

# Farmers and Herdsmen Conflict in Nigeria and the Case of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1-16: A Reflection

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## **Abstract**

Conflict is certainly an inevitable part of our existence as humans. How we manage and atimes resolve such conflicts remain a defining characteristic of human life. One of such conflicts that has bedeviled humanity since creation when the world consists only of a man (Adam), his wife (Eve) and two sons (Cain and Abel) is that of farmer and herder dichotomy. This is the conflict of Cain and Abel the two first born humans in Genesis 4:1-16 which many have come to attribute to the perennial and never ending farmers and herdsmen clash in Nigeria. Biblical scholarship which this research represents, however, argue that these conflicts should be analysed within a broader historical and policy context. More so, this research aims at emphasising that the Cain and Abel narrative by the Deuteronomistic historian has more often than not been (mis)interpreted as a reflection of the traditional conflict between the farmers and the nomads, and its probable bias in favour of the latter is seen as representing a nomadic ideal in Israel. This work gives recommendations on how Farmers and Herdsmen can live peacefully with one another.

## **1. Introduction**

Going down memory lane, there has been enormous complementarity and symbiotic relationship between the farmer and the nomad in Nigeria. The mutual benefits and complementarity between these two groups have in recent times been replaced by unhealthy competition, distrust, and violence. Many have come to believe, conclude and take the biblical myth of the conflict between Cain and his brother Abel which led the former to treacherously murder the latter as the archetypal example of the tension amongst our sedentary farmers and migrating pastoralists.

Nigeria as a nation does not have the unfortunate monopoly of the farmers' and pastoralists conflict. Such conflicts seem to have affected other parts of the world as well and Africa in particular. Countries like Niger and Mali (Turner, pp. 869-89), Ivory Coast (Bassett, pp.453-72), Cameroon (Moritz, pp. 101-26), Tanzania (Tor, pp. 423-45), Rwanda (Baechler, 1998) just to mention these few,

have had their fair share of the range of ugly blood bath between farmers and nomads. In fact, the 2015 Global Terrorism Index reported that 'Fulani militants' are the 4<sup>th</sup> deadliest terrorist group in the world, responsible for the deaths of 1,229 people in 2014- up from 63 in 2013. However, in this research we shall focus on the Nigerian situation only.

Our aim is twofold. Firstly, to correct what we perceive as the biased way of looking at the farmers and pastoralists violence in the light of Cain and Abel story as recorded in Genesis 4:1-16. In doing this, we are not in any way trying to shy away from the truth that the clash between these two professions constitutes one if not the oldest conflict on earth. It appears, as the story suggests, in the very first generation forced to live outside the scriptural Garden of Eden and apply the toil of their hands to their own survival. Secondly, to give a critique of the Nomads Verses Farmers conflict in Nigeria with the sole aim of hoping that this violence will end eventually. More so, the urgent need to address the issues dispassionately with a view of finding a lasting solution to the problem, otherwise the consequences on the religious, ethnic, political and food security in Nigeria will be devastating also necessitates this research.

We have taken the liberty to use the words, farmers, agriculturalists interchangeably to refer to the cultivators of the soil while using the words nomads, pastoralists, herdsmen to refer to shepherds and the Fulani nationality. Our focus on the Fulani is due to the scope of their pastoral activities and their political visibility.

## **2. The Sense of Genesis 4:1-16 (Only RSV is used in this work)**

Genesis the first book in the Bible, constitutes an embarrassment of riches for any biblical interpreter, scholar, and commentator. The pericope in this research is 4:1-16. The account is seemingly clear but like many biblical stories, there are many gaps. It is these gaps that allow for further discussion by theologians and other commentators and as a result, much has been written and said about this well-known passage of the Bible. Many Old Testament scholars and contemporary biblical gurus have tried to give meaning to these vesicles.

Three main episodes are contained in the narration:

- i. Cain and Abel are the sons of Adam and Eve, vv. 1-2
- ii. Cain and Abel offer sacrifices to God, vv. 3-7
- iii. Cain murders Abel and is punished by God, vv. 8-16

From the start of the narrative, opposition and conflict abound. In the etymologies of the names of the main characters, we find our first conflict: the name Cain (in Hebrew, *Qayin*, Koine Greek, *Ka-in*, Ethiopian version, *Qayen*,

Arabic, *Qabil*) is related to the root meaning, 'acquired' and is reported to arise from Eve's acquisition of a child, which implies that his life has significant value (v.3). Contrast this with Abel (in Hebrew, *Hevel* and Arabic, *Habil*), which means 'breath, vapor, nothingness. The name itself by implication implies something ephemeral and valueless: a puff of breath or vanity. Beyond this lack of intrinsic value, Abel's birth is virtually uncelebrated in the narrative. The arrival of Adam and Eve's second son is presented as a mere afterthought when compared to the statement announcing Cain's entry into the world.

