



Ethnic Groups, Land Tenure Systems and Agricultural Spatial Injustice in Cameroon

Abdoulay Mfewou

Department of Geography, University of Dschang, Dschang, Cameroon
Associate researcher in University of Paris Diderot (France)

Abstract: This article presents the territorial origins of ethnic groups in different regions and their customary land tenure in Cameroon. Between laws and realities, the social and cultural analysis of each group shows the connection between customary land allocation mechanisms to rural development stakeholders' activities and, the injustice during land allocation which results in discrimination always towards women. These modes of allocation, that is, referred to as ancient ethno-social norms are evolving in each group in Cameroon. With the current demographic context which is increasing (at a rate of 3% per annum), land has become rents by notabilities. This land discrimination against women practiced by the co-heirs of land is part of a strategy to challenge public authorities on their mission to ensure the promotion of social equality in collaboration with traditional leaders in order to reduce this injustice. Agricultural spatial justice is about economic efficiency and productivity, of course, but also about social peace between genders.

Keywords: Agriculture, Cameroon, Ethnicity, Spatial Injustice, Land Tenure Systems, Land.

Introduction

Cameroon's rural land space presents an apparent void, yet this land belongs politically to the state but economically to traditional leaders. The injustice of agricultural space in Cameroon arises from the customary old land norms, traditional rules of access and land allocation. This spatial injustice remains today issues of agricultural development and sustainable management of ecosystems (Vermeulen, 1997, Weber, 1974). On the whole, land discrimination is characterized by unequal allocation to women. In the last 20 years, competition has grown between different types of actors. Due to contradictions of customary policies and failures of arbitration systems on the conflicts between modern law and customary law, men are privileged in relation to women.

This spatial injustice reduces women's investments in agricultural production. However, Cameroon is a space of distance and dispersion. A vast area of 475650 km² on which resides a population of 19 406 100 inhabitants (Bucrep, 2010). This space has a social dimension in which we record a mixed ethnic, cohabitating and living together, as shown in Figure 1. Cameroon has 240 ethnic groups on its national triangle. Each group presents a local history of development from its origins, its conquest of land in space whose traditional chief remains the guardian of land and traditional values which is the ancestral mark (Abouna, 2011, Harvey, 1973).

Indeed, the issue of land allocation, access to land, its resources that reflects agricultural spatial injustice and sometimes even the claiming of land by the coheirs had long been considered secondary in the decision making in relation to agricultural policies or fight

