



The Narratives of Capitalist Land Accumulation and Recognition in Coastal Cameroon

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Abstract

Coastal Cameroon is currently the arena of land acquisition operations for large-scale agricultural investments, mainly the monoculture of palm oil. Huge agro-industrial concessions are increasingly granted, very often in obscure conditions. The phenomenon shows a great replicability across the country – and its geometry is actually difficult to master. But while examining the issue of land rush and transfer, it should be noted that Coastal Cameroon’s agrarian history is a history of land dispossession since German colonization (1884-1914), passing through British and French colonization (1918-1960). This paper is an assessment, put as narratives, of the trajectories of land dispossession in this region (an ancient phenomenon), on the one hand, and land accumulation by transnational companies (a new phenomenon), on the other. The paper informs that: (i) these different land control and appropriation processes went – and are going – hand in hand with the misrecognition of institutions mandated for local representation, including customary institutions/mechanisms and local governments; (ii) the agrarian capitalism in effect is a tentacular phenomenon, which aims at incorporating all the rural landscape in its niche through the so-called village plantations option and the formation of a local agrarian sub-capitalism by local elites, leading to the reversal of customary tenure logics and the amplification of land individualization practices; (iii) institution recognition or misrecognition are among the driving forces of land conflict across the region yesterday and today; (iv) three future land scenarios are likely to occur in Coastal Cameroon in the next decades, the most dramatic being the radicalization of the land tenure issue, as a result of land marginalization – through land grab operations – and the rise of a violent social grammar rejecting the alliance between the state and the transnational capitalism. This is an eminently problematic policy and political challenge in today’s Cameroon and Africa.

About the Author

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“Before the arrival of the Europeans, relationships between the local people and land were those of insuring security of spaces conquered by ethnic groups... and inside these spaces, those of venerating and using. In these societies, land is so sacred that private ownership is not possible. Property is basically collective”.

Kenfack (2012 : 7)

1 Introduction

To date, Cameroon’s landholding and tenure systems – including customary systems – have already experienced *three great transformations*¹– or what Hall (2010) calls *policy cycles*. There is little doubt that the *first great transformation* took place, with traditional farming systems, during the formation of ethnic territories by successive migration waves in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries (Maquetet *al.* 1972). The *second great transformation* occurred through the colonial intrusion: it resulted in a severe upheaval and dismantling of local territorial logics and customary tenure rights by various colonial administrations (Oyono 2005).² Some analysts note that after the independence of the country in 1960, the state significantly consolidated the legal and institutional bases of the *second great transformation*, by reproducing the “state domain” paradigm (or state land and forest estate) in land and forest legislations (Diaw and Njomkap 1998; Nguiffoet *al.* 2008; Alden Wily 2011).

The establishment of this paradigm has, *de facto* and *de jure*, imposed the state as the ultimate “master of land and forest”, to which – conversely – the local communities continue to claim ownership rights, spread out over centuries, and erected on the basis of occupation and use through custom and appropriate economic logics (Anyangwe 1984; Oyono 2005; Alden Wily 2011). Under such legal and institutional conditions, the local communities became simple users, rather than rights-holders, of their land (Diaw and Njomkap 1998; Puépi 2010). Moreover, the *second great transformation* led to the incorporation, progressive and irreversible, of Cameroon’s land into circuits of agrarian capitalism, with the creation of large agro-industrial complexes, as shown by various studies (Courade 1984; Konings 1986; Bakouméet *al.* 2002; Gerber 2007; Richards 2013).

Since the beginning of the mid-2000s, we have entered the *third great transformation*. Like in many other developing countries (Smolek 2004; Borrás *et al.* 2008; Peluso and Lund 2011; White *et al.* 2012), the question of land control and appropriation is coming up today in a more critical intonation and grammar in Coastal Cameroon (Gerber 2009; Nguiffo and Schwartz 2012; Oakland Institute 2012; Schwartz *et al.* 2012). Territoriality – associated, within national borders, with strong economic and policy issues and challenges – has become a global concern (Borrás 2009; Cotula 2012; Kelly 2012; White *et al.* 2012). In this regard, Cameroon, alongside with the other countries of the Congo Basin, is, fully, embarked on the global movement of land transfer and leasing–through very complex transactions and deals with strong involvement of global financial capital (Cotula 2011; Cotula 2012; Karsenty and Ongolo 2012).

In general, these transactions are powered by the ongoing mutant neo-liberalism rooted in the mystique of privatization and capital accumulation (Bakouméet *al.* 2000; Moyo 2008; Cotula 2012; Hall 2012). In other words, neo-liberalism – its discourse, policies and practices – and its developmental grammar seek to demonstrate that in Africa three postulates are essential, as mentioned and criticized by Moyo (2008) and White *et al.* (2012). Firstly, state disengagement should be the rule and not the exception. Secondly, the extent of collective land rights-holding should be

¹ I do not take into account change introduced in local systems by the Fulbé conquest and the associated imposition of the Islamic legislation in a series of ethnic territories in Northern Cameroon in the 19th century (Gonné2010), for two reasons. First is that the imposition of the Islamic legislation has not been a country-wide; second is that Coastal Cameroon is geographically very far from the areas that were invaded by the Fulbé.

² The Germans, first (1884-1914), and the British and the French, afterwards (1918-1960).

reduced and land—of course—transferred amongst a domestic or comprador agrarian elite and multinational entities. Thirdly, these new arrangements would be more efficient in terms of growth and wealth creation.

A considerable body of social science has been concentrating on land control issues over the past decades, with the theoretical weight of notions such as exclusion, expropriation, accumulation, viewed as the outcomes of both global and domestic power relations over land resources (Barrows and Roth 1990; Moyo 2008; Hall 2010; Peluso and Lund 2011; Hall 2012). I share this theoretical concern. Therefore I am, hereby, evidencing it with a historical approach to land and agrarian change in Cameroon, on the one hand. On the other, I am, very briefly, plunging land relations and arrangements in the theory of recognition, as outlined nowadays by some outstanding thinkers (Honneth 1996; Fraser 2000; Anderson 2009).

