IN THE NAME OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENT: ETHNICITY, AUTOCHTHONY AND PRIVATE SECTOR PROMOTION IN NORTHERN CAMEROON*

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I have written a fairly long paper, so here I will try to cut the argument I develop in it to its barebones.

The paper starts with the intriguing figure of Kassim.

Kassim may well boast for having made it to the website of one of the world's largest corporation. He is indeed smiling. He lives in a town in northern Cameroon that had never before seen anything quite like the Chad-Cameroon petroleum development and pipeline project. Kassim is one of the beneficiaries of the increased commercial activity resulting from the construction of the pipeline. Project contractors buy from him goods ranging from electrical appliances and auto parts to "office automation" and unspecified "safety" equipment. To cater for the project's needs, he has now made room in his tidy boutique for products that were previously unavailable in these parts of the world. Not only contractors but also project employees are now making new demands. As they see their standard of living improve, they purchase from Kassim things they could not afford before. Business prospects have never looked brighter. Or so we are told in one of the quarterly reports that the consortium led by Exxon-Mobil publishes in both electronic and paper formats.

Kassim's close-up and a view of his business premises are just two among dozens of other photographs that we can find interspersed in the pages of these reports.

Much of the Chad-Cameroon pipeline project's documentation—and the quarterly reports are no exception to this—turns around the theme of development. The pipeline developmental goals included, among other things, the promotion of both Chad's and Cameroon's private sectors by making them participants in the project. While the consortium's story of how this mission was achieved leaves no role for ethnicity and/or autochthony, discourses that I ran across in my fieldwork attribute decisive weight to these factors on the project's hiring and subcontracting practices.

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The Chad-Cameroon pipeline project as a development project:

The Chad-Cameroon petroleum development and pipeline project is one of the larger infrastructural projects undertaken in recent years in West and Central Africa. This multibillion project, which has developed oil wells in southern Chad and constructed a pipeline to off-shore oil-shipment facilities on Cameroon's coast, was carried out by a consortium formed by Exxon-Mobil, Chevron, Petronas, and the two African governments. Funding for the project also included a World Bank loan. This loan attracted much critical comment from campaigning NGOs. The World Bank, in response, has justified its involvement as an example of effective public-private partnership in the development process (see Guyer 2002). Be it as it may, the Bank's participation in the project had a decisive impact on the consortium's own discourse about the project.

Indeed, the pipeline was formally transformed into a development project only a few months before the construction phase started. The different parties signed some of the legal instruments that specified the obligations when the construction phase had already began. Foremost among the documents that detailed the consortium's development commitments was an ambitious Environmental Management Plan (EMP). One of the explicit goals of the EMP, in its part relative to Cameroon, is the promotion of "Cameroonian business participation in the economic benefits of the project"[1]. Since the bulk of the construction works had been contracted with foreign companies, this in turn required the commitment of those contractors to adhere to such goals.

Local business development in northern Cameroon according to the pipeline consortium

The northern part of the country is one of the areas in Cameroon that has experienced the direct effects of the project. Almost a third of the pipeline goes across two of the three northern provinces. Many temporary and permanent project facilities been constructed in Adamaoua Province and in the North Province. The project has also upgraded large portions of the provincial road and rail networks to transport its equipment. In gross financial terms, the project did inject large sums into the regional economy.

This was in the form of salaries and compensation, but also of contracts for local businesses.

The progress reports published on a quarterly basis by Exxon-Mobil, which provide the consortium's account of its actions in the *name* of development, always include a section on *local business development*. In the early reports we learn how the consortium aimed at "maximizing local business involvement in the Project" by "giving priority to host country subcontractors and suppliers who meet competitive standards of quality, cost, reliability, schedule and payment terms".

[1] See the EMP's Socioeconomic topic #2 (www.essochad.com/Chad-English/PA/Files/vol1cam2.pdf)

The preference given to a non-local had to be justified on the grounds that, in that particular case, locals did not meet these "competitive standards". Yet, the most significant decisions in economic terms about what was to be undertaken by foreign contractors and what by Cameroonians had been taken before the rule of giving priority to in-country businesses was formulated. Indeed, foreign companies had already secured all major contracts, such as those referring to the pipeline construction itself, the transport of materials and equipment, the upgrading of the road system and the building of most project facilities.

