

THE NIGERIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

ISSN: 0331-4111

E-ISSN: 2736-075X

Volume 24, No. 1 (June, 2026)

DOI: 10.36108/NJSA/6202.42.0160

Anthropology of War and the Trajectory of Wars in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Anthropology of war and the trajectory of wars in Nigeria simply denote that war has its culture and triggers that necessitate them. The paper adopted the qualitative research design, utilizing case studies with the attendant content analyses. Data were gathered from different secondary sources of literature which have economic, religious and political undertones. There are trajectories of conflict and war in economic and political issues among African countries. In Nigeria communities, Islamic religious groups; Boko Haram and Islamic State of West Africa (ISWA) exhibit this zeal of conversion of non-members to their groups by force or by total elimination, while some dissident Fulani herdsmen are bent on killing and uprooting indigenous people from their home lands especially in Benue state Nigeria. The paper sees the trajectories of war in Nigeria as unabating and should demand international attention and assistance.

Keywords: Anthropology of war, Dissident Fulani herdsmen, Islamic State of West Africa

Introduction

In every human society, the climate of social order is ideal but in almost all contexts very unattainable. Nigeria is no exception, but wars in Nigeria are very often eccentrically motivated. News is everywhere about warfare, feuding, armed conflict in almost every geopolitical divide in Nigeria. Malinowski defined warfare (1941, p. 522) as:

an armed contest between two independent political units by means of organized military force in the pursuit of a tribal or national policy.

On his own part, Mead (1940, p. 402) defined warfare as “a recognised conflict between two groups as groups in which each of the groups puts an army even if the army is only fifteen pygmies into the field to fight and kill, if possible, some of the members of the army of the other group. To Mead (1968) warfare exists if the conflict is organised and socially sanctioned and the killing is not regarded as murder. For warfare to exist, the conflict must be organized and socially sanctioned, the killing is not seen as murder. In such warfare there is the intention to kill members of the opposing side and there exists the willingness to die.

There are issues that have to be examined in the warfare. We have the political community that is culturally recognized as Nigeria and any warfare therein is regarded as internal warfare. Warfare with other political communities such as Niger or Ghana should be seen as external warfare (Otterbein, 1970).

The paper argues that the internal wars taking place in Nigeria since its independence are not warfare per se but internal rebellions occurring for various reasons. The work examines people of different beliefs in Nigeria and their reactions to national and sectional problems such as Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen who have been overheating the Nigerian religious, economic and political system.

Warfare in Anthropological Literature

Many ethnographies contain recent detailed account of warfare in different parts of the globe. Some of the early 19th century anthropologists in Nigeria did not document major warfare ethnographies especially since most of the people studied had started to cease from engaging in serious warfare as the colonial anthropologists with colonialists started arriving. However, anthropologists see instinct of innate aggression as major cause of war between warring groups. It is seen as innate genetically based drive. McDougali (1926) a psychologist who conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Oceania noted that warfare is an inherited predisposition that can be activated by some instigating frustrating conditions. For Freud (1959) it is a constantly operating force continually seeking release. Warfare is rooted in man's psychobiological heritage. Intergroup warfare selected men not only for their pugnacity but for their moral qualities. Those who obeyed the command of leaders were more successful in war. For McDougali (1964), the instinct of pugnacity impelled primitive societies to war which in turn led to the defeat of those societies whose warriors were deficient in fundamental social attributes which were related to strengthening of the gregarious instinct and the instinct of self-assertion and subjection.

Warfare can have biological effect upon particular cultures and upon mankind as a whole. Divale (1970) argues that warfare through death in battles can alter the age and sex composition of a particular culture. Paul (1968) concurs with this finding saying that warfare through different death rates alters the sizes of population relative to each other. Cook (1946) describes the

effects of war and sacrifice upon the population of the valley of Mexico just prior to the Spanish conquest.

Hutse (1961) argues that warfare for a number of reasons may result in stimulating or impeding shifts in gene frequencies. The extinction of genetically distinct groups will produce a shift. For example, returning warriors may bring home diseases that have a selective influence upon the population and captured females may introduce new genes into the population. Warriors might even spread their genes among the peoples in whose lands, they are fighting even conquerors who establish themselves as aristocrats may by taking multiple wives, concubines, and mistresses contribute many genes to the conquered population (Otterbein, 1973).

Theories of Warfare

From time immemorial societies or people do not begin wars without a cause. There must be a reason for war. In this work, four theories of warfare are discussed as explanations for warfare.

