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Land Conflicts and Social Insecurity in the Municipality of Kpele 1 in the Face of Sustainability Challenges in Togo

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Abstract

In the commune of Kpélé 1 in south-western Togo, land is considered, according to social norms, to be a shared inheritance. The community therefore establishes rules to specify the use, sharing and transfer of this precious asset among all members. Belonging to the ancestors, the first occupants, the land is passed on in various forms to descendants, adopted foreigners or buyers. The availability of land and its exploitation according to customary rules have long been the basis for cohabitation and peaceful coexistence between several social groups. However, it has become the subject of controversy and conflict with the deterioration of social ties and family breakdown due to the monetisation of society and the decline of the collectivist spirit. This research aims to highlight the issues at stake, to understand the traditional and modern rationales that contextualise conflicts, and to identify endogenous and exogenous resolution mechanisms in the face of the challenges of lasting peace and social cohesion. The results show that several factors contribute to land conflicts, ranging from urban dynamics to historical and legal factors. In addition, conflicts are complex, and their resolution depends on the level of categorisation. It is therefore necessary to disseminate the legal framework based on the Land and State Property Code and to organise interviews and awareness-raising sessions with all stakeholders to promote social cohesion and peace, which are key to sustainable development.

Keywords: *Land conflict, social cohesion, Land and Property Code, sustainability Kpélé 1.*

Introduction

In *Terres et tensions en Afrique* (*Land and Tensions in Africa*), [1] argued that in Africa, land belongs to those who buy it. While this assertion seems undeniable, it warrants some reflection given that certain plots or estates, despite having been purchased, give rise to controversy and conflict several years later. Indeed, access to land has been a vital issue for all societies in sub-Saharan Africa since time immemorial. Social groups have therefore developed written and unwritten rules to specify the use, sharing and transfer of this precious asset among all. In Togo, there is a liberal system of land distribution and acquisition. There is also the system of transmission by lineage, which makes it clear to everyone that the land belongs to the first occupants or those who cultivate it [1] and who pass it on in various forms to their descendants, adopted children or buyers, according to social law [2] "The first people to settle in an area become the owners of its land. This is the rule of the axe and fire. They have the right to enjoy these lands T. Sondou et al [3]. With population growth and the tendency for people to live in detached houses – owning a plot of land or even their own house is the primary concern of residents M. Somadjago et al [4] – the issue of land has become central, leading to numerous conflicts in recent years. In most cases, these conflicts over access to land have led to bloodshed and are fuelled by the lack of clarity in land regulations. The land issue is jeopardising the coexistence of populations. In the commune of Kpélé 1, in Togo, for example, several ethnic groups and lineages have coexisted for a long time. This seemingly peaceful coexistence was based on the availability of land according to customary rules. But in recent years, this "sacred" asset has become the subject of all kinds of disputes and conflicts in this locality. Social ties have deteriorated and families have been torn apart because of land. These land conflicts have led to the loss of property and even the expulsion of certain communities or lineages from a locality. They can be explained in brief by the monetisation of society and the decline of the collectivist spirit in favour of the individualist spirit [5] and the transformation of the nature of land market transactions in the locality, as well as the parties involved [3]. Faced with serious disagreements, the State, through the adoption of the Land and State Property Code in 2018, aimed not only to regulate the acquisition of rights but also to pacify land relations. This is because land, as a basis for rights, has a legal status that determines how it is occupied or exploited according to its social significance and

