



Land grabbing, governance and social peace-building issues in Cameroon: Case study of the roles of elites in land deals and commoditisation in the North West Region

By J. A. Mope Simo

Paper presented at the
International Conference on
**Global Land
Grabbing**
6-8 April 2011

Organised by the Land Deals Politics Initiative (LDPI) in collaboration with the Journal of Peasant Studies and hosted by the Future Agricultures Consortium at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex

Land grabbing, governance and social peace-building issues in Cameroon: Case study of the roles of elites in land deals and commoditisation in the North West Region

J. A. Mope Simo

Abstract

A critical analysis of patterns of land grabbing and commoditisation by big capitals or state-funded agribusinesses and elites in Cameroon reveals that the social phenomenon is a major obstacle to local livelihood concerns and sustainable development. The evidence suggests that the government and local administrations have played a seminal role to assist land acquisitions and in turn the processes have resulted in the neglect of traditional land and resource rights. Parastatal agro-industrial complexes have taken advantage of the opportunities provided in the modern land law for private property rights and the weak defence offered by customary land tenure systems to engage in the accumulation of huge arable and accessible agricultural lands in the hinterlands. On the other hand, (traditional and modern) elites as important stakeholders and power brokers have facilitated land acquisitions and/or increasing outright sales through the expropriation and appropriation of community lands.

This paper focuses on land grab strategies by elites in the North West Region. It takes a scrupulously even-handed look at the assertion that land deals violate the characteristics of local governance: accountability, observance of the rule of law, human rights and dignity, inclusive political performance in the face of the country's irrevocable democratisation process, and social peace-building. The ensuing conflicts remain unsettled here and there, with great ramifications on peasant societies; irrespective of gender.

Introduction

According to the Chambers 20th Century Dictionary, to grab is to seize or grasp suddenly; it also refers to an unscrupulous seizure of something, in this case land. This remains the most vital means of production in the vast majority peasant households; where increasingly different types of market-oriented economies--or sorts of capitalist development--have emerged today. Thus land grabbing or the claiming of "ownership" by domestic elites implies taking control of the common property without the permission or consent of the rightful "owners"¹, and in most cases its transformation into a commodity.

It is important to emphasise from the outset that land grabbing is 'illegal' because most often the initiators do not act on the basis of rightness and/or jurisprudence. So they do not have the expectations in both the law and in practice that their claims will be respected by those with duty. What I mean to say is that the different land acquisition strategies identified locally and

¹ Land grabbing has become a veritable threat to the rural economies in the North West Region (NWR) that are increasingly driven by a sort of agrarian capitalism. The phenomenon can be viewed as a new form of material accumulation characterised by self-centredness and prestige by a minority of privilege citizens or superior social groups. The strategies used are market-based rather than resource-based. Thus driving force behind any land deal is personal enrichment and aggrandisement, and does not take into account the changing social, economic and political interests and needs of the peasantry. The politics and governance of land acquisition will change when women and men engage in public discourse and play different roles in decision-making processes and the implementation of such decisions.

globally do not often take into consideration the unwritten law, law of nations nor international law.

As the concept of land grabbing will be repeatedly used in this work, it implies sorts of structural strains which allow local elites to adopt "troublemaking" standards or strategies related to traditional and modern land laws to gain material wealth. Such behaviours instil disorder and indiscipline into the land market, as well as facilitating and maximising the sources of protracted land boundary disputes between chiefdoms, bloody conflicts, and litigations. Moreover, from a governance stand point, the actors constitute part of the political, social, economic and administrative structure of the wider society. The mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which they organise their activities do not permit ordinary citizens and groups to articulate their interests, exercise their rights, meet their obligations, let alone to mediate their differences.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the degradation and depletion of such patches of land and other natural resources actually originate in the dissolution of local level institutional arrangements whose very *raison d'être* was to give rise to land and resource use patterns that were sustainable. In a later section of this work, I shall demonstrate that when common property becomes private property through land grabbing, the associated fences that prevent traditional movements and uses of a people and their cattle, "it is hardly legitimate to blame them and their property regime" (Bromley and Cernea, 1989: 3). The different types of land deals that a keen observer can identify across the country include: the activities of private and public administrations, national and international agribusinesses and domestic elites.

Although land grabbing is a global problem, it has not yet become the subject of in-depth and systematic enquiry by Cameroonian social scientists (development) economists, sociologists, anthropologists, social geographers, historians, and political scientists (see Nkankeu and Bryant, 2010). But there is evidence of some useful information on the increasing importance of the issue in Cameroon produced by expatriate authors, as well as the implications for untapped hinterlands, social insecurity and governance² (Aryeetey and Lewis, 2010).

The complex and rampant issue of land deals in the country as seen from instances of colonial land grabbing--under the Cameroon Development Corporation, CDC--, post-independence (inappropriate) national land policies which have been routinely flouted; the strategies of local elites for land accumulation and commoditisation in different parts of the country; and more recently the scramble by foreign investors to obtain biofuels from food crops in marginal and forested lands here like in other developing countries, can be described as 'dirty business'. Indisputably, a peculiarity of land grabbing is that what could be considered as 'nobody's lands' and/or marginal forested lands are being transformed or suddenly economically valuable.

