

**THE STATE, FARMERS/HERDERS' CLASHES AND VOTER MOBILIZATION IN  
THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: INTERROGATING  
ELECTIONEERING CAMPAIGN RHETORIC IN BENUE STATE**

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***Abstract***

*The internecine farmers/herders' clashes that became pervasive in Nigeria in recent times took the centre stage in electioneering campaign in the 2019 general elections in the country. The opposition parties used the bloody clashes that aggravated inter-ethnic disharmony, undermined the country's security and unleashed socio-economic losses as a main campaign issue. Hence, campaign slogans, jingles and songs that harped on the farmers/herders' clashes were used during electioneering campaigns to mobilize votes. This study, therefore, examines the campaign slogans, songs and messages by the main opposition party, the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) candidates and its supporters at political rallies in the 2019 elections in Benue State that dwell on the armed herdsmen attacks to dissuade voters from voting the ruling party, the All Progressive Congress (APC) headed by Muhammadu Buhari a Fulani. The study adopts Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony as its theoretical frame of analysis. The study which made use of content analysis and is analytically revealed that political language has become an instrument of hegemonic control meant to divert peoples' attention from socio-economic realities. In as much as party songs, slogans and jingles tend to convey symbolic aspects of genuine concern for the people's plight, they fail to offer alternative solutions to prevailing socio-economic realities in Benue State. Amongst other recommendations, it suggests that political debates should be institutionalized in the country's electoral process.*

***Keywords:*** *State, farmers/herders' clashes, electioneering campaign, elections.*

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**1. Introduction**

Farmers/herders' conflict have intensified and spread in Nigeria over the past decade and today, it poses a great threat to national survival (Gambari, 2017). These clashes have not only led to wanton loss of lives and property but have also led to human displacement. Between 2006 -

2014, statistics from the Nigerian Watch database indicate that 615 violent deaths related to cattle grazing were recorded (Ogo-Oluwa, 2017). Also, between January 2016-October, 2018, Amnesty International (2018), has documented 312 incidents of attacks and reprisal attacks in 22 states and Abuja in which an estimated 3,641 people were killed, 406 were injured, 5000 houses were burnt down, and 182,530 people got displaced. In fact, today the farmers/herders' conflict has been identified as Nigeria's greatest security challenge claiming more lives than the Boko Haram insurgency, (Bada,2018). The attacks are pervasive, and there is no geopolitical zone of the country that has not been affected by these clashes.

International Crisis Group (2017) has pointed out that apart from the loss of lives, these clashes have impacted negatively on the nation's economy and have aggravated the already fragile relations among the country's major regional, ethnic and religious groups. A recent report by Search for Common Ground indicates the federal government is losing \$13.7 billion annually as a result of farmers/herders' clashes (Jimoh, 2017). The study also found out that on average, Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa and Plateau States have lost 47% of their internally generated revenues as a result of the crises. Reports by Mercy Corps, a global humanitarian organization funded by the British Department for International Development (DFID) indicate that between 2013 and 2016, the average Nigerian household affected by farmers-pastoralist's conflict would experience at least a 64% increase in income, if these conflicts were reduced to zero (Mercy Corps, 2015).

The incessant farmers/herders' clashes in the country have been attributed to a myriad of factors. David and Luna (2008) have pointed out that population growth, environmental degradation and the shift from exchange-based relations to commodification have intensified pressure on natural resources making them scarcer and this has invariably aggravated the potential for opposition between the interest of sedentary farmers and pastoralists. Climate change induced rainfall shifting pattern and desertification have reduced croplands and grazing lands which the herdsman have historically used for grazing to move into southern States, and in some cases settle permanently in these areas in an attempt to find pasture for their herds. In the course of grazing their livestock, the herdsman often fail to control their livestock, and they trespass into farms causing damage to the farmer's crops, and this ensues conflict between farmers and herdsman (Akerjiir,2018). The increasing farmers/herders' conflict is therefore aggravated by the desperation of the affected groups to adequately protect as well as advance their survivalist interest in the context of an ever-diminishing ecological properties occasioned

by increased resource scarcity, crisis of group survival and increase in human population, (Luka & Erunke, 2016). The clashes as emphasized are largely a clash of interest over access to means of livelihood by pastoralists and farmers.

