

“This Mine is for the Entire Casamance Coastline”: The Politics of Scale and the Future of the Extractive Frontier in Casamance, Senegal

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Abstract: As evidenced by the widespread controversy surrounding an otherwise small-scale mining investment pending in Casamance, Senegal, uncertainty shapes the extension of the extractive frontier. Fent argues that amid this uncertainty, different actors are able to politicize or depoliticize extractive investments through the work of scaling. Opponents cast the project as part of larger-scale, longer-term extraction, linking it with regional narratives. By contrast, state and corporate actors depoliticized the mine by emphasizing its limited extent and downscaling conflict to the local level. This demonstrates the conflictual processes through which extractive frontiers are realized—and resisted—through both space and time.

Résumé: Comme en témoigne la controverse généralisée autour d'un investissement minier d'échelle modeste et en attente en Casamance, au Sénégal, l'incertitude façonne l'extension de la frontière extractive. Fent fait valoir qu'au milieu de cette incertitude, différents acteurs sont en mesure de politiser ou de dépolitiser les investissements extractifs grâce à un travail de mise à l'échelle. Les opposants présentent le projet comme faisant partie d'une extraction à plus grande échelle et à plus long terme en le reliant aux récits régionaux. En revanche, les acteurs étatiques et corporatifs ont dépolitisé la mine en soulignant son étendue limitée et en réduisant le conflit au niveau local. Ceci démontre les processus conflictuels par lesquels les frontières extractives se réalisent - et se résistent - dans l'espace et le temps.

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Resumo: Conforme demonstra a ampla controvérsia em torno de um investimento mineiro de pequena escala pendente em Casamansa, Senegal, a extensão da fronteira extrativa é dominada pela incerteza. Segundo Fent, por entre esta incerteza, os vários atores conseguem politizar ou despolitizar os investimentos na indústria extrativa através da noção de escala. Os opositores consideram que o projeto faz parte de uma extração em larga escala e de longo prazo, vinculando-o a narrativas regionais. Pelo contrário, os atores estatais e corporativos despolitizaram a mina, realçando a sua pequena dimensão e enquadrando o conflito no contexto local. Assim, ficam demonstrados os processos conflituais através dos quais as fronteiras extrativas são concretizadas, bem como a resistência de que são alvo, ao longo do tempo e do espaço.

Key Words: land; extractive industry; mining; scale; Casamance; Senegal

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Introduction

"Voilà, the start of another war in Casamance" (interview, location withheld, August 27, 2014). So said a representative of one branch of the regional separatist Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC, *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de la Casamance*) when I interviewed him and his brother at their home one rainy night. I was accompanied by an activist friend who was organizing against the Niafarang Project—a pending heavy mineral sands mine slated for the far northwest corner of the Ziguinchor region—and had connections with the MFDC, including the men I met that night. Discussing the mining project, the representative shook his head and declared that the project would trigger a new outbreak of violence in the region; his tone indicated that this was both a prediction and a threat.

Yet the connection between the Niafarang Project and the broader regional conflict is not self-evident. The mine itself would only occupy 185 hectares (1.85 km²) of land in a remote corner of the region—an area that many Casamançais may have neither heard of nor visited. How did this small-scale mining project become seen as a critical regional issue?

In part, this was because the extent of the mine was itself a point of contention. In 2015, I sat with a group of men in a village near Niafarang as a known supporter of the mining project explained the size of the mine by tracing measurements in the sandy soil with his finger: 20 meters wide, and 40 meters deep. Other men quickly interrupted. One added additional lines to the sketch in the dirt, insisting that they would dredge the entire length of the dune, all the way to Abéné. The men argued, giving competing lengths, areas, and extents of the mine, from 6km to 700km².

There was a scalar disjuncture between the 6km length of dune that would be exploited in Niafarang and the prospective cartography of the mine, as represented through the 2004 exploration license that covered

740km² (Coetzee 2013). From the initial exploration license of 740km², subsequent renewals progressively diminished the exploration area, as geological data allowed for more precise targets (Coetzee 2013). But maps of the initial exploration area were made available to community members by consultants for the project, as well as being publicly available on the internet; the exploration license map informed how many village residents, activists, and MFDC members understood the mining project, in spite of assurances that the eventual mining license itself would be confined to a significantly smaller area. For instance, at one public meeting convened by state officials, a local retired military officer approached the seated officials, furiously waving a laminated copy of the map of the exploration license in the air. “This mine is for the entire Casamance coastline,” he bellowed. Like him, a number of people opposed to the mining project continued to assert an understanding of the Niafarang Project as merely the first stage of what could ultimately be a much more spatially expansive extractive project (as the exploration license map portended and as the company’s own language on their website suggests).

In this article, I argue that the extractive frontier is a spatio-temporal process constituted by uncertainty. This uncertainty—specifically about the extent and effects of extraction—creates a space for various actors to cast investments at different scales, thereby politicizing or depoliticizing them. The Niafarang Project’s opponents cast the mine as larger in size than suggested by official measurements, and they mapped it onto the politically and culturally salient regional scale. This connected the proposed mine with longer-running regional debates about land ownership, historical exploitation, and conflict. However, the regional scaling of the mining project also produced internal tensions and contradictions within the opposition. This use of scale was also challenged by a different politics of scale on the part of project proponents, including state and corporate actors. Theirs was a project of spatio-temporal fragmentation, highlighting the limited, small-scale, and hyper-local nature of the mining project, even while envisioning the mine as the “first stage” of (potentially) extending the extractive frontier in the future. These attempts to weaken and dissipate the political significance of the regional scale in fact repoliticize the project by transforming the state and generating local conflict between individuals and villages.

