

'People are willing to fight to the end': romanticising the 'moral' in moral economies of irrigation

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‘PEOPLE ARE WILLING TO FIGHT TO THE END’. ROMANTICISING THE ‘MORAL’ IN MORAL ECONOMIES OF IRRIGATION

Abstract

This article is about the continued salience of a particular understanding of moral economy in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the fact that a significant body of anthropological theory argues against simplified binaries of market and moral economies, such binaries persist. These either romanticise or vilify moral economies and exist in both policy and academic contexts. Thus, moral economies are said to drive corruption or shape anti-market cultural stances.

Meanwhile, a romantic fantasy of a non-capitalist rural economy oriented by morality rather than economic rationality continues to animate areas of development policy and to direct funding. My argument is not with the concept of moral economy itself, but with how it is marshalled in support of both romantic and sometimes negatively essentialised conceptions of people and places. The article sets out the case for the persistence of these ideas, focusing on their application to irrigation development and the problems with this. I then use an example from southern Malawi to illustrate how moral ideas of fairness and reciprocity interplay with processes of differentiation in access to (and exclusion from) land and labour and influence how people manage scarce resources. Whilst there are moral discourses and a mutual embeddedness of the moral and economic, these reflect a range of ethically-informed positions which are influenced by social position and power. However, this emic perspective is largely absent from the more romanticised models. I conclude by reflecting on the politics of their persistence.

Moral economy, irrigation, Malawi, Africa

Introduction

How do ‘moral economies’ play a role in the collective management of natural resources? Are there specifically ‘African’ moralities that enable or constrain this? Despite a wealth of anthropological argument against reification and dichotomising in the treatment of the relationship between economy and morality (Alexander et al 2019, De Neve et al. 2008, Mc Namara 2019, Olivier de Sardan 2013, Palomera and Vetta 2016, Siméant 2015) these questions are still posed by those who seek to make sense of ‘the social’ and ‘culture’ as barriers to (or facilitators of) the success of development interventions. This is sometimes manifested as a romantic fantasy of a non-capitalist rural economy oriented by morality rather than economic rationality. The possible benefits of the generalised reciprocity and mutual obligation implied by notions such as moral economy are may be viewed positively, especially when seen as an element of the ‘social capital’ that is of interest to some development donors (Fine 2008, Levien 2015), and as key to the successful functioning of a ‘New Green Revolution’ (Kimambo et al. 2008) or underpinning reciprocity and sharing (Brewis et al 2019, Wutich et al 2018). Alternatively, moral economy is a barrier, seen in arguments that suggest that a particular ‘African moral economy’ has hampered the success of interventions such as the Green Revolution (e.g. Sugimura 2008), or underpins problems of African corruption (Olivier de Sardan 1999¹; Whyte and Wietgratz 2016, Wiegatz 2016).

This paper interrogates these uses of moral economy, particularly as they have been discussed in relation to agriculture and to the specific case of irrigation management. The management of small-scale irrigation has been a preoccupation for policy makers in recent years, partly because sub-Saharan Africa is repeatedly presented as not living up to its

¹ Olivier de Sardan argues against a monolithic or deterministic theory of culture, but his argument concerning the ‘logics’ of corruption still lends itself to this interpretation, revealed in more simplistic accounts of ‘African corruption’ (Harrison 2004).

irrigation potential. Problems and possibilities in irrigation development have also been conceptualised partly in terms of the culturally embedded characteristics of communities, while solutions to these problems have incorporated institutional intervention in such characteristics; processes of formalisation that render them both legible and controllable (Oates et al. 2015; Ostrom 2010; Suhardiman et al 2014, Venot 2014). Recently, donors such as the World Bank have reiterated the potential significance of ‘farmer-led irrigation’ based on narratives of modernity in which the ‘entrepreneurial’ and productive farmer, assisted by market-oriented irrigation, is contrasted to his or her fellows who are still locked in a pre-capitalist ethics of subsistence (Harrison and Mdee 2018) As De Bont et al (2019: 107) put it, thus ‘reducing them discursively to backward peasants incapable of innovation without the external intervention and administration of the government’.

In the following sections, I revisit the intellectual background to accounts of moral economy and their application to irrigation development, identifying how such ideas have specific political orientations. Palomera and Vetta have recently (2016) suggested that the radical foundations of the term moral economy need to be reclaimed, avoiding the binary thinking that has characterized several contemporary articulations of the approach. I agree with this and argue that this requires an unpacking of the assumptions on which they rest, including in the context of irrigation development. This may in turn help to explain their continuing attractiveness, which has much to do with the political (or sometimes apparently apolitical) flavour of the more romantic articulations.

Turning to an ethnographic example of irrigation management in Southern Malawi, I explore two key themes that have been significant when it comes to the deployment of ideas of moral economy in analyses of irrigation: first, how principles such as fairness and reciprocity

intersect with access to and control over land and labour, so as to influence how people manage scarce resources; and second, the issue of how autonomy and the nature of ‘community’ apparently shape institutional and bureaucratic legitimacy. This shows how diverse moral discourses do not constitute a ‘moral economy’ as commonly described, so much as a range of ethically-informed positions which are influenced in dynamic ways by economics, history and social position. Among these, gender is an important, but not the only, marker of differentiation. In the concluding discussion, I reflect on the reasons for the continuing attractiveness of the more romantic views of moral economy, particularly as they are applied to irrigation development.

