

Understanding Herder-Farmer Conflicts in West Africa: Outline of a Processual Approach

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While West African herders and farmers have long coexisted in symbiotic relationships that endure both peace and contentious engagements, reports of violent clashes between these two groups are becoming more frequent. It is urgent that we understand when, how, and why resource-related conflicts between herders and farmers escalate into widespread violence between whole communities. Until now, we have not been asking an important question: Why are most conflicts peacefully resolved while others in the same area escalate into violent engagement? In this paper, I outline a processual approach of addressing that question. While structural approaches have offered fruitful explanations of why there are herder-farmer conflicts, viewing these conflicts as dynamic processes can explain variability in outcomes across the many conflicts that may occur within the same context. I present this analytical approach by discussing studies of herder-farmer conflicts in Burkina Faso and Cameroon that, escalating, resulted in multiple deaths.

Key words: herder-farmer conflicts, conflict theory, processual analysis, pastoral systems, West Africa

Introduction

In West Africa, agriculture and pastoralism have coexisted side-by-side for centuries. Over time, many herding and farming communities in the same area have developed interdependent relationships through reciprocity, other exchange, and support. At the same time, conflicts between herders and farmers have arisen for centuries. Recently, a small number of these disputes have escalated into widespread violence and displacement of people. In some cases, herder-farmer conflicts articulated with other ethnic, political, and religious conflicts. For example, in 2004, President Obasanjo of Nigeria declared a state of emergency in Central Plateau State, when herder-farmer conflicts resulted in “near-mutual genocide” of Christians and Muslims and more than 20,000 refugees fleeing to neighboring Cameroon. Because herder-farmer conflicts are often considered local, endemic, low-intensity conflicts and not wars, they have been largely ignored in the burgeoning literature on violent conflicts in Africa and

elsewhere (e.g., Chabal, Engel, and Gentili 2005; Lind and Sturman 2002; Richards 2005b). Herder-farmer conflicts not only have a direct impact on the lives and livelihoods of those involved, they also disrupt and threaten the sustainability of agricultural and pastoral production in West Africa. Ignoring these clashes is unwise because local conflicts may escalate into “real wars,” argues Richards (2005a:14), who writes that Burkina Faso may well be at the brink of ethnic violence along the “occupational boundary of farming and herding.”

The increasing number of reports of violence at this occupational boundary makes understanding herder-farmer conflicts an urgent task.¹ We need to know not just why friction begins, but also why and how, as some conflicts unfold they articulate with religious, ethnic, and political conditions. Perhaps the most crucial question is why some conflicts between herders and farmers *escalate* into widespread violence. I define escalation as the transformation of a disagreement, argument, or dispute between a single herder and a single farmer, for example over crop damage, into widespread violence between communities that results in multiple fatalities.

Explanations of farmer-herder conflicts have generally been structural in nature, invoking factors shared by all members of both communities. Herders and farmers in many locales make their livelihood within the same geographical, political, and sociocultural conditions, which may be characterized by resource scarcity (e.g., Braukämper 2000) or political inequality (e.g., Bassett 1988). While structural factors may and do give rise to many herder-farmer conflicts, it is not the case that all disagreements occurring under the same structural conditions escalate into large-scale, violent clashes that engage whole communities.

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If patterns of herder-farmer conflict could be entirely explained by structural factors, we would expect all conflicts in the same stressful context to display not only similar causes, but also similar levels of engagement and violence and similar outcomes. In fact, in many instances (Bassett 1988; Hagberg 1998, 2001, 2005; Harshbarger 1995), conflict outcomes under the same conditions result in a wide variety of outcomes. In Ghana, for example, crop damages have on numerous occasions resulted in widespread violence between farmer youths and FulBe herders, but this certainly is not always the case (Tonah 2006:167).

Herder-farmer conflicts are complex (Bassett 1988, Noorduyn 2005) products of both structures and processes and cannot be explained solely in terms of either. A general theory of herder-farmer conflicts must include both structural and processual variables. Structural variables are necessary to explain the causes of conflicts, while processual variables can explain the outcomes of conflicts. In his discussion of ethnic conflicts, Sandole (1999) integrates structural and processual approaches as he makes a distinction between conflict-as-startup conditions and conflict-as-process, in which the former refers to the structural dimensions or the underlying or fundamental causes and the latter refers to the situation in which the conflict is in full swing and becomes a self-perpetuating and self-stimulating process. In this framework, the conflict-as-startup conditions are necessary but not sufficient for conflicts to escalate, and the goal is to identify the proximate causes of escalation (Porto 2002).

