

The Internal Violence against Nature in the Farmer–Herder Conflict in Nigeria

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Abstract: This article examines the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria through the lens of Norbert Elias's figurational theory. It argues that current interventions on this violent conflict fail to address the underlying ontological and relational dynamics of such violence. Departing from conventional explanations that reduce the farmer-herder conflict to resource scarcity, ethnicity, or security challenges, the article conceptualises the conflict as a form of internal violence, rooted in historical socialisations and shifting interdependencies that affects nature. The analysis reveals how this conflict reproduces disrupted figurations between communities and within the natural environment, exacerbated by climatic, economic, and political transformations. The article contends that understanding the deeper violence against nature, underlying the farmer-herder conflict, is essential to grasping the broader dynamics of violence. It concludes that addressing such conflicts requires more than policy and institutional reforms; it also demands a fundamental transformation in how communities are shaped to relate to one another and to the natural environment. The article contributes to debate on environmental sociology by foregrounding the relational dimensions of violence against nature and their implications for addressing environmental sustainability and social cohesion.

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel untersucht den Konflikt zwischen Landwirt*innen und Viehzüchter*innen in Nigeria aus prozess- und figurationssoziologischer Sicht. Er argumentiert, dass die aktuellen Interventionen in den gewalttätigen Konflikt die zugrunde liegenden ontologischen und relationalen Dynamiken der Gewalt nicht ansprechen. Abweichend von Erklärungen, die den Konflikt auf Ressourcenknappheit, Ethnizität oder Sicherheitsprobleme reduzieren, konzipiert der Artikel die Krise als interne Gewalt, die in historischen Sozialisierungen und sich verändernden Abhängigkeiten verwurzelt ist, die sich auf die Natur auswirken. Die Analyse zeigt, wie dieser Konflikt disruptive Figurationen zwischen Gemeinschaften sowie – verschärft durch klimatische, ökonomische und politische Transformationen – innerhalb der natürlichen Umwelt reproduziert. Das Verständnis der tieferliegenden Gewalt gegen die Natur, die dem Konflikt zugrunde liegt, ist wesentlich, um die breiteren Gewaltdynamiken zu begreifen. Die Bewältigung solcher Konflikte erfordert neben politischen und institutionellen Reformen auch eine grundlegende Transformation der Beziehungen zwischen Gemeinschaften und zur natürlichen Umwelt. Der Artikel trägt zu Debatten der Umweltsoziologie und Nachhaltigkeitsforschung bei, indem er die symbolischen und relationalen Dimensionen von Gewalt sowie deren Auswirkungen auf ökologische Resilienz und soziale Kohäsion hervorhebt.

Keywords: figurational sociology; farmer–herder conflict; internal violence; society–nature relations; Nigeria; sustainability

Introduction

The farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria has long been examined through the lenses of resource scarcity (Omoroghomwan 2020), security and political instability (Udosen 2021), and ethnic rivalry (Oyetade/Ayantayo 2025). Yet, beneath these visible tensions lies a deeper question: how does this conflict embody a form of violence directed at nature? This article asks: In what ways does the farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria represent not only human conflict but also a violence against nature, and how might this reconceptualisation shift our understanding of violence? Although the farmer–herder conflicts have a direct impact on the lives and livelihoods of those involved, they also disrupt and threaten the sustainability of nature in invisible ways. To disregard the nuances of such violent conflicts is to overlook a critical dimension of environmental sociology and sustainability. Nigeria provides a particularly compelling case where climatic pressures such as desertification and erratic rainfall have intensified southward migration of herders, while population growth and agricultural expansion have deepened farmers' attachment to sedentary land use. While the conflict is most pronounced in the North-central region, it has also spread in troubling ways to South-western Nigeria. According to the 2017 International Crisis Group Report, the historically cooperative relationships between farmers and herders have gradually broken down, giving way to violent confrontations across at least 22 of the country's 36 states (International Crisis Group 2017: 1). While the economic, social, and political costs of these clashes are well documented (Babalola et al. 2024), their ecological or environmental dimension has received less sustained attention. By ecological or environmental dimension, I mean that the effects of the farmers–herders clash on the natural environment should be given more consideration rather than just on people, politics, and the economy. This article demonstrates that the farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria must be understood at a more fundamental level where internal violence against nature persists. It needs to be made clear that the natural

environment is not only the *stage* upon which the conflict unfolds but also a *victim* of entrenched patterns of human action and perception. Building on recent philosophical works on socialisation and violence (see Checkel 2017, Sanni 2024), as well as relying on Norbert Elias's figurational sociology, particularly in his work *Involvement and Detachment* (1987), the article conceptualises violence as the internalised ideologies, value systems, and worldviews that normalise domination of both human and non-human communities. When farming and herding groups treat land and water as commodities rather than shared heritage, and when political institutions reinforce rigid attachments and identities, pursuing superiority rather than cultivate ecological responsibility, they perpetuate an internal violence that precedes and legitimises external harm upon both human beings and every other component of nature. In this sense, the article demonstrates that the farmer–herder crisis is not merely a social conflict with environmental consequences but a symptom of deeper formations within the subject at the centre of these violent conflicts.

What distinguishes this approach is its integration of Norbert Elias's process sociological theory with the concept of internal violence against nature in understanding the farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria. Before now, Elias has used this theory to scrutinise African civilisation processes, particularly in Ghana (see Reicher et al. 2022). Elias's approach clarifies how dominant social practices and perceptions are formed and sustained. It also underscores the need for Africans to interrogate inherited interpretive frames 'and not to accept blindly the conventional categories' (Reicher et al. 2022: 37). This is by far the most expansive work on the adaptation of Norbert Elias's process sociological theory to Africa. He uses that methodological approach to scrutinise the processes of state and tribe formation among other themes (see Reicher et al. 2022).

