

## **From Friendship to Conflict: Interrogating Farmers-Herders Relations in the Middle Benue Valley, 1804-2017**

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### **Abstract**

The paper interrogates farmers-herd relations in the Middle Benue Valley from 1804-2017. It establishes that farmers and herders were neither enemies nor at wars since time immemorial. The narratives of their contacts and relations in the Middle Benue valley have not been that of conflicts, crises and wars as the case may be. Prior to the evolution of the present state of antagonisms and violence, the two groups had co-existed and co-habited mutually and peacefully in a socio-economic and cultural ambience devoid of rancor and suspicion. This established ties and generated socio-cultural osmosis. This symbiosis became antagonized with the emergence of violent clashes and mutual suspicion between the sedentary farming communities in the Middle Benue valley and the pastoral herders' community thereby making the sustenance of the hitherto symbiotic relationship and pace elusive. This reduced the Middle Benue region to a hotbed of crisis and conflict; a theater of war where life has become "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to interrogate the dynamic nature and character of farmer-herder relations in the Middle Benue valley within the period under study. The paper utilized both primary (interviews) and secondary sources to arrive at its findings. It concludes that the two groups, historically, were not in a competitive struggle that was capable of engendering conflicts. The transition of their relationship from friendship to conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was a concomitant effect of some environmental changes, mutations and metamorphoses from the Sahel region across Nigeria which affected both the ecological and ethnographic configuration of the area. Other intervening variables and factors also inter-played to compound the worsening relationship.

### **Introduction**

Historically, the phenomenon of pastoralism which often gives rise to herders-farmers conflicts is an age-long development and movement which pre-dated the evolution of Nigeria as a

geo-political entity. The movement of the nomads from one location to another in search of grazing land was, and is, a resultant effect of ecological, geographical and environmental changes and mutations. According to scholars of environmental studies, these changes are often occasioned by decreasing interdependence of pastoral and agricultural economies and other natural environmental factors like drought and desertification etc. Against this backdrop, two theoretical approaches or postulations emerged to explain the causes of herders-farmers conflict in Africa: the environmental security approach and the political ecological theory. The environmentalists hinged their argument on scarcity of resources and the increasing competition for these scarce resources which they deem to be the major causes of the conflicts.<sup>1</sup> The political ecological school of thought, on the other hand, impugned the environmentalist thesis that there is a causal or symbiotic link between resource scarcity and violent conflicts between the two groups. Using countries like Cote d' Ivoire and Central Cameroon as case studies, they argued that though grazing areas are relatively abundant in these countries, herders-farmers conflicts still abound and even more intense and precarious. Thus, the exponents of the political ecological school postulate that the causes of herder-farmer conflicts can be

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<sup>1</sup> Homer-Dixon, T.F. *Environment, scarcity and violence*. Princeton: University Press, 1999. 30.

located within the worsening pastoral and agricultural economies and the impoverishment of the two groups due to some intervening variables.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the emergence of the present state of mutual antagonisms, skirmishes and violent conflicts between the herders and farmers, the two groups had co-existed and cohabited peacefully in a socio-economic and cultural ambience. This peaceful co-existence became elusive with the emergence of violent clashes between the two groups across the length and breadth of Africa. Thus, from the horn of Africa to the Cape of Good Hope, from the Zambezi Rivers to the Coast of West Africa and from the Sahel region across the Sahara to the Limpopo Rivers, reports of herders-farmers violent conflicts reverberated and echoed through the once peaceful ethnographic and ecological landscape of Africa. This did not only distort but also truncated every attempt at restoring the fast degenerating and eroding peace, confidence and trust between the herders and the sedentary farming communities on the continent. In West Africa and indeed Nigeria, agriculture and pastoralism co-existed side by side in a mutually interdependent fashion for centuries. In the Middle Benue valley, the two groups had co-existed

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<sup>2</sup> Basset, Thomas J., "The Political Ecology of Peasant-herder Conflicts on the Northern Ivory Coast." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 78(3), 1998. 450-475.

and cohabited peacefully and mutually in a socio-economic climate before the evolution of the present state of mutual antagonisms, skirmishes and violence. According to Mark Moritz,

Many communities of farmers and herders have built interdependent relationships with one another through emerging processes of exchange. Such interdependence has often been described as symbiotic, in which the two communities form host-client or host-stranger relationship with one another.<sup>3</sup>

This level of inter-group relations generated socio-cultural and economic linkages, established ties and bonds of friendship with attendant interdependence and symbiosis. In the Middle Benue valley, this relationship under-went some levels of metamorphoses in the aftermath of the Jihad of 1804 that led to the establishment of the caliphate and the concomitant shift of political power from the Hausa Aristocrats to the emerging Fulani Oligarchy. This phenomenon gave the Fulani, predominantly pastoralists and nomads, further impetus to extend footholds to areas that hitherto were not within the Hausa States but were within areas of influence either due to diplomacy or geographical proximity.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Moritz, "Understanding Herder-Farmer Conflicts in West Africa: Outline of a Processual Approach." *Journal of Human Organization*, vol.69. No.2, 2010. 139-142.

