Tradeswomen and Businessmen

The Social Relations of Contract Gardening in Southwestern Burkina Faso

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This article examines the prospects for the expansion of export-oriented contract horticulture in southwestern Burkina Faso, a guinea-savannah region known for lush vegetable gardens, a lively market-town capital, and village populations which, while considered some of the most productive and skilled farming communities in the nation, have not always welcomed state or private programs to organize and rationalize their daily work. Market-gardening (or maraîchage) in the hinterlands of the provincial capital, Bobo-Dioulasso (pop. 350,000) dates back to the 1920s, but most commercial vegetable production remains small-scale, and destined for local or regional markets. Bad roads, inadequate shipping options and political and economic instability have long discouraged substantial private investment in the horticultural sector, while state projects have concentrated on foreign-funded irrigation schemes in the drought-prone, densely populated central and northern provinces. Most of the Burkina Faso green beans sold in European marketplaces between December and March are grown on these schemes, surrounded by desert but well-linked by tarmac to the airport in the capital city of Ouagadougou. By contrast, the “garden belt” of Bobo-Dioulasso, despite relatively favorable agro-climatic conditions and experienced growers, remains a verdant backwater.

This may be changing, however. Since accepting a World Bank structural adjustment program (SAP) in 1991, the government of Burkina Faso has liberalized trade policies and pledged to expand and diversify
its exports of fruit and vegetables (now a distant second to cotton among agricultural exports). Especially since the 50 percent devaluation of the West African franc (CFA) in January 1994, Burkinabé horticultural products have become more competitive in the markets of both Europe and the coastal West African cities. Last and perhaps most significant for southwestern Burkina Faso, in 1993 Air Afrique resumed cargo flights (dropped ten years earlier, for lack of steady business) between Bobo-Dioulasso and Paris.

A handful of entrepreneurs already involved in commercial agriculture around Bobo-Dioulasso welcome these changes. Anticipating continued economic liberalization, they have recently either launched or expanded export trades by contracting with local small-scale growers for the production of high-value vegetables. Although their early results have been mixed, at best, they are seeking new buyers abroad, and talk of diversifying into new crops. Yet the same measures intended to “open up” the Burkina Faso countryside to both domestic and foreign investors are also increasing rural producers’ vulnerability to hardship. Production costs have risen, and local sales have slumped. Precisely because they are so familiar with this kind of “reproduction squeeze”—whether brought on by crop or market failures, or oftentimes some vicious combination of the two—small-scale commercial vegetable farmers are much more skeptical about a forthcoming boom. Promises of prosperity from politicians and foreigners have never amounted to much in the past; why should they now?

Local residents have long been wary of the outsiders’ word; during the early colonial period French administrators complained that the “independent and savage” populations of southern Haute-Volta were unusually resistant to instruction or orders—not least on the subject of farming, which they considered their own area of expertise. These days few villagers question the utility of fertilizer or ploughs, but they are if anything more cynical than previous generations about the intentions of politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen. Justified or not, their doubts create a difficult climate for contract farming, and may ultimately prevent export ventures from ever reaching more than a few of the region’s growers. This is bitterly ironic, for most of the rural vegetable farmers very much want the resources they cannot trust—cannot afford to trust—the contractors to provide: pre-season credit, improved inputs, and above all access to high-value external markets. But in light of the marketing arrangements they are accustomed to, their apprehensions are hardly surprising. For decades, the fragile security and occasional prosperity of market-gardeners has depended on their maintaining workable if not always harmonious relations with local women wholesale traders. Compared to corporate contract schemes in other horticultural export countries (see, for example, Jaffee 1994), the entrepreneurs in the Bobo-Dioulasso region, like the women wholesalers, operate on a very small scale, and on the assumption that any contracts made with growers are not, in practical terms, legally enforceable. But there the similarity ends.

Two fundamental differences between customary arrangements and horticultural export contracts together define who is able and likely to participate in either. They will also, I shall argue, ultimately shape and perhaps block any future agrarian transition based on contract farming. First, the local wholesalers’ specifications are fewer and less rigid, due partly to the commodities and markets involved. Second, customary commercial relations rely on the mutual recognition that each side is committed to them, in both the positive and negative sense of the term: positive, in that both parties invest in the trade relationship, which serves as a professional asset as well as a means of reproducing social ties and cultural identity; negative, in that neither village gardeners nor women traders see much alternative to their inherited careers. The understanding that they are “stuck” with each other, through good seasons and bad, by no means assures harmony or honesty, but it does reduce the perceived risks on both sides. By contrast, the understanding that export-contractors have many alternatives but little patience makes both parties to a contract quicker to break it, and makes poorer gardeners less likely even to agree to one in the first place. For these reasons, not even under broad national liberalization programs will horticultural export contracting easily “capture” regions where, as in many parts of West Africa, the social and economic institutions of market-gardening are already well-established. Rather, the insecurity and hardship typical of liberalization programs in Africa may make strict export contracts even less feasible and attractive to small-scale producers.

This article shall proceed in four parts. To begin, I shall set out the main arguments for why any discussion of West African contract farming must take account of the gender roles and moral codes which have
historically informed relations between peasants and different members of the urban merchant community. The following section will outline briefly the development of commercial horticulture in southwestern Burkina Faso. The third part shall compare how regional wholesaling and export-contracting operate, at a practical level; the final part will show how growers’ perceptions of these different marketing arrangements—and thus their ways of participating in them—are shaped not only by the actual terms of financing and purchase agreements, but also by their collective lore and personal experiences in a highly gendered regional commerce.

PART I: PATRONS, TRADERS, AND PEASANTS:  
THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF RURAL COMMERCIALIZATION

The short history of African agricultural development is strewn with the relics of state and corporate export crop schemes which made the costly, sometimes fatal error of disregarding or misinterpreting local property rights and production relations. In inevitable conflicts, both between labor and management and within the laboring households and communities, it became apparent that many agricultural modernization schemes had not simply appropriated peasants’ fields and disrupted their daily and seasonal work habits, but fundamentally threatened their moral economy: that is, the practices, relationships and values holding peasant societies together in body and spirit. Faced with rural unrest and outmigration, not to mention failing agricultural projects, African states and private capital looked to contract farming as a less conflicted means of “capturing” the peasant labor force (Little and Watts 1994). Contracting, according to its proponents, preserves and in fact takes advantage of the customary norms and relations of rural households and villages; it uses their survival ethics and age and gender hierarchies to mobilize cheap and hardworking labor, at minimal risk to the contractor.

Many African contract farming schemes, of course, have proven no less disruptive or more profitable than plantations or state farms. By and large, analyses of troubled schemes has focused either on macro-level inadequacies—poor marketing and transportation infrastructures, lack of credit and legal institutions, isolation from global trade and information networks (Jaffee and Morton 1995)—or, again, hardship and resistance at the micro-level, within the households and villages under contract (Carney and Watts 1990; Carney 1994; MacKintosh 1989; Mblinyi 1990). But certain links are missing from these analyses. Contract farming takes place in regional economies knit together not only by household and community production relations, but also by the intertwined relations of kinship, commerce and patronage between rural producers and urban merchants and political elites. These latter relations are equally central to subsistence and social reproduction, and equally informed by historically-constructed norms of rights and duties. But perhaps because urban merchants, elite or otherwise, have not typically exerted influence over rural production as landlords (certainly not to the extent that they have in Europe, Japan and Latin America), the literature on African contract farming has paid little attention to how their different historical roles in the countryside have, in fact, shaped the social landscape of contemporary contract farming.

Historical and ethnographic studies of African commerce and entrepreneurship have much to offer here. For centuries the difficulties of commodifying either land or labor, on a continent where the former was abundant and the latter highly mobile, confounded the development of indigenous capitalism. Defining wealth in people rather than landed property, members of African societies which were both stratified and stateless in turn defined “making a living” in social terms: that is, in the accumulation of relations through marriage, childbearing, and membership in broader social groups and networks (Iliffe, 1983; Berry, 1989). Material accumulation was also socially valuable and moral valid, but only if it was redistributed or otherwise invested in the well-being to kin and community (Ferguson 1995).

This people-centered economic history has of course made “development” a quite different experience in Africa than it was in the land-centered economies of post-feudal Europe. “Bloated” and clientelistic states, overemployed industries and high fertility rates all reflect the logic of investing in social relations, a logic both contributing to and reinforced by contemporary hardship and uncertainty (Berry 1993). Structural adjustment has shrunk the state in both size and regulatory capacity, but without much changing the political, economic or social conditions which encouraged state clientelism in the first place. In West Africa, it has certainly not severed long-cultivated links between government and business elites. Gregoire’s and Labazée’s ethnographies of
West African entrepreneurship, for example, shows that the concurrence of liberalization and democratization has closed some channels of access, but opened others. Now wealthy merchants finance campaigns, or even run for office themselves (Gregoire and Labazée 1993; Gregoire 1994; Labazée 1994).

