

expanding dramatically and demanding more and more meat, which the Kel Ahnet pastoralists supply. Hence, the Kel Ahnet nomads still have a secure market for their products, which are made independently of any fossil energy in the middle of the largest desert in the world.

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Appropriating Land, Worldviews, and Spiritual Navigation

The Dynamics and Praxis of Everyday Life in the Alavanyo-Nkonya Land Dispute in Ghana

Gariba Joshua Awienagua

1 Introduction

In Africa, worldviews/cosmologies, i.e., the ways and means a people order and structure the world around them in a meaningful way to respond to

their needs and aspirations, underpin the praxis of everyday life. This is so because worldviews give orientation, direction, and meaning to what people do and provide concrete expression of their worldviews. These two perspectives tend to interdigitate in a dynamic synchrony. Cosmology is thus a reference point for appreciating and interpreting how, what, when, and why people do things the way they do (Tengan 1991: 2).

In Africa, worldviews are rooted in the belief in a Supreme Being, deities, ancestors, etc., but one cannot reduce the worldview of a people to only the religious domain; the economic, political, and social dimensions equally are very significant aspects of cosmology (cf. Greene 1996: 130).

In Ghana, and not least other parts of Africa, the dynamic relations between worldviews and land use practices are well entrenched in society. This is very much the case with the people of Alavanyo and Nkonya, who are the focus of this article. In this local terrain, land is said to be a “living being” (*akyankpator* in Nkonya or *nugbagbe* in Ewe) that supports and gives orientation to human existence. Nyinanse (1984: 85) and Agorsah (2010: 65 ff.) argue that the land constitutes everything for these two groups, as people say that they do not “live” on the land, but “relate” with the land as with a human being. But the land, they say, comes from the Supreme Being Mawu or Nanabulu through the ancestors who really own the land and have passed it on to the current generation who must use it and pass it on to future generations. This belief also finds an ample expression in a research conducted by Awuah-Nyamekye and Sarfo-Mensah (2011: 2). They argue that contrary to the perception that the belief in the spirituality of the land¹ in Ghanaian society is eroded, it rather is observable that on the basis of cosmology local communities continue to view land as a divine resource belonging to the ancestors and which the current generation must use and pass it on to future generations (see also Sarfo-Mensah and Oduro 2007: 1).

In a different body of research, however, Sarfo-Mensah et al. (2010: 5 ff.) demonstrate that whilst local cosmologies rooted in the belief in sacred grooves supported the conservation of forests and land-related practices in parts of the Brong Ahafo region, today the ecological, social, and economic concerns are threatening sacred grooves, indicating that the belief in the sacredness of the land is not static but subject to ecological and socioeconom-

ic forces. In a related research, Boni (2006: 168 ff.) also shows that in the Sefwi area, land appropriation and expropriation have been the grounds of conflict in spite of the belief in a Supreme Being, deities, and ancestors.

In Ghana, especially in local communities, cosmological beliefs can inspire a culture where people believe the land is a spiritual entity and the source of life in such a way that their relationship with the land becomes replete with reverence, ritual, and order. On the other hand, cosmic beliefs can also be the basis of protracted land conflicts. These two narratives find eloquent evidence in the case of the people of Alavanyo and Nkonya, where local worldviews or cosmologies have enabled the two communities to appropriate the land to meet agrarian, socioeconomic, and cultural needs, but at the same time these beliefs have created a land conflict which started in the early 1900s and is still going on (cf. Lilley 1925: 124 f.).

In this local area, the worldviews of the two groups have not enabled them to solve the land dispute, but have enabled them to appropriate local beliefs in a Supreme Being, deities, and ancestors to meet land use practices and also to appropriate the agency of spiritual agents, such as diviners, juju men and women, and pastors to deal with the vicissitudes of the land dispute and to mediate in the precarious situation between various factions in everyday life.

How these social trajectories or realities play out in different public and private scenarios or contexts is the burden of this article, which is divided into five parts. In the first part, a brief background of the people and study area is given. The cosmology/worldview of the two communities and how these affect land use practices and underpin everything they do will be treated in the second part. The role of the ancestors and how they influence the socioeconomic, religious, and social aspects of the people's life will be tackled in the third part. Among the Alavanyo and the Nkonya, the concept of life designates a special quality that is attained through a harmonious relationship between the people, the Supreme Being, the ancestors, and the land. How this plays out in the context of a protracted land dispute will be examined in the fourth part. In the fifth part, I will demonstrate how locals in Alavanyo and Nkonya appropriate celestial beings, e.g., deities, through spiritually gifted people like juju men and women, pastors, and diviners to negotiate and navigate the burdens and challenges of everyday life. The conclusion will then follow.

¹ By spirituality of the land, I mean the reverence people show for the land as a deity/living being. This is an essential aspect of their worldview and common to many African societies.

2 The People and the Study Area

The Alavanyo who are Ewe and the Nkonya who are Guan, are part of northern Eweland and they form “a substantial part of Ghana’s Volta region, which has an area of 20,344 sq. km” (Gavua 2000: 1). In both communities, land – *ɔsulu* in Nkonya and *anyigba* in Ewe – is sacred and is said to be a “mother” with whom the people relate at the metaphysical and physical levels. In Alavanyo and Nkonya, the people say they do not live on the land but they relate with the land. The land is thus everything for the two groups (Nyinanse 1984: 62 f.).

The Alavanyo and Nkonya fall within the forest-savanna transitional ecological zone of Ghana, with the forest part at its northeastern sectors. Thus, the two communities have access to a huge agricultural potential, though the destructive activities of illegal lumbering of timber and bad farming practices have devastated parts of the forest. Rainfed subsistence agriculture, however, continues to be a major source of livelihood to many people.

The Alavanyo and the Nkonya are organised around patrilineal clans, and while the Alavanyo are dispersed over a wide field of land, the Nkonya tend to stay closely together. Both are patrilineal societies, marriage is exogamous, and residence is both virilocal and patrilocal. Land is owned by the lineage and managed by clan and family heads. Each member of the family is entitled to land, but while men have allodial rights, women have only usufruct rights to land.

