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# Beyond Urban Bias: Peasant Movements and the State in Africa

Connor Rockett  
connorrockett@gmail.com

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Beyond Urban Bias:  
Peasant Movements and the State in Africa

An Honors Paper for the Department of Government and Legal Studies

By Connor Cluff Rockett

Bowdoin College, 2019

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*For my family and friends*

*For my teachers at Bowdoin and in the Dover-Sherborn school system*

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## Chapter I: Introduction

In 2017, the leaders of rural movements from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Niger, Mali, Senegal, and Ghana converged in Spain's Basque region at the annual conference of La Vía Campesina, a prominent international peasant organization.<sup>1</sup> The activists discussed their campaigns to defend the rights and resources of small farmers in the face of governments pursuing agro-industrial development projects and the reallocation of sizeable tracts of land to corporate entities. The representatives were indicative of an increasingly common form of African peasant politics, namely organized social movements. In this vein, the considerable presence of African peasant associations at the conference raises questions about small farmers, some 60% of the sub-Saharan population,<sup>2</sup> as political actors on the continent. While esteemed Africanists and scholars of peasant politics have highlighted the obstacles to collective action for small farmers, the emergence of more and more peasant movements across Africa shows that new investigations of peasant collective action are needed. What causes peasants to choose collective action when making political claims? Where do peasant movements emerge? When do they engage broad-based and diverse rural populations? These are the questions from which this study departs.

I have tried to illuminate the political activities of small farmers in Africa by testing a hypothesis holding, in essence, that state intervention in agrarian economies causes peasant movements to engage in broad-based contention, on regional and national levels. The study traces the connections between government land and agricultural institutions and the

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<sup>1</sup> La Vía Campesina, "African peasants highlight their struggles at La Vía Campesina global conference," July 21, 2017. Accessed April 24, 2019: <https://viacampesina.org/en/african-peasants-highlight-struggles-via-campesina-global-conference/>

<sup>2</sup> "Rural Population (% of total): sub-Saharan Africa ," the World Bank: Data, accessed December 11, 2018, [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?contextual=default&locations=ZG&name\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?contextual=default&locations=ZG&name_desc=false)

characteristics of rural movements that make claims on them. Case studies of regions of Tanzania, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ethiopia show the ways in which rural movements are constructed in response to the political and social environments in which they arise. That is, the comparisons demonstrate that the character of political authority and social organization are important determinants of the form taken by peasant movements.

Starting from my hypothesis, I construct an argument as to how statist land tenure and agricultural systems interact with social structures to cause peasants to adopt ethnically inclusive political identities and scaled-up contestation strategies, terms which I define below. The study shows that the systems used to govern rural resources and the social organization of rural groups profoundly influence the essential characteristics of peasant movements. In this sense, the study investigates two independent variables, one that is intrinsic to the nation-state and one that is intrinsic to rural societies, in order to explain the political activities of small farmers in Africa. Since 60% of the sub-Saharan population in 2017 lived in rural areas,<sup>3</sup> the institutions which govern land and agriculture - the bases of economic activity for that sizeable population - are critical to understanding African politics and development.

The case study comparisons made here shed light on an under-analyzed and under-theorized dynamic of peasant-state relations in Africa: the conditions (1) under which peasant political action reaches up to directly challenge the highest levels of national authority and (2) under which narrow ethnic identities are supplanted by more encompassing ones. I show over the course of this essay that such outcomes depend on the interaction between modernizing state-managed rural economic institutions and the structure of the traditional agrarian societies that encounter them. Building off of the work of Catherine Boone on land tenure systems, this paper

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<sup>3</sup> "Rural Population (% of total): sub-Saharan Africa," the World Bank: Data, accessed December 11, 2018, [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?contextual=default&locations=ZG&name\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?contextual=default&locations=ZG&name_desc=false)

presents evidence for a theory of the scaling-up and broadening of African peasant political activity. The cases are of confrontation, ranging from concerted electoral challenges to armed rebellion, between rural groups and national authority.

### *Terminology*

Before introducing the hypothesis and theoretical framework, it is necessary to define the key terms used throughout the study. I define a “land tenure regime” as the set of formal and informal institutions and laws that govern land and are used to resolve conflicts over it. In a strictly legal sense, these systems are distinguished as either statist or neo-customary, to use Boone’s categories. Statist land tenure regimes are governed by secular agents of the state, ordinary bureaucrats, sometimes with the help and oversight of locally elected representatives, and are therefore referred to as a form of direct rule over land. Neo-customary land tenure regimes invest power in chiefs and other traditional authorities to govern land access. I consider these to be a form of indirect rule over land, in the sense that intermediaries, wielding some degree of personally specific authority, are used by the central state to govern in its place.<sup>4</sup> In theory, the two types of land tenure regimes produce different “political effects,” another term used frequently here which simply refers to a manifestation of political activity. For simplicity, I also use “outcomes” interchangeably with “political effects” throughout the essay. The two political effects with which this study is primarily concerned are the “political identity” and “contestation strategy” of peasants. Political identity is the identity an individual or group uses to give coherence and rhetorical weight to political claims. Political identity may take ethnic, regional, and/or national forms, for example. Contestation strategies are the tactics used to make those claims. In the arena of land politics, they range from lobbying a local leader individually

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<sup>4</sup> Catherine Boone and Lydia Nyeme, “Land Institutions and Political Ethnicity in Africa: Evidence from Tanzania,” *Comparative Politics* 48, no. 1 (2015), 69-70.



for more land to mobilizing across villages and jurisdictions to pressure the state for changes to the way land is allocated. Relating these terms, Boone argues that neo-customary systems accentuate ethnic political identities and village-level contestation and that statist regimes foster non-ethnic, modern political identities and regional and national forms of contestation.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the analyses of the effect of group social structure on peasant movements frequently use the descriptors “hierarchical” and “egalitarian.” By a hierarchical society, I mean one that is characterized by social differentiation and inequality, with leaders that control subject populations. I also describe hierarchical societies as being “centralized,” or having some degree of concentrated political power in particular leaders or institutions, such as organized religious orders. Egalitarian societies, which are referred to as “decentralized,” do not have leaders who dominate or control other community members and have a more equal organization of society. They are called decentralized for the lack of prominent leaders and institutions wielding power over the collective. Government in egalitarian societies may be communal and/or loosely constructed. I also use the term “acephalous” to refer to egalitarian groups.

### *Question*

Far more land in sub-Saharan Africa is governed under neo-customary regimes than under statist ones and prominent works such as Mamdani’s *Citizen and Subject* and Lund’s *Local Politics and the Dynamics of Property in Africa* have analyzed rural politics under the former. Moreover, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania* by Hyden, *The State in Africa* by Bayart, and *No Condition is Permanent* by Berry have examined the day-to-day tactics used by individual and small groups of peasants to defend themselves against and negotiate with overbearing states. While these contributions and others have covered the most common forms of African peasant

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<sup>5</sup> Boone and Nyeme, “Land Institutions and Political Ethnicity in Africa,” 69-70.

politics and land institutions, analyses of collective peasant movements and statist land tenure systems are both lacking. Though it is more common for peasants to “avoid the state by taking refuge in alternatives that are clearly second best,”<sup>6</sup> I have focused on cases of organized collective action to better understand when peasants seek to make a systemic impact and are not limited by “second best” tactics.

To fill this knowledge gap, I have attempted to answer the following: *Under what conditions do ethnically diverse groups of peasants join collectively to challenge and assert claims on the central state?* The analytic emphasis throughout this study is thus on explaining the *form* that peasant political activity takes, though I have taken care to explain the processes leading to mobilization in each of the core cases. By analyzing episodes of broad-based and scaled-up peasant contention in Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, and Ethiopia, I defend my argument that state involvement in land allocation and agriculture interacts with group social structure to influence the forms of peasant collective action, in what I believe is a theoretical contribution to the study of African peasant and land politics.

### *Hypothesis*

The hypothetical framework set forth here draws on Boone’s theory of the political incentives of statist or direct rule land tenure regimes, which I elaborate on below, and augments it by explaining the effect of the social structure of agrarian groups on outcomes for peasant political activity. Following Boone, direct rule of land and agriculture incentivizes peasants (1) to assert their claims on a regional and national scale, through collective action and in institutions above the level of the village and (2) to adopt political identities that are more inclusive than ethnicity. The first outcome should occur because direct rule of the rural economy leads

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Bates, *Markets and States in Tropical Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 87.

contentious peasants to pressure the state as the authority over land and agricultural resources, making mass-mobilization and collective action useful strategies for waging rural political claims. Since the state is the target to which land and agricultural claims must be directed, movements will seek to exert pressure on it. Aggrieved peasants therefore have a reason to form wide-ranging, noisy protest movements and to pursue claims in higher-level arenas, such as courts and elections. The second outcome predicted by the hypothesis is based on reasoning that direct rule of land, by secular agents of the state, disregards ethnic claims to land. In contrast to traditional leaders that allocate land according to group-insider status, keeping the resource to members of the ethnic group and the traditional community, statist institutions de-emphasize ethnicity when distributing land. The absence of an ethnic basis for land claims pushes peasants to adopt political identities that are more salient and that can be used to unify ethnically diverse movements to contest the state's management of land.

This institutional theory of the political effects of statist land tenure systems is, however, incomplete. It explains *how* statist institutions cause peasant movements to adopt encompassing political identities and to challenge state power, but it falls short in explaining *where* such institutions take hold in emerging states. A predictive understanding of peasant movements then requires an understanding of the patterns of state-building; knowing where strong statist institutions are likely to develop, one can in turn better predict where broad-based peasant movements are likely to occur. To this end, I seek to deepen the explanatory power of Boone's institutional theory of peasant movements by synthesizing it with a focus on the social underpinnings of African state-building.

A more complete theory should account for the way in which the presence or absence of powerful local leaders, sitting atop a social hierarchy, influence the extension of the state's

authority and its relationship with rural populations. Because the social characteristics of rural groups, such as their degree of centralization and historical inequality, shape the penetration of statist rural institutions, they ultimately shape outcomes for peasant politics. Imposing statist institutions is a challenging task for budding governments, made all the more difficult when done in the face of jealous and powerful regional leaders. The extent to which the state operates in practice as the authority over land is contingent on the existence of local, traditional leaders whose own authority may rival that of the state. Prominent local leaders are likely to become mediators between nascent or weak bureaucracies, looking to consolidate order with the help of influential locals, and rural populations. In mediating between their peasant clients and the state, local leaders directly shape the way in which developing state policies and resources are respectively implemented and allocated. Ingratiating themselves with the state in turn helps local leaders to maintain their own authority and to displace the state as the target of claims.

It is on these grounds that I argue that the social structure of a rural group is determinative of the forms of peasant political activity that emerge to make claims under statist land tenure systems. Where powerful local leaders are able to mediate between rural populations and the state and to assume powers over agricultural resource allocation, peasants belonging to hierarchical groups are likely to direct their claims to these figures, meaning that contestation will not scale up to put pressure on the state and that ethnic identities will continue to be meaningful in land and agricultural claims. Moreover, traditional leaders are often able to suppress peasants from joining together by relying on forbidding institutions, social norms, and ideologies that justify the docility of subjects. The ability of local leaders to control their subjects makes them a generally attractive ally for states seeking to consolidate their authority and

therefore hierarchical groups are more likely to be given compensatory access to the state's political and economic resources.

To develop a theoretical framework of labelled outcomes, we expect the **containment** of contestation, meaning that local leaders either suppress peasant collective action or remain the target of claims, when hierarchical societies encounter statist rural economic regimes. Just as contention should not broaden its scope under such circumstances, political identities will continue to be narrow or **ethnically exclusive** as well. Ethnicity and communal belonging should remain a salient force for peasants seeking to sway traditional leaders who mediate conflicts over land and agriculture on behalf of the state.

While hierarchical groups are more readily incorporated into the state's political-economic order, egalitarian or acephalous groups, lacking intermediaries, are unlikely to command the organizational force to do so. Unconstrained by powerful regional challengers, state-builders can more easily impose statist land and agricultural systems directly on the countryside. As a result, there is a much higher likelihood of close contact between the state and the rural population. In a statist institutional environment, peasants must pressure the state directly when grievances arise, instead of appealing to local notables. To this end, egalitarian groups use contestation strategies that go beyond local boundaries to target regional and national authorities. We expect to see the **upscaling** of contestation when a fragmented, decentralized group mobilizes to make claims on a statist regime. With contention transcending the boundaries of ethnic communities, political identities will also become **ethnically inclusive**, grouping together diverse claimants and taking on regionalist or nationalist forms. These outcomes are arrayed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Framework of Peasant Politics under Statist Economic Systems

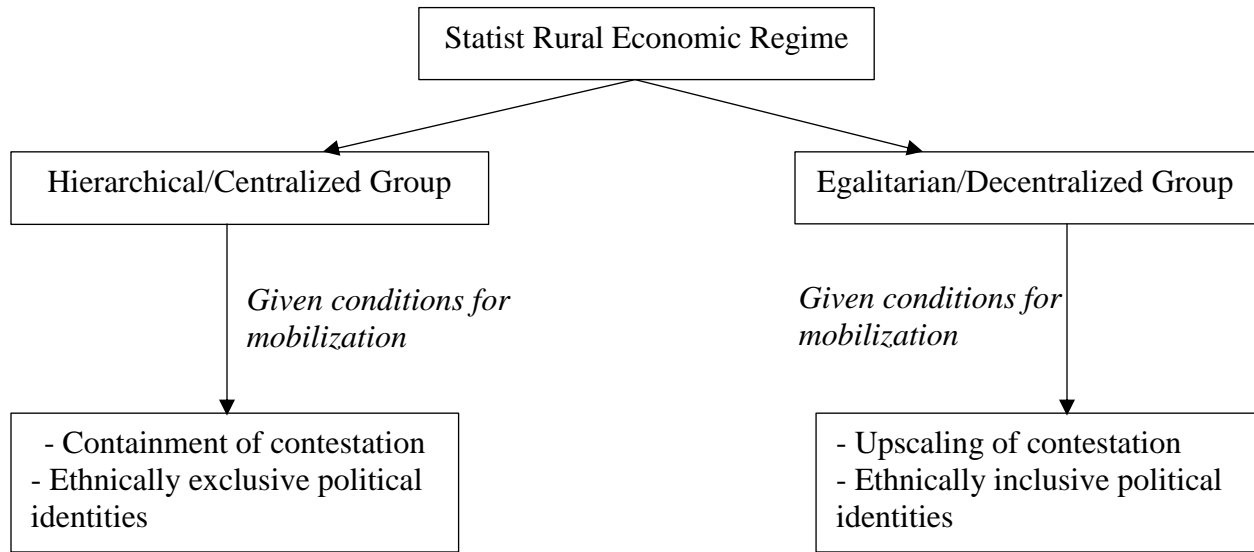


Figure 1 is intended to serve as an organizing schematic for peasant political outcomes. It visualizes the interaction between modernizing statist land and agricultural regimes and rural societies. The framework is based on the arguments made here that centralized/hierarchical and decentralized/egalitarian societies differ in their capacity to shield their populations from the reach of modern states. Leaders of hierarchical societies are better able to ally themselves with state elites and are consequently better able to shape the effects of state penetration, which directly impacts peasant political outcomes. The result of this process is a characteristic compromise of African state-building, in which local leaders retain status and authority in exchange for allegiance to the central state and acceptance of its political-economic order. As traditional authorities mediate between the state and their peasant subjects, the politics of the latter continue to adhere to traditional forms. On the other hand, egalitarian groups are in general unable to initially counteract the imposition of statist institutions; African state-builders usually meet less concerted resistance from decentralized groups than from centralized ones, enabling them to construct institutions with direct control over land allocation and agriculture. The political activity of peasants then will correspondingly target the higher-level, delocalized, and

de-ethnicized governments they seek to challenge in moments of contention. The framework, therefore, highlights the socio-political factors, captured in the hierarchy/centralization – equality/decentralization variable, which determine state penetration. Once the degree of state penetration is ascertained, one can make more accurate predictions about the characteristics of peasant movements. In this way, the framework provides a fuller account of where high-level, multiethnic peasant movements are likely to emerge, with greater explanatory capacity than a purely institutional model.

The framework in Figure 1, however, can only partly explain the characteristics of peasant contention. It lays the foundation for more in depth explanations for the scope and inclusivity of peasant movements, which must be developed from analyses of specific configurations of state and traditional power. Between variations in statist rural regimes and in the degree of centralization or fragmentation, such configurations cannot be reduced to a single schematic. In this sense, the framework can be used to guide individual analyses of the interplay between nationalizing states and localizing traditional orders and to inform predictions about how that interplay will impact on the characteristics of peasant politics. The framework provides predictive guidelines for analysts to construct country- and region-specific predictions about the potential form of rural movements. The case studies analyzed here conform generally to the framework, while also demonstrating the complexity of interactions between the key statist regime and group hierarchy variables.

#### *Explaining the Mobilization of Peasants*

Though this paper primarily makes an argument as to what form peasant movements take, each case study also analyzes the conditions that led peasants to engage in contentious political activity in the first place. To organize these analyses, I have relied on the social

movement framework in *Dynamics of Contention* by Doug McAdam, Sydney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly.<sup>7</sup> While their work covers the full trajectory of social movements, I have used their model of the initial mobilization process to augment the case studies. Their framework conforms to the standard or “classical” social movement model, but aims to exchange a static conception of mobilization for one emphasizing more dynamic interaction between actors. They modify the classic terminology to reflect the dynamism they hope to introduce into theoretical models of social movements, for example, exchanging the more determined “opportunity structure” for the more uncertain process of “attribution of opportunity and threat.”

