

Original Research Article**Socio-Territorial Hierarchisation and Land Differentiation of Allochthones: A Constructivist Reading of Land Access Regimes in Semien (Cote D'ivoire)**YOUL Félix^{1*}¹Assistant Professor (CAMES), Department of Sociology, Félix Houphouët-Boigny University**Article History****Received:** 02.06.2025**Accepted:** 30.07.2025**Published:** 02.08.2025**Journal homepage:**<https://www.easpublisher.com>**Quick Response Code**

Abstract: This qualitative study is situated within a constructivist sociology of territorial belonging. Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted in Semien, it examines the dynamics of land differentiation experienced by allochthones amid demographic pressure and the reactivation of lineage-based norms. The findings reveal a socio-territorial hierarchy enacted through customary legitimisation mechanisms, resulting in a conflictual territorialisation of usage rights. The analysis highlights the interplay between social memory, autochthony capital, and the power of land allocation.

Keywords: Autochthony, Rural Land, Social Differentiation, Legitimacy, Territorialisation, Côte d'Ivoire.

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INTRODUCTION

Field data collected in Semien reveal a persistent asymmetry in modalities of land access between indigenous groups and allochthonous populations. Interviews highlight differentiated land practices, largely structured by the statutory origin of individuals. While the indigenous populations mobilise an inherited and performative capital of autochthony, the allochthones find themselves relegated to precarious land statuses, conditioned by asymmetrical interdependence, informal arrangements, or oral contracts lacking stable institutional recognition.

This empirical observation leads to a central paradox. In a context where the state advocates legal equality and the formalisation of land rights through instruments such as the rural land certificate, local customary practices continue to reproduce deeply entrenched status-territorial hierarchies. Thus, the promise of equitable access to land collapses under the weight of social logics of differentiation and indigenous legitimisation.

The resulting research question is as follows: how are differentiated regimes of land access constructed and reproduced in Semien according to membership status, and which legitimising mechanisms operate within this construction? This inquiry aligns with a

constructivist reading of land tenure, understood as a space for the production of social recognition rather than a mere right of use or ownership.

The scientific scope of this study is twofold. On the one hand, it contributes to the understanding of contemporary dynamics of socio-territorial inequalities in postcolonial contexts, at the interface between customary legacies and state dispositifs. On the other hand, it proposes an analytical framework based on the notion of differentiated land capital, articulating social memory, settlement genealogy, and communal recognition. Socially, it sheds light on the latent tensions that permeate Ivorian rural spaces, where land rootedness becomes both an identity stake and a vulnerability factor for minority groups.

This reflection situates itself within a sociological tradition attentive to processes of differentiation and legitimation in social configurations. Bourdieu (1980) emphasises the role of symbolic capital in reproducing social inequalities, including spatial relations. Lund (2008), drawing on West African contexts, demonstrates that land access relies less on formal rights than on regimes of recognition, produced by fluctuating social relations. Chauveau (2006), for his part, shows that customary norms are not fixed but strategically reinterpreted depending on context. This normative plasticity helps to understand how

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allochthonous groups can be simultaneously included in local communities and excluded from legitimate possession regimes.

In sum, land access in Semien is not solely a matter of law. It is anchored in historical configurations, shared memories, and a hierarchy of belongings, which together outline an unequal territorial cartography. It is precisely this cartography, both tangible and symbolic, that this study endeavours to deconstruct.

1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The analysis of socio-territorial hierarchisation and differentiated land tenure among allochthonous groups in Semien necessitates a critical engagement with several theoretical currents. Foremost, the constructivist approach to the social, as elaborated by Berger and Luckmann (1966), provides the central epistemological foundation. From this perspective, land cannot be apprehended merely as a juridical or economic object; rather, it constitutes a social construct, continuously produced and reproduced through interactions, narratives, and recognition mechanisms.

Complementing this framework is Weber's (1922) sociology of legitimacy regimes, whose typology of legitimate dominations illuminates the competing forms of authority mobilised to justify land access. Within a context of normative pluralism, allochthonous actors find themselves embedded in fragmented recognition configurations oscillating between customary institutions, state authority, and community recognition. This fragmentation engenders an implicit hierarchy among groups, within which autochthony functions as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1979), acting as a gatekeeper to land resources.

