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Rural Radicalism and the Historical Land Conflict in the Malawian Tea Economy

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This article contributes to the debate about land conflicts in Africa and explores how people and social groups claim, negotiate and legitimate access to land and local resources through the construction of political repertoires drawing on history. Empirically, the article discusses a historical land conflict in Thyolo, southern Malawi, and presents details about a recently established rural movement known as the People’s Land Organisation (PLO). The lens of territoriality is used to contextualise current rural radicalism within the history of the tea economy, and to highlight strategies to establish or maintain control over undeveloped or underdeveloped land. By suggesting that land conflicts embody broader competition for shares of public authority, the article concludes that territorial strategies drawing on alternative views of history are central to the formulation and legitimation of land claims in the Malawian tea economy.

Introduction

On 28 August 2014, only a few days into his appointment as District Commissioner of Thyolo, Charles Thombozi had to address a question that had been more than a century in the making. A few hundred metres outside his office in Thyolo Boma, a farmers’ organisation known as the People’s Land Organisation (PLO) called a public meeting to discuss what they referred to as the ‘colonial land question’. In a document addressed to the District Commissioner, the PLO claimed compensation ‘for all used colonial estate land accruing from 1914 to date [and] for the wages for all the people involved in the Thangata system from 1914 to 1963’. The organisation also claimed the right to cultivate 24,000 hectares of plantations’ ‘idle lands’, and demanded a rise in the minimum wage to British standards. ‘[I]f the colonial estate owners shall not be able to pay […], the accrued charges shall empower the people through the PLO to take over control and ownership of all colonial estates of Thyolo and Mulanje at 70% shareholding’.1 Although the meeting was not authorised, hundreds of farmers showed up, and rising tension led the police to arrest several people, including one of the PLO’s leaders. While for the PLO the reference to a local history of exploitation is a fundamental aspect of its struggle for land, for the District Commissioner the land issue in Thyolo is a national concern that can’t be addressed at district level. In both cases, the historical trajectory of land conflicts informs how land rights are validated; and more broadly informs how this validation constitutes authority.

Land conflicts in Africa can be analysed from several perspectives. One is that they reflect opposing claims for legitimacy, between overlapping politico-legal institutions competing for

Conflicts over land in contested political spaces embody competition over public authority. They are about defending or gaining sovereignty, and manifest in the continual construction and reproduction of political narratives in order to legitimate access. In such a fluid process, conflicts not only redefine the rules over the actual exercise of authority, but also constantly shape the boundaries of what is considered legitimate and illegitimate. Understanding how claims to land are legitimated is therefore central to understanding how land conflicts unfold, and ultimately how they inform mechanisms of social, economic and political exclusion and inclusion.

This article fits into the debate about land conflicts and explores how people and social groups claim, negotiate and legitimate access to land through the construction of different political repertoires. Empirically, the article analyses the case of the PLO, a recently established rural movement in Thyolo, southern Malawi. In order to explore the roots of the current land conflict in southern Malawi, the article analyses the historical formation of the tea economy in Thyolo since the colonial period, with a specific focus on the constitution and evolution of tenant villages on private estate land. The analysis demonstrates how current manifestations of rural radicalism in former tenant villages have clear historical roots, reflect the construction of a narrative drawing on the ‘colonial land question’, and are about claiming legitimacy. In the tea economy of Malawi since the colonial period, strategies to establish or maintain control over so-called ‘undeveloped’ or ‘underdeveloped’ land embodied broader competition for shares of public authority. These strategies included the encouragement of labour migration by colonial authorities, labour arrangements, passive resistance and absenteeism from work, land invasions, land redistribution, and resettlement. The historical processes of validating claims to undeveloped land have framed present and past forms of rural radicalism, currently exemplified by the PLO in Thyolo.

The background to the story of the PLO is set in the turbulent political transition of 2012–14, which began with the unexpected death of Bingu Mutharika, was followed by the two-year presidential mandate of Joyce Banda, and ended with the victory of Peter Mutharika in the May 2014 elections. The political transition is particularly important to land claims on the tea estates, for at least two reasons. First, expectations of political change intensify competition for public authority, bringing to the surface latent conflicts and making opposing claims for legitimacy much more extreme. Second, political transitions offer privileged viewpoints on how specific political conditions influence the reproduction of specific narratives.

These two elements elucidate the article’s main argument. The land conflict at the tea estates today draws both on alternative versions of history and on present-day political concerns. At a broad level, claims to the rural space are made via the formulation of specific interpretations of history. At a more practical level, the land conflict is about securing access to contested political spaces. It reflects overlapping strategies, by multiple politico-legal actors, in contexts where public authority is fragmented, to compete for public authority by delimiting and asserting

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control over a geographical area: a piece of land. As noted by Lund, claims to resources are expressed in terms of land; but territorialisation goes beyond this, attempting to legitimate public authority through claims to spaces. The authority manifested in legitimate claims to such spaces is historically contingent. It is shaped by the continual construction and reproduction of political narratives that legitimate claims to the land, and thereby defend or enable access to resources.

