

Contacts, Contracts, and Green Bean Schemes: Liberalisation and Agro-Entrepreneurship in Burkina Faso

by SUSANNE FREIDBERG*

SOON after midnight in early January 1994, an Air Afrique cargo jet took off from the airport of Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina Faso. It roared north over the sleeping city carrying 15 tons of *première-qualité*, extra-fine green beans bound for Paris. Within several hours, the beans would be unloaded and trucked to the sprawling wholesale docks of Rungis, on the outskirts of the French capital, and put up for sale to restaurant and supermarket buyers from throughout Europe. The jet's blast marked the first time in over a decade that a cargo flight had carried the region's garden produce overseas. It represented, perhaps, the opening of an isolated and stagnant economy, the linking of local producers to the global market. It was exactly the kind of 'take-off' the World Bank hoped for from this poor but deadly earnest country when it began a structural adjustment loan programme in Burkina Faso in 1991.

The months of negotiations and labour preceding this landmark flight, however, had hardly gone as smoothly as the lift-off from the darkened savannah runway. Indeed, the whole enterprise was so fraught with mishap that simply the arrival of that first shipment in Europe mattered more, especially to those who initiated the 'green bean scheme', than the fact that it made no money.

Africa's states and foreign financiers are calling on entrepreneurs to pull the continent out of its economic doldrums. Until the current trickle of multinational investment picks up, 'least-developed countries' like Burkina Faso must depend on the domestic private sector to replace the state as the motor of economic growth and job creation. Given that structural adjustment conditions mandate increased primary commodity exports over industrialisation, the agricultural sector in particular – where 85 per cent of the population makes

* Visiting Lecturer, Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley.

its living – awaits what the World Bank calls the ‘entrepreneurial catalyst’. But given declining world markets for traditional tropical commodities such as cotton or palm oil, the sector needs not only increased output but also intensification, diversification, and the means to find and reach overseas ‘niche’ markets – in short, more green bean schemes.

At a time of great expectations and even greater uncertainty, it is worth asking at least two questions about contemporary agricultural ‘entrepreneurship’ in sub-Saharan Africa. First, how are changing economic and ideological conditions – namely liberalisation, austerity, and ‘scientific’ capitalism¹ – transforming both practice and meaning: that is, both the day-to-day production and exchange relations, as well as the professional norms, identity, and aspirations? Second, who is leading the charge into new crops, technologies, and markets, and how are they able to do so? What, in other words, is the source of entrepreneurial ‘spirit’ and capacity? Yield and earning statistics, the usual measures of agricultural development, are not much help here; like a glimpse inside the cargo jet, they reveal only the end product, not how it got there.

This article, by contrast, takes a biographical approach as the outcome of information collected in a series of interviews conducted in and around Bobo-Dioulasso between October 1993 and July 1994.² By recounting the career histories and current ventures of a number of ‘agro-entrepreneurs’ operating in southwestern Burkina Faso, it will show that while they are finding both new opportunities and perils in high-value export horticulture, they are also running up against obstacles to agricultural accumulation familiar to generations of entrepreneurs throughout West Africa and, arguably, much of the continent. As in earlier eras, the real challenge lies in mastering both the ‘old’ and ‘new’ ways of doing business, and knowing when and where each applies. Meeting this challenge, I will argue, requires a combination of skills, resources, and status that effectively limits who can even participate in the emerging horticultural export trade, much less hope to succeed.

¹ James Ferguson, ‘From African Socialism to Scientific Capitalism: reflections on the legitimation crisis in IMF-ruled Africa’, in David B. Moore and Gerald J. Schmit (eds.), *Debating Development Discourse: institutional and popular perspectives* (New York, 1995).

² See Susanne Freidberg, ‘Making a Living: a social history of market-garden work in the regional economy of Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso’, Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1996, and ‘Tradeswomen and Businessmen: the social relations of contract gardening in southwestern Burkina Faso’, in *African Urban and Rural Studies* (East Lansing, MI), forthcoming.

ECONOMIC MAN IN AFRICA

The guiding principles of structural adjustment assume that beneath the mire of over-sized bureaucracies, over-regulated markets, and over-staffed parastatals waits the rational, self-interested actor of neo-classical economic theory. According to this model, clearing the mire – primarily through deregulation, privatisation, and public sector ‘downsizing’ – should leave *homo oeconomicus* ‘free to accumulate capital’, and thus invest in the productive activities necessary for sustainable economic growth.³

The World Bank Line: from swamp to seedbed

While early structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in Africa adhered relatively closely to this bare-bones formula, the plan signed by the Government of Burkina Faso in 1991 reflects the World Bank’s revised appreciation for the rôle of the state and other institutions in preventing ‘market failure’, not to mention social anarchy. It views the state’s proper function in free-market economic development as ‘capacity-building’, both in infrastructural and human terms. Accordingly, the Bank and its bilateral partners are financing not only a number of the state’s road construction projects, but also a variety of ‘entrepreneurial development’ programmes, where would-be businessmen (and women) can find all manner of advice, training, and start-up loans. The US Agency for International Development in particular supports the new government bureau for small and medium-sized companies, *les petits et moyens entreprises*. These programmes assume that, once ‘market mechanisms’ are in place, the transfer of certain basic skills such as book-keeping and personnel management will suffice to sprout the ‘seedbed of indigenous entrepreneurship’.⁴

The areas in which the Bank anticipates such developments include the so-called informal sector and non-traditional high-value export agriculture. The first is viewed as a ‘training ground’ for resourceful, flexible, competitive entrepreneurs held back only by the cost and nuisance of small-business regulations. Cutting red tape, it is argued, should encourage bootstrap business people in trade, services, and micro-manufacturing to ‘formalize’ and expand, thus generating

³ World Bank, *Sub-Saharan Africa. From Crisis to Sustainable Growth: a long-term perspective study* (Washington, DC, 1989), p. 135.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 136.

linkages and employment.⁵ Although I will not be discussing the informal sector in any detail, the Bank's supportive stance is worth noting here because it reflects a fundamental assumption about the future of African entrepreneurship: namely, that the emerging market economy will be an open playing-field, where skill and hard work will count for more than nepotistic connections. It also reflects the Bank's efforts to promote the economic activities of women, though as I shall suggest below, it is not clear that the recommended 'capacity-building' steps will propel many out of shoe-string trades and into modern 'formal' sector businesses.

The Bank's enthusiasm for high-value non-traditional agro-exports assumes that the 'successes' (in terms of export earnings) of Thai shrimps, Chilean fruits, and Kenyan horticulture can be repeated elsewhere. In the case of Kenya, many of the products (including French green beans) are grown by rural smallholders under contract with private export firms of varying size and origin. Contract farming appears especially suited for perishable horticultural commodities because it allows, in theory, for standardised production, efficient distribution, and sophisticated marketing while taking advantage of the 'careful crop husbandry' of small farm households. Contract horticulture also has the potential, according to its proponents, to promote both rural welfare and dynamism, by bringing higher returns than traditional agro-exports while preserving the autonomy of smallholders. In addition, it could prove particularly promising for indigenous entrepreneurs who lack the capital and expertise for, say, industrial ventures, but are more familiar with the region's lands, languages, and customs than foreign investors.⁶

Whether any of the boons of contract arrangements can be realised through horticultural development in a region known, like south-western Burkina Faso, for its abominable transport and communications infrastructures, as well as a historically 'uncooperative' indigenous rural population, remains to be seen. The exploits of the agro-entrepreneurs described in this article, at least, give cause for scepticism. None the less, these are arrangements that the World Bank typically promotes as a means to expand and diversify agro-exporting through private rather than state-run agricultural marketing. So when

⁵ Ibid. p. 142.

