

AGRO-INDUSTRY AND REGIONALISM IN THE SOUTH WEST PROVINCE OF CAMEROON DURING THE NATIONAL ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CRISIS

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The South West Province of Cameroon was born in 1972. Its birth marked the end of a unique experiment in Africa whereby the political elite of two regions with different colonial legacies—one French and the other British—had agreed on the formation of a federal state (Ardener, 1967; Johnson, 1970; Le Vine, 1971; Benjamin, 1972; Forge, 1981). Stark (1976) has convincingly argued that from its very start in October 1961, federalism in Cameroon was more 'shadow than reality'. During the negotiations between the two parties, it was already evident that the bargaining strength of the delegation from the Francophone region was much greater than that of the Anglophone delegation. Compared to the Francophone region, the size and population of the Anglophone region was small, comprising only 9 per cent of the total area and 21 per cent of the total population of the federation (Kofele-Kale, 1986). More important, at the time of the negotiations, the former French Trust Territory of Cameroun was already an independent state, having been renamed the Republic of Cameroun, while the British Trust Territory of Southern Cameroons was, by the terms of the United Nations plebiscite, still to achieve its independence by joining the sovereign Republic of Cameroon. Capitalizing on this 'senior' status of his region, Ahmadou Ahidjo, the then Prime Minister of the Republic of Cameroon and leader of the Francophone delegation, was able to dictate the terms for federation. Whereas John Ngu Foncha, then Prime Minister of Southern Cameroons and Anglophone delegation leader, had proposed a loose form of federalism, which he regarded as a guarantee for equal partnership of both parties and for preservation of the cultural heritage and identity of the Anglophone minority, Ahidjo eventually forced him to accept a highly centralized form of federalism. Ahidjo, who was to become the President of the Federal Republic of Cameroon, looked upon federalism merely as an unavoidable transitory phase to the total integration of the Anglophone minority into a strong, Francophone-dominated unitary state (Chem-Langhee, 1995: 24). To achieve this objective, he employed several tactics (DeLancey, 1989: 52-65). One of these was to play Anglophone political factions off against each other and eventually unite them into the single party, the Cameroon National Union (CNU). Another was to eliminate from positions of power any Anglophone leaders who remained strongly committed to federalism, replacing them by others who favoured a unitary state. Still another was to create 'clients' among the Anglophone elite. By granting top posts in federal institutions and in the party to representatives of significant ethnic and regional groups in the Anglophone region, he tried to control these groups. Finally, he did not hesitate to repress any opposition. Through these and other tactics, he succeeded in putting an end to the federation. His justification for the 'glorious revolution of 20 May 1972' was that federalism fostered regionalism and impeded economic development (Stark, 1976). The vast majority of the Anglophones, however, did not attribute the emergence of 'regionalism' and lack of economic development to federalism per se, but rather to the hegemonic tendencies of the Francophone-dominated federal state. They soon began to resent their regional loss of autonomy and their integration as a subordinate minority into the unitary state. Their numerous grievances are mainly of a political, economic and cultural nature. These grievances concern in particular their under-representation and inferior role in the national decision-making councils, the neglect of the infrastructure and the exploitation of the region's economic resources, and the attempts at 'frenchification'.

The creation of the South West Province in 1972 was closely connected to the growing dissatisfaction of the Anglophone community with this subordinate position. There is no doubt that Ahidjo's decision after the 'glorious revolution' to divide the erstwhile

Federated State of West Cameroon into two provinces, the South West and North West Provinces, was aimed at reducing the danger of any united Anglophone action against the Francophone-dominated state. In making his decision he was well aware of the internal contradictions within the Anglophone community between the coastal/forest people (the South West Province) and the Grassfield people (North West Province). One of the major reasons for these internal conflicts is the loss of hegemony by the South West elite in the Anglophone region. The coastal population had been exposed to early contact with Western trade, religion and education, giving it a head start over the Grassfield population. An intelligentsia emerged in the coastal area, notably among the Bakweri, and it quickly rose to the forefront in the nationalist struggle and dominated the Anglophone political scene up to the end of the 1950s. The transfer of power from the South Westerner, Dr Emmanuel Endeley, to the North Westerner, Mr John Ngu Foncha, was a political event with significant repercussions for South West-North West relations. Following this transfer, the North West elite began asserting its presence. It soon became ubiquitous in the higher levels of government and in high non-governmental positions. In pre-empting for itself the choicest jobs as well as the best lands in the South West, it provoked strong resentment among South Westerners to North West domination (Kofele-Kale, 1981). Regional sentiments have been intensified by the fact that the 'entrepreneurial' North Westerners have gradually succeeded in dominating most sectors of the South West economy, in particular trade, transport and housing (Rowlands, 1993). Another source of the South West-North West divide was the UN plebiscite of 1961: on that occasion, the South West showed considerable sympathy for alignment with Nigeria, as opposed to the Cameroonian choice which prevailed, mainly on the strength of the North West votes. A final source of tensions and conflicts is the massive labour migration from the North West to the South West and subsequent settlement of North Western workers in the South West. The lack of unity among the Anglophone elite and the severe repression during the Ahidjo period largely precluded the Anglophone community from openly expressing its grievances about Francophone domination until 1982, when Biya took power. Following the relative liberalization introduced by the new president, Anglophones began voicing their long-standing grievances. They not only protested against inadequate Anglophone representation and participation at decision-making levels of government, but they also addressed the more basic problem of the status of the Anglophone community in the nation. In changing the official name of the country from the 'United Republic of Cameroon' to simply the 'Republic of Cameroon' in 1984, the Biya administration argued that Cameroon had become more united and moved ahead to integration. Anglophones protested that the new name implied they had no problems; they also recalled that the new name was the same one Ahidjo had given to independent Francophone Cameroon before reunification. Regional tensions in Anglophone Cameroon were fueled when it became manifest that the president's ethnic group, the Beti, were increasingly monopolizing political and economic power. Like his predecessor, Biya attempted to divide the Anglophones. One of his strategies was to replace North Westerners, who held key positions in the South West, by South Westerners. During the economic and political crisis which arose in the mid-1980s, contradictions between the Anglophone community and the Francophone-dominated state and between the South West and North West were reinforced. The economic crisis and subsequent Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) severely affected the private and public enterprises in Anglophone Cameroon. The crisis was caused mainly by the dramatic fall of commodity prices on the world market. However, Anglophones were inclined to attribute the crisis first and foremost to the corruption and mismanagement of the Biya regime, which continued to enjoy strong French support. Their greatest anxiety was that the few remaining enterprises in their region would be either liquidated or sold to Francophone and French business interests. Although the South West elite entertained similar fears, they were equally opposed to a North West takeover of any important enterprises located in their province, for that would result in renewed North West domination over the South West.

