

## Visual Representation of Social Actors in the Herders-Farmers' Conflict in Nigeria

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**Abstract.** The farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria has received robust scholarly attention, except for the visual construction of the social actors involved in the crisis. This study, therefore, investigates the visual representation of the social actors and their actions in the conflict with a view to exploring their potential impacts. Sixteen cartoons depicting relevant themes and narratives surrounding the conflict were purposively selected from *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *ThisDay*, *Daily Trust*, and *Leadership* online newspapers published between 2016 and 2021. The newspapers were chosen based on their relative geographical spread which guaranteed varied perspectives, and the period marked the introduction of several government policies on the conflict. We drew upon Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar and van Leeuwen's visual representation of social actors to explore these constructions. Newspapers allocated roles to actors such as the FG, farmers, herders, and the police, based on their regional inclination. For instance, the southern newspapers represent the government as being partial, insensitive, inept, and wicked, whereas the northern newspapers are silent on such. The northern newspaper also portrays the herders as victims of multiple economic, dignity, material, and life losses, whereas the southern origins portray the herders as colonisers, accusers, villains, oppressors, and murderers. Regarding the farmers, all the sampled newspapers, except northern, describe them as the victims, helpless, precarious, and alienated, whereas the latter paints them as false accusers. In sum, the selected newspapers' visual portrayal of the dispute revealed biases and prejudices, which could adversely impact viewers' emotions and complicate the conflict's resolution.

**Keywords:** Visual Representation, Farmers, Herders, Biases, Emotional Impacts

**Languages:** English

### *How to Cite this Article:*

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## 1.0 Introduction

Nigeria is home to a multilingual, multiethnic, multireligious, and multicultural population with a wide range of cultural and traditional heritage as well as political, social, and economic affiliations (Ajayi, 2014). The complexities have always led to conflict. For example, the nation had just gained independence from Great Britain in 1960 when it was plunged into a violent civil war that lasted from 1967 to 1970 (Ayodele, 2019). One of the most crippling issues at the core of ethnic crises witnessed since Nigeria's independence in 1960 is the three major ethno-political structures—the Hausa-Fulani of the North, the Ibo of the East, and the Yoruba of the West—into which Nigeria was carved out by the colonialists (Alimba & Ngige, 2020).

The causes of the never-ending crises within the nation are many, complicated, and contentious, including the seemingly insurmountable differences between the various peoples that make up Nigeria, regional politics manifesting in tribalism, discord, and fear and suspicion of dominance (Ayodele, 2019). All of these things made it more difficult for true patriotism or a sense of national identity to emerge; instead, they encouraged interethnic conflict, squabbling, nepotism, corruption, the misuse of authority, and the politicisation of security processes (Mbalisi, 2017). The situation has left the various ethnic nationalities that comprise the country's territory in a perpetual state of discord, political instability, and generalised insecurity of lives and property (Ojo, 2014).

A recent conflict in the country is that between the nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers who had hitherto enjoyed cordial relationships a few decades ago. Despite records of disagreements over grazing on farmlands, they consistently resolved these disagreements through various mechanisms (Alimba & Ngige, 2020). The two groups had, therefore, lived mutually beneficial lives (Amnesty International, 2018) until recently. As a result, this decade has witnessed an astronomical increase in farmer-herder violence in Nigeria. About 8,000 fatalities have resulted from herdsmen and farmers' clashes in the country between 2018 and 2020 (Brottem, 2021). To solve the problem, the federal government (FG) of Nigeria proposed several programmes, such as cattle colonies, cattle routes, grazing reserves, and Rural Grazing Areas (RUGA) (Ademola, 2020).

Accordingly, conversations on the conflict between farmers and herders and various interventions by the Nigerian government have spread across the media and other domains. However, discourse most often promotes a particular perspective on conflict to the benefit of a particular group, as well as the dissemination of certain ideologies to the public through linguistic and non-linguistic semiotics (Fairclough, 2006). This may be said to be true about Nigerian media as their failure to "de-ethnicise" and be objective in their reporting always results in the promotion of ethnic

agendas and division among the nation's component regions (Alegu *et al.*, 2020). For example, Nigerian herders and farmers' disputes are always depicted by the media as involving two separate groups: Fulani itinerant herdsman and permanent farmers. Nevertheless, the intricate dynamics of the dispute are not well conveyed in this picture because the Hausa, Kanuri, Tiv, Jukun, and Berom are among the several ethnic and religious groups represented among the herders are also involved in the conflict ((Kugbayi, 2024). A similar diversity of ethnic and religious origins is seen among the farmers engaged in the conflict, including Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba (Mountjoy & Hilling, 2023). Perhaps that is why Alegu *et al.* (2020) argue that without highlighting the Nigerian media's dysfunctional responsibilities of promoting ethnic agendas and division among the many sectors of society, any author claiming that Nigerian media champions national unity and cohesiveness would be engaging in academic dishonesty.

As a result, the examination of the media's portrayal of the farmers-herdsmen conflict is crucial, as the media significantly shapes public opinion and subsequent actions. This is because the constant portrayal of "reality" legitimises and normalises a particular aspect of the story, thereby exerting a significant emotional impact on the audience (Griffiths, 2010). To that end, demeaning representation of people's tribes, ethnicities, and ideas through the use of various meaning-making resources, such as cartoons, can harm the viewers' emotional state. The representation can therefore shape their attitude, values, and actions (Sheldon, 2004). As Lester (2000) states, a visual cannot be without a message, and the meaning it conveys always has a more lasting effect on the viewers' minds than words.

