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Yves Van Leynseele *, Malin Olofsson

Governance and Inclusive Development, Human Geography, Planning and International Development Studies, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Market-oriented agrarian transformation challenges notions of the 'communal' nature of customary land. This paper foregrounds the emergent patterns of land access in the context of an expanding tree-crop commodity frontier in the former 'homeland' of Venda, South Africa. We develop an actor-focused, assemblage approach and use it to identify how three entrepreneurial, accumulating tree-crop farmers engaging in commercial macadamia nut and avocado production mediate land access through a combination of historic access, social networks, insider-knowledge, access to capital and brokering of good community relations through land sharing and job provisioning. We approach this mediation as (re)-assembling practices that unfold within the particular conditions at this historical conjuncture and the gradual agricultural de-activation in food crop production and urbanisation occurring locally. These practices blend collective and private elements into an unwieldy, land-associated assemblage in ways that challenge the political economical reading of the commoditisation trend as a 'the single land grab', 'accumulation from below' or as leading to the neoliberalisation of African land tenure systems. We argue that this reconstruction 'from below' requires attention to the way situated practices forge relations to other (translocal)assemblages, local agency in shaping land- and production relations, the opportunity structure related to changes in the local political economy and a sensibility to the multiple, possible futures of this frontier moment.

1. Introduction

The nature and direction of communal land tenure in South Africa and responses are shaped by changes in the agrarian environment. After being systematically marginalised, post-apartheid state reforms have attempted to revive the black, smallholder sector. New actors and partnerships have emerged on a ticket of economic transformation and the promotion of a class of black, commercial farmers in the image of the established white commercial farming sector (Greenberg, 2013). Such efforts have however not materialised, with critical observers reporting an ever-increasing gap in the racialised farming sector (Bernstein, 2013) and growing antagonism between historically-disadvantaged agrarian classes as a result of 'processes of 'accumulation from below' (Cousins, 2013). Whilst this commercialisation of smallholders suggests increased individualisation and commoditisation of land and production relations, political-economy inspired literature has also remarked how traditional authorities such as chiefs and headmen have retained control over land in the former 'homelands' or Bantustans[1] (Capps, 2018; Claassens, 2018). Government failure or unwillingness to effectively reform communal land tenure and local government are often seen as the main reason for this continuity and maintenance of undemocratic, unproductive and inequitable land tenure regimes in these areas (Claassens & Cousins, 2008; Fraser, 2007; Hall & Kepe, 2017).

This paper aims to present a more fluid proposition. We focus on the key role played by entrepreneurial smallholder farmers in shaping land relations 'from below' in Tshakhuma town, located in the former Venda homeland in South Africa in what is now Vhembe District, Limpopo Province. The local agricultural environment is marked by dense settlement and gradual de-activation in traditional field crops like maize. This transition has altered land and production relations, creating an opening in which a select group of commodity-focused macadamia nut and avocado farmers, and new entrants in farming, insert themselves.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: y.p.b.vanleynseele@uva.nl (Y. Van Leynseele), malinolof@gmail.com (M. Olofsson).

[1] The policy of separate development created ten ethnically-divided 'homelands' or 'Bantustans' (also referred to as 'communal areas') where the black majority were forcible removed to and denied political rights as part of the grand Apartheid project. Venda was created for the Venda-speaking peoples and is currently part of Limpopo Province.

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Using a mix of old and new land accessing strategies, crop diversification (tree- and food crop) and innovative land sharing arrangements, they opportunistically obtain large portions of orchard land. They are also party to making of new land markets that run contrary to custom but implicate the traditional authorities (Olofsson, 2021). Below, we will illustrate how three representatives of this group of so-called 'emerging growers' tentatively and incrementally blend private and collective elements into unwieldy, land-associated assemblages. Our approach to assemblages is methodically actor-oriented, focusing on the forging of alignments and (translocal)linkages by local actors within a particular historical conjuncture (Li, 2007, 2014) or 'frontier moment' (Peluso & Lund, 2011).

Conceptualisations of local, land-based responses to capitalist development tend to emphasise policy responses to corporate investments and elite capture (Cotula, 2013; Hall & Kepe, 2017), permutations and hybridisation in traditional land tenure systems (Boone, 2015; Chitonge, Mfune, Kafwamba, & Kajoba, 2017) and the role of local public authorities such as traditional leaders in shaping outcomes (Bottazzi, Goguen, & Rist, 2016; Lund, 2008). Although we also understand outcomes as resulting from situated responses to changing local and global opportunities, we however break with institutional- and elite-focused analyses and aforementioned determinism found in political economical approaches to South African agrarian change. Starting from producers' land-accessing strategies, we emphasise the role of local agency in constituting new assemblages and making linkages with existent ones. In doing this we acknowledge that it is impossible to trace all the interactions, forms that emerge as temporary fixtures (Woods et al., 2021), and rather emphasise (re)assembling practices by these producers, and how these practices help change land and production relations and contribute to the multiplicity and openness of the land-associated assemblage.

The next section elaborates our theoretical proposition and methodology, which builds on one of the questions this special issue addresses: how can we reimagine collective-private land arrangements in ways attentive to their adaptiveness and the possibilities of evolving, hybrid forms? Following this, we first elaborate Tshakhuma's political economy and the impacts of successive frontier moments on landholding and land-governing authority. We then briefly discuss the diversity and social differentiation amongst smallholder tree crop farmers in Vhembe District. This sets the scene for tracing the particular land accessing and agricultural accumulation strategies followed by our three protagonists and entrepreneurial smallholders engaged in assembling. In our discussion and conclusion, we show how their different land accessing strategies unfold in a conjunctural moment that privileges certain local actors over others. Their strategies combine collective and private elements into a land-associated assemblage that reconfigures historical notions of land access and land-governing authority and helps change the agricultural environment toward tree-crop commercialisation. Its hybrid features and multiple, possible futures however make it hard to speak of 'accumulation from above or below', enclosure, elite capture or a commodity frontier in which exploitation, standardisation and codification is associated with smallholder participation in international, agricultural value chains. The emerging properties of this assemblage bare characteristics of the vernacular, market-based land tenure regime (Chimhowu & Woodhouse, 2006), but they do not match conceptualisations of the transformed, 'neoliberalised' African customary land tenure regime (Chimhowu, 2019) and evolutionary thinking that sees the logic of neoliberal developmentalism as promoting the formalisation and privatization of land and natural resources (Platteau, 1996). Although our protagonists help strengthen capitalist relations on the ground, we show that their piecemeal accumulation also depends on non-commodified, customary land access strategies and brokering of good community relations.

