THE NEXUS OF BANDITRY, ALLIED MILITIAS AND CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION IN NIGERIA: A SHIFT IN TRADITIONAL CULTURAL NORMATIVE

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Abstract
This study investigates the nexus of banditry, allied militias, and Christian persecution in Nigeria, highlighting the resultant shift in traditional cultural norms. Over the last two decades, Nigeria has experienced a surge in violent insecurity, particularly in the northern and central regions, characterized by kidnappings, cattle raids, village attacks, and targeted assaults on Christian communities. This paper examines the origins, motivations, and operational dynamics of bandits and allied militias, emphasizing their fluid alliances, economic and territorial objectives, and exploitation of weak governance. Drawing on empirical data, human rights reports, and conflict analyses, the study demonstrates how these groups not only perpetrate violence for profit and control but also contribute to a broader pattern of religiously motivated persecution. The research further explores the socio-cultural consequences of this insecurity, including the erosion of communal trust, redefinition of moral codes, shifts in gender roles, and alterations in traditional conflict-resolution practices. Ultimately, the study argues that the intertwining of banditry, militia activity, and targeted religious violence represents a profound disruption of Nigeria's historical norms of communal coexistence, tolerance, and cultural cohesion, calling for comprehensive security, political, and socio-economic interventions.

Keywords: Nexus, Banditry, Allied Militias, Christian Persecution, and Traditional Cultural Normative

Introduction

Nigeria has witnessed a troubling rise in violent insecurity over the last two decades, marked by banditry, insurgency, ethnic militias and attacks on Christian communities. What began as isolated rural clashes has evolved into complex networks of armed groups with ideological, economic, ethnic and religious motivations. This escalation represents not only a breakdown of state security but also a fundamental shift in traditional cultural norms that once governed coexistence among Nigeria's diverse communities. Nigerian cultural normative is that of mutual respect and peaceful co-existence among all tribes and religions at witnessed in the past. Recently, armed assailants stormed the Government Girls Secondary School, Maga in Danko Wasagu Local Government Area of Kebbi State on 17th November, 2025 killing two members of staff and abducting 25 students. Also, on the 21st of November 2025, 303 students and 12 teachers were kidnapped in St. Mary's Catholic school in Niger state and it has been described as one of the worst mass abductions in Nigeria's history. This article examines the interconnection between banditry, allied militias, and Christian persecution, highlighting how these forces collectively reshape Nigeria's long-standing cultural patterns of tolerance, communal

protection and social harmony.

The Concept of Banditry and Allied militia Banditry

Rufus, Anthony Israel, and Ekoja Bernard Ogbe in their work ―The Rise of Banditry in Northwest Nigeria‖ assert that Banditry is the organized predatory violence of armed criminal groups operating outside state control which has emerged as a major security and governance challenge in many parts of West Africa, especially north-west and central Nigeria. Over the last decade what began as loosely organized criminal gangs involved in cattle-theft, rustling, and opportunistic raids has evolved into a multifaceted phenomenon that overlaps with illicit economies, community militias, and (in some places) violent extremist groups. Recent field research and data analyses show bandit groups are embedded in local economies, shift alliances opportunistically and often exploit weak state presence to sustain prolonged campaigns of predation and coercion. Banditry in contemporary conflict studies refers to armed groups whose primary aim is criminal profit (kidnapping for ransom, robbery, extortion, cattle rustling, illegal mining, smuggling) rather than a clear ideological or separatist agenda (22–35). These groups typically:

- Operate in rural or semi-rural spaces where state authority is thin or contested.
- Use small arms and light weapons to project force across villages and roads.
- Rely on networks (local informants, smugglers, marketplaces) that allow them to monetize violence.

Allied militias

Okoli, Al Chukwuma, and Innocent Ugwu described Allied Militias as semi-organized, often community-rooted armed groups that can be defensive (vigilantes), politically sponsored, or criminalized over time. They become ―allied‖ to bandits when they cooperate (or collude) for mutual advantage sharing intelligence, protection, markets, or access to arms or when state actors tacitly employ militias to punch above the state‘s capacity. This alliance is seldom fixed: the relationship between bandits and militias is fluid and transactional (7-8).

The Phenomenon of Banditry in Northern Nigeria

Mashi, Mubarak Ahmed, and Bala Abdullahi Husaini insist that Banditry represents one of Nigeria‘s most severe contemporary security challenges. The phenomenon involves armed groups, often operating in rural areas, who engage in cattle rustling, kidnappings, and village raids. These groups are primarily motivated by profit, though their operations often intersect with insurgency networks.

