

The Politics of Contestation for Land-based Resources in the Middle Belt in Contemporary Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper hinges on the politics of contestation for land-based resources in the Middle Belt in contemporary Nigeria. It argues that people contest because of economic, social, and political reasons. The paper views the Middle Belt from diverse perspectives for a lucid understanding of the subject matter. Adducing supportive evidence from statistics, other extant literature, and oral sources of data in tandem with interdisciplinary methods, the paper discusses several land-based resources that are competed for in the focal area ranging from land spaces, pastures, water, forests, and fishponds, among others. In doing so, the aftermaths and challenges resulting from the politics of conflict over land-based resources are also taken into account. The main finding of the paper is that people compete for land-based resources in the Middle Belt because they are essential to their existence. To come out of the quagmire emanating from the politics of contestation, the paper advances some rescue approaches.

Keywords: Politics of Contestation; Land-Based Resource; Middle Belt; Contemporary Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

The essence of competition by individuals and groups is to acquire and accumulate economic and social capital to be leveraged for political influence. Economic and political influence then command respect and obedience in society. Geography or class does not restrict the competition. This implies that in both the developed and developing countries people contest or compete for things that are valuable to them. The status and occupation or lifestyles of the contestants determine what would be contested. For example, farmers usually contest for land among themselves because they need it for agricultural purposes. Nomadic cattle herders usually move from one place to another looking for pastures, water, and other land resources to feed their cattle. In fishing communities, fishermen are also curious to have and exercise their influence on fishing ponds or

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porches, or the *fadama* areas. The dire need and the scarcity of these resources, coupled with the population explosion triggers fierce competition leading to clashes and a high death toll. To corroborate this narrative, an interviewee Orngu, espoused that:

“People engage in contestations over things that are of value to them. And generally, valuable things are usually scarce. For instance, resources are valuable. It is common knowledge that resources are scarce, especially in the economic context. The struggle to access and acquire these scarce resources is usually what gravitates to a clash of interests between the concerned parties. To that extent, anything that is valueless is not attractive and cannot generate conflicting interests, especially in developing societies where means and resources are generally scarce”.²

The foregoing material explains the prevalence of particular typologies of conflicts in Nigeria such as land disputes, chieftaincy disputes, ethno-religious violence, *et cetera*. These kinds of conflicts are almost completely absent in societies that are far more developed. This explains why it is logical to argue that poverty is an adequate cause and source of conflict. In other words, poverty and conflicts are two sides of the same coin; and this is commonly expressed in developing countries like Nigeria including the Middle Belt region.³

Land concerns can include more than just land. Instead, they bring up questions of property and, more broadly, social and political connections.⁴ Due to the close connection between land claims and issues of power, citizenship, and jurisdictional politics, it is possible that conflicts over property are as much about the breadth and organization of authority as they are about access to resources.⁵ For humans to survive, land is necessary. Land has a significant impact on how people live. People live on land, which provides them with food, resources, and a foundation for growth and wellbeing.

The history of the land is magical in Africa. The essence of the complex connection that controls land concerns in the context of African Societies is encapsulated in this remark. According to traditional African beliefs, the current generation holds the land in trust for the benefits of future generations. The ancestors also leave land as a bequest to the current generations, endowing the land and its resources with characteristics that are akin to those of humans and the supernatural.⁶ The planning and management of land and land-based resources were thus circumscribed by customs, taboos, and rules that ensured that each adult member had land to farm. Despite these prescriptions, the centrality of land to economic survival, and coupled with population explosion, it has become a contested and politicized resource in Africa, Nigeria, and the Middle Belt in particular. An oral informant, Orngu disclosed that:

During contestations over land resources, the groups in the land disputes usually deployed the political facility to win the support and sympathy of government institutions and also

² Interview, C.S. Orngu, C.53, Lecturer, Benue State University, Makurdi, 2022.

³ Interview, C.S. Orngu,

⁴ C. Lund, and C. Boone, “Introduction: Land Politics in Africa- Constituting Authority over Territory, Property, and Persons”, *Africa*, Vol.83, No.1, 2000, P.1-13.

⁵ C. Lund, and C. Boone, “Introduction: Land Politics, 11.

⁶ S.B. Kendie, “Planning and Management of Land Resources in Africa”, *Area-Studies (Regional Sustainable Development Review)* Vol.1., Encyclopedia of Life Support System (EOLSS), 2000.

to enjoy the backing of heavyweight politicians and political groups to whom they are affiliated in the course of their actions. Politics has become a platform for group agitations in developing countries and the contestations over land resources are more potent when the political facility is deployed as a platform for groups agitating for access and acquisition of scarce resources.⁷

Those who are endowed with land resources in their areas have used it as a bargaining chip to seek political relevance, while the antagonist has fought against exploration or sabotaged the development of resources.⁸ Even though, the above positions are important in explaining the contestations and politics of land resources in Nigeria, not much research has been conducted on these phenomena. Drawing on the instances/experiences in the Middle Belt Region, this research seeks to discuss issues surrounding the phenomenon of land resource contestations and the politics associated with it.