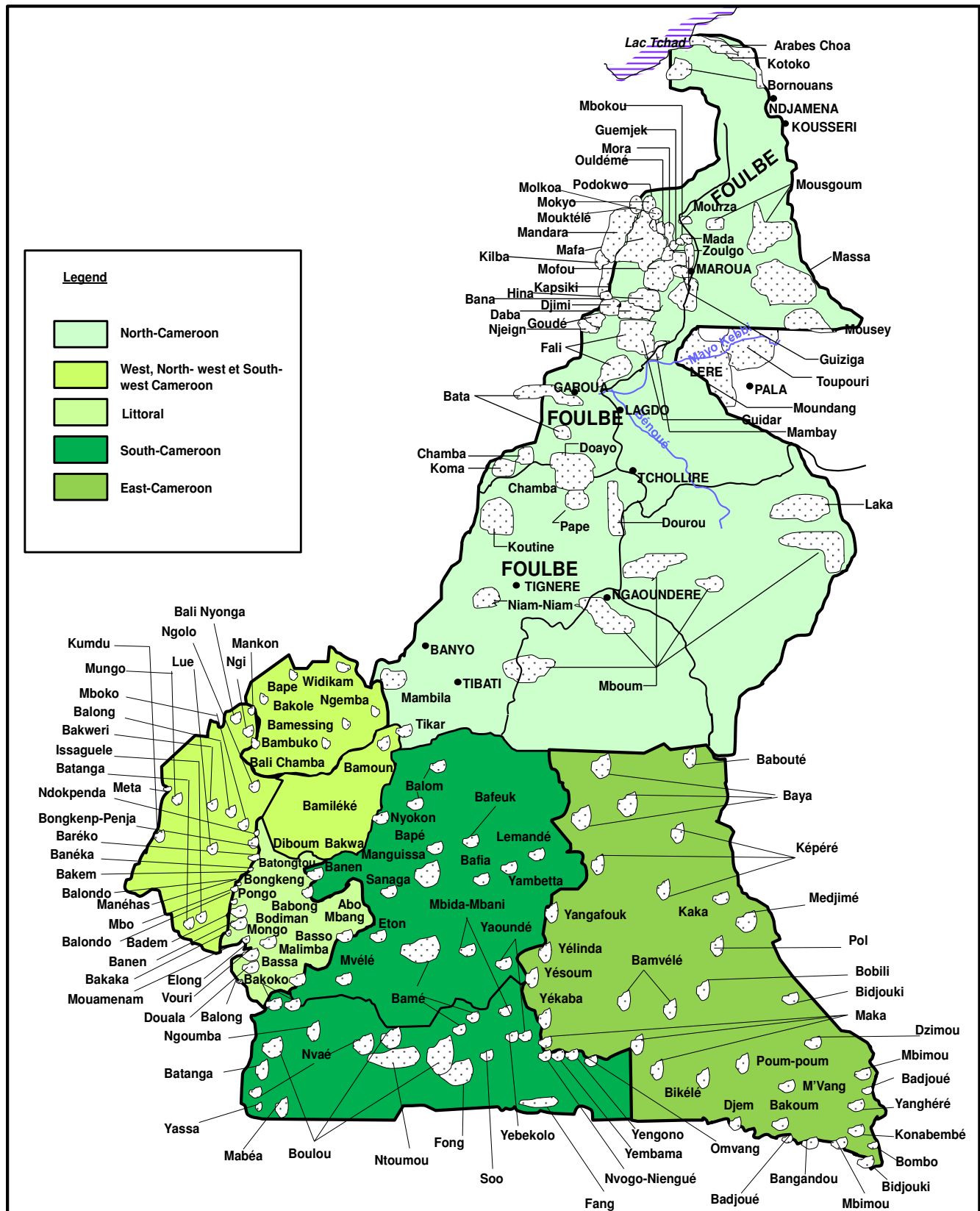


Figure 1: The ethnic groups of Cameroon

against poverty. It is now recognized as a central issue, carrying important political, economic, social and environmental issues for 80% of Cameroonians. Through multiple interests, the injustice victim challenges traditions that refer to the local history of the people, traditional laws and state laws. On the basis of this problem, our objective is to analyze the practical progress of the normative elaborations of the gender question and also to analyze the interactions between space and society in understanding spatial injustices the application of the reflection to territorial agricultural policies.

We can see that the context of agricultural land evolution, economic inequalities, which remain central within the different ethnic groups, articulate with each other, to describe the complexity of the relations of domination, in their spatial dimension. Can we talk about easy access to land for women within each ethnic group?

Answering this question requires a good knowledge of the reality of local dynamics and local land processes. Our research methodology consists of conducting a survey in ten regions with the collaboration of 15 volunteer investigators under our direction. This survey was conducted among different stakeholders: traditional chiefs, local population, gender and state institutions. We also borrowed an analytical approach from the work of a sociologist, Barrier (1981), on "ethnic groups and languages in Cameroon" to show this ethnic diversity: the local history of conquest of each group that defines social types and administrative boundaries of the regions today that are extensions of the local traditional power constituencies.

Land tenure, customary access and agricultural spatial injustice

The legal and legislative framework advocates more equitable land management, integrating the aspect of local social realities. Access rights to land first require presenting the two tenure systems (Teyssier, 2004, Vermeulen, 1997); the state system and the customary Cameroonian land tenure system that relies on ethnicity or family and property rights are sometimes collective. This collective right is exercised everywhere by the same person, the chief of land or head of a large family whose household members serve only as agricultural labor on the exploited parcel.