This article proceeds by first situating the Niafarang Project controversy within the literature on land deals—understood here as including both agroindustrial and mining projects (Hall 2011)—as well as the literatures on the politics of scale and extractive spatio-temporalities. It then provides background information on the project and the Casamance conflict and briefly details the research methodology, before discussing how various actors have construed the scale of the project. In these sections, I highlight similarities and differences in how MFDC members, activists, and village residents mapped the mining project onto “Casamance,” and how these depictions of the mining project were countered by the network of local, state, and corporate actors in favor of the mine, who attempted to depoliticize

and "downscale" the project. Using scale as a strategy can be effective in expanding the stakes and audiences for extractive controversies, challenging state and corporate productions of geographical and temporal fragmentation, even as it generates new conflicts, tensions, and counter-strategies.

Extractive spatio-temporalities and the politics of scale

Large-scale land acquisitions for agroindustry, mining, biofuels, and conservation have captured the public and academic imagination. Although sometimes considered separately from agroindustrial land deals, mining frequently entails similar issues of land expropriation, physical displacement, and marginalization of local land users for the benefit of national elites and foreign investors. Further, both mining-related and agroindustrial land acquisitions are often bound up with extractivism, exploiting resources to meet international demand and generate profits for national governments, corporations, and other distant actors rather than local people—although there are exceptions involving land transfers to local or national elites (Fairbairn 2013) and/or that are aimed at production for national economies.

These various types of extractive investment in Africa (and beyond) have revealed how "methodological territorialism" falsely assumes coherence within the bounded territory of the nation-state (Agnew 1994; Brenner 1999). James Ferguson (2005) details uneven spatialities of extraction, through which extractive enclaves of "usable Africa" receive investment and infrastructural development and are often subject to policing and private security; meanwhile, the rest of "unusable" Africa suffers from disinvestment, insecurity, and a lack of functional government. In this way, transnational mining and oil corporations instantiate novel and neocolonial modes of uneven territorialization—in some cases, these investments are so "socially thin" that they do not even extend onshore (Ferguson 2006). This view suggests a patchwork spatiality in terms of which places come to matter to mobile capital and the state and which ones do not. Highly mobile and selective forms of investment and sovereignty "touch down" upon certain people and places, while "jumping over" vast areas and leaving them untouched (Ferguson 2006)—even as these attempts to produce enclaves and bypass "unusable" places nevertheless remain functionally entangled with them (Reed 2009; Appel 2012a, 2012b). Whereas earlier developmental periods saw states attempting to extend into and incorporate their peripheries (Ferguson 1994; Scott 1998), the current dynamics produce geographies of economic and political fragmentation and atomization.

In viewing these processes as spatio-temporal, some scholars use the concept of the mining frontier (d'Avignon 2018). The notion of the frontier implies the movement of extraction into new areas, but it also stresses the territorializing processes through which often marginal people and places are transformed into state subjects (Tsing 2005; Klinger 2017). The frontier, then, operates according to logics of both capital accumulation and the

exertion of sovereignty, either by states or increasingly by more complex and entangled constellations of control over people, land, and resources (Mbembe 2001; Carmody 2009; Emel, Huber & Makene 2011; Peluso & Lund 2011; Gilberthorpe & Rajak 2017). The frontier both deterritorializes places, by erasing or minimizing existing patterns of use and ownership, and reterritorializes them as corporate-owned concessions and as part of the national patrimony.

However, extractive spatialities such as the enclave and the frontier are temporal artifacts. “Unusable Africa” can become usable, and vice versa. There are already wide swaths of land and offshore reserves that are known to be rich in resources, awaiting investment and development. Technical and political labor is harnessed in anticipation of the potential of these reserves, even when they still remain unrealized (Weszkalns 2014, 2015). Indeed, as has been seen in southeastern Senegal, geological exploration can facilitate “shelf projects” that are tabled until global prices and state policies create more favorable conditions for inviting tenders and commencing mining operations (d’Avignon 2018). Similarly, some scholars have noted a “pre-resource curse” that occurs when governments engage in profligate borrowing and spending on the assumption of future resource wealth (Cust & Mihalyi 2017; Frynas & Buur 2020).

Even for approved concessions, temporality plays an important role. Many large land deals are realized in phases, beginning with smaller plots and gradually increasing in area over long periods of time (Cotula et al. 2009; Cotula 2012). Furthermore, many reported large-scale land acquisitions remain speculative or stalled (Deininger & Byerlee 2011; Cotula 2012; Cotula et al. 2014). In this context, Youjin Chung (2020) suggests thinking about land deals as continually in the making, generating their own practices of governmentality in the liminal space-time between land acquisition and project implementation. At the same time, temporality also informs counter-movements that seek to establish continued presence and make claims to land (Wittekind 2018).

This widespread condition of liminality speaks to the power of uncertainty to create opportunities for both politicization and depoliticization. Uncertainty about the effects of extractive projects and their spatio-temporal extents fuels public fears of widespread damage, while on the other hand, states and corporations often strategically withhold information and generate ambiguity in order to minimize culpability and individualize responsibility (Li 2015; Senanayake & King 2020). The Nifarang Project similarly entails a considerable amount of uncertainty about its eventual extent and impact; in part as a result of this uncertainty, it can be enrolled into making various kinds of competing claims about how expansive or limited its extent will be.

It is here that the scale or extent of an extractive project becomes important, materially and politically. Socio-spatial scale is defined by Neil Smith as

the geographical resolution of contradictory social processes of competition and cooperation. The continual production and reproduction of scale expresses the social as much as geographical contest to establish boundaries between different places, location, and sites of experience. (1992:65)

In other words, scale distinguishes between different *kinds* of places; it is fundamentally about establishing the level at which a given phenomenon occurs, matters, or has meaning. As such, the scales at which extractive acquisitions are understood transform them into different *kinds* of projects, with different political constituencies and audiences.

