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Research Article

The Past In The Present Carnage In North Central Nigeria: The Role Of Collective Memory On Conflict Persistence

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The North Central region of Nigeria is the epicentre of violent conflicts over land and agricultural resources. Several plausible causes have been identified, but there are insufficient explanations for how the synergy of political-historical events and collective memory formed the region's violent conflicts up to the present. This paper examined how the region's residents' collective memories, created by political-historical contestations, have influenced the recurrence of violent conflict between herders and farmers by analysing historical accounts using an adapted version of the Rational Choice and Symbolic Political Theory. It argues that the persistence of eco-violence stems from elites' emotions and intuitions, which, in their pursuit of resources to achieve parochial goals, create grievances and inequity, establishing collective memories that amplify ethnic fears and fears of annihilation among diverse groups, resulting in people's desire to address grievances through non-normative collective action. It contends that addressing these collective memories could reduce eco-violence.

Introduction

'The new nation called Nigeria should be an estate of our great grandfather, Uthman Dan Fodio. We must ruthlessly prevent a change of power. We use the minorities in the north as willing tools, and the south, as conquered territory and never allow them to rule over us, and never allow them to have control over their future' (Sir Ahmadu Bello cited in Iyekekpolo, 2020, p. 757)

This statement could be a powerful or menacing one, depending on people's affiliation with one of the groups discussed in the statement. Sir Ahmadu Bello was credited with those words in the *Parrot Newspaper* of October 12, 1960. There could be a plethora of explanations for this statement, but *collective memory* and *collective action* are notable. *Collective memory*, on the other hand, is a society's publicly accessible symbols or the shared individual memories of community members transmitted through historical representation that influences their collective identity and behaviour (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 77; William Hirst et al., 2018, p. 439; Misztal, 2010, p. 28; Villamil, 2021, p. 413). Whereas, *collective actions* are those actions undertaken by members of a group acting as representatives of the group to improve their collective conditions, which may adhere to or violate societal norms; they may be *normative* or *non-normative* and may include actions such as violent or nonviolent protests, violent conflicts, or dialogue (Adam-Troian et al., 2021, p. 561; Wright et al., 1990, p. 995). Espousing collective memory does influence the conduct of social groups (Misztal, 2010, p. 29), particularly in shaping political behaviour (Villamil, 2021, p. 400) and the occurrence and recurrence of violent conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 77). Thus, it is possible to infer that Sir Bello was using *collective memory* to advocate for *collective actions* to exert control over future events in Nigeria to shape the fortunes of members of his ethno-religious group at the expense of others.

From the era of primordial conflicts over slaves, land, and domination to European imperialism, the 'independence' and civil war periods, and military dictatorships, to the era of multi-party politics in the twenty-first century, Nigeria has been a hotspot of violence. Violence and exploitation have affected the path of Nigeria's history and the lived realities of its people; there are several conflicts, but this paper will focus on eco-violence. Eco-violence refers to the violent conflicts over water and other agricultural resources between state or non-state actors that lead to mass murder and the destruction of nature and infrastructures (Olumba et al., 2022).

The North Central region of Nigeria with a population of over 35 million people is witnessing an intractable and unprecedented carnage between nomadic Fulani herdsmen and sedentary farmers over access to and control of water and grazing fields, which is called *eco-violence.* Extant literature has asserted a plethora of causes for these violent conflicts citing resources scarcity, migration, adverse climatic conditions, and encroachment into farms and denial of access to grazing opportunities (Benjaminsen et al., 2012; Kuusaana & Bukari, 2015; Olaniyan, 2015; Sule, 2021), whereas others state that it is political failures, elite corruption, existence of ungoverned spaces and ethnoreligious discriminations (Ajala, 2020; Benjaminsen et al., 2012; Mbih, 2020; Ojo, 2020),

amongst others. Scholars also argue that the introduction of colonialism by the European countries, the colonial experiences of Africa and the aftermath of such issues are the causes and factors influencing conflicts in Africa (Davidheiser & Luna, 2008; Maiangwa, 2017; Onwuzuruigbo, 2013). Others contend that ethnoreligious fears and accumulated prejudices in the Middle Belt promote the continuation of violent disputes over water and agricultural resources (Ejiofor, 2021; Higazi, 2016, p. 370).

Despite these studies, there has not been a strong focus on the impact of the interaction of politico-historical events and collective memory on the continuance of violent conflicts between farmers and Fulani herders within the Sahel region, particularly in North central Nigeria. As such, the analysis done in this paper provides additional insights and a nuanced perspective on how politico-historical contestations influence collective memory and, consequently, conflict prolongation. This issue – the question of how people's emotions shaped by collective memories influence the persistence of eco-violence – is the central theme of this paper. It does so by analysing the impact of pre-colonial and colonial contestations, as well as post-independence contestations on people's collective memories and how these issues affect collective actions and, ultimately, violent conflict against the out-group. In other words, this paper highlights some politico-historical events, policies, and other factors, to analyse their influences on people's collective memories and actions. In addition, this paper makes a theoretical contribution to the study of conflict causes and persistence by adapting and synthesising *Rational Choice Theory* and *Symbolic Political Theory (SPT)* so that they can be used to analyse how cognitive and politico-historical factors contribute to the onset and persistence of wars.

