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Banditry and “captive population syndrome” in northern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The banditry crisis in northern Nigeria has been associated with dire implications for human population and settlement. Scholarship on the subject area has largely failed to foreground the nexus between banditry and population dynamics in the context of threat-induced migration, displacement, and bond-settlement patterns. Although there are diverse media and policy-based insights pertaining to the impact of the banditry crisis on the settled population, the conditions of persons, households and communities displaced or subjected to various forms of captivity by the crisis have been almost entirely unexplored by way of organized research. Using a combination of primary and secondary data, this paper examines the population-in-captivity dimension of the banditry crisis in northern Nigeria. It posits that the banditry crisis has, among others, created a captive population(s) who are exposed to complex, mortal existential threats, and vulnerabilities in the context of Nigeria’s burgeoning un(der)governed spaces and state fragility syndrome.

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Banditry; captive population; population displacement; state fragility; un(der)governed spaces; northern Nigeria

Introduction

Banditry is at the core of Nigeria’s present national security travails. It has become a common predictor of insecurity in many sections of the county (Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD], 2022; Egbejule, 2022). Extant research indicates that banditry has been a leading source of human fatalities and displacements, sometimes resulting in serious humanitarian crises in some parts of Nigeria (Akinetum, 2021; Armed Conflict Location and Event Project [ACLED], 2021; Okoli, 2021; Osasona, 2022).

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Project [ACLED], banditry accounted for the death of no fewer than 2, 600 civilians in 2021 alone (ACLED, 2021). This is in addition to hundreds of thousands of persons displaced by the crisis (ACAPS, 2020; Okoli, 2021).

The problematique in contemporary discourse on Nigeria’s banditry crisis is not banditry qua banditry (it is certainly not banditry per se). Rather, it is the intensification

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and consolidation of the banditry threat into a complex national security emergency, to wit:

- (i) The banditry crisis is getting rather sophisticated, complicated, and lethal (Okoli & Nwangwu, 2023).
- (ii) Bandits are becoming increasingly daring, audacious and adventurous in their operations (Ojewale et al., 2022).
- (iii) Clans of bandits wield territories (enclaves and safe havens) and enforce a quasi-territorial control in some parts of Nigeria's hinterlands (Ojo, 2020).
- (iv) Cells and factions of bandits maintain strategic and mutually instrumental relationships with jihadist elements in the North Central and North West regions of Nigeria (International Crisis Group, 2020; Okoli & Nwangwu, 2023).
- (v) Bandits get involved as mercenaries in communal conflicts in parts of North Central Nigeria (Okoli & Ukwandu, 2021).
- (vi) Bandits are working with other organized criminal or violent groups to entrench a regime of criminal franchise based on ransoming, extortion, looting, smuggling, as well as trafficking in persons, arms, and drugs (Okoli, 2019; Ogbonnaya, 2020; Rufa'i, 2021).
- (vii) Bandits have sacked scores of households and communities from their settled habitations, rendering many of them refugees or internally displaced persons [IDPs] (WANEP, 2020; ACLED, 2021).

Although scholarship on banditry in Nigeria is not entirely new (Okunola & Ikuomala, 2010; Shalangwa, 2013),¹ studies that foreground the import of banditry as a critical national security threat are nascent and emerging (cf. Ojo, 2020; Okoli & Anthony, 2019; Olaniyan, 2017; Olaniyan & Aliyu, 2016; Onwuruigbo, 2020). The prevailing scholarly thinking on the subject area has largely failed to systematically relate the nexus between banditry and population dynamics in the context of threat-induced migration, displacement, and bond-habitation. Although there are diverse media and policy-based insights pertaining to the impact of the banditry crisis on the settled population, the conditions of persons, households and communities displaced or subjected to various forms of captivity by the crisis have been almost entirely unexplored by way of organized research.

Using a combination of primary and secondary data, this paper examines the population-in-captivity dimension of the banditry crisis in northern Nigeria. It posits that the banditry crisis has, among others, created a captive population who are exposed to complex, mortal existential threats, and vulnerabilities as a result of their captive status within the territory of a sovereign state. It further argues that the captive population phenomenon is symptomatic of Nigeria's state of fragility and un(der)governed space syndrome. The paper draws insights from the occurrences in Niger, Kaduna, Katsina and Zamfara states in order to make sense of the population-in-captivity dimension of Nigeria's banditry crisis.

