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International African Institute

Social Institutions and Access to Resources

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 59, No. 1, Access, Control and Use of Resources in African Agriculture (1989), pp. 41-55

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) on behalf of the [International African Institute](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1160762>

Accessed: 01/12/2011 10:08

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SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Sara Berry

For over a decade African economies have been plagued by recurrent food shortages, economic decline and growing disparities between the living standards of rich and poor. To a large extent food shortages and rural impoverishment may be attributed to external shocks—world recession, oil price shocks, deteriorating terms of trade and mounting debt service obligations—compounded in the 1970s and early 1980s by drought and war. In addition government policies have exacerbated the effects of adverse environmental and world market trends, aggravating rather than alleviating food shortages and depressing rural output and incomes.

A further dimension of the agrarian crisis in recent years has been the extreme volatility of both agroclimatic and politico-economic conditions facing agricultural producers and rural households. Not only the weather, but also relative prices, the availability of inputs, services and consumer goods, access to markets and off-farm employment, and government policies themselves have fluctuated widely and unpredictably. In addition to economic decline, African farmers have had to cope with an increasingly uncertain environment.

The present article describes some of the strategies which farmers have used to cope with the crisis, and explores their implications for agricultural performance. People's ability to generate a livelihood or increase their assets depends on their access to productive resources and their ability to control and use resources effectively. Access depends, in turn, on participation in a variety of social institutions, as well as on material wealth and market transactions. One objective of this paper is to examine some of the ways in which institutions have served as channels of access to productive resources; have shaped strategies of agricultural production and investment; and have been affected, in turn, by farmers' patterns of resource use.

A second issue to be addressed is the extent to which the increasing instability of economic, political and environmental conditions in recent years has reinforced or altered on-going processes of resource access and resource use. Like farmers anywhere, Africans have responded to instability and economic decline by economising and, at the same time, attempting to diversify their options. The particular forms of these activities have, however, reflected specifically African conditions—including the role of social institutions in processes of access and control—and may, in turn, have contributed to the intractability of the agrarian crisis itself.

CONDITIONS OF ACCESS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Since pre-colonial times, Africans have gained access to land, labour, and capital for agricultural production both through exchange and through membership and status in various social units. Rights to occupy, hunt, administer or cultivate land, for example, were often contingent on membership or status in a compound, descent group or community. To gain

access to such rights outsiders had to obtain permission from or actually join the land-holding group—through marriage, fostering, capture, purchase or by placing themselves under the protection and authority of its leaders. Within descent groups or communities, rights varied according to status—based on seniority, gender, office holding, etc. (Berry, forthcoming).

Similarly, rights to labour were exchanged both through market transactions (purchase of slaves, pawning) and through social transactions such as marriage or fostering. The explicit transfer of rights to a woman's labour and/or reproductive powers in exchange for bridewealth has led some observers to argue that, for example, 'the institution of "slavery" . . . is to be seen as an arrangement of the same kind as "marriage"'. Slaves and women, unlike men, do not have a choice of residences open to them'. (MacGaffey, 1983: 179; cf. Bledsoe, 1980; Lovejoy, 1983). The comparison is not exact: children of free and slave wives held different status, in central Zaïre and elsewhere, and wives could, in principle, rely on the support of their own agnatic kin in cases of dispute or misfortune. For the present it is sufficient to note that both marriage and slavery are examples of institutions in which access to labour is predicated on social status, and material transactions (marriage payments, purchase of slaves) serve to define or validate changes in status, rather than to elicit or reward productive effort. Similarly, in many societies children customarily worked for their parents; bridegrooms for their prospective in-laws, juniors for elders, clients for patrons, subjects for chiefs, religious disciples for spiritual leaders, and so forth. Control over capital goods—cattle, granaries, gold—was also often based on social identity or status.

