

## **IDENTITY AND ‘FULANIZATION’ OF BANDITRY IN NIGERIA: THE FULANI AS A ‘CRIMINAL TRIBE’.**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

The belief that Fulani and bandits can be equated has recently become a source of debate among researchers and opinion shapers. Several views have been advanced, believing that Fulani constitutes a security challenge. In contrast, others thought they share normal criminal behavior that has nothing to do with their tribe, as such bandits should be identified and treated as criminals and not by their tribe. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how ‘criminal identity’ is equated with the Fulani tribe in Nigeria to find the extent of its implication on the security of most innocent Fulani people. The analysis in this article was based on social identity theory, which describes how a specific identity is generated, propagated, and accepted. This is a qualitative study that gathered its data from secondary sources. The researchers used journal articles, newspapers, and pertinent government reports to analyze qualitative data. The findings of this study show that the identity of the Fulani tribe has been criminalized in Nigeria, and it has gained widespread acceptability. This study believes that criminalizing the entire tribe through profiling stops, while banditry is thoroughly considered and treated as a non-Fulani cause, criminals exacerbate criminality. The article recommends establishing effective policies by the government to mitigate the spread of criminalizing tribes based on the actions of the criminal ones among them.

**Keywords:** ‘Fulanization,’ banditry, social identity, criminal behavior, and race.

### **Introduction**

Profiling of tribes and races about criminal activities is recently gaining widespread acceptance across the globe. However, it is a significant challenge characterizing social relations in Nigeria today. This profiling is done on the Fulani tribe who have massively engaged in criminal activities, which generated severe fear and suspicion between them and the rest of the tribes in Nigeria. This condition has led to new ideas and myriads of accusations over the character of social relations in the country. The mutual suspicion has significantly influenced the relationships where the Fulani tribe has been stereotyped as criminals. In contrast, attacks have been organized around their communities, with innocent people from both sides bearing the greater brunt of the attacks.

Researchers have done multiple studies and concluded that Fulani have been involved in various criminal activities across the Sahel, most notably in Sub-Saharan Africa, with northern Nigeria serving as the epicenter (Ojo, 2020). For instance, findings from Aghedo (2015), Kotasińska (2020), Ojo (2020), Okoli and Lenshie (2018), Okoli and Ugwu (2019), and Okoli and Abubakar (2021) indicate that many victims of crimes in northern Nigeria, such as armed robbery, banditry, kidnapping, hostage-taking, and insurgency, have testified to encounters with Fulani as the majority members of various criminal gangs that assaulted them.

On the other hand, findings from more research have shown how Fulani involvement is instilling anxiety in other tribes that Fulani pose a security threat to their lives, which generated retaliation, forcing innocent members of the Fulani tribe to flee some of the communities they share with other tribes (Bukari & Schareika, 2015).

On the other hand, researchers have not investigated the connection between Fulani and banditry or how this leads to criminal profiling of Fulani in the country. Although, they are said to have made up the bulk of members of several organizations, including the Ansaru terrorist group in northern Nigeria (Cline, 2021; Zenn & Weiss, 2021). However, sociological anthropologists and ethnographers have linked Fulani to numerous cultural practices assessed to be a source of bravery in several communities in Kenya, Uganda, Mali, and Burkina Faso, which, in turn, causes some attitudinal shift among the Fulani (Angió, 2018; Benjaminsen & Boubacar, 2021; S. Gray et al., 2003; S. J. Gray, 2000; Ladan, 2014; Munyua, 2015; Nyadera & Massaoud, 2019). This has had a significant impact on people's minds and political beliefs across the region (Strelitz, 2008). However, many questions have been raised about the connection of the Fulani tribe to banditry. Such questions include; who are these bandits terrorizing people and killing at will? How true is it that Fulani can become bandits more than any other group? To answer these questions, this article investigates the Fulani's connection to banditry in Nigeria, which leads to various attempts to reconstruct their identities as criminals who owe nothing but to be criminality.

### **The Fulani tribe**

The Fulani culture has enormously attracted the attention of researchers across the globe, including the United Nations and the European Union, all of which have contributed in different ways to understanding Fulani and their cultural practices. Fulani are cultured people, and it has been argued that their culture has massively settled on cattle and farming, which is assumed to be dominated by primitive practices (Ekpo et al., 2008; Glew et al., 2003, 2004; Gordon, 2000). However, the warrior-self-reliant herdsman's nature inspires no doubt adoration and gives them a more striking physical presence through their native economic and cultural practices (Gulliver, 2013).

