

## Article

# Anchored in History: Understanding the Persistence of Eco-Violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt through Collective Memory

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**Abstract:** 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), this paper examines empirical case studies conducted in April 2018 and May 2022 in Benue State, Nigeria, to determine why these conflicts persist. The paper argues that contending parties anchor, objectify, and socially represent past contestations in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Nigeria in present-day realities and events in the Middle Belt, leading to the re-experience of collective memories and their consequences on people's violent collective behaviour. Consequently, people resort to violence to redress present grievances viewed through the prism of past events. To promote sustainable peace when tackling deeply-rooted conflicts, it is essential to comprehend the historical context and the significance of collective memory while employing a comprehensive strategy for conflict resolution. Implementing the Cognitive Reappraisal Technique to address issues related to collective memories is critical to this approach.

**Keywords:** collective memory; conflicts persistence; eco-violence; social representation theory; cognitive reappraisal technique; Nigeria



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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 [Iyekekpolo 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).

This paper adheres to the idea of collective memory as a social representation of the past, explaining how people's collective memories are shaped not only within the social groups and social frameworks to which they belong but also against the social groups and social frameworks to which they do not consider themselves members ([Obradović 2016](#), p. 13). 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).

Espousing 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 *jihād* 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. This paper focuses on the conflict between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers in the Middle Belt.

The North Central region of Nigeria, with a population of over thirty-five million, is experiencing persistent and unprecedented violence between nomadic Fulani herders and sedentary farmers over access to water and grazing fields. Existing literature cites various causes for these conflicts, including resource scarcity, migration, adverse climate conditions, encroachment, the failure of politics, corruption, and ethnic and religious discrimination (Olumba 2022b; Ajala 2020; Mbih 2020; Ojo 2023; Mlambo 2023). Some argue that colonialism and its aftermath shaped African conflicts (Piguet 2018; Onwuzuruigbo 2013; Maiangwa 2017). Others contend that accumulated prejudices in the Middle Belt drive violent disputes over resources (Higazi 2016; Ostien 2009).

Despite these studies, there has not been a significant focus on how the representation of past events influences collective memories and consequently evokes emotions that lead to collective violence and the continuation of violent conflicts in the Middle Belt. This paper seeks to comprehend the link between the process of making sense of current events through historical accounts and how its outputs, which are socially constructed meanings, are represented to impact collective memory and, as a result, perpetuate conflicts. This paper achieves this by analysing the impact of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence contestations within the region on people's collective memories, emphasising how the representation of past events, such as colonial experiences and the Jihad of 1804, serves as defining moments. Contesting groups use these events to justify their actions or condemn those of others.

This paper employs a qualitative research design and draws upon data collected from two focus groups conducted in April 2018 with internally displaced persons (IDPs) at the Abagana IDP camp in Makurdi and a focus group in May 2022 with IDPs at a host community<sup>3</sup> in Agatu, Benue State. The focus group conducted in 2008 comprised thirteen people—three women and ten men—who are primarily farmers. In contrast, eight men were in the second focus group, mostly members or representatives of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), a socio-cultural group for Fulani herders. I sourced the quotes used in the paper from one focus group among the five conducted in two states in the Middle Belt region: Benue and Nasarawa. Specifically, this focus group was conducted in O village in Agatu, Benue State, and consisted of respondents who had fled from neighbouring conflict-affected communities, including the Aila community. It

comprised 11 men from different communities. Though this number may not constitute a representative sample, [Stratford and Bradshaw \(2021, p. 99\)](#) assert that in-depth interviews with a few knowledgeable informants can yield valuable insights for addressing research questions. The focus group discussions explored the impact of eco-violence on peaceful coexistence between farmers and herders and the factors that influence and sustain some sedentary farmers' pursuit of immobility in conflict-affected communities.

