The Indigene–Settler Divide, Modernisation and the Land Question: Indications for Social (Dis)order in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines an indigene-settler divide in the Cameroonian urban social space as an emanation of the land question, and hinges on the role which modernisation has played. The paper argues that modernization, despite its weak legal framework in Douala, has managed to sustain a fragmented urban social co-existence among stakeholders from the two groups.

The paper finds that within the context of such an indigene-settler dichotomy, social coexistence is being fragmented by rising animosity as the government and the various groups have resorted to a politicisation of the land question. What ensues has been a withering of meritocratic and democratic values in this modern space. The paper concludes that this divide over land and the problems associated with its politicisation poses a challenge to a sustainable urban governance project in Douala.

The essay recommends a government and community partnership of the urban stakeholders within a framework of dialogue if these anti-modern processes are to be overcome.

Keywords: Cameroon, indigene-settler, land question, modernisation, urban governance

INTRODUCTION

The pattern of social co-existence in Cameroon's rural and urban space is increasingly determined by a *de facto* indigene-settler dichotomy. This is increasingly true for the urban centres, characterized by neighbourhoods delineated along lines of ethnic homogeneity (Biya, 1987; Ngeve & Orock, forthcoming). Social relations are thus under constant threat of change, described by Mbuagbo and Tanga (2001: 325) as the "dynamics of intercommunity relations". This change is apparently for the worse on each occasion.

The definition of 'indigene' and 'settler' often determines who gets what, and when and how they get it in such communities. It is therefore an effort to engender politics that attributes benefits and privileges to some (indigene) groups in the community while attempting to deny these to others (settlers), appropriately termed a "politics of exclusion" (Mbuagbo and Tanga, ibid.). This divide sows

social exclusion for some groups in community life, constraining their participation in it, and reducing their citizenship.

For Yenshu (2001: 26) this dichotomy, especially in urban space, is a consequence of modernization and social differentiation, beginning during the colonial periods of plantation agriculture, which required the displacements of people who were once 'indigenes' from some communities, to work as labourers in these plantation areas, by means of which they have become 'settlers', living permanently in these new areas. This process has altered the socio-economic pattern of these plantation or coastal areas, establishing socio-economic hierarchies in most areas, which tended to favour the 'settlers' (Ngoh 1996; Nyamjoh & Konings 2000; Levine 1964). This phenomenon, commonly observed in the coastal region of Cameroon, the Littoral and the Southwest Provinces, is presently affecting the distribution of resources between the 'indigenes' and 'settler' groups. The redistribution process displays a struggle which, though 'silent', pervades the entire social interaction process, and which has become almost an open confrontation between the two groups.

One such scarce resource whose redistribution pattern is changing, exhibiting 'indigene-settler' divides, is land. The land question in such communities is conceived in terms of its distribution between 'indigenes' and 'settlers'. The former, commonly referred to as 'autochthones' or "sons of the soils', hold strongly to the notion that being indigenes gives them exclusive rights or access to the land, and that they should dominate in every other major aspect of community life. For the 'settlers' – called 'come no go' to mean 'permanent settlers' (Yenshu 2001) – the acquisition of land in their 'host' communities is vital for their survival there, as well as a strong determinant of their ability to invite their kin back home to join them in their new sites of struggle for a livelihood. What ensues is a tussle over the physical space in the communities, which is often on the brink of ushering in a pattern of social disorder in such communities.

In this attempt to understand the dialectics of land ownership and its emerging patterns of social co-existence and social order, we consider certain questions: how did the 'indigene-settler' divide on land emerge in this community? What has prevented these presently subtle cleavages from degeneration into confrontations? What prospects do these indicate for social order in Cameroon's urban communities, within the context of a modern and democratic urban governance project?

This paper examines the land question in an urban coastal area of Cameroon, in Douala, using a historical comparative approach and analysis framed by unobtrusive observation of the inter-community relations in Douala, as well as documented evidence such as that available in the press. The paper aims at deciphering patterns of social co-existence and consequently prospect for social order in these multi-ethnic urban settings in Cameroon within the context of a sustainable and democratic urban governance process.

