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Rural Banditry, Regional Security and Integration in West Africa

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Abstract

Rural banditry is increasingly becoming one of the worst forms of domestic insurgencies affecting West African sub-region. The prevalence and severity of rural banditry has contributed to the rising increase of regional insecurity with a potential threat on regional integration of West Africa. With reference to Nigeria, this paper examines the nature and dynamics of rural banditry and its overall international security implications as well as describe how it inputs into West African states efforts towards regional security and integration. Using secondary sources of data, the study revealed that rural banditry is a resource-based conflict compounded by elite conspiracy, the primitive quest for wealth and general poverty situation which affected the people of West Africa. It has become a lucrative business accentuated by bad governance, political clientelism, the gradual disappearance of grazing lands and routes, urbanization, climate change, and absence of effective conflict resolution mechanisms. The paper revealed that rural banditry has gradually evolved into a sub-regional conflict with socio-economic and political implications on efforts towards West African security and integration. The study found that some of the implications of rural banditry with consequences on regional integration of West African include radicalization of youth, increase rate of youth unemployment and their subsequent involvement in illicit gun and narcotic drug trade across the sub-region, the emergence of a network of miscreants groups, gradual collapse of agricultural and livestock development with effects on income, trade and commerce, proliferation of small firearms and light weapons, bastardization of traditional institutions and hostile ethnic and tribal relations among ethnic groups, illegal migration and refugee problems across the sub-region as well as proliferation and networking of domestic insurgency groups threatening regional peace and stability of the sub-region. In this regard, the paper recommends a comprehensive review of regional security and integration initiatives, regional security and intelligence cooperation among security agencies of ECOWAS countries, increase surveillance and border security, awareness creation and dialogue among local communities as some of the ways of reducing the scourge of rural banditry across West African sub-region.

Keywords: Rural Banditry, Regional Security, Integration

Introduction

One of the major forms of domestic insurgencies which accompanied the West African development process is the phenomenon of rural banditry. It is one of the worst forms of domestic conflicts affecting peaceful co-existence of West Africa and thus become a threat to sub-regional integration, peace, and security in the region. Rural banditry began as a resource-based conflict, and over time evolved into a regional conflict manifesting itself in the form of farmers/herders conflict, village raids, rape, and kidnapping. Empirical evidence revealed that millions of lives and properties were displaced and lost due to the prevalence of rural banditry in West Africa. Scholars and

students of African politics alike argued that rural banditry is more upon than not a form of identity conflict which affects social relations among ethnic and tribal groups in West Africa. This is evident in the way rural banditry created fear, suspicion, hatred as well as lack of trust among tribal and religious groups with consequences on peaceful co-existence and stability of the sub-region. The ethnic and/or identity dimension of rural banditry indicated that it is not only a security threat but also an impediment to national and regional integration in West Africa. Perhaps this explains why Olaniyan and Yahaya (2016) argued that cattle rustling as a form of rural banditry has significantly contributed to integration challenges faced by some countries in Africa. It compounded the problem of identity conflicts and sowed the seed of hatred among people who hitherto lived as brothers keepers and in an atmosphere of peace and harmony. Regrettably, scanty attention is given by West African states and governments towards providing policy solutions to the problem of rural banditry in the region. Poor handling of rural banditry provide a fertile ground for rural bandits to establish and operates in deserts and forest as routes and training camps for membership recruitment. They carved out forest and desert as their territories with the objective to overthrow the prevailing political system in countries like Benin, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria.

It is against this backdrop that this paper interrogates the rising increase of rural banditry in Nigeria and its implications on regional security and integration of West Africa. It is an undeniable fact that Nigeria is a strategic and an important country in West Africa. Thus, the escalation of rural banditry in the country could affect the development of West Africa. To achieve the objectives of this paper, the study is divided into five sections. Section one is this introduction, followed by a discourse on the nature and pattern of rural banditry in selected countries of West Africa. The third section is a historical overview of ECOWAS regional integration initiatives and their effectiveness in surmounting the challenges of regional security and integration, the fourth section investigates rural banditry in the Northwest, and its implications on regional security and integration of West Africa and the last section concludes the paper.