⁶ For case-studies as well as critiques, see Peter D. Little and Michael Watts (eds.), *Living Under Contract: contract farming and agrarian transformation in sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison, WI, 1994). Also, Nurad Islam, *Horticultural Exports of Developing Countries: past performances, future prospects, and policy issues* (Washington, DC, 1990).

Burkina Faso signed a structural adjustment programme in 1991, the sectoral plan for agriculture called for increased horticultural production, as well as the total privatisation of marketing fruit and vegetable exports.

Rethinking Economic Rationality

While neo-liberal models of economic activity and entrepreneurship lend themselves to neat policy measures, they do not hold up well in the face of detailed portrayals of the lives and circumstances of Africa's commercial farmers, traders, and industrialists. The following discussion draws together some of the major contributions of Africanist economic history and anthropology, including the francophone school of 'enterprise anthropology'.

In both bodies of literature, much of the analysis in the past two decades has focused, of course, less on *how* African economies work but why they have *not*. Especially as famine swept through much of the continent in the mid-1980s, scholars as well as policy-makers were pressed to explain why national and foreign agency-sponsored agricultural development programmes had largely failed, and why, then, many Africans were more vulnerable to hunger than they had been 20 years earlier. While the neo-classical analysis placed blame on the overbearing states and misguided policies borne of 1960s developmentalism, the history of most African countries reveals that conditions discouraging 'productive' investments in agriculture long preceded Independence – and, indeed, even colonial occupation. On a continent characterised for centuries by abundant land and relatively scarce labour, wealth came to be measured and invested in *people*, not landed property.⁷ This did not preclude, especially in the West African savannah states, the development of extensive trade networks or artisanal commodity production, but neither did it provide fertile ground for a British-style agricultural revolution. Instead, the central importance of human relations to both social security and status gave rise to practices and norms of 'social investment' and wealth redistribution quite foreign to Britain and the other colonial powers.⁸

The efforts of bureaucratic colonial states to bring Africa into the economic and cultural empires of Europe, while straining many kinds

⁷ Ferguson, loc. cit.

⁸ Sara Berry, *No Condition is Permanent: the social dynamics of agrarian change in sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison, 1993), p. 160.

of customary social ties and hierarchies, did not undermine the logic of investing in social institutions more generally. To the contrary: as Sara Berry argues, the insecurity, uncertainty, and social conflict inherent in the project of colonial rule reinforced the logic of accumulating memberships and status within as many social groups and networks as possible.⁹ In other words, regardless of the size of particular colonial régimes or their specific forms of intervention, the institutions and ideologies necessary to colonial administration and surplus extraction both introduced new definitions of rights and status and provoked disputes over ‘customary’ definitions. The resulting legal and normative ambiguity permitted some groups to pursue new freedoms and economic opportunities.¹⁰ But it also made accumulating wealth (whether through farming, trade, or, most often, a combination of activities) heavily dependent on an individual’s or family’s influence within certain realms of decision-making and resource distribution. This influence was built through the ongoing cultivation of allies, clients, and benefactors, especially those connected to the colonial bureaucracy and court system.

The confusion and negotiation over access to resources at all levels, from the household to the state, did not end with decolonisation. If anything, expanding governments and newly arrived foreign development agencies only multiplied the institutions that Africans needed to understand, join, and seek to manipulate if they were to assure their livelihoods and career ambitions, especially as national economic and political prospects looked increasingly bleak. Under such conditions, ‘rational’ entrepreneurs continue to invest, on the one hand, in the ‘means of negotiation’ by building social status and networks and, on the other, in multiple sources of income – a civil service job, a ‘weekend’ farm, a part-time trade, a rent-collecting house.¹¹

Those most successful at these diversified strategies now rank among what Jean-François Bayart calls the ‘dominant elite’ of bureaucrats,

⁹ Ibid. ch. 7.

¹⁰ In colonial Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), for example, women used the marriage laws of the Catholic church to avoid undesired arranged marriages, and those of the colonial courts to seek divorce. Mission-educated young men became civil servants and later politicians, while some of their elders accumulated small fortunes as ‘chiefs’ appointed by colonial administrations. Joseph-Roger de Benoist, *Église et pouvoir colonial au Soudan français: les relations entre les administrateurs et les missionnaires catholiques dans la Boucle du Niger, de 1885 à 1945* (Paris, 1987).

¹¹ Case-studies of African entrepreneurship in the anglophone literature include Peter Kilby, *African Enterprise: the Nigerian bread industry* (Stanford, CA, 1965), and Janet MacGaffey, *Entrepreneurs and Parasites: the struggle for indigenous capitalism in Zaïre* (Cambridge, 1987); and in Burkina Faso, Mahir Saul, ‘The Organization of a West African Grain Market’, in *American Anthropologist* (Washington, DC), 89, 1, 1987, pp. 74–95.

politicians, and business operators who, whatever their formal titles, have risen to and maintained an enviable status precisely because their individual careers and social networks ‘straddle’ the public and private sectors. The ways in which such élites ‘fed from the trough’ of colonial and post-colonial developmentalist states are by now well-documented,¹² but a recent crop of francophone work sheds light on how West African merchants and industry operators continue to capitalise off political connections in the 1980s and 1990s, despite the purported ‘depoliticisation of the market’ under structural adjustment.¹³ In some cases they tap these connections for relatively conventional purposes – i.e. to obtain export licenses, project contracts, government-controlled goods, especially petrol – or to avoid persecution for underground trading or workplace violations.

But the transition to multi-party electoral politics in a number of West African nations has also opened new possibilities for influence-building. The same *hommes d'affaires* who have been cultivating clientelistic relations with non-elected state officials for decades (and who may have once been civil servants themselves), have now become major party financiers or are even running for political office. Given that few citizens in, for example, Mali, Niger, or Burkina Faso can afford to support campaigns financially, the economic clout of business communities in these emerging democracies goes largely uncontested. Arguably, they have simply found new and somewhat more legitimate ways to buy off the state.¹⁴

None of the agro-entrepreneurs profiled in this article have launched campaigns for elected office – at least not yet. But they circulate in the same social milieu as politicians and upper-level bureaucrats, and they employ very similar strategies of networking and constituency-building. Their accounts make two additional points about entrepreneurs in contemporary Africa. First, they show the extent to which both the milieu and the strategies of successful businessmen remain, indeed,

¹² Gavin Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya: the making of an African petite-bourgeoisie, 1905–1970* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1980); Paul M. Lubeck (ed.), *The African Bourgeoisie: capitalist development in Nigeria, Kenya and the Ivory Coast* (Boulder, CO, 1987); and Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: the politics of the belly* (London and New York, 1993).

