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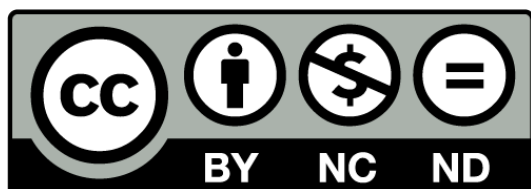
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# “BEING, BEING WITH, BECOMING AND DOING WITH”:

## THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY IN OUR ANALYSIS OF ‘LAND GRAB’ OUTCOMES

By: Rama Salla Dieng

**T**here has been growing concern across Africa by activists and policymakers alike around the question of land rushes

(especially after the 2007-2008 land rush) often framed as “land grabs” (see Oya 2013b, Dieng 2017), and their implications for local communities. This “global land rush” emerged in the turbulent context of socio-economic and political transformations. While the drivers, scale and actors in this renewed interest in land (and labour) are still contested, a body of knowledge interested in its differentiated impact and outcomes, as well as political reactions to these deals, is still growing (Hall et al 2015). It is important for us to consider however that land deals “do not occur in a socio-economic or political vacuum” (Oya 2013b: 1550). They are interventions connecting capital with labour with previous and ongoing dynamics of place-making resulting in uneven, unfinished processes of social change. Not only do land deals re-shape the places in which they occur, they are also an expression of capitalist expansion across the globe.

Feminist, postcolonial and decolonial scholars have contributed to acknowledging that mainstream models with their limited interpretation of ‘the economic’ are grounded in gendered cultural values and norms, though the recognition of this has been late and partial (Barker et al 2003, Pollard et al 2011, Zein-Elabdin 2016).

My interest in the topic of land grabbing has been partly inspired by interest in land issues, and partly the experience of my mother who lost her land in Senegal due to a large-scale state-led infrastructure development project in 1996 and recovered it only 21 years later, in 2017. This article draws on extensive fieldwork in Northern Senegal, experiencing the emergence of commercial horticultural farming and horticultural markets. To shed light on the socio-cultural outcomes of ‘land grabs’, the research involves mixed research methods (survey, focus group discussions, life stories and semi-structured interviews).