The analysis in this paper was conducted using the social representation theory (SRT). The SRT has been used over time to comprehend how historical events emerge as "... common-sense knowledge and communicate something about who 'we' are, and how 'we' should act"; the central tenet of the SRT is how we make sense of the world and, consequently, how knowledge is socially created and represented ([Obradović 2019, p. 59](#)).

This paper employs a reflexive thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke 2021](#)), which relates to interpreting and creating narratives from data ([Braun et al. 2019, p. 591](#)). The thematic analysis, conducted at semantic and latent levels using responses' surface and underlying meanings ([Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 84](#)), employed six steps from the reflexive analysis approach ([Campbell et al. 2021, pp. 2016–20](#); [Braun et al. 2019, pp. 852–57](#)). The analysis revealed that 'collective memory' was a pervasive theme interrelated with numerous other themes identified in the data. Although explicit quotes referencing 'collective memory' were absent in the transcribed data, the thematic analysis—at the latent level—([Braun and Clarke 2006](#)) extended beyond participants' direct statements. Nevertheless, some quotes were used to emphasise the respondents' voices.

This approach employed in the present study bears similarities to the approach outlined by [Hopwood \(2010\)](#) in his work, wherein he also encountered a paucity of direct quotes in the raw data. As [Hopwood \(2010, p. 107\)](#) highlights, his analysis was informed by a more abstract level of interpretation beyond the interviewees' explicit responses, necessitating a greater degree of analytical interpretation. In addition, the paper treats historical narratives as perspectives, acknowledging informed narratives supported by historical evidence. [Glassberg \(1996, p. 10\)](#) posited that people construct histories based on their experiences. Therefore, people's orientation and context influence their narratives about past events. As such, only accounts that were reported by numerous scholars were used in the analysis.

This paper provides new insights into the connection between collective memory and the persistence of violent conflicts. It offers nuanced perspectives on how socially constructed meanings of past events impact current collective behaviour and perpetuate violence in North Central Nigeria. This paper argues that events and lived experiences from the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras are objectified and socially represented in current events in the Middle Belt, leading to the re-experiencing of collective memories and their consequences on violent behaviour. Reliving ethnic fears impacts people's emotions and non-normative collective behaviours against perceived outgroups. Retribution follows, perpetuating the cycle. The paper highlights why eco-violence has persisted for over a century in the Middle Belt.

By concentrating on the conflicts between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers in the Middle Belt, this paper provides a perspective on these conflicts that currently need to be sufficiently addressed in the literature. In addition, this paper recommends the cognitive reappraisal strategy ([Halperin et al. 2013](#); [Hurtado-Parrado et al. 2019](#)), which is an insightful conflict resolution mechanism yet to be used for settling disputes in the Sahel area, despite its efficacy in other conflict environments. The paper does not question the importance of addressing these conflicts by resolving issues related to competition for water, land, and other agricultural resources. However, it argues that it is also essential to recognise and respond to issues related to people's cognitive processes and their connectedness to conflict persistence, in this case, collective memory, to eliminate the intractable nature of these conflicts.

The remainder of the paper examines the current research on violent conflicts between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers in the Middle Belt. This paper provides a brief history

of the conflict and explores the connection between how past events are represented in contemporary Middle Belt realities by contending parties. It then examines the impact of these representations on collective behaviours and the persistence of eco-violence. The analysis primarily draws from the perspectives of sedentary farmers regarding eco-violence among themselves or with others. Following that, there is a call for the cognitive reappraisal technique to be implemented in Nigeria for resolving disputes, which has been used in other countries with a great deal of conflict, particularly in the Middle Belt.

*Current State of Research: The Conflicts between Fulani Herders and Farmers in North Central Nigeria*

Climate change has had a profound influence on people's lifestyles in Africa's Sahel region since the 1950s (Shirkie 1979). The 1970s and 1980s droughts precipitated an upsurge in the disputes between nomadic herders and farmers, which have raged for decades (Bassett 1988), with leaders on both sides periodically reaching an accord and soothing the situation (Tonah 2002; Cold-Ravnkilde and Ba 2022). Conflicts between these groups have reached record heights in the last decade, becoming increasingly violent and destructive (Akingbe 2022; Cline 2021; Lacher 2022; Olumba 2022b). This situation has been linked to the rising availability of military-grade weaponry, the elites' vested interests, the proliferation of ungoverned spaces, and inept governance (Ajala 2020; Nartey and Ladegaard 2021; Olaniyan et al. 2022).