By recognition, I mean, in my phraseology and in this context, “recognition of local institutions”. In this essay I develop a body of narratives of land dispossession, transfer and acquisition in Cameroon since the German colonization in the 19th century. At the same time, I put in perspective, in the same narratives, the question of the recognition of local institutions (both informal and formal) with the conditions of land dispossession, transfer and acquisition, on the one hand, and the social dynamics engendered by the politics of land control, on the other. My basic argument is that while dispossession/accumulation are central to the agrarian question, recognitive processes shape both national and local politics and, thereby, have a significant symbolic and material potential downstream, in terms of *claim-making, conflict* or *status quo keeping*

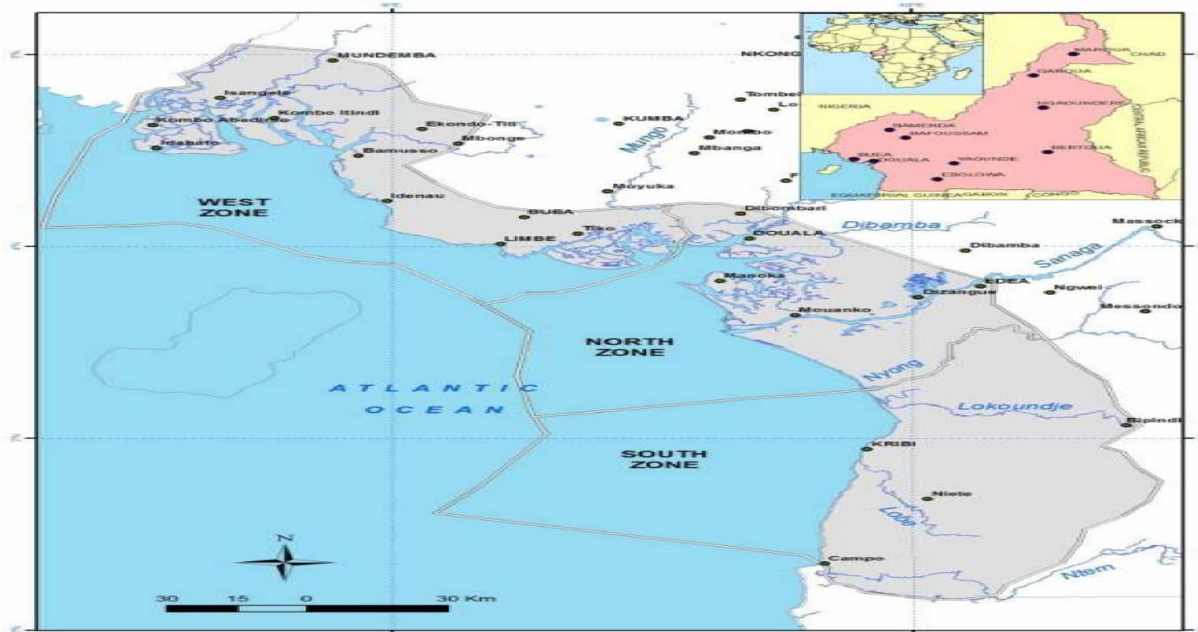
The first section of this essay draws the legal profile of land governance since the Germans and introduces the concept and practices of institutional recognition/misrecognition³ in processes of land dispossession and accumulation. The second section redraws the trajectories and geometry of land dispossession and accumulation in Cameroon, in general, and in the coastal areas, in particular. The third section is a synthesis of current developments, including the acquisition of large-scale concessions, the consolidation of the process of privatization of land in the hands of certain actors and the multiplication of experiences aiming at capitalizing customary land and forest. The fourth section examines the bipolarity of agrarian capitalism in Cameroon, on the basis of its domestic and global agency and gives a short overview of the potential of the politics of land control for engendering conflicts and social struggles. The conclusion of this essay outlines future scenarios relating to this phenomenon in Coastal Cameroon.

2 Background

Before exploring the historical trajectories of land dispossession, accumulation and rush in Coastal Cameroon – through the various agrarian transformations evoked in the previous section – and examining ongoing developments, it seems appropriate to make a brief presentation of some founding factors. In addition, I am introducing the question of institutional recognition in this section, using critical and social theory. The conjunction of the question of the *legal dispossession* of ancestral land and the question of recognition/misrecognition of local institutions that, in principle, must have a voice and say in land governance issues, will help identify some elements for understanding past, present and future land disputes and conflicts.

³Notably correlations between recognition, misrecognition and social dynamics associated with the issue of land and forest tenure.

Map 1: Coastal Cameroon along the Atlantic Ocean



2.1 The Origins of Land Accumulation

In an article published in the mid-1980s, French researcher George Courade makes an analysis of Cameroon's state and its preference for promoting large agro-industrial complexes, on the one hand, and, on the other, assesses the social, political and economic outcomes of this policy choice on peasants and the local communities (Courade 1986). From his perspective, one of the political, economic and ideological objectives of this agricultural development option taken by post-colonial Cameroon is the incorporation of peasants and rural areas, as a whole, in the capitalist system (see also Konings 1996)⁴. This aim is equally a kind of historic reproduction of voracious land acquisition practices institutionalized by the colonial state (Etoga 1971; Oyono 2005; Puépi 2010). Courade's analysis was later validated by Konings (1986, 1993), in his massive work on the social outcomes of capitalist agriculture on peasants and workers in Coastal Cameroon, and Moyo (2008), in his study of the issue of land in Africa and the role of the state in the context of "neo-liberal developmentalism".

In Cameroon, the process for dispossessing ethnic land was both the basis and the result of capitalist colonialism, as demonstrated by Mbembe (1996). In the beginning of colonial installation, the German administration legally disqualified all the customary legal systems regarding land (Rudin 1938). In coastal villages, inside the arc of a circle constituted by the towns of Limbe and Kribi (see Map 2 below), the local communities were, irremediably, deprived of their historical land rights and, sometimes in the cases of territorial eviction, their land (Oyono *et al.* 2004). Needless to say, the first well-structured political expressions of Cameroonian nationalism and rejection of the German presence had ideological bases embedded in the question of the control of land and customary territories (Mveng 1985; Mbembe 1986)⁵.

⁴ See also, at a more theoretical level, Bernstein (1979).

⁵ The "founding fathers" of Cameroonian nationalism, Rudolf Douala Manga Bell (a jurist educated in Germany) and Martin Paul Samba (trained as a colonial army officer in Germany) were – in 1914 – hanged and shot, respectively, for having revolted against colonial authorities and protesting, among other things, against the dispossession of the customary land of the Duala and the Bulu ethnic groups.