As these examples suggest, both social identity and status depended on a combination of ascribed and achieved qualifications. For example, accumulation of bridewealth was in many societies a necessary but not sufficient condition for marriage; prospective husbands also needed parents or other senior kin to intercede for them in negotiating advantageous marriages (Lewis, 1981). Similarly, land-use rights were granted only to strangers who agreed to accept the authority of the landowning group and its leaders, capital and credit were awarded primarily to loyal subordinates, titles and offices could be held only by members of specified descent groups, and so on. In short, rights of access to land, labour and capital were rarely sold for cash or material goods alone. Control over productive resources also depended on one's ability to dominate or influence others and could be claimed by all incumbents of a particular group or status category, irrespective of individual wealth. Rules of inheritance or succession, for example, usually defined categories of potential heirs to property or office, rather than designating individuals. As Okoth-Ogendo (this issue) points out, such rules did not often give rise to rights of exclusive control. Individuals' access depended on the political structure and dynamic of the resource-controlling group.

At the same time individuals could advance their status (or even alter their identity) by personal achievement and the adroit use of wealth. Cattle, grain, gold or other commodities could be used to acquire control over wives, marriage wards, slaves or clients and their dependents. Succession to offices and titles was usually open to competition among a number of eligible individuals. Success in competing for office depended on the size and

dedication of one's following, which could, in turn, be increased through strategic acts of generosity or patronage. Social status could be achieved as well as ascribed; both membership in social groups and rank within them might be objects as well as instruments of accumulation. The general point is strikingly illustrated by the institution of woman–woman marriage, found in a number of pre-colonial African societies (Luo, Kpelle, Yoruba, among others), in which a wealthy or influential woman paid bridewealth for a junior woman, thus acquiring control over her reproductive capacity and enabling the senior woman to found her own lineage. In other words, a successful woman could invest in acquiring the status of a married man, with the associated rights of access to and authority over dependent kin.

Under colonial rule specific mechanisms of access changed with changing economic and political circumstances, but the general principle—that access depended on social identity as well as on purchasing power—persisted. New sources of wealth—trade, commercial farming, wage employment—were tapped for the wherewithal to invest in access. Increasingly, payments for land-use rights, bridewealth, titles, etc., were made in cash (Snyder, 1981; Murray, 1981) and hired labour began to replace pawning, slavery and other forms of domestic servitude (Hill, 1963; Freund, 1984; Swindell, 1985). Also new categories of people rose to positions of influence within existing social institutions as they gained access to new forms of wealth. Young men used earnings from employment or trade to marry or accumulate marriage wards at an earlier age than their forebears; prosperous farmers and traders competed successfully with their elders for seniority or titles; mission-educated youths challenged the authority of their fathers in family councils; wives gained new independence through trade or cash-cropping. People continued to invest in marriage, seniority, chieftaincy titles, etc., but their prerogatives were exercised in new ways by new categories of people (Peters, 1983; Comaroff, 1980; Berry, 1985).

Structures of power also changed under colonial rule. In order to stretch their own limited budgets and administrative personnel, colonial authorities often sought to preserve traditional offices and governing structures, although they appointed their own candidates to positions of authority within them. They also created new overarching structures of government, which provided frameworks for national units after independence. These new polities were polyglot collections of diverse traditional structures and cultures, but central control over powers of coercion, taxation and access to world markets created powerful new nodes of identity and action—most of which have survived the turmoil of independence, political conflict and economic crisis. Under the influence of 'indirect rule', traditional polities, like descent groups and domestic units, survived but in altered form. Clerks with enough Western education to mediate between colonisers and colonised wielded unprecedented power, but chiefs were important too.

