
Original Article

Property Relations by other Means: Conflict over Dryland Resources in Benin and Mali

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Abstract Conflicts over natural resources and property concern the distribution of entitlements to resources and social identities. The highlighting of this continuity enables the insertion of conflict into a broader historical and theoretical framework dealing with social change, as well as access to and control over resources. However, this reveals nothing about the discontinuity between tensions over natural resources and outbreaks of conflict involving physical and symbolic violence. Case studies carried out in Mali and Benin provide an empirical basis for the discussion of the following set of exploratory hypotheses: they stress the continuity between conflict and property within the frame of a theory of access to natural resources; they emphasise the plurality of actors involved in disputes over natural resources in African drylands beyond the farmer–herdsman configuration; and they see resource conflict, property and policy as a matter of persuasion, that is, representation and narrative.

Les conflits sur les ressources naturelles et la propriété concernent la distribution des droits sur les ressources et la définition des identités sociales. Mettre l'accent sur cette continuité permet d'insérer le conflit dans un cadre historique et théorique plus large touchant au changement social et à l'accès et au contrôle des ressources naturelles. Toutefois, cela ne dit rien de la discontinuité entre tensions sur les ressources et déclenchement de conflits impliquant une violence physique et symbolique. Des études de cas au Mali et Bénin fournissent la base de discussion d'hypothèses mettant l'accent sur la continuité entre conflit et propriété dans le cadre d'une théorie de l'accès aux ressources naturelles ; montrant la pluralité des acteurs impliqués dans les disputes sur les ressources naturelles en Afrique sèche au-delà de la polarité agriculteur-éleveur ; concevant les conflits, propriétés et politiques des ressources naturelles comme une affaire de persuasion, donc de représentation et de récit.

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Introduction

'War is merely the continuation of politics by other means', Carl von Clausewitz's dictum could provide a telling starting point for the interpretation of conflicts over natural resources in Africa and elsewhere. Rephrased in words more appropriate to our subject matter, his statement could be reformulated as follows: conflict over dryland natural resources is the continuation of property relations by other means. As Hann argues, 'property' is best seen as directing attention to a vast field of cultural as well as social relations, to the symbolic as well as the material contexts within which things are recognised and personal as well as collective identities are made' (1998, p. 5). Conflict over

natural resources is akin to property involving the distribution of resources and identities: ‘Taking sides, constructing identities’, as Schlee puts it (2004). The highlighting of the continuity between property regimes and conflicts over dryland natural resources, as distributing rights to resources and belongings, enables the insertion of conflict into a broader historical and theoretical framework related to social change and access to and control over resources. Ribot and Peluso developed a broad theory founded on ‘access’ as the ‘ability to benefit from things’; ‘access control’ as ‘the ability to mediate others’ access’; ‘gaining access’ as the ‘process by which access is established’; and the ‘maintenance of access’ as requiring ‘[the] expending [of] resources or powers to keep a particular sort of resource access open’ (2003: pp. 153–4). The ‘politics of belonging’ (Kuba and Lentz, 2006) obviously constitute an important device in the mechanisms of access maintenance in sub-Saharan Africa.¹ However, ‘[i]dentification in conflict situations is in no way determined by contested resources’ (Schlee, 2004, p. 149). If natural resources and belonging are both at stake in conflicts over landed resources, they are in a position of relative mutual autonomy. Furthermore, illicit mechanisms, including violence, threat, corruption and theft, represent alternative ways of accessing property rights to resources that are anchored in law, custom or convention. Conflict comes into the picture at this juncture, *inter alia*, as a mode of gaining or maintaining access to resources or contesting existing rules or their interpretation, control devices, and the balance of power in African drylands – and beyond (Sikor and Lund, 2009).

However – and this is the second thread of our argument – the uniting of conflict and property in a common theory of access offers little insight into the discontinuity that occurs as a result of the passage from tension over natural resources to the outbreak of conflict involving physical and symbolic violence (see also Hagberg, 1998; Moritz, 2006, pp. 12–14). Indeed, it is no easy task to define the precise nature of a conflict over natural resources. What are the factors underlying competition or (latent) tension and the passage to (open) conflict? Where is the fine line between contested regulation and real dispute? If there is conflict, what is it about: access, boundaries, resource definition, rules, belonging or authorities? To what extent is a conflict a localised phenomenon or the expression of a larger process of social change, a ‘meta-conflict’ that unfolds in the long term? How are conflicts resolved, ignored or ‘calmed down’ – or not, thus escalating into outbreaks of violence – and according to which legal, social and moral principles?

Third point, conflicts over natural resources in the African drylands involve a complex set of state and non-state actors as well as institutions, and extend beyond the usual suspects of farmers and herdsman (Hussein *et al*, 1999; Moritz, 2006). The conceptual and practical continuity between conflict and property, which can be understood within the frame of a theory of access to natural resources, can be extended to policy issues we will meet in the guise of decentralisation, development projects or conservation programmes in the case studies.

