

The Esu-Elba Ranch Imbrogio, 1987-2008: Contending perspectives of land control in the Cameroon Grasslands

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ABSTRACT: The arrival of the cattle Fulani in the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon in the first half of the twentieth century coupled with the systematic increase in herd sizes and attempt to modernize cattle breeding against an increasing human population brought tremendous pressure to bear on land resources. This paper examines the Esu-Elba ranch clash in the North West Region of Cameroon. It argues that although there were disputes over geographical space, especially between Esu, her neighbours and the immigrant Fulani grazier population over the use and ownership of land, the situation became endemic with the establishment of the ranch in 1987. The article establishes that, the Esu-Elba ranch contention was centrally motivated by the irreconcilable power perception between progressive elite land exploitation and the conservative traditional discernment of the use and meaning of ancestral land. The investigation was based on secondary and primary sources which were interpreted following a qualitative analyses and presented thematically.

KEY WORDS: Imbrogio, contending, perspectives, Esu, Elba, Fulani, Farming, Grazing, communal land, national lands, ranch.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In most African societies where agriculture is the main stay of the economy, the search and use of geographical space has most often been the primary cause of conflicts. Considering the socio-economic significance of geographical space, it is not surprising that social or ethnic conflicts are occasioned by inequitable control over land initiating the foundations of human differentiation.¹ This concern found expression in Esu before 1987 and brought about the distinction between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ as far as access to and control of land was concerned. The dispute over land became endemic in Esu, with the establishment of the Elba ranch scheme that had as corollary, the expropriation of farm holdings from a cross section of indigenous farming groups. It was an encounter of coercion and resilience between a new economic competitor, the ranch entrepreneur and the community of people, principal arable crop farmers, who held dear to a history of *prima occupantis*. This etic-emic divide between opposing actors over land resources constitutes the thrust of the paper. It engages in context the quintessence and implications of contending perspectives over land control in social power relations and inter-community coexistence.

Context Issues

Esu is located in Fungom Sub-Division of Menchum Division in the North West Region of Cameroon. It is bordered to the North by the Federal Republic of Nigeria and Fru-Awa Sub-Division. The *Fondom*² is located between latitudes 6° and 7° North while longitude 10° East runs through its centre. It shares boundaries to the eastern side with four villages: Mufu, Munken, Menkaf and Zhoa, while Marshi, Mundabili, Koshin, Missong, Kung and Fang are to the Far East. Further south it is neighbored by Wum and Weh and to the west by Menchum Valley Sub-Division, where river Mosaka serves as a natural boundary. The population of Esu increased from 1,206 in 1921 to 15,015 in 1987. In spite of this significant increase in population, the chiefdom remained one of the most sparsely populated settlements of the North West Region of Cameroon. The total land surface area was about five-eighths of the then Fungom Native Authority Area which measured 1300 miles. The fondom covers an estimated 540 square miles³, most of which was characterised by extensive grassy vegetation. This natural endowment undoubtedly initially attracted migrant Fulani pastoralists and later, the Elba ranch project into the area.

The Esu group sociologically forms part of the larger Tikar country in Cameroon that migrated from Mbum land in the Adamawa Region of Cameroon. They left Mbum together with other Tikar groups southward to the Ndog plain where they sojourned for a while, before continuing to Ndiwum.⁴ This group later dispersed

to form sub-groups such as Mmen, Bafut, and Esu. The Esu faction led by Ngumà Tang separated from the others and moved to their current location through the direction of a spear. This movement was motivated by the quest for farming space and more importantly, the desire to establish control over people and strategic resources. When they arrived, they met two earlier groups; Kesu and Okar and began a gradual, but systematic expansionist policy. The Okar who could not contain the colonizing character of the Esu were pressured out of the area. Esu passion for conquest and expansion brought the Assieh, Nser, Munka, Kwep and Zhoa under her control.⁵ In order to have a grip over the conquered land, Esu devised the scheme of satellite settlements as a means of guarding her frontiers.⁶