Researchers have extensively examined the media's impact on the escalation or de-escalation of conflicts, recognising it as a powerful social institution that regulates perspectives on any subject (Mayr, 2008; Thompson, 2007; Chebii, 2015). Media coverage of the conflict between pastoralist herders and sedentary farmers in Nigeria has also attracted an appreciable amount of scholarship. For instance, Nwabueze *et al.* (2019) explore the framing of cartoons on the crisis in Benue State by selected newspapers published between January and December 2018. The study is anchored in framing and play theories of communication and its findings revealed that the dominant cartoon frames used among the selected newspapers are power imbalance and government negligence frames, while the participants perceived the cartoons as informative and revelation of the state of the nation. This study has limited chronological and spatial coverage. Nwankwo *et al.* (2020) also investigate the politics of media discourse of the conflict. The study highlights how newspapers' political, ideological, regional, and ethnic dispositions reflect in their representation of the crisis. Similarly, Abdulbaqi and Ariemu (2017) examine the newspapers' framing of herdsman-farmer conflicts in Nigeria and their implications for peace-oriented journalism. The study, which sources its

data from *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Trust*, and *Leadership* Newspapers, reveals that the dailies employ typical war-oriented lexical items in their portrayal of the crisis.

Although the scope of some of the studies above is narrow, while some are in the linguistic sphere, they have broadened the understanding of the conflict. However, considering the emotional appeals of visuals, it is important to interrogate the visual representation of actors and their actions in the herdsman-farmers conflict in Nigeria. This investigation will provide valuable insights into the potential effects of the aesthetic representation on the targeted individuals, and aid the actors in adapting their actions to facilitate a peaceful resolution of the crisis. This study, therefore, investigates the visual representation of the social actors in the conflict and their actions with a view to exploring their potential impacts.

## **2.0 The Media and Conflict**

It is the social responsibility of the media to report injustices in society and to sensitise the citizens on how to seek redress. The media also observe the environment, report on social conflict and interpret, contextualise, and extrapolate the implications of these events for society (Tsegyu & Akogwu, 2018). Nevertheless, their linguistic and non-linguistic choices in carrying out these duties always determine the reactions of the viewing or listening public (Chebii, 2015). Their reports have the potential to aggravate conflict situations or contribute to their amicable resolution (Puddephat, 2006). As a result, the linguistic and visual information the media provides on a conflict at each stage of a crisis can either engender peace or trigger violence (Alimba & Ngige, 2020).

In other words, the media wields a substantial influence on its consuming populace. This power can be used positively or negatively to make or mar peaceful coexistence in society. The contribution of the media to the escalation or de-escalation of conflict is enormous (Nwankwo et al., 2020). They can de-escalate crises through unbiased and responsible reportage of conflicts. To de-escalate conflict, the media “need an all-sided view of the conflict, an unconditional obligation to standards of truth, and a clear stand in the logic of peaceful transformation of conflicts.” (Kempf, W. 2002: p. 60). However, numerous cases suggest a tendency towards escalation of conflicts (Chebii, 2015). They do this in three ways: by engaging in the politics of reportage, participating in the competing process of conflict resolution, and constructing the psychological infrastructure of war.

The literature is replete with media instigation of violent conflict. For instance, Thompson (2007) links the media's inability to provide balanced reportage to the 1994 Rwanda genocide. Similarly, Chebii (2015) asserts that the media played a role in the post-election violence in Kenya in 2007/08. It has also been noted that some government-owned and private

media in Nigeria may seem to be tools for promoting ethnic agendas, political aspirations, or the financial interests of its owners rather than always advocating for the interests of the country (Alegu et al., 2020). Consequently, a scholarly investigation of the Nigerian newspapers' visual representation of the social actors in the conflicts between the pastoralists and the farmers becomes necessary to forestall a recurrence. This is also essential considering the enduring impacts of visuals on the minds of the viewers.

### **3.0 Analytical Tools**

#### ***3.1 Multimodal Social-Semiotic Approach***

The multimodal social semiotic approach emphasises meaning-making in different modes (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). The approach adopts Halliday's metafunctions of ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions, but with a little modification as they name the features of their approach: representational, interactive, and compositional. Representation is the process of encoding relationships or interactions between humans, places, or things (participants). Thus, the approach recognises two categories of visual representation, including narrative and conceptual representation. The narrative pattern represents the involvement of participants in interactions (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The narrative pattern categorises interactions into action, reaction, speech, mental, and conversion processes. An 'Actor' is the doer or performer of an action, while a transactional or non-transactional goal is the recipient of the action.

Vectors in visuals always indicate actions, depicting what participants are doing for or to each other (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). However, when representations of actions include only the Goal, it is called an Event, which implies that something is transpiring without a visible agent being responsible (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: p. 67) define the reactional process as the "depiction of participants' reactions through the formation of a vector, based on the direction of one or more represented participants' glances." In this case, the participant who does the looking is referred to as the reactor (which could be a human or an animal), while the receiver is called Phenomena.

