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Battle for the bush: Banditry and violent agrarian change in northwest Nigeria

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BATTLE FOR THE BUSH

banditry and violent agrarian change in northwest Nigeria

Peer Schouten and James Barnett

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Cover photo: Aerial view of the frontier between herding and farming in Isa local government area of Sokoto state. (Airbus/Maxar Technologies)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	2
Introduction	3
What are northwest Nigeria's bandits?	5
The expanding farming frontier and the enclosure of the bush	7
Deliberate invisibility and patronage politics	8
Banditry and agrarian change	11
The frontier erupts	11
Reclaiming the bush: banditry as a violent counter-enclosure	13
Inverting the farming frontier	13
Crisis-induced demographic change	15
State retrenchment and deepening rural isolation	16
From reclaiming to governing the bush	17
Pastoralists victims	20
Conclusion	20
Bibliography	22

ABSTRACT

Contemporary banditry in northwest Nigeria is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses a wide spectrum of violence waged by heavily militarised yet loosely organised rural gangs. These groups engage in everything from cattle rustling to kidnapping for ransom and extortion of peasant communities, with bandits becoming important *de facto* authorities in swathes of rural northwest Nigeria.

Underpinning the contemporary bandit conflict, we argue, is an ongoing ‘battle for the bush’ – a struggle over land, governance and rural livelihoods. Historically, the bush functioned as a shared space for farmers and pastoralists. However, land use data shows that the expansion of cropland farming has gradually overtaken grazing lands, reducing pastoral mobility and generating increasing conflicts. The state’s failure to mediate these tensions or provide equitable land policies, coupled with the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, has allowed grievances to fester. In response, bandits have violently reclaimed and reshaped the governance of the bush, not only as a refuge but as a domain of coercive rule, imposing levies on farming and controlling access to land and cattle.

We examine the historical processes that led to this transformation and analyse how opportunistic criminals and social bandits have evolved into *de facto* rural rulers. Along the way, the trend of cropland expansion has been reversed. Yet instead of reestablishing a pastoral idyll, banditry is reproducing the very conditions that gave rise to it, further undermining rural livelihoods in the northwest. This has compounded rural poverty and food insecurity while depriving pastoralist youths’ access to government services and education that could provide for a better future. Our analysis implies that the crisis cannot be solved through military interventions alone but requires a rethinking of rural governance.

INTRODUCTION

Banditry in contemporary northern Nigeria is a complex armed conflict that has resulted in thousands of deaths and even more displacement.¹ At the heart of this crisis in northwest Nigeria lies a long and often violent struggle over the bush. As the Sarkin Daji of Sabon Birni – the traditional authority overseeing forested areas – observed in an interview, ‘I am the Sarkin Daji, responsible for the bush. The bush is not in peace.’² The bush of northwest Nigeria has become so associated to the scourge of banditry in policy discourse, that the former governor of Kaduna state advocated for the Nigerian Air Force to ‘carpet bomb’ forest areas to eliminate bandit strongholds.³

The bush (*daji* in Hausa) has indeed evolved into the heartland of a complex crisis that has spiralled out of hand. Northwest Nigeria’s hinterlands are currently home to an estimated 100 bandit groups employing thousands of armed men, forming a security threat that vies with extremist groups in its impacts.⁴ The bush holds both practical and symbolic significance for bandits: they utilise the cover of rough terrain to stage their operations, and ‘entering the bush’ has evolved into a metaphor for armed resistance.

Yet, this paper argues that this narrow association between banditry and the bush hides a deeper and more complex conundrum. While policy discourse frames banditry as flourishing in the ‘ungoverned zones’ of the bush⁵, empirical evidence indicates that the bush has actually contracted significantly due to a slow process of agrarian change.⁶ Rather than to insecurity and the absence of rule, for pastoralists the concept of the ‘bush’ is intimately connected to pastoralist mobility and identity, encapsulated in the traditional Fulani moral code known as *Pulaaku*, ‘*dum tokkuḡo laddé*’ (‘Pulaaku is following the bush’).⁷ The bush is thus a conceptually and practically contested space.

What farmers and politicians consider unused bush has in fact often been shaped by decades of pastoralist resource management, creating fertile ecosystems that subsequently attracted agricultural settlement. Once a vast, open landscape where pastoralists could freely move their herds, the bush has steadily disappeared under the weight of cropland expansion. With each passing decade, the pastoral commons have shrunk, forcing herders into increasingly precarious margins. This was not an accident but the result of deliberate policies that prioritised farmland expansion and the monetisation of rural land over the preservation of shared access to natural resources. Yet while banditry today is increasingly interpreted by Nigerians through an ethnic lens, this ecological degradation was not a one-sided, zero-sum contest between Fulani and non-Fulani. Rather, as detailed in this report, a significant number of Fulani pastoralists themselves began shifting into agropastoralism from the 1980s onward, contributing to the same conditions that have marginalised pastoral livelihoods.

¹ <https://www.msf.org/neglected-humanitarian-crisis-escalates-northwest-nigeria>

² Interview, Sokoto, December 2024.

³ Onwuzuruigbo 2020, Olaniyan 2017, cf. <https://www.thecable.ng/el-rufai-lets-bomb-forests-to-tackle-banditry/>.

Incidentally, many Nigerian air force operations have the ‘bush’ in their names: *haradin daji* (‘the hazard of the bush’); *wutan daji* (‘bush fire’).

⁴ See our mirror report Schouten & Barnett, 2025.

⁵ See, for instance, Olaniyan, 2017; Onwuzuruigbo, 2020.

⁶ Sedano et al., 2020.

⁷ Rufa’i, 2019.

This paper traces how the banditry crisis entails a violent reversal of this trend, recreating bush landscapes that serve bandits' interests in the name of reconstructing a pastoral idyl. Whereas herders have long responded to the ensuing challenges by relying on mobility, they reverted to violence in the early 2010s. Whether consciously or unconsciously, bandits have violently reasserted control over the bush, not only using it as a refuge but actively recreating it as a space of power. Their attacks on farming communities and their displacement of settled populations have reversed decades of enclosure, turning once-cultivated fields back into bushland. However, this does not portend a return to an idyllic pastoral past. Rather than restoring a commons where herders and farmers coexist, bandits have imposed their own violent order, claiming control over land, cattle and livelihoods. They now dictate who may farm, who may herd, and under what conditions. The bush has been remade – not as a free space, but as a domain of coercion and tribute.

This paper thus forms a window into a bigger crisis affecting pastoralism in the Sahel⁸, which involves a creeping transition of customary and flexible land rights towards permanent and exclusive claims.⁹ As a response, bandits are imposing a violent rearrangement of peasant resources according to non-market mechanisms. While the banditry conflict is complex, dynamic and iterative, and thus cannot be reduced to monocausal explanations of a single 'driver', this report sheds light on one of the key grievances that spurred many erstwhile pastoralists to initially transition into banditry: agrarian change.¹⁰

This process has been gradual and contains different dimensions - economic, ecological, demographic, political and social, each of which we touch upon here. Our objective is to bring together these different threads to explain how banditry, far from being either an inexplicable and sudden phenomenon that Nigerians could not have anticipated or part of a long-term conspiracy of ethnic Fulani domination (as more sensationalist studies have argued¹¹), is a culmination of intersecting structural changes over decades, political decisions made by key actors during times of transition, and changing social attitudes within previously accommodating communities. In doing so, we recognise that it is very difficult to pinpoint a specific 'start' of the crisis in either geographical or chronological terms, with the sources we interviewed alternatively tracing the crisis back to 2012, the late 2000s, or even the 1980s.¹² What is clear, however, is that in the first years of the 21st century, the agrarian economy and landscape in northern Nigeria looked vastly different than they had four decades earlier at the start of Nigeria's independence. It is this change that is the focus of our analysis.