2. Reworking land relations 'from below': farmers' assembling practices

Political economic analyses of agrarian change areas brought valuable insights into the way capitalist expansion drives changes in production relations and African land tenure. Such thinking has however tended to narrowly focus on processes of 'accumulation from above' or 'accumulation by dispossession' and the roles of capital and labour in class differentiation (Bernstein, 2010). The enclosure movements facilitating commoditisation of land and livelihoods usually invoke the state as territorialising enabler, freeing up and redesignating valuable farming land to outside investors (Hall, 2011) or local elites (Becker, 2013). In the South African context, there is exceptional state complicity in maintaining the 'dual agrarian structure' - the historical and growing gap between black smallholders producing in the former 'homelands' and the white-dominated, commercial farming sector and agribusiness (Hall & Cousins, 2018, O'Laughlin, Bernstein, Cousins, & Peters, 2013). Customary land access mechanisms based on group membership however still remain pivotal in ensuring rural livelihoods, more especially for the rural poor (Cousins, Dubb, Hornby, & Mtero, 2018.: 1079). The broader trend in rural South Africa and in the former Venda homeland however is a diminishing contribution of agriculture to rural livelihoods due to a range of factors like reliance of state pensions and other welfare programmes, land scarcity and urbanisation (Aliber, Maluleke, Manenzhe, Paradza, & Cousins, 2013). Agrarian political economic thinking dictates that once such a trajectory to de-agrarianisation sets in, we will see a linear pathway whereby black smallholders' alienation from land is inevitable and a return to farming inconceivable (Hebinck, 2018).

Actor-oriented approaches have stressed the agentive qualities of enterprising local actors to use customary and statutory categories of land opportunistically and situationally (Lund, 2008; von Benda-Beckmann, von Benda-Beckmann, & Wiber, 2009). They caution for a reading of the "one land grab", emphasizing "a series of changing contexts, emergent processes and forces, and contestations that are producing new conditions and facilitating shifts in both de jure and de facto land control". (Peluso & Lund, 2011, p. 669). Such calls to rethink the transition narrative from collective to private and from non-commodified to commodified, demand a closer scrutiny of the competing types of developmentalism that shape land and local livelihoods and the more tentative, socially-embedded nature of social arrangements (Vijayabaskar, 2020). Land governing systems are fragmented and subject to reworking 'from below', with specific configurations unfolding over time (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018). Efforts at controlling space and the making of territory by state and other territorialising actors 'blend new and old elements of 'institutional debris' (Ibid, p. 389). This approach can help us think how commodity frontiers unfold in non-linear ways, are reworked by new and old actors and how they articulate with changes in the local political economies. In analysing the impact of expanding tree crop frontiers on local livelihoods and village relations in rural Indonesia, Li (2014)Li (2014) vividly illustrates how capitalist relations unfold in a banal and piecemeal way. They lead to antagonization of social relations of production, community and kin, heighten competition over productive resources and inequities. Her ethnography challenges the notion of agrarian transformation as "teleological unfolding" and "understandings of capitalism as totalizing system", preferring rather to show the particular elements and relationships unfolding at conjunctural moments, as witnessed 'from below' (Ibid.: 4; see also Moore, 2005). We adopt a similar analytical sensibility to localising perspectives, focusing not so much on the resource-poor but rather on the agentive patterning of land- and production relations by well-positioned, enterprising local actors.

We conceptualise these emergent configurations in terms of actor-focused land-associated assemblages, which has theoretical and methodological implications. Assemblages are constituted of heterogenous social, natural and material elements that are blended through unstable relations (McFarlane & Anderson, 2011; Ong & Collier, 2005). Although

they might express recognizable territorial (customary and statutory) aspects and strategies, assemblages are not governed or pervaded by a singular, pervasive capitalist logic. As fluid and networked wholes, they require constant work through social actors' forging of alignments (Li, 2007). Assemblages are fitted together with distinct elements; they are held together through social relationships of 'interiority' such as community, kin and household and 'exteriority' that are linked to a certain governing authority or (multi-sited) economic or political association (De Landa, 2016). Our emphasis is 'assembling as verb' and organising practices by well-positioned local agricultural producers and brokering landowners on a capitalist trajectory. This puts into focus 'process' over territorialised outcomes and foregrounds the actual ways through which old and new elements unfolds through actor projects (Koster & Van Leynseele, 2018; Long, 2008). These projects show how existing socio-natural configurations are reassembled from old and new elements and how local sites of production are linked to more general, globalising tendencies associated with smallholder commercialisation (Woods et al., 2021).

In line with place-sensitive assemblage-thinking, we assert that it would be impossible to capture all the complex interactions and linkages and propose to start empirically with 'a single identified interaction' from which relations of interiority and exteriority as well as emergent properties and consequences can be discerned (Woods et al., 2021, p. 293). We build on the notion of food-related assemblages with a focus on those associations related to agricultural production and distribution that span across different temporalities, spaces and places (Marsden, Hebinck, & Mathijs, 2018). In the context of the expanding tree-crop frontier, land-associated assembling by rural actors concern livelihood-oriented practices that involve the patterning of land and production relations in order to connect smallholder producers to local-to-global value chains. This implies their simultaneous participation in commodity and non-commodity circuits. Forms of commoditisation may bring strong exterior linkages and patterning that is consistent with establishing linkages to global value chains and (standardised) farming practices associated with industrial farming. At the same time, smallholders accumulate through engagement with non-commodified elements such as "socially and culturally defined identities and relations, and finds ideological expression in notions of 'community' and 'tradition', including kinship relations and intra-community ties (Cousins et al., 2018, p. 1065). As will be illustrated, our vignettes show how such 'private' and 'collective' elements are blended through farmers' agentive re-assembling and navigation.

Methodologically, we thus foreground the assembling by different rural producers, who have distinct navigation strategies on their trajectories to becoming (semi) capitalist farmers. Their land access and patterning of production and labour, entangles elements like the materiality of tree crops, communal land rights and historically-sedimented landscapes to form larger wholes. We however emphasise that agency is not evenly distributed; particular conjunctural moments represent certain opportunity structures that privilege certain actors over others. The expanding treecrop frontier, in tandem with ongoing urbanisation and de-agrarianisation, increases competition over mountainous, inaccessible lands requiring high levels of investment. Farmers' variable land accessing strategies show how key resources such as capital, reputations, local knowledge and kinship ties are unevenly distributed (Olofsson, 2019); an unevenness requiring a skilled navigation of community relations and brokering of local beneficiation.

