

The Evolution of Conflicts Related to Natural Resource Management in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT Since independence, African countries have been searching for appropriate conflict management approaches to deal with the numerous and apparently intractable conflicts between states and among ethnic groups over the ownership and exploitation of natural resources. In Cameroon, conflicting claims regarding rights to the management of natural resources have, over the years led to inter-ethnic conflicts and disputes between communities, especially on food crop and livestock farmers, aggravating the poverty situation in rural areas. In attempts to resolve resource management conflicts between rival groups, the approach adopted by the modern state is highly centralised and mostly top-top without due consideration to the historical and cultural systems and values of the indigenous communities that constitute the country. The objective of this paper is to discuss the anthropological context within which the natural resource management system in Cameroon operates, identify the causes of land degradation and conflicts over resource exploitation and assess the relevance of indigenous conflict-resolution principles in the present context. This paper explores natural resources management in the pre-colonial, the colonial and post-colonial periods and argues through out that there is a structural disconnect between the conflict management systems adopted by the modern state institutions and those of the indigenous communities over which the latter has gained jurisdiction. This paper advocates for community participation in designing natural resources management strategies and harmonisation of the conflict management systems of indigenous communities with those of the modern state to provide a lasting solution to the incessant conflicts over resource exploitation to ensure peaceful co-existence. Such measures would contribute to improving the managerial, organisational and income-generating skills of community members to tackle the rising incidence of rural poverty and human deprivation.

INTRODUCTION

The management of natural resources in Cameroon is largely conditioned by systems which were established by European colonial powers including Germany, Britain and France. Reforms enacted after independence were influenced by European concepts of private property, some of which vary greatly with the indigenous land tenure principles because African systems and cultural values were never taken into consideration. Cameroon extends from the Gulf of Guinea in the south to Lake Chad in the north, covering an area of 475,442 square km (Gwanfogbe and Melingui 1990; Forgwe 2005). The country is generally referred to as 'Africa in miniature' because of its diversity in terms of ecology, farming systems and human cultures. Its economy depends largely on exploitation of natural resources that are in turn subject to changes in climate and the intensity of human activities (Oyono 2004).

Like many African countries, Cameroon, has a complex ethnic configuration of 236 ethnic groups, each with its own patterns and historical

and cultural references. This anthropological complexity is further worsened by the socio-economic problems that afflict the rural population in particular, including conflicts over the ownership of land for crop and livestock production (Amungwa 2009).

About 11 percent of Cameroon's landscape is in the Sahelian savannah, 30 percent lies in the higher altitude moist savannah (generally above 400 metres) and 58 percent is in the moist tropical forest zone. The rest lies in a variety of other ecosystems (Forgwe 2005). This endows the country with a wide variety of natural resources, climates and biological diversity. These geographical zones also have numerous specific demographic, social and land tenure characteristics. Two of the country's ten regions, Far north and north, lie in the Sahelian zone; three, north-west, west and Adamawa are in the moist savannah zone; and the remaining east, south, centre, Littoral and south-west are mainly in the moist forest zone (Neba 1987; Besong 1995).

In the Far north, semi-arid conditions prevail with little rain. Several dry-land crops like cotton, millet, sorghum, and groundnuts are

grown. Rice is also grown in this area under irrigation. In the moist savannah, covered with short grasses and occasional clumps of trees, rainfall is higher, especially in the coastal areas at higher altitudes. A variety of crops for self-consumption and marketing, cattle, goat and sheep rearing are common in this zone. More than half the population of Cameroon, currently estimated at 16.38 million people is concentrated in these two regions with about 15 percent of the total land area (Gwanfogbe and Melingui 1990; Amin 2008).

The moist tropical forest zone stretches from the Atlantic coast in the south-west to Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Congo in the south, and to the Central African Republic in the south-east. About 35 percent of this land is covered by dense humid forest and mangrove swamps cover parts of the Atlantic coast and along Equatorial Guinea. Some of the human settlements in this region undertake fishing as their principal livelihood activity. Indigenous populations like the Baka and Bakola live in the moist forest areas with hunting and subsistence farming as their means of livelihood. Most of the logging in Cameroon is done in this region within which the biggest urban agglomerations, Douala and Yaoundé are found. Cameroon's natural forests in the 1990s covered some 20.4 million hectares, 43.7 percent of the country's total land area (FAO 1993). Tropical rain forests make up 30 percent of this total and moist deciduous forest 55 percent, with the 15 percent remainder found in dry deciduous and montane zones (Besong 1995).

