

Combatting the Socio-Political and Economic Challenges of Farmer-Herdsmen Conflict in Nigeria: A Study of Abdullahi Abubakar's *Citizens or Strangers?*

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Abstract

Political and economic factors such as rivalry, intolerance, land ownership, power tussle, and so on are often the major causes of conflicts in every human society. As a peculiar social phenomenon, virtually every society in the world has witnessed one form of conflict or the other. Situated between causes and effects, it takes different shapes and dimensions from society to society. The usual atmospheres are inter-racial conflict, inter-tribal/ethnic conflict, inter-state conflict, inter-political conflict, etc. In Nigeria, especially the north central zone of the country, the conflictual incidents cum associated fatalities between the pastoralists and sedentary farming communities has risen high and taken appalling dimensions in the recent time. In dealing with such phenomenon, irrespective of its nature, studies in issues in conflict and conflict resolution have revealed that analysing the dynamics of a specific conflict, among others, is a vital step towards its resolution. To this end, therefore, theoretically situated between social functionality of literature and conflict analysis and resolution, the paper examines Abdullahi Abubakar's play, *Citizens or Strangers?* as a theatrical approach towards analysing the dynamics of the farmer-herdsmen crisis in Nigeria, thereby providing an in-depth understanding of it and suggesting a lasting resolution.

Keywords: Conflict, Farmer-Herdsmen, Nigeria, Theatre, Abdullahi Abubakar

Introduction

Conflict is a peculiar social phenomenon in all over the world. Indeed, humanity has grown to accept conflict as part of its nature, as virtually every society in the world has witnessed one form of conflict or the other (Auwal, 2010). Situated between causes and effects, it takes different shapes and dimensions from society to society. The usual atmospheres are inter-racial conflict, inter-tribal/ethnic conflict, inter-state conflict, international conflict, inter-political conflict, organisational conflict, etc. (Radda, 2006). On the one hand, these forms can largely be regarded as social or communal conflicts. On the other hand, conflict is also experienced at the individual level, specifically in two ways: interpersonal conflict and conflict within self. Irrespective of the form it takes, at the heart of every conflict lie cause(s) and effect(s). To this end, remarkable strides have been made by scholars in dealing with conflict and conflict resolution, largely within the framework of cause-and-effect, seeking methods and devising institutions, with a view to resolving the existing conflicts, curtailing a likely eruption, mitigating its

effects from spreading and escalating when they do occur and maintaining a conflict-free society. (Habib, 2006)

In a plural society like Nigeria, according to Auwal (2010, p. 51), "conflicts have been more than associated with social, communal, religious or ethnic issues rather than any other factors". Nigeria has experienced and continues to experience conflicts with serious consequences on the people (Radda, 2006). The north central zone of the country is a peculiar battle ground with the conflictual incidents cum associated fatalities between the pastoralists and sedentary farming communities rising high and taking appalling dimensions in the recent time. Odinkalu and Tukur (2010) report that "over the past decades, the intensity, frequency and geographical scope of these incidents have risen sharply and rapidly. Thousands have been killed; many more have been displaced; properties, crops and livestock worth billions of naira destroyed". (www.kapital929.fm/resolving-the-farmer-herdsmen-conflict/)

Considering the far-reaching roles both parties play in the socio-economic growth of the country; via the provision of essential sustenance for the country, the farmers' industrious efforts to feed themselves, their family and the country at large, and the pastoralists' efforts that ensure the country's dairy and protein needs are met, it is greatly incumbent on both the government and potential individuals to intervene in providing and/or suggestion of urgent and enduring solutions to the extremely hostile clashes. In rising to this challenge, especially at the individual levels, looking into the various conflict resolution strategies and/or methods is, therefore, crucial. To this end, the paper examines Abdullahi Abubakar's play *Citizens or Strangers?* as a theatrical intervention essentially aimed at analysing the dynamics of the communal crisis between the Fulani cattle breeders and Idoma farmers of Benue State of Nigeria, thereby providing an in-depth understanding of it and suggesting a lasting resolution path.