The contested politics of moral economies

Moral economy is a ‘polysemic category’ (Edelman 2012: 59), having a complex genealogy, multiple interpretations and a ‘rather promiscuous deployment’ (Alexander et al 2019: 124). Most authors point to the significance of the work of EP Thompson (1971, 1991) and James Scott (1976) in shaping its use, though Thompson himself emphasised the much earlier origins of the term². However, there is considerable diversity in the political orientation of those who seek to identify and understand moral economies. Thompson’s original usage had its roots in class analysis and an emphasis on historical specificity. Indeed, he demonstrates considerable frustration with those who sought to extend its application, writing in 1991 that: ‘It was not about *all* kinds of crowd, and a reader would have to be unusually thick-headed who supposed so. It was about the crowd’s ‘moral economy’ in a context which the article defines’ (Thompson 1991: 260). His concern was with social conflict, in which he clearly

² In the 1991 essay ‘*Moral Economy Reviewed*’, Thompson suggests that the term probably originated in the late 18th Century and cites an 1837 source of an example. In his (2015) critique of Thompson, Götz identifies a wide range of even earlier uses.

distinguished himself from the work of structural functionalist anthropologists who draw on the work of Durkheim and are more likely to emphasise harmony and consensus. Thompson also robustly differentiated himself from the *laissez-faire* implications of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. For Thompson, the focus of enquiry is not a 'community', understood as people in a place, but a specific group of people, identified as 'the poor', and particularly those who experience a dearth of food and respond to it through protest. They are part of an economy and they have moral sentiments about what is right and wrong, which is partly what stimulates their action. But for Thompson, moral economy does not simply revolve around norms that do not change. As I will discuss, one of the problems with some of the recent romantic interpretations of moral economy is precisely that it is taken to refer to people in a place, elided with 'community', without questioning the boundary-making and differentiation that are inevitably part of this.

Scott was also concerned with class conflict. For him, a moral economy is a social order based on principles of reciprocity and responsibility that include the right of everyone to have access to the means of subsistence and survival along with obligations to give and receive. This includes notions of economic justice and exploitation among peasants which, he suggests, is 'representative of peasants everywhere' (Scott 1976: 3). Scott argued that moral economies are threatened by the introduction of capitalism which is not subject to the same values. Like Thompson, his empirical focus was protest, though in the colonised and recently decolonised nations of Southeast Asia, primarily Burma and Vietnam. Scott also urged against romanticising moral economies, though his work has lent itself to such interpretations, as I discuss below.

Some of the more influential accounts of moral economy were thus strongly influenced by Marxism. The concept has, however, also been used by authors who have emphasised the

more harmonious elements of moral economy but without a corresponding analysis of class, power or politics. For example, Booth (1984) equates ‘moral economists’ with functionalist anthropologists such as Evans Pritchard and draws on Polanyi’s (1954) notion of the *Great Transformation* in support of this. For Booth, the idea of the ‘embedded’ moral economy is deployed in explaining the transition from ‘traditional societies to the present epoch’ (1984: 653). More recently, Bryceson (2010) has discussed the moral economies of ‘African societies’ in similar terms: she emphasises a ‘subsistence ethic of social responsibility’ (2010: 3), which is both coherent and based on shared social identity. African moral economy constructs in this account include the linking of production for wealth and social distribution; the creation of wealth to build relational ties and the significance of distributive responsibilities. Bryceson suggests that ‘Any small-scale rural community where everyone knows each other and follows roughly the same agrarian way of life can cohere as a moral economy’ (2010: 4).

In Bryceson and Booth’s analyses, moral economies exist outside of, and precede the development of capitalism. They are also reified, tending to be based on generalisations rather than empirical or historical specificities. This is also the case in certain other reinterpretations of moral economy, among which the work of Goran Hyden is particularly influential. For example, in a volume on ‘Contemporary perspectives on African Moral Economy’ (Kimambo et al. 2008), Sugimura (2008) argues that a revitalised understanding of African moral economies can be important in aspirations towards sustainable development. This is because the ‘disastrous stagnation of rural Africa must be related to some unique mechanism that underlies peasant economies in Africa’ (2008:3), but there is nevertheless hope, in that ‘Formerly the moral economy of African peasants was seen as the main ‘problem’ or ‘difficulty’ for Africa’s development because of its incompatibility with the ‘Green Revolution’, but recently it has begun to be considered as the key to ‘another Green

Revolution' that would bring about a symbiotic relationship between nature and human beings' (Sugimura 2008: 4).

This 2008 volume explicitly builds on Hyden's work on the 'economy of affection' (1980, 1983) and includes a chapter by Hyden himself. For Hyden, the 'economy of affection' was (and is) a type of moral economy which is at the root of both clientelism and various forms of reciprocity. It forms a network of support among groups connected by a variety of characteristics, including kinship and community³. In this analysis the 'African peasantry' is 'uncaptured'; smallholder farmers are outside of the 'formal economy' and rely strongly on custom, unwritten codes and interpersonal relations⁴. Being 'uncaptured' includes both autonomy and the ability to do things on one's own, thus denying others their influence. He suggests that informal institutions combine clientelism, pooling, charisma and self defense in order to undermine the work of formal institutions. Hyden argues that: 'The modern market economy is a culturally foreign institution that 'people in these countries approach with caution and when doing so with little understanding of how to use it for ends other than very short term personal ones' (2008: 30).

During the 1980s, Hyden's arguments were the subject of robust criticism. As Kasfir (1986: 339) put it: 'I think Hyden's argument is thoroughly misconceived. It overstates peasant self-sufficiency to the point where it blocks understanding of the complex relations, partly dependent and partly self-sufficient, that connect peasants to the larger political economy'.

Kasfir, and subsequently Williams (1987) point to the significance of agricultural wage

³ Hyden refers to Scott's work in *No Shortcuts to Progress* (Hyden 1983), but only in passing. It is not necessarily the case that Scott would agree with the equation of 'economy of affection' with 'moral economy'.

