



Power and conviction dynamics on land and linked natural resources: explorative insights from the greater south region of Cameroon

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Abstract Communities in several parts of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) depend on natural resources for their sustenance. While growing pressure on such resources has been accused of framing conflicts, the power and convictions dimension of such conflicts remains relatively less explored. Taking the case of Cameroon, this paper undertakes an explorative

analysis of power and convictions around land and linked natural resources. Specifically, the paper maps harmful convictions and their role in steering unequal access to land and linked natural resources; explores power manifestations among different categories of resource use actors; and discusses the role of different typologies of actors in shaping harmful convictions linked to land and other natural resources. Qualitative data derived from four communities in the greater south region informed this study: focus group discussions (14), key informants, and expert interviews (25) were employed. Using the actor-centred power analytical lens, the analysis entailed the use of directed content analysis, thematic analysis and narratives. The results indicate the following: Firstly, while ethnic/region-based and elitism-based harmful convictions significantly drive land resource access, gender-based and religious-based convictions are less recurrent. Secondly, while elitism-based actors exercise power through coercion, religious and political actors employ (dis)incentives and dominant information, respectively, in their quest for forestland. Thirdly, elitism-based and ethnic/region-based actors are at the centre of harmful convictions around land and linked natural resources. The results inform the actor-centred power concept, with emphasis on convictions around land and linked natural resources. Future studies should explore the conflict implications of these harmful convictions.

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Introduction

Natural resources continue to demonstrate an umbilical relationship with community livelihoods, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Some of the crucial resources in this regard are land, water, forests, and minerals among others. Viewed as critical for the survival of communities, land and its linked natural resources (e.g. forests, and minerals) are increasingly becoming scarce against the backdrop of unsustainable exploitation (Aye, 2014; Kimengsi, 2015; Nkonya et al., 2016). Besides some of these practices, greed-triggered scarcities are evident in several parts of SSA (Koning, 2007; Rattan, 2015). These manifest through the colonialization of natural resources by powerful actors, while dispossessing weaker segments of a population (Barasa et al., 2016; Kimengsi & Balgah, 2021). This lethargy explains the rise in human conflicts linked to land resources. For instance, persistent conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Angola are all linked to greed-based mechanisms (Butsic et al., 2015; Delgado-Matas et al., 2015; Hanai, 2021). Understanding and dealing with conflicts in SSA requires an in-depth exploration of the political ecology of conflicts and their multi-scale ramifications. To this end, studies that explore the political ecology of conflicts, with emphasis on actors and their use of power resources to secure their interests, are increasingly prioritized (Green, 2016; Hanai, 2021). For instance, studies in Ghana showed how Chiefs drew from their power resources to influence charcoal exploitation (Aabeyir & Agyare, 2020; Brobbey et al., 2021). In parts of Central Africa, the elite capture process is applied through coercion and the use of dominant information to influence weaker members in different resource settings (Duguma et al., 2018; Kimengsi & Bhusal, 2021). However, with growing conflicts and threats of a bleak future (Compaore et al., 2020; Kabandula & Shaw, 2018), there is a need to further analyse conflict triggers and outcomes in sub-Saharan African countries, with Cameroon serving as a classical example. Described as “Africa in miniature”, Cameroon stands at a crisis crossroads with myriads of natural resource-linked conflicts (Amungwa, 2011). This

is further tied to political, ethnic, and religious differences, potentially setting the stage for uncontrolled conflicts in the future, if the current momentum is not mitigated (Lambi, 2009)

Cameroon’s historical context of ethnicity and identity politics which gained steam in the 1990s led to the proliferation of harmful narratives and convictions of an “us” versus “them” narrative (Nyamnjoh & Rowlands, 1998). In fact, state machinery, through the 1996 Constitution, enshrined ethnicity with the use of the terms “autochthony” and “allogene” (Geschiera, 2009; Konings, 2008). The constitution created panic amongst potential migrants, leading to the rise of political and tribal squabbles to secure a greater share of state resources (Ndi, 2017). This was achieved in most cases, by excluding “outsiders” (Ndi et al., 2021, 2022). Political elites from different regional settings were pitted against each other, in a rat race for ethnic hegemony. Consequently, ethnocentric and ethnolinguistic tendencies further permeated the state machinery. Historically, the First President of Cameroon (Ahmadou Ahidjo) preached national citizenship, although traces of regional/ethnic-based tendencies existed. With a shift to the era of the Second President (Paul Biya), the ethnic/regional divide seems to have continued unabated. Additionally, the birth of multiparty politics further ignited ethnic/regional divides across the country (Fonchingong, 2005; Konings, 2008). The springing up of elite-based groupings fanned the divide between ‘natives’ and ‘strangers’ in the context of the politics of belonging (Geschiera, 2009; Geschiera & Nyamnjoh, 2001). This development created an atmosphere in which political parties at the local level were replaced by ethnic/elite associations as key players in regional and national politics (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003; Nyamnjoh & Rowlands, 1998).

A relic of colonialism is the co-existence of modern and traditional land tenure systems in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Mamdani, 1996; Mamdani & Mandani, 2018). For instance, the application of the French Direct Rule and the British Indirect Rule meant the strategic selection of elements of despotism and their application in land resource access and use. While power and authority were exercised on racial grounds under French direct rule, it was exercised through highly centralized traditional/customary systems under British indirect rule. In both cases, institutionalized despotism was quite visible (Mamdani

& Mandani, 2018). These systems provided much impetus to state machinery today, leading to the overall dominance in decision-making over land access and use by multinationals under the guise of fostering development. The above developments have created a fragile system of national integration, as different actors, shaped by their convictions struggle to capture land and linked natural resources. To date, there is limited evidence on the extent to which the different typologies of actors draw from their portfolio of power resources to acquire land and linked resources while dispossessing riparian communities. Furthermore, the harmful convictions around land and linked natural resources which re-ignite such practices remain relatively less explored (Ezzine de Blas et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2012). This suggests the need for an in-depth analysis of actor roles in the current and future land and linked natural resource dynamics.