Following McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, mobilization begins to emerge when *social change processes* produce threats to and political opportunities for contentious actors. Groups that have perceived *threats* and *political opportunities* are primed to initiate and respond to mobilization efforts. Within a newly contestable political environment, actors tap into social networks, in what they refer to as *social appropriation*, to organize those politically enlivened group members who have encountered threats and/or opportunities. Whether through existing or newly created associations, actors rely on connections to the broader community to bring new members into action. From these organizational sites, groups plan and undertake collective actions, such as mass protests, boycotts, and land occupations. In the descriptive sections of the case studies, I explain the emergence of rural movements using these concepts.

#### *Historical Context: The Evolution of Land Tenure Laws in Africa*

Before analyzing the effect of the state’s control of land on peasant politics, it is necessary to prepare by reviewing the history of land governance in post-colonial Africa. While there is considerable cross- (and intra-) country variation in land tenure regimes, it is possible to

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<sup>7</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 38-50.



identify regional trends, stemming from colonial experiences, in their *legal* form. In emphasizing trends in the legal or formal aspects of land tenure regimes, I intend to make clear that these aspects, despite regional similarities, often contradict the actual authorities and institutions that govern access to land. While statist laws tended to be popular at independence, they were often obstructed or coopted by traditional authorities, which meant that in practice neo-customary regimes were used to govern far more land than statist ones.<sup>8</sup> Beginning in the 1990s with democratization and the adoption of neoliberal structural adjustment programs, there emerges a continent-wide, donor-driven shift in land laws towards privatization that continues to this day. Against these top-down efforts, simultaneous decentralization processes stymied the shift to privatization while other actors have advocated for reforms that prioritize use rights of small-holders or communal rights.

Throughout Francophone West Africa, most newly independent states formally established systems of direct rule of land, seeking to carry over modified versions of the colonial system of land tenure.<sup>9</sup> The extensive prerogatives over land of the colonial state, in this region of former extractive colonies, were appealing to new elites with developmental and or selfish objectives. The continued use of a *domaine national* from the colonial period meant that the state would be the ultimate owner of the vast majority of lands, with prerogatives over allocation.<sup>10</sup> More specifically, the use of a “leasehold” system, in which an occupant must satisfy requirements of economic development or *mise en valeur* in order to receive a revocable and conditional title to land, persisted in many former French colonies and the Democratic Republic

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<sup>8</sup> In 2007, Boone wrote “Over 80 percent of all arable land in sub-Saharan Africa is currently held under some form of ‘customary’ or non-statutory tenure.”

Catherine Boone, “Property and Constitutional Order: Land Tenure Reform and the Future of the African State,” *African Affairs* 106, no. 425 (2007): 11.

<sup>9</sup> John Bruce et al., *Country Profiles of Land Tenure: Africa 1996*, Land Tenure Center, University of Wisconsin – Madison, 1998: 8.

<sup>10</sup> Sara Berry, “Struggles Over Land and Authority in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 60, no. 3 (2017), 108.

of Congo (DRC), which was a Belgian colony. Such *mise en valeur* requirements were, in theory, a means to solidify the state's decision-making power over land; local committees or administrators sent by the center would assess the productivity of landholders and reallocate land in cases where standards of use were unmet. Guinea, DRC, Republic of Congo, Benin, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, to name a few examples, saw “nationalization, partial nationalization, or some variation on this theme”<sup>11</sup> in their first decades of independence.

Despite statist laws, traditional authorities continued to play a significant role in land allocation decisions in these nations and throughout West Africa, either as a result of political strategies for incorporating the periphery (which meant applying statist laws according to the interests of coopted local authorities) or state weakness. Thus, in 1996 Bruce wrote that, “in all West African Countries, whether officially recognized or not, community-based [neo-customary, in the terms of this study] tenure systems predominantly dictate who has access to land and natural resources.”<sup>12</sup> Such a state of affairs indicates the relevant distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* land tenure systems as well as a certain degree of “legal pluralism,” often decried by legalistic development experts as being inimical to the formation of stable land markets and rural modernization.

Exceptions to the general trend of statist land tenure laws in West Africa are Liberia, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Ghana, and Guinea Bissau, countries that were not part of French West Africa and where neo-customary land tenure regimes were enshrined in law on at least a regional level.<sup>13</sup> In these countries, the state expressly acknowledged the authority of chiefs in limited areas to allocate land and resolve conflicts.

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce et al., *Country Profiles of Land Tenure: Africa 1996*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce et al., *Country Profiles of Land Tenure: Africa 1996*, 11.

Shifting our geographic focus, land tenure laws in the former colonies of East and southern Africa, many with a history of settler colonization, differ from those of West Africa in that they provide for privatization or full individual ownership of land. Consequently, higher percentages of land are privately owned than in West African states.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, statist land laws are prevalent as well; in reaction to the presence of white settlers, “redistributive land reform came hard on the heels of independence. In Tanzania, Mozambique, and Angola, where most land had been in the name of the state under the colonial concession regime, the new governments retained state ownership and opted for socialist reform models, seeking to replace household farming with village collectives or state farms.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, although not directly after independence, “in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Namibia, land reform has meant the subdivision and reassignment of what were either freehold or long-term leasehold white farms into smaller holdings for resettlement by Africans, usually retained in state ownership and allocated to the new holders on permits or leaseholds.”<sup>16</sup> Even in this context of statist reforms and nationalizations, it is important to keep in mind the coexistence of unofficial, *de facto* neo-customary land tenure regimes in this region as well.

These regional trends in post-independence land laws reveal the effect of colonial experiences on the governance of land. In West Africa, the maintenance of colonial laws would formally maintain a strong role for the state, yet, as will be shown in the case of the groundnut basin of Senegal, such statist powers could actually often reinforce the authority of rural elites. On the other hand, former British colonies in this region gave legal backing to neo-customary

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<sup>14</sup> In 2003, 41 percent of land was privately owned in Zimbabwe, 44 percent in Namibia, and 72 percent in South Africa, compared with 5 percent in Senegal and 2 percent in Côte d’Ivoire and Cameroon. Boone, *Property and Political Order in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 24.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce et al., *Country Profiles of Land Tenure: Africa 1996*, 202.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

land tenure regimes, in line with the practices of colonial administrators. In East and southern Africa, redistributive reforms went hand in hand with the direct rule of land while private ownership of land is also relatively more common, both of which are tendencies stemming from settler colony histories. Finally, while statist land tenure laws tended to be popular across the continent in the decades after independence, the visions of such laws were rarely realized as neo-customary systems governed much more land than statist ones.

Shifting forward in time to the 1990s, international aid agencies began providing an impetus for land law reforms, with a focus on securing private ownership rights. As African governments agreed to structural adjustment programs to finance debts owed to international creditors, donor agencies “had concluded that market reforms would not be effective unless property rights were clearly defined and consistently enforced.”<sup>17</sup> In conjunction with policies of market liberalization and state retrenchment, many governments initiated land law reforms by establishing or revitalizing national registries for land, attempting to provide a greater degree of tenure security that was supposed to facilitate investment and economic growth.<sup>18</sup>

Simultaneously, donor funding for land law reforms and policy documents on the subject increased greatly, making it all the more feasible and attractive for governments to undertake reform processes.<sup>19</sup> Between 1992 and 2006, land law reforms were undertaken in Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, Malawi, Mozambique, and Botswana, to name a few cases.<sup>20</sup>

Just as statist land laws were mostly thwarted or obstructed by rural elites in the first decades of independence, decentralization processes in the 1990s raised countervailing forces

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<sup>17</sup> Berry, “Struggles Over Land and Authority in Africa,” 106.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>19</sup> Ambreena Manji, *The Politics of Land Reform in Africa* (London: Zed Books, 2006), 56-57.

<sup>20</sup> Boone, “Property and Constitutional Order,” 569.

that worked against donors' top-down efforts at formalization of tenure.<sup>21</sup> As struggling governments sought to address challenges of legitimacy and to improve governance through decentralization strategies,<sup>22</sup> more and more prerogatives over land were shifted towards traditional rural leaders. These processes diverted attention away from formalization of tenure laws, as rural authorities were further empowered to uphold the traditional land relations that are in many areas the foundation of their authority. For example, decentralization reforms in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger and Côte d'Ivoire "bolster[ed] historical and communal rights that circumscribe market forces."<sup>23</sup> Decentralization's effects call to mind that land laws must be considered within the social context in which they are implemented and have rarely led to new land tenure regimes in a straightforward manner.

Today, many countries continue to recalibrate their land tenure systems through national dialogues and further elaboration of new laws, as pressures on land mount from population growth, urbanization, and global warming and liberalizations clear the way for large-scale land grabs. With the World Bank pressing for privatization reforms, other actor have raised their voices in national reform discussions to advocate for the securitization of user rights, which would give small farmers security over the land they use, or for greater communal rights over land, allowing communities to manage land for themselves.<sup>24</sup>

#### *A Preliminary Case: Direct Rule of Land in Tanzania*

Having laid out the broader historical trends in land governance across Africa, the study will now begin constructing the argument regarding the political effects produced by statist land

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<sup>21</sup>Boone, "Property and Constitutional Order," 574.

<sup>22</sup> Tyler Dickovick and James Wunsch, eds., *Decentralization in Africa: The Paradox of State Strength* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 5.

<sup>23</sup> Boone, "Property and Constitutional Order," 574.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 571-576.

tenure regimes. This subsection provides an in-depth summary of Boone's Tanzania case study in which she argues that the political identities and contestation strategies of rural populations are shaped by the country's statist land tenure regime. With respect to political identities, the subsection outlines the argument that direct rule of land in Tanzania has contributed to the emergence in rural areas of a nationalist political identity based on Tanzanian heritage and the diminution of narrower ethnic political identities. It shows that, in seeking to appeal to state land bureaucrats in moments of conflict, peasants adopt discourses of the state, which are based on nationalist ideologies. It also examines the scaled-up institutions and strategies which peasants use to assert or challenge claims to land, such as regional protest and elections. By outlining Boone's case, I aim to clarify the hypothesis' predictions about how direct rule influences rural forms of political contestation and the identities that motivate it. What Boone does not cover, however, are the social dynamics that shape peasant politics, which I analyze in the main chapters.

Boone's case study provides empirical data on the forms of political action and identity that arise under Tanzania's statist tenure regime. She conducted fieldwork in the neighboring Babati, Hanang, and Mbulu districts, located in north-central Tanzania, regions where land scarcity is high and conflicts over it are prevalent. The research covers six instances of land conflict, the first of which occurred in the Kiru Valley of Babati District. In the 1990s, following the failure of agricultural projects on land leased by the government to private corporations, large tracts were vacated by the lessees. Many indigenous small-farmers began working the newly unoccupied lands, without legal permission to do so. The government tacitly allowed the squatters to remain on the land, simply ignoring them. Subsequent decisions by the government to lease the land to private investors, many of which were Tanzanian citizens of Asian descent,

has stoked conflict in a territory where land is scarce and where peasant families are expanding. The ensuing struggles over who should have the right to work the land reveals much about the specific effect of direct rule on political contestation and identity.

The rhetoric of identity surrounding the conflict pits “‘indigenous Tanzanians’ against ‘outside investors’ (who are non-indigenous Tanzanian citizens [of Asian descent.]”<sup>25</sup> Animosity towards the Asian minority in Tanzania is entrenched in the political culture “as socialist-era nationalism... [denounced] Asian citizens who accumulated private capital as bloodsucking exploiters of citizenship.”<sup>26</sup> Relying on this notion of authentic Tanzanian identity, peasants use it to legitimize their demands, which they express “through violence, protests, civil disobedience, and the multiparty system.”<sup>27</sup> What is striking in the political use of a unified Tanzanian identity is that the peasants of the Kiru Valley are culturally and ethnically heterogeneous, many of them coming from families that migrated to the region to work on the estates of colonists.

This broad, de-ethnicized political identity emerges as a product of the direct rule of land, which generates this identity in two ways. First, the state’s land allocation decisions are not based on historical ethnic claims. Since ethnicity has no force under Tanzania’s statist tenure system, that form of identity is supplanted by a nationalistic one with greater numerical strength, capable of giving coherence to peasants’ claims. In this way, direct rule of land creates an incentive structure which is more conducive to the formation of broader identity coalitions that are not necessarily limited by distinctions of ethnicity. Political action in land conflict that is grounded in a nationalist identity therefore becomes tenable and viable.

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<sup>25</sup> Boone and Nyeme, “Land Institutions and Political Ethnicity in Africa,” 75.

<sup>26</sup> Ronald Aminzade, *Race, Nation, and Citizenship in Post-Colonial Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Boone and Nyeme, “Land Institutions and Political Ethnicity in Africa,” 75.

Second, direct rule requires that appeals be made to state bureaucrats and therefore in a political language that resonates with that audience. As peasants seek to target state land administrators, they appropriate the discourse and ideology of Tanzanian nationalism, in an attempt to talk to and sway bureaucrats using their own terms. James Scott's work on peasant resistance brings to light the rhetorical appropriation of the discourse of the state by smallholders.<sup>28</sup> Whereas Scott analyzes this phenomenon in southeast Asia, Brockington similarly points to "a tradition of rural peoples exploiting their rulers and their rulers' rhetoric in Tanzania."<sup>29</sup> The discourse and ideology of national identity is entrenched in Tanzanian state tradition, making it a point of leverage that peasants exploit in the land conflict of the Kiru valley.<sup>30</sup> The legacy of Nyerere's socialist nationalism gives a degree of salience to claims that are couched in its language. Under direct rule, political communication and claims are articulated in such a way as to appeal to the modernist outlook of the state.

With respect to contestation strategies, direct rule incentivizes peasants to raise land conflicts to regional and national political arenas. The smallholders of the Kiru Valley asserted their claims in the national court system, bringing the conflict out of the village level and implicating higher levels of state authority.<sup>31</sup> In the run up to elections in 2010, a candidate of the Chadema party seized upon peasant grievances and campaigned on land issues. The peasants, in turn, "all... voted for Chadema."<sup>32</sup> Finally, the peasants' various protests and forms of civil disobedience elicited a response from the government, which sent leading members of parliament to investigate the conflict. Together, the use of these national institutions as well as

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<sup>28</sup> James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

<sup>29</sup> Dan Brockington, "The Politics and Ethnography of Environmentalisms in Tanzania," *African Affairs* 105, no. 418 (2006), 101.

<sup>30</sup> Aminzade, *Race, Nation, and Citizenship in Post-Colonial Africa*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Boone and Nyeme, "Land Institutions and Political Ethnicity in Africa," 75.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.



the politically noisy mobilization of peasants in the valley indicate that land contestation scaled up in the system of direct rule of land in Tanzania.

### *Testing the Hypothesis*

To be sure, Tanzania is a special case of nation-building. The legacy of a high modernist state and Nyerere's socialism have left a considerable impact on the nation and the people.<sup>33</sup> Direct rule of land is itself a product of Tanzanian nation-building, as are all statist land tenure systems in that they are assertions of modern state power over traditional local power. Given the expansive history of nation-building, it is possible that factors other than the statist tenure regime contributed disproportionately to the nationalism and engagement with the state observed in Boone's study. To further test the causality of direct rule of land, chapter two analyzes the political effects produced by the statist land tenure regime in two regions of Senegal in the 1980s, where nation-building has proceeded less aggressively than in Tanzania,<sup>34</sup> making it a case with less potential for confounding variables. Chapter three tests the hypothesis with the case of Côte d'Ivoire, where the state for decades promoted the internal colonization of the cocoa and coffee forest regions, controlling the allocation of land and agricultural resources to this end. Finally, chapter 4 analyzes the peasant rebellion during the late 1970s and 1980s in the Tigray region of Ethiopia under the Derg's communist regime, which undertook nationalization of land and agricultural collectivization. These cases were selected based on the occurrence of concerted rural movements, so as to study their scope and political identities, to deduce what produced those outcomes, and thereby strengthen or refute the hypothesis. After reviewing the findings, I

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<sup>33</sup> James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 223.

<sup>34</sup> Donal Cruise O'Brien, "The Shadow Politics of Wolofisation," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 1 (March, 1998), 45.

conclude by linking them to present-day trends in African domestic and international politics and by outlining areas of future research.

## Chapter II: Peasant Politics and Land in Senegal, 1970s-1980s

### Introduction

This chapter tests the hypothesis by examining the political identities and contestation strategies of peasants in Senegal, which has instituted a statist land regime. After a general overview of the context of land tenure in rural Senegal and the 1964 *Loi sur le domaine national* (1964 LDN), the law which aimed to establish the statist land regime, I analyze the effects it produced in two socially distinct regions, the groundnut basin of central Senegal and Lower Casamance, in the southwestern corner of the country. The findings from this section indicate the importance of social structure as a determining factor in the outcomes for peasant politics under statist land tenure systems. I first argue that the interaction of the statist land tenure system and the hierarchy of the groundnut basin actually produced a form of indirect rule, which in turn precluded the formation of peasant political identities and mobilization for land claims. I then show that the egalitarian social structure of Lower Casamance pushed the state to govern without relying on elite intermediaries, creating a more direct channel between Dakar's land administrators and the peasantry in the region and giving the former greater capacity to act autonomously than in the groundnut basin. I argue that direct rule incentivized the adoption of a regional political identity and the emergence of a peasant-based secessionist movement. The conclusion summarizes the arguments and relates the findings to the hypothesis.

### *The Legal and Economic Context of Land in Senegal*

The French colonial state's limited penetration into rural society as well as its reliance on rural notables as administrative middlemen were phenomena of the Senegalese colonial period that left many traditional social structures, including those relating to land governance, in place and in many cases stronger than before the arrival of Europeans. After independence, the

enduring influence of traditional authorities contrasted sharply with the modernist vision of Léopold Senghor's government, whose members were influenced by the French political culture of republican national uniformity and centrally managed capitalism.<sup>1</sup> The Senegalese state sought early on to assert its authority over rural leaders by enacting the 1964 *Loi sur le domaine national* (LDN), the most important formal law which governs land allocation and tenure.

