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## **Co-victims or Antagonists: Some Observations on Farmers and Herders Conflicts in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Farmers and herders conflict is an example of eco-violence, where scarcity of resources caused by environmental factors led to conflict and violence among competing groups. In Central Nigeria, the conflict is fundamentally a land-use contest between farmers and herders. Although the conflict has taken a dangerous religious and ethnic dimension with devastating effects on ethnic relations, however, the objective of this paper is to identify the underlying causes which has its root in the climate induces degradation of pasture causing increasing violence in the far north and thereby forced herders to move southward. This paper made reference to newspaper publications, statute books, published books and close-group discussion and interview with selected individuals who shared their personal experiences with the authors. The findings reveal that the movement of livestock en mass to the Central Nigeria area caused degradation on the environment resulting in the desolation of the land thereby reducing arable land for cultivation. The overgrazing of the area led to fewer yields in production of crops such as yam, cassava, rice, maize, guinea corn, and soya beans amongst others. Therefore, in a quest to expand their farmland for more yields, farmers swallowed up grazing reserves and block traditional grazing routes. The anti-grazing laws passed by some States of the Central Nigeria was not only geared towards curbing clashes but also to mitigate the environmental impact of the open grazing due to the over grazing of the area.

### **Keywords:**

*Environment, Ecology, over-grazing, desertification, land degradation.*

## Introduction

“The environment is man first right, without a safe environment, man cannot exist to claim other rights, be they political, social or economic.”\* This statement by Ken Saro-Wiwa shortly before he was executed by the Nigerian government in 1995, aptly captures the importance of the environment to human survival. The farmers and herders have their means of livelihood hinged on the environment which in the recent years seems to have failed ecologically. Therefore, the discourse revolves around the indices of the failure and the factors responsible.

The paper is divided into sections. The first is the ongoing introduction, the second deals with the review of the early contact between the farmers and herders during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. The third section is tag what happened to the environment. The fourth section looks at types and causes of environmental degradation. Section five analyses the various measures taken to keep the environment safe and the last section is the conclusion.

## Early Contact between the Farmers and Herders

Farmers and herders contact in central Nigeria area is not a recent phenomenon. Nigeria history is replete of the movements and contacts between the Fulani who were and are still the majority of the group that owns the herds and other ethnic groups who were and are predominantly farmers. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the leaders of the Jihad movement who were predominantly Fulani had consolidated their administration in the far north and spread to the central Nigeria area. Attempts to consolidate their Emirate rule among the non-Fulani groups of the central Nigeria was not smooth like experienced in the far north. The ethnic groups of central Nigeria area resisted to be conquered and included in the emirate system of administration. As Sa’ad Abubakar states, “the revolt by the non-Fulani made it extremely difficult for the Fulani to consolidate their control over the various “heathen tribes” within the perimeter of the emirate and this explains the nature of conflict throughout most part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”† In order to expand their territory, the rulers raided the territories of their neighbours causing destruction. The attacks by the emirates on the minority ethnic groups were driven by unbridled materialism and plunder for resources.‡

The strains and stresses in the relationship between the Fulani and other ethnic groups of central Nigeria area ended when British colonial domination was imposed in Nigeria. The British colonial administrative policy curved out the minority groups from the emirate rule as they were put in separate Divisions and Districts away from the emirate control. For instance, Benue Province was created mainly to cater for the groups outside the emirate system. Ethnic groups that were before the advent of the British not under the administration of the emirate were placed in Benue Province.§ Indeed, the migration and contact between the people whose profession was

\* Maathai W. *The Challenge for Africa*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2009, p.249 (Google scholar)

† Sa’ad Abubakar, “The Established Caliphate: Sokoto, the Emirate and their neighbours” in Obaro Ikime (ed) *Ground work of Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980, p.311

‡ Mahmoud Hamman, *The Middle Benue region and Sokoto Jihad 1812 – 1869: The Impact of the Establishment of the Emirate of Muri*, Kaduna: Ahmadu Bello University press, 2007, p.116

§ J.A. Ballard, “Pagan administration and Political Development in Northern Nigeria” in *Savannah*, Vol.1

No.1 June 1972, p.8 it should be noted that the former Benue Province comprised the present State of Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa, part of Kogi State and Southern part of Taraba State.

solely to keep herds and farmers continued even with the establishment of the British rule. During this period, the herders wanted to evade the much hated cattle tax (jangali) imposed by the British colonial government and exacerbated by the rulers in the far north migrated to the central Nigeria area and even shifting their migratory routes further south.

