GENERAL ARTICLES

Multiscalar moral economy Global agribusiness, rural Zambian residents, and the distributed crowd

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Abstract: This article addresses the relevance of the moral economy concept in light of unequal socioeconomic relations between a European agribusiness and rural residents in Zambia. It argues that the moral economy concept offers a helpful heuristic device for analyzing how relationships are constituted, negotiated, and contested among interdependent actors with “opposing” socioeconomic interests. To explain the dynamics of their relationships, however, the moral economy concept has to extend beyond its usual, spatially restricted (i.e., local) focus. Instead, “external,” distant, non-local actors, such as foreign critics concerned about “land grabbing,” also influence the local character of moral-economic exchanges between the agribusiness and rural residents. Hence, the article proposes a multiscalar perspective to account for the influence of a wider array of actors.

Keywords: agribusiness, inequality, land, moral economy, Zambia

Beginning with Edward P. Thompson's (1971, 1991) and James C. Scott's (1976, 2000) seminal contributions, the moral economy concept has traveled in various directions. For Thompson and Scott, as well as in recent contributions (e.g., Edelman 2005; Hann 2010; Palomera and Vetta 2016), the primary focus is on “the economy.” In other directions, the interest lies with “the economy of morals,” a notion of moral economy associated with scholarship of Lorraine Daston (1995) and Didier Fassin (2005, 2009). This notion tends to be less concerned with the material economy (Hann 2018), and is instead focused on the production, distribution, circulation, and deployment of moral sentiments, emotions,

and values, as well as ideas of rights and obligations within social space (Fassin 2009: 1257). The argument presented here remains closer to the former “economic” conception of moral economy, although overtones of the latter conception may be also be encountered.

“Moral economy” does not imply that (capitalist) economies are amoral; it is too simplistic to contrast moral economy with capitalist market societies in which the latter are “morally vacuous” by definition (Browne 2009: 4). Capitalism and the foundations of modern economics have always been shaped and influenced by moral convictions (Fourcade and Healy 2007; Hann and Hart 2011). This is not to say that a

moral critique of capitalism does not offer a legitimate analytical (and political) insight, as was undeniably also the case in work by Thompson and Scott. These scholars, however, did not argue that capitalist markets are amoral (Palomera and Vetta 2016: 420; Randall and Charlesworth 2000: 18). Capitalism, in fact, may partly succeed in sustaining itself by including moral claims, however limited these may be (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Economic activities, thus, can never be clearly separated from social relations and moral considerations (e.g., Carrier 2018; Sampson 2016; Wiegatz 2016). Accordingly, Patrick Neveling warns that “if scientific analysis takes on the guise of moralism, [it] comes at the high cost of misleading juxtapositions of an ‘immoral’ Western world of capitalism and a ‘moral’ non-Western world of pre-capitalist societies” (2015: 229).

Yet, insofar as all economies have moral foundations, to what extent does the moral economy concept differ from a long history of discussing the morality-economy nexus more generally? In line with Thompson and Scott’s original analyses, I consider the moral economy concept a particularly useful heuristic device for investigating the endurance of inequality between actors of different socioeconomic or class backgrounds, who in some material way depend on each other—for income, operating production processes, securing access to resources such as land, and so forth. As Susana Narotzky and Niko Besnier argue (2014: 7), “theoretical approaches that showcase moral economies seek to understand the mutual obligations and responsibilities that render exploitation acceptable, at least for a time, and enable particular forms of socioeconomic differentiation to endure.” The moral economy concept thus helps to analytically grasp how exploitation is, at least to a certain extent, “stabilized” as a result of what actors consider morally (un)acceptable practices. Even when this may also be addressed in other bodies of literature, research on moral economies especially helps to explain how all kind of moral justifications and obligations—including their transgression—shape and contest the

(re)distribution of material-economic aspects that may, at first blush, appear to be of a “purely” economic nature. Hence, the moral economy concept reveals that inequality and exploitation are rarely naked, but often come dressed up in moral clothing—as discrepancies between the European agribusiness’s moral representations and its CEO salary will also demonstrate. This does not imply that different sides necessarily operate within the same moral value system, but that moral frames to rationalize or justify “good” and “bad” practices are not only applied to challenge inequality, but especially, on the side of socioeconomic elite, may also be deployed to defend the status quo and neutralize demands for (more) “distributive justice,” that is fair(er) distribution of material goods and rewards in society (e.g., Roemer 1998).

