

9. DIACHRONIC DETERIORATION OF THE RURAL FOOD SUPPLY

9.1. Hunger in Village Life

If the seasonal fluctuations described in the preceding chapter constituted the only changes in the Kinanbwa food economy, the community would have little trouble in adapting. Peasant societies around the world have devised perfectly effective belt-tightening strategies to deal with the seasonal food-availability oscillations that are an essential part of most small-scale agrarian economies. Unfortunately for the peasants of Kinanbwa, however, and for the Haitian peasantry in general, there has been another type of nutritionally more dangerous shift simultaneously taking place throughout the country for at least four decades and probably longer. To a degree unknown in the past, the Haitian peasant -- and his children -- have had to deal increasingly with the phenomenon of hunger as an integral part of daily life at certain times of the year. And reference is not being made, of course, to the pre-meal "appetite" that members of any human society feel. The hunger that we are talking about here in contrast is the much stronger pain felt, especially by children, when a mealtime has simply been missed or substituted with some light snack for lack of adequate food. It is perhaps unfortunate that languages tend to refer to both of these sensations -- the pre-meal appetite and the missed-meal pain -- with the same vocabulary item.

For though they both may be called "hunger" in English, "faim" in French and "grangou" in Creole, the physiological experience of the two hungers is fundamentally different. The missed-meal hunger is recognized by the peasant to produce in his child a sharper, much more painful variant of grangou which he describes as a gaz ("gas") that enters the child's stomach and is further believed to prevent the food subsequently served from having its ordinary nutritional effects. "Pitit-la deja gin gaz nan vant-li. Manjé ou ba-li-a pap fèanyin pou li. Li vin tro ta." This is a very

special type of hunger about which several perhaps obvious but not-always remembered points can be made.

1. It is not part of traditional life in Haiti. Kinanbwa peasants do not see it as "normal" to feel this second type of hunger. Most did not feel it regularly as part of their own growing-up experience. It is only more recent cohorts of children who have begun to feel this hunger on a large scale. The economic deterioration which has characterized Haiti for several decades has only recently taken the form of food shortages in Kinanbwa. Something new is happening, and the peasants are aware of it.

2. The problem is first experienced as crying children. Though the peasants are aware of negative physical effects of moderate food intake, their own discussion of the problem emphasizes the crying of their children. Stated somewhat differently, whereas the outsider emphasizes somatic symptoms such as small arm-circumferences and sub-standard height-for-age or the like, the peasant is most immediately concerned with the crying of his young children and the silent glances toward the kitchen of his older children. These older children will have learned to suppress crying in the face of hunger. But the constant crying of hungry younger children has become the most frequent image invoked by villagers in discussing the differences between the better-off past and the increasingly stressful present. Putting it perhaps somewhat more harshly, the Kinanbwa parent has no need of well-meaning outsiders to remind him about the ill-effects of hunger. His young children take constant charge of this task.

3. Patterns of paternal shame. But the neighbors also have their own say as well. The feeding of children is, in rural Haiti as in most other human societies, a collaborative effort involving inputs from both parents. But with respect to the crying of hungry children,

we have over and over received the impression that if anything, village fathers are more concerned with the crying than are the mothers themselves. This concern is perfectly understandable in view of the fact that "paternal instincts" are buttressed by strong community norms which make it first and foremost the husband/father's duty to provide food, even if that be done through providing his wife with trading capital. The absence of food in a house, and the crying of hungry children, are more a source of social shame for the father than for the mother. Men who fall into an argument with a neighbor will often have the crying of their hungry children cast in their face. We have never heard this insult hurled at a village woman. It is the man, not the woman, who in the last analysis has the duty to chaché manjé pou ti-moun you, "go get some food for the kids". If a woman has no husband, and her young children go hungry, the woman is seen as unfortunate. If a man, in contrast, is living in the same house with his hungry offspring, it is seen, not only as unfortunate, but as shameful and disgraceful as well.

4. The known physical effects of hunger. Village discussions of malnutrition may emphasize the cries of children and the shame of fathers. But the peasants are also perfectly aware that lack of adequate food will produce stunting in children. They also know that red hair and swollen bellies can also be the result of insufficient food intake. Outsiders sometimes can be heard to say that "the peasant attributes swollen bellies to the spirits," and rapidly conclude that the peasant is ignorant of the physical symptoms or effects of malnutrition. What is happening, however, is that the peasant knows that the same physical symptoms can be produced by different causes (including spiritual ones). But he knows perfectly well that inadequate food intake will result in stunted or swollen children. (The stunting is believed to come from lack of food, the swelling from "gas" that enters the underdeveloped child.)

