Communities as the agents of commodification:
The Kumbo Water Authority in Northwest Cameroon

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Abstract

In 1991 the people of the town of Kumbo in Northwest Cameroon expelled the national water corporation from town by force. They claimed to be retrieving a network that the community rightfully owned and they began to run the system along community lines. The paper tells the story of that water supply twice. First it reproduces the popular accounts that circulated in the 1990s that emphasize the role played by the community in the development and operation of the water supply and portray recent events as a triumph of community management. Then it retells the story using archive evidence that puts a quite different light on some of the events. It is argued that the emphasis on community management has a tendency to obscure other important aspects of the story, for example its political context and consequences. It is suggested that the widespread admiration for any initiative that is community based often results in an uncritical analysis of this form of development project. In this case the commodification of water accelerates after the community has wrested control of this public service from the state.

Keywords: Cameroon; Community development; Water supply

1. Introduction

This paper tells the story of the evolution of a piped water supply in the town of Kumbo in Northwest Cameroon. The aim is to show how the development of this public service has been shaped by politics at a variety of scales, and, reciprocally, how those politics have been shaped by the development of this public service. This should be a corrective to those accounts of the provision of African water supplies, which try to suspend local, national and international politics from the analysis. These ruptures are achieved by insisting that the moral importance of development justifies an interpretation of water projects based only on the end results, measured in terms of the sustainability of service provision (Ferguson, 1994; Sachs, 1992). Such development writing about water supplies tends to be enframed either by a purely technical discussion (engineering or planning) or by an unrelenting concern with the relative merits of different water management institutions (governments, commercial companies or communities). In contrast the goal here is to bring out the connections between institutions, technologies, places and politics. Whilst the paper does query the sustainability of community water management in Kumbo the main aim is to show how a narrative of community development was constructed and used for a range of political purposes by different local interest groups.

Two different histories of the water supplies in Kumbo are compared. One (the ‘public story’) is derived from the account of events given in interviews carried out in Kumba in 1998 and also presented in newspapers. The other (the ‘archival story’) is derived largely from government papers and correspondence held in the national archives. The aim is not to show that one is true and the other false, rather it is to show how these development stories can be used to serve particular purposes. Both stories are constructed. The account drawn from the archives is no less selective than that presented in the newspapers. Just as journalists have chosen which interviews to draw on when producing one history of the Kumbo water supply, so too this research has set out to produce an alternative history, which is based on choices over which claims to include and which to exclude in
order to bring the politics of development to the fore. It is argued that the ‘public story’ has been constructed by a range of local political leaders who chose to represent the events in Kumbo as an illustration of the success of community participation because this suited their own ambitions. They claim to represent the whole Kumbo community when providing information for journalists. This is made more complicated by the fact that some of these individuals and factions are politically opposed at the local level but they find common ground in claiming community ownership of the water supply. The journalists who disseminated the story nationally were attracted to it either because community participation was symbolic of Anglophone Cameroonian initiative or because it described the humiliation of a nationally despised institution—the Government’s water authority.

The paper has five sections. First, it describes the two dominant ideas (privatisation and community management) that are used to construct problems and solutions for urban water management in Africa. Second, it briefly introduces the geographical location and historical context of this particular study. Third it sets out the story of Kumbo’s water supply as usually told by members of the Kumbo community, journalists and international development experts. That narrative characterises the Kumbo water supply as an example of the triumphs of community participation and community development. The fourth section retells the same story in a different way, highlighting evidence of government involvement in the history of the water supply and drawing out the ambiguities of the existing triumphalist reading by questioning the sustainability of community management in a town of around 40,000 people. This account chooses to foreground the political dimensions of the story; it shows how local political careers and factions in Kumbo have been constructed around the development of the water supply. In the conclusion the paper argues that the lauding of ‘community’ (as exemplified through stories like this one) often obscures the politics associated with development projects. The paper shows how ‘community management’ is employed as the vehicle through which water is marketed in Kumbo at the same time as it is being marketised through privatisation elsewhere in Cameroon.

2. Urban water management in contemporary Africa

Providing safe water to the inhabitants of the rapidly growing cities of Africa has been a key target for urban managers for many decades (Satterthwaite and Crawford, 1997). Since independence post-colonial governments and international development agencies have often made water supply a central political aim in their public rhetoric (Mabogunje, 1990, p. 142). Despite this, the proportion of urban residents with access to water remains stubbornly low and in many cities has even fallen over the last two decades (FAO, 1994; World Bank, 1998). The statistics of levels of supply need to be treated with some caution. This is not only because they blur the complex mosaic of social access to water in any particular city (Swyngedouw, 1997) but also because the purpose to which these statistics are being put are constantly changing as what is considered orthodox in development policy changes. For example in the past access levels were played up to demonstrate the progress of modernization. More recently access levels have been played down to emphasize the failures of African Governments as water suppliers. This failure is central to the justification of a global shift from state provision of water supplies to private provision (Hall, 1999b). It is not difficult to find faults in the way that states manage water supplies in Africa. However, it does also seem likely that there may be a relationship between the radical economic and social restructuring that has taken place in many African countries over the last two decades and the declining quality of urban public services (Potts and Mutambirwa, 1998).

Two sets of ideas and terminology currently dominate the proposals to improve the supply of water to urban areas in Africa. First there are those who advocate increasing private sector participation (Brookshire and Whittington, 1993; DFID, n.d; Evans, 1996; Franceys, 1997; Guislan, 1997; Lee, 1996; Martinand, 1994; Rivera, 1996; Serageldin, 1994, 1995; Silva et al., 1998; Uitto and Biswas, 2000; Winpenny, 1994, 1997). Second there are those who advocate increasing community participation. These two languages organise the conversations amongst the different groups of people involved in water management. The ideas draw their authority from particular forms of knowledge production as well as certain discursive conventions and strategies (Klak and Myers, 1997). Privatisation is associated with the most modern technology, large cities and high levels of investment in the built infrastructure paid for through loans. Community management, on the other hand, is associated with ‘appropriate technology’, small towns and payment through grants or locally derived investments (cash contributions, voluntary labour and payment in kind). Though these two positions are often treated separately they may actually be mutually reinforcing. Community water provision can occupy the spaces left behind by the cherry picking that so often accompanies privatisation. In West Africa ideas of community management have a longer genealogy than private sector participation, but in recent years it is privatisation that has become more dominant. A considerable part of the success of the privatisation lobby, particularly in relation to the public popularity of the policy, reflects their ability to dictate the terms of the debate.
2.1. Privatising water supplies in West Africa