A multiscalar perspective

My analysis focuses on the asymmetrical and yet interdependent socioeconomic relations between a European agribusiness firm, initially with substantial financial means to invest in the Zambian countryside, and its rural neighbors who relied on (semi-)subsistence farming and hoped the agribusiness would help to improve their situation. In my analysis of the moral economy between these actors, I realized that their relationships cannot be understood without an analytical openness to the role of “external” actors, which is a topic that has received relatively little attention in the moral economy literature. Most analyses tend to focus on locally constituted and direct interactions among actors with opposing socioeconomic interests (Edelman 2005; Randall and Charlesworth 2000)—almost as if these interactions take place under a giant permeable bowl, placed upside down on the surface of the earth, yet spatially and causally separated from all other actors and factors. By contrast, anthropological studies of NGOs, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and advocacy (e.g., Dolan and Rajak 2016; Fortun 2001) have long argued that the realities in localized settings can often not be understood

without considering wider spheres of influence. In the context of global migration, for example, Ayse Çağlar and Nina Glick Schiller (2015) demonstrate that a multiscalar perspective helps to recognize how different actors are situated in multiple networks of power across localities, regions, and nation-states (see also Xiang 2013). To better grasp how various actors, geographies, and ideologies shape particular but often locally constituted moral-economic interactions among different but interdependent actors, I similarly propose a multiscalar perspective for the study of moral economies.

I do not imply that “external” influences are absent in other analyses of the moral economy concept. Yet, these are mainly formulated as impersonal or abstract processes (of “global capitalism”), rather than actors with agency. In the case of the European agribusiness firm in Zambia, abstract capitalist logics also underpin a focus on profit maximization, and thus determine interactions with rural residents who feel that they do not receive fair compensation. Following Chris Hann (2018) and Jaime Palomera and Theodora Vetta (2016), it is essential to acknowledge the influence of global forms of political economy and capital accumulation as structuring enduring (local) unequal economic relationships around the world. Yet, these logics and structures are also challenged in myriad ways by critics “operating from afar,” who may influence unequal socioeconomic relationships and related moral discourses. The critics discussed here are by no means the only “external” actors who potentially shape moral economies. Jörg Wiegratz (2016: 145) suggests that in order to understand “local” moral economies, analysts must consider a wide range of extra-local “norm setters,” including state officials, donors, transnational corporations, and so on, who may shape the moral claims related to particular economic practices and interactions.¹ The impacts of these actors vary, and may even favor the strongest actors in a particular socioeconomic constellation. In this article, however, I focus especially on one group of global actors with the capacity to shape realities on the ground,

namely, international critics who aim to mitigate the negative impact of corporate practices. I refer to them as members of the “distributed” crowd.²

Contrary to Thompson’s famous English crowd, external critics tend to only be indirectly involved in interactions on the ground. Yet by casting moral judgment, even if they do not necessarily share the same moral critique in detail, they may still have an impact on economic realities in which they often do not directly partake. The Zambian case, for example, exemplifies that the company’s interactions with rural residents cannot be detached from an international movement of NGOs, journalists, (activist-)scholars, and other actors concerned about the global land rush (e.g., Anseeuw et al. 2012; Borrás et al. 2013; White et al. 2012). Through their discourses, media and other (“naming and shaming”) campaigns, and on-site visits, such actors can have impacts on the ground. Interestingly, the fiercest critics among them may have a closer resemblance with Thompson’s crowd than others, including numerous rural Zambian residents who are directly involved in interactions on the ground. Like Thompson’s analysis of resistance in eighteenth-century England (see also Keene 2015), these critics oppose the expansion of capitalist markets (in land in this case). Many local residents, though, initially welcomed the investment and may have been more concerned about the investment’s contribution to their sustenance—resonating more with Scott’s peasants in Southeast Asia.

