Land Grabbing, Local Contestation, and the Struggle for Economic Gain: Insights From Nguti Village, South West Cameroon

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Abstract
This article examines why peasant communities in South West Cameroon have contested a U.S.-based company’s intentions to establish an agro-industrial palm oil plantation in their region. Land investments in the form of agro plantations, if not properly conceived, negotiated, and implemented, pose a series of threats to the ecological, cultural, and economic stability among peasant farming communities, who depend on land and forest resources for their livelihood. Using Nguti as a case study, this article argues that local communities do not necessarily oppose investment in land but they contest projects that attempt to alienate them from their sources of livelihood without providing alternatives. The study also demonstrates how local communities, despite being critical of the project, struggle with the company through their relations with government, to demand new social contracts and/or memoranda that could offer them greater opportunities as economic partners. The article concludes that for palm oil plantations to be economically equitable, local communities’ incorporation is necessary to safeguard rural livelihoods and to ensure that provisions are made for adequate compensation and alternative sources of livelihood.

Keywords
large land acquisition, local contestation, incorporation, rural livelihoods, SW Cameroon

Introduction
This article seeks to examine why some land and forest-dependent communities in South West Cameroon (commonly referred here as local communities or peasants) contest a purportedly “developmental” large-scale agricultural land acquisition (LSLA) project. Focusing on the community of Nguti, I argue that local communities do not necessarily oppose LSLA outright; rather, their concern is how they can incorporate themselves into this sort of investment without detriment (particularly if they lose access to their most fertile agricultural farmland). This is an emerging topic in the literature on land grabbing that requires critical attention (cf. Hall et al., 2015). South West Cameroon is a good example, because land appropriation for commercial agriculture is occurring at an alarming rate (Cotula, Vermeulen, Leonard, & Keeley, 2009; Deininger & Byerlee, 2011; Kandel, 2015; Zoomers, 2010). Rich industrialized countries, including their investors from North America, Europe, China, India, the Middle East, Brazil, and South Africa embarked on the purchase and/or lease of thousands of hectares of arable lands from countries in Africa (including, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, and Ghana), but especially in post-war reconstruction countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, and Sudan (Borras, Hall, Scoones, White, & Wolford, 2011; Zoomers, 2013). This phenomenon is what became known as the global land grab (Zoomers, 2010, 2013). By definition, “land grab” refers to large-scale acquisition of land or...
land-related rights and resources by corporate (business, non-profit, or public) entities for various uses (White, Borras, Hall, Scoones, & Wolford, 2012). These acquisitions are not necessarily about enormous tracts of land, or mega-projects, but can emerge from an amalgamation of smaller acquisitions that add up to a significant “grab” and that may displace existing land users and land uses.

This study uses LSLA interchangeably with “land grabbing” not only in recognition of the fact that the debates on terminology are ongoing and contentious (see also Doss, Summerfield, & Tsikata, 2014) but also because of the processes involved and their impact on local communities. Even though both terminologies are used, land grabbing is a more accurate term for this study because of the shady nature of the land deals, and the company’s inability to respect certain criteria for responsible land investment and good governance, for example, lack of proper social and environmental impact assessment (SEIA).

Foreign land acquisition occurs through many different ways, and for different purposes, producing a variety of outcomes (Hall et al., 2015; Wolford, 2010). However, Lorenzo Cotula and others have argued that unequal power relations between foreign investors and national African governments lead to land deals that favor the investors (Cotula et al., 2014). Most of the time, the local gains do not materialize (Anseeuw, 2013; O’Brien, 2011). Critical literature identifies cases where the greatest impacts are felt by the poorest of the poor—those forest-dependent and pastoralist populations who are dispossessed and left without other options to farm or graze livestock (Cotula et al., 2014; De Schutter, 2012; Mope Simo, 2011).

In Cameroon, attempts to dispossess communities of their land have generated varied forms of conflict and resistance (active and passive) across rural societies. Inadequate consultation, unfulfilled promises, uncertainty, and mistrust surrounding investment projects combine in peoples’ minds with concerns over their environmental effects. In South West Cameroon, the people of Nguti village have been hesitant to accept the establishment of commercial oil palm plantations on traditionally owned land by Herakles Farms (Sithe Global Sustainable Oils Cameroon [SG-SOC]), and in what ways do they struggle for incorporation?

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**Research Question 1:** Why do some land and forest-dependent communities in South West Cameroon contest the establishment of commercial palm plantations by Herakles Farms (Sithe Global Sustainable Oils Cameroon [SG-SOC]), and in what ways do they struggle for incorporation?

“Incorporation” means local community’s inclusion and participation in investment projects through binding MoUs in ways that are more beneficial, particularly for those directly affected by a project. This will require that the state create “responsible” land governance institutions, to ensure checks and balances, and the respects of agreements as stipulated in MoU signed with communities.

A major challenge for researchers is to understand the different ways that people react when their tenure rights are threatened or curtailed, or when they are been displaced (Kandel, 2015; see also Hall et al., 2015). Some scholars have challenged the presupposition in the land grab literature that peasants and indigenous populations are always displaced, and that, they are necessarily opposed to land deals (Borras & Franco, 2010; Hall et al., 2015; Mamonova, 2015). This article contributes to this debate by using the Herakles case, to show that local communities of Nguti are not necessarily against large land investment per se, but rather struggle to turn it to their own benefit.

Reactions to land acquisition cannot be predicted or read off from inevitable inequalities between the actors involved (Borras & Franco, 2013; Hall et al., 2015; Mamonova, 2012; Smalley & Corbera, 2012). In Nguti, different sub-groups demand incorporation in different ways. Their demands coincide with community desires for social and infrastructure development (such as village halls, roads, piped water, vocational schools, and scholarship schemes). I follow Ruth Hall et al., in arguing that some people will always try to participate or benefit from land acquisition (Hall et al., 2015).

In Cameroon, existing research on this topic has tended to focus on the nature and impact of land grabs (Cotula et al., 2009; Feintrenie et al., 2014; Fonjong et al., 2015; Greenpeace USA, 2013; Linder, 2013; Nature Cameroon [NC], 2011; SEFE, 2012, 2015; Vermeulen & Cotula, 2010), the processes involved (Fonjong et al., 2015), and its implication on women (Fonjong et al., 2016). Other scholars have examined not only the contested legality of LSLA in the country (for example, see Fernando, 2013) but also how the law enables
or constrains accountability in land investment processes (Cotula et al., 2016). Notwithstanding, there is little research on how local people struggle to incorporate themselves in existing projects. Hence, my focus is on explaining local peoples’ contestation, and their struggle to renegotiate their livelihood options faced with potential threats.

