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Culture, conventions and colonial constructs of rurality in south–north horticultural trades

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Abstract

This paper draws on comparative social history and convention theory to examine current transformations in the contemporary "Anglophone" and "Francophone" fresh vegetable trades between Africa and Europe. In the 1990s both British and later French supermarkets adopted codes defining standards of food safety, agricultural best practice and, in the UK, "ethical trade." As conventions, these standards represent corporate efforts not only to assure but also profit from an increasingly comprehensive notion of food quality. These standards also promise to drive changes in retailers' international fresh produce supply chains, but not uniformly. Comparative historical analysis of French and English conventions, as they apply to African fresh produce commodity chains, provides insight into the interplay between place, culture, and national and international political economies.

As recently as the early 1980s, non-traditional food commodities appeared to offer Sub-Saharan Africa a "fresh" start on the road to export-led development. World market prices for many of the continent's traditional export commodities were stagnant or declining, but Europe's growing appetite for exotic, counter-season, and semi-processed fruits and vegetables suggested that the future lay in these high-value "non-traditional" crops. With help from improved "cool chain" technologies and donor-funded irrigation projects, it became possible for an increasing number of the world's poorest countries to sell fresh produce to some of the richest; their mangetout peas and fine beans, sold in posh London supermarkets and Parisian restaurants, seemed to epitomize the triumph of free trade and technology over distance and perishability. Not least, the labor demands and high market prices of these fragile crops made them eminently suitable for smallholder production. In Kenya, home to one of the continent's oldest and largest horticultural export sectors, even long-neglected women farmers had been able to participate in contract farming schemes as independent producers (Jaffee, 1995).

By the late 1990s, however, European food scares and mounting "anti-globalization" sentiment had cast doubt on the African smallholders' future in the global fresh fruit and vegetable (FFV) trade. Although far removed in almost every sense from the agro-food industries that gave Europe mad cows and dioxin chickens, African FFV export producers have nonetheless been subject to European retailers' efforts to reassure consumers about the safety and quality of all their food, whatever its origins.

Most of the early research on this phenomenon has focused on British supermarkets, which now demand "traceability" of their African fresh produce suppliers as well as adherence to strict codes concerning on-farm hygiene, environmental protection, and worker welfare (Dolan et al., 1999; Barrett et al., 1999; see also Marsden, 1997; Marsden et al., 2000). In addition, this research indicates that British retailers have sought to facilitate quality control and innovation by shedding some suppliers and forging more communicative "partnerships" with those who remain (Hughes, 1999). In other words, they rely on both industry standards and personal relationships to assure the quality of their products (and thus the loyalty of their customers) and this has had significant consequences for their African suppliers.

Yet a closer look at the range of networks connecting Africa's fresh vegetable producers and exporters to European (not simply British) markets reveals considerable heterogeneity in the organization as well as direction and scope of ongoing restructuring. For starters, France imports fresh produce from several of

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its former African colonies, including countries where the conditions and scale of production could never meet British supermarket standards.

Within agro-food studies, actor-network theory and convention theory have no trouble with heterogeneity; indeed, it is the likely outcome of the different ways people and things act together in different places and networks. But the spatial and social geographies of these networks are by no means arbitrary. Rather they must be understood in light of the broader, longer historical relationships linking Africa to Europe—in particular, the colonial relationship—and farmers to markets. More broadly, these networks demonstrate the need for analyses of agro-food trade that appreciate the multifaceted and multi-scaled legacies of empire.

In Africa, European colonialism established not only enduring ties of aid, trade and language, but also different patterns of rural resource use and distribution. These patterns were informed (though hardly determined) by the colonizers' economic and strategic objectives in particular places, and by their different normative visions of rural Africa. This paper shows how the colonial project in two parts of Africa—France's Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) and England's Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia)—laid the groundwork for two quite different horticultural networks between Africa and Europe.

The history of food provisioning in England and France is also an important part of the story of difference, though this paper addresses it only briefly. Distinct trajectories and timelines of agrarian change and industrialization have produced societies with different traditions of handling the nature of food, and different conceptions of quality, purity and taste (Mennell, 1985). These have in turn shaped the English and French markets for African fresh vegetables. In addition, this history has produced different national structures of food distribution, which in turn condition the relative autonomy of the actors who actually do business in Africa.

Through a comparative analysis of the "Anglophone" and "Francophone" horticultural networks, I aim to make two larger points. The first concerns the enduring importance of *history* in the analysis of even the newest and seemingly most "non-traditional" agro-food networks. As both global neoliberalism and its countermovements have given rise to such networks within and between regions of the global South and North, much recent research has focused on the roles and relationships of new and newly prominent actors, both human and non-human, individual and corporate. Through empirical studies of transnational R&D collaborations, emerging forms of private sector food governance, and a variety of "alternative" food marketing arrangements, this research has also considered new conceptualizations of power, agency, and meanings attached to food and farming (for example, Busch and Juska, 1997; Fitzsimmons and Goodman, 1998; Marsden, 1997; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997). Not least, this work has generated considerable debate about how best to reconcile (or choose among) a widening range of analytical frameworks (Goodman, 1999, 2001; Murdoch et al., 2000).

In the midst of this exploration, however, we still need to consider how emerging networks, for all their newness, may in fact be laid down in the deep ruts worn by earlier relations of domination and extraction, on both a macro and micro scale. Ethnographic agrarian studies research in Africa (among other places) has shown how these relations, and the institutions they created and transformed, continue to shape the ways humans use and value nature (Watts, 1983; Berry, 1993; Guyer, 1988, 1997; Mortimore, 1998).

