Vernacular Security and Local Constructions of Insecurity: A Case Study of Plateau State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Mainstream security discourses in Nigeria have long been dominated by state-centric perspectives that frame insecurity through the lenses of terrorism, insurgency, and national security. However, these discourses often obscure the everyday ways in which ordinary people experience, narrate, and respond to insecurity. It is based on this stance that this article examines the conceptual framework of Vernacular Security Studies (VSS) to explore how residents of Plateau State, Nigeria, articulate and operationalize their own meanings of security and insecurity. Using qualitative research approach that draws on interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary sources, the study examines the vernacular categories through which Plateau residents perceive insecurity such as A*n Fara* ("it has started"), *Malos* (a local label for Muslims, often derogatory and pejorative), *Fulani* (as both threat and victim identity), and *Yan Ta'adi* (bandits/violent actors). The article argues that these terms are not mere linguistic artifacts but powerful vernacular securitizations that structure everyday practices of vigilance, exclusion, and resilience. By foregrounding local vocabularies of security, the study highlights the inadequacy of top-down counterinsurgency narratives and demonstrates the importance of grounding security studies in local knowledge.

Keywords: Conflict, Vernacular Security, Security, Insecurity, Plateau State, Nigeria

Introduction

Plateau State, in Nigeria's Middle Belt, has for decades occupied a central position in the country's security landscape (Ettang, 2015). Often described and regarded as Nigeria's "home of peace and tourism" (Ettang & Okem,2016). However, the event of September 7th, 2001, saw the state witnessing in reality recurring episodes of communal violence, ethno-religious conflict, and farmer-herder clashes (Krause, 2011; Higazi, 2013; Abdullahi, Abdullahi & Igbashangev, 2024). In dominant policy and media narratives, these conflicts are often represented as extensions of terrorism, religious extremism, or criminal banditry (Dalhatu, 2025). While not inaccurate, such framings privilege elite, state, and international perspectives over the lived realities of Plateau residents.

In contrast, the concept of vernacular security drawn from the vernacular security studies (VSS) emphasizes how ordinary people define and experience security in their own terms (Jarvis & Lister, 2013; Croft & Vaughan-Williams, 2017). Rather than

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accepting the universal validity of "terrorism" or "national security," VSS directs attention to the local languages, practices, and labels through which communities narrate insecurity (Jarvis, Lister & Oyawale, 2025). In Plateau state, for example, where daily life is shaped by memory of past violence and anticipation of new threats, vernacular security practices are not abstract but central to the survival of residents of the state (Titus, & Ogundiya, 2025).

Studies have shown that expressions such as *an fara* ("it has started") function as grassroots early-warning systems, while labels like *malos, Fulani,* and *yan ta'adi* shape who is perceived as a threat and who is seen as a victim (Musa & Ferguson, 2013; Fodang, 2018; Eke, 2022a). These vernaculars provide a lens into how Plateau residents themselves securitize their environment, often in ways that contradict or complicate state-centric approaches (Ossai, 2024).

This study, therefore, investigates how Plateau communities construct insecurity through vernacular labels and practices, and what implications this has for broader security policy in Nigeria. Specifically, this research aims to explore how insecurity is constructed, narrated, and contested in Plateau State, Nigeria, through vernacular categories, and how these local constructions challenge or complement state-centric security narratives and discourses. To achieve this objective, the article has the following research questions it seeks to ask: 1. What are the key vernacular terms and labels through which Plateau residents understand and articulate insecurity? 2. How do these vernaculars function as everyday practices of security and insecurity? 3. In what ways do local security discourses challenge, resist, or reinforce state-centric narratives of terrorism, banditry, and national unity? 4. What implications do vernacular security perspectives have for designing inclusive and context-sensitive security policies in Nigeria?

It is important to note that this article is significant in several respects. First, it contributes to the growing body of literature on vernacular security studies by applying its insights to a concrete African case. While VSS has been developed mainly in Euro-American contexts, its application in Plateau State demonstrates its relevance to societies where insecurity is deeply embedded in everyday life. Secondly, the study foregrounds the voices of local communities, amplifying their narratives against the backdrop of dominant state and international discourses. In doing so, it challenges the hegemony of counterterrorism frameworks that reduce complex local dynamics into simplistic categories of "terrorists" versus "victims." Finally, for policy formulation and implementation, the findings emphasize the importance of integrating local knowledge and vernacular understandings into conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and security sector reform in Nigeria. By recognizing terms like *An fara, Malos, Fulani,* and *Yan ta'adi* as meaningful categories of security, policymakers and practitioners can design interventions that resonate with communities rather than alienating them.