It will be recalled that the protracted economic crisis from the 1980s up until the early 1990s on the one hand, and the opportunities created in the modern land law and the policies of economic and political liberation, on the other hand, have permitted land grabbers to develop innovative strategies either for survival/maintaining social control mechanisms and even capitalist agro-pastoral productions. These officious or official actions often violate the

² The concept of governance is used in this work to include a wide range of ways in which the political, social and administrative structures of the regional and national bureaucracies intertwine and affect land grabs. The processes comprise the mechanisms and institutions through which ordinary citizens and elites articulate their interests, exercise their rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences.

permanent ancestral and/or usufruct rights of communities over land. Other effects on peasant societies, especially female cultivators who constitute the majority of food crops producers include fomenting tenure insecurity and the disrespect of their human rights.

While traditional and modern elites clearly play significant roles in land grabbing in the NWR today, so too, do national factors and/or government agro-allied industries such as the CDC³, SOCAPALM, HEVECAM, SOSUCAM, SODECOTON, PAMOL, SODERIM, MIDEVIV, UNVDA, and so on. The increasing direct participation of the various actors outlined above in the capitalist-oriented economy is linked with the preponderance of commercialisation production and the existence of the required economic and political spaces.

Admittedly, the concept of “democratic entitlement” in which citizens have a universal right to be governed according to democratic standards is being implemented. There are indications that most traditional leaders (*fons*) and other highly placed individuals, who can all be classified as domestic or local elites⁴ violate the ‘code of conduct’ inherent in customary land tenure arrangements and the opportunities stipulated in the unified national land law through expropriation and appropriation of common property lands. These strategies are for personal enrichment, satisfying patron-client interests, and erstwhile relationships. At the same time, it can be said that the allegiance of many of these dignitaries to the ruling political party, the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement, CPDM, gives them much room for manoeuvre.

The elitist perspective depicts elites as unified in purpose--in this case land grabbing and/or its commoditisation--and outlook because of their dominant and overlapping positions in key social institutions, and the convergence of their economic interests (Domhoff, 1990). Thus it can be said that the concentration of power in a small group of elites is inevitable in modern societies, whether or not the development policies are driven by democratic and capitalistic principles.

In this paper, I intend to summarise some key findings of my grounded research intermittently carried out between 1989 and 2007 in some chiefdoms of the NWR on the soaring effects of land deals on tenure insecurity, and poverty of the rural masses. Specifically, it examines the roles of *fons*, as one of the two categories of elites who are increasingly involved in land deals;

³ The CDC which is the biggest state-funded agro-industrial complex in the country has been acquiring huge arable and accessible lands in the hinterlands of the South West and Littoral regions.

⁴As used in this study, the concept of domestic or local elite concerns two categories of superior social groups called traditional and modern elites. Traditional elite is an ascribed-high status in the indigenous social hierarchy used to describe notables and powerful hereditary *fons*. They also include some retired upper rank administrators, politicians, the military oligarchy, the judiciary, and the intelligentsia. Generally, they have retired, permanently resident in their natal villages, but had acquired land and dispose the necessary financial capital to invest in the agricultural and pastoral sectors. Although the latter type of traditional elites have an achieved status, the main difference between them and what I describe in a moment as modern elites, is that they have retired and taken up permanent residence in their natal villages. Although modern elites are all resident in the urban areas, they have the same characteristics like achieved status traditional elites. That is secured and good education, high-paying jobs and are state officials or higher echelon works in the private sector, and newly rich business classes, and so on. Both type of achieved status elites have acquired land some and dispose the necessary financial capital to invest in either the agricultural or pastoral sectors. In my earlier works, local or domestic elites are simply called ‘big men’ (see Mope Simo, 1995; 2002). This is because of their perception of land grabbing as another kind of capital accumulation inherent in the modern land law, and through free market mechanisms.

and to a lesser extent the modern ones, too. The reason for this choice is that they are exploiting the culturally defined rights and duties associated with their (hereditary) ascribed high status and ill-considered dabbling in partisan politics in the wake of the restoration of a multiparty system in the 1990, to engage in extensive land accumulations today. An understanding of land grabbing across the country cannot be dissociated from its contemporary politics and/or the irreversible democratisation process. I shall use some of the case materials in section three below to illustrate this striking phenomenon⁵.

The major assertion that guides my discussions in this work can be stated as follows: land grabs violate the characteristics of governance at all levels of human life: accountability, predictability, adherence to the rule of law, and human rights. On the other hand, the phenomenon promotes inter-chiefdom clashes, and political sycophancy. In turn, these forces for change impede development and impair peace, social justice, societal building, regional integration, and the quality of life for poor women and men who constitute the vast majority of inhabitants in any peasant society.

Background

This section offers a rapid tour of the horizons regarding the challenges which most of the chiefdoms pose to development in the North West Region (NWR) today. The major difficulties are a) lack of effective local democratisation; b) gender issues in emancipation from poverty and inequality (i.e. colossal deficits in livelihoods) which cast huge shadows; c) lack of responsible open and legitimate governance; and d) numerous unresolved and conflicts resulting from land acquisition and commoditisation mainly by traditional elites (*fons*)⁶.

All customary power relations, social control, consumption, distribution and of course, the management of land and natural resource here begin and end with a *fon*, (the legitimate traditional leader of any given chiefdom)⁷, and the complex palace institutions that are associated with royalty. In the study site like elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, the traditional perception was that “Land is not a commodity. It has an atavistic pull in most cultures, and is semi-sacred everywhere” (<http://farmlandgrab.org/15444>, 2010: 3).