The Benue valley was to witness increased migratory movements and large scale settlement of Fulani herders from both the Sahel region and far north. This antecedent affected the ethnographic, ecological and demographic configuration of the Benue valley significantly.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century when this phenomenal migration and penetration of the region became widespread, the farming communities in the Benue valley had lived and cohabited with these stranger-elements as hosts amicably, cultivating symbiotic relationships. This peaceful co-existence began to wane from the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and progressively advanced to a crisis point by the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Peace and mutual understanding became elusive in the aftermath of the violent clashes and wars that ensued. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to interrogate the inter-group relations between the farming communities in the Middle Benue valley and the Fulani herding communities from the 1804, when Uthman dan Fodio led a jihad in Hausaland, to 2017, when the debacle assumed a new dimension.

### **Conceptual Issues/ Clarifications**

#### **Inter-group relations**

The study is essentially on inter-group relations. It focuses on the farming communities in the Middle Benue valley and their client, the Fulani pastoralists. Many scholars, past and present, have attempted to conceptualize the term from diverse

intellectual climates and perspectives. According to A.E. Afigbo, "inter-group relations pre-supposes contact and interaction between groups each of which has an identity to make some inputs into the relationship, in short, each of which has some scope and area of autonomous actions."<sup>4</sup> Okpe Okpe, in his contribution, observed that inter-group relations entail contact and interactions between groups, which implies that it is the logical consequence of contact between people, in which case it deals with human beings and therefore a social phenomenon which significantly means that wherever and in whichever form it manifests (whether as inter-ethnic, inter-racial, inter-religious, inter-class, inter-generational, cross-gender, international or supra-national relations), inter-group relations reflect human actions which are also part of the process of existence. Okpe Okpe further raises the issue of unique identities of the interacting groups and the reciprocity of interactions as vital elements of inter-group relations.<sup>5</sup>

M. Sherif and G.W. Sherif define inter-group relations as a state of friendship or hostility, cooperation or competition, dominance or subordination, alliance or enmity, peace or war between two or more groups and their respective members.<sup>6</sup> According to E. Robert, the term refers to the responsive behavior and interaction of societies or groups towards one another.<sup>7</sup> Other scholars have defined it as a process within a broad continuum.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that though inter-group relations may take the form of war and enslavement, they also express themselves through diplomacy, treaties, the visit of travelling scholars, borrowing of techniques and above all trade. Viewing inter-group relations as a process within a broad continuum, the following five stages of inter-group relations will be explored and applied as tools in assessing the dynamics of farmers-herders relations in the Middle Benue valley: the stage of contact and interaction; the stage of compromise and cooperation; the stage of competition; the stage of conflict; and

<sup>4</sup>Afigbo, A.E., *The Igbo and their Neighbours: Inter-group Relations in South-eastern Nigeria to 1935*. Ibadan: University Press, 1980. 18. Also see Apex A. Apeh and Chidi M. Amaechi, "Agaba Idu: Historicizing Culture-Contact and Royalty among some Nigerian Peoples" *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, Vol. 27 No. 1 2019, 37-53.

<sup>5</sup> Okpe O.Okpe, "Conceptual and Theoretical Issues of Studies in Inter-group Relations" in Olayemi Akinwunmi et al (eds), *Inter-Group Relations in Nigeria during the 19<sup>th</sup> and*

*20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. Ibadan: Aboki Publishers, 2006. 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Sherif, M. and Sherif, C.W., *Social Psychology*. Oklahoma: University Press, 1969. 80-88.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Smith, M.G. (ed.), *Pluralism in Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969. 368-375.

<sup>8</sup>Bates, R.H., (1974), *Ethnic Group Emission and Modernization in Contemporary Africa: Comparative Political Studies*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974. 344-362.

the stage of assimilation and integration.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Benue Valley Dissection**

The Benue valley is located within the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, known, in a geo-political parlance, as Central Nigeria. Located at the center of Nigeria, the region is situated between latitude 7°30" North and 11°15' North and longitude 4° and 12° East of Prime Meridian. In terms of landmass, the region covers an area of approximately 342,390 km<sup>2</sup> or 37 percent of the land area of Nigeria. It is bounded in the East and West by republics of Cameroon and Benin respectively and in the North and South by the Northern and Southern states of Nigeria.<sup>10</sup> Based on political taxonomy, the Middle Belt region is made up of six states which include Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nassarawa, Niger, Plateau and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. According to Okpe Okpe, the region is an area with certain climatic coherence, stretching over two distinct ecological zones namely, the Savanna zone and the Rain Forest Zone. It is also a region of very striking broken terrain with the complex relief of the Jos Plateau and has many ranges of hills mostly along its eastern escarpment.<sup>11</sup> The region is

also known for its aquatic culture as a result of many waterways and rivers that meander through its ecological landscape. According to Forde, these waterways (mostly the Niger and Benue and their tributaries) facilitated easy movement of different ethnic groups into and out of the region, just as their banks served as the foci of settlement for many groups during the formative stages in the remote past, hence its description as a great cultural watershed.<sup>12</sup>

Geographically, the Middle Belt region is further dissected into upper, middle, and lower Benue. The Middle Benue valley, as noted by some scholars, is the largest and most ethnically and geographically complex and fragmented of the Benue sub-regions. The region is known for its fertile land, green and arable land for pastoralism, farming and hunting hence its attraction to both farmers and pastoralists since historical times. The area is interspersed with rivers like the Benue and Niger and other waterways meandering across the length and breadth of its ecology. The ethnography of the area is characterized by the existence of

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<sup>9</sup> Kropotkin, P. (1910), *Mutual Aid*. London: Frank Cass, 1910. 66-72.