Most villagers had relatively little access to state patronage and often acquired it indirectly, typically via the wealthy merchants whose own connections allowed them to buy agricultural goods or sell smuggled textiles throughout the countryside (Labazée 1993). In recent years, reduced state services combined with shifts in development agency funding toward the "non-governmental" sector has, if anything, made many villagers more dependent on these private operators not just for access to markets, but for all kinds of assistance.²

From the villagers’ perspective, a shift in patronage from the state bureaucrat or politician to the private sector entrepreneur means little more than a change in persona. They see little difference between these elites not only because many of them “straddle” both sectors, or because they all possess attributes and resources that most villagers lack (education, salaried employment, fancy cars and clothing) but also because villagers’ relations with entrepreneurs, bureaucrats and politicians have long been very similar. As Bayart (1993) observes, in the many African countries where the state has largely failed either to provide for or win legitimation from its people, elites of all kinds practice “politics of the belly.” In other words, they feed from the state coffers, and they build constituencies and enterprises of their own by doling out to hungry populations appetizing tidbits—aid projects, jobs, money, perhaps food itself—and promises of more to follow. But given that this kind of wealth redistribution is not only informal (i.e., if not illegal, then not subject to legal oversight) but also itself a source of economic and political volatility, more handouts often do not follow. Villagers subjected repeatedly to broken promises and outright scams know by now that big-belied politicians and businessmen are regular eaters (in both a literal and metaphorical sense) but fickle providers.

In light of their past experiences with “big men” of all stripes, villagers’ suspicions of export contractors is hardly surprising. If the men proposing contracts are not actually the same individuals who have been “wheeling and dealing” in the region for years, to villagers they may well appear to be dealing in the same kind of patronage—useful, but also risky and potentially short-lived. The classic distinction between “traditional” status-based relationships and the presumed neutrality and security of the legally-binding contract (Goodell 1980) does not apply to many real-life instances of African contract farming, and certainly not as it is practiced in southwestern Burkina Faso. Whether agreements are sealed by handshake or signature, villagers’ limited financial resources makes legal recourse by either party unlikely. So whatever the exporters’ intentions, to villagers the contract represents simply the latest form of mutually opportunistic patron-client relationship between two parties of obviously unequal status. They recognize that the exporter, like other “big men” before him, could easily abandon them. Therefore they are likely to approach contracts with caution, and adhere to them only so long as someone else does not offer a better deal.

Despite wealth and political clout, elites’ ability either to make villagers respect a contract or to otherwise influence their daily lives is limited by the fact that they are not a constant or crucial presence in rural daily life. In West Africa especially, day-to-day provisioning and commercialization depends much more on the relatively regular rhythms of itinerant traders and local marketplaces. The predominance of women in certain regional and local food trades (fresh fruits and vegetables, and petty sales of all kinds) reflects the paradoxical history of West African gender relations. On one hand, men’s superior access to certain key resources has allowed them to enter and even monopolize lucrative trades at opportune moments. After World War II, for example, Upper Volta war veterans who invested their pensions in lorries and warehouses in Bobo-Dioulasso were able to take over regional grain wholesaling from women traders (Saul 1986). On the other hand, women dealing in commodities deemed too risky and unprofitable for men have used their customary rights to an independent income as well as their own social networks to build, in some cases, formidable enterprises. On the whole women’s fresh produce trading did not simply respond to rural commercialization, but indeed helped drive it (Clark 1994; Freidberg 1996).

Tradeswomen’s role in the development of sectors and region now targeted for export-contract farming has received remarkably little attention. The historical record largely overlooked women’s economic activities of all kinds until relatively recently, or at best characterized their “petty” trading as the epitome of premodern exchange. Contemporary ethnographies have made clear, however, that the activities, responsibilities and
relations of marketwomen’s professional lives both shape and are shaped by those of their domestic life (as, of course, are men’s). In other words, norms of maternal and wifely duty limit what kind of careers women can pursue, and how much time and money they can devote to them. But women whose high earnings give them substantial economic clout within their own households and kin groups typically enjoy greater freedom from “traditional” domestic constraints. This is why, for example, women wholesalers in otherwise conservative patriarchal societies may regularly work late at night or spend several days at a time on the road.

The gender norms and relations of home and marketplace have in turn shaped the regional economies where women trade. Historical accounts of contract farming in Europe and Asia, of course, typically focus on landlord-tenant relations, and how the production practices and moral obligations of the manorial or village economy generated social and material conditions more or less suitable for the development of contract relations (Goodell 1980). In Asano-Tamanoi’s case studies from Japan and Spain (1988), contemporary peasant farmers’ interpretations of contractual relationships with food industry buyers drew on the same rules and norms describing earlier relations with local landowners. Thus the “culture of contract farming” is rooted in local agrarian history. This history is obviously always “gendered” in one way or another, but in West Africa the crucial role of women traders, contrasted with that of male politicians and entrepreneurs, has created a distinctive culture of contract farming. As the following case study shall demonstrate, women traders have made the most of limited career opportunities by placing the flexibility and durability of their commercial relations above season-to-season profits. They make concessions that more professionally mobile male entrepreneurs have not historically needed and cannot now, as export contractors, afford. In the interests of building trades they could pass to their daughters, women wholesalers set standards of trust and commitment that contractors find hard to match.

PART II: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The methods and varieties characterizing contemporary maraichage in the Bobo-Dioulasso region date back to the early years of colonial rule, when members of the local colonial administration began planting seeds imported from France in their own potagers (“kitchen gardens”). Upon finding the soils and dry-season climate suitable for a wide variety of “European” garden crops, agricultural agents identified a small number of nearby sites alongside the river Houet, for larger-scale commercial production. Potatoes from these sites were exported to colonial posts throughout the colony and neighboring Côte d’Ivoire until the outbreak of World War One cut off food supplies from Europe, and brought thousands of soldiers (both French and African) to the Bobo-Dioulasso military camp. From then until the end of the Second World War, gardening was one of several forms of compulsory labor service requisitioned from local villagers.

In addition to working under close supervision in the so-called “public garden” on the outskirts of town, villagers were required to grow potatoes on their own riverside land, and carry their harvests to a central collection point. There they were paid “a negligible sum,” according to elderly survivors, and forbidden to sell anywhere else. But local expatriates’ willingness to pay at least twice the official price for scarce garden produce led to the development of a vigorous “potato black market.” While some villagers smuggled the goods into town themselves in well-wrapped bundles, others relied on visits from urban women traders. The latter made their purchases in the relative privacy of the villagers’ compounds, and delivered them directly to their European clientele.

This early collaboration between village gardeners and marketwomen was characteristic of relations between the region’s main ethnic groups. Most of the residents of the garden villages were Bobo, Mande cultivators who claim to be the region’s first inhabitants (Le Moal 1980). Most of the marketwomen were Zara, itinerant traders who settled and took up farming among the Bobo at least two centuries ago. As Muslims, Zara women did not live in seclusion but neither did they participate extensively in agricultural production, as did Bobo women. Rather, they were considered born dionula (Mande for merchant), and otherwise conservative gender norms did not proscribe them from spending all day or even several days away from home on trading ventures.

In 1946, France abolished forced labor and lifted trade restrictions throughout its colonial empire. In the Bobo-Dioulasso area, liberation marked the beginning of a modest economic boom. Many of the Upper
Volta veterans settled in or near the provincial capital, and invested their pensions in agriculture, commerce, and/or urban real estate. At the same time, men in more and more villages in the Bobo-Dioulasso hinterlands began devoting the nine-month dry season to market-gardening. Village women, who generally lacked access both to suitable land and sufficient labor to practice maraîchage themselves, were in some cases recruited to water their husbands’ gardens (whether this new task counted among their conjugal duties was apparently a source of dispute) but in the villages within walking distance of town, women more typically helped by carrying household garden produce to market.

The colonial agricultural ministry encouraged the villagers’ interest in market production by distributing new seed varieties and technical advice, and offering loans to help beginning gardeners prepare land and purchase equipment. It also sponsored annual produce fairs, where gardeners won prizes for their giant cabbages and flawless tomatoes. A large new daily market in downtown Bobo-Dioulasso opened in 1951 to serve a growing urban population of civil servants, tradespeople, and factory workers, many of whom shared the resident expatriates’ taste for green beans and salad. Gardeners during these “honeymoon years” recall earning for the first time enough money to buy goods from the shops in town: bicycles, waterers, tin roofing for their huts, and clothes for the holidays.