Actors in natural resource settings make use of their power tools to actualise their claims over land and linked natural resources (Krott et al., 2014). This perspective makes the actor-centred power a veritable analytical tool that shapes our understanding of the different forms of resource dispossession and re-possession in natural resource settings. As an analytical approach, the actor-centred power approach (ACP) draws from power theories to uncover politically most powerful actors in natural resource settings (Krott et al., 2014). It depicts a social relationship in which an actor “X” (known as the *potentate*) uses power resources to alter the behavior of another actor “Y” (the *subordinate*) without due recognition of the latter’s will. The definition draws from the perspectives of Weber (2000) and Dahl (1957) and has been extensively applied in environmental policy analysis (Hasanagas, 2004). Three potential actions are observable in this process: Firstly, an actor may alter the behavior of the subordinate by force—depicting *coercion*. Force does not only include physical but also depicts psychological harm induced on the subordinate (Popitz, 1992). The potentate might *disincentivize* the subordinate in a bid to alter his/her behavior. In this regard, they could draw from their political, traditional, and enterprise-based power to create disadvantages for community members, until they succumb to the actors’ will to access and use land and linked natural resources. On the other hand, the potentate might also decide to periodically provide *incentives* (e.g. cash gifts and food

items) to community members while subtly dispossessing them of their natural resources. Thirdly, the use of *dominant information* is a power tool that the potentate applies to the subordinate. For instance, the propagation of false narratives or unverified information which pits tribal groups against each other grants the potentate the ability to continue resource exploitation in the midst of a carefully created chaos. Through the supply of erroneous information which is trusted by the subordinate, the potentate succeeds in altering the behavior of subordinates without recognizing their will (Krott et al., 2014). While this framework captures power elements employed by actors, it is yet to be complemented by the dimension of harmful convictions linked to the exercise of power. We approach our analysis by introducing the element of harmful convictions—those narratives and beliefs/positions which are widely held by resource-dependent communities, creating an “us” vs “them” narrative (Fig. 1).

Put succinctly, while growing pressure on land and linked resources have been accused of framing conflicts, the extent to which such clashes are rooted in power dynamics and the convictions of riparian communities remain relatively less explored. To close this knowledge deficit, this paper exploratively analyses the portfolio of power resources and convictions around land and linked resources in the greater south region of Cameroon. Specifically, it (1) maps harmful convictions and their role in steering unequal access to land and linked natural resources, (2) explores power manifestations among different categories of resource use actors, and (3) discusses the role of different typologies of actors in shaping harmful convictions linked to land and other natural resources. The results provide insights to advance the ACP analytical approach, with a focus on the harmful convictions employed in the (dis)possession of land and linked natural resources.

The next sections of this paper are structured as follows: “Materials and methods” section presents the materials and methods, beginning with a brief description of the study area—the greater south region of Cameroon. This is followed by the design of the research instruments and the data collection and analysis procedure. “Results” section reports on the results with the mapping of harmful convictions and their role in steering the (dis)possession of land and linked natural resources, the power manifestations among resource

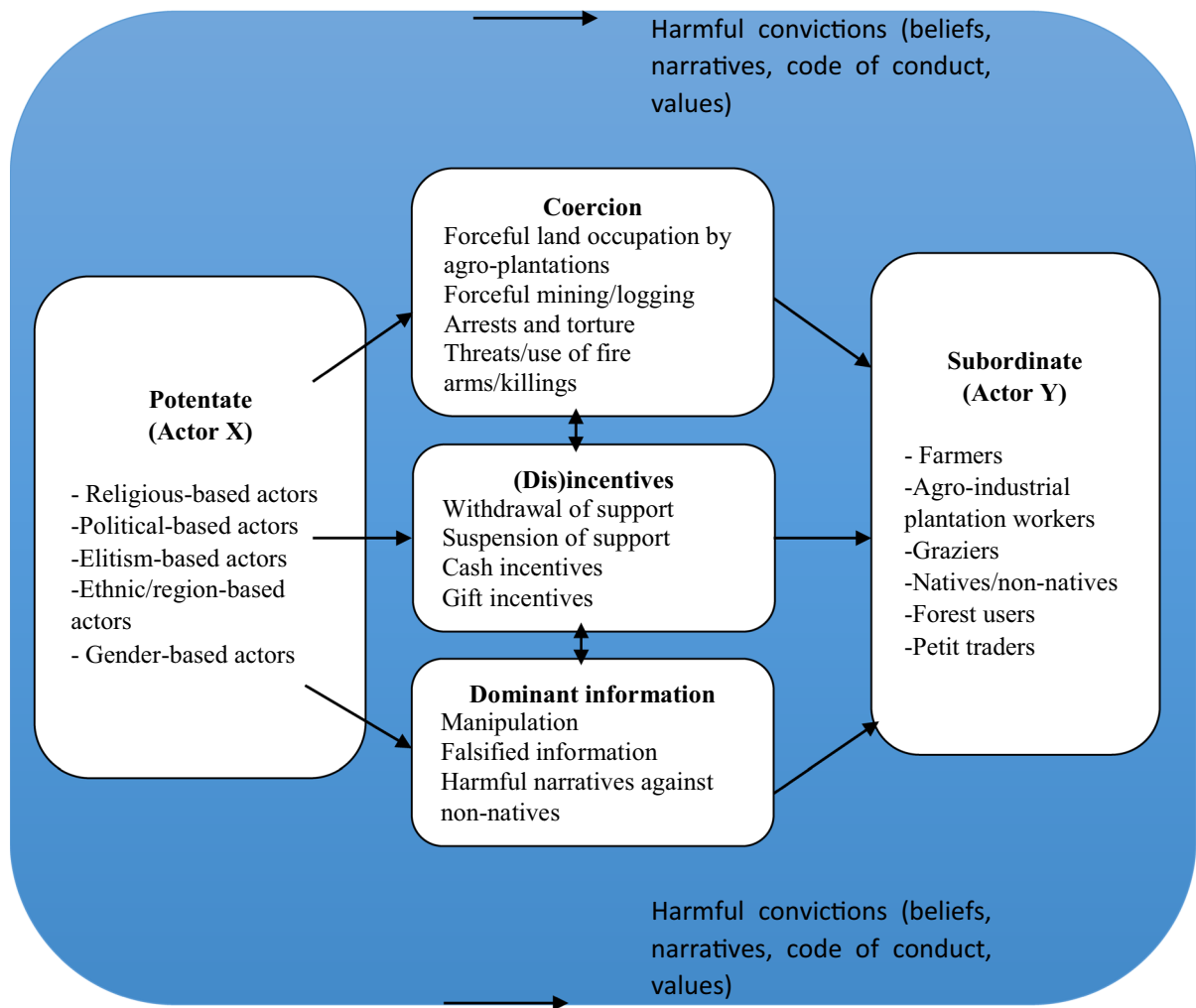


Fig. 1 Actor centred power perspective around land and linked natural resources in the greater south region of Cameroon (developed from Krott et al., 2014)

users, and the role of different typologies of actors in shaping harmful convictions linked to land access and use. “[Discussion](#)” section discusses the results in relation to the analytical approach employed and existing empirical evidence. In “[Theoretical and Practical implications](#)”, section the theoretical and practical implications are discussed, while “[Conclusion](#)” section

concludes and provides perspectives for future research considerations.

