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The company is here to do goodness to us: Imaginaries of development, whiteness, and patronage in Sierra Leone's agribusiness investment deals

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Abstract

In this paper, we consider how references to 'development' are deployed to convince communities to lease their land to agribusiness investors in Sierra Leone. We argue that promises of development made by companies resonate with the aspirations for development that communities already have. The already existing 'imaginaries' of development, actual conditions of economic hardship and the material relations of power bound up in who does the 'asking' for land mean that communities need little convincing to give their land. Imaginaries of development are effective not only because of the promises of development themselves, but also because of how these imaginaries function through the role of coloniality – and 'whiteness' in particular. Analyses that focus only on the coercive power of elites in making land deals miss the degree to which companies' promises of development fit into already existing imaginaries of a more prosperous future.

Keywords

Development, Sierra Leone, land deals

Introduction

During a community meeting in rural Gbekeloko Chiefdom in Northern Sierra Leone, a community elder shared that the presence of a 40,000 hectare oil palm plantation in the chiefdom was the result

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of a visit by a Member of Parliament (MP) and three chiefs, who came to the community with a representative of an oil palm company. When we asked what the meeting had been about, he replied: 'They wanted to convince us for giving the land for lease and doing goodness in return'.[1] Here, 'goodness' refers to what local people associate with 'development', which includes jobs, schools, better roads, water wells, as well as a broader social contract establishing connectedness and reciprocity between 'landlords' and 'strangers'. In other words, when this investor, along with local leaders, approached the community for land, their approach was already conditioned by local understandings of development and embedded in local assemblages of power. Local understandings of what development entails and how it is mediated and distributed, exist simultaneously with how the Sierra Leonean state, its international development partners and finance institutions, and investing companies understand the nature of rural development and investment. While recent studies have focused on how communities and agribusiness investment companies in Sierra Leone relate to one another once 'the company'[2] starts operating, less attention has been given to how communities' hopes for what 'the company' might bring matter when investment companies first arrive to ask for land (Ferme, 2018; Hennings, 2018; Millar, 2016; Ryan, 2018; Yengoh and Armah, 2016).

In Sierra Leone's bids to attract international investment, engaging agribusiness is a priority. The broader discourse regarding the country's need for investment as well as the specific reference to agribusiness is framed in terms of 'bringing' development (Bottazzi et al., 2016; Millar, 2018). In this paper, we consider how references to 'development' are deployed to convince communities to lease their land to agribusiness investors in Sierra Leone. We argue that promises of development made by companies resonate with the aspirations for development communities already have. These existing 'imaginaries' of development, actual conditions of economic hardship and the material relations of power bound up in who does the asking for land mean that communities need little convincing to give their land. Imaginaries of development are effective not only because of the promises of development themselves, but because of how these imaginaries function through the role of coloniality – and 'whiteness' in particular – and the references that local and national elites make to these imaginaries when they bring the companies to the community. Postcolonial scholars have pointed to how mainstream logics of 'development' have roots in colonial understandings of progress, the desirability of particular trajectories and the periodization of history, as well as the ways in which development entails a process of racial formation (Kothari, 2009; Mudimbe, 1988; Pailey, 2020; White, 2010). In the context of giving land for agribusiness, the racialized logics of development function both to drive the assumptions of companies that local communities can be easily convinced to give up their land, as well as to drive the assumptions of local communities that giving their land to companies will 'lift them from poverty'.

The discussion of 'development' and the initiation of land deals in existing literature has largely considered the association between agribusiness investment and economic development as conceptualized by the state, investing companies and international financial institutions (Collins and Mitchell, 2018; McMichael, 2013; Wolford et al., 2013). Engaging with the relationship between land deals and development helps to understand the broader global processes, logics and understandings of land that make large-scale land deals possible in the Global South. Without discounting the power of these imaginaries to push the agenda of allocating land for agribusiness investment, we still believe that an element is missing: that imaginaries of development always already exist in communities when companies approach them for land. It is therefore important to also understand how these global processes and understandings intersect with local understandings of development and the particular assemblages of power that facilitate the entry of companies into particular communities (Zoomers, 2018).

To do this, we draw on a notion of 'imaginaries' of development. Social imagination of what development 'looks like' is a key element in how communities perceive investing companies

when they arrive. 'The term imaginary conveys a vision that is real in that interested actors are working to bring about these new forms of order and life. Imaginaries in this sense do not rest in individual minds but are collective interpretations of a social reality' (Eaton et al., 2014: 230). In the following section, we discuss existing debates about imaginaries around development, myths of modernity and the role of whiteness and coloniality. We explore how these debates shaped our understanding of conversations with communities about what they hoped to gain from these companies when they were first approached for land. The next section explains the methodology for the wider project, of which this paper is a part. From there, we analyse how the arrival of investing companies was part of a social imaginary of development. At the same time, we argue that these imaginaries are effective because of the material relations of power tied up in the process of who comes to ask for land.