This paper provides essential historical context to the complex phenomenon of banditry that is detailed in our DIIS report, *Divided They Rule?* Like that report, this study draws on interviews carried out by the authors in several states of northwest Nigeria between October 2024 and March 2025, in addition to spatial analysis of historical land use change patterns and conflict data and a review of the existing literature on banditry. The paper begins with a brief description of today's bandits before offering a historical

⁸ Brottem, 2021.

⁹ Blench, 2017.

¹⁰ In doing so, we are building on the lens first developed by Michael Watts (1977).

¹¹ See Moritz and Mbacke, 2022.

¹² Certain inflection points have been widely recognised as escalating the banditry conflict, such as the killing by Yan Sakai of prominent Fulani elder Alhaji Isheyi in Zamfara in 2012 (see Rufai, 2021; Hassan and Barnett, 2022; Higazi and Hassan, 2022; Okoli, 2024; and our mirror report, *Divided they rule*). But establishing a clear 'start' of the conflict is much more difficult given the fact that banditry is not a conventional insurgency 'declared' by a single rebel movement or leader.

analysis of agrarian change and how state policies have facilitated the gradual enclosure of the bush, driving pastoralists into crisis. The second section examines the emergence of banditry as an initial response to this process, charting its evolution from social banditry to a system of violent rural governance. The third section investigates how bandits have selectively undone certain agrarian transformations while deepening others, effectively remaking rural economies and power structures. The final section reflects on the lessons learned and the broader implications of this ‘battle for the bush,’ concluding with several recommendations for rethinking rural governance, land policy and conflict resolution in northwest Nigeria.

WHAT ARE NORTHWEST NIGERIA’S BANDITS?

Figure 1. Bandits in northwest Nigeria



Photo: James Barnett, edited by authors.

To understand the linkages between agrarian change and the present-day violence in Nigeria, it is necessary to underscore the ways in which today’s banditry represents a spectrum of violence waged by a complex array of actors rather than a clearly delineated insurgency conducted by any single organisation that articulates an explicit political ideology or agenda. Put differently, Nigerian banditry is an exceptionally chaotic form of multi-sided armed conflict – there is no homogenous bloc of ‘bandits’ that are trying to seize territory from the government in the manner that an insurgent force would, but rather a constellation of different armed actors with fluctuating allegiances whom observers conceptualise with nebulous (and disputed¹³) labels such as ‘bandit.’¹⁴ In this, we see a parallel between cause and effect: While the violence is all too apparent today,

¹³ One prominent bandit interviewed by Barnett (2021) rejected the bandit label ascribed to him by Nigerian society and media, preferring instead to identify his gang as something akin to a community militia.

¹⁴ See for example, Osasona, 2023.

the emergence of banditry as a conflict was *gradual* and *decentralised* – much as the agrarian change that contributed to this crisis, described in this report.

This banditry defies easy categorisation. Many Nigerians refer to the spectrum of violence conducted by bandits as a form of terrorism, and not without reason given the degree to which the bandits raid, kidnap, and kill civilians in the Northwest. (The Nigerian government has likewise designated bandit gangs as terrorists, albeit with limited tangible effect.¹⁵) Yet, the *modus operandi* of the bandits is distinct from Nigeria's oft-studied jihadist groups, i.e., Boko Haram and its offshoots. Contemporary Nigerian banditry is alternatively described in much of the existing scholarship and media coverage as either a form of organised crime/criminal insurgency¹⁶ or a form of intercommunal conflict,¹⁷ yet as we detail in our companion report, we see elements of both profit-seeking and of 'social banditry' conscientiously framed around the grievances of rural pastoralists among today's bandits.¹⁸

Our respondents in the northwest generally consider today's banditry to have evolved from cattle rustling, which has long been an occurrence in northern Nigeria, but which has increased in intensity and became more militarised since the late 2000s. Bandits have subsequently shifted focus from cattle rustling (although they still engage in this) to more lucrative kidnappings for ransom (including at a mass scale, targeting schools or commuters on major roadways), now augmented by 'stationary' forms of banditry characterised by levy-collection from peasants, forced labour, and illicit mining.¹⁹

Nigeria's bandits are also hard to characterise because they constitute a far more decentralised and fluid network of armed actors than, say, the region's jihadists: Rather than organising themselves into a formal institutional hierarchy with a clear identity (e.g., the pan-Sahelian jihadist group Jama'at Nasr al Islam wal Muslimeen), individual bandit 'kingpins' or 'warlords'²⁰ may oversee a network of hundreds of fighters loosely organised across various camps that are each, in turn, led by a largely autonomous 'lieutenant' of the bigger boss.²¹ These allegiances are volatile, however, with bandit infighting as common as *ad hoc* tactical cooperation between otherwise autonomous gangs.

One of the paradoxes of banditry is that many of the bandits hail from the pastoralist subset of the larger Fulani population of northern Nigeria and attack communities that engage in violence or discrimination against the Fulani, such that the conflict is increasingly viewed by the Nigerian public as an ethnic war of 'Fulani against the rest'. Yet many non-Fulani pastoralists have also become prominent bandits,²² and bandits may target their fellow pastoralists with the same rapacity and violence that they inflict on non-Fulani peasants. Here too we see another parallel between the decades-long process of agrarian change and contemporary banditry: rather than being violent

¹⁵ Barnett (forthcoming).

¹⁶ Okoli, 2021.

¹⁷ See for example, the highly insightful 2022 *BBC Africa Eye* documentary, "The Bandit Warlords of Zamfara," which centers the breakdown in Hausa-Fulani relations in its explanation of the conflict.

¹⁸ See our companion report, Schouten & Barnett, 2025.

¹⁹ Madueke et al. 2024.

²⁰ Barnett, 2021.

²¹ Schouten & Barnett, 2025.

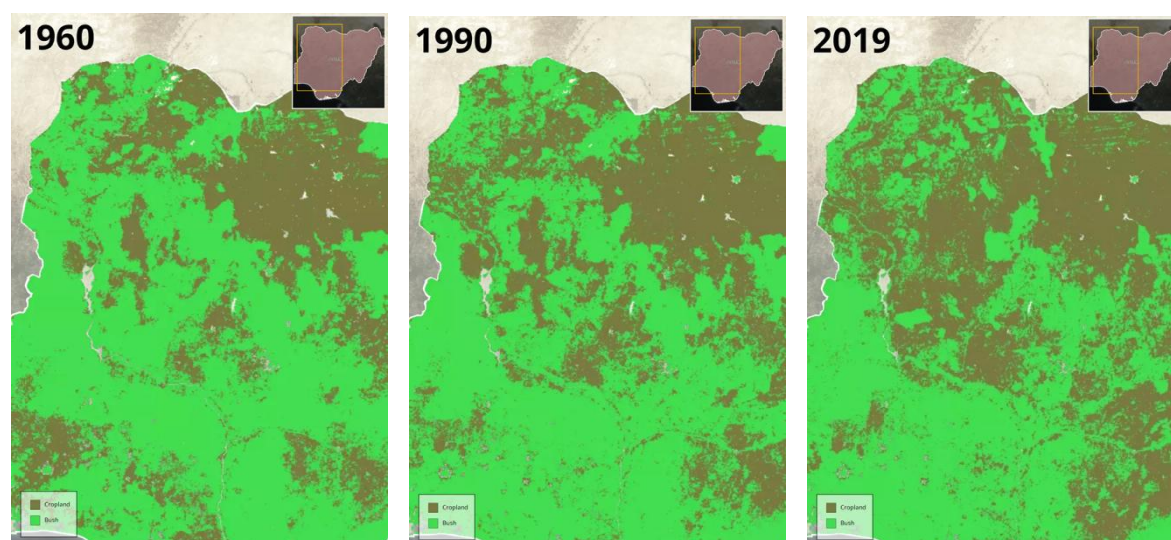
²² Ibid. Interviews with repentant bandits in Kaduna conducted by one of the authors in late 2024 and early 2025, along with documents shared by a former Zamfara police official in early 2025 also reinforced claims by some of our informants that a number of the early bandits in the northwest (including prominent figures such as Alhaji Kundu) were not Fulani but Kanuri, Tuareg, or even Hausa.