Furthermore, in Nigeria, Fulani are nomads that rear cattle, sheep, and goats as their primary economic occupation with particular cultural outlooks (Osadebamwen, 2017). Their socioeconomic activities are organized in and around the grazing regions of the rural areas and forested reserves. Challenges of climate change and security (Okoli & Lenshie, 2018) have pushed them to have abandoned in part or in full their major economic activities further southward (Osadebamwen, 2017). Most of their cattle have now been rustled (Anka, 2017; Olaniyan, 2018; Onwuzuruigbo, 2021) along the process, leaving them with land as the only economic goods (Bamidele, 2019). On the other hand, even the land had been taken over by farmers (Osadebamwen, 2017) through government policies of revoking and re-allocation Fields (Nartey & Ladegaard, 2021).

Fulani has now been pointed at as the principal suspect behind the major insecurity issues linking northern and southern Nigeria. They are identified with violent behavior through multiple criminal activities (Nnabugwu, 2018). As the insecurity is so pervasive across northwestern Nigeria, Fulani is into all kinds of criminalities such as armed robbery, banditry, kidnapping for ransom, hostage-taking, and insurgency (Aghedo, 2015; Ojo, 2020). By all shreds of evidence, deviants among Fulani appeared to be more in acts of banditry than any other tribe in Nigeria. Therefore, this has been adopted to reconstruct their identity as criminals who owe nothing other than being criminals.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts the social identity theory. The idea of social identity attempts to explain social perception, bias, discrimination, and conflict in society. Social groups give their members a shared identity that defines and assesses who they are, what they should think, and how they should act, distinguishing them from out-groups. When two groups have a mutually exclusive aim that only one group can attain at the expense of the other (e.g., world dominance), they compete fiercely. Prejudice and discrimination, and ultimately dehumanization, are typically accompanied by damaging intergroup conduct and disparaging intergroup attitudes. When two or more groups share a common purpose that can only be reached through intergroup relations, they become less competitive and even cooperative and harmonic (Capozza & Brown, 2000; Hogg, 2016; Korostelina, 2007). On the other hand, intergroup relations have always been a central aspect of the theory, for the simple reason that what happens within groups is inextricably linked to and influenced by what happens between groups, and vice versa (Hogg, 2016).

However, identity is majorly the essential characteristic of human beings. On a general note, it is used differently in many instances, according to the specific contexts. According to the social identity theory, identity is a commonly used concept. It can signify many different things to various people. Identity can also refer to a sense of self-integration, in which many components form a coherent whole of the 'self' (Deaux, 2001). According to Scott (2021), identity consists of features that define a person or make the person, which is fundamentally a matter that human beings care about. Identity is more used to attract sympathy to oneself, present one as an outcast amongst competing groups, or score political goals in ways that matter most to the intended purposes. An identity is a form for or against a particular group as a means to an end. It is used to score goals, particularly in a liberal democratic setup as the identity machine (Leve, 2011). It has been manipulated to increase political purposes and (Garcia-Rios & Barreto, 2016).

However, in-group members sometimes deliberately or subconsciously create an identity for the out-groups, as in the case of Fulani in Nigeria. The general expressions of the context-dependent attributes were developed to conform to the Fulani categorized out-group. For example, Hogg and Reid (2006) show that their representation to conform to the category's context-dependent prototype is restructured when people are categorized. As a result, such terms can transcend the borders they originally intended to affect. By this, intended negative expression emerges only through deliberate creation of social identity attributes on a prototypical group of people, making in-groups see members of that group as deviant against the standard features. Therefore, it is on this ground that a prototypical criminal attribute was created to conform to the new identity of Fulani. The inherent fear in the minds of different in-groups (other tribes ) in Nigeria had majorly paved the way for the act.

For the Fulani tribe, their new identity of being 'violent' was created. In the aftermath of the construction of the new identity, it usually causes deep-seated dislocations, anomic frames of mind, and unhappiness (Scott, 2021). One cannot assume that the construction was done deliberately but caused by some attitudes of the Fulani. At the subnational level, ethnic, regional, and sociocultural identities are created to challenge some current and widely held opinions on managing states' multicultural relations. This is, in essence, to say the least, that identity shapes relationships between citizens, groups, and political opportunities. Where groups are created with a particular identity, movement acts based on identity status that is externally defined. The identity itself forms a part of the basis for the grievance (Bernstein, 2005).

