



The Social Relations of Agrarian Change

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The literature on land grabbing and agricultural commercialization has established that there have been major changes in the agrarian political economy over the last three decades. However, the implications of these for agrarian social relations have not been given full consideration. This paper examines some of these questions, identifying agreements and contestations about the implications of agrarian change for social relations, particularly those of class, gender and kinship, which are key to the production and reproduction of the agrarian political economy. We argue that issues of growing social differentiation and inequalities need to be addressed both by the literature and in policy discussions.

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Summary

The social relations that underpin the organisation of livelihoods are pivotal in the processes and outcomes of agrarian change. This makes them a key piece in debates about the trajectories of sub-Saharan Africa's agrarian economies and societies. In the last few decades, momentous changes in the world economy have contributed to significant changes in agrarian systems in sub-Saharan Africa. These developments have been the subject of a new body of work on land grabbing and agricultural commercialization which has not sufficiently addressed social relations. However, there are debates about agrarian change that raise longstanding questions about social relations.

This paper examines some of these questions, identifying agreements and contestations, suggesting new research to improve the conceptual and empirical bases of debates about the social relations of agrarian change. The paper focuses on some key debates about the state of social relations in a context of agrarian change, specifically, a) the nature of customary laws of land tenure, which constitute the main institutional framework for agrarian social relations; b) the future of patron–client relations; c) the trajectories of gender, kinship and inter-generational relations and d) host-migrant relations. While these social relations do not operate in separate channels, they are discussed separately for analytical clarity and consistently to the literature.

The paper first examines the debates about the effectiveness of customary laws. Initially seen by evolutionary theorists as problematic for the establishment of land markets, responsible for many of the deep-seated problems of land tenure systems in Africa, customary tenure seemed to head towards extinction as a result of demographic growth, agricultural intensification and the individualisation and commercialisation of land rights. By the 1980s, there was much contestation about customary land law, particularly its capacity to support the development of healthy land markets and agricultural intensification and development. A number of studies commissioned and directed by the World Bank concluded that contrary to previous assessments, customary land tenures were flexible, adaptable and well suited to commercial agriculture. The paper also discusses the critiques

of this more positive view of customary law, which include the observation that it belies the high levels of contestation and conflicts around access to land and terms of access across Africa.

With regard to patron–client relations, the paper argues that they are often, though not always the basis of various land and labour relations in the agrarian political economy that are regulated by customary law. These include agricultural tenancies, cooperative labour arrangements for production as well as relations which occur in the sphere of exchange such as grain marketing in Northern Nigeria.

The paper notes that debates about patron–client relations in the 1970s and 1980s sought among other things, to explore the connections between the pre-capitalist and capitalist labour forms underpinning the agrarian political economy. Some expositions of patron–client relations in this period stressed the elements of solidarity in these relations, while others argued that they were inherently coercive, particularly in entrapping the poor in a vicious cycle of debt, credit and force, with no alternative means of survival. This fault line in the literature survived into the 1990s and after.

Some studies examine the future of patron–client relations, while others stress their continued importance to the agrarian political economy, arguing that these are not a hangover from pre-capitalist relations, but are instead an integral aspect of capitalist labour. However, they also acknowledge that patron–client relations have changed along with the wider political economy.

With regard to the literature on gender, land and agriculture, the paper notes that there is a long tradition of highlighting economic and social processes implicated in agrarian change that have resulted in land tenure insecurities for certain groups of women. Some of the studies have demonstrated the gendered nature of access to material and non-material resources which has implications for the inter-generational transfer of assets, human resources, privilege and disadvantage. Other studies have also sought to differentiate among countries; regions within countries; kinship systems as well as among women arising from their life-cycle status - age, marital status, the age of their sons; marriage residence; and lineage membership.

The paper examines some of the criticisms of the gender and kinship literature. The first is that there is an over-emphasis on the structures of inequality underpinning gender and inter-generational relationships and insufficient attention to the agency of women. Also critiqued is the stress on conflicts among household members which downplays the substantial levels of cooperation and shared interests between husbands and wives and among household members and between them and their wider kin. It also underestimates the extent of rational commitments women have to household arrangements, including those which appear to be gender inequitable. The paper argues that while these caveats should lead to more textured and nuanced studies, it is important that these studies enable us to understand clearly the state of gender relations.

The social relations connected with conflicts among different land uses and land users such as that between sedentary farmers and pastoralists. The paper notes that some of these studies examine the long term processes of dispossession which are reshaping pastoralist livelihoods, entrenching vulnerability and pitting pastoralists against sedentary farmers.

More generally, the paper finds that questions of citizenship and autochthony permeate the literature on land tenure. In some cases, migrants were considered tenure insecure and vulnerable to unilateral modifications by landowners in times of land scarcity. More recent literature is suggesting that migrants with money are better off than poorer members of land owning lineages as the commodification of land gathers pace; with the result that autochthony is no longer an iron-clad passport to control of land. This is an issue which has long been a staple in the agrarian literature across West Africa and migrant-host contestations over land are considered responsible for some of the most serious civil conflicts in Africa.