For over a century, herders were forced to move from one region to the other. The reason for their constant movement varied, Sa'ad Abubakar attributed their movements to the deteriorating pasture position and increased incursion by other nomads.<sup>\*\*</sup> The question that readily comes to mind is what was responsible for the deterioration of the pasture and the aggressive movements of the nomads to new places. The movements of the herders is intensified in the recent period causing conflict with farmers which has been a source of serious security challenge threatening the stability of the country, therefore the need to finding the underlying factor for their constant movements.

### **The Condition of the Environment**

There are constant changes in the Nigeria environment. In 2008, the National Meteorological Agency reported that over the preceding thirty years the annual rainy season dropped from an average of 150 to 200 days. The report further states that in the last six decades, over 350,000 square kilometer of the arid region turned to desert or desert-like conditions and progressing southward at the rate of 0.6km per year. The Nigeria far north States were worst hit with this environment change, with 50 – 70 percent of land area becoming desert.<sup>††</sup> The environmental condition which is the deteriorating condition of the land led to desertification which is the word use to describe waterless, treeless, uninhabited or sparsely inhabited land. The amount of arable land lost to desertification annually is at the rate of ten kilometers. Yusuf Dingyadi says the desert encroaches with about 20 to 30 kilometers annually or more than compare to ten years back.<sup>‡‡</sup> The Nigeria far north experienced long dry season from October to May and low rainfall (600 to 900mm) from June to September.<sup>§§</sup> The desertification is believed to be responsible for altered whether patterns and increase frequency of the extreme weather.

The changes in the environment had adverse effect on the population whose sources of livelihood were tied to land resources. The non-stop environmental degradation in the far-north caused many herders to migrate in search of pasture. The movement took them to the central Nigeria area and their presence in large number compounded the overcrowded space. The climates induce degradation of the pasture of the far-north made survival difficult for the herders. In searching for suitable pasture and water, herders moved their cattle mostly on foot across cultivated and not cultivated lands. The movements of the cattle en mass and repeatedly caused degradation to the land. The herders when make camps usually temporary as they seldom have permanent home

<sup>\*\*</sup> Sa'ad Abubakar, Lamibe of Fombina: *A Political History of Adamawa 1809 – 1901*, Zaria, ABU press, 1977, p.27

<sup>††</sup> Ahmed- Gamgum, W.A, Herders and Farmers Conflict in Nigeria: Another Dimension of Insecurity” *Journal of Public Administration and Social Welfare Research*, Vol.3, No.1, 2018 , p23.

<sup>‡‡</sup> Yusuf Dingyadi, Desert Encroachment: Poor Response on Managing Disaster.

[www.gaji.com/article3000/NEWS3662.HTM](http://www.gaji.com/article3000/NEWS3662.HTM). 11/6/2022

<sup>§§</sup> Koroma, D.S.M, “Perspective on the Political Economy of Drought, Desertification and Famine in the Arid Zone of Nigeria” in Ashafa, A.M (ed) *The Challenges of Nigeria at 50, Essay in Honour of Professor Abdullahi Mahadi*, Gombe: Gombe State University, 2010,p.278

transverse particular portion of land in search of grazing pasture which were also usually scarce. As ruminant animal, cattle need large amount of grass to adequately feed on

The overgrazing of the land of the Central Nigeria area led to hash ecological disruption thereby depleting the fertility of the land. An environment that suffered overgrazing experiences shortage of adequate pasture growth. This has a multiplier effects on both the farmers and herders. On the one hand, as the land lost its fertility, farmers tend to increase their farmland which in turn threatened the survival of the herds which made them veer into farmlands and destroyed crops.\*\*\*