Conceptual Insights and Review of Relevant Literature: Vernacular Security Studies, Conflict, Insecurity, and Security

Vernacular Security Studies (VSS):

Vernacular Security Studies (VSS) provides the overarching lens for this framework. Unlike traditional security studies, which privilege state-centric or elite-driven discourses, VSS emphasizes how ordinary people construct and articulate meanings of security and insecurity in their everyday lives (Jarvis & Lister, 2013; Vaughan-Williams & Stevens, 2016). This perspective highlights that security is not universal but plural and situated, shaped by local histories, identities, and lived experiences. In conflict-prone environments like Jos, Plateau State, different groups produce different vernaculars in explaining the concept of security: for example, for indigenous farmers, security is tied to the protection of ancestral land, while for Fulani pastoralists, it may be framed as freedom of movement and access to grazing resources (Luckham & Kirk, 2012).

Conflict:

Within this vernacular frame of analysis, conflict is seen as the interaction of competing security claims. Coser (1998) argued that conflict is an inevitable feature of social relations, arising when groups perceive their interests as incompatible. As put forward by Galtung (1996), conflict may manifest as direct violence (physical harm), structural violence (embedded inequalities), or cultural violence (norms and beliefs that legitimize domination). From a vernacular perspective, conflict in Plateau is not simply an ethnic or religious clash but a negotiation over whose definition of security prevails: indigene groups seeking political recognition, settlers demanding equal citizenship, or pastoralists requiring mobility and livelihoods (Insights from Key Informant Interviews, 2025).

Insecurity:

Insecurity emerges when these vernacular conflicts escalate without effective resolution. Buzan (1991) conceptualized insecurity as the condition of being vulnerable to threats across military, political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors. Importantly, insecurity is both objective and subjective: it includes real threats to life and property but also the perception of being unsafe. Within the operational context of Jos, insecurity manifests in the recurrent communal clashes, forced displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and segregation of communities into "safe" and "unsafe" zones often referred to as *'no-go areas'* (Insights from KII, 2025). Here, vernacular perspectives sharpen the analysis by showing that insecurity is understood locally not only as fear of violence but also as loss of land, exclusion from governance, and denial of identity (Ibid).

Security:

Traditionally, security was defined in state-centric terms to mean the protection of sovereignty from external threats (Waltz, 1979; Topper, 1998). However, contemporary approaches broaden the concept to include human security: "freedom from fear and freedom from want" (UNDP, 1994). Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) further developed the idea of securitization, where issues are constructed as existential threats requiring urgent responses (Buzan et al., 1998). Within a vernacular frame, security is best understood as multidimensional and contested: the state may securitize farmer–

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herder conflict as a law-and-order issue, but local actors may frame it as a struggle for recognition, resources, or justice (Omotola, 2010).

Bringing these insights together, the framework it is important to understand that VSS provides the lens, by privileging local voices and recognizing multiple securities. This is because conflict is the process that arises when different vernaculars of security clash over resources, recognition, or power. Insecurity is the outcome of unresolved conflicts, experienced as both material threats (violence, displacement) and symbolic threats (marginalization and exclusion).

The concept of security is the goal, but its meaning is often described by its practitioners as contested, given the fact that it may be state-centric (stability, sovereignty), human-centered (basic needs, freedoms), or community-centered (cultural survival, identity protection). Thus, insecurity in Plateau State cannot be understood only through state-centric or religious/ethnic lenses; it must be seen as the product of competing vernacular securities that fuel conflict and reproduce these cycles of violence.

Furthermore, research has shown that indigene groups frame security in vernacular terms of land rights, ancestral heritage, and political control. For example, settler communities (e.g., Hausa) frame security in terms of equal citizenship and freedom from discrimination (FGDs, 2025). While the Fulani pastoralists frame security in terms of mobility, access to grazing, and protection from vigilante groups (KII, 2025). Whereas, the state frames security largely in terms of law-and-order, counter-violence, counterinsurgency, anti-terrorism, and electoral stability (KII, 2025). Therefore, the clash of these vernacular securities produces persistent conflict. When left unresolved, it translates into insecurity, manifesting as violence, displacement, and economic disruption. Achieving security in this context requires engaging with these multiple vernaculars rather than imposing a single, state-centric narrative.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Vernacular Security Studies, complemented by Everyday Security and Postcolonial Security Theory.