So much so that, by the start of the construction phase, no pipeline subcontracting had taken place with firms based in northern Cameroon. Even once the construction was underway, the consortium run into difficulties in meeting its engagements. The progress reports themselves reveal tensions that weighed heavily on the consortium's decisions. On the one hand, it had to comply with World Bank-imposed high standards of environmental protection and of working conditions for project employees. Moreover, Cotco (the Cameroonian branch of the consortium) had to respect its own rigorous procedural norms for contract bidding, aimed at ensuring transparency. On the other hand, it had to satisfy its commitment to encourage local business development, which in places such as northern Cameroon implied dealing with considerable levels of economic informality. Sticking to the project rules and working extensively with Cameroonian firms often proved to be incompatible goals. In many of the instances where Cameroonian firms were indeed awarded subcontracts, this was done at the expense of bypassing project rules.

As can be gathered from what has been said so far, *the local* has certainly played a pivotal role in determining what were the consortium's duties. A principle of belonging to communities inhabiting the regions traversed by the pipeline was the point of departure for deciding who fell under the category of local populations.

However, the way in which the category of *the local* is summoned in the project's documentation stands out, if anything, for the latitude of its usage. In most instances, local is synonymous with non-foreign. One of the effects this has is the homogenization of those who fall under its umbrella*. Local populations, local workers, local businesses* operate as signifiers of an undifferentiated mass in which other identifications are dissolved. The lines of social difference that those people have to negotiate in their everyday lives are thus omitted.

Here, fro the sake of time, I have to skip a brief discussion on the role that discourses on ethnicity and autochthony have played northern Cameroon's history. In the paper, after a swift review of the region's history I argue that decisions over which Cameroonian firms the consortium worked with, could only ignore issues of belonging at the price of disregarding the full impact of the project on the host countries.

In northern Cameroon, whether the firms favored by pipeline contracts were headed by Fulbe, who have dominated the region since the nineteenth century, and even earlier in some areas, or whether they were firms headed by their former subjects, could not pass unnoticed. In this regard, in the north, the majority of Cotco and its main partners' subcontracts went to Muslim operators, though there were many significant exceptions. These choices can be seen as exercises of expediency whereby the consortium accommodated preferably the demands of those locals among the locals that, if excluded, could make things difficult for the project—as in fact they did in the early stages of the pipeline construction when the consortium failed to hire any northern contractors. In this respect, in its dealings with Cameroonians, Cotco tended to accommodate the existing ethnic composition of the different business communities with which it interacted.

Anyhow, the divide separating Fulbe from *haaBe* (people of servile descent or simply 'pagans') is not the only one that disappears in the consortium's account. The reports' constant references to *the local* also help elide a second boundary, that which subsumes Fulbe and *haabe* into a broader category of *nordistes* (northerners) and distinguishes them from people from other parts of the country. In the *nordiste / sudiste* distinction the emphasis shifts from ethnicity to autochthony. In the north as well as in the rest of the country, the allochthonous group that figures most prominently in business circles is that of the Bamileke. It is paradoxical that the consortium presented the Bamileke that had benefited from pipeline business opportunities in the north as representative of its commitment to work with local contractors. In the view of most northern Cameroonians, they are the example of the non-local *par excellence*.

I suggest that ethnicity and autochthony figure in these reports as the presence of an absence, relegated to the level of a sub-text, that remains inaccessible for the uninitiated reader. Given the same textual and photographic treatment in the pipeline progress reports, the business partner of a former minister or the relative of a powerful traditional ruler are almost undistinguishable from the fruit hawker in a small market or the owner of a street restaurant. All presented under the unified label of *local business*, the instituted differences that operate between them are thus dissolved.

Other discourses on the weight of ethnicity and autochthony on decisions over project hiring and subcontracting

Though of interest in its own right, the consortium's documentation is certainly neither the only source, nor the most informative, for an assessment of the project's accomplishments in the domain of *local business development*. In relation to the role of ethnicity and autochthony in shaping the project's action in this domain, the contrast between the consortium's official discourse and the other discourses could not be more eloquent. While the former systematically

avoids any reference to ethnicity and autochthony, popular discourses, for example, often attribute considerable explanatory power to both.

