



‘Fulanisation’ of kidnapping: Ethnic profiling of criminality in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria has recently witnessed an increase in kidnapping for ransom. Fulani militants are considered a contemporary non-state armed group engaged in abduction for ransom. The ransom industry continues to flourish across geopolitical zones due to a wide range of factors that have provided an enabling environment for its prevalence. At the same time, the phenomenon of the 'Fulanisation' of kidnapping has become a common topic of discussion in public forums. This paper examines the criminalisation of ethnic identity, particularly in relation to the constructed narrative of 'Fulanisation'. The implications of this narrative on peaceful coexistence are discussed. The paper utilises identity theory to explain the criminalisation of the Fulani ethnic group. Departing from popular narratives of collective criminalisation, the paper delves into the social imagery that poses a significant threat to Nigeria's social cohesion.

Keywords: Ethnic profiling, Fulanisation, Insecurity, Kidnapping, Nigeria, Ransom

Introduction

There is a growing scholarship on the phenomenon of kidnapping for ransom across disciplines (Tade et al., 2020; Otu & Nnam, 2018; Badiora, 2015; Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Aghedo, 2015; Osumah & Aghedo, 2011). Kidnapping has been one of the distinctive strategies adopted by terrorists, militias, ritualists, rebels, and several other criminal groups to achieve their primary objectives worldwide (Oyewole, 2016). The commercialisation of kidnapping by non-state armed groups has made it a money-spinning criminal enterprise. Kidnapping for ransom has been one of the "fastest-growing criminal industries, globally estimated to be worth \$500 million each year" (Bickley, 2003, p. 169). Money made from ransoms has been the primary source of funding for many terrorist organisations around the world. For example, ransom has been employed as a fundamental source of financing Jihadist and extremist groups in the Arabian Peninsula. Groups such as al-Qaeda in North Africa, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen survive on income from kidnapping for ransom. Between 2004 and 2012, \$120 million ransom was paid to al-Qaeda, while al-Qaeda in Yemen received at least \$20 million (Knickmeyer, 2014). It has also been observed that wide-ranging

pirate activities off the coastal lines of Somalia have been instrumental in the economic survival of Al-Shabab (Anyu & Moki, 2009).

Mexico is one of the developing nations facing the highest rate of kidnapping globally, with an estimated 1,200 reported cases every year. According to the 2024 Worldmetrics report, "in Mexico, one out of every 1,000 people is kidnapped" (Lindner, 2024, online). The organised drug cartels in Latin America have transformed the economy of kidnapping into a money-spinning venture. Venezuela and Caracas are considered the most dangerous places in Latin America. In Asia and the Middle East, countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Yemen, India, and Afghanistan are the flashpoints of kidnapping, essentially done for political or economic reasons. In Africa, several kidnapping cases have been reported in Nigeria (Rose, 2011; Romano, 2007). Nearly all the countries regarded as failed states have experienced a 'ransom epidemic', making it a global challenge (Christi, 2008).

Kidnapping is not a recent phenomenon in Nigeria. It dates back to the 1980s when such an act was often perpetrated for ritual money. However, in the 1990s,

it became a weapon of war against economic marginalisation in the Niger Delta region of the country. The first significant kidnapping attempt took place on 28 June 1999 when two expatriates (a Briton and an Australian) who worked for the Royal Dutch Shell were kidnapped (BBC News, 1999). Since the 1980s, kidnapping for many purposes has become one of the many security challenges faced by Nigerians. In Nigeria, it is believed that people indulge in kidnapping for sexual, economic, political, vengeance, ritual, and ethnic purposes. However, the recent occurrences have been unique, spanning the northern and southern regions of the country, gradually resulting in a national security concern. The primary targets of kidnapping often include schoolchildren, expatriates, traditional rulers, religious leaders, politicians, government officials, businessmen and women, diplomats, and ordinary citizens (Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019). Besides the Boko Haram insurgency that has established its base in the northern region, the circular economy of kidnapping has become another security challenge that has posed a risk to the survival of ordinary citizens in the country. One reason why kidnapping spreads like wildfire across Nigeria is the economic benefits

associated with it (Otu et al., 2018). As a result, it has become a recurring event, especially in the post-Niger Delta amnesty programme, transforming Nigeria into a theatre of chaos.

Starting from mid-2000, several militant groups emerged in the Niger Delta region, such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Coalition for Militant Action (COMA), Niger Delta Freedom Fighters (NDFF), the Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF), just to mention a few. These groups took up arms against the multinational oil companies and the Nigerian state chiefly because of environmental pollution caused by oil exploration in the region (Onuoha, 2008). Attacks on oil facilities and the kidnapping of expatriates for ransom were the dominant strategies employed by the militant armed groups to showcase their grievances against economic marginalisation, youth unemployment, poverty, and the environmental dystopia of the oil-producing region. Therefore, the economic sabotage orchestrated by the activities of these groups negatively impacted the country's economic survival and so was considered a threat to national security. Since 2009, under the political administration of late former

President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, the Nigerian state dialogued with the militant groups. Following the state-led disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) initiatives and the ecological regeneration of oil-producing communities, relative peace was achieved in the region at the time (Aghedo, 2015).

