



INSIDE THE GRABBED LAND: SPACE OF COLONIAL PERSISTENCE IN KENYA.

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on land dispossession operated by large corporations, and the way they produce spaces of exceptions, through peculiar structures and sovereignty systems that differ from the state-based administrative settings in which they are located. The paper focuses on phenomena occurring in large agricultural estates, with closer focus on the Teita sisal cultivation scheme in the Taita-Taveta county of Kenya, the largest sisal estate in the world, established during the colonial time. The scheme is a great attractor of migrant workers, a choice made by the administrators to avoid potential conflicts with the neighbouring communities, who still consider those fields as their communal land. Different working tasks are racialized and bodies have to function to be valued as resource. Inside the camp, life and work are regulated with meticulous biopolitical order in restricted conditions. Patrolled borders and gates keep distance with the neighboring communities who claim the progressing expansion of the estate dispossessing land, roads and the river, but are legally defined as squatters. Recent grabs have also interested arid lands, where a new game reserve and tourist lodges have been established. In relation to this private company, the national state maintains a soft hand, avoiding conflicts and putting on the plate of the scale expected introits from taxation. In reporting this case study in this conference, my interest is to present situations of oppression on both sides of the borders of the estate lands: struggles that remain parcellized and hidden. There is a need for new possible solidarity linkages between groups confronting realities of grabs in Kenya and Africa, to support their political empowerment and rights to environmental and resource justice.

CAPITALIST SPACES, COLONIAL PERSISTENCE AND BORDERING.

African countries are still deeply shaped along colonial structures, both political and productive, for instance through agrarian spaces (Cooper 1990, 2014; Minoia (1996, 2012a). Large estates in Africa are capitalist spaces having special characters of colonial continuity, with managing units activating patronizing relations with workers and other used resources. Colonial persistence is not always easy to recognize in situations of unclear

conflict, or lack of open conflict. In most cases, land grabbing occur under unresponsive State regimes or with the endorsement of local governments, adhering to modernization narratives linking extensive landholdings to intensified production and secured crop, revenue and jobs (although Li 2014, among others, has explained how these processes cause new poverty). In some cases, land appropriation is even justified by *force majeure*, to face declared ecological degradation via protected areas: i.e. enclosures privately managed as game parks with leisure and tourism economy. While green- and plantation-estates increase, open and available space for local and indigenous communities shrink dramatically, making it impossible for small farmers and pastoralists to secure a living to their families.

Colonial spaces are more than spaces of capitalist production. They create *critical junctions* (Kalb and Tak 2005) through time, space, relations of power and dependency. Their infrastructures shape the space so to transform their territorial processes, as “living mediation of what organises life” (Berlant, 2016). Large-scale irrigation schemes, for instance (in Sudan: Minoia 1996; in Morocco: Minoia 2012) activate physical and immaterial processes that enforce practices of eviction and racialized control. Moreover, colonialist large estates create distinct domains that do not only relate to strict economic cycles but also involve specific regulations, politics, societal and household relations. These structures of power interact paternalistically with their subaltern subjects, seen as radically insufficient and in need of their protection and, sometimes, own care systems that are unrelated to those provided by the State.

Borders are fundamental tools for segregation and rejection of mobile people (German, Unks and King 2017); they do not only aim to defending national spaces from outsiders, but also internal districts, involving different levels and scales, within states. Bordering practices are enacted through fences, gazettement, privatization and unequal entitlements; they all act towards excluding people, producing otherness and environmental injustices, obstructing rights over resources and spaces. People may face different levels of borders placed by different actors. Space sovereignty does not only pertain to public actors but also to private entities and corporations having powers of territorial control.

The African continent presents a reality of many living practices that are traditionally on the move, but interrupted by different bordering types. While national borders are directly inherited from colonialism, their enforcement has been brought through infrastructures that have produced new State's spaces. In these cases, borders – even those made to protect natural resources and biodiversity - have been placed over (naturally) borderless ecosystems and obstructed mobile forms of living of social and ethnic groups, and other non-human species, while creating space of strict territorial control inside them. Some examples of newly constructed State bordering territoriality through farming have been observed in Northern Sudan. Irrigation schemes in Nubia, Khashm el Girba-New Halfa in the East, and Gash-Tokar delta agricultural schemes at the border with Eritrea, were established for multiple aims: for cash crop productions of high export value, for water exploitation, land acquisition, deportation of landless farmers and stabilization of nomadic groups, demographic re-engineering of the country by mixing ethnicities in segregated spaces, and finally, for strategical occupation of the State margins (Bertoncin et al 1995, Minoia 1996). In these cases, therefore, territorialization was produced through manipulation of water, land and other natural resources and capitals. Production cycles, organizations and crop species were firmly decided from the above, through authoritarian regulations. Traditional practices and territorialities were unrecognized and deleted.