In this paper, I outline an analytical framework that examines herder-farmer conflict as a dynamic process to explain the variable outcomes of herder-farmer conflicts—in particular conflict escalation. Once a conflict begins, the parties are engaged in an interaction that unfolds as a sequence of moves, each in response to the immediately prior move. Within this sequence, escalation may or may not occur. The immediate reason(s) why the parties escalate the conflict, as well as the reason(s) why they resolve it peacefully, are to be found within the conflict as it unfolds. My analysis draws on conflict theory (e.g., Kriesberg 2007; Mitchell 1981; Pruitt and Kim 2004) and processual approaches in anthropology (e.g., Bailey 1969; Barth 1959) to identify variables that contribute to the escalation of herder-farmer conflicts.

I illustrate this processual approach with two ethnographic case studies of herder-farmer conflicts that escalated into widespread violence, one in the Northwest of Cameroon (Harshbarger 1995; Kum 1983) and one from Southwest Burkina Faso (Hagberg 1998, 2001, 2005). I show that processual analysis yields variables in conflict analysis that have not yet been considered in debates about herder-farmer conflict and that these variables help to explain why and how conflicts escalate. While I focus here on West Africa, similar conflicts also occur in East Africa (e.g., Campbell et al. 2000; Little 1987). Conflict is ubiquitous in West Africa, where farming and herding production systems are integrated at the household, community, and regional levels. In contrast, in East Africa there are more conflicts among pastoralists, which

have escalated in the last decades because of the availability of automatic weapons and the general insecurity in the greater Horn of Africa (Gray 2000; McCabe 2004).

Studies of Herder-Farmer Conflicts

Many communities of farmers and herders have built interdependent relationships with one another through emergent processes of exchange. Such interdependence has often been described as symbiotic, in which the two communities form *host-client* or *host-stranger* relationships with one another (Bassett 1986; de Haan, van Driel, and Kruithof 1990; Diallo 2000; Tonah 2006). A good example of a host-client relation is that between Mbororo herders and Gbaya farmers in the Adamawa Province of Cameroon (Burnham 1980). The basis of this long-term symbiotic relationship is reciprocity, which either party may initiate with small gifts of, for example, kola nuts and later exchange more substantive gifts and commodities. Gbaya may give sacks of manioc and maize, while Mbororo may give calves, radios, or bicycles. Both men and women in the respective households engage in reciprocal exchanges. Mbororo women first exchange milk for vegetables with their Gbaya female friends before they sell the remainder on the local market. Mbororo men take entrusted animals from their Gbaya friends with them on transhumance, while the Gbaya build wet season huts for their Mbororo friends on their fallow fields.

Host-client relations have been considered critical to integrating FulBe pastoralists into agricultural societies and to preventing and resolving herder-farmer conflicts across West Africa (Breusers, Nederlof, and van Rheeën 1998; Dafinger and Pelican 2006). Dafinger and Pelican (2006) consider the host-client relations a structural factor that explains variation in herder-farmer conflicts between Central South Burkina Faso and Northwest Cameroon. But the Gbaya-Mbororo example also shows that host-client relations can be studied as a process in which the relationship is strengthened over time through reciprocal exchange of goods and services.

These symbiotic relationships usually facilitate dispute resolution between herders and farmers. The Mossi and FulBe in Central Plateau of Burkina Faso also have long standing host-stranger relations that involve reciprocal gift-giving, grazing of stubble, manure for fields, entrustment of animals, milk for millet, godparent hood, and friendships (Breusers et al. 2000). The historical context is critical in that it sets the stage for reconciliation and maintenance of the peace. In one case, described in detail by Breusers et al. (1998), Mossi farmers accompanied by a village official went to the cattle owner the day following the crop damage to negotiate compensation. Existing relations of animal entrustment between the negotiators was key to the resolution of the conflict.

Breusers (1999) argues that most conflicts in the Central Plateau are settled quickly without major complications and rarely are cases brought to administrative authorities, but that this is and has not always been the case (Breusers et al. 2000; Oksen 2000). Sometimes, however, the symbiosis

breaks down and minor conflicts escalate into deadly violence between communities. Barrot (1992:5), for example, reflects on the massacre of FulBe in Toda, Niger on October 30, 1991, in which 103 people were killed, mostly women and children:

It all began with a commonplace quarrel over stray cattle, in which a Hausa farmer lost his temper and opened fire on a Peul bystander. He missed and was killed by a cudgel blow. The punitive expedition that followed was out of all proportion. The "army of farmers" (four or five hundred men) was raised by a few hot-heads, who passed around amphetamine tablets to rouse their troops. The manhunt began, ending in the most appalling blood bath.

The underlying or structural reasons for the conflict, according to Barrot, quoting André Marty, is the demise of the symbiotic relations between herders and farmers across West Africa. As livestock ownership among farmers has increased, they no longer need manure contracts. Moreover, farmers now compete directly with herders for grazing lands, which have been slowly disappearing due to population growth and agricultural expansion.

Barrot's analysis is representative of studies that examine herder-farmer conflicts in order to identify the structural conditions under which they occur. Such studies under-theorize processual variables, which are often glossed over by reference to chance or "luck." Barrot (1992:6) addresses the question of why this particular conflict escalated by stating that it was "simply bad luck that one of these mundane scuffles between farmers and herders ended in a death," i.e., the farmer's death by cudgel blow.