Vernacular Security Studies (VSS): Provides the central lens, positing that security is articulated differently across contexts and must be understood through local categories. Within the context of Plateau state, concepts such as *an fara, malos, Fulani*, and *yan ta'adi* are not simply words but securitizing acts (Insights from FGDs, 2025).

Secondly, *'Everyday Security'*, explains how communities operationalize these labels in daily life by mobilizing patrols, avoiding perceived threat-related markets, restricting farming, or engaging in interfaith mediation (KII, 2025). Thirdly, *Postcolonial Security* situates Plateau's vernaculars within historical legacies of colonial boundary-making, discriminatory land tenure, and the imposition of Eurocentric categories of security that misrepresent African agency (FGDS 2025; KII, 2025).

By synthesizing these approaches, the framework underscores the multiplicity of security meanings and highlights how local vernaculars contest elite-driven narratives.

Methodology

Research Design:

This is a qualitative study drawing on narrative and discourse analysis. It combines semi-structured interviews with key informants, focus group discussions (FGDs), and secondary sources, including media reports, NGO documents, and academic and non-academic documents relevant to the study.

Data Collection:

The Key Informant Interviews engagements was conducted with community leaders, youth, women's groups, and religious clerics in Jos North, Jos South, Barkin Ladi, and Riyom LGAs. The Focused Group Discussions were held with displaced persons and vigilante groups among the four designated LGAs in the Plateau North Senatorial Zone or districts.

The secondary sources involve archival news reports, policy briefs from relevant Civil Society Organizations and Non-governmental Organizations NGO, and other relevant documents to the study. The temporal dimension for both the FGDs and KIIs was from November 2024 – May, 2025.

Analytical Approach:

Discourse analysis was employed to trace how vernacular terms are mobilized in narratives of insecurity. Attention was paid to the performative power of language, how words like *an fara* trigger action, or how Fulani becomes a shorthand for threat.

Conflict and Insecurity in Jos- Plateau State: Background and Context

The city of Jos, capital of Plateau State in Nigeria's Middle Belt, has long been viewed as a melting pot of ethnicities, cultures, and religions (Titus & Ogundiya, 2025). Historically celebrated for its tin mining and cosmopolitan character, Jos has, since the late twentieth century, become one of Nigeria's most notorious flashpoints for violent conflict (Madueke, 2018). The cycles of violence, often framed along ethno-religious and farmer–herder lines, have produced protracted insecurity, large-scale displacement, and significant humanitarian consequences (Oosterom, Sha & Dowd, 2021).

Studies by several experts revealed that the roots of the Jos conflict are deeply embedded in colonial-era economic and demographic transformations. With the discovery of tin in the early twentieth century, British colonial authorities established Jos as a mining hub, attracting large numbers of Hausa-Fulani migrants from Northern Nigeria alongside other groups seeking work and trade (Blench, 2004; Oosterom et al. 2021). This rapid influx altered the demographic and cultural landscape, producing a diverse and multi-ethnic urban environment (Tuki, 2025). Yet colonial governance reinforced ethnic stratification, privileging certain groups over others and establishing patterns of residential segregation (Danfulani & Fwatshak, 2002; Madueke & Vermeulen, 2018). These colonial legacies hardened ethnic and religious boundaries that would later fuel competition and conflict.

As put forward by Asogwa, & Asogwa (2025), one of the most enduring sources of contention in Plateau State is the indigene–settler dichotomy. This is because, the Nigerian law and local politics accord "indigenes" communities regarded as original inhabitants, such as the *Berom, Anaguta, and Afizere,* privileged access to land, political appointments, and social services, while "settlers," often Hausa-Fulani migrants and their descendants, are marginalized in these domains (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Egwu, 2009; Afolabi, 2016; Eke, 2022b). The struggle over recognition and rights has thus become a central axis of political rivalry and social exclusion within the Jos environs (Katu, 2023).