I acknowledge the heterogeneity of communities and emphasize that the reasons for peasant contestation depend on their ascribed and achieved status, in terms of class, gender, and socio-economic or political position. Social differentiation ultimately determines the different ways in which local people struggle to insert themselves in, or to resist an agricultural project. Unemployed people lacking formal education seek work, especially those without land; educated unemployed are looking for employment at decent wage, and are unwilling to accept jobs not befitting their level of education; rural women in this area are reluctant to accept employment or compensation unless they are permitted to continuously access forest resources; smallholders want technical and material assistance to support production; and local elites and politicians seek shareholder positions. Needs and aspirations vary between individuals, as I will show.

Information for this study comes from ethnographic research carried out over a period of 9 months from March to November 2015 among potentially affected communities in Nguti, a village in a sub-division of the same name, in the larger Kupe Manenguba Division (see Figure 1).

I undertook focus group discussions, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and participant observation. Around 100 semi-structured interviews were conducted in local communities1 (farmers, hunters and gatherers, and wage laborers). Ten key respondent interviews were carried out with key community actors including the divisional officer (DO), the mayor, agriculture delegates, local politicians, village chiefs and the council of elders, and non-governmental organization (NGO) personnel. Some interviews were conducted informally because of the sensitive nature of LSLA in Cameroon. Six focus group discussions were held: one with women, two with men, one with men and women—mixed, one with youth groups (15-30 years), and one with an environmental NGO. All participants were intentionally selected. I attended village meetings organized by senior government officials concerning issues between the agro-industrial company and local communities. All meetings and interviews were transcribed and documented.

Secondary data were elicited through the review of a wide range of published and unpublished scholarly and technical sources including reports from government and non-governmental agencies. This allowed me to situate this research within the global and African land grab discourse.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: section “Background to Study Area and the Investment Project” provides a brief background to the study region, its traditional livelihood practices, and a brief about the Herakles agro-industrial project. Section “The Context of LSLA in South West Cameroon” examines the context of LSLA in South West Cameroon. Section “Conceptualizing Local Resistance” conceptualizes peasant resistance to land grabbing in general, and I examine why agro plantations are contested in section “Why Are Agro Plantation Projects Contested?” Section “Minimizing Disadvantage, Maximizing Economic Gains” shows how local communities struggle for economic gain, whereas the last section draws a short conclusion.

Background to Study Area and the Investment Project

Geography, Socio-Economic, and Livelihood Context

South West Cameroon is one of 10 regions. It is also one of the two Anglophone regions, much of it in the equatorial rain forest. Its divisions are Fako, Kupe Manenguba, Lebialem, Manyu, Meme, and Ndian (see Figure 1). Each is further divided into sub-divisions. According to the Cameroon Data
Portal (2015), the region has an estimated population of 1.5 million people. It has been described as an “ecological paradise”—because of the richness of its forests, fisheries, and wildlife, in addition to its high rainfall and extremely rich volcanic soils, which attract the cultivation of a wide range of subsistence and cash crops.

Nguti village is a community earmarked for the development of palm oil plantations. It has an official population of about 17,000 people (Nguti Rural Council, 2009). The municipality incorporates large tracts of very dense tropical rain forest, endowed with valuable timber and non-timber forest resources. Abundant land is “available” or at least uncultivated, much of it inaccessible to motorized transport. Livelihood systems are diverse, and have co-evolved with the equatorial rain forest over thousands of years. Agriculture constitutes the main occupation and source of income for the majority of the population (Nguti Rural Council, 2009; see also Bederman, 1966). Agricultural production is gendered, with men responsible for hunting, palm wine, cocoa, and palm oil production, whereas women farm subsistence crops including cocoyams, maize, beans, plantains, and extract non-timber forest products (NTFPs). However, the economic crisis of the 1980s seemed to have blurred these divisions (cf. Fonchingong, 1999).

Agricultural techniques and farming methods are well adapted to local conditions around settlements and further into the forest, but are labor intensive and use basic technology (see Molua & Lambi, 2007). Cameroon is the world’s fourth largest producer of cocoa (Gockowski & Sonwa, 2011), which comes from these rural areas. Most cocoa farms are small in size, often fragmented, and are managed by small producers.

Local communities also supplement their dietary needs through the rearing of livestock. Households keep pigs, goats, and chickens. Livestock help to assist dietary intake, while also serving as collateral. In times of hardship, they are sold to generate additional household income. Local peoples’ encroachment into the forest is mitigated to some extent through the availability of these domestic sources of animal protein (Nguti Rural Council, 2009).

Rivers and streams including the river Mungo (in Meme Division), Bake, Bakebe, and Madie (in Kupe Manenguba Division) cut across the dense tropical rain forest, permitting artisanal fishing (Figure 2). Fishing activities are usually carried out by small women’s groups, and most often in the absence of men, during which women can freely share their experiences about what is happening in their communities, including some of the challenges faced within their households.

In addition, rural communities harvest timber and NTFPs (including fruits and vegetables, game, medicinal plants, condiments, and fibers), which are considered vital for ensuring livelihoods among rural societies in general (cf. Nguti Rural Council, 2009). All these products are ascribed local names (such as “eru,” “njangsanga,” “contry onion,” “kola nut,” “bitter cola,” “monkey cola,” and “bush pepper”) and are often ascribed symbolic socio-cultural meanings. Some items are exported internationally (Perez, Ndoye, Eyebe, & Ngono, 2002). For instance, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Central African Republic, and Congo buy not only cocoa and coffee but also NTFPs such as eru, njangsanga, and kola nut.

In sum, Cameroon’s fertile soils, fairly stable rainfall pattern, and its relative peace and stability explain its essential role as a breadbasket for unprocessed and partially processed food to other nations in the Central African Region (Fonjong, 2004). In addition, its forests have aesthetic, regulatory, cultural, and religious importance (Malleson, 2002). Fonjong (2004) describe forests as “the livewire of socio-cultural and economic survival.” Its potential explains the reason for earmarking it for the development of palm plantations, along with its governance structure and land tenure regulations. Herakles’ presence in the region has been contested and heavily debated, as I will show.