The spread of kidnapping from Niger Delta to other parts of the country has become a concern to the Nigerian state and the international community. Several non-state armed groups perceive and use kidnapping as an instrument to intimidate the government and citizens in a bid to achieve their primary objectives. Examples of such threats are the recent wave of kidnapping for ransom by Boko Haram terrorist groups, bandits, and Fulani militants in Nigeria. In addition, the recent emergence of banditry and Fulani militancy in the north has spread to the Middle-Belt and southern regions (Ojo, 2020), further exacerbating the Nigerian security dilemma. Following in the steps of the Niger Delta militant groups, the Fulani militants, bandits and unknown gunmen (UG) now use kidnapping for ransom to frustrate the security obligation of the state, and is now considered money-spinning venture to promote atrocious agenda. The current wave of kidnapping for ransom by the

Fulani armed groups has polarised Nigeria across ethnic and regional lines. In a report titled the "Economics of the kidnap (sic) industry in Nigeria" published by SB Morgen, a firm that focuses on geopolitical research in Africa, it is estimated that between June 2011 and March 2020, at least \$18.34 million had been paid as ransom to kidnappers in Nigeria (SB Morgen, 2020).

Kidnapping for ransom is aided by the incessant conflicts between the Fulani herdsman and farmers across the geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Most of the Fulani herdsman have been kidnapping for ransom, while some of them have colluded with security agents to achieve their aims. The reason for many kidnapping cases in developing nations, especially in Nigeria, is rooted in poverty, marginalisation, and economic deprivation (Okafor & Ede, 2020). In addition, the corrupt nature of security agencies in developing countries, particularly in Nigeria, has contributed to the escalation and spread of kidnapping across geopolitical landscapes (Rose, 2011). Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene (2019) argue that the mismanagement of the economy by the political elite which gave birth to a high rate of unemployment and endemic poverty, coupled with the proliferation of weapons due to porous

borders, are key underlying factors that triggered the resurgence of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria.

Reports from several abducted citizens have shown that their abductors were predominantly Fulani. Such practical experience in the den of kidnappers has been used to criminalise the Fulani ethnic group in Nigeria (Akwagyriam, 2020; Obaji, 2021). It is against this background that one of the prominent Nigerian religious leaders has argued that "seven out of ten kidnappers arrested are Fulani" (Sahara Reporter, 2021, online).

Therefore, this paper examines the prevalence of kidnapping for ransom and the criminalisation of the Fulani ethnic group in Nigeria. It argues that despite the widespread participation of Fulani ethnic group in kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria, such an act should be considered a national security phenomenon rather than tagging a particular group as kidnappers. This is on the premise that people from other ethnic groups also engage in kidnapping for ransom.

Moreover, Fulani pastoralists are also considered victims of kidnapping in some cases, thereby exonerating no ethnic group from the menace of kidnapping for ransom. Thus, the state at the national and sub-national levels should remodel their strategies to mitigate the booming

economy of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria.

Kidnapping for ransom and its typology

Kidnapping for ransom can be referred to as an illegitimate abduction of a person to an unknown destination for imprisonment contrary to the consent of the victims with the aim of extorting money from the victims or their relatives, associates, friends, government, or private entity as a requirement for the liberation of the victim (Romano, 2007; Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019). As a business, kidnapping often involves a large group of stakeholders, such as a group leader, arms agents, weapon handlers and trainers, informants, food vendors, cooks, drivers, guards, and several other actors that can be crucial to a successful operation. It has been argued that some of the actors involved in recent kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria have been engaged in cattle rustling, armed robbery, militancy, cultism, human trafficking, and several other criminal activities. Experience from these past illegal activities became helpful in their kidnapping operations (Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019).

Ransom payments for the victims' freedom can be made in cash or exchanged for their members in government custody. Three underlying

factors can be adduced to explain the phenomenon. First, the necessity for the deployment of force for the abduction of the victim. Second, demand for the release of the abductee(s) is elicited, and third, the request of the abductor(s) (Odoemene, 2018). The value for abducted victims is usually based on a wide range of factors, including the victim's socio-economic and political affiliation, family status, the type of criminal gangs involved in the kidnapping operation, and the nature of negotiation for the ransom payment. On several occasions, people from a well-to-do background are often targeted by the kidnappers (Okoli, 2019).

According to Marongiu & Clarke (1993), planning and preparation encapsulating identifying a particular location, time and negotiation are essential components of the ransom industry. If the abductee's relatives, government, or close allies do not meet the abductor's demand(s), there is a likelihood that the victims will be killed. However, there are instances where the abductors killed the victims despite meeting the abductors' demands or died because of an uninhabitable environment that may cause the victim's illness. On the other hand, there are cases whereby the security operatives championed the rescue of the victims

without any form of injury or death (Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019). Alexander & Klein (2009) have argued that violence is often used against the victims, which is considered an instrument of intimidation to coerce the victims to cooperate with their abductors.

Scholars have identified different models of kidnapping. According to Onuoha and Okolie-Osemene (2019), three essential models exist: the invasion model, the highway model, and the insider kidnapping model for ransom. The invasion model implies ransacking a targeted populace or group, including a student population, a community, or a targeted well-to-do populace. Executing such a mass abduction requires effective surveillance, provisional escaping itineraries, selecting the date and time of the invasion, and information gathering by the criminal syndicate. Such an operation must be intelligently planned by mobilising adequate resources such as ammunition and the necessary logistics required for its execution. Given its complexity, the invasion model requires highly experienced criminal gangs to execute. The victims of mass abduction are usually transported to ungoverned spaces such as forests, creeks or bushes, which are difficult for security agents to access. The kidnapping gang members

randomly execute the highway model. Significant roads in cities are the hotspots of the highway model. In most cases, the kidnappers adopt blockage of the road to abduct their victims. Following the abduction, the families of the victims are contacted to negotiate the ransom. The close associates of the victim habitually orchestrate the insider model. In many instances, the close associates are maids, drivers, gatekeepers, friends, business associates, or anyone with information about the victim.