As for conceptual representation, it refers to "representing participants in terms of their more generalised and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, structure, or meaning" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: p. 79). Classificational, analytical, and symbolic processes are the three types of conceptual representation. Classificational processes, which apply to this study, compare participants with each other in hierarchical (overt taxonomy), or non-hierarchical (covert taxonomy) patterns.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) also state that interactive relations refer to the projection of interpersonal relations among the maker, the viewer, and the entity (participant). For instance, the viewers may interpret a scenario where the represented participants gaze directly at them as a request. In terms of facial expression (appearance), a smile could request a social bond from the viewers, a stare could request the viewers to stay away, and a suggestive look could request a desire. However, when it comes to gestures, a posture can indicate either a close relationship or a social distance. The scholars also highlight images that do not directly address the viewers, instead presenting them with an offer.

The composition indicates how “the representational and integrative elements are made to relate to each other, that is, the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: p. 176). Three interwoven networks—information value, salience, and framing—are believed to make visual integration possible.

Information value deals with placing visual elements with each other in certain positions (left and right, top and bottom, centre and margin), which may confer on them the value of information accorded such positions. Salience refers to how much stress is given to some visual elements to make them attractive to viewers, while framing is used to depict individuality or identity (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006).

We are not unmindful of the diverse adaptations of this theory and the challenges posed by digital technologies to its application. However, the valuable insights into meaning-making across various modes this theory provides are explored.

### **3.2 Visual Representation of Social Actors**

Van Leeuwen (2008) developed the socio-semantic approach, which provides a discursive framework for the critical examination of the verbal and visual representation of social actors in texts and pictures. We considered only a few aspects of his framework relevant to investigating the visual representation of social actors in the conflict between Nigerian farmers and herders. The social actors' representation regards discourse as the re-contextualisation of social behaviour. Re-contextualisation includes guiding the audience's feelings and attitudes towards the roles that are played by selecting certain social roles (van Leeuwen, 2008). van Leeuwen (2005) divides the linguistic symbols in texts into inclusion and exclusion. According to van Leeuwen (2008), the inclusion or exclusion of social actors from representation depends on their goals and interests in relation to the intended readers. In terms of exclusion, van Leeuwen (2008) notes that some texts completely exclude any mention of social actors. Suppression and backgrounding are two distinct methods of exclusion (van Leeuwen, 2008). Suppression refers to the complete removal of social actors and their actions from representation, leaving no trace behind. For backgrounding,

the social players who are left out of a particular action reappear later in the same phrase, clause, or passage (Evayani & Rido, 2019).

In terms of inclusion, it is a strategy that emphasises social actors' participation in the text (van Leeuwen, 2008). van Leeuwen (2008) acknowledges the inclusion subcategories, such as passive or active. For example, social actors undergo passivation when depicted as "undergoing" or "at the receiving end" of an activity, whereas they are activated when depicted as the dynamic, active forces in the action (van Leeuwen, 2005). van Leeuwen (2008) further states that a crucial element in the portrayal of social actors is the decision made between generic and particular depictions. van Leeuwen also draws attention to the distinctions between representing social actors as identifiable individuals (specified) and as members of a class of persons (genericised) in this category. van Leeuwen (2008) provides an example of how print media targeted at middle-class readers depicts specialists in a particular way while representing "ordinary people" in a general way.

Similarly, social actors may be categorised as groups through assimilation or as individuals through individualisation (van Leeuwen, 2008). Aggregation and collectivisation are the two forms of assimilation. While collectivisation does not utilise statistics to quantify groupings of individuals, aggregation does. van Leeuwen (2008) also expresses those social actors, apart from their portrayal as human beings (personalisation), can also exhibit characteristics or establish connections with objects or locations that hold personal significance for them (impersonalisation). In the same vein, van Leeuwen (2008) classifies social actors based on the identities and functions they share with others, or based on their own distinct identity if nominated. One may also utilise determination and indetermination to symbolise social actors. First, one can portray social actors as vague, "anonymous" individuals or groups; second, one can apply their identities when one defines them in some ways (van Leeuwen, 2005). In addition, van Leeuwen (2005) makes a distinction between identification and functionalisation. Social actors become functionalised when they are described in terms of an activity, such as a job or position, that they perform. Identification takes place when social actors are defined more in terms of who they are, whether permanently or inevitably, than by what they do.

Van Leeuwen's (2008) socio-semantic method has a drawback in that it might oversimplify the intricate and delicate ways in which social actors are portrayed, thereby omitting significant cultural nuances and contextual elements. Nonetheless, its affordances allow for a thorough examination of how media visuals are deployed to shape viewers' perceptions of the conflict.