The remainder of the paper is broadly structured under the following themes: conceptual clarification; contextualizing Nigeria's banditry crisis; armed violence and human population vulnerability; theoretical framework: state fragility theory/ungoverned spaces' thesis; banditry and human population dynamics in Northern Nigeria; banditry and

captive population in northern Nigeria; banditry and population-in-captivity: strategic implications; conclusion.

Conceptual clarifications: banditry, captive population(s)

Two key terms constitute the conceptual pillars of discourse in this paper, namely banditry and captive population. Banditry is a violent crime involving the threat or use of arms to steal, extort, loot, or kill. Bandits are not mere criminals; they are outlaws who live by criminality. Simply put, banditry is an organized crime perpetrated by outlaws, brigands or marauders who are motivated to steal, rob, loot, extort, or pillage by threat or use of violence.

The motive of banditry varies from context to context, reflecting the dynamics of time and space. Onuoha and Joseph (2022:38) view banditry primarily as “economically motivated armed violence perpetrated by gangs driven primarily by the intention to extort, dispossess or plunder their targets – individuals, groups or communities”. Although bandits generally steal, rob, loot, kill, pillage, and extort in pursuit of economic gains, there are exceptional instances where they may engage in acts geared towards extracting other strategic gains (Okoli, 2021). In effect, there are cases where economic gains may not be the prime driver of banditry. In such situations, socio-idiosyncratic or political reasons may be the underlying factors. This is the case with the phenomenon of social banditry. Social banditry combines elements of criminality and resistance. Thus, in addition to being lawbreakers, social bandits may double as freedom fighters, revolutionaries, or populist reformers.

Banditry has manifested in various forms and patterns across the world. The contextual dynamics of banditry is such that it tends to take on its essence based on the peculiarities of its setting. In the context of Nigeria, it has manifested in diverse forms in different domains. For instance, cattle rustling is common in rural agrarian communities (Okoli, 2019). Also, piracy is peculiar to maritime domains and adjoining territorial waters (Onuoha, 2013). The tribes of brigands operating in southeastern Nigeria, popularly known as the “unknown gunmen” (Nwangwu, 2022). This also count among the contemporary genres of banditry in Nigeria. Beyond its obvious criminal import, acts of banditry have also been resorted to by organized non-state violent groups as a means of funding and sustaining their operations. Scholarship on banditry owes a lot to the pioneering works of Eric Hobsbawm (1959, 1981). Hobsbawm is associated with the idea of social banditry by which he presupposes a socially “conscious” and “responsible” brigandage (Harian, 1996). In his seminal work titled “Primitive Rebels” (1959), Hobsbawm models an archetypical pattern of banditry – social banditry, where he depicts a bandit “who took from the rich to give to the poor and never killed but in self-defence or just revenge” (p.13).

The emphasis in social banditry is not on its criminal essence and import but on its social significance and appeal (Perry, 1983). Hence, although a social bandit is outlawed by the state, he, nonetheless, enjoys the social protection, admiration, patronage, and solidarity of his people (Perry, 1983). In effect, he is even idealized, idolized, and immortalized by them (Harian, 1996). To say the least, therefore, a social bandit engages in populist criminality, and is endeared to his people through practical deeds of “criminal societization” (Okoli & Mamuda, 2021).

The crux of social banditry thinking is that a bandit is not necessarily and essentially “evil”. Although he indulges in some irregular activities defined by the state as unlawful, he is, nevertheless, seen and acclaimed as a hero or a champion by social convention (Perry, 1983). In fact, he is engaged in a sort of “criminal activism” whose goal is adjudged to be both reformatory and emancipatory for society; hence, the end of such act legitimizes, and, invariably, justifies the means (Antony, 1998).

Social banditry has been variously recognized in the literature as a primitive form of organized protest (Hobsbawm, 1959, 1981), an expression of collective self-defence or resistance (Harian, 1996), a system of traditional feuding (Mburu, 1999), and an anti-peasant revolt (Perry, 1983). In a sense, it is a class-oriented phenomenon, with the socio-economic agenda of freeing the lower classes from the entrenched grips of the exploitative and oppressive ruling hierarchies (Harian, 1996).