The ability to naturalize scales is fundamental to the exercise—and subversion—of power. As such, the “politics of scale” illustrate the stakes involved in establishing the scale of a given issue. The politics of scale can be defined as “strategies used by actors to explain, justify, defend and even try to impose the link between a particular scale or scalar configuration and a political project” (Gonzalez 2006:838). People seek to stabilize their own scalar narratives and present phenomena as either more confined or more expansive, to justify particular kinds of interventions. By using scale as a strategy and as part of the “politics from below” through which social movements resist land acquisitions (Hall et al. 2015), local groups can shape narratives about their struggles, make demands at different administrative levels, or bring new scales into being (Jones 1998:26; Towers 2000; Kurtz 2003; McCarthy 2005). Katherine Jones illustrates the power of this rescaling when she states:

They discursively re-present their political struggles across scale, and in so doing, they help to recast opposition itself. They show that a ‘local’ struggle, for example, may also be represented as a global struggle, and when it is done so, the local struggle may strike a chord with many people who will argue on its behalf. (1998:26)

Through encounters between governments, investors, and ordinary people, scales are socially and politically produced and (re)hierarchized in relation to one another (Delaney & Leitner 1997; Brenner 2001).

In this context, casting the Niarang Project as a regional-scale issue served to politicize the project and head off the future mobility of the extractive frontier. Many opponents cast it as a large-scale threat, viewing it as the harbinger of a much larger mining concession along the Casamance coastline. They claimed that mining would affect all of Casamance—a region that is itself a historically- and culturally-specific political project. Although small-scale in terms of its published coordinates, the mining project came to be seen as a much larger-scale project in terms of both its size and its impact. As has been more widely observed, those in power tend to privatize conflict by fragmenting and localizing struggles, while those contesting power tend to expand the scope and scale of the issue—from a local to regional, national, or even international one (Schattschneider 1960; Nevins 2004). This

contestation—about not only the issue at hand but also the scale of its impact and therefore the governmental level at which it should be addressed—can widen audiences and halt or stall projects. While states and corporations may reduce land to discrete resources and plots, the work of scaling by resistance movements connects these individual spaces into a broader terrain of meaning and collective action.

Viewing scale as a strategy for asserting political meaning and territorial claims, against attempts at spatio-temporal fragmentation or enclavization, allows for a different interpretation of extractive land deals in Africa. In the Niafarang Project case, the opponents' scaling of the mine anticipated and has (temporarily) stalled the extension of the extractive frontier. The project, which has been in negotiations since 2011, might already be underway had local activists not presented it as a Casamance-wide issue, thereby attracting the support of various branches of the MFDC and producing a more politically significant audience and resistance. At the same time, the Senegalese state and the mining corporation have positioned the mine as hyper-local, diluting its broader political salience and fragmenting opposition.

Background

The Niafarang Project proposes to extract heavy mineral sands (zircon and titanium sands, including rutile, ilmenite, and leucoxene) from what is estimated to be a Probable Ore Reserve of 4.65 million tons, along 6 km of a coastal dune.¹ The project would begin in Niafarang, a small coastal village in the Ziguinchor Region (see [Figure 1](#)). Its conception began in 2004, when Australia-based Carnegie Minerals secured an exploration license covering an area 740 km², spanning the length of the Casamance coastline and including much of the Casamance River estuary (Coetzee 2013).

After a series of mergers and acquisitions, the Niafarang Project has been fully owned by the Hong Kong- and Australia-based corporation Astron since 2008. Although it would be a minor contributor to the national government's revenues, with total revenues estimated at USD234 million—of which ten percent would go to Senegal—it is part of Senegalese President Macky Sall's broader priorities to advance mining and natural gas extraction, among other ambitious economic development goals, as laid out in the Emerging Senegal Program (PSE).

The population of Niafarang and nearby villages includes well-established families who have lived in these villages for many generations, along with migrants from elsewhere in Casamance, Senegal, and West Africa, in addition to European expatriates. The majority of Niafarang residents identify as Kalorn, a distinctive subgroup of the Jola from the Karon Islands, and they practice Catholicism and traditional religion. By contrast, the majority of the population and leadership of the nearby villages of Kabadio and Abéné are Muslim Mandinka. Most residents of Niafarang express opposition to the mining project, while populations in neighboring villages are more divided.

Figure 1. Map showing the location of Niafarang in the Ziguinchor Region (Database of Global Administrative Areas, 2015)



Various groups holding different political viewpoints oppose the project. The Committee Against Zircon Mining in Casamance, hereinafter “the Committee,” is a locally-based group which has been actively organizing against the project since 2010, citing concerns about ecological destruction and neocolonial economic exploitation by foreign corporations. Led by residents of Niafarang and nearby villages, the Committee has organized marches, demonstrations, and a benefit concert against the mine. It has also cultivated international, national, and regional networks of support, including foreign journalists, researchers, lawyers, Senegalese politicians in the National Assembly, and the MFDC.

The region historically and colloquially known as Casamance has experienced decades of low-intensity conflict between the MFDC and the Senegalese state. As a precursor to this conflict, the western Casamance experienced sporadic protests in the 1970s, largely around transformations in land ownership. While the colonial leaders of French West Africa had administered land in a way that bolstered claims to autochthony and existing religious authority, the independent Senegalese state passed the National Domain Law in 1964, vesting 95 percent of the national territory in the hands of the state and allowed for that land to be tenurable based on continuous productive use, rather than traditional claims (Boone 2007). Although land in the national domain was to be governed and allotted through elected Rural Councils, this was not the case in Lower Casamance (the western *cercle*

under French colonial rule, now known as the Ziguinchor Region). Instead, subprefects appointed by the central government continued to make land decisions, with very little input or authority on the part of elected local officials on the Rural Councils who represented each Rural Community (Boone 2003:125).² In fact, land and administrative reform arrived later to the region than elsewhere; while Rural Communities were created in 1972, they were not introduced in Casamance until 1979 (Hesseling 1994:250). Some areas in Casamance suffered from state expropriations for the purpose of outside investments in groundnut agriculture, agroindustry, and tourist facilities, often to the chagrin of local people, who saw this as an invasion by *nordistes* from northern Senegal (Evans 2004; Boone 2007:565). These expropriations and the dispossession of local groups with customary land tenure contributed to historical and regionally-specific sentiments that informed calls for autonomy (Cormier-Salem 1993; Hesseling 1994).

