

THE POLITICS OF PERMANENT CONFLICT:
HERDER-FARMER CONFLICTS IN THE FAR NORTH OF CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that in order to come to a better understanding of herder-farmer conflicts in West Africa, we need to consider more explicitly what individual actors have to gain from these conflicts. I argue that by integrating the perspective of the ‘politics of the belly,’ including its premise that actors are strategically pursuing their own interests, into the analysis of herder-farmer conflicts, we will advance our understanding of the role that authorities play in the perpetuation of conflicts over natural resources. I will discuss a conflict between migrant Tupuri farmers and nomadic FulBe pastoralists over campsites in the Far North of Cameroon to show how traditional and regional administrative authorities purposefully and masterfully avoided conflict resolution, as they had to gain more by perpetuation of the conflict than by its resolution. Finally, I argue that despite the motto of “politics first,” political ecologists generally have failed to incorporate systematically the politics of permanent conflict. This paper draws from data collected during my research projects with FulBe pastoralists in the Far North in 1996 in collaboration with Paul Scholte and Saïdou Kari of the Waza Logone Project and in 1999 and 2000-2001 independently, as well as material collected by others who have reported on the same conflict.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article propose que pour mieux comprendre les conflits entre pasteurs et agriculteurs en Afrique de l’Ouest, on doit considérer plus explicitement ce que les différents acteurs peuvent gagner de ces conflits. L’argument est fait qu’on doit intégrer ‘la politique du ventre’ et sa prémisses que les acteurs poursuivent stratégiquement leurs propres intérêts dans l’analyse des conflits entre pasteurs et agriculteurs. Cette analyse avancera notre compréhension du rôle des autorités dans la gestion de ces ressources naturelles et des conflits. Un conflit entre les agriculteurs de Tupuri et les pasteurs nomades de FulBe dans l’Extrême-Nord du Cameroun est discuté pour montrer comment les autorités traditionnelles et autorités d’Etat par leur ‘politique de conflit permanent’ continuent activement des conflits entre pasteurs et agriculteurs.

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National Science Foundation (BCS-9910557); the Wenner-Gren Foundation (Gr. 6661); the International Studies and Overseas Program (UCLA); the Anthropology Department (UCLA); the James S. Coleman African Studies Center (UCLA); and the Ford Foundation.

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In this paper I will argue that to come to a better understanding of herder-farmer conflicts in West Africa, we need to consider more explicitly what individual actors have to gain from these conflicts. A better understanding of these conflicts is urgent because there is reason to suspect that they will increase and become more violent in West Africa in the near future, due to population growth and intensified competition over limited natural resources, and might articulate with other conflicts (Homer-Dixon, 1991; Kaplan, 1994). Policies and programs aimed at preventing or resolving these conflicts are doomed to fail, however, if they are based on erroneous assumptions and incomplete understandings of herder-farmer conflicts. Recent studies of herder-farmer relations in West Africa have challenged several widely held assumptions – that herder-farmer relations were more symbiotic in the past (Breusers et al., 1998); that these relations have become increasingly more violent (Hussein et al., 2000); and that scarcity of natural resources is the main cause of these conflicts (Turner, 2002) – and underscored the need for empirical evidence and careful analysis. In their discussion of Mossi farmers and FulBe herders, Breusers et al. (1998) have argued that one cannot study herder-farmer relationships as dichotomous relationships between two bounded ethnic groups, showing that there are conflicting interests among Mossi farmers and that herder-farmer relations are, in fact, multi-stranded. Although FulBe herders are presented as one homogenous group, the strength of their argument lies in their analysis of the behavior of individual Mossi farmers. Their story of Ousmane stands out. He publicly called for 25,000 FCFA compensation from a FulBe herder held responsible for damaging the millet crop of a fellow Mossi, even though Ousmane had to contribute himself to that compensation because he had entrusted animals in the FulBe herd that had caused the damage (although I suspect that Ousmane's animals did not feed off the millet, but I will come back to that later). It is through the focus on the decision-making and behavior of individual Mossi farmers that Breusers et al. arrive at a deeper understanding of ostensibly conflictual herder-farmer relations.

I will argue that when we apply systematically an analytical focus on the individual actions and decision-making of all parties involved in these conflicts, we will greatly improve our understanding of herder-farmer conflicts in general. This analytical approach entails methodological individualism; evaluation of costs and benefits of individual actions (which can be material, political, social, or symbolic); the supposition that individuals are strategic actors who take advantage of opportunities (but not always); and a reliance on empirical and ethnographic data (instead of reasonable assumptions and generalizations). An indepth discussion of one particular conflict between nomadic FulBe pastoralists and migrant Tupuri farmers in Mayo Kobo in the Far North Province of Cameroon demonstrates the value of such an analytical approach. Drawing on data collected during my research projects with FulBe pastoralists in the Far North in 1996 in collaboration with Paul Scholte and Saïdou Kari of the Waza Logone Project and in 1999 and 2000-2001 independently, as well as material collected by others who have reported

on the same conflict (Wassouni, 2001; van der Ploeg, 2001), I show that traditional and regional administrative authorities purposefully and masterfully avoided conflict resolution, as they had to gain more by perpetuation of the conflict than by its resolution. Drawing from recent studies of the African political systems (van de Walle, 2001; Bayart, 1993; Bayart et al., 1999; Chabal and Daloz, 1999), I will discuss how authorities use the current institutional ambiguity in land tenure regimes to ‘fill their bellies’ at the expense of both FulBe pastoralists and Tupuri farmers. I will also argue that despite the motto of ‘politics first,’ political ecologists generally have failed to incorporate systematically and explicitly the ‘politics of permanent conflict’ (borrowing from van de Walle, 2001), which is based on the premise that authorities are rational actors who strategically pursue their interests.¹