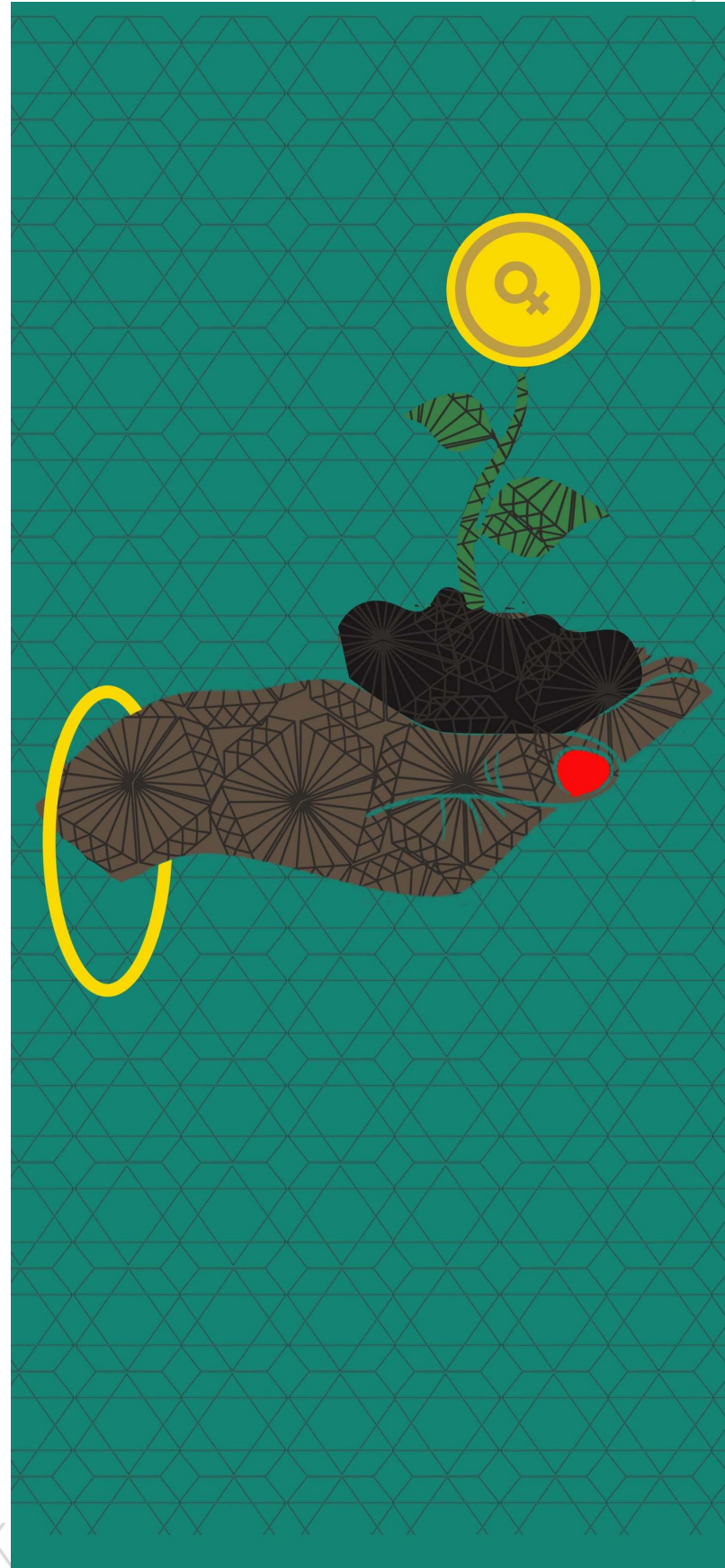
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<sup>1</sup>This paper is an excerpt of my yet-to-be published PhD thesis at SOAS titled: “Contemporary land rush and Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Senegal (2006-2017)”. I am grateful to the interviewees and respondents of the survey. I would like to thank the Mo Ibrahim Foundation for granting me a PhD scholarship for my doctoral studies at SOAS. I would more particularly like to dedicate this paper to my sister Ndèye Anta Dieng (1985-2019) who came with me to Northern Senegal, supporting me as a research assistant and as my main support system, helping look after my little one; and ii) my family for their unwavering support. I also thank my supervisors at SOAS, especially Carlos Oya, my main advisor. Finally, I also thank Jessica Horn, Dinnah Nabwire and the AWDF team for their useful feedback and for including me in this excellent initiative.

This article compares two case studies<sup>1</sup>: an export horticulture estate and a scheme funded by an international financial institution in communities based in the delta of the river, in Northern Senegal. These communities are experiencing the boom of commercial horticultural farming and rural labour markets after the 2007-2008 land rush whose effects sediment with and build on previous dynamics of social differentiation. In this article, I challenge the tendency to over-focus on either narratives emphasizing dualisms such as ‘insiders vs outsiders’ or prioritising economic (and gendered) outcomes of ‘land grabs’. More specifically, I combine feminist and decolonial methodologies which interweave the personal and the political, to demonstrate how, if used together, they can enrich the ‘land grab’ scholarship especially within political economy.

This allows me to argue that questions of land are fundamentally gendered and intersect with generation, marital and social status, kinship among other factors to influence class dynamics of agrarian change. In addition, land also shapes and is shaped by socio-political and cultural relations, alongside economic dynamics. As a result, ‘land grabs’ and horticultural work operate crucial shifts in ‘having land’ or ‘having a job’. Analysing such shifts in the *longue durée* is key to understanding how land deals influence the *emic* production and (re)presentation of the self, others and society. I recommend that there is a need for political economists and policymakers to adopt the intersectional lens dear to feminists in our analysis of outcomes of changes in land relations following new agricultural investments

and to re-embed them in their socio-cultural context for a holistic understanding of new and pre-existing dynamics in order to integrate land use changes from the point of view of the research participants (*emic* perspective).