¹³ See, for example, Emmanuel Grégoire and Pascal Labazée (eds.), *Grands commerçants d'Afrique de l'Ouest* (Paris, 1993); *Politique africaine* (Paris), 56, 1994, ‘Entrepreneurs, ajustement et démocratie’, which includes Yves A. Fauré, ‘Les Politiciens dans les entreprises en Côte d'Ivoire: investisseurs ou courtiers?’, pp. 26–40; and Stephen Ellis and Yves A. Fauré (eds.), *Entreprises et entrepreneurs africains* (Paris, 1995).

¹⁴ Emmanuel Grégoire, ‘Démocratie, état et milieux d'affaires au Niger’, in *Politique africaine*, 56, 1994, pp. 94–107, and Pascal Labazée, ‘Les Entrepreneurs africains entre ajustement et démocratie’, in *ibid.* pp. 000–000.

open only to men. The stories of renowned ‘market queens’ and ‘Mama Benzes’ should not obscure the fact that women still comprise a tiny minority of Africa’s medium and large business owners, that most made their fortunes in a limited number of historically ‘female’ trades – i.e. perishable foodstuffs and textiles – and that they often did so at great personal cost.¹⁵ Entrepreneurial ‘capacity’ is gendered and stratified by norms and practices that deny women access not only to critical resources, but also to critical *places* for doing business.

Second, the way that the agro-entrepreneurs describe their careers and ambitions express what I believe is a widely felt sense of ambivalence about any kind of occupation that quite obviously enriches the ‘patron’ much more than his employees or, in this case, the contracted vegetable growers. Despite the ruling party’s official approval of entrepreneurial ambition, the moral status of the practising capitalist has become, if anything, more dubious during recent years of SAP-imposed austerity. In the popular view becoming wealthy is fine and admirable, but assiduously using one’s assets to become wealthier still, when almost everyone else seems to be getting poorer, is not. Ever careful of their image, the men profiled below describe their own work both in bold terms, as ‘pioneering modern agro-enterprise’, but also modestly, as a way to make ends meet, and a form of public service to the peasantry.

Current events in the horticultural sector around Bobo-Dioulasso suggest that both the social legitimacy and economic viability of export-contracting remain, like the broader socio-economic climate under structural adjustment, too unsettled to recommend the unfettered pursuit of profit – in other words, without regard to local norms of patronage or the etiquette of commercial relations. So once again, the instability and ambiguities borne of a new era make it unwise for would-be modern entrepreneurs to abandon entirely old ways of ‘doing business’. Those who do, or those foreign business operators ignorant of the customary expectations of their rôle, may find their ambitions thwarted or at least complicated by misunderstandings, non-co-operation, or outright resistance. The biographical accounts include examples of such instances, as well as of the many conventional frustrations and risks facing any horticultural export venture under-

¹⁵ Claire C. Robertson, *Sharing the Same Bowl: a socioeconomic history of women and class in Accra, Ghana* (Bloomington, IN, 1984), and Gracia Clark, *Onions are My Husband: survival and accumulation by West African market women* (Chicago and London, 1994), examine the lives of ‘market queens’. Several chapters in Christine Oppong (ed.), *Female and Male in West Africa* (London, 1983), analyse the strategies of and stigmas against ambitious women.

taken in the less-than-ideal social and infrastructural conditions typical of much of rural Africa. By the end it should be clear that those entrepreneurs best suited to adapt to new challenges will continue to be those who have the means and status to gain access to many different places of work and sociability, and the wits to know how to conduct themselves most profitably in each.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MARKET-GARDENING

European-style intensive commercial vegetable production, or *maraîchage*, was introduced to the hinterlands of Bobo-Dioulasso during the early years of French colonial rule, as one of the many forms of compulsory service used to feed the town's military base and administrative population. After the abolition of forced labour in 1946, local villagers continued market-gardening as a means of earning dry-season income. The network of small but numerous waterways north of 'Bobo' offered some of the best gardening conditions in sudano-savannah West Africa, and rapidly growing urban populations created strong local and regional demand for fresh vegetables. For some 30 years after World War II market-gardening was considered a lucrative and desirable occupation, and many young men preferred it to migrant labour in Côte d'Ivoire, or even wage work in town.

But gradual ecological deterioration combined with political and economic instability in the 1980s put an end to what older gardeners now refer to as the 'honeymoon years' of their profession. By the mid-1970s, a falling water table and declining soil fertility in the longest-cultivated village gardens were requiring growers to spend more on fertilisers and motorised pumps. The *coup d'état* staged in 1983 by Thomas Sankara, a military officer and self-proclaimed revolutionary, while welcomed by many of the urban and rural poor, cost gardeners in and around Bobo-Dioulasso some of their most valued customers. High-paying Ivoirian and Togolese wholesalers stopped coming after Sankara banned fresh-produce imports, and many local expatriates and Burkinabé businessmen left the country, fearing retribution from the President who referred to merchants as 'greedy compradores'.

Such rhetoric generated enmity among groups far more powerful than the market-gardeners, so when an internal coup in 1987 ended Sankara's life and brought to power his former friend, Blaise Compaoré, the new President lost no time repairing relations with both the merchant community and western donors. His ruling party now refers to private sector enterprise as the 'motor' of economic development,

and political élites openly display the wealth earned through sideline businesses. The market-gardeners, however, have found Campaoré's 'rectification' no better for *their* business than revolution. Trade, industry, and international development agencies have become increasingly concentrated in Ouagadougou, the capital, leaving in Bobo-Dioulasso a relatively small number of consumers wealthy enough to afford the pricier garden crops, such as green beans. The rest of the inhabitants, meanwhile, have been tightening their belts since Burkina Faso agreed to stabilisation and structural adjustment measures in 1991. Austerity has not only hurt demand for fresh vegetables but also led more and more unemployed school-leavers, laid-off workers, and cash-poor grain farmers to become gardeners themselves, even though these days they complain that 'there are more producers than consumers'.

They also say, in light of the depressed local economy, that more than anything else they need access to higher-paying exterior markets. The 50 per cent devaluation of the CFA in 1994 did at least initially increase demand for Burkina Faso vegetables abroad, especially in Abidjan and the other large coastal capitals which had previously imported much of their 'European' produce from Europe itself. But the cost and limited supply of public transportation, combined with the volume and quality specifications of the supermarket buyers in those cities, pose formidable entry barriers to most small-scale gardeners, even those organised in village co-operatives. Women wholesalers do take tomatoes and cabbages south by train and bus from Bobo-Dioulasso, but their commerce does not absorb enough of the region's high-season production to prevent colossal gluts on the city's market. Nor does it always offer very remunerative prices, since most of this produce is destined for sale to lower and middle class consumers, not supermarket shoppers.

It is in this context that a small number of men have recently either begun or expanded high-end export vegetable trades. Unlike the women wholesalers, all are by national standards well educated, and have built prior careers in government or industry. All describe their methods not as inherited customs but rather as the scientific, profit-minded techniques of modern agro-enterprise. All have undertaken horticultural export-contracting, sometimes in combination with other forms of commercial agriculture, hoping to profit from the improved domestic business climate, the promising international trade and monetary policy reforms (in particular the currency devaluation), and the dire need of local village gardeners for new markets.