The objective of this paper is to identify the causes of land degradation and natural resources management conflicts within the anthropological context of Cameroon and highlight the relevance of the indigenous conflict-resolution system in the present context of escalating land-related disputes between different ethnic communities. This paper attempts to explain how the management of natural resources in Cameroon, has undergone transformation from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period without participation of indigenous peoples in key decision-making. The causes of natural resource management conflicts and an exploration of the indigenous system are examined. This paper concludes by suggesting community participation and harmonisation of the indigenous and modern state conflict management systems as the way forward.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Cameroon, like some other African countries has been beset by a number of conflicting claims regarding rights over the management of natural resources, leading at times, to inter-ethnic conflicts, farmer-grazier disputes, damages and loss of property, lives, and the aggravation of the poverty situation in rural areas. Approaches to natural resource management in Cameroon either are a mimic or a total adoption of Western countries' methodologies which are often difficult to adopt in the humid tropical socio-economic and biophysical environment (Numben 1999). Before the colonial era, land in the village communities belonged to the whole community and traditional leaders acted as custodians of the land and could lease it and hold it in trust for the future use of their populations. Colonialism inadvertently erected structures that ruptured the dynamics which had controlled inter-ethnic relations and interests before the advent of colonial rule. The process of constructing the State by indiscriminately merging the diverse ethnic groups, under one administrative authority harbours tensions between ethnic groups. The post-colonial era witnessed further manipulation and disintegration of ethnic identities and groups, thus making the state central to the dynamics of ethnicity (Nnoli 2001). Under these circumstances the individual is caught up in mixed feelings of identity with the ethnic group they feel most akin to and of belonging to a multi-ethnic state which to them seems far removed and quite abstract.

Land legislation enacted after independence did not only retain various European ideas and concepts of property, but also diluted them with certain notions which have been at variance with the indigenous land tenure principles because due consideration was never given to the indigenous system. The legal responsibility for the management of natural resources falls on the Government, through the issuing of licenses and certificates/titles and collection of revenue from them. Recent hostilities between the Mbessa and the Oku ethnic groups of Boyo and of Bui Divisions, as well as the Bali Nyonga and Bawok peoples of Mezam Division in the North West Region, which have left indelible wounds on the belligerents and nation-building efforts are largely attributed to the exploitation of natural resources (Viban and Nke 2007). Land disputes

are rampant to varying degrees throughout the savannah regions of Cameroon where livestock and crop producers co-exist in their quest to increase their production and productivity (Mope Simo 1997). Repeated farmer-grazier conflicts between pastoralists and farmers in Menchum and Boyo Divisions among other parts of Cameroon result largely from poor management of natural resources. The management of natural resources is a potential area of conflict with social, economic and political implications, requiring prompt attention from the civil society, the academic and the political communities. Peoples' varied needs, aspirations, beliefs and expectations are among the factors that shape their responses to development activities, and consequently, their exploitation of environmental resources, which today is causing problems (Sikod 1999).

The problem stems from a structural disconnect between the conflict management systems adopted by formal state institutions and those of the indigenous communities over which modern states have gained jurisdiction.

LAND DEGRADATION AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT CONFLICTS

The main causes of conflict in Cameroon over the management of natural resources like land are:

Land Ownership System

Land as a resource-base has in no small measure mediated relationships between groups of people and nations the world over. The law in Cameroon classifies land into three categories: State property, private property and national lands. Because State lands cover areas where traditional land tenure arrangements are respected, and the government has control over all lands and can distribute to private owners by the issue of certificates, inter-village conflicts and farmer-grazier disputes are very common (Mope 1997; Idowu 2000; Ngwa et al. 2007). Inter-ethnic conflicts in Ghana for example have been found to be related to ownership of land (Agyeman 2001). With an ever-growing population in Cameroon, the pressure on land has always been on the increase and ownership claims over land lie at the heart of many resource management conflicts in Cameroon (Viban and

Nke 2007). Pioneer occupants of a piece of land have the right to exploit the land for food, fuel, and building materials. These items must be obtained from a diversity of habitats under different types of grazing, a mixture of crops, trees for fruit, fibres, medicine or building. Land is the key natural resource that communities (livestock or food crop farmers) possess and exploit to earn a living. But when the land is privatized it passes into the hands of people whose priority is to make money.