Nature, Pattern, and Causes of Rural Banditry in Selected West African Countries

It is significant to note at the onset that any meaningful discussion about rural banditry and its implications on regional integration and security would not be complete without interrogating the concept. Conceptually, banditry is a derivative of the term bandit meaning an unlawful armed group terrorizing people and confiscating their properties. It is synonymous with the establishment of gang groups who used small and light weapons to carry out attacks against people. In this regard, banditry could mean a set up criminal activities deliberately designed and carried out for personal gains. Due to the complex nature of rural bandits' activities, Egwu (2016) narrowly described rural banditry as a practice of stealing cattle and animals from herders or raiding of cattle from their ranches. However, where the term banditry is connected to rural, it implies a group of rural outlawed involved in illicit activities such as raiding of villages, kidnappings and cattle rustling for primitive accumulation of wealth. Thus, rural bandits are gang groups terrorizing local people or travelers of their valuable items or properties such as merchandize, money, cattle, camel, sheep, etc. They operate within and along rural borders with the assistance of their local collaborators including in some cases, state agents deployed to work for the safety and security of the people.

From the historical point of view, rural banditry is not something novel to West Africa. Its origin and development are as old as the sub-region itself dating back to inter-tribal periods characterized by conflicts and wars over scarce economic resources and territorial expansion for political influence. Most parts of Africa experienced these forms of conflicts during the slave trading, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Even though there have been remarkable changes on the nature and pattern of rural banditry and other forms of conflicts in West Africa, yet socio-economic and political reasons remain significant in explaining the prevalence of the phenomenon in the sub-region. Perhaps, this explains why the struggle for political independence and the subsequent establishment of the post-colonial state in West Africa were considered as some of the major events which shaped the pattern of rural banditry in the sub-region. It also suggests that socio-economic and political realities could be used to explain the intensity, prevalence, and the dynamics of rural banditry as evident in different parts of West Africa. For instance, in Tillaberi and Tahoua region of Niger republic, rural banditry such as cattle and sheep rustling as well as the killing of

innocent citizens in border communities has a strong connection with the general poverty situation of the people arising from poor governance of the country. In Mali, the evolution and development of rural banditry have been related to religious extremism by sectarian religious groups but further aggravated by weak state institutions as it relates to service delivery. According to UNOWAS report (2018), weak state institutions, insurgency, and lawlessness have pushed more pastoralist into religious extremism, leading to rising in bandit activities in northern Mali. The frequency of rural bandits activities have created tensions between farmers and herders as well as exacerbate the proliferation of armed groups in different regions of Mali. However, in Mauritania, trans-border banditry by the local groups as well as challenges relating to resource management and distribution of pastoralist lands explains the nature and pattern of rural banditry in the country. Unlike Mali and Niger, competition over resources, particularly water resources, pasture, and animal feeds led to a rapid increase of rural banditry in Mauritania (UNOWAS, 2018). Similarly, livestock theft is becoming a trans-border criminal activity affecting movement and relations along Burkina Faso and Ghanaian border. Local bandit groups mostly Burkinabe connived with traditional elites to rustle livestock and share the proceeds of their criminality. The foregoing suggests that rural banditry has affected livestock development, revenue generation, and separate many families with their only source of income and/or living across West Africa.

An overview of ECOWAS Regional Integration Initiatives

Regional integration is not a novel idea in African governance and development discourse. It has been a major strategy adopted by African countries since independence for their socio-economic and political development. The rationale for regional integration initiatives in Africa was influenced by several factors. From the historical point of view, the desire for collective action against colonial rule in Africa was largely responsible for the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Moreover, the same platform of OAU was utilized by more powerful countries such as Nigeria to support the struggle against colonialism in Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, among others. Impliedly the idea of unity and continental integration towards colonial rule was perhaps the most important factor which contributed to the formation and continued the existence of the OAU up to the end of the 1990s.

In view of the desire to push for regional development of Africa, the OAU before its demise has served as a continental platform upon which African countries engaged the global community on their political development particularly on how to end colonial rule and establish an indigenous political leadership capable of transforming the continent. In fact, the over-reliance of African countries on the OAU explains why Diallo (2016) maintained that integration in Africa is an idea which arises as a form of resistance and struggles against external aggression that the continent and its people have suffered throughout history. In addition, the transformation of the OAU into African Union (.AU) further shows the indispensability of regional integration, particularly for African countries which are in dire need for a practical solution to their development predicament. More importantly, the increasing influence of globalization is making it compelling for African states to look for better ways of establishing collaborations which could create more opportunities for their population while also expanding harmonious relations with each other.