It is instructive to note that the herds grazed everywhere they like. The movement of herds from place to place in search of water and pasture was only more suitable in the far north because of relatively large land and pasture with sparse population. The partially drier nature of the environment of the far north due to short duration of rainfall makes it suitable to cultivate different types of crops that might not require enough rain. At the end of the short period of the rain and crops harvested, the herders were encouraged to freely move around in search of pasture and water. The expansion of farm space to meet up with their poor yield which was cause by overgrazing of the farmland was adopted by farmers to address the environmental failure. The shortage in the amount of the annual rainfall drastically affected crop production. Therefore, the river flood plains usually called *fadama* were put under intensive cultivation during the dry season. In other words, the dry season farming was employed by the farmers to cushion the inadequacy of the rain during the wet season. As the farmers desire the water bodies in the dry season to cultivate crops to augment what they could not achieve due to short period of rain fall, the herders on the other hand need the pasture around the streams and river for their cattle.

The ecological effect or degradation of the land is created by consolidation of an effectively substantial and expanding human populace. The depletion of resources such as air, water and soil cause the deteriorating of the environment. The constant tempering or destruction of the ecosystems, habitats and the extinction of wildlife by humans and animals result to environmental degradation. This occurs when the earth's natural resources are depleted. Rapid growth in population of humans and animals is a catalyst for destruction of the environment.

### **Types and Causes of Environmental Degradation**

Environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment which are done through the consumption of assets, for example, air, water and soil. Degradation of soil and land occurred as a result of poor farming practices, excessive use of fertilizer and pesticides. The application of fertilizer in excess by farmer is because the land has lost its natural fertility which was due to not only human activities because the increase frequency of extreme weather had direct effect on the soil.

It should be noted that although most of the destructions on the environment were human inflicted, however, nature itself caused ecological issues as well. In other words, while environmental degradations were always connected with the action of people, the environment itself changes. With or without the effect of human activities, a few biological systems degraded

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\*\*\* Vahyala Adamu Tari, "Farmers and Herders Conflicts in Riyom Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria" in *FUWukari Journal of Politics and Development*, Vol.3, No.2, July 2019,p.253

to the point that they could not adequately sustain the population whose livelihood depended on the natural resources. Human degrade soils when they compact it, disrupt its organic and inorganic structure. Desertification, urbanization, mining, overgrazing and alteration of soil moisture all damage or destroy soil. Soil constitute the foundation of human agriculture, yet agriculture , including livestock salting and saturation of poorly managed irrigated lands, compaction by heavy machinery and the hooves of livestock, pollution from excessive fertilizers, animal waste and pesticides.

Water degradation is the pollution of water from trash dumped in ocean, illegal dumping or disposal of large amounts of industrial waste into nearby river or lake. People spent energy, money and time trying to control the movement and availability of water than to manage any other natural resources. In the process we contaminate water, move water across and out of natural basins, deplete surface and ground water and alter natural flood pattern. In doing so, we dry up wetlands, lakes and inland sea.

Deforestation is also common in Central Nigeria area and had adverse effect on the environment. The use of forest land for agriculture and animal grazing caused harm to the environment as decrease forest size put carbon back into the environment. By over harvesting fish, over cutting forest, overgrazing grassland we are killing other organisms outright or eliminating their habitats, thereby driving species to extinction and impoverishing the diversity of life. In addition, biotic impoverishment also encompasses the categories of human impacts on the biosphere which are direct depletion of living system through alteration in physical and chemical environments, direct depletion of human life.<sup>†††</sup>

At this juncture it should be clear that in Nigeria farmers were the producers of arable crops. Estimates in 2006 suggested that 75 percent of food comes from 12 arable crops and five animal species. Only three arable crops namely rice, maize and wheat account for about 60 percent of the calories and proteins obtained from plants. The production of these crops forms the basis of subsistence as food and sources of income. The rural- base small scale arable crop producers account for about 80 percent of total food supply. The average farm size is about 4.58 hectares.<sup>†††</sup> In central Nigeria area millions of hectares of arable crops were cultivated annually which were mostly rain-fed, with farming activities normally beginning at the onset of rains. The crops apart from being veritable source of income for farmers, it was also processed into other useful items at industrial and household levels. Indeed, the need for the suitable soil for the cultivation arable crop is indispensable. Adequate arable land is needed by the farmers for their survival and material need. On the other hand, the produce of the herds is the main source of meat, the most available and cheap source of animal proteins consumed by Nigerians.