In short the adults of Kinanbwa not only experience the annual plenty/scarcity food fluctuations that characterize many agrarian settings. In addition they are painfully aware of the unidirectional slide downward that has simultaneously begun to manifest itself in the food economy of their community.

9.2. The Causes of Increasing Stress: Outsider and Peasant Models

In assessing the causes of this malnutrition, it is instructive to compare the causes which outsiders emphasize to those which the peasants posit. Different groups of outsiders will tend to search for the principal cause in terms of their own bailiwick. Agronomists will attribute the malnutrition of children to the inadequacy of the agricultural techniques of their parents. Family planning professionals will in contrast blame malnutrition on the failure of parents to have fewer children. Nutrition educators may emphasize the ignorance of rural parents; missionaries may emphasize their lack of parental responsibility as witnessed by the failure of many to get married in church. And the social scientist may, of course, want to ultimately blame the malnutrition of the peasant child on the exploitative machinations of some other social group. The particular theoretical models, career interests, and peer-group fads of each benevolent observer will combine to shape his perception of the principal cause.

The peasants of Kinanbwa are also interested in discussing the causes of the increasing food stress that is rapidly undermining the viability of village life. They tend to posit general types of causes, over none of which they have any real control.

1. Deterioration of land quality. A given unit of land will today yield less than it used to. The land back then was pi béni, "more blessed." Whatever you used to plant-- rice, plantains, shallot-- you could count on a good harvest. Now you plant with fear either that

the land will totally destroy the harvest or that the harvest will be less than expected. The deterioration of the overall quality of land tends to be attributed less to overworking than to the effect of several natural disasters that have occurred in the past decades. The garden land on the surrounding plain has frequently been inundated following hurricanes, causing two sorts of problems: the washing away of the better soil and the depositing of layers of salt.

2. Parasitic infestation. These decreases in soil quality are also believed to be associated with a much larger degree of parasitic infestation, especially of the most important root crop, the sweet potato. The problems experienced today from the ti-landeng were virtually unknown in the past, and the arrival of this parasite is believed to be associated with the above-mentioned deterioration that has simultaneously occurred in the physical quality of the land itself.

3. Changing rainfall patterns. The only increase in rainfall that villagers notice is that associated with increasingly destructive hurricanes. But ordinary rainfall has decreased in quantity. This means not only less rain falling directly on the land, but also less rainfall to feed the irrigation systems on which local plains agriculture so heavily depends. This decrease in rainfall, while ultimately believed to be the work of God, is also known or thought to be linked to the fact that most trees in the area have also been cut down. Finally it is believed that even the quality of the water that constitute the rains has deteriorated. That is the rains are not only less frequent, they are also less healthy for the crops.

4. Overworking of land. The peasants place priority on the degradation caused by deteriorated soil, increasing pest infestation, and changing climate. But they also know that reduced per-karo yields come also as a result of insufficient "rest" periods.

5. Inflation. But perhaps what most leaps to the fore in peasant explanations of the increasing rural food crisis is the unabated pattern of food-price increases that has steadily been undermining their food purchasing power over the past 10 years. The price of a mamit of beans has increased by over 1000% in the memory of some farmers now in their fifties, and much of this increase has happened in the last decade.

That is: farmers' views of the causes of nutritional stress take into account changes in both of the major pipelines of food on which they have traditionally depended: the gardens and the marketplace. But the impact of increasing food prices is clearly perceived as the most serious immediate cause of their current situation. If they had a choice between miraculously increasing the productivity of their lands or miraculously decreasing the prices they have to pay for food, the majority would opt for the lower food prices.

One might ask: since the farmers sell agricultural produce, and since their wives market agricultural produce, why are they not beneficiaries of inflationary food prices? A number of reasons conspire to keep them on the short end of the transformation.

