Enclaves of Banditry: Ungoverned Forest Spaces and Cattle Rustling in Northern Nigeria

Ifeanyi Onwuzuruigbo

Abstract: Parts of northern Nigeria are becoming enclaves of banditry for gangs of cattle rustlers who maraud largely ungoverned forests. Extant studies of banditry shy away from serious interrogation of cattle rustling and ungoverned forest spaces in northern Nigeria. Onwuzuruigbo investigates the connection between cattle rustling and ungoverned forest spaces, highlighting the role of criminal groups in creating their own governance structures. The upswing in cattle rustling may thus be attributed to poor forest governance, which effectively keeps the government and its agents away from forests. Inclusive forest governance is one path toward addressing cattle rustling in northern Nigeria.

Résumé: Certaines régions du nord du Nigeria deviennent des enclaves de banditisme pour des gangs de voleurs de bétail qui maraudent des forêts en grande partie non gouvernées. Les études existantes sur le banditisme évitent tout interrogatoire sérieux sur le vol de bétail et les espaces forestiers non gouvernés dans le nord du Nigeria. Onwuzuruigbo étudie le lien entre le vol de bétail et les espaces forestiers non gouvernés, soulignant le rôle des groupes criminels dans la création de leurs propres structures de gouvernance. La hausse du vol de bétail peut donc être attribuée à une mauvaise gouvernance forestière qui maintient efficacement à distance des forêts le gouvernement et ses représentants. La gouvernance forestière inclusive est donc un moyen de lutter contre le vol de bétail dans le nord du Nigéria.

Resumo: Várias parcelas do território da Nigéria setentrional estão a transformar-se em enclaves de banditismo, dominados por gangues de salteadores de gado

African Studies Review, Volume 64, Number 1 (March 2021), pp. 168–191

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doi:10.1017/asr.2020.46

dedicados a saquear as florestas, onde em grande medida não existe um sistema de gestão pública. Até hoje, os estudos sobre banditismo têm evitado debruçar-se em profundidade sobre o roubo de gado e os espaços florestais fora da alçada efetiva do governo, no norte da Nigéria. Neste artigo, Onwuzuruigbo perscruta as ligações entre o roubo de gado e os espaços florestais onde não se verifica um sistema de gestão pública, sublinhando o papel dos grupos de criminosos na criação das suas próprias estruturas de governação. O aumento do roubo de gado pode, portanto, ser atribuído à gestão pública deficitária das florestas, em que o governo e os seus agentes se mantêm alheios a estes espaços. Investir numa gestão inclusiva das florestas é, pois, uma via para combater o roubo de gado na Nigéria setentrional.

Keywords: cattle rustling; crime; forests; governance; Nigeria

(Received 4 December 2018 – Revised 2 April 2020 – Accepted 10 April 2020)

Introduction

Cattle rustling in northern Nigeria, conducted with amazing sophistication and audacity by criminal groups of marauders, is becoming increasingly prevalent. This is due in part to the growing incidence of bloody engagements between herders and farmers in north-central Nigeria, which provides additional impetus for cattle rustling. In 2013, over 64,750 cattle were stolen, while about 2,991 herders lost their lives to cattle rustlers in the north-central region (International Crisis Group [ICG] 2017). According to the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSDC), between 2011 and 2015 cattle rustlers massacred 1,135 people in the north-western state of Zamfara alone (Umar 2017). Commercial farms, including those owned by influential politicians, revered clerics, and prominent traditional rulers are not spared.[1] These figures, in any case, are conservative estimates; there is, in fact, an acute dearth of accurate records on cattle rustling and other indicators of (in) security and development in Nigeria. Many cases of cattle banditry, particularly those happening in isolated villages, forests, and spaces with either an absence or a limited presence of the already overwhelmed state security apparatus go unnoticed, undocumented, and unreported.

Measures put in place by the government to stem the rising tide of cattle rustling in northern Nigeria have not been effective. State security officials whose duty it is to implement these measures are themselves unfortunately major impediments to the successful implementation of such measures. Attempts to deploy vigilante groups to deal with rustling have complicated matters in situations where the extrajudicial execution of rustlers has elicited reprisal attacks. Instances abound where vigilantes become extortionists, wheedling cash and cattle as "protection levy" from beleaguered herders (ICG 2017). In 2016, for instance, the military arrested four serving soldiers, two police officers, and some members of the vigilante group "Civilian Joint

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Task Force" for assisting Boko Haram cattle rustlers to sell stolen cattle in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State in north-eastern Nigeria.[2] These developments have compelled researchers and policy makers to treat cattle rustling as one of the many factors contributing to the state of insecurity in northern Nigeria.

Although there is a mushrooming literature on cattle herding and rustling in Africa, the preponderance of cattle rustling in East Africa, where warlords organize and train cattle rustlers, dominates the literature (Mburu 1999; Fleisher 2000; Osamba 2000; Mkutu 2007, 2008; Eaton 2008; Greiner 2013). Concerning the Lake Chad Basin and the West African sub-region, the bulk of studies concentrate on the more preponderant conflicts between herders and farmers rather than the commercialized form of cattle rustling which, until recently, occurred less frequently in these regions (Shetima & Tar 2008; Moritz 2006, 2010; Higazi 2016; Maiangwa 2017). Consequently, predatory cattle rustling has attracted very meager scholarly attention and has been treated only tangentially in West African studies (Tonah 2000).

With respect to Nigeria, despite incontrovertible evidence linking ungoverned forests to cattle rustling, extant studies, such as Stephen Ellis' (2016) exposé on the history of organized crime in Nigeria, Richard Olaniyan and Rufus Akinyele's (2016) analysis of ungoverned spaces, and Mohammed Kuna and Jibrin Ibrahim's (2015) text on rural banditry in northern Nigeria all avoid interrogating the interface of cattle rustling with ungoverned forests. Nevertheless, the incipient spate of violence, looting, and killings associated with cattle rustling in Nigeria, the Lake Chad Basin, and the chronically unstable West African sub-region not only beggar description and imagination but also beg for urgent scholarly intervention in order to unmask these challenges and formulate policies that will effectively reduce their occurrence. The next questions that arise are: how do we make sense of cattle rustling in Africa? In more specific terms, how do forests become enclaves of cattle banditry in Africa and Nigeria in particular? And what are their implications for generating result-oriented policies for combating cattle-rustling in northern Nigeria?

