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The Transmutation of Land Ownership Paradigms and Associated Conflicts in Santa Sub-Division, 1930 - 2020: Cash Crop Economy, Commodification and Institutional Fragmentation

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ABSTRACT **Original Research Article**

This article provides a comprehensive historical exegesis of the transmutation of land ownership paradigms and the concomitant proliferation of agrarian conflicts between 1930 and 2020 in Santa Sub-Division, Mezam Division, North West Region of Cameroon. It advances the central thesis that the inexorable incursion of the cash crop economy, epitomized first by Coffea arabica and subsequently by intensive market gardening, precipitated a profound ontological metamorphosis of land from a communally sacralized patrimony governed by elastic customary jurisprudence to a highly monetized, fiercely contested and assiduously litigated commodity. Anchored in a robust qualitative methodology encompassing semi-structured interviews, and archival hermeneutics, the study propounds a pentagonal typology of conflicts. These include intra-familial and inheritance-related, boundary and demarcation, farmer-grazier, inter-village territorial, and commodification-driven disputations. It critically deconstructs intervention mechanisms encompassing traditional authorities, civil society organizations, administrative apparatus, and the Land Consultative Board, demonstrating that entrenched legal pluralism and pervasive elite capture engendered fragmentary, contradictory and ultimately inefficacious outcomes. It further elucidates the contradictory socio-economic ramifications of commercialization, revealing simultaneous processes of accumulation and dispossession, social mobility and structural marginalization. The article concludes by advocating for comprehensive institutional restructuring that harmonizes statutory and customary epistemologies while restoring legitimacy, equity and accessibility as foundational principles of sustainable land governance.

Keywords: Land Ownership, Conflict, Cash Crop Economy, Commodification, Institutional Fragmentation, Santa.

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Introduction

In agrarian civilizations across sub-Saharan Africa, land transcends its reductive economistic conceptualization as a mere factor of production. It constitutes the ontological substratum of identity, belonging, social reproduction, cosmological continuity and political authority (Berry 1993, 101). It is at once ancestry, materiality, spirituality and posterity. Nowhere is this axiomatic verity more poignantly manifest than in the Bamenda Grassfields, where land functions simultaneously as ancestral patrimony, economic lifeline, symbolic capital and political instrumentality. In Santa Sub-Division, a fertile volcanic highland corridor of immense agro-ecological fecundity straddling the strategic Bamenda-Bafoussam axis, the intricate nexus between land, livelihood and conflict has undergone a profound diachronic metamorphosis over the past nine decades. What was hitherto a communally regulated resource governed by flexible, adaptive and spiritually sanctioned customary norms has been transfigured into a highly monetized, intensely contested and litigiously saturated commodity. This study interrogates this

epochal transformation between 1930 and 2020, with particular analytical focus on the dialectical and inexorable relationship between the cash crop economy and the exponential escalation of land conflicts.

The pre-colonial land tenure regime in Santa, consonant with broader Grassfields paradigms, was anchored in communal custodianship and corporate ownership. Land was vested in the community as an indivisible patrimony under the spiritual and political custodianship of the Fon, the sacralized embodiment of ancestral continuity, while lineage heads and family patriarchs exercised usufructuary rights on behalf of their constituent members (Nkwi and Warnier, 1982, 45). The Fon was custodian, never proprietor. This system was not devoid of competition or contestation, but it possessed what this study conceptualizes as institutional elasticity: an extraordinary capacity to absorb demographic pressures, ecological exigencies and social cleavages through shifting cultivation, judicious reallocation of fallow lands, flexible boundary negotiation mediated by traditional councils, and potent spiritual sanctions invoking ancestral wrath. Boundaries were fluid, symbolic, zonal rather than linear, and anchored on natural markers such as streams, valleys, sacred groves and footpaths, thereby permitting remarkable social flexibility and conflict prophylaxis.

This elasticity was fundamentally ruptured and irrevocably eviscerated by the colonial encounter and its extractive economic logic. The introduction and systematic imposition of Coffea arabica cultivation from the 1930s onwards, as integral component of the broader colonial imperative to integrate the Bamenda Highlands into the global commodity chain and metropolitan accumulation, marked a definitive watershed. Coffee, as a perennial cash crop requiring permanent fixation of land for three to five years before initial harvest and thirty to forty years of productive lifespan, necessitated exclusive individual control, long-term capital investment and rigid boundary demarcation, principles antithetical to communal rotation and collective custodianship (Konings 2001, 291; Hill 1963, 22). The colonial state, while assiduously encouraging coffee expansion for fiscal revenue, conspicuously failed to institute a coherent tenure reformulation to accommodate this new agrarian reality. It encouraged individual accumulation without providing juridical framework for it. The post-colonial state further exacerbated and compounded the institutional landscape through the promulgation of the 1974 Land Ordinances, Law No. 74/1 of 6 July 1974 and Decree No. 76/165 of 27 April 1976, which effectively nationalized all unregistered lands and introduced statutory private titling through land certificates as exclusive proof of ownership, creating a situation of acute legal pluralism where customary and statutory regimes co-existed in contradictory, competitive and mutually subversive competition (Fisiy 1992, 31; Sobseh and Willibroaddze-Ngwa 2021, 867).

The scholarly debate on the cash crop economy provides the conceptual anchorage for this study. Early modernization theorists epitomized by Lewis (1954, 139) celebrated cash crops as the engine for transferring surplus labour from subsistence to commercial agriculture and stimulating economic growth, industrialization and modernity. This teleological optimism was systematically deconstructed and challenged by dependency theorists such as Prebisch (1950, 14) and Rodney (1972, 162), who cogently argued that the cash crop economy was structurally designed to produce underdevelopment, peripheralization and unequal exchange through extraction of surplus to the metropolis and deterioration of terms of trade. While their macro-structural critique remains intellectually salient and empirically relevant, it insufficiently captures local agency, micro-institutional dynamics and endogenous responses. Polly Hill (1963, 22) offered a crucial corrective by demonstrating the rational, entrepreneurial and innovative response of Ghanaian cocoa farmers who accumulated capital and transformed agrarian relations. Piet Konings (2001, 293) applied a similar analytical lens to the Bamenda Grassfields, demonstrating that coffee generated genuine local accumulation, social differentiation and rural bourgeoisie formation.