Similarly, five patterns of kidnapping for ransom have been identified, namely virtual, single, group, express and political (Moor & Remijnse, 2008). Virtual kidnapping implies a situation whereby the victims are falsely notified that their relatives or family have been kidnapped (Moor & Remijnse, 2008). In Nigeria, this dimension of false kidnapping has been one of the approaches usually adopted for perpetrators to get money from their families. In such a self-staged kidnapping, an arrangement is made between the deceptive victim, who will ask the associates to call the family of the abductors. The rationale behind such a charade is to extort money under the pretence of self-staged kidnapping.

Single kidnapping entails one person being abducted, while group kidnapping involves more than one person. A typical example of group kidnapping is the recent abduction of secondary school students in Nigeria by bandits. One advantage of group kidnapping is that it generates the national government's attention as well as that of the international community. In such an environment, a ransom for releasing the abducted group is often enormous. Express kidnapping usually occurs within urban spaces. Unsophisticated criminals or mediocre can perpetuate it (Pires et al., 2014). The politically motivated kidnapping is frequently targeted towards releasing a politically significant individual (Moor & Remijnse, 2008). Although money remains a cardinal pillar of abduction for ransom, other instruments for ransom payment revolve around welfare demands and political demands, such as releasing prisoners.

From grievance to greed: The changing contours of kidnapping for ransom

In the pro-amnesty period, the primary targets of kidnappers in the Niger Delta were expatriates, particularly oil workers. Such abductions were carried out in protest against the economic deprivations

and environmental degradation caused by the oil companies in the region. However, the current kidnapping in Nigeria is not motivated by a single factor. Kidnapping now involves business moguls, ordinary citizens, farmers, politicians, relatives, and even clergymen (Aghedo, 2011). Comparatively, the pre-amnesty era witnessed constructive agitation by the Niger Delta militants. However, the resurgence of kidnapping for ransom has no underlying demands against the Nigerian state.

Organised criminal syndicates have terrorised communities, ransacking villages, abducting travellers, and kidnapping commuters. The groups have also considered mass abduction, especially the kidnapping of schoolchildren, which was previously associated with only the Boko Haram jihadist group (The Defense Post, 2021). Following the incessant Fulani herders-farmers conflicts in nearly all geo-political zones in Nigeria, conflicts were triggered by competition over natural resources such as access to land and water, particularly by the Fulani herders. Due to a range of factors such as climate change affecting the livestock in the arid north, Fulani migration from the core north to the Middle-Belt and southern part of the country has become necessary

to seek green pasture and water (The Defense Post, 2021). The encroachment on farmlands by the herds and cattle rustling by the criminal gangs have continued to be a source of conflict between the farmers and Fulani pastoralists, resulting in kidnapping, killings, and reprisal attacks (Ojo, 2020; Financial Times, 2021). Some of these groups have transformed into banditry – a loose term often used to describe the activities of kidnappers, cattle rustlers, armed robbers, Fulani herders and several other armed militant groups motivated by economic rewards (BBC News, 2021; Okoli & Nwangwu, 2023).

Since December 2020, non-state armed groups popularly known as bandits have traumatised innocent citizens across the country. In a recent mass abduction, 769 students were kidnapped across the country's northern region. Mass kidnapping guarantees government negotiation and recognition by the public, which may force the government to pay millions of dollars for the freedom of the abductees. Due to the ineffective policing system, the bandits have always been at the vantage position that helps them promote their heinous agenda, especially in primarily ungoverned spaces where government presence is almost not visible (Ojo, 2020). With the several eyewitness

accounts – particularly the abductees freed by the bandits following the payment of ransoms, it is believed that the abductors primarily comprise Fulani herders and several other pastoralists. Between June 2011 and March 2020, the government and families of abductees have paid more than \$18.34 million to release the abducted citizens (Addeh, 2023).

Currently, abductions have become unselective while the deaths associated with kidnapping have increased. In a recent report published by SDM Intelligence, a Nigerian-based intelligence firm, kidnappers demand ransom based on each victim abducted. However, when it involves mass abduction, such as kidnapping schoolchildren, the ransom value is usually high because of international pressure and the country's global image. Moreover, mediators, those who participate in rescue missions and corrupt public officials have been beneficiaries of such ransom (Maclean, 2021). It is estimated that between July and June 2023, more than 3,620 people were kidnapped with a ransom payment of 302 million Naira (SB Morgen, 2023).

Thus, the motive behind most cases of kidnapping in Nigeria today is not for ideological movements but for economic

survival (Iyora, 2021). While the outrageous level of poverty rate in today's Nigeria has triggered the current resurgence of kidnapping in the country, it is important to interrogate why schools are the primary soft targets of the kidnappers. The rationale behind such mass abduction of students and women is that it attracts a tremendous amount of ransom. It is also acknowledged that men often have the financial strength to secure the release of their children and wives (Iyora, 2021). Weighing the operational display of the contemporary criminal gangs that kidnap for ransom, it is believed that the groups have pledged allegiance to the Boko haram jihadist group in the northeast (International Crisis Group, 2021; The Defense Post, 2021). Moreover, it is also believed that the fall of Muammar Gaddafi and the collapse of Libya triggered the migration of Libyan fighters to Nigeria. The movement of arms and ammunition from Libya into Nigeria fuelled the current dilemma of kidnapping for ransom (Ojo, 2020). Nigeria's territory is a fertile operational base for kidnappers, jihadist terrorists, and Fulani bandits. The ungoverned enclaves have been utilised to promote their criminal agenda in the country. As Nigeria shares borders with neighbouring states such as Niger, Cameroon, Chad, and Benin Republic, the

lack of identification and database makes identifying people of Nigerian origin difficult. Such a vacuum creates a dilemma for security forces to identify criminals and foreign jihadists disguised as Fulani herdsman migrating through Nigeria's porous borders (Ojo, 2020).