On the (Zambian) ground

Following wider interests in Zambia’s alleged abundance of “available” land (Chitonge et al. 2017; Joala et al. 2016; Matenga and Hichaambwa 2017), the European agribusiness purchased about 38,000 hectares of titled land in Zambia’s Central Province, which was predominantly owned by absentee-landlords or only partially developed. Much of the land had to be cleared and infrastructure put in place when the com-

pany initiated operations in 2012. A few years later, in 2015, I first visited the area and have since been conducting ethnographic research at the investment site at regular intervals. In exchange for the possibility of studying its internal operations in Zambia, I guaranteed anonymity for the agribusiness firm, European country of origin, and exact location in Zambia; I will instead refer to the firm with the pseudonym, Miombo Inc. Notwithstanding that I have been unable to obtain detailed insights about its financial operations, and the company also unilaterally revoked the agreement in 2019,³ my field research allowed me to closely follow employees (including the managing director) in their daily work, as well as to conduct interviews and observe interactions with, and moral judgments about, neighboring residents. In addition, I corresponded via email and met in person with the staff of the European headquarters.

Around the investment site, there is a population of mainly (semi-)subsistence smallholder farmers living under very basic conditions in several chieftaincies, with one directly bordering land that Miombo Inc. has developed thus far, comprising less than 6,000 hectares. In addition, there is a small “cooperative” of about one hundred, mainly elderly, Zambians who originally lived in the capital Lusaka. These families operate as individual smallholder farm units, however, they own the land conjointly. I spoke to about fifty of these rural residents, including a chief and members of his entourage, and also visited local villages and homesteads. My focus was primarily on their interactions with Miombo Inc. and less on varieties of attitudes within the communities. However, I observed that residents by no means share the same interests and interactions with the agribusiness, due in part to various levels and sources of income, although there appeared to be less polarization in the acceptance or rejection of foreign investments as found elsewhere in Africa (e.g., Gilfoy 2014). While residents had political agency in interactions with Miombo Inc. from the outset, a multiscalar approach also reveals that “external” critics contributed substantially to

the shape their interactions took. I interviewed about ten European actors, including NGO representatives, who can be said to constitute part of the distributed crowd of moral critics. Interviews with government officials in Miombo Inc.’s country of origin and embassy staff based in Lusaka also provided relevant information about their engagements with Miombo Inc. as well as concerns about how a (potentially) damaged reputation could reflect on the country of origin. In the district’s administrative center, moreover, I regularly spoke with government officials whose contributions also shaped moral-economic interactions, even though they were not directly affected by relations on the ground. At times, these local official allowed Miombo Inc. to get away with practices that rural residents considered unacceptable, while in other instances they defended the interests of rural residents by putting moral pressure on the company.

Establishing relationships

With an estimated investment of about US\$60 million, Miombo Inc.’s plan, among other things, was to build two dams for irrigation infrastructure to support “10,000 hectares for food production,” which would allow the company to grow crops in both rainy and dry seasons. Other land would be allocated to cattle ranching, while Miombo Inc. also intended to engage in trading and processing facilities. Although the firm was financially superior to all other actors in the area, and had only purchased titled land, it presented itself with explicitly moral-economic arguments about how local communities would substantially benefit from the investment. The firm would employ up to one thousand people, especially local residents, and set up an out-grower scheme that would benefit smallholder farmers. Moreover, as the firm had to resettle a number of residents living on land it had purchased, Miombo Inc. also applied moral-economic arguments to build relationships with rural residents.

Contrary to Thompson’s English crowd and Scott’s peasants, who had long histories of lo-

cal interactions with elite actors, moral-economic relations in the Zambian countryside had to be built from the ground up, in a way similar to the rice projects that Graeme MacRae (2016) describes in Bali. In his case, “external” (Indonesian) businessmen aimed to establish business relations with local rice farmers. They arrived with many promises and proposals to find new solutions for the farmers, much like Miombo Inc. This indicates that in order to establish its commercial operations, Miombo Inc. depended in part on neighboring residents and could not merely advance its economic interests unilaterally. Rural residents’ moral-economic expectations (about improving their economic conditions), and objections to potentially negative impacts, could not be ignored, as was demonstrated in negotiations with the cooperative of mostly elderly Zambians over the construction of one of the dams. As one of the cooperative’s members explained, they were initially very skeptical, because one never knows with these big companies: “they may dangle some sweets in front of you, but later you will have to swallow the bitter pill.” Moral concerns like these shaped the residents’ approach to negotiating compensation for a land swap required for Miombo Inc. to construct the dam. Eventually, two sides with what appeared to be huge differences in finances and power conjointly shaped expectations and obligations from which the cooperative also thought it would benefit. The cooperative managed, for example, to receive compensation in the construction of houses, the drilling of boreholes, and also other small forms of ad hoc assistance.