AN ACTOR ORIENTED-APPROACH

Actor-oriented analytical approaches are not new to ecological and environmental theory and research; the use of an actor-oriented approach in these research paradigms does not imply that context or systems are ignored (Vayda, 1983; de Groot, 1998; Long and Long, 1992). De Groot, for example, employs an Action-in-Context model to analyze and explain environmental problems, starting with the options and motivations of different actors, contextualized within the ‘actors’ fields’, i.e., the underlying power relations, culture and markets in society, progressively following the causal chain upwards (1998:33). I will use a similar actor-oriented approach here, combining a concern for context with a form of methodological individualism that is akin to rational actor theory, in order to arrive at a better understanding of herder-farmer conflicts.

I am not using a model of rational actors defined in the narrowest economical sense as individuals who are motivated by self-interest, perfectly informed, calculating costs and benefits, and maximizing their way through life (Ensminger, 1992:12), or, as Sen called them, ‘social morons’ (1977). Actor-oriented paradigms, in particular rational actor models, have often been criticized for being too individualistic and not paying enough attention to structural constraints, whether these are cognitive (Camerer, 1995), social (Granovetter, 1985), or cultural (LeVine, 1984:79-80). Anthropologists have argued therefore for a more relativist definition of rational actors as humans being rational within a particular cultural and economic context. As Plattner observes; “Individuals in any culture are seen as fully ‘rational’, in the sense that their solutions to their economic problems make sense once the many constraints (social, cultural, cognitive, and political, as well as economic) that individuals must take into account are understood” (1989:xi).

The disadvantage of this relativist approach is the loss of the sense of individuals as strategic actors who take advantage of opportunities. Bourdieu’s theory of practice

¹ Turner (n.d.) argues that a closer examination of herder-farmer conflicts may reveal that they are shaped by the political strategies of the people involved, particularly elites. But while Turner concludes that research should therefore focus on herder-farmer interactions as multi-stranded social relationships, I argue instead that we need to focus more on individual’s strategic decision-making and behavior of all parties involved, including various authorities.

encompasses the constraints on individual behavior without doing away with individual agency or a strategic action (1980). Bourdieu argued that not rational calculation but the dispositions of *habitus*, internalized implicitly and inculcated explicitly during socialization, make people do what they do. The habitus, or feel for the game, informs the everyday practice of individuals, which means that in practice people improvise and “work with rules and norms in a forward thinking strategic way, using their knowledge to pursue their interests”(Wilk, 1996:142). In practice theory people are strategic actors, even when their practices are grounded in the habitus and contingent on local social, cultural, and political structures. I will show that the use of such an actor-oriented approach that assumes individuals to be strategic actors who take advantage of opportunities will increase our understanding of herder-farmer conflicts.

POLITICS OF PERMANENT CONFLICT

The premise that people are strategic actors who take advantage of opportunities, even if it means breaking rules and taking advantage of others, is common in the recent literature on African political systems (Chabal and Daloz, 1999; Bayart, 1993; van de Walle, 2001; Bayart et al., 1999; Cruise O'Brien et al., 1989). These studies of the African state use an analytical approach of methodological individualism that assumes individuals to be maximizing and strategizing actors. In fact, rational actor theory describes well the political logic of the ‘politics of the belly’ (Bayart et al., 1999:34). The politics of the belly “is a Cameroonian expression which has numerous equivalents throughout sub-Saharan Africa. It denotes at the same time the accumulation of wealth through tenure of political power (implied in the proverb ‘the goat grazes wherever it is tied’), the symbolic reference to family lineage and to witchcraft, and the physical corpulence which is felt is appropriate in ‘big men’ or powerful women”(Bayart et al., 1999:8). Bayart has argued that the politics of the belly is a complex mode of government, rooted in subterranean networks of family ties and patron and client networks in what he calls *l’etat rhizome* (1993) but is also referred to as the neopatrimonial state (van de Walle, 2001). In this mode of government, patrimonial practices coexist with modern bureaucracy of Weber’s legal-rational state. As van de Walle argues: “outwardly the state has all the trappings of a Weberian rational-legal system, with written laws and a constitutional order. However, this official order is constantly subverted by a patrimonial logic, in which officeholders systematically appropriate public resources for their own uses and political authority is largely based on clientelist practices, including patronage, various forms of rent-seeking, and prebendalism”(van de Walle, 2001:51-2). Some scholars conceive of the African state as a ‘shadow state’ in which the modern bureaucracy is just an empty façade (Reno, 1995; Chabal and Daloz, 1999). Others have argued that it is better to think of African states as hybrid regimes in which personal rule coexists with a modern bureaucracy (van de Walle, 2001). There are budgets and laws, but these “can be thought of as public goods on which neopatrimonial interests attempt to free-ride ... rent-seeking and much corruption require that the state set rules that are generally followed, so that the rents created can be abused for personal profit”(van de Walle, 2001:128).

