

CHAPTER NINE

CULTURE AND CONSERVATION

9.1 Formulation of the Question

One of the hypothesis envisioned in the workscope concerns the possible impact of a number of cultural issues on the success or failure of erosion control projects. Are there some features of the general cultural orientations, or forms of autochthonous social organization, found among Haitian peasants which either facilitate or hinder the success of soil conservation projects? It should be obvious by now that the results of this study suggest the primacy of economic and institutional determinants, rather than the traditions and attitudinal patterns popularly lumped under the rubric "culture". But if Haitian peasant culture is not the major deter-  
minant of project success or failure, nonetheless it sets up possibilities and constraints which should be taken into account in the organization of projects.

9.2 Culture and Deforestation

The observer who stares in horror at ridge after ridge of treeless, barren hillsides cut with savage gullies and stripped of all but a thin remainder of now infertile topsoil can be pardoned for wondering about the culture which has encouraged, or at least permitted, its bearers to destroy the environment which supports their

life. I have heard more than one homespun analysis of the "extractive" nature of the orientation of the Haitian peasant, or of the absence of the disciplined "future orientation" which presumably helps the technologically advanced Euro-American to "delay gratification" and plan for the future.

Before launching into tirades against Haitian peasant culture, however, it is useful to recall that environments had already been altered by human cultivators long before human beings even thought of settling the Antilles some 7,000 years ago. Furthermore the desertification of vast expanses within large regions such as the African Sahel, largely as a result of overintensive tillage practices, have produced landscapes even more barren than those generally found in Haiti. Nonetheless the destruction of the Haitian environment correctly strikes observers as being disastrously thorough even in comparison, for example, with the milder types of environmental degradation which have afflicted Haiti's neighbors in the Greater Antilles.

Only the most lethargic mind could refrain from entertaining at least a mild curiosity about the causes of Haiti's unquestioned local lead in this tragic downward race.

But before laying the burden on Haitian culture, it is analytically healthy to examine more prosaic material features such as the pre-existing environment. Perhaps there was something special about the ecology of colonial and postcolonial Haiti which made it more prone than its neighbors to ecological destruction. A case could be made that indeed the very topography of Haiti made it likely that if one Caribbean nation were to end up denuded and eroded, Haiti would be that nation. An unparalleled percentage of the nation's surface takes the form of hillsides. 75% of Haitian land has slopes greater than 20 degrees. Using standard international land classification schemes, less than 20%--one observer puts the figure at 14%--of Haiti's land is truly arable, and even most of the arable land constitutes slopes which would require erosion control measures for proper cultivation. In short the very physical endowment of Haiti has rendered the corner of Hispaniola inherently more vulnerable to environmental degradation. Whatever his culture, the Haitian peasant had the ecological cards stacked against him from the outset.

But ecology explains only part of the matter, and perhaps a small part at that. The anthropological literature of the past two decades is replete with well documented examples of agrarian societies which have successfully--frequently on their own--devised environment-protecting customs and institutions which seem conspicuously absent in Haiti.

Such agrarian strategies frequently take the guise of religious taboos, for example. It has recently been argued, for example, that the now famous Sacred Cow complex in India can best be understood as a subtle form of economic insurance against the destruction of an invaluable local adjunct to the local agrarian economy--the cow whose droppings provide the most important source of domestic fuel. It would appear that Haiti could have benefited from the emergence of vigorous folk-religious taboos against the cutting of trees. Why have these taboos not conveniently appeared?

As a matter of fact, they have. I have lived in a village of the plain whose inhabitants are hard pressed to find firewood and where--surprisingly--there is a substantial number of trees still standing which in other regions would have long ago fallen to the axes of the charcoal makers. In virtually every single case, these trees are bwa sévi, sacred trees whose destruction would bring prompt retribution down on the head of the feller (or on the heads of his children). But these taboos are weak, certainly weaker than the more powerful forces which have made it necessary and/or profitable to chop the trees down. And for reasons which fall beyond the scope of this discussion, rural Haitian folk religion has come to focus on matters of sickness and healing rather than on matters overtly connected with the local agrarian economy.

But other agrarian societies have successfully devised non-religious, technological solutions to problems of soil erosion. One need only point to the famous terraces constructed by the Inca-- some of them still in use today--or the elaborate tillage practices of many tribal peoples which, in combination, with careful systematic fallowing practices have managed to preserve fragile environments.

Why have such environment-protecting agrarian practices apparently never emerged as a feature of Haitian peasant culture?

As for the terraces, an examination of the anthropological literature will reveal that such labor demanding innovations tend to occur only within certain sociopolitical contexts. Probably the principal governing factor is the presence of either an advanced chiefdom or a centralized state which has developed effective institutions of communal labor mobilization. It is true that Haiti has been a nation-state with a centralized government from the earliest days of the Republic. But the government has been, throughout its history, conspicuously inefficient in the mobilization of communal labor for communal ends. The most glorious exception--Henry Christophe--mobilized his subjects, not for the building of hillside bench terraces, but for the construction of an enormous mountain Citadel, a not unreasonable choice in view

of the then imminent danger of a reinvasion by the recently ejected French, and the remoteness of the problem of soil erosion in a country that was then still heavily forested and underpopulated. By the time soil erosion has become a problem, Haitian governmental institutions had long since lost most vestiges of effective labor-mobilizing control over the rural population. It is not unfair to point out that most recent Haitian governments have been much more skillful in the organization of extraction than in the organization of production. But the important point here is that the absence of the impressive terrace works that have characterized certain other agrarian cultures is more a reflection of the state of the local institutional superstructure than of the culture of the peasants.