<sup>10</sup> Dawan, P.D., "Aspects of the Geography of Central Nigeria Area" in Idrees, A.A and Ochefu, Y.A.(eds), *Studies in the History of Central Nigeria, vol 1*. Lagos: CSS Ltd.2002. 6-11

<sup>11</sup> Okpe O.Okpe, "Inter-group migrations,

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conflicts and displacements in Central Nigeria" in Falola T. and Okpe, O.O. (eds), *Population movements, conflicts and displacement in Nigeria*. Eritrea: Africa World Press, Inc. 2008, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Forde, D., "People of the Niger-Benue confluence" in Idrees, A.A and Ochefu, Y.A. (eds), *Studies in the History of Central Nigeria, vol 1*. Lagos: CSS Ltd. 2002. 16-22.

numerous ethnic groups like the Jukun, Mumuye, Chamba, Kuteb, Wurkuri/Bikrin, the Tiv, Idoma, Goemal, Montrol, Kantara/Kutere, the Yala, Eloyi, Bekwara, Alago, BassaNge, Bassa Nkomo, the Igala etc. This often led to in-group and out-group squabble, conflict and contestation over resources. Just as observed by Logams;

Historically, the region has been the theatre of inter-group migrations and conflicts during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The region is also a plural polity that is defined by socio-cultural and institutional diversity between (largely minority) ethnic nationalities of various populations, having the highest socio-political and religious plurality of any of the regional units of the federation. The region played host to the largest chunk of ethnic minorities in Nigeria. It is also a contestation region for Islam, Christianity and traditional religions. Thus taken as a socio-economic and political entity, the region is inherently conflict prone.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Who are the Fulani?**

According to a United Kingdom based humanitarian organization, *Mercy Corps*, the Fulani are believed to be the largest semi-nomadic group in the World and are found across West and Central Africa; from Senegal to the

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<sup>13</sup> See a research paper on the Fulani menace in Africa by a UK based humanitarian organization, *Mercy Corps*. Online Publication. 2016.

Central African Republic. In Nigeria, the Hausa-Fulani constitute about 29 percent of the total population with some of them living as semi-nomadic herders while others have moved to cities. Unlike the more integrated city dwellers, the nomadic groups spend most of their lives in the bush and are the ones largely involved in these clashes. They herd their animals across vast areas, frequently clashing with farming communities. They are often linked with another group, the Hausas, having lived together for a very long time. Some refer to them as Hausa-Fulani but they are different groups. The Fulanis played a very key role in the 19<sup>th</sup> century revival of Islam in Nigeria. They are found across major settlements and communities in the Benue valley and Central Nigeria with tales of violent conflicts and clashes. These include; Bokobaru, Kanbari, Zuru, Edo, Nupe, Gbagyi, Igala, Kaje, Idoma, Birom, Efik, Jukunoid, Tarok, Jibu, Samyev, Mumuye etc. The most common weapon used in these conflicts is the AK47 assault rifle, the source of which is still unknown. However, keen observers are of the view that the conflict in Libya and Mali may have increased the proliferation of small and large arms into the country because Nigeria's porous borders are uncontrollable. It is also alleged that some people exchanged stolen crude oil for arms which are shipped through sea ports. The weapons are also said to be sourced from the black markets across West and Central Africa because they live in the bush and travel across the region.

### **Theoretical Construct**

As a human phenomenon, inter-group relations study raises a lot of contending theoretical issues among scholars regarding its real nature, evolution and what influences and compels groups to come in contact and interact. Human society, where and in whatever form and nature it exists, is predicated on interdependence. This is anchored on the fact that human beings, by nature, are dependent creatures; they depend on the environment and others for food, shelter and clothing, all of which give them a sense of purpose here on earth. However what constitutes this interdependence between groups has continued to engage the keen and critical interest of scholars. It is against this backdrop that this paper considered and applied the following theoretical frameworks.

### **The Theory of Mutual Aid**

The proponents of the Mutual Aid theory postulate that in the all-important question of the struggle for the basic things of life, human beings cooperate not just for the sake of social community, but indeed out of necessity.<sup>14</sup> According to this postulation, necessity, rather than mere social interaction, is the driving force for group cooperation and association. Impliedly, where groups' interests are not at stake, they dissociate from interacting with one another.

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<sup>14</sup> For details, see Kropotkin, P., *Mutual Aid*. London: Frank Cass, 1910. 66-72.

### **The Environmental Scarcity Theory (EST)**

Propounded by Thomas Dixon in 1994, the Environmental Scarcity Theory emphasises the ability or otherwise of individuals, communities or nations to cope with environmental changes and the attendant risks and hazards and the conflict over limited resources. The theory emphasizes the role of resource scarcity and the increasing competition for these scarce resources as the primary though not the only reason for more frequent violent conflicts over natural resources. The theory links conflict between multiple resource and land users with the increased tension between farmers and herders globally. The theory considers conflict between these two resource users as the inevitable outcome of the competition for scarce natural resources to enhance security of livelihood. Dixon states further that environmental changes, population growth or demographic change and unequal distribution of land resources, policies that determine land use, and other social and political factors are responsible for resource scarcity which often leads to migration of herders from one locality to another, leading to clash situations that often trigger violent conflict, crisis and war.<sup>15</sup>

### **Origin and Evolution of Contact/Interactions**

The Middle Benue valley and, by

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<sup>15</sup>Homer-Dixon, T.F., *Environment, scarcity and violence*. Princeton: University Press, 1998. 30-34.