When the Esu arrived, they settled at Utoh from where they began their expansion. From a concentrated settlement, the chiefdom gradually sprawled into thirteen quarters and some new lay-outs.⁷ The coadjutors to the *fon* in the management of these areas were elected officials, not hereditary representatives as was the case with the original quarters. While the Esu group and other earlier groups were spreading out in the area, the Aku Fulani herdsmen with white Zebu cattle arrived in the early 1940s from Nigeria in search of pastoral space.⁸ Their practice of transhumance, often led to the destruction of crops by cattle.⁹ The arrival of the cattle Fulani and their unplanned grazing practices, consciously or unconsciously resulted to skirmishes with the indigenous people. These skirmishes have occupied a crucial slot in the politics of coexistence between the two groups for over half a century with the blame responsibilities shared at different occasions.¹⁰ The coming of the Elba ranch affected not only the Esu, but also the small scale Fulani graziers and extended what was barely a farmer-grazier problem to a grazier-grazier conflict.¹¹ To better understand the basis and dimension of the conflict there is need to review the customary land tenure system of the Esu.

The concept of Land Occupancy in Esu

In the Grassfields, chiefs were the custodians of land in their respective chiefdoms and enjoyed the privilege of exercising proprietary rights to land. In principle, all land was controlled by the chief. He was the only one who could give out land, and it was usually attributed to family heads.¹² In Esu land, was nominally owned by the chiefs who acted as trustees for the people.¹³ The village was divided into seven main parts, represented by clan heads of Wimeh, Kendongho, Kejeme, Wineghe, Wabvuo, Keghi and Witeme and allotted to applicants once a year during the Dry Season.¹⁴ Egbe supports this view and argues that clan heads had the obligation to share land rationally among the living taking into consideration the unborn.¹⁵ Whatever, land ownership, use and loss of rights depended strictly on some rules, guided by the *fon* and clan heads.¹⁶ Any land allocation to the state or individuals by the chief had to take place with the consent of the clan head directly concerned. Although the *fon* was the overall custodian of the land, he had direct powers over Wimeh land.¹⁷

Even though land was communally owned, its exploitation for arable crop farming was mostly the preserve of the women folk. In spite of the central role women commanded in Esu as bread-winners of the community, their rights to land control and ownership was most often circumscribed. Goheen notes this in Nso' when she posits that "though women did not own the land, they had usufruct rights over the land they cultivated. The right to a plot was acquired through cultivation. Such a plot could be handed over to one's successors."¹⁸ This state of affairs undermined women in Esu and kept them at the ardent mercy of their families and husbands for land use. This scenario was very characteristic of the Esu-Elba ranch imbroglia where most of those who were expropriated from farming lands were women that had had long years of usufruct rights over the land they cultivated. Although women were primary targets of the expropriation scheme, their social roles as food winners for the community, quickly made the land seizure issue a communal concern.¹⁹ A cursory look at the economic context of communal land use in Esu could help to understand why the establishment of the Elba ranch culminated in a clash with the indigenous population.

Context of communal land use

The notion that land could be communal property, jointly exploited by many villages was alien to European colonizers. In traditional Africa, all land was the property of a group or community; the concept of wasteland or no man's land as applied in Europe was absent.²⁰ It is in this context that the Esu exploited the land factor. Agriculture was and remains the main source of livelihood of the people. The people cultivated various cereals, tubers and vegetables along valleys, plains and hill sides. They practised different farming methods with the most prominent being shifting cultivation. This of course, was conditioned by the easy access to and abundance of cultivable land. The indigenes by virtue of their strenuous environment worked extremely hard, but food yields remained comparatively low partly because of the rudimentary technology employed and the siege mentality of limiting production to subsistence consumption.²¹

However, self-reliant the people were, they were nonetheless ambitious as far as space control was concerned. It is in this connection that large and extensive farm holdings and settlements were established in localities of the *Fondom* like Kedzu, Munkep, Gayama and Torkisong.²² Fishing and hunting were equally associated activities of the people, although the scale of engagement was by far insignificant as compared to

arable crop cultivation.²³ In this regard, life and development among the Esu centred on land. It is certainly this socio-economic philosophy that Kaberry in characterizing the Esu mentions *inter-alia* that; “power wealth and survival in the *Fondom* were measured by ownership and control over land.”²⁴ While the vast lands provided wide-ranging arable crop space, the grassy vegetation offered opportunity of natural pasture for livestock development.

