

Knowledge and Control in the Contemporary Land Rush : Making Local Land Legible and Corporate  
Power Applicable in Rural Sierra Leone

GEAROID MILLAR

*Substantial media and academic attention has recently focused on changing patterns of land control in the 'global south,' wherein foreign governments and corporations seek to control land for food, fuel and feed production. Recent scholarship describes such projects as symptomatic of a broader liberalization of global governance. However, few studies investigate how such liberal governance is applied on-the-ground in host countries. This paper fills this need by examining one such case in Sierra Leone and describing the various technologies of control deployed to make local land legible to the corporate eye and therefore manageable within the liberal model. As I show, such imported technologies are disrupting and displacing traditional modes of authority and allowing the company concerned to apply power and manage both the land and the local people. At the same time, however, these technologies generate frictions on-the-ground, creating dangerous tensions between the various actors in the local setting.*

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Gearoid Millar, Department of Sociology and Institute for Conflict, Transition, and Peace Research (ICTPR), Edward Wright Building, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, AB24 3ND, United Kingdom. E-mail: [g.millar@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:g.millar@abdn.ac.uk)

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## INTRODUCTION

As will be discussed below, various global dynamics have recently spurred heavy investment in African land (Zoomers 2010; De Schutter 2011: 251; McMichael 2013: 50; Baka 2013: 410; Doss et al. 2014: 2). Initial accounts of these land-deals included somewhat simplistic caricatures of massive land acquisitions by powerful northern states and corporations with little input from the individuals, communities, or governments from whom those lands were being ‘grabbed’ (Oya 2013a: 1536-1537; Scoones et al. 2013: 477; Bräutigam and Zhang 2013: 1679). However, more recent publications have provided more nuanced accounts. It has become clear, for example, that host governments are often actively attracting such investments and local elites are regularly willing beneficiaries of such deals (De Schutter 2011: 274; Baglioni and Gibbon 2013: 1562; Cotula 2013: 1611; Ossome 2014: 163), that such ‘land-grab’ projects are often abandoned or stalled prior to implementation on the ground (Edelman et al. 2013: 1525; Buckley 2013: 432), and that the situation is generally far more complex than was initially reported by media and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (Borras and Franco 2013: 1724).

While this new literature therefore nuances the earlier caricatures, it nonetheless attests to the fact that ‘a renewed land rush is indeed happening worldwide, albeit unevenly’ (Edelman et al. 2013: 1520). Many recent contributions, therefore, have analyzed not stand-alone acquisitions, but the dynamics of the broader global ‘land rush’. While earlier reports noted the targeting of weak states for land acquisition, for example, more recent scholarship describes how this very weakness is a product of global economic policy transitions (McMichael 2013; Verma 2014: 66), and scholars have emphasized the progressive weakening of the state in comparison to the strengthening influence of corporations and capital (Sassen 2013: 43; Franco et al. 2013: 1659-61). Such scholars are arguing, in essence, that the new land deals are *nested* within changing global ‘configurations of power’ (Margulis and Borras 2013: 1) and ‘new transnational political struggles for authority and control’ (ibid: 3). While each particular land deal must be seen as engaging with a unique arrangement of actors, products, markets, regulations and laws, each such arrangement is nonetheless patterned by the broader global configurations of power, authority, and control.

The nested nature of such land-deals highlights, therefore, the need to analyse both global patterns and local particularities. But while recent contributions do a great amount of the former, they do very little of the latter. Scoones et al. have recently noted that '[f]ew assess whether anything is happening on the ground, and most reports offer very few insights into overall impacts, either positive or negative' (2013: 473). Oya describes most studies so far as 'abundant in anecdotal or unsystematic evidence,' and as 'empirically hasty and methodologically prone to cut corners' (2013: 511-513). Such scholars have called, therefore, for more qualitative assessments of the on the ground socio-economic impacts of these land deals (ibid: 1554). Edelman specifically calls for more '[e]thnographic or historical analyses' which are 'necessarily more micro-focused and labour-intensive' but have the potential to discover the 'on the ground realities' of the contemporary land deals (2013: 490). This is what I provide in the following pages by examining how global patterns of governance and authority are embodied in technologies of control applied by global actors and how such processes are experienced on the ground in local contexts.

To that end, this paper describes the case of a large bio-energy project in rural Sierra Leone, carried out by a multi-national corporation based in Switzerland and funded with over €250 million from a consortium of seven development banks and claiming to provide significant social, economic, health, and environmental benefits to local communities. The paper illustrates how the various technologies employed by the project, necessary for measuring, cataloguing and understanding the local land (and indirectly the local population), serve as technologies for the application of corporate power. These technologies allow the company to map local land, control local people, co-opt customary authorities, and apply power in diverse ways for the protection of its interests. The paper proceeds to show that these technologies serve to counter the positive rhetoric of the liberal model of governance and ensures that freedom, choice, and empowerment are never truly operative at the local level. Instead, these global norms of control are reinterpreted within the local setting, through traditional lenses and perspectives, and result in friction between expectations and outcomes; and thus, unexpected and potentially problematic experiences on the ground.

The paper is divided into five parts. Part one provides a review of the ‘land rush’ literature, focusing specifically on the recent framing of such land-deals as symptoms of a global liberalizing process. At the end of this section I connect this literature to established theories regarding legibility, authority and control to highlight the interaction of global and local modes of authority within the context of contemporary land deals. Part two briefly describes the land-deal studied, my core research questions, and the methodology used to collect my data. Part three presents that data and focuses on describing the various technologies of control employed by the company to make the land and people of the project area legible and, ultimately, manageable. I focus first on technologies used to produce knowledge and then on technologies used to reify and control that knowledge. The final section summarizes the argument, presents my conclusions regarding the technologies of control in this specific case, and relates my observations on this very micro-level back to the more global debates in the recent ‘land rush’ literature and theories of legibility, authority, and control.