Research shows that banditry has devastated states such as Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, and Sokoto. Between 2011 and 2019, over 6,300 lives were lost in Zamfara alone, with thousands kidnapped and hundreds of villages destroyed. The bandits operate from forest hideouts and maintain loose networks across Nigeria‘s porous northern borders. Although not explicitly ideological, the cumulative effect of banditry mirrors insurgency by undermining governance, disrupting education, and displacing millions. The abduction of over six hundred schoolchildren between 2019 and 2021 demonstrates the deepening crisis.

Banditry is among the latest security challenges facing Nigeria today, while bandits are violet groups found mostly across the northern zone of the country. The term has become convenient to phrase the ongoing desolation and mayhem taking place in the North West and North central geographical regions of the country. This has caused tension and volatility in the security conditions with the effect felt in all spheres of life (Atubi, 2020). Ascribable to the severity of their attack, Nigerian media organizations, policymakers and international organizations has made a case for bandits to be branded as terrorists. Many scholarly studies have termed bandits as a collection of criminal groups who carry out large scale assault like kidnappings, cattle rustling, armed robbery, sexual assault, village marauding especially in north west and north central Nigeria (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2021).These bandits are mainly from the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups, but there have also been evidence of non-Nigerian bandits from Niger or other West African states sharing porous, poorly delineated and under policed borders with Nigeria. Bandits operate in autonomous clusters without a formal structure and they operate mostly in rural residential settlements with their enclaves inside the forests. In most occasions, the primary motive is for self-enrichment, they have no political, ethnic or religious connotations Consequently, Nigeria has been under siege of bandits since 2018, the country‘s distress is manifested in the numerous spate of banditry and criminality in the northern hemisphere. The apocalyptic situation has been disproportionate with Boko-haram insurgency in the north east.

(Zenn, 2018). Herders militancy and banditry in north central (Okoli & Ogayi, 2018), while the north west has been engulfed in a speedy spate of banditry in its rural areas along with other states sharing boundary with the north west states (Okoli & Ugwu 2019). Banditry in the region is prominent in the north western states of Katstina, Kebbi, Kano, Zamfara and Sokoto. Out of these 3 states five states of Kaduna, Zamfara, Katstina, Kebbi and Sokoto seems to be the acute hotspot for banditry. However, Kaduna, Katstina and Zamfara have received the greatest brunt of the scourge (Okoli & Ugwu 2019). Though most recently Sokoto has seen an upsurge of banditry in its rural areas, this is due to bandits fleeing from Zamfara as a result of the onslaught they have been receiving from coordinated security attacks on them. It is worthy to note here that the activities of bandits also abound in the north eastern zone. The activities of these notorious gangs have disrupted the lives and livelihood of over twenty-one (21) million Nigerians in the northwestern part of the country alone (Osasona, 2020).

According to a report released by the Zamfara State government, not less than six thousand, three hundred and nineteen (6,319) lives have been taken by bandits in the state. Yet another three thousand, six hundred and seventy-two kidnapped and nothing less than five hundred (500) villages marauded in the state between 2011 and 2019. Meanwhile, the displaced victims in Zamfara State are more than two hundred thousand (200,000). Similarly, Olalekan (2021) in line with Osasona (2020) submitted that six thousand, three hundred and nineteen people have been abducted in Zamfara between 2011-2019. At the same time, two billion, eight hundred and five million, forty-nine thousand, seven hundred and forty-eight naira (₦2,805,049,748.00) has been paid as ransom by government, victims and family members, while the bandits have operated from about one hundred and five (105) camps in the state (Olalekan 2021).

According to Osasona (2020), the number of people killed by bandits in Nigeria, is more than the numbers of people killed by kidnappers, Boko-Haram, cultists and armed robbers when put together. In 2019, bandits were responsible for 47.5% of violet deaths. A worrisome trend in banditry that has become very common is the targeting of school children in their ten‘s and hundreds in Niger, Kaduna, Kebbi and Zamfara States. As at March 2021 more than six hundred 4 school children have been abducted, these abductions have led to the closure of many schools in North West and north central Nigeria (Adebayo, 2021).

Though there has been much scholarly research on some dimensions of the problem (Zenn 2018; Okoli & Ogayi 2018; Amnesty International 2018 and Okoli & Ugwu 2019. None of these studies have actually accounted for the causal factors and trend of banditry in the northern part of Nigeria in one study, this research is an effort to examine the phenomenon, get acquitted with the Causal factors and understand the trend of banditry in recent years across the northwest and north- central zones of the country. What therefore are the critical causes or factors responsible for banditry in these areas? What is the trend of attacks by bandits? These analytical questions make up the push for this write up. Looking at the very few studies on the problem, the major objectives of this study is to carry out a prima facie examination into the causal factors and bringing the trend of banditry to the bare. There is no doubt that this will stimulate further research on different aspects of banditry in Nigeria.

