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Vernaline Watson
Tennessee State University

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Watson: Family Economic Organization and the Practice of Subsistence Crop
**FAMILY ECONOMIC-ORGANIZATION AND THE PRACTICE
OF SUBSISTENCE CROPPING: THE CASE OF SWAZILAND¹**

Vernale Watson
Department of Sociology
Tennessee State University

ABSTRACT An understanding of interrelationships between agronomic systems and the larger social organizational structures that sustain them is deemed crucial in devising appropriate strategies for increased crop production in Africa and other nonwestern settings. This paper focuses on Swaziland, in southern Africa, where effort is under way to promote surplus, commercial cropping among small-scale indigenous farmers. The persistence of subsistence type cropping by these farmers is shown to relate to traditional patterns of family economic organization, specifically division of labor and ties of economic interdependence among family members. Implications for agronomic policy are discussed.

Introduction

The rate of population growth in relationship to the level of agricultural production has reached crisis proportions in much of sub-Sahara Africa (Cummins et al. 1986; Eicher 1982; World Bank 1984). A continuing challenge to national governments of the region, social planners, and international donors is to find ways to offset and reverse this trend.

To date, intervention strategies designed to increase the yield and scope of crops grown on family farms have been only minimally successful. An apparent weakness of such strategies has been the tendency to focus almost exclusively on technical aspects of crop production, with regard to agronomy, infrastructure development, marketing, and the like.

Little consideration has been given the sociocultural context in which crop production takes place in Africa. This omission is widespread, despite growing recognition that agriculture does not function as an isolated economic entity but rather is an integral part of the entire social and institutional framework of a society (Moody 1980; Winkelmann and Moscardi 1982). The development of more culturally sensitive, wholistic approaches to agricultural intervention can be expected to lead to more fruitful outcomes.

¹ Adaptation of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Rural Sociology Section of the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists, Orlando, Florida, February 2-5, 1986. (Revised September 1987.)

This paper addresses the need for concentrated attention to interrelationships between sociocultural and agronomic systems in any effort to influence cropping practices in nonwestern settings. By way of example, the discussion centers on Swaziland, in southern Africa, where attempts are being made to promote surplus, commercial cropping among small-scale indigenous farmers. The persistence of subsistence style cropping by these farmers, despite government incentives to the contrary, is examined within the context of traditional Swazi economic organization. Specifically, the analysis focuses on division of labor and economic interdependence among family members as factors relevant to Swazi crop production practices. Implications for agronomic policy are discussed.

Data for this analysis resulted from two sources: extensive review of prior studies and government documents relating to Swaziland agriculture and observations by the author during a two-year stay in Swaziland, 1982-84, while collecting background information for an agricultural development project.

Social context of Swaziland agriculture

Located in southeast Africa near the Indian Ocean, and bordered on three sides by the Republic of South Africa and on the east by Mozambique, the tiny kingdom of Swaziland consists of a land area of 6,704 square miles--about the size of New Jersey. Its population of 600,000² is largely homogeneous, being 90 percent Swazi in ancestry.²

The basic social structure of the Swazi nation has changed little since settlement of the country by Bantu ancestors in 1750. Unlike a majority of black African societies, traditional patterns of social organization in Swaziland were never disrupted by forced colonization. Although the country was administered by two foreign governments from 1895 to 1968,³ the socioeconomic and political institutions of the Swazi people followed a separate and relatively independent course of development, compared with that of European settlers in the country (Kuper 1963; Matsebula 1976).

This duality of development is sharply reflected in two current systems of agricultural production. First, is a traditional system practiced by Swazi descendants on land designated as Swazi Nation Land (SNL). This category of land is communal and accounts for about 56 percent of the

² Additional groups inhabiting the country include Zulu (2.3 percent), Europeans (2.1 percent), and other African and non-African groups (5.6 percent).

³ By agreements initially entered into by the Swazi Government as protective measures, the country was administered by the South African Republic from 1895 to 1902 and by the British government from 1902 to 1968 (Matsebula 1976).

country's land resources.⁴ Approximately 56,000 Swazi families have land allocations on SNL. Family farms average less than three hectares (7.4 acres) in size. Forty-one percent are less than one hectare in land area (Central Statistical Office 1982). SNL farms account for about 40 percent of the country's total agricultural output. Production centers primarily around maize and cattle and is mostly used for subsistence. Cultivation resources typically consist of family labor, hand implements, and oxen for draft power.