# BRINGING THE SOCIAL BACK IN

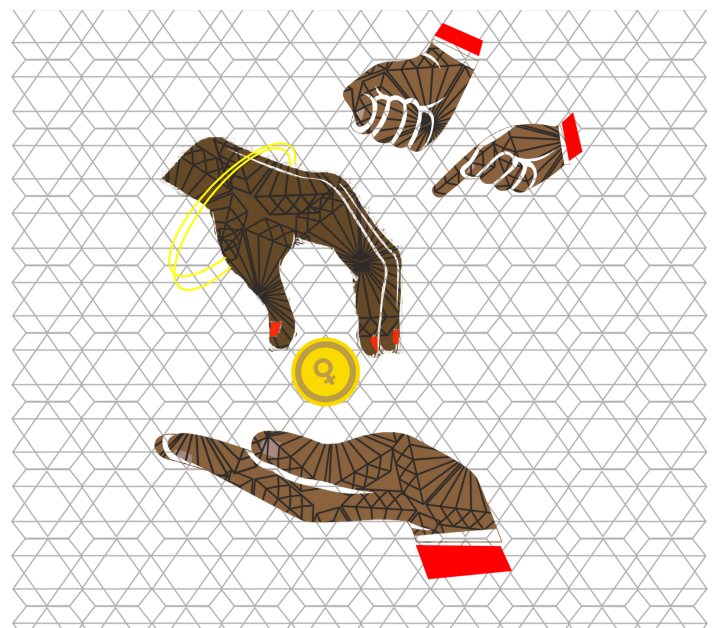
Much of the scholarship on “land grabs” and agrarian change in Africa concentrates on processes of land acquisition (including the role of the state) (Cotula 2013, Wolford et al 2013, Edelman et al 2015), politics of evidence (Oya 2013a, 2013b, Dieng 2017), reactions to it (Borras et al 2013, Hall et al 2015a), socio-economic outcomes (Hall et al 2015b), implications for the classical agrarian question (Oya 2013b) as well as gendered dynamics (Behrman et al., 2012; Hall et al., 2015; Tsikata and Yaro, 2014; Mbilinyi 2016, Chung 2017). Only lately have questions of belonging in space-making in the aftermath of land deals been explored (Githigaro 2017). Other political economists have also recognised the need for a holistic approach paying equal attention to socio-cultural and economic aspects of agrarian change.

This is the case of Akram-Lodhi (2018<sup>2</sup>) who suggests, in his definition of critical agrarian studies, the centrality of a multidimensional class analysis by “identifying and exploring the cultural, ecological, social, political and economic factors and forces that facilitate or impede class formation”.

Similarly, Berry (1993: 12-14) says that in both neoclassical and Marxist political economy, culture like power “is treated as exogenous or subordinate to economic systems and processes”.

Archie Mafeje (2003) proposes that there is more than one way to understand the relationship between agrarian change and social development, and that “mono-economics” should not lead in the analysis of the agrarian question (and land tenure) in Africa. Dzodzi Tsikata argues a similar case when she considers the social relations of lands deals (2015). Finally, the Senegalese philosopher, Souleymane Bachir Diagne (1991: 2) argues that “one cannot be economically right if they are socio-culturally wrong”. Put simply, culture, economics and social dynamics matter when we speak about land.

There is however a need to re-interrogate our framings of the question of land rushes in Africa, and move beyond explaining every phenomenon through the logic of capital (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015; Tafira and Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017). It is therefore important to analyse the political economy outcomes of the shift from ‘having land’ to ‘having jobs’, as well as increased capitalisation and marketisation, translate on the ground.



# THE LAND RUSH IN SENEGAL AND METHODS

I conducted fieldwork on the question of land rushes in Senegal and the UK between March 2017 and June 2018 using mixed research methods, and focusing in particular on land deals that took place between 2006 and 2012. The interest in land acquisition in Senegal has risen steadily over the past two decades.

The Land Matrix reports a total of 34 intended, concluded and failed land deals in Senegal between 2003 and 2018. The total intended size of the deals was 539,460 hectares, the contract size 327,229 hectares and surprisingly as of 2018, only 21,686 hectares were in production. However, 63.6% of the total deals took place between 2006 and 2012 according to the Land Matrix<sup>3</sup> Repository- hence the reason for focusing on this period. The geographical focus of this article is Northern Senegal (more precisely the Delta of the Senegalese River in the region of Saint Louis).

In this article, I will focus on two particular land deals in order to draw out my argument:

1. A case concerning an export agribusiness with under 500ha involving British capital and involving over 6 villages in the region Saint-Louis.
2. A case involving an international financial institution (IFI) in Senegal, in the same villages in the region Saint-Louis.