extension, the entire Middle Belt region was a watershed of people and cultures in time past. The region is known for large scale in and out migrations, movements and intermingling of peoples and cultures. Certain human and natural factors facilitated these movements across the length and breadth of its landscape. As noted earlier, the geographical location of the Middle Belt region which encompasses the Middle Benue valley is a transition point between the north and the south. The vast natural endowment of the region makes it a point of convergence for many migratory groups both from within Nigeria and across the Sahel and Sahara from historical times to present. Hence the region has often been referred to as a melting pot of peoples and cultures. It is a geo-political region that played host to small scale societies in pre-colonial period. The alluring natural endowments, pastures and stable environmental conditions attracted the in-gathering of many and diverse groups since the earliest period.<sup>16</sup> Apart from the two major rivers of Benue and Niger and its tributaries that crisscrossed the region, the ecology of the area is dotted with innumerable waterways. Some sources hold that between Benue and Nassarawa there abound 36 tributaries which constitute great assets to the

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<sup>16</sup> See Dawan, P.D., "Aspects of the Geography of Central Nigeria Area"..... 3-8.

agricultural prosperity of the area.<sup>17</sup>

Establishing a nexus between climate change and herders' migrations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Oyama has observed that the severe drought of 1970-73 and 1984-85 led to mass movement of Fulani pastoralists from the Sahel region to Hausaland and that further migrations brought them (the Fulani pastoralists) to the Benue valley. At the end of each rainy season, the pastoralists moved southward from the Sahara Desert, passing through Hausaland from November to January. Some of these pastoralists, according to Oyama, are nomads who moved their settlements throughout the year. These individuals are known as "Fulandaji" in Hausa language and "Fulbra'de" in Fulfube language.<sup>18</sup>

Population explosion was another phenomenon that induced waves of migration from the Sahel region through the far north to the Benue valley. According to Oyama and other scholars on demographic study;

The increased in the human population has led to dramatic consequences in the Sahelian countries. The Sahelian countries have experienced rapid population growth in both human and cattle/herds. This rapid population increase, the lack of agricultural technology and over

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<sup>17</sup>A handbook on the aquatic culture of the Middle Belt region (Unpublished).

<sup>18</sup> Shuichi Oyama, *Farmer-Herder conflict, land rehabilitation and conflict prevention in the Sahel region of West Africa*. Kyoto: African Study Monographs, Suppl.50. 2014, 104-5.



grazing are causing land degradation in the Sahel area. Land degradation has led to crop failures, food shortages, malnutrition and financial hardship for Sahelian nations. The Sahel drought of 1972-1974 and the resulting resource crisis led to poor food supply, inadequate livestock management, environmental degradation and poor cropping skills. The population increases also had multiplier dramatic effects leading to food shortages, farmland expansion and conflicts over land and natural resources... The quest for greener pastures by herdsman usually brings them in contact with the sedentary population who are involved in crop production.<sup>19</sup>

The exigencies of these environmental, climatic and demographic changes and the attendant imperative for survival propelled, or induced, the migration of the Fulani herders to the Benue valley. Brooks described the Sahel region as an arc-like land mass lying to the immediate south of the Sahara Desert and stretching east-west across the breadth of the African countries. A largely semi-arid belt of barren sandy and rock-strewn land, the Sahel marks the physical and cultural transition between the continent's most fertile tropical region to the south and its desert in the north. It stretches from Senegal on the Atlantic coast through parts of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina

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<sup>19</sup> Shuichi Oyama, *Farmer-Herder Conflict*, 103.

Fasso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Sudan to Eritrea on the Red Sea coasts. Culturally and historically, the Sahel is a shoreline between the north-east and the sub-Saharan Africa. This means, it is the site of interaction between Arabic, Islamic and nomadic cultures from the north and indigenous and traditional cultures from the south. The Sahel suffers from ethno-religious tensions, political instability, poverty and natural disaster. In recent years, the Sahel has been in the global spotlight due to famine, religious terrorism, anti-state rebellions and arms, drugs and human trafficking. These developments are the products of both local and global dynamics.<sup>20</sup>

While these developments in the Sahel region continue to induce migrations of Fulani pastoralists to the Benue valley, the Uthman dan Fodio jihad of 1804 orchestrated further waves of internal migrations of Fulani herders to the Benue valley. After the establishment of the Caliphate, the Benue valley witnessed increased migrations of Fulani herders from the north that infiltrated the region in numbers. According to Adeleye, the jihad led to the expansion of the Hausa traders, artisans and missionaries in the region. The increase in the activities of these categories of Hausas in this region during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be traced to the Fulani

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<sup>20</sup> Nick Brooks, "Climate change, drought and pastoralism in the Sahel." A Discussion note for World Initiative on Sustainable Pastoralism. 2006. 1-5.

jihad.<sup>21</sup> Okpe O. Okpe also observed that the jihad led to several demographic migrations into different locations.<sup>22</sup> Some of these Hausa-Fulani groups found the Middle Belt region attractive to settle and graze their cattle. Describing the attractive nature and character of the Benue valley, Forde opines that the region is generally endowed with both human and natural resources and that in the past, it attracted people from both the northern and southern parts of Nigeria as well as from outside.<sup>23</sup>

These historical antecedents, epitomized in both human and natural forces of mutations, were some of the factors that brought the Fulani herders in contact with the sedentary communities in the Benue valley in historical times. Thus, the two groups entered into the first stage of contact and interaction.