1. Reduced stock and stagnant profit margins for female traders. The female trader in the family may not be benefitting from the price increases. She has to have a substantially larger amount of capital now to purchase the same amount of stock. If her capital has not increased she may end up with substantially less stock. Furthermore, though the purchase and resale price are higher in absolute terms, her profit margin may be basically the same per volume unit as it was traditionally. If she earns roughly the same profit margin on a lower volume of stock, her revenue will be dropping, even in absolute terms. And in real terms, her earnings may in fact be plummeting.

2. Decreasing production. The declines in productivity discussed above work toward offsetting the additional income they would otherwise reap. That is, if per-unit productivity were constant, rising market prices would increase gross revenues. But where rising food prices are accompanied by a dwindling output on his part, the farmer's gross revenues may be remaining near constant. But this means a substantial drop in real income when inflation has been taken into account.

3. Time lags between food sales and food purchases. But the very scheduling of sales and purchases would of itself tend to make price rises burdensome. Even if the farmers' gross food output were remaining steady and his gross revenue therefore increasing because of higher market prices, he would still perceive the higher food prices as an overall disadvantage. This is because he will be forced to buy back during times of scarcity when a) the prices will be even higher than when he sold after harvest and more importantly, b) he will already have spent or invested the revenue earned from postharvest sales. Now he has to generate income to purchase extremely expensive food. And the price paid for his labor (if he chooses wage labor options) have clearly not increased at the same rate as the food prices.

The result of all of these processes can be summed up in one sentence: there is less food today per-capita flowing into the homes of Kinanbwa than in times past. Both major pipelines, the gardens and the biweekly good packets are experiencing a dangerous diminution of the amount of food they are carrying into the village.

A number of the patterns that one sees in the village today should be seen, not as parts of the traditional village life, but as adaptations to these increasing nutritional stresses. The more important of these can be briefly mentioned.

9.3. Increasing Dependence on Purchased Food

The traditional dependence of village households on a mixture of homegrown and purchased foods is shifting. There are now periods of the year when the entire village economy is dependent on purchased food. In former times animals would be killed, bananas cut, and root crops harvested in the periods of the year when there was no grain harvest. But the diminution of agricultural production has created a situation where these traditional standbys are no longer present in the village. The biweekly food shipments from Port-au-Prince have become the only source of food for many households during these off months. This is not a traditional pattern, but the product of recent economic shifts.

9.4. Intensified Trade and Maternal Absenteeism

Women were traditionally involved in trade. But what has changed over the years has been the intensity of involvement. It used to be the case that the women of better off households, though still valuing female commercial prowess, could afford to spend more time at home and withdraw from commerce for longer periods of time. But now virtually all adult females have to go into urban trade, especially during the hungry months. Households that have no members in Port-au-Prince will have to purchase food locally at higher prices. And whereas the marketwoman in Port-au-Prince has the advantage of purchasing food with money that is at least slowly growing, households purchasing food from inactive village money are literally eating away their capital. To avoid this, virtually all households now send representatives to trade in the city.

But not only are more women involved in trade. They now in addition spend longer periods of time in the city. Their returns to the village are less frequent than before. There are months of the year when visitors to the village are astounded at the absence of adult females. This

increasing female absence intensifies the dependence of young children on maternal surrogates for their nutritional and other needs. This should all be seen, not as a traditional pattern, but as the evolution of a traditional pattern toward a more extreme variant under the pressure of nutritional stress.

9.5. Increasingly Early Weaning of Children

The weaning of young children has been discussed earlier. Traditional practices called for an 18 month withdrawal of the woman from trade. This is no longer possible. Rather than take their children to the marketplace or even to Port-au-Prince, however, most mothers simply opt for a substantially earlier weaning of children.

9.6. Emergence of Consumption Debts

In times past it was unheard of to borrow money to eat. But now the borrowing of money has become a much more common strategy into which households fall. Figure 5 is a schematized (and highly impressionistic) breakdown of the "credit portfolio" of a village household with respect to food related items. Even in traditional village life borrowing was not unknown in all three major domestic/economic domains (Trade, agriculture, and Consumption). The percentages in the left-hand column of Figure 5 represent the relative amount of total debts incurred for items in times past. The percentages in the right-hand column represent the approximate present importance of that same item in terms of a household's entire debt portfolio.

