The Mobility of Terror
Motorcycle Bandits, Violence and Anarchy in Nigeria

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The Nigerian state has witnessed an upsurge in violent crime – such as kidnapping, looting and cattle rustling – especially in its northwest geopolitical zone. Referred to as ‘armed bandits’ in local parlance, loosely organised criminal gangs with strong links to Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province have compounded the war on terror in the Sahel. In this article, Promise Frank Ejiofor draws on the New Mobilities Paradigm to contend that mobility is central to comprehending the persistence of armed banditry. By understanding the problem in this way, anti-terror legislation could then aim at effectively governing not just territorial spaces but also mobilities.

Despite being nicknamed the ‘Giant of Africa’ by journalists and pundits, Nigeria is bedevilled by myriad security conundrums perpetrated by non-state armed groups (NSAGs). In the northeast geopolitical zone, such groups include Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). In the northwest and north-central geopolitical zones, NSAGs called ‘armed bandits’ wreak havoc on local communities. Between 2011 and 2019, more than 8,000 people have been killed – mainly in Zamfara state – with over 200,000 internally displaced and about 60,000 fleeing into Niger Republic as a consequence of the activities of armed bandits in the northwest region. The armed bandits have also killed more Nigerians than Boko Haram, robbers, kidnappers and cultists combined, and were responsible for 47.5% of killings in 2019. Historians, political scientists and anthropologists have shown that armed banditry has existed in the northern region of Nigeria as well as the Lake Chad Basin since the pre-colonial and colonial eras, meaning this is not a novel phenomenon in Nigeria. However, with the advent of new resources such as mobile

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1. This article uses the term ‘armed bandit’ rather than ‘terrorist’ not only because this is how they are referred to in local parlance, but also because there is no clear political goal associated with the criminal gangs. However, the Nigerian government has labelled banditry as terrorism. In a relatively recent proscription order, the Nigerian government made the following pronouncement on the armed bandits: ‘The activities of Yan Bindiga Group, Yan Ta’adda Group and other similar groups in Nigeria are declared to be terrorism and illegal in any part of Nigeria, especially in the North-West and North-Central Regions of Nigeria and are proscribed pursuant to sections 1 and 2 of the Terrorism (Prevention) Act, 2011. ... The activities of Yan Bindiga and Yan Ta’adda groups and other similar groups constitute acts of terrorism that can lead to a breakdown of public order and safety and is [sic.] a threat to national security and the corporate existence of Nigeria’. See Ameh Ejekwonyilo, ‘UPDATED: Nigerian Govt Gazettes Declaration of Bandit Groups as Terrorists’, Premium Times, 5 January 2022, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/504177-just-in-nigerian-govt-gazettes-declaration-of-bandit-groups-as-terrorists.html>, accessed 20 February 2022.

2. International Crisis Group, ‘Violence in Nigeria’s North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem’, Africa Report No. 288, 18 May 2020.

3. Daily Trust, ‘Bandits Kill More Nigerians Than Boko Haram, Robbers, Kidnappers, Cultists, Others’, 22 September 2019, <https://dailytrust.com/bandits-kill-more-nigerians-than-boko-haram-robbers-kidnappers-cultists-others>, accessed 25 July 2021.

4. See Janet Roitman, ‘The Ethics of Illegality in the Chad Basin’, in Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (eds), Law and Disorder in the Postcolony (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 247–72; Scott MacEachern, Searching
phones, Kalashnikovs and motorcycles, the vicious activities of armed bandits – the *coupeurs de route* – have intensified in the northern region of Nigeria where there are scarce opportunities for economic emancipation.5

Because these loosely organised criminal gangs exploit vast forests stretching from northern Nigeria to Niger and connecting to Cameroon, Chad, the Central African Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso and Senegal,6 armed banditry has been largely explained through the ‘ungoverned spaces’ theoretical framework. Ungoverned spaces are understood to mean areas or places where ‘territorial state control has been voluntarily or involuntarily ceded in whole or part to actors other than the relevant legally recognised sovereign authorities’.7 The scholarly contention is that the rise and persistence of the criminal gangs is due to the inability of the state to govern its forests and monopolise violence on its territory, leaving armed bandits to terrorise residents and road users in local communities in the northwest region.8 It is thus no coincidence that Nigeria has been called a ‘failed state’, as it is ostensibly unable to keep its

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5. MacEachern, *Searching for Boko Haram*, pp. 117–52.
6. At least nine forests have been identified across northern Nigeria that serve as havens for armed bandits in the northwest and north-central geopolitical zones. These include Sambisa, Alagarno, Kamuku, Kuduru, Kuyambana, Burwaye, Ajja, Dajin Rugu and Sububu. See Daily Trust, “Things You Need to Know About Forests ‘Governed’ By Bandits, Boko Haram’, 27 February 2021, <https://dailytrust.com/9-forests-governed-by-bandits-b-haram>, accessed 26 July 2021.
7. Anne L Clunan and Harold A Trinkunas, *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 17.
8. See John Sunday Ojo, ‘Governing “Ungoverned Spaces” in the Foliage of Conspiracy: Toward (Re)ordering Terrorism, from Boko Haram Insurgency, Fulani Militancy to Banditry in Northern Nigeria’, *African Security* (Vol. 13, No. 1, February 2020), pp. 77–110; Al Chukwuma Okoli and Mamuda Abubakar, “‘Crimelordism’: Understanding a New Phenomenon in Armed Banditry in Nigeria’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (Vol. 56, No. 7, November 2021), pp. 1724–37; Iheanyi Onuwuzuruiogbo, ‘Enclaves of Banditry: Ungoverned Forest Spaces and Cattle Rustling in Northern Nigeria’, *African Studies Review* (Vol. 64, No. 1, March 2021), pp. 168–91.
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According to the cultural geographer Peter Adey, ‘mobility is movement imbued with meaning’.10 This means, according to Adey, that mobility without meaning is nothing more than movement. However, this is not to suggest that mobility has a pre-existent meaning or significance. As Adey clarifies: ‘Mobility does not implicitly mean one thing or another. Mobility is not essentially good or bad. Rather mobility is given or inscribed with meaning and the way it is given meaning is dependent upon the context in which it occurs and who decides upon the significance it is given’.11 Tim Cresswell contends that ‘[t]he movements of people (and things) all over the world and at all scales are, after all, full of meaning. They are also products and producers of power’.12 Mobilities can take several interdependent forms.13 For this article, however, a distinction is drawn between social mobility (the change in one’s social status) and physical movement (the movement of people and objects from one location to another for varied purposes). These two forms of mobility are critical to understanding armed banditry in northern Nigeria, for the phenomenon stems from a lack of opportunities to address social immobility for an occupational group. It depends on a population that is stuck, yet constantly on the move to carve out opportunities for survival. As the next section highlights, a disproportionate number of the armed bandits are former nomads inhabiting a region with little or no economic opportunities, who employ motorcycles to torment local communities in their quest for socioeconomic emancipation.

