

Land Utilization System in Burkina Faso: A Case Study in Ziniaré

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Abstract

In Burkina Faso, the rights to land utilization and distribution have been generally defined by the traditional “first occupant” rule. New comers have been given rights to land utilization from the first occupant. But this rule is now changing because of many factors which are recently emerging such as administrative, legal and economic system changes, land nationalization, population growth, desertification and diminishing pasture land, urbanization, modernization, globalization, social structural changes, mentality changes, commercialization, and so on. Many small farmers are obliged to cope with this new situation. This study is composed of three parts: first we briefly overview traditional rules in Burkina Faso regarding land utilization; then recent situations are described in two ways: legal changes, and observations and perceptions expressed by our interviewees; and finally we present one of our case studies conducted in a Mossi village in the province of Plateau Central as an example of changes occurred in production and consumption systems at a large household: a way how a polygamy family shifted from a “collective” to an “individual” system?

Keywords: Burkina Faso; Land ownership; Rights to land utilization, Farmers, Rural area

Introduction

The Améli-Eaur project started in 2010 in Burkina Faso, by a joint team of Hokkaido University and 2iE (Institut International d'Ingénierie de l'Eau et de l'Environnement), aiming at improvement of farmers' productivity using waste water and compost. Beside the main project theme, we noticed that rural people's life has been affected by new changes which are occurring nationwide in Burkina Faso in connection to land utilization. Farmlands and pasturelands alongside asphalt roads have been enclosed year by year by fences, thus excluding farmers and herders. In rural areas we have sometimes heard about new conflicts occurred between different ethnic groups because of land shortage. In villages in the outskirts of the capital city, traditionally cultivated lands have become inaccessible because of new public arrangements such as “lotissement” (systematic land parceling for houses construction) or construction of big buildings. We have also heard about displacement of farmers due to gold or other mining exploitation.

This is why we are interested in looking at the ways of land occupation, utilization and ownership.

This paper is consisted of three parts: first description of traditional systems concerning land utilization and its rights in Burkina Faso, then glance at recent changes, and finally presentation of a large polygamy family case in a Mossi village.

1. Methods

The research about the general system, both traditional ways and modern legislation setting in Burkina Faso, was done through documentation (Boutillier 1964; Matlon 1994; Konate 1992; and national laws and strategies)

as well as interviews of university professors, village chiefs and NGO officials. Interviews of village farmers and women were also undertaken for complementary information gathering.

The case studies were conducted in the Mossi village K. and the Peul village B. in Ziniaré area in the region of Plateau Central of Burkina Faso. (Both are pilot villages of the Améli-Eaur project, but in order to avoid to disclose individual information, only initials are put.) In this paper, the case of a Mossi peasant family of Village K. is presented. Regarding the case study, in addition to the observations which were conducted throughout the Améli-Eaur project (several days each in 2011, 12, 13 and 14), interviews were undertaken with Mr. M.C. and some of his family members on the 2nd April, 7th June and 23rd August of 2014 by the author. The language used was Mooré which was translated into French, or sometimes directly in French.

2. Traditional System of Land Ownership and Utilization System in Burkina Faso

Generally speaking, land ownership and utilization system in Sub-Saharan Africa is very different from Europe or Western style administration countries where the registration system is established with land title documents or written lease contracts. In Burkina Faso, traditional rules have reigned for a long time, and it is after the colonial time that the government tried to introduce Western systems. Traditional and modern systems thus coexist still now, and people are struggling to adapt themselves to these sometimes ambiguous, sometimes contradictory, or conflicting situations.

According to the interviews with Prof. Ouedraogo B., Prof. Ouedraogo F.B. and Mr. Bombiri F., the followings have been (and still are) commonly recognized systems in many ethnic groups in Burkina Faso. The literature of documents such as Boutillier 1964; Matlon 1994 confirms this statement in many parts of their papers.

- 1) The first person who settles in a place has the ownership (or, the rights of distribution) of the land. It has been thought that a wild land is inhabited by the genii, and the first person could live there after an agreement with them. Therefore he will serve as the mediator between the genii and those who come to live there afterward. In Boutillier J-L., the first comer is called "chef de terre".
- 2) Those who come to settle down there later will be given the land by the first settler. At that time, there were three cases: a) Those who cleared wild lands have the utilization right for ever, with hereditary right. b) Those who could (were allowed to) plant trees have the utilization right for ever, with hereditary right. c) Those who planted cereals have the temporally utilization right without hereditary right.
- 3) The possibility to inherit land or a house belongs to men, and women are not concerned. However there are very minor exceptions which differ from one ethnic to another. Among the Mossi, a woman may be given a tiny land near her house with its crops (mainly okra-bombo) to be stored in her hut. She can even sell this land. In the same manner, in some ethnics women can be given a small land for a specific crop: for example, among the Bissa living near Tenkodogo, a small peanut land, and among the Gouin near Banfora, a small paddy field.

3. Recent Changes of Land Utilization and Ownership System in Burkina Faso

For a long time in the Sahel region, there has been always enough wild land to absorb new comers or new generations. In this situation, the importance was not the land itself, but the ability or needs to utilize it.

