

**Haiti's peasantry as *poto mitan*:
Refocusing the foundations of prosperity and development**

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Abstract Peasant farmers in northern Haiti have lost more than access to state land in a recent public–private partnership between the agro-export corporation Agritrans and the Government of Haiti. Using the Haitian concept of *poto mitan*, characterised by locally defined attributes of the moral economy of community care, identity and autonomy, this research establishes how peasants lose the ability to make critical and strategic contributions to food security and social stability. This suggests large-scale agro-export development trades peasants' welfare for shareholders' and for GDP growth and does not truly create a net benefit for Haiti.

Résumé Suite à la récente conclusion du partenariat public-privé entre la société agro-export Agritrans et le gouvernement d'Haïti, les paysans du nord du pays ont perdu bien plus que l'accès aux terres agricoles publiques. En utilisant le concept haïtien de *poto mitan*, caractérisé par des attributs localement définis de l'économie morale des soins communautaires, de l'identité et de l'autonomie, cette recherche montre comment les paysans ont perdu leur capacité à apporter des contributions stratégiques à la sécurité alimentaire et à la stabilité sociale. Cela suggère que le développement à grande échelle de l'agro-exportation échange le bien-être des paysans contre l'intérêt des actionnaires et la croissance du PIB, ne créant par conséquent aucun bénéfice net pour Haïti.

Keywords: land grab, moral economy, Haiti, food security, community-based organisations

Haitian Proverb – *Yon sèl dwèt pa mange kalalou*
“You can't eat okra with one finger”; or
“it takes a community to create food security”

The aim of this article is to demonstrate how peasant farmers in northern Haiti use state land and locally defined concepts of the moral economy of care, identity and

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autonomy to enhance local food security and social stability. The analysis uses the Haitian concept of *poto mitan* to highlight peasant perspectives on community relations, social change and economic development. *Poto mitan*, which translates literally as “central post”, refers to a worldview wherein peasants are the central post holding up Haiti’s ability to function as a nation, as communities and as households, or the central axis around which all activities originate and find support. It refers to the concept of building personhood, not as separate individuals, but as a people situated within the collective consciousness of Haitian society (McCarthy-Brown 2010). In contrast, policymakers overlook the functionality of the moral dimensions of small-scale peasant economies. They disregard and ultimately undermine the contribution of such small-scale economies to stabilise livelihoods and food security, and to ecological and socially sustainable development. This oversight is demonstrated with a case study of the conversion of state land in the Commune of Limonade from a community-controlled agricultural economy to a large-scale agro-export banana plantation called Agritrans. This study serves as an example of how repurposing state land may impact food security and social stability of peasant farmers.

The Agritrans plantation, designed and implemented by Haitian businessman and current President Jovenel Moïse, is used as a blueprint for Haiti’s development future (CFI 2015).¹ Since the 2010 earthquake, Haiti has been subject to an increasing number of land grabs (Edelman, Oya, and Borrás 2013) under the development priority “Haiti: Open for Business” supported by international actors and the Government of Haiti (GOH). The large-scale reconstruction approach disrupts the day-to-day livelihood strategies and community support networks of Haitian small farmers (Steckley and Shamsie 2015). Small farmers refer to themselves as peasants,² and in agreement with

Steckley (2015) and Shanin (1972), I conceptualise peasantry as a dynamic and modern process, fitting contemporary socio-economic needs with multiple sites and scales of activity. The peasants constitute the centre pole of the nation, community and household; they are the *poto mitan*.

My findings were developed during research in 2013–2014, when I examined peasant small economic development projects prior to the Agritrans land grab in 2014. My pre- and post-land conversion data provide a unique opportunity to document the immediate impact on peasant activities and lives. The state land grab considered in this study (displacing nearly 1,000 farmers) is one small example of many land conversions already in progress, with more expected to materialise in the near future, according to local mayors and the Centre for Facilitation of Investment (CFI 2015).

To meet the study goal, I describe how peasants' self-determined moral economy of care, autonomy and identity shaped commercially viable value-added projects and subsistence agriculture prior to the land grab. I contrast these outcomes with the impact of the Agritrans' land grab to demonstrate how a project intent on short-term gains undermines peasants' efforts at long-term food security and social stability and their strategic contributions to local and national well-being.

Case study area

The study area is located in the Commune of Limonade, North Department, Haiti. The commune is 131.9 km² and in 2008 had a population of 46,162 rural and 25,000 city inhabitants (Agrisud 2013). It is located 13 km east of the second largest city in Haiti, Cap-Haïtien. The Commune of Limonade has three administrative sections comprising 36 local organisations plus a mixture of local and international nongovernmental organisations. The participants in this study are located in the administrative section

called Roucou, home to 17,896 peasants plus the city of Limonade, 10 churches, three primary schools, one lycée school, one university, a vocational school of construction and 23 bitasyon³habitations; the area is 48 per cent plains and 52 per cent mountains (Agrisud 2013). The main activity of the area is farming with some charcoal production. Here they grow cassava, yam, plantain, banana, peanuts, beans, maize, sweet potato, taro, orange, lime and cashew, and raise goats, chickens and cattle (Agrisud 2013). The area is semiarid with a one-metre layer of fertile loam. Irrigation infrastructure is the limiting factor to most agricultural efforts in this area, although flooding is also a seasonal problem.⁴

Historical activities in North and Northeast Departments

The peasants interviewed in this study live in North Department and used to access state land directly adjacent, in Northeast Department. Since the 1980s, they have used the land to cultivate agricultural products and collect wild foods for households to eat and sell in the local markets, to harvest small trees for charcoal⁵ production, and to raise free-range cattle. From 1927 to 1966, the state land in question comprised 50,000 hectares (ha) of sisal and sugar cane operated by the Dauphin family, the Haitian American Sugar Company and the Welch family (Paul 2011, 27). The plantations closed due to changes in global markets and national restructuring caused by structural adjustment programs (SAPs),⁶ demonstrating the impermanence of large-scale projects in comparison to the longevity of the peasantry. Since that time, local peasants have utilised the state land, first unofficially and then after 2009 through a legal contract negotiated with the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) to use approximately 1,000

ha for farming activities until 2016. On average the peasants interviewed had worked the state land for 16 years, with some reporting multigenerational use of up to 35 years.