The article draws two main conclusions. First, the historical land conflict in the Malawian tea economy has been primarily about claiming shares of public authority. Second, in contested political spaces, territorial strategies – such as mobilisation of labour, encroachment, and active use of the land – regulate the formulation and legitimation of land claims. The next two sections set the background to the historical land conflict in Thyolo in the colonial and independence periods; the following section provides details about the PLO and the contemporary land issue; and we make some concluding remarks.

**Land, Labour and Tea: The Historical Trajectory of a Tenant Village in Thyolo**

The socio-economic and political geography of Thyolo plays a central role in explaining present and past land disputes, and more broadly sets the background to how opposing claims to land are currently negotiated and legitimated. Alongside neighbouring Mulanje, the recent history of this portion of the Shire Highlands is bound up with the formation and consolidation of the tea economy in the colonial period, driven by favourable international and local conditions. Before the establishment of such plantations, Thyolo and Mulanje (Cholo and Mlanje in the colonial period) were sparsely populated lands, largely unoccupied when Europeans first settled the region. As noted by Palmer, by the mid 19th century, the Mang’ anja populations inhabiting these areas were largely expelled by Yao, Ngoni and slave raiders. This initial feature set the central problem that the British colonial project had to address until independence: how to allow, control and regulate an influx of Africans to serve as labour-force in the plantations.

The colonial authorities resolved this problem by officially encouraging immigration into the Shire Highlands of people initially known as ‘Anguru’, later on identified as Lomwe, from neighbouring Portuguese East Africa, as well as favoured internal migration from other provinces of the Nyasaland Protectorate, mostly Ngoni from the Dedza area. Brutalities and much harsher work conditions under Portuguese rule represented a main motivational factor, and explain why migration of Lomwe became so significant. Some studies account a Lomwe population in Nyasaland of over 100,000 in 1920; a number that by 1945 reached an estimated 380,000. The significance of Lomwe migration was that, regardless of whether they settled on

12 The article is based on two consecutive periods of fieldwork in Malawi: the first between January and April 2014, the second between September and October 2014. Empirically, the article is based on 60 in-depth interviews conducted by the author with farmers, local officials, traditional authorities (TA) and civil society organisations elaborated through qualitative methods of research analysis and data collection The historical reconstruction draws on archival research conducted at the Malawian National Archive (hereafter MNA) in Zomba.
Crown land or on private estates, they were a captive labour force because their right to settle and reside in Nyasaland was conditional on their work in the plantations.  

The rapid expansion of the tea economy brought at least three transformations, with very significant implications for the configuration of the historical land conflict in Thyolo. First, Africans were alienated from the most fertile lands and relocated to other areas to make space for the plantations’ development, this being a prominent aspect of the territorialisation of colonial power in the rural context. These people served as the initial labour force for the plantations, while at the same time cultivating food crops in the trust lands, which, after the introduction of indirect rule in 1933, were administered through chiefs. However, as noted by Colin Baker, land alienation never took place in heavily congested areas, and was genuinely agreed by the chiefs, to whom fair value was paid. Indeed, alienations excluded areas devoted to village settlements, gardens and space for their expansions. None the less, the question about whether chiefs had the actual authority to give away other, under-utilised, land on behalf of their community – for which they were ‘custodians of the land’ – is a central issue behind the contested nature of land rights, and an important feature in shaping opposing views of history in the land conflict today.

Second, as thoroughly described by Robin Palmer, the increasing demand for labour in the tea plantations intensified migratory patterns and resulted in several categories of migrant workers. A main distinction was between temporary and permanent workers. The former included workers from Portuguese Mozambique seeking seasonal employment in the Mulanje plantations during the peak season between December and April, and, casual daily labour known as *ganyu*, often performed by women in both Thyolo and Mulanje. Permanent workers constituted the large majority of the workforce in the tea economy, and their provenance and residence arrangements differed across Thyolo and Mulanje. A vast majority of the workforce in Mulanje came from villages in Crown land in the proximity of the tea estates. These ‘local workers’ were those enjoying the greatest flexibility, as their status of resident pre-existed the plantations. Among these workers, absenteeism was widespread, especially during the rainy season, when requirement for labour in individual gardens was the highest.

Relatively less flexible was the condition of workers coming from other areas of Nyasaland, primarily Central province, who were prevalent in Thyolo. Particularly from the 1930s, the Thyolo planters began seeking additional workforce, as an expanding tea economy rapidly raised labour requirement in the plantations. Central province workers became particularly important in Thyolo from the late 1930s because of the tightening by Portuguese authorities of border restrictions for Lomwe migrants. The influx of workers from Central province was regulated by individual agreements between tea planters and chiefs, who in return received compensation, often in the form of gifts.

Meanwhile, in Thyolo the massive migration of Lomwe settling on a permanent basis, together with the dearth of Crown land, led to the establishment of tenant villages inside the plantations. Throughout the colonial period, the right to reside on private estate land was regulated through a labour rent known as *thangata*, which ensured both a right to residence and the allocation of plots for food cultivation. Under the *thangata* system,

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22 MNA. 18918. 2-30-7R/3494. Investigation into the Shortage of Labour. 1950–1952.  
tenants were normally required to work one month to pay off their rent and another to pay their tax, although its actual implementation varied considerably from estate to estate, and sometimes abuses were reported.26 As thangata was normally solicited during the crucial rainy season, it soon became a source of grievance, and pointed to as the symbol of colonial exploitation.