Land affects social, political, economic, cultural and environmental relations due to its “social embeddedness” (Polanyi 1944). Therefore in this paper, I use “land grabs” as an entry point to analyse the ways in which land constitutes a crucial marker not only of identity (being) and belonging (being with), but also success: (becoming), class and property (livelihoods and owning), belonging (being with) and participation and inclusion (doing with).

This is key to understanding how land deals influence the production and (re)presentation of the self, others and society. In my analysis, I am interested in a more holistic approach for understanding processes of agrarian change. This approach will not only allow me to overcome the difficulty of defining what a land grab *is* by responding to what it *does*, but to contribute to challenging the discourses homogenising so-called gender-less and class-less “victims, “winners” and “local communities”. I use a feminist scholarship combined with critical political economy to document the many changing stories of rural African men and women, whose lives are much more than simply economic.

# BEING AND BECOMING

My observation in the two communities in question is that there has been an increasing redefinition of social values and norms which valued the collective over the individual<sup>4</sup> due to increasing marketisation and capitalisation.

Young people, for instance, were earning a living earlier than previous generations, which put them in a position to contest various forms of social hierarchies or traditions. Previously they depended economically on the oldest male of the household, and were therefore they we considered as surge, junior dependents. In these communities, junior working men generally built a room of their own at the back of their father's house with their support to have some private space (*beru*). They had access to a small plot of the family land to cultivate, however their independence would only be total when they marry. Even then, they would still remain *surga* (socially dependent) to their father and elders.

However, with increasing financial autonomy with the emergence of horticultural labour markets, some young horticultural workers, for instance, would no longer give the largest share of their salary to their parents as is traditionally the norm. In addition, rather than building rooms, more and more junior men were investing in building a flat of their own in the family compound, which they could occupy with their future wife. There was also competition amongst young men (and their families): how far a man went up the social ladder was measured by the material used to build a house (cement or not), the number of storeys, the equipment in their rooms and how well they dressed<sup>5</sup>(Interview).

This race for social status within and between families mirrored the increasing competition amongst villages (and their chiefs) about attracting providential investors summarised by this laconic sentence “mine (my project) is better than ours” (Interview). This situation underscores the rise of individualism in societies where previously the group was more valued (Diop 1985), and solidarity constituted a social safety net for the most deprived.

Figures of success and being a “person of value” have also shifted in rural Senegal and opened up possibilities for “becoming with”. In previous generations, success was generally defined by wealth, social networks, and status. Pathways to success were also shaped by migration and mobility as illustrated by the 4 Ts “*Tukki, Tekki Tedd, Terale*”: “Travelling, making it, succeeding socially, and helping family and friends”. A general tendency observed in the interviews and life stories that I documented is that wage work provided new avenues for upward social mobility.

'Becoming someone was now possible without having to travel as illustrated by the many stories of workers who returned home and their recurrent claims to “have made it at home” (*tekki fii*).'

Becoming someone in the farms allowed workers to “have a name” without travelling for everyone to witness. In addition, the expansion of horticultural farms and rural labour markets has also widened the aspirations of uneducated workers which

somehow opened pathways of success far away from literary education, and entrepreneurship. In doing so, it also allows for new itineraries of accumulation.

Despite this, the values of seniority were less eroded than other social norms. Several interviews revealed that even old and powerful men still respected older men or women no matter their class. The notion of “*kilifé*”, authority, is still central. This can make the oldest son return to the village immediately after the demise of the father or other older male figures to take over their duties towards the family, lineage and social group. Community life remains gendered, perhaps more so in Wolof and Pulaar villages, and less in the other villages in which men and particularly husbands tend to take part in domestic work.

In Mbane, Ngalam and Ngnith, most men were part of cooperative groups who articulate and defend their common interests. They would sit under the village’s palaver tree to discuss important issues whilst women took care of unpaid care work. Women remained central in the organisation of ceremonies and used an important part of their salaries as a ceremonial fund. They were also engaged in collective forms of saving: their monthly *natt* (tontines) allowed them to combine ceremonial activities and forms of social reproduction and organising (economic interest groups - GIE). Through these GIEs, junior men and women sought to obtain land, not through inheritance or gifts from family, but through other channels such as the local community (Commune), or through private schemes. The women I lived with in all the villages were conforming to dominant subservient gender roles in public, but in private they voiced their

opinions loud and clear. Several interesting stories were relayed by the village chief who played the role of mediator in conjugal or domestic conflicts.