The narrative briefly and simply goes thus: the two brothers offered sacrifices to God from the work of their hands. God accepted Abel's (the nomad) and rejected Cain's (the farmer). Cain in turn, treacherously murdered his brother Abel, lied about it to God and as a result was cursed and marked for life. One thing stands clear; the Genesis narrative does not give us a specific reason for the murder of Abel. Ancient and modern commentators typically assume that the motives were jealousy and anger due to God's rejection of Cain's offering, while accepting Abel's. Apart from being the product of envy and anger, it has been argued that the fratricidal Cain and Abel episode can also be understood metaphorically, as a representation of the struggle between two particular social and economic patterns- the farmers and the herdsmen (see also Hazony, pp.104-10).

Despite the nature of this ancient narrative or perhaps because of it- authors and composers have developed a wide range of understandings of what can be deduced from the account of the two first brothers. All of the writings attempting to understand the truths underpinning this story fall under the category of exegesis, which is the explanation or exposition of (typically) scriptural text.

Early theologians in the camp of the Fathers of the Church, discerned prefiguration of Christ's sacrifice in the personalities of both brothers. The elder brother is often connected by the Church Fathers to various non-Christian groups, most frequently the Jews. Tertullian is a clear case of one that relates Cain to the children of Israel and interpreted Abel not Christologically but rather as a representation of all Christians (Tertullian, p.156). Ambrose (p. 362) yet another Father of the Church writes regarding the two brothers thus:

Two nations are in your womb; two peoples stem from your body. These two brothers, Cain and Abel, have furnished us with the prototype of the Synagogue and the Church. In Cain, we perceive the patricidal people of the Jews, who were stained with the blood of their Lord, their Creator, and as a result of the childbearing of the Virgin Mary, their Brother, also.

Other scholars have lent their comments regarding the Cain and Abel saga but there has not been any consensus in this regard. Skinner (p. 10), for instance, proposed that the story represents an early stage of Israelite religion in which animal sacrifice alone was acceptable to Yahweh. Gunkel (p. 43) on his part claims that: "This myth indicates that God loves the shepherd and the offering of flesh, but as far as the farmer and the fruits of the field are concerned, He will have none of them." Other schools of thoughts claim that it is fair to suggest that the conflict between Cain and Abel was a religious conflict. Cain was in conflict with God. Cain's anger towards God provoked violence towards his brother. He could not kill God, so he killed the one with whom God was pleased. In striking down his brother, Cain murdered a person who was born in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27). It is ironic that the very religious acts that are observed to honour God can be corrupted to bring great dishonor to God's name. Cain's worship ended with Abel's murder.

Daniel Quin (1992) is one of the few theorists who sheds some (supposed) unbiased light on the matter. He assumes that the narrative tries to convey the clash between an agrarian society in the making (Cain cultivated land) and a society based on herding and hunting (Abel was a herdsman). This scholar goes on to tell us that the advent of agriculture ([over ]10,000 years ago) ameliorated the standards of living (meaning more food in the stomach) of those tribes who till than those who based their economy in hunting/herding. A natural consequence of this development was that those who embraced agriculture experienced a considerable growth in population. Therefore, because more land was needed to feed more people, an expansionist policy was implemented leading, eventually to the first conflicts for land in our history.

Quin's (1992) hypothesis maintains that because of these conflicts, farmers acquired the negative reputation (and may deserve) for being too violent. He believes that a popular story around the fire amongst those herdsman would certainly be that of the mean farmer killing his innocent shepherd brother- Cain and Abel. This view in the mind of this researcher is unlikely. The evidence for such an ideal in biblical literature is extremely flimsy. Further still, there is no slightest suggestion in the text of any comparative evaluation of the vocations of Cain and Abel, nor is there the slightest disparagement of the tiller of the soil. On the contrary, agriculture is regarded as the original occupation of man in the Garden of Eden as well as outside of it.