Theoretical framework

The phenomenon of identity is universally acknowledged in social sciences, particularly social psychology. Two theories that have gained prominence in this regard, especially in classifying groups within the social space and organisational environment, are social identity and self-categorisation theories (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel, 1982; Burke & Stets, 2009). These divergent schools of thought have acknowledged individual and group distinctive characteristics that shape people's behaviours, attitudes, cultures, customs and beliefs in relation to their group membership in society (Reynolds et al., 2003). The fundamental element of social identity is engrossed rooted in social interaction within a given society. It defines individual's roles as a distinctive member of a specific group in the wider society. Such identification provides a unique recognition of the membership of the group. One of the underlying tenets of identity theory is to underscore, negotiate and manage how

meanings are ascribed to different identities during in discourse. The theory acknowledges how identity is ascribed to social occurrences, which shapes people's social structure, behaviour, and physical and cognitive stability (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Three dominant models of the identity hypothesis dwell within the epistemological domain of people's cultural values. At the same time, others have applied such a theoretical framework to social collectivism and personality determinism (Tajfel, 1982). Social identity is the social imagery of a particular group within a larger society. These elements embedded in the social construction of the group affect their behavioural and attitudinal inclinations. Affiliation with a specific group oils self-esteem, which can serve as a means of sustaining social identity. In developmental psychology, social identity has been constructed to analogue socialisation and conformism (Leaper, 2011). Social identity theory can be viewed with dual lenses. The first can be found within the milieu of psychology. This perspective explains the cognitive orientation that encourages a positive social identity. The second component underscores the resilience against negative social identity, which further

echoes the people's reaction towards a negative social identity (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019).

Another school of thought highlights the relevance and importance of belongingness, which is considered a basis for self-esteem within the social enclave (Tajfel, 1979). Such belongingness has been a source of polarisation, constructing society along "them" versus "us," which is considered a form of the social categorisation process. Tajfel (1979) further argues that the logic behind such stereotyping is enmeshed within the cognitive rationalisation that explains the distinction between groups and their commonalities. However, sociological predisposition between cultural values often leads to racial or ethnic discrimination. This often breeds "them and us" social constructs that promote "in-groups and out-groups" representations. Here, the central argument is enshrined in the collective sensitivity of a group and how much memory affects the social image of other groups.

When the phenomenon of identity is attributed to an occurrence, a feedback response is automatically activated. These feedback loops have five significant elements. First, the attachment and

capacity of self-awareness are animated. Second, how individuals perceive themselves and the response generated from such a perception is determined. The third one recognises the perceptive interpretation that is based on the identity standard connotations. The fourth component asserts the emotional interpretation based on perceptive meaning and identity standard explanations. The last one highlights and compares behaviour, perceptive interpretation, and identity standard extrapolations (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Identity theorists have recognised the importance of resources in enacting individual identities. In this regard, people use resources to ascertain their identities. In this context, resources are dynamically perceived in different circumstances (Freese & Burke, 1994). Three categories of resources have been identified, namely structural, interpersonal, and personal (Stets & Cast, 2007). The usage of these resources reinforces identity verification. Structural resources bolster individual influence within the social structure. Occupational position can be used for identity verification in such dimensions. Interpersonal resources emanate from a relationship that enables to substantiate individual status. Finally, personal resources constitute a belief that

facilitates identity confirmation (Stets & Cast, 2007).

According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), people promote a positive sense of uniqueness that distinguishes their social identity. Positive uniqueness may imply self-esteem and recognition compared to other social groups. The inter-group comparison is an epistemological foundation for defining social groups' character and altitudinal values.

Nevertheless, when comparable equivalents are found in groups under comparison, the key differences become nearly impossible or referred to as a 'social identity threat' (Branscombe et al., 1999). Tajfel and Turner (1986) suggest that the personal experience of individuals regarding collective belongingness and identity is determined by their group membership, which racial, ethnic, and gender affinities can determine. Thus, social identity enables individual self-categorisation, usually constructed along 'us versus them.'

To assert a positive social identity within a social context, comparison of diverse

groups, which promotes sympathetic favouritism towards the members of the in-group, becomes inevitable (Ramasubramanian & Murphy, 2014). The fundamental argument in this school of

thought is that the more a group values its members, the more its members express bias towards its course. However, this generalisation has been challenged by many scholars such as Liebkind (2004) who argue that this principle does not apply to all groups. It is assumed that such a narrative is based on the dominant level of individualism and collectivism embedded in a particular group (Liebkind, 2004).

Nevertheless, social categorisation is constructed to promote stratification. This is often tagged along racial, ethnic and gender lines. The rationale behind the categorisation of groups of people within the social setting is to garner an understanding of such groups' social standing or status. Such categorisation enables us make assumptions about the interaction processes. Social identities are fundamental in predicting collective roles and values within the social structure. Therefore, the individual action and social identity are assumed as a collective prism rather than rhetoric isolationism (Burke, 2012).

Identity and kidnapping: A discourse on the narrative of Fulanisation

Fulanisation is an ethnic construct synonymous with the forceful hijack and occupation of the ancestral land of other

ethnic groups by the Fulani pastoralists. It constitutes land hegemony, a tactic of displacement to occupy the entire country by the Fulani herders. It is an invasion to take over territories and lands, particularly in the southern region of Nigeria, by the Fulani herdsmen. Such a construct is considered within the context of territorial expansion by the Fulani herders in the country's southern region. This is achieved through psychological warfare, invasion, intimidation, encroachment on farmland, as well as maiming and killing of indigenous people in the host communities. Therefore, the Fulani pastoralists assumed it was a forceful subordination of other ethnic groups (Anaele, 2020). However, such an assumption has been challenged by the national government. Such invasions and killings have been frequently interpreted, especially by the federal government, as Fulani/Farmers conflicts in the country's middle-belt and southern states.