The idea of shifting water management from government to some form of private sector participation in Africa has been a preoccupation for many key policy makers for some time (Briscoe, 1987; Lewis and Miller, 1987; Rietveld and Berna, 1990; Roth, 1987; Warford and DeAnne, 1977). West Africa is rather lagging behind the rest of the world, but a few major privatisation projects are underway (Bayliss and Hall, 2000). Private sector participation in West Africa has generally taken the form of a lease, affermage or management contract, with the state retaining ownership of the infrastructure. This is modelled on the apparent success of the system in Cote D’Ivoire (Leseur and Plane, 1994; Menard and Clarke, 2000). Most of the private companies involved in West Africa are drawn from the small group of water multi-nationals: Ondeo (Suez-Lyonnaise), Vivendi (General des Eaux), SAUR (Bouygues), Biwater and International Water Ltd (Bechtel/Edison) (Hall, 1999b). Private participation has already been introduced to major cities in Ghana (Dennis, 1998) and Kaduna (Nigeria), and is being introduced in Cameroon (Page, 2000). The largest regional privatisation is planned for Lagos (Nigeria) between 2003 and 2005. All these shifts have been achieved with only limited opposition. This lack of popular antagonism reflects a number of things. First, the pro-privatisation lobby has convinced key decision makers within African societies who can then deliver popular acquiescence (Bayart, 1993). Second, the allure of the promise of inward investment and improved services (Briscoe, 1996, 1999; Lee, 1995). Third, the unpopularity of local politicians and a lack of faith in African Governments and state water suppliers (Adeniji, 1985; Atangana, 1997; Oyebande, 1990). And fourth, some strategic discursive silences in relation to water prices and cost recovery (Briscoe, 1997; Katko, 1990, 1992; Laredo, 1991; OECD, 1987; WHO, 1994). Nervous foreign investors are being reassured by numerous studies of ‘customers’ greater willingness to pay for water in the cities of West Africa (Whittington et al., 1991; Whittington, 1998). Empirical studies of successful user payment schemes also support claims that price rises will be tolerated (Cleaver and Lomas, 1996; Evans, 1992; Mashauri and Katko, 1993; Singha, 1996). However the southern African experience suggests that future opposition is likely (Bayliss, 2001; Bond, 1999; Hall, 1999a; Marvin and Laurie, 1999; Ruiters and Bond, 1999; Ruiters, 2000, 2001). Far less critical attention has been given to the other main area of discussion—the community management of water supplies.

2.2. Community participation in water supplies

The second set of ideas for improving African urban water management circulates around the notion of community participation. This water management strategy entails involving water-users in a variety of ways during the construction and operation of water supplies. Communities can be financial donors before construction, voluntary or paid labourers during construction and trained operatives who maintain the system after it is built. Ultimately the community might also be the owner of the infrastructure. As part of the operation of any community run system, managers are also expected to organise any collection of fees from users for the purpose of running and repairing the water network (Yacoob, 1990; Yacoob and Walker, 1991). Central to the organisation of such a system is some variant on a “community water committee”—a representative body, often elected, which makes both the everyday and long-term plans for the water supply in a particular community, often through discussion with an external adviser. Communities have been restructured as the agents of progress (Bell, 1991) not only in water supply but in a whole variety of development projects (Ngwa, 1986). Generally this strategy has been considered important in rural areas (settlements up to 10,000 people), but historically it has also been used in the construction of urban water supplies in Cameroon and it is also increasingly used in the urban villages of West Africa.

Four main arguments are employed in theoretical support of the community participation approach. First, there is the view that people only respect something they have paid for. So communities who build, operate and pay for the water supply are considered to appreciate its value more than those who are merely recipients of government largesse or international aid. People only respect what they sense they own. This idea is supported by statistics of the failures of ‘top-down’ aid projects and government led white elephants (Therkildsen, 1988). Payment becomes less about creating an economically sustainable unit than about generating a sense of community ownership and responsibility, which leads to effective maintenance (Evans, 1992; van Wijk-Sijbesma, 1989). Linked to this argument is the widespread idea that African communities have no faith in the ability of their politicians and that they do not trust government water suppliers. It is argued that when management is localised and shifted from state to community, fraud decreases and the willingness to purchase domestic water connections increases (Adeniji, 1985). Second, there is the view that the operation of a complete national network of water supplies is beyond the capacity of African Governments and that communities are more likely to do the job effectively. Clearly such views circulate within a wider discourse of scepticism about state capacity in West Africa. Third there is the view that the simple ‘appropriate technology’ employed in community run systems is more economically attuned to the financial capacity of African communities than more
sophisticated and expensive infrastructure. Added to this the expectations in terms of the quality of service are deemed to be lower and so the technology does not need to be so sophisticated. Fourth, the subsidy provided by communities in the form of cash, locally produced materials and labour enables the limited resources of government and donors to be stretched a long way. In summary community participation is considered sustainable because it generates a sense of ownership, because it evades the mire of state bureaucracy, because the technology is cheap and easy to maintain and because the construction makes the most of limited resources.

Whereas water privatisation is a relatively new policy objective in most of West Africa (the famous exception being Cote D’Ivoire), community participation has a much longer history (Kwo, 1984, 1986). ‘Community Development’ was introduced to Anglophone Cameroon to between 1950 and 1952 when ‘self-help’ became the main British strategy for implementation of the new welfare orientated colonial development policy. The origins of this method lay in the British Colonial Development and Welfare scheme. This was enacted by the Westminster parliament in February 1940 but only became important in Cameroon in 1950. Initially the scheme focussed on mass education and adult literacy, but later it developed into a framework for a variety of building, agricultural and health projects. To implement the scheme a method was needed which did not overburden the finances of the colonial government. Community Development emerged as the most effective of these: local people provided labour and materials in exchange for a cash grant from the colonial administration and technical advice. Much thought was given to the psychological consequences of these projects, and in particular with a desire to ‘sow the seeds’ of self-help in African consciousness. The principle colonial advocate of this approach in Eastern Nigeria was, Mr. E.R. Chadwick who described Community Development in 1950 as “the development of communities by their own effort and industry, and not development of communities by Government… our object is to induce in the people a desire for progress and the will to achieve it by their own efforts”. A definition that would not be out of place in many contemporary descriptions of community participation. Aside from the improvement that this method was perceived to produce in the minds of Africans it also had clear financial merits. As pamphlets addressed to community leaders and local politicians in the 1950s made clear after the Government had met its national obligations there was no money left over for local communities. “The Government does not have enough money to give every village what it needs… we often think that Government has all the money in the world. But this is not so… It is true that the Government is there to help all the people in the country. But surely the people should help themselves. The best things in life are the things we have made for ourselves.” In the judgement of British administrators Community Development was morally superior because it developed a work ethic and because it preserved an historic African tradition of co-operation.