The proliferating acquisition of chunks of hinterlands has become an inherently sensitive and political issue, as well as a facile source of capital accumulation and commoditisation by *fons*, because any legitimate traditional ruler is the custodian of all lands under his jurisdiction. As the supreme leader of the powerful regulatory association--called differently according to the chiefdom--he is expected to provide unity and social cohesion and peace; as well as perform

⁵ Despite the privileges and prestige inherent in the high socio-politico-magico-religious ascribed status of *fons*, the introduction of private property rights through direct buying and selling of the commodity and the increasing poverty syndrome that affects virtually every *fon* today, makes many of them to abuse their status (i.e. culturally defined rights and duties assigned to their role). This is by irregularly engaging in even more manipulations for land acquisition than achievement-based elites. Although the role performance varies, their activities have vast consequences in sowing seeds of disorder/instability, domestic violence, and of course, jeopardising the democratisation governance processes in the region.

⁶ The point must be made that chieftaincy structures are now embedded in the modern administrative, economic, and political bureaucracies. This situation leaves administrators and local elites with important rights and advantages over ordinary citizens. It also gives them the opportunity to manipulate and/or even undermine customary tenures and the national land reform package when their interests and privileges are at stake.

⁷ The words chiefdom and village will be interchangeably used in this work to refer to the same geographical entity.

rituals for the fertility of the land⁸. I shall show later on that land grabbing ignores the rituals, norms, values and symbolism attached to it, by transforming land to have purely an economic (capitalist) value.

Each of the ten regions of Cameroon is under the headship of a Governor, who is appointed by the President of the country has a Governor. As chief executive he oversees all administrative, economic, and political activities in collaboration with the traditional leaders who are recognised as auxiliaries of the administration. At the same time, each of the numerous chiefdoms remains a state-like society in its own right within the modern state. It is headed by a hereditary *fon* who is traditionally recognised as the most senior title-holder and in the traditional politico-administrative structure.

This personality--and to a less extent the nobility--dominates the politico-economic, spiritual, symbolic, and ritual spheres. Put differently, every *fon* is still the main source of power and authority and the symbol of the collective spirit, unity, and the focal point of all public affairs in his community. At base, these persons represent society's model of material ritualised ('gift') exchanges and social stratification. Other sources of social differentiation--e.g. capitalist agriculture and pastoralist activities, petty trading and other business endeavours, in the informal sector--can be identified and are integrated and articulated with the local traditional structures in the study site (Mope Simo, 1995: 85-86).

Structural change such as increasing specialisation and commoditisation of land, labour, agricultural/pastoral products and symbolic capital are occurring. Nonetheless, local elites especially *fons*, are not relinquishing claims to customary rights (e.g. titles, status, custodian of common property), co-operation and even domination through kinship, gender roles and divisions and power relations. In terms of the interaction between gender, patriarchy and symbolism, the different ideologies concerning social control and hierarchy are embedded in power relations, individualism, patronage, and royal sacredness. On the other hand, religion, chieftainship, market and patriarchal ideologies can be interpreted as fundamental to systems of moral order, domination and social control of ordinary men and women.

The different forms different forms land grabbing and accumulation result in the transformation of collective (common) property into private property by state apparatuses and members of superior social groups can be described in this paper as land grabbing. The phenomenon creates clashes over rights and values and the ensuing conflicts are the sources of changes in the social organisation forms and management patterns under one or another property regime. The data presented in this work will be described as enhancing a new form of materialism and accumulation, control mechanism, as well as the manipulation of traditional values and symbols for personal aggrandisement and prestige. Arguably, the strategies initiated by local elites to participate in land deals can be described as being against some of the characteristics of good governance. The major ones which quickly come to mind include: i) respect of individual, family and community rights; ii) promotion of peace and unity; iii) receptive to different opinions, integrity and credibility; and iv) education of citizens about their rights and duties toward their communities (Ruwa, 2001: 31-32).

⁸ Across the NWR, chieftaincy as a socio-political institution that once had a largely symbolic value are being transformed to assume a more direct material significance and occasion a competitive display and accumulation of wealth, such as land..

Dynamics of Land Tenure Systems and the Facilitation of Land Grabbing

Decision-making about land acquisition in Cameroon is a tenure issue. Thus as governance problem, it can neither be separated from the dispensations inherent in the customary rules and modern land tenure system, nor from the contemporary democratisation process. The disparate customary precepts of land tenure and European codes which regulated management decisions on how land-based resources were used for immediate needs and long-term sustainable investment motivated the formulation of the national land reform package in 1974. The purpose was to establish uniformity and greater rationality in organisation, rights and security of tenure (United Republic of Cameroon, 1974). Legally this meant that any parcel of land could be bargained and bought/sold like any other commodity in a free market.

The country's land tenure institutions determine the rights and obligations of individuals, local communities, private and public administrations in access to land, forests, water and other natural resources. Land tenure relationships are a good indicator of social relationships in the local, regional and national contexts. The ultimate objective of the modern land law promulgated in 1974 remains the promotion of development by decentralising land from chiefdoms or small peasant groups. Generally, the twin processes of land grabbing and commoditisation can be traced back to the implementation and strengthening of institutional arrangements embedded in this legal instrument.

