

BOOK REVIEW

Joanny Bélair. *Tanzania's Land Rush: Impacts of the Farmland Investment Game*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2023. xxiii + 163 pp. Illustrations. Notes. References. Index. \$58.50. Paper. ISBN: 9781350273931.

Tanzania's Land Rush explores how political actors, investors, and farmers jostle over land, the power to determine access to it, and the benefits that flow from this power.

Following a brief introduction to the book's theoretical framework and the topic of large-scale land investments in sub-Saharan Africa, Chapter Two sets out to debunk several "unquestioned and unproven assumptions" (20) about this phenomenon. While the existence of a voluminous literature, parts of which Bélair relies on to issue her correctives, makes it debateable just how unquestioned these assumptions are, she notes that land in sub-Saharan Africa is, contrary to perceptions, typically not in fact un- or underutilized; that investment in it, therefore, typically cannot avoid dispossession; and that assumed benefits, such as employment creation or productivity improvements, often fail to materialize. This is perhaps not very surprising when familiar wheeling and dealing around land acquisitions—besides speculation, Bélair cites as possible side-benefits access to bank loans, produce trading, and hunting in the vicinity of a national park—takes the focus and onus off agricultural production.

Chapter Three provides a somewhat unfocused political history of Tanzania and a barebones sketch of the country's complex land tenure regime, a firmer grasp of which may have helped avoid problems in Chapter Four. There, Bélair for instance interprets a still-not-enacted 2018 reform proposal of Tanzania's National Land Policy as an attempt to reshape institutions with the goal of "strengthening the discretionary power of the President" (55). She cites as evidence provisions giving the president the power to declare eminent domain and approve village assemblies' decisions to transfer village-controlled lands into a category that allows investors to gain access. But these provisions simply reassert existing presidential powers under the 1999 Village Land Act. Such long-standing statist aspects of the land regime, in addition to enduring communal, village control over about two-thirds of Tanzania's lands and the recognition of customary rights, also sit uncomfortably with Bélair's assertion that land policy has, since the 1980s, "eagerly embraced neoliberal ideas and discourse" (47).

Likewise, a section on the arbitrary powers exercised by local officials in the demarcation of village lands operates under the assumption that these are precisely knowable areas. When officials then "mis-record" them, this must, *ipso facto*, be purposive, that is, corrupt. A more searching analysis may have taken its starting point from an acknowledgement of a central conundrum of Tanzania's

land regime: precise boundaries of most village lands were not delineated when this category and its geographical reality were created in the context of the massive villagization resettlement campaigns of the first half of the 1970s. This produced a legacy of fuzziness in statutory land rights. Compounding this problem, Tanzania's tenure regime also recognizes customary rights that often overlap and conflict with statutory rights. There is, therefore, often simply no straightforward answer to the question of who has rights to what land.

More cogently argued and supported by better evidence, Chapter Five focuses on local state officials and state agency employees positioning themselves as land-access brokers in Rufiji District. Acting, essentially, as agents of land investors, they earn fees for official acts, guide the search for productive lands, circumvent processes that center decisions on access to most lands on village assemblies, shield investors from central government oversight and local contention alike, and steer compensation processes to their own and investors' benefit.

The chapter's portrayal of the loyalties of local officialdom as exclusively one-sided does raise questions about such a scheme's political viability—and, therefore, about whether the flow of benefits can in fact typically be quite as unidirectional as suggested. (A brief discussion of the role of a local MP in Chapter Seven indicates greater complexities.) Other authors—for example, Martina Locher, Sina Schlimmer, and Elisa Greco—who have examined these same dynamics in Tanzania paint a more nuanced and politically complex picture. The chapter does not engage with any of this work, thus both depriving itself of the opportunity to sharpen its own analysis and failing to acknowledge that it is not bestriding *terra incognita*. Broader inadequacies in how the book works with the literature extend to this review's author finding a sentence from his own work quoted for purposes of analytically framing a section of Chapter Four but misattributed to, among others, Bélair's own insufficiently referenced, unpublished, co-authored work (59). This may be a glitch; the lack of any citation of the actual source anywhere in that section, which borrows from it various truncated points and ideas, is problematic scholarship. Numerous text-editing errors and problems with writing, especially in the first half of the book, add to a general impression of carelessness, including on the part of the publisher.

Chapters Six and Seven, like Chapter Five previously published in article form, focus on the clientelist relations surrounding sugarcane production in Kagera Region. They are the book's strongest, not least because they show that such relations must labor to strike a delicate balance between competing interests. Taking the book beyond a narrower focus on large-scale land investment, these chapters sketch out the contours of a political economy that has grown around sugar production and that involves outgrower operations, class formation through land accumulation by local actors, and the contingent activation of the at times violent politics of autochthony amidst heightened struggles over land. This discussion and the empirical material the book presents on land deals in Tanzania are its chief contribution.

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