

## COMMON QUARRELS – INDIVIDUAL SOLUTIONS. COPING WITH CONFLICTS IN THE LAKE CHAD AREA OF NORTHERN NIGERIA

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The focus of this paper – conflicts and solutions – is related to fieldwork experience in two set-ups. In the former area of research – conducted in a so called traditional Kanuri-village outside the Lake Chad area – violence or expulsion were only rarely reported as a strategy to solve conflicts (excluding matrimonial cases). During my last stay in the multiethnic environment of the Lake Chad area – end of November 1998 to the beginning of March 1999 – a number of cases occurred where exactly these strategies became rampant.<sup>1</sup>

If one compares the cases within the Lake Chad area with the cases outside the lake one might say that the later are mediated by compromises and agreement. The former are characterised by involving the state executive personnel and violent means of self-help. In some cases the people were even sent away from the settlement or island for good.

In the literature on conflicts, and especially those on land conflicts, focus is placed quite often on those where the different sets of actors are classified according to their place of origin (see STAMM 1995: 537). In such classifications the actors come from the same or from different villages. The disputes which occur in those settings usually center upon individuals, families and authorities or question existing frontiers. As a third category conflicts are stated where strangers oppose so called autochthonous settlers.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the features mentioned do occur in the Lake Chad area as well: cattle-rearers do fight with farmers over destroyed harvests or planted pathways (Fulbe/Shuwa vs. Hausa/Kanuri etc); people using different techniques for the same economic undertaking do compete for fishing rights<sup>3</sup>; and absent urban farmers conflict with local brokers and peasants.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In many cases the discourse on conflicts where strangers are involved centres around ethnic differences and not on different economic strategies which might be the reason for the misunderstanding.

<sup>3</sup> See for example the conflict elaborated on by Matthias Krings in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> Similar difficulties occur in connection with trading activities. Here the trade in fish is the most lucrative business as Yakubu Mukthar and Waziri Gazali showed (see article in the same volume).

The case I want to elaborate on does not fit into these categories totally but relates to the one or other aspect.

- The people involved do not belong to the permanent settlers of the Lake Chad area and might be termed – as I have tried to categorise the different groups of migrants elsewhere (PLATTE 1999) – as “close migrants”. They represent the majority of seasonal migrants and do not only immigrate from within a close place in a physical sense but also by way of interaction. Many of them have a personal history, which means that they themselves or their families are known. In the Lake Chad area this category mainly involves the ethnic groups living along the shores of the Lake Chad, namely the Shuwa, Kanuri, Kanembu and Kotoko living in Nigeria and the neighbouring countries.<sup>5</sup>

- The people I refer to belong to the same ethnic group as the majority and the powerbrokers of the settlement where the conflict happened – but not to the same political faction.

- They have been migrating seasonally into the area since decades partly to subsidise their home subsistence economy, partly because of the production of cash crops. Like many others coming into the area they want to earn money in the migrant setting. And they do this by economic strategies and techniques which are not different from those living permanently in the area under study: they farm on land which is commoditised as are other means of production too, *e.g.* that the right to farm on a certain plot can be bought seasonally or permanently.

The conflict I refer to happened at the beginning of the 1998 farming season when the distribution of land started. The seasonal migrants went into the village area where they had been farming since many years, they gave their contributions and payments to the respective officials and started to prepare the land. Shortly after they had started to plant the beans – the main cash crop beside fishing – they were harassed by armed people and had to leave the area. Only several weeks later they were able to go back to their prepared fields and proceeded with their farming business.

The question I want to concentrate on is related to the topic of the ethnological sub-project – “Community building in newly founded settlements in

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<sup>5</sup> An additional group can be labelled as “far migrants”, people whose family background is not known but who share a common language, religion and culture. This category might vary with the size of the migrant community and the migratory history of the respective people. One can mention the Hausa and Fulani in this context on the basis that they are not regarded as “indigenous people” of the area but who are in many settlements part of the firstcomer communities. More typical for this category are for example the Mali-migrants, Masa from Cameroon or Mandara from Nigeria. People might be termed as “distant migrants” who come from a different language, religious or cultural background, namely the Christian communities of the Banana, Margi, Higi and Igbo from Nigeria and the Chad Republic.

the Lake Chad area” – and can be specified as “What do conflicts tell us about the community and people involved?”<sup>6</sup>

### Decreasing lake level and in-migrants hopes

Since the seventies quite a number of new settlements have been established on the Nigerian side of the Lake Chad.<sup>7</sup> The migrants, mainly coming from the Sudanic belt, used the immense reduction of the water-level related to the big Sahel droughts during the early seventies to establish their temporary or permanent settlements. They came in search of luck and in a way it can be described as “Goldgräberstimmung”, an atmosphere of hope and promising fortune which is quite different from the expectations towards life in other parts of the country.