**Figure 2. Map of Nguti sub-division showing villages, roads, rivers, wildlife, and vegetation cover.**

**Herakles Farms’ (SG-SOC’s) Controversial Oil Palm Project in Cameroon**

On September 17, 2009, SG-SOC signed a lease with the government of Cameroon to establish palm oil plantations and refineries in the South West Region. Herakles Farms is a U.S. company, the parent of SG-SOC and an affiliate of Herakles Capital (Achobang, 2013; Achobang, Nguiffo, & Schwartz, 2009). The company claims it was permitted to acquire 73,086 ha of land for 99 years in three sub-divisions of the country—Mundemba, Toko, and Nguti. SG-SOC’s SEIA indicated it would utilize 60,000 ha of the land for nursery development, palm plantations, and refineries. The remaining land (about 12,000 ha) would serve as “protected” zones for environmentally or socially sensitive resources, plantation infrastructure, and land for village livelihoods (Achobang et al., 2009).
The project has generated controversy ever since. The company claimed the project would benefit communities, promoting socio-economic and infrastructure development. Due to the opaque nature of the land negotiation process, local communities (with the support of national and international NGOs, and environmental and conservation advocates) have expressed concerns over its possible social, environmental, and economic consequences, as well as associated human rights injustices (CED, 2012; Greenpeace USA, 2013; NC, 2011; The Oakland Institute, 2012). In September 2011, critics of the plantation filed a formal grievance with the Roundtable for Sustainable Oil Production (RSPO), citing inadequate environmental assessments and unsupported claims made by SG-SOC (Linder, 2013). As a reaction to this, in August 2012, the company withdrew its membership from RSPO arguing that the grievance process was causing delays to its activities (Achobang, 2013; see also Linder, 2013).

Perhaps as a response to the numerous contestations and appeals, the government of Cameroon passed a decree on the November 25, 2013, granting a temporary lease of 3 years, and also significantly downscaled its concession to 19,843 ha (Fonjong et al., 2015; Linder, 2013; Potter, 2015). Despite this reduction, the Nguti people still challenge it through overt and covert resistance, not only to protect their local environment but also to guarantee rural livelihoods.

**The Context of LSLA in South West Cameroon**

Large-scale land acquisitions in South West Cameroon were less contentious in the past, when the population density was lower and land was considered more abundant. During the German colonial administration (1884-1916) colonizers appropriated land for agricultural production including for palm, rubber, pepper, tea, and banana cultivation (Bederman, 1966). There was resistance against external agricultural companies. Most of the conflicts recorded with the Germans (before World War I) and later the British and French (after World War I) were not as a direct result of land acquisition, but were campaigns for higher wages, better working conditions, or protests against late paycheques (Bederman, 1966; Konings, 2008).

The country’s plantations were among the most prosperous in West Africa, and were the major economic sector in South West Cameroon (Bederman, 1966). They have continued to provide employment to many people. The Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), a statutory corporation chartered in 1947 by the British Government, owns many. Since the 1960s, it has been a state-owned parastatal (Epale, 1985; Izard, Ardener, Ardener, Warmington, & Ruel, 1963; Konings, 1993), as well as the country’s second largest employer after the government (Konings, 2008).

Since the early 2000s, the international demand for land for food and biofuel production has risen (Sunderlin et al., 2000). Investors in land have colluded with the national government to acquire large parcels without the consent and/or participation of local landholders (Cotula et al., 2014; Fonjong et al., 2015). This elitist top-down approach to land acquisition is common across Africa, and the forces that drive it are responsible for many of the social conflicts that affect contemporary rural societies, whose main livelihood sources (land and forest) are threatened or likely to be threatened by large-scale investment projects (Cotula, 2013).

In Cameroon, the government plays an enabling role in large land acquisition. Large land deals are “negotiated” and approved in the capital city (Yaounde), and information concerning approved deals is channeled to divisional and sub-divisional levels, and then a “gray version” of the deals are presented to communities, notifying them of what has been decided at the national level. Some studies indicate that because most deals are done behind “closed doors,” they are bound to lack adequate compensation and/or alternative sources of livelihoods to (potentially) affected communities before and after land acquisition (see Fonjong et al., 2015). The ethically and legally contentious nature of most deals partly explains why there are no accurate data on the trends, scale, and actors involved in LSLA in the country (cf. Nkankeu & Bryant, 2010, quoted in Mope Simo, 2011).

During the process of negotiation of large land deals, some rent-seeking individuals, businessmen, state agents, politicians, local chiefs, and other influential community members or clients of the political regime dominate the process and claim to represent potentially affected communities (Fonjong et al., 2015). At the level of implementation, these “representatives,” who lack a mandate to represent potentially affected peoples, seek personal gains and attest the legitimacy of land deals. But there is a conflict of interest if they are legitimizing and also benefiting from the same transactions (cf. Fonjong et al., 2015). As a consequence, most land deals tend to put pressure on the poorest, who are those same land users whose livelihoods depend largely on land and forest resources.

The tension over legitimacy occurs because the Cameroonian government is motivated to embrace land investment projects as possible sources of employment, and more important, for income generation through taxes or sale and/or lease of land (see MINEPAT, 2009). However, companies are in search of profits through agribusiness development, mining, timber extraction, and other commercial uses, and so their motivation to support local people is almost always secondary. Without any mechanism to ensure checks and balances, local communities or those at risk of losing land suffer the brunt of land acquisition. Given that land is the main source of livelihood for local communities, I now explain some of the reasons why the people of Nguti resist large land alienation, but also how they struggle to renegotiate rural livelihoods.
Conceptualizing Local Resistance

The consequences of land acquisition include community dispossession, displacement, and privatization of communally owned resources, and in some cases, restriction of access to local livelihood sources. It is, therefore, important to understand the context of peasant resistance.