Road improvements, increasing lorry traffic and the construction of a nearly 1000 hectare irrigated rice scheme in the 1960s opened new areas to dry-season commercial vegetable production. But one of the most important forces behind the expansion of Bobo-Dioulasso “gardenbelt” during this period was the work of women traders who traveled around the countryside in search of growers. Some of these women had previously traded in other agricultural commodities (i.e., grains) and many had rural kin, so in more ways than one they were working in familiar territory. In addition to making spot purchases, the women traders encouraged villagers to start gardening because they were willing to offer pre-season credit for certain heavy-demand crops, such as tomatoes and cabbages. By cultivating a base of regular “suppliers” in other words, they brought more and more villagers into the maraîchage economy.

Evidence for expanding production is necessarily anecdotal, for at the time the Upper Volta agricultural ministry paid little attention to small-scale market-gardening, devoting research and resources instead to cotton (the country’s main export crop) and staple grains. The one major state initiative to support maraîchage in the southwest established a regional “union” of market-gardening cooperatives (URCABO). State-approved village gardeners’ cooperatives were eligible for seasonal and medium-term loans and subsidized inputs. URCABO also contracted with the cooperatives for the production of a number of crops, destined for export (by air to Paris, or by road to Abidjan) or sale at a small local outlet. Although many gardeners took advantage of the loans and cheap seeds, they had little praise for URCABO’s marketing practices. The parasatal agency did not always offer the most competitive prices, and frequently did not pay for its orders until several months after the harvest. This was an intolerable delay for chronically cash-poor gardeners, and hardly encouraged loyalty to URCABO, especially when private traders offered better options. The resulting “leaks” and loan defaults worsened URCABO’s own budget problems, which in turn undermined it services to members (such as providing farmgate pickups and packing materials).

By the late 1980s, most of the cooperatives formed under URCABO’s auspices were either effectively defunct or sold most of their produce through other channels.

Despite the moribund cooperative system, market-gardening remained throughout the 1970s a means of livelihood many villagers found preferable to seasonal migrant labor (a common practice especially among northern Burkinabé) or even salaried work in town. The Bobo-Dioulasso area’s renowned dry season vegetable bounty drew wholesale buyers from the capital city Ouagadougou as well as neighboring countries. Local demand was also strong, due in large part to a sizable urban population of civil servants and development agency employees, both national and expatriate. Enterprising and skilled gardeners increased their local earnings by arranging to supply Bobo-Dioulasso hotels and restaurants with high-priced luxury crops, such as petits pois or strawberries.

Unfortunately, evidence that small-scale maraîchage could be profitable during periods of relative prosperity made it an all too common fallback strategy during periods of hardship. In the 1980s, the same combination of economic decline and political instability that pushed more and more people into market-gardening during the 1980s also pushed down market demand. The 1983 revolution led by the young populist Thomas Sankara, while generally welcomed among the peasantry and
the urban poor, won little support from the market-gardeners around Bobo-Dioulasso—some of whom called the revolution the beginning of “la chute” (the “plunge” in the market, and their fortunes). Many of their chief customers in the expatriate and business communities left town, and a ban on fruit imports severely disrupted all cross-border produce sales. After Sankara’s overthrow and assassination in 1987, the new regime’s pledge to “rectify” the revolution did not revive the gardeners’ business. If anything, a national budget crisis (due in part to plunging world cotton prices) only further undermined consumer buying power and ultimately forced the government to accept the austerity measures dictated by a IMF/World Bank structural adjustment program (SAP), which the previous regime had rejected.5

Although the SAP signed in 1991 did not require the country to undergo “shock therapy” as drastic as that inflicted on many of its neighbors, it did call for immediate subsidy cuts and industrial “rationalization,” followed by privatization and further trade liberalization. Higher prices for basic goods and government services combined with thousands of factory layoffs sent many urbanites “back to the land”—though that land was sometimes only a courtyard garden or a strip of bare roadside—to grow food for themselves and/or for sale. Urban women vegetable retailers (some of whose husbands had lost factory jobs) described the effects on the market in plain terms: “these days, there are more producers than consumers.”

The 50 percent devaluation of the West African franc (CFA) in January 1994 further depressed the local market for fresh vegetables, as well as other non-essential foodstuffs. The consequences for the export were mixed, and remain uncertain. Entrepreneurs interested or already working in Burkina welcomed the devaluation, especially since it was accompanied by government pledges to further liberalize trade and investment policies. In the horticultural sector, markets in the large coastal capitals looked particularly promising. In Abidjan, for example, the large European expatriate population had previously shown little interest in fresh vegetables from Burkina Faso, since imports from France cost only slightly more. But the devaluation made transcontinental fresh produce shipments so expensive that many Abidjan merchants simply stopped orders, and looked instead at substitutes from the Bobo-Dioulasso area. Ivorian demand for Burkinabé butter lettuce, carrots and green peppers, among others, leapt immediately after the devaluation.

On the other hand, those who attempted to take advantage of new markets either in neighboring countries or overseas quickly encountered a variety of logistical problems, all reminders that the Burkina Faso economy, however deregulated, was still desperately poor and rundown. The road network around Bobo-Dioulasso, the pride of colonial administrators in the 1930s, had become a provincial embarrassment. Many gardens are located far off the main roads, accessible only by overgrown and heavily rutted dirt tracks best suited for donkey carts or mopeds. Getting fragile vegetables to town quickly and undamaged is no easy feat, especially when one of the relatively large trucks used by the export contractors breaks an axle or gets stuck in a ditch. Transportation to exterior markets is also difficult. The train to Abidjan, for years the only affordable way for small scale traders or farmers to send their produce south, runs only three times weekly, breaks down frequently, and has no refrigerator cars. It has always been extremely overcrowded, but after the 1994 devaluation the dramatic increase in livestock exports (as Ivorian consumers switched from South American to Burkinabé meat) overwhelmed the train’s cargo capacity entirely, so that at times vegetable shippers could not even get their produce aboard. Exporters might also go by road, but increased banditry and lengthy customs inspections en route make for a perilous and costly journey.6 Finally, the devaluation increased shipping rates as well packaging costs. In Burkina Faso the only new, high-quality, labeled cartons suitable for international marketing are manufactured by the state-owned paper-goods factory, using primarily imported materials. Exporters complained that after the devaluation, each cardboard box was worth more than the green beans inside it.

None of the current logjams in Bobo-Dioulasso’s horticultural export sector are necessarily permanent. More generally, none of the costs of working in a region with such an underdeveloped export infrastructure necessarily outweigh the possible benefits of investing in that region’s relatively “underexploited” resources. Despite high rates of migration into the Bobo-Dioulasso hinterland area, the region’s oldest Bobo and Zara lineages still control large tracts of land suitable for dry-season gardening, not all of which they actually cultivate. Moreover, many of these longtime residents are known to be experienced vegetable growers who, whatever their wealth in land, desperately need new markets. Should not
this combination of factors, over the long run, outweigh the current in-
conveniences in transport and marketing?

The question here is really whether or not these “factors”—the gar-
deners and their land—can be effectively mobilized through contract
relations. It is an empirical question, and can only be answered by
examining the other kinds of social relations which have historically dril-
ven and organized the region’s horticultural organization. For while the
Bobo-Dioulasso hinterland area is isolated and “underdeveloped” rela-
tive to the international fresh vegetable trade, it by no means lacks a re-
gional marketing system. The exchange and credit relations linking rural
producers to urban consumers are rooted in the region’s historical expe-
rience of colonialism, commodification, and postcolonial economic de-
cline, and are informed by norms of kinship, friendship, and
professional solidarity. These relations have not always been harmo-
nious nor, clearly, have they sheltered participants from the shocks of
deregulation and devaluation. But even if the regional marketing system
no longer provides sufficient income for gardeners, it continues to pro-
vide a practical and moral frame of reference, against which they assess
other means of commercialization. The rest of the article undertakes
such an assessment. It first examines how, in light of the different prac-
tical concerns of regional wholesaling and export contracting, the latter’s
buyer-grower agreements are more rigid, exclusive and risky, especially
for growers. Then it analyses how growers perceive risk and
obligation in terms of the gender, kin and patronage relations which have
historically linked town and countryside.