The two main theoretical approaches in the study of herder-farmer conflicts in West Africa are both structural: environmental security and political ecology. Environmental security scholars, like Thomas Homer-Dixon, have emphasized the role of resource scarcity and increasing competition for these scarce resources as the primary, though not the only reason for more frequent and more frequently violent conflicts over natural resources (Homer-Dixon 1999). Political ecologists have challenged Homer-Dixon's thesis that there is a causal link between resource scarcity and violent conflicts (e.g., Hartmann 2001). Bassett (1988) observes, for example, that herder-farmer conflicts are equally intense in Cote d'Ivoire and Central Cameroon, where grazing areas are relatively abundant.

Researchers have identified many structural factors that contribute to the increasing incidence of conflict between herders and farmers, including resource scarcity (Blench 1984; Braukämper 2000; Zuppan 1994), decreasing interdependence of pastoral and agricultural economies (Blench 1984; Breusers, Nederlof, and van Rheenen 1998; Oksen 2000; Tonah 2000, 2006; van Driel 1999), institutional failure to resolve conflicts (Arditi 1997; Beeler 2006; Benjaminsen and Ba 2009; Braukämper 2000; Harshbarger 1995; Moritz 2006b; Noorduynd 2005), the larger political context (Bassett 1988; Beeler 2006; Diallo 1999; Gausset 2005; Hurault 1998; Tonah 2000), historical context (Arditi 1997; Blench

1984; Dafinger and Pelican 2006; Davidheiser and Luna 2008; Hurault 1998), or cultural differences between herders and farmers (Adebayo 1997; Blench 1984; Hagberg 2000; Tonah 2000).

Bassett (1988) makes a distinction between proximate and ultimate causes; for example, drought and high cereal prices are proximate causes, whereas impoverishment due to excessive surplus extraction is an ultimate cause. Distinguishing between proximate and ultimate causes is, therefore, useful for understanding how and why herder-farmer conflicts *begin*. But these structural explanations alone do not explain the variation in conflict *outcomes*. For example, in the same areas in Nigeria and Burkina Faso where herder-farmer disputes have recently escalated, hundreds of herder-farmer disputes are peacefully resolved every year. A processual analysis that focuses on the dynamics of the conflicts themselves can contribute to a better understanding of why and how some herder-farmer conflicts escalate and most others are peacefully resolved.

Processual Approaches in Anthropology

Anthropology has seen multiple paradigmatic shifts between structural and processual approaches. Anthropologists of the Manchester School, for example, shifted away from structural-functionalist analyses to a more agent-focused analysis of the social and political dimensions of conflict situations. They developed analytical methodologies, like situational analysis and the extended case method, that entailed a detailed examination of one event to see how actors position and reposition themselves in a series of moves (see Gluckman 1955; Mitchell 1983; van Velsen 1979).

Processual analyses also came to the forefront in the 1960s in political anthropology (Bailey 1969; for a review, see Kurtz 2001; Swartz et al. 1966b). The processualists defined the study of politics "as the study of the *processes* involved in determining and implementing public goals and in the differential achievement and use of power by the members of the group concerned with those goals [their emphasis]" (Swartz et al. 1966a:7). The processualists, thus, built on the work of Barth (1959). The analytical approach naturally entailed a diachronic study of conflicts in which the focus is on the succession of phases in order to find patterns of political processes. Swartz et al. (1966b), for example, modeled political process on Turner's (1957) social drama, breaking it down into multiple phases: breach, crisis, mobilization, countervailing measures and redressive mechanisms, and peace (see also Gulliver 1979). In breaking up conflict in multiple phases, processual anthropologists followed a similar analytical strategy as conflict theorists.

In the 1970s, there was a shift back to more structural analyses of the political economy of dependency and world systems (Frank 1967; Wallerstein 1974; Wolf 1982). This paradigm was central to the emergence of political ecology, which has become one of the dominant theoretical frameworks in the study of conflicts over natural resources (Blaikie

and Brookfield 1987; Peet and Watts 1996; Peluso and Watts 2001) and the study of herder-farmer conflicts (Bassett 1988; Campbell et al. 2000). Structural political ecologists focused more on structure rather than agency, which often translates into a focus on formal institutions instead of individual behavior (see also Bryant 1998; Horowitz 2003; Walker 2005). Recently, there has been a shift to processual analyses in political ecology (Paulson, Gezon, and Watts 2003) as well as political and legal anthropology (Davidheiser 2005; Moore 2005).