There are several possible theoretical explanations. Following Marxist reasoning, Das (2007) argues that true resistance is organized through collective actions and mobilized to challenge dominance and the underlying political system. But it is risky and difficult: It occurs to sustain moral economies as well as to safeguard socio-economic and cultural identities (Malseed, 2008; Scott, 1976; Walker, 2008). Hall et al. (2015) explore a wider range of responses to dispossession. Loss of land threatens the morality of “the subsistence ethic” (Scott, 1976) and Scott understands peasants as political and moral actors, with the capacity to guarantee livelihood security as well as to uphold their community values.

In Weapons of the Weak (1985), he identifies diverse forms of everyday resistance (that include foot dragging, sabotage, pilfering, false compliance, feigned ignorance, arson), to show that while engaging in these, “subaltern” people belittle dominance and are not passive victims. He contends that class resistance includes any act(s) by a member (s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended to mitigate or deny claims made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example respect, work, land) vis-a-vis those superordinate classes. (Scott, 1985, p. 290)

Benedict Kerkvliet goes further to define resistance as “…what people do that shows disgust, anger, indignation or opposition to what they regard as unjust, unfair, illegal claims on them by people in higher, more powerful class and status positions or institutions…” (Kerkvliet, 2009, p. 233). People in subordinate positions struggle to affirm their claims “to what they believed they are entitled to based on values and rights recognized by a significant proportion of other people similar to them” (Kerkvliet, 2009, p. 233).

Resistance, therefore, consists of two things: The first is intentions and the second is the act itself (which refers to what oppressed people actually do). Peasant reactions against exploitation and oppression can be unorganized, individualized, and localized forms of insurgency that “do not make headlines” (Moreda, 2015). Scott says that these peasant actions are “real” and part of economic and political struggle by “subordinate classes” (Scott, 1985, p. 292), and “…the goal, after all, of the great bulk of peasant resistance is not to overthrow or transform a system of domination but rather to survive … within it” (Scott, 1987, p. 424). “To ignore the weapons of the weak is to ignore the peasants’ principal arsenal” (Isaacman, 1990, p. 33).

In sum, understanding the motivations for overt and covert resistance and its operationalization is important (Schneider, 2011). The people of Nguti alter their responses to dispossession depending on the socio-economic and political context in which they find themselves. The next sections explain why, and then how, local communities contest and resist the establishment of commercial palm plantations on traditionally owned land.

Why Are Agro Plantation Projects Contested?

When large land deals gain momentum, they generate new and complex political dynamics within the state and across society (Hall et al., 2015). Cameroon’s customary systems of land ownership are not fully recognized by the state. This makes it difficult to incorporate community micro-politics in land negotiation processes. Large land deals (including those that cause dispossession and expulsion of local communities) are justified under national laws (cf. Wily, 2012). Milgroom’s research shows how large land deals in Mozambique proceed in legally binding ways, protecting investors’ interests and not the interests of local communities whose sources of livelihoods are threatened (Milgroom, 2015). A similar situation occurs in South West Cameroon where the government is more concerned with allocating land to foreign investors without the consent of local communities who inhabit the area (Fonjong et al., 2015; see also Feintrenie et al., 2014). Local communities of Nguti dissent because they find the negotiation process unequal, and the requests for land too large. Promises have not been met, and uncertainty and mistrust surrounding the project and the company combine in their minds with concerns over environmental destruction. These issues are discussed in turn.

The Approach Used in Negotiating Large Land Deals

The approach used by foreign investors to acquire land in Cameroon has been widely criticized, and described as top-down, elite dominated, corrupt, and gender-biased (Fonjong et al., 2015, 2016). As per the national constitution, all untitled land belongs to the state. This gives it the power to manage land in such a way as to ensure rational use and to “develop” it, if need be. Interviews and discussions held with individuals, groups, as well as with government officials in Nguti clearly reveal that the approach was not only top-down, but also lacked broad-based consultation. Local communities complained they were merely informed in 2009, that the national government in Yaounde has already repossessed part of their land for the development of an agro-palm plantation, and that they should offer their full collaboration. During interviews, local government officials acknowledged that villagers could claim some basic rights to the land because of their prior occupancy. Nonetheless, officials insisted that most of the leased...
lands were considered “empty” and “unoccupied,” hence a property of the state as stipulated in the “conclusion” section of Decree No. 76-166 of April 27, 1976.

The general impression gained from interviews and observation of meetings was that local communities, in particular, farmers and hunters and gatherers, are not against development per se; rather, they are against any projects that will not enhance their livelihood options. Women questioned how the project will benefit them in the event that they lose access to land, on which they use to grow seasonal food crops and also harvest NTFPs. They want guarantees that sustainable livelihood options will exist if land is lost. Whereas some asked for guaranteed employment opportunities and better pay, others (especially the elderly) argued that they still need continuous access to the forest to collect NTFPs. Similarly, in a focus group discussion with women on the May 15, 2015, one farmer recounted how she is solely responsible for providing food in her home. Another confirmed that there are many households in Nguti where women are the main breadwinners. They argued that the needs of women for land should be prioritized in negotiations.

Most men demanded a complete overhaul of the land negotiation process, also with full community consultation. They said that apart from knowing the large area first demanded by the company (73,086 ha), they were not informed of the exact quantity of land required from Nguti village, the exact terms, or any safety nets. Male farmers expressed concerns about losing land on which they grow major cash crops such as cocoa, bitter mango,\(^{12}\) and traditional oil palm trees, and including sacred forests. One said,

. . . To me it’s like a dream that the government think they can just send us out of our land just like that . . . What happens to our lives and our children? How do we earn a living? How can the government take such a decision without consulting us? This project cannot hold unless we negotiate on favourable terms with the company and they prove to us they are purely developmental as they claim . . . (April 20, 2015)

Corruption in SG-SOC’s dealings also emerged in interviews (cf. Dupuy & Bakia, 2013). At the national level, for example, it is no secret that the deal between the company and the government was signed behind “closed doors” (Fonjong et al., 2015). This raises questions about not only the process but also the key signatories. For instance on September 17, 2009, Louis Paul Motaze, the minister of economy, planning, and territorial development, signed the first land lease granting the full 73,086 ha to SG-SOC on behalf of the government (Dupuy & Bakia, 2013). Officially, the constitution only permits the President to approve large land deals above 50 ha (Achobang et al., 2009; Potter, 2015). Both parties, the company and the ministry, could not have violated this law without payments of some kind, despite the altruistic intent of the former Herakles Farms CEO, the late Bruce Wrobel (cf. Fonjong et al., 2015).

