Geoforum xxx (2016) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Mapping for investability: Remaking land and maps in Lesotho ☆

Charles Fogelman *, Thomas J. Bassett

Department of Geography & GIS, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 605 E Springfield Ave., Rm. 255, Champaign, IL 61820, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 28 February 2016
Received in revised form 7 July 2016
Accepted 18 July 2016
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Mapping
Land reform
Cadastral maps
Lesotho
Land titling

ABSTRACT

Maps are instrumental in the commodification of land and its exchange in markets. The critical cartography literature emphasizes the "power of maps" to (re)define property relations through their descriptive and prescriptive attributes. But how do maps work to achieve these outcomes? This paper examines the notion of maps as "inscription devices" that turn land into a commodity that can be bought and sold by investors. It is based on the analysis of a land reform project in the Southern African country of Lesotho. In contrast to the prescriptive notion of maps as inscription devices we argue that cadastral maps are better understood as processual. Maps are only powerful in concert with contingent social forces in changing political and economic contexts. We use the example of cadastral mapping and land sales in a peri-urban village in Lesotho to make the case for a more dynamic notion of maps and mapping in understanding the work they do in making land investable.

1. Introduction

Maps are at the center of an ongoing land reform in Lesotho,[1] a small and mountainous country of two million people in Southern Africa. The reform is focused on the urban and peri-urban areas around Maseru, the capital, and has effectively ended customary land tenure within the city limits. In place of a land rights system led by chiefly allocation, the reform has implemented a system of leasehold titling. The vast majority of these leases are either individual or joint leases, and they are alienable and freely exchangeable. This new system, which privileges "willing buyer, willing seller" [WB/WS] exchanges of land, has effectively done away with a customary tenure system that privileged flexibility and shared land use.

Southern Africa is the scene of many contested land reforms, largely because of its recent independence struggles and history of settler colonialism. Unlike the "populist land reform" in Zimbabwe (Scoones et al., 2012), Lesotho's more closely mirrors that of its neighbor, South Africa, where pro-poor reform based on WB/WS tenets has been called a "failed experiment" (Lahiff, 2007), that "will not unravel years of colonial and apartheid dispossession" (Ntsebeza, 2007, 129) and "would allow rural social relations to be undisturbed, and nationalization of productive economic activity would be kept to a minimum" (Bond, 2002, 37). Despite a regional history of failure (including in Zimbabwe, where a post-independence WB/WS agenda is often blamed for political unrest there over the last two decades (Bond, 2002; Mamdani, 2009; Moyo, 2014)), Lesotho's reform falls squarely in the WB/WS camp. This is due in large part to the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the U.S. government international development agency that sponsored Lesotho's reform. The MCC is devoted to "poverty reduction through economic growth," and WB/WS reforms are consistent with this market-led development strategy. It devoted over $20 million to the passage and implementation of *Land Act 2010*, the piece of legislation that provided for leasehold titling in Lesotho.

The legislation that legally ended customary tenure in Maseru and moved to leasehold titling was not new. In fact, the *Land Act 2010* was nearly identical to the legislation it replaced, *Land Act 1979*. The 2010 law succeeded where the 1979 law failed almost entirely because of a surveying and mapping project financed by the MCC. In 1979, there was no state or donor money available to pay for surveys of land parcels, but surveys were a necessary component of a lease application. Prior to the 2010 Land Act, anyone who wished to apply for a lease had to pay a surveyor to delimit the land parcel. The high costs of these services combined with the resistance of chiefs to the loss of their customary land allocation power resulted in little land titling.[2] In the 2010 case, 55,000

☆ Support for this research was provided by the National Science Foundation (NSF award #1333186), the University of Illinois Department of Geography and GIS, the University of Illinois Graduate College, and the University of Illinois Women and Gender in Global Perspectives Program.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: fogelma2@illinois.edu (C. Fogelman), bassett@illinois.edu (T.J. Bassett).

[1] A note about word usage: *Lesotho* is a Southern African country, inhabited by *Basotho* (singular: *Mosotho*), whose language and culture are *Sesotho*.

[2] Chiefs proved entrepreneurial and maintained their power by routinely backdating allocation papers to read 1978, effectively grandfathering those allocations into a time before leases were mandated.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.07.008
0016-7185/

surveys (the estimated number of plots in Maseru) were paid for by the MCC. This surveying project led to the creation of a cadastral map and land register, the first near-complete property map of Maseru in over a century, when the population was in the hundreds, rather than the hundreds of thousands (Ambrose, 1993). In this paper, we consider the building of this cadastral map as illustrative of the relationships between mapping and "rendering land investable" (Li, 2014). We argue that viewing maps' roles in rendering land investable as "inscription devices" ascribes alchemical powers to them. We contest that view, and propose that the concept of *mapping* is more helpful in understanding how a cadastral map works in the world and helps to render land investable. In making this argument, we draw upon debates within critical cartography on the "power of maps" (Harley, 1989; Wood and Fels, 1992; Crampton, 2001, 2009; Wood, 2010; Kitchin and Dodge, 2007; Dodge et al., 2011).