The pipeline became throughout the construction phase a topic that would regularly come up in everyday social gatherings and conversations. For many casual observers with no particular interest in the project, the failure of the consortium and its main partners to comply with the principle of 'locals first' was blatant. Many of them equally interpreted the fact that Cameroonians with other regions of origin had been preferred in some instances as proof of the marginalization of northerners in contemporary Cameroon. Notions of the region's victimization by the regime, which crystallized after the 1984 failed coup d'état, continue to have considerable currency today.

These negative opinions on the project circulated so widely that the few northern Cameroonians employed by Cotco in decision-making jobs often found themselves in a defensive position. Let me give an example. In a public discussion about the consortium's efforts in these areas, one of these northern employees recounted how, as he put it, "in order not to have problems" with World Bank, they had actively encouraged women to bid for contracts. In a town in Adamaoua Province, none of the women that worked in the market were ready to sell foodstuffs on credit. The one that did, ended up securing project supplies contracts. He told us: "There was just one of them, a Bamileke woman…" Then, he deemed an explanation was in order and added: "In the project, when we talk about 'locals' we don't necessarily mean autochthonous. It simply refers to all people who have settled [in the area] before or during the project. Those are the locals".

His words also insinuate another dimension of popular discourses in the north. His tying the mention of a pipeline contractor's ethnic origin ("a Bamileke woman") to an elaboration on the way the consortium conceived its commitment to give priority to locals, is intended to respond to stereotypical views about the effectiveness of Bamileke networks of ethnic solidarity in monopolizing economic opportunities[2]. Some high-skilled employees of the consortium and its main partners identified as Bamileke were commonly thought to systematically favor other kin in their decisions. The mirror image of this discourse was that of many Bamileke pipeline employees and subcontractors who posited themselves as victims of discrimination and portrayed *les autochtones* as backward and unenlightened.

Nonetheless, retrospective discourses coming from actors that had tried to capitalize on the pipeline project as a source of resources, tended more generally to avoid specific references to

[2] Such views are also widespread outside northern Cameroon. For a recent article that documents stereotypes about Bamileke prevalent in Yaoundé, see Socpa 2006.

ethnicity. Instead, these persons' accounts favor the distinctly vague dichotomy I mentioned earlier, that between *nordistes* and *sudistes*. Though it should not escape anyone that within the category of northerners, there are degrees of autochthony. (Fulbe themselves were strangers that came from the East not that long ago after all and imposed their rule on other ethnic groups)

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Let me go back where I started, back to Kassim, the protagonist of one of the snapshots that fill the pipeline consortium's reports. Though by no means an exceptional figure in the West and Central African context, he is an odd choice for proving the consortium's commitment to providing business opportunities for host country operators. Kassim is one among the scores of Lebanese traders that have settled in Cameroon. Their presence in the north dates back to at least the 1940s, How could someone like Kassim, who could be seen as the epitome of the *trader as stranger*, in Simmel's classic formulation[3], how could he show up in the local business development section of one of the pipeline progress reports? Kassim, I would contend, is an extreme instance of the ways in which *the local* is emptied in the consortium's signifying practice.

Let me sum up the main arguments put forth in these pages. In relation to northern Cameroon, my analysis shows that the consortium's discourse on *local business development* effaces effective modes of social identification and dissolves the historicity of *the local*. These reports convey an image of *the local* as identical to itself, freed from the weight of the past and the indeterminacy of the future.

Discourses stemming both from casual observers of the project activities and from Cameroonians that took active part in it offer a sharp contrast. In their version of events, notions of ethnicity and, even more so, of autochthony figure prominently[4]. This is consonant with recent work, both on African contexts and elsewhere, that highlights how discourse on autochthony and belonging, "which seems to imply a return to the local and a celebration of origins—reflects in practice a determined struggle about access to the global" (Geschiere & Jackson 2006: 6). For many of the people whose views I documented, autochthony and ethnicity are crucial in accounting for the ways in which actors in northern Cameroon tapped into the diverse resources made available by the Chad-Cameroon pipeline project.

[3] Simmel, 1950.
[4] The more prominent place of autochthony occupies in my informants' discourse may well have to do with its being more "malleable" than notions of ethnicity, as Peter Geschiere and others have repeatedly suggested (see Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000; Geschiere & Jackson 2006: 6).