The rational choice theory postulates that the rational pursuit of wealth and power and the attendant security dilemma and predatory elite incentives foster conflict(Fearon & Laitin, 2003, pp. 75–88; Kaufman, 2006b, p. 49). The Symbolic politics theory posits that myths, fear of extinction and chauvinistic leadership cause war (Kaufman, 2001, pp. 30–32). This study argues that infusing the analytical tools from both frameworks makes them sufficient for analysing the origins of conflict and its persistence in specific contexts, such as the Sahel, where diverse forces have influenced realities at various epochs. Consequently, this paper has illustrated that if this model derived from the fusion of rational choice theory and symbolic political theory were applied to conflict-affected regions, particularly areas experiencing eco-violence, a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the causes driving their persistence would be achieved.

This paper employs the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and uses historical account to contribute to the dearth of research in this niche area by offering nuanced narratives on the persistence of old-age conflicts in north-central Nigeria in contemporary times. Historical narratives examined here were treated as perspectives; however, informed narratives supported with historical evidence were acknowledged. Glassberg (1996) stated that '(…) every person is his or her own historian, creating idiosyncratic versions of the past that make sense given personal situations and experiences' (p.10). In other words, people's orientation and experiences and the context in which they find themselves influence the narratives they give about past events. As such, only accounts that were reported by numerous scholars were used in the analysis.

Following this introduction, a literature review will be outlined, followed by a discussion on the false dichotomy between symbolic politics and rational choice theories and the need to synthesise them for better analysis of the causes and persistence of violent conflicts. After that, a brief history of eco-violence in North Central Nigeria will be presented. The last section examined the effect of political-historical circumstances and collective memories on collective action.

Current State of Research: Eco-violence in North Central Nigeria

Ungoverned spaces that allow for insecurity, institutional failures, and the incapacity of government employees to manage conflicts between herders and farmers without bias are considered to be the causes of these conflicts (Ajala, 2020; Benjaminsen et al., 2012; Ojo, 2020). Social inequities, ethnic and cultural discrimination, and erroneous land-tenure regulations have been blamed for eco-violence (Bassett, 2008; Kuusaana & Bukari, 2015). Also, agricultural investors and unscrupulous government officials protecting personal and factional interests have intensified the conflicts (Ajala, 2020; Benjaminsen, 2008; Benjaminsen et al., 2012; Mbih, 2020), enabling the introduction and use of advanced military-grade weaponry (Ajala, 2020).

Climate change-related challenges have resulted in resource scarcity, prompting herders to transhumance beyond where they used to graze their cattle, bringing them into contact with farmers and generating violent clashes (Ducrotoy et al., 2018; Kuusaana & Bukari, 2015; Ojo, 2020). However, scholars still doubt a direct link between climate change and conflict eruptions (Turner, 2004). Instead of scarcity, abundant resources are responsible for these conflicts (Bukari et al., 2018; Koubi et al., 2014; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD, 2010). Others argue that grievances and altercations on both sides cause violent conflicts to perpetuate, such as

uncompensated crop damage, cattle rustling, rape, murder, destruction of infrastructure and livelihood, and denial of grazing opportunities (Olaniyan, 2015; Sule, 2021).

Scholars argue that the violence seen in recent times in many African countries is directly related to colonial influences (Davidheiser & Luna, 2008; Maiangwa, 2017; Maiangwa et al., 2018; Tseayo, 1975). For Maiangwa et al. (2018, p. 16), the widespread violence in recent times in Nigeria is '[…] not simply a response to the failures of the state' but also speaks to the role of British colonialism. Others argue that colonialism and its instruments of economic exploitation sowed the seed of conflict among Africans (Davidheiser & Luna, 2008; Likaka, 2009, p. 36; Mbih, 2020; Onwuzuruigbo, 2013, p. 142). According to Ejiofor (2021), who utilised the ontological security theoretical framework to analyse conflict persistence in Nigeria, fears and historically accumulated prejudices feed the continuation of conflicts. Higazi (2016, p. 370), while describing the narratives of the indigenes of the Plateau state, which is located in the Middle Belt, stated that they view eco-violence in Jos and in its environs as a resurgence of the Jihad of 1804, which swept through many parts of the Hausa region but failed in the majority of the Middle Belt. Even with all these contributions, there has been insufficient focus on the impact of politico-historical contestations on people's collective memories and actions in Nigeria's ongoing eco-violence. Thus, there is much to learn about how pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence contestations and realities shape people's collective memory and behaviour.

Beyond the erroneous divide between emotional and rational decision-making in the emergence and persistence of conflict

Many theories explain the causes of war. The social-psychological and instrumentalist-rationalist paradigms are the two prominent schools of thought used to explain the causes and resolutions of conflict (Kaufman, 2006b). According to instrumentalist–rationalist researchers, civil wars occur from rivalry between rational groups of people for wealth and power; in some instances, state failure precipitates civil war (Kaufman, 2006a, pp. 203–204). Lake and Rothchild (1996, pp. 41–42) argue that ethnic conflict develops due to collective fears about the future among contending multi-ethnic groups pursuing similar goals, resulting in information failure, credibility issues, and a security dilemma that ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs exploit in pursuit of their interests, resulting in murderous violence. Emotions cause ethnic conflicts, argue social-psychological scientists (Kaufman, 2006). Two theories stand out for these two schools: the symbolic political theory and the rational choice theory.

