



Community, cohesion and context: Agrarian development and religion in Eastern Region, Ghana



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ABSTRACT

The role of community based dynamics in successful agrarian development is considered through comparing two neighbouring villages in Ghana, with similar agro-ecological conditions and market access: one, Gyedi, is a religious community and the other, Apaa, is not. While the direct role of religion in promoting agrarian development is limited, interaction with extension staff in Gyedi enables farmers to avoid problems characteristic of smallholder realities in Africa in general. Skills intensive technologies and internal market co-ordination promoted by community cohesion are key explanations for diverging development trajectories. The role of tenancy arrangements in diverging trajectories, pointing to the potential challenges for pro-poor agricultural growth strategies in other settings.

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1. Introduction

While broad based development approaches and poverty reduction strategies have encouraged inclusivity¹ in some regional contexts the challenges of finding generalizable success stories for Africa have been monumental. In relation to agrarian development specifically, issues of social and economic nature are difficult to disentangle from aspects of agro-ecology. The large variation of soil types and rainfall patterns, even within short distances, is often put forth as a major obstacle to the replication of an Asian style Green Revolution in Africa. Less attention has been paid to local level variation in social characteristics. Research on social and institutional mechanisms of villages with similar physical conditions may however provide insights into local level divergence in types of livelihoods. Simply put: given similarities in agro-ecology, infrastructure and the broad agricultural policy environment what other explanations of differences in incomes and agricultural production patterns can be found at the village level? Comparing and contrasting successful and less successful cases of local level development processes may shed light on community based dynamics that contribute to this variation. This is what we propose to do in this

article, on the basis of a mixed methods approach using quantitative survey data as well as qualitative interview material from Fanteakwa District in the Eastern Region of Ghana.

In November 2011, as a follow up to an earlier project on agrarian development in nine African countries (see [Djurfeldt et al., 2005, 2011a](#)) and as part of a new project on the gendered interaction between farm and non-farm income sources in Ghana and Kenya, we were involved in qualitative field work in a number of villages in the Eastern Region and Upper East Regions of Ghana.² In preparation for field work we studied the (cash) income data from the villages covered by the original sample of eight villages: one village, Gyedi in the Eastern Region, located just on the outskirts of the District capital of Begoro stood out. Here the average household cash income of 1493 USD in 2008 was twice as high as in the remaining villages in the Eastern Region. Perhaps most remarkably, it was more than double the average cash income per household, 731 USD, in the neighbouring village of Apaa, just 7 km away. In 2002 when both villages were selected for the survey, the differences were smaller: rainfall in Apaa was described as good, but erratic in Gyedi, land use was restricted to 65% of available area in Apaa and 60% in Gyedi. Both villages were considered to have generally good potential for agricultural growth, although Apaa was described as more marginal in terms of market access ([Wayo Seini and Nyanteng, 2003](#)).

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¹ Examples include comprehensive social welfare schemes such as the conditional cash transfer programmes in Latin America and the early Green Revolution policies in India.

² The original survey covered eight villages in Eastern and Upper Eastern Region of Ghana ([Dzanku and Sarpong, 2011](#)).

Gyedi differed from Akaa not only with respect to average income, however. Our first visit to the village revealed that it was a religiously based farming community founded by the Saviour Church of Ghana in the mid-1970s. Gyedi therefore is the exception rather than the rule, at least when considering broader processes of rural development. The purpose of the following paper is to compare and contrast the successful (Gyedi) and less successful (Akaa) cases of village level development processes. If such development is an outcome of community characteristics indirectly linked to religion is a key question throughout the paper. Which processes have redressed many of the problems commonly associated with smallholder based agrarian environments in Africa is another issue that is dealt with. Whether generalizable lessons for the smallholder sector in Africa can be drawn also from the exceptional is in this sense the overarching research question. While our general answer to this question is 'no', our conclusions point to some insights that can be gained also from exceptional cases like that of Gyedi.

2. Theoretical framework

While the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s and early 1990s plunged most African countries into the "lost decades" for smallholder based agriculture, another effect of these liberal reforms was the decentralization of development policy to regional or even local levels. Discussions of decentralisation and community based development therefore came to dominate the discourse as well as concrete development strategies in the two closing decades of the twentieth century. The conceptual framework for the empirical analysis of the villages considers the ways in which religiously based dynamics can interact to enhance or stymie the types of development processes envisioned in community based development approaches and decentralization strategies.