This article explores the connection between Nigeria's ungoverned forest spaces and the upswing in cattle rustling in northern Nigeria. I focus on ways in which Nigeria's ungoverned forests provide breeding spaces and havens for cattle rustling in the beleaguered region. Organized in five sections, I first interrogate the dominant platforms for explaining cattle rustling in Africa. Ungoverned spaces, especially forests, are critical causal factors, yet they are seldom prioritized in Africa (especially in Nigeria) in identifying the causes of cattle banditry. The second part presents a critique of the notion of "ungoverned space." Its shortcomings notwithstanding, the idea of ungoverned space remains germane in articulating the connections between forests and cattle rustling in northern Nigeria. Forests are identified as one of the many ungoverned spaces feeding into wars, terrorism, and organized crime. Focusing on northern Nigeria, the third section illustrates how forest management and governance have suffered neglect from state

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

authorities in recent years, thus limiting government presence and the effectiveness of its agents and apparatus in the forests. The subsequent section addresses how armed non-state actors and bandits, including cattle rustlers, appropriate the hugely ungoverned forests and "govern" them in ways that promote criminality. The fifth section identifies steps taken to combat cattle rustling and reviews more reliable and effective measures to curb cattle banditry.

Explaining Cattle Rustling in Africa

Three clusters of explanatory frameworks dominate attempts to explain cattle rustling, or what Matthew Luizza (2017) recently referred to as "neo-pastoralism." They present culture and tradition as one factor, population pressure and environmental scarcity as another, and finally the "failed state" and proliferation of small arms as factors that fuel cattle banditry on the continent (Mirzeler & Young 2000; Eaton 2008; Greiner 2013; Kuna & Ibrahim 2015; Verweijen & Brabant 2017).

The first framework dates back prior to the 1990s, when it was fashionable to blame certain cultures and traditions of pastoralists for actively promoting cattle rustling. Cattle occupy a significant position in the daily activities, cultural traditions, and worldview of pastoral communities. Apart from serving as a reliable means of production, transportation, income, and wealth, cattle are a veritable sociocultural capital and asset. Yet, among African pastoral groups, cattle rustling is rationalized as a cultural necessity (Eaton 2008). It is motivated by the desire to replenish cattle lost to raiders and drought; to redistribute wealth and ensure that community members are fed, particularly during periods of drought and scarcity; to enable marriages and the payment of bride price quantified in cattle; to forge alliances with other groups; and to celebrate bravery and the warrior tradition of nomads (Fleisher 1999; Osamba 2000; Mkutu 2007; Greiner 2013). Besides, some nomadic groups hold sacrosanct certain myths and traditions that limit ownership of cattle strictly to members of their group, while perceiving others as potential cattle thieves. Such myths present cattle thieves and ownership of cattle by exogenous groups as an anathema that must be discouraged by the threat of severe punishment (Ndagala 1991; Nganga 2012). Curiously, cattle banditry is often adopted by the group as the most punitive and effective mechanism for discouraging cattle ownership and rustling by outsiders. These vicious circles of cattle rustling ensure that raiding expeditions justify but also provoke retaliatory raids and attacks, mostly in the East and the Horn of Africa (Markakis 1993; Triche 2014).

The second framework relates to those perspectives that explain conflict and violence from the prism of environmental scarcity, population explosion, climate change, and ecology. Following this line of thought, Thomas Homer-Dixon (2010) argues that population pressure and resource scarcity are conducive to crimes and violent conflicts. Robert Kaplan (1994) painstakingly demonstrates how population growth and other environmental

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challenges have triggered mass migration, criminality, and bloody conflicts in West Africa. Several years of drought in the Horn of Africa, John Markakis (1993) contends, depleted the region's resource base and engendered a rat race expressed in the growing intensity and sophistication of cattle rustling. There is a consensus among scholars that the shrinking of Lake Chad has resulted in the rapid desertification of northern Nigeria. About 35 percent of the land that was arable prior to 1960s is gradually becoming arid. "Livelihoods of some 15 million pastoralists in northern Nigeria are threatened by decreasing access to water and pasture" (Olaniyan & Okeke-Uzodike 2015:24). These developments are progressively confounded by harsh economic realities, excruciating poverty, and the activities of Boko Haram terrorists in the territory. As pastoralists migrate from the acute aridity of northern Nigeria to the Middle Belt and the Southern regions in search of greener pastures, their herds are plundered by desperate cattle rustlers and daredevil Boko Haram insurgents (Obaji 2017). This southward movement no longer holds out any respite for pastoralists and their cattle. Backlashes arising from the frequent bloody squabbles between pastoralists and host communities over access to grazing and farming lands in the context of growing poverty, high unemployment rates, and the lingering downturn in the economy result in increased cattle banditry and its attendant adversities (Kuna & Ibrahim 2015; Maiangwa 2017; Ajala 2018).

Drawing inspiration from Weberian and Hobbesian theorizations of the state as preeminent political association and Mary Kaldor's (2012) notion of "new wars," the failed state perspective and the proliferation of small arms define and designate states in Africa as "weak," "fragile," and therefore "failed." Inability or reluctance to provide social goods and services, exercise effective monopoly over instruments of coercion, and maintain law and order, eminent indices of fragile states, have been strongly associated with the state in Africa. Consequently, contemporary African states, it is argued, create conditions for violent conflicts and new wars to fester. Wars and crimes are further enhanced by the structure of "new wars," which take the form of guerrilla warfare, prosecuted with small arms and light weapons by resource-greedy warlords who head rebel groups, criminal gangs, and terrorist organizations in much of Africa. As states and their elites become increasingly interconnected through information and communication technology (ICT), bilateral and multilateral treaties and protocols facilitating cross-border movements and interaction of men, materials, and sometimes animals, coupled with ubiquitous smuggling activities, have served to broaden the spaces of war and crime (Lecocq & Schrijver 2017). Cattle banditry, scholars contend, receives additional impetus from the proliferation of small arms and light weapons flowing across porous borders into the several sites of bloody wars and criminal violence in Africa (Mkutu 2007; Verweijen & Brabant 2017). While the fact of their proliferation makes small arms and light weapons cheaper and easier to procure by nonstate actors, their possession by criminally-minded individuals and groups presents an avalanche of security challenges, one of which is the burgeoning of cattle rustling gangs

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and syndicates across several national boundaries in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions.