Hitherto, although there were significant differences in the political and social organisation forms and management patterns at work under one or another existing property regimes--whether collective property, state property, open access, or some combination thereof--, customary land tenure systems prevailed in the rural and urban areas. Consequently, land and resource rights by individuals, private/public administrations, and even (foreign) agri-businesses; were either respected or access and control over them were directly negotiated with the communities concerned.

While customary tenure arrangements offer weak defences, the modern land law displays huge opportunities for land grabbing⁹. Both types of land tenure institutions determine rights and obligations, as well as facilitating the accumulation of the best arable and accessible agricultural lands by elites, private and public organisations, especially government agricultural agencies. In the NWR like across the country, the power of the local elites is now rooted in the democratic and capitalist institutions. These give them a free hand to carry out their 'entrepreneurial' activities. As I see it, their pervasive power leaves few areas of social life untouched and in turn lends support to the idea that the different social classes in society are based on one's relationship to the means of production, through land deals or bargains and connections with the new political system

Over the years, public administrations and state-funded agricultural enterprises have taken advantage of the opportunities provided in the modern land law for private property rights and the weak defence offered by customary land tenure systems to engage in the accumulation of

⁹It is clear that the customary tenure procedures and modern land laws create space for land acquisition and capital accumulation in the increasingly market-oriented local and national economies. In particular, the institutionalisation of private property rights in the latter land system facilitates land deals, commoditisation and corruption, through a sort of 'survival of the fittest' public policy.

huge arable and accessible agricultural lands in the hinterlands. On the other hand, (traditional and modern) elites as important stakeholders and power brokers have facilitated land acquisitions and/or increasing outright sales through the expropriation and appropriation of community lands. The present essay is just beginning to provide the data and theories necessary for an understanding of the structure of the country's land grabbing systems, by domestic elites across the NWR. The discussions mainly focus on *fons* who are changing their traditional roles as custodians of all lands under their jurisdiction to land grabbers. On a lighter note, some educated and highly informed actors are taking advantage of the ambiguities and confusions in the modern land law to engage in land deals which undermine the livelihood concerns of peasant societies and governance issues.

Puzzlingly enough, no mention is made of upholding and securing women's land and resource rights and access to legal systems. For example, this would be through free legal services especially during crisis, as well as the enhancement of their usually downgraded status and low-self esteem. Despite of significant differences in social structures, another common weakness in the country's traditional land systems and the modern land law is that power dynamics within most households often make it difficult for the majority of women to assert ownership rights and benefits.

The rural poor, the majority of who are women use and value land most, but it is also they who enjoy the least gains and power. Usually the main threats to common property land and resource rights include: i) unequal social, economic, and political relations which stem from gender inequalities and patriarchal ideologies; ii) inappropriate policies and institutions; iii) strategies of powerful vested interests by local elites that reinforce gender inequalities; and iv) weaknesses easily identified in the interaction of social structures of control and symbolism that facilitate domination and which can be interpreted in terms of gender bias and discrimination. Arguably, there can be no peace, social cohesion, stability, and above all sustainable development in any society without real land rights and security particularly for women who remain the driving force in the predominantly agrarian and agricultural local and regional economies in the study site. In the face of the emerging social dynamics and democratisation observed in the NWR today, the land grabbing strategies adopted by local elites do not promote community unity and regional integration. I shall come back to this point in the next section of this paper.

Despite the institutionalisation of freeholds or title deeds through commoditisation by individuals and corporate bodies, customary tenure arrangements remain the rule than the exception for natives and migrants (newcomers) living in any local community or chiefdom. In terms of who gains from the implementation of the unified land law in the country, it can be said that it is the state, agricultural corporations, foreign investors, and traditional/modern elites with knowledge and connections with the national bureaucracy. This has led to land speculations and the emergence of considerable differences in the accumulation of land. As I have argued elsewhere, "This is part of a muddled process where patronage, traditional rights and capital are the means with which to speculate in land...land issues will become even more difficult in the years ahead; mainly because both traditional and modern 'big men' and, increasingly, 'big women'...will eventually take advantage of the poverty and ignorance of the majority to grab land" (Mope Simo, 2002: 41).

Inordinate Land Grabbing in the NWR: Violent Turmoil, Human Security and Social Peace-Building Issues

Land is commonly considered the most fundamental resource to the poor and is essential to enabling them to lift themselves out of poverty. More than 70 per cent of the active populations

in the NWR depend on land for satisfying their livelihoods. Today there is the growing recognition of the centrality of land and resource rights in the attainment of sustainable development here as witnessed by the huge number of rampant conflicts related to land deals mainly initiated by *fons* during the past decades or thereabouts.

During much of the 1990s up until 2007, the history of this part of the country has been marked by desperations triggered off by a lethal combination of economic, political, and social crises. The most pervasive challenges include: extreme poverty, human and land tenure insecurities, and factional tensions resulting from land grabbing strategies by local elites, notably *fons*, and of course, bad governance. On the other hand, multi-party politics have been dominated by bouts of political turmoil over massive national and regional electoral frauds or mismanagement between 1992 and 2004 had made headlines in a flurry of media reports.