2.1. Decentralization and community based approaches to agrarian development

Promoted by notions of good governance and devolution of power, the redirection of funds to local level administrative structures as part of SAPs was connected to an ideology of bringing development closer to people through encouraging popular participation. By this token, participation would encourage not only local level political involvement, but also economic growth and development more generally. The possibilities for stakeholders to engage in locally defined development initiatives was perceived to be greater than for policies rolled out from the political centre. Hence decentralization in itself was deemed to be capable of generating development (World Bank, 2000). Connected also to ideals of self-reliance, ownership and empowerment, advanced as part of the agenda of economic liberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, participation came to be equated over time with localized, comprehensive social and economic transformation more broadly (Cornwall, 2000).

In operational terms, decentralization and participatory approaches have, however met with limited success in an African context: the speed of decentralization has resulted in administrative and political ambiguity and conflict between different levels of government, while local government frequently depends on central government funding. Ambitions towards political decentralization have been further undermined by weak fiscal bases and lack of adequate resources (Prud'homme, 2003; Smoke, 2003; Awortwi, 2011). Poor human resources and management at the local level alongside difficulties of controlling and reaching rural areas means that in practice the exercise of central

government locally has been devolved to traditional elites (Holmén, 2011).

The link between decentralization and local level democracy has also been shown to be spurious: While charged with greater responsibilities for service delivery, local governments as represented by local elites are as Crook (2003) suggests not particularly responsive to the needs of the poor. Instead, idioms of tradition and community based development have been used to "decentralize despotism" (Mamdani, 1996) and uphold inherently inequitable systems shaped by the interaction of traditional elites with the political and economic influences of colonialism (Berry, 1989, 1993).

2.2. Community, development and religion

The empirical literature on decentralisation and community based development initiatives suggest that the radical, rights-based perspectives at the root of participatory research in the 1970s and 1980s (Freire, 1971; Chambers, 1983), when confronted with the realities of African politics have been unable to generate the type of transformation envisioned. Arguably, "the community", which in practice often equates to traditional elites, has been stripped of its original meaning and failed to fulfil the participatory ambitions of community based approaches. By contrast theoretical approaches to community – whether in religious settings or otherwise – stress social cohesion and solidarity, also in an African context (Munyuki-Hungwe, 2011).

While the concept of community draws its intellectual heritage from the early sociological works of Durkheim, Tönnies and Marx, who viewed "authentic communities as a major antidote to alienation and tyranny and as a key element of 'good society' (Etzioni, 1996: 4)", all communities are based on collective identity, history and norms. In early socialist experimental communes (see Goldstein, 1982 for example) as well as religiously based communities, egalitarian ideals often in combination with geographical isolation gave rise to what are known as Utopian communities "formed intentionally and voluntarily by men and women who were not exclusively kin, and who lived and worked together and shared their property. In such groups, members' private property is highly limited and does not include productive assets (Brumann, 2003, p. 396)".

The connection between religion and economic growth has been postulated in a variety of contexts, perhaps most famously by Weber (1930) in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Numerous examples of economically successful religious-based communities are documented in the literature, but for the most part these concern artisanal communities founded on the outskirts of large cities. Religious communities have, however on occasion also scaled up and diversified their activities from purely local ventures to large-scale, national and even international denominational scope (Turner, 1969, 1980; Jules-Rosette, 1997).

In relation to African religion in particular the agrarian thrift of early African Independent Churches (AIC) is often contrasted with the ostentatious, modernizing, urbanism of later Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches, which tend to stress what is known as the prosperity gospel (Jules-Rosette, 1997; Maxwell, 1998; Gifford, 2004, 2008; Meyer, 2004). Fundamentally different both in theological outlook and history, the growth of AICs generally occurred in areas of heavy missionary presence, where disappointment with the ability of mainline churches and Western medicine to deal with spiritual concerns, in combination with vernacular bible translations, created the foundation for movements that linked traditional religion and Christian faith (Jules-Rosette, 1997: 155).

Dovlo (2004) suggests that the independent churches, as less intellectual than the missions of the mainline churches, catered primarily to rural groups. Competition with traditional priests

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