Much as these scholarly interventions help explain cattle rustling, we think they are inadequate and fundamentally misguided; in other words, they have yet to provide robust explanations for its varying forms and dynamics (Kuna & Ibrahim 2015), or to offer any practical ideas for remediation. First, the culture and tradition perspective falls short of explaining the more recent forms of predatory and commercialized cattle rustling. What was once a minor raiding expedition to replenish stock, organized and regulated by elders to ensure that it did not spiral out of control, has blossomed into a highly weaponized and commercialized adventure. Aggravated by the regime of neoliberal policies that polarizes the poor and the rich and whittles down the authority of the elders, emerging forms of rustling are essentially propelled by a new generation of elite and youth guided by narrow self-interest and greed. Likewise, the effect of environmental scarcity on rustling remains controversial and speculative. While studies have established strong links between environmental scarcity and rustling in northern Nigeria, the reverse seems to be the case for northern Kenya. Wario Adano and co-authors (2012) associate pastoral conflicts involving violent killings and raiding with the onset of rains, not drought, in northern Kenya. Pastoralists, ironically, fight more in periods of plenty and less in times of scarcity.

Second, by analyzing cattle rustling from a one-size-fits-all approach, existing explanatory frameworks merely provide "omni-causal" explanations and pay little or no attention to contexts and peculiarities. Stewart Patrick (2007:644) cautions against sweeping generalizations and draws attention to the ways they rob us of analytical insights; such generalizations do not, he argues, ask "whether (and how) particular developing countries are associated with particular threats." As is now well known, cattle rustling is exacerbated by a range of complex factors, including arms proliferation, under- or poorly-governed spaces, and badly managed forests. In much of Africa where open grazing rather than ranching persists, forests become intrinsic to understanding pastoralism and its many challenges. Apart from providing pasture and rendezvous for cattle and their herders, forests, in recent times, have come to host all forms of criminal groups, including cattle rustlers (Jong et al. 2007). Compared to the widely examined and appreciated phenomenon of arms proliferation, the notion of ungoverned (forest) spaces and the related problem of forest governance are scarcely problematized and discussed in conventional analytical perspectives of cattle rustling. It is, therefore, important to note and take into consideration ungoverned forest spaces as one of such neglected factors—as emphasised by Patrick (2007)—that might account for regional differences and state peculiarities in the occurrence of cattle rustling.

In Nigeria, for instance, the criminal invasion of forests—some of which have long been officially designated as forest reserves and national parks—and the transformation of the forests into enclaves of rustlers and arenas for cattle rustling are acknowledged in popular discourse, newspapers,

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newsmagazines, and security reports. Until recently, however, they have been scarcely researched. What, then, is "ungoverned space"?

States, Insecurity, and Ungoverned Spaces

Among the primary responsibilities of the state is providing citizens with governance and security of life and property. However, states sometimes encounter difficulties in discharging their responsibilities or are reluctant to do so. Ungoverned spaces are construed as social, economic, and political territories within otherwise functional states where authorities are reluctant or unable to establish "effective sovereignty." States may perceive certain territories as economically unviable or too expensive and difficult to govern. For example, the enormous challenges of governing Sambisa Forest prevented both colonial and post-colonial governments from taking control of the forest, thus paving the way for its invasion and subsequent control by Boko Haram terrorists (Albert 2017). Ungoverned space, therefore, exists in territories where a state has voluntarily or involuntarily relinquished its sovereign authority, wholly or partially, to non-state actors whose activities could be injurious to national, regional, and global peace. What is implied is that ungoverned spaces are equally territories of multiple or contested sovereignties. For this reason, governance in such spaces is usually weak or anomalous (Clunan & Trinkunas 2010; Keister 2014; Taylor 2016).

Ungoverned spaces are not new; they have always existed. To the extent that they did not constitute a threat to national or regional security, they were previously ignored. Until recently, Nigeria's Niger Delta and the East Africa Corridor, prototypical ungoverned regions, existed with little or no appreciation of their potential danger to national and regional security (Whelan 2006; Rabasa et al. 2007). The recent obsession with ungoverned spaces, nevertheless, is attributable to two interrelated issues: first, the persistent concerns about state-centered conceptualization spawned by scholars, policy makers, and development agencies struggling to make sense of the emergence of the overwhelming number of politically disordered spaces under the sway of violent nonstate actors (VNSAs), and second, the realization within the U.S. security community that threats to U.S. security, particularly in the post-Cold War world, could result from poor governance abroad or emanate from territories within or at the borders of states that, for several reasons, are at the fringes of state control (Rabasa et al. 2007; Clunan & Trinkunas 2010). These endeavors have further triggered curiosity about the nature and workings of ungoverned areas and led to the emergence of two contending views: one, the orthodox view, affirms the existence of ungoverned spaces as a matter of fact; the other, the alternative or opposing perspective, dismisses the concept as a farce (Clunan & Trinkunas 2010; Taylor 2016).

In 2006, Theresa Whelan, Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, articulated the U.S. official thinking and policies on ungoverned spaces in Africa. The merger of sources of ungovernability and factors that facilitate the

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exploitation of ungoverned spaces by insurgents, criminals, and terrorist groups form the bedrock of the U.S. position (Whelan 2006). Later in 2007 and 2008, two empirical studies of ungoverned spaces were funded by the U.S. Air Force and the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy to demonstrate and garner support for the American perspective (Rabasa et al. 2007; Lamb 2008). The projects identified factors responsible for the governance deficit as the absence or non-functioning of state institutions and physical infrastructure, prevalence of corruption and informal economy, as well as social and cultural resistance to penetration by state institutions. Other indicators include loss of the monopoly of force, low or inefficient border control, external interference, high crime rates, and arms proliferation.