#### **4.0 Methodology**

This study's primary objective was to investigate the visual representation of social actors in the herders-farmers conflict in Nigerian newspapers. We, therefore, sourced data from the cartoons of the online publications of *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *ThisDay*, and *Daily Trust* newspapers, which depicted the farmers-herdsmen conflict and the various social actors involved in it. The selection of the newspapers, namely *The Punch* and *Vanguard* (South), *ThisDay* and *Daily Trust* (North), was based on their respective geographical spread (Ojebuyi and Chukwunwike, 2018), except for the relative scarcity of cartoons on the farmers-herders clashes in the northern-oriented newspapers. The selection guaranteed a varied portrayal of perspectives on the conflict from all parts of Nigeria, as there is a great deal of ethnic, cultural, and regional variety in Nigeria, and media sources often represent these interests (Ayodele, 2019). Sixteen (16) cartoons were purposively sampled from the online newspapers published between 2016 and 2021 based on their visual reports on the conflict. Consequently, cartoons that depicted relevant themes and narratives surrounding the conflict were given priority, enabling an in-depth investigation of how social actors are portrayed visually. We selected the timeframe of 2016–2021 to provide a rich background for the research, coinciding with the introduction of various government measures addressing the conflict between farmers and herders (Ademola, 2020). We downloaded the cartoons from the online archives of the newspapers and examined them many times to fully grasp their context and visual substance. The components of van Leeuwen's (2008) framework to depict social actors visually, and applied Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar were used to code the visual elements. The themes extracted from the coded data represented the underlying narratives and visual constructs of social actors. Academic peers also reviewed the coding and thematic analysis to ensure consistency and accuracy. In addition, the study contextualised the interpretation of the themes within the broader socio-political landscape of Nigeria.

#### **5.0 Data Analysis**

This study explores the visual depictions of the conflict between herders and farmers found in online cartoons published in Nigerian newspapers. The social actions where the representations are discovered are government policy on the provision of settlements for the herders, mopping up of illegal arms, response to the conflict in relation to other conflicts, response to the reportage on the conflict, response to appeals for intervention, and reconstruction of victimisation. They are discussed below.



### 5.1 Governmental Policy on Provisional Settlements

To find a solution to the worrisome herders-farmers conflict, the federal government of Nigeria proposed several settlement programmes, such as cattle colonies, cattle routes, grazing reserves, and Rural Grazing Areas (RUGA) (Ademola, Emmanuel Olatunji, 2020). The media visually responded to the proposals in Figure 1.

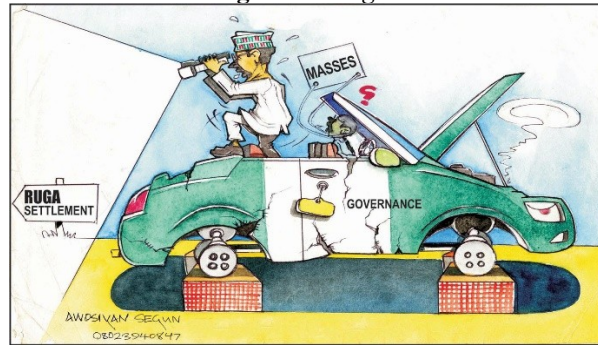
Figure 1: *The Punch* (4 July 2019)



Following the outrage against the proposed RUGA by the FG in Benue State, the programme was reported to have been suspended, as the caption in the ideal position of plate 1, *FG-postponed RUGA – News*, indicates. However, the label on the container carried by a represented participant (social actor) with the physiognomic depiction of the former Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, labelled *RUGA solution CAUTION highly inflammable*, depicts hypocrisy. His portrayal implies a close relationship with the controversial RUGA programme. The colour red is a symbol of danger. It, therefore, suggests that the FG has a dangerous plan contrary to its declaration. The killing occasioned by the conflict is also depicted as analogous to a serious conflagration, ready to consume the entire country. This is represented as a burning house where its helpless occupants, with a Nigerian flag, cry for help. Unfortunately, the social actor from whom such help is expected carries an item that will exacerbate the already precarious situation, which is ironic given his promise. The scene also shows images of dead bodies littering the ground, while the label on the building, *HERDSMEN KILLINGS*, indicates the actor in the act. The horizontal shot of the plate equally includes a symbolic space between the Actor and its Goal (herdsmen killing). The space between the known and the new information is also relatively large. The swiftness with which the actor moves is, therefore, emblematic. Contrary to the complaint of ineptitude against the actor in some quarters, he moves hurriedly to execute his plan of fueling the already burning house without minding a subordinate participant trying to caution him.

As shown in Figure 2. the RUGA policy is equally represented as being prioritised by the government.

Figure 2: Vanguard



...SCALE OF PREFERENCE?

The plate above shows a grounded vehicle. The vehicle has its tyres removed and its rear mirrors worn out. Besides, the vehicle is emitting flames from its engine and its bonnet is left open. All these are signs that the vehicle, symbolising Nigeria, through the colour of the nation's flag, is in awful condition. The colour connects the picture to the country. The label, *governance*, on the vehicle, also specifies that the aspect that is being satirised is the day-to-day running of the nation. It implies that governance is dysfunctional. The interrogatory verbal process “?”, by the represented participant labelled “masses” equally represents the yearnings of the masses calling the attention of the driver of the nation, the president. Regrettably, the question appears inverted, suggesting a misinterpretation of the citizens' demands. However, the superordinately represented participant turns his back to where he is supposed to face; he views a long distance with an amplifying instrument. The locative circumstance (coverage area) of his viewing action is labelled *RUGA Settlement*. The clear space surrounding the setting under observation contrasts sharply with the cloudy environment of the car. This demonstrates the participant's priority order. The interrogative caption, ...SCALE OF PREFERENCE?, therefore, succinctly summarises the message of the cartoon. It means that the producer implies that governance is in a deplorable situation because the social actor in charge seems to be more concerned about RUGA than any other issue.