expansionists or merely passive victims, Nigeria's pastoralists play varying and at points contradictory roles in the evolution of rural land use.

THE EXPANDING FARMING FRONTIER AND THE ENCLOSURE OF THE BUSH

Rural livelihoods have always been in flux in northwest Nigeria. But since colonial times, a pattern has emerged of increasing conversion of land amenable to grazing to cropland – both by a growing farming population seeking livelihoods and by herders diversifying into farming in response to external shocks such as droughts and cattle diseases.²³

Figure 2. Cropland expansion in northwest Nigeria



Sources: Data from the HILDA+ global land use change dataset.

Land use change studies provide evidence of the unfettered farmland expansion (see above). Nigeria has the highest consistent rate of cropland expansion in Africa, with a sustained rate of 5700 km² added per year between 2000-2023 – in total adding an area the size of Greece – most of it in the north of the country.²⁴ The expansion of cropland conversion would primarily target grazing land and cattle routes, because these had been fertilised over the centuries by herders.²⁵ Indeed, the added cropland in northwest Nigeria came at the expense of grassland and forested areas, which have shrunk at the same pace as farmland expanded. Whereas around 67% of Nigeria's land was 'uncultivated bush' available for grazing in 1951, only about 39% was left by 1986.²⁶ This change was most intense in northern Nigeria – where in some places, 90% of grazing land was converted to cropland.²⁷ A 2018 Zamfara state report identified 37 grazing reserves in Zamfara and found that some were completely lost to farming, while most were largely taken over and the few remaining were at least 30% encroached

²³ Ingawa et al., 1989: 5; Blench, 2017: 2; cf. Majekodumni et al., 2017.

²⁴ Nzabarinda et al., 2021; Akinyemi and Speranza, 2024.

²⁵ Blench, 2010: 5-8.

²⁶ Gefu & Gilles, 1990: 39.

²⁷ FORMECU, 1998: 8-45.

upon.²⁸ Many of the estimated 20,000 herders in Zamfara's largest reserve were dispossessed.²⁹

Figure 3. Farmer tilling land next to a beacon demarcating a grazing reserve



Photo: Courtesy of Ali Abdullahi.

By the early 2000s, the World Bank estimated there wasn't much 'open' land left for the farming frontier to expand into.³⁰ Rangeland experts at the time concluded that 'the ongoing appropriation of open access rangeland for cultivation puts pressure on the shrinking resource base of both livestock and crop production and threatens to increase rangeland degradation'.³¹ In the subsequent period, the remaining full-time herders kept being pushed either to southern Nigeria or to more marginal lands, leading to overgrazing in remaining productive ecologies.³² One traditional authority concluded, 'Fulani herders didn't choose the bush – the *daji* – they were forced into it'.³³ Yet, as this process was not planned or steered from above, it represents an ungoverned but significant encroachment 'from below' rather than a premeditated land grab 'from above', making it difficult for those affected to point the finger at any individual culprit.

Deliberate invisibility and patronage politics

Yet, the occupation of traditional grazing territories in northwest Nigeria resulted not only from unregulated encroachment processes 'from below' but also from deliberate policy choices not to regulate pastoral land entitlements. The ensuing spatial ambiguity – what might be termed 'strategic illegibility' – has systematically disadvantaged pastoral

²⁸ Higazi and Hassan, 2022.

²⁹ Higazi and Hassan, 2022: 13.

³⁰ Sedano et al., 2020: 12 & 15.

³¹ Hof et al., 2003.

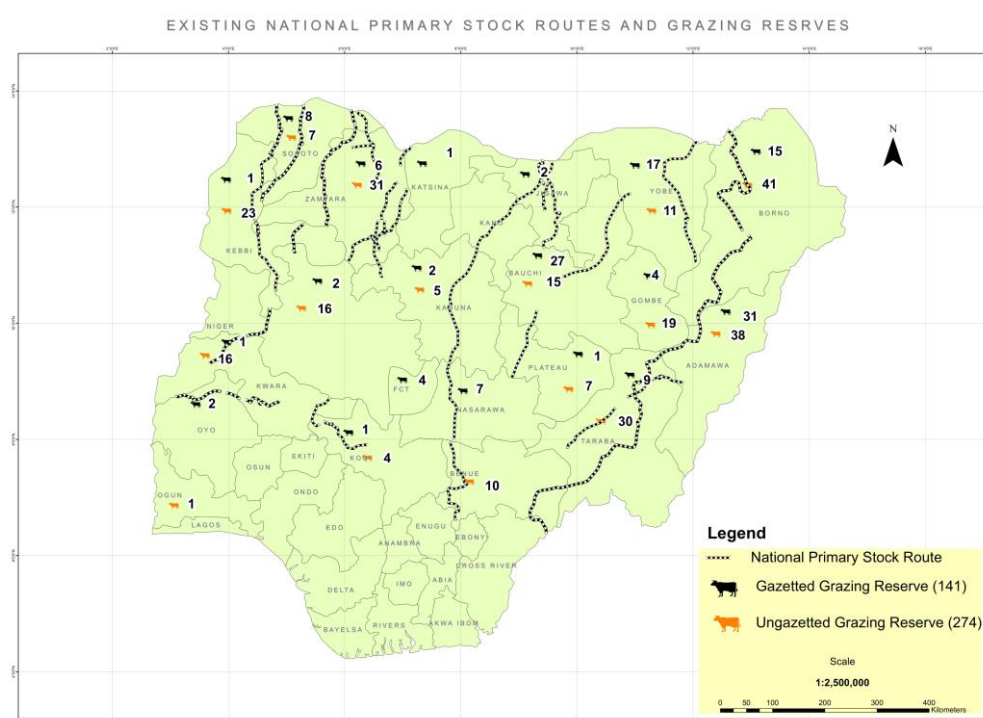
³² Cf. Ducrottoy et al., 2018.

³³ Interview traditional authority from Zamfara, December 2024.

communities while empowering those who broker land access through informal channels.³⁴

The problem dates back to just after Nigerian independence, in 1960. At the time, the Nigerian government, with significant donor support, ostensibly committed to establishing an extensive network of grazing reserves – over 400 reserves encompassing nearly 3 million hectares – with accompanying service provision for pastoral communities. However, the subsequent petroleum boom provided subnational governments with substantial federal allocations that effectively removed the incentive for governors to develop the livestock sector. While government officials still frequently raise the spectre of developing grazing reserves, the implementation gap is striking: only one-quarter of the planned reserves achieved gazetted status, and a mere 20 of the 400 received basic infrastructures.³⁵ Concomitantly, comprehensive maps of Nigeria's grazing reserves – whether gazetted or ungazetted – that would allow monitoring and accountability were never produced. The most detailed map of grazing reserves on the national level is shown below.³⁶ This lack of spatial demarcation has created conditions conducive to patronage-based land allocation regimes, prompting one traditional authority's sardonic observation: 'We lack nothing: only administration'.³⁷

Figure 4. The distribution of grazing reserves in Nigeria



Source: Courtesy of the Nigerian National Livestock Project.

