

# Eco-Violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt through Collective Memory

Subjects: Political Science

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The Nigerian Middle Belt is the epicentre of violent conflicts between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers over land and agricultural resources called eco-violence; existing research has not adequately addressed the persistence of these conflicts. Using Social Representations Theory (SRT).

Keywords: collective memory ; conflicts persistence ; eco-violence ; social representation theory

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## 1. 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 [Iyemekpolo 2020, p. 757](#)).

The statement above can be perceived as powerful or menacing, depending on one's affiliation with the groups mentioned. Credited to Sir Ahmadu Bello in the October 12, 1960 issue of the *Parrot Newspaper*, the statement's reference to Uthman Dan Fodio<sup>1</sup> suggests a connection to *collective memory* and *action*. *Collective memory* could be described as a society's publicly accessible symbols or the shared individual memories of community members transmitted through a historical representation that influences their collective identity and behaviour ([Hirst et al. 2018, p. 439](#); [Villamil 2021, p. 413](#); [Bar-Tal 2003, p. 77](#); [Misztal 2010, p. 28](#)).

Collective memory as a social representation is similar; it can be viewed as an active process of reconstructing the past in relation to the present ([Feola et al. 2023, p. 4](#)). *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](#)).

Esponsing 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](#)). Politicians exploit collective memory to gain political advantage by representing the past in contemporary settings ([Yoder 2019](#)). Thus, it is possible to infer that Sir Bello spoke on the strengths of the successful Fulani *jihad of 1804*, which established the Sokoto Caliphate ([Buba 2018](#); [Pieri and Zenn 2016](#)), and other such events to inspire and motivate his kin, particularly the Fulani people who became leaders in Northern Nigeria, to action. In that quote, Sir Bello urged his people, the Fulani, to exercise influence over future events in Nigeria to secure their fortunes at the expense of others. Not only was he socially representing the past ([Obradović 2016, p. 13](#)), but he was also emotionally anchoring<sup>2</sup> the past into the present ([Obradović 2019, p. 2](#); [Bar-Tal 2003, p. 77](#)) and future ([Szpunar and Szpunar 2016](#); [Saint-Laurent and Obradović 2019, p. 9](#)) with the stated intention of shaping ethnic relations in the new country called Nigeria.

Nigeria's history is marked by persistent violence, from primordial conflicts through European imperialism, independence, civil wars, and military dictatorships to twenty-first-century multi-party politics. Despite immense natural wealth, violence, underdevelopment, and exploitation have shaped the nation's trajectory and people's experiences.

## 2. A Brief History of Eco-Violence in the Nigerian Middle Belt

Nigeria was a colonial creation of the United Kingdom. A diverse geographical area with multi-ethnic and religious people merged for British colonial rule. Before 1960, when Nigeria gained independence from the United Kingdom, it consisted of three territories: one directly ruled by the English crown—the Crown Colony of Lagos; and the others controlled by

corporations: the Niger Coast Protectorate and the Northern Nigerian Protectorate (Niven 1971; Nwabughuogu 1981; Afigbo 1991). Some individuals and pressure groups in the United Kingdom, albeit with divergent interests and a desire for a change in British policy, criticised this strategy of different administration patterns (Nwabughuogu 1981, p. 69). According to Nwabughuogu, they hide their true motivations, their vested interests, behind humanitarianism and support for British expansion through public lectures, publications, and lobbying; notable supporters included Frederick D. Lugard<sup>4</sup>, Mary Kingsley, and Sir George Goldie. Flora Shaw<sup>5</sup> was a key backer of these groups and their campaign, publishing two articles in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* in 1904, a book in 1906, and numerous articles in *The Times*<sup>6</sup> of London aimed at swaying British opinion in their favour (Nwabughuogu 1981, p. 81).

One of the colonies, the Niger Protectorate—Northern Nigeria—was initially owned by George Goldie through his company, the *Royal Niger Company* (RNC), which was governed on behalf of the crown under a royal charter issued in July 1886, which was revoked in 1900 (Pearson 1971). George Goldie only relinquished the territory to the British colonial establishment after an agreement for a payment of £856,895 was made (Pearson 1971). However, only £556,895 was paid and the RNC received 1% of the royalties on the natural resources of the former territory for 99 years (Pearson 1971, p. 77). In 1914, Frederick D. Lugard, who later became the top British colonial soldier and administrator, merged the colonies to create Nigeria (Bourne 2015; Ellis 2016; Ugwuoke et al. 2020). The term 'Nigeria or Nigeria-area' was coined by Flora Shaw, the girlfriend of Lugard and the colonial editor of *The Times* during that period; she adapted the term from the name of the Niger River (Perham 1950; Bourne 2015; Ellis 2016).

In the 15th century, what is now Northern Nigeria was inhabited predominantly by the Hausa people, who were pagans and had a hereditary monarchical system of rulership (Niven 1971; Falola and Heaton 2008). Within this period, Islamic Jihadists from the Futa Jallon regions and other parts of Senegal and Guinea migrated to other parts of Africa, including Nigeria, to spread their politico-religious Islamic lifestyle (Smith 1961; Falola and Heaton 2008). During a violent Jihad of 1804, Usman Dan Fodio and his Fulani ethnic group seized control of formerly Hausa-led kingdoms throughout Northern Nigeria and established the Sokoto caliphate and its vassal territories (Smith 1978; Buba 2018). The caliphate was a political and theocratic institution established on violence, with the Sultan of Sokoto at its head and various vassal areas administered by emirs (Buba 2018, p. 1; Pieri and Zenn 2016). The Fulani rulers retained the Hausa language, culture, and administrative structures (Ochonu 2008), while Fulfulde<sup>7</sup> was retained for aristocracy (Lovejoy 1988, p. 264).