The rational choice theory argues that ethnic conflicts are generated by people's rational pursuit of wealth, power, and security and the security dilemma and predatory elite inclinations impact the onset of violence (Kaufman, 2006b, p. 49). For rational choice theorists, ethnic violence is not caused by ethnic or religious differences, economic or civic grievances, or state discrimination against minorities (Fearon & Laitin, 2003, p. 88). Poverty, a large population, and instability, which fuel insurgencies, cause murderous violence inside states (Fearon & Laitin, 2003, p. 75). Although ethnic conflicts have been resolved in a few instances, most of the failures stem from the assumption by diplomats, rationalist analysts, and other stakeholders that all parties are rational and prefer peace to violence with the contending issues are tangible interests and institutional failures (Kaufman, 2006a, p. 205).

The symbolic politics theory posits that emotions, not logical calculations, govern human behaviour (Kaufman, 2006b, pp. 50–51). It posits that '… people respond to ethnic symbols and mobilize for war only if a widely known and accepted ethnic mythsymbol complex justifies hostility to the other group' (Kaufman, 2001, p. 30). Ethnic violence is fuelled by group mythologies that justify animosity, fears of group extinction, and chauvinist-inspired politics that draw from ethnic symbols (Kaufman, 2006b, p. 47). However, scholars have argued the cultural symbols and practices that define the group's cultural identity are negotiable when the only alternative is committing to the destruction of the group's members (Lake and Rothchild, 1996, p. 48). Using the Rwandan genocide as an example, (Fearon & Laitin, 2000, pp. 683–684) argue that it is not ethnic myths that cannot be used to justify the cause of the genocide. According to the tenets of Symbolic politics theory, *myths* justifying ethnic animosity, ethnic *fears*, and the *opportunity* to mobilise and fight are essential factors for the formation of ethnic conflicts (Kaufman, 2001, pp. 30–32).

Symbolic politics theory contends that emotions impact war decisions, but rational choice theory contends that individuals go to war to achieve rational objectives. However, emotions and rationality are not opposed to each other (Barrett, 2020, p. 26; Mellerup, 2019, p. 6); as the arguments of the two theories tend to illustrate. The idea of this separation between emotion and rationality can be attributed to the 'myth of the triune brain' which scientists have debunked (Barrett, 2020). This paper argues that the 'myth of the triune' influenced the emergence and arguments of the rational choice theory and symbolic politics theory. According to the triune brain theory, the human brain has three layers: one for survival, one for emotion, and one for thinking (Barrett, 2020; Mellerup, 2019, p. 6). The *lizard brain* (or R-complex), which is the reptilian part of the brain, is said to house the survival

instincts of humans; the middle layer called the *limbic system* is believed to contain ancient parts for emotions, whereas the outermost layer part of the cerebral cortex, known as the *neocortex*, is supposed to regulate the rational brain (Barrett, 2020, p. 14; Mellerup, 2019, p. 6). 'This story about the brain is one of the most successful and widespread errors in all of science' (Barrett, 2020, p. 15). Recent scientific studies support the hypothesis that emotions are created in neocortical circuits in the same manner as higher-order non-emotional experiences, debunking the triune theory on how emotions emanate from the subconscious layers (Ledoux & Brown, 2017, p. e2016). Other scientific studies have invalidated the triune brain hypothesis.

Integrating symbolic politics theory with rational choice theory provides unique analytical tools for assessing and explaining the variables that have contributed to the persistence of violent conflict in North Central Nigeria and other conflict zones, particularly those with multi-ethnic compositions. The symbolic politics theory claims that decision-making that drives the emergence of conflicts is not rational but intuitive, that people's emotions play a crucial role in the decision-making process (Kaufman, 2001, p. 29). However, it is essential to note that '... rationality and emotion are not at war ... they do not even live in separate parts of the brain' (Barrett, 2020, p. 16). According to the arguments of Barrett (2020), it is plausible that decisions taken out of fear of imminent danger might be ascribed to rational thinking; thus, emotional responses may be rational at times and the supposed rational responses may deviate from yielding the optimal degree of advantage. Similarly, the rational choice theory too could have been useful in explaining why conflicts elongate because it is viewed that at the heart of the conflict is the quest for access and control of political power and resources (Fearon & Laitin, 2003, p. 88; Kaufman, 2006a, p. 49).

According to the literature violent conflicts in Nigeria, especially eco-violence, are influenced by people's emotions about themselves and others as well as the resources within their locality, plus the quest for resources, a growing population, a security dilemma, and poverty, amongst others. Thus, a combination of both theories could provide a more profound and nuanced explanation for the persistence of eco-violence. Despite their divergent viewpoints, proponents of both theories agree that cognitive experiences are crucial to the emergence of war. Thus, violence and its objectives are determined by emotion and intuition.

Moving Beyond the debate between Rational Choice theory and Symbolic politics theory

It is essential to transcend this dichotomy between emotion and rationality. Such a shift will allow for incorporating analytical tools of both frameworks to better comprehend the origins and persistence of war, including how cognitive influences and politico-historical elements such as regime change, policies and political behaviour produce and prolong violent conflicts. This paper argues, within that debate, that it is more appropriate to adapt and incorporate both frameworks to have a better model for understanding the emergence and persistence of conflicts, which are predicated on the notion that decisions are based on emotionally-charged insights (Kaufman, 2001, p. 29). Such emotion-laden insights could also be rational, according to Barrett (2020, pp. 27–28), being emotional does not equate to being illogical, and rational desires may be emotionally-laden.

Thus, this model can help explore and analyse the politico-historical factors that influenced pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial contestations in the North Central and their influences on collective memories and action. This paper contends that combining narratives of the consequences of competition for economic resources, a large population, security dilemmas, and poverty (rational choice theory) with the aftermath of ethnic fear, fears of extinction, official discrimination, socio-economic grievances, predatory politics, and the opportunity to mobilise and fight (Symbolic politics theory) can plausibly help to capture the determinants of conflict persistence more thoroughly. Thereby, offering explanations on how violence and its objectives are determined by emotion and intuition.