To achieve this aim, some questions are brought under consideration: What prompted the evolution of the Middle Belt? Where is the Middle Belt located? What are the available and contested land resources in the Middle Belt? How did people politicize their contest for land resources in the studied area? What are the challenges arising from the contest and politics of land resources in the area under consideration? What are the approaches/policy options that would help in stemming the rising tide of these challenges? These are the major concerns of this paper.

The analysis hinges on interdisciplinary methodology with the use of primary and secondary data for corroboration and objectivity as demanded by historical reconstruction. The research is basically focused on the post-colonial period (1960 to present) however a brief historical overview of pre-colonial and colonial period (mid-19th century to 1960) has also been undertaken to present a complete picture. Apart from the published primary and secondary sources, several interviews from a selection of respondents have been conducted mostly in the year 2022, in order to gain a first-hand perspective. Purposive sampling method is used for a rather limited sample size. These respondents have been purposefully selected from among the persons who had first-hand experience or information of the relevant issues. They include farmers, fishermen, lecturers, public servants, retired officers and policy analysts.

Understanding the Middle Belt in Historical and Geographical Context

Historically, the Middle Belt has always been in existence since the First Republic⁹, although in the shadow of the core-North. Thus, during the First Republic, the late Senator Joseph Sarwuan Tarka (popularly known as J.S. Tarka) led a notable political movement known as the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), which metamorphosed into a political party in that era. This political movement marks the genesis of the Middle Belt region.¹⁰ The region was borne out of the desire of traumatized and marginalized people to assist them in fighting for a better future. Under

⁷ Interview, C.S. Orngu,

⁸ Interview, E.S. Okla, C.52, Lecturer, Edo State University, Uzairu, 2022.

⁹ The First Republic was the republican government of Nigeria between 1963 and 1966 governed by the first republican constitution

¹⁰ N.T. Gbehe, "Geo-Political Perspectives on Resource Control in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria: Periscoping Agriculture in the Benue Economy", Okpeh, O.O., Okau, A, and Fwatshark, S.U. (eds.), *The Middle Belt in the Shadow of Nigeria*. Makurdi: Oracle Business Ltd. 2007.

the three regional structures of Nigeria's Federalism, the Middle Belt found itself helmed by the powerful Northern, Eastern, and Western regions, and the Middle Belt people were considered to belong to the North.¹¹ The truth is that the inhabitants of this region (Middle Belt) were so considered for swelling this "monolithic" core North's population for political reasons, especially during the national elections. However, once elections were won, the upper North took up most if not all the key positions in government thereby denying the Middle Belt of the most needed development.

Okpeh takes a trio approach to the Middle Belt. The region is primarily viewed as a geographical concept, followed by a political movement, and finally, a belief system that anchors the people's struggle for identity in Nigeria.¹² According to the geographic viewpoint adopted by Egwu and Dabin, one of the characteristics that set the Middle Belt apart from other minority regions in Nigeria is the physical proximity of the Middle Belt States.¹³

With these many viewpoints, this study takes the Middle Belt's geographical perspective. It envisions North Central Nigeria as the Middle Belt. The region is a part of the Belt, which also includes Southern Bauchi, Southern Kaduna, and Southern Gombe,¹⁴ as well as Adamawa, Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kwara, Niger, Taraba, and Kogi. Between the larger Hausa/Fulani belt of the North and the Igbo Yoruba and the other ethnic groups of the South, these states collectively make up a belt of minority ethnic groups. They also populate the area that is directly between the largely Muslim north and the predominantly Christian south. In this way, the Middle Belt serves as a physical and cultural "buffer zone" between Northern and Southern Nigeria, thus the name "Middle Belt".¹⁵ Land resources or natural resources are abundant in the area, including fadama, water, fishing ponds, woods, and solid minerals like limestone and quarry sites. Due to the scarcity and critical place these land resources occupy in the life of the Middle Belters, it has become a matter of contestation and politicization with accompanying negative consequences.

Politics of contestation for Land-Based Resources in the Middle Belt

This segment of the paper identifies types of land resources and the politics of contestations over them in the Middle Belt Region. The argument here has been presented in broad strokes for a deeper understanding of the phenomena under consideration. The land resources considered here include land space, pastures, water, fishing ponds (in streams and rivers), and forests.

Land Spaces

With the population explosion, the issue of land in the Middle Belt has become delicate, critical, and contested. Land or land-related issues have occasioned most of the conflicts that emanated in this region. For example, land conflicts have occurred between Zagon- Kataf (Atyap) in Kaduna State, Tiv- Azara in Nasarawa State, Bachama- Hausa in Adamawa State, and Jos crises in Plateau

¹¹ N.T. Gbehe, "Geo-Political Perspectives,

¹² O.O. Okpeh, "The Middle Belt in the Current Political Dispensation: The Need for and Agenda of Political Action", Okpeh, O.O., Okau, A, and Fwatshak, S.U. (eds.), *The Middle Belt in the Shadow of Nigeria*. Makurdi: Oracle Business Ltd. 2007.

¹³ S. Egwu, and H.K. Dabin, *The Middle Belt Politics in Nigerian Politics* (Mimeo). 1989.