Recent research in critical cartography is largely in agreement about the "constitutive" nature of maps. That is, scholars believe that maps play a role in producing territory rather than simply representing it. Where authors differ is on how maps do this work and on the (im)mutability of that work. Harley and Wood and Fels view the map itself as producing certain effects, like commodification, taxation, or dispossession. For Kitchin and Dodge, maps "emerge in process" through technical and ideological practices "*to solve diverse and context dependent problems*" (Kitchin and Dodge, 2007, 340, 342, emphasis in original). We share this processual view of maps that emerge "through contingent, relational, context-embedded practices" (Kitchin and Dodge, 2007, 342) in our discussion of mapping for investability in Lesotho.

2. Land, cadastral maps, & mapping

Land is not, in and of itself, a commodity or a location of investment. It must be made so. In short, it must be "rendered investable." Tania Li explores this process in a paper that asks "What is Land?" According to Li, land is something we typically call a "natural resource," which "is a provisional assemblage of heterogenous elements including material substances, technologies, discourses and practices" (Li, 2014, 589). These resources never exist in their raw form, but instead are always mediated by the "heterogeneous elements" that comprise them. Among those elements are what Li terms "inscription devices," such as axes, plows, and maps. The inscription device, a term coined by Bruno Latour, is a tool or apparatus that simplifies the complex; these devices "can make the things they say they are talking about easily readable" (Latour, 1983, 161). Land titles are an example of an inscription device; they provide a readable solution to complex social, political, and economic problems. Titling is an effort at simplifying a more complicated land rights system that resists easy representation and readability. In Lesotho, that complex land rights system was the domain of chiefs from the colonial era until the execution of *Land Act 2010*.

Under customary tenure, a parcel of land in rural Lesotho had many legitimate users. Farmers often formed partnerships with other farmers, with livestock owners in grazing partnerships/loans (*mafisa*), and worked communal land held by the chief for the common good (Turner, 2005). Flexible land use arrangements like these, which served as a form of safety net for the poorest in a community, were contingent on powerful chiefs and an adaptable land tenure regime. One scholar went as far as to say that Lesotho's existence depended on these overlapping land rights arrangements: "Without these sharing mechanisms, Lesotho would not have survived the 20th century" (Turner, 2005, 1). Village chiefs have traditionally managed these multiple land rights systems; their power over the land also gave them power over the structure of land use and of labor use, by helping determine who performed what agricultural and pastoral duties in a village. In effect, the land rights system in Lesotho was qualitatively different before *Land Act 2010* and widespread urban and peri-urban titling. Under customary allocation, land was a social good that had individual users, but also elements of common property; a multitude of people could have some type of usufruct rights to one piece of land. With the surveying, mapping, and leasing of land under *Land Act 2010*, this flexible land rights system was replaced by a more precarious one in which the land use rights of an entire community could be alienated by a single outside investor.

Land is not inherently a commodity; it must be made into a good fit for exchange and investment. As Li phrases it, "Land's diverse affordances make it especially challenging to assemble as a resource available for global investment, and yet this work is sometimes accomplished and investments proceed." Land commodification is achieved through a multitude of actors, including investors, states, technologies, etc., all helping to define a common end shared by those investors and states: land as commodity that can be bought and sold. Mapping is an inscription device that creates a condition where land can be freely exchanged. It appears apolitical, even as it does the work of defining land as a simplified place of measurable and objective characteristics, despite its social complexities. Li, following Demeritt (2001, 439) calls this simplification of complex phenomena into precise and measurable components "statistical picturing."

Cadastral maps – maps that define precise locations, boundaries, ownership, and tenure of property rights – are predicated on a number of assumptions. Chief among these assumptions is that the answer to the question "what is land?" is easily enclosed within a mapped representation. To make a cadastral map is to remake land from the institutions and social relationships that create and maintain it. This map-led remaking is consistent with Li's assertion of maps as "feats of assembly work." In effect, this is a view of maps as both ontologically secure and prescriptive. Considering maps as prescriptive contrasts with the more common view that maps are essentially representational. Cartographic theorists from Robinson (1952) to Harley (1989) argued that maps are representational; that is that they demonstrate a certain truth about reality (as Robinson would argue) or about ideology (Harley's perspective). In contrast, Li asserts that maps have specific powers that do work in the world. Her view is consistent with James C. Scott's explanation of a cadastral map's role as prescriptive, in that it both simplifies and alters reality.

> Thus a state cadastral map created to designate taxable property-holders does not merely describe a system of land tenure; it creates such a system through its ability to give its categories the force of law.
>
> [Scott, 1998, 3]

Scott's point is crucial to the argument that maps are inscription devices; they do not only reflect and describe a certain reality. Maps also *create* a new reality that is more consistent with the aims of mapmakers and their sponsors. This is particularly true with the cadastral map, which redefines land as an economic good that is governed at the scale of the state, rather than a social good governed at the community scale (Watts, 2004). The map, in this formulation, redefines land as a good that is transferrable. This changes the way that land is "socially embedded" within a given territory (Peters, 2004).

Scott's argument is echoed by that of Wood and Fels (2008), who contend that maps are *prescriptive* rather than simply *descriptive*. They call this the "power of the map to establish, almost in the religious sense" (Wood and Fels, 2008, 192). Their view is a Latourian one consistent with Li and Scott; the map is an inscription

Please cite this article in press as: Fogelman, C., Bassett, T.J. Mapping for investability: Remaking land and maps in Lesotho. Geoforum (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.07.008