These three related threads are rarely mobilised simultaneously in the literature we reviewed. Together they contribute to a political anthropology of conflict over dryland resources in West Africa that takes into account property relations as well as the interplay of access and belonging. This combination stems from our longstanding field work on the topic in Mali (Hochet, 2005, 2006a, b, 2007) and Benin (Le Meur, 2002, 2006a, b, c, 2008a, b).² This inductive approach has been compared with the results of a critical review of the literature (detailed in Le Meur *et al*, 2006),³ which extended the panel of cases of conflict over natural resources in the African drylands, in particular to outbreaks of violence, a form of conflict we did not encounter – or only marginally – in our research.

The article begins by elaborating on the theory of conflict (part one) before dealing with the case studies (part two) and then returning to our three hypothesis for a final discussion (part three). A short coda will briefly address a fourth line of argument we only incidentally deal with in the case studies: to a certain extent, conflict, property and policy are a matter of persuasion (Fortmann, 1995; Rose, 1994), that is: of representation, storytelling and narrative.⁴ The narrative function is inherent in human agency (Ricoeur, 1983–1985) and taking it systematically into account in studying resource conflict, property and policy is a promising line of research.

Understanding Resource Conflict in the Drylands of Africa

Typologies of conflicts between herdsmen and farmers based on formalised variables, such as frequency, intensity and scale (Hussein *et al*, 1999, pp. 398–402), can provide an overview of occurrences of conflict in a defined area and help in the construction of hypotheses about the link between macro-factors and the emergence of conflict. However, this kind of quantification has no explanatory power *per se*. Such an approach relies all too often on a naive theory of conflict as opposed to consensus. It fails to take into account conflict dynamics and evolving linkages between (temporally and/or spatially) distant arenas and situations. Formal approaches also come up against practical challenges regarding the visibility of conflicts, which is not only a matter of scale and intensity, but also of publicness and categorisation. In the same way, visual representations based on this type of approach produce unsatisfactory results because of the multi-sited nature of conflicts and their causal complexities.

Conflicts over dryland resources are part and parcel of social life and therefore must not be isolated analytically from the flows of events, of which they are a part, and which regulate access to and control over landed resources. Negotiated processes generating new regulations about land are ‘more or less conflictive according to contexts and negotiating actors: the practical limit between regulation and conflict is actually extremely thin’ (Lavigne Delville and Hochet, 2005, p. 103). Conflicts are, therefore, manifestations of social cleavages and diverging interests as well as modes of communication. At the same time, the boundary between tension and conflict is not easy to decipher, and social actors can manipulate this line by resorting to threats and symbolic actions within the limits of apparently non-violent relationships (Chauveau and Mathieu, 1998, p. 243). Conflict is integrated into chains of events that include disputes, negotiations, violent clashes, appeasement, the re-opening of cases, the intrusion of new actors and new rules, and the shifting places of arbitration. In short, a conflict cannot be understood in isolation from the wider set of actors and events it involves. As public and historically situated chains of events, conflicts are normal facts (in both the statistical and normative senses) to be negotiated, appeased, mitigated and, if possible, prevented, or at least anticipated, and not a social pathology to be eradicated. However, although some conflicts result in violence, destruction of social ties and disappearance of shared moral principles, others provide space for the renegotiation of rights, rules and power asymmetries, that is, social change in general. We deem the latter as ‘productive conflicts’ as opposed to ‘blocked’ or ‘blocking situations’ (and by analogy with the double-sidedness of power, as both constraining and enabling; see Foucault, 2001).

Conflicts over landed resources express moments of reconfiguration or reproduction of rules and positions, ranging from conflict surrounding the interpretation of shared normative rules to the contesting of these rules or the mobilisation of multiple normative

repertoires as discursive resources in a context of legal pluralism (Comaroff and Roberts, 1981). As we shall see in the Malian case study, conflict can strengthen and reproduce the herdsman–farmer identity boundary or be used to contest existing agreements about access to labour and resources that are constitutive of their respective identities. Whatever the degree of fragmentation, opacity and asymmetry inherent in multiple-stage conflicts, one can define conflict as expressing in a public manner the perception of a rupture in the working social order. The passage from tension to conflict involves the entry of a third party into an initially dyadic relation. Conflict is, therefore, about contesting and negotiating a public compromise, about justice and social order between different levels or communities of belonging (household, lineage, village, ethnic group and national level) in relation to different public authorities and, as demonstrated by the Malian case, with the instrumentalization of the ‘pastoral charter’ introduced by a development project to the advantage of the farmers (see also Jacob, 2007). Hence, the involvement of a third party, that is an external authority, community members, internalised rules, ancestors or gods, could be postulated as the defining feature of conflict. However, the focus on publicness as a defining feature of conflict leaves open the question as to the mechanisms by which latent disputes sometimes escalate into open conflicts.