On questions of policy debates which concern the social relations of agrarian change, the paper argues that there is an emerging consensus that there is growing social differentiation as a result of changes in the agrarian political economy that had resulted in the expansion of land and agricultural commercialisation, land concentration and growing land scarcity. Therefore, the paper argues that the starting point of policies should be to tackle land concentration and some of its manifestations within the agrarian political economy such as landlessness, poverty and food insecurity among smallholders. This suggests agrarian policies which prioritise decent livelihoods and food security for smallholders and promote equitable social relations and outcomes in a period of change. This policy agenda requires research which prioritises social relations of agrarian production systems and society. Addressing the land needs of pastoralists should be integral to land reforms in order to reduce land use conflicts between them and sedentary farmers, but also as part of the strategy for a diversified agrarian economy and food security.

Finally, the paper identifies research needs for policy making, arguing that they involve filling gaps in knowledge, advancing debates and mapping the changes in the social relations. A key area of inquiry would be agrarian labour relations, which are a foundation of agrarian change.

1

Introduction

The social relations that underpin the organisation of livelihoods are pivotal in the processes and outcomes of agrarian change (Bernstein, 2010; Berry, 1993; da Corta, 2008; Okali, 2012; O'Laughlin, 2001; Tsikata, 2009). This makes them a key piece in debates about the trajectories of sub-Saharan Africa's agrarian economies and societies. In the last decade, momentous changes in the world economy – the increasing financialisation of capital; a global financial, food and energy crisis; and a third scramble for agricultural land in Africa – contributed to significant changes in agrarian systems in sub-Saharan Africa. These developments have been the subject of a new body of work on land grabbing and agricultural commercialisation. Within this literature, discussions of social relations are struggling to fully emerge; however, the debates about agrarian change raise longstanding questions about social relations. These include the extent of dispossession of local communities and who have been most affected; social differentiation and emerging labour relations (Amanor, 2010; Moyo and Yeros, 2013); the role of the African state and dominant social groups such as owners of capital, bureaucrats, chiefs and lineage heads (Amanor, 2007; Lund, 2008); changes in customary law; the erosion of communal property systems and kinship relations; and emerging class, gender and inter-generational inequalities (Daley and Pallas, 2014; Doss *et al.*, 2014; FAO, 2013; Ossome, 2014; Tsikata and Yaro, 2014; Verma, 2014).

This paper examines some of these questions, identifying agreements and contestations about the implications of developments such as the expansion of commercial agriculture and growing land concentration for social relations. I then discuss policy options for reducing social differentiation and suggest new research to improve the conceptual and empirical

bases of debates about the social relations of agrarian change. This approach situates social relations within processes and developments in the broader agrarian political economy and enables an examination of how the political economy frames social relations and how changing social relations are in turn implicated in developments within the agrarian political economy (Okali, 2012; O'Laughlin, 2001; Razavi, 2003).

Social relations are defined here as the structured and systemic interactions of different social groups and individuals within those groups for production, exchange, consumption and reproduction, which are governed by institutions such as markets, states, civil society and households. The key social relations within the agrarian political economies of sub-Saharan Africa are class, patron–client, gender, kinship and generation, as well as the host–stranger relations of race, nationality and local citizenship.

In their operation, the different social relations intersect and interlock in complicated ways, reinforcing or qualifying privilege, advantages, hierarchies, inequalities and disadvantages, a situation referred to as intersectionality in the literature (Crenshaw, 1989). Furthermore, the bases and substance of social relations can change, for example when petty commodity producers revert to subsistence production and free labourers become tied labourers; or when women move from domestic productive work to wage work outside the household (da Corta, 2008).

Social relations are constituted in economic, social and political hierarchies which enable certain groups and individuals to accumulate material and non-material resources. In the agrarian political economy these include land, labour, capital, technologies, knowledge, various skills and social and political status (Hall *et*

al., 2011). Thus differences in interests, strategies and power are the hallmark of most social relations. For example, with respect to labour relations, employers are looking for reliable supplies of cheap, disciplined and obedient workers, while labourers are looking for good wages, terms and conditions; security of tenure; the ability to press for better conditions and the mobility to seek higher wages in other employment. Where employers prevail, Marxian scholars see exploitation through surplus labour appropriation, while others see mutuality and choice (da Corta, 2008).

Efforts to analyse the social relations of agrarian change have tended to privilege relations of production, and with it, labour relations. However, relations of exchange which occur at different levels and scales among a wide range of persons – producers and traders; traders of different scales, goods and services; and traders and consumers – are also important (da Corta, 2008; see also Foster-Carter, 1978). While space does not permit a substantive discussion of this and the relations of exchange in this paper, it is important to keep these relations in view for future research agendas.

The production focus also ignores the contribution of reproductive labour or care work, mainly undertaken by women, to productive labour and to the reproduction of the agrarian political economy as a whole (Okali, 2012) – the present paper devotes some space to reproductive labour. To set the context for examining the debates about social relations, we turn to some of the important developments within the agrarian political economy since the colonial period.