Similar space control and bordering phenomena happen with national parks. One example is the Volcanoes national park that was established in Rwanda at the border with Congo, at the expenses of indigenous Batwa population, displaced forcedly to another area of the country, in a new housing scheme on the eastern border with Tanzania (Minoia 2012b). Recalling environmental goals is a patronizing mode to maintain the territorial control over human and non-human bodies, and to justify various kinds of environmental injustices.

With the transformation of postcolonial states from developmentalist to neoliberal models, private companies have become the new dominant actors in large-scale farming. The selloff of State-managed schemes and new land grabs of communal lands have let to a concentration of large private holdings.

Land enclosures, no matter their property, through their marginalization of smallholdings and grazing exacerbate the combined effects of climate and environmental changes and make subsistence more challenging (Hastrup and Olwig 2012, Elhadary 2014). Bordering practices limit traditional mobility and shifting practices protecting livelihoods from soil and water erosion. Circularity, seasonality, and other temporality forms of mobility, especially within and from rural areas, were aimed to extend the spatiality of livelihoods through common routes, pasturelands and cultivation shifts, as number of ethnographers have described (e.g. Lebon 1961, Gallais 1984, Minoia 1996, Hohenthal et al 2015): for instance, wide arid and semi-arid areas in Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa like those of grazing and nomadic practices supported by artesian wells along the ways

(FIG 1: migratory routes in Sudan); rainfed agricultures on communal areas that are temporarily assigned, by rotation; and returns to native lands.



Fig. 1: Migratory routes in Sudan (Lebon1961)

Similar patterns happened also on humid zones, where grazing and agriculture could follow seasonal river flooding and controlled slash and burn practices in forested areas, for instance in the Taita hills of Kenya. Agro-silvo-pastoralism could be organized flexibly along ecological variations like those of meteorology and flooding.

Land titling cause rigidity of land use, and marginal farming (fig.2) is encroached by the expansion of private estates, national parks, ranching for tourist animal sanctuaries and mineral prospectors.



Fig.2 Marginal farming in Northern Sudan, outside an irrigated land.

Land privatization and capitalist exploitation, constraining natural resources within fences and reducing spatial mobility for production and reproduction of local people, together contribute to the current migratory crises. The invisibility of these changes, territorial rigidity and spatial control by a minority, have obstructed the resilience of local groups, either pastoralists or small farmers.

Migrations imply passages towards status of otherness, into somewhere migrants do not belong. This moving-out projects the migrants in a status of bare, dangerous life and political disempowerment (Reid 2011). This also happens when borders to be crossed are not those of national frontiers, but also for those of properties, infrastructures, areas of segregation.

The domestic character of these barriers to flexible mobility, due to modernity, has normalized the idea of the loss of entitlements by indigenous groups. The crisis is produced by progressive environmental variations summed to unequal power relations manifested through authoritarianism within the controlled spaces, and bordering practices. However, spatial shrinking for local communities and resource injustices deriving from exclusive, highly concentrated entitlements, are still largely unchallenged politically.

LAND PRIVATIZATION IN KENYA

In Kenya, the land reform after State independence disorganized the rural systems that were under traditional control. In many cases, land distribution and the new titling are said to have benefited a generation of farmers, which had to start apply new norms in their forms of living. Distributions were performed along ethnic and genealogical lines and did not reach all households. Land privatizations and titling were bio-political acts creating exclusion, barely protecting small beneficiaries, and disabling the excluded ones. A large part of Kenyan population still practice pastoralism, and their search for natural pastures conflicts with arable crop requirements. The un-entitled ones, especially pastoralists, became *outsiders*, unwelcome, blamed for their poverty and accused for environmental damage, such as wood collection, water collection for their herds, and soil erosion. However, even the small farming units are rarely sufficient to support households. Various public reports confirm this vision of small farmers as mismanagers of their own environment. In reality, their lives are spent around land work, investments, protection, exchange, heritage, evaluation, division and many other practices around the reduced, exhausted plot; or with the risk of animal attacks - especially monkeys and elephants moving from Tsavo East Park - that destroy crops. Conflicts between people occur, whatever the environment and even if it rains properly. Often, farmers finally sell it to urban investors who enlarge their domain, and together with land, they offer their own workforce and become sharecroppers or salaried workers. Outside the borders of private land, people cannot simply change their mobility practices and move somewhere else; in case of need, no common resources are to be redistributed.

Even more than diffused land distribution, larger schemes have produced visible territorializing impacts. New waterscapes appear since economic and political structures create new ecologies. In some cases, changes have occurred from the early independence phase under the Kenyan State regime, or by corporations that could continue from the colonial times as they were not nationalized (Hornsby 2012). One example is the large-scale sisal plantation in Mwatate, Southern Kenya: a farming monoculture established during the colonial period, but whole extension is progressing at the expenses of neighbouring communities; recently, its extension has interested also the arid southern fringe to create a wildlife sanctuary, said to protect biodiversity and wilderness and to make profit from tourism. Ranching in Kenya has expanded as a practice of protection of livestock and wildlife from predators, and a large number of private ranches belong to foreigners.