As a result, all Coastal Cameroon's land was annexed to the German Crown, unequivocally (Mveng 1985)⁶. After the departure of the Germans, with their defeat in the First World War (1914-1918), the imposition of a French-British joint mandate systematically amplified the dismantling of collective property, previously protected by customary legal systems (Anyangwe 1984). Huge units of customary land became state land. Indeed, after independence all the legal instruments relating to land governance simply reaffirmed the hegemony of the state over land and forest (Diaw and Njomkap 1998), in a legal unilateralism. The first determinant of these transformations in land ownership was highly political (see Box 1, below) – occupation and territorial annexation – with legal, material and symbolic state violence and total domination as the key driving forces (Oyono 2005; Nguiffoet *al.* 2008).

For the German colonial administration, the establishment of land concessions for agricultural purposes was an effective way for, *de facto* and *de jure*, grabbing customary land and forest, on the one hand, and for installing and consolidating a trading system based on the great capital (see Box 1, below), on the other (Mbembe 1996; Oyono 2005). It was in the 1890s that the process of creation of large agro-industrial plantations was launched by the Germans, with the creation of the West & Süd Kamerun Gesellschaft and the Westafrikanische Pflanzungsgesellschaft Victoria, respectively in 1894 and 1896 (Rudin 1938). Spread throughout Coastal Cameroon, and elsewhere in the hinterland, vast plantations of rubber, tea, cocoa, banana and palm oil were installed on customary land by the two German companies (Rudin 1938; Etoga 1971).

Box 1: At the foundation of agro-industrial companies

Moral and material support that the colonial government quickly gave an official and military look to the process [...], to the point that both men and things were subordinated to the development of large plantations. [...] It was a clear fact that colonial plantations formed the back bone of the economy of the territory, and therefore successive German, British and French administrations could not deny them.

Source: Etoga (1971)

After the war, Kamerun (in German) became a co-mandate, with Britain administering the western part of the country and France the eastern part (Mveng 1985)⁷. The creation of the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) by the British in Coastal Cameroon in 1947 represented an important milestone in the process of land accumulation by the state and its foreign partners (Berderman 1968). After incorporating all the plantations left by the Germans, the land concession attributed to CDC covered all the land around Mount Cameroon and a good portion of the useful land of the southern part of British Cameroon in 1960 (Berderman 1968)⁸. In the 1980s, the whole part of Coastal Cameroon west of Douala was occupied by CDC, notably the land of the Bakweri, the main ethnic group of the area (Etoga 1971). In French Cameroon, coastal areas were equally the preferred sites for the installation of vast plantations of palm oil since the colonial period (Konings 1993).

The *second great transformation* gave birth to two types of territorial identities and logics, which still co-exist in this geographic space (Oyono *et al.* 2004). On the one side, those of the local communities,

⁶ As shown in this statement by the German Emperor dating from 1896 (Jodie 1984): “We, William, by the grace of God, German Emperor, King of Prussia, give following instructions for the territory of Kamerun [...] All land within the territory of the protectorate of Kamerun is Crown land. And without masters, its property falls.”

⁷ The western part was associated with Nigeria, a British colony, and the eastern part to the Afrique Equatoriale Française (French Equatorial Africa).

⁸ See Maps.

organized around the formation of ethnic territories on the basis of simple economic reproduction (Diaw 1997). On the other, land logics of the Germans, the British and the French – inherited by the postcolonial state – organized around land control and capitalist accumulation as key principles (Mbembe 1996; Diaw and Njomkap 1998; Bakouméet *al.* 2002; Oyono 2005). The second determinant of the formation of land and forest concentration in the hands of the state and transnational capital was therefore highly economic (Mbembe 1996; Oyono 2004).

2.2 A Replicated Legal Technology

By attributing what is today known as Cameroon to Germany, the Berlin Conference (1884/85) is, rightly, considered as the first founding framework – in legal terms – of the dispossession of customary land in this country (Mveng1985). During their presence in Cameroon, the Germans issued a series of edicts legalizing the colonial empire’s property claims on customary land and forest, which were qualified as being “without masters” (Rudin 1938)⁹. Edicts of 1893, 1900 and 1913 were the founding tools of the German’s legal technology for occupying and controlling land in Cameroon, with land concentration in the hands of the German Crown and European private agro-industrial companies as a primary aim (Oyono 2005). Therefore, these three edicts have engaged the historical process of customary land dispossession in Coastal Cameroon (Schanz 1914).

The British – who had Western Cameroon under their mandate – blithely reproduced the legal technology developed by the Germans in favor of land transfer to agro-industrial plantations (Berderman 1968). In British Cameroon, the Freehold Lands Acts of 1927, 1937 and 1948 converted customary land into Crown land¹⁰, before leasing large units to private companies’ land (Bakouméet *al.* 2002; Oyono 2005). The dispossession of customary land was more pronounced in British Cameroon (Anyangwe 1984). However, the French colonial administration did not act differently in French Cameroon (Oyono 2005). A cascade of decrees on land and forestland (1920, 1925, 1926, 1935, 1946), copied on the French Civil Code, produced a legal technology similar to that of the Germans and the British.

This legal technology, basically drawn from the Roman law, is so robust that more than 50 years after independence, it is still predominating in all the official tools relating to land and forest governance in post-independence Cameroon (Oyonoet *al.* 2012). Land is currently governed by orders No. 74-1 and 74-2 of July 1974, whose key word is “state supremacy over land” (see Box 2, below). Similarly, Cameroon’s forest legislation currently in effect, enacted in 1994, is fully organized around the “ideology” of state hegemony over forest¹¹ (see Box 2, below).

Box 2: A legal continuity

Since 1960, the year of its independence, Cameroon has promulgated four fundamental legal texts on land and forests: the Forest Ordinance of 1973; the Land Ordinance of 1974; the Forestry Law of 1981; and the Forestry Law of 1994. The Forest Ordinance of 1973 and Law of 1981 strongly reaffirmed, on the basis of colonial heritage and of policy fidelity, the official options of forest authoritarianism and of the marginalization of the local communities. [...] The rights of the local communities to land and forest have never been substantively recognized by the legal engineering.

Source: Oyono (2005)

⁹See Note 5.

¹⁰See Ardener (1956).