FIGURE 5

Evolution of the Rural Domestic Credit Portfolio for Food-Related Items

		Sector	Type of Credit	Past		Present	
CREDIT	TRADE	Cash	In kind	50%		15%	
			Interest free	10%		10%	
			With interest	10%		15%	
			Trade Subtotal		70%		50%
	AGRICUL- TURE	Cash	In kind	5%		5%	
			Interest free	8%		2%	
			With interest	2%		8%	
			Agric. Subtotal		15%		15%
	CONSUMP- TION	Cash	In kind	8%		10%	
			Interest free	5%		5%	
			With interest	2%		20%	
			Consumpt. Subtotal		15%		35%
				100%	100%	100%	100%

There are four important shifts which have taken place and which appear to be intensifying. In the first place the entire debt portfolio has increased substantially for the typical household. (This is not represented in the diagram, which deals only in percentages). Even discounting inflation, the debts incurred by the rural households today are substantially greater in terms of their overall capital than was true in times past.

Secondly, the relative importance of the different sectors or domains has also shifted. Consumption credit used to be minimal, whereas now families are borrowing frequently for the direct purchase of food. In times past the borrowing was focused principally for trading capital, and food would be purchased from the revenues of the trade. But now an increasing (and, for the peasants, frightening) percentage of what they borrow goes directly for food purchase.

Thirdly, the relative preponderance of "in kind" vs. "cash" loans is shifting. Female traders have always gotten some of their credit in the form of stock lent by the supplier to be paid for after sale and some of their credit in the form of cash loans from a third party. Likewise, consumption credit was always partially in kind from the supplier and at least partially in the form of cash loans from a third party. But now the cash loans, which were formally of lesser importance, have become more important than loans in kind in terms of the overall credit portfolio.

Fourthly, the conditions under which these cash loans are made has also undergone a dangerous shift. It used to be that money was readily available interest-free from relatives and close friends. People would simply prété lajan a term which in the village lexicon generally refers to interestfree borrowing of money. But now cash-needy villagers are to a much greater degree being forced to eskonté lajan or loue lajan (to "rent money") at high rates of interest. Local moneylenders

tend to be well-off females who are known in the region. (None happens to live in Kinanbwa). Interest rates are at least 120% per annum, and some informants reported loans at rates as high as 240% per annum. Even intracommunity loans between friends and relatives are now made with interest, though at rates lower than those just cited.

In short the increasing food-and-money shortage described in this chapter has been the principal spur in the evolution of drastically altered borrowing patterns in many rural households. Community response has been, not a withdrawal from cash involvements, but a microeconomically dangerous and burdensome intensification of involvement in the most disadvantageous types of debt arrangements. And what is perhaps most striking in this process from the point of view of standard economic analysis is that only a small section of the rural credit portfolio is aimed at production. Rural "food-related" borrowing has traditionally been, and continues to be, dominated by loans made for consumption and trade.

9.7. Increasing Husband/Wife Economic Tensions

The arrival of increasing nutritional and overall economic stress is not without effect on intrafamilial relationships. The emergence of a strong female trading role as a normal part of the domestic economy of the village had long ago led to a balance of domestic power in which the men, while retaining their role as public "head" of the house, nonetheless refrained from "raising their voices" to their wives. But the increasing deterioration of the food-supply chain has meant that both partners to the domestic endeavour are having a harder time in filling their own particular part of the conjugal bargain.

The response of the males has frequently been to get involved in the more burdensome debt relations mentioned above and to get in a situation where they owe many people a great deal of money. The response

of the females, in contrast, has frequently been to succumb to pressure to use part of their trading capital to purchase food to send back for their husbands and children in the village. The absent wife/mother must constantly find a compromise between two competing sets of pressures. On the one hand she must at minimum keep her capital intact, so that at the end of each week or month she does not end up with less capital than she had started with. But on the other hand she must purchase food to get her husband and children through several days back in the village. If the food packet is too small, her husband will have to borrow money or food on the final day before the next food shipment and go deeper into debt himself. If, on the other hand, she spends too much money on the food, she will be eating into her capital. At minimum, she must make enough profit in trade not only to permit nutritionally adequate biweekly food purchases to be made independently of her trading capital. But in addition her capital itself must increase enough to keep up with inflation, to permit her to continue handling at least the same volume of stock.