The Fulanisation narrative is a construct that promotes Fulani ethnic domination using federal might and political instruments. Historically, such a plan has been adopted to conquer the Hausa ethnic group by establishing the Sokoto Caliphate, populated by the Fulani. Following the emergence of Muhammadu

Buhari as the president of Nigeria in 2015, several policies were initiated and championed by the federal government, which tended to support the fear of Fulanisation. The programmes included the RUGA settlement policy, National Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA), National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP), water resources bill, resuscitation of grazing routes for the Fulani pastoralists, among several others. These initiatives received resistance from the people in the middle belt and southern parts of the country. The southern and middle-belt states considered these policies as a ploy to cede their ancestral lands to the Fulani ethnic group who are the kinsmen of President Muhammadu Buhari (Nnanna, 2021). While this construct continued to generate ethnic cum regional backlash in the country, the Fulanisation rhetoric positions the Fulani ethnic group as a threat to other ethnic groups, particularly in the southern part of the country. This is because of the continuous social mayhem infiltrated by the Fulani pastoralists in the country.

From the religious perspective, Fulanisation has been perceived as an effort to Islamise Nigeria by the Fulani ethnic group. The Islamisation agenda has been a sensitive issue that often creates a

regional polarity between the Muslim-dominated north and the Christian-populated south. The former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, buttressed this position when he claimed that "the herdsmen and Boko Haram are no longer an issue of a lack of education and employment for our youths in Nigeria, which it began as, it is now West African Fulanisation, African Islamisation and global organised crimes" (Oluwole, 2019, online).

Against this backdrop, people in the southern region tend to collectively portray every Fulani as terrorists and kidnappers (Eghagha, 2021). Amidst the failure of the state to protect the citizens from bandits' attacks, the emergence of non-state actors has become inevitable. The state security forces have vehemently clamped down on such informal efforts to curtail the bandits' criminal activities. On this, it has been claimed that:

Strangers come with arms to kill us, rape our women, destroy our farms and abduct some of us for ransom. Instead of the government to protect us, they describe these attacks as "clashes" between us and the armed strangers just because those strangers are their kinsmen. The government refuses to protect us.

Instead, when we try to fight back, the government sends its army, police, and security agencies to arrest and kill us. Those we captured and handed over to the government for prosecution are released with their deadly arms to continue attacking us. Then, the government says we must give up our land to these violent strangers who are now claiming that our land belongs to them. (Nnanna, 2021, online)

Such a bias by the federal government-led security forces has propelled resentment against the Fulani ethnic group in Nigeria. Such biases are embedded in the deliberate inability of the federal government-controlled security agencies, such as the Nigerian Army, Police, and Civil Defence, to protect the indigenous people whenever attacks are unleashed on the host communities (Nwangwu et al., 2020). When people are mobilised to defend themselves, particularly by engaging the Fulani bandits in gun battles, such a movement is usually confronted with overwhelming resistance by the federal security agency. The narrative has been substantiated in many Fulani herdsmen attacks, where indigenous people took up the responsibility of protecting their people and ancestral lands against the Fulani

invasion. The Fulani militants' continued killing of innocent citizens has provided an opportunity for the emergence of informal and non-state security networks such as the Amotekun in the southwest of Nigeria and the Eastern Security Network (ESN) fashioned out by the Biafra secessionist group (European Union, 2021; Nwangwu, 2023). The continuous invasion, abduction, and everyday killing of innocent citizens by the Fulani bandits have fuelled secession in eastern and southwestern Nigeria. However, Fulani are also vulnerable to cattle rustling and kidnapping for ransom, often orchestrated by the bandits. Kidnapping in Nigeria is a criminal enterprise that has attracted criminals from various ethnic backgrounds in Nigeria (Ojo, 2023b). However, the sheer media framing of the crime has been woven around the Fulani ethnic extraction, as shown in Table 1.

The media ecosystem in Nigeria has played a central role in shaping and sustaining the discursive narratives associated with the 'Fulanisation' of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria. According to Carpentier and Terzis (2005), a journalist has the responsibility to adopt a particular model of war or peace reporting, such as those proposed by Galtung (1998) (i.e., peace-oriented

journalism, which is generally perceived as people- and solution-oriented, or conflict/war journalism, which is violence-oriented and tends towards propaganda). Citing Galtung (2000) and Galtung and Fischer (2013), Nijenhuis (2014) argues that the media in the practice of war journalism can exacerbate the conflict by focusing on violence, highlighting the differences between groups and presenting the conflict as a zero-sum game while ignoring the broad range of causes and outcomes of conflict. Thus, the Nigerian audiences, as primary consumers of media content emanating from the mainstream media and digital journalism, are served with news and images of young men with AK 47 in the forest with herds of cattle as a symbol of kidnappers masquerading as herders. Over the last five years, this has reinforced the 'Fulanisation' of kidnapping in the country (Chiluwa, 2022).