Upon accession to independence, the natural resource management approach adopted by Cameroon was highly-centralised and mostly top-down (Ngwasiri 2001). The power of the central authority over the traditional leaders of the different ethnic groups that make up the nation became more accentuated and sustained. The traditional leaders ceased to be political personalities and became administrative agents charged with applying directives from the central authorities in their respective areas. Lack of land tenure security exacerbates natural resources management as the general population had little or no incentive to invest in land management and soil and water conservation practices, while focusing on meeting their short-term economic needs.

Unsustainable Agricultural Practices

There is mounting incidence of soil infertility especially in the Sudano-Sahelian and Western zones coupled with poor farming systems. This is linked to weak capacity for sustainable water and land use planning and implementation, inappropriate crop intensification, especially under monoculture systems, expansion of agricultural production to marginal lands, agronomic practices poorly suited to local soil and water conditions, and inappropriate agricultural policies and incentives (Khan and Gbetnkom 2008). High demographic pressure on land and inappropriate land use and management practices like overgrazing and slash-and-burn farming practices tend to aggravate the problem at the communal and regional levels.

Over-grazing, Bush Fires, Desertification and Soil Erosion

These result in the degradation of vegetative cover and the destruction of micro-fauna. Depletion of natural resources is a national issue, but

it is also a local one. As in many developing countries, numerous village communities in Cameroon depend for their survival on the judicious exploitation of their physical environment. Managing them so that they remain available for future generations is the key challenge. Many conflicts occur between land users, especially between crop farmers and pastoralists. Nowhere is this felt more acutely than in those regions where population pressure and competing crop cultivation and livestock grazing activities accelerate depletion of the natural resource base and conflict. Ongoing land degradation is a key barrier to maintaining and increasing the productive capacity of the agro-pastoral sector. Food insecurity is chronic in the Sudano-Sahelian zone as well as in the Western zone, a phenomenon closely linked with unsustainable utilization of the land (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development 2007). Given that increasing land productivity presents a key element of any equation to boost rural sector growth, land degradation is increasingly viewed by local stakeholders as an issue of vital importance, and seen both as a cause and a consequence of the perpetuation of pervasive poverty. In the north and Adamawa Regions, which are characterised by fragile ecosystems (Ayonghe 2001), land degradation is increasingly visible and beginning to impact the country's hydro-electric reservoir, (the Lagdo Dam for example) which supplies energy to the three regions (Far north, north and Adamawa).

Deforestation

This is caused largely by over-harvesting of fuel-wood, conversion of woodland to large-scale crop or livestock production areas, and uncontrolled forest fires, often started to clear land for farming or to facilitate hunting of wildlife (Ngouffo and Tchoffo 2001). In the west region, deforestation and overgrazing in the Bamboutos highlands, intensive and detrimental farming practices, and destruction of 'sacred forests' linked to high demographic pressure and conflicts between land users represent the main cause of land degradation in the western region. Deforestation and loss of soil fertility generally because of unsuitable agricultural techniques like slash-and-burn causes severe land degradation.

Irrational Land-use Planning

There are no zoning plans in most rural areas, and the capacity to respond to climatic variabil-

ity is weak. Poor land management practices and a rising population provokes competition over natural resources, causes land degradation and out-migration of those without access to land. Encroachment on forest reserves and areas traditionally designed as pastoral lands exacerbates the potential for conflicts among farmers, herders, and forest conservators. This phenomenon is prevalent in the Adamawa, north and east regions because of the development of national parks, camping, and hunting areas (Oyono 2003a). As a result the livestock of the Adamawa Region, estimated at 6 million animals, is increasingly confined to a limited area on the Adamawa Plateau, giving rise to conflicts over access to pasture and damage to crop lands, overgrazing and soil degradation (Oyono 2003a; Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Animal Production 2006)

Mounting Population Pressure

The erroneous belief in the infinite supply of land tends to create environmental degradation especially in the highly populated zone of the high plateau of the west region, north-west and centre regions. Indeed, mounting pressure upon Cameroon's natural resources coupled with stagnating agro-pastoral productivity has contributed to significant pressure on the country's biodiversity and ecological resources (Nkwi and Mbah 1999). Population growth and the use of unsustainable agricultural methods by livestock and crop farming populations contribute to aggravate land-related conflicts in Cameroon especially in the west, north-west and the north and far-north regions.