Imagining development, developing imaginaries

Recent literature on the link between development and extractive industries has focused on the idea of 'imaginaries' to explain how a collective can come to see the future of development through extractivism in the present. This should be seen in relation to a wider trend, in which the solutions to underdevelopment are framed through private investment – or a public–private partnership – and in which investing companies rely on the languages of 'development' to justify their projects (Langan, 2017; Lavers, 2012; McMichael, 2009; Wolford et al., 2013). Much of this work focuses on how elites (international, national and local) frame the imaginary of development in order to garner support for a project. For example, Burnod et al. (2011) found that in the process of facilitating investment projects in Madagascar, local politicians imagined these projects through their understanding of past development projects. 'From the mayors' point of view, welcoming an agribusiness project is similar to welcoming an international aid project. It is a means to compensate for the deficiencies of the welfare state' (Burnod et al., 2011: 12).

At a state level, imaginaries of development can be seen through an extractive imperative in which the state views natural resources as the means to achieve development and poverty elimination. This is particularly notable in Latin America, for example in the Bolivian state's view of the role of oil in addressing poverty and inequality (Pellegrini, 2018) or in Ecuador, where a 2009 mining law framed resource nationalism as a way that extractives could begin to 'repay' social debt of centuries of inequality (Riofrancos, 2020: 12). This imperative can be seen in other states as well and is often particularly evident in poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSP) and national development plans (Chimhowu et al., 2019; Pellegrini, 2012). This is clearly the case for Sierra Leone's most recent PRSP, which states: 'The Agenda for Prosperity Vision relies heavily on use of Sierra Leone's rich natural resources, both renewable and non-renewable, to be the initial driver for rapid growth' (Government of Sierra Leone, 2013: xiv). In this sense, investment companies seeking land for agribusiness arrive in a context where an extractive imperative is aligned with an objective to advance economic and social development in the country. This provides a necessary, but not entirely sufficient, understanding of what makes the entry of companies into communities possible.

The collective imagination about what brings development extends 'down' beyond the state and elites, to the people who are 'targets' of development programs or investment projects. Eaton (2016) presents an informative analysis of how this can be seen at community level, through his study of the opposing reactions of two communities in northern Michigan to proposals for a bioenergy project. He argues that the communities viewed the proposal and its imagined future through their understanding of their present situation and, crucially, through their past experiences with 'industrial culture'. Through this shared logic or imaginary, actors actively (re)interpret the past by ascribing meaning to more recent or historical events, as well as by imagining what the

future would entail if a project were to come into being (Eaton, 2016: 78). In order to imagine a future, there also needs to be an interpretation of the community's present. In his research in the Zambian copper belt region in the 1990s, Ferguson (1999: 13) describes how 'myth' comes to shape understandings of what it means to 'enter' modernity. 'The myth of modernization (no less than any other myth) gives form to an understanding of the world, providing a set of categories and premises that continue to shape people's experiences and interpretations of their lives'. The way in which myth or imaginary gives form to an understanding of the world is central to our findings in Northern Sierra Leone, insofar as informants consistently referred to their view of the goodness they imagined the companies would bring and how this would relieve them from poverty.

These imaginaries are intimately connected to the materiality of resource scarcity. Understanding why and how imaginaries of development have power requires engaging with the material conditions of communities. In the context of large-scale land deals in Sierra Leone, this means it is necessary to consider the legitimacy of communities' desires for development, as well as how these desires are shaped and informed by an acute awareness of their relative economic position in the global order (Ferguson, 2006). Post-colonial theorising on the role of hierarchies of knowledge between the Global North and Global South is crucial for challenging discourses that treat African knowledge as 'lacking' (Mbembe, 2001, 2017; Mudimbe, 1988). At the same time, focus on discourse alone would miss accounting for the material and economic inequality that can be seen in what rural communities in Sierra Leone may want – for instance electricity, access to safe, reliable supplies of water and connectedness to other places (both in the form of reliable roads and to digital technology). An awareness of what is absent is widespread in communities and reflected in what people say they want 'someone to bring' – better roads, light, a health clinic, a better football pitch, okadas (motorcycle taxis), bridges, water, a school, a drying floor, money, and so on. It should not be surprising, therefore, that people in rural communities know there are places where having 'light' all day is possible.[3] Or that there are places where being able to access markets, schools and clinics does not depend on whether or not the rains have washed out the road, or where one does not have to make the decision to cut down meals to once a day in order to last until harvest. It is therefore also unsurprising that people who are able to identify these possible material goods, and compare them to their own reality, would want things to be different.

Thus, while the critique of defining Africa by 'ideological lack' is critical as a decolonizing strategy, this should not be done without serious consideration for the real economic and material inequalities that people grapple with. Indeed, the two practices should go hand in hand, considering how the constant reference to Africa as lacking is a condition of possibility for a global economic order in which Africa's wealth is plundered and in which places that fuel global economic wealth through resource extraction are systematically deprived of returns on their resources. The material economic inequality that permeates daily life in rural Sierra Leone must be considered not as a 'lack' by accident or as a failure of communities to 'know better', but as communities that have been *made to lack*, by design. In turn, the absence of material wealth in communities becomes a reference point for why they should welcome agribusiness investment companies.