The second explanation for regional integration relates to the character of post-independent African leadership. Most African countries experienced military intervention and authoritarian leadership after independence. This type of leadership involved itself in human right abuses, intimidation of perceived political opponents, killings, and culture of impunity in order to sustain itself in power. This style of leadership eventually led to identity conflicts and/or civil wars with devastating consequences on unity and stability of the continent. For example, the civil war in Nigeria from 1967 to 1970, the apartheid regime in South Africa, the Liberian civil war, etc. were some of the product of bad leadership in Africa. In this regard, regional and sub-regional initiatives were developed to among things improve the quality of leadership and by extension, enhance the quality of governance in Africa. Innovation such as the formation of sub-regional initiatives such as the South African Customs Union in 1910, East African Community in 1919 and the Economic Community of West African States (EOWAS) in 1975. This was further complemented by the creation of governance instrument like New Partnership for African

Development (NEPAD) and African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) to deal with the problem of bad leadership in the continent.

Specifically, the formation of ECOWAS is to promote trade and enhance integration among member nations. According to UNECA (2015) report, the objectives of ECOWAS were to promote cooperation and integration in the economic, social, and cultural domain for the overall development of the sub-region. The concern of ECOWAS at its formative years is purely economic integration, and thus not much pay attention is given to issues relating to conflicts, security, and governance. According to UNECA report (2015), issues relating to regional peace and security were only incorporated into the ECOWAS protocol in the 1990s due to the growing forms of conflict across the sub-region. This initiative translates into the formation of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). The ECOMOG since inception intervened in countries like Liberia in 1990, Sierra Leone in 1997 and in Guinea-Bissau in 1999. To strengthened peace and security and consolidate the achievements of ECOMOG, ECOWAS adopted in December 1999 a mechanism for conflict prevention, management, resolution, peacekeeping, and security with a view to resolving issues relating to peacemaking and keeping, humanitarian support and curtail trans-border crimes. While ECOWAS was critical of issues which concerns peace and security, it is equally mindful of the growing acceptance and influence of democratization, hence, the adoption of a supplementary protocol on democracy and good governance in 2001 (UNECA, 2015). ECOWAS argued that the achievement installation of a democratic system of rule is instrumental to the promotion and sustenance of peace and stability in the sub-region. In this regard, ECOWAS has at a different point in time constituted high powered delegations to observe and monitor elections and consequently negotiated the promotion of democracy, peace, and stability in Mali, Ghana, and Cote d Ivoire as well as recently in the Gambia. It established a sub-regional election body known as ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commission (ECONET). The task of ECONET is to regulate, assess, and identify ways of raising the quality of election in West Africa. ECOWAS through the ECONET is currently working towards the establishment of central election logistics data bank in Senegal. The foregoing efforts of ECOWAS suggest that there is a strong link between democratic governance, integration as well as the promotion of peace and stability in the sub-region.

The dynamics of international economic and political systems are gradually influencing the focus and direction of ECOWAS. The dynamics compelled ECOWAS to pursue governance reforms, economic liberalization, and structural adjustment programmes with a view to protecting West African countries from the negative implications of globalization and technological development. In this regard, ECOWAS has introduced different initiatives such as the single currency initiative, ECOWAS Parliament, ECOWAS transportation, trade, and commerce initiatives and free movement through the adoption of ECOWAS passport. These initiatives were desirous of promoting integration and protecting ECOWAS members from security and technological challenges associated with globalization. Even though some member nations have reservations on some of these initiatives due to their socio-economic and political realities, many of these initiatives have already been implemented while many others are due for implementation in no distance time. As these initiatives forced ECOWAS countries to open up through globalization, challenges of global and domestic insurgencies and conflicts are accompanying this development and thus become a threat to regional peace and security, particularly in Africa. The accompanying conflicts and their severity made regional cooperation as the alternative for sustainable peace and stability in the sub-region and Africa at large. Gupta (2015) argued that the rising increase of insecurity and conflicts across the sub-region influenced the emergence of reforms in the structure and focus of regional institutions to include safety and security of lives and properties of the people.