However, the cardinal limitation of this corpus of literature is that it treats the cash crop economy either as a macro-structure that happened to rural societies as exogenous imposition or as a context for rational choice and entrepreneurial calculation, without sufficiently interrogating its micro-institutional dislocations, socio-cultural ruptures and juridical contradictions. It does not satisfactorily explain why wealth creation produced conflict, not peace, accumulation and dispossession simultaneously. It is precisely this lacuna that the present study addresses through meticulous micro-historical analysis. In the Cameroonian context, a burgeoning body of scholarship has examined land conflicts. Henry Kah (2006, 55) and Francis Nyamnjoh (2005, 23) have brilliantly illuminated the nexus between land, ethnicity, autochthony, belonging and the politics of identity. Sobseh and Ndale (2024, 3777) have demonstrated how Grassfields migrant farmers in Noun Division introduced agricultural innovation and market dynamism but were systematically undermined by multiple sales, tenure insecurity and a rigid host tenure system that denied them security. Similarly, Sobseh and Dze-Ngwa (2021, 870) cogently argued that tenure insecurity systematically benefited wealthy elites and bureaucrats who weaponized statutory titling to expropriate productive smallholder land.

This article therefore, examines the transformation of communal land tenure into contested commodity in Santa 1930-2020; the disruptive role of Arabica coffee and market gardening economies; the typology of five land conflicts including intra-family inheritance, boundary demarcation, farmer-grazier, inter-village territorial and commodification-driven disputes; the failure of intervention mechanisms of traditional authorities, civil society, administration and Land

Consultative Board due to legal pluralism, elite capture and institutional fragmentation; and the contradictory socio-economic implications of accumulation, social differentiation, land fragmentation, gender marginalization, youth dispossession and commodification of sacred values.

Conceptual Framework

The analytical architecture of this study rests upon five interlocking, mutually constitutive concepts: land, land conflict, cash crop economy, legal pluralism and institutional fragmentation. These concepts are not abstract theoretical constructs; they are lived, visceral and quotidian realities in Santa.

Land: From Patrimony to Property, From Use-Value to Exchange-Value. Drawing on Karl Polanyi (1944, 72) seminal conceptualization, we theorize land as a fictitious commodity: it is not produced for sale, yet under market economies it is subjected to market logic, speculation and commodification. For the people of Santa, land (kəla in Ngemba) is ancestry, identity, spirituality, security and futurity. It contains the graves of forebears, the shrines of Kwifor, the first coffee trees planted by a father, the umbilical cord of belonging. As Sara Berry (1993, 101) persuasively argues, access to land is access to social membership, citizenship and personhood. To be landless is to be socially moribund. Pre-colonial tenure was based on communal custodianship with the Fon as spiritual custodian, not proprietor (Nkwi and Warnier 1982, 46). Family heads allocated usufructuary rights. Its cardinal attribute was flexibility and elasticity (Fisiy 1992, 28). Fallow land could be reallocated to needy families. Boundaries could be renegotiated through ritual libation. This study retains the concept of elasticity to argue that elasticity was the central mechanism of conflict containment and social homeostasis before 1930. Commodification, defined by Appadurai (1986, 15) as the transformation of things previously outside the market sphere into objects of transaction, exchange and speculation, was triggered by the cash crop economy (Peters 2004, 274). When coffee trees live 40 years, land can no longer rotate. When cabbage yields 3 million FCFA per hectare per season, land acquires astronomical exchange value and becomes object of speculation.

Land Conflict: Cumulative Grievance and Accumulation by Dispossession. We define land conflict in Santa as a sustained, socially embedded, historically sedimented competition among individuals, lineages, communities and institutional actors over rights of access, use, ownership, transfer and control of land, shaped and exacerbated by the cash crop economy, demographic transformation and institutional contradictions (Sobseh and Willibroad Dze-Ngwa 2021, 869). It is not a singular event; it is a protracted process, a palimpsest of grievances. Two theoretical lenses illuminate its dynamics with exceptional explanatory power: David Harvey's (2003, 137) concept of accumulation by dispossession, where elites, bureaucrats and urban capital accumulate wealth by dispossessing smallholders through legal, market and extra-economic mechanisms, as empirically demonstrated in Land Title No. 20485 where a subsisting court injunction was egregiously violated through political connections to obtain title (Akwo 2026); and Derick Fay's (2009, 55) concept of cumulative grievance, where unresolved historical injustices sediment, accumulate and compound over time, each new violation adding to old wounds, making mediation exponentially more difficult. A 1965 boundary dispute left unresolved becomes a 1995 violent clash with machetes and a 2019 protracted court case.

Cash Crop Economy: Beyond Modernization and Dependency. While Lewis (1954, 139) celebrated cash crops as harbinger of modernity and Prebisch (1950, 16) and Rodney (1972, 165) critiqued them as instrument of underdevelopment, Hill (1963, 18) and Konings (2001, 291) demonstrated farmers as rational, calculative entrepreneurs. This study extends Konings by introducing a micro-institutional critique that interrogates institutional dislocation. The cash crop economy in Santa refers to two distinct but interconnected epochs: Arabica coffee from the 1930s to late 1980s as colonial and post-colonial export crop, and intensive market gardening of Irish potatoes, cabbages, carrots, leeks, tomatoes from the 1980s to present as domestic commercial crop (Konings 2001, 298; Divisional Office Santa 2010, 19). Both transformed land from communally held resource into monetized asset, producing what Berry (1993, 104) calls the commercialization of social relations, where even kinship, marriage and ancestry become market relations mediated by money.