Through the 1964 LDN, “the state formally appropriated all powers and prerogatives to distribute land throughout the entire national territory.”<sup>2</sup> For the terms of this study, Senegal therefore has a solidly statist land tenure regime.<sup>3</sup> The law classifies 95% of land as belonging to the “national domain,” which is supposed to be administered in a decentralized manner by elected bodies, known as Rural Councils.<sup>4</sup> The Rural Councils consist of local representatives as well as leaders of farming cooperatives and are supposed to govern the allocation of land and resolve disputes for groups of thirty to fifty villages.<sup>5</sup> Through the Rural Councils, the 1964 LDN aimed to usurp the power of traditional leaders and to place it in the hands of municipalities, falling under the developmentalist and modernizing reach of the party-state, at the time controlled by the *Parti socialiste*.

The 1964 LDN ordered the Rural Councils to grant tenure security to those who were working the land in a productive way at the time of adoption, provided that the tenant lived in the community where the land was located.<sup>6</sup> Land is not considered to be inalienable property under the 1964 LDN; an individual simply receives the right to manage it from the Rural Councils and

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<sup>1</sup> Donal Cruise O'Brien, *Saints and Politicians: Essays in the Organisation of a Senegalese Peasant Society*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 129.

<sup>2</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 73.

<sup>3</sup> As will be shown below, whether a statist land tenure regime takes hold in a region depends on the social context.

<sup>4</sup> The remaining 5% of land is apparently designated as private property, whose owners are not subject to oversight by the rural councils.

<sup>5</sup> Donal Cruise O'Brien, *The Mourides of Senegal: The Political and Economic Organization of an Islamic Brotherhood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 202.

<sup>6</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 75.

this right can be revoked if the management is not deemed to be productive. In the terms of the law, the land is “affected” to individuals, families, or corporations and their continued right to use of the land is contingent on their productive exploitation of it. As land rights would be granted to those who worked the land, traditional forms of land tenure in which a landholder does not directly exploit the land, such as share cropping or seasonal leasing, would become illegal. The intent to eradicate these forms of land tenure gave the law its developmentalist thrust, as it sanctioned a modernized yet communitarian form of agriculture.<sup>7</sup> In light of the requirement of community membership for rights to land, the law sought to support the wellbeing of local farmers and the economic development of whole communities, who would be shielded from speculative land grabs of outsiders. The extent to which the modernist vision of 1964 LDN has been realized, however, varies significantly across regions with traditional leaders in the groundnut basin, for example, capturing the Rural Councils to perpetuate feudal forms of land tenure.

Turning to the economic context, Senegal is an agrarian, low-income country. In 2017, 60% of the population was engaged in the agricultural sector, producing 15% of GDP.<sup>8</sup> The principal export crop is the groundnut, which is grown by 27% of all households and by 52% of households in extreme poverty.<sup>9</sup> To this day, the groundnut has continued its historical dominance of agriculture but donor and state projects to diversify the rural economy have targeted rice and fruit cultivation. Although the cases examined in this section date to the 70s and 80s, when state-builders were still in the process of constructing the post-independence political and economic order, these current statistics underscore the importance of the land tenure system

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<sup>7</sup> Cruise O’Brien, *Mourides of Senegal*, 202.

<sup>8</sup> “Senegal: Economy,” *Europa World Plus*, accessed October 28, 2018, <http://www.europaworld.com/entry/sn>.

<sup>9</sup> “Groundnut Value Chain Competitiveness and Prospects for Development,” The World Bank, accessed December 11, 2018.

to Senegal's developing economy. Today as in the past, the land tenure system affects livelihoods and development objectives across the country. While land conflicts have escalated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, access to land has been an extremely contentious issue for decades, as demonstrated by the case study of Lower Casamance in the late 1970s and 1980s. Throughout Senegal's independent history, urbanization, proliferation of foreign land-grabbing, and state-led agro-industrial development initiatives have put increasing pressure on peasants.<sup>10</sup> Recent years have seen an increase in the amount of land held by foreign corporations and there is an ongoing national debate over pro-peasant versus agro-industrial land tenure systems and the extent to which the government should favor either of these approaches.<sup>11</sup> Having outlined the economic context and the legal contours of the land regime in Senegal, let us now look more closely at its ramifications for the political identities and contentious activities of small farmers.

### **Peasant Politics and the Land Tenure Regime in the Groundnut Basin and Lower Casamance**

How has the formally statist, non-ethnic system of land allocation in Senegal shaped the political identities and contestation strategies of peasants? One can observe both statist and quasi-traditional forms of land tenure in Senegal, since regional variations in social structure dramatically affect the actual extension of the statist land tenure system. Given regional differences in the degree of contact between the state and rural people, regional outcomes for political identities and contestation strategies, the two aspects of peasant politics with which I am concerned, differ correspondingly. In the socially-hierarchical groundnut basin of central Senegal, where the marabout notables used the statist land tenure laws to reinforce their

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<sup>10</sup> "USAID Country Profile: Property Rights and Resource Governance – Senegal," USAID, accessed November 19, 2018, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Denis Pesche, "Construction du mouvement paysan et élaboration des politiques agricoles agricoles en Afrique subsaharienne," *Politique Africaine* 2, no. 114 (2009), 149-150.

authority, peasants are locked in feudal relationships that heavily discourage the formation of political identities and contestation strategies. In egalitarian Lower Casamance, on the other hand, contact between peasants and the state fostered scaled-up contention, in the form of a regional secessionist movement, which pressured the state for changes in land allocation. Similar effects on identity and contestation emerged in Lower Casamance and Tanzania, I argue, because of direct rule of land. This section will parse out the regionally differing outcomes produced by the land tenure regime in Senegal.

#### *Marabout Capture of Statist Land Institutions in the Groundnut Basin*

In the Wolof groundnut basin of central Senegal from 1964 to the early 1990s, day-to-day land allocations and conflicts were *de facto* governed by Muslim holy men and leaders known as marabouts, whose control of statist institutions allows them to perpetuate the feudal dependence of their peasant-followers. As noted, decision-making power over land was invested in the Rural Councils, which oversee land allocations for groupings of villages. Despite the universal scope and statist character of the 1964 LDN, the marabout elites of the groundnut basin captured the Rural Councils, using them to reinforce their dominance. Exploiting their political and electoral clout as the leaders of a hierarchical society and their ties to the Socialist Party, rural elites secured nominations to seats on the Rural Councils and thus solidified their land management powers.<sup>12</sup> They effectively coopted the statist 1964 LDN and continued to govern land distribution and conflict, now with an aura of state authority. “As progressive and modernizing as the 1964 *Loi sur le domaine national* may have sounded at first, in [the groundnut basin] of Senegal its effects were deeply conservative,”<sup>13</sup> with the decentralization of state land

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<sup>12</sup> Linda Beck, “‘Patrimonial Democrats’ in a Culturally Plural Society: Democratization and Political Accommodation in the Patronage Politics of Senegal,” PhD diss., (University of Wisconsin – Madison, 1996), 256.

<sup>13</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 77.

institutions entrenching the authority of local elites. Moreover, “the goal of popular participation [in rural economic development] was not accomplished, since state resources became the object of patrimonial and clientelist management by the rural councils, headed by local notables.”<sup>14</sup> In this way, the decentralization of state power into the hierarchical, feudal society of the groundnut basin actually stymied the development of a modern and democratic political system in the region.

Regarding the effects on political identity and contestation over land conflicts, the statist Rural Councils produced outcomes that differ sharply from the broad-based and highly contentious ones observed in Tanzania. Given that the Rural Councils cemented the existing feudal relationship between peasants and marabout landlords in the groundnut basin, it is reasonable to ask whether peasants there are able to conceive of a political identity and contestation strategy in land conflict at all. Under the hierarchically enforced stasis of feudalism, the opportunities and incentives favoring the creation of a peasant political identity or contestation strategy are minimized by the relationship of dependence, through which access to land is mediated. The dependence of the peasant on the landlord means his claim to land is purely individual, not based on a civic or national identity.<sup>15</sup> There is no public space for articulating claims on the basis of belonging to a collectivity; land claims are resolved in private between marabout and peasant. In the groundnut basin, this individual relationship is however characterized and structured by shared adherence to Islam. As such, peasants should be motivated to accentuate their pious commitment to the faith and their marabout leader, in order

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<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Blundo, “Les courtiers du développement en milieu rural sénégalais,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 35, no. 137 (1995), 77.

<sup>15</sup> Cruise O’Brien, *Saints and Politicians*, 161. On the disproportionate importance of patron-client affiliation in groundnut basin politics over broader political identities, Cruise O’Brien comments: “it remains notable in Senegal that the ‘larger’ loyalties have been mobilized on few enough occasions.”



to establish loyalty to him and receive additional land allocations or a favorable decision when a conflict arises with another peasant. Nevertheless, the relational and personal nature of claims to land in a feudal system precludes the formation of a political identity; there is no incentive to identify with a collectivity to assert a land claim since they are personal affairs between the marabout and peasant.

Contestation is similarly limited in this relationship. As isolated dependents of a marabout, peasants lack the unifying power of a political identity that could give birth to a collective movement to secure better land allocations. Moreover, the social hierarchy is also justified and perpetuated by religious sanction; Marabouts “made groundnut cultivation a religious duty for the peasants of central Senegal.”<sup>16</sup> Any attempt to criticize or revolt against the socioeconomic order surely jeopardizes the commitment of a peasant to the faith in the eyes of the marabout and the religious community. Since the relationship between peasant-disciples and the marabout is underwritten by piety, the former run the terrible risk of eviction from the land if they demonstrate unfaithful behavior by challenging the established order.

Finally, we may deduce a basic understanding of the political weakness of the groundnut basin peasantry, and by implication the absence of unified political identities and contestation strategies, by examining the alliance that developed between the Socialist Party and the marabout elite, which solidified political order in the region. Since the state was able to rely on indirect rule in this region, what does that *say* about the political activity of the peasantry there? Under the feudal system, peasants were electoral bargaining chips of the marabouts. Beck emphasizes the marabouts’ control over the political action of the peasantry, noting that they “have been characterized as the *grands électeurs* who historically have utilized their religious authority and

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<sup>16</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 54.

the hierarchical structure of the brotherhoods to mobilize their disciples into large voting blocs.”<sup>17</sup> Knowing that electoral success could be guaranteed by the support of the marabouts, with their utter control over the peasantry, “Senghor’s government used all means at its disposal to institutionalize the conservative coalition of notables upon which it rested.”<sup>18</sup> The post-independence government thus secured its reign by accepting the rural elite’s control over institutions such as the Rural Councils.<sup>19</sup> Given the political subjugation and electoral manipulability of peasants in this feudal system, indirect rule was a politically expedient and necessary tactic for Senegalese central leaders. That the peasants of the groundnut basin were so easily controlled by their marabout leaders confirms their political disempowerment, and for the purposes of my argument, a corresponding weakness in political identity and autonomous contestation.

Ultimately, Senegal’s statist land tenure regime, which “was explicitly designed to end exploitation of peasants by [marabout landowners] and others”<sup>20</sup> was subsumed and transformed into an institutional buttress for the social hierarchy in the groundnut basin. Whereas the 1964 LDN was formally a developmentalist and modernizing law, its application in practice entrenched the traditional authorities of the groundnut basin. Consequently, its effects on the political identity and contestation strategies of peasants, far from initiating an *animation rurale* and stirring peasant consciousness, were simply to perpetuate the relationship of dependence, opening no channels for collective action. Claims to land remained localized and individualized, an affair between the marabout and the disciple in this context of order and piety. Religious

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<sup>17</sup> Linda Beck, “Reining in the Marabouts? Democratization and Local Governance in Senegal,” *African Affairs* 100 (2001): 611-612.

<sup>18</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 67.

<sup>19</sup> Beck, “‘Patrimonial Democrats’ in a Culturally Plural Society,” 255.

<sup>20</sup> Cruise O’Brien, *Mourides of Senegal*, 201.

sanctioning of the social order and the importance of pious subjugation to the marabout strongly disincentivized the creation of political identities and strategies for contesting land claims. Cruise O'Brien highlights the collective disempowerment of the peasantry of the groundnut basin, noting that "the mass of peasant producers indeed have few economic or political resources, with established rural leaders already partially committed to the state apparatus. They do nonetheless have the means of an effective passive resistance.... Such a choice [however] certainly offers no long-run solution to the dire material problems of the Senegalese peasantry."<sup>21</sup>

The history of the land tenure regime in the groundnut basin of Senegal points to the importance of social context and power differentials between the state and local authorities in determining the extent to which a statist regime comes into contact with rural peoples. In particular, rural social hierarchies can pose insurmountable obstacles to the modernizing visions of central states. Rural social structure is therefore an important variable in determining the political outcomes produced under statist land regimes. The next section clarifies our understanding of social structure as a variable by analyzing the political effects produced by Senegal's land tenure regime in Lower Casamance, home to the egalitarian Diola society. This non-hierarchical society makes Lower Casamance an important test case for social structure as an intermediate determinant of the political effects produced by statist land tenure regimes. The outcomes it produced are more in line with those observed in Tanzania, as rural peoples mobilized collectively to challenge the state's management of land. The form of political identity that tied this movement together differed slightly from that of Tanzanian peasants; the peasants of Lower Casamance adopted a regional identity, not a nationally encompassing one as in Tanzania, although both were unconcerned with ethnicity.

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<sup>21</sup> Cruise O'Brien, *Saints and Politicians*, 141.

*Statist Land Intervention and Regional Backlash in Lower Casamance*

Senegal's Casamance region is located south of the Gambia. A result of the perverse national boundaries created during colonial rule, Casamance is geographically separated from the rest of Senegal by the territorial strip of the Gambia. Moving from east to west, the region is divided into Upper, Middle, and Lower Casamance. Occupying the southwestern corner of Senegal, Lower Casamance is a lush, non-Sahelian region with fertile soils.<sup>22</sup> In the colonial period, peasants cultivated rice and fruit in addition to groundnuts there, thanks to adequate rainfall. In the 1960s, these favorable agricultural conditions supported a population of prosperous peasants who "lived in better houses and ate better than farmers anywhere else in Senegal.... There were districts around Bignona, just south of the Casamance River, with some of the highest rural population densities in all of West Africa."<sup>23</sup>

The region is home to the Diola people, whose societies are characterized by egalitarian cohesiveness and a culture of horizontal solidarity.<sup>24</sup> Diola society has "no castes, no monarchies or aristocracies, and no hierarchical or bureaucratic state structures."<sup>25</sup> As in the groundnut basin, religious life in Lower Casamance is implicated in the organization of society, but with an effect opposite to that of maraboutic Islam. Pélissier notes that Diola religious tradition sustains social equality and cohesion by emphasizing "honor, respect for the wellbeing of others, the duty of solidarity, and pride in the family and the group."<sup>26</sup> In the areas where Islam has taken hold in Lower Casamance, it has done so "less uniformly and less hegemonically than in the North, and

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<sup>22</sup> Olga F. Linares, "Jola Agriculture at a Crossroads," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 39, no. 2 (2005): 235. *Political Topographies of the African State*, 98.

<sup>23</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 99.

<sup>24</sup> Olga F. Linares, *Power, Prayer and Production: The Jola of Casamance, Senegal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 96.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Pélissier, *Les Paysans du Sénégal: Les Civilisations Agraires du Cayor à la Casamance* (Saint-Yrieix, Haute-Vienne : Imprimerie Fabrègue, 1966), 398.

not in the form of the centralized brotherhoods that so dominate central Senegal.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, mutual-aid organizations uphold the principals of social equality and cooperation in daily life, providing shared farm labor and additional assistance during difficult seasons for their members.<sup>28</sup> Péliissier asserts that these groups “plainly manifest the Diola sense of solidarity.”<sup>29</sup> Before analyzing the process by which direct rule pushed Diola peasants, and those belonging to other ethnic groups of Lower Casamance, to collectively contest the state’s land management, I will clarify why and how the presence of an egalitarian society brought about a more aggressive application of statist land tenure there than in the hierarchical groundnut basin.

The egalitarian society of Lower Casamance required a different strategy of rule than the one employed in the groundnut basin. The region’s horizontal social structure constrained the ways in which the central state could control and govern, since Diola society “lacked the social hierarchies that can provide ready-made infrastructure for indirect rule.”<sup>30</sup> That is, the absence of distinct leaders, who could function as intermediaries to guarantee the electoral support of the peasantry as well as its submission to taxation, meant that the central state had to truly pursue direct rule in Lower Casamance.

Instead of passively allowing dependable local elites to capture the Rural Councils as in the groundnut basin, Dakar made its agents oversee and intervene in local land decisions, acting as the authority over land starting in 1979, when a groundnut price crisis and prolonged drought necessitated a transformation of the agricultural sector. For example, although “land allocation was the main responsibility of the new elected [Rural Councils].... *sous-préfets* [unelected administrators chosen by the state] usually handled land questions in more-or-less unilateral

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<sup>27</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 96.

<sup>28</sup> Péliissier, *Les Paysans du Sénégal*, 399.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>30</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 111.

fashion.”<sup>31</sup> By way of the *sous-préfets*, the state asserted itself directly into local land affairs, creating a new dimension to its relationship with the peasantry as well as new points of contact to which collective action could be directed. What is more, this project of direct rule picked up considerable strength in the 1980s when national financial interests and aid agencies began pressuring the state to diversify the economy beyond the struggling groundnut sector.<sup>32</sup> The state set out to develop and modernize agriculture in Lower Casamance, further enhancing the administrative strength and prerogatives of its agents and, crucially, facilitating access to land for outsiders. To this end, it turned a blind eye to violations of the 1964 LDN which prohibits the allocation of land to individuals who do not live in the community. Centrally led development projects and extensive land allocations to wealthy non-local investors ensued:

*Around Ziguinchor and Cap Skirring, the Rural Councils were instruments by which Casamançais from other localities, functionaries native to other regions of Senegal, marabouts from the groundnut basin and their peasant followers, Dakarois, and even French firms acquired land for groundnut production, orchards, touristic encampments, or fishing rights. These same actors lined up to get a piece of the action in new irrigation and land reclamation projects, many of them financed in part by international lenders such as the World Bank.*<sup>33</sup>

These highly disruptive interventions incited the fury of the Diola, who were dismayed to see their lands falling into the hands of outsiders to the detriment of the local population, with the full-fledged support of Dakar. Pointing to the economic and cultural importance of land, Darbon notes that “the state and notably its public development agencies continually undermined the Diola’s precious connection to the Earth.”<sup>34</sup> The sense of “an invasion and systematic land expropriation by *nordistes*”<sup>35</sup> galvanized the Diola who initiated broad-based collective action

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<sup>31</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 125.