Another layer of complexity was the tension between the social organisation of the Lomwe migrants, based on matrilineal rules of inheritance and uxorilocal marriage – with the sorority group or mbumba as the central unit of social organisation – and the men’s liability for taxes.27 Very often, tenant villages consisted of a collection of mbumba groups unrelated to one another. The British did not understand the uxorilocal organisation of Lomwe and applied taxation to men as husbands, assuming that they held the rights to land allocated by the estates. The social organisation of Lomwe was largely re-invented to adapt to the changing circumstances, and fictive kinship links were constructed where real links were absent.28 Tenant villages reflected the extent to which the territorialisation of colonial power in the rural context – entailing the creation of socio-spatial boundaries to legitimate exclusive use of land and exploitation of labour – generated broader restructuring of political power and authority within existing African social organisations. Hence tenant villages soon became recipients of grievance and rural frustration that manifested themselves in several episodes of unrest throughout the colonial and independence periods.

Third, a specificity of Thyolo was that the combined effect of land shortage, grievance over thangata on the part of the Lomwe, and population pressure made the issues of land and labour politically explosive.29 A main paradox was that land shortage and population pressure co-existed with shortage of labour in the plantations. According to Palmer, the implementation of the International Tea Regulation Scheme since 1933 – which established a system of quota restrictions to sustain tea’s world prices – allowed Nyasaland’s low-quality teas to be marketed profitably, and hence guaranteed a steady growth of the tea plantations.30 However, the growing tea industry faced several problems in attracting enough workers, as labour requirements more than doubled within a few years from the late 1930s.31 Labour shortage was felt particularly in the post-war context. As reported by Palmer, ‘an estimated 2,000 acres [went] out of production in 1947’,32 while in 1952 the Nyasaland Tea Association estimated that labour shortage was responsible for the loss of some 3 million lb of tea a year.33

While exploitative work conditions and low salaries in the plantations played a role in explaining labour shortage (as the final report of the 1948 Land Planning Committee pointed out),34 Palmer documented the active use of what he defined as strategies of passive resistance, including absenteeism, non-cooperation, and desertion from work.35 As a result, many planters had to keep a much larger registry of workers, and labour shortage was manifested as a problem of labour productivity rather than the number of workers employed in the plantations. Such tensions in Thyolo were aggravated in the late 1940s by the 1949 famine, and manifested in incidents, sporadic strikes, and encroachments on plantation lands.36

32 Ibid., pp. 117–18.
33 MNA, 18918. 2-30-7R/3494. Investigation into the Shortage of Labour. 1950–1952.
That excessive plantation landholdings constituted a source of legitimate grievance was also recognised by the colonial authorities in 1946, when the Abrahams report recommended that the colonial government purchase and redistribute undeveloped plantation land.\(^{37}\) By acknowledging that such problems were particularly relevant in the highly congested district of Thyolo, the 1948 Land Planning Committee – charged with following up the Abrahams report – recommended ‘the concentration of the African population in compact villages in areas to be acquired adjacent to the tea estates’.\(^{38}\) This was meant to solve a central tension behind the politicisation of land and labour issues: going beyond tenant villages through public purchases of private plantation land.

However, planters perceived African cultivation of individual gardens – either for family consumption or for the market – as a threat, because during the crucial rainy season it was prioritised over employment in the plantations. Resettlement was meant to solve this central problem by attempting to establish a clearer distinction between plantation workers and African farmers.\(^{39}\) Phasing out part-time peasant agriculturalists was a priority in addressing the question of labour shortage in the plantations. While the idea of incentivising a stratum of progressive African farmers (yeomen) lasted for a couple of years, the resettlement scheme in Thyolo turned out to be ineffective, and remained largely incomplete.\(^ {40}\) Although between 1948 and 1950 Governor Colby in Southern province managed to purchase more than 300,000 acres of private land for the resettlement of African families, little of this land came from Thyolo, where planters resisted selling the undeveloped estate land as recommended by the 1948 Land Planning Committee.\(^ {41}\)

As a result, the issues of land and labour remained highly politicised throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Grievances found expression in land invasions in the plantations, which in turn became strongly associated with the fight for independence.\(^ {42}\) One episode in particular, the 1953 ‘Tennet massacre’, is still remembered today as a fundamental moment of the anti-colonial struggle in Thyolo, and marks the beginning of the so called ‘Thyolo riots’ or ‘Thyolo disturbances’.\(^ {43}\) In August 1953, A.J. Tennet and his sons were believed to have abducted and killed two Africans responsible for stealing oranges.\(^ {44}\) The story was particularly powerful as it was rumoured that the white planters had also eaten the flesh of the two men in order to gain strength. The following day, a large number of people gathered, and police forces accidentally shot one man, who subsequently died in hospital. In the days that followed, 10 more people were killed during the disturbances on the estate. This episode generated widespread violence throughout Thyolo and soon spread out to other districts.\(^ {45}\) Thus it exacerbated a deep sense of injustice, which ended up further legitimating the land encroachments initiated months before, on plantations belonging to the British Central Africa Company,\(^ {46}\) by tenants protesting against increasing rents and low salaries.\(^ {47}\) The rising tension of 1953 should also be contextualised