In contrast to this traditional form of agricultural production, the second system is a more modern capital-intensive, highly mechanized, and commercial system of agriculture. It operates on land holdings designated as Individual Tenure Farm Land (ITFL) which are privately owned and operated primarily by persons of European descent. ITFL farms total about 850 in number, occupy approximately 40 percent of the country's land area, and average about 800 hectares (1,977 acres) each in size (Government of Swaziland 1978/79-1982/83). Although only about 70 percent of these farms are actively exploited, economically they account for 60 percent of the total agricultural output of the country. The products of ITFL farms--mainly sugar, wood pulp, pineapple, and citrus--are directed toward export.

A goal for agricultural development by the government of Swaziland, with assistance from foreign donors, is to increase the level of productivity and profitability of Swazi Nation Land agriculture. This is seen as an important means of increasing the standard of living of the rural population and lessening the growing dependence of the country upon import of food crops, especially maize, from the Republic of South Africa (Government of Swaziland 1978/79-1982/83).

One priority objective is to assist SNL farmers in making a transition from subsistence to surplus and commercial agriculture. In order to enhance the implementation of this and other rural development objectives, the Government of Swaziland established a Rural Development Areas Programme (RDAP) in 1970. The Programme provides direct, enabling services to farmers as to infrastructure development, farm inputs, mechanization, marketing, and crops-livestock extension services. Government sponsored farm loans are also available at low interest rates.

By 1982 the RDAP was operational in one-half of the SNL area. Despite major improvements in SNL crop production practices attributable to the RDAP--such as adoption of hybrid seeds, compound fertilizers, and improved plowing methods--production of crops for marketing remains negligible (Government of Swaziland 1982, 1986). Less than 10 percent of SNL farmers can be characterized as commercial croppers.

⁴ Does not include urban areas, land newly purchased by the Swaziland government, or Individual Tenure Farm Land.

Further, analysts (Low 1983; Martin 1980) documented a downward trend in maize production, the Swazi staple crop, from roughly 1972 to 1982. During this period, maize imports increased from approximately 20,000 tons to 35,000 tons. Although production practices adopted by farmers were found to have resulted in better maize yields per land and labor unit, the total land area devoted to maize production was described as static or decreasing (Low 1983).

At the same time, there was little evidence of significant substitution of other crops for maize (which typically occupies about 70 percent of all cropped areas). Cotton, the second major crop grown primarily in the lowveld (a climatic area largely unsuited to maize), showed some increase but nevertheless accounted for only about 16 percent of cropped land. Two other commercially grown crops, tobacco and irrigated vegetables, each accounted for less than one percent of cultivated areas. The remaining land was mainly occupied by subsistence food crops, including groundnuts, sorghum, beans, and potatoes (Central Statistical Office 1981, 1982).

Several explanations have been given for the relative lack of success of the RDAP and other efforts to move SNL agriculture from a pattern of subsistence to commercialization. Official government policy, and that of international donors to Swaziland agriculture, typically stress the need for expansion of the kinds of assistance offered by the RDAP, such as extension services, provision of input supplies, promotion of improved land use and husbandry methods. They also note the need for additional mechanisms to motivate farmers to produce crops, such as farmer credit, price incentives, and crop insurance (Government of Swaziland 1982, 1986; SADAP 1978).

Other analysts tend to concentrate on the issue of "economic feasibility" of intensive cropping on SNL. These issues relate primarily to constraints of small land holdings, the communal land tenure system (Holleman 1964; Hughes 1972), and to the availability of alternative sources of cash income (Low 1983; Low and Fowler 1980).

While the foregoing explanations provide noteworthy insights, they fail to recognize important systemic linkages between SNL cropping behavior and other aspects of Swazi social life. This appears to be an issue which must ultimately be addressed in devising meaningful and appropriate intervention strategies for SNL agriculture. The following discussion concerns the relevance of community and family organization of Swazi crop production practices. Patterns of family organization with regard to division of labor and economic interdependence is given specific focus.

Family organization and SNL cropping practices

Agriculture as presently practiced on Swazi Nation Land reflects modes of adaptation deeply rooted in Swazi social history. The extended family serves as the primary basis for organized social life and community. The socioeconomic survival of the various interconnected kinship groups is

closely linked to the land and to a communal system of land tenure. By tradition, each Swazi male gains entitlement to land for himself and his family of procreation at the time of marriage. Community land is allocated to families through the jurisdiction of area chiefs. The amount of land allocated is customarily determined by subsistence needs of families.

Within this general system of community subsistence, the family group, which constitutes a homestead, functions as the basic social support unit. The Swazi homestead can be defined as a group of close kin holding usage rights to a segment of Swazi Nation Land and sharing a common livelihood. The typical homestead is recognizable by a distinct cluster of residential buildings bounded by the homestead's livestock kraals and agricultural fields. In this regard, the Swazis do not organize into villages. Homesteads are relatively scattered, autonomous units of social organization (Watson et al. 1983).