Combined with budgetary crises and retrenchments that adversely impacted Casamançais (Evans 2004; Marut 2005), these land issues created a fertile ground for local intellectuals to develop and disseminate calls for separatism. These individuals reconstituted the MFDC, a multi-ethnic political party in the 1940s, as a Jola-dominated organization demanding regional independence. Although often portrayed as an ethnic conflict between Jola-dominated areas of Casamance and the Wolof-dominated Senegalese state, the conflict is primarily rooted in historical and political economic narratives (Lambert 1998; De Jong 1999; Evans 2003; De Jong & Gasser 2005). The MFDC held that the French colonial government had administered Casamance differently and quasi-autonomously from the rest of Senegal—a claim somewhat supported by historical documents and analysis (Lambert 1998; Boone 2003). Further, the MFDC suggested that at Senegal's independence in 1960, President Léopold Sédar Senghor had drawn up an agreement with Casamançais politician Emile Badiane to temporarily unify, promising to grant Casamance full independence in twenty years. Many MFDC leaders still attribute Badiane's death in 1972 to an assassination plot by the Senegalese government and assert that records of the signed agreement were destroyed (Lambert 1998; interviews, 2014 and 2015–16). Finally, the MFDC's demands rested on a more widespread narrative about the region's unique marginalization and “recolonization” by the Senegalese state.³

In 1982, the MFDC led a demonstration in Ziguinchor, calling for independence from Senegal and raising white Casamance flags on government buildings (Evans 2004). This resulted in violent skirmishes with *gendarmes* and, ultimately, the arrest and sentencing of MFDC leaders in 1983. These arrests set off increasingly violent conflicts between Senegal and the MFDC, which peaked in intensity in the 1990s. The conflict resulted in an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 deaths, 62,638 internally displaced people and refugees by the late 1990s, and the installation of land mines by both parties (Evans 2004). In the early 2000s, divide and conquer strategies by former President Abdoulaye Wade's administration led to the fracturing of the

MFDC into five separate factions. Some were willing to abandon hardline demands for regional independence and engage in peace negotiations with the Senegalese government; others refused to soften their demands and retreated to hideouts in The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau.

Regardless of whether they support the MFDC, many Casamançais view their region as exploited by *nordistes* and marginalized from the political and economic life of the rest of the country. Jean-Claude Marut (2005) suggests that this common narrative results from the effects of structural adjustment in the 1980s, combined with the arrival of outsiders and the state's expropriation of land and resources. While colonial and postcolonial governments did indeed display patterns of uneven regional investment and development, the understanding of Casamance as uniquely and exceptionally marginalized is largely a modern invention that has been projected backward into the past. It also continues to strongly inform Casamançais identity in the present.

However, the "Casamance" as such no longer exists, administratively. Amid the conflict, the Senegalese government engaged in administrative reorganizations that removed Casamance from the map. As shown in Figure 1, these reorganizations divided Casamance into two regions, renamed Ziguinchor and Kolda, with Sédhiou subsequently added in 2008 (Marut 1995, 2010; Dramé 1998). Nevertheless, Casamance remains a culturally and historically powerful idea—a region that, for some, "naturally" stretches as far as eastern Senegal, in spite of multiple religious and ethnic divisions.

Ongoing concerns about the Casamance conflict and historical tensions over land ownership have continued to be important in the mining controversy. Although the state technically owns the mine site under the National Domain Law, state actors have preferred to negotiate rather than seize the land by force. This was motivated in part by a desire not to reignite violent conflict amid tenuous peace accords signed between the state and factions of the MFDC in 2014.

At the time of this writing, the mining project has not yet begun operating. In May of 2017, the mining company was awarded a small-mine license by the Senegalese Ministry of Industry and Mines; this license stated that the mine would cover 185 hectares (1.85 km²). Due in part to popular protest, however, the Senegalese government has revisited the mining license. According to interlocutors in Niafarang as of June 2019, the corporation and state actors have attempted to address the impasse with local populations by cultivating a small group of project supporters and attempting to conduct land surveys in anticipation of the project's eventual implementation.

Methodology

This article is informed by fourteen months of participant observation from 2014 to 2017 and over seventy semi-structured interviews with individuals and

groups, conducted predominantly in French. My positionality affected people's willingness to talk to me and the aspects of their experiences they shared with me. As a white woman conducting research in Senegal, I met members of the Committee initially through internships in Dakar. My subsequent ethnographic fieldwork was thus facilitated largely by a growing network of activist interlocutors involved in the Committee; given my own entry point into the project, the analysis presented here reflects more strongly the sources of opposition to the mining project. Most of my interlocutors were men, who were more active in the Committee and other organizations, and who spoke French or Wolof (given my limited conversational abilities in Mandinka, Jola-Fogny, and Kulonaay, which are more widely spoken in the area).

Although I did conduct a number of interviews with state actors and observed interactions among these actors and community members, these interactions were less rooted in sustained ethnographic observation. Additionally, the mining company had a very limited presence in Senegal, and did not respond to email requests for interviews; therefore, my understanding of the Niafarang Project is informed by publicly available resources online and by the descriptions of my interlocutors in villages and governmental ministries and offices.

Like all knowledge, my understanding of the controversy is partial and situated. The analysis presented here reflects my reading of a particular political and historical moment in a long-running mining controversy and an even longer regional conflict. As such, the processes and phenomena I describe must be understood as temporally and geographically specific.

