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# LAND RESTITUTION AND CONFLICT IN CAMEROON: THE CASE OF THE BAKWERI

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## ABSTRACT

Land that was appropriated in the colonial period is only rarely returned to African claimants. Drawing largely on interviews from 2018, this article examines a process of surrendering parcels of state-managed plantation land to Bakweri communities in the South-West Region of Cameroon, which has been operating since 2003. The article not only analyses the national political effects of the scheme, but also engages with debates about interpretive frameworks by contrasting neopatrimonial and political settlements (PS) approaches. The article argues that the original intention of the land restitution scheme may have been to benefit some local communities, but it also reduced effective opposition to the national government by undermining Bakweri institutions and unity. It sustained established national political arrangements by generating significant rents, which are distributed among the government's supporters in exchange for loyalty. The article argues that this part of the argument would align with the neopatrimonial framing, but that PS address some of the criticisms levelled at neopatrimonialism particularly in relation to the explanations for and limits to clientelism.

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## *Introduction*

LAND THAT WAS APPROPRIATED DURING THE COLONIAL ERA is only rarely returned to its African claimants. This article examines the workings of one such land restitution process in Fako Division in the Anglophone South-West Region of Cameroon, which has transferred around 10,000 hectares of land from a state-owned agroindustrial enterprise to at least 38 villages

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since 2003.<sup>1</sup> It argues that the explicit intention of the scheme was to benefit local communities who identify as indigenes, but that its real significance lies in its broader political effects. Through mechanisms like this land surrender process, an elite coalition in Cameroon has been able to retain power and mostly prevent large-scale violence for over four decades.

'Stability' has been the defining ambition of the Cameroonian political system over this time. There have been only two presidents in Cameroon since independence in 1960/61. Over these decades, the system has endured perturbations relating to the tail end of a civil war; abolition of the federal constitution; a presidential transition; a coup attempt; a major economic crisis; political liberalization in the 1980s and 90s; multiple popular protests; and the consequences of wars just over the border and (since 2013) within Cameroon. These challenges can all be understood as moments of political rupture; however, the group who form the upper echelons of the national leadership has adapted to each crisis and remained in control. For example, many of the current leadership in the military are now in their 80s and have been senior officers for over 40 years. As Paul Biya (president since 1982) said in 2015: 'The one who stays in power is the one who can, not the one who wants to.'<sup>2</sup>

The arrangement in Cameroon has been sustained partly through authoritarian coercion and partly through purchasing the consent of multiple groups across the country. Funding this consent has not been cheap, but sources have generally been available – although they have changed over time. Timber, plantation agriculture, and parastatal corporations were replaced by oil and now oil by gas. The privatization of parastatals was designed to disentangle these industries from politics, but the new private owners of former public assets sometimes turned out to be elites close to the centre of power.<sup>3</sup> At the current time, the cost of buying consent is greater than ever, and this is how the land in Fako became enrolled in national politics. It is one more mechanism used to fund the now fraying Cameroonian political settlement. The land surrender process is not just an opportunity for corrupt individuals to enrich themselves quickly at a local level, but a story that connects this peripheral land to sustaining the national political system.

1. CONAC 'Cameroon's 2018 anti-corruption status report' (CONAC, Yaoundé, December 2019) pp. 25–45. The National Anti-Corruption Commission (CONAC) was established in March 2006. Implementation of its recommendations depends on the President.

2. Speaking during President François Hollande's 2015 visit to Yaoundé. Cited in Fred Eboko and Patrick Awondo, 'The stationary state, between chaos and rebirth', *Politique africaine* 150, 2 (2018), pp. 5–27.

3. Piet Konings, 'Privatisation and Ethno-Regional Protest in Cameroon', *Africa Spectrum* 38, 1 (2003), pp. 5–26.

In 2016 a secessionist rebellion began in the North-West and South-West Regions of the country (including Fako) seeking to establish a new Anglophone nation-state called Ambazonia. This conflict is now woven into debates about land in Fako. First, the land restitution scheme is one policy (among many) cited as evidence by the insurgents that the Francophone-led government is extracting wealth from the Anglophone areas.<sup>4</sup> It is used to justify the conflict. Second, although the rebellion has been partially contained by military force, the violence has caused changes to the land restitution scheme in Fako. By treating Anglophone elites (especially traditional rulers) who have benefitted from the land scheme as accomplices of the national government, the rebels have driven many of them to flee, effectively bringing a halt to further land transfers. The land restitution scheme predates the recent conflict, but their dynamics have become interwoven.

Fako Division is far from the centre of Cameroonian power in Yaoundé.<sup>5</sup> It is an ethnically cosmopolitan area with the Bakweri people (who identify as the indigenes) significantly outnumbered by many generations of immigrants (both English and French speakers).<sup>6</sup> The landscape that makes up the case study area (2,093 km<sup>2</sup>) is a mosaic of growing mid-sized urban settlements (Buea, Limbe, Muyuka, and Tiko), villages, designated conservation areas, industrial areas (such as the oil refinery), and the extensive plantations of the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC). Representatives of the Bakweri people claim to own all of the plantation land in Fako, and this is the land on which this article focuses.

The return of parcels of CDC plantation land to Bakweri is known locally as 'land surrender'. This scheme was initiated by Peter Mafany Musonge, a member of the Bakweri elite who had been General Manager of CDC and was later Cameroon's Prime Minister from 1996 to 2004. It was intended as a pragmatic attempt to return 'some' land to 'some' Bakweri people without undermining the economic viability of the CDC. However, since Musonge had previously sparred with Bakweri activists claiming compensation for lost land during his attempts to privatize the CDC in the late 1990s, the

4. Venatius Ngwoh 'Cameroon: State Policy as Grounds for Indigenous Rebellion. The Bakweri Land Problem, 1946–2014', *Conflict Studies Quarterly* 27 (2019), pp. 39–58.

5. The South-West Region (headed by a Governor) has six Divisions. Buea is the capital of the Region and Limbe is the capital of Fako Division. Fako is divided into seven subdivisions (Buea; Limbe I, II, and III; West Coast; Tiko; and Muyuka). The SDO (or *Préfet*) is the highest ranking official within the Ministry of Territorial Administration in Fako. Each subdivision is headed by a DO (*Sous-Préfet*).

6. At annexation in 1884, six ethnic groups were described as indigenes of this area: the Bakweri, the Balong (in Muyuka), the Wovia and the Isubu (on the coast near Bimbia), the Bamboko (in Idenau), and the Mungo (in Tiko). Edwin Ardener, *Divorce and fertility: An African study* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1962). The term 'Bakweri' was often used to describe all the 'indigenes' of Fako despite the fact that they are from different groups. Several non-Bakweri elites have led the BLCC.

wider political effect of the land surrender in weakening Bakweri opposition to the government would also have been known to him.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the scheme also opened a space for many individuals to make money in a range of ways – money that was often used to reward government allies. Once this accumulation process began it became self-reinforcing as the political system adapted to a new source of rents.<sup>8</sup>

As well as analysing the role of the land restitution scheme in sustaining Cameroon's established political arrangements, the article also assesses how those arrangements are interpreted. The political settlements (PS) framework is contrasted with the established approach used in the analysis of Cameroonian politics: neopatrimonialism. We ask whether PS generates novel insights or resolves any of the criticisms that have been directed towards neopatrimonialism elsewhere in Africa. We conclude that both approaches have merits and are useful interpretive tools that reveal how politics in Cameroon works. Over several decades, neopatrimonialism has provided a series of key insights to explain political stability in Cameroon. However, we argue that PS does bring a new way of first explaining the prevalence of clientelism and second exploring a politics beyond clientelism that relates to ideas and ideology.<sup>9</sup> These innovations acknowledge the broader complaint of residual affinities between some Africanist political theory and colonial racial stereotypes, and they create a space where we can discuss empirical material that does not fit within a purely clientelist account of Cameroonian politics.<sup>10</sup>

The article is based on the authors' long-term engagement with everyday life in Buea in which the dramas of the land surrender are staples of conversation alongside debates about Anglophone identity and ethnic competition.<sup>11</sup> Evidence is also drawn from fifteen interviews (undertaken in English or Pidgin) with Bakweri activists, Bakweri traditional rulers, state bureaucrats, CDC officials, and those buying plots of land. All interviewees gave informed consent and participated voluntarily. Most interviews were undertaken in early 2018 with some supplementary interviews in 2020 relating to the impact of the conflict on the land surrender scheme.