The bulk of the mainstream literature on social banditry has derived from historical and anthropological studies, of which the ground-breaking contributions of Eric Hobsbawm trump. In that epistemic tradition, banditry has been romanticized as a heroic act (Antony, 1998). Even though such a conception has been criticized as being more fictional than historical (Antony, 1998), it is significant to the extent that it has set a general conceptual premise for scholarship on banditry. However, it may not be adequate to guide the understanding of the contemporary dynamics of the banditry phenomenon, especially in Africa.

The changing nature of banditry and its social dialectics warrant a paradigmatic rethink of the phenomenon. Such an endeavour needs to reflect the fast-transforming motives, methods and contexts that define banditry in its evolutionary expressions from traditional to modern patterns. For instance, the transformation of banditry into modalities of organized crime and non-state violence in various circumstantial conjunctures in Africa and beyond (Gaye, 2018; Mburu, 1999; Okoli & Anthony, 2019) needs to be foregrounded in the emerging studies on crimes and security studies.

Suffice it to note that the manifestation of banditry in Nigeria has shown manifest patterns that are atypical of the depictions in the mainstream literature. To be sure, bandits in Nigeria lack the class orientation, cult discipline, and social appeal that define the Robin Hood model of banditry. The Nigerian bandits are driven essentially by criminal opportunism. They indulge in indiscriminate brigandage, often against the poor in the hinterlands, and with reckless cruelty. Also underlying their operations is an opportunistic gang culture that enable them to switch between organized criminality and rebellion (Okoli & Nwangwu, 2022).

Although there have been isolated instances in Nigeria where established bandits indulged in acts of social philanthropy and community self-help (Okoli & Mamuda, 2021), Nigerian bandits are largely motivated by the drive for criminal profiteering and terrorizing. Among the Nigerian bandits are tribes and clans of brigands who engage in sundry crimes, including piracy, smuggling, cattle rustling, kidnapping, mercenary militancy, arms trafficking, and terrorism-facilitating.

As with the term banditry, the concept of a captive population could mean different things in diverse contexts. Simply put, a captive population refers to an animal or person being kept imprisoned or enclosed. The concept of captive population derives originally from the practice of captive breeding or propagation whereby a species of plant or animal

is kept in controlled confinement, mainly for the purposes of conservation. In this sense, the essence of captivity is primarily informed by an attempt at conservation or preservation of the creature.

The concept, however, has been applied in the present discourse to denote the idea of holding a human population captive in a territory partly occupied or controlled by an armed non-state opposition group in advancement of its socio-economic, political, or ideological motive. Here, the instrumentalization of violence is central to moulding captivity; primarily informed by an attempt at extortion and exploitation of the creature. Captive populations in this context encapsulate human entities, dwellings or communities that inhabit territories that are fully or partly occupied or controlled by bandits. It includes persons who are held bondage in bandits' camps and others that live in varying degrees of captivity in territories or communities occupied by these criminal actors.

In such territories, they live as bond-dwellers, lacking in both state protection and communitarian self-defence. Among them are those who have been coerced into accepting the "authority" of the bandits as well as those who might have acquiesced to their dictates for want of remedy. They are captive to the extent that they have, for the reason of their captivity, lost their rights to free, safe, and secure habitation in that context.

In effect, they live in situational bondage, having their lives and livelihoods, ipso facto, controlled by the bandits. As will be demonstrated later, the extraction of fees, levies or taxes is used by the criminals to sustain both the architecture of violence and captivity. It is pertinent to note that captive populations are not the same as displaced persons. Displaced persons are dislodged from their places of settled habitation while captive populations are held hostage, instead, in that context.

Contextualizing the banditry crisis in northern Nigeria

Nigeria's banditry crisis has followed some evolutionary patterns over the years. Within the remit of northern Nigeria, the foremost group of bandits that emerged was the herder militants of Zamfara. This refers to a tribe of mercenary militants commissioned by the herding communities to fight in their defence in the context of the farmland/rangeland conflicts between the herders and settled crop farmers in the early 2010s (International Crisis Group, 2020; Rufa'i, 2021). Subsequently, some of these herder militants were involved in occasional marauding of goldmines in the state, where they stole gold and cash in night raids (Egbejule, 2022; Maurice, 2020). In the mid-2010s, some of these militants were recruited to fight for different herding communities in parts of Central Nigeria (Bagu & Katie, 2017; Okoli & Cornelius, 2018; Okoli & Francis, 2014). Some of the militants also got involved in cattle rustling and sundry rural brigandage in many parts of northern Nigeria in the late 2010s (Okoli & Lenshie, 2018).