## **THE GLOBAL ‘LAND RUSH’**

While scholars and practitioners continue to debate the appropriate term by which to refer to this phenomenon (Hall 2013: 1599; Margulis et al. 2013: 16; Doss et al. 2014: 4), in this paper I will use the term ‘land rush’. This term, I believe, has the benefit of focusing on the broader phenomenon as opposed to characterizing all cases and so allows us, within this global ‘land rush’, to later identify individual cases as ‘grabs’, ‘leases’, ‘deals’, ‘purchases’, ‘acquisitions’, etc. This approach also avoids assigning any motivation or culpability to the actors, being based only on the empirical evidence which does seem to indicate a recent surge in the number of such cases. Finally, this approach is also useful methodologically as it allows various levels of analysis within the ‘global’ – the regional, national, and local – and so prompts us to be conscious of variability between cases within the broader phenomenon. This also helpfully echoes the most recent scholarly literature.

As described by Bräutigam and Zhang, the initial attention to the land rush issue was generated not by academic studies, but by a flood of media stories and reports by NGOs that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the 2007/2008 commodity price crisis (2013: 1677-1678; see also

Scoones et al. 2013: 470). These reports described growing interest and investment in land in the Global South and made very worrying claims regarding their effects on local populations (GRAIN 2008; Al Jazeera 2009; Global Land Project 2010; BBC 2011; Bread for All 2011; Economist 2011; Guardian 2011; New York Times 2011; The Oakland Institute 2011). But the data presented in these reports proved to be somewhat driven by the ‘mission of the organization’ doing the reporting as opposed to verifiable facts (Bräutigam and Zhang 2013: 1679). In essence, ‘the initial salvo of journalistic and NGO fact-finding research’ presented assumptions that proved to be overly simplistic; including ‘the dominance of foreign grabbers’ ... ‘the centrality of deals related to food production, and the near-exclusive focus on sub-Saharan Africa’ (Edelman et al. 2013: 1519).

However, this attention from the media and NGOs did inspire a wave of academic interest and a number of scholarly journals have recently published special issues reporting more rigorous analyses of the phenomenon. These include issues of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (Borras et al. 2010; Fairhead et al. 2012), *Water Alternatives* (Mehta et al. 2012), *Third World Quarterly* (Edelman et al. 2013), *Development and Change* (Wolford et al. 2013), *Globalizations* (Margulis et al. 2013), and *Feminist Economics* (Doss et al. 2014). These special issues, along with various other recent articles, provide a more nuanced picture of the ongoing land rush. We know now, for example, that speculation is playing a major role in the current rush for land (De Schutter 2011: 253; McMichael 2013: 49; Franco et al. 2013: 1654; Fairbairn 2013: 342; Osome 2014: 159), that many ‘deals’ initially reported in media stories and NGO reports actually never resulted in projects on-the-ground (Edelman et al. 2013: 1525; Buckley 2013: 432), that local governments often actively encouraged projects that were initially reported as ‘land grabs’ (Baglioni and Gibbon 2013: 1562; Margulis et al. 2013: 11; Cotula 2013: 1611; Grandia 2013; Verma 2014), and that the local experiences of those projects that are eventually implemented can be hugely variable (Borras et al. 2013: 1724; Buckley 2013; Tsikata and Yaro 2014: 203-204; Millar 2014: 87). Even as they emphasize the variety, however, these contributions also provide general lessons about the broader phenomenon.

First, as noted above, it is generally agreed that something new and significant is indeed changing with regard to land control in much of the world (Edelman et al. 2013: 1520; Wolford et al.

2013: 190); something qualitatively different to earlier colonial land appropriations. Fairbairn argues that seeing the current land-rush simply as a repeat of colonialism may ‘obscure as much as it illuminates’ (2013: 352), while Verma argues that while the current land rush illustrates ‘some tenacious continuities from the past’ (2014: 64), ‘what is truly novel is the convergence of global crises: the result of a perfect storm of financial, climate, energy, food, and development crises coming together’ (ibid: 65). Verma also notes that ‘new forces, intensities, and the hyper speed of dispossessions are shaping the way land is grabbed’ (2014: 64); an argument echoed by Margulis et al., who consider ‘the drivers, scale, and pace of the recent wave of land grabs’ to be ‘distinct from previous eras’ (2013: 3). In short, while the current land rush may appear similar to earlier appropriations, recent contributions argue that there is something qualitatively different about the contemporary phenomenon.

Recent scholarship also consistently identifies the source of this new land rush in ongoing transitions in the dominant modes of global governance. Scholars such as McMichael (2013), Verma (2013), Cotula (2013), Hall (2013), and Sassen (2013) identify the root of these changes in the restructuring processes driven by the global financial institutions over recent decades which, they argue, enforced a new paradigm of governance rooted in neoliberal economic norms. They argue that neoliberal policies have degraded the state and its ability to either capably produce agricultural development themselves (Cotula 2013: 1614) or functionally regulate the actions of private companies within their territories (McMichael 2013: 56). Edelman and Leon, for example, describe how neoliberal actors ‘argued that the state should roll back its support for the “inefficient” peasant sector and promote the region’s “competitive advantages,” particularly cheap labour and national resources, including land’ (2013:1710), while Wolford et al. describe how states ‘have been hollowed out and pulled back’ (2013: 198); a process Franco et al. describe as a general effort to ‘consolidate neoliberalism internationally by strengthening markets while shrinking states’ (2013:1659).

Further, many recent contributions argue that this neoliberal turn has had broader implications for the conceptualization of land itself. Much more than simply enforcing accepted rules for the exchange of land between parties, they argue that neoliberal reforms enforce conceptual changes

regarding the very nature of land within socio-cultural settings previously unconditioned to see land as a commodity for exchange. As Cotula argues, the global land rush highlights how ‘new transitions are occurring between more commodified and more “socially embedded” conceptualizations of land’ (2013: 1605); transitions which will, in the end, establish a new normative conception of land embedded not in already accepted indigenous social relations, but ‘re-embedded’ in imported norms of neoliberal production and exchange (Ibid: 1623). This conceptual shift serves to legitimize supposedly apolitical market forces in the process of dispossession and to provide protections not for the state or the population, but for the principles of neoliberal economics themselves, which inherently discriminate ‘against individuals and social groups according to their resources and capabilities’ (Izumi 1999: 13) and, thus, always favour those who control capital. As Franco et al. argue, the commodification of land is ‘a reflection of the ideological ascendancy of neoliberal corporate power across domains’ (2013: 1661). The result of this transition, therefore, is that within states reformed in conformity with the neoliberal model the governance of land ‘is essentially organized to accommodate powerful private interests’ (McMichael 2013: 56), and these private interests are given privileged authority to control land as a commodity.