Legal Pluralism and Institutional Fragmentation: Bifurcated State. John Griffiths (1986, 38) defines legal pluralism as coexistence of two or more legal systems, normative orders and juridical epistemologies in the same social field. The 1974 Land Ordinances declared all lands not registered as national lands and introduced land certificates as only incontrovertible proof of ownership (Fisiy 1992, 31). In Santa, two antagonistic systems govern land: customary realm governed by the Fon, Kwifor and family councils deriving legitimacy from ancestry and spirituality, and statutory realm governed by the Senior Divisional Officer, Divisional Officer and Land Consultative Board deriving legitimacy from state coercion (Mamdani 1996, 18). A peasant farmer holds customary legitimacy but no paper; an elite from Bamenda holds paper but no legitimacy, no graves, no history. This fragmentation produces what Sally Falk Moore (2001, 35) calls semi-autonomous social fields, each with its own rules, sanctions and legitimacy but none with absolute authority. It explains why traditional authorities, administration, civil society and Land Consultative Board produced only partial, contradictory and ephemeral outcomes (Nyamnjoh 2005, 29; Kah 2006, 62). A traditional council resolves a case after libation, the loser goes to Divisional Officer. Divisional Officer resolves, loser goes to High Court.

High Court issues injunction, winner of injunction sees opponent obtain title from Lands Department through bribery. This is institutional fragmentation par excellence.

In synthesis, the framework posits a causal chain of inexorable logic: Cash Crop Economy triggers Commodification which triggers Scarcity and Value Appreciation which under conditions of Legal Pluralism and Institutional Fragmentation leads to Cumulative and Intractable Land Conflicts.

Geo-Historical Background

Santa Sub-Division was officially created on 5 October 1992 by Presidential Decree No. 92/206 from erstwhile Bamenda Central Sub-Division and encompasses approximately 532.67 square kilometres of undulating highland topography (Divisional Office Santa 2010, 5; Bufeh 2018, 22). It lies within Mezam Division between latitude 5°42' and 5°53' North and longitude 9°58' and 10°18' East, bounded to the north by Bamenda II and Bamenda III Sub-Divisions, to the west by Batibo Sub-Division, to the south by Wabane Sub-Division in Lebialem Division and Galim Sub-Division in Bamboutos Division, and to the east by Babadjou Sub-Division in Bamboutos Division. This liminal location along the Bamenda-Bafoussam corridor, the economic lifeline and commercial artery of the Western Highlands, confers immense strategic commercial importance, with daily convoys of trucks transporting potatoes, cabbages and carrots to Douala and Yaounde markets (Nkwi and Warnier 1982, 15; Konings 2001, 289).

Ecologically, it constitutes integral component of the Western Highlands, the Bamenda Highlands, with tripartite relief configuration: high lava plateau of Awing-Bamock (1200-1800m) characterized by steep slopes, deep incised valleys and montane grassland, intermediate hills of Pinyin-Mbei with rolling topography, lateritic soils and coffee plantations, and low-lying marshy depressions of Baligham-Akotsia and Mbu with hydromorphic, organic-rich soils (Bufeh 2018, 24). These marshy valleys, locally designated as Mbuoh or Ndop, were historically marginal, utilized only for dry season grazing and raffia palm extraction, but became epicentre of market gardening revolution from the 1980s because they retain moisture in dry season and permit year-round cultivation. Climate is Cameroon-type equatorial montane with bimodal rainfall pattern, rainy season March to October and dry season November to February, with 2000-3000mm annual precipitation and 19°C to 24°C average temperature, ideal for Arabica coffee, Irish potatoes and temperate vegetables, with ethereal mist shrouding hills in mornings (Divisional Office Santa 2010, 8). Soils are predominantly basaltic, hydromorphic and andosols, highly fertile volcanic origin with elevated organic matter and cation exchange capacity (Nkwi 1976, 112). Vegetation was originally dense montane forest with extraordinary biodiversity, progressively transformed since 1930s into mosaic of grassland, eucalyptus plantations, food crop farms, coffee farms and now intensive market gardening, leading to deforestation, watershed degradation and biodiversity loss (Nkwewo 2025).

Migratory origins are labyrinthine, contested and politically instrumentalized, feeding directly into contemporary land conflicts. Awing (Mevum) migrated from Widikum under legendary Zang Akoh in late 18th century fleeing Chamba slave raids; Pinyin traces origins to Bafut, breaking away due to succession disputes in Bafut Fondom; Akum, Bawock, Mbu have multiple competing narratives linking them to Tikar or Widikum; Baligham arrived early 19th century as conquering, militarily organized group from the east under Ga Ngwafong, subjugating autochthonous Mbulu population (Nkwi 1976, 88; Warnier 1975, 62; Bufeh 2018, 36). Each claim to first-comer status is simultaneously claim to autochthony, political precedence and land ownership. From the 1930s, Santa received influx of migrant farmers from Nso, Kom, Moghamo and Meta attracted by coffee boom and fertile land, later from Bamileke from Galim and Babadjou attracted by market gardening profitability (Konings 2001, 292; Sobseh and Ndale 2024, 3780). This demographic layering created what Nyamnjoh (2005, 24) and Kah (2006, 58) perspicaciously call the politics of autochthony and belonging, where first-comer status legitimizes claims and late-comers are pejoratively labelled strangers, even after six decades of residence, cultivation and intermarriage.