2

Phases of agrarian transitions

The colonial and early post-colonial period

The main features of the agrarian political economy in much of sub-Saharan Africa were established in the colonial period when the drive for export commodities fuelled the commercialisation of agriculture, mining and other natural resource extraction activities. These developments created land and labour markets and growing social differentiation albeit with specificities for the three main types of colonial economic arrangements: smallholder economies (mainly in West Africa), plantation economies (mainly in Central Africa) and settler economies (mainly in East and Southern Africa). These were distinguished by (a) their levels of land concentration, inequalities in the size of land holdings and the extent of smallholder landlessness; and (b) the character of their labour regimes and the extent of forced labour, wage employment and labour migration; differences which could be seen in their levels of social differentiation and the state of key social relations.

Differences in colonial histories have been reflected in post-colonial agrarian economies across Africa, which can be distinguished by the extent of large-scale commercial agriculture, the development of formal land markets as well as levels of income inequalities and stages of agrarian transitions. However, post-colonial developments have begun to blur some of these distinctions, particularly from the 1980s and 1990s, when far-reaching economic liberalisation of macro-economic and sectoral policies, supported by land tenure reforms promoting titling and registration of land

and the liberalisation of land markets were instituted across Africa (Tsikata, 2009).

The period of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPS) and economic liberalisation

Structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 1990s laid the foundations for land and agricultural commercialisation, the expansion of surface mining and other large-scale commercial land uses. This increased land scarcity even in areas formerly considered land abundant and strained household production systems of smallholder families. Land scarcity has fuelled tensions between autochthons and migrants, chiefs and subjects, and land-owning family leaders and their members (Amanor, 2001; Van Hear, 1984).

During this period, new agricultural commodities whose cultivation required modifications in labour relations and regimes were introduced. The cultivation of cut flowers, spices, vegetables and fruits encouraged the entry of women into agricultural wage labour, thus diluting the male agricultural labour domination of commercial farming. This has taken labour away from smallholder farming and created a new class of wage labourers whose conditions are the subject of debate in the literature. Some studies have highlighted their low wages, poor terms and conditions and the incompatibility between their productive and reproductive duties (Barrientos *et al.*, 2003; Razavi,

2003; Smith *et al.*, 2004; Tsikata, 2009). Others have focused on the opportunities for economic emancipation and autonomy represented by wage labour for women (Sender *et al.*, 2006; see Smalley, 2012 for a more detailed discussion).

A common feature of agrarian change in Africa has been the diversification of agrarian livelihood strategies and activities. After debating the significance of diversification, researchers now largely agree that the fact of livelihood diversification is not necessarily positive or negative, as it could either be a survivalist/ coping mechanism or an accumulation strategy. In particular, researchers have found gender differences in the use of livelihood diversification, with women often doing this for survival rather than accumulation (Whitehead and Kabeer, 2001). Furthermore, even in situations where diversification improves livelihood security, there are trade-offs such as the lack of specialisation, poor technical efficiency and the diversion of resources from investments in production to investments in social relations, which could affect livelihood security (Berry, 1984; Peters, 2004).

However, there is an important strand in the diversification literature which has argued that the high numbers of peasants deserting agriculture altogether to improve their livelihood outcomes is evidence of a process of de-agrarianisation. Others disagreed, arguing that agrarian livelihood activities have always been diversified and have included off-farm and non-agricultural elements combined in different ways depending on the perceived opportunities and risks. They have instead described the expansion of wage work among smallholders who have continued to engage in self-employment and self-provisioning as a process of semi-proletarianisation which they argue is neither new nor linear (Mafeje, 2003; Moyo and Yeros, 2005).

More recent studies have concluded that households in rural areas often straddle agrarian and non-agrarian livelihood activities and/or try to make a living in both rural and urban areas. In some cases, people have returned to or taken up agrarian livelihood activities

as a response to crises of urban livelihood activities or new opportunities in the countryside such as land redistribution. This phenomenon has been described as repeasantisation (Moyo *et al.*, 2013). How widespread and sustained it is in any one country or in other countries, and what it represents in the discussion of agrarian livelihoods, is not settled. At the very least, the mixed profile of new small and middle farmers in Zimbabwe who include war veterans, retired officers of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, teachers and other professionals and ex-farm labourers points to a much more complicated sector, with actors connected and resourced in ways not usual for smallholders. Similarly, in describing recent contract farmers in south western Togo, Gardini (2012) argues that several of these are not poor smallholders, but rural and urban ex-migrants with savings to invest in land and commercial farming.

The countryside across Africa is also home to labour that is less dependent on earnings from agriculture, but also not easily absorbed within the non-farm economy. This is also the case in countries with fairly advanced agrarian transitions such as South Africa, where rural peoples' strategies for survival combine the straddling of rural and urban spaces with formal and informal sources of income and state sponsored social protection. Even in situations of agrarian transitions, agricultural self-provisioning remains an important part of the livelihood portfolio (du Toit and Neves, 2014).

The variations in livelihood strategies are challenging rural urban dichotomies in what is termed the new rurality, in which rural households are seen as "largely semi-proletarianised, semi-globalised and increasingly semi-urban" (Hecht, 2010, cited in Fairbairn *et al.*, 2014, p. 659). The different responses to the changing conditions in the agrarian political economy, within and between countries, which need systematic mapping and analysis to move the debates about changes in agrarian livelihoods forward.