The definition of conflict as inherently public and historical raises questions about the interpretation of pastoral land disputes and, more specifically, about the threshold between tension and conflict. Conventional conflict analysis starts with the structural factors that ‘underlie’ conflicts. Based on a broad review of the literature on the African drylands (see Le Meur *et al*, 2006), we have classified these factors into three categories: (i) demographic (in particular in-migration) and environmental factors that generate pressure and competition in relation to natural resources; (ii) law, development and policy factors that generate legal and institutional pluralism, contradictions between development projects, conservation areas and administrative boundaries, and new opportunities and constraints in the appropriation of, access to and use of natural resource; (iii) socio-political and economic factors (identity politics, the commoditization of agriculture and the development of land markets) that generate inequalities, that is unequal access to natural resources or unequal capacities for the exploitation of these resources (Peters, 2004).

However, all of these factors do not automatically lead to conflict in the African drylands. They drive social change through an increase in resource competition, normative pluralism, situational adjustment and growing social inequalities. The genesis of tensions in a potentially conflictive situation, the emergence of the conflict itself and the dynamics of its unfolding or settlement: all of these stages must be differentiated analytically. They do not form an automatic or linear sequence and, as we shall see in the empirical section of this paper, the way in which they interlink causally depends on local circumstances. Macro-factors, such as demographic pressure, the scarcity of natural resources or economic policy do not generate conflicts as such. They are mediated by localised contexts and involve the interplay of local situations and exogenous influences (Turner, 2006). This includes cases, in which strong demographic pressure has arisen, for example in the Sudanese cotton area as demonstrated by Hagberg (1998). As opposed to a linear view of conflict positing a causal sequence between underlying factors and the outbreak of conflict that would link these stages mechanically, it is possible to refer to the ‘semi-autonomy’ (Moore, 2000) of conflict trajectories. This viewpoint helps to eliminate the stereotypes and policy narratives about the alleged demographic and

ecological causes of conflicts surrounding resources (Leach and Mearns, 1997). External factors play a key role here by bringing new discursive and material resources and disrupting local norms. This can lead to political exploitation by outsiders or the use of these factors as resources by insiders (see Chauveau and Richards, 2008). Land law, public policies and decentralisation constitute a specific set of factors linking the local with the national level (Lund, 1998; Homewood *et al*, 2004; Batterbury and Fernando, 2006).

External intervention very often takes the paradigmatic form of a ‘development project’ that includes natural resource management and conservation programmes. They involve the influx of resources of various orders (financial, technical, political or symbolic) beyond the actual objectives of the project. Because the rules of the (new) game, as defined by development projects/agents, often lack local legitimacy, such interventions may add to the existing institutional and normative pluralism. The discrepancy between the influx of resources and weak or uncertain regulations generates space for opportunistic behaviours (Long, 1989). Finally, as exemplified by the large-scale colonial and post-colonial irrigation scheme on the Niger Delta in Mali with the *Office du Niger* (van Beusekom, 2002) or the Gezira Scheme in Sudan (Barnett, 1977), external interventions, such as land development and reform, development programmes and environmental policy, often have deep historical roots that need to be taken into account in reaching an understanding of contemporary conflicts.

Case Studies: Conflict over Natural Resources in Mali and Benin as Multi-Stake and Multi-Actor Arenas

The two case studies drawn from our field work in south-east Mali and north-central Benin appear to revolve around classical configurations of relationships, tensions and conflicts between farmers and herders in West Africa (de Bruijn and van Dijk, 1997; Diallo and Schlee, 2000). Productive practices, complementarities and agreements as well as competition over landed resources are focal issues in both cases. In this respect, they exemplify continuity between conflict and property within the frame of a theory of access to natural resources.

Herder–farmer conflicts in south-east Mali revolve around different production systems and resource uses. Coordination and tensions between them are closely connected to the definition of different levels of belonging and normative frames, including development projects. The Benin case extends and enriches the analysis of resource conflicts in the African drylands as it brings into play state actors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international donors involved in the recently intensified conservation policy. Therefore, both cases highlight the plurality of actors involved in disputes over natural resources in African drylands beyond the farmer–herdsman configuration.

Rather than being an explicit focus, our third exploratory hypothesis of conflict and property as a matter of persuasion, representation and narrative underlies the presented cases. For example, the past herder–farmer symbiosis (Breusers *et al*, 1998) constitutes the narrative background against which present conflicts are assessed by the project, whereas neo-Malthusian narratives (Leach and Mearns, 1997) underlie the conservationist policy in Benin. At individual level, claims are all embedded in specific stories and trajectories and asserted to end of persuasion.

Belonging and Resource Politics in South-East Mali

Tensions between ‘Fulbe herdsmen’ and ‘native farmers’ over crop residues have been a regular occurrence in Kouri in south-east Mali since the late 1990s.⁵ The herdsmen are composed of two sub-groups: the Seno and Bendugu pastoralists, who began cultivating in the past two to three generations (referred to ‘agro-pastoralists’ here), and the Gimbala who engage in cattle trading. In addition, the farmers can be sub-divided into two groups: cotton growers, who have invested their cash in cattle (the ‘cattle-owning farmers’) and farmers, who have no or incomplete ox plough, that is, the ‘agriculturalists’. The farmers belong to four ethnic groups: the Minyanka, Dafina, Dogon and Senufo.