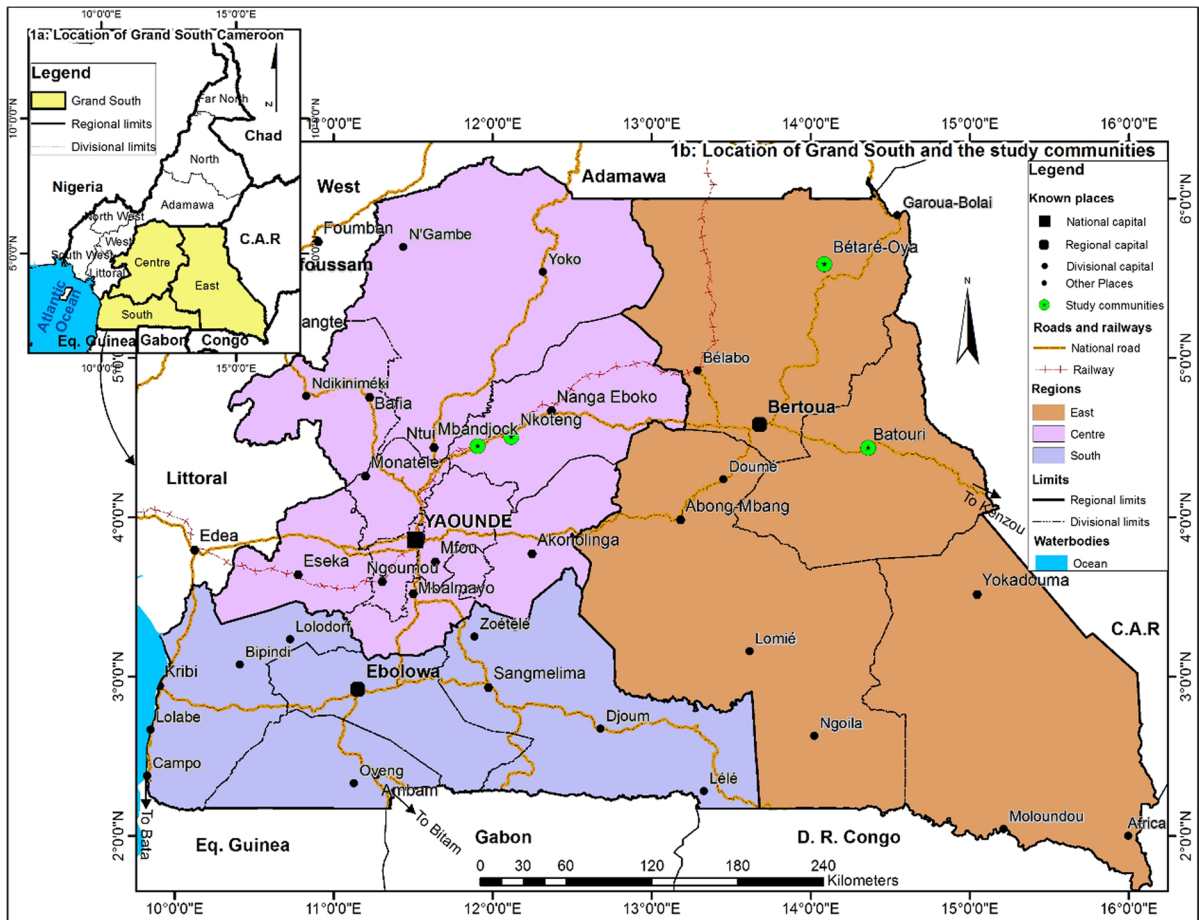


Fig. 2 Location of study communities in the greater south region of Cameroon

Materials and methods

Study area

The greater south region of Cameroon constitutes the Centre, East, and South regions of Cameroon, predominantly inhabited by the Betis, Fangs, and Bulus (Fig. 2). This forms part of the forest belt of Cameroon. In the context of this study, the Centre and East regions were selected, as significant land dispossession, triggered by harmful convictions is recurrent in both regions. The centre region falls within the forest belt of the country, with a vast expanse of land. At the dawn of independence, *Société Sucrière du Cameroun* (SOSUCAM) was established in the area of Mbandjock and Nkoteng in the Upper Sanaga Division of the Centre Region.

To provide the needed labour, the state facilitated the migration of Northerners into this area. This brought in cultural differences, resulting in different convictions in relation to land. Recently, migrants from the North West and South West Regions have moved into this area. This has also introduced a new dynamic in relation to the convictions around land resources. The East region is well known for its mineral wealth, especially the presence of gold deposits (Kanga et al., 2020). The deposits have attracted both international and artisanal miners, thus triggering conflicts. In addition, it hosts refugees from the war-torn Central Africa Republic. Therefore, the area does not only host new cultures but is also greeted with the reality of new land use practices. For instance, the region has witnessed an increase in cattle rearing and the development of peasant plantations. Within each region, two

communities were selected for the study. In the Centre Region, Mbandjock and Nkoteng, all communities which are affected by the establishment of large-scale agro-plantations were selected. In the East Region, Betare Oya and Batouri, well-known areas of gold mining, with conflict often reported between the local population and miners, were selected.

