

Beyond Normal: Thinking About the Multi-dimensionalities of Distressed Habitability Landscapes in Dryland African Cities

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My contribution to this seminar is drawn from personal encounters and inquiries related to shelter characteristics of local and cross-border displaced persons in northern Nigerian cities of Kano, Katsina, and Maiduguri. This experience spans over a decade of changing landscapes of habitability and climate and conflicts nexuses. The combined population of the three urban areas and their peripheries is around or higher than the entire populations of some Sahelian countries such as Mali or Burkina Faso, both with 23 million people. The information I want to relate were drawn from Key Informant Interviews (KII), focus group discussions, and field observations held between 2009 and 2023. Most of the studies that I have drawn insights from came through academic, commissioned and collaborative studies.

The Historical Evidence on Habitability

The most extensive dryland region of Africa also called the Sahel (8°-18°N, 17W-20°E) bestrides drier parts of Gambia, Senegal, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan and Ethiopia. The population of this extensive bio-climatic zone is rapidly growing. Its population is projected to grow from 516 million today to 914 million by 2050.¹ The Sahel region receives mean seasonal rainfall of between 100 to 600 mm from its north and southern edges and experiences minor and major droughts within every five years (Kandji et al. 2006). One of the recent critical droughts was recorded in 2010 when June and August temperatures in various parts of the Sahel reached up to 49.6°C (121.3°F), breaking records of 1961 and 1998 (Masters 2010).

According to UNEP (2011), the starvation of people through shortage of food, water, livestock, diseases makes Sahel a ground zero for climate change. This area is identified with bouts of intense droughts such as those of 1898-1916, 1930-31, 1940-41, 1947-49 through the Great Sahelian droughts of 1968-1988 (Jacques and Le Treut 2006). Researchers noted that the 1983-1985 droughts are said to be a major cause of population drift to cities (Wilson and Legesse 2004).

Some researchers identified an increase in the pattern of ethnic Tuareg moving to Kano city during the droughts experienced in the 1980s (Mortimore 1982). Thus, the influx of

¹ UN Population Division Data Portal <https://population.un.org/dataportal>

environmentally induced migrants would be easier for some group of people and notably the Tuareg who have historical experiences of moving into Kano city. The Tuareg featured prominently in the Trans-Saharan trade that links many African cities, and Kano was its southernmost city (Shea 2003; Lovejoy 2005). For this reason, the city of Kano has accommodated Tuareg traders many of whom settled permanently in some parts of the city and rural areas during pre-colonial and colonial periods (Paden 1973). The collapse of the Trans-Saharan trade and the dichotomisation of borders between the French and the British colonial territories significantly slowed the volume of Tuareg trading with Kano city. As a result, Tuareg influx to Kano changed from trade to forced migration, a situation that Mortimore (1982) attributed to the drought cycles of 1970s and 1980s. On the other hand, urbanisation has made Kano more open to an influx of Tuareg and other potential environmental migrants from other ethnic groups the West African Sahel. According to the UN Habitat (2010), Kano dominates the emerging Maradi-Katsina-Kano urban corridor linking Nigeria and Niger Republic.

Current Evidence of Habitability In Light of the Climate Conflict Nexus

There is much attention in the popular press to the nexus of climate change and conflicts in northern Nigeria (Daniel 2021, Nugent 2018), though some contest the linkage (Daoust & Selby 2022). Droughts, flooding and desertification are confounding conflicts and human displacement, especially in cities at the edge of conflicts that receive displaced persons. The IOM has estimated that there are over two million IDPs in Nigeria along with close to two million returnees.² On the other hand, the International Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) puts the number of IDPs in Nigeria at slightly above 3.2 million at the end of 2021.³ The two figures not only reveal the size of the displacement challenge in the urban areas but also allude to the urgent need for policy and capacity building to protect the IDPs, especially the most vulnerable among them, namely women and children.

Scholars, humanitarian and development stakeholders have always drawn attention to sufferings within camps or what is known as humanitarian urbanism. We have seen militarisation of the drylands in the name of securitisation. More recently also we see emerging of unarmed civilian protection mechanisms evolving as an alternative. Yet, there is too little attention on shelter characteristics of the recently increasing displacements due to conflicts and climate stressors. Those hit hardest are women, children, the urban poor, and other vulnerable groups such as people living with disabilities (PLWDs). In situ perspectives and how they linguistically define and conceptualise the affected people and their habitat is unheard of in the mainstream literature and development circles.

In my own research, I seek to bring to light the shelter characteristics and experiences of women, children, aged men and women (usually PLWDs), and male household heads. Each of these demographic groups have different place-making experiences and semantics and semantics that normally define them. The semantics are based on the meanings given to these

² See <https://dtm.iom.int/nigeria>

³ See <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data>

groups and other experiences in Hausa Language – the lingua franca of Northern Nigeria and parts of Northern West Africa. The Hausa keywords of interest to this presentation are as follows:

- *Almajiri* (singular, *Almajirai*, plural) Quranic school pupils – originally from Arabic word *Almuhajirun* – migrants.
- *Yan Gudun Hijira* – displaced person (usually by conflicts or disasters)
- *Almajiri* (singular, *Almajirai*, plural, *Almajira* -female) usually aged male and street beggars.
- *Talaka* (singular, *Talakawa*, plural,) usually the ordinary urban living poor.

Within the last 10 years the escalating conflicts, displacement and climatic uncertainties have changed the experiences and habitabilities, especially through multidimensional poverty that has engulfed rural and urban landscapes of the region. Even urban areas can experience a loss of habitability, as such is interpreted as having the mechanisms to cope with extreme heat and living in peace and security. For example: an informant observed that: “around midnight an *almajiri* (an under aged kid) was forced by hot weather to come out of their overcrowded room and slept at the edge of a filthy gutter. He slept with his hands partly inside the gutter and mosquitoes were all over his body.” A journalist anchoring a radio programme informed me of a woman “who sleeps on top of a tree in Kano inner city due to fear of loan sharks.” This is how urban poverty creates uninhabitable shelter. She narrated how loan sharks can take away sofas and mattresses.

Some questions to address include: What is the evidence that current conflicts in northern Nigeria are attributable at least in part to climate factors? How does conflict affect habitability? Are places with declining habitability breeding conflict, or are they simply areas in need of humanitarian intervention? *However, the big question is: who will protect these groups of people?*

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