

## Chapter 8

# Lands, Livelihoods and Politics

Land is central to the reciprocal arrangement established between hosts and strangers. While groups of firstcomers control access to land through political and ritual prerogatives, strangers can acquire property rights over the course of generations. However, throughout West Africa, governmental policies and land pressure, by modifying power relations between social groups, have affected those relations and polarized ethnic identities along the lines of autochthony.<sup>1</sup> The modification of the relations between firstcomers (groups who claim ownership by virtue of autochthony) and latecomers (groups of strangers who initially occupied land allocated by firstcomers) results from the combination of political changes and economic precarity. The scarcity of resources leads to the intensification of local struggles for local power and the capture of land as the main avenues for mitigating uncertainty.

Discourses of autochthony emerge when the presence of strangers is experienced as a form of injustice and dispossession – of land rights, political and ritual prerogatives, etc. The reception of strangers by host communities depends on several factors, among which are the scale of migratory processes, the ‘power structure’ between the two groups who compete for the same political and economic assets, and the institutional framework in which those relations unfold (Shack 1979a; Skinner 1963). The context of the Peninsula gathers these various factors. Locals experience the success of latecomers in the fishing economy as economic deprivation. Moreover, demographic pressure increasingly constrains access to land as an economic asset. Finally, postwar governments, by changing the rules of access to land and leadership, have modified the structural position of strangers, who can claim these rights as granted directly by the state. Among local Sherbro populations, these processes have led to the strong categorization of ‘Temne’ as the ethnic ‘other’.

Competition over land and political leadership have intertwined, as places populated by latecomers have acquired gradually political independence – namely, the right to elect their own village head – and thus have broken free from their host communities by engaging with the state. Boone (2013) emphasizes that the institutional authority in position to allocate land rights plays a critical role in shaping the outcome of conflicts between ‘indigenes’ and migrants. In regions where land allocation is under the control of customary authorities, strangers are likely to be excluded from land ownership. By contrast, she notes:

Where in-migration has been sponsored by the central government, in-migrants’ land claims are based on national citizenship. The government that granted the land rights to the settlers is expected to defend these rights. Under this land tenure regime, the land-rights losers are those who claim land rights on the basis of indigeneity. (Boone 2013: 194)

On the Peninsula, the APC government that was in power between 2007 and 2018 did not encourage migration, but courted the recent settlers for political support. The patron–client relations thus established fostered the conditions for competition between autochthones and migrants; migrants validated the legitimacy of the state that granted them land rights. Land competition has activated ethnic identities, which mainly play out in the political scene (Boone 2013: 191).

Moreover, government law and policies increasingly shape land claims. In recent years, the value of land has skyrocketed in the region. The Peninsula, due to



**Figure 8.1.** Deforested hills in Lakka, 2012. © Anaïs Ménard

its proximity to Freetown, has become an attractive investment area for wealthy Sierra Leoneans living in the capital and abroad. As in other periurban zones of Africa, the customary politics of land redistribution, associated with established modes of social negotiation, recede as land becomes part of strategies of accumulation by the political and economic elites (see Zangré-Konseiga 2020). Unequal transactions between elites and local owners mark the epitome of the capitalist market economy ‘disembedded’ from social relations (Polanyi 1944).

Land has become a critical economic asset that has pushed people to enter into fierce conflicts, both at the interpersonal and collective levels. Communities across the Peninsula have engaged in strategies to enter clientelistic relationships with high-ranked politicians or civil servants in order to validate their ownership claims. Securing networks of state officials is a necessary strategy for people in order to navigate a periurban context of ‘insecure modernity’ characterized by: rupture – the acceleration of modernization and economic deregulation; doubt – the changes of customary mechanisms pertaining to land tenure and politics; and mistrust – the rearrangement of patron–client relationships as based on precarity and extreme economic dependency (Laurent 2013). This context modifies host/stranger relations in profound ways and creates the basis for autochthonous discourses to occur.

Nevertheless, this context does not question the local rationale of reciprocity. Groups of firstcomers and latecomers continue to invoke reciprocal arrangements to substantiate their actions. The logic of patronage permeates local discourses on both sides. People in Sherbro localities legitimate their autochthonous claims by stating that strangers, who are in a position of social dependence to access political and land rights, have bypassed customary channels of reciprocation. Similarly, latecomers emancipate themselves from those channels by arguing that firstcomers have denied them the rights that they have earned under the customary system.

## **The Local Experience of Statehood**

Sherbro autochthony is articulated with reference to the context of legal dualism that divides the national territory into two parts, each ruled by different laws with regard to customary tenure and local politics. The process of state formation in Sierra Leone can be analysed using the concept of the colonial ‘bi-furcated state’, which enforced a geographical and legal separation of the urban citizenry from the mass of rural subjects (Mamdani 1996).

In Sierra Leone, the colonial distinction between Colony and Protectorate produced a situation of legal dualism (see Renner-Thomas 2010). In the Protectorate’s territory, colonial authorities maintained and institutionalized the chieftaincy system as the guarantor of customary rights. This appeared to be the most efficient modality of indirect rule. In the Colony, they ignored the existence of

the local customary system and applied English law. Envisioning the Western Area as a land of pioneers, they considered the settlers to be ‘non-native’ (see Chapter 1). This status had legal implications: ‘non-native’ populations could not own land outside the Western Area. To this day, the Provinces Land Act of 1960 prohibits ‘non-natives’ from purchasing land outside of the Western Area in territories under customary law and, in a tautological way, defines ‘non-native’ as ‘any person not entitled under customary law to rights in land in a Province’.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, there are no restrictions on land acquisition in the Western Area imposed on other ethnic groups, which constitutes a problematic discrepancy in the legal landscape (Renner-Thomas 2010: 9). Recently, Krios have been quite active on social media to denounce this legal difference as unfair.

Sherbro populations identify the institutional legacy of the colonial state as highly problematic. The state continues to assume the Peninsula to be a land ‘without natives’. The legal framework makes provisions for state and private properties, but not for customary land rights. In 2008, the Deputy Minister of Lands, Country Planning and the Environment officially stated that ‘there is no community land in the Western Area’ – a sentence that my Sherbro interlocutors repeated to highlight the unfair treatment they have received from the government in comparison to the Provinces, where chiefs are ‘custodians of the land’. By this, Sherbros understood land as ‘a customary communal holding’ linked to a specific indigenous identity (see Mamdani 1996: 22). The right to claim customary tenure, both individually and collectively, depends on the right to be considered a ‘native’ (indigenous) group by central institutions. People referred to the differences between Colony and Protectorate to express their feeling of being deprived of their collective rights to land.

Sherbro relations with the state may be defined as a situation of ambiguous proximity. People reinterpret the historical experience of direct rule as both an opportunity and a burden. In the colonial system, Sherbro populations were ‘neither citizen nor subject’ – they lived in a space of direct rule, but likely preserved their customary political and tenure regimes (see Chapters 1 and 2). In contemporary practice, people mobilized the history of the Colony to represent themselves strategically as *either* citizen *or* subject according to situational needs.

The ‘Colony’ was often referred to in the present tense, in statements such as ‘We are part of the Colony’ or ‘Here is the Colony’. People viewed historical belonging to the Colony as granting a privileged social status opposed to the ‘native’ identities of people living in (or coming from) the interior. In this sense, proximity to the state resulted in a local distinction between the uncivilized and the civilized, the old and the modern – dichotomies that were re-enacted in contemporary discourses. For instance, it was often argued that the proximity of the state made Sherbro populations more acquainted with modernity and its institutions, such as the judicial and administrative systems.

According to the vocabulary often employed by NGOs, the set of skills derived from institutional proximity was often referred to as ‘awareness’, which drew a distinction between *aware* citizens, who were exposed to a historical civilizing process, and *unaware* subjects, who were not. Such representations blurred the lines between present and past, and emphasized the supposed predispositions of inhabitants of the Western Area to act as citizens in modern terms, while contrasting them with the habits of populations in the Provinces. Commenting on historical differences, an elder of Kissi Town said:

The people from the Colony get more of the Western life. And those from the Protectorate, there are our cultural people. They have chiefs, all their cases go through chiefs and their laws are different. But in the Colony now, you have to go according to the rule of the police, the modern law. If you are in the Colony, you are more attached to the modern law. But if you are in the Protectorate, that does not happen. If you commit an offence, they will say that they should tie you and they will tie you and put you under the sun.

Narratives about the Provinces accentuated the cruelty and absurdity of customary laws and of punishment practices. They also stressed the local despotism exerted by chiefs. In contrast, local headmen often presented themselves as respectful of state law and individual freedoms.

Nonetheless, the proximity of the central government was also presented in a narrative of subjugation and predation. In Krio and Sherbro settlements, local discourses presented Sherbros in the past as fearful of a colonial state that they poorly understood. By contrast, ‘Krios’ (understood here as the Liberated Africans) had engaged directly with colonial institutions. People claimed that, at first, Sherbros were not educated and relied on Krios for their interactions with colonial institutions. Representations of Krios as mediators aimed at supporting the representations of Sherbros as past colonial subjects, who lacked the necessary social and cultural skills to enjoy their rights and opportunities as citizens of the Colony.