Economic livelihood of most homesteads derives from three interrelated enterprises: off-farm employment cropping, and livestock. These enterprises are supplemented by a variety of small-scale, income-generating activities such as handicraft production, beer brewing, transport services, and sale of food and goods (Watson et al. 1983).

Division of family labor and crop production

Few changes have occurred historically in the way homesteads allocate labor in meeting socioeconomic needs. Traditionally, women had primary responsibility for cultivation of crops and attention to internal, domestic affairs of homesteads. Men were mainly responsible for the care of cattle and attention to the external affairs of homesteads, including hunting, war, politics, and economic concerns which extended to the outside world (Ngubane 1983).

The rise of the cash economy in the southern Africa region during the early nineteenth century, and subsequent taxation of the Swazi population, resulted in a need for homesteads to produce cash income. Accordingly, young adult males began migrating to cities, mines of South Africa, and agricultural estates in pursuit of wage employment. The assumption of outside paid employment by men (mostly in jobs located in Swaziland) was to become an institutional part of Swazi life, buttressed by increased consumer needs for cash. In addition to taxes, cash became a regularly used medium in connection with school fees, supplementary food, and cattle acquisition.

Homesteads adapted to this situation by expanding the agricultural roles of women to include care of livestock, as well as the growing of crops. This pattern still prevails. Women are usually assisted in routine farm chores by children and elderly persons. By custom, able-bodied men carry out the heavier tasks of cropping, such as land clearing and plowing. Major activities associated with the care and disposition of cattle remain the purview of men.

The incorporation of wage earning into the economic

structure of Swazi homesteads had a negative impact on the cultivation of crops. The level of production of food crops decreased from subsistence to sub-subsistence. This change was suggestive of the competing demands time made upon women; once greater responsibility for total farm operations was bestowed on them, women no longer grew crops in sufficient quantity to feed their families year-round.

Today, nearly all homesteads purchase some food items from the market. Wage earnings enable such purchases. Maize accounts for a large proportion of the food obtained outside the homestead. Additionally, growing but undetermined numbers of families are believed to plow the land and plant crops only as a means of maintaining entitlement to land (FAO 1980).

The argument is sometimes made that if the income potential of crop production became more viable, men could be attracted back to SNL family farms to earn a livelihood. The assumption might be in error. By tradition and historical circumstances, Swazi males are not predisposed to cropping as a full-time occupation. Their customary roles center around livestock and the external affairs of homesteads. Given the peripheral relationship of Swazi men to crop growing, it is unlikely that many of them would become avid croppers, even in the absence of wage employment opportunities. Therefore, the conversion of family farms to commercial crop production could well result in women having to provide more intensive field labor input. This outcome has been documented in other agricultural systems in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where women are the major croppers (Boserup 1970; Cheater 1981; Tinker 1976).

In the case of Swazi women, commercial cropping of family land without major labor input from men could lead to role strain and other negative impacts. Apart from present responsibilities for farm work, children, and domestic chores, many women produce handicraft or brew beer for sale. These latter two activities provide the only income that women generally control. Also, better educated Swazi women are increasingly taking advantage of off-farm wage employment opportunities, especially during early adulthood. Increased cropping demands could curtail such pursuits.

Besides labor considerations, the ties of socioeconomic interdependence that links family members to one another may provide an even greater deterrent to changes in present patterns of cropping.

Subsistence cropping and family economic interdependence

Subsistence cropping is an important part of the organizational system that binds Swazi family members into a network of mutual interdependence. The social security of each individual (and the group as a whole) is assured by an intricate set of rules, rights, and obligations applicable according to one's sex, age, seniority, and marital status. The system insures that basic needs of family members are met, in particular residential rights, crops and other benefits of land, and familial care when one is sick or otherwise in need of others (Sibisi 1980).

Currently the socioeconomic livelihood of most family units is structured so that persons whose activities are primarily homestead based (mostly women, the elderly, and, to a lesser extent, children) produce food crops to which all constituent family members (both resident and migrant) are entitled. These persons also attend to livestock and other internal economic concerns. On the other hand, persons employed off-farm (mostly young and middle-age men) provide income support, supplementary crop labor, and other assistance as needed by those working at the homestead.

A significant point to be made is that this type of arrangement promotes the survival and growth of the extended family system. It is especially relevant to maintenance of family solidarity regarding those members who migrate off-farm. In exchange for satisfying cash needs of the homestead--such as school fees, cattle accumulation, supplementary food, and purchased inputs for crop growing--absentee workers are assured a refuge at the homestead when they retire, become ill, lose their off-farm jobs, or otherwise have need for family assistance (Sibisi 1980).⁵ They also are entitled to a portion of the food crops grown on the family land and to individual land allocations when they marry.