7. Piet Konings, *Neoliberal bandwagonism: Civil society and the politics of belonging in Anglophone Cameroon* (Langaa, Buea, and Leiden, 2009) pp.199–201.

8. Manu Lekunze, *Complex adaptive systems: Resilience and security in Cameroon* (Routledge, London, 2019).

9. Pritish Behuria, Lars Buur, and Hazel Gray, 'Studying political settlements in Africa', *African Affairs* 116, 464 (2017), pp. 508–525.

10. Raufu Mustapha, 'State, Predation and Violence: Reconceptualizing Political Action and Political Community in Africa', paper presented at the 10th General Assembly of CODESRIA, Kampala, Uganda, December 8–12, (2002).

11. Ben Page and Emile Sunjo, 'Africa's middle class: building houses and constructing identities in the small town of Buea, Cameroon', *Urban Geography* 39, 1 (2018), pp. 75–103; Ben Page, 'Domestic dramas: class, taste and home decoration in Buea, Cameroon', in Joël Noret (ed.), *Social im/mobilities in Africa* (Berghahn, Oxford, 2019), pp.178–198.

Materials from the Cameroonian press and official documents from the Ministry of State Property, Surveys and Land Tenure (MINDCAF) support our primary data.<sup>12</sup>

The article proceeds as follows. After this introduction there is a discussion about the analytical frameworks, which is followed by a history of the Bakweri land issue. The three main sections of the article focus on the bureaucratic system of the land surrender process; the funding of the political settlement within the political elite and the undermining of political opponents outside the settlement.

### *Framing an analysis of politics, land and development in Cameroon*

For many years, Cameroon was one of the key sites where new concepts within the neopatrimonial framework of analysis (including terms such as the hegemonic bloc, the rhizomatic state, and elite straddling) were tested.<sup>13</sup> Daniel Bach argues that, by 1979, Jean-François Médard had used his work on Cameroon to distil the main axioms of neopatrimonialism such as the idea that a ruler can remain in power by transforming monopolistic control over the state into a source of rents for their family and clients in exchange for votes and loyalty.<sup>14</sup> Although some writers have explored the limits of neopatrimonialism in Cameroon,<sup>15</sup> it is widely argued that it still works well.<sup>16</sup> For example, in a recent special issue of *Politique africaine*, Fred Eboko and Patrick Awondo describe Cameroon as a 'stationary state' based on a 'mode of political organization that produces

12. The *Ministère des Domaines, du Cadastre et des Affaires Foncières* (MINDCAF) was carved out of the *Ministère de l'Habitat et du Développement Urbain* in 2011.

13. Jean-François Bayart, 'Clientelism, elections and systems of inequality and domination in Cameroon: A reconsideration of the notion of political and social control', in Guy Hermet (ed.), *Elections without choice* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1978), pp. 66–87; Jean-François Bayart, *The state in Africa. The politics of the belly* (Longman, London, 1993); Jean-François Médard, 'L'État sous-développé au Cameroun', *Année africaine 1977*, (Pedone, Paris, 1979), pp. 35–84; Jean-François Médard, 'The Underdeveloped state in Tropical Africa: Political clientelism or neo-patrimonialism?', in Christopher Clapham (ed.), *Private patronage and public power: Political clientelism in the modern state* (Frances Pinter, London, 1982); Nicolas Van de Walle, 'Neopatrimonialism and democracy in Africa, with an Illustration from Cameroon', in Jennifer Widner (ed.), *Economic change and political liberalization in Sub-Saharan Africa* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1994), pp. 129–157.

14. Daniel Bach, 'Patrimonialism and neopatrimonialism: comparative trajectories and readings', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 49, 3 (2011), pp. 275–294.

15. Ketil Hansen, 'The politics of personal relations: Beyond neopatrimonial practices in Northern Cameroon', *Africa* 73, 2 (2003), pp. 202–225.

16. Melchisedek Chétima, 'Ethno-regional grievances and political (mis)uses of memoranda in Cameroon: Chronicle of a death foretold?', *Afrique Contemporaine* 267–268, 3–4 (2018), pp. 253–268; Charles Fonchingong, 'The travails of democratization in Cameroon in the context of political liberalisation since the 1990s', *African and Asian Studies* 3, 1(2004), pp. 33–59; Rogers Orock, 'Manyu youths, belonging and the antinomies of patrimonial elite politics in contemporary Cameroon', *Cultural Dynamics* 25, 3 (2013), pp. 269–290; Nguini Owona and Hélène-Laure Menthong, '"Perpetual rule" and Janus-faced democratization in Cameroon (1990–2018)', *Politique africaine* 150, 2 (2018), pp. 97–114.

a system of clientelist allegiances the central aim of which is to preserve the existing power structure'.<sup>17</sup> However, they also add

although this central African country was one of those most keenly studied by Africanist social scientists between the 1970s and the 1990s, over the course of the past decade its relative political stability, the permanence of its agony, and the anomic nature of its social and economic life have stunted the emergence of any new political, social, or economic thought.<sup>18</sup>

Neopatrimonialism has become common sense in thinking about Cameroon and it has proved hard to think outside it.

Elsewhere in Africa, neopatrimonialism has been extensively critiqued.<sup>19</sup> This critique variously focuses on its tendency to relate macro-economic outcomes to micro-economic data; exceptionalize and homogenize Africa; deploy what some see as racist stereotypes of African culture and Africans' motivations; underplay the significance of colonial legacies and the asymmetric position of African states in the structures of the world economy; and reinforce a pessimism about Africa's future based on the assumption that neopatrimonial structures are impervious to reform and fundamentally impede development. The authors levelling this critique argued that it is time to consider new analytical frameworks.

PS is now the most widely used approach to analysing African political economy in the UK where, over the last decade, it has almost eclipsed neopatrimonialism, although it is still evolving conceptually.<sup>20</sup> British development policymakers have put PS at the centre of recent research funding streams.<sup>21</sup> However, although there is now some interest in PS

17. Eboko and Awondo, 'The stationary state', p. 7.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Hazel Gray and Lindsay Whitfield, 'Reframing African political economy: Clientelism, rents and accumulation as drivers of capitalist transformation' (Working Paper No. 14-159, London School of Economics, Department of International Development, London, 2014); Thandika Mkandawire, 'Neopatrimonialism and the political economy of economic performance in Africa: Critical reflections', *World Politics* 67, 3 (2015), pp. 563-612; Raufu Mustapha, 'State, predation and violence'; Anne Pitcher, Mary Moran and Michael Johnston, 'Rethinking patrimonialism and neopatrimonialism in Africa', *African Studies Review* 52, 1 (2009), pp. 125-56; Zubairu Wai, 'Neopatrimonialism and the discourse of state failure in Africa', *Review of African Political Economy* 39, 131 (2012), pp. 27-43.

20. Hazel Gray, 'Understanding and deploying the political settlement framework in Africa', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2019, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.888>> (5 September 2022); Mushtaq Khan, 'Political settlements and the analysis of institutions', *African Affairs* 117, 469 (2018a), pp. 636-655; Mushtaq Khan, 'Power, pacts and political settlements: A reply to Tim Kelsall', *African Affairs* 117, 469 (2018b), pp. 670-694; Tim Kelsall, 'Towards a universal political settlement concept: A response to Mushtaq Khan', *African Affairs* 117, 469 (2018), pp. 656-669.

21. For example, £32 million was awarded to the University of Manchester in 2020 by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to establish the African Cities Research Consortium, which uses a PS approach as a key analytical tool. <https://www.african-cities.org/research-approach/> (29 June 2022).

beyond the UK, it has had little impact among scholars who work on Cameroon.<sup>22</sup>

PS started from the observations that the same development policy can have very different outcomes in different places and that clientelism does not necessarily impede development.<sup>23</sup> It explained this diversity of outcomes in terms of different national configurations of power or political settlements. Prominent studies in Africa using this approach draw on data from Ghana, Rwanda, and Tanzania, but most consider the political settlement from the perspective of the national centre, whereas we seek to develop a more ethnographic understanding of how such settlements are experienced from the periphery.