The interplay between economic change, colonial administrative practice and chiefly prerogative has been widely documented. For the present discussion, a single example will suffice—namely, Peel's (1983) depiction of the political economy of divorce in Ilesha at the turn of the century. *Pax britannica* stimulated the growth of urban centres and commercial activity in southern Nigeria after 1890, and many young men emigrated from their

home areas in search of wage employment or opportunities in trade. After a few years of trading 'abroad', most emigrants returned home anxious to marry and settle down. In the past they might have spent years working for their prospective affines, or accumulating 'credit' with their senior agnates towards eventual assistance in arranging or completing a suitable marriage. Armed with the profits of their trade, however, young men began to bypass this process—seducing women already married to senior polygynists and using their earnings to pay compensation to the injured husbands. Local courts were kept busy adjudicating marital disputes. The chiefs of Ilesha, in particular, were caught on the horns of a dilemma. They wished to discipline their juniors and retain their wives, but the British had outlawed many forms of tribute collection which chiefs had formerly relied upon for income, and they also needed the revenues from divorce compensation payments and court fees. The resulting struggles even had repercussions for the local food economy: 'all observers, from the chiefs to the Commissioner, held that it was the departure of the young men [in search of cash] . . . which caused a crisis in food-crop production, resulting in a serious famine in 1905; and shortages for some years thereafter (Peel, 1983: 106).

In short, some of the apparent anomalies of colonial political economies—such as educated men competing for traditional chieftaincy titles or would-be exploiters defending inclusive forms of communal tenure—reflected processes whereby institutional mechanisms of resource access adjusted to changing circumstances. People sought access to new sources of wealth and power through existing institutional channels and used their newfound wealth and influence in ways which served to restructure old institutions and social relations rather than to destroy them.

In many areas, such patterns have persisted since independence. As Africans took control of their own national governments, the state passed into the hands of people who already belonged to local communities and descent groups and who had often received assistance from relatives and neighbours in rising to positions of wealth or public office. Accordingly, many ordinary citizens entertained high hopes of furthering their own access to the resources of the state through the gratitude and/or patronage of their successful protégés. States' control over economic resources increased as well: apart from outright nationalisation of land and other assets, African governments' efforts to accelerate economic development served to concentrate control of economic opportunities—jobs, contracts, foreign exchange—in the hands of the state. State power could also be used to manipulate rules of access to land, labour and capital by influencing legislation, administrative practices or the outcomes of judicial procedures. In short, access to the state became a precondition for doing business successfully.

As competition for access to the state intensified, people explored every available option, simultaneously reinforcing community and descent-based ties and forming new class- or party-based connections. (For an excellent case study, see Dunn and Robertson, 1973.) Africans joined political parties, contributed to ethnic unions and home town improvement societies, organised guilds, trade unions and professional associations, attached themselves as clients to powerful people, paid bribes, migrated, and solicited favours from kinsmen in high places. Their efforts to diversify potential channels of

access meant that the number of channels proliferated, while increasing competition for a constant or shrinking pool of resources reduced the likelihood that any particular channel would 'pay off'.

As the euphoria of independence wore off and national treasuries became depleted, mounting economic problems and social tensions also threatened the stability of African regimes. Like their constituents, politicians and civil servants sought to expand and diversify their sources of support by accumulating clients, multiplying state agencies and parastatals, and appealing to constituents on both sectional and ideological grounds. In Ghana, for example, governments tried to forestall opposition by distributing jobs, contracts and other favours widely. Budgetary constraints placed limits on this strategy, though often not until a national government had accumulated a crippling burden of domestic and foreign debt. Economic decline further eroded states' resources and hence the returns to any particular channel of access. Intensifying pressures to proliferate channels of access from above and below left Africans within and outside the state in a position similar to Alice's in her race with the Red Queen: 'here it takes all the running you can do to stay in one place'. People could not afford either to relinquish membership in any given institution or to rely on it for access to the means of personal (or collective) advance.