Thus the woman is under two sets of pressures. On the one hand, niggardly food packages will result in hunger for her children back home and complaints from an increasingly harrassed and indebted husband. On the other hand generous food shipments can mean a slow erosion of her capital and of her ability to trade and a concomitant gradual deterioration of her own business. The tragic finale comes when the woman shows up in the village one day and sadly announces to her husband that she has no more money with which to trade, that they have all been forced to "eat" the money with which she hoped to make a profit, and that they have to start from scratch again (frequently by the sale of land or of livestock that were being raised with a hope of future land purchase).

9.8. An Increase in Thievery

Thievery was already an issue in village life when our first research was carried out. But the importance of this theme had increased during the most recent research. There were two major types of thievery: that directed against villagers and that performed by villagers.

Thievery of the first type principally affects market women. During the past eight years, organized gangs of thieves have begun intensifying their activities in the urban streets where the women sit and sell their produce. Women protect their money in cloth bags (sakit) which they carefully keep tucked in front under their dress. Yet many women have been the victims of robbery in the streets. The thieves are believed frequently to have purchased magic charms that assist them in their activities. The more skillful ones are believed to be able to rale ("draw") your money while they are talking with you. If thievery occurs early in the day when the female's capital is in stock, little harm is done. But if the theft occurs after stock has been sold off and before new stock has been purchased, the effect can be devastating to the already delicate economic balance which many village households must struggle to maintain.

But the theme of thievery has also increased in the village. Men particularly can be heard to say with astonishing frequency that "no matter how hungry your children are, you can't just go out and steal." The very frequency of this assertion is itself a testimony to the salience of theft as a possible response to increasing economic pressure and hunger. The attitude toward thievery in the village is clearly ambivalent. In traditional times the worst epithet that could be hurled at someone is vole, "thief". And the person caught stealing will be tainted with a social black-mark that even a lifetime will scarcely be able to erase from village memory. The shame appears to be especially

intense if the thief is an adult male.

But on the other hand there seems to be at the same time an increasingly strong sympathy (though certainly not tolerance) for papa pitit (fathers) who get caught stealing in the rural areas. Such thievery is seen as being qualitatively different from the thievery committed by younger people with no domestic responsibilities. Fathers frequently say that they hope they never have to steal.

The growing importance of the theme of thievery in village conversations is related to another noteworthy pattern that distinguishes Haiti from most other settings in Latin America with which we are familiar: the absence of openly stated anger against the government itself in the face of the economic decline that has been affecting virtually the entire rural sector. Whereas some would initially interpret this silence as the self-protective suppression of an anger, others familiar with rural Haiti will also recognize that in fact we may be dealing in many cases with the absence of public-sector expectations, an absence which is rooted in the objective historical experiences of the Haitian peasant. Though the peasant will be to some degree aware of the frequent expressions of paternal solicitude made by the rulers of Haiti, no Kinanwa villager expects the local town authorities even to care about the hunger of his children, let alone to take steps to remedy the economic conditions which create this hunger.

This chapter can be briefly summarized. The food supply system of the village is characterized not only by seasonal oscillations linked to annual agricultural and trade cycles. In addition there has been a unidirectional deterioration of the local economy and a dwindling of the amounts and varieties of food being funneled into village cooking pots from the gardens and the marketplaces. The themes of childhood hunger, parental shame, and general desperation have worked their way into the fabric of local life to a degree

unknown in the past. The dwindling of agricultural production has forced villagers into even greater dependence on the food sent back home by itinerant female traders. But the commercial activities of these traders, and their ability to purchase food, is being undermined by rapid inflation. The villagers are eating less homegrown food, but at the same time finding it more difficult to purchase food as well. This double-bind situation is leading to intensified borrowing of money by fathers, the use of trading capital for food purchase by mothers, and the sense of entrapment in processes over which they have increasingly less control by the villagers in general. People are desperately treading water in their attempts to fulfill what virtually all adults accept as their principal immediate duty, to chache manjé pou ti-moun yo, to "go get some food for the kids."

This chapter and the preceding ones have been concerned with the basic food supply of the village. We are under no illusions that we have studied a "traditional" food supply system; rather we have studied a traditional system in a state of rapid change. Many of the behaviors that people engage in are recent adaptations of traditional practices. The discussion will now leave issues of food supply and turn to the questions of food preparation and food distribution in the village. We shall see that in these domains as well, the practices currently prevailing must be seen, not as a manifestation of untouched rural Haitian tradition, but as a compromise between the mandates of tradition and the pressures of an increasingly stressful present.