Chabal and Daloz (1999) imply that neopatrimonial networks work as redistributive systems that also benefit poorer clients in their book with the suggestive title *Africa Works*. But in reality, little trickles down and most remains in the few hands at the top (van de Walle, 2001:119), where it is used to forge alliances across different elites in 'hegemonial exchanges' or 'reciprocal assimilation of elites' (Rothchild, 1985; Bayart, 1993). For most Africans, the neopatrimonial state does not lead to significant wealth or empowerment (van de Walle, 2001:120). On the contrary, the hybridization of personal rule and modern bureaucracy creates greater ambiguity and uncertainty that leaves the poor powerless and dependent on the whims or *mètis* of the state's elites and bureaucrats. The notion of *mètis*, discussed by Bayart as an aspect of African individualism (1999), is about achieving success by playing *with* rather than *by* the rules of the game, i.e., through trickery. However, unlike in African folk stories, in which the trickster uses its *mètis* to gain victory over the powerful, in the neopatrimonial state it is the powerful elite who use their *mètis* to exploit institutional ambiguity and take advantage of the poor and powerless (Cruise O'Brien et al., 1989:6).

The use of public resources for personal enrichment, i.e., the privatization of the state, by not only the elite but by every group with access to the state, has led to a weakening of the state: underfinanced state structures; almost no revenues from taxes, tariffs, licenses; weak administrative capacities; and thus no resources to undertake developmental policy (Cruise O'Brien et al., 1989; van de Walle, 2001). In turn, this "has facilitated various rent-seeking and corrupt practices", and "state agents who wish to undertake these practices have a clear interest in weakening the state's administrative capacities"(van de Walle, 2001:135). It is not just that capacities of African states are weak; they are weak because the politics of the belly is the dominant mode of government and the logic that guides the behavior of individual bureaucrats and politicians in the African state.

BELLY POLITICS FIRST

'Putting politics first' is the motto of an analytical approach called political ecology which embeds ecological concerns in political analyses (Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987). The approach of political ecology "combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy. Together this encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources, and also within classes and groups within society itself" (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987:17). The diverse and interdisciplinary field of political ecology has produced a number of high-quality studies that have significantly contributed to a greater understanding of the relationships between nature and social relations, and in particular how larger political-economic processes affect this relationship (for reviews see Watts, 2000; Bryant, 1998; Peluso and Watts, 2001). Vayda and Walters (1999) have argued that some political ecologists pay more attention to politics than to ecology and that this is resulting in 'politics without ecology' (167). In contrast, I argue here that studies of natural resource management in West Africa have not paid enough attention to politics or the right sort of politics: 'belly politics'.

In much of the scholarly and development literature on natural resource management in West Africa, the image of the state is quite different from the one discussed in the recent political science literature. In the former, the analysis of the role of the state in natural resource management often focuses on the official laws and policies analysis of an ideal bureaucratic state, rather than on bureaucrats' actual behavior in a neopatrimonial state. This focus results in unrealistic expectations of 'the state'. Subsequent failures of the state to manage natural resources (and the conflicts there over) are then explained as a weakness of the state that can be remedied through institution building or financial support. The assumption is that authorities follow the laws of land and do not engage in rent-seeking behavior or that it is incidental and not a mode of government. When the 'politics of disorder' are discussed, they are worded in terms of plurality, ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty in the governing of natural resources (Benjaminsen and Lund, 2001:12; Mehta et al., 1999:10). However, I think that these terms conceal more than they reveal, and inhibit better understanding of herder-farmer conflicts – unless we examine more closely how individual actors negotiate the institutional ambiguity and complexity to pursue their own interests.²

The lack of integration of the 'politics of the belly' in political ecology analysis also signals theoretical and analytical differences with recent literature on the African state; political ecologists focus more on structure rather than agency, and this often translates into a focus on formal institutions instead of individual behavior (see also Bryant, 1998:81-2; Horowitz, 2003:27). The 'politics of the belly' are not formalized, but they are institutionalized. Practice theorists would argue that the practices of individual bureaucrats constitute the structure or institutions. In their discussion paper, Mehta et al. (1999) integrate practice theory in the analysis of natural resource management and argue that: "the new insights on the overlapping nature of institutions in legal pluralism help us to comprehend how interpretations are negotiated across institutional arenas, with law emerging less as fixed rules than as practice worked out in context. Thus processes of mediation, bargaining, conflict and power become key in institutional landscapes where uncertainties prevail" (26). However, even though Mehta et al. (1999) discuss power differences in their discussion of institutions and uncertainty in natural resource management, there is no explicit acknowledgement that the institutional landscape that emerges, at least in West Africa, is that of the 'politics of the belly' in which smallholders are steadily losing out to the wealthy, powerful, and better connected elite, who are much better positioned in these 'negotiations'. This point is well noted by Peters (2002) who argued that "the positive aspects of ambiguity and indeterminacy in Africa's 'land question' may be over-emphasized to the point of ignoring or deflecting research and policy away from growing inequity in access to and use of land"(56).³ Natural resources

² The political system of neo-patrimonialism is seldom referenced in studies of land tenure and herder-farmer conflicts (for an exception see Toulmin et al., 2002:10-11). Bassett (1988) mentions the clientelist political system in Cote d'Ivoire's, but it functions in his analysis of herder-farmer conflicts as a structural factor in the overall economy of the country, and not directly in the conflicts itself. Juul (2002) describes how FulBe pastoralists in Senegal use clientelistic networks to secure access to natural resources, but her analysis focuses on group strategies of FulBe pastoralists rather than the strategic actions of individual agents of the neopatrimonial state.

³ Other anthropologists have also noted how power inequalities have led to accumulation of lands by 'modern big men' in rural Africa (Goheen, 1988; Downs and Reyna, 1988; Shipton and Goheen, 1992;

have to be seen in the same light as other public resources of the state: a public good that can be exploited by elites with access to the state for personal gain.