Most of the economic opportunities are related to the yearly fluctuation of the water-level. In connection with these ecological changes different sets of migrants are attracted to the lake area. Some of them follow the decreasing water-level in search of green pastures for their cattle. Others hope to find rich fishing-grounds in the deep waters. Especially at the beginning of each new farming season in January/February a number of seasonal migrants from neighbouring regions move into the lake region. Beside other undertakings they try to get employment as farm-labourers or to find a plot on the new land to farm on their own.

The dominant population, not only by number but also as gatekeepers, and such in officially authorised positions predominantly belong to ethnic groups who regard themselves either as “indigenous” – namely Kanuri and Shuwa – or as “firstcomers” – namely the Hausa. The Buduma or Yedina, the people who are known in the literature to be the autochthonous settlers of the islands within the lake live only in the more northern and eastern portions.

The area under study is hardly accessible for six months of the year and is situated in a region where four national borders meet. The state representatives of law and order – the police, the mobile police, the army and the joint border police – are actively present. A presence which is an indicator of an economic lively region. Limitations in the area under study are set by the rank. It is the personnel of lower ranks which is present on the executive and administrative level. As such one finds for example ward heads and village area heads living inside the settlements whereas the district head and the chairman as well as the area court are situated outside the seasonal flooded land. Representatives of

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<sup>6</sup> The analysis of conflicts has a longstanding tradition in ethnographical research. See for example the conflict theory developed by Gluckmann (1971) his approach in extended-case studies and process analysis or Schweizers’ (1996:116) approach on network analysis and the meaning of multiplex and uniplex realtions.

<sup>7</sup> For the newly founded settlements see the contributions of Kirscht and Werthmann, and Krings in this volume, but also Krings (1998) and Kirscht (1998).

the latter visit the area once in a while for reasons of familiarisation, mobilisation or in case of conflicts which need attendance and evaluation on the spot.

### Increasing lake level and the shortage of land

Since the end of the eighties the process of a shrinking Lake reversed – at least for the time being. Hydrologically, Lake Chad depends to 90 percent on the rains of areas situated further south and east. The rainwater is fed into the Lake Chad by the river systems of the Shari Logone, Elbeid and Yedseram. The increase of the lake's water-level was even more pronounced in the 1998 rainy season where the water-level rose to an extent that some of the villages were totally washed away. Thus a whole set of people had to leave the newly created villages within the lake area to look for some economic opportunities on the expanded shores, others searched for options on other islands within the reach of the lake, some stayed and waited for the delayed farming or fishing seasons to begin or for business with the expected migrants and again others left the lake for good.

The value of land shifted. Land which was for the past years regarded as favourable and occupied often by the powerbrokers of the area was still flooded at the beginning of the beans season.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand land which was not accessible for farming since decades because of the low water level had now become the land which emerged out of the waters first and as such was the first to be cultivated.

One consequence of this hydrological change was that not only the seasonal farmers who usually hire land for a certain period only were looking for plots. But also those farmers who worked on the same plot since years had to look for land on which they could start to farm "in time".

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<sup>8</sup> The planting of beans is the first of a series of planting seasons and starts with the declining of the lake waters after its highest peak in December/January.



Fig. 2: Two ward-heads taking care of some property which was not destroyed by the 1998/1999 flood

### Land of politics – politics of land

Beside the flood and the consequent shifting of the value of farm land the period under discussion was also a period of political transition from a military towards a civilian regime: the Third Nigerian Republic – an ongoing process since 1992. Here three phases can be differentiated: The first phase stopped with the annulled elections on June 12 in 1993; the second phase was interrupted by the death of General Sani Abacha in June 1998; and the third phase which started in November 1998 and was completed with the handing over of the power on 29th of May 1999.