That residents were relatively successful in negotiating an agreement with Miombo Inc. as well as other financial contributions of the firm to neighboring residents resulted importantly from Miombo Inc.’s initial availability of funding—these financial contributions also reinforced expectations among residents, though. With little financial means of their own, residents successfully lobbied for donations (for schools, festivities, etc.) and also appreciated the fact that Miombo Inc. (initially) purchased their

produce directly in the village. Their concerns were more about sustenance than anti-capitalist critique—and to a certain extent they even welcomed integration into capitalist markets. For Miombo Inc., this engagement was not without additional financial costs, even though it could be argued that this was driven by a view toward securing long-term profits; as Scott (1976: 24) suggests, “in fact, it is not at all clear that capitalist firms do not often choose stability and steady growth over profit maximization.” Miombo Inc.’s approach was thus certainly strategic from an economic point of view, although (some) moral concerns about rural residents’ well-being were not absent among its employees—independent of the agribusiness’ profit motives. The extent to which these moral concerns were really a driving force, however, has at times been a point of debate in my discussions with the company. The sustainability managing director based at the European headquarters argued that Miombo Inc.’s approach vis-à-vis the rural residents is first and foremost driven by their moral concerns for the welfare of the less privileged. Although the company is by no means the same as more unscrupulous actors in the global land rush (Global Witness 2016), the director’s presentation does not reflect realities on the ground. The company’s “moral” concerns are not only limited, as I will show below, but, especially as I observed during the first two years of research, they were significantly instigated by concern about how angry rural residents might affect the company’s reputation (among the distributed crowd) abroad.

Opposing the global land rush from afar

Interactions between Miombo Inc. and neighboring residents may appear to be a local affair, yet these relationships cannot be understood without extending the moral economy concept beyond the spatially confined setting of the Zambian countryside, that is, adopting a multiscalar approach. Transnational corporations are different than locally operating market ac-

tors, such as individual commercial farmers in Zambia. In these cases, however, workers and/or rural residents also tend to navigate different settings, including the countryside and Lusaka, both physically and via cell phones and social media, which shapes their position in the interactions with a company. This resonates with Dimitra Kofti's (2016) work that highlights how diverse moral frameworks converge in movements between the workspace (of a Bulgarian factory) and the workers' households. Although Kofti may not define this convergence in such terms, she points toward a multiscalar approach for adequately analyzing the reproduction of precarity and capital. Yet, in the case of an international company like Miombo Inc., it is especially employees who move between even more distant spaces, from the Zambian investment site to the firm's European headquarters. Arriving from abroad, these employees introduce a new level of spatialization to the countryside. The expansion of space, though not defined in such terms, was also central to Thompson's (1971) analysis: with the rise of the national capitalist market, the crowd felt that the implicit "agreement" between them and local elites was no longer being obeyed. Apparently, in the new (wider) setting, elites no longer felt obliged to uphold existing obligations to the crowd, which led to food riots. Since the eighteenth century, commodity markets have only continued to expand, and between 2007 and 2009, increasing global food prices led to food riots in various places around the world. Similar to the historical food riots in England, these riots were as much about social justice and unequal economic relationships in a globalized world as they were about hunger, and they could be accordingly analyzed under the moral economy concept (Hossain 2009; Hossain and Kalita 2014).

Global patterns shaping (local) inequalities, however, have also been challenged at a global level, which is beyond locally confined settings. Marc Edelman (2005), for example, analyzes global peasant movements opposing World Trade Organization (WTO) policies through appeals to moral economy concepts.

Even broader is the alleged constitution of a global moral economy that has emerged out of concerns expressed by global civil society and the global justice movement against the spread of global capitalism (Calabrese 2005; Sandberg 2015). Yet, even in these spatial expansions of the concept, the focus is still predominantly on directly affected by, and involved in, unequal socioeconomic interactions. The main "external" influences that are accounted for are, as mentioned above, impersonal political-economic structures and abstract forms of (global) capital accumulation, which tend to favor "powerful" economic actors in local moral economies. These are thus relevant to address, especially in response to the micro-social focus of many moral economy analyses that leave out these structures (Palomera and Vetta 2016: 5). However, it is also relevant to attend to actors at various other (local, national, global) scales, who through their discourses, practices, and social pressure may still shape moral-economic interactions, even when they are not direct stakeholders.