The NMP was first advanced by Mimi Sheller and John Urry to counter the bias towards the sedentarism implicitly embedded in the social sciences. The social sciences, in their view, had been ‘static’ in that they had ‘largely ignored or trivialised the importance of the systematic movements of people for work and family life, for leisure and pleasure, and for politics and protest’.14 The NMP foregrounds transportation and mobilities in the study of social and political life by positing that the movements of people and things almost invariably

Methodology

Due to the security challenges in the northern region, coupled with the restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic, it was impossible for the author to conduct ethnographic fieldwork for this research article. For this reason, research relied on secondary sources such as newspapers, television interviews, radio broadcasts, political commentaries and academic literature that analyse armed banditry and varied forms of armed conflict in Nigeria. The information presented here was analysed in the context of the theoretical work and extant knowledge on armed conflict in northern Nigeria.

9. Robert I Rothberg and John Campbell, ‘Nigeria Is a Failed State’, Foreign Policy, 27 May 2021.
10. Peter Adey, Mobility, 2nd edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 63.
11. Ibid., p. 66.
12. Tim Cresswell, On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.
13. John Urry highlights five interdependent forms of mobility: corporeal; physical; imaginative; virtual; and communicative travels. See John Urry, ‘Does Mobility Have a Future?’, in Margaret Grieco and John Urry (eds), Mobilities: New Perspectives on Transport and Society (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 4–19.
14. Mimi Sheller and John Urry, ‘The New Mobilities Paradigm’, Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space (Vol. 38, No. 2, February 2006), p. 208.
have meanings and implications. In particular, they argue that automobility ‘impacts not only on local public spaces and opportunities for coming together, but also on the formation of gendered subjectivities, familial and social networks, spatially segregated urban neighbourhoods, national images and aspirations to modernity, and global relations ranging from transnational migration to terrorism and oil wars’. 17 The NMP accentuates the idea that no place or space is an island; rather, all places, spaces and social relationships are embedded in networks of interconnectivity. Hence, the main point of the NMP is that mobility is central to human survival not least because movements provide individuals and groups with symbolic power to navigate all aspects of everyday life.

Since the advance of the NMP, it has contributed to numerous debates in varied disciplinary fields, including social anthropology, migration studies, urban studies, science and technology studies, cultural studies, tourism and transportation studies, to mention just a few.16 However, despite the theoretical importance of the NMP, the paradigm has been largely overlooked in the study of terrorism, theoretical importance of the NMP, the paradigm has been largely overlooked in the study of terrorism, and oil wars’. 15 The NMP accentuates the idea that no place or space is an island; rather, all places, spaces and social relationships are embedded in networks of interconnectivity. Hence, the main point of the NMP is that mobility is central to human survival not least because movements provide individuals and groups with symbolic power to navigate all aspects of everyday life.

As this article will show, one of the major reasons armed banditry has persisted, despite the state’s high-handed militarised approach, is that the state has failed miserably to effectively govern the mobilities of these criminal gangs, notwithstanding its laws banning the sale and use of motorcycles for commercial purposes in the northwest and north-central geopolitical zones. This article argues that not only are constraints on social mobility at the root of the armed banditry but also that physical mobility fuels the criminal activities of the NSAGs. Curbing the armed bandits’ weaponisation of mobilities and addressing grievances emanating from constraints on pastoralists’ social mobility is thus critical to the termination of armed banditry.

From Nomadic Pastoralism to Criminality

Depending on how one looks at it, armed banditry is the consequence of constraints on social mobility from nomadic pastoralism. Although not all nomads are armed bandits, '[m]ost of the actors are Fulani, the ethnic group that spreads across West Africa and is known for being nomadic pastoralists, while the communities being attacked are mostly Hausa farming communities’.18 In Nigeria, as well as in West Africa, the lifestyles of nomadic pastoralists are increasingly under threat due to a conjunction of factors such as environmental scarcity, political ecology, population pressures, urbanisation, political corruption and resource conflicts with farmers that have rendered pastoralists poor.19 Indeed, while