But what of the simpler types of protective devices which less complex tribal societies have hit upon in the course of their own agrarian development? Why do so many Haitian peasant communities give the appearance of taking no precautions against soil erosion? A rather same answer would be to point out that there are at least a few observed cases of peasant communities some of whose members erect different types of vegetal barriers on steeper slopes in hopes of slowing down at least some of the soil loss. And in some communities which I have visited, these devices were reported to be longstanding traditions in the community, rather than innovations introduced by an agronomist.

But such cultural devices constitute feeble exceptions in an agrarian system that is frankly characterized by the general absence of soil protecting measures in physical environments which appear to cry out for such measures. With respect to this, it must be pointed out that the major weapon in the conservation regime of most highland horticulturalists has been the maintaining of a reasonably lengthy fallow period which permits regrowth of secondary vegetation and the concomitant regeneration of the soil. But population growth has been found, wherever it occurs, to wreak havoc on highland horticultural systems principally through a forced shortening of the fallow period. Rather than letting the land rest 12 or 15 years, cultivators may be forced to return to the plot after only one or two years of brief pause--during which period they may even have been forced to graze their animals on the plot, thus impeding the growth of even low brush vegetation. This is the situation which characterizes perhaps most of rural Haiti. The current population density creates a pressure on land that effectively precludes the application of necessary fallowing practices. The result has been widespread destruction of even secondary forest environments, and their replacement in many regions by treeless, brushless highland savannas, now forever beyond the reach of spontaneous forest regeneration even if by some miracle the land were to be left untouched. In short once again we find that it is an exogenous variable--population pressure--rather than culture which bears the causal brunt in the process of environmental degradation.

But population pressure has exerted its environmentally destructive impact via another route as well. The response of most Haitian peasants has been to shorten their fallow. But the response of a growing number has been to give up the entire hopeless endeavour and seek their fortune in Port-au-Prince or other smaller towns. But this has created market for lumber and charcoal where presumably such markets did not exist before. It should be pointed out that the exportation of lumber was one of the major sources of governmental revenue during parts of the nineteenth century and several documents allude to the existence of private lumber companies that had arisen to meet this market. But in recent decades the demand has focused in the urban areas, combining with the simultaneous demand for charcoal. These forces, which from an environmental point of view constitute negative pressures, from the peasant's point of view constitutes a new economic opportunity to generate cash from a product formerly devoid of commercial value. The manner in which the peasants have leapt to fill this growing demand has already been the subject of several professional reports.



In filling this demand, the Haitian peasant has been neither more nor less vigorous than his counterparts across the Dominican border. And yet there exist dramatic ecological difference between the two sides of the border. During my research in the mountains south of the border town of Belladere, I was once again impressed by the contrast between the luxuriant pine forest visible on the Dominican side and the barren, yellow savannas of the Haitian side. This contrast is best understood, not as a product of Dominican Haitian cultural differences, but of differences in governmental institutions. For nearly two decades the Dominican government has vigorously enforced stringent forestry legislation imposing heavy penalties on the cutting of trees, even trees that are on one's own land. The rural agents of the Haitian forestry service, in contrast, have adopted a policy, not of curtailing, but of simply cashing in on, the cutting of trees by charging fees to peasants or professional lumber merchants. Once again, sound comparative analysis would be forced to explain contrasts in Haitian and Dominican ecology, less in terms of differences between the respective cultures than in terms of contrasts between their respective governments.

9.3 Culture and Tree Planting

Is the only interaction between the peasant and trees one of destruction? Do the traditional lifeways of Haiti make no allowance for the planting of any trees by the peasant to replace those that are cut down? Can this not be seen as a lacuna in Haitian peasant culture?

No observer of traditional Haitian life has ever recorded a systematic custom of replacing trees that have been purposely cut for one reason or another. The tree cutting of the Haitian peasant is truly extractive, and the concept of sustained yield harvesting is totally alien to his traditional lifeways. But the same is true of virtually every other agrarian group that has depended on the cutting of trees for land clearing purposes. The regeneration that successfully occurs on the former garden plots of many tropical horticulturists is always first and foremost a product of the spontaneous regrowth of secondary cover, not of deliberate tree planting on the part of the cultivators. The principal difference is that in some settings land is abundant enough to permit long fallows, where in other regions such as Haiti demography and land pressure conspire to eliminate the practice of systematic, lengthy fallow.

There have, however, been certain types of tree planting in traditional rural Haiti. The most important type, especially prevalent in the mountain areas, has been the custom of surrounding one's house and courtyard (lakou) with an orchard and/or coffee grove, whose principal functions, aside from the harvesting of the fruits, have been the provision of shade and the sheltering of the house from the wind.