3

Current features of agrarian farming systems

Since the 1980s, there has been a consolidation of three different models of commercial agriculture which co-exist with smallholder agriculture: large-scale plantations, contract farming and small and medium commercial farms. There is immense variation within each of these models even within the same country, depending on the crops cultivated, the period in which the model was established in the country, the level of land concentration and land scarcity in that country, and the pre-existing land tenure systems underpinning the models (Oya, 2012; Smalley, 2013). Despite these variations, the dominant social relations of the models can be distilled.

Plantations generally are capital intensive, centrally managed and utilise large tracts of land devoted to a single crop.¹ Plantations employ both permanent and casual workers, resident and non-resident labour, including migrants with a clear gender segmentation of work and reward systems (Behrman *et al.*, 2011; Daley and Pallas, 2014; Smalley, 2013).

Contract farming is when farmers agree to supply their harvest to a buyer usually at a determined price, time and quality. There are several models of contract farming, e.g. a nucleus farm operation with contracted out-growers who supplement the produce from the nucleus farm using their own land or land they have acquired from local owners. Some employment occurs,

but on a smaller scale than on a plantation, with the majority of local participants, often mostly male, recruited as contract farmers. While such farmers may not be dispossessed of their land, contract farming often entails some disruption of pre-existing livelihood activities and greater exposure to the vicissitudes of the global commodity trading system, more intensive labour demands and the loss of autonomy in decision making about livelihood strategies. Studies have observed a decline of foreign-owned plantations and the increasing popularity of contract farming in Africa (Oya, 2012; Smalley, 2013).

A commercial farming area is where several private commercial farms of small-, medium- or large-scale operate in the same area. Commercial farming sometimes involves central planning by private enterprise and the state, or may be internally driven by local farmers or migrants opening up new areas. Commercial farming is labour intensive, compared with plantations, and involves several possible labour relations: between farmers and the land owners they may have rented land from, between them and the labourers they hire and between them and members of their households whose increased labour is often the basis of commercial farm operations. Differences between plantation and large commercial farms are in some cases only a matter of degree (Smalley, 2013).

¹ While there is a debate about whether to scale farms in terms of their capital investments or size of land they use, from the point of view of local communities the land alienated by a farming operation is as critical an issue as its capital intensiveness.

The majority of farmers in the agrarian economies of most African countries are smallholders or peasants who mainly use their own and family labour for cultivating small farms smaller than 10 hectares (but usually not more than 2 hectares), for consumption and sale (Vermuelen and Cotula, 2010). These rely on very basic technologies, and increasingly, are net buyers of food.

Each of the agrarian production systems discussed above involves labour relations associated with social differentiation – share contracts, daily wage labour (for farm maintenance), piece work (for land clearing and harvesting), seasonal work on plantations, casual work of different kinds and permanent farm work (Amanor, 2010; Gardini, 2012). In the case of contract farming, there is differentiation between participants and non-participants, but also among participants. Some nucleus farm and out-grower schemes have resulted in landlessness among some former smallholders, who are not always the ones recruited as contract farmers. Contract farming is dominated by male farmers, with women mostly participating as household labourers or employees. Furthermore, the deductions taken from the earnings from crops to cover input costs, have led to reports of exploitation and indebtedness (Smalley, 2013; Tsikata and Yaro, 2014).

In the case of plantations, it is in the relationship between owner and paid farm workers and that among farm workers, between permanent and casual that we see differentiation, which is often along class and gender lines. The literature suggests that wage farm work can be one of the worst paid, most hazardous and least protected of all livelihood activities, particularly in the observed shift in recent decades from salaried to piece work and the greater reliance on casual as opposed to permanent workers (Razavi, 2003). As Smalley (2013) observes, some people take up plantation labour because of their poverty and

landlessness, while for others it is an opportunity to diversify income and raise cash for particular projects. This distinction is important in how plantations affect social relations, particularly between plantation workers and own-account farmers, small and medium scale; male and female plantation workers, permanent and casual; salaried and piece workers; and plantation workers and their wives, relatives and children.

Large- and medium-scale agriculture in commercial farming areas has been adjudged to provide more possibilities for local linkages than plantations and to also have more synergies with pastoralism (Ariyo and Mortimore, 2011; Shete and Rutten, unpublished). The possibility of technology transfer, with benefits for local agriculture has also been mentioned. However, like plantations, large-scale farms can disrupt access to land, and lead to the dispossession of smallholders. Also, given their lower levels of capitalisation, they may not be able to afford the wage levels that plantations can guarantee their employees.

The processes of consolidation of farming models has been accompanied by massive land dispossession described as a third scramble for agricultural land in Africa.² As a result, issues of dispossession, exclusion and social differentiation are once again topical in the land and agrarian literature (Borras and Franco, 2010; Cotula, 2010; Cotula *et al.*, 2009; Edelman, 2013; Hilhorst *et al.*, 2011; Kachika, 2010; Oya, 2013; Scoones *et al.*, 2013). This literature is, among other things, drawing attention to the acceleration of processes of local and national accumulation, which are of much longer duration and have contributed significantly to social differentiation and reinforced the more recent processes of land concentration (Oya, 2010; Peters, 2004). I turn next to the implications for agrarian social relations of old and new processes of land concentration.