The Fulbe settled in Kouri during the periods of drought experienced in the Sahel from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s (de Bruijn and van Dijk, 1995, 2003). The Gimbala came from Timbuktu; the Bendugu from the Dogon highlands; and the Seno from northern Burkina Faso. At the same time, the *Compagnie française de développement des fibres textiles* (CFDT) and later the *Compagnie malienne pour le développement des textiles* (CMDT) encouraged the Malian peasants to cultivate with ox plough (1967–1976 and 1976–1989). In this context, the Fulbe soon emerged as ‘helpful strangers’ for the Minyanka (Hochet, 2006b). Indeed, their social and economic integration occurred in two ways: first, through inter-individual exchanges of oxen for ploughing for access to pastoral resources (crop residues and water) between herdsmen and farmers; and, second, through agreements between neighbouring villages to allow Fulbe camps to settle on the borders of their land with a pledge to shield them from agricultural clearance if possible. During this period, farmers could sell cowpea, groundnut and cotton residues; however, they did not consider millet and sorghum residues as resources. Thanks to the agreements reached with the Minyanka villages, the Fulbe could use these residues collectively on the basis of an inter-village ‘economy of sharing’ (Thébaud, 2002, p. 221 *et seq*) to prepare herds for the long dry season and transhumance (Welte, 1997; Ramisch, 1999).

The coinciding of the Fulbe settlement and the establishment of the CMDT projects paved the way for the development of farmer and pastoralist associations in Kouri region throughout the 1980s (Hochet, 2006b). By the end of 1990s, most of the natives had become ‘cattle-owning farmers’, owning some of the largest herds in the region. At the same time, Bendugu and Seno pastoralists cultivated cotton and maize, thus becoming ‘agro-pastoralists’. From that time on, therefore, millet and sorghum crop residues became a strategic resource for both the ‘agro-pastoralists’ and the new ‘cattle-owning farmers’. The late 1990s also saw the demise of an entire generation of customary authorities, such as village chiefs, land priests and heads of lineages, which had established the inter-village agreements for the hosting of the Fulbe camps. The new generation of leaders that came to be recognised as customary authorities challenged these agreements and no longer guaranteed the Fulbe access to the resources required by their herds (bush, water and crop residues).

By the late 1990s, tensions had arisen between the agro-pastoralists and cattle-owning farmers around the issue of the access to and collective use of millet and sorghum residues. Each actor (re-) defined the boundaries of the user community in his own way: the agro-pastoralists maintained the collective inter-village sharing of the resources, whereas the cattle-owning farmers claimed strictly familial ownership. The agro-pastoralists continued to rely on the inter-village agreements that allowed them to settle and maintain their supra-local access to harvested plots and the shared use of residues. According to

them, the access to land and resource use was not the exclusive right of the households, other potential users were also entitled to access and use them. For their part, the cattle-owning farmers could not accept the grazing of crop residues by Fulbe herds for two reasons. First, they also had cattle that relied on residues. Second, they defined/perceived sorghum and millet stems as a resource created by their own efforts: they integrated crop residues into the pool of resources deemed as resulting from their work, thus justifying their claim to restrict the right to use them to the domestic production unit. Indeed, as in many West African societies, the Minyanka base property rights on labour investment in land. Thus, tensions arose as a result of the clash between the cattle-owning farmers' claim to an exclusive use right to the crop residues and the agro-pastoralists' claim to an inter-village and communal use right.

However, what was involved here was not exclusively a dispute over the resource. The issue was mainly about the definition of the boundaries of the community, within which the resource can be shared (see Jacob, 2007, p. 206 *et sq.*). The boundaries of this community were based on adjacency to production areas (fields, bush and cattle park). Indeed, the cattle-owning farmers displayed different attitudes to neighbours and non-neighbours (or strangers). According to them, the herdsmen who misbehaved were those who came from other villages, whereas those from the village were more respectful. As is the case in northern Benin (see below), people observed a difference between transhumant and local herdsmen. For their part, the Fulbe asserted that cattle-owning farmers and cultivators who have plots bordering herd grazing areas in the bush shared their crop residues, whereas those settled further away definitely refused. The closeness of farming and grazing areas provided a point of juncture between the two groups. But this physical proximity was not enough for the establishment of a neighbourhood community. This involved a procedure that complies with the moral principle of *sigi bé dudiya*, which expresses the idea of sitting in peace next to someone. This principle allows actors to recognise their common humanity and to consider agreements between them. Drawing on this moral principle, farmers define a 'good neighbour' as someone who: (i) asks a farmer for permission before grazing crop residues; (ii) does not turn the herds too much around the fields during harvest; and (iii) respects the precedence of farmers. The interplay between the proximity of production areas and the moral qualification of 'good neighbourliness' allowed the agro-pastoralists and cattle-owning farmers to root the joint use of crop residues in a shared belonging.