PART III: TERMS AND CONDITIONS: WHOLESALING AND
CONTRACTING COMPARED

Wholesalers and Suppliers

The agreements between Bobo-Dioulasso women wholesalers and vil-
lage gardeners are much less comprehensive than those usually associ-
ated with contemporary contract farming. They can best be described as
“resource contracts,” (Mighell and Jones 1963) in that they provide cer-
tain productive resources—in this case, pre-season loans—against future
purchase of the crop. Unlike the exporters now operating in the region,
the wholesale traders specify little in advance and oversee little of the
garden work. To understand what role their limited contracts play in
production and commercialization, we need first to discuss briefly the
commodities and markets they trade in, as well as of the costs and con-
straints of the gardeners’ production process.

Commodities and Production Requirements  The Bobo-Dioulasso
wholesalers in question are based at the central downtown produce
wholesale market, also referred to locally as the “stadium market” be-
cause it sits on a 200 meter strip of dirt next to the football stadium.
Formerly located in the all-purpose Grand Marché in the center of town, the
wholesalers had to relocate in 1991 for lack of space. They are by no
means the only bulk vegetable buyers in town, but they do handle the
collection and distribution of a number of the region’s most-traded vege-
table commodities. Unlike wholesalers in other West African market-
places, very few specialize in a single commodity (Clark 1994). Rather,
they deal in a narrow range of vegetables regularly used in local cuisines
throughout the subregion: tomatoes and cabbage especially, plus a few
other items on a more occasional basis, such as eggplant, okra, squash,
or seasonal fresh maize. They trade only infrequently in the more ex-
pensive “European vegetables” (green beans, carrots, cucumbers,
among others) and almost never in lettuce, much of which is grown in
villages just outside of town, and carried to market on foot by gardeners’
wives or small-scale resalers. They also do not trade in the many vari-
eties of indigenous greens familiar only to locals.

Most major vegetable crops grow best during the dry season (October-
May). During the rainy season crop losses are high, due to flooding,
mildew, and insects, and labor much scarcer, as most rural households
turn their efforts to grain farming. Consequently, most commercial gar-
deners either stop or cut back production entirely when the rains start.
They plant again during or shortly after the millet harvests, as soon as they
have the labor and cash to spare. Because vegetable prices start high, fall
dramatically as production peaks, and then climb again during the rains,
gardeners who have the resources to plant early or year-round can earn
hefty profits. Indeed, the key to success on the local market, most growers
agree, lies in having large volumes of high-demand vegetable commodi-
ties (like tomatoes and cabbage) ready to sell when few others do.
Most growers, however, cannot actually pursue this strategy, because they do not have enough capital when they need it. To begin the *maraichage* season gardeners must have labor, fertilizer and seeds. Given the heavy labor demands in the grain fields during the early dry season, only wealthy or very large households can afford enough hands to simultaneously harvest the millet and plant the garden. Fertilizer costs 5000 CFA (approximately $20) for a 50 kilogram sack; “compost” (garbage from the city dump) costs upwards of 1500 CFA for a donkey-cart load, depending on transport distance. Gardeners with a quarter-hectare plot might spend anywhere from 20,000 to 80,000 CFA to fertilize it, but for those without financing from wholesalers, cost is usually the limiting factor. Seeds vary widely in price. Green bean and certain varieties of eggplant seeds can be saved from one year to the next, but tomato and cabbage seeds must be purchased annually. Cabbage seeds, imported from France or Japan, were expensive by local standards even before the devaluation, and thereafter doubly so. (A half liter can of seeds cost 8000 CFA before the devaluation, 16,000 afterward.)

Gardeners’ start-up costs of course vary widely, depending on how much land they intend to cultivate (most commercial gardens in the region range in size between 0.1 and 2 hectares), whether they need hired labor, and what kind of crops they plant. But a “typical” gardener, planting a quarter-hectare plot of cabbages, with help from one son and one day-laborer, would need at least 50,000 CFA. In October, many households have long since spent revenue from the previous gardening season, and many also have school fees to pay. Some growers have other sources of household income (part-time wage labor, sales of livestock or orchard fruit, remittances) but for the rest, cash is short. Indeed, because most village households run short on cash at certain times of the year, borrowing anything more than a petty sum from a neighbor is usually not an option. Consequently, growers are often forced to delay the garden planting, use inadequate fertilizer, and/or plant cheaper, but less lucrative crops, such as local varieties of greens. Since all these measures compromise the season’s earnings, growers who have the alternative of taking a loan from a wholesaler are at a distinct advantage.

Compared to the importance of timing and volume of one’s harvest, the quality of the produce matters relatively less—or at least, quality standards at the Bobo-Dioulasso wholesale market are relatively forgiving, especially when overall supply is scarce. Traders do not want produce that is obviously infested or rotting, but neither they nor their customers are put off by a few bruises or wilted leaves. The predominance of long-cooked stews and sauces in most of the region’s cuisines makes cosmetic perfection largely irrelevant; with the exception of salad ingredients, most vegetables will end up thoroughly chopped and stewed anyway. In the case of tomatoes, bruised and bursting fruit are considered ideal for the same-day’s sauce. Only traders catering to expatriates, restaurateurs and other “elite” customers make aesthetics a top priority (and make their customers pay accordingly).

**Customers**

Most of the wholesalers’ customers fall into one of two categories. The most numerous buyers are the local retailers, resellers, and cooked food vendors who make small but frequent purchases, such as a headpan of cabbages each day, or a few baskets of tomatoes per week. Many of these buyers are chronically cash-poor, and would quickly go out of business if they could not buy stocks on credit. Therefore most buy regularly from a small number of wholesalers, in order to earn their trust and be allowed *taa ka naa* (to go and come—in other words, to pay later). The wholesalers complain about “regulars” who go bankrupt or never quite repay, but at the same time consider these petty defaults “part of the trade,” an unavoidable business expense. They are unavoidable because wholesalers need loyal customers. When the market is glutted or when their produce is not as attractive as neighboring traders’, they count on “regulars” for steady business.

The second group of customers are the bulk buyers from Ouagadougou, Abidjan or other nearby towns and cities. They come only during certain times of the year, when vegetables are scarce in their own regions. But they buy in quantities large enough to affect both market prices and availability, as well as regional production patterns. When large numbers of Ivory Coast traders come to the stadium market shortly before holiday feasts, for example, wholesalers raise their prices and set aside some of their produce, making it more difficult for small-scale local retailers to buy stocks themselves. And because of the foreign traders’ preferences for tomatoes suitable for long, rough journeys, many gardeners in the Bobo-Dioulasso region grow an unusually hardy (if not particularly flavorful) variety of plum tomato.
Local wholesalers are understandably more cautious about extending credit to foreigners than to local retailers, but the most successful and experienced among them consider it a necessary risk. These traders have all at one time or another lost large sums of money (in some cases, thousands of dollars) to dishonest Abidjanais, but they have also made their biggest windfalls from high-volume sales to high-rolling foreigners. The key to using credit effectively at either scale of commerce lies not in trying to avoid bad debtors entirely, for such a conservative strategy would damage both their sales and reputation. Rather, it lies in accumulating enough capital to absorb losses. Most traders agree that those who can afford to be generous (though not foolish) with credit will, over the long run, lose some but earn more.

How, then, to accumulate capital despite the market’s seasonal vagaries and constant risks? Wholesalers stress the importance of rapid-turnover, high-volume trading. For this they need access to as much produce as they have buyers for, even when stocks are scarce and costly. They need to be able to buy on credit and to repay on a flexible schedule, so that their own cash shortages do not bring trade to a halt. As one trader stressed, “you need to be able to get supplies at any moment.” Wholesalers assure this kind of access primarily by using pre-season financing to develop a network of suppliers. The more loans they distribute, the wider their supply base, and the broader the possibilities for purchasing stocks in quantity and on credit. It is not a fail-safe strategy, given that crops fail and suppliers sometimes prove unreliable. But as in their credit relations with customers, most wholesalers see loans to producers as worthwhile investments, especially if maintained in the long-term contractual relations described below.

Agreements The logic underlying relations between gardeners and wholesalers—that is, why gardeners need financing, and why it is in the interests of wholesalers to provide it—should now be clear. How, then, is it operationalized in the practices and specifications of their agreements? At the beginning of the gardening season, a wholesaler will lend one or more of her “suppliers” anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 CFA. The sum varies according to the wholesaler’s means, the gardener’s needs, and the level of trust between the two. Most wholesalers give loans to four or five growers each year, but the wealthiest traders may finance more than ten.

A loan will usually not cover a gardener’s start-up costs entirely, but rather enable him to produce the kind and quantity of crops that the wholesaler wants to buy. However, since wholesalers have only a rough idea (based on previous seasons) how much demand to expect for any particular commodity, the choice of crop may be negotiable, and depends at least partly on a gardener’s production conditions and prior experience. A wholesaler is safest financing a gardener for crops he has grown before, so if she is seeking a particular commodity, she will typically approach gardeners known for that crop.