Typologies and Organizational Forms

Researchers and field reports identify several organizational forms:

1. Small, mobile bandit bands raid villages, kidnap travellers, sell captives or loot to middlemen.
2. Criminal networks embedded in illicit economic control or tax illegal mining, trade routes, or cattle markets.
3. Militia-like formations larger groups with semi-permanent camps, fixed leadership, and territorial ambitions.
4. Hybrid formations bandit groups that sometimes perform governance functions (levying ―taxes‖, mediating disputes) in areas where the state is absent. SpringerLink+1

Drivers and Root Causes

According to UNIDIR and ACLED Banditry and the allied militia phenomenon are sustained by a mix of structural and proximate drivers as listed below:

- State weakness and governance gaps: limited police presence, porous borders, slow justice systems and corruption create permissive environments.
- Illicit economies: gold, artisanal mining, smuggling, and cattle markets provide financing and logistical routes.
- Youth unemployment and local grievances: a large unemployed youth cohort provides recruits; unresolved local disputes (over land, grazing rights) become recruitment pools.

- Arms proliferation**:** easy access to small arms sustains violent tactics.

- Political instrumentalization: local power brokers or politicians sometimes sponsor militias or tolerate bandit activity for short-term gains (electoral muscle, intimidation, or revenue).

The Nexus: How Bandits and Militias Collaborate

The relationship between bandits and allied militias generally follows economic and security logic:

- Mutual protection and territorial control: militias may protect bandit safe havens; bandits may fund militias for protection or political leverage.

- Market access and rent extraction**:** bandits and militias share control over illicit trade nodes (mines, markets) and split profits or protection fees. ACLED

- Intelligence and manpower exchange: local militias' knowledge of terrain and communities is valuable to bandits; bandits provide cash or weapons.

- Fluid allegiances: groups switch sides depending on payoffs, government pressure, or leadership splits; —enemy today, ally tomorrow‖ describes much of the dynamic.

Christian Persecution and Emerging Genocidal Patterns

Christian persecution in Nigeria has intensified alongside the insurgency and banditry crisis. According to Open Doors International, over 360 million Christians worldwide face high levels of persecution, with Nigeria ranking among the top ten most dangerous nations for Christian believers. In 2015 alone, 4,028 Christians were killed and 198 churches attacked.

The killing of Reverend Lawan Andimi in 2020 by Boko Haram underscored the targeted nature of this violence. Despite national and international condemnation, including from the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the government's response has been inadequate. The Northern Elders Forum, led by Professor Ango Abdullahi, also criticized the Buhari administration for failing to protect citizens regardless of religion.

While the Nigerian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion under Article 38, the reality suggests systemic neglect. The United States House of Representatives has described Nigeria as —the most dangerous place for Christians in the world.‖ Patterns of abduction, execution, and church destruction indicate a sustained campaign to eliminate Christian presence in the northern regions.

Statistical Data of Killings (2001–2025)

Data from Nigeria Watch and ACLED indicate that between 2006 and 2021, at least 169,033 people died from violent causes, including insurgency, crime, and communal conflict. The year 2014 marked the peak with 22,873 recorded deaths, primarily due to Boko Haram activities. From 2015 to 2023, 63,111 deaths occurred during President Muhammadu Buhari's tenure. In the first half of 2025 alone, approximately 6,800 fatalities were recorded,

surpassing the total number of killings from the previous year. Plateau State alone reported 11,749 deaths from 2001 to 2025 as a result of herder–farmer clashes.

These figures highlight the deteriorating security situation and the human cost of governance failure.

The Trump Call and International Controversy

In late 2025, former U.S. President Donald Trump's statements condemning the ―mass killing of Christians by Islamists‖ in Nigeria sparked significant diplomatic tension. Islamic clerics such as Sheikh Ahmad Gumi denounced Trump's remarks as an affront to Nigeria's sovereignty. Christian leaders, however, welcomed the acknowledgment, arguing that global attention could pressure the Nigerian government to act.

The Nigerian government denied allegations of state complicity in religious persecution and urged restraint in foreign commentary. The episode reignited debate over international intervention and religious diplomacy, revealing deep divisions between Muslim and Christian communities.