The proliferation of strategies and channels of access to the state after independence has also affected patterns of access to productive resources not controlled by the state. Rights in land continue to be associated with membership in descent groups, etc., even in areas where transactions in land rights were highly commercialised. Even outright state appropriation has often failed to transform patterns of land access and use. In Embu, for example, although Kenya's land reform 'superimposed a new *de jure* system of consolidated holdings and individually registered freehold titles, *de facto* fragmentation, borrowing, lending, and even some communal grazing on individually owned land persist' (Haugerud, 1983: 84; cf., Shipton, 1985; Okoth-Ogendo, 1976; Francis, 1984; Snyder, 1981). Elsewhere traditional systems permitted people to exchange use rights separately from rights of tribute collection, adjudication, etc., and use rights have been leased or sold without abrogating the authority of land-holding groups. Also claims to use rights have been established in more than one way, all of which may be socially and even legally acceptable. Again in the case of tree crops, rights of a farmer's heirs may overlap or conflict with those of his wives, sharecroppers or children who worked the farm during his lifetime on the understanding that they were thereby accumulating equity either in the farm itself or in their employer's estate. The persistence of unresolved conflicts of interest among rival claimants may discourage replanting of old trees or investment in other land-based assets, thus contributing to declining incomes and productivity in once flourishing tree-crop economies (Berry, 1985, 1988; Okali, 1983).

Even where rural land is readily available and not subject to intense struggles over access, increasing agricultural production usually requires access to labour or the means to hire it in. For those without working capital, domestic relations have remained important as mechanisms of access to others' labour. This has been particularly important for women, who often can rely only on their children for assistance in farming (Guyer, 1984). Men

and some women are more likely to seek wage employment or self-employment outside of their home areas in order to augment their cash incomes. Migration in turn has depended heavily on the use of social networks.

In both urban and commercialised farming areas rural emigrants have frequently relied on kin or fellow villagers to help them find work or land to farm, pay school fees, start businesses, and in general establish themselves in a new area where income opportunities are better than 'at home'. Where kin or fellow townsmen were unavailable or unable to meet migrants' needs, migrants developed new social relations which resemble those based on descent or community of origin. Many immigrants to the tree crop-growing regions of West Africa have, for example, acquired rights to plant or harvest trees in exchange for labour on established farms. Relations between farmers and migrant labourers or 'tenants' are clearly economic, but also entail elements of subordination and dependence characteristic of more generalised patron-client ties.¹ Similarly, urban migrants attach themselves to more established residents, performing domestic chores and accepting their authority in exchange for shelter, protection and help in finding work (Peace, 1979; Parkin, 1969, 1978; Mayer, 1980; Amin, 1974; Shack and Skinner, 1979; Eades, 1980).

CONDITIONS OF ACCESS AND PATTERNS OF RESOURCE USE

How have the conditions and strategies of access to productive resources described in the previous section affected patterns of agricultural production and investment? What are the implications for agricultural performance?

To the extent that access depends on social status or membership in a social group, one would expect to find differential access to productive resources associated with social characteristics—such as gender, seniority or place of origin. However, the extent to which socially based differences in access coincide with differences in income and wealth also depends on the history of production and accumulation by different groups within a local economy. For example, although both Ewe and Yoruba women found it difficult to mobilise land, labour and working capital to plant tree crops on their own account, their economic activities changed in very different ways with the spread of cocoa growing. Ewe women tended to assume full responsibility for food-crop production, which they had formerly shared with men, and often suffered declining levels of welfare as a result (Bukh, 1979). Yoruba women, on the other hand, followed their earlier pattern of specialisation in trade, food processing and other non-farming activities, and their incomes rose and fell with the fortunes of the cocoa economy as a whole (Berry, 1985: ch. 4; cf. Guyer, 1984).