The return to civilian rule in 1999 intensified political competition and revived dormant grievances among inhabitants of the Jos community. A turning point occurred on the 7th September 2001, when clashes over the appointment of a local coordinator escalated into days of rioting, and violence, leaving hundreds dead and entire neighborhoods destroyed (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Subsequent crises in 2004, 2008, post-LGA elections, and the 2010–2011 post-elections skirmishes reproduced similar patterns, which saw disputes over political representation, allegations of discrimination, or localized incidents such as disputes at markets or attacks on individuals rapidly spiralled into communal violence (Krause, 2011; Insights from FGDs and KIIs, 2025).

In many of such conflict cases, state security responses worsened rather than alleviated the situation (FGDs, 2025). This is because there are reported incidences of excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests, and lack of accountability for perpetrators, further deepening distrust in state institutions to manage the conflict (Insights from FGDs, and KIIs 2025). Despite the recommendations of several judicial commissions of inquiry established after these crises, yet their recommendations were seldom implemented, reinforcing a culture of impunity and crass arrogance (KII, 2025).

Dimensions and Consequences of the Conflict and Insecurity in Jos - Plateau State

The periods from the mid-2000s onward, the conflict in Jos coincided with Nigeria's wider farmer–herder crisis, inter-religious, and inter-ethnic strives (Njoku & Kolapo, 2022). This is because competition over resources such as land, water, and grazing routes became increasingly violent as pastoralist communities, mainly Fulani, moved southward due to desertification, demographic pressures, and insecurity in northern Nigeria (International Crisis Group, 2017). On the Plateau, where land is already scarce due to population growth and urbanization, crop damage by cattle or retaliatory killings quickly escalated into large-scale violence (Adenuga, 2022). The proliferation of small arms and the rise of organized armed groups increased the lethality of these clashes (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Adediran, Olaogun, Oluwadele, & Oluwadele, 2021).

While often portrayed in religious terms, the conflict in Jos, is fundamentally tied to structural issues of governance deficit, resource governance, weak conflict resolution institutions, and climate-induced migration (Tonah, 2006; Adeyeye, 2020). Yet the political and media framing frequently reduces these complex dynamics to simplistic Muslim-Christian antagonism, thereby obscuring underlying economic and ecological dimensions (Interview, with a Religious Cleric in Jos, February 18th, 2025).

The recurrent violence in Jos has devastated local communities where thousands of lives have been lost across successive waves of violence, while tens of thousands have been displaced from their ancestral homes (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Markets, places of worship, schools, and homes have been destroyed, eroding livelihoods and undermining inter-communal trust and community spirit of togetherness and oneness (). Other critical sectors such as education and healthcare have been severely disrupted, while youth unemployment and poverty remain high, feeding recruitment into armed groups (Best, 2007; Krause, 2011; Maza, Koldas, & Sait, 2020). The conflict has also transformed the city's social geography, this is because, once-integrated neighborhoods have become increasingly segregated along ethnic and religious lines, with the "no-go" areas labeling for particular groups (Danfulani & Fwatshak, 2002). This fragmentation reduces opportunities for inter-group interaction, entrenching stereotypes and suspicion (KII, 2025).

There have been numerous efforts made by states and non-state actors to address the conflict and insecurity in Plateau State by successive administrations from 1999 to date (Insights from FGDs, 2025). This was further accompanied by the setting up of several peace committees, interfaith dialogues, and community mediation initiatives which have occasionally succeeded in reducing tensions at the grassroots level (Egwu, 2009). However, their effectiveness is often undermined by the failure of the state and other relevant agencies to address structural inequalities, reform land tenure systems, or prosecute perpetrators of violence (Maza et al. 2020). Legislative proposals such as anti-grazing laws or "cattle colonies" have generated further controversy, as they are seen by some groups as discriminatory or as attempts to dispossess them of land (International Crisis Group, 2017; Adebayo, 2024).

It is important to note that the conflict and insecurity in Jos are the product of historical legacies, political exclusion, and resource competition, exacerbated by weak governance and climate pressures. While often framed in religious or ethnic terms, the violence is rooted in broader structural challenges of citizenship, land rights, and institutional legitimacy. Sustainable peace will require moving beyond reactive security deployments toward systemic reforms: clarifying indigene–settler rights, strengthening inclusive governance, investing in resource management, and ensuring accountability for violence. Without such measures, Jos risks remaining trapped in cycles of violence that undermine both local development and Nigeria's broader stability.

