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Nugormesese: An Indigenous Basis of Social Capital in a West African Community

The primary objective of this article is to present *nugormesese* as an indigenous mechanism of social capital in Buem-Kator, a farming community on the Ghana side of the Ghana-Togo border area.[1] For the purpose of this article, the concept of social capital will be minimally defined to refer to the capability of social norms and customs to hold members of a group together by effectively setting and facilitating the terms of their relationships. Unlike physical capital (machineries, bank accounts, etc.) and human capital (knowledge, skills, etc), social capital is a relational factor or social resource that sustainably facilitates collective action for achieving mutually beneficial ends.

Based on this definition, this article will show that, by functioning as the underlying mechanism of social capital, *nugormesese* served as an environment of trust, thus facilitating the relationships between and among the people in this farming area at the early stage in the development of cocoa and coffee. These export crops were introduced into the area at the turn of the 20th century. *Nugormesese* particularly functioned in facilitating binary relationships between the people either as members of the host community and migrants, as landlords and tenants, as creditors and debtors, as farm owners and farm workers, or as farmers and non-farmers. As time went by and the area's social structure had become more complex as a result of the increased diversity of the people, the transformation of the preexisting subsistence economy into cash economy, and the eventual erosion of the underlying normative order of the local institutions, including the land tenure system, *nugormesese* came under stress.

Nugormesese is an Ewe[2] word, which, in its everyday usage, simply means "understanding." It is a derivative from the infinitive *segorme*—"to understand" or "to understand it." But, in its sociological connotations, its meanings are wide and far-reaching. It can be conceptualized as an institutional framework that facilitated binary interactions between the people in this farming community. *Nugormesese* was a culture of mutual understanding and trust that developed particularly between the Buems—the indigenous members of the host community—and migrant farmers in the area.[3] Even though the breach of this contract would normally attract only "intrinsic sanctions,"[4] there are instances in which a violator can be subjectedto a verbal reproach or even a material fine, normally in the form of a bottle

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or two of the local alcoholic beverage. In this area, where, at the early stage of the development of the export-based economy, there was a widespread absence of functional literacy which could facilitate the drawing of formal contracts to guide land transactions, *nugormesese* performed a crucial role in facilitating all manner of economic, political, and social relationships between the two groups.

As an institutional framework, *nugormesese* served its social capital purpose primarily because of its ability to create an environment of trust. This is because the role of effective institutions in the lives of people is analogous to the role of third-parties in trilateral conflict management. To achieve its conflict management objective, the third-party must be perceived by the adversarial parties as a repository of trust. Thus, the key point being made here is that the mutual understanding, trust, and respect for each other—as embodied in *nugormesese*, are mechanisms of social control. Thus, like my conception of *kanye ndu bowi* (*IK Note* 56), these three indigenous philosophical contexts primarily served as conflict management mechanisms, hence as a basis of social capital in their respective communities.

Mutuality of Benefits

The question, therefore, is: What role did *nugormesese* play in the early stage in the development of the export-based economy in Buem-Kator? This question directs attention to what could be called "mutuality of benefits" vis-à-vis the Buems and the migrant groups.[5] Given the limited nature of information which the Buems had about the migrants on one hand and the virtual absence of alternative sources of information about the new physical and socio-cultural environments to the migrants on the other hand, mutual understanding and trust of each other, as embodied in *nugormesese*, were functionally necessary. In fact, *nugormesese* was a functional alternative to formal contracts at the time.

These relationships are primarily between *afetor* (landlord) or *anyigbator* (landowner) and *amedzro agbledela* (stranger farmer) There are three types of *amedzro agbledela*: one is the *amedzro agbledela* who works on his or her own farm and the other is *apavi* (farm laborer). An a*pavi* is the one who works on other peoples' farm. This type of *apavi* can be someone who works as a daily or seasonal farm laborer and is usually itinerant or an *apavi* who is stationary with an established farmstead, though he, too, works on other people's farm. In-between the itinerant *apavi* and the established one is the *dibi amedzro* (share cropper). This is a stranger farmer who works on a share contract called *dibi na menso medi*—a Twi word, literarily meaning, "eat some so that I eat some, too."[6] This stranger farmer is on the so-called "agricultural ladder," that is, on the way of becoming both an *agbletor* (farm owner) and *anyigbator*. This is because in this share contract, the cultivated land is divided into two equal parts between the original landowner and the *dibi* farmer, to whom both the farm and the land become a property, which in theory can be held in perpetuity.

The two groups in the export crops business—Buems, particularly the heads of the landowning lineages, and the migrant farmers—needed each other regarding land transactions. These involved the transfer of the land on the part of the Buems and its acquisition by the migrant farmers. The members of the host community needed the migrant farmers to acquire land from them so that they (the members of the host community) could reap promising cash benefits from the sale of the land to them. On their part, too, the migrants needed the members of the Buems to acquire cultivable land for the development of the crops. Thus, the land-hunger of the migrant farmers was correspondingly met by the desire of the head of the landowning Buem lineages to sell their land—a textbook example of double coincidence of wants.