These shifts towards more individualistic and cross-cultural understandings are certainly part of a long-term process of change. I suggest that they are unexceptional elements of every dynamic and evolving society, though marketisation might have given economic means for some to exercise their rights to decision-making over their own destiny.

'Becoming someone was now possible without having to travel as illustrated by the many stories of workers who returned home and their recurrent claims to “have made it at home” (*tekki fii*).'





# (POLITICS OF) BELONGING AND OWNING

Land grabs have also affected how people view and respond to people deemed to be “other”, and contribute to changing socio-cultural biases, but also in some cases to an expanded notion of who “belongs”. An important socio-cultural dynamic is the politics of difference, how some people are “othered” in order to define the limits of belonging. Most villagers reported changes in local habits, a “rise in crime and violence”, or simply “smoking” and “moral deprivation”. Rising levels of violence and insecurity that follow land grabs have been documented elsewhere (Li 2017). As one villager said: “before, you could leave your bag on the road, go to the village and come back, and it will still be there until tomorrow”.

While this might seem like a romanticising of the past, it also cohabits with politics of othering between different groups: “before the company, if you lost your cattle, you immediately knew it was the Pulaar, now they are busy working”. This shows how social groups reorganise against new outsiders.

Studies in Ghana (Amanor 2001) highlight a “narrowing of the definition of belonging” and new divisions within family, lineage, kinship group, neighbourhood, the broader village and company. However, these sediment with previous ongoing dynamics while reinforcing yesteryear micropolitics between “late-comers” and “new-comers”, “natives and strangers”, which is a particular feature in West Africa (Kuba and Lentz 2006:12, Kea 2012). This is also illustrated amongst local capitalists: the local competitors of one of the corporate investors used the argument of “economic nationalism”

to re-define the contours of belonging, even though in this case, othering clearly serves the purpose of excluding an economic competitor. This illustrates the ways in which identities are weaponised against certain social groups to influence the distribution of rents, thus the need to differentiate between belonging per se and “politics of belonging” (Yuval-Davis 2011, Kea 2012) as illustrated here in the case of land deals.

Migrant workers’ experiences in more traditional villages are revealing of the politics of othering. A supervisor and senior manager both testified to being socially discriminated against when they arrived in the village. After residing in the village and sharing the same food they felt more accepted.

**'In Diama and Ngalam, European supervisors were courted, respected and feared while African migrants faced unfriendly treatment, as they were considered “ñak”. This Wolof word is used to “other” other African nationals.'**

Though increasingly taken to mean stranger or outsider, this term originally meant “frontier or barrier”. This is an example of “the politics of belonging” (Geschiere et al. 2000; Kuba et al. 2006, Githigaro 2017) defining the social fabrication of “autochthony” and “indigeneity”, and present in other communities in the African region.