### **3. The Nigerian Scenario**

Herdsman and farmers have over the years contributed their own quota tremendously to the economy of Nigeria. The place of the Fulani herdsman and sedentary farmers cannot be over emphasized as they have sustained the

production and sale of meat and food items across the length and breadth of the country. They two have lived together as far as the mind can remember. In the past, due to the healthy and godly relationships, farmers welcomed the seasonal migration of the Fulani and their cattle. The cattle fertilized the farmers' fields with their dung and the farmers in turn reserved land for the cattle to freely graze. It was somewhat as already observed of a mutual relationship. Today, however, the relationship between the Fulani cattle-herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria has taken a deadly turn. Nigeria today is embroiled in farmer/herdsmen conflict that has divided people across ethnic and religious lines with thousands killed and millions lost over the past few years. This has made Nigeria to have the unfortunate reputation for being a violent country. In 2014, it was considered to be the seventeenth most fragile state in the world, and it was ranked 151 out of 162 countries in the Global Peace Index, a multidimensional report on violence, security, and criminality (see: <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/#/page/indexes/global-peace-index,15:04:2017>).

Some scholars (Breusers et.al., pp. 357-80) believe that these conflicts are not new phenomena because, 'they already occurred at the time of the Biblical patriarchs,' and is mythically symbolized in many cultures. Cain slew Abel, the Chinese emperors built the Great Wall to keep out the marauding hordes (Roger and Mallam, 2003). Others look at these conflicts as inevitable and violent in nature. Gladwell (p. 102) puts it succinctly thus:

...the kind of culture that grows up around being a herdsman is very different from the culture that grows up around growing crops. The survival of a farmer depends upon the cooperation of others in the community. But a herdsman is off by himself. Farmers also do not have to worry that their livelihood will be stolen in the night, because crops cannot easily be stolen unless of course, a thief wants to go to the trouble of harvesting an entire field on his own. But a herdsman does have to worry. He is under constant threat of ruin through the loss of his animals. So he has to be aggressive: he has to make it clear, through his words and deeds, that he is not weak.

The causes of these conflicts remain an issue of debate among Nigerian watchers and analysts alike. Some have depicted the violence as a continuation of the ethno-religious struggles that predates the colonial era. The fact that the majority of farmers and herdsmen clashes pit Muslim Fulani pastoralists against peasant Christians has exacerbated ethnoreligious hostilities at both national and local levels. Prominent Christian clerics have claimed that the Fulanis act as proxies for northern Nigeria's elites and/or Boko Haram, while some Muslim organisations have bitterly denounced the alleged mistreatment

Fulani herdsmen suffer at the hands of empowered Christian communities and state agents. These claims and counter claims are a bit problematic because the relative absence of such widespread bloodshed throughout much of Nigeria's post-independence history suggests more contemporary factors are to blame. Sadly, however, these conflicts are a prime example of religious divides aggravating land tensions in Nigeria. Small disputes over land and cattle have escalated into full massacres because of strong religious divides.

#### **4. Herdsmen and Farmers Clash in Nigeria: Some Observations**

While there have been many heated debates in connecting the Cain and Abel saga on the issue under discussion, we have observed very limited discussions on the "Nigerianess" and global character of the crises. In our view, the Biblical story of Cain and Abel should be left to rest and let us concentrate on the cause(s) of the problem, for without a proper understanding of the root cause of the problems, a lasting solution will be impossible to come by. Indeed, there is a compelling need to identify the root cause(s) of, as well as explore and discover strategies for finding solutions to farmers-herdsmen conflicts. This is particularly true if any reasonable success is to be achieved in the agricultural and animal husbandry sectors that are currently undergoing changing production patterns as a result of markets and population driven intensification.

Accepted as it is that the herdsmen and farmers conflict is a perennial problem with a long history. More to this, such conflicts in Nigeria are often presented as typical instances of resource conflicts in line with the influential 'environmental scarcity' literature. However, a recent work by Milligan and Binns (2008, pp.163-84) in northern Nigeria have seriously questioned the assumption which seem to regard farmer-pastoralist conflict as 'inevitable consequence of steady population growth, environmental stress, and irrational natural resource management'. arguing that such 'crisis narratives, are technicist in approach and have the tendency to obscure other points of view, in particular, those that place an accent on the role of power, history, and symbolism in the dynamics of rural society, and neglects the degree of heterogeneity and disequilibria in the natural environment.' But no matter how you look at it, the causes of farmers and herdsmen conflicts are not far-fetched. We must be quick to note that there appears to be no consensus amongst both groups as to the causes of their mutual conflict. We propose that our contemporary situation needs to be looked at with the following observable lenses:

- a) Democratization of Nigeria which in and of itself is good but sadly is said to be one of the causes of radical identification with Islam and Christianity and consequently with the farmer and herder conflict.