Most of the analyses of the farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria treats farmers and herders as actors responding to external pressures such as resource scarcity and weak governance. By contrast, this article ana-

lyses how shifting figurations of interdependence, identities, and worldviews of these farmers and herders produce a subtle but profound violence against nature itself. However, I need to point out that the concept of nature in this article is intentionally two-fold. On the one hand, it refers to the shared environment – the more-than-human world inhabited by humans alongside non-human beings. On the other hand, I also use nature to denote human nature, that is, the fundamental dispositions, impulses, and patterned tendencies that shape how people perceive, value, and act within that shared world.

The article proceeds in four broad sections. The first section explores the conceptual intersections of socialisation, violence, and the environment, demonstrating that socialisation is not a neutral process in understanding violence, in particular environmental violence. The second section analyses the farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria through the lens of Norbert Elias’s figurational theory, showing how changing relations between farmers, herders, and the natural environment are sustained by internalised norms and identities. The third section analyses how this internal violence against nature is manifested in the farmer–herder conflict making the environment both a medium and a casualty of violent conflict. The final section proposes three crucial recommendations for addressing internal violence against nature in Nigeria and perhaps elsewhere, including a multi-dimensional approach to addressing environmental violence; adaptive policies, and the need for resocialisation toward ecological responsibility.

This article does not only reframe the farmer–herder conflict as both an environmental and social problem, it also expands debates in environmental sociology by connecting violence, socialisation, and sustainability ethics. In reframing the farmer–herder conflict as a case of internal violence against nature, this article offers a robust philosophical lens for understanding violence, and also contributes to broader debates on sustainability by urging a radical rethinking of how societies internalise, justify, and reproduce violence towards nature.

1. Socialisation, Violence and the Environment in Africa

This section critically examines the conceptual intersections of socialisation, violence, and the environment. Although these dimensions are deeply intertwined in lived realities (Macnaghten 2003), their interconnectedness remains underexplored in scholarly literature, except for works on the links between socialisation and violence (see Checkel 2017). The absence of interdisciplinary frameworks has limited inquiry into how social norms, transmitted through socialisation, legitimise violence – whether structural, physical, or symbolic – against both people and ecosystems. While violence, in forms such as armed conflict, civil unrest, systemic oppression, and interpersonal aggression, is widely recognised for its social consequences, its ecological implications remain comparatively neglected (Wirtu/Abdela 2025). Although some authors suggest that sustainable violence prevention requires the involvement of multiple disciplines and actors, including educational institutions, local communities, and the media, there is still no clear interdisciplinary approach that showcases this intersection (see Čustović 2024). While it is undeniable that a nuanced understanding of a specific society’s historical ontology would enrich this analysis, I consciously refrain from focusing on any one society in particular. Instead, I address the general philosophical and sociological relevance of these interconnections across diverse contexts in Africa.

Violence, as Peluso and Watts (2001: 29–30) argue, is deeply embedded in ‘local histories and social relations’ but also influenced by broader political, economic, and historical dynamics. This means that violence might be ubiquitous across human societies, yet it does not manifest uniformly. Violent experiences vary across social contexts, such as distinctions between settler and non-settler societies, and are further shaped by the ways individuals are positioned within these structures (Sanni 2024). These differing contexts and relationships also influence how violence is understood. In this sense, violence is not

merely a series of isolated acts but is entangled with the structural and symbolic conditions that make such acts possible and intelligible. This variability not only shows the complexity of violence as described by Pagani (2015) but also suggests why it is philosophically significant.

In war-torn regions, scholars have demonstrated that violence can accelerate environmental degradation, resulting in deforestation, habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, soil depletion, and the contamination of air and water systems (see Kiyala 2024). These effects are often exacerbated by military activities, forced displacement, and exploitative resource extraction, which Wirtu and Abdela (2025) describe collectively as *ecocide*. The term *ecocide* suggests that violence and aggression can also be directed toward plants, animals and even inanimate objects. Such violence has also been referred to as *ecoterrorism* (Berkowicz 2011).

However, while violence is traditionally conceptualised as a social phenomenon, it is equally, though less often, acknowledged as an environmental phenomenon (Kostecka/Butt 2019). Beyond targeting individual environmental defenders or specific species, violence also affects communities, ecosystems, and the complex web of human–nature relationships (Mukete et al. 2016). Equally important is the fact that violence can, in turn, be caused by the natural environment. That is, where environmental resources that support human wellbeing are lacking, there is the tendency for conflict to become a regular feature in such society. Findings suggest that the balance of an environment determines the state of peace in such environment (see Baechler 1998, Homer-Dixon 1991). Providing a more lucid analysis of violence upon the environment, Homer-Dixon (2010) discuss extensively how ‘environmental scarcity,’ especially in many developing countries, contributes to social breakdown and violence. Environmental scarcity refers to scarcities of critical environmental resources especially of cropland, freshwater, and forests. He further argues that environmental scarcity acts as a ‘threat multiplier’ exacerbating pre-existing political, economic, and social tensions, particularly in fragile

states (see Homer-Dixon 2010: 14). For instance, in regions where agricultural land becomes infertile or water sources are depleted, communities often compete more aggressively over remaining resources, fuelling local grievances and sometimes leading to organised violence or state failure. Such violence, in turn, accelerates ecological disruption through displacement, resource overexploitation, and weakened environmental governance.

The Malthusian perspective¹ on the connection between population growth, scarcity of resources and conflicts has been criticised by some political ecologists who rejected the ‘automatic, simplistic linkages’ between environmental scarcity and violent conflicts, and the ‘crude, essentialised ways’ in which environmental security scholars analyse ‘complex empirical realities’ (Peluso/Watts 2001: 5, 15). Political ecologists like Peluso and Watts do not view the environment as the source of conflict, but rather as ‘a theatre in which conflicts or claims over property, assets, labour, and the politics of recognition play themselves out’ (2001: 25). From this perspective, the environment is viewed merely as a stage where social, political, and economic conflicts among various actors unfold.