The actual materiality of development interacts with already existing imaginaries to consolidate communities' perceptions of themselves in relation to their notion of progress, and their imagination of what investing companies can bring. This is particularly true because of the blatant inequality between those asking for the communities' land and those being asked for it. We analyse this further in a subsequent section, but it is worthwhile to briefly call attention to markers of economic inequality that communities are confronted with when the 'askers' arrive in shiny four-by-fours, carrying the newest electronic gadgets and other objects of desire, such as watches and fancy clothes. In these moments, the askers represent an aspirational status, and in turn, communities may imagine that if those people arrive to ask for something from them, they should be able to expect something in return.

Ferguson (1999, 2005) points to how the 'myth' of modernity reflects objects of desire – material goods, benefits and infrastructure that are associated with ideas about 'modernity'. In this sense, modernity is not so much an idea or set of ideas, but 'comes to appear as a standard of living, as *a status* not a telos' (Ferguson 2005: 175). This relates to a similar point of discussion raised by Mbembe (2017), that myths of modernity in Africa are mediated through race and understandings of what it means to have material wealth and privilege: whiteness and fantasies of whiteness are related to objects that are associated with privilege. 'In this view the fantasy of Whiteness involves a constellation of objects of desire and public signs of privilege that relate to body and image, language and wealth' (Mbembe, 2017: 45). Social imaginaries of whiteness matter because people imagine the 'whiteness' of the companies as representative of spaces of progress in Europe coming to Sierra Leone.

This relationship between objects of desire and 'whiteness' can also be seen within the particularity of Temne communities in Northern Sierra Leone. In Temne cosmology, 'money and Western commodities are often linked to the image of an invisible city of witches whose affluence is built upon the theft of human lives' (Shaw, 2002: 12). Cosmologies that link material affluence and whiteness through less-than-legitimate means of acquiring wealth are a starting point to understand the role of whiteness in imaginaries of development, but are insufficient on their own. These cosmologies are also bound up with people's experiences, especially since the civil war, of people arriving from outside 'to bring development' (Bolten, 2009; Denney, 2013; Ferme, 2018). Even communities that had not experienced development aid projects directly had certainly heard rumours of them. We argue that the 'whiteness' of the company increased communities' expectations for development. At the same time, the patronage power of chiefs and power brokers structured the ways in which communities understood the power broker as 'bringing' the company on behalf of community development. This matters in the context of land deals for two reasons. First, and as explored by others, because it drives assumptions by investors that local communities 'need' companies to come in and make their land profitable for them (Dwyer, 2013; Gill, 2016; Makki, 2014; McMichael, 2014). Secondly, we argue, it is crucial to consider how imaginaries of whiteness have come to be tied to imaginaries of development in such a way that the communities we visited made similar calculations – namely, that some people claim to have agreed to the deal not only because of the development promises, but because those promises were brought by 'white people'.

The eagerness with which local communities agreed to lease their land presents a puzzle that cannot be explained by focusing only on coercion or force, or straightforward economic calculations by elites. We focus this paper on the role of imaginaries of development as one element in the conditions that made land deals possible. While it is beyond the scope of the paper to engage with whether these imaginaries are realized, it is important to recognize that communities and most individuals within them were largely unhappy. The land deals we encountered for this study were all exploitative and exclusionary, with annual surface rent payments of around US$5 per hectare per year for a period of 25–50 years – far less than the estimated monetary value of this land for subsistence farming. Moreover, these small payments were usually channelled directly through existing patronage networks and primarily benefited local elites and land-owning elders, excluding younger generations from sharing in potential benefits and removing access rights from current land users. Even amidst the dissatisfaction and disappointment, people were eager to discuss what they imagined the deal would do. Their discussions of dissatisfaction were framed in contrast to what they had hoped for. We think this makes it necessary to take these imaginaries seriously in considering how the deals were initiated.

Methodology

Research for this paper was carried out by both authors as part of a broader research project on large-scale land deals in Sierra Leone. The broader project, initiated by the second author, considers the interactions between the universal norm of 'agribusiness plantations' and the 'messiness' – as Edelman (2013) would say – of five specific plantation deals in Port Loko. Two principal questions form the starting point: 'what makes land deals possible?' and 'what types of power do land deals (re)produce?' This paper presents findings from one element that makes land deals possible. What communities imagined would be possible if plantations were established on their land was a clear and consistent theme throughout the research. Identifying this as an element in what makes land deals possible in Sierra Leone was inductive, and reflects the broader research strategy of the project to consider how individual elements, such as references to development promises, function as a 'node' in a particular set of elements (Aradau et al., 2015: 62).