In social practices and forms of customary land governance, the chief of land is the closest descendant of the first occupant of the place. He is thus the intermediary between the living, the dead parents and the invisible powers, co-owners of the occupied lands (Bruneau, 2003, Feussi, 2004). The chief of land administers the property assets of the whole group in his name and on his behalf. It distributes land to families, households and individuals according to their needs and sometimes performs the sacrificial rites required for the settlement of a stranger or for the clearing of new lands, giving the land especially to men and moderately to women. This obligation of ritual consecration, or the religious sanctioning of all land transactions, gives the real meaning of the institution of the chieftdom of the land. Any member of the group has a right of use, of permanent exploitation.

On his death, without a new intervention of the chief of land, his heirs occupy and exploit the land of their ancestral author, which becomes the parcel of the family and the woman has only a right of use of the land. What is sought after in customary tenure is a set of unwritten, highly hierarchical and ancestral rules of different ethnicities; it is much more the security and cohesion of the group than an exploitation of the land in purely economic sense. The land remains the main link between community members after the blood and the man remains the main heir.

The search for more justice or less injustice is one of the fundamental objectives of all Cameroonian companies today, a founding principle aimed at preserving human dignity and equity. In this context, space is a natural good of traditional chieftdoms conquered through arms in local history. However, access to land ownership is open to all persons of

Cameroonian nationality, as well as foreigners, except in border areas and subject to the terms of visas and reciprocity.

The private domain of the State can be: assigned to public services; transferred to local and regional authorities and other legal entities governed by public law; allocated to private companies; allocated to the enjoyment or ownership of natural or legal persons. But, the right of property does not appear in the same way between the Great North-Cameroon and the Great-South. In all regions of Cameroon, women are excluded from customary land donations. This land exclusion has its origins in the traditions of each group: "the woman cultivates the land of her husband head of household even after the death of her husband, the land is more for these male children." Sometimes the woman negotiates the little space possible to make the family food.

The populations and the dominant characters of the ethnic groups of Cameroon

Very little scientific work has been done on ethnicity and agricultural spatial injustice (Philippe, 2008). Studies are missing for several reasons. The first is the scarcity of statistical data and studies with national coverage.

In general, the "landless peasant" and especially women pose the problem differently. Researchers assert that sub-Saharan Africa has not experienced land injustice with the period contemporary or even with colonization. The profound transformations of the African continent are increasingly affecting the natural environment and as populations increase.

Oral and written traditions relating to the history of Cameroon's settlement bear witness to the multiplicity of geographical origins between and within the various groups (Abouna, 2011, Boutrais, 1994). The estimated 240 ethnic groups in Cameroon form five major cultural regions: the western plateau peoples, including Bamileke, Bamoun (or Bamun) and other groups in the North West Coastal Rainforest peoples, including Bassa, Douala (or Duala) and other entities of the South-West peoples of the tropical rainforests of the South including Beti (or Pahouins), Boulou, Ewondo and Fang (sub-groups of Béti-Pahouin), and Baka Pygmies, peoples of the semi-arid regions of the North (the Sahel) and central lands including Fulani and Kirdi in the northern Sudanian zone and central lands.

In its integration policy "respect for the sociological component" widely interpreted and extensively discussed has fueled the political debate to take into account the pygmy ethnicity, Mbororo, and the issue of discrimination of women in decision-making.

The history of the settlement of North Cameroon and the local land authority

The dynamics of the intersection between the multiple forms of tradition on the one hand and the complex processes of ancient creation of land tenure norms in each ethnic group on the other. The customary land power that is found everywhere in the great north of Cameroon is rooted in the history of settlement explained by the old mobilities of the people. The conquest of the Fulani in the nineteenth century is marked by their military superiority and subjugated immense spaces. The Fulani have been able to impose their authority in the plains and their land power. This movement of displacement and geographical colonization was born inside Africa (Senegal, Nigeria, Chad ...) and allowed the creation and the development of great sultanates (Seignobos & Iyébi-Mandjek, 2000, Podlewski, 1971).