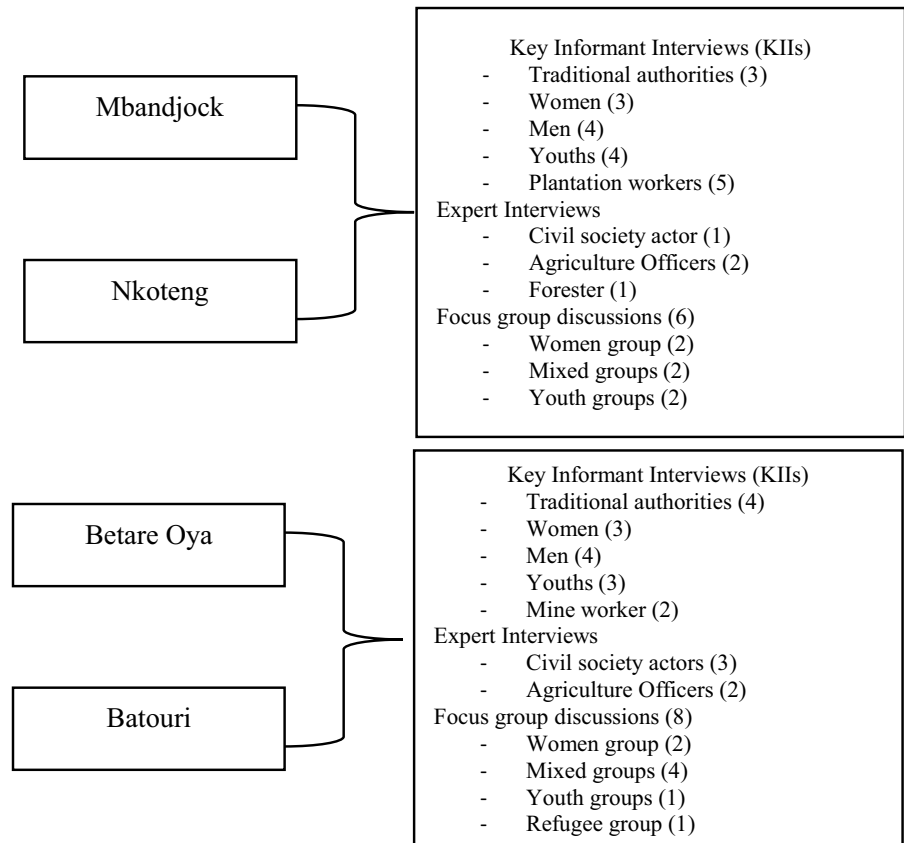
Data collection and analysis

This study forms part of a broader exploratory research on “power and conviction analysis on land and linked natural resources in four regions of Cameroon”. Three instruments were designed to carry out this research to include a key informant interview guide (7 items), an expert interview guide (6 items), and a focus group discussion guide (8 items). The key informant interview guide consisted of seven main questions which focused on the identification of land and linked resources, issues of power and conviction around the land, and linked resources with a focus on ethnic, political, and class differences. The next section of the interview guide captured the intersection of convictions around land and linked resources and the manifestation of convictions around land and linked resources. This was preceded by the mapping of influential actors/stakeholders and their power relations. The last section centred on pathways to address harmful convictions around land and linked resources. For the expert interview guide, emphasis was placed on the usefulness of land and linked natural resources, land access constraints linked to gender, ethnicity and class, religion and political affiliations, concrete narratives/convictions used in describing other ethnic groups, violence, and conflicts over land, actor interests around land and linked natural resources and instruments used by actors to negatively or positively influence these convictions. Regarding focus group discussions, the eight questions revolved around the views of participants on what land represents to communities, power and land deprivation experiences, ethnic and religious diversity, narratives/slogans fanning the “us” versus “them” narrative, political affiliations and land deprivation, elites, and harmful convictions around the land, actor roles and positions in encouraging or countering harmful convictions. It equally captured perspectives on dealing with harmful convictions. These instruments were carefully

reviewed and pilot-tested (N=5). Based on the feedback, the instruments were revised and translated into French. Prior to data collection, the data collection team explained the objectives of the research to the respondents. The respondents were assured that the study was intended purely for academic purposes. As part of the ethical procedure, the free prior informed consent of the respondents was sought. Participants were assured of confidentiality in their responses and they were also given the opportunity to decline to respond to the interviews.

In the two regions, 2 communities each were selected to include Mbandjock and Nkoteng (Centre), and Betare Oya and Batouri (East). The communities of the Centre Region were selected due to their proximity to agro-industrial establishments which has intensified power and conflict issues around the land. Furthermore, Betare Oya and Batouri were selected as mining communities which suffer from the effects of illegal mining and land dispossession, and despoliation. Data were collected through key informant interviews, expert interviews, and focus group discussions (Fig. 3). In each region, two research assistants were recruited and trained to support data collection. A field guide/translator was recruited in each community, to assist in gaining access to the communities and in the selection of respondents. Regarding key informant and expert interviews, 23 were conducted in the Centre Region while 22 were conducted in the East Region. To ensure sufficient representation, a purposive selection of respondents from all segments of the population was assured, targeting traditional authorities, women and men, youths, plantation and mine workers, amongst others. The respondents were selected considering their interests in land and linked natural resources, and their length of stay in the community—all respondents had lived in the community for at least 10 years. This period was considered sufficient enough for the respondents to appreciate the harmful convictions and power dimensions around land and linked natural resources. The interviews lasted between 50 and 63 min each. The four expert interviews were conducted with civil society actors, and state officials of forestry and agriculture. To further generate data, 14 focus group discussions were carried out with women groups, mixed groups, youth groups, and refugee-constituted groups. These focus group discussions ran for 45 to 60 min. Record-ers were used to collect the data, while field notes also

Fig. 3 Data collection Chart



aided in the recording of additional data. Through the assistance of the field guides/translators who were natives of the respective communities, it was easy to organize meetings with respondents as trust was easily established. The research team explained the reasons for the study to the participants and sought their consent before recording the data. The entire data collection process was accomplished between July and September 2021.

The recorded data were transcribed and further translated into the English language. From the transcribed and translated interviews, the contents which had elements of convictions stood as the relevant research findings to guide the initial coding. The directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was employed in which key messages derived from the interviews were carefully studied and extracted from the transcribed data set (Appendix I in supplementary material). The directed content analysis enabled the interpretation of meanings from the content of the transcribed text data. This was employed to validate the manifestations of power as presented in

the ACP framework, while also conceptually extending it through the dimension of harmful convictions. In this light, key concepts of ethnicity, elitism, and political class were identified. and presented as narratives. Furthermore, the transcribed text was read and part of the text that represented ethnicity, elitism, and political class was highlighted. This was followed by the clustering of the highlighted texts following the pre-established themes. The texts which did not align with the pre-determined themes were further read to derive other linked convictions in which new quotes were attributed to them. A thematic analysis was also performed; three pre-determined themes which correspond to the three specific objectives of this paper formed the basis for the thematic analysis. The analysis, therefore, centred around the role of harmful convictions in steering unequal access to land and linked natural resources, power manifestations among different categories of actors, and the role of different typologies of actors in shaping harmful convictions linked to land access and use. Furthermore, the analysis proceeded to establish the different forms of

power and their manifestations, guided by the ACP approach. Finally, the research explored the role of different categories of actors (e.g. elites, politicians, religious authorities, and traditional authorities) in either promoting or constraining harmful convictions which generate conflicts around land and linked natural resources. The thematic analysis provides an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analytical approach facilitates the assessment and derivation of lessons using the case in question (Stake, 2005)—the greater south region of Cameroon.

Results

Role of harmful convictions in shaping land resource access

Convictions relate to the constellation of religious, ethnic-driven, gender, class-linked, and political narratives around land and linked natural resources in the study sites. They are considered harmful when, through everyday rituals and practices, they directly or indirectly foster the dispossession and/or re-possession of land and linked resources amongst different groups in a community. Field evidence reports on the existence of several harmful convictions which could be categorised under five classes: ethnic/region-based convictions, elitism-based convictions, gender-based convictions, religious-based convictions, and politically-based convictions.

Ethnic/region-based convictions

While Cameroon's over 250 ethnic groups could play a role as an asset, it represents a channel for the propagation of harmful convictions regarding different tribal groups and their use of land and linked natural resources. In the context of the greater south, this conviction targets three groups of persons: the Bamilekes (from the West Region), the North West and South West (Anglophone Cameroon), and those from the Northern regions. Narratives and daily practices targeting the Bamilekes and Anglophones are linked to their growing numbers and significant acquisition of land for agro-industrial development. In the case of the northerners, it is linked to their increasing

acquisition of land for grazing. As this continues, the natives feel threatened and continually strive to initiate conflicts with these “strangers”. Slangs such as “le Bamis” and “les anglofous” are common in this area. In most cases, the land acquisition process by non-natives is genuinely done. However, this still creates a sense of insecurity amongst natives who now resort to verbal and sometimes physical attacks against non-natives. A respondent in Nkoteng affirmed as follows:

There are times when us against them convictions are used in this community. There are even moments when there are death threats. For instance, when migrants come to the village and want the land because they think that they have money, there are moments when those of us in the village threaten their lives. Words like this is my home, I will see how you will settle, you are the one who will finally go are frequently used.