Another government policy regarding the unrest generated by the conflict is the cattle colony. It is also visually reviewed by the media, as stated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Vanguard



The plate above displays a caption, NIGERIA: BRITISH COLONY FROM 1914-1960, which evokes memories of the colonial era before the country's independence. The label "Nigeria in 2018" also contextualises the producer's period of interest. A chain is a symbol of bondage and a metaphor for slavery. To that end, the chained map of Nigeria, in the colour of its flag — green, white green — and labelled as a cattle colony, implies that the nation is undergoing a re-colonisation process. However, the colonial master has now changed from the British to the herdsmen – the cattle's owners. It further implies that the British colonial rule period in Nigeria, although repressive, could be regarded as a time of freedom compared to the period of cattle colony. The caption, ...*When is our next independence?* suggests a desire for a different kind of independence, implying that the status quo is similar to colonial subjugation and that freedom from this new kind of dominance is required.

### 5.2 Governmental Policy on Mopping of Illegal Arms

Another policy introduced by the government in some parts of the country in the wake of the wanton destruction of lives and property occasioned by the conflict is the mopping of illegal arms, such as in Figure 4 as a visual representation of the policy.

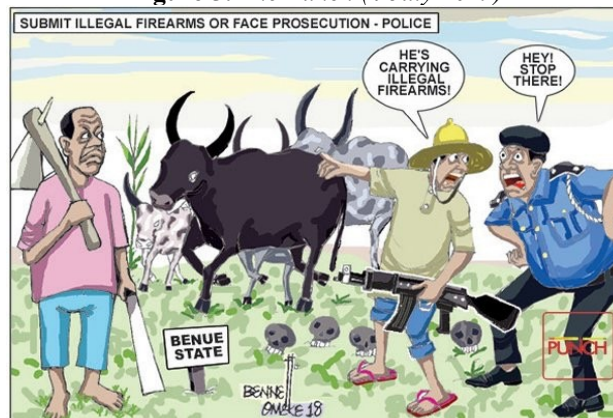
Figure 4: *The Punch* (25 April 2018)



The caption of the cartoon on the plate above reveals the event that led to the government's policy of mopping illegal arms. The interrogative verbal process from one of the represented participants (wearing a cap) in the given position of the plate, followed by the response from another represented participant, sheds light on the event. Similarly, the four participants bear sophisticated guns popularly known as AK-47s. On the other hand, the gun being submitted by the participant with a bent posture appears to be of inferior quality. This is exemplified by the number of guns carried by the social actor in charge of enforcement. He might not have been able to carry such a large number of guns if the rifles were of the AK-47 type, considering their weight. However, while the farmers are submitting their weapons, the other participants, whose Symbolic Attributives are portrayed as herders, hold on to theirs. Consequently, one could argue that the policy's implementation is uneven.

The enforcement of the mopping by the officers of the law is equally depicted as an insincere act. The plate below exemplifies this:

Figure 5: *The Punch* (4 July 2019)



As depicted in the cartoon caption on the plate above, the social actor responsible for enforcing the mopping policy has made a declaration. The declaration outlines the penalties for failing to surrender illegal weapons.

The label depicts the farmers in Benue wielding hoes and cutlasses. In comparison, their counterpart social actors (herdsmen) possess a sophisticated weapon. The herder's verbal process assigns him the role of law enforcer, which differs from being a party in a crisis. He informs the state actor (police) that the farmer has illegal firearms. The verbal process also indicates that he has authorised the farmer's arrest. He also exerts his authority over the farmer by gesturing with his hand. The plate's horizontal presentation also shows the farmer and his crops occupying a small space. Despite the provided information, the herder and his herds appear to occupy a relatively larger space. This supports the claim that the herders are occupying farmlands in the state. With the images of the dead littering the grounds, it could be implied that the mopping of the illegal weapons incapacitates the farmers to prevent their resistance.

In addition, the enforcement is represented as being hypocritical. The plate below is an example:

Figure 6: Vanguard



The caption on the plate above reveals the FG's intention. Placing the intention in the known part portrays it as an ideal. However, the participant, labelled as a herdsman who also carries a gun, depicts reality in a way that indicates he is the actor. The posture of the first participant with the physiognomy of the former president of the country reinforces this. He stands as an Accompaniment and takes a passive role in an event where he is supposed to be in charge. The three of them also direct a non-transactional reaction to an unseen Phenomenon (object). The police officer also has a non-transactional action as he uses the torch as a vector to act on an unseen Goal. Thus, the brightness of the light produced no result. The cartoon's colour modality is likewise low, suggesting that the search is a charade. The reality being painted by the caption, *in search of illegal arms... Really?* is that the policy comparable to chasing a shadow.