Sherbros also presented themselves as extremely afraid of the police and direct state interventions in the recent past, which revealed a persistent mistrust of state institutions and agents. Some police cases had made a longlasting impact on local minds. One of the most violent and intriguing cases happened in 1972 in one Sherbro locality, as residents were accused of a ritual murder that had taken place inside the Poro sacred grove. The predatory nature of the state emerged in recollections of the event, as people said: ‘They captured all men in the village’ or ‘They came with trucks, and took everyone away’. Fishermen who escaped the state authorities hid for months in faraway settlements. People who were children at that time remembered ‘an empty village’ only populated

by grandmothers, who cared for their grandchildren. From those men who were caught, many died in prison, while others came back with serious physical and psychological traumas. In their recollections, inhabitants emphasized that local people, at that time, did not know about their rights. Interestingly, they described contemporary land cases that involved the state by using a similar narrative frame. Many people emphasized both the arbitrary power of the state (to take land) and their own powerlessness, as they saw ‘trucks, police men and soldiers’ coming to grab land.

The imaginary of the Colony and the language of institutional duality, in Mamdani’s terms (1996: 18), continue to frame the relations with state power. Contemporary representations as *either* citizen *or* subject reflect the ambiguity of the relations between indigenous populations and the colonial state in a social and legal environment shaped by direct rule. In contemporary terms, the proximity of the state is ambiguous: it may offer social and economic benefits – and ‘development’ in general – and yet state penetration down to the local level may become a threat. Referring to the Colony allows people to express a heightened feeling of insecurity related to state intrusion in the local arena in the postwar years, particularly regarding the regulation of political and land rights.

## **Institutional Reforms and Their Malcontents**

In the postwar phase, the international agenda for reconstruction involved institutional reforms driven by transparency guidelines. As in other parts of Africa, democratization and decentralization reforms, by reshuffling power relations in local and regional political arenas, triggered the emergence of autochthonous discourses (Geschiere 2009). The application of a new electoral system modified the structural position of strangers within communities.

The Local Government Act of 2004, as part of the decentralization reform, introduced the election of village heads every three years. It also stipulated easy conditions for eligibility to the post: literacy and five years of residence within a community. Before then, it seems the organization of headmanship elections had been left largely to the local level.<sup>3</sup>

This reform contributed to reversing power relations between firstcomers and latecomers. Many latecomer groups have resided for generations on the Peninsula, but have seized the opportunity of legal and demographic changes to redefine their social status and advance their political claims. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) conducted village headmen elections, but only partially, it seems, in 2006 and 2009. The results were either unavailable or did not give a full picture of the changes at work in the Western Area Rural District. By contrast, the village head elections of 2013 and 2017 (in 96 and 121 villages respectively)<sup>4</sup> revealed the shift in voting power between groups. The examples of Mile 13 and Number Two River will shed light on these processes.

Mile 13 is situated on the territory of Sussex and depends politically on the headman of Sussex/King Town. In 2012, it was mostly populated by families who had settled long before the war. Most of the territory of Mile 13 is legally owned by an inhabitant of Sussex/Sherbro Town, who inherited it from his father. He gained recognition of ownership in court against the inhabitants of Mile 13 and tried to drive them away by having their houses demolished. Nevertheless, inhabitants came back and rebuilt their houses. They also established their own cemetery, which is an act that marks the foundation of a politically independent place, and thus asserted collective ownership on the ground by land occupation.

In 2016, the candidate of Mile 13 won the village head elections. By that time, due to the construction of the Peninsula Road and the migration that pushes people outside Freetown, Mile 13 had become much more populated than Sussex. With a Mile 13 resident as village head of Sussex, Krio and Sherbro landowners found themselves subsumed under the authority of a person, and population, whom they considered 'strangers'. For their part, people in Mile 13 considered that they had been 'slaves' to inhabitants of Sussex, as they had to pay taxes for land use and farming. The possibility to have their own candidate elected marked a form of social and political emancipation from landowning families.

In Number Two River, the headman elected in 2017, like the Mile 13 winner, gained the vote from new residents in the community. Landowning families considered him, too, to be a 'stranger'. His parents did not originate from the region. His father had come in the 1960s as a forest guard and had settled in an area called Forestry Compound, further away from the original Sherbro settlement. The headman had been born on the Peninsula and he had married a woman from a landowning family. But his biography was not sufficient to ensure the respect of firstcomers, who profoundly disliked him. He was also not a Poro member, which is often a requirement for accessing power under customary rules (see Chapter 7). He had been fiercely challenged by other contestants who were Poro members, but still he had won.

The newly elected headman told me that he had stood 'to liberate the people'. He meant the majority of the inhabitants of Number Two River who were considered 'strangers' and who were excluded from political participation by 'sons of the soil'.<sup>5</sup> Still, he could not expect an easy tenure. The polls only gave him a slight majority and landowning families employed various intimidation tactics to discredit his leadership: accusations of land misappropriation (cases that often involved the police), witchcraft, Poro-related rituals, etc. As a Poro member told me, the new headman would not 'enjoy power' as somebody 'from the soil'. Because he had no legitimacy in the eyes of landowners, they continued to contest his authority during his ruling years.

These political developments encouraged a stronger territorial and political division between the upper part of settlements, near the Peninsula Road,

where new populations resided, and the lower part of settlements populated by firstcomers who tried to retain their control over the beach side. Economic specialization reinforced the up/down distinction, as new residents worked mainly in the construction field, like building, caretaking of land, or stone breaking at quarries. Furthermore, landowning families were concerned with preserving their collective rights to the beach. In Number Two River, the economic stakes were high, as the beach is managed by a communal association and tourism represents the main income of most people ‘down’ the settlement. Thus, the beach side stood as the symbol of ritual authority and autochthony in a context of land pressure and political competition.

In 2012, the new registration process, which aimed at issuing biometric voter cards, also created tensions at the local level. The registration process binds electors to the location where they registered for participation in a wide range of polls: village head, local council, parliamentary and presidential elections. Below I present the case of the registration process in Bureh Town, which I observed on 27 January 2012;

In January 2012, at the start of the registration process for the general elections, I lived in Bureh Town with my host, Mrs Dowu. One morning, she and I were sitting in her backyard when we heard shouts coming from the primary school, where one of the classrooms had been converted into a registration office for the forthcoming elections. I followed Mrs Dowu, who ran towards the school. There, about twenty to twenty-five people, non-residents of Bureh Town, were standing in line in



**Figure 8.2.** Quarry in Number Two River, 2018. © Anaïs Ménard

front of the classroom to register. About a dozen inhabitants of Bureh Town, who remained at a distance, were shouting at them. We were soon surrounded by many more people from Bureh Town, who heatedly expressed their discontent: 'It is not their Ward!' 'We don't know you!' 'We are from here!' [*Na wi de de* expresses the notion of being born from the soil] 'You are not from here!' [*Yu/una no de de* expresses the position of outsiders]. The people who had come to register remained in line, strangely silent. Someone from the crowd said that according to government law, one had to live or work in the area in order to register. A respected Krio man who lived in Bureh Town wanted to call the police in Tombo: 'Let them come, they will put them in a cell.' Debates erupted over what should be done. Eventually, after exchanging a few words among themselves, the people who had come to register walked away.

Nonetheless, Bureh Town residents did not calm down. The discussion remained heated. 'No stranger has the right to come here!' 'They will bury us here!' 'They will kill us and bury us!' Such verbal images of violence were unusual, although residents in Sherbro communities openly expressed resentment towards newcomers. The people who had come to register were likely economic migrants and rural workers living in neighbouring communities. Inhabitants of Bureh Town suspected that the headman had offered them money to register in Bureh Town, whereas they believed these people should have gone to a registration centre nearer to their residences. The headman was a rather young man who had lost the trust of Bureh Town residents because of various conflicts. It was likely that he had tried to ensure voting support for himself in the next elections by sending the people to register in Bureh Town.

That same day, the headman returned with three policemen from Tombo, and the same group of people who had come in the morning stood waiting in line again, now protected by men in uniforms. Inhabitants of Bureh Town gathered in front of the school and objected. The headman argued that not only did these people work here and had the right to register, but anyone could register anywhere. The following exchange occurred between a Bureh Town resident and the headman:

THE MAN: No, not anywhere they want. I am not a resident of Lumley so I will not register in Lumley.

THE HEADMAN: Why not? You could. You are a Sierra Leonean.

THE MAN: No, I am a descendant of Bureh Town. You should not be allowed to spoil this village.

Meanwhile, the police wanted to take Mrs Dowu to the police station because she had insulted the headman – but she said that she would

not get in the car. The man who had protested to the headman argued in her favour. He justified the reaction of the residents by explaining that nobody in this village knew these people. The policemen seemed embarrassed, caught between their duty and their sympathy for the inhabitants, as they understood the injustice of the situation. In the end, nobody was arrested for obstructing the registration process.

Mr Small, the main elderly political figure of Bureh Town and its former headman, arrived on the scene. His presence brought the dispute to a halt, as he explained to the registration staff that inhabitants of Bureh Town did not understand why non-residents were being allowed to register. The headman argued that any Sierra Leonean could register anywhere in Sierra Leone, the only condition being that one must be 18 years or older. One member of the registration staff said that he had called an official from the NEC, who was on his way to settle the matter. The NEC official arrived in a jeep, inquired as to the reason for the dispute, and, unimpressed, declared that the only official rule was that everyone had to register once. As a Sierra Leonean, anyone could register anywhere. However, he added, because the same voter card was to be used for presidential, parliamentary, local council and headmanship elections, someone who had not registered in his/her place of origin would not be able to elect his/her headman. The official did not comment on the converse situation: that people who had registered elsewhere than their place of origin or residence would vote for a local representative who would not represent *them*, given that although local residency did not matter for national or council elections, it mattered for village head elections. Such a situation implied that Bureh Town would have 'virtual' inhabitants showing up only to influence local elections. The NEC official's declarations were met with a stunned silence. Then the argument resumed but with less intensity. Elders decided to boycott the community meeting organized by the headman for that afternoon. Somebody said: 'Let [the headman] call people whom he considers "community people" in Bureh Town because we are no "community people" ... If these [people who have come to register] are community people, then they should take part in the meetings.' The above event represented the end of any chance for constructive dialogue between the headman and the residents of Bureh Town, whose relationship had deteriorated over the past months.