Since different ungoverned territories pose different levels of threat, adequacy of infrastructure and operational access, availability of sources of income, favorable demographics and invisibility were employed in measuring the extent to which ungoverned spaces were conducive to criminality and terrorism. On this basis, states with ungoverned spaces were categorized along a three-typology continuum, beginning with contested and progressing to incomplete and finally abdicated governance (Rabasa et al. 2007). The benign end of the typology, which is not mutually exclusive, features states such as Nigeria and Mali which, though functional, have lost some spaces in their territories (contested). Failed states such as Somalia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, whose structures of governance weakened and totally broke down in the 1990s, lined the other end (abdicated governance). Lying between these two extremes are most other West African nations, where states lack the resources to exercise authority over their territories and provide for the public good, even when they desire to do so (incomplete governance) (Rabasa et al.2007:29–30).

Several scholars who hold and express alternative but opposing opinions have berated the orthodox conception of ungoverned spaces for not paying due attention to the nuances of ungoverned spaces, thereby providing a misleading conception and analysis of the phenomenon (see Clunan & Trinkunas 2010; Prevost et al. 2014; Risse 2011; Keister 2014). This uncritical engagement with the idea of ungoverned spaces, they contend, stems from the erroneous conviction that the western model of territorial state sovereignty, anchored on the Westphalian notion of sovereignty and Weber's "ideal type" conception of the state as exercising a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, is the natural, right, and universal form of political authority that is most capable of producing world order. The scholars further assert that many of the so-called ungoverned spaces are not ungoverned but instead governed "differently." The absence of government, after all, does not necessarily imply the absence of governance. Where states are reluctant or unable to govern, nonstate actors, ranging from tribal heads to insurgents, terrorists, and warlords, do provide "alternative governance." Indeed, there is really no power vacuum, but rather the dominance of some alternative governance to state power. As a matter of fact, tribal areas found along the

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Afghanistan-Pakistan borders, otherwise thought to be ungoverned, are effectively governed, not by the state, but by tribal chiefs.

Frustration with the concept of "ungoverned spaces" reflects several concerns. Critics have argued that it is a façade and a ploy by the U.S. security and intelligence communities to rationalize and sustain U.S. global hegemony. Garry Prevost and co-writers (2014) have argued that the U.S. security focus in Latin America has little to do with terrorism and more to do with defending long-standing political and economic interests in the region following the effervescence of political movements that challenge U.S. hegemony. Further still, the concept concentrates on the so-called weak and failed states, as though "strong" states do not provide conditions conducive for terrorism, criminality, and the emergence of ungoverned spaces. Yet the availability of functional infrastructure in strong states makes them a lot more attractive to terrorist and criminal groups than the mostly underpopulated ungoverned territories that are usually deficient in social facilities and infrastructures.

It does appear that both schools of thought concur on the existence of territories of minimal governance. As Angel Rabasa and co-authors (2007:3) contend, "we do not imply that the territories in question are ungovernable. A territory may in fact be governable, but state apparatus may not be equal to the task. We mean that in these regions the state is absent, unable or unwilling to perform its functions." Clearly, the bone of contention and point of departure for the two opposing views relate to the sources and forms of governance. From the orthodox perspective, "Ungoverned means that these territories are outside the control of the government that holds nominal sovereignty over the territory in question" (Rabasa et al. 2007:3). The other perspective asserts that the areas at issue are indeed governed—in some cases effectively so—not by the state, though, but rather by nonstate actors. While the orthodox view sticks to a narrower understanding of governance as flowing only from the Westphalian and Weberian state, the opposing view holds a broader view of governance that can and does flow from alternative sources other than the state, including VNSAs.

Rather than devalue or degrade, criticisms of the notion of ungoverned space ironically sustain and enhance its utility value to the extent that it can be deployed to appreciate the link between ungoverned forest spaces and organized crimes such as cattle banditry in Nigeria. If forests are *ab initio* effectively policed and managed by state authorities, terrorist and criminal groups would shun grabbing and using them to commit horrendous crimes. As Azeez Olaniyan (2018:5) argues,

> Past and present examples of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) successfully occupying a space and establishing some form of government show that these spaces were legitimately ungoverned otherwise this need would not have been created and subsequently fulfilled. No VNSA can occupy legitimately governed spaces.

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Forests are invaded and converted to colonies and enclaves of criminal gangs because they are primarily deprived of government presence.

This, then, is the point: whether they are assessed from the orthodox understanding of ungoverned spaces or the counteracting viewpoint, a significant portion of Nigerian forests not only qualify as ungoverned spaces but also pose existential security challenges for Nigerians. The rainforests of the oil-rich Niger Delta host pipeline vandals, illegal oil bunkers, and thieves, as well as insurgent groups enmeshed in the struggle for control of oil resources. Forests in the Eastern and Western parts of the country have been overwhelmed by kidnappers, armed robbers, smugglers, and ritualists, even as those in the northern axis are infested with Boko Haram terrorists, cattle rustlers, killer herdsmen, and other armed bandits (Olaniyan 2018). Whereas some of the forests are controlled and effectively governed by VNSAs such as the Niger Delta insurgent groups in the south-south region and Boko Haram terrorists in the north-east—and this supports the critique of the conventional notion of ungoverned spaces—other forests suffer the absence of state authority and governance, the central plank of the orthodox framing of ungoverned spaces.

Additionally, the degree of ungovernability of the forests varies at different times. Rabasa and her colleagues, as earlier pointed out, have suggested a continuum of three designations—which are not mutually exclusive—for categorizing, from the standpoint of the government, the ungovernability of ungoverned spaces. There are forests such as the Sambisa Forests (several forests stretch into it) where government has abdicated governance, or its authority is seriously contested by Boko Haram terrorists who refuse to "acknowledge the legitimacy of government's rule and pledge loyalty to other forms of social organisation" such as Sharia or the Islamic State (Rabasa et al. 2007:30; Kassim & Nwankpa 2018). Another category refers to forests such as the rainforests of the Niger Delta and those along the Ore and Mosinmi in southwestern Nigeria, where the state seeks to re-exert its authority which has been hitherto contested by militants and criminals involved in illegal oil bunkering and the vandalization of oil pipelines. Under President Goodluck Jonathan, the Nigerian government awarded contracts for the protection and surveillance of oil pipelines to the Niger Delta insurgents and militants affiliated with the Oodua People's Congress in the Southwest (Eke 2015; Adams 2015).