THE INDIGENOUS RESOURCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Before the advent of colonisation, there was interaction among the ethnic groups that were later carved out as Cameroon. The phenomenon of collective identity in the early days may well have begun with activities like food gathering and hunting undertaken to ensure survival, especially as they evolved into competitive activities. The territorial imperative in human behaviour probably inaugurated the distinction between insiders and outsiders, between 'we' and 'they', influencing people to lay claims on who had the right to hunt and/or gather fruit or roots in particular areas, probably initiating the

foundations of human differentiation and therefore human identity (Giddens et al. 2003). Disputes over hunting and gathering space became part and parcel of social relations and conflict of identities leading at times to disputes between rival groups.

The indigenous management of natural resources has in the past, been generally rational. The people's culture restricted the exploitation of animal species solely for food and medicinal needs. Land belonged to the entire community and its custodians, the traditional authorities shared it rationally among the living taking into consideration countless members that are still unborn (Egbe 1995). Land was considered to be in abundance and cases of encroachment on land already occupied by someone else were rare. In the case of unavoidable conflicts solutions were sought amicably first by the elders of the family if the belligerents were of the same lineage and could be taken up to higher levels for examination by a council of elders and notables at the quarter and at the village chief's palace. The decisions of the 'courts' were binding and the penalties were symbolic. The decisions were respected for fear of the wrath of the ancestors and shame of the recalcitrant deviant by the entire community. The traditions and customs of the indigenous communities, though unwritten were respected to ensure that the people lived in harmony. Discussions to find a solution to disputes including resource management conflicts could go on for long until a consensus was reached.

In communities like Bambui in the Tubah Sub-Division in the north-west region for example, crop production and livestock grazing especially of dwarf cattle, belonging to the royal family, the areas for crop cultivation were well separated from grazing land. This custom was maintained even after the arrival of the Fulani herdsmen into the village and this has contributed in limiting the number of farmer-grazier conflicts (Amungwa forthcoming). The introduction of private ownership of land by the state has to a certain measure, contributed to an escalation of farmer-grazier conflicts.

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT DURING AND AFTER COLONISATION

The capacity or failure to manage tensions emanating from the exploitation of natural

resources is determined by changes brought about by the trajectories of historical events. On top of the land degradation problems should be added the peculiar socio-economic and political difficulties attendant on the colonisation experience. The divide-and-rule policy of the colonial powers, expressed through policies like indirect rule, assimilation and 'association' contributed significantly to sectionalism and distortion of the ways in which traditional Cameroonian society handled natural resource management conflicts.

The system of law governing the management of natural resources in Cameroon today is largely based on principles left behind by successive European colonial powers. Colonial policy on natural resource management was essentially hegemonic in character, and intended to guarantee the regular supply of agricultural and forestry resources to Europe (Ngwasiri 2001). Such a policy generated conflicts and smouldering antipathy from the indigenous population, as exemplified by the Bakweri land problem (Ngwasiri 1995; Tumnde 2001; Mbuagbaw and Lambi 2003). Today's 'national lands', is a replica of the German concept of *herrenlos* land, which means land without an occupant, declared as crown land vested in the German Empire. When Germany lost the First World War and their hold on Cameroon, the territory came under British and French influence through the League of Nations as a Trusteeship territory and later under the United Nations Mandate system. The French decreed in August 1920, in their sphere of influence that all unoccupied land was vested in the French State. In 1927, the British extended the application of the Land and Native Rights Ordinance, which was in force in Northern Nigeria to Anglophone Cameroon (Ngo 1996; Tumnde 2001). The Ordinance empowered the British Colonial Governor to carve out forest reserves and lands for placement at the disposal of government and protected the interests of the indigenous population over resources which were held according to and subject to native law and custom. The British used the indirect rule approach with reliance on indigenous authorities and peoples having distinctive characteristics and aspirations of their own. The French authorities adopted a policy of assimilation to the ideals of France and later changed to one of association. The strategies of the French were aimed at weakening traditional rulers where possible, by breaking up existing political units

and appointing *chefs de canton*, who generally had little status and were assigned with unpopular responsibilities like tax collection and forced labour, with greatly weakened authority over their ethnic populations. Even in matters of managing natural resources, France bequeathed to her colonies, a legacy of extreme centralisation, where traditionally no solution to a land conflict could be found in any provincial town or village without permission from the central authority.