The disclosure that violence and aggression directed toward plants, animals and even inanimate objects requires a compelling case for the inclusion of non-human animals in sociological agendas, has become the focus of an emerging field of research on the sociology of violence (Cudworth 2015). The consequence of violence may also be seen in environmental damage. Let me provide some contextual analysis of the ways in which violence affects the environment. In Nigeria, environmental violence manifests in direct actions like the recurrent oil spills by *Shell* and other petrochemical industries that have rendered communities like Ogoni land uninhabitable (see Boele et al. 2001). Also, the terrorist sect, Boko Haram’s destruction of irrigation systems and farmlands in the Northeast and the illegal gold

1 For detailed explanations on the Malthusian theory, see Hardaway (1997).

mining in Zamfara have led to the death of hundreds of children from lead poisoning. The result of violence may also be environmental damage. Another form of environmental damage has been described as ecoterrorism, i.e. the use of threat or violence to exert pressure on private or public entities in the sphere of activities related to the natural environment (see Alpas et al. 2011).

The link between socialisation and the environment is quite important in this age of environmental crisis. Dawson, Prewitt and Dawson (1977: 9) define socialisation as a process of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community, the endpoint of which is internalisation of beliefs, attitudes and orientation. Socialisation, in other words, is a process whose intended result is not simple behavioural adaptation, but a deeper change in an actor's sense of self. This implies that socialisation shapes not only outward conduct but also an individual's identity, values, and worldview, embedding societal expectations so deeply that they become part of one's internal compass for judgment and action. Checkel (2017) also defines socialisation as the process through which individuals adopt the norms and rules of a given community. He argues that understanding socialisation is crucial for analysing violence across various contexts (Checkel 2017: 593). Through socialisation, culture is transmitted and social order is stabilised; yet this same process embeds normative assumptions within individuals and institutions that can normalise, rationalise, or mask violence. Moreover, Keto and Foster (2020) argue that the view of the socialisation process as something happening within just the human context is not complete. They contend that 'parallel to the human-human and human-society interactions, we are ecosocialised by human-other beings and human-ecosystem interactions' (Keto/Foster 2020: 34). The recognition of the simultaneity and non-hierarchical nature of socialisation and what they regard as 'ecosocialisation' is quite important for understanding how socialisation intersects with violence against the environment.

The process of socialisation often normalises domination, hierarchy, and utilitarian logics in human-na-

ture relations, creating fertile ground for what Marcantonio (2022) calls environmental violence. Importantly, environmental violence is not limited to overt and tangible acts like deforestation, oil spills, or species extinction. It also includes structural and systemic patterns of harm – those encoded in legal regimes, economic models, and political decisions – that degrade ecosystems and perpetuate environmental injustice. Marcantonio (2022: 3) argues that environmental violence is most dangerous when it is invisible, concealed beneath the surface of policy, development planning, and even international environmental agreements.

One would then need to question the socialisation rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and capitalist utilitarianism that reinforces violence by promoting a worldview that reduces the non-human world to passive material for human use. In such a framework, forests are not living entities but timber reserves; rivers are not ecosystems but irrigation channels; and land is not sacred but real estate. This worldview legitimises environmental degradation by framing it as progress in civilisation and socialisation. As Marcantonio argues, this perspective results in a failure to see the harm in environmental degradation because 'violence is hidden in plain sight, obscured by the very institutions designed to prevent it' (Marcantonio, 2022: 10). In other words, social norms become ideological filters that sponsor violence and at the same time render environmental injustice invisible or justifiable.

The socio-economic and socio-political systems have also been instrumental in causing environmental violence (Khan 1978). Legal, political, and epistemological systems co-produce environmental violence by institutionalising specific ways of knowing and acting. Citizens and state institutions alike are often socialised into interpreting ecological harm as inevitable or acceptable (Kenney-Lazar et al. 2023). For example, environmental regulatory frameworks in the United States typically establish 'permissible pollution' levels, effectively authorising certain degrees of ecological harm (Edwards et al. 2013, Karkkainen 2019). These thresholds do not emerge from ecolo-

gical necessity but from socio-political negotiation, shaped by the demands of industry and economic growth. Edward et al. (2013), drawing from critical legal theory and environmental justice scholarship, emphasises that legal systems, while ostensibly neutral, often perpetuate violence by reinforcing hierarchies of value between human and non-human life (Edwards et al. 2013). This line of argument resonates with environmental ethics, particularly critiques of anthropocentric moral reasoning, that warn that unless institutions are reoriented toward ecological realities and ethical pluralism, they may deepen rather than solve environmental crises (Kopnina et al. 2018). The cumulative effects of environmental violence are most apparent in vulnerable communities whose ways of life are most intimately tied to the natural environment. In many parts of the Global South, especially in African societies, environmental violence intersects with colonial legacies, political instability, and socio-economic inequality (Prince et al. 2023). The result is not just environmental degradation but a profound disruption of human–nature relations. For example, in the last decade in rural Ghana, mining operations – both legal and illegal – have significantly altered river ecosystems, disrupted agricultural livelihoods, and eroded communal land ownership systems (see Mensah et al. 2015). These transformations are not just economic but existential: they reshape how communities relate to place, heritage, and collective identity. These impacts are amplified by the fact that many of these communities are systematically excluded from decision-making processes, ostensibly making their marginalisation both a political and ecological phenomenon.

The extractivist model of development, common in post-colonial African states, is another context in which socialisation leads to environmental violence. Ogude and Mushonga (2022) analyse this pattern of violence, making the claim that the age of anthropocentrism cannot capture the undercurrent of capital exploitation that is responsible for environmental degradation in Africa. Hence, they follow previous authors (Moore 2017, Parenti 2016) to suggest ‘violent capitalocenes’ as the rightful description of the mood

of this age, that Africa must be aware of (Ogude/Mushonga 2022: 6–8).