By 2019, the banditry crisis in northern Nigeria had become rather sophisticated and intricate, with the emergence and spread of bandit syndicates who engage in arms trafficking, illicit mining, and kidnapping for ransom in many parts of the region. There was also the rise of "crimelords" who wielded territories in Nigeria's North Central and North-western regions (Maurice, 2020; Okoli & Mamuda, 2021). This period witnessed the metamorphosis of banditry from a predominantly rural occurrence to the one that was also pervasive in the semi-urban settlements. One remarkable trait of the banditry crisis in

this era was its transformation into a sort of sedentary practice (Okoli & Anthony, 2019). This was evidenced by the rise of clans of bandits who lived among settled communities where they maintained wide-ranging communitized relations with the civil populace. Some of the bandits established criminal fiefdoms within which they exercised quasi-territorial control over the settled population. Remarkably, banditry in this era became manifestly lethal, both in terms of arms bearing and fatal consequences (Okoli, 2021).

By 2021, the banditry crisis had metamorphosed into a dire national emergency. Subsequently, bandits have become rather audacious, tending towards a sort of insurgency. They have carried out daring attacks on some of Nigeria's national security hard targets, including the Defence Academy in Kaduna (Okoli & Damian, 2021). This is in addition to a series of mass abductions of women, girls and school children geared towards extracting ransom and other strategic gains (Okoli, 2021). Some gangs of bandits operating in north-western and north-central Nigeria have cultivated some levels of functional synergy with jihadist groups in the region (Okoli & Nwangwu, 2022). This trend has complicated the dire security situation in north-western Nigeria which has been the critical hotbed of the banditry crisis. In this region, banditry has evolved from localized episodic occurrences to a more generalized and routine insecurity, with dire humanitarian outcomes (Okoli, 2021).

Armed conflict and human population vulnerability: a literature review

The Use of Force Committee in its Initial Report on "The Meaning of Armed Conflict in International Law" notes that there are two primary criteria for the existence of an armed conflict for general purposes in international law. These include organized groups and their engagement in intense fighting (O'Connell, 2009). There are essentially two forms of armed conflicts which include international and non-international armed conflict. While the former reflects armed conflict between opposing parties, such as within the framework of interstate fighting, the latter, on the other hand, is mostly confined to intra-state fighting against opposing parties. The vulnerability of human populations during armed conflicts comes to the fore in several ways. The result of armed conflict is often the manifestation of several factors broadly categorized as socio-economic, political, ethno-religious, and environmental. Armed conflict not only poses a direct threat to the safety of human populations, but it also affects them in ways that create exclusion and deprivation, thereby denying them access to human security and human development.

This understanding has informed the wider discourse in the literature about the deprivation vulnerability approach to human security (Busumtwi-Sam, 2008). Human security of populations dates to the eighteenth century and was mostly anchored on pluralist beliefs at the time (Taylor, 2004). Understanding the vulnerability of human populations within armed conflict contexts presupposes a departure from traditional state-centric security which emphasizes state survival in a post-Cold War discourse that accords attention towards individual human security (Acharya, 2001; Newman, 2010; Taylor, 2004). The utility of human security which aptly captures concerns over the vulnerability of human populations, has been fraught with vagueness. Despite this, however, Paris (2001) rightly contends that its relevance is not lost in security studies

related to research which draws attention to conditions affecting the survival of individuals, groups, and societies.

Human security of human populations therefore highlights the well-being of individuals, who are often affected during armed conflict. Some of these include freedom from fear and freedom from want, encapsulated in livelihood security, environmental security, health security, and energy security amongst others (O'Brien & Robin, 2008). Human security therefore reflects an infusion of development and security in ways that are interconnected, questioned, and complemented (Duffield, 2006). Vulnerabilities of human populations owing to deprivations from socio-economic factors such as poverty and inequality are reinforced and exacerbated within armed conflict settings such as from terrorism, resulting in the subsistence rights, civil and political rights of such populations being denied (Callaway & Julie, 2006).