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value in the development process [6A]. Despite this progress, here as elsewhere, there are lineage and ethnic tensions involving several issues that give rise to multiple forms of violence due to demographic pressure and the scarcity of land or natural resources, J. Chauveau et al [7]. Indeed, in the commune of Kpélé 1, land has been a major source of conflict, dispute and crisis for several years. Recurring family and lineage disputes over land are common in this community. Conflicts between indigenous and non-indigenous people are almost daily occurrences, and several forms of insecurity, including physical assaults, forced displacement, exile, arrests and imprisonment, are experienced. In 2020, 75% of the conflicts recorded and dealt with were land-related. Three years later, in 2023, 1,109 out of 1,254 conflicts, or 88%, were related to land issues, according to the traditional chiefdom council responsible for land affairs[2]. These disputes involve multi-stakeholder issues and logics that underpin the following central question: What are the customary and public interactions that determine land conflicts in the municipality of Kpélé 1 in Togo? The aim of this research is to understand these customary and public interactions in land conflicts and to analyse the traditional and modern rationales that promote social cohesion and urban sustainability in the municipality of Kpélé 1. The initial responses led us to identify urban dynamics as a key factor in land conflicts and endogenous and exogenous strategies as a possible solution. As this is an empirical study, a methodology combining several approaches and techniques was used to collect data and information, the analysis and interpretation of which are presented in the section on field results.

Methodology

The first stage of the methodological approach was a literature review, which shed light on the direction to be taken in the article. It focused on writings in history, geography, sociology and, primarily, anthropology. The readings favoured a historical approach to land issues, geographical considerations relating to spatial and demographic dynamics, sociological interactions and the anthropological dimension of conflicts. This reading stage provided guidance for the fieldwork activities.

As this was intended to be anthropological research, a qualitative approach was adopted, involving individual and group interviews, participant observation and field visits.

A sampling based on reasoned choice identified eight investigation sites considered by the target population to be places where the phenomenon occurs repeatedly. The investigation was conducted in the canton chiefdoms of Akata-Adamé, Kpélé-Tutu, Kpélé-Adéta, and Kpélé-Govié-Apégamé. Other secondary sites, particularly agricultural areas, were also targeted, such as Ziolétsu, Atimé-Dodi, Bodzé, and Akata-Todzi.

The individuals interviewed included traditional village and canton chiefs, neighbourhood and lineage elders, heirs, rural and semi-urban land buyers, indigenous farmers, non-indigenous people and their descendants, law enforcement and security forces, and judges. The fieldwork involved 42 people in individual interviews. In addition, three focus groups, four participant observations and three field visits were carried out. The observation consisted of our participation in land dispute resolution sessions held every Tuesday at the Kpélé prefecture office under the auspices of the prefect. We also took part in visits and observations of disputed land by conflict resolution teams to verify natural evidence of ownership.

These various field activities enabled us to obtain information, the analysis of which formed the basis of the presentation of the results. The key issues, the forces at play and the levels and methods of conflict management are the salient points.

From the origins to the outcomes of land conflicts

Symbolism and cosmogony of land among the Ewé people of Kpelé 1

Beyond its physical aspects, in the eyes of the African population, the earth is rich in identity, mythical-religious and historical potential. We can conclude that, in African communities, the earth is not just a physical reality; it is also the image of ancestors, a transmitted heritage, a protective [8], and the foundation of life. It is a sacred asset that every individual would like to possess, protect and preserve for posterity. The social imagination sees the relationship between man and the earth as a two-way interdependence. At birth, the earth belongs to man, and this right of ownership can be obtained through inheritance, usufruct, purchase, donation or bequest. In this case, the land belongs to

[2] Data Collected from de Council of Traditional Chiefs of theKpele Prefecture, the bodyrespnsible for land conflict management.

man. Conversely, at the end of man's existence on earth, the land he possessed becomes his processor through burial. Once buried after death, the land now possesses man; he will remain in its depths. This ambivalent nature of the relationship between man and earth is the subject of the expression of the intransigence of lineages and families in the face of misunderstandings related to the earth. What we possess today and what will possess us tomorrow after our death must under no circumstances be left to a third party, whatever the situation may be or may become. It is not just a matter of production, nor a simple inheritance, but also a sacred asset of an ascendant nature and, even more so, a space of physical finitude on Earth, the arena of transition between humanity and ancestry. Gaglo, 71, interviewed in Govié-Apégamé, believes that:

"The life and death of man revolves around the earth. At birth, the land you have inherited belongs to you. At death, you will belong to the earth. No one should compromise on a land issue as long as they have proof of ownership. It is a sacred asset, a representation of ancestors, proof that our forefathers truly existed." Field survey of 14 May 2025.