¹⁴ O.O. Okpeh, "The Middle Belt

¹⁵ O.O. Okpeh, "The Middle Belt

State, amongst others. Explaining the Zagon-Kataf conflicts in 1992, Shut notes that land, ethnic, cultural, and religious identities were found to be the main sources of the conflicts which began with the disagreement between a Hausa man and a Kataf (Atyap) woman in the market square. The second phase of the conflict over the land, which the Atyap claimed the Hausa occupied without compensation and demanded that it be returned.¹⁶

The root of these conflicts in this area is traceable to pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods, including the contemporary era. In both cases, the Atyap felt marginalized and cheated. They were raided for slaves in the pre-colonial period; they paid the tax and provided forced labor in the colonial period. In the colonial era, the District Head of Atyap was appointed from Zaria under the indirect rule system. The 1992 land conflict took a more political dimension, instead of resolving the conflict amicably, it is alleged that the then government in power at that point took sides with the Hausa. As a result of the politicization of this conflict, prominent Atyap sons like General Zamani Lekwot were imprisoned and sentenced to death by the Babangida regime because of the conflict.¹⁷ The people also suffered under the NPC-led Northern regional government, the Chairmanship of Zagon Local Government accentuating the division between the Atyap and other minorities on the one hand, and the Hausa Fulani on the other.¹⁸

Furthermore, the 2001 Tiv-Azara conflict was a contestation over farmlands, admissions, promotions, and appointments in political positions in Nasarawa State between Tiv and the other groups including Fulani, Hausa, Migili, and Alago.¹⁹ In corroboration, Shut argues that:

The conflict between the Tiv and the people of Lafia South particularly the Azara is on land where there is a seeming dominance of the Tiv in this area which is eventually translated into electoral gains. Any politician who wants to win cannot toy with the Tiv votes in the area.²⁰

The issue of land resources and dominance has served as a driver of the hostility between the Tiv and other groups in the area. There is apparent fear of dominance by the Tiv who are perceived to be “settlers” by the “indigenes” of the area. The death of the Chief of Azara, Dr. Musa Ibrahim, on June 12 2001 was the immediate trigger of the conflict. The investigation of the cause of his death was also politicized. While no one was identified with the incontrovertible facts relating to the death; many Tiv people were arrested because the incident took place in the Tiv-dominated area.

Relatedly, the crisis that occurred in Jos in 2001 (popularly known as the Black September incident of 2001) was a land resource conflict that later assumed a political dimension. Nnabuhe posits that the Black September incident in 2001 has interconnectivity to autochthony, space, and infrastructure provision. The creation of the local government in 1991, according to a Jos native

¹⁶ T.T. Shut, “The settler or indigene phenomenon and conflict generation in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria”, Akinwunmi, A., Okpeh, O.O., and Gwamna, J.D. (eds.) *Inter-Group Relations in Nigeria During the 19th and 20th Centuries in Nigeria*. Makurdi: Aboki Publishers, 2007, P. 101.

¹⁷ T.T. Shut, “The settler or indigene, p.107.

¹⁸ T.T. Shut, “The settler or indigene, p.111.

¹⁹ J.O. Aper, “Ethnic conflict in Azara, Nasarawa State”, Akinwunmi, A., Okpeh, O.O., and Gwamna, J.D. (eds.) *Inter-Group Relations in Nigeria During the 19th and 20th Centuries in Nigeria*. Makurdi: Aboki Publishers, 2007, Pp.631-640.

²⁰ T.T. Shut, “The settler or indigen, p.102

who spoke on the record under the condition of anonymity. He claimed that the division of the Old Jos Local Government into North and South created the circumstances that gave rise to disputes and the conflicts that later engulfed the city.²¹ According to Nnabuihe, the military government led by General Ibrahim Babangida allegedly produced a situation where the majority of individuals identifying as indigenous people felt excluded from Jos North politics.²² An informant cited in Nnabuihe emphasized that:

“This was done to give an edge to the Hausa community to take dominance of Jos.. the old Jos had ten districts. What the ... was to remove nine districts to form Jos South Local Government...One district was... left to form one local government... Gwon District. The nine districts comprise four in Jos South and five in Jos East as of today. The violence ... is traceable to this local government creation”.²³

In the *Sunday Standard* Newspaper, respondents from Christian organizations (who claimed the status of indigenous people) concurred that this conflict was caused by the establishment of local governments in around two-thirds of the interviews and focus groups. The Federal Government should modify the boundaries of Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas to accommodate these Christian groups (Afizare, Anagwuta, and Berom), according to these groups.²⁴ The current demarcation places these groups in a position that makes them minorities in their own country. The aforementioned Christian organizations asserted that because of the politics of the split, the Muslim Hausa and Fulani now have access to Jos's political, cultural, and economic resources, including those that are based on the land. As a result, they are prepared to stop this from happening, even if it necessitates using force.

Pastures

A significant resource in the marsh, especially the Middle Belt, is pasture or grazing land. Each year, the flood recedes, leaving long expanses of new grass on the uncultivated floodlands. As a result, it has drawn pastoralists for a long time, particularly the Fulbe (Fulani). Before the advent of artificial fertilizers, pastoral herds were frequently welcomed on farms after harvest because they fertilized the soil by dropping dung while they grazed on crop remains.²⁵ The Middle Belt caught the attention of the nomadic herders for a long period. Contemporary, the Fulani nomadic cattle herders have noted severally that the pastures of the Benue Valley are so greenish and nutritious for consumption by the cattle resulting in regular birth compared to those that consume pastures in other regions of the Federation.