Nevertheless, several herdsmen reported about clashes with certain cattle-owning farmers. The latter used a formal 'pastoral charter' to break their informal inter-individual agreements and demand sanctions and fines because the former's herds had grazed their plots. Indeed, during the 1990s a project of sustainable resource management helped the local agro-pastoralist union to define and enforce a 'pastoral charter', a formal agreement that defines the period when the entire territory is open to herds and when grazing is forbidden to give precedence to farming (Hochet, 2006a, pp. 123–124). Paradoxically, the negotiations between farmers and pastoralists organised by the project benefited the farmers (for the presentation of a similar case, see Bierschenk, 1988). The charter established in 1999 that the territory is open to cattle grazing every year from 31 December when all Fulbe herds are not at Kouri but in transhumance. Although the agro-pastoralist needed the crop residues before this date to feed the herds before transhumance, according to the pastoral charter, agro-pastoralists who allow herds to graze on crop residues before this date are engaging in an illegal activity. By creating a space for the rupture of inter-individual agreements, the pastoral charter turned negotiations into conflicts. The charter

did not regulate herdsman–farmer relations but paved the way for new opportunistic behaviours that fuelled tensions between them.

Conservation Policy and Conflicts over Boundaries and Resources in Northern Benin

Benin has experienced a renewed interest in environmental protection and forestry over the past decade, especially in the central and northern regions, where most of the state forests and the two national parks W and Pendjari are located, all of which originate from the colonial era. The renewal of the conservationist policy impetus by international development agencies takes the form of an influx of externally funded conservation projects, which have generated institutions at different levels. At village level, the ‘local committee’ is the paradigmatic product of participatory development approaches, which do not question the nature of the ‘village’ (local community or administrative entity), and all too often bypass the decentralised authorities that were democratically elected in 2002 and 2003. Although state forests remain legally out of their reach, the new mayors are officially in charge of land issues and natural resource management. Nonetheless, the conflicts arising outside of the forests are closely linked with the current hardening of the (forest and national park) conservation policy in a context of deep uncertainty with regard to landed property (Le Meur, 2006a, b; see also Bassett *et al*, 2007; Boutrais, 2008).

In Borgou and Alibori provinces in the north-east of Benin, autochthonous farmers (Tchabe, a Yoruba sub-group) in search of new land began to encroach on state forests (Toui-Kilibo forest) or other areas. In the process they pushed migrants from north-west Benin (Atakora) into the forest (Edja, 1999; Doevenspeck, 2005). Local populations had never considered the national parks and forest administrations as legitimate landowners and the latter’s *laissez-faire* management style had reinforced this view in recent years. When the park authorities tried to impose a rent on farmers for the right to farm in the buffer zone surrounding the core area of the park, their initiative was seen as completely illegitimate as no compensation had been paid for the expropriation of land by the park. The spatial organisation of the park and its buffer zones also tended to harden the social boundaries between the herdsman and farmers, downplaying the old ties of friendships and exchange linking the two groups. According to the farmers, the park administration assigned the best areas to the Fulbe as there is water there. Nevertheless, they sometimes suggested allowing herdsman settle in the buffer zone because, as legitimate owners of the land (so runs the argument), they would recover their property through the settlement of Fulbe clients as a result.

The eviction of farmers from forests by the state forest department also generated conflict in adjacent localities. People were forced to return to villages, which, in some cases, they had left several decades ago. They claimed access to land in their original communities; however, membership of a social grouping (household, lineage) is no guarantee of automatic access to a share in communal land. Furthermore, in their absence, cotton cultivation had developed in northern Benin and led to the rapid extension of cultivated areas and ox ploughing. Conflicts unfolded differently, depending on whether they involved the autochthonous farmers alone or the migrants as well. Intra-autochthonous conflicts are inherently conflicts over legitimacy and justification principles. People who had left their villages to clear land in state forests claimed access on the basis of belonging, and those who had stayed behind claimed that they had invested labour in the land. Migrants can invoke a right to livelihood inherent in a principle of ‘common humanity’ and their ‘good behaviour’ as a proof of their integration as specific ‘local

citizens' (see Le Meur, 2006b; Berry, 2009). Their status is that of strangers tied to the community by a web of rights and duties. Therefore, the conflict between the yam cultivators (formerly located in the forest) and cotton growers, who had invested in animal traction and chemical inputs, was not only about land rights and moral principles, but also about farming systems. Cotton development and the extension of cultivated areas generated also affect pastoral practices. Cotton fields have tended to expand across pastoral passageways and herdsmen have had to find other pathways for moving their cattle, namely in protected areas such as forests and parks.

Overlapping boundaries are also potential causes of conflict. Forest development plans are based on the zoning of state forests. They are divided into management units incorporating the villages bordering the forests. Administrative boundaries, such as villages or communes, do not exist within forests that are part of the state's property, making the involvement of communal authorities difficult. Furthermore, the modalities of resource sharing between communes and forest administration had not been clearly defined thus far.