At the time of the loan, the wholesaler and grower do not settle on a price nor an exact volume, but they do agree on the approximate time of the first harvest (depending on the varieties and quantity of crops planted, a grower may will typically make at least two harvests during the season). After that, the two will not necessarily have any “professional” contact (they are likely to cross paths at the marketplace or social occasions) for several weeks, unless the latter needs more money. Gardeners who use motorized waterpumps often do, in fact, run into periodic cash crises; petrol and repairs for these machines can easily run well over 100,000 CFA for an eight-month season, depending on the size of the pump and the frequency of use (and breakdowns). Short on funds, some growers will simply put away their pumps for awhile and recruit more household labor to haul water by hand. But this is not always possible, and if a gardener’s crop is imperiled because one week he cannot afford to buy fuel or a spare part, it is in the wholesaler’s interest to help out with an additional loan, provided she still believes he is reliable.

Beyond assuring the minimal solvency of their suppliers, wholesalers do not otherwise involve themselves in the production process. As financiers and traders, they choose growers carefully and may advise them on market conditions, but do not consider it their place to offer technical instructions or criticism, much less to supervise their suppliers’ work. The wholesalers’ distance from production reflects the region’s distinctive gender division of labor, in which women and men alike characterize maraîchage as a man’s occupation, requiring heavy tasks unfit for women of status. Even the few women wholesalers who have their own commercial gardens, on land granted to them by husbands or kin, do not actually work on them, but instead hire laborers. The reasons why women in the Bobo-Dioulasso area dominate the regional vegetable
commerce but participate so little in commercial production are rooted as much in the local history of Islamization and colonial forced labor as in women’s limited rights to land and labor (Freidberg 1996). What matters here is that even the women traders who grew up in market-gardening households do not profess much interest or expertise in the growing of vegetables. This attitude marks an important difference between the traders and the region’s export contractors.

When the harvest time approaches, either the gardener will send word to the wholesaler, indicating when he will begin picking the contracted crop, or the wholesaler will check up on the gardener in one of her periodic supply trips through the countryside. If vegetables are scarce and that gardener’s reliability uncertain, the wholesaler’s primary concern is that he not sell the harvest to a high-bidding spot buyer. Such a breach of promise might or might not cost her the loan (gardeners who “leak” contracted produce are still expected to repay debts) but it will certainly cost her time to find stocks elsewhere. Assuming this does not happen, each purchase of a supplier’s crops can involve hours of negotiating over not only the price of a particular quantity of produce (i.e., 20 beds of cabbage, or 50 baskets of tomatoes) but also how much the trader will pay in cash, how much she will take on credit, and how much she will deduct from the original loan. The gradual repayment of debts over the course of a gardening season helps reinforce mutual obligations. The gardener, who may not be able to repay his debt all at once anyway, wants to insure that the wholesaler will come back for later harvests, even if the market is glutted. The wholesaler, for her part, agrees to the extended repayment in order to keep open the option of buying on credit. Although both sides may grumble about lengthy bargaining involved in each transaction, they also recognize certain codes of conduct applied to both negotiation and repayment. Civil bargaining, noted one gardener, pays off: “as long as you are not too difficult, you will be reimbursed, and you will also gain clients.” On the other hand, said one wholesaler, “if you try to be more clever than your supplier, he will drop you.” Above all, both sides emphasized the importance of preserving entente. “You pray to God for peace between you and the gardeners,” one trader explained, “for if there’s a certain understanding, then when you run short on money, you can settle everything without fighting.”

If a gardener’s crop fails or a wholesaler loses money on stocks she bought on credit, the maraichage season may end in late May with one side indebted to the other. But as long as “a certain understanding” prevails, outstanding debts will simply be carried over to the next year. Wholesaler-supplier relations commonly last for years, even into the next generation. A wholesaler’s daughter will often launch her independent trade by purchasing stocks from her mother’s suppliers, while a gardener’s son may receive his first pre-season financing from a trader who already buys from his father. Both sides, in other words, measure the value of these relations not only in terms of seasonal profits, but also in terms of accumulated and heritable trust. I shall return to the issue of trust in grower-trader relations after examining the quite different specifications of export-oriented contracts.

Export-Oriented Contract Gardening

Because contract-exporters in the Bobo-Dioulasso are so few in number and so new to the business, it is more difficult to generalize about their work than about the relatively well-established practices of the hundreds of local women wholesalers. The information here comes from interviews and observation of four self-proclaimed “agro-entrepreneurs.” One man exports vegetables only to neighboring countries, another only to France, and two to both. They are southwest Burkina Faso’s most prominent dealers in high-value export vegetables (a number of fruit exporters also operate out of Bobo-Dioulasso) and the only ones as of 1994 licensed to purchase space on Air Afrique’s limited number of scheduled cargo flights to Europe. Given their quite different personal and professional backgrounds—one is an agricultural extension agent, another a former minister, the third a French plant biologist, and the last a former corporate accountant (henceforth exporters A, B, C and D)—they bring to the export business different skills, resources and expectations. Still, a number of common features distinguish this business from the regional wholesale trade.

Commodities and Production Requirements The most important crop in the export trade is the green bean, the haricot vert extra-fin. Although no other Burkina Faso vegetables are sold in Europe in any significant quantity, the cross-border commerce is considerably more diverse. One of the entrepreneurs, for example, regularly ships “premier quality” tomatoes to Lomé, while another contracts with gardeners to grow a wide
variety of boutique crops—carrots, cauliflower, cucumbers, leeks, as well as green beans—for Abidjan supermarkets. The labor and inputs needed for these crops vary, but all require a degree of specialized knowledge beyond that needed to grow most vegetables destined for the local market. They require, in other words, not just an understanding of the basics of dry-season garden watering, weeding and soil maintenance (which is in fact quite common knowledge in the villages with decades of market-gardening experience) but also skills in specific kinds of crop care, such as pruning, thinning, and tying up vines.

Above all, producers of these crops must understand how to meet the stringent quality specifications of particular export markets. The small, irregularly shaped plum tomatoes exported by Burkinabé and Ivoirian women wholesalers end up in outdoor marketplaces where, as in Bobo-Dioulasso itself, customers tend to care more about price and “sauce-readiness” than appearance. Top-end Abidjan grocers, on the other hand, expect uniform, relatively flawless tomatoes—the kind their French customers could get in France. Buyers in France itself (all green beans flown to Europe from Bobo-Dioulasso enter through Rungis, the massive wholesale market on the outskirts of Paris) are if anything more selective. Green beans exceeding the “extra-fine” size limits will be downgraded if not rejected outright.

Exporters can avoid rejection at the point of sale by insuring that vegetables are produced to specification and then collected and shipped without delay. As the following pages shall illustrate, this is easier said than done in the Bobo-Dioulasso region. But in addition, most buyers in Abidjan or Paris demand not only high quality produce but also large quantities, typically a few metric tons per sale. The three Burkinabé entrepreneurs, in fact, first became involved in commercial horticulture as independent growers, and though all produced on a larger scale than most of the region’s commercial gardeners (on three to twelve hectares of land each) their harvests alone still could not fill a typical supermarket order. Rather than expanding their own vegetable farms—which would have involved higher risks and more problems of labor supervision—each instead contracted with other growers for supplementary crops.

For gardeners, export-oriented contract production offers potentially higher returns than they could otherwise earn, because it enables them to grow more lucrative crops and, even more importantly, to sell them in stronger markets. Gardeners often observe that the local economy is so depressed that to grow capital-intensive luxury crops is pointless. They are also concerned about their prospects for earning even a minimal livelihood producing common-variety crops for what appears to be an increasingly saturated local market. Thus, they say, their only hope is to sell abroad. Some gardeners suggest that the government should help them do so, but most recognize that the far more likely channel to exterior markets is through connections to people “with long arms (bras longs).” The contract-exporters operating in the Bobo-Dioulasso do indeed fit this description in terms of resource access and social influence. But, as the following section will demonstrate, their “long arms” bring inputs and markets only to certain kinds of gardeners, and under conditions even they may find difficult to meet.

Contracts Given the quality and quantity standards of their markets as well as their relatively tight shipping schedules (at least for air freight), the exporters’ contracts are necessarily less flexible and more exclusive than the wholesalers’ financing arrangements. They are also less familiar, and thus make for a variety of tensions and mishaps which may or may not terminate a contract relationship. I shall illustrate these points by examining the experiences of the four profiled exporters during the 1993-94 growing season, just after Air Afrique resumed cargo flights out of Bobo-Dioulasso. This was the first year in the business for “C,” the expatriate scientist-turned-entrepreneur, but the others had previous experience contracting for cross-border exports.