Being an industrious group, the Bamilekes are virtually ubiquitous across the Centre and East Regions. They have secured huge investments in construction and own most of the big businesses. Furthermore, this group is considered the architect of cocoa production; they own major plantations and are presently acquiring thousands of hectares for huge developments in agriculture. To this end, they are viewed as real threats to land security. The northerners (*Wajos*) are reputed for their pastoral activities. However, driven by rising insecurity, especially in the East Region, they are forced to graze closer to homes and farmlands. This triggers hostilities. A key informant in Betare Oya explained that while they are yet to grapple with the land despoliation linked to mining, the northerners have introduced a new pattern that further affects their livelihood:

we have hostilities between the indigenes against the miners (mostly Chinese), and pastoralists against farmers. For farmer-grazer conflicts, this is happening because of highway robbers, since grazing zones are further into the countryside, they avoid insecurity and come closer to settlements, creating problems for farmers.

To this end, migrants are confronted with a frustrating situation of ethnic-based harmful convictions which limits their enthusiasm to further develop land and linked resources. Closely linked to such

convictions and their attendant narratives are elitism-based convictions.

Elitism-based harmful convictions

Elitism-based convictions are mirrored through enterprise-based attributes. For instance, land grabbing by agro-industrial companies and logging and mining enterprises are shaped by the conviction that ‘might is right’. Locals hold a strong position that agro-industrial companies; mining, and logging enterprises are sanctioned by some state officials to carry out land expropriation, even without the consent of the population. While this may be true in some cases, some elites simply manipulate populations with fake state authorisation documents. In the Centre Region, natives share the view that SOSUCAM has grabbed land from many communities on the promise of recruitment for the youths and the provision of social amenities. As reported by a traditional authority in Nkoteng,

Land is important to the population as everybody here is involved in agriculture, but SOSUCAM has taken all our land and we are left just with a small portion. Look, just behind my palace is their sugar cane farm.

The land-grabbing process was facilitated by the company’s regular fulfilment of its promise to supply cows to the community during Christmas. A key informant explained thus:

I came to Mbandjock and was frustrated to notice that SOSUCAM has covered a vast land without even electrifying the village. ... I was made to understand that the population asked the company to be giving them cows during Christmas for compensation and SOSUCAM is doing that

In the Centre Region, a majority of the respondents affirm convictions that are related to the unequal distribution of resources in favour of the powerful and privileged in the zone of Nkoteng and Mbandjock. They contend that top government administrators have grabbed the bulk of the land in the area after SOSUCAM. A similar scenario was reported for the East Region. A focus group discussant explained as follows:

Yes, people feel dispossessed of their land. When you have land and suddenly somebody comes with papers from Yaoundé indicating that he is the one to exploit the land, your rights are violated. When miners especially the Chinese come and refuse to sufficiently compensate for our crops, fruit trees, and our land, we have to confront them. It resulted in attacks twice in 2018 and 2020 and even deaths. A Chinese shot and killed a native and the Chinese was killed.

The practice by enterprise-based actors occurs sometimes in complicity with traditional rulers and/or members of the family in question. Focus group discussants noted that,

“the Chinese just come and present documents that were awarded in Yaounde and start exploiting. At times they see the chefferie (chiefs) and at times the population finally gets nothing; this causes conflicts... when this happens we defend ourselves against them to get compensation”. Besides the forceful takeover of the land for exploitation, locals are equally denied access to the land even after exploitation. In another focus group, discussants noted that,

in the gold mining sites of Kambele, we have been deprived of our rights to fend for our own daily bread. The Chinese take up our farms and land for mining. In the past, when they finish from a site, we then move into the site using artisanal means to fend for ourselves. Now they don’t even allow us to enter the site again. More so, we had cases where some people forcefully entered the sites and the Chinese shot at them... people also die from the open pits they leave after mining....

The footprints of Chinese occupation are the numerous open pits that serve as death traps for locals. What is more? traditional authorities are unaware of the process of land access and use by mining enterprises. A traditional ruler noted, *“We are chiefs but papers are presented to us coming from Yaoundé and they exploit, what we can do. Others even come and start exploiting the land without coming to see us as traditional leaders. We only see them around buying food in the market or their cars passing”*.

Besides enterprise-based actors, elites who serve as either state bureaucrats or representatives of the people sustain the land dispossession process. Some

elites have acquired huge parcels of land, with the complicity of traditional rulers who receive menial sums in the process. This creates problems in the near future. In the words of a key informant, “*elites own vast expanses of land, part of it is inherited while part is bought. They are well placed, they had a vision and acquired the land in areas where there was limited pressure...in some areas, there are problems where youths are reshaping the boundaries*”.

While some elites inherited these parcels of land, others have used their means and power to acquire them. To this end, when the population feels completely dispossessed of their lands for farming, they will encroach upon these lands. A focus group participant in Mbandjock justified this by stating that, “*land grabbing by powerful elites has resulted in conflicts between the local population and the elites. For example, one of our brothers revolted against land grabbing by a general and it created an enormous problem that warranted the intervention of the paramount chief to solve the problem*”.

Gender-based harmful convictions

While studies significantly report gender-based convictions in many parts of Africa, they seem to be less recurrent in the greater south of Cameroon. Here, women had equal access to and ownership of land as men. In the Centre Region, a notable in Nkoteng explained that “*there is no discrimination with respect to gender. A man or a woman can acquire and own land. I know of many women who have their own lands*”. However, while women can acquire land, they are limited by the financial means to purchase land. Limited land access is not predicated upon gender considerations; rather, it is a product of structural challenges (poverty) which cause women to be resource deficient to acquire land. A female migrant in Mbandjock justified that there is access to land for all genders by explaining that,

I think generally women face a lot of difficulties, but I don't see any problem with women owning land. Myself, I am the owner of this land. I think it is more difficult for women who do not have the means. They depend on the land of their husbands, and such land can be marketed without their consent.

This was corroborated by a traditional ruler who explained that: “*Women have the same right to have land as men here. However, although the women have the right to own land, it creates a problem because with us the Bantus, the women are supposed to go to their marital homes*”.

This view was not shared by an expert interviewee who affirmed that on the basis of inheritance there is some discrimination towards women: “*Relating to inheritance, women do not inherit much land like men since they get married and have children for other families, but they have access*”.

Religious-based harmful convictions

Field evidence did not significantly indicate religious-based convictions linked to the land. Irrespective of the faith, land ownership and/or dispossession are not linked to religion. However, there is a conviction that the Catholic Church owns more land than all other denominations. Focus group discussants stated that “*All religious denominations own land led by the Catholic by virtue of the fact that they came earlier. But there are few convictions when it comes to land. For instance, Muslims are very much involved in live-stock rearing, especially cattle, sheep, and goats. So when it comes to farmer-grazier conflicts, the grazing community is mostly the Muslims notably the Fulbe and the Hausa who are involved in conflicts because of highway robbers*”. This indicates the potentially insignificant role of religion and religious narratives in fostering land deprivation.