The following biographical sketches of four such agro-entrepreneurs show how over the course of their careers they have accumulated not only monetary savings, but also skills, knowledge, contacts, and social standing, all of which are very useful in their latest ventures. On the other hand, at a time when both the economy and the norms governing economic relations are highly uncertain, the clashing expectations and ambitions of these self-proclaimed ‘pioneers’ in export horticulture and those of local producers can, at times, turn this ‘seedbed’ of indigenous entrepreneurship into a minefield of misunderstanding and misadventure.

THE AGRO-ENTREPRENEURS

1. *The Bureaucrat*

‘Moussa’ was born near Orodara, a mid-sized orchard town about 40 miles west of Bobo-Dioulasso. He came from a family sufficiently well-off to send him to the University of Ouagadougou for a degree in agronomy. Like most of the college-educated of his generation, he went on immediately to work for the state, in his case as an agricultural extension agent. Now in his 40s, he is the chief agronomist at the provincial bureau of the agricultural ministry in Bobo-Dioulasso. On the job, he makes frequent forays into the countryside to observe and counsel farmers, and in particular commercial gardeners. On the side, he runs a large and diversified farm enterprise, as men of his standing often do. ‘It’s a profitable way for *fonctionnaires* to spend their free time’, he says.

Moussa began devoting his weekends to gardening in 1982, when he acquired 25 hectares of riverside land in a village 45 kilometres north of Bobo-Dioulasso, just off the main road to the Mali border. Although it is still common in rural Burkina Faso for ‘outsiders’ to gain long-term usufruct rights to farm land through borrowing rather than purchase, in this case the village authorities wanted to sell – an arrangement which suited Moussa because, he said, formal title would be more secure over the long term. At one point he planted up to 12 hectares each season with tomatoes, cabbages, and green peppers, but has currently only about a quarter, due to lack of time and reliable workers. Labour supervision is a common problem for ‘weekend farmers’, and although Moussa drives out to inspect his farm every Saturday (it helps that the road is paved) this may not be often enough if the hired help is less than trustworthy. He built on-site housing for his workers, as well as an office and warehouse, with financing from one of

the national banks, and like other state employees, enjoys relatively easy access to credit, because his regular salary serves as collateral.

After selling only his own product for several years, Moussa began looking into bigger and more lucrative markets. The Togolese traders offered the best tomato prices, but only for large deals. So he contacted some of the many gardeners he knew through his job and found several in each of four different villages willing to co-operate. They agreed in advance on a price and schedule, and at harvest time the women came in trucks to collect the produce. In 1993, the gardeners sold 30 tons of tomatoes altogether.

This informal co-operative arrangement is not without its problems. 'The peasants', Moussa says, 'are disorganised', and some jeopardise contracts by trying to raise their prices when the buyers arrive at season's end. In addition, at certain times of the year the Lomé market is glutted with Ghanaian and Togolese tomatoes; on other occasions, must less predictably, political unrest in Togo has closed borders and disrupted trade. But Moussa says his 'liaisons' in Lomé fax him immediately with news of important developments. He can also turn to other markets, if necessary; his wife sometimes sends truckloads of tomatoes to Abidjan, where she has her own buyers. Moussa originally found his contacts abroad by travelling during annual vacations – another benefit of a ministry job. By 'asking around', he eventually found interested produce buyers in Lomé's commercial district.

Considered one of the local horticultural experts, given his education and employment, Moussa has served as a 'consultant' to the *Union régionale des coopératives agricoles et maraîchères de Bolo-Dioulasso* (Urcabo) and other groups attempting to form gardener co-operatives. He blames their difficulties in finding export markets on 'bad presentation': they mix ugly vegetables with good ones, and box them carelessly in old and dirty cartons. Familiar with the stringent aesthetic standards of capital-city supermarkets, Moussa himself puts a high priority on attractive packaging, even though it adds considerably to his expenses.

Familiar as well with the risks of exporting highly perishable crops across volatile borders, Moussa has not limited his weekend farming endeavours to vegetable gardening. He recently began planting maize and rice on his original piece of land, as well as raising sheep and chicken on another site closer to town. He claims the chickens lay as many as 600 eggs a day, so far all for the local market. The maize feeds the sheep; their manure fertilises the crops. This, he laughs, is '*l'agriculture autosuffisante*'.

Moussa fully recognises the advantages he enjoys as a *fonctionnaire*-farmer. He has a monthly salary, easy access to credit, and plenty of opportunities to make rural contacts. His background in agronomy helps too. Unlike some 'gentlemen farmers', he says, 'I know the techniques, I know how to cultivate'. He also keeps abreast of new trends in vegetable production and marketing by reading seed catalogues and farm journals. Finally, unlike many local commercial gardeners, Moussa sees in the 1994 currency devaluation great opportunities, both for increasing horticultural sales to Lomé and other coastal capitals (where fruits and vegetables imported from France and North Africa have become prohibitively expensive even for expatriate consumers) and for expanding grain sales locally (where prices of imported wheat and rice have also risen significantly). As for other farmers' complaints about higher production costs, he shrugs, 'It's not so bad as all that. My sales went very well this year.'

2. *The Ex-Politician*

What we're doing is not just an intellectual and moral accomplishment. Not at all. Economically, Madame, it's profitable! Provided, of course, you've got the means. – Lionel, Ouagadougou, 1 April 1994

'Lionel' is a native of north-central Burkina Faso, and came to the Bobo-Dioulasso area in 1968 as a young military officer assigned to a regional army post. The late-1960s Sahelian drought was causing increasingly severe hardships for family members in his rural homeland, so shortly after settling in Bobo he borrowed a piece of land from local villagers, and recruited some brothers to grow rainy-season maize. But since the land was located near enough to a river to be arable the year-round, he decided to put them to work producing dry-season vegetables for the local market.

And thus, Lionel says, took root his 'passion'. At first market-gardening simply helped him fulfil the responsibilities of a young educated salary-man, expected to support the many family members back home. 'I saw in this modern agriculture not only a means of generating revenue from my investments', he says, 'but also of easing the burden of the *fonctionnaire*'. Eventually, however, his ambition became that of an '*alpiniste*', or mountain climber: 'the more difficulties I encountered, the more the challenge attracted me'.

Indeed, his career path became rocky from time to time. During the 1970s he was promoted first to Secretary of Rural Development, then to Minister of Finances. On the side, he built his commercial gardening

venture into a full-scale *société familiale* called ‘Pionnier’ – appropriate for what he claims was the first ‘modern agricultural enterprise’ in the region. He bought farm machines, a large combination office-villa in Bobo-Dioulasso, a cold-storage room, a refrigerated truck. He read agronomy books, and asked experts for advice. He secured deals with supermarket buyers in Abidjan, and to meet their large-volume orders began contracting with local villagers to grow lettuces.

Then a *coup d'état* in 1980 landed him in prison, along with many other high-ranking officials. He was released briefly and later re-imprisoned by Sankara, on uncertain grounds, until 1985. When his name was finally cleared, government work remained an option. ‘I’d spent 35 years in the army as a superior officer. I had seven years of ministerial experience, and plenty of connections. I could have got a post. But instead I decided to return to *la passion*’. All the property supporting his passion, however, had been seized by the state. Both the Sankara and Campaoré régimes ran Pionnier as a money-losing parastatal until it eventually failed in the early 1990s.