In total, we conducted 12 weeks of field research in Port Loko district from October 2017 to January 2018. As part of a research team with two facilitating researchers, Mafudia Kamara and Osman Gbassey Kamara, we visited 33 communities across seven chiefdoms.[4] We used purposive sampling to ensure variation in size, ranging from 6 to over 500 households, and remoteness, ranging from along a main tarmac highway to more than an hour from any paved road. Six of these communities had no land under lease and serve as a baseline for comparison. Of the remaining communities, four have land under lease to a company that mainly focuses on rice production (with a total lease size of 1500 hectares), three communities lease land to a company that produces turmeric for export (total lease size 350 hectares) and a further three communities lease land to a company that mainly produces rice and sorghum (total lease size 410 hectares). Sixteen communities leased land to two palm oil projects (total size of leased land was 74,000 hectares at the time of research, but the land under operation was only 13,000 hectares). Finally, in one community, a plot of land was allegedly 'sold' by community elders to a Sierra Leonean individual, which caused significant internal conflict. This variation allowed us to compare across different spaces. That being said, we also found that the imaginaries of development described in this paper are not specific to particular deals or localities, but already exist even in communities that have not been approached for land.

Our methods take seriously the social dimension of inquiry that Bueger and Mireanu (2015) and others highlight as crucial to contextualized understandings of 'messy politics' (Hönke and Müller, 2012; Li, 2014; Mac Ginty, 2010; Tsing, 2005). During community meetings, we collected data through open discussions about the community's history, land and resources, after which we asked specific questions about the lease agreement. This is not only a useful way to gather information about the community and lease agreement, but also presents an opportunity to observe social dynamics, such as who talks and who is silent. Depending on the size of the community, we conducted 5–20 semi-structured individual interviews per village, adding up to 339 interviews in total.[5] In addition, the second author conducted 25 key informant interviews with local and national government officials, NGOs and representatives from four of the five companies. The first author conducted 10 follow-up interviews with government officials and local chiefs in November 2019.

Through this combination of methods and data it was possible to analyse how the company and the land deal were perceived and experienced by different members of local communities. Furthermore, it allowed us to triangulate all our data within and across different communities to confirm the reliability of our findings. That being said, Edelman rightly points out that studying land issues on the ground is always 'extraordinarily messy' (2013: 491). Indeed, confusion and ambiguity surrounding the land deals were more of a rule than an exception. While this certainly posed a challenge to this research project, it is also an important reminder of the complex everyday reality of people directly affected by land deals.

The data that supports our analysis in this paper comes from our inductive coding of the community meetings and individual interviews using Atlas.ti. To do so, we first looked for dominant themes and then triangulated responses from within communities. We used our reflexive research notes and notes from the discussions regularly held as a research team to further verify our findings. Individual interview responses were also analysed in relation to who mentioned them, through coding for co-occurrence with attributes such as land-owning status, gender and age. The majority of the responses used in this paper are responses to three of the more than 30 open-ended questions we asked in individual interviews. Namely: (13) What do you know about how the deal was made? How do you know this?, (16) What do you know about what the agreement with the company says?, How do you know this? and (20) How were you feeling when the company first arrived? We did not limit our coding to these questions, but the answers to these three questions provided the most mentions of 'development' 'goodness' and 'promises'. In community meetings, mentions of development, goodness, and promises were made throughout the meetings, but mostly in response to the question 'What were some of the first things you heard about this company?' and 'What happened when the company first arrived?'

Mentions of development, goodness, and promises were made in all 27 community meetings where land was under lease. In individual interviews, they were mentioned by 199 individuals – 191 of these individuals were in communities with land under lease (out of a total of 310 individuals interviewed in these 27 communities). Therefore, while we used an open-ended approach to data collection and an inductive approach to analysis, we are confident that the data used in this paper reflects a broad sentiment across communities and individuals, and that the role of imaginaries of development are a key element in the wider question of what makes land deals possible. The scope of this paper is limited to this element, but we do not claim this is the only aspect of what makes land deals possible.

Imaginaries of development

Sierra Leone has a dual tenure system established under colonial rule, in which differences exist between the freehold system which applies to the Western Area (the Freetown peninsula), and the provinces. Under the customary land tenure system in the provinces of Sierra Leone, land ownership is based on extended lineage and paramount chiefs are seen as custodians of the land. In every community, one or more land-owning families control different parcels of land to which members of that family can make claims for yearly farming (Moyo and Foray, 2009). Anyone who cannot claim land through patrilineal descent to land-owning lineage in a given community is considered a 'stranger'. Strangers can still access land for farming through a local landowner, who serves as a patron. Historical accounts of this practice suggest that strangers often married into the landlord's lineage to secure land tenure (Dorjahn and Fyfe, 1962; Palliere et al., 2018). Importantly, strangers settling in new areas have to abide by their landlord's terms in order to gain rights to land use. Some examples of the terms of these agreements are to give up a bushel of rice after harvest, to help brush the landlord's farm and to refrain from harvesting oil palms and other fruit trees. While it is not common practice for strangers to pay rent, they should respect the duties and expectations associated with their social incorporation in a given community. In exchange for their access to land, strangers owe gratitude to their landlords. In turn, landlords gain status and recognition by allowing strangers to access their land. To some extent, this history of landlord–stranger relationships informs communities' expectations for companies that have come in to ask landowners for their land. In their capacity as landowners and decision makers, lineage heads have the authority to allow incoming companies to access their land and to formally sign lease agreements. In addition, community meetings with companies serve to generate wider acceptance in the community – similar to the social integration of strangers. When asked