About the Playwright

Abdullahi Abubakar is a Professor in the Department of English, University of Ilorin. He is a theorist, playwright and theatre director. His strong sense of social vision has culminated in many published plays to his credit. These include the following: *A New Weft in the Loom* (2012), *Next Time* (2012), *Creating a Future* (2013), *Sirens and Whispers* (2013), *Corper'tion* (2013), *All for God!* (2014) and *The New Eves* (2020).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the study is situated between social functionality of literature and conflict analysis and resolution. Stressing the social functionality of literature in "Artistic Creativity: Literature in the Service of Society", Ezeigbo (2008) posits that, in literature from all over the world, instances abound of how writers employ the power of imagination and illusion of reality to "create and re-create experiences that hold up a mirror to their societies to view their actions and understand the need to achieve positive transformations of the society" (p. 12). In the context of this study, the reflected experience in the artistic mirror is a form of conflict that is, on the surface, characterized by ethnic/professional rivalry. Oyesola (2015, p. 101) posits that there is

conflict when:

there is a sharp disagreement or clash, for instance, between divergent ideas, interests or people and nations. Conflict is universal yet distinct in every culture. It is common to all persons yet experienced uniquely by every individual. It is a visible sign of human energy and often the result of competitive striving for the same goals, rights or resources.

The study thus conceives that the conflictual experience which has been theatrically re-created here is critically with a view to analysing the components of the conflict and showing the society their actions, their human brutality, thereby understanding the much need for positive social transformation. The theatrical re-enactment thus becomes an important means of understanding and interpreting the aspect of a society which involves social conflict, class struggle and the human condition. Since the principal aim of conflict analysis is to aid the understanding of a specific conflict in order to positively transform it, Gusau (2006, p. 33) observes that it is crucial for interveners or analysts to "start from mastering the components of the conflict, namely its background and context, stages, positions or attitudes of the parties, and the parties themselves". To this end, to a large degree, it can be posited that the whole artistic idea in this play is geared towards unraveling the inherent conflicting issues, hence seeking resolution to the entire conflict. Technically, such analytical stride is referred to as conflict resolution. In his definition, Auwal (2010, pp. 57-58) posits that:

conflict resolution usually implies the process of resolving a dispute or conflict permanently. It is done by providing each side with appropriate terms of bargaining. It is predicated on the belief that a good conflict resolution begins by identifying the problems and demands of each party involved in conflict, and then by adequately addressing the interest of each; it is expected that a lasting peace can be restored.

Thus, aligning the optimism expressed in the above conception of conflict resolution with

the social functionality of literature described by Akachi (2008), it is equally expected that the social reality dramatized in the play under study will impact positively on resolving the conflict, thereby contributing significantly, also, to other measures and approaches already in place towards achieving such end.

The Play and the Dynamics of Farmer-Herdsman Conflict/The Dynamics of the Conflict in the Play

Understanding and analyzing the dynamics of a specific conflict is requisite in a bid to resolving it. To this end, digging into the root cause(s) appears to be the foremost step which will provide one with such backgrounds as the history of the conflict, the socio-cultural, political, economic and even religious contexts of the parties in the conflict. In some cases, posits Gusau (2006, p. 34), “the distant, and the recent past, as well as the political, economic and social arrangements in the society that may affect the way each of the parties perceives itself in relation to the other and to the issue at hand, all combine to help in the understanding of the conflict. To this effect, the entire dramatization quite insightfully sets the historical background to the crisis between the Fulani cattle breeders and Idoma farmers of Benue State of Nigeria.

The play opens with the background ambience of a vehement and glowing hostility between two communities of distinct tribes or ethnicity – the Fulanis and Idomas. A Fulani herdsman is shown leaning on a tree while he watches over the grazing herd. Three villagers, a man and two women, obviously Idoma farmers on their way to the farm, appear, and on sighting the herd; as if a taboo, a very strong alarm is raised immediately. The ensuing atmosphere culminates in exchange of war songs, thereby heralding another phase of the lingering crisis between them. Some key chiefs of the two communities, boiling with anger, relate the situation at hand to their respective leaders. From both ends, unanimous consensus is reached to embark on war; hence preparations in place.