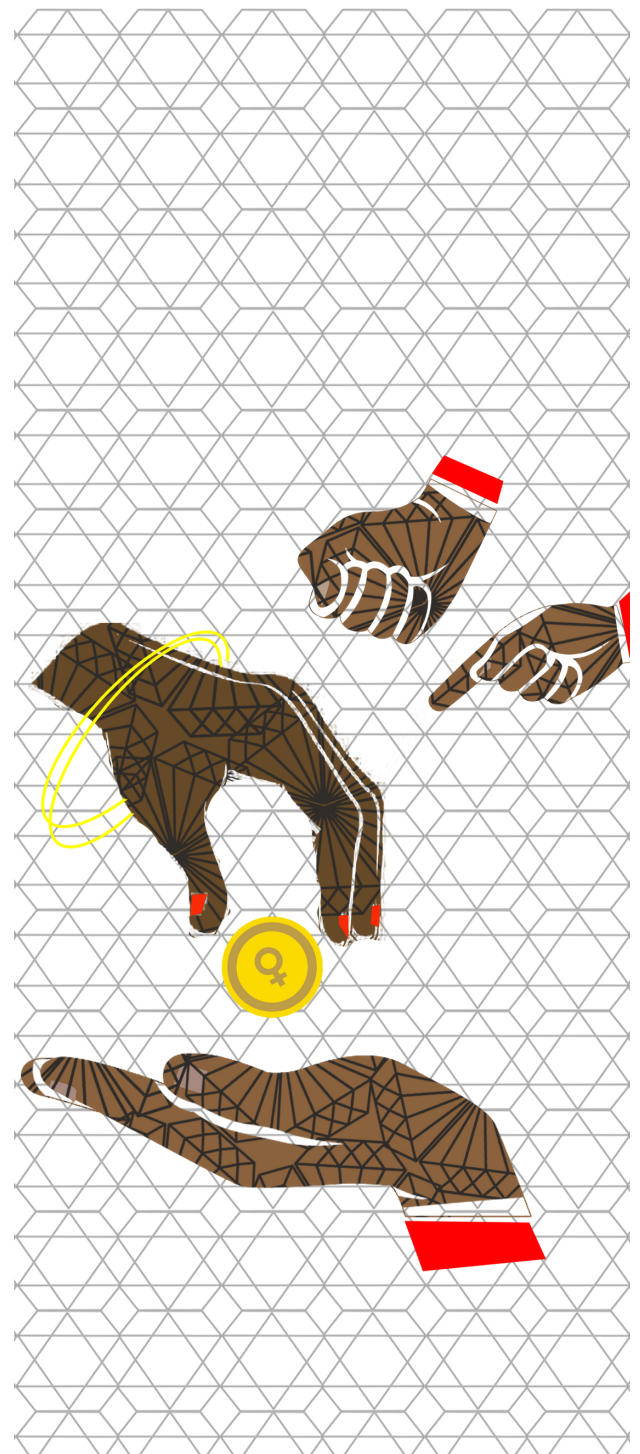
The claim “that one is an original inhabitant of a given area and therefore belongs to the area, leading to the exclusion of those not considered original inhabitants”, is a pervasive social phenomenon in the North Rift Region of Kenya for example (Githigaro 2017: 83-95). Such images of community allow different social groups to articulate claims. The above and confirms that there are stakes behind the redefinition of contours of belonging and citizenship. This allows villagers to defend their rights to jobs, or other elements of rent (redistribution), while othering outside the family, the lineage, the village, etc.

Whether the current increasing of labour mobility leads to more forceful forms of exclusion through the politics of belonging (Geschiere et al. 2000:448-9;) in the aftermath of the “land grab” is uncertain. However, increasing politics of identity may just represent a more “mundane” manifestation of already existent capitalist relation (Li 2014).

What is certain is that migrants do manage to exert their rights to acquire property despite rural communities’ formal conditions of residence and primacy of rights of “autochthones” compared to “allochthones”. Fieldwork data tells us that 61.25% of the migrants were (sole or joint with their spouse) house owners, which is evidence of the tendency of migrants to acquire land assets and settle (regardless of reason for migration, and gender) against 80.49% for locals.

In addition, across all villages, workers testified that working in agribusinesses had created new social relations, fostered cross-cultural understanding and led to inter-marriages. There is evidence to suggest there has been a decrease in discrimination on the basis of social

stratification because at the farm “we are all wage labourers”. As a worker who is ñyeeño (supposedly lower caste) testified, while recognising that at the beginning, especially at families of previous slave-owners and their former slaves or supposedly lower caste, would not mix or talk”. This was confirmed by a supervisor who said: “each group would stay in their corner. But things are much better now: they even invite each other to social events outside the farm”.



# “BEING WITH” AND “DOING WITH”: THE POWER OF “INCLUSION” AND “PARTICIPATION” AS DISCOURSES

I found that in the selected areas, though land holdings had not significantly changed, modes of access and enjoyment of land and forest resources were affected by the land rush. I offer to illustrate this with the two case studies from Yamane and Ngnith. Before that, I provide a short overview of the main routes for women and junior men to access land. Previous studies have found that women access land mainly through their husbands and to a lesser extent through Rural Councils when organised in women’s groups, GIEs - Economic Interest Groups - or collectives (Sow 1992; Tine and Sy 2003).

This is corroborated by my survey:

**'Women were found to access land mainly through inheritance or gifts from their husbands in the selected areas. This can be explained by the fact that traditionally women do not own land in the Wolof society, and only have enjoyment and use (usufruct) rights permitted by Islamic succession laws on which most current family law is built.'**

Therefore, women inherit property as a wife (a quarter or one eighth of a male share depending upon whether there are children), as a daughter (half of a male share), or as a mother or relative. Women can also receive land as a gift or obtain it through the local authorities.