Analysis: Vernacular Constructions of Insecurity in Plateau State

1. "An Fara": Anticipation and Early Warning:

The phrase *an fara* ("it has started") is used widely across Plateau as an alarm signal (FGDs, 2025). In this context, it refers not only to the outbreak of violence but to a shared memory of cycles of conflict (KIIs, 2025). Once uttered, it often triggers defensive actions for youths mobilization to defend their respective communities, a call for women to hide their children, and sellers in the market and other public spaces to scamper for safety thereby making these places to become deserted (Interview with a community leader in Angwan Rukuba, 2025). Insights from the FGDs and KII's revealed

that the concept and idea of *An fara* thus performs a securitizing function which further translates rumour mongering into certainty and everyday fear into action (KIIs, 2025; FGDs, 2025).

2. *"Malos": Religious Othering:*

The term *malos* (from Hausa, often derogatory for Muslims) exemplifies how security is constructed along religious lines (FGDs 2025). In local Christian narratives, *malos* are frequently associated with external jihadist threats, while Muslim communities reject the label as stigmatizing (Interview with a Cleric in Jos, 2025). The word demonstrates how insecurity is not only physical but embedded in identity politics and vernacular labelling (FGDs, 2025).

3. *"Fulani": Between Threat and Victimhood:*

In Plateau discourses, the idea of the *Fulani* is often associated as a shorthand for armed herders associated with attacks on farming communities (FGDs, 2025). Yet, within the Fulani narratives and discourses, they too are victims of cattle rustling, discrimination, and political exclusion. They are also misrepresented by the media to be harbingers of insecurity and violence (Interview, with a Fulani community leader in Jos, 2025). The term thus embodies ambivalence, showing how vernaculars can both stigmatize and humanize this community of peoples depending on the perspective and stance one supports (FGDs, 2025).

4. *"Yan Ta'adi" The Bandit Figure:*

Yan ta'adi refers to violent criminal actors, often blamed for kidnappings and rural banditry (Insights from FGDs and KIIs, 2025). Unlike Fulani or malos, which are identity-bound, *yan ta'adi* is action-bound, describing behavior rather than ethnicity (FGDs, 2025). However, in practice, the label is often racialized, merging into the broader *Fulani and Malos* identity discourses (FGDs, 2025). This conflation does not only fuels mistrust but also makes reconciliation difficult as it relates to the conflict, insecurity and securitization narratives in Jos, Plateau state.

Findings

The following are findings of this article:

1. Vernaculars as security infrastructure where words like *an fara* function as informal early-warning systems.

2. Language and Identity: Labels such as malos and Fulani securitize religious and ethnic difference.

3.   Ambiguity and Contestation in the understanding of terms like *Fulani*'s highlight how victim-perpetrator boundaries are blurred.

4.   Everyday Agency: Local communities use these vernaculars to mobilize resilience practices such as vigilante patrols, church-mosque mediation, and restricted farming practices.

5.   There has always been a disjuncture with state narratives regarding the concept and idea of insecurity, where state security forces often frame violence as "terrorism" or "banditry," while the locals articulate it in vernaculars that better capture everyday lived realities and experiences.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that in Plateau State, insecurity cannot be fully understood through state-centric categories. Instead, residents draw on vernacular vocabularies such as *an fara, malos, Fulani, yan ta'adi* to interpret, respond to, and endure insecurity. These terms shape everyday practices of survival, exclusion, and resilience. By foregrounding vernacular constructions, the study challenges reductive narratives of "ethnic" or "religious" violence and instead highlights the plural, contested, and deeply contextual meanings of security.

Therefore to address this, the article suggests the following recommendations:

1.   There is a need for Policy Integration where security agencies should integrate vernacular early-warning systems, such as *an fara,* into the formal peace and security architecture.

2.   There should be deliberate de-stigmatization campaigns through community dialogues to address derogatory labels such as *malos, Fulani,* to reduce identity-based securitization.

3.   States and non-state actors should ensure the entrenchment of community-based policing practice by leveraging vigilante and youth groups that embed them in inclusive, accountable security frameworks and arrangements.

4.   Relevant stakeholders should ensure the introduction of peace education at formal and informal settings that seek to promote narratives that challenge the conflation of identity with insecurity.

5.   Scholars and policymakers must resist external frames that erase local agency and instead recognize vernacular security practices as valid knowledge systems.

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