My assertion is that the single most important event that has rekindled an incipient hope, a 'new' spirit of patriotism and unity, a sense of belonging, and human security in the vast majority of citizens was the visit of the President, H.E. Paul Biya, on December 8, 2010¹⁰. Judging from the massive and uninterrupted participation during three days of women and men from all walks of life--not forgetting school children and other young adults--the historic visit turned out to be a rallying force, a remarkable display of solidarity, peaceful-co-existence, and a cultural jamboree. In short, apparently many of the people forgot the long-standing and proximate causes of their differences and frustrations, especially over "overt and clandestine" land deals, and the ensuing violent individual intra- and inter-chiefdom conflicts.

In line with the discussions presented in this section, I am using the notion of "social peace-building" to include making open, transparent, accountable and (gender) participatory processes especially in decision-making concerning land deals and decision-making for implementation, as central components of social cohesion development, and human security and rights on the one hand, and actions leading to dialogue or negotiations with all social classes in any community for land conflict resolution and peace-building, on the other (Jayanama, 1999; Stiglitz, 1999).

But how can the key concept, human security, announced in the above consideration be pragmatically and realistically defined in the context of this study? I share the standpoint that "Human security in its broadest sense, touches on the respect of human rights of an individual and his or her personal dignity...Human security also touches on the question of peace, which is more than the absence of war, and on our ability to end conflicts because, in today's world, it's civilians who suffer from such conflicts" (Annan, 1999: 5). As I see it, whether the debate is about politics, social stability and social integration before or after crisis, peace-building and governance must be strengthened as prerequisites for the achievement of gender equality and sustainable development.

Available data show that either directly or indirectly, *fons* have mastermind most of the rampant land disputes and feuds--i.e. inter-chiefdom skirmishes and long-standing farmer-grazier problems. Here I attempt to examine the assumption that the meddling of ascribed-based elites

¹⁰ The main objective was the celebration of the golden jubilee of the Armed Forces. The windfall of the visit included the tarring of the dilapidated streets and roads of the city of Bamenda, refurbishment of the airstrip, the long awaited creation of a public university, and perhaps from a political standpoint the greatest 'gift' to the nation as a whole was the first ever public encounter with the leader of opposition, Mr John Fru Ndi. These actions have significantly reduced the tensions and misgivings that hitherto lingered in the minds of all segments of the populations.

in partisan politics and the perpetuation of land acquisitions, competition, and commoditisation¹¹ are impediments to consolidating the country's democratisation process, the capitalist market-oriented economy in the region and societal building. Above all, land deals by these local leaders hinder the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in general, and gender equality as the cornerstone of development, in particular.

For lack of space, I shall briefly use three case materials to illustrate the chronic issue of land grabbing by these dignitaries. The cases selected include: i) elite participation and agrarian capitalism; ii) land skirmishes between Bali-Nyonga and Bawock; and iii) infamous violent conflicts between Bali-Kumbat and Bafanji.

Case Material 1: The Participation Elites in Agrarian Capitalism

A critical analysis of the role of Cameroon's (rural) elites in agrarian capitalism has been little studied or not well-documented, particularly NWR. Even so, a careful review of the available literature reveals that the official agricultural policy before the 1990s was explicitly aimed at the creation of such a class of elite or big farmers (see Koopman-Henn, 1989: 531-555).

Now that the country has entered what appears to be its 'post-oil era', there is no alternative to private enterprise investment in agriculture resuming the leading role in recovery and driving economic growth (Mope Simo, 2006). One of the ways by which this new development model is taking shape, can be seen by the contributions made by traditional and modern elites in the local and national agricultural and pastoral economies. While Fulani (Mbororo) play a dominant role in cattle production across the NWR, many elites from other villages have been involved in this highly rewarding economic activity for a long time. Despite the numerous unresolved farmer-graziers disputes on record, traditional and improved cattle rearing methods abound. The conflicts are always about cattle trespassing on farm lands in search of better pasture (Mope Simo, 2002).

In view of the possibilities provided in the modern land law, the state leased 3 000 hectares of marshy lands from several villages in Ndop Plain to the government agency, Upper Noun Valley Development Authority (UNVDA), for the cultivation of this commodity, in the late 19970s (Mope Simo, 2009: 183-188). The public policy of this government agency consisted of encouraging individuals without bias based on gender, status, and ethnicity, in the selection of potential farmers for the the production of high-priced rice, well-suited to the available resources and facilities. Consequently, in Bamunka village where there is a concentration of the biggest farmers, it is possible to identify both native (men and women who are members even of the same household) and a huge number of migrant producers, too.

The principal argument here hinges on the fact that the increasing competition between smallholders and elites rice farmers has been linked with the preponderance of the purely commercialisation of the product and the existence of the required economic incentives and spaces. Arguably, for the contribution of elites to have positive impacts on the commodity and

¹¹ The he spectre of violence resulting from land deals with their trail of innocent victims and wanton destruction of properties has raised its head so often that the phenomenon can be rightly described as chronic and such events have jeopardised the prospects of local and regional integration, dialogue, and peaceful co-existence of different chiefdoms.

the dynamics of the industry, such efforts should be examined in the context of political and economic liberalisation institutionalised in the early 1990s.

As hinted above, rice development was mainly for the market and participation in the business. From the outset then, the policy consisted of encouraging individuals to participate in the production of high-priced rice, well-suited to the available resources and facilities. Apart from ordinary citizens, some retired elites who had taken up a new permanent residence in the different villages, became interested, given that rice consumption can be said to be a new staple for many rural and urban families in the country.