Faced with these contradictory interests and legitimacies, the mayors felt helpless. Institutions for solving conflicts involving local authorities and state officials were set up in the 1980s, such as the *comités de constat*, which estimated the costs of damage to fields (Van Driel, 2001, p. 169). These committees and the similar pastoral committees, which were later established, never proved effective and their weak legitimacy resulted directly from their striking absence from dispute settlement (Lund, 2002). The mayors tried to find allies to consolidate their position in dispute resolution. Experts and researchers represented one option, customary chiefs another. The customary chieftaincy experienced a comeback on the political scene in Benin in the period of democratisation of the 1990s; this gave them renewed legitimacy in respect of land management. In the face of the strong tensions over land, mayors explicitly supported the re-establishment of customary institutions for the sake of 'social peace and identity' (interview with Mayor of Gogonou, 26 March 2006). The limit of their involvement lay in the areas in which the state had asserted its presence most thoroughly, namely in state forestry and national parks. Although the state ownership of these areas was not locally recognised, the state forests and park boundaries appeared to have been internalised by the customary chiefs. For example, the Kandisonou or earth priest stated that he would never become involved in disputes relating to the national park areas managed by *Centre national de gestion des réserves de faune* (CENAGREF) (see Le Meur *et al.*, 1999 for similar observations). The imperative of maintaining peace (Hagberg, 1998) was also used by mayors and other actors to defend their preference for the involvement of the prefects (and sub-prefects before decentralisation) in dispute settlement: the administrative authorities tended to favour reconciliation based on a 'customary logic' that is pervasive within 'modern institutions', whereas courts of justice generate definitive scissions by 'stating the law'.

Of civil society organisations, the herdsmen association *Union départementale des organisations professionnelles des éleveurs du Borgou-Alibori* (UDOPER), which was established in 2002, has become a central player in rural development and natural resource management in north Benin. This association was initially established for the purpose of cattle vaccination, and its members claim strong professional positioning. UDOPER has a trans-ethnic constituency and presents itself as a professional organisation of cattle breeders. This means that civil servants and urban dwellers, who sometimes own enormous herds of cattle are not eligible for membership, whereas farmers who breed cattle can. For UDOPER the 'pure' farmer or 'pure' pastoralist no longer exists. They are

all settled or semi-settled agro-pastoralists or farmers who keep stock (see also Van Driel, 2001, p. 9 *et seq.*).

UDOPER defends pastoralists at local and regional level vis-à-vis the forest administration and acts as an intermediary in cases of conflict. Its objective is active participation in ‘the fair management of land and resources’ as stated by Allassane Boukari Bata, a Baatonu animal technician and conflict specialist in UDOPER (interviewed on 26 March 2006 in Kandi). The organisation fights for better land-use planning in forested areas, in particular the assignment of a clear status to pastoral passageways. This issue is highly sensitive and procedures for the identification of land rights, for example the rural land plan (Le Meur, 2006a) – not to mention land titling – encounter practical and conceptual difficulties in dealing with pastoral rights that are at once seasonal and regular. The proposal is to create permanent pastoral corridors to be designated under the aegis of the communal authorities, which are officially responsible for land administration. UDOPER leaders also attempt to establish a dialogue with pastoralist organisations in neighbouring countries as they observe a gap in the behaviour of foreign herdsmen. The latter appear to break all the rules when they come to Benin, whereas (supposedly) respecting regulations and resources in their native country. This behaviour has repercussions for the local Fulbe who are always suspected of collusion with their foreign ‘brothers’. To date, UDOPER has not been successful in this undertaking and their leaders suspect that the fact that urban dwellers (civil servants, politicians and traders) are members of the herdsmen’s associations in Niger and Burkina Faso poses the main obstacle to this dialogue. Their interests are too divergent.

Discussion: Boundary Work and the Politics of Conflict

The two case studies stress the continuity between conflict and property, within the frame of the issue of access to natural resources. In both cases, the definition and the boundaries of resources and belongings are at stake. The conflicts that have been unfolding around the boundaries of protected areas in Benin have involved farmer–herder oppositions, but have also resulted in internal disputes among the farmer and herder groups. In the Malian case, we also note changing configurations of ‘users’ communities’ between herders and farmers. Both situations also emphasise the plurality of actors involved in disputes over natural resources in African drylands beyond the farmer–herdsman configuration. However, the Benin case study encompasses a broader realm than the Malian case, with a transnational dimension of movements and conflicts over natural resources. It is also characterised by a deeper direct or indirect involvement of the state and international development/conservation agencies as major stakeholders in the management of natural resources.

Conflict as Complex Arena

Farmer–herder conflicts involve actors other than the farmers and herders: the first and main approach to the analysis of conflicts involving natural resources in African drylands is the consideration of the entire arena of actors, resources and institutions that are directly or indirectly involved in the case. In doing this, a timeframe should be considered that is long enough to include changes relating to actors, resources, stakes and rules. For example, the tensions over crop residues in south-eastern Mali resulted from the

convergence of at least six independent chains of events: droughts, the settlement and integration of the Fulbe, the evolution of the local production system, changes in customary powers, the co-existence of competing and common moral principles, and, finally, the intrusion of a development project in the guise of a local pastoral charter from the year 2000. In other words, the increasing tension between farmers and herders is multi-factorial and multi-scalar. It cannot be reduced to a mechanical opposition between ethnic or professional groups, for example, as tensions and their transformation into conflict are context-dependent and mediated by local histories.