Amongst the most pronounced forms of vulnerability inflicted on human populations during instances of armed conflict include forced migration and the internal displacement of people. During such times, these human populations become victims of exploitation and other forms of violence, some of which include gender-based sexual violence perpetuated against them (Dara & Ragnhild, 2009). Such as the case with women and children within such complex environments characterized by armed conflict. It is also pertinent to note that men are also often victims of sexual violence during armed conflicts (Sandesh, 2007). In addition to these, other less obvious emotional vulnerabilities that human populations are exposed to during armed conflicts include psycho-social trauma (Susan, 1998).

Left unattended to, this has a devastating effect on their mental wellbeing as well. Other forms of vulnerability that human populations remain subjected to during armed conflict is in their use as human shields, particularly by non-state armed groups, which are further complicated by the destruction of property. Stewart (2004), therefore, argues that the effect of armed conflict on human well-being is therefore reflected in entitlement failures, such that individuals' entitlements through their command of resources fall below their requirements owing to armed conflict or war.

Theoretical framework: state fragility theory/ungoverned spaces hypothesis

One of the fundamental responsibilities of the state is to ensure the protection of the lives and property of its inhabitants. Being able to provide security across its territory is central to ensuring this function, given that the inherent idea behind a nation-state constitutes a clearly defined geographical entity. State capacity in this regard, therefore, remains a core requirement (Grimm et al., 2014). Several terminologies have been used to explain the absence of this function. Some of these have been used interchangeably such as "state fragility", "state failure", "failed state", "failing state", "weak state" and "collapsed state". Zartman (1995) defines state failure as a situation whereby the state can no longer perform its essential functions. It would then be assumed that a non-functional state ceases to exist, depicting a condition of outright collapse, which Rotberg (2002) describes as being an extreme version of a failed state. Some others subscribe to a less radical interpretation of what constitutes a collapsed state, arguing a collapsed state might still maintain a few or more functioning institutions (Hannan & Hany, 2007). Some examples of

failed states, at one point in time or the other, have included Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Rwanda, and Bosnia (Gros, 1996). In addition to lacking legitimacy, failed states are primarily states that cannot ensure the protection of the lives of their own citizens (Saha & Siddharth, 2006:4258).

Some common attributes of states that fit this description across the world include high poverty levels, protracted armed conflicts, and enduring humanitarian crises, earning them the name of “fragile states” (Hannan & Hany, 2007:5). A common attribute of these states is also that the limited presence of government in vast areas mainly rural communities. The absence of government presence in such areas has been described as “ungoverned spaces” (Ojo, 2020). As Adedeji (2021) rightly notes, this problem is further complicated by the existence of porous borders, with little or no security thereby, making easy for the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). In addition to this, there is also the attendant problem of allegations of corruption and complicity amongst border officials, which plays a vital role in the criminalization of borders (Benjaminson et al, 2012). Bandits are mostly known to take advantage of these “policing gaps” in carrying out their nefarious activities in local communities. Similarly, Rem (2008) argues that this creates “black holes” which are areas of appeal to terrorist groups, such as bandits, owing to seven elements, which are identified as the lack of government control, ethnic-religious communities/population, legacy from prior conflicts, geographical characteristics, economic opportunities, economic underdevelopment, and external influence.

This paper, therefore, adopts the state fragility theory/ungoverned spaces hypothesis in explaining the phenomenon of banditry and the captive population in Northern Nigeria. The state fragility theory is particularly suited here as it underscores how the phenomenon of captive populations symptomizes state fragility/ungoverned spaces syndrome. This interconnectedness is manifested through the protracted acts of armed conflict caused by banditry and its devastating effects on vulnerable populations such that they are perpetually in a state of captivity towards bandits. The connection between state fragility and armed conflict exists such that owing to fragile states’ incapacity to protect their vulnerable society, prospects of guaranteeing peace and security is significantly reduced.

Banditry and human population vulnerability in northern Nigeria

The scourge of banditry has had a devastating effect on vulnerable populations, thereby affecting lives and livelihoods across Northern Nigeria. Numbering over 30,000 across the region (Yaba, 2021), the activities of bandits who have been recently designated as terrorist groups by the Nigerian state (Ameh, 2022) have resulted in the deaths of over 2,600 people in 2021 alone (Ayandele and Goos, 2021) and the forceful internal displacement of an estimated 1 million people (Hassan and Barnett, 2022) and over 11,500 people into neighbouring Niger republic (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021). This has also resulted in a looming humanitarian situation across Northern Nigeria, including in the Northwest region, which is most affected by banditry (France24, 2021).