THE MAYO KOBO CONFLICT

The Mayo Kobo conflict illustrates well how authorities used competition for public lands to create and perpetuate conflicts between migrant Tupuri farmers and nomadic FulBe pastoralists for personal gain. The conflict started in 1996 when Tupuri farmers cleared the campsites of nomadic FulBe on the banks of the seasonal river Mayo Kobo. Subsequent protests from the FulBe led to involvement of various traditional and state authorities, who generally decided in their favor, even though this did not lead to the removal of the farmers. In fact, the Tupuri settlement continued to grow in the three years that the conflict lasted.

To illuminate the role of authorities in the Mayo Kobo conflict, I am using an analytical approach of methodological individualism that considers the costs and benefits of individual actions (and inactions) and assumes individuals to be strategic actors who take advantage of opportunities. The problem of studying the ‘politics of permanent conflict’ lies in the collection of reliable data on the neopatrimonial activities of the elite (Bayart et al., 1999) and on conflicts in general (see, Roy, 1994; Hagberg, 2001:54). This study relies in part on drawing inferences from contradictory accounts, incomplete information, and partial observations (see also, Hansen, 2003:208), and it is therefore maybe more appropriate to write about an interpretative framework. The advantage of discussing the Mayo Kobo conflict is that two other researchers have studied the same conflict (and that thus more incomplete and contradictory information is available)(van der Ploeg, 2001; Wassouni, 2001). I am also using data from other herder-farmer conflicts in the Far North as well as the extensive literature on politics and society in Cameroon in order to understand the actions and motivations of actors involved in the conflict and situate the conflict in the ecological, socioeconomic, political, and historical setting of the Diamaré in which Mayo Kobo is located.⁴ I present the ‘facts’ of the Mayo Kobo conflict in indented blocks and analysis in regular text to signal distinction between facts agreed upon by the researchers and my interpretations of the actions of the authorities.

The Mayo Kobo conflict started in the 1996 rainy season when three migratory groups of nomadic FulBe Mare’en (approximately 35 nomadic families) returned to the Diamaré plains to find their customary rainy season campsites at the banks of the Mayo Kobo occupied by seven

Berry, 1993; for a good discussion of how the ‘politics of the belly’ affect farmers’ access to land in northern Cameroon see van den Berg, 1997).

⁴ The Diamaré is a term that refers to a geographical area that generally includes Maroua and surroundings but the boundaries of the area change depending on what definition of the Diamaré is employed (Seignobos and Tourneux, 2002:88-9). Here it refers to the plains between the Mandara Mountains, Logone Flood Plain, and Logone River conquered by the FulBe in the nineteenth century.

migrant Tupuri families.⁵ The Tupuri had come in search of land to cultivate sorghum. The Mayo Kobo campsites were desirable sites for cultivation because of the fertile layers of cattle dung, especially since these campsites had been used for 22 years, but also because they were relatively easy to clear as they were located at higher elevated sandy soils with only a few trees.

There is no immediate shortage of land in the Moulvoudaye sous-prefecture. It has some of the lowest population densities in the province, which is one of the reasons why nomadic pastoralists have their rainy season camps in the Mindif and Moulvoudaye sous-prefectures (Seignobos and Iyébi-Mandjek, 2000). However, there is competition for the campsites between migrant Tupuri farmers and nomadic FulBe pastoralists; the former value the campsites for their fertility, the latter for elevation and proximity to water and pastures. Because Tupuri generally set up compounds next to the fields they clear, and campsites are far away from established villages, migrant farmers are not in direct competition for land with autochthonous farmers – only with nomadic FulBe pastoralists who are there ‘only’ in the rainy season. The seven families that occupied the Mayo Kobo sites were part of a larger migration from the area of Doukoula, the Tupuri ‘homeland’ in the southeast corner of the Far North province. They were pushed by a lack of arable land in this densely populated and intensively cultivated area. Tupuri have been relocating to the Mindif and Moulvoudaye sous-prefectures since at least the 1930s, and surpassed the agro-pastoral FulBe population in numbers in the 1950s, such that Seignobos writes about a “veritable Tupuri colonialization”, 150 years after the FulBe conquered the land in a jihad (holy war) (Seignobos and Iyébi-Mandjek, 2000).

Early in the nineteenth century, the FulBe conquered a number of populations in the part of the Far North Province that is called the Diamaré. The conquest took place under the cover of a larger FulBe jihad that was started in Sokoto in 1804 by sheikh ‘Uthmân dan Fodio (Seignobos and Iyébi-Mandjek, 2000). Scholars have argued that the jihad and conquest of the Diamaré served as legitimatization of other pursuits; some of the FulBe were in search of slaves, others in search of pastures (Seignobos and Iyébi-Mandjek, 2000). The FulBe emirates established in the Diamaré after the jihad (Maroua, Mindif, Kalfou, and Bogo emirates) were loosely organized in the segmentary state of the Sokoto Caliphate as vassal provinces of the Adamawa emirate. The emirates resembled the highly centralized and hierarchical medieval Muslim caliphates (Azarya, 1978). At the top of the hierarchy was the *laamiiDo* (plural *laamiiBe*), who governed his territory via secondary and tertiary chiefs, *lawan’en* and *jawruBe* respectively (singular *lawan* and *jawro*). The political system of the FulBe emirates was later incorporated in the colonial and postcolonial state.