A Shift in Traditional Cultural Norms Due to Allied Militias and Banditry

Traditional cultural norms, often defined by community values, social structures, and customary laws, have historically guided behavior, conflict resolution, and social cohesion in many societies. In contexts such as Nigeria, where local communities have historically relied on communal protection and traditional justice systems, these norms play a critical role in maintaining order and identity. However, the emergence and proliferation of allied militias and banditry have significantly disrupted these long-standing norms, leading to social, moral, and cultural transformations.

In Nigeria, especially in the northern regions, the rise of banditry and allied militias has been closely linked to socio-political instability and economic deprivation. Communities historically governed by customary law now witness frequent kidnappings, cattle raids, and violent confrontations. Studies have shown that affected communities increasingly abandon traditional policing methods, instead forming vigilante groups or negotiating with armed groups, illustrating a marked shift in cultural norms and societal expectations.

The presence of allied militias and banditry does not just threaten physical security, it disrupts the foundational cultural norms that define communal life. Over time, these shifts can result in long-term social fragmentation, altered moral codes, and redefined cultural practices. Understanding these transformations is essential for policymakers, cultural anthropologists, and peacebuilding practitioners seeking to restore stability and reinforce culturally grounded norms in affected regions.

Impact of Banditry and Allied Militias on Cultural Norms

1. Erosion of Communal Trust

Traditional societies often rely on close-knit communities and mutual trust to maintain order.

With the rise of banditry and allied militias, fear and suspicion have replaced trust.

Families may avoid collective gatherings, community policing mechanisms weaken, and social cohesion deteriorates. This breakdown shifts the normative expectation that communities can self-regulate and protect each other.

2. **Redefinition of Moral Codes**

   Banditry and militia activities normalize violence as a survival strategy. Actions once considered morally reprehensible such as theft, extrajudicial killings, or kidnapping become tolerated or even valorized in some communities, especially where local authorities are perceived as ineffective. This moral shift challenges traditional norms of right and wrong that were rooted in communal ethics and cultural heritage.

3. **Alteration of Gender Roles**

   In many affected areas, women and children bear the brunt of violence, facing displacement, sexual violence, and forced labor. Traditional gender expectations, which may have emphasized domestic roles and protection by male family members, are undermined. Women may take on more active roles in economic survival or local defense, while men's traditional role as protectors is challenged by the inability to shield their families from bandit attacks.

4. **Shifts in Conflict Resolution Practices**

   Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, such as councils of elders or local arbitration, are weakened by armed militias' presence. People increasingly rely on vigilante groups, self-defense militias, or even negotiating with bandits for safety, marking a departure from culturally sanctioned dispute resolution norms.

5. **Changes in Religious and Ethical Perceptions**

   In some regions, bandits and militias manipulate religious or cultural symbols to legitimize their actions. Communities may reinterpret cultural or religious doctrines to rationalize survival strategies in the face of insecurity, leading to a shift in collective ethical reasoning.

Documented Attacks by Bandits and Allied Militias Armed Groups in Nigeria

Here is a table summarizing some recent documented attacks by bandits and allied militias / armed groups in Nigeria (2023–2025). Because comprehensive data is often incomplete or inconsistent, this table selects a few well-reported incidents and aggregates broader statistics from credible reports. Use this as a snapshot, not a full catalogue.

Date / Period	Location (State / Region)	Nature of Attack / Event	Reported Casualties & Impact	Notes / Perpetrators (where known)
23–25 December 2023	Bokkos Local Government Area & Barkin Ladi Local Government Area — Plateau State (Central Nigeria)	Coordinated mass shootings, arson on rural communities	≈ 200 killed, ≈ 500 wounded/injured + widespread property destruction (Wikipedia)	Believed linked to a militia (often described as Fulani militia), amid herder-farmer / ethnic-religious tensions (Wikipedia)
November 2024 – April 2025 (6-month span)	Multiple states in North-Central Nigeria (including central zones relevant to your region)	Bandit / herder-related attacks on rural communities, farm-raids, village raids	578 people killed across the region (eduweb)	Rising insecurity involving armed bandits and suspected herders / criminal gangs (eduweb)
2024 overall	Nationwide aggregate (9 states + FCT)	Rural banditry, cattle rustling, community raids, ambushes & counter-operations	~1,452 deaths reported in rural-banditry incidents (up from 892 in 2023) (Nigeria Watch)	Biggest fatalities in Katsina State (≈577), Zamfara State (≈394), Kaduna State (≈225) (Nigeria Watch)
2024 (yearly total)	Nationwide	Violent incidents covering terrorism, bandit attacks, insurgency, etc.	5,291 violent incidents (2020–2024), of which 1,306 were bandit attacks in 2024 alone (GlobalSentinel)	Data from the NGO Nextier on Nigeria‘s violent-conflict trends (The Guardian Nigeria)
2024–2025 (two years since 2023)	Several states across North-West, North-Central including Benue State and Plateau	Widespread attacks: village raids, destruction of property (farms, clinics, boreholes), killings, displacement	Over 10,217 people killed in that period (across multiple states), including >2,630 in Plateau and ~6,896 in Benue (Amnesty International); 638 villages reportedly sacked in Zamfara, and 725 villages	Perpetrators: ―gunmen‖, armed bandits / militia / pastoral-herder groups; forms part of broader humanitarian crisis (Amnesty International)