### **Measures Taken to Save the Environment**

The Taraba State Open Gazing prohibition and ranches establishment law, 2017 in one of its objectives unequivocally states in section 3 (e) “to regulate and support the growth of livestock

<sup>†††</sup> Karr,J.R and Chu, E.W, “Ecological integrity: Reclaiming lost connection” in Westra, L and Lemon, J, (eds) Perspectives in Ecological Integrity, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic, 1995, pp 34 - 48

<sup>†††</sup> Krupa, S, Global Climate Change and Sustainability of Food Security, EnviroNews – Newsetter of Indian Society for Environmental Biology (ISEB) India, Vol.16, No.3, July 2010,

farming and prevent the environmental impact of open livestock grazing.”<sup>§§§</sup> The general perception and the public and particularly the herders saw the law as meant to cause hardship to them. Although it is true that the law was aim at preventing recurrent violent clash between the farmers and herders, however, one of its salient objectives was to prevent the effects of overgrazing on the environment. The law in section 17 states as follows: “It shall be unlawful for any person to engage in the rearing of livestock by openly grazing on farm land or any other land except within the confines of a ranch.”<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> The decision to control the indiscriminate movements of cattle was a right step toward preserving the environment. When the environment is free from too many human and animal disturbances, it will regain its fertility and serve the purpose of the population whose livelihood depended on it. The open grazing prohibition law as passed by some States in Central Nigeria received condemnation from larger population without taking the benefit of the law to the environment into consideration. The open grazing prohibition law was pro-environment.

The Federal Government of Nigeria through Decree No.58 of 1988 established the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) to protect, restore and preserve the ecosystem. FEPA was given the right to search locations, seize items and arrest people contravening any law on environmental standard and prosecuting them.<sup>†††</sup> The National Environmental Standards and Regulations Agency (NESREA) was later created in 2007 to replace the defunct FEPA. The body was charged with the protection of the Nigeria’s environment. In line with section 20 of the 1999 constitution as Amended, the Federal Government, established the agency as an institution under the supervision of the Federal Ministry of Environment.<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>

Since its establishment on 30<sup>th</sup> July, 2007, NESREA was saddled with the responsibility for enforcing of environmental standards, regulations, rules, laws, policies and guidelines. It was also charge with the responsibility for the protection and development of Nigeria’s natural resources as well as environmental technology. Over the years, the agency was more concerned with regulation on importation, exportation, production, distribution, storage, disposal of hazardous chemical and waste, safer use of pesticide and disposal of spent packages. From all indication, it’s commendable that they focus on hazardous chemical and waste so as not to repeat the Koko incident of 1988. The embarrassing incidence happened in in June 1988, when a toxic waste was dumped by an Italian ship in Koko, a remote town of the then Bendel State and now Delta State. The Federal Government swiftly followed up by enacting the Harmful Waste (Special Criminal Provision) Acts, 1988 to deal specifically with illegal dumping of harmful waste.<sup>§§§§</sup>

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<sup>§§§</sup> Taraba State of Nigeria Official Gazette, Taraba State Law NO.7 of 2017: The Taraba State open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law , 2017, p3

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Taraba State of Nigeria Official Gazette, Taraba State Law NO.7 of 2017... p8

<sup>†††</sup> Apeku Gabriel Aondofa Melvin, “National Youth Service Corps and Collaboration with National Environmental Standard and Regulations Enforcement Agency” in Shuaibu Ibrahim et al (eds) *The National Youth Service Corps and Nigeria’s Health Sector*, Kaduna:Pyla-Mak press, 2021, p.234

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> Apeku Gabriel Aondofa Melvin, “National Youth Service Corps and Collaboration with National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency” in Shuaibu Ibrahim et al (eds) ... p238

<sup>§§§§</sup> Apeku Gabriel Aondofa Melvin, “National Youth Service Corps and Collaboration with National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency” in Shuaibu Ibrahim et al (eds) ...



