



Land sales and the transformation of social relations and landscape in peri-urban Mali

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ABSTRACT

Small-scale land acquisitions are transforming long-standing human–land relations in West Africa. In particular, high rates of urban population growth lead to the transfer of land from non-market customary tenure systems to market-based, formal land tenure regimes on the edges of cities. The literature suggests that the conversion process from inalienable land to private property is highly contested, locally specific, and historically contingent. However, little is known about how this process affects a community. In the Kati cercle on Bamako's peri-urban eastern edge with exponential growth in land registration, this village case study examines: (1) how residents secure livelihoods, and (2) how the advent of a land market affects livelihood strategies. Interviews conducted in 2011 in the village of Soro complement data collected in 1996 and 1987. The longitudinal data show increases in population as well as indicators of relatively stable livelihood strategies. Since 2001 only men in the chieftancy lineage and families close to it have sold land, and that land was of least value to them using the subsistence logic of grain production. Those authorizing land sales at the local level are also the immediate beneficiaries. Land privatization reduces access to resources for those with secondary land rights recognized through social relations in a customary tenure system. This study concludes that public policy in areas undergoing land conversion – especially peri-urban areas – should consider the impact of social differentiation in communities and how new land values will change land use and access.

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1. Introduction

Rural Africa's large-scale land acquisitions make headlines (Baldauf, 2011; Daily Nation, 2009; Donnelly, 2009; MacFarquhar, 2010; Smith, 2009; Vidal, 2010). Characterized as land grabs or foreign direct investments depending on the perspective, large-scale land deals in African countries transfer thousands of hectares of land to foreign entities, either governments or private corporations (Cotula et al., 2009). More common, but less-publicized, small-scale land acquisitions are transforming long-standing human–land relations (Cotula, 2012; Hilhorst et al., 2011). High rates of urban population growth fuel demand for land on the edges of cities where people are willing to pay for land. Land sales result. Most of the resulting land sales mark the transfer of land out of non-market customary land tenure systems where social relations determined access to land. The conversion process from customary tenure to private property and state regimes is highly contested, locally specific, and historically contingent (Amanor and Ubink, 2008; Lund, 2006; Moyo, 2008; Sikor and Lund, 2009; Toulmin, 2008). The consequences of both the conversion process and its contested nature

for social relations and the use of land itself in peri-urban communities are not well known.

While land conversions occur across Africa and other regions of the Global South, the unprecedented urban expansion of West African cities is creating a particularly dynamic land market bonanza in peri-urban zones.¹ This paper focuses on Bamako, Mali, with a population of 1.8 million (République du Mali, 2009) that grew 4.8% annually in the decade 1999–2009, one of the fastest rates of urban growth in the world (United Nations, 2009). This rapid growth came after 23 years of dictatorship that ended in 1991 and the subsequent implementation of policies to decentralize political administration.

Based on fieldwork in January–February 2011 and the author's previous field studies in 1996 and 1987 (Becker, 1990, 1996, 2000, 2001), this study examines the impact of the burgeoning land market on the case study village of Soro in peri-urban Bamako (Fig. 1). The village population was 779, with 39 farm households. The author interviewed representatives of each household. These interviews provided information on demographic change,

¹ “Peri-urban” refers to a transitional zone between rural and urban areas where at one end of a continuum agricultural villages, such as in this case study, have many ties to a city, and areas entirely absorbed within a city are at the other extreme (Simon et al., 2004).

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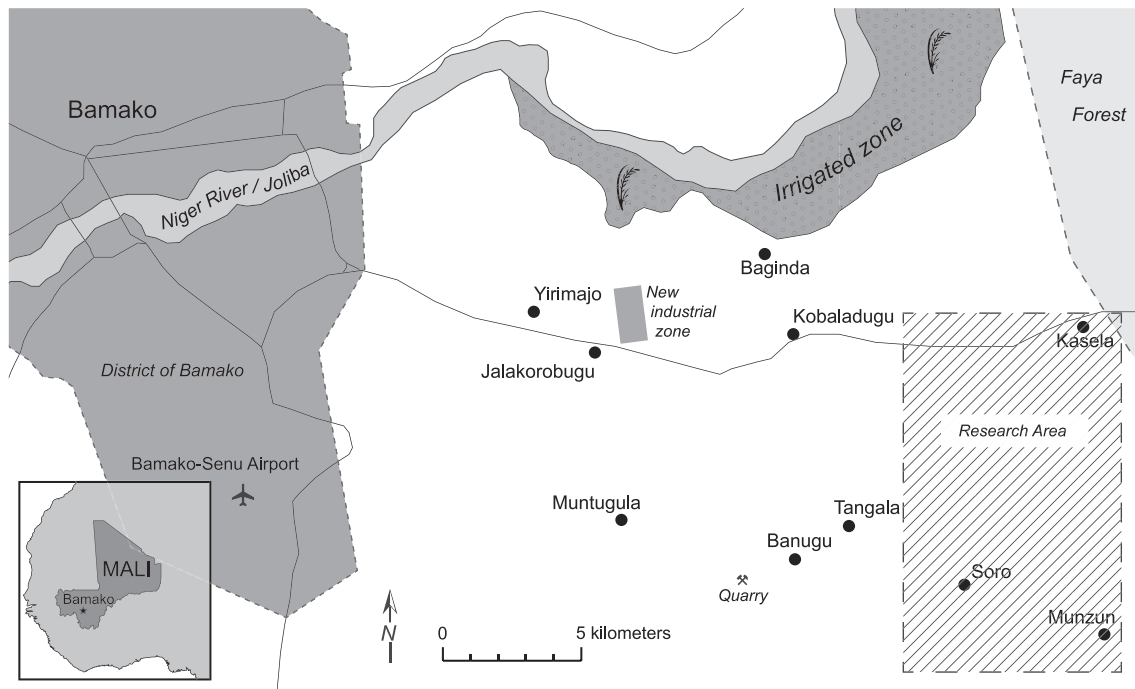