15. Ibid., p. 209.
16. For a comprehensive overview of studies that have mobilised the New Mobilities Paradigm (NMP), see Mimi Sheller and John Urry, 'Mobilizing the New Mobilities Paradigm', Applied Mobilities (Vol. 1, No. 1, March 2016), pp. 10–25.
17. The notable exception here with regard to the foregrounding of the NMP in terrorism research is the work of Daniel E Agbiboa. See, for example, Daniel E Agbiboa, 'Ten Years of Boko Haram: How Transportation Drives Africa’s Deadliest Insurgency', Cultural Studies (Vol. 34, No. 3, 2020), pp. 363–91.
18. Mark Amaza, 'Nigeria is Also Losing Control of its Troubles Northwest Region', Quartz Africa, 24 November 2020, <https://qz.com/africa/1935821/nigeria-losing-control-of-northwest-region-to-bandit-herdsmen/>, accessed 22 March 2022.
19. International Crisis Group, ‘Violence in Nigeria’s North West’. For a comparative outlook on the crisis of nomadism and the farmer–herder conflicts in Africa, see Tor A Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, ‘Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups? A Political Ecological Explanation’, Journal of Peasant Studies (Vol. 46, No. 1, 2019), pp. 1–20; Thomas J Bassett, ‘The Political Ecology of Peasant-Herder Conflicts in the Northern Ivory Coast’, Annals of the Association of American Geographers (Vol. 78, No. 3, September 1988), pp. 453–72; Charliene Cabot, Climate Change, Security Risks and Conflict Reduction in Africa: A Case Study of Farmer-Herder Conflicts Over Natural Resources in Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Burkina Faso 1960–2000 (Berlin: Springer, 2017); Matthew D Turner, ‘Political Ecology and the Moral Dimensions of “Resource Conflicts”: The Case of Farmer–Herder Conflicts in the Sahel’, Political Geography (Vol. 23, No. 7, September 2004), pp. 863–89; Steve Tonah, ‘Migration and Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Ghana’s Volta Basin’, Canadian Journal of African Studies (Vol. 40, No. 1, 2006), pp. 152–78; Tor A Benjaminsen, Faustin P Maganga and Jumanne Moshi Abdallah, ‘The Kilosa Killings: Political Ecology of a Farmer–Herder Conflict in Tanzania’, Development and Change (Vol. 40, No. 3, 2009), pp. 423–45.
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There is no attempt to essentialise the membership of armed bandity, the term ‘armed bandit’ in the northwest zone is, in local parlance, shorthand for nomadic pastoralists of Fulani extraction who have taken to criminality in the absence of economic alternatives beyond cattle herding.20 The Fulani were originally nomads, but some became sedentary and settled in the urban areas of northern Nigeria after the jihadi conquest – the Fulani War (1804–08) – of the Fulani revolutionary, Usman Dan Fodio. This brought about a distinction within the Fulani, with the nomadic ones choosing to continue herding cattle in forests and bushes while the sedentary ones abandoned nomadism to acquire education and get jobs in government.

What binds the sedentary and pastoralist Fulani is not just the identification with the Fulani culture (pulaaku) but also the ability to speak and comprehend the Fulani language, Fullulde.21 However, criticisms of the sedentary Fulani for having abandoned pastoralism are not uncommon among the nomadic Fulani who tend to see nomadic pastoralism as constitutive of authentic Fulani identity. The sedentary Fulani are equally critical of nomadic pastoralism and tend not to subscribe to it, even though they may own some cattle.22 And, whereas the sedentary Fulani are predominantly Muslim and educated, the nomadic Fulani fuse parts of Islamic practices with traditional beliefs and generally lack formal education.23 Clearly, although not all Fulani are nomadic pastoralists, there are many nomadic pastoralists among them who comprehend mobility and ownership of cattle as constitutive of Fulani identity. The nomadic Fulani who have turned to armed bandity are the focus of this article.

Mobility is central to the survival of the nomadic Fulani. Kristín Loftsdóttir asserts that the nomadic Fulani ‘base their ethnic identity strongly on livestock holdings and the mobility intrinsic to their economy.’24 For the nomadic Fulani, cattle represent: social-security guarantee and inheritable assets for the herder’s family, particularly for his offspring. So central is the herd as pastoral capital that, aside from functioning as a means of production, storage, and transport, and a way to transfer food and wealth to the Fulani, its size indicates the social status of the individual or family and evokes an unspoken dictum to strive to increase the herd.25

The social mobility of the nomadic Fulani is determined by their number of cattle.26 Abandoning the nomadic lifestyle is tantamount to a loss of identity as the nomadic Fulani ‘regards cattle as the all-in-all of his life. To him cattle rearing is a way of life rather than an economic activity; cattle are an

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20. Obi Anyadike, ‘The Longshot Bid to End Rampant Bandity in Nigeria’s Northwest’, New Humanitarian, 19 January 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2021/01/19/Nigeria-bandits-peace-zamfara-fulani-pastoralism>, accessed 20 June 2021.
21. Francis B Nyamnjoh, ‘The Nimbleness of Being Fulani’, Africa Today (Vol. 59, No. 3, March 2013), pp. 104–34.
22. Benjamin Maiangwa, ‘“Conflicting Indigeneity” and Farmer–Herder Conflicts in Postcolonial Africa’, Peace Review (Vol. 29, No. 3, 2017), pp. 282–88.
23. Ibid., pp. 283–84.
24. Kristín Loftsdóttir, ‘When Nomads Lose Cattle: Wodaabe Negotiations of Ethnicity’, African Sociological Review (Vol. 8, No. 2, 2004), p. 53.
25. Olaniyin and Yahaya, ‘Cows, Bandits, and Violent Conflicts’, p. 24.
26. This is precisely why, writing on armed bandity from a Fulani perspective, Ahmadu Shehu – a Fulani herdsman – underscores the cultural, social and economic significance of pastoralism for the Fulani in the following way: ‘On the one hand, [nomadic pastoralism] is our only means of livelihood – feeding, clothing, shelter, health, everything. To understand this, compare with your own occupation – military, civil service, business, etc. – how far you would go to advance, promote and protect your trade. ... Unlike acquired professions and trades, on the other hand, herding is our ancestral occupation. For instance, when someone loses money or anything of financial value, they have only lost some part of material wealth. All that is needed is to take other alternatives to regain or acquire even more wealth. The consequences end right there. On the contrary, owning livestock for pastoralists is a necessary cultural tool and having or lacking livestock places an individual on certain social status. The wellbeing of the livestock entails personal joy which supersedes any other considerations. When pastoralists lose their herds they have not just lost some material wealth, but also their self-esteem, social status and a lot more of cultural values in the society. ... It should be clearly understood that the millennia-old sociocultural relationship between pastoralists and livestock means that any attempt to change this system is perceived as [a] direct affront to the esteemed cultural values these communities stand for’.
27. See Ahmadu Shehu, ‘The Roots of Bandity: A Fulani Perspective (I)’, Daily Trust, 5 January 2022, <https://dailytrust.com/the-roots-of-bandity-a-fulani-perspective-i>, accessed 20 January 2022.
end in themselves as much as a means to an end’. Even when the nomadic Fulani abandon their cattle to look for economic opportunities in urban spaces, they do not see staying in the city as abandonment of mobility or an attempt at sedentarisation. Instead, they view it as an ‘ongoing journey that will eventually lead them back to the bush’. The nomadic Fulani’s mobile lifestyle has been – for centuries before the foundation of modern African polities in the Sahel and West Africa – adapted to fit variable environmental and climatic conditions. When the environmental conditions are unfavourable, they move in search of greener pastures for their cattle. Transhumance (the seasonal movement of livestock) is patently their survival strategy.