A political settlement is ‘an interdependent combination of a structure of power and institutions at the level of a society that is mutually “compatible” and also “sustainable” in terms of economic and political viability’.<sup>24</sup> The different groups that make up a society reach an agreement to reduce violence by behaving in predictable ways using formal and informal social norms and rules (‘institutions’) in exchange for a share of the material and non-material benefits (‘rents’).<sup>25</sup> The agreement to abide by the institutions may be tacit rather than an explicit treaty but in Cameroon those who know the rules of the game are idiomatically described as those who can ‘play politics’. The regional conflict in Anglophone Cameroon illustrates the pressures that Cameroon’s aged national settlement is currently under.

Central to the PS approach is the idea of national distributions of power, which can vary between countries and over time. In any society it is possible to distinguish between those who accept the agreement (‘the leader’s bloc’) and those who do not (‘the opposition bloc’).<sup>26</sup> This is known as the horizontal variable. Within the leader’s bloc there is assumed to be a distinction between the central elite (the leaders) and a much larger group (the followers) who may (i) voluntarily ally themselves with the elite group, (ii) be co-opted because they represent a potential threat to the settlement, or (iii) be coerced through force (repression) to accept the settlement.

22. Cameroon is included in the PS Dataset. Nicolai Schulz and Tim Kelsall, ‘The Political Settlements dataset: an introduction with illustrative applications’ (Working Paper No. 165, Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre, University of Manchester, 2021).

23. Mushtaq Khan, ‘Political settlements and the governance of growth-enhancing institutions’, (SOAS, London, 2010), <[https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/9968/1/Political\\_Settlements\\_internet.pdf](https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/9968/1/Political_Settlements_internet.pdf)> (8 June 2022) p. 20.

24. *Ibid.*

25. ‘Groups’ are not just formal political parties but include business interests, ethnicities, trade unions, gender-based movements, and religious formations.

26. Tim Kelsall, Nicolai Schulz, William D. Ferguson, Matthias vom Hau, Sam Hickey, and Brian Levy, *Political settlements and development: theory, evidence, implications* (online edition, Oxford Academic, 23 June 2022), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192848932.003.0004>> (5 September 2022) p. 77.



The followers' loyalty to the settlement is contingent upon their sense that any alternative will leave them in a worse position. This distribution of power 'within' the leader's bloc is known as the vertical variable. Using this framework entails asking two key questions about our case study: how has the financing of Cameroon's political settlement changed over time? And, how do the horizontal and vertical variables change over time? We argue that land in Fako becomes incorporated into financing the national political settlement, and we use the horizontal and vertical variables as a way to understand the political effects of the land restitution scheme. Our evidence suggests that people in Fako have a clear sense of these effects, but they also understand the land debate in other, non-clientelist, terms as well.

In contrast to earlier iterations of PS, more recent accounts have drawn attention to an ideological dimension of politics beyond clientelism.<sup>27</sup> Initial PS theorizations took the idea that politics in African countries is organized through clientelist networks for granted, but argued that significant differences exist between countries in the way that these networks function, and these differences then shape development outcomes.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, unlike some earlier approaches, PS understood the emergence of clientelism not as a consequence of African culture or individual greed but 'by locating these practices within the context of specific colonial histories and economic structures'.<sup>29</sup> More recent elaborations of PS propose going further and suggest that non-clientelist politics 'informed by ideas, political commitments, and ideologies' are also relevant to sustaining a political settlement.<sup>30</sup> This dimension matters because marshalling these normative discussions can contribute to a group's capacity to organize, mobilize support, and gain legitimacy either within or against the settlement.

This is useful as it reveals an account of the land restitution in Fako in which clientelism and corruption are not the only dimensions of the story. Land in Fako is a fungible commodity absorbed into funding national politics, but it is also linked to political and social ideas that cannot be reduced to clientelism. For example, there are public debates about how best to compensate Bakweri families for colonial injustices, whether land should be used for farming or houses, how beneficiaries should best use

27. Behuria, 'Studying political settlements'; see also: Frederick Golooba-Mutebi and David Booth, *Bilateral cooperation and local power dynamics: The case of Rwanda* (ODI, London, 2013) pp.14–15. <<https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/8605.pdf>> (4 August 2022); Hazel Gray, 'Understanding and deploying the political settlement framework in Africa'; Tom Lavers, 'Taking ideas seriously within political settlements analysis' (Working Paper No. 95, Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre, University of Manchester, 2018).

28. Khan, 'Political settlements', p. 60.

29. Gray, 'Understanding and deploying the political settlement framework'.

30. Behuria, 'Studying political settlements', p. 512.



windfall assets, and how corruption can be reversed.<sup>31</sup> An overly tight focus on clientelism leaves little space to acknowledge these other debates.

### *Historicizing the Bakweri land issue*

During the German colonial period (1884–1916), around 100,000 hectares of what is now Fako were acquired by violent force, trickery, or purchase and were converted by African labour into private German-owned plantations.<sup>32</sup> After the Germans were defeated in 1916, Kamerun was divided into two League of Nations Mandate Territories under British and French administration (which became United Nations Trusteeships in 1946). Between the wars, many Germans returned to Cameroon, so after 1939 most of the plantations were seized again by the British Custodian of Enemy Property, who then sold them to the colonial Government for £850,000 to be held under the custody of the Governor of Nigeria on behalf of ‘the native population’.<sup>33</sup> In 1947, the separate plantations were agglomerated and leased for 60 years to a new nationalized agro-industrial entity called the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), which continues to use this land up the present.<sup>34</sup> The vision was to use the CDC to generate income for the whole Trusteeship territory (not just those in the immediate vicinity).<sup>35</sup> The CDC was ‘to administer and develop these lands until such time that the inhabitants of the territory were capable of managing them without outside assistance’.<sup>36</sup> Bakweri campaigners interpret this lease arrangement as colonial recognition that the Bakweri were the owners of this land.<sup>37</sup> This view was upheld in a special resolution adopted at the Sixth Meeting of the United Nations Trusteeship Council in March 1950.<sup>38</sup> The indigenes of Fako have formally demanded the return of this land in full (a campaign known locally as ‘the Bakweri Land Issue’) since at least 1946 when the Bakweri Land Committee was first constituted.<sup>39</sup>

31. *Ibid.*

32. Edwin Ardener, Shirley Ardener, and W. Allen Warmington, *Plantation and village in the Cameroons* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1960).

33. Sanford Bederman, ‘Plantation agriculture in Victoria division, West Cameroon: An historical introduction’, *Geography* 51, 4 (1966), pp. 349–360.

34. Ardener, *Plantation and village in the Cameroons*; Simon Epale, *Plantations and development in Western Cameroon* (Vantage Press, New York NY, 1985). Not all the land has been put into productive use.

35. In 1946 only 14,000 of the 100,000 hectares were being farmed and the workforce had dropped from a pre-war peak of around 25,000 to 16,000. Ardener, *Plantation and Village*.

36. *Cameroons Development Corporation Ordinance, No. 39* (1946). Ndiva Kofele-Kale ‘Asserting permanent sovereignty over ancestral lands: the Bakweri land litigation against Cameroon’, *Annual Survey of International & Comparative Law* 13, 1 (2007), pp. 103–156.

37. Kofele-Kale, ‘Asserting Permanent Sovereignty’ p. 115.

38. Charles Meek, *Land tenure and administration in Nigeria and the Cameroons* (HMSO, London, 1957), p. 407.

39. Bakweri Lands Committee, ‘1948 petition of the Bakweri Lands Committee, Cameroons under British Mandate’, *Africa* 18, 4 (1948), p. 306; Bakweri Lands Committee, ‘1946 letter to the British Secretary of State for the colonies’ <[https://www.blccarchives.org/2006/07/letter\\_to\\_the\\_b.html#more](https://www.blccarchives.org/2006/07/letter_to_the_b.html#more)> (8 June 2022); Venantius Ngwoh ‘Cameroon State

