gaa Kondo, Igbo-Ora, Ijebu Ode, Imeko, Ikenne, Iseyin, Mushin, Owode Egba, Oyo, Saki, Sagamu, Sango-Ota, Waasinmi, and Yewa North were hunted, pursued, and attacked by members of the Oodua People’s Congress—with more than twelve thousand people of Hausa-Fulani descent killed and maimed. Hundreds of

Yoruba farmers have also been killed by Hausa-Fulani offenders in several retaliatory killings.<sup>59</sup> Property has also been destroyed. The aim of the Oodua People's Congress is to eliminate all pastoral communities and abolish the idea of pastoralists settling in southwestern Nigeria.<sup>60</sup>

Although the federal and state governments have repeatedly intervened to end these conflicts, not much has been achieved for peace and development. Peace and security committees have also been commissioned at the local government level. Additionally, the attention of police public relations committees in the six states has been drawn to the need to be more communitarian in their interactions with citizens at the local level. Other peace-mediating initiatives have similarly been created as a basis for spurring development, harmony, and peace across these states. However, peaceful settlements of disputes have remained elusive and far-fetched. These tensions further highlight the problematic context of the citizenship question in the country as well.

## CONCLUSION

This study has offered a reflection on the nature of the land and national questions in Nigeria. Drawing on primary data generated from focus group discussions and oral interviews carried out between 2009 and 2015 across locations with pronounced land-based conflicts in southwestern Nigeria, this essay examined the role of land as a source of conflict from the period following the implementation of the structural adjustment program in the country. As part of the ongoing debates on the very bases of conflict and post-conflict transitions within the context of Africa's changing experiences, this study aims to interrogate the transition from conflict to post-conflict situations in Africa and thereby provide concrete suggestions not only for consolidating democracy and peaceful coexistence but also for enhancing economic development across the continent.

As this essay has shown, the land question is a daunting challenge undermining nation-building and state consolidation in Nigeria. This has especially been the case since 1999—the year marking the country's return to civil democratic politics after fifteen years of military dictatorship. Since this period, the country has been vexed by numerous violent conflicts, litigations on fiscal over-centralization, and a plethora of constitutional crises—among other pathologies—that underlie the constitutional and structural constraints of Nigerian federalism.<sup>61</sup> The land question exists in

other parts of the continent beyond Nigeria as well. Notwithstanding the noted differences in conceptualizing this problem across various postcolonial societies, shared experiences converge around exclusion and inclusion and are central to forging a sense of nationhood. The criteria for exclusion and inclusion are, however, never easily determined—just as they are not arrived at without some prolonged contestation. Rather, it is usually the complex histories of such struggles—sometimes spanning several centuries—that produce recent challenges, dimensions, and manifestations for forging nationhood on the heels of such disintegrated experiences and societies.

How are citizens' rights understood by ordinary people across various rural communities in the country? How best might land redistribution and reforms be undertaken by the Nigerian state? How do Africans and Nigerians transform ethnic and other forms of deference and devotion by the citizens into those of the state? These questions are central to the land and national questions in Nigeria. To achieve meaningful and sustainable impact, arguments that focus on the democratic, federal, and national questions in Nigeria must be properly grounded in a conception of accountability and participation. In the context of development, this strengthens and transforms the status of citizens from that of abstract claimants to effective economic contributors and rightful beneficiaries of development on an inclusive and non-discriminatory basis.

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