Lionel was still trying to reclaim his land and tractors in 1994, but meanwhile had started a new company, ‘Promagri’, with some friends. They began with three million FCFA (approximately \$11,000), and this time, rather than investing in machines and acreage for his own production, Lionel concentrated on developing the productivity and loyalty of prospective contract growers. Since most gardeners in the Bobo-Dioulasso region were cultivating lands outside ‘managed’ irrigation zones, using labour-intensive methods and limited inputs, Lionel’s first step was to find external financial and technical assistance... or rather, to make local growers *eligible* for assistance. So he returned to the village where several gardeners had grown lettuces for Pionnier years before, and proposed they organise a co-operative.

When I arrived in 1987, some people were watering their little tomato plots with calabashes. They had nothing. Well, four or five had motorpumps. So we met, and located a site where we were sure to have water... They already had a co-op in name, but no statutes, no regulations. So it was necessary to put all that together, and to draw up a project. And then I submitted the dossier everywhere... the BCEAO [*Banque centrale des états de l’Afrique de l’Ouest*] refused; the French also refused; the Canadians, they were interested.

The Canadian Government agreed to pay for 20 hectares of mechanised irrigation, a warehouse, shipping crates – in short, everything the gardeners would need to produce export-quality vegetables for Promagri. By the early 1990s Lionel had organised and found aid for two other village co-operatives, and was again shipping a wide

variety of vegetables to Abidjan, including cauliflowers, beets, and carrots. Meanwhile, gardeners in the first village patronised by the 'former minister' were selling their high-value produce to other wholesalers (who sought out speciality crops), as well as to retail outlets in downtown Bobo-Dioulasso.

Lionel had been looking for new buyers 'all over the place' when one of Europe's biggest green bean importers, whom he had met while at the agricultural ministry in the 1970s, proposed a new product for Promagri: fresh herbs. Lionel liked the idea and arranged for a village to grow basil, rosemary, and a number of other varieties for the European winter market. He participated little in the on-site activities (a French herb specialist was flown in to supervise training, production, and transport), but did spend a great deal of time negotiating finance with the Parisian importer. The latter's unwillingness to pay for necessary equipment made it difficult for Promagri to meet the specifications of the contract, not least since the lack of a refrigerated truck led to some spoilage, and Lionel vowed to find a new European partner. Still, the first season's basil arrived in good condition in Paris, accompanying the green beans of the aforementioned cargo jet in January 1993. 'We managed', Lionel later noted proudly, 'to inscribe the name of Burkina Faso among the exporters of *herbes aromatiques*'.

Lionel is particularly excited about his prospects in Abidjan, where even 'picky' French expatriates have become more receptive to competitively priced Burkinabé vegetables. If Promagri can simply meet half of Abidjan's demand for carrots – ten tons a week, he estimates – 'I won't need anything else to live on!'. This sounds like a tall order, but Lionel says he is optimistic, having resolved to devote his life to contract vegetable-exporting. He plans to limit his rôle in this business, however, to that of the intermediary between foreign financiers, gardeners, and buyers. Even if he does eventually win back his confiscated property from the state (the case was still in court in 1994), he claims he has no need or desire to resume production himself.

3. *The Scientist's Family*

'Jean' is a French plant biologist who has lived 30 years in Africa, most of them in a spacious villa on an agricultural research station just south of Bobo-Dioulasso. His knowledge of vegetable diseases and breeding led to the introduction and improvement of numerous crop varieties now grown in the region, ranging from premier-quality butter lettuces to, most recently, seedless Japanese egg-plants. His contacts

throughout France and the academic community help both to win foundation support and attract students (both French and African) to the research station.

Hardly a 'foreigner' to these parts, despite French citizenship, Jean speaks Dioula and knows intimately those parts of the countryside which grow vegetables. Like many long-time expatriates of his generation, however, his views of and behaviour towards '*les Africains*' remain those of an old *colon*. Acting as though he assumes everyone around him is either corrupt or stupid, he is respected but not terribly well-liked.

In 1993, Jean recruited his wife and two adult sons, one of whom has an MBA, to help him launch a vegetable export business. He had contacts with a major Parisian wholesaler, and his businessman son negotiated with Air Afrique to fly cargo out of Bobo-Dioulasso. The airline's agreement to resume service to this airport (which it had cut a decade earlier, for lack of profits) was crucial, Jean believed, to the success of any regional horticultural export venture. In the past, vegetables trucked to the next nearest airport in Ouagadougou often deteriorated or were even spoiled by the time they arrived in Paris.

Jean and his family began the 1993–4 growing season quite methodically. They selected a number of sites with appropriate soil and water conditions, arranged tonnage, price, and harvest dates with village authorities, and distributed seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides. Then the entire family spent the next several weeks making daily excursions to oversee the work. Complications quickly arose, however. First, because Burkinabé law still made it very difficult for non-nationals to undertake single-handedly this kind of business, Jean had needed to find a Burkinabé partner. The Bobo-Dioulasso businessman who agreed to collaborate (whose biography follows), while experienced in commercial agriculture and well-known among regional gardeners, proved to be exceedingly unreliable. Like many local businessmen, he was involved in several different money-making activities simultaneously, and the joint venture with the Frenchman ranked low on his list of priorities. A few weeks into the season, Jean charged that his partner was not checking up on sites assigned to his supervision, and was in fact absconding with fertilisers he was supposed to distribute. As a result, several of the neglected growers ended up with poor or failed harvests.

In addition, the French family found that even the growers they monitored themselves did not respect the terms of their contract when it did not suit them. Jean complained that some did not water the green

beans at the correct intervals, or did not properly tie up the vines. Worst of all, on one pre-arranged harvest day an entire village refused to work because the chief had died the previous night. Such a delay could prove disastrous not only because of flight schedules, but also because 'string' green beans quickly grow too thick to command top prices on the Parisian market. Jean did in fact have to cancel the next day's flight, for lack of adequate tonnage. Indeed, he had to cancel a number of weekly flights during the three-month season, and at the end his son announced that they had lost money. But several late-night shipments did reach Paris, and both men had faith that if they trained their growers better and found a new business partner, the next season would go more smoothly. They even talked of diversifying into snow peas and cherry tomatoes.

4. *The Ex-Accountant*

My father is not a farmer, nor is my mother. I was not born into agriculture; I do not know the rural world. But I love agriculture – I *came* to this world... As a practising Catholic I said to myself, I have the good fortune, the education to be discerning, to choose my investments. I am capable of drawing up a financial plan [for a commercial farm], and I have done nothing to deserve all this. My God has given it to me...so I must give it to others. – Joseph, Bobo-Dioulasso, 15 February 1994

If export horticulture represents a weekend vocation for the bureaucrat, a mountain-climber's passion for the politician, an entrepreneurial experiment for the botanist, then for 'Joseph' it is a divine calling. The pursuit of his 'God-given' talent for making money from commercial agriculture has earned him wide though mixed renown throughout the vegetable-producing region of southern Burkina Faso, where everyone, it seems, has done some kind of business with the large grey-haired man in the white pick-up truck.