Conflicts between pastoralists and farmers in Nigeria have also been interpreted as a 'subtle continuation of the 1804 Fulani jihad by today's' fully armed, and well protected Fulani herdsmen with the same old agenda to overrun and Islamize Nigeria' (Orebe, 2018; p.20). There is also a vengeance perspective which links the worsening economic condition in the country with the dramatic rise in incidents of cattle rustling and coordinated armed attacks on herdsmen. Hence, the violent attacks by herdsmen is a reaction to the incessant theft of their livestock; and has led to the weaponization of the trade (pastoralism) on a large scale in order to defend their source of livelihood (Alamu, 2018). Leff (2009) brought in a political perspective and argues that the structures behind the violent clashes between the farmers and herdsmen are deep rooted and politically entrenched. He points out that the Nigerian government has conferred preferential land rights on those they dubbed indigenes (Natives) to a region, thereby marginalizing and frustrating the so-called settler (foreigner) groups which occasionally includes the nomadic Fulani. Consequently, political elites have manipulated such laws, rallying supporters to protect indigene status or stocking settler resentment for votes. Hence, the politicians have turned the herdsmen conflict into an 'easy to sell and buy commodity' for campaigns during elections.

Benue State, in North Central Region of Nigeria is one of the States in the federation that has recorded frequent clashes between herdsmen and farmers in recent times. It is on record that from 2012 to 2017, fourteen out of the twenty-three Local Government Areas of the State were violently attacked by Fulani herdsmen who move around with their cattle in search of pasture, Albert (as cited in, Dzeko and Iornumbe, 2016, p.236). Most times, these cattle stray on farmers' land destroying crops and when confronted by the owners of the farms, they engage them in violent clashes and often kill the farmers and flee from the scene of both the crop damage and murders. Forty-nine attacks have been carried out by suspected herdsmen against farming communities in the state between 2012 and 2017 (Iorhemen, 2018). The Benue State Commissioner for Information and National Orientation has disclosed at a news briefing in Makurdi, the State capital that Fulani Herdsmen have killed more than 1,500 farmers including Policemen and Soldiers in Benue Communities between 2016 and 2018 (Iorhemen, 2018). He

further disclosed that damage done to local inhabitants' property was worth over N100 billion lost to the attacks.

During the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria, the clashes between farmers and herders have been exploited by politicians for political gains. Electioneering campaign songs, slogans and messages at political rallies have harped on the farmers/herders' conflict to gain political advantage. This study, therefore, examines how the farmers/herders' conflict metamorphosed to political salesmanship in Benue State during the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria. Specifically, the study examines the campaign songs, slogans and messages by politicians at political rallies to determine their import.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Several theories such as political ecology theory and social identity theory have been adopted by analysts to explain the perennial clashes between herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria in recent times, ( AI-Chukwuma&Atelhe, 2014; Luka &Erunke, 2016). This is because changes in ecological condition seems to be a major reason that triggers the conflicts and the attendant resort to aggression as a means of realizing group or sectional interest. But since this study is focused on political rhetorics and voter mobilization orchestrated by the farmers-herders' clashes, the study adopts Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony as its theoretical frame of analysis. Hegemony is a set of ideas by means of which dominant groups strive to secure the consent of subordinate groups to their leadership, (Ransome, 1992). Gramsci's theory of hegemony is derived from Karl Marx analysis of the capitalist society which is premised on economic determinism. Marxism gives primacy to the material conditions particularly economic factors in the explanation of social life. The central thesis of this theoretical construct is that the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life processes generally (Marx,1970). Marx conceived society as a social formation with three independent parts, the economic foundation, a legal and political superstructure and definite forms of social consciousness and he pointed out that it is the economic base of the society that determines the superstructure of the society (William, 1977).