¹¹The Land Code and the Forestry Code are currently under revision.

2.3 Recognition and Misrecognition

In this essay, the question of recognition of local institutions (both formal and informal) has a theoretical as well as a practical dimension. In this section, I make a brief incursion in its theoretical dimension, based on critical theory and social theory (Honneth 1996), to show that land dispossession, in the past, and land rush and concentration, presently underway, involve correlating processes of recognition/misrecognition of local institutions and authorities. These processes are linked to processes of institutional choice, or choice of institutions (Ribot 2011). In the light of this proposition, I demonstrate that all these processes generate negative outcomes that affect the whole equilibrium of local social formations and shape the politics of land control.

As noted by Anderson (2009), many scholars do not formulate a clear definition of the notion of recognition. By trying to avoid this semantic debate, I can say that recognition provides evidence of a statute, while being at the origin of this evidence (Deranty and Renault 2009). In other words, recognitive processes can allocate a wide spectrum of statuses (social, economic, institutional, political and symbolic) to a person, a community or an institution and these series of statuses provide the evidence of recognition. There are various forms of recognition (expressive, communicative, symbolic, silent, legal, cultural, diplomatic, etc.). German social philosopher Honneth (1996) provides a useful descriptive contribution to understanding the notion of recognition. From his viewpoint, “one is something only in relation to the others”. One is a human being because one is recognized as such by others; an institution is an institution because it is recognized as such by other institutions. Social and institutional life is, therefore, a continuous and cyclical “struggle for recognition” (Honneth 1996).

There are three modes of recognition: love-based or interpersonal recognition; legal recognition; cultural recognition. For Honneth (2006) and others –such as, among others, Taylor (1992), Fraser (2000), Renault (2000), Ribot (2011)– not being recognized is equivalent to not being respected. The denial of recognition – misrecognition and *malrecognition*–is synonymous with contempt (Deranty and Renault 2009). Anderson (2009) is actually holistic in the interpretation of the different meanings of recognition. From his perspective, recognition may designate: (i) relations of love with others and relating concern; (ii) the discursive acceptance of equality in diversity and particularity; (iii) admission of the equal value of all cultures; (iv) the acceptance of identity differences and of demands of emancipation emitted by the others. The processes of institutional recognition or misrecognition through land accumulation in Coastal Cameroon fall into the second, third and fourth assertions.

Thinkers of the *New Left*– including, among others, Alexander and Lara (1996), Fraser (2000) and Pourtois (2009) – insist on the issue of legal recognition, which is associated with human rights, categorical social rights and social movements. Recognition is, in this frame, attached to a whole bundle of social relations that express its moral or material roots and its outcomes in the social and political life (demands, struggles, liberation, realization of self, emancipation, collaboration, submission, subordination, objectification, reification, annihilation, contempt, and compromise). Many articulations of this social and political grammar of power relations can be applied to the production of recognition/misrecognition of local institutions/authorities through the formation of agrarian capitalism in Coastal Cameroon.

3 Historical Trajectories of Land Dispossession

In this section, the land dispossession paradigm is approached from a more historical-material perspective, after its legal roots have been presented above. Overall, two historical-material trajectories are detectable in the process of land dispossession and concentration in the Coastal Cameroon – that is, the *western trajectory* and the *southern trajectory*, with the city of Douala as

the geographic referential point (see Maps). Therefore, by **western trajectory**, I mean the land reservoir that lies west of the city of Douala. By **southern trajectory**, I mean the land reservoir located south of Douala, including the areas of Yabassi, Dizangué, Edéa and Kribi.

The development of the **western trajectory** was initiated by the Germans, through the establishment of the West & Süd Kamerun Gesellschaft, as already mentioned in this essay. Plantations managed by this company covered tens of thousands of hectares in the end of the 1900s (Hedin 1930). Many other agro-industrial companies gravitated around the West & Süd Kamerun Gesellschaft, west of Douala, including the Westafrikanische Pflanzungsgesellschaft Victoria and the Bibundi Company (Etoga 1971). According to Rudin (1938), the process of land dispossession and accumulation by the German colonial administration through the **western trajectory** was already terminated in 1907.

After the arrival of the British, all the plantations of the West & Süd Kamerun Gesellschaft and the Westafrikanische Pflanzungsgesellschaft Victoria were sold in auctions to British companies (Etoga 1971). To expand the agrarian capitalism model in British Cameroon, the Unilever Group chose to take up four former German plantations, but also set up – on 10,000 hectares of customary land and forest until then under the common property of lineages – the Pamol Plantations Limited (Pamol) for palm oil (Etoga 1971). Undoubtedly, the most impressive change in the agrarian history of British Cameroon occurred in 1947, with the creation of CDC. Most of the former German plantations became the epicenter of the land reservoir transferred to this huge agro-industrial complex, the largest to date in Cameroon (Gobinaet al. 2002), whose plantations today cover 102 000 hectares (NebaShu 2003)¹².

Box 3: Deprivation and dehumanization

In the French part of Cameroon, former German plantations were bought by European private companies. This is the case for example of the plantations of Dizangué, taken over in 1959 by the Rivaud Group (Terres Rouges). These plantations belong now to the Société Africaine Forestière et Agricole du Cameroun (SAFACAM, a French acronym for the African Forestry and Farming Company of Cameroon), a subsidiary of the Bolloré Group. As at the time of the German occupation, voluntary workers were insufficient in number and the French restored forced labor practices in private plantations. French trade unionist G. Donnat wrote in the 1940s that the plantations of the Company Terres Rouges "occupied a very large fully fenced territory, with armed guards and even a jail. Workers lived in barracks; they were prisoners and many of them never went back to their village."

Source: Etoga (1971)

Located in French Cameroon, the **southern trajectory** of land accumulation and the formation of agrarian capitalism in Coastal Cameroon are more segmented. Instead of setting up a giant company like the CDC, a smaller company, the Société des Palmeraies de la Ferme Suisse (SPFS), was installed in the Edéa area in 1910 (Etoga 1971). Like in British Cameroon, former German plantations located in French Cameroon, for instance Woerman's Plantations, were automatically transferred by the French colonial administration to private companies (see Box 3). So, the Rivaud Groupe created palm oil plantations on nearly 12,000 hectares in the Dizangué area¹³, between the cities of Douala and Edéa. In addition to these plantations managed by SAFACAM, the Société des Palmeraies du Cameroun (SOCAPALM) also created plantations in this area in the early 1980s (see Map 2), as reported by Bakouméet al. (2002).