\(^{38}\) Baker, ‘Seeds of Trouble’, p. 56.
\(^{39}\) MNA, MP 20674. Resettlement of African Trust Land. 8-8-3F/35789. 1952.
\(^{45}\) Power, Political Culture, p. 68–9.
\(^{46}\) The British Central African Company was one of the largest British-owned companies operating in Nyasaland that obtained vast land concessions throughout the Protectorate, including large estates in Thyolo. As noted by McCracken, the company was known for its inefficient organisation: in 1948 it made productive use of only 6,340 acres of land out of a total of 329,353 acres; see McCracken, A History of Malawi, p. 308.
in the widespread opposition throughout the protectorate against the establishment of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in the same year.48

The colonial period in Thyolo left a legacy of political unrest and resentment over the land and labour problems, which had its epicentre in tenant villages on private tea estates. This legacy constitutes the background against which rural radicalism in Thyolo took shape in independent Malawi, and which persists today in the form of the current land reclamation movements on the tea estates.

**Rural Radicalism in Contemporary Thyolo**

Despite the initial promises, and as soon as President Banda had consolidated power by the end of the 1960s, the modernisation approach to rural development, which privileged the plantation model, frustrated any meaningful expectation for comprehensive land redistribution. Plantation-based modernisation was a prominent feature of the territorialisation of ruling party power in the rural areas.49 However, the new policy imperative had very different impacts in different parts of the country, as a study of impact in the tea districts of Thyolo and Mulanje amply illustrates. The tea estates had distinctive features that were not seen elsewhere in independent Malawi. In the northern and central regions, the policy of President Banda was to replace white planters, favouring the emergence of Malawian landowners producing for the market. However, the tea estates in Thyolo and Mulanje proved rather resilient to such change.50 The geography of these districts continued to be characterised by the dichotomy between foreign-owned tea plantations and customary areas, the latter now being fully formalised and incorporated into the new state structures through the 1965 Chiefs Act. The political tensions and contradictions that Thyolo exemplified in the 1950s – particularly the trend of increasing population pressure – remained largely unaddressed, and contributed to reproducing similar political outcomes after the independence.51

A main specificity of Thyolo was that, unlike in the rest of the country (including Mulanje), there was much less land available for the chiefs to redistribute to new claimants, or to the estate sector, to expand existing commercial plantations.52 Land hunger, in areas still characterised by large-scale tea plantations under expatriate ownership, continued to generate grievances and political unrest. McCracken documents that, by the mid 1960s, landless people, under the name of ‘Land Freedom Army’, had organised encroachments into the tea plantations of both Thyolo and Mulanje, creating considerable embarrassment among the leadership of the Malawian Congress Party (MCP).53 A main target of squatters was unused or undeveloped land, including forestland and riverbanks not cleared for tea planting. McCracken accounts for 5,500 acres of land occupied following independence in 1964.54

Spontaneous invasions were a source of embarrassment among the MCP elites because the quest for land redistribution had played an important role in legitimating the political campaign for independence. While the MCP actively attempted to build rural consensus around the topic of land, this ended up legitimating forms of rural radicalism that the party was unable to control in the highly volatile districts of Thyolo and Mulanje. This proved central to the formulation of the narrative of ‘the colonial land question’ and its articulation through forms of rural radicalism, whereby villagers in Thyolo and Mulanje considered land encroachments as a

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52 Interview with TA Kwethemule, Thyolo, 22 October 2014.
legitimate means of redressing inequalities in land distribution. It should not be forgotten that, since independence, tea planters continued to be powerful players, and exercised considerable influence in local and national matters, even though compulsory purchase remained a constant threat, selectively used by the government depending on the political conjuncture.55

While, since 1977, the civil war in Mozambique strengthened existing regional migratory patterns – with Malawi constituting a main recipient of war refugees – little is known about its specific impact on the Lomwe migration to the tea districts of Thyolo and Mulanje.56 What is known is that, by that time, the two districts were already highly congested, and offered, at best, opportunities for seasonal employment in the tea plantations. In a similar vein, the liberalisation and structural adjustment policies implemented from the early 1980s did not bring drastic changes to the geography of Thyolo or, the tea-growing areas more broadly. The liberalisation of the tobacco market in the 1990s also did not have an impact on the tea economy, or bring any significant change to existing relationships between plantations and increasingly overpopulated customary areas. None the less, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, selective dynamics of political and economic liberalisation exacerbated existing social differentiation, which in turn contributed further to politicising the issues of land and labour.57

The transition to the multi-party system in the 1990s revitalised expectations for land redistribution, which once again found political expression in land invasions on the tea plantations – through strategies of territorialisation that were now legitimated through the new narrative of democratisation.58 As in the 1960s, land redistribution became a theme that political parties used extensively to mobilise support in the rural areas. As a result, the transition to the multi-party democratic system reinforced existing tendencies to rural radicalism, by associating the fulfilment of democracy with comprehensive land redistribution. Once again this legitimated land encroachments as strategies to address the ‘colonial land question’.59 Not surprisingly, in former tenant villages in Thyolo, where tensions around land were far more significant than in the rest of the country, democracy came to mean the ‘liberty to encroach on plantations’ land’.60 One reason for this was that the land question in the district, unlike in the rest of the country, was not entirely de-racialised, with almost all of the tea plantations still under foreign ownership today.