Written and oral narratives relate that the Nkonya settled in the area part of which is in dispute today since around the 16th century, long before the Alavanyo arrived there in the early 1800s.² Relations between the two groups were characterised by intermarriages, common celebration of funerals, festivals, and other social interactive activities until a land boundary dispute emerged around the 1900s and weakened the harmonious relations between the two (Lilley 1925: 124 f.; Ampene 2011: 104). The disputed land, which has an area of 6,459.82 acres or 2,616.23 hectares,³ is rich in timber, fertile for agrarian activities, and alleged to have deposits of gold, mercury, and clay. Official records say the dispute is still ongoing because of the land boundary map, drawn in 1913 by the German colonial cartographer Hans Gruner. In the “real world,” however, what is driving the dispute are land secu-

urity, ethnic politics, interference of politicians from the area, and the economic interest of a few in the commercial trees on the land.⁴

Till today, the land dispute is still going on in spite of many efforts by traditional authorities (chiefs), the courts, government supported mediation committees, and church institutions to try and solve it. This is the reality underpinning the socio-economic, cultural, and political relations between the Alavanyo and Nkonya since colonial times.

3 Alavanyo and Nkonya Worldviews: The Emergence of a Life Orientation

In anthropology, the worldview/cosmology of people is mostly studied in the context of religion, i.e., the beliefs and practices of people. Thus, Edmund Leach talks about cosmology as “the system of beliefs and practices which social anthropologists commonly refer to as ‘primitive religion’” (cited in Howell 2010: 129). Also, Agorsah (2010: 65 ff.) articulates that in the realm of African traditional religion the worldview of the people permeates every facet of their life and relationship with supernatural beings. Others such as Tengan (1991: 2) argue that:

A people’s world-view is always a culturally constructed world. As such, it results from the double dialogue among humans and between the latter and their milieu. Nevertheless, its adherents regard it as given in nature, that is, the natural way the world is actually ordered. In this wise, it is taken as the model for the structuring of their society. It is also seen as the foundation for their ethical and moral norms.

I conceptualise cosmology/worldview as a people’s perception of the world around them and how they order and structure this world in meaningful ways to respond to their needs and beliefs. Like all human processes, worldviews are not static or immutable but are changed and shaped by social and political forces, national and global ideologies/philosophies, and media productions among other factors (cf. Greene 1996: 130). Thus, in treating the worldview of the Alavanyo and Nkonya my intention is to see how all these factors impact on their worldview, and how this cosmology serves as a horizon for understanding how they interpret and deal with

2 Wiegräbe (1963: 27); Dzathor (1998: 52); Gavua (2000: 3).

3 The size of the disputed land is recorded in a composite map that was drawn by two surveyors in 2007 as part of the efforts to resolve the dispute.

4 Nana Ampem Darko III, a subchief of Nkonya, told the Regional Minister, who visited the area in the wake of killings, that the real issue in Alavanyo and Nkonya is not land but timber and he blamed the Alavanyo for entering Nkonya territory and logging the timber illegally (Regional News, 09.07.2013).

the consequences of the land dispute, and do things the way they do.

Any researcher examining the worldview/cosmology of the Alavanyo and Nkonya will notice that the two communities articulate a worldview/cosmology based on what they share with the larger Ewe and Guan ethnic groups to which they belong respectively. As such, it is difficult to talk of a distinctive Nkonya or Alavanyo worldview. Central to the Ewe and Guan cosmologies is the belief in a Supreme Being/High God, (“Mawu” in Ewe and “Nanabulu” in Nkonya) and deities/smaller gods, *mawuwo*, and the spirit of ancestors, *togbuiwo*.⁵ Among the Alavanyo and Nkonya, Mawu/Nanabulu is the ultimate frame of reference for perceiving, interpreting, and giving meaning to the human world. They take for granted the existence of Mawu, who is believed to have always existed. Greene (1996: 125), however, points out that while

evidence indicates that there did exist the concept of a Supreme Being among the Ewe and Fon prior to the nineteenth century, but evidence also suggests that this God’s attributes shifted and changed over time under the influence of changing power relations within the upper and middle Slave Coast where the Ewe and Fon were situated.

This being the case, it is possible to underscore the fact that power politics between two groups of people can actually affect the nature and definition of Mawu’s place in human affairs.

The Alavanyo and Nkonya believe that Mawu made, *me* or formed *wo* human beings from pre-existing material and not out of nothing/*ex nihilo* as is expressed in the Christian concept of creation, i.e., *creatio ex nihilo* or creation out of nothing (see also Wiredu about the Akan worldview [1998: 187 ff.]). For example, the creation myths/stories of the Ewe relate that,

the human being is of earth and was “fashioned” by God, whose main task it still is to form human bodies. God uses the jaw-bone of a dead man and potters’ clay which he kneads and forms for the manufacture of a human body (Spieth 2011: 52).

The allusion to the earth (this could also mean land) and clay grounds represents a belief in the sacredness or spirituality of the earth/land. As such, the Nkonya and the Alavanyo believe that the land is a “living being” and that in this capacity it is capable of influencing the movements and orientations of their lifeworld beyond time and space.⁶ It

is, therefore, intimately linked to the numinous. Its symbolic influence in everyday life is never in question, because it is obvious, lived, and relived. Thus, “together with the world, God constitutes the spatio-temporal ‘totality’ of existence” (Wiredu 1998: 187).

Additionally, I also observed during fieldwork that in the worldview of the two groups, the world and the experiences of humans are understood and explained in terms of a duality. According to this duality, the world is one but made up of two dimensions, namely, the spiritual world, which is also conceived of as the world above the earth, *dzi po*, and the physical world, which is on the earth, *anyigba te*.⁷ In the eyes of the Nkonya, however, the expression of this duality is not based on gender, i.e., male/female, as do the Alavanyo, but simply in a duality characterised by the categories of good and evil, spirits/humans, the bush and the home.

The duality is further elaborated by Gavua (2000: 85) who shows how the Ewe combine the belief in a High God/Mawu/Segbo-Lisa:

who is spirit, omnipresence, omnipotent and omniscient, with belief in other smaller gods that serve as agents of the High God and as media through which humans communicate with this God. The spirit of the high god has two components, female and male. The female component is objectified by the earth, *Miano Zodzi* or *Anyigba* and is responsible for harmony, peace, care, nurture, fertility, motherhood, gentleness, creativity, forgiveness, love, rest, joy and freshness. Symbolized by power, strength, labour, and toughness, the male spirit of God, *Lisa*, controls and dispenses justice, steadfastness, pain and suffering, security, protection and all human strivings.

