

# Cattle Rustling and Dialectics of Security in Northern Nigeria

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the phenomenon of cattle rustling in northern Nigeria with a view to underscoring its strategic implications for national security. By way of qualitative discourse, predicated on secondary sources, the paper observes that cattle rustling represent a veritable threat to public safety and security in Nigeria. This is in view the dire impacts and repercussions of the phenomenon which negates national security of the country. As the way forward, the paper recommends that the government should recognise cattle rustling as a national emergency and put drastic measures, such as proactive community policing, in place towards mitigating it.*

**Keywords:** Cattle rustling; organized crime; national security; public safety; nomad.

## 1. Introduction

Cattle rustling refers to the stealing of grazing cattle. The term is of the historical United States colloquial etymology in which context pioneer farmers lost cattle while grazing on huge ranges that were difficult to patrol for policing (Microsoft Students Encarta, 2008 DVD). Traditionally, cattle rustling has been driven by the criminal intent to expropriate cow for meat or for sale. Pertinently, it must have served as a means of primitive accumulation of cow-herd in the contexts of subsistence and commercial pastoralism (Blench, 2004).

Over the years, cattle rustling has evolved into a pattern of organized crime with immense criminal sophistication and efficiency. Hence, contemporary cattle rustlers operate with modern weaponry and their operations are marked by trans-locational and trans-national syndication (Alemika, 2013). This clearly underscores cattle rustling as a typical and prominent instance of 'underworld franchise' in contemporary societies (Okoli and Agada, 2014; Okoli and Okpaleke, 2014).

Cattle's rustling is a global phenomenon. It has manifested in various scales and dimensions across the nations. For instance, in Scotland, 300 cattle were reported to have been rustled by the end of 2013,

leading to the declaration of cattle rustling as a national emergency by the government (*Daily Trust Editorial*, 05 February, 2014).

In Nigeria, the prevalence of cattle rustling has been widespread, particularly in the northern part of the country where cattle rearing obtains as a dominant agricultural practice. Recent developments tend to have implicated cattle rustling in the rising wave of violence in northern Nigeria, as exemplified in the phenomenon of Boko Haram insurgency and herder/farmer conflicts (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014; Okoli and Iortyer, 2014). This scenario has accentuated the significance of cattle rustling as a fundamental national security problematique in Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the phenomenon of cattle rustling in northern Nigeria with a view to situating its security implications and repercussions.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: The Queer Ladder Theory (QLT)**

This paper applies itself to the analytical perspective of Queer Ladder Theory (QLT). This theory was influenced by an American sociologist, Daniel Bell (1919-2011), who coined the idea of ‘queer ladder’ in an attempt to explain the functional significance of organized crime as a desperate tactic for socioeconomic empowerment and social climbing. This theoretical perspective has since fertilized into a popular theoretical framework widely used in contemporary crime studies. The basic assumptions of QLT are:

- i. Organized crime is an instrumental behavior; it is a means to an end.
- ii. It is an instrument of social climbing and/or socio-economic advancement
- iii. It is a means to accumulate wealth and build power (Mallory, 2007; Okoli & Orinya, 2013).

Often ascribed to QLT is the notion that organized crime thrives in contexts where the government’s capacity to dictate, sanction and deter crime is poor; where public corruption is endemic; and where legitimate livelihood opportunities are slim (Nwoye, 2000; Lyman, 2007; Okoli & Orinya, 2013). Under these circumstances, the incentive to indulge in life of crime is high, while deterrence from criminal living is low. Put differently, the benefits of committing a crime surpass the costs and/or risks. This creates pretext for criminal impunity and franchise (Okoli & Orinya, 2013).