But because nomadic pastoralism is increasingly under threat from various ecological factors – stemming from both environmental and political causes – some nomadic Fulani communities in the northwest geopolitical zone have little or no means for social or upward mobility. Consider, by way of example, the following report:

In Zamfara state, the government decided to clear large forests and grazing reserves in the Kuyambana forest and in parts of the Maru and Zurmi local government areas. This action disrupted life in Fulani hamlets, some centuries old, limiting the availability of pasture for their livestock. The allocation of land to farmers also resulted in encroachment on, and blockage of, livestock grazing routes, and created conditions for increased trespass on farmlands by herders and more demands for compensation for damaged crops. While farmers complained of herders trespassing on their farms and damaging crops, herders protested the compensation they had to pay for damaged crops, and complained that farmers, district heads, police and courts were colluding against them in a corrupt process.

Deprived of grasslands and grazing areas with which to feed their cattle, and lacking the education required to access jobs, the nomadic Fulani – many of whom are members of the violent criminal gangs in the northwest and north-central zones – exploit their knowledge of the vast forests where they used to herd cattle to make terror mobile. If social mobility used to be coterminous with cattle herding, the age-old practice of nomadic pastoralism now seems neither profitable nor sustainable to the nomadic Fulani, who must therefore find other means of livelihood and economic survival. This constraint on the social mobility of nomadic pastoralists such as the Fulani is the root of armed banditry, as they are willing to do anything to survive whenever cattle herding – their livelihood – is threatened by nature or human intervention. Indeed, when an armed bandit – a former nomadic Fulani – was asked why he took to criminality, his response corroborated how the decision to become a bandit is in consequence of restrictions on nomadism and cattle herding: ‘We are deprived of keeping cattle because of lack of grazing areas. They have taken over the grazing areas, even the grazing routes are no longer there. Soldiers would take over [our] cattle, vigilante[s] would confiscate and gunmen would rustle. We have been rendered poor’. Additionally, the response from armed bandits regarding why they engage in criminal activities such as kidnapping, cattle rustling and looting corroborates the problem of social immobility:

‘We took up arms because we are herders and despite this country’s wealth, we are not carried along; we are not educated, we do not know anything. We do not have security, we do not have any benefit.’

‘We are the ones being killed, but are always seen as the aggressors. We don’t have anything. Wherever a herder is, he is uneducated and has nothing. In this country, there is everything but we are not carried along. It is as though we do not exist. We are just being killed.’

Of course, abandoning the mobility associated with the nomadic lifestyle does not amount to giving up mobility in its entirety. That would mean extinction. Rather, the nomadic bandits merely replace the former mobile instrument of upward mobility (cattle) with another (automobiles) while maintaining their original homes in the thick forests. The advantage the armed bandits have over the state’s military is that – having grazed cattle in those

27. Mustafa B Ibrahim, ‘The Fulani – A Nomadic Tribe in Northern Nigeria’, African Affairs (Vol. 65, No. 259, April 1966), p. 173.
28. Loftsdóttir, ‘When Nomads Lose Cattle’, p. 69.
29. International Crisis Group, ‘Violence in Nigeria’s North West’. 31. Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, ‘In Rare Access to Enclave: Bandits Speak on Ravaging Insecurity’, Daily Trust, 26 February 2021,
30. Adedeji Ademola, ‘The Growing Threat of Armed Banditry in North-West Nigeria’, Strife, 8 January 2021, <https://www.strifeblog.org/2021/01/08/the-growing-threat-of-armed-banditry-in-north-west-nigeria/> accessed 20 July 2021.
31. Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, ‘In Rare Access to Enclave: Bandits Speak on Ravaging Insecurity’, Daily Trust, 26 February 2021, <https://www.dailytrust.com/in-rare-access-to-enclave-bandits-speak-on-ravaging-insecurity>, accessed 20 June 2021.
32. As transcribed in Sahara Reporters, ‘Buhari Should Personally Lead Peace Talks With Us To End Insecurity —Bandit Leader Says In Video’, 16 June 2021, <http://saharareporters.com/2021/06/16/buhari-should-personally-lead-peace-talks-us-end-insecurity-%E2%80%94bandit-leader-says-video>, accessed 22 March 2022.
forests (which are concentrated around rural, mostly underdeveloped, areas) for decades – they are more knowledgeable about the routes in the forests than law enforcement agencies. The automobiles are weaponised to acquire wealth by other means. The next section expands on how the armed bandits weaponise mobility to achieve their goals.