Strictly speaking, the more relevant question for scholars and policy analysts does not so much concern the degree or quality of governance but instead the manner of governance, "who is, and who is not governing an area, and what are the consequences of the particular way they govern" (Taylor 2016:13). To explore this question, it is important to consider the ways forests are governed in Nigeria, and how ungoverned space in northern Nigeria is conducive to cattle rustling.

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Forestry Departments and Governance

Forests assume different meanings and definitions in different climes. Much of what is defined as a "forest" in countries such as Spain and Australia differs from what is considered a forest in western Europe (Irland 2008). In this discussion, "forest" refers to plant communities consisting predominantly of trees, other woody vegetation, and animals, while "forest reserves" are forest areas such as conservation areas and national parks, preserved and managed by the government (Ladan 2014). As a composite part of the environment, forests contribute in critical ways to the spiritual, socio-cultural, and economic sustenance of human beings. Among other roles, forests regulate climate, serve as sacred groves, and function as sources of timber, food, and fuel. In addition, they preserve soil fertility, protect wildlife, and provide habitat for both human beings and animals. Perhaps for these reasons, and for the need to exert absolute control over all territories under its domain, the three tiers of government—federal, state, and local—in Nigeria are at different levels directly involved in forest governance and management.

Nigeria's total forest area is estimated to be 13 million hectares, while forest reserves account for less than 10 percent of Nigeria's territory. The southern rainforest covers 2 percent of the total land area, with the savannah woodland of northern Nigeria making up the rest (Gregeson et al. 2004). Some of the prominent forests and forest reserves in northern Nigeria include the Rigachikun, Kagoro, Kuyanbana, and Kamuku Forests located in Kaduna State; Kabakawa and Rumah/Kukah Jangarai Forests in Katsina State; Sambisa Forest and Forest Reserve located in Borno State; Idu and Gwagwa Forest Reserves in the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja; Balmo Forest in Bauchi and Jigawa States; and Falgore Forest and Falgore Games Reserve in Kano State (Ladan 2014). These forests are endowed with a rich repertoire of plants, animals, streams, and tributaries of important rivers and waterfalls, and they stretch into rural communities, crisscrossing towns, cities, and expressways, connecting states in northern Nigeria. Partly because of this, they are known by different names in different states.

Government involvement in the governance and management of forests in Nigeria began with the promulgation of the Forestry Ordinance in 1890 and the establishment of the Nigerian Forest Department by the British colonial government in 1899. The Ordinance and the Department were intended to facilitate the establishment of forest reserves and to promote timber production and the rubber trade in the Southern Protectorate (Gregeson et al. 2004; Akindele 2008). Reginald Cline-Cole (1998) has catalogued the evolution of colonial government intervention in forest governance in the Northern Protectorate. Available evidence reveals that this intervention was inspired by the need to stem deforestation in the region. Thus, in 1902, the Protection of Tree Proclamation, which sought to control the exploitation of valuable trees around cantonments and stations, was enacted. Two years later, in 1904, a Forestry Officer was appointed to oversee the management of forest reserves in the region. Yet another legislation,

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Forestry Proclamation Number 6 of 1916, was required to extend the coverage of the 1902 proclamation to include other unreserved areas (Mustapha 2003).

Concerns for the forest and the environment did not wane at the end of colonial rule. Governments that emerged after colonialism, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, demonstrated profound interest in forest governance through several policy initiatives aimed at addressing the colonial legacy of exclusive centralization of forestry management. The initiatives culminated in the National Forest Policy of 1988, which decentralized forest governance by encouraging greater participation by states and local governments in forest management. At the federal or national level, the Federal Department of Forestry plays an advisory role and monitors forestry projects funded by the federal government. Through State Forestry Departments, states develop forestry policies implemented within the states. In the northern region, however, states and local governments exercise dual control of forests, although forest guards and patrols are paid by local governments (Hyman 1993; Akindele 2008).

Despite the positive transformations that have been recorded, swathes of forestland and forest reserves in Nigeria have, in past and recent decades, suffered neglect and abandonment. The management and policing of forests and forest reserves by state governments in northern Nigeria have been bedevilled by a multiplicity of daunting challenges, ranging from neglect by some critical stakeholders and corruption to poor funding, manpower shortages, and weak infrastructure, just to mention a few. Brilliant recommendations for refocusing extant policies to tackle these emerging challenges have been ignored by governments in the region (Hyman 1993).

Nigeria has a history of lean budgetary allocation and inadequate and untimely funding of forestry projects and programs at both the federal and state levels. Of the NGN31.5 billion budgetary allocation for capital projects of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, only about NGN311 million was allotted to the National Grazing Reserve and Pasture Development Programme. In 2012, the ministry received NGN45 billion, out of which NGN930 million was channeled to the development of grazing reserves, 1,140 kilometres of stock routes and resting points all over Nigeria (Mohammed & Tanko 2018). Hans Gregeson and colleagues (2004) observe that budgetary allocation in some states could shrink to as low as 1 percent. Between 2002 and 2006, the forestry budget for the north-central state of Nasarawa stood at over NGN186 million, a paltry sum when compared to allocations for other sectors. Worse still, only NGN2 million was finally released for use to the state Forestry Department which, nevertheless, raked in over NGN6 million during the period. This amount was not invested in funding forestry (Alao 2009). Although over NGN317 million was budgeted for forestry from 2004 to 2008 by the government of the north-central state of Kaduna, only a little over NGN214 million was released at the last count. Within the corresponding period, NGN15 million was generated by the Department of Forestry but a little over NGN7 million—considering the

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dilapidated state of forest reserves in the state—was plowed back to forest regeneration (Larinde & Chima 2014). These difficulties linger because many states perceive and treat forestry as a reliable source of income rather than as an important resource to be developed (Gregeson et al. 2004).