<sup>32</sup> Beck, “‘Patrimonial Democrats’ in a Culturally Plural Society,” 255.

<sup>33</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 134.

<sup>34</sup> Dominique Darbon, “Le culturalisme bas-casamançais,” *Politique africaine* 14 (1984) : 128.

<sup>35</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 134.

against the state and the status quo of land allocation. A group known as the *Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de la Casamance* (MFDC) organized the peasants' collective action and asserted secessionist claims through protests as well as destruction of state property and violence against officials. Throughout these mobilizations, the peasants adopted a regional political identity, emphasizing the unity of Casamance against a conspiracy of exploitative interests supported by Dakar. The analysis of these political effects demonstrates that the direct rule of land conditioned peasants' adoption of a regional political identity and their mobilization in Lower Casamance. Before treating the ways in which direct rule influenced the forms of contention, let us clarify the processes leading to mobilization.

#### *Explaining Mobilization in Lower Casamance*

Lower Casamance's political and economic marginalization within the "Islamolo" state<sup>36</sup> primed the region for contentious activity. The political status quo ruptured as the state intensified its pro-northern land allocations and development projects in the late 70s and early 80s, following the crash of groundnut prices and sustained droughts. This burst of heightened state intervention, encouraged by international creditors, marked the social change episode that triggered the MFDC's mobilization. Seeing more and more outsiders gaining access to land and the benefits of development schemes, the Casamançais saw the central state as depriving them of resources and engaged in threat attribution, this instance being more direct and proximal than what was felt over the previous decades of generalized political-economic exclusion.<sup>37</sup>

Simultaneously, a new opportunity emerged for a concerted challenge to Dakar's increasingly unfair clientelism. In November of 1981, a group of Diola officials and notables met in secret at

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<sup>36</sup> Mamadou Diouf, *Tolerance, Democracy, and Sufis in Senegal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 164.

<sup>37</sup> Darbon, "Le culturalisme bas-casamançais," 128.

the regional airport to form the MFDC.<sup>38</sup> Having organized a core group of motivated actors, the movements' initial members were able to expand their following by tapping into Diola mutual-aid groups and the generally robust networks of cooperation and solidarity; this social appropriation allowed the movement to generate considerable strength, spreading into rural forest communities.<sup>39</sup> From these mobilizing sites, the MFDC coordinated protests and guerrilla tactics, in what amounted to a full-fledged insurgency against the Senegalese state.

#### *Direct Rule of Land and Political Effects in Lower Casamance*

Direct rule operated in two ways to produce the political identity and mobilization with which we are concerned; it first created the regional frustration that motivated peasants' collective action across Lower Casamance and then implicated the central state as the authority behind the population's marginalization and, therefore, the state became the target to which collective action was to be directed. As direct rule of land linked the central state's land decisions and actions to the shared regional experience of hardship, it provided the impetus for the articulation of a regional political identity and the broad-based secessionist movement throughout Lower Casamance. By analyzing the political incentives created by the statist administration of land, I aim to illuminate the processes by which the state's management of land in Lower Casamance fomented peasant identity formation and collective action at the regional level.

Turning first to political identity, the one adopted by peasants connected to the secessionist movement was regional in nature and inclusive of ethnic diversity, even though the movement was dominated by the Diola people. Nevertheless, Beck writes that Casamance

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph Roger de Benoist, "Pour une solution définitive du conflit en Casamance," *Afrique contemporaine* 160 (1991), 33.

<sup>39</sup> Michel Ben Arrous and Lazare Ki-Zerbo, eds., *Études africaines de géographie par le bas* (Dakar : CODESRIA, 2009), 60.



separatists “do not... rely on a rhetoric of ethnic mobilization, but rather regional identity in response to malign neglect by state institutions which the separatists claim are dominated by northerners, and to what the separatists describe as the ‘invasion’ of the Casamance by ‘northerners.’”<sup>40</sup> Direct rule gave rise to this regional political identity by uniformly subjecting the peasantry of Lower Casamance to expropriation and economic marginalization, regardless of ethnicity. In this way, direct rule of land created a shared grievance, around which peasants unified themselves and on which they based their political identity. By transcending ethnicity and creating a region-wide experience of economic and political exclusion, direct rule groups the peasants of Lower Casamance together, linking them through the common grievance of reduced access to land.

In light of the structural dominance of northern interests over state land decisions, direct rule further accentuated regional divisions, with the Casamançais seeing themselves under the yoke of Dakar and its Wolof partners.<sup>41</sup> A Casamance regional political identity therefore became more salient as it was opposed to and contrasted against unjust domination by the northerners. In the context of Lower Casamance and its relation to the rest of Senegal, direct rule made regional identity a relevant category for peasants to use in articulating and unifying their claims. Just as direct rule of land appeared to foster a nationalist political identity in Tanzania, the salience of regional identity in Lower Casamance supports the hypothesis’ predictions that direct rule of land tends to generate political identities that extend beyond ethnicity and the scope of the village.

This regional identity rhetorically unified the secessionist movement of Casamance. The secessionists engaged in all forms of protest, ranging from destruction of infrastructure to public

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<sup>40</sup> Beck, “‘Patrimonial Democrats’ in a Culturally Plural Society,” 230.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

demonstrations.<sup>42</sup> The first actions began in 1982, when “the MFDC organized a demonstration in which over a thousand Casamançais of various ethnic groups, though primarily Joola, marched through the streets of Ziguinchor, taking down the Senegalese flags from government buildings and replacing it with a white sheet as a statement of Casamance independence.”<sup>43</sup>

Continuing the argument, the collective actions of the secessionist movement were generated by direct rule of land. To be sure, there is no shortage of analysts who “directly attribute the emergence of [the] guerrilla secessionist movement in Lower Casamance in 1982 to the application of Senegal’s administrative and land reforms in 1979.”<sup>44</sup> In what way did direct rule of land lead peasant political action to take on the form of a social movement? The answer lies in the fact that direct rule shifted the scale at which peasant contestation became effective, making the regional secessionist movement a politically viable strategy, capable of producing desired outcomes. Direct rule of land made the state the target of land claims, which therefore incentivized peasants to build a movement that was capable of pressuring the state for change. In order to achieve the political goal of greater control over the allocation of land, the peasants of Lower Casamance constructed a movement that could realistically pressure the state, as the authority which currently controls that resource. Moreover, just as direct rule united the peasants of Lower Casamance in a shared experience of dispossession of land, it similarly facilitated the formation of the secessionist movement by creating ample potential supporters and recruits, eager to challenge the state’s land management. In other words, direct rule of land created both a logical basis for broad-based contestation and the political actors willing to contribute to that contestation.

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<sup>42</sup> Darbon, “Le culturalisme bas-casamançais,” 126.

<sup>43</sup> Beck, “‘Patrimonial Democrats’ in a Culturally Plural Society,” 263.

<sup>44</sup> Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State*, 135.

Through the secessionist movement, the contestation of land management scaled up to a national level, raising questions about the territorial integrity of the Senegalese state and its authority over Lower Casamance. As a result of where direct rule located authority over land, the peasant movement responded with actions that rose to the level of the central state, going beyond village boundaries. The scaling up of the contestation produced an equivalent response from Dakar; Beck writes that

*President Diouf responded to the Casamance problem with [investments in].... a number of infrastructure projects: repairing roads as well as the bridge to Ziguinchor; building schools; and initiating large development projects such as the Anambe-Kayan dam funded by the Saudi government. The state also created a new commission on the distribution of land in Ziguinchor that was generally considered to be more equitable in its decisions.<sup>45</sup>*

Simultaneously, Dakar deployed the military in order to eradicate secessionist guerillas and a simmering struggle between the state's forces and the MFDC continues to this day. In this way, we see direct rule scaling up peasants' contestation strategies to the national level in Lower Casamance, as in Tanzania, in line with the hypothesis, and even eliciting national-level responses.

## **Conclusion**

The cases of the groundnut basin and Lower Casamance revealed firstly that social structure was critically determinative of the effects that Senegal's formally statist land tenure regime produced for peasant politics. Political expediency and rural powerbases shaped the application of the law. In the groundnut basin, the marabouts' domination of social and political life enabled that group to turn the law into a buttress to their existing authority, integrating it into the modern state. Indirect rule based on feudal social arrangements emerged in the region. I

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<sup>45</sup> Beck, "Patrimonial Democrats' in a Culturally Plural Society," 263.

argued that the rigidity and hierarchy of feudalism strongly disincentivized the formation of peasant political identities and contestation strategies.

The absence of a social hierarchy in the societies of Lower Casamance forced the state to adopt a more rigorously statist approach to land management there. The egalitarian Diola people did not provide the social leaders who could be coopted as intermediaries of the state, as in the groundnut basin. Conflict over land erupted as the state began to allocate land to outsiders, displacing the local populations. The regional political identity and the secessionist movement which it supported were products of the direct rule of land in Lower Casamance. Firstly, the state's land allocations affected peasants across the region, giving them a shared grievance around which they articulated a regional political identity. Secondly, the fact of the state's control over land made it the relevant target of land claims. Peasants in the region had an incentive to mobilize on a scale that would exert meaningful and threatening pressure on the state. Ultimately, the frictional relations between the state's land administration and the Diola society, coupled with conditions for mobilization, pushed the region's peasants to form the multi-ethnic, secessionist movement in Lower Casamance.

## **Chapter III: The Forest Frontier and Rural Politics in Côte d’Ivoire, 1990-1999**

### **Introduction**

Throughout Côte d’Ivoire’s colonial and independent history, agriculture has occupied a place of central importance in politics. From independence in 1960 to democratization in 1990, the regime of President Félix Houphouët-Boigny built its political-economic order around a system of export agriculture, bargaining with clients and allocating state resources as needed. This chapter will first survey the system of export-led agricultural development that dominated the Ivorian economy from independence to the death of President Houphouët-Boigny in 1993. To set up the argumentative section, I address the state’s patterned interventions in customary land tenure systems and the tensions that emerged in rural areas as a result of this covert form of direct rule. In comparison with the more intensely statist systems of rural economic management studied in the Tanzania and Lower Casamance sections, the Ivorian system is referred to as being “semi-statist,”<sup>1</sup> in that the state exercised tremendous influence over the rural economy without ever abolishing local tenure systems; through consistent intercessions from administrators, the state profoundly shaped broad trends in land allocation and agriculture, while traditional leaders continued to oversee quotidian affairs in these domains. The discussion of what scholars have called the Houphouëtist system will establish the historical context for the mutations in rural politics that occurred in the 1990s when the economic status quo was contested following Houphouët-Boigny’s death and the dissolution of his political coalition. After analyzing the

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<sup>1</sup> A note regarding this term: it is not meant to indicate that the state had any less power over the rural economy. In the long run, the Ivorian state in this time period was highly influential over land and agricultural affairs, perhaps one of the most influential in Africa. I use “semi-statist” simply to refer to the fact that the state tolerated the continued exercise of customary authorities in the countryside over daily economic affairs, while it shaped the fundamental development of export agriculture. I elaborate on the state’s interventions and the effect that the semi-statist arrangement had on peasant politics below.

emergence of contestation, I will show how the pattern of state intervention in agriculture and land management produced the mutations, which were the electoral nationalization of the land question and the concomitant emergence of the concept of *ivoirité*, a political identity that conditioned full Ivorian citizenship on autochthony and “authentic” belonging to the nation-state. Both of these outcomes, I argue, support the hypothesis’ predictions regarding the upscaling and broadening of peasant contention and identities, respectively.

### **The Ivorian Miracle: Export Agriculture, Immigration, and Patronage**

A doctor and plantation farmer, Félix Houphouët-Boigny was elected president of Côte d’Ivoire in 1960, the year of its formal independence from France. Having risen to prominence for his successful leadership of cocoa and coffee planters in the late colonial period, he governed a one-party state with a charismatic, populist persona and was known fondly throughout most of his 33 years of rule as the *Président Paysan* (Peasant President) and *Le Vieux* (The Old One). His country stood out amongst the newly independent African states for its exceptional export-led growth, embrace of world capitalism, and relatively wealthy smallholder population in the 60s and 70s. GDP growth averaged 8% per year between 1961 and 1975,<sup>2</sup> while producers were paid a stable and internationally competitive price for their crops that increased with inflation.<sup>3</sup> The subject of much scholarly debate, the so-called Ivorian Miracle was based on the extensive cultivation of cocoa and coffee throughout the countryside and the international boom in prices for these goods, spurred by demand from increasingly wealthy consumers in Europe and North America. During the colonial period, vast expanses of frontier forest land enabled a “cash crop

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<sup>2</sup> “GDP growth (annual %): Côte d’Ivoire, 1961-1975,” The World Bank: Data, accessed March 19, 2019, <https://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators#>

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Widner, “The Origins of Agricultural Policy in Ivory Coast 1960-1986,” *The Journal of Development Studies* 29, no. 4 (1993): 31.

revolution,” which made Côte d’Ivoire the wealthiest colony of French West Africa.<sup>4</sup> Influxes of migrant smallholders, often from poorer regions of the French West African empire, to the sparsely populated forest regions powered the expansion of the cash crop frontier and became a fixture of the Ivorian political-economy.

Spurred by colonial precedent, steady immigration became an essential feature of Ivorian rural development for a number of reasons. In addition to political-economic forces discussed below, the intrinsic characteristics of cocoa production factored into the trend. Cocoa is most profitable when it is cultivated in fresh soils, which in turn drives outward expansion and the emergence of “pioneer fronts,” cleared by migrant farmers. Clarence-Smith and Ruf explain the dynamics of cocoa pioneer fronts and are worth quoting at length:

*In the 1980s... comparative research demonstrated the dependence of cocoa cultivators on the exploitation of a ‘differential forest rent,’ in the Ricardian sense of the term. A forest rent exists because it is rarely economically viable to replace decrepit cocoa trees by new ones in the same land, or to plant cocoa in land used previously for other crops, as long as forest is available. Planters clearing poorly regenerated secondary forest and former coffee groves to grow cocoa in eastern Madagascar found that they could not compete on the world market. Producers clearing primary forest, in contrast, benefited from the fertility of virgin soils and low concentrations of weeds, pests and diseases.... Given the existence of this forest rent, cocoa cultivation has been marked by the sporadic emergence of new ‘pioneer fronts,’ defined as large groups of immigrants rapidly clearing tropical forest to plant cocoa.<sup>5</sup>*

In light of cocoa’s logic of profitability, Houphouët-Boigny’s government facilitated a steady flow of migrants to frontier regions, coercing local authorities to welcome them and to give them access to land.<sup>6</sup> With the post-war commodity price boom in full swing, the independent

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<sup>4</sup> Abou Bamba, *African Miracle, African Mirage: Transnational Politics and the Paradox of Modernization in Ivory Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016), 32-34.

<sup>5</sup> William Clarence-Smith, ed., *Cocoa Pioneer Fronts Since 1880: The Role of Smallholders, Planters and Merchants* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Pierre Chauveau, “Question Foncière et Construction Nationale en Côte d’Ivoire,” *Politique Africaine*, no. 78 : 104.

government reaped considerable benefits from this model of agricultural development based on pioneering small farmer immigration

Initiated under encouraging geographic, ecological, and market conditions, export-led development was sustained by patronage politics: “the dominance of Houphouët-Boigny’s Parti Démocratique de la Côte d’Ivoire (PDCI) rested on an elaborate system of patronage financed by agricultural export earnings.”<sup>7</sup> The government was able to derive the bulk of its revenue through its marketing board, which retained a portion of the price it received for the crops on the international market. When not being stored in the price stabilization fund or devoted to development projects, export taxes were used to satisfy political clients and to shore up the PDCI’s hold on power.<sup>8</sup> The rents and benefits of export agriculture “constituted a powerful instrument for paternalist regulation of the sociopolitical space, assuring a certain stability within the political system.”<sup>9</sup>

The survival of Houphouët-Boigny’s regime was thus dependent on the good functioning and expansion of export agriculture. Constant immigration, to drive the sector, was all the more necessary. Seeking to maximize export earnings and driven by the constraints of cocoa profitability, Houphouët-Boigny used an open-door immigration policy to bring farmers from Burkina Faso, Mali, and other poorer countries to the southern and western forest lands.<sup>10</sup> Farmers from the northern regions were encouraged to become cocoa pioneers as well. As their numbers increased, the migrant laborers at the forefront of Ivorian agriculture became a

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<sup>7</sup> Sara Berry, “Struggles over Land and Authority in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 60, no.3 (2017): 112.

<sup>8</sup> The transfer of rents from the marketing board to elites and urban ventures is the standard manifestation of urban bias in West Africa, documented by Bates in *Markets and States in Tropical Africa*. Whether or not it is true, as many analysts have argued, that Côte d’Ivoire exhibited a comparatively low degree of urban bias, the PDCI still engaged in practices that are symptoms of the phenomenon.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Akindès, *Les racines de la crise militaro-politique en Côte d’Ivoire* (Dakar : CODESRIA, 2004), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Berry, “Land and Authority,” 112.



significant and valuable constituency, in many southwestern districts comprising at least 20% and up to 25% of the population.<sup>11</sup>

The obedience of the growing number of smallholders became a necessity for the PDCI, hoping to maintain a stable and unobstructed flow of exports to the world market. By appealing to the rural producers from which it derived its wealth and power, giving special attention to the migrant population, the PDCI secured an economic and political order in the countryside.