In the literature, the conflicts over water and other agricultural resources between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers across Africa have been referred to with several inappropriate terms such as 'herdsmen militancy' and 'farmer–herder conflicts'. A recent study contends that 'eco-violence' is more appropriate for describing these conflicts because current labels are not neutral; some connect to people's occupations and ethnicities, while others depict some groups as victims and others as perpetrators (Olumba et al. 2022). According to the study, the umbrella term *eco-violence* advocates an inclusive approach that encompasses social and environmental injustices as significant conflict components and the effects of political factors.

Eco-violence has been used to characterise disputes between social groupings over scarce resources (Homer-Dixon 1999), ecological harm to the biosphere caused by modern social structures (Rees 2008), and the killing of individuals (Stoett 2012). It has also been used to characterise unlawful wildlife commerce (Stoett and Omrow 2021). According to Soysa (2002, p. 1), eco-violence is a conflict 'where people fight for survival due to environmental pressure stemming from a denuded resource base'.

In the context of the Sahel region, eco-violence has been described as '*... conflicts in which competition for water and agricultural resources occurs within or between social groups or state actors, often resulting in mass murder and destruction of the environment and properties; such conflicts are exacerbated by the state's (or states') failure to address resource redistribution challenges, institutional failures, and environmental and social injustice*' (Olumba et al. 2022, 2082 italics in original).

Eco-violence has been argued to stem from herders' migratory movement to newer areas as a result of exposure to adverse climatic conditions and their subsequent settlement in such environments also exposed to resource scarcity issues (Omilusi 2016; Bukari et al. 2018; Ducrotoy et al. 2018); the denial of access to grazing opportunities; crop damage; rape; cattle rustling; retaliatory killing (Okoli and Atelhe 2014; Okpaleke and Abraham-Dukuma 2020; Ogbette 2021; Cline 2021; Jacquemot 2022); and social discrimination related to people's rights as indigenes within a locality and insufficient community input in policy formulation (Bassett 1988; Kuusaana and Bukari 2015; Maiangwa 2020b; Ojo 2023). Historical contestations between groups and inspiration from past events have contributed to Nigeria's continuance of conflict (Pieri and Zenn 2016; Higazi 2016).

Even with all of these contributions, there is the need to offer more explanations to how historical events are interpreted in the present, to the extent that they influence the reexperience of collective memories and emotion, hence perpetuating intractable communal

violence in the Nigerian Middle Belt. Consequently, there is much to learn about the interconnectedness of past events and their influence on contemporary happenings when we examine these issues through the prism of people's collective memories.

## 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*.

### 3. Collective Memory and the Persistence of Eco-Violence: Unpacking the Role of Social Representation

The intertwined nature of conflict and memory mutually reinforce one another; conflicts leave lasting imprints on the memories of individuals and groups, while memory brings the past into the present, reigniting old scars, grudges, resentments, hatreds, and emotions of revenge (Wagoner and Brescó 2016, p. 3). How people represent their history is vital to who they are and their social relations with others (Liu and Hilton 2005, p. 537). Such history could include narratives of insecurity, indignity, and humiliation passed down through families, educators, and experiences (Becker 2019, p. 107). The family, schools, and media are critical in the transmission of collective memory (Birkner and Donk 2020, p. 379; O'Connor 2022). Memory is neither history nor characterised by the perspective of time; whilst history is defined by the analysis of archival documents and artefacts, memory is 'from within' (Verovšek 2020, p. 210). While, '... popular history is often a collective memory of conflicts against other groups' (Liu and Hilton 2005, p. 550). Thus, conflicts generate

memories, which can re-enact the occurrence of conflicts, incubating and developing other disputes; however, not all collective memories are violent or can cause violence.