The idea of ‘control’ is also widely discussed and refers, according to Doss et al., to the ability to ‘determine how the land will be used’ (2014: 9), and is thus inherently interlinked with norms of authority and power. Margulis et al., for example, argue that the current land rush is not about owning or accessing more land, but about ‘control grabbing’ (2013: 13); *exercising control over* more land. They therefore describe the current land rush as ‘an important site of new transnational struggles for authority and control over resources and governance’ (Ibid. 2013: 3). Grajales deploys the concept of ‘territorialisation’ to describe the process whereby control over resources and those who can access and use them is determined (2013: 214). Grajales is arguing, along with many others, that the driving capitalist motivations of the contemporary land rush define land as ‘unused’, ‘empty’, ‘marginal’, ‘public’, ‘underutilized’ or ‘frontier’ in order to allow appropriation of those lands and, thus, their absorption into new paradigms of control and authority (see also De Schutter 2011: 258; McMichael 2013: 53; Scoones et al. 2013: 473; Edelman and Leon 2013: 1698; Oliveira 2013: 264;

Dwyer 2013: 318; Baka 2013: 410; Verma 2014: 66). In short, the recent literature argues that the norms and discourses of global neoliberal governance are being deployed by organizations, institutions and corporations to redefine the social meaning of land; to *dis-embed* it from norms unique to specific socio-cultural settings and *re-embed* it within universalized norms of control and authority applied by agents of the global neoliberal transition (Edelman et al. 2013: 1524).

This dynamic echoes earlier arguments regarding the legibility and control of land. James C. Scott, for example, described the manner in which early modern European states were committed to ‘rationalizing and standardizing what was a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format’ which allowed them to apply and reproduce state power (1998: 3). He described this as ‘high-modernism’ and argued that mapping and knowing the land within state borders provided ‘the capacity for large-scale social engineering’ (Ibid: 5). David Turnbull echoes these arguments, noting that ‘beginning around 1600’ ... ‘the state, science and cartography became so strongly intermeshed that in effect they coproduced one another’ (2000:94), and argued further that ‘the connections that maps establish with the social life in which they are embedded’ ... ‘have power effects that pervade the whole society’ (Ibid: 103). Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing too describes how ‘descriptions of resource frontiers’ ... ‘label and count the resources and tell us who owns what,’ noting also that processes operative on the ‘frontier’ are geared towards making ‘human subjects as well as natural objects’ (2005:29-30); it is a project of power, therefore, to make individuals and resources legible, knowable, and controllable.

In addition, however, each of these authors also describe these processes of legibility and control as resulting from incorrectly ‘universalized’ norms which are applied globally. Tsing has described, for example, how capitalist processes work to ‘to universalize categories of capital, money, and commodity fetishism’ (Tsing 2005: 4), and further notes that ‘those who claim to be in touch with the universal are notoriously bad at seeing the limits and exclusions of their knowledge’ (Ibid: 8). In other words, a) this capitalist logic is thought to be universal and b) that the social construction of that universal is lost to those who apply it. Turnbull similarly describes what he calls the ‘illusory nature’ of ‘technoscientific knowledge’ (2000: 1) and the ‘received view’ of science itself as ‘autonomous,



rational, objective, and universal' (Ibid: 4). He later argues that 'we are blind to the processes by which the social is naturalized' (Ibid: 102). These arguments both echo Bourdieu's contention that 'everything conspires to make us forget the socially constructed, and hence arbitrary and artificial character' of the economic game (2005: 10).

However, while each of these scholars describes the application of practices of legibility and control (applications of implicitly accepted logics) – which clearly connects to the evolving land rush literature – these three studies are actually more interesting for the complications they highlight. Scott's primary contribution was not simply to describe how power becomes applicable, but to illustrate the various complications that arise when knowledge believed incorrectly to be *techne* (universal) actually proves to be only *mētis* ('contextual and particular') (1998: 320). Turnbull too is occupied primarily with describing the 'messy' and 'contingent' manner of interaction between different 'locals'; described as processes of 'assembly' which often fail to produce predictable outcomes (2000: 14). Tsing's concept of 'friction' perhaps best captures this complexity, as she has written of friction as the 'awkward engagements' (2005: xi) between supposed universals transported to alternative socio-cultural settings which interact with local norms and concepts in 'awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative' ways (ibid.: 4). These frictions create new dynamics through interaction, but such interactions are 'less controllable than those at the top imply' (Ibid.: 271). As a result, while a supposedly 'universal' norm may be applied – and those who apply it may believe implicitly in its universal applicability – these scholars indicate instead that such applications may have unpredictable, 'messy' results within local settings.

However, while the various recent publications on the global land rush are relatively consistent in their interpretations of the operative hegemonic liberal norm, there is far less analysis of what is happening on the ground in particular cases; and so there is little understanding of how neoliberal governance becomes operative at the local level. So far, as noted, few studies have attempted to investigate these dynamics. As a result, another characteristic of the recent scholarship is a consistent demand for more qualitative case-based evidence. Oya makes a strident case for more qualitative fieldwork based evaluations and demands that scholars spend 'more time to collect high-

quality evidence on process, actors and impact’ (2013b: 512), while Edelman argues that ‘we need case studies that are both more numerous and more rigorous’ (2013: 498; see also Daley and Palas 2014: 179; McKeon 2013: 117). This paper, therefore, contributes to this literature by illustrating the manner in which neoliberal authority and control become operative on the ground. I examine this through one such case in the rural north of Sierra Leone.

## **THE BIO-ENERGY PROJECT, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY**

The project described here is a bio-ethanol plantation covering 40,000 hectares of agricultural land in the rural north of Sierra Leone which has received over €250 million from a consortium of development banks and claims to have beneficial effects for local individuals and communities.<sup>1</sup> The project plans to plant 10,000 hectares of sugar cane which will then be harvested, processed and exported to Europe as ethanol. However, it also claims that it will infuse \$3 million into the local economy each year through salaries to 2000 local employees, payments of \$3.20 per acre to land-owning families, and \$1.80 per acre in taxes to be divided between the local chiefdom councils, the district councils, and the central government in Freetown. At the same time, as the project will utilize less than half of the leased land, it has no plans to relocate any villages or families and claims that villagers will be able to farm the remaining land in and around the company’s sugar cane fields.