Since the 2010 earthquake, North and Northeast Departments have become the centre of business development, with the installation of Caracol Industrial Park (246 ha), University Roi Christophe (25 ha), Grand Marnier orange plantation (150 ha), Villaj la Différence and Caracol-EKAM USAID⁷ housing developments (50 ha) and now Agritrans' plantation (987 ha). The banana plantation occupies the land that the peasants were legally farming. The land used for this particular development was small in comparison to the 50,000 ha available in Northeast Department (CFI 2015).

The Agritrans plantation, conceived and implemented by Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, received US\$6 million from the Haitian Ministry of Finance's Industrial Development Fund and US\$10.2 million from an anonymous shareholder group, with an expected US\$27 million needed to complete the project (Saint Pre 2015; Vansteenkiste and Schuller 2016). The first agricultural export trading zone established in Haiti, the plantation benefits from tax-free status, special customs treatment and exemption from communal taxes for 15 years (USDS 2015). The project was portrayed during the 2015–2016 election as a successful model for Haiti's future economic development blueprint.

The transition to the agro-exportation plantation was abrupt. Mayors from Limonade in North Department and Trou-du-Nord in Northeast Department stated that they were unaware the development would happen so quickly. In 2014, both mayors commented that they still see government surveyors on their department lands and have no knowledge of why they are present. Under Haiti's Constitution, local mayors, ASEC and CASEC⁸ have responsibility for the development of state lands in their departments. Unfortunately, the national state works without recognition of this legal framework.

Conceptual and methodological frameworks

The Haitian *poto mitan* informs the conceptual framework of this study. The concept embraces peasants' epistemological understanding of what constitutes full personhood, which comes with responsibilities for the well-being of nation, community and household. This study explores how peasant epistemology develops the concepts of the moral economy of care (mutual support and vulnerability reduction through pooled resources), autonomy (the power to make choices as community and as individuals) and identity (control over the process of making meaning within the life of the community and the lives of members of the community) as characteristics of the *poto mitan* to deliver outcomes of food security and social stability. This approach stands in contrast to the mechanistic business process and outcomes of a plantation.

All three concepts reside within communities and are outcomes of social norms, conventions and mechanisms (Thompson 1971; Jackson, Ward, and Russell 2008) to provide a subsistence ethic, or normative root, to minimise vulnerability and risk in peasant societies that live on the margins (Scott 1976). Scott argues that the moral economy is derived from norms of reciprocity and the right to subsistence. For peasants, the moral economy takes precedence in the design of economic projects and works to embed the market into society (Polanyi 1944; Nicholas 2005) and to prioritise community care – as opposed to the prioritisation of power in a commodity system (Dixon 1999; Jackson, Ward and Russell 2008). As individuals, peasants utilise the value of community structures to reduce their vulnerability and risk.

My methodological approach, consistent with transnational feminism, is to embrace the interviewees' voices as valid expressions of their own epistemology and to

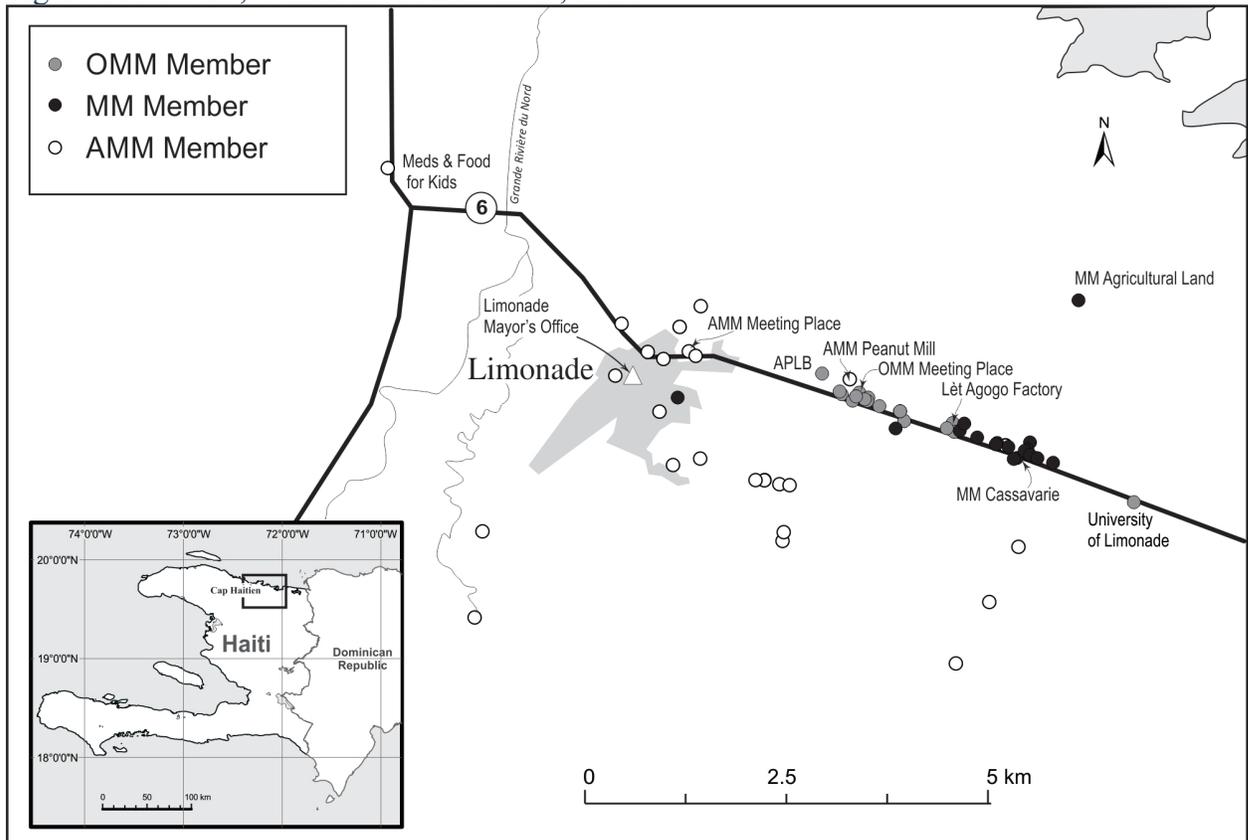
ensure that their narrative and way of being is documented authentically, as well as to rethink the researcher–researched relationship (Charles 1995). Researchers can realign the power of scholarly work by involving participants in the creation, verification and falsification of narratives. Activist research is a step toward the process of social change, an approach demonstrated by Haitian feminists Charles, Ulysse, Loth, N’zengou-Tayo, Glover and Davis.⁹ This choice answers the concerns of Loth (2015), Glover (2012) and Ulysse (2010a), who identify the perpetual negative constructions of Haiti as a source of the country’s governance problems.¹⁰ Further, this study heeds Ulysse’s (2010b) call for new narratives of Haiti, by producing narratives that are more precise representations of Haitian lives from Haitian perspectives and that counter misinformed negative metanarratives.