A Brief History of Eco-violence in North Central Nigeria

Eco-violence denotes conflict over water and agricultural resources that lead to mass murder and destruction of lives and properties which could occur between non-state actors or state actors; the North Central region is the worst hit in Nigeria (Olumba et al., 2022). The North Central area, often called the Middle Belt, is inhabited predominantly by the Tiv, Idoma, Igede, Igala, Ebira, Okun, Berom, Jukun, Afizere, Anaguta, and Mambila, among others (Kwaja, 2017; Ochonu, 2008). Pre-colonial Northern Nigeria was characterised by warfare, slave raids and trafficking, displacements and migration, particularly between the Sokoto Caliphate and its vassal kingdoms and the non-Muslim populations of the North Central area (Falola & Heaton, 2008). In the early 19th century, Islamic Jihadists aspired to impose their politico-religious brand of Islam on West Africa (Falola & Heaton, 2008). One of such groups was the nomadic Fulani, who had arrived in what became Northern Nigeria

in the 15th century with Islam (Falola & Heaton, 2008), which was inhabited predominantly by the Hausa people, who were pagans and had a hereditary monarchical system of rulership (Niven, 1971). Usman dan Fodio, a Fulani preacher, conquered the Hausa kingdoms in 1803 and created a Fulani-led Islamic caliphate (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Niven, 1971, p. 13). However, the Fulani rulers retained the Hausa language, culture, and administrative structures (Ochonu, 2008). In this era, slave-hunting and trade were common. The Sokoto caliphates and their vassal emirates conducted enormous slave raids in the Middle Belt (Ellis, 2016, p. 11). Slave-hunting and trading produced sorrow and anguish but a fortune for some. The Middle Belt's minority ethnic groups also plundered each other for people to enslave (Fardon, 2015; Makar, 1994). Political networks might frame wartime occurrences to highlight victimisation, forming collective memories (Villamil, 2021, p. 402). Thus, the contestations within this period could have been framed to become collective memories. For instance, the *Infaq al-Maysur*[1] or *Infakul Maisuri*, the chronicles of the Sokoto Caliphate, which exaggerated certain events, issues, and profiles and influenced the representation of the peoples of Northern Nigeria by early European explorers, including Hugh Clapperton, Richard and John Lander, and British colonialists (Ibrahim, 2009, p. 170; Ochonu, 2008, p. 103).

At the time, it was believed that the Muslim rulers of the Sokoto Caliphate governed the entire Northern Nigeria (Ochonu, 2014). Such myths led to a misunderstanding of pre-colonial Northern Nigeria, creating the false impression that the Fulani conquered and ruled the whole region, including the Middle Belt (Ochonu, 2008, p. 107). In 1900, when the Tiv fought construction workers erecting a communication line between Lokoja and Ibi, the Middle Belt's reality was exposed (Ikime, 1973). The incident demonstrated that not all Northern Nigeria was controlled by Muslim monarchs of the Sokoto caliphate who collaborated with the British. The British colonial authorities launched a murder-and-destruction campaign in the Middle Belt from January to June 1900 (Dorward, 1969; Ikime, 1973). During such attacks, the Tiv relied on poisoned arrows, their numbers, and the 'dense forest' as a defence; in reality, these were no match for a maxim-machine gun used by the British; most of the time, when attacked, the Tiv would flee into the next village, and British soldiers would burn their village and follow them into the next to do the same (Ikime, 1973, p. 104).

In the Middle Belt, the British colonial authority practised 'subcolonialism', ruling via the Hausa-Fulani people (Ochonu, 2014, p. 9). Thus, Hausa became the official language of British colonial control in the Middle Belt. Notably, the administration of the court system, clerical clerks, security apparatus, colonial police (*dogari*) and enforcers (ugwana), and tax collection in Tiv territory were

delegated to Hausa-Fulani agents for the British colonial administration (Bunte & Vinson, 2016, p. 63; Ochonu, 2014). Their heavy-handedness and partiality fostered a deep-seated hostility and enmity among the Tiv towards the Hausa-Fulani (Dorward, 1975, p. 591; Ochonu, 2014). The Tiv people and others in the Middle Belt staged violent anti-colonial rallies in 1929 and 1939 to vent their anger and disgust against colonial taxes, forced labour, and the activities of the colonial agents (Tseayo, 1975). These frustrations and hardships experienced and articulated by ethnic groups in the Middle Belt, particularly the Tiv may have resulted in what Horowitz (1985) referred to as 'historical grievances'. *Historical grievances* may result from migration and a successful campaign that conquered one group over another (Horowitz, 1985, p. 30); and '[...] popular history is often a collective memory of conflicts against other groups' (Liu & Hilton, 2005, p. 550).

Because of the need for fertile land, the Tiv people fought their neighbours and grabbed their land (Fardon, 2015, p. 578; Makar, 1994, p. 32). Tiv and Jukun view themselves as natives, yet they are also settlers (Bamidele, 2022, p. 1716) because both groups migrated from elsewhere to their present locations (Bamidele, 2022; Palmer, 1942, p. 253). The British colonialists frowned on the Tiv's push into Jukun territory in quest of virgin land (Dorward, 1969, p. 321). In 1917, the British colonial enterprise established the 'Ring Fence Policy'; a policy which demarcated Tiv and Jukun territory, particularly in the Wukari region, banned all Tiv from Jukun territory, prevented Tiv from invading Jukun land, and subordinated all Tiv in the Wukari area to the Aku Uka of Wukari – the Chief of Wukari (Dorward, 1969; Fardon, 2015). Before colonial rule, Jukun and Tiv relations were cordial and symbiotic, although they clashed in Akwana, a salt settlement in Jukun territory (Akombo, 2005). The ring fence policy exacerbated the conflict between the Tiv and Jukun (Dorward, 1969), aggravating a fragile relationship and intensifying a violent conflict that remains unsolved within the region.