Following the Koko incidence, the Nigeria Government led the fight against hazardous waste dumping until the signing of the Basel Convention against trans-boundary transportation of hazardous, toxic and radioactive waste in 1989. A replica of this action is needed in the fight against human and animal activities that deteriorate the arable land in Central Nigeria area and the country as a whole. NESREA should as a matter of urgency take serious measures to address activities leading to gradual degradation of the cultivable land.

It is also obvious that some of the government agencies which have focused on the environment protection and sanitation are worth commendation because in 2015, World Health Organization estimated that four billion cases of diseases related to poor sanitation and hygiene were recovered.<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> It is also expedient that the deterioration of the arable land be given deserve attention, in order to increase food production and ensure availability of meat for human consumption. In addition, it will also mitigate the violent conflicts between farmers and herders which have been adjudge as a threat to our national unity. Undoubtedly, we must have an environment that is completely safe before we tackle our socio-economic and engage in political gerrymandering.

To save the environment from land contamination, portion of land should be carefully selected and mapped for refuse disposal. There is need for awareness in protecting our environment from degradation since the quality of what we eat and drink on this planet is a function of it.<sup>††††</sup> Generally, engineered crops do confer some economic and environmental benefits for farmers as its result to higher yields, lower cost, saving in management time and gains in flexibility for the environment, indirect benefit from using fewer pesticides and herbicides. But it is still an open question whether such benefit out weight potential ecological risks or whether the public will embrace having genetically modified foods as dietary staple. It is clear that biotechnologists focus on the potential of the new millennium green revolution to feed the growing population, but other scientists worry about unknown human and ecological health risks.

It is pertinent to stress with emphasis that the farmers and herders should see themselves as co-victims of an environment that has failed or is failing ecologically. What they need to do therefore, is to work together and find ways that will facilitate their mutual survival. As Yusufu Bala Usman stress:

Fighting like primitive caveman, slaughtering  
one another over spurious claims for piece of  
territory, we are not capable of putting to use,  
amount to taking a short cut to our demise, as  
our standards of human existence sink further  
and further below those of the rest of mankind.  
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<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> Ntagu, Miracle Promise and Promise, Chinecherem Victory, “NYSC and Environmental Sanitation Advocacy in Nigeria (A Review of NYSC Environmental Protection and Sanitation CDS Group activities in Anambra State)”, in Shuiabu Ibrahim et al (eds)... p.290

<sup>††††</sup> Joel Patrick Dada and I.I Orie, *Studies in Environmental Archeology*, Owerri: C.N Ozic Production, 2014, p.224

<sup>††††</sup> Analyst, Vol.4:No.3, 2004, p.7

## Conclusion

The 2004 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize admonishes that if we destroy the environment, we will undermine our own ways of life and ultimately kill ourselves. This is way the environment needs to be at the center of domestic and international policy and practice. If it is not, we don't stand a chance of alleviating poverty in any significant way.<sup>§§§§§</sup> In Nigerian this kind of advice was ignored for decades, the nation is experiencing the negative reactions of populations whose livelihood depended on the environment as they struggle to survive and escape its impact.

In 2000, World Leaders supported by the United Nations Development Programme, define a set of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be attained by 2015 which combine poverty, education, employment and environmental sustainability. The agency reported in 2015 that global poverty has been reduced by halved, about 91% of the world's population had access to improved drinking water sources, and remarkable progress had been made in fighting malaria and tuberculosis, but environmental sustainability remains under severe threat, as global carbon emissions escalate and forest are felled. Practically, MDGs did little or nothing to sustain the environment. Ecologically, Nigeria's environment especially of Central Nigeria had failed due to human, animal and natural causes living the farmers and herders as co-victims. The case was not like this in the past decades, this is because the green colour in Nigeria's national flag depicts the preponderance of green pasture of the country's environment and Michael Taiwo Akinkunmi who designed the flag was correct to describe the environment as green, unfortunately the beautiful environment have degraded just before the announcement of his demise on Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> August, 2023.

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<sup>§§§§§</sup> Maathai W, The Challenge for Africa....



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