This ancient mobility shares a certain number of affinities, both in the religious and dialectical domain, which play the role of cement between the different ethnic groups of the Northern region. The penetration of these groups in the north of the country was not easy in the face of the already present indigenous population. Any form of mobility will encounter obstacles in the host countries, that materializes in wars between the natives and foreigners, as quickly won by the Fulani on the non-Fulani region. The current ethno-demographic distribution indicates a mix of ethnic groups (Peul, Mboum, Sao, Dii, Bata ...) living together

in urban and rural neighborhoods and organizing themselves into small groups of the same ethnicity in rural areas.

This ethnic mosaic occupies the whole of Cameroon today. In addition, Islamized groups and non-Islamist groups are traditionally distinguished. Each of these groups offers, through its oral tradition, testimonies of migrations to more or less long range whose causes are diverse and sometimes unclear. The Fulani are the last to arrive, but remain more powerful than other ethnic groups. They have well-structured chieftaincies.

The Peul hegemony and organization were effective from the beginning and the occupation of the lands which allowed them to reign better. The Lamidates remained the survivors of this period, renewed by the colonial administrations who had relied on them to govern and amplify the axes of agricultural mobility in the north of the country towards the fertile areas. These old constituencies are also renewed by the independent state and remain current administrative districts, with only a few modifications that create three regions. These climatically different regions present a very distinct agricultural situation: the Far-North region is located in the Sahelian climate, that of the North in the Sudanian climate and that of Adamaoua in the Sudano-Guinean climate. The traditional political systems remain very varied with a hierarchical organization based on dynasties and politically unstructured groups (kirdi).

Traditional chieftaincy in North Cameroon and land power

In the Peule society, traditional power is nowadays an essential element of the present state in the management of the land. The work of Nach (2000) shows that the chieftaincy is based first of all on a human collectivity established on a part of the territory of the State. The traditional chiefs appointed by the colonizer should serve the colonial administration. However, the communal reform put an end to the practice of siege reserved for the traditional authorities in the municipal council by the law N0 74/23 of December 05th, 1974. The chief remains today a survival of the multiple forms of socio-economic organization policy. Political pluralism (1990) strengthened the powers of traditional chiefs as paid administrative auxiliaries. The chieftaincies influence the political and administrative institutions (Nach, 2000). The chief has the attribution to transmit to the population the directives of the State and to ensure its execution: the vaccination against the diseases, the census of the population, the inscriptions on the electoral list. But land, it remains the undisputed master. The migrant in this case must go through him for his installation and the woman has the right to use.

Forest, multi-ethnic and land area

The most representative ethnic groups are Bantu: Beti, Bakundu, Maka, Pygmies. These ethnic groups are mainly located in the central and southern regions of the country. A legend reports that the Beti comes from the other side of the Sanaga River. As a result, some Beti have not passed the other side of the Sanaga and that is why we still find them around the Mbam region. The cities of Yaoundé, Mbalmayo, Obala and Ebolowa remain traditionally their stronghold, given the almost ethnic distribution of cities. Today, Beti are scattered throughout the country, especially on the coast, because of the proliferation of economic activities (Bruneau, 2003).

The origin of Beti is complex to define. The most commonly accepted thesis is the origin given by the oral tradition (Mvondo, 1998). For the Beti, Nanga would be their ancestor of Bantu origin. He would have had descendants, Kolo Beti, Eton Beti, Mvele Beti, Mvan Beti, Meka Beti Bulu (the only girl) and Ntumu, the last born. Today, the main beti tribes are Eton, Ewondo, Bene who are direct brothers of Ewondo, the Fong who are considered Bene through

their father Otololo'o., Bulu also even as sources that they would be rather Congolese, Manguissa, Ntumu and Mvele, closer Bulu than Eton and Ewondo..