In December 1959, responsibility for holding the plantation land in trust was transferred to the Prime Minister of the Southern Cameroons (at that time John Ngu Foncha). The Government of Southern Cameroons then re-leased the lands to the CDC for a period of 99 years starting from 1 January 1960, shifting the date when the land would be returned to the Bakweri from 2007 to 2059.<sup>40</sup> This arrangement persisted through the postcolonial federal period from 1960/61 to 1972. However, in 1974, soon after Cameroon became a unitary state, a new national land law was passed, the CDC lease was made void, and the Bakweri land claim was rejected.<sup>41</sup> The state categorized the plantations as ‘national land’ owned by the national government in perpetuity. The first opportunity for the Bakweri to resist this designation came in 1994 when there was an attempt to privatize the CDC.<sup>42</sup> This led the reborn Bakweri Land Claims Committee (BLCC) to start a case at the African Commission of Human and People’s Rights in Banjul (The Gambia).<sup>43</sup> In 2003 (before any court judgement was given), the Government of Cameroon established a new process through which ownership of small tranches of CDC land could be surrendered to individual Bakweri villages for the purpose of ‘village enlargement’. This scheme was advocated as a compromise resolution to the legal dispute by Peter Mafany Musonge. However, contrary to the stated ambitions of providing land for new generations of Bakweri farmers, this ‘land surrender’ process has created a vibrant land market in land in Fako as the Bakweri owners to whom land is surrendered are often keen to sell it. The land market is driven by strong demand for building plots, especially on the urban peripheries.<sup>44</sup>

The CDC is now a wholly government-owned entity producing rubber, oil palm, and bananas. Its managerial autonomy has declined since 2016,

Policy as grounds for indigenous rebellion’; Ambe Njoh, ‘Indigenous peoples and ancestral lands: Implications of the Bakweri case in Cameroon’, in Robert Home (ed.), *Essays in African land law* (Pretoria University Press, Pretoria, 2011), pp. 69–90; Dibussi Tande, *A brief history of the Bakweri land problem* (BLCC Communications Department, Buea, 2006).

40. Interview, Barrister Ikomi Ngongi, Assistant Secretary General BLCC, Buea, 5 April 2018.

41. Ambe Njoh, ‘Continuity and change in Cameroonian land policy’, *Planning Perspectives* 15, 3 (2000), pp. 241–265.

42. Piet Konings, ‘Chieftaincy and privatisation in Anglophone Cameroon’, in Wim van Binsbergen (ed.), *The dynamics of power and the rule of law: Essays on Africa and beyond* (Lit Verlag, Munster, 2003), pp. 79–99; Ngambouk Pemunta and Njiki Fonmboh, ‘Experiencing neoliberalism from below: the Bakweri confrontation of the State of Cameroon over the privatisation of the Cameroon Development Corporation’, *Journal of Human Security* 6, 1 (2010), pp. 38–54.

43. Interview, Mula Mokake Elali John, formerly Assistant Secretary General BLCC, Buea, 2 April 2018.

44. Page and Sunjo, ‘Africa’s middle class’; Cynthia Eno and Lawrence Fombe, ‘Development implications of ceded lands by the Cameroon Development Corporation Fako Division – South West Region of Cameroon from 1960 to 2010’, *Advances in Social Sciences Research* 3, 11 (2016), pp. 154–164.

when it was brought fully under the remit of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.<sup>45</sup> The Board of Directors is made up almost entirely of Government appointees, including two from the Presidency. With over 22,000 employees, it is the second largest employer in the country, although most employees are not currently receiving salaries because of the Anglophone conflict. CDC is a deliberate target for the rebels partly as it was a symbol of the region's British colonial past and partly because their strategy has been to try to disrupt the local economy, which, they argue, is exploited primarily for the benefit of the national government and not for Anglophones.<sup>46</sup> Early in the conflict, plantation workers who refused to boycott work were brutally assaulted by rebel groups.<sup>47</sup> Large parts of the CDC are not now functioning. In this current context, the Government is more concerned about the economic viability of the CDC and is, therefore, less likely to be ready to surrender CDC land to Bakweri villages.<sup>48</sup>

Assessing how much CDC land has been surrendered over time is not straightforward. Between 1947 and 2003, several portions of CDC land were surrendered for public purposes.<sup>49</sup> For example, the University of Buea is built on 354 hectares of land originally surrendered in 1977.<sup>50</sup> However, after the new process was introduced in 2003, the scale of surrenders increased dramatically. According to the National Anti-Corruption Commission (CONAC), by 2011 the 'CDC had already relinquished a total of 10,586 hectares'.<sup>51</sup> In 2018, the CDC property manager told us that the figure was around 30,000 hectares.<sup>52</sup> One of the issues is that the land actually surrendered does not always match that agreed in surveys.<sup>53</sup> The Fako Department of Surveys tried to review surrendered land in just

45. Government of Cameroon Decrees 31 and 32, 19 January 2016.

46. Dinsi Chung, 'The impact of armed conflict on agro-industrial development in Cameroon: The case of the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) within the context of the Anglophone crisis', *Journal of Agricultural and Crop Research* 8, 12 (2020), pp. 279–288.

47. Voice of America New Africa, 'Armed Groups attack Cameroon plantation workers', 4 November 2018, <<https://www.voanews.com/a/armed-groups-attack-cameroon-plantation-workers/4643961.html>> (16 July 2022). Human Rights Watch, 'Cameroon: Separatist abuses in Anglophone regions', 27 June 2022, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/27/cameroon-separatist-abuses-anglophone-regions>> (25 July 2022).

48. *Guardian Post Newspaper*, 'At security meeting in Limbe MINAT boss orders administrators to stop selling CDC, PAMOL lands.' No. 2476, 13 June 2022.

49. Interview, Molua Patrick, Traditional Council Chairman, Lower Muea, Molyko, 14 April 2018.

50. Although the land was allocated in 1977, the formal process of securing a legal title began in 1993. In 2001 a deed of surrender transferred the land from CDC and in 2005 the land certificate was secured. Boudiuh Adams, 'University of Buea "Land-grabbers" in Police Dragnet', *The Post Newspaper*, No. 01803, 13 August 2017, p. 6.

51. Government of Cameroon, CONAC, 'Cameroon's 2018 anti-corruption status report', p. 26.

52. Interview, Athanasius Kebbi, CDC Property Manager, Limbe, 16 April 2018. As well as land surrendered to communities, land was also surrendered for roads, power lines, the *Chantier Naval*, the fisheries school, the oil refinery, government schools, hospitals, and Limbe football stadium.

53. *Ibid.*

Buea Sub-Division and suggested that at least 537 hectares was surrendered in 2008 alone.<sup>54</sup> If that scale were replicated across other subdivisions and other years, a figure of tens of thousands of hectares by 2020 does not seem implausible, even allowing for the scheme to have slowed down significantly since the intensification of the violent conflict in 2018.

*The legal process of land surrender and a case study of success*

Land surrender follows a bureaucratic process set in place by a Ministerial Order in 2003.<sup>55</sup> First, the chief of the relevant village (or potentially an NGO or church) contacts one of the Divisional Officers (DOs) in Fako. Second, the DO will give them guidance on producing application dossier which needs to include (i) a cadastral survey of the land requested, (ii) a feasibility assessment from a representative of the CDC, and (iii) a rationale for the request based on the needs of the community. Third, the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) for Fako assembles a Site Board Commission to visit the proposed site and make a recommendation to approve or reject the request, which then passes to MINDCAF in Yaoundé. These Site Board Commissions combine representatives from the village, the CDC, and various services of the government (the SDO's office, the relevant DO's office, MINDCAF, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, and local government).<sup>56</sup> The CDC often want to retain productive land, but as a state entity they defer to the government's agenda: 'We can reject applications, but if the SDO requires us we have to oblige'.<sup>57</sup> If CDC reject a specific site, they are usually asked to find an alternative piece of land for the community instead. As a result, the land surrendered may be miles from the village claiming it. Next, the Minister of State Property and Land Tenure in Yaoundé approves the individual land surrender. Finally, it is the responsibility of the chief and his councillors to then subdivide the surrendered land into individual plots, which are allocated to different families. This whole process can take several years.

One example where the 2003 Ministerial Order seems to have been followed carefully was the village of Bwiteva. The village is located on a hilly site in Buea Sub-Division, 2 km to the north-east of Molyko a rapidly growing area of Buea. Chief Linonge Francis Kinge explained that his village had

54. Interview, Simplicie Kenmogne, Regional Director, Department of Surveys, MINDCAF, Buea, 3 April 2018.

55. Ministerial Order 000097/2.5/MINUH/D200, 3 March 2003, 'Fixing the procedure of examining applications for the attribution formulated by third parties and relating to land belonging to the State and hired by CDC'. Signed by Adji Abdoulaye Haman, Minister of Urban Development and Housing. In this instance, the first party is the CDC, the second party is the Government of Cameroon, and third parties are anyone else. Also interview, Paul Kouam Wokam, DO, Buea, 29 March 2018.