The failure to demarcate pastoral territories sits within a more insidious way of reasoning that systematically obscures pastoralist contributions to productive land use. Pastoral landscapes coveted by agricultural expansion are not pristine or 'wild', unused,

³⁴ Cf. Randall, 2015.

³⁵ Knox 1998: 113.

³⁶ As a recent land use assessment of Nigeria observes: 'Even though agriculture is the main source of livelihoods, there is little information on the area and distribution of cultivated land, and no known empirical studies on the availability of grazing resources'. Usman and Nichol, 2022.

³⁷ Traditional ruler from Sokoto.

bush, but rather human-made ecosystems cultivated through generations of pastoral management practices.³⁸ In Nigeria and elsewhere, these herder-shaped vegetation patterns and ecological modifications have historically been denied legal recognition, contrasting sharply with agricultural land use practices that receive formal acknowledgment through the visible 'marks of the plough and hoe'.³⁹

This lack of recognition and demarcation has allowed regional governors and traditional authorities to systematically allocate large tracts of land in grazing reserves to political affiliates and sell smaller plots to farmers willing to provide financial consideration.⁴⁰ One traditional authority from Sokoto commented: 'The inflection point was when politicians started taking land of the communities, of the pastoralists. They had been herding it over 50-100 years and suddenly you tell them they are strangers in their own land'.⁴¹

During the 1980s, populist state governments in northern states leveraged robust oil revenues to abolish taxes on pastoralists.⁴² This fiscal reform precipitated the withdrawal of previously established service provision in pastoral areas – including veterinary services and nomadic education – and eliminated data collection mechanisms concerning herd demographics and pastoralist settlement patterns.⁴³

Many pastoralist communities identify this transition from interventionist to laissez-faire livestock policy as the genesis of the contemporary crisis.⁴⁴ The dissolution of the taxation-accountability nexus further removed pastoralist communities from state visibility and governance priorities. As one representative of the pastoralist association Miyetti Allah put it: 'Even though we saw little benefit in taxes and paternalistic programmes at the time, we later saw that when the government withdrew them, we became prey to personal interests without any protection.'⁴⁵

As Figure 1 on page 7 shows, there is a notable uptick of cropland expansion in northern Nigeria in the decade following democratisation in 1999.⁴⁶ Newly empowered governors and federal legislators systematically allocated substantial portions of reserves to former military officers and political associates, and the sale of land to farmers became entrenched as a mode of accumulation for political and traditional authorities in northern Nigeria.⁴⁷ In Zamfara state – the epicentre of the banditry crisis – informants consistently identified the appropriation of pastoral territories by political elites in Gusau

³⁸ Kratli, 2017.

³⁹ Cf. Kratli and Toulmin, 2020. An exponent of this logic is that farming communities are labeled 'indigenes' under Nigerian federal law.

⁴⁰ Indeed, massive sale of land, by government and other powerful people connected with the government, without due compensation, along with human rights violations, was a persistent feature of military regimes from 1966 to 1999. See: press release 1st January 2005: NDM Releases Full Version of Oputa Panel Report at: <https://dawodu.com/oputa1.htm>; Volume Three, pp. 11 ff.

⁴¹ Interview, traditional authority from Sokoto.

⁴² Owen, 2018: 478; <https://dailytrust.com/the-return-of-jangali/>

⁴³ Interviews GAFDAN president; Kano traditional rulers; <https://dailytrust.com/the-return-of-jangali/>; <https://dailytrust.com/restoring-jangali-haraji-in-northern-nigeria-will-end-insecurity-prof-hamman/>

⁴⁴ Interviews with various pastoralist communities, Kebbi, Zamfara and Sokoto, November and December 2024.

⁴⁵ Miyetti Allah interview, Sokoto, December 2024.

⁴⁶ Also see Akinyemi and Speranza, 2024.

⁴⁷ For example, the largest poultry farm in Nigeria is owned by the daughter of a former senator, while former officers involved in various coups and military regimes are reported or alleged to be involved in mining, farming or hydroelectric power projects that involved serious real estate acquisitions in rural Nigeria. Sources in Zamfara state we spoke with said that most major political figures are involved in gold mining in one form or another. <https://www.instagram.com/pulsenigeria247/reel/DBRZ8aztKHH/>; <https://thesun.ng/about-billionaire-t-y-danjumas-new-goldmine/>; <https://blueprint.ng/the-untold-story-of-gold-mining-in-zamfara-state/>; <https://truthnigeria.com/2023/12/how-nigerian-governors-fuel-illegal-gold-mining/>; <https://desertherald.ng/insecurity-gov-matawalle-accuses-gen-gusau-of-aiding-banditry/>

as a critical factor in the escalation of banditry. This provides the context for the statement by bandit leader Najaja in Anka, Zamfara:

Since the passing of Danfodiyo no one respects the Fulani anymore. When they come to the bush, the judge hurts the Fulani, the policeman hurts the Fulani, the *sarki* hurts the Fulani – everyone with the power and the opportunity. Before we became thieves, they became thieves, before we became villains, they became villains, before we became terrorists, they became terrorists.⁴⁸

BANDITRY AND AGRARIAN CHANGE

Banditry in northwest Nigeria tends to be approached as a criminal enterprise or terrorist venture. But against the background outlined above, banditry can also be understood as a violent response to agrarian crisis in remote rural frontiers. Since 2010, banditry has led to important reversals of trends that threatened pastoral livelihoods – but the outcome has not benefited pastoralists. While not driven by an overarching agenda, the sum of bandit depredations amounts to a violent form of agrarian change – what may be called a ‘bandit effect’ on rural governance.⁴⁹ It comprises two distinct but overlapping stages. The first stage, from 2010 onward, comprises a brutal undoing of the long-term agrarian trends that threaten pastoralist livelihoods. In the second, currently unfolding stage, bandits are becoming the architects of a new rural order.

The frontier erupts

By the early 2010s, the unfettered expansion of the farming frontier reached its spatial limits in northwest Nigeria.⁵⁰ As it did, the changing entitlements to land access precipitated violence when farmers began forcefully resisting crop destruction that occurred with increasing frequency as herders could no longer avoid cultivated farmland while moving with their herds.⁵¹ The escalating incidents of harassment and cattle rustling became a critical inflection point where the time-tested exit strategy of avoiding conflict through mobility gave way to the voice of the gun. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms that for years had sustained relatively peaceful relations between settled farming communities and seasonally migrant pastoralists proved inadequate when the number of migrating pastoralists grew even as access to land grazing shrunk amid cropland expansion.⁵² These factors likewise limited the ability of herders to relocate to other communities: migrating herders would sometimes carry a broad grudge against farmers owing from their previous disputes over cropland, which resulted in them being more negligent around crops when they moved to new regions.⁵³

⁴⁸ Interview, December 2024, conducted by a local member of the research team.

⁴⁹ See Schouten & Barnett, 2025, for discussion.