### 5.3 Response to the Conflict via Other Conflicts

The media also paints a picture of a sentimental treatment of the herders by comparing FG’s handling of their activities with other sources of uprisings in the country. This is evident in the plate below:

Figure 7: *The Punch* (4 July 2019)



The plate above draws a sharp contrast between the government’s handling of different conflicts in the country. The use of two frames depicts double-dealing. In the *Herdsmen Emergency* frame, the onomatopoeic representation of *GRIN*, *BRIN*, and *GARR* is heavier and stronger than the panel in the *Agitator Militants* position, *GRIN GARR*, which is thinner and lighter. Accordingly, the postures of the represented participant, whose physiognomy is that of the then Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari in the two events, are symbolic. In the known panel, he takes a sleeping and snoring posture despite the heavy effect of the carnage. His vocalisation of "Police over to you!" indicates his desire to avoid disruption. This implies that he appears unbothered by the herders's killings. In contrast, he adopts a roaring posture on the plate in the new section, despite the mild agitation. His verbal process, in the new position, *Python! Tiger! Lion! Crocodile Smile!*, is also engaging. The anthropomorphic names are subtle references to the military operations code names in the southern part of Nigeria, which is believed to harbour agitators and militants. The boldfaced writing of the crocodile is a reference to the actual operation known as the crocodile smile. Others are exaggerations. The FG launched Operation Python Dance, aiming to discourage militancy in the southern region of the nation in the future.

Similarly, the actor's goal exhibits several dichotomies. In the first panel, the actor acts on the goal, which is a police officer with a vectorial hand. Ironically, instead of carrying a gun as a deterrent, the goal wields a catapult, symbolising a lack of authority. It is a metaphor for the inferior quality of the ammunition given to the police. It is possible to infer that he is treating the herders with care. On the other hand, the goal in the second panel is not visible, but the deeper response, *yes sir*, to the roaring of the actor is louder. It indicates that the roaring is louder to the extent that the

goal that is not in sight can hear it. Likewise, the operational engagements of the police and the soldiers differ significantly. The police concentrate their operations on civil disturbances, whereas the soldiers undergo lethal training to deter external aggression. A possible explanation for this is that the government is biased in its handling of the conflicts involving the herdsmen and those relating to the agitators.

#### 5.4 Response to Reporting on the Conflict

The reportages of the crises and the responses the reportages elicited from the government are also portrayed, as shown below:

Figure 8: *The Punch* (8 February 2020)



As presented on the plate above, there are two separate panels with the caption, *6,982 Nigerians killed in 36 months—News*. The locative circumstances in the two frames show images of dead bodies littering the ground. This implies that the events depicted in the two frames are identical. However, the responses to them are different. For instance, the verbal process of the represented participant in the suit reads, *Herdsmen invade farmland and kill farmers*, while he also uses his hands to act on the images of the dead on the ground to support his reportage. But the represented participant in “Agbada” has a verbal process, *bad journalism*, as he acts on the reporter. In the second frame, the represented participant, labelled media aide, is shown with a happy facial expression. He also directs a demanding gaze at the audience. It is a request for solidarity; he wants the viewers to believe with him that all is well. His verbal process, *one injured as farmers and herders clash...*, also downplays the seriousness of the conflict. With the two reportages, the viewers are left to decipher the true situation, considering the images of the dead in the reality position of the two plates. The politician’s posture applauds the news by the aide and verbally supports it with an accolade, *good reportage*. The media assistant also carries the briefcase the politician once held, suggesting that he accepts bribes to slant

the news. The plate below presents an additional reaction to the news of the herdsman-farmers clash.

Figure 9: *The Punch* (10 March 2018)



The cartoon on the plate above presents an agentilised caption, *Herdsman kill 11, torch 50 houses in Plateau*, and it specifies the number of people killed and the houses burnt. This thorough description highlights the incident's gravity and consequences. Likewise, the known section is saliently presented. The presentation includes representations of the dead bodies and the actor responsible for the killings. The presentation also portrays other participants in a helpless state. Three of them have their hands raised, depicting surrender, terrible conditions and power imbalance. This visual representation effectively communicates the susceptibility of those affected by the violence. The actor, herder, and his goal occupy a significant portion of the plate. The participant labelled, *FG*, therefore, has a small space, signifying the government's little role or influence in halting the violence. This geographical marginalisation also suggests insufficient attention or action by the federal government. This implies that the herdsman are in control. Similarly, the social actor labelled, *FG*, turns his back on the heinous action in progress. One could interpret this posture as implicit support for the ongoing action. As a result, it implies that the *FG* remains unaffected by the extent of loss of life and property in the news. Plate 10 below illustrates another response to the coverage of the crisis:



Figure 10: Daily Trust Newspaper (2018)

