Land, Ecology and Pan-Africanism in the 21st century

I. Introduction:

Land and ecology are central to Pan-Africanism because of their foundational role in realizing the movement's core objectives: national liberation, political unity, collective self-reliance, and economic regionalism (Mkandawire, 2011). This essay is premised on the notion that both land governance systems and ecological processes constitute the material basis upon which sovereign democratic development and popular control over resources must be constructed. Their transboundary character, encompassing agro-ecological zones, river basins, wildlife corridors, forest ecosystems, rangelands, and their associated human and non-human uses are essential for social reproduction, and necessitates governance frameworks of regional integration not subjected to the logics of polarized primitive accumulation or nation-state boundaries. These logics have systematically disrupted endogenous patterns of land governance and ecological management techniques that evolved through accumulated knowledge in relation to specific socio-ecological contexts. These knowledge and practices have been explored for their instrumental value (and limits) in achieving national liberation and autonomous development by prominent Pan-Africanist thinkers, most notably Amílcar Cabral and, more recently, Dani W. Nabudere.

Yet the structural significance of land and ecological issues have been articulated unevenly within Pan-Africanist discourses. While reversing colonial land relations was regarded as central to achieving national liberation, substantive discussions regarding what genuine sovereign land governance systems across different social classes would entail and its relation to the Pan-African agenda remain underdeveloped. Similarly, although ecological liberation was conceptualized as contingent upon national liberation, a clearly articulated ecological agenda emerged slowly within Pan-Africanist institutions and intellectual circles.

As articulated in the inaugural editorial of the Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy, the agrarian question of the 21st century encompasses national liberation, land sovereignty, ecology, monopoly finance, and gender concerns (Agrarian South:2012). Land and ecology are co-constitutive issues whose dynamics must be analyzed in tandem. This is particularly critical in the twenty-first century when responses to the ecological crisis and agrarian stagnation have

been channeled through the expansion of monopoly finance capital (Ajl, 2023; Sène, 2024; Moyo et al 2019), generating patterns of monopolistic land ownership that further alienate agrarian communities (Sène, 2025; Moyo et al 2019). The practice of withdrawing vast swaths of core subsistence lands, forests and waters from production to protect biodiversity and serve as carbon sinks for the unsustainable economic growth of core imperialist countries exemplifies this dynamic. Currently, between 5 and 45 percent of the total national land area of various African countries are designated for conservation and area-based climate solutions, with significant sections concessioned to foreign capital (Moyo, 2008). Such neoliberal solutions to the ecological crisis reassert colonial land relations in agrarian spaces. As Sam Moyo observes, the North-driven ecological agenda, which seeks "to reserve more African land and biodiversity to external forces," is "increasingly marshalled against agrarian development from below by displacing peasant socio-economic processes" (2015, p. 68).

There is a compelling case for why the agrarian question should constitute an analytical nexus to examine the issues of land, ecology, and sovereign development in relation to the Pan-African political and economic project in the twenty-first century. First, insofar as Pan-Africanism constitutes a national project of popular control over territory with regional economic integration, agrarian spaces emerge as the primary localized sites where such objectives materialize in quotidian practices for the majority of Africans, especially if agricultural development and land and natural resource use are important leviers of sovereign developmentalist projects (Nkrumah, 1963). Consequently, land governance institutions and socio-ecological systems function as critical mediating mechanisms through which the peasantry can be structurally incorporated into national and regional projects. Pan-Africanism thus emerges as a powerful ideological platform capable of bringing together African people to challenge neocolonial plunder of land and the ecology under imperialism.

Furthermore, as Gill (2024) and Shivji (2002) argue, class struggles and the reintegration of the peasantry, including Indigenous populations, are central to redefining the qualitative relations between people and land. Within this framework, regenerating natural ecological processes becomes inseparable from reclaiming popular control over territory and determining how land and its resources should be used and renewed. Such an approach situates land governance and

ecological restoration not as a technocratic exercise but as the internal basis of sovereign development.

Finally, agrarian movements stand at the center of contemporary anti-imperialist struggle precisely because agrarian lands have become primary sites of global accumulation amid converging ecological and capitalist crises (Moyo & Yeros, 2005; Moyo 2008). Both, Samir Amin and Dani W. Nabudere have compellingly advanced the constitutive role of agrarian societies in transitioning towards non-capitalist systems and averting ecological and climate crises, serving as a technical foundation for such transitions (see Nabudere, 2001; Amin, 2017; 2022). This intellectual tradition offers possibilities to break from the epistemological subservience to the core in regard to how we conceptualize issues of land and ecology.

This article broadly addresses how land and ecological questions, which constitute the core of the agrarian question, are situated within the Pan-African tradition. More specifically, it examines how African institutions and intellectuals have addressed these issues from historical and contemporary perspectives. The study also explores the influence of neocolonialism on land and ecological agendas, proposing strategies to reclaim these concerns within a Pan-Africanist framework. The objective is to address an existing lacuna in literature where homegrown solutions have historically been sidelined in favor of Western ideological frameworks in the development discourse and to propose an autonomous development framework centered on land and ecological sovereignty.

In what follows, the second section frames how the land and ecological questions were conceived by nationalist movements across the African continent. An overview of how the land and ecological questions were approached by Pan-African institutions within the context of decolonization is provided in the third section. The fourth section discusses intellectual debates on land and ecological issues. Section five presents the influences and impacts of Western neoliberal agendas on land and ecology. Section six offers alternative development frameworks largely informed by Pan-Africanism and delinking. The final section presents a conclusion that summarizes the major findings.