⁴ Waters (2007) has argued for the persistence of the 'economy of affection', drawing on Hyden to argue that 'peasants', including in contemporary Tanzania, live 'beneath' the marketplace and remain uncaptured.

labour in contributing to differentiation. Cliffe (1987: 626) noted that Kasfir's critique was so devastating as to 'make one wonder why this line of argument was ever taken seriously', and concluded that empirical analysis should substitute for a search for 'general laws of motion' of African peasants.

The important insight from these critics of Hyden and of others who focus on moral economies as separate and non-relational, is that it is important to understand the nature of the relationships that contribute to differentiation. As Olivier de Sardan (2013) argues, many moral economy approaches have tended to over-emphasise the 'great divide' (Latour 1993) between capitalist and pre-capitalist societies or 'moral economies', resulting in a 'central opposition' (Olivier de Sardan 2013: 285) between the formal and the informal and, by extension, between market-based and 'traditional' social arrangements. Olivier de Sardan suggests that, even with Scott and Thompson, there is a strong association between 'pre-market' and traditional and the idea of the moral economy and that the more informal institutions that constitute the moral economy are undermined by, yet resist, capitalism. While the evidence that Scott and Thompson had such a dichotomous and evolutionist perspective on the relation between capitalism and moral economy is limited, the fact that they themselves spoke in limited terms of the 'moral economy of the peasant', and the 'moral economy of the crowd' contributes to a subsequent tendency to limit the notion of moral economy to particular groups, somehow situated outside of both state and market (Palomera and Vetta 2016) as if this were possible in the nineteenth, let alone the twenty-first, centuries. As Siméant (2015: 170) notes, the theoretical problem is one of romanticizing societies 'outside of the market' and reinforcing binaries between 'early' and 'modern' societies. However, in case of irrigation, such binaries continue to be reinforced and are given new salience in the context of the 'new Green Revolution' which emphasises the market in

contradistinction to the less modern and subsistence-oriented farming of much of sub-Saharan Africa. It is to these that I now turn.

Moral economies of irrigation

Discussions of moral economies of irrigation have tended to reinforce, rather than contest, less differentiated approaches. For example, the anthropologist Paul Trawick (2001, 2003) draws on Scott and Thompson to describe a ‘moral economy of irrigation’ in the Peruvian Andes, based on principles of proportionality, contiguity, autonomy, uniformity, transparency and regularity. He suggests that the rules constitute a system that enables farmers to work together to share water resources in an equitable and fair way that is also effective and sustainable and that such principles occur more widely in both the Andes and beyond. Understanding these, he argues, can enable policy recommendations ‘for resolving situations of tragedy’ (Trawick 2001: 3). For Trawick, where such systems have ‘broken down’, it is precisely because of the stratifying effects caused by their interaction with capitalism. More recently, Trawick et al. (2014) have pursued this argument with comparative research in Spain, arguing that a similar moral economy, also based on principles of equity, transparency and fairness, and rooted in ‘moral principles dating back to Islamic times’, (2014: 94) has independently evolved and that ‘its adaptive dynamics are shown to be of great relevance to small farmers today as they face the growing scarcity of water being induced by population growth and by climate change’ (2014: 87). Trawick et al. (2014) argue in favour of seeking out such moral economies of water use in other contexts.

The interpretation of moral economy provided by Trawick et al. relies on a principle of the autonomy of both ‘irrigation systems’ and ‘communities’. In contrast, Garrido (2014) examines 19th Century accounts of the same irrigation systems, questioning whether they

were run by irrigators along democratic lines and based on ‘principles established by the Moors’. These are myths, he argues, but have nonetheless been influential in subsequent suggestions that water users’ associations (WUAs) should be supported in irrigation development in other contexts. As Venot (2014) argues, there have been problems with such institutional approaches in which WUAs have been treated as panaceas, including those that build on the work of Ostrom (1990, 2010). Ostrom, focusing specifically on common property resource management, stressed the significance of crafting institutions for sustainable management, based on rules, or ‘design principles’. This work has been important in refuting ‘tragedy of the commons’ arguments (Hardin 1968) that emphasise management failures in the absence of the state or clear private property relations. However, it has also been adopted and simplified by the ‘social engineering’ approaches that have characterised much development intervention and thinking (Merrey and Cook 2012). This is despite the fact that Ostrom herself warned against such simplified usage (Venot 2014). According to Venot, these approaches to WUAs ‘convey an over-formalized approach to water resources governance that overlooks the pluralist nature of common property resources management and the multiple arenas in which participation, authority, legitimacy and accountability are continuously negotiated among multiple actors’ (2014: 544-5). Such formalization is also part and parcel of the narratives of irrigation management that characterize much contemporary policy discourse (de Bont et al 2019, Veldwisch et al 2019).

A range of scholars has also sought to identify specifically ‘African’ moral economies for the management of irrigation. Some approach the issue of moral economies for irrigation from the perspective of collective action theory (Muchara et al. 2014), asking what determines whether and how farmers participate in collective action when irrigation schemes are handed over to them. There has also been extensive debate concerning ‘solidarity networks’ in

constraining and facilitating local level organisations (Bernard et al 2010). Discussing access to water in Senegal, Gomez-Temezio (2016: 654) has recently argued that ‘Sons of the soil narratives shed light on a specific ‘moral economy’ in which people born on the same soil, home, have obligations to each other’. Ethnographers have also undertaken detailed historical analysis of specific areas and irrigation systems, particularly those with deep ‘traditional’ or indigenous roots, for example around Kilimanjaro in Tanzania (Adams and Anderson 1998, Bender 2013, Hillbom 2012, Tagseth 2008). In these cases, moral economy is rooted in the long history of irrigation management, but such ideas have more general currency too, including where irrigation has been more recently introduced.