While land is an asset to be exploited, its value is also linked to the history of its occupation. According to African cosmogony, is agreeing to give up land to a third party not a betrayal of the ancestors who occupied it and passed it down from generation to generation? Indeed, among the Kpélé, as in all African societies, the land belongs to the first occupants and their descendants are therefore the heirs. This initial occupation, which explains the right of ownership, is formalised from the very first moment of settlement or visit through settlement rituals known as "tsoti" ceremonies, followed by the planting of a young mahogany tree, "*atsa dede* gu", which symbolises the transition from an empty, unoccupied space to a place that is now owned. This symbolism, the consequence of which also reveals the toponymy of the space, gives the heirs proof of inheritance, enabling them to defend the property left by their ancestors. The existence of this anthropological and environmental evidence, considered as material proof in land disputes, reveals complexities in cases where often motivated interference undermines its credibility for undisclosed reasons. Very often, issues of false testimony and corruption do not lead to a straightforward resolution. These results are reflected in the symbolic African pattern according to which the earth is a sacred asset, endowed with a certain life. For Africans, land is not simply a mundane material and physical asset, but rather a mystical and mysterious being whose sacredness occupies a prominent place in the cosmogony of peoples[6B], [9].

The roots of land disputes in Kpélé

Why has the commune of Kpélé 1, considered for several decades as a place of communal living and coexistence, now become a battleground centred on land?

Land conflicts in the municipality of Kpélé are the result of several societal transformations.

Urban and infrastructural dynamics observed in Kpélé

The reasons given do not seem to obscure the rapid spatial development experienced by the town of Adéta, the centre of the municipality. For many years considered a rural area where agricultural activities dominated and employed more than 80% of the population, the village of Adéta has transformed into a semi-urban environment where savannahs, forests and clearings, not to mention gallery forests, have quickly given way to housing, commercial services, schools, hotels, etc. The rapid population increase caused by the birth rate and the massive influx of migrants, already numerous in the surrounding areas, have made Adéta and its neighbouring villages a remarkably changing environment. Within ten years, rural activities and hunting areas have disappeared. The various villages, whose construction dynamics are well established, have expanded rapidly. The spread of small localities has led to conurbation, creating a more urbanised area. Thus, the villages of Kpélé Govie-Konda, Kpélé Tsiko and Kpélé Atimé, together with Adéta, form an urban centre undergoing change. Far from slowing down, the factors driving this dynamic are evolving day by day, making land more expensive and practically less available, except in remote areas. One of the factors to mention is the reconstruction of the Kpalimé-Atakpamé road, which crosses the central part of the municipality. The project to rehabilitate this national road has transformed several villages in the municipality, making them more accessible and livelier, giving them a new spatial and environmental configuration and confirming what [10] describe as the "road" effect in urbanisation. Very early on, it became easier to reach villages, farms and hamlets that were previously considered remote. This accessibility led to the arrival of an increasingly large population, as well as the Kpèlé diaspora, who returned and built new structures.

Public policies promoting land grabbing

The resurgence of land conflicts and their current widespread nature in the municipality of Kpélé 1 also brings public policies to mind. This is because, as part of territorial development policies, particularly those related to decentralisation, the municipality has benefited from infrastructure through various programmes. The area has been equipped with a teacher training college (ENI), a secondary education inspectorate (IEDD), a prefectural health department (DPS), and police and security forces. Similarly, in order to meet socio-economic needs, financial services, which were previously limited to FUCEC microfinance, have been expanded with the creation of branches of the Togolese Development Bank (BTD), the post office and ORABANK ATMs. That being said, the availability and accessibility of infrastructure make the construction of both housing and services increasingly urgent, which is synonymous with the need for land. In this demographic, economic and spatial dynamic, the sale of plots of land has become a profitable activity, a way to earn money without too much effort. The struggle to own a plot of land has become almost daily. These conclusive analyses corroborate those highlighted in the commune of Lokoundje in Cameroon, which attest to the role of landscape dynamics, spatial change, and migratory dynamics in the socio-spatial problems that are the source of land crises [11].