Weaponising Mobilities

The use of motorcycles or *okada* in Nigeria emerged in the 1980s due to the decline in formal public transport systems in urban areas coupled with economic recession and high inflation. Gradually, motorcycles became the norm for alternative transportation in both cities and rural areas. Those who cannot make ends meet in the harsh economic climate take up *okada* business as a profession in the informal sector, conveying people from one spot to another at relatively high speed. This is particularly true of the northwest geopolitical zone – the bandits’ abode – which is the poorest of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Indeed:

As of 2019, all seven states in the [northwest geopolitical] zone had poverty levels above the national average of 40.1 per cent, led by Sokoto (87.7 per cent), Jigawa (87 per cent) and Zamfara (74 per cent). Millions lack access to basic health care and clean water, and immunisation coverage is far below national goals.

Some unemployed young men in the northwest zone have taken up *okada* business to feed their families, pay children’s tuition fees, marry women and pay house rents. As one respondent underlined when asked why he took to the *okada* business: ‘Since United Nigerian Textile Company (UNTL) was shut down in 2006, I have had no other job. The gratuity paid to me could not even buy a plot of land. So I invested the money in Okada business ... From the income generated, I pay school fees of my children, feed them and pay my house rent’. Although the *okada* business enables the poor to cope with Nigeria’s precarious economic situation, the very same motorcycles – typically Honda ACE 125s – have been used by criminal gangs in the northwest zone for nefarious purposes. Prices range from 400,000 naira ($970) to 600,000 ($1,400) for a motorcycle, and the armed bandits refuse to register the ones they purchase in an attempt to prevent the government from tracking and tracing them. This has made it difficult to arrest criminal elements in the northwest as security officials are neither aware of the number of motorcycles in circulation in the region nor which ones are used to foment terror. It is these motorcycles that connect the armed bandits from the forests to the farms, markets, schools, hospitals, villages and highways where they kidnap residents and loot resources. Arms and ammunition are also transported through the vast Sahelian forests by motorcycles. Without them, the armed bandits would operate much less effectively: they use them ‘because of [their] ease of manoeuvrability. They can storm a town at once and they can move out at once’. Motorcycles can also travel on poor-quality roads better than cars, especially in the northwest geopolitical zone where infrastructure is lacking. The motorcycle therefore serves as a vital weapon for bandits, akin to arms and ammunition.

A typical attack involves over 200 motorcycles with two armed bandits on each one. As one security expert noted:

> They ride in twos, and move in hundreds ... Sometimes you see the bandits on about 200 motorcycles, meaning 400 of them at a go ... You will see two people on one and they can put their kidnapped victim at the centre and zoom to the bush without a trace.

33. *Okada* is a term for motorcycles used as taxis. For more information on the origin of *okada*, see Odion Okonofua, “This Is How the “Okada” Got its Name [Pulse Explainer]”, *Pulse*, 17 February 2020, <https://www.pulse.ng/news/local/how-okada-got-its-name/tx1173q>, accessed 10 July 2021.
34. Agbiboa, ‘Ten Years of Boko Haram’.
35. *Ibid*.
36. International Crisis Group, ‘Violence in Nigeria’s North West’.
37. John Gabriel, ‘Kaduna Residents Find Solace in Okada Business Amid Job Loss, Demolition of Markets, Shops’, *Daily Post*, 30 July 2021, <https://dailypost.ng/2021/07/30/kaduna-residents-find-solace-in-okada-business-amid-job-loss-demolition-of-markets-shops/>; accessed 1 August 2021.
38. For examples of the prices of motorcycles in Nigeria, see Jiji, ‘Honda Motorcycles & Scooters in Nigeria’, <https://jiji.ng/motorcycles-and-scooters/honda>; accessed 1 August 2021.
39. *Daily Trust*, ‘How Unregistered Motorcycles Aid Banditry, Other Crimes in North-West’, 30 May 2021, <https://dailytrust.com/how-unregistered-motorcycles-aid-banditry-other-crimes-in-north-west/>; accessed 30 July 2021.
40. *Ibid*.
41. *Ibid*. 

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Victims of abductions are conveyed to the forests before friends and relatives are called on to pay exorbitant ransom fees. Indeed, motorcycles have been pivotal to all the successful attacks perpetrated on schools and universities which involve the abduction of students and staff. For example, the kidnapping of 333 schoolboys of the Government Science Secondary School in Katsina state in December 2020 was made possible by the motorcycles. Looted goods and resources are similarly taken to the forests using the motorcycles. With such huge numbers of armed bandits — about 400 — available for many attacks on ordinary citizens thanks to the availability of motorcycles, the state’s weak law enforcement agencies are occasionally outnumbered and outgunned.

But the armed bandits do not weaponise only motorcycles; sometimes they also employ vehicles such as trucks and vans for criminal activities. This is usually the case when the armed bandits’ targets are animals — especially cattle. As previously mentioned, cattle symbolise economic, cultural and social capital. Reports show that, in 2015, an adult cow in Nigeria costs about 250,000 naira ($1,000). In this case, trucks enable the quick movement of cattle to the forests before the arrival of security forces. Occasionally, they are used in combination with motorcycles to convey victims from the point of abduction to the hostage zone in the forests, where they are then distributed among different criminal gangs. For example, in February 2021, over 300 schoolgirls were abducted from the Government Girls Secondary School, Jangebe in Zamfara State. Official reports suggest that the armed bandits were able to carry out the attack with Hilux vehicles and motorcycles.