Pre-colonial socio-political organization was centralized Fondom system with Fon as spiritual, juridical and political apex, embodiment of ancestors, custodian of land, guarantor of fertility and justice, supported by council of elders (Kwifor in Awing, Mbechum in Pinyin, Ngumba in Baligham), quarter-heads (Atsum) who were lineage heads and ritual specialists, family heads (Batangshu), and regulatory societies and age grades that enforced norms (Nkwi and Warnier 1982, 47; Nkwi 1976, 115). Land tenure was corporate, lineage-based and spiritually embedded with cardinal principles of inalienability, land could not be sold because it belongs to ancestors, flexibility of boundaries, boundaries were negotiated zones not fixed lines, and ritual embedding, every allocation required libation with palm wine, blood of fowl and invocation of ancestors. Land containing ancestral graves, sacred trees, shrines and totemic symbols could never be alienated, its sale was sacrilege punishable by ancestral wrath (Kaberry 1952, 48; Gluckman 1965, 38; Akwo 2026). German colonial period (1890-1916) focused on forced labour, plantation expropriation in coastal areas and did not fundamentally alter tenure in Grassfields (Njeuma 1978, 102). The rupture came under British indirect rule after 1916: British maintained traditional authorities but introduced cash crops as revenue imperative. By 1932, first coffee nurseries established in Santa by British Agricultural Department, by 1955, over 2,500 registered coffee farmers cultivating more than 1.2 million trees, each farmer 0.5 to 2 hectares, producing 800 tons (Bamenda Provincial Annual Report 1955, 12). Population grew exponentially from

estimated 12,000 in 1930 to 32,000 in 1976 to over 120,000 by 2010, with density rising from 22 to 225 persons per sq km, intensifying scarcity, competition and conflict (Divisional Office Santa 2010, 12). The 1974 Land Ordinances introduced legal pluralism and institutional fragmentation that remains unresolved conundrum.

Types and Causes of Land Conflicts

Building on Wehrmann (2008, 24) typology and grounded in Santa empirics, five ideal types exist, often overlapping and imbricated in one dispute.

Intra-Family and Inheritance-Related Conflicts. Accounting for over 45 percent of disputes adjudicated in traditional councils in Awing, Pinyin and Baligham from the 1970s to present (Nkwewo 2025), these are most ubiquitous, most protracted and most socially corrosive because they rupture kinship solidarity. Causes include polygamous inheritance crisis, Santa traditionally polygamous, a man with 3 wives and 15 children dies intestate leaving 2 hectare coffee farm and house, customary primogeniture privileging first-son of first wife claims monopolistic inheritance, other wives and sons contest, invoking equity and contribution (Berry 1993, 112; Goheen 1996, 78). After 1961, with coffee commercialization, disputes involving division of deceased farmers' coffee plantations became frequent because coffee is perennial, valuable and indivisible (Teneng 2026). Second, subdivision and fragmentation, each generation fragments father's land among sons, a 3 hectare farm in 1970 becomes 11 plots of 0.27 hectare by 2015 scattered in five locations, making land economically unviable, prompting distress sales (Peters 2004, 276; Fay 2009, 55). Third, unauthorized and clandestine sales, the quintessence of commodification, individual members surreptitiously sell family land without collective consent of family council, often at night to stranger, to defray school fees, medical bills or bride price, breaking ancestral taboo and corporate solidarity. This is elite capture within the family microcosm (Sobseh and Willibroad Dze-Ngwa 2021, 871). Classic paradigmatic case, shows that in 2018, Cho Marcel unilaterally sold family land in Alajip quarter Awing containing 4 ancestral graves and 30 mature coffee trees and eucalyptus to Meli Maurice from Bamenda for 2.5 million FCFA, family led by Akwo Eric vehemently opposed, invoking sacrilege and corporate ownership, instituted action at High Court Mezam, obtained Judgment No. 135/CIVM/19 of 27/03/2019 restraining buyer from developing, yet despite subsisting injunction, Meli Maurice through political connections at Mezam Land Service procured Land Title No. 20485 through mendacious declaration of neighbors and mendacious claim of occupation since 1970, violating Section 6 of Decree 76/165 which requires peaceful, uncontested occupation (Akwo 2026). This case encapsulates all elements: sacred graves, perennial crops, familial perfidy, judicial injunction violation, fraudulent titling and accumulation by dispossession.

Boundary and Land Demarcation Conflicts. Second most prevalent, ubiquitous in every village. Causes include collapse and obliteration of natural markers, rivers changed course due to eucalyptus planting, sacred trees felled for coffee expansion, footpaths expanded into motorable roads, so boundaries lost in palimpsest of transformations (Bufeh 2018, 44). Introduction of survey beacons and cadastral survey from 1974 introduced fixed Cartesian lines but with prohibitive costs 500,000 FCFA for private survey, rampant corruption, and poor technology producing overlapping claims, beacon shifting (Divisional Office Santa 2010, 18). A surveyor bribed with 100,000 FCFA places beacon 10 meters into neighbor's farm, generating decades litigation. Third, market gardening intensification requiring intensive demarcation, valley plots are diminutive 0.1 hectare but exceedingly valuable, ridges must be rectilinear for irrigation, so farmer incrementally expands ridge by 1 meter each season, insidiously encroaching, leading to violent altercations over 0.5 meter (Sobseh and Ndale 2024, 3782). Population growth intensified competition for valley bottoms, producing clashes in Akum and Mbu in 2005-2015 involving machetes and destruction of crops. Coffee itself required boundary fixation for long-term investment security, farmers planted eucalyptus as living beacons, eucalyptus now marks boundaries (Konings 2001, 294).

Farmer-Grazier Conflicts. Santa has been epicentre and hotspot of farmer-grazier conflicts in North West due to extensive grassland suitable for both cultivation and pastoralism. Competition pits sedentary Tikar/Ngemba cultivators against Mbororo Fulani pastoralists who migrated from Adamawa from 1920s in search of pasture, led by Ardos and Lamidos. Roger Blench (2004, 16) cogently argues these are not primordial ethnic hatreds but resource competition intensified by economic transformation and institutional failure. Three interlocking causes include coffee expansion from 1930s blocked and severed transhumance routes (ladde) that Fulani used to move cattle from high plateau in rainy season to low valleys in dry season, coffee farms fenced routes with barbed wire (Kah 2006, 60). Market gardening from 1980s occupied and privatized dry-season grazing reserves, Mbuoh valleys were last dry season reserve for Fulani cattle, now drained, ridged and cultivated for cabbages, cattle starve, pastoralists destitute (Blench 2004, 18). Institutional bias invoking autochthony where Mbororo labelled strangers despite decades residence since 1940s, not allowed to sit in Kwifor, not allowed to own land, only graze with annual permission and tribute of a cow to Fon, yet when crop damage occurs, farmer demands exorbitant compensation 500,000 FCFA for 0.1 hectare, administration invariably sides with autochthones for electoral considerations (Nyamnjoh 2005, 26; Kah 2006, 62). Violent incidents in Awing 1982 led to 2 deaths and burning of 10 huts, 1999 burning of Fulani huts in Mbei, 2012 killing of 12 cows in Baligham, all unresolved, cumulative grievance.