The political crisis was aggravated when an opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) was set up in Bamenda, the capital of the North West Province. Its massive launching rally in May 1990 ended in the killing of six young Anglophones by government troops. After this bloody event and the eventual legislation of a multi-party system, the SDF's influence spread in Anglophone Cameroon, but the party proved far more popular in the North West than in the South West, as the South West elite continued to be suspicious of the aspirations of the predominantly North Western leadership of the party. Interestingly, while the SDF claimed to be a 'national' rather than a 'regional' party, evidenced by its growing Francophone membership, the military 'occupation' of the Anglophone region and brutalities towards its population led to the emergence and rapid growth of several Anglophone pressure groups, including the Cameroon Anglophone Movement (CAM) and the All Anglophone Conference (AAC). Most of them call for a return to the federal state; a few extreme ones call for outright secession (Mehler, 1993; Krieger, 1994). These movements have done much to foster unity among the Anglophone elite. One reason is that for tactical reasons the North West elite has largely left the leadership of these pressure groups to the South West elite.

The South West Province is the only region in Cameroon with a plantation economy. This can be traced back to the German colonial era (1884-1914). Two agro-industrial enterprises have long dominated the South Western plantation sector: one of them is a parastatal, the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), and the other is a private company, the Plantations Pamol du Cameroun Ltd, or Pamol, as popularly called. These enterprises have contributed greatly to regional development, and are therefore looked upon as the lifelines of the Anglophone region in general and the South West in particular. The economic crisis brought both companies to the verge of collapse. Pamol was put into voluntary liquidation by Unilever in October 1987 and has been up for sale ever since. The CDC was first deprived of public grants and subsidies, and since 1994 it is set for privatization. Control over both companies has become an issue raising regional sentiments. It has again brought to the fore the contradictions between the Anglophone community and the Francophone-dominated state as well as those between the South West and the North West.

THE LIQUIDATION AND SALE OF PAMOL ESTATES

The Plantations Pamol du Cameroun Ltd (Pamol) was previously a subsidiary of the Unilever giant. Founded in the 1920s, it is one of the oldest agro-industrial enterprises in Cameroon. Its principal estates produce palm oil and are situated in the Ndian Division of the South West Province, an area bordering Eastern Nigeria (Courade, 1978). Economically, the Ndian Division is one of the most important areas in the country: it possesses large oil deposits at Idabato around Rio del Rey, as well as timber and oil palms. Paradoxically, despite its natural riches, it continues to be one of the most isolated and marginalized regions in the country. For a long time it was deprived of basic infrastructural provisions. There was no road connecting it with other parts of Cameroon, with transport occurring via a network of waterways (rivers, creeks, and sea). When a road was finally constructed between Ndian and Kumba during the seventies, it was usually not well maintained during the dry season and scarcely passable during the rainy season. The area appears to maintain closer links with Nigeria than with Cameroon, with many Nigerian fishermen, traders and peasants living in the area. Nigerian currency is still widely in circulation and Efik is the lingua franca in the maritime areas of the division. Legal and illegal trade with Nigeria is prominently visible and provides lucrative income opportunities for some members of the local population. The main reason for the area's marginalization seems to be political. During the inter-war period it was a kind of no-man's land, in which the British authorities showed little interest. From 1945 onwards, it was an integral part of the Kumba Division. Being rather far from Kumba, it continued to be neglected by district authorities. It was not until 1967 that it was separated from the

Kumba Division and declared an autonomous division by presidential decree. Still, hardly any development funds were allocated to the new division. Actually, it was still being penalized for the fact that during the 1961 plebiscite approximately 95 per cent of the local population voted for integration into Nigeria rather than reunification with Francophone Cameroon. A few months before the plebiscite, one of its foremost leaders, Mr N.N. Mbile, declared that his people were 'irrevocably [decided] never to accept union with the Cameroon Republic'. 'If on this we shall have to be killed to the last man', he pledged, 'it should rather be better that history records how a race of men died to the man fighting for their freedom' (cited in Johnson, 1970: 166). Following reunification, the Ndian Division was never honoured with a ministerial seat in the Federal government. Lack of national integration was also manifest in the low profile of the single party in the area. A few months before promulgation of the unitary state in 1972, the District Officer for the Ekondo Titi Subdivision reported:

The response to the call for buying and owning the party card is still slow. Meetings of cells and branches around the Headquarters have not been held and I have no reason to believe that the organs in the remote villages are more effective. I called up some of the people and asked whether they owned the party cards and the answer they gave was amazing. They said since they do not travel they see no need to own the cards. Only people who are mobile need the cards because their kits are being inspected by the forces of law and order.

For the local population, Pamol was and still is the area's lifeline. It is felt that this company has realized what political rulers and regional barons have persistently failed in: the promotion of regional development. It is the only private enterprise in the area that employs a sizable labour force, having in its heyday 3,000-3,500 workers. It is responsible for 90 per cent of the Ndian Division's taxation revenue. It has constructed labour camps with an adequate supply of water and electricity, hospitals, schools and roads. It has also rendered transport services to its workers and the local population. Local people still remember well that a company launch, the M.V. Rio, with a capacity of 45 passengers, was plying the Ndian-Lobe route three times a week. Last, but not least, the company stimulated from the early 1960s smallholders' schemes around its oil palm estates. Given its significant role in regional development for many decades, the announcement of Pamol's voluntary liquidation on 13 October 1987 caused a tremendous shock in Anglophone Cameroon, and in the Ndian Division in particular. For those familiar with the multitude of problems that beset the agro-industrial palm oil sector, however, the liquidation did not come as a complete surprise (Konings, 1989). Agro-industrial enterprises engaged in local palm oil production were poorly competitive on the world market due to low productivity and high production costs. As a result, they were highly dependent upon sales in the local market. From the early 1980s, however, they faced enormous market problems, for two main reasons:

- Government expansion of this sector had effected a staggering increase in output. Particularly the huge expansion of the two parastatals that dominate the sector, the CDC and the Société Camerounaise de Palmeraies (SOCAPALM), created the unprecedented situation that locally produced palm oil exceeded domestic demand by about 40 percent.