In this cosmic narrative the link between the motherhood of Mawu and the earth is expressed. In addition, the values of harmony, peace, care, fertility, gentleness, etc. are said to be emanating from the earth. I understand this to mean that the people’s relationship with the land is potentially a path to discover how they can live out the values of peace, care, and forgiveness.

In the eyes of the Alavanyo and the Nkonya, the ontological status of the spiritual and the physical beings is rather different and separable, yet there is an intimate metaphysical connection between the two families of beings. In other instances, they also

liefs among the Ashanti and other ethnic groups in northern Ghana.

7 Awuah-Nyamekye and Sarfo-Mensah (2011: 4) have also talked about similar realities among the Brong Ahafo of southern Ghana. Understanding the world in dual terms, ordering and structuring the events of everyday life on this duality is very fundamental to the worldview/cosmology of many African societies.

5 The Nkonya call the deities/smaller gods, *ikpi* and the ancestors, *anain*.

6 See also Sarfo-Mensah and Oduro (2007: 8) for similar be-

describe the spiritual world as strange, dangerous, unpredictable, and fear inducing. Nevertheless, the link between the spiritual and physical beings always remains indispensable and inseparable because it is believed that the ontological existence of the physical beings is intimately linked to the Supreme Being, as mentioned above. The vitality of what is human is always rooted in the vitality of what is spiritual. It is from this interconnectedness that the human draws not only spiritual power but also his origin, essence, and worth. It is a dynamic divine-human encounter that embeds a life orientation in which individuals seek meaning and power as they move back and forth between the fragile and mundane world of the human and the powerful world of the spiritual. Elsewhere, Awuah-Nyamakeye and Sarfo-Mensah (2011: 4 ff.) have shown that similar metaphysical convictions are expressed among the people of Buabeng Fiema, Dotabaa, Bofie, and Nchiraa in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana. I turn to believe that the divine-human dialogue inherent in the worldview of the Alavanyo and the Nkonya is a way in which they appeal to the divine as a “spiritual and rational buffer zone” to find answers for and to explain the inexplicable events/realities of life.

In the world of the Alavanyo and the Nkonya, there is also a strong belief in deities, *mawuwo/ikpi*, and the ancestors *torgbuiwo*. Cosmologically, the deities and ancestors are the intermediaries through whom Mawu/Nanabulu intervenes in human affairs via different forms of rituals. In the imagination of the two peoples, even though the geography of the spiritual world of the deities eludes clear description, their effect on human affairs in this world is not in doubt. I also came to understand that apart from the *mawuwo*, the world is also inhabited by bad or good spiritual forces/powers, the *gbɔgbɔ von/nyui*, and whose power can be tapped into through incantations/rituals by spiritually-gifted people. These ritual specialists are approached by many, including those who want to cause harm to others or those who want to avert some misfortune coming their way. Soon, I also realised that the cosmology of the two communities posits a political hierarchy of power relations between the Supreme Being, the deities, and ancestors and their relations with the people. For the people, this structure of power relations has nothing arbitrary; it is the divine blueprint informing power relations in the visible world between the living and the ancestors and between traditional authorities and their subjects. This explains why, among the Alavanyo and Nkonya, traditional authorities are greatly respected. It is believed that they are the immediate representative voice and au-

thority of Mawu in society and in the daily unfolding of life.⁸ In this way, to disobey the words of a chief, an elder, or clan head is to disrespect Nanabulu and to risk his wrath or close the door to his benevolence and blessings. A chief or an elder, however, can be challenged if he begins to abuse the power vested in him through, e.g., drunkenness or adultery.

The worldviews of the Alavanyo and Nkonya, however, have not remained unchallenged by the socioeconomic and religious changes that have taken place in the society since colonial times. Analysing religion and Christianity among the northern Ewe,⁹ Gavua (2000: 84) argues that there is no doubt that Christianity, in a form that in this area was championed by the Bremen and Catholic missionaries, over the years has deeply influenced local religious beliefs and has profoundly impacted on “the conception of the people about the nature of the universe and about the place of human beings in it.”

This assertion allows for the observation that Nkonya and Alavanyo worldviews are very much an amalgam of Christian and local religious beliefs which in no little way have impacted and continue to impact on the way they order and structure the world around them, the relations between the two, and attitudes about the land dispute.¹⁰

4 The Ancestors and the Spirituality of the Land: “They Own the Land, We Live and Relate with the Land”

As already mentioned, through the connection of the ancestors (*torgbuiwo*) to the land it is believed that they influence the very source of life, which is the land. But who are these ancestors? The ancestors are the living dead who are venerated for their exemplary upright lives and the spiritual guidance and protection they offer the people/community. The ancestors are the progenitors of the so-

8 The works of Victor Turner and Mary Douglas on the nature of symbolisms and rituals have indicated that the experiences of human beings based on the hierarchisation of society in terms of age and status seems to have influenced our symbolic structuring of our relationship between the Supreme Being, deities, and ancestors.

9 Gavua (2000: 3) uses the term “northern Ewe” to encapsulate all ethnic groups in the northern part of the Volta region of Ghana because of their cultural, political, and linguistic similarities.

10 During fieldwork, some older informants affirmed this by intimating that the Christianisation of the communities of Alavanyo and Nkonya around the 1850s must have influenced their cosmological myths and stories about the High God, deities, and ancestors.

cial, metaphysical, and political order and continue to assist in the daily affairs of the people towards the collective good.¹¹ Thus, in the two communities the elders are very adept in telling the youth stories of how they owe the land to the *torgbuiwo* and how they (elders) will join them when they die. The elders will normally end these narratives with a moral lesson telling the youth to live good lives, so that they can be what the ancestors have been.

Through such activities the community ensures the intergenerational transmission of ancestral beliefs, values, and moral norms that regulate the social and political orders. Becoming a *torgbui*, however, is not a given, it is a status that must be earned. To be a *torgbui*, “one must, among others, lead a good life, live up to at least middle age, have children and die a good (natural) death. Death not considered good is one from any of the following ailments, diseases or causes: leprosy, lunacy, swollen body, suicide, accidents, executions, and ulcers” (Nukunya 2007: 58).