HISTORY OF DISPLACEMENTS AND LAND REFORMS

An understanding of indigene-settler cleavages and the vindication of land rights can be situated within the history of Cameroon, especially its political economic history. As already mentioned, Ngoh (1996) traces a massive wave of migration to the coastal areas, especially the present Southwest Province, during the period between 1884 and 1996 (German colonial rule). This period saw the emergence of a plantation economy in Cameroon, with many of such plantations established in the present Southwest Province. This spurred a significant wave of migrant workers, mainly from the Northwest and West Provinces of Cameroon, in response to a shortage of manpower and the general unwillingness of coastal natives to work on such plantations. In the Littoral Province, a similar situation emerged, as the local people were unwilling to work in such plantations. Indigenes in these two provinces refused to work because they saw such occupations as demeaning and they sought revenge for colonial exploitation of their land.

In fact, the indigene-settler divide in Douala is historically linked to conflicts that opposed the natives against their colonial overlords on the issue of the expropriation of native lands for colonial plantations and settlements, generating an alienation from the Douala indigenes for whom the land law had a symbolic value (Yenshu 2001). This colonial estrangement of the indigenes was deepened by their structural displacement and resettlement beyond the main areas of active urban activities such as Akwa and New Bell (the main commercial areas in Douala). Consequently, the indigenes refused to work on such plantations. The willingness of the settlers to work on the plantations caused them to be perceived as allies of the colonialist during confrontations between the native Doualans and the latter (Lobe 1977). Eventually, when peace between the locals and the colonial authorities returned, the Douala indigenes decided to join this plantation economy and its related economic benefits, and these settlers or strangers posed as strong competitors for economic benefits from this modernized action process in the indigenes' areas (Yenshu 2001). Levine (1964) has observed that the settler groups challenged the socio-economic pre-eminence enjoyed by the indigenes during pre-colonial periods and the early years of colonial rule, provoking the animosity of the latter towards the former. This could be seen as the genesis of the indigene-settler divide in Douala.

With respect to land reforms after independence, Mafeje (2003: 4) rightly notes that most African governments do not possess any land policy of their own, apart form agricultural ones, except Ethiopia after the 1974 revolution. However, he recognized that after the persistent customary tenure, in which heads of lineages or chiefs distribute land to their community members especially on the basis of consanguinity, the second source of authority for the allocation of land in independent sub-Saharan Africa is the government (Mafeje 2003: 6). And in the face of increasing modernization, the government's role in the allocation of land right expands.

In the context of Cameroon, the present land tenure system was introduced starting in 1976, with the declaration of all lands as 'national lands' while granting their temporary use to indigenous communities until the state might wish to use the land itself (Yenshu 2001; Ngwasiri 2001). Confirming Mafeje's observation, Ngwasiri (ibid.) notes that the present system is a mere reproduction of colonial systems, concluding that it enables the appropriation of large pieces of land by a much more educated people, bringing inequalities of opportunities through its registration process, given the high number of illiterates, especially in the rural areas. This leads to the argument that the chiefs and landlords of these 'indigene' areas are the main mechanisms through which 'settlers' obtain land. Indeed, an interview with Chief Ngale Vakoh of Dibanda (Mile 14) Buea, a coastal village with a layering of 'settlers', recalls that at present it is only a few individuals who own land and who sell such land to settlers, as he, the chief, has no more land to lease or sell.

As mentioned earlier, the central business locations in Douala, such as Akwa, are predominantly owned by Bamileke, and parts of Bonanjo, principally located with the state offices, is an agglomeration of people from different non-native communities. Moreover, Bamileke, Beti and people from the Northwest and Southwest Provinces, principally inhabit all modern-middle class residential areas such as Bonamoussadi, Makepe, Bonaberi, and the other part of Bonanjo and the prestigious Bonapriso neighbourhood. Even the growing ghetto areas of New Bell and Bonadibong are principally inhabited by Bamileke, Fulani Moslems and other northern tribesman, as well as people from the Northwest and Southwest provinces (English-speaking provinces). The native Douala people turn to be found along the peripheral areas of the town, such as in Bonaberi along the Bonassama strip, and in the intermediate areas (close enough to the central business areas) such as Akwa-North, and Deido. But these are far from being economically active like the other settler-dominated settlements. It is worth nothing that most of these regions are structurally similar to slums especially the Bonassama area.