Goals of War Theory

White 1949, Newcomb (1950) and Fathauer (1954) hold fast to the belief that warfares have their definite goals. The goals of war theory posit that wars are caused by men attempting to obtain certain goals at the expense of other men. People are engaged in warfare when they employ armed combat to achieve their goals. It is argued that the goals exist in the minds of the warriors while the genesis of the goal is in the culture itself. Fathauer (1954) subscribes to the view that goals pursued by means of warfare are to be seen in the minds of the warriors. For example, the Mohave of the American South West were motivated to go to war to satisfy magico-religious beliefs that were integral to their culture. White (1949) sees goals of war as emanating from the culture; he delves into psychological explanations of warfare while upholding the cultural explanation of warfare. On his own, Newcomb (1950) argues that plains Indians went to war because their sociocultural systems obliged them to do so. Wilson (1958) sees in Mundurucu warfare a cultural imperative requiring these South American Indians to recruit new members. In the goals the authors so cited for warfare are subjugation of enemies and tribute payment; land disputes, plunder, glory and trophies, honour, defence and revenge. It is no gain saying that the goals of warfare in Nigeria as conceived by Boko Haram and ISWA are to Islamize the Nigerian State by over running and eliminating those opposed to their religious values.

Innate Aggression Theory

This theory explains fighting as innate genetically based drive that takes place not only between individuals but also among groups of men. McDougall (1926) sees fighting as an innate predisposition that can be activated by some instigating frustrating condition. Freud (1959) sees it as a constantly generating force, that is continually seeking release. Warfare for these instincts is rooted

in men's psychological heritage. The instinct of pugnacity impels primitive societies to war, which in turn leads to the defeat of those societies whose warriors are deficient in fundamental social attributes. The victors have superior moral qualities which McDougall (1926) believes are related to the strengthening of the gregarious instincts and the instincts of self-assertion and subjection.

Warfare can also have a biological effect upon particular cultures and upon mankind as a whole. Hulse (1961) argues that warfare through death in battle could alter the age and sex composition of a particular culture. Divale (1970) assembled data to prove that in many traditional societies, the sex ratio is frequently three boys to two girls. This is usually attributed to female infanticide. Yet, the adult sex ratio for the same group is approximately one boy to one girl. It is also known that warfare in many nations increases disease rate which in turn leads to higher death rate; since war is between people of different susceptibilities to communicable diseases.

Paul (1965) argues that wars through differential death rates alter the sizes of populations relative to each other. Hulse (1961) also noted that warfare for a number of reasons may result in stimulating or impeding shifts in gene frequencies. Indeed, extinction of genetically distinct groups will produce a shift, while remaining warriors may bring in diseases that have selective influence upon the population. Innate aggression in the current trajectories of war could be said to have the religious psychological instinct which motivates Boko Haram and ISWA to even eliminate Muslims in Sokoto, Kebbi and Katsina who they accuse of not being down to earth enough as Muslims.

Frustration Aggression Theory

The frustration of everyday life creates an aggressiveness that is often channelled into warfare. This does not say that aggression causes war. The theory appears to imply that once military organizations exist, the more frustrated a people become, the more likely they are to go to war. This view is held from the psychological viewpoint by Dollard *et al.* (1939). It is assumed that aggression is always a consequence of frustration and contrary wise that existence of frustration leads to some form of aggression. It is upheld by this theory that warfare is an outlet for aggression. Many communities in Nigeria that feel insulted by other communities in areas of land-grabbing as Umuleri and Aguleri accuse each other, contest for mineral deposit as in Gusau Gold, by insurgents and fishing rights, resort to war with neighbours and are only stopped through governmental authorities using police or army.

Military Preparedness Theory

Military preparedness can itself be considered a cause for war. When a community is well prepared for war, it is more likely to be involved in warfare than if it were not prepared. Otterbein (1970) argues that preparedness may tempt a community leader to go to war with a community he believes is less prepared for war, though having war posture.

The converse of this theory is that military readiness decreases the likelihood that a political community will become involved in war. Otterbein (1970) believes that the proponents of this theory hold the view that the possession of a good military formation will deter others from wanting to go to war with such well militarily equipped community.

Naroll (1969) tested this deterrence theory by correlating various types of deterrence instances with war frequency and then arrive mainly at the same results of low positive correlation which provides no support for deterrence theory and only weak support for military preparedness theory.

Otterbein (1970) concludes by saying that political communities with efficient military organizations are likely to engage in frequent warfare with culturally different political communities. Indeed, a theory of military preparedness as a cause of one type of war has empirical support within Nigerian communities. Dissident Fulani Herdsmen who carry AK47 rifles about in the forest feel well prepared to drive out owners of the land.

This work adopts the entire theories, so discussed here as its point of departure for this article on Anthropology of war and the trajectory of wars in Nigeria.