⁵⁰ Land use experts (Akinyemi and Speranza, 2024) note that the rate of cropland expansion slowed markedly after 2013 in northern Nigeria, likely because little land was available for further extension (cf. Sedano et al., 2020)

⁵¹ However, sociological changes inside Fulani society also contributed to this: with diminishing family herds, youth unable to inherit enough cattle to constitute their own herds, may find employment as hired herders, who engage in cattle rearing for absentee owners—the long distances from families often placing them outside of traditional authority structures, allowing for higher risks of mischief or problems during transhumance. See Blench, 2017: 2; Higazi, 2022.

⁵² Interviews, Kebbi and Sokoto states (October–November 2024) and Oyo state (March 2025).

⁵³ Ibid.

Figure 5. Cattle moving through cropland in northwest Nigeria



Photo: Courtesy of Ali Abdullahi.

Armed Hausa militia began mobilising first in different parts of northwest Nigeria. Pastoralist informants reported that these militia engaged in targeted violence against herders and systematic livestock confiscation, slaughtering animals and selling their meat at heavily discounted prices in rural settlements.⁵⁴ For Fulani pastoralist communities, cattle loss represents not merely economic deprivation but an assault on cultural identity. As one observer retrospectively noted: 'Some 15-20 years ago, there were warning signs, but we ignored it, and it metamorphosed into where we are today'.⁵⁵ Herders began organising defensive militia called *kungiyar gayu* ('youth association') in rural Zamfara and Katsina to retaliate and recover livestock. As Fulani elders recounted in an interview:

Because the government didn't do anything after our pleas to address the encroachment on our grazing lands, the radical Fulani came with the idea of crop and farm destruction in the grazing reserves. Every Fulani with a herd was forced to participate or else they would receive punishment in the form of their cattle taken or even death.⁵⁶

This provided the opportunity for entrepreneurial criminal elements – a small minority within Fulani communities – to reposition themselves as communal defenders.⁵⁷ As prominent bandit leader Bello Turji said in an interview with Nigerian media: 'My fellow

⁵⁴ Interviews, Kebbi, November 2024.

⁵⁵ Traditional authority from Sokoto.

⁵⁶ Interview in Sokoto, December 2024.

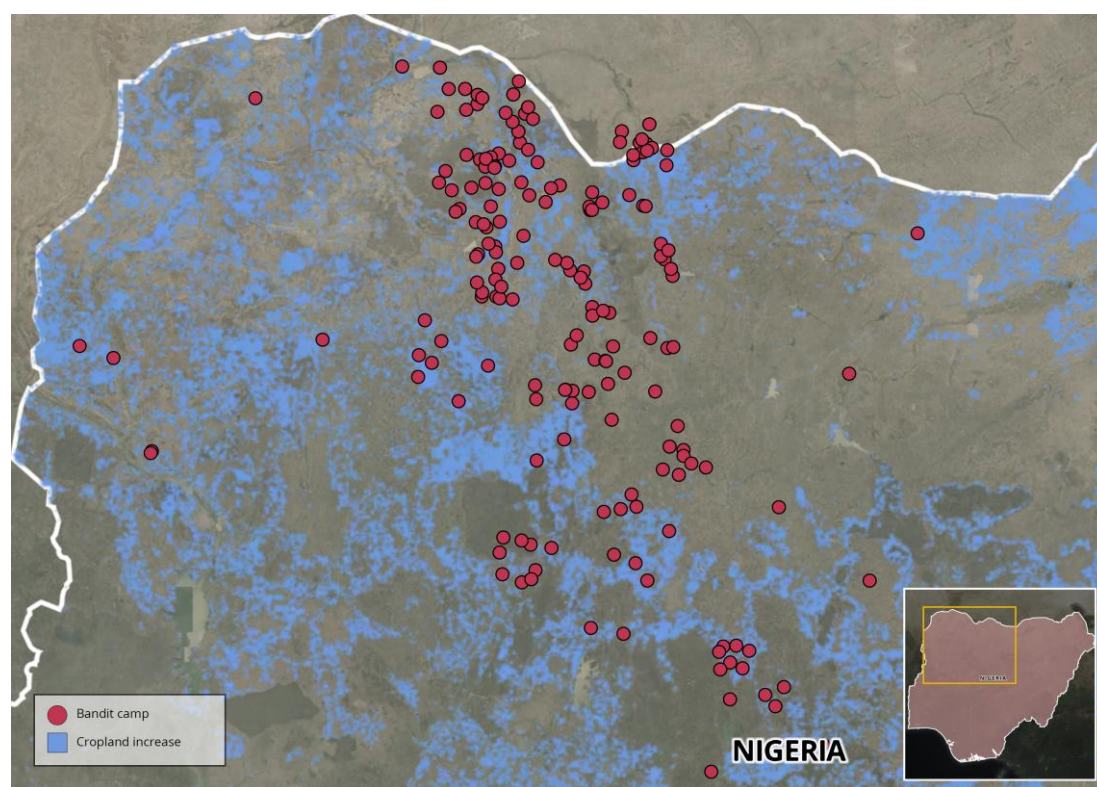
⁵⁷ Barnett [forthcoming].

Fulani were killed, and over one thousand cattle rustled... When I realised that I had no one to complain to, and no authority to help us, there was no option but to pick up arms'.⁵⁸ Contemporary banditry thus emerged from this convergence between established criminal networks and pastoralist communities mobilising in perceived self-defense.

RECLAIMING THE BUSH: BANDITRY AS A VIOLENT COUNTER-ENCLOSURE

Combining vengeance with enrichment, banditry has subsequently reversed some of the agrarian changes that sparked it. These transformations included the progressive enclosure of pastoral spaces through small-scale crop farming expansion, alongside farmers' adoption of livestock. To the extent that these evolving mixed livelihood practices - themselves adaptive responses to ecological and economic pressures - became primary targets for bandit groups, contemporary banditry can be conceptualised as a violent recreation of the 'bush'.

Figure 6. Bandit camps sit on or near the areas affected by cropland expansion since independence



Source: Cropland change data from the HILDA+ global land use change dataset; approximate bandit camp locations from authors' own research.

Inverting the farming frontier

In the early 2010s, the first wave of bandits systematically targeted rural communities within contested reserves and adjacent settlements. Their raids often targeted livestock owned by Hausa agriculturalists but also the cattle of fellow pastoralists. As cattle became exceedingly rare, bandits would gradually diversify into kidnapping, forcing