It is in this light that, for example, the intelligent and altruistic *fon* of Bamunka, Yenyi II of blessed memory, became one of the most enterprising and successful rice producers. For example, he did not only depend on the land leased by the state, but used his social high status to acquire even more accessible and arable patches of land from common property under his custody. These additional tracts of land were for himself and his numerous wives. On the other hand, different categories of households (i.e. husband and wife/wives and single headed) played a preponderant role in this economy and the type of agrarian capitalism that occurred resulted in the development of intra- and intra-household class relations.

During my subsequent visits to Ndop Plain, between 1983 and 1990, I concluded that unlike ordinary rice cultivators, the nearness of their farms to the royal palace was an incentive for more commitment to the business. In Bamunka like in other rice producing chiefdoms in the area, even though in principle the implementation of the modern land law was supposed to transform a *fon's* titular control over village lands to one symbolic power, most of his subjects still respect him, and would not easily challenge his claims. Consequently, "any *fon* can easily negotiate with occasionally recalcitrant notables or lineage heads, to manipulate the decisions of the national bureaucracy on such matters without provoking a political turmoil or crisis" (Mope Simo, 2009: 185). Similarly, the *fon's* high status in the traditional and modern power structures enables his wives to have greater access to new inputs such as skills, fertilizers, HYVs of seeds and even credits.

The indications are that from the outset, the policy framework regulating the activities of the UNVDA consisted of encouraging individuals to participate in the production of high-priced rice, well-suited to the available resources and facilities. The point must be made that this traditional leader expropriated and appropriated even more accessible and arable portions of lands from the chiefdom property under his custody. This was partly for his personal use on the one hand, and distribution to those of his hard working wives who made their requests.

It is clear that variations of access to land and modern inputs by his wives and ordinary producers are fundamental determinants of their class relations. This position illustrates the assertion that changes in and access to productive resources often affect farmers relationships to them and the emerging social class relations of the farmers within and between different types of households. Over the years, this *fon* and his numerous wives who took up rice cultivation as a gainful activity were recognised as being among the most successful farmers in the locality.

The interaction between customary land tenure systems and capitalist development have facilitated land grabbing by knowledgeable and wealthy citizens (i.e. ascribed and achieved-based elites) to become a new and crucial source of wealth accumulation and prestige, as well as the development of class relations in capitalist rice production. During field work, informants

were quick to point out that these changes have left poor cultivators living near the rapidly expanding urban areas in much weaker positions to bargain for arable farm lands too.

Case Material 2: Invasion of Bawock by Bali-Nyonga: Local Politics and Claims over Land and Resource Rights

It is common to hear people in the NWR to argue that because of natural human population growth and the increasing scarcity of enough land, some *fons* from the larger and more politically powerful chiefdoms with the complicity of their subjects (resident and outside elites) decide to invade their powerless neighbours to acquire new patches of land. Many informants have said that they participate in such shameful and horrible acts with the hope that if successful, there will be eventual redistributions by leaders to their needy citizens.

Paradoxically, because of the increasing material poverty experienced by the vast majority of *fons*¹² as compared to their subjects, it is commonplace for traditional rulers and even notables who control community and lineage lands respectively to engage in unilateral sales to natives and settlers alike. It can be said that this was the main cause of the latest bout of turmoil which occurred in 2007 between the domineering Bali-Nyonga people and a comparatively the much smaller and powerless Bawock chiefdom (Loh, 2007: 11).

The skirmishes that occurred on the 3rd and 6th of March 2007 were premeditated act aimed at disrupting their agricultural calendar of th Bawock. It caused the dominant social, economic and political classes, irrespective of political leanings to tremble. Official and independent sources were in agreement that the scuffles resulted in considerable destruction of individual and community properties, as well as the involuntary (temporary) resettlement of more than 2000 men, women, and children at the Bamenda Congress Hall.

When the Prime Minister's envoy, Mr Emmanuel Edou, Minister Delegate at the former Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation, arrived in the belligerent village (Bawock) on the 19th March, he discovered horror and vandalism it their best inflicted by men against fellow human beings. Government and private press wee in agreement that some 487 houses had been looted and burnt to ashes, countless animals killed or stolen, plantations cleared, and numerous bags of harvested staple food (maize) and the main cash crop (coffee) destroyed in what can be described as a lifeless village. Among the Bawock desperate and homeless citizens who sought refuge were hundreds of school pupils and their parents who pleaded the Minister to restore immediate peace and security (Loh, 2007: 11).

The enjoyment of security of tenure is often seen as a precondition for the intensification of agricultural production and increasingly it is being stressed as a prerequisite for better land and resource use and management. Peasant farmers need both secure individual rights to farm plots and secure collective rights to common pool resources upon which whole villages (chiefdoms) depend for survival and livelihood systems. During the course of a few days of skirmishes between the two villages, the hopes of Bawock people were all dashed, and they fled for safe havens even to undetermined destinations.

¹² The exception here is those of them who officially participate in partisan politics and have become members of the Political Bureau and Central Committee or the ruling CPDM political party, and/or parliamentarians under its ticket. Some of the prominent ones include: *fons* S.A. Angwafor of Mankon, Doh Gah Gwanyi III of Bali-Kumbat, Galega of Bali-Nyonga, late Yakumtu of Bambalang, etc.

