New Perspectives on Inclusive and Sustainable Development in Rural Haiti

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Introduction

This study draws on empirical field data to argue that recent, state land grabs for large scale agro-exportation in Haiti are only capable of meeting short-term temporary development goals, and will fail in the more complex goals of decolonization and community development. Agrarian political economy, identity formation, and the conceptual use of space and place are deployed in this examination to compare livelihood outcomes from two different models of land use. Specifically, this study examines placemaking, the creation of identity and belonging rooted in space and place, influenced by the physical environment, and everyday social and cultural practices (Feagan 2007; Main and Sandoval 2015). Placemaking reshapes traditions to meet current challenges and self-identified ways of being.

In this study I look at the form of agrarian political economy developed by small peasant farmers of five community based organizations (CBOs) in North Department, Haiti, to demonstrate that placemaking represents decolonization. I demonstrate this by first, examining how and why CBOs structure food production, distribution and consumption within economic projects as expressions of community caring, identity and belonging; second, I demonstrate how a recent land grab by Agritrans, an agro-exportation plantation, thwarts agrarian placemaking and heightens livelihood
vulnerability and food insecurity.

**Insiders’ Voices Matter**

Decolonization cannot be achieved from the outside; it must be a product of internal design based on internal desires. Haitian CBOs are addressing decolonization through what appear to be food security and economic development projects, but which incorporate decolonization through placemaking. Documenting a community’s production of space and place as socio-cultural practices – namely norms and conventions – reveals traditional moral institutions. These institutions appear when the Haitian peasantry materialize their own local version of an agrarian political economy, an articulation of their history, of intergenerational stories and wisdom, of self-understanding. Agrarian political economy is a field of inquiry that examines changing social relations, and the context of uneven power and distribution of land and wealth (Steckley 2015).

All of this meshes tightly with a critical approach to space and place making. Narratives may construct one desired space as being backwards and non-progressive, and another as forward, efficient and productive. This powerful discursive act freezes one set of realities and gives precedence to a narrative that structures land for conversion into monetary gain at the peril of local visions of space and place building. One reality supplants another, in what Tsing (2000) calls the “performance for economic development.” As Tsing suggests, interested actors imagine a new dramatic space, one of success and economic benefit, to attract international and national financial backers.
The performances create imagery that plots global homogeneity precisely against the heterogeneity of the local, the exotic, the unruly and the dangerous. Cultural diversity becomes locked into a space of the local, and its narrative stays local with little upward traction. This study examines the value of the peasants’ vision of space to decolonize identity while simultaneously contributing to economic and social stability for the region.

**Sampling and Methods**

Five CBOs, all located in the Commune of Limonade, North Department, were chosen as the case study since their inter-linkages enabled an assessment of how local economies and societies were being built in one concentrated area. The project was explained to each CBO leadership and permission was granted to ask the general membership for volunteers. Research data was collected in creole by four research assistants using semi-structured and structured interviews, and focus groups, then translated into English and analyzed using Excel, SPSS, and HyperRESEARCH.

Identity in Haiti is closely associated with the CBO to which one belongs. CBOs became popular during the 1990s, mainly encouraged by three events: a) the impact of the structural adjustment period of the 1980s, which reduced the Government of Haiti’s (GOH) support for its citizenry by retracting government services such as education, healthcare, agricultural extension services etc.; b) the departure of dictator President Jean Claude Duvalier on February 7, 1986; and c) the commencement of substantial government funding set aside in the national budget’s Small Projects section for CBOs by President Aristide (Adrien 2011). According to Adrien (2011) approximately 16,135 CBOs
are officially registered across Haiti. It is often reported that membership in a CBO is one of the few ways to access development project benefits or to improve one’s life. The profits from the value added activities were able to strengthen the CBOs in this study, allowing them to offer more programs to existing members and to extend assistance to new members.

**Grass Root CBOs**

Four (CBOa through CBOd) of the five CBOs were smaller in geographical area and projects’ size. CBO-e is a larger peasant farmer organization with over 1000 members and was responsible for gaining legal access to almost 993 ha of state land, negotiated in 2009 during Presidet Préval’s administration. CBO-b had negotiated legal use of 103 ha for their organization alone, while CBO-a had negotiated legal use of 1 ha for a community garden. A delegation representing the local peasantry negotiated the contracts with the Institut National de la Reforme Agraine (INARAH) and pay 50 gourde (US $1.16)/ha each year to Direction Generale Impots (DGI) for rent.