56. The Ministry of Agriculture assess the value of CDC crops lost in the surrender.

57. Interview, Athanasius Kebbi, CDC Property Manager, Limbe, 16 April 2018.

lost their land during the colonial period and so applied for 100 hectares of CDC land in 2011.<sup>58</sup> Their main rationale for needing the land was to resettle villagers who had encroached into the village's water catchment. However, they also wanted to end aerial spraying of banana crops near people's homes. In the end, they were allocated 28 hectares on the edge of the village, which was then subdivided into over 200 plots. The village registered the land using one community land certificate to ensure security of tenure. The chief told us this was explicitly designed to make it harder for senior government officials to cut into the plot and acquire land for themselves – a practice they knew had occurred elsewhere.<sup>59</sup>

The plots in Bwiteva were allocated first to those displaced from the catchment, then village youths, and then to other adults irrespective of gender. Each household was given three plots of land. Other non-Bwiteva people of Bakweri origin and a few non-Bakweri community members were also allocated land. Although the chief claimed not to have taken any money in advance of the surrender or paid any undue money to administrative officials, he did say

at the end of the process however, I did allocate some plots for people in administration who had helped us to acquire the land...we had to satisfy people who helped us.<sup>60</sup>

Much of this land was swiftly sold to individual developers. Because Bwiteva is close to Buea and has a reliable water supply, the land here is valuable. The chief regretted the fact that many of the beneficiaries had quickly sold their plots, but he did understand that selling the land was logical – he described it as 'poverty alleviation'.<sup>61</sup> Some community members built accommodation they could rent out. When a community member sold a plot to a third party, they had to come to the chief to have the plot removed from the community land certificate. When that occurred, they had to pay the chief for the attestation and half of that money was put into an account to support the village water supply.

There are four main reasons for the success of the process in Bwiteva. The chief himself was a retired senior police officer who had served in the diplomatic service so was already relatively well off and well educated. The chief did not have to borrow any money in advance to help pursue the land claim. Second, because he had some authority, he was not afraid to challenge state bureaucrats who were trying to take advantage of the community.

58. Interview, Chief Linonge Francis Kinge, Bwiteva, 5 April 2018.

59. *Ibid.*; also interview, Barrister Ikomi Ngongi, Assistant Secretary General BLCC, Buea, 5 April 2018.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

Third, there was effective collaboration between the village's traditional council and external legal advisors. Fourth, the protection of the water catchment gave the scheme a genuine rationale over and above making money from land sales.<sup>62</sup>

From a PS perspective, the story of Bwiteva shows how the 'horizontal variable' in the settlement changes over time because of the land surrender policy. It illustrates how a well-organized, legal land surrender undermines the BLCC's campaign for full restitution of land by dividing the Bakweri between winners and losers. Recovering land in the future that has been legally returned and then legally sold will be challenging. Bakweri land activists have opposed the national political settlement for many years and have drawn strength for that opposition from uniting behind an idea (in this case the idea of being entitled to compensation for lost land). That idea was undermined by the 2003 scheme, which left BLCC activists in the invidious position of arguing against the piecemeal land restitution, which was clearly benefitting some of the Bakweri people they claim to represent.

Accounts of well-managed land surrenders were rare. In contrast, most interviewees outlined nearly two decades of rampant mismanagement of the land surrender process.<sup>63</sup> In August 2014, at the prompting of BLCC activists, the Minister of State Property (Jacqueline Koung à Bessike) tried to re-assert the 2003 process, issued an order that suspended all further land surrender in Fako, and demanded an inventory of all land surrendered so far.<sup>64</sup> The effect of this intervention was limited. In January 2019, the Minister herself left the government and in May 2019 was ordered not to leave the country pending investigation for corruption in relation to a land deal in Douala.<sup>65</sup>

Since 2018, the violent conflict in Anglophone Cameroon has intensified significantly, effectively halting the formal land surrender process.<sup>66</sup> One key reason for this is that the Bakweri chiefs, who are crucial actors in the process, have become one of the main targets for Ambazonian fighters.<sup>67</sup>

62. *Ibid.*

63. Ngwoh 'Cameroon State Policy'; Helen Linonge-Fontebo, 'The question of land access and ownership by women in Cameroon: A case study of the Bakweri women', *South African Review of Sociology*, 49, 1 (2018), pp. 18–33.

64. Interview, Barrister Ikomi Ngongi Assistant Secretary General BLCC, Buea, 5 April 2018; Government of Cameroon 00008/MINDCAF/A100, 8 August 2014.

65. She died in 2021. 'Former minister dies', *Cameroon Intelligence Report*, 4 June 2021, <[https://www.cameroonintelligence.com/special-criminal-court-former-minister-dies-after-several-auditions/?utm\\_source=ground.news&utm\\_medium=referral](https://www.cameroonintelligence.com/special-criminal-court-former-minister-dies-after-several-auditions/?utm_source=ground.news&utm_medium=referral)> (16 July 2022).

66. Interview, Chief Maole Ngale of Mokunda Village, Limbe II, 10 August 2021. Interview, Roland Ekombo, Bakweri elite, 11 August 2021.

67. Maxwell Bone and Kelvin Nkwain, 'Why are Cameroonian separatists attacking local chiefs?', *African Arguments*, 29 June 2021, <<https://africanarguments.org/2021/06/anglophone-crisis-why-are-cameroonian-separatists-attacking-local-chiefs/>> (3 August 2022).



This is partly because they are seen as auxiliaries of the state and partly because (as a result of land sales) they are seen as wealthy and therefore capable of paying ransoms. Villagers who feel their chief has abused the land restitution scheme are also using the instability to try to settle scores. As a result, most chiefs have abandoned their villages and sought refuge as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) elsewhere in the country.<sup>68</sup> Without the chiefs, the formal land surrender process cannot proceed. Nor is it safe for the site boards to meet because many of the Ambazonian camps in Fako are found on unused CDC lands. Yet, the demand for land in Fako has increased significantly during the crisis – particularly in areas known as ‘Green Zones’, perceived to be at less risk of either rebel attacks or Government reprisals. Rents and land prices in and around Buea have risen sharply (by as much as 60 percent) as IDPs have moved there from neighbouring areas and from the North-West Province. So, the supply of new building land from land surrenders has stopped, but demand for such land in Fako has increased.

#### *Financing the political settlement*

PS require funding, and the sources of funding change over time. Such funds are distributed within the leader’s bloc in order to ensure that the followers judge the existing arrangements to be preferable to change. The land surrender process provided a new injection of assets that opened this politically peripheral space as a source of spoils for supporters of the Government of Cameroon. The scope for bureaucrats, some Bakweri Chiefs, and some businessmen to access significant personal benefits is extensive and the sums of money involved are not trivial. For example, if all the 200 plots in Bwiteva were sold, they would have a market value of more than 1 million pounds. Sometimes these benefits come from owning the land, but often they are generated through the way the surrender process works.

Government bureaucrats in Cameroon generally expect benefits beyond their salary as a normal part of their compensation. Bakweri communities can only proceed with the surrender process with the assistance of different members of the administration, all of whom therefore have leverage to extract benefits from those communities. For example, without the DO’s help, the dossier of documents will make no progress between administrative offices. Numerous interviewees we spoke to had found a formula for justifying the fact that many plots of land were allegedly ending up in the ownership of either DOs or SDOs or Governors (or their family members) or other civil servants.<sup>69</sup> They told us that they were ‘thanking’

68. *Ibid.*

69. Land titles in the name of Governor Okalia were published in the press. Bouddih Adams, ‘Who owns these plots? Documents show Governor Okalia owns them...’ *The Post Newspaper*,



these individuals for the role they had played in helping the community with the land surrender process.

Some Bakweri chiefs also had significant opportunities for self-enrichment. Not only did they have privileged information about the location and scale of the surrender, but they were primarily responsible for allocating plots to community members, which put them in a strong position to benefit. Prior to 2003 being a chief in Fako was not lucrative, but since then the position has changed.<sup>70</sup> As a result, multiple chieftaincy disputes emerged. Within the Bakweri tradition, chieftaincy does not necessarily pass to the oldest son of the previous chief but is at the discretion of the elders of the community so there is considerable scope for conflict.<sup>71</sup> Again, this creates opportunities for bureaucrats since chiefs are installed by DOs, acting as the president's direct representative. A DO who backs one claimant's case over another might logically expect future rewards of land in return. Reciprocally, securing chieftaincy titles requires an individual to align themselves with the existing political establishment. However, these disputes are well publicized in the local media and are the object of passionate normative debates about how chiefs ought to behave.