Inter-Village and Territorial Disputes. Most dangerous because they mobilize entire villages, Fons, elites, youth, and sometimes escalate to inter-village wars with bows, arrows and Dane guns. Examples include Awing versus Pinyin over border at Menka valley rich in dry season pasture, Baligham versus Bawock over Baba II hill with eucalyptus plantations, Bawock versus Pinyin over Mbu plain fertile for potatoes. Rooted in pre-colonial migratory histories where boundaries were never clearly delimited because land abundant and population sparse (Nkwi 1976, 90). Oral histories contradictory, each village claims first-comer status and autochthony, invoking mythical ancestors. Cash crop economy exponentially raised stakes; when land values appreciate from 10,000 FCFA per hectare in 1960 to 5 million FCFA per hectare in 2010 due to market gardening profitability, incentive to claim, encroach and litigate territory increases astronomically (Peters 2004, 270). Elites based in Yaounde and Bamenda, ministers, directors, businessmen, mobilize and finance disputes for political legitimacy, funding village to fight to demonstrate they defend homeland and secure votes (Sobseh and Willibroad Dze-Ngwa 2021, 873). Land Consultative Board lacked historical expertise, archival knowledge and ethnographic sensitivity and imposed arbitrary straight-line boundaries using GPS coordinates without consulting elders, boundaries rejected by both parties as illegitimate (Lund 2008, 12).

Commodification-Driven Conflicts. Direct product and quintessential manifestation of commodification and legal pluralism, most modern and increasingly dominant form. Three sub-types: multiple and illegal sale by individual vendors without family consent, same plot sold to 2 or more buyers, each with receipt, leading to multiple claimants with contradictory documentations (Sobseh and Ndale 2024, 3781). Elite capture and urban encroachment from 1990s, Bamenda elites, civil servants, businessmen, politicians, acquire large tracts 10 to 20 hectares through connections at Land Service, bypassing customary procedures, converting communal grazing land, watersheds and family lands to private titles for speculation and resale (Fisiy 1992, 34; Harvey 2003, 140). Fraudulent titling, issuance of land titles through false declarations, perjury, violation of court injunctions, lack of qualification, as in Land Title No. 20485 case which involved egregious violation of subsisting court order, false declaration that neighbors were consulted when they were not, and mendacious claim of occupation since 1970 when land had graves from 1950s belonging to another family, demonstrating accumulation by dispossession in its crudest form (Akwo 2026; Mamdani 1996, 20; Sobseh and Dze-Ngwa 2021, 870).

Intervention Mechanisms by Actors and Institutions

Four mechanisms coexist, compete, contradict, not complement, creating what Griffith s (1986, 38) calls legal pluralism and Mamdani (1996, 18) bifurcated state and Lund (2008, 10) calls forum shopping.

Traditional Authorities: Fon, Atsum, Batangshu, Kwifor, Mbechum, and family councils. They handled over 60 percent of cases between 1970-2000, still handle majority of minor cases (Nkwewo 2025). The process involved complainant reports to quarter-head with bottle of palm wine, quarter-head attempts reconciliation, if fails case forwarded to Fon, hearing convened at palace forecourt with libation to ancestors, both parties bring palm wine, elders listen, pour libation, visit locus in quo, impose fine of goat, palm wine and 5,000 FCFA, reconciliation through handshake and sharing of palm wine. Strengths include unparalleled legitimacy, because Fon is spiritual embodiment of ancestors, sacralized, his pronouncement is ancestors' verdict, accessibility, no fees, only palm wine, proximity, hearing within days not years as in courts, cultural resonance, uses mother tongue Ngemba, proverbs, idioms, rituals, focus on reconciliation and restorative justice not retributive punishment, win-win, restores social harmony and conviviality (Fisiy 1992, 26; Kaberry 1952, 48; Gluckman 1965, 40). Weaknesses include erosion and devaluation of authority, since 1980s Fons themselves became substantial landholders through coffee and market gardening, some Fons sold communal land to elites for millions, losing moral authority and legitimacy, youth no longer respect because Fon is perceived as businessman and politician not neutral arbiter (Konings 2001, 295; Bufeh 2018, 55; Peters 2004, 276). Second, patriarchal bias and exclusionary proclivities, customary law in Grassfields is patriarchal and gerontocratic, women cannot inherit, cannot speak in council, must kneel, youth cannot challenge elders, Mbororo not allowed in Kwifor, so their cases adjudicated with structural bias (Berry 1993, 115; Teneng 2026; Goheen 1996, 78). Third, lack of enforceability and coercive apparatus, no police, no prison, decision is moral and spiritual, if recalcitrant loser refuses compliance, winner must proceed to administration, leading to forum shopping, where disputants strategically choose institution that favours them, resulting in institutional shopping and protracted conflict (Lund 2008, 10; Moore 2001, 36).

