

A working paper on the local land access arrangement in rural Nigeria

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Introduction

In West Africa conflicts over the use of scarce natural resources between farmers and herders are said to be increasing in recent years. This perspective justifies direct intervention and implies new structure for natural resource use and conflict management. Case materials from the Nupe farmers and the Fulani herders in Nigeria, however, suggest a different perspective. Even though limited natural resources are shared and their production systems are gradually converging, the cooperative relationship between the two groups remains cordial. The traditional institutions governing natural resource use and conflict resolution are being preserved and are functioning well. This paper focuses on corralling contract, which is one of the most important traditional institutions between farmers and herders practiced down through the ages in sub-Saharan Africa. Corraling contract refers to the contractual agreement between farmers and herders to maintain livestock on croplands for a specified time period. Interrupted fieldwork has been conducted since 2005 on the Nupe farmers and the Fulani herders in the Bida area of Niger State of Nigeria to investigate the implementation of this traditional institution. Following the great reduction since mid-1980s and finally the withdrawal in 1997 of fertilizer subsidies by the Nigerian government, the corraling contract has become more important for resource-poor African farmers who cannot afford fertilizer. Meanwhile, the decreasing availability of grazing resources due to expansion of cultivated area outpacing population growth also makes African herders rely more on the corraling contract as the tool to ensure access to resources.

Corraling Contract

Corraling contract is an indigenous fertilization system commonly practiced in the semi-arid area of West Africa (Asanuma, 2004; Neef, 2001). When individual or group of farmer and herder enter into the contractual agreement, the herder has to corral his cattle overnight on the farmer's field for a specific period of time at the farmer's request. In return the farmer pays the herder in cash or in kind and allows livestock to graze on the crop residues on his fields. Land scarcity and degradation from insufficient nutrient cycling increase the demand for manure in sub-Saharan Africa. In Nigeria, the lack of accessibility to good quality and affordable fertilizer and the unavailability of fertilizer in time of need make farmers rely on cattle manure. Demand for manure increased especially after the gradual reduction of the fertilizer subsidy since the mid-1980s and the liberalization of the

fertilizer sector in 1997 (Nagy and Edun, 2002; Shimada, 1999). Farmers have to rely on cattle manure to retrieve productivity of their lands when fallow system for long-period is difficult. The benefits of use of manure in crop production are the improvement in soil physical properties and the provision of N.P.K. and other mineral nutrients. The application of livestock manure increases soil organic matter content, which leads to improved water infiltration and water holding capacity as well as increased cation exchange capacity.

Many researches have proven the effectiveness of corralling livestock on cropland for improving soil fertility (Schlecht et al, 2004; Achard & Banoin, 2003). It is more effective in maximizing nutrient cycling of soil comparing with merely applying manure transferred from other places. Based on TropSoils (1991), the ecological benefits from manure applied by corralling animals can last for 10 years, which is much longer than that of transported manure which can last for only 3 years. The corresponding crop yields are also significantly higher. The difference is proven to be brought by cattle urine, which is difficult to be transported (Powell & Williams, 1993). Urine and manure together can effectively raise the PH level of soil and accelerate the decomposition of organic matter and termite mounds (Brouwer and Powell, 1998). Many farmers regard the corralling contract with herders a better mean to fertilize their fields than the application of fertilizer by themselves.

Exchange between farmers and herders is very common (Grayzel, 1990; Wilson, 1984; Ogawa, 1998). Corraling contract is an important reciprocal arrangement that facilitates the complimentary relationship of the two groups. Nevertheless, changes caused by economic, environmental and political factors are making the contract less accessible to some farmers. Heasley and Delehanty (1996) point out that corraling contract has turned into tools and symbols in broader struggles among communities over access to land for field and pasture. The research of Neef (1997) in south-west Niger finds out that richer and more influential farmers obtain greater access to manure through corraling contract than poor farmers. On the other hand, higher demand for manure enhances the bargaining power of herders and enables them to get a better position in the politics of manure. Many pastoralists use the contract as a trump in case of land conflicts (Loofboro, 1993) and as a strategy to obtain and secure permanent land use rights from private landowners or local leaders (Neef, 1997).

The Nupe Production System

The Nupe studied are subsistence farmers (Hirose, 2002). Because of increasing population density, farmland is becoming scarce. Fallow period is largely shortened on uplands and lowland fields are being cultivated annually. Few Nupe farmers use inputs such as chemical fertilizers, insecticides, pesticides, improved seeds or imported agricultural equipment. In

2006, a bag of 50kg fertilizer (NPK:15-15-15) is estimated at NGN 3, 000 (USAID, 2007), which is expensive relative to return and credit for purchase is unavailable. Despite of the introduction of the Land Use Act in 1980 which took over the legal ownership of all land to the state, communal land right still prevails in most part of Nigeria including the study area. Due to history of Fulani conquest in the 19th century, customary land tenure system of the Bida area is complicated. There is a three-layered structure of pattern of control over land and land related activities (Masuda, 2002). On the top level is the local king *Bida Emir*. In principle all territories of the Bida Emirate are under the control of the *Emir*. Under the *Emir* there are primary landlords which are created by the feudalistic system of the old Nupe kingdom. At the bottom of the structure there are secondary landlords whose powers over village lands are restricted to allocation of farmland and management of vacant land. Under the customary land system, pastoral Fulani do not have guaranteed access to land as they are still regarded as strangers even though some of them have been cohabitating with Nupe in the area for over a century. Grazing lands in the study area are regarded as open access resources. The peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding with their Nupe hosts grant pastoral Fulani unrestricted access to any fallow lands either during the rainy or dry season.