about their initial feelings when they were approached for land, most respondents indicated that they were joyful, happy, or excited when the stakeholders (such as Members of Parliament and Paramount Chiefs) brought company people to the village. Across all communities, people strongly linked the arrival of investment companies to development. Many people explained that they expected the company to 'bring development' or 'goodness' to their community and that they had been very happy about the company's arrival because of this. They also frequently indicated that they welcomed the company's arrival because of what they thought they would 'enjoy' from having the company on their land.[6]

> They laughed and smiled with us when they asked for the land, and we sang and danced for them.[7]

> At the beginning, I was happy, it was good news at the meeting when the community was informed.[8]

The recollections people had of the initial encounters with the company were overwhelmingly positive.

> During the meeting, the landowners accepted immediately, based on the promises that were made. They were happy and not aggrieved that they would have a rest from farming. People were happy that day, it was like a festival.[9]

This initial happiness reflected how the prospect of agribusiness investment was generally associated with 'development' for a community. From this general imaginary, people's specific expectations took a more concrete shape based on verbal promises about the material benefits a company would bring. Many people recalled that when company representatives and/or local power brokers first came to their community to ask for land, they promised to construct new roads and bridges, to build new schools, health centres, a community centre or mosques, or even to bring electricity, to employ people from the community, to provide scholarships and so on. 'Development' was often used as a shorthand for these sets of promises. For young men, women and strangers[10] – people who would not directly benefit from surface rent payments themselves – these development promises were framed as things that would uplift the whole community.

The aspirational qualities of development were indicators of progress for communities as a whole, but they also offered particular benefits for land-owning families beyond the prospect of surface rent payments. Elders of land-owning families responsible for decision-making discussed these 'development' promises as a reason why they did not resist or spend a lot of time considering whether or not to agree.

> I did not resist the company's arrival because I thought the company would bring development.[11]

> They told us that if we give them our land they will have some development they will bring for us like a community centre, water well, dry floor, Mosque and they will have to employ us permanent.[12]

> The ___ family was happy because of the promise of electricity. They were promised enjoyment from the deal and poverty reduction. They had no objection.[13]

For the elders of land-owning families, promises of development were powerful and effective not only because they resonated with pre-existing expectations about the benefits of allowing 'strangers' to use your land, but also because material signs of 'goodness' from the company testified to the significance of the reciprocal relationship between the company and landowners over time. This

was often part of discussions we had regarding the initial arrival of companies during our individual interviews:

> When a stranger asks for land, we ask what they have in return. They gave the promises for development, so we thought it wise to give the land.[14]

> They said they would help, that we would have a rest from farming. *Was the money or the development more important?* The development. They said they would develop the community. The money will finish sooner or later, but the development is more important.[15]

In the customary context of land-based relationships in rural Sierra Leone, arrangements to give land need to be maintained by ongoing forms of 'association' between the lineage and the tenant. If the tenant is a smallholder 'stranger' he may maintain his association through contributing labour to a landlord's building project, or to a collective labour group for community projects which reflects favourably on the landlord for 'hosting' the stranger. Members of land-owning families expressed a similar logic in relation to commercial investors, who were expected to provide tangible signs of development. The symbolic power of these benefits can serve as a material basis of power for land-owning families that lease their land to foreign investors. This is in line with Unruh's (2008) observation about lease arrangements in Sierra Leone, namely that monetary lease payments are secondary in importance to other aspects of a land lease arrangement. 'A pervasive desire was expressed by both chiefs and elders of landholding lineages to have additional tangible features of conveyance engage the 'element of continuation' in ways that robustly benefit the broader lineage over the long term (as land does)' (Unruh, 2008: 112). These features of 'development' served to demonstrate an association between the landowners and the tangible benefits the community would enjoy, thus bolstering the power of land-owning families because they 'hosted' the strangers.

While companies were framed as 'strangers' in the locally meaningful sense of the term, the associated expectations of the kind of goodness to expect were much higher than of typical strangers. Frequently, respondents related their expectations of the development the company would bring to the 'whiteness' of the company, or that the prospect of *having* white people was imagined as a guarantee of goodness.

> The decision was easy because the Oporto [white man] promised development.[16]

> The community should have enjoyed the company's arrival. The community has vast land for large farming but no resources like machines. When the white people came, people expected a helping hand.[17]

> When the company first came, they asked for land. It was the first time foreigners asked for land, so we were really excited and happy to give land[18]

In at least one instance, the respondent was initially ambivalent because of the whiteness of the company but was persuaded by elders and power brokers that allowing the white man to have land would alleviate poverty.