At the sub-divisional level, some local institutions were created to cater to the needs of those affected or likely to be affected by the deal (called SG-SOC PAV—SG-SOC Project Affected Villages). As Fonjong et al. (2015) have argued, these institutions are not legally recognized, and those appointed to manage them are not legitimate representatives and lack a mandate to represent the people. My interviews and discussions revealed they were political attachés to the government, with allegiances to it, over and above local communities.

At the village level, communities described the process as corrupt and non-transparent. An official from one of the NGOs in the region stated that

. . . local government officials and a few influential community people (mostly absentee landlords, local elites and some traditional council members) were invited to deliberate over land acquisition on behalf of the entire village, which is wrong . . . (May 18, 2015)

Moreover, the decision to create a committee to steer the SG-SOC PAV was made by a prefectural order signed by the senior divisional officer (SDO) for Fako, more than 50 km away and outside his jurisdiction, without the involvement of colleagues in Ndian or Nguti such as the SDO for Kupe Manenguba or the D.O of Nguti where the project is located. A lack of transparency permeates the recent history of SG-SOC, and Fonjong et al. (2015) question what interest the SDO of Fako had in signing the SG-SOC PAV. A village councilor (who refused to attend such “dark meetings” or was not invited), had this to say:

. . . Herakles thinks that because they are rich, they can just throw money to some people who claim to be representing us, when in reality these people are not! We know our people, and we know how some of them can be greedy especially those absentee landlords. But they cannot deceive everyone . . . Herakles must come and see us for proper negotiations . . . (May 12, 2015)

Earlier studies in the region have identified other questionable corporate practices such as the distribution of food to selected villages, and the occasional holding of meetings with village elites and incentivizing them with brown “envelopes”\(^{13}\) (Fonjong et al., 2015). In 2013, the company acknowledged donating 10 metric tons of fresh fish and 11 metric tons of rice to more than 8,000 people living within the project area (PRNewswire, 2013). During interviews with some key respondents, I was told that agro companies, particularly SG-SOC tend to focus its efforts on winning over resistant communities by using bribes and tricks to capture their attention. One key respondent remarked, “. . . SG-SOC in this case tried to use ordinary fish and rice to capture the people of Nguti . . . I can assure you that they will not succeed through this means . . .” (April 20, 2015).

Interviewees also revealed some chiefs in the sub-division were won over with bribes of food and money. I was
told that when the company initially announced its intention to acquire land in the sub-division in 2009, all the chiefs (except one who has been accused of masterminding the project in the region) were against it. They responded with petition letters, denouncing its establishment. I was made to understand from an “insider,” a very respected personality, that a few months later, the company met with some of the chiefs who decided to satisfy their selfish interest at the expense of the community; some “washing hands” occurred, which later prompted them to change their stories in favor of the plantation. Some chiefs were promised shares with the company or offered the opportunity to occupy management positions, whereas others were simply deceived and received nothing.

Some chiefs appeared to transform their lifestyles “over-night.” Between 2014 and 2015, poorer chiefly households received and drove expensive cars. One villager commented, “. . . it is evident that the process to large land acquisition in Cameroon is very corrupt . . . all we are asking for is that the government should consider us . . .” However, it seems the people of Nguti are aware of the complexities surrounding the land acquisition process, as well as the enabling role of the government. So, they are less concerned about those who are already corrupt, but worry more about how to sustain livelihoods with the agro project already approved by the government.

Company officials have intimidated rural people on several occasions (Fonjong et al., 2015). For instance, in 2010 in Nguti and Mundemba, a peaceful protest against the company was met by massive police arrest and brutality—inflicting civil and political rights. Borras and Franco (2010) noted that “the ground for exercising everyday politics is not smooth and is played out under various constraining structures that make such activities difficult political endeavours” (p. 23). Indeed between 2010 and 2013, the population of Nguti reacted more openly by blocking access to the company’s palm nursery in Nguti village, necessitating the intervention of the government and police. In addition, on April 4, 2014, villagers from Babensi II staged a street protest against the illegal occupation of their land, demanding the company leave, with compensation for those whose crops were destroyed. They blamed authorities for turning a blind eye to the encroachment of their land by SG-SOC. As Adnan (2007) has argued, where peasants can no longer succumb to pressure, everyday forms of resistance can be transformed into more risky and direct confrontation (see also Schneider, 2011).

Local communities in Nguti employ customary law to justify their ownership or usufruct of productive land. They say their forefathers occupied the land centuries ago, before the modern or the colonial state existed. They argue that agreements completed without their consent have to be renegotiated and at present, the land deal is a violation of their customary rights to ancestral land. This is a story repeated across Africa, and indeed over time, in other regions (Scott, 1987).

The Location and Quantity of Land Requested

The majority of Nguti villagers I interviewed believed that the quantity of land demanded by Herakles Farms is enormous; and the locations are also in close proximity to national parks and forest reserves of high conservation value (HCV) such as the Banyang-Mbo Wildlife Sanctuary (69,147 ha), the Nguti Council Forest (11,919 ha), and the Bakossi National Park (29,320 ha). Existing studies in the region have confirmed this claim (see, for example, H&B Consulting, 2011; Linder, 2013).

Many criticisms have been levied against the project for social and economic injustices and poor environmental destruction. Finally, following global media reports and concerted campaigns, a Presidential decree was passed on November 25, 2013, granting the company a “temporary lease” of 3 years, and downsizing the quantity of land (as stated above) with a possibility of extension if implementation was satisfactory (Achobang, 2013). Following this decree, Nguti village alone is still expected to allocate 2,532 ha to the company, reduced from the earlier, but unknown figure. Potter (2015) has noted that the government of Cameroon neither shares information with the public about concessions nor enters their boundaries in the National Land Cadastre. This contributes to local confusion over boundary issues, leading to conflict among and within communities (cf. Fonjong et al., 2015). The residents of Nguti (in particular, semi-subsistence farmers, hunters and gatherers, village elders, and representatives of NGOs) still argue that the quantity of land demanded by the company is too great.

