
SPRINGS

THE RACHEL CARSON CENTER REVIEW

Issue #1 | 2022

July



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THE POOR WOODS OF NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Springs
The Rachel Carson Center Review

1 • 2022

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I have loved trees since childhood. Mother said she was sitting under a mango tree when her water broke and I was to be born. She carried me as a baby and sang me lullabies under trees. I took my first steps under trees. I played as a toddler under trees. I am now an adult with a profound respect for trees.



Herbal Heritage Centre at Gona in Nigeria. Photograph by Sule Emmanuel Egya. [CC BY 4.0](#).

Trees, trees, everywhere trees. This was my village Usha in north-central Nigeria, where I grew up seeing different trees, all planted and nurtured for different reasons. Ancestral, recreational, commercial. Every household had trees, out front, in the compound, and on the boundaries. Usha was a thrilling bouquet of mango and orange and cashew trees.

Given my love for trees, I was angry whenever I saw any kind of hostility against them. And although I had heard of and seen reprehensible wood logging, nothing prepared me for the encounter I had in north-east Nigeria in 2021.

Along with my research team, I arrived in the city of Gombe on a cold January evening. Our environmental humanities research involved travelling across Nigeria to witness the reality of degradation. We chose the northeastern states of Gombe and Bauchi.

Gombe is erosion-prone, marked by gaping gullies, widening gutters, broken buildings, and crumbling bridges. There were also marks of attempts to confront erosion, as I saw fresh stone walls, new drainages, and the demolition of structures on waterways.

I also saw hundreds of seedlings in black polythene bags elegantly arranged in groups by the roadsides. Enthusiastic young men were watering them. The news, according to our guide, was that the state's governor loved trees. Upset that people cut trees without planting new ones, he had declared a four million tree planting action. A million for each of the four years of his tenure.

The happiness of the news of tree planting in the city gradually diminished as we set out for the hinterland. The eyesore of Hayin Kwari Nisau, a community on the outskirts, was devastating. It was a scene of massive erosion that had swallowed half of the buildings. A couple of deserted buildings, cut in halves, hung precariously on the sharp edge. The owners had moved to the other side of the community, hoping it would take some time before the destructive erosion reached their new homes. There was a big neem tree, half of its roots chopped off, as the earth beneath it gave way.

No, they did not have any hope of intervention from governments, from non-governmental organizations, from the almighty United Nations through its ecological funds. They had hoped in vain. Some of the inhabitants were staring at us from afar. As I drew closer to ask why they were living with such a phenomenal danger, I noticed hostility in their eyes as they kept mum.

The elderly lady I approached, in the hope that she would talk to me, blurted out in Hausa, “So, you people have come again to gloat over our precarity, to take photos of our condition, to laugh at us, eh?”



Erosion site at Hayin Kwari Nisau. Photograph by Sule Emmanuel Egya. [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

“Mama, I’m sorry about how you feel,” I said. “But we’re researchers and our aim is not to laugh at your condition. We’re hoping our research will draw attention to your plight.”

She gave a short bitter laugh. “We have seen many people who said the same thing. We even open our doors to them, but nothing has been done and as you can see things are getting worse.”

“I’m really sorry,” I mumbled. “But you could have planted trees. The landscape is treeless.”

“Trees? What trees? Are you blind—can’t you see that falling tree?” She pointed at a lone neem tree in a precarious pose. “We have legs to run, the trees can’t move. They are worse hit.”

I opened my mouth to reply when I noticed our guide beside me, signaling we should leave. The young men were growing more aggressive.

“We have to leave now,” Ben said in an urgent tone. “Have you noticed the young men gathering?”

Talatu and Maria, two research team members who had moved near the neem tree for a closer look, returned hurriedly, looking frightened.

My mood turned downcast. Tears welled up in me. Averting my eyes, I told my fellow researchers that we should leave, and our bus soon departed from the site.

I struggled to understand the contradiction of having this precarious condition within the same Gombe metropolis in which attempts had been made to deal with erosion. Was the government pretending not to see the condition of Hayin Kwari Nisau? Were the people of the community being punished?

The government had used the case of Hayin Kwari Nisau to beg for funding from international donors. Yet nothing had come out of it.