In this way, the Fulbe tribes developed enduring ties with the Middle Belt's settlements and enjoyed regular access to neighboring pastures, which they took advantage of every year. Both pastures and agricultural leftovers have increased in value, scarcity, and contention as the demand for resources has increased and the usage of traction animals has proliferated. In most cases,

²¹ O.E. Nnabuike, "Autochthony and space in communal war: citizenship, conflicts and Infrastructural provision in Jos, Central Nigeria", *African affairs*, 2019, Pp. 1-23.

²² O.E. Nnabuike, "Autochthony and space, p.18.

²³ O.E. Nnabuike, "Autochthony and space, Pp.5-6

²⁴ Inquiring into September 7 and 8 September 2002 Crisis", *Sunday Standard Newspaper*.

²⁵ R. Blench, *Natural Resource Conflicts in North-central Nigeria: A Handbook and Case Studies*. United Kingdom: Mallam Dendo Ltd. 2004.

farmers charge Fulbe a certain amount of money before accessing their fields after harvest. Fulani herders at times entered directly into such fields to graze without the consent of the owner. With the introduction and the application of modern fertilizer and the increased pressure on farmlands, the situation has changed. The farmers who cultivate horticultural goods are not at all eager to allow the cattle to access their fields. However, from time to time the nomads still enter thereby paving the way for clashes between them and farmers. The clashes usually have grave consequences for the parties involved. It was in line with the negative effects of this situation that prompted, Varvar to disclose that:

The period from 2010 ... has witnessed sustained brutal attacks on the rural farming communities of the Benue Valley area, leading to loss of lives and displacement of populations. Central Nigerian farmers have seriously been affected as agricultural and socio-economic activities have been crippled in some of the affected areas. Many of the Tiv migrant farming communities have been displaced and their land has been forcefully taken over by herdsman.²⁶

An interviewee, Fundai espoused that in most of these clashes, both farmers and herders lose their lives. However, instead of taking more proactive measures to deal with the situation for long-lasting peace, politics have ensued thereby prolonging the violent conflicts. The present administration of President Muhammadu Buhari has been criticized for taking sides with his Fulani kinsmen. Besides, any time a committee is set up to investigate the menace of the herders-farmer's conflagration, the committee ends up getting economic incentives and leaving the truth unearthed. To make matters worse, it is alleged that some youths in the affected farming communities in the Middle Belt were bribed by the Fulani to assist them in fighting against their kinsmen (Fulani) so that they could win the war and take charge of the land to effectively tap its resources. Some traditional rulers and state governors in the Middle Belt were also accused of collecting money from herders for land leases. Unfortunately, those Fulani have turned to politicizing their lease agreement as they compete for permanent ownership or occupancy of the land.²⁷

At the same time, potential religious conflict is being stoked up by politicians for dubious ends. Pastoralists are by and large Muslims, whereas many of the people they move among are Christians and traditionalists. It is relatively easy to reframe these land natural resources contestations or disputes as a conflict of religion, especially as the crisis has reached its *crescendo*. The failure of the Government to act decisively on these issues has allowed this type of influence-peddling free rein.²⁸

Water

Water is one of the necessities of life (for both flora and fauna). Water is also a Common Property (or Pool) Resource (CPR), but its availability in the traditional regime meant that access was not generally a challenge. However, with the beginning of the damming process, as water scarcity

²⁶ T.A Varvar, "Towards the utilization of Migrant Labour for increased Agricultural production: The case of Tiv Migrant in the Benue Valley". Paper presented at the 5th General Conference of the Association of West African Universities held at Universite Abdou Moumouni, Niamey Niger Republic, September 17th- 21st, 2017, P.13.

²⁷ Interview, T.A Fundai, C. 37, Civil servant and part-time farmers, Jos, Plateau State, 2022.

²⁸ R. Blench, *Natural Resource Conflicts*,

began, it became gradually apparent that it was a resource to be competed for.²⁹ In the Middle Belt, both members of the rural communities need it to drink, cook, wash, and attend to other domestic chores and also for irrigational purposes, especially during dry season farming, usually in *fadama* areas. The nomadic cattle herders also need it to water their cattle and for their consumption.