All four exporters had lived in the Bobo-Dioulasso area for years, and so knew the countryside well. All four began the season with buyers lined up abroad, and at least rough estimates of the quantities of produce they would be prepared to sell over the following months. Those exporting to Paris also had agreed with Air Afrique on a minimum tonnage of green beans they would ship on each weekly flight between late December and late February.

The gardeners contracted by the exporters (in 1993 and before) were scattered throughout the Bobo-Dioulasso hinterlands, anywhere from five to sixty kilometers from the city. Some were organized in official village cooperatives, some not. The exporters used a number of criteria in deciding who to offer contracts. In terms of physical conditions, they
looked not only for adequate dry-season water supplies and proper soils, but also for relatively large gardens (a half hectare or more), preferably watered by motor-pump (which, whether or not it helps a gardener water more thoroughly and evenly than hand-watering, does demonstrate he is invested in his work). These criteria exclude most growers in the densely populated areas just outside the city, where families who have gardened since the 1920s have divided their riverside land into strips sometimes no bigger than a tenth of hectare, usually watered with sprinkling cans.

In choosing growers, the exporters looked for men with experience, an adequate labor supply (hired or household), and an apparent openness to modern methods. “B,” for example, contracted with a 20-member cooperative whose leader had been sent to France in the late 1950s on a rural study tour, and subsequently became one of the most renowned maraichers in the region. “C’s” growers included several large polygamous households in an old market-gardening village, a couple of cooperatives with less experience but good land and irrigation, and a rural pastor, who was educated, accustomed to dealing with Europeans, and very much interested in modern farming.

Although potential contractees were not required to have additional sources of income—whether from pensions, remittances, commercial orchards, or like the pastor, a regular salary—it certainly helped, for two reasons. First, gardeners who had no other revenue besides vegetable sales generally cannot afford motor-pumps or hired labor, and are accustomed to using minimal, often suboptimal inputs. So they appeared less attractive candidates from the beginning. Second, even if they do have access to adequate land and household labor, gardeners with no other revenue are often reluctant to plant even a half hectare with a single, relatively costly and slow-maturing crop (like green beans, which take three months), preferring instead to plant small varied patches, including some vegetables which mature very quickly (like lettuce, in one month). Truly cash-poor gardeners need more liquidity than contract export production provides, as well as more security. As I shall discuss below, it is not just the crops and commitment of time and land they find too risky, but also the social context of the contract.

At the beginning of the season the exporters distributed, either directly to the gardeners or to the cooperative chiefs, the seeds and chemical inputs needed to produce a specified quantity of green beans or other crops. They also set—with little if any negotiation—the price per kilo and, at least in the case of crops destined for Paris, the exact harvest dates. Both airline schedules and the precise size standards used to grade extra-fine green beans meant that these dates had to be kept.

Over the following weeks, the exporters’ supervision of the production varied widely. “A” worked in town Monday through Friday but made weekend excursions to his own and his contractees’ farms. As an extension agent he had provided many of them with advice for years, as part of his job. “B,” the former minister, was self-educated in maraichage, and kept up with the latest developments by reading trade journals. He instructed his contractors on new crops but, since he had known them for years (and had actually secured aid monies to install a mechanized irrigation system on their garden land) he appeared to trust their abilities, and check on them only infrequently.

“C,” by contrast, not only recruited his wife and two adult sons to help supervise growers, but also formed a partnership with “D,” the fourth exporter, with the understanding that he too would make rounds to the garden sites. “C” and his family members did in fact spend most of their days driving to and from the sites and monitoring their progress. They did not hesitate to criticize the gardeners (at times harshly) and frequently complained of either laziness or incompetence. Some gardeners, they reported, had ruined their crops by not watering for a week; others had flooded their fields. The only person who caused “C” more problems than any of the gardeners was “D,” who did not share the Frenchman’s enthusiasm for site visits, and preferred to spend his time on independent money-making ventures. Worse still, one of these ventures appeared (it was never confirmed) to involve selling fertilizer intended for growers under his supervision. Some of those growers reported midseason that they had seen nothing of “D” (nor the fertilizer) for weeks. Their crops suffered accordingly.

Harvests took place over several weeks. Assuming the produce met the exporter’s expectations, growers would be paid on the spot, minus the cost of the inputs. “A,” who had arranged for Togolese buyers to pick up 30 tons of contracted tomatoes at farmgate, had two primary complaints. The “peasants” he said, were “disorganized,” meaning they did not always produce on time or in the quantities expected. Moreover, some of them attempted to raise their prices when the buyers arrived. In other words, negotiations at the point of sale—while expected in most
other marketing situations—were unacceptable, for they might cause the buyers to change their minds. “B,” again, reported few problems, and his growers especially appreciated the prompt payments.

“C” had the most problems at harvest time, partly it was the first year of operation but partly also because his complicated and tightly planned scheme left little leeway for likely if not inevitable mishaps. First, crop failures meant that the projected tonnage of the early harvests fell short, and he was forced to delay the first cargo flight—hardly a good start, given Air Afrique’s reservations about even serving the Bobo-Dioulasso airport. Then on the morning of a major picking day, one group of contracted growers announced that their chief had died the night before, and no one in the village would work until they had mourned him properly. This announcement caused “C” great distress, for even if this delay did not result in another cancelled flight, it could allow the green beans to grow just slightly trop gros to make the “extra fine” size limit. “C” complained, in general, that many gardeners did not appreciate size limits any more than they respected schedules. Given that they are accustomed to maximizing the volume of their harvests, this is hardly surprising.

At the end of the 1993-94 green bean season, “C” reported that he had made no money but intended to try again next year—with changes. The French family would drop the partnership with “D,” as well as any growers who were clearly incapable of meeting contract conditions. As for those who did produce passable crops more or less on time, they received payment as promised and at least some considered it an arrangement lucrative enough to continue. Judging by local gossip about the Frenchman, few appreciated either his or family members’ patronizing airs and short tempers, but neither did they doubt that, for better or worse, he would keep his word.

“D,” on the other hand—despite a jovial, “local-boy-made-good” demeanor—had a reputation for dishonest business dealings, ranging from simple unkept promises to a substantial embezzlement case years earlier. “D” was also pursuing so many business ventures at once, one gardener observed, that he could hardly avoid breaking his word. So no one (except perhaps “C”) expressed surprise to hear that the businessman had distributed seeds for export crops and then “disappeared” with the fertilizer. At first glance, this kind of broken contract appears to benefit the gardeners, since they had effectively gotten free seeds, and then the liberty to sell the crop to whomever they liked. But the problem for most gardeners, of course, is that they do not know other top-end vegetable buyers. For them, to devote three months and most or all of their garden to a crop that later did not sell (except perhaps at desperation prices) would be a disastrous blow, undermining already tenuous household security. Thus the only growers who will agree to produce export crops for someone as unreliable as “D” are those who have alternative buyers. One gardener who grew a hectare of cucumbers for “D” in 1993-94, for example, was able to shrug off the entrepreneur’s failure to reappear at harvest time, because he knew a few traders who supplied the downtown produce stalls and Lebanese groceries frequented by Europeans. But some of his less well-connected neighbors said they would never agree to grow anything for “D”; they could not afford the risk.

We can now see that the contracts proposed by the exporters operating in the Bobo-Dioulasso region are exclusive because first, they require resources many gardeners do not have and second (and related), they pose risks many cannot afford to take. As is often the case in contract farming, the contract terms alone screen out more marginal producers. But as the above anecdotes have suggested, not merely the terms concern the gardeners, but who is offering them. And just as the exporters use stereotypes to label and distinguish between gardeners (“backwards peasants” versus “modern farmers”) so too do the gardeners understand the exporters—and their relationship to them—in broad, historically-created social categories. As the final section shall demonstrate, at the most general level these categories derive from customary village and regional patron-client relations, but they have been shaped as well by local encounters with the post-colonial state and its development agency partners. Most importantly, gardeners see in the exporters’ backgrounds familiar patterns of exploitative and potentially ephemeral patronage, and see their roles in the regional maraichage economy as fundamentally unlike those of the women wholesalers.

PART IV: TRUST CAPITAL AND TRICKY BUSINESSES

Big Women?