Understanding the effects of banditry on vulnerable human populations in Northern Nigeria requires a prior understanding of some of the factors that have left the human populations in the region vulnerable to the activities of bandits. These are mostly

characterized by socio-economic factors which reinforce the vulnerability of human populations across the region. Some of these include high poverty and unemployment rates. Data on the Living Standards from Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (2020) reveals that poverty rates across the country are more prevalent in the North. These conditions, therefore, create an enabling environment which bandits take advantage of in perpetuating their nefarious activities of thefts, pillage, extortions, and kidnappings for ransom, in addition to recruiting youth.

This has been a common trend amongst not just bandits, but other terrorist groups across Northern Nigeria (Adelaja et al., 2018; Wayas et al., 2019). The continued vicious circle of poverty and unemployment that exists across the region, therefore, increases the likelihood of vulnerable human populations in the hands of bandits. The poverty rate in the Northern region, particularly in the Northwest remains the highest across Nigeria, such that each of the seven states in the region has poverty rates which are above the national average (NBS, 2020). This is further worsened by the high level of illiteracy across the North, particularly in the Northwest region, which stands at 29.7% (NBS, 2020). This has resulted in the North having the highest number of out-of-school children across Nigeria, according to the United Nations Children Education Fund (Mohammed, 2018). For instance, Katsina state, which is one of the most affected states by banditry in Northern Nigeria, has over 781,500 out-of-school children, which makes it the second highest in Nigeria (Mohammed, 2018).

According to the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organization (Food and Agricultural Organisation [FAO], 2021), as of November 2021, out of the 12 million people in Nigeria who were in danger of food insecurity, those in Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara were among the most vulnerable given that they are in some of the states most affected by banditry.

It is therefore, pertinent, to note that combined, these vices contribute towards the increased vulnerability of human populations to banditry. Aware of this, bandits have taken advantage of these, which have been manifested through increased acts of sexual violence in the form of rape (Daily Trust, 2021) and the continued extortion and exploitation of local farmers by bandits (Niyi et al., 2019). These are in addition to the collection of multiple levies by bandits across vulnerable human populations and communities (Okere, 2021).

Captive population in the context of the banditry crisis in northern Nigeria

Bandits' captive population can be in camp or off camp. In-camp captives are those held in bondage in various camps (enclaves, safe havens, or sanctuaries) operated by clans of bandits, especially in the vast and scarcely guarded forested and rural landscapes of northern Nigeria. Some camps are not merely stationary hideouts; they are settled communes with sedentarized and communitized culture (Okoli & Mamuda, 2021).

Each camp is superintended by a bandit-lord at whose behest the camp exists. In some camps, life seems usual and routine: resident bandits work, rest, pray, recreate, produce, and reproduce. They even practice subsistence and semi-commercial crop and livestock farming (Barnet, 2021). They also maintain wide-ranging community ties that enable them to engage in shared social and economic activities (marriages, funerals, etc.).

The camps are operational sites where bandits plan their attacks, coordinate logistics and intelligence, harness, and train recruits, as well as stock arms and other essential supplies (Rufa'i, 2021). The camps also host the captives or abductees of the bandits, in addition to some of their family members (Barnet, 2021). Also located in the bandit camps are detention cells, armouries and food and drugs stores (Rufa'i, 2021).

The captive persons in the camps are not simply restricted; they are, stripped of habitational autonomy in that context. Essentially, they are variously objectified into sex slavery, forced marriage, and bond servitude. This is in addition to being tactically used as human shields on the occasions of military raids and bombardments on the camps (Barnet et al., 2022).

In large bandit camps in Zamfara, Kaduna and Niger states, captives are sexually abused and dehumanized (Field Study, 2022). Some are made to work in their captors' farms or undertake allied chores if their captivity lasts (Field Study, 2022). Women and girls among them stand the risk of being forcefully betrothed. A case in point is some of the abducted pupils from the Federal Government College Birinin Yauri in Kebbi State who have been married off by bandits (Iheanacho, 2022).