Further, the company has established a number of targets on issues such as income, education, healthcare, food security, and environmental protection, which will be monitored by the company’s own Monitoring and Evaluation program (M&E). The company claims, in short, to be socially, economically, and environmentally responsible. And indeed, during my fieldwork within the land-lease area in 2012 the project was providing some benefits that were considered positive by some local people. It was employing 1700 local people at that point and was thus distributing substantial cash through monthly salaries of about 300,000 Leone (\$70), it was distributing payments to land-

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<sup>1</sup> Due to research ethics guidelines at my current University the company is considered, alongside all interviewees, as a research subject. As a result, the company is here de-identified for the purpose of anonymity just as all interviewees quoted below are provided with pseudonyms.

owning families on whose land the project had begun work, it was assisting many villages in relocating and re-establishing their rice farms, and it had constructed many roads throughout the project area and provided easier access to the highway, larger cities, and markets for products. Through these measures the project was fulfilling some of the commitments it had made in exchange for the village land it was using.

Such villages are quite diverse in some ways. During my six months of fieldwork I visited villages as small as four buildings occupied by one extended family, and villages of more than 100 buildings occupied by as many as four large land-owning families and many other non land-owning or *stranger* families. Some larger villages are located astride a mud packed road which served, even before the project arrived, as a main artery for motorcycle taxis and foot traffic, while others even after the project has arrived are a half hour hike through rice paddies and muddy fields from any road. Similarly, some of these villages are located inland where water is scarce and life very difficult in the dry spring months, while others are located on one of the many streams that cut across the area, earn some money from fishing or from providing ferry services across the river, and benefit from easier travel and access to water for drinking, washing, and bathing.

However, while there are clearly differences among such a large selection of villages, there are still many commonalities. As is true of the vast majority of villages in rural Sierra Leone, there were few signs of wealth in this particular area. The vast majority of houses were made of mud blocks and thatched roofs, and almost every resident self identified as uneducated and as either a farmer or petty trader. In most of these villages almost no one was literate and very few had access to any ready source of expendable income. While in larger towns in Northern Sierra Leone there is a mix of Muslims and Christians, migrants from various towns or regions, and speakers of various languages including local tribal languages, Krio (the lingua franca), and English, in these villages almost everyone was Muslim, spoke only Temne, and identified themselves as a native of the area; “*here is where they bore me,*” I was told repeatedly.

Very briefly, this paper addresses one central question. *How is this project applying power over the land and people within the local context?* However, this question is related to a series of sub-questions. For example:

- What technologies of knowledge and control existed prior to the arrival of the company?
- What are the implications of this transition for the protection of local people and communities?
- What motivations exist for corporate actors in applying these technologies?

These sub-questions will be addressed below, but the data presented is primarily concerned with addressing the central question and describing the various technologies of control that allow the company studied to gain knowledge of and power over the local land and people.

The data itself was collected over six months, from April to September 2012, during which I first conducted six weeks of participant observation and informal interviews with the bio-energy project itself, and then a series of semi-structured interviews with individual residents of 12 different villages within the land-lease area, followed by a handful of interviews with local elites. During the six weeks of participant observation I was working within the company's M&E program. I was later asked to leave the company because, as I was told, I had identified a number of serious weaknesses in the monitoring program and refused to sign a document ensuring that I would publish nothing that might 'harm the reputation' of the company. Hence, I was not associated with the project when conducting interviews in the later stages of the fieldwork.

Most of the interviews (50) were conducted in 10 villages selected randomly from within the five phased development areas of the project, two villages from each area. This sampling allowed me to evaluate local experiences of the staggered implementation of the project – two villages had been experiencing the project for three years, two for two years, two for one year, two had barely seen any work on the part of the company, and two had still not yet agreed to the lease-agreement. In addition, I interviewed five people from two additional villages which were of particular interest because they were having unique experiences with the project due to their proximity to particularly large elements of its infrastructure.

I also conducted a small number of interviews (4) with local elites regarding their experience of and opinions about the project; included here are interviews with one of the paramount chiefs, a local representative of the human rights commission, and two staff members of a national NGO which was also concerned with, and therefore conducting evaluations of, the practices of the company. Finally, in addition to spending substantial time with a number of expatriate employees of the company during the first six weeks of participant observation, I formally interviewed the head of the M&E project during my final days in country in order to hear his responses to some of the problems I had identified in the villages. These additional perspectives, from both Sierra Leonean elites and the employees of the company, highlighted the problems underlying the application of technologies of control and power within the land-lease area; as will be described below.

This dual methodology (described in much more depth in Millar (2014)) allowed me to evaluate both how the project conducts its business – and particularly how it engages and communicates with the local residents – as well as how local people understand, perceive and experience the project itself. In order to understand the impact and importance of the technologies of control applied by the company it is necessary to understand the pre-existing systems of power and authority on the land on which the project is now operating. We begin the next section, therefore, with a necessarily brief introduction to the customary system of land ownership in rural Sierra Leone.

## **LAND AND POWER IN RURAL SIERRA LEONE**

The project is located in the rural north of Sierra Leone, an area long identified as marginalized even within this largely impoverished state (Bolten 2012). Before the arrival of the project within the land-lease area there were no power lines, no water pipes, no paved roads, no police stations, and only a handful of health clinics and elementary schools for a population of approximately 30,000. The area was isolated from and in many ways marginalized by the central governing authorities that have failed to initiate or maintain sufficient service delivery in such areas throughout the country for decades. This marginalization from central government authority is evident both by the near total lack of services and by the importance of customary governing authorities. While the central government has

been attempting to reach more successfully into rural areas since the end of the war through a process of decentralization, customary authorities – headmen, section chiefs and paramount chiefs – are still the predominant respected powers in rural Sierra Leone.