Linkages between farmers in the rural, peri-urban and urban landscape are necessary to increase production and to support value added transformation centers located in the peri-urban and urban centers. The peasants’ ability to secure international development funding for projects does not change their grassroots identity, although some compromises on project objectives were most likely necessary. Economic development based on agricultural production is how Haitians often build socio-economic and political institutions. Traditional agrarian morality keeps intact priorities of
the community, through distribution of project benefits including food and money, stronger social networks, and improved livelihood needs, in a context mostly free from government support. Social capital is very important to Haitian peasants to reduce risk and vulnerability (Steckley 2015; Smucker and Thomson 1999).

The GOH converted state land to large scale agro-exportation usage in early 2014. Peasants had used the land to create local economic, social, and political autonomy, identity building, and reproduction of a caring agrarian community. On these lands members would grow crops, harvest wild foods, process wood into charcoal, and free range animals, to sell in the local markets or for household consumption. Crops were also used for value added processing. CBO-a, in cooperation with Oxfam GB and Agrisud (French NGO) had established a peanut mill and sold traditional Haitian peanut butter locally, and plain peanut butter to Meds for Foods and Kids (MFK) an international NGO that makes medical peanut butter for malnourished infants and toddlers. CBO-b, in cooperation with Oxfam GB and Agrisud, grew and processed manioc into cassava bread for sale to the local market and visiting diaspora. CBO-c in cooperation with Federation Chamber of National Agriculture (FECHAN), the French Embassy, the Aquitune/Dordogne region of France and Oxfam GB, milled corn for sale to the local market and to the World Food Programme (WFP) for distribution to school feeding programs. CBO-d bought and processed cocoa from local farmers for local markets and tourists, and hopes to increase production to provide chocolate (considered a highly nutritious food), to local school children through WFP.
Each of the four organizations embarked on value added transformation of traditional Haitian fare, finding niches in the local market either not saturated by cheap imports or, in the case of MFK and WFP, given preferential sales. In addition to these activities many of the members used state land to free range cattle. The milk produced was sold to Veterimed’s local milk and yogurt factory called Let Agogo (*Milk in Abundance*). Veterimed’s first factory was located in Limonade and now the Haitian NGO has 35 factories across Haiti. The product is of the highest quality, winning international recognition (1st place of 1600 submissions from 35 countries) in Santiago Chili, in 2013. It was through these projects that members of the five CBOs were able to improve food production, distribution and consumption, and simultaneously create forward and backward linkages to traditional foods, producing a genre of capitalism that reflected Haitian peasant concerns.

*The space inside the economic activities*

Members materialize an agrarian economy inside the economic activities just described. The agrarian economy is historically situated; it exists prior to the newly imagined economic project and is the reason for the economic project. The agrarian economy is the materialization of symbolic space shaped by a historical narrative onto a modern context. It is relational (space being folded into social relations). This is achieved by materializing the space of community care, where identity and autonomy are imagined, produced, and performed. There is no one homogeneous construction of community care shared by all the CBOs; however there are some general characteristics.
These include the backward linkages to traditional Haitian social norms of *konbits* (work parties), sharing, and an emphasis on community well-being. They also include forward linkages to formal lending structures, combined with efforts to revitalize national agriculture and find niche markets in an internal food economy dominated by neoliberal globalization.

**a. Production**

CBO members make distinct use of economic projects to continue producing traditional Haitian fare – cocoa, peanuts, cassava, and corn meal. By producing traditional foods, respondents report feeling connected to ancestors, having greater access to eating healthy foods, and of rebuilding the nation by displacing imports. A traditional social mechanism of sharing labor, called a *konbit*, was utilized to share the work and the benefits of the harvest, and to strengthen trust in social capital within the community, building a sense of belonging and greater social stability.