Across countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique, communities have been socialised – via state propaganda, schooling, and economic policies – into seeing mining of cobalt as a path to national prosperity (Sovacool 2019). However, the ecological toll of mining, including deforestation, water contamination, and loss of biodiversity, often outweighs its short-term economic gains. This form of developmental socialisation blinds citizens to alternative paradigms of prosperity that prioritise ecological integrity and community wellbeing. Environmental violence in these countries is not imposed from above but internalised from within, through the normalisation of extractive logics and the marginalisation of regenerative ones.

A similar dynamic unfolds in large-scale land acquisitions, commonly referred to as ‘land grabbing’, in parts of East and Southern Africa (see Haller et al. 2019). These land deals, typically framed as economic development initiatives, involve the transfer of vast tracts of land from local communities to multinational agribusinesses, often with the support of national governments. While such projects promise modernisation and job creation, they often entail the dispossession of indigenous peoples whose relationships to land are spiritual, ancestral, and communal. This process reflects a socialisation into neoliberal developmentalism, wherein land is understood primarily as a commodity and economic productivity is privileged over ecological integrity. Whyte (2018: 8) shows that the marginalisation of alternative epistemologies – particularly those rooted in relational ontologies of land – is a form of violence that is both social and environmental. Environmental violence here refers not only to the immediate degradation of ecosystems but also to the long-term structural harms inflicted when dominant economic logics override other ways of valuing and relating to nature. The violence here is therefore twofold. There is first the dislocation of communities from the ancestral grounds that sustain their cultural and spiritual life, while simultaneously eroding the ecological systems

necessary for collective survival.

Similarly, the recurring conflicts between farmers and herders in northern Nigeria is revealing how environmental violence is deeply entwined with socialisation processes. These clashes are often framed in ethnic or religious terms, but at their core lie environmental stressors such as desertification, shrinking arable land, and changing rainfall patterns. Herders, historically socialised into nomadic pastoralism, increasingly move southward in search of pasture. Farmers, socialised into sedentary agriculture and territorial ownership, interpret this movement as encroachment. This creates a volatile environment where inherited norms – about land, mobility, identity, and legitimacy – become sources of conflict. Without a critical interrogation of these socialised worldviews, violence becomes cyclical and self-perpetuating. What is often presented as ethnic strife is in fact deeply ecological and profoundly shaped by rigid cultural scripts.

These African examples underscore the broader philosophical claim of this section that socialisation is not a neutral process in understanding violence and the scope of this violence should not be human-centred. It (socialisation) is normative, directional, and capable of producing violence upon the environment when it instils values and assumptions that support domination, exclusion, or erasure. The escalation of this kind of violence underscores the need for critical inquiry into the socialisation processes through which societies organise relations, not only among themselves, but also in ways that reproduce forms of violence with profound environmental consequences.

2. Farmer–Herder Conflict in Nigeria: A Figural Analysis

In recent literature, the persistent conflict between farmers and herders in West Africa is frequently interpreted through the lenses of (food) insecurity (Udosen 2021), ethnicity (Oyetade/Ayantayo 2025) and resource scarcity (Omoroghomwan 2020). Although some scholars have scrutinised the validity

of the claims of increasing violent conflict in Africa, casting doubt on some of the normative and empirical studies around this conflict (Hussein et al. 1999: 412–413, Moritz 2006: 12–14), the frequent scholarly attention to the farmer–herder conflict in West Africa is nevertheless justified. Oftentimes, scholars, particularly non-Africans, treat the actors in this conflict as isolated agents responding to external pressures (see Raleigh 2010, Hendrix 2012, Brottem 2016). However, a processual analysis of farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria using Norbert Elias’s approach reveals a different picture. By applying this framework, it becomes possible to examine how the actors situated within the farmer–herder conflict perceive their positions, how these positions shift over time, and more importantly, how the evolving figuration reshapes both their sense of self and their relationship with nature. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the evolving relationships, power dynamics, and interdependencies that characterise this conflict.

Norbert Elias’s figural theory emphasises that individuals and groups are interdependent and that their actions and positions are embedded in dynamic relational networks (Elias 2009). Elias defines a figuration as a structure of interdependent human relationships, where each individual’s actions both shape and are shaped by the group (Elias 1978: 213–214). Elias’s figuration concept here posits that individuals are situated in webs of mutual interdependence where power dynamics are fluid. In *Involvement and Detachment*, he describes the complexity of interdependencies that characterise our world when he says that:

‘it is obvious that the whole existence of human beings is geared to a world – their lungs to the air, their eyes to the sunlight, their legs to the firm earth, and their hearts to other humans. The interdependence is basic: it determines the way “objects” act upon “subjects”, “subjects” upon “objects”, non-human nature upon humans, humans upon non-human nature.’ (Elias 1978: 48–49)

Elias applied this figurational approach to scrutinise the civilisation processes in Ghana for a better understanding of ‘modern’ Western societies (see Reicher et al. 2022: 11). In a similar vein, analysing the farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria is crucial for pointing out obscurities and correcting misconceptions that circulate among scholars both within Nigeria and beyond. This incomplete framing, in turn, provides a strong rationale for applying Elias’s theory to analyse this long-standing and recurrent pattern of violence between farmers and herders in Nigeria.

Two distinct parties are involved in this farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria. These are the Yoruba, who are the indigenous inhabitants of South-west Nigeria and the Fulani, a nomadic ethnic group across Northern-eastern Nigeria, whose original abode is traceable to Futa Djallon highlands in Lobe region in Central Guinea.² The Yoruba Farmers on the one hand, are usually identified as agriculturists in the South-western region of Nigeria. The Fulani(s) on the other hand are of two groups namely; the Gidan Fulani (Town Fulani) and the Fulani Bororo (Cattle Fulani). The Fulani Bororo are the centre for discussion here. Their primary occupation is raising livestock particularly cattle grazing. They are largely located in the Sahel and semi desert parts of West Africa. However, due to the relatively recent climate changes, many herdsman moved further south into the savannah and tropical forest belt of West Africa. Historically, both groups maintained relatively peaceful relations based on mutual benefits. The herders provided dairy and meat, while farmers cultivated staple crops (Aliyu et al. 2018). This claim was corroborated by Nzeh (2015) and Doyin (2017), pointing out that prior to 2012 in Nigeria, there had been a friendly, peaceful, and harmonious relationship between farmers and herders throughout the states, with the exception of a few minor disagreements that had ne-

ver resulted in a fatality or affected economic activity. However, tensions have grown over the past decade, with increasingly violent flare-ups spreading throughout central and southern states. A growing body of research interprets these tensions through the lens of resource scarcity, suggesting that the depletion of natural resources intensifies contestation between farmers and herders (Omoroghomwan 2020). In such contexts, both groups are compelled to exceed customary boundaries and norms in order to sustain productivity, often leading to heightened friction and violence over increasingly limited resources.