The guide said he did not know. What he did know was that the government had used the case of Hayin Kwari Nisau to beg for funding from international donors, and many of the donors had sent their research teams here. Yet nothing had come out of it.

“But the government could have started doing something about it,” I said. “What about the ecological fund donated to all states?”

The guide said, “Of course, they get a large chunk of the ecological fund, given the peculiarity of Gombe, and you saw how it has been spent repairing erosion sites in the city.”

“Ah yes, like that place near the mosque in the city centre. But Hayin Kwari Nisau has a more critical condition.”

“You’re right, professor,” the guide said. Then he laughed. “That place near the mosque is the family house of the former governor. His parents still live there. That’s why it received attention.”

A sad silence enveloped the bus as we drove on.

Much of the hinterland was marked by low and sparse growths, except for the ubiquitous neems and baobabs. In some places, the ground had dried, strong as a stone. In others, I saw much more

of the sand dunes that stretched far away. Most of the trees I saw were on farms, suggesting that the farmers had planted the trees themselves.

Our guide took us to specific forest reserves. We visited the Herbal Heritage Centre in Gona community. The forestry authority had so designated it because it was meant to grow all local medicinal herbs. It was meant to be a source for traditional medicinal practice. Trees planted here were a variety of local species well-known for their herbal uses: mango, orange, cashew, guava, neem, locus bean, and so on.

"Was the aim ever achieved?" I asked the guide, as we stepped onto the reserve.

"But you can see for yourself," he pointed at a large stump. Then to another one, and yet another.

The forestry authority had just planted new trees, which were growing luxuriantly, providing shade to the remains of the dead ones.

It was then I noticed the low growth of newly-planted trees was interspersed with huge melancholic stumps of old trees. These were the trees that had grown here, that became huge, and then viperous wood loggers descended on them. They totally killed the reserve. The forestry authority had just planted new trees, which were growing luxuriantly, providing shade to the remains of the dead ones.

We visited a big woodlot in Malala village. I looked out for the stumps because I saw three motorways leading to the reserve, implying that the loggers were also here. The stumps looked pale and yet resilient as though they had defied death. Here too they were shaded, as if protected, by ebullient young trees recently planted.

"The stumps, and the young stems: why the pattern?" I asked our guide. "Is it that those who cut the trees are replacing them?"

"That's not the case," the guide replied.

He explained that the loggers would swoop on a reserve, decimate it, and move on to the next. They were vicious, never held accountable. They were rich and powerful people, sometimes coming from faraway places to feed their growing factories.

"How about forest guards?" Maria asked.

Forest guards were few, our guide said, because government would not employ more people as guards. They were poorly paid, neglected, and left at the mercy of the powerful loggers, like the trees. You could easily bribe and get them to even help you log the trees.

"Who is planting these trees now?" Ben asked.

In the case of this place, the guide said, a non-governmental organization had decided to intervene, perhaps because they saw the kindness of the present governor to trees. An NGO had planted the trees, was tending them, even providing financial allowances to the forest guards to protect the reserve. Most of the young trees were neem, mahogany, eucalyptus, cassia, locust bean, and silk cotton.

Gadam Forest Reserve was our next destination. As we waded into the forest of tall eucalyptus trees, I saw a pile of freshly cut trunks. The trunks were long and slender, neatly arranged. A few meters further ahead, I saw the same kind of pile. I counted about five piles before I saw a long truck, tailgate open, half-loaded with trunks. Sweaty muscular young men were working, throwing the trunks on board, and arranging them.

"They aren't afraid of anyone. They're armed and ready to fight any intruder."

Our driver stopped and we got off the bus.

"Here are the leeches in action," I whispered.

Ben said, "Have you noticed the way they look at us?"

Talatu corroborated, "They're looking at us with suspicion."

"They will probably recognize our guard and think we're here to arrest them," Maria added.

Our guard laughed, throwing his head backward. "Not at all. They aren't afraid of anyone. They're armed and ready to fight any intruder."

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

"Oh yes, they are," the guard continued. "They mean business. To arrest them, we need a team of armed policemen, sometimes soldiers, and that usually doesn't happen."

"Why?" asked Maria.

