

## Ecological Factor in the Rise of Insurgency in North-East Nigeria

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### Abstract

*Discourses on the upsurge and debilitating effect of insurgency in the north eastern part of Nigeria have received scholarly attention over the years. The dominant narratives seem to be tilted towards the religious paradigm which invariably explains the phenomenon as a backlash of the activities of certain religious fanatics over a period of time. This paper departs from this micro perspective, it fundamentally seeks to trace the origin of insurgency in the area as a by-product of the shrinking of the Lake Chad which accentuated the gradual disarticulation and destruction of the economic livelihood of the people, precipitating poverty. Other factors such as the absence of government presence in some of the areas and weak state institutions compounded this state of affair and propelled some religious figures to capitalize on the precarious condition of the pauperized masses while appealing to their existential grievances and attempting to establish governmental structures based on certain religious convictions. The paper posits that the strengthening of government institutions, improving local administration and the robust facilitation of development in its entire ramification is the panacea for the restoration of peace and order in the badly ravaged area. The paper adopts the conflict theory in its analysis.*

## **Introduction**

This paper seeks to discuss the origin of insurgency in the North–Eastern part of Nigeria. As the most underdeveloped zone in Nigeria and the most ravaged part as a result of the debilitating effect of the activities of the Boko Haram terrorist group. The paper departs from the microscopic overemphasis on the religious roots and traces the origin of the insurgency from the perspective of the age-long climatic and ecological changes that engulfed the area which led to the disarticulation of the economy and the development of poverty, criminality and insurgency in the area.

## **Land and People of North-East**

The north-east geopolitical zone of Nigeria covers close to one-third (280,419 km) of Nigeria’s land area, (909,890 km). It comprises six states:

Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba and Yobe. According to projections for 2011 by the National Bureau of Statistics, these states have 13.5% (i.e. 23,558,674) of Nigeria’s population. The zone shares international borders with three countries: Republic of Cameroon to the East, Republic of Chad to the North-East and Niger Republic to the North.<sup>1</sup> The North-East has been a major contributor to national net food production and the zone plays an integral role in the national security of the country due to the fact that it shares extensive international borders with three other countries. The important location has a profound implication for the country’s security strategies ranging from immigration policy, custom policy and labour laws.

The region is historically known for the production of crops and livestock which contribute greatly to the economy of the country.<sup>2</sup> Prior to British colonialism, parts of the region falls under the Kanem Borno empire and eventually the El-kanemi dynasty, the Emirates of Fombina and Muri and other smaller disparate autonomous political groups.<sup>3</sup> The major ethnic groups are Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri who are predominantly Muslims. It was from Borno that Islam came and spread to other parts of Nigeria, dating to the 9th century. In addition, the activities of the Lutheran and Sudan Interior Mission as well as the

Roman Catholic missionaries profoundly impacted some part of the area leading to a considerable number of conversions to Christianity largely from the pre-existing indigenous religions of the area.<sup>4</sup> The region is densely populated as compared to the southern region of the country. The major occupation of the peoples of the north east is farming as this is reflected in the fertility of the soil of the area, which again created occupation for them in cattle rearing.<sup>5</sup>

### **Framework of Analysis**

Theories are heuristic devices that direct and guide the analysis of issues or a phenomenon of study.<sup>6</sup> As standpoints in all academic fields, its functional relevance lies in the fact that rather than conditioning judgment or submission on conjectural presentations or speculations, it fundamentally establishes the basis and line of research activity or argument in the context of available evidence based on certain verifiable premises. This paper adopts the conflict theory as advanced by Karl Marx. The major proposition of the theory is the inevitability of conflict in any given society as a direct consequence of the social interaction which creates the conditions for conflicts to occur.<sup>7</sup> The divergence of needs, behaviours, tendencies and inclinations ultimately ignites a conflictual state whereby opposing perceptions of realities emerges. The internal contradictions imminent in a given society predisposes it to conflict and this is an underlying factor for societal dynamism.<sup>8</sup> In the context of unfolding realities in the Nigerian north east, the predatory tendencies of the power elite vis-a-vis the gullibility of the pauperized masses have given rise to conflict in the society and have, among other issues, resulted to the disarticulation of the economy and the fracturing of social relationship in the area.