Conflict Studies

Conflict theory offers a processual analysis that is in line with process-oriented theories in anthropology. The interdisciplinary field of conflict studies aims to explain all kinds of conflicts, from domestic quarrels to international disputes. The field defines conflict broadly as “any situation in which two or more social entities or ‘parties’ perceive that they possess mutually incompatible goals” (Mitchell 1981:17). Conflict theorists argue that despite great variability in the scale and contexts of the conflicts that make up their data, they can discern universal patterns in how conflicts unfold. They describe conflict explicitly as a sequence of interactions, and it is this sequence, rather than background conditions, that they study. Conflict theory is particularly useful for conceptualizing the problem of herder-farmer conflict escalation because it offers a well-articulated approach to conflict escalation generally. Crucially, reasons for escalation can be located by examining the sequence of interactions to explain why some conflicts escalate and others do not (Kriesberg 2007).

Just as processualists in anthropology delineated the phases of politics, conflict theorists identify phases in how conflicts develop. Mitchell (1981:51), for example, distinguishes between four developmental stages of conflict: (1) no conflict (no incompatible goals), (2) incipient conflict (existence of goal incompatibility), (3) latent conflict (parties’ recognition of goal incompatibility), and (4) manifest conflict (parties engage in conflict behavior to achieve goals).

Within conflict theory, escalation generally refers to an increase in severity a widening of conflict (Kriesberg 2007). In escalation, more people are involved under harsher consequences. In Mitchell’s model, parties to a conflict escalate or become resolved when a conflict is in the manifest stage and the parties have begun to engage in conflict behavior (Mitchell 1981). Importantly, conflict theorists argue that parties do not seek to escalate the conflicts they have engaged in. Escalation is instead usually an unintended consequence of conflict behavior and “may occur inadvertently, step by step, without the opponents having carefully considered the implications of their actions” (Kriesberg 2007:157).

Just as I have argued that we should not treat all herder-farmer conflicts alike, theorists who study conflict escalation argue that not all escalation events are alike. Rather, there are general patterns in how conflicts metamorphose into widespread, violent engagements. These patterns of trans-

formation can be found in who or what groups of people are involved, in the actions they take, and in the stakes they hold or the goals they pursue during the conflict. Pruitt and Kim (2004:89-91) discuss five general transformations that occur during conflict escalation: (1) shift from small to large (i.e., increasing investment in the conflict); (2) shift from light to heavy tactics (e.g., from persuasion to violence); (3) shift from specific to general (e.g., from crop damage to ethnic conflict); (4) shift from few to many (i.e., increase in the number of people involved in the conflict); and (5) shifts in goals from doing well to winning to hurting the other party (e.g., from solving the problem to killing all opponents (see also Deutsch 1969; Mitchell 1981).

In addition to phases in conflict dynamics and a taxonomy of conflict dynamics that constitute escalation, conflict theorists’ models of how a conflict escalates are also useful for developing an understanding of the variability in herder-farmer conflicts, from minor to violent. Conflict theorists have offered three general models for conflict escalation: the contender-defender model, the conflict spiral model, and the structural change model (Pruitt and Kim 2004). The models have slightly different foci, respectively parties, interaction, and psychology, which clearly overlap and complement each other. The contender-defender model describes conflicts in terms of the actions of one party (the contender) who seeks change and the reactions of the other party (the defender). Conflicts escalate, in this model, because the contender uses increasingly more coercive strategies to attain its goals. The conflict spiral model focuses on the interaction between the two parties, in particular the vicious circle of actions and reactions of retaliation and deterrence. The structural change model focuses on psychological changes that take place in the parties as conflicts progress. These psychological changes are the result of escalation but also contribute to further escalation because they reinforce hostile behavior attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. The psychological changes involve emotions, attitudes, perceptions, and behavior of individuals, for example, the dehumanization and deindividuation of the other. The psychological changes also affect the social dynamics in groups, for example, the development of group goals, enhanced group identity and cohesiveness, emergence of militant subgroups and leaders. The model is called the structural change model because some of these changes are persistent (Pruitt and Kim 2004).

Methodology: Outline of an Analytical Approach

Herder-farmer conflicts are seldom observed firsthand by researchers, so analyses of them rely primarily on data from post hoc interviews and archives (Moritz 2006a). These data may be inadequate, incomplete, or contradictory, and what the researcher collects has been interpreted and reinterpreted by her informants. Studying a conflict between Hindus and Muslims in Bangladesh in 1954 that started with crop damage by cows, Roy (1994:5) notes:

It is true that the stories I heard in that Bangladeshi village were not about “what happened” (itself a questionable concept). What I heard was how people *saw* what happened, or, rather, how people *remembered* what they saw, or, rather, how they *talked* about what they remembered, or, rather, how they talked *to me* about what they remembered—or, rather, what I *heard* people say to me about what they remembered [emphasis in the original].