Marx was particularly interested in how changes take place in the society. He revealed that the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle. At each stage of historical development, the society is divided into two antagonistic classes. The owners of the means of production rise to the position of dominant class while those living solely on their

labour on the terms dictated by the former constitute the dependent class. He emphasized that the ruling class are able to maintain power solely because they had economic power.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony is an off shoot of Marx's analysis of the society but it lays emphasis on the superstructure rather than the base (Essays, UK, 2018). While, Marx in his analysis gives primacy to the economic base, Gramsci's analysis emphasized the superstructure and ideology. Gramsci did not accede to the idea advanced by Marx that the ruling class stayed in power solely because they had economic power but he rather insisted that it is ideology. He argues that ideological power kept the ruling class in power because it allowed them to brainwash and manipulate the rest of society. This is done through hegemonic control. Hegemony is a set of ideas by means of which dominant groups strive to secure the consent of subordinate groups to their leadership, (Ransome, P. 1992). They maintain their dominance by persuading the other classes of society to accept their moral, political and cultural values. This is done by combining either physical force or coercion with intellectual, moral and cultural persuasion. (Ransome, 1992). The coercive instruments are public institutions such as the government, police, armed forces and the legal system while the non-coercive institutions are the churches, the schools, trade unions, political parties, cultural associations, clubs and family. Through these institutions, the dominant ideology is thus accepted, practiced and spread. Hence, hegemony emerges out of social and class struggles and serves to shape and influence people.

Political language is a major instrument of hegemonic control. As emphasized by Edelman, (as cited in Nzekwe, 1989, p.91), through communication between political authorities and mass public, the ruling class significantly structure the expectations people have on them and significantly contribute to accepting relationship of mass public to the authority. Through rhetorical evocations, through ideologically loaded phrases and through metaphor, metonymy and syntax, linguistic references evoke mythic cognitive structures in people's minds (Nzekwe, 1989). In partisan politics, politicians do carefully and consciously frame words that are used at political rallies and in sponsored adverts in media houses with monotonous regularity. These words, carefully crafted, while conveying symbolic aspect of genuine concern and interest of the populace, they seek at the same time to rationalize the policies of the politicians, and ensure hegemonic control by the ruling class.

### **3. The socio-economic and security challenges of Benue State and political contest in 2019 General Elections**

Political contest does not take place in a vacuum; it takes place in a socio - economic environment which throws up challenges to the political class to address. An understanding of the socio-economic environment of Benue State before the 2019 General Elections, therefore, becomes imperative in order to understand the task ahead of political leaders to address as priorities in electioneering campaign messages.

Benue State is one of the thirty six States that make up the Nigerian federation. The state has a landmass of 33,955 square kilometres and is made up of twenty- three Local Government areas. Out of these twenty- three Local Government Areas, the Tiv ethnic group occupy fourteen Local Government Areas, the Idoma ethnic group occupy seven and the Igede occupy two. The state has a population of 2,780,398 according to the official 1991 census with a projection to 3,100,311 in 1996 and 3,500,000 by 2001, (BENSEEDS, 2004). Most of the state lies in the southern guinea savannah zone and the natural vegetation comprising grasses, trees and shrubs is currently used for grazing, firewood, timber, woodcarving and construction purposes. This resource can also be used for water conservation, erosion control and grazing reserves.

Agriculture forms the backbone of the Benue State economy, engaging more than 70% of the working population. Bush fallow using simple tools is the dominant system of agriculture. Farm inputs such as fertilizers, improved seeds, insecticides and herbicides are increasingly needed by farmers. However, cost and availability at the right time of the year is a significant problem. The farms are generally small and fragmented, ranging from one hectare to six hectares and the total output is generally impressive. Important cash crops include soya beans, rice, groundnut and citrus, oil palm, melon and tomatoes.

Only about 52% of households have access to a water supply while only a quarter of households have a safe water supply (defined as pipe water, protected well or borehole/hand pump). The most common source of safe water supply in both urban and rural areas is protected well. Only about 57% of the households have means of sanitation and out of this, only 35% have a good means of sanitary disposal (defined as household with flush to sewage system, flush to septic tank, covered pit latrine and ventilated pit latrine (BENSEEDS, 2004).