Case Material 3: The Notorious Land Disputes between Bali-Kumbat and Bafanji

It is commonly recognised that the *fon* of Bali-Kumbat takes the blame for the long-standing and notorious land wars that have erupted between these two villages, notably that of 2-4 June, 1995. Like other inter-chiefdom violent conflicts in the NWR, these are interwoven with the restoration of multiparty politics and democratisation process in the country are well documented (see Goheen, 1989; Berg van den, 1992; Mope Simo, 1997 and 2004, for a detailed analysis).

The notorious events did not only get out of control, but the trauma on the victimised populations of Bafanji can be viewed as one of the properties, and financial costs. The warring factions had used automatic weapons, grenades, cutlasses, clubs, spears and poisoned arrows (Kum-Set, 1995b; Mope Simo, 2004). Troops made up of gendarmes and police swooped on Bali-Kumbat on June 22 and in an attempt to restore peace, social order, and identify the culprits of the humanitarian chaos that loomed in the area, they made careful searches of houses and seized large quantities of arms. This action was indicative that the administration in the NWR had been criticised by the Chairperson of the Cameroon Human rights Commission for negligence and the tardy reaction to the clashes. He had also established without prejudice that the people of Bali-Kumbat with the support of their *fon* were guilty of gross human rights abuses.

Throughout the region, the perception and general opinion about *fon* Doh Gah Gwanyi III of Bali-Kumbat, is one of stigma for being directly responsible for the well planned invasion and destruction of a neighbouring village. Their activities are geared towards the achievement economic and political ends, and so, corruption is rife. On the other hand, this *fon* had previously shot and killed one of his subjects who had courageously and publicly complained to the local administration about his habitual malpractices during the 1992 legislative elections and illegal land deals and sales (Mope Simo, 1997: 238; 2009: 177).

There are other incriminating reports about the same personality's role in inordinate land acquisitions and /or sales, as well as his perpetration of crimes related to them by necessity and choice (see Nkematabong, 2007: 9). It is also possible to claim that his heinous activities could reoccur in future because. This is because as a senior boss of the ruling political party, CPDM, the administration has often failed to respect the existing regulations and acting promptly and with impartiality towards him. By neglecting governance principles, it is such *fons* with ambitions for territorial aggrandisement within and outside their chiefdoms are being encouraged to perpetrate their aggressions and human rights abuses.

In the same light, as I have already pointed out in this work, despite the traditional rights inherent in the high status of these dignitaries, and/or their nominal control over all land in their chiefdoms, the introduction of private property rights through direct buying and selling of the commodity, has meant that they can easily sow seeds of disorder and regional disintegration. The change in the atmosphere often signals the pandemonium and confrontations that ultimately result in fatal land conflict. Even more seriously for social peace and security, it is important to mention the displacement of victims like it occurred to the victims of the notorious land wars described in this case material.

It is clear that over the years the numerous land disputes between Bali-Kumbat and Banfanji have ignored the values of peace, tolerance, and love that should be instituted in social life. It is only by adopting public policies related to broader gender participation in the development

process and based on an increase in civil society's involvement in the management of justice and equity over the type of land deals presented here that social peace-building, political stability, civil liberty and democratic governance can become lasting values in Bali-Kumbat and Bafanji chiefdoms, and by extension in the NWR (Mope Simo, 2004: 42).

Land is commonly considered the most fundamental resource to the poor and is essential to enabling them to lift themselves out of poverty. More than 70 per cent of the active populations in the NWR depend on land for satisfying their livelihoods. There is the growing recognition of the centrality of land and resource rights in the attainment of sustainable development here as witnessed by the huge number of rampant conflicts related to land deals mainly initiated by *fons* during the past decades or thereabouts.

Nowadays, some *fons* are breaking all the tenets underlying customary land holdings and the harmonised land legislation to acquire lands even beyond their territorial boundaries. The strategies adopted by domestic elites are characterised by manipulations of existing land tenure systems and a failure of democratic governance. As a result, households and communities are losing their traditional security of land and resource rights for agriculture, housing, and other development projects. As a sort of "criminal activity" therefore, land grabbing through the invasion of socially and politically powerless neighbouring chiefdoms is a violation of (community) common property rights, human security and peace. As I have argued elsewhere, "it is out of question for any government to tolerate their relatively new tendency of wanton expropriation, appropriation, and/or outright of lands under their areas of jurisdiction; and becoming part of the country's emerging landowning elites. In a state of law like ours, such behaviour is not dignifying of the custodians of local cultures, social and symbolic values, and above all, land" (Mope Simo, 2009: 159).

Conclusion

The analyses of the available data reveal that in the capitalist market-oriented economy, existing and new opportunities facilitate land deals by ascribed- and achievement-based local elites on the one hand, and that their often diabolic plans are the root cause of uprisings and violent conflicts over land and resource rights, on the other. Such activities are detrimental to good governance, regional integration, peace-building, and social mobility. The findings also show that on the basis of the culturally defined rights and preferential access attached to the high social status of *fons*, they can acquire more lands anywhere in their chiefdoms, as well as even the invasion of neighbouring chiefdoms to satisfy their increasing interests and changing material needs today.

Notwithstanding the impacts of such irregular strategies for greater land acquisition on peasant societies, the data challenges the assertion that rural households break up under the stress of commoditisation and other effects of capitalist agricultural and pastoral production systems. As long as the different land tenure systems are unchecked and the disrespect of human rights is not systematically corrected in any society, land deals (*'accaparement des terres'*) will continue.