A significant element of this customary system, and one of the reasons the customary authorities are so respected and powerful, is that the paramount chief's primary role is as the custodian of the land (Jackson 2007: 100; Peters and Richards 2011: 392). He – and in northern Sierra Leone the paramount chief is always a he – holds the memory of what family farms what land, how long they have farmed that particular plot, the details of any land exchanges, and how long and why such exchanges have been in effect. In essence, partially because so few residents of rural areas are literate, land agreements have not traditionally been formally documented and signed by the concerned parties. Instead, the chief becomes the repository of all land agreements and the final arbiter in any land conflicts. He has power specifically through his knowledge of the land itself, of people's relationship to the land, and of relationships between families and villages as embodied in the land. As no formal system of land titling has been in effect, prior to the arrival of the company very little of the land was ever surveyed, mapped, or registered, and farmers, headmen, and chiefs alike therefore know the land from river to pathway, hill to valley, and tree-line to village. They know the land from living and working on it.

I do not want to be seen as romanticizing these customary authorities or the form of power they wield. Certainly I agree with scholars such as Richards (1996), Fanthorpe (2006), Jackson (2007), and Peters and Richards (2011) that paramount chiefs in Sierra Leone have, both in the past and still in the present, been primary agents of inequality; often marginalizing young men, 'strangers', and all women from decision making and from the benefits of development projects both local and national. It is also important to recognize that village head-men and section chiefs (who serve under paramount chiefs) occupy a very different position in society than do most contemporary paramount chiefs who are more educated, more cosmopolitan, and have more access to formal levers of power. Indeed, these are issues I have explored in other publications (Millar 2010; 2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2014; forthcoming in 2015). However, this does not negate the fact that paramount chiefs do still command both respect

and loyalty in Sierra Leone (and particularly in isolated rural settings), or that their role as custodians of the land is itself rooted in forms of knowledge, authority and control which many people in rural settings still consider if not perfect, at least to be understandable and legitimate for the management of local land issues.

However, as much as these traditional forms of knowledge and customary systems of authority work to manage inter-family or inter-village disputes regarding lands and farming, they are completely insufficient for managing large corporate agricultural projects. Such projects require precise knowledge of how much land there is, who owns it, what it is used for, the quality of the soil, its elevation, salinity and proximity to water, the extent of population, and scores of other minute details. Companies must have such in-depth knowledge because they are making very expensive and potentially costly investments in that land, are responsible to corporate boards, investment banks and share holders, and are incentivized primarily to find the most efficient use of resources in order to maximize profit and minimize loss; incentives inherent to the neoliberal model but which nonetheless demand a very different kind of knowledge to that which dominated the customary land-tenure system. This is not unique to large-scale agricultural projects in Africa, but is simply intrinsic to the nature of capital; more detailed information cuts waste, streamlines production, and maximizes profits. However, it does mean that an entirely new paradigm of knowledge is necessary, and a new disposition of power emerges from that paradigm. I will describe now how the company in this particular case has come to know, visualize, and map the land and how these technologies of knowledge production function inherently as technologies of control over land and the individuals and communities living on that land.

### *Creating Cartographic Knowledge*

One of the most obvious technologies used by the bio-energy project to produce knowledge about the land is cartography. Maps may seem at first like rather simple or even archaic tools, but when combined with the more contemporary technologies of Global Positioning Systems (GPS), Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and surveying flyovers and satellite imagery, maps become

powerful tools of knowledge and, eventually control. The first interaction I had with the project described here occurred a year before it actually started work; at a table around the pool of a new hotel in one of the larger towns in the north of Sierra Leone, in 2009. During drinks with friends one night I saw four or five people leaning over a table covered with maps. When I went over to ask them who they were and what they were doing they told me they were mapping out land for a potential bio-energy project. As it turned out, this was my first interaction with what would become the project I would study three years later; a group of people hunched over a table covered with maps, drawing lines and learning how to read the land from satellite images.

Similarly, when I arrived at the project site in April of 2012, prepared to begin a study of how the project is operating, engaging with local communities, and experienced by local people, one of the first things I saw, throughout the company's offices, were maps; maps of the roads and maps of the rivers, maps of the sugar-cane fields and maps of the water pipes, maps of the villages and maps of the sacred bushes, maps made from flyovers by chartered aircraft and maps generated from points set with handheld GPS devices. The entire project seemed to be built on a thick stack of maps. In the office of the M&E manager on the very first day of my research I was shown a map of the boundaries between villages – not yet quite complete – which had been generated in consultation with villages. This, I was told, was one of the biggest contributions of the project; mapping for the people the land that they own. And indeed, shortly after arriving I was myself corralled into the role of cartographer when a South African consultant arrived with a suitcase containing 15 GPS enabled Samsung handheld devices to be used for the M&E program's household survey evaluations. This way, I was informed, we can know exactly the socioeconomic status of each house, exactly where that house is on the map, and how it is affected by the project over time.

This mapping is so important because to those managing the project in 2012 – primarily white South Africans with a few Europeans and at least one returning Diaspora Sierra Leonean – the land is invisible without some medium of visual representation. The project's employees seemed unable to see the land as land, and instead could only visualize it, and therefore control it, if it was made legible on paper or in digital form. Reminiscent of the claims within the recent literature that such projects



bring into use previously ‘empty’ or ‘unused’ land, I was regularly told while travelling around the land-lease area during those first six weeks with project employees and consultants that ‘nothing was here before’ and that you could now ‘see development’. When local headmen came to the project’s office – usually to discuss grievances regarding use of the land or perceived breaches of the lease agreements – I could not help but imagine the difference between how the company visualizes and experiences the land, inherently from a 10,000 foot perspective that constantly measures and values, and how local people view the land while walking through, living in, and working on it.

The effects of the two different approaches to ‘knowing’ the land can be made clear by describing a handful of particular events. The first regards local processes of ‘hiding’ the land from the company. As has been reported by many scholars, Sierra Leonean culture is characterized by a belief in invisible forces and the potency of secret knowledge (Murphy 1990; Ferme 2001; Shaw 2002; Millar 2011). This is a land where magic is believed to live in unseen spaces such as the society bush (Bledsoe 1984) or ritually sealed amulets (Bledsoe and Robey 1986), and power is multiplied when arising from unknown sources (Murphy 1998). Consistent with this past scholarship, during the six weeks I spent conducting participant observation with the project, and later while conducting interviews in the villages, I heard various stories about villages attempting to conceal land from the company, either through misinformation or magic. Let me explain.