Politically-based harmful convictions

Politically-based harmful convictions are explained by covert or overt discrimination to land access on the basis of political leanings. For instance, those who supported opposition parties have reported discrimination. A party was described as an “*Anglo-phone party*”. With such narratives, natives were quick to buy the idea of their political leaders who predominantly militate for the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) party. Furthermore, militants of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM) were equally targeted and discriminated against in terms of land access. These activities sometimes go on with the loud silence of political and administrative authorities. A key informant in

Mbandjock recounted this: “*Based on harmful convictions in relation to politics, there was an Anglophone who was a member of the SDF party and was troubled due to his political stands and it forced him to resign from his job in SOSUCAM and leave the community*”.

On the whole, a strong intersection is observed for ethnic/region-based and political-based convictions. Some political leaders around these communities manipulate the locals to use hate speech against non-natives, especially those who do not align with their party and interests. Through misinformation, politicians manipulate locals to resist opposing political ideologies. In the course of executing such acts, non-natives face deprivation and sometimes dispossession of their land. Furthermore, elite/class-based convictions intersect with political-based convictions. Enterprise operators easily obtain tacit approval to continue land expropriation at the detriment of locals. However, religious and gender-based convictions do not show a strong connection with the earlier-mentioned ones. It, therefore, holds that ethnic/region-based convictions, elitism-based convictions, and political-based convictions are predominant around land and linked natural resources in the greater south region of Cameroon. The root causes of (harmful) convictions are multifaceted with the most common being the unequal distribution of power and privilege, deep-rooted patriarchy, and enshrined autochthony. Furthermore, some traditional authorities are affiliated with different political parties and are increasingly forcing their subjects to politically align with them or face the consequences. These traditional authorities often favour subjects who sympathize with their political affiliation while victimising those who do not align with them. Overall, this has led to land deprivation among the masses and ethnic minorities. Autochthony is equally deeply enshrined. The native vs non-native narrative exists in these parts of Cameroon. This has led to conflicts between the so-called “natives” and the non-natives. The consequences of these harmful convictions are far-reaching. Examples include conflicts and their attendant ills, subjugation of minority groups, land deprivation especially among the masses and ethnic minorities, forced migration, unending hatred and animosity within the community, hate speech, and many others.

Actors’ use of power in land and natural resource use

As reported by Krott et al. (2014), actors draw from their portfolio of power resources to influence the subordinate. This occurs through coercion, (dis)incentives, and dominant information. This section reports on the roles played by actors using these three power approaches.

Coercion

The practice of coercion significantly manifests in the greater south. This is exhibited mostly by political and administrative authorities, and elitism-based actors (agro-industrialists, mining, and logging companies). For instance, gold mining in Betare Oya and Batouri depicts a clear situation where the locals are coerced to accept the expropriation of their land and its despoliation with little or no recompense. From field evidence, Chinese gold miners simply present authorizations that are issued at the ministerial level, and with individual or state protection, they proceed with their mining operations. This forceful land occupation depicts coercion which is upheld by elitism-based actors with the complicity of some political/administrative authorities. Closely followed by this is the situation of significant land expropriation by SOSUCAM. This process is characterised by the extension of plantation space while depriving locals of access to farmlands. In cases where communities rise against such practices, they are prone to arrest and torture to ensure that they submit to these conditions.

Disincentives

The practice of incentives is common for religious-based actors. Besides cash incentives, denominations equally promise locals of unending blessings due to the land they have supplied to advance their religion. Agro-enterprises equally use incentives (e.g. cash gifts and cow gifts) to lure the population to accept the continued expansion of plantations. A classic example is SOSUCAM. Regarding disincentives, the withdrawal of such promises or the threats to do so, usually causes the population to rethink and potentially withdraw from protesting against the land occupation. Some political manipulate the population and incentivize them to think that by staying hostile

to non-natives, they will cause them to leave the community so that their lands will be returned to them. Very limited incentives are provided by logging and mining companies. The chief of a village in Nkoteng attested that *“In the past, we had a very serious war that resulted in the death of many people and created a serious conflict between the southerners and the northerners in the entire Nkoteng and Mbandjock area”*. A migrant from the north confirmed the view expressed by the chief noting, *“When I was 11 years old, there was an ethnic war between the Northerners and the Southerners which resulted in the death of many persons. It is even for this reason that they opened the police post in this area”*. In some cases, this category of actors simply buy over the traditional and administrative authorities in their communities of operation to enable them to look away from the issues which community members decry.

Dominant information

Political actors generally claim the monopoly of information and are revered by the locals. In this regard, they easily convince traditional authorities and locals to grant them enough land access with a promise of future development projects which will benefit the community. This manipulative approach explains why communities surrender huge parcels of land to politicians. Furthermore, elitism-based actors (mining enterprises, agro-enterprises, and logging enterprises) sometimes draw from the ignorance of the population to present falsified information which grants them access to exploit and expropriate land. Several cases of doubtful documents were reported by locals, especially in the mining sector. These shady deals continue due to the complicity of some administrative authorities. In addition, political actors tend to manipulate community members by introducing very harmful narratives against non-natives. For instance, the idea that non-natives are planning to overthrow local authorities is sometimes falsified. This robs communities of peaceful co-existence and provides a good avenue for politicians to continually engage in their quest for land expansion. In the Centre Region, animosity whipped up by harmful convictions was reported between the so-called “northerners” and the “southerners. In some years past, there was a brutal conflict that led to the death of many persons in the

communities of Nkoteng and Mbandjock as a result of ethnic differences.

Actor typology and harmful convictions around land and linked natural resources

Field evidence revealed the presence of five typologies of actors (Table 1): elitism-based actors, politically-based actors, ethnic/region-based actors, religious-based actors, and gender-based actors. Elitism-based actors constitute agro-industrialists, mining and logging concession owners who have, over the years, been significantly engaged in the use of land and its resources. It is widely held that the state of Cameroon tacitly supports these enterprise developers, causing them to continually disregard the natives and ethnic minorities in their quest for land resources. Furthermore, in a bid to advance their cause for land expropriation, they work closely with traditional rulers who tend to support their motives. In case such traditional authorities fail to align with their goals, they are threatened. The identified convictions apply in the case of land, timber, and mineral resources. Closely linked to this are politically-based convictions.

The key actors under this typology are politicians and administrative authorities. Field evidence reveals that community members continually hold the conviction that politicians have deprived locals of land for future use as they sometimes forcefully secure huge parcels of land. From an ethnic/region-based dimension, it is held that natives generally hold several negative views about non-natives. For instance, the natives are aggrieved that the Bamilekes and Anglophones as well as northerners (wajos) have captured huge parcels of their land. In this regard, they are viewed as the enemy and should leave. Equally even after selling off their land, natives still hold the view that the land belongs to them. The gender narrative holds that discrimination hardly exists between men and women. However, men are widely believed to be the land grabbers, while married women inherit less land compared to men. While religious-based convictions are quite insignificant, it is widely held that some churches own more land than others. In addition, due to the conviction that land still belongs to them, some natives attempt to reclaim land which has been acquired by the church.