Fig. 3: Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) during the 1998/1999 campaign

Each of these approaches started with the creation of new parties and was followed up by a process of elections from the village, local government, state and federal level. One result after all the elections was that the potential voters became disinterested in politics especially after they had experienced that none of the politicians “did something for the villagers”. For the politicians on the other hand it became difficult to mobilise voters not only because of the distrust and frustration but also because of exhausted financial resources which are necessary for any election. In addition the financial resources of the politicians were also restricted because during the 1998/1999 political transition government money was not given out as usual to campaign. In this situation the politicians had either to associate themselves with a financially potent individual who sponsored their campaign or to come out of a family with the respective resources.

It was in this context that the people who had been chased out of the land started immediately to associate their maltreatment with the fact that they belonged to the “wrong party”, *e.g.* the party which opposed the local government candidate for the chairmanship, who seemed to have won the elections and who was the patron of the official responsible for the distribution of the land.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The interest at least in some party-politics was mainly related to the fact that the political authorities of the area have direct and indirect influence on the distribution of land. On the lowest level it is the “owner of the land” (trustee) who might be a ward head, village area head or individual who is regarded as the “owner” because he had paid for the right to use the land or because he or she was the one who cleared the bush first. People being regarded as the owner but not being in a politically authorised position as the ward or

In addition to the “tiredness of politics” a widespread confusion of the respective parties and phases occurred. People helped themselves by differentiating politicians by the different colours of the party symbols. They started to talk about the „reds and the whites“ and associated them not with any political programme which might have made a significant difference but with different individuals and families. This was even more pronounced because of the fact that the two candidates under discussion for the local government involved had already taken part during the former political phases. They had been candidates for different parties and as such representing the only constant connection between the party politics of the last years.

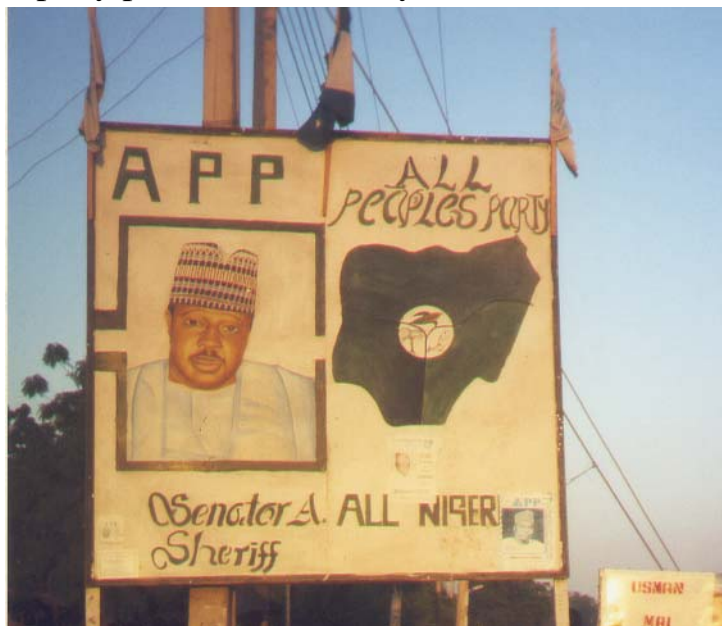


Fig. 4: All Peoples Party (APP) during the 1998/1999 campaign

Although the authorities in the settlements (ward-, village area heads) as well as civil servants are officially not allowed to hold any position in connection with a party most office-holders are known to support the one or other party-candidate. This publicly known un-official support involves not only the own vote but also those of the followers of the respective individual. Both in case of success as well as failure each candidate has to show that he appreciated that support. One of the possibilities to show that one knows “how it all happened” is to provide offices to the supporters, who on their part have to show their appreciation to their followers and so forth. All these activities result in a network of dependencies of people who received or gave out favours and support and which might change the set-up of officials coming into power in the village area.<sup>10</sup>

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village area heads have to give out of each harvest a share to the authorities. For land rights and use see also Krings (1998: 35-36).