According to its main proponent, ‘... the theory of social representations, on its own modest level, encompasses both a view of communication and everyday thinking in the world of today and an analysis of the anonymous facts that are their counterpart’ (Moscovici 1988, p. 213). Thus, the core tenet of the SRT is that it supports the comprehension of the social environment and how knowledge is formed and socially represented (Obrovic 2016, p. 13; 2019, p. 59; Moscovici 1984). The theory proposes that social representation is generated by two mechanisms: anchoring and objectifying (Höijer 2011, p. 11). Anchoring makes the unknown known by placing it within a familiar domain of previously established schema, allowing us to compare and interpret it, whereas objectifying explains the unknown by transforming it into something physical that we can sense, touch, and therefore control (Höijer 2011, p. 7). Thus, all representations aim to ‘make something unfamiliar, or unfamiliarity itself, familiar’ (Moscovici 1984, p. 24). The conceptual richness of the SRT appears better suited for characterizing the impact of historical accounts, specifically the anchoring and objectification of the 1804 jihad, on people’s collective memories. This analysis demonstrates how social cognitions, through emotional anchoring and personification, influence emotions and consequently contribute to the persistence of collective violence.

Numerous individuals in the region attribute the deaths and destruction in these communities to a revival of the 1804 jihad, which they said failed. A clergy member stated that the Fulani people aim to complete the jihad that Usman Dan Fodio was unable to accomplish in the Benue Valley, with intentions to *destroy* and *conquer* (Olumba 2018). In other words, the eco-violence in the Middle Belt has much more to do with the continuation of the jihad of 1804 which was led by Usman Dan Fodio. This quote represents an act of anchoring on three levels: *naming*, giving something a name or history and removing it from anonymity (Moscovici 2000, p. 46); *emotional*, attaching a new or current event with a previously well-known emotion—thus, the unknown becomes recognizable through the emotions that came from the previous event (Höijer 2011, p. 7); and *anchoring* via *basic antinomies*, the new event receives the societal antinomies of the previous well-known event (Höijer 2011, p. 9).

In addition, the quote also objectifies the conflict which people in the rural communities of the Middle Belt were experiencing, which culminated in almost weekly mass murder and displacement. By means of objectification, ‘a new complex and abstract phenomenon is thereby materialised into familiar frames of references and transformed into everyday common sense’ (Höijer 2011, p. 12). The term ‘jihad’ depicts *destruction* on one side and *triumph* on the other and paints a mental picture that people can sense; thus, the violent conflict that others have attributed to climate change, inept governance, migration, and other factors has been objectified simply as a ‘jihad’ by the respondents. Emotional objectification<sup>9</sup> was evident when basic antinomies such as *destroy* and *conquer* were employed to explain the objective of the supposed ‘new jihad’ in the Benue valley.

In a Channels TV interview, Nobel laureate Professor Wole Soyinka addressed the pervasive violence across the country, highlighting a statement made by a representative from the Fulani socio-cultural organization, Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria. The following were Soyinka remarks:

“Take for instance when the incursion of the Fulani herdsmen began, and the Miyetti Allah. Their spokesman said, I think it was in Borno, we once ruled this place, and we can take back our land anytime we want. I remember that statement; I’ve never forgotten” (Elusoji 2022).

The Miyetti Allah spokesperson referred to the 1804 Jihad, asserting their perceived entitlement to reclaim ‘their land’ at will. This remark highlights the ongoing conflict between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers in Nigeria and the complex historical and socio-political factors involved. Many people in the Middle Belt believed they could resist current violence similarly to how their ancestors resisted the 1804 jihad (Higazi 2016;

[Olumba 2018](#)). This stance aligns with the notion that collective memory is a collective act of claiming space and resistance ([Binoy 2022](#), p. 40).