The contextual and historic dynamics shaping current land relations in Vhembe District were explored by author one over 19 months of ethnographic fieldwork during 2006–2007. The findings relating to land transactions driven by the expanding smallholder tree crop commodity frontier is based on ethnographic oriented field work undertaken by both authors between 2015 and 2019. During this time annual visits to the field site were conducted (comprising around 18 months) which enabled us to trace the developments in land relations as they unfolded. An initial survey was conducted in 2016 with a random sample of 80 tree-crop farmers. This provided a broad overview of processes of agrarian change taking place in the region and understanding of farmers' production portfolios and strategies. Based on the survey, 16 farmers were identified as having been involvement in recent land transactions and in-depth interviews were subsequently conducted with them. In cases where land acquisitions were in progress or imminent, follow-up interviews were conducted over the subsequent three years. These were complemented by 10 interviews with traditional leaders - both headmen and local chiefs - from the respective areas where land transactions were taking place, 9 interviews in these same areas with administrative staff working for the traditional authorities, 13 interviews with extension service officials from both the Vhembe district and Thulamela and Makhado local municipalities, and 2 interviews with officials from the municipal spatial planning department responsible for land matters. The three protagonists that became the focus of this paper were identified based on their representativeness of the diverse processes of land accumulation and expansion taking place in the region. Follow up telephonic interviews were conducted at the end of 2020 and early 2021 with these individuals.

3. Tshakhuma: a peri-urban settlement at the crossroads

Norms and practices governing the access, use and transaction of customary land in and around peri-urban Tshahkuma are constantly evolving. The area is located in one of only three regions in South Africa suitable for subtropical fruits such as litchi, macadamia nuts, banana and avocado. Lutheran missionaries first settled here in 1874, carving out a territory where missionary spatial disciplining, agricultural intensification and customary land governance went hand in hand (Kirkaldy, 2005). It sits on the border with the former Levubu irrigation scheme – a state-initiated 10,000 ha scheme that was reserved for white farmers under white minority government but has since been subject to a comprehensive, post-apartheid land redistribution project. It has a reputation as fruit basket of Venda owing to the women-ran fresh produce market at the local intersection and the 367 ha 'Barotta' banana plantation that was initiated by the development corporation of the then so-called Venda Republic to create local jobs. Due to its strategic location at the border with the white-owned commercial farms and agricultural processing factories at nearby Levubu, the presence of Madzivhandila teacher's training college and being situated centrally at the crossroads of the Louis Trichardt, Elim and Thohoyandou towns, it has attracted many job-seeking, newcomers who compete for residential land with Tshakhuma's urbanising youth seeking a (second) home. Like much of rural South Africa, a gradual process of de-activation in field cultivation is taking place (Cf Shackleton et al., 2019). It is marked by dense settlement of those lower areas where services like electricity and water are available or expected to come, and diminishing interest in the mountainous areas suitable for treecrop farming. The changing land use and process of urbanisation is illustrated in the areal pictures spanning the period 1937 to 2004 (Fig. 1).

Consecutive historical conjunctures helped reinforce the local Madzivhandila chieftaincy and tribal authority as public authorities governing land and local development. In this, land allocation and demarcation played a particular role. After withdrawal of the Lutheran mission society in the 1960s, the local Chief Madzivhandila thwarted official attempts to have Tshakhuma included into the whites-only irrigation scheme. He successfully parried these, owing also to a successful political carerr that led him to become Minister of Agriculture and Vice President in the government of the 'independent' Venda Republic (1979–1994). With the chaotic dissolution of the Venda Republic, the Chief returned to his seat at Tshakhuma in 1991. Amidst accusations of corruption and claims for his removal by youth groups or 'civics', he managed to retain his position by giving into the demands for new residential plots on land he himself had forcibly removed for a large agricultural project (see Diambele area, Fig. 1). Another entrenchment of the traditional leadership through control over land came in 2003

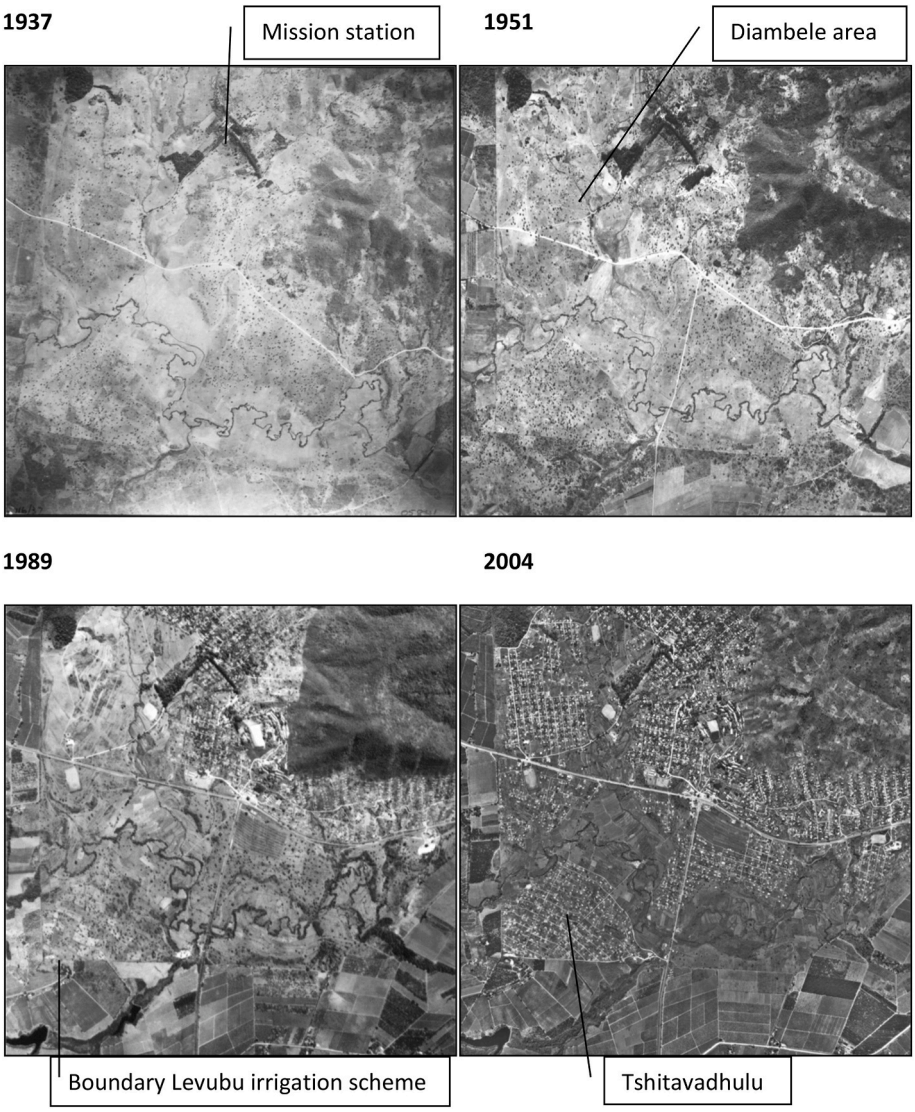

Fig. 1. Aerial pictures of Tshakhuma location, specified by year.

when they were awarded a substantial portion of over 1,000 ha of the former Levubu irrigation as part of a successful land claim under the Restitution of Land Rights Act. A newly-formed Tribal Trust now represents over 900 land reform beneficiaries and their families. It became the community partner in a botched Levubu Strategic Partnership with a commercial farming entity (Fraser, 2007, Leynseele, 2013) and now oversees a number of private and collective lease holdings on the reclaimed farmland. In this capacity they were also initially able to select community members for jobs on the community land returned to them under the land restitution deal. This entrenchment as public authority in local and land government is further typified by the way they currently have a stake in state-sponsored development projects, such as the Barotta banana estate, and are incorporated into South Africa's post-apartheid local government structure.