Moreover, some Fulani pastoralists have been subjected to heinous attacks by the rural bandits. While such narratives have been contested in different scholarly discussions, Chukwuma (2020) argues that the nexus between 'Fulanisation', pastoralism and Islamisation is founded in Nigeria's chequered and beleaguered political history. It is important to note that not all Fulani are Muslims, and not

all Muslims are Fulani. This underscores a constructive analysis that transcends belligerent parochialism. For instance, the endless deadly attacks on Fulani communities by Fulani bandits in Zamfara, Niger, Kaduna, and Katsina States, established that the phenomenon of kidnapping for ransom transcends ethnic affiliation. In 2012 alone, due to abduction and attacks on Fulani villages, it was estimated that more than 23,000 Fulani herders were displaced from Taraba State and sojourned in Cameroon (The New Humanitarian, 2013). Many Fulani were victims of kidnapping for ransom, as reported by a media outlet: *"They are the major victims of kidnapping and then the wider kidnapping that is*

conducted by other Fulanis and non-Fulanis, who have come to form criminal gangs. We don't even hear their stories. We don't hear their side. We just think they are complicit. They are not. Majority of them are peaceful and decent people, seeking to make a living" (The Cable, 2021, online). Moreover, evidence from several kidnapping for ransom cases in South-West Nigeria reveals that indigenes also collaborated with the kidnappers. They served as informants who provided information about the people who would be abducted (Arise News, 2021). This demonstrates that kidnapping for ransom surpasses ethnic colourations.

Table 1: Fulanisation of kidnapping narratives in the news in Nigeria

	Media Framing	Medium	Year
1.	Police nab 25 Fulani expressway kidnappers in Kogi	Sun News Online	2017
2.	still on murderous Fulani kidnappers	Security King	2018
3.	Nigeria: Fulani kidnap 46 Christians in ambush attack days after killing 32 civilians	The Christian Post	2019
4.	Fulani alone not responsible for kidnappings, other tribes deeply involved - Falana	PMNews	2019
5.	We were kidnapped by Fulani herdsmen – Ogun kidnapped victim	BusinessDay	2019
6.	Fulani gunmen kidnapping Abuja motorists & travellers arrested	Naijagists.com	2020
7.	For three weeks, Fulani kidnappers beat me twice daily –Freed victim	Punch Newspaper	2021

8.	Six Fulani kidnapers in Taraba pledge to desist from criminality	International Centre for Investigative Reporting	2021
9.	Seven out of every ten kidnapers arrested are Fulani— Sultan of Sokoto	Sahara Reporters	2021
10.	Fulani kidnapers in Ondo use generators, play music inside forest —Farmer	Online tabloid	2021
11.	Sultan's confession: Eight out of 10 kidnapers arrested are Fulanis	PM News	2021
12.	Again, Fulani herdsmen attack Isuikwuato, kidnap 10, kill woman	This Day	2021
13.	Amotekun arrests suspected Fulani man for kidnapping in Ondo	This Day	2021
14.	Abductors of Osun travellers are suspected Fulani – CP	Punch	2021
15.	Kidnapped Ondo Eze Ndigbo regains freedom, says ‘my abductors are purely herdsmen’	Vanguard	2021
16.	Suspected Fulani herdsmen kidnap travellers in Delta	Punch	2021
17.	Herdsmen abduct 10 travellers, rape, stab woman to death in Abia	Vanguard	2021
18.	South-West Amotekun operatives arrest two Fulani herders for kidnapping fellow herdsmen in Ondo	Sahara Reporters	2021
19.	To God be the glory! Nigerian man says after narrating his horrific experience with Fulani kidnapers along Benin-Ore Expressway!	Naija Super Fans	2021
20.	A priest in Nigeria tells the story of his kidnapping by Fulani herdsmen	Aleteia	2021
21.	MACBAN hands over six suspected Fulani kidnapers, gun runner to police	Daily Post	2021
22.	Alaafin laments release of arrested Fulani kidnapers by police	Gossip	2021
23.	I was kidnapped in church, sold to Fulani kidnapers – Edo Immigration PRO	Believers Portal	2021
24.	Watch how 60 years old man transport AK47 to Fulani herdsmen for kidnapping operation in Nigeria	Youtube	2021

26.	Fulani kidnappers kill driver, abduct 5 others on Lagos-Ibadan Expressway	Tribune Newspaper	2022
27.	Ondo Amotekun arrests two Fulani herdsmen for abducting fellow Fulani herdsmen	TVC Television	2022
28.	Fulani kidnappers ask woman for N30m to save husband's life	GlobalTimesNG	2022
29.	Tension in Edo as suspected Fulani herdsmen take over community	Vanguard	2022
30.	My abductors are Fulani, says Zamfara emir who spent a month in kidnappers' den	Sahara Reporters	2022
31.	Dare devil Fulani kidnappers promised not to abduct us in future after collecting N10m ransom – Ibadan-based businessman reveals	The Street Journal	2022
32.	In Ekiti, 'Fulani kidnappers' ask woman for N30m to save husband's life	Foundation for Investigative Journalism	2022
33.	Suspected Fulani kidnappers kill driver, abduct five on Lagos-Ibadan Expressway	Present	2022
34.	Ibadan Court remands 15 suspected Fulani kidnappers	Allnews	2022
35.	Two suspected Fulani kidnappers arrested	The supreme	2022
36.	Nigeria police rescue man kidnapped by Fulani bandits, arrests one (Video)	Eons Intelligence	2022

Source: Authors' Compilation

State and non-state responses to identity-motivated kidnapping

The disruptive impact of identity-motivated kidnapping in Nigeria affects all stakeholders across the entire governance spectrum and has elicited different responses, focusing on respective spheres of influence and mandate. The liberation of the civic space following Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999 has allowed more

opportunities for citizen participation and political expression, thus broadening the definition and scope of the state and its responses to issues (Aiyede, 2003). This is mainly reflected in the various reactions to the crisis of kidnapping in Nigeria. For ease of discussion, responses are aggregated into three discrete approaches, each representing a distinct set of interests and methods. These classifications are the responses of formal

political institutions at the national and sub-national levels, socio-cultural platforms and associations and civil society organisations (CSOs).