Civil Society Organizations: Farmer cooperatives like Santa Coffee Cooperative Society formed 1958 with 2000 members, Santa Rural Development Association, MBOSCUDA for Mbororo rights formed 1992, Common Initiative Groups for market gardening, NGOs like COMINSUD, Helvetas. Strengths include rights-based discourse and civic education, they educate farmers on rights, procedures, documentation, they write petitions to administration and courts, they document abuses. Weaknesses include donor dependency and project ephemerality, project-based, when donor money ends project terminates, not sustainable, staff unpaid, office closed (Sobseh and Ndale 2024, 3783). Ethnic bias reinforcing politics of belonging, MBOSCUDA defends only Mbororo

pastoralists, farmers association defends only autochthonous farmers, so mediation becomes advocacy not neutrality, exacerbating polarization (Nyamnjoh 2005, 28). Lack of legal standing and coercive power, they cannot issue enforceable decisions, only mediate and conciliate. Mediation without enforcement fails when economic stakes astronomically high, where hectare of cabbage generates over 3 million FCFA per season, no rational actor accepts loss due to moral suasion of NGO (Divisional Office Santa 2010, 19; Wehrmann 2008, 45).

The Administration: Divisional Officer, Senior Divisional Officer, Governor, High Court, Court of First Instance, Land Service, Survey Department, Ministry of State Property. Strengths include coercive power, state sovereignty and enforceable orders, they command police, gendarmes, can incarcerate, can issue injunctions, restraining orders, can demolish structures, for example Judgment No. 135/CIVM/19 of 27/03/2019 issued by High Court Mezam restraining Meli Maurice from developing disputed land pending determination, with power of state and contempt of court behind it (Akwo 2026). Weaknesses include egregious legal ignorance and decontextualization, administrators are mostly non-indigenes from Centre, South, Littoral Regions, posted for 2-year tenure, do not understand Grassfields tenure, do not speak Ngemba or Pidgin, rely on briefings from interested parties and elites, apply statutory law blindly without understanding that grave means ownership, that eucalyptus means boundary (Kah 2006, 61). Corruption and elite capture and venality, land service is most corrupt service in Cameroon according to Fisiy (1992, 35), surveyors demand 200,000 FCFA bribe to place beacons, Land Consultative Board members collect 500,000 to 1 million FCFA to issue favourable report, case of Title No. 20485 where despite subsisting court injunction, title issued through false declaration because buyer connected to official in Yaounde, demonstrating Harvey (2003, 137) accumulation by dispossession through state apparatus (Sobseh and Willibroad Dze-Ngwa 2021, 873). Contradictory jurisdictions producing forum shopping and juridical cacophony, Divisional Officer says customary law applies, Senior Divisional Officer says statutory, High Court says injunction, Land Service says title valid, same case has four contradictory decisions from state institutions, parties shop for favourable forum (Griffiths 1986, 40). Prohibitive cost, temporal protraction and inaccessibility, filing case in High Court costs 500,000 FCFA filing fees, lawyer 1 million minimum, takes 3 to 5 years minimum, hearings in Bamenda not Santa, language English/French not Ngemba, poor farmers cannot afford, justice becomes luxury for rich (Wehrmann 2008, 48).

The Land Consultative Board. Established by Decree No. 76/165 of 27 April 1976 as hybrid body to manage national lands, comprising Divisional Officer as chair, representative of Lands, Survey, Agriculture, Town Planning, and two traditional authorities of area (Fisiy 1992, 32). Intended to harmonize systems including traditional authorities, bridging customary and statutory, procedure: application for title with dossier, posting at Divisional Office for 30 days for opposition, field verification with neighbors and traditional authorities, report to Board, Board deliberates in camera, recommendation to Minister for issuance of title. Intended as deliberative hybrid institution. Weaknesses include structural opacity, procedural violation and institutionalized mendacity, in practice public notice never posted, or posted for 2 days not 30, at obscure place, field verification never done or done without genuine neighbors, using hired stand-ins, proof of pre-1974 occupation routinely violated, many titles issued for land never occupied before 1974 but claimed as ancestral, as in Title No. 20485 where verification report mendaciously claimed neighbors Mbah and Tita were present and consented when they were never invited, and claimed peaceful occupation since 1970 when graves from 1950s belonging to Akwo family irrefutably prove otherwise, demonstrating systematic fraud (Akwo 2026; Nkwewo 2025; Teneng 2026). Second, elite-dominated composition with co-opted and suborned traditional authorities, traditional authorities on Board are often co-opted, given sitting allowance 50,000 FCFA and transport, they agree with Divisional Officer, do not defend community, they are token presence (Mamdani 1996, 22). Third, juridical contradiction where conversion to title extinguishes overlapping, secondary and seasonal rights, customary tenure has overlapping rights: family head custodian, sons usufructuaries, women seasonal users for vegetables, Mbororo secondary grazing rights in dry season, title converts to absolute, exclusive, individual ownership to one person, extinguishing all others, producing dispossession and accumulation by dispossession (Lund 2008, 11). Fourth, absence of mechanism for restitution and cancellation, once fraudulent title issued, only way to cancel is petition to Minister of State Property in Yaounde which takes 5 to 10 years, requires lawyer in Yaounde, costs millions, poor farmers abandon, fraudulent title becomes indefeasible after 2 years. The result is that Land Consultative Board intended to harmonize became principal instrument of accumulation by dispossession, producing competing semi-autonomous social fields (Moore 2001, 35) and cumulative grievance (Fay 2009, 58).

It is important to reiterate the fact that Santa does not suffer from institutional vacuum; it suffers from institutional surfeit, superfluity and cacophony, each institution with partial legitimacy and partial power, competing, contradicting, not complementing, leading to forum shopping, juridical insecurity and permanent conflict. What is needed is comprehensive restructuring and harmonization, not proliferation of more institutions.

Socio-Economic Implications of the Cash Crop Economy

The three main distinct phases with contradictory implications include coffee expansion 1930-1988 golden age

of accumulation, crisis and Structural Adjustment 1986-1995 collapse and impoverishment, market gardening intensification 1980-2020 new boom and new conflicts.