More specifically, a historically informed ethnographic analysis illuminates not only why and how particular agro-food networks have formed, but also why their apparent conventions may not in fact assure "quality" as defined by the market. In other words, it allows us to avoid a functionalist conception of institutions (Hart, 1997), and to appreciate how the norms, practices and relationships that get goods from farm to market may be highly unstable, variously interpreted, and perhaps best not called conventions at all—even if they do, somehow, endure.

Second, I want to raise some questions about *trust* as the basis of "quality" agro-food networks. Characterized by high-value products, "reflexive" consumption, and specialized, often place-specific labor processes, these networks owe their contemporary vigor to consumers' loss of trust in (or at least appetite for) the industrialized food supply (Murdoch and Miele, 1999; Murdoch et al., 2000; Dupuis, 2000). Yet trust is extraordinarily difficult in many "situations of exchange" (Appadurai, 1986) and here I argue that relationships that appear to operate on trust—that is, on the assumption that the parties involved will treat each other as honestly and fairly as they would themselves want to be treated—are often just situations where one or all parties has no choice but to hope for luck or mercy. This is perhaps especially true when major retailers seek "quality" in countries and regions where producers have few alternative sources of income, and no realistic possibility of legal recourse. Economies of quality, in this sense, are not necessarily less exploitative than others.

1. Conventions, colonialism, and the border question

Scholars at France's Institut Nationale de Récherche Agronome (INRA) originally turned to convention theory to address the late-twentieth century concerns of French agriculture and its related food industries. In a country where the demise of the peasantry came late, and where much of the citizenry takes pride in national traditions of artisanal food production and specialized markets, convention theory provided a framework for understanding how "quality" enabled farms and firms to survive in a competitive and discerning marketplace (Sylvander, 1995). Within this framework, quality differs from measurable, objective standards for goods, like size, color or weight; it describes instead characteristics such as purity, freshness, and taste, which may derive from particular production processes but are not always immediately obvious or universally recognized.

By this definition, "quality" is a construct, and its marketing depends means of external assurance, or conventions. More fundamentally, it depends on buyers' acceptance of both the value assigned to a particular quality, and the reliability of the convention used to assure it. Typologies of conventions vary; Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) list six, while Salais and Storper (1997) divide them according to four "worlds of production." For present purposes I use Sylvander's simpler distinction between "institutional" means of quality assurance (such as certification schemes and labels, which Boltanski and Thévenot would classify as "industrial" conventions) and "transactional" means (i.e., the norms and practices underlying trust between buyer and seller, a key aspect of Boltanski and Thevenot's "domestic" convention) (Sylvander, 1995).

More recently, the field of Anglophone agro-food studies has drawn on convention theory to help bridge the longstanding conceptual divide between society and nature. Convention theory's recognition that quality is situational—that is, specific not only to the goods but also to the place and actors involved—complements actor-network theory's insistence on the "collective action" of the social and the natural. In its appreciation for "non-market" means of qualification, convention theory also lends itself to the analysis of alternative food provisioning systems, such as fair trade and community-supported agriculture (Murdoch and Miele, 1999).

Ironically, despite all the interest in networks that have arisen in the age of globalization, relatively little research in this genre has ventured far across the globe (with the notable exception of "fair trade" case studies (Raynolds, 2000; Whatmore and Thorne, 1997)). The research tradition of convention theory, in particular, has focused mostly on Western Europe and North America (Allaire and Boyer, 1995; Wilkinson, 1997). Even studies on "artisanal" or "non-industrial" production and marketing systems are set in highly industrialized countries. Partly, of course, this reflects the now common association of quality in food with local production or national patrimony (Murdoch et al., 2000; Sylvander, 1995). But the narrow geographic focus of this research tradition frames a second irony. It recognizes heterogeneity among networks and their conventions, yet assumes that conventions are created and maintained with the support of certain technologies and legal-bureaucratic institutions, and by actors who have more or less the same ideas about not only what defines quality in a product, but also what constitutes fair and trustworthy behavior (Seligman, 1997). It assumes, in other words, a relatively homogeneous techno-normative landscape for collective action.

In that sense, convention theory shares the limitations of liberal attempts to explain economic growth and prosperity in terms of trust and "culture" more generally. Fukuyama's Trust (1995) and Landes' (1998) even more grandiose *Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998), for example, both claim that prosperous societies (or in Landes' term, the "winners") are those where a culture of civic trust—as codified in the norms and mores taught at home, school and church, in business practices and in the legal system—encourages people to invest time and capital outside their family and clan. It encourages them, in other words, to take productive risks with strangers. This "trust" in strangers is based on the knowledge that the stranger is governed by and aware of the same kinds of legal and ethical codes as oneself.[1]

Yet obviously many actors participate in "situations of exchange" that are not only transnational but also transcultural—that is, between people who do *not* necessarily share ethical or behavioral norms, nor access to the same institutional protections against risk (Seligman, 1998). Who then to trust? This question is particularly compelling in those realms of international commerce, investment and subcontracting where the quality of the commodities themselves cannot be standardized or guaranteed in advance (as in fresh produce or artisanal goods), where the market's standards are rapidly changing, and where infrastructure and information access is highly uneven.

The Afro-European trade in fresh vegetables illustrates this point. The trade still encompasses a range of producers working under different environmental and technological conditions, as well as intermediaries ranging from one-man import–export companies to multinational corporations (who in some cases do business with one another). All are expected to deliver "quality;" unlike tropical fresh exports such as bananas or citrus, Sub-Saharan Africa's fresh vegetables have historically been considered "specialized" products,

[1] As one anonymous reviewer correctly observed, it is no coincidence that the parts of the world described as lacking in civic traditions are those which were subjected to European and North American imperialism during the era when said civic traditions were taking root. Put somewhat differently (and as Polanyi (1944,2000) among others has noted) the institutions that helped inculcate and maintain a culture of civic trust emerged in the "winner" nations even as the latter plundered the wealth and destroyed the social safety nets of peoples in the now-"loser" regions.

because of their labor and skill requirements (Salais and Storper, 1997). The British and French markets for these vegetables, as I will discuss later, differ in a few important ways, but both are comprised of consumers willing to pay a premium for fresh vegetables, either because they are counter-season, hand-picked, "baby," exotic, pre-packed, or all the above.