Farmers and herders are also more than farmers and herders, in the sense that they both rely on other forms of identification and belonging; their mutual relations are multi-stranded, and their livelihood cannot be boiled down to a single activity (see Moritz, 2006, pp. 22–25; Turner, 2006). Moreover, farmers and herders are not discrete categories. In Mali, Hochet (2005, pp. 60–71) demonstrates that a conflict that initially presented as an opposition between a farmer and a herder was, in fact, a singular expression of tensions between farmers related to strategies for the colonisation of two native villages. The two categories are not homogeneous but interrelated: farmers express their concealed rivalries through open conflicts against herders.

Moreover, one important point raised by both case studies is the key role played by development apparatuses, decentralisation and the customary authorities in these conflicts. The symbiotic relationship between land and resource claimants struggling for the recognition of their rights and politico-legal authorities seeking legitimacy, has already been noted (Lund, 2002). We can go one step further by stressing the fact that, to a certain extent, claimant and authority functions can be assumed successively by social actors depending on the context involved. Development interventions, including conservationist approaches as seen in Benin, supply material and symbolic resources. Among these, new rules and boundaries are likely to favour opportunistic behaviours and to spark off conflict. Development intervention generates new authorities by creating new instances such as local management committees. At the same time, these authorities assert claims in relation to the maintenance of new boundaries and land-use zoning, including ‘their’ areas of intervention, for example the core area of national parks in Benin. The case of decentralisation instances is telling in this regard. In Benin, the communes have been mostly omitted from the new forest and conservation policies both as regulatory authorities (despite being such authorities) and as the holders of official competency in matters concerning land and natural resources within the communal territory. Mayors deal with this ambiguous situation by building alliances with customary authorities and civil society organisations for the settlement of land disputes, restoration of peace and regaining of control over their territory so that they can increase their bargaining power in the context of external intervention. Institutional pluralism and conflict instrumentalization do not necessarily rhyme with the ‘politics of permanent conflict’ (Moritz, 2006).

In this respect, the specific cases of farmer–herder conflict we have presented are all about competing forms of sovereignty and territorialising power involving decentralisation instances, conservation and development projects, customary authorities, state services, civil society organisations and so on. Critical here is the – overlapping, uncertain, contested and historically layered – boundary issue that lies at the heart of state anchoring, ‘villagization’ and *gestion de terroir* policies (Le Meur, 2006a; Bassett *et al*, 2007; Colin, Le Meur and Léonard, 2009). Adopting the argument of Breusers *et al* (1998, pp. 365–368) (see also Bassett, 2009) who stress the antiquity of farmer-herder conflicts over natural resources, we could argue that what is new in the situations we have examined empirically

and reviewed is the growing complexity of the mediating role fulfilled by external actors and authorities in reshaping resource conflicts.

Conflict, Property and Control over Natural Resources

The interplay and interchange of claims and arbitration, claimants and authorities is part of the institutional and legal pluralism observed both in our case studies and elsewhere in Africa in relation to conflicts surrounding natural resources. Resource conflicts are at once a matter of bundles of property rights and bundles of powers interacting with each other (Ribot and Peluso, 2003; Sikor and Lund, 2009).

The continuity between conflict over landed resources and landed property relations that we postulated at the beginning of this article is confirmed from the long-term perspective. The multi-strandedness of relations between farmers and herders and the plurality of the registers, in which they can be expressed, make it difficult if not impossible to unravel conflict from non-conflict. Or, more precisely, what we observe is a combination (from a synchronic point of view) and continuity (from a diachronic point of view) of conflict and non-conflict between farmers and herdsman in south-eastern Mali and northern Benin. The Malian case shows that the boundary between tension and conflict over resources is blurred and moving. The fact that the same kind of issue leads to tension, negotiation or conflict in a given context, depends on the material and moral resources at the disposal of the actors involved. This intricacy is striking in the Beninese case, in which farmers simultaneously protest against the favouritism that would have benefited the Fulbe in relation to the allocation of land by the W national park and allow them to settle on the basis of old friendship and patron–client ties in the buffer zone so as to lay claim to this land, which they consider their own. A specific dispute about park boundaries is therefore part and parcel of a chain of conflictive and non-conflictive relations between farmers and herders that have evolved over time.

This continuity can be grasped from a multi-sited point of view too. In accordance with the frontstage/backstage duality highlighted in conflict studies (Murphy, 1990; Breusers *et al*, 1998), the outbreak of conflict at one site can be linked to the reaching of consensus at another, or vice versa. Such dynamics often occur in relation to new arenas created as a result of development or conservation intervention. The absence of the voicing of disputes in these arenas can reflect the fact that the relevant places for conflict resolution established, as a result of the intervention, are not located within the intervention devices themselves but outside their institutional boundaries (Le Meur, 2006a). As we have seen, the mayors' claim of being part of the conservation apparatus implemented by externally funded intervention in north Benin has been backed by their capacity to build alliances with other authorities to deal with conflicts surrounding natural resources.