At Tshakhuma the historical Permission-to-Occupy System (PTO) persists as the way of administering and allocating land. It means that land titling is done in discretionary ways through communal leaders who authorise the issuing of PTO documents by the local municipality to community members. These certificates are used for land deals within the community and are also required for gaining access to external, state and private, support programmes. Besides the PTO-registered land, we also find commons land, which is typically grazing land but may be allocated (temporally) to resource-poor farmers for growing food crops. According to custom traditional leaders may reallocate communal land into the hands of entrepreneurial farmers if not used 'productively'. Individual land rights for orchards are usually held under PTO and as such cannot be sold openly. These rights are registered both by the traditional authority and the local municipality as stipulated by the 2013 Spatial Planning and Management Act 16 (SPLUMA) however they do not transfer ownership rights over land to the occupant but user rights. These user rights are traditionally passed down through inheritance however as we are witnessing in the case of Tshakhuma's orchards, it is becoming increasingly common for them to be transacted between individuals for substantial sums of money. Customary authorities are well aware of this practice and generally justify the practice based on it being legitimate for a farmer to be compensated for the land-based investments that come with establishing an orchard. As one local headman explained "We turn a blind eye to land sales, we are only busy with change of ownership." And a farmer reaffirms: "The tribal authority does not want people to sell their land. Of course, if they have developed the land, they [the land owner] need some compensation. One doesn't tell the tribal authority that you have paid someone for land" (Interview 28 April 2016). These transactions are usually negotiated in a covert manner between buyer and seller and prices are highly varied depending on what the seller needs and the anticipated means of the buyer.

Whereas residential plots became readily available for community

members as a result of the Chief's reallocation of lower-lying areas from agricultural to residential after his 1991 comeback, access to agricultural plots remains problematic. The prime fields along the side of the dam were controlled by a group of elderly community members who obtained them due to their proximity to the traditional authorities. Lutheran converts who had been close to the missionary still hold plots on what was formerly the mission farm. Farmland is still available on the mountainous slopes in the north but it demands laborious and unpopular forms of farming. One of the elderly claimants farming this peripheral area explained the situation:

> Some stands are kept for the sake of holding onto the land. People will just put-up shacks. These shacks compromise the community because our land becomes a hub for foreigners and criminals. If you will say something about this it will seem like you are being political or want to bring somebody down … The farmers are ageing and don't have the power to walk up the mountain. The youth of today is mostly working in town or at the farms or they are studying outside the village (Interview 14 September 2007).

Her diversified livelihood typified that of the older generation who were partially engaged in rain-fed agriculture and managed to market some of their mangoes and avocados to Tshakhuma's fresh produce market. The mainstay of her income was from a state pension grant, with which she also supported three of her grandchildren while their parents held jobs in order to develop their residential plot across the tar road, where services like electricity and water were available.

The local political economy at Tshakhuma shows its position at the interface and convergence of two key movements: an urbanisation trend and related de-activation in vegetable and staple crop production on the one hand, and the gradual incorporation into the tree-crop commodity frontier on the other (to be elaborated below). These developments drive adaptiveness of landed authority, change the value of productive land and the opportunity structure in which our three protagonists inserted themselves. In the next section, we present a typology of smallholder profiles in the local area and then unpack our protagonists' assembling practices.

4. Contextualising smallholder differentiations in Vhembe District

The recent orientation of local smallholders to tree-crop production at Tshakhuma and more widely across the Vhembe district resonates with a national and regional boom in the production and export of subtropical tree crops. Macadamia is emblematic of this boom, with South Africa having become one of the world's major producers (SAMAC, 2021). Acreage under macadamia production has grown explosively, with an additional 5,887 new hectares planted in 2019 predominantly by white commercial farmers, agribusinesses and to a lesser extent commercially-operated land reform projects (SAMAC, 2021). Statistics on adoption of subtropical tree-crop commodities by smallholders in Vhembe District are sketchy, with 2018 data from the provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development suggesting that there are 1,163 smallholder orchard owners in Vhembe District. Land registration data from eight tribal authorities indicate much higher figures: 4,713 orchards (registered as PTO) that together cover 9,746 ha (Olofsson, 2021, pp. 44–45). These records show that the average size of orchards held by individuals is 6 ha, although sizes differ a lot according to aspects such geography and the profiles of farmers. Subtropical fruit production amongst smallholders includes 'older' crops such as avocado, litchi and mango, which are mostly sold and consumed locally. Macadamia was being grown since the 1950s in the white commercial farming areas and incrementally started making inroads amongst black smallholders in the late 1990s and 2000s.

Smallholder tree-crop farmers in Vhembe are differentiated, primarily according to their main source of income, as well aa their capital assets, type of labour used, land area cultivated, market integration and agricultural diversification amongst others. Despite these differences, four relatively distinct categories were identifiable based primarily on their class position as petty commodity producers and small-scale capitalists (see Fig. 2). The majority of farmers were engaged in petty commodity production, highly constrained in terms of access to capital and labour and thereby their ability to engage in expanded reproduction was very limited. In contrast a minority of farmers can be classified as small-scale capitalist with access to off-farm income were making significant investment on their land and are able to engage to varying degree in expanded reproduction (Olofsson, 2019, see also Olofsson, Ros-tonen, Gupta, de Steenhuysen Piters, & Van Leynseele, 2021).

The *welfare dependent petty commodity producers* rely primarily on state pension grants as their main livelihood source, with their orchards mostly being a secondary income. This group can be considered as 'hanging in' as their farms are not generating much income. Without much capital to invest, they are doing what they can with their own and some family labour but severely constrained. These farmers were the 'original' farmers who acquired land during the apartheid years and their orchards are mostly aging, and not very well maintained and underproductive. The future of these farms largely hinges on the next generation which in many instances are not interested in taking over the farms and hence these orchards are often targeted for purchase the small-scale capitalist (cluster 3 and 4).