The application of the theory of orders of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) further enables the decoding of discursive and moral logics that actors invoke to legitimise their land claims. Indeed, the land access regimes in Semien are permeated by heterogeneous justifications merit, seniority, services rendered, filiation, etc. which are inscribed within a moral economy of land tenure (Scott, 1976).

However, these approaches exhibit certain limitations. They tend to naturalise the fragmentation of legitimacies without fully accounting for the underlying symbolic violence or silent power relations that sustain exclusionary mechanisms. Hence, a postcolonial lens (Chatterjee, 2004) is indispensable for re-situating these logics within a *longue durée* history of state disqualification of local norms and the implicit racialisation of territorial belonging.

This research adopts a qualitative methodology grounded in a comprehensive epistemology aiming to reconstitute actors' rationalities in situ. The site of Semien, located in the Facobly department (Côte d'Ivoire), was

selected due to its stratified land tenure configuration: an area of longstanding settlement by migrant allochthonous groups from neighbouring regions (Dan, Kroumen, Yacouba), a historical theatre of customary land transactions, and more recently, latent conflicts over land recognition.

The selection of respondents followed a dual criterion of social relevance and positional variation. Included were customary chiefs, representatives of long-established allochthonous communities, young community leaders, as well as local land administration officials. The objective was to capture the diversity of recognition regimes and the associated perceptual conflicts surrounding autochthony and allochthony.

The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling by maximum variation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), aimed at constructing a contrasted discursive corpus. Data collection tools principally consisted of semi-structured interviews structured around three axes: settlement trajectories, land access modalities, and experiences of recognition or rejection. Additionally, non-participant ethnographic observation was conducted during village meetings, allowing for the capture of performative interactions around land tenure.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was combined with a socio-semantic approach inspired by Bourdieu (1980). The goal was to identify repertoires of justification, implicit hierarchies, as well as indigenous categories of recognition. Particular attention was paid to distinction games performed by actors, notably through figures such as the "good allochthone," the "false autochthone," or the "integrated but unrecognised stranger."

Scientifically, this research contributes to deconstructing the naturalistic essentialisms surrounding land belonging. It demonstrates that the categories of autochthones and allochthones do not denote fixed statuses but are fluid products of negotiation, memorial narratives, and recognition strategies. In this regard, it interrogates the normative foundations of land citizenship in postcolonial contexts.

Socially, the study calls for a reconfiguration of land governance dispositifs, incorporating territorial subjectivities and buried memories within recognition processes. It advocates for an inclusive pluralism that does not merely juxtapose norms but creates spaces of intermediation between them.

2. RESULTS

2.1. Dynamics of Differentiated Integration and Challenges of Ethno-Familial Territorialisation: A Sociology of Land Boundaries in Semien

The study revealed dynamics of differentiated integration, a concept denoting processes through which diverse social groups particularly ethnic and familial

integrate unevenly within a shared space. This inequality stems from historical, cultural, and political factors directly influencing access to resources, especially land. Thus, integration is never uniform; it varies according to individuals' social position, marital alliances, and recognition, whether legal or customary.

The challenges of ethno-familial territorialisation refer to the ways in which ethnic and familial affiliations structure practices of appropriation and control over land. Territorialisation is understood as a process through which social groups invest territory with symbolic and material meanings. This process produces social boundaries that clearly distinguish integrated members from excluded ones. These boundaries are not immutable but are the outcome of struggles and negotiations often marked by conflicts related to land interests.

The adopted approach aligns with a sociology of land boundaries that transcends mere physical delimitation to focus on social and symbolic boundaries defining conditions of land access. In Semien, these boundaries manifest through differentiated access regimes, which may reproduce or challenge local social hierarchies and power relations.

Overall, the collected data allow an in-depth analysis of social mechanisms regulating the integration of allochthonous groups, the construction of land belonging, and the inherent conflicts over land possession and control. These dynamics unfold within an Ivorian context characterised by particularly complex historical, political, and economic stakes.