Furthermore, in the eyes of the Alavanyo and the Nkonya, the ancestors who first lived on the land are the owners of the land (see also Awuah-Nyamekye and Sarfo-Mensah 2011: 5). And as the ancestors dwell among them – but are also close to Nana-bulu –, they have the power to make the land fertile and fruitful, and to grant fecundity to childless women. This creed is the basis for the belief in the ancestors’ daily involvement with their life. It is a relationship that produces and reproduces the moral norms, rituals, and symbolic metaphors for the living.¹² This is also, why they constantly supplicate the ancestors and endeavour to emulate the moral and spiritual legacies they left among them.

Among the Alavanyo and Nkonya, the relationship between the *torgbuiwo* and the land as a living being (*nugbagbe*) is a twin relationship and explains why the people respect the rituals and symbolic norms that fertilise the relationship between them and the *torgbuiwo*, so that the latter will continue to enrich the land for the community’s benefit. In my

relationship with the Alavanyo and Nkonya, I came to realise that the ancestor theory seems to be given too much weight/importance by the people. In fact, I gave considerable attention to this discourse because both the young and the old continuously kept referring to the ancestors. Writing about the Akan and drawing on other experiences of the African continent, Gyekye (1998: 166–168) has also observed a similar experience where the living tend to give excessive and undue attention to the ancestors. It seems that the frequent reference to the ancestors is a programmatic discourse often employed by the older generation to give compelling foundation to custom and “tradition” and to ground their power over the interpretation of history and cultural practices, which are sometimes inexplicable. The discourse on the ancestors, therefore, is a discourse about power and control over property, history, and persons.

Again, while the ethos of reverence for the land and the belief in the ancestors is essential to the worldview of the Alavanyo and Nkonya, some of my informants have also argued that it is equally true that, over the years, especially in reference to the ongoing land conflict, this ethos has been over-essentialised by some elders and the local elites for their covert involvement in the illegal timber business and other material/pecuniary benefits following from the conflict. The ethos of ancestorship and reverence for the land, which both constitute instruments of power and authority, is vested in elders who are said to be living representatives of the ancestors (cf. Kopytoff 1971: 129; Mendosa 1976: 63 f.) but who may also abuse that power.

Earlier, I intimated that for the two groups the invisible world and the visible world are actually one world in two parts. I tried to seek a further understanding of this belief to know how it plays out in different arenas, in order to be able to analytically ground it. Thus, in interacting with some of my informants, I discovered that the “one world in two parts” theory fundamentally constitutes a way for the Alavanyo and Nkonya to give meaning and purpose to the relationship between the world of invisible agents (ancestors) and the world of visible agents (humans). In this way, they show how both worlds interconnect and interpenetrate, which explains why the two groups are constantly supplicating the ancestors for various intentions. Some examples are given here to drive home the point.

In Alavanyo and Nkonya, when a person dies it is said that such a person is transiting from the world of the living to another world where life is lived as on earth but in a location that defies human rationality. When a renowned hunter or a farmer dies, it

11 Cassiman (2006: 53 f.) finds a similar belief among the Kansa of northeastern Ghana when she says: “The ancestors were first, and are regenerated in the blood of the progeny. The relation between the ancestral world and this world defines the rhythm of the generations. The ancestral world models the geographical world of the living. The ancestors are the epistemological and ethical presuppositions which guarantee insight into the meaningfulness of the world and of the community order.” See also Dzobo (1992: 232 ff.) for an overview of the places of ancestors in African societies.

12 Sarpong (2002: 98) and Quarcoopome (1987: 43) have also elaborated similar views of how the vital role of the ancestors in the daily events of human life is well-articulated in Akan cosmology.

is believed that he goes to the land of the ancestors or to the village, and depending on his age, marital and social status he is buried with a hoe, cutlass, and/or gun. Nukunya (2007: 58) affirms this by arguing that in Eweland before burial special mortuary rites are performed for people of specific professions such as hunters, linguists, fishermen, and farmers. Similarly, when an old woman, who has been influencing major decisions involving matters of her lineage/clan or selection of people for chiefly office in the village, dies she is buried with special traditional cloths and other paraphernalia. These burial accompaniments are symbolic of honour and the good life these people have lived here on earth, and it indicates their status in the next world. It is also indicative of “the belief that death is not the end of man and that when someone dies, the physical body is survived by a spirit which goes to live in a world of spirits from where it is able to influence life in this earthly world” (Nukunya 2007: 17). The vital link or the daily interaction between the living and the dead underscores the fact that life is a progression and an endless movement in which the living and the ancestors are always mutually engaged.

Undoubtedly, these elements also emphasise how indispensable the land is to the Alavanyo and Nkonya. It shows how a lack of land may become a potential source of conflict. Indeed, it may be argued that without the land and the dynamic connection between ancestors and humans, life is unpredictable and will be almost impossible to live. On the other hand, the generally shared belief in the ancestors may also lead to the inclusion (and exclusion) of others when it comes to the appropriation of land or other resources, as demonstrated by Boni (2006: 168 ff.) in his work concerning the Sefwi of Ghana. Boni illustrates that in the Sefwi area the booming of the cocoa industry increased the value of land and enticed chiefs to invent a criterion based on ancestry, so as to differentiate between “pure” Sefwi who could have land rights and “impure” Sefwi who could not. This exclusionist criterion led to numerous land disputes showing that an appeal to the ancestors may always be instrumentalised by actors engaged in resource conflicts for a myriad of reasons (see also Shipton 2009: 160 ff.).

In the context of Ghana, researchers such as Awuah-Nyamekye and Sarfo-Mensah (2011: 4), Lund (2008: 58 ff.), and Tengan (1991: 37–40) have emphasised the dynamic link between the spirituality of the land and land rights/tenure systems and the appropriate traditional authorities invested with power in granting land rights. In some parts of Ghana, this linkage has sometimes turned land “palavers” into deadly matters, leading to the destool-

ment or disenskinment of chiefs who misappropriate the land they hold in trust for the people for personal gains (Ubink 2008: 159–162).

Among the Alavanyo and Nkonya the current generation must use the land with the view to passing it on to future generations. This ethos is grounded in the belief that land is life and as such constitutes an intergenerational heritage whose essence and beneficence transcends the boundaries of space and time. Both communities argue that what Mawu has bequeathed to them through the ancestors cannot be left to go extinct; it will be tantamount to obliterating the basis of life and history. The elders I interviewed in the two communities have explained that this rationale is one factor for the emotional, rational, and sometimes irrational involvement of the people in the land dispute over the years.