Ehohi, a daughter of a politician of Idoma extraction representing the entire communities of Fulani and Idoma at the National Assembly, Ediga, is going abroad to study. While hastily on a

chartered vehicle to the capital city to catch up with the next available flight after missing her originally scheduled flight, a heavy flood occur, and coupled with the roaring of a hippopotamus, many people abandon their vehicles and run for safety. Consequentially, this event leads Ehohi and the commercial driver, Durow, to the Fulani community. Perceiving them as spies in that environment, which is circumstantial of the current crisis, they are held in captivity.

Meanwhile, Ehohi’s father has been seriously ill with his health on a degenerating note and he is being referred from one specialist to the other. The illness has, however, defied orthodox therapy by every means. Alternatively, via the efforts of his wife, Ajuma, a spiritual consultation reveals that Ediga has a confession to make before the Fulani leader, Jowuro, as a requisite for his healing. Being an illustrious son and their pride, the Idoma leader, Oche, and other chiefs cannot but support him in this regard, so as not to lose him. Out of no choice, a peace message is sent to the Fulanis to this effect. A reasonable level of tolerance is maintained at this level and a further arrangement is made for a meeting between the representatives of the two communities at a neutral ground.

Ediga’s confession reveals that he is greatly instrumental to the genesis of the entire rift. As the then Commissioner of Agriculture in the state, he invests a huge amount of money he acquires illegally in irrigation farming with another ten billion naira loan obtained from the World Bank. A vast land near the river is usurped for this purpose. Just a day before the coming of the World Bank Assessment Team for the loan, Ediga claims that a herdsman allows his animals to encroach into his farm which amounts to huge damage. He then instructs a total onslaught on them and the entire members of that family – Reebo’s – are wiped out. Coincidentally, Durow is the only survivor of that attack as a kid then. The act thus marks the genesis of the entire communal crisis:

EDIGA: (*continues in a similar manner.*)
it wasn’t all my fault. As the then Commissioner for Agriculture in the state, ... I got a huge amount made from a fertilizer scam; so, I

decided to engage in irrigation farming... for which a loan of ten billion naira could be secured..., using my good office. I usurped the land beside the river... claiming government interest in it and... warned against trespass. But the herdsman would not heed, claiming scarcity of water for their animals... One day, a herdsman allowed his animals to encroach into my farm... near the river. The damage was too much and... coming just a day before the World Bank... assessment committee for the lone, I got mad. I set my boys loose on the family; ... and members of the Reebo family were wiped out. This started the whole crisis. (Abubakar, 2015, p. 52)

Subsequently, he allows the crisis to linger on using the atmosphere as an advantage to drive stronger his inordinate political ambition. During elections; armed, his boys would raid polling units where he is unpopular and get away with ballot boxes and papers under the guise of Fulani or Idoma attack, with the media being the channel via which the false reportage would be let out:

EDIGA: I later realized that the fracas would help my political ambition... so I allowed it to linger on. During elections, many polling units where I was not popular... were attacked by my boys, ... under the guise of the herdsman or farmers as I found it convenient. The media were our veritable outlets. (Abubakar, 2015, p. 53)

Based on the foregoing, the cumulative factors surrounding the conflict are, at first, political and economic, and the impacts of this development is greatly ascertainable on the way each of the communities perceive itself in relation to the other and largely, to the issue at hand. Their relationship is absolutely characterized by an atmosphere of suspicion, anxiety, distrust and enmity largely bred

by poor leadership and lack of good governance as depicted in the character of Ediga. Clearly, as an important political figure, Ediga has a greater role to play in the governance of the entire communities. This borders on democratization, maintenance of law and order, accountability and transparency, responsiveness, respect for rule of law as well respect for minority rights among other human rights concerns. These are characteristic of good governance and are indeed, all together, “a conflict prevention technique as well as an effective resolution as the case may be” (Bambale, 2006, p. 51). However, Ediga’s failure to institute such a structure of good governance not only triggered the conflict but also devastatingly fueled and prolonged it.

In his analysis of conflict, Gusau (2006) offers that it is a phenomenon that passes through certain stages and it is quite crucial for a conflict analyst to study and understand the inherent changes occurring from stage to stage, largely because there are certain behavioural patterns from the parties that are peculiar to the crisis as it unfolds in phases. To this end, five stages or phases are said to be inherently identifiable in a conflict: pre-conflict stage; confrontation stage; the crisis stage; the stage where all conflicts tend to one of two ends, that is, either one side wins or the other loses, or both sides become consumed in it and reached an accord; and the post-conflict period.