In recent years, however, delivering quality has gotten more complicated. In addition to the inherent challenges involved in the production and transport of fragile, perishable, premium-grade fresh vegetables (especially in the unpredictable climatic conditions of tropical Africa) participants in the Afro-European trade have faced the European retailers' demands for more paperwork (proof of quality), changes in EU pesticide laws (Chan and King, 2000), and growing uncertainty about the cost and availability of transportation. European retailers and regulatory bodies are imposing new "conventions," but their negotiated acceptance (and thus effectiveness) is by no means a given.

Unlike some actors in "alternative" agro-food networks, participants in the Afro-European fresh vegetable trade are not necessarily ideologically committed to their work (Raynolds, 2000). Yet neither does profit alone explain their actions and aspirations (Freidberg, 1997). Their motives, rather, are varied and complex, and must be situated in both place and history. More specifically, relations between producers and traders, Africans and Europeans, must be situated in circuits of commerce and patronage that were established under colonial rule (in some cases before) and have been largely reinforced by postcolonial development aid.

The contemporary significance of these historical bonds goes beyond language and logistics. Colonial polices governing resource use and distribution varied by region (Berry, 1993)—agricultural policies in the British colony of the Gold Coast, for example, differed considerably from those in the Rhodesias—but they all came wrapped in ideas about how Africa should be "civilized" and its land and people made useful (or *mise en valeur*, as the French put it) (Conklin, 1997). These ideas were influenced to some degree by the European colonizers' own experience of industrialization and agricultural modernization. The social and spatial organization of Burkina Faso's green bean export sector, for example, reflects the layered legacies of French colonial agricultural policies in Upper Volta, and postcolonial populism and drought relief programs. The sector comprises just one part of an overall vision of development that defines the incorporation of peasants into markets and donor projects as a morally valid end in itself, even if the peasants ultimately benefit little.

Zambia's horticultural export industry, by contrast, sprouted from the rubble of a once-prosperous mining economy, on the fertile lands claimed by Europeans a century earlier. It owes its rapid growth to liberalization policies and donor aid that appealed to white settler ambition and overseas Anglo-Saxon corporate investment. As in Burkina Faso, however, the discursive justification for the industry's inequities draws on a highly normative vision of rural development. In Zambia, a vision of development measured in terms of jobs generated, technologies and skills disseminated, and lands made commercially productive helps to justify, at least in the minds of the industry's leaders, the reproduction of colonial era patterns of concentrated landholding and hierarchical, white-dominated management structures. It is a vision influenced not just by Britain's own experience of agricultural industrialization but also, I would argue, by the historical role of industrial-scale enterprises in the "civilizing" of British southern Africa (Ferguson, 1999; Trollope, 1973).

Thus whether or not colonial ideals and policies had any social merit or economic pay-off, they left their mark on the moral economies that now govern relations of power and resource control—and thus relations between human and non-human—within horticultural export networks. Here moral economy describes a set of widely recognized, but not necessarily respected norms of decency and justice (Thompson, 1991).

In Burkina Faso, for example, the horticultural moral economy defines the respective rights and obligations of peasant producers and urban-based exporters (and to a certain extent French importers) who must make the best of a short and erratic growing season, an unreliable infrastructure, and generally impoverished conditions of production. In Zambia, the horticultural moral economy has a more industrial character and defines white farmers and white-run companies' obligations to take care for their workforce as well as their relatively generous natural resource base. Although colonial in origin, these paternalistic obligations have become all the more politic in light of government hostility towards white farming in neighboring Zimbabwe, not to mention ongoing tensions in South Africa (where "neo-paternalism" persists on wine and fruit farms (Ewert and Hamman, 1999; Du Toit, 1998).

While white managers of the Zambian export companies worry about the porosity of national borders in a conflict-ridden region, other kinds of borders drawn or redefined under colonial rule—between black and white, African and European, peasant and merchant and manager—remain highly visible in the organization and daily workings of Afro-European horticultural networks more generally. Here, the comparison of networks dealing in similar commodities but through very different social forms, makes clear how different kinds of borders and affinities, different views of 'the other,' shape actors' commitment to particular kinds of conventions, and also, to an extent, their willingness to trust.

1.1. Benign dictators

The following analysis draws on fieldwork conducted in 1999–2002 in Burkina Faso, Zambia, France and England.[2] It builds on earlier research tracing the social and environmental history of market-gardening in Burkina Faso, and is part of a larger project examining how changing cultural constructs of food quality and risk are playing out within different Afro-European fresh food networks (see also Freidberg, 2001).

In the African field sites, interviews and participant observation focused on the daily work and professional histories of fresh vegetable growers and exporters, and on how relations between these two groups and their European clients had been affected by the changing quality and safety demands of the European market. In the European field sites, the inquiry focused on importers, and on their relations with both their African suppliers and their retail clients. In all four sites, archival research and interviews with NGO and trade group representatives situated the contemporary fresh vegetable trade in the history of colonial and postcolonial agricultural development policy as well as within English and French histories of food marketing and consumption. The field research also considered how different actors and institutions have experienced the rise of global neoliberalism—as manifested, for example, in structural adjustment programs, and the proposed abolition of Europe's preferential trade agreements with Africa (McMichael, 2000).