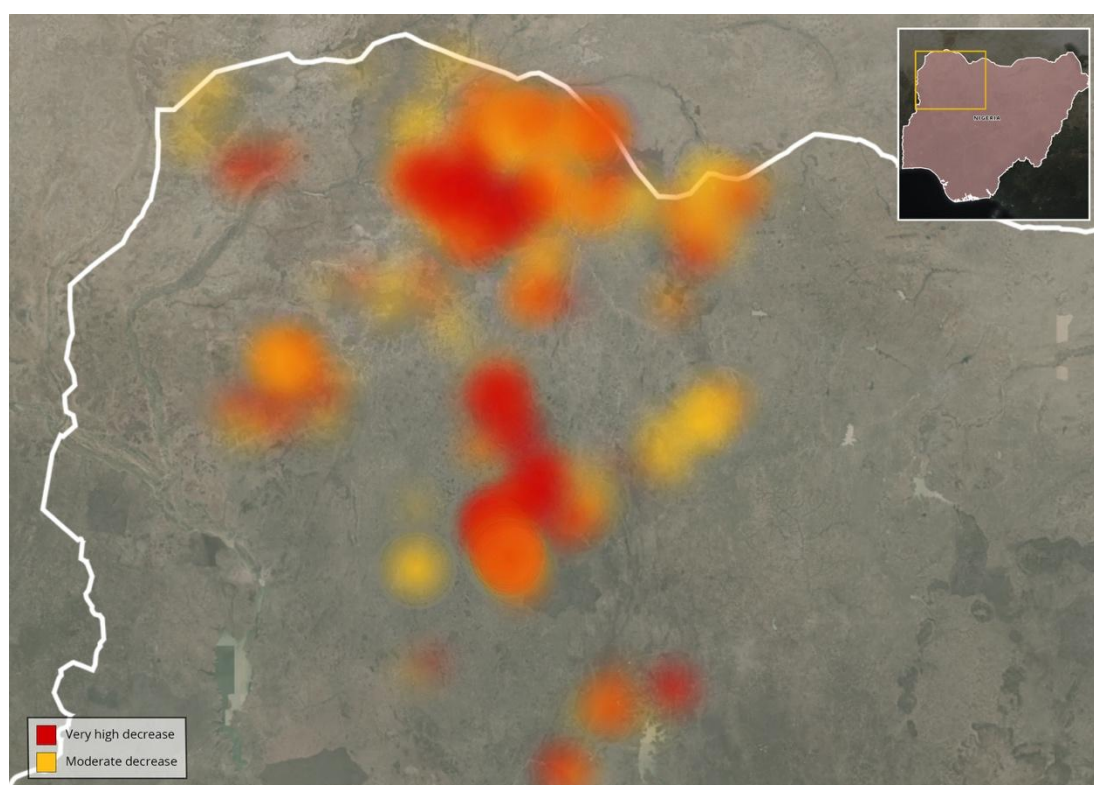
⁵⁸ <https://dailytrust.com/how-i-joined-banditry-and-why-i-want-to-quit-bello-turji/>

farmers to convert their harvests into cash and herders to give up their cattle to pay ransom. Along the way, the bandits turned outlying farming areas into insecure no-go zones. These depredations forced many farming communities to abandon their fields, reversing the encroachment of cultivating in grazing reserves. As a traditional ruler from Sokoto put it in an interview:

The land the bandits have taken over by force, in the bush, is farmland – but wasn't it grazing reserves and cattle routes in the past? Perhaps they are taking back by force what they consider theirs. They have sent virtually everybody away from the land and now it has turned to bush. Because the Fulani have very good memories and they hold their grudges very long. Even if it's 30 years later, they will take revenge. So, for the areas that were grazing reserves before and have not yet been taken back, it is a timebomb that is ready to explode.⁵⁹

As we discuss in our companion report, bandit networks are decentralised and bandits are typically driven by short-term enrichment, so they can hardly be imputed a concerted agenda to take back the grazing reserves. Yet data shows their depredations have nonetheless had the cumulative effect of reversing the trend that had eaten away at the bush.

Figure 7. Negative cropland change in northwest Nigeria between 2017-2021



Source: Data from Copernicus, crop change detection in conflict-affected areas of Nigeria, agricultural season 2021 (activation EMSN113).

A survey conducted by this research team in Sabon Birni (Sokoto state) shows that up to 75% of all farmland in this local government area has been abandoned because of banditry, while recent investigations suggest that 50% of farmland in Zamfara state, the epicenter of the crisis, is left uncultivated because of banditry-induced insecurity.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Interview, Sokoto.

⁶⁰ See Schouten & Barnett, 2025 & <https://fij.ng/article/tunnel-of-thorns-in-zamfara-farmers-work-bandits-eat/>

Satellite imagery analysis suggests that negative cropland change over the past years specifically concentrates in and around forest reserves and designated grazing areas (see map above), while land use change analysis confirms that the insecurity associated with banditry has markedly slowed the rate of cropland expansion in northwest Nigeria since 2013, while it continues unabated elsewhere in Nigeria.⁶¹

Figure 8. Village in Zamfara in 2017 (left) and in 2022 (right), after it was abandoned



Source: Google Earth/Maxar Technologies.

Crisis-induced demographic change

Additionally, the banditry crisis has precipitated a substantial demographic reconfiguration in the hardest-hit areas of rural northwest Nigeria, reversing the dispersal of smallholder farms and compelling farmers to retreat to larger settlements. International organisations document that banditry is responsible for ‘100 percent of the population displacements observed in Zamfara and Niger states, 87 percent in Sokoto, 84 percent in Katsina, and 50 percent in Kaduna’.⁶²

Figure 9. IDP camp in Zamfara in 2021



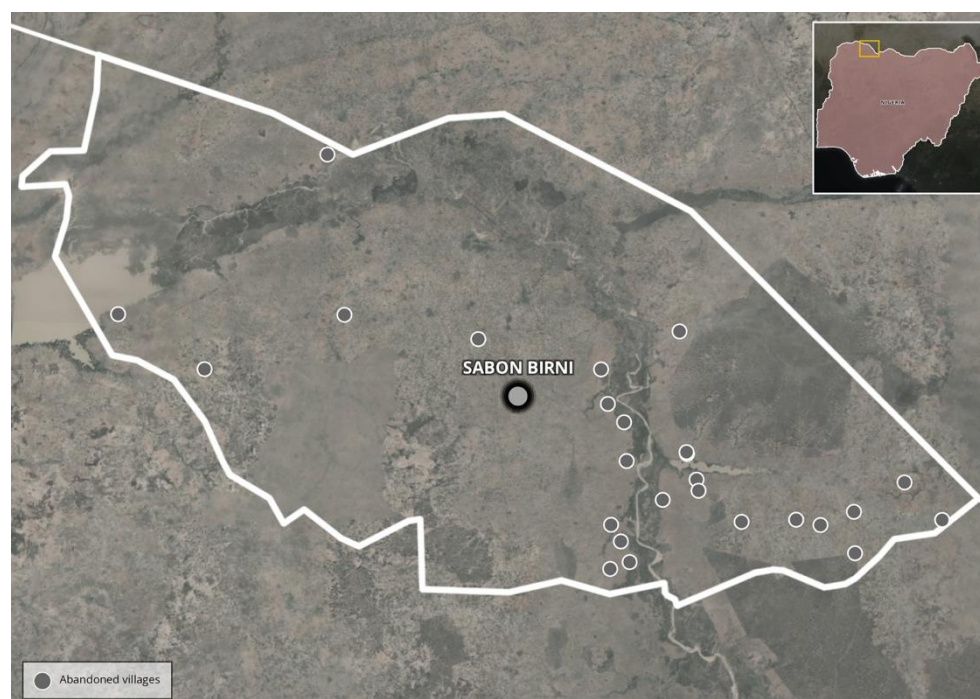
Photo: James Barnett.

⁶¹ Usman and Nichol, 2022.

⁶² <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/nigeria-north-central-and-north-west-round-14-idp-atlas-june-2024>

For instance, Sabon Birni town now hosts over 25,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) – the highest concentration in Sokoto state – from surrounding settlements, many formerly located in or near former grazing and forest reserves.⁶³ It is similarly no coincidence that 27 abandoned settlements registered in Kaduna state in 2024 all hug the margins of reserves.⁶⁴ Here and elsewhere in northwest Nigeria, settlements in the reserves are gradually reverting to bush vegetation. This spatial reorganisation reverses historical patterns: colonial rule had enabled farmers to disperse from hill refuges and larger settlements as rural areas became more secure.⁶⁵ A century later, this pattern is inverting, with bush farms being abandoned in favour of fields adjacent to settlements.