In the play, the pre-conflict stage between the two communities is largely implicit. Inferably, however, it is the post-annihilation of the herdsman’s (Reebo) family. Consequently, the atmosphere of their relationship becomes characterized by “incompatibility of goals of the parties where each is nursing different expectations, goals, rights, etc.” (Gusau, 2006, p. 35). Hence, the nature of such incompatible goals certainly must have taken such dimensions as: who owns the land? Who dominates who? Who are ‘citizens’ and who ‘strangers’ are? Thus, the conflicting parties’ preoccupations with finding favourable answers to these questions lead to the confrontation phase between them.

Also, this stage is implicit in the play. According to Gusau (2006), the confrontation stage is a period of conflict development in which

it comes to the open “where all the parties begin to make demands, agitations and at some point become polarized on their stands, where low levels of violence such as minor skirmishes involving the parties occur” (p. 35). The reader has a glimpse of this from the scene where an update of the warring situation is taken to Jowuro’s palace by two Fulani chiefs, Gongooru and Baajobo. The trio reiterates their stand thus:

GONGOORU: Tell the Jowuro we are here. (*a guard goes in to announce the presence of the chiefs. Jowuro comes out of his hut to meet the chiefs and they exchange greetings*). Jowuro! There is fire on the mountain! (*Pointing to the second chief*) Baajobo, let him hear.

BAAJOB: Jowuro! We lost many of our warriors to spiral killings; so we cannot fold our arms any longer.

JOWURO: Ah!...

BAAJOB: Jowuro, we are going to war!

GONGOORU: Yes!

JOWURO: (*Rhetorically*) Do you know what you will do for me, now? Inform the Chief army and get all the youths. We are going to war! (Abubakar, 2015, p. 4)

At the other end, also, two Idoma chiefs, Alapa and Apala, are also seen bearing the situation at hand to their leader. At this point, the Idoma war song re-echoes with the former chief equally roaring with anger and pride:

ALAPA: (*in anger but is calmed by Akpala.*) Don’t tell me anything. I must see the Oche.

APALA: Take it easy.

ALAPA: I am going to war! As the commander of the army, I cannot allow to be put to shame. I must keep my pride at all cost! (Abubakar, 2015, p. 5)

The totality of the foregoing is considerably indicative of an ideological polarity which has set the two communities apart and also suggestive of the earlier confrontation when the crisis was just springing up with the parties getting engaged through the use of threats and insults.

The climax of a conflict is marked when it becomes characterized by violent confrontation, with both sides “suffering levels of casualties, large scale population displacements, destruction

of lives and properties, etc.” (Gusau, 2006, p. 35). In the play, through the eyes of two narrators, the atmosphere of the actual crisis stage; which is characterized by horror, irrationality, ruthlessness and inhumanity, is revealed thus:

NARRATOR I: I say no! ...

NARRATOR II: Yes, no to this carnage

NARRATOR I: This is not helpful, my brother.

NARRATOR II: (*to the integrated audience*) What do you think, too?

NARRATOR I: The herdsmen and the farmers... why do we slaughter each other, my people?

NARRATOR II: Killing one-another! It is such a pity.

NARRATOR I: Why penetrate such evil against humanity by killing fellow citizens? How can we justify this ‘war’?

NARRATOR II: So much blood spilled, for what?

NARRATOR I: No (*repeat for emphasis*)...! We should think about it.

What reason is justifiable enough for one to terminate his fellow man’s life?

NARRATOR II: What excuse, my people? I am short of words. My heart bleeds.

NARRATOR I: I am happy you see it, just the way I do, too.

NARRATOR II: (*to the integrated audience*) What about you, too? We shall allow you also to see it. (Abubakar, 2015, pp. 3-4)

Amidst these violent confrontations, it is evident that the two communities have become consumed in the conflict, with no winner but losers at both ends; hence, an accord path is eventually taken. The message of peace the Idomas sent to the Fulanis, which yields an agreement to have a representative meeting at a neutral ground, remains a crucial build up to the ‘final truce’, being the optimistic or utopian atmosphere the play paints as the post-conflict period. At this level, the processes of addressing the causes of the conflict are given space and a quite innovative and developmental path is being channeled. This development is clearly indicative of the accommodating and compromising postures from

the conflicting parties.