The end of colonialism in Nigeria in 1960 led to changes in the political landscape of Nigeria, a rise in the demand for resources, and heightened ethnic tensions among the country's many ethnic groups. At this time, the Middle Belt people were supposedly marginalised politically and economically by the Hausa-Fulani elites (Makar, 1994; Tseayo, 1975), to the point where one of their leaders, Isaac Sha'ahu, claimed that the Tiv people would secede from Nigeria (Ibrahim, 2000, p. 46). As a result of their dissatisfaction and grievances, the Tiv people, in particular, revolted against the Nigerian state (Tseayo, 1975, p. 57), to demonstrate their disapproval and disloyalty to the Nigerian government, which they viewed as a Northern Nigeria scheme led by the Hausa-Fulani people (Tseayo, 1975, p. 152). These issues culminated in the 1960 *'nande nande'* (burn-burn) riots and

the 1964 *'atem itiough'* disturbances (Makar, 1994). Dissatisfaction with the military's deployment in the Middle Belt to quell the 1964 riots - a move mimicking the British colonial government's 'pacification measures' – was one factor in the 15th January 1966 coup that changed Nigeria's history (Ejiogu, 2007, p. 115; Ellis, 2016, p. 81). In the revolts of 1964, the coup leader stated that the army killed 10,000 Tivs, a figure that may have been inflated (Ellis, 2016).

The pattern and character of the Nigerian state in the post-colonial era were shaped and influenced by three factors: its colonial past, the post-colonial era of multi-ethnic and multi-religious politics, and the lengthy military regimes (Ibrahim, 2000, p. 27). 2009 may have marked the beginning of the fourth era, with the emergence of 'democratic' rule. These eras brought about changes that favoured different groups at different times, and violence of many kinds was a reality but was mainly associated with the military coups of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Bourne, 2015); which exacerbated the severity and repercussions of Nigeria's problems (Klay & Agbese, 1993, p. 421). When the civilian rule was restored in 1999, conflicts among non-state actors surged (Okoli & Ogayi, 2018). The Tiv and Jukun lived peacefully from the 1970s until 1991/1992, when a land dispute in Wukari lasted months, encompassed numerous villages, and cost many lives and possessions (Akombo, 2005). The discovery of 19 mutilated soldiers sent to restore peace in Zaki Biam in October 2001 changed the conflict's direction and severity (Ambe-Uva, 2011). The Nigerian army attacked seven Tiv-dominated towns and villages for days in October 2001, killing 200 and damaging many private and public buildings (Ambe-Uva, 2011). Today, eco-violence occurs not just between the Tiv and Jukun but also between groups with similar linguistic and ethnic backgrounds and within the same communities. The carnage between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers observed in various communities across the Sahel region has remained persistent; it replicates and represents the past carnages of the present day.

The Past in the Present Carnage: Collective Memory and Eco-violence

How people represent their history is vital to who they are and their social relations with others (Liu & Hilton, 2005, p. 537). Such history could include narratives of insecurity, disconnection, judgement, indignity, and humiliation passed down through families, instructors, and experiences from one generation to another (Becker, 2019, p. 107); which could be rational or irrational or both. Collective memory here entails '... changeable repertoire of both action-structuring and action-

determining possibilities' (Devine-Wright, 2003, p. 31). The *repertoire* may include constructed or contextual historical events, experiences, myths, and symbols which are *possibilities* that could influence individual actions culminating in collective actions. Scholars who study how people remember and represent their past argue that the depictions or representations of the past could be characterised by grandiosity and self-obsessed renditions that exaggerate their group's accomplishments (Halbwachs, 1992; W. Hirst & Manier, 2008); whereas, such people could also gloss over or underplaying those of others (Lake and Rothchild, 1996, p. 55; Stone et al., 2012). Revisiting the quote from Sir Ahmadu Bello[2] is vital to enunciate the imports of collective memory. Sir Ahmadu Bello was not a commoner; his words carried considerable weight. He was simultaneously the premier of Northern Nigeria and the Sardauna of Sokoto – a political and religious leader for northern Nigeria (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Sir Bello said Nigeria is his ancestor, Uthman Dan Fodio's estate; it belongs to his people, the Fulani. This rhetoric and others drive non-normative collective actions in Nigeria (Iyekekpolo, 2020, p. 757). His statements may be regarded as a myth, an element of a collective memory; however, promoting collective memory may have practical implications, especially in the recurrence of violent conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 77).