Figure 10. Depopulated settlements Sabon Birni



Source: Data from authors' research.

State retrenchment and deepening rural isolation

In the rural settlements that remain populated, banditry has nonetheless led to a deepening of rural isolation. The insecurity has provoked a further withdrawal of already patchy government services from rural areas and strengthens their characteristics as ungoverned spaces, i.e. 'bush'. Several areas that were once well connected to the country's main economic and political hubs are now increasingly viewed as 'remote', dangerous, and challenging to govern. Bandits across the states have looted health care facilities to treat their comrades; other medical centres closed down because of the threat to health care workers.⁶⁶ Many rural schools have been closed for years – in Zamfara alone almost 170 of them.⁶⁷ It is not without symbolism that a number of bandits have turned occupied schools and dispensaries into their abodes, signalling their takeover of spaces associated with unequally administered public goods from which they themselves had not benefitted.

⁶³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/nigeria-rapid-need-assessment-report-sabon-birni-lga-sokoto-state>

⁶⁴ <https://goroinitiative.org/armed-banditry-is-wiping-out-communities-displacing-people/>

⁶⁵ Last, 2016

⁶⁶ <https://humanglemedia.com/caught-in-the-line-of-fire-health-workers-not-spared-in-nigerias-unending-conflict/>

⁶⁷ https://twitter.com/AIT_Online/status/1735990336533447043; cf. ajogbeje and sylwester, 2024.

Bandits are often seen as a pathology emerging from a lack of education, whether religious or secular, affecting rural Fulani youth.⁶⁸ The bandits share with certain extremist groups the frustration that the state and its promise of social mobility based on western education has done nothing for them. It is for this reason that, as one interlocutor noted:

We met Dogo Gide and I saw two young boys of 12 years. I asked him that he should let me take them with me. Dogo Gide said “No. Why should they go to school? The essence of education is to secure your future, to get something going. They already have something going”.⁶⁹

In chasing away state services, the bandits are perhaps unwittingly reproducing the conditions for broader swaths of the deep rural populations that adversely affected themselves, thus breeding a new generation of people without Western or clerical education that has seen nothing else but bandit life as an avenue for social mobility.⁷⁰

FROM RECLAIMING TO GOVERNING THE BUSH

Figure 11. 20 million naira in cash collected by the residents of Gidan-Goga village in Maradun, Zamfara, to pay bandit leader Bello Turji for access to their farms in 2022



Photos: Courtesy of Makama Zagazola.

⁶⁸ Cf. Higazi, 2022; Ojewale, 2024.

⁶⁹ Interview, bandit negotiator, Kaduna.

⁷⁰ Interview, youth leader, Gobirawa. The bandits are condemned by Fulani as having lost the path of *pulaaku* and by Muslims as having lost the faith, and generally by townsfolk as lacking education. Rural Fulani youth are thus everywhere seen as underdeveloped, uncivilised, their lifestyles a sad anachronism. Yet it is not uncommon for bandits to have 3-4 wives and to have impregnated many others through force. Given the low social status the bandits typically occupied before their exploits, this alternative avenue to social mobility by claiming control over reproductive rights is notable. This kind of ‘wealth in people’ has been fully out of reach for marginalised Fulani youth.

By the late 2010s, bandits had begun shifting their approach towards agrarian activities in the bush. Instead of completely eradicating farming, they started allowing it under what is best understood as a neofeudal regime. Farming communities, once the principal targets of displacement, were now permitted to cultivate their land but only in exchange for levies and tributes. This arrangement bore striking similarities to the precolonial systems of rural governance that prevailed in these areas little more than a century ago.⁷¹

The 'battle for the bush' has therefore pivoted from resistance to imposition. Bandits have assumed the role of rural landlords, extracting tribute from farmers and deciding who gets to access land, water and cattle. In doing so, they have turned the bush into both a sanctuary and a site of oppression. In this evolving dynamic, bandits have redefined their role in the bush, positioning themselves as a the 'Gwamnatin Daji' ('government of the bush'), as locals have come to refer to bandit rule. One notable (now late) bandit himself adopted the title 'Buharin Daji', declaring that while one Buhari ruled the cities (referring to Nigeria's former president), he ruled the bush.⁷² Armed bandits have effectively seized control of land and its governance in remote rural areas, reappropriating some of the best farmland from politicians and farmers and converting it into their own plantations. As an interview with Miyetti Allah representatives highlighted:

All of the land was occupied by farmers and politicians first, but now the bandits occupy it. Today, in some cases, the herders go further than just reclaiming the grazing lands of yore and inhibiting farming; they are becoming overlords.⁷³

Bandits have positioned themselves at the pinnacle of wealth extraction from farming, forcing communities to submit to a non-market economy to ensure their survival. As one traditional authority from Sabon Birni explained, 'The worst thing that bandits can do, the thing we fear most, is denying us access to our farmlands to keep us in hunger, and then deny access from the market'.⁷⁴ While this emerging form of bandit rule is certainly more violent, it also mirrors prevailing modes of rural governance, where land allocation is deeply politicised and depends on patronage networks connected to the government. In response, bandits have imposed their own force-based land access system, functioning as an alternative regime of control. Surrounding the abodes of notorious bandit leaders are rural communities whose labour is systematically appropriated through levies and forced labour. This rudimentary form of bandit rule has been expanding since 2018, with the list of villages paying tribute growing annually.

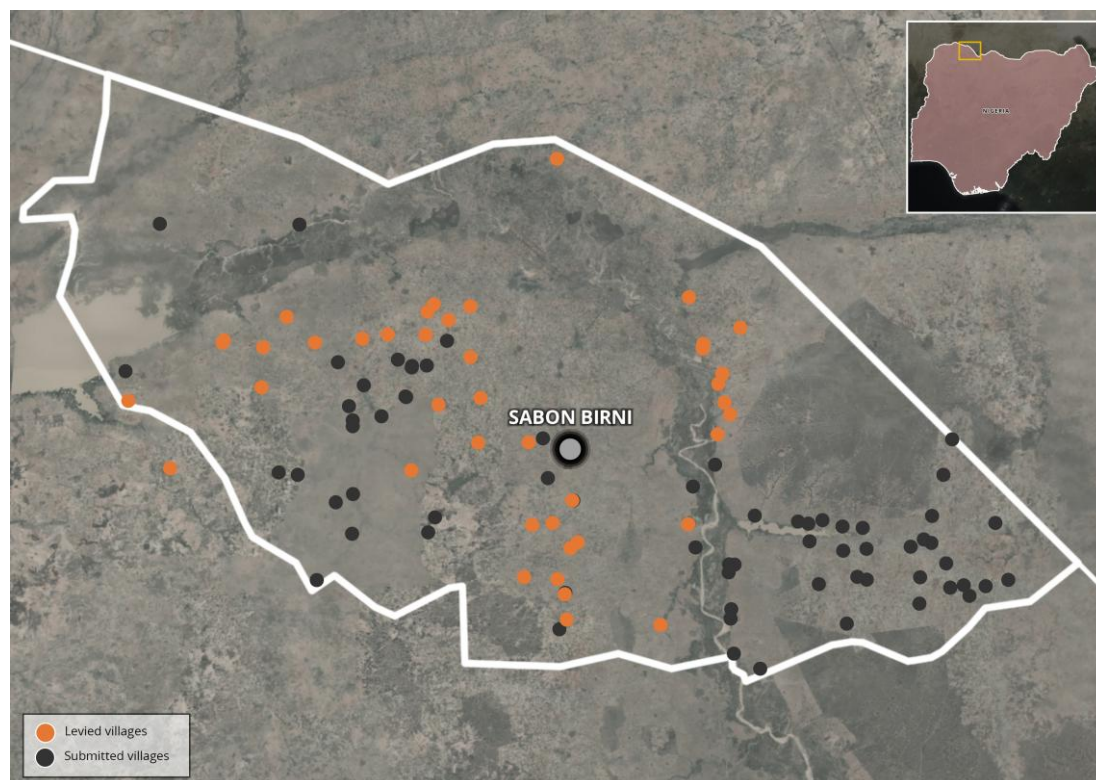
⁷¹ See Schouten & Barnett, 2025.