Furthermore, since many farmers use part of their income to try to increase (or protect) their access to the means of production in the future, social identity and status become objects as well as instruments of investment. Strategies of production and accumulation are directed towards establishing or strengthening social relations, which in turn affect the terms on which people gain access to resources. Strategies of social investment have influenced a wide range of economic and social activities in Africa. For

example, in the literature on rural emigration it has been argued that, because migrants from poor rural areas retain rights of access to cultivable land in their home communities, they are not true proletarians. Hence, their exploitation has not given rise to capitalist accumulation or the development of the forces of production (Hart, 1978; Saul, 1983). This argument has been criticised with respect to Southern Africa on the grounds that migrant workers 'retain' access to land in their home areas only because South Africa forbids them to reside permanently in the white areas. Rural land in Lesotho, for example, and most of the homelands is far too scarce and unproductive to provide workers with an adequate income; in effect, therefore, they have no choice but to seek wage employment in South Africa in order to survive (Murray, 1981; Spiegel, 1980; Wolpe, 1972). Institutional channels—marriage, clientage, descent—are now geared primarily towards access to wage-employment, remittances or pensions, on which most rural households depend for their livelihood (Sharp and Spiegel, 1985).

In West Africa agricultural conditions in labour-exporting areas vary widely—from Sahelian regions where rural communities derive most of their income from migrants' remittances and very little from local agricultural production (Weigel, 1982; Haswell, 1973)² to savanna regions where local farming systems can sustain their populations under all but the most unfavourable environmental conditions (Lewis, 1981; Watts, 1983; Hill, 1977; Norman *et al.*, 1982). Whether or not local agriculture is viable, however, labour-exporting areas seek to retain control over their emigrant sons (and, more rarely, daughters) and their earnings, both to retain access to their labour and to gain access to income from wider economic systems. Similarly, in Kenya people have drawn on kin- and community-based relationships to organise access to urban employment and/or to straddle the rural and urban sectors (Parkin, 1969, 1978; Stichter, 1982; Cowen, 1981).

Strategies for exercising control over emigrants and their earnings often affect patterns of agricultural production and investment in the migrants' home areas. Bambara farmers in southern Mali forego relatively profitable opportunities to cultivate peanuts on individual plots in order to grow millet on large fields worked by groups of young men, partly to maintain the necessity for young men to return home annually to participate in food-crop cultivation (Lewis, 1981; cf. Saul, 1983). In Soninke villages in the middle valley of the Senegal River, where migrants' remittances provide up to 70 per cent of local income, rural families 'invest' in access to the migrant labour system itself, allocating part of each migrant's remittances to the cost of the next trip to town (or France), to marriage payments which bind male migrants more closely to their home communities, and to acquiring property in Dakar (Weigel, 1982). Yoruba cocoa farmers in western Nigeria invested parts of the proceeds from their farms both in training their children for non-agricultural employment and in reaffirming or strengthening descent group and home-town ties as a basis for establishing claim to their descendants' earnings (Berry, 1985). Giriama coconut-palm owners invested in elaborate funerals and marriages in order to reaffirm their commitment to kinship and gerontocracy, and to the assistance of relatives and elders in defending their rights to land and trees (Parkin, 1972). Even in Southern Africa migrants and their kin invest in livestock, for example, partly because

of its importance for bridewealth and other socially significant transactions (Ferguson, 1985; Beinart, 1980; Murray, 1981).

Where access depends on social identity, principles of organisation involved in relevant social institutions may also influence the management of productive enterprises. In competition for access to both local resources and state-controlled resources, the returns to an individual's investment in social relations depend on the wealth and/or influence of the group or its leaders.³ This, in turn, increases with the size of their following. In other words, descent groups, ethnic associations, etc., stand to gain by recruiting additional members. Such groups are not necessarily closed corporations. Their power rests not on excluding people from membership or access, but on perpetuating a distinctive identity. Thus new members are welcomed as long as they agree to uphold the norms of the group and/or the authority of its leaders.