² This development is known in the literature as land grabbing and has been attributed to the logic of the accumulation and the increasing financialisation of capital. There is general agreement that the scramble has intensified in the last few years in response to the combined global food, energy and capital crises from 2007 (Moyo *et al.*, 2012).

4

Debates about the social relations of agrarian change

This discussion of debates about the social relations of agrarian change focuses on four interconnected issues – a) the nature and implications of the customary laws of land tenure, which constitute the main institutional framework for agrarian social relations; b) the future of patron–client relations; c) the current state of gender, kinship and inter-generational relations; and d) the significance of host–migrant relations. While these social relations do not operate in separate channels, they have been traditionally discussed separately for analytical clarity.

Customary land tenure: fluid and dynamic or an obstacle to the development of land markets?

Land and agrarian relations in Africa are largely governed by customary law within a system of legal pluralism, in which statutory and customary laws are mutually constitutive (Stewart, 1996; Whitehead and Tsikata, 2003). This has generated much scholarly interest in customary law, initially seen by evolutionary theorists as problematic for the establishment of land markets, responsible for many of the deep-seated problems of land tenure systems in Africa and headed towards extinction as a result of demographic growth,

agricultural intensification and the individualisation and commercialisation of land rights (see Amanor, 2001; Cotula, 2007; Toulmin and Quan, 2000 for critiques of the evolutionary approaches). There was much contestation about customary land law, particularly in relation to its capacity to support the development of healthy land markets and agricultural intensification and development. In the 1980s, however, a number of studies commissioned and directed by the World Bank concluded that contrary to previous assessments, customary land tenures were flexible, adaptable and well suited to commercial agriculture (Bruce, 1993; Bruce and Migot-Adholla, 1994; Migot-Adholla *et al.*, 1991). These and other studies set up a counter-narrative against evolutionary approaches to customary law.

Peters (2013) pointed out that this more positive view of customary law belies the high levels of contestation and conflicts around access to land and terms of access. Studies from Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon and Uganda report endemic conflicts – in the high numbers of land disputes in the courts or before chiefs, the burgeoning land movements and civil society actions, everyday struggles of people against land expropriation and conflicts between different land uses and users (e.g. pastoralists and farmers, housing and agriculture, and agriculture and extractive industries), autochthons and migrants, chiefs and subjects and land-owning family leaders and their members (Akindes, 2004; Aryeetey *et al.*, 2007; Moyo *et al.*, forthcoming; Tsikata and Seini, 2004).

These resource conflicts are a reflection of the inequalities in access which underpin the accumulation strategies of some groups and adversely affect the fortunes of others. Customary law plays a role in this differentiation through norms, rules, conventions and practices that govern the control of capital and other productive resources; the labour relations between households; the division of productive and reproductive labour; responsibilities for household expenditures such as food, education and health; inheritance arrangements; and the distribution of maintenance responsibilities, productive assets, paid labour and the control of joint resources within households (da Corta, 2008).

A number of studies have discussed the ways in which land and agriculture commercialisation and other changes in the agrarian political economy have resulted in the erosion of the communal principles underpinning customary law and the conversion of collective land interests into private property, leading to land dispossession and social differentiation. Based on this, they have cautioned against an uncritical turn to customary law as the solution to land tenure problems (Amanor, 2007; Peters, 2003, 2007; Whitehead and Tsikata, 2003).

The contestations about customary law systems are also reflected in discussions about its future. Within feminist legal scholarship for example, attitudes to customary law are divided between those who recommend its replacement with statutory law rules and those who seek its codification as a strategy to increase certainty and do away with unconstitutional practices. Codification has its sceptics, who are concerned about the loss of flexibility and dynamism and also about the perpetuation of inequalities. There are also other scholars engaged in a positive reinterpretation of customary law rules as a strategy for reducing social differentiation and inequalities (Ossome, 2014; Whitehead and Tsikata, 2003). How these strategies, at the level of laws and policies, influence social relations on the ground needs more systematic consideration.

Patron–client relations: reciprocity, surplus extraction and decline?

Patron–client relations, defined as “the networks of dyadic relation centred on power figures the patrons, who control resources essential to the survival and well-being of the dependent groups” (Michie, 1981, p. 23). Patron–client relations are often, though not always, the basis of various land and labour relations in the agrarian political economy that are regulated by customary law.

These include agricultural tenancies such as the *abusa* and *abunu* tenancies in West Africa, where tenants are given one-third (*abusa* labourer), half (*abunu*) or two-thirds (*abusa* tenant) of the farm or the produce in return for their contributions to the establishment of the farm and its maintenance (Agbosu *et al.*, 2007; Lavigne-Delville *et al.*, 2002; see also Hamzaoui, 1970, for a discussion of agricultural tenancies as an example of patron–client relations in Tunisia and Algeria).