Closely connected to the lean budgetary allocation for forestry is the shortage of qualified personnel and poor remuneration. Forestry Departments, like their counterparts in the civil service, are perennially understaffed with poorly remunerated employees whose productivity and morale are consequently very low. According to S. Alao (2008), staffing positions in the northern states of Kaduna, Benue, and Kwara have remained deplorable. The case of Nasarawa is even more disheartening; its 41 forest reserves, covering 145,228.1 hectares, are manned by only twenty forest guards, resulting in a guard coverage ratio of 1:7261 hectares (Alao 2009). In the case of Kaduna, S. Larinde and U. Chima (2014) observed that only 193 staffers were available for a government-sponsored forestry project designed to be executed by about 293 forestry specialists. Disillusioned and frustrated, forest guards and rangers, who hitherto lived and worked around the forests, have deserted the forests for better job opportunities. As Gregeson and colleagues (2004) argue, insufficient funding is at the root of the unattractive remuneration and increasing disdain for forestry jobs.

Corruption has been identified as a major impediment to the effective policing of forests. "Almost half of the globe's forest," noted Lloyd Irland (2008:199), "is in nations exhibiting corruption." Nigeria is not an exception. Often revenues accruing to forestry activities are diverted into private pockets and accounts of state officials and their collaborators in the private sector. Because the culprits are well-connected, prosecuting them sometimes becomes a herculean task, an impossible mission. A recent study of the north-eastern state of Taraba revealed that since 1991, only 287 cases of forestry-related offenses have been prosecuted, despite the numerous cases of illegal logging and corruption within the Forestry Department. Massive corruption has equally reduced the capacity of the state Forestry Department to renovate broken-down infrastructure and to equip forest rangers and guards with basic facilities such as boots and uniforms needed to patrol the forests (see Ahmed & Oruonye 2017).

Above all, forestry policies in Nigeria still adopt a top-to-bottom approach that gives little or no consideration for participatory forest management strategies. The policies often discount or neglect host communities in the implementation and realization of policy objectives. Whereas in theory, host communities are recognized as owners of the forests and conceded concessionary rights to fuelwood and passage, in practice, the legal framework to guarantee these rights is scarcely activated. For this reason, communities are alienated, and their interest is compromised as they become less empowered to take "ownership" of their forests. Local communities, therefore, become hostile or apathetic to forestry-related issues and willingly collude with criminals, if such collusion readily offers better reward. A participatory forest management approach guarantees the active participation of local

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communities but also empowers them to keep watch over the forests and take appropriate actions to forestall the invasion and subsequent conversion of the forests to hideaways for criminals.

Government presence in the forests has historically been either minimal or totally absent. The forests consequently have become very attractive to criminal gangs such as kidnappers, killer herdsmen, and cattle bandits, who find the forest locations conducive for planning and executing their ignoble activities. This, indeed, is the fate of most forests in northern Nigeria.

Northern Nigeria and Cattle Banditry

Of Nigeria's six geopolitical territories, three zones—north-west, north-central, and north-east—comprise northern Nigeria, which consists of 19 of the federation of 36 states. Northern Nigeria is home to small groups of nomadic peoples, of which the Fulani are the most prominent. The majority of Nigeria's cattle are owned and herded by transhumant pastoral groups who, as a matter of tradition, graze their cattle in the region's numerous forests. Just as for other pastoral societies in Africa, forests and cattle in this region are intrinsically linked to the lived experiences of the individual nomad and his society. Forests provide conducive space for grazing cattle, a major household asset. Cattle are the primary source of meat, milk, income—when stocks are sold—status, and prestige, and they are used for cementing kinship and marriage relationships. For similar reasons, bandits in pastoral societies target forests and cattle for attack. In this manner, forest-based crimes, such as cattle banditry, become a prominent feature of transhumant nomadism.

From the 1960s up until the 1980s, the disciplines of social history and criminology were enlivened by Eric Hobsbawm's (1959, 1969) pioneering works. Hobsbawm's intellectual engagement with the concept of banditry, as was expected, elicited the fascination of other scholars and provoked fierce debates. There is by now a rich theoretical and empirical discourse on banditry (Crummey 1986). Conceptualizing banditry need not detain or disrupt our discussion. It suffices to say that banditry is not here defined à la Hobsbawm (1959:13) as a "primitive form of organised social protest" but, following a modification of Guiseppe Rossetti (1982), banditry is loosely conceived as the flouting of the laws of the state through organized criminality, and cattle banditry is explained as the organized rustling of cattle. Cattle bandits or rustlers are conceived as armed criminals operating in bands for the purpose of thieving cattle.

Incipient forms of cattle banditry in Africa are generally motivated by commercial and political interests. The main actors, bandits and rustlers, are recruited from the teeming population of Africa's impoverished, marginalized, and desperate youths by influential politicians, businessmen, and livestock owners. In Kenya, youths are recruited by businessmen and politicians to prosecute cattle "warlordism" for the purpose of wealth accumulation, establishing claims over administrative boundaries, and safeguarding

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ethnically homogenous electoral bases (Osamba 2000; Greiner 2013). Cattle dealers and butchers in northern Nigeria encourage cattle rustling, ostensibly to catch up with the growing urban demand for red meat, but essentially the main purpose is for wealth accumulation (Obaji 2017). Bandits are no strangers to cattle herding; a typical northern Nigerian cattle bandit, like his California counterpart, is a herder "trained on how to rear cows," who "knows how to handle livestock and where to dispose it" (Lektzian & Perez 2008:75; Agha 2016:28).

What might distinguish cattle bandits in Nigeria from their counterparts elsewhere on the continent is the deep involvement of terrorists and nationals of other countries in Nigeria's illicit cattle rustling business. For obvious reasons, Boko Haram militants operate the most clandestine and sophisticated network of cattle rustlers and purveyors of stolen cattle locally and across national boundaries. In addition to the more crucial task of funding its terrorist activities, Boko Haram faces the daily challenge of feeding its militants and the ever-increasing population of hostages taken into its base in the Sambisa Forests. For Boko Haram, stolen livestock comes in handy as a dependable source of food and funds (Marama 2016; ICG 2017). Whenever Boko Haram bandits steal livestock in Cameroon, for instance, the militants, with the aid of numerous collaborators, ferry the stolen livestock across Nigerian borders to Maiduguri cattle markets through the mostly under-policed forests hemming Nigeria's northern borders. Similarly, from neighboring countries of the Sahel and West Africa, foreign criminal elements troop into Nigeria and collaborate with local cattle-rustling networks. One of these foreign bandits was Umar Dogo, a Senegalese, who, when he was killed in 2015, was described as a "notorious cattle-rustling kingpin" by the government of Kano State in north-western Nigeria (Ahmed 2015).