The *agricultural petty commodity producers* are mostly second generation farmers who have inherited farms. In the absence of additional income sources to finance the capital investment needed in the orchards, these farmers often diversify into seasonal cash crops, and other informal livelihood activities that provide a regular income and limited surplus that they can use to cross subsidise the orchards as newly-planted trees mature. In this way they are 'inching up' looking to gradually expand the area of land under cultivation, as most have around 60% cultivated of the land area they have the rights to.

It is the small-scale capitalist who is mostly navigating access to land both to enter into the tree-crop 'boom' and/or to expand their current landholdings. The *salaried small-scale capitalists* are mostly civil servants who use their income to invest in land and orchards. This group have either inherited their farms or are first generation farmers 'stepping in' to agriculture as a livelihood diversification and investment strategy. The *agricultural small-scale capitalists* are largely those who have 'graduated' from the previous category. Once their orchards are established and starting to generate returns, they move into full-time farming and as they start to realise a surplus this is reinvested in expanded production, driving the market for customary land.

Traditional means of land access through inheritance or through allocation by the traditional leader by virtue of one's local group membership is still the most common for the majority of tree crop farmers (petty commodity producer mentioned above). However, the emerging customary land market presents an opportunity for

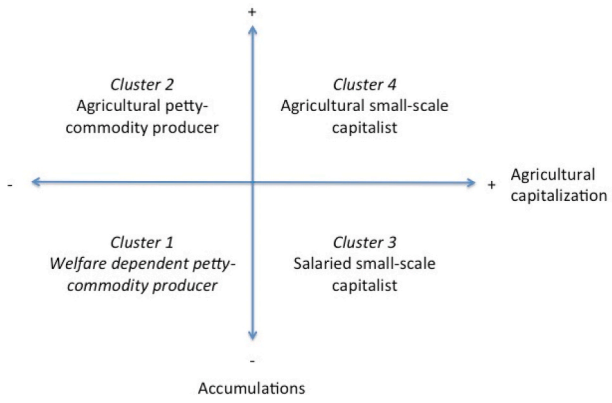

Fig. 2. Typology of smallholder tree-crop farmers.

newcomers to gain a foothold in tree-crop production but also a means to enable accumulation through extensification (predominantly small-scale capitalists). This signals both continuities with past practises of accessing land which were governed by social norms and custom, but also important ruptures from the past in that land access increasingly hinges on financial transactions. These dynamics were explored in a recent study in the Vhembe district of land transaction across nine traditional authorities where tree crops are most prominent (Olofsson, 2021). This study found that while substantial sums of money are being transacted between individuals for orchards, traditional leaders are using these opportunities to appropriate rent. The study found that traditional authorities have 'official' prices for land that varied from as little as R600p/ha to R50 000p/ha (41-3,400 USD), with an average price being R9511p/ha (647 USD). Illicit payment to the traditional leaders, however, accompanied these 'official' sums in most cases.

In the next section, we hone in on Tshakhuma, unpacking land accessing strategies of three purposively selected individuals, who are broadly representative of the diverse means through which land access is currently being navigated. In doing so, it is important to note that of no interest to investor groups and large growers that have been shoring up macadamia farms in the neighbouring white-owned, commercial farming areas where land is sold on the market and farms have a high degree of capitalisation and standardisation. Although the popularity of macadamia owes to its raising status as cash crop in the commercial farming sector, the competing land claims in Venda currently revolve greatly around the local competition between residential and agricultural land uses.

5. Three trajectories of navigating land access

5.1. Mr Lutendo[2]: Navigating land access through opportunistic purchases and job creation

Lutendo's entry into farming was not a conventional one. Unlike other middle-aged tree-crop farmers who mostly gain access to land with established orchards via inheritance, Lutendo's family who are relatively well off and have no history of farming, financed his way into land access. Lutendo was the black sheep of the family, he didn't finish school and by his own account he got involved with 'the wrong crowd' and a series of illicit activities. It was against this backdrop that his father purchased him a farm in 2003 in the hope that this would put him on a more socially-accepted and respectable career track.

The highly fertile land on the Southern side of the Tshakhuma dam was originally demarcated in the 1980s and 1990s for the establishment of mostly avocado orchards, by the then chief Madzivhandila (see Fig. 1, dam area directly North of 'Diambele'). The area was divided into eight portions which were allocated without payments to individuals in close proximity to the chief. Many of these original owners have since passed on. Lutendo's first farm was acquired from the daughter of one of these original landowners. She was only willing to sell a portion (2.5ha) of the farm she inherited even though the farm was no longer being maintained and yields from the aging trees were very low. She needed the money but was well aware of the potential value of land and wanted to hold on to what she could. This was the first of four separate parcels of land that Lutendo purchased between 2004 and 2017, backed with the financial support of his family. Each of the subsequent purchases was the result of a drawn-out process of negotiation, that sometimes spanned several years. This was largely because most landowners at Tshakhuma, both the original owners or their decedents, were generally reluctant to sell their access rights to land in the face of the aforementioned land scarcity and dense settlement. Knowing when a particular family was under financial strain or going through an unexpected crisis that left them in need of cash posed an opportune moment enabling the transaction of land. In one instance Lutendo acquired a land parcel from a widow of the original landowner who needed surgery and the land sale provided the capital which enables this. Timing and having insider knowledge of the personal circumstances of the landowners played critical roles in all four opportunistic land sales. The value of orchard land dramatically increased over the years since Lutendo acquired his first farm in 2004. At the time he paid R18 000 (1,224 USD) for 1ha, while in 2017 he paid R70 000 (4,760 USD) for 1ha.

The value of these transactions are not publicly disclosed. As Mr Lutendo said: "I make the deal with the seller and the seller doesn't tell the chief they are selling, we make our own contract between us and the seller just tells the chief they are giving me the land. The chief knows we are selling but can't prove it" (Interview 9 July 2018). In total Lutendo managed to acquire a total of 8.5ha of land adjacent to the dam, spread across the four separate plots. He has a medium-term strategy to acquire additional parcels bordering his land, and can relate the personal circumstances of each landowner and the expected time frames before he can secure additional plots. His vision is to consolidate his separate parcels into one, large farm. On the land his family purchased for him, he relies entirely on hired labour and has mostly removed the aging avocado trees and replanted with the macadamia cultivars desired by the market. In some instances, he has left some of the fruit bearing avocados and intercropped with macadamia seedlings, with the view to eventually remove the avocado trees once the macadamia start maturing.