It can be also concluded that land acquisitions by local elites is mainly resource seeking rather than market seeking. Admittedly, elites have invested in some of the acquired lands by engaging in modern agro-pastoral activities with remarkable increases in productivity and accruing financial wealth. The examples of capitalist irrigated rice production in Ndop Plain and improved cattle rearing here and there have been discussed. It is clear that rampant inter-chiefdom clashes over ownership rights of patches of arable and grazing lands do not augur

well for individual and collective security, the dynamics of contemporary local and national politics and poverty eradication for the vast majority of rural households. Rather, the complex and interrelated events that are unfolding have resulted in the reinforcement of gender stratification and gender inequalities, which are politically and therefore, socially controlled in the largely patriarchal communities.

The land grabbing-democratic governance paradigm is a growing phenomenon in many developing countries, yet in terms of the implication for peace, regional/national integration, aspects of governance and sustainable development, it has not been examined deeply, thoroughly, and systematically in Cameroon in general, and in the NWR in particular. Moreover, this striking social phenomenon does not only involve the disrespect of common property rights, but deprives the less privileged women and men in rural communities security of tenure and rights even over what are commonly recognised by their communities as their own lands. This work has helped to dispel some of the myths, confusions, and exaggerations that have gained currency under the “NW bush wars” or land grabbing strategy allegory.

The government’s political decentralisation process is already under way, but this should be extended to include the social and economic aspects of life, too. For example, in terms of land grabbing, the adoption of such an approach will make it possible for customary land procedures and laws to be formally integrated into the much needed new natural resource tenure system. By doing so, the state will be also fostering effective citizen participation in shaping the future of their communities and nation as a whole. By and large, the rampant inter-chiefdom clashes over land that some *fons* have adopted as new strategies for land accumulation and commoditisation, can be considered as detrimental to pluralist politics, governance, and especially the security of real land and resource rights.

References

- Annan, K. (1999) “Interview: The United Nations in the New Millennium”,
In *CHOICES*, Vol. 8, N° 3, pp. 5-7
- Aryeetey, E. & Lewis, Z. (2010) “African Land grabbing: Whose Interests are Served?”,
<http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2010>, Retrieved 5/02/2011
- Berg van den, A. (1992) *Women in Bamenda: Survival Strategies and Access to Land*,
Leiden: African Studies Centre
- Bromley, D.W. and Cernea, M.M. (1989) *The Management of Common Property Natural Resources*, World Bank Working Paper 57, Washington, D.C.
- Domhoff, G.W. (1990) *The Power Elite and the State: How Policy is made in America*,
New York: Aldine de Gruyter
- Goheen, M. (1989) “Big Men, Farm Women, and Rural Self-Sufficiency: Land Concentration and the Subsistence Farm”,
- Jayanama, A. (1999) “Peace-Building and Development: Thailand’s Experience with UNTAC”, In *CHOICES*, Vol. 8, N° 3, p. 25

- Koopman-Henn, J. (1989) "Food Policy, Food Production, and the Family Farm in Cameroon", In P. Geschiere & P. Konings, (eds.), *Research Report*, N° 35, Part II, pp. 531-557, Leiden: African Studies Centre
- Kum-Set, E. (1995a) "Tribal Wars in the NW: 18 Killed, 3000 Flee to the West Province", *The Herald*, N° 212, Monday June 12-14, 1995, pp. 1, 3
- Kum-Set, E. (1995b) "NW Tribal Wars: Troops Raid Bali-Kumbat, Seize Arms", *The Herald*, N° 216, Monday June 26-28, pp.1-2
- Loh, C. "P.M's Envoy Sizes up Destruction in Bawock/Bali", *Cameroon Tribune*, Tuesday March 20, 2007, p. 11
- Mope Simo, J.A. (1995) "Structures of Control, and Power and the Implications for Social Change in a Western Grassfields Chieftdom", In *PAIDEUMA*, 41, pp.83-94
- Mope Simo, J.A. (2002) "Customary Land tenure Regimes in North Western Cameroon", In C. Toulmin, P.L. Delville, & S. Traoré, (eds.), *The Dynamics of Resource Tenure in West Africa*, pp. 37- 47, London and Oxford: IIED and James Currey Ltd.
- Mope Simo, J.A. (2004) "Social Peace-Building amid Political Turmoil and Violence over Land Ownership Rights in the North West Province of Cameroon: The Bali-Kumbat and Bafanji Conflicts Revisited", *Journal of the PanAfrican Anthropological Association*, Volume 11 (1) pp. 24-46
- Mope Simo, J. (2009) « Challenges to Chieftaincy Today: Governance Issues and how Fons Strategise to Overcome the Obstacles of Overarching Structures in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon", In E. Tamajong, (ed). *Les Mutations en Afrique*, Yaounde: Presses d'UCAC, pp.159-193
- Stiglitz, J. E. (1999) "The Role of participation in Development", In *Development Outreach*, Vol. 1, N° 1, summer 1999, pp. 10-16
- The Telegraph, (2010) "The Backlash Begins against the World Land grab" <http://farmlandgrab.org/15444>, (Retrieved 12 January 2011)
- United Republic of Cameroon (1974) *Land Tenure and State Lands: Ordinances N° 74-1 7-2, and 73-3*, Yaoundé: National Printing Press