

Smallholder societies and the safeguarding of complex strategies of action and land use systems

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Given the extensive ethnographic, anthropological, and geographical literature,¹ it will not be possible in the following sections to provide a comprehensive characterisation of African peasant societies and their variations. Rather, an attempt will be made to compile - with a necessarily simplifying approach - certain aspects that have relevance to our attempt of refining the structural model and its problem orientation. These aspects must not only reflect how peasant strategies of action are embedded in the societal context, but also relate to environmental concerns. This latter relationship is of particular significance in the actor-oriented perspective on regional development presented in the GLOPP lessons 'Actor Orientations'.

Given that the characteristics of African peasant societies have been shaped by their specific history and have been influenced and by their political, socio-economic and ecological environment - and therefore exhibit a great degree of variation - we must confront the question of an appropriate context for our present purpose. We shall attempt to develop an idealised characterisation of several aspects of African smallholder societies important in the present context, through referring to a societal situation that is not yet transformed by peasantisation - an approach which is not entirely unproblematic.² This approach will permit us to illustrate the importance and scope of changes in dynamic conditions of action that influence peasants and peasant societies.

The importance of the societal dimension in safeguarding smallholder strategies and land use systems

Before we attempt an idealised characterisation of African smallholder societies, attention should be drawn to why socio-structural and socio-cultural systems are important to an understanding of smallholder action and practice. This will involve supporting the hypothesis that an adequate understanding of smallholder strategies and land use systems cannot be developed without considering their embedment and linkages within social structures, rules, and values.³

For this we consider an example from southern Ethiopia. Amborn, in an impressive study (1987), investigated the reactions of a smallholder society to increasing drought. He demonstrated that as drought intensifies, reactions follow a specific pattern, characterised by the following stages: **(1)** Increased protection of natural resources through application of special techniques; **(2)** variations in single land use components, such as techniques of cultivation and mix of crop varieties; **(3)** extension of mutual assistance through labour and material support; **(4)** resort to emergency food supplies in the form of grain stocks, perennial tubers, and livestock herds; **(5)** increased measures of population control, including the prohibition of marriage; **(6)** a partial exclusion of non-productive persons from solidarity patterns; **(7)** abandonment or complete change of the land use and production system.

This example suggests two idealised aspects of smallholder organisation that are central to our investigation:

- Smallholder land use systems do not just reflect individual attempts to reduce risk and maximise utility; they are also socially constituted to include a subsistence-oriented guarantee of livelihood for all members, spreading and distribution of risks, and joint reactive measures within the entire smallholder society. Correspondingly, these land use systems are extremely complex in terms of variety of products⁴ and technologies,⁵ as well as in terms of productive and reproductive labour.⁶ This high degree of land use complexity - the totality of which cannot

anymore be explained at the individual level⁷ - requires a high degree of persistence, exemplified by the fact that a fundamental change in the land use system came about only as a last resort in the study quoted above. Only this combination of complexity and persistence allows flexible reactions to dynamic conditions of action, and is therefore the basis for the great flexibility exhibited in the single components of the land use system.

- The common strategies adopted by smallholder societies to deal with variable conditions of action not only include reactions associated with the flexible components of the complex and persistent land use system. But they also comprise strategic elements of the socio-cultural and socio-structural systems (e.g. mutual assistance or demographic measures - see above).

A key conclusion can be drawn from these two observations: The complex land use system and complex risk strategies are preserved by necessarily being linked to a strong social and cultural system which regulates, controls, and reproduces individual strategies of action as well as land use systems in a broad variety of ways. From this it can be concluded that present day peasant strategies cannot be understood without considering the regulating and determining aspects of the systems in which they are embedded, even when these aspects appear to have declined in importance owing to overall socio-economic changes and corresponding processes of peasantisation.⁸

The social and cultural system in African smallholder societies is or was built at least upon the following structural components: Within ethnic groups, kinship systems⁹ in terms of clans and lineages¹⁰ are constituting elements of social organisation. Families, which in the African context are - or were - complex and only rarely nuclear, may be spread among different households and sub-households and are ascribed to a lineage, and hence to a clan, and ethnic group.¹¹ Running through this primarily hierarchical social structure is a second type of social classification, which assigns individuals to different classes based on age and gender. At least until being superposed by other social systems, this dual structure of social organisation fulfilled the need to regulate and reproduce individual strategies of action and land use systems - even in cases where the social structure was based on egalitarian principles.¹²

The relationships between the social system and land use systems in African smallholder societies

Against the background of the social structures outlined above, we shall now consider some of the defining characteristics of the social and cultural systems of African smallholder societies which are important to our present purpose. As previously noted, this discussion will be thematically restricted and limited to an idealised and generalising view (see above). The ways in which smallholder strategies of action and land use systems relate to the social and cultural systems of African smallholder societies will be at the centre of our considerations.