Lutendo's land acquisition around the Tshakhuma dam did not quench his thirst for land. His vision remains to resemble the largescale white commercial macadamia farmers in the area and expand his production area. With no large parcels of communal land available in his own village, he set his sights on land in the neighbouring Mashau traditional authority which is less densely populated and still has relatively large tracks of communal land that had not been demarcated to individuals. He managed to negotiate access to 35ha 'communal land', which far exceeds the 5–10ha historically granted to community members under customary rules. This negotiation was not done directly with the chief but through a local headman. It was only once the price was settled and sale confirmed that Lutendo met with the chief to close the deal over some fine whisky as Lutendo recalls. Lutendo's access was enabled primarily through his access to finance: "other people won't have the same access as me, those people [traditional leaders] they identify if a person has money. It's all about money. They know my dad and asked if I would give them R200,000 (13,600 USD), and when I said yes they said come tomorrow we will show you the land … The chiefs just charge according to what they need" (Interview 28 April 2016). Although Lutendo's transaction runs counter to custom, the legitimacy of the transfer has however not been directly challenged by local residents largely due to the promise of much-needed jobs that will materialise once the farming operation takes off. By 2020, some five years after acquiring the 35ha farm, substantial private grant funding was acquired which enabled the initial investment on the land to be made. The land was fenced and cleared, boreholes sunk, 15ha of macadamia planted and 35 permanent and 17 seasonal jobs created in the process. With the rapid growth, Lutendo's brother has left the financial sector to be full-time on the farm.

These visible developments prompted the chief at the end of 2020 to offer access to an additional 45ha of land which will enable the expansion of the newly planted orchards. This second expansion is however considered a "very sensitive issue" in terms of the relations with the local community since this land is also highly desirable for residential expansion as it is so centrally located next to the residential area. To maintain these relations both with the local community and the traditional leaders, a local community liaison was employed. "This is important for us because we are not from Mashau, we don't know the ways and needs of the community … The community liaison did all his schooling with the chief so they know each other from an early age and they can communicate easily so that was the simple route for us to get someone who knows the chief very well" (Interview, 18 January 2021).

[2] All names have been changed.

The creation and maintenance of jobs for the local residents is central to managing community relations. To this end the introduction of tomatoes in-between the newly established orchards is considered key as it ensures the number of jobs can be maintained through the labour-intensive nature of tomatoes as well as providing Lutendo income during the long maturation period of the tree-crop orchard. An innovative lottery system has been set up for the seasonal jobs to ensure the jobs being offered are shared between community members in a socially accepted manner. It is key to maintaining the support of the local community and condonement of an 'outsider' acquiring land.

The rapid acquisition of land and thereby the growth of the farming enterprise has hinged on the complementary assets of Lutendo local networks, knowledge of landholders' situations and his brother's financial assets and business acumen. These enabled the strategic navigation of the relations with the local community and traditional authority outside of their own community. As Lutendo himself confesses "My network is good and [my ability to] consult with people is very good" (Interview, 28 April 2016). His brother acknowledges this important role in facilitating access and creating the investment opportunities for him. "Lutendo is well-known and popular around these areas, he knows the area and the people individually. I'm a businessman, I didn't grow up in Venda, I don't know the language properly, so I can't have a full discussion with the chief. You don't want to go there and speak English. Lutendo knows the custom and the cultural values that come with these discussions. I rather choose to focus on the production side of the business and Lutendo manages the communication in that space" (Interview, 18 January 2021).

5.2. Mr Tendani: Navigating land access through repurposing and distant geographies

After retiring in 2014 from a teaching career, Tendani turned his energy and dedication to full-time farming at Tshakhuma. Up until his retirement his farming activities had been limited to a small 0.5ha plot near the river in Tshitavhadhulu (see Fig. 1), which he had been allocated by the local headman when another elderly farmer 'retired' from cultivating it. His cultivation here had been limited to maize and groundnuts for home consumption. He was simultaneously farming another 0.5ha plot adjacent to his home where he planted a small macadamia orchard back in the early 1990s. After retiring, his primary objective was to acquire more land to expand with macadamia. From his 0.5ha macadamia orchard he was generating a reasonable income despite its limited size and this motivated him to expand. He considered himself having two options, the first being to acquire additional land on which to establish a larger orchard and the other to convert the land he already had access to into a macadamia orchard. He pursued both strategies. His trajectory of land acquisition demonstrates a much more constrained path in comparison to Lutendo due to his limited access to capital.

In terms of acquiring new land, he started exploring options that were within the limited budget that his teachers' pension could enable. He anticipated that the land around Tshakhuma dam would be too expensive as orchards have already been established there. Hence, he explored what he considered to be the more affordable option; acquiring small plots of land from the elderly farmers growing seasonal maize for household consumption on the mountainside above the residential area. He initially identified an elderly lady who had access to 1.5ha and it took a few years but finally in 2015 she agreed to the sale once she had become 'too tired' to continue farming. She charged R3 000 and together they went to the tribal authority to register the transaction. "It's not allowed to sell land so I can't say I paid, otherwise it would be reporting her." Land that is being cultivated for subsistence purposes is not usually issued with a PTO certificate. However, with Tendani's ambitions to establish a macadamia orchard he wanted to obtain a PTO both to secure his land rights and in order to qualify for potential support initiative from government or private sector. He continued negotiations with other elderly farmers who bordered his new plot and after another drawn-out process he acquired the adjacent 0.5ha plot in 2019. For this 0.5ha he was requested to pay R4 000 but after some negotiations he managed to secure it for R3 500 (239 USD). He is currently preparing the land to establish his orchard. In addition to getting access to new land he also started converting the land he already owns. In 2015 he started repurposing his 0.5 plot of land in Tshitavhadhulu by planting macadamia seedlings. Initially he intercropped the young trees with green beans and garlic and various other vegetables for sale into local markets which would bring in a small income while the trees matured. He anticipated getting his first harvest in 2021 from this new macadamia orchard.

Farming across the three small separate parcels of land was considered far from ideal and he wanted to establish a much large orchard but knew this would not be possible given the land scarcity in Tshakhuma. He had heard that land was being sold cheaply in Rambuda, a tribal authority some 70 km (close on 2 h' drive) from Tshakhuma. He approached the local traditional leaders and requested access to 10ha. Eventually he was offered a 5ha parcel of land to purchase for R15 000. While he felt he had made a good purchase, in the five years since he purchased this land he has been unable to afford to do anything with the land. He is concerned that this land will be taken back by the Rambuda traditional authority because he has not been able to finance the clearing of the land and make steps towards establishing an orchard. Given the logistics of this land being so far away and his inability to access finance, he now does not think it will be feasible to do anything with it apart from maybe keeping some goats there. He is anxious to at least put up a fence so that there is a visible marker that he is investing something in the land, in order to avoid the land being reclaimed by the traditional authority for reallocation to more 'productive' users. He is uncertain how the traditional authority will act in this instance as he has officially purchased the land.