## **Methodology**

This article is a qualitative investigation into the Fulani's relationship to banditry and how it was utilized to create an unofficial criminal identity for the whole Fulani tribe by groups who

consider themselves in-groups and indigenous to Nigeria. The study draws on data from secondary sources such as relevant published journal articles, media reports, and other appropriate government and non-governmental organization reports.

### **Connecting crime to tribe, race, and youths**

The connection between Fulani and banditry is not new in global history. It has occurred in various parts of the world and multiple ways. For example, in the United States, the racialization of crime among Latino or Mexican immigrants as criminals (Brown et al., 2018). However, people have been profiled based on their sexual orientation and faith, particularly with the current global spread of terrorism (Reynolds, 2017). More so, attempts have been made to link criminal tendencies to human growth and development, particularly modern technology. In this regard, young people are profiled with tendencies to form criminality from emerging technologies that construct their personhood (Brewer et al., 2018; Forbes, 2020).

Like those in the rest of the world, Male Fulani youths are more likely to become criminals than their older ones. This is a belief that comes from various researchers and opinion-makers. However, such contributions did not consider the context specificity of crime and criminals in their generalization, as such, numerous scholars have used criminology theories to justify the claim that youths are more likely to become criminals as they progress through the social development process (Akpokighe & Ejovi, 2021; Nwalozie, 2021). Nonetheless, it is a fact that Fulani youths have been caught in more significant numbers than any other tribe among the bandits, kidnappers, and cattle rustlers in northern Nigeria. As a result, the criminalization of tribes becomes all-pervasive, widespread, and widely accepted. A situation like this often leads to government officials making assumptions and opinions about a tribe, as happened mostly in the US and with the Fulani in Nigeria (Nadama, 2019).

In the United States, a high sense of this racialization of crime in the police service shows that it has become a regular practice by the white police agents. According to (Lett et al., 2021), police shootings for blacks and other people of color were high between 2015 and 2020. More so, Gross and Livingston (2002) further argue that many officers are in the habit of questioning, stopping, searching, arresting, or otherwise investigating a person because his race or ethnicity matches information about a perpetrator of a specific crime that the police is investigating. Many incidents have lately happened, including but not limited to the recent 2020 George Floyd's murder by the white police even though a couple of other racial treatments of blacks and Latinos have continued (Oriola & Knight, 2020).

### **Connection of Fulani to banditry**

Several studies have linked banditry in northern Nigeria's ungoverned areas to the Fulani tribe (Ojo, 2020). This calls for understanding both bandits and acts of banditry. However, according to modern researchers' frameworks, defining banditry could be pretty tricky (Miller, 2013). This is due to the multiple developments and consequent changes daily noticed in acts of banditry. The problem has unraveled many perspectives about bandits and acts of banditry in northern Nigeria. However, bandits are called differently as thugs, outlaws, brigands, criminals, heroes, on other hand. They are, however, sometimes called rebels (Collier, 2000) and appeared not only in a modern but primitive state system (Moselle, 2001).

In Nigeria, bandits are defined by their psychological and social identities (Ojo, 2020), which explains why banditry becomes the new fixed identity of the Fulani tribe. Facts and realities have shown that the Fulani were more likely than any other group to be implicated in banditry as they constituted the major suspect group. However, no effort was made to differentiate between the criminals and their tribe, adopting blanket profiling. It is worthy of note that criminality has no psychological or social characteristics. Still, innocent Fulani

persons who have been profiled have been placed in great danger due to their profiling. However, this article believes that blanket profiling was done through the concerted techniques of framing and propaganda to create the link between the Fulani tribe and banditry.

In framing the connectivity of banditry to the Fulani tribe, media was used to create wider publicity against the Fulani tribe. However, many instances have shown how specific groups and unique prototypes were developed based on particular stereotypical special identities. In India, for example, through propaganda, the British colonial masters had criminalized a whole wandering tribe like Fulani in Nigeria by the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, which referred to the tribes as gangs and criminals. However, Safdar (2020) reported that:

The criminalization of these 'tribes,' followed by their surveillance, was accomplished to assuage the fear of masses increasingly alarmed by the spike in crime rate. On the one hand, 'criminal tribes' were deemed inherently criminal, 'explaining' why the crime occurred and provide a measure for action against crime. On the other hand, the colonial state sought to 'reform' these nomadic tribes by redefining their relationship to property and imparting sedentary habits among them, modifying their inherent nature (P. 2).