Before 1987, a wide variety of livestock were reared in the *Fondom* to meet some strategic needs. These included sheep, goats, swine and fowls which were essential for the protein demands of families; exchange for other goods like palm oil, rice and salt and remotely, but importantly, as entry fees for such cultural activities as initiation into juju societies, funerals, and payment of bridal wealth. The last breed of livestock that came into the *Fondom* as already mentioned was cattle, brought in by the nomadic herdsman of Aku Fulani extraction. With the continuous increase in the number of cattle and absence of indigenous people in their rearing, coupled with frequent trespasses of cattle on farms, there was bitter animosity between both groups.²⁵ This imbroglia over land control accounted for several stalemates. For instance in 1968, the Wum Court fined eight Esu women for invading a Fulani, Mamori’s, grazing land at Melang. The women paid 8500 F CFA for the damage and in 1982 there was a massive female demonstration against cattle trespass into their farms.²⁶ Important as these conflicts were, they did not gain unprecedented prominence like the effects of the unconsented appropriation of space to accommodate an agro-industrial structure, the Elba Ranch in 1987 in the locality.

The Elba Ranch

In 1986, El Hadj Amadou Danpullo, a wealthy billionaire and a colossus of the Central Committee of the national governing party, the Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM), was granted a license by the government of Cameroon to open a ranch in Ndawara in Boyo Division of the North West Region. From this vantage point, he extended his quest for land in Esu, a contiguous extension of grassy highlands from Ndawara, where he was granted grazing rights by HRH, Joseph Meh Buh II and some chiefs on a specific portion of land at Ibi Wundele in Weneghi.²⁷ Chi intimates that the importance and strategic nature of the *Fondom*, urged the ranch management to resort to a spacious clutch of land beyond the initial portion, spreading to as far as Kendzong, Melang, Ida, Kemeweh and Toukison, hitherto communal land.²⁸ The establishment of the ranch had tremendous ramifications on the indigenous perception and control of land as a factor of production. It exposed the explicative tension between public administrative decisions and traditional land customs. It also exposed the inequality in power relations as Rhoda and Waima²⁹ posit that rich cattle owners are never satisfied with the land at their disposal and complicate modern land laws through their political and economic power relations. In more apt terms, it relates the asymmetry between the affluent versus the poor in land quests as Wehrmann espouses that:

The most difficult type of land conflict to resolve involves a powerful person against one or more poor people. “Powerful” is shorthand for a group of categories of people that include high-ranking politicians, civil servants, the military, the police, companies and other rich and influential groups or individuals.³⁰

In many countries or situations, the poor hesitate and often do not dare to resist the powerful,³¹ but in the Esu case the situation was different as the villagers stood to defend what they considered as their ancestral lands.

The ranch establishment: What legal justification?

It would be too sweeping to conclude that by establishing the Elba ranch, Danpullo flouted all the rules of land occupancy in Cameroon. In order to launch the ranch operations, Danpullo on July 2, 1986, addressed an application for agricultural and grazing land to the then traditional ruler of Esu, *Fon* Joseph Meh Buh II. In his application, he specified the land requested to be from the “Big Bridge” to Ewo”. The piece of land from the “Big Bridge” to Ewo was then occupied by one Ngwa of Bafut origin, who was growing soya beans on parts of the parcel of land. In response to the letter addressed by Danpullo, the Esu traditional council on July 17, 1987, addressed a rejoinder letter to the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) of Menchum. This letter was signed by the *Fon* and three traditional council members with the subject being: “Grant of land to the Elba Ranch”. The SDO was informed that land located at Wundele quarter, from El Hadj Waziri Kupa to the area near El Hadj Malo along the Esu-Furu Awa road, had been allocated to Danpullo. In this connection, a well-defined stretch of land was allocated for the ranch project in Esu village by the community.³²