The main and most evident reason for the displacements of these indigenous groups, and successful occupation of these vital areas by 'settler' groups could be seen to be their economic prosperity, achieved through hard work in all sort of activities, ranging from 'demeaning' jobs as office assistants (clerks), teachers and corporate managers (Levine 1964). It is this economic power that enabled them to acquire greater portions of land, fuelled by the government's policy of land registration that permitted two-party negotiations between the indigenous landlords and the settler peoples. The indigenes of these coastal areas found themselves defeated in economic competition by their initial refusal to participate in the modern economy ushered in by the plantation economy: hence their lower levels in the social-economic hierarchies of Douala when they joined later (Warnier 1993; Dogmo 1982).

MODERNISATION AND ITS INARTICULATIONS

Douala, a cosmopolitan city is a true picture of increasing capitalist embourgeoisement and an increasing modernization process, as can be seen from its population explosion. This increasing population is indeed an ethno-productively heterogonous one, displaying a good mixture of the country's 279 ethnic groups (UNRISD 2000; Ndumbe III 1985) and an elaborate division of economic tasks. The indigenous population has been outnumbered by settler communities and values of modernization such as those typical of modern capitalist societies that include individual achievement, economic profits and greater interdependence, all of which characterize the modern Douala. Collective or group actions are *par excellence* to be increasingly removed from the kin-base to the extra-kin or family-ethnic level. Consequently, social interaction is to transcend kinship consideration in space and time, and is characterized by secondary rather than primary interaction, making up the social process (Wirth 1938). The above picture points to the existence of what Durkheim (1893 and 1947) terms 'organic bonds' within the population in Douala.

The above image shows the inhabitants of Douala as having become properly merged with and adjusted to modernizing trends that have been introduced since colonial days. However, this has not been the case, as there have been many inarticulations of the modernization process. One such inarticulation is the non-existence of a viable legal framework to regulate the wide array of contractual relations typical of modern corporate existence. In fact, one of the most institutional supports of modernization is an elaborate system of legal rules (Durkheim, ibid.). The absence of such elaborate rules has therefore prevented modernization from running its full course in Douala, generating inarticulations of the modernization process rather than supporting it.

One case of materialised inarticulation *via* the legal framework is the emergence of the land question in Douala. The pattern of land-ownership in Douala, as earlier observed, has considerably changed from its original consanguineous basis, to become integrated into notions of the market economy typical of capitalist modes and modern contexts, a process that began in the early years of the colonial economy through to their refusal to cooperate, find themselves 'left' behind by the pace of modernization and rejected by the socio-economic hegemony that they were once associated with. The growing influx of settlers made land scarce, but with added value. The indigenes saw their ownership of these market economies, selling their most 'profitable' economic 'space' or pieces of land to the 'settlers'. These pieces of land gave the latter access to other 'social capital' such as education, rationalizing their view of such lands as part of their 'vital space' (espace viteaux) in Douala. The process of settler acquisition of the best-located pieces of land has meant the displacement of indigenes, except for the most prestigious families (royal families), from the central to peripheral areas. Economically viable settlers such as the Bamileke

group in the past, and more recently the Beti, have occupied these central locations by buying from the natives.

The poor quality of land on the periphery, mostly marshy and swampy in nature, and occupied principally by the natives, is increasingly an issue of concern to the indigenes of Douala. However, their present economic situation prevents them from buying better pieces of land. The natives have therefore been legally dispossessed of their lands and the present market forces are maintaining the status quo in favour of the settlers.

In one of their numerous attempts at forcefully 're-owning' their lands, in July 1996, some chiefs under the leadership of the most senior of them, Prince René Bell, were alleged to have gone round the prestigious neighbourhood of Bonapriso, inspecting houses belonging to settlers, requiring them to leave those houses which the settlers owned, or regenerate the value of the land on which they had built (Yenshu 2001: 29). This was followed by a reaction from the Bamiléke (setter group) youth cultural organization denoted as 'poo'lah', which saw this as an act of provocation on the part of the indigenes and indicated its intention to act legally or otherwise (Yenshu, ibid.). Within the context of modernization, this is illegal and 'irrational' conduct with regard to contractual relations on the part of the indigenous groups, generating 'unjustified' conflict, which threatens social co-existence and social order. The legal basis for such action on the part of the indigenes was absent and the law enforcing authorities did not issue any warning, even if the settlers did not complain.