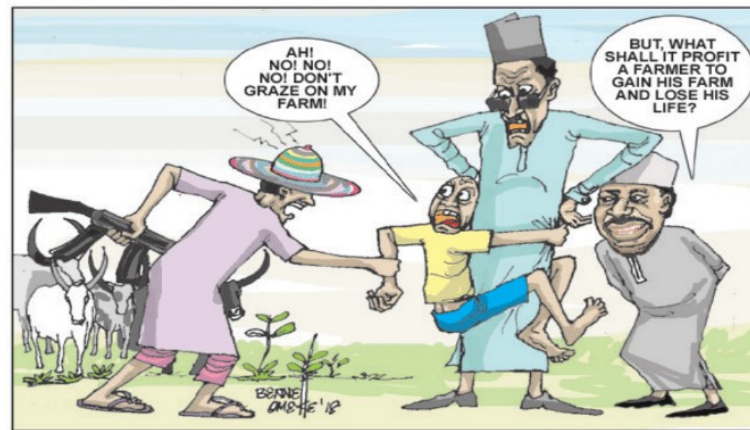


The verbal processes of the first participant holding a newspaper with the label “...killings—news” provide perspective on the agent responsible for the herders-farmers-related killings in Benue State. The label suggests that the killings are unrelated to the conflict between the two groups. In other words, the ellipsis before “killings—news” implies that the killings are a component of a more extensive problem that may not be related to the conflict between farmers and herders. The label “...killings—news” also depicts that the focus is on all the killings in the state. It suggests that rather than directly linking Benue's violence to the herders-farmers conflict, the media is more interested in highlighting the country's overall level of violence. It is possible to interpret this broad classification as an effort to minimise the particular circumstances of the violence. The verbal process of the first participant “*Our security agencies said ISLAMIC STATE TERRORISTS are behind Benue killings...*” also corroborates the effort. However, the participant in the novel part adopts a different perspective. His standing posture, frustrated facial expression and verbal process “*I guess somebody is having difficulty pronouncing POLITICAL TERRORISM*” indicate his vehement disagreement with the opinion of the first participant.

### 5.5 Response to Appeals for Intervention in the Conflict

As the conflict rages, there are several appeals for the government's intervention. The FG's response to such appeals is represented, as shown below:

Figure 11: *The Punch* (12 July 2018)



In plate 11 above, four participants are represented. The first participant on the left side wears a type of hat, which is one of the herdsmen's ethnic markers. He holds a gun, a symbol of the destruction of lives. The presence of crops and cows represents the main points of contention between farmers and herders: grazing livestock versus agricultural production. These images provide a background for the continuous struggle for resources. Similarly, the participant with a gun equally grips another participant who hangs on to a salient participant placed in the reality position. Placing the affected participant's vocal complaint in the *ideal* section highlights the conflict's immediate reality—cattle grazing on his farm. This location draws attention to the farmer's complaints and the invasion of his property. The farmer's subordinate size compared to the herder's superordinate size is symbolic of the power that the latter exerts on the former. The third participant, who is the most salient, stands akimbo and appears unwilling to protect the one who clings to him for safety. The event in the reality section shows that the victim gets no assistance from the participant, whose physiognomy is that of the former Nigerian president. The fourth participant, who is bending, appears to confirm the lack of assistance through his verbal responses. His vocal reply implies that the farmer has no alternative but to accept the possibility of losing his life or his means of subsistence. It conveys a sombre acceptance of the circumstance. Similarly, the public is portrayed as presenting the case for the government's intervention. This is shown in the plate below:

Figure 12: *ThisDay* (5 August 2018)



In the new section of the plate above, images of a Career with Symbolic Attributives of a gun and a cutlass are shown. As an Actor in the event being presented, killing, he acts on his Goal with the vector of a cutlass. The background also shows burning houses. This could imply that the killing occurs after the house has been set on fire. Another participant, labelled *masses*, who tries to escape the event, is being pulled back by a hand labelled *herdsmen & insurgent*. Presumably, he wants to prevent him from escaping the ongoing onslaught. A cut and tears are also visible on the victim's face. In a similar manner, he makes hand gestures and pleads for help from a participant who resembles the former Nigerian president. However, the latter's reaction to the Phenomenon (situation) through his facial expression and his gesture with his hands indicates that assistance will not be rendered. The president poses as an Accompaniment (passer-by) who has no business in the affair that is being portrayed. The participant, *masses*, also wears a green colour, which symbolises the farmers. The appeal for intervention is also offered not only to the government but to the general masses as the plate below shows:

Figure 13: *Leadership Newspaper* (2022)



The social actor, portrayed in a protest posture in Plate 13, articulates the public's cruel stance by failing to comment on the crisis as expected. The red-colour signpost also paints a picture of the conflict in Benue State as an act of cruelty. Unexpectedly, the representation of the second participant as an animal, along with its revealing verbal process, is striking. Not only does the verbal process reveal the alleged perpetrator of the killing, but it also portrays the general public as sympathising with the victims. It alludes to the recent social media campaign advocating for people to stop eating beef. It is believed that this will financially incapacitate the social actor who raises cows. The representations also depict that an offer of assistance to quell the crisis is also rejected as could be seen below:

**Figure 14:** *Leadership Newspaper (2021)*



The plate above depicts the former Nigerian president as the first participant, displaying a disturbed facial expression. His fear is probably occasioned by a symbol labelled Fulani vs. Farmers. He portrays the conflict as a bomb poised to explode. He presents the crisis through a football vocabulary, Fulani vs. Farmers, giving the label a playful feel. It also seems to shift the narrative from an ethnic perspective to an occupational one, given that farmers are a ubiquitous presence across the nation. However, the second participant with the physiognomy of the then Governor of Kano State, Abdullahi Umar Ganduje, appears unperturbed based on his facial expression. Perhaps he believes he has found a solution. He presents an object labelled anti-bomb, which the first participant seems not ready to take, as shown by the posture of his hands, which he puts backwards instead of stretching forward.