The strong socio-economic centrality of Kpelé in the spatial framework

One of the fundamental reasons for the thorny land issue in the municipality of Kpèlé 1 is its location and geographical potential. With Adéta as its capital, the municipality is a crossroads between the capital Lomé, Atakpamé, and Ghana, passing successively through Kpalimé, Amou-Oblo, and Danyi. This positioning makes the centre of the municipality a hub for the movement of people and goods. Trade in both necessities and agricultural products is flourishing, attracting sellers and buyers who, over the years, have ended up settling there. Several informal and formal commercial activities are developing, with a strong focus on products that were once only available once a week, very often on market day.

As part of the plateau region, an area with high rainfall, the municipality of Kpélé 1 and its surrounding areas are mainly known for their agricultural productivity. Agricultural products such as cash crops, tubers, legumes, and cereals are widely cultivated and served according to the seasons. Localities such as Ziolétsu, Banyabanya, Bodzé, Atravé and Damonu are known as the commune's granaries, where land seekers converge. These characteristics and potentialities of Kpèlé 1 in its rural heartland attract many foreigners in search of arable land. Localities such as Aplahoé, Tado, Tohoun, Agoe, and northern Togo are sources of agricultural labour and other commercial activities. These observations illustrate the socio-economic potential that [9] refers to in terms of land fertility, job opportunities and better business opportunities for development.

Land conflicts also linked to the history of the area

Historical realities as an explanatory factor for land conflicts trace the massive presence of non-native populations from the north, mainly the Kabyè. According to history, during German colonisation and the French mandate, the Kpèlé land welcomed successive waves of Kabyès from the north, either through deportation or voluntarily for land development [12], [13]. Since then, the two communities, joined by other ethnic groups, have managed to build a shared life not only in terms of agricultural exploitation but also through cohabitation, alliances, and the sharing of socio-cultural and religious activities. Once considered foreigners, this Kabyè diaspora has, over time, circumstances and types of social relations, acquired several forms of status that allow them to have a connection to the land. Taken on as sharecroppers ("apavi") for years, the non-native or their descendants have, over the years, become adopted sons, sharecropper-owners, husbands, or sons-in-law. Today, these changes in socio-community status are giving rise to misunderstandings and disputes over land that was commonly farmed decades ago. These conflicts highlight the changes that land ownership has undergone, in which the process of appropriation has enabled non-natives to become landowners through reward, purchase, legacy, or family adoption. These principles, which had marked several years of communal living, are described as controversial contracts by the sons of the indigenous people, who are claiming the plots of land ceded by their grandparents. This raises the issue of migration leading to cultural heterogeneity, which is undermining traditional authority and threatening the indigenous group [9]. Certain land disputes, which can be described as preventive measures, stem from the legal framework governing land use, in particular the Land Code, whose provisions are interpreted in different ways.

The interpretation of legal texts in the exacerbation of conflicts

The 2018 law, in Chapter II, Section 1 ...

Article 412: Acquisition by prescription is a means of acquiring an unregistered immovable property or an unregistered real property right by virtue of possession, without the person claiming it being obliged to produce a title or being subject to the defence of bad faith.

Article 413: The possessor of an unregistered immovable property acquires ownership thereof by continuous possession for a period fixed by Articles 418 and 422 of this Code.

Article 418: The possessor of property acquires ownership thereof by continuous possession for thirty (30) years[3].

This law, which is variously understood and appreciated, seems to create a certain fear among landowners or their heirs, who believe that it is no longer possible to have vacant land more than one hundred and fifty years (150 years) after the exodus of the Ewe people. The latter see in these articles of the land code only state measures aimed at allocating local land to non-locals. Furthermore, some even classify this legal provision as land ceded for exploitation. For them, this means that land given to a third party for exploitation for mutual profitability will become their property after three decades. Several of our informants questioned what would become of our children without land in their ancestral territory, arguing that this law is incompatible with the interactionist logic of donors and operators. These positions are in line with [14], theory of the difficult coexistence between legal systems belonging to two different systems: one legal and the other legitimate, and the idea of conflicts based on diversity of law [15].