For those who seek to support irrigation in sub-Saharan Africa, especially when it is seen to have failed to live up to expectations, the ‘cultural’ predispositions of irrigating farmers has also been viewed as a problem to be explained in order to make sense of failure, rather than an set of dispositions and practices that might generate success. For example, in SSA the ‘potential’ irrigable land area is much greater than that actually irrigated and irrigation is considerably less developed than in Asia (You et al. 2010). There are well-documented problems of poor management, in which irrigation schemes have been initiated and then collapsed and, although the blame for this has partly been placed with weaknesses in the public sector (Oates et al. 2015), it is also supposedly found in the essentialised characteristics of (unmodernised) community norms and beliefs. This has sometimes involved a tendency to blame ‘corrupt, lazy and undisciplined communities’ or ‘cultures of jealousy and witchcraft’ (Van Koppen et al. 2012: 1).

While the characteristics of the communities in which irrigation develops have been portrayed negatively, their enlistment in attempts to make irrigation more successful has

nonetheless also been critical. An extensive literature thus documents the political, technical and institutional challenges of irrigation management and reform (Suhardiman et al. 2014). One key element of this has been the widespread policy shift from the 1990s onwards towards ‘Participatory Irrigation Management’ (PIM) and ‘Irrigation Management Transfer’ (IMT) (Sakaki and Koga 2013, Garces-Restrepo 2007) which nominally hands control of formerly government-run schemes over to farmers and their representative organisations, often WUAs. For example, in Mwanza district, Tanzania, there is a long history of irrigation practice but, since 2001, government policy has required that this irrigation be managed through WUAs (Mvungi 2008). However, farmers resisted the WUA rules: there was considerable water theft and bribery, along with a reluctance to accept the legitimacy of the formal offices of the WUA. Mvungi argues that this is caused by the logic of the economy of affection which rejects imported forms of organisation, and in which the farmers remain ‘uncaptured’.

As with accounts of moral economy in general, these applications to irrigation development are clearly problematic. First, they tend to cast irrigating farmers as a form a community that is largely separate and autonomous from the outside - a position that is also conveyed in Trawick’s (2001, 2003) account of irrigation communities in the Andes. The concept of ‘the community’ and ‘the irrigation community’ can obscure more than it reveals, overlooking differences in interests and assuming boundaries between communities and others that in reality may be complex and contested⁵. The meaning of community for different groups of people needs to be examined in context, asking both who is within that community and what shapes people’s attachment, belonging and inclination to participate. Such issues become

⁵ The literature that engages with the meaning and nature of community is extensive. Key texts include Agrawal and Clark 1999; Amit and Rapport 2002; Lovell 1998.

especially significant when considering the roles of both new and old institutions in representing their ‘communities’, such as WUAs, including how and under what conditions they attain legitimacy in their attempts to represent and manage others.

An irrigation scheme in malawi

The discussion thus far has set out the theoretical background to the concept of moral economy and its application to irrigation. I have identified both diversity in political orientation and a tendency to dichotomise between more or less market-oriented ‘communities’ in a way that simplifies and romanticises. But, as Mc Namara (2019) and Kea (2013) argue, moving beyond such simplifications also requires ethnographic engagement with emic perspectives. When considering irrigation, this means engaging with specific cases of irrigation management. What can be said about how people manage irrigation in such cases? How do notions of morality and fairness intersect with the realities of access to resources such as land and labour? How do they emerge and take hold (or not)? Do moral systems and rules exist ‘autonomously’ and how are rights to and control over resources shaped by factors beyond the local?

In what follows I therefore explore these questions through an account of small-scale irrigation in Southern Malawi. My observations arise from my participation in a donor-funded research project whose initial aims were precisely to identify and consider the transferability of norms of moral economy for irrigation in sub-Saharan Africa. As time went on, and as I discuss below, it became evident that such aims make as little sense in Southern Malawi as they did to Thompson when he discussed English food riots. This has been the gist of my argument above, but the empirical case provides further support. Research took the

form of participant observation over a year combined with informal and group interviews, the details of which are provided in []⁶.

An irrigation scheme in Southern Malawi

Small-scale irrigation at what is now the Muona Scheme in Nsanje District in the Lower Shire Valley has taken place at least since the mid-1950s, though it is likely that such practices existed earlier as there is a long history of farmers irrigating their crops from rivers and in low-lying wetlands, both in Malawi and throughout the region (Veldwisch et al. 2009). During the 1950s, farmers, mainly women, diverted water from the Tangadzi River to irrigate their crops. These activities then became formalized as part of a set of wider attempts to improve the productivity of agriculture. In an area named after the colonial officer based there, Magreaver, farmers' irrigation practices became more systematized, and assistance was provided in diversifying crops and introducing new varieties, particularly of rice. With Independence in 1964, a government push to increase irrigation across the country led to the establishment of 16 smallholder settler schemes between 1969 and 1975, including at Muona (Ferguson and Mulwafu 2007, Veldwisch et al. 2009). The Muona scheme was built by the government with assistance from Chinese aid between 1969 and 1972. This greatly expanded the area developed at Magreaver, incorporating both the matrilineal Mang'anja people who were already settled in or near Magreaver, and others from further afield, including patrilineal Sena migrants, originally from Mozambique, some of whom were displaced by the scheme creation.

Until 1975, the scheme received technical assistance from China, including the introduction of new and better yielding rice varieties. Each block had an allocated extension officer and a

⁶ [Project information withheld for review]

‘water guard’. An irrigation officer was also stationed at the scheme, and discipline was enforced by the paramilitary wing of the ruling Malawi Congress Party, the Young Pioneers. From the mid-1970s, however, the scheme gradually declined, partly because of siltation of the canals. There was an attempt at rehabilitation in the mid-1980s (with some temporary support provided by the Danish International Development Agency), but by the mid-2000s, like many other such schemes⁷, it was seen as a costly failure. Recently, in line with the national and international revival of interest in support to irrigation, it has been ‘rehabilitated’ with World Bank and IFAD funding under the IRLAD project, which operated between 2006 and 2015. Along with infrastructural improvements, the rehabilitation prioritised the strengthening of institutions for managing the scheme, including re-launching the WUA and formally handing the control of the scheme over to it as representative of the irrigation community.