This vignette illustrates claims of autochthony in the local context of Bureh Town, as influenced by electoral reforms and demographic changes in the region. Bureh Town, a rather small community, was rather secluded, less economically

attractive and did not welcome many strangers, as compared to other settlements such as Mama Beach, Kissi Town and Tombo. Nevertheless, residents were very aware of the risk of being outvoted by latecomers and reacted accordingly, with a discourse of exclusion of ‘allochtones’ in order to remind them of their (relative) subordinate social position as strangers.

This event marked the penetration of the logics of the state in the local political arena. The government’s official discourse, backed by the use of modern technologies, created a sense of frustration among residents, who felt caught in a web of democratic rules that ignored the specificities of the local. Before the NEC official arrived to settle the dispute, most residents of Bureh Town believed that the case would be decided in their favour. They believed that, at the town level, such problems continued to be solved according to customary law. They also believed that state representatives like the police would validate their autochthonous rights. However, on this day, most of the inhabitants came to realize that the town was subsumed by a new national legal framework.

The incident set two political spheres in opposition: the state, which guarantees the equality of citizens before the law, and the community, whose members advocated for the negotiation of relations between social groups in accordance with customary laws. Residents opposed national citizenship to local citizenship, understood as a set of rights granted by firstcomers. In this regard, the laconic explanation of the NEC official created a heightened sense of injustice, as it meant that firstcomers had lost their status of political ‘patrons’, sovereign in their locality, to the state. Nevertheless, inhabitants of Bureh Town targeted their critics less at strangers than at local politicians, who, in their view, engaged in electoral malpractice to secure personal interests. In many places, local candidates were aware of the voting power of latecomer populations and tried to mobilize their votes. In this context, Sherbros identified the state as the main culprit for their changing relations with strangers, as state law gradually superseded local prerogatives in the allocation of political and land rights.

For their part, headmen elected among migrant populations often upheld the new law against local arguments of autochthony. In Tombo, a member of the town committee commented on Sherbro claims to a monopoly over leadership in these terms:

The indigenous rights bring a lot of problems in our community. Sherbros claim to be indigenous. But Tombo is under the Colony. It is for each and every Sierra Leonean. Whoever wants to contest for headmanship should stay at least five years in the community. The law does not say that you should be born here. The five years is for you to prove that you pay taxes. The right [to headmanship] is based on residential stay.

In this statement, the legal heritage of the Colony was presented as more democratic than the one in the Provinces, a point to which I will return below. The five-year residential rule was interpreted as linked to one's duties towards the state. By comparison, Sherbro local authorities understood the five-year rule as a partisan decision linked to the political strategy of the successive APC governments to enrol the vote of migrants on the Peninsula. Comments such as 'We don't blame migrants, we blame the party [APC]' were common. Those comments underscore the point, reported in earlier chapters, that the relations with latecomers had, until the postwar period, been managed at a relatively local level, and that the law concerning headmen changed both the nature of political relations and the management of land disputes.

### **Citizenship(s) and Land Affairs**

In a context of economic uncertainty, land has become the central asset to secure, both for individuals and communities. In the Western Area, the coexistence of legal regimes plays a role in pitting ethnic identities against one another in the process of ownership legitimation.

At the local level, Sherbro communities have maintained rules that qualify as customary with respect to land tenure, although this type of ownership does not benefit from legal recognition. As a result, Sherbros tend to present their identity as affixed to customary tenure, while other groups invoke state law to prove ownership. Ownership legitimation points to different conceptualizations of citizenship, by which I understand a set of rights and duties tied to belonging to a specific political community, whether local or national (Lund 2011).

Ownership in Krio settlements originates in the legitimation of property by the colonial state. Krios presented themselves as 'early' citizens of the Colony, whose land rights derived from titles they had acquired from colonial authorities. In the Colony, freehold tenure was not granted at first: the settlers became tenants of the British Crown. The Colony's administration later recognized land titles and turned them into a form of freehold (Renner-Thomas 2010: 19–20). On the Peninsula, although the settlers appropriated vast amounts of land, most had no deeds; rather, land simply passed from one generation to the next. Hence, the Unoccupied Lands Ordinance of 1911 guaranteed that land without title belonged to the Crown. This persuaded many Krios to obtain official ownership by way of declaration, thereby claiming vast amounts of land, which led to later speculation (Asiama 2006: 223–24).

As a result, in Krio settlements, land is mostly private. The prevalence of private property is also expressed through the perception that Krios 'trust documents' more than other groups do. Krio property holders are known for refusing customary relations through which strangers access land ownership after some time. In Sherbro settlements, people often criticized the way in which Krios

would retrieve land from tenants even after many years of renting. They often contrasted this practice with that in Sherbro settlements, in which land ownership was granted as soon as a stranger had built on a parcel of land. If he had not prevented the building, the former owner had no right to take back the land. In those statements, Sherbros positioned themselves as customary landlords to other groups, while criticizing the 'Krio system' of ownership based on documents. Similarly, Sherbros complained that their Krio relatives did not take their customary claims to land (in Krio settlements) seriously.

In a context of land pressure, Sherbro landowners strongly disapproved of the idea that the legitimization of ownership based on title deeds should take precedence over customary ownership based on local history and land occupation. People often emphasized that their parents did not think about obtaining documents, as previously land was available and customary ownership went unchallenged at the local level. Customary tenure results from developing one's land by clearing, planting trees, building a house or a *pan bodi* (basic iron structure for a caretaker). Local people were particularly resentful that outsiders to local communities, who had acquired land years ago for a cheap price and had abandoned it, returned to claim their property now that the Peninsula had become attractive and valuable. Renewing the image of the first colonial encounter, they explained that their ancestors who sold land did not understand, at that time, the implications of signing a document. They contended that document holders should pay the difference, as land was much more valuable today. In their view, the customary argument of developing one's land came first in these disputes.

When a young man living abroad came back to Sussex/King Town to claim a parcel bought by his parents in the 1960s, for which they held documents, the reaction of inhabitants was one of shock and incredulity. Somebody stated as we were discussing the case:

Forty years! Can you imagine! These Krios bought it, then they went abroad and they forgot about the land for forty years! They do not build anything on it, they do not put anyone as caretaker, they don't even clear it. And see, when one of their children has a project, they suddenly remember that they have land.

In this case, the family had neither *displayed* ownership nor showed interest in the community. They had been out of the country for years and suddenly their son came back to secure land. The man's claim was valid under statutory law, but was not legitimate in the eyes of Sussex inhabitants, who drew on local standards of customary tenure.

A family from Sherbro Town, whose status as property holders was established locally, opposed the man's claim. The headman advised both parties to check the validity of their respective documents at the Ministry of Lands. He

stated that although he was in favour of the local family, ‘documents are bigger than he is’ – in other words, he had no right to legitimate customary ownership. The representative of the family from Sherbro Town claimed to have documents, but did not want to display them. It is likely that they did not exist. As a result, he forced the claimant to fight with customary symbols: the other family cleared the land hurriedly, following which he stored the materials for a house construction directly on the parcel. Neither of the two parties wanted a court case, due to the complications this would bring in terms of time and money. For the claimant, who would have surely won the case in court, a legal decision would not have necessarily marked victory on the ground. Therefore, each continued to use customary markers, hoping to wear the other down and reach a compromise. Thus, at the local level, customary markers also remained relevant in disputes that involved document holders. Land occupation, often combined with numerous and inconclusive court cases, became the basis on which specific land disputes were ultimately arbitrated.

Nonetheless, the legitimacy of customary claims dropped as the state penetrated and superseded the local in land affairs. In the context of land pressure, the ability to produce documents is an asset: it allows the recognition of property rights and opens up the possibility of asking for compensation in the case of a land dispute. The construction of the Peninsula Road between Tokeh and York in the 2000s, for instance, encroached on private lands. In Tokeh, the Sierra Leone Road Authority took land from Sherbro families who, as customary owners, were unlikely to prove legal ownership. These families had no right to compensation. In neighbouring York, the Krio families who were in the same situation held property deeds and thus were entitled to financial compensation. They received a large amount of money as a result.

Such land cases, whether they involved the state, investors or private document holders, were common across the Peninsula since the end of the Civil War and forced residents in Sherbro settlements to reconsider the validity of their customary claim beyond the local level. The fact that a significant number of land disputes ended up in court encouraged many people relying on customary ownership to survey their properties and secure title deeds. Yet, land survey and registration remained a difficult and costly process. In order to alleviate this cost, it was common for people to pay land surveyors in kind – with acres of land.

As government representatives tended to abuse their right to claim ‘state land’ for their own individual purposes, the image of the predatory state reemerged in many narratives. There was a pervasive fear that ‘the state’ might challenge local customary ownership and take land without compensation, as in the case detailed above. As an inhabitant of Mama Beach explained:

I have a land but I don't have documents for it. Before, people did not understand that land had a value. A few years ago, I planted mango trees

on that parcel, because I had not enough money to build a house and it looked bushy. Now it looks like it has value. It shows that it belongs to somebody. In the village, everybody knows the boundary of our family land. They know it belongs to us. The only thing I am afraid of is the government. They can just come and take somebody's land.