Other examples of patron–client relations for production are the cooperative labour arrangements, defined as the “joint performance of a task, or a series of sequentially related tasks by a group of persons practising a minimal division of labour whose relationship to the beneficiary, or beneficiaries, of their work is other than employer to employee” (Moore, 1975, p. 271). What distinguishes patron–client relations from other labour relations is their in-built mechanisms for perpetuation and the fact that they extend beyond the economic to the social and ritual as well (Moore, 1975).

Patron–client relations also exist in the sphere of exchange. The study by Clough (1985) of grain marketing in northern Nigeria is a good example. He uncovers a flourishing rural capital market in northern Nigeria, based on patrons exploiting the labour time and social capital of clients while appearing benevolent, and clients using the patrons’ resources and their own knowledge of the terrain to enter into more egalitarian social relations with others to maximise their returns (Clough, 1985; see also Cliffe, 1977 for an examination of a long tradition of patron–client relations in the agrarian political economy in East Africa).

Studies of patron–client relations contributed to a vibrant debate about their essential character and future in the 1970s and 1980s. Space does not allow a detailed discussion of this literature, except to observe that it sought to situate patron–client relations within the context of dependent capitalism. For example, Rothstein (1979) argued that dependent capitalism in developing countries, which results in the transfer abroad of much of the locally produced surplus, limits the distribution of benefits and therefore encourages clientelism. While the dyadic character of patron–client relations gives them the appearance of promoting individual rather than group interests, they typically occur between people of different social strata or classes, and service the reproduction of class relations (Michie, 1981).

Writers within the articulation of the modes of production tradition also argued that patron–client relations were one set of social relations underpinning the articulation of pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production. In this connection, patron–client relations, although pre-capitalist in origin, were now integral to the capitalist political economy (Foster-Carter, 1978).

Some expositions of patron–client relations in this period stressed the elements of solidarity, strong and weak, in these relations, often expressed as interpersonal loyalty and attachment (Eisentadt and Roniger, 1980). Others argued that they were inherently coercive, particularly in entrapping the poor in a vicious cycle of debt, credit and force, with no alternative means of survival (Hall, 1974). This fault line in the literature survived into the 1990s and after, and is best represented by the work of authors such as Berry (1993), Amanor (2001, 2007) and Peters (2004, 2013).

Berry's study of the social dynamics of agrarian change in sub-Saharan Africa which focuses on Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and Zambia, is perhaps one of the most comprehensive contributions to understanding how social relations are imbricated in agrarian systems and their pivotal role in driving agrarian change (Berry, 1993). Her analysis not only establishes the mutually constitutive character of the economic, political and social, but also the fluidity and dynamism of social and political relations in agrarian systems. She critiques the tendency to see the inexactitudes and open-endedness of customary arrangements as pathological, rationalising the never-ending transactions between patrons and clients as a strategy to retain influence and control and as part of the project of guaranteeing long-term benefits from reciprocal relations (Berry, 1993). Berry, however, also acknowledges that the struggles for resources have resulted in more or less social differentiation in class, gender and kinship relations.

Peters (2004) critiqued the more benign view of agrarian social relations as not taking account of the limits of negotiability and widespread processes of exclusion and deepening inequalities which have been some of the visible outcomes of commoditisation, structural adjustment, market liberalisation and globalisation. She therefore advocates a theoretical shift – “away from privileging contingency, flexibility and negotiability that willy-nilly ends by suggesting an open field, to one able to identify those situations and processes... that limit or end negotiations and flexibility for certain social groups and categories” (Peters, 2004, p. 269; see also Amanor, 2001)

In relation to the future of patron–client relations, some authors have stressed their continued importance to the agrarian political economy. Williams (2004), for example, noted the continued importance of agrarian relations such as rent, share and labour tenancies to commercial agriculture in both settler and smallholder economic systems. Others acknowledged that patron–client relations were changing along with the wider political economy, and in some cases, slowly evolving into wage work (Hamzaoui, 1970). As early as in the mid-1970s, Moore was writing about the decline in cooperative labour as a result of several factors, including population growth, the emergence of

the agricultural proletariat, greater availability of cash and the introduction of permanent full time non-farm employment (Moore, 1975). There is a large gap in the African literature about the contours of the decline of patron–client relations and its implications for other agrarian social relations which needs research attention.

Debates on structure and agency in gender, kinship and inter-generational relations

The literature on gender, land and agriculture has a long tradition of highlighting economic and social processes implicated in agrarian change that have resulted in land tenure insecurities for certain groups of women (Boserup, 1970; Kevane and Gray, 1999; Lastarra-Cornhiel, 1997; Mbilinyi, 1997; Okali, 2012; Okeyo, 1980; Whitehead and Tsikata, 2003). Some of the studies have demonstrated the gendered nature of access to material and non-material resources which has implications for the long-term development of sons compared with daughters and to the inter-generational transfer of assets, human resources, privilege and disadvantage (Bird, 2007). Gender, kinship and inter-generational relations operate within households, markets, communities and states and those groups subordinated in intra-household relations carry disadvantages which translate into power deficits in relations outside the household. However, intra-household relations may shift in response to changes in the position of subordinated members of the household, e.g. when women who are largely engaged in unpaid family labour within the agrarian economy acquire paid labour outside the household and can contribute to household expenditures in their own right. Studies have sought to differentiate among countries; regions within countries; kinship systems; as well as among women arising from their life-cycle status (e.g. age, marital status and age of their sons), marriage residence and lineage membership (Apusigah, 2009; Tsikata, 2009; Verma, 2014).