Originally all Beti spoke a language called "ati". Arrived in Yaoundé, they dispersed, some Eton being found in Nkometou (a region of Yaounde). Their migrations were intended to seek rich land for agriculture, in this agricultural colonization, the land belongs to the head of the family or head of household who is the husband, the woman cultivates the family land. It has only the right of use. But, the works of Mariteuw Chimère Diaw and Phil René Oyono show that the so-called "acephalic" forest companies are not disorganized and confused. They are endowed with a strong socialization of individuals in the values of the clan and lineage system (Diaw and Oyono, 1998). Thus, it is not necessary, in general, to ask permission to open a space (field of forest) to an external authority, it is enough to know that this space belongs to its lineage and to know how to read the landscape (presence some flowers, some species indicating climax vegetation) to verify that no-one else has established pre-emptive cultivation rights. Agricultural spatial injustice occurs within the family when the woman has only the right land use.

Coastal area and extension of Douala and Bassa

The Bassa are Central African Bantu living in Cameroon, in the Central and Littoral regions, in the Nyong-et-Kélé division and in Sanaga-Maritime. There are also Bassa in the division of Nkam, Wouri and Mefou-and-Akono. Another ethnic group linked to the Bassa, is the Yambassa.

The Bakoko and Bassa are undoubtedly, although to varying degrees, in the Douala zone of influence. The religious propaganda is carried out according to the regions; either in Bassa or in Douala and this last evolved language will probably supplant the first one in a more or less distant future. There are social inequalities and they are generally spatialized, which finds its roots in the history of local settlement. The land returns first to the husband, then to the male children.

Northwestern, Southwestern Region and Land Authority

The Ngemba are Bantu population living in western Cameroon, around Bamenda. Some communities also live on the other side of the border in Nigeria. They are part of the Bamileke group. Among the variants of the ethnonym are: Babankis, Banki. Babungo and Nso, who are considered a subgroup of the Tikar. Families have evolved along with society.

Land power in Bamoun, Bamileke and West Cameroon

Land governance in "Bamoun country and Bamileke country" involves multiple actors, local authorities, new notables, state agents, in complex relationships of competition. The land donation is easier to members of the royal family and notability. This land discrimination has its origin in the great conquests through the organization of chieftaincies.

It is difficult to go back in time beyond the Tikar from which came the Bamouns and Bamilekes. In the history of the Bamilekes, the decline of Nubia began when Arab invaders attacked this country and brought enslaved populations to the north of the country between 1171 and 1250 (Courade, 1977).

Today the Bamiléké people are one of the most important social-cultural groups in Cameroon. During the great migration, late seventeenth century, some Bamiléké did not cross the Nun, they stayed in the "Bamoun country" and mixed with the natives. The chiefs (fon) were for the most part great hunters (Courade, 1977). According to Justin Mouafo quoted by Kana, (2010), the Bamileke word is derived from Pue melekeu meaning: inhabitants of mountains and plains or rocks.

Bamilékés today represent a very large number of dialects spread over a hundred small independent kingdoms. They are famous throughout the country for their sense of commerce. Finally, the Bamileke people are strongly attached to their roots. They respect and maintain the ancestral traditions and constitute a paradoxical and surprising people: Individualistic, but supportive, materialistic and expansionist. The Bamoun country is vast, larger; this space was conquered by arms and remains in the hands of a single 'fon' and his notables.

The Bamileke country is composed of the groups of Haut-Nkam, Nde, Hauts-Plateaux, Mifi, Koung-Khi, Menoua and Bamboutos, divided into several chiefdoms. Most chieftaincies (Bana, Bangoua, Batcha etc.) begin with Ba plural of Yi (Onana, 2005).

The chief of the village, the Fon, is invested with authority and is accompanied by the council of elders of the most powerful families of the community, he is recognized as the owner of all the lands of the village, he is also invested with power. In the judiciary, the land power remains alive in the hands of the chief and the notables extend them (Tardits, 1960).

Fotsing (1995) shows that in "Bamileke country" the land is a collective good of all the inhabitants of the community. In the land competition and land-use strategy in western Cameroon, each individual can receive a piece of community heritage and have the right of ownership established. Land tenure is a social relationship determined by the appropriation of space as a means of securing.