“All of Casamance”: the regional scale of the Niafarang Project

As I walked with a member of the Committee to his cousin's orange grove one evening, he told me that some of the villages of the district had not taken part in early discussions about the mining project, believing its effects to be confined to Niafarang. Explaining how the village had come to see it as a regional issue, he explained: “Now they understand that this concerns all of Casamance, and in fact the whole world.” Many opponents of the mine, including members of the Committee and ordinary village residents, often interpreted the Niafarang Project as a microcosm of the issues faced by the Casamance as a whole and stressed that “all of Casamance” had unified in opposition to the mine.⁴

This message was also disseminated to wider audiences. “Casamance” has often been invoked on signs at demonstrations by the Committee and in songs written about the controversy, and it has been featured in press descriptions that frame the issue as Casamance-wide, affecting “all of Casamance” (e.g., [AuSenegal.com](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.54) 2014). This was not strictly true—outside of the district, many people from Casamance had not even heard about the mining project. Yet this statement reflected the attempt to solidify a regional-scale audience and base of stakeholders and to use this to stall construction and prevent the mine from being realized. As a strategy, this was somewhat

effective in politicizing the concession and stalling mine development and land acquisition.

In this section, I show how the Niafarang Project was discursively scaled up to the region, and came to be entangled with narratives of regional marginalization and exploitation by northern Senegal. I focus on how three groups of actors—members of the Committee, members of the MFDC, and village residents—explained their understanding of the mining project and the extent of its impact. These actors drew on historical and collective understandings of the region and its unequal incorporation into Senegal, although they differed in their demands, their political stances, and their levels of militancy. The ability of the mining project to be mapped onto and acted upon at the regional scale produced political meaning, emboldening the opposition and gaining leverage against the state. At the same time, this scaling was rife with tensions and contradictions, which proved somewhat amenable to state and corporate co-optation strategies.

“Zircon is not good for Casamance”: the Committee

In August 2014, I sat with Moussa and Thierry, two members of the Committee, in one of the small, unelectrified village hotels on the dune whose owners would be displaced by the mine.⁵ As Moussa explained: “Even today, it is products from Casamance that go to the north—mangos, oranges, fish. In the whole sub-region, we didn’t say no [to sending natural resources north]. Even to the detriment of Casamance’s interests, see? We didn’t say no. But the zircon is not good for Casamance!” Thierry added: “That’s why the people of Casamance are always frustrated and feel that they’re experiencing injustice. These resources are exploited in a way that doesn’t benefit Casamance at all” (interview, location withheld, August 26, 2014). The two men were from different areas of Casamance, having come to this district after spending a number of years in Dakar. Yet both viewed the mining project as part of these longer histories of resource extraction. As such, they portrayed the Niafarang Project as a “Casamance” issue, with much larger ideological and geographical referents than would be possible in just focusing on the mine’s official coordinates and the impacted district itself.

The Committee’s mobilization of the regional scale in their actions and rhetoric also produced wider audiences. In 2017, protests against the mining license were held in Ziguinchor, 100 kilometers away from the proposed mine site, and were covered by Dakar- and Ziguinchor-based news media. Furthermore, Moussa frequently called into the national radio station Zik FM, as well as a local radio station, Radio Kafountine. One afternoon when I was sitting with Moussa and his family at the village hotel, one of the stations was having a debate about Senegalese President Macky Sall. A man called in and asked to speak in French; he began discussing what was needed to “put Casamance to work,” because “the people are here and the resources are here, but they need support and investment.” Growing agitated, Moussa turned down the volume and called in on his mobile phone. “What has

Macky Sall ever done for Casamance?” he said. “The state just wants to exploit the zircon and leave Casamance in ruins!” In his call, he encouraged listeners to connect a small and local struggle to broader regional frustrations about the lack of productive investment and narratives of historical neglect.

“The mining won’t stop at Niafarang”: the MFDC

The MFDC initially became aware of the mining project through communications with Committee members. Members of various factions of the MFDC, in both the sub-region and as far south as Ziguinchor, engaged in informal conversations with Committee members, exchanged information and updates about the mining project, and offered some support to the mine opposition. As one member of the Committee told me, “I should tell you about our collaborators and our friends. They include foreigners, and they include the MFDC, who give us some support. The zircon venture is a situation to be put on the negotiating table, and is no longer up for discussion” (interview, Niafarang, August 26, 2014).

The MFDC interpreted the Niafarang Project as an assault on Casamance’s resources. As one MFDC representative stated, “We are at war. They [the northerners] know with certainty that Casamance has a lot of potential, so they have to take advantage of it. It’s pillage, theft. That’s why they prefer to save their zircon up north and come here to exploit Casamance” (interview, location withheld, August 27, 2014). His comment referenced a much larger heavy mineral sands mine in northern Senegal, which by 2014 had already entered into its construction phase and is now operational. The suggestion that the Senegalese state was trying to “save” its own zircon was factually incorrect, but it reinforced a widespread perception of exploitation by the north.

For the MFDC, the mining venture would impact all Casamançais. As expressed by the MFDC representative,

The Casamançais are in solidarity. Casamance belongs to the people of Casamance. The mining won’t stop at Niafarang, and it’s not only Niafarang that will suffer the ecological consequences that will be unleashed. All of Casamance will suffer. (interview, location withheld, August 27, 2014)

He conveyed an imagined ecological and social extent of the mine that would encompass “all of Casamance.” The ecological consequences of such a project, he suggested, would be disastrous not only for Niafarang, but for the region as a whole. He also referred to the “people” of Casamance, as a unified group with particular rights to land and autonomy throughout the region.

His brother, also an MFDC representative, echoed similar ideas in criticizing the mining project in the context of longer processes of economic exploitation:

Capital comes in the door and then leaves out the window. We were shocked by a mine of that extent of 700 kilometers [referring to the initial exploration license of 740 km²], in a country like Casamance that is at war. ... As for economic needs, I think that if it's not profitable for the population, it's useless. (interview, location withheld, August 27, 2014)

This representative referred to the areal extent of the original exploration license, bolstering his and his brother's claims that the mining project would ultimately claim much more Casamançais land—which he consciously described as belonging to the "country" of Casamance.