Moreover, among the two peoples, land size is often a symbol of wealth and power. This is not only the case for traditional authorities but also for lineages, clans, families, and individuals. The land is also not just earth/soil to undertake agrarian activities but a “living entity,” a mother with whom to relate at the metaphysical and physical levels. An Alavanyo elder remarked: “The land is a mother and we are her children; we call it *anyigba*, also rendered as *a-nyi-wo-gba*, i.e., the great earth, which first nurtures the newborn child in the spiritual world before it is born to its biological mother in the physical world.” Every being, according to Nkonya and Ewe cosmology, has two births: a birth in the spiritual/invisible world and a birth in the physical/visible world. As a mother the land feeds, nourishes, empowers, and protects her children wherever they are. Similarly, Spieth (2011: 50) shows that in Eweland the land/earth is

named *mia no*, “our mother.” She is the woman, the wife of heaven and together with him, they produce human beings, animals and plants, yes, even the earth gods. She is the great nourisher of every living thing who does not collapse, even when her enemies assault her.

The Alavanyo and Nkonya believe that, as the land is mother, it is from her uterine facility that the sustenance of human and animal life is formed and reformed in the course of the generations. The land is therefore the substratum on which birth and burial, production and consumption, gender relations, healing and the consultative practices of divination and soothsaying are enacted and reenacted to give meaning and purpose to life and to the dynamism embedded in the relationship between the people and the land.

In the eyes of the two groups, the land is the basis of guidance and protection, and it provides spiritual

and bodily nourishment. Hence, it is said that “without the land, there would be no food, no shelter, no rituals, no life, and consequently no meaningful human existence” (Tengan 1991: 37).

Further, among the Alavanyo as well as the Nkonya, it is said that the land is capable of acting and reacting, feeling and knowing. As the land is sacred, having sex on the land, killing one’s neighbour or a stranger, or falsely dispossessing people of their land are tabooed actions. When offences against the land are committed they are quickly expiated through libation by fetish priests, lineage heads, or clan heads. It is equally a taboo for the Nkonya to work on the land on every sixth day and for the Alavanyo on Thursdays and Sundays. This is to allow the land to rest and revitalise, while also allowing humans to rest from their labours. It is said that the gods have their own way of dealing out punishment to offenders, but my observations during fieldwork, on the contrary, indicate that today these taboos have lost some of their importance. For example, I often met people going or returning from their farms on a resting day with the excuse that they just went to “carry foodstuffs” and not to “work.” What constitutes work in this context is very fluid and subject to different interpretations.

5 Weaving the Threads of Life: The Paths to Human Wholeness

In Alavanyo and Nkonya, what constitutes life is one major path of appreciating what people mean when they say “they live and relate with” the land. As a researcher trying to grasp the deeper layers of the idea of life in relation to the land as variously expressed in different socioeconomic and political contexts, my encounter with Togbe Anane Mensah, a subchief of Alavanyo, provided me with a better understanding of what life means to the Alavanyo. For this chief, “life (*agbe*) means material security, ‘*nunoamesi*’ and spiritual vitality, ‘*gbɔgbɔme ɪuse*,’ and is a gift from Mawuga to us through the ancestors with whom we have a vital living relationship.” Similarly, according to Nkonya belief, life (*nkpa*) comes from the land and because the land is a living being, human beings living on the land are able to perpetually have life because of their connection to the land. The two perspectives are complementary and make bare the argument that for Alavanyo and Nkonya the land is the axis around which life is attained and retained for current and future generations. As expressed by Togbe, life is composed of two components: a religious one and a material one, which is a central tenet of their worldview. It

is within the dynamic nexus between the two that one attains human wholeness and fulfilment. It is also partly this belief that has sustained the contestations, reinventions, and agitations characterising the land dispute from colonial to postcolonial times and the present.

Religiously, *agbe/nkpa* is attained through the eternal relations between the living and the gods and ancestors. These relations are ritually reenacted periodically. Hence, people’s constant effort to maintain good relations with the ancestors serves the purpose of securing their divine goodness/blessing. As life comes through these close ties with the land, and as the land comes from the Supreme Being through the ancestors, fullness of life is always guaranteed when one is in full communion with the deities and ancestors. Hence, any act that offends them or is likely to produce a curse, quickly is remedied through votive and propitiatory sacrifices so that one may continue to be beneficiaries of the spiritual support of the ancestors and deities. Furthermore, the Alavanyo and Nkonya believe that in death one must properly be received by the land in order to get to one’s ancestors. Thus, the land which “assumes in itself the two fundamental axes of human existence (life and death) needs to be approached with all reverence and awe” (Tengan 1991: 38). Individuals and families always try to maintain a good relationship with the land in order to be received by it at death.

In the material sphere, life means good physical and social health, i.e., a good relationship with one’s household/family as well as with neighbours. The fullness of *agbe/nkpa* is felt when the youth are vibrant and collectively alternate in assisting each other on their farms, helping each other to build houses, and celebrating marriage, funerals, and other festivities together. Also, *nkpa* is deeply experienced when community members greet each other, e.g., in Ewe: “*Ele agbea*,” meaning “are you existing life?” And the respondent will reply: “*Mele agbe*,” meaning “I am existing life.” “Have a good night” is expressed as “*do agbe*,” meaning “go and sleep life.” Similarly, among the Guan, “thank you” is expressed as “*nkpadzi wole*,” meaning “life is yours” (Dzobo 1992: 236). Through such phrases and activities the community enriches the life of individuals and vice versa. As *agbe* involves relationships, it is articulated as a way of living, such as that one’s good acts and good neighbourliness will become the conduit for the constant transmission of more life. Accordingly, an Alavanyo or Nkonya will not say “we live on the land” but “we relate with the land,” thus expressing their dependence and bonding with the source of life. This in effect “is about

attachments between people, and between people and things – and what these two kinds of ties have to do with each other. In short, it is about belonging” (Shipton 2009: ix).

Additionally, when a man has acquired wealth (in things or in people: in the form of cocoa and other cash crops, for example, or in the form of wives and children) and is hospitable to people (especially strangers), such a person is said to have life and share life. Such a man will never lack the blessings of the deities and ancestors. He is an example to be emulated in the community and he is considered a “big man” with considerable networks (Utas 2012: 1 ff.). Joseph Owura, a 73-year-old elder of Nkonya, however, cautions that such persons can easily attract the jealous and wicked eyes of persons who may seek to destroy them because of their magnanimity. Communities have life when the old and young can fend for their families and defend the resources of the village, especially water and land. Life is lost when they are no longer capable of carrying out these functions.