- Government incapacity or unwillingness to control the imports of cheap oils, especially refined oil from Malaysia, led to a further reduction in the domestic demand for locally produced palm oil.

Inevitably, these two factors gave rise to keen competition, and even a price war, between Cameroonian agro-industrial enterprises in the domestic market, which forced prices down to a level far below production costs and the government-recommended price. In the end, most could no longer avoid selling an increasing volume of palm oil on the world market. These exports occurred at a time that a 40 per cent increase in the value of the CFA franc against the US dollar had made locally produced palm oil even less competitive on the world market, while world market prices had collapsed to their

lowest level in fifty years. In a desperate attempt to rid themselves of their growing stocks of perishable palm oil, Cameroonian agro-industrial enterprises were obliged to dump their produce on the world market, resulting in major financial losses. In December 1986, Unilever briefed the Biya government on the company's deteriorating financial position and urged it to implement forthwith a series of protective measures for the ailing agro-industrial palm oil sector - in particular an increase in domestic palm oil prices, the imposition of a special tax on all imports of edible oils, and the granting of export subsidies. It complained once more that Pamol was unable to compete with the state-subsidized parastatals, even though the company was more productive and supplied higher-quality oil than the parastatals. To end this situation of unequal competition, it requested the government to grant Pamol similar low-interest loan facilities to those the parastatals enjoyed, to improve the roads leading to its estates and mill, and to render every possible assistance in the construction of a refinery. The then Minister of Industrial Development and Commerce, Mr Nomo Ongolo, rejected Unilever's request out of hand. He gave the following reasons for his refusal: Being confronted with a serious economic crisis after a long period of remarkable economic growth (Körner, 1987), the government was less inclined to allocate extra funds to the ailing agro-industrial sector. Moreover, the government was of the opinion that a giant multinational like Unilever should not call upon the government for assistance during the crisis, but rather reinvest in Pamol a certain proportion of the substantial profits it had made in the country. Of course, one underlying reason for his blunt refusal was that the enormous expansion of the parastatals had made the government less dependent on multinational enterprises for the supplying of palm oil to the local market.

It was, however, widely believed in Anglophone Cameroon that the hidden agenda for his refusal was to engineer the closure of one of the leading private enterprises with British connections in their region, as a further step in the emasculation of the regional economic potential by the Francophone-dominated state. Some well-informed sources allege that Mr Nomo Ongolo was also personally interested in acquiring a stake in Pamol, for he knew very well that, following his disapproval of its request for assistance, Unilever would decline to subsidize a company which had incurred a loss of FCFA 1.3 billion between 1984 and 1987, and rather prefer to wind up its activities in Cameroon. In July 1987, Unilever informed the government of its intention to sell Pamol. The government, in turn, immediately gave Unilever in very clear terms to understand that the state was not going to take over the company. Already burdened with the huge losses of the agro-industrial parastatals during the economic crisis, it could not afford to buy Pamol, especially since the company's debts amounted to about FCFA 4.2 billion and its neglected estates and mill required costly refurbishment. Moreover, in view of the economic crisis the government was no longer in favour of extending the role of the state in the agro-industrial sector; rather, it had adopted a policy that the existing agro-industrial parastatals should become self-sufficient and profitable and, in the event of failure, be either liquidated or privatized (Tedga, 1990). In the end, it strongly advised Unilever to sell the company to interested Cameroonian businessmen. Such a transaction would be a major contribution to the realization of one of the principal objectives of the government's 'New Deal' policies: getting various sections of the Cameroonian elite to set up medium-sized and large-scale plantations (Konings, 1993; Takougang, 1993).

Unilever accepted this advice. It soon entered into secret negotiations with a small group of well-known North West businessmen, including Messrs Nangah, Ngufor, Buyo, Kilo, Nuiouat, and Acha. This business consortium was given legal advice by Mr Sendze, a renowned lawyer in Bamenda. Unilever had come into contact with this group through the mediation of the Pamol management staff, mainly composed of North Westerners. Having a personal interest in an eventual North West takeover of the company, some of these senior North Western managers continued to act as 'brokers' between Unilever and the North West business consortium and to provide this group with vital information on the company's situation. The North West group was well aware that any substantial

investment in the domestic agro-industrial palm oil sector was a very risky undertaking. It justified its resolve to take over Pamol as follows:

- It was motivated in the first place by 'regional' sentiments rather than by (short-term) profit considerations. It was anxious to safeguard the employment of the company's labour force, the majority of which originated from the North West Province.

- It was convinced that the company's precarious financial position could be redressed in the long run provided that (i) the government would implement at once all the protective measures for the agro-industrial palm oil sector previously proposed by Unilever, and (ii) the company would be thoroughly reorganized.

Eventually, Unilever decided to sell the company to the North West group following the latter's agreement to take over Pamol's liabilities in the form of long-term loans and to guarantee the payment of the workers' wages and termination benefits. A contract was then signed between both parties. It was this contract that raised regionalist sentiments among the South West elite. As soon as the secret 'deal' between Unilever and the North West group became known, the South West elite started to agitate against the North West takeover of Pamol and appealed to the state to intervene on its behalf. In a strongly worded petition presented to the Head of State, the South West elite stated categorically that it would never allow its ancestral lands, which had been occupied by Unilever for decades, to be 'colonized' and 'exploited' by North Westerners. It stressed that a North West takeover of Pamol would inevitably strengthen North West domination over the South West. It therefore made an urgent appeal to the state to annul the contract between Unilever and the North West group and support an eventual South West takeover of Pamol. This regional conflict painfully revealed the fragility of Ahidjo's 'hegemonic project' of national integration. In addition, the appeal of the South West elite forced the Biya government to take a stand on this politically delicate issue, thus risking being accused of serving specific regional interests rather than the national interest.