This legal provision raises many questions and involves several agricultural partners in conflicts. While for non-native beneficiaries, it is a justified law because it would make them owners of large estates that their parents had worked on behalf of local owners, for native people, it is one of the positions that poorly conceals the exposure, misappropriation, and deprivation of livelihoods for the benefit of foreigners. The thirty-year-old law, which is viewed in different ways, distorts the concept of property and alarms families who have always welcomed foreigners looking for land for agricultural production.

From historical necessities to geographical location, natural assets, and the emergence of administrative and commercial services, which together have increased the population of Kpèlé 1, land conflicts are fuelled by several justifiable factors.

A complex interaction of forces at play

Land conflicts in the municipality of Kpele1 are determined by multi-stakeholder relational factors. Disputes over land and plots of land stem from social dynamics involving several individuals, groups of individuals or other forms of parental entities. Although disputes very often lead to the worst forms of violence, revealing the uncertain nature of land ownership [10], it should be noted that the reasons for ownership raised during court proceedings are well known to society itself. From historical references to lineage relationships, individuals or social groups disputing a plot of land have a background file that may or may not justify a complaint.

The primary actors are those who, based on ancestral occupation, claim property rights. They claim to be heirs by virtue of their ancestors' initial occupation. As indicated above, in many African societies, land belongs to the first occupants. Toponymic and anthroponymic clarifications most often bear witness to this. However, in several cases that have been resolved, the current generations at the origin of the conflicts do not have a clear understanding of the gifts, retrocessions, or exchanges made by their forefathers or ancestors following events, encounters, or a history of good neighbourliness. Thus, at the root of land disputes in the study area lies a proven or unproven knowledge of the history of a family, siblings, or lineage claiming a portion of land based on their filiation. These claims evoke illegal occupation by a third party, dispossession, or a sale not accepted by all the heirs. However, when it comes to heritage property such as land, we are dealing with several individuals grouped within a community, an ethnic group, or a sub-ethnic group [16]. This is where the notion of strategic groups comes in, groups that share, at least virtually, common interests in terms of access to land resources and their use, and which organise themselves, at least temporarily, to defend these interests [15].

[3] REPUBLIC OF TOGO, 2018, Land and State Property Code, Law No. 2018-005 of 14 June 2018 on the Land and State Property Code.

Thus, a misunderstanding over land ownership in the Kpèlé 1 community evokes a history dating back to the boundaries of the lignagners. The social space that characterises the land conflict includes several groups with socio-anthropological determinants that give rise to the complexity of the disputes. The notion of kinship, which refers to the relationship of filiation, is one example. Indeed, if we go back to the first actual occupants of the land in this locality, since the exodus of the Ewé people from Notsè, we would find ourselves in the 1720s [17]). This implies that it is the heirs of the 7^{th}generation who each are claiming ownership of the land. However, between the first occupants and the heirs in conflict, six generations have mutated into several lineages. In one way or another, each of the heirs has a valid reason for their claim. The issue of land allocation in question requires a critical analysis of several parameters, including the space exploited by family heads according to generation, blood relations, and contract allocations. Added to these equations are retrocessions based on alliances involving the exchange of women and mortgages, marking specific events. Thus, while current generations may have ancestral evidence to refer to, they do not necessarily know the histories that have marked the appropriation and reappropriation of land. For from a personal inheritance from a grandparent, the lands in the kpèlé are now subjects of social crisis in which uncle and nephew, elder and younger brother, parallel cousins and cross cousins have become antagonists without regard for their shared history.