Economic Implications

Monetization and Rural Accumulation and Capital Formation: by 1955, coffee accounted for over 70 percent of cash income in Awing and Pinyin, financing transformation from thatched huts to modern houses with zinc roofs and cement floors between 1960-1980, financing education of children to secondary school and university, financing bride price which rose from 10,000 to 200,000 FCFA, financing bicycles, radios and later motorcycles (Bamenda Provincial Annual Report 1955, 12; Konings 2001, 291; Divisional Office Santa 2010, 16). Coffee income transformed economy from subsistence and barter to monetized cash economy. Hill (1963, 22) called this rural capitalism, farmers became entrepreneurs hiring labour from Moghamo and Meta for weeding and harvesting, reinvesting surplus into land acquisition and labour (Teneng 2026). Some astute farmers accumulated 5 to 10 hectares through purchase from poorer families in distress.

Social Differentiation, Stratification and Inequality: coffee created distinct socio-economic stratification, three classes, rich farmers above 5 hectares with 2000+ coffee trees and hiring 5-10 labourers, middle farmers 1-3 hectares family labour, poor and landless below 0.5 hectares working as labourers for rich (Konings 2001, 293). Rich used wealth to acquire titles through 1974 ordinances, converting customary holdings to statutory titles, enclosing commons and dispossessing poor (Fisiy 1992, 34; Sobseh and Willibroaddze-Ngwa 2021, 871). Gini coefficient of landholding rose from estimated 0.28 in 1960 relatively egalitarian to 0.51 in 2010 highly unequal, comparable to Latin America (Divisional Office Santa 2010, 18; Peters 2004, 274). Inequality produced envy, jealousy, witchcraft accusations and conflict.

Fragmentation and Miniaturization and Parcellation: inheritance under customary primogeniture but with many sons fragmented land inexorably, a 3 hectare farm in Pinyin in 1970 fragmented into 11 plots averaging 0.27 hectare by 2015 scattered in five locations, making mechanization, irrigation and commercial farming impossible, increasing boundary disputes exponentially, each son's plot too small to feed family, forcing distress sale or migration (Teneng 2026; Fay 2009, 55). Fragmentation is direct result of commodification under customary inheritance regime that was designed for abundance not scarcity.

Coffee Crisis and Rural Impoverishment and Deagrarianization: after 1987, world coffee price collapsed from $2.50 per lb to $0.80 due to Vietnam entry and overproduction, Cameroon government under Structural Adjustment Programs imposed by World Bank and IMF withdrew subsidies, National Produce Marketing Board which guaranteed price stopped buying, incomes collapsed 60 percent between 1988-1992, farmers abandoned coffee, cut coffee trees for firewood and charcoal, rural exodus to Bamenda and Douala, houses collapsed, school dropout increased, health deteriorated, classic case of vulnerability and precarity of cash crop economy to world market vagaries and structural adjustment conditionalities (Akwo 2026; Konings 2001, 298). Some families lost all cash income, returned to subsistence.

Adaptation, Resilience and Market Gardening Boom: from 1990s, remarkably resilient farmers adapted, shifting to intensive market gardening of Irish potatoes, cabbages, carrots, leeks, tomatoes in marshy valleys Mbuoh, using chemical fertilizers, pesticides, motor pumps and irrigation, yielding 2.5-3 million FCFA per hectare per season for cabbages versus 300,000 FCFA from coffee, ten times more lucrative, revaluing previously marginal marshy land and making it epicentre of most contested and valuable land in Santa (Divisional Office Santa 2010, 19). This boom revalued valleys, intensified farmer-grazier conflicts because valleys were dry season grazing reserves for Fulani, now drained and privatized (Blench 2004, 18; Sobseh and Ndale 2024, 3782). It also attracted Bamileke entrepreneurs from Galim with capital, trucks and market connections, who rent land.

Elite Capture and Accumulation by Dispossession and Speculation: from 1990s, Bamenda elites, civil servants, businessmen, politicians, military officers, acquired large tracts 10 to 20 hectares through connections at Land Service, bypassing customary procedures, converting communal grazing land, watersheds and family lands to private titles for speculation, some titles never developed, held for 10 years for resale at 10 times price, violating injunctions, demonstrating Harvey (2003, 140) accumulation by dispossession in purest form, where capital accumulates by dispossessing smallholders through legal mechanisms and state complicity (Akwo 2026; Fisiy 1992, 35).

Social Implications

Transformation of Kinship, Family and Moral Economy: family head Batangshu metamorphosed from custodian allocating usufruct for family welfare and continuity to seller alienating family land for personal aggrandizement, from moral economy where land is sacred and inalienable to market morality where everything has price, from elder protecting family to elder exploiting family, commercialization of kinship (Berry 1993, 105). Kinship commercialized, brother litigates against brother over 0.1 hectare, father sells land without informing sons, taboo shattered, graves sold, as in Alajip case where graves containing ancestors sold for 2.5 million, breaking most sacred taboo in Grassfields that land with graves can never be sold, ancestor will punish (Akwo 2026; Nkwewo 2025).

Gendered Implications and Feminization of Labour, Masculinization of Income: women are primary producers of

food and vegetables, provide 70 percent of labour in market gardening, weeding, harvesting, carrying to market, yet have secondary, derivative and insecure rights, cannot own land under customary law, cannot inherit, cannot obtain titles because Land Consultative Board requires male guardian, less than 20 percent of income from market gardening controlled by women despite labour, men control sale and money, spend on alcohol, second wives and status symbols, widows evicted from husband's land by husband's brothers after husband's death, despite having farmed it for 30 years and having children, because they are considered strangers, not blood, patriarchal ideology legitimizes dispossession (Kaberry 1952, 62; Goheen 1996, 78; Bufeh 2018, 52; Peters 2004, 272; Teneng 2026). Market gardening increased women's labour burden exponentially without increasing control or income.

Youth Dispossession, Precarity, Migration and Radicalization: youth landless and precarious because father's land fragmented among many brothers, average youth 25 years owns 0.15 hectare, insufficient to marry, build house and feed family, so migrate to Bamenda for bendskin motorbike taxi precarious work, to South West for plantation labour, to Nigeria for trading, leaving ageing farming population average age 55, encroaching on watersheds and steep slopes because all good land appropriated, environmental degradation, vulnerability to armed recruitment intersecting Anglophone crisis from 2016, where landless, hopeless youth join armed groups Amba Boys because they have no future in farming, no land, no hope (Konings 2001, 300; Divisional Office Santa 2010, 21).