As a strategy for mobilising communities to undertake small-scale development projects (in both urban and rural settings) Community Development was enormously successful in Anglophone Cameroon. In no sector was this more true than water supply, though the scale of work undertaken only took off after Independence in 1960 when a Community Development Department was established as part of the Ministry of Agriculture. This department has used self-help methods on rural water supply projects for 35 years while working with a Swiss development organisation, SATA/Helvetas (Zimmerman, 1981; Helvetas, 1989). In this time they have overseen the construction of over 100 village and small town water supplies in the two Anglophone Provinces. SATA/Helvetas has been the main conduit for international aid into rural water supplies in this part of Cameroon for over three decades and remains highly influential.

The ideas around community participation are now of global significance. They are promulgated via a wide network of NGOs and development bodies (Unicef, Water Aid, etc.), academics (Bah, 1992; Burkey, 1993; Lammerink, 1998), government departments, conferences (for example the annual WEDC conferences, see Pickford, 1996), journals (for example ‘Waterlines’) and research centres. Community participation has become the development orthodoxy. This is the most widespread strategy through which rural development of water supplies are approached. However, what is of particular significance to the contemporary situation in West Africa is that these methods are being scaled up to cover not only rural but also urban settlements of tens of thousands of inhabitants (Boydell, 1996; Gariba and Derksen, 1996; Parry, 1996). Compared to the particular individuals and institutions advocating privatisation of urban water supplies the writers pursuing a community participation approach are relatively powerless. They lack the influence that comes from the financial scale of government and private sector participants. As such bureaucrats often view them as worthy, but ultimately less important. The slow rate at which commu-


Community participation projects often move can make them politically unpopular. Nevertheless these ideas, actors and institutions articulate a second water development discourse.

3. The context of the case study

Cameroon has a complex pre-colonial and colonial history, but since independence has been relatively tranquil compared to its neighbours Nigeria, Chad, CAR, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea (Fig. 1). Diverse cultures have occupied Cameroon since the early Stone Age and colonial history brought more change to an already dynamic situation. The Portuguese named the country, the Germans colonized it and the British and French acquired control after 1916, dividing the colony between them as League of Nations Mandates (Yearwood, 1993). Since independence in 1960 there have been just two Presidents though this apparent stability disguises a bloody internal war in the 1960s and an attempted coup in the early 1980s. Cameroonian politics are characterised as a hegemonic alliance between a national elite and geo-ethnic regional elites. These regional elites deliver political stability as they compete for the patrimony of the central government (Bayart, 1979, 1993). The Germans, French and British exploited timber resources and developed extensive agro-industrial plantations (oil-palm, cotton, rubber, tea) which, along with the cocoa and coffee produced by peasants, were the mainstay of the Cameroonian economy until the development of the offshore oil reserves in the 1970s. Having grown steadily in the 1960s, 70s and early 80s the Cameroonian economy foundered in the late 1980s and the Government very reluctantly entered into a structural adjustment programme, which has continued in a desultory fashion throughout the 1990s.

Kumbo is an important settlement within the Northwest Province of Cameroon (Fig. 2). It is sometimes referred to as Kimbo, Banso, Nso or Nsaw. In general Nso refers to the chief, the people or the culture, while Kumbo refers to the town. Though it is distant from the main centres of population and industry it serves an important regional function as the administrative headquarters of Bui, one of the Divisions of the Northwest Province. Within the Province it is second only to Bamenda in terms of population and services. Its influential position is largely derived from its important history as the centre of one of the major kingdoms in the region.

Much of the Province, including Kumbo, covers a rolling mountain savannah generically referred to as the “Grassfields.” Archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests that this area has been peopled for several millennia (Warnier, 1984). Despite occasional mountain peaks the whole zone is relatively open and offered easy movement for both invaders and nomadic groups. As a consequence the Grassfields have had a very variable and mobile population and have experienced considerable social change as migrants and raiders have taken advantage of the fertile soils and relative safety of the area. Within the region there were many different pre-colonial polities operating at a variety of scales. There were a number of large kingdoms, such as Nso’ and Bamoun, some small city states like Bali and Bafut and many autonomous villages, for example in the Widikum

Fig. 1. The international and provincial boundaries of Cameroon.

Fig. 2. The Northwest Province of Cameroon, showing the location of Kumbo.
area. Many of these units had common characteristics. Amongst the kingdoms and city-states for example chieftaincy is almost universal and the chief is the embodiment of traditions and guardian of custom (Nkw, 1996). In Nso’s the chief is called the Fon, and his Palace (nto’ Nso’), is at the centre of Kumbo. Chiefs have elaborate bureaucracies of wives, retainers, pages and ritual specialists who manage the Palace and provide councillors for the Fon. In many polities there are male secret associations. Sometimes they are military units and sometimes they are judicial units. Sometimes they act as a diplomatic corps with the authority to act as a check on the power of the chief (regulatory societies). In Nso’s the regulatory society is known as Ngwerong and the military and hunting clubs as the Manjong (Chem-Langhée et al., 1985).

Chieftaincy and its associated institutions are not merely of interest to historians and anthropologists but remain important to the culture and politics of contemporary Kumbo. From 1896, the Grassfields became a labour reservoir for the plantations near the coast (Chilver, 1963; Rowlands, 1989). From the outset the Germans relied on Chiefs to collect taxes and secure a supply of labour migrants, and some Chiefs (as at Bali) were given a stipend for this reason. Chiefs decided who was to go to the plantations and they were given a lien on the earnings of plantation labourers to offset against their tax liability as an incentive to keep up the labour supply. However, the same Chiefs regarded prolonged absence by their subjects as treasonable, which lead to difficulty stabilising the plantation labour force (Arden et al., 1960; Konings, 1993). By 1912 the German officials were increasingly inclined to move away from using the Chiefs and to rely instead on a more direct form of administration. After the transfer of colonial power to the English this policy was reversed and enhancing the authority of the Chiefs became an active colonial policy. Indeed in 1917 the Fon of Nso’ requested that colonial troops should be sent to the palace to help collect the tax (Rowlands, 1989).