Initially, there appeared to be ample reason for government support of a North West takeover of Pamol. The North West group had taken considerable risks in its decision to buy Pamol in view of the precarious financial position of the enterprise and the generally unhealthy situation of the domestic agro-industrial palm oil sector. Despite the severe crisis in the national economy, the group had been able to raise the substantial capital resources required for the takeover of the company and its liabilities. Beyond any doubt it possessed the 'entrepreneurial' and managerial qualities to run the company. Furthermore, the takeover was in line with public policy of encouraging the various elite groups, whatever their ethnic or regional origin, to invest in medium-sized and large-scale agricultural plantations in any part of the country. Furthermore, there appeared initially to be no convincing reason for a positive response of the government to the South West appeal for the annulment of the agreement between Unilever and the North West group, precisely because that opposition was largely based on regional sentiments. Nor was any proof provided that the South West elite was capable of raising the necessary funds for a take-over of Pamol.

The South West elite then launched a political offensive to strengthen its bargaining position. It tried to impress upon the government that Unilever's decision to sell the company to the North West group was unjust. Since Pamol was operating on South West ancestral lands, Unilever should have invited the South West group to make the first bid to purchase Pamol. It was also stressed that a close link existed between the company's plantation activities and regional development. This link was more likely to be preserved by a South West than a North West take-over. Finally, the government was warned that a North West takeover would give rise to widespread political discontent in the South West.

The effective mobilization of the regional elite was evidently a decisive factor in the eventual success of the South West political offensive. After this demonstration of unity and determination, the government did not dare to disappoint the South West, a region of vital importance to the national economy in terms of its rich oil, timber and

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agricultural resources (Ombe Ndzana, 1987). When the government finally announced that the contract between Unilever and the North West group would be annulled, Unilever decided on 13 October 1987 to put the company into voluntary liquidation. It had become frustrated by government policies and it simply refused to renegotiate the sale of the company. Immediately after the company had been put into voluntary liquidation, a liquidator and a Committee of Inspection for the liquidation representing the principal creditors, in particular the state and several banks, were nominated. The liquidator appointed was Mr C.G. Mure, a Frenchman, who owned an auditing firm in Douala associated with Coopers and Lybrand. He seemed to be well qualified for the job, as he had already been involved in liquidating several private and public enterprises in the country.

During his first meeting with the creditors on 3 November 1987, he presented a situation report on the company's liquidation. In this report he argued that a public auction of the company assets would be a disaster for the Ndian Division in social and economic respects. He therefore proposed to maintain and run the company as an ongoing business and to seek possible solutions to its long-standing problems before selling it to a reliable buyer. He claimed that his unorthodox proposal was both in line with the 1961 Companies Act of Anglophone Cameroon, and feasible, as the situation at Pamol had not yet deteriorated beyond recovery. His proposal was approved by the creditors. This was a significant event, for it was the first time in Cameroon that a company chose to remain in business while in liquidation. The liquidator assumed the function of Chief Executive of the company. He devised and implemented a series of measures to restore health to the company. He refused to pay accruing company and income taxes due to the treasury, interests on bank overdrafts, and other liabilities, on the grounds that the company was in liquidation. Together with the other agro-industrial companies, he entered into negotiations with the government for a revitalization of the ailing agro-industrial palm oil sector. Eventually he succeeded in persuading the government to raise the domestic palm oil prices and to impose a surcharge tax on imported oils to protect local palm oil production. As a result of these measures, the chances of Pamol's survival were considerably enhanced. The liquidator then undertook to rehabilitate the estates. Intensified efforts were made to replant the estates, to refurbish the mill, to improve roads, and to buy new lorries for the transport of the produce. Unfortunately, the sale of palm oil, the company's main source of income and investment, remained problematic, as the parastatals began undercutting prices once again. Pamol was thus confronted in the early 1990s with a severe liquidity crisis and was unable to regularly pay its workers.

From the very start the liquidator had carried on negotiations for the sale of Pamol. Several business groups and companies have shown interest in purchasing Pamol. The most important are (i) the South West group, (ii) the Commonwealth Development Corporation (COMDEV), and (iii) the liquidator's group. The South West group was the first business consortium to inform the liquidator of its continuing interest in buying the company. The group had meanwhile formed a company, the so-called Cameroon Agro-Industrial Company (CAMAGRIC), which aimed at take-over of Pamol. Its chairman was Chief Mosah Allen Misembe, a businessman hailing from the Ndian Division. Closely connected with CAMAGRIC were some long-established South Western businessmen like Michael Atabong and Monango Williams, as well as some politicians and bureaucrats who had moved into business more recently, such as Nerijs Nomaso Mbile and Sylvester Dioh. Its legal adviser was Dr Henry Enonchong. The company began issuing shares at 25,000 FCFA each. According to well-informed sources, CAMAGRIC was initially unable to raise more than 50 million FCFA, including 10 million FCFA from its chairman. Obviously it was easier to mobilize the South West elite for a protest action against a North West takeover of Pamol than for a risky capital investment in the liquidated company. The purchase bid of CAMAGRIC was 500 million FCFA, which the liquidator categorically rejected as not reflecting the true value of Pamol assets estimated by the Hunting Technical Service of London at 5 billion FCFA. The liquidator in fact continued to doubt CAMAGRIC's capacity to raise the huge capital resources needed for

purchase of the company, take-over of its liabilities, and refurbishment of its estates and mill. The group tried all sorts of pressures, including aggressive letters and interviews, requests for political intervention, and the spread of tendentious and erroneous information, to persuade the government to order the closure of Pamol, enabling the group to buy the company at the price offered. These pressures yielded no results. The government seemed no longer inclined to intervene on behalf of the South West group. Represented in the Committee of Inspection for the liquidation, the government seemed to fully agree with the strategy of the liquidator: to restore the company to some health before selling it to a reliable and financially strong buyer. There is proof that some high-ranking government officials of South Western origin were also connected with the South West group and CAMAGRIC, albeit mostly behind the scenes. In 1988 a delegation from this group led by Mr Ogork Ebot Ntui, the then Minister with Special Duties at the presidency, met with the liquidator, informing him that they wanted to buy Pamol, with a loan from BCCI, a bank regularly accused of maintaining close ties with the drugs 'mafia'. Apparently, Mr Ogork Ebot Ntui was interested in turning Pamol into an Indian hemp company, and asked the liquidator to accept the post of personnel manager. Upon the liquidator's refusal, he used his ministerial powers to frustrate Pamol's activities. Company lorries were held up for long periods at customs, and with the complicity of a bailiff at Kumba, a number of them were even seized by the minister, who later offered them for sale at a public auction.