Widespread rural frustration and disillusionment was generated by the delays in passing a new land law and later its enabling legislations, since the first Presidential Commission of Inquiry on Land Policy Reform was established in 1996 – an impasse still persisting today. This contributed further to the politicisation of land and labour problems.61 It is therefore little surprise that in the 2000s all these elements reproduced new rural unrest, which once again sprang from the areas where tensions were much more pronounced and had deeper historical roots: former tenant villages inside the tea plantations in Thyolo. As with the ‘Land Freedom Army’ in the 1960s, the People’s Land Organisation in the late 2000s originated from a number of land disputes between villagers in Chibwana, a former tenant village, and Conforzi, the neighbouring plantation. In order to understand fully the significance of the current land conflict, it is therefore important briefly to explain the remnants of a colonial tenant village at the time of fieldwork.

55 Interview with a former tea planter, Zomba, 24 October 2014.
60 Interview with village headman, Magombo, Thyolo, 26 March 2014.
Chibwana, which numbers around 4,000 people, is a small village entirely surrounded by estate land. Over recent decades, it has been characterised by rapid population growth and constantly decreasing land availability for household production. In Chibwana, one could argue that everybody and nobody is a farmer at the same time. People have too little land to be able to make a living, and get by through a number of different activities.\(^{62}\) Given the precarious living conditions, the production of maize – by far the main crop produced by individual farmers – is an essential component of household strategies of socio-economic reproduction. It is perceived as a safety net, to be either consumed or marketed, which allows for a certain degree of independence. As explained by an elder, the land in Chibwana has both symbolic and material value, which is entrenched in the history of the village as a tenant village of migrants.\(^{63}\)

The geographical proximity to Thyolo Boma, only half an hour’s walk, as well as its location across a tarmac road, allows Chibwana villagers to have comparatively easy access to services, such as the hospital, as well as to one of the district’s main markets. People go to Thyolo Boma on a daily basis, and are engaged in a number of different economic activities, such as petty trade, at the crossroad between the formal and informal economy. Many villagers, especially young women and men, also find employment in the tea plantations as seasonal workers during the peak season, from October to April. Work conditions are very hard in the tea plantations for seasonal tea pluckers, and seldom allow people to make a full living. Earning the minimum salary of 560 Malawian Kwacha (MKw) a day for a required harvest of 44 kilograms (kg) of tea, pluckers normally work much longer than the eight hours required by their contract.\(^{64}\) During the peak season, workers can pick up to 150 kg per day: any harvest above 44 kg is paid 12 MKw on top of the minimum salary. Normally pluckers work from 5 or 6 a.m. up to 5 or 6 p.m. This is partly explained by the need to get a higher salary, with many casual workers living very far from the plantations and having to walk every day for several hours before reaching home.

The increasing congestion of large tracts of Thyolo such as Chibwana stems from several factors. They include the legacy of the land and labour problems and the inability of government policies to provide alternative sources of income, and diversify a rural economy largely dependent on tea and peasant agriculture. These multiple, historically constructed, socio-spatial relationships set the background against which the current land conflicts unfold, a topic addressed in the rest of the article through the discussion of the case of the PLO.

### Claiming Space, Contesting Authority: The People’s Land Organisation and the Struggle for Land in Thyolo

In the trajectory of the Malawian tea economy, the historical land conflict can be regarded as the result of opposing claims for legitimacy manifesting themselves in territorial strategies aimed at gaining or defending control over land and its revenues. From a different angle, recent studies highlight the fact that, in a generalised context of increasing land pressure, customary rules in Malawi now play a much weaker role than in the past in determining successful land access. Takane, for instance, gives an account of the growing importance of vernacular land markets in informing individual strategies to secure land rights.\(^{65}\) In their analysis of land conflicts in southern Malawi, Jul-Larsen and Mvula contend that deeply rooted norms and values are as important as the players’ strategic interests. As part of their argumentation, the authors note that labour is usually a more fundamental regulating principle than inheritance in access to land in present day Malawi, and that– as a result – the active use of undeveloped or underdeveloped

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62 According to Thyolo Land Officer (17 March 2014), on average 0.1 hectares. The broader picture for Thyolo is less than 0.5 hectares.

63 Interview with an elder in Chibwana, Thyolo, 15 March 2014.

64 At the time of the fieldwork, 560MKw corresponded to approximately US$1.2.

land is particularly important in the formulation of land claims. Starting from this idea, in the following pages I contend that the processes leading to successful control over undeveloped land constitute an important element in legitimating current forms of rural radicalism; and that this can be illustrated by discussing the formation of the PLO in Thyolo.