The gift of *nkpa* or *agbe* is also connected to the respect and honour they accord the environment because “the environment shares its bounty with humans just as humans share with one another, thereby integrating both human and non-human components of the world into one, all-embracing ‘cosmic economy of sharing’” (Ingold 2011: 44). As the environment is an essential dimension of the land, any destruction of the environment is a destruction of the land, which will become unfriendly to human habitation/survival.

Any person who has *agbe/nkpa* must be a transmitter of life through the sharing of material things but also spiritual gifts and talents within the community and beyond. Then there is the distinction the Nkonya make between “bad life” (*nkpa lalahe*) and “good life” (*nkpa wang klan*).¹³ Bad life expresses a state of living in fear; it refers to famine, lack of freedom, absence of peace, shortage of rain for farming, threats from neighbours, or a general state of uneasiness, when the social environment is full of land and marital litigations. On the other hand, the community has good life when there is enough food to feed families, when there is absence of war/conflict, when there is good health, freedom, and peace, and when young men and women can meet the reproductive needs of the respective families and society. Against this background, some elders have described the current situation of conflict in the area as a state of lifelessness.

13 In Ewe, bad life means *agbe bada* and good life means *agbe nyui*.

An 80-year-old informant commented:

The communities have lost life because we don’t have enough to feed ourselves, we have lost farms, we are poor, we are sick, and we cannot nourish good relationships among ourselves and with our neighbours. Even our gods and ancestors seem to have deserted us. Our capacity to generate life and transmit it among ourselves is destroyed (Interview with Agya Ofori, Nkonya-Wurupong, March, 2012).

For the people of Alavanyo and Nkonya, who are life-affirming, this scenario is a fault line / weakness that challenges the core values of their world-view about life. It also brings to the fore that good life is not a given, it must be consciously cultivated and guided at the community and individual levels through a healthy relationship between the ancestors and the living, and among the living. In this way, the ever-presence of life within the community will be guaranteed.

What I deduce from the above narrative is that the more the land dispute goes on, the more people will be deprived of life, and the more people are deprived of life, the more the chances of conflict gaining grounds in the area. At a deeper level and in the longer term, the conflict over the land is about more than the economic gains a few are making; it is about the very foundation of existence.

6 Spiritual Navigation: The Appropriation of Celestial Beings and Agents in the Challenges of Everyday Life

I am Openi Kojo Adu, 75, and a Christian. In Nkonyaland, we believe there is a cause for everything including death, no one dies for nothing, even if the medical reasons are known; there is a spiritual component to things. Two experiences took place in my life that I would like to share with you. Once my son and another man’s son were walking home from farm, and a snake came from the bush to bite my son and not the other man’s son. He did not die but got home and was treated. I knew there was a reason why the snake got my son and left the other man’s son, for this is not by chance. So I consulted the diviner, *bokɔ*, and it came out that my son had disrespected an elder in the community by calling him names. So in anger, he caused the snake to bite my son. I followed the instructions of the diviner and my son lived. The second is this, my daughter who is married to a polygamous man could not have children, she either had miscarriage or the child died at still-birth. My son-in-law and I consulted a pastor and a juju man¹⁴ and it came out that it was the work of one of her

14 *Juju* is a fetish, a charm, amulet, or bangle that is believed to be imbued with some power that can protect people and

rivals who was jealous of her success in business and was destroying the babies in her womb. With the assistance of the two spiritual men, we inverted the process and now my daughter has two children.

So life in our area (here he included Alavanyo) is precarious and has many dimensions composed of good and bad/dangerous moments and events, so there are spiritual forces/powerful people like soothsayers or those with witchcraft who help us mitigate/negotiate these precarious moments. I know people whose wives can't get children, those whose lands are forcefully taken, and those whose farms are not doing well, and they have remedied these situations by consulting juju men and pastors.

Individuals in Alavanyo told me many similar stories. What is important from the narrative is the salience of the political economy of power between evil and good forces, which can be tapped into by various agents (medicine men and women, but also pastors, for example), and how one might seek their intervention to handle the challenges of life in the competing arenas of domestic life, human relations, power relations, agrarian life, and land struggles. I term the process or human effort by which individuals or groups resort to agents, such as medicine men and women, juju men, or pastors, in order to gain control over life's challenges and which is illustrated with the story of Openi K. Adu, as spiritual navigation. Fundamentally, spiritual navigation is a problem-solving "device" or "scheme": for Alavanyo and Nkonya it offers a pathway on which to navigate around the burdens and problems of life. In this way, spiritual navigation is political in that it entails the acquisition of power by people who are challenged by problems and are seeking some force to navigate the challenge.

Based on the story of Openi K. Adu, it is clear that while he remains a Christian he does not restrict himself to its orthodox tenets, but goes or gazes beyond that to navigate a pragmatic way to handle his predicaments by consulting a diviner – *afakala* – and a pastor.

In Alavanyo and Nkonya, since precolonial times and very much so today, the relations and impact of Mawu, the deities, ancestors, and other spiritual forces on human activities have formed the most compelling and definitive matrix of faith and practice. Among them, it is believed that human life is not just a linear movement of undisturbed events but rather that life unfolds along a curvilinear pattern, unpredictable and dangerous. In such a world, spir-

itual navigation is necessary to successfully negotiate the precarious and uncertain.

In living and relating with Alavanyo and Nkonya, I observed that they have a strong belief in lineage, clan, and community gods (*troga* in Ewe and *wulubulu* in Nkonya). These gods, I am told, are involved in human affairs on a daily basis and have numerous responsibilities, including that of protecting individuals and groups against witchcraft, sorcery, juju, or epidemics among other things. There are also personal gods, which are said to be guardians of individuals, protecting them from various forms of harm. Aggrieved persons within the community can seek the intervention of a community god to dispense justice, which often is said to be instant and severe. This is why the community god Nanasia is of great importance to the people of Nkonyaland. Nanasia is said to grant good fortune in the form of wealth, success in business, safe travel, the gift of childbirth, and protection to people involved in local and state politics.