⁵ The FulBe Mare’en are a sub-ethnic group of nomadic FulBe, meaning a group consisting of different clan fractions that have in common a migratory history and certain cultural traits (e.g., dialect, ceremonies, cattle breed, tents) (Burnham, 1996). The Mare’en are referred to as Woyla’en (‘the northern folks’) by sedentary FulBe because they came originally from Borno, Nigeria. Only a small minority of the estimated 265,000 FulBe in the Far North is nomadic, approximately 5,000 (or 2%)(Seignobos and Iyébi-Mandjek, 2000). Most of them came fairly recently from Niger and Nigeria, mainly during the droughts of 1973-4 and 1984. The FulBe Mare’en came to the Far North, about 60 years ago, which makes them the nomadic group with the longest presence in the Diamaré.

Although the Tupuri were never subjugated by the FulBe, they were involved in the hundred years of war between the FulBe emirates and neighboring populations following the jihad (Beauvilain, 1989; Issa and Adama, 2002). The tension and mutual distrust between the two ethnic groups is historically rooted and was frequently expressed in the discourse of the parties involved in the Mayo Kobo conflict (van der Ploeg, 2001), even though the nomadic FulBe Mare'en are not descendants of the FulBe that established the emirates and fought the hundred-year war.

The FulBe Mare'en stay in the Diamaré three months out of the year. They and other transhumant pastoralists in the Far North Province oscillate between two phytogeographic zones that characterize the province: Sudanian (Sudano-sahelian) in the southern grades and Sahelian (Sahelo-sudanian) in the Logone flood plain. While the Sahelian zone is characterized by lower rainfall and a shorter rainy season, the seasonal flooding of the Logone flood plain makes the zone one of the most important dry season rangelands in the Chad Basin. Pastoralists from Cameroon and neighboring Nigeria and Niger trek each November to the Logone flood plain when the water retreats to exploit the excellent quantity and quality of the rangelands. At the start of the rainy season, Cameroonian transhumant pastoralists return to the higher elevated plains of the Diamaré, while pastoralists from neighboring countries return to their respective countries. The Logone flood plain and the Diamaré plains thus form complementary resources in the pastoral ecosystem of the Far North, the former providing pastures in the dry season, the latter in the rainy season.

Even though the FulBe Mare'en stay only three months out of the year in the Diamaré, they are integrated into the political system of the FulBe lamidats (which is the commonly used French word for emirate or territory governed by the laamiiDo). The migratory groups of the FulBe Mare'en are considered small villages or quarters within the lamidat under the leadership of an *ardo*, similar to how villages of agro-pastoral FulBe and other agricultural groups such as the Giziga, Kanuri, Tupuri, and Mundang were headed by a *jawro*. Nomadic pastoralists and the FulBe authorities had a 'nomadic contract' in which nomads' access to rangelands and personal safety were protected by the laamiiDo or *lawan* in exchange for tax and tribute (Moritz et al., 2002). LaamiiBe were generally good in protecting the grazing rights of nomadic pastoralists, as they had a clear interest in ensuring that nomads returned to their territories because of the taxes they paid. Through their association with the FulBe laamiiBe, FulBe Mare'en were also integrated in the bureaucratic structure of the state. They are inscribed on the roles of the municipality in the lamidat where they spend the rainy season and pay their poll taxes (rather than in the dry season transhumance area of the Logone flood plain). However, over the last two decades, especially since the introduction of the multi-party democracy in 1990, this arrangement between nomadic FulBe and the laamiiBe has come under pressure, as the latter have gradually lost power, not only to the state and its agents but also to their own subordinates: the *lawan'en* and *jawruBe* (Moritz et al., 2002). This has led to greater ambiguity and insecurity in the tenure situation for nomadic pastoralists in the Diamaré since multiple authorities now claim to 'own' the land.

When the three FulBe Mare'en migratory groups found their campsites occupied in June of 1996, they first went to the *lawan* of Daram with whom they had a 'contract' and who customarily had some authority over

the Mayo Kobo lands.⁶ The nomads argued that the Tupuri farmers had not only taken their campsites but also that their ‘colonialization’ led to a parcelization of the surrounding rangelands, which rendered them un-exploitable (because of increased risks of crop damage). The lawan was sympathetic to their case and expressed anger that migrant Tupuri farmers had cleared fields in his territory without his permission. But the lawan also said that he could do little because he no longer had enough power to remove them. He suggested the FulBe Mare’en to take their case to the laamiiDo in Mindif, his superior in the hierarchy of the traditional FulBe system, and the sous-préfet in Moulvoudaye, his superior in the state’s administration. The migrant Tupuri farmers who had cleared the fields, on the other hand, proceeded as if Mayo Kobo was located in the neighboring lawanat and went to the lawan of Kobo who was partial to the agricultural populations. The lawan had repeatedly declared that nomadic pastoralists were not welcome in his territory because he did not profit from their presence.⁷ The lawan of Kobo also suggested the Tupuri to take their case to the sous-préfet in Moulvoudaye.

The location of Mayo Kobo at the banks of the small seasonal river is partly responsible for some uncertainty over which lawan had the authority over the campsites because the river forms the boundary between the Kobo and Daram lawanats (French for the territory governed by a lawan). But this was not a major problem since both lawan’en declined to make a decision and instead sent their ‘clients’ to higher-level authorities. The problem of ambiguity lies in the fact that it was unclear who had the effective authority over the campsites and grazing lands of Mayo Kobo: the laamiiDo of Mindif or the sous-préfet of Moulvoudaye.