Women and poor land allocation: largely socially enshrined

In Cameroon, Article 1 of the Land Tenure Ordinance of 06/07/1974 stipulates that "the State guarantees to all natural or legal persons who own land in possession the right to enjoy it and to freely dispose of them ", of which men and women have the right of access to the possession and ownership of the land under the conditions determined by law" although the law speaks of equal access to land for all citizens, the issue of land donation to women by customary chiefs or heads of families is still a serious issue in rural areas. Yet women are an important part of the workforce on family farms. Despite this essential role in agricultural production, their access to land still reveals a spatial injustice.

Without highlighting the notion of justice, we refer strongly to issues of socio-spatial agricultural inequality. Women are still discriminated against for agricultural land. It should be noted that it is not the lack of land that is problematic in Cameroon but the conditions of access for women in rural areas and its poor distribution among members of the ethnic group.

In ethnic migrations, men and women participated together in major conquests of land colonization led by their leader. Although socially the woman is very respected in each group. Between laws and realities, social and cultural analysis shows that women are more disadvantaged to the right of access to land than men. The head of household especially the man has access to land first compared to his wife. While women are most involved in agricultural activities, they are still considered housewives in African societies

For the newly married couple, the husband is allowed to clear the vegetation to install his building or to establish a farm. The reasons given in favor of providing the land of the man are: the woman comes in marriage and in the couple the land is attributed to the husband and sometimes even registered in his name, the woman cultivates the family field and has the right to use even after the death of her husband, the land returns to her son who is the heir and the woman continues to farm but cannot sell this plot except the heir, this denies the woman the land on behalf of the family because, sometimes there are conflicts within the family. For those who do not get married, especially the oldest (more than 45 years) parents can give him a piece of land permanently.

In fact, in agrarian conquests, which are sometimes perceived as reconquest, people often recover land that has been confiscated by the administrative authorities; "swamp lands or mountainsides" often exploited by M'bororo nomadic herders on the decision of the colonizer

with the agreement of the traditional chief. In this reconquest sometimes supported by their traditional chief, who organizes the distribution of land and the notables extend the land power. The woman can benefit the family plot with the right of land use. In this spatial injustice the woman often hardly benefits from fertilizer or improved seeds offered by the ministry in charge of the rural world.

Different from the savanna zone of Cameroon, the ax is still accepted in the forest area, it is enough to clear and practice slash-and-burn agriculture. Women have access to parcels of land that are allocated to the family to support family feeding. Since the woman has only indirect access through the husband, father or other male persons, she can rent or buy a parcel of land in her name if she has the financial means and can be established the right of ownership.

Conclusion

In a dynamic movement of property standards between ethnic groups that mark the land power of the heads of families, traditional chiefs and notables, considered as the closest to ancestors remain in charge of customary land tenure on the national chessboard. Of the various territories with a social dimension in which a mixed ethnic, cohabitating and living together are taking place, the right to customary land allocation in Cameroon excludes women from access to land, while they participate widely in the land agricultural exploitation. This exclusion is rooted in discrimination in the local history of each group. According to land legislation, all land belongs to the state, but in practice and custom, it is managed by the village chief and customary chiefs who are auxiliaries to the administration. Chiefs allocate more land to men and notables than women.

This land injustice has become central in agricultural development policies that often lead to many conflicts within families. But, the customary land rules are judged by the coheirs as a greater securing of land in each group. This securing avoids the invasion of space by other ethnic groups. Farmers want a reduction of spatial injustice towards women, and young people. The current population growth (of 3%), leads to an increase in the value of land put by customary chiefs that would result in increasing monetarization of access to land through sales and rentals. The land donation that is already a problem for women will pose a risk for everyone because of the customary land tenure.

In Cameroon, men have the right to property on land, but women have the right to property over crops since tenure systems encourage men to own the land that these women actively cultivate. This means that women produce food for their family and for sale. Women play a central role in the food security of their families. It is therefore necessary to promote and facilitate women's access to land in order to prevent risks that may hinder the development of families.