### **Ecological Mutations**

North-east Nigeria and the wider area of the Chad Basin are historically well suited to pastoralism and fertile for agricultural production. It is the fertility of the soil and a productive livestock sector that had for centuries defined the cultures and sustained the lives of the people.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the body of water in the Lake Chad facilitated a lot of farming in the land activities. The Lake Chad was the principal life source of the area. The Lake was very big and there were many fishes available for those whose economic means of livelihood was fishing and the islands surrounding the lake were thick with vegetation. In the 1940s, the inhabitants who heavily depended on the Lake drank from it, fished in it, wove mats and

baskets and huts from it reeds.<sup>10</sup> Pastoralists in north-east Nigeria were mobile, practicing seasonal transhumance to utilize available pasture and water in the region.

There was a system of transhumance routes whereby headers migrated with their livestock when on transhumance. The pastoralists of north-east Nigeria were concentrated on and around the shores and the islands of the Lake Chad.<sup>11</sup> They have specialized in the lacustrine environment and their cattle were adapted to the water which was readily available. There were different forms of pastoralism in the Chad basin, ranging from nomadic and transhumance pastoralism, that is the movement of household or cattle and other animals between pasture and water points on a seasonal basis, between wet and dry seasons to semi settled and settled pastoralism, where at least, part of the household remained in one place. Most of the inhabitants of the Lake Chad Basin practiced agro-pastoralism - a mixed economy of livestock rearing and farming and their livestock, especially cattle, had high market value which boost the economy of the area.<sup>12</sup> Before the outset of insurgency in the north-east, seasonal transhumance within the region and across the border transhumance between Nigeria and neighbouring countries in the Chad Basin was the norm.

There were many different transhumance routes, but the general pattern was a southwards movement during the dry season and a northwards movement in the rainy season and transhumance commenced according to the timing, distribution and intensity of the rains which ultimately determined the availability and distribution of pasture and water, and by farming activities especially the start of the planting season and the period of harvest.<sup>13</sup> The normal preference would be to migrate after harvest to avoid conflict with farmers. During the dry season, pastoralists would generally move southwards, from the more arid parts of Borno and Yobe to southern Borno or further south into Taraba, Adamawa, Gombe or Bauchi. Some of the pastoralists did not move south but migrated to water sources - to wetlands around Lake Chad or to where there were functioning wells. Lateral movements principally occurred to avoid areas that were heavily cultivated to areas where there was less cultivation and more pasture. These state of affair began to change from the early 1970s.

Since the 1970s, the level of sedentarization among pastoralists has increased throughout north-east Nigeria, but it has not been total and most pastoralists do still rely on some form of transhumance.<sup>14</sup> Nomadic life continued but there were fewer true nomads than there were at the beginning of the twentieth century. The droughts of the 1970s-80s, had lasting impact on pastoralism in the north-east as many families were impoverished after the

lost of their herds, precipitating some pastoralist families to relocate to parts of Central Nigeria. From the 1970s, accentuated by drought, the Lake Chad began to recede and there had, since then, been dramatic fluctuations in water level between the rainy and the dry seasons. Floating masses of reeds and water lilies began to clog the remaining waterways, making it impossible to navigate old trading routes between the islands.<sup>15</sup> The drought and attendant famine of the 1970s had a devastating effect on the people living in the islands of the Lake Chad, given that the mainland was more and more encroaching and the rivers feeding into the Lake Chad dried up and there was a conspicuous decline in the size and the number of fish, followed by a plague of tse-tse flies which descended on the islands. They feasted on the cows, transmitting a disease that made them sickly, infertile and unable to produce milk.<sup>16</sup>

Other attendant ecological mutations was the shortage of rainfall, desert encroachment and desertification, lost of farmlands, dry and scorching hotness, experience of weather irregularity and the shrinking of the Lake Chad. The increasing drought and shortage of rainfall invariably led to death of livestock and increasing manifestation of strange pests and diseases which destroyed crops like maize, millets and tomatoes, while also reducing water for farming and fishing.<sup>17</sup> By the end of the 1990s, the Lake had shrunk by roughly ninety-five percent and much of the northern basin was lost to the desert and people started starving and dying of hunger. An informant narrated his ordeal thus:

Before now, that is about twenty years ago, my farm was very huge. Most of them now have been taken over by the desert. These days, there are new pest and diseases that affect and kill our crops. Some of them are like maggots and they eat up crops like maize, millet and tomatoes. Every year, the rain keeps reducing and the drought intensifies. There is less water for both the crops and the livestock and we depend on natural rainfall for both our crops and animals.”<sup>18</sup>