Discursive corpus collected:

"The first foreigners or Burkinabé who are here with us we consider as our brothers; some have married our sisters and had children with them. But those who came later, we do not know them, and they are dangerous, so we cannot give them our land, or else our children will suffer." Indigenous community chief.

This statement by an indigenous community leader highlights a complex dialectic between inclusion and exclusion within local land dynamics. The utterance explicitly distinguishes a temporality of allochthonous settlement, establishing a clear demarcation between 'first' and 'later' arrivals. This temporal differentiation is not neutral but constitutes a fundamental normative criterion, underpinning a differentiated legitimacy regime in land access. Length of settlement thus becomes a vector of social and land recognition, positively sanctioning early migrants to the detriment of more recent arrivals.

This opposition is coupled with affective and kinesthetic inscription: recognition of the 'first' relies on endogamous marital alliances weaving a social fabric intertwining ethnicity and kinship. Here, land is not

merely material property but a symbolic stake intimately tied to social and identity reproduction. Interethnic unions create filiation and alliance bonds mobilised as legitimate foundations of territorial belonging, contributing to transforming foreigners into 'brothers' vested with social and land rights.

Conversely, the category of 'newcomers' bears a strong negative charge, associated with threatening alterity. The fear expressed towards them is embedded in a protective exclusion logic, where refusal to grant land rights responds to an imperative of safeguarding indigenous future generations' interests. This apprehension arises from a discursive regime founded on distrust and essentialisation, whereby the unknown is perceived as dangerous and socio-economically risky, reflecting a classical dialectic of limited hospitality.

More broadly, this discourse reveals mechanisms reproducing a hierarchical social order where power and legitimacy relations articulate with differentiated regimes of land recognition. Beyond its economic function, land serves as a major identity marker crystallising tensions related to access, control, and transmission. These differentiated regimes thus participate in constructing shifting social and territorial boundaries, where belongings are negotiated within asymmetric power configurations.

In sum, this contribution underscores the necessity of apprehending land dynamics not solely through the prism of material domination relations but also as a discursive field where symbolic struggles for recognition and subjectivation unfold. The interplay between collective memory, customary legitimacy, and migratory temporality illuminates processes through which differentiated territorial belongings are constructed, highlighting the performative and constructed dimension of land recognition.

2.2. Differentiated Temporalities of Migratory Anchoring and Land Hierarchies: A Constructivist Analysis of Belonging Regimes in Semien

Differentiated temporalities of migratory anchoring refer to the reality that various migrant groups do not settle in a territory following the same rhythm or period. Some have established themselves long ago and thus enjoy a legitimacy progressively constructed over the years. Conversely, more recent arrivals are frequently perceived as less legitimate. This temporal differentiation plays a decisive role in organising local social relations, particularly concerning access to land.

Land hierarchies denote the orders of priority, privileges, or restrictions governing the access and use of land resources. These hierarchies extend beyond formal legal rights to encompass social and symbolic dimensions, based on criteria such as seniority, ethnic belonging, customary recognition, or integration into local networks.

A constructivist analysis insists that these belonging regimes are neither immutable nor natural but are social constructions perpetually produced and reproduced by actors through their discourses, practices, and institutions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Constructivism thus invites us to understand how land belonging is negotiated, contested, and redefined in contexts marked by tension and transformation.

Applied to Semien, this approach enables the decoding of mechanisms by which different temporalities of migrant settlement generate differentiated land access regimes. It also highlights how these regimes contribute to the fabrication of local social hierarchies, revealing the complex processes of legitimization, exclusion, and claim-making that permeate land dynamics.

Discursive Data from Interviews:

"I arrived here in 1992; there were already Burkinabé brothers here but they don't have land problems it's us who have problems (...) they say we are not the same because they have been here for a long time." An allochthonous interviewee.

This testimony highlights the temporal and social stratification conditioning access to land resources in the studied migratory context. The explicit reference to the arrival date, here fixed in 1992, establishes a chronological dividing line playing a structuring role in differentiating land statuses. The mention of the "Burkinabé brothers" already settled embeds the question of legitimacy within a differentiated temporality of rootedness, where length of presence becomes a symbolic capital mobilised to justify inequalities in access. This temporality is constitutive of belonging regimes, functioning both as a mode of social qualification and a control instrument.