By taking the initiative to move towards the community to gain land for the extension of the ranch project, Danpullo was reasonably aware of the fact that in the Cameroon Grasslands, land was communally owned. Each community or chiefdom had precise boundaries and maps which meant that a village was not only

a social reality but also a geographical location. Therefore, land in spite of its vastness was not considered as 'unoccupied'. The traditional rulers were customary guardians of the lands and rights over their use were based on one's membership and kinship ties in the community.³³

After successfully getting grazing concession from the *Fon* of Esu, Danpullo within a few months started acting in defiance of the communal land policy as he embarked on an expansionist policy to accommodate the annual increase of his herd sizes. His expansion went mostly at the expense of communal land that was deemed as unoccupied or underexploited. In this connection, the entrepreneur acted with siege knowledge of the statutory laws guiding land use in Cameroon as outlined in the 1974 land law. By the provisions of the law, all lands whether occupied or unoccupied are mere parcels of national land. The law maintains that, any plot of land whose self-declared owner does not have a land title belongs *ipso facto* to the national property of the Cameroon state,³⁴ even if the owner has occupied that piece of land for centuries. Like in most of Africa, all land in Cameroon belongs to the state and people have usufructuary rights.³⁵ Judging from this perspective, Danpullo's expansion could therefore be interpreted as exploiting opportunities created by the modern state land laws that made most lands 'no man's land.' The launching of the ranch in fair measure exposed the incomprehension between customary land practices and modern state land laws. These insights could provide useful leads into the causes of the Esu-Elba ranch imbroglia.

Causes of the Conflict

As mentioned earlier, land ownership in Esu was clearly defined and partitioned into seven under the custody of various clan heads before the advent of the Elba ranch. But with the advent of the ranch, traditional land laws were altered as clan heads were neither informed nor consulted on matters of land allocation within their spheres. Tumnde³⁶ argues that Cameroon's unequal application of land legislation favours this undemocratic system, which leads to more chaos than purported solutions. This attitude often causes clan heads and their subjects to be in disagreement with their *Fons*, thereby adopting confrontational tactics in recovering their lands. Sone establishes further that the misappropriation of communal land has far reaching consequences as could be seen with the case in Big Babanki in 2005 where HRH Vugah was assassinated by his subjects for depriving them of their land. Thus the advent of the ranch in Esu did not only alienate traditional land customs, but also brought division among the people.³⁷ The neglect of traditional governing laws was closely connected to pressure on land as a result of population explosion.

Amungwa³⁸ argues that land is the key natural resource that communities possess and exploit to earn a living. Therefore, any community needs ample land to accommodate its population, cultivate and graze. As previously mentioned, the population of Esu was barely 15,015 when the ranch was created, but doubled to more than 31,000 inhabitants in 2008.³⁹ The Esu chiefdom within the same time frame had over 40,000 cattle.⁴⁰ This fact increased the pressure on land use and ownership between the farming and grazing communities. In order to handle the issue, HRH Albert Chi Kawzu declared as follows:

I would want my graziers to understand that before their coming into this *Fondom*, the population of this land was very small. But nowadays, it has doubled and doubled again causing congestion. So sooner or later, some graziers shall be asked to shift behind in order to give building and farming lands for the ageing...⁴¹

From the preceding figures and testimony, it was evident that the expansion of population and ranch activities was going to bring the Esu and ranch management at loggerheads over available land space. This was evidently so as conflict ensued between both parties a few months after the establishment of the ranch. On February 14, 1988, the Quarter Heads of Esu wrote a letter to the President of the Republic of Cameroon, to complain about the fraudulent acquisition of land by Danpullo.⁴² This complaint did not win total support from the cross section of the Esu community as there were disagreements among the inhabitants on its existence. Those who could readily win opportunities in the new structure were sharply opposed by those who hitherto occupied parcels of land that were expropriated to establish the ranch. The ranch management took advantage of this division and moved on with its mission of expanding the land holdings to graze cattle.