In the face of its inability to both forcefully and legally repossess their lands, the issue has been transferred to other socio-economic and political spheres. Following the 1996 municipal or council elections in which the opposition party, the S.D.F., won in many coastal councils (Douala, Limbe, Kumba), presidential decree No. 96/031 appointed the Sawa to "congratulate the head of state for heading to their call to put a check on the hegemony of non-nationals in their cities" (Yenshu, ibid.). This victimization of the settlers, especially the Bamiléke groups, in Douala could even be traced to have an institutional basis, as Mr. Soub Lazare, Mayor of the Douala III Council, a Bamiléke, was expelled from the S.D.F. party for not following the party's directives to 'appease' the indigenes by appointing an indigene as mayor of the council following the 1996 municipal polls (Yenshu 2001: 28).

These political processes are a product of the politicisation of the land question by the indigenes. They have sought to legitimize their claims to re-occupy their lands and to 'chase away' the settlers by means of a political agenda. In an interview in the *Cameroon Tribune* (February 1996), a state-run daily newspaper, a Sawa leader, Chief Ekwalla E. Deido, clearly declares that, even though settlers have bought land from natives, the settlers should not consider such lands as their homeland. He argues that all Cameroonians who want to exercise their rights of citizenship to become mayor should do so in their native councils, giving the Douala or Sawa indigenes 'sole rights' to become mayors in their native area, which is Douala (cited in Yenshu, ibid.).

This view stems from the results of the July 2003 legislative and municipal twin-elections in Cameroon. In Douala, out of five municipal councils four are headed by settlers and one headed by an indigene. Of the four, three are of Bamileke origin and one of Hausa origin. Such ethnic domination of urban politics by the settler groups explains the resentment of the indigenes towards the settlers, especially those of Bamileke origin.

The efforts of the indigenes to re-occupy their vital spaces (land being an important part) by force have apparently failed. In the same vein, efforts to politicise this land question have been frustrated by extensive settler domination of urban politics, ensured by their economic power-base.

In the light of such facts, we can begin to discern the pattern of social interaction and co-existence in Douala between the indigenes and settlers as a result of the land problem. The indigene-settler co-existence in Douala is consequently a 'knife edged' balance, which till now has been maintained by market forces and modernization, invisibly preventing these 'soft' conflicts from degenerating into open confrontations. It is, therefore, a fragile co-existence mode, which prevents by concealing deep fragmentations in the social interactive and relational processes in Douala. The victimized non-nationals are disgruntled by the reaction of the indigenes, and by the 'less than observant role' of the government when attacked by the indigenes. The indigenes refer to their past, and are vehemently angry about the place occupied by the settlers in their social space, which has become one of pre-eminence and economic success.

These tussles have emerged as a constant threat to social order in Douala. The indigene-settler divide, ushered in as an in articulation of modernization, is also eroding all social, economic and political relations between these two groups in Douala. It is equally this modernization process that has lamely attempting to maintain social order in this urban community by its markets forces, which are rewarding efforts, and by its elaboration of the legal framework in an attempt to maintain and protect such 'market reward' among individuals.

WHITHER MODERN VALUES? CHALLENGES FOR URBAN GOVERNANCE

The politicisation of the land question, operated through indigene-settler cleavages, has produced a community devoid of values supposedly inherent in modern communities and accompanied by a crisis in urban governance.

The settler communities have outnumbered the native Sawa group (especially the Bamileke ethnic group) and this demographic advantage (in addition to their economic stronghold) enables members of these settler groups to gain access to political offices, which involve popular votes. Moreover the indigene-settler politics has emerged as a 'goldmine' in to which the government and local political demagogues exploit the situation to foster their parochial interests, playing one group off against another (in the case of the government) and calling

for the return to an identification with the values, beliefs and customs of each group (in the case of 'fattening' local politicians).