The foregoing suggests that regional integration in Africa and West Africa, in particular, is a deliberate response adopted by the political leadership to the problems and challenges facing the continent. However, the overall assessment of the African integration efforts could be said to be below the expectation of the people of the continent partly due to the over-ambitious nature of the programmes of integration, poor leadership, inadequate funding and lack of cooperation from among the countries of Africa.

Rural Banditry in the Northwest: Implications on Security and Integration of West Africa

The Northwest is one of the largest geopolitical zones in Nigeria in terms of landmass and population. The zone covered 192, 689 km equivalent to 83, 415 sq mi of land with a combined population of about 40 million of Nigeria's 200 million people (NPC and ICF, 2014, NBS, 2017). Hausa and *Fulani* ethnic groups are the predominant groups in the Northwest with minority groups across the geo-political zone. The zone comprises up to seven states of Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, Katsina, Kaduna, Kano, and Jigawa. A significant part of Northwest is dry land, but the land is fertile and agrarian for farming and livestock development. In spite of the potentials of the Northwest, the zone has since the return of democracy experienced devastating rural banditry which claims thousands of lives and properties. It began as localized disputes between headers and farmers over access to land and water resources. However, poor handling of the rural banditry has significantly contributed to its transformation into a deadly conflict posing a major threat to national and regional security and integration. The pattern and intensity of rural banditry in the Northwest are connected to socio-economic, environmental, and political forces which shape the development of the geo-political zone. The first is what could be described as environmental forces caused partly by climatic conditions and changes that the sub-region is faced with. The Northwest has, at different point been affected by drought, food insecurity, flooding and shrinking of rivers due to changes in climatic condition. This changes influenced herders and farmers' movement from one area to another in most cases beyond the zone in search of water resources and grazing land. Where this movement coincides with the harvesting period, it becomes a source of conflicts between farmers and herders with devastating effects on agricultural and livestock development of the Northwest. Farmers and herders who lost their farmlands and products or herders who lost their cattle resort to rural banditry as a means of survival. Added to the growing tension over resources between farmers and herders is a rivalry between self-help groups mostly the Hausas who are deployed by local communities to curtail the insurgency on the one hand and the herders predominantly the *Fulanis* and who are accused of rural banditry across Nigeria. The rivalry, particularly in Zamfara and Katsina states, was a product of long-time incessant and indiscriminate handling of grievances between the two ethnic groups by the local traditional rulers. Each of group accused leadership of one another of maltreatment and outright indiscriminate on matters involving land and cattle ownership. This was further aggravated by hate speeches, name-calling, and the failure of the state to handle the problems effectively. Thus, as the rivalry intensified both groups resort to sexual assault of women and female children and burn local food reserves in villages. The rivalry increase tribal tension raised credibility questions of traditional institutions, and eventually led to the loss of lives and properties from the two groups. According to Egbejule (2018) farmers and herders conflicts arising from loss of farms and/or cattle as well as inter-tribal rivalry turned to bandits and resort to indiscriminate kidnapping, murder and abducting women as well as forcing them into sex slavery.

Closely connected to the foregoing is the gradual disappearance of grazing land and routes caused by the indiscriminate allocation of lands and poor implementation of urban and regional development plan across the Northwest. In the past, colonial and post-colonial governments across Nigeria have made deliberate institutional and livestock development policies for acquisition and maintenance of grazing lands and routes. Regrettably, the discovery of oil and the subsequent neglect of the agricultural sector contributed to the gradual confiscation and handing over of grazing lands and cattle routes for urban and land development programmes. State governors who are constitutionally responsible for land allocation and development blatantly abused and misused such powers for political benefits. Some state governors moved around with land titles and certificates as a political tool to generate support from elites and the electorates. Political patronage, tribute and prebendalism guide the allocation of lands and development in most part of the Northwest. Empirical evidence shows that some of these lands located in places such as Birnin-Gwari Kaduna, Tureta in Sokoto and Birnin-Magaji in Zamfara state were used for the construction of farm houses and filling stations. While some of these urban development programmes are desirous, many others were of no relevance to rural development as it only intensified agricultural capitalism for easy access to agricultural facilities and loans from financial institutions. The dynamics associated with the disappearance of grazing lands and routes altered agrarian relations and further complicate social relations among occupational groups across Nigeria. This forced *Fulani* herders, farmers and other occupational groups to employ banditry

tactics to compete for scarce land and water resources which sometimes degenerate into rural banditry and other forms of domestic insurgencies in Nigeria (Egwu, 2016).