The basic premise of this comparative project holds that the differences between the Anglophone and Francophone networks were products of geographically distinct but linked histories of agrarian change and food provisioning. This paper focuses on the African production regions, but it is worth mentioning the key differences between the French and British food import and retail trades, insofar as they affect their African suppliers. Some of these differences reflect historically distinct French and British tastes (Mennell, 1985); a more detailed discussion would show that these tastes themselves have some basis in agrarian history.

First, in both England and France, the food retail trade underwent rapid concentration in the 1990s, leaving the bulk of food sales in each country in the hands of four of five supermarket chains. But supermarkets, or "multiples," have a longer history of dominance in the UK, especially in the provision of fresh and specialty foods, which many French consumers still prefer to buy at outdoor markets or small shops (Ducrocq, 1999). Second, the UK supermarkets, granted considerable regulatory autonomy by the 1990 Food Safety Law, more actively control the hygienic, social and environmental conditions of food production, both at home and abroad, than their French counterparts (Marsden 1997; Marsden et al., 2000). The most quality-conscious multiples not only dictate their standards to the import agents but also send their own employees abroad to inspect farms and packing plants, to confer with their suppliers, and more generally to establish their companies' presence (Barrett et al., 1999). In other words, the supermarkets' capacity to discipline and thus transform their suppliers—the topic of much scholarly as well as popular criticism in the UK—is hardly diluted by distance. If anything, they exercise even greater disciplinary power over Africa's commercial horticultural producers than Britain's, because the former have fewer local alternatives, and fewer allies amongst Britain's politicians, media outlets, and agro-food advocacy groups.[3]

Compared to the likes of Tesco and Sainsbury's, French supermarkets' relations with their suppliers are strikingly laissez-faire. They only began demanding "traceability" in their African supply chains in the late 1990s, after BSE-tainted beef found its way into supermarket meat supplies. The major chains have endorsed EUREP-GAP, a European retailer "best practice" protocol aimed at getting fresh fruit and vegetable suppliers to practice (eventually) integrated pest management and food safety risk analysis on their farms (EUREP-GAP, 2000). Otherwise, however, the French supermarkets have kept their distance, leaving responsibility for all on-the-ground operations in Africa in the hands of French importers. Some of the latter are family run businesses who have worked in Africa for decades, and who maintain a broad range of retail clientele—that is, not just supermarkets, but also outdoor market vendors and luxury greengrocers. They are therefore accustomed to dealing with diverse standards and conventions of quality, and in fact rely on this diversity to manage risk.

The French and English markets also look to Sub-Saharan Africa for different *forms* of quality vegetables. The French have historically imported little besides loose French beans (*haricot vert*), mostly in the

[2]This research was supported by grants from the Rockefeller Foundation at Dartmouth College, the National Science Foundation Geography and Cultural Anthropology Programs, and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies.

[3]Especially since the foot-and-mouth epidemic, groups such as Friends of the Earth, the Countryside Agency, Sustain, and the Soil Association (Britain's oldest and largest organic certifier and advocacy group) have joined more traditional farmers' lobbies (the National Farmers Union, the British Independent Fruit Growers) in criticizing the supermarkets for contributing to the destruction of British family farming, both by imposing quality and quantity demands that small farmers cannot afford to meet, and by sourcing goods from overseas. In response to British media coverage of these charges, as well as of the British farming crisis more generally, the supermarkets have stepped up their own public pledges to support the nation's farmers (Vidal, 2002; Hawkes et al., 2000).

wintertime and always the slenderest varieties.[4] The French market for pre-packed beans is growing, according to importers, but still supplied nearly exclusively by Kenya, Africa's biggest exporter. The UK supermarkets, by contrast, want not just green beans (both thin and fat) but also a wide variety of "baby" vegetables, supplied year round and almost entirely in pre-packaged form. This demand reflects partly consumer habits, past and present: English consumers' historically greater dependence (relative to the French) on processed and packaged food, and their recent interest in exotic and ethnic cuisines (Cook and Crang, 1996). But it also reflects the large retailers' success in marketing fresh produce that can be kept on the shelf several days, sold under the store brand name, and at a value-added price (Wrigley, 1998).[5]

By the mid-1990s, supermarkets effectively set the bar for the UK market for African fresh vegetables, and producers hoping to stay (much less break into) this market had to invest in meeting its quality norms (Ngige and Wagacha, 1999). In Kenya, Britain's oldest and largest Sub-Saharan supplier, many producers and exporters lacked the means to expand and upgrade, and subsequently lost their supermarket clients.[6] Overall, the share of exports coming from small-scale African growers (typically organized in cooperatives or outgrower projects) diminished, while the proportion coming from large, vertically integrated and typically expatriate-owned companies increased (Dolan et al., 1999).[7] One study of this trend concluded that the only hope for smallholders' survival in the horticultural export sector (at least in African countries supplying the UK market) lay in outgrower schemes run by "benign dictators," meaning "major, well-established" firms committed to working with small farmers, and capable of "assuming responsibility for the rigid enforcement of standards" (IDS/NRI, 1999). Such firms exist in Kenya as well as in Zimbabwe (the UK market's second biggest African supplier) but in the latter they are an even smaller minority; in the 1990s all but around 5% of Zimbabwe's horticultural export production came from large commercial (meaning white-owned) farms.

Zambia entered the horticultural export market late, and with no input from African peasant farmers. Instead the first exporters were white commercial farmers desperate for hard currency. Liberalized foreign exchange controls in the 1980s inspired a brief boom in exports of non-traditional goods such as melons and avocadoes, followed by a rapid consolidation as most of the farmers either gave up on horticulture entirely (melons turned out to be much harder work, and not much more profitable, than maize, their traditional crop) or became outgrowers for a larger company. Within a few years two corporations, each employing a few thousand pickers and packers, controlled the entire vegetable export sector. One is owned by CDC Capital Partners, a "public–private" equity investor partly funded by the UK government (formerly known as the Commonwealth Development Corporation) and the other by TransZambezi Industries, an investment firm active in southern Africa but incorporated in the British Virgin Islands.