5.3. Mr Nduvho: Navigating land access through slow consolidation

Nduvho was a teacher in Johannesburg, who took early retirement due to the opportunity presented by his father acquiring land to establish an orchard. His father was one of the select few from Tshakhuma who were in close proximity to the chief and through this privileged position acquired access to 20ha in 1996. Initially his father was only cultivating maize on a small portion of the land, financially unable to start establishing an orchard. His father's intention with acquiring the land was that his son would one day take over the farm and turn it into a commercial orchard. Having made some lucrative investment with his limited savings he was able to use this as the initial financial investment to start his orchard. This enabled Nduvho to return to Venda from Johannesburg where he had been teaching and started work fulltime on the farm. He was initially only able to establish 5ha with tree crops which he did incrementally over a couple of years. His limited access to capital means he is following a slow but consistent trajectory of expansion as his agricultural income allows. This is accompanied by a strategic diversification of tree-crops. As he explained: "To play your cards safe, you must have avocado's, litchis and macadamia and then if the market is not good one year you have another crop" (Interview 16 April 2016). While he proceeded with caution, restricted to following a slow trajectory towards expansion due to financial constraints, by the end of 2020 he has almost managed to fill his arable land with tree-crops. By 2020 he was turning to new opportunities for expansion.

Nduvho's vision remains growth-oriented and he aspires to establish a further 5ha with tree-crops over the coming years as his profits enable. In order to achieve this, he is in the process of negotiating access to the land adjacent to his existing orchard which extend along a corridor to the east between the upper row of residential stands and the forest in the mountainside. He recalls how once this area was being actively cultivated by many local residents, and the indigenous bush was removed for this purpose. However, over time "they got tired" and now rely only on

their pensions, leaving only a few maize cultivators. This posed increasing difficulties for those who remained as the indigenous bush grew back around their fields and with it the threats caused to their crops by wild animals has increased. Hence, Nduvo observes that it's only a matter of time till those who remain retire from cultivating, however he does not want to wait until such a time so has embarked in negotiations with them. He is offering them each R2 500 (171 USD) essentially to stop cultivating there, justifying this amount as a token gesture to "keep good relations" rather than as a purchase of the access rights. He explains "these gogos [grannies] are happy to negotiate with me, they know me. I give their children work on my farm during the harvest season" (Conversation, 21 December 2020). Once they acceded to this, Nduvho approached the traditional authority to adjust his current PTO certificate to reflect the additional 4ha that he can now prove is no longer being cultivated.

6. Trajectories compared

Tshakhuma is an interstitial site that finds itself partly embedded in South Africa's white-dominated, commercial sector and urbanising, former 'homeland' area. Successive frontier movements have prompted responses by the traditional authorities in ways that entrench their control over land and local economic development. Whilst lower-lying areas agricultural land is steadily converted into residential, we also see that higher-lying crop land previously farmed by resource-poor farmers are being converted to orchards for commercial tree-crop farming. This urbanisation, accompanied by agricultural de-activation of staple crops, mirrors a type of multifaceted and relational 'extended urbanisation' (Ghosh and Meer, 2021). Tshakhuma's contingent elements typify it as an internally-heterogenous 'place-assemblage' of which its components are connected to globalised assemblages or other place-based assemblages (Anderson, Kearnes, McFarlane, & Swanton, 2012).

Relations of exteriority (Woods et al., 2021) that have shaped this place-assemblage relate to Tshakhuma's attractiveness to jobseekers and community members seeking a second home there. This attractiveness owes to the relatively-good public services and proximity to white-owned commercial farms, the Barotta banana estate and the central position and transport infrastructure linking the place to other job centres like Elim and Louis Trichardt. The recent macadamia and avocado commodity boom that hit the surrounding white farmers are also driving changes in production and land relations. These interactions and developments provide the backdrop for introduction of tree-crop commodities by our three protagonists. We illustrated how these new relations of interiority and exteriority were not the product of an investor-driven land grab or enclosure movement driven by national elites. They were actively produced by our protagonists in piecemeal ways, helping strengthen interactions between Tshakhuma as place-based assemblage and other, *trans*-local assemblages such as the expanding, commodity tree-crop frontier.

Their assembling was described in terms of an agentive type of patterning of production and navigation of sensitive ownership deals and construction of new land markets. This reworking was distinctive for the three examples of land accessing and related accumulation, based also on their respective positions as agricultural small-scale capitalists (Mr. Lutendo and Mr, Nduvho) and salaried small-scale capitalist (Mr. Tendani). Their assembling shows how various social, natural and economic elements such as tree-crop characteristics, natural endowments, financial resources, reputations and kinship ties are agentively blended into new, unwieldy, land-associated assemblages. Certain public and private elements were evident in this new assemblage. Market-focused, commodity-like elements related to the new macadamia and avocado crops were evident in their materiality and suitability for hillside production, annual cycles, transformation of cropland for local food consumption into orchards for commercial tree crops, and use of seasonal, paid agricultural labour. Expansion of orchard land in all three cases also involved the conversion of 'commons land' or land used for subsistence-needs into commercial cropland farmed individually by (aspirational) small-scale capitalist farmers. This process mirrored more neoliberal forms of tenure change in terms of a gradual change of customary land tenure toward more individualised forms and related formalisation of 'title' by PTO-registration of newly-acquired orchards. Farmers with adequate capital means and good business acumen can earn reputations that enable exceptionally large plots of land to be allocated to them, thereby concentrating agricultural land in fewer hands in a process that resembles gentrification of land relations.

We however also witnessed the risks accompanying capitalist accumulation. Managing these brought into focus the public aspects and the navigation of delicate, community relationships. Their trajectories still mark them out as marginal 'emerging growers', who face the typical range of obstacles to value chain participation facing the black, smallholder sector (Greenberg, 2013) and engage in forms of crop diversification characteristic of smallholder farming (Olofsson, 2019). Access to capital largely determines the pace and nature of their land acquisition. For capital-poor Nduvho capital injection was done more incrementally through crop diversification strategies and cross-subsidization by using income from food crops for tree-crop expansion. Skilful navigation also meant engagements in non-commodity circuits through land sharing arrangements that reified communitarian values and identities. The tree-crop maturation process implies a gap in production between planting and canopy closure – a gap which also could be used to mend and maintain good community relations by granting resource-poor maize farmers temporary use of orchards. Whilst traditional access to land through inheritance or proximity to the traditional leadership is still critical, we also found that community membership as precondition to accessing land is being restyled through the land purchases made in other tribal areas in which our protagonists held no customary land rights. These delicate land deals ran contrary to custom and required local relations of kin and reputations enabled such purchases. Tendani's intention to strengthen his claim by fencing his distant plot at Rambuda and Lutendo's employment of a local community intermediary to maintain good community relations at neighbouring Mashau, show the contingent and hybrid, collective-private nature of our smallholder-driven land accumulation. Job provisioning at Mashau through a lottery system administered by traditional leaders also served to boost the status and authority of traditional leaders who can lubricate such land transfers with reference to a customary notion of serving the public demand for jobs. Not abiding by communitarian norms and the public good, may affect individual reputations and undermine future land deals.