The armed bandits’ weaponisation of mobilities through the use of motorcycles has earned them the title of ‘motorcycle bandits’ — a conjunction which shows how much bandits are almost inconceivable without motorcycles. The lethality of the criminal gangs is largely due to their ability to manoeuvre with motorcycles on bad roads, carry out criminal activities at a very fast pace, and evade capture by and confrontation with the state’s security forces. The criminal gangs are feared and loathed by motorists, other road users and local communities. In fact, due to the perception that they are more powerful than the state’s security operatives, some local communities in the northwest have struck deals with the armed bandits. These ensure that communities are protected by the armed bandits, and the communities, in turn, provide the bandits to paying exorbitant ransom fees for victims’ release. For instance, criminals demanded six Honda motorcycles — amounting to 3 million naira ($7,500) — as an additional condition to release 136 kidnapped pupils of Salihu Tanko Islamiyya School in Niger State who were abducted in May 2021. Similarly, armed bandits imposed the purchase of 10 new Honda motorcycles on families and relatives of victims abducted from Greenfield University in Kaduna State in April 2021.

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So critical are motorcycles that victims’ families are almost always required to provide the armed bandits with motorcycles in addition to paying exorbitant ransom fees for victims’ release

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The armed bandits’ weaponisation of mobilities through the use of motorcycles has earned them the title of ‘motorcycle bandits’ — a conjunction which shows how much bandits are almost inconceivable without motorcycles. The lethality of the criminal gangs is largely due to their ability to manoeuvre with motorcycles on bad roads, carry out criminal activities at a very fast pace, and evade capture by and confrontation with the state’s security forces. The criminal gangs are feared and loathed by motorists, other road users and local communities. In fact, due to the perception that they are more powerful than the state’s security operatives, some local communities in the northwest have struck deals with the armed bandits. These ensure that communities are protected by the armed bandits, and the communities, in turn, provide the bandits

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42. Leon Usigbe, Muhammad Sabiu and Soji-Eze Fagbemi, ‘Bandits Moved Abducted 333 School Boys on Bikes —DHQ’, *Nigerian Tribune*, 15 December 2020, <https://tribuneonlineng.com/bandits-moved-abducted-333-school-boys-on-bikes-dhq/>, accessed 30 July 2021.
43. *Nigerian Observer*, ‘Prices Of Cattle Go Up – Survey’, 23 March 2015, <http://nigerianobservernews.com/2015/03/prices-of-cattle-go-up-survey/>., accessed 22 March 2022.
44. Maiharaji Altine, ‘Gunmen Abduct Over 300 Girls in Zamfara School’, *Punch*, 26 February 2021, <https://punchng.com/gunmen-abduct-over-300-schoolgirls-from-zamfara-school/>, accessed 20 July 2021.
45. Priscilla Dennis, ‘Tegina School Abduction: Bandits Insist on N3m Motorbikes After Collecting N55m Ransom from Parents’, *Daily Post*, 31 July 2021, <https://dailypost.ng/2021/07/31/tegina-school-abduction-bandits-insist-on-n3m-motorbikes-after-collecting-n55m-ransom-from-parents/>., accessed 20 August 2021.
46. Wuzup Nigeria, ‘Bandits Threaten to Kill Greenfield Varsity Students in Captivity, Demand N100m, 10 Motorcycles’, 3 May 2021, <https://wuzupnigeria.ng/bandits-threaten-to-kill-greenfield-varsity-students-in-captivity-demand-%E2%82%A6100m-10-motorcycles/>., accessed 30 July 2021.
with money, food and motorcycles.47 Some farming communities also pay taxes to the armed bandits.48 Such pacts have seemingly filled the apparent ‘governance lacuna’ in security provision by the state.

The persistence of armed banditry has had colossal impacts on communities in the northwest geopolitical zone and the entire Nigerian state. The conflicts have produced many internally displaced persons and refugees, with many fleeing to neighbouring Niger for safety. Schools, businesses and hospitals have been shut down due to fear of armed bandit attacks. The closing of some schools, in particular, does not bode well for education in the northwest. It is already the poorest geopolitical zone in Nigeria, with a literacy rate of 29.7% and the highest number of out-of-school children in Nigeria. On top of those who do not attend school at all, millions of children are in the poorly resourced and ill-supervised Quranic school system, or almajiranci, which produces cohorts of unskilled youth.49 Some farmers and pastoralists have abandoned farming and cattle grazing and taken refuge in neighbouring states or camps for internally displaced persons with squalid living conditions. This negatively affects food security given that Nigeria is already one of the ‘hunger hotspots’ of the world, with millions – especially in northern Nigeria – at risk of dying from famine.50

Moreover, the victims of armed bandits’ abductions suffer physical and psychological harm during captivity stemming from malnutrition, torture, rape, abuse and death. All these concerns prompt the question as to how the state has responded to the crisis. The next section looks at this in more detail.

State Responses to Banditry

Because armed banditry has been considered a problem of ‘ungoverned spaces’, the federal government and various state governments in the northwest geopolitical zone have largely employed ineffective measures to curb it. Such measures could be divided into carrots and sticks. The ‘sticks’ are mainly military and airforce operations, as well as legal measures. Military and airforce operations include Exercise Harbin Kunama III and Operations Puff Adder, Diran Mikiya, Sharan Daji, Hadarin Daji and Thunder Strike.51 For these, the military raids the forest enclaves and bushes from which the bandits operate. Whereas the Nigerian Air Force neutralises armed bandits through aerial surveillance missions, the Nigerian Army uses soldiers on the ground to identify hideouts and prevent abductions, looting and cattle rustling.