The companies' top managers, all expatriates with previous experience in international agribusiness or farm management, regularly visit their clients during both business and holiday trips to the UK. They note that Zambia offers not only an attractive investment environment (since the early 1990s it has deregulated its economy while remaining relatively politically stable) but also a natural environment suitable for the kind of year-round production the UK market demands. Indeed, the Zambezi River alone gives Zambia a significant irrigation and energy advantage over many African countries.

The horticultural company managers also emphasize the differences between the racial climates of Zambia and neighboring Zimbabwe, where white farms were subject to invasions by supporters of President Robert Mugabe in 2000–1. Whites in Zambia, they point out, never occupied much land. This is true relative to white land control in Zimbabwe, though not relative to the landholdings of most black Zambians. Additionally, according to one company manager in Zambia, "we're not really classified as 'big white farmer.' It's more corporate, investing big money, creating lots of jobs…and therefore I think that it's seen as a very positive development." One would expect such a remark from a corporate manager, but the distinction between "corporate" and "white farmer" enterprise has a history in Zambia. Foreign mining corporations brought the country jobs and infrastructure, helping make it one of Africa's most prosperous countries during the height of the copper boom (Ferguson, 1999). The mining corporations also made significant concessions to the late-colonial demands of the Zambian labor movement (Gann, 1964). They were considered, in other words,

[4] France imports a more diverse range of vegetables from its former North African colonies.

[5] Pre-packaging also facilitates traceability, though it is not universally viewed as safer than unpackaged produce (particularly in France, such packaging, like canned goods, has long been associated with industrial dangers such as botulism and listeria).

[6] In Kenya there has long been a parallel vegetable trade between Kenya Asian exporters and Asian produce sellers in the UK. This trade has been imperiled both by the supermarkets' growing share of fresh produce sales and by rising air freight costs (Barrett et al., 1999).

[7] In the 1980s and early 1990s, most of Kenya's export horticultural production—approximately 75% as of 1992—was contracted out to smallholders, whose household labor was considered best suited to fragile, labor-intensive crops like French beans. By 1998, smallholders' contribution to horticultural exports had dropped to 30% of the total volume (Dolan et al., 1999).

progressive employers compared to white settler farmers, who paid poorly and often treated workers badly (Vickery, 1986).

Pay in the contemporary horticultural industry, which averages around a dollar a day for packers and pickers (the latter are paid piece-rate), hardly compare with the wages once earned by Zambian mineworkers. But the management boasts that "looking after of your people," as one manager put it, is standard industry practice (and, one might add, a practice long encouraged in Britain's white settler colonies (see for example Macmillan, 1919)). This means on-farm clinics and kindergartens, on-farm housing for permanent employees, soccer fields for employee matches, and free lunches (or, in the case of one company, a daily high-protein drink). At least some of these benefits, of course, serve the companies' interest in maximizing their workers' ability and willingness to labor hard and attentively. As one manager admitted, "let's be fairly hard about it. If our people are not healthy and happy, we're not going to get the work from them."

The other reason for attending to worker welfare, of course, is that the UK supermarkets now require it. They also require that their African horticultural suppliers adhere to rigorous hygiene and environmental protection standards, as detailed in the supermarkets' codes of conduct. Some of the standards are company-specific, but many are drawn from national or international codes, such as the "base code" of the UK-based Ethical Trade Initiative, EUREP-GAP and ISO standards. In other words they are "industrial" or "institutionalized" conventions, serving to assure that production processes meet with the home market's quality standards, despite ecological and sociocultural conditions of production potentially quite different from those of the home country, and despite the distance and anonymity separating seller from buyer (Du Toit, 2001; Freidberg, 2003).

It is worth emphasizing Du Toit's point that these conventions, while presuming "global standards" of ethical and environmentally sound farm practice, are in fact implemented differently in different localities and trade relationships (2001, p.2). Equally important, although detailed protocols and checklists allow retailers to "act at a distance," these "technologies of ethics" (Du Toit, 2001) are reinforced by frequent personal communication between the export company managers, their import agents, and the supermarket buyers and technologists. To a certain extent, these individuals' common cultural and professional background—a legacy of settler colonialism—eases what is potentially a tense relationship. They can empathize with and adjust to each other's day-to-day difficulties and broader anxieties; they all understand how easily weather, insects, and worker error can damage a crop, and how easily a food scare can damage a company. In interviews they refer to each other by their first names. But familiarity and even solidarity of this sort erases neither the ultimate priority of shareholder profits, nor the wide power imbalance between suppliers and supermarkets (Hughes, 2001). All parties realize that for all the talk about "committed partnerships," it is easier for supermarkets to find new suppliers (for most products) than the other way around. One export company manager, having boasted of how his company had begun supplying most of the major UK supermarkets within the space of a few years, then admitted to its vulnerability:

> …the big supermarkets won't give you written contracts. So it's all on trust, you know, but then, tomorrow they could drop you like that. And one hopes that they have some sort of moral undertaking…you know, if they dropped us like that basically it would put thousands of people's livelihoods at risk, just with (our company) alone. One hopes to get that message across more and more to the supermarkets.