The tradition of organising Chiefs into a hierarchy with varying tasks and salaries continues unbroken to the present. Their power, however, has declined relative to bureaucrats and politicians within the central elite. In 1922 Chiefs were given particular legal and fiscal responsibilities through the introduction of indirect rule. The Fon of Nso’ is at the highest level of the hierarchy of traditional rulers and continues to be paid a salary by the post-colonial Government. In return he carries out a variety of legal services (particularly in relation to land disputes) on behalf of the Government within his geographical jurisdiction. This leaves the chief in an ambiguous position in relation to the Government. On the one hand he is an avowedly apolitical figure embodying the culture of Nso’, on the other his personal wealth depends on his capacity to participate in national politics and serve the interests of the central state at a local level. Similarly other title-holders and traditional institutions also continue to wield influence in the present. New economic elites, who have derived their wealth through access to state resources will buy traditional titles in the usual way and are actively involved in the politics of tradition in Kumbo (Goheen, 1991). Accumulation is achieved through knowledge of how to manipulate both national laws and local institutions.

The water supply in Kumbo serves around 40,000 people and has a capacity of 139 cubic metres per hour. It is gravity fed and uses stream sources from a partially protected watershed of 2008 hectares. There is a reservoir and treatment station (comprising sedimentation basin, slow sand filters and chlorine dosing equipment), which requires some consumption of electricity. The 20 km distribution network is made from asbestos-cement pipes and supplies public stand taps and private metered connections (Nga, 2000, p. 4–5). There is no wastewater disposal system.

4. The public story of the Kumbo water supply

The first history of the Kumbo water supply is the one most commonly told. It is the account that is currently in public circulation throughout the town, and indeed the country. It is the version that community leaders (the Fon, the elite’s Development Association, the Mayor, the Council and the water managers) would like to present to outsiders and journalists. It is based on a number of newspaper and magazine accounts from the early 1990s and interviews carried out in Kumbo in 1998. It is a calculated representation of the story by the journalists who publicised the relevant events. Their interpretation is shaped to meet the needs of politicians, diplomats and international development NGOs who want to use the story as a model of apolitical community participation and development.

4.1. The origins of the water supply in Kumbo

The story begins in late 1960s. The first piped water supply system in Kumbo was constructed between 1968 and 1970 by community labour, with community financial contributions (1500 CFA francs from men and 1000 CFA francs from women). Evidence for such payments is easily available in the receipts issued by the Department for Urban Development, which supervised the collection of the levy. This money supplemented a

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donation of materials from Canada, which had been negotiated by Bernard Fonlon, a community member, who at the time was the Deputy Foreign Minister of Cameroon. Professor Fonlon, a well-known Cameroonian intellectual, had been born in Kumbo and maintained close links with Nso though he was educated in Nigeria, Oxford and the Sorbonne. After a visit home to Kumbo he asked the people what they needed. The old women complained that they lacked drinking water. Soon afterwards Professor Fonlon was in Canada, where he used his contacts with the Prime Minister to raise the question of Kumbo’s water. After a Canadian inspection of Kumbo had been made a formal request for assistance from the Canadians was made through the Cameroonian Government.

After the Canadians made the engineering studies the materials were shipped to Cameroon. The Canadian commitment ended with the delivery of the materials to the port and the transport of the materials from the coast to Kumbo proved to be problematic, but it was a problem that the Kumbo community solved. Vehicles from the Nso Area Co-operative Union delivered coffee from Kumbo to Douala, and on their return they gradually shifted the materials for the water supply back to Kumbo. In the town the labour was organised by the Fon through the traditional societies. Following traditional practices certain days were set aside for communal work, which were used to dig the trenches for the pipelines. Different parts of the town took it in turn to prepare food and palm wine as compensation for the labourers; this was the only compensation that they received for their work. When the project was completed there were 74 standpipes from which people could drink for free. The Kumbo Urban Council did not have to pay any fees to the Public Works Department in the capital because the water supply was a gift from the people of Canada to the people of Kumbo who, therefore, owned the water supply. In acknowledgement of his efforts Bernard Fonlon was awarded the traditional title of Shu-fai Ntodez, which means “sub-chief of the water source.” In short the planning, execution and operation of the water supply was embedded in traditional institutions and practices, and was driven forward by members of the Kumbo community, with the material support of only the Canadians.

4.2. The transfer of operations to SNEC

The next episode in the life of the water supply entails its transfer from community ownership to state ownership in 1984. According to local accounts there was a Presidential Order which stated that all water systems in the country were to be handed over to the national water corporation the Société National Des Eaux du Cameroun (SNEC). SNEC had been created in July 1967, when it took over the management of water supplies in 11 towns in Francophone Cameroon that had been operated by three different organisations. SNEC was a parastatal company that operated a concession awarded by the Government for 40 years. The principal shareholders were the Government, the Government electricity corporation and the French Government Fund for Development (CFD) (Atangana, 1997; DeLancey and Mokeba, 1990). However, the account suggests that this transfer was opposed in council meetings and by the populace at large, who occupied the Fon’s Palace demanding to know why their free water was being replaced by SNEC water for which they had to pay. Many people in Kumbo held the view that the Mayor of Kumbo and the Fon of Nso were bribed by SNEC to sign a secret handover contract with SNEC. These individuals, it is suggested, claimed to be representatives of the community and, therefore, to be able to sign away the community’s ownership of the network. Following the handover the quality of service deteriorated and a litany of disasters followed. The price of water escalated. The council were forced to pay for the water taken from public debts and when they failed to pay the public taps were closed down. Maintenance work deteriorated as operation was taken away from local people and handed over to the francophone employees of the national water corporation. The people of Kumbo were forced to go back to collecting dirty water from streams.

4.3. The expulsion of SNEC from Kumbo and community management in the 1990s

In the spring and summer of 1991, the people of Kumbo, decided to retrieve what they rightfully owned. They wrested back control of the water supply, by force from SNEC, though at the cost of 6 lives. In April a crowd of youths burnt down the SNEC office, and a couple of months later under the leadership of some students recently returned from University the community repaired and re-opened 64 public taps that had been closed, repaired leakages and cleaned the water intake which had become filled with silt. In parallel the people of Kumbo rushed to provide money to cover the costs of the repairs and the operation of the system. The original plumbers who had been displaced by the employees of SNEC offered their labour for free “like their old fathers and mothers had done while the students directed and supervised the work” (Shiytut, 1992, p. 26). SNEC finally admitted defeat and left Kumbo in October 1991. Ownership of the water system was handed to the Ngerwong, it was run by some of the students, who re-fashioned themselves as the democratic Kumbo Water Authority (KWA) (Table 1).