Holding corporate power to account

The relations between Miombo Inc. and neighboring residents, including the cooperative, have evidently been influenced by a global movement of critics pointing to the negative impacts of large-scale land deals and agricultural production on the poorest of the world—exemplified by NGOs such as Grain, Friends of the Earth, and Oxfam, as well as by peasant movements such as La Via Campesina, and activist scholars (Borras 2016). A number of these critics have also visited the Zambian site Miombo Inc. used to establish itself, which highlights the analytic relevance of including actors external to direct interactions on the ground. Although international critics often respond to local developments (Keck and Sikkink 1998), rural residents in the Zambian case had not requested support. Rather, critics followed Miombo Inc. after the size of their land purchase had been published in European media. Although various critics

shared concerns about the impact that a large-scale foreign land investment could have in the Zambian countryside, they did not have unified approaches and interests—yet, apart from nuanced differences in their approach, I did not observe tensions between them. For example, representatives of a political party from Miombo Inc.'s home country had come to investigate whether the company was having a negative environmental impact on its neighboring communities. An NGO, in addition, had a mandate to defend the human right for food—of rural residents, in this case—and fiercely oppose the increasing commodification of land. Apart from occasional visits to the area, moreover, I observed little long-lasting communication between overseas critics and residents. Once visitors had left the area, contacts ceased in most instances. In the case of the representatives of a political party, moreover, they only visited the area once. The intended audience and moral considerations of international critics and local residents were also different, with many residents initially hoping Miombo Inc. would offer employment and other opportunities, while visiting critics mainly focused on the negative impact a “powerful” company from their country of origin could have on “poor” rural residents—and against the expansion of capitalist markets. Generally speaking, disparities between external moral inventions and local moral-economic expectations are not uncommon, as debates about Survival International's interventions on behalf of the Kalahari San in Botswana demonstrate (e.g., Solway 2009). Notwithstanding, with their looming potential to level criticism and undertake public actions—such as public campaigns or appealing to relevant ministers in the firm's European home country—the visitors (and related global opposition against land grabbing) have had a direct influence on Miombo Inc.'s interactions with rural residents.

Agreements that the company reached with a number of families residing on its land were partly the result of the company's concerns with being accused of “land grabbing” at home, not unlike other large-scale land investments (Sal-

verda 2019a). Hence, Miombo Inc.'s concerns particularly emerged from the negative impact that the distributed crowd could have on the firm's international reputation, which seemed to be somewhat (economically) beneficial to the residents. The company resettled the families and provided them with new plots of land for which they also obtained land titles—something they did not have before. It additionally promised to construct brick houses. When I visited a number of the resettled residents, they appeared satisfied with the compensation, especially their brick houses and the security of titled land.

Although “contributions” such as brick houses and land security did not lift rural residents out of poverty, it shows that outside actors exerting pressure on locally operating market actors may influence the balance of economic and moral considerations, even when they often operate from afar and do not face the negative consequences of market exchanges themselves. This is by no means a new phenomenon, as European colonial expansion “also inspired counter-arguments about the moral significance of common human feeling” (Redfield and Bornstein 2011: 13), while the British anti-slavery movement exemplifies the role of people acting from afar in balancing profit-seeking and human well-being (Robertson 2017). More recent, and of central relevance to the case discussed here, is the international movement of critics who hold globally expanding corporations accountable for the negative impacts of their actions elsewhere (Hughes et al. 2008). Kim Fortun's (2001) work on advocacy in the aftermath of the Bhopal disaster, for example, demonstrates that a multiscalar perspective is important to understanding realities on the ground. Examples like Fair Trade certification, as well as CSR (e.g., Dolan and Rajak 2016), are equally examples of an increasing spatial separation between the location of critics, such as NGOs and other civil society actors, and actors directly experiencing the negative consequences of corporate activities. The multiscalar dynamics of the Fair Trade movement are evident insofar as it was constituted by actors in the Global North who