In the precolonial past, all lands were owned by the laamiiDo and there was no distinction between public and private lands in the lamidats. The traditional FulBe authorities – laamiiDo, lawan, and jawro – owned all lands. Farmers had only temporary use rights and when they left land fallow the FulBe authorities could reclaim it. Under colonial rule, all the so-called ‘vacant and ownerless’ lands were considered public lands and administered by the colonial administration, even though in the Far North traditional FulBe authorities remained de facto ‘owners’ of the land. In 1959, one year before independence, the colonial administration enacted a law that formally returned control to customary authorities. A few years later, however, new laws returned control over these lands to the state, and this was reaffirmed in the 1974 land reform act, which officially abolished customary tenure systems and introduced individual, state and national lands (Fisiy, 1992; van den Berg, 1997:190-1). The allocation of national, i.e., public lands officially became the prerogative of the sous-préfet, but again, effectively little changed and traditional institutions continued to guide land tenure systems in the Far North.

⁶ The village head (jawro) of Gadja, the village closest to Mayo Kobo was bypassed by both the FulBe Mare’en and the Tupuri. He had no power to intervene in conflicts as the sous-préfet and lawan always interfered and took away the case (and its spoils).

⁷ Later it was established that the sites were located in the Daram lawanat, but the move of the Tupuri made the lawan of Daram proclaim that the Tupuri had paid bribes to get permission from the lawan of Kobo to clear the campsites that were not even located in his territory (van der Ploeg, 2001).

Traditional FulBe authorities continued to be the ‘owners’ of the land from whom farmers ask permission to clear land or buy fallow fields (see also, van den Berg, 1997:200). In recent decades, however, the power of traditional FulBe authorities has diminished (Moritz et al., 2002). Sous-préfets, the official ‘owners’ of the land, are increasingly asserting their authority over national lands and are now often referred to as *chef de terre*, indicating that they are gaining more and more control over the land.

After their initial visit to the lawan of Kobo, the Tupuri farmers were slower to pursue a hearing with the Moulvoudaye sous-préfet as the threat of immediate removal subsided. The initiative was with the FulBe Mare’en, who tried to reclaim their campsites. After multiple visits to the lawan of Daram, the FulBe Mare’en were received in July by the sous-préfet in Moulvoudaye. (The laamiiDo of Mindif was at that time in Yaoundé for a meeting of the national organization of traditional authorities. The FulBe Mare’en could not wait for his return and had decided to go directly to the sous-préfet.) The lawan of Daram was actively involved in organizing a hearing for the FulBe Mare’en at the sous-prefecture in Moulvoudaye. None of the FulBe Mare’en spoke French, one of the national languages, but the lawan of Daram, who acted as their broker, did. The nomads had paid him *gooro* to ensure their case was heard by the sous-préfet (*gooro*, Fulfulde for kola nut, is a term frequently used as euphemism for bribes and rents). The FulBe Mare’en represented by the lawan of Daram demanded from the sous-préfet the immediate removal of the Tupuri farmers. In response, the sous-préfet chose to send a delegation to the campsites and interrogate the Tupuri farmers and FulBe Mare’en at the site. The delegation consisted of the sous-préfet himself, the lawan of Daram, and the commander of the brigade and the veterinarian of Moulvoudaye. The delegation, which was ‘financed’ by the FulBe Mare’en, interviewed the parties involved at the site. After consultation with the other members of the delegation, the sous-préfet decided that the nomadic pastoralists had legitimate claims to the campsites and that the farmers had to leave. However, the sous-préfet also argued that nothing could be done at that time because the farmers had already sown their sorghum – to chase them would condemn to hunger and that would be morally wrong (van der Ploeg, 2001).

The FulBe Mare’en paid the transport of the delegation to the campsites; this meant not only the fuel for the car but also the ‘motivation’ for the members of the delegation in the car.⁸ In fact, practically each step in the judiciary pathway involved some transfer of cash to the authorities. The FulBe Mare’en paid the lawan (and through him others as well) to ensure that the judiciary process continued. But these payments did not necessarily ensure that justice was done in their favor.

During the interviews at the site, the Tupuri farmers complained that FulBe cattle entered their fields and destroyed their crops. In response, the

⁸ *Payer le carburant* (‘paying for fuel’) is another Cameroonian euphemism for paying rents and bribes.

sous-préfet decided that in this case it was the responsibility of the farmers to protect their crop from incursions from FulBe cattle. In fact, the sous-préfet said that the nomads could camp right next to the fields and did not have to worry about crop damage, which already had occurred several times and had led to fights between the Tupuri and the FulBe Mare'en

This decision of the sous-préfet was a recipe for continuing conflicts between Tupuri farmers and nomadic herders over crop damage and a possible violent escalation of the Mayo Kobo conflict.⁹ The situation did not improve after the delegation's visit and decisions. In fact, the decisions of the sous-préfet maintained the status quo. After all the efforts and expenses of both Tupuri and FulBe Mare'en, nothing had changed. This became even more evident in the years following.

When the FulBe Mare'en returned to Mayo Kobo from their transhumance to the Logone flood plain in the rainy season of 1997 they found not only that the Tupuri farmers were still on their campsites, but also that the settlement had grown by three families. Again, the FulBe Mare'en pursued the case at the lawan and the sous-préfet, and again, the authorities sided with the nomadic pastoralists by reaffirming their earlier decisions but effectively did not undertake any action. The story repeated itself in 1998. But with one important change: the lawan of Daram had named one of the farmers as jawro of the Tupuri settlement at Mayo Kobo (van der Ploeg, 2001). He thereby no longer simply condoned the actions of the migrant farmers but legalized their settlement. It became clear that the lawan was playing both sides in the conflict.