In summary, my study design aims to create space within the research project for the locally derived concept of *poto mitan*. This approach allows Haitian peasants to become the subjects and voices of their own narrative, to express their epistemology in the face of capitalist indicators of success and to demonstrate that development of personhood is more important than profits. This evidence-based research is suited to inform Haitian policy and governance decisions with substantiated ways to capitalise on the strategic and critical contributions made by peasants to national well-being. Through this process, peasants become agents in shaping the symbolic and material space of social change.

Sampling and methods

Before undertaking this study, I spent eight years conducting research with urban and peri-urban women in nearby Cap-Haïtien and building a network of contacts throughout North Department. For this project, 10 community-based organisations (CBOs) were considered for inclusion. All are located in the Commune of Limonade (Figure 1). Three primary and one secondary CBOs were chosen because of the interesting interlinkages among them and with the Haitian nongovernmental organisation Veterimed¹¹ and its *Lèt Agogo* (Milk in Abundance¹²) milk factory.

Figure 1 Field site, Commune of Limonade, Haiti.



Source: Marie Puddister cartography, Dept. of Geography, Guelph, and author's data.

The first primary CBO is Asosiyasyon Manman Mamba (AMM), an all-women organisation with a membership of 400 drawn from a large rural, peri-urban and urban area. Its headquarters are located in the peri-urban area, and its peanut mill and artisan centre in the rural area. This organisation has partnered with Oxfam, Agrisud, PAPDA,¹³ Agrisol and USAID. Agrisud is a French NGO funded through the Aquitaine/Dordogne region of France. Thirty-two women involved in the peanut project were interviewed.

The second primary CBO is Mouvman Manyòk (MM), a smaller, rural mixed-gender group with 150 members. MM received project funding from Oxfam GB and Agrisud. Twenty-three people (11 men and 12 women) involved in the *cassavarie* (cassava bakery) project were interviewed.

The third primary CBO is Òganizasyon Moun Mayi (OMM) is a small, rural mixed-gender group with 115 members. The 24 members (8 men and 16 women) interviewed participate in a cornmeal project with the Federation Chamber of National Agriculture (FECHAN), funded by the GOH and Aquitaine/Dordogne region of France.

The secondary CBO where interviews were conducted is Asosiyasyon Pwodiktè Lèt Bèf (APLB). With over 1,000 male and female members, it is the largest of the surveyed organisations. APLB works closely with Veterimed to help farmers with free-range cattle and milk production, and was instrumental in negotiating leases with the central state for access to state land. Seven men at the executive level were interviewed after the state land conversion. Members from the previously mentioned CBOs are also APLB members and milk producers, demonstrating the organisational interlinkages.

All the peasants interviewed were small farmers.¹⁴ The lands they utilise include state, rented, owned, family-owned and sharecropped. The average size of nonstate land was 0.51 ha, with sizes ranging from 0.1 ha to 2 ha. They grow a mixture of crops that

include beans, maize, banana, cassava, sugar cane, peanuts, cocoa, spinach, sweet potato, peppers, cabbage and carrot. There is no outstanding difference among individual farmers' crop choices; however, some would grow a larger volume of a specific product to supply their CBO's processing project. Three men from OMM thought they had personally reduced the variety of production too much in favour of maize. Aflatoxin had impeded their maize sales in the previous season, and they were rethinking their choices and risks.

A research team comprising four university-educated Haitians and myself interviewed 79 members, 19 men and 60 women, from the three primary CBOs on three occasions between May 2013 and February 2014, before the surprise land grab, and then added a fourth interview between April and June 2014, after the grab. The interviews spanned several sessions with the same interviewees in order to build rapport and a deeper understanding of the peasant epistemology. In April 2016, the findings were presented to the communities for verification, and members were given an opportunity to correct any misrepresentations and add new insights to bring clarity and accuracy to their narrative. In addition, we interviewed seven executives of secondary APLB and expert informants (EIs) – mayors, a CASEC, a Veterimed executive, agronomists – and finally we spent time observing events in the region. Studying this combination of grassroots entities enabled us to assess how local economies and societies were being built in one concentrated area.