II. Land Question in Pan-African Movement and Thought

Land question and Pan-Africanism

The ideological underpinnings of African nationalism, which fueled the national liberation movement, were firmly rooted in Pan-Africanism (Gumede, 2017). Recognizing the importance of self-determination, nationalists prioritized freeing fundamental means of production, such as land and mineral resources, from white minority control (Cabral, 2004; Mkandawire, 2011). Thus, nationalists and intellectuals considered resolving the land question a *sine qua non* for national sovereignty (Mkandawire, 2011). This was particularly evident in settler colonial Africa, where colonial regimes extensively expropriated land from indigenous populations while substantially consolidating their own landholdings (Moyo, 2007). Resolving the land question was considered essential for launching industrialization and broad-based development (The Agrarian South, 2012; Cabral, 2004). Progressive nationalists and intellectuals widely agreed that achieving these objectives depended on implementing redistributive land reforms in postcolonial states, particularly those plagued by racially based land ownership inequalities, such as South Africa, Kenya, Namibia, and Zimbabwe (Moyo & Yeros , 2005; Mkandawire, 2011).

Driving the national liberation project agenda were liberation movements inspired by Pan-African ideology (Moyo & Yeros, 2011). These movements included the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, the Mau Mau in Kenya, the Patriotic Front (PF) in Zimbabwe, the Pan-African Congress (PAC) and the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, and the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) in Mozambique. Notably, most of these movements—including FRELIMO, PAIGC, PF, and PAC—adhered to the principle of land redistribution as a prerequisite for establishing a socialist, egalitarian society and restoring human dignity to Black natives who had been dehumanized for centuries (Moyo, 2008).

Among the African nationalists, Julius Nyerere stood out because of the way he linked the land and agrarian questions to broader development. Not only did Nyerere write about the land question, he also put his ideas into practice by promoting African socialism, farming cooperatives, and villagization (Shivji, 2002; Greco, 2016). The Ujamaa program embodied tensions between two different approaches to land and agrarian relations. On the one hand, there was an attempt to break free from the inequitable land and agrarian relations that were rooted in the colonial past. On the other hand, there was an upholding of exploitative agrarian relations that mirrored colonial practices (Shivji 2002). This was particularly evident in the state's role in extracting surplus value

from peasants through unfair pricing schemes and the use of coercion to displace farmers from their ancestral lands under land resettlement programs in the name of development (Shivji, 1992; Greco, 2016).

In his writings on freedom and development, Julius Nyerere asserted that decentralizing land governance was essential for development to occur in an agrarian country like Tanzania (Nyerere, 1973). To this end, his administration established village assemblies and councils. The former consisted of all the villagers, while the latter was an executive committee of 25 elected villagers (Shivji, 2002; Greco, 2016). This reform was an important feature of Nyerere's legacy because it sought to deepen democracy by breaking away from colonial land governance, which positioned natives as "subjects" with no say in land governance matters (Mamdani, 1996). However, these reforms were undone by policy measures that assigned "technocrats" from the central government to manage village affairs (Greco, 2016). As Greco (2016) and Shivji (2002) argue, the village assemblies and councils had limited powers because the district-level government, representing the central government, retained sole authority to adjudicate land conflicts. Thus, colonial land governance practices persisted even under Julius Nyerere, one of the most progressive Pan-Africanists, and his policies could be described as decentralization without democratization.

Furthermore, colonial continuities were reflected in the state custodianship and nationalization of land by most postcolonial states, which considered these measures critical to forestalling land concentration and foreign land ownership (Shivji & Mazwi, 2021; Shivji, 2023). For instance, Nyerere (1973, p. 38) states:

> In a country such as this(Tanganyika), where, generally speaking, the African are poor and the foreigners are rich, it is quite possible that, within eighty or a hundred years, if the poor African were allowed to sell his land, all the land in Tanganyika would belong to wealthy immigrants, and the local people would be tenants.

The notion of state stewardship of land as being inextricably linked to the developmental processes was not merely a characteristic of Nyerere's Tanganyika, which would subsequently be recognized as Tanzania, but rather was ubiquitous in the majority of postcolonial states. According to Mamdani (1996), most postcolonial states—both settler and non-settler states—inherited and sustained bifurcated land tenure regimes consisting of customary and freehold tenure systems. Traditional authorities administered customary tenure to serve the state's interests in extracting

surplus value from peasants (Mamdani, 1987; Shivji, 2002). This land governance model, controlled by the central state, pitted the state against the peasantry. It was characterized by coercion, whereby peasants were displaced from their land in the name of "development" (Shivji, 2002; Nyoka, 2020). Thus, state custodianship of land became a retrogressive system that undermined the Pan-African vision of equality and human dignity, as the postcolonial state replicated the colonial state's use of force and violence against the peasantry (Mamdani, 1996). Kamata (2009) asserts that the state's custodianship of land was based on the idea that peasants and the state were both essential to agricultural production and development. Kamata (2009) also regarded this concept as a strategy to prevent predatory foreign entities from displacing peasants through extra-economic force.

The issue of national sovereignty over land, which had been a central focus of the Pan-African and revolutionary agendas in countries such as Botswana, Swaziland, South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Kenya, remained unresolved at the time of independence (Moyo 2008). This was partly the result of a negotiated settlement between nationalist movements, white settlers, and global hegemonic forces at independence (Moyo, 2004). The entire framework of independence was characterized by a transfer of political power to liberation movements while white agrarian capital retained control of the means of production, such as land. This control was protected by property rights clauses inserted into national constitutions (Moyo and Yeros, 2008). In these countries, the land question of national sovereignty is one in which indigenous groups contest and challenge land alienations undertaken during colonialism (Moyo, 2008). Zimbabwe is an exception because it undertook radical land reforms that challenged colonial land inequalities induced by settlers by transferring land to the black majority (Moyo and Yeros, 2005).