¹² With 15000 employees, the CDC is the second employer in the country, after the state.

¹³ These plantations belong today to the Bolloré Group through the Société Africaine Forestière Agricole du Cameroun.

Land accumulation by the state and private corporations through the *southern trajectory* peaked between 1971 and 1980 (Konings, 1986). During this decade, the post-colonial state created, in the French-speaking part of Coastal Cameroon (the Kribi area), two other large agro-industrial concessions complementary to CDC (Oyono 2005; Gerber 2009). The first concession is home to a giant company, the Société des Hévéa du Cameroun (HEVECAM). It has an area of more than 50,000 hectares of rubber, for the production of latex (Gerber 2009). HEVECAM, created by the state and a consortium composed of the Rivaud Group, the Cameroonian state and the World Bank, was privatized in 1998 and sold to an Asian multinational, the Golden Millennium Group International (GMG), a subsidiary of the Chinese Sinochem International Group. The second concession is owned by SOCAPALM and is managed by SOCFINAL (see Maps), which belongs to the Bolloré Group already mentioned above. It occupies an area of 20,000 hectares, intended for palm oil plantations and the production of palm oil for both the national and international markets.

Table 1: Surface areas of the “historical” agro-industrial concessions in Coastal Cameroon

Concession	Date of Creation	Surf. Area (ha)	Observation
CDC	1947	102,000	Ongoing social movements
SAFACAM	1922	12,000	In extension
Fermes Suisses	1910	4,000	In extension
SOCAPALM (Kribi and Dizangué)	1978	28,000	In extension
HEVECAM	1975	50,000	In extension

Source: compilation of data and Bakouméet al. (2002).

4 The New Trajectories

As we can see, *western* and *southern trajectories* of land accumulation in Coastal Cameroon are both an augur and tangible illustration of the formation and expansion of agrarian capitalism in this part of the country, through the *second great transformation*. Launched on the basis of challenges relating to colonial territorial expansion and economic accumulation, the process of land dispossession was surrounded by more refined stakes (see previous sections). On its side, ongoing transnationalized agrarian capitalism is part of the game of influence between global economic powers – developed countries and emerging Asian, Arab and South American countries (Karsenty and Ongolo 2012). Land grab and concentration is no longer the result of colonial expansion and land management for administrative control and development purposes. It has become a global mechanism, linked to market forces and capitalist competition (Cotula 2011), and, perhaps, to the geopolitics. It is this mechanism that structures the third *great agrarian transformation* in Coastal Cameroon.

It is estimated that 83.2 million of hectares of land have already been purchased and leased by international investors in developing countries since 2000¹⁴. The total area of land acquired as concessions in Cameroon is estimated to be at least 700,000 hectares (Hoyle and Levang 2012). Since 2000, many cases of land transfer are reported in Coastal Cameroon (see Table 2, below). Negotiations are highly centralized at the level of the central government when these transfers are based on medium and large-scale acquisitions, mostly specialized in the monoculture of palm oil (Hoyle and Levang 2012). In some cases, like when based on very small surface areas, these transfers are made through negotiations with subnational administrative authorities, at the provincial level for instance. In both cases, these arrangements do not, by and large, involve customary institutions and authorities or local governments (see also Oyono *et al.* 2010). The most illustrative case of the

¹⁴Source: Land Matrix 2012.

explosive nature of the allocation of land concessions to foreign investors in Coastal Cameroon is the installation of the SG Sustainable Oils Cameroon (SGSOC).

SGSOC is 100%-owned by the American company Herakles Farm. In September 2009, SGSOC signed a contract with the government of Cameroon for the creation of a large concession of palm oil and of a palm oil refinery, with projected production capacity of 400,000 tons of oil palm per year (Nguiffoand Schwartz 2012). The company was allocated rights over an area of 80,000 hectares in the administrative units of Ndian and Kupe-Manengouba, in the English-speaking part of Cameroon, through a land lease of 99 years (Nguiffo and Schwartz 2012). In addition to actors of the *third great transformation* reported in Table 2 below, Hoyle and Levang (2012) report that an array of Asian companies, including, for instance, Palm Co and Smart Holding (China), would be looking for about 150,000 hectares in Coastal Cameroon, for creating palm oil plantations. In addition, the Malaysian palm oil company Sime Darby (see Table 2) is planning to acquire 600,000 hectares throughout the country during the coming decade (Hoyle and Levang 2013).

Table 2: Some “known actors” of the third great transformation in Coastal Cameroon

Company	Localisation	Origin	Surface areas (ha)
SGSOC	Ndian and Kupe	USA	80,000
Sime Darby	Yingui/iYabassi	Malaysia	300,000
Siva Group	Kribi	India/Indonesia	50,000 ¹⁵
Good Hope	Kribi	Singapore	No data
Palm Co and Smart Holding	Yingui/Yabassi	China	125,000

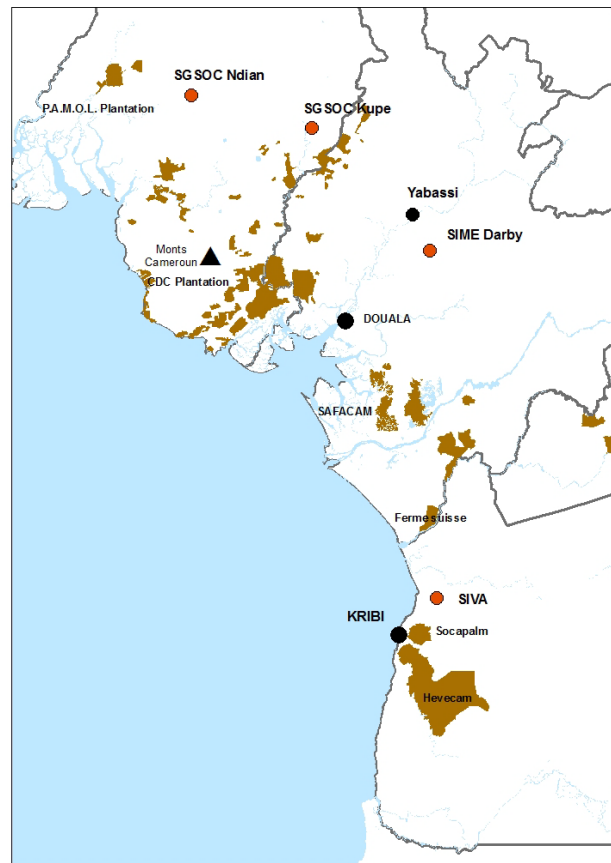
Source: Hoyle and Levang (2012).