Muona now covers about 450 hectares organized into twelve blocks supplied from the Tangadzi River by a network of canals to support rice (and some maize) farming. In 2015, there were just under 2500 plot holders. The river brings silt as well as water, providing a rich alluvium that supports agricultural production. Farmers combine the cash cropping of rice (and some maize) on the scheme with rain-fed maize, millet, sorghum, beans and pigeon peas, grown on the adjacent non-irrigated areas. Muona is gravity-fed, but given the varied topography, some sections are difficult to irrigate while others are hard to drain, suffering from waterlogging and salinization and siltation. These problems with aspects of the design of the scheme intersect closely with the social and political factors that shape its management, as I will discuss below.

⁷ The history of the development of irrigation in Malawi is outlined in Veldwisch et al. (2009).

Getting the work done: land and labour access

Irrigation necessarily requires a degree of collective management; there is a need to coordinate planting times and to ensure that canals are free of weeds, for example. In the literature discussed above, this is either enforced by the rules of moral economy, or its failure is seen as an illustration of moral economy not functioning very effectively. But what happens in practice is shaped as much by factors such as gender and differences in wealth as by simple rules or norms, however discourses of fairness and normative judgements may play a role. Understanding this requires a consideration of what shapes such differences and analysis of both access to land and access to labour is a part of this.

In Muona, access to land is an important aspect of differentiation and the ways in which land is 'owned' or tenanted is complex, reflecting both earlier claims and present realities, where the very notion of 'ownership' is subject to conflicting interpretations, particularly where there are multiple claims. This all has implications for how the scheme is managed, particularly in terms of the relationship between tenants and landlords. Formally, in Malawi, three forms of land tenure are recognised: 'customary', 'private' and 'public' property, and there is currently considerable debate about land reforms that seek to lessen the role of chiefs in the allocation of customary land, and to create greater formalisation of land access (Peters 2010, Chinsinga and Wren-Lewis 2013). These debates are played out in the ways that people negotiate access to land in Muona where residents distinguish between 'owned' and 'rented' land and the history of land acquisition plays a part in contemporary claims. 'Owned' land refers to land that a household or individual is entitled to through either customary tenure accessed through inheritance, but also increasingly through purchase. This is despite the fact that, formally, land sales are not allowed in the scheme. As one informant

told us: ‘If two people agree on selling land they have to go to WUA and settle that. They never talk about money; they say that they are exchanging land-farmland for a residential plot. Behind all this there is money’⁸. When it comes to inheritance, marriage between historically matrilineal and patrilineal descent groups, alongside public discussions of ideas of gender equality, have also somewhat altered peoples’ perceptions of the functioning of inheritance, so that there is less distinction in entitlement to inheritance between men and women.

‘Rental’ involves a combination of formal leasing alongside much less formal situations in which people allow others to farm their plots. In Muona, in the early years of the scheme, the predominant payment for access to ‘rented’ land was in-kind, couched in terms of social obligation and ‘doing the right thing’. As one respondent put it: ‘If someone had offered you their land to use, it was expected that you would feel compelled to give something to show your gratitude. Most people gave a tenth of their harvest to the landowner, and that kept relationships positive’⁹. Such exchanges are now much more monetised. Land in Muona is rented out at rates ranging from K4000 (US\$8) per 0.1ha K6000 (US\$12) in the prime areas of the scheme. Despite this, there is a common argument from landlords that their motivation to lease out land is out of good ‘moral responsibility’, and that the rent charged is kept reasonable so that ‘the poor could also access land and feed their children’. However, tenants’ rights and the obligations of landowners are unclear and this has implications for management. Ideas about rights and responsibilities articulated here are thus ‘moral’ in the sense that they are ethically-framed, but they are not necessarily a ‘moral economy’ as a separate or autonomous system.

⁸ Male farmer, February 2015

⁹ Male farmer, February 2014

In general, the length of tenancies is not more than three seasons. This is because of fears on the part of landlords of possible capture by tenants or others, including government. It was suggested by several informants that if a tenant were given the same piece of land over multiple seasons, he or she might be able to claim ownership in the future, including in the event of the death of the landlord. Tenants, on the other hand, tend to dismiss landlords as 'lazy' and argue that their tenancies are insecure because landowners might evict them if they were too 'successful' in their farming. They also complain of a problem of 'rogue' landlords who might try to let the same plot of land to several tenants, especially when these were people who came from further away from the scheme. One participant in a tenants' focus group said: 'There are some very bad apples in the scheme. Some landowners may rent out the same plot of land to five people! Yes, we know that most of the landowners are poor people, but this is very wrong. It robs people of their annual food supply and income'¹⁰

These tensions between landlords and tenants cause fragmentation. Small plots are broken up to enable offspring to have land on which to farm, and landowners organise their land in 0.1ha sections as a standard against which to charge rents. For tenants seeking to use more than 0.1ha of land it is likely that they will have multiple landowners with whom to negotiate. For example, a farmer using 0.5ha may have five landlords to deal with and pieces of land located in different blocks dotted across the scheme. Such an arrangement increases transaction costs, but it also makes scheme management very difficult. The tenant has five canals to contribute towards clearing; five block committee meetings to attend; has to be present on each one of the five plots on the day that they are irrigated to ensure that each plot receives water and to complain if that does not happen. They also have to deal with different

¹⁰ Female participant, focus group, January 2014

management issues; waterlogging may be a problem in one plot, an uncooperative neighbour on another, and so on.