The third factor which sustains rural banditry is elite conspiracy influenced by the quest for primitive accumulation of power and wealth. For instance, political elites across political parties who lost the election and are dissatisfied with the state leadership support and conspired bandit groups to discredit political leadership and erode its legitimacy in the eyes of the electorates. Apart from political elites, traditional rulers were also involved in aiding and abating rural banditry in the Northwest. Empirical evidence shows that some traditional rulers provide safety to bandits groups to carry out their illicit operations. They were accused of blatantly refusing to take action against rural bandits' activities in their communities. It is no longer something new that rural bandits enjoyed unprecedented immunity from traditional rulers and were seen around local markets working freely with dangerous weapons. They attacked innocent people, impose toll collection and demand ransom from traders and buyers on local markets days in Shinkafi, Birnin Magaji and other local communities in Zamfara state. In some cases, traditional rulers appoint their agents to negotiate terms and conditions of collaboration with the bandits on their behalf. In this regard, cases of banditry brought before the traditional rulers were either discharge without any serious interrogation or backfire on the communities.

Public officials in state security institutions are also becoming part of the conspiracy through out right misappropriation of funds meant for the welfare of security personnel and supply of arms to fight banditry in the Northwest. This is evident in the series of allegation cases of misappropriation and out-right embezzlement of funds meant for military and police operations across Nigeria. This was further compounded by the failure of the Nigerian police and military leadership to monitor their operations in areas devastated by rural banditry closely. Most senior military officers in charge of field operations hardly go to the field to have an on the spot idea on welfare, operational and technical challenges affecting their personnel, instead, they were mostly lodged in hotels and government guest houses at the instance of the state. This idea of using hotels and guest houses as control centers of the army affects command, control, and operations of the war against banditry in the Northwest. It also denied the military hierarchy opportunity to have transparent and credible intelligence that would improve military operations in the affected areas. Closely connected to the foregoing is a poor inter-agency collaboration between the major segments of the army on one hand and other security agencies such as the Nigerian Police and Department of State Services (DSS) on the other. There were reported cases of lack of information sharing and poor coordination between the land army and air force in most areas affected by rural banditry in Nigeria. This poor handling of the conflict coupled with the terrible working condition under which officers and men prosecute the war has raised capacity and credibility questions on the sincerity of political leadership in dealing with the conflict. Added to elite conspiracy was the involvement of families and relations of victims of banditry in providing information to bandits in exchange for monetary incentives. Many families were confirmed to serve as an errand to bandits groups by providing them with information on the location, time, and where about of their victims. This indicates the degeneration of moral, cultural, and ethical values of brotherhood and communitarian tradition of African societies. It has created suspicions among families with negative consequences on state-society relation in the continent.

Apart from the elite conspiracy, state and non-state institutions have also contributed to the rise of rural banditry in the Northwest. One of such institution is the Nigeria media which have become polarized and biased in their reporting and coverage of rural banditry in the sub-region. The conflict is under-reported, and little attention is given to it in popular public discourse. In addition, hate speeches, name calling, and the use of offensive language, particularly in the social media by politicians and private media owners further complicate public order and the problem of rural banditry. Indeed the Nigeria media have become part of the conspiracy which escalate farmers-herders conflicts and other forms of domestic insurgency in the country. It is in this regard, Ibrahim (2016) argued that the narratives of rural banditry by the media and in popular discourse are becoming part of the drivers for expanding conflicts in Nigeria. The biased nature of the Nigerian media reports on rural banditry could be seen as a grand design meant to create public disorder instead of serving as a medium of providing a solution to the problem of banditry in the country.