References

- Abouna, P. (2011). *Le pouvoir de l'ethnie: introduction à l'ethnocratie*. Editions L'Harmattan.
- Barrier J. C. (1981). *Les groupes ethnique et les langues au Cameroun* » ORSTOM-IRD.
- Boutrais, J. (1994). *Pour une nouvelle cartographie des Peuls (Remapping the Fulani). Cahiers d'études africaines*, 137-146.
- Bruneau, J. C. (2003). *De l'ethnie au parler commun: espaces et cultures au Cameroun*. P. Cosaert, & F. Bart (Éd.), *Patrimoines et développement dans les pays tropicaux*, 18, 529-547.
- Bucrep (2010) *rapport Bureau Central des Recensements et des Etudes de Population*.
- Courade, C., & Courade, G. (1977). *Education in anglophone Cameroon (1915-1975)*.

- Diaw, M. C., & Oyono, P. R. (1998). Dynamiques et représentations des espaces forestiers au Sud-Cameroun: pour une relecture sociale des paysages. *Bulletin arbres, forêts et communautés rurales*, (15-16), 36-43.
- Dufaux Frédéric, Gervais-Lambony Philippe, Lehman Frisch Sonia, Moreau Sophie, « Avis de naissance », in *Justice Spatiale/Spatial Justice*, n° 1, 2009, jssj.org/04.php.
- Feussi, V. (2004). Politique linguistique et développement durable au Cameroun: perspective émique ou perspective étique?. In *Actes du colloque Développement durable, leçons et perspectives* (Vol. 2, pp. 27-36).
- Fotsing, J. M. (1995). Compétition foncière et stratégies d'occupation des terres en Pays Bamiléké (Cameroun). *BLANC-PAMARD C., CAMBREZV L. eds, Dynamique des systèmes agraires. Terre, terroir, territoire. Les tensions foncières. ORSTOM, URA, 94*, 131-148.
- Gervais-Lambony, P. (2008). Space matters: identity, justice and democracy at the ward level in South African cities. *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, 66(1), 83-97.
- Harvey David (1973). *Social Justice and the City*, Athens, University of Georgia Press.
- Kana, C. C. F. (2010). *Valeurs religieuses et développement durable: une approche d'analyse des institutions des Bamiléké du Cameroun*. African Books Collective.
- Mback, C. N. (2000). La chefferie traditionnelle au Cameroun: ambiguïtés juridiques et dérives politiques. *Africa Development/Afrique et Développement*, 77-118.
- Mvondo, P. N. (1998). Le régime foncier camerounais face à l'exigence constitutionnelle de préservation des droits des populations autochtones. *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee/Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, 343-370.
- Onana, J. B. (2005). Bamiléké au Cameroun. *Outre-terre*, (2), 337-344.
- Podlewski, A. M. (1971). La dynamique des principales populations du Nord Cameroun (2e partie): 'Piemont et plateau de l'adamaoua'. *Cahiers ORSTOM: Sciences humaines*, 8, 5-144.
- Seignobos, C., & Iyébi-Mandjek, O. (2000). *Atlas de la province extrême-nord Cameroun*.
- Tardits, C. (1960). *Les Bamiléké de l'ouest Cameroun*.
- Teyssier, A. (2004). La régulation foncière au Cameroun: entre régimes communautaires et aspirations citoyennes. *Cahiers Agricultures*, 13(6), 522-527.
- Vermeulen, C. (1997). Problématique de la délimitation des forêts communautaires en forêt dense humide, Sud-Est Cameroun. Application à l'occupation spatiale coutumière de l'espace forestier par l'ethnie Badjoué. *Faculté Universitaire des Sciences Agronomiques de Gembloux, Travail de fin d'études*.
- Weber, J. (1974). Structures agraires et évolution des milieux ruraux: le cas de la région cacaoyère du Centre-Sud Cameroun. *Office de la recherche scientifique et technique outre-mer*.