According to the *International Crisis Group Report*, it was noted that the incidence of farmer–herder conflict in the last decade, has occurred in at least 22 of the country’s 36 states (International Crisis Group Report 2017: 1). The farmer–herder conflict has had a detrimental impact on economic development in Nigeria. Both farmers and herders make significant contributions to the economic and social fabric of these regions, and the consequences of their clashes extend beyond human communities (International Crisis Group Report 2017: 19). According to a 2015 study by Mercy Corps, the federal government was losing \$13.7 billion in revenue annually because of herder–farmer conflicts in Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa and Plateau states. The study found that on average these four states lost 47 per cent of their internally-generated revenues (Mercy Corps 2015).

Before the intensification of the conflict, the relationship between farmers and herders was governed by customary rules and informal agreements. These included respect for grazing routes, communal dispute resolution mechanisms, and seasonal migration schedules (Ofuoku/ Isife 2009). However, these social structures have gradually eroded. Babalola et al. (2024) underscore the collapse of both traditional and legal regulatory frameworks that supported the conflict. For instance, the 1964 *Grazing Reserve Act*, intended to establish designated grazing areas, is now largely defunct.³ This legal vacuum has led to sponta-

2 The Fulani, the world’s largest semi-nomadic group, live in fourteen West and Central African countries, from Senegal to Central African Republic. They established the Sokoto caliphate (1804–1903), which played a key role in the revival and spread of Islam in northern Nigeria.

3 Most of the 415 grazing reserves established by the northern regional government in the 1960s have since been lost. Only 114 were

neous contestation of land use, with herders increasingly accused of violating farmland boundaries and farmers resorting to self-help measures. In Eliasian terms, the erosion of regulating norms marks a transformation in the figuration where a prior cooperative mode of interdependence shifts towards antagonistic confrontation.⁴

A key contribution of using Elias's framework for understanding this conflict is its attention to symbolic positioning based on long term perceptions (see Tsekeris 2013). In the first chapter of *Involvement and Detachment* (1978), Elias explains that 'involvement' is not simply bias or error, but a structured orientation in which interpretation is organised around group-centred meanings. The 'question characteristic of involvement,' he writes, is 'What does it mean for me or for us?' (Elias 1987: 6). In settings of high insecurity and tightly bound group identities like the farmer–herder conflict, this question becomes dominant; land, cattle, water, and mobility are read primarily through the registers of belonging and survival. This helps explain why ecological pressures such as drought, shrinking pasture, changing rainfall are rapidly translated into identity narratives ('we' versus 'they') that legitimise retaliation and entrench adversarial claims over territory. Farmers increasingly perceive herders as invaders or agents of Islamisation, a narrative amplified by political rhetoric and media representations (International Crisis Group 2017: 8). Conversely, herders feel criminalised, dispossessed, and excluded from legal protection. These shifts signify a reconfiguration of the social imaginary that fuels mutual blame and precludes reconciliation. Blaming the conflict on some individuals without closely considering their figurations does not lead to any solution, i.e., a more

peaceful and cooperative mode of interdependence. As herders increasingly accuse farming communities of livestock theft, and farmers allege that herders destroy their crops through uncontrolled grazing, the dispute has escalated into a cycle of mutual blame with lasting consequences for both people and the environment, an attitude that Elias cautions. Elias explains that: Instead of considering the structure of the figuration of states which – without effective violence-control – engenders violent conflicts, one focuses attention exclusively on individual persons who wilfully started the conflict. Such persons may exist and yet, to content oneself with voluntaristic explanations of inter-state conflicts, emotionally satisfying though it may be to have someone to blame, is at most a partial explanation (Elias 1978: 84). The International Crisis Group Report notes that both groups have lost faith in formal and informal dispute mechanisms, turning instead to violence for redress (International Crisis Group 2017: 6).

Beyond being a competition over land, the conflict represents the breakdown of a historically cooperative figuration – one shaped by intertwined environmental, political, and economic processes. In the chapter on *The Fishermen in the Maelstrom* Elias describes a multi-level linkage in which individual personality structures are connected to state-society ('we') and to inter-state relations ('they'), and these dynamics 'also determine a person's relationships with the objects of "nature"' (Elias 1987: xvii). This suggests that the human-nature relation in farmer–herder conflict is not reducible to local customs or immediate scarcity. It is shaped by the Nigerian state's uneven monopoly of violence, by regional movements of people and livestock, and by broader climatic and geopolitical pressures that reorganise who can move, who can claim, and who can secure land. These pressures have not only strained intergroup relations but also inflicted serious harm on nature and its vital resources.

In the farmer–herder conflict, herders enter the figuration due to ecological and economic necessity. As nomads in a new environment, their position is initially peripheral, but with sustained presence, their demands for land, rights,

formally documented or demarcated, though the government failed to back these agreements with legislation guaranteeing exclusive usage or take active measures to prevent encroachment (see International Crisis Group 2017: 4).