The "message" appeals for a morally committed buyer–supplier relationship, not one premised simply on the efficiencies gained by stability. Certainly individual buyers might desire such a relationship as much as the African exporters, but in the context of intense retailer competition there is little room for underperforming suppliers of any kind. So in the late 1990s both Zambian export companies, in order to keep up with the supermarkets' quantity or quality demands, invested in expanding their farms, upgrading their facilities, and—in the hopes of recouping these investments—developing yet higher value-added product lines. In addition, company managers pressured outgrowers, in person as well as on paper, to spend as much as necessary to comply with the supermarkets' worker welfare, environmental and food safety standards.

The nature of the relations between company managers and outgrowers reflect the intimacy and relative affluence characterizing contemporary Zambia's small population (estimated at a few hundred households) of white farmers and agro-industrialists. Most members of this population live in or around the capital, Lusaka, or in two or three other line-of-rail towns; many belong to the same social and sporting clubs, and send their children to the same schools. This does not mean that relations between the export company and the outgrowers have been uniformly close and friendly. But they are based on shared understandings about how business is done (not least, with an awareness that everyone talks about everybody else), as well as certain shared interests. In particular, managers and farmers alike had a stake in the public face of the horticultural industry within Zambia, given the historically negative image of white commercial agriculture in the region and especially in neighboring Zimbabwe. They had good reason to show that modern horticulture was good for Zambia—its workers, land, and economy—even if it remained a predominantly "white" agro-industry.

The unanswered question, as of 2000, was whether the UK supermarkets' standards for "ethical" production would advance or undermine the Zambian companies' domestic public relations agenda. The outgrowers interviewed generally agreed with the standards' objectives, especially those aimed at minimizing pesticide use. Like many farmers in the UK, they already considered themselves good stewards of the environment and food safety, and resented the fact that distant bureaucrats and consumers thought otherwise. Only the requirement that they provide on-farm childcare generated much outright criticism, on the grounds that it was irrelevant and inappropriate. As one outgrower said of her Zambian workers, "it's not in these people's culture" to leave their babies with strangers.

The far greater problem was the cost of compliance (see also Collinson, 2001). Some of the outgrowers already had clinics and schools on or near their farms, but they still had to build new storage and washing facilities, and hire and train additional workers for tasks such as crop scouting and bookkeeping. Yet the prices the supermarkets paid them remained the same. As a result, most of the more than two dozen outgrowers producing export vegetables in the mid-1990s had given up 5 years later. They switched to cash crops not subject to such intense overseas scrutiny and regulation: dairy and poultry products for the domestic market, paprika, and most recently marigolds (used in food dye). For the remaining five or six outgrowers (most of whom were women) a sense of obligation, combined with uncertainty about what else to do, sustained them more than any evidence that horticulture would once again become lucrative. They mentioned the importance of providing jobs for neighboring communities, especially for women, but they also mentioned their loyalty to the export company manager. "He has me wrapped around his little finger," said one outgrower.

In short, the "industrial" or "institutionalized" conventions imposed by the UK supermarkets have raised the costs and stresses of outgrower horticultural production, and only in exceptional cases have personal loyalties compensated for these pressures. As a result, the export company that lost most of its outgrowers while trying to meet supermarket *quality* standards then faced, ironically, the problem of producing enough *quantity*.

This quantity crisis was one reason the company decided to begin purchasing produce from cooperatives of "smallholders," meaning black Zambians cultivating 1–4 ha in the well-irrigated, easily accessible farming areas around Lusaka. The smallholder scheme, which received substantial help from foreign donors, placed the company in the "benign dictator" role discussed earlier, insofar as it not only provided all inputs but also (in principle) had its own employees handle pesticide spraying. The other motivation behind the scheme was more political: involving smallholders would demonstrate that the company's growth offered black Zambians a broad range of opportunities, not just jobs as pickers and packers.

As of 2000 the smallholder scheme was too new to assess. But it is worth noting that the economics of the scheme assumed that the Zambian smallholders have lower overhead costs and will thus accept lower prices than white farmers. Most of the "smallholders," however, were actually members of members of the Zambian professional and bureaucratic elite, living on some of the country's most valuable land. Like the white farmers (some of whom are their neighbors), they relied predominantly on hired labor, and maintained relatively high standards of living. Their costs, in other words, were not necessarily much lower than those of their white counterparts. Neither were these smallholders (whose ranks include former army generals and cabinet ministers) necessarily willing to have the terms of their participation in export horticulture "dictated" to them by an upstart company's young managers and agronomists.

Clearly much remains uncertain about the future of the Zambian-UK fresh produce network. But it is also clear that the legacies of British settler colonialism have both facilitated and constrained the export company managers' efforts to meet the market's quality standards. They operate in a country where the infrastructure is relatively good, where corporate enterprise is both locally welcomed and well-funded from abroad, and where a perceived common cultural background (relatively speaking) has eased relations between growers, exporters and importers. But it is also a country where profitable production has historically depended on cheap labor and inputs, and where white domination of commercial agriculture (as well as other forms of natural resource-based enterprise, like wildlife tourism) remains, ultimately, a sensitive issue. Quality conventions proved relatively easy to negotiate, in other words, but they may not prove politically or economically sustainable.

1.2. Moral middlemen

Unlike Britain's colonies in the relatively temperate, mineral rich zones of southern Central Africa, the French colonies of the Sahel attracted few European settlers. Colonial Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta) served primarily as a migrant labor reserve for the more richly endowed colonies in France's West African Empire (AOF), but its peasant households were also expected to produce export crops such as cotton. What few resources the Upper Volta colonial administration devoted to agricultural development went not towards developing large-scale production, but rather towards programs to educate and otherwise "modernize" the (male) peasant (Lindou, 1989; Massa and Madiega, 1995).