In legal texts, the Public Land Ordinance of 1898 authorizes the compulsory acquisition of land by the state, provided that the owner is informed and compensated (Renner-Thomas 2010: 116). Yet, no compensation is necessary if the land has remained unoccupied for a period of at least twelve years. Renner-Thomas observes that 'a person who is unable to prove beneficial user of his land for the prescribed period may well find himself being expropriated without receiving any compensation' (*ibid.*: 117). Furthermore, the clear definition of 'land occupation' is problematic and left to the discretion of the state.

People in Sherbro localities often criticized the legal system as it was inherited from the Colony. They referred to the changes brought about by colonialism, which involved the concentration of power in the hands of colonial administrators. Land-grabbing by state officials was, in such a way, reinterpreted as a historical and political legacy of direct rule. Their attitude became linked to the appropriative nature of the colonial regime, as the following statement by a Sherbro elder in Kissi Town indicates: 'The whole Colony had been bought by the colonial masters. It was theirs. The government thinks it is its own personal land.' Direct rule is equated with the strong personalization of the modern state and the omnipotence of state officials in power. These discourses reformulated in contemporary terms the consequences of the bifurcated state that resulted in an advantage to the state and a disadvantage to the people.

Among these differences, the lack of power of village heads on the Peninsula compared to that of chiefs in the Provinces was a major subject of complaint. In the Provinces, the title to communal land is vested in the paramount chief and involves 'the right to control the disposition of land to strangers' (Renner-Thomas 2010: 162). Members of Sherbro landowning families contended that people in the Provinces did not need documents, as chiefs have the right to legitimate land-use rights. By contrast, their own village heads could not defend customary claims against private owners or abuses from state representatives. This discourse allowed them to criticize, in the Western Area, the absence of a legally empowered intermediary level between them and the state. Village heads, at the time of my research, were overloaded with demands from private people to acquire land on the Peninsula or to locate a parcel that their relatives had bought in the past. Some of the headmen expressed their discouragement that they could not protect any land for community development.

By contrast, groups of latecomers used the legal distinction between the Western Area and the Provinces to reaffirm the role of the state in granting land

ownership (see O’Kane and Ménard 2015). They grounded their claims in the historical specificities of the Western Area as a ‘free land’, a land of pioneers, where no specific ethnic group could claim autochthony and where the state gives equal rights and opportunities to all. This included, in their view, the ability to obtain land directly from the Ministry of Lands. The headman of PWD Compound, a newly politically independent settlement populated by latecomers (both fishermen and rural workers), explained:

If you want to buy land here, only documentation works because there is only government-owned land here ... As headmen, we are only here for a period of three years. In the Provinces, the paramount chief is the custodian of the land; he is there for life. There is nothing that goes on without the knowledge of the paramount chief. This is why land issues are not devolved to Local Councils. But here you will work directly with the Ministry of Lands when you want to buy land ... Do you know why there are no paramount chiefs in the Western Area? The Creoles had a tradition different from the rest of the country. This is not a province. This is the Western Area urban and rural; the different tribes all meet here, but we still use their [the British] system ... For instance, Kent: is it a local name? Waterloo, Hastings, Newton, York ... These are not local names. These are foreign [British] names. In case of land disputes, it is the government that will put a notice that it is state land.

Like the headman of PWD Compound, many groups of latecomers stressed the role of the state in legitimating ownership in order to evade customary hierarchies that maintained them in a subordinate position with regard to land and political rights. They aimed at acquiring control over land without the mediation of Sherbro authorities and reinterpreted the Colony’s legacy as a ‘modern’ citizenship characterized by a direct link between citizens and the state.

Sherbro firstcomers, by contrast, advocated for differentiated rights. They understood citizenship as primarily local and conferred by one’s belonging to a Sherbro community. National citizenship, for Sherbros, appeared as the outcome of the equal recognition of autochthonous rights and local citizenships throughout the national territory, which involved, for them, the end of the legal ‘exceptionalism’ of the Western Area.

## **Political Schisms and Frontier Processes**

Demographic changes, land pressure and the increase in land value have encouraged populations of latecomers – whether they arrived recently in the Western Area or not – to seek political independence from settlements to which they were territorially and politically attached. This move towards political emancipation

is also an attempt at securing land control. For instance, groups of latecomers often complained that landowning families build facilities only in their own areas, leaving later parts of the settlements ‘undeveloped’. These groups could easily achieve political independence by asking the relevant central authorities to grant the right to elect one’s village head, a decision based on population numbers.

Nevertheless, becoming a firstcomer is not a status granted by the state. It is achieved when settlements that provided land in the first place accept claims to political independence and land ownership as legitimate. Processes of legitimation in that case follow customary patterns pertaining to the host/stranger relationship. My argument follows Kopytoff’s observation (1987) that the frontier process, through which groups create new polities, is characterized by cultural conservatism. Although latecomers may draw on state legitimacy to access political independence, local negotiations based on customary obligations between hosts and strangers are necessary to legitimate land ownership. Hosts like to remind strangers of their ‘debt of gratitude’ (Colson 1970: 41), while strangers can easily invoke the obligations of their hosts to grant political and land rights. When conflict arises, the territorial extension operated by hosts when granting land can easily turn into political scission.

Thus, land disputes (and scissions) between communities continued to be fought on customary grounds and we can advance two reasons for this. First, neither customary landowners nor claimants could engage in a costly process to acquire title deeds. Second, most settlements that demanded political independence also existed before the Civil War; their inhabitants had created relations of reciprocation and mutual obligations with the host community to which they were attached long before the passage of the new law. Due to these relations, processes of legitimation still followed customary practices.

I present here as an illustration the case of PWD Compound, a settlement populated by latecomers who claim political independence from the two adjacent communities of Mama Beach and Kissi Town. PWD Compound lies between these two towns. In the 1930s, it served as a temporary base for workers employed by the Public Works Department for the construction of the Peninsula Road. In the 1960s, seasonal fishermen, mostly from the Bullom shore, started to settle permanently in the area. The first boundaries of the settlement resulted from customary negotiations, as local authorities of Mama Beach and Kissi Town allocated land to latecomers. Elders of PWD Compound who migrated during the 1960s remember having given the *kola*, usually money, rice and rum, to landowning families.

The demographic setup of the area changed with recent migrations. As it has become a large town, PWD Compound recently claimed its political independence and voted for its own village head for the first time in 2013. In the process of demarcating their new polity, the inhabitants changed the name of their town to ‘Brigitte Village’ and erected signboards on both sides of the

settlement, thereby drawing new boundaries with Kissi Town and Mama Beach. As the frontier process shows, the naming of a new political entity constitutes a critical event in establishing rights as firstcomers (Murphy and Bledsoe 1987).

The preference of firstcomers is that latecomers should use customary arguments to establish land ownership. They recognize that long-term land occupation is a legitimate reason to access property under customary law (Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962: 392). The possibility for second- and third-generation latecomers to access both political and land rights can hardly be contested by host communities. As a Sherbro landowner in Mama Beach stated about PWD Compound:

When [migrants] have stayed long in that place, they can claim that it belongs to them. They tell us that they are born here, that nobody should come control them anymore, that they are citizens here. We cannot deny that. Since they have stood up to gain their independence, we cannot do anything about that. But we don't like the way they did it. If they had begged us, we would have given land with all our heart. But they just took it without asking.

The decision to grant local citizenship rights, including land ownership, would not be denied to someone with long-term residence, so long as customary reciprocal obligations that uphold relations between landowners and land users were followed. As this fisherman reminded me, land users need to acknowledge the social and political primacy of landowners and their social debt towards them. That is why they should *beg* for land. *Begging* indicates a form of respect and humility that strangers and their descendants need to display towards original landowners. Once they fulfil their obligations, land ownership can be granted.

Yet, to call upon these mechanisms hides the fact that the value of land has increased considerably in recent years. Firstcomers are less inclined to grant ownership, as land has become the main economic asset in the region. For many, selling land has become the only option to secure other investments, like paying school fees, building a house or buying a car. Latecomers, for their part, know that they would have to pay a heavy financial compensation for the land that they occupy. The capitalist economy thus informs the nature of local negotiations, as should become clear in the case of PWD Compound.

Landowning families in Mama Beach and Kissi Town liked to tell of a shift in host/stranger relations dating back to the early 2000s. They stated that, in contrast to earlier migrations that brought fishermen from the Bullom coast, most Temne-speaking fishermen in Tombo were from the countryside and ignored everything about fishing when they arrived on the Peninsula. In reality, many of them still migrated from Bullom, and many seasonal fishermen came from the Sherbro coast. Nonetheless, Sherbros used this contrast to explain how the scale of migration and the influence of new migrants had changed the

attitude of latecomers in PWD Compound, who, they said, felt confident in asserting their rights.

Certainly, another difference was that earlier migrants were remembered as having received land and citizenship rights individually. With the election of a headman, inhabitants of PWD Compound had obtained leadership, but the question of political independence, at the local level, appeared to be a complex issue. The state legitimated the new headman, but inhabitants needed their status as landowners to be recognized by the other two communities.

The construction of communal facilities was the first step towards this goal. In the absence of 'community land' on the Peninsula, the securing of communal services has become the main customary symbol of a group's political sovereignty. A district councillor of the Western Area summed it up once for me: 'When a village has no land for development, people feel deprived because they have to rely on the facilities of their neighbours and they could be denied of that right at any time if the other village decides so.' Having no facilities in a settlement creates dependency. It feeds a feeling of social inferiority for inhabitants who have to use the infrastructures of another town and questions the rights of that group to access communal properties based on autochthony.