The opportunity cost of Danpullo's unchecked action was the alienation of vast expanses of land from the primary occupants.⁴³ Supporting this view, Izumi maintains that the idea of modern land ownership is based on people's capability to negotiate their right to land by manipulating existing land rules.⁴⁴ This stems from the fact that local elite depend on the rich land grabbers to extort money for their personal gains. This was not different in Esu where some individuals honoured a festive party thrown by Danpullo to the populace as bait to win some solidarity to his land expropriation mission.⁴⁵ This was against the utter dismay of part of the population, especially those who were victims of the land seizures. This act led to squabbles between the *Fon*, clan heads and villagers. Gray and Kevane argue that in the face of such manoeuvres, the poor are increasingly being driven out of family land they acquired for farm use and family sustenance stirring conflict between them and land grabbers.⁴⁶ This was very evident in Esu where some weak income farmers constituting several families were forced out of their considered ancestral land in order to lend grazing space for Danpullo's agro-

industrial livestock investment. This action which was considered by the Esu as callous, did not only end at the level of complaints, but degenerated into conflicts.

Conflict Escalation

Land expropriation fuelled the conflict between Esu and the ranch management. Ranch workers competed with farmers over farming lands for grazing, precipitating the death of some persons through physical assaults. In order for the ranch management to grab as much land as possible, farmers were maimed, displaced; rendered homeless, starved, tortured and crops destroyed, roads were blocked, isolating farmers from farms and their highly cherished raffia bushes destroyed. Ngwoh justifies this when he mentions that “between 1993 and 1995, many farmers were evicted from their farms in places like Ibi Wundele, Melang, Toukisong. While their crops were simply cut down, those who resisted were tortured by employees of the ranch...”⁴⁷ This situation can better be understood in a lamentation from the son of one of the victims as follows:

My father had a very big compound in Toukisong as well as farms and livestock, but this guy’s men drove them out and burnt down the houses. [He] has seized the land and has prohibited anyone from farming on it. It truly hurts when you think of things like this and all the other victims who were rendered homeless and deprived of their farm holdings.⁴⁸

The obsessive quest for land by the ranch entrepreneur had immense ramifications.⁴⁹ Arable crop farmers lost most of their livestock, foodstuffs and some belongings to ranch workers. Faced with this situation, the local inhabitants reacted in different proportions. In 1988, young boys constituted themselves into a fortified group and used hit-and-run tactics to scare off employees of the ranch from the area. This created some insecurity in the locality leading to the stationing of law enforcement officers at the ranch. In response, the ranch management orchestrated the arrest and detention of Esu indigenes like Charlie Meh Kum, Charles Ndong, Charles Fuh Chu, Victor Bin Akang, Venantius Kah Buh and Venantius Tem in 1988 for raising an alarm about the expropriation of ancestral farmlands.

It was in the backdrop of these reprisals that, on March 19, 1993, approximately 2,500 women trekked to Wum to complain to the SDO to provide a lasting solution to the problems caused by the Elba cattle ranch in Esu.⁵⁰ It is worthy to note that Danpullo’s complex did not only place a toll on the indigenous farming population but on other small scale herders who had settled in Esu before the establishment of the ranch. A case in point was the migration from 2000 to 2005 of El Hadj Tashi and his descendants from Toukisong with over 5000 cattle to Kessasei closer to the settlement because of rampant raid by the workers of the Elba Ranch who settled in close proximity with him. Many more lost their livestock through raid. For the sake of peace and desire to have animals, many herders left Esu to Fouban and some as far as North Cameroon.⁵¹

Although early efforts were made by the indigenous population, to resolve the conflict amicably, the ranch management remained repressive, sending in forces of law and order to arrest all who were found or suspected of tress pass. Several youths and farmers were arraigned for trespass. This attitude was highly repudiated by the youths who denounced the stigma bestowed on them by ranch workers and uniform officers.⁵² The impartiality of the administration in litigations between the Esu farmers and ranch management was not uncommon, it conflates with Wehrmann’s assessment that:

In many countries or situations, the poor hesitate and often do not dare to resist the powerful, not least in court. If they do, or if the powerful sue them instead, the chances are very low that the poor will win the case. ..Frequently, cases that involve a powerful actor but which have been brought to court by a poor one are not dealt with at all. In many cases bribery plays a major role. In other cases, the richer party simply can afford the better lawyer.⁵³

The injudiciousness of graziers who preferred to bribe the courts with huge sums than reach win-win conciliation only came to justify the asymmetry in land conflicts between the rich versus the poor.⁵⁴ For over two decades, the strained relations between the Esu and the ranch management over land ownership and use remained irresolute until 2008.