Applied to the purpose of this paper, QLT enables us to come to terms with the prevalence of organized crime in Nigeria. In this regard, it is to be observed that the phenomenon of cattle rustling in Nigeria has been driven by criminal quest for economic accumulation in an environment that more or less condones crimes. This has been worsened by the prevailing socio-economic malaise and concomitant livelihood crisis in the country. The apparent lethargy of relevant government agencies to ensure efficient sanctioning of crime in that context has all the more complicated and accentuated the problem. A necessary consequence of this trend is prevalence of crime and criminal impunity (Okoli & Orinya, 2013).

The concept of ‘ladder’ in QLT signifies untoward pattern of social mobility. Hence, those who take to organized crime, such as cattle rustling, do so as a desperate means of economic accumulation and socio-economic empowerment. The adoption of the theory for the purpose of this discourse is informed by its analytical utility in providing insights into the sociological foundations of organized crime, prominent among which is cattle rustling, in Nigeria.

## **3. Perspectives on Cattle Rustling**

The phenomenon of cattle rustling has been variously interrogated by scholars and analysts. This has given rise to a variety of scholarly perspectives on the subject matter. Some of these perspectives are considered in this section.

Conceptually, the term ‘cattle rustling’ appears to have evolved into a more or less standardized, specialist nomenclature. Hence, the concept is almost universally applied to designate the act of stealing

cattle from a grazing herd notwithstanding the motivation or contextual specifics. Some recent studies have, however, used the notion of ‘cattle raid’ to denote the same reality (Greiner, 2013).

The basic understanding regarding contemporary cattle rustling in the existing literature is that it is a form of livelihood crime, motivated by both ‘subsistence’ and ‘commercial’ imperatives (Gueye, 2013). In this regard, cattle rustlers are principally motivated by the criminal intent to expropriate grazing cattle for meat or for sale (Gueye, 2013:66).

As a corollary, cattle rustling have also been largely motivated by the quest for primitive accumulation of capital and untaxed wealth (Alemika, 2013:19). In this sense, cattle rustling passes for a typical instance of organized crime (Okoli and Okpaleke, 2014; Okoli and Agada, 2014). An organized crime is a criminal enterprise involving discernible hierarchical social networking and syndication (Alemika, 2013:17).

The conception of cattle rustling as an organized crime, among other things, presupposes the level of sophistication and criminal efficiency that characterizes its contemporary manifestations. In this regard, it has been observed that cattle rustling have evolved into ‘a serious crime with far-reaching implications’ (*Daily Trust Editorial*, February 05, 2014).

In its apparent global dynamics of sophistication and degeneration, cattle rustling has been associated with spiral violence in different parts of the world today. As observed by Gueye:

Cattle rustling are [sic] a major problem in rural areas and the groups involved in the crime are often armed and pose a threat to the state as their activities may lead to violent conflicts between communities or support for rebel groups that may emerge within the countries (2013:55-56).

The significance of the preceding citation is that cattle rustling has metamorphosed from ordinary subsistence or livelihood crime into an organized crime with glaring correlations to politics, power and organized violence. With reference to the contemporary trends and dynamics of cattle rustling in Kenya, Greiner (2013:1) opines:

[Cattle] raiding among northern Kenya’s pastoralists has changed profoundly in the last decades. Fought with modern weaponry and often extreme violence, raiding is increasingly enmeshed in politicized claims over administrative boundaries, struggles for exclusive access to land and attempts to establish or safeguard ethnically homogenous election base.

The association of cattle rustling with political struggles has been evident in some parts of Africa. For instance, in 2013, many people were killed or wounded in series of massive cattle raids perpetrated by rebels in Jonglei region of South Sudan (News24, 2013: para.1). Similarly, in Nigeria, the spate of cattle rustling in the northern part of the country in the recent years has sometimes been associated with the activities of the Boko Haram Islamic sect (Okoli, 2014a). The argument in this regard is that rebel or terrorist groups resort to cattle rustling as a means of raising fund in support of their group agenda (Okoli and Iortyer, 2014).