### **The Era of Mutuality and Reciprocity**

As observed earlier, the relationships between the farming communities in the Middle Benue valley and the Fulani herders were not that of “cat and dog”

from historical times. The two groups had interacted and inter-related mutually, cultivating symbiotic relationships and interdependence which generated social intercourse that led to the establishment of ties and bonds of friendship and reciprocity. The whole gamut of these relationships brought about socio-cultural osmosis and interactions that broke every fetter of discrimination and group irredentism. This further led to and facilitated the achievement of group goals and aspirations which invariably enhanced mutual co-existence and interdependence. As observed by Mark Moritz, “many communities of farmers and herders have built interdependent relationships with one another through emergent process of exchange. Such interdependence has often been described as symbiotic in which the two communities form host-client or host-stranger relationships with one another.”<sup>24</sup>

Using the relationship between Mbororo herders and Gbaya farmers in the Adamawa Province to structure out a classic of host-client relationships, Moritz observed that the relationship was predicated on reciprocity initiated by either party with small gift of, for example, kola nut which was followed later with the exchange of more substantive gifts and commodities.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Adeleye, R.A., *Power and diplomacy in Northern Nigeria 1804-1906*. London: Longman, 1971, 3-4.

<sup>22</sup> See Okpe O. Okpe, “Inter-group migrations, conflicts and displacements in Central Nigeria” in Falola T. and Okpe, O.O. (eds), *Population movements, conflicts and displacement in Nigeria...* 36.

<sup>23</sup> See Forde, D., “People of the Niger-Benue confluence in Idrees, A.A and Ochefu, Y.A. (eds), *Studies in the History of Central Nigeria, vol. 1...* 68-77

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Moritz, “Understanding Herder-Farmer Conflicts in West Africa: Outline of a Processual Approach.” *Journal of Human Organization, vol.69*. 2010. 139.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Moritz, “Understanding Herder-Farmer Conflict.....” 139-140.

While Breussers and others view the host-client relations as a critical element in integrating Fulbe pastoralists into agricultural or sedentary societies and in preventing and resolving herders-farmers conflicts across West Africa,<sup>26</sup> Darfinger and Peklan consider the host-client relations a structural factor that explains variations in herders-farmers conflicts. Deducing from the above scenario, they opined that the host-client relations can be studied as a process in which the relationship is strengthened over time through reciprocal exchange of goods and services.<sup>27</sup> It was this level of relationship that flourished between the sedentary communities in the Middle Benue valley and their clients, the Fulani herders from time past till the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the relationships began to wane.

The Tiv who constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in the region exhibited this classic example of host-client relationships with the Fulani herders in Tivland and its' environ. From the inception of their contacts

and interactions, the Tiv farmers had co-existed peacefully in a mutually reciprocal and interdependent fashion with Fulani nomads. According to some elders in Tivland, this mutuality cut across socio-economic domains to other areas of human existence. The archaeology of this mutuality are still observable in contemporary Tiv community as evident in Fulani borrowed names like Daudu, Yelwata, Udei, Mai kudi (later anglicized to Makurdi), Yakubu, Amedu, Sule, Sabo, Dankaro, Abubakar, Audu etc.<sup>28</sup> These cultural borrowings speak volume of people or groups who have had mutual relationships in the past. I.A. Onoja notes,

One of the distinguishing hallmarks of a people's culture and identity is their native names. By name, one's cultural identity and ethnicity can be deduced. Names are also as old as the people their cultures. This by implication means that names evolve along with the people.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Breusers Mark et al, "Conflict or symbiosis? Disentangling Farmer-Herdsman Relations: The Mossi and Fulbe of the Central Plateau." *Burkina Faso Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36(3). 1998. 357-60.

<sup>27</sup> Dafinger Andreas and Micheal Pelican, "Sharing or dividing the land? Land Rights and Herder-Farmer Relations in Burkina Faso and Northwest Cameroon." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 40 (1), 2006. 126-9.

<sup>28</sup> Oral Interview with some Tiv elders: Terna Aganyi, 67 years, Terdoo Aboho, 62 years, Mishin Hember, 58 years and Magnus Mom, 56 years, farmers from Yelwata village, in Guma LGA, interviewed on the 5<sup>th</sup> December, 2017 at Daudu. Tile Aime, 44 years, Buruku LGA, interviewed in Makurdi on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Onoja, I.A., "Agila-Ezza Relations From 1655-1980: A Study in Inter-group Relations in Nigeria." A PhD Thesis Presented to the Department of History and International Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. 2012. 96

There existed also trade relationships between the Tiv and the Fulani herders in time past till the outbreak of hostilities. According to some elders in Tivland, while the Tiv farmers sold yams, dried cassava, corn, chicken etc to Fulani herders, they in turn bought cows, sheep (mostly during festivities), cow milk, bush animals killed in the course of grazing etc from the herders. The Tiv also patronized the Fulani for charms and other fetish concoctions used for protection, love portions, herbal medicines for curative purposes etc. In a bid to facilitate easy communication with their host communities, the Fulani pastoralists attempted to learn the Tiv native language. Historical evidence survived to show that quite a number of Fulani herders domiciled in Tivland were proficient in speaking the Tiv language. This further cemented relationships, strengthened bond of friendship and ties which further instilled confidence, engendered acceptance and attempts at integration hence the intergroup pet names of “dan Tivi” and “dan Fulani”(Tiv and Fulani man) that became common complimentary slogans between the two groups each time they had contact and interacted.<sup>30</sup>

Other narratives tend to establish that Tiv - Fulani relations date back to antiquity as they were said to be brothers. According to this narrative, the Tiv and Fulani who lived together