If we assume that individual strategies of action of smallholders peasant are characterised by a dynamic combination of risk minimisation and utility maximisation, then the social and cultural system must harmonise and optimise these individual strategies in order to ensure social security and balance.¹³ In view of the complex, subsistence-oriented land use system on which strategies of action in a smallholder society are primarily based, harmonisation and optimisation must be guaranteed by the social and cultural system, at least with respect to the following four areas: **(1)** Ensuring access to resources for all members of the society; **(2)** ensuring the highest possible ratio of producers to consumers; **(3)** ensuring a variety of possible reactive measures in order to reduce and balance risks; **(4)** ensuring that complex knowledge about ecosystems and land use is preserved.

Figure 2 illustrates which components and characteristics of the socio-economic and socio-cultural system in traditional rural Africa provide guarantees in the four areas where certain conditions must be ensured. Before we turn to a consideration of individual aspects, two limiting factors associated with

the elements and the linkages shown in Figure 1 should be mentioned. Firstly, elements of the social and cultural system shown here represent a limited selection, which on the basis of the existing literature¹⁴ nevertheless seems to be important in view of the relation to the land use system. Secondly, it must be emphasised that these linkages are not meant in terms of causal-genetic functions but that they reflect relationships which relate specific aspects of social organisation to the above mentioned aspects of ensuring certain functions with a high degree of freedom. Having stated these restrictive qualifications, we can now discuss the linkages shown in Figure 2.

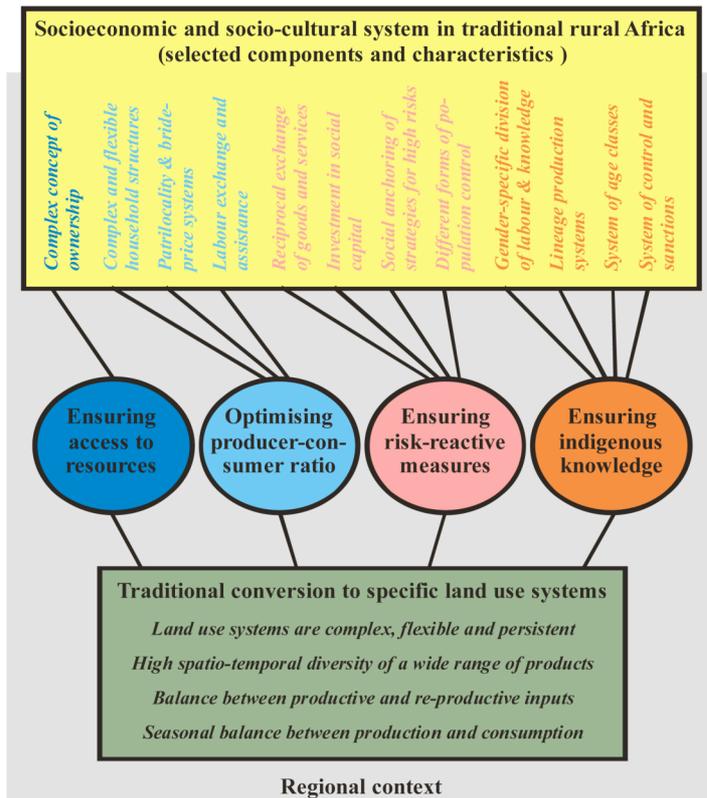


Figure 2: Idealised linkages between the social system and the land use system in African smallholder societies

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1. Ensuring access to resources:

In a land use system based primarily on subsistence production, access to natural resources - in particular land, water, plants, trees, animals - is essential. The concept of ownership and user rights therefore becomes central.

In African smallholder societies this concept is generally complex and varied: Components and concepts of individual and communal ownership at large exist side by side, and the ratio between them may also change over time.¹⁵ In addition, ownership and user rights are frequently hierarchically determined, for example, in the first instance according to lineage, secondarily according to the patrilineal line, and finally in accordance with the matrilineal line and 'adopted' relatives.

2. Optimising the producer-consumer ratio:

The well-known theory proposed by Tschayanov¹⁶ holds that in the absence of a labour market and a specific level of technology, the producer-consumer ratio in a subsistence economy determines the welfare of a household. However, this ratio varies within an individual household over time in a cyclical manner.

Social organisation in African smallholder societies seeks to smooth out these cyclical variations and to optimise the producer-consumer ratio: As women are considered important producers in systems based on hoe agriculture, the producer-consumer ratio is optimised by means of complex household structures.¹⁷ This complexity is guaranteed by multi-generation households and, in societies where location is determined patrilineally and where a bride-price system exists,¹⁸ by polygamous structures. The producer-consumer ratio is further enhanced by the absorption of poorer relatives and through the system of reciprocal labour exchange and assistance¹⁹ prevalent in most African smallholder societies.²⁰

3. Ensuring risk-reactive measures

A cushioning against risk through appropriate reactive measures is a primary concern of African smallholder societies. Core strategies are composed of varied and complex types of reciprocal exchange of goods and services between households.²¹ Closely connected with this reciprocity is systematic preservation of relationships, in both material and social terms, in the sense of 'investment in social capital'²² which can be drawn upon in times of need.