Conventionally, cattle rustling is, more or less, a nomadic phenomenon. This observation is predicated on two principal assumptions, namely:

- i. It takes a nomad to effectively ‘drive’ a stolen cow or a cow-herd from the graze.
- ii. It also takes a nomad to efficiently navigate the ‘forest routes’, escaping with the stolen cow.

Without any prejudice to possible exceptions, it would take an active involvement, or at least connivance, of a nomad to plan and prosecute a ‘good’ cattle rustling deal. In this connection, it has been alleged that the bulk of the cases of cattle rustling in northern Nigeria has been perpetrated by the ‘transnational syndicate of renegade Fulani-nomads who know the forest well’ (IRIN, 2013: para 20). IRIN (2013), continues to note that most of the culprits of cattle rustling are nomads themselves who must have

lost their cattle as a result of the incessant ‘resource-conflict’ with the settled farmers (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014), or any other mishaps. The point being emphasized by IRIN is that cattle rustling is largely a nomadic phenomenon. It is mainly perpetrated by ‘disgruntled Fulanis who have lost cattle’ and has thus taken to ‘highway robbery and raiding of herds of their kinsmen who they begrudge for not coming to their aid in their predicament’ (IRIN, 2013: para.1and 5).

Overall, the prevalence of cattle rustling in Africa today has been associated with a number of predisposing and causative factors, among which are:

- i. The worsening material/livelihood conditions of the herders arising from the repercussions of climate change and the attendant resource conflicts tend to be compelling criminal tendencies among the herders.
- ii. Proliferation of arms and ammunition in Africa has placed enormous weaponry in the arms of criminal elements some of whom perpetrate cattle rustling.
- iii. Terrorism and armed rebellion in the sub-Saharan Africa have promoted cattle rustling as a franchise dedicated to funding of group struggles.
- iv. The remoteness of grazing fields makes effective surveillance and policing of cattle herd problematic.
- v. The itinerant pattern of grazing in Africa predisposes cattle rustling.
- vi. Absence of effective legal framework for mandatory cattle identification and/or registration has obstructed the fight against cattle rustling.
- vii. The porous nature of inter-state border-lines in Africa makes trans-border cattle rustling conducive and thriving.
- viii. The criminal impunity of the people, arising from the apparent lethargy of the government to deter crime through drastic penalty (IRIN, 2013; News24, 2013; Gueye, 2013).

#### **4. Prevalence of Cattle Rustling in Northern Nigeria**

Cattle rustling has been a perennial problem in Nigeria. In Northern Nigeria where cattle rearing constitutes a dominant occupation, the problem has been complicated by the rising incidence of farmer/herder conflicts as well as the Boko Haram insurgency (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014; Okoli and Iortyer, 2014).

Data showing absolute and discrete figures and trends on cattle rustling in Nigeria is scarcely available. However, few isolated statistics exist to indicate contemporary prevalence of cattle rustling in the country. A recent revelation from the Pan-Nigerian association of cattle breeders, Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), shows that 322 herders were killed in the seven states of Nigeria in 2013 (*Daily Trusty*, 2013: para 1). The states include Kaduna, Benue, Plateau, Taraba, Nasarawa, Zamfara and Niger. The source also revealed that about 60,000 cattle were stolen in the incidents of cattle rustling in the same period (*Daily Trust*, 2013:para. 1).

The prevalence of cattle rustling has been most prevalent in the wider central region of Nigeria with a number of states thereof as critical flashpoints (see Table 1 for insights).

**Table 1: The Flashpoints of Cattle Rustling in Nigeria.**

STATES	STATES
CRITICAL FLASHPOINT	ORDINARY FLASHPOINT
Benue	Adamawa
Gombe	Bauchi
Kaduna	Borno
Katsina	Jigawa
Nasarawa	Kebbi
Niger	Kogi
Plateau	Kano
Taraba	Kwara
Zamfara	Sokoto
	Yobe

Source: Authors

The above classification (Table 1) is determined by the reported incidence and prevalence of cattle rustling, by the media and relevant stakeholders, such as MACBAN. Within the aforementioned states, incidents of cattle rustling are more pervasive in areas where grazing activities are more pronounced. For instance, in Benue state, cattle rustling mostly took place in Agatu, Apa, Giver and Guma axis while in Plateau state, critical flashpoints include Wase, Shendam, and Lantang North and South (*Daily Trust*, 2013: para 3).