Local communities want to be given the opportunity to choose any land they offer, and also to determine its location. The company is unwilling to accept. Villagers, especially men, were willing to cede land to the company further into the “Mbo hinterlands,” an area of dense forest without road access. But the company is unwilling, and suggested the area is below sea level, and will not be good for oil palm. Additional research needs to be done to verify whether this is scientifically correct. The discourse of plantation developers is often that they acquire marginal and “unused” land. But “vacant land,” “empty land,” or “unused land” is a fiction here, as it is across Africa (Borras et al., 2011). Foreign investors naturally target land with market proximity, fertile soils, higher rainfall, or access to irrigation (Cotula et al., 2009; Vermeulen & Cotula, 2010). For example, in Mali, research shows that all recorded large land deals are concentrated in high potential agricultural zones (Cotula et al., 2009). This is also true for the Herakles Farms’/SG-SOC project. As one peasant farmer commented,
. . . SG-SOC does not want to go into the interior . . . How can they claim the Mbo hinterland is not good for palms . . . that cannot be true! They simply want to stay closer to motorable roads . . . (April 21, 2015)

A local agricultural technician responded that the reluctance of the company to occupy the Mbo hinterland is not justified given that the area already produces about 60% of all palm oil in the sub-division. The majority of the farmers argued that for practical reasons, and to protect the interest of younger generations, they must be realistic in their offer of land. A retired civil servant who now makes a living from farming, and also from his meager pension allowance, describes the situation:

We can only give to Herakles what we have and what we can . . . . Either the company takes it or leaves it . . . They cannot claim they are developmental, and at the same time they want to concentrate their activities only around where there are already developed road networks . . . (April 22, 2015)

In sum, the company’s refusal raises suspicions, and its purported aim of aiding local economic development is called into question by the local communities of Nguti.

**Uncertainty, Failed Promises, and Mistrust Surrounding the Project**

By 2015, local people were already questioning whether the project will proceed at all. When the company first came into the sub-division, they presented themselves as a multinational operation involved in the cultivation of palm. But later on, villagers observed they were extracting timber, as a by-product of land clearance. Local chiefs (in the villages of Talangaye, Manyemen, and Ayong) were made unfulfilled promises. The people of Nguti, perhaps by virtue of their political status as the sub-divisional headquarters, decided to investigate the possible benefits and costs of the project. With the help of national and international NGOs, they learned of widespread timber extraction ongoing since 2009.

Farmers are uncertain about the company’s intentions. Some believe the declaration of agribusiness interests, whereas others think they are timber exploiters, but disguised as a palm oil producer. Others believe they are pursuing both strategies. Some even said they could transfer to mining if they discovered mineral assets. To exemplify this confusion, on May 14, 2015, I attended a meeting organized by the SDO for Kupe Manenguba Division on SG-SOC, a logging company (Uniprovince), and local communities. Chiefs and their representatives were invited from all the villages concerned. Surprisingly, the representative of SG-SOC was the same person representing the timber extraction company. The SDO got annoyed and exclaimed in anger “. . . what is happening here! . . . I thought you (referring to the agro representative) are representing SG-SOC . . . how come you are also representing Uniprovince (a logging company)?” The SDO urged the representative to sit down rather than represent Uniprovince. It has been alleged that SG-SOC created Uniprovince, a “shell” company, which was awarded a vente de coupe (sale of standing volume) to remove timber from its concession zone (cf. Potter, 2015). SG-SOC is certainly not revealing its plans to the local population, or to the local government. A farmer said,

. . . When they first came, they said they want to invest in plantation agriculture, which will create many employments for us . . . while we were still to go into negotiation, we realized that they were also into timber extraction . . . We now wonder what their real intentions are . . . what happens if we give them land and they discover that it is rich in minerals? We want to know their real intention before we can go into agreement on clearly defined terms . . . (November 1, 2015)

Suspicion and distrust is widespread. I was told that in villages where the project is operational, SG-SOC is trespassing, and even went as far as negotiating for more land in Mosongiseli (8,000 ha) and Ngumu (3,000 ha)—villages that were not covered by the company’s environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA; cf. Dupuy & Bakia, 2013). Another incursion was reported at Babensi II, prompting further land negotiations. One respondent posts,

. . . The problem with agro companies is that when you give them 1 ha, they will take 5 ha. When you give them 3 ha, they will take 10 . . . (April 20, 2015)

He was actually making reference to the CDC, which has a much longer history in South West Cameroon. But the general point is that the people of Nguti are responding to the absence of clarity surrounding the project.

In sum, there is little clarity about the actual agenda of the Herakles Farms’ (SG-SOC’s) project in the sub-division. As of late 2016, the company is doing little to clarify its position. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) is needed with SG-SOC before any real oil palm development can commence in Nguti. Local people are resisting by demanding SG-SOC first make known its intentions. One way to do so would be to enlist and train more local people in project activities, making good on its promises of job opportunities. This would offer any locals able to assume management responsibilities a way to install some checks and balances.

**Environmental Destruction and the Disappearance of Livelihood Sources**

The siting of the proposed agro plantation boundaries has been a major concern to many individuals and organizations in the sub-division. The concession zone is very rich in plant and animal species and also close to national parks and forest reserves (Greenpeace USA, 2013; H&B Consulting, 2011; Linder, 2013; NC, 2011; WWF, 2012). Interviewing the CEO of a non-governmental organization in the region, I was told that plantation establishment would involve clear felling. He
said, “...the cost to the environment and to the local people are many...” (April 18, 2015).

Environmental concerns against the project have been raised by national and international NGOs such as Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), Greenpeace, the World Conservation Society (WCS), the Oakland Institute, NC, and Struggle to Economise Future Environment (SEFE). These organizations have played active roles in sensitizing local communities to the possible effects of the project on the environment and on rural livelihoods, as well as informing the world about what is going on in Cameroon, a country that generally lacks a high media profile in Western nations. Farming, fishing, hunting, and the harvesting of NTFPs characterize life in rural South West Cameroon in general, and Nguti village in particular. Threats to natural resources are threats to livelihoods. There are additional social, cultural, spiritual, and even symbolic considerations here that help to explain why land and forest—dependent people of Nguti contest any attempt by SG-SOC to disconnect them from their sources of livelihood. Reacting to the company’s request for land in the village of Nguti, one of the chief’s representatives, whose life largely depends on small-scale agriculture, stated that,

... apart from the economic benefit derived from our forest, culture is also important... if we fail to negotiate, we might lose connections with our ancestors. We need to ensure they don’t go into those sacred places and also burials sites... In some villages graves have been levelled out... we cannot let that happen in Nguti... we have to show them where to establish... if they trespass they will battle not just with us but also with our ancestors... (September 1, 2015)

Although environmental concerns are among the issues raised as a factor explaining local contestation, villagers are still open for land negotiations that would safeguard communities’ livelihoods and also make provision for proper environmental management. This implies that local communities are aware of some of the possible benefits and costs associated with the project, and are willing to cede part of their land to the company in return for sustainable livelihood options. As one government official noted, “...development is a give and take... you can’t eat your cake and have it back...” (May 9, 2015).