### **5.6 Reconstruction of Victimisation**

Some visuals also reconstruct the victims of the conflict. An example is presented below:

**Figure 15:** *Daily Trust* (14 March 2021)



The plate above represents four actions. The upper vertical axis depicts the burning of several hamlets. The unburnt parts of the hamlet's physical structure mark herders' settlements. Next to that, on the left-hand side, is a herd, which appears to lack herders, following five men who are on two motorcycles, characteristics of the bandits or cattle rustlers. In the plate's reality section, a gun-wielding participant physically assaults two veiled women in the left-hand corner. The culture of those women in veils forbids personal, close-distance interaction with a man who is not their husband. Their facial expression also conveys fear. In addition, two dead bodies lie in a pool of their blood on the right-hand side. The aforementioned elements imply that the herdsman bear the brunt of the crisis. The narrative portrays them as victims of property destruction, cattle rustling, rape, and death and generalises the conflict as being caused by cattle rustling and banditry. The actor in the act of victimisation is also reconstructed by the media as indicated below:

**Figure 16:** *Daily Trust* (8 March 2020)



The caption of the cartoon above, "Legislators' decade of zero legislation on farmers/herders' clashes," employs role reversal in its construction of the

clashes. First, the role of the failure to find a solution to the conflict is shifted to the legislators, whose membership cuts across the entire federation. This means the entire nation shares in the blame. Second, the caption places the farmer before the herder, implying that the farmers are the agents of the conflict, while the herdsmen are the victims. This suggests that farmers are victims and herdsmen are attackers. The cartoon also confirms the helplessness of the farmers, as the first participant in the known part is shown in a surrendering posture. Perhaps, the producer adopts this posture because the killings cannot be denied; the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP, 2014) declared the herdsmen the 4th deadliest terrorist group in 2014. Furthermore, the cartoon's producer recasts the herdsmen as the supposed villains in the crisis, highlighting their differences from others. Herdsmen are excluded. The attire of the second participant in the new position is not associated with the sociocultural identity of the herdsmen. This implies that the assailants are not herdsmen but other elements, probably bandits. As a result, any reprisal attacks by the farmers on the herdsmen may be termed as a transfer of aggression.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

This study sets out to interrogate the visual construction of the herdsmen-farmers conflict in Nigerian newspapers. We used Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal semiotic tools—and van Leeuwen's (2008) actor representation dimensions to explore the linguistic and non-linguistic resources the media deployed to paint graphic images of the crisis. North-South dichotomies on critical issues affecting Nigeria have always divided the country. The findings of this study suggest that, despite their supposed impartiality, newspapers are often at the forefront of ethnic divides in their depictions of the conflict. The study's results reveal that the visual representations of various newspapers reflect their regional and ethnic biases. For example, the southern newspapers include all of the herdsmen's negative actions but exclude the farmers' resistance or retaliatory actions. In contrast, the northern newspapers do not include several killings by herdsmen in their visual representations. These findings are in agreement with Nwankwo et al. (2020). The media owes the public objective reportage, irrespective of their regional affiliation or ideological leanings. It is expected that the media remain transparent in all forms of communication, whether visual or verbal. These types of jaundiced opinions being propagated by the media, which are expected to maintain some levels of neutrality, are inimical to the peace and tranquillity of the country as well as the spirit of conflict management and resolution. Another notable aspect of the visualisation is that newspapers based in the southern region exclude farmers. Newspapers based in the southern region conspicuously exclude farmers from potential reactionary spots. They also exclude the herdsmen from specific patient positions. Similarly, the inclusionary strategy is

adopted. The inclusionary strategy includes herders as agents of evil or criminality, while it treats farmers as patients or victims of these evils. Conversely, the northern newspapers portray significant losses by the herders in four distinct categories: lives, property, dignity, and means of livelihood, while excluding any harm to others. This result is consistent with Kugbayi (2024) who found that at the height of the Nigerian farmer-herder issue, the media failed to present the dispute between the two groups fairly and impartially, which had an impact on the public's behaviour and attitudes. However, this finding is in complete disagreement with Nwabueze et al. (2019) who discovered that the dominant cartoon frames used among the selected newspapers are power imbalance and government negligence frames, while the participants perceived the cartoons as informative and revelation of the state of the nation. Our study also shows that the visuals deploy strategies, such as villainisation, victimisation, and abetment. For instance, while the farmers are depicted as being the victims of the crisis, the herders are portrayed as the villains, and vice versa, whereas the FG, as represented by the nation's president, is constructed as playing the role of an abettor in the rumpus. The narrative portrays the federal government as aiding the herdsmen in their attempts to kill the farmers. The newspapers follow the same pattern of representing the crisis in ways that can discourage conflict resolution and lead to its escalation. This can incite attacks or reprisals. Although some of the representations may be the social constructs of the audience in the socio-cultural milieu of the newspapers, their visual constructions by the media can legitimise such viewpoints, especially with their aesthetic concretisation. In summary, the visual portrayal of the herders-farmers crisis in Nigeria employs strategies that are both biased and prejudiced. Such depictions may have a negative impact on the audience's affective domain, making conflict resolution difficult or impossible.

This study is limited by its reliance on purposive sampling, which could not accurately reflect the variety of viewpoints on the conflict between Nigerian farmers and herders and the lack of cartoons from publications with a northern focus which might result in an under-representation of opinions from that area. However, the findings of this study will significantly add to the body of knowledge in media and conflict discourses, as it will offer a deeper understanding of the causes and triggers of conflict. Its findings will, therefore, provide the government with a robust insight into its policy, which can generate conflict, assist the media to ensure unbiased reporting, help the regulatory bodies incorporate visuals and other modes in their supervisory checks, and guide the public to guard their hearts against the influence of conflict-inclined visuals.

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