An important, if unintended, consequence of the Niafarang Project was the opportunity it offered to re-unify the fragmented separatist movement. As Luc Descroix and Jean-Claude Marut note:

The zircon venture offers the different factions an opportunity to reunite. ... All the factions—civilian and military, radical and moderate—are making their opposition to the venture known, considering any commencement of work on the mine as a *casus belli*. ... [T]he mining venture has become a lightning rod in the Casamance conflict. (Descroix & Marut 2015:16, translation mine).

This speaks to the power of the controversy to bring into being a reinvigorated MFDC, ready to articulate the Niafarang Project as part of broader exploitative policies toward the "entire" Casamance—and, by extension, as another reason to demand political autonomy.

"Things are extracted here": a village leader

Even among people who did not take part in the Committee's activities, the mining project was refracted through the historical territorial claims that have informed the Casamance conflict. One day as I walked with a friend, we encountered a village chief bicycling to his orange grove. The two men began discussing the mining venture. "We're all against it," the chief said adamantly. "What happened to autonomy for Casamance? We were never supposed to be the same country," he insisted.

This village chief was a former military officer, educated in Dakar. In a separate interview after our impromptu encounter, he explained the long history of Casamance's exploitation—first by the French, and then by the northerners:

First of all, we're on two sides. Senegal, the north, is managed differently than we are. It's state policy. The French colonizers of French West Africa, when they came to Gorée Island, and to Saint-Louis and Thiès, they found the *évolués* [Europeanized native elites], and they gave them French citizenship. They brought money, the *franc*. They gave it to the northerners, and they left us in darkness. To earn money, we had to work the land. You had to pay taxes, and to do that, you had to make money. The northerners, their

land was poor. They came to Casamance, where there were agriculturalists, workers, and they bought fruits and took them to the north. It's now that system that governs relations between the two sides. There are the producers, and there are the buyers. From the eighteenth century until now, they prefer to keep the factories in Dakar and Thiès and keep us as agriculturalists and resource users. All our goods come from there. It will be the same with the zircon. They'll take it to Dakar, and we'll get nothing from it. They'll continue treating us like objects. You see what that does? It doesn't work. *Waxal dëgg rekk* [just tell the truth, in Wolof], it doesn't work! Things are extracted here, and all the factories are up there. (interview, Kataba I district, July 6, 2015)

In this recounting, the chief drew on particular historical understandings of regional populations, and the role of taxation, representation, and extraction in mediating between different populations and the (colonial) state.⁶

These historical narratives are widely shared in the sub-region, and they allowed for an articulation of the mining controversy at a scale beyond the community or district. The mine was interpreted within a historical regional context, and was seen as reinforcing relations of exploitation. This resonates with other cases in which land deals and their attendant social tensions have been mapped onto longer histories of governmental neglect and violent conflict (Kandel 2015; Martiniello 2015).

These identities and narratives were echoed widely in the district, even by people neither directly implicated in activist organizing against the mining project nor involved in the MFDC. This worked to make the mining concession part of popular historical understandings, and to build an opposition that was both local and Casamançais, based on historical narratives and territorial claims. This scaling work made the project politically significant in ways that had to be contended with and countered by both Astron and the Senegalese state, and that contributed to delays and continued negotiations.

Contradictions of “Casamance”

Mapping the project onto the region tapped into meaningful political narratives, territorial claims, and histories of conflict and resistance. But there was no coherent “Casamançais population” opposed to the mine; indeed, many people outside of the district were unaware or only distantly aware of the controversy. The “unity” of the population at this scale was thus constructed through ways of talking and through the labor of organizing by the Committee, with very real impacts on the relationship between Niafarang, the MFDC, and the state.

While the objectives and narratives of the Committee aligned in some ways with the MFDC's messaging, the scaling of the project and its potential stakeholders to Casamance (and to the MFDC's way of framing Casamance) increased local interpersonal tensions and political divisions within the Committee. At one meeting of the Committee that I attended in November

2015, members debated whether to attend an MFDC meeting to which they had been invited to speak about the zircon controversy. Talla, the president of the Committee, was infuriated that the MFDC representative had delivered the invitation letter to him at his place of work; he found this intimidating and inappropriate. Some members thought that attending the MFDC meeting would allow them to spread awareness of the current status of the project, or at least to learn about the MFDC's plans. Talla and others rejected this proposition, explaining that appearing to side with the MFDC would jeopardize their local organizing work. As one man added, "What will the state say if we are aligned with the MFDC? We have to make it clear that this is a *civil* struggle." After some discussion, the Committee leadership agreed to neither attend the meeting nor respond to the invitation.

The mining controversy also reflected ethnic tensions. Members of the MFDC often drew on problematic associations between Jola ethnic identity and "all of Casamance." This understanding is particularly inaccurate in Niafarang and the Fogy subregion of which it is a part, given the histories of Soninke and Mandinka settlement and conquests (Pélissier 1966; Mark 1985; Barry 1988). Two supporters of the mine suggested to me that the mining project would never have been controversial had it been an avenue for the MFDC's enrichment: "The Jola villages block us at every turn. ... They want to destroy the environment all the way to Cap Skirring. But you hear nothing about it, because it's all Jola villages" (fieldnotes, July 11, 2015). These men saw hypocrisy in the MFDC's selective approach to environmental protection, and challenged interpretations of the region that highlighted Jola identity and ownership while invalidating the historical Mandinka presence in this area. They viewed the mine's opponents as reproducing dangerous regional conflicts.

These latent tensions at stake in presenting the mine as large-scale and therefore as a regional issue were exploitable by state and corporate attempts at socio-spatial fragmentation. In this process, the mine was depoliticized through technical references to its coordinates and its small-scale nature, and repoliticized through localized conflict among individuals and villages.