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			under bandit control across 13 LGAs (Amnesty International)	
19 August 2025	Unguwan Mantau, Malumfashi Local Government Area, Katsina State (NW Nigeria)	Dawn-prayer mosque attack	17–27 people killed (reports vary) (Wikipedia)	Attack attributed to armed bandits; casualties among worshippers during prayer (Wikipedia)
1 July 2025	Kwallajiya, Tangaza LGA, Sokoto State (North-West)	Village/ community raid by militants	15–17 people killed (plus ―several‖ injured), per varying sources (Wikipedia)	Attack reportedly by militants from Lakurawa (linked to Islamic State – Sahel Province) (Wikipedia)
17 November 2025	Government Girls Comprehensive Secondary School, Maga — Maga, Kebbi State	Night-raid on boarding school; abduction of students; murder of vice-principal	25 schoolgirls abducted (1 escaped), vice-principal killed (Africanews)	Attack by armed gunmen / bandits; no group publicly claimed responsibility. (Al Jazeera)
21 November 2025	St Mary‘s School, Papiri — Papiri community, Niger State	Mass school abduction (boarding school)	~303 students + 12 staff abducted (both pupils and teachers) (The Guardian)	Believed to be ―armed men‖ / bandits; no explicit claim of responsibility. (Al Jazeera)
Nov–Dec 2025 (ongoing)	Niger State (and across north-western corridor including Kebbi)	Kidnappings, hostage-taking of schoolchildren, staff and civilians; mass abduction campaigns	As of early December: about 100 of the abducted schoolchildren released; many still missing / unaccounted for. (AP News)	Attacks attributed broadly to ―armed gangs / bandits.‖ Government increased air & ground surveillance over forests in Niger, Kebbi, Kwara. (Vanguard News)

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Oct 2025	Along Road between Kontagora (Niger) and Yauri (Kebbi)	Ambush / roadside kidnapping of passengers in commercial vehicle; village raids	Six passengers abducted; additional villagers kidnapped; vehicle torched; some rustling of cattle; at least one person shot. (TheCable)	Perpetrators described as ―bandits.‖ Kidnapping happened during travel between Niger and Kebbi — underscoring risk on transit routes. (TheCable)

Conclusion

The intersection of banditry, allied militias, and Christian persecution in Nigeria has created a complex security and socio-cultural crisis. The escalation of violent attacks ranging from mass abductions and village raids to targeted killings of religious leaders, illustrates the erosion of both state authority and traditional cultural norms. Communities that historically relied on communal trust, customary laws, and conflict-resolution mechanisms now face insecurity, fear, and social fragmentation. Bandits and militias, motivated by profit, political leverage, and opportunistic alliances, exploit governance gaps, porous borders, and local grievances, perpetuating cycles of violence. Simultaneously, Christian communities have

increasingly borne the brunt of targeted violence, indicating emerging patterns of religious persecution. This multifaceted crisis has reshaped societal expectations, moral codes, gender roles, and communal practices, revealing the urgent need for holistic interventions to restore security, cohesion, and cultural integrity.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Governance and Security: Enhance state presence in vulnerable areas through coordinated policing, intelligence-led operations, and border security improvements. Establish rapid-response mechanisms to prevent and respond to kidnappings and raids.

2. Promote Interfaith Dialogue and Community Peacebuilding: Facilitate initiatives that foster mutual understanding, tolerance, and collaboration between religious and ethnic groups to mitigate the risk of communal polarization.

3. Socioeconomic Development and Youth Empowerment: Address underlying drivers of banditry by creating employment opportunities, vocational training programs, and youth engagement initiatives in affected regions.

4. Legal and Judicial Reform: Ensure accountability for perpetrators through strengthened judicial processes, anti-corruption measures, and protection of witnesses, reducing impunity.

5. Support for Affected Communities: Provide psychosocial support, trauma counseling, and social reintegration programs for victims of banditry, kidnappings, and religious violence.

6. International Collaboration: Partner with regional and international bodies to combat cross-border banditry, monitor human rights violations, and support intelligence sharing.

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