Eco-violence has recently become one of the most infamous disputes in Nigeria. In contemporary times, eco-violence occurs not just between sedentary Tiv and Jukun farmers and fishers, but also between sedentary Middle Belt farmers and nomadic Fulani herders as well as between nomadic herders (Ajala, 2020). The statements by Sir Ahmadu Bello are believed to have become part of the collective memories of his kith and kin – the Fulani people. The *Infakul Maisuri* (caliphate chronicles), history, experiences, and social thoughts accumulated during the pre-colonial and colonial periods are believed to have influenced the collective memories of the Fulani who ruled the Sokoto Caliphate and to be influencing the behaviour of the Hausa-Fulani in the post-colonial era. The historiography, social thought, and literature of the Fulani, and myths and realities of the successful Jihad of 1803 by Uthman dan Fodio[3] have shaped the collective imaginaries of the Hausa-Fulani, influencing their social relations with other groups. The Hausa-Fulani people lay claim to their rights and privileges over access to agricultural resources in the Middle Belt by arguing that they are descendants of the glorious Sokoto caliphate that rules over most of the lands in the Middle Belt, as such, are entitled to the resources that their forefathers left for them (Maiangwa, 2017, p. 286; Ochonu, 2014). Nomadic herders are aggrieved when they are denied access to grazing opportunities on lands they believe belong to them as descendants of the glorious Sokoto caliphate.

The colonial experiences of ethnic groups in the Middle Belt, such as the Tiv, Idoma, Igede, Igala, and Jukun, among others, were categorised and represented as distinct from those of the Muslim Hausa-Fulani (Fardon, 2015). So, their collective memories may differ from those of the Hausa-Fulani people, who used to rule over a lot of Northern Nigeria. Consequently, the suffering, misery, and death of thousands of people during colonial invasions of the Middle Belt, particularly the Tiv land, and the years of conflict between these communities must have created animosity, mistrust, and other unpleasant feelings. These politico-historical grievances may have influenced the collective memories of the Tiv people, their social relations, and their perceptions of others – particularly the Hausa-Fulani, their land, and themselves. In addition to the extant causes of eco-violence, the aftermaths of the changes to the opportunity structures in Northern Nigeria and the ensuing contestations may have inflamed the collective memories of the Tiv people and, subsequently, their violent collective action against other groups and the retaliatory actions of other groups. The Tiv people claim to be the natives, whereas the Fulani herders settlers in the Middle Belt (Maiangwa, 2017, p. 286; Ochonu, 2014).

These arguments explain why eco-violence has lasted among the Tiv and other groups, especially with the nomadic Fulani herders, which have reached unprecedented and cruel levels in recent years. When all these political-historical events and experiences of the peoples of the Middle Belt are considered together, they can be better analysed using the unique model that combines the analytical tools of the rational choice theory and symbolic politics theory to explain the factors influencing the persistence of eco-violence.

Why does eco-violence persist in contemporary times in the Middle Belt?

Assessing the causes of conflicts in pre-colonial Hausa land (northern Nigeria) helps us appreciate how individuals' rational or illogical decisions and the collective actions of their subjects impacted that region's socio-cultural, religious, and political environment. Thus, it could be argued that the Jihad of 1804, led by Uthman dan Fodio, that dethroned all Hausa rulers in Northern Nigeria and replaced them with Fulani Emirs (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Makar, 1994), depicts a change brought about by emotionally-laden insights orchestrated by Usman Dan Fodio and supported by collective actions from the ordinary Hausa people over their rulers with the promise of Islamic purity and better economic opportunities. The reign of the jihad brought about much violence in the pre-colonial eras in Northern Nigeria (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Makar, 1994). The effects of the combination of the quest

for resources, a growing population, and the security dilemma (rational choice theory), as well as the consequences of socio-economic grievances, and the manipulations by predatory elites (Symbolic politics theory) led to a violent conflict (jihad) brought down the reign of the whole of Hausa emirs in northern Nigeria and the emergence of the Fulani emirs. Thus, both rational and irrational reasons were recipes for the emergence of the violent conflict in the pre-colonial Nigeria.

When the same analytic approach is applied to understand the causes of conflict in colonial northern Nigeria, one could argue that emotionally-laden insights orchestrated by the British colonial enterprise and supported by collective actions from the rulers and members of the Sokoto caliphate brought about the emergence of untold violence with the geo-political area called today as northern Nigeria. The British colonial soldiers and administrators were overlords. Colonialism relegated the Muslim rulers of the Sokoto Caliphate in Northern Nigeria to the second rung of the rulership hierarchy, just above the inhabitants of the Middle Belt. Although colonialism transformed the socio-economic and political landscape of northern Nigeria, it also benefited the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, who were made colonial agents under subcolonialism, to the detriment of non-Muslims in the Middle Belt, who suffered the wrath of British colonialism for their rejection of colonialism (Dorward, 1969; Ochonu, 2014).

Inexplicable murderous violence became a reality with the combination of the pursuit of material resources by the British colonial enterprise and their colonial Hausa-Fulani agents, as well as the continued quest for fertile land by the Tiv people (rational choice theory), along with the consequence of ethnic fears and fears of extinction on all sides, official discrimination by the colonial agents, socio-economic grievances, the predatory elite politics of colonialism and opportunity to mobilise and fight (Symbolic politics theory). Such contestations may have resulted in the evolution of a repertoire of collective memories that include constructed or contextual historical events, experiences, myths, and symbols conveyed through opinion-makers, literature, and folklores (Misztal, 2010) to the present day. Subsequently propagating, if feasible, narratives of insecurity, disconnection, judgement, indignity, and humiliation (Becker, 2019, p. 107) and grievances, which might hurt the social relations of these groups and, consequently, their non-normative collective actions against one another. It is vital to note that memory '[...] has an inherently normative flavour, and thus it influences groups' conduct' (Misztal, 2010, p. 29). As observed in several communities across the Middle Belt of Nigeria, when moderated by social context, violence promotes collective memories, which impact behaviour (Villamil, 2021, p. 413).