> When the elders came for the meeting, we were arguing. I did not agree. We did not meet our ancestors with white people and we are not starting it now. But the elders asked: ever since your forefathers came here, what have they done? What do you gain from processing palm oil? Why don't you take the money from the white people? They will change your life. If you have white people in your community, there will no longer be poverty in your life. […] We agreed, because we are poor.[19]

Here, whiteness itself is not what convinced the respondent to agree, but rather the argument that whiteness is associated with eliminating poverty. This fits with some of the ways in which Shaw has explained Temne understandings of whiteness and wealth: there is some underlying apprehension about the provenance of the wealth of whites tied to understandings that whites generate wealth through devious means, but having whites around means benefitting from their wealth (Shaw, 2002).

Whiteness also operated at a level of symbolism when the company arrived from outside of Africa. 'Oporto' serves as a shorthand to describe general foreignness, as seen in one community meeting in which someone referred to the farm manager as 'the Black American Oporto'.[20] This was similar for companies with Indian or Bangladeshi owners or farm managers. In the case of one company, the original lease was negotiated by a white British man as a speculative deal but was ultimately sold to an Indian company. People in communities with land under lease to this company referred to 'these Oportos now' in comparison to 'the first Oporto'.

There is also a general symbolic capital of whiteness that is not embodied, but still reflects an imaginary of whiteness tied to poverty alleviation. In almost every case when we asked people what the lease amount per year was, an amount in United States Dollars (USD) was mentioned. However, when we talked about processes of payments, people indicated receiving Leones. According to one respondent:

> When people mention 'dollar' to them, people think they will be rich for their life. But people regret the deal now. People were willing to give everything and are waiting to be rich. *Would it be different if the amount was mentioned in Leones?* If they had mentioned Leones and minimized the promises for development, people would be more cautious. People are willing to do anything for richness.[21]

While there may be multiple reasons why companies might to offer an amount in USD and pay in Leones[22], we argue that the promise of USD adds to the imaginaries of development when deals are negotiated because imaginaries of 'richness' are tied to USD. The use of the term 'richness' matters here insofar as it reflects a locally resonating imaginary of 'achieving' or 'arriving' at a particular economic status.

Notably, it is not only whiteness that is tied to imaginaries of bringing development. Other studies of land deals in Sierra Leone and other parts of West Africa point to the role of customary authority and national elites in facilitating, coercing, or forcing communities to give their land to investors (Bottazzi et al., 2016; Ferme, 2018; Grajales, 2020; Hennings, 2018; Millar, 2018; Ryan, 2018). Within the scope of this paper we do not unpack all of the various ways in which customary authorities and elites leverage forms of power to get communities and land owners to agree. We do not make a comprehensive analysis of the power of Chiefs and other elites but instead comment on how patronage functions in relation to imaginaries of development.

> We got these people [the company] from the now MP. He said he was bringing these white people and bringing development, and that it would take away poverty.[23]

> The honourable said: if you allow the company to work on the land, you will move away from hardship and you will reap the benefits yearly[24]

> The MP called us in advance of the first meeting and told us that he was bringing us an investment[25]

> The MP claims to have brought the company from abroad[26]

> They [MP and PC] called on us to tell us that they had development to bring us[27]

> They [company] came with honourable [Name MP]. He said: I brought a project for you.[28]

There are two important points that can be raised here. The first is that the elites in question are actively (re)producing the imaginary that associates 'having' a company with poverty alleviation and development. Secondly, similar to landlords striving to 'host' strangers who can elevate their status, the language of 'bringing' the company to the community reflects existing understandings of patronage: that a good patron will 'bring' opportunities. The elites in question above specifically link this to bringing in a company from outside. The MPs and PCs who refer to 'bringing' are relying on their legitimacy as patrons for the community to accept the 'thing' they bring, while they similarly re-enforce their legitimacy through 'bringing'. Here, imaginaries of development clearly interact with pre-existing material forms of power. These responses represent a broader trend in most communities, where the language of development is more powerful and effective when it comes from known and trusted authority figures. This is particularly the case when that authority is embedded in patronage networks and local understandings of autochthony in which strangers should bring 'goodness' and Big Men and Chiefs have the moral authority to bring strangers.

Women, strangers, and even younger men from land-owning families reported not knowing much about how deals were made, but they did claim to have knowledge of the promises made for the development of the community, reflecting the degree to which these promises fit into a shared social imaginary. This imaginary was a lively topic of discussion when we held community meetings. As Escobar points out, local understandings of development are the result of local/international interaction/interpretation (2012: 49–50). We see this interaction in how respondents reflected on the original arrival of the company. We want to emphasize that while the imaginary did not arise for the first time with the arrival of the company, it was bolstered by the discussions companies had when they entered communities. In particular, when we held community meetings, community members discussed the long lists of 'the promises for goodness' made by stakeholders and company representatives. This reflects the degree to which 'development' as a social imaginary is reasserted through collective discussions of what material goods people aspire to have – both for the community (schools, mosques and drying floors), as well as for individuals or families (new houses, light and jobs).