Chauveau describes the social contract that emerged, writing, “In return for guarantees in respect of prices, outlets, farm inputs and a rising standard of living, rural people were expected to show political submission and recognize the monopoly of the state and its agents over management of the cash crop sector.”<sup>12</sup> The coalition between rural peoples and the PDCI underpinned what Chauveau terms a “peasant state,” in which the party-state ensured its survival by negotiated access to the wealth produced by small farmers.

The negotiations and interventions that facilitated this relationship are indicative of the state’s influence over the rural economy and peasant livelihoods and, therefore, of great importance to the argument here. A system of inconspicuous direct rule emerged with the strategies that the state used to maintain its export-dependent political-economic order. While it continued to recognize the authority of customary leaders over day-to-day land decisions, the PDCI directed its agents to facilitate the expansion of the cash crop frontier. To this end, a semi-statist system took shape as:

*non-Ivorian and Ivorian colonists [of the frontier] enjoyed protection in gaining access to land: pressures were applied to the local village authorities and communities to get them to welcome migrant farmers.... Disputes were settled in favor of migrants who were developing the land; locals were forbidden to make foreigners pay rent; and the infiltration of protected forests was tolerated. In the North, if crops were damaged by large herds practicing transhumance, government agents sided with the herd owners. In*

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<sup>11</sup> Akindès, *Les racines de la crise*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Chauveau, “Question foncière,” 104.

*the Western forest region, landed estates were allocated to members of the ruling elite, who often originated from the East or Centre of the country.*<sup>13</sup>

The state, therefore, worked on the behalf of its pioneer smallholder clients and others who were seen as contributing to export agriculture throughout the 60s and 70s. This pattern of state intercession in rural society constitutes the peasant-state relationship that, as hypothesized, should cause smallholder contestation strategies and political identities to respectively scale upwards and to become more inclusive. The Ivorian case is, however, unique in that customary authorities continued to oversee day-to-day aspects of rural social and economic life.<sup>14</sup> The enduring authority of traditional leaders, whose governance tended to favor members of the ethnic group and blood-based claims to land, sustained the salience of ethnicity in rural society. As we will see, the interaction of an ethnically-conscious rural population with state support for outsiders produced an electoral mobilization for xenophobic, nationalist politicians appealing to disaffected rural autochthones. This mobilization occurred following a decade of mounting tensions in rural areas, produced by intractable problems within the political-economic order, and the political vacuum that appeared in the wake of Houphouët-Boigny's death in 1993, events to which we now turn.

### **The End of Houphouëtism and the Reconfiguration of the Ivorian Polity**

A confluence of events undermined the stability of Houphouët-Boigny's regime and its rural and urban coalitions throughout the 1980s.<sup>15</sup> First, undeveloped forest land became scarce, while the populations seeking to farm it continued to rise. Tensions between indigenous and migrant farmers rose as land became less accessible. While minor disputes between the two groups were commonplace in the preceding decades, they became more virulent and numerous

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<sup>13</sup> Chauveau, "Question foncière," 105-106.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 102 and Berry, "Land and Authority," 108.

<sup>15</sup> Berry, "Land and Authority," 112.

as supplies of unworked land dwindled.<sup>16</sup> Where the state had previously been able to negotiate and coerce the settlement of land disputes, it now faced disgruntled farmers without the convenience of a forest frontier. Moreover, commodity prices slumped in the 1980s, causing state revenues, read as patronage resources, to dry up. As a result, the PDCI's ability to appease elites and gain their loyalty weakened somewhat. Worse yet, these difficulties were compounded by the fact that the government found itself unable to pay off its loan debt. Bitten by the dependence for which it had opted, Côte d'Ivoire was ironically constrained by the system that had made it the success story of African independence and export-led development within the world economy.

Seeking reprieve from its financial distress, Houphouët-Boigny's regime turned to the international lending agencies and became one of the first African governments to implement a structural adjustment package in exchange for debt relief. Liberalization and retrenchment, while intended to raise producer prices and protect against urban-bias, exacerbated other conditions for small farmers, who had benefitted from the marketing board, price stabilization, and technical assistance, all of which were now reduced or eliminated. Rural areas experienced further duress as urban-dwellers, formally employed in administration and parastatals, lost their jobs and returned to their villages of origin in search of land and farm work. "Finding that their elders had distributed most of their land to strangers, leaving little for their sons to cultivate or live on, urban returnees vented their frustration – berating their elders for depriving them of their patrimony, while joining them in resentment against the immigrants whom they regarded as exploiters."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Dwayne Woods, "The Tragedy of the Cocoa Pod: Rent-Seeking, Land and Ethnic Conflict in Ivory Coast," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, no. 4 (2003): 643.

<sup>17</sup> Berry, "Land and Authority," 113.

As rural and urban areas wrestled with unemployment and a faltering economy, Ivoirians began calling for democratization and the end of one-party rule. Combined with demands to the same end from international donors, Houphouët-Boigny ushered in multi-party competition and announced a presidential election in 1990.<sup>18</sup> He won the election and remained in office, though unprecedented fissures in the Ivorian polity had emerged and would go unaddressed in the final years of Houphouëtism. In the forest regions, schisms between indigenous and immigrant populations came to the fore as land disputes intensified and began to turn on communal belonging and inherited, traditional rights. More than ever, the categories of insider and outsider became apparent. What is more, state policies of favoring migrants increasingly came under scrutiny and drew the ire of indigenous groups, as the basis for their dispossession.

Perceptions of differential treatment and state favoritism further activated insider and outsider identities. Hitherto unchallenged, the ethnic hierarchy of the state became a point of salience as well.<sup>19</sup> Dominated by the Baoulé, Houphouët-Boigny's ethnic group, the government's cooperation with immigrants at the expense of the forest populations heightened unease and tension. Members of the fragmented and acephalous societies of the forest regions, frustrated by their land deprivation, came to see the government as a cabal of Baoulé and non-indigenous interests. Lines of opposition were being drawn, with the "true" Ivoirians, whose ancestors had inhabited the forest for generations, on one side and the corrupt government and its foreign clients on the other. These were the first signs of the mutations in rural political identities that would culminate in the adoption of *ivoirité* (Ivorianness) and the fierce debates over its meaning and scope.

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<sup>18</sup> Akindès, *Racines de la crise*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

### *Explaining Opposition Mobilization and Electoral Changes*

As tensions spread, questions of the state's role in agriculture and of who should have access to land, employment, and citizenship attained new importance in Ivorian politics. Before these questions could come up for debate, the old Houphouëtist consensus had to be challenged. Why did the previously stable political scene become contested and what mobilized voters in opposition to the PDCI? Channeled for the most part through the new opposition parties, the Ivorian polity between 1993 and 1999 was recalibrated by processes of contained or institutional and transgressive contention,<sup>20</sup> though forms of the latter became more commonplace as struggles wore on in the decade. The Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI) and the Rassemblement des Républicains (RDR) seized on the political opportunities produced by sweeping social change processes, begun with the socio-economic crises and democratization and then amplified with the death of Houphouët-Boigny in 1993.<sup>21</sup> Having bolstered the PDCI's power with his charismatic leadership, Houphouët-Boigny's death created additional space for contention. Henri Konan Bédié, a member of the PDCI and leader of the National Assembly, assumed the presidency in accordance with constitutional law, but the country's first leadership change nonetheless stimulated contentious activity, with then prime minister Alassane Dramane Ouattara attempting a power grab. At the constituent level, as voters suffered unemployment and or came to resent outsiders, they increasingly attributed a threat to the PDCI's status quo and became motivated to affiliate with opposition parties catering to their concerns. Thus, the PDCI faced institutional contention with the opposition's mobilization of new supporters. Later on in

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<sup>20</sup> McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, 7: "Contained contention refers to those cases of contention in which all parties are previously established actors employing well established means of claim making.... Transgressive contention consists of episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects... when at least some of the parties employ [unprecedented or forbidden forms of] collective action."

<sup>21</sup> Akindès, *Racines de la crise*, 22.

the decade, localized, yet widespread forms of transgressive contention emerged, such as expulsion of foreigners, which, while not directly aimed at the PDCI, still eroded its authority. In the southwestern region of Tabou, indigenous citizens took it upon themselves to expel Burkinabe workers; a journalist for *Le Monde* wrote, “what happened in Tabou is only an indication of what is happening throughout the country.”<sup>22</sup> The spreading rural unrest was also rooted in the social change of economic crisis and the attribution of a foreign threat, but it interacted with the institutionalized, electoral contention and inflammatory anti-immigrant rhetoric of leading politicians. Moreover, as the opposition parties grew in stature, uncertainty and perceptions of the PDCI’s weakness mounted, stimulating transgressive contention in defiance of the law.

The fracturing of the PDCI’s coalition and the rise of the opposition also point to the effect of social structure on the mobilization of opposition support. Specifically, social structure shaped the state’s regional presence and played into the opposition’s rise. Under one-party rule, regions were incorporated into the PDCI’s order to different degrees, according to the presence and leverage of regional brokers, as was the case in Senegal under the *Parti socialiste*. In the southwestern forest regions, society was organized into “small, decentralized settlements of farming households, where decisions were made by household heads or groups of elders, rather than by chiefs.”<sup>23</sup> The absence of a substantial social hierarchy in these regions, populated by the Kru and southern Mandé ethnicities, meant that there were few regional intermediaries to negotiate the unfolding of Houphouëtism on the forest frontier. These populations were

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<sup>22</sup> Pompey Fabienne, "En Cote d'Ivoire, un conflit foncier provoque une chasse aux Burkinabes," *Le Monde*, November 23, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Berry, “Land and Authority,” 113.

consequently excluded from processes of internal party-state bargaining.<sup>24</sup> The state therefore acted with fewer constraints in the region, allowing it to more aggressively promote land allocation for migrants, which ultimately contributed to the marginalization of the indigenous populations. As predicted by the hypothesis, the fragmentation of the southwestern forest societies permitted the state to intervene heavily in land allocation and to do so with fewer restrictions than in regions controlled by powerful intermediaries. The social character of the region led to both a more complete extension of state influence and the population's exclusion from the patronage system. With the advent of democratization, the disgruntled, non-hierarchical populations of the forest frontier provided the electoral support for opposition parties, especially the FPI, to challenge the PDCI's order. In this way, the variable of social structure produced an alienated constituency, frustrated with its structural domination, for the opposition to mobilize and with which to contest the status quo of the rural economy.

With the opposition capitalizing on the social change processes and political opportunities that emerged in the wake of Bédié's assumption of power, "one witnesses Houphouëtism on trial with a call for a reinvention of fundamental political compromises."<sup>25</sup> That reinvention proceeded with the electoral competition amongst the PDCI, the FPI, and the RDR, whose constituencies I describe below. In the campaigning, debates, and policies that came with this electoral jockeying, questions of the state's role in agriculture and of who should have access to resources and rights were of central importance. That is, rural grievances and claims were newly contested in national electoral politics. Having tracked the conditions leading to electoral

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<sup>24</sup> Manuel Vogt et al., "Integrating Data on Ethnicity, Geography, and Conflict: The Ethnic Power Relations Data Set Family," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 7 (2015): 1327-42. EPR data set, with Ivorian power rankings, accessed at: <https://icr.ethz.ch/data/epr/core/>

<sup>25</sup> Akindès, *Les racines de la crise*, 22.

contention, let us now examine the instances of scaled-up rural claims and political identities in that arena and analyze their roots in the legacy of Houphouëtist intervention in rural affairs.

### ***Ivoirité*, the Land Law of 1998, and the State: The Upscaling of Rural Issues**

With the disintegration of Houphouëtism, the three parties each sought to construct electoral coalitions with direct appeals to rural constituencies. The FPI of Laurent Gbagbo primarily represented the disaffected indigenous populations of the West and Southwest forest frontier, which, for the reasons discussed earlier, saw themselves as excluded from the benefits of the PDCI's political-economic order.<sup>26</sup> The RDR of Alassane Dramane Ouattara, the country's current president, consisted of alienated PDCI cadres and a voting bloc in the majority Muslim North of herders and some farmers that had migrated to the frontier. Over the decade's presidential and legislative contests, the opposition parties forced the PDCI, now led by Henri Konan-Bédié who assumed the presidency with the passing of Houphouët-Boigny, to reevaluate its own rural policies and rework its electoral base. The PDCI continued to control the Baoulé grouping in the center of the country, though it needed to shore up its appeal to other constituencies that were increasingly approached by the opposition. Influenced by the demands of electoral competition, the contestation of rural economic and land grievances became a central focus of national party politics, culminating in the passage of a new land code. Also of importance to the hypothesis, parties mobilized voters using the political identity of *ivoirité*, which combined both nationalist and ethnic rhetoric. I will describe these outcomes and then demonstrate the way in which the legacy of state intervention in rural affairs caused them to play out in national party politics and legislation.

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Crook, "Winning Coalitions and Ethno-Regional Politics: The Failure of the Opposition in the 1990 and 1995 Elections in Côte d'Ivoire," *African Affairs* 96, no. 383 (1997): 223.



As indigenous populations linked regional marginalization to the Houphouëtist state's support for migrants, a nationalist xenophobia took hold across the countryside. To coopt these sentiments and to discredit his main challenger in the 1995 presidential election who had professional and diplomatic links to Burkina-Faso, Bédié deployed a new political identity, that of *ivoirité*.<sup>27</sup> While multiple definitions exist, *ivoirité* generally fused both national and ethnic attachments, defining a true Ivorian citizen as someone who belonged to one of the country's native ethnicities. A university theorist associated with Bédié wrote of the concept, "the individual who has *ivoirité* is a citizen of Côte d'Ivoire and is born of Ivorian parents belonging to one of the autochthonous ethnicities of Côte d'Ivoire."<sup>28</sup> It politicized and nationalized autochthony, conditioning citizenship and access to resources on being a "son of the soil." Reflecting the coalition building requirements of multi-party elections, *ivoirité* combined nationalism and ethnicity in one political identity.

Bédié demonstrated his commitment to this new ideology with two legislative acts in particular. First, he reversed the PDCI's historical openness to migrants by barring them from voting and running in future elections with the passing of a new electoral code in 1994.<sup>29</sup> Over the next four years he also worked with opposition parties to craft a new land law. The Land Act of 1998 passed in the National Assembly and stipulated that only Ivorian nationals could own land. Land claims and identity were now inseparable and the state henceforth would recognize ownership strictly on the basis of citizenship, in a dramatic reversal of the legacy of pro-immigrant intervention.<sup>30</sup> Where previously the state had relied on a certain degree of legal

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<sup>27</sup> Alfred Babo and Yvan Droz, "Conflits fonciers: de l'ethnie à la nation. Rapports interethniques et 'ivoirité' dans le sud-ouest de la Côte d'Ivoire," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 48, no. 192 (2008):752.

<sup>28</sup> Akindès, *Les racines de la crise*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>30</sup> Alfred Babo, "The Crisis of Public Policies in Côte d'Ivoire: Land Law and the Nationality Trap in Tabou's Rural Communities," *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute* 83, no. 1 (2013): 106.

ambiguity to ensure that immigrants were given access to land and the right to work it, the new land law expressly barred them from ownership and mandated that they receive permission from customary proprietors to obtain use rights.<sup>31</sup> The new emphasis on customary permission for non-citizen use rights empowered and appeased dispossessed autochthones, allowing them to evict unwanted foreign users.

Like *ivoirité*, the land law was the product of the struggle to win rural constituents in a multi-party system: “party bosses and politicians were generally tempted to embrace the autochthonous claims of their electoral bases,”<sup>32</sup> finally culminating in the new land tenure law. In the years leading up to its passage, the debates and appeals regarding the state’s land tenure system reflected the extent to which “the question of the distribution of increasingly scarce resources (landed property, jobs, various forms of power and their attributes, etc.) became the major issue in domestic politics.”<sup>33</sup> It is in the electoral and legislative struggle over the land question that rural claims were contested at the highest level of politics, transcending their local origins.

Analysts have pointed to the distinct combination of rural frustration and political identities that *ivoirité* and the Land Act of 1998 sought to valorize and coopt. Babo and Droz reveal the overlapping relation between the two policies, writing, “[*ivoirité*] was a question of redistributing to so-called true Ivoirians political (state power), social (employment), and economic (land, water bodies, forests) resources.”<sup>34</sup> As policies and mobilizing tools, *ivoirité* and the Land Act of 1998 at once honed in on political identity and rural dispossession, absorbing the

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<sup>31</sup> Babo, “Land Law and the Nationality Trap,” 110.

<sup>32</sup> Chauveau, “Question foncière,” 114.

<sup>33</sup> Akindès, *Les racines de la crise*, 27.

<sup>34</sup> Babo and Droz, “De l’ethnie à la nation,” 752.

energy of ethnically-based land claims and hostility to the outsiders who stood in the way of them.

### *Explaining the Effect of Semi-Statist Land Management*

Considered as outcomes, the contestation of land claims amongst national parties and the adoption of *ivoirité* conform to the predictions of the hypothesis. I argue here that they originated in the semi-statist management of the rural economy, referring to the legacy of “state facilitation of massive immigration of agricultural colonists in the forest region since independence”<sup>35</sup> and the simultaneous acceptance of traditional, ethnicized authority over day-to-day land questions.