A renewed attempt to buy Pamol was being undertaken by the South West Elite Association (SWELA), which was founded in 1991. SWELA was an attempt to unite all the existing elite associations in the South West, including CAMAGRIC, into one single organization. Its leadership continually claimed that SWELA was a non-political pressure group, the main aim of which was to promote the socio-economic development and cultural revival of the South West Province. The South West was to be restored to its 'former glory' after being marginalized by the Francophone-dominated state and subjected to 'Grassfield imperialism'. Clearly, fear of a renewed North West domination over the South West was one of the underlying motives for the association's foundation. SWELA came into existence after the launching of the SDF and the latter's subsequent expansion into the South West. On several occasions, SWELA leaders, especially those closely allied with the ruling regime, issued public statements blaming the SDF for acts of violence and anti-government activities in the South West. SWELA is subdivided into chapters representing different subdistricts. It holds annual conferences to plan development priorities and evaluate past activities. Its planned development projects include the improvement of infrastructural facilities neglected by the Francophone-dominated state. They include the rehabilitation of Limbe harbour and Tiko airport, the establishment of an Anglophone university at Buea, and the promotion of cultural festivals in the region. SWELA also strives to establish South West control over the remaining enterprises in the region, especially the oil refinery at Limbe and important agro-industrial companies. Recently, splits have occurred in SWELA. The association has become divided into: a group which maintains close links with the Biya regime and the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), and often displays strong anti-North West sentiments. This is why many people continue to see SWELA as a CPDM appendage and a resurrection of VIKUMA - the Victoria-Kumba-Mamfe alliance propagated in the mid-1960s by Walter Wilson Mbong to destroy 'graffi' domination over the South West. This group is composed of the older and younger CPDM 'barons' like Emmanuel Tabi Egbe, Peter Agbor Tabi, Joseph Takem, and Ephraim Inoni, as well as important South West chiefs like Mola Samuel Endeley and Nfon Victor Mukete. It opposes the return to the federal state advocated by the Anglophone pressure groups. Like the CPDM government, it champions the ten-state option, which would retain the present separation between the South West and North West Provinces and thus safeguard South West autonomy-a group which is more critical of government policies and often allied to opposition parties, including the SDF. This group vehemently

condemned the military brutalities in the South West during the 1993 government anti-smuggling campaign. It advocates closer cooperation between the South West and North West as a necessary precondition for effective representation of Anglophone and South West interests. It strongly supports the Anglophone demand for a return to the federal state. SWELA wants to monitor the sale of Pamol and eventually buy the company. Since 1993 it is urging its members to subscribe to shares at 50,000 FCFA each for the take-over of Pamol. The Commonwealth Development Corporation (COMDEV) is another serious candidate for the take-over. It offered 3.2 billion FCFA for the purchase of the company. The purchase would be made through a new company to be created, the Société d'Exploitation de l'Entreprise Pamol (S.E.E. Pamol). COMDEV was ready to furnish the company with a loan of 1.2 billion FCFA at a 9 per cent interest rate, repayable over 10 years. The minimum capital of the company would be 1 billion FCFA. COMDEV would subscribe to only 20 per cent of the share capital of the new company. It has committed itself to implement company policy of promoting smallholders' schemes. This would lead by the year 2000 to 60 per cent palm oil production by smallholders. It has also promised to construct a refinery with a minimum capacity of 20 tons a day. At one stage of the negotiations, the Meridian Bank International, whose General Manager is president of the Inspection Committee for the liquidation, proposed a joint venture: COMDEV 20 per cent, Meridian Bank International 40 per cent, and Palma Limited Company 40 per cent, the last being a holding company whose shareholders would be (i) Pamol staff, (ii) smallholders interested in the future of Pamol, and (iii) Cameroonian businessmen from all quarters. In September 1993, Pamol workers and managerial staff announced that they had more confidence in COMDEV than in SWELA, because of COMDEV's international reputation, proven financial background and experience in the management of companies and plantations in Africa, including Cameroon. That Pamol workers and managers preferred COMDEV to SWELA is not altogether surprising, since most of them hail from the North West Province. However, I found that South Western workers, too, had more faith in COMDEV than in SWELA. All Pamol workers and management staff stressed that the English-speaking origin of COMDEV was an additional reason to welcome its take-over of Pamol. Unlike the French, the British were not out to dominate Anglophone Cameroon. Moreover, the English-speaking business culture fitted well in Anglophone Cameroon.

Apparently the liquidator, too, became interested in purchasing the revitalized company within the conditions spelt out by COMDEV. To this end, he appears to have formed a consortium of Cameroonian investors with solid international backing. Remarkably, however, Pamol workers and managerial staff in September 1993 strongly rejected the presence of the liquidator in any group of prospective buyers 'in view of his gross mismanagement of the company in liquidation'. This is a clear expression of their striking change of attitude towards the liquidator during his tenure of office. The liquidator was once hailed as the 'saviour of Pamol' and commanded great respect among the workers. When the initial euphoria about the company's possible survival was over and Pamol started to face liquidity problems, workers and managers alike became increasingly disgruntled with the liquidator's behaviour. The liquidator turned out to be extremely arrogant and authoritarian. Contrary to the Unilever style of management, he was in the habit of treating even the most senior managers with disdain bordering on contempt; and following the renewed deterioration in the company's situation, he refused to consult any of them. His French nationality, too, became increasingly problematic after the Biya regime had fuelled existing contradictions between Francophones and Anglophones (Gaillard, 1992). His appointment was now perceived retroactively as yet another example of Francophone domination over the Anglophone region. Pamol workers and managers strongly resented the liquidator's poor command of the English language. They were infuriated when he created the impression that he preferred Francophone to Anglophone managers. He recruited a dozen well-paid Francophone graduates to understudy the Anglophone managers in order to eventually take over the latter's

responsibilities. This led to considerable confusion in the existing chain of command and fierce conflicts between the Anglophone managers and the liquidator and his Francophone graduates.