This manifest cleavage reflects a dual logic of inclusion and exclusion. The figure of the 'senior' allochthonous "brother" is endowed with a quasi-native status, the fruit of social and marital integration that reconfigures boundaries between indigenous and allochthonous groups. This gradual naturalisation allows the conferment of a land legitimacy constructed and performed over time, contrasting with the precarious and marginal condition of more recent arrivals, here explicitly identified as "those who have problems." This divide translates a social hierarchy that surpasses mere ethnic belonging to intersect with temporal criteria and local integration practices.

Moreover, the statement reveals a discursive relegation process, whereby the "newcomers" are positioned in a liminal space of land and social precariousness. This disqualification is accompanied by symbolic devaluation, helping to maintain these actors on the margins of recognition and land rights securitisation dispositifs. In this sense, access to land

becomes a power stake embodied in the capacity to inscribe oneself within a recognised temporality, thereby conditioning resource appropriation and reproducing structural inequalities.

In conclusion, this excerpt underscores the importance of a dynamic analysis of land belonging regimes, which cannot be reduced to an essentialist reading of ethnic relations. It highlights the hybridity of social statuses, where migratory temporality and the performativity of interpersonal relations play crucial roles in constructing territorial legitimacies. This approach invites a rethinking of land policies through a perspective integrating the relational and temporal dimensions of social belonging.

3. DISCUSSION

The survey results highlighted the existence of a deeply rooted socio-territorial hierarchy embedded within customary legitimization mechanisms, which have served as a structuring framework for the unequal distribution of land use rights. This hierarchy transcended mere spatial organisation and was actively performed through rituals, narratives of seniority, and differentiated practices of belonging recognition. It thus engendered a conflictual territorialisation, in which land rights were contested, negotiated, or denied according to autochthony status, lineage affiliations, or intercommunity alliances. The analysis elucidated the logics by which social memory particularly that of early settlements, marital alliances, and martial commitments was mobilised as a resource to reinforce the capital of autochthony. This capital, in turn, conferred on certain groups a differentiated power of land allocation, enabling them to regulate land access and exercise symbolic authority over newcomers or populations perceived as allochthones.

These findings resonate with a Foucauldian reading of territorialisation as the differentiated production of spatial normativity. Foucault (1975) demonstrated that power operates not merely through prohibition but via dispositifs that organise visibility and differential assignment of bodies within space. In Semien, customary legitimization functions as such a dispositif, encoding relations of domination within land management, thereby granting certain groups the capacity to order land access according to a territorialised moral order.

This perspective aligns with Bourdieu's (1980) analysis, who argued that the naturalisation of social hierarchies rests on the internalisation of symbolic structures, here materialised by narratives of seniority. The effect of doxa that is, the implicit acceptance of the established land order is nonetheless challenged in the studied case. Intercommunity claims and allegiance conflicts fracture the shared belief in the legitimacy of customary hierarchies.

Meillassoux (1975) had already emphasised the centrality of land control in the reproduction of lineage structures. In Semien, this logic endures but becomes more complex. Marital alliances no longer solely serve social reproduction; they also become strategies for symbolic access to land. Here, the findings converge with Meillassoux's analyses while revealing contemporary reconfigurations.

Bayart (1989) introduced the notion of the "politics of the belly," which posits the instrumentalisation of traditional dispositifs within deferred appropriation logics. In Semien, customary authorities reactivate filiation narratives to justify exclusionary rights, contributing to a political reconfiguration of custom. However, unlike Bayart's account, the study's results reveal strong local resistance to the corruption of customary discourse, signalling internal tensions within the norm.

John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2009) demonstrate that ethnicity can be mobilised as an economic resource. The Semien case shows that the capital of autochthony operates similarly as a strategic resource for land access. However, while the Comaroffs stress the explicit commodification of identities, in Semien, this monetarisation remains latent and is masked under customary law appearances.