The PLO emerged in the 2000s as a grassroots movement in Thyolo. The movement’s inception is bound to a number of land invasions organised around the village of Chibwana following a dispute with Conforzi, the neighbouring plantation. PLO members explained that in November 2009, following the request of some villagers, Conforzi refused to grant a plot of land to expand Chibwana’s graveyard. The plantation manager contended that in the past the cemetery had already been illegally expanded and that this would no longer be tolerated: ‘in the past illegal invasions contributed to significant losses of estate land, which was never returned back to the company’. The villagers countered that the plantation had ‘not only refused to grant the land to expand the cemetery, but that they desecrated existing graves by planting trees on the borders between the village and the plantation’. This episode was followed by a campaign of invasions around Chibwana co-ordinated by Vincent Wandale, the movement’s leader, and was followed soon after by other invasions in the surrounding villages.

For the squatters, the campaign was a success: initially both the tea company and the district authorities decided to take no action against the invasion. Part of the reason was that, at the time of the invasion, the occupied land was not under cultivation. From the perspective of the squatters, the plantation company had left the land in question undeveloped (‘idle’) for the past 10 years, thus legitimating the encroachment as a strategy to redress present and past inequalities in land distribution – ‘the colonial land question’ – and deeply exploitative labour conditions in the plantations. However, when the invasions began to become more common and more intense, the district administration and the police intervened and managed to find a compromise whereby the encroachers promised to leave the occupied land following the next spring harvest. While some decided to stay (and remain today), others were forcibly evicted, or pulled out voluntarily, in accordance with the compromise.

Wandale and the villagers of Chibwana sanctioned the constitution of the PLO through a traditional harvest feast known as *nsembe* in spring 2010. Many of Thyolo’s traditional authorities attended this celebration, giving the movement initial recognition. It is worth remarking that the *nsembe* had the function of validating the claim of the movement to farm the land, which from their perspective was left ‘idle’ by the plantations, and was therefore undeveloped or underdeveloped.

The PLO was able to get established in Thyolo beyond the area of Chibwana because of the initial support – more or less formal and intentional – that the organisation received from both the traditional authorities and government institutions. While it is difficult to establish the degree of involvement with any certainty, it seems that the government of Bingu Mutharika, originating from Thyolo, provided a politically fertile ground for the PLO to emerge. This should be contextualised against the background of the 2011 and 2012 economic and political crisis that was both cause and consequence of the alignment of Bingu’s government with Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe’s political ideas about economic development. It is certainly not a secret that Bingu and Mugabe had very close ties. It is quite common among PLO members, as well as Thyolo villagers, to consider Mugabe as the most progressive of African leaders when it comes to land policy. At least until the sudden death of Bingu in April 2012, the PLO received some degree of institutional support from the district government,

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67 Interview with Conforzi plantation manager, Thyolo, 26 March 2014.
68 Interview with a group of farmers, Chibwana, Thyolo, 21 March 2014.
which, for instance, provided the organisation with a car to expand its membership throughout the district. Thus in July 2010 the PLO obtained formal registration as a national organisation under the Trustees Incorporation Act.

The PLO’s constitution states that its mission is ‘to assist in re-appropriating land taken by settlers/estates in order to end hunger and create wealth for all landless people’. Objectives include advancing modern farming technologies among members; child education; representation in cases of land disputes; negotiating with estates owners on wages, employment conditions and social responsibility issues; and to lobby the government on land issues and allocation. Members agree to pay an initial fee of MWK3,000, renewed yearly with MWK1,500, motivated by the need to provide for the organisation’s operating costs. The organisation is led by a board of trustees, and by a secretariat including representatives of local branches established at village level.

Between 2010 and 2014 the PLO attempted to pursue what they defined as the ‘institutional way to see our rights to land recognised’. This essentially entailed a strategy based on voicing the issue of land redistribution before the national and local government institutions, while in practice demanding the right to cultivate undeveloped estate land, which was labelled ‘idle land’. On several occasions, the organisation sought support from central and local government institutions, the chiefs, and the tea estates directly. Requests for the use of land were sent to the Ministry of Land, to district offices, and directly to individual estates. Letters were normally framed as follows:

the aim of the meeting with the Chiefs was to seek their support on the PLO programme to negotiate with Estate owners on the use of idle land in the District, the majority of which is under Estate ownership. […] The PLO [is] willing and ready to use the idle land during the forthcoming growing season […] You are one of the Estate owners that has such idle land and we are calling you to a meeting.71

However, in so far as estate owners ignored or responded negatively to such requests, they usually did so by claiming that the land was by no means undeveloped or ‘idle’, rather than referring to their status as freeholders. In a letter responding to the request of the PLO for land, a plantation company puts this as follows:

[N]o land […] is permanently idle. Land which may appear to an onlooker to be idle is in fact in active use, consistent with the requirements of good land husbandry and management. Thus apparently idle land is in use […] [for the preservation and protection of natural surface and underground water courses, […] for nurturing of natural and planted forests, […] and to preserve and protect catchment areas with sensitive and potentially fragile ecosystems.72

The territorial dimension of the struggle for securing land rights in Thyolo – that is, the principle by which active use provides legitimacy to specific claims – emerges in more in-depth discussion, when estate owners explain further reasons why they can’t allow people to farm estate land, even on a seasonal basis: ‘[i]f you give them some land, you’ll never have it back. They will never leave, and they will start claiming the land as their own right […] And tomorrow they will ask even more’.73 This interpretation is also confirmed in other studies reporting that estates in Thyolo found it difficult to implement eviction of villagers who were allowed to settle and cultivate estate land on a temporary basis.74 Conversely, national and local government institutions always argued that they were not competent to deal with such matters, as is clear in the following response from the Secretary for Lands, Housing and Urban Development, in January 2011.