Chiefs and other traditional leaders as well as poorer segments of the farming population also help constitute the land-associated assemblage. Rather than eroding communal land systems and authority of chiefs, we witness that the new interactions enhance opportunities of traditional leaser for rent extraction and may strengthen their authority by giving them roles in selecting and administering workers for the newly-established farms. The different pathways to accessing land, the delicate interplay of actor projects and interests and the situated blending of collective and private elements through such projects, illustrate why it is problematic to speak about more-or-less coherent land tenure regimes or food-related governance regimes. We also cannot readily associate these new crops and producers with 'practices that fix or consolidate forms of access, claiming, and exclusion for some time' and that may lead to enclosures and legalization of land rights through alignment with state laws and land reform (Peluso & Lund, 2011, p. 668). Such foreclosure, even when defined as temporal fixity, would not do justice to the multiplicity in new land-associated assemblages and the existent ones they interact with, as well as the various possible (semi-)agrarian futures that may still unfold at Tshakhuma.

A historical continuity is however evident in the state complicity in maintaining traditional authorities' hold on land in such former 'homeland' areas. This can be traced back to the racist 'separate

development' policies and the inability of the post-apartheid land tenure reform to democratize or otherwise actualize land rights in the former 'homeland' areas (Ainslie & Kepe, 2016; Hall & Kepe, 2017). Nuancing the 'accumulation from above' thesis, we however see a limited degree of standardisation and codification of the observed interactions by extra-local actors like agribusiness. National grower's associations are gradually taking smallholders on as members but knowledge sharing and lobbying take large-scale commercial as the norm (Cousins & Scoones, 2010). Well-intended local value chain actors like a macadamia nut processing plant have set up smallholder sellers' groups but recently reported arresting such activities since they makes 'no economic sense' to try to get smallholders into their supply chain (Interview G. Whyte, 10/3/2017). The promotion of a 'class of black, capitalist farmers' is a prominent feature of current agrarian reform policies. State support for aspiring capitalist growers in Vhembe District is however very limited. As individual farmers not grouped as co-operatives or Communal Property Associations established in land reform projects, they are pooled together with all types of rural producers and receive the same minimal support such as fertilizer and pesticide provision. When they are organised as collectives and can present records of transactions, water rights certificates and business plans, commodity-focused smallholders they do however have a comparative advantage when applying for school feeding schemes and grants for mechanisation, farm improvements and subsidised labour. As yet, this support reaches only a handful of Vhembe tree-crop farmers in our research area, For these aspiring farmers, cross-subsidization from pensions and public service jobs as well as family loans, community ties and their navigation skills still represent key resources for farm expansion.

7. Conclusion

Recent debates on the rise of capitalist farming in South Africa's smallholder sector as 'accumulation from below' (Cousins, 2013; Cousins et al., 2018). They suggest a gradual but linear expansion of commodity relations, which follows a singular logic and is predatory on the rural poor. Similar processes towards individualisation and elite formation are reported in the literature on the neo-liberalisation of African customary tenure systems (Chimhowu, 2019) or land privatization (Peluso & Lund, 2011). In this paper, we have attempted to nuance this transition narrative by focusing on new actors who introduce new agricultural commodities. We showed how land access in the former Venda homeland is mediated through skilful navigation by smallholder farmers, representatives of a small sub-section of semi-capitalist 'black' farmers, who are engaged in market-oriented avocado and macadamia farming. Although they represent different degrees of value cain integration and accumulation trajectories, they all operate within a certain opportunity structure that is related to the local political economy and larger conjunctural movements. Gradual processes of urbanisation at Tshakhuma, together with de-activation in traditional crops like maize and vegetables, have heightened land competition and changed values attributed to land. Against this background, we analysed how these smallholders agentively (re)pattern land and production relations, drawing on family support, local knowledge, crop diversification strategies and brokering of good community relations.

Our actor-oriented approach to land-associated assemblages has methodological and theoretical implications. Actors' assembling was approached through their land-accessing strategies and farming activities that focused primarily on commercial tree crop production. We illustrated how these farmers' assembling practices make exterior linkages to globalised, value chains. At the same time, we foregrounded the relations of interiority with Tshakhuma as a heterogenous place-assemblage; a site having its own set of relations of interiority and exteriority, as well as its particular history of land governance and development trajectory from rural-to peri-urban settlement. Although land-accessing strategies of our three protagonists differed according to their individual profiles, they all contributed to the blending of collective and private elements. Their expansion of commercial tree crops introduced the rules pervading in international agricultural value chains and localised elements of capitalist production through processes such as formalisation of land titles, hiring of seasonal labour, fencing and the increase of (illicit) land sales. Their land accessing strategies, however, also show the continued importance of non-commodified elements as shown in historic, hereditary land access, and need to maintain close relations to the traditional leadership and engender community goodwill by entering into land sharing agreements with land-starved neighbours. Land deals where land was bought outside the community required the maintenance of sensitive community relations and providing of agricultural jobs that could be administered locally by traditional leaders.

In this light, the capitalist relations witnessed at this commodity frontier are not necessarily accompanied by the codification of global trends or regulations associated with global expansion of commodity production whereby rule-making is vested in transnational food assemblages and inevitably leads to standardisation and centralised coordination (Law & Mol, 2008). Neither could their assemblage-making be understood in terms of 'capital's other' and the types of counter-hegemonic responses associated with alternative food movements (Marsden et al., 2018). We rather emphasise the indeterminate nature of outcomes, emphasizing how our protagonists' assembling opens up a range of possible, conditional futures. In understanding this 'frontier moment', we propose an anthropological sensibility to agricultural commodity frontiers as unfolding at the interface between micro-practices, changing social relations as a result of gradual expansion of capitalism and the larger structural pressures or conjunctures driving changes in the local political economy (Cf. Li, 2014). We see farmer-driven,tree-crop intensification being contingent on what we described as Tshakhuma's heterogenous, place assemblage and local development processes such as concentrated, residential settlement. This conditionality, combined with the skilful, individualised land-accessing strategies that enhance rather than reduce multiplicity, defy a singular, linear understanding of trajectories toward accumulation and commodification. This agrarian transformation is made possible by its hybrid, open and indeterminate nature, even though a gradual shift to more commoditised production- and land tenure arrangements is discernible. In conclusion, we thus suggest more detailed, situated studies into such enterprising actors 'doing the assembling' that may be few in numbers and not viable as a target population for policy interventions but are critical, analytical entry points for unpacking emerging properties of land and production relations.

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