The overall research objective, to compare food security frameworks employed by local organisations, was explained to the leadership committee. From there, we received permission to present our research and ask for volunteers at the general assemblies. The research assistants and I collected data using focus groups and semistructured and

structured interviews. We recorded the interview data in audio and written form in Creole. All data were transcribed into English by the research assistants and checked against the audio recording by another assistant who worked outside of the main group. After entering all data into Excel, SPSS and HyperRESEARCH, I coded and analysed them using grounded theory for patterns and themes. The structured interviews collected dietary diversity¹⁵ and income information from before and after the land grab.

Findings

Interview findings are divided into two sections. The first presents pre-land conversion qualitative data demonstrating the three constituent parts of the *poto mitan* – the moral economy of care, identity and autonomy – within commercial and subsistence activities. The second section presents qualitative and quantitative data on the impact on livelihoods after the land grab.

Pre-land conversion: commercial value and subsistence activities

Peasants built a modern local economy that included both commercial value-added processing and subsistence activities. The activities are shaped by the *poto mitan* concept and its constituent parts – the moral economy of care, autonomy and identity – to enhance food security and social stability. The *poto mitan* is a foundational concept, as explained by one EI:

Mothers are the foundational *poto mitan* of the household food, economy and family life; peasants are the foundational *poto mitan* of agriculture, economy and the base of society; and ancestors are the *poto mitan* of agriculture knowledge, spirituality and morality. (Female EI, Haitian NGO)

Moral economy of care

Haiti has been the destination for cheap food products since the early 1970s. This deluge of imports has squeezed local farmers out of local markets, causing four decades of massive rural-urban migration (Dupuy 2010; Steckley 2015). To remain a peasant farmer, as in much of the Global South, one needs to find market niches not subsumed by imported products. The interviews indicated that all four CBOs embark on commercially viable value-added production to meet traditional food market niches, reversing the historical trend of declining agriculture. An interviewee explains her motivation:

The system of agriculture has not advanced well since the 1970s and 1980s. People have a loss of pride and loss of motivation. People move to the city and forget about sharing. Now we have changing rainfall patterns; everyone is hungry. Now we put our heads together to produce food again. (Female, OMM)

Members from all four CBOs expressed similar sentiments about their loss.

We used to be able to provide for our needs. When someone was sick we would just go to the garden and get medicine. We are losing this knowledge and we feel helpless, so we started the community garden to share lessons. (Female, AMM)

This need for a role in production that allows peasants to be able to care for one another is an example of the moral economy of care.

During our investigation it was found that AMM, in cooperation with international funders, had established a peanut mill and sold traditional Haitian peppered peanut butter in local markets and raw peanuts to Meds for Foods and Kids (MFK), an international NGO that makes medical peanut butter for malnourished infants. MM, in cooperation with funders, grew and processed cassava into bread to sell to the local market and visiting diaspora. OMM, in cooperation with funders, milled maize for the

local market and sold to the World Food Program for distribution to school feeding programs. These activities worked to strengthen members as the *poto mitan*.

The project mission is to promote production in the area and to improve the living conditions of local citizens, socially and economically. Socially, the members meet more people and with training learn how to interact professionally. They gain more knowledge about how to process our products. Economically, they gain more money and increase the food for the household. In this way they improve how they feel about themselves, they independently care for themselves and their family and participate in helping other CBO members and community members. The organisation is the central axis to making everyone strong.

(Female leader, AMM)

Peasants in Haiti are contemporary actors. They adapt traditional social mechanisms to build small economic enterprises that create employment and benefit more than just the individual.

It was found that APLB organised peasant farmers who raise free-range cattle for milk and meat production. The milk was sold to Veterimed's local milk and yogurt factory, *Lèt Agogo*. Veterimed's first factory was located in Limonade; the NGO now has 35 factories across Haiti. The product is of the highest quality, winning international recognition from *l'Agriculture familiale que la Commission économique pour l'Amérique latine et la Caraïbe* (first place of 1,600 submissions from 35 countries) in Santiago, Chile, in 2013. Veterimed uses a cooperative framework, which includes regular contact with peasants to assess production issues. These include: (1) securing government-subsidised veterinary treatment for cattle infections; (2) installing water points on state land for cattle during the 1999 drought; and (3) addressing gendered barriers to include women in production. Through Veterimed's support, a greater number of Haitians participate in the milk industry to improve local and regional food security. Veterimed is

a good example of how a network of Haitian NGOs and CBOs facilitate the peasants to be the *poto mitan* of food security and create a contemporary platform for economic development and dialogue between the GOH and farmers.

CBO projects are focal points for activities. As reported, the “*cassavarie* is the *poto mitan* of our community” (Male, MM). APLB members expressed similar sentiments about milk production, while AMM and OMM members identified their CBO, as opposed to one single project, as the axis. These examples demonstrate how peasants materialise the *poto mitan* worldview into economic projects that have commitments to community well-being.

Moral economy of care and sharing/reciprocity

The moral economy of care is shaped by reciprocity and is represented by the proverb “*Fe byen lajounen pou ou ka mache lannwit,*” which conveys the meaning “If you do good work for others, then good things will come to you.” Reciprocity was observed on two scales: first, among members within a CBO and second, among CBO members and the larger community.