Depoliticization and repoliticization: state and corporate "downscaling" and fragmentation

From the start, the primary scale of interest to Carnegie (and later Astron) was the scale of the mineral deposit. With a then-operational mine in Kartong, just across the Gambian border, Carnegie detailed ongoing efforts in 2007 to explore resource potential and extend mining efforts across the border into Casamance: "The results of the exploration work in Senegal will provide an understanding of the probable final scale/mine life of this cross-border mineral sands project which the board believes has significant potential" (Carnegie Minerals 2007:2). As the report states, exploration efforts began in Niafarang because it allowed for "quick progress," sitting atop the same deposit as the existing Gambian operations (later closed by

former Gambian President Yahya Jammeh) (Carnegie Minerals 2007:7). Describing exploratory drilling and airborne geophysical surveys that were later continued farther south of Niafarang, Carnegie notes that “the Company’s goal ... is to discover further areas of mineralisation that can significantly add to the explored Niafarang deposit” (FE Trustnet 2008). Yet to realize its operations across the cross-border deposit, the company inevitably had to (selectively) entangle itself with actors at socio-politically significant national, regional, and local scales.

Because Astron had no direct corporate presence at the local or national levels, it alternately worked through the Senegalese state and private individuals to embed itself in the locality and pursue public acceptance of the Niafarang Project. Corporate actors remained at a distance until their contacts on the ground—especially their “local Project consultant,” mentioned in company documents—informed them of relevant developments in progress toward the mining license. This “local Project consultant” was not in fact local, but was based in Dakar; many local residents had a deep distrust of him due to his work as both an “independent” environmental consultant for the project’s Environmental and Social Impact Study and the company’s representative. As a personification of the otherwise distant corporation, he was *persona non grata* in the village of Niafarang. By working through him, Astron individualized risk and avoided their own direct entanglement in conflict.

However, the consultant’s unpopularity in the district served to foment additional controversy, necessitating the involvement of appointed and elected state actors in the negotiations. This, combined with the inclusion of heavy mineral sands mining in Macky Sall’s PSE in 2014, signaled that, as one Committee member stated, “we are no longer fighting the multinational, but now the state.” As has been observed elsewhere, in spite of contemporary understandings of sovereignty as an extensive and international network (rather than confined to the nation-states), states are still the main territorial coordinating entity through which privately-held or national land and resources can be transferred to outside investors; as such, the state is often the main target of anti-dispossession movements (Levien 2013).

The regional significance of the project and the potential for renewed conflict contributed to the stalling of the mining project. In 2015, Salif Sadio, the leader of one of the most militant factions of the MFDC, sent a menacing letter to numerous village chiefs in the district, informing them that he was willing to resume violence in the event that the mining project went forward. Threats that the mine could reignite the separatist conflict compelled state officials in Dakar, Ziguinchor, and Diouloulou to continue what had already been a long-term process of dialogue with local communities. One official in Dakar explained that they had already spent years negotiating the project in Casamance, but “the project doesn’t have the right to enter into a tense context. We have to negotiate and not use force” (interview, Dakar, July 24, 2015). And, as one regional administrator involved in the negotiations stated, “We want the social peace to be preserved—that’s my main concern. We don’t want the project to tear the social fabric. We need to maintain peace

in all of Casamance" (interview, Ziguinchor Region, March 7, 2016). Their approach to this was to recruit locally influential people, working through these individuals to secure local acceptance.

State actors and the mining company's consultant increasingly focused on securing consent from a small group of residents of nearby Mandinka villages (especially the village of Kabadio), by-passing the Niafarang residents altogether. Heated arguments occurred (reportedly manifesting in a brawl) about a Memorandum of Understanding that was signed by a small group of men in one of these villages, state officials, and the mining company. Amid a particularly tense time in the mining negotiations, Moussa recounted to me that one evening many years ago, residents of Kabadio had rounded up all the guns from Niafarang; according to Moussa, they had claimed that since Niafarang was a village of "rebels" affiliated with the MFDC, keeping the weapons in Kabadio would be safer. He told me: "[The guns] are still in Kabadio! I've always said, if anyone uses force against Niafarang, it will be Kabadio, not the state" (fieldnotes, November 9, 2015). As other studies of extraction and land deals have shown, corporations are often enacted locally through meticulously-cultivated supporters; this serves to localize conflicts, making communities the first line of defense to protect companies and pitting locals against each other (Welker 2009; Hall et al. 2015:471).

Ultimately, the Memorandum of Understanding was taken to fulfill the conditions of popular approval mandated under the Senegalese Environmental Code. In allowing a small group of people—none of whom actually lived in Niafarang itself—to speak for the entire population, this choice reinforced the mining project as a hyper-local issue.

For Astron's consultant, the expansiveness of the opposition masked the fact that the mining concession would affect only a handful of landowners. These landowners, he suggested, were manipulated by foreign interests, and they had in turn managed to convince the rest of the population to side with them (interview, Dakar, September 11, 2014). This perspective was shared by a number of project proponents within the villages—including those who signed the Memorandum of Understanding—who emphasized the limited spatial extent and minimal ecological effects of the mine. One mine supporter who had been working with the company to assuage local people's fears about the project expressed to me that he was frustrated by what he saw as an entire opposition movement formed around a few landowners' interests, as he felt that this would hold back local economic development. This view inverted the scaling of the project by its opponents; rather than threatening regional destruction, the project portended positive effects at a wider local or sub-regional scale, while its negative effects would be limited to a few individuals. This understanding legitimized state and corporate actors' more restrictive approach to the negotiations, which were limited to acquiescent local residents and excluded activists and the Niafarang landowners who would be directly displaced.

Like other mining companies pursuing an informal "social license to operate" by engaging in local life, religious rituals, and national imaginaries

(Rajak 2014; Welker 2014), the company also selectively (and superficially) engaged in local cultural practices: “Village Chief’s [sic] and Chief Notables were engaged with whereby Astron representatives were invited to join in local prayer ceremonies. The prayer ceremonies were an indication of the local respect and acceptance of Astron in developing a small mine in the local region” (Astron 2017:np). Leaving aside the question of whether an invitation to prayer actually conferred widespread acceptance of the project, this account indicates how the company sought to selectively align itself with leaders and communities, even as it remained largely absent from daily life and local conflicts over the mine. This further indicates how global capitalism is locally instantiated, often in ways that seek to keep corporations themselves at a “safe” distance and disentangled from political or civil strife; at the same time, they remain entangled in these processes, due to logistical exigencies and/or the pursuit of legitimacy (Appel 2012a; Rajak 2014; Welker 2014).

