



Logging conflicts in Southern Cameroon: A feminist ecological economics perspective

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ABSTRACT

Growing attention has been paid to gender in ecological economics, political ecology and development studies but a focus on gender in resource extraction conflicts is still rare. This article explores women-led resistance movements to commercial logging in South-eastern Cameroon, focusing on the moabi tree (*Baillonella toxisperma*). The latter provides oil, medicine and other non-timber products and use-values to local forest societies and particularly to women. Resistances arise because most socio-environmental costs of the international logging trade are imposed on the rural populations and especially on women of the extractive regions. The aim of this paper is to analyze the root causes of the gender structure of such mobilisations as well as the impacts on gender relations induced by such resource extraction conflicts. After proposing a typology of different environmental currents and their gender counterparts, this paper focuses on the gender construction of local Bantu societies, taking as a point of departure Paola Tabet's thesis that masculine control over production tools is the objective factor revealing the sexual division of work. In our case study, we found that the men's control over technology not only highlights the sexual work division but also the gendered division of access rights to natural resources. Thereby, we argue that the sexual division of access rights and work – revealed through differentiated control over technology – are two key institutions explaining the gendered structure of local mobilizations. We, then, discuss the empowerment allowed by the new forms of women's organizations, with a particular focus on the appropriation of new production tools by women. This highlights a non-Western form of environmental feminism.

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1. Introduction

The convergence between feminism and ecology has been explored from various perspectives since d'Eaubonne's book was published (1974). It has been envisaged from an essentialist viewpoint, generally referring to Shiva (1989), but also from a social constructivist perspective, that looks at gender construction in its material relations to the environment (Agarwal, 1994, 1998; Mackenzie, 1990; Mellor, 1997a,b; Moore and Vaughan, 1994; Rocheleau, 1997; Rocheleau et al., 1996; Thomas-Slayter, 1992). It has thus raised the old conflict between feminism and essentialism among all these scholars critical of traditional economic development. In addition, mainstream economic authors (World Bank, 1987, 1994) have also begun to address the relation between gender and the environment.

For their part, ecological economists have addressed women's roles in the economy, arguing that mainstream economic thinking has neglected both women's work and ecosystem services (Perkins, 1997, 2007; O'Hara, 2009) and pointing out that there are 'links between the marginalization and exploitation of the natural world and women's labour' (Perkins and Kuiper, 2005: 122). A special issue of Ecological

Economics was devoted to Women, Ecology and Economics (Perkins, 1997). This article contributes to the feminist ecological economics literature by studying the connection between (1) the exploitation and degradation of the environment due to international trade in 'precious' woods, and (2) the resulting gendered structure of the conflicts over such resource extraction with a special emphasis on control over technology. This will be done by examining the resistances of Bantu communities to the commercial logging of moabi (*B. toxisperma*), an endemic tree species of the Congo basin forest, the world's second most important forested region.

The management of moabi trees offers a good starting point for the study of gender structure of resistances to commercial logging because this species attracts a variety of interests and cultural values. Indeed, moabi trees provide oil, medicine and other use-values to Cameroonian forest societies and particularly to women, but at the same time moabi wood is particularly valued by loggers due to its high price, and its numerous qualities in carpentry. In line with this, moabi is the eighth most exported tree species in Cameroon (in volume of sawn logs) (Cameroonian customs, pers. comm., 2007), despite its low density as well as its fragility and low reproduction rate. This leads to an increasing shortage in this species which alarms international NGOs such as Friends of the Earth who proposed adding this species to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) red list.

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In this article, we first explore the links between three main environmental currents and gender issues, in order to situate our analysis in the debates on gender, environment and development. Then, we examine the construction of gender in Bantu forest societies of Southern Cameroon, emphasizing the gender division over the control of technologies. In doing this, we use [Tabet \(1998\)](#) theoretical insight – on the control of tools as the objective factors of the sexual division of work – and propose an extension of it by arguing that, in this case, control over technologies also reveals gendered access to natural resources. Secondly, we focus on the access rights to moabi and on the specific gendered knowledge and interests in this tree species, highlighting the distinctive way women perceive ecological degradation because of their daily experience. Thirdly, we link this gender specification ([Zein-Elabdin, 1996](#)) with the gendered structure of resistances to moabi logging. Finally, we emphasize how resistance leads to new strategies built up by women in this extractive region, thereby promoting women's empowerment.

This article contributes therefore to the literature on gender, ecology and economics by providing additional empirical material for understanding how gender interacts with environment and thus shape gender structure of resistances in resource extraction conflicts. Moreover, it highlights how these resistances can also challenge patriarchy in the specific context of the Bantu societies of Southern Cameroon, thereby pointing out non-Western forms of environmental feminism.

2. Connecting environmental currents and gender

To understand the socio-environmental mobilizations under analysis, [Martínez-Alier \(2002\)](#) three main currents of environmentalism are taken as a starting point. Moreover, we explore how these currents are articulated with gender.