There was, moreover, a general consensus within the company that the reward for the liquidator's services was out of proportion to the income of even the most senior managers. Without consultation he appears to have rewarded himself fees and allowances amounting to 430 million FCFA during his 5.5-year tenure of office (October 1987-May 1993), even though he spent most of his time in Douala where he lived and ran his auditing firm. He commuted between Douala and Pamol headquarters at Lobe once or twice a week by chartered plane, costing the company more than 1 million FCFA per return trip. Little wonder that many people inside and outside the company believed he was not eager to sell the company because of his vested interest in the continuation of the liquidation. Furthermore, there is no doubt that his close contacts with the Biya regime were widely resented in the company. Several informants told me that the liquidator was given to boast about his connections with high-ranking officials right up to the presidency. They also alleged that he dipped his hand into company coffers to ensure Biya's re-election in the presidential elections in 1992: he is said to have provided the South Western Minister John Ebong Ngolle, a close friend, with a new Pajero and a substantial sum to allow him to campaign for Biya in the South West Province. Understandably, his well-known contacts with the Biya regime did not endear him to the company's workers and managerial staff, the vast majority of whom supported the candidature of John Fru Ndi, chairman of the SDF, during the presidential elections. It is reported that after Biya's victory in the fraudulent elections, the liquidator led a group of Biya loyalists to the house of Dr I.N. Timti, a North Western manager, on what he described as a 'condolence' mission. On that occasion he is alleged to have said, 'Please, accept my sympathy that your leader has lost the elections, so you will not replace me as the company's General Manager'. These factors, together with the liquidator's inability to pay the workers during the company's severe liquidity crisis in 1992/93, led the workers to embark on a two-month strike on 10 March 1993. On that fateful day, the liquidator barely escaped from being lynched by the workers, being rescued just in time from his hiding place on the estate by the military.

On 26 April 1993, the Committee of Inspection for the liquidation resolved it would thenceforth take over responsibility for the liquidation. The Mundemba High Court first suspended the liquidator from duty on 4 May 1993 and later dismissed him on 15 November 1993. On 8 May 1993, the Committee of Inspection created a local management committee led by Dr I.N. Timti to run the company. The liquidator's prediction that the company would crumble after his departure has not yet materialized. It is still alive though it continues to face formidable liquidity problems. In these circumstances, it is unlikely that a reliable buyer can be found.

STATE WITHDRAWAL AND PRIVATIZATION OF THE CDC

The CDC is the largest agro-industrial enterprise in Cameroon. It is the country's second largest employer of labour, surpassed only by the government. It formerly employed 25,000 workers. At present it still employs about 15,000 permanent workers and a few thousand seasonal and casual ones. It is one of the few agro-industrial enterprises in the world that specialize in a variety of crops, its four major crops being rubber, palm oil, tea and bananas. The CDC was founded in 1946, but its roots can be traced back to the German colonial period (1884-1914) (Ardener et al. 1960; Epale, 1985; Konings, 1993). During that period many large-scale private plantations were created in the present South West Province, particularly on the fertile, volcanic soils in the area around Mount Cameroon. The establishment of a plantation economy in the region led to the expulsion of the original occupants of the land, notably the Bakweri, into prescribed restricted native reserves (Courade, 1981/82). At the start of World War II, the German plantations were

expropriated by the British. After the war, a decision had to be reached on how to dispose of the expropriated estate lands. The educated Bakweri elite, organized in the so-called Bakweri Land Committee, immediately began agitating for retrieval of its ancestral lands. It sent several petitions, first to the British Crown, and subsequently to the United Nations. The British authorities ignored the Bakweri claims and eventually decided to form a public enterprise, the CDC, which was charged with development and management of the ex-German estate lands for the benefit of the people of the Trusteeship territory. It was also to provide for the spiritual, educational and social welfare of its employees. Any profit realized after the corporation had met its statutory obligations, discharged its normal functions, and placed in reserve such sums as might be required for effectively running the enterprise, was to be paid to the public authorities for the purpose of developing the Trusteeship territory.

Some students of plantation agriculture, such as G. Beckford (1972), have blamed the persistent poverty and underdevelopment of Third World economies on this mode of production. In the case of the CDC, however, this thesis finds little support, for the corporation has been a major instrument of modernization and is largely credited with whatever socioeconomic development has occurred in Anglophone Cameroon. It has created employment for many men and women. It has constructed numerous roads. It has supplied water and electricity. It has built and staffed schools. It has awarded a substantial number of scholarships. It has provided medical care for a relatively large proportion of the local population. It has stimulated the supply of goods and services to itself and its workers. And it has played an important role in the commercialization and modernization of peasant production - as an intermediary in marketing the Bakweri peasantry's banana production during the fifties (Ardener, 1958; Geschiere, 1995) and in the establishment of regional smallholders' oil palm and rubber schemes from the early sixties (Konings, 1993). As a result, the CDC has often been called the economic lifeline of Anglophone Cameroon. In 1960, one year before Cameroonian reunification, an important change took place in the management of the corporation. COMDEV took over the management of the corporation and invested 1 million pounds in it. It managed the corporation until 1974, when a North Westerner, Mr J.N. Ngu, was appointed General Manager. Following reunification, one may observe increasing intervention by the Francophone-dominated federal state in this Anglophone corporation, and an increasing dependence of the corporation on foreign financial institutions for its modernization and expansion. In the period 1967-87, the corporation expanded its cultivated area from about 20,000 to 40,000 ha with loans supplied by several external financiers, including the World Bank, the International Development Association (IDA), the European Development Fund (FED), COMDEV, and the (French) Central Fund for Economic Cooperation (CCCE). In compliance with the terms of the external loans, the Federal state in 1966 began contributing to the corporation's equity share capital, which had formerly been divided between the Federal State of West Cameroon and the West Cameroon Marketing Board. The Federal Minister of Planning and Territorial Development became the corporation's Supervisory Minister. In the wake of the promulgation of the unitary state, decree no. 73/597 of 28 September 1973 charged the corporation with a mission to contribute to national development and announced a new Memorandum and Articles of Association under which the CDC had to operate. One article made the United Republic of Cameroon and the National Produce Marketing Board (ONCPB) the exclusive shareholders of the corporation. In 1977 the government ordered the CDC management to expand outside the South West Province, a further attempt to transform the CDC from a 'regional' into a 'national' corporation. As a result, the CDC now owns estates in the North West, West and Littoral Provinces. Since 1982 the chairman and the general manager of the corporation are no longer appointed by the CDC Board of Directors, but by decree. Strikingly, despite these integrative efforts, the people of Anglophone Cameroon in general and the South West Province in particular have continued to perceive the CDC as 'their' corporation.