All land ownership reforms, whether during colonial or post-colonial times were enacted without the participation of the indigenous population. Successive legislation has only sought to institutionalize State monopoly in the management of natural resources while relegating indigenous communities to the background. In 1976 the government abolished indigenous land tenure and introduced a system of registration of title to land (Vabi 2000; Ngwasiri 2001). The procedures to be followed by individuals who wish to register their land rights and be issued a land title are similar to those established by the French colonial authorities in Cameroon. The State remains the sole proprietor of national lands and applications for land certificates or titles are handled by the Ministry of Lands and State Property. The Land Consultative Boards which play a major role in the handling of conflicts related to the management of national lands are a replica of the German Land Commissions of 1896 and the French Land Board of 1932 (Ngwasiri 2001). In the domain of agriculture, the European powers formed their stereotypes of African livestock and food crop farmers. European notions of farming and herding converged with historical circumstances and indigenous cultural ideologies to create a model of separate, autonomous and antagonistic groups.

With colonialism, Cameroonians were compelled to abandon their own economic activities and participate in the capitalist mode of production dominated by German, British or French ownership of the major means of production, distribution and exchange. Colonial rule superimposed new institutions and management systems on African indigenous institutions and management system laying emphasis more on extracting compliance and resources to meet the needs of the colonizing countries rather than on serving the development needs of Africans. Currently land tenure in Cameroon is regulated by both a legal framework and traditional mechanisms.

The implementation of these legal frameworks is jeopardised due to insufficient coordination, resulting in land insecurity. In effect most farmers are not legal land owners. In some regions like the north-west, north and Adamawa, for example, land can be seized without prior warning by the village chief or declared a protected-area by Ministerial Decree without pre-consensus from local authorities and other stakeholders. This land insecurity tends to discourage investment in land management.

Considerable interest now exists among the Government of Cameroon and rural communities to address land degradation and resource management conflicts in an integrated manner. Recent Forestry sector reforms, for example have demonstrated the political will and capacity to implement environmentally sustainable development measures, including competitive awarding of concessions, levying penalties for illegal logging, increased transparency, and involvement of rural councils and communities in the management of natural resources (Besong and Ngwasiri 1995).

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND WAY FORWARD

The overall observation of this paper is that, contemporary conflict management systems in Cameroon neglect the importance of the indigenous systems of the communities over which the modern state has gained jurisdiction. The challenges involved in the management of natural resources call for responses in the form of new conflict management models that take into account the socio-cultural and political frameworks and peculiarities of indigenous communities. Community participation in the decision-making process of state institutions can ensure that the indigenous cultural values of the rural population are taken into consideration in designing strategies for judicious management of natural resources. The functionality of existing Land Tenure Commissions on the modalities for resolving natural resource management conflicts needs to be reinforced by including farmers, foresters, pastoralists, community leaders and other resource users at the local level.

One area in which indigenous principles are in conflict with those of the modern state is the determination of land rights, which has become the major source of conflict in the country. The

way forward in resolving natural resource management conflicts more appropriately is for the Government and its development partners to seek means by which the relevant aspects of conflict management systems of the indigenous communities can be synthesised with those of the modern state in order to harmonise the potential benefits of both systems. It is important to investigate and understand the social structures and the various forms of authority and power of indigenous communities, to ensure that their legitimate interests are also taken into consideration in decision making on natural resource management issues. A critical observation of some of the resurging inter-ethnic conflicts in Cameroon lead to the conviction that any state intervention for promoting peaceful coexistence which is not firmly rooted in the people's culture will not be sustainable. By assuming that government administrative and technical officers know what is best for the local population, their input into building the critical linkages needed for solving resource management conflicts is undermined. Involving indigenous communities in the process of decision-making offers better prospects for development of sustainable natural resource management strategies now and in the future.

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