One unanticipated consequence of the land surrender was a new practice of reviving moribund chieftaincy titles. These relate to villages that had been erased by the plantations and were considered extinct with no living descendants, but which are now being 'revitalized' because people claimed an ancestral link to those sites.<sup>72</sup> The DO for Buea claimed to have revived 20–30 such villages, but, he emphasized, only where there was sufficient evidence from the archives or oral history for a chieftaincy claim to be legitimated.<sup>73</sup> In contrast, critics of the surrender process claim that administrative officials collude with individuals in such cases. Soon after a chief is appointed in a revitalized village, a land surrender file is assembled, which is expediently treated in Yaoundé, the land is then sold, and the proceeds shared between the chief and bureaucrats.<sup>74</sup>

It is important to emphasize that not all Bakweri chiefs have applied for land surrender. For example, the Paramount Chief of Buea told us:

No. 01553, 11 August 2014, cover page and p. 5. The Governor has repeatedly denied taking land in Fako: Foanyi Nkemayang, 'SW Governor breaks silence', *The Star*, 4 August 2014, pp. 6–7. Using only initials not names, CONAC also identified over 70 mid- and low-level bureaucrats in Fako illegally involved in the process, but did not name more senior bureaucrats. Government of Cameroon, CONAC, 'Cameroon's 2018 anti-corruption status report'.

70. As auxiliaries of the administration most Bakweri chiefs were given only a very small monthly 'bonus' of 50,000 CFA (£65). Interview, Ngome Elvis, historian, Molyko, 31 March 2018.

71. Interview, Mula Mokake Elali John, formerly Assistant Secretary General BLCC, Buea, 2 April 2018.

72. Interview, Wokam Paul, DO, Buea, 29 March 2018.

73. Maungu and Liwo were cited as examples.

74. Interview, Barrister Ikomi Ngongi, Assistant Secretary General BLCC, Buea, 5 April 2018.

neither I nor my predecessors have ever requested for land for Buea...It is a matter of principle. As the custodians of the paramountcy of Buea, we have never sought for land surrender. My predecessor, HRM SML Endeley never applied for land return in Buea, even though he had always argued for the return of the land to the natives.<sup>75</sup>

The benefits of land surrender are therefore being shared very unevenly amongst indigenes.

Businessmen who have benefitted from the surrender process fall into two main categories: land speculators and 'sponsors'. The land surrender process has created new opportunities for large-scale land speculation. Many urban business elites, who have no plans of building in Fako, will buy multiple plots from Bakweri communities in expectation that its value will appreciate over time due to urban growth in Fako. One of our interviewees who was building a house in Buea had acquired the land in a hotel lobby in Yaoundé from a speculator who had never been to Fako but who had himself bought the land title from a friend in MINDCAF.<sup>76</sup> According to Chief Edward Ngale of Mokunda village, speculation is most common along the Limbe–Idenau coast where there are plans to construct a deep sea port.<sup>77</sup> Villagers in Fako like to see houses being built on the plots they sell because services (such as electricity) will often follow, so they dislike speculators.<sup>78</sup> When selling plots communities often require purchasers to start building within 6 months, but they have no legal means of enforcement.

'Sponsors' are another group of elite businessmen who benefit from the surrender process. The land surrender application process entails costs for chiefs that have to be paid before any land is allocated, which is money they are unlikely to have. Chiefs are unwilling to raise this money within the community since the contributors might subsequently expect accountability. Therefore, to raise the capital chiefs turn to 'sponsors'. In exchange for advancing money, sponsors are promised some plots of land at the end of the process. The capital provided is less than the market value of the land they are later given. An investment of 5 million Communauté Financière Africaine franc (CFA) could easily lead to an allocation of five plots and a profit of eight million CFA (£10,000) once land is sold. In addition, having discovered that they could raise money in this way, chiefs often engaged multiple sponsors – raising much more money than they need to pursue the land claim. They then spent the money on other things. However, any subsequent failure to honour their obligations often led to lawsuits with the sponsors.

75. Correspondence with HRM Esuka Endeley, Paramount Chief of Buea, 29 March 2018.

76. Interview, anonymous professor, University of Buea, 6 April 2018.

77. Interview, Chief Maole Ngale of Mokunda Village, Limbe II, 4 April 2018.

78. *Ibid.*

*Table 1.* Costs paid by communities requesting land surrender to members of the administration. Source: Petition by 13 Aggrieved Traditional Rulers to President Paul Biya

Activity	Amount community to pay (million CFA)
Creation of Site Board Commission	0.5
Site Board Commission Logistics	0.5–1.0
Production of Sketch Site Plan	1.5
Signing of Site Board Commission Minutes by Fako Divisional Chief of Service for Lands	0.5–1.0
Divisional Delegate of State Property (who ensures that files are signed by other relevant officials and forwarded to CDC)	2.0–3.0
Demarcation and planting of pillars	2.5–3.0
Total	7.5–10

An example of a chief/sponsor conflict emerged in 2016 when a group of 13 Fako chiefs addressed a petition to President Paul Biya asking for a portion of land to be given to them from the campus of the University of Buea.<sup>79</sup> In the petition, the chiefs explained that they had been ‘embarrassed’ by sponsors. The chiefs had borrowed money but did not later have the land they needed to repay their debts. They claimed that some dossiers had not been forwarded to MINDCAF, other applications generated less land than expected, and others allocated land that, it turned out, had already been surrendered to other communities. In the petition, the chiefs claimed to have spent an average of 10–15 million CFA in the application process (Table 1). They described these payments as ‘a deliberate, and well-calculated ploy to extort monies from us by these state agents and we made a complaint to the National Chairman of CONAC’.<sup>80</sup>

As a result of these chiefs’ failures to pay their debts, the sponsors were now suing them in the criminal courts. Threatened by prison sentences, the chiefs appealed to the president to intervene. They reminded him of their

79. The confidential petition to the president was leaked and published in full (*The Post*, ‘Fako Chiefs beg Biya to rescue them from imprisonment’, No. 01760, 23 September 2016, p. 8). The chiefs were from: Bokwai, Bonakanda, Wonjia, Lysoka-Wombaki, Wokeya, Woteva, Bova I, Bova II, Ewili, Likoko Membea, Bokwango, Wonyanga, and Upper Bokova. Subsequently, one of the signatories (Chief Ndie Mandenge of Wonjia) accused Chief Etina Monono of Great Soppo of leaking the petition not only to the press but to the SDO. Chief Monono, it was alleged, had originally been one of the signatories (having spent over 10 million CFA on his own surrender file and having been given only 14 of the 40 hectares he was expecting). *The Post*, ‘Chiefs marked for Kondengui accuse colleague of betrayal: Villagers want land grabbing Chiefs jailed’, No. 01763, 3 October 2016, p. 8.

80. *The Post*, ‘Fako Chiefs beg Biya’.

role in maintaining social stability by mobilizing their subjects to support the ruling party (the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement):

It goes without saying that the rural masses and the indigenes of this municipality are ardent militants and supporters of the CPDM party and the backlash of this situation may certainly have a very negative effect to our cherished party and its Chairman who doubles as the President of our country.<sup>81</sup>

For their critics this was

a mere hoax aimed to hoodwink Biya to accord them more land so that they can grab and replenish their stock... These chiefs do not have value for education but have value for big cars.<sup>82</sup>

Ultimately an alternative solution to save the chiefs from jail was found: 339 hectares of CDC land in the Musaka banana plantation, near Ekona, were surveyed for land surrender in August 2017. This land was then subdivided between fourteen villages. Nine of the villages whose chiefs were among the petitioners were allocated portions of this land.<sup>83</sup>

In summary, the land surrender scheme became a source of rents that was absorbed into a pre-existing system of rewarding those who followed the leader's bloc. This shows how the vertical variable in the political settlement is marked by both change (a new source of finance) and continuity (an existing set of relationships). The actors in this case study include all those who have any role in progressing the dossier put together by the chief. This includes officials in Yaoundé, Buea, and Limbe across a range of ministries. Land that is given to officials as 'thanks' from communities can be quickly sold and turned into cash, which is hard to trace. It includes the chiefs, the sponsors, and speculators too. In each instance the incentive is to perpetuate existing political arrangements and preserve existing institutions. The case study also shows how regional clients have some leverage within the Cameroonian settlement vis-à-vis the central elite. The story of the thirteen Bakweri chiefs petitioning the president is important precisely because they did ultimately get what they wanted – more land. These chiefs

81. *Ibid.*

82. Fako Progressive Indigenous Association, 8 October 2016, <<http://www.cameroon-info.net/article/cameroon-south-west-fako-indigenes-recommend-severe-sanctions-against-land-grabbing-chiefs-272112.html>> (8 June 2022). See also Francis Tim Mbom, 'Biya urged to punish Chiefs scheming to grab University of Buea land', *The Post Newspaper*, No. 01763, 03 October 2016, p. 12; Tirlarious Atia Azohnwi, "'Fako Chiefs" letter to Biya: plea or blackmail?', *The Sun Newspaper*, No. 0399, 26 September 2016, p. 7.