The guard explained, "You may make the effort to organize the armed policemen to arrest them. The next day they are free because a powerful man wants them free. And then they are back here, hacking down the trees. Your effort, in the end, is wasted."

"I see," I said. "Corruption."

We boarded the bus and slowly drove past. In order not to provoke them, we didn't take any photos.

We drove for a while and found ourselves in the province of Bauchi State, bordering Gombe State. The landscape was the same. I saw the effects of destructive erosion in the villages. Most of the houses were constructed with mud and had thatched roofs. The villages used cut wood and/or charcoal for domestic fuel. In some villages, nearly each household had a place, mostly in front, for keeping cut wood for domestic fires. In other villages, there were sacks of charcoal in front of the houses.



(Left) Wood cut for fuel in Bishi. Photograph by Sule Emmanuel Egya. [CC BY 4.0](#). (Right) Men loading logs onto a truck. Photograph by [Gudjohnsen007](#), 2017. [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

Our guide took us to Bishi, a place notorious for logging. On the highway linking Bauchi to Maiduguri, we frequently slowed down to behold the incredible sight of wood cutting. One place, just by the roadside, was a huge industry. Freshly logged wood was piled up high, giving a picture of a grand pyramid. More than twenty young men, armed with axes, were splitting the logs. Others were arranging split wood by the roadside. And others still were loading trucks with wood fuel. Girls and women of different ages milled about, buying wood fuel, selling food to the workers. It was a lively marketplace.

“One of the biggest markets of wood cutting around here,” our guide said.

“An open place, by the roadside. The authorities see them and nothing is done,” Ben said in an angry tone.

I added. “All have conspired to kill the woods. No one to defend the woods.”

By now I had become totally disheartened. Totally dispirited. I asked the driver to take us back to our hotel. My team members looked at me with surprise. The guide showed even more surprise, with unspoken questions hanging out of his parted lips.

I explained, “Ladies and gentlemen, I’ve seen enough destruction to make me weep. I’m sorry, I don’t want to see more.”

The guide replied, “If you say so, I’m just a . . .”

Talatu interrupted, “Prof, this is a field trip and . . .”

I said, sounding grumpy, "Oh yes, I know it is a research trip. I'm sorry for being emotional. But I'm totally down. How do you feel when you see many corpses of innocent people lying on the ground, being butchered by their killers? That is how I feel now!"

"I understand you, Sir," Ben said. Then he ordered the driver to turn and head for Gombe.

We drove in silence, punctuated by intermittent coughs. Later they started to talk because the journey was long. But I remained sullen.

My childhood years returned vividly. Father was away in the city working, only visiting during vacation. For the love of farming, Mother rejected the city.

I gamboled around Mother on the farm. You must sit quietly and allow me to work, she would say. Where else did I sit other than under a tree? Mother always identified the biggest tree on the farm and prepared a seat under it. Then I would study the tree. I fed my imagination with the tree patterns; the large, protruding roots; the rough trunk with barks often caking off. I marveled at the big branches, at how the leaves stately arranged themselves, at the tree's height.

In most cases I accompanied Mother to the forest in search of wood fuel. She would find a tree that had fallen long ago, perhaps died of natural causes, which had long become dried sticks that she would cut to take home, or look for dried branches that had fallen off a huge tree. She never cut a living tree for wood fuel.

This trip had exposed me to the precarious condition of trees. I had long known that northern Nigeria was prone to desertification. It suffered from shortage in rainfall. Its harmattan wind was harsh and skin-scarring. I had thought that the people would have embraced trees. The scale of open hostility to trees baffled me.

I didn't know how far the Gombe State tree planting policy would go in salvaging the situation. But I quietly prayed for the souls of the poor trees of northern Nigeria.



Sule Emmanuel Egya is professor of African literature and cultural studies at Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai, Nigeria. In 2018 he was a Carson Fellow. He writes poetry and fiction under the pen name E. E. Sule and has won several research grants and literary awards, including the Commonwealth Book Prize for the Africa region.



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Cite this article

Egya, Sule Emmanuel. "The Poor Woods of Northern Nigeria." *Springs: The Rachel Carson Center Review*, no. 1 (July 2022). <https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc-springs-1463>.

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ISSN 2751-9317

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