Pastoralist Fulani in Bida

At about 1800, Fulani mallams and Fulani cattle owners began to settle in the Nupe country (Ismaila, 2002). The first group of pastoral Fulani that settled in Bida country was the *Dindima'em* group led by *Abdul-Maliki*. They migrated from an area named Machina located somewhere north-east to the Sokoto country near Niger. During the colonial era, Fulani from the *Dindima'em* group was selected by the *Emir* as *Dikko*—the chief of all pastoral Fulani in the emirate—for the convenience of cattle tax collection. By 2005, the *Dikko Bida* at that time estimated that there were about 1450 Fulani groups under his domain in the whole Bida Emirate, and 350 groups were in Bida region. The main pastoral Fulani lineages are the *Dindima'em*, the *Boodi* and the *Fittoji*. Pastoral Fulani in Bida sustain their subsistence by raising cattle, sheep and chicken. Some of them begin to carry out small-scale upland farming in recent years. They form small groups composed of several families and live in cooperation with one another. A Fulani group normally composed of several *baade*, which refer to a family headed by a married man with an independent herd of cattle and his wife and children. The Fulani call their camp as *wuro*. The spatial structure of a Fulani camp in the study area is long and narrow rectangular in shape extending from south to north. A Fulani camp consists of a residential section for Fulani people and an enclosure for their cattle herd which is called *hoggo*.

Corralling contract between Nupe and pastoral Fulani

The brief record of the practice of corralling contract in the study area can be found in the ethnographies of Nadel (1942:206) and Shikano (2002:353). Nadel described corralling contract as “*an interesting cooperation*” between villagers or landlord and nomadic Fulani herdsmen. It was an accepted arrangement among the Bida landlords to place one’s fallow land at the disposal of the Fulani herdsmen before leasing it to a new tenant. The landlord could then obtain a much higher price for his land. The records of Nadel and Shikano were very brief, but they indicated that corralling contract had been an arrangement being practiced at least for half a century in the study area. The pastoral Fulani groups studied have diverse migration patterns and degree of closeness with Nupe villages. They arrange corralling contract with the Nupe in different ways in response to their unique circumstances and needs. In this study four patterns of corralling contract adopted by the Fulani have been identified. Each pattern is illustrated below with a representative case study.

Corralling contact as a local political tool

As the chief of all pastoral Fulani in Bida Emirate, the group of *Dikko Bida* needs to act as a role model regarding the practice to sit for Nupe villages. The group of *Dikko Bida* began to sit for villages north to Bida town for the rainy season since 1990. The group moved northward as the *Dindima'em* lineage expanded so it moved northward to explore new grazing resources. For rainy season, the group rotates among four Nupe villages, namely Kologa, Bube, Akote and Emigbari. Meanwhile for the dry season, the group has been sitting for just one village – the Eyagi village, for all the last 90 years. For *Dikko Bida*, corralling contact is a local political tool to symbolize the harmonious social relationship between pastoral Fulani and Nupe farmers, as well as to maintain the linkage with the *Emir*. Eyagi village is the birthplace of the mother of the late Bida *Emir* and the village head of Eyagi has always been the Village Area head, *Etsu Yenkpa*, who is responsible for dispute settlement at community level. Sitting for Eyagi can be regarded as an annual virtual to acknowledge the allegiance of pastoral Fulani to the Bida Emirate. Corralling contract with villages does not bring economic benefits to *Dikko Bida*’s group, but it has an important local political meaning for the maintenance of cordial social relationship between Nupe and pastoral Fulani at a whole.

Corralling contract as an economic tool

Informants from the more popular groups which receive multiple invitations describe the corralling contract as a kind of “exchange”. They regard it as a kind of service provided for

farmers to achieve better yield, and in return they can take some advantages from it. The popular groups receive higher payments and more gifts from farmers for the contract. However, they are not absolute utilitarian in their consideration for village selection. The long term harmonious relationship with various villages is a more important consideration for them. The groups with higher popularity usually have higher social status, such as belonging to the ruling house or led by respectful Islamic *mallam*. The group of *Aliyu Abdullahi* is one of the most popular groups in the area. It is the second largest group in the area in terms of population and it sits for various villages south to Bida town in the rainy season. In the dry season, the group migrates to the basin of Gbako River and rotates among a few villages. The informant of the group points out that, “*It is good to maintain relationship with various villages because it gives you more freedom and bargaining power.*” When deciding which village to select, informant says, “*You cannot follow money, you need to follow cattle.*” Financial benefit is just one of their considerations, what really matter to them are the welfare of their cattle and the good relationship with villages which make grazing on farmers’ land an easier task. To avoid conflict among villages, the group needs to rotate. To run the corralling contract is similar to running a “business” to those popular groups. They care about financial benefit, but they also need to maintain “customer relations” with various “clients” and to prevent them from “fighting among themselves”.