[Higazi \(2016, p. 370\)](#) conducted an empirical study in Jos, Plateau State, also in the Middle Belt, from which excerpts support the notion that the 1804 Jihad is being utilised to represent contemporary violent events and is influencing collective behaviour.

“Some political narratives of Plateau indigenes claim that there is an Islamic agenda to dominate Plateau State and that Muslims instigated violence on the Jos Plateau in their struggle for power. This viewpoint has also been framed historically, arguing that the current conflicts are a continuation of the nineteenth century jihad that swept across northern Nigeria, establishing the Sokoto Caliphate, but which the people of the high Plateau, aided by the rugged terrain and their decentralised pattern of social organisation, successfully resisted” ([Higazi 2016](#), p. 370).

Thus, Plateau indigenes attribute the persistence of eco-violence in their communities to the unfinished Jihad of 1804, which has fuelled deadly conflicts between the Fulani and other ethnic groups in Plateau State. The anchoring of current events and the emotional objectification of past events indicate a deep-seated enmity passed down from generation to generation. Once a social item or event is objectified, further references to it may be related to an actual perception of reality ([Nicholson 2017](#), p. 219). Comparing current violent conflicts in the Middle Belt to the jihad of 1804 creates the notion that these battles are authentic jihad. Such notions influence the ferocity and intensity with which both contending groups use to settle their scores over time, and the expansion of the repertoire of collective memories because of these recent events led to the amplification of mutual ethnic hatred and further conflicts.

These confrontations between Fulani herders and farmers are interpreted through the lens of the Jihad of 1804 once more. Such interpretations rely on narratives of sufferings, hatred, and deaths experienced that have been passed down from generation to generation ([Becker and Ferrara 2019](#), p. 107). These narratives are now socially constructed to have meanings that become collective memories that shape relations within social groups and those they consider outsiders ([Obradović 2016](#), p. 13); such memories are viewed as evidence of the conflict’s roots, hence perpetuating the perception of competition ([Nicholson 2017](#), p. 219).

Eco-violence in the Middle Belt does not solely involve Fulani herders and sedentary farmers; an ongoing violent conflict between two clans persists in the Aila community, situated within the Agatu local government area. Through a focus group conducted in the host community, it was revealed that a majority of displaced male respondents originated from Aila. An excerpt from a segment of the discussion illustrates how collective memory shapes the conflict:

Moderator: Why is the crisis happening?

The crisis is connected with a land dispute. Between one community and another (#6-OIU-M-IDP).<sup>10</sup>

Moderator: Between who and who?

Between Abugbe and Agbaduma<sup>11</sup> (#6-OIU-M-IDP).

Moderator: But you said that you were from Aila? How is the conflict between Abugbe and Agbaduma?

Because we live in the same area (#6-OIU-M-IDP).

Moderator: Explain to me, please.

We live together. In the olden days, when our forefathers founded the place, it was Abugbe who founded it, and later, Agabduma people came and joined us to live there. Later, they began to snatch our land, claiming to be the owners. As we live together, you have an elder, and the elder is from Abugbe. Later, conflict emerged among the clans over the tussle for land (#6-OIU-M-IDP).

In addition, Agbaduma is a community in Aila; they came to live there. They came to live there, but the original owner of that land is Abugbe. So when the Agbaduma came as a community, they started having issues with the Abugbe people over who would be the district head. The Abugbe argued that them being the owners of the land should be the first district head. But the Agbaduma disagreed, and that was the origin of the crisis or violence (#9-OIU-M-IDP).

Moderator: It means that the conflict that made you flee is the result of a land dispute between which communities?

Chorus: Abugbe and Agbaduma in Aila.

Moderator: So Aila is the name of the area?

Chorus: Yes.

Moderator: You mean within Aila, there are two communities?

Chorus: Yes, we live together.

Moderator: So it means that the conflict is not between Fulani herders and Aila people?