Minimizing Disadvantage, Maximizing Economic Gains

Large land deals in most parts of Africa have triggered complex political dynamics within nation states, and between states and citizens. As interest in “land grabs” in Africa grew in the 2000s, media reports and academic debates often assume that large land deals would lead to the wholesale expulsion of local communities from traditionally owned land, which they would resist (see Hall et al., 2015). Others have demonstrated a more complex and variegated range of responses (White et al., 2012; Wolford et al., 2013). Communities are heterogeneous (cf. Hall et al., 2015). Central to the demands among majority of the population of Nguti are social and health facilities (such as hospitals, piped water, electricity, roads, scholarship schemes), but their personal interests differ. As Scott (1985) has argued, participants have varying objectives, and acknowledging these complexities is crucial to understanding resistance.

In Nguti, there are farmers, migrants, unemployed, local elites, politicians, retired civil servants, and resource use and access is also gendered. These actors have different interests. Those uneducated unemployed, who are able, and willing to work (particularly migrants—without land) are looking for employment at a decent wage, although it is alleged that the salaries for general labor are too low—about 40,000 Communaute Financiere Africaine Franc (FCFA) to 60,000 FCFA/month (between US$69 and US$102 per month). Interviews with some workers revealed that a monthly salary of 40,000 FCFA (US$69) is deemed inadequate for plantation work. Among those seeking employment, a few (especially women) still ask for access to forests for artisanal hunting, fishing, and gathering of NTFPs, arguing that monthly salaries could not support their families. Educated unemployed people seek better jobs like the community development officer position held by the chief of Ayong village. Peasant farmers at risk of losing land are demanding better compensation and/or alternative sources of livelihood. Women are generally reluctant to accept any form of compensation unless they are permitted to continuously access forest resources.

In addition, some farmers were requesting free hybrid palm seedlings to expand their own palm holdings, with the intention of selling palm fruits back to SG-SOC at a profit; or they want to process palm oil using the company’s machines. Smallholder producers concerned about limitations on expanding their farms in the future are requesting partnership with SG-SOC or support from the company in the form of technical, material, and financial assistance. These actors are now organized into smallholder development schemes to combine their yearly production, hoping to sell it to SG-SOC. As a group, they believe they can bargain more effectively for good prices. A failure to secure their interests motivates people to action, including strikes and demonstrations, legal complaints, petition letters, and meetings.

Finally, local elites, retired civil servants, and politicians are not just demanding employment, but they want managerial positions within the company. Many interviewees within this category made this point. A politician in the region said to me, “... SG-SOC should recognize our importance in this society... we represent our people in and out of Nguti... SG-SOC needs to make us shareholders or board members...” Another local elite commented “... We cannot derive maximum benefit from this company without joining the management team... ordinary employment is not enough...” (October 10, 2015). Becoming part of SG-SOC’s project...
would be more rewarding and also reduce the chances of any exploitative behavior that may emerge from the company to the disadvantage of local people. Some scholars have referred to this as “adverse incorporation” (Hickey & du Toit, 2007; see also Hall et al., 2015).

Local communities are aware of some of the politics of land grabbing, and in Nguti, they are using government officials strategically as a medium to channel their complaints to responsible individuals. Scott argued that “… the bulk of peasant resistance is not to overthrow or transform a system of domination but rather to survive . . . within it . . .” (Scott, 1987, p. 424). In the same way, Nguti residents are struggling to survive by renegotiating as yet un-implemented deals. They do not completely oppose the decisions of the state, given the top-down hierarchies of decision making in which they rarely figure; rather, they are trying to ensure that development will meet community needs. Put in another way, they are merely trying to minimize potential loss of land, or as Eric Hobsbawm (in Scott, 1987) puts it, “… the non-utopian aim of peasants is working the system to their minimum disadvantage . . .” (Hobsbawm, 1973, cited in Scott, 1987, p. 424). Some local administrators are driven by a moral conscience to respond to the plight of communities, and in this region, I was told they often advise and guide them on how to write petition letters and what to mention in them. For example, during an informal conversation with a government representative of the region (that asked for anonymity), the official stated,

... I sympathize with my people ... I have told them what to write in their letters and have guided them how to do it ... At the moment, I am representing the interest of the government and obliged to execute its missions without questioning ... so the most I can do is to advise my people how to approach the government and the company ... (May 12, 2015)

In most of these letters, the villagers mentioned that they are unwilling to cede even an inch of their ancestral land, after the project had sidelined them in negotiations. This was the case in a letter addressed to the President of the Republic dated August 1, 2011 (Bassosi Cultural and Development Association–MBUOM-NSUASE, 2011). In another dated August 19, 2011, the same organization cautioned, “... anybody dealing with whosoever with regards to Bassosi ancestral land is doing so at his own risk ... we are therefore appealing for government intervention . . .” (MBUOM-NSUASE, 2011). And, they sent a notice on August 1 to the directors of the agro plantation notifying them not to tamper with their land (MBUOM-NSUASE, 2011).

The letters were carefully structured to let the government and the company know of their dissatisfaction. A village councilor commented that “… trying to acquire peoples’ farmland without their consent is a manifestation of bad faith ...” Nonetheless, interviewees said that despite their threats, they were actually open to new negotiations on more favorable terms. As explained above, they want the company to locate to presently inaccessible areas of the region, but are keeping watch to ensure that all conditions are considered before they can engage in any lease agreements. They have also indicated to the local administration their desire to determine and spearhead the development of any potential MoU with the company. This is an effort to insert themselves into land deals without being displaced or expelled. If successful, this strategy would confirm the premise that not all land grabs are about displacement and expulsion (Hall et al., 2015) or the privatization of common pool resources.