The projects provided opportunities for social cohesion through *konbit*, a traditional Haitian social mechanism representing reciprocity. *Konbit* requires shared work for shared harvests or project benefits, and ultimately strengthens social capital within the community. It was easy to observe the camaraderie, trust and community built through working with and caring for one another.

With the profits from the sour cassava we buy roots for our cooperative garden. The work in the cooperative garden is done on special days by work teams called *konbit*. (Male, MM)

The *konbit* brings us together. We share the work, we sing, we eat and at harvest we share the benefits. This is how we work together to survive. (Male, OMM)

Reciprocity of work in commercial niche food production builds obligations and trust that creates a moral economy of care. Members contribute to strengthening CBOs: “The money is reinvested in root-stock to increase production in the cooperative garden, and that helps all of us” (Male, MM). In return, CBOs take care of members: one interviewee said the earnings from sales to MFK were returned to AMM “to buy equipment and help members with their problems and needs” (Female, AMM). Another reported:

When we need cassava we just come here and our children can eat each morning. The children eat other things too, but if we don’t have anything we eat the cassava bread.
(Female, MM).

This is another example of CBOs materialising as the *poto mitan*. CBOs support a moral economy of care designed to provide for the needs of members. Examples of sharing CBO benefits with the larger community include the following:

The money from our cooperative efforts is used to help women in the community join the organisation (Female AMM)

Other people can rent the cassavarie to process cassava bread; I serve the organisation and the Limonade community. We all benefit this way (Male MM)

People in the community know me from the cassavarie, and when people see me they are more willing to help me because I helped them. We live in solidarity now. (Male MM)

Reciprocity here refers to the moral economy of care, a Haitian tradition of providing mutual support and vulnerability reduction through pooled resources to strengthen social networks and community structures. The rental income is redirected back into CBO programs – agricultural training, socialisation skills training, economic projects, helping a member in need – and by sharing the benefits to the larger community through bringing in new members and giving access or opportunity to participate in small-scale value-added production. All of this helps build food security and social stability.

The moral economy of care extends further than the local commune. CBO projects enhanced food security regionally by providing commercial food products across the region and as far as Cap-Haïtien, and by providing humanitarian assistance nationally: as mentioned above, OMM contributed cornmeal to school feeding programs and AMM's peanuts were used for medically enhanced peanut butter. CBO members spoke about their obligation to meet national food security needs.

I am Haitian. It is my responsibility, and the responsibility of all farmers, to reject imports and to grow food for my country. I am proud to make this contribution and I consider myself the *poto mitan* of production (Male APLB).

Autonomy

Respondents explained how commercial and subsistence activities lend themselves to building independent producers who strengthen food security and social stability. Many respondents viewed their responsibility for the success of their CBO not as a burden but as a duty to an organisation that facilitates a path to a better life. The responsibility to the organisation was balanced with their own household subsistence activities. One respondent described the interdependent relationship:

This organisation is where women feel autonomy. We receive help from the organisation to increase our own production. If we have a bad season we don't have to give the organisation anything. It is not an obligation. (Female, AMM)

Women who farmed peanuts would divide their harvest between their household and the organisation. The women would decide on the division themselves, exercising a healthy autonomy and independence from the organisation and strengthening the CBO's social network of independent producers, to which people also turn in times of food insecurity.

Haitians know that food security is a risky business, and traditional pluriculture with community support has long been the strategy to prevent food shortages. As one interviewee puts it:

Sometimes when waking in the morning I have no money, so I'll go in the garden to get something to cook. That is why I love doing association of plants and cultivation, so in case I am hungry I can eat and sell at the same time. (Female, AMM)

Pluriculture, unlike monoculture, allows for a continuous harvest and income independent of global price spikes and is an important strategy for the subsistence portfolio. It provides autonomy from the marketplace, yet simultaneously produces for the market. This is a typical Haitian peasant response to managing risk in a context of uncertainty – uncertainty of government support, Haitian harvests and global food pricing.

One respondent makes a clear linkage between poor health and changing patterns of food production and consumption initiated by SAPs and the related loss of autonomous local food production:

We are disconnected from our grandparents. Starting in 1986–1987, a slogan began: *Lew granmoun se domino ou jwe* [Grandparents, go and play dominos]. Now we have sages in many categories and we don't take their cultural, spiritual and political wisdom, and we don't listen to their advice on how to produce in the garden. With this kind of practice we make a deficit and import almost everything. Now you can observe that we have a lot of disease; our grandparents did not have diabetes or high blood pressure. (Male OMM)

All CBOs involved in this study acknowledged these changes and all indicated they were working to reestablish cultural food traditions across generations. AMM had a one-

hectare community garden project to promote agricultural knowledge sharing; unfortunately, this was lost during the land conversion.

Veterimed understands the local challenges and, to its credit, runs a program to challenge the gender construct that women naturally fear cattle. This creates opportunities for women to autonomously earn higher incomes as commercial producers and to provide milk for their households, building social status and identity. A woman leader explains: “We can execute a project to improve the lives of women – economically, culturally, socially, with skills that usually just men have” (Female, AMM). The programs are designed to strengthen the community members as strong autonomous units or nodes in the moral economy of care social network, in the face of globalisation. By strengthening individuals of the CBO, the whole community’s ability to tolerate risk is improved.

Identity

Globalisation and the decline of pluriculture and ancestral knowledge impacts identity. During one focus group, we spoke about different food types. Participants spoke enthusiastically of the emotional connection they felt with their ancestors when they produced and ate traditional foods, and said this was in stark contrast to the feelings aroused by imports.

We feel well when we eat traditional food. The ancestors’ food keeps us strong. (Female, OMM)

The Dominican Republic tries to sell us everything just to fill our stomachs, not quality.