⁷² Barnett [forthcoming].

⁷³ Interview, Sokoto, November.

⁷⁴ Interview.

Figure 12. Settlements paying levies to bandits in Sabon Birni, Sokoto state



Source: Data for 2024 from author's research 'Levied villages' pay more substantial tribute than 'submitted villages'.

The exploitation of captive peasant labour has become central to the emerging political economy of the bush. Bandits have found extortion of farmers to be a lucrative means of benefitting from the rural economy's mainstay. Bandits collect hundreds of millions of naira, if not billions, in levies from farmers each year, on top of the levies they place on herders and gold miners. The principal method of exploitation hinges on the threat to withhold peasants' access to their farms at critical planting and harvesting periods. Data reflects a biannual peak in violence against farmers, coinciding with these crucial moments in the agricultural cycle, as bandits enforce tribute payments before allowing work to commence.⁷⁵ As we describe in detail in a companion report, this control mechanism creates conditions resembling serfdom for captive rural populations.⁷⁶

A more direct form of peasant labour exploitation involves bandit leaders forcing villagers to work the farmland they have commandeered under armed supervision. Contrary to the pastoralist idyll often invoked in bandit discourse, major bandit leaders have themselves diversified into agropastoralism, commandeering significant farmlands in the grazing reserves – ironically following the example set by Nigerian politicians. Submitted villages are required to send either all able-bodied persons or a specified number of individuals to work on bandit plantations at designated times. In 2021, for example, the bandit leader Alhaji Shingi alone reportedly collected a stunning 3,000 bags of beans, maize and millet through forced labour.⁷⁷ The result is a system where rural populations are not just taxed but physically coerced into labour, further entrenching the bandits' dominance over the agrarian economy in deep rural areas.

⁷⁵ Madueke et al., 2024.

⁷⁶ See our mirror report (Schouten & Barnett, 2025).

⁷⁷ <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/561000-merchants-of-terror-2-inside-multi-million-naira-farming-sustaining-nigerias-terrorists.html>; see mirror report.

Pastoralists victims

While bandits frequently appeal to a deep-rooted Fulani nostalgia for an idealised past of free access to pasture and cattle routes, the violent reconfiguration of the bush exhibits a complex relationship with pastoralist grievances. Rather than restoring pastoral commons, banditry has significantly harmed rural Fulani herders and agropastoralists. They are now feared and harassed by villagers, and major bandits have consistently raided their livestock.

This has forced many pastoralists to concentrate in peri-urban areas like state capitals such as Gusau or to seek greener pastures elsewhere, generating new intercommunal tensions.⁷⁸ Interviews with community leaders in IDP settlements suggests that a substantial proportion of IDPs in the northwest may be ethnic Fulani who have either been displaced from rural settlements or refused alignment with bandits.⁷⁹ By rustling the cattle of their fellow kinfolk, bandits have accelerated the long-term trend of conversion of traditional herders toward farming, seasonal urban employment or recruitment into banditry itself. Multiple traditional authorities, Fulani elders, and rangeland experts predict that if current trends hold, pastoralism may become untenable in much of the northwest within a couple of years. Indeed, the tragedy of many seemingly social bandits throughout history is that they deploy widespread grievances against the marginalisation of the rural poor to then engage in crime and self-enrichment on the back of those already impoverished populations.⁸⁰

CONCLUSION

At the core of the crisis in northwest Nigeria is a longstanding, often violent struggle over the bush. Once an open landscape for pastoralists, it has steadily vanished due to agrarian expansion, state neglect and political patronage. This report contended that this transformation was not merely incidental but also the result of policies favouring farmland expansion and rural land monetisation over shared resource access. This creeping agrarian crisis erupted into violence exactly at the moment when the expanding farming frontier met its spatial limits – slowing down the unsustainable rate of cropland expansion and pushing herders into cultivated areas.

In response, bandits have violently reclaimed the bush, not merely as a refuge but as a domain of power. Their attacks on farming communities and displacement of settled populations are reversing decades of enclosure, converting cultivated fields back into bushland. However, this shift does not restore a purported pastoral commons. Instead, bandits impose their own violent order, controlling land, cattle and livelihoods, dictating who may farm, herd, and under what conditions. The bush is being remade – not as a free space, but as a domain of coercion and tribute.

This ‘battle for the bush’ is not simply about land management. It is about politics, about who holds power in the deep rural spaces of northwest Nigeria. For decades, the Nigerian state has treated the bush as an unregulated frontier, allowing local elites and patronage networks to determine access to land and resources. This abdication of responsibility has created grievances that bandits have responded to with their own

⁷⁸ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/301-sud-ouest-du-niger-prevenir-un-nouveau-front-insurrectionnel>

⁷⁹ Interviews, Sabon Birni, Gagi, Sokoto, December 2024

⁸⁰ Cf. Blok, 1972.

violent form of rule. The crisis, then, is not merely one of criminality but of sovereignty – who governs the rural periphery, and on what terms?

As this paper has shown, the banditry crisis cannot be understood in isolation from the broader processes of agrarian change that have shaped rural Nigeria over the past century. The violent contestation over land and resources is the latest chapter in a long history of shifting entitlements, where pastoralists and farmers have alternately co-operated and clashed over access to the bush. Yet, while previous conflicts were often managed through local institutions and negotiated settlements, today's crisis has taken on a different character. The scale of displacement, the militarisation of land access, and the increasing economic extraction imposed by bandit networks have pushed the region into a new era of rural insecurity.

If the 'battle for the bush' is to be resolved, it cannot be won solely through military campaigns or short-term security operations. As we detail in our mirror report, banditry has become interwoven with the social fabric of rural areas, with the weapon offering an exit to exclusion for many young men.⁸¹ The deeper agrarian contradictions that fuel this crisis must be addressed. This means confronting the long-standing marginalisation of pastoralists and ensuring that land policies recognise and accommodate the needs of mobile livestock production alongside agricultural and other uses. In a context of rapid environmental change, scientific evidence suggests that pastoralism has the capacity to conserve and improve bioproductivity in the vulnerable semi-arid ecosystems of the Sudano-Sahel, if herders can respond to resource variability by relying on mobility.⁸² Enabling this requires re-establishing credible mechanisms for resolving land disputes, rebuilding trust between farmers and herders, and restoring negotiated land access regimes to replace today's force-based systems. Above all, it means acknowledging that the bush is not an empty space to be settled, but a vital, contested landscape whose future will determine the stability of northwest Nigeria.

⁸¹ In this regard, banditry shares some similarities to what De Bois (2016) identifies as the 'inter-war'. For debates on demobilisation programmes in the northwest, see: <https://www.dw.com/en/nigeria-bets-on-deradicalization-program-in-north-west/a-71811067>

⁸² Brierley et al., 2018.

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