In January 1996, the party dominated by Tupuri, the MDR (Movement for the Defense of the Republic) won mayoral elections in three major towns in the southeast of the province: Moulvoudaye, Guidiguiss, and Doukoula (Mouiche, 2000). The MDR, led by a Tupuri Dakolé Daïssala, has presented itself as the political party for the *Kirdi* – a term used by colonial administrators for non-FulBe and non-Muslim populations in the Far North. The term has been appropriated by Kirdi populations themselves to protest the exclusivity and discrimination by the Muslim FulBe (particularly during the regime of the first president Ahidjo). *Kirditude* represents a political and cultural movement that is growing in importance in regional and national politics (Mouiche, 2000). It is unclear whether the election results bolstered the migrant Tupuri farmers in their land grab, but traditional FulBe authorities certainly perceived these results as indicators of a threat to their power and the Tupuri as force to reckon with. It may have been an opportunistic move on the part of the lawan to side with the Tupuri, who were becoming an important constituent in his territory.¹⁰

⁹ The reoccurring crop damage did not directly lead to violent conflicts between Tupuri and FulBe Mare'en, but in 1998, a conflict over the theft of donkeys led to fatalities when FulBe herders entered a Tupuri village searching for the stolen animals. The build-up of anger and resentment between the two groups has been held responsible for the violent escalation (van der Ploeg, 2001).

¹⁰ Early during the conflict, the lawan of Daram had said that he could not do anything about the Tupuri farmers that had occupied the Mayo Kobo campsites because the Tupuri had *grand hommes politiques* and as a demographic group constituted a growing force in local politics of the area. He noted that many Tupuri

As the conflict continued, it became clear that the lawan of Daram had given permission to migrant Tupuri farmers in 1996 to clear the nomadic campsites at Mayo Kobo (though not to all farmers), knowing that conflicts would arise from which he could profit as broker for the nomads who lost their campsites. One of the nomads characterized the lawan's strategy 'he had created a cow that could be milked'. The Tupuri farmers had each paid the lawan of Daram 20,000 FCFA in addition to an unknown amount that one of their leaders had paid the lawan and the sous-préfet (van der Ploeg, 2001). The reason the lawan of Daram was initially angry when the nomadic pastoralists brought their case to him in 1996 was that he found out that some of the farmers had *not* paid him.

The Mayo Kobo conflict ended in 1999 due to a combination of reasons and despite the efforts of the authorities. Migrating elephants from Waza National Park had come through the area destroying all the fields and crops in their path. The fields in Mayo Kobo were particularly vulnerable to elephant damages since they were relatively isolated and far from the population centers generally avoided by the elephants. The crop losses suffered by farmers were significant (and far worse than those caused by FulBe cattle). A number of Tupuri left and moved elsewhere because of the threat of future destruction (van der Ploeg, 2001), but the FulBe Mare'en remained in the area as their cattle were habituated to the elephants.

The previous year, a special unit of the security forces commonly referred to as the *anti-gang* had been sent to the Far North because of growing insecurity resulting from banditry. The anti-gang operated outside the law and summarily executed suspected bandits, ordinary criminals, and lower-ranking traditional authorities that protected them (Amnesty International, 1998). Two young Tupuri men from the Mayo Kobo settlement were suspected of theft of donkeys from the displaced nomadic FulBe were taken by the anti-gang in June 1999, never to be seen again (van der Ploeg, 2001:109). The actions of the anti-gang unit created an atmosphere of fear and intimidated both parties involved in the Mayo Kobo conflict. The destruction by the elephants and the anti-gang sounded the end of the conflict in 1999. The nomads finally accepted the futility of pursuing their case after three years of being subjected to the authorities' *mètis* and moved to neighboring Kolara leaving their campsites to the remaining Tupuri.

DISCUSSION

I have argued that natural resources have to be considered public goods of the state that can be used by the authorities for personal gain. However, the problem is that "the chief cannot eat the land" (*le chef ne mange pas la terre*) as one traditional chief succinctly stated; that is, lands have no value in themselves for the authorities, who, like farmers, must make them productive (*mise en valeur*). One way authorities make public

do not ask him anymore for permission to clear lands in the bush; they go directly to the sous-préfet or even the préfet in Kaélé (van der Ploeg, 2001).

lands productive in the Far North of Cameroon is by exploiting competing interests over natural resources to create, mediate, and perpetuate conflicts over land. But these politics of permanent conflict are not always transparent.¹¹ Outwardly, the authorities in the Mayo Kobo conflict appeared to adhere to the official judiciary process of the bureaucratic state. They followed a protocol, conscientiously organized a delegation to the site to investigate the case and interview all parties involved (though they needed ‘motivation’), and referred to official laws and policies in their decisions. The delegation’s findings and decisions were documented in official papers that were given to the FulBe Mare’en and the Tupuri and filed in the archives of the sous-prefecture. On the surface, the authorities seemed concerned about and committed to resolving the conflict between migrant Tupuri farmers and nomadic FulBe pastoralists. The problem was that no action was undertaken to enforce the sous-préfet’s decision at the end of the growing season and consequently nothing changed and the conflict continued for two more years.

One could argue that the authorities did not undertake any effective action because it was politically unwise to remove the Tupuri farmers in the current political climate or that the state was weak and authorities lacked the financial means to enforce their decisions. Those reasons may have played a role, and again, it remains difficult to determine whether inaction is due to limited resources or ‘eating’ by the local authorities (or both). My point is that the authorities had no incentives to resolve the conflict – a conflict that they themselves had created. The authorities stood to gain more by a continuation of the conflict than its resolution since they could collect rents from the FulBe Mare’en who wanted to continue the judiciary process to regain their campsites and from the Tupuri who wanted to slow the process to avoid their eviction. The *lawan* of Daram played a pivotal role in making the national lands productive for the authorities. First, he granted permission to the migrant Tupuri farmers to clear the campsites of the nomadic pastoralists in exchange for payments to him and the sous-préfet of Moulvoudaye. Then he assisted the FulBe Mare’en in the judiciary process and thus generated more income for himself and the sous-préfet, who in turn shared some of it with other elites in Moulvoudaye by including them in the delegation.