This has fostered the proliferation of various buildings housing the 'Cultural Association Halls' of many ethnic communities, aimed at promoting the economic and political interests of such communities (Ndumbe III 1985; Ngeve and Orock, forthcoming). This has been enabling both the government and its aiding local political agents to operate their politics of exclusion and self-preservation, exacerbating the schism between the two groups. This is 'profiteering' from indigene-settler cleavages through what Kaarsholm (1994: 34) and Mentan (1999) regard as the ethnicisation of politics to consolidate political gains.

The present situation in Douala depicts the absence of at least two of what Christopher Hurn (1985) would consider the important values of modern industrial(ising) communities. In the first instance, the notion of a meritocratic society steadily erodes and eludes the citizens, with occupational roles being increasingly ascriptive rather than achieved, based on identification with the kin either of the indigene side or of one of the settler communities, further widening the level of social exclusion.

Moreover, efforts to build a democratic society are equally dwindling in the dark as a result of the diabolical forces of this sectionalisation of the community. This is accompanied by failures in the goals of governance, such as social justice and popular participation, which would fulfil the lives of all citizens and indicate their reconciliation with diversity. What constantly obtains in this socio-politically hazy community is the retrogression of efforts at building a democratic urban governance culture and framework that is socially inclusive. This is worsened by the government's appointment of 'Government Delegates' in most urban councils in the country in an effort to control opposition-controlled councils. These agents are supposed to 'oversee' the activities of duly elected mayors, who in the case of Douala mostly come from the settler groups (especially the Bamileke groups generally identified as groups in opposition to the ruling party). The appointment of an indigene as the 'Government Delegate' of the Douala Urban Council has been interpreted by the indigenes as an indication of the government's support for its claims and efforts at supremacy over the settlers (Yenshu, ibid.). For their part, the settlers perceive this as a 'national plot' hatched by their longstanding Beti rivals (the ethnic group of the current President of Cameroon, Paul Biya), who own the government, in order to bankrupt them (Banock 1992: 240; Mentan 1999).

These facts present a deep crisis in the urban governance attempting to construct a democratic, inclusive and sustainable future. The consideration of these problems exposes them as challenges to the ushering-in of a sustainable democratic urban governance framework in Douala.

CONCLUSION

The indigene-settler divide in Douala – which is typical of many other Cameroonian urban communities – is a product of Douala's historical development through modernization, which has introduced heterogeneous groups to a process of interaction and co-existence. In the case of Douala, the indigenous animosity towards their colonial *conquistadors* has invariably been transferred to their 'more equal' settler counterparts. The co-existence rests more or less on a 'knife-edged' as a result of the superficial interaction of and organic bonds between the modern social groups. The social exclusion, ascription and social tensions often on the verge of outright conflicts emerging from these indigene-settle diverges is in reality nothing more than a maladjustment of both groups to the processes of modernization, heterogeneity, transitionality and superficiality. Paradoxically, it is this very process of modernization which is, albeit lamely, attempting to maintain these social-economic relations under peaceful social conditions created by market forces, but also within a frail legal framework characterized by corruption and inefficiency.

In relation to this *status quo* effect of modernization, the indigene-settler divide in Douala has been projected into the political sphere of the community. The government and the local political stakeholders have been manipulating the real bone of contention – the land question. What emerges is a crisis of urban government, and the general prospect of social order leaves much to be desired. Social identification falls within the narrow scope of 'kinsmen' *versus* 'regional-brothers' relations. This leads to a fear of what Kaplan (1994) would term a "coming anarchy" in Douala, referring to the breakdown in social interaction, co-existence and functioning, quickening the community's pace on the highway of urban dysfunction which poses challenges such as the construction of a meritocratic and democratic society with the aim of producing socially inclusive, human and socially just urban governance. This will obviously require a government and community partnership in a frank and clear tone of dialogue between all of the urban stakeholders involved.

One of the preconditions for such a mechanism must be the recognition of the economic motivations for such an indigene-settler political crisis – the land question. As Ake (1981: 2) points out, failures to solve the issue of tribalism have been caused by ignorance of its economic basis, and in an indication of this Yenshu (2001: 35) observes the perception of settlers by the indigenes as a tool of their colonial alienation of their vital substance, land.

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