Access to land through male intermediation poses a problem for women’s rights.

Article 15 of the Senegalese Constitution acknowledges formal equal land rights whereas article 152 of the Family Code recognises the husband as the head of the household entitled to use this power in the interest of his women and children. As for junior men’s access to land, it has been seldom studied in Senegal, but their access and control of land is determined by their position in the family or kin group and older, wealthier and high caste men are more likely to own/access/control more land (Lastarria-Cornhiel 1997: 1320).

Therefore, household heads and oldest sons are more likely to control land in Wolof and Pulaar society, whilst younger men’s ownership of land is less likely in a context of scarce land availability. Land plays a major role in shaping masculinity as land is decisive in constructing gendered roles and identities. However, both unmarried men and women still have access to family lands as explained in previous sections. For women, ownership is not access, they can access family lands as is the case for unmarried men in Yamane.

The corporate investor in Yamane received 200 hectares from the rural community, and “villagers” too received 200ha, without recipients being named and with no mention of how the land would be shared.

My host family received in total 13.4ha which they shared with their cousins. Following the land deal, the populations of these villages were grouped into GIEs led by community leaders to improve sharing the land. Heads of family received plots almost 12 times bigger than those of other married men in the family. In both cases, women and unmarried men did not receive individual land titles but two female GIE were created and received collective land titles. This illustrates how shrinking land resources have been redistributed at the village level.

Inspired by this land deal, an international financial institution requested land and was allocated 500ha by the commune of Ngnith to develop an agriculture project involving a corporate investor and small producers. As in the previous first case study, 230ha were for the population and 270 for the same corporate investor as in the first case study, with in this case 50ha for women and another 50ha for youth groups.

The project was not able to install the irrigation schemes as planned. They conducted surveys to assess the opportunity costs for the population who were not able to start producing at the same time as the corporate investor due to delays in irrigation. Based on these surveys, and after several meetings, compensations were offered to the landholders (mainly senior men) to enable them to work on their plots. Those who received compensations were very satisfied.

**'Most women I interviewed were never invited to the meetings and at one of the meetings I attended, the only women present were the wives of one local chief and another senior woman.'**

As for younger men, those present were also part of the local elite (sons or nephews of leaders). I use this example to illustrate how

the same way genderless “winners” and “losers” do not help us to understand the complex effects of these deals, approaches that just “add women and stir” do not work (Cornwall 2003:1338).