The major source of water in rural communities in the Middle Belt is spring water; due to the nature of cattle, they cannot drink from the same stream as a human being without the water contaminating. Since the increase in the human and animal population, water has become a scarce resource, both farmers and herders contest for it and in the process, violent conflicts ignited from such competitions usually lead to loss of lives and property. Besides, farmers or members of the rural communities also compete among themselves for water, in some instances paving water to quarrel, fight, and even die. A recent incident took place in the Tiv axis of the Middle Belt between the people of Mbagwaza and Tsambe districts. The problem started over the competition for a spring source of water located in Mbagwaza. An informant, Tseaa revealed that during the water scarcity of 2020; the Tsambe women used to go earlier to queue to fetch water from the spring while the Mbagwaza women were usually coming late. On this particular occasion, a woman from Tsambe went early to fetch water and Mbagwaza woman later came and wanted to manipulate and take the first turn, this degenerated into a fight. This fight started as a mere quarrel but later attracted the attention of the youths from both sides. It became a communal conflict that many people were killed; some fled the area, and crops and properties were equally destroyed.³⁰

Fishing Ponds, Streams, and Rivers

Fishing is one of the occupations of the Middle Belters (both indigenes and settlers/migrants). Some inhabitants of the area practice it as a part-time activity to meet their dietary needs while to others it is a commercial venture (that is on a full-time basis). Those who practice it on a commercial scale make their entire subsistence from the aquatic resources and in some cases do not engage in crop farming. The proceeds from fishing are used for food for domestic consumption. Commercial fishermen, at times, move from place to place depending on their target areas. In the process of moving or migrating, few use motorized boats on the rivers. The mobile fishing population is found in the Niger-Benue trough. Their movement is presented in Table 1 below.

²⁹ R. Blench, *Natural Resource Conflicts*,

³⁰ Interview, S.G Tseaa, C.55, Retired Public Servant, Tsambe, Vandeikya, Benue State, 2022.

Table 1**Migratory Fishing Peoples of Nigeria**

Ethnic Group	Language	Location
Ijo	Ijo	Niger Delta
Efai	Efai	Islands off Calabar and into Cameroun
Bacama	Bacama	Benue rivers from the confluence of Cameroun
Kakanda	Kakanda	Niger-Benue confluence up to Yola
Sokoto	Sarkanci	Fishing people on the Niger and Lake Kainji
Laru	Laranci	Fishing people on the lake Kainji
Lopa	Lopanci	Fishing people on the lake Kainji
Zarma	Zarma(Songhay)	Farmers in Kamba area but migrant fishermen on the Sokoto-Rima system
Reshe	Reshe	Fishing people on the Niger and Lake Kainji
Jemani	Nupe	Fishing people on the Niger and Lake Kainji
Arawa	Hausa	Migrant fishing peoples settled further north

Source: Blench, 2004, p.142.

Table 1 depicts that some migrant fishermen come from other areas to the Middle Belt for fishing. This they did to enable them to excel in their fishing occupation. In the course of migrating, they engage in contestations overfishing spaces where they employ political means to achieve their aim. In discussing the contestations and politics of fishing in the Middle Belt, an oral informant, Guda was particular, about the Taraba situation, and disclosed that:

All the fish ponds in each community are controlled by the community leader (a local chief of lower ranks) known as *Mi Angwa*. The local chief then leases the fish ponds to fishermen who are willing to hire. Once the fishermen hired a pond, it becomes his or her for that agreed period and whatever the lessor gets from the harvest automatically belongs to him or her.³¹

Many people depend on fishing as their source of livelihood, there is usually competition on who gets the ponds. The *Mi Angwas* (plural of *Mi Angwa*) are aware of the centrality of fishing to fishermen and the contestations arising from it and as such charged high (compared to the financial status of the fishermen) prices for the lessors, usually for one year.³² Hoyo, a migrant settler in Taraba State explained that the local chiefs give cash or kind returns to the Taraba State Government through the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Bureau of Chieftaincy Affairs. The cash and the returns from the local chiefs are avenues where politics manifested. Some

³¹ Interview, G.T. Guda, C. 50, Public Servant now in Benue State, 2022.

³² Interview, G.T. Guda,

people lobby through the concerned authorities to be appointed local chiefs in their communities to be given returns from the sales of fish and fish products.³³

Forests

As a complex component of the ecosystem, woods have a crucial role in the spiritual, sociocultural, and economic well-being of people. In addition to other functions, woods control the temperature, act as holy groves, and are a source of fuel, food, and building materials. They also protect wildlife, maintain soil fertility, and offer habitat for both people and animals.³⁴ Due to the vitality of forest to humankind, contestations have arisen over it. The three tiers of government (Federal, State, and Local) in Nigeria, including the Middle Belt, are directly involved in forest governance and management. Laws have been enacted to prevent people from illegally using forestry resources. Rural communities where these forests are found have defied regulations on the use of their resources and tend to compete over their ownership and management with government authorities. Government workers or representatives, mostly forest guards and officials that are custodians of such forests at times politicize and compromise their duties. Some of them collect bribes from the defaulters of Forest Reserves Laws to tap the forestry resources, for either indiscriminate lumbering, farming, hunting, or so forth.