In conflict analysis, the foregoing is part of the four variants of the cooperative postures available to the parties. Hence, at this point, the two parties demonstrate accommodating dispositions and eventually adopt a strategy of compromise that shows readiness of the parties to find a common ground for a solution, that which is mutually satisfying and acceptable to both parties (Gusau 2006). To this end, a major resolution path is suggested through the eyes of Durow whose figure represents an agriculturalist, portrayed as deserving to be given chance to serve the society in the cognate capacity, based on merit and not favour. In terms of both attitude and aptitude, as evident in his innovation, magnanimity and communal spirit, the characterization of Durow is no doubt upright. The subsequent decision of the joint elders' council to have him replacing Ediga at the National Assembly is a significant pointer to this. After all, as pointed out by the first narrator, "one would expect that the most sensible thing to do is fishing out the most disciplined, orderly and diligent persons as leaders" (Abubakar, 2015, p. 11). Thus, as characteristic of conflict, their rationality is challenged to think of alternative ways of meeting contesting human needs and interests. What is emphasized therefore is not conflict *per se* but the ways the rational ones among them have responded to it (Auwal, 2010; emphasis added). Durow and a Fulani chief, Gongooru, are significantly insightful in these regards:

GONGOORU: ... It is the issue of strategy that is polarizing us. Before now, our two communities have co-existed with no rancours. What degenerated into the mass killings have been the same incidents of cows eating up farms, which we often resolved amicably through compensations agreed upon in roundtable talks. Why has the situation then degenerated to mass killings? That is the question that requires an answer before we plan. (Abubakar, 2015, p. 42)

DUROW: The lingering crisis has preoccupied my mind for long and a

suggestion has been on my mind since. To move forward, I want to propose a permanent solution to main cause of disagreement between the two domicile professions of breeding and farming. (*The integral and integrated audiences express surprise, anxiety, and relief in different ways.*) Let us begin to see our roles as complimentary and not at variance, if we want progress in the land. (*Some adjust their seats while others become more attentive*) Henceforth, we should earmark some areas as grazing land for a couple of years, we shall make the land recuperate from extensive years of farming. Also, the animals' waste would serve as manure for the quick recuperation of such lands. Afterwards, the grazing land would be exchanged for farmland with less yields. The same shall apply to the water sides which shall be shared among the herdsmen and the farmers. Thank you. (Abubakar, 2015, pp. 55-56)

As a build up to this, the joint elders' council has earlier convened a meeting during which the path of peace, unity and progress is finally ratified. The attitudes demonstrated by the two warring communities – their willingness to review their positions and compromise on their demands – speak volume on the perspectives of both parties on the crisis. Accordingly, Gusau (2006) observes that, at this level, parties to a conflict tend to "understand or interpret the conflict in relation to a number of factors such as their beliefs, values, views, their images of themselves and of the other party, etc. (p. 36). Thus, both attitudes and perspectives of the parties contribute considerably in defining their relationships with the others. What this apparently suggests is that, at this point in time, the conflict could have been resolved upon prompt and strategic interventions.

The atmosphere described by Gusau (2006) above can be contextualized in the play at the climax of the crisis. It begins to set in from the Fulanis when the fate of the captives (Ehohi and Durow) is to be decided. A chief, Baajobo, suggests death penalty retaliatory to their claimed murdered children. Another two key chiefs,

however, caution respectively:

BOODERI: I support the idea with a little modification. Let us determine the actual identity of the accused, to ensure we are not taking a wrong decision; we should initiate a fresh enmity.