Chorus: No.

These perspectives suggest violent conflicts can emerge between groups with similar ethnic and linguistic traits, as seen between the Abugbe and Agbaduma clans within the Aila community, identifying as Idoma people. In Nigeria, ancestral ties within a particular community determine claims to land and its resources, and a lack of such ties prevents access to communal land (Okoli and Atelhe 2014, p. 85; Vanger and Nwosu 2020, p. 35; Umejiesi 2015). Moreover, communities rely on their shared memory, history, and resources to cultivate a collective identity and pursue self-determination (Umejiesi 2015, p. 12). As a result, in Nigerian communities, these primordial connections determine land claims; disputes over these connections lead to land struggles, resulting in violent conflicts between the contending parties. Primordial connections, passed down as collective memories, play significant roles in land ownership claims. For instance, respondent #9-OIU-M-IDP, referring to the 'forefathers' of the Abugbe clan, stated that they 'founded' their community in the 'olden days'. This assertion positions the Abugbe clan as the original 'owners of the land', with the Agbaduma clan joining later. It is noteworthy that the respondent, like most focus group respondents, identified as a member of the Abugbe clan; this suggests a potential displacement of the Abugbe clan members by the Agbaduma clan.

Consequently, using collective memories to assert claims to communal lands can lead to persistent violent conflicts due to the inherent challenges in determining ownership based on such claims. In this context, the influence of collective memories on communal land ownership, indigeneity issues, and collective behaviour is crucial, as it can precipitate violent clashes between contending groups. Thus, issues of indigeneity and land disputes are profoundly embedded in the narratives passed down through generations. The cited excerpts support this claim, illustrating the effect of collective memory on shaping people's expectations of status and the kinds of opportunities they believe should be granted to or withheld from others. This impact is evident in the distribution of resources, discrimination, violence, and opportunities within the community. As exemplified by the experiences of the Aila community members, such disputes have escalated into violent conflicts, resulting in numerous casualties, displacing many Abugbe people, prompting the immobility of the Agbaduma people, and perpetuating the possibility of further retaliatory attacks through the persistence of eco-violence.

It is vital to note that memory '... has an inherently normative flavour, and thus it influences groups' conduct' (Misztal 2010, p. 29). As observed in several communities across the Middle Belt of Nigeria, when moderated by social context, violence promotes collective memories, which impact behaviour (Villamil 2021, p. 413). These collective memories contribute to the forging of collective identities and boundaries and have significant ramifications (Misztal 2010, p. 28). Identity formations prompted by violent social

representations of the past that emphasise intergroup hostility and differences can produce intractable conflict and social group identities that cannot agree on issues (Kelman 1999). Olumba (2022a, p. 10) contends that memories and experiences from violent conflicts could influence people's collective behaviour regarding how they view their nation, its link to their identity, and their within-group behaviour.

People's social standing is now thematically based. Basic antinomies such as indigenous and non-indigenous, settler and native, and others are exploited to build barriers that have been recognised as primary drivers of these conflicts (Ochonu 2008, 2014; Maiangwa 2020a, 2017). According to Ochonu (2014) and Maiangwa (2017, p. 286), the Hausa-Fulani people claim their rights and privileges over agricultural resources in the Middle Belt as descendants of the Sokoto caliphate. They argue that they are entitled to the resources left by their ancestors, who ruled over parts of the Middle Belt. These references to the Sokoto caliphate further reveal the widespread influence of the 1804 jihad on current events. The strength of representations lies in their ability to impact present reality through the past (Moscovici 1984, p. 10), with practical consequences, particularly in the recurrence of violent conflicts (Bar-Tal 2003, p. 77). In the Middle Belt, such anchoring and representations give new life to past events through present circumstances, impacting people's collective behaviour.