83. 'Fako indigenes recommend severe sanctions against land grabbing chiefs', Ministerial Decision 001059-001073/MINDCAF/A020 of 18 September 2017 allocated 135 hectares of land (potentially 2700 building plots, then worth around £7 million).

are not high-ranking members of the central elite, but they can persuade those who are to continue to supply them with land. Perhaps this willingness to respond to their demands has more to do with the rents that do accrue to people higher up in the hierarchy than the capacity to harvest votes from relatively small communities. The loyalty of these chiefs is contingent on the supply of land. So, the picture is mixed: the distribution of power in Cameroon is concentrated, but not unipolar.

*Undermining the power of opposing groups*

A key political effect of the land surrender process has been to delegitimize the BLCC's land claim by creating confusion over land and undermining Bakweri institutions and solidarity. Many Bakweri elites (such as Mafany Musonge) have been closely allied to the leader's bloc, but others, especially those in the BLCC, have been closely associated with Anglophone secessionism for many years and have resisted all attempts to be co-opted as followers of the government.<sup>84</sup> Because the BLCC have consistently opposed the 2003 land surrender process, those who receive land have often turned against them. The land surrender process has set Bakweri chiefs against the people as well as each other. It has set Bakweri communities who receive land against those who do not. It has set communities who receive a lot of land against those who receive a little. The BLCC's capacity to claim to be the recognized body articulating the land claim (as was agreed in Banjul in the late 1990s) has been significantly weakened by the way land restitution has been undertaken.<sup>85</sup>

The Bakweri institution of chieftaincy has been undermined by the land surrender scheme. Despite the relative clarity of the formal land surrender process as written in government memoranda, the reality in Fako is disorderly and opaque. Ambiguity over who is the recognized chief is often part of this confusion. This has opened numerous possibilities for criminality, some of which have come to court. For example, in the village of Ewili, a man named Ndzie Thomas Ekinde was recognized as the Bakweri chief and installed in 2012 even though critics claimed his father was from the Bakossi ethnic group.<sup>86</sup> Ewili was a very small revitalized 'village' where there had been no chief for 46 years.<sup>87</sup> However, in 2015 he

84. Epitomized by late Mola Njoh Litumbe who was a long-standing leader of the (proscribed) Southern Cameroons National Council and was also at one time Secretary General of the BLCC. He died in May 2020.

85. Kofele-Kale, 'Asserting Permanent Sovereignty'.

86. Francis Ekongang Nzame, 'Is the Chief of Ewili, Muea a Bakweri man or Bakossi?', *The Star*, 21 July 2014; Interview, Molua Patrick, Traditional Council Chairman, Lower Muea, Molyko, 14 April 2018.

87. Moki Mondo, 'Buea D.O Installs New Chief to Revive Ewili Village Amidst Opposition from a Small Group of People', *Fako News Centre*, 20 April 2012, <<https://www.fakonewscentre.com/ewilivillagechief.htm>> (8 June 2022).

was convicted for taking money from a ‘sponsor’ by using false documents from a land surrender to a different village.<sup>88</sup> After the trial his critics, who included a rival claimant to the chief’s title, accused him of conniving with the administration to be made chief in order to apply for a land surrender.<sup>89</sup> Although they demanded that he should be dethroned he was not, indeed after he was kidnapped (and later released) by Ambazonians in August 2018, he was received by the Minister of Territorial Administration in Yaoundé as one of a group of honoured loyal chiefs.<sup>90</sup> Such accounts show not only how the land surrender process connects to the national division of spoils, but how by rewarding some chiefs and making them followers of the government, divisions amongst the Bakweri are fostered. The horizontal and vertical dimensions of the political settlement are not autonomous but are closely connected – binding individual chiefs into the central hierarchy simultaneously weakens the authority of those outside the leader’s bloc.

Perhaps the most important political opportunity that arises from the disorderly process of land surrender is the chance for the central elite to delegitimize the core idea which Bakweri activists have been arguing for since 1946. That is the claim that Fako is ‘all’ indigenous land as recognized by the colonial CDC lease, which should ‘all’ be returned to the Bakweri people.<sup>91</sup> On the one hand, the government can use the surrenders to claim to be giving Bakweri citizens the land that they have been demanding. On the other hand, they do not ever have to say that they are giving Bakweri people all their land back because the colonial lease has expired. The surrender is represented as an act of government largesse because the land being returned has been ‘national land’ since 1974. The experience (for some Bakweri communities) may be of getting some land, but the formal reason for being given that land may not be the reason they think it is (the return of their indigenous land). Even though this land is deeply embroiled in funding the political settlement, these arguments are also crucial in a battle of ideas. For Esuka Endeley, Paramount Chief of Buea, ‘the manner in which the return is currently being done fails to justify the initial argument’.<sup>92</sup> The government is giving the Bakweri people what they want,

88. Herman Bamnjo, ‘Contested Chief of Ewili detained’, *The Horizon*, No. 236, 25 May 2015, p. 4; Herman Bamnjo, ‘Buea Sub-Division: Ewili Village Chief jailed for 4-1-9, forgery’, *The Median*, No. 0156, 17 June 2015, p. 3.

89. *Ibid.*

90. Nformi Sonde Kinsai, ‘Minister tells Freed Fako Chiefs: Lure your subjects out of bushes’, *Cameroon Post*, 9 August 2018, <<https://cameroonpostline.com/minister-tells-freed-fako-chiefs-lure-your-subjects-out-of-bushes/%E2%80%8B>> (26 July 2022).

91. Contrary to the wider government position on land ownership, the 2018 CONAC report on land grabbing in Fako states ‘Most of the land owned by the natives (the Bakweri) is managed by the CDC’, Government of Cameroon CONAC ‘Cameroon’s 2018 anti-corruption status report’, p. 26.

92. Correspondence with HRM Esuka Endeley, Paramount Chief of Buea, 29 March 2018.

and in so doing they show their own power in relation to the weakness of the BLCC. The land is returned in a manner chosen and managed by the central administration. It is not a response to BLCC demands.

The recipients of land effectively colluded in undermining the larger Bakweri case as pursued by the BLCC. The administration claims it is giving state-owned land to Cameroonian citizens who need space for their children to farm and build homes. Yet, everyone knows that most surrendered land will be sold to raise capital.<sup>93</sup> To quote from the Paramount Chief of Buea again

lands are allocated to villages that are nowhere adjacent to them; in some cases, several tens of miles away. Anyone allocated land 20 or 30 miles away from their current residence is mostly likely going to exchange the land for cash which eventually ends up in the hands of non-natives. This is the opposite of the *raison d'être* of land surrender.<sup>94</sup>

Land as an economic asset may be fungible, but the same does not apply to the idea of 'ancestral' land to which specific villages are meant to have a spiritual connection. If the land allocated was closer to the villages it is allocated to, then selling it would be harder. That idea of a more mystical meaning for land remains real in Fako, even as land is simultaneously being treated as an economic good.

The case study shows how the balance of power between the leader's bloc and the opposition changes over time. There are moments when the Bakweri opposition had little influence or capacity to assert its agenda: for example, when John Foncha rewrote the terms of the CDC lease in 1959 or when President Ahidjo's government brought in the 1974 land law and used it to erase the lease entirely. Such was the weakness of the opposition bloc in 1974 that there was no opportunity to question the legality of the changing status of CDC land at that moment. For long periods of Cameroonian history, the Bakweri activists were tolerated by the state because they had not demonstrated a capacity to mobilize or organize support in significant numbers. Their progress towards pursuing their claim through legal means in international courts in the Gambia in the late 1990s represented the opposite – they achieved more leverage. This was the moment when the state responded quickly with a more short-term vision by instituting the 2003 land restitution scheme.