By 1993 this arrangement was made more formal and water levies set out. However because of their inexperience and a degree of corruption the students were unable to run the KWA successfully. Eventually
Community leaders were forced to terminate the manager’s contract despite recognising the historic role played by the students. The KWA was restructured once more and since 1994 has been run by an older more experienced group of men. It has a small active committee responsible for day to day operations, and a large democratically elected council which ensures both that the operations are guided by the community and that the water managers have a vehicle through which to communicate with the community. It has been operating successfully in terms of providing an effective service, maintaining the network and balancing the books (in 1998, the KWA’s income of £26,000 was about £2000 greater than expenditure) (Table 1). Because of their confidence in the management, more and more consumers are paying to have a connection in their home. The KWA have been lauded for their efforts by foreign diplomats, such as the British Ambassador, who presented them with a Land Rover as a gift; proof not only of their success, but of the rightness of their cause. By the end of the decade the community managers had even generated enough profit to build an extension to the network and have convinced the households who use public taps to pay a monthly contribution for their water. In short it is a tale of a community endeavour triumphing over a sclerotic state.

5. The archival story and the politics of water in Kumbo

There is an alternative way to tell the story of what happened in Kumbo. Though there are some facts that are contrary to the account already given it is not the intention here to argue that the public narrative is untrue and that this alternative represents the privileged truthful insight of the outsider. Rather the suggestion is that the public account relies on an invented tradition (Ranger, 1983), which is used to serve a political purpose. That is to say it constantly emphasizes aspects relating to community, voluntary labour and tradition and ignores other aspects which do not suit the purpose for which the story is being told. In particular it plays down the role played by various facets of the Government of Cameroon in the original construction history, the financial aspects of the project prior to SNEC’s take over and the role of national politics in the 1990s. In this alternative account it is these aspects that are foregrounded. 4

5.1. The origins of the water supply in Kumbo

After independence in 1960 Cameroon became a federation of two states: East Cameroon (the former French colony) and West Cameroon (the former English colony). Each state had its own government, and there was a higher Federal tier of government as well. The Government of West Cameroon was based in the town of Buea, the Federal Government was based in the national capital, Yaoundé. This constitutional structure had been the basis for reunifying the two colonial territories, but it soon became clear that the Federal Government aspired towards a centralisation of power and the abolition of the State Governments. To this end the State Governments were gradually disempowered by a process of regulating their fiscal authority and controlling the disbursements they received.

In 1964/65 attempts had been made by the Public Works Department (PWD) of the Government of West Cameroon to construct a water supply in Kumbo. The town was lucky because one of the two most senior Cameroonian engineers in the department, Mr. O.B. Sendze, was from Kumbo. However, in the context of the struggle between the Governments in Yaoundé and Buea it is unsurprising that the project was starved of funds and, though a number of pipes were purchased and delivered, the system was never constructed. However, the design for the system was established by the Government’s surveyors and engineers from the PWD. In March 1968 a Canadian Government mission visiting Yaoundé expressed an interest in supporting a number of water projects. In November of the same year Canadian engineers visited Kumbo accompanied by engineers from the West Cameroon Government. They used the PWDs existing technical plans to produce their report and concluded that there was no need to send

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4This account is based on material from the following files Rd(1962)5 and Rd(1971)2 in the National Archives Buea. It is supported by a number of interviews carried out in 1998 with officials who were active in the late 1960s and with some of the protesters who were involved in the events of the early 1990s.
Canadians to supervise the work since the Cameroonian engineers were clearly capable of doing so themselves. In September 1969 a formal agreement was drawn up between the Cameroonian Government in Yaoundé and the Canadian Government. The Canadians would provide all the hardware for the project and would transport it to Cameroon, this contribution was valued at 130 million CFA francs. The Cameroonian Government would transport the material from the port to Kumbo and would provide the labour and expertise for construction. The anticipated costs in Cameroon amounted to 25 million FCFA. The Government of West Cameroon signalled a willingness to contribute 5 million FCFA, and the community contribution was also put at 5 million FCFA, though it was not included in the formal agreement. Three months later the pipes were delivered to Cameroon.

The speed with which the materials were delivered clearly caught the Cameroonian Governments unawares. No money had been set aside within that year’s budget to cover the costs of transporting 2000 tons of pipes a distance of several hundred kilometres. The Government of West Cameroon eventually paid 12 million FCFA to transport some of the materials to Kumbo, but then, in January 1970 called a halt to the project whilst it considered the financial consequences of continuing since they were virtually bankrupt. They re-calculated the local costs at 60 million CFA if labour was to be paid for, or 47 million CFA if labour was to be given voluntarily. However, they resisted involving the local community to meet this cash shortfall. The Secretary of State for Urban Development argued that “Cash contributions by local authorities would make them believe they should be exempted from water rate… it would seem advisable to limit the local contribution to the provision of free labour… this we think is easier to convey to the population and avoids later complications”. Clearly the Government viewed this as a Government led project with community assistance. They had every intention of adding this system to the portfolio of systems already run by the state. In April 1971 the Government of West Cameroon accepted a loan of 1.5 million from the people of Nso so that work could begin. The money was used to pay skilled labourers from the PWD to start work alongside the voluntary unskilled labourers from Kumbo. Public announcements were made that the money had been allocated to the scheme, but in reality the Government of West Cameroon never had sufficient capital to see the project through. By August 1971, Bernard Fonlon had used his position as a Minister in Yaoundé to ensure that 30 million FCFA was given to the project from the central Government to ensure its completion. However, he also used his influence to flatten the plans to use voluntary labour and instead campaigned that the workers of Kumbo should be remunerated for their labour. “It is unthinkable that all trenching will continue to be done by communal labour. I wish to suggest, therefore that when money does come in hand and labour is to be employed as much local labour as is available should be employed.” This injunction seems to have been heeded, certainly the Cameroonian PWD engineer who supervised the pipe laying in Kumbo remembers that all the labourers were paid for their work. Though the work was planned to take 3 years, 300 local people were employed and the project was completed in 10 months, delayed briefly only by the disappearance (death) of the Fon of Nso. When the project was completed in March 1972 it was officially incorporated into the list of water supplies owned and operated by Government. As such the local council in Kumbo was expected to collect water rates with other forms of direct taxation and hand this money over to national Government. Across the country there was considerable laxity about this collection, however, there is no doubt that officially the Government viewed the Kumbo system as Government owned and expected the people to pay for their water. Not only that but, the system was operated by employees of the PWD answerable to officials in Bamenda.

Such elaborate details about the origins of a small water supply in a relatively minor town would be unjustifiable if they did not stand in distinct contrast to the story that is being told about the system elsewhere.