When the project employees would arrive to conduct surveys of land, to collect soil samples, or to consult village elders and headmen about the boundaries between their land and their neighbour’s, the elders would often leave some land aside, not speaking of it to the company and therefore, not including it in the land to be leased. In this case the local logic went this way; if this land was not discussed or shown to the project, how could they know about it? Alternatively, to protect a patch of land that had been put aside the elders would erect the *Poro* sticks (a symbol of the men’s secret society) to show that no one must enter this land – i.e. marking it as sacred land. But, of course, land cannot be hidden from a satellite or a plane flying overhead and taking pictures, nor do the sugar-cane farmers operating the machinery and supervising unskilled local employees – almost all of whom were expatriates from Southern Africa during my fieldwork in 2012 – care much for the

traditional secret society symbols of rural Sierra Leoneans. To the local people, land could be put aside and hidden. Just as society bush cannot be used for farming, cannot be entered by non-society members, and is protected by powerful invisible forces, so local logic dictated that land could be protected through secrecy. Local people had no working knowledge of satellite imagery or surveying technology and were therefore working within a paradigm of knowledge unlike that of the company.

Significantly, when these two systems of 'knowing' the land clashed, the local knowledge never held up. To the company, the maps showed clearly where the land was, proved that it was accessible, and that they could make it theirs. Indeed, Pa Morey Karoma a 42 year old headman in a very small village, told me of how they could erect *Poro* sticks to keep the company off the land that the people had set aside. As he said:

'Sometimes if the driver come ... I can go and stop him in time' ... 'I plant the *Poro* and we here, you know now, if you see I plant the *Poro*, some will not go further. The operator, if you ask him to go out he will go out, he will not fight.'

However, when I asked him then, if this had ever been successful permanently, if there was any land that they had protected with *Poro* sticks that the company had not taken at some later point, he replied, appearing somewhat deflated, 'well, we don't have that land.' The residents of the land learned the hard way that there was no way to hide land from the project. And, indeed, this was true, as I regularly saw company employees pulling out the maps to instruct local people regarding the boundaries and uses of their own land; the new technologies of knowledge and control made the company the authority, not the local people. This imported technology of knowing became a technology of control.

### ***Fixing Land in Time***

A second experience that illustrates clearly the conflict between these two ways of knowing the land relates to the way land is understood temporally. To the project, as noted already above, the land was empty before their arrival. I was told regularly that there was 'nothing here before', and was informed that, even if the project proved a financial catastrophe and shut up shop, at least the local people now

had all of these nice flat round fields where before there was nothing. But this perspective clearly sees the land from a static temporal position, related, I believe, to the static knowledge tool of the map. On a map a tree is a point in a geographical space, collected through laborious GPS surveying of every tree in the project area – as I was informed by one of the project consultants. The tree was not a thing in time, producing palm oil, mangos, bananas or firewood every year, perhaps for generations. It had not been planted, tended, and harvested. It had not paid children's school fees or covered the medical costs of a sick elder. It was not 'embedded' within the social relations of a village and the family who tend it. Indeed, to the company the tree was a static point; there it is, that dot in the middle of the field, each tree reified as a spot on a map.

The same is true for crops, fields, and bushes. To the company these are things to be marked on a map; seen, recorded, known. The common refrain that nothing had been here before evidences this static view of land-use. But it also exhibits a denial of local understandings of the land and its many resources as constantly and continuously in use. This was made clear to me when one day I actually found myself walking through one of the few small pieces of land within the land-lease area that truly had not been used in years. This land had not been farmed for ten years because of a dispute over which family in the nearby village had the right to farm it. It had, therefore, grown wild with trees and shrubs standing anywhere from six to fifteen feet high and the path through it was barely wider than my shoulders. This was, and remains, the thickest piece of bush I have seen within the land-lease area of the project because, contrary to the company's rhetoric, the vast majority of the land is regularly used, even though it is not under constant cultivation. Land is left fallow to regain its productivity, young trees are left to grow to be used as future building materials, grasses are let grow tall for thatch, etc. But, unfortunately the need to map and know the land on the part of the company gives rise to a static interpretation and perspective of land use. If it does not have a crop on it when the plane flies over, then it is unused land. If a tree is not over a certain height when it is surveyed, then it is not an economically valuable tree.

Alternatively, local conceptions of the land, and the value of land resources, are inherently related to how the land is used over time, not how it appears in a snapshot. One of the most regular

complaints I heard regarding the project was that it paid for productive trees (primarily palm oil trees) only once, and considered them only to be productive if they were over a certain height. To local people palm trees are tended over generations, and are often the primary way that families can earn cash income to send children to school, improve their home, or start a small trading business.

Momadu for example, a 52 year old man married with 2 wives and 10 children, lamented that:

‘Even the palm trees that are in the *boli* [wetland] after they have cut them down, they only pay for them a single year. But there we were getting our palm oil to eat. We also sell to pay for our children to [go to] school. They told us that it will be, going to be fifty thousand per tree [\$12], which of course, that money is small. After they have them down, and pay for the single year, they are off.’

Similarly, Tutu, a 25 year old petty trader and mother of one, stated:

‘The way we are seeing the condition now, they have come to take us backward, because we used to survive from our plantations, but today, all have been uprooted. They said they are coming to take us from poverty. But that is not the case.’

To these people the plantations were an ongoing source of support. I often heard, when I asked how old palm trees were, that ‘*we met them here*’, which means ‘they were here when we were born’. In this context, the great lament was that the company has only paid for them once, not each year. Again, these two different ways of seeing the land – as static versus as shifting and changing – are directly related to the competing and perhaps incompatible technologies of knowledge which serve, in the end, as technologies of control. To the company the land must be known to be controlled, to be made efficient, productive and profitable. To local people the land is lived and worked upon and, like social relations in general, its resources must be fostered and managed over the long term. But while the former is consistent with and constantly reinforced by the supposed universal value of the neoliberal norm, the latter is considered illegitimate – and more likely goes completely unrecognized – by those who wield these new technologies.