The interacting forces also refer to the history of Kpèlé as a land of welcome, exile, and refuge for other peoples. Here, the Kabyè diaspora in search of arable land provides an illustration. Indeed, already in the interwar period, under the impetus of land development projects advocated by the German colonisers, large colonies from northern Togo, notably the Kabyè, arrived in the plateau region. Like other localities, Kpèlé welcomed them, settling them in agricultural areas where food crops and cash crops such as coffee and cocoa were grown. These northern colonies, which for several years worked as sharecroppers, later became landowners thanks to various forms of farming contracts [18]. Today, these farming arrangements, which enabled non-natives to own land for themselves, are being challenged by the descendants of the indigenous people, who argue that the contracts are incongruous. As perplexing as they are complicated, these misunderstandings, which are the source of land disputes between the descendants of non-indigenous people from northern Togo and the indigenous heirs of Kpèlé in the south, highlight the issue of coexistence in public spaces. One question remains essential: should the agreements of procession and retrocession giving rise to the purchase of real estate thirty (30) to forty (40) years later be called into question? These detailed elements and the content of agreements, which are very often verbal, give rise to diverse interpretations, conflicting statements, uncertain and vacillating games, and multifaceted attacks on the integrity of the parties involved. These actors and the levels of resolution confronted with the intelligibility and dynamics of exploitable resources (some judgements can take up to four years to be decided) are reshaping positions. In many cases, the length of time involved gives rise to suspicion, depending on the relations between the parties in conflict. Accused, rightly or wrongly, of being biased, the efforts made by those involved in resolving land crises are not often appreciated at their true value.

The initiation of disputes and appeals to higher authorities are early warning sign of violence, especially when a cessation of activities is imposed in the disputed area. With their clan homogeneity since the exodus of the Ewe people from Notsè, the Kpélé have social marriage practices that are not unrelated to land conflicts. During wedding ceremonies, the bride's family was obliged to give up part, or at least a portion, of their land to the new couple. According to the elders, this requirement, which was part of the rules of marriage, guaranteed a source of livelihood for the husband, who had to cultivate the land to feed his wife and children. These portions of land, known as "*nyama no* nui" ("woman without problems"), became, at the end of the marriage, the property of the new couple, primarily the husband. It should be noted that these lands were very large but rural. Several years later, with changing demographic parameters and the dynamics of human settlements, the land changed status. From extremely rural land of little importance, as it was only used for farming and hunting, the land became a rare, very expensive commodity, and even insufficient for families who, a few years earlier, had not considered it important. The descendants of families who had ceded estates as part of a matrimonial settlement involving a grandmother or aunt ended up reclaiming them, arguing that too much land had been bequeathed as part of a marriage. While they did not reclaim the entire estate, after more than 60 to 70 years, they felt they should recover a portion of it. However, as this is a clan rule, no change is possible. It is then that the land known as *nyama nonui*, granted to a son-in-law for his marriage, becomes a source of conflict decades later.

Categorisation of conflicts and level of resolution.

This final section of the research outlines the types of land disputes and the bodies responsible for managing them. The concept of types of land conflicts refers to the nature of the conflict, which depends on the social relationship between the parties involved, while the bodies refer to the different levels or range of resolution options. In the tradition of the study area, conflict management is not intended to produce a winner or loser, but rather to harmonise points of view and resolve differences. This approach aims to restore lasting peace and harmonious coexistence. In most cases, only individuals or groups of individuals with a blood or adoptive family connection or a social relationship are likely to have a land dispute.

There are three types of land conflicts, depending on the forces involved. First, those between members of the same lineage; second, those between two or more lineages; and finally, those between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. The levels of resolution depend on these different categories of conflict.

Concerning conflicts between members of the same lineage, it should be noted that they are most often related to issues of field boundaries or the consensual exploitation of exploitable trees such as iroko, ebony, teak or fruit trees. Misunderstandings initially manifest themselves through the installation of boundary markers, then escalate into verbal exchanges and finally complaints to the clan's elder. These are crises that are resolved within the family through gerontocratic governance. The person with the authority to decide who should be invited to participate in judgements and field visits is the eldest member of the clan. Depending on the nature and severity of the conflict, this person may call on other resource persons from the protagonists' maternal families to serve as witnesses during the resolution process. This is because refusal or recurrence in the face of decisions is considered rude or a form of rebellion synonymous with the destruction of the lineage. In this type of settlement, the parties in conflict are all bound by their belonging to the lineage, and each must show docility for peace to be restored. In any case, it is a matter of peaceful resolution with the requirement to value family ties first and foremost and to set a good example for future generations. These judgements often begin with a reminder of the names of ancestors and a litany of previous generations who, through bravery, loyalty, and concern for the well-being of their offspring, were able to occupy, exploit, and preserve the estates for those not yet born. A true awakening of consciousness about the notions of the common good and the preservation of heritage, the resolution of land conflicts in the commune of Kpélé 1 takes on, first and foremost, the responsibility of reconciliation and the reconstruction of the family fabric.