There are also implications in terms of the contribution of labour to the maintenance of the scheme, and of aspirations towards uniformity. Muona operates on a seasonal calendar that gives an indication of what the farmer should be doing at a particular time. With the formalisation of the scheme, there has been an attempt to create a standardization of farming practices. For example, the formal dates for establishing seedling nurseries are between 15th January and 15th February, with transplanting expected by the end of February. However, in the 2014 season about 40% of all plots had no established nurseries by the beginning of March and some people were still transplanting in April. These differences in transplanting dates had the effect of creating uneven demand for water across blocks.

This lack of standardisation is accompanied by a common narrative of ‘laziness’ applied to those who fail to do things on time: ‘it is like they are being forced to farm’, one woman told us¹¹. However, an important part of the picture that is obscured by such narratives is the realities of social differentiation within the scheme and the relative poverty of some farmers - and wealth of others. Much delayed planting reflects the complex relationship between water management, food security and casual labour (*ganyu*), and in particular the fact that undertaking *ganyu* is often a symptom of food insecurity and distress. Bryceson (2008) argues that *ganyu* has increasingly become a relationship between those of unequal asset endowments and a sign of rural impoverishment. Historically, such labour exchanges were accompanied by a strong sense of moral responsibility; ‘Negotiating around differences of economic need and wealth demanded acute sensitivity’ (Bryceson 2008: 90) and reflected a

¹¹ Female informant, January 2015

balanced reciprocity. However, recent pressures, particularly those associated with decreased food security, have resulted in an increase in undertaking *ganyu* for the poorest and its separation from relationships of reciprocity. This in turn affects the timing of the *ganyu* labourers' farming.

In line with these findings, in Muona many late planters face the challenge of a lack of resources, particularly labour and money for inputs. Several pointed out that the onset of the rice-farming season coincides with peak food shortage and they are forced to make difficult choices between working on the future crop and concentrating on short-term survival. They also are unlikely to be able to hire themselves. As one woman said: 'Just look at me. Do I look like the type that can afford *ganyu*?'¹² This particular woman, working on the margins of the scheme, lamented its development, saying that people like her have just got poorer because she was not allocated a good plot in the first place. Food insecurity thus leads some poorer households to sacrifice their own plots in order to meet more immediate food requirements, through working as *ganyu*, thus worsening their longer-term food security. Meanwhile, some of the richer households keep food reserves specifically for use for payment of *ganyu*. As noted, these richer households include those who are effectively commercial farmers - not resident in the scheme, and who treat their activities within it as just one among several other enterprises.

Issues of the ways in which land and labour access influence management thus reflect broader considerations of poverty and social differentiation. They are clearly economic and may involve an alteration of previously prevailing moral rules. But this is not 'moral economy' in the dichotomous sense of the embeddedness of one set of (moral) rules that are

¹² Field interview, November 2014.

opposed to a different and external set of rules. Rather, changes in the ways under which some people are able to get by are historical processes that in turn reflect changing power, of both groups and individuals.

Bureaucratic formalisation, community and autonomy

In several of the accounts of moral economy discussed above, ‘communities’ are treated as not only homogeneous, but as also autonomous and unaffected by political struggle. The account of labour and land access shows how differentiation influences notions of fairness. But what of the formal institutions and people’s relationship to the world beyond the scheme? In Muona, in line with other parts of SSA described above, there has been relatively recent bureaucratic formalisation, following a breakdown of earlier rules: ‘In the euphoria of the end of Banda’s rule, farmers disregarded cropping calendars... No one seemed to listen to the management committees any more. They said they had democracy and democracy meant that everyone was free to do as they pleased’¹³. These narratives of past control and its breakdown then play a role in contemporary discourses of blame and responsibility.

With the rehabilitation of the scheme, there has been an attempt to reintroduce formalised and bureaucratic management practices via the WUA. Access to water is now managed by an elected executive committee, which formally represents the membership, who are part of a General Assembly. The executive committee handles operations and maintenance and day-to-day management of water is through block committees headed by a chairperson who is in charge of ensuring that all water users within their respective blocks can access adequate water. The block chairpersons report to the executive committee, although the way that this works in practice reflects variations in the status and ‘centrality’ of individual block chairs. A

¹³ Male farmer, February 2014.

board of trustees selected by the General Assembly in theory holds the WUA executive to account and a separate Water Jury handles ‘disciplinary issues’.

However, the bureaucratisation of water management and creation of formal structures has not been accompanied by much ‘buy in’ to them. For the general membership there is a lack of engagement in the management structures, with overall attendance at meetings generally very low, often at less than 1% of the membership. Those that do attend tend to be those who manage the scheme through their involvement in sub-committees. Such a lack of engagement in formal representation structures is of course not peculiar to irrigation schemes, but it does bely the notion, presented in many accounts of irrigation management, that the WUA *is* the farmers.

There are also important questions of legitimacy of the bureaucratic structures, raised especially by those who feel that they are marginal to these structures and less able to exert influence. In focus group discussions, farmers commented on the multiple political engagements of the WUA executive, that prevent them from giving their full attention to the needs of the scheme. There is also a widespread view that enforcement of regulations is weak, partly because of a perspective that questions the motivation of the management structures. Even those with a formal role, for example members of the Water Jury, feel that they are not able to ‘see fair play’, reflecting contestations over authority. As one put it:

The coming of the WUA led to a relaxation of most of the rules in the scheme and the farmers noticed that and are taking advantage...They dislike some of us because they think we made tough judgements as we are from another time (Banda’s time), and so

they may appeal against our judgement with the WUA executive. Sometimes they win when they go the WUA executive¹⁴.

In general, the Water Jury is perceived as not powerful enough to deal with the richer people in the scheme: ‘It is not easy to take a rich person to a group of poor farmers. That doesn’t work’¹⁵. Key informant interviewees told us that, although the Water Jury and WUA executive are meant to be on the same level, ‘by virtue of being called an executive, the WUA executive thinks it is more senior. Besides, it has a President when the WJ has a chairperson’¹⁶.