5 M.N. Luma, Secretary of State for Urban Development, 30th January 1970, ExCo Minute.

6 M.N. Luma, Secretary of State for Urban Development Buea to Minister of Territorial Administration, Yaoundé, May 1971.

7 B. Fonlon, Minister of Public Health, Yaoundé to S.T. Muna, Prime Minister of West Cameroon, August 1971.

8 Mr. E. Efumani, Interview, Buea March 13th 1998.
Community development strategies were part of the story in Kumbo, but not its totality. The role of the Federal Government and the Government of West Cameroon was integral to planning, international diplomacy, finance, supervision and ultimately the operation of the system. From the perspective of the Government this was their project and community involvement was a necessary evil given the limits of the state’s financial capacity. The state claimed to own the system from the moment it was constructed. The state ownership of the project was also recognised by other organisations. For example when the World Health Organization assessed Cameroon’s Urban Water Supplies in 1974 they recognised the Kumbo water supply as one owned and operated by government. Those analysts who assert that this was always a community project do so in order to help bolster their moral authority when ‘reclaiming’ the system from Government in the 1990s.

Two months after the Kumbo system was completed, the federal constitution was abolished and Cameroon became a unitary state. The water supply in Kumbo was claimed as a triumph of the change. In many ways the town had been a pawn in a national struggle between two scales of Government. By withholding the money the town had been a pawn in a national struggle between the two scales of Government. By withholding the money from the Government of West Cameroon the Government in Yaoundé made them look powerless, ineffectual and unsupportive in the eyes of the residents of Kumbo. When the Federal Government finally funded the project they demonstrated their own benevolence and authority. To try and recontextualize this history as just another example of community development is also to effectively hide this political struggle over scales of government.

5.2. The transfer of operations to SNEC

This early history also sheds a new light on the transfer of operation of the Kumbo water supply to SNEC in 1984. Whereas the public story suggests that this was a transfer from community ownership to national state ownership, the alternative version of the story suggests that this was a transfer from operation by a regional part of Government (the Ministry of Mines and Power) to a national parastatal corporation, (SNEC). In other words, from Government perspective this was both a geographical rationalisation of the various different disparate organisations who had been supplying water to different parts of the country and also a denationalisation in as far as SNEC was one degree removed from the Government and was meant to operate as an independent commercial entity. What was perceived in Kumbo (and later represented) as a shift from community to central Government control, can equally be interpreted as a shift from state control to private control. In many respects the former representation is entirely plausible. The Ministry of Mines and Power was overstretched and understaffed. Its daily operations in Kumbo (and elsewhere) relied on local operators from the community and more senior staff visited only rarely. As a result the system was in effect community run and water was perceived to be free. Equally it is a myth to imagine that SNEC ever sought to act like an independent firm, instead it was (like so many other Cameroonian parastatals corporations) a politicised arm of Government. Nevertheless by emphasizing the loss of community control the public story glosses over the crucial shift towards commodifying water.

What the shift from Mines and Power to SNEC undoubtedly did signify was a determined marketisation of water supplies. Whereas the Ministry had been relatively ineffective at collecting water rates and at setting economic prices, SNEC was far more orientated towards cost recovery. For water-users throughout Anglophone Cameroon the experience of the early 1980s was of sharply rising prices, frequent disconnections and the closure of ‘free’ public taps. In order to sweeten this bitter pill a variety of construction projects took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s which improved the quality of the water supply in many towns throughout the country. These public works were funded through World Bank loans and carried out by international building contractors. In Kumbo (and in many other towns) these works involved the construction of chemical water treatment plants. However unlike some other towns, because the Kumbo system was relatively new (only 12 years old) there was only a limited anxiety about the quality of existing service provision and the public were not overly impressed by the physical change to the system that accompanied the arrival of SNEC. The improvement in service quality that was intended to accompany the increased water rates was insufficient to quell dissatisfaction.

5.3. The expulsion of SNEC from Kumbo and community management in the 1990s

The public story of the expulsion of SNEC from Kumbo emphasizes the idea of a community reclaiming control of a system which it rightly owns. This alternative interpretation places more emphasis on the wider political-economic context to explain the violence in Kumbo. After two decades of economic growth Cameroon’s economy founded around 1985. In 1989 international credit to the Cameroonian Government was curtailed in an effort by lenders to institute changes in economic policy and in the practice of government. The Government prevaricated over these reforms, but, by the early 1990s, change became inevitable (Konings, 1996; van de Walle, 1991). The Government withdrew from marketing agricultural produce, reformed tariffs, ended a range of subsidies, liberalised labour laws, privatised or abolished parastatals, cut civil service salaries
and, in 1994, devalued the currency. The almost universal experience for Cameroonian households in this period was of a rapid decline in the standard of living. These political-economic reforms disturbed the existing social contract and led to widespread urban civil unrest. Across Cameroon there were demands for an end to one party politics, for constitutional and electoral reform and a liberalisation of the media. Opposition movements also demanded a change in the personnel occupying key positions within Government and directed their anger towards the governing party the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement. Some of these protests also resurrected campaigns for secession for Anglophones; a political project which relied on fomenting hostility between French-speaking and English-speaking Cameroonian. One of the geographical centres of this political unrest was the ‘Grassfields’ area including Kumbo. Riots in Bamenda marked the start and some of the most violent expressions of discontent and resulted in the formation of one of the (many) new opposition parties, the Social Democratic Front. This new party developed a considerable following in Kumbo. Protests were commonplace in the cities and towns of the Grassfields in the early 1990s.

The initial protest against SNEC in Kumbo in April 1991 can be seen as one example of a general trend. As they marched across Kumbo the protestors sang anti-Government songs. Part of their antipathy towards SNEC was based on the fact that so many of the corporation’s staff were Francophone. After they had razed the office of the water corporation they went on to attack the local courthouse and threatened first the police and then the gendarmerie. The protest was not only an attack on SNEC but also on Francophones and on the state justice system in general. The march was ended when the gendarmerie shot a number of the rioters. Overnight the town was occupied by the army, who came in from the barracks at Koutaba (Fig. 2). The military presence, however, was temporary and for a standoff. The Government’s response to the destruction of the SNEC office and other buildings in Kumbo was (relatively) lax because so many other demands were being made on the armed forces by other violent protests elsewhere in Cameroon at the same time and because Kumbo was a relatively unimportant centre.