72 PLO, ‘Re: Request to Conforzi Plantation for Land to Cultivate’ (unpublished, Thyolo Boma, 2010).
73 Interview with an estate owner, 26 March 2014.
My humble and earnest advise [sic] is that under the current Land Laws there is nothing that this Ministry can do to force the holders of freehold land in Thyolo to relinquish parts of their land to your members. For your information these land holdings are held under freehold status and are treated as private property till perhaps the passing of the draft Land Bill.75

The growing frustration arising from the silence of government institutions was matched politically by the sudden death of Bingu Mutharika in April 2012, when the fate of the PLO changed significantly. Political and logistical support started to fade, and stopped completely when the Peoples’ Party (PP) replaced the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) district commissioner in August 2013. The PLO made requests for registration at district and regional levels, but in both cases the application was rejected. The Development Planning Officer explained that the mission of the organisation as formulated in the application was too broad and focused on too many issues, and tried to hide land redistribution as the ultimate goal of the organisation.76 As no significant result was achieved, the initial appeal of the PLO among the people began to shrink. The ‘institutional way’ was not working. At the same time, while initially raising high expectations for a fast resolution of the question of land, ‘people started thinking we would not be able to achieve our goals, and complained’.77

It is in this context of shrinking institutional support that the PLO changed strategy to prevent a loss of consensus, and hence legitimacy, among the people. On 1 January 2014, the organisation circulated among the offices of the local government a letter titled ‘Declaration of Intifada by the Peoples Land Organization on the land question in Thyolo, Malawi’. The letter contended that:

[W]e the Peoples Land Organization (PLO) find it very unjustifiable for some persons to be keeping vast idle lands for over 50 years without using it for anything but preservation of natural grass and bushes while we the people need it for food cultivation to keep alive. […] [T]he PLO has […] declared INTIFADA across Thyolo District to deal with the land question in a fast forward manner. […] [L]andless people will be working in groups of 9–11 people to ease field operations in order to catch up with the ongoing rains. […] the PLO […] is ready to resume these land talks in June 2014 after harvests.78

As explained by the organisation’s leader, the term intifada was a catchphrase aimed at emphasising and publicising the movement’s struggle for land. The document made reference once again to a general claim for land redistribution drawing on the ‘colonial land question’, while in practice demanding the use of undeveloped land. On the one hand, the movement contended that, since the colonial period, the people of Thyolo ‘have been exploited by means of fraudulent release of “certificate of claims” to the estate sector’, and deeply exploitative labour conditions, because today ‘the system of exploitation of the labour force in the plantations is the new thangata’.79 Conversely, the main practical request was the use 24,000 hectares of land that the movement claimed the estate sector had left ‘idle’ for years.

The letter was also meant to be a message to the government in the light of the forthcoming elections in May 2014. As noted by one PLO member, ‘if we don’t do this now, no one is going to listen to us after the elections’.80 The Declaration of Intifada had immediate political effect, and radically changed the relationship between the PLO and the local government institutions and the chiefs, and had internal implications for the movement. The government response was immediate: a few days after the declaration was released several members of the board of trustees, including the leader, were arrested and kept in custody. The mounting tension led

75 Secretary for Lands, Housing and Urban Development, ‘Re: Request for access to use idle estate land for cultivation in the 2010/11 growing season’ (Ref. No. PLO/1/3, Malawi, 19 January 2011).
76 Interview with the Development Planning Officer, Thyolo Boma, 19 March 2014.
77 Interview with PLO member, Thyolo, 22 March 2014.
79 Group interview with members of the PLO, Thyolo, 20 March 2014.
80 Interview with a PLO member, Thyolo, 24 March 2014.
to a demonstration on 15 January 2014, when a group of 1,000 villagers gathered in Thyolo Boma to demand the liberation of the movement’s leaders. As a result of the confrontation, six people died from injuries they sustained from police intervention, an event that marks the movement’s first bloodshed. This episode generated other repercussions. The chiefs of Thyolo condemned the violence and also those who were more supportive of the movement, and judged the Declaration of Intifada an inappropriate means to pursue a legitimate aspiration. One traditional authority explained:

I was sympathetic with the movement, and I offered my support to address the question of land restitution in a peaceful manner. [...] However, we have to reject violence by all means, and what they have done is not acceptable.81

The chiefs’ initial sympathy for the movement was motivated by the attempt to exercise some degree of control over the issue of land restitution by strategically being at the crossroads between the people, the government and the plantation companies.