In fact, in Ghana, both the Alavanyo and the Nkonya are known for their prowess in juju, witchcraft, and sorcery. On the grounds of this recognition, one of my interlocutors has described the ongoing land conflict not only as a battle over land but also as a battle between gods/spiritual forces of the two communities, a battle in which the question arises whose gods are stronger and supreme. Also, a research conducted by Darkwa et al. (2012: 60) on the Nkonya-Alavanyo land dispute lends eloquent credence to this assertion, as they observed that

some of the killings are said to be spiritually or supernaturally done through the wearing of special amulets, the singing of special chants, and cleansing and fortification rituals performed by the "war leaders" or powerful "juju men" on both divides. These "war leaders" or "juju men" are viewed with much respect and highly revered by all due to their spiritual role in the communities. It is believed by some members of the two communities that spirituality played an active role in the conflict with regards to its double-edged use as a medium for promoting violent attacks during the conflict and as a post conflict peace-making tool.

Thus, both communities strongly believe that there is something "spiritual" about the dispute and this may be the reason why it is often deemed insoluble, and why spiritual navigation is needed, so that the way may be cleared for the "true" owner of the land to emerge. But the uncertainties involved in navigating the spiritual world makes this expectation a challenging task.

Furthermore, given the precarious nature of life and more so because of the land conflict, people of different faith persuasions in the two communi-

can also aid people cause harm to those who hate them. A *juju* man is one invested with the power or the technique of empowering people with amulets, charms, or powdery substances for various reasons/intentions.

ties have great recourse to Voodoo priests, diviners, and medicine men and women as mentioned above. These agents are consulted when the rains fail and the fertility of the land is diminished, or during the selection and enstoolment of chiefs, when people want to avert some calamity, when people are chronically ill and for a host of other intentions. Greene (1996: 135) gives credence to this dimension of spiritual navigation by showing how a belief in the reincarnation of the soul, *luva*, required all Anlo of southeast Ghana to consult a diviner in order to determine who the newborn infant was a reincarnation of. She argues that the deity whom the diviner consulted was Mawu or some other named Supreme Deity. Divination and other forms of oracular consultations were and continue to be of vital importance to the way both the Alavanyo and Nkonya handle the unknown and realities outside the contours of human rationality and yet affect human affairs. An elderly informant told me,

diviners and juju men and women are people with special powers who hold in their hands the capacity to blur social and spiritual boundaries and demonstrate the ability to heal and to destroy, cover and uncover the “secrets” of individuals and groups and to broker peace or engender dispute if they want to.

Nukunya (2007: 64) explains that divination has become popular and somehow lucrative in Ghanaian society because “its operation and success lie in the notion that a supernatural phenomenon can only be understood through supernatural means.”

As part of the professional stratagem, diviners “also keep their ears and eyes open to what is happening in their communities so that they have a store of working knowledge which they use in their divination” (Mbiti 1989: 172). There is equally some form of secrecy around them, which invariably adds up to the respect, power, and honour they command in the community. Thus, their fixity or less mobility is itself a source of power because of the different people within and without the community who regularly consult them.

In Alavanyo and Nkonya today, it is observable that Christians are visiting shrines and consulting fetish priests and pastors, juju men and women when they have to contend with “forces” or “problems” beyond their control as in the case narrated above. While the story of Openi Adu may be perceived by some Christians as a form of “betrayal” of his faith in the Christian God, others would see it as a form of a “religious tactic”¹⁵ that has allowed him to navigate a challenge confronting him.

15 Here, I am inspired by de Certeau’s use of the term (1988:

Analysing how spiritual navigation has been mainstreamed into everyday life in the Volta region, not least with regard to Alavanyo and Nkonya, Gava (2000: 85) argues that “even the most devout Christians and church elders still believe in the power and potency of gods and other spirits associated with the indigenous religion.” The capacity to benefit from the “graces and blessings” of both the Christian God and the consultation of fetish priests or visiting shrines is very much present in Alavanyo and Nkonya today than ever before, as some of my informants recounted.¹⁶ This is so because in the worldview of the Alavanyo and Nkonya there is no contradiction in vacillating between two faiths, because there are two sides to every phenomenon (as intimated above) and people in difficult circumstances could navigate their way to both in order to attain desired results. Indeed, according to some older informants, in the past and during different escalations of the land dispute more recently, both communities (individuals or groups) have consulted fetish priests, diviners, and medicine men within and without the communities for direction and mystical power to protect themselves or to do their opponents in.¹⁷

Belief in witchcraft, sorcery, magic, and malevolent spirits is very strong among the Alavanyo and the Nkonya. It is argued that Mawu/Nanabulu created “bad” and “good” spirits (*gbɔgbɔwo* in Ewe or *one* in Nkonya), magicians, witches, and sorcerers, and one can “manipulate” these spirits for good or bad ends. To be given witchcraft substance or to acquire it is not necessarily bad; it depends on the use to which it is put, for a witch may use his/her witchcraft for various purposes, including offering protection to the family or help other people succeed in some venture and so on. However,

37). He says, tactics “operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep. This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment.”

16 In the words of Meyer (1999: 106), this is equally expressed in Ewe as “*Yesu viɖe, dzo viɖe* ...; i.e., ‘a little bit of Jesus and a little bit of magic’.”

17 During fieldwork, I met with some youth in Alavanyo and Nkonya who told me how they drunk concoctions and smeared their bodies with substances meant to protect them from gunshots and unforeseen attacks by their opponents. The youth equally intimated that the concoctions and medicinal balms have not always worked and that some of them have died through failure of these spiritual arsenals.

the philosophy of witchcraft also makes it clear that individual agency alone does not *determine* social outcomes. People act, with good or evil intent, but the social effectivity of their actions depends not only on their own capacities but also on their access to sources of power that lie outside the individual and beyond his or her control (Berry 2001: xxv).

In the eyes of the Alavanyo and Nkonya, when the rains fail and lead to a poor harvest, the witches and malevolent spirits may be punishing the community because of some wrong handling. To overcome this challenge, farmers will “spiritually barricade” their farms against the intrusion of witches and evil spirits. While young girls or boys may be accused of witchcraft in places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Alavanyo and Nkonya, older women are often accused of witchcraft and doing harm to society (cf. De Boeck 2005: 190 ff; Sarpong 2002: 100).