Table 1 Typology of actors and linked convictions

| Actor typology | Key convictions | Resources in question |
|--|---|----------------------------|
| Elitism-based actors (Agro-industrialists, mining and logging concession owners) | The state favours agro-industrial, logging and mining companies over natives and ethnic minorities; Agro-industrial, mining and logging companies have no regard or consideration for the natives and ethnic minorities and contribute little to development; Traditional rulers work in tandem with agro-industrial, mining and logging companies to take land away from the natives and ethnic minorities; Chiefs work in complicity with elites to help them deprive the local population of land; Elites and top government officials threaten the underprivileged and grab land with impunity; | Land Mineral Forests |
| Political-based actors (Politicians, administrative authorities) | Politicians have deprived locals of land for future use Politicians have the right to own more land than the common man in the community; Politicians intimidate the local population in order to own more land. | |
| Ethnic/region-based actors (natives, non-natives and refugees) | The Bamilekes and the Anglophones have significantly occupied land in this area; Northerners have acquired vast lands for cattle rearing, depriving the natives of land Anglophones and Bamilekes should leave – they are the enemy Natives or autochtones have the right to own all the land in the community; | Land Forest |
| Religious-based actors (Church/mosque leaders and faithful) | All churches own land, but the Catholic church owns the most; Conflicts arise against practicing muslims who keep livestock; Some natives attempt to regain church land. | Grazing land |
| Gender-based actors (Men, women and youths in the community) | There is no discrimination on land issues between the men and women; Men are more involved in land grabbing; Married women inherit less land from their biological families. | Land |

Discussion

Harmful convictions shaping land resource access

From the analysis, it could be deduced that ethnic/region-based and elitism-based harmful convictions significantly drive land resource access in the greater south of Cameroon. In this regard, natives hold the view that non-natives pose a threat in terms of their consistent occupation of land resources. For instance, the Anglophones and Bamilekes are considered key land speculators who acquire huge parcels of land for agricultural and housing development. While their acquisition process is genuine, it creates a scare of colonization. This causes the natives to be

discouraged to engage in land dealings with them. On the other hand, despite the long history that northerners have in the greater south, they are significantly viewed as a threat with regard to their acquisition of grazing land. In parts of West Africa, Kugbega and Aboagye (2021) reported growing land tenure insecurity and a sense of deprivation amongst natives as a result of growing pastoralist activities. This situation is triggered by lapses in customary land administration systems, which facilitate land allocation in exchange for cash benefits. Conversely, studies in northern Ghana rather revealed an insignificant difference in access and ownership of land and other resources among natives and non-natives (Tanle, 2014). Unlike in South Asia where the patterns of

sons-of-the-soil (SoS) conflicts are linked to rural migration and the scarcity of land and linked natural resources (de Bruin et al., 2021; Qin, 2010), studies in other parts of Africa (e.g. northern Uganda, eastern DRC, southwestern Côte d'Ivoire and the Casamance Region of Senegal) show that such conflicts are further triggered by variations in land tenure institutions in sub-Saharan Africa (Boone, 2017). This suggests the need for future studies to prioritize institutional interplay in shaping power and convictions around land and linked natural resources.

Ethnic/region-based convictions are further strengthened by elitism-based convictions. In this case, enterprise developers with the tacit support of political and administrative authorities, engage in land expropriation for agro-industrial plantation development, mining, and logging expansion. Communities, therefore, hold the conviction that elites and non-natives pose a threat to their land and resources, even as they continue the colonisation process. While clashes have been reported in this area, there are strong indications that such disputes may potentially arise, if pathways for advocacy to change such harmful convictions are not sought. A negative fallout of the fragile and ethnic/region-based system is the persistence of weak land governance arrangements. Such systems have led to massive land grabbing by multinationals, in complicity with local elites who seek to attain their selfish interest. In parts of South West Cameroon, Ndi (2017) showed how land grabbing exerted a negative influence on access to land—women suffered the most in this process. Besides these, changing land tenure arrangements facilitated land grabbing, leading to political conflicts (Ndi, 2019; Ndi & Batterbury, 2017). On the whole, Cameroon's polity as manifested through the "might is right" syndrome shows how a network of predatory elites and traditional authorities act as accomplices to land deprivation against their subjects (Baye, 2008; Nyamnjoh, 2002).

In many parts of Africa (e.g. Mali and Madagascar), large-scale land acquisition has nursed grievances leading to protests and other forms of conflict. This process is blamed on the arrangements made by foreign governments and corporations with the governments of African states (Thaler, 2013). A similar situation is reported for Latin America and Asia (Zoomers, 2011). Studies to uncover the conflict implications of such harmful convictions need to be

explored. Surprisingly gender-based convictions are less recurrent. While several studies established that women have limited access to land and other natural resources, this does not apply to the greater south region of Cameroon. Sato (2022) reported the significant reform-driven dispossession of land for women in parts of Southern Africa. Similarly, in Post-war Myanmar, studies have uncovered significant insecurity and land dispossession for women (Hedström & Olivius, 2020). Although in principle, women can access land resources, contextual conditions linked to limited access to income and other resources constrain them from owning land. Studies to uncover the gender-based arrangements which could leverage women's resource portfolios are required.

Actors' use of power in land resource use

To acquire land and linked natural resources, actors draw from a portfolio of power resources including coercion, (dis)incentives, and dominant information. In the context of the greater south, there exist disparities in actor-specific applications of power resources. For instance, while elitism-based actors exercise power through coercion, religious and political actors employ (dis)incentives and dominant information, respectively, in their quest for land and other natural resources. Elitism-based actors, especially agro-industrialists, mining, and logging enterprises significantly acquire land around communities through the imposition of their will. Agro-industrialists advance the narrative of contributing to local socio-economic development and employment creation as a justification for the expansion of their plantations. However, field evidence reveals that community members did not report significant advancements linked to the establishment of plantations. Regarding mining, national and Chinese investors significantly invade communities and engage in mining activities which precipitates land despoliation. In most cases, they present an authorisation from the national government, giving them the leverage to impose their will over community members. When there are resentments, they count on the support of security forces. Schueler et al. (2011) reported how mining in Ghana contributed to deforestation, the loss of farmland within mining concessions, and other negative spill-overs which led to the rapid erosion of livelihoods. This process is usually actualised through the application

of different forms of power. In addition, a similar situation has been reported for Asia and Latin America (Zoomers, 2011). Hathaway (2016) showed that actors realise their interests through resource control and decision-making (visible power); imperceptible machinations and institutions (hidden), amongst others. These strategies constitute an integral part of the coercive approaches employed by natural resource actors to meet up with their interests. Studies in the forestry sector in Indonesia indicate that the application of coercive approaches by actors is further actualized through partnerships—the power delivery phase (Sahide et al., 2020). Coercion is also indirectly applied through traditional authorities who conspire with these actors. Studies to uncover the informal interests especially of state authorities in timber and mining concessions are required.