In addition to in-camp captives, others live under varying levels of situational bondage in areas where bandits are in firm control (see Table 1). This category of captives is found in communities occupied or controlled by bandits. They live under a parallel government superintended by the bandits (Okoli & Mamuda, 2021).

In some parts of Katsina, Kebbi, Kaduna and Zamfara states, bandits commandeer locals to pay some amount of money (or its material equivalent in produce or other items) to be allowed to access and make use of their farmlands (Field Study, Katsina, 2022). In some instances, locals are made to pay some sums of money as protection fees to guarantee their safe and "protected" dwelling in their communities. Persons who cannot afford the payments are compelled to work in the bandits' farms for time commensurate to the fees (Field Study, Katsina, 2022).

Monies generated from the imposition of fees, levies and taxes sustain the operation of the bandits, especially in terms of procuring food, medicine, hard drugs, ammunition, arms, and other logistics critical to not only their survival but also their capacity and resilience in challenging the Nigerian state and its security forces.

Beyond the extortive practices and relations highlighted above, bandits also play some roles in community governance. Paradoxically, they are involved in conflict resolution, crime control, and dispensation of justice. In Birnin Gwari area of Kaduna State, a resident was fined the sum of one million naira (approx. \$2,250) by the bandits for selling a piece of land without the consent of the custodians (Akhaine, 2022).

Captive communities provide bandits with an avenue for communitarian legitimation. Some bandits engage in social philanthropy and invest proceeds of their criminal enterprises in socially beneficial ventures (Okoli & Mamuda, 2021). By so doing, they can curry the goodwill and mechanical solidarity of segments of the populace. In such a context, banditry gets both "societized" and "communitized" (Okoli & Mamuda, 2021) in a manner that confounds its essence.

Table 2 is not exhaustive but merely illustrative of the scale of bandits' territorial advances and incursions into the settled society in different parts of northern Nigeria. It is to be noted that not all the bandit-occupied/controlled areas are typically captive. Some

Table 1. Select cases where bandits have imposed tax on communities (2021–2023).

Community	Amount Imposed	Bandit Leader/Gang Responsible	Community Response	Remarks
Forty villages in Sabon Birinin, Local Government, Sokoto State	Between 1 and 2 million naira was imposed on each of the villages for access their farmlands for harvest	Bello Turji	The complied without resistance	Each household in the affected villages was levied N5, 000
Four communities in Birnin Gwari Emirate, Kaduna	12 million naira for protection	Unspecified	They complied without resistance	Bandits threatened to raid the villages if they fail to comply
Nine communities in Bakkuyum Local Government Area of Katsina State	24 million naira for protection	Unspecified	They complied without resistance	These villages had suffered series of attacks hitherto
Gurmana, Manta, Bassa/ Kukoki communities in Shiroro Local Governments	As much as 2 million naira for protection	Unspecified	They complied without resistance	Other items, including motorcycles were also demanded by the bandits
Tashar Biri village in Yatumaki community in Dan Musa Local Government Area of Katsina State	30 million naira as a compensation for the death of Dankarami	Bandits allied to Dankarami	Most of the residents deserted their village for fear of being attacked	Dankarami was killed by military air strike in Tashar Biri

Source: Authors' compilation (Desk study, 2023).

of them are deserted areas inhabited by roving bandits alone for camping of criminal franchising.

It is important to note as well that some captive communities highlighted in [Table 2](#) were occupied at different times, in the same manner, and for the same period. In effect, bandits' occupation and captivity tend to have been more protracted and entrenched in some areas than others. A relevant example is the Birnin Gwari area in Kaduna State, where bandits have foisted an enduring and resilient regime of brigandage on the settled populace (Akhaine, 2022).

The insights shared in the foregoing discourse are time-and-space specific information reflecting the status of the focal communities as of the time of the research (mid 2022). It is only apparent that a few things might have changed regarding the state of banditry but also bandits' territorial annexation in that context.

Banditry and population-in-captivity: strategic implications

Populations living in captivity in the context of banditry in Nigeria are exposed to multiple vulnerable conditions. First, they have lost their right to free, safe, and secure habitation. They live under the whims and caprices of the bandits, who are inclined to treat them as "bond-dwellers in a captured commune" (Key informant, 2022). As long as their armed bondage lasts, communities under bandits' captivity do not enjoy proper citizenship. In effect, they are situationally "stateless" as far as living under the authority and protection of the state is concerned. Out of fear or frustration, they may be disposed to switch allegiance to the bandits in a desperate bid to survive.