The formal system is meant to ensure fairness in the allocation of water for irrigation, but this is highly contested. Water enters the scheme through a main canal and is subsequently diverted to the various blocks, depending on the rotation, via a network of secondary canals that rely on the opening and closing of gates located within these canals. However, conflicts are regular, often when farmers have blocked the movement of water across the scheme. One remarked that:

When water is in short supply people get very selfish. Everyone wants to fill their field with water. They put themselves first. Some people may even block water from leaving their fields, which means that those in the interior cannot access water. This is very bad because when those in the interior fail to get water they start getting agitated

¹⁴ Water Jury member, December 2014

¹⁵ Water Jury former treasurer, November 2014

¹⁶ Extensionist, November 2014.

and forcefully demand that water be released. This is how fights flare up; people are willing to fight to the end just so they can get water¹⁷

In theory, proportionality in water access is enforced through an irrigation schedule in which each one of the scheme's thirteen blocks are allocated the same duration of 48 hours of watering as a standard by the WUA committee. On this basis, all blocks are meant to get the same amount of water. In practice, those blocks that had not been levelled when the scheme was created (which tend to be those further away from the main canal as well) get far less water. For these blocks, canals are too low relative to the plot level so greater effort is needed to bring the water to the field. Farmers argue that individuals with positions of authority in the scheme, including WUA committee members and block chairpersons, tend to have better land allocations with better water availability. One farmer complained that:

The problem is that the block chairmen often cultivate plots in the better sections of blocks and never get to understand concerns of those in the drier parts. We should be selecting block leaders from the drier sections of the block... Even if you were to complain that the (allocated) forty-eight hours did not allow for adequate wetting of your field, they wouldn't agree to add a few more hours. They know they end up getting more water as a result¹⁸

A key informant working in one of the disadvantaged blocks, argued that it was in the interest of the WUA committee not to tolerate any requests for more water from less well served blocks:

¹⁷ Male respondent, February 2014.

¹⁸ Male respondent, January 2014.

Since our block is more difficult to irrigate, we have often argued for more time allocation but this request has been turned down by several times by the WUA committee. As farmers ourselves we know that they would never agree to that, they suspect that their crops would suffer if we were given more time¹⁹.

In general, there is a narrative that richer farmers get away with unfair allocations and that there is nothing that can be done about it. In turn, wealth is related to historical factors such as original allocations of land, as well as the fact that some farmers are absentees who have ‘bought in’ to the scheme. Perceptions of unfair allocation also has gendered dimensions; at a women’s focus group discussion, we were told that water theft is prevalent, but female farmers often fail to report this because of fears of physical violence. Men also dominate the block committees; all ten chairpersons are men and women are less likely to be listened to: ‘Most women do attend meetings in the scheme, but they cannot compete with the men. Overall, there are more women than men, but the men still dominate discussions’²⁰

A female farmer argued that, historically, water guards had been responsive to the plight of farmers in poorly levelled blocks. The water guards were salaried officers whose priority was fair allocation of water, and their job descriptions included ensuring that all farmers received adequate water. However, she suggested that in the system under the WUA and block chairpersons, their own interests were fulfilled at the expense of fellow farmers. She told us that: ‘In the past we used to tell the water guard that some plots had not been watered, and he

¹⁹ Farmer in block E, October 2014

²⁰ Women’s focus group discussion, October 2014

would come and check and release more water. Nowadays we may tell the block chair and if his block is watered he won't care any less²¹.

In the case discussed by Mvungi (2008) above, the Tanzanian irrigators' failure to abide by rules inspired by outsiders is taken as an indication that they are relatively autonomous and 'uncaptured'. I would suggest a rather different interpretation of the apparently similar material from southern Malawi, which in turn reflects the way in which the 'community' of the scheme is both diverse and not neatly bounded. Muona should no more be described as 'autonomous' than similar areas in many other parts of rural sub-Saharan Africa; those living within Muona are intimately connected to the social economic and political worlds that surround them, especially through their experiences with government and donors and through the differentiating effects of such experiences. Importantly, and contrary to common representations, they also do not constitute 'communities' in any obvious way. The 'irrigation community' of Muona is not only divided by wealth and gender; it also contains members whose association with the scheme is somewhat tangential.

It is thus not possible to identify some 'indigenous' way of managing resources that is independent of the impacts of interventions and relationships beyond the scheme. Nsanje District as a whole has long been a focus of both external intervention, from colonial plans to improve agricultural productivity, to more recent government and donor support responding to perennial combination of poverty, natural disasters and an influx of refugees from Mozambique. The highly populous district (averaging 123 people/km², NSO, 2008) has high levels of poverty and has, over many years, been subject to both serious droughts and catastrophic flooding. In 2015, severe floods were caused by tropical cyclone Chedza

²¹ Woman in poorly levelled plot, Feb 2014

resulted in the loss of about 200 lives and displacement of 170,000 people. In 2019, cyclone Idai, which devastated neighbouring Zimbabwe and Mozambique, also resulted in the displacement of some 11,000 people in Nsanje District.

Partly because of these conditions, there have been numerous interventions in the District from a range of external donors and projects. As noted above, Muona itself has been supported by a series of international and national development actors. There is therefore a complex intersection of bureaucratic legitimacy influenced by links to outsiders and by historically-rooted senses of justice and injustice concerning such links – not a set of institutions that are in any way simply embedded in the local. Those who live in Nsanje are responding to these influences: anticipating assistance, feeling insecure over their access to land, or suspicious of ‘authorities’ that tells them what to do. Indeed, in Muona, farmers were keen to get leases for their land to ‘protect’ themselves from such insecurity of possible government acquisition.