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<sup>30</sup>Oral interviews with some elders from selected farming communities across the Middle Benue valley between September and December 2017.

as brothers were given cows to rear and out of share likeness for meat; Tiv slaughtered his and ate the meat while Fulani pastured his until it multiplied into herds. This act made Fulani to nickname Tiv his brother “munchi.”<sup>31</sup> That the Tiv kept the “muturu” cow till date validates the fact that they must have had close contacts and interactions with the Fulani in time past. From Abinsi to Taraba and the Mambila and the entire Middle Benue ecology, these levels of kith and kin relationships pervade the landscape. It was against the backdrop of these historical antecedents that the National Commission for Nomadic Education established nomadic schools virtually in every community in the Middle Benue region for nomads in the 1980s because of the large presence of Fulani pastoralists in the area.<sup>32</sup> Until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the schools are still found in most communities of the Middle Benue.

Another area of social intercourse between the two groups that permeated the Middle Benue valley was epitomized in mutual visitation and exchange of gifts. According to a popular assertion across the region;

In those days of peace and friendship, our people(Tiv and other ethnic groups) exchanged visits with the Fulani. We visited

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<sup>31</sup> The folklore was told by a group of Tiv elders from Logo and Guma LGAs, led by MsendeTyokula, 78 years at a town hall meeting held at Ugba in September 2016.

<sup>32</sup> See National Commission for Nomadic Schools website.

them in their settlements in the bush during their naming ceremonies called “suna” and participated actively in the ceremony; eating and drinking fresh cow milk. When celebrating their “biki” our Fulani friends were also inviting and hosting us at their various settlements in the bush. During this ceremony, we (the host communities and friends) gave our Fulani friends gifts ranging from food items like yam, dried cassava, millet, rice, corn, guinea corn to chicken etc.<sup>33</sup>

One direct effect and impact of these symbioses on the Middle Benue valley was the evolution of pastoral apprenticeship where some natives particularly the youth took to herding as a trade under the Fulani herders for agreed period of apprenticeship after which they were compensated with a cow or two to start full-time pastoralism. This practice led to the emergence of domestic or indigenous cattle breeders who can otherwise be referred to as “sedentary pastoralists.” In the course of such apprenticeship, some of the natives became converted to Islam and either “naturalized” and became full-time bush pastoralists or returned back to the community and continued with the twin practices of Islam and pastoralism.<sup>34</sup> These levels of mutuality permeated the Middle Benue ethnographic landscape throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Where

<sup>33</sup> Oral interviews with selected farming communities already cited.

<sup>34</sup> As above.

Islam had penetrated before Fulani migration to such areas, the bond of Islam and its culture further became closely knitted and deepened the symbiotic relationship, advancing it to the level of inter-marriage. In the words of some elders from Agatu, a community in Benue south;

Our people are predominantly Muslim. Islam penetrated our land long before the Fulani came to settle among us. Because of our common religion and Islamic culture, we considered them to be one of us and gave our lands to them to settle. With the passage of time, they started asking for the hands of our daughters in marriage and we obliged. Many of them came to live with us in the villages and taking their cattle for grazing in the bush. We went to the same village markets, health centers, streams and rivers and other social functions together. After the harvest season, we often give them farm crops like yam, maize, millet, guinea corn, cassava etc.<sup>35</sup>

In the case of Agatu community, the Fulani had settled albeit permanently with the people and to some extent integrated into the socio-economic, cultural and traditional milieu of the people. The preponderance of Islamic religion in the area and the attendant adherence to Islamic principle and

<sup>35</sup> Oral interviews with elders and youth leaders from Agatu LGA led by elder Adanu Danjuma Ogwoje, 78 years and Shaibu Salisu, 38 years at Obagaji on the 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2016.

culture by the people of Agatu encouraged the Fulani pastoralists to settle in large numbers in the area. This added impetus to the intergroup relationships that evolved between the two groups. This symbiosis affected all aspects of their co-existence and cohabitation in time past. Since they came into contact, the people of Agatu had lived and coexisted with the Fulani herders in an ambience of peace, mutuality, interdependence and reciprocity. And from Bekwara to Alago, Chamba-Kuteb to Bassa Nge and Bassa Nkomo, from Keana to Mumuye, Kantara/Kutere to Jukun, the relationships between the farming communities and their clients, the Fulani herders were once cordial, mutual and friendly, to say the least.

Thus, the relationships advanced to the level of compromised and cooperation, where the natives ceded or compromised their land to the Fulani and the two groups cooperated to achieve the common goal of peace and interdependence. At this stage, the relationships between the social groups had become very complex and interdependent to enhance compromise and cooperation. At this level, social groups relate mutually and the nature and character of the relationship is symbiotic, involving the process of giving and taking that is generally supportive of the groups involved.