Federal government's responses

First and foremost, kidnapping is an offence against the state in Nigeria. However, with grave implications on the national security outlook, the government's decision to prioritise kidnapping as a threat to national security has led to the mobilisation of security resources to address the menace.

The national government's response to the spiralling security crisis has been three-pronged: securitisation, community engagement and resource-led interventions. The government's primary responsibility under the Nigerian state's constitution is the security and welfare of citizens. Section 14 (2) (b) unambiguously provides that "the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government." One dominant example of the government securitisation of the kidnapping crisis is the establishment of different security taskforces and operations by the national government targeted at kidnapping and banditry. The most recent taskforces are Exercise Golden Dawn, Operation Enduring Peace and Exercise Still Water, launched in October 2021 by the Nigerian Chief of

Army Staff (Vanguard, 2021). Apart from the current joint military taskforces, there are ongoing military operations and deployment of military assets targeted at criminal gangs involved in kidnapping for ransom across Nigeria, particularly in the northwest region. In addition, there are specialised police units across the state/regional commands of the Nigeria Police Force that are trained and charged with tackling kidnapping and other allied crimes.

The federal government has a greater responsibility because of the constitutional mandate of centrally controlling all military and policing outfits in Nigeria and has a larger share of resources (Musa, 2019). While kidnapping is not a federal offence as it often occurs at the community level, the government has been involved in efforts aimed at containing the menace of kidnapping. Identifying the link between farmer-herder conflicts and kidnapping in Nigeria, the government announced a new plan in 2018 to set up cattle colonies across all geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Each colony was to cover 5,000 hectares (about 25km by 20km) and would be a cluster of ranches, with resources and facilities including grass, water, veterinary services, mills (for converting agro-waste to livestock feed),

schools, hospitals, and markets, all secured by agro-rangers (Ojo, 2023a; Ojo, 2023b).

In a belated attempt at reversing the spate of identity-motivated kidnapping, the federal government has visited victims and engaged affected communities across Nigeria. The president, the vice-president and the interior minister have launched fact-finding and consolation visits to affected communities (Wakili, 2018). Also, the National Economic Council, working on the assumption that one of the main drivers of identity-driven kidnapping in Nigeria is the festering herder-farmer resource conflict, constituted a ten-person working committee headed by the then Vice President of Nigeria, Yemi Osinbajo, and charged with the responsibility of finding solutions to the killings in order to address impunity and facilitate the government's long-term plan to resolve the herder-farmer resource control conflict across Nigeria (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Responses of sub-national governments

Several states in Nigeria have come up with legislations criminalising kidnapping, cattle rustling and other allied crimes. One of the recent states to pass anti-kidnapping legislations in

Nigeria is Niger State. According to the 2021 anti-kidnapping law of the state, "Whoever instigates any person to kidnap person or rustle cattle, or intentionally aids, abets or facilitate by any acts of omission or commission of the offence of kidnapping and or cattle rustling is guilty of an offence and is liable to conviction to death by hanging in public" (The Cable, 2021, online). Also, some states with anti-kidnapping legislation have reviewed existing laws to make the crime a capital offence (Shaban, 2019).

Moreover, one of the most distinctive impacts of the recent security crisis in Nigeria and the apparent unsatisfactory response of the federal government-owned security services is the creation of regional and state policing outfits across some regions in Nigeria (Ojo, 2020). Although there are ongoing contentions about the legality of such state policing outfits, 23 states in the country are currently operating local security outfits to complement the efforts of the federally-controlled Nigerian police in securing their respective states (Alike & Ogunje, 2020). Also, geopolitical zones across Nigeria have created security outfits in response to the spate of highway kidnappings. One of the most popularised is the security outfit created by the southwest geopolitical zone

known as 'Amotekun Corps' (This Day, 2020). In addition, other regions are replicating this regional security architecture by creating their own security outfits.

While states have continued to deny the ransom payment for the release of victims in cases of mass abductions, reports have confirmed that some state governments did pay ransoms. For instance, the Kastina State government continuously denied the ransom payment for the Kankara schoolchildren kidnapped by armed bandits, while reports confirmed that the state government did pay for the release of these schoolchildren. (Parkinson & Akingbule, 2020). Also, a report from the National Security Summit organised by the House of Representatives stated that as much as \$2.4m had been paid to secure the release of schoolchildren in five separate mass kidnapping incidents in the northwest since November 2020, validating the fact that states often pay ransoms for the release of their kidnapped citizens (Odeniyi et al., 2020).

Response of socio-cultural platforms and associations

The escalation of incidences of banditry allegedly dominated by an ethnic group has worsened ethnic tension in the country. It has resulted in ethic-based

platforms and associations interpreting this identity-oriented kidnapping as a subtle act of domination. It has been suggested that ongoing acts of kidnapping and banditry are newly emerging forms of terrorism and a continuation of the historical Fulani Jihad of 1804-1807 (SB Morgen Intelligence, 2015). It has also been suggested that the violence is geared towards the depopulation of communities in the middle-belt and the south, and the Islamisation agenda of expanding northern Nigeria, particularly non-Hausa and Fulani-dominated regions. One of the most vocal socio-cultural groups in Nigeria actively engaged in the issue of banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria is the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria. It is a loose partisan advocacy group that promotes the welfare of Fulani pastoralists in Nigeria (Kuna & Ibrahim, 2016). The group is actively involved in negotiating and dialoguing with bandits and kidnappers to secure the release of kidnapped victims. The group was recorded as helping to secure the release of abducted schoolchildren in Katsina State (Asadu, 2020).