Work completed for the organization is carefully balanced against the harvest, and the needs of the households. Many interviewees expressed their responsibility to the success of the CBO, not as an obligation or burden, but as their “path to a better life.” Women decide, independently of the organization, how much of their harvest, if any, goes to the organization and how much is saved for their own households. Autonomous decision making builds independence from CBOs and is encouraged because although autonomy building is based in a relationship of interdependency, the project goal is to develop people who are self-sufficient.
Territorial identity building is accomplished at different scales. The Commune of Limonade, known for its milk and yogurt production, is often identified by government documents and maps as having vast cattle grazing lands. Veterimed, in cooperation with local peasants, strengthens the visibility and territorial identity of the Commune of Limonade as a place of successful milk producers. International recognition for Veterimed’s yogurt reinforced the identity and status of local farmers. From a view of productivity, or efficiency, the factory was underutilized, but peasant farmers and Veterimed executives spoke more about displacing importation with better quality product, improving livelihoods, and building social support and community for local peasant farmers. This resonates with the idea that an economic project that attends to decolonization is more important than an economic project that attends to profit margins.

b. Distribution

The benefits of the projects are distributed amongst the members in terms of providing work, schools for community children, food to improve nutrition, and credit loans to avoid high interest lenders. The project creates a social safety net for members. Simultaneously members have autonomy through individual production. The space of the project leaves room for a balance of community care and autonomy.

The loans are dispersed through a mechanism called a mutual or gwoup solidarite, which is an internal credit institution. The formation of local credit structures helps to protect community members from informal lenders charging high interest, and fills the void left by formal institutions that avoid loans to rural peasants or poor urban
women. These actions make salient the concept of community care as it creates a root of resistance, a space that challenges classism and institutional lending structures that are designed to aid the elite. The goal is to create a social safety net for the community, to help leverage the community forward, and enhance identity from belonging to a community. This goal also challenges the space and narrative of classism, and supports a self-identified decolonized reality.

The project also offers a space of material resistance against the dependence on international aid. The peanuts were processed into medical Plumpy Nut paste for malnourished children at an international NGO in Limonade, and the cornmeal fed school children through WFP. The projects established a sense of self-sufficiency and cooperative care of the most vulnerable of Haitian society. An interviewee reported, “These projects mean we may take care of our families and our community.” These actions reinforce symbolic spaces of Haitian identity with backward linkages to traditional community caring, and strengthening self-determined identity. The projects also create a space for peasants to negotiate with international agencies’ support for their conception of agrarian economic development, proving the forwardness of peasant decolonization.

c. Consumption

Community care is accomplished by providing nutritious food for members and the local community. CBOs take seriously the need to valorize Haitian traditions and agriculture at a time when Haitian culture and values are being challenged by globalization. Respondents complained that many food production and consumption
traditions have declined since the intensification of globalization and importation. Respondents complained that imported food caused poor health and conversely ancestral foods made them healthier and stronger. The loss of traditional products impacted the feeding of the Lwa spirits too. “The Lwa only eat local foods, not imports.” Changing production, distribution and consumption patterns weave their effects deep into one’s identity, including into spiritual rituals. Regaining consumption knowledge is an act of materializing identity and autonomy by valorizing backward linkages to ancestors and to what Haitian land may provide. All four of the small CBOs produce traditional products – cassava bread, peanut butter, chocolate and corn meal -- and a member was proud to testify: “These products enhance our relationship with our ancestors.” The moral economy of care and consumption patterns extends past the current generation and deep into past generations, strengthening one’s sense of place and identity.

**Agritrans thwarts decolonization and the Agrarian space**

This section demonstrates that the neoliberal agro-exportation project called Agritrans is not structured on the intent to build community, with all the benefits described in the previous section. Rather, Agritrans is a typical capitalist for-profit model benefitting shareholders and GOH, while monetizing benefits from the environment, and impacting the quality of people’s lives by dispossessing them of their ability to reproduce their agrarian community. Early in 2014, a portion of state land, including all of the contracted 993 ha, was converted by Agritrans into a plantation of bananas for agro-
exportation. The conversion was a surprise, and free range cattle ran away from equipment that removed the semi-arid vegetation to build a 330 ha plantation, and a 700 000 gallon water lagoon (Le Nouvelliste 2015). Previous to this land conversion, 150 ha had been converted for Grand Marnier orange production, 25 ha for Université Roi Henry Christophe, 246 ha for Caracol Industrial Park, and 50 ha for Villaj la Différence.