The land question in Pan-African intellectual debates

Notable scholars such as Samir Amin, Archie Mafeje, Sam Moyo, Issa Shivji, and Mahmood Mamdani have spearheaded intellectual discussions on land questions. These debates have primarily focused on land tenure and the evolving dimensions of land questions on the continent, as well as the role of agriculture in broader economic development. Samir Amin (1972) was the first to analyze the effects of colonialism on African social formations. He argued that colonialism established three macro-regions: Africa of the Colonial Trade (West Africa), Africa of the Colonial

Concessions (Central Africa), and Africa of the Labor Reserves (Southern and Eastern Africa). These regions reflected the degree and nature of capitalist control over land and agricultural production (ibid). Peasant production and limited land alienation were retained in West Africa, while large-scale plantations and commercial farms were established in Southern and Eastern Africa. In the concessionary region (Central Africa), companies were granted concessions to exploit natural resources but were unable to establish agricultural operations. This led to the predominance of mineral and timber exploitation to satisfy European markets. These different modes of colonial penetration have been a source of major debates among Pan-Africans regarding the existence and nature of the land question(s) in Africa (see Mafeje, 1999, 2003; Moyo, 2008, 2007).

For example, Archie Mafeje (1999: 2003) contended that non-settler Africa did not have a land question, whereas the land question only existed in former settler colonies where extensive land alienation had accompanied colonialism. For Mafeje, what only existed in former non-settler Africa was the agrarian question, denoting issues related to low agricultural productivity and a lack of articulation between agriculture and industry (Mafeje 2003). Several eminent scholars concurred with Mafeje, noting that the lack of articulation between agriculture and industry was a primary source of underdevelopment on the continent (Shivji 2008; Moyo & Yeros 2005; Amin 2011; Moyo 2008). Pan-Africanist scholars, including Mafeje, agreed that pursuing extraverted economic models in agriculture, mining, and tourism undermined development and national sovereignty on the continent (Mafeje, 2003; Moyo, 2007; Moyo & Yeros, 2005; Amin, 2011; Shivji, 2002).

However, Moyo (2007; 2008) refuted Mafeje's claim that there was no land question in former non-settler Africa. Moyo argued that focusing on land questions arising from historical land dispossession obscures land questions that can be triggered by colonially modified customary tenure systems and state developmentalism (Moyo, 2008). New land questions in both former non-settler and ex-settler Africa include land scarcity, peasants' lack of access to natural resources, poor land administration, and conflict management (Moyo, 2008). Moyo's argument was backed by empirical evidence showing varying degrees of land enclosure and capital penetration throughout the continent. These changes in agrarian structures were largely driven by domestic elites and foreign capital, thereby presenting new land questions.

The suitability and individualization of customary and formal land tenure systems generated debate among Pan-African intellectuals and policymakers. Mafeje (1999, 2003), Shivji (2002), and Mamdani (1996) argued that colonial authorities reinvented customary tenure as a strategy to assert social, political, and economic control over the indigenous African population. The modified customary tenure differed from the precolonial system, in which communities collectively governed land through democratic lineage systems (Mafeje, 2003; Amanor, 2008; Mamdani, 1996). The argument is made that the modified customary tenure, achieved through the imposition of pliant traditional authorities and the granting of authority over land to these authorities, undermined democracy in land governance. This, in turn, resulted in insecure land rights, which are characterized by the dispossession of weaker groups on their land (Mamdani, 1996; Amanor, 2008). Western concepts such as "ownership" and "property," which did not exist in African jurisprudence, were introduced to facilitate land alienation and concentration during the colonial period (Mamdani, 1996; Mafeje, 2003). For Pan-African intellectuals, state ownership and custodianship of land is a colonial construct that postcolonial regimes on the continent further advanced to shape accumulation pathways and generate surplus value for the state (Moyo, 2007; Mamdani, 1987, 1996; Shivji, 2002; Mafeje, 2003).

The unresolved land question represented only one dimension of the many challenges facing the Pan-African project. Among these, the relationship between territorial sovereignty and ecological sovereignty posed a critical yet underexplored concern. If control over land was essential to national liberation, what conditions were necessary to safeguard the ecological base of the land and resources essential for production within frameworks of sovereign development and economic integration? This question, though implicit in liberation struggles, remained theoretically underdeveloped until Pan-Africanist intellectuals began to explicitly frame the "ecological question."

III. Ecology and Pan-Africanism

The “ecological question” in Pan-Africanism:

In his pan-Africanist vision, Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah foregrounded Africa's remarkable ecological endowment and the pivotal role it must play in the continent's sovereign development. For Nkrumah, the continent's soils, forests, rivers, wetlands, and mineral wealth constituted not merely natural assets but the ecological base upon which economic transformation, political unity and collective self-determination would rest. As he asserted:

> "Africa contains about 27% of the total world forest area…we in Africa have untold agricultural, mineral and water-power resources. These almost fabulous resources can be fully exploited and utilized in the interest of Africa and the African people, only if we develop them within a Union Government of African States." (1963, p.219).