4 Norbert Elias considered this 'static subject-object relationship [...] completely unusable' since 'in the process of gaining knowledge, knowledge changes; the subject itself changes; and the human being also changes as more knowledge is acquired over the generations' (Elias 2009: 104).

and recognition increase. This transition threatens the perceived dominance of farmers and alters the balance of power. According to Elias, figurations are dynamic; individuals and groups enter or exit them based on circumstances, and their positions may shift over time. He underscores that changes are often driven by long-term social processes rather than isolated incidents (Elias 2000). Although, it is also possible that some actors leave the figuration altogether. For example, displaced farmers in some parts of Nigeria abandon their lands, either temporarily or permanently, leading to demographic changes and loss of agricultural productivity (Nwakanma/Boroh 2019). Young men from both groups often exit the agricultural economy to join vigilante or militia groups, thereby radicalising the conflict (Animasawun 2025). These movements signify a transformation of social roles within the figuration – from economic actors to security agents or political symbols. At the same time, some actors adapt. For instance, certain herders may adopt sedentary lifestyles or enter into land lease agreements as is the case of Ethiopia (Wang et al. 2022), thereby repositioning themselves within the figuration. These micro-negotiations offer opportunities for peace but are limited by broader structural factors such as ethnic mistrust, religious tension, and political manipulation (Ajibo 2018).

Elias had emphasised that actions are always embedded in broader social processes (Elias 2000). Recent studies have shown that the behaviours of herders and farmers are not isolated acts of aggression but responses shaped by broader socio-environmental and economic constraints. As population was increasing and the climatic conditions were changing, the availability of environmental resources like land, river and grazing areas became quite thin. The herders' southward migration is not merely a cultural preference but a necessity precipitated by desertification, dwindling pasture, and livestock-dependent livelihoods (see Omoroghomwan 2020, Adeyeye 2020). Similarly, the farmers' recourse to vigilantism or local militia groups arises from perceived neglect by the state and a desire to protect their land and crops. The

expression of violent actions, such as arson, killings, and retaliatory attacks, that has characterised this conflict did not emerge from innate hostility alone but also from the breakdown of prior interdependencies of human beings and environmental resources. The escalation of these acts reflects a failure to maintain the figuration balance, where embedded actions were previously restrained by norms, trust, and informal sanctions.

Elias notes that the success or failure of individuals to change their figuration is determined by access to resources, institutional support, and the elasticity of the social structure (Tsekeris 2013). In the present case, environmental degradation plays a pivotal role in this change. Drought and desert encroachment in the Sahel have pushed herders further south, increasing their reliance on previously unexploited territories (International Crisis Group 2017: 3). The breakdown of grazing reserves and the erosion of traditional mechanisms for resolving disputes have removed institutional buffers that previously maintained stability in the figuration (International Crisis Group 2017: 4–6). Both herders and farmers attempt to manage or change their figuration, but with mixed results. Farmers appeal to state and local governments for legal protections but are often met with inadequate security responses. Herders attempt to assert their rights through ethnic and political networks, sometimes gaining temporary support but also exacerbating tensions. Some scholars have described this tension as that of cattle rights versus human rights (see Apeh et al. 2021).

In sum, while I have framed the farmer-herder conflict in Eliasian terms, I only traced its origin largely to environmental forces within the figurations alone. However, a process sociological lens also portrays the farmers-herders' conflict as a distinctive manifestation of violence rooted in subtle but profound shifts in mutual perception. In this regard, I will analyse this conflict as arising from what I call internal violence, that is, a gradual transformation in attitudes, identities, and social imaginaries that precedes and animates more overt confrontations. It is this form of violence, particularly in its entanglement with and

impact upon the natural environment, that the next section will explore.

3. Internal Violence against Nature in Farmer–Herder Conflict in Nigeria

This section pursues two key objectives. First, it offers a conceptual analysis of internal violence and explores its relevance for understanding and addressing violence against nature or what is popularly referred to as environmental violence. Second, it argues that the understanding of internal violence against nature is important for ontological and practical reasons.

Conceptualising internal Violence against Nature

In the age of environmental crisis, nature is increasingly viewed, not as a passive object, but as a moral subject deserving ethical consideration in western and non-western traditions. Mubai (2024) describes nature as an object of violence in colonial and post-colonial Africa, highlighting the centrality of the natural environment in African historical processes. In recent times, environmental ethicists have posed critical questions regarding nature such as: Does nature possess intrinsic value? What responsibilities do humans have toward non-human entities? These questions assume that humans are critical components of nature and all forms of violence among people over natural resources is also violence against nature (Mubai 2024: 655). While various forms of violence have been linked to environmental degradation (Pessina 2022), internal violence, a concept often discussed in social and psychological contexts (see Shihade 2005, Segal 2023), has rarely been examined as a contributing factor to environmental destruction.

There is a recent wave of discussion around violence in African studies (Sanni 2024, Mlambo/Chitando 2024). John Sanni proposes a philosophically rigorous interrogation of violence, identity, and socialisation, with deep implications for postcolonial African societies but very scanty application to sustainability ethics (Sanni 2024: 47–60). Sanni provides

a novel distinction between external violence – the physical imposition of harm – and internal violence – the critical, transformative disruption of entrenched identity-forming socialisations (see Sanni 2024: 47). His construct of internal violence is crucial to this discussion because it highlights the underlying value systems, modes of socialisation, and epistemologies that shape how individuals and societies engage with the natural world.

Sanni frames violence as a ‘social kind’ – a product of social constructions such as colonial ideologies, epistemic dominance, and racialised identity formations (Sanni 2024: 48). He asserts that the origin of violence lies in absolutist socialisations, i.e., rigid, exclusionary ways of understanding the *self* and *others* that justify domination and dehumanisation (Sanni 2024: 48–49). Central to Sanni’s thesis is the idea of ‘internal violence’ which he describes as a deliberate, critical disruption of inherited socialisations and value systems that entrench violence (Sanni 2024: 55–56). This framing directly aligns with the recent post-structural critiques of identity and normativity in African philosophy (see Cawood 2015, Eze 2017). It also suggests an important way of evaluating violence related to environmental crisis as I will show later.