Similarly, researchers writing about herder-farmer conflicts in West Africa draw inferences from contradictory accounts, incomplete information, and partial observations. They generally rely on one or two, often historical, cases to illustrate observed patterns in herder-farmer relations, rather than surveys with a large *N* (but see Brockhaus, Pickard, and Rischkowsky 2003; Harshbarger 1995; Turner et al. 2006). But surveys do not capture the complex dynamic of how conflicts unfold (Moritz 2006a). The analytical approach that I am outlining here aims to capture these dynamics and explain when, how, and why some herder-farmer conflicts escalate and others do not.

Foremost, processual analysis involves a holistic approach to an event. By holistic, I mean interpreting events, actions, and actors within their particular, local context, considering sociocultural, historical, ecological, economic, political or institutional factors. For example, to explain a herder-farmer conflict in the Far North of Cameroon, I had to consider the historical context of the 19th century FulBe jihad (Moritz 2006b). In an ethnographic analysis, structural context is not simply “background,” because agents and actions are meaningful only within this context. In this analysis, it is unclear where an “event” ends and “context” begins, as the analytical boundaries between the two are always blurry. The point of the processual analysis is that it starts with the event (the conflict) and then examines how it articulates with the sociocultural, political, historical, ecological, demographic, economic, and institutional context.

To develop an explanatory model of conflict escalation between herder and farmer communities, we should focus on behaviors and processes conflict theorists have identified as critical for escalation. Herder-farmer relations can be considered latent conflicts, in Mitchell’s terms (1981), because both parties recognize that their goals are incompatible. Herders and farmers alike know that they compete with one another over natural resources. But as long as both parties do not engage in conflict behavior, i.e., try to bring about change in the other party to reduce their grievances, there is no manifest conflict.

The approach I outline here is, thus, particularly concerned with the transition from latent to manifest conflict. I draw from a combination of models, including the contender-defender, the conflict spiral, and the structural change model, to study this transition. It focuses, for example, on the action and reactions of the parties involved in the conflict (e.g., the initial use of violence and the reaction thereupon) and the psychological changes in individuals and groups (e.g., the formation of crowds and militant leadership). My approach

to analyzing conflict escalation between herder and farmer communities, thus, looks to the specific, local unfolding of an actual conflict in order to see the points at which it escalates.

The cases presented here were selected for two reasons. First, they are one of the few detailed case studies of escalating herder-farmer conflicts in the literature. Second, they show how processual analyses highlight the role of conflict dynamics and complement previous structural analysis.

The Grassfields, Northwest Cameroon

In December 1980, public protests by Aghem women in Wum, Mechum division in the Northwest Province of Cameroon escalated into widespread violence against the Aku population, sub-ethnic Fulani group, the involvement of security forces, and the death of eight Aghem men. This instance of Aku-Aghem conflict was preceded by a long history of conflicts between Aghem women farmers and Aku herders (information about this case comes from Harshbarger 1995; Kum 1983).

The Fulani came under the protectorate of the British colonial government in the 20th century. Their settlement was supported by colonial, postcolonial, and local authorities primarily because of the cattle tax and tribute they paid. Fulani pastoralists from Nigeria have moved to the Grassfields of Northwest Cameroon in the last hundred years because of excellent grazing resources (Boutrais 1996). The influx of Fulani, the growth of their herds, and the expansion of cash crop production have led to greater competition over land between Grassfield subsistence farmers and Fulani herders.

Gender is an important variable in herder-farmer conflicts in the Grassfields because subsistence farmers are primarily women and Fulani herders are men. Goheen (1996), for example, shows that Nso women have limited rights to land and are steadily losing land because the *fon* and lineage chiefs receive tribute for allocating farmland to Fulani, but not from land that the women farm. Nso men produce cash crops, and they receive land closer to the village. Women’s subsistence crops get moved farther and farther away from the village and closer to grazing areas. As a result, women’s workload increases and conflicts with herders are almost inevitable. Women are continually and increasingly frustrated with Fulani herders, but also with government and local authorities whom they hold responsible for their suffering. Similar situations have been described throughout the Grassfields (e.g., see Kum 1983).

Most of the herder-farmer disputes in the Grassfields end peacefully. Though they end, they are not resolved, so they continue to contribute to greater anger and frustration on the part of the women. A number of these disputes have led to women’s protest, which takes a particular form in the Northwest. One specific example of women’s protest in the Kom chiefdom is the *anlu*. (In my discussion below, I draw extensively from Shanklin 1990.) The *anlu* was a system that enforced the moral standards of the community. In particular, the *anlu* operates to redress the insults and abuse of women.

Either women decided collectively to *lu* (drive away) the offender or the victim gave an “alarm call.” In both cases, women went to the offender’s compound covered with leaves and rags, singing lewd songs, using obscene gestures and language, urinating and defecating in the house and compound of the offender, and throwing garden eggs at the offender. The offender had to offer proof of penitence, fowl and corn flour, in a reconciliation ceremony, which was as elaborate and symbolic as the confrontation. Then their compound would be cleaned, and they would be cleaned in a stream, after which their heads were shaved and rubbed with camwood (Shanklin 1990). Offenders usually repented quickly, but a few fled and never repented or only after weeks or months.