The concession allocated to SGSOC is, of course, a case surrounded by other several cases. In a recent study conducted by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), it appears that Coastal Cameroon has become the preferred target for foreign investors, through, inter alia, the acquisition of medium and large-scale concessions (Hoyle and Levang 2012). Land concessions contracts are usually hidden, insofar as arrangements are not transparent and are not publicized, before or after the attribution (Tchawa2012; Assembe et al. 2013). However, the area occupied through secretive – not publicized –oil palm contracts is estimated at 80,000 hectares.

In fact, there is, to date, nobody to inform with accuracy on the surface areas occupied – or about to be–by international investors in Coastal Cameroon and the conditions under which these concessions are allocated. However, what is clear is that this region is going through another deep agrarian transition. Unlike actors of the first wave of the second great transformation (the colonial concessionaries), the new actors are not under the patronizing wings of colonial powers. In addition, legal, administrative, institutional and technical requirements have become more complex (contracts, environmental standards, social safeguards, compliance with the national growth strategy). As an illustration, Table 2 above makes a classification of some new agro-industrial companies involved in the unfolding of a third great agrarian transformation in Coastal Cameroon. To help visualize the extent of capitalist land concentration, Map 2 below shows how land investments are swarming in this part of the country.

¹⁵In its contract, Siva Group is authorized to increase its basic surface area by10,000 hectares yearly, for more than 20 years (Hoyle and Levang 2012).

Map 2: The new Coastal Cameroon under a systematic expansion of agrarian capitalism



5 A Bipolar Agrarian Capitalism

It would be limiting, from a theoretical point of view, to present postcolonial agrarian capitalism under the sole facet of the proliferation of international investments and the arrival *en masse* of transnational companies. It would be also wrong to hang onto the orthodox approach to agrarian capitalism, which seeks to show that in African countries, agrarian capitalism is an exogenous phenomenon with an invasive geography – and that it is unique and invariant. This section shows that we are facing a truly sprawling phenomenon.

There is an exogenous agrarian capitalism, whose historical phenomenology is assessed in the previous sections. There is also a correlated local agrarian capitalism, which is a sub-product of transnational agrarian capitalism (Gerber 2009; Oyono *et al.* 2010). Companies such as CDC, HEVECAM, SAFACAM and SOCAPALM – prior to their privatization in the transition from state capitalism to transnational agrarian capitalism—are representative of these processes of horizontal and vertical reproduction. Like under colonization, with the converging interests between the colonial state and private companies (Geshiere 1985), state capitalism in effect in the 1970s and the 1980s was an illustration of the alliance between the postcolonial state and foreign interests (Gerber 2009).

Studies conducted on what I can call “historical”¹⁶ agro-industrial corporations (CDC, SOCAPALM, SAFACAM and HEVECAM) have analyzed how these companies have set up refined strategies for ruralizing the existing model of agrarian capitalism in Coastal Cameroon (Courade 1984; Konings 1986; Bakoumé *et al.* 2002). These researchers have examined the negative results of these strategies

¹⁶Because they were the first *giants*.
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on the local social and economic fabric (Konings 1993; Gerber 2009), including subordination, proletarianization, prostitution and conflicts. With the aim of capturing and integrating the local peasantry into prevailing production systems, the Cameroonian agrarian capitalism model has developed and implemented two complementary approaches.

The first approach, launched under the Germans, consisted of expropriating the local communities from their customary land in order to install large plantations likely to supply the world market (Geschiere 1985). The second approach— from the 1970s and 1980s – is represented by the development of the so-called “village plantations”¹⁷ as a form of *contract farming*. In this form of agriculture, a well-sorted and reliable local elite must plant the same products as those of agro-industrial plantations, and sell these products, on contract, to these companies (see Box 4, below).

Basically, the so-called “village plantations” approach arose from a matrix of strategies for capturing peasants and local elites through a sort of satellite agriculture (Courade 1984). In his research work in the English-speaking part of Coastal Cameroon, mainly on the CDC, Konings (1986) shows that this approach, a product of the alliance between agro-industrial companies, international financial capital and the state, aims ultimately at annexing village producers. This further leads to their proletarianization, since they have ultimately become a category of workers (Konings 1993). Since the late 1990s and the 2000s, HEVECAM, SOCAPALM and SAFACAM have also, in the wake of the CDC, engaged in a rural process aiming at supporting the creation and multiplication of village plantations (Gerber 2009; Oyonoet *al.* 2010).

Through various forms of *contract farming*, selected peasants and elites create village plantations or rent plots from the agro-industrial companies. After taking root in the English-speaking part of Cameroon, this “rural innovation” spread to the Dizangue-Edéa and Kribi areas, taken up by SAFACAM, SOCAPALM and HEVECAM (see Box 4, below). In exchange for upstream technical support, small producers are required to sell their production to the “mother company”. Two types of agrarian capitalism live together already in these areas: a dominant and organizing capitalism, a sort of umbrella, and a dominated and subordinated capitalism, located in the margins of the first.

Box 4: Village plantations

In theory, agro-industries are responsible for the production of the selected material and technical training to support small producers in all the upstream agricultural operations, as well as the exploitation of their plantations. In return, the small producers sign a subcontracting agreement, which binds them to the agro-industry in question for at least several years and obliges them to deliver the totality of their production to it. The purchase price of a kilogram is fixed by the agro-industry.

Adapted from Courade (1984) and Bakouméet *al.* (2002).