The transformation of this general act of sporadic violence into a more co-ordinated attempt to expel SNEC later in the year reflects the role played by university students returning from Yaoundé to Kumbo. These individuals had become politicised while studying at Cameroon’s only university in the capital. There they had been at the forefront of struggles between the Government and opposition. In response to intensified armed attacks on the University the student body had resolved to leave the capital and return to their various different home towns and to diffuse their struggle across the nation. When the students who came from Kumbo returned home they quickly identified the ownership of the water supply as the issue around which it would be easiest to articulate local resistance. Interviews with some of these individuals suggest that water was merely the vehicle through which to organise a wider struggle against the Government. However to challenge the Government they needed to generate a sense of moral outrage not only amongst those who were naturally sympathetic to their cause but to those who were less inclined to disturb the status quo. For this reason they placed considerable emphasis on the technical failures of SNEC and circulated rumours about dead donkeys rotting in the water intake. They also emphasized the claim to community ownership of the system—for example when they protested (peacefully) in the streets of Kumbo they marched with pictures of Bernard Fonlon, who had died 5 years earlier, and who was so closely associated in the minds of the community with the construction of the water supply. In this way they gathered the necessary momentum and wide basis of support which was necessary to sustain the campaign to expel SNEC.

By October 1991 the people of Kumbo had successfully achieved their goal of reclaiming ownership of the water supply, however, the extent to which they can be said to have challenged the Government more generally is questionable. After the KWA had been established a Government minister, Francis Nkwain, was sent from Yaoundé to try to persuade the people of Kumbo to allow SNEC to return and operate the water supply. He arrived accompanied by troops, and was met by a large crowd of Kumbo people in the courtyard of the Palace of the Fon. Many of the crowd carried traditional weapons and dressed as if for war. Before the Minister had read his own speech, he had to listen to the community’s position, which made clear their readiness to use violence to defend the water supply. Witnesses to this event say that the Minister was intimidated and never read his own speech, but instead invited the Fon to return with him to Yaoundé to continue discussions there. Rather than the Fon it was decided that one of the student leaders the man who had just read the Kumbo community’s speech should be sent to Yaoundé as the Fon’s representative, with the unequivocal instruction to give no ground on the issue. Whilst this appears to be a symbolic success in the struggle between opposition and state it also marks the beginning of divisions within the alliance that had originally taken control of the water supply and linked to that the failure to expand the struggle much beyond issues around the water supply.

The political cleavage within Kumbo was between those forces opposed the Government and those who were either sympathetic or averse to antagonising the Government. This division can be illustrated by
considering two individuals: the Fon and Njong Donatus, the man who read the speech to Francis Nkwain and later represented the Kumbo community in Yaoundé. The Fon is a member of both the local and national political elite, as a salaried official whose status and wealth relied on links with the central state he was also dependent on the Government. As a traditional ruler the Fon was officially outside politics and judged that the interests of the town were best served by avoiding conflict with the state. Though the KWA was using part of the Fon’s Palace as an office, thus claiming his endorsement, he himself was not entirely trusted by the KWA. This is suggested by the fact that ownership of the water supply was formally invested in the Ngw-erong, the regulatory society which in some respects has authority over the Fon. Similarly when the opportunity came for the Fon to go to Yaoundé to defend the interests of the KWA it was feared he might accept a compromise so an alternative negotiator was found. That individual, Njong Donatus epitomises the other faction within the Kumbo society. In 1991, when he rose to prominence he was a local schoolteacher. By 1997 he had become the town Mayor and a local leader of the opposition party the SDF. His critics argue that he used the struggles over the water supply as the springboard for his own political ambitions. They go further to say that he had no right to speak at the meeting with Francis Nkwain since it was a break with the accepted traditional protocol. The struggle between pro and anti-Government factions in Kumbo was played out in struggles over the KWA and though both employed ‘tradition’ in pursuit of their goals it also became a struggle between an established and an emergent local elite. Ultimately the pro-Government faction asserted its control over the water supply and the anti-Government faction diversified into more formal channels of political struggle and took control of the local council.

The immediate goal of those who were sympathetic to the Government was to separate the Kumbo protest over water from wider social unrest. As one commentator put it in 1992 “it would be a great mistake for anyone to associate the burning down of the SNEC office, nonpayment of water bills and taking over of the water… with recent political issues. No. They simply looked back in anger and decided to vent their grievances” (Shiyntum, 1992, p. 28). Again this illustrates why it was so important to this faction to assert the historical links between the community and the water supply. For nearly 2 years the KWA was run by some of the students from the anti-Government faction, however they lost control in 1994 when the manager was dismissed amid accusations of incompetence and embezzlement. They were replaced by much older men, more closely associated with the palace and with established elite interests. As a newspaper put it “While continuing to applaud the students for their majestic stride in seizing their water scheme from SNEC it seems at this stage not to be in the community’s interest to turn the scheme into a students aid board”. ⁹ The students had alienated many important people by charging more for domestic water connections than SNEC had before they were expelled. Furthermore there was a general sentiment that it would be a matter of great embarrassment if the project failed as it would undermine the principle of self-help and the reputation of the people of Kumbo. This shift in the personnel managing the KWA has enabled a gradual and continuing rapprochement to emerge between the water managers and the local representatives of the national state. Some Government offices and officials even pay the KWA for their water. Officials from the Ministry of Mines and Power give the managers technical advice and a local official from the Ministry of Territorial Administration regularly attends KWA board meetings. The water managers are now in the process of negotiating official legal recognition.

The second half of the 1990s was marked by considerable success for the KWA measured by a variety of parameters. They gained the trust of their customers. They expanded the number of people with domestic connections. They covered the costs of operation. They carried out a range of maintenance tasks and repairs. They made enough profit to build an extension to the system. They achieved these targets by ensuring that the water supply was reliable, that the costs undercut the costs of SNEC supplies and by playing on their community credentials. They expanded community representation on the committee to ensure increased transparency and education of consumers. SNEC had always maintained that, after the payment of salaries and their head office fees Kumbo had a loss-making water supply, yet the KWA managed to collect around 30 million FCFA a year and make it break even. However, a question arises over the sustainability of this situation.

The long-term viability of the KWA seems questionable. In order to break even the KWA pays very few salaries. Instead it relies heavily on voluntary labour. For some individuals who play an active role on the committee this is a time consuming task with only moderate rewards in terms of the respect it brings. They have also dramatically reduced the number of salaried plumbers they employ. Most of the technicians are now sub-contracted on a daily basis when needed. From the perspective of the KWA this has the advantage that they are not paid unless there is work and there is no liability for pensions or national insurance. However, the effective operation of the system relies on the knowledge of these plumbers many of whom have worked on the water system for many years. Should they become dis-

satisfied with this arrangement there is a risk that the reliability of the supply might be undermined. Another money saving strategy has been the reduction in the use of chemicals at the water treatment station, which also introduces risks. But the major problem is that the pipe network is now 30 years old. The asbestos-cement pipes are at the end of their design life. They break frequently and are difficult and expensive to repair. The KWA has commissioned a study of the cost of replacing the pipe network with plastic pipes. In 1998 this was estimated at 781 million FCFA, well beyond the capacity of the residents of Kumbo. In order to raise this capital the KWA has had to look to other sources of funding.