Religious actors significantly make use of (dis)incentives as they strive to secure land for religious purposes. Besides the cash provided, incentives are linked to the expected blessing to the community for surrendering parcels of land to advance the mission of Christianity. Of all the denominations, it is widely held that the Catholic Church is the most significant acquirer of land. Regarding dominant information, the results indicate that political actors who claim to master the legal procedures and policies of the state tend to manipulate community members as they lobby for more land. Promises of significant developments linked to land are usually presented in such cases. In parts of SSA, faith-based organizations have been considered instrumental in land acquisition and development (Rademaker & Jochemsen, 2019). Contrary to the case in the greater south region of Cameroon, studies in Southern Africa report that missionaries were linked to frontier wars and armed conflicts over land and other natural resources (Burchardt & Swidler, 2020; Villa-Vicencio, 1995).

Actor typology and harmful convictions around land resources

While several actors engender harmful convictions, the study highlighted the role of elitism-based and ethnic/region-based actors as key players driving harmful convictions around land and linked natural resources. In the greater south, while gender-based harmful convictions around natural resources dwindle, ethnic/region and elitism-based convictions

multiply in multi-faceted dimensions. Significant convictions are linked to ethnic/region-based actors. While natives view non-natives (Bamilekes, Anglphones, and northerners) as significant threats, narratives that ‘they will leave the land for the natives in future’ or ‘do not trust them when it comes to land deals’ have been consistently used. Non-natives on the other hand are also united on the course, as they strive to protect their land and natural resources. As reported in parts of East Africa, the precipitation of land acquisition processes is not only driven by changing management practices but also by processes such as increasing stratification, cultural differentiation, and other ecological processes (Greiner et al., 2021). However, in Indonesia, migration and ethnic forces were believed to drive the process of land acquisition and the convictions associated with it (Weber et al., 2007). Elitism-based convictions apply in cases where agro-industrialists, mining, and logging enterprises are viewed as powerful and significantly protected by the state. In such a case, there is a high risk of communities not confronting these actors due to the belief of state backing. The use of coercive approaches further substantiates this claim. Studies in parts of Africa (e.g. Schueler et al., 2011), Asia, and Latin America (e.g. Zoomers, 2011) indicate a series of narratives linked to the land and natural resource acquisition of enterprise-based actors (e.g. agro-industrialists, mining/logging concessions). This however contradicts other findings which showed how traditional authorities draw from their power resources to influence natural resource exploitation (Aabeyir & Agyare, 2020; Brobbey et al., 2021). Therefore, studies that clarify the chain of information linked to state approval of agro-establishment, mining, and logging claims need to be further explored. Regarding gender-based convictions, it is widely held that women are not discriminated against in terms of land and linked natural resource acquisition. While this holds true, the structural conditions (e.g. limited income opportunities for women) render them incapable of significantly acquiring land. Furthermore, women in such communities do not inherit land in the same proportion as men. This established practice represents another issue to be further explored, especially with regard to the rationale and implications of disproportionate land inheritance. The evidence provided in this paper does not only explain the use of power tools as reported in the ACP

approach but provides insights into the key harmful convictions around land and linked natural resource access and use.

Theoretical and practical implications

The study is theoretically relevant in that it goes beyond the reporting of power manifestations around land and linked natural resources by highlighting a crucial aspect which has been ignored in the literature; that is, the harmful convictions linked to the social relationships between the potentate and the subordinate in the case of natural resource access and use. Additionally, the study establishes a theoretical link between different categories of actors and the harmful convictions they steer. For instance, political and elitism based actors were known to steer coercion in their power manifestations while religious actors steer (dis)incentives. From a practical standpoint, this study is imperative as it informs policy and legislation in Cameroon. Specifically, it provides very useful insights to inform the revision of the Land Tenure Law, the Forestry and Wildlife Law, and the laws regulating mining in Cameroon. In this light, it emphasizes the need for these instruments to be revised to address power asymmetry and the harmful convictions they breed.

Conclusion

The way in which actors exercise power in the acquisition of natural resources has received significant attention. However, the convictions linked to such power constellations still require significant empirical grounding, especially in ethnically diverse settings of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Taking the case of the greater south region of Cameroon, this paper provides explorative insights into the power and conviction dynamics around land and linked natural resources. Based on the analysis, the following conclusions are plausible: Firstly, key harmful convictions shaping land resource access are in rooted ethnic/regional, elitism, and politically based factors. In the greater south region, ethnic/region-based narratives significantly target the Bamilekes and the Anglophones—with emphasis on land access

for agro-industrial plantation and housing development. Furthermore, narratives around the northerners (*Wajos*) are linked to the perception of their increased acquisition of grazing land. Elitism-based convictions manifest through enterprise and class-based patterns, as agro-enterprises, with the complicity of political, administrative, and traditional authorities secure significant parcels of land. This widely held conviction leads to either the avoidance of confrontation between natives and elite-based actors, or to confrontations. Surprisingly, gender-based and religious-based harmful convictions are less recurrent in the greater south. It can thus be concluded that ethnic/religious-based and elitism-based harmful convictions drive land resource access in the greater south of Cameroon. Secondly, while actors draw from a portfolio of power tools (coercion, (dis)incentives, and dominant information), the practice of coercion predominates in the application of these power tools. This is driven more by political and elitism-based actors. However, religious-based actors employ more of (dis)incentives while political-based actors draw more from dominant information in their quest for land resource access. Thirdly, the key harmful convictions around land relates to the claim that the state of Cameroon tacitly supports elitism-based actors as they advance their land-grabbing course, virtually disregarding, natives and ethnic minorities. It can thus be held that elitism-based and ethnic/region-based actors steer harmful convictions around land and linked natural resources. These results provide useful evidence on the harmful convictions linked to the access and use of land and related natural resources. It, therefore, provides a complementary dimension to the actor-centred power concept, with a focus on harmful convictions and narratives which are inherent in power issues around the land.

As a limitation, this study reports on the case of a few communities in the greater south region. So, the evidence derived here provides the scientific community with specific lessons to be learned from this case. It does not capture the dynamics in other parts of the greater south region such as around Kribi and the Campo Ma'an National Park area which might reveal a whole different dynamic. Future studies should extend to other parts of the greater south region to reveal other yet-to-be established harmful convictions and power

manifestations. Another limitation is that this study is purely qualitative in nature. The use of a mixed methods research approach which combines both qualitative and quantitative methods could potentially reveal new patterns and enhance our appreciation of power and conviction dynamics in this area.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest Authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest. This research did not experiment with humans or animals. Prior informed consent of respondents was sought before the data collection process.

Ethical approval The ethics and deontology governing the conduct of research in Cameroon was respected to the latter during the course of this study.

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