Joseph is the son of a prominent local lawyer whose 'weekend farm' consisted of a few well-watered hectares of fruit trees and farmland on the outskirts of town. He received his education at the Catholic mission in Bobo-Dioulasso, and after completing secondary school took a job managing a Uniroyal tyre store while at the same time studying for his *baccalauréat*. Aged 25, he went to the Netherlands in 1973 to become an apprentice in a similar firm, but not long afterwards returned to Bobo, where the national tyre company hired him as chief accountant. In 1980 he quit, he says, to start his own auto-parts import-export firm, and to go back to school. Two years later, he finished a master's thesis in business management through a correspondence course with

tutors in Mauritius. He taught briefly in Bobo, and ran a private accounting service. In 1983 he took a job at the national battery factory, but after only one month there decided that his future lay on the land, not in the corporate world.

Joseph claims to have been moving ('called') in this direction for several years, and during business trips abroad as a corporate accountant he often visited farm enterprises in Benin, Togo, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire. 'I realised', he says, that 'agriculture is *un métier*, just like accounting'. By 1983 he had taken over the management of his father's land, and acquired additional acreage in a more distant village. Consulting fellow farmers, technicians, and textbooks along the way, he planted new mango and papaya varieties in the old orchard, and installed canal irrigation for vegetable production. He also bought pedigreed hens and hogs, which are more difficult to raise but produce bigger eggs and better meat than common varieties. Within a number of years Joseph had established himself among the region's farming élite, well-known for his exotic and premier-quality products:

now I can say that I'm a professional. I'm not an 'agriculturalist' – that's vast, like general medicine...rather, I'm specialised – in horticulture, and fruit trees, and pork-raising, and poultry. And I want to know more and more... it's a conviction.

Quite early on, Joseph began selling his vegetable crops to buyers in Abidjan, and later Lomé. But like other local exporters, he found that his harvests alone could not always fill the high-volume orders of large wholesalers or supermarkets. So like the aforementioned 'Lionel', he proposed to a number of experienced and reputable gardeners that they form a co-operative, more exclusive and profitable than that run previously by the state. Joseph would be an active member of this venture – in fact, its president – and would use his own reputation as a 'dynamic' commercial farmer to secure start-up funds from an international non-governmental agency.

Enthusiasm for this new and improved co-operative faded as members realised that it was not helping them to find new markets or sell more goods. It was not doing much at all, it appeared, besides collecting membership fees. Six years later, Joseph resigned from the enterprise after fellow members alleged that he had embezzled several thousand dollars. He does not mention the accusation in his own version of events, but says that he was fed up with trying to 'manage the peasants', and would thenceforth only buy certain produce from them on contract, on a one-on-one basis. In the meantime, he continues to oversee affairs on his own farm, and has opened a high-end

grocery in downtown Bobo-Dioulasso, featuring his own garden produce, eggs, meat, even fruit jams. Next door, he has also established a sort of business school for farmers, where local growers are invited to take courses in accounting and marketing. In addition, he continues to travel to neighbouring cities and countries, ever in search of new markets, while maintaining a visible presence in the local Catholic community.

Considering this range of commitments it would hardly be surprising if, in fact, Joseph was neglecting his responsibilities to the French scientist's export venture. The Burkinabé businessman may not actually care much about jeopardising a partnership where his autonomy and potential gains appear limited. But among commercial gardeners and traders his reputation also suffers from his tendency to 'disappear' – that is, to leave town suddenly, miss appointments, and especially to back out on contracts without warning or explanation. Although a potentially valuable acquaintance, given Joseph's wealth and connections – what locals call *les bras longs*, or 'long arms' – the only gardeners who continue to produce on contract for him are usually those who are themselves relatively affluent and well-connected to top-end vegetable buyers. Only they can risk devoting three months and all or much of their garden to a crop of export-quality green beans that he may never return to purchase.

For someone described by most who know him as over-ambitious, even unethical, Joseph depicts himself as a businessman of modest and honourable goals. Having already witnessed one troubled season of the French scientist's 'green bean scheme', he expresses concern about the difficulties of expanding into the trans-Atlantic trade in, ironically, moral terms:

Everyone says we must export to Europe. But I am still not convinced of the potential of this market. You must excuse me, but I think that's where the biggest bandits in the world are. They have no faith, no religion, they think only of their pockets. If I have the possibility of forging south–south relations, I prefer that ... After all, I'm not trying to become a millionaire. You earn your daily bread in this; you manage to feed the family. You provide for future needs.

CONNECTIONS AND COCKTAILS

Together, the stories of the four agro-entrepreneurs raise a number of points worth further discussion. First, past or concurrent employment has clearly helped each man to undertake and expand export-oriented agricultural enterprises. In terms of building from line of work to the

next, however, the salary or pension is only one among many benefits of salaried employment; at least as important are the skills, *savoir-faire*, contacts, and prestige acquired while on the job. Second, if such benefits are achieved advantages for these businessmen, what are their ascribed advantages? In other words, what aspects of their social status, what privileges have effectively enabled them to pursue entrepreneurial ambitions further, and with fewer constraints, than other men and especially women? Finally, these individuals are engaging in their commercial agricultural ventures during a time of post-socialist liberalisation and state austerity. We need to consider precisely how shifts in official ideology and policies of resource distribution have transformed the conditions of entrepreneurship – and how, perhaps, they have not.

The professional backgrounds of the agro-entrepreneurs have endowed them with various means of tapping the resources of the state, the foreign donor community, even the Air Afrique board of directors. In part, their advantages derive from their ‘expert’ status in, for example, agronomy or international marketing. Employed as experts, they exercise at least some clout over the decisions and practices of gardeners, funders, and policy-makers. Their salaries or pensions also, of course, have enabled them to spend far more on transport, labour, machines, and so forth than can most gardeners, or traders. But just as importantly, their careers have provided opportunities to acquire information, contacts, and experience, which in turn have bolstered their expertise, and expanded their influence.

The ex-politician, for example, began his career as a military officer, but learned in later ministerial positions the organisational tactics and bureaucratic procedures needed to form rural co-operatives, draw up project dossiers, and apply for aid. For all four men, regular vacations and business trips have provided time to investigate potential markets and find likely buyers. Their jobs have also introduced them to ‘experts’ in related fields, to useful media (trade journals, scientific texts, seed catalogues), as well as to various people passing through their offices for whatever reason, who might someday prove useful – as, for example, the French importer of green beans who became a helpful acquaintance to the ex-politician.

Contacts made within or through the state, as well as through kin and ethnic networks, are everywhere used in the world of African enterprise. Identifying these relations helps explain why enterprises take certain forms, and why and how people are involved in particular entrepreneurial activities, but does not by itself explain an individual

or firm's success. Family ties and state patronage can stifle as well as support, and especially in an era of public-sector cutbacks and widespread economic hardships, many informal 'connections', not to mention institutionalised government resources, have become much less reliable. In Burkina Faso, for example, structural adjustments designed to shrink and limit the regulatory power of state ministries mean that having a relative or acquaintance in the régime is helpful but no longer necessarily sufficient to secure a public sector job, or even a minor favour. Bureaucrats find themselves besieged with requests they no longer have either the official authority or the personal financial means to fulfil.

In the interests of minimising such claims on their wealth, Burkinabé merchants often launch their trades with family capital and labour, but later distance themselves as much as possible from kin who are likely to prove more burden than boon to the enterprise.¹⁶ Similarly, the Burkinabé agro-entrepreneurs described here all initially received some form of support from relatives, at the very least for the education which qualified them for salaried employment, but now run their businesses relatively independently. Ironically, only the French plant biologist – the man so condescending towards African backwardness – depends on the full-time help of his spouse and children.