State land, when utilized by the peasants, materializes the concept of an agrarian community with support mechanisms. Removing the land from peasant production weakens the CBO, the community, and the territory, turning many peasants into landless laborers for the plantation, diminishing their quality of life by preventing the materialization of community, identity and autonomy. Table I denotes the reliance on state land and the subsequent percentage of participants who lost access to those lands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CBO</th>
<th>% of respondents who farmed on state land</th>
<th>% of respondents who farmed reported losing access to state land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CBO1</td>
<td>19/32=59%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBO2</td>
<td>17/23=73%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBO3</td>
<td>10/25=40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When communities are dispossessed of the land they use for sociological functions, a sense of placelessness occurs. This loss undermines identity, autonomy and the agency to placemake an agrarian community. Peasants reported slaughtering cows due to a lack of feed, losing crops, ceasing charcoal production and the collection of wild foods,  

1 Urban CBO-d did not participate in this survey.
therefore making drastic changes to the household economy. Data collected revealed an average loss of income over $1400 US per year, as well as loss of charcoal, wild and cropped foods, and cattle milk and meat consumed directly by the household. Household expenditures increased, household income decreased and Dietary Diversity Surveys indicated a decline in day-to-day nutrition. Besides this tangible loss was the intangible exchange of agricultural knowledge in CBO-a’s community garden. The garden allowed a space and place to exchange knowledge, test crops in the face of changing climatic conditions, and strengthen community networks of reliance. Cattle ranchers lost their shared experience and identity. The food and economic projects were building a strong civil society through strong inter-linkages with all the CBOs, and by materializing community care, autonomy and identity. The GOH repurposed state land for Agritrans but ignored the local context, heightening food and livelihood insecurity.

Discussion

Relativizing space to an agrarian political economy is a necessary step toward decolonization. It is the space where the symbolic expression of community materializes into improved production, distribution and consumption activities to improve economies, but more importantly it is where identity and autonomy are locally imagined, produced and performed. This space shaping has backward linkages to ancestral traditions and forward linkages to international organizations, and is designed to fit within the restrictions of available market space left over from the intrusion of the
global food supply.

Policy makers designated agriculture as an economic growth engine rather than allowing it to fulfill its various socio-ecological functions. “The conviction that market forces will generate the conditions for economic development and social progress informs all of Haiti’s recent policy documents” (Shamsie 2012:140). Yet, the reality in Haiti is that “[n]eoliberalism ignores the potential of smaller geographical scales” (Merilus 2015:37) as an economic engine and a space and place to strengthen social stability.

Decolonization contains an element of healing, not from illness, but from trauma inflicted to one’s identity and autonomy through the process of colonization. This healing is contained in the agrarian political economy as a concept to heal relationships between people, within people, and between people and the land. The field data collected has demonstrated that the state land repurposed for Agritran’s agro-exportation was filling a much greater role than just economic development. The land, and economic projects made from the land, supported CBOs’ efforts to address gender equality, socialization programs, food security, education, micro-credit lending circles; to enhance a social norm of sharing, and to valorize agriculture in the next generation. Community projects are the healing performances that reproduce community care, identity and autonomy, and access to state land is paramount to this process of decolonization.

As demonstrated, the small peasant farmers possess great entrepreneurial strength, and act to materialize multiple sociological functions. Through this
investigation we may better understand why neoliberal development fails, and more importantly why Haitian people are better equipped to decolonize their own future.

**Conclusion**

Haitian society, like all societies, is a communally imagined project and a unique expression of what it means to be Haitian in the current world system. The projects have been upheaved, threatened and unbalanced by ongoing efforts of colonializing, resource extraction, and labor exploitation. Plantations for agro-exportation are spaces and places for agricultural production not human reproduction, hence unchecked global processes create placelessness and ultimately physical suffering and social instability through a heightened loss of ability to create subjective identity, autonomy and a meaningful community. Through an agrarian political economy analysis, coupled with theories of identity formation, and the concept of space and place, it becomes apparent how power and knowledge play out spatially to include or exclude peasant desires. This study has demonstrated that understanding the world through one paradigm of market-based neoliberalism, misses and excludes the rich complexities of cultures that make up the totality of human existence. Likewise, we need to recognize that there is no one model of reality, no hierarchy of modern or backward in civilizations; there are just different ways of being.
References