Since the rural socio-economic crisis was rooted in the Houphouëtist system, its resolution could only be achieved by challenging and reconfiguring the state itself. Once it became clear that the PDCI’s control of the state and its management of land was the source of rural grievances, contestation had to be directed at the highest level of government in order to resolve them. As we have seen, the parties sought to prove their governing effectiveness and win supporters by elaborating new allocations of resources, which culminated for the countryside with the Land Act of 1998. Unlike the previous cases, multiparty democracy responded to and channeled rural unrest; voters mobilized in support of parties rather than with a transgressive collective movement. Rural claims were, nonetheless, contested on a national, elevated level, where state power could be won or at least effectively influenced to change. If Houphouëtist management of the rural economy required that successful contestation be directed at upper levels of government, multiparty democracy was the means by which that contestation proceeded, providing vote-seeking parties with an incentive to respond to rural grievances.

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<sup>35</sup> Jean-Pierre Chauveau, “La question foncière à l’épreuve de la reconstruction en Côte d’Ivoire,” *Les Cahiers du Pôle Foncier*, no. 6 (2014) : 3.

With respect to *ivoirité*, we must consider and show how the coexistence of traditional and statist institutions in the countryside produced this virulent blending of nationalist and ethnic political identity. Starting with its national component, Houphouëtism gave indigenous peasants a common experience of unequal treatment vis-à-vis the migrant population that the state welcomed and on whose behalf it intervened to allocate land. Mistrust of the PDCI's old order was a unifying characteristic for many indigenous Ivorians, making a political identity which resonated with that group a valuable mobilizing tool for parties seeking to win voters. In this sense, the actions of the state in rural society created a class of dispossessed farmers, that were susceptible to xenophobic nationalism. Ultimately, it was the PDCI that reversed its stance on immigration and first espoused *ivoirité* to win this constituency.

While obviously limited in its scope, *Ivoirité* united ethnic identities based on an authentic belonging to the national community. As parties challenged the state's perceived favoritism of non-nationals, they legitimized their claims with the element of civic national belonging contained in *ivoirité*. Groups espousing it justified their struggle by appearing as the patriotic and rightful inheritors of state power and resources, against a Houphouëtism that "privileges the individual to the detriment of the citizen."<sup>36</sup> Since the allocation of state resources and power both provoked the crisis and was being contested, *ivoirité*'s emphasis on citizenship and attachment to the nation made it a compelling political identity in the struggles over who should control the state and who should benefit from it. It effectively argued that the most "authentic" members of the polity should be the first to benefit from the state's support.

The ethnic component of *ivoirité* stemmed from the continued relevance of traditional authority in the semi-statist system. In a society where traditional authorities were still

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<sup>36</sup> Akindès, *Les racines de la crise*, 29.

recognized and where claims to land based on communal belonging were still considered legitimate, ethnicity remained a salient force and a meaningful basis for claims-making. Semi-direct rule, which mixed secular-modern and ethnicized authorities, allowed ethnicity to retain its meaning and made it a politically relevant category, leading to its expression in *ivoirité*. Unlike the Tanzanian case, for example, where a highly statist system mostly eradicated vestiges of traditional authority and ethnic attachment, their continued existence in Ivorian society gave them a solidity on which to make political claims. The Houphouëtist system, in its simultaneous recognition of traditional and state authority over land, likewise generated the ethnic *and* nationalist force of *ivoirité*.

### **Conclusion: The Legacy of Houphouëtism**

For two decades after independence, the Ivorian polity was held together by the PDCI's patronal management of export-led development. The limits of the Houphouëtist system became apparent in the 1980s and political-economic order began to erode with the closing of the forest frontier and the end of the international commodity boom. Structural adjustment exacerbated the system's complications. In the ensuing crises of employment and land scarcity, social change processes were unleashed and political opportunities opened up that spurred opposition movements. Following democratization, the structural alienation of the fragmented southwestern populations empowered the parties challenging the PDCI; again, the direct, unconstrained influence of the state over the egalitarian societies of the forest frontier indicates the importance of the social variable to the emergence of scaled-up contention. In this new context of multi-party competition, parties courted indigenous rural constituencies and aimed to address the rural crisis by rewriting the land code and by redefining who would benefit from state support and resources with *ivoirité*. As forms of scaled-up contestation and broad-based political identity,

these outcomes are in line with the hypothesis. On the one hand, the state's systematic interventions in the rural economy were the target of change and the source of grievances. To be successful and to strike at the root of the issue, contestation had to scale up to national party politics and force changes in the highest levels of authority. The Land Act of 1998 was the result of that contestation, which proceeded through mediatized and legislative debates from 1993 onward. As "the Ivorian iteration of modern nationalism,"<sup>37</sup> *Ivoirité* emerged as a direct challenge to the state's openness to migrants, especially on the forest frontier. While a desire to reclaim the state motivated the nationalist aspect of this political identity, it also drew strength from the customary authorities and ethnic attachments that were allowed to thrive with the semi-statist management of the rural economy.

The high-level contestation of land allocation and the introduction of *ivoirité* originated in Houphouëtism. While on the surface appearing as measures for the reconstruction of a nation-state, the Land Act of 1998 and *ivoirité* were manipulated to divisive, xenophobic ends and fueled indigenous attacks on foreigners.<sup>38</sup> Both of these phenomena ultimately contributed to the intensification of unrest in Côte d'Ivoire and its descent into civil war at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Having secured Côte d'Ivoire's status as a developmental wonder in the 60s and 70s, Houphouëtism and its ripple effects set the country against itself, which should be remembered in debates of the Ivorian miracle and its long-term implications. Moreover, as the Ivorian case demonstrates, it is important to note that instances in which peasant concerns impact national politics will not necessarily result in a healthier, safer, or fairer society.

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<sup>37</sup> Akindès, *Les racines de la crise*, 28.

<sup>38</sup> Babo, "Land Law and the Nationality Trap," 102.

## **Chapter IV: Rural Insurrection in Tigray, Ethiopia, 1975-1991**

### **Introduction**

This chapter tests the hypothesis against a case of armed peasant rebellion during the 1970s and 1980s in Tigray province, located in northern Ethiopia. Organized by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the province's rural population rebelled against the system of direct rule under the communist military government, known as the Derg, which governed Ethiopia starting in 1974. Having toppled the imperial regime of Haile Selassie, the Derg initiated a radical program of land nationalization and statist control of the rural economy. These programs, I will argue, caused the scaling up of the two aspects of peasant politics, contestation strategies and political identities, analyzed in the preceding sections. Contestation strategies rose to the national scale, in that they targeted the highest levels of state authority and brought together rural Tigrayans in a regional insurgency. As for peasant political identities, the TPLF employed a form of narrow ethno-nationalism, an outcome which, in its reliance on ethnicity, diverges some from the hypothesis' predictions. In the latter stages of its movement, the TPLF embraced cooperation with other ethnic groups, which conforms more to the inclusive political identities predicted by the hypothesis. I analyze these outcomes and test them against the hypothesis in the argumentative section. The conclusion summarizes the chapter and refines the role of social hierarchy as a variable within the hypothesis by comparing the differing outcomes for peasant politics in Tigray and the groundnut basin, two hierarchical societies. Before engaging the hypothesis, let us turn to the agricultural, social, and political context of the case.

### *Tigray under Imperial Rule*

This section will first provide an overview of Tigrayan agriculture and society, which were based on a form of feudalism that linked the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the ruling

nobility, and the peasantry. The second half of the section describes the center-periphery relation between the imperial central government and the province during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the lead up to the 1974 military coup that deposed Emperor Haile Selassie. This perspective on pre-revolutionary Tigrayan society and politics will help to contextualize the disruptions and subsequent grievances produced by the Derg's interventions.

Tigray is located on the northern plateau of present-day Ethiopia, at altitudes ranging from 1500 to 10000 feet above sea level.<sup>1</sup> Flat-topped mesas and deep gorges cover the region, giving it a topographical uniqueness. With erratic rainfall, severe droughts and consequent famines have plagued the region, notably from 1888-1892, 1973-1974, and 1984-1985.<sup>2</sup> Despite semi-arid growing conditions, fixed agriculture is used to principally grow cereals, such as barley, wheat, and sorghum.<sup>3</sup> Fertile soils support these crops but are highly susceptible to erosion as a result of vegetation clearance.<sup>4</sup> Historically, Tigray was wealthy relative to the rest of the Ethiopian empire, with a solid productive output. Writing about 16<sup>th</sup> century Tigray, a Portuguese missionary commented, “it seems to me that in the whole world there is not so populous a country or one so abundant in crops” and that inhabitants “gathered so much crops of all kinds that were it not for the worm, there would have been abundance for ten years.”<sup>5</sup>

This agricultural resplendence stemmed from Tigray's advantageous position within the political order of the Ethiopian Empire, which was based on an alliance between the Amhara and the Tigrayan peoples. Together, these two groups of the larger region known as Abyssinia controlled a centralized Christian empire, whose rulers claimed a line of descent from King

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Hess, *Ethiopia: The Modernization of Autocracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Bard et al., “The Environmental History of Tigray (Northern Ethiopia) in the Middle and Late Holocene: A Preliminary Outline,” *The African Archaeological Review* 17, no. 2 (2000): 81.

<sup>5</sup> Mengisteab, Kidane, *Ethiopia: Failure of Land Reform and Agricultural Crisis* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990), 39.



Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.<sup>6</sup> Tribute and loyalty flowed from provincial governors to the emperor, who conquered neighboring lands and dispensed justice with divine authority.

Underpinning political order in Tigray was a system of indirect rule, in which “emperors had to depend on local leaders and... the ancient practice of building political loyalty through dynastic marriages in the province.”<sup>7</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, shifts in the locus of political power and disruptions produced by Italian incursions exacerbated relations between Tigray and Shoa, the imperial and Amhara-dominated capital. Such changes led to the economic marginalization and impoverishment of the region, although it retained a cohesive social organization and strong cultural identity.

Traditional Tigrayan society was highly stratified, being organized around “the classic trinity of noble, priest, and peasant.”<sup>8</sup> Up to the revolution in 1974, rural society was feudal, hierarchical, and largely unchanged over the past 500 years.<sup>9</sup> Peasants practiced fixed subsistence agriculture, yet sustained the Church and rulers, both of which heavily taxed their surplus production and demanded uncompensated labor.<sup>10</sup> The peasantry was “traditionally taxed to the limits of its capacity” to support the rest of the social pyramid.<sup>11</sup> In return for their labor and tribute, peasants could depend on the local gentry for assistance in times of crisis and on the Church for salvation. Markakis notes that the counterbalance to steep inequality was a degree of “vertical integration which tends to diminish class antagonism to vanishing point.”<sup>12</sup> The vertical integration described by Markakis was reinforced by kinship ties between peasants, nobles and priests as well as Church teachings that linked the social order with divine will. A

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<sup>6</sup> Hess, *Ethiopia: The Modernization of Autocracy*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, 47.

<sup>8</sup> John Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 79.

<sup>9</sup> Hess, *Ethiopia: The Modernization of Autocracy*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, 74.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

Church pamphlet from the 1960s warned peasants against ambitions of drastic social advancement, asserting that “any human creature should keep his position in the hierarchy and know his capacity, and if he lives according to the position assigned to him by fate, he will have no regrets about himself or God.”<sup>13</sup> It was, however, possible for a peasant to join the ranks of the priesthood or become a local ruler. Moreover, there was little difference in material wealth and cultural life between the lowest members of the ruling class and priesthood on the one hand, and the peasantry on the other. Close contact between the humblest priests and rulers minimized the sense of distance between the peasants and the non-productive classes as a whole, which enhanced social cohesion. Reinforced by familial bonds and the secular and religious upper classes’ promises of worldly and spiritual security, there was a fatalistic continuity to traditional life, although there was no shortage of small-scale rebellions and sayings that pointed to the harshness of life for the average rural Tigrayan.

In this agricultural society, land was the most important economic asset and the systems used to govern it implicated all sections of the population. For the peasantry, access to land was determined by membership in the extended family or kinship group of an ancestor that was said to have first cleared land or to have received it from a royal grant. In order to receive a plot of the ancestral estate, it was necessary to prove one’s lineage through documentation. Such claims were respected and authenticated by the local secular and religious authorities. Elders of the kinship groups were responsible for allocating the land of the hereditary estates to land rights-entitled family members, which essentially accounted for all Tigrayan peasants. This system in which land rights were allocated according to descent was called *rist*. Markakis summarizes the condition of the peasantry within this traditional tenure system, noting:

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<sup>13</sup> Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, 103.

*The Christian peasantry of the northern provinces has always been a smallholder group with secure rights to land. The rist system of landholding ensures that practically everyone holds land.... Although it promotes fragmentation of holdings, this system has prevented land alienation and the emergence of a landless class.<sup>14</sup>*

The *rist* system thus provided a stable foundation for the continuation of peasant economic activity, within a highly exploitative social structure and in the face of occasional droughts. State and Church recognition ensured the legitimacy and normal functioning of the system.

In light of the stability of peasant agriculture and its integration into a hierarchical, yet cohesive social order, pre-revolutionary rural Tigray does not appear as a region that would foster a massive uprising of small farmers. Forms of social control and relationships of dependence that would inhibit the formation of a broad-based peasant movement were deeply entrenched, as in the groundnut basin of Senegal. Frustration over land rights would, moreover, be directed to the elders of the kinship group as the authority over land, confining conflict to the local parish and the hereditary estate. The juxtaposition of this historic background of peasant acquiescence with the rural insurgency that appeared in the wake of the 1974 revolution draws out important implications for the argument, specifically regarding *what* changed such that the peasants became motivated to engage in a broad-based uprising. As I will argue below, the creation of direct rule institutions to govern the rural economy altered peasant-state relations such that insurgency became a viable and necessary contestation strategy.

*The Politics of Centralization in Tigray: End of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the Eve of Revolution*

Even before the communist Derg had levelled the rural hierarchy to make way for direct rule, that form of government was taking shape in rural Ethiopia after Emperor Haile Selassie had initiated a campaign of centralization, aiming to undermine the regional nobility and increase the state's presence in the lives of its subjects. In Tigray, this trend in centralization was tainted

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<sup>14</sup> Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, 80.

by a regional sense of betrayal and marginalization. As nobles and peasants felt the pains of Amhara domination, the centralization program only exacerbated an already fraught relation between the region and the imperial government.

Tigrayan frustration with the Amharan government was the product of a confluence of negative experiences across the region, beginning in the 1880s with the Italian invasion of the province of Eritrea, just north of Tigray. There was a large Tigrigna speaking population in Eritrea, who shared an affinity with their co-linguists to the south, linking the peoples of the two provinces. Tigrayans were dismayed when the Amharan Emperor Menelik signed the Treaty of Wichale on May 2, 1889, that recognized Italian sovereignty over Eritrea.<sup>15</sup> After years of fighting, the forfeiture of the northern province was a stinging defeat for Tigrayans, who viewed the emperor's agreement with the Italians as an indication of the expendability of non-Amharan peoples within the framework of the empire. Moreover, the sense of betrayal was heightened by the outcome of negotiations after Menelik's forces defeated the Italians and halted their southward advance at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. Instead of using the victory to regain lost territories, Menelik continued to recognize Italian control of Eritrea, reinforcing Tigrayan mistrust of the center.

The temporary peace with Italy served to further marginalize Tigrayans at the turn of the twentieth century. Having held the Italians at bay, the imperial center began a campaign of southern expansion, capturing fertile farmlands that were suitable for coffee production.<sup>16</sup> The primary benefactors of this expansion were Amharan elites and court favorites, who received large estates and thus reinforced their economic dominance. Within the empire's socio-economic

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<sup>15</sup> John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 45.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

system, the disparity between the Tigrayan and Amharan groups, despite their shared claims to imperial authority and preeminence, grew wider as a result of the southern land distributions.

With expansion-minded colonizers on its northern border, Tigray effectively became a buffer zone in the Amharan empire's protracted struggles to maintain its territorial integrity against Egyptian and Italian invaders. Elaborating on Tigray's suffering as a result of its location relative to competing hostile forces, Young writes,

*Some twenty major battles were fought on Tigrayan soil between the Battle of Adwa and the Italian invasion of 1935. The armies that fought these invaders and various rival Tigrayan factions were primarily made up of peasants who were forced to feed the armies and suffered the depredations of the wars they brought to their lands. With no salaries (until the formation of a professional army in 1941) or even regular food supplies, it was common practice for soldiers to feed themselves at the expense of the peasants whose lands they traversed. Indeed, pillaging from the peasants and collecting war booty were the soldiers' chief incentives for joining the army.<sup>17</sup>*

Tigray thus sunk into poverty under the burden of such frequent warfare, the effects of which were compounded by frequent famines throughout the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tigrayans were increasingly economically differentiated from the Amharans and more than ever attributed their grievances to Shoa, giving rise to the first indications of ethno-nationalist sentiments.<sup>18</sup>

Italian colonial aspirations were reinvigorated as Benito Mussolini's fascist party came to power in 1922, espousing a vision of returning Rome to its former glory.<sup>19</sup> Italian activities, aiming to undermine the integrity of Haile-Selassie's empire, would have important consequences for the relationship between Tigray and the center. Notably, the Italians' "Tigrayan policy" consisted of a subversive propaganda campaign that specifically played off of regional disenchantment with Amhara domination.<sup>20</sup> Rome hoped to drive a wedge between the non-

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<sup>17</sup> Young, *Peasant Revolution*, 46.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1991), 151.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

Amhara peoples and the center and thereby bring about more favorable conditions for its impending invasion.

The Italians invaded Ethiopia by way of Tigray in 1935, ultimately gaining control of Shoa and Addis Ababa in 1936. Having been abandoned by Haile-Selassie during the army's early strategic retreats, Tigrayans seriously questioned their allegiance to the center.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the investments that followed from Italian colonization proved to be more alluring than the economic marginalization Tigrayans had endured previously. Many Tigrayans began to acquiesce to and even embrace the colonialists and their modernization projects, such was the extent of their disillusionment under the old imperial order. Italian colonization brought with it modern amenities, such as hospitals and schools, and infrastructural improvements that had been severely lacking.