There are several criticisms of some of this literature. The first is that there is an over-emphasis on the structures of inequality underpinning gender and inter-generational relationships and insufficient attention to the agency of women. This assumes therefore that the outcomes of contestations over resources always favour men. Secondly, women are cast as undifferentiated victims of gender inequalities or as heroic survivors against the odds, thus reducing complex social relations to over-simplified statements about inequalities and exploitation. Also critiqued is the stress on conflicts among household members, which downplays the

substantial levels of cooperation and shared interests between husbands and wives and among household members and between them and their wider kin. It also underestimates the extent of rational commitments women have to household arrangements, including those which appear to be gender inequitable (Okali, 2012; Whitehead, 2002). These caveats are important, especially as the social construction of groups such as women can also affect their opportunities to contribute to and benefit from policies (Okali, 2012).

Part of the problem could be that the gender and development literature being referred to is focused more on outcomes than on processes of agrarian change. The caveats about complexity and the importance of agency should lead to more textured and nuanced studies, but these should also provide a handle on the gender relations of agrarian change. Differences among women in their ability to exercise agency and adopt strategies to strengthen their position notwithstanding, the statistics point to clear gender differences and inequalities in the division of labour, the segmentation of work, remuneration and the control of both non-land and landed assets (Doss *et al.*, 2012; Oduro *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, while a more open-ended approach to social relations is helpful, more effort is needed to sufficiently distinguish the parties in these relationships and to draw conclusions about the processes and outcomes of contests over resources.

An added problem is that the insights of the gender and development literature into the agrarian political economy have not been fully integrated into mainstream analyses of agrarian social relations. This has resulted in parallel policy discussions about addressing the needs of smallholders (i.e. male farmers) on the one hand, and securing women farmers' land rights on the other hand, but both offered as the solution to low productivity and poverty reduction. It has also meant that the mainstream literature has paid insufficient attention to the contribution of reproductive work to the agrarian political economy and to the burden of reproductive labour in low technology agrarian systems and the implications of the loss of reproductive resources such as water, fuel wood and non-cultivated food sources in situations of land dispossessions. The gender literature, for its part, has been criticised for not paying sufficient attention to the broader challenges of agrarian political economy that affect both male and female smallholders, albeit in specific ways (Mbilinyi, 1997; Razavi, 2003; Whitehead and Tsikata, 2003).

Migration and migrant–host relations

Beyond tensions in domestic and inter-generational relations, studies have documented serious conflicts among different land uses and land users such as farmers and pastoralists. In countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia, lands which were common property resources and used regularly by pastoralists or those lands they migrated to in times of drought are no longer readily available to them because of processes of land concentration. In recent periods of cyclical droughts that have followed land consolidation and enclosures, pastoralists have suffered heavy losses to their herds. This current instalment of a long-term process of dispossession is reshaping pastoralist livelihoods, entrenching vulnerability with uncertain outcomes in the long term (Letai and Lind, 2013; Shete and Rutten, unpublished). Not surprisingly, conflicts between pastoralists and farmers are on the rise across Africa (Mwangi, 2007; Verma, 2010). In some cases, questions of citizenship have been raised as pastoralists were considered to be foreign nationals (Aryeetey *et al.*, 2007; Moyo *et al.*, forthcoming).

More generally, questions of citizenship and autochthony permeate the literature on land tenure. In some cases, migrants were considered as a category of land users with insecure tenure and vulnerable to unilateral modifications by landowners once land became scarce. However, there have been studies of migrants whose outright land purchases were recognised and respected by land experts, statutory land institutions and the courts (Benneh, 1970; Hill, 1963). More recent literature suggests that migrants with money could be better off than poorer members of land-owning lineages as the commodification of land gathers pace, with the result that autochthony is no longer an iron-clad passport to control of land. This issue has long been a staple in the agrarian literature across West Africa (Amanor, 2010; Gardini, 2012) and migrant–host contestations over land are considered responsible for some of the most serious civil conflicts in Cote d'Ivoire, northern Ghana, the Jos Plateau area in Nigeria and parts of Cameroon (Moyo *et al.*, forthcoming).

