



Emergent livelihoods: A case study in emergent ecologies, diverse economies and the co-production of livelihoods from the Afram Plains, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

In the far northeastern corner of the Afram Plains, Ghana, a history of large-scale developmental interventions has led to the emergence of a dynamic ecological and economic assemblage that underpins the formation of emergent livelihood strategies among farming and fishing communities in the region. The cornerstone of these livelihood strategies are local bartering institutions, which have been maintained by these communities for over 60 years. This paper combines the diverse economies and emergent ecologies literatures in order to theorize and situate emergent livelihood practices within an emergent socio-ecological system in the context of historical and contemporary processes of developmental change. Using the lens of feminist political ecology to understand the unequal and gendered dimensions of these livelihood strategies, this research proposes the concept of emergent livelihoods as a way of encapsulating a rich empirical case study that draws diverse economies and emergent ecologies into conversation with critical development studies through a co-production of livelihoods framework.

1. Introduction

“No condition is permanent, by the grace of God”¹ reads the mud-stucco wall of Kwame Ganu’s house, and perhaps he would know better than most. Kwame is almost 75-years old and has seen significant change during his lifetime in Akpeme, a small fishing community in the far northeast of the Afram Plains, Ghana where he has lived since he was a boy. The shade-forests that once nurtured the cocoa groves he farmed as a young man have given way to Lake Volta, the result of Ghana’s efforts to electrify the country and grow the economy, which has come to support the fishing livelihood he pursues as an older man. Now, with a changing climate and the prospects of local infrastructural development, Kwame and the members of his and surrounding communities are once again faced with changing environmental and social contexts to navigate on their own.

Despite Akpeme’s location, seemingly removed from the urban centers and large market hubs of Southern Ghana, it has nevertheless borne the brunt of great change at the hands of large-scale developmental interventions throughout its history. What has been different in this place, however, are the subsequent economic and ecological responses to these interventions, especially as they manifest through a unique and diverse system of local livelihood strategies. These

livelihood systems, which revolve primarily around subsistence practices and a set of formal and informal bartering institutions, not only present a case study at the intersection of emergent ecologies and large-scale development, but also an empirical example of diverse, community economies in practice. Using the analytical lens of feminist political ecology (Rocheleau et al., 1996, 2001; Rocheleau, 2008; Escobar, 1999), this paper aims to interrogate and theorize these changing ecological conditions and community adaptations in the wake of various phases of historical and contemporary developmental ambitions.

By locating this research within the growing literatures on diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006, 2008; Fickey and Hanrahan, 2014; Gibson et al., 2015a; Gibson-Graham and Miller, 2015; White and Williams, 2016) and emergent ecologies (Rocheleau et al., 2001; Kirksey, 2015; Tsing, 2015; Haraway, 2016) this paper will demonstrate not only important conceptual and practical linkages between these theoretical camps, but also how cross-fertilization between them can engender interesting ways of rethinking livelihoods and livelihood systems. To this end, not only will this paper develop a theoretical framework to grapple with a novel empirical example at the intersection of diverse economies and emergent economies, but it will conclude by using this framework as a means to speak to critical development theory, specifically through the concept of the co-production of

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¹ This phrase is commonly seen on bumper stickers throughout Ghana and was also the inspiration for the title of Sara Berry’s (1993) book on the social dynamics of agrarian change in sub-Saharan Africa (see Berry, 1993).

livelihoods (McCusker and Carr, 2006; Carr and McCusker, 2009).

This theoretical move parallels recent similar efforts by scholars such as Gibson-Graham and Miller (2015), among others, who are working at the nexus of economy, ecology and livelihoods in the context of increasingly deep human-ecological entanglements that have come to define the Anthropocene era. By bringing these various veins of theory into conversation, it is hoped that the implications of emergent ecological dynamics and diverse economic practices for the prospects of livelihoods and development can be explored, a point with potentially significant implications for Akpeme, surrounding communities and beyond.

2. The ecological and economic dimensions of development

2.1. Development as an emergent ecological process

Many scholars in political ecology and elsewhere have noted the distinctly socially-mediated dimensions of even seemingly pristine ecosystems. Whether a function of subsistence practices (Carr, 2011), colonialization (Carr, 2011), development (Escobar, 1999), conservation (Robbins, 2001), global climate change, or a combination of any (or several) of these, human-modified landscapes dominate earth's surface to such an extent that significant anthropogenic impacts have been detected on every continent and in most of the world's oceans (Barros et al., 2014).