The situation in the Middle Belt region has enabled heinous atrocities, with the contending parties engaging in frequent attacks and retaliatory strikes resulting in the pervasive abandonment of communities, mass displacement from villages, and devastation of livelihoods and property (Ajala 2020; Ojo 2020; Sule 2021; Olumba 2022b). For example, amid Nigeria's general elections in February 2023, a decline in fatalities was observed within the Middle Belt. However, in the short span between the elections' end on February 25th and March 11th, over 400 farmers lost their lives in communities across Benue State (Duru 2023; Ewokor 2023; Charles 2023). The Good Friday massacre, occurring on Good Friday of Easter 2023, led to hundreds of casualties in various communities within Benue State. According to Charles (2023), 38 internally displaced persons (IDPs) were among the victims killed at the Local Government Education Authority Primary School in Mgbani, Guma LGA, on Good Friday; these individuals had been forced to flee their communities due to the persistent conflict between farmers and herders.

In the Middle Belt region, historical events are uniquely represented in contemporary times, drawing upon collective memory to validate current claims. This process of anchoring the past to the present revitalises historical events within the context of current circumstances, influencing collective emotions and contributing to the persistence of eco-violence in rural communities. This paper argues that eco-violence has persisted in the Middle Belt for over a century due to its legitimisation or condemnation through social representation. Contending parties anchor current events within familiar historical contexts, such as the 1804 Jihad and colonial and post-colonial experiences. This anchoring facilitates comparisons and interpretations of the past and present, objectifying events and aligning them with current violent collective behaviours. These manifestations contribute to the enduring eco-violence that has plagued the region for over a century.

This paper argues that lay representations of the past, such as the one credited to Sir Bello, communicate past events through narratives, informing current responsibilities (Poole 2008, p. 160). As such, '... the past is used not just to give meaning to the present, but also to the future' (Saint-Laurent and Obradović 2019, p. 9) and also the collective imagining of the future could aid in the (re)construction of the past (Szpunar and Szpunar 2016; Szpunar 2021). Yesterday's planned retribution is today's action, and today's future retaliation will be tomorrow's; thus, the circle of violence continues.

#### 4. Cognitive Reappraisal and Eco-Violence in the Middle Belt

Policy actions addressing Nigeria's eco-violence-related conflicts focus mainly on competition for water, land, and agricultural resources. While addressing these issues is essential, the ineffectiveness of these policies necessitates the adoption of alternative

conflict resolution mechanisms. Memory can help us comprehend how past actions may reignite, prolong, or trigger conflicts; understanding how societies utilise memory to learn from history can encourage more reflective approaches to addressing the past, ultimately preventing future conflicts (Wagoner and Brescó 2016, p. 3). In other words, it is essential to settle concerns about the contending parties' collective memories. This notion was also supported by Obradović (2019, p. 58) when she argued that we could draw on history to legitimise the present and the future, creating a sense of stability and continuity in a country.

This paper argues that an approach that addresses concerns about collective memory should be considered seriously, as it may be one of the most effective means of resolving ethnic fears, the dread of annihilation, ancient wounds, and the compensation of victims on both sides. It proposes that cognitive reappraisal techniques (Halperin et al. 2013; Hurtado-Parrado et al. 2019) should be included in addition to other peace-building measures to address the persistent eco-violence in the Middle Belt. Cognitive reappraisal is a process of emotion regulation involving exposing people to emotionally-charged scenarios whose meaning has been altered to modify their emotional response to such a scenario to reduce inter-group animosity, thereby increasing their conciliatory response to past violent episodes and decreasing aggressive reactions in intergroup relations (Halperin et al. 2013; Gross 2008).

This approach could include education and awareness about historical events that have shaped collective memories contributing to ongoing conflicts. By facilitating open discussions, providing platforms for sharing experiences, and encouraging unbiased historical accounts, misconceptions and prejudices can be dispelled, promoting a better understanding of the past and its impact on present-day conflicts among involved parties.