> They gave promises of a school, a health centre, a dry store. The war had made us lose all that we had, and people came and made an offer to develop and elevate us from poverty. Because no one loves poverty, and we needed elevating, we agreed. All that we had before was because of farming. They promised a school, houses, cloth.[29]

> They also gave examples of other plantations and what companies do. They mentioned schools, roads, hand pumps, and during Ramadan they would provide food.[30]

It is important to note that in some of the community meetings, precise details about promises made by the company and the imagined development resulting from the company were topics of minor contestation. In one community in Maconteh chiefdom, when we asked why the landowners had continued to agree even in the absence of a formal lease agreement, one of the elders declared:

> This was one reason we were not stressed to have a lease document, because they promised microcredit for the women, a football field, a school, a community centre, scholarships, a health centre, a hand pump, road rehabilitation.[31]

When we asked for clarification on whether these had been suggestions of what could happen or actual promises, the elder said that 'they were 100% guaranteed'.[32] However, another man interjected and stated that the company said they would bring those things if the oil palm plantation produced a lot. In this negotiation over the narrative of the company's arrival, the disagreement was temporal – the question was when the company would bring these things. Not contested here is the fact that these were things that the community expected to 'enjoy' as a result of the company's arrival.[33]

Importantly, these imaginaries of development were not limited to settings with investors. Many people from communities that were not approached by international investors expressed their hope that a company would come to their community to 'release them from poverty'. This reflects a desire to be released from subsistence farming, as being employed by an investment company is considered the better alternative, especially if the associated development also includes material goods the community lacks.

> It's good to have strangers. A good stranger comes with a plan for what he will do, and that should benefit the community. I wouldn't give land to any stranger without a plan. The whole community needs to benefit because this community needs development.[34]

The fact that the international investors are associated with development even in remote communities with no prior direct experience with investors reflects that this is a commonly held view in rural Sierra Leone, rather than a view that arises after actual interaction with foreign investors. It is also clear that the meaning of 'having investors' is not constructed only from outside Sierra Leone. We therefore need to think beyond a simple focus on the role of global markets, the incentivizing power of international financial institutions and the discourses of post-war market-based economic reforms. Investment deals will always be proposed in particular contexts where already existing assemblages of power deploy the opportunities of deals in particular ways most relevant to local social norms.

> *Who made the agreement?* [Name MP], the coordinator. The director of the company. They [landowners] accepted the first time already, because of the money. People heard about Addax, the company that provided employment to the villages. [Name MP] promised scholarship, the construction of a factory for this village. The white colour influenced the elders, but they agreed mostly because of the stories about Addax.[35]

This quote shows the different strands that come together in imagining the arrival of the company as a marker of a development. The landowners needed little convincing for several reasons: the money that would come in, the promised 'development' projects that would mark the community as hosting a company whiteness and the knowledge that another company was already operating in a nearby district.

To conclude, we encountered imaginaries of development that were framed both in terms of the *material goods* that the company would bring, – positioned as things the community lacked – and of aspirations to emerge from poverty or to 'have a rest' from farming tasks. Material goods were often discussed as the main thing that made people agree to the deal. The durability of these narratives years after the initial agreement indicates the centrality of imaginaries of development as an aspirational state, defined mostly by material markers of 'modernity'. While the material goods differ from the imaginaries of future development that Eaton et al. (2014) found in rural Michigan, the relationship between choosing in the present to allow resource extraction and a future imagined state of development are very similar. This is important, we argue, because in the literature on land deals in the Global South, local communities are frequently framed as places where deals

happen and people to whom deals are applied. In the case of the deals in Port Loko District, we argue, there is a need to also consider how much communities hoped for investment deals and how clearly and consistently they imagined such deals to be the way to a brighter future.

Conclusion

We highlight the study by Eaton et al. (2014) again because imaginaries of development are not unique to the Global South. The study shows how people in northern Michigan considered a bioenergy project with a particular imaginary of the project's capacity to deliver a more prosperous future. The imaginaries of development existed prior to the company's first appearance. Similarly, people in communities in Northern Sierra Leone held imaginaries of development before company representatives and local elites arrived. In this paper, we argue that analyses focused only on the coercive power of elites in making land deals miss the degree to which companies fit into already existing imaginaries of a more prosperous future. This is not explained by writing off people in Northern Sierra Leone as 'uneducated'. Indeed, it may be better explained by their acute awareness of their economic conditions relative to others. Imaginaries of development are powerful because of the shared ideas of what it means to 'have' a company within the community; the contexts of material hardship; the role of whiteness in the imaginary in which the company is imagined as 'better' because it comes from outside; and the role of chiefs in referring to future shared prosperity. In a relatively small country like Sierra Leone, where much news travels by word of mouth, imaginaries of development linked to 'outside' are part of a long historical trajectory, wherein the most recent trends have been towards increased foreign investment. These recent investments further fuel the imaginary of what it means to 'have' a company.