From the perspective of crop production, the incentive for most homesteads to change current methods in order to incorporate commercial cropping probably is low. As stated, the women would be adversely affected. Also, there would be little incentive for the average off-farm worker to support a commercial farm enterprise, since income earned from nonfarm pursuits is generally sufficient to meet the wage earner's basic needs and obligations, as well as to provide some surplus (Low 1983). Further Swazi values disfavor the accumulation of individual wealth or its conspicuous display,⁶ so there are limited acceptable uses for a surplus of money.

Another important issue is that changes in homestead land use, from subsistence to commercial orientation, could result in conflicts regarding entitlements and legitimate uses of land resources. The question is applicable to the larger community as well as to the immediate family. This circumstance is less applicable to subsistence food crops.⁷

⁵ This does not mean, however, that the incorporation of wage earning into traditional forms of livelihood has been without stresses (for discussion, see Sibisi 1980).

⁶ The growing problem of cattle overstocking and subsequent degradation of SNL grazing areas is thought to be largely caused by lack of other acceptable ways to expand cash once immediate needs for food, school fees, crop inputs, and the like, have been satisfied.

⁷ Currently, most crop sales by homesteads result from incidental surpluses, usually involving maize. This income is usually managed by the homestead head for the benefit of the entire homestead.

Issues of this nature are likely to be most acute in multiple-household homesteads. Although the constituent households of such homesteads generally have their own fields for cultivation, they frequently share oxen, crop manure, implements, and, to a lesser extent, labor. Households engaged in cash cropping might require more than their share.

Also, the largest and best maintained segment of arable homestead land, frequently referred to as grandmother's field(s), belongs to the entire homestead. All households are expected to share in the cropping of common field(s). Likewise, they are entitled to share in the resulting harvest (traditionally maize) which is distributed among the various households by the homestead head (Ngubane 1983). Commercial cropping of this land could be difficult.

Indirect evidence of constraints to cash cropping by multiple-household homesteads is reflected in studies showing that commercial cropping on SNL is pursued mainly by homesteads that are nuclear in structure (Sibisi 1981) or by a single household (usually that of the head) within a multiple-household setting (Watson and Malaza, 1984). In these situations there is virtually no contribution of labor or other consideration by family members not belonging to the household unit involved in cash cropping (Watson and Malaza 1984).

Conclusions and policy implications

The fact that less than 10 percent of Swazi Nation Land farmers pursue commercial cropping despite major support incentives by the government is compelling evidence that cash cropping is not a practical alternative for most Swazi homesteads. The traditional practice of subsistence food cropping is compatible with an established system of family and community adaptation which will not easily yield to change. It is also consistent with the customary division of labor among family members. And, perhaps of greater importance, it supports a vital system of mutual interdependence and social security among family members.

A crucial challenge is to develop techniques for improving crop yields and encouraging food self-sufficiency within this traditional organizational framework. As a first step, it would appear feasible to institute official measures to stimulate homesteads to upgrade crop production, particularly maize, to at least the subsistence level. Present national development objectives for SNL agriculture place strong emphasis on food self-sufficiency (Government of Swaziland 1986). Moreover, the current land tenure system allows for redistribution of land that is unacceptably utilized. Widespread implementation of this measure would necessarily require cooperation and commitment from local communities and traditional leaders.

At the same time, suitable technologies should be extended to enable a majority of SNL homesteads to participate in the goal of food self-reliance. Experience shows that SNL farmers are likely to adopt cropping

innovations shown to have positive and visible results if they are easily accessible, not cost prohibitive, and are amenable to existing systems of social organization.

Commercialization of crops on SNL farms might best be advanced by identifying and concentrating appropriate forms of agricultural assistance to those homesteads and communities that are likely candidates for pursuit of cash cropping enterprises. Pertinent research suggests that homesteads now characterized by commercial cropping differ considerably in structure and environmental circumstances from those that are not (Sibisi 1981; Sterkenburg and Testerink 1982). The continued development of government-supported commercial cropping schemes on large tracks of land purchased from private holders also seems feasible.

Any proposals for major changes in SNL agriculture should be assessed with caution and with attention to potential consequences regarding the social structures and practices that have served the needs of the Swazi people for many generations. Numerous examples from around the world document social damage resulting from inappropriately applied technologies (Apthorpe 1971; Ashby 1981; Fortmann 1984; Tinker 1976). Female farmers have been most vulnerable in this respect. It is hoped, lessons learned will be used to the benefit of agricultural development in Swaziland and elsewhere.

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