In addition to such influences, there is the important issue of belonging and attachment to the community of the scheme. In Muona the ‘scheme’ is a geographical entity that overlaps with other entities, to which those that farm in the scheme are only variably attached. The scheme draws farmers from a radius of several kilometres, and from 45 different surrounding settlements. As noted, each of these farmers combines cultivation in the scheme with either dryland farming or other enterprises, or both. Some are thus only ‘part timers’, or landlords for which the irrigation scheme is just one of their many investments. Others are relatively impoverished and can only afford to participate in a marginally committed way, especially if their land in the scheme is a tiny inherited plot. These factors may go some way to explaining the lack of engagement in WUA meetings or willingness to undertake collective labour.

Therefore, however much both state and donors refer to the ‘community’ that is expected to manage the irrigation scheme, such a community may well be less meaningful in people’s lives than possible other communities. Rather than being an identifiable moral economy located in groups there is, in Muona as elsewhere, a combination of moral judgements combining in complex ways with different people’s individual and collective interests and experiences.

Concluding discussion

As Ferguson (2006) has argued, moral discourses and moralizing are prevalent across Africa, but these do not constitute a rigid system; rather they provide a ‘moral vocabulary for talking and thinking about issues of wealth, prosperity, profit and exploitation’ (Ferguson 2006: 72). From the discussion above it is clear that the idea of an embedded moral economy that shapes behaviour blinds us to the fact that all economies, whether ‘ancient’ or ‘modern’ are both economizing and normative in nature (Arnold 2001). Moral ideas are always entangled with economic relations and perceptions of institutional legitimacy. The farmers of Muona thus make strategic calculations about how and whether to deploy labour, when to plant, or whether to help out with canal maintenance, alongside strong views on what is right, wrong or ‘moral’ behaviour. Such views are clearly manifested in the moral discourses of fairness, laziness and bureaucratic legitimacy identified above. However, rather than argue that there are specific ‘African’ (or Malawian) moral economies that either facilitate economic development or, as here, impede it, this material suggests that it is instead the case that the moral is always present in economic and social relations and vice-verse. In this case, the existence of moral discourses does not constitute a ‘moral economy’, but the ways in which these discourses are articulated reflects differing positionalities, which vary by wealth or poverty, closeness to the bureaucracy, gender, and landholding status. This can lead to both

cooperation and conflict, but is a far cry from an ‘economy of affection’ existing outside of such factors.

Those who have identified ‘moral economies’ of irrigation elsewhere, particularly where irrigation has a long and well-established history, might argue that the lack of strongly identifiable moral economies at Muona is precisely the result of the peculiarities of the empirical case – here, the lack of a long irrigation history. My point is a broader one: that a focus on finding rules as static entities may draw attention away from how people are differently able to shape and call upon them; there is often quite some distance between nominal rules and how people actually behave (Komakech et.al 2012, Mosse, 2003, 2006). Attempts to discern moral economies that exist as part of some precapitalist order, and a dichotomy between moral economies and those less ‘culturally embedded’ (Cieslik 2016:14) thus conceal how in all resource struggles moral claims are made. The case that I have discussed here therefore does not represent the failure of a set of rules that might otherwise ensure effective management. This is because such rules are shaped by diverse forces, and should be understood through analysis of how different people are differently able to shape, make, and break those rules.

The idea of ‘autonomy’ that is invoked by those who present what I have characterised as a romantic version of moral economy suggests a binary between the ‘local’ and that which is outside it, which obscures interconnections through which ‘the local’ is embedded in wider processes. As I have discussed, this is often accompanied by a simplification of the idea of community that misrepresents how people may belong to varying communities, which partially intersect with location, but also with a wide range of other characteristics. ‘Moral economies’ are not simply there to be uncovered and the economic and power relations that

shape them are significant. Therefore, rather than focusing on ‘norms’ and rules at a ‘local’ level, it is necessary to understand how rules and institutions evolve in ways that reflect power across levels. This means considering the ways in which national and international politics and history intersect with various dimensions of the local. Political economy considerations of ownership, access to and control over resources, labour relations and the formation of institutions in specific contexts are central here and have both economic and moral dimensions (Bernstein 2010, Fairbairn et.al 2014, Peluso and Lund 2011, Peters 2013, Watts 2015). Such concerns may well be occluded by a focus on moralities as essential and vested in communities.

All of this matters, because, as established in the first sections of this article, dichotomous, evolutionist and romantic perspectives on moral economy are still articulated in both policy and academic circles, including for irrigation. The problems of how ethical choices are made, and under what conditions people work together to manage scarce resources continue to be important to policy makers. However, explanations that focus less on considerations of power and complexity, and more on essentialisms, have a particular attractiveness. Why is this? I would suggest that this has much to do with the politics of the concept of moral economy. While some anthropologists have called for its rescuing from its more depoliticised framings, it is precisely such framings which are both more comprehensible and less threatening to policy makers. In irrigation, focusing on farmer management and bureaucratic organisation can, charitably, be seen as a part of an honourable tradition of emphasising ‘farmer first’²². More problematically, it can also be part of the well-documented tendency to root explanation in ‘the other’ (farmers), with less attention to the political context and complex

²² ‘Farmer first’ approaches (Chambers 1974, Chambers et al 1989) were originally a radical alternative to ‘top down’ development, but some see them as becoming domesticated as they have been mainstreamed in development policy.

systems of political, economic and moral relationships within which they make their lives. The formalisation of mechanisms to control and manage irrigating farmers, along with an focus on entrepreneurialism, is part of this tendency. Critique of such narratives may have been part of the bedrock of the anthropology of development for thirty years or so²³, but there is little sign of them changing.

²³ The literature on this is extensive, but key sources include, Gardner and Lewis 1996, Grillo and Stirrat 1997, Li 2007, Mosse 2005, Porter et al 1991.

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