Lastly, using the same analytical approach to comprehend the persistence of eco-violence in the post-colonial period until the present in the North Central of Nigeria, it could be argued that emotionally-laden insights and actions orchestrated leaders of several regimes and governments in the post-independence period in Nigeria supported with collective actions from the rulers and followers at different times in the quest for resources, political power and manifestations of predatory politics could have shaped the collective memories of the people Nigeria especially the farmers and herders leading to the continuation of violent conflicts witnessed in the pre-colonial and colonial eras in Nigeria. Such collective memories shape these people's sense of social identity, and their social relationships amongst themselves and people in the out-group resulting in a collective action that affects everyone within these locations. Before collective action can occur, a profound structure of opportunities must exist, such as ethnic solidarity, resource mobilisation, and 'advantageous opportunities' within a community (Barrett, 2020, pp. 27–28; Nasong'o W., 2015; Percival & Homer-Dixon, 1998).

During the post-independence era, Middle Belt people argued that the Hausa-Fulani political class marginalised and repressed them (Ibrahim, 2000). The experiences of the Tiv people before, during, and after the riots of 1960 and 1964, in which thousands of Tiv people were killed to quell the riots (Ejiogu, 2007, p. 115; Ellis, 2018, p. 81), must have unquestionably shaped their self-identity and social relations with others, particularly the Hausa-Fulani people. Fulani herders have been aggrieved in Nigeria during the past few years due to their limited access to grazing opportunities, the exclusionary practices against them, and cattle rustling, amongst others (Ojo, 2020). As a result, the escalation of the eco-violence between the Fulani herders and farmers has reached unprecedented levels in the last decade. Since 2015, when President Buhari, a Fulani himself, became president of Nigeria, he has attempted to address the grievances of the Fulani herders. His administration has developed a 'Ruga' compensation programme to offer grazing land and settlements to nomadic Fulani herders in 36 federal states (Sule, 2021). It has been stated that these initiatives are meant to favour Fulani herders with free land from the farmers, placing them in conflict not just with farmers but also with legislation adopted by some federal state governments that restrict open grazing of cattle (Ojo, 2020; Sule, 2021). RUGA mirrors resource capture, as defined by Percival and Homer-Dixon (1998, p. 280), which is the inequitable appropriation and use of resources to benefit a group at the expense of others, supported by legislative enactments. These land policies resemble but are not identical to the Ring Fence Policy, but they are not only discriminatory but also incite conflict.

As a result of policies and actions that have evolved under the new government in Nigeria since 2015, some have stated that a certain ethnic group is favoured (Adekola et al., 2022, p. 11). As such, it may be argued that such people are pointing to the Fulani people as being unduly favoured by Nigeria's current government. According to Kaufman (2001, p. 32), the essential conditions that breed violent conflict are myths justifying ethnic animosity, ethnic fears, and the opportunity to mobilise and fight. Among the crucial '... requirement for ethnic war is opportunity: ethnic groups must have enough freedom to mobilize politically without being stopped by state coercion'. As a result, if any group finds an opportunity to mobilise and fight without state involvement, that group would seize it to redress their alleged complaints; many Nigerians and groups believe the Fulani have been given such an opportunity since 2015 (Akinrefon & Ajayi, 2021; Oyero, 2021; Shobayo, 2021; World Watch Monitor, 2018).

Such an argument could be refuted by the federal government of Nigeria's assertions that it is implementing programmes and policies designed to increase agricultural output from Fulani herders and reduce eco-violence between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers in Nigeria (Adekola et al., 2022, p. 2; Ejiofor, 2021, p. 4). Considering the arrangements made by several stakeholders in the Nigerian government for Fulani herders and Tiv farmers, both may be aggrieved since there are contradicting laws regarding these land policies from the federal government, led by a Fulani man, and the federal states (Olumba et al., 2022, p. 2078). These recent grievances feed into those deposited in the collective memories of both social groups, which increases their ethnic fears and fears of extinction, exacerbated by their elites' predatory politics, thereby, heightening their insecurity among them. These collective memories contribute to the forging of collective identities and boundaries and have significant ramifications (Misztal, 2010, p. 28). Olumba (2022) contends that memories and experiences from violent conflicts could influence people's collective behaviour regarding how they view their nation, its link to their identity, and their within-group behaviour. For instance, the presence of thousands of uninhabited houses in the Igbo region has been linked to the Igbos' collective memory of their experiences during and after the Nigerian-Biafran civil war (Olumba, 2022, p. 10).

Thus, it can be argued that the impacts of emotion and intuition which relates to the arguments of symbolic politics theory, such as ethnic fears, myths, and chauvinist-inspired politics (Kaufman, 2006b, p. 47) as well as the quest for economic resources, a growing population and the diminishing agricultural resources (especially agricultural resources) have fuelled the prevalence of eco-violence in the Middle Belt. This paper argues that the persistence of eco-violence is the result of a synergy

between the effects of *emotionally-charged decisions* that could be rational made by predatory elites and the *events* that created collective memories for the people of the Middle Belt, resulting in the intensification of *ethnic fears* and *fears of collective annihilatio*n among various social groups, compounded by *economic pursuits* and *population explosion*. Such events may be violent or peaceful and could produce experiences from which narratives of collective insecurity, disconnection, judgement, indignity, and humiliation emerge and are communicated within a particular social group (Becker, 2019, p. 107). According to Higazi (2016), the 'indigenes' of the Plateau state, which is also in the Middle Belt, attributed the persistence of eco-violence in their communities to a historical occurrence. They see eco-violence as an Islamic plot by Muslims to subjugate them; 'this viewpoint has also been framed historically, arguing that the current conflicts are a continuation of the nineteenth century jihad that swept across northern Nigeria, establishing the Sokoto Caliphate...' (Higazi, 2016, p. 370), which has previously failed. This argument is consistent with the paper's position that collective memories of violent wars or events impact present conflicts in the Middle Belt, although such occurrences result from the decisions of a small group of leaders and elites.