Food in our country is so fresh. Imports make us sick. (Female, MM).

Poto mitan is considered foundational, and begins with the ancestors’ knowledge of agriculture, spirituality and morality. The demise of production impacts the use and reproduction of the ancestors’ foundational knowledge and changes farmers’

identity as *poto mitan*. It also impacts spiritual relationships. Leaving traditional foods for the *lwa* (vodou spirits) is important to the peasants.

The *lwa* eat *tchaka*. We leave *manje marasa* [mixed natural food] for the *lwa*. We leave only local food for the *lwa*, no Miami rice. (Female, AMM).

“Miami rice” refers to any cheap imported rice – and serves as a salient example of how imports have disrupted local production, distribution and consumption patterns to heighten food insecurity in Haiti.¹⁶ According to the interviews and the research assistants, since traditional products are no longer readily available, linkages to ancestral foods such as *tchaka* are being lost. Changing food patterns affects one’s ability to maintain spiritual identity.

CBO members often spoke of the importance of valorising Haitian production and traditional consumption patterns as a path back to good health and regaining Haitian identity. Regaining this knowledge is a process of materialising the *poto mitan*. All four of the CBOs produce traditional products – cassava bread, peanut butter, milk, and cornmeal – and members recognised that:

These products enhance our relationship with our ancestors. Cassava is served at funerals and *konbit*, or is put out in a special location for the spirits. Ancestors had the habit of feeding the vodou spirits. Generation after generation feed the spirits. Children continue these protections like the ancestors did before. (Female and male, MM)

The *poto mitan* extends deep into past generations and ahead to future generations, thickening one’s sense of place, identity and belonging, shapes morality and forms the process for creating food security and social stability.

The land grab’s impact on local activities

Early in 2014, the state land was converted into an Agritrans banana plantation. Respondents stated that the equipment showed up overnight, frightened away free-

ranging cattle and destroyed agricultural crops. Prior to the land grab, 78 per cent of respondents reported they were not worried about losing access to state land. However, by the time we began re-interviewing in April 2014, CBO members' lives had changed in distinct ways. One recalled:

We didn't even have time to collect our cattle. We just went in the morning and they had run off. Some people have never found their cattle because they have run to the mountains.

(Male, MM)

Cattle are an important component of a household's livelihood strategy, and their loss impacts both the economic security and the identity of peasant families. The heavy equipment that scared the cattle was there to clear the vegetation for development of the banana plantation. Simultaneously, workers destroyed crops used for households and markets, large trees that provided fruit and in which the *lwa* lived and scrub trees that were utilised for charcoal. On the cleared land a 987-ha plantation was built, with a 700,000-gallon aquifer-filled lagoon and a 12,000 m² greenhouse to grow Costa Rica seedlings (Baptiste 2014; Saint Pre 2015). These changes had profound impacts. Peasants previously using state land were displaced. Land-poor peasants became labourers for the plantation, losing their status as autonomous producers and household providers.

A local agronomist who had worked with MM but was not a member was concerned with the impact to household livelihoods and social structures: "People were either selling their cows or killing them for market. And this is not good for the household economy. The banana project has changed the socialisation of the farmers" (Local male agronomist, EI).

From FAO Dietary Diversity Surveys taken before and after the land grab, we found a 49 per cent (n=79, p=0.001¹⁷) increase in meat consumption and an 18 per cent

(n=79, p=0.000) increase in cooking oil consumption as consumers benefitted from the culling of cattle herds and a decline in cattle value (15,000g to 10,000g). The long-term impact on meat consumption has yet to be determined. At the Limonade milk factory, we met a local milk producer waiting to make his daily delivery. He relayed his production experience:

Before the Haitian government took the land I had 10 cows that gave eight or nine gallons a day, and now I collect only two gallons because the cows have no food or water. Before, they wandered freely on the state land and now I have them corralled. (Male cattle rancher, EI)

The changes have brought extra farm work. Unlike the previous fieldwork season, it was now commonplace for us to see peasant farmers transporting, by bicycle, tall stacks of elephant grass for feed. Table 1 presents interview data from AMM, MM and OMM members that demonstrate the loss of cattle, charcoal and crop income after Agritrans' land conversion.

Figure 2. Lost milk production² and income due to Agritrans' state land conversion.

| n=79 | Milk production before | Milk production after ³ | Milk income lost | Crop money lost | Wild food collected | Charcoal income lost | Total income lost |
|---|------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Avg. income USD/year/person | \$1393 | \$319 | \$1074 | \$69 | --- | \$314 | \$1433 |
| Percentage of interviewees using state land for the stated activity | 75% | Private land | | 16% | 90% | 16% | |

² Average milk production before land conversion = 2.19gal/day/farmer; after land conversion = 0.5gal/day/farmer. Most respondents have 1-2 milking cows.

³ Wilcoxon - Analysis, Non-parametric, Related p=0.000

The plantation wage offered for peasant labour was 200 gourde¹⁸ per day or roughly US\$3.53. Table 1 shows the percentage of interviewees who used state land for each activity and total income lost from production (sales) – US\$1,433 per year or US\$3.93 per day. Beyond the income loss, there are also reports of less wild food¹⁹, crops, meat, milk and charcoal produced directly for household consumption. In addition to producing market and household items, farmers would work sporadically as labourers within the nearby cities of Limonade and Cap-Haïtien or further afield. As mentioned, 65 per cent of respondents also accessed private land holdings. These activities combined to create a portfolio of livelihood strategies that peasants use, depending on the season, climatic issues and household needs.