The distribution of casualties arising from cattle rustling has been uneven among the affected states. Based on the 2013 incidence, the distribution is staggering, as shown in Table 2 hereunder.

**Table 2: State Distribution of Cattle Rustling Casualties in 2013**

STATE	N0. OF HERDERS KILLED	N0. OF CATTLE STOLEN
Plateau	87	7,200
Nasarawa	125	12,000
Benue	12	2,000
Zamfara	37	2,462
Niger	15	500
Taraba	17	700
Gombe	---	2,904
Yobe	---	92
Sokoto	---	99
Bauchi	---	204
Kwara	---	204

Source: *Daily Trust* (2013: para 1).

A later dimension of cattle rustling in Nigeria takes the form of massive village raids whereby herding communities are attacked, mostly in retaliation for previous showdown by community vigilantes or collective resistance by community dwellers. This pattern of attack has been recurrent in Zamfara, Kaduna and Katsina states in the recent months (Okoli, 2014; *Daily Trust*, 2014; Okoli and Okpaleke, 2014).

Generally, the prevalence of cattle rustling has appeared to be on a rapid increase in Northern Nigeria over the recent years. A brief highlight of some major instances of cattle rustling in that context

would suffice to situate the foregoing observation. Information reflected on Table 3 hereunder offers vital insights in this regard.

**Table 3: Timeline of Selected Cattle Rustling Incidents in Nigeria (2012-2013)**

DATE	INCIDENT
June 13, 2013	Bandits raid Kwasa-Kwasa in Birnin Gwari District of Kaduna State, killing five people including two soldiers and three vigilantes.
June 8, 2013	Bandits attack three villages in Birnin Gwari District, Kaduna State killing seven residents and carting away over 300 cattle, leading to displacement of 300 residents.
May 19, 2013	Around 2,000 residents and six (6) nomadic villages in Faskari District of Katsina State abandoned their homes after raids by gunmen in which four people were killed and scores of cattle were stolen.
January 05, 2013	Thirty gunmen on motorcycles gunned down seven people in raids on Makera and Usi villages in Birnin-Magaji District of Zamfara State in what was said to be a reprisal attack.
June 12, 2012	Scores of motorcycle-riding bandits shot dead 23 residents of Dangulbi village in Dansadau District of Zamfara State in what was said to be a reprisal attack.
October 04, 2012	Killing of 20 people in an attack on Dogon Daura village in Birnin Gwari District of Kaduna State in a retaliatory assault.

**Source:**IRIN (2013: Sidebar- cf. References)

Based on empirical insights, three dimensions of cattle rustling can be identified in Nigeria. These are petty/localized rustling, inland rustling, and trans-border rustling. Table 4 hereunder attempts a cursory highlight of the comparative characteristics of these dimensions of cattle rustling.

**Table 4: Dimensions of Cattle Rustling in Nigeria**

	Orientation	Motivation	Origination	Destination	Culprits
Petty/Localized rustling	Not Syndicated; not armed.	Criminal quest for household protein or dairy (meat and milk)	Neighbourhood paddocks or grazing fields.	Local households	Local farmers and nomads
Inland rustling	Loosely Syndicated and fairly armed	Quest for capital accumulation	Grazing fields of herding communities.	Local cattle markets and abattoirs.	Nomads and their local cronies.
Trans-border rustling	Robustly syndicated, organized and armed	Quest for capital accumulation; funding of political cause e.g. armed rebellion and terrorism.	Grazing fields, commercial farms; cattle markets; herding communes.	Across national boundary to Niger, Chad, Cameroon.	Nomads and a cartel of agents, merchants, and foreign accomplices.