The second type of conflict involves disputes between two or more families. These groups may belong to the same neighbourhood, the same village, or even several villages. Here, unless the geographical location of the disputed land, the history of its occupation, neighbouring lineages, and modes of acquisition are taken into account, social affiliations determine how the land is managed. In the case of lineages from the same neighbourhood, resolution is always the responsibility of the gerontocracy. The eldest member of the lineage who feels provoked files a complaint with the eldest member of the neighbourhood, who holds local power delegated by the village chief, as he represents the entire neighbourhood on the council of notables. Pejoratively referred to as the neighbourhood chief, the latter convenes each family in a first session to hear allegations relating to the source of the conflict, which allows him to request all the human resources necessary for the proceedings. These resolution meetings are always held with strict consideration for those summoned and invited, with respect for the ancestors and a prohibition on perjury on the land except in cases of necessity. The divine nature of the land implies that its name should not be invoked without compelling circumstances.

Land disputes resolved by the village chief, the highest authority in several neighbourhoods, involve a dispute between one or more neighbourhoods. On a larger scale, these conflicts are most often linked to large estates located in rural areas that are not yet heavily exploited, which everyone is striving to acquire with a view to selling them to foreign farmers in the area. The village chief, assisted by his elders, carefully analyses the history behind the occupations, the witnesses, the natural features of the area, and the sequence of events. At this level of resolution, the process takes several days or even weeks and involves frequent visits to the estate. If difficulties persist in reaching an amicable and fraternal resolution, invoking the ancestors, the first occupants of the land, becomes a necessary step. Invoking the dead, or ancestors, to help resolve land disputes is common practice in EWE countries (Benin, Togo, Ghana). In such circumstances, reflections would emerge on the interaction between ancestors and land. Indeed, in the community under study, the deceased, the first occupants of the land, share these spaces with the living. They are invoked during major ceremonies and receive

ovations, libations and feasts. In Leurres *et lueurs*, 1960, published by Présence Africaine, [19] emphasised the presence of the dead among the living, declaring in the fourth stanza:

"*Those who have died have never left,*
They are in the womb of the woman,
They are in the child who cries..."

In Ewe cosmogony in general, and Kpele cosmogony in particular, people believe in the immortality of the soul. According to mythical and religious knowledge, those who have passed into ancestry continue to share space and daily life with the living, but only in the invisible world known as "*tsièfe" or "awlime".* From there, the dead provide ontological protection for society and, above all, for the property they have left as a legacy to current and future generations. Two legacies are predominant, namely the mother house "*apedome"*, the land "*anyigba*", and the family estate "*ome nyigba*". As the first occupants and therefore the real owners, the ancestors are invoked through libations so that they can safeguard what belonged to them.

Returning to the levels of conflict and their levels of resolution, it should be noted that the emerging pattern of land disputes is one that occurs between indigenous and non-indigenous people and highlights issues of land ownership and dispossession, the problem of exploitation contracts and sales without the knowledge of the operators. Synonymous with crisis between blood relatives and adopted sons, disputes between indigenous and non-indigenous people over land lead to divisions against a backdrop of expropriation, social disintegration, and endless complaints at various levels of conflict resolution.