INSIDE THE LARGE-SCALE SISAL SCHEME

Teita Sisal estate is an extended close domain, the largest sisal estate in the world with an official extension of 30 000 acres (fig 3), and the third producer after Brazil and China (??). Land grabbing by the Teita estate started during the colonial plantation time. The processing of sisal involves several stages, namely decortications and extraction of the fibre, drying, brushing and baling. While it persists with the sisal monoculture production, a more recent expansion of the land in the southern arid zone, has allowed to establish a game reserve including luxury tourist lodges. The new park ranching is said to protect biodiversity and wilderness and to make profit from tourism on a land who is considered as arid, empty, with no value. The former use of nomadic and seminomadic pastoralists were not considered, and on the contrary, their distancing is claimed as increasing security, especially for those of Somali origin who do transboundary moving.

We conducted field research in South-Eastern Kenya, and particularly in the area of Mwatate where a large corporation occupies, since the colonial times, the Teita sisal cultivation and processing scheme. Visits of outsiders to the estate are generally forbidden, and we could only enter once, in 2014. Previous requests, also from other researchers, were denied, and on that occasion, we had to keep our cameras and recorders inactive. We could only speak to two foreign members of the administration board of the estate, one of which escorted us during the visit. We could not interview any of the workers. We waited some years before publishing the result of that observation to avoid conflicts, also because our funded research had another specific focus, looking at the perceptions of resident communities living outside the scheme, about water problems vis a vis to bureaucratic knowledge (Hohenthal et al 2018). During the interviews, however, it became clear that the sisal estate had a role in the water issues in Mwatate, and that the estate's use caused a limited access by the population. Clearly, the relation between resident communities and the sisal estate was still problematic, and unresolved by the local

government. Not only the access to water was the cause, but also land, that people living outside the estate were claiming.

The area is accessible from few gates, with guards patrolling them, especially to keep the neighboring communities distant. To get in, permits are needed. The estate has enclosed public roads, which the local government had asked to keep accessible, but these requests are ignored. The national state maintains a soft hand, avoiding conflicts and putting on the plate of the scale expected introits from taxation.

Mwatate River delimitates the eastern borders of the estate but it is a border controlled by the estate, and waters are primarily for the estate's uses. The owners tolerate outsiders to collect water; however with some restriction that was reported in periods of drought. Despite the longtime of the estate occupation, the land is still considered by locals as a grab that should return to them, especially since the estate continues to expand, keeping the tension high. During the time of our visit, in fact, many protests lead to rebalance justice and restitution of grabbed land. Especially the Singila Majengo people claimed the loss of 30,000 acres of ancestral land in 1991 (Mwandambo 2015) were the estate planted sisal; this grab had caused eviction of more than 6000 people (Mwadime 2015). Because of more than 20 years of fights, squatters could not settle permanently or produce any farming. Other requests from other communities made a total of 70 000 acres that the Sisal estate should return. So far, in 2016, only 200 acres of land were returned to the Singila community (Mkanyika 2016).



Fig. 3: Teita sisal estate, Mwatate, Kenya

Inside the camp, life and work are regulated with meticulous biopolitical order in restricted conditions. The estate is a grand attractor of migrants: internal production is made by largely non-local workforce that the interviewed administrator clearly defined as belonging to distinct ethnicity, so that different physical characteristics can be exploited to better serve the cycle's needs. The administrator we interviewed spoke of the following characters: muscularity, height and agility. What is this, if not colonialism and racial segregation at the service of

foreign capitalism?

The description about the "virtues" of the estate and the white patronizing superiority continued with the account of the services provided there by the estate: housing, schools (including at least a public one), groceries, churches, funeral and similar types, so that workers were discouraged from crossing the borders of the estate. However, retirements or other disabilities make the workers lose the right to remain and the need to empty their houses for their substitute. Old disabled workers have to cross the borders again, in state of difficulty and precarious/end of living. Segregation then occurs by age, ethnicity and physical state, but compared to the communities living outside the plantation, they remain silent and politically passive subjects, subaltern to the estate rulers. Lack of unionization and silencing make these stories invisible.

CONCLUSIONS

Post- and neocolonial histories show segregation, dispossession of communal lands, privatization, fragmentation, overexploitation and deforestation, against the traditional mobility strategies, and constraining transhumant herders and farmers to immobility status.

The paper has focused on spaces of accumulation in Africa and the specific case of the sisal estate in Taita, Kenya. Authority, property and bordering have been fundamental in preserving this form of capitalist occupation having territorializing effects, similar to those of states.

Recent grabs have also interested arid lands, where a new game reserve and tourist lodges have been established. In relation to this private company. In reporting this case study, my intention was to present a situation of oppression on both sides of the borders of the estate lands: struggles that remain parcellized and hidden. There is a need for new possible solidarity linkages between groups confronting realities of grabs in Kenya and Africa, to support their political empowerment and rights to environmental and resource justice.