Passive corralling contract

Some Fulani groups are not so eager to engage in corralling contract with villages. They value freedom of mobility higher than the close relationship with certain Nupe communities. *Adamu Iya* belongs to the *Boodie* lineage group which began to settle in the Bida area migrating from the Sokoto region in the 1930s. Unlike the *Dindima'em* group, most of the *Boodie* groups studied do not formally engage in corralling contract with Nupe villages. They usually settle on a particular village continuously for several years during the same season. For example, by 2005, *Adamu Iya* has been setting up his camp in Fakunba village during the rainy season for five consecutive years, and in Gaba village for the dry season for ten consecutive years. *Adamu Iya* does not actively engage in corralling contract with villages although a few villages always show welcome to host his group. He prefers to be flexible so that he can explore new environment for his cattle anytime he wants. The precondition for him to stay in a village is that the villagers have shown welcome and have ever forgiven him for minor destruction caused by farm encroachment.

Fixed corralling contract

There are a few groups studied that do not carry out seasonal migration. They settle both in the rainy and dry seasons in a particular village for years. Their life-style can be regarded

as semi-settled, but they do not own permanent shelters and need to move their cattle enclosure frequently within the village following the request of their hosts. The villages they stay are usually larger in scale, with large area of vacant land and possess water resource even during the dry season. Groups prefer not to migrate but just sit for a particular village because it is “too much suffering” to move among villages. The group of *Aliyu* moved into the Bida area from the Sokoto region for more than 45 years ago. *Aliyu* has never moved out of Gbanchitako village for over a decade. The stable relationship with the village enables him to get a relatively large plot to do his own farming. *Aliyu* moves his cattle enclosure following the wishes of farmers in the rainy season. In the dry season, he can let his cattle to stay on his two farms for two months respectively. *Aliyu* is not interested in getting financial benefits by corralling contract. Stability is more valued and by sitting for a village all year round for long term, he is able to sustain a semi-settled life.

Utilization of pastoral Fulani camp site

Cattle manures are accumulated inside the *hoggo* during the season. Fulani do not use cattle manure as fuel or construction material. In the next rainy season after the group have moved away, Nupe farmers spread the faeces all over the previous camp site and transfer part of the manure to their other farms as well. The arrangement for corralling contract of Nupe farmers can be categorized into two: hosting by collective effort of a whole village and hosting by single household of a village. When arrangement is made by collective effort of a whole village, the land for past Fulani camp site is divided into many small plots and distributed to village members according to village norms and rules. Dividing the field into many long and narrow small plots does not comply with the principle of economics of scale, but for Nupe farmers the notion of fairness in community is highly important. That is the reason why larger group is more desirable by Nupe farmers. By hosting a bigger Fulani group, they can ensure members of every household of the village can get a share of the manured land.

Conclusion

The corralling contract has enhanced the mutual dependence of Nupe farmers and Fulani herders in central Nigeria. It is especially essential to Fulani who, under the customary land system, has no guaranteed access to land. With the failure of the government in providing grazing reserve, the corralling contract has remained as their most important asset that assists them to access to resources. It is also the most important antifriction for the social relations between the two groups. Most of the interviewed farmers answered that they would forgive pastoral Fulani for minor crop encroachment for the sake of the cattle manure. Village heads are expected to assist their Fulani guests when they have disputes

with other villages. In the study area, most of the disputes caused by cattle encroachment into farms can be settled by village heads, rarely do cases reach to *Dikko* or the *Emir*.

Despite the history of Fulani conquer in the early nineteenth century, Nupe farmers generally are not antagonistic toward pastoral Fulani. Although they do not form marital relations, the Nupe and the Fulani have a wide range of social interaction. The camps of Fulani are generally close to homestead of villagers. Fulani men often gather in village and pray in mosque with their Nupe fellows. The corralling contract has a positive impact on the social relation of the two groups. They see each other as partner: the Nupe need the Fulani for manure while the Fulani need the Nupe for land and fodder. The corralling contract is not a casual arrangement, but a dynamic and functioning traditional institution that facilitates the collaboration of the two groups. It is an important example of local adaptation and innovation that allows balance to be maintained when limited resources are being shared. Statutory efforts to draw territorial distinctions between agriculture and livestock production have created social rifts in many regions in Africa. Technological solutions, such as chemical fertilizers, have not halted the decline in agricultural productivity. Corraling contract should be advanced as a part of the complex set of social and biophysical conditions in agropastoral regions. Instead of working in vain to simplify the system with statutory and technological solutions which separate agriculture from livestock production, efforts should be focused on removing constraints of corraling contract implementation on both sides and facilitating this institution to enhance the association between agricultural and livestock production.

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