What most accounts neglect – but which the entrepreneurs themselves cannot – is the time-consuming, tiring, but critical work of *finding* business. The interviewed exporters of vegetables all made initial contact with most of their buyers and contract-producers by simply walking down the streets of Abidjan and Lomé and inquiring in the supermarkets and wholesale yards, by driving through the countryside and introducing themselves to villagers. One gardener on the outskirts of Bobo-Dioulasso, for example, who periodically grows green beans for Joseph, remembers meeting him years ago when the businessman, whose own property lies nearby, simply wandered into his garden to look at the vegetables.

So at least initially, would-be agro-entrepreneurs must spend considerable time and energy *making* connections, and turning relative strangers into potential buyers, suppliers, and collaborators. In addition, as the conditions for receiving financial and technical assistance from the state and many foreign donor agencies become increasingly stringent, they must devote considerable effort to the procedures and politics of aid-seeking. Lionel and Joseph, for example,

¹⁶ Pascal Labazée, *Entreprises et entrepreneurs du Burkina Faso* (Paris, 1988).

won financial and technical assistance for village co-operatives which ultimately improved their personal commercial opportunities at least as much as it did any of the villagers. To do so they had to know not only how to draw up an application for aid, but also where and how to pitch their appeals. The Canadian aid agency approved Lionel's proposal for an irrigated horticultural production site not to make him a rich man, but because it appeared that the project, as described, would benefit the local peasantry as well as the growing export of vegetables.

Hunting for aid is a logical entrepreneurial strategy in a country where foreign governments, banks, and private agencies have long underwritten much of agricultural and infrastructural development, and it remains so at a time when the uncertain prospects of the national economy, government reforms, and international trade policy make many agro-entrepreneurs hesitant to invest much of their own capital (assuming they have any) in a risky and unproven export trade. Unlike the cash-strapped national banks, foreign donors not only provide grants or low-interest loans for approved projects, but also bring in technology and expertise not available locally. In addition, the businessman becomes a local hero if the aid proves beneficial (as in Lionel's irrigation project), but incurs relatively few losses if it does not. The businessman is only the go-between, not the investor. So although winning aid takes considerable experience and perseverance, it offers entrepreneurs involved in contract-gardening a relatively low-risk, low-cost means of improving the productivity of their enterprises.

Clearly, the agro-entrepreneurs benefit from the capital, skills, experience, and connections they bring from their other occupations. But these advantages bear fruit only if used to cultivate further contacts, more skills, and bigger sources of financing. Much of this footwork takes place in markets and villages, in offices, libraries, and banks. But the activities conducted at 'after-hours' meeting places are also crucial, both for what they produce and whom they exclude. Food-and-drink establishments are abundant and often short-lived in Bobo-Dioulasso, as in many West African cities, but those frequented primarily by businessmen (both local and foreign), aid workers, politicians, and top-level bureaucrats are relatively few, and easily identified. The bars and swimming-pool patios of luxury-class hotels are prime rendezvous spots, as is any place with a television set that can show closed-circuit international soccer. All are popular sites not only for business lunches and drinks with clients, but also as strategic locations for 'being seen', for establishing oneself among the city's

respectable business class. The contacts made, deals forged, and ideas generated in this milieu can do at least as much for an aspiring entrepreneur's career as the most diligent research and record-keeping.

Such establishments are not, however, open to everybody. Although most are not private clubs, the price of the drinks combined with an oftentimes unmistakably élitist atmosphere effectively shuts out most of the local population, including the scruffy small-time 'informal' entrepreneurs. Many young men who spend their days in downtown Bobo-Dioulasso, for example, come from families in neighbouring villages who control local gardens and orchards. Some of them spend part of the year working on the land, and know enough about market-gardening to have plenty of ideas and opinions about how *they* would run a vegetable export firm (or other venture) if they had the 'means' and the contacts. Many have made it at least partway through secondary school, but under current economic conditions have little chance of finding steady jobs. So they spend a great deal of time piecing together '*business*' – an afternoon's work as a guide, messenger, or delivery boy; spotting transactions in cheap handicrafts, used clothes, or pirated music tapes; or simply sitting outside the hotels or bars where important people pass by, hoping someone might request their services. They dress in jeans and baseball caps, and are often broke and bored.

Even though a number of these young men possess skills, access to land, and fierce 'entrepreneurial spirit', they appear idle and unremarkable, and lack entirely the social standing (as well as the cash and the clothing) needed to be welcomed or taken seriously in the 'businessman bars'. In 1994, I met only one from this age group and background in Bobo-Dioulasso whose future in agro-enterprise looked at all promising. A 27-year old bartender at the most popular downtown luxury hotel, he was unusually well-positioned to eavesdrop and to learn about the people passing through town, and the business they were conducting. He had eventually managed to arrange, albeit tentatively, finance and buyers for a scheme to turn several hectares of family land into an export-oriented orchard and vegetable farm.

THE MEN'S CLUB?

Besides most young men, the other people absent from the world of negotiations and casual meetings, from the circuits of information and contacts, are women. They may have controlled the regional and urban vegetable commerce for decades, and some have become by local

standards quite wealthy. But not even the two or three women reputed to be the richest, most successful traders in the Bobo-Dioulasso wholesale market, have operations comparable to the enterprises described in the preceding biographies. They make smaller transactions, deal in fewer and usually lower-value commodities, and have no overseas markets or sources of financing.

In part, women are less likely to build agro-enterprises comparable to men's because even the tiny percentage who attend university and find salaried employment do not necessarily acquire the right skills and contacts. Although more and more fill clerical or extension-agent posts in the government bureaucracy, the few women appointed to higher positions are concentrated in the ministries of social welfare, culture and tourism, not agriculture or trade.¹⁷ Moreover, they will probably have, like women in other sectors, more domestic obligations than their male colleagues, and so less time to pursue sideline businesses.

Women who do climb relatively high in the fresh produce trade, in other West African cities as well as Bobo-Dioulasso,¹⁸ have historically done so with little or no education, and without prior remunerated employment, though they may receive monetary aid from a salaried spouse or relative. A woman who begins full-time trading in adolescence will eventually accumulate considerable experience, contacts, and perhaps wealth. But she will probably not gain access to the kinds of information useful to larger international vegetable export enterprises (faxed reports on market conditions in Lomé and green bean prices in Paris, trade journals on new lettuce varieties and farm chemicals, texts of government trade regulations), nor will she acquire the knowledge needed to find and apply for large-scale financial aid. Nor, ultimately, will a woman who builds a wholesaling career learning from and dressing like her female peers – most in Bobo typically speak little or no French, do business in a loud, aggressive 'marketplace Dioula', and wear 'traditional' cloth wraps – easily win the respect of male agro-entrepreneurs, or feel at ease in the clubby locales where they relax and do business.¹⁹

¹⁷ Women in these positions may also run sideline businesses, but these are likely to be those which accommodate their professional background and social milieu, the day-to-day constraints on their time, and prevailing norms about appropriate enterprises for bourgeois women. In Burkina Faso, women commonly own textile firms, clothing, and jewellery boutiques, as well as residential real estate.