Migration, Autochthony and Politics of Belonging and Exclusion: market gardening attracted migrants, territorialization of identity and politicization of belonging, first-comer versus stranger dichotomy, migrants from Nso, Kom, Moghamo, Meta, Bamileke who have lived since 1930s, some born in Santa, speak Ngemba, married locally, yet still considered strangers (ghang nighe) versus autochthones (ghang kuo), denied right to plant perennial crops like coffee or eucalyptus which signify ownership, denied right to obtain titles, required to pay annual tribute to Fon of goat and palm wine, evicted when autochthones want land back, despite decades residence and constitutional provision that all Cameroonians equal and can settle anywhere, despite having developed land (Konings 2001, 292; Nyamnjoh 2005, 24; Kah 2006, 58; Lund 2008, 9; Sobseh and Ndale 2024, 3781). This produces permanent insecurity, inhibits investment and generates perpetual conflict.

Commodification of Sacred Values and Moral Crisis and Cultural Disembedding: graves, shrines (Fey), sacred trees (aboh), totems, libation sites felled, bulldozed for market gardening, Kwifor loses authority and legitimacy because its sacred groves sold by same Fons who are custodians, cultural disembedding, Polanyi (1944, 72) great transformation, land disembedded from social, spiritual and moral relations and embedded into market, moral crisis, anomie, elders lament that land no longer respects people and people no longer respect land, that money has eaten tradition.

Policy Recommendations

Policy recommendations for sustainable land peace in Santa and Bamenda Grassfields include the following:

- First, harmonization and hybridization of tenure, recognizing collective customary ownership as registrable title in name of family not individual, including secondary rights of women and Mbororo as legally recognized encumbrances on title, not extinguishing them, gender-sensitive reform;
- Second, radical reform of Land Consultative Board enforcing transparency, mandatory 30-day public posting at palace, market and church not just Divisional Office, mandatory GPS field verification with genuine neighbors with national ID cards and photos, digitization and publication of all land titles online, and expedited administrative cancellation of fraudulent titles like No. 20485 within 90 days not 5 years through administrative tribunal;
- Third, strengthening and democratizing traditional mechanisms as first-instance courts with statutory recognition, inclusion of women, youth, Mbororo in councils, written decisions, and state enforcement of their decisions through Divisional Officer;
- fourth, special land fund and affirmative action for youth and women leaseholds in valley bottoms, 0.5 hectare per youth group for market gardening with micro-credit, irrigation and extension;
- Fifth, participatory historical mapping and truth-telling for inter-village boundaries involving elders, archives, colonial maps, ritual reconciliation ceremonies and libations (Kah 2006, 62; Nyamnjoh 2005, 29; Peters 2004, 280; Sobseh and Willibroaddze-Ngwa 2021, 875).

Conclusion

This study has sustained the argument that Santa moved from elasticity to scarcity, from patrimony to property, from use-value to exchange-value, from negotiation to litigation, from moral economy to market economy between 1930 and 2020. The cash crop economy was catalyst and prime mover, legal pluralism structural contradiction and institutional trap, cumulative grievance temporal mechanism and historical sedimentation. Empirically, we have demonstrated pre-colonial elasticity: Fon custodian not owner, lineage usufruct, fluid natural markers streams valleys sacred groves, spiritual sanctions, conflict contained through negotiation, libation and restorative justice (Nkwi and Warnier 1982, 47; Gluckman 1965, 38; Kaberry 1952, 48). Coffee from 1930s destroyed elasticity: permanent fixation required, use-value to

exchange-value transformation (Polanyi 1944, 72; Peters 2004, 274), population growth from 12,000 to 120,000, land value from 10,000 to 5 million FCFA per hectare, scarcity and commodification. Typology five conflicts: intra-family 45 percent palaces over inheritance polygamy fragmentation unauthorized sales with paradigmatic case Alajip graves and Title No. 20485 violating Judgment No. 135/CIVM/19 (Akwo 2026; Nkwewo 2025), boundary collapse markers costly survey market gardening ridges, farmer-grazier blocking ladde occupying Mbuoh bias autochthony with deaths (Blench 2004, 18; Kah 2006, 60), inter-village migratory never delimited stakes raised elite manipulation (Nkwi 1976, 90; Nyamnjoh 2005, 24), commodification multiple sales elite encroachment fraudulent titling. Socio-economic contradictory dialectics: monetization accumulation mobility zinc houses education but inequality fragmentation Gini 0.28 to 0.51, elite dispossession accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003, 137), kinship commercialization (Berry 1993, 104), women marginalization 70 percent labour 20 percent income (Bufeh 2018, 52; Goheen 1996, 78), youth exodus and precarity, autochthony politics. Intervention failure institutional fragmentation forum shopping not institutional vacuum: legitimacy without enforcement traditional patriarchal co-opted, enforcement without legitimacy administration corrupt ignorant costly, advocacy without power civil society donor biased, statutory power without transparency LCB violating notice verification pre-1974 extinguishing overlapping rights (Griffiths 1986, 38; Moore 2001, 35; Lund 2008, 10; Wehrmann 2008, 45; Fay 2009, 58). Requires comprehensive restructuring. Theoretical we have extended cash crop debate beyond Lewis (1954, 139) optimism, Prebisch (1950, 16) and Rodney (1972, 165) pessimism structural, Hill (1963, 22) and Konings (2001, 291) actor-oriented, through micro-institutional critique showing how wealth creation produces institutional dislocation, commodification and conflict; refines legal pluralism showing statutory law does not merely coexist but actively extinguishes customary secondary rights of women, youth, Mbororo, producing dispossession and accumulation by dispossession (Mamdani 1996, 20; Fisiy 1992, 35); operationalizes cumulative grievance (Fay 2009, 55) showing how unresolved disputes sediment and compound.

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