Agricultural pastoralist activities were negatively impacted by climate change and this invariably made particularly the youth vulnerable and readily available for indoctrination and recruitment by the Boko Haram terrorist organization. It also predisposed them to other criminal activities inimical to the overall wellbeing of the society. Out of disillusionment and frustration, occasioned by the failure of agriculture and pastoralism due to climate and

ecological changes, some of the inhabitants of the areas fell for whatever could give them some form of financial and material incentives regardless of the rightness of such engagement. Loss of farmlands and the progressive shrinking of the Lake Chad have had massive negative consequences for agriculture in the north-east of Nigeria. Agricultural communities like Biu, Konduga, Askari/Uba, Bama, Kukawa, Mafa, Jere, Gwoza, Abadam, Hawul, Garkida, Gelle, Batso, Gombi, Girei, Kalaa, Maiha, Mubi, Buyuk, Tongo, Demsa, Imburu, Misau, Nafada, among others, have been seriously affected by climate change, a situation which negatively affected agricultural activities and grazing. In Mubi, for instance, the beans cultivation has reduced in recent years while in Bama, Borno state, inadequate water has led to unwarranted death of livestock and low crops yield.<sup>20</sup> The huge loss of farmland, crop failure and frustration incurred by the farmers and pastoralists in the area have made most of them to abandon farming and engage in alternative activities like commercial motorcyclists (achaba) cobblers, petty trading, security guards (Mai gadi) and hawking water (Mai ruwa).<sup>21</sup> However, some of them who disengaged from agriculture ended up engaging in criminal activities like armed robbery, drug abuse, political thuggery and terrorism like the Boko Haram group which is ravaging the region since 2009.

### **Poverty**

According to Sussan Rice, a Diplomat of the United States of America, “Nigeria is too rich to be poor and too poor to be rich.”<sup>22</sup> The pathetic and extreme state of poverty of most Nigerians has variously been stressed by International bodies concerned with issues of human development. The fractured nature of the socio-economic formation of the country has rendered many Nigerians to the margins of society. Since 1999, the Nigerian state has suffered capacity and legitimacy gaps, manifestly demonstrated in the declining capacity of its institutions to deliver public goods, including security, water, medical care, transportation, power and education. A prominent section of the avaricious power elite thrives on crony capitalism and patron-client deals in violation of the subsisting rule of law and the social contract.<sup>23</sup> Its members are from different ethnic, political and religious communities. When they agree on how to share the spoils, all is well, but when they disagree, they politicize, manipulate and instrumentalise ethno-religious and regional differences. With the failure of governance and development, and ever increasing number millenarian religious movements, separatist groups, ethnic militias are being mobilized, for pressing ideological and practical goals and for self-defense.

It is sustained economic hardship, rising social frustration, coupled with the historical shift in climatic and ecological conditions that fostered the growth of the radical and extremist Boko Haram organization in the north-east of Nigeria. Boko Haram tapped into the issues of Islamic revivalism in the north. Before 2009, Muhammad Yusuf, a young Salafi preacher in north-east Nigeria delivered sermons about the ruinous legacy of colonialism and massive corruption of the Nigeria's elite.<sup>24</sup> After decades of political turbulence and military coups, oil extraction had made Nigeria arguably the richest country in Africa and yet the percentage of people living in poverty was growing each year.

Since 1985, the north-east has retained the position of the poorest geo-political zone in Nigeria. The index highlight states of Borno, Adamawa, Bauchi, Taraba with the highest incidence of poverty ranging between 54.9% to 72.2%.<sup>25</sup> According to Muhammad Ladan, an expert in security matters, "By the index of 50.6%, Nigeria is the third among 20 countries in the world with the widest gap between the rich and the poor and poverty in Nigeria is undoubtedly the face of the north. Out of this, 70% are the majority rural poor that fall between the ages of 25-60 and in a country where you have this particular age bracket, it is a time bomb."<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, he blamed bad governance for this state of affair and further said that; "if we fail to address social, economic and political injustices, unemployment and issues relating to education, you create a time bomb and allow youth to become hopeless, frustrated and their energies are driven towards something else".<sup>27</sup> According to Muhammad Sanusi II, "the north-east and the north-west are the poorest part of the world. The north-east and the north-west demographically constitute the bulk of Nigeria's population but look at human development indices, look at the number of children out of school, look at adult literacy, maternal mortality, girl-child completion rate, income per capital, these zones are among the poorest in the world."<sup>28</sup>