There are several woods in Nigeria's Middle Belt, but those in Kaduna State's Rigachikun, Kagoro, Kuyanbana, and Kamuku forests stand out. The FCT, Abuja, also has the Idu and Gwagwa forest reserves. In addition to this, Bauchi State has a Balmo forest.³⁵ Other avalanche forests in the region are less popular but are highly contested or competed for. In supporting this position, an oral informant, Polang stated that:

There are two forests, one is called Kurmin Jato while the other is known as Kurmin Musaaround Kagoro Local Government Area, Kwoi of Jaba, and Kachia Local governments, all situated in the Southern Kaduna. Hausa traders nicknamed the forestry areas to reflect the names of Hausa traders who stop around those forests in the 20th century during their trade journeys. The people mostly Jaba and Koro of Southern Kaduna did not protest the names and as such, they stuck.³⁶

Now, these forests have become contested resources between the Hausa migrants and the indigenous people of Kaduna State precisely those who inhabited the forests and the adjoining areas of Kyenyi, Gantyang, and Bayakum, among others. The Hausa claimed that the forests belong to them. There was also a contestation on a forest in Gaav Clan in Konshisha Local Government area of Benue State between members of the same extended family. Initially, the contested forest was known as *Ikyo Nyande*, it was named after Nyande Kaaki, who was one of the patriarchal of the Shar family. However, on the demise of Kaaki, an elder of the same extended family named Kaanga Gyuse started contesting over it with another elder, Ujima Nyihemba. The children of these elders stretch the contestation into physical assault destroying crops, and the demolition of a homestead that was under construction (close to the forest) by one of the

³³ Interview, I. Hoyo, C.40, Fisherman and Farmer, Taraba State, 2022.

³⁴ I. Onwuzuruigbo, "Enclaves of Banditry: An Ungoverned Forests Spaces and Cattle Rustling in Northern Nigeria", *African Studies Review*. Vol. 64, No.1, 2021, Pp.168-191.

³⁵ Onwuzuruigbo, "Enclaves of Banditry", p.172.

³⁶ Interview with D. Polang, C.41, Public Servant, Jos Plateau State, Nigeria, 2022.

contestants. Politically, elders and kinsmen in the Mbatyough council where the conflict occurred met, discussed, and ex-communicated Kaanga from participating in the affairs of *ityo* (the council of elders) because he was responsible for the conflict. And he was not willing to surrender the forest that was not his property. It was, however, disclosed that the ex-communicated elder later bribed the Kindred Head of Mbatyough (*Or-Tar-u-Mbatyough*) who now pronounced pardon and renounced that Kaanga was right in his actions and also readmitted into the *ityo- i-Mbatyough* (Mbatyough council of elders).³⁷

Associated with the above, the Middle Belt forests have constituted a great source of security threat to the host communities as well as the travelers. Ladan, speaking from personal experience, asserted that disgruntled and resentful Fulani herders who lost their cattle as a result of land disputes and battles over grazing areas use the forests as a means of retaliation against the herds of their kin who, in their eyes, failed to help them when their herds were rustled and launched. Additionally, these woodlands served as a staging area for stolen animals waiting to be moved to cattle markets in other regions of the country for trade. Nowadays, the bandits have taken a more radical dimension; they kidnap their victims and take them hostage, in the different forests in the region. They collect the ransom and free other victims while those whose relatives could not afford the ransom mostly lost their lives. It has been alleged that some of the bandits are empowered by politicians, knowingly or unknowingly. The political class purchased guns and other weapons for them to help rig the elections in their favor. But after elections, the thugs retained their weapons and in the face of abject poverty took to diverse criminalities including banditry and robbery using the available forests as platforms for committing their ills.³⁸

Presently, banditry and livestock rustling have become such routine occurrences that we learn about their horrifying deeds every day. Rustlers operate in astonishing ways. One of them mentioned how astonishingly they go while pulling stolen animals. He highlighted that they travel quickly and steer clear of residential areas, preferring to travel through the woodland instead so that they cannot be spotted.³⁹ When cattle are moved, it is often done so under the supervision of skilled herders and trained ranchers who are compelled to raid them by robbers. Agha cites one of the rustlers who provided a confessional statement saying:

“We are trained to rear cows. Our hideouts are located far inside forests in Kogi and Benue States, those manning the stolen cows are armed. We have over 5,000 cows in those forests. Watchmen are usually stationed on trees and strategic places in the bush while on the lookout for trackers”.⁴⁰

Certainly, this trend is not exclusive to Kogi and Benue States alone but is only one illustration of conflicts over the Middle Belt's forests and recent unrest.

³⁷ Interview, Anonymous, C. 55, Berom Christian, Policy Analyst, Kabongi, Jos North, 2022.

³⁸ S. Ladan, “Forests and Forest Reserves as Security Threats in Northern Nigeria”, *European Scientific Journal*. Vol. 10, No.35, 2014, Pp.120-142.

³⁹ Y. Ibrahim, “Falgore Forest: Where Kano’s Deadly Bandits Dwell”, *Daily Trust*, November 14, 2015.

⁴⁰ E. Agha, “How Stolen Cows from the North are moved from the South-West”, *Daily Trust*, May 19, 2016, P.28.