These elites have existed throughout Nigeria's history, but the consequences of their policies and actions have lasted to the current day through the transmission of collective memories. In other words, the elites have changed from the pre-colonial to the colonial and post-independence epochs; however, the grievances and violent conflict over the quest for agricultural resources, emotionally-laden discrimination by the people and government against certain people at any given time have remained constant. This understanding has shown that although many causal variables – directly or indirectly – have been identified over the years by many studies, the Middle Belt still faces conflict resolution and transformation issues that have not gotten sufficient attention. The intractability of the eco-violence in Nigeria and especially in the Middle Belt region demands a holistic approach that should not avoid efforts at resolving issues related to the collective memory.

The inability of the parties involved to engage in peaceful resolution but instead perpetuating cycles of violence exemplifies the intractable nature of eco-violence in the Middle Belt, and it appears that a culture of violence has developed among the contending groups, which is supported by the collective memory that preserves the experiences and their meanings (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 84). Most conflict resolution initiatives targeted at resolving eco-violence appear to be centred on addressing competition for water, land, and other agricultural resources. It is crucial to address these issues, which rational choice theorists have hypothesised are the causes of conflict. However, this should not

be the sole method for resolving conflicts in the Middle Belt. Additionally, it is essential to settle concerns about the contending parties' collective memories. This paper argues that an approach that addresses the concerns about collective memory can assist in resolving the ethnic fears and fear of annihilation, as well as other difficulties, that symbolic politics theory identifies as factors that influence decisions to wage war.

This paper suggests that as much as other peaceful processes are rolled out to resolve the intractable eco-violence in the Middle Belt, cognitive-reappraisal conditions (Halperin et al., 2013; Hurtado-Parrado et al., 2019) must be added to those other peaceful processes. Cognitive reappraisal is a process of emotion regulation involving exposing people to emotionally-charged scenarios whose meaning has been altered to modify their emotional response to such a scenario to reduce inter-group animosity, thereby increasing conciliatory response to past violent episodes and decreasing aggressive reactions in intergroup relations (Gross, 2008; Halperin et al., 2013). As such, Cognitive reappraisal will be suitable when adapted to suit the complexities in the Middle Belt, and it is suggested that those who evolve collective memories should be the first target. According to Bar-Tal, (2003, p. 77), groups in protracted conflict institutionalise and sustain collective memory through political, social, and cultural institutions. Therefore, those institutions and persons who could be involved in creating and sustaining collective memories should be the main targets of the Cognitive reappraisal. In studies conducted in Columbia, Hurtado-Parrado et al. (2019, p. 6) argue that the cognitive reappraisal technique is easily replicable in other conflict situations because their findings replicated those of other studies conducted elsewhere, arguing that cognitive reappraisal training reduced the levels of negative emotions, fear, and anger, among others, and that it also increased the participants' preference for peace. In order to begin the process of peaceful resolution and peace transformation on the issue of eco-violence in the Middle Belt, those who create and maintain collective memories must undergo cognitive reappraisal training; this will resolve issues relating to the interests of chauvinistic and predatory elites who make decisions that result in violent conflicts. These same institutions and leaders might assist develop reconciliatory collective memories. Then, techniques for public participation in cognitive reappraisal training might be devised.

Conclusion

This paper has offered another perspective to viewing the factors causing the persistence of eco-violence and an analytic approach to addressing the causes and persistence of conflict in the

contemporary era. Unlike other studies, it addressed the need to better understand the influence of politico-historical contestations and collective memories on collective actions and further how such actions have led to the persistence of eco-violence. This paper used a model derived from the fusion of rational choice theory and the theory of symbolic politics to analyse the influence of the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial contestations experienced by people in the Middle Belt; their effects on these people's collective memories; and the subsequent effect on their collective action.

This paper argues that the persistence of eco-violence in Nigeria is determined by the emotions and intuitions of elites who, in their quest for resources to achieve parochial objectives, produce grievances and inequity, establishing collective memories that amplify ethnic fears and fears of annihilation among diverse groups and communities, resulting in the desire by people to address grievances through non-normative collective action.

Furthermore, it argues that addressing the collective memories of the contending groups in the Middle Belt is necessary if a lasting resolution to the conflict is intended. It is proposed that cognitive-reappraisal training be utilised effectively in various conflict situations and administered to members of institutions and other individuals who create and maintain collective memory. Failure to address challenges associated with collective memory would ensure that violent conflicts in the region continue to be intractable. The paper calls for research in Middle Belt conflict areas utilising a cognitive-reappraisal approach.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s)

Footnotes

[1] Infakul Maisuri was composed during the reign of Sultan Mohammed Bello, the son of Uthman dan Fodio and Sir Ahmadu Bello's great-grandfather.

[2] He was the great-great-grandson of Uthman dan Fodio, who founded the Sokoto Caliphate, and was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II of England barely a year before he made that statement.

[3] The father of sultan Mohammed Bello, who is the great-grandfather of Sir Ahmadu Bello.

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Declarations