While Sanni regards internal violence, not as destructive but as emancipatory – akin to ethical resistance or self-decolonisation (Sanni 2024: 57), I take Sanni’s point to be that individuals, especially within Western traditions, must confront the ‘natural arrogance’ of assuming their worldview is the only valid one. This idea resonates with Santos’ (2016) call for epistemologies of the South and plural knowledges. Interestingly, Sanni’s analysis of internal violence is deployed as a critique of *epistemic monism* and *ontological closure* which are the twin markers of ‘epistemic violence’ (Brunner 2021, Graves/Spencer 2022). In another connection, *epistemic monism* and *ontological closure* are also crucial root causes of socio-environmental crises. Just as colonial ideologies denied African social realities, modern industrial paradigms often negate indigenous cosmologies, relational ontologies, and non-human agency. Sanni’s position on internal violence can also be regarded as a

call for critical reflection on our relations with the more-than-human world, urging a dismantling of hegemonic anthropocentrism from within.

From Sanni's analysis of internal violence, how should we then understand internal violence against nature? Internal violence against nature refers to the internalised ideologies, cultural assumptions, and value systems that, though not physically violent in themselves, enable, justify, or normalise external violence against the natural world. This concept draws on the philosophical insight that violence is not only about physical acts but also about epistemic, symbolic, and ontological domination (Murphy 2012, Hanssen 2014). This kind of violence against nature begins with a mindset that does not see nature as kin or community, but as a resource and commodity. For the environmental ethicist, the idea of internal violence against nature suggests that a reflection on group conflicts requires an examination of how internal transformations – within the self, traditions and institutions – have contributed to external violence against components of nature. In essence, the point is that violence against nature – whether by individuals or groups – begins as a form of internal violence within human nature. It emerges when people's worldviews are fractured by the pursuit of narrow, self-serving interests at the expense of the shared environmental good. Internal violence against nature is subtle but pervasive. It is embedded in how we think, speak, and act toward the Earth. Unlike visible forms of environmental destruction, it operates through cultural norms, ontological assumptions, and epistemic silencing.

The understanding of this kind of violence matters for two reasons. First, environmental discourse often explains violence in direct, external terms such as physical harm to ecosystems or resource-based conflicts, without addressing its deeper ontological dimensions (Kostecka/Butt 2019: 183–189). This framing assumes that environmental violence begins with what is visible or measurable. However, such an approach is limited, as it overlooks the underlying worldviews, value systems, and cultural assumptions that make external violence possible in the first

place. Second, when evaluating violence against nature, to focus solely on observable damage is to ignore the internal, ideational foundations that normalise and justify harm to the natural world, thereby repressing the striving towards ecological responsibility. Hence, there is an important link between internal violence and ecological responsibility.

Ecological responsibility is inseparable from internal violence because ecological harm is rarely only an external act; it is typically preceded by an internalised moral and cognitive orientation that makes harm feel normal, necessary, or even invisible. By the same token, ecological responsibility begins as an ethical reformation that requires a critical disruption of inherited, exploitative socialisations and identity scripts. Before one can cultivate ecological responsibility, the internal logics that legitimise harm must first be resisted. This point echoes Arne Naess's notion of deep ecology, where ecological responsibility begins with a transformation of the self (Naess 1986).

Farmers-Herder's conflict as internal violence against nature

How does the farmer-herders conflict represent a manifestation of internal violence against nature? There is a deep and often overlooked connection between internal violence and the farmer-herder conflict, especially when viewed through the lens of critical theory, environmental ethics, and social philosophy. The farmer-herder conflict is not only a contestation over land and livelihood but also a manifestation of internal violence against nature. Beneath the visible hostilities lies a deeper epistemic and cultural fracture, a shift in how nature is perceived and valued. Elias explains that the 'double-bind relationships' that existed between humans and non-human in pre-scientific times have disappeared leaving grave consequences or natural catastrophes of global dimension that we witness (Elias 1978: 73).

There is a clear indication that both farming and herding communities have been socialised into rigid ethnic or religious identities (e.g., 'this land belongs to *us*', or '*they* are outsiders/invaders'). This relates

to Elias' concept of *Involvement* where groups get entangled in struggles because of their registers of belongings and identities. These absolute identifications form the basis of in-group/out-group thinking. Internal violence against nature grows from the unquestioned acceptance of these identities without openness to alternative relational possibilities.

The environmental crisis driving herders southward (e.g., desertification in the Sahel) is itself the outcome of a subtle act of internal violence against nature. In this regard, human socialisations in Africa and elsewhere have treated the land and its components as endlessly exploitable. The failure to collectively re-examine and restructure value systems around land in the time of shortage of critical environmental resources traps both groups in a zero-sum struggle. Over time, both farming and herding communities in Nigeria have increasingly related to land and natural resources through utilitarian lenses, shaped by economic survivalism, and global market pressures. Land is no longer viewed as a shared heritage or relational space but as a contested commodity. This shift reflects an internalised worldview, often unconsciously absorbed through socialisation, that regards nature not as kin or community, but as a means to an end. Such a mindset, though not physically violent in itself, enables and legitimises external violence in the form of degradation of soil, water bodies, grazing routes, and ecological diversity, in pursuit of competing economic goals. Although the farmers–herders conflict – common in Nigeria and across West Africa – is a resource-based conflict, often attributed to land competition, climate change, population pressure, and ethnic tensions, the undercurrent of the conflict is internal and invisible. Farmers seek stable land for cultivation, while nomadic or semi-nomadic herders seek grazing routes for livestock. The situation becomes violent when these needs clash and are inflamed by politics, religion, or historical grievances. Moreso, in Nigeria, the political institutions often contribute to the conflict between farmers and herders through the narratives of a monolithic *Other* (Famwang 2024). Here, I mean that the conflict be-

tween farmers and herders is exacerbated by the way the media portrays the parties in the conflict. When political narratives portray farmers or herders as a monolithic enemy because of the internalised ideologies of fear, supremacy, and victimhood, such narratives often escape scrutiny because they are embedded in the social fabric (Ayantayo 2023). They justify retaliation and violence by constructing the *other* as inherently violent or illegitimate. These ideational shifts are part of a broader figuration that normalises violence against the land, even when communities are in conflict with each other rather than with the environment directly. The farmer–herder conflict, therefore, becomes a secondary expression of a more primary rupture in the human–nature relationship. As both groups engage in destructive practices – whether through overgrazing, land encroachment, or retaliatory attacks – the environment bears the cumulative burden. What makes this especially insidious is that the violence is rooted in deeply internalised assumptions about ownership, productivity, and dominance. Recognising internal violence against nature in the context of the farmer–herder conflict not only complicates the understanding of the crisis but also calls for a re-evaluation of how cultural values, economic systems, and social norms shape environmental degradation. Addressing the conflict thus requires not only political and economic solutions but a transformative reimagining of humans' relationship with the non-human nature.