In PWD Compound, the development of facilities began before the election. The mosque, the church and the school were built during the last decade. The new name of the community, Brigitte Village, honoured the German woman who had founded the health centre. This name therefore had political



**Figure 8.3.** 'Brigitte Village' signboard at PWD Compound, 2012. © Anaïs Ménard

significance, as PWD Compound was the only place that had a health centre except for Tombo and Kent, and the name itself indicated that Mama Beach and Kissi Town might also come to depend on PWD Compound's infrastructure. Furthermore, by evoking direct connections to the Western world, the signboards situated PWD Compound within the networks of global patronage, which, in itself, substantiated the inhabitants' claim in constituting a standalone community.

The new name has not gained either popular or official recognition. In the lists of the 2013 and 2017 village heads elections, the settlement is called PWD Compound. Inhabitants of Mama Beach and Kissi Town refused to use the name Brigitte Village because in their view, 'compound' indicates that the area remains a subpart of a wider settlement and not an independent community. To change the name from 'compound' to 'village' was understood as a clear provocation, which was criticized in these terms by Mr Nicol, the representative of the main landowning family of Kissi Town:

Compound is not theirs, like Forest Compound, Tokeh Compound [the compound between Tokeh and Number Two River] – it belongs to another settlement. At least if they want to become independent, they should not have called it Brigitte. They should have taken the name of one of the stakeholders of the community, like Pa [name], and give it to the community. Then it would have looked good.

To Mr Nicol, if PWD Compound claimed independence, at least the new name should have reflected local history and showed respect towards families who had historically allocated land. The name he mentioned was one of the early migrants to PWD Compound, who was related to him and recognized his authority in land disputes.

Thus, customary readings of local practices provided the basis upon which relations between settlements unfolded. Local authorities of PWD Compound changed the name of the settlement, but also placed signboards to mark new boundaries with Kissi Town and Mama Beach. The signboards were uprooted, but were soon replaced. These new markers of ownership created land disputes on both sides. On the Mama Beach side, although the boundary was disputed, people tended to privilege customary markers of ownership, such as clearing and building, and accepted that inhabitants of PWD Compound had acquired land rights based on long-term occupation. On the Kissi Town side, the land dispute remained unresolved and the boundary contested, sparking episodes of violence between the two settlements.

The reason for the difference in boundary disputes on each side lies in the normative orders at play. In Mama Beach, the new community's claims were accepted, in part, because most of the landowning families in Mama Beach did

not have documents for their land. Therefore, disputes could be arbitrated only on the basis of customary markers. However, the boundary dispute between Kissi Town and PWD Compound was likely to last for some time because land ownership in Kissi Town could not be negotiated on the basis of customary tenure.

Already before the war, Mr Nicol had surveyed more than 100 acres that covered the whole territory of Kissi Town between Tombo and Mama Beach. His documents were difficult to challenge in court and inhabitants of PWD Compound legally owed rent to Mr Nicol. In order to access property, they would have needed to buy his land from him. Among families who had arrived in the 1960s, some had paid the difference in price and obtained title deeds. Yet, for others, the existence of Mr Nicol's documents blocked the renegotiation of customary land rights; the relations between landowners and strangers were fixed by statutory law and could only be reassessed through the purchase of land.

Thus blocked, inhabitants of PWD Compound modified their strategies to achieve ownership at the local level. They disregarded Mr Nicol's documents. Some purchased land directly from customary landowners; Mr Nicol insisted that because a land sale required a conveyance signed by him, these purchases were illegal. Yet, his claim of illegal land sales is telling, in that it shows that despite the primacy of statutory law, latecomers can still effectively obtain land ownership through occupation – even if indirectly. As in the example of Mile 13, title deeds are of no avail in large settlements, where people have built and lived for an extended period and thereby gained customary tenure. Taking action in the statutory legal system may not bring any change when large populations claim rights under customary tenure. Ultimately, land users may get their individual claims recognized by surveying their plot without buying it.

As a counterpoint to this argument about the centrality of customary practices, it is necessary to mention that groups of latecomers, more than access to property itself, aim at acquiring 'the right to allocate use rights' to other groups (Lentz 2006b: 54). They renegotiate the borders of their polities to position themselves as firstcomers and have the ultimate control over land allocation. In the context of the Peninsula characterized by land speculation, this corresponded to the right of selling land. Thus, becoming firstcomers was a way of appropriating a lucrative rent under statutory law. As village heads preside over private land sales, obtaining one's own village head is the guarantee that he or she will approve and facilitate land sales within the territory of the new community. Conversely, this explains why landowning families may resist the redefinition of political boundaries.

Symbolic resources are also important in claiming customary tenure. Having a separate cemetery is a critical step for a community that seeks to establish firstcomer rights, although it is not a legal obligation to obtain independence under state law. The 'frontier' process implies that a group of firstcomers concludes a special relationship with the spirits of the land. Political and ritual

authority are intertwined in a single founding moment. Establishing a cemetery is a pivotal event that symbolizes the birth of a new polity: it marks the sacrality of the land in which one settles and confers authority to the settlers. In practice, funerals are a sign of local belonging. They are performed where a person 'belongs'. A cemetery thus indicates that inhabitants believe that they reside in a land of their own – that they are 'at home'. And, as 'home' is also where a migrant should vote (Geschiere 2009: 55), the right to have a cemetery proves the right to have an independent leadership.

In 2012, residents in PWD Compound were still buried in either Kissi Town or Mama Beach depending on family connections, and others were sent back to be buried 'at home'. The absence of a cemetery marked the subordinate position of inhabitants of PWD Compound, who depended on customary links with families of firstcomers to bury their dead. Local authorities of PWD Compound had negotiated for land for a cemetery with the local authorities of Mama Beach, but it was not yet opened. In 2018, the new cemetery was in use.

The need to establish a separate cemetery in PWD Compound became critical in 2012, as the village head of Kissi Town decided to block access by neighbours to the Kissi Town cemetery, due to episodes of violence between the settlements that had been sparked by disputes over land rights. The headman of Kissi Town was not a 'son of the soil'. However, his relations with landowning families of Kissi Town were good. He explained that his decision to forbid access to the Kissi Town cemetery was due to the decision by PWD Compound to become independent: 'These people say that they stand by themselves now, so they should get a pot, they should get a pan.' In his view, if residents wanted their political independence, they needed to obtain the necessary elements to establish their community. Moreover, he said that the Kissi Town cemetery was too small for the populations of both settlements, both of which had increased in recent years. He was in favour of granting full political independence to PWD Compound as soon as possible in order to prevent further conflict.

Among members of landowning families, however, contradictory feelings coexisted. They admitted that if people in PWD compound wanted their independence, they had to establish their own cemetery to support their claim. Nevertheless, it would mean that customary relations between families of landowners and families of latecomers would end. Landowning families of Kissi Town and early groups of latecomers bridged the two settlements by way of family relations. Sharing a single cemetery materialized such relations, involving both the social and spiritual ascendancy of people 'born of the soil' and the sharing of a common ancestral ground with families of latecomers. Mr Nicol was in favour of allowing access to the cemetery because there were people in PWD Compound to whom families in Kissi Town were related, and who would probably like to be buried in the same place as their kin. At the same time, he protected his right to claim PWD Compound as his. By contrast, the headman

of Kissi Town, who did not have customary relations with PWD Compound inhabitants, was in favour of severing the remaining links with them.

In the end, local authorities of PWD Compound secured land for a cemetery from a landowning family in Mama Beach. Land rights were transferred after customary negotiations that involved the representatives of the landowning family and the local authorities of both settlements. The new cemetery confirmed the customary process of boundary making – a process that proved impossible on the Kissi Town side due to the existence of documents.

However, local authorities of Mama Beach had to deal with another cemetery issue. The boundaries of the settlement were contested on the other side by Bonga Wharf, a village that had recently gained official political recognition. The two settlements disputed ownership of land situated at their boundary, where a luxurious hotel had been built that had brought about substantial economic benefits. As in many other cases, the process of obtaining political independence was related to the appropriation of economic rents. People in Bonga Wharf claimed this land as part of their own territory. In Mama Beach, local authorities refused to acknowledge political boundaries with Bonga Wharf. For the headman, inhabitants of Bonga Wharf, despite the fact that they had elected their own village head, were under his authority.

In 2012, inhabitants of Bonga Wharf were using the Muslim cemetery of Mama Beach. Mama Beach originally separated the cemetery for local populations, who were mainly Christian, from the Muslim cemetery for strangers. As a result of the boundary dispute, the headman of Mama Beach decided to join the two cemeteries, ‘for people of Bonga Wharf not to believe that they were independent’. He said that he did not want Bonga Wharf to claim the cemetery reserved for Muslims as its own. When I raised the concern that Bonga Wharf had an independent village head, he responded:

They don't have a permanent cemetery because people bury [their dead] wherever they want now. If they want to be independent, they should have their own cemetery. The one they used previously, they can no longer access it freely since it has somewhat joined with the other one and belongs to Mama Beach ... It all depends on what they mean by independence. If an entity wants to be independent, then they should have all that they are supposed to have before starting to think about it. But the land they want to use belongs to Mama Beach community, and we are not ready to cede it. Even the place they live in is not theirs. It was a land entrusted to them by Mama Beach community, and part of it is part of the forest that is owned by the government.