### ***Legitimizing Knowledge***

A potent addition to the advanced technologies of satellites, GPS, and GIS mapping, is that embodied in what I will call the *power of paper*. As described above, power over land is traditionally held by the chief because he acts as the repository of knowledge regarding the land and who controls or has access to it. As the repository of knowledge he traditionally serves also as the final arbiter of land disputes and, therefore, holds customary authority and power. However, as new ways of mapping and visualizing the land have imposed onto this context a new way of gaining or creating knowledge, so imported technologies of recording that knowledge have consolidated power in the hands of the company; the new repository of knowledge. Specifically, writing and literacy have, to a great extent, undermined customary authority, marginalized local people, and shifted power into the hands of the company. As the vast majority of local people are completely illiterate, the process of recording land boundaries, land-lease agreements, and contractual obligations on paper places local residents at a distinct disadvantage. Technologies of knowledge production (GPS, GIS, satellites, flyovers, etc.) are wedded to technologies for recording knowledge (legal language, databases, contracts, agreements, signatures, etc.). In short, the function of the first is to know, the function of the second is to reify that knowledge for the protection of power.

Let me illustrate briefly how this works with reference to the case. As noted above, among my 55 local interviews, only two individuals spoke English and the vast majority were illiterate. As Sierra Leoneans say in Krio, most did not '*lan book*,' or go to school. However, all of the rights, responsibilities, privileges, and protections associated with the project are written into documents, in English, that almost none of these people can understand. On my final day in Makeni, I spoke with the manager of the company's M&E project for about four hours regarding the various issues I had identified within the land-lease area. During this time I explained that local people were confused about what land they could use and what land they were now denied access to, that local people felt that the company had made many promises regarding education, employment, healthcare, and infrastructure that had not been met, that employees felt their salaries were below the agreed daily rate, and that many local people felt that the compensation payments for economically productive trees were far below the market value of those trees over time. In response, I was repeatedly shown the

folders filled with official documents, legal language, signatures, and thumb-prints which lined his office and which 'proved' that everything was above board and everyone had been treated fairly.

When I tried to communicate to him the inability of local people to understand these documents, the distinctions between a pre-literate tradition of oral and often carefully managed knowledge and his (our) own tradition of documenting and contracting everything – as well as the implicit and often unspoken nature of patron-client association in West Africa which clearly attributes to the large and powerful company the responsibility to provide for their clients (see Millar 2010; 2013) – he seemed quite startled; as if nobody had bothered to mention this underlying dynamic that was driving so much of the disquiet within the land-lease area. I was told that the amount of money paid for each palm tree was appropriate because it says so on this official document; the result of negotiations held with the ministry of agriculture. Similarly, I was told that each family was paid the right amount of money for the right piece of land because the exact crops and trees they were paid for are marked on these maps and all of their thumb prints are here in this binder of receipts. I was informed that this or that dispute between villages is really just about the money, there is no dispute over land because you can see clearly on this map that the boundary line runs from X to Y. To the company, the knowledge was reified on paper and was, therefore, true. It had the force of reality.

Here we are witnessing two processes closely associated with the new application of corporate power; first, the application of modern Western technologies of control within a non-Western setting, and second, the complementary disruption or displacement of customary technologies of control associated with locally grounded modes of authority. The new technologies of control consist both of technologies of knowledge production (satellites, GPS, GIS) and of recording and reification (Maps, contracts, agreements). These new technologies are disrupting and displacing older forms of knowledge production (walking, living and working on the land) that are associated with older forms of recording and reification (memory, narrative, and negotiation). As a result, power accrues in the hands of those who wield the newly established technologies of knowing, just as before it accrued to the headmen, section chiefs, and paramount chiefs who walked, worked, and lived on the land and recorded its ownership in memory. The authority and control flows to those who control the

legitimized technologies of knowledge and in the context of the contemporary global land rush that is the company and not the customary authorities.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This paper has contributed to the growing literature on the contemporary global land rush by providing data about the on-the-ground impacts of one such project in northern Sierra Leone. This recent literature has problematized many earlier assumptions regarding this phenomenon and described the variety of actors, motivations, and projects involved, and the broader underlying transitions occurring (or simply continuing to unfold) at the global level which underpin the individual cases that together make up the 'land rush'. These transitions include the ongoing degradation of state influence and the attendant belief in private markets and capital investment as the primary driver of development and the reconceptualization of land within this new global orthodoxy as a commodity to be acquired, controlled, and made productive for the purposes of profit and the logic of capital. This is just one aspect of the more general 'ideological ascendancy of neoliberal corporate power across domains' (Franco et al. 2013: 1661), but it has had significant repercussions with regard to land in the global south which, through this capitalist lens, has been defined as 'unused', 'empty', 'marginal', 'public', 'underutilized' or 'frontier'. As a result, and as the recent literature makes clear, in the wake of the 2007/2008 commodity price crises the world has witnessed a qualitatively different form of land rush. However, while this literature has described these global processes, few studies have examined how neoliberal governance is applied or becomes embodied in practice on the ground.

This paper has done just that by describing three specific mechanisms by which neoliberal modes of authority and control become operative on-the-ground in Sierra Leone. I have described how the knowledge requirements of the company involved necessitated the use of technologies associated with a very modern form of knowledge production (satellite imagery, GPS, and GIS), which contributed to the diffusion of corporate power over local land and people. I then described how this particular mode of knowledge production results in 'static' knowledge which dissociates

information regarding land from the dynamic social contexts in which they are located. And finally, I described how the knowledge produced by such technologies is then reified in formal contracts and legal documents; forms of knowledge recording which are often difficult or even impossible for local people to access and, therefore, serve to marginalize local people from the operation of power. In short, these new technologies disrupt and displace traditional modes of knowledge production and recording, and, as such, take the place of locally embedded forms of authority and control associated with village headmen, section chiefs, and paramount chiefs.

Finally, and perhaps most worryingly, I have shown that the company itself, and those working on the project in 2012, are largely ignorant of this dynamic. These actors believe that they are providing new resources to local communities and that they are being forthright and honest with local individuals. The logic of the neoliberal global order is internalized by individuals within the states and communities from which the company and its employees emerge; they have no reason to question the validity of that logic or the appropriateness of its application to every context. This logic has become hegemonic – ‘belonging to the universe of the undisputed’ (Bourdieu 1977: 19). As such, locally embedded modes of knowledge, authority, and control are de-legitimized because they are inconsistent with the new paradigms and processes of measurement and management inherent to the company’s profit making motive. As a result, local people’s claims to particular patches of land or requests for new valuations of their crops and plantations are de-legitimized because their memories and experiences are not legitimate in the new paradigms of authority. More important still is that neither the employees of the company nor the local actors seem to understand the miscommunications and conflicts generated by the interaction of these incompatible logics; to each the other seems ignorant.