Traditionally, transhumant pastoralists have grazed their cattle in the peaceful savannah forests of northern Nigeria in the rainy season, prior to their migration to the rainforests of the southern part of the country as the season became drier and harsher. In the 1960s, the northern regional government established 415 grazing reserves for herders but could only demarcate and document 114 reserves without taking measures such as legislative instruments that criminalized encroachment into the grazing reserves. Following the balkanization of the region into states in the 1970s, most grazing reserves straddling two or more states suffered serious neglect arising from the failure of the states to manage the reserves. The others could not withstand the perennial pressure from population growth, increasing demand for farmland, rapid urbanization, and the provision of urban infrastructure, as they were appropriated by government and private commercial interests. These developments drastically reduced the number of designated grazing reserves and forced herders to return to available forests to graze their cattle (Mohammed & Tanko 2018).

But the forests have since ceased to be the peaceful rendezvous for grazers that they were previously. They have become enclaves of criminality,

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where bandits rustle cattle and sometimes kill or maim cattle herders (Onwuzuruigbo 2019). The Kamuku and Kuyanbana Forests, spreading through Kaduna, Katsina, Niger, Zamfara, Kebbi, and Sokoto, are notorious for the cattle-rustling activities that occur there. Security forces recovered 1,223 cows, 295 sheep, and 14 donkeys from bandits after raiding the forest in August 2015. Abductees are known to be held in the forest pending the payment of ransom for their release or forceful initiation into the criminal network of cattle rustling upon failure to extract ransom from their relatives (*Vanguard* 2018).

The Rumah and Kukah Jangarai Forests in the north-western state of Katsina were merged in 1959 to create the Rumah/Kukah Jangarai Forest Reserve, which now stretches from Kaduna and Niger states, covering Danmusa, Safana, Batsari, and Jibia Local Government Areas (LGA) in Katsina, continuing up to the neighboring Republic of Niger. Disgruntled and aggrieved Fulani herders who lost their cattle in the course of land conflicts and struggles over grazing routes use the forest to vent their anger on the herds of kinsmen whom they identify as having failed to extend assistance to them in their predicament (Ladan 2014). The forest also serves as a transit camp for stolen cattle waiting to be transported to cattle markets in other parts of Nigeria where they are sold. Located in Sumaila LGA of Kano State, Falgore Forest links Yankari Forest in Bauchi, Sambisa in Borno State, and the Republic of Cameroon. In October 2015, stolen cows and sheep were recovered from over 72 cattle rustlers arrested in the forest (Adeyemi 2015). In the same month, 818 cattle were recovered from bandits operating at the Tudun Wada/Doguwa end of Falgore (Salihi 2015).

Sambisa Forest occupies part of the Maiduguri-Bama road in Borno State and extends to Bauchi, Gombe, Jigawa, and Kano States. Its international borders, however, extend up to Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. Olawale Albert (2017) estimated the size of the forest to be larger than Lagos State in south-western Nigeria. Boko Haram established its operational base in the forest following the inability of the federal and Borno State governments to take control of the forest. From Sambisa, Boko Haram terrorists launch deadly attacks on Nigerian, Cameroonian, Chadian, and Nigerien communities, carting away cattle and other valuable possessions (Musa 2013). In the words of Kashim Shetima, former governor of Borno, "Our security agencies have established that most of the cattle traded at the markets were the direct proceeds of cattle-rustling perpetrated by the insurgents" (Idowu 2016). Profits realized from such transactions are, of course, used to sustain the group and fund its terrorist activities (Obeche 2016). In November of 2017, local hunters recovered 48 cows, 58 goats, 36 sheep, and 12 donkeys from Boko Haram cattle rustlers in Gur village in Bui LGA, Borno State (Erunke 2017).

The modus operandi of rustlers is astounding. As one of the victims noted, the "speed at which the bandits move with stolen cows will shock you! … they always move fast, and they do not pass through the villages, rather through thick forests so no one can sight them, not to talk of trailing them"

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(Ibrahim 2015). The movement is usually aided by experienced herders and trained ranchers, who are forced by the bandits to first raid cattle and then move them under close supervision (Obaji 2017). The confession of another rustler provides more insights:

> We are trained on how to rear cows. Our hideouts are located far inside the forests in Kogi and Benue States and those manning the stolen cows are armed. We have over 5000 cows in those forests. The watchmen usually hide on trees and strategic places in the bush, while on the lookout for trackers. (Agha 2016:28)

This pattern is certainly not peculiar to Kogi and Benue alone, but reflects a general pattern of rustling cattle in northern Nigeria. This way, bandits keep forests in northern Nigeria insecure and bloody and raise misgivings about the potency of the instruments and approaches taken to deal with the menace.

Combating Cattle Rustling

The campaign against cattle rustling was not pursued with the urgency and vigor it required until 2014. The present initiative adopts a two-pronged approach to dealing with the problem. The first is to flush cattle bandits from the forests that have become their haven. The second seeks to design a range of policies that would regulate and secure open grazing in the long run. None of the two responses focuses on the forests themselves and how to re-establish government presence there. This constitutes the major flaw of the approaches.

In 2014, the Nigerian Police established a task force on cattle rustling and associated crimes. The following year, state governors in the region set up joint task forces comprising the police, military, and other relevant security outfits to fight cattle rustling and committed themselves to a regular review and evaluation of their strategies (Yusuf 2015; Olaniyan & Aliyu 2016). In 2018, the Nigerian Army joined the fray against cattle rustling when it launched the military exercise *Ayem Apatuma* (Cat Race) in the north-central states where cattle rustling was most problematic; it has now spread to the north-west. In the realm of policy, the federal government has yet to adopt any concrete policy to deal with cattle rustling. Despite the threat of cattle rustling to national security, the federal government is still mulling and dawdling over several policy proposals, including the use of ICT in cattle rearing, adoption of pastoralist transhumance certificates to separate genuine herders from cattle bandits, and acquisition of land for establishing cattle colonies, otherwise referred to as *ruga*, in all parts of the federation (Lere 2014). In summary, government seems to advocate a policy that encourages implantation of computer microchips in cattle to track their movement as they graze within and outside the various rugas, under the watchful eyes of security agents who would chaperone both cattle and herders (Abbas 2015).