The headman stressed that the decision to join the two cemeteries was a local decision and yet it was a sign that undermined the political legitimacy granted

by the state to inhabitants of Bonga Wharf. It indicated that local authorities in Mama Beach were not ready to accept the separation of Bonga Wharf and Mama Beach as two differentiated political entities.

Cemetery issues illustrate strikingly customary processes of recognition. Despite a legal environment shaped by state law, there is an interest for both latecomers and local groups to maintain the permanent (re)negotiability of land ownership based on customary symbols and social relations. Latecomers had the support of the state, and new settlements had their own village heads, but they were aware that they needed to gain legitimacy at the local level through customary negotiations. The ‘inconclusiveness’ of negotiation (Berry 2002: 654) opposed the conclusiveness of documents. At the same time, documents also proved to be inconclusive, as they did not solve the problem of land occupation. In the long term, occupation, combined with a ‘new’ customary marker – that is, securing state land to build communal facilities – remained the surest way to assert collective rights over land.

### **Securing Patrons and State Sponsorship**

‘There is no community land in the Western Area’ is the official line of the Sierra Leonean government. Local authorities need to apply to the Ministry of Lands, Country Planning and the Environment to obtain state land for communal purposes – community centres, schools, cemeteries, garbage dump sites, etc. This is the case even though at the local level, some land has always been considered ‘community land’.

The gap between the national government’s assertion that communities in the Western Area have no community land and local practices of demarcating land as such is a new site for conflict. The successive postwar governments have aimed to encourage further land privatization in the Western Area. They have also aimed to circumvent local attempts to declaring as ‘community land’ parcels that might be of interest to potential investors from whom the state would profit by selling the land directly (state representatives themselves often take a personal interest in acquiring certain parcels). In a context of land-grabbing, with numerous cases of falsified deeds, double or triple sales, and an incredible rise in land disputes, the Ministry of Lands in 2008 also placed a ban on the sale of state land – i.e. all land not formally deeded to individual owners. The ban was still in place in 2018.

Sherbro local authorities reacted strongly against the government’s position. Village heads, for instance, argued that within settlements, every family who had land could allocate a parcel to the community. Residents considered communal facilities, such as schools or sacred groves, as ‘community land’. At the local level, ‘community land’ represented the sum of the efforts of families to promote the social and economic development of a territory held in common.

By contrast, land speculation was perceived as a fundamentally antisocial behaviour that impaired development, despite the fact that everyone engaged in it.

People in local communities resented the speculative attitude of state representatives and used customary arguments to position the state as a ‘stranger’, who merely *borrowed* what belonged to the community. As such, the state appeared as ‘one actor among many others in society’ (Jul and Lund 2002: 3). Residents reversed the rule of statutory law according to which unoccupied and nondocumented land belongs to the state: they considered that the landowner *by default* was the community, and that the state and its representatives had customary obligations towards them. People openly disapproved of cases in which a ‘state land’ signboard appeared on a land that was ultimately left undeveloped:

[Government representatives] come and just put a signboard ‘state property’ without asking if it belongs to somebody. People get really annoyed, they root out signboards. If it is state property, then they should put a state building, develop the land. But they don’t do that.

Land seized by government officials or sold to foreigners often resulted either in an absence of major community improvement or in projects unsuitable or unprofitable for local inhabitants. These plots were rarely considered ‘community land’.

Local authorities in each settlement used multiple strategies to secure state land for community purposes. Engaging with the state became necessary to ensure this right. Protecting community land from land-grabbing rested on the political ability of village heads to connect to the centre of power and to position themselves and their community as ‘clients’ to the state and its representatives. This strategy included finding high-ranked politicians or foreign investors ready to support a specific project, such as a school, a water-well or a garbage area. As I could observe, village heads had to be very mobile and regularly visit ministries, decentralized institutions and other centres of power both to negotiate the ‘customary rights’ of their communities and to connect with potential private investors. As transportation to Freetown remained long and difficult, many headmen bought cars, and transport became a symbol of their political competence (O’Kane and Ménard 2015).

One example may shed light on the way in which people could negotiate customary rights with decentralized institutions. In 2012, the headman of Bureh Town sold undocumented land that was considered ‘community land’ under customary tenure. A group of forty residents took the matter collectively to the Western Area Rural District Council and the Chief Administrator invited them to discuss the case. Mr Small, the previous headman who had ruled for more than a decade, spoke on behalf of the group. He raised arguments that were related not only to land, but also to leadership. He explained that the new

headman was disrespectful of the elders and did not know how to maintain social peace. He said that the headman had sold the land without consulting the Committee of Elders. His management was opaque and residents did not know any details regarding the sale. When the Chief Administrator responded, he re-asserted the duties of village heads, who should 'help the council to maintain the peace in the village and help the council to get resources from developments'. He dwelled on the fact that the headman was a 'small boy' who did not know how to take up his responsibilities, and that he should listen to elder people, who had more experience than him.

The Chief Administrator did not offer a solution to secure the return of the land. Cancelling a sale was not within his power. However, his position showed that the concept of 'community land' could be accepted and negotiated at an institutional level. He accepted Mr Small's claim as legitimate and scolded the headman (who briefly appeared during the meeting) in front of the group. The Ministry of Lands, he told me after the meeting, was the 'custodian of state land' and government representatives were concerned with anything that was being done with state land. Moreover, he argued that the District Council encouraged local development on state land. He stressed the responsibilities of the headmen who, according to state law, had to cooperate with the District Council to survey, register or lease land,<sup>6</sup> thereby introducing aspects of 'customary' negotiation into a strict legal framework.

The status of 'state land' also helped local authorities to protect land reserved for community purposes from private sales and encroachments. In Tokeh, the headman used the status of 'state land' to contest private claims over an area with high touristic potential. Beach areas in particular attract private investors, hotels, and business enterprises such as fisheries. Their financial offers and promises of economic profit are appealing to local communities. In 2010, the government declared Tokeh a major tourism area and invited foreign companies to invest in the Peninsula. During the same period, an international promoter leased land on Tokeh beach in order to build a luxury hotel. By 2018, its construction had been achieved.

Before the lease was agreed by the headman of Tokeh, the land had been contested over a long period. A well-known Freetown lawyer had claimed the property since 1977. At that time, the community had disputed the legitimacy of his documents, which, according to the headman, had not been signed by the rightful local authorities of Tokeh. In 2006, the lawyer returned to claim the land a second time. The headman contested his claim and drove away the land surveyors. The case ended up in court. In 2007, the man tried again to have the land surveyed, this time surreptitiously, but the headman was alerted and took the surveyors to the police. The headman won the case in court, but the dispute continued until the international company came on to the scene in 2009–10. The headman concluded:

If we had not allowed the government to intervene in that dispute, we would not have been able to fight that man. But because we said that it was government property, nobody could claim it anymore. It does not matter that Tokeh had it [that it was community land]. We gave it to the government so that the government could protect us. Now, we will get benefits from it. [That man] had that land for long, since 1977, and he did not do anything with it. If he had developed it, if he had given people work ... like [the company], who hired 75 per cent of the workers [at the building site] from the community ... They take some social responsibility, they build a secondary school, then they will build the dam, and they will also build the community centre.

The lease had permitted inhabitants to negotiate the construction of communal facilities with the foreign company. In 2018, the company had achieved the construction of a secondary school. As the headman mentioned above, such developments would not have been possible if the area had been privatized. Precisely because the land had not been developed previously, he had been able to justify its status as 'state land' and dismiss private claims.

In this conflict, the clause of the Unoccupied Lands Ordinance of 1911, according to which land that has been unoccupied for twelve years can be declared 'state land', worked in favour of the village head. Also included in state land are 'shores, beaches, lagoons, creeks, rivers, estuaries and other places and waters whatsoever belonging to, acquired by, or which may be lawfully disposed of by or on behalf of the Crown'.<sup>7</sup> Local people knew of this law and commonly mentioned that any land within 150 feet of the high-water level belonged to the state. They relied on this argument to contest private claims related to the beach.

The state acted in this case as a patron: by agreeing to hand over the land to the state, the community of Tokeh put itself in a position of a client seeking the protection of the state. Nevertheless, for Tokeh inhabitants, the lease indicated that the land had been considered community land – understood as 'for the development of the community' – at the state level, although officially it is a lease contracted between an international company and the state.

The promotion of tourism had another consequence: the prospect of resettling part of Tokeh up the Peninsula Road. The town had become too populated and lacked basic facilities. The government's impulse to transform Tokeh into a tourism centre was the major driving force behind the project of relocation, but it provided the headman with an opportunity to promise newcomers land and thereby to consolidate his voting base. The lease to the foreign company accelerated the process of securing land up the Peninsula Road. The Ministry of Lands surveyed 300 acres and issued a master plan. In 2018, residents of Tokeh, including the headman himself, had started to build on the new land and they expected the Ministry to issue deeds for each family. The headman considered

this land to ‘belong to Tokeh community’, whereas, in fact, it was state land that would be turned into private plots.

In this case too, the strategy pursued by the headman showed a constant interplay between the statuses of state land and community land. Once leased by the state to a foreign investor, inhabitants of Tokeh took the lease to indicate that the state recognized the land as community land. They pushed for the company to provide community facilities as part of the bargain – presumably with a state agent standing by the headman in his negotiations. Furthermore, the project, and future tourism prospects, enabled the headman to request land from the Ministry for the relocation of the community. At the local level, the building of new facilities on the land showed its progressive transformation from state to community land.