Poor service delivery and poverty situation of the people in the Northwest arising from bad governance was identified as a major factor for the development of bandit groups across the region. The Northwest geo-political zone, as explained at the beginning of this section, is vast in terms of land size and population compared to other geo-political zones in Nigeria. While Nigeria accounts for about 2/3 of the 320 million people in the ECOWAS region, the Northwest constitute about 1/5 of Nigeria's population. In spite of its population endowment, the Northwest zone was reported to be the most poorest with serious infrastructural and social service deficit compared to other parts of Nigeria. According to the United Nations, 2015 statistics on multi-dimensional poverty index 80.9% of people in the Northwest Nigeria lives in absolute poverty which is higher than those of the southern region and national average (UN, 2015). In this regard, many families lived without access to quality education, health care, and basic security. Empirical evidence revealed that a large proportion of the youth in the zone have no access to quality education and are without any meaningful employment. Some of these desperate youth transformed themselves into rural bandits groups and were used by some elites as a political tool for the actualization of their personal interest. They were created into foot soldiers by some desperate politicians to control and maintain political power. This dastardly act further compounded the problem of rural banditry and create political tension across local communities in the zone and the country at large.

The foregoing suggests that rural banditry can be classified into two ways. First, there is rural banditry based on need, and second, there is also banditry based on greed. Rural banditry on need is perpetuated by those that lost their means of livelihood such as peasant farmers and Fulani herders due to either natural or manmade factors. The second is perpetuated by elites for primitive accumulation of power and /or wealth. Regrettably, Nigeria's political leadership paid more attention to the first form of banditry neglecting the second, which is more severe than the first. Perhaps, the inability of the state to recognize banditry by greed is increasingly transforming rural banditry into a major form of the domestic conflict ravaging the Northwest. It is gradually evolving into trans-border crimes with the increasing involvement of non-Nigerians in the conflict. This is evident in the way rural bandit activities are rising long border communities in countries like Niger, Chad, and Mali, etc. The bandits' groups formed alliances and networks and infiltrate the sub-region, particularly border communities. The increasing nature of banditry along with border communities and its transformation into trans-border conflict could be related to the porosity of borders, common language, and religion among border communities as well as weak or absence of state security institutions. This changing nature of rural banditry has added to the prevalence of identity conflicts, armed politics and accelerate religious fundamentalism as well as ethnic hatred across West Africa. It has made regional security and integration elusive and fragile with effect on the development of the West African region and Africa at large.

The prevalence and transformation of rural banditry into a sub-regional conflict have implications on regional security and integration. It is no doubt that regional security and integration were among the major challenges affecting the stability and development of West African sub-region. The sub-region has for the last four to five decades experienced proliferations of rural banditry. The protracted nature of these conflicts has intensified village raids, illegal toll collection, rapes, kidnappings, and cattle rustling. Specifically, cattle rustling has escalated and continued to remain a source of rural banditry in West Africa. Scholarly studies revealed that there are over 62 million cattle, 227 million sheep, and goats, and 4.6 million camels in West Africa (UNOWAS, 2018). This shows that the pastoralist sector is central to the development of the sub-region. The sector has contributed to raising the standard of living of the individual pastoralist and the communities where they lived in terms of income and supply of beef and milk requirements. Regrettably, millions of cattle have been rustled from Nigeria, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania, among others. Due to the violent nature of rural banditry in West Africa, farmlands and grazing routes have been deserted, and farmers and pastoralists were denied the opportunity to utilize their farmlands and livestock respectively as their source of livelihood. This has significantly affected agricultural and livestock development across the sub-region. One of the implications of rural banditry is the gradual decline of beef and milk production, which denied farmers and herders the needed income to improve their condition of living. The lost of the source of income contributed to worsening poverty situation of famers and herders as well as their subsequent involvement in banditry activities, including the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the sub-region. Some of the affected pastoralist and farmers' plea to other potential conflicts prone areas and joined

forces with other domestic insurgency groups such as *Boko Haram*. The gradual decline of milk and beef production also gave rise to food insecurity, which further inflicts hunger and wants among the population of the West African region. In addition to its negative effect on revenue generation drive of West African states. All these worsened poverty situations increases refugees and migration problems in West Africa and affect ECOWAS effort towards economic and political integration of the region. Given the proximity of West African countries, it is significant to note that regional security and integration could not be achieved without proper utilization of agricultural endowments that the sub-region is blessed with. Indeed economic and political integration within the context of agricultural development is the foundation for sustainable peace and security in the sub-region.

