


Chapter 6

Multimodal Representation of Herder–Farmer Conflicts in Selected Nigerian Online Cartoons

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ABSTRACT

Cartoons reveal complex dimensions of clashes between nomadic herders and agrarian farmers in Nigeria. This study examines 13 cartoons published in e-publishing unit of The Punch, one of Nigeria's most widely read newspapers, to explore how multiple modes combine to depict herder-farmer conflicts (HFCs), in order to describe how semiotic resources contextualise HFCs and how digital resources function in humourising HFCs in online newspapers. Multimodal discourse exploration of HFCs is performed via Kress' (2010) social semiotic approach to multimodal discourse. Findings reveal that The Punch deploys diverse modes of representation – image, writing, caricature. Interaction among semiotic resources, shared situation and linguistic forms reveals dimensions of insecurity, ethnoreligious bigotry, human rights violation, hypocrisy. Cartoonists are critical of Nigerian government's level of involvement in HFCs, revealing state actors as cohorts in herders' attacks; and sedentary farmers as victims. HCFs are framed as complex sociopolitical crises, intensifying ethnic tensions and divisions.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent times, Herder-Farmer Conflicts (HFCs) in Nigeria have become a long-lasting issue posing security challenges to Nigerians, particularly in the northern and Middle Belt regions of the country. These conflicts commonly involve rattles between sedentary farmers who depend on agrarian lands for cultivating crops and Fulani herdsmen who engage in nomadic livestock grazing (Gürsoy, 2019). Scholars have offered refreshing debates as to the underlying factors contributing to the conflicts. For instance, Nassef et al. (2023) and Efobi et al. (2025) submit that ecological pressure and climate change have informed the movement of northern herders southward in quest of water and grazing land, causing increased rivalry with farmers. However, others (Oghuvbu & Oghuvbu, 2020) have attributed these conflicts to diversities in their land-use practices including their ethnic-based outlook on land ownership. The disputes are increasingly growing into religious and tribal clashes and remain a threat to state integration. Drawing on the aforementioned views, one could safely assert that HFCs in these regions are often intensified by religious and ethnic divisions. A complex dimension of HFCs is also presented by scholars who remark on the complications posed by the disputes in attempts to reach a resolution (Ajayi & Sennuga, 2022). In the arguments, government's negligence, absence of security forces as well as economic and political interests of the ruling class, particularly in rural areas, exacerbate the clashes, leaving agrarian communities vulnerable to violent attacks from farmers or armed herders (Oli et al., 2018). Ultimately, armed groups often hijack the disputes, leading to casualties, insecurity and displacement (Bello & Abdullahi, 2021). In Osisanwo's (2024) corpus-based study on gunmen, bandits and ransom demanders in the Nigerian context, the root of insecurity has been moored on power struggle, corrupt practices, bad governance and government's lapses as regards unemployment.

HFCs offer chances for online media to express vantage points about teeming dilemmas of insecurity as well as series of land-use clashes between herders and farmers across North Central Nigeria. Online newspapers are deployed as powerful tools to project this contextual issue and often provide platforms for columnists and editorial cartoonists to project their contextual goals and to shape the views of the public. Indeed, online entry of most Nigerian newspapers have made the perspectives (opinions created in graphical forms) of cartoon strip artists more accessible. Nigerian editorial cartoons produced online are presumed to function as communicative tools for unveiling sociopolitical trends indexing serious subjects by means of humour. Editorial cartoons are understood as multimodal texts as they represent a number of semiotic components (Amore & Atoloye, 2016). While unearthing critical thoughts from readers constitute the specific goal of cartoonists in the pictorial representation of HFCs, they are engrossed with eliciting mirth in a bid to convey sociopolitical

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