Nkrumah's ecological perspective, however, extended beyond advocating the use of natural resources for development. He was acutely aware of the environmental degradation inherent in colonial capitalist development frameworks. He condemned the ecological destruction produced by ruthless colonial extraction, particularly in his home country of Ghana, where he witnessed deforestation driven by the British colonial economy's export-oriented cocoa and timber production. This dual position, affirming the ecological foundations of Africa's sovereign development while denouncing the ecological destruction wrought by imperialist capitalism, was common across the pan-African movement (Cabral,1964; Nkrumah, 1963; Rodney, 1972; Nabudere, 1977; Sankara, 1988). For Nkrumah, as for many contemporary Pan-African intellectuals, ecological liberation was inseparable from the broader pursuit of national liberation.

Nonetheless, explicit and systematic engagement with the "ecological question" remained underdeveloped during the height of the pan-African and national liberation movements. This analytical gap contributed to a broader underestimation of the ecological agenda embedded within colonial rule. While pan-Africanist thinkers recognized environmental destruction and criticized colonial conservation laws as instruments of land dispossession (Nkrumah, 1963; Nabudere, 1977; Shivji, 1987), they often overlooked the broader role colonial environmentalism played in organizing production systems, including labor regimes and land-use patterns, and integrate African territories into the global capitalist economy (Ibo, 1993; Ece, 2008; Kwashirai, 2009; Lunstrum, 2015). In many African countries, ecological protection didn't just emerge as

necessity to preserve wildlife, forests and biodiversity. Rather, it was deeply shaped by racial colonial land ownership structures, economy-driven land uses, and demand for African labor (ibid). This gap has often obscured the political dimensions of ecological discourse and planning, particularly within debates over environmental conservation, and their implications for national liberation and Pan-Africanist projects. Nevertheless, an ecological consciousness and agenda gradually emerged since the 1960s, crystalizing more clearly over the past two decades, and manifesting in different forms and degrees across Pan-African political institutions, intellectual debates and revolutionary thought.

Ecological question in Pan-Africanist thoughts:

Pan-Africanist intellectuals were unequivocal that ecological liberation was predicated on national liberation, yet in their Pan-Africanist visions, the question of how to safeguard the ecological basis of sovereign development remained underdeveloped. Nonetheless, through their engagement with pressing national questions, analysis of postcolonial social formations, and anti-imperialist thoughts have developed an analytical foundation with strong implications on land governance and socio-ecological systems providing a critical foundation for integrating ecological concerns into Pan-Africanist discourse.

Dar Es Salam debates and socio-ecological analysis

The Dar Es Salam debates of the 1970s and 1980s offered an interesting entry point for socio-ecological analysis. The ddebates centered on the nature of imperialism, neocolonial state and class formations and transition to socialism and ecological concerns remained marginal (Tandon, 1982; Nabolsy, 2023). Yet the discussions surrounding Ujamaa in Tanzania, African socialism, and communal forms of social organization provided fertile ground for reflecting on the reproduction of natural processes and endogenous agrarian systems capable of sustaining the socio-ecological relations that underpin life and sovereign development. This was particularly true given that the national agrarian question, along with new land and labor relations, had been central to socialist debates and visions of socially oriented development (Shivji, 1976; 2003; Amanor, 2008).

The Tanzanian experience under Pan-Africanist leader Julius K. Nyerere provides a critical analytical site for examining how socialist development articulated with regional integration planning under the unrelenting grip of imperialism, as well as with the socio-ecological dynamics generated by state-directed agrarian and communal organizational transformations. During this period, Tanzania simultaneously pursued postcolonial nation-state formation through socialist experimentation and membership in the East African Federation, while undergoing agrarian transitions that fundamentally reconfigured the ecological management practices integral to endogenous agrarian systems. Pastoralism and indigenous farming techniques exemplify such systems subjected to transformation.

A socio-ecological analysis could critically interrogate the World Bank's agrarian modernization prescriptions, which profoundly shaped Tanzania's socialist trajectory while systematically displacing established agrarian systems (Ake, 1996; Nabudere, 1982). This dynamic manifested conspicuously in the coercive sedentarization of pastoralist populations and subsequent privatization of rangelands. Both processes were rationalized through environmental conservation and tourism-oriented economic development imperatives under the 1964 Range Development and Management Act (Shivji, 1976; 2023; Sène, 2025). These policies contributed to the gradual dismantling of Tanzanian pastoralism, an agrarian system that had sustained rangeland ecological resilience over centuries (Shivji, 1976; Smith, 1992; The Land Gap Report, 2022). Furthermore, the incorporation of capitalist agricultural technologies, particularly chemical fertilizers inherently destructive to natural regeneration capacities, systematically undermined ecological management practices integral to endogenous agrarian systems (ibid).

It is also important to note that the Range Development and Management Act, which increased conservancies under Tanzania's socialist experimentation, was justified by logics of neocolonial eco-fascism. This sparked a debate between pan-Africanist thinkers (including Marxist–Leninists), Julius Nyerere, Walter Rodney, and Issa Shivji, about the tradeoffs of environmental conservation, economic development, and self-determination made by the new African postcolonial states on the backs of the Indigenous and peasantry. The tendency of conservation and development projects was to decimate the peasantry in favor of international investors, hunting companies and tour operators (Shivji, 2023). In 1972, Walter Rodney called attention to

wildlife conservation as a new form of imperialist exploitation and domination within the global capitalist economy. In his essay, 'Problems of the Third World,' Rodney (1972/2022, p. 225) wrote:

> "Just as in Latin America there used to be 'Banana Republics,' so international imperialism was threatening to transform Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania into 'Wildlife Republics' […]Incidentally, it is not at all true that it is the indigenous people who are responsible for such diminution in the wildlife population as has occurred in recent years, because groups like the Maasai have always coexisted with the lions and wild game. And in recent times, the problem of game conservation is of far lesser magnitude than that of human development and that of the survival and creativity of peoples of the region"

The theoretical foundations for addressing the ecological question that emerged within Pan-African intellectual debates were significantly advanced by revolutionary thinkers who situated their ecological analysis explicitly within anti-imperialist frameworks.