Scott (1998) critiques the administrative simplification of customary rights by the modern state. The field data confirm this critique: land rights are entangled, heterogeneous, and irreducible to a single form of legitimation. Local authorities navigate multiple grammars of land access, generating both friction and zones of negotiation.

Mbembe (2000) highlights forms of symbolic violence at play in the management of belonging. In Semien, differentiated land allocation constitutes such violence non-spectacular but deeply structuring. Land becomes a filter of inclusion or exclusion. However, whereas Mbembe privileges analysis of state dispositifs, the Semien study shows this violence is also produced by endogenous actors.

Ayimpam (2014) studies informal appropriation practices within precarious land regimes. Similar logics of negotiated use and contextual legitimation are found in Semien, but set against a backdrop of still-strong customary normativity. This difference reveals a point of divergence: in Kinshasa, informality becomes autonomous; in Semien, it remains embedded within a form of community authority.

In sum, Gnabali (2018), in his work on land reconfigurations in Côte d'Ivoire, shows how memories of early settlements and narratives of suffering are activated to symbolically exclude allochthones. This process was observed in Semien. Yet the study reveals

this memory is not homogeneous: it is contested, reconfigured, and sometimes denied by younger or female factions, which nuances the monolithic character of autochthony.

In conclusion, the study's results align with major sociological axes concerning land and symbolic power. They extend the analyses of Foucault, Bourdieu, and the Comaroffs while qualifying them through the local dynamics observed. The originality of the Semien field lies in the interdependence between legitimacy narratives, exclusionary practices, and customary adjustments, operating beyond strictly state or capitalist domination forms.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has interrogated, through a distinctly sociological and constructivist lens, the complex dynamics of land allocation within a context marked by the conflictual coexistence of autochthonous and allochthonous groups. Employing a rigorous qualitative methodology, the investigation brought to light the existence of a deeply entrenched socio-territorial hierarchy embedded in performative customary dispositifs that have structured the differentiation of land-use rights.

From this perspective, the study demonstrated that access to land cannot be reduced merely to an economic or legal fact; rather, it constitutes a social construct articulated around identity representations, contested memories, and symbolic mechanisms of exclusion and legitimation. This social fabrication of land relations, characterised by processes of conflictual territorialisation, revealed the capacity of local actors to negotiate, contest, and redefine regimes of appropriation by mobilising symbolic resources such as autochthony capital, narratives of seniority, and lineage alliances.

The scientific contribution of this study lies in its renewal of understanding of land regimes in sub-Saharan Africa, emphasising the performative and dynamic nature of customary norms as well as the interethnic tensions crystallised therein. Moreover, it opened a conceptual breach within the sociology of territoriality by illustrating how land differentiation unfolds through social and discursive mechanisms that transcend mere formal power relations. This theoretical contribution is particularly significant as it sheds light on the limitations of essentialist and institutionalist approaches, which often remain fixed in static readings of land regimes.

On a practical level, the findings have provided local decision-makers and political actors with a pertinent analytical framework for devising inclusive land policies tailored to socio-territorial specificities. Recognising the identity and symbolic dimensions of land access may indeed promote more equitable and

peaceful management of land conflicts by deconstructing hierarchies imposed by customary exclusionary logics.

However, the study encountered several limitations. Firstly, although the qualitative approach offered considerable depth, it did not enable a comprehensive apprehension of the full range of quantitative mechanisms of land access nor the entire diversity of economic practices related to land. Secondly, the analysis primarily focused on interactions between autochthonous and allochthonous actors, marginalising other potentially influential stakeholders such as state authorities or private investors, whose roles warrant thorough examination.

Looking ahead, this research paves the way for future inquiries into the processes of recomposition of land regimes at the interface of custom and formal law, particularly through multidisciplinary approaches that integrate anthropology, law, and political science. It would also be pertinent to study the impact of collective mobilisations and social movements on the redefinition of land legitimacies, alongside the effects of demographic and environmental changes on territorial configurations.

Thus, this study has laid the groundwork for a critical and constructivist sociology of land regimes in Semien, opening a fertile heuristic field for reflecting on the complexity of land relations within contexts of normative plurality and social heterogeneity.

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