In addition to the multi-localisation of conflict processes, we must also take into account the plurality of levels of belonging. Jacob (2007, chapter 8) proposes a structural hypothesis about the emergence of conflict over landed resources: the level at which conflicts emerge corresponds to a specific level of integration – into a community of belonging – at which positive arbitration between tenure security as a public and a private asset no longer operates. As the Malian case shows, the capacity of actors to reconfigure community boundaries in relation to new stakes and contexts, as well as to mobilise available moral and material resources and the interchange of actors' roles as claimants and authorities renders this proposal more complex on the ground but not irrelevant. On the one hand, there is a tendency towards the 'narrowing in the definition of belonging', as

'social conflict over land takes the form of stricter definitions of those who have legitimate claims to resources, or, in other words, group boundaries are more exclusively defined' (Peters, 2004, p. 302). This can be phrased in the terms of a stricter definition of local citizenship as regards access to landed resources (Hochet, 2007; Jacob and Le Meur, 2010) and as observed in the above-presented case studies. However, the evolution is not that linear, and one can identify different levels of integration and different membership communities competing over how migrants and land resources are governed in central and northern Benin. The two elements at play here are autochthony (possibly across ethnic groups) and village territory (vague administrative boundaries; Le Meur, 2006b). On the other hand, the territorial extension of forest and conservation policies across and beyond administrative boundaries is matched by new forms of alliances and organisation building as shown in the case of the UDOPER pastoralist association. These devices are part of a strategy for gaining or maintaining access to natural resources, for adjudicating disputes and for controlling access to resources. Therefore, they assume claimant and authority functions alternately.

Conclusion

A commonality between property, conflict and policy, namely their intrinsic narrative dimension has already been noted. A central element of 'narrative discourses' (Genette, 2007) is causality. Telling a story is about selecting and sequencing items (events, discourses, things and people) to produce an effect of truth and persuasion anchored in a specific repertoire (or mobilising several repertoires). For example, the depiction of farmer–herder relationships as symbiotic in the past, despite the fact that historical investigations prove the contrary (Breusers *et al*, 1998; Turner, 2004), highlights simultaneously the putative naturalness of this relationship and a lost golden age of peace. In this narrative context, conflict constitutes a rupture in the pre-existing order of things and policy is thought as a device for restoring it. A narrative is a multilayered process relating to property, conflict and policy. Claiming a right or legitimate access to a natural resource requires a supporting story to persuade the politico–legal authorities. Describing a conflict is about selecting and ordering events and discourses in order to produce a meaningful narrative. Interventions and programmes concerning natural resources can be inserted into different policy narratives that provide them with legibility and legitimacy (Roe, 1994; Scott, 1998; Lavigne Delville, 2009).

In the West African contexts we have explored through our case studies and literature review, the social field built around access and control over natural resources can no longer be described in terms of the story of a 'couple' structured around the alternatively symbiotic or conflictive relation that ties farmers and herders to each other. This holds true for property rights, access conflict and policy. New players have entered the game. Among these, the development and conservation interventions are key together with other strategic groups from the state and entrepreneurship fields. They introduce new material and symbolic resources, re-activate old boundaries or create new ones, contribute to a new normative deal and create space for opportunistic behaviours at the individual level and for the building of new alliances and organisations in response to the shift in the decision-making and negotiation arenas to upper levels. In other words, if the conflicts we have talked about in the African drylands revolve around natural resources, they are not necessarily about the natural resources or their relative or absolute scarcity. They are all

about history (conflicting narratives), mobility (overlapping action spaces) and policy (inflow of resources and norms and territorial re-shaping) in a context of high ecological variability (de Bruijn and van Dijk, 1995). In this respect, conflict, property and policy function on the basis of mutual narratives and counter-narratives which social actors, including social scientists, try to disentangle and re-assemble in their own ways.

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Notes

1. We conceive belonging (in a broad sense: family, generation, lineage, gender, village, ethnic group, social class, religion and nation) as a second order resource enabling access to other resources (Boissevain, 1974).
2. See also Lavigne Delville and Hochet (2005), Chauveau *et al* (2006).
3. This report results from a study about the ‘factors underlying conflicts over access to land and water resources within Sub-Saharan drylands’ and was commissioned by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as part of the project ‘Novel forms of livestock and wildlife integration adjacent to protected areas in Africa (Tanzania)’.
4. Narrative is conceived as the product of a situated way of selecting, sequencing and ordering events and ideas according to various purposes (persuasive, ideological, esthetic, etc.); see Genette (2007) on narrative theory, Ricœur (1983–1985) on narrative identity, also Roe (1994) on policy narrative.
5. Kouri’ refers to seven villages that have had political ties with Kouri since the pre-colonial period.

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