The anlu took a new form in 1958 when women protested the suspected sale of land to Nigerian Igbos by the colonial government. Women from all over the region joined the anlu, which transformed into an active and ongoing force that shut down markets and schools, blocked roads, and disrupted life in the chiefdom for a period of three years during which women took over control of traditional and colonial powers in Kom (Shanklin 1990). In the 1950s, 11 Aku families, following a wealthy ardo, moved from Jos Plateau (Nigeria) to Wum, where three Aghem chiefs had offered grazing zones far away from towns and farms in exchange for tribute. The initial settlement was followed by a rapid influx of more Aku and their cattle in Wum, who increasingly competed with farmers for use of the land. More frequent damage to farms are reported through the 1960s, including massive encroachments of cattle and consequent losses in the fields of Aghem women. This led to public protests by Aghem women in 1973 in which they boycotted the market, banned the sale of foods, and marched 80 km to the office of the governor in Bamenda.

Ten years later, on December 26, 1980, Aku cows destroyed the farms of a number of Aghem women. The women reported the damage to the Wum administration, which was, at the time of the women’s report, organizing a meeting of all the important authorities in the province. Because the administration was otherwise engaged, it did not undertake any immediate actions to address the women’s reports. The following day, December 27, the women organized themselves and returned to their farms to assess the damage. They then decided to evict the three Aku whom they held responsible for the damage from their farms. A bitter fight ensued, in which 16 Aghem women and two Aku men were wounded and hospitalized.

At this point, Aghem men joined the women in a conflict that was now directed against all Aku rather than against the three herders that were held responsible for the crop damage. Aghem men, women, and children armed with sticks attempted to drive away all the Aku that were staying near their farms. They destroyed houses, property, and farms. The Aku fled to neighboring villages. The pogrom continued for a few days until on January 1, 1981 when the police chief tried to stop the mob. When that failed, he ordered his forces to shoot into the crowd, and they killed eight people (Harshbarger 1995). This conflict of 1980-1981 stands out among the many conflicts between Aku and Aghem of that

season. Aghem women had registered many complaints over many years to the administration. None of them had led to this level of violence.

Kum (1983) argues that the Wum conflict transformed from an economic into an ethnic conflict because of continuous destruction of farms, delay in settlement of cases, and the fact that farmers generally lost cases against herders and were left uncompensated or not compensated enough. Harshbarger (1995), studying herder-farmer conflicts using a state-society approach, argues that herders, farmers, state officials, and local chiefs in Northwest Cameroon use the mediation of herder-farmer conflicts to compete for political power, social control, and natural resources in local villages and how this competition ultimately undermines the legitimacy of the state. She describes how farmers in Tugi and Wum suffering from cattle trespassing and crop damage are becoming impatient with corruption of authorities, who “collaborate” with herders, and, therefore, “take the law into their own hands” (Harshbarger 1995). Both authors, thus, view the escalation primarily as a result of institutional failure on the part of state and traditional authorities to resolve these conflicts. But this structural explanation does not explain why the 1980-1981 dispute escalated into widespread violence directed at all Aku while the hundreds of other disputes between 1973 and 1981 in Wum did not.

Comoé Province, Southwest Burkina Faso

In 1986, a herder-farmer conflict escalated and resulted in the death of seven people in Sideradougou, Southwest Burkina Faso. Sten Hagberg (1998, 2001, 2005) has extensively described and interpreted this conflict. Hagberg’s analysis of this and other herder-farmer conflicts focuses on processes of conflict management and resolution and the roles of four groups: Karaboro farmers, FulBe pastoralists, masters of the earth, and state officials. His thesis is that these four categories of actors seek a balance between peace and justice in the ever-present shadow of conflict. As elsewhere, most conflicts between herders and farmers are peacefully resolved, but there have been a number of cases in which conflicts escalated and resulted in multiple casualties. One of them is the “conflict of Sideradougou.”

The conflict started in the small village of Noumousso on December 3, 1986, when three women told a 20-year-old man that FulBe cattle were in his family’s fields. The young Karaboro took his father’s gun and went to the field where he found a young Pullo (singular of FulBe) herder and his cattle. They argued, and at one point, the young Karaboro fatally shot the herder, after which the young Karaboro returned home. (These are the facts that everyone agrees on, but there is disagreement among Hagberg’s informants whether harvest was finished, whether the shooting was intentional, and whether the herder first started hitting with his stick). Later that same day, the young Karaboro and his father, the owner of the field, were imprisoned. (Again, it is unclear whether they reported themselves or whether they were arrested and