The blame game, hate speeches, and name-calling syndrome accompanying rural banditry is gradually transforming the conflict into ethnic and religious conflicts with adverse effects on peaceful co-existence among tribal groups that lived together for centuries. For instance, rural banditry like cattle rustling in ethnically highly diverse and volatile areas such as Plateau, Benue and Taraba states in Nigeria have compounded ethnic and religious tensions between the *Fulani* Muslims who are considered as settlers and Hausas, Birom, Tivs and Jukuns who are often described as the indigenous tribes in the affected states. The International Crisis Group (2017) reported that the *Fulani* herders who are predominately Muslims and pastoralist from the north were described as an Islamization force and as such any confrontation with other ethnic group by the *Fulanis* is perceived as an agenda for extending the frontiers of the *Fulani* caliphate. Similarly, political leadership from different extraction, including *Fulanis* were not also left out in the blame game as they were alleged to have aided and abated the perceived atrocities of their ethnic groups in the affected states. The coloration of rural banditry as ethnic agenda has an implication on state-society relations in the sub-region as *Fulanis* from other West African countries like Benin, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad were often described as criminals and were denied rights and privileges in other ECOWAS countries as contained in ECOWAS protocol. In this regard, the ECOWAS efforts of regional integration and the establishment of hybrid socio-economic and political institutions such as the ECOWAS Parliament, ECOWAS Central Bank, ECOWAS Court and ECO currency, etc. may be difficult to realize in an environment characterized by heightened mutual distrust, suspicion and fragile relations among the ethnic and religious group. Regardless of ethnic coloration of rural banditry, the fact of the matter is that rural banditry has nothing to do with religion or ethnicity as evidence revealed that different groups *Fulanis* and non-*Fulanis* have lived together and carried out their economic activities for several centuries. Beside both groups have embraced and immensely benefitted from farming and transhumance pastoralism across West Africa. Some *Fulani* pastoralists became sedentary through crop cultivation, in addition to grazing. On the other hand, wealthy farmers and industrialists invest in cattle husbandry and in some cases, entrust their cattle to herders (Manu et al., 2014). The participation of different ethnic groups in both farming and cattle husbandry has contributed about 5 to 10 percent of the G.D.P of countries such as Nigeria, Niger, and Chad, among others. It is obvious that the branding of rural banditry as ethnic and/or religious conflict is not only a fallacy but could also be regarded as a diversionary strategy to destabilize countries with diversity in West Africa. It is significant to add that the root causes of rural banditry and general insecurity in some parts of West Africa relate to the question of social injustice and exclusion, the primitive quest for power, lack of respect for the rule of law and weak democratic institutions. Regardless of the perspective, one takes in explaining the phenomenon, and rural banditry has affected social relations among people with diversities in different parts of West Africa.

The growing intensity of rural banditry in Nigeria has affected the country's efforts and ability to contribute meaningfully to the stability and integration of West Africa. This could be seen in the way Nigeria has turned into a transit route as well as the destination for the supply and proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Arms proliferation has contributed significantly to the radicalization of youths and the creation of gun runners' syndicate who moved in and across the West, Central, and East Africa to cause conflicts and instability. These syndicate groups create supply chain and sales routes from Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Libya, thereby increasing access to guns and other weapons to bandits and religious extremist groups. An ECOWAS expert reported that Mali had become an established transit route for weapons heading from West Africa's increasingly peaceful coastal states to active conflicts west and central Africa (IRIN, 2018). Affirming the foregoing argument, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (1999) maintained that armed groups from Niger and Chad

were crossing into Nigeria supplying and assisting domestic insurgents groups such as *Boko Haram* in the Northeast and rural bandits in the Northwest to attack public interest and killed innocent citizens. This has contributed to the rising increase of banditry in border communities with implications on border stability and control as well as diplomatic relations among countries of West Africa. In fact, border banditry has created a tense and fragile security situation along with border communities of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Benin. It also distorted informal trading relations which have been in existence for decades and has been contributing to economic growth and development of West Africa and Central Africa. It is significant to note that informal cross-border trade around 70 percent of the G.D.P of countries like Benin and Niger Republics (Blum, 2014).