Tracing the Pan-Africanist anti-imperialist ecological thoughts

Ecological concerns have always been embedded in the anti-imperialist thought of many African revolutionaries with the ecological question at the forefront of their politics. There is no greater reminder of this than Thomas Sankara and Amílcar Cabral. Sankara's famous speech at the International Conference on Trees and Forests in Paris on February 5, 1986, articulated an explicitly anti-imperialist ecological politics. Declaring that "imperialism is the arsonist of our forests and savannas," Sankara theorized the onslaught of capitalist imperialist forces as leading directly to the plunder of nature. He was unequivocal in his claim that the struggle to protect nature was first and foremost a political battle:

> Colonial plunder has decimated our forests without the slightest thought of replenishing them for our tomorrows. The unpunished disruption of the biosphere by savage and murderous forays on the land and in the air continues [...] We therefore wish to affirm that the battle against the encroachment of the desert is a battle to establish a balance between man, nature and society. As such it is a political battle above all, and not an act of fate. (Sankara, 2007, p. 275)

Similarly, Guinean revolutionary Amílcar Cabral developed an ecological theory that positioned "[man as] an integral part of Nature" (IICT & INEP, 1988, quoted in deGrassi, 2023, p. 1568).

DeGrassi (2023) demonstrates how Cabral's anti-colonial and revolutionary struggle grappled with "developing environmental, non-reductive, spatialized, non-ontological, and anticolonial analyses, incorporating key issues of shifting cultivation, the state, colonialism, and race" (p. 1580). Cabral's ecological theory, according to deGrassi, can be recognized as an early form of engaged analysis subsequently termed Black political ecology and African-centered political ecology. Having witnessed the connections between Portuguese colonialism and land degradation, particularly the imposition of monoculture on African agrarian systems for export crops, Cabral grounded his environmentalism in the question of national liberation. He understood the ecological wisdom of African farming practices in relation to their environment but recognized that colonialism had subjected African farmers to ecologically destructive practices. To Cabral, "farmers do not willfully destroy their land; they are the tools through which society operates" (quoted in deGrassi, 2023, p. 1570). This insight owed much to his training and experience as an agronomist, which enabled him to comprehend the socio-ecological foundations of agrarian systems in ways that many of his contemporaries did not.

In more recent decades, Pan-Africanist development critics and theorists have also foregrounded the ecological question in their political theory and analysis of capitalism. Among the most prominent were Samir Amin and Dani W. Nabudere, whose ecological thought emerged from their inquiry into the devastating consequences of industrial and capitalist agriculture on both human and non-human worlds. Both theorized the polarizing world system of value and waste accumulation as the basis of ecological destruction. While Amin's groundbreaking analysis of global capitalism did not frame his ecological thought in conventional political ecology and nature conservation discourses, the question was unequivocal in his analysis.

Ajl (2021) engaged Amin's theories of ecology in his critique of economic growth, especially through the expansion of industrial agriculture in Africa. Amin's examination of ecological forms of agriculture underpinned his prominent theory of delinking from the priorities of global capitalist and imperialist systems. As Ajl explains:

> His analysis of accumulation showed an awareness of the ecological consequences of agricultural modernization and of capitalism. Building from work on how the structure of prices prevented the protection of Senegal's soil from the consequences of monoculture

> peanut farming [...] He furthermore argues that defending the environment meant abandoning capitalism and its metrics of valuation, an argument for which he later found proof in the notion of the ecological footprint. (p. 86)

In a similar spirit, Nabudere, a prominent critic of imperial capitalism, traced the evolution of industrial agriculture in Africa and its destructive effects on ecology and agrarian socio-economic systems. Like Amin, Nabudere considered the key role of agrarian societies in transitioning to non-capitalist systems and averting ecological and climate crises. He argued that African Indigenous knowledge systems and agroecology should constitute the ideological and technical basis of these transitions from capitalism:

> "Indigenous knowledge systems or traditional knowledge systems are in general low-input agricultural systems which are based on an extensive and applied knowledge about natural processes which preserve life and the animal world. (p. 143) It is these systems that have enabled millions of people to survive the most hostile environments while protecting the land and resources.

While these intellectual interventions established crucial theoretical frameworks for linking ecology to anti-imperialist struggle, the articulation of land and ecological agendas within Pan-African political institutions followed an uneven trajectory. **I.V. Land and ecological agendas in Pan-African Political Institutions**

At the dawn of the independence era, after decades of colonial exploitation, newly sovereign African states sought to reclaim their right to autonomous development planning and implementation. Pan-African political institutions, most notably the Organization of African Unity (OAU), placed Africa's right to development at the center of continental agendas. Industrialization, regional integration, technological advancement, and agricultural modernization were conceived as essential pathways through which African states could overcome the structural underdevelopment imposed by colonialism.

Yet the land and ecological questions received uneven attention at the continental level. The land question, in particular, received less attention than ecological issues, despite being one of the main issues hindering social and economic progress and the primary basis for launching

liberation struggles in former settler colonies. Some analysts argued that this was because reactionary elements had seized control of most countries' governments, allowing neocolonialism to dictate economic policies (Shivji, 2008; Wuyts, 2008). This pattern was certainly evident in the nature conservation agenda that emerged during this period.