Socio-cultural platforms in Nigeria have provided an opportunity for inter-ethnic engagements to address the problems of identity-motivated kidnapping in Nigeria.

These platforms have created opportunities for communities across Nigeria to employ the best strategies for addressing the challenges posed by the problem of kidnapping. In addition, some socio-cultural platforms in Nigeria have created local vigilantes to protect their local communities from the impact of kidnapping. For instance, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) members are actively securing communities across Southwestern Nigeria. The platform, in collaboration of South-western governments, has created a strong security outfit known as 'Amotekun Corps' to combat or curtail the incessant unprovoked incursions of the Fulani marauders on the rural farmers. In recent times, it has worked with formal policing actors and local hunters to track and arrest kidnapers in the forest across communities in the region. (Odeniyi et al., 2021; Abaiziem, 2021).

Civil society organisations

Since Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999, civil society groups have been critical actors in Nigeria's chaotic democratisation process as agents of social change, public reorientation, and mobilisation across different governance thematic areas. These platforms provide opportunities and set agendas to engage Nigeria's

governing instruments and institutions in result-oriented deliberations (Osasona, 2016). While the security sector remains one of the most resistant to public input, Nigeria's Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have been critical engagement channels between security services and the citizenry. These organisations deploy their agency and remain at the forefront of interventions to address kidnapping and terrorism in Nigeria. Areas of intervention by civil society organisations include undertaking studies and bridging the knowledge gaps in understanding the drivers of identity-embedded kidnapping in Nigeria, documenting the experiences of victims and affected communities, providing platforms of engagement between the affected communities and security agencies, and influencing public policy processes and government decisions as they relate to safeguarding the lives and property of the local communities. Some of these CSOs include Youth Coalition Against Terrorism (YOCAT), the NEEM Foundation, the African Initiative for Peacebuilding, Advocacy and Advancement (AfriPeace), and the Kukah Centre, among others.

Appraisal of current strategies

Nothing underscores the dismal performance of the current strategies to contain the menace of kidnapping for

ransom in Nigeria than the number of persons kidnapped in Nigeria in the first half of 2021. According to a report, an average of 13 persons were abducted daily in Nigeria in the first half of 2021 (SB Morgen Intelligence, 2021). Furthermore, bandits and kidnappers caused 5,800 deaths, while 2,943 people were kidnapped in the first half of 2021 in Nigeria (Sahara Reporters, 2021). At the root cause of the current epidemic of kidnapping for ransom is the generational failure of governance that has limited the opportunities available to young persons from the indicted ethnic groups involved in kidnapping for ransom. Without taking cognisance of these socio-economic catastrophic failures, the militarisation of the crisis will only result in the displacement of the criminal gangs, which will lead to the expansion of the crisis into other geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Thus, one of the lessons that can be learnt from Nigeria's chequered history and those of other countries is that militarisation is neither sustainable nor will it address the core issues motivating and fuelling banditry and kidnapping.

The current securitisation has failed to contain the crisis across states in Nigeria, and one primary cause of the failure is the centralisation of security planning

and implementation. Moreover, in most instances, kidnapping for ransom has local peculiarities and dimensions, which questions the reluctance of successive federal governments to localise policing and to make the local communities the primary focus of the security framework. Therefore, security-wise, the starting point should be an extensive review of the present policing system in order to create a localised and community-focused one that allows organisational, human resources and operational input into the policing outfit through the bottom-up approach. An in-depth analysis of the current security crisis across states in Nigeria reveals that the kidnapping festers because of the gaps in governance at three critical levels: a) effective governance of rural communities, b) effective policing of the various interconnecting forestlands located across the states, and c) effective integration of informal institutions of early warning into the governance architecture at the grassroots and appropriate community policing models.

While security experts and scholars have noted the threats posed by these forestlands, the managers of these forest spaces at both national and sub-national levels have failed to create an effective policing regime to safeguard these

territorial assets that have become havens for kidnappers and imperil commuters and communities across Nigeria (Okoli & Ochim, 2016). The outmoded forest/park guard system, where the primary focus of the guard corps is environmental rather than fitting into the broader security architecture, promotes rather than checks the evolving security threats of identity-motivated kidnapping. As a result, the criminals have found a haven in the ungoverned forestlands (Ojo, 2020).

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the ethnic criminalisation of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria. Despite the social narrative of the Fulani ethnic group dominating kidnapping for ransom operations, we argue that such ethnic profiling endangers social cohesion in Nigeria. Our arguments are based on the premise that Fulani pastoralists have also experienced kidnapping orchestrated by the Fulani bandits. Therefore, it becomes challenging and abnormal to criminalise an ethnic group when people from the same ethnic origin experience kidnapping for ransom and undergo similar attacks by the same Fulani bandits. In this context, ethnicising criminality can disrupt societal arrangements and worsen Nigeria's security dilemma. Thus, a

number of factors have been identified as responsible for the current wave of insecurity. Nigeria's porous borders that allow foreigners to gain access to Nigeria's territory constitute one of the significant challenges. In this manner, identifying the Nigerian Fulani pastoralists remains an arduous task. Such a challenge does not help matters, coupled with the corrupt border control security forces. Thus, the proper documentation of citizens has been proven effective in many developed countries, specifically to weed out criminals and illegal immigrants. Such digitalised documentation can be adopted to safeguard Nigerian territories against foreign criminals. Therefore, kidnapping for ransom should be considered a national security challenge and to be tackled collectively by the different nationalities in the country. The sub-national governments should be empowered to promote the security of lives and property in their respective areas of jurisdiction. However, the constitutional obstacles that handicapped the sub-national government in security matters should be amended in order to allow them to exercise their mandate within their jurisdictional spaces.

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