Attempt at Rapprochement

Conciliation by the Elba Ranch management came some 21 years later during the enthronement of *Fon* Kum à Chuo II with the support of 1,000,000 FCFA on February 5, 2008.⁵⁵ But the first ever face to face meeting between El-Hadj Ahmadou Danpullo and the Esu people took place on July 1, 2008.⁵⁶ This meeting was attended by all the Chiefs of Esu, Fulani and Hausa leaders, all *Ntchu* members, leaders of the feminine traditional cult, *Kefab*, the *Fon* of Mmen, the Mayor of Zhoa Council, Ebui Jonas, some Esu Cultural and Development Association (ECUDA) executive members and panoply of notables. Although the encounter was primarily to pay homage to the new *Fon*, it was the first real encounter in the context of the crisis between Danpullo and the Esu afflicted population.⁵⁷

During the encounter with the *Fon*, the ranch entrepreneur descended from his power-bloated platform and formally introduced himself to the *Fon* and people of Esu. He presented some gifts to the *Fon* among which was a Pick-up truck. He approbated himself as a son of Esu and apologized for his wrong doings in the past and said he had come back home to ask for forgiveness.⁵⁸ His conciliatory desire was further exhibited when he regretted having stayed for so long without meeting face to face with the population, but laid the blame of his misdeeds on those who were acting on his behalf.⁵⁹ He applauded the idea to build a befitting palace for the new *Fon*, and pledged to support with the sum of 5,000,000FCFA. Finally he called for an amicable resolution of the problems associated with his land use in the area.⁶⁰

The *Fon* of Esu, for his part, thanked the ranch entrepreneur for the visit and kind gesture. But added that he had had a lot of problems with the villagers as a result of his activities. He however concluded that it was necessary for Danpullo to create time for the problems to be diagnosed and treated harmoniously. These concluding words were a mark of conciliation with the ranch management. It marked an important turning point in the relations between the Esu community and the ranch developers. Danpullo's humility towards the *Fon* of Esu and his subjects charted ways for a collective enterprise in the exploitation of land resources in Esu.⁶¹

II. CONCLUSION

The Esu-Elba ranch dispute represents a case of contending land perspectives between progressive elite land exploitation and the conservative traditional discernment of the use and meaning of ancestral land. The land conflict between the ranch enterprise of El Hadj Amadou Danpullo and the Esu community rested on an assemblage of factors. In the first place it built up on a history of migration and primary occupation where different groups moved and settled in varied parts of the *Fondom*. Besides, the contention rested on the strong attachment of the people to land for over a century. The lands which were vast and underexploited because of the state of the technology and economics of production were for over a century considered as inalienable property of the people not waste lands. This conservative philosophy gradually eroded with the arrival of cattle Fulani who mistook grazing concessions for land rights. The introduction of a grazing culture acted as a lure for a gigantic and more advanced agro-industrial cattle rearing complex. The size of the enterprise and the unflinching quest for expansion brought tremendous pressure to bear on the hitherto considered communal land holdings in Esu.

The antagonistic farming cultures of cattle rearing and arable crop cultivation and more importantly, elite influence of the ranch owner, Danpullo, to expropriate vast expanses of land brought resistance and resilience from the indigenous Esu. This scenario found expression in open hostilities that led to the arrest and torture of some villagers, loss of lives and wanton destruction of property. The conflict stifled economic activities in the area for a couple of years, but its protracted nature reached a relative compromise when the ranch entrepreneur softened his position and sued for peace with the Esu through their traditional head, the *Fon*. The paper has engaged in context the quintessence and implications of contending perspectives over land control in social power relations and inter-community coexistence.

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