First of all, [Martínez-Alier \(2002\)](#) identifies the 'cult of wilderness' which promotes conservation of a pristine nature free of any human intervention. Its academic support is often conservation biology. Arguably, its feminist counterpart is essentialism, where women and men are regarded as psychologically distinct, as a result of their biological natures, and their attributed roles are therefore not questioned. Women's emancipation, or, better said, their accomplishment, is attained through the valorization of their traditional tasks, characteristics and values. In both cases, the idea is to allocate space or/and bodies to different activities in a dualistic and complementary way, such as industry and conservation – without questioning economic growth – or women and men – without questioning gender relations. 'Essentialist' scholars have applied the mythical pristine approach to the relations of women with nature arguing that women are, due to their biology, closer to nature than men. It gave rise to an early branch of ecofeminism ([Diamond and Orenstein, 1990](#); [Plant, 1989](#)), challenged by later scholars arguing for a materialist ecofeminism ([Mellor, 1997a](#)). Valuable debates on the different positions and contents are provided by [Agarwal \(1992, 1998\)](#), [Jackson \(1995, 1996\)](#), [Leach \(2007\)](#), [Mellor \(1996\)](#), [Moore \(2008\)](#), and [Salleh \(1996\)](#).

Secondly, the environmentalist current of 'eco-efficiency' seeks to make economic growth compatible with environmental conservation, by technical change and by economic policies that 'internalize' the market's 'negative externalities'. Today, it is the dominant current and its foremost academic support that can typically be found in environmental economics. It appears in notions such as 'ecological modernization', 'clean technologies', and 'green accountancy'. It is dominated by technological optimism, and economic growth is seen as enhancing sustainability (as in Kuznets' environmental curves) ([World Bank, 1992](#)). Increasingly, this current also tends to integrate a gender dimension in its analyses, but in a way similar to the environmental cost approach: as a variable to be internalized. Its counterpart within gender studies manifests itself through political and institutional changes allowing women to access traditionally masculine opportunities and professions by positive discrimination – as a kind of gender main-

streaming. Gender and empowerment questions are generally dealt with in the perspective of women's catching up with men through their insertion in market economy (wage labour, access to property and credit, and education). Of course, reaching equality is desirable, but over what standards? It is often the Western masculine model that determines the norms to be reached, thereby complying with the dominant ideology of development which demands that non-Western societies catch up with industrialized countries through their rapid insertion in world markets.

Thirdly, we have the current that [Martínez-Alier \(2002\)](#) has called the 'environmentalism of the poor' – or the 'environmental justice' movement or 'liberation ecology' ([Peet and Watts, 1996](#)). This current complains against the negative impacts of economic growth and, more generally, against unequal distribution of economic benefits and socio-environmental impacts of industrialization. It manifests itself through social conflicts over the access to natural resources and services and over the burdens of pollution or other environmental impacts that arise because of unequal property rights and inequalities of power and income. The protagonists of these conflicts are on one hand the state and/or private companies and, on the other, impoverished populations, rural or urban, made up of peasants, indigenous people or waged workers, claiming social justice. This current often remains invisible because it contests the dominant discourse on the economy but also because the category of the 'poor' is somewhat vague. The category comprises (1) urban disadvantaged populations, more or less integrated into the market system but unable to make a proper living in it; (2) indigenous groups not integrated into the market and considered as 'poor', although many of them are not poor as they adapt to their surrounding natural wealth without undermining it ([Berkes, 1999](#)); and (3) rural populations that have been impoverished by the market system and that fight to protect the ecosystems upon which they depend ([Guha, 1999](#); [Peluso, 1992](#)). Of course, not all poor people are environmentalists, but in many environmental conflicts, the poor are on the side of the conservation of natural resources, not because of an environmentalist ideology, but because of their own livelihood needs or in order to protect their health. Their idiom is not a unified language; it is often not the language of Western ecology, nor is it the one of standard economics: local populations may use the language of defence of human rights, the urgencies of livelihood, the need for food security, the defence of cultural identity and territorial rights, and the respect for sacredness. However, the language of Western environmentalism is increasingly used for strategic reasons (communication, visibility, and protection), but also because it fits well into their demands, and because there is a globalization of environmental concerns ([Dunlap and York, 2008](#)).

[Guha \(2000: 122\)](#) summarizes the differences between the cult of wilderness and the environmentalism of the poor as follows: 'While Northern greens have been deeply attentive to the rights of victimized or endangered animal and plant species, Southern greens have generally been more alert to the rights of the less fortunate members of their own species'. The academic support for this current would be ecological anthropology, agro-ecology, political ecology and sometimes ecological economics.

The feminist counterpart of this current could be called the 'eco-feminism of the poor' or 'feminist liberation ecology'. In many environmental conflicts – such as the ones examined in this article –, women play a key role because of the gender division of work, power and access rights to natural resources, implying specific responsibilities, knowledge, and action spheres ([Rocheleau et al., 1996](#)). [Zein-Elabdin \(1996: 930\)](#) suggests the use of the concept of gender specification which 'defines the relative positions of women and men in the economy and in relation to the environment'. Thereby, institutions are the key elements articulating access to resources and gender relations. By mobilizing to preserve ecosystems, feminine impoverished populations undertake actions in new spheres, start new activities, and question gender identities and relations within their own society. What is more, in some cases they try to connect with the market system through their

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