Challenges for the Politics of Land-Based Resources in the Middle Belt in Contemporary Nigeria

The politics accompanying land resources of the Middle Belt region have had profound negative effects on the economy and the society of the area and even beyond. Firstly, it has created a state of insecurity, which in turn gave way to psychological trauma, which has hindered the people from actively participating in agricultural activities. This situation manifested itself clearly among the farming communities in the study area. The economy of the region is largely dependent on agricultural produce. Nevertheless, in the contemporary era especially since 2001, the competition for land resources has propelled farmers to vacate their ancestral land for the safety of their lives. They have now concentrated in their hometowns and some even migrated to the major settlements or state capitals where they thought that the cases of insecurity were minimal. In doing this, they have been compelled by the exigencies on the ground to abandon agricultural productivity. Lamenting this scenario, Ityonzughul captured an oral interviewee, Joy M. Suega of Logo Local Government expressing her reluctance to farming saying, "I kept a reasonable amount of money to send home to my parents to help coordinate my farm work, but I contemplated whether herders will still attack our community". Words such as these represent fear and trauma and under such circumstances, farming activities cannot be effectively carried out.⁴¹

Secondly, there is a shortage of food and hunger in the study area arising from the competition for land resources. This is because people left the production areas for towns and cities where agricultural activities hardly take place. The few available rural areas where insecurity cases are minimal cannot be able to supply food adequately to the entire Middle Belt. Unfortunately, it is the most fertile and productive areas in the Middle Belt that are worst hit by such contestations leading to a high level of insecurity. In 1993, John Gbor published an article portraying how the Tiv of the Middle Belt contributed significantly to the national economy of Nigeria. In it, he showed how the Zaki-Biam market alone supplied foods to different states across the Federation. The succeeding Tables 2 and 3 are deployed to confirm this claim.⁴²

⁴¹ T.T. Ityonzughul, "Central Bank of Nigeria and Agricultural Development in Benue State, 1978- 2015". *Ph.D Thesis*, Department of History, Benue State University, Makurdi, 2019, P.219.

⁴² J.W.T. Gbor, "Tiv Contributions to the National Economy", Ahire, P.T. (ed.), *The Tiv in Contemporary Nigeria*. Zaria: Tiv Studies Project, 1993, Pp.65-85.

Table 2**Frequency of Commodity Trucking from Zaki-Biam Food Market in 248 days**

Commodity	Percent of the Number of Times Loaded	Frequency or Number of Times loaded
Yams	32.2	1141
Dried Cassava	11.6	411
Groundnut	14.9	526
Sorghum	4.5	158
Millet	8.9	315
Maize(corn seed)	1.1	39
Beniseed	7.8	276
Rice	5.0	176
Soybeans	8.4	298
Orange fruits	1.9	68
Dried Yam	0.1	2
Garri	0.1	3
Beans	3.4	120
Pepper	0.2	6
Total	100.00	3539

Source: Gbor, J.W.T., p.70.

Table 2 indicates that yams were loaded more often than other foodstuffs in bags. Yams make up 32.2 percent of the accumulated frequency. The other foodstuffs that have frequencies above 10 percent are groundnuts 14.19 percent, and dried cassava, 11.6 percent.

Table 3

The Frequency of State Participation in Food Trucking at Zaki-Biam Food Market in 248 days. The Total Frequency = 3539

Northern States	Percent	Southern	Percent
Abuja	1.2	Akwa-Ibom	1.2
Bauchi	1.4	Anambra	11.3
Borno	5.7	Bendel	5.2
Gongola	3.4	Cross River	0.9
Kaduna	6.2	Imo	9.7
Kano	14.4	Lagos	14.0
Katsina	0.2	Ogun	0.0
Kwara	1.9	Ondo	0.3
Niger	0.8	Oyo	1.9
Plateau	5.2	Rivers	1.6
Sokoto	8.4		
Benue	5.3		
Total North	46.7		

Source: Gbor, J.W.T., p.71.

Table 3 reflects that the state with the highest truckload is Kano, which has 14.4 percent. Next in frequency is Lagos with 14.0 while Anambra and Imo have a high frequency of 11.3 percent and 9.7 percent respectively. Katsina and Ondo have the lowest rates of participation. The level of participation likely depended on the quantity and type of foods demanded in the state. However, likely, Katsina, which was created out of Kaduna State, at the time of these statistics, was still buying its foods from Kaduna, which had a 6.7 percent level of participation, and the Ondo people bought from Lagos, which has a 14.0 percent level of participation.

Analytically, such a level of food supply demonstrated in tables 2 and 3 above was not restricted to the Zaki-Biam market but it was a similar situation to all the major rural food markets in the Middle Belt. However, the level of production has been scaled down because of insecurity emanating from the contestations over land resources thereby leading to food shortages. Currently, those who produce on a commercial scale sold it at exorbitant rates making it difficult for many families to afford a three-square meal. In this situation of hunger, some politicians who are the wealthy class took advantage of launching their political campaigns while supplying food items to the electorate with the hope of gaining or influencing their votes.

Furthermore, the competition for forest resources led to deforestation in the Middle Belt. As noted earlier in the paper, some members of host communities are involved in the indiscriminate falling

of trees which has resulted in the modification of natural vegetation without commensurate efforts to renew the cleared vegetation. The consequences of this action, which include increasing the vulnerability of soils to degradable agents, may also result in the reduction or complete change of the niche for many wide-life species or even plants themselves. The removal of forest cover in large quantities without a corresponding replacement is an activity that does not appear to have taken note of the impact this rate of depletion is causing thus, leading to the increasing cost of fuel wood for example.⁴³ In any case, the region tends to increase the effects of deforestation and this should be discouraged in order to avert the dangers accompanying it.