_In this trade you need courage, because it’s not everyday you’ll turn a profit._

Anyone who tours the marketplaces of Bobo-Dioulasso cannot help but notice that the stadium market wholesalers, compared to most of the women hawking produce in the neighborhood retail markets, cut imposing figures. This is because they earn much more money than the average petty vendor, and can afford to eat well and wrap themselves in several meters of fine cloth. Some of them rank among the city’s wealthiest women, holding assets in gold and real estate. Together, they control the collection and resal e of a substantial portion of the urban fresh-food supply. So they occupy a powerful position in the regional economy, and it is apparent in their confident, in some cases even imperial demeanor in the marketplace. But like other large-scale female traders in Africa, they have risen to this position despite the odds set by a patriarchal society, and only by taking full advantage of the “professional” resources—training, credit, clientele—available through kin relations as well as within the marketplace itself. In doing so, they have inherited and reproduced certain norms of conduct. These norms, while not immutable, have historically shaped relations between wholesalers and growers, and how growers perceive them, at least as much as the practical terms of their financing and purchase “agreements.” The gendered career strategies of women wholesalers, in other words, have defined the region’s prevailing moral economy of trade relations. To make this final point clear, I shall discuss first the multilayered ties between wholesalers and rural producers, and then how, given women’s limited opportunities for independent accumulation and status-building, they tend to be committed to these ties. Finally, some examples of how bureaucrats and businessmen have typically conducted themselves in past dealings with the market-gardeners will illustrate why the mere appearance of “big men” like the contract-exporters raises suspicions in the gardening villages, whatever the terms of their contracts.

I have already mentioned how women traders played an important role in carrying gardeners’ produce to town even before the colonial administration legally permitted them to sell it. After a half century of marriage and commerce between Bobo cultivators and Zara commerçants, the ethnic division of labor has blurred. Although relatively few Bobo women trade at the wholesale level, many of the region’s market-gardeners claim descent from Zara traders. The custom of endogamous arranged marriages within extended patrilineages has woven the gardening villages and old Zara neighborhoods of Bobo-Dioulasso into a network of kin ties which the wholesalers reinforce in their daily commercial work. Many of them were born in the villages, and most have relatives who have gardens scattered throughout the countryside. Produce wholesaling is not, like some West African trades, “closed” to other ethnic groups; the few wholesalers of northern Burkinabe origin stressed that gardeners are more interested in a trader’s cash and reliability than her family or ethnic background. But growers and traders alike do invoke kinship (however remote) when bargaining or appealing for credit, and traders call on rural relatives when making overnight supply trips.

The important question here is how these “extra-economic” ties affect the economic ones: how the fact that many of the gardeners and wholesalers claim descent from the same ancestors affects how they perceive and do business with each other. The answer, I believe, is rather complicated. Neither side necessarily finds it easier or more profitable to deal with kin; some gardeners say outright they prefer not to, suggesting they lose less money (and certainly less time) on credit sales to relative strangers than on kinswomen’s unceasing demands for “family rates” and debt forgiveness. Yet because wholesalers as a group are identified as descendants of the first local agricultural and trading families, they are seen to play not only a necessary but an integral, historical role in the regional market-gardening economy. In other words, their occupation as traders holds a legitimacy not only equal to but intertwined with their rural kins’ occupation of ancestral lands. And from this recognition of shared history follows, for better or worse, a sense of shared destiny. As one trader put it, “we are condemned to get along.” So they may argue, cheat on, and make sweeping generalizations about each other (“difficult” and “greedy” are common charges on both sides) but all in the fatalistic manner of people who do not expect their interdependent relationship to end or even change much. They are as bonded by livelihood as by blood.

Gender, of course, also shapes wholesalers’ relations with gardeners. Rather than delve into the interesting but complex question of how gender norms shape their day-to-day interactions as women and men, I want to focus here on how the wholesalers’ daily and work and professional opportunities in particular are shaped by gendered rights, duties and resource access. Here as in many parts of Africa, lack of access to land, labor, and
education, heavy domestic workloads, and restrictive social mores have historically circumscribed women’s ability to pursue wealth and status through independent work. While in recent years some indicators of women’s status in Burkina Faso have improved (i.e., school attendance and government representation) female literacy rates remain extremely low, and employment in traditionally male realms (such as industry and construction) uncommon. Norms of duty and propriety especially restrict the occupational pursuits of many young married mothers. Food trading is among the few kinds of work which offers not only relatively easy entry for women with little time or money but also the possibility, for those who do in fact find time and money to invest, of socially acceptable accumulation.

But the life histories of women wholesalers in Bobo-Dioulasso show that even those who have worked their way to wealth and local recognition do not acquire the resources or status needed to build or change careers as freely as might men of similar ambition. Many, for one, have found that rising incomes have brought increasing responsibility for family expenses, such as grain purchases and school fees, that in principle should be covered by household patriarchs. In some cases this was because their husbands had left, died, or grown too old or sick to work, but some women’s’ husbands, they suggested, simply reduced their own contributions to the household budget. Norms assigning mothers ultimate responsibility for feeding and clothing the children do not allow women as much leeway as men to separate business and household expenses.

Whether or not familial obligations drain their savings, the women wholesalers lack certain skills and “social capital” necessary to succeed in commercial spheres outside their own. Most are illiterate, speak little French, and rely on arithmetic learned on the job. Male bureaucrats and entrepreneurs who work in the vegetable export sector typically view the activities at the stadium market as part of a traditional, closed system which runs on female ambition and connections, oblivious to the logic of modern business. This attitude (which is common among the general public as well) was apparent in one young man working at the stadium market as a hired driver. Educated in theology, he aspired to become an exporter, but found dealing with “the women” difficult because they reserved stocks for customers, and would “not simply sell to the biggest buyer.” In one interview he also suggested that these days, such practices

would ultimately not make up for ignorance. Pointing to one of the richest wholesalers, he described how a few years earlier she had tried unsuccessfully to take her trade to Lomé. The big-city traders, he said, were able to cheat her and ultimately shut her out of the market because she “did not know her rights.” She also did not know to “conduct a market analysis” (as he would have) beforehand. In other words, her trading savvy and local networking would only take her so far.

The constraints on women wholesalers’ entrepreneurship hold two main implications for their relations with gardeners. First, they reinforce the sense of relative permanence and stability; like their suppliers, many of the wholesalers were “born into” their work and expect to continue it until they no longer have the will or strength. Some successful traders do move into a more capital-intensive commerce, like grain wholesaling or textile importing. But they usually keep a hand in vegetable trading, or at least rely on the same rural networks for business.

Second, because the wholesalers are necessarily committed to regional trading, they invest in their professional relations and reputation, both for their own sake and for their daughters. Many are trying to educate their girls in the hopes that they will find white-collar jobs (or at least white-collar husbands) but meanwhile they prepare them for wholesale trading. This entails not only training them in the day-to-day marketplace activities but also providing them with trading capital, or dagokun. This capital is usually partly monetary (typically 10,000 to 50,000 CFA given at marriage) but invariably social; it is “trust capital” accumulated over years of reputable trading. In addition to paying debts and purchasing crops as promised, a wholesaler builds “trust capital” by extending favors, such as the occasional emergency loan or forgiven debt. As discussed in the previous section, these practices (whether or not motivated by compassion) make good business sense, to the extent that they allow a trader to request reciprocal favors. Moreover, they make an invaluable inheritance, for the daughter of a reputable wholesaler can launch her own trade on “trust capital.” A number of young women in the stadium market said they did not need cash to start wholesaling, because grace à maman they were able to make their initial purchases on credit. They did not even necessarily have to make those purchases from their mothers’ regular suppliers, because gardeners throughout the region knew of their solid reputations.
Finally, the bonds between growers and traders have been, paradoxically, both strained and reinforced by the past several years of regional economic decline and SAP austerity. In this era of gweleya or “hard times,” all parties rely more heavily on credit than before; as one gardener noted, “nowadays, everyone owes.” Small-scale retailers especially are vulnerable to bankruptcy, and their failure to reimburse wholesalers for their purchases makes it difficult for the wholesalers to pay debts to suppliers. In addition, the local market is so depressed and at times glutted that a gardener is likely to find even a wholesaler’s reasonable offers disappointingly low, relative to the time and money he put into production. Both debts and low prices can be sources of tensions in day-to-day negotiations.

On the other hand, neither growers nor traders hold each other responsible, either individually or as a group, for their own hardships. Rather, this they attribute to the bad market—vegetables just don’t sell like they once did—and to the broader problem of, as one gardener said, “the pauperization of the people.” Producers and traders of garden crops realize all too well that demand for their goods, unlike that for staple grains, is perilously elastic; when people are poor they buy millet first, and eat thinner sauces. Popular explanations for “pauperization” vary, typically blaming either the politicians in Ouagadougou (suspect both simply because they are politicians and because many southerners believe that the Ouagadougou area gets an unfair share of foreign aid) the World Bank, or often both. People have heard, for example, of the numerous foreign-funded road-paving and construction projects initiated in and around the capital city since the imposition of structural adjustment; meanwhile, national newspapers refer to their own town as the city of “decay” and “decrepitude.”