According to the World Bank –which was an initiator and promoter of this approach (Bakouméet *al.* 2002) – the benefits of village plantations are multiple: they guarantee stable income to the small producers; they secure land; and they reinforce the monetization of the rural environment, thus creating “development”. But analyses generate, on the contrary, different conclusions (Courade 1984; Konings 1993; Assembeet *al.* 2013): the village plantations approach induces a process of land individualization and contractual liabilities (debts) that destabilize traditional lineage institutions; they further marginalize weak social categories (such as young people and women); finally, they

¹⁷ The village plantations strategy was, for the first time, experienced by the CDC in villages around the Mount Cameroon.

deepen inequalities and especially allow local elites to stand further from the rest of the community and grab land (see also Bakouméet *al.* 2002; Oyonoet *al.* 2010). All the new actors who are nowadays acquiring large land concessions in Coastal Cameroon will aim to duplicate this approach, with a dramatic evolution towards land privatization, capitalization of customary land, patronage, growing social inequality and establishment of small local bourgeoisies.

6 The Effects of Recognitive Logics and Practices

This section addresses the issue of recognition of local institutions in the process of land concentration by the state and foreign companies. It explores recognitive logics and practices in capitalist land accumulation along the agrarian history of Coastal Cameroon, from German colonization to present days. In order to occupy customary land in coastal areas, the Germans made use of both strength and trickery. For strength, they pointed guns on villages owned by the Duala, Bakweri, Bassa, Batanga and Bulu ethnic groups¹⁸ (Mveng 1985). For trickery, they relied on customary authorities, without use of their guns¹⁹ (Mveng 1985). The Germans saw these customary authorities as the only local “land keepers” (Ardener 1956): that is why they recognized them as individuals (see also Ardener 1977). But it should be clearly said that this administrative recognition was more instrumental than substantive (see also Austen 1977; Geschiere 1993), insofar as local authorities were not actually included in any decision-making process regarding the governance of the colony (Ardener 1956).

Besides this instrumental recognition— I can call it *malrecognition* because of the minimization of customary authorities by colonial authorities —and manipulation (see also Geschiere 1993), there were more substantive recognitive processes. As an illustration, the first agricultural companies that acquired land in Coastal Cameroon between 1890 and 1914 were legally and substantively recognized by colonial administrative institutions, on the one hand (Geschiere 1985). On the other, colonial administrative institutions and authorities were fully recognized by these companies as the “masters of land” (Geschiere 1985). This mutual recognition process had various forms of expression, including legal, administrative, identity-based²⁰, communicative and symbolic forms.

The structure of the recognitive arena was indeed asymmetrical: while colonial institutions/authorities and private companies were respected – mutual respect – in land transactions, the local institutions/authorities were subordinated in these very transactions. Colonial institutions gave authority over land to capitalist companies. As a result, these companies have continuously disregarded and manipulated customary institutions and authorities. These logics and practices governed the agrarian history of coastal territories throughout the colonial period. According to Mveng (1985), popular revolts against colonial masters in the coastal region were nourished by the rejection of misrecognition and subordination.

In connection with this essay, the process of misrecognition of customary tenure arrangements and systems in the shaping of new tenure relations during the colonial period was the expression of a clear legal, institutional, political and symbolic contempt. Thus, customary institutions became subordinated. Like during the colonial period, customary institutions and local authorities were not recognized by the 1970s and 1980s’ version of postcolonial agro-industrial capitalism as “institutions and authorities that/who count”. When they were considered as stakeholders, it was *for show* – or through the distribution of food and wine by the companies, as a social entry point.

¹⁸These are some of the main coastal ethnic groups.

¹⁹The conquerors gave to these Kinglets stuffs like of barrels of rum, jackets, rifles, pagnes, pictures and mirrors (Mveng 1985).

²⁰Both groups of actor were Europeans.

Rural local governments – or rural councils, in the administrative terminology – were created after the independence (Finken 1996). Rural councils are primarily responsible for promoting local development throughout the country. There is no evidence that rural councils have had any authority on land transaction operations conducted around the creation of agro-industrial complexes in the Edéa-Dizangué and Kribi areas in the 1970s and the 1980s. Only administrative authorities – presenting themselves as “local representatives” – were recognized by agro-industries, in search for administrative and legal protection. Therefore, the misrecognition of local governments²¹ in ongoing land transactions between the central government and foreign investors is emblematic of the contempt of local elected bodies – that are supposed to represent the local communities in everyday life.

In a research work conducted in the Kribi area, Oyono *et al.* (2010) note that neither customary authorities nor rural council authorities are, to date, aware of contractual agreements established between the government of Cameroon and the Chinese corporation GMC in the privatization process of HEVECAM. At the same time, the local communities continue to show historical and social evidence of their property rights to land occupied by this concession, as part of their customary and village territories (see also Oyono 2005 and Gerber 2009). On the whole, processes of misrecognition deprive the terrain of land transactions of citizens’ voice and say (see also Nyamnjoh and Englund 2004).

In the CDC area, representatives of the Bakweri ethnic group are today loudly claiming portions of their ancestral land occupied by the CDC (Ekwe 2003). The misrecognition of customary institutions, like customary property and rights, in land transactions generates a cohort of negative social and political effects in the margins of agro-industrial concessions since the 1980s (see Konings 1996; Oyono 2005; Gerber 2009). In all the villages of the Kribi area (HEVECAM and SOCAPALM), there is a growing development of demands for substantive recognition by the private companies, notably amongst the youth (Oyono *et al.* 2010). Thus, since the beginning of the 2000s, about 20 social conflicts, fuelled by claims over land and feelings of contempt derived from misrecognition, have seen the youth of villages located at the edge of HEVECAM and SOCAPALM pitted against these agro-industries, which are protected by heavily armed security forces (Gerber 2009; Oyono *et al.* 2010)²². In Ndian and Kupe-Manenguba administrative units, the very controversial site of SGSOC, youth associations and intellectuals of the area, speaking in the name of all the misrecognized local communities in land transactions, are claiming back portions of ancestral land (Tchawa 2012).

Honneth (1996) calls these demands and their moral economy, the “moral grammar of social conflicts” or the “struggles for recognition”. Gerber (2009) uses the term “social resistance”. The repertoire of institutional marginalization used by agro-industrial corporations leads to misunderstandings, social shocks, rights-based conflicts, cyclical community claims and violent social eruptions. These different effects encapsulate the problems of territorial marginalization, misrecognition and economic capture of the local communities (see also Nyamnjoh and Englund 2004).

Concomitantly, the implementation of *contract farming*, with village plantations, by promoting the emergence of new agrarian elites, creates new intra-community tenure conditions based on rural elitism and inequity (see also Nyamnjoh and Englund 2004). By and large, social structures are damaged and local authorities eroded everywhere in Coastal Cameroon due to bad relationships

²¹It should be noted that local governments benefit from taxes paid by these companies, but my purpose is about contracts and decision-making upstream.