Finally, among the losses to Agritrans' land conversion is the food grown to feed the *lwa* and the loss of large trees in which the *lwa* live. The *lwa* are an important feature in the Haitian social fabric; alongside the Christian deity, *lwa* provide guidance for understanding and upholding social norms around behavior and food practices. The loss of large trees such as mangos through land conversions is equivalent to *dechouké*, or the uprooting, of the Haitian belief system.²⁰

The lost grazing lands and the corresponding loss of milk production resulted in lower consumption of dairy products. Dietary Diversity Surveys show a 63 per cent decrease in milk consumption among respondents who are CBO members (n=79; p=0.000). Moreover, Veterimed's yogurt jumped in price from 25 to 30 gourde, impacting milk consumption in the whole region of Limonade and Cap-Haïtien.

The changing grazing patterns also disrupted the tradition of pluriculture that was practiced along the edges of cooperative gardens on the state land. As one land-poor CBO member explained, "After the state land upheaval, jealous farmers opened up the fence to

the protected MM land and let animals in to eat. The animals ate my beans and peanuts” (Female, MM). Although this respondent is not a cattle farmer, she was indirectly affected by the land conversion. When asked how she would now feed her family, she replied that she would participate in *degage*, that is, taking long-term lovers to make ends meet. The impact of land conversions extend beyond a person’s position in the moral economy of care to their personal health, safety and identity.

A member commented land conversions may be perceived as acceptable by peasants if they benefit the larger community.

The university was a good project. When they took land we accepted the decision because it was for the benefit of many people. But now the government is not supporting us. The land for the plantation is for one person now and not many. The land was already prepared to plant and some was ready to harvest. Everything was destroyed and now we cannot touch the land.

(Female, AMM).

AMM members in particular felt the loss of land on their fresh vegetable intake. The machinery arrived without notice and bulldozed the garden and signage. There was no opportunity to save any of the vegetables ready to harvest. The garden fulfilled a material aspect of the *poto mitan*, making place for sharing of production knowledge and for testing new cropping regimes in the light of changing climatic conditions – thus strengthening food security and community. As one member reflected, the garden was a place to strengthen women.

We had one hectare of land to help feed ourselves and to learn better agricultural techniques, but the state has taken it. We had planted gardens, grass for animals and beans, and they erased everything, even our billboard. (Female, AMM)

In addition to impacting identity within knowledge exchange, the land conversion also negated local peasants’ identity and autonomy in the planning and use of local state

land. Respondents reported using the land an average of 16 years and by multiple generations. Planning, coordination and communication (“PKK) is considered a critical element of development by local actors. The Haitian Constitution mandates that local administrators work with local farmers to plan and design state land use. Yet, the state made the land conversion decision “without the local administration in any of the three sections,” according to a local mayor (Male mayor, EI). One CBO leader reports:

There was no *PKK* between the government and local authorities or the people. They just took the land. The CASEC, ASEC and mayors were not informed. Now we don’t know what to do. We asked for a meeting [with government officials] but without success. (Female, AMM)

And, from an executive of Veterimed:

The farmers work with APLB and had a legal contract from MEF to use the state land. Now they cannot feed their cows and must sell them, thereby losing their income. This encourages labour migration to the Dominican Republic, adding to the government’s problems. It doesn’t make sense. First the government tries to put in place a system to stop people from migrating to the Dominican Republic, then they crush the farmers’ way of making a living, and finally they talk about national production. The president needs to understand that he has affected 1,000 farmers. These farmers were self-reliant, they did not ask for any assistance from the government, and now they will have trouble taking care of their families’ needs. (Male Veterimed executive, EI)

The mayor of Limonade stated he was disheartened by the turn of events since the communes of Limonade, Limbe and Bas Limbe had worked with local community and international NGO partners to devise a strategy to combat local food insecurity and poverty. The plan was published in three separate reports, one for each commune, plus an overall report entitled *Démarche D’élaboration des Plans Prioritaires Communaux de Sécurité Alimentaire* (Agrisud 2013). Diverse pluriculture to support local value chains is

the strategy envisioned within this report, yet it is not included in land conversion planning. He articulated the main advantage:

With pluriculture we eat earlier because we are harvesting continuously; monoculture makes more money for shareholders and the government, but it has more risks for the local population. (Male mayor, EI)

Through these examples we can begin to see how government policy undermines the process of building the *poto mitan* and the critical contributions peasants are making to food security and social stability.

Discussion

As documented, peasants represent the *poto mitan* of household and commercial food security locally, regionally and nationally. Further, the *poto mitan* creates social stability through community networks that exchange traditional agricultural knowledge, techniques to meet changing conditions and food and resources to reduce risk. Finally, activities strengthen peasant identity as important members of the moral economy of care and as autonomous food producers linked to traditional lands, valorising Haitian culture as it is being challenged by globalisation. The GOH, as demonstrated by the land grab, is more intent on short-term profits for shareholders, improved GDP growth and transitioning peasants into income-earning labour units.

Feminist methodology gives us the tools to understand how the government's agenda leads to a net loss for local communities and for Haiti as a nation. The methodology allows us to unpack *poto mitan* as: 1) the conceptual space of the ideal community, spanning time when decisions are made to meet strategic needs that include the preservation of local knowledge and the long-term stability of the community; and as 2) the material place where practical needs are met through actions in one's daily life. It

is important to recognise that both aspects of the *poto mitan* are present and needed because it is not just about making a wage or eating food; it is about the means and process that people take to get to those ends.

Peasants as Haiti's *poto mitan* have longevity as a development model when supported by adequate mechanisms. Peasants reach back into traditional knowledge of reciprocity, obligation and trust and adapt it to the present context to facilitate building commercially viable as well as subsistence food systems. Central to the functioning of these systems is the moral economy of care, autonomy and identity; together they make a process of belonging. Through these actions the peasants assert themselves not only as necessary for national food security and social stability, but also as a critical platform for leveraging government policy.