¹⁸ See, for example, in addition to Robertson, *op. cit.* and Clark, *op. cit.*, Niara Sudarkasa, *Where Women Work: a study of Yoruba women in the marketplace and in the home* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1973).

¹⁹ For two ethnographies of market women that describe typical career paths, as well as how they differ and are kept separate from men's, see Ellie Bosch, *Les Femmes de marché de Bobo-Dioulasso* (Leiden, 1985), and Claudia Roth, *La Séparation des sexes chez les Zava au Burkina Faso* (Paris, 1996).

Even market women who could easily afford to patronise popular bars will not do so unless accompanied by a man. Besides the fact they are usually too busy, many prefer not to be seen in places where, except for expatriates and well-known wives of prominent local men, most of the female ‘customers’ are assumed to be prostitutes. Bar and hotel owners tolerate (even welcome) the ‘regulars’ provided they are well-dressed and discreet, a condition which obviously makes it harder for other women present not to be suspected of the same profession. So most stay away, and consequently miss out on the casual but important after-hours socialisation, conversation, and networking of male entrepreneurs.

On the other hand, although most women do not have access to the realms of ‘contacts and cocktails’, or to the various resources necessary to building agro-enterprises like those described, they are by no means unaware of the changes wrought by structural adjustment. While for most women in the vegetable trade these have brought only greater hardships – in the form of higher living costs, slumping sales, and perhaps laid-off spouses – a few are managing to exploit the opportunities of the contemporary liberalising market.

Consider the case of ‘Fatou’, a 25-year old Bobo-Dioulasso woman who grew up helping her grandmother sell vegetables and spices at a neighbourhood retail market. She never went to school, but learned maths on the job by hawking fruits and vegetables on the busiest downtown streets after her grandmother had given her 500 CFA (less than two dollars). Fatou claims that by selling everything at a 100 per cent mark-up (not inconceivable in the centre of town) for 12 years she was able to turn her 500 into 100,000 CFA, and hence able to set up a produce stall outside the most popular Lebanese grocery. Here she greets the elite clientele in lilting, if limited, French – ‘*Bonjour Madame, il ya des belles tomates, et des fraises très douces*’ – and earns, she says, 10,000 CFA on a good day.

But this is only a small part of Fatou’s business. She also exports local produce (mainly carrots, since the devaluation) to Abidjan and Cotonou, and buys and sells according to current market conditions rather than placing large pre-season orders with suppliers. Unlike most other women (or men, for that matter) in the regional trade, she does not export by train or truck, but instead boards one of Air Burkina’s regular passenger flights, which gets her to Abidjan in a mere two hours, Cotonou slightly longer. Fatou only takes one or two 50 kg sacks at a time – she does not mention paying excess baggage charges – but can earn 50,000 CFA for each (again, about a 100 per cent mark-up).

Since airfares cost at least twice that, how can such a venture make a profit? 'I don't do just one thing', she explains. Rather, she uses cash from the carrot sales to buy luxury imports for expatriate customers in Bobo: Granny Smith apples from South Africa, peaches and cherries from France, even fresh shrimps packed on ice if specially ordered. Sometimes she also buys several metres of expensive batik cloth to resell to African customers, or to add to her already sizeable personal collection. Finally, before catching the flight back to Bobo, she goes to the airport 'free shop' and buys as much champagne and whisky as she can legally (she says) take with her. These purchases, according to her calculations, make the price of the airline ticket worthwhile, especially since the whole trip can be done in less than two days, and under conditions much less gruelling than on the 20+ hours, one-way train ride.

During 1993–4 Fatou was perhaps the only woman produce trader in Bobo who came into the main downtown hotel not just to dispose of a headpan of strawberries or sweetpeas, but to buy a soda or even an occasional beer. She has been selling produce in the neighbourhood (and to the hotel kitchen itself) for so long that she now refers to the gruff Lebanese hotel owner by his first name, and he buys champagne from her for the hotel's New Year's Eve party. In these ways, Fatou is not remotely 'typical', even among the small number of local women who sell top-quality fruits and vegetables in front of the downtown groceries. She has worked her way into a set of privileged business relations through an unparalleled combination of market savvy, charisma, and sheer gall.

On the other hand, Fatou has paid a price: local opinion assumes that any woman who does so well in a cross-border trade must use sex to get through customs. Women of such repute are generally considered less desirable wives, and indeed, she is teased for not having found a husband yet. Not every woman would choose her line of work, given the sacrifices it entails, and she herself sometimes hints at wanting to settle down into respectable married motherhood. Fatou's career is the exception proving what has historically been the rule for ambitious women: success comes through different kinds of entrepreneurial strategies than those pursued by men, and brings them often rather more ambivalent rewards.

CONCLUSION

By now it should be apparent that the ongoing economic reforms in Burkina Faso and elsewhere in Africa are, for better or worse, only that – reforms. While certain measures have had a huge and immediate impact on the conditions of most people's daily work and survival (mass lay-offs and the currency devaluation, in particular), it looks much less likely that the overall effects of adjustment programmes will in fact dramatically transform the historical–structural conditions of African entrepreneurship. As for the men and woman profiled above, nepotism and patronage alone clearly do not explain their career trajectories. Yet neither could one argue that they have been eager and able to exploit new and risky markets simply because liberalisation measures have freed them from dependency on, and obligations to, family and state – which, in fact, they have not. Nor, as Fatou and other women traders are well aware, has it created a market that is more free of handicapping prejudices and old-boyism than commerce under socialism or colonialism.

This is not a comment, one way or the other, on whether the coming years will bring the expansion and proliferation of export-oriented agro-enterprises in Burkina Faso and other liberalising African countries. Any such projection would have to take into account many more variables than I have discussed here, including domestic politics and international trade and aid policies. The point is rather that because the norms, practices, and sites of economic activity are constructed in all kinds of places under different social and material conditions, with different uses and understandings of wealth, entrepreneurship simply does not work in the same way everywhere. It may be structured by relations of gender, class, and so forth – but again, in historically specific ways. That these are hardly new observations makes it all the more remarkable that World Bank policies continue to assume that entrepreneurship is a generic, even innate human quality. Arguably, only the metaphors and some of the methods of developing this quality have changed over the past 50 years: modernisation theorists expected *homo oeconomicus* to evolve, but now, in the hurried era of structural adjustment, he must be 'unleashed'.

In southwestern Burkina Faso, the entrepreneurial dynamism so far unleashed by liberalisation reflects not so much a broad-based acceptance of the rules of the market economy as a scramble to readapt earlier strategies to new conditions. Best positioned to adapt are those individuals who have already accumulated during their working lives

not just capital (though that, clearly, is not unimportant), but also the skills, knowledge, social relations, and status needed to win acceptance and 'do business' in all kinds of social contexts, from the village to the bank office or hotel bar. As the case-studies above illustrate, no amount of technical skill will compensate for the inability to communicate or understand the other parties in a contract, partnership, or exchange; nor will fierce ambition necessarily compensate entirely for long-standing social inequalities and prejudice. What precisely constitutes entrepreneurial capacity varies over time and place, but in all cases it is both ascribed and achieved, a product of particular life situations put to most profitable use.