The land-based resource competitions have thickened Christian-Muslim conflicts in the area. Anytime some members of Christianity and Islam have a misunderstanding in their quest to control land resources, the issue usually aggravates into Muslim-Christian conflict. This has brought some level of segregation in some states in the Middle Belt. In reacting to the conflicts, the government usually forms committees to investigate the issue and make some suggestions or policy options for peace to reign but at the time of this study, those suggestions emerging from such committees have not yet found a lasting solution. In the bid to curtail these conflicts and strengthen the cord of unity between Christians and Muslims; in states like Kaduna and Plateau, the government has built hospital facilities separately for both Christians and Muslims in their segregated domains.

Additionally, the contestations and politics over land-based resources gave impetus to poverty in the Middle Belt. This is because farm families could not access their ancestral farmlands because of the insecurity and they have nothing to sell to earn a living. Commercial agriculture has suffered stunted growth thereby throwing the region into abject poverty. Similarly, Keggku asserts that poverty in the Middle Belt is severe, widespread, and multi-dimensional.⁴⁴ Poverty is a predominantly (although not exclusively) rural phenomenon. He identifies the causative factors of poverty in the study area ranging from the microeconomic distortions; effects of globalization, bad governance, corruption, debt burden, low productivity, unemployment, and high population growth.⁴⁵ Some of the aforementioned factors are responsible for the contestations and politics for land resources while others came into the limelight in the process and the aftermath of such contestations.

Conclusion: Rescue Approaches

This paper centered on the politics of contestation for land-based resources in Nigeria's Middle Belt region. It has been acknowledged that people contest over things that are of value to them, be it economic, cultural, or political. In the course of such competitions, politics usually comes into play. It is through political manipulations that the most influential contestants achieve their needs. In doing this, the chapter has approached the Middle Belt from the historical and geographical dimensions. Identification and analysis of the politics for the contestation and the politics of land-based resources in the area under consideration have been done. For a holistic analysis of the

⁴³ A. Lyam, "The Ecological Foundations of Communal Crisis within Benue and its Environs", Bur, A. (ed.), *Communal Relations: Conflicts and Management Strategies*. Makurdi: Aboki Publishers, 2002, Pp.14-28.

⁴⁴ T. Keggku, "Strategies for Sustainable Poverty Reduction and Employment in the Middle Belt: Opportunities and Challenges", Okpeh, O.O., Okau, A, and Fwatshark, S.U. (eds.), *The Middle Belt in the Shadow of Nigeria*. Makurdi: Oracle Business Ltd., 2007, P. 217-227.

⁴⁵ T. Keggku, "Strategies for Sustainable,

phenomena under consideration, the study has equally analyzed the teething challenges emanating from the competition and politicization of the resources under consideration ranging from insecurity and trauma, shortage of food leading to hunger, deforestation, thickening of Christian-Muslim conflicts, and impetus to poverty.

To come out of this quagmire, the study advances some approaches to the rescue. First, the conflicts between the autochthones (the indigenous people) and allochthones (the settlers) should be averted. To achieve this, there should be a continuous dialogue between the elite of the settler and indigenous people to enable them to forge a unity of purpose and understanding in sharing land-based resources.

Secondly, Governors of the Middle Belt states should beef up the security architecture of the region. What is obtainable in the region at the time of this study regarding the efforts of the Federal Government and individual states is not enough because insecurity has engulfed the region. There should be a security network formed by the Middle Belt governors basically to ensure sanity by dealing with the security threats emanating from the ungoverned spaces (especially forestry areas) arising from the contestation of land-based resources.

Thirdly, indiscriminate and arbitrary falling of trees (illegal deforestation) should be averted. This could be achieved by enacting strict laws that would protect the forests. The Federal Government of Nigeria and the affected states (in the region) should enhance their operational activities of securing the forests. Government officers who politicized or comprised their assigned duties of protecting the forest for economic gains should desist from such acts since they have the potential to hinder the development of the region and Nigeria from a broader perspective. Those that would contravene the laws should be prosecuted and convicted by the law court, this would serve as deterrence to orders and the forests will be better protected. If this is done, the Middle Belt would parcel those challenges arising from deforestation.

Fourthly, the chapter has revealed that the politics of land resources have thickened the Christian-Muslim conflict in the zone. In this regard, the study recommends inter-marriages across members of these religious groups. This may help to reduce some of the prejudices between people. This may cement their relationship to the extent that the issue of religious affiliations that usually aggravate the fierce contestations over land resources may not become very prominent.

Finally, it has been noted that the politics of land resources in the area under review gave impetus to poverty. In this connection, the chapter recommends that micro-credits should be given to the displaced farmers who lost their sources of livelihood. If this is done, it would enable them to engage in at least small and medium-scale businesses to better their economic lot, and as such the high rate of poverty would be reduced. Poverty and unemployment seem to have a symbiotic relationship. Regarding this, the chapter suggests massive employment opportunities for the youths (by both government and the private sectors) who are ever willing to engage in any form of contestation (including over land-based resources in Nigeria's Middle Belt and wherever they find themselves) to earn a living even if it takes a violent dimension.

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