However nowadays the situation regarding the land has been drastically changed. (The recent land scarcity problems are repeatedly stated in literature such as Boutillier 1964; Matelon 1994)

First of all, the needs for land has increased due to tremendous population growth and pastoral migration pushed by desertification. Second, sudden urbanization has brought a construction boom of houses, offices, factories, commercial malls, hotels etc. This phenomenon has seriously affected rural areas situated near cities and alongside asphalt roads. Vast areas are fenced off by global enterprises or business men, and farmers are kicked off and pastoralists can no more let their herds in the fence. Systematic land arrangement for houses construction (“lottissement”) has deprived farmers from the land formerly utilised for cultivation. (This can be compared to the “enclosure movement” occurred in England in the early 1700s.) The third element is mineral deposit which is abundant in Burkina Faso. There are now serious conflicts with big mine companies. In this regards, land nationalization often causes tremendous problems to farmers.

The RAF (Réforme Agraire et Foncière), initiated in 1984 by Thomas Sankara, and modified several times afterword, was strengthened by a law in 2007 and 2009, which legalized the principle of land nationalization in Burkina Faso. Usually individuals have the right to utilize their land, however according to the new law, once the land is declared “utilité publique”, the land can be confiscated by the national or communal administration.

For the moment farmers do not seem anxious about the nationalization of farming land per se. According to the interviews done with farmers, they think that the land which is only used for agriculture/animal husbandry will not be confiscated. But there is an apparent common trend to legalize their rights to land by documents. They began to register their “utilization rights” at the communal administration office which has not been their habit before. The “first occupant’s right” is, however, not to be registered. This is still so strongly and commonly recognized in the community. Another reason of the non-registration of the “first occupant right” might be the fact that it does not concern “utilization right”, but a sort of “ownership” or “land distribution right” (“chef de terre” according to Boutillier's terminology), which means less compatible with the modern nationalization system.

Another significant change is recently observed in the people’s perception of land. Wide range of people in Burkina Faso began to consider the land as “the property which will yield big money”. As the result, farmers and pastoralists also look at the land, not only as a place for subsistence in agriculture or pasture, but also as the place from where they can expect money. Many interviewees, living in variety of places such as rural areas of Ziniaré, Dédougou and Banfora, and in the city of Ouagadougou, confirmed this change of perception. For instance, one farmer living in a village far from a town and an asphalt road, told the author that in the future his land might be sold for a huge amount of money like the lands near Ziniaré city right now. This trend, still not so eminent in deep rural areas, begins however to affect farmers’ mentality, behaviour and tradition.

Regarding women and the land, the situation is also changing. Among the Mossi, the farm land has been owned (i.e. with established utilization right) by a man (head of the household), and all the family, including several wives and children, have worked together in his land. Nowadays we noticed that in some families, the land is divided between wives and big children, and each member of the family work separately in their parcels, after working in the man’s ones. The crops are also for their own. The wives use their own harvest to prepare meals, with an eventual subsidy from the husband at shortage situations. In the following chapter, we would like to present a case of a farmer’s family.

4. The Case of Mr. M.C.’S Family in the Village in Ziniaré Area

4.1. About the Village K.

The Village K. is a typical Mossi rural village, situated at one km from the asphalt road near Ziniaré. It has 750 inhabitants. Some families are Muslims, and some others Christians. These two religions cohabit apparently without conflicts. All the heads of the family in the village are male, and the majority are polygamy. As frequently seen in Burkina Faso, the characteristic of the house is a big compound (called “concession” in French) composed of many huts, granaries (store huts) and very important courtyard(s) which serve(s) as a multipurpose space like living, dining, kitchen, atelier, laundry etc. In average there are 6-7 huts/houses and several granaries per compound, with 18-19 people living there. The common type of construction of house is in mud brick. All the households have traditionally lived on subsistence agriculture (mainly sorghum, millet, maize, rice and beans) All the women grow also okra (as the main ingredient for “toh” sauce), and some Christian women are engaged in production of “doro”(local beer) in the courtyard for their cash earning.

It is said that around seventy years ago, there was a problem of bandit in the village, and to solve this problem, Mogho Naba (King of the Mossi) sent one of his sons, who became the chief of the Village K. He had 17 wives. (One of his wives is still alive and is among our interviewees.) This Mogho Naba’s son’s story illustrates very well what the literature describes: Mogho Naba has expanded his territory by sending his relatives to villages as the head of administration. The son of Mogho Naba had a large labor force composed of his 17 wives and their children. This allowed him to cultivate a huge space of land and enjoy a big economic capacity ensuring his political power. In this sense also, the Village K. is a typical Mossi village.

4.2. Mr. M.C., his family and lands

Mr. M.C., 67 years old (born in 1947), is the head of a family of 18 people living in the compound of six huts and four granaries. He lives with three wives (the first wife is 46 years old, and two others both around 30 years old), one grown up daughter and 13 children at school age or younger (of whom nine sons and four daughters). He has six more adult children (of the first wife) who live in cities or nearby villages. The religion is Islam.