After British and Ethiopian resistance forces drove out the Italians in 1941, Haile Selassie reclaimed his throne and sought to reconstitute his authority and tax-base through a new program of centralization, although he faced stern resistance in Tigray. With bitter memories of Amhara domination still fresh in their minds, Tigrayans were reluctant to resubmit to Haile Selassie's order, which was increasingly represented by Amhara bureaucrats, as agents of a governmental modernization process, instead of local nobles. "Angered by Haile Selassie's new administration... Tigrayan nobles encouraged peasant resistance and gave it a populist anti-Shoan character."<sup>22</sup> Regional anger against the returning government's ethnically skewed centralization culminated in a full-fledged rural rebellion, known as the *Weyane*.<sup>23</sup> This uprising brought together a diverse set of actors in defiance of the imperial state, such as the

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<sup>21</sup> Young, *Peasant Revolution*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 89.

“semipastoral communities of southern Tigray,... sectarian nobility,... and highland cultivators,” all of which were in some way opposed to the configuration and prospects of renewed Amharan rule.<sup>24</sup>

The Weyane uprising ended with Haile Selassie granting concessions to Tigrayan interests and was a clear manifestation of the tense center-periphery relationship that characterized this region of Ethiopia in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Weyane prefigures the TPLF’s insurgency in that, in both cases, the center alienated regional groups as a result of its attempts to increase its ability to intervene in daily life, to advance a form of direct rule.

Regional frustrations would continue to simmer in the years leading up to the Derg’s seizure of power in 1974. But the history of Tigrayan-Shoan relations indicates the difficulty the Derg would face in attempting to assimilate the region to its highly centralized framework. Given its history, Tigray was largely disillusioned by promises of socialist incorporation under another distant government. Decades of marginalization linked Tigrayan identity with central oppression and ethno-nationalist sentiments were increasingly vibrant in towns before and after the revolution. Such historical grievances would be fundamental to the rallying message espoused by the Tigrayan student movement in its mobilization of the peasantry. Before the TPLF organized its rural revolt, the disaffected urban military officers of the Derg toppled Haile Selassie and seized power, ushering in a socialist government that aspired to centralization far beyond that which had occurred under the imperial regime.

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<sup>24</sup> Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, 89. “The semipastoral communities of southern Tigray, especially the Raya and Azebo, wanted to preempt feudal incorporation because they felt it posed a danger to their communal ideals of egalitarianism and justice; a sectarian nobility wanted a greater share in the regional reallocation of power; and the highland cultivators wished to terminate the predatory activities of petty state officials and the militia.”

### *The Fall of the Imperial Regime*

On top of the center-periphery tensions just discussed, the imperial regime faced the ire of an emergent and demanding urban middle-class, whose unrest would provide the impetus for the coup that deposed Haile Selassie. While a full account of the coup is beyond the scope of this study and not necessary to it, suffice it to say that it was brought on by the imperial regime's inability to respond to the demands for greater political representation, a higher quality of life, and secure employment of the urban students, teachers, bureaucrats, laborers, and industrialists, many of whom were themselves products of the state's modernization and centralization projects.<sup>25</sup> Unrest mounted throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, as the regime responded either half-heartedly to reform demands or not at all. As time passed, urban actors were organizing and increasingly disaffected with the old order and its lagging adaptation to patterns of modernization. It was in this context of middle-class frustration that a group of "about 120 non-commissioned officers, enlisted soldiers, and radical junior officers with ties to the intelligentsia... overthrew the imperial regime in February 1974 and formed the de facto government, the Provisional Military Administration Council."<sup>26</sup> Themselves a fraction of the angry urban classes, the mid and low-level soldiers of the Derg seized on the political opportunity created by burgeoning resentment of the imperial regime.

With a number of political organizations seeking to upend the traditional order, the Derg's authority was fragile at best in the aftermath of the coup. Diverse nationalist and Marxist student groups jockeyed for influence, each envisioning different strategies for engaging the military government, yet adding to the confusion. In the midst of the transitional disorder, the Derg worked quickly to consolidate its power in both the cities and the countryside. First, it won

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<sup>25</sup> Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, 56-59.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.



urban support with its promises of progressive socialism, despite the constant suspicion of the radical student groups, which included the TPLF. It then extended its base of support to the rural masses by nationalizing land with the Land Proclamation of 4 March 1975. Indicating the political expediency of this reform, Young notes that “the agrarian transformation... had as much to do with the regime’s survival than any commitment to scientific socialism.”<sup>27</sup> Between these two strategic appeals, the Derg was able to dispel some of the uncertainty surrounding its claim to power and to win the popular legitimacy it needed in the aftermath of the coup.

Despite ongoing contestation from urban student groups, the Derg set out to construct a highly centralized party-state and socialized economic planning throughout Ethiopia. Having traced out the relevant history of Tigrayan society and politics and the Derg’s ascent to power, we may now begin to consider in greater detail the implications of its land nationalization for the rural population, that policy being the basis for a new system of direct rule in the countryside. It is direct rule, I will argue, that ultimately transformed peasant politics, raising them up to the regional and national levels.

### **Nationalization of Land and the Emergence of Rural Unrest**

The nationalization decree remade the political economy of rural Ethiopia, bringing with it a more intensive form of direct rule than the one that had evolved incompletely under Haile Selassie’s centralization reforms. Where the nascent bureaucracy had to appease traditional nobles under the imperial political system,<sup>28</sup> the military government aimed to fully eradicate remaining vestiges of feudalism and to bring the rural economy under its complete control. Nationalization furthermore had significant impacts on the production and livelihoods of the

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<sup>27</sup> Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen and Weintraub, *Land and Peasants in Imperial Ethiopia: The Social Background to a Revolution* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975), 91.

peasantry. Where agricultural modernization would have destabilized the powerbase of the rural leaders and therefore the old political order, the Derg set out to accelerate rural economic development, adhering to its ideology in the face of the hostility of traditional leaders, yet failing to achieve the desired results. It is the interaction between direct rule and the detrimental outcomes of the Derg's statist agriculture that would ultimately stimulate new forms of political action in rural Tigray and to which we now turn. I will first discuss the statist land reform, analyzing it in relation to the direct rule of rural society. After focusing on nationalization, I will then move to collectivization, these two programs being the core elements of direct rule in the countryside. I will then provide an overview of the experiences of Tigrayan peasants under the statist agricultural system, which initiated their disaffection from and ultimate rebellion against the Derg.

Beginning with nationalization, the Land Proclamation of 1975 recast the socioeconomic organization of rural Tigray, sweeping away the hereditary land tenure system and dispossessing the Church and the local nobility of their large holdings.<sup>29</sup> It declared that "all rural lands shall be collective property of the Ethiopian people" and that local Peasant Associations were to administer centrally drawn territorial plots.<sup>30</sup> Peasant households were to be granted rights over the land they worked and the sale or transfer of land was forbidden. Smallholders throughout the country hailed these redistributive promises and looked forward to a life free from the grinding taxation of their traditional overlords.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kidane Mengisteab, *Ethiopia: The Failure of Land Reform and Agricultural Crisis* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 97.

<sup>30</sup> Dessalegn Rahmato, *Agrarian Reform in Ethiopia* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1985), 37.

<sup>31</sup> Dessalegn Rahmato, "Agrarian Change and Agrarian Crisis: State and Peasantry in Post-Revolution Ethiopia," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 63, no. 1 (1993), 38.

The nationalization of land and the establishment of the Peasant Associations brought the party-state into closer contact with the rural population and gave it a new presence in peasant life. The Peasant Associations were “made up of all household heads in each community, and they were given authority to redistribute land, maintain common assets, resolve conflicts and enable development activities taking place in their areas.”<sup>32</sup> While these structures were intended “to serve as a form of popular self-administration,” they in reality became local-level extensions of the state, falling under the sway of party favorites.<sup>33</sup> This cooptation allowed the state to penetrate further into daily rural life; the Peasant Associations provided an additional means by which the state “[carried] out a variety of political functions, including collecting taxes, maintaining law and order, channeling directives to the peasantry, enforcing the... grain requisition programmes and later recruiting young men for the military.”<sup>34</sup> Using the Peasant Associations and the apparatus of rural administration in general, the Derg imposed numerous taxes on peasant producers as well as a grain quota to be exchanged for cash via the state’s marketing board.<sup>35</sup> By many accounts, the various contributions demanded of the peasantry were crushing and excessive.

Direct rule of the countryside thus intensified following nationalization, with the structures of statist land administration serving as additional channels of coercion, taxation, and intervention. Nationalization “cleared the way for direct access to the peasantry.... The object [of which] was to make demands on peasant resources – taxes, ‘contributions,’ food or cash crops, free labor... and to prepare peasants for the government’s socialist ventures such as cooperatives,

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<sup>32</sup> Rahmato, “Agrarian Change and Agrarian Crisis,” 39.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

villagization, and resettlement schemes.”<sup>36</sup> While the Derg was unable to extend its influence to all corners of Tigray, with outlying western regions under the control of rebel movements from the early days of the coup onward, it is safe to say that the population in non-rebel areas recognized the state as, or at least its intent to be, the authority over land and the rural economy generally.<sup>37</sup> That the old system of land tenure had been terminated throughout the province<sup>38</sup> indicates that the peasants had acknowledged land would be governed by the central state and its agents. The creation of the Peasant Associations and national ownership of land were the first and most important extensions of direct rule, which would continue to materialize with agricultural collectivization, as well as preparatory resettlement and villagization schemes, in the early 1980s. The nationalization reforms paved the way for these high-modernist socialization programs, all of which would be based upon the state’s complete control over the allocation of land.<sup>39</sup> Although they were haphazardly implemented and limited in scope, these programs were nonetheless further indications of the state’s willingness to intervene in rural life.

Collectivized agriculture contrasted sharply with the historic experience of individualized peasant production in Tigray. To be sure, Tigrayan peasants were deeply embedded in communal bonds but farming was an individual affair, meant to sustain the household and meet the taxational obligations it owed to the Church and nobility. Where the traditional system was based on self-reliance for subsistence, collectivization aimed to use communal ownership of resources for the sake of increased productivity; the means and the ends of the rural economy were to be reworked.

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<sup>36</sup> Rahmato, “Agrarian Change and Agrarian Crisis,” 44.

<sup>37</sup> Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, 93.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>39</sup> Rahmato, “Agrarian Change and Agrarian Crisis,” 39.

In addition to administrative challenges related to the coordination of the reforms, such a drastic reorganization of economic life entailed cultural friction with a peasantry unaccustomed to the mode of agriculture proposed by collectivization. Working against the tide of tradition, the Derg began the collectivization process in the late 1970s. While only a small percentage of agricultural land was successfully given over to collective farms, doing so nevertheless involved a high degree of state intervention and lasting effects on rural communities. The appropriation of productive land and the forced resettlement of peasants to work there were requisite measures. The peasants who worked on them moreover encountered a mismanaged and restrictive system, described in greater detail by Rahmato:

*In the majority of [collective farms], the holdings that were being worked were small in relative terms. Each co-operator in Arsi province, for example, often worked less than the average individual peasant in the same province. Co-operatives thus did not benefit from scale of operations or from more efficient deployment of labor. Moreover the enterprises were just as constrained by a shortage of draught animals (their main traction power) as individual cultivators. Co-operative labor was organized on a 'work gang' basis but the gangs were rarely formed on the basis of compatibility, ability or performance. The result was less intensive labor, delays in completing necessary tasks, and low output. The system of remuneration... was not well received by many peasants because they believed it encouraged shirking, incompetence and waste.<sup>40</sup>*

In light of such conditions, the productive outcomes of the collective farms fell far short of what was envisioned for them and, from 1980 to 1988, produced less per hectare on average than individually managed farms.<sup>41</sup>

In Tigray specifically, the Derg established collective farms in the southern portions of the province and relocated peasants to work on them.<sup>42</sup> Young notes that “these co-operatives were resented by indigenous residents, some of whom were killed by the Derg for resisting them. In the event the scheme did not prove successful, apparently because of the difficulty

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<sup>40</sup> Rahmato, “Agrarian Change and Agrarian Crisis,” 41-42.

<sup>41</sup> Mengisteab, *Ethiopia: The Failure of Land Reform and Agricultural Crisis*, 151.

<sup>42</sup> Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, 182.

individualistic Tigrayan peasants had in working collectively.”<sup>43</sup> Although it was implemented only in a portion of Tigray, collectivization served as an indication of the state’s prerogative over land and its intent to intervene in peasant life. Whether they worked on a collective farm or had merely heard about them, rural populations throughout Tigray became aware of the Derg’s presence in their daily affairs in the late 1970s and early 1980s as news of collectivization and resettlements circulated. Collectivization thus represented a novel, looming aspect of direct rule for rural Tigrayans and Ethiopians in general. Along with nationalization reforms and the activity of the Peasant Associations, such manifestations of direct rule of land would, according to the hypothesis, drive peasants to target the state and to mobilize in numbers in order resolve grievances related to land and, in this more expansive case, the rural economy.

Although they were initially welcoming of the Derg’s equalizing reforms, Tigrayan peasants soon became disaffected with the new system. As noted above, the numerous frustrations that arose from direct rule of rural life included crushing taxation, ineffective and unfair management of agricultural resources, and authoritarian administration, conditions which were exacerbated by famines in the late 1970s and 1980s. The combination of miserable levels of productivity and insatiable state demands pushed the peasantry to reject the Derg. Ultimately, “the seeds of [the military regime’s] humiliating downfall were sown by its own doctrinaire agrarian policies, which led to the hardening of peasant-state relations, and eventually to the complete alienation of the peasantry from the regime.”<sup>44</sup>

The experience of direct rule, therefore, primed the Tigrayan peasantry for mobilization. Using McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly’s interactive framework of mobilization, we can elucidate the causal mechanisms of Tigrayan revolt. Firstly, the miserable experience of direct rule, in this

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<sup>43</sup> Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, 182.

<sup>44</sup> Rahmato, “Agrarian Change and Agrarian Crisis,” 36.

case the relevant social change process, caused the peasantry to engage in threat attribution, seeing the Derg as an enemy. The disaffection of the rural population thus provided an opening for urban-rural brokerage, an opportunity which the established, yet city-centered TPLF used to venture into the countryside and mobilize the peasantry for its ethno-nationalist struggle.<sup>45</sup> Using its organizational resources, the TPLF initiated a process of social appropriation, sending out insurgent recruiters to tap into rural social networks and incorporate peasant villages into their movement. Feudalism's residual forms of social integration, comprised of kinship networks, the parish community, and the authority of village elders and local notables, were the organizational footholds that the TPLF could exploit to mobilize the rural masses. Indeed, brokerage and social appropriation fit squarely within the TPLF's mobilization of the peasantry, in that they are the "processes by which well-defined oppositional groups seek to appropriate the routine identities and everyday networks of shared fate and trust of previously inactive (or, at best, marginally active) social groupings."<sup>46</sup> By way of these processes, beginning with threat attribution as a consequence of a grinding system of direct rule and ending with the incorporation of peasants into its movement, the TPLF mobilized the hitherto disengaged peasantry.

With a statist system of rural economic planning in place, Tigrayan peasants came into direct contact with the state in their daily lives and felt its demands in the form of taxes and quotas. As the central state became the primary authority over peasant livelihoods, the hypothetical conditions were set for the emergence of contestation strategies capable of challenging state policies and the activation of political identities that transcend ethnic boundaries. Having laid out the system of direct rule, the grievances that arose under it, and the

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<sup>45</sup> Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, 215.

<sup>46</sup> McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, 115.

mobilization of the rural population, let us now turn to the forms of peasant politics that emerged in this context.

### **Ethno-Nationalism and Rural Insurrection in Tigray**

I argue here that direct rule of land caused Tigrayan peasant politics, in the forms of contestation strategies and political identities, to take on a regional scope in order to challenge the national government. I first show that direct rule channeled peasant contestation strategies upwards to the regional level, as manifested by the rural insurgency that sought to drive the Derg out of Tigray. Throughout that struggle, the political identity adopted by peasant insurgents was based on ethno-nationalism and the desire for inclusive self-determination of ethnic groups within the Ethiopian political system. Seeing as Tigrayan ethnic identity retained its salience, instead of ceding to a regional or national identity that explicitly accommodated multiple ethnicities, this outcome diverges to some extent from what the hypothesis predicts of peasant political identities under direct rule. These discrepancies between hypothesis and observed outcome stem from the historic differential treatment of non-Amhara peoples within the imperial system, which reinforced ethnic groups by giving each a unique experience of subjugation. Ethnic self-determination within the structure of Ethiopian politics thus became a prominent theme for the urban leaders of many of the anti-Derg movements, including the TPLF.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, since the TPLF members' political identity was premised on a notion of self-determination within a poly-ethnic Ethiopia, we do see an affiliation with the national polity, which is more in line with the hypothesis. This section elaborates on these arguments regarding

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<sup>47</sup> Hans Bauer et al., “‘This Pasture Is Ours Since Ancient Times’: An Ethnographic Analysis of the Reduction in Conflicts along the Post-1991 Afar-Tigray Regional Boundary,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 52, no. 1 (2014): 25-26.



peasant contestation strategies and political identities, first detailing what forms they took and then showing how direct rule scaled them upwards to be forces in national politics.

Having rejected the Derg's management of rural society, peasants engaged in regionwide collective action to challenge the state by supporting the TPLF, usually as militia members, but also as informants and logistical aides. This contestation strategy spread across the province and the TPLF soon became the dominant anti-Derg movement in Tigray as it gained the backing of the rural masses.<sup>48</sup> The core of the TPLF's armed forces consisted of peasants who engaged in guerilla warfare, carrying out attacks on central government outposts and skirmishing with the Ethiopian military.<sup>49</sup> Peasants moreover joined the leadership ranks of the TPLF and enacted administrative reforms in areas under the movement's control, taking on new roles in a democratized system of government.<sup>50</sup> For example, "the TPLF ensured that their [land reform program]... was carried out by the peasants."<sup>51</sup> Other administrative reforms instituted under the TPLF included a court system and committees of elected community members focusing on social issues such as health and education. Political contestation, in this sense, meant not only waging guerilla war but also the creation of a region-specific system of government, in place of central control. The peasantry and the TPLF thus implicitly challenged the overall configuration of political authority, driving out the Derg's military and administration and asserting a form of self-government across Tigray.<sup>52</sup>

Between the armed insurgency and the creation of a new administrative system, such direct assertions of regional authority demonstrate the scaling up of peasant politics; peasant

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<sup>48</sup> Aregawi Berhe, "A Political History of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (1975-1991): Revolt, Ideology, and Mobilisation in Ethiopia," PhD diss. (University of Amsterdam, 2008), 112.