Where risks do not only affect the individual household but the entire smallholder society - in the case of drought, for example - population control measures and communally induced changes in components of the land use system are of decisive importance.²³ Respective social pressure and control is exerted via the clan-lineage system and/or on the basis of age or gender classes.

4. Safeguarding indigenous knowledge systems

In view of the complex nature of the persistent and at the same time flexible land use systems, safeguarding the indigenous knowledge²⁴ that underlies these systems is of paramount importance.

This is accomplished, on the one hand, through the formation and tradition of 'lineage production modes'²⁵ residing within the seniority and gender systems, whereby men and women each maintain their specific fields of knowledge and information. On the other hand, a system of societal advice, control, and sanctions²⁶ guarantees that the members of a smallholder society focus on existing indigenous knowledge and respective rules and regulations.

These briefly described relationships between the socio-economic and socio-cultural systems and the land use systems - confined, as noted, to idealised aspects - should be seen as a point of departure for approaches to understanding contemporary African peasant societies.

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¹ Without directly referring to them, the following studies were - among others - important in shaping our considerations: G-Egziabher, 1995, Arnold, 1992, Buch-Hansen, 1992, Adams, 1991, Bell & Hotchkiss, 1991, Groh, 1991, Jodha, 1990, Christiansson, et al., 1988, Bernal, 1988, Marten, 1987, Peters, 1986. With his basic contribution on African religion and philosophy Mbithi, 1974, provided an important background. Pongratz, 1991, Giordano & Hettlage (eds.), 1989, and Abt, 1986, Spittler, 1991, were especially important in relating to agrarian development and societies outside Africa.

² This approach is in a double sense problematical: On the one hand, it leads to oversimplification and generalisation that comes close to the limits of the permissible. On the other hand, and this is perhaps even more important, it suggests a basis in a form of cultural evolution theory that views the peasant as a transitional phenomenon, located between a 'primitive' society and one emerging and progressing into modernity. This position, which is e.g. represented in modernisation theories, is not only ethically questionable but is also hindering sight on the meanings of non-westernised cultural and societal forms and arrangements. Hence, it is hardly defensible as background to development policies. Against this background, our approach does not imply a cultural evolution theory, but it just intends to illustrate dynamics through use of idealised types. On these problems see also Rüdtenklau, 1993, and Schmied-Kowarzik, 1993.

³ This proposition implies a distancing from the already discussed theories regarding the rationale of peasant actors, in that these theories implicitly posit individually optimising units.

⁴ In this connection reference can be made to the varieties of the same crop, each exhibiting specific distinctive features and functions, which taken together allow for a utility optimisation and risk reduction. See e.g. Amborn, 1987, who refers to examples of sorghum varieties in southern Ethiopia. See also Little & Horowitz, 1987.

⁵ See, e.g., Critchley, et al., 1994, Hailu & Runge-Metzger, 1993 who show this variety in relation to soil conservation and productivity.

⁶ See Bätzing, 1993.

⁷ Even if an individual risk minimisation theory is considered.

⁸ It should be remembered here that part of the definition of peasantry is the double connection and exposure to the market economy and the moral economy.

⁹ Kinship is thereby not primarily a biological but an ascriptive social relation (see e.g. Cheater, 1989).

¹⁰ Clans (ancestors not known) consist of lineages (ancestors known) and are mostly patrilineal, rarely matrilineal or mixed (Cheater, 1989).

¹¹ Radcliffe-Brown, 1950, (cited in Cheater, 1989) suggests that the clear ascription of individually acting units to distinct groups - each with its own solidarity - is a key condition to continuing social structures.

¹² The example of the Kikuyu (Kenya) is often cited (see Wacker, 1996)

¹³ See, e.g., Harris, 1982.

¹⁴ As point of departure we base our considerations on Cheater, 1989, and we therefore refer to her bibliography, especially concerning cited case studies.

¹⁵ For example, during a resettlement period or in the case of inheritance. A well-research example can be found in the case of the Kikuyu in Kenya.

¹⁶ Tschayanow, 1987 (reprint of 1923). For further development and discussion on his theory see e.g. Ellis, 1993, Spittler, 1987, or De Janvry, et al., 1990.

¹⁷ See Siegel, 1992, Ehmer & Mitterauer, 1986, or Richards, 1950.

¹⁸ See Comaroff (ed.), 1980, Phillips & Morris, 1971, and - on an example from the Gusii of Kenya - Hakansson, 1994.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Ehmer & Mitterauer, 1986.

²⁰ The social components that regulate the producer-consumer ratio can vary and change within relatively short time: Cheater, 1989, cites the case of the Kafyar in Nigeria who lived in highlands in nuclear families with few children. Here the land holdings were a limiting factor. After migration to lower areas, the producer-consumer ratio becomes a limiting factor, and within short time complex, partly polygamous households developed.

²¹ On the system of reciprocity see Lemarchand, 1989, Elwert, 1980(a) and (b).

²² See Sottas, 1992.

²³ See in this connection the example given by Amborn, 1987.

²⁴ See McClure, 1989, Wamalwa, 1989.

²⁵ See Cheater, 1989.

²⁶ See, e.g., Bernardi, 1985.