Inclusive strategies of recruitment are thus politically advantageous, even necessary, but they create certain dilemmas for the group's ability to advance the economic interests of its members. First, if resources are fixed, increased membership implies less for each and may reduce the fortunes of all (Chazan, 1982; cf. Hart, 1982; Murray, 1981). Second, inclusive strategies of recruitment also affect relations of production within the group. For example, individuals contribute labour on compound fields or to village work parties not in exchange for immediate remuneration, but rather to validate or strengthen their position within the group—and hence their ability to draw on its support or assistance in other contexts. In such circumstances exploitation hinges on subordination within a group which controls access to the means of production rather than on exclusion and outright dispossession. People work for the benefit of others not out of fear of dismissal and destitution, but in the hope of advancing towards full membership or higher status within the group. Subordinates are willing to work within the system because they hope to advance through its ranks. Hence superiors must extend the offer of inclusion in order to exploit their labour.

Inclusive modes of labour mobilisation are not particularly conducive to maximising labour productivity. In effect the managers of productive enterprises must cultivate the loyalty of their workers and reward their expectations with periodic demonstrations of open recruitment and internal mobility. In such a system enterprises tend to employ 'too many' workers; scarce funds are dissipated in rewards to loyal supporters or celebrations of group solidarity; land is overgrazed or inefficiently worked. A classic example is the peanut farms of Mourides *shaikhs* in Senegal, cultivated by throngs of religious disciples who seek to demonstrate their spiritual worth through self-denial and devotion to the *shaikh* rather than careful farming. Working conditions on the *shaikh*'s fields have been described as 'anarchic': large numbers of disciples, working with little supervision, engage in a kind of devotional strip-farming, producing quick cash returns for the *shaikh* at the cost of 'a steady degradation of the soil, falling productivity per acre, and in the worst cases a form of "desertification" where recklessly cleared land is exposed to the effects of wind erosion' (Cruise O'Brien, 1970: 221).

Similar if less dramatic patterns have been observed in more conventional community settings. In some contexts it has been argued that compound or

village work parties are more expensive and less productive than other methods of labour employment (Saul, 1983; Lewis, 1981) but they persist because of their importance in maintaining group cohesion, although in other cases work groups increase productivity through internal specialisation and division of labour (Richards, 1986). Peters (1983) makes an analogous argument with respect to the contradictions of borehole management in the Kgatlang district of Botswana. Large herd owners refrain from enclosing grazing land around water points, even though they pay to sink and maintain their boreholes, because they also hope to have access to open grazing rights and the labour or political loyalty of non-syndicate members who also graze the open ranges and sometimes herd the cattle of their wealthier kin and neighbours.

In sum, the historical development of conditions and strategies of access to productive resources in many rural African economies may have encouraged under-investment in increased agricultural production and promoted inclusive strategies of management which do little to maximise returns to labour or scarce capital. If people need kin, etc., to gain and defend property rights, to recruit labour at very low wages, and to compete successfully for working capital, they will divert surplus from direct increases in productive capacity to invest in social relations and bypass opportunities to hire in labour in favour of employing relatives or clients whom they cannot effectively exploit.⁴

ACCESS, LOW PRODUCTIVITY AND THE AGRARIAN CRISIS

The previous discussion suggests that the adverse effects of drought and external economic shocks on African agricultural performance have been compounded by farmers' strategies of access to productive resources and their impact on agricultural performance. Investment in social relations as channels of access may divert surplus from investment in directly productive activities, and direct the management of production towards fostering loyalty rather than maximising physical output. Proliferation of channels of access in the face of political centralisation, economic decline and mounting instability almost certainly results in the duplication of activities and the diversion of resources from directly productive activities. Institutions themselves may, of course, be regarded as a form of social overhead capital, but the effective 'payoff' to investments therein is so ephemeral and uncertain that their productivity is problematic.