Methodological Issues

The Article employs a qualitative research design, utilizing case studies and content analysis. The study elicited data mainly from different literature which are secondary sources of data collection. These sources are mainly economic and political as they pertain to Africa especially Sudan, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Cameroon and Democratic Republic of Congo. By mentioning trajectory of conflicts in Africa, the author means the different stages and phases conflict assumes in Africa with the possibility of its spilling into full scale war. There are however at times skirmishes that dovetail into war such as M23 and Congo (DRC). The paper sees the trajectories of war in Nigeria as different from the other African trajectories in the sense that warfare in Nigeria is not only economic and political but religious and ethnic cleansing as militant Fulani Herdsmen kill and occupy land spaces in Benue state while Boko Haram and ISWA kill or convert people by force into their own brand of Islam. The Nigerian trajectory of warfare is the focus of this paper.

Trajectory of War

Within African nations there are macro and micro levels of conflict which are progressive and transitional and could engender feuding and even mature into full scale wars. This work cites a few and discusses their implications for social order and tranquility in Africa.

The Lagdo dam is a case in point of possible international conflict. The Lagdo dam located on the Benue River in Northern Cameroon was meant to improve the lot of the people of Benue River valley through providing water for irrigation to boost agricultural production in this river valley considered as

one of the country's very poor regions (World Bank 2017). It was also meant to generate electricity.

The area lies within the Sudano-Sahel in Savanah agro-ecological zone. This zone has the shortest rain-fed season out of all the five agro-economic zones in Cameroon. In dam construction there is the need for proper consultation with all communities downstream in order to prevent conflict in the course of future release of water within the flooding areas.

This work is concerned with the negative flood impacts that were not intended of Lagdo dam but have far reaching consequences on its downstream neighbour of Nigeria. Nigeria was also constructing Dasin Hausa dam in Adamawa State as Lagdo dam constructing was on from 1977 to 1982. The Dasin Hausa dam could have been mitigating the effect of flooding from the Lagdo dam but the Dasin Hausa dam was never completed. This would have averted the hundreds of death Nigeria experienced as a result of Lagdo dam. Nigeria has had an earlier brush with Cameroon over Bakassi Peninsula. The fight would have continued but for Nigeria choosing to respect the International Court of Justice ruling in 2002 that awarded the territory to Cameroon. The Green tree agreement Nigeria signed in 2006 outlined a peaceful transfer and time line for Bakassi withdrawal. This prevented further military conflict between the two nations which had come close to all-out war over the oil rich region. The trajectory of wars between Nigeria and Cameroon was never at its height because of international oversight and voice of reason. The same voice of reason is expected to overwhelm threats of war and blockade between Egypt and Ethiopia. For example, the Grand Renaissance dam in Ethiopia, which is currently the biggest dam in Africa and a dam over the Blue Nile disturbs water flow at Egyptian Nile thus causing serious obvious needs for water. The problem should be handled with care since about eleven African countries are covered by Nile River basins.

Some International disputes have gone beyond mere accusations and become full-fledged war. The problem between the M23 'rebel' group and the Congo army is rooted in ethnic tension, disputes over citizenship, and control over mineral rich land (Cholter, 2023). The M23 is a Tutsi-affiliated rebel group that claims the Congolese government failed to implement a 2009 peace agreement which stipulates that its members were to be integrated into the Congolese armed forces and administration. The M23 fighters claim their current fighting is to protect Tutsi in Eastern DRC from other armed groups of DRC. Rwanda which is ruled by Tutsis has been accused of providing military support for M23 while Rwanda says its activities near DRC are to protect its borders from the Hutu militia which is said to have links with the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In indepth research shows that the Eastern DRC is a rich mineral zone especially Coltan and gold and may be the covert causes of escalating conflicts (Ollington, 2024).

It is obvious that this conflict that has ethnic colouration cannot be settled without international mediator. Qatar is helping to reduce the escalation. The

East African Community (EAC) and the United Nations have to mediate if the current war between the M23 and DRC must abate (Henry, 2018).

Trajectory of War in Nigeria

On the local scenario, conflicts whether between communities or religious groups are very intense and disorganizing. A case in point is the Aguleri and Umuleri land dispute in Anambra State of Nigeria. The long standing Aguleri-Umuleri land dispute stems from conflicting claims over Otuocha land, rooted in divergent origin myths about who first settled in the area with both groups claiming descent from Nri.

Obiakor (nd) sees that control over otuocha was linked to political power in local government area, leading to a broader struggle for dominance. The lucrative leasing of Otuocha land to commercial entities exacerbated disputes as both groups sought control to gain financial advantages. The Aguleri and Umuleri conflict appears to have defied all conflict resolution methods having fought in 1933, again in 1964 and in April 1999. Lives have been lost in those instances (Abada, 2004; Ifediora, N. D., & Eke, 2011).