Migration's salience is because the injection of migrant labour into various localities and regions has played an important role in the expansion of commercial agriculture, particularly in West Africa since the 19th century.³ The labour of own-account migrants and that of their families have been critical in this regard. However, the discussion of the social relations of

³ Migration was encouraged by colonial states across Africa to provide labour in various enterprises and also to ensure the collection of colonial taxes (Kea, 2012). Studies have documented the importance of migrants and share contracts to the development of cocoa in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, and groundnuts in Senegal and Gambia (Hill, 1963; Robertson, 1987).

migration has traditionally focused on male migrants, a bias justified in terms of the relative numbers of own-account male and female migrants. As Kea (2012) notes, however, it is easy to underestimate the extent of female migration because of well-documented instances of social disapproval of women and girls' independent migration. Her study of female Senegalese migrants to the Gambia is interesting in this regard, but also for its identification of the host–stranger dichotomy as a significant socio-cultural paradigm in West Africa, which also structures the control of resources, production and exchange relations. The study demonstrates the agency of female migrants and their efforts to utilise the host–stranger dichotomy to their advantage through exchanging their labour for crops or farmland in share cropping or contract farming arrangements that Kea (2012) defines as agrarian clientelism.

Although the particular focus of Kea's study was to unearth various strategies of incorporation used by migrants, it draws attention to the host–stranger dynamic and its role in reinforcing social hierarchies and dichotomies, excluding migrants from rights to political office, making use of their unpaid labour and giving them a distinct identity of having only rights that are recognised by their hosts (Kea, 2012).

5

Policy implications of changes in agrarian social relations and questions for future research

The foregoing discussion reviewed the literature on some of the key social relations in the agrarian political economy, and identified social differentiation as one of the main issues of debate. In spite of differences in emphases and concern in the literature, there is general agreement that there is growing social differentiation as a result of the expansion of land and agricultural commercialisation, land concentration and land scarcity. This section discusses policy recommendations and issues for future research. While some of these speak directly to social relations, some are more indirect, in that they pertain to the larger political economy, but have implications for social relations. For example, policies which prioritise support for smallholders can protect them from patron–client relations that promote accumulation by medium- and large-scale farmers to their detriment. In receiving support outside these relations of production and exchange, smallholders strengthen their own possibilities for accumulation.

In this connection, the starting point of policies should be to tackle the problems of land concentration and some of its manifestations within the agrarian political economy such as landlessness, poverty and food insecurity among smallholders. This suggests agrarian policies which prioritise decent livelihoods and food security for the majority of farmers (i.e. smallholders) and promote equitable social relations and outcomes in a period of change (Hilhorst *et al.*, 2011; Lipton, 2012; Moyo *et al.*, 2013). Prioritising smallholder agriculture does not mean discounting the role of medium- and large-scale commercial agriculture in a healthy agrarian political economy (Hilhorst *et al.*, 2011; Tsikata and Yaro, 2011). This policy agenda requires research which prioritises social relations of agrarian production systems and society.

In some cases, land redistribution to improve smallholder land holdings on terms which do not constrain their livelihood activities is necessary. Women, young men and migrants should be able to access such land in their own right and on the basis of their ability to utilise such land. Addressing the land needs of pastoralists should be integral to agrarian policies in order to reduce land use conflicts between them and sedentary farmers, but also as part of the strategy for a diversified agrarian economy and food security. As the land needs of pastoralists are significant, the enclosure policies being pursued in several countries need rethinking to promote the sustainable sharing of pastures and also methods of animal husbandry that reduce the scale of transhumance in pastoralism.

A positive view of smallholder agriculture does not fully account for labour exploitation within smallholder agriculture, which requires serious policy and research attention. Labour relations within smallholder agriculture, particularly those based on class, gender and inter-generational relations, need more detailed disaggregated research and policy attention. More broadly, domestic and inter-generational relations should become integral to research and policy on social relations in the agrarian political economy. In this connection, the question of reproduction and its integral link with production and exchange should be policy and research priorities both to strengthen the agrarian sector and also to promote more egalitarian social relations in the agrarian political economy.

The research needs going forward are immense, as they involve filling gaps in knowledge, advancing debates and mapping the changes in the social relations of agrarian transitions. Key areas of inquiry are agrarian labour relations and labour regimes, the availability and costs of labour, the labour relations embedded in agricultural tenancies, the conditions of labour reproduction, how labour issues contribute to processes and outcomes of agrarian change, and how relations of class, gender and kinship intersect in the agrarian political economy.

An important recommendation from the literature is the need to make more visible the economic interests and accumulation strategies of patrons and capitalists, particularly their strategies to manage the price of labour and the ideologies they deploy to discipline labour such as traditional loyalties, and ideas about the gender and age division of labour. Other fruitful areas of inquiry would be the relations among different levels of commercial farmers, e.g. medium and larger national and global companies. Finally, more research on relations of exchange within the agrarian political economy is needed, particularly research that identifies the key exchange relations. While more research will not resolve some of the more intractable debates about social relations, it would at least establish them as pivotal to understanding agrarian change and the likely directions of Africa's agricultural future.

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The literature on land grabbing and agricultural commercialization has established that there have been major changes in the agrarian political economy over the last three decades. However, the implications of these for agrarian social relations have not been given full consideration. This paper examines some of these questions, identifying agreements and contestations about the implications of agrarian change for social relations, particularly those of class, gender and kinship, which are key to the production and reproduction of the agrarian political economy. We argue that issues of growing social differentiation and inequalities need to be addressed both by the literature and in policy discussions.

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