In recent years economic crises have reinforced people's efforts to diversify their assets and sources of income and have contributed to the proliferation of channels of access. They have also impelled many producers to economise on working capital whenever they can. Common strategies for economising on working capital include substitution of social ties for savings, wage- or self-employment, and maintaining as liquid a position as possible in one's asset holdings. People are reluctant to tie up capital in fixed assets or long-term projects and prefer to hold commodities (such as staple food-stuffs—whose value tends to appreciate with inflation) or to specialise in activities with rapid turnover (such as trade) rather than in those with long gestation periods. (In highly unstable conditions even annual crops which remain in the ground for several months may appear to have an unacceptably

long gestation period.) The result is a kind of inflationary process—not only in the usual sense of rising prices, but also in the structure of income-generating activity itself. The quantity of commodities and services in the economy remains constant or declines, while their ‘velocity of circulation’ increases.

Pottier’s (1983) study of rural Mambwe responses to declining remittances from the Zambian copperbelt illustrates aspects of this process. Faced with shrinking urban employment opportunities and the drying-up of urban-to-rural remittances, rural Mambwe rely increasingly on petty trade for their livelihood. Urban migrants return to the rural areas on retirement but avoid their home villages, where needy relatives would quickly absorb their meagre savings. Even government policies designed to provide increased incentives for agricultural production invoke perverse responses. In the late 1970s, although urban demand for beans created a seller’s market in Northern Province, local production of beans did not increase. People preferred to buy beans across the border in Tanzania for quick resale in Zambia rather than to tie themselves down to actual cultivation of the crop.

Similarly, in western Nigeria rapid increases in domestic demand which followed the growth of oil exports in the 1970s also induced not an expansion of agricultural output but a kind of restless mobility, in which people hesitated to stay too long in either rural or urban areas, for fear of missing a fleeting opportunity somewhere else, and preferred to invest their savings in readily saleable stocks of imported goods than in expanding productive capacity in agriculture (Berry, 1985). In seeking to cope with economic instability by diversifying their options and holding liquid assets, many Africans have become locked into multiple channels of access and strategies of resource management which perpetuate low productivity. This has occurred not because Africans’ strategies for coping with economic decline and instability are fundamentally different from those used in other parts of the world. Rather it is the ways in which strategies of access and control have been played out in the political and economic context of post-colonial Africa which gives the dynamic of agrarian change in Africa its distinctive character.

To illustrate further the implications of the dynamic processes outlined above, let us briefly consider their implications for rural differentiation. Several recent analyses have argued that understanding processes of rural differentiation in Africa is not a matter of deciding whether socio-economic cleavages are predicated on kinship ties *or* class interests, but rather one of elucidating their interactions (Berry, 1985; Peel, 1983; Murray, 1987). The pursuit of security and surplus through both kin- and class-based affiliations creates multiple and relatively fluid lines of social conflict. However, there are also people in contemporary African economies who may opt—or fall—out of the race to diversify the options just described. Some escape at the top—rising to positions of independent wealth (e.g. Sandbrook, 1986) and the power to manipulate rules of access to their own advantage—while others literally fall out at the bottom.

One category of people likely to fall out at the bottom is rural women whose husbands or lovers have migrated in search of better opportunities, leaving them to support themselves and their children in a declining rural economy. In an effort to cope with low or declining soil fertility and returns

to crop cultivation, to protect themselves against uncontrollable fluctuations in yields or price, and to stretch their own labour over multiple tasks, women may adopt farming methods which further reduce yields over time (Fresco, 1982, 1986) or supplement their meagre output by hiring themselves out at very low wages.⁵ Similarly, in desperately poor resettlement areas of South Africa extreme poverty and lack of access to jobs, remittances and, for many recently resettled people, kin have led to a 'rapid disintegration of the fundamental links of kinship' (Sharp and Spiegel, 1985: 145).