4. Implications for Addressing internal Violence against Nature

From the preceding analysis, I have clarified that the farmer–herder conflict is a manifestation of internal violence against nature and this kind of violence does not emerge suddenly or in isolation. Instead, it is a gradual process deeply embedded in societal transformations in perceptions, norms, and values – particularly in how human communities relate to each other and to nature. This understanding is critical for shaping responses that not only address the visible conflict but also tackle the deeper social and ecologi-

cal ruptures from which it arises.

In this final section, given this unique way of understanding violence against nature, I would like to provide some proposals on how to address this kind of violence. I will briefly discuss three ways to address internal violence against nature and their implications for future research.

First, there is the need for a multi-dimensional approach to addressing internal violence against nature similar to Elias's multi-layered approach in *Involve-ment and Detachment* where he suggests that there is the need to find ways of addressing problems via the means of a detour – 'the detour via detachment' (Elias 1987: 6). In a similar manner, addressing internal violence against nature 'requires standing apart from the idealised self-images and beliefs which provide the intellectual and emotional legitimisation of their hostility towards each other' (Elias 1978: 108). This means that rather than deal with such violence in a linear-causative manner, it is imperative to reframe urgent claims over resources within a longer temporal horizon and within wider interdependencies so that the range of beliefs and behaviours of actors can be scrutinised. This multi-dimensional approach also requires doing away with the narrow definition of violence. Navas, Mingorria and Aguilar González (2018: 650–658) argue that traditional analyses of environmental conflicts often rely on narrow definitions of violence, focusing mainly on direct, physical harm. They advocate for a multidimensional approach to violence, encompassing direct violence, structural violence, cultural violence, slow violence, and ecological violence. Their study reveals that environmental violence is not only inflicted upon environmental defenders but also impacts entire communities, ecosystems, and the sustainability of human–nature relations. In a similar manner, it should be clear from the analysis above that violence to non-human nature must be understood as both processual and multifaceted. The complex nature of environmental violence should rightfully suggest the need to develop a more integrated approach. Adopting a multidimensional framework is essential for uncovering the full complexity of environmental conflicts and for ensu-

ring more just and sustainable solutions.

Second, if one must address violence against nature in any society, flexible policies that align with socio-ecological realities must be negotiated. For instance, in Nigeria, I think the recommendations of open grazing or ranching may not work because it does not consider the socio-political and the socio-ecological realities. Adeyeye (2020: 89) points out some of the failed policy responses to the farmer-herder conflict that include the establishment of grazing reserves in different parts of the country. At the federal level, policies are too often top-down, centralised, and rigid, leaving little room for the complex, local realities of land use and traditional conflict resolution. This rigid approach reflects a deeper internal violence in which governance institutions are conditioned to equate control with peace, rather than dialogue with justice. As I have argued, the farmer-herder conflict is not merely an external struggle over territory or survival; it is a manifestation of entrenched internal violence marked by rigid identities, inherited distrust, environmental neglect, and institutional paralysis. Confronting it therefore requires more than short-term mediation or military force. It calls for dismantling structural patterns of exclusion and reimagining governance around trust, reciprocity, and ecological responsibility.

Third, a shift in socialisation practices is crucial in addressing internal violence against nature. This applies to Nigeria and elsewhere. For example, there is an urgent need to replace rigid, exclusionary traditions with social values that promote sustainable land-sharing and climate-resilient agricultural practices. If farmers and herders cling to absolute, inherited ways of life instead of adapting to new conditions and also negotiating coexistence, they will continue to perpetuate internal violence against nature. This shift is not just a theoretical necessity but a practical imperative for fostering long-term environmental stewardship and resilience.

5. Conclusion

This article argued that the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria is not just a struggle over land or livelihood but a manifestation of internal violence, a violence that arises from entrenched perceptions, socialisations, and epistemologies that shape how communities relate to one another and to the natural environment. By applying Norbert Elias's process sociological theory, the analysis has revealed how shifts in environmental conditions, political narratives, and cultural identities transform intergroup relations and disrupt the human-nature balance. Beyond physical confrontations, the article showed that the farmer-herder conflicts represent deeper ontological and symbolic ruptures of human and extra human nature, calling for a reframing of such violence.

Recognising certain violence as a fundamental driver of ecological harm challenges conventional approaches that frame such violence in purely external or technical terms. Instead, it calls for a transformation in how communities are socialised to perceive violence and non-human nature. Therefore, resolving the farmer-herder crisis requires more than policy prescriptions; it necessitates a radical resocialisation towards relational interdependencies or figuration balance, an approach that can positively influence environmental sustainability.

The findings of this research contribute to the growing field of environmental sociology and sustainability by offering a conceptual framework that links socialisation, violence, and the natural environment in a dynamic and processual manner. However, future research could expand this inquiry by exploring similar conflicts in other regions of Africa through the lens of internal violence and ecological figuration. Additionally, empirical studies could further investigate how local narratives, indigenous ontologies, and evolving intergroup dynamics either sustain or mitigate violence, particularly internal violence. Such research would deepen our understanding of the moral, political, and environmental dimensions of conflict in a rapidly changing world.

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