opposed transnational economic actors “using their power for further enrichment to the detriment of poorer countries and producers, particularly of agricultural products like coffee” (Haight 2011: 75). The garment and textile industry also has a history of facing pressure from critics demanding justice for affected parties, even when they are often not experiencing negative consequences themselves (e.g., Neve 2008); equally, extractive industries have been confronted by “external” concerns about labor relations, displacement of communities, and environmental destruction (Kirsch 2014; Rajak 2011; Welker 2014). Even if many of these attempts may hardly alter structural inequalities, and corporations often fall short of substantial change, critics may still succeed in pressuring corporations to address some of the moral concerns raised (Welker 2014: 217–218).

Further highlighting the relevance of a multiscalar approach to moral economy, the Miombo Inc. and other cases demonstrate the potential of a small group of vocal critics to draw in the general public “at home,” which in actual terms would be a more “proper” crowd, so to speak. These are large groups that do not directly experience the negative impacts of unequal socio-economic distributions either, but that can, as members of “distributed” crowds, be mobilized against corporations in their respective home countries. Many transnational corporations are particularly concerned about the potential of this vibrant public of consumers and electorates, who can call for consumer boycotts, stage protests ahead of shareholder meetings (e.g., Foster 2008), or demand that politicians or prosecutors in their countries of origin take action (see also Sampson 2016). This has been further reinforced by the speed and reach of critique through social media and the internet, as I also noticed in my interactions with Miombo Inc. (Salverda 2019b). Corporate concerns about what negative impact the distributed crowd could have on their public image is thus not only about its physical presence, but especially also about its potential to publish critique online.

Local struggles

Even when international initiatives may not fundamentally alter the position of “opposing” sides within particular moral economies, they can, as the above shows, influence moral-economic relationships on the ground. In this particular case, the “success” of international critics especially results from corporate concerns about their (international) image, as Miombo Inc.’s managing director in Zambia also indicated. He was actually of the opinion that residents’ demands largely result from their awareness of the European headquarters’ concerns about international critics. The residents continue to complain and push for more, he argued, because they know that Miombo Inc. wants to avoid negative publicity. Even when he disagreed with a resident, he explained, dismissing their demands outright is not an option: “you have to talk and talk to the people and let them realize themselves that they can’t get more.” With moral-economic arguments, such as Miombo Inc.’s economic contribution to residents’ well-being as well as morally questioning their claims, he intended to protect the company’s interests, although I also observed that discussions with residents sometimes resulted in agreeing to some of their demands. My observations, however, show that in their struggles with Miombo Inc., locals contemplate the international pressure the company faces less than the managing director assumed.

From the beginning, residents have been pushing their own interests in relation to the company without considering international critique, even though, as my main argument has been here, linkages to international scales have importantly contributed to constituting relationships between them and Miombo Inc. As a multiscalar approach helped to reveal, international NGOs and European politicians have been instrumental in pushing Miombo Inc. to pledging particular commitments, yet this was also due to the fact that Miombo Inc. started with substantial investment capital. However, the company has not yet made a profit, due in part to some

unforeseen developments. In 2018, for example, the company had irrigation infrastructure in place for 2,200 hectares, of which, due to a lack of water, only 760 hectares was under irrigation; hence, the company cultivated substantially less than the intended 10,000 hectares. As a result, Miombo Inc. has not been able to live up to its promises, though international critics have hardly followed up on this—especially as they come less often and at more irregular intervals. By the time delays and other shortcomings appeared, the struggle became mainly local.

In 2016, for example, I attended a meeting at Miombo Inc.'s offices with two neighboring residents from the cooperative who were dissatisfied with the pace of implementation for what Miombo Inc. had promised in return for their approval of the dam—the building of the brick houses was taking longer than expected. As demonstrated above, they were initially mildly positive about the arrival of Miombo Inc., yet one of the residents now wondered whether the company was “playing a game.” To rebuke this questioning of the company's morals, the managing director stated that there was no malice intended from the company nor any intent to delay the project. The agreement between them, he argued, was an expression of friendship going beyond the requirements of national regulatory bodies: “we have a commitment and stick to our agreements, though sometimes a bit late.” A year later, the company had indeed made up for some of the delays, as the construction of the houses had progressed. In the meantime, however, new delays had occurred as some houses and other commitments were still not completely finalized in 2019. The residents were particularly dissatisfied about Miombo Inc.'s approach and lack of communication. One member complained that the managing director asks them favors, such as attending an event in honor of Zambia's president visiting the investment. Yet they receive little in return for contributing to Miombo Inc.'s image. He said, “most of the time [the managing director] takes us for a ride. We do a good deed for him, but he returns it with unfriendliness.” This demonstrates that to understand how so-