Marginalised people not only fall back on cropping strategies and methods of cultivation which in the long run are not sustainable, but may also begin to divest their 'holdings' in social institutions such as marriage. The evidence on this issue is not entirely clear. Sharp and Spiegel (1985) show, for example, that only the poorest rural families fail to diversify their options and invest in institutional as well as directly productive strategies of income generation, and Guyer (1986) suggests that the chaotic state of family law in the South African 'homelands' is as likely to promote investment in institutional networks (to stave off destitution) as not. If, in the long run, increasing numbers of impoverished rural people simply divest themselves, intentionally or no, of membership in access-controlling institutions, they will form a new category of dispossessed people. Such people may not be entirely dispossessed of the physical means of production—land and labour—but rather of the social and institutional means to exploit them effectively. Whether the emergence of such a class will promote the development of capitalist agriculture—or simply remain outside the existing agrarian process—will also depend on changing strategies of investment and resource use among those elements of the agrarian sector which continue to command investable surplus and on the development of new institutional links, from above or below, which prove more effective in giving people access to livelihood or the means of production (e.g. Vaughan, 1983).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that proliferation of channels of access promotes and is reinforced by diversification, investment in social relations and a preference for rapid turnover and liquid assets; and that perpetuation of access via social identity leads to further investment in institutions as potential channels of access. If investment in social relations rises faster than productive capacity, 'returns' to such investment will tend to decline. The resulting institutional devaluation reduces the incentive to invest in social relations, but the proliferation of channels of access makes it difficult for people to withdraw from them. The inclusive mode of labour management and recruitment associated with investment in institutions as channels of access may also promote unproductive patterns of resource use—overemployment, overgrazing, inefficient labour effort, and accumulation of claims and clients rather than fixed capital. The argument outlined here provides no blueprint for the future but seeks rather to locate a range of common practices—such as increased cassava monocropping, failure to replace old cocoa trees, hoarding stocks of grain, overstocking, soil degradation, mechanised shifting cultivation, and high levels of expenditure on

ceremonies and monuments—as multiple facets of the agrarian crisis, and to clarify the dynamic relations between conditions of access to productive resources and strategies of resource use.

NOTES

¹ The multifaceted—and ambiguous—nature of these implicit contracts is sometimes reflected in local parlance. In western Nigeria, for example ‘landlords’ and ‘tenants’ are designated by the same words—*olori oko* or ‘owner of the farm’ (Berry, 1975: 95; cf. Robertson, 1983; Okali, 1983; Hill, 1963). In southern Ivory Coast even national legislation according rights of ownership to the person who cultivates a piece of land has not stopped the tendency for latecomers to subordinate themselves to those who ‘showed them where to farm’ (Chauveau, 1979; Schwartz, 1979).

² This includes savanna regions in Nigeria, for example, where agriculture has been neglected because of better opportunities elsewhere, not because of environmental degradation (Berry, 1985; cf. Ross, 1987).

³ In some cultural lexicons wealth is explicitly identified with people (Bledsoe, 1980; Ambler, 1987; cf. Richards, 1986).

⁴ Such factors may help to explain the anomaly, noted by Blaikie (this issue) that otherwise ‘rational’ farmers choose crops and cultivation practices which contribute to soil degradation. Their behaviour simply illustrates the point that ‘rationality’ is relative to how one assesses the situation.

⁵ Such processes do not only affect women. Men have also been squeezed out of institutional channels of access, especially in times of crisis (Starr, 1987; Motzafi, 1985; Murray, 1981; Sharp and Spiegel, 1985).

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Résumé

Institutions sociales, accès aux ressources et changements agraires en Afrique

Pendant plus d'une décennie, les économies africaines ont périodiquement souffert de pénuries alimentaires, du déclin économique et des disproportions croissantes du niveau de vie entre les pauvres et les riches. Cet article décrit quelques unes des stratégies employées par les fermiers pour enrayer la crise et explore leurs implications en matière de performance agricole. On soutient que 1) la prolifération des voies d'accès développe la diversification, l'investissement dans les relations sociales et une préférence pour la rapidité de rendement et les liquidités tout en étant renforcée par ceux-ci; et que 2) la perpétuation des accès grâce à l'identité sociale entraîne un autre investissement dans les institutions comme voies d'accès potentielles.