The 1961 Symposium on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources in Modern African States (Arusha Conference), convened by the IUCN under the auspices of UNESCO and the Food and Agriculture Organization, was strategically designed to influence emergent government policies in ways that would ensure external control over protected areas and wildlife resources for decades to come. The African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, adopted by the OAU in 1968, represented the first explicit articulation of an ecological agenda from a Pan-Africanist political institution. Yet this continent-wide agreement functionally reproduced and expanded the wildlife and biodiversity conservation regimes established by colonial administrations. The very regimes that had precipitated sweeping land and resource dispossessions during direct colonial rule. During this period, meaningful opposition to this ecological agenda, which perpetuated colonial environmentalism under new institutional arrangements, was largely absent within even the more radical sections of the Pan-Africanist movement.

The Lagos Plan of Action: Towards Sovereign Development and Ecological Integration

This neglect began to shift at the turn of the 1980s. The Lagos Plan of Action (LPA), adopted in 1980, constituted one of the most comprehensive and sovereignty-oriented development agendas advanced by the OAU. The LPA's proposal was to encourage the protection of African natural resources and the promotion of local processing as a strategy to reduce the unequal exchange between Africa and the Global North. Dependency theorists argued that this exchange was heavily skewed in favor of the Global North (OAU, 1980). Furthermore, the LPA envisioned establishing African multinational institutions to administer and provide technical guidance on natural resource governance, thereby reducing foreign ownership and control of natural resources. In agriculture, peasant farmers and cooperatives were critical to achieving food self-sufficiency through state intervention, which included providing subsidies to farmers (OAU,

1980). These perspectives on the broader political economy reflected a persistent desire for self-determination and sovereignty guided by Pan-Africanism (Wuyts, 2008).

It was within this sovereign-development framework, that Pan-African leadership explicitly acknowledged the necessity of integrating environmental protection into the continent's development strategy. The LPA included a dedicated section outlining national-level guidelines for the formulation of "policies, strategies, institutions and programmes for the protection of the environment," alongside a regional directive calling for the "establishment of an intergovernmental committee on environmental matters" (1980, p. 74). This reorientation occurred in the aftermath of a devastating decade marked by severe and prolonged droughts in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa—crises that exposed the deepening vulnerability of African socio-ecological systems to climatic variability and underscored the material threats environmental degradation posed to sovereign development trajectories.

The integration of an explicit ecological agenda into the LPA framework, directly linking it to Africa's right to "self-reliance (national and collective) and self-sustaining development" (Ake, 1996, p. 23), marked a significant analytical and political departure. This strategic positioning imbued the ecological question with the political content it had previously been denied, anchoring it firmly within the discourse of sovereign development. In doing so, it challenged the depoliticizing tendency of mainstream environmentalism championed by Western institutions, which systematically stripped ecological concerns of their structural dimensions, thereby facilitating their appropriation in service of capital accumulation. This formulation also represented a decisive break from the Western-led conservation conventions the OAU had previously endorsed.

Furthermore, by situating the ecological question alongside African leaders' analysis of the continent's "exploitation carried out through neo-colonialist external forces which seek to influence the economic policies and directions of African states," the LPA framework rejected the notion that socio-ecological crises were merely the outcome of adverse environmental conditions unfolding in a historical and political-economic vacuum. Instead, it positioned these crises as products of deep structural distortions arising from a century of colonial and neo-

colonial impositions, distortions perpetuated by a global economic order that systematically degraded Africa's ecological base while undermining the productive capacity of African states to withstand environmental shocks and regenerate natural ecological processes. This framing embedded the ecological question within the broader anti-imperialist struggle to reclaim control over Africa's productive forces and achieve genuine self-determination. As such, it constituted a radical departure from imperialist environmentalism, which depoliticized ecological issues by reducing them to technical or managerial challenges while obscuring the processes of Western-led capital accumulation that precipitates ecological collapse.

The LPA's ecological attentiveness deepened later in the decade through the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in the African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes (AAF-SAP) of 1989. In a direct critique of the austerity-driven, export-oriented Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), the AAF-SAP emphasized that environmental degradation—threatening the long-term viability of African development—was a result of natural and man-made factors, including externally imposed restructuring of Africa's economy and its patterns of production and consumption. In this framework, ecological protection was not framed as a depoliticized issue, as it often is in mainstream environmental discourses that rely on a priori concepts of radical human-nature separation (Ajl, 2023). Instead, it was understood as an integral part of Africa's sovereign development trajectory, grounded in the human use of nature and the reproduction of resilient socio-ecological systems. Prominent pan-African economists influenced the development of this alternative framework, including Samir Amin and Thandika Mkandawire, which aimed to offer a human-centered and democratic development path for the continent. It placed great emphasis on the full mobilization and efficient utilization of domestic resources, as well as the need to establish an enabling environment for sustainable development (AAF-SAP, 1980, p. 5).

Undoubtedly, the LPA and AA-SFP demonstrated a profound understanding of the international political economy and took an anti-imperialist position. However, the authors of the blueprint underestimated the relentless nature of imperialism, especially regarding land. In our view, the lack of an explicit focus on land—a central feature of the Pan-African project during liberation struggles—explains why many postcolonial African states have failed to resolve land questions and why neoliberal policies have ascended. Another key limitation of the LPA was its proposed

mechanism for financing development. While the establishment of African multinational institutions was commendable, the proposal to fund development in the natural resource sector through foreign entities was akin to inviting semi-colonialism through land grabs. Evidence indicating the acquisition of land for agricultural and environmental purposes in recent decades supports this assertion (Moyo et al., 2019; Sène, 2025; Fairhead et al., 2012). Consequently, these observations suggest that the LPA exhibited schizophrenic characteristics. Similarly, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), adopted by the African Union at the turn of the millennium, has exhibited weaknesses similar to the LPA's reliance on external actors to finance critical components of continental development (Saruchera & Amoweh, 2004).