The CDC has been one of the few agro-industrial enterprises in Cameroon which had generally positive operational results, though these fluctuated over the years. As a public enterprise it continued to receive large annual government subsidies and grants, irrespective of performance: between 1981 and 1987 the CDC received approximately 93 million FCFA from the government. Similarly to other agro-industrial enterprises in Cameroon, the CDC has suffered a severe economic crisis since 1986. In the three years preceding the crisis (1983/84-1985/86), the corporation was still making substantial profits, totaling 3.2 billion FCFA. The crisis, however, had a dramatic impact on the corporation's financial situation: during the period 1986/87-1990/91 it suffered a loss of about 18 billion FCFA (Konings, 1995). The main reasons for this crisis have been mentioned above. There have also been frequent reports of involvement by the managerial elite in massive embezzlement, reckless expenditure, waste, and struggle for power often based on ethnic and regional considerations.

The South West-North West divide, in fact, has often paralyzed the corporation's administration. Since reunification, the chairman of the CDC Board of Directors has usually been a South Westerner. Prominent SWELA members like Nfon V. Mukete, Chief S. Endeley, and Messrs John Ebong Ngolle and Nerius Nomaso Mbile have occupied this position. The daily management of the corporation, however, has been dominated by North Westerners. The appointment of the North Westerner, Mr J.N. Ngu, as the CDC General Manager occurred on the 'advice' of the corporation's external financiers, but it was strongly resented by the South Western managerial elite. First, there were also suitable South Western candidates for this post, particularly Mr I.N. Malafa who used to be senior to Mr Ngu in the corporation's hierarchy, having served as the Deputy General Manager during the last years of COMDEV management. Second, the South Western managerial elite feared that Ngu's appointment would reinforce North West domination over the CDC management. Ngu's thirteen years of office have been marked by strong anti-North West feelings, he himself being regularly accused by the South Western managerial elite of favouring his own 'countrymen'. Ngu's severe conflicts with two of the South Western chairmen of the CDC, Nfon V. Mukete and Chief S. Endeley, have become almost legendary.

When Biya started to appoint some South Westerners to key positions in the South West to reduce North West 'domination' and to achieve 'regional balance', his friend Ngu was replaced in 1988 by Mr Peter Mafany Musonge, a Bakweri. Ngu was then appointed Minister of Agriculture, a post which, incidentally, had meanwhile become Supervisory Minister of the CDC. In this capacity, Ngu continued to interfere in the CDC, denying his successor the freedom to discharge his duties. The South Western managerial elite alleged that Ngu was using his 'brothers' among the management staff to pester or even to get rid of Musonge. Together with other sections of the South Western elite, they put constant pressure upon Musonge to reduce North West influence in the corporation. Particularly after the foundation of the SDF, SWELA and the Bakweri elite urged Musonge to sack those North Western managers 'suspected' of being SDF supporters. In a strongly worded petition, the Bakweri Elite Youth Wing declared in July 1991: This is a reminder of an earlier letter to you this year in which we requested you to support our fight against SDF and their 'Graffi' domination that has caused the Bakweri people to be deprived of what belongs to them. Mola, you have to redundant the following 'grasslanders' who are strong supporters of SDF. They are Mr Ngeh F., Chie W., Tatani, Ndenesho, and Fomuso. Do this now. We are behind you. You are also supported by Chief Justice S.M.L. Endeley and all Vikumas.

Without any doubt, these internal conflicts within the CDC management impeded management capacity to combat the economic crisis. Managerial problems were aggravated by the fact that the government was no longer prepared to render any financial assistance to the ailing parastatal. To save the company from total collapse, the management and the trade unions on the CDC estates agreed to adopt a series of adjustment measures aimed at cost reduction and productivity increase (Konings, 1995).

This managerial strategy for economic recovery was reinforced in 1989/90 when the IMF- and World Bank-inspired SAP demanded a restructuring of the parastatal sector. The CDC management was then obliged to sign a four-year performance contract (1989/90-1993/94) with the government (Tedga, 1990), under which the corporation was expected to achieve a set of objectives relating to plantation development, production costs, quantity and quality of output, and personnel productivity. In return, the government wrote off some of the corporation's debts amounting to 9 billion FCFA and exempted it from payment of certain taxes.

The various adjustment measures brought some relief to the company's liquidity problems but, owing to the continuing decline in commodity prices, the company's survival remained precarious. In June 1992, the Biya government, highly dependent on French support and aid, managed to obtain a 7 billion FCFA low-interest loan for the ailing company from the French CCCE. Although this loan provided much-needed capital for investment purposes, the increased control of France over the corporation was strongly resented by CDC workers and managers, as well as by the wider public in Anglophone Cameroon. It was rumoured that the CCCE was interested in taking over the management of the CDC oil palm estates, and this again resulted in widespread protest in Anglophone Cameroon. This regional outcry against the supposed increasing French control over the corporation was in sharp contrast to regional sentiments about former and later transfers of management of two major CDC crops to English-speaking companies. Few protests were voiced in Anglophone Cameroon when the corporation entrusted management of the banana sector to the American multinational, Del Monte, in 1987. Regional newspapers even lauded the agreement signed between the CDC and COMDEV in late 1992, stipulating that management of the corporation's three tea estates be transferred to COMDEV for a period of 10 years. From 1992 onwards, persistent rumours were in circulation in Anglophone Cameroon that the Biya government was about to either sell, liquidate or privatize the CDC. While World Bank sources confirmed that the external financiers were putting strong pressure on the government to do so, the government continued to deny these rumours. On 15 July 1994, however, the government issued a decree announcing the privatization or liquidation of a first batch of 15 public enterprises, notably in the transport and agro-industrial sectors (Konings, forthcoming). The CDC was one of the most conspicuous 'victims' of this decree. The announcement caused a great commotion in Anglophone Cameroon. All existing parties, organizations and associations, among them the SDF, SWELA, Chiefs, and Anglophone pressure groups such as the CAM and the AAC seemed to forget their differences as they rallied in protest against what they perceived as 'the attempt of the Biya government to sell this sizable corporation, which has been for long the pride of Anglophone Cameroon, to France'. Some also alleged that privatization was a 'plan of Biya to compensate his "tribesmen" and allies with a slice of 'the parastatal cake'. One local paper claimed that the government was offering the CDC 'at low cost to cronies'.