Besides the Intercommunity wars, Nigeria has presently an upsurge of religious bigots making life uncomfortable within the country. The Global Peace Foundation of Nigeria has re-interated that no faith supports killing, kidnapping and maiming of human beings. The extremists in Nigeria twist religion in the guise of religion especially Islam to destroy human lives. It is no longer a secret that these extremists such as Boko Haram, some radical Fulani Herdsmen have burnt down churches in Northern parts of the country and beheaded clergymen, abducted killed Christian worshippers.

Orekoya (2025) the General Overseer of New Life for all Nations Ministries spoke on the continued attacks on churches and Christian communities across Nigeria "Anyone who sees the video of how a Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Chairman was murdered can't say there is no genocide". It is a targeted persecution.

There are very many instances of isolated but targeted murder of innocent Christians in Nigerian communities. One of the latest adoptions was Christian students of the Catholic Diocese of Kontagora Niger State where 239 children, 26 staff members were herded away into the forest by bandits at about 1 am on Friday, 21st November, 2025 (See Nigerian Saturday Vanguard November 29, 2025, p. 15). Besides the targeted Christians, there are Fulani bandits especially in Benue, Plateau and Taraba states who are said to focus on grabbing the natives indigenous land and displacing the indigenes (Mutfwang, 2025). These indigenes are seen in internally displaced people's camps (IDPs).

Some of the Fulani Herders bandits also operate in the Moslem dominated North Western parts of Nigeria such as Sokoto, Katsina and Zamfara. These extremists usually go into the rural villages to rustle cattle and carry away women and children. They at times kill Moslem worshippers in the mosque to prove their extremist nature for various reasons.

They also target security men and infrastructure. There are reasons to believe these extremists are being sponsored by well to do Nigerians (Sara-Igbe 2025) and there are reasons to believe some of these bandits have infiltrated the ranks of security men in Nigeria (Sara-Igbe, 2025).

Radicalized Extremists and their view

A terrorist suspect Babagana Umar who admitted being a Boko Haram Commander told a court in Abuja during trial that his group would capture Nigeria despite their incarceration. He made the statement while facing summary trial in 2018. According to Dauda Hassan the Director of Civil Litigation at the Legal Aid Council. Hassan told the Whistler (2025) during an exclusive chat on the prosecution of suspected terrorists that the suspects were not afraid to admit their crimes. Hassan's team represented Hussaini Ismaila, a leader of the Islamic State West Africa Province who was sentenced to 20 years in prison last month by the Federal High Court in Abuja said many of the terrorists were unrepentant due to long term indoctrination

Hassan recalled that there was another suspect who was also a commander who admitted trying to bomb a school in Gombe. He was caught before he could detonate the bomb. When Hassan asked him if he knew that there could be Muslims like him in the school, he was trying to bomb, he answered, if there were muslims in the schools, they must be infidels. This exactly explains why they bomb schools housing Christian children and churches since they see those places as infidels' concentrations or centres.

Summary

In the issues relating to Anthropology of war, there are trajectories of war and outright skirmishes of war in the world and especially in Nigeria. The trajectories of economic war such as between countries of the River Nile and Cameroon's Lagdo dam downstream in Nigeria could be controlled through dialogue. The insurgencies of bandits in sub-saharan Africa especially Nigeria are target driven; some are religiously propelled against Christians; others are focused on taking over of state apparatus and others are economic. There is a need for democratic regimes such as in Nigeria, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Benin to uphold their values and in any hard situation seek help from developed democratic regimes, such as Britain, USA and France.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the trajectories of war in Nigeria have gone beyond communal fights and should not be taken as ordinary. In Nigeria insurgencies of the religious form mainly against Christians in the North are undertaken by religious extremists in the guise of Islam. Their focus is land grab and other economic benefits including rustling of animals and unsettling the government. These insurgents have their sponsors who may have higher goals such as regime change, conversion of Christians and land grabbing. Governments

should fight to defend their democratic values which make societies sustainable and enduring.

Recommendations

1. The trajectories of war in Nigeria and its local community levels should be attacked headlong using Nigerian Federal might.
2. Insurgency, banditry and negative activities of Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen are focused on destabilizing the Nigerian State and should be handled with the force necessary to wipe them out and even foreign democratic countries such as USA, Britain, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire should be called to assist obliterate the insurgents.
3. No internal effort to disorganize insurgents all over Nigeria can be deeply rooted until the rural communities are empowered to participate. The state police is the institution that can use indigenes to flush out insurgents, militants and their sponsors.
4. Governments should be guided to know that they are voted to maintain stability and peaceful atmosphere for all citizens and so, they have to keep all Nigerian highways safe from kidnappers and all other forms of insurgencies.

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