The brandishing of the entire Fulani tribe as criminals was further supported by specific policies and declarations of some politicians. However, the attempt was actualized by states such as Ondo in the West and Benue and Taraba in the Northcentral. Despite the justifications for the ingroup structural divides among the Fulani tribe, other out-group tribes made them appear to be one and identical. The criminal persona that has been established against them becomes an accepted identity, and it is supported by the actions of the criminals among them. For fair treatment, they needed to have been identified as three distinct groups: farmers, cattle breeders, and city dwellers who do not grow cattle or farm fields (Nagarajan, 2019).

However, several researchers have argued that framing creates a form and medium through which information is delivered with its perceived impacts on individuals' judgments and choices (Kente, 2021; P.37). Subsequently, many conflicts have happened by media framing of political situations. According to Okoroji et al. (2021), such an act influences attitudes toward the object framed, which in most cases resulted in a rise in negative attitudes.

### **Effects of Fulanization of crime and banditry**

The profiling of the Fulani as a criminal tribe has resulted in a slew of adverse effects, including a worsening of the violence. While the Fulani tribe is regarded as the 'other' in Nigerian social connections, the subsequent impact was ethnicization of the conflict, which is precisely what is happening in the country. However, the bandits were not seen as those working to achieve specific material and criminal interests (Ahmadu, 2019). As such, the criminal identity was replaced by the Fulani tribal identity portraying the entire tribe with intentions to ensure destabilization of Nigeria. It is worthy of note that the Fulani tribe is like other tribes in the country; there are among them the peace-loving ones and the deviant ones capable of becoming criminals.

Many innocent Fulani have been reported gruesomely slaughtered in different parts of the country, which has become a security concern in Nigeria (Bamidele, 2018). Their herding business has been declared a natural disaster due to the metaphorical conceptualization of Fulani as a 'criminal tribe' (Igwebuikwe, 2021). More so, what the profiling essentially does is create a perceived dichotomy among the citizens, which breeds local tension often capitalized on by other criminals, insurgents, and terrorist organizations in northern Nigeria. As a result, calls for modernization of herding have been widely preached, and advocacies are being churned out almost daily.

Furthermore, trans-border activities of the Fulani tribe have been tagged criminal and illegal by other tribes in Nigeria. This is similar to the experience of Fulani in the Sahelian

countries. For instance, in central Mali, a sponsored campaign has led to violent clashes between Fulani and Dogon militia in the Seeno plains. The Fulani are mainly identified to have dominated the jihadist insurgency by the Malian military and therefore sponsored the major onslaught against the entire Fulani tribe and their communities (Benjaminsen & Boubacar, 2021). In furtherance of that, various unfriendly laws and policies were formed. For example, in Ghana, nationalization of expulsion exercises of Fulani tribe (e.g., Operation Cow Leg) as a result of being stereotyped as armed robbers, rapists, violent and uncivilized has led to local evictions and confiscation of Fulani-acquired lands (Bukari & Schareika, 2015; Nartey & Ladegaard, 2021). Many innocent Fulani have fled areas where they were originally born and brought up to save their lives.

### Conclusion

Finally, it is worth noting that the ‘fulanization’ of banditry has contributed to the conflict’s expansion and, as a result, intensification of banditry in northern Nigeria. This has been added to the list of conflict-inducing factors in the region. Religion, ethnicity, culture, politics, and poverty are among the responsible factors (Ajaegbu, 2012; Bernstein, 2005; Dunmoye, 2007; Khosrokhavar, 2015). These factors have had a significant negative impact on Nigeria’s interpersonal social ties. Most importantly, individuals use race to profile crimes and criminals worldwide. In Nigeria, for example, Fulani are distinguished by their skin color and physical appearance and are often lynched if their brethren commit a crime, particularly in southern Nigeria. As a result, the ‘fulanization’ of banditry and crime in Nigeria is gaining traction. Innocent Fulani have been slain due to racial prejudice in various cases. According to this article, states should do all legally feasible to eradicate this idea and practice by enacting effective regulations with a clear goal.

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