There were protest marches in the Anglophone towns. Protesters carried banners with slogans as 'France: hands off Anglophones' and 'Hands off or we will burn the plantations'. CDC workers went on strike, for they thought privatization would mean retrenchment. A memorandum to Biya, cosigned by Anglophone pressure groups by prominent local landowners, contended that the CDC was not for sale as (i) local landowners, in particular the Bakweri, had neither relinquished ownership of CDC land nor received any royalties for the use of their land since the corporation's foundation in 1946, and (ii) CDC workers had injected over 5.5 FCFA billion into the corporation as compulsory savings during the crisis. In August 1994, the Biya government sent a delegation composed of Anglophone ministers to the capitals of the two Anglophone provinces to appease the population. They were jeered, however, and accused of wanting to 'benefit from the spoils'. In Buea, the capital of the South West Province, they met an assembly of the powerful association of South Western chiefs. Mola S. Endeley,

Paramount Chief of the Bakweri and ex-chairman of the CDC, was spokesman for the latter, and he expressed to the delegation the region's bewilderment at being sacrificed on the altar of 'uncontrolled liberalization'. Though close to the regime, he did not shrink from protesting against the 'underground manoeuvres to deprive the local population of its most precious possession, land', emphasizing:

Our lands are not for sale. We are against the privatization of the CDC. Please, hand over this message of the presidency to the republic. The privatization protest movement was one of the recent developments in Anglophone Cameroon that made the Biya regime painfully aware of the growing unity and determination among the Anglophones in their struggle for redress of the marginalization and subordination of their region within the Francophone-dominated state.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the economic and political crisis in Cameroon has reinforced existing regional sentiments among the South West elite. These regional sentiments appear ambivalent, however. This is manifest in their struggle for control over the two major agro-industrial enterprises located in the South West Province. At most times, they tend to adopt an Anglophone identity and to resist any attempt of the Francophone-dominated state to dismantle the Anglophone common colonial legacy. Consequently, when rumours spread that the Biya regime intended to sell the few remaining 'Anglophone' companies to Francophone or French business interests, they rallied with the North Western elite in defence of the Anglophone patrimony. But as soon as they suspect the North Western elite of being interested in establishing control over economic resources in the South West, they are inclined to adopt a South West identity, for fear of renewed North West domination over their province. Significantly, my study provides evidence that, in the wake of the introduction of multi-partyism in late 1990, Anglophone interests in general and South West interests in particular have not been represented by the newly created political parties in the Anglophone region, but rather by the emerging 'non-political' associations and pressure groups of the South West and Anglophone elite. While personal animosities among South Western political leaders formed a divisive element in the South Western political space, North Western political leaders proved capable of founding a strong political party, the SDF, which soon became the principal opposition party in the country against the Biya regime, with a growing membership in the South West. Nevertheless, it would appear that the SDF is now losing its initial appeal in Anglophone Cameroon. This is especially because the SDF gradually came to present itself as a 'national' rather than a 'regional' party, and to adopt an ambivalent, half-hearted stand towards the 'Anglophone problem' and the Anglophone demand for a return to the federal state (Krieger, 1994). The positive response in both the South West and North West Provinces to the 1994 actions by Anglophone pressure groups in protest against the Biya government's privatization of the CDC demonstrates that the South West-North West divide has been reduced in recent years. With the exception of those who continue to be co-opted in the 'hegemonic alliance' for private gains, the Anglophone elite has become increasingly aware of the importance of common struggles against the Francophone-dominated state. The brutal clampdown of the Biya regime on the South West Province in 1993 was a decisive factor in drawing still hesitant members of the South West elite into the ranks of the Anglophone pressure groups. At present, many of them claim simultaneous membership of SWELA, AAC and other Anglophone pressure groups. While some members of the South Western elite and chiefs, particularly those closely allied to the regime in power, continue to champion a 10-state federation with a view to preserving their province's autonomy versus the North West Province, the majority of the South West elite, like that of the North West, seems to be opting for a return to the federal state. The Biya regime attempts to ignore the 'Anglophone problem' and to create divisions within the Anglophone community, accusing the AAC and its

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affiliated organizations of having adopted secession of Anglophone Cameroon as their goal. Biya has persistently refused to discuss any constitutional reforms for a return to a federal state. The regime's arrogance and clumsiness on the issue, as well as its increasing resort to repression, could lead to an escalation of Anglophone demands past a point of no return.

NOTES

1. For the numerous Anglophone complaints, see, for instance, AAC, The Buea Declaration, 2-3 April 1993, Limbe: Nooremac Press.
2. For a critique of some of the Anglophone complaints, see Kofele-Kale, 1986 and Olinga, 1994.
3. See Buo, S.Kum, 'Biya and the Anglophones', *West Africa*, 12 August 1985, p. 1640.
4. Political Report on Ekondo Titi Subdivision for March 1972, by Mr Michael Nkamsi, D.O., in: BNA, file Cd (1972)2, Political Reports on Ekondo Titi Subdivision. See also Monthly Political and Economic Report for the Month of April, 1970, in: BNA, file 1969/1, Divisional Economic and Political Reports.
5. *The Messenger*, 14 October 1993, pp. 8-9.
6. Minutes of a Meeting with Labour Officials, Pamol Management, Staff Representatives, Trade Unionists and the Administration to discuss the problems of non-payment of salaries to Pamol workers, held in the Conference Hall of Korup National Park on 8 March 1993, in: file MTPS/SWP/MND.49/Vol. 2, General Correspondence -Plantations Pamol du Cameroun Ltd.
7. See, for instance, *The Herald*, 28 December 1993, pp. 1-2; and *The Messenger*, 9 Sep. 1993, p. 7
8. His propagation of this alliance led to his imprisonment in 1965 as well as the banning of his newspaper, *The Spokesman*.
9. Report of the National Security at Ekondo Titi, dated 22 September 1993, in: file G 4002/49, Vol. 3, Pamol Cameroon Ltd -General Correspondence.
10. See Memorandum to the Chairman, Inspection Committee of Pamol, presented by the workers of Pamol deliberating at Lobe on 16 Sep. 1993, Archives Pamol Headquarters, Lobe.
11. Ibid
12. *The Messenger*, 17 June 1993, p. 14.
13. *The New Standard*, 30 July 1991, p. 6.
14. See *New African*, no. 326, January 1995, p. 25; and *Africa International*, no. 279/280, January-February 1995, p. 39.

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