These Pan-African frameworks stood in direct opposition to the Western agendas emanating from Bretton Woods institutions and the United Nations. The subsequent consolidation of neoliberal capitalism facilitated the emergence of a hegemonic global environmental discourse and land governance structured by the interests of transnational capital. Simultaneously, the structural crises afflicting advanced capitalist economies in the late Cold War period generated new modalities of imperial expansion, what scholars have variously theorized as "green grabbing," "ecological imperialism," or "green colonialism", through which Northern states and capital sought control over land, forests, water, and biodiversity in the Global South under the legitimating discourse of environmental protection.

V. Western agendas on land and ecology in the 21st century

Western agendas on land have not only transformed land tenure systems, but also reconfigured agricultural systems by increasing export-oriented production, thereby heightening food insecurity (Moyo 2007; Mafeje 2003). These agendas initially introduced under colonialism have been reinforced under neoliberal policies (Amanor, 2008; Moyo, 2007). Under neoliberalism, many African countries have intensified land registration and titling to encourage agricultural commercialization (Moyo, 2007; Amanor, 2008).

However, these efforts to liberalize customary land tenure predate neoliberalism and were first implemented during colonialism to modernize agricultural systems (Amanor, 2008). From the 1960s to the 1970s, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) promoted

neoclassical orthodoxy, prioritizing individualized tenure and advancing it as a land governance model for African countries (Mafeje, 2003). These initiatives failed to commercialize agriculture and instead brought about social conflicts and differentiation, especially in Kenya (Wuyts, 2009; Amanor, 2008). For neoliberal proponents, land registration and issuance of private titles should lead to secure land rights for peasants, although emerging evidence from multiple countries shows that it has significantly whittled down customary land (Amanor 2008). This occurs as medium- to large-scale commercial farmers consolidate and convert customary lands for commercial use (Moyo, 2007; Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003; Moyo et al., 2019). The transformation of agrarian structures is driven by the rise of formal and informal land markets, particularly in countries such as the Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Zambia (Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003; Amanor, 2008). Although the emergence of land markets under neoliberalism is partly driven by factors such as population growth and urbanization, the replacement of traditional tenure systems with foreign notions of land governance has also been a key factor.

These land tenure reforms have reconfigured agrarian structures in former settler and non-settler regions of Africa, raising questions about land similar to those of the colonial era (Moyo, 2007, 2016). Recent decades have witnessed a renewed acquisition of land on a continental scale, triggered by neoliberal land policies and the 2007–2008 food, energy, and economic crises (Moyo et al. 2019; Chambati et al. 2018), appropriately labeled the "second and third scramble for African natural resources," respectively (see Moyo, Yeros, and Jha, 2012). The continent was an easy target due to the liberalization of the land sector and the erroneous external belief that the continent had vast tracts of underutilized land (Moyo et al., 2019). Due to resistance from social movements, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and African governments have shifted their focus to promoting "responsible investments" (FAO, 2012). The main instruments used to promote "responsible investments" are contract farming and the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) principle, promoted under the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT) framework. However, the FPIC principle has been criticized for ignoring power asymmetries arising from the different class positions occupied by foreign capital, domestic elites, the state, and the peasantry within the political and agrarian landscape, which often disadvantages the latter (Chambati et al., 2018; Moyo et al., 2019). Even in contexts where FPIC is operational, such as in Mozambique, evidence suggests that capital tends to displace the peasantry (Moyo et

al., 2019; Hall et al., 2017). Thus, the guidelines have failed to stop the neoliberal onslaught on land and natural resources, reversing some of the gains achieved during the post-independence developmental era. Land tenure reform initiatives have been observed to threaten the sovereignty of African nations and the livelihoods of individuals dependent on land (Mazwi et al., 2022; Jha et al., 2022). Notable outcomes of these processes include heightened social contradictions based on class, race, gender, and citizenship (Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003; Amanor, 2008).

Another consequence of privatizing land tenure systems is the shift in land use patterns from food crops to export crops, which has undermined national food sovereignty (Moyo, 2000, 2007). Furthermore, evidence suggests that the expansion of export-oriented agricultural activities has contributed to escalating food insecurity, poverty, and malnutrition on the continent (Chambati et al., 2018). As Patnaik (2025) argues, countries in the Global South cannot be sovereign if they depend on food imports from the Global North since trade can be used to undermine the sovereignty of weaker states. Donald Trump's second administration's use of trade tariffs underscores how imperialism uses trade to undermine the sovereignty of weaker states.

On the ecological front, it has become increasingly clear that, amidst the heightened ecological crisis, the intersecting conservation and climate agendas have emerged as new instruments of global primitive accumulation propelled by the consolidation of finance capital. In the past decade, several reports have documented large-scale displacements and human rights violations of local communities resulting from conservation-area-based carbon projects and transboundary conservation areas (Sène, 2023; The Oakland Institute, 2023).

Yet as we have witnessed over the past half century, dispossession at such pace and scale produces structural effects well beyond land and resource alienation. The alarming number of private concessions for logging, mining, and plantations in protected areas supports Sam Moyo's argument regarding the speculative function of conservation—namely, that it reserves resources and biodiversity for future exploitation. Furthermore, these processes transform socio-economic relations in dispossessed communities in ways that deepen class and patriarchal structures while

reshaping labour relations between the world's capitalist core and its peripheries (Moyo, 2008; Prasad, 2020; Gill, 2024).