- b) Land degradation: This is caused by agricultural and pastoral practices. Farmers both commercial and sustenance, use bush burning as a method to clear the land for crops. Bush fires, rendering lands useless, have destroyed nutrients that help healthy crop growth and natural pasture development.
- c) Deforestation: It is also a major factor in land degradation. Reduction in tree cover through indiscriminate falling of trees leaves the land vulnerable to water erosion and wind pollution by denying the soil the stability of tree roots. Thus rendering the land useless to both the farmer and the pastoralist.
- d) Cattle damage to land: This is caused by overgrazing and cattle compacting of the land. Cattle are being restricted to smaller grazing areas which increases complete depletion of that area's soil nutrients. Additionally, the system of alternating between cattle grazing and crop growth during seasons have been eradicated by commercial farming of dry season crops all year round and the overall decrease of arable land in the northern regions. The alternating approach allowed lands to be fertilized and rejuvenated by herd's waste. Instead, lands are overgrazed and compacted year round and unsuitable for use after a couple of years.
- e) Water pollution: When the herdsmen take their cattle to drink at community rivers or streams, the water is very often polluted by the animals as they indiscriminately urinate and defecate in them. Hence, children and women who source water for household chores are put through a lot of stress seeking clean water for drinking and cooking. It has also been reported that some of these Fulani herdsmen kidnap, beat up, rape and murder some of the women and children that dare to challenge them about the pollution of their water sources.
- f) Cattle thefts: Another cause of farmers-herdsmen conflicts is increasing rate of cattle theft which this research observes is often accompanied by violence.
- g) Settlers and indigenes divide: It has also been understood by this research that instead of the Cain and Abel connection, one cause of the conflict is understood in the land tenure system and the settlers and indigenes contest over land and misplaced development strategies of the government.
- h) De Haan (pp. 1-13) is of the view that: "destruction of crops by the cattle and other properties and equipments (irrigation equipment and infrastructure) by the pastoralists themselves are the main direct cause for conflicts cited by the farmers, whereas burning of rangelands and fadama and blockage of stock routes and water points by crop encroachment are important direct reasons cited by the pastoralists.' Ojo, on the other hand, is of the opinion that many of the cattle been reared by the Fulani nomads do not belong to them but to some wealthy individuals who gave it to them to nurture on a mutually agreed terms of payment. In fact, it was alleged that it is these

wealthy owners that give arms and ammunition to these herdsmen to fight the farmers anytime they kill their cattle.

- I) Unpredictable rainfall and Dry Seasons: Rainfall has not only been sporadic when it does come, the magnanimity of rainfall has equally been as unpredictable and destructive as the absence of it. Floods and droughts contribute to a degraded quality of the land by either washing away or drying up viable pastures and cropland.

In addition to the above causes, researches are of the opinion that climate change has a vital role in this. For example, desertification in the savannah region of northern Nigeria due to low rainfall has substantially reduced the grazing land and water sources for cattle. Thus, the herdsmen in order to feed their animals have to migrate where they could get grass to nurture them. In the course of doing that, the cattle swoop on farmlands and destroy crops planted by farmers. Of course, the farmers have to fight back over the destruction of their means of livelihood hence the bloody conflict between the two sets of people helping the country to solve its food security challenge. Surely, it has been deciphered by this researcher that at the heart of the pastoralist- farmer conflict in Nigeria is not the scriptural Cain and Abel myth but resource scarcity. This is agreed by scholars like Adekunle, Adisa, Onuoha (see. <http://environmentalsynergy.wordpress.com/2011/04/18/the-effects-of-climate-change-in-nigeria>) amongst others. The question is: what brings about this type of resource scarcity if not climate change that adversely affects environmental resources through drought and desertification. Nasiru captures the scenario when he said:

Nigeria is experiencing adverse climate conditions with negative impacts on the welfare of millions of people. Persistent droughts and flooding, off season rains and dry spells have sent growing seasons out of orbit, on a country depended on a rain fed agriculture. Alarm bells are ringing with lakes drying up and a reduction in river flow in the arid and semi-arid region. The result is fewer water supplies for us in agriculture, hydro power generation and other users. The main suspect for all this havoc is climate change. Scientific studies show snows are disappearing rapidly. (<http://environmentalsynergy.wordpress.com/2011/04/18/the-effects-of-climate-change-in-nigeria>)