Conclusion

The article has shown that local communities in Nguti, in South West Cameroon, do not contest a large land acquisition project because they are completely opposed to it as a community, or support it unreservedly. Rather, they are trying to create a space for their integration within the SG-SOC project while prioritizing or enhancing their livelihoods and traditional activities. Communities advocate a revisitation of existing arrangements already signed with the government. By virtue of the importance of land and forest to these communities, local people’s struggle for incorporation is a struggle for survival and to protect their natural environment. They renegotiate livelihoods as a differentiated community holding multiple aspirations: as paid workers, as smallholder farmers benefiting from technical knowhow and material incentives, or even as shareholders. Consequently, the level of community incorporation into SG-SOC’s agro-industrial project is critical in determining its success or failure, and the extent to which they engage in strategies of resistance. Practically, articulating incorporation in exchange for land further into the forest would minimize the impact of LSLA on local peoples’ livelihoods, and would maximize community gains through the provision of infrastructure and incentives, both central to their demands. In this case, LSLA may not lead to dispossession if local community members are brought on board, trained, and empowered with skills to work and manage plantations. This supports Hall et al.’s (2015) premise that land grabs in Africa are not always about dispossession and expulsion alone.

Africa is a melting pot for many large land deals around commercial agriculture, biofuels, mining, and timber extraction. Depending on the nature of investments and the behavior of the investors, large land deals could contribute to poverty alleviation, at the national level (see Zoomers, 2010). But as many studies have shown, gains from such investments have been unable to reach dispossessed local communities or those at risk of eviction (Anseuwe, 2013; O’Brien, 2011). The absence of consultations with local people greatly undermines rural livelihood survival strategies, and partly explains the failures associated with many land deals (cf. Vermeulen & Cotula, 2010). At least within the context of most rural societies, dispossession or denial of access literally means ruin. Livelihoods, homes, and histories are effaced
when people are sidelined in processes and activities that affect their well-being (Lund, 2014). From a moral economy point of view, when the actions of the state and other dominating actors threaten or cause damage to the livelihoods of local communities that are characterized by distinct cultural identities, then the morality of “the subsistence ethic” is disrupted and will likely provoke resistance (Scott, 1976, p. 3).

This study confirms that the benefits of land deals do not always trickle down to local communities, urging the need for more inclusive and collaborative strategies (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2009). Investment projects need to adopt a more inclusive, bottom-up approach that pays particular attention to the social–ecological dynamics of local communities. Codes of conduct are needed to ensure that investors abide by a number of key principles, for instance, to respect terms and conditions in the MoU signed with communities (Zoomers, 2010). Without this, resistance—passive and active—is most likely to continue. This is because people in subordinate positions struggle to affirm their claims “to what they believe they are entitled to based on values and rights recognized by a significant proportion of other people similar to them” (Kerkvliet, 2009, p. 233; see also Adnan, 2007). With respect to the Herakles project, for it to be successful, local communities’ active engagement or incorporation is necessary to minimize local resistance, safeguard rural livelihoods, and ensure that provisions are made for adequate compensation and alternatives. Although this may seem straightforward, effective incorporation requires the state to undertake a legal revisitation of existing land governance policies not only to enforce and recognize community customary land rights but also to ensure checks and balances in land arrangements between communities and investors.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Achuo Forbia for assisting me during fieldwork in Cameroon, and to Simon Batterbury and Peter Kamstra for reading this work and making constructive comments and suggestions. I also remain grateful to the local government authorities, traditional leaders, and population of Nguti sub-division for their cooperation, without which it would not have been possible to access such a difficult terrain to conduct field research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article. This study was funded by the University of Melbourne.

Notes

1. Even though I try to categorize people into groups, these groups are not restrictive or mutually exclusive. Peoples’ activities tend to cut across one another. For example, a civil servant might own a cocoa farm or a hunter can also grow basic food crops and also produce cocoa.

2. Eru (Gnetum africanum) is a vegetable. Eru is the most commercialized wild vegetable in Cameroon. Recently, it has been cultivated. The major buyers come from Nigeria.

3. Njansanga comes from the njansang tree. It is used as a spice in special dishes.

4. Contry onion is also a spice used in many traditional dishes. It is also used as medication against heartburn.

5. Kola nut, a mild stimulant chewed across all of West Africa to maintain energy, is also one of the most valued traditional items used in customary gift exchange. It is required during cultural celebrations or during rituals. Conflict is resolved by sharing cola nut.

6. Bitter cola (cola acuminate) is also a socio-cultural item, often presented to visitors, indicating that they are welcome. Men also consume bitter cola to enhance sexual performance.

7. Njabe is a tree. The bark of the tree is used for medicinal purposes. It also produces seeds that are smashed, and cooking oil is extracted from the seeds.

8. Monkey cola (Tamarindus indica) is a fruit.

9. Bush pepper: This is a category of chili. The seeds are used as spice to give flavor. The leaves are used for tea. It also used as cough medicine, against aching thorax, and intestinal worms. The main market is Nigeria and the United Kingdom.

10. Roundtable for Sustainable Oil Production (RSPO) requires that its members or applicants implement a robust-free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) process with local communities, refrain from clearing or pressurizing high conservation value (HCV) areas, comply with all national laws in their countries of operation, and publish a New Planting procedure informational document at least 30 days prior to planting oil palm or clearing land to make way for planting. Sithe Global Sustainable Oils Cameroon (SG-SOC) was unable to implement many of these standards and processes, which led to the company’s withdrawal (Achobang, 2013).

11. Cameroon has complex land laws because of its colonial heritage and multi-ethnic makeup. Land is classified under three categories: national, state, or private land. All untitled land are considered national land, hence is a property of the state. This means that local communities can only have access and use over such land, but they cannot claim ownership.

12. Bitter mango is a tree crop that bears fruits of the same name. It can be eaten and used in cooking. It is widely consumed in Cameroon, Nigerian, Gabon, and Central African Republic.

13. Handing out brown envelopes is very common when bribery and corruption is concerned, and refers to financial gifts. Brown envelopes imply underlying motives. The giver expects something in return.

14. Washing hands also denotes corruption. It refers, in this case, to financial incentives or job offers provided to some influential community people to back the agro project.

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