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Legal measures include passing laws to stem whatever fuels the violence, such as the use of commercial motorcycles and illegal mining. For example, in early April 2019, the Nigerian government – persuaded that illegal mining drives terrorist activities in the northwest – banned mining in Zamfara and other states in the northwest geopolitical zone.52 This neither prevented illegal mining nor looting, cattle rustling or kidnapping by the criminal gangs. Of course, banning artisanal and small-scale miners from mining would not resolve the grievances of pastoralists who have joined terrorist groups; rather, it would serve as the breeding ground for poor residents to engage in criminal activities in collaboration with foreign

47. Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, “Dining with the Devil”: How Villagers Co-Habit with Bandits, Daily Trust, 24 May 2021, <https://dailytrust.com/dining-with-the-devil-how-villagers-co-habit-with-bandits>, accessed 30 July 2021.
48. Ibid.
49. International Crisis Group, ‘Violence in Nigeria’s North West’.
50. Punch, ‘Northern Nigeria One of World’s “Highest Alert Hunger Hotspots” – Report’, 31 July 2021, <https://punchng.com/northern-nigeria-one-of-worlds-highest-alert-hunger-hotspots-report/>, accessed 1 August 2021.
51. John Campbell, ‘Not All Violent Problems Require Violent Solutions: Banditry in Nigeria’s North-West’, blog post, Council on Foreign Relations, 23 July 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/not-all-violent-problems-require-violent-solutions-banditry-nigerias-north-west>, accessed 1 August 2021.
52. Lukman Abolade, ‘Why FG Banned Mining Activities in Zamfara’, International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 2 March 2021, <https://www.icirnigeria.org/why-fg-banned-mining-activities-in-zamfara/>, accessed 10 December 2021.
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nations, as is already evident in Nigeria.53 Restrictions on mining are unlikely to achieve much as socioeconomic opportunities are not created for young people – especially those in pastoralist Fulani communities – in the northwest.

Bans on the use of commercial motorcycles are also included in the legal measures. For example, in May 2019, the Nigerian Army banned the use of motorcycles as a means of transportation in the northwest zone in a bid to curtail armed banditry.54 However, the bandits have strong ties to motorcycle vendors in the underground economy who supply them with unregistered motorcycles.

While these measures are undoubtedly remarkable, they have been largely unsuccessful because of the federal and state governments’ lack of engagement with social mobility.

States in the northwest have also tried to curb armed banditry by shutting down telecommunication services. They were temporarily shut down in Zamfara, Sokoto and Katsina, and the sale of petrol in jerry cans was banned in September 2021 in an attempt to further blunt the mobility of the bandits. But these measures simply pushed them to neighbouring states, where they continued to wreak havoc on local communities.55 The measures also severely impacted the lives and livelihoods of residents in the concerned states – especially those who depended on telecommunication services to support themselves. Depending on how one looks at it, the ‘sticks’ have largely failed to extirpate armed banditry in northern Nigeria.

The ‘carrots’ include the state negotiating with the criminal gangs and offering them amnesty or state pardon. For example, the governors of Zamfara, Katsina and Sokoto negotiated with the armed bandits in 2019. However, the peace deal was rather short-lived as the armed bandits returned to their criminal activities some months after they were granted amnesty. The failure of the amnesty programme has been attributed to the fact that the armed bandits ‘lack central command and a common goal, so it has been difficult to bring them all to a common negotiation. Moreover, agreements made with one group are not binding on others’.56 Treating them as a single group with one leader has been profoundly counterproductive. There are also concerns that most of the recalcitrant criminals never gave up their arms and that the guns-for-cash programme emboldened the bandits with more money to purchase more arms, and more motivation to raid villages and communities with gross impunity. Rewarding bandits who surrendered their arms with money and cars caused panic among residents that their criminal lifestyle may be indirectly legitimised as a means of earning a living. This is precisely why Obi Anyadike posits that ‘the money incentivised gun ownership, creating more criminals, which a negligent state government then failed to pay. Some bandits – being bandits – also cheated and only pretended to quit, returning to crime full-time when the cash ran out’.57

While these measures are undoubtedly remarkable, they have been largely unsuccessful because of the federal and state governments’ lack of engagement with social mobility – which is not just at the root of armed banditry, but also fuels it. In other words, the Nigerian government’s ‘governmobility’58 strategy for curbing armed conflict in general – including terrorist activists perpetrated by jihadists such as Boko Haram and ISWAP – has been centred

53. *Premium Times*, ‘Foreigners Perpetrating Illegal Mining in Nigeria – Minister’, 14 October 2020, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/420761-foreigners-perpetrating-illegal-mining-in-nigeria-minister.html>, accessed 15 March 2022.
54. Wole Mosadomi, Bashir Bello and Nasir Muhammad Gusau, ‘North-West Dangerous Men: Outrageous Tales from the Okada Bandit, Kidnapper Hub’, *Vanguard*, 19 May 2019, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/05/north-west-dangerous-men-outrageous-tales-from-the-okada-bandit-kidnapper-hub/>, accessed 20 July 2021.
55. Aminu Abubakar, ‘Nigeria’s Military Crackdown Puts Squeeze on Bandit Gangs’, *Mail & Guardian*, 21 September 2021, <https://mg.co.za/africa/2021-09-21-nigerias-military-crackdown-puts-squeeze-on-bandit-gangs/>, accessed 20 January 2022.
56. Oluwole Ojewale, Rising Insecurity in Northwest Nigeria: Terrorism Thinly Disguised as Banditry’, *Africa in Focus*, a blog of the Brookings Institution, 18 February 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2021/02/18/rising-insecurity-in-northwest-nigeria-terrorism-thinly-disguised-as-banditry/>, accessed 20 July 2021.
57. Anyadike, ‘The Longshot Bid to End Rampant Banditry in Nigeria’s Northwest’.
58. Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt, ‘Governmobility: The Powers of Mobility’, *Mobilities* (Vol. 8, No. 1, 2013), pp. 20–34.
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on placing restrictions on physical mobility without a concomitant engagement with social mobility through socioeconomic interventions. A group of bandits that reneged on the peace deal noted their social immobility and did not wish to accept any more deals if they did not come with socioeconomic interventions for pastoralist communities in the northwest geopolitical zone: ‘In some of our communities, there is no potable drinking water, no accessible road, no good health care delivery service or any form of social facility and until the state government addresses these problems, we will not embrace the peace accord and reconciliation’.