Poverty in Benue State is severe widespread and multi-dimensional and has increased considerably in the last two decades. Particularly vulnerable groups include children, the aged, victims of HIV/AIDS, and persons displaced by communal violence. In fact, the state is rated as the eight poorest of the thirty-six states of the Federation (BENSEEDS 2004). The pervasive

poverty rate is also attributed to the closure of most agro-based industries in the state such as Taraku Mills, Agro-millers Makurdi, Yuteco Foods, Gboko, Tomato/Mango juice plant at Wannune, Benue FruitcomKatsina-Ala that would have engaged most of the youth (Ugbudu&Onoja, 2017).

In recent years, there has been an increase in Fulani herdsmen attack against communities in Benue State. The victims of armed violence in Benue State include /students, politicians, farmers, women, children and the elderly. Investigations by Africa Conflict and Security Analysis Network, ACSAN (2017) shows that 4194 people were killed and 2957 were injured between 2014 and 2016. In 2018, precisely on new year day, suspected Fulani herdsmen attacked GaambeTiev, Ayilamo, Turan, Umenger, Tse- Akor and Tomatar communities in Guma and Logo Local Government Areas in which seventy- three (73) persons were murdered and several others were injured and their houses were set ablaze. A few months ago, the same group of gangsters had burnt a whole village in Agatu killed and maimed hundreds of people. There are over 40,000 displaced persons in the state now,(Odufowokan, 2018).

This, in brief, is a synopsis of the socio-economic realities of Benue State before the 2019 General elections in Nigeria. The issue at hand is did the political parties and the party candidates in their campaign messages allude to these realities and project a vision on how to tackle these challenges?

#### **4. Political Parties and Electioneering Campaign Rhetoric in Benue State, 2019**

By the dawn of the 2019 General Election in Nigeria, two political parties dominated the political landscape in Benue State, the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) which had ruled the state for sixteen years and its rival the All Progressive Congress (APC) which controls the government at the federal level and has the incumbent Mohammadu Buhari a Fulani as its presidential flag bearer. The PDP in its manifesto promises to ensure sustainable development through the creation of an enabling environment for private sector led economic development. The party also promises to make accessible to every Nigerian the basic needs of life. The APC manifesto promises to create a market-based economy driven by small and medium scale businesses and regulated by a reformed public sector. To achieve this laudable programme APC promises to restructure the country, devolve power to the units, with the best practices of federalism. The APC offers these 7 (seven) cardinal programmes to the Nigeria populace. War

against Corruption; Food Security; Accelerated Power Supply; Integrated Transport Network; Free Education; Devolution of Power; Accelerated Economic Growth (Olarenwaju, 2015).

Having looked at the socio-economic and security challenges besetting Benue State on the eve of the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria via-a-vis the party manifestoes, the issue now is how did the PDP, the ruling party in Benue State and an opposition party to the APC led federal government addresses these issues in her campaign during the 2019 General Elections in Benue State? To answer this question, we will have to peep at the campaign messages, songs and slogans- the main instrument of political mobilization used by political parties in Benue State to woo supporters.

It should be noted that the killings by Fulani herdsmen in Benue State became a major weakness and the main campaign issue that was canvassed by the state government to gain political support. Campaign messages, slogans and songs were harped on the killing of Benue indigenes by armed Fulani herdsmen. In the article, "Benue killings: Plan by Fulani herdsmen to exterminate TivPeople"(2018), Benue people were admonished that;

We voted massively for the APC led federal government and cannot accept the killings of our wives, children, brothers and sisters. We unequivocally stand with our Governor, His Excellency, Samuel Ortom, the government and people of Benue State over the full implementation of the anti-open grazing law- people who have livestock should ranch as it is applicable in most civilized countries of the world. We are farmers and cannot allow cows to take over our farms (p.3).