to what extent they were imprisoned to protect them from the FulBe.) Meanwhile, the FulBe in the area came together for the wake (at which one leader supposedly calls for “destruction” of the Karaboro family) and burial of the young herder the next morning. Just after the burial, gendarmes and an official from the agricultural services visited the murder site, which was near the burial, to survey the crop damage together with the owner of the field. (Hagberg argues that this is an administrative, bureaucratic procedure.) The FulBe saw this as a provocation and started arguing with the gendarme. Suddenly, there was a cry, confusion followed, during which the owner flees. FulBe pursued him into the bush. The gendarmes were behind and found the farmer bathed in blood. During the transport home, he died. The next day, many Karaboro and men from other local ethnic groups assembled to go to the gendarmerie and request the release of the deceased’s son. Military and gendarmes from the nearby city of Bobo-Dioulasso arrived because of the mounting tension in the village of Sidéradouougou. This tension was also directed at the security forces, who confiscated all the guns from the farmers and kept them in a compound in town. Then a Pullo passed the compound and was advised by the gendarmes to leave because of the rising tension and anger among the crowd gathered near the compound. He refused. (There is some debate whether the Pullo was armed or not.) This set off the Karaboro, who forced their way into the compound, took their weapons, and headed into town shooting. Two or three FulBe were killed. Hagberg’s informants described it as “an all out war” that spread rapidly among Karaboro farmers in the region. The next day, more military arrived and there was a standoff between farmers and the military who installed a machine gun to defend themselves and FulBe refugees. The conflict subsided but tension and revenge dominated in the area for years, and both FulBe and Karaboro fled the region. All in all, one Karaboro, six FulBe, and numerous cattle were killed in these three days of widespread violence (Hagberg 1998, 2001).

Hagberg argues that frustration with the authorities’ corruption and consequent impunity of the herders was the ultimate reason for the escalation, while the immediate reason was the age of the participants. Hagberg (1998:180) quotes a Dyula elder: “The way of children and the way of adults are not the same. So [the son of the Karaboro field owner] took the firearm and went to the field.” Hagberg’s analysis of the escalation of the Sidéradouougou conflict focuses primarily on the structural context of the authorities’ corruption and failure of conflict management. Hagberg (1998) also notes that not all Karaboro and FulBe were involved in the conflict, and that some Karaboro not only kept their distance but protected local FulBe by giving them refuge. This is an important point, and one that applies to practically all herder-farmer conflicts.

Discussion

The escalation of the conflicts in the two case studies has been explained by Hagberg, Harshbarger, and Kum primarily in terms of conflict-as-startup or structural variables,

in particular resource scarcity and institutional failures. Yet processual variables are also considered; Hagberg (1998), for example, argues that the age of the herder and farmer is the immediate reason for the escalation (see also Dafinger and Pelican 2006; Tonah 2006). The structural variables may be necessary conditions for the escalation of herder-farmer conflicts, but they cannot explain the escalation itself. Here I briefly discuss four processual variables—crowd formation, direct confrontations, initial casualties, and the role of intermediaries—to show that processual analysis better explain the escalation.

Both cases follow general patterns of escalation described in conflict theory. In Northwest Cameroon, tactics shift from light to heavy as the Aghem women first pursue legal action before they resort to physical violence. Further, the goal shifts from specific to general as women first demand compensation for crop damage from the three herders and then seek the eviction of all herders. As the conflict evolves, there is also a greater investment in the conflict and an increase in participation. For example, Aghem men become involved when violence is done to *their women* and they start attacking all Aku and their property. Aghem men ignored women’s problems and protests until the women are harmed. Then men become involved and turn it into a conflict between Aghem and Aku. Women, until then, targeted the offenders, which included Aghem and Aku herders.³

However, when we compare the two cases, we find similarities and differences in how and why the conflict escalates. In both cases, the increase in participation in the conflict changes the nature of the conflict. When the Aghem women in Northwest Cameroon came together and decided to “take law into their own hands,” there was a greater likelihood that the conflict would escalate as social psychologists and conflict theorists have long noted that group dynamics tend to escalate conflicts for a number of reasons, including the development of group cohesiveness and militant leadership (e.g., see Pruitt and Kim 2004). Similar group dynamics happened among the FulBe and Karaboro in Burkina Faso. Wakes, burials, and funerals can be considered critical in the escalation of herder-farmer conflicts in that they assemble and mobilize groups. It may explain why and how the initial fatalities contribute to the further escalation of violence.

Analysis of the two case studies also suggests that direct face-to-face contact between the two parties, particularly during the initial stages of the conflict when emotions run high, may contribute to the escalation of conflicts. This makes moments when crop damage is detected or cattle are caught in the field especially critical. For example, in the case of the Sidéradouougou conflict, there was a direct confrontation between the parties immediately after the crop damage has occurred, when the farmer’s son confronted the young herder caught in the field with cattle. This confrontation escalated—we don’t know exactly why and how, but a number of factors may have played a role—“a flash of anger” on the part of the son or “saving face” on the part of the herder. Similarly, the

decision of the Aghem women to assess the crop damage meant that they were directly confronted with the devastating damage and potentially the herders who caused the damage. The women waited a day to survey the damage, but then confronted the damage as a group, which may have contributed to the escalation.