In contrast, the Agritrans land grab – premised on the idea that efficient agro-export production would better serve the economic interests of Haiti – is far from a poverty reduction strategy. This case study demonstrates that the artificial separation of economic from social concerns misses the critical and strategic contributions that peasants make, as citizens, to national food security and social stability. Further, the policy choice negates the government's obligatory role to reaffirm citizenship rights of the peasant electorate and to abide by the Haitian Constitution, which mandates participatory decentralisation as a planning methodology for state land use. This negation is supported by national government actors and a wider array of American politicians, foreign and national business elites and development agencies. The chosen development approach breaks the *poto mitan* axis, coincidentally creating poverty and reaffirming class hierarchies. It appears that this wider array of actors chose an ideological trap that provides a single lens for understanding progress, one where the construction of large-

scale projects is equated with success that omits a space of inclusion for alternative ways and remains difficult to extricate from the political economy of development. Reversing this disorder would take commitment to prioritise, maintain and celebrate local strategies for food security and to create a strategic plan on a wider spatial scale without diminishing local efforts. In fact, local networks of CBOs such as those in this study form that essential platform for policymakers to engage in planning dialogue, an opportunity that to date they neglect.

Conclusion

Haitian peasants are who they are because they imagine themselves as the *poto mitan* of the nation and create tangible spaces that express their central role. This stands in opposition to the way large-scale projects construe people as homogenous labour units, whereby self-determination and the metaphysical sense of humanity and community is lost. The difference is stark. In essence, the land conversion project, through dispossession of land, monetises belonging, food security and social stability so they can be funnelled up to a different scale.

In response to Ulysse's call for new narratives, this article has presented evidence that Haitian peasants are actively producing Haiti's food security, local economies and social stability, and when provided with land resources and government support, are better situated to make the greatest impact. Further, this case study offers evidence to support participatory decentralisation, as mandated by the Haitian Constitution, as a governance methodology that is worthy of further exploration to maximise the benefits of natural resources through peasant activities in Haiti and elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

The author graciously acknowledges the contribution made by Haitian interviewees and research assistants, without which this work would not be possible.

Funding

This work was supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre under Grant 107099-99906075-034; and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada under grant 752-2013-1518.

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Notes

¹ Charles (2015). Moïse – with the election moniker *Nèg Bannann* (Banana Man) – ran on a platform promoting Agritrans as Haiti's future economic model.

² Small farmers in Haiti refer to themselves as *peyizan* (peasants), as depicted in *Mouvman Peyizan Papay* (Peasant Movement of Papay). I too engage this word in an effort to revalorise its meaning away from often homogenous and negative connotations.

³ *Bitasyon*, or habitation in French, is a cluster of *lakou*, (homes and yards) similar to a homestead or a family compound, and formerly a plantation.

⁴ Rainy seasons are November to January and mid-August to October. The subterranean water source is located 100 to 150 feet down (Agrisud 2013).

⁵ Charcoal production has been documented as a highly lucrative industry in the region, since the surge of imported foods and associated decline of national agricultural production beginning in the 1980s (Murray and Bannister 2004).

⁶ The Structural Adjustment Programme occurred post-Duvalier under the direction of the US-created National Governing Council. The conditionalities, designed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, impacted agriculture by liberalising domestic markets in pursuit of export-led growth (see Bernstein 2001; Steckley and Shamsie 2015).

⁷ USAID = United States Agency for International Development.

⁸ CASEC = Boards of Directors of Communal Sections; ASEC= Administration of Communal Sections.

⁹ N'zengou-Tayo (1998) outlines the characteristics of women as *poto mitan* of the household, community and nation, roles shaped by the historical political economy of Haiti.

¹⁰ Haitian scholars have noted the power of negative narratives – conflating the Haitian body with food insecurity and abhorrent living conditions (Loth 2015). Dehumanised as subjects of research and representation, Haitians are “often been portrayed as fractures, as fragments – bodies without minds, heads without bodies, or roving spirits” (Ulysse 2010a, 2) and “consistently heralded for its exceptional, superhuman ability to withstand. To be bullied. To be displaced and disenfranchised” (Glover 2012, 200).

¹¹ Veterimed is led by a volunteer Board of Directors and has over 40 salaried professional employees across Haiti (Veterimed 2013).

¹² This translation from Creole to English, as well as all the quotations in the present article, were done by the research team; see section “Sampling and methods” section.

¹³ Programme D’appui Au Developpement Agricole, the largest peasant organisation in Northern Haiti.

¹⁴ Generally women produce for the household and men for export markets. Women are the centre of household economics and make claims on men to meet financial needs.

¹⁵ FAO (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation) Dietary Diversity Survey, adapted for Haitian diets. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i1983e.pdf>

¹⁶ With tariff reductions from 50 to 3 per cent in 1995 (McGuigan 2006), Haiti’s rice region, the Artibonite valley, halved production between 1989 and 2004 (Lundahl 2004), despite a growing population.

¹⁷ All Dietary Diversity Study data are calculated with Wilcoxon-analysis, non-parametric, related.

¹⁸ The gourde is Haiti’s basic monetary unit.

¹⁹ Types of wild food noted by respondents: soursop, mango, orange, guava, cashew, grapefruit, lime, passionate fruit, avocado, watermelon, common purslane, lanman laye, cucumber, papaya, pumpkin, mushroom, yam, and elephant grass and cow spinach for animals.

²⁰ “Vodou is omnipresent in Haiti’s social life and “by providing moral coherence through cosmological understandings” represents a key element of Haitian consciousness (Michel 1996, 283).

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