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The task forces and military exercises, vacillating between strings of uncoordinated and unsustainable actions, achieved negligible results. They have since lost steam and become moribund. With a short life span of three months, Ayem Apatuma, for instance, was too brief to make any lasting impact. Funding challenges, political considerations, decreasing commitment on the part of state governments, and persistent pressure on state security organizations whose capacity to deal with crime has been overstretched by the rash of criminal violence and by bloody conflicts ravaging several parts of the nation undoubtedly account for their poor performance. In the same vein, the proposed establishment of cattle colonies and rugas has elicited sharp opposition, national condemnation, and outrage from a large section of Nigerians who argue that it not only violates constitutional provisions on ownership and access to land but further devalues the doctrine of federalism which guides the conduct of national affairs. Indeed, support for open grazing and cattle colonies, in whatever form or guise, has cast serious doubts on the commitment of the federal government to finding genuine solutions to the problem. More importantly, these measures, taken together, focus on the symptoms rather than the causes, thus raising the question of whether cattle banditry and bandits are the causes or the symptoms.

If, as demonstrated in our discussion, deficiency or lack of government infrastructure and reluctance or inability of government to establish its authority account for the widespread insecurity in the forests, policy measures aimed at dealing with cattle banditry should center on the provision of infrastructure and presence of government agencies in and around the forests. Based on the understanding that spaces are not entirely "ungovernable" but "differently governed," Jennifer Keister (2014) advocates the adoption of any or all of the three-pronged approaches in formulating policies aimed at governing ungoverned (forest) spaces. These approaches include (1) replacing or reforming existing authorities, (2) out-competing them for local loyalty, and/or (3) co-opting and using them in local governance. Keister concedes that her recommendations are not without challenges, but she believes these challenges can be tackled through generous funding and incorporation not only of security but also of other relevant agencies of government in containing cattle rustling.

While in the interim, well-coordinated and adequately funded military and police actions can help to achieve some of the measures suggested by Keister, it is important to note that the key to tackling cattle rustling in northern Nigeria in the long run lies in meeting the infrastructural needs of the forests, re-instituting government authority, and re-entrenching its control of the forests. This can be achieved through robust policy reforms and actions as well as inter-agency collaboration aimed at currying the cooperation and loyalty of forest communities, and at replacing cattle rustlers who have taken over the forests with forest guards and state security agents, either forcefully or by reforming repentant rustlers and integrating them in the fight against the menace. To achieve this, a top-down forest governance policy must be pursued. Forestry Departments must be extricated from the

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shackles of institutional weaknesses, administrative bottlenecks, and meager budgetary allocations implicated in their inability to efficiently discharge their statutory responsibilities. Additionally, policy reforms must encourage the development of modern cattle ranching options. This will help to confine the movement and grazing of cattle within ranches and guarantee their safety. Pastoralists must be made to appreciate the current global transformation in identity politics and socioeconomic and cultural relations, and how such changes, while favoring ranching and negating open grazing, holds out greater opportunities for political recognition, social elevation, and economic empowerment of pastoralists.

Conclusion

The upswing in commercialized and predatory cattle rustling has exacerbated the existing security challenges confronting northern Nigeria. Scholarly attempts to explain cattle banditry have relied mainly on orthodox theoretical and epistemological frameworks which are fraught with flaws and inadequacies. Because they fail to pay attention to regional and state differences which ought to be taken into consideration in explaining cattle rustling, these approaches provide few analytical insights or guidance for policy makers. For instance, the relationship between the many ungoverned forests and cattle banditry in northern Nigeria is yet to be thoroughly investigated, and the contributions of these forests to the escalation of cattle banditry is not fully appreciated.

Northern Nigeria's forests are ungoverned spaces bereft of government presence and control. Government agencies and institutions are either totally lacking or neglected—where and when they are present in the forests. Cattle bandits invade and usurp the ungoverned forests, converting them to theaters of cattle rustling and havens for cattle rustlers. The consequence for northern Nigeria has been the alarming increase in incidences of cattle rustling and other ancillary crimes such as kidnapping, killing, and armed robbery.

In the absence of any identifiable policy designed to tackle cattle banditry, the Nigerian government has adopted a two-pronged solution to the problem. The first seeks to dislodge the bandits from the forests, while the other aims at designing policies that would make open grazing more secure. But none of these efforts has yielded the desired results, mainly because greater energies and resources are spent fighting the symptom—in a rather disarticulated and uncoordinated manner—instead of treating the cause, which is the absence of government presence in the forests. Among other measures, policy reforms may strengthen the capacity of Forestry Departments to effectively govern the forests by entrenching government presence and stamping its authority on the forests.

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Acknowledgments

This paper was presented at the European Conference on African Studies (ECAS), which took place in the University of Edinburgh from June 11 to 14, 2019. I thank the University of Pretoria for funding my participation in the conference. I acknowledge the scholarly interventions of Prof. Abdi Samatar and Dr. Cori Wielenga of the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria, Dr. Benjamin Lawrance, *ASR* editor, and the anonymous reviewers. Kathryn Salucka, *ASR* Managing editor, thanks for your patience and encouragement.

Funding

This article draws on research funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) in the University of Pretoria, Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) Collaborative Research in the University of Ibadan, and the Maria Sibylla Merian Centres Programme of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, Germany, under grant number 01UK1824A. The paper was, however, written during my stay at the Future Africa Campus, University of Pretoria. I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of these organisations to my scholarship.

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Notes

1. In 2013, rustlers invaded the farm of the former Vice President Namadi Sambo, located along Birnin Gwari Road in Kaduna State, and carted away over 1,000 cattle. In addition, the Emir of Zazzau, Alhaji Shehu Idris, lost over 250 cows when cattle rustlers attacked his farm located along Soba Road in Zaria, Kaduna State (Yusuf 2015), while Benjamin Kwashe, the Anglican Bishop of Jos, lost his cows to bandits on June 30, 2018 (Ukwu 2018).
2. Estimates show that corrupt security officials are richer by NGN5,000—equivalent of USD16.5—for every cow that successfully finds its way to the Maiduguri cattle market (Obaji 2017).

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.46 Published online by Cambridge University Press