Regarding the government’s position on community land, the headman stated:

Well, actually it is not correct. But if the government does not do it this way, there will not be any land for community development anymore ... Now, people in Sierra Leone believe they can just take and sell everything. I support the government in its decision to regulate that. Otherwise, everybody will take what he wants. Now, the government has said that Tokeh is a touristic area. Development has come. We will not build near the sea now and if the government had not protected the land, we would not have been able to get that land [up the Peninsula Road]. They gave us 300 acres where to relocate the village. The government spread the message that communities have no land because people want to misuse the land. If people misuse the land, future generations will suffer. They have to control us. [The company] has given me money to build the school. Where shall I build the school if there is no land?

Furthermore, this statement shows that the headman was aware of his capacity to negotiate the concepts of community and state land at various levels. He used the government’s statement about community land as a political strategy to avoid land-grabbing in the face of accelerating land scarcity. In other words, he presented ‘state land’ as a necessary official legal status that protected community land from private claims. This headman was very successful: in recent years, he had secured many infrastructures – a police station, a health centre and schools – that had transformed Tokeh into an attractive economic centre. It proved his skills in connecting his community to wider political networks and positioning it as a ‘client’ to the state.

Most headmen pursued a similar strategy and regarded the central government as the only institution that could protect ‘community land’ against

private owners and encroachers. Clearly, securing community land depended on the ability of local authorities to negotiate directly with the state. Community land existed, but securing it required a nuanced approach to negotiation. In a situation of land pressure and expanding communities, other headmen had successfully secured parcels up the Peninsula Road to relocate part of their communities. In 2018, it appeared more clearly that village heads had to act very fast to secure state land, as private sales had accelerated at an incredible speed.

### **Environmental Protection and Its Shortcomings**

Participation in the forest protection programme also allowed Sherbros to claim beach areas as communal land by developing community-based ecotourism (ecolodges, ecotours, etc.) and promoting their local knowledge of the environment. The beach had become the symbol of locally driven development and communal ownership, not only because its control secures future economic prospects, but also because the privatization of beach areas restricted fishermen's access to the seashore and threatened their livelihood. Moreover, as the NGO in charge, Welt Hunger Hilfe (WHH) had a close relationship with the government. People interpreted its position as the state's recognition of Sherbro autochthony.

In 2008, the programme for the protection of the Western Area Peninsula Forest Reserve (WAPFoR) was launched through the financial and executive assistance of WHH. The forest protection programme aimed at redrawing the boundaries of the WAPFoR first demarcated in 1916 and mitigating the causes of recent deforestation. The new delimitation included a 150-metre 'buffer zone' that was initially thought of as an area where inhabitants could implement communal projects such as tree planting and beekeeping.

Since the end of the Civil War, deforestation has been fuelled primarily by land acquisition and unregulated building. The construction boom is visible through the intensification of new activities, such as stone-breaking at large quarries and sand mining on certain beaches, such as Hamilton and John Obey. Successive postwar governments have denounced the erection of 'illegal' structures (those without legal documents of ownership), while keeping silent about the impacts of the legal permits allocated by the Ministry of Lands. 'Blaming the poor' for environmental degradation has become a strategy by which central authorities can turn a blind eye on the disruptive entry of speculative capital in the region (Munro 2009). Due to the reliance on fuel wood for smoking fish, the fishing industry is regularly blamed for the decline of forest and mangrove covers. However, the impact of charcoal-burning and wood-cutting on the forest cover has been incidental compared to the clearance of land for sale.<sup>8</sup> Across the entire Peninsula, the allocation of private plots (with signs of ownership, such as pillars and fences) threatens both the buffer zone and the forest.

The forest protection programme led by WHH left aside the sensitive issue of land speculation and emphasized the role of the fishing economy in endangering the forest. The project started with the idea of providing either alternative types of livelihood for people living from forest activity, or ecofriendly livelihood tools, such as solar-powered ovens for smoking fish. Thus, the fight for forest protection implicitly embraced the discourse that presented the rural poor as ‘ignorant degraders, in need of sensitization and enlightenment from elite officials in Freetown’ (Munro 2009: 114). Locally, Sherbro participants to the project shifted this argument about the poor to one about migrants, who exploit forest resources for their livelihoods and have to be ‘sensitized’ about forest protection. Environmental protection was also associated with the promotion of community-based tourism, which was presented as a decent alternative livelihood to forest activities. Before the Ebola crisis hit the country in 2014, tourism was developing at a fast pace: expatriates were visiting the beach on weekends, communities were building beach huts and hotel investors were acquiring land. However, the ecotourism line of the WHH project mainly favoured local economic actors, often Sherbro autochthones, with control over the beach.

The project for forest protection rested on the converging interests of the actors at play, namely the state (who commissioned WHH to implement the programme) and local populations, who saw a benefit both in blaming migrants for environmental degradation and in taking an opportunity for developing local tourism. Sherbro communities were the first ones to be included in the project. Local staff and volunteers appropriated the discourse of forest protection as an emblem for identity claims. The beach area was presented as a communal space uniting Sherbros against private interests – namely, investors who wanted to privatize portions of the beach<sup>9</sup> – and newcomers, whose economic activities were denounced as having a negative impact on the ecosystem of the Peninsula. Volunteers often used the Sherbro word for unity/togetherness (*lomthibul*) as a way of displaying a common identity in the face of current migration. Participation in the programme also allowed them to renegotiate the autochthonous status of Sherbro communities with the state. Through the appropriation of the forest protection discourse, they declared the beach as a place to be controlled by firstcomers and to be used for the benefit of local communities. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the leading figures of the programme on the ground were coming from Number Two River, as it is the only settlement where the management of the entire beach is held by a communal association.

The discourse on tourism has become an important argument for Sherbros to claim their status as firstcomers: it relates to a prewar period, as some Sherbro people have participated in the development of tourism in the 1980s. Tourism calls upon a common past and a discourse of nostalgia about the ‘golden age’ of the mid-1980s, when the country was famous for its beaches and luxury hotels. The period is commonly referred as ‘the Africana days’, taken from the name of

the hotel based in Tokeh, which attracted an exclusive clientele and employed many people. Tourism stands in for the lost glory of the area as well as its future economic perspectives. It relates to peaceful times. In 2012, the gradual return of foreigners was viewed positively, as a tangible sign that the war had truly ended and that the country was becoming attractive again. In 2018, local communities considered tourism as a good strategy to rebuild a positive image of the country abroad, which had been severely undermined by the Ebola crisis.

Based on past tourism ventures on the Peninsula, local inhabitants in Sherbro communities liked to stress their business abilities and their knowledge of how to deal with tourists. They claimed to know what food tourists liked, how they liked to be treated and what excursions they enjoyed. Some people who had worked in tourism told me, for instance, that they had developed tourism at a time when local people had only limited contact with foreigners. Such discourses refashioned in a contemporary way the historical claim of coastal populations having been the first Africans in contact with Europeans in the precolonial days. They re-enacted hierarchies between ‘civilized’ populations of the coast and populations of the interior, while reaffirming the indigenous status of Sherbros in the region. Community-based tourism played the authenticity card by promoting indigenous ‘traditions’ to present to tourists, such as artisanal fishing or cultural performances (see Chapter 7).

The involvement of Sherbro populations in the project was based on a paradox from the outset, since most Sherbros are small-scale fishermen whose activities do not particularly affect the forest. In settlements where people lived at least partly on forest activities, residents could hardly see the benefits of the project, as someone from Mile 13 complained to me: ‘[Sherbros] do not invite us for meetings. But it is not Sherbros who are spoiling the forest.’ Project volunteers from various settlements soon organized in an informal network and met every week on a different beach. This Sherbro-dominated social circle allowed volunteers to complain openly about the detrimental impact of migrants’ activities on the Peninsula ecosystem. The rhetoric of forest protection, backed up by NGO and state authority, suddenly gave official legitimacy to these complaints. As more settlements became involved in the project, non-Sherbros were included in the discussion. People from John Obey and Tombo, for instance, were invited to discuss their own community projects in relation to environment protection. Yet, during weekly meetings, talks centred on how these members could convince their own community to stop illegal activities such as sand mining (in John Obey in particular), which in the long run might destroy the entire beach area.

Meetings generally started with a carefully crafted development discourse articulated by the local staff, stressing the benefits to be gained from alternative sources of income and livelihoods in order to preserve nature. It was usually suggested that ‘Sherbros do not exploit the forest but have always been

on the seaside', and thereby asserted three things: the autochthonous status of Sherbro compared to those exploiting the forest; the firstcomers' right to land, which was sometimes explicitly mentioned; and the legitimacy of autochthonous populations in controlling economic and touristic activities on the Peninsula. Such discourses accentuated simplistic dichotomies of host/stranger, modern/backward, and civilized/primitive. The image of 'the bush' emphasized these oppositions – 'Le wi komot na bush' (Let's come out of the bush) served as a slogan for meetings and public awareness events. While conveying a message against forest exploitation, the term 'bush' played on representations of backwardness and primitiveness, thereby presenting migrants as populations to 'educate' and 'sensitize' about forest protection. In contrast, Sherbro presented themselves as having a specialized knowledge of forestry in relation to the coastal ecosystem. In their discourses, the bush turned into an object of autochthonous knowledge that valorized Sherbro 'tradition'.