There were other incentives to the two groups to sustain the mutual understanding and have mutual respect and trust for each other. For example, the number of migrant farmers a head of a landowning Buem lineage had under his "control" was not only a mark of prestige to the lineage head as this could enhance his social standing in the community, but it could also determine the size of other economic benefits he would have access to. This was because migrants were customarily expected to make donations in both cash and kind to their landlords in the event of birth, death, and other forms of *rites des passages* in the latter's nuclear or extended family.

The migrants, too, needed the Buems for other socio-economic reasons. For example, the migrants needed to be protected against the existing environmental hazards, particularly the dangers posed by carnivores like lions that were highly prevalent in the area at the time. Also, the migrants needed information and guidance from the Buems regarding the effective exploitation of their new environment. For example, the migrants had to be helped to acquire knowledge about things such as hunting techniques, sources of water, topography, and soil and climatic conditions of the area.

Even though migrants normally lived close to each other, some of the early migrants settled with Buem families,

usually those from whom they had acquired land. They would live with their landlords while cultivating the newly acquired land and preparing homesteads for themselves on the newly acquired land. The length of stay with the landlord depended on the length of time it took the migrant to get his own homestead ready for habitation. The ability of the migrant to live in the bush, particularly if he was isolated from other migrants, was also a factor in his decision to relocate to his own cottage. It was easier for migrants who had relatives or friends or spouses with them to move immediately into their own house, even if it was far into the uninhabited bush and largely isolated from other residents.

As time went by, the effectiveness of *nugormesese* came under stress, hence the diminishing quality of its mediatory character. By the early 1960s, most of the land-vending lineages in Buem-Kator had begun to see not only the steady disappearance of their land frontiers, but also increasing landlessness among them. Because the bulk of the cultivable land of the area had been transferred to the migrant farmers in most sections of the area, the migrants no longer exclusively depended on the host community for the acquisition of land. Some of the migrants have even evolved into landlords in their own right. Also, having lived in the area for some time, the migrants no longer needed to depend on the host community for protection against natural hazards and knowledge about the physical environment. Furthermore, later generations of the two groups no longer shared the warmth and mutual understanding and trust that characterized the relationships between their parents. Thus, the mutual needs and reciprocal assistance that used to bind them together had largely eroded.

At the time of the author's fieldwork, he noticed three key developments: one was the proliferation of land-related conflicts between the two groups, another was increasing substitution of more formal contracts to the more informal *nugormesese*, and the third was a shift in the methods of conflict resolution. Available evidence showed that there was a steady proliferation of conflicts, particularly land-related conflicts, between the host community and the migrant groups, depicting a situation that normally results from painful co-existence of landlessness and virtual absence of non-farm jobs. As noted above, the Buems were much more affected by the migrant farmers. There also was an increasing resort to more formal contracts, which was a shift from mere mutual understanding to written documents regarding all forms of land transactions, though, according to the migrants, these did not seem capable of extinguishing the host community's claim to rights in the land. Third, mediation, which used to be the most preferred means of resolving conflict between the two groups for its quality of amicability had largely given way to the more confrontational statutory court procedures, the decisions of which were usually ignored by the people. It is an established fact that the impact of Africa's statutory systems on resolving communal strife, particularly land-related conflicts, has been of little consequence in most of its communities.

Conclusion

The challenge in the area of Buem-Kator, in fact, in rural Africa in general, today is the increasing breakdown in indigenous systems of social control. Even though the resort to the statutory court systems for conflict resolution in most African countries has often not achieved the desired objective as a result of a persisting "disconnect" between the philosophical orientation of the state and that of their indigenous communities, there is an apparent difficulty in adapting the indigenous systems to the exigencies of the modern situations.

Thus, the question is: In what way can African countries best redesign their philosophical and institutional environments in order to create workable means of social control? This question directs attention to the need for governments to imaginatively integrate the relevant aspects of their norms of trust with those of the people's indigenous ones as a means of dealing with the exigencies of the modern situations. The potentially innovative character of this proposal lies in its promise of blending the structures and processes of the two systems of social control, which will bridge the perceived gaps between the philosophical underpinnings of the two systems.

1. Data for this study were collected from four visits to the field, starting in the summer of 1992 and ending winter of 2004, when the author was working on his doctoral dissertation.

2. Ewe is a language spoken natively by about 13 percent of the population of Ghana It is spoken in Togo and southern section of Benin, too.

3. Even though the concept of *nugormesese*, as used in the present study, is similar to that of *lelorkalorbunu*, which the author presented as one of the pillars of *kanye ndu bowi*"— "the ingredients of harmony" (*IK Note* 56), unlike *nugormesese*, *lelorkalorbunu* relates only to conflict resolution. Among the Buems, whether the conflict resolution forum was *bate kate* (adjudication) or *benyaogba ukpikator* (mediation), there was the need for *lelorkalorbunu*—mutual understanding and acceptance of both the process and outcome of the particular judicial forum.

4. The author defined this form of intrinsic sanction in *IK Notes* 56 as the feeling of moral discomfort that people experience they violate the normative principles that undergird the normative order.

5. The author notes note that migration into uncultivated tropical rainforests was one of the key instruments behind the development of cocoa and coffee as export crops in West Africa.

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