This strategy assumed that peasant production was not only the most efficient but also the most ecologically and socially desirable route to rural commercialization. This assumption in turn drew on evidence from West African regions where peasant households, with help from indigenous merchant networks, had been producing tropical export commodities and consuming European manufactured goods for more than a century (Berry, 1975). But it also drew on a belief that has long informed French policies and politics at all levels: namely, that family farmers belong in a modern society not only to produce food and fiber, but also to protect the rural world against the city's destabilizing and polluting influences, cultural and moral as much as environmental (Muller, 1984; Delavignette, 1946).

This vision has informed decades of "pro-peasant" rural development planning in Burkina Faso during and since the colonial era, with mixed results. On one hand, rural poverty remains the norm; during poor harvest years, hunger is common and famine a not-so-distant threat. On the other hand, in relatively few rural areas have peasant households experienced land expropriation or forced land sales. Local conflicts over bet over property boundaries and inheritance claims abound, but the basic tenets of indigenous land rights remain inviolate. Moreover, governmental and donor efforts to cope with an apparently drying climate have continued to prioritize (at least in principle) peasant production and land stewardship (Batterbury, 1994).

Such programs, first launched in the late 1960s, included irrigated horticultural export projects aimed at improving both foreign exchange earnings and rural food security in drought-prone regions. The projects provided small-scale growers access to irrigated plots on the condition that they join a state-run cooperative and agree to produce green beans, a crop that the French had long imported from its North African colonies. With their income from the green beans—produced between December and March, when the weather was dry and relatively cool and French demand greatest—the peasants would, in theory, be able to buy staple grains to supplement their own increasingly unreliable rainy-season harvests.

So unlike in Zambia, where all the export vegetable farms are rationally clustered close to the capital city, in Burkina Faso the sites of export production are widely scattered, some 6 h or more (on bad roads) from the Ouagadougou airport. Most green beans are produced on 0.1–1 ha plots by men and (less often) women who rely primarily on household labor, supplemented with hired hands at harvest time. The sector's greatest structural change since the late 1960s is that exporting is no longer handled by a state-run monopoly but rather by one to two dozen private firms. One formerly state-owned firm, UCOBAM, has a few hundred employees, but most of the rest are family or even one-man operations, and about half are only intermittently active.

As a group the exporters are much wealthier and better educated than most Burkinabé. Still, most rely at least partially on financing from a small (and shrinking) number of French importers to buy seeds and other inputs for peasant cooperatives. They typically contract with the cooperatives for a certain tonnage of green beans per month, at a pre-agreed price. Like the exporter–importer agreements, these contracts are often put in writing, but this means relatively little. The wide disparities in wealth and power between the contracting parties make legal recourse, in the event of a violation, effectively futile. So finding a trustworthy supplier or client is crucial, but often difficult.

In the case of relations between Burkinabé exporters and French importers, this is at least partly because longstanding, mutually held stereotypes encourage quick assumptions and, in some cases, a "cheat or be cheated" mentality—not ideal conditions for forging trust. In the case of relations between growers and exporters, stereotypes about "the peasant" and "the big businessman" also operate, but these are entangled in and reinforced by more material obstacles to trust. In other words, environmental and logistical conditions outside actors' control (wind storms, equipment breakdowns, cancelled flights, insufficient funds from abroad) drive them to violate their contracts (and thus compromise quality) all the time.

If, for example, a cooperative's production falls short for some reason, an exporter may buy beans that have been promised to and pre-financed by one of their competitors. Since this transaction amounts to a roundabout form of theft, it is conducted covertly, sometimes in the middle of the night. Or, if an exporter finds mid-season that he cannot afford to buy pesticides, he may simply "disappear" on his growers, leaving them with tons of green beans and no assured market. Or he may not pay them the promised sum.

For their part, individual growers may pre-empt a potentially unreliable exporter by selling not just their green beans on the sly, but also their fertilizer. They are also known to use cheap, toxic pesticides intended for cotton (still the country's main export crop) in place of chemicals appropriate for vegetables. As pesticide residue inspections have stepped up at France's ports of entry, this practice has become a source of considerable anxiety for Burkinabé exporters as well as French importers. More generally, all the violations of pre-season contractual agreements not only foster a climate of mistrust and instability—some buyer–supplier relationships fall apart after a year or two—but also undermine the aesthetic quality and quantity of supply.

Everyone involved realizes that Burkina Faso, once second only to Kenya among Sub-Saharan green bean exporters, has fallen in the ranks of African horticultural export countries. French importers complain that simply too many Burkinabé exporters are trying to squeeze into what is ultimately a limited market, and that their numbers increase (from 12 to 21 between 2000 and 2001) even as the sector plunges further into crisis. This apparent paradox suggests not simply that the Burkina Faso Ministry of Commerce has failed in its effort to discipline the export trade, but also that would-be green bean exporters are going into this business for rather more complicated reasons than pure commercial profit, as I discuss below.

Additionally, the exporters themselves realize that part of their problem lies in their limited control over growers, whom they visit once or twice a week at best, and in some cases much less frequently.[8] But to date, exporters have not responded to this situation by going into production themselves. They have not, in other words, adopted the Anglophone "command and control" model of the wage-labor plantation, even though at least some of them could obtain land for this purpose relatively easily.[9] Instead, they have diversified into other commodities (mangoes, oilseeds, textiles) and other sectors (real estate, consulting). This strategy not only helps minimize their risks; it also allows them to maintain the moral status and economic entitlements associated with their role as agro-exporters.

The moral status derives from their purported roles as the patrons of the peasantry. Several exporters claimed that greatest satisfaction of their work came from "helping" their growers earn a decent living. Although their "help" may be unreliable and much less than the growers deserve, the exporters' role still carries a certain moral weight in urban educated Burkinabé society, where almost everyone lives with the burden of needy rural kin.