The theories articulated by Scott (1998), Turnbull (2000), and Tsing (2005) are clearly useful for analysing cases such as this, in that a supposedly ‘universal’ idea which is actually a historically contingent concept rooted in Western norms and practices, is being forcibly applied to a non-Western context for the purpose of creating knowledge and facilitating control. On the other hand of course, the local setting hosts its own historically contingent ‘universals’ which drive local expectations



regarding which company employees are similarly ignorant. In 2012 local communities and individuals were, understandably, very confused by the process. They felt that they were now dependent on the company – that it was the new patron and they are its clients. They believed that they had been promised services and resources by the company, and did not understand why these services had not been forthcoming. These expectations of patronage and provision are rooted in local concepts and norms that local actors would consider to be ‘universal’ (see Millar 2014: 72-8).

Such interactions between the global and the local are unlikely to be linear and predictable and are, indeed, much more likely to be ‘messy’ (Turnbull 2000) and produce ‘friction’ (Tsing 2005); this is indeed what appears to be emerging in this case. None of the individuals I spoke with in the villages fully understood the details of the land-lease agreement. None had read it and most knew only that the company had come to use their land, that they would be growing sugar cane, and that the company had made many promises about how this would benefit the villages; i.e. they would grow food for them, build schools and clinics, employ the youth, provide annual payments, etc. All of this echo the negative findings often reported by the media and NGOs regarding the ‘land rush’, but what I want to make clear here is that these problems are not simply a ‘he-said/she-said’ problem; it is not simply that the company makes positive claims about its processes and impacts for its own benefit and local people negative claims for their benefit. Instead what we are witnessing here is a more complicated interaction between a globally dominant liberal paradigm of knowledge, authority, and control that has been taken as given and universally applicable and embodied within the norms and practices of this bio-energy project and the particular and complex socio-cultural dynamics of the setting in which it is attempting to apply these practices; characterized as they are by the norms of patron-client relationships focused on the paramount chief as the custodian of the land.

What I want to highlight in concluding, therefore, is not that this is necessarily good or necessarily bad. Certainly the customary patterns of authority and control in Sierra Leone have marginalized many from influence and power, resulted in massive inequalities, and, as has been argued, contributed to Sierra Leone’s long civil war (Peters and Richards 2011). Indeed, the dynamics of authority and control may have been in need of disruption and displacement and today many youth

do question the authority of the gerontocracy and have started to articulate this through the rhetoric of human rights (Borsch-Supan 2012). Similarly, it is perfectly possible that food security might be improved by incorporating Western technologies into agricultural management and production in Sierra Leone. Both of these, however, are debates outside the scope of this paper. The key point here is that the unpredictability of the interaction between the global and the local, and the failure on the part of the powerful interveners to understand the potential fallout of their actions which they themselves take to be the 'self-evident and natural order which goes without saying' (Bourdieu 1977: 166), demands that we take seriously the non-linear and potentially negative externalities of such interventions.

It would be wrong, for example, to assume that this new diffusion of power is simply a destruction of local elite's customary power. Indeed, many elite's are among the few local people who are literate, have the resources to challenge the company, gain employment or payments from the company, or benefit through their role as intermediaries of employment and payment to local individuals and communities. As such, the application of new technologies of authority and control have not produced simple linear effects or the equal marginalization of all local actors from power. These technologies are more accurately seen as operating in concert with and further concentrating prior inequalities. The disempowered in the customary system are further disempowered and the empowered are further empowered. The large bio-ethanol project studied in this case has, with little intent, greatly exacerbated local inequality. The problem, of course, is that even the best of intentions can have the most disruptive effects when 'universals' so deeply assumed as to be completely unquestioned are applied in socio-cultural settings misunderstood by interventionary actors (see Millar 2014).

And for the most part this is where the foreign companies and the development banks can improve on their practice. In such least developed, often post-conflict states with weak governments and underfunded and often poorly resourced NGOs we really cannot expect either the government or civil society to protect the rights of the marginalized, or, given the dissociated nature of much of the elite class in sub-Saharan Africa, to even identify with the rural poor. Nor should we expect bankers,

businessmen, engineers and farmers involved in large-scale agricultural projects to be anthropologists or human rights activists with the skill or motivation to understand local cultures or to have any stake in local empowerment. But companies endeavouring to invest in such sensitive settings should and can be forced to recognize the constructed nature of their own taken for granted assumptions and invest greater resources in an effort to avoid the kinds of negative externalities described here. The development banks who fund such projects – and remember that this project is financed by more than €250 million – can apply the leverage of the purse string to demand more contextual awareness and enforce more stringent standards and controls on negative impacts. In many ways corporations are ill-equipped to understand their own impacts within local communities because they do not understand local communities or the implicit concepts that govern local expectations. But this is exactly where scholarship and activism can intervene.

I would argue, therefore, that while the currently emerging land rush literature has engaged quite extensively with the broader global phenomenon, in order both to progress our understanding of such processes and to address the problems described here it must: a) focus much more on grounded analyses of individual cases and comparison of those cases within and between regions; b) commit not simply to studies of international, regional and national economic policies and regulations, nor to qualitative studies among international actors and their national political and economic counterparts within host states, but to ethnographic analyses of the local experiences of such processes within the local settings of intervention; c) study the inherently complex dynamics interacting in sensitive states wherein not only economic but also political, social, demographic and cultural transitions are ongoing; d) pay particular attention not only to considered intentions and conscious motivations, but to the unconscious, the unconsidered, and the implicit assumptions; and e) work actively, perhaps through civil society partners, to pressure companies themselves and the development banks who fund them to recognize the complex problems associated with foreign direct investment based interventions in complex local contexts and to incorporate staff capable of analyzing and understanding such dynamics into their preparation, planning, and evaluation of such projects.

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