### **The Metamorphosis**

By the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the opening of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the hitherto mutual relationship between the

farming communities and the Fulani herders in the Benue valley started showing signs of decay as a result of inherent contradictions. These contradictions were the resultant effects of the dialectics and forces of mutations that began to antagonize the whole gamut of the relationship. As observed by a local historian in Tivland;

Since the jihad of 1804 during which we resisted the invasion and subjugation of our land by repelling the attacks by the Fulani marauders, we have not had conflicts or skirmishes with them till recently when they started destroying our farmlands and crops with impunity. In the past, they were remorseful and even paying compensations to our farmers in monetary terms. But suddenly they became arrogant, unrepentant and aggressive when such reports were made against them. This created rancor and misunderstanding between us (Tiv) and them (Fulani herders).<sup>36</sup>

In the Idoma area, south of Benue, the people were at peace with the Fulani settlers since the pre-colonial period till in the 1970s when the two groups first had a clash. As observed by Agbegbedia and others,

in the Idoma Division of the State, force was last used against Fulani herdsmen and their herds in the late 1970s in Otukpo. For reasons connected with traditions, no interest is displayed in milk

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Tiv elders, cited.

products.<sup>37</sup>

By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the narratives of farmers-herders mutual relationship in the Benue valley had changed dramatically as the once symbiotic ambience became beclouded with tales of antagonism and agony occasioned by frequent and consistent crises and conflicts between the two social groups. What went wrong? What were the dialectics that changed the nature and character of the relationship? Many scholars and traditional institutions have attempted to interrogate the changing nature of farmers-herders' relations in the Benue valley. As Braukimper and Basset posited,

Explanations of farmer-herder conflicts have generally been structural in nature, invoking factors shared by all members of both communities which may be characterized by resource scarcity or political inequality...Herder-farmer conflicts are complex products of both structure and processes and cannot be explained solely in terms of either. A general theory of herder-farmer conflicts must include both structural and processual variables. Structural variables are necessary to explain the outcome of conflict.<sup>38</sup>

Extrapolating from the above theoretical postulations, researchers have identified in general terms some structural factors that contribute to the increasing incidences of conflict between herders and farmers to include; resource scarcity, decreasing interdependence of pastoral and agricultural economies, institutional failure to resolve conflicts, cultural differences between herders and farmers etc.<sup>39</sup> Raising methodological issues from the above standpoint, Mark Moritz observes that herder-farmer conflicts are seldom observed firsthand by researchers, so analysis of them rely primarily on data from post hoc interviews and archives. These data, according to Moritz, may be inadequate, incomplete or contradictory and what the researcher collects has been interpreted and re-interpreted by her informants. Similarly, researchers writing about herder-farmer conflicts in West Africa draw inferences from contradictory accounts, incomplete information and partial observations. In Moritz view, they generally rely on one or two often historical cases rather than survey with

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<sup>37</sup> Agbegbedia, O.A., "A historical analysis of the migration, penetration and diffusion of the Fulani into the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria." *IOSR Journal of Humanity and Social Science*. Vol.19, Issue 10. 2014. 59.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Mark Moritz, "Understanding Herder-Farmer Conflicts in West Africa:

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Outline of a Processual Approach." *Journal of Human Organization*, vol.69.138.

<sup>39</sup> Blench Roger, *Conflict and Co-operation: Fulani Relations with the Samba and Mambila Peoples*. *Cambridge Anthropology* 9(2), 1984. 44-5.

a large N.<sup>40</sup>

One factor or issue that is endemic and a common variable in the changing nature and character of farmers-herders relations in the Middle Benue valley is embedded in the Eco-violence theory propounded by Homer-Dixon which states that decrease in the quality and quantity of renewable resources, population growth and resource access act singly, or in various combinations, to increase the scarcity for certain population groups of croplands, water, forest and fish. This, in Homer-Dixon's view, can reduce economic productivity both for the local groups experiencing the scarcity and for the larger regional and national economies. The affected people may migrate or be expelled to new lands. Migrating groups often trigger ethnic/group conflicts when they move to new areas, while decrease in wealth can cause deprivation conflicts.<sup>41</sup> Just like Onuoha and others observed, implicit in the eco-violence theory is the assumption that competition over scarce ecological resources engenders violent conflict. The trend has been aggravated in contemporary times owing to the impacts of climate change which exacerbated ecological scarcity across the World.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Moritz, "Understanding Herder-Farmer Conflicts in West Africa: Outline of a Processual Approach....." 142.

<sup>41</sup> Homer-Dixon, T.F., *Environment, scarcity and violence...*30.

<sup>42</sup> Blench, R., *National resources conflict in North-Central Nigeria: A handbook and*

The shrinking ecological space and resorts of the Benue valley and elsewhere concomitantly created an atmosphere of eco-scarcity and other attendant environmental challenges thus raising the stake and premium on the available limited resources in the region. The resultant outcome is often the fierce competition and desperate struggle for survival. When a people's sources of livelihood are threatened as a result of ecological vicissitude and vagaries associated with climatic change, desperate tactics and methods are employed to ensure survival. This unambiguously elucidates the perennial and consistent debacle between farming communities and Fulani herders in the Benue valley. The ecological issue was further compounded by the phenomenal demographic transformation epitomized in population explosion and other ancillary human activities, activated by the necessity to respond to the dictates and demands of the natural environment and the instinct for meaningful existence. The aggregation of all these emerging developments restricted and limited grazing and other nomadic activities. The Fulani herders thus found themselves in a bellicose environment across the length and breadth of the Benue valley. In a desperate struggle for survival, the Fulani pastoralists began to encroach and invade farmlands, destroying both crops and arable lands with impunity which

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*case studies.* Mallam Dendo Ltd. 2004. 6-8



adversely affected crop yield and, by implication, the wealth and subsistence of the people. As noted earlier, to the average Fulani-herdsman, pastoralism is a way of living, which is reckoned with as a mark of common heritage. In effect, any threat to his herd amounts to a threat, not only to his survival but also to his common destiny.<sup>43</sup> This way of thinking is encapsulated in a citation credited to a Fulani nomad thus;