Fig. 1. Research area. East of Bamako and south of the highway linking the capital with the nation's second largest city, Segou, the case study village of Soro is in the peri-urban zone. (Map by Chris Becker.)

household dynamics, and production. They also served as a starting point for new questions, especially regarding land sales, that the author investigated through interviews of women, household heads, junior men, and school teachers (in both the study village and the neighboring village of Munzun). Participant observation in the case study village—its settlement core, three spatially separate hamlets, market gardens, fallow fields, savanna forest and pasture, plus neighboring villages—provided additional information.

Specifically, this study investigates how peasant farmers up until now engaged in subsistence agriculture, as well as market gardening, shea butter processing, firewood collecting, and livestock raising forms of commodity production respond to a new land market. The research seeks to explain (1) how villagers secure livelihoods, and (2) how the advent of a land market affects livelihood strategies. The location of the case study village in the southeastern portion of the *cercle* of Kati adjacent to the District of Bamako is particularly well-suited to examining agrarian change where farmers have access to land through lineage rights but in the last decade began to sell land. Unlike the informal, oral, customary land tenure system, the new urban-based purchasers of the land seek formal registration of their landholdings. Djiré (2007) found in the Kati Land Registry that only four titles were registered by 1947, and that even by 1988 the total was still fewer than 200 titles. Exponential growth occurred from 1996 to 2005, with over 5800 new titles registered during a 2-year period, 2003–2005. In this setting, how do farmers gain access to land through the customary land tenure system? How do they secure their livelihoods? When land sales begin, what are the consequences?

2. Contested legitimacy of access to peri-urban land in West Africa

Uncertainty, rapid change, and dispute mark claims to land in peri-urban spaces throughout West Africa. New land markets on the peripheries of the region's cities have created large areas where the co-existence of customary and state-derived land tenure sys-

tems causes ambiguity in land policy (Arko-Adjei et al., 2010; Dauvergne, 2010; Gough and Yankson, 2000; Mabogunje, 1992). Lund (2007: 673) refers to the institutions that play ambiguous public authority roles in Africa as “twilight institutions”: “They defy clear-cut distinction.” The lack of clarity stems from ongoing struggles for land control. On the one hand, customary land authorities derive their legitimacy for land decisions in non-market values framed with reference to historical cultural practice. On the other hand, state authorities claim legitimacy through legal systems initially imposed by colonial states and modified since independence.

With reference to Southeast Asia but relevant to West Africa, Hall et al. (2011) argue that these competing institutions must be understood through their differentiated powers of exclusion. Various powers shape claims to land including first-come status, lineage, payment, and documentation. Ultimately, all land use and tenure inherently create both security and insecurity for different groups and individuals since where land is scarce some inevitably lose access. In this way, the land pressures of peri-urban zones reflect deep historical social, economic, and political struggles.

In customary African land tenure systems, certain social actors derive their powers to exclude others from land based on a broadly accepted notion of land as the heritage of ancestors. In this view, land is inalienable. Those believed to have first cleared land and their descendants thus have legitimacy in allocating land to others who come later (Toulmin, 2008). In a primarily subsistence-oriented farming system, the principle of assuring food for the community influences decisions about allocating land to newcomers (Mabogunje, 1992). Meillassoux (1981) showed that the lineage heads in West African subsistence farming systems who have access to land through their social relations to the perceived first-to-clear land are motivated by the twin goals of food production for household livelihood security and the reproduction of descendants. A lineage head holds land, is responsible for the reproduction of the group, and is “the guardian of his tenure heritage.” (Verdier and Rochegude, 1986: 12). Where land is not a commodity, its non-market values define cultural identity

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