The rumours of other development elsewhere in the country feed the imaginary of companies bringing development, for example, when we heard people discuss Addax, an enormous ethanol plantation. Around the time that some of the deals in Port Loko were made (2011/2012), Addax offered some benefits to the local communities in which it operated (Millar, 2016). Elders were more likely to draw on this knowledge, than on the knowledge that Addax was also fostering grievances, creating problems between and within families, excluding women, or making it hard for some people to get enough to eat (Millar, 2015, 2016, 2018; Yengoh et al., 2015; Yengoh and Armah, 2016). That the 'good' rumours travel more readily than the bad in terms of the company's operations underlines how powerful these imaginaries are, and how much hope people have for them. The bad rumours are not enough to disprove the imaginary, and problems are reduced to a matter of 'bad examples' or 'bad companies'. This fits with how people explained their dissatisfaction with the failings of companies to deliver, particularly when they expressed desires for another company to come and replace the 'bad' one. This suggests that the fundamental imaginary of companies bringing development is still intact and that such imaginaries should be an analytical focus in considering what makes land deals possible. Understanding the conditions in which landowners in Sierra Leone agreed to give their land requires not only considering conditions of coercion, but also the conditions of possibility that allowed them to imagine that the arrival of the company would bring goodness.

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Notes

1. Community meeting, Community 29, Gbekeloko Chiefdom, December 2017.
2. Throughout the article we use 'the company' to reflect how communities referred to the agribusiness investment companies who were leasing land. All of the investing companies were agribusiness firms, but this is not how community members or most local and national politicians referred to them. When speaking about 'the company' people also used language that reflected that they saw 'the company' not as a singular legal entity, but as a group of people, as evidenced by the discussions of what happened when 'they' arrived or references to the company as 'strangers.'
3. Electricity.
4. The two facilitating researchers had educational background in agriculture, were familiar in the region and spoke Temne, the local language. They helped translating community discussions and individual interviews and gave vital input into research design and understanding the initial findings. A third research assistant helped with negotiating access to the chiefdoms through paramount chiefs. He was known in the region through his work as a community worker for a local NGO. We use the term facilitating researchers purposefully, in relation to recent debates about the relations between researchers, expertise, and knowledge in the Global North and the Global South (see Abedi Dunia et al., 2020; Eriksson Baaz and Utas, 2019).
5. We used purposive sampling to include an equal share of men and women, along different age groups and including both 'strangers' and people from land-owning families. These include interviews with local chiefs and headmen. In this paper, people are referred to by their gender, age group and whether they are a (self-identified) 'stranger' or from a land-owning family.
6. By and large, these expectations were not met, and promises were not delivered. People generally reported that they were worse off from these deals.
7. Community 28, Gbekeloko Chiefdom, interview 2, elder woman from a land-owning family,
8. Community 3, Romende Chiefdom, interview 1, middle-aged woman, stranger
9. Community 9, Marampa Chiefdom, interview 1, older woman, stranger
10. People in a community that do not belong to a land-owning family are called 'strangers'.
11. Community 15, Maconteh Chiefdom, elder man from a land-owning family
12. Community 8, Marampa Chiefdom, interview 7, elder man from a land-owning family
13. Community 8, Marampa Chiefdom, interview 4, elder woman from a land-owning family

14. Community 3, Romende Chiefdom, interview 14, middle-aged man from a land-owning family
15. Community 8, Marampa Chiefdom, interview 7, elder man from a land-owning family
16. Community 10, Marampa Chiefdom, Interview 4, elder male from a land-owning family
17. Community 8, Marampa Chiefdom, interview 3, middle aged woman, stranger
18. Community 11, Masiermera Chiefdom, interview 12, elder man from a land-owning family
19. Community 9, Marampa Chiefdom, middle-aged man from a land-owning family
20. He was from Suriname
21. Community 8, Marampa Chiefdom, interview 3, middle aged woman, stranger
22. We did not ask companies or government about this, so we can only speculate
23. Community 8, Marampa Chiefdom, Community Meeting – comment by Ceremonial Chief
24. Community 15, Maconteh Chiefdom, interview 7, older male stranger, 2nd headman
25. Community 18, Maconteh Chiefdom, interview 9, elder man from land-owning family
26. Community 17, Maconteh Chiefdom, community meeting
27. Community 23, Bureh Chiefdom, interview 8, elder man from a land-owning family
28. Community 15, Maconteh Chiefdom, interview 12, elder man from a land-owning family
29. Community 9, Marampa Chiefdom, Community meeting
30. Community 17, Maconteh Chiefdom, Community meeting
31. Community 18, Maconteh Chiefdom, Community meeting
32. Community 18, Maconteh Chiefdom, Community meeting
33. In interviews with representatives from two of the companies, we were told that people from the community understood that they would have to wait for actual development until the company makes enough profit. Follow-up interview with former Member of Parliament at the premises of one of the companies, November 2019 Marampa Chiefdom.
34. Community 26, Gbekeloko Chiefdom, interview 8, young man from a land-owning family
35. Community 8, Marampa Chiefdom, interview 8, young man from a land-owning family

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