Put simply, the Nigerian state has responded to armed banditry with violence. This is reminiscent of Wale Adebanwi and Ebenezer Obadare’s argument that the Nigerian state is characterised by violence as it treats every problem as a state of emergency:

> Whether that violence consolidates, re-establishes or attempts to break existing violence; whether it is practiced as a military coup or counter-coup, a civil uprising or ethno-regional, inter-ethnic, inter-faith or political violent clashes, hegemonic or counter-hegemonic suppression, oppression or revolt, pro-democratic, student and workers' riots or election violence, police killings, pogrom, rebellion or civil war, Nigeria has become a permanent state of emergencies – with hardly any means, method, or institutions for efficiently addressing emergencies beyond more violence.

Merely bombarding forests and placing bans on motorcycles and illegal mining can hardly solve the problem of armed banditry. Indeed, by banning motorcycles used by ‘marginal men’ to eke out a living as part of its governmobility strategy, the Nigerian state reproduces social immobility by paupering young people who depend on motorcycles for their daily sustenance.

There are three reasons why the state’s governmobility strategy has failed to meet expectations. First, although the armed bandits use the forests for their varied criminal exploits, they are not sedentary but profoundly mobile and thus not confined to the forests. They disguise themselves as members of the local communities they attack, impose taxes on and make pacts with. In many cases, the bandits have informants within the local communities who keep them abreast of the activities of security officers, which in turn gives them the opportunity to either ambush the security officers or quickly flee into the forests on motorcycles.

Such mobility (and flexibility) seems to portend the armed bandits as ‘invisible creatures’. The state currently lacks the resources to monitor bandits’ mobilities within local communities and villages to identify such informants and sympathisers. Second, even though motorcycle use has been interdicted in the northwest geopolitical zone, the criminal gangs have strong ties to motorcycle vendors in the underground economy who supply them with unregistered motorcycles. The state lacks the resources to curb this and is also largely unable to prevent their supply through ransom payments. Third, constraints on the physical and social mobility of the nomadic communities (many of whom are members of the criminal gangs) in the northwest geopolitical zone in terms of cattle herding and the availability of grazing lands have not been addressed by the state. The amnesty programme failed in large part because the armed bandits felt that it did not address their grievances, and would not enable the nomadic communities to thrive and acquire social, cultural and economic capital. This was emphasised when some of the bandits were asked why the peace deal with the government failed. They responded that ‘An agreement was reached but you left that person in the forest with a gun and nothing to

59. Ifeanyi Nwannah, ‘Negotiate with Unrepentant Fulani Bandits, Grant Amnesty to Them – Sheikh Gumi Tells Buhari’, <https://dailypost.ng/2021/02/05/negotiate-with-unrepentant-fulani-bandits-grant-amnesty-to-them-sheikh-gumi-tells-buhari/>, accessed 20 February 2022.
60. Quoted in Ziya Meral, How Violence Shapes Religion: Belief and Conflict in the Middle East and Africa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 61. Emphasis added.
61. James Ferguson, ‘Marginal Men & Urban Social Conflicts: Okada Riders in Lagos’, in Wale Adebanwi (ed.), The Political Economy of Everyday Life in Africa: Beyond the Margins (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), pp. 239–65.
62. Daily Trust, ‘How Unregistered Motorcycles Aid Banditry, Other Crimes in North-West’.
63. See Nasir Ibrahim, ‘Police Arrest Suspected Motorcycles Supplier to Zamfara Bandits’, Premium Times, 23 March 2021, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/450641-police-arrest-suspected-motorcycles-supplier-to-zamfara-bandits.html>, accessed 1 August 2021.
64. Kayode Oyero, ‘Most Bandits Are Fulani Who Profess Same Religious Beliefs as Me – Masari’, Punch, 6 September 2021, <https://punchng.com/most-bandits-are-fulani-who-profess-same-religious-beliefs-as-me-masari/>, accessed 15 March 2022.
substitute. What do you expect? How do you want that person to survive? 65

That the state has failed to address the underlying ethnic grievances due to constraints on pastoralists’ opportunity for social mobility worsens the problem. The combination of these three issues, which stem from overemphasising ‘ungoverned spaces’ and placing restrictions on physical mobility while underemphasising social mobility, indicates that the state’s current policies to halt banditry are misguided.

Conclusion

This article charts a new path in the analysis of armed banditry in Nigeria beyond the conventional ungoverned spaces thesis. To end armed banditry and everyday criminality in the northwest geopolitical zone, the Nigerian state must foreground both physical and social mobility in its war on terror. This could be done in three concurrent ways. First, the state must monitor movements within local communities and villages in the northwest geopolitical zone to identify members of the criminal gangs who disguise themselves as ordinary citizens. To do this, the state must impose legibility on society not least because the armed bandits are not confined to the forests but live and move about freely. Second, the state must ameliorate its strategy in curbing the sale or provision of motorcycles to armed bandits. In fact, this is one of the most critical factors that could go a long way to stem their reign of terror. Finally, addressing issues of mobility also means that the state must review the constraints on the pastoralists’ social mobility that continue to produce the armed conflict. This could be through the provision of grazing areas and ranches for nomadic communities to continue herding cattle – a lifestyle and source of economic livelihood increasingly threatened by ecological factors linked to environmental and political factors. The state must also prosecute – and, where appropriate, reintegrate – criminals, address ethnic grievances, and provide education, healthcare and social amenities to communities in the northwest geopolitical zone. These socioeconomic interventions would enable social mobility and prevent the descent into anarchy from political violence such as war, terrorism and insurgency in northern Nigeria.

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65. The Cable, ‘Bandits Say Buhari Not Serious About Peace Talks, Invite Him to Lead Dialogue’, 24 February 2021, <https://www.thecable.ng/bandits-say-buhari-not-serious-about-peace-talks-invite-him-to-lead-dialogue>, accessed 15 February 2022.