<sup>10</sup> In the Lake Chad area the political authorities themselves are not traditional rulers in a sense that their office is inherited. They rely on the backing of the community out of which they are chosen by a forum of decision makers as well as on the agreement of the

It was not surprising that the people reflecting on their situation as having been maltreated considered that the ward head had been manipulated by the winner of the election. As such it was only logical that they had to leave the area – especially in a situation where the land had become scarce – to make room for the followers of the party-candidate who had won.

One problem which arose was that although the winner of the election belonged to another ethnic group than the people driven out of the area the incidence could not easily be termed as an ethnic-conflict – a blaming which was “in the air”. Many of the own ethnic group had “helped” and voted for the candidate. The next step was that the line between oneself and the other was not constructed by aiming at concepts of ethnicity but by labelling the leader of the opposite party, his pressure group and all his supporters as crooks and criminals. During the next few days all sorts of evidences were being circulated to prove this conviction.

At the same time preparations for the governmental elections started. On the village-level one was interested in these activities not only because the results could have changed the power structure in the rural areas but also because of the fact that one of the governmental candidates was a relative of the not yet officially announced winner of the local government election. Now the arguments had to be elevated to a higher hierarchical level but were basically formed on the grounds of one’s own experience. Also the governmental candidate was announced to be a crook and criminal, was arrogant and on top of that had tried to create a picture of himself and his ethnic group as belonging to a minority of the state citizens and as such had broken up his long-standing coalition with the majority and powermakers of the state only to be associated with minority groups and Christians. Here again a lot of cases were cited but not proved and especially the efforts to split from the state majority were taken into consideration when it was announced that not he but his opponent had won the election.

Immediately after the results were announced the former political victims went back to their farmlands. Convinced that the state elections might influence the not yet officially proved elections on the Local Government level they started to negotiate on the farms they had left behind half-planted. They either claimed back the whole land or asked for financial compensation on the basis of the money they had spent already on the farms (seeds, labourers, payments) including the profit expected after harvest.

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next higher authority who has to confirm the choice. It depends on the particular case and circumstances whether the authority on the spot was proposed from within the settlement itself or if it was the higher authority who initiated the choice. One might conclude in this context that the higher the position concerned the higher the number of outsiders are involved in the decision making (ward head by the people – village area head by other village area heads, district head and chairman). For the intertwined aspects of the traditional and modern political power structure in Borno see also Kirscht (1997).



These “political victims“ had now become self-confident “fighters for their rights“ who took the injustice experienced as a solid reason for fighting back, involving those strategies and means which they thought had been mobilised against them – violence, officials and the personnel of the state executive. This transformation from victims to perpetrators was in the line and got additional support when it was announced that the elections in the Local Government were annulled and a bye-election planned.

## Conclusion

The most obvious feature in the case presented refers to the fragility of the territorial communities in the Lake Chad area, a fragility of the social structure which is additionally stressed by the unstable ecological situation as well as the not yet consolidated power structure of the area.

Not only the migrants are mobile but also many of the people in official positions. Ward heads are appointed and dismissed, village area heads are equally frequently installed and have their land expanded or limited in relation to the prevailing power on the next higher hierarchical position. Police and soldiers come into the area when they are posted or when they learn of an increasing market and move out when the market-day or the season is over. In this context the increasing commoditisation is not limited to trade goods only but applies equally to social relationships. An “Expansion der Käuflichkeit“ as ELWERT (1985) has called this economical transformation, which makes decisions predictable only for those who can afford the exchange of gifts and favours.

In such an atmosphere solutions are not primarily based on long-standing relationships and a powerful interest in peaceful solutions (through mediations by compromise and agreement) – as for example in cases where the office of the village area head or district head is inherited – but on the individual’s potential to mobilise financial resources.

In addition – at least for the people whom I concentrated on, *e.g.* the seasonal migrants – they even took the risk of violent confrontations because they had the option to move out of the area. For them as for many others peace and the respective social setting lies outside the Lake Chad area to which they move in to concentrate on increasing profits and not to find new friends and a permanent place to live. Also many of them have been coming for many years and sometimes even represent a second generation of returning migrants, their loyalties however are bound to their home area. Here they do not only support and “help their people” to move upwards in the social hierarchy but also get the support and backing if they face conflicts in the area they migrate to.

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