An opposition candidate in the article titled "The will of the people is the only legitimate foundation of any government" (*The Voice*, January,28) urged party supporters and Benue people to vote for the incumbent governor, Samuel Ortom because who has enacted the anti-open grazing law to stop herdsmen from open grazing of cattle that has escalated killings in Benue State. In his words.

As a man of God, I wish to further strengthen Governor Samuel Ortom and the good people of Benue State by saying that the Fulani herdsmen's menace can be likened to the activities of the Biblical Midianites and the Amalekites recorded in the scriptures (Judges 6:1-6). However, our firm stand on the issue is for purposes of self-defense or protection as recorded in the scriptures and demonstrated by the Israelites to the nations who came to fight them on the journey to the promised land of Canaan. My brother Governor Ortom. I wish to encourage you further by saying that ' Hard and trying times test the resilience and leadership qualities of leaders" therefore, Aluta continue, victory acerta' ( p.29).



The above campaign messages have brought to fore the PDP campaign message in Benue State. The message is that Benue people have been killed by Fulani herdsmen and the APC is led by Muhammadu Buhari, a Fulani and if Benue people vote for an APC led government, it is a tacit approval of Fulani occupation and continued killings by herdsmen in Benue State. Hence, to protect their land against Fulani occupation, they should vote the incumbent governor, Samuel Ortom of PDP who has enacted an ant-open grazing and ranches establishment bill in the state to stop open grazing of livestock that has brought violent confrontation between herdsmen and sedentary farming communities.

The preceding song composed by supporters of the Ortom led PDP administration in Benue State in the 2019 General Elections depicts the APC as a party dominated by the Hausa/Fulani who are Muslims and against the interest of Benue people who are predominantly Christians. So, if Benue people do not vote for PDP and vote APC, they are empowering the Fulani who are killers to come and take possession of their land and Islamize the people.

### **Tiv**

Ityoyamyange se tsua or ugen hen hunda la  
Yangeyem Senator TivlumunNytitseva se atemityo  
Tim ityoyaseTivpuur  
Ainge shi se tsua wan ngona Senate  
Ka u hadanityo I Benue ityough  
Hegenkpanenityoyamshi se verasemagaTivshi man venonguayol-ase  
Nenge Benue ne kavvindicindi  
Hegen ne Tivkavkwaghvendanhegenervenonguga  
Wan da nyor Hausa  
Hide ngutiminityoyaseTiv been Doctor BemMelladu, gademwam  
Shamimiyongilaityo yam kuleJevkaatemaikyonughkilaooo...

### **English**

My people, we once elected a man from this lineage  
When he got to the senate, TivlumunNytitse, he caused and brought 'head-breaking'  
This consumed many lives in Tiv  
This time too, we have elected someone from that same lineage as Senator  
He is creating enmity for the Benue people  
If people are not mindful, this time too, there would have been in-fighting among the

Tiv

Tiv are wise this time and have refused to fight  
The person has instead decided to join Hausa/Muslims  
He has brought genocide to Tivland, elder BemMelladu

Honestly, my people have resolved that Jev (PDP) should occupy that Senate seat.

In fact, the song below composed by an APC supporter in the state, insinuates that the message of Fulani killings propagated by the PDP at campaign rallies through songs and speeches was a deceptive instrument meant to secure support for the PDP led government in Benue State. The message of Fulani killings was a grand plan to falsely reassure the Benue people was protecting their interest against Fulani herdsmen who are killers by enacting the anti-open grazing law thus diverting their attention from the socio-economic realities accentuated by non-payment of salaries, pensions and gratuity of workers. The issue of Fulani killings was used as mask to brainwash and manipulate the people to accept the policies of the government in power.