²²Konings (1993) made a very fruitful analysis of this type of clashes in the villages of CDC in the English-speaking Cameroon.

between agro-industries and village communities. The setting up of new agrarian elites in villages is a new form of recognition initiated by these agro-industries.

It involves potential social and political risks, however: it creates problems more than it solves. In the Kribi area, individuals who want to access the privileged status of “village planters” must meet specific conditionalities, including their access to capital (in terms of personal financial contribution), the level of education and a reliable social status. The formation of a class of “village planters” thus structurally equals the constitution of a local agrarian elite, as a local substitute and conduit for transnational agrarian capitalism. The social and economic outcomes of this substitution and vertical and downward reproduction cover a wide terrain that ranges from a new process of marginalization to the proletarianization of the poorest peasants, passing by elite violence and intra-community struggles around community land grab by the local elite.

Box 5: Why is land so important?

It is a primary and fundamental but also highly symbolic resource for the vast majority of African peoples, representing a key building block for so-called traditionalist societies and economies. Being a valuable and immovable resource of limited quantity, land is not only fundamental to the livelihoods a precious reservoir for of natural resources. Land is a core element in the complex social relations of production and reproduction [...] At the same time, ancestral land impacts on people’s identity – on the ways that they are bound to the land and relate to their natural surroundings, as well as to fundamental feelings of ‘connectedness’ with the social and cultural environment in its entirety. As economic symbolic and emotional aspects are at stake, land is often at the source of violence...

Source: Anseeuw and Alden (2010)

7 Conclusion

Given the plurality of national and international interests in the ongoing process of land rush, industrial monocultures looks set to continue to expand in the whole Coastal Cameroon. Some areas, like the English-speaking part and Kribi (see Maps), are already at flash point. The corollary is, in addition to subordination to agrarian capitalism and conflicts (and tomorrow’s social movements), the worsening of ecological impacts, such as the destruction of high value conservation and biodiversity forests, with emissions of greenhouse gases following forest conversion, erosion, and water pollution, in an administrative context marked by laxity in the monitoring of environmental standards. Moreover, all the land concessions found in Coastal Cameroon are located in the vicinity of national parks (Korup, Bakossi, Ebo and Campo) and wildlife reserves, with obvious risks of encroachment on these protected areas by the agro-industrial concessions.

Three scenarios are likely to emerge in this region by the middle of the 21st century at the intersection of the politics of land transactions, on the one hand, and the politics of recognition and misrecognition, on the other. *Scenario 1* is the worsening of land crises and polarization of tenure relations. This scenario can occur if the state continues to avoid the question of the legal status of community rights to land, while demographic forces explode and poverty grows, on the one hand, and large-scale investments and transactions take a more and more uncontrolled speed, on the other hand. *Scenario 2* involves the implementation of a kind of negative compromise, characterized by the stubbornness of the state in encouraging externalities, including large-scale agricultural investments, while small opportunities are open to local communities through the allocation of weak rights and low-level jobs and the institutionalization of substitutes such as village plantations. In *scenario 3*, positive and adaptive compromises are found and implemented. Sustainable policy and legal solutions are found to the current impasse. Customary land rights are recognized and customary land

is titled as collective property. Contracts between the state and land investors therefore involve the local communities as rights-holders.

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LDPI Working Paper Series

A convergence of factors has been driving a revaluation of land by powerful economic and political actors. This is occurring across the world, but especially in the global South. As a result, we see unfolding worldwide a dramatic rise in the extent of cross-border, transnational corporation-driven and, in some cases, foreign government-driven, large-scale land deals. The phrase 'global land grab' has become a catch-all phrase to describe this explosion of (trans)national commercial land transactions revolving around the production and sale of food and biofuels, conservation and mining activities.

The Land Deal Politics Initiative launched in 2010 as an 'engaged research' initiative, taking the side of the rural poor, but based on solid evidence and detailed, field-based research. The LDPI promotes in-depth and systematic enquiry to inform deeper, meaningful and productive debates about the global trends and local manifestations. The LDPI aims for a broad framework encompassing the political economy, political ecology and political sociology of land deals centred on food, biofuels, minerals and conservation. Working within the broad analytical lenses of these three fields, the LDPI uses as a general framework the four key questions in agrarian political economy: (i) who owns what? (ii) who does what? (iii) who gets what? and (iv) what do they do with the surplus wealth created? Two additional key questions highlight political dynamics between groups and social classes: 'what do they do to each other?', and 'how do changes in politics get shaped by dynamic ecologies, and vice versa?' The LDPI network explores a range of big picture questions through detailed in-depth case studies in several sites globally, focusing on the politics of land deals.

The Narratives of Capitalist Land Accumulation and Recognition in Coastal Cameroon

Coastal Cameroon is currently the arena of land acquisition operations for large-scale agricultural investments, mainly the monoculture of palm oil. Huge agro-industrial concessions are increasingly granted, very often in obscure conditions. The phenomenon shows a great replicability across the country – and its geometry is actually difficult to master. But while examining the issue of land rush and transfer, it should be noted that Coastal Cameroon's agrarian history is a history of land dispossession since German colonization, passing through British and French colonization. This paper is an assessment, put as narratives, of the trajectories of land dispossession in this region, on the one hand, and land accumulation by transnational companies, on the other. The paper informs that: (i) these different land control and appropriation processes went – and are going – hand in hand with the misrecognition of institutions mandated for local representation, including customary institutions/mechanisms and local governments; (ii) the agrarian capitalism in effect is a tentacular phenomenon, which aims at incorporating all the rural landscape in its niche through the so-called village plantations option and the formation of a local agrarian sub-capitalism by local elites, leading to the reversal of customary tenure logics and the amplification of land individualization practices; (iii) institution recognition or misrecognition are among the driving forces of land conflict across the region yesterday and today; (iv) three future land scenarios are likely to occur in Coastal Cameroon in the next decades, the most dramatic being the radicalization of the land tenure issue, as a result of land marginalization – through land grab operations – and the rise of a violent social grammar rejecting the alliance between the state and the transnational capitalism. This is an eminently problematic policy and political challenge in today's Cameroon and Africa.



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