The ascendancy of the finance world through carbon deals and other nature-based solutions comes at a critical juncture of intersecting capitalist and biodiversity crises, marking a turning point in capitalist capture of the environmental agenda. Together, the land and ecological dimensions of contemporary neoliberal imperialism reveal how dispossession operates through both agricultural transformation and environmental financialization, consolidating external control over African territories under competing yet interconnected legitimating discourses of development and conservation.

V.I. What are the alternatives for autonomous development centered on land sovereignty and addressing the ecological crisis?

Resolving ecological and land questions is essential for fostering sovereignty and addressing the national question. This requires implementing a coherent strategy that addresses the fragmentation of African states and the involvement of people in governance under a Pan-African ideological framework that challenges imperialism. Politically, this entails African states committing to federated regional integration, which devolves political power to member states while collectively safeguarding their interests and those of the African people (see Moyo and Yeros, 2011). Continued fragmentation at the continental level leaves many countries vulnerable to destabilization from imperialist forces, as evidenced by the situations in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Libya, Mozambique, and many other countries. This political and military destabilization is part of primitive accumulation and the "third scramble for Africa" (Moyo, Yeros, & Jha, 2012) and often precedes ecological plunder, as is currently unfolding in the aforementioned countries. Moyo and Yeros (2011) assert that this level of regional integration must be accompanied by an anti-imperialist mutual defense pact to protect weaker states.

Ideologically, this federated regional entity must be guided by Pan-Africanism. This requires reviving the ideals that gripped the continent from the 1960s to the 1980s and led to the adoption of the LPA. Over the last four decades, geopolitics has undergone significant changes, including

the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, the rise of the United States as a superpower, and the emergence of China as a major economic and political force. These developments call for greater cooperation among African states. The choice of Pan-Africanism as the ideological foundation is based on its demonstrated history of success in uniting Africans, both on the continent and in the diaspora, in the fight against racism, colonialism, and economic exploitation (Mkandawire 2011).

Samir Amin (1987) posited that the most efficacious route for the continent to attain sovereignty is through the process of delinking. Notwithstanding the fact that Amin's conceptualization of delinking did not encompass ecological or land-related concerns, we contend that these elements must be integrated within the overarching framework. Samir Amin asserted with unwavering conviction that the ecological crisis confronting the world today is a direct consequence of capitalist barbarism, a system that recklessly devastates the environment in its relentless pursuit of profits (Amin 2012). He also provided a critique of monoculture and large-scale capitalist agriculture, which he viewed as detrimental to the ecology. He argued that these practices threatened the survival of billions of peasant farmers in the Global South (Amin 2012). Nevertheless, Amin's perspective on the adoption of contemporary agricultural practices as a pivotal element for the advancement of agriculture in the Third World remains a significant challenge to his theoretical framework (see Ajl 2021). This is primarily due to the ecological implications associated with the implementation of Green Revolution-type agricultural practices.

Conceptually, delinking is perceived as a political and economic slogan that subordinates policy choices to the logic of internal development as opposed to external demands (Amin, 1987). It aims to reduce Third World countries' dependency on exports, which is an important step toward achieving industrialization on the continent (Amin & Bush, 2014). Within the realm of land and ecology, we propose expanding delinking to prioritize popular ecological planning over imposed Western agendas that promote land enclosures. This includes promoting indigenous nature conservation over colonial and neoliberal policies pursued under contemporary capitalism (see Sene, 2024; 2025). Nicaragua provides a useful example, as it promoted ecological democracy through popular forms of social governance and planning in response to an ecological crisis in the 1960s which proved to be successful before it was sabotaged by imperialism (Faber, 1992). For agrarian communities, the socioeconomic and cultural losses resulting from placing land under

nature conservation for wildlife exploitation and carbon credit arrangements far outweigh the benefits, as research has shown (Fairhead et al., 2012; Sene, 2025; Moyo, 2000). A shift away from mono-cropping and extroverted agriculture toward producing commodities for the domestic market that are less harmful to the natural ecosystem is equally imperative under ecological delinking and popular planning. This approach limits the costs of unequal exchange, which occurs through low commodity prices on global markets and soil degradation in these agrarian communities.

In light of the heightened global ecological crises, the continental body must adopt the proposal contained in the LPA to establish African Multi-National Institutions (AMNIs) dedicated to natural resources and the environment. The decentralization of these institutions to regional economic communities (RECs) and national levels is imperative. In these decentralized structures, the institutions will assume the responsibility of coordinating and planning matters related to land, agriculture, and the environment. Additionally, they will be tasked with providing technical guidance to African states. Moreover, this body could serve as a representative voice for the continent on matters pertaining to land and environmental issues at the global level. Consequently, a comprehensive approach encompassing popular planning and participation, firmly grounded in Pan-Africanism, is imperative to shape environmental and land-related policies. This strategy is pivotal in counteracting the pervasive influence of foreign entities within these sectors. In alignment with this perspective, the dismantling of land tenure systems founded on Western jurisprudence remains imperative. A critical component of delinking is the alignment of current land policies with the objective of safeguarding the interests of individuals against the potential alienation of land influenced by foreign capital. Furthermore, the establishment of land sovereignty necessitates the implementation of new land tenure systems that are founded on principles of egalitarianism, democracy, and decentralization, while being firmly anchored within African cultural and traditional systems.

Conclusion to be developed.

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