The authorities were shrewd in the timing and organization of the process. Although few (if any) Tupuri and FulBe Mare’en trust the authorities, the *lawan* and the sous-préfet pretended convincingly enough that the judiciary process made sufficient progress to keep the conflicting parties invested (and investing). Their actions and words were enough to convince the FulBe Mare’en that there was a chance that they could reclaim their campsites and enough to spread fear and insecurity among the Tupuri farmers that they might lose their fields. The final decision of the sous-préfet was also cunning. On the surface, the sous-préfet’s decision was resolute and clear: the FulBe Mare’en reclaimed their campsites and the Tupuri had to leave after the growing season. However, it also meant victories for both groups – the FulBe Mare’en had won and the Tupuri could stay – and thus motivated both groups to remain invested in the conflict. More importantly, the conflict was effectively unresolved and at the same time the stage

¹¹ It is possible that my work in Cameroon has colored my perspective (cf., Bayart, 1993; Mbembe, 2001; Takougang and Krieger, 1998) and that the politics of the belly are more prominent in herder-farmer conflicts in Cameroon than elsewhere. It is noteworthy that neopatrimonial activities figure more prominently in the chapters that cover Cameroon than in those covering other West African countries in an edited volume on the dynamics of resource tenure in West Africa (Toulmin et al., 2002).

was set for a continuation of the politics of permanent conflict in the year following when the FulBe Mare'en returned from their transhumance. Seen from the point of the authorities there was no ambiguity in who had the authority over the Mayo Kobo lands, as they cooperated and shared the spoils of conflict mediation in an reciprocal accommodation of elites (Reno, 1998).¹² Authorities in the neopatrimonial state derive their power and income partly from arbitrage between different groups or networks (Cruise O'Brien et al., 1989:8; Bayart, 1989:41), and it is thus in their interest to create or perpetuate conflicts between these groups (Berry, 1993:130), and this is exactly what the authorities did in the Mayo Kobo conflict.

Herders and farmers coping with the belly politics are increasingly frustrated about the 'appetite' of the authorities, in part because the payment of rents no longer guarantees a favorable outcome.¹³ The most likely outcome in conflicts over natural resources is a status quo, and this puts the party already in control of the natural resources at an advantage. The politics of permanent conflict thus reaffirm the existing West African pattern that farmers' usufruct rights are more secure than those of herders. But it has also increased the costs for farmers, as insecure land tenure requires constant 'investments' in patrimonial networks. There is a growing sense among both herders and farmers that one never really wins if one goes to the authorities, and as this awareness becomes more widespread one could possibly see more conflict resolution at a community level without the politics of the authorities. Although one has to keep in mind that 'elites' among herders and farmers, including the jawro of the Tupuri village and the leaders of the FulBe Mare'en, have a stake in and play a supporting role in the politics of permanent conflict.

I have limited my discussion here to the role of authorities, but a similar actor-oriented analysis can be done of the herders and farmers involved in these conflicts. For example, it is frequently assumed that damages to farmer's crops are accidental. And often that is true. However, sending cattle into farmer's fields is also a deliberate feeding strategy used by herders to overcome the dry season crunch in the Sahel. In fact, FulBe pastoralists in the Far North believe that a good herder is a malicious herder, i.e., one that take good care of his animals by destroying farmers' crops.¹⁴ I have noted in the introduction that Ousmane's animals probably did not feed off the millet, even though he had to pay his share of the damages. The reason is that when FulBe herders purposively send cattle into fields, they will only let their own animals graze, while keeping those of others in the herd at bay. In that case, herders act as veritable rational actors by maximizing their profits while minimizing the costs. I have argued that integrating a

¹² To a certain extent, the leaders (*ardoBe*) of the FulBe Mare'en also participated in the hegemonial assimilation of the elites. As representatives of nomadic pastoralists, the *ardoBe* took cuts from the taxes and tributes that they collected from their followers and transferred to the FulBe *laamiiBe* as part of the nomadic contract. It would probably go too far to argue that the nomadic leaders were interested in perpetuating the Mayo Kobo conflict – they were genuinely infuriated – but as representatives of the nomads, they certainly had an interest in the conflict. Failure to regain the campsites could always be blamed on the 'outside world'.

¹³ Moreover, success in persuading the authorities does not depend on the money and/or services exchanged in one single transaction, but on the potential for exchanges in the future. This suggests that exchange and game theory are extremely relevant for the study of belly politics.

¹⁴ *Bononda*, Fulfulde for 'crop damages caused by animals', has the same verbal root as *wongo* (*won-*), which means 'to be malicious' (Noye, 1989:387).

rational actor model and cost-benefit analyses in the study of herder-farmer conflicts will lead to a better understanding of these conflicts. This is not just an academic exercise. Policies aimed at preventing herder-farmer conflicts – e.g., decentralization, co-management, strengthening traditional institutions, pastoral charters, designation of land-use zones – are doomed to fail if they do not consider the politics of permanent conflict. They will merely change the rules with which the authorities play.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Leslie Moore and Ruth Noorduyn for useful comments. Thanks also to Paul Scholte and Saïdou Kari for the collaboration.

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