Yet this should be understood against the historical trajectory of Thyolo, where, unlike much of Malawi, the chiefs’ power over land allocation constantly shrank as a result of decreasing land availability in the customary lands. Siding with the ‘historical struggle for land’ meant the possibility of re-acquiring at least some leverage over land allocation, and, as a consequence, public authority. However, when it became clear that the PLO intended to redistribute the land itself, once restitution was achieved, the chiefs withdrew their support to the organisation. They started painting the movement as ‘a violent organisation that has no legitimacy with the people, and that is marginal’ or as ‘a movement of few people making promises that they can’t keep’.

The events of January 2014 generated a split within the PLO itself. The executive director and the treasurer were fired ‘because they were not doing what the plenary deliberated, and were spies of the estates’.82 Their view was that they rejected the ‘violent turn’ of the organisation, and instead they were the ‘real’ representatives of the aspirations of the people of Thyolo and the PLO. While this split is significant, it seems that the two resigning members had a very limited following. While in theory they could rely on the support of the chiefs, the split faction seemed to have little support and limited organisational capacity. Soon after the January 2014 events, the leader of the movement was himself fired from his position at the Ministry of Agriculture for being involved in proposing and inciting violence in Thyolo district on the land issue.

The turbulent May 2014 elections marked the DPP’s return to power, with Peter Mutharika, Bingu’s brother, becoming President, after Joyce Banda’s two-year interlude. This changed the political landscape against which the PLO attempted to validate its claim for legitimacy. Soon after the elections, the PLO launched a new campaign to expand the membership and to revitalise the movement under the slogan ndizotheka, meaning ‘it is possible’. For the first time, this allowed the PLO to extend its operations and membership consistently beyond the area around Thyolo Boma. The movement leadership contended that, as a result of the campaign, the membership rose from around 6,000 people in April 2014 to 15,000 people in November. In August 2014, after the appointment of the new district commissioner, Thombozi, the PLO intensified the pressure on local government and called for the 28 August meeting described in the introduction. Once again, while the overall claim of the organisation drew on the broader narrative of the ‘colonial land question’, the practical request was about using undeveloped plantation land.

The importance of ‘active use’ as the principle legitimating rights of access to land was reflected in how the tea companies reacted to the PLO’s campaign for the 24,000 hectares of ‘idle land’. Informants noted that, as a way to prevent encroachments and invasions, many estates started to make a more intensive use of the contested land. This was done

81 Interview with a TA in Thyolo, 24 March 2014.
82 Interview with a PLO member, Thyolo, 22 March 2014.
in different ways. Some estates simply expanded existing production of crops such as tea and tobacco, or began new endeavours such as poultry production. Other estates fenced the plantation’s boundaries with trees as a way to protect the plantation from the risk of invasion, particularly in those plots where land not directly in use bordered village land. Even more remarkable is perhaps the response of the PLO, in a document addressed to the plantation owners and the local government offices, which denounced the plantations’ reaction as follows:

> It is obligatory that any further expansion of colonial estate infrastructure into the 24,000 hectares of idle colonial estate land need to be stopped immediately because we the owners of the land need the land now. This idle land […] should return to us […] to build houses and plant food crops starting this September 2014.83

**Conclusion**

In a global context of rapid increase in competition over natural resources, conflicts over land highlight historically embedded tensions and contradictions in the negotiation of public authority. As noted by Sara Berry, it is important to ‘sitat[e] land struggles in specific historical contexts, taking account of the way multiple interests and categories of people come into play, and impinge on one another, as people seek to acquire, defend, and exercise claims on land’.84 Land conflicts reflect broader processes of social and political exclusion and inclusion;85 they can ultimately be reduced to territorial strategies to gain or defend shares of public authority. Territorial strategies – such as land encroachment – draw on constantly re-invented histories for the formulation and legitimation of land claims. This article has shown that the roots of present rural radicalism in Thyolo – exemplified by the PLO – are to be found in the historical processes leading to the validation of various claims to undeveloped or underdeveloped land. In these contested political spaces, land encroachments are legitimated through the formulation of a narrative of the ‘colonial land question’.

Whereas the trajectory of land conflicts is embedded in history and manifest in the current competition for public authority, their actual outcome depends on a number of contingent political factors that are very difficult to predict. In other words, although the historical roots of land reclamation movements in Thyolo are clearly defined, the actual emergence of the PLO has depended on several contingent factors, such as the initial support of various local actors (chiefs, local government), and the agency of its members (charismatic leadership). These very same factors will likewise determine whether the movement will be successful in pursuing its goals or not, and whether its claim for legitimacy will translate into actual authority. The 28 August 2014 document effectively concludes:

> If anyone has contrary facts to what I have presented regarding the historical truth of thangata, the historical truth of land acquisition without pay, poor conditions of service of indigenous black labourers in all colonial estates, then we are all here to listen and appreciate. If however there is no objection to these facts then I pray that we reach an amicable resolution by ourselves now rather than wait for unpleasant scenes to do so.86

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83 PLO, ‘Demands’.
85 Peters, ‘Inequality and Social Conflict’.
86 PLO, ‘Demands’.
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