The territories of Northern Nigeria, formerly the Niger Protectorate, were mainly under the control of the Sokoto caliphate, except for a few areas along the Benue Valley or the Middle Belt. At the time, it was believed that the 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). The North Central area, often called the Middle Belt, is inhabited predominantly by the Tiv, Idoma, Iggede, Igala, Ebira, Okun, Berom, Jukun, Afizere, Anaguta, and Mambila, among others (Ochonu 2008; Kwaja 2017). 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 the maxim-machine gun used by the British; most of the time, when attacked, the Tiv would flee into the next village, and the 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 administration 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 and 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).

Because of the need for fertile land, the Tiv people fought their neighbours and grabbed their land (Makar 1994, p. 32; Fardon 2015, p. 578). 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 (Palmer 1942, p. 253; Bamidele 2022). 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 historical epochs of the Middle Belt region have witnessed various forms of violent clashes and acts of aggression stemming from diverse sources, including but not limited to perceived and actual persecutions. The people of the Middle Belt had protested against British rule, their Hausa-Fulani sub-colonial agents, and the post-colonial policies of Nigerian politicians—Hausa-Fulani domination. The violent demonstrations of 1939 (*Inyambuan*)<sup>8</sup>, 1960 (*nande nande*), and 1964 (*Ateem Ityough*) protested colonial practices such as subcolonialism, taxes, forced labour, the elimination of exchange 'marriage', and Hausa-Fulani marginalisation in post-colonial Nigeria (Tseayo 1975; Makar 1994; Ahokegh 2014). The violent protests seem to have continued in present-day Nigeria. Fulani herders seeking access to grazing resources and water in the Middle Belt clash with sedentary farmers who feel their communities are being encroached upon (Ele 2020; Olumba 2022b). Moreover, the Middle Belt's elites accuse the current Fulani-led administration in Nigeria of marginalisation, citing perceived political, economic, and social disadvantages and an absence of effective measures to address regional challenges, particularly eco-violence (Duru 2020; Ele 2020; Ejekwonyilo 2022; Okoh 2022).

The independence of Nigeria in 1960 did not bring respite to the peoples of the Middle Belt. The short periods of multi-party political activities and the circumstances of that time made it possible for regional parties with ethnic support to emerge (Falola and Heaton 2008). On 15th January 1966, a group of military officers led by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu staged a failed coup that brought the NPC-dominated government to an end. Among other things, Major Nzeogwu and his men were dissatisfied with the military's deployment in the Middle Belt to suppress the 1964 riots—an operation that mimicked the British colonial government's 'pacification activities' (Ejiogu 2007, p. 115; Ellis 2016, p. 81). The people of the Middle Belt believed that they had negative experiences with these changes throughout different eras.

Domestic policies adopted by the outgoing Nigerian President, Buhari, have produced an environment in which multiple state governors, particularly those in the Middle Belt, accuse his government of marginalisation (Olumba 2022b; Ele 2020; Duru 2020; Ejekwonyilo 2022; Okoh 2022). These accusations emphasise the perceived promotion of Hausa-Fulani dominance in Nigeria, prioritising the interests of Fulani herders while disregarding the concerns of Middle Belt populations who continue to face persistent violence within their communities (Olumba 2022c; Asikhia 2021, p. 17; Ojo 2023), echoing the narratives of Middle Belt elites during the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods (Dorward 1969; Tseayo 1975; Ibrahim 2000; Suleiman 2019).

These experiences of the peoples of the Middle Belt for over a century and their perception by others within their environment may have shaped their collective memories and created what Horowitz called 'historical grievances.' 'Historical grievances' may be created by migration, attempts to conquer a people by others, or by a successful campaign that leads to the conquest of a group by another (Horowitz 1985, p. 30).

Among the pivotal factors that have remained influential in Middle Belt conflicts are the various perceptions that different ethnic groups in the Middle Belt have of the region's land and space (Maiangwa 2017, p. 287), as well as their perceptions of themselves and others (Eke 2020); these issues are related to collective memories. Non-Hausa-Fulani and non-Muslims, who comprise most of the Middle Belt region, consider themselves the indigenous and 'indigenous' people; they attribute the migration of Fulani herders into their 'lands' to the Islamic jihad, British colonialism, and political forces (Maiangwa 2017, p. 286).

The clashing collective memories held by the two social groups regarding land ownership, space, and resources in the Middle Belt and their divergent perceptions of identity have led to violent conflicts between the herders and farmers. In sum, the Middle Belt can be said to be a region bedevilled by several conflicts for over a century, fighting among its people and against outsiders. The current carnage in the Middle Belt which is characterised by the mass murder of people and destruction in communities is not different from past events in the region, as espoused by narratives from several

scholars ([Isichei 1982](#), p. 210; [Ojie 2006](#); [Ellis 2016](#), p. 81; [Ejiogu 2007](#); [Ojo 2020](#); [Olumba 2022b](#)). Thus, *the past is represented in the present carnage in the Middle Belt*.

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