The Cameroonian state has weakened the Bakweri politically using a 'divide and rule' move that has been rehearsed many times with many

93. Interview, Barrister Ikomi Ngongi, Assistant Secretary General BLCC, Buea, 5 April 2018.

94. *Ibid.*



groups in Cameroon over many years.<sup>95</sup> The architect of the scheme, Peter Mafany Musonge, is both Bakweri and, as Prime Minister, was firmly within the leader's bloc. His sincere aspirations to support some Bakweri communities by returning plantation land to them without crippling the CDC are set against his understanding that such a policy would necessarily also weaken the government's opponents in the BLCC. Meanwhile, the paramount chief of the Bakweri, who is also by default aligned to the leader's bloc, is opposed to the manner in which the land surrender scheme is undertaken – his loyalty to the centre is more contingent and requires a delicate balancing act as he faces demands both nationally and locally. The land surrender process has brought confusion; chieftaincy disputes have become common and land is often passing swiftly, and legally, into the hands of non-indigenes after it is sold. Land surrender has the political advantage of undermining opponents outside the ruling coalition, whilst simultaneously reaching beyond them to incorporate individual Bakweri villages into the leader's bloc. However, as the violent conflict in Anglophone Cameroon now shows, for many people the threat of state violence and the promise of some financial reward for accepting the status quo can no longer generate consent. The emerging question is whether this is just a regional issue or whether such sentiments threaten the national settlement.<sup>96</sup>

### *Conclusions*

Using the case study of the land surrender scheme in Fako, we have explored how the vertical and horizontal variables of Cameroon's political settlement have changed over time. After 2003, the land in Fako was swiftly incorporated into the process of funding the national settlement by binding the government's followers into sustaining the current political system. Diverse government allies (chiefs, government officials, and businesspeople) have profited from this land either by acquiring it and selling it for their own benefit or by lubricating the process itself. This has meant that some followers in the periphery have some leverage over the centre – as the case of the thirteen chiefs facing prison showed. Numerous individual Bakweri households have also benefitted from receiving a windfall asset when they are allocated land, but the political effect of this has been to weaken the local opposition by undermining the BLCC's cause. The subsequent insurgency in Fako and elsewhere in Anglophone Cameroon reflects the limits of such strategies in the Cameroonian periphery and the fragility of the national

95. Francis Nyamnjoh, 'Cameroon: a country united by ethnic ambition and difference', *African Affairs* 98, 390 (1999), pp.101–118.

96. Manu Lekunze and Ben Page, 'Security in Cameroon: a growing risk of persistent insurgency', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, (2020).

political settlement at this moment. Although some Cameroonians understand how the settlement works and are, therefore, able to 'play politics', we do not find evidence that the settlement was consciously planned. Yet the idea that stability is a desirable policy outcome is repeated frequently in Cameroon and is being used to justify the sustainability of existing political arrangements.

The PS framework provides a useful set of tools for thinking about Cameroonian politics. It draws attention to the way in which the spoils are distributed without necessarily assuming that such arrangements are a barrier to development. By conceiving of the national political economy as a dynamic, interdependent combination of a structure of power and institutions, it shows how this geographically peripheral site is connected to the political centre and how it contributes to sustaining the existing system. In these ways it disturbs the dominant framework. However, we would also recognize that from the perspective of an analyst more familiar with a neopatrimonial approach, it is hard to see that much that is new here. For example, our findings about how power works inside the leader's bloc often rehearse well-known accounts of: the Cameroonian policy of regional balance; elite straddling of the centre and periphery; co-opting elites to ensure loyalty; and tactics of intra-elite competition.<sup>97</sup> Ultimately both approaches analyse the distribution of patronage via clientelism in order to ensure loyalty within the bounds of the nation-state.

Where we see the most value for developing a PS framework in future analyses is in thinking about not only what drives clientelism but also what to do with political debates that do not sit easily inside an interpretation of politics that relies entirely on clientelism. Hazel Gray distances PS from explanations for clientelism in Africa that rely either on forms of cultural determinism or on ideas about individual greed and profit maximization.<sup>98</sup> In contrast she argues that 'the colonial imposition of Western political and economic institutions on pre-existing authority structures led to a disjuncture between the formal institutions of the state and the distribution of power'.<sup>99</sup> Specific colonial and postcolonial histories explain not only clientelism's emergence, but its diversity. We argue however that this debate should be not only about explaining the origins of clientelism, but also exploring a world beyond clientelism.

We find that we have lots of ethnographic data about the experience of living through the land surrender process 'left over', largely because it does not fit within an account of the case study that relies so heavily on clientelism. There is more to the land surrender story than just

97. Bayart, *The state in Africa*.

98. Gray, 'Understanding and deploying the political settlement framework in Africa'.

99. *Ibid.*

self-serving elites being allowed to corruptly appropriate assets on the condition that they return the favour by supporting existing political arrangements. Prime Minister Musonge might have wished to disempower the BLCC when they were making progress in the international courts, but he was also being pragmatic. The land restitution scheme that was developed was a political compromise: it did not excessively harm the viability of the CDC, it did relieve the poverty of some Bakweri households, and it did not threaten the property rights of generations of non-Bakweri Cameroonians who had bought plots of land in Fako. Perhaps the subsequent abuses of the scheme could have been predicted, but the initial intention was to help some poorer Cameroonians by giving them access to land to which they had an historic claim, which they could then use as they wish. We did not hear any stories suggesting that Musonge personally benefitted from the scheme so he could perhaps be accused of naivety about corruption, but not of greed. Indeed, across the story there are many individuals who are not being greedy – Bakweri families inheriting four or five plots of land and then taking advantage of a lively land market to sell them and raise capital for investments in property, education, or business are better understood as entrepreneurial rather than greedy surely? Thinking outside clientelism opens this debate to these ideas.

There are also normative political ideas about land in Fako that should be included in future analysis. For example, people argue about whether Bakweri beneficiaries do the right thing when they sell the land they are allocated. Some people hold that you should never sell land, and others that it is foolish to waste the land on farming when it could be sold and converted into cash that could then be used for education or a business. Those who do invest in the land (by becoming landlords for example) are commended. Those who blow their windfall on cars and girlfriends are mocked. Some people are debating the importance of the CDC as a national asset. PS is interested in the way that these other political debates can contribute to the capacity of some groups within the settlement to organize, mobilize support, and gain legitimacy.<sup>100</sup> The Ambazonian conflict will continue because the civilian population, despite its suffering, remains broadly convinced of the legitimacy of the insurgents' key idea. These political ideas about land and territory may not amount to a coherent ideological political programme, but they are not irrelevant to sustaining the settlement either.

Elements of this Cameroonian example are aligned to a neopatrimonial perspective, whilst others are revealed by using the PS approach and many points overlap. Thandika Mkandawire suggested that the logic of

100. Behuria, 'Studying political settlements in Africa' p. 512; Lavers, 'Taking ideas seriously'.

neopatrimonialism generates 'a deterministically pessimistic view of development in Africa...pushing the analysis toward ontological despair'<sup>101</sup> and quotes Jean-François Bayart suggesting that at best Africa's 'long term prison is more like a probation'.<sup>102</sup> But our own case study might also seem rather pessimistic: an old Cameroonian political settlement that has adapted to dramatic events but in which the same cabal of aged politicians retains power in a country that has underperformed in terms of development. This conclusion could fit easily within a neopatrimonial analysis. However, this is where the evidence of a politics beyond clientelism is so important. Zubairu Wai draws a strong distinction between 'the politics of the belly' (implying the domination of self-interest) and the 'politics of the mind' (potentially a more selfless, principled, and thoughtful set of ideas), and he demands that we pay more attention to the latter.<sup>103</sup> Whether you really need a PS approach to find a non-clientelist African politics is another question.

101. Mkandawire, 'Neopatrimonialism and the political economy of economic performance', p. 602.

102. Bayart, *The state in Africa*, p. 263.

103. Comments on Twitter by Zubairu Wai @ZubaWai, 19 September 2021.