<sup>49</sup> Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, 220.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>51</sup> Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, 183.

<sup>52</sup> Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, 220.

contestation strategies aimed to secure the TPLF's authority throughout Tigray. What brought about this transformation was the structural necessity of replacing the existing form of direct rule, which had come to be seen as detrimental to the interests of rural Tigrayans. Young notes the causal link between direct rule and scaled-up peasant insurrection that targeted the state, writing "the desire to transform both Tigray and its relationship with the state was the fundamental reason why the TPLF launched its revolution, but realizing this objective could only come about through successfully waging revolutionary war."<sup>53</sup> With the system of authoritarian direct rule being the cause of unrest, the resolution of peasant grievances required that political action be directed at the institution from which they originated. Where peasant grievances stemmed from direct rule by the military government, political action aimed at resolving them needed to be of a scale and scope capable of changing the character of that form of government. In line with this objective, the rural insurgency struck at the territorial integrity of the Ethiopian state and self-government aimed to replace it altogether in Tigray. From the perspective of the peasantry, both of these contestation strategies became foreseeably effective in the context of grievances produced by direct rule, leading to their adoption.

As members of the TPLF, peasants adopted rural insurgency and self-government because such contestation strategies could reasonably challenge the Derg's direct rule. In this way, the structure of politics delineated the form of political action, causing rural voices and aspirations to impact on a national level and forcing their consideration at the highest level of government. In March of 1990, the last days of its existence, the Derg attempted to regain peasant support by introducing a raft of rural reforms that would relax some of the demands of the centralized economy. "The regime was forced to concede [the reforms]... by the escalating

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<sup>53</sup> Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, 172.

anti-government insurgency in the countryside,” now in virtually all rural areas.<sup>54</sup> Though the response was too late to regain peasant support, the Derg’s concessions and, more importantly, its overthrow by a coalition of TPLF-led ethno-nationalist groups in 1991 indicate the extent to which peasant rebellion succeeded in challenging the state’s management of the rural economy.

Turning now to the form of political identity that emerged with the TPLF’s struggle, there are important differences between the ethnically-based identity that unified the TPLF and the more inclusive ones that the hypothesis predicts will be adopted by rural groups under direct rule. Throughout the TPLF’s insurrection, supporters adopted ethno-nationalist political identities, that were inspired by a vision of “national self-determination against an oppressive state.”<sup>55</sup> Tigrayan ethnicity, based on “economic interdependence, common language, religion, culture and history,”<sup>56</sup> was the unifying force of the movement. Young notes that “The TPLF, a movement based on ethnic identity, not surprisingly found its appeal limited when attempting to attract support outside its ethnic core.”<sup>57</sup> The exclusive nature of this ethnic political identity was, however, counterbalanced by the desire for self-determination within the greater Ethiopian polity and to “find a lasting space in Ethiopian power politics.”<sup>58</sup> That is, the potential for cooperation in a reconfigured, ethnically equalized Ethiopia was fundamental to TPLF supporters.

To be sure, the ethnic narrowness of the TPLF’s political identity diverges from the predictions of the hypothesis. The explanation for the observed outcomes lies in the nature of the Ethiopian political system and its reification of ethnicity, specifically the Tigrayan experience of

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<sup>54</sup> Rahmato, “Agrarian Change and Agrarian Crisis,” 36.

<sup>55</sup> Berhe, “Tigray People’s Liberation Front,” 588.

<sup>56</sup> Alemseged Abbay, “The Eritrean and Tigrayan Divergent Nationalist Paths,” PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 1996), 2.

<sup>57</sup> Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia*, 170.

<sup>58</sup> Berhe, “Tigray People’s Liberation Front,” 588.

economic marginalization in the last century of the empire. The Ethiopian state's historical association with Amhara domination, the political source of Tigrayan suffering, made the national question of paramount importance to the TPLF. Tigray's liberation, it was determined, could only be achieved with a reorganization of the relationship between the central government and the minorities within Ethiopia's "prison house of nationalities."<sup>59</sup> The ethnic basis of the structural imbalance in Ethiopia accentuated the sense of alienation from the national government, even with the rise to power of the Derg, which was seen as only another iteration of Amhara domination. Moreover, the Derg's explicitly nationalist rhetoric, exemplified by its "Ethiopia First" slogan, discounted that form of political identity,<sup>60</sup> despite its potential for greater inclusivity and recruitment into the TPLF forces.

Under these conditions, direct rule of the countryside and the Derg's attempts to promote Ethiopian identity were not capable of defusing the salience of ethnicity. The historical experience of marginalization based on ethnicity had given that identity a powerful basis in political life and the TPLF understood the suffering of Tigrayans in ethnic terms, as non-Amharans. Moreover, direct rule by the Derg was continually challenged by the TPLF, limiting the extent to which national identities could be consolidated around a relationship with the central state. Finally, where the Derg had asserted direct rule, the suffering associated with the system of government made nationalism and any rhetorical association with it all the less attractive as a political identity.

Compared with the earlier cases of regionalism observed in Lower Casamance and nationalism in Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire, the ethno-nationalism of the TPLF is a less inclusive form of political identity. It is important, however, to acknowledge the TPLF's attachment to

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<sup>59</sup> Berhe, "Tigray People's Liberation Front," 580.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 588.

Ethiopian cohesion, demonstrated by the desire for self-determination within the territory of the existing state. This attachment conforms to the hypothesis' predictions, in that it represents a broadening of political identity, albeit a minor one, seeing as the TPLF aimed to rework the relationship between Tigray and the central state and ultimately to maintain it.<sup>61</sup> If this aspect of the observed political identity conforms to the hypothesis' predictions, in what way did direct rule produce this outcome? The answer stems from the strategic conditions of the rebellions produced under the Derg's system of government. Having alienated numerous other ethnic groups and their associated rebel movements through the system of direct rule, with its convoluted economic organization and heavy taxational burdens, the Derg made itself the target of a collection of aggrieved minorities. Sharing a desire to overturn the central government, yet only capable of doing so in conjunction, the various ethnic rebellions found ethno-nationalism to be a politically advantageous strategy.<sup>62</sup> As the struggle against the Derg progressed, the TPLF sought to further articulate its vision of ethnic federalism, which the TPLF leaders could use to their strategic advantage in leading and/or joining forces with other ethnic movements.<sup>63</sup> Though direct rule under both Haile Selassie and the Derg proved to be catastrophic for Tigrayans, a federalized version of it was enticing for the TPLF and shaped its rhetoric, demonstrated by the sense of belonging to the Ethiopian polity that characterized the group's political identity. Direct rule thus influenced Tigrayan ethno-nationalism to the extent that political identity was derived from the strategic conditions that emerged as a result of that system of government. In other words, direct rule united the disparate fronts by giving them a shared enemy and thereby

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<sup>61</sup> Berhe, "Tigray People's Liberation Front," 4.

<sup>62</sup> Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, 221.

<sup>63</sup> Jean-Nicolas Bach, "EPRDF's Nation-Building: Tinkering with Convictions and Pragmatism," *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos*, no. 27 (2014), 4.

influenced the calculations of their leaders regarding the long term effectiveness of an ethno-nationalism that promised cohesion amongst the ethnicities.

In the latter stages of the rebellion against the Derg, Tareke commented, “Now that the TPLF has moved from the regional to the national terrain, criticizing its initial actions as manifestations of ‘narrow nationalist deviations,’ . . . . The front will have to repoliticize ethnicity for purposes of national unity.”<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, the TPLF led the coalition that ultimately overthrew the military government, known as the Ethiopian People’s Democratic Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and, in doing so, laid the foundation for ethnic federalism in contemporary Ethiopia. To this day, the ethno-national basis of political identity, as well as the TPLF’s rural mobilization are of great importance to contemporary Ethiopian politics, having become aspects of state tradition.<sup>65</sup>

### **Conclusion: Comparing the Effect of Hierarchy on Peasant Politics**

After outlining the history of Tigrayan agricultural society and the region’s relations with the successive central governments, this chapter argued that direct rule caused rural Tigrayans to engage in scaled-up contestation strategies that impacted on the highest levels of Ethiopian politics. Peasant participation in those strategies, which were armed insurgency and self-administration, was facilitated by the TPLF. This urban group mobilized the peasantry by exploiting the brokerage opportunity created by rural alienation from the military government and its statist agriculture. While the outcomes for peasant contestation strategies corresponded to the hypothesis’ predictions, the ethno-national political identity that initially unified the TPLF’s movement diverged from them. The movement’s emphasis on Tigrayan ethnicity was rooted in Ethiopia’s imperial system, whose structural inequalities put regional groups in tension with the

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<sup>64</sup> Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*, 221.

<sup>65</sup> Bach, “EPRDF’s Nation-Building,” 4.

Amhara leadership and central government. Nationalism, at this point associated with a new iteration of centralized domination, was not a relevant political identity and the experience of common oppression associated with the ethnic group gave narrower ethno-nationalism a greater motivating capacity. As the TPLF expanded beyond its regional base, the strategic benefits of emphasizing self-determination within the Ethiopian polity led to the modification of the movement's political identity, so as to create cohesion amongst the various other ethnic rebellions in their attempt to overthrow the Derg. Direct rule led to the broadening of political identities in that it provided a common enemy that the TPLF and other ethnic movements toppled, under the unified banner of the EPRDF.

Considering the conditions that produced these outcomes, the variable of hierarchy, which hitherto has not been discussed in this chapter, must not be discounted, yet its effect is only now apparent. Comparing the groundnut basin and Tigray province, cases of feudal societies which responded differently to the presence of central state authority, reveals that mobilization of hierarchical groups depends on the degree of those groups' incorporation or marginalization within the state's political order. Up until this case study, hierarchy was closely correlated with incorporation, regional bargaining power, and constraints on state penetration. Given the unique history of Ethiopian state-building, which differed from the experiences of the former colonies of French West Africa, these associations did not hold up. Where the experience of oppression within the imperial political order conditioned the rebellion in hierarchical Tigray, the marabout elites of the groundnut basin came to an agreement with the Senegalese socialist party in order to maintain their interests. In these two cases, mobilization depended on the hierarchy's level of incorporation into the central state's political framework. Seeing little hope

of advancement under yet another distant government, Tigrayan actors engaged in collective action to challenge the Ethiopian state.

Moreover, Tigrayan hierarchy influenced the political identity adopted by the TPLF. As hierarchy brought with it socio-cultural reproduction, it in turn provided an array symbols, memories, and traditions, that served as resources for an ethno-national political identity.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the vertical integration referred to by Markakis solidified the bonds of the Tigrayan ethnicity and reinforced group members' sense of belonging to it. Through cultural and social connections, hierarchy bolstered the salience of ethnicity and gave it political force for the TPLF, leading to its adoption of ethno-nationalism. To recalibrate the hypothesis to match this outcome, it should predict unincorporated, hierarchical groups to adopt somewhat more exclusive political identities, which adhere to the culture and social bonds of the group. These, it should be remembered, will remain flexible as contestation spreads and makes narrower identities less palpable for disparate groups, as observed in the TPLF's emphasis on self-determination and cooperation amongst the oppressed nationalities.

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<sup>66</sup> Abbay, "Divergent Nationalist Paths," 2.



## Chapter V: Conclusion

This study was inspired by a desire to understand the emergence of broad-based peasant movements in Africa. In seeking to understand under what conditions small farmers collectively challenge state power, in a direct way that goes beyond the “second best” tactics of evasion and passive resistance, I hoped to shed light on an aspect of peasant politics that had not been covered by the voluminous accounts of exploitation, dispossession, and urban-bias. Over the course of this work, I honed in on the structure of rural societies and state intervention in land and agriculture as the critical variables in explaining where nationally significant peasant movements emerge. As demonstrated by the case studies of the groundnut basin and Lower Casamance in Senegal and the cocoa frontier of Côte d’Ivoire, state penetration could be loosely gauged by the political strength of the rural society it encountered. In Lower Casamance and in the forest region of Côte d’Ivoire, nascent states managed land and agriculture with minimal initial resistance from the fragmented, acephalous societies of these areas. The marabout leaders of the groundnut basin, on the other hand, were able to use their political and economic weight to curtail the state’s influence and to constrain its autonomy. While this formula for state penetration applied to the post-colonial nations of Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire, it did not explain the case for Tigray in Ethiopia, where the hierarchical society clashed with, instead of allying with, the central state. We traced this outlying case to the specific history of Ethiopian state-building, in which dynastic politics and an imperial system severely undermined the potential for cooperation between the Tigrayan periphery and the Amhara center.

Bearing in mind the outlier case of Tigray, the understanding of state penetration based on social structures told us where the state is likely to come into close contact with rural populations and become a principal authority over peasant livelihoods. By tracking state

penetration according to group social structure, we could more methodically predict the location of statist institutions, the other key variable in explaining where strong peasant movements take hold. Working from Boone's theory regarding the effects of statist institutions on peasant politics, such institutions seemed likely to bring peasant movements into high-level political arenas, all while grouping together diverse ethnicities. Statist rural institutions in theory would shape peasant political activity to the specific form that the study sought to understand.

Where statist systems were fully articulated, and once conditions for mobilization were met, peasant contestation took on the scope to challenge modern states. Indeed, in all of the cases of scaled-up contestation, the movements elicited responses from central authorities. If the outcomes for contestation strategies were fairly uniform, with peasant actors making claims on a level that corresponded to the authority they targeted, there was slightly more variation in outcomes for peasant political identities across cases. In Lower Casamance and in Côte d'Ivoire, diverse ethnicities were grouped together in making claims on the state, but in the latter case ethnic identity still had some relevance, given the influence of ethnic authorities in the semi-statist system. In Tigray, the early stages of the TPLF's movement emphasized ethnic identity, although the tactical demands of challenging a centralized state caused diverse ethnicities to come together; the practical conditions of politics under a system of direct rule eventually outweighed the ideological significance of ethnicity. Regarding the character of peasant political identity, the degree of traditional authority in the mobilized society largely determined the importance of narrower identities. In the acephalous area of Lower Casamance, which encountered a fully statist system, the MFDC did not valorize ethnic belonging; as mentioned above, the electoral struggles on the cocoa frontier saw the mixing of ethnic and national identities, in conjunction with a mixture of statist and traditional tenure systems; in Tigray, the

cultural specificity and sense of ethnic pride that stemmed from a rigid organization of society made ethno-nationalism a powerful force for the TPLF, at least in the initial stages of the movement.

Given the outcomes for political identity and contestation, a predictive framework for scaled-up, broad-based peasant movements must reserve space for close analyses of the balance of traditional and state power in rural regions. In understanding the pull of these opposing forces, the analyst, I believe, can gauge the extent to which peasant movements will be ethnically inclusive and geared towards challenging regional or national authorities. At the same time, such analyses need not start from scratch. The framework I presented, in which the centralization of regional societies is used to roughly measure the penetration of statist land and agricultural systems, lays the groundwork for predictions and explanations of vibrant peasant movements. Moreover, it was confirmed by the post-colonial case studies and helped to orient the explanation of the unique outcomes in Tigray.

Turning now to future research prospects, the framework could be further developed by incorporating a geographical and ecological analysis of state-building. What types of terrain and agriculture are accessible for states? Where is it easiest to escape from centralized authorities? An understanding of the environmental conditions that restrict or facilitate state penetration and control of populations could be used to extend the predictive scope of the framework. Environmental factors certainly impact on the rural centralization variable, so they are therefore meaningful to the explanatory depth of the theory. Additionally, it would be useful to analyze the cultural and ideological aversion of decentralized groups to state power. What is the moral value of remaining in an acephalous system, to those who belong to them? How do these convictions motivate and inform resistance to central authorities? A closer analysis of the mentality of the

Diola and indigenous cocoa frontier populations could greatly augment the understanding of center-periphery relations and peasant politics in those cases.

Finally, there is considerable need for contemporary analyses of the emerging peasant movements, which, I believe, can be complemented by the theories laid out here. A number of African states have in recent years facilitated land sales to corporate entities and the creation of private agro-industrial development projects; such trends reflect the type of state interventions that should cause peasant movements to rise to a national scale. While structural adjustment reined in states' capacity to intervene in the rural economy, centralized private actors have in many cases filled some of the void left by the retrenchment of centralized public actors. Just as peasants were seen responding to statist management, a similar trend is unfolding today as broad rural movements advocate for their members' rights in the face of massive land grabs.<sup>1</sup> Peasant movements are calling on states to protect small farmers, at risk of dispossession as larger actors seek access to land. Moreover, the juxtaposition of foreign agro-industrial corporations with a disempowered peasantry has the potential to incite a nationalism claiming the right to the state's protection from outside interests. Finally, global warming and soaring populations will continue to put pressure on rural resources, heightening the possibility for contention and conflict. African politics will be shaped by these trends; analysts, policymakers, and advocates that are equipped to understand the emergence of peasant contention will be better positioned to respond to its effects. In any case, the findings presented here indicate that peasant political action must not be discounted even when it targets much larger actors. The processes leading to such contention and the responses it produced are, I believe, grounds for a cautious optimism in the future of the newly emerging peasant movements.

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<sup>1</sup> See Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros, eds., *Reclaiming the Land: The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America* (London: Zed Books, 2005).

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