Our herd is our life because to every nomad, life is worthless without his cattle. What do you expect from us when our source of existence is threatened? The encroachment of grazing field and routes by farmers is a call to war.<sup>44</sup>

According to Young and Sing Oei, the implication of the above citation is that a typical Fulani pastoralist would care less to live if the survival and sustenance of his herd come under serious threats.<sup>45</sup> As Okoli observed;

The rising wave of militancy among the Fulani herdsman in Nigeria is a phenomenon that is principally driven by a 'do or die' struggle for survival in an environment that is competitive and perceptibly hostile to their collective sustainable livelihood...The inevitable

<sup>43</sup> Okoli, A.C. and Atelhe, G.A., "Nomads against Natives: A political ecology of Herder/Farmer conflicts in Nasarawa State, Nigeria." *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, vol. 4 No2. 2014. 80

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Okoli and Atelhe, Ibid. 80

<sup>45</sup> As cited above, 80

outcome of this pattern of inter-group relations...has been a vicious circle of eco-violence and vendetta.<sup>46</sup>

From the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, farmers-herders conflicts began to escalate and became widespread in the Benue valley. The menace of Fulani attacks and escapades in the region became more terrifying as it took a terrorist dimension. By 2004, the Global Terrorism Index declared the Fulani militants the fourth deadliest terrorist group, using machine guns to wreck and devastate villages and farming communities through series of organized attacks.<sup>47</sup> From the stage of competition, farmers-herders relations in the Benue valley advanced to the level of conflict and eventually to war. Elsewhere In Nigeria, the conflicts also escalated with death tolls rising astronomically. With the killing of 80 people between 2010 and 2013, the figure rose to about 1229 in 2014 and 22,500 in 2016, according to Global Terrorism Index record.<sup>47</sup> The figure rose higher in 2017 and even more with the further attacks on Agatu, Guma and Logo LGAs of Benue State.

### Conclusion

From the forgoing discussion, we have established that the contacts and interactions between the farming communities and the Fulani

<sup>46</sup> Same as above, 80-82

<sup>47</sup> See Global Terrorism Index publication, 2004. Online publication.

pastoralists in the Middle Benue valley dated back to pre-colonial period and that the jihad of 1804 opened the floodgate of Fulani influx via migrations to the region. It is also our thesis that the relationship that evolved between the two groups in the aftermath of their contacts was mutual, predicated on interdependence and symbiosis. In all spheres of co-existence, the relationships were mutually beneficial with attendant rewards. The emergence of inherent contradictions in the eco-system viz-a-vis the change in the demographic configuration of the Middle Benue area truncated the hitherto mutual intergroup relations and network between the two groups. These antagonized the symbiotic ambience that guaranteed peaceful cohabitation, interdependence and other social intercourse that generated socio-economic osmosis. At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the narratives of farmers-herders relations in the Benue valley had changed from peace to crisis, interdependence to dichotomy, reciprocity to hostility and finally to war as the final stage of integration became elusive. Mark Moritz attributed four main themes to this emerging phase of dichotomy viz:

- Increased competition of pastoralists for a dwindling "stock" of grazing land as agriculture expanded,
- the collapse of the system of cattle tracks intended to separate livestock from farmers,
- movements of pastoralists into new terrain where language,

religion, culture and landholding patterns are unfamiliar and,

- declining importance of the market dairy products.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, in the words of Agbegbedia and others,

The Middle Belt region is a plural polity that is defined by socio-cultural and institutional diversity between (largely minority) ethnic nationalities of various populations...As a socio-economic and political entity, the region is inherently conflict prone. As part of the wider Nigerian nation, the Middle Belt has had far reaching impacts on intergroup migrations, penetration, colonization and conflicts, all of which have had far reaching impacts on its peoples and their relations with each other. In analyzing the manifestations of these social processes in the region from the earliest times therefore, it is necessary we note the following:

- That the geographical location of the region in the transition point between the north and south coupled with its natural endowments make it a haven for many Nigerian migratory groups in times past as well as presently,
- That its ethno-cultural heterogeneity in addition to its structural economic

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<sup>48</sup> Mark Moritz, "Understanding Herder-Farmer Conflicts in West Africa: Outline of a Processual Approach." *Journal of Human Organization*, ...138-140

backwardness makes the region an explosive conflict zone.<sup>49</sup>

As from 2014, the conflicts became hydra-headed and debacle, far beyond the control and management of the communities and even the states within the region. At this cross-road, some states, led by Benue, started contemplating nipping the conflicts in the bud through legislative enactments. Against this backdrop, the Benue State government through the State House of Assembly enacted the "Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law" which came into effect on November 1<sup>st</sup> 2017. Taraba State followed suit. Far from curtailing the crises, the law further exacerbated the violence as the herders militantly and confrontationally resisted its enforcement. To the Fulani herders, the law was anti-pastoralism and, by implication, anti-Fulani survival and destiny and as such must not see the light of the day. This led to further violent attacks and killings, which have reduced the Middle Benue region to a hotbed of crises and conflicts; a theater of war where life has become "solitary, brutish, nasty and short" Bringing the glorious days of the mutual relations between the farmers and

herders in the Benue valley into front burner of mutual discourse in our search for viable, enduring, lasting and permanent solutions to this debacle may be potent enough in re-establishing those idyllic past times and re-enacting the fast degenerating mutual social relations between the two groups.

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<sup>49</sup> Agbegbedia, O.A., "A historical analysis of the migration, penetration and diffusion of the Fulani into the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria." 57.

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