In spite of attempts to present the mine as hyper-local and to contain conflict, the scaling of the project by project opponents forced Astron to engage with the “region.” In 2017, Astron awarded a three-year financing contract in the amount of XOF90 million (approximately USD155,000) to Casa Sports, a regional association based in Ziguinchor. This was made explicit in the company’s publicized explanation of the rationale behind the deal: “Casa Sport [sic] is the regional football association which extends over the Casamance region, not just the specific project area. The decision to sponsor such an organization was made as football is a passionate past time [sic] of the region and the connection to people far and wide was identified as the most effective way to support a region without specific regional bias” (Astron 2017).⁷ It is significant that this contribution targeted the regional scale, rather than funding local teams (some of which had been approached and had rejected the company’s donations); this underscores the tensions between the local and regional terms of debate and approval.

While the Niafarang Project was officially and technically a small-scale mine, it portended future extensions of the mining frontier. On its website, Astron describes the Niafarang Project as the first phase of extraction within a broader spatial extent, represented by the exploration license: “The Niafarang Project is located within an exploration license zone covering an area of 397km² along a 75km stretch of the Casamance coast of Senegal, West Africa. An area approximately 6km along the coast ... constitutes the first stage of the proposed project” (Niafarang Mineral Sands Project 2021). Even as they have encountered multiple difficulties in beginning mining operations (including debates within Senegal and problems with external financing), the company continues to renew the exploration license to “provide Astron with an insight to the future growth opportunities within the initial project commencement area of Casamance and other regions within Senegal” (Astron 2017:np). Meanwhile, a Dakar-based mining company, West African Investment Holdings, acquired exploration rights for heavy mineral sands in an area of 187 km² in the Karon Islands, just south of the Niafarang Project site, in 2013 (République du Sénégal 2013). While the Niafarang Project may

therefore be one small mining project, the future of various communities along the Casamance coast may be more broadly impacted by the geological accident of straddling mineral reserves, whose value fluctuates according to demand on global markets. It also means that the scale of mining—by Astron, and by others—remains an open question for the future.

Conclusion

The opposition to the Niafarang Project demonstrates how one "small-scale" concession was cast as potentially becoming "large-scale" and was thereby understood and acted upon as a wider regional issue. This politicized and linked discrete extractive projects as part of a broader regional history of exploitation, thereby expanding stakeholders, audiences, and leverage. In spite of the tensions, exclusions, and contradictions involved, scaling the project to "the region" imparted political meaning and enabled widespread opposition.

Mapping the eventual extent of the project onto "all of Casamance" both countered a more divisive and fragmentary strategy on the part of state and corporate actors, and produced contradictions that were exploited in attempts to "downscale" the mine and the conflict. State officials and mining consultants have consistently stressed the "small-scale," local nature of the mine and have selectively negotiated with certain individuals. Likewise, local proponents of the project have sought to portray the mine's potentially detrimental effects as minimal, limited to a few landowners who live on the site itself. Bolstering these assumptions, Astron has worked through these local proponents, while also appeasing "regional" demands and retaining a focus on further expansion of mining operations in the future. This demonstrates a common tendency for larger-scale projects to be realized in piecemeal fashion over time, in ways that fragment opposition and limit popular understandings of extractive projects and their impacts. As a result, "small-scale" concessions should not be seen as insignificant, as these concessions often have serious, cumulative impacts on land transformations and livelihoods.

Attention to the politics of scale expands understandings of resistance to extractive projects and of the spatio-temporalities through which extraction transforms landscapes and lives. Uncertainty and future unknowns about the development of the deposit allowed both those opposed to and those in support of the Niafarang Project to strategically advance their own more definitive claims about the project's extent, positioning it as either a regional or a hyper-local issue. The politics of scale play a role in anticipating future extensions of extractive projects and in stalling land deals, but delays are very common in many agricultural and mining land deals, for various reasons, from political conflict, to bureaucratic deficiencies, to falling market prices. The impact of resistance "from below" on producing these delays is important and should not be understated; at the same time, delays may in fact be a terrain of corporate speculation and may therefore enable extractive enterprises in the future.

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Notes

1. In mining industry classification systems, a Probable Ore Reserve refers to indicated and/or measured mineral resources that can be mined in an economically viable way.
2. Rural Communities were created in 1972, by *Loi N° 72-25 du 19 avril 1972 relative aux Communautés Rurales*. They included between ten and fifty villages (Boone 2003), which inhabited the same *terroir* and were connected through solidarity and shared interests (Loi N° 72-25 du 19 avril 1972).
3. Although in some ways this experience of marginality is not unique to Casamance, Catherine Boone (2003) has noted that egalitarian Jola societies and long traditions of resistance in Lower Casamance posed challenges to clientelist models of integration for both the French colonial state and the Senegalese state.
4. Not all opponents used this regional scaling. Notably, women rarely mentioned “Casamance” as a whole, but were instead focused on the proximate effects of the mine on their lives and on future generations within the villages. These understandings of the mine’s significance were marginalized in the scaling of the Niafarang Project to a Casamance issue (and are marginalized in my analysis here).
5. All proper names are pseudonyms. I have retained village names and the names of corporations.
6. Throughout French West Africa, the *évolués* had different rights and privileges (including access to education) than did other populations. Senegal was also unique, in that original residents of what were termed the Four Communes—Dakar, Rufisque, Gorée Island, and Saint-Louis—were entitled to representation by deputies in the French National Assembly (Diouf 2001).
7. Casa Sports has long been bound up with Casamançais nationalism, with separatists using the stadium, soccer, and the association itself as a forum for articulating demands for regional independence (Deets 2016).