The ecotourism initiative granted legitimacy to Sherbro autochthonous claims, through a process of negotiation with different levels of authority. From local perspectives, WHH was usually associated with the government, which supported the perception that 'the beach' was now being recognized at the state level as community property. Nevertheless, at volunteers' meetings, the project was often talked about in terms of national development:



**Figure 8.4.** 'Sensitization day' ('Water and forest are life, don't destroy them'), 2011. © Anaïs Ménard

Government declared the Peninsula as a tourism area. Tourism is able to develop a country fast; we can remember the Africana days. The country was strong. The revenues from tourism spread over all regions. We do not want to sit down and just complain about the government. We want to develop our area so that everyone will say ‘We are citizens, we are Sierra Leoneans’.

This statement crossed ethnic lines, calling for national cohesion and hailing back to the ‘old days’ of tourism in the Western Area, which it claimed benefited the country as a whole. It expressed the need to rebuild a positive national image based on tourism activities, involving not only local populations but other Sierra Leoneans as well.<sup>10</sup>

Weekly meetings conveyed a strong belief that tourism on the Peninsula could help rebuild a positive international image of the country, which would also attract investors. National symbols were reinterpreted along those lines. The green, white and blue flag was often said to be representative of the landscape of the Western Area with its forest, pristine beaches and sea (in reality, green stands for agriculture and natural resources, white for justice and blue for the Freetown harbour). Discourses about tourism were also framed within a unifying vocabulary, expressing the ambiguous position of local populations, who wished their autochthonous status to be recognized while looking for ways by which the region could develop economically. In 2018, people were conscious of the terrible publicity Sierra Leone suffered in the international media, from the Civil War to the more recent Ebola outbreak. People often said that the country had ‘nothing to sell’ to the outside world except for its exceptional beaches. The Peninsula was considered a decisive asset that would help re-establish a positive image of the country and a sense of national pride.

Although the WHH-led programme was short-lived, local fishermen had started to formulate their own projects regarding tourism. In 2018, domestic and international tourism was on the rise. Two beaches, Bureh Town and Number Two River, were drawing enormous crowds of urbanites for beach ‘outings’ on weekends. In both communities, the interest for fishing had declined sharply. In Number Two River, the chairman of the beach bought fresh seafood for touristic supply in other communities. Other beaches, such as Sussex, Baw-Baw or Tokeh, instead relied on individual businesses and had their own smaller customer base.

However, the existence of competing economic strategies in the Peninsula area both threatened tourism and undermined any attempt at tackling environmental issues. In 2018, the acceleration of ecological changes in the area was obvious: the depletion of fish stocks, the rise of the sea level (mainly due to sand mining) and coastal erosion, deforestation up hills and in the mangroves, the smog coming from Freetown, etc. Sand mining was seriously endangering

beaches like Bureh Town. It was occurring at its border with the community of John Obey, with trucks loading sand continuously. John Obey's beach had become unsuitable for tourism and the investors who had built touristic infrastructure had left. The same men who had been involved in the WHH-led project had alerted the central authorities and had spoken on national television to expose the problem of sand mining. This action failed to produce results; certainly, there was no policy implemented to provide alternative livelihoods for miners. Presumably, the financial dividends that local authorities and decentralized institutions derived from this activity outweighed any ecological concerns.

To the south of the Peninsula, the recent implantation of Asian fish processing factories and the construction of the Lumley-Tokeh Road were expected to boost the fishing sector. As one of the ex-WHH volunteers told me, efforts to unlock the beach side's economic potential were condemned by the lack of a collective project for the region: 'We want to do tourism ... but Tombo and Gorderich, they have made their beaches for fishing, Hamilton and John Obey, they have made their beach for sand mining.' As each local community decided which economic activity it would push forward, small-scale environment-friendly projects were bound to remain limited to the same tourism-oriented communities and were under threat of larger economic projects in fishing.<sup>11</sup>

In 2018, WHH had put its activities on hold on the Peninsula, but local volunteers had re-activated their networks to participate in a smaller project funded by the United Nations Development Programme aimed at mitigating climate change and the pollution of coastal areas. This project constituted a new economic rent to tap, yet participants were less enthusiastic than before about their possibilities for leverage. Many expressed feelings of powerlessness. After having denounced the development of forest activities, they faced the limit of their strategy and realized that they could not include many partners in the discussion. The strategy towards an 'autochthonization' of the environmental question could not be sustained, as other actors had also seized opportunities to promote their own vision of economic development.

## Conclusion

Autochthony is a multilayered discourse that appears to be the product of colonial state formation as well as recent political, economic and institutional processes. Sherbros refer to the legal heritage of the divide between Colony and Protectorate to denounce the nonrecognition of their customary rights in the Western Area. Autochthony becomes articulated with a claim to indigeneity – the right to be recognized as a 'native' group. In these discourses, the state appears as an ambivalent force, both dangerous and necessary, as it has become the patron to which local communities have to turn in order to validate their customary claims. The state is equated with the forces of urbanization,

modernization and the entry of local populations into an unregulated capitalistic world, in which economic inequalities have sharpened and survival increasingly depends on one's connections.

Land matters are only one symptom of a suffering national economy. As Jonathan told me once, 'the country has no job, nothing to do, but people have land', emphasizing the quick financial reward of land sales. Land on the Peninsula has become the rent that one needs to capture in order to feel secure, and this has required both individual and collective strategies.

Nevertheless, the social arrangement between landowners and strangers remains highly relevant in land matters. Land speculation, combined with demographic changes, has led to a 'densification' of the frontier process (Chauveau, Jacob and Le Meur 2004: 5) by which communities redefine their relationships. Land disputes continue to be arbitrated on the basis of customary practices that pertain to the rights and duties of firstcomers and latecomers. Failures to meet one's obligations – strangers should 'beg' for land and hosts should allocate them ownership after some time – lead to confrontations. These frontier processes are embedded in state logics, but operate at the margins of the state, in an unregulated environment that forces actors to find new solutions to the lack of available land and economic precarity. These changes transform the scale and the time-frame of customary arrangements by intensifying and accelerating them. In this process, ethnic identities assume a less flexible form and become more tightly aligned with social identities as firstcomer or latecomer.

In this accelerating context, tourism may appear as 'the new frontier' by which people can look forward to creating a new space for reaffirming identity and developing the local economy. For Sherbro, it implies the framing of indigeneity within the global, perhaps more neutral, vocabulary of tourism. Yet, the entry of capital has a deregulating effect that leads to fierce competition for control over resources and land, as the increasing privatization of the beach areas shows. One of the newly elected village heads liked to repeat that the Peninsula is 'the most lucrative constituency' in Sierra Leone. While it would have been complicated to assess the reality of this statement, I could not help wondering for whom and for how long.

## Notes

1. See e.g. Bøås and Dunn 2013; Chauveau 2000; Lentz 2013; Socpa 2006.
2. Provinces Land Act, Cap. 122, quoted by Renner-Thomas (2010: 8).
3. For instance, some people remembered voting by standing in a queue for their candidate in the 1970s, which would be the equivalent of a show of hands.
4. These figures mean that between the two elections, twenty-five villages applied to the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development for political recognition and obtained it. This is a stark illustration of the extent to which the Local Government Act of

2004 allowed new and older communities to gain political independence in the postwar context.

5. The other two contestants were not born in Number Two River, but both could claim community belonging on their mother's side and Poro membership (see Chapter 7).
6. This refers to Statutory Instrument No. 16 of 2005 (see Renner-Thomas 2010: 10).
7. Crown Land Ordinance No. 19 of 1969, cited by Asiama (2006: 226). This legislation is still valid and has passed to the Sierra Leonean state.
8. In 2012, most of the firewood supply in Goderich was harvested in the province as a by-product of the farming cycle (Munro and van der Horst 2012: 71–72). Around Tombo, fish sellers mostly use mangrove wood for smoking, which comes by boat from Port Lokko and Bonthe District (Greg van der Horst, personal communication). Similarly, whereas charcoal has become the main household fuel, the Freetown and Peninsula markets are largely supplied by upcountry producers (*ibid.*: 83).
9. It is interesting to note that Tokeh did not take part in the programme, because this discourse did not fit the economic and land strategy of privatization led by local authorities.
10. As I could experience both in Sierra Leone and among people of the diaspora in Europe, rehabilitating 'Mama Salone' abroad is a matter of national pride. People would often say 'I would like to say that I am proud to be a Sierra Leonean', implying that it is difficult to express such pride in the face of popular images of Sierra Leone on the international scene – civil war, blood diamonds and Ebola. The wish to defend national colours is intertwined with the ambition to craft an alternative discourse to narratives of conflict, poverty and failure.
11. In 2021, the Sierra Leonean government concluded with a state-owned Chinese company the sale of 252 acres of land at Black Johnson, a small and secluded village of the Peninsula, for the construction of an industrial fishing harbour. The decision-making process that informed the choice of Black Johnson for this project remained opaque and state authorities ignored the necessity for an official environmental and social impact assessment. In May 2021, local landowners, including owners of small-scale ecotourism facilities, wrote an open letter to the President to alert on the ecological disaster that this project would cause (destruction of the wetland and rainforest ecosystems, loss of species, pollution ...) and on its human consequences, as people will lose their land and livelihood. Conservationists groups also raised the alarm about the environmental risk, as Black Johnson is situated on Whale Bay, a critical ecological spot that hosts endangered species. The construction will also likely affect tourism development in nearby locations. The controversy and lack of public dialogue around this project demonstrated the state's perception of 'development' as a one-sided enterprise based on megaprojects, with no consideration for the multiplicity of voices and needs on the ground. In this context, local owners emphasized the state's practices of intimidation and coercion. The lack of consideration for the ecological risk further illustrated the short-sightedness of state authorities regarding the need for a comprehensive and concerted public policy of economic development on the Peninsula.