CHAPTER FOUR

LOST CONTROL, LEGAL PLURALISM AND DAMMING THE FLOOD: CHANGING INSTITUTIONS AMONG THE MUSGUM AND KOTOKO OF THE VILLAGE LAHAÏ IN THE WAZA-LOGONE FLOODPLAIN (CAMEROON)

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ABSTRACT

In the Waza-Logone floodplain not only did specialised strategies emerge out of the century-long interaction between men and nature, but also rules (institutions) were developed, which ensured a sustainable use of the common-pool resources. The pressure (demographic growth, rising poverty and severe economic stress) on the natural resources of the floodplain increased with the colonial times, but this alone would not have forcibly led to an overuse of the natural resources such as the fisheries. This paper shows that today’s problems in resource management can not be derived directly from external factors (like economy, technology, demography and environment); but that they have to be set in relation to institutional change in order to get the full picture. The paper focuses on a study of the Kotoko village, Lahaï, where institutions regulating access to fisheries have undergone many transformations since pre-colonial times. This is due to several factors, which include demographic pressure, market economy, technological and political changes. It shows that the practise of the Kotoko fishing group excluding later immigrants from fisheries based on access to techniques declined, as prices for fish began to rise, making this common-pool resource attractive for the market and changing local institutions of access to the fisheries. Independence introduced a new administrative structure, a modern administration that should have superseded the traditional (Kotoko) administration. The traditional system could not be erased though, so that two parallel systems with different, yet overlapping rules and laws continued to exist in a form of legal pluralism. Adding to the local problems was the
environmental changes caused by the Maga Dam, resulting in water shortage in the floodplain, degradation and diminishing the available natural resources. The people had to intensify and diversify the use of the natural resources so that the traditional restrictions on the use of the resources, especially in the fishery, came under severe pressure and began to erode. The absence of a generally respected authority and the weakness of the state administration under the democratisation and decentralisation process, allowed wealthier people to bribe the administrators to bend the rules, aggravating conflicts over access to resources, as can be shown in the case of Lahaï.

1. Introduction

Lahaï is situated in the Waza-Logone floodplain in the extreme-north of Cameroon, where the Musgum and the Kotoko face increased pressure on their natural resources (pastures and fisheries). Explanations that lie to hand are global climatic change, the construction of the Maga Dam and the population growth in the area. But institutional, political and social changes also have to be considered.

Over centuries, the Kotoko developed their natural resource management system (based on the fisheries) in adaptation to the seasonal variability of the resources. These institutions play a key role because they used to limit the access to resources, impose and control the access rules and sanction abuses. Hence, their transformation has had a major influence on the management of the natural resources of today. Therefore, the focus of this paper is on the Kotoko institutions and examines how they were working in the past and why and how they changed up to today. Institutional change can derive from different influences. External and internal factors such as power relations (bargaining power), political and economic changes, ideology, organisation and demographic and technical variables have to be taken into consideration (Ensminger 1992). Also important is the analysis of conflicts that arise due to the legislative insecurity.

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