cioeconomic interactions evolve, it is important to take moral interpretations of promises as well as of a sense of “exploitation” into account—similar to what MacRae observed in Bali, where farmers eventually realized that agreements with “external” businessmen were not so advantageous, and “their real concern was as much about matters of principle and their lack of voice in the process as the money itself” (2016: 97).

Deflecting critique

The moral economy concept equally helps to explain how even when Miombo Inc. does not meet expectations, the company nevertheless often succeeds in mitigating critique. Employment numbers, for example, have been much lower than promised, especially from neighboring communities. A number of international critics anticipated that this would happen, as it is common to promise more employment than is actually delivered in order to facilitate large-scale land deals (Li 2011). Local residents, including the chief, complained about this. However, in the case of competing interests between “elite” members of communities and others, which are frequently witnessed in the case of large-scale land investments (e.g. Borras and Franco 2012; DeVore 2018), the position of the chief vis-à-vis Miombo Inc. is rather ambivalent and points toward differences among rural residents in the benefits they derive from interactions with the company. Owing to the chief's powerful position in the area, Miombo Inc. appeared especially concerned about maintaining his support by offering him (ad hoc) support, often in the form of fertilizers and seeds.

In a similar vein, Miombo Inc. has also succeeded in maintaining government support, even though the District Commissioner (DC), one of the highest-ranking regional government officials, had to ask Miombo Inc. to address local residents' grievances on a number of occasions, after residents had come to his office to complain. Illustrative of the fact that the government's dealing with Miombo Inc. fluctuates, however, he also praised a recent partnership

between the company and a health NGO from Miombo Inc.'s home country in Europe in 2018: "we are very, very thankful for that partnership, which has come at the right time for us." States like Zambia that lack sufficient means to provide for their citizens represent opportunities for foreign firms to step in and thereby limit the impact of (external) critics. Relatively small contributions, such as for the building of schools, allow Miombo Inc. to present itself as a "moral" actor, even though many of the initiatives are often only made possible with financial contributions and assistance from international development organizations, such as health and other NGOs as well as USAID. Hence, when I asked the company's head of sustainable development (based at the European headquarters) about Miombo Inc.'s financial difficulties, she not only categorically denied that such difficulties existed, but she also pointed to all the "good" they are doing in local communities. Relying on a mixture of economic and moral arguments, she wrote to me: "[you do not talk] at all about the enormous benefits brought to the area such as millions of dollars injected into the local economy for grain purchases from smallscale [*sic*] farmers, supporting 13,000 farmers and several schools through trainings and other Outgrower initiatives for crop diversification, yield improvements and production expansion, employment, infrastructure development etc." Dressed up in moral clothing, she diverted attention away from persistent inequalities between corporate staff and the relatively insignificant benefits to local residents. While she and other development partners with whom Miombo Inc. collaborates emphasize moral concerns about the lives of ordinary Africans, they remain silent about the fact that the company has yet to make a profit from the Zambia venture. Notwithstanding, in 2016 the CEO's salary even increased to €646,000 (US\$740,000) despite the absence of profit, while casual workers in Zambia receive a salary of 25 Kwacha per day (less than US\$2). Instead of attending to these disparities, firm spokespersons deploy "moral" sentiments to deflect critique, as can be witnessed in collabo-

rations between corporations and the Fair Trade movement, whereby the former have relatively successfully appropriated Fair Trade's moral authority in order to divert concerns away from remaining inequalities (Dolan 2007; Kuiper and Gemählich 2017). Through the lens of moral economy, this example shows how Miombo Inc. is able to convey a moral message about long-term social responsibility vis-à-vis surrounding residents, meanwhile deflecting attention away from the reality that it remains a corporate venture whose management that takes care of its own shareholders, first and foremost, and exploits rural Zambian residents who are willing to work for less than US\$2 a day.