According to Bar-Tal (2003, p. 77), groups in protracted conflict institutionalise and sustain collective memory through political, social, and cultural institutions. Consequently, the institutions and people engaged in creating and sustaining collective memories should be the primary target of the cognitive reappraisal technique. In studies conducted in Columbia, Hurtado-Parrado et al. (2019, p. 6) demonstrated the efficacy and replicability of this technique and established that cognitive reappraisal training decreased negative emotions such as fear and anger and enhanced participants' preference for peace. If the peaceful resolution and transformation of eco-violence-related issues are crucial, the government must establish mechanisms for institutional and public participation in cognitive reappraisal training.

## 5. Conclusions

This research offers an original perspective on the factors underlying the persistent eco-violence in the Middle Belt region. By examining epochal events such as the 1804 jihad and colonial experiences as watershed moments, the paper argues that these events, along with their successes and failures, have been utilised by conflicting groups to frame contemporary circumstances in the Middle Belt. As a result, collective memories are relived, intensifying ethnic fears and continuously influencing emotions and collective behaviour.

Addressing the collective memories of the contending groups is crucial for achieving sustainable peace in the Middle Belt. The cognitive reappraisal technique, successfully implemented in Colombia and Israel, is advocated for this purpose. Addressing issues of collective memory is essential for resolving insecurity and fostering a peaceful environment for development. Future research should focus on the applicability of cognitive reappraisal techniques in achieving peaceful conflict resolution in the Middle Belt, with particular attention to how collective identities can inform these techniques to effectively mitigate eco-violence.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sir Ahmadu Bello was the great-grandson of Sultan Muhammadu Bello (Buba 2018, p. 6). Sultan Muhammadu Bello was the son of Uthman dan Fodio, who founded the Sokoto Caliphate in 1804 through a Fulani-led Jihad (Smith 1978). Queen Elizabeth II of England knighted Sir Bello barely a year before he made that statement. Sir Bello made the statement a couple of days after Nigeria gained flag independence from Great Britain.
- <sup>2</sup> Emotional anchoring is a strategy of communication in which a new phenomenon or motive is made more recognisable by associating them with familiar emotions (Höjjer 2011, p. 7).
- <sup>3</sup> The focus group was part of a doctoral research project, and the host community’s anonymity was maintained for security and ethical reasons, while the origin community of displaced respondents was disclosed.
- <sup>4</sup> Lugard went on to become Commissioner of Northern Nigeria between 1900 and 1906 (Gale 1976; Ukpabi 1976, p. 64) and the first Governor-General of Nigeria (President) in 1912 after being recommended and presented to the British parliament by the Secretary of State for Colonies, Lewis Harcourt (Nwabughuogu 1981, p. 85). The oil-rich city of Port Harcourt in Nigeria was named after Mr Lewis, the British parliament’s Secretary of State for Colonies (Ayotamuno and Gobo 2004, p. 390; Azuonwu et al. 2011, p. 584). In 1922, Mr Harcourt met an untimely demise (Walter and Pridmore 2012, p. 51).
- <sup>5</sup> Flora Shaw later married Lugard. Her mother was born in Mauritius, while her father was a British soldier.
- <sup>6</sup> One of the most notable daily newspapers in the United Kingdom, *The Times*, was established in 1785.
- <sup>7</sup> Fulfulde is the language spoken by the Fulani people all over the West African sub-region.
- <sup>8</sup> The Nyambuan revolt initially targeted witchcraft but ultimately functioned as a protest against the British colonial rule; similarly, the Nande (burn) and Atemtyough (smasher of head) represented the Tiv people’s opposition to the British colonial enterprise and the Nigerian state (Tseayo 1975; Makar 1994; Ahokegh 2014).
- <sup>9</sup> Emotional objectification is when emotional aspects are added to the process of objectification (Höjjer 2011, p. 13).
- <sup>10</sup> #9-OIU-M-IDP and #6-OIU-M-IDP are codes for male farmers who were displaced from Aila and participated in a focus group with nine others on 5 May 2022, in the host community.
- <sup>11</sup> Both are clans of the Aila community.

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