Today, while on the surface Christian denominations of the Catholic and the Presbyterian variant and the Pentecostal charismatic churches are dominant in Alavanyo and Nkonya¹⁸ beneath the surface and in everyday praxis, what is actually dominant is the consulting of magico-spiritual agents like diviners and medicine men and women. Thus, the expression of everyday religious practice in Alavanyo and Nkonya is syncretic, consisting of Christian and “traditional” beliefs and followers. This religious syncretism has been mainstreamed into the process of spiritual navigation leading to a marketisation of “spiritual powers” which are “purchased” by different people in Alavanyo and Nkonya in order to negotiate the blessings and burdens, the good and evil, and the known and unknown challenges of the conflict situation in which they are encapsulated.

From the foregoing, I opine that the world of the Alavanyo and Nkonya constitutes a localised network of spiritual beings and forces that can be approached by the people for multiple favours, which may be good or bad but of utility to individuals and groups. Additionally, I argue that the proclivity of

the people to negotiate and gain control over the problems of life through spiritual navigation is a way they seek to access power through the agency of spiritual men and women in the competitive environment of the land dispute and other aspects of life. It is also a way of maintaining social balance in living on and relating with the land and neighbours.

7 Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated that relations between the Alavanyo and Nkonya were harmonious until a land dispute began in the early 1900s and weakened the relations between them. I have also shown that the cosmological beliefs of the Nkonya and the Alavanyo are the basis with regard to how and why they do things the way they do. In the two communities, the relations between the Supreme Being, deities, ancestors, and the people give orientation to how they “live” and “relate” with the land; the source of life and sustenance. The Alavanyo and the Nkonya believe that land belongs to the venerable ancestors and not to the living; thus, the living must use the land and pass it on to future generations. However, the belief in the ancestors is also political, for it constitutes a power and programmatic discourse often employed by the older generation to give compelling foundation to custom and “tradition” and to ground their power over the interpretation of history and cultural practices, which are sometimes inexplicable. The discourse on the ancestors, which is very much alive today, therefore, is a discourse about power and control over property, history, and persons.

This article has also underscored that for the Alavanyo and the Nkonya, life – *nkpa* or *agbe* – is not a given, but is achievable through individual and collective reverential and harmonious relations with the Supreme Being, ancestors, spirits of the land, and among themselves. Additionally, this article brings to the fore that for Alavanyo and Nkonya the human existence is not a linear progression of undisturbed events and movements but one that is often fractured by unknown “forces”; hence, necessitating the art of spiritual navigation – a spiritual process that empowers groups and individuals to mitigate the precarious and uncertain through the agency of juju men and women, pastors, and diviners.

Thus, in Alavanyo and Nkonya cosmology, the appropriation of celestial beings through spiritual agents is the essential mode/scheme of human existence. This scheme affords locals the possibility to deal with the burdens and challenges imposed on them by the ongoing land dispute and to negotiate

18 During fieldwork, some of my informants told me the story of two female-headed spiritual churches in Alavanyo – “Come to Jesus,” founded by Sister Alice and “Kristo Nye fia” (Christ is King), founded by Esinu Ntem – and how these churches are well-patronised by adherents from Alavanyo and the surrounding towns of Nkonya, Kpandu, Hohoe, and the cities of Accra and Tema. The interesting thing is that the two women started together, but later had to break up because Esinu started to accuse Sister Alice of consulting satanic powers and shrines for powers in effecting healing and other activities, so the former started her own church. Thus, even within the Christian groups and among pastors, syncretism is very much a practice of everyday life.

and navigate the dangers and complex challenges of everyday life that defines the way they see the “universe” or the world around them. These two narratives are not contradictory but interdigitate to give meaning to life, because in their worldview there are two sides to every human phenomenon and people in different dire situations can tap into multiple beliefs and practices that can save them and offer wholeness and wellbeing.

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ricans (Sebola 2014: 15). The process resulted in unintended consequences, however, in the sense that most claiming communities lodge, in a dishonest manner, claims to the land that they identified. The Land Claims Commissioners conduct therefore the so-called “verifications process,” in which the communities should identify graveyards or old buildings as proofs that they themselves, or their ancestors, once settled in the area. At least two major problems hinder the entire process. Firstly, claimants want to claim only the areas that are economically profitable; and, secondly, multiple related or unrelated clans, motivated by greed, lay claims to the same area. The case in point analyzed here is Mapungubwe that became the centre of such controversy. Specifically, the Batwanamba of Tshivhula (Sebola) and various Vhavenda groupings claim to have been settlers of the Mapungubwe area and descendants of the ancestors resting in the Mapungubwe graves. They also claim to belong to the powerful Mapungubwe dynasty. In this article, I do not ask if the said dynasty ever existed or not but rather address the question if the people lying in those graves are the ancestors of the Batwanamba of Tshivhula (Sebola) clans (in this case Sebola, Machete, and Leshiba) or the Venda (in this case the Vhalemba, Vhangona, Vhavenda, and Vhasenzi)? In answering this question, I will critically look at the controversial nature of the Mapungubwe excavations, as well as the legitimacy of the Batwanamba of Tshivhula (Sebola) and the Vhavenda claims, respectively.

Mapungubwe

The Mapungubwe story dates back to the 1930s, to the research project undertaken by the University of Pretoria that concerned archaeological excavations in the Transvaal Province. The story began at the Farm Greefswald, then owned by E. E. Collins, located close to the point where the borders of South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Botswana come together (Carruthers 2006; UNESCO 2014: 1–17). The discovery of the Mapungubwe site in 1932 was in fact a rediscovery of that place already known to local farmers (Hirst 2014: 2). Tshiwana Sematla (Mokoena) took the researchers to the hill that was considered a no-go area by the people living in that area who believed that something terrible could happen to any person who would dare to go to the gravesites there. People were cautioned through their oral tradition never to visit that place or even not to point at it with a finger. This suggests that the people buried there were not ordinary mortals but rather of noble origin. However, E. S. J van

The Mapungubwe Story and Land Claims**The Battle for the Soul of the Dead, Greed, and Deception**

M. Piet Sebola

Introduction

The South African government initiated the land claims process in order to solve the land inequalities created by the “Native Land Act of 1913” which resulted in asymmetrical ownership of land between Africans and whites. As a result, 87% of productive land is owned by the white minority as compared to only 13% of infertile land belonging to Af-