Property and Political Order in Africa

In sub-Saharan Africa, property relationships around land and access to natural resources vary across localities, districts, and farming regions. These differences produce patterned variations in relationships between individuals, communities, and the state. This book captures these patterns in an analysis of structure and variation in rural land tenure regimes. In most farming areas, state authority is deeply embedded in land regimes, drawing farmers, ethnic insiders and outsiders, lineages, villages, and communities into direct and indirect relationships with political authorities at different levels of the state apparatus. The analysis shows how property institutions – institutions that define political authority and hierarchy around land – shape dynamics of great interest to scholars of politics, including the dynamics of land-related competition and conflict, territorial conflict, patron-client relations, electoral cleavage and mobilization, ethnic politics, rural rebellion, and the localization and “nationalization” of political competition.

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Property and Political Order in Africa

Land Rights and the Structure of Politics

CATHERINE BOONE

London School of Economics and Political Science
To my family
Of course the land question in sub-Saharan Africa has dominated the political arena for over two centuries. Land and land resources were central to the imperial conquest, the colonial settlement and the extractive economy, administered in terms of imported legal frameworks which claimed to extinguish rights held under local customary law. Whether the purpose was agriculture, mining, administrative control or simply trade, land and property rights became the subject of fierce competition and conflict and, in most cases, were at the root of the freedom struggle. . . . For up to four decades after independence, issues of land and property rights have remained at the centre of contemporary politics in the region. Yet, with the exception of a few states, we have been reluctant to confront the land issue.

– Permanent Secretary, Kenya’s Ministry of Lands and Housing, Eng. E. K. Mwongera

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Although analysts of African politics have focused mostly on the cities, civil conflict has played out mostly in the countryside. This pattern has become much starker in the past two decades. The 1990s and 2000s also drew observers’ attention to the role and weight of rural populations as voters in national elections. These shifts underscore the pressing need for tools to understand political dynamics in rural Africa, home to 60–70 percent of the continent’s population but still largely indecipherable to most political analysts.

Drawing on literatures in the new institutional economics, property rights, and the political science institutionalisms, this book proposes a model of political and economic structure in rural Africa, how it varies at the subnational level, and how it shapes subnational- and national-level outcomes. In the countryside, local political arenas are defined largely by land tenure regimes, which we define as property institutions (or rules) governing landholding and land access. The shape and political effects of these property regimes are visible in the political expression of land-related conflict. These same property regimes go far in structuring local patterns of social stratification and hierarchy, ethnic conflict, electoral mobilization, and representation in the national political arena.

Land-related conflicts are the empirical grist for this study. They are important substantively: they are often the stakes or the stimulus in larger conflicts that are shaping the course of African nations. A group of Nairobi-based observers stated that “land issues are almost always part of the conflict,” and they are correct.¹ In agrarian society, land tenure relations go far in defining relationships among individuals, groups, markets, and the state. Land-related conflict is important in this study for purely analytical reasons as well. It is a phenomenon that manifests in a wide variety of observable instances of rural

¹ Huggins, Kumugi et al. ACTS, 32.
Preface and Acknowledgments

political expression. This allows us to probe the possibilities and limits of our argument, which attributes differences in the political expression of land-related conflict to variation in local property regimes and in how these connect to political institutions and processes at the national level.

Approximately thirty land-related conflicts, all played out in subnational (district level, mostly) political arenas, form a broad empirical base for this study. About a dozen cases (from eight countries) are presented as case studies in the book’s main chapters. These are based on secondary literature, gray literature, field research including farm-level interviews, newspaper analysis, and research in national archives.

Many institutions, groups, and individuals have helped me with this project. A yearlong research grant from the American Council of Learned Societies to study land conflict in Africa got me started. I thank the ACLS and the proposal reviewers for their confidence in this study. Financial support for this project also came from the West Africa Research Association and the Long Chair in Democratic Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. The project was conducted while I was Professor of Government at UT, and I am grateful to this institution and especially to the staff of the university’s Perry-Casteñeda Library for their support.

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Talks I have given over the past six years helped me develop material that is presented here, including presentations at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (twice); Northwestern University (twice); University of Florida, Gainesville; Princeton University; Brown University; Yale University (twice); University of Virginia; Indiana University Workshop on Political Theory and Policy Analysis and WOW IV meeting; Columbia University; Pomona College; University of Pennsylvania; University of Chicago (twice); the “Tanzania and the World Conference” hosted by Texas Southern University and Rice University; the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI); SAIS/Johns Hopkins University; the Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Studies; and the Africa Talks seminar series at the London School of Economics, which provided the occasion for a very educational discussion with Elliott Green, Sam Moyo, and Thandika Mkandawire. I thank those who invited me to present this work at these seminars and workshops.

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