Helvetas is a Swiss organisation with a long and distinguished history of involvement in community based water supplies in this part of Cameroon (Helvetas, 1989; Zimmerman, 1981). They act as the main gatekeepers of foreign aid into the water sector in this region of Cameroon. Most of the Embassies who wish to put money into water supply hand over responsibility for disbursing that money to Helvetas. In recent years, however Helvetas have switched their emphasis from the construction of new water supplies to catchment protection projects and providing institutional support for existing water committees in order to foster improved maintenance (Frolich et al., 1995). In particular they have been advocating the institutionalisation of user-fees for everyone consuming water for a number of years. In this respect they are not unusual but instead reflect a global shift in the policies of international NGOs concerned with water supplies in the rural areas of the developing world.

The KWA have been courting Helvetas for some years. They have already received a small grant to help protect the area around the water catchment. However, their need to generate a substantial tranche of capital for reconstruction has also shaped their policy with regard to universal payments for water-users. In 1999 they introduced user-payments at the public taps for the first time. Given that the protests in 1991 had castigated SNEC for driving Kumbo Council into bankruptcy by charging them for the water collected from public taps, and that the slogan at the time had been “Bring free water back to the people” this is a remarkable turnaround. While some other towns where the water supply is delivered by SNEC still have water free at the public taps, Kumbo, which is community managed, has successfully introduced payments. Each tap is attached to a water meter, and each month a bill is sent to a tap users committee who divide that bill amongst those families who regularly use the tap. Vulnerable consumers (for example landless widows) are protected by their neighbours who allow them to collect the water for free. The rate for water collected from a tap is still lower than that delivered by a domestic connection, but to the satisfaction of outside observers everyone is seen to be paying. According to the KWA chairman this new policy was justified to the people of the town as a performance for the benefit of Helvetas. When explaining the willingness of the people to accept these fees to Helvetas they cite the trust that users have in the KWA because they are a community organisation. When the policy was first mooted there were rumours that students in the town were planning a demonstration, but at the request of the KWA the forces of law and order were brought in to town to maintain the peace.

6. Conclusion

The public story of water management in Kumbo presents the takeover from SNEC and the KWA as a triumph of community participation. Yet despite the consistency of this narrative there is a political struggle going on within the Kumbo community. The importance of the role of community management is consistent, but the rhetorical use to which it puts varies with the political interest groups. The first group to deliberately use the pre-existing sentiments in Kumbo around community ownership of the water supply were the students who organised the expulsion of SNEC from Kumbo in 1991. They found that an emphasis on the community’s claim of ownership enabled them to mobilise the local population to take action against the Cameroonian Government. Community control of the water supply was a device through which to motivate the Kumbo population to adopt a more antagonistic position towards the Cameroonian state after decades of pliant submission. They used the struggles over water to disseminate their more far-reaching ambitions of democratisation, and even independence for English-speaking Cameroon. The successful operation of the water network was symbolic of liberation from the shackles of a failing and discriminatory state. These grander political projects were sidetracked as the students became bogged down in the practicality of running the water system. But, their dependence on a notion of ‘community’ proved to be problematic. They did not trust elements within the Kumbo population who they saw as the stooges of the Government. In particular, the Fon, though officially politically neutral was not seen as trustworthy by some of the protestors. But it was contradictory to simultaneously appeal to traditional communalism but reject traditional leadership. Furthermore their own youthfulness stood in contrast to traditional ideas of hierarchy and leadership. These contradictions were less problematic for the second interest group who promulgated the narrative of community control, namely the Kumbo elite, who took control of the KWA away from the students in 1994. Indeed they used the need to defend Kumbo’s reputation as a model of
community management as justification for easing the students out of control of the KWA.

The Kumbo elite, who oversaw the new water managers after 1994, were no less confident that community control of water supply would be more effective than operation by SNEC, but they were far less antagonistic towards the government in other spheres. Instead they pursued a policy designed to separate water from all other matters and to seek some kind of accommodation with the central authorities. As part of this policy reference was repeatedly made to a history of community management in the water sector which enabled distinctions to be drawn between water and electricity supply or telecommunications. Water was peculiar precisely because of the community’s involvement in its history.

In order to enable effective operation of the water supply the KWA needed to access finance and again the idea of successful community management was central to fundraising. When appealing either to successful individuals from Kumbo who had left the town and prospered elsewhere (in Cameroon, Europe or the US) or when appealing for international development the language of community participation was helpful. For those born in Kumbo but living elsewhere the notion of community could provide not only a sense of obligation to donate in support of the KWA but also a sense of continuing belonging. For the international development organisations community participation has become the orthodoxy of development practice, particularly within the rural water supply sector, so that Kumbo became a symbol for those NGOs who wanted to draw attention to the success of community management relative to government control. When making grant proposals local water managers present the project as model of democracy and economic sustainability in order to market it to international funding bodies and NGOs. In the last few years the managers at the KWA have played on the fact that they have become a ‘test case’ at a regional and national scale for the potential of community management. When extending demands for payment for water to public taps they justify their actions as a defence of community control. That is to say they that they suggest to the people of Kumbo that for the project to fail would bring shame upon them and upon the existing reputation of their town and culture.

Emphasizing those historical elements of the project, which can be identified as ‘community’ helps to justify what was a violent illegal act against the state, it helps to align the existing management with the structures favoured by international development institutions and it helps to blur the internal social divisions within Kumbo. However, such presentations are, in some respects, historically inaccurate and illustrate what might be called ‘the invention of community’. The degree to which this community centred narrative is an invention is illustrated by a careful retelling of the story based on interviews and archival information. The water managers themselves are not the only actors who participate in this process of invention. The politicians of the national elite reinforce a communitarian reading of events in order to pursue their wider national agendas of privatisation and political hegemony. In the context of cherry picking of profitable water supplies by international water companies the state is afraid that it will be left with a rump of unprofitable supplies. Shifting responsibility for these onto local communities solves this problem and absolves the state of further financial demands. The international funding bodies also support this communitarian interpretation of events in order to pursue their wider agenda of commodifying water, of fostering the idea that water should be managed as an economic resource. The shift to universal user-fees is seen as a community’s choice, though given the need for funds for reconstruction the leverage these institutions have is considerable. Any anxieties external donors might have about equity issues are also annulled by reference to the community’s moral economy, which finds strategies through which those who can least afford to pay are allowed to fetch water for free. By representing themselves as community water managers the KWA are able to trace a path between personal ambition, local demands for autonomy, national demands for acquiescence and international demands for marketisation.

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