## 5. Evaluation

That no nomad can exist for long without contact with sedentary people is an aphorism with a universal acceptance. Hence, pastoralists and crop farmers are intertwined-sharing land, water, fodder and other resources. Their contributions to food security, environmental sustenance, economic stability

and security monitoring cannot be over emphasised. As such, it is unfortunate that the competition between these two agricultural land user-groups has often times turned into serious overt and covert hostilities and social friction in many parts of Nigeria which many have come to relate with the Cain and Abel story of the Old Testament. Therefore, whatever the causes of farmers-herdsmen conflicts, efforts must be made by all and sundry to nib the bud on the head. For it is evident that these conflicts have been of great negative effects not only to the nomads and farmers but to one and all. These range from physical effects (such as death of a loved one, injuries for live, destruction of farm lands, crops, and residential houses); socio-psychological effects in the forms of depression, emotional exhaustion, job dissatisfaction; economic effects like loss of income and resources.

While agreeing that the biblical story of the conflict between Cain and Abel that led the former to kill the latter is subtly and in a manner of speaking an archetypical example of the tension between sedentary farmers and migrating pastoralists, we make bold to observe that attempts at agricultural modernization have fostered an anti-pastoral environment in Nigeria. The government's aim is to confine livestock keeping to grazing reserves, but these reserves lack sufficient pastures and water supplies, and other essential amenities, leading herdsmen to search for such resources elsewhere. Pastoral access to wetlands is decreasing due to expansion of cultivated areas and the promotion of farming all year round. This leads actors to try to solve problems through other means, notably violence which is inimical to the growth and development of a people.

Helping to curb the menace of farmers and herdsmen conflict is a necessity which can be achieved via:

- Educating both parties on the need for peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding.
- Creating better awareness of land use regulations among farmers and herdsmen.
- Education among the two parties should be realistically encouraged. This would not only lead to better perception but also create better opportunity for awareness of realistic coping strategies.
- Traditional and local leaders should be well involved in finding solutions to farmers and herdsmen conflict.
- Theoretical and empirical analyses of farmer-herdsmen conflict are grossly inadequate without the inclusion of conflict actors and victims coping mechanism.
- The problem between pastoralists and farmers is connected to development and economic challenges that ought to be discussed in this manner.

- One sided reportage should be discouraged. For instance, 'the Fulani herdsmen have borne a large proportion of the blame for most conflict and environmental degradation in policy statements in the Guinea Savannah region of West African states.' (Thebaud and Batterbury, pp. 69-78).

### **Conclusion**

Farmers-herdsmen conflict in Nigeria is definitely having its toll on animal and agricultural production on the economy and on the household of the two groups. Pastoralists require the calories produced by the crop farmers, much as the crop farmer also often require the protein and dairy products produced by the pastoralists and thus no need for conflicts; even if there be misunderstanding, it needs not be as intractable as it currently seems.

The attempt to give ethnic and religious identities to this recurring conflict is unfortunate. Yes, some of the actors are Christians and some Muslims but we also have followers of African Traditional Religion and free thinkers amongst them. Relating and interpreting the conflicts in the light of the Cain and Abel myth is misleading. One thing is certain; the conflict between Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 has been described as a story that explains ancient animosity between farmers and herdsmen, or to explain sibling rivalry. However, for this work, its most basic purpose is to demonstrate that fallen humans embrace violence in a conflict situation. This is a story of what is in man's heart and how that affects his life.

We have outlined some factors which though not exhaustive, but have necessary connection to the farmer-herdsmen conflict and nowhere have we seen it as the consequence of the actions in the biblical story of the two brothers, Cain and Abel. In the case of the brothers' story, by allowing his jealousy get the better of him, the elder, Cain gives in to aggression against his brother and then fails to take any responsibility for his own actions even when confronted by the Creator (God). But the single act through which Cain robs Abel of everything changes Cain too. For Cain forever uproots the comfortable, settled farmer who he was and becomes instead a rootless, unprotected wanderer - in essence, a walking replica of his murdered brother. Once he deprives Abel of his safety, and once he denies his own responsibility, Cain is exposed to the depths of human cruelty in ways he never before imagined. And in so doing, Cain ironically deprives himself of his ability to feel safe himself. For when the world is not safe for one, it is not safe for anyone. Indeed, the proverbial saying that a person who has taken a life has taken a world is compelling and true to the core. Therefore, instead of trying to look wrongly at the farmers-herdsman conflict in the manner of the Cain and Abel story for justification, all must be done to end the menace.

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