**Source:** Authors

## **5. Cattle Rustling and National Security in Nigeria**

Cattle rustling has been a veritable threat to public safety and security in Nigeria. As we have noted in the foregoing discourse, it has led to loss of lives, human injury, population displacements, as well as loss of cattle in their numbers. This situation goes with repercussions that do not portend well for the collective wellbeing of the herding communities. It creates a sense of insecurity which has the capacity to hamper the productivity of the herding enterprise. The loss of cattle to rustlers means depletion of household income and communal resource of the herding community. The implications of this for sustainable productivity of the herding venture are easy to decipher. This could ultimately lead to drop in the aggregate supply of organic protein and dairy in Nigeria.

What is more critical and dicey is the correlation between cattle rustling and spiral violence in some parts of northern Nigeria. The incessant attacks by cattle rustlers on herding communities tend to set them at loggerheads with their ecological neighbours - the settled native farmers. In some instances, the farmers are arbitrarily accused by the herders as the culprit and masterminds of their cattle raids. This engenders ill-feelings that exacerbate the already conflictive herder/farmer inter-group relations, leading ultimately to vicious circle of violence.

Another critical dimension of the implication of cattle rustling is its apparent degeneration into a terror-brand mass raids wherein innocent villagers, including women and children are victimized are often killed. Only recently, the public sensibilities of Nigerians were outraged over the report of massive killings and raping that characterized one of the recent occurrences of cattle rustling escapade in Katsina and Kaduna states in February, 2014. If this development is a necessary trajectory of cattle rustling in its dynamics of degeneration, the implication is that it passes for terrorism in terms of destructive import. Related to this, is the concern that cattle rustling is being resorted to by the insurgents as a fund-raising strategy of terror financing. The strategic implication of this development is that it has the capacity of raising the instrumental value and utility of cattle rustling to a level where its solution would be as problematic as terrorism itself. The logic is that if cattle rustling earnestly becomes an instrumentality for terrorist design, it will surely thrive so long as terrorism prevails.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Cattle rustling is one of the critical dimensions of public insecurity in contemporary Nigeria. It poses a serious threat to the national security of Nigeria in view of its dire impacts and implications. The latest manifestation of cattle rustling in the fashion of blood-letting community raids in some parts of northern Nigeria, as well as its purported association with the Boko Haram insurgency points to a new dimension to the national security challenge. It therefore behoves the Federal Government to come up with pragmatic measures towards mitigating this national emergency. In this regard, the paper recommends as follows:

- i. Effective resolution of the prevalent herder/farmer conflicts in northern Nigeria.
- ii. Promotion of community policing, especially motorised patrol and surveillance in the major grazing areas.
- iii. Effective police patrol along the Nigerian border-lines to ward off cattle marauders operating across the boundaries.
- iv. Urgent remediation of the problem of arms proliferation in Nigeria.
- v. Scaling up of counter-insurgency campaign in northern Nigeria to ameliorate terror-induced cattle rustling.
- vi. Stiffer penalty for the perpetrators of cattle rustling.
- vii. Involvement of the herding communities in the fight against cattle rustlers by way of Private-Public-Partnership (PPP) of community policing.

- viii. Bi-lateral engagement with neighbouring states of Niger, Chad and Cameroun in an attempt to check trans-border dimensions of cattle rustling.
- ix. Creation of cattle ranges and ranches for easy security of herds as well as effective regulation of grazing activities, etc.

It is the position of this paper that conscientious implementation of some of the aforementioned measures would go a long way in addressing the menace of cattle rustling in northern Nigeria. To say the least, the Nigerian government must recognise the fact that cattle rustling is a serious national emergency and respond to it accordingly.

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