### **Tiv**

U pine salary?  
Iorkpemooo  
U temagomna u ernyi?  
M-ii ikyomderianieniooo  
Iorkpemooo

U ergodobi mom je kpa?  
Iorkpemooo  
U temagomna u ernyi?  
M-ii ikyomderianieniooo  
Iorkpemooo

U mar se gutter mom je kpa?  
Iorkpemooo  
U temagomna u mar nyi?  
M-ii ikyomderianieniooo.  
Iorkpemooo

U ernena a kwagh u bailout?  
Iorkpemooo  
U ngoholyo u mar nyi?  
M-ii ikyomderianieniooo...  
Iorkpemooo

U kimbi pension di je kpa  
Iorkpemooo  
U nyorgomna u kimbinyi?  
M-ii ikyomderianieniooo  
Iorkpeooo

U ernyisha gratuity  
Iorkpeooo  
U temagomna u kimbinyi?  
M-ii ikomderianieniooo  
Iorkpemooo

U temagomna u vaanavaa?  
Iorkpemooo.  
U temagomna u ernyi?  
m-iiikyomderianieniooo  
iorkpeooo

U kulegbenda u Gbajimba je kpa?  
Iorkpemooo  
U temagomna u kulenyi?  
M-ii ikyomderianieniooo  
Iorkpemooo

### **English**

If you ask for salaries  
Oh, my people have died  
What have you achieved so far that you became governor?  
Oh, I have buried eight hundred souls  
Oh, my people have died

Have you constructed a single Street?  
Oh, my people have died  
What have you achieved so far that you became governor?  
Oh, I have buried eight hundred souls (Refrain...!!)  
Oh, my people have died

Have you constructed just a single gutter for the people?  
Oh, my people have died  
What have you achieved since you became governor?  
Refrain...!!

What have you done with the bail out funds (released by the federal government to States)?  
Oh, my people have died  
What have you built since you received the money?  
Refrain....!!

Have you paid pensioners?  
Oh, my people have died  
What have you paid since you became governor?  
Refrain...!!

Have you paid gratuity to retirees?  
Oh, my people have died  
What have you paid since you became governor?  
Refrain...!!

Are, you Governor just to be crying and mourning?  
Oh, my people have died  
What have you achieved since you became governor?  
Refrain...!!  
Have you finished construction of Gbajimba (Governor's home town) road?  
Oh, my people have died  
Refrain...!!

## **5. Conclusion**

The campaign speeches and songs analyzed above have shown that the farmers herders clashes metamorphosed to political salesmanship in the 2019 General Elections in Benue State. Campaign speeches, slogans and songs- the main instrument of political mobilization in Benue State were carefully crafted, composed and consciously used to evoke genuine concern by the government in power over the plight of the people from the herdsmen attack. The constant repetition of words/concepts like 'Iorkpemooo' (oh, my people have died), Fulani domination, 'Atemityo' (head breaking), Fulani- herdsmen, Killers, Fulani party, jihadists, Islamization and domination by the ruling PDP in Benue State helped brainwash and had psychological impact on a traumatized people who were desperately seeking re-assurance and demanding leadership. It should be noted that these words while conveying genuine concern and protection for all, seek at the same time to rationalize the policies of the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party in Benue State which is in opposition to the APC led government at the federal under Muhammadu Buhari a Fulani.

The emphasis on the killings by herdsmen was meant to ensure hegemonic control and becloud the performance record of the PDP led government in the state. The rhetorical questions posed in EL-Staffy's song clearly depicts that the government in power failed to positively improve the socio-economic well-being of the Benue people. Questions like 'have you paid salaries? Have you paid people's pension? Have you constructed any street? How many gutters have you constructed? What have you done with the bailout money? How many roads have you constructed? Are you governor to be mourning and crying only? These questions expose the deceptiveness in the Herders'-killing message as a subtle camouflage to deter the people from the socio-economic realities confronting them to rather vote in the PDP government that has

enacted an anti- open grazing law to pre-empt Fulani occupation of Benue land. This strategy paid off as it succeeded in bringing back the PDP for a second term in office. To wane the deceptive impact of electioneering campaign messages on the electorate, it is suggested that campaign slogans, speeches and songs should be issue based. Political debate should be institutionalized in the electoral process in Benue state. The government should also collaborate with stakeholders to set up ranches so as to douse the lingering conflict between the pastoralists and farmers in the country. The grazing reserve areas in the country should also be safeguarded and protected by the government to avoid clashes between pastoralists and farmers.

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