Especially in the epoch of the Anthropocene, “[e]cosystems have become assemblages that increasingly cannot be separated from human social systems and technical machines” (Kirksey, 2015: 217). Increasingly, we face ecological realities that, while not conforming to human managerial efforts such as conservation or development, nevertheless lead to the emergence of novel (Robbins and Moore, 2013; Robbins, 2014) and hybrid ecologies (Escobar, 1999; Zimmerer, 2000) as full of challenges and risks as they are possibilities and opportunities (see Kirksey, 2015; Tsing, 2015). These emergent ecologies (Rocheleau et al., 2001; Kirksey, 2015) require an important ontological shift that jettisons a pristine nature for a messy socio-ecology that is always emergent (see Haraway, 2016).

Emergence itself is not only a characteristic of complex systems, but a process based on the nature of the elements that constitute these systems, while at the same time not being wholly caused, contained or reducible to these disparate natures (O'Connor, 1994). Socio-ecological systems, for example, cannot be reduced to either the ecological or social dynamics that “cause” them, but are themselves emergent realities of the interactions between these various dynamics. As Kirksey, (2015) points out in his book on the topic, “[e]mergent ecologies is a study of multispecies communities that have been formed and transformed by chance encounters [and] historical accidents” (1), the relevance of which has been increasingly highlighted by scholars such as Tsing (2015) and Haraway (2016).

In the context of the bartering markets in Akpeme and surrounding communities, this approach proves particularly relevant considering its historical experiences with various phases of large-scale developmental interventions, the details of which will be expanded upon later in this paper. The result of these various interventions has been the emergence of a hybrid ecological system in which local communities have developed livelihood strategies specifically situated within these emergent ecological dynamics. Development, in this sense and in these communities, functions as a significant system of material and discursive re-ordering with substantial implications for the process of ecological emergence.

This conceptualization of development as an emergent ecological process problematizes the notions of development as an inherently destructive intervention into a landscape, but it also does not grant development to be wholly productive by default. Echoing the sentiments of Kirksey (2015) and Tsing (2015) above, as well as recent work by Haraway (2016), emergent ecological processes instead create the

potential for “multispecies flourishing” with challenges as well as unforeseen opportunities. Casting these emergent ecological dynamics of development as either productive or destructive, either good or bad, misses the point that these scholars as well as political ecologists such as Escobar (1999), Rocheleau et al. (2001), Zimmerer (2000), and Robbins (2014) have been articulating. Instead, development, like other modernist schemes, is a material as well as political process that is transformational of the relationships that connect societies and their ecologies, relationships which themselves are continually emergent.

2.2. From emergent ecologies to diverse economies

Parallel to the discussion of the relationship between development and emergent ecologies runs the ever-expanding discussion on diverse economies. As the result of feminist critiques leveled by Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) against traditional Marxist analysis, which was limited by its often totalizing, structural narratives of human society, the diverse economies literature looks to illuminate the myriad anti-capitalist alternatives enacted every day. The diverse economies framework levels a similar critique against the hegemonic renderings of the economy that the emergent ecologies framework levels against similarly simplistic renderings of ecological systems.

Both the diverse economies and emergent ecologies literatures seem to draw from a more general critique of top-down, high-modernist renderings of the material and social world described by Scott (1998), which can be applied to economic systems as easily as ecological ones. As well, both literatures take issue with structural inclinations to only “see” certain arrangements—be they ecological, economic, or somewhere in between—as being valid or meaningful in the greater scheme of social and ecological relationships. In the emergent ecologies literature, scholars insist that how we recognize emergent ecological dynamics, not as an abomination of a pristine nature, but instead as an inevitable and potentially productive ecological process, is a representational decision with significant practical and political ramifications (see Tsing, 2015; Haraway, 2016).

Likewise, in the diverse economies literatures, scholars have long criticized the tendency to ignore any number of diverse economic practices and thereby invalidate or invisibilize the otherwise vital livelihood functions these practices support. Choosing to read for difference, to “see” these diverse economic practices, therefore emerges as an important political decision to represent complex social and economic dynamics that were previously illegible through the traditional economic lens (Carnegie, 2008; Fickey, 2011). Just as “seeing” novel ecological arrangements as emergent processes is a political-ontological shift in representing complex ecological dynamics, so too is the act of recognizing diverse economic practices a shift in representing complex economic practices.

2.3. Dimensions of diverse economies

The academic literature on diverse economies has blossomed in the years since Gibson-Graham's original publications on the topic as much through research efforts as through a deep engagement with and proliferation of empirical case studies. And while this has given birth to a growing diverse economies research community (Gibson-Graham, 2008), more recently, there has been a significant effort on the part of scholars to clarify some of the key terminology and address some of the foundational assumptions that have become part of this expanding field.

In particular, the term ‘diverse economies’ itself has become a sort of grab-bag for various informal, non-capitalist economic practices, at times without much critical analysis (Samers, 2005; Fickey and Hanrahan, 2014). The distinction between capitalist/non-capitalist or formal/informal practices is neither hard nor absolute (Samers, 2005) and especially at the level of livelihood strategies, there is significant overlap which itself merits careful examination and proper

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