The prevalent status quo in north-east was that the avaricious power elite had, through history, created a thin layer of leaders from whom everyone else draws their protective existence. Unless one belongs to such elite group, one cannot be appointed into the upper echelons of government. This was done for fear of breeding critics who might rise to overthrow them. Notably, a great number of young men who had no privilege having the overlord influence existed side by side with the power elite and over the years became aggrieved with restraint for over sixty years.<sup>29</sup> Besides, some of the young men were

ignorantly brainwashed against any attempt to change the feudal system and inhuman treatment being inflicted on them by the feudal lords, and many of them do not have meaningful sources of livelihood. They were practically at the mercy of these feudal minded elite who have connived within themselves and are bent on preserving their socio-economic status.<sup>30</sup>

Acromony against this parasitic elite group in the north-east are indisputably the backlash of age-long accumulation of deep seated grievances of the down trodden amidst the neglect by the local administration in these areas. It was easy therefore, for Muhammad Yusuf to appeal to the existential grievances of these marginalized and unemployed youth. He indoctrinated them by telling them that the only way forward was to install a Caliphate in Nigeria. His fanatical followers became known as Boko Haram. The group currently has linkages and affiliations with other international terrorist organizations and has adopted several barbaric methods to unleash terror on Nigerians and neighbouring countries. The north-east is the epicenter of the insurgency but its debilitating effect reverberates through the entire country and constitutes a major source of underdevelopment and disgrace to Nigeria.

### **The State of Insurgency**

The north-east geopolitical zone of Nigeria is structurally fractured and it is a typical illustration of a thoroughly dysfunctional society accentuated by the upsurge of insurgency in the area since 2009. It is not in doubt in academic cycle that the rise of insurgency in the north-east has had serious debilitating and catastrophic effect on the people inhabiting the area, alongside with the destruction of infrastructure on a massive scale unknown before in the annals of the people of the area.<sup>31</sup> The state of destruction in human and materials terms has negatively impacted the social and economic development of the most under-developed geo-political zone of Nigeria.

The human development indices of Nigeria clearly indicate the parlous and precarious state of the economy and society of the north-east. Between July 27, 2009 and February 17, 2016, the dreaded Boko Haram insurgents had launched up to 93 attacks in which more than six thousand people were killed and thousands seriously injured.<sup>32</sup> It is somewhat difficult to quantify in exact terms the number of lives and properties lost to the marauding insurgents as whatever is put down simply represents a tentative figure. The extent of destruction and the callousness with which the insurgent unleashed terror on the society concerned is, to say the least, unprecedented and defies any logical explanation. The ensuing killings, bombings,

arson, maiming, disorderliness, anarchy and psychological disorientation are catastrophic and invariably expose the extent to which the fabric of the society have been compromised and jeopardized on account of prolonged violence, deep seated socio-economic inequalities, poverty, greed, endemic corruption, mal-administration, grievances and ecological mutations.

The resultant effect of this dismal state of affair in the north-east, accentuated by the upsurge of insurgency, is the displacement of more than two million people, devastation of an already battered and ravaged economy and the destruction of hundreds of schools, government buildings and places of worship. It is not an overstatement to submit that in the post civil war dynamics of Nigeria's historical development, the Nigerian security services had never been this overstretched like the current security realities which seem to be spiraling like a wildfire to other parts of the country under different guises. This is both a serious challenge and manifestation of more profound threats to Nigeria's security and its corporate existence.<sup>33</sup> The panacea for the restoration of peace and order lies in the strengthening of government institutions and facilitating multi-dimensional development with all its attendant impact in the north-east. Local government ought to be improved and the marginalized in the society should be incorporated and giving a sense of belonging through the deepening of democratic tendencies.

## **Conclusion**

The paper discusses the origin of insurgency in north-east Nigeria from the perspective of ecological changes accentuated by the age long desertification of the Sahara, the shrinking of the Lake Chad, drought and shortage of rainfall, loss of farmland, scarcity of water and extreme poverty. The paper departs from the microscopic overemphasis on the religious interpretations of the upsurge of insurgency in the area. It argues that the climatic and ecological mutations in the north-east, over the years, have seriously undermined the economy and precipitated criminality in the area. Other factors such as the avariciousness and predatory tendencies of the power elite in the north east, coupled with the failure of governance in the area all combined to appeal to the existential grievances of the pauperized masses of the area which is the most underdeveloped geo-political zone of Nigeria.

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