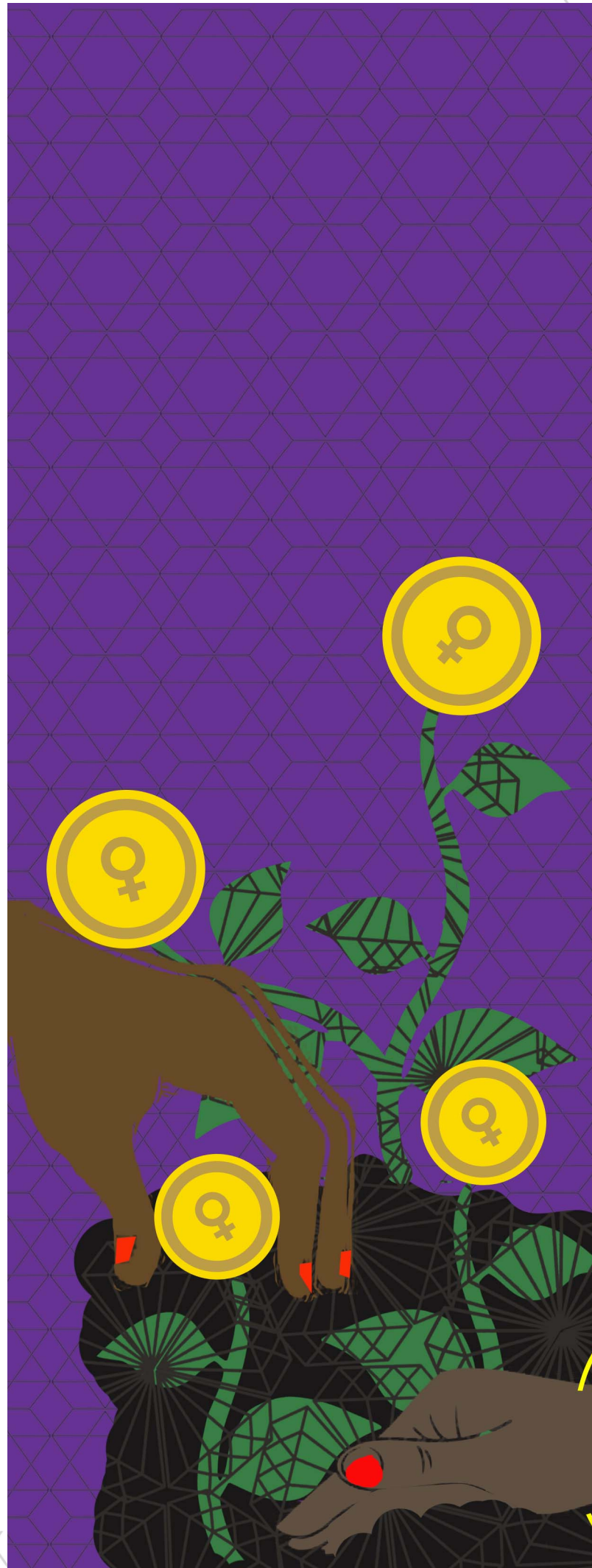
Whilst this example shows how most women were not “at the table”, the attendance of senior women led me to reconsider my views. They attested to being elected to represent other women, yet the meeting was being held at 2pm and so many women could not attend. The wife of the Pulaar chief said she was designated by her peers to attend the meeting on their behalf. This reproduces the elitist nature of representative democracy with the female elite occupying the same privileged class position as men. I use this example to illustrate how ideas of the “add women and stir” approaches to being inclusive do not work as “voice does not automatically translate into influence” (Cornwall 2003: 1329). Participation does not guarantee inclusiveness.

Land rights are not granted on the basis of the application of statutory law but through “the triple heritage”: African, Islamic and colonial influences (Bass et al 2006), as well as customary practices generated divergent understandings of how land should be governed notwithstanding the existence of the 1964 land law. Customary land practices can offer women secure land rights under certain circumstances as previous research has shown (Carney and Watts 1990; Ossome 2014; Verma 2001; Wanyeki 2003). I however recommend reconsidering what our understanding of buzzwords such as “inclusion” and “participation” (Cornwall 2007) are at the light of the results obtained through such processes. Do they increase the target populations’ influence over decision-making or not?

# CONCLUSION

The renewed interest in land in Africa, especially after 2007 has led to land being viewed as a new strategic asset. The drivers of this rush sometimes referred to as ‘land grabs’ are contested, as are its actors and scale, creating a fierce debate between activists, academics and politicians. This battlefield of competing claims on evidence about outcomes with a focus on economic dimensions.

In this article, I focused on land as a source and a resource, within and beyond economic considerations. I considered the ways in which land shapes identity by analysing the social meanings of shifts from “having land” to “having a job”. This led me to underscore what pre-existing and emerging shifts appeared with regards to “being, becoming, belonging and succeeding” with the emergence of horticultural labour markets in Northern Senegal. Doing so allowed me to reconcile social formations and forms of production, base and superstructure for a more holistic analysis of land deals outcomes rather than a fragmented reality of its alleged “intersecting” facets. This analysis birthed a key recommendation for policy-makers to adopt an intersectional lens. It is hinged on the belief that “There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives (Lorde 1984).”



# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The original fieldwork involves 4 case studies.

<sup>2</sup><http://roape.net/2018/03/28/what-is-critical-agrarian-studies/>

<sup>3</sup>[https://landmatrix.org/media/filer\\_public/c5/20/c520a5a1-d407-464b-a89d-d364edecaef6/7969\\_up\\_psard\\_land\\_matrix\\_senegal\\_country\\_portfolio1.pdf](https://landmatrix.org/media/filer_public/c5/20/c520a5a1-d407-464b-a89d-d364edecaef6/7969_up_psard_land_matrix_senegal_country_portfolio1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>As illustrated by the expression: Man is Man's best remedy

<sup>5</sup>Younger women will remain a *surga* forever, leaving their father's and brother's guardianship only to be placed under their husband's, if they marry (Diop 1985).

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