Conclusion

The moral economy concept highlights how material inequalities can and ought to be understood with reference to moral justifications deployed by relevant actors. However, to grasp the manifold relationships that occur between different and yet interdependent socioeconomic actors, the moral economy concept needs to be extended far beyond a spatially restricted setting and include actors and factors "operating from afar." In the case of Miombo Inc., and similar international corporations, their "moral" practices and concerns about the well-being of much poorer neighboring residents are largely deployed in response to international critics, who constitute "distributed" crowds. Through globalization, civil society organizations, scholars, politicians, NGOs, and others increasingly voice moral concerns about inequalities they do not necessarily experience themselves—with important historical analogies to organizations such as the international abolition movement. A multiscalar perspective is required to account for these transnational moral-economic connections as well as other relevant influences and actors. One might imagine moral economy as an amoeba-like phenomenon,⁴ often extending beyond the confines of an imaginary large inverted bowl covering a geographically con-

financed space, so to speak. Like an amoeba, it may change its shape to encompass a distributed set of actors, geographies, and other factors necessary for any analysis of what may otherwise appear to be merely local moral-economic interactions. One “scale” may pull or push local interactions into one particular direction, while at other times shifting them toward another “scale” of social action and analysis.

A multiscalar approach does not imply, as the Miombo Inc. case also demonstrates, that local actors (and varieties among them) are no longer centrally relevant. Yet even though there are certainly examples of moral economies that barely involve “distributed” actors operating from afar, in many instances, a variety of national, regional, and global actors, as well as prevailing political-economic patterns, probably influence the directions of what otherwise appear to be “local” interactions. Much like the peasants in Scott’s *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976), some of these actors may be primarily concerned about their sustenance, while others may aim to resist incursions from capitalist markets. Similar to Thompson’s English crowd, the latter may not succeed in completely blocking the expansion of capitalist markets, yet their voicing of anti-capitalist critiques may nevertheless shape realities on the ground; as Jonathan DeVore (2018: 517) points out, such voices, narratives, and other semiotic phenomena “produce material consequences at different scales and sites of social interaction.” Hence, the distributed efforts of local residents, international critics, and other actors help to explain (changing) opposition to unequal distributions in the material economy. In a global capitalist system, as the Zambian and many other cases illustrate, their efforts may only slightly improve conditions for the weakest actors within particular (economic) power dynamics. In highlighting the relevance of the moral economy concept for studying socioeconomic inequalities, however, it is just as important to analyze “responses” to attempts to transform economic conditions.

Promises, ad hoc concessions, gifts, and other contributions of the powerful, as seen in

Miombo Inc.’s CSR activities, may actually prolong, as Scott (1976) suggests, the toleration of unequal power relations and inequality. With reference to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s (2005) analysis of the function of critique in capitalism, it could be argued that market actors’ responses to international as well as local critics also neutralize critique, even if these may somewhat alleviate local conditions. This aspect within capitalism may actually be “one of the reasons for the impressive longevity of this economic system, which Marx considered doomed to a rapid demise” (Chiapello 2013: 63). Yet as unequal material distributions remain intact, it is also likely that moral-economic tensions and relationships will be “tested” again—and again. This supports Palomera and Vetta’s (2016: 12) claim that the moral economy is a dynamic concept, which highlights the extent to which markets and sites of social reproduction are “spaces where class relations are constantly renegotiated.” The extent to which unequal material distributions can subsequently be sustained in the face of new challenges partly depends on whether new moral-economic obligations will be successfully (re)negotiated in the wake of disputes between actors of different socioeconomic backgrounds—including criticisms levied by distributed crowds from afar.

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Notes

1. For other relevant exceptions on the role of overseas (philanthropic) aid and (corporate) donors, see Gardner 2015; Ivarsson 2015.
2. Jonathan DeVore, a cultural anthropologist who helped proofread an earlier draft of this paper, proposed the term “distributed” crowd in reference to scholarship on distributed mind and social cognition.
3. The company disagreed with the arguments laid out in a recently published article (Salverda 2019b). Following this disagreement, it revoked our agreement. Due to legal reasons, however, I will still uphold my end of the agreement and refer to the firm as Miombo Inc. in this article.
4. Personal correspondence with Chris Hann, 17 October 2017.

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