The involvement of traditional rulers in cattle rustling and other forms of banditry has changed the narratives about the conflicts and its implications on the legitimacy of traditional institutions in West Africa. It is argued that prior to the colonial conquest of Africa, traditional institutions were recognized as the most important institutions of conflict mediation and resolution as well as the general administration of Africa. They have been regarded as the custodian of African traditions and value system. Due to their strategic significance, the traditional institutions have also been used by the political leadership in resolving communal and other forms of conflict across the sub-region. In fact, people across the continent respect traditional institutions more than any other and thus described the institutions as a symbol of hope and unity, particularly in times of emergencies. Unfortunately, the credibility of traditional institutions and the societal values of respect, dignity, integrity, and mutual co-existence which, have been aiding and contributing to the stability and security of the region are gradually declining. This is so because of the perceived involvement of traditional rulers in providing safety to rural bandits, especially in some states in the Northwest zone of Nigeria. This gradual decline of traditional values and institutions has implications state reconstruction and nation-building particularly in conflict-prone areas of West Africa, and it also has an implication on political culture and socialization of the emerging political leadership of sub-region.

Infrastructural development, trade, and foreign direct investment have also been adversely affected by the rising increase of attacks and kidnapping of foreign nationals by rural bandits in different parts of Nigeria including the oil-rich Niger Delta region. Egbejule (2018) revealed that one expatriate engineer working on a project in Zamfara state was kidnapped and kept for 12 days until a ransom of ₦30 million equivalent to \$83,100 was paid by his employer. Similarly, two foreign expatriates, together with their police escort, were kidnapped and killed on their way to their project sight in Sokoto state. Some of the affected road construction companies such as K & E and CGC were forced to abandoned projects and relocate to other African countries which are relatively peaceful and attractive for investment. Similar cases of banditry have also been experienced by expatriates and native Africans working in oil and gas as well as telecommunication companies across Nigeria. The rising trend of banditry has to become a lucrative business amid the rising increase of poverty and hunger across West Africa. It is significant to note that one of the major initiatives of ECOWAS is the massive construction of roads linking different countries of ECOWAS. The increasing rate of kidnapping and killings of foreigners has affected infrastructural development, which has been one of the major priority areas for economic integration initiated by ECOWAS. Impliedly infrastructural development across the sub-region is meant to facilitate trade and guarantee the free movement of people, goods, and services into ECOWAS countries without hindrance. Where infrastructural development opportunities are not available, resulting from the problem of insecurity, the menace of banditry will be on the rise with implications on security and integration of West Africa.

Conclusion

This paper examines the nature, pattern, and implications of rural banditry on security and integration of West Africa. The study identified salient factors surrounding the rise and intensification of rural banditry in West Africa with a focus on Northwest geo-political zone of Nigeria. The paper concludes that rural banditry is a product of resource conflicts over land and water resources. While some of the drivers of rural banditry and in particular cattle theft are attributable to poor governance and bad leadership, elite conspiracy and the primitive quest for wealth and power further compounded rural banditry in Nigeria. Given the strategic significance of Nigeria to West African effort towards regional integration and security, the unabated rise of rural banditry in the country if

left unchecked would affect regional integration and stability of West Africa. In this regard, there is the need for a joint effort by political leadership under the ECOWAS to come up with a comprehensive regional policy that would provide grazing lands and routes as well as cattle ranches in order to curtail encroachment into farmlands which serves as a major driver for intensification of rural banditry. Political leadership must aggressively pursue, institute, and enforce severe sanctions on public officials involved in the mismanagement of funds and other resources meant to fight rural banditry. Traditional rulers directly involved should be dethroned and be made to face the wrath of the law. In addition, efforts need to be intensified to mobilize financial and human resources to fund disarmament, and de-radicalization programmes to curtail the problems of arms proliferation across the sub-region. Adequate supply and installation of modern technology as well as increase surveillance of border security are urgently needed to check trans-border crimes as one of the igniting factors for cattle rustling and other forms of domestic insurgencies in West Africa. While joint and effective coordination of security agencies by a regional military initiative is needed to guide surveillance and intelligence gathering, awareness creation and integration of traditional institutions and youth groups into the security architecture are required so as to strengthen security networks, particularly in rural West Africa. This would no doubt help to reduce or eliminate rural banditry and by extension, influence regional integration and security in West African sub-region.

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