When direct interactions lead to injuries or fatalities, they increase the chance of conflict escalating into widespread violence between communities and can quickly lead to more violence between people that were not involved in the first place. This can be seen clearly in both cases. Fortunately, in most cases of crop damage, the culprits and their animals have gone and there is no direct and immediate confrontation that may further the escalation of the conflict. Initial casualties do not always lead to further escalation, but in certain structural contexts they do.

However, there are also important differences between the cases, in particular with regard to the role of third parties (i.e., the authorities). There is much evidence of institutional failure of traditional and governmental authorities across West Africa (e.g., Brockhaus 2005). In the Grassfields, the administration has not been able to resolve conflicts in the past. In this particular conflict, the administration was clearly not taking any action because of its preparation for a big meeting. The inertia and corruption on the part of the administration was not new; Aghem women had complained about it before. This time, however, there was no pretense that the administration would take immediate action; they were too occupied. That was when women decided to take matters into their own hands. The absence of third parties “mediating” or “managing” the conflict, even if those authorities are corrupt or incompetent, may, thus, play a critical role in preventing conflicts from escalating (e.g., see Moritz 2006b).

In Sidéradougou, on the other hand, the authorities played an active role in the management of the conflict from the beginning. But by then, the herder had already been killed in a direct confrontation immediately following the drop damage. This already set the stage for the escalation of the conflict, and when the authorities went to the field the next day to survey the damage, the situation quickly got out of hand.

Finally, there is one other factor that is central to the field of anthropology but is not covered much in conflict theory: culture. Herders and farmers across West Africa are generally members of two different ethnic groups who may or may not share beliefs and practices on how to manage conflicts. Aghem women, for example, have very different ideas about how to engage in conflict than the Fulani men in the Grassfields. And although neither Harshbarger nor Kum give much detail about the fight, we know that the cultural repertoires of conflict resolution of Grassfield women and Fulani men are incompatible. Pelican (2006:237) argues, for example, that “in Grassfielders’ perspective, arguing and negotiations are, thus, part of a standard process that renders the two parties equal; concurrently, they perceive refutation [by Fulani] as insulting and as rendering them powerless.”

While “some [Aku] informants considered it beyond their dignity to dispute publicly with agitated Grassfields women, [this partly is a reflection of] diverging ideas of the appropriate comportment with regard to ethnicity and gender. According to *pulaaku* [moral Fulani code], [Aku] herders are supposed to restrain their emotions in public; thus, open conflict should be avoided” (Pelican 2006:237-238). Consequently, conflicts between Grassfield herders and female farmers are much easier resolved (see also Harshbarger 1995). Because Grassfield women’s protests, like the anlu, are cultural activities with particular rules and practices that are shared by other members of those societies, including male members, the protests work *within* cultural settings, but not necessarily *across* cultural settings. In cross-cultural encounters, the meaning of the actions does not accurately or effectively translate. Aku men, for example, can never repent according to the script of the anlu because it involves practices that run counter to many Aku cultural codes, for example, being washed or being fed by women. This makes women’s protest against strangers, like the Aku, more prone to escalate. Thus, differences in conflict repertoires, although not always as obvious as in the case of the Grassfields, may also contribute to the escalation of the herder-farmer conflicts.

A processual analysis of the two case studies shows that herder-farmer conflicts follow general patterns described in conflict theory. The processual approach, focusing on conflict dynamics rather than structural context, leads to the identification of new variables that may explain why some herder-farmer conflicts escalate and others do not. It is important, however, to keep in mind that herder-farmer conflicts are complex and their escalation cannot be explained by one single factor. Rather, different causal combinations of structural and processual variables may lead to that particular outcome (Ragin 1987). It is, thus, necessary to integrate both structural and processual variables in a general theory in order to understand the escalation of herder-farmer conflicts in West Africa.

Notes

¹Hussein, Sumberg, and Seddon (2000) have argued that there is no systematic data available to evaluate whether the actual number of conflicts has increased or not.

²In an earlier and much longer version of this paper, I analyzed four herder-farmer conflicts: two that escalated and are discussed in this paper and two that did not escalate (Breusers, Nederlof, and van Rheeën 1998; Moritz 2006b). Because of space limitations and because my goal is here to outline an analytical approach rather than testing a hypothesis, I focus here on the two conflicts that escalated.

³It is important to note that women are also frustrated with Aghem men and authorities. Aghem men also own cattle that cause crop damage, moreover when women file complaints, men lay claim to the fines (Diduk 1989; Pelican 2006). Aghem men played a more or less active role in redirecting the aggression and frustration towards the Aku, turning an economic conflict into an ethnic conflict when they sided with women against all Aku. (On the question of affiliation in conflicts, see Schlee 2004.)

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