"*How can they take away the land that our parents obtained from their parents after many years of service? These are signs of recognition and, above all, of the relationships that bound them together. We are the legal heirs today, and justice must be done*," exclaimed Téi, 49, a descendant of the Kabyè immigrant community and a farmer in Atravé, Novivé canton, during a dispute in Atimé. In many circumstances, immigrants cannot take possession of land without clear evidence from the outset, and attempts at expropriation after several years are interpreted as injustice. Arguments and counterarguments do not often provide opportunities for a justified settlement. While non-indigenous people refer to the covetousness of their land, dotted with cash crops, by the sons of indigenous people, the latter raise the issue of the incomprehensibility of the procedures or contracts that made them landowners. They believe that a purchase or donation following a well-established contract must be proven materially, which is difficult in a society where words and witnesses are considered convincing reasons. Faced with such questionable opposition, the traditional chiefs of the localities concerned, assisted by community leaders, try to iron out the differences and settle the dispute between the parties. Each side, supported by witnesses and relatives, presents the knowledge and memories that serve as supporting evidence before the councils, which are often held at the chief's residence. At this level of resolution, there are three categories of peacemakers: village chiefs, known as "dufia"; community chiefs, known as "kotafia", who are in fact the leaders of non-native ethnic groups; and canton chiefs, known as "*nutomefiaga"*, who are the senior chiefs at the prefecture level.

Land disputes, which neither elders nor traditional leaders seem to consider important according to the explanations given by the parties involved, foreshadow violence of all kinds and decades of division within families, neighbourhoods and even villages. Indeed, faced with what the belligerents describe as an injustice that indirectly favours one side, violence soon becomes a means of resolving land disputes. We find ourselves in the camps of the 'dominant' and the 'dominated' [7], where handmade knives and firearms became tools of vigilante justice. From warnings to complaints that were either ignored or met with unfavourable responses, some people, believing themselves to be within their property rights, physically attacked others either on the land itself or in isolated locations, sometimes to the point of death. These cases, which raise many questions within the community, have been reported in the localities of Kpélé-Tutu in the canton of Dawlotou and Akata in the canton of Akata. In serious cases of land-related crises, political authorities such as the prefect and administrative authorities, as well as law enforcement and security forces, intervene directly. This level of resolution, the highest level of conflict management, results in arrests, court trials and convictions in accordance with the laws in force in Togo. In these cases, the Kpélé community, which abhors crime and murder, gives its full support to the authorities through testimonies, the presentation of evidence and cross-checking so that justice is done not only for the disputed land but also for the victim(s). Nowadays, land disputes in the municipality of Kpélé 1 continue to worsen and intensify, revealing the uncertainty of social peace, which was once the most widely shared commodity. Ignorance of the land and property

code, disregard for the master plan and planning, and failure to respect the spirit of the ancestors are putting the future of land heritage to the test.

Conclusion

In the commune of Kpélé 1, the local population, based on its endogenous knowledge and its relationship with the land, has established a dynamic of interdependence with the land that provides the population with security in several areas. Beyond its value as an inheritance for descendants of lineages, the land is also a common resource to be exploited and shared. While in the past, norms, values, and mythical representations had established the logic of its individual or collective development, today, changes in its status are generating conflicts on several levels. From donation to retrocession according to forms of contract linked to local knowledge, land has become a commodity in which social relations have taken a back seat. A source of conflict between families, neighbourhoods, villages, indigenous and non-indigenous people, and even foreigners, land disputes play a major role in efforts to achieve reconciliation and peace in the community.

The population explosion, modernisation of the environment, and geographical and economic potential have given land in the locality an unexpected value, leading to an obsession with "*wanting to own more*" in order to sell or exploit it. Faced with this situation, the interactions determining notions of kinship and filiation on the one hand, and the massive arrival of foreigners on the other, complicate the issues involved in land disputes, which range from simple boundary problems to murder.

The approaches to resolving these conflicts correspond to their nature and the different levels of governance, because in the commune of Kpélé 1, as in other clans in southern Togo, two forms of governance are distinguished at the local level: gerontocracy and chiefdom. Except in cases of physical aggression, these two levels of city management reconcile positions, appease insults, and promote peaceful coexistence.

However, the rapid urbanisation of African cities, which has not spared the rural municipalities of Togo, shows that land conflicts in the municipality of Kpélé 1, far from finding sustainable solutions, remain a factor of fragility and exclusion. Resilience and sustainability strategies within the framework of SDG 11 need to be redefined through mechanisms that combine social logic and state policies.

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