The economic entitlements come in the form of the "help" the exporters themselves receive from the World Bank and Agence Francaise du Developpement (AFD), which launched an aid program for the newly formed fruit and vegetable exporters association (APEFEL) in the mid-1990s. The program represented part of the donors' larger effort to reinvigorate peasant export production by "professionalizing" the exporters. While the French AFD official in charge of the program in Ouagadougou readily admitted in 2000 that progress was slow, the exporters had not been idle. Rather, they had used aid-funded "learning tours" to Paris and East Africa, plus assorted moneys and material, to build and reinforce their expert status as well as their local and international commercial networks. They described themselves as professional businessmen, even if the French aid officials did not see them that way.

The exporters' strategies for tapping donor-aid resources are perfectly consistent with those employed by the region's mercantile elite for the past half-century. In other words, they are using rural patron–client relations to build personal business careers that are both subsidized and justified by the cause of peasant-based development (Saul, 1986). Many members of this elite worked for government ministries and foreign NGOs before starting their own businesses; they rent trucks to food relief agencies and houses to expatriate aid workers. You might say they are professional middlemen, and proud of it! Put somewhat differently: the "qualification" of their labor derives more from the role they play in a historically constructed moral economy (a role that has historically been exploitative, arguably hypocritical, but indispensable) than from their ability to deliver a quality product.

But the market, of course, demands the quality product, and according to the logic of neoliberalism, a business and indeed an entire national export sector that cannot consistently provide this product should eventually perish. And indeed, this may happen to Burkina Faso's green bean trade, because while several French import firms buy Burkinabé green beans on commission, only one still consistently sends the pre-season financing on which most of the country's production depends. This firm, the biggest green bean importer in Europe (and perhaps the world), is run by a man who has done business in Burkina Faso for more than 30 years, and who claims to continue chiefly because his suppliers are now his friends. Ordinarily this would seem like a suspiciously sentimental remark from a businessman of his stature. But given the complicated meanings and obligations of "friendship" within the West African trade networks where this importer has long worked, (Hart, 1988) it makes sense. If he has not "become African," as he says, he has at least learned how to work profitably in an African country where most other French fresh produce firms have given up.

It helps that this importer buys his beans in several different countries, and sells them to retail clients with a range of quality standards. The size of his enterprise gives him a buffer. But his loyalty to Burkina Faso also

[8] The fact that British supermarket buyers visit their suppliers much less frequently yet control them much more effectively reflects, again, the shared understandings and communication modes (technological as well as social) established by settler colonialism, and reinforced by the supermarkets' rigorous use of industrialized conventions (such as the EUREP-GAP protocol).

[9] Some of the exporters' families have customary tenure rights to relatively large amounts of land. Alternatively, they could secure long-term (99 year) leases to land elsewhere. In the late 1990s a French businessman obtained such a lease to 30-some hectares of floodplain land in the southernmost part of Burkina Faso, in order to produce herbs for export. He abandoned the enterprise a few years later, however, claiming that it was too far from the airport (7 h by road).

gives him power. There he is "*le roi d'haricot vert*" (the green bean king); he can set prices, distribute his patronage selectively among the country's exporters, and trust them, in return, to work very hard procuring beans that will meet the market's rising aesthetic as well as hygienic and phytosanitary standards. This exporter takes losses, but barring mishaps like cancelled flights, he manages to get quality on the cheap in Burkina. His supply strategies in this country would not work everywhere—certainly not in Zambia, where history has defined the moral and economic parameters of exploitation quite differently. But his strategies do demonstrate, once again, how personalized (or "transactional") quality conventions may be built on highly uneven power relations, and at multiple levels.

The importer's favored supplier-friend, for example, is not an urban-based businessman but rather a prominent ethnic Mossi chief who lives in a village near a donor-constructed irrigation project. The chief has some 500 local households—his subjects, really—growing green beans on small plots. He controls access to the land and provides all inputs.

The chief's operations are no more technically sophisticated than anywhere else in Burkina Faso—he has no bookkeepers, no computers, no electricity even—but he knows immediately when a dust storm hits or a water pump breaks down. He does not pay his growers particularly good prices compared to some exporters, but they say he's "always there" for them when they need loans or other sorts of help, and he allows them to use part of their irrigated land for vegetables they can eat or sell locally. Such concessions, he says, helps keeps growers honest. His local presence, combined with his moral authority as chief (quite important in the Mossi region), has helped him to assure the quality, quantity and reliability of production that his friend, the French importer, demands. It has paid off. In 2000, when French supermarkets were beginning to demand imported produce that conformed to EUREP-GAP safety and environmental standards, the French importer chose the chief's land to experiment with drip irrigation and non-chemical pest control. He also discussed plans to help the chief, a Catholic, build a church in his village—a monument that would testify to the moral and material worth of both men.

In both Zambia and Burkina Faso, the overseas markets' changing quality and safety standards have touched the farthest reaches of the supply chain. These standards have affected the ways growers, exporters and importers work with each other and, in at least some cases, with nature. Combined with increasing retail concentration and competition, these standards have also transformed the conditions of trust. Personal, trust-based relationships have always helped participants in fresh produce trades negotiate the risks posed by nature and the market; for many, they have also helped make otherwise difficult jobs more satisfying. For suppliers of fresh produce in both Anglophone and Francophone Africa, neither the increasingly corporate scale of much commerce nor retailers' insistence on impersonal forms of quality assurance (codes of conduct, labels, traceability systems) have made personal trust of this sort any less important. If anything, the reverse is true; a buyer's loyalty may be a farmer or exporter's last (and increasingly tenuous) hope. For this reason alone it is worth examining the normative and historical bases of such relationships—not necessarily to predict their future endurance or demise, but rather to understand the different kinds of power and exploitation that go into the production of quality.

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