Not surprisingly, many longtime residents of the Bobo-Dioulasso area understand the gweleya in regional terms, in that they see their entire economy suffering as a result of the unjust actions and neglect of distant powers. These sentiments reinforce gardeners’ and traders sense that, after all the day-to-day bickering, they are still all in the same boat.

Big Men

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.

—entrepreneur “B,” April 1994

The agro-entrepreneurs play an ambiguous role in this regional economy. Although all have lived and farmed in the Bobo-Dioulasso area for several years, at least intermittently, locals refer to them neither as farmers nor traders (the term “contractor” is not used) but rather by their other professional titles—i.e., “the former minister,” or “the tire factory businessman.” The entrepreneurs depict themselves, not surprisingly, as patrons of the “peasantry,” providing access to much-needed inputs and markets, and skills. “B” takes pride in the many technical improvements he brought to his contractors’ gardens, noting that “before, they had nothing.” “D” describes the use of his “God-given” accounting and marketing talents in the service of commercial agriculture as a Christian duty. At the same time, however, these entrepreneurs emphasize their differences from the “traditional” sector, and express frustration with those who do not yet seem to appreciate this difference: European firms reluctant to invest, national banks that refuse loan requests, “backwards” peasants. Both these complaints and their self-profiles as “modern” and “professional” agro-entrepreneurs echo rhetoric commonly heard in the Burkina Faso media, the conversations in the downtown “businessman bars,” even the official proclamations of the formerly socialist ruling party—which, since signing on to an open-ended term of World Bank-prescribed liberalization, has fully endorsed entrepreneurial ambition, especially when it generates exports.12

But while the agro-entrepreneurs see themselves as a new and even heroic breed, the region’s gardeners view them as the latest incarnation of the “big men” who have been circulating through the Bobo-Dioulasso hinterlands for decades, full of grand plans and promises. The region’s market-gardening history abounds with legends of such men, whether or not they are entirely accurate, capture much of the villagers’ sentiments. Unlike accounts of epic disputes between local lineages over land or tree-cutting rights, these stories tend to be short and end invariably with the abrupt and unexplained disappearance of the supposed benefactor, promises unfulfilled. They tell for example, of the repeated, relatively innocuous incidents of government agents who tell gardeners that if they provide information for a study (the purpose of which is never disclosed) they will be rewarded with seeds and even tractors (which never arrive). Other tales describe the ploys of middlebrow conmen who claim to be organizing cooperatives: they pass out membership cards,
collect dues, and vanish. Exporter “D” actually did start a cooperative several years back, for which he secured several thousand dollars worth of start-up funds from a foreign donor. Few of the villagers recruited saw any benefits of membership, and much of “D’s” current notoriety rests on suspicions, never proven, that he bouffed (“ate,” or embezzled) all the money.

Finally, the stories villagers tell most bitterly—since they involved the greatest losses of time, money and morale—concern advance purchase agreements very similar to those proposed by the current round of contract exporters. In the early 1980s, for example, most of the gardeners in one of the villages just outside of town agreed to the proposal of “some European” to grow green beans for export. Garden plots on the immediate urban periphery are typically quite small (i.e., 0.1 to .5 hectares), so the contracted crop took up most, if not all of many households’ vegetable-growing land. At harvest time, they picked, boxed and delivered the beans to a central collection site in the village, but the buyer never came to claim them. Government officials blame incidents of broken contracts with green bean growers more generally in the 1980s on freight ceilings imposed by the airlines, implying that the country’s hardworking peasants simply produced too many beans. Gardeners in this particular village, however, have little use for such flattery. “It was a disaster for everyone who participated,” one man recalled. More than a decade later, a few ambitious gardeners in this village periodically grow green beans as part of informal, one-on-one agreements with exporters, but there remains widespread suspicion of “outsiders’” efforts to organize village cooperatives for the purposes of contract production. As one young gardener noted, “these co-ops, they’re all the same. At the start it works very well. The first harvest, they pay you right away; the second too. The third time, you are encouraged, you produce a lot—and then they disappear with the money.”

CONCLUSION

It is clearly too early to make any definitive predictions about the future of contract horticulture in southwestern Burkina Faso. Much depends on trends within the national economy as well as within the international fresh-vegetable trade. If the country cannot lure more foreign investment even after undergoing quite dramatic liberalization, it is hard to imagine contract gardening in the southwest achieving a scale, productivity or formality comparable to horticultural export zones in more affluent African countries, such as Kenya. But even if foreign firms do venture into the Bobo-Dioulasso “garden belt,” however, it is still far from certain that they will find social conditions conducive to profitable contract schemes, despite growers’ oft-expressed need for access to external markets. The presence of a well-established regional trade network poses a potential obstacle, and not simply because it might compete for growers and encourage “leaks.” Even if commercialization through this network is not more lucrative than export contracting, the norms and practices which bind the region’s women traders and village gardeners endure because they are essential to the economic security and occupational identity of both parties. Like any kind of agrarian moral economy, theirs reflects not a mythical egalitarian harmony but rather the historical and ongoing efforts of all parties to secure decent livelihoods despite uncertainties and social inequalities—despite, in particular, the highly uncertain and unequal patronage relations periodically offered, then retracted, by “long-armed” business and government elites. Historical experience, in other words, has shaped the normative framework of regional commerce, and it continues to inform and justify gardeners’ apprehensive views of export-oriented contracting. Unless new contract schemes break decisively with old patterns, these apprehensions will likely persist.

NOTES

1. Research for this project was conducted in 1993-94, with grants from the Fulbright Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and the University of California-Berkeley.

2. The “NGO-ization” of development aid has made it a quite common and logical practice for urban-based businessmen or bureaucrats to apply for assistance on behalf of village-based “NGOs” which they organize and profit from. These are often their natal villages, but not
always. One of the entrepreneurs discussed in this article, for example, secured grants and technical aid from the Canadian government to build a 20 hectare mechanized irrigation scheme for village gardeners who would subsequently use this land to produce contracted export vegetables for him.

3. See, for example, Robertson 1984; Bosch (1985); Clark (1994); and the collection by House-Midamba & Ekechi (1995).

4. Information on colonial era maraichage was collected from colonial administrative records stored in the Archives Nationales de Senegal, diaries from the municipal and Catholic mission archives in Bobo-Dioulasso, and oral histories.


6. Paying bribes in order to avoid delays en route has become more common in Burkina, the “land of upright men,” since austerity measures have made it necessary for many low and middle-level state employees to seek additional, “informal” sources of income. Since liberalization has also led to increased smuggling, the government supports the police and border officials’ efforts to “crack down” by demanding inspections of all remotely suspicious vehicles. Travelers with large and perishable loads are easy targets, since they would usually rather pay a bribe than stop for a lengthy search.

7. Wholesalers reported that some gardeners, responding to the doubling of seed prices, were increasingly using seeds pressed out of eggplants, tomatoes and green peppers rather than buying them. This saves money, obviously, but often results in an inferior crop.

8. For example: a trader loans a gardener 10,000 CFA to buy two bags of fertilizer in November. Between March and May, the gardener then makes five harvests of tomatoes and okra, worth a total of 25,000. The first time the trader comes, she takes the produce for a negotiated price of 5000 CFA: 2000 of that will be the gardener’s partial repayment; 3000 she buys on credit. The next time she repays the 3000 (or part of it) and then makes another purchase on credit, again deducting part of the gardener’s debt.

9. In the 1980s, many of the green bean exporters operating out of Ouagadougou ran up huge debts with the national banks, and frequently failed to meet both producer contracts and the quality standards of European importers. In 1990 the Burkina Faso government passed a law intended to “weed out” poorly-run horticultural export firms by restricting air-shipping licenses to those who could demonstrate adequate funds and equipment. To obtain licenses, firms must now possess a refrigerator truck and storage facilities, and they must be capable of exporting at least 100 tons of produce annually. Le Ministre du Commerce et de l’Approvisionnement du Peuple/Le Ministre de l’Action Paysanne/Le Ministre de l’Agriculture et de l’Élevage, “Réglementation de la profession d’exporteur des fruits et légumes,” signed 30 October, 1990.

10. Even wholesalers from other regions or ethnic groups who do more or less the same daily work as the Zara women—selling in the stadium market, haggling in dioula, traveling together on supply trips in rented lorries—share in this regional occupational identity.


REFERENCES


Map 3: The "garden belt" of Bobo-Dioulasso. Adapted from Sanou (1989).