GONGOORU: I want to warn against any hasty decision on this matter. If we consider our losses in terms lives and property in these past years, we may see no logic in brokering peace. Do not misunderstand me; I am not preaching cowardice but caution. The *nagge* is remarkable for its strength to make a market desolate but that would be when its patience is stretched to its limit.... Let us understand one thing. At the other end, they only lose people when we attack. At this end, we lose our property in addition to our youths. Also, consider our population as a scattered people all over the land and the implication of that on our strength. (Abubakar, 2015, pp. 41-42)

Similarly, at a meeting point where Ediga is to make his confession, the conscious de-escalatory language and dispositions of two Idoma chiefs, Alapa and Apala, and a Fulani chief, Baajobo, coupled with the responses from all the villagers, all together, ring a positively significant attitudinal change to the entire conflict. More so, the attitudinal changes displayed by the conflicting parties owe so much to their perspectives of the lingering crisis and, thereby helping significantly in defining their relationships:

ALAPA: May there be peace in our land

ALL: Amin....Amen.

BAAJOBBO: That is if we are sincere in our pursuance of it.

ALAPA: We have ever been a peaceful people except we are pushed to the war.

APALA: Please, let us exercise patience. Our mission is quite different. (*Pointing to Ediga*) Our representative here has something to say to us all. Let us listen. (Abubakar, 2015, p. 51)

Furthermore, a major vital step towards understanding the many ramifications of a conflict is identification of the parties to the conflict (Gusau, 2006). It is maintained that identifying the

individuals, groups or even nations to a conflict help to map out the strategies for management and resolution; hence their preferences, positions, needs, fears, the interests they are pursuing or striving to protect are adequately addressed (Gusau, 2006). To this end, the entire dramatization is loaded with this conflict analytical strategy. On the one hand, the parties are apparently identified – the Fulani cattle breeders and the Idoma farmers found in the north central part of Nigeria, specifically Benue State. On the other hand, the interests they are pursuing or protecting are also ascertained with purely economic and socio-political underpinnings. Economically, the Fulanis seek sustenance for their herd, invariably themselves, and the only means is grazing, especially where the pastures seem greener. The Idomas similarly seek sustenance for themselves, their families and the community at large through farming. From both ends, thus, the provision of dairies and meat from the cows and that of food from the farms have great economic impacts. Socio-politically, on the other hand, their entire socio-political setting is characterized by such questions as: who dominates who? Who are the land owners and who the settlers are? Who are the ‘citizens’ and who the ‘strangers’ are? This points to the central argument of the Structural Theory of conflict which holds that violence or conflict “is a phenomenon that is built in human societies according to how they are structured and organised” (Mohammed, 2006, p. 19).

Moreover, irrespective of the type of structure, the entire fabric of social life is said to be inherently consists of a struggle for power and status between groups and between individuals (Umar, 2006). At the both conceptual levels, evidently, this is portrayed in the relationship of the two communities. Hence, the fundamental statement the play ideologically makes resides in this structural relationship. It is a fragile but significant relationship that must be responsively and responsibly maintained at both the individual and governmental levels, in order to rid the society of such disruption and unjustifiable destruction of lives and properties.

Conclusion

Although it is a paramount national issue,

the play has dealt particularly with a conflicting issue that directly affects certain ethnic groups from northern region of Nigeria. What makes an ideal polity is “the extent to which conflicting interests and needs are constructively managed (Auwal, 2010, p. 51). Hence, to this effect, the significance of the play is fundamentally revealed in the fact that it underscores the dire need for a kind of societal resurgence which embraces good governance, prompt leadership intervention in the face of looming crisis, sincerity of purpose, prioritizing of communal interests over those of the individuals, prioritizing dialogue over violence in the event of incompatibility of goals, respect for rule of law and upholding of professional ethics. On the whole, it is evident that the dearth of all these in the dramatized political landscape has not only bred the crisis but also terribly fueled it the more.

Thus, the conflict analysis theatrically

explored in the play would have earned the play the power of theatre to shape the thinking of the society, having employed an analytical technique or approach to the understanding; hence the resolution of the intra-communal/professional crisis in the specified sub-region of the country, in particular, and the entire nation at large. Essentially, the paper offers that, to a remarkable extent, from a well-grounded research and insight, the playwright has justifiably dramatized the causes and related issues of the conflict, in the same vein an expert in conflict analysis would do, while suggesting enduring solutions to the persistent menace that has engulfed the country in the recent time. This is ultimately with a view to proffering a solid ground on which to permanently combat the menace in the country.

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