Table 2. Select captive communities in northern Nigeria (by mid-2022).

State	Locality
Kaduna	Madobiya in Birinin Gwari Local Government Area (LGA)
	Kazage in Birinin Gwari LGA
	Kujello in Birinin Gwari LGA
	Parts of Kudun forestlands
Katsina	Parts of Chikun and Kajuru LGAs
	Inu in Batsari LGA
	Shalewa in Batsari LGA
	Tsambe in Jibia LGA
	Mallamawa in Jibia LGA
	Ummadam in Batsari LGA
Niger	Settlements around Ruma in Batsari LGA
	Galadima-Kogo in Shiroro LGA
	Kuchi in Munya LGA
	Fuka in Munya LGA
	Bangi in Mariga LGA
	Kupa in Lavun LGA
	Ubegi in Mashegu LGA
Zamfara	Mayasa in Zurmi LGA
	Kware in Shinkafi LGA
	Dan Gulbi in Maru LGA
	Gama Gira in Anka LGA
	Yankuzo in Tsafe LGA
	Yan Kaba in Kaura Namoda LGA
Kaya in Maradun LGA	

Source: Compiled by Authors (Field Study, 2022).

In their dire and vulnerable existential conditions, the captive populations are at the risk of getting coerced or coopted into banditry. By enlisting members of their occupied/controlled communities into various roles in the banditry enterprise, bandits create and sustain a vicious chain of community participation in criminality (cf. Okoli & Mamuda, 2021). Such an outcome is a recipe for criminal cum terrorist recruiting and reproduction.

Communities occupied by bandits provide a haven for the bandits' diverse strategic operations: camping, coordination, training, et cetera. The captive population in the bandits' camps serve as human shields for the bandits during counter-banditry raids and bombardments by the military. By infiltrating a community and mingling with its population, bandits can deter the offensive of the government troops over concerns about civilian casualties. Bandits capitalize on such tactical dilemma to exploit the government's counter-banditry resolve.

The occupation of communities by bandits in Nigeria signals the erosion of territoriality. The annexation of aspects of Nigeria's territory by violent non-state actors, among others things, means that the state in that context is either receding or failing in terms of its coercive competencies. This implies that Nigeria's sovereign and territorial integrity is diminishing or eroding amid the rising threat by subversive anti-state elements (Onuoha, 2021). Only an urgent and jealous resolve at reclaiming and policing Nigeria's vast un(der)governed territorial spheres will save the country from an impending collapse.

Conclusion

Nigeria's banditry crisis has evolved remarkably over the years. It has transformed from a localized threat in the country's Northwest region to a complex and pervasive threat in

northern Nigeria and beyond. In its apparent deteriorating trajectory, the crisis has transitioned into a national security emergency with dire complications and consequences. This paper examines the phenomenon of “captive population” as it relates to banditry’s impact on settled populations in some parts of northern Nigeria. It is established in the paper that, in addition to displacing people, banditry has plunged some communities and individuals into captivity by limiting (if not obliterating) their rights to safe, accessible, and secure habitation. Communities and persons dwelling in the territories occupied or controlled by bandits live virtually as captive entities. They are subjected to varying degrees and dimensions of situational bondage. In such a circumstance, they were exposed to multiple vulnerabilities, including the risk of being coopted or coerced into the banditry enterprise.

Captive populations are highly vulnerable. Protecting communities from such an extreme vulnerability would entail stopping them from being annexed in the first place by the marauding violent non-state actors, be they militants, terrorists, or bandits. To this end, it is incumbent on the government in Nigeria to accord territorial protection and reclamation, a strategic priority in its national security policies and actions. Extant counterterrorism/counter-banditry protocol and instruments must be retooled to accommodate and prioritize the exigencies of territorial security. No segment of the country, no matter how remote or distant, should be left to its own fate amid the spiraling forces of terror in the country. Degrading the capabilities of the bandits to wield territory and protecting the vulnerable hinterland communities from criminal occupation must constitute a prime concern in Nigeria’s counter-terrorism drive.

Note

1. These works refer to a clan of transnational brigands called *Kwanta-kwanta* in Hausa, which used to be active in the frontier states of the northeast Nigeria.

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