Mr. M.C.'s father was not native from this village. He had had some problem in his native village, and migrated here. (According to our hearings, his case is not an exception: this sort of situation has very often happened in Burkina Faso, and has easily been accepted in the migrated places.) He asked for some lands to the chief of the village (who was “chef de terre”), and got the same lands that his son, Mr. M.C. actually cultivates. No payment was asked.

When Mr. M.C.’s father died thirty years ago, his four sons inherited the land which was divided into four. However, Mr. M.C.’s three brothers have died, and their sons all live now in big towns. As only Mr. M.C. lives actually in the village, all the lands are exploited by him, except for a small parcel given to his sister-in-law (a wife of a brother) who lives next to Mr. M.C.’s house.

Mr. M.C.’s right as the user of the land is well recognized by the village chief (descendant of Mogho Naba). The documents which prove Mr. M.C.’s rights exist both at the communal office and at the house of the village chief. The right of the village chief is widely and solidly recognized by all the villagers as well as by the commune, but there is no written document on it.

4.3. Working system

Mr. M.C. has four field areas and one paddy field near the dam site, totalling more than four hectares to cultivate. Before, these lands were cultivated by all the family in a collective way, and the use of the crops also in common under Mr. M.C.’s management.

Three years ago, the first wife was separated from the collective work, by being given her own land in all the five fields. Mr. M.C. explains this separation “because of her age”. She became old, and could no more work

as before. This affected negatively the collective work (i.e., other wives work less than before). Examples of this type of separation can be found in the documentation (Konate 1992), according to which among the Mossi, when a woman reaches the menopause, she is given her own land to have her own economic life. In the case of Mr. M.C.'s first wife, she has ten children, the majority of whom have grown up and live in other places. We can easily imagine that even though she can no more work like before, she should surely be helped by her sons.

One year later, the other two wives claimed their lands, and Mr. M.C. responded in dividing all his lands between his wives and himself. All the five fields were divided each to three wives, and some parts to himself. Now the wives work at their own parcels, with their own children, after having worked together for Mr. M.C.'s land. The crops from each field are stored in each storing hut, and used by each wife to prepare meals or sold to buy school materials and clothes of her own children. Older children (around ten year old or more) are also given small parcels from their mother's field, and the harvest is stored separately in their mother's storing hut. They sell the crops for their own use such as school materials, clothes or sweets. In addition, the eldest son (12 years old) living in the house possesses five goats which he takes care of. But all the chickens of the house belong to Mr. M.C.

Mr. M.C. considers this new system "very good", as it yields more productivity because "the wives work harder than before" driven by 1) rivalry and 2) responsibility (the wives have to feed and satisfy the needs of their children by themselves). But the opinion of a grown-up son (a teacher in a city) of the first wife is different: "young wives should be losers, because they have to work harder with their small children in the fields."

4.4. Consumption system

In contrast to many other African countries, in Burkina Faso, meals are taken in groups and never all the family members together. The husband never takes meals with his wives. (According to Mr. Frédéric Bombiri and Ms. Véronique Cassando: "it is prohibited that a husband takes a meal with his wife."). At Mr. M.C.'s household, meals are taken in six groups: Mr. M.C., two groups of elder boys, and each group of three wives (the mother, daughters and babies).

Preparation of everyday meals also changed. Before it was collectively done, in turn, by three wives. Every three days, one wife had prepared six groups of food. Cereals for the main dish (usually "toh") had been provided by Mr. M.C., and the seasonings and herbs for the sauce were each wife's responsibility. After the division of land, wives carry all the responsibility. Every day, each wife prepares two meals for six groups. Each wife has to provide both cereals and herbs and seasonings. At the time of shortage, Mr. M.C. subsidizes cereals. The daughters of each wife are in charge of fetching water to fill their own mother's "canary" (big pottery).

4.5. Changes in the Village K.

Documents (Konate, Boutillier, Kawada) mention that in Mossi villages, the prevailing system has been collective farming in the family: father's land is cultivated together by all the family, and harvested crops are stored and managed by the family chief for common consumption. It has been the same in the Village K. An interviewee, the former village chief's 16th wife, now 80 years old, confirmed that at her time all the 17 wives lived in 17 huts in the same compound, worked together, and consumed together. At that time, all the households in the village had the collective system, and there were no households where the wives had separate parcels. According to Mr. M.C. and other interviewees, in this village, this collective system still prevails in small households, but in large families, the trend goes to divide lands and economy.

Conculsion

The land utilization and ownership system now seems to be on its turning point in the long history of Burkina Faso. Traditional systems, so far widely recognized, are still prevailing in many places especially in rural areas, but new phenomena are emerging. Farmers are facing this new situation, and seeking ways to cope with it.

The case study showed that the land utilization system is also changing in some farmers' households. And it also revealed that this change has modified the economic management system within the family: from collective to individual way.

Urbanization and modernization quickly emerging in Burkina Faso have also given negative effects on traditional systems of land utilization. The shortage of land has become seriously felt in some parts of rural areas. All these factors risk to more seriously affect land heritage and utilization systems and thus drastically change all the social aspects in Burkina Faso in the near future.

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