Two features of this custom are important. The first is its smallness of scale. The practice consists of planting one or two trees of several varieties. It has nothing to do, either in scale or layout, with the orchard-planting behavior envisioned by some soil conservation specialists. Unfortunately, when pre-project questioning is done of the peasants concerning "what trees would you like to plant," the project technician posing the question is thinking in terms of intercropped orchards, but the peasant is in all likelihood thinking in terms of a small number of trees to supplement those which he has around his house.

Secondly this traditional tree planting involves only fruit trees. The concept of planting a wood tree is totally alien to the traditional practices of the peasant. Indeed some peasants consider the practice of planting wood trees such as bwa blan and bwa plé as the most revolutionary aspect of the reforestation projects

with which they are familiar. In traditional life, a wood tree is not something you planté; it is something that lève pou kò-là (grows by itself). In short projects which attempt to introduce systematic tree planting on a large scale, especially the planting of wood trees, are undertaking something for which there is no pre-existing cultural precedent in rural Haiti.

#### 9.4 The Short-Term Future: Investment for Profits

Soil conservation projects presuppose a concern for the future. To what degree do rural Haitian value systems and cultural orientations equip their bearers to engage in future oriented behaviors. I will discuss this issue by distinguishing among the short-term future, the intermediate future, and the distant future.

In terms of the short-term future, the Haitian peasant manifests an entrepreneurial spirit that has few parallels among his counterparts in other impoverished rural settings of the Americas. Most first-hand observers would agree in characterizing Haitian peasants as cash-croppers par-excellence, willing to plant for the market when there are realistic hopes of profits to be made. In addition, their wives have the distinction of being, as a group, the most active--and, for analysts, probably the most respected and studied--marketwomen in the Western hemisphere, willing to combine small amounts of capital with enormous amounts of labor in hopes of making a small cash profit.

But the investment behaviors of the peasant household go beyond the short-term undertakings that terminate at the end of a cropping cycle or a marketing venture. In addition there exist impressive patterns of the saurization for future land purchase which take the form principally of sayings in livestock. Popular stereotype repeats the story of the young peasant who sells some eggs to buy small chickens, sells the chickens to buy a goat, sells the goats to buy a pig, sells the pigs to buy a cow, and finally--as the grand payoff--sells the cow to purchase a plot of ground. The frequency of some variant of this process indicates clearly the existence of an effective and practical future orientation in the behavior of the Haitian peasant.

But the catch, from the point of view of soil conservation projects, is that the end result must generally entail some sort of tangible cash-generating payoff. If soil conservation schemes have on occasion failed to excite peasant communities, the fault lies not with an absence of concern for the future in the orientation of the peasant, but with the absence of realistic, convincingly presented material payoffs in the design of the project.

As has already been stated, and as will be restated in the recommendations section of the report, this is by far the most important determinant of the success or failure of soil conservation projects. Program design must emphasize the cash payoffs that will come from trees, but must first have explored different alternatives to produce an agroforestation model which, both on paper and "on the ground", will produce higher profits for the peasant cultivator. With few exceptions, projects up till now have neither put together an economically viable agro-forestation micro-model, nor have they been particularly successful in convincing the peasant as to the benefits to be derived from the project's implementation. Many have simply droned on about the need to protect one's soil.

9.5 The Intermediate Future: Preparation for Old Age and Death

Another anthropologically impressive element in Haitian peasant culture is the preparation that is given for old age and death. As they enter their fifties and their energies begin to decline, peasants with at least some means will begin making preparations for a gradual withdrawal from the agricultural cycle and for the spending of an old age in which they are free from the need for heavy field labor and are covered in terms of their food, clothing, and illness needs. In addition to giving out pre-inheritance land

to his children (who will then be obliged to support him), the peasant will also try to retain at least some land to be worked by share-croppers, thus insuring himself of direct stakes in as many gardens as possible, in addition to receiving regular contributions from his children.

But probably the most impressive--and, for outsiders, most bizarre--element of the old-age preparation of the Haitian peasant is to be found in the elaborate and costly preparations which are made for death. The salient element in this preparation will be the construction of an expensive tomb, the average one costing some three or four hundred dollars, but more elaborate ones costing up to several thousand dollars. The hidden economic rationale behind this apparently "irrational" investment--the land-circulating function carried out by the rural Haitian mortuary complex--falls beyond the scope of the present discussion. What is important here is the existence of a value system which emphasizes preparation not only for the short-range objectives mentioned earlier, but for substantially more delayed objectives as well.

In the course of this research I have heard experienced field agents exhort peasants to plant trees as a preparation for their old age. In fact the possession of a private woodlot would make perfect sense in terms of the current scheme of things. The income generated from the trees might not only free a peasant from the need to sell land in some future crisis; they would also assure him a steady cash income, obtainable with a minimum of labor, in his old age. As one technician exhorted: Planté pye bwa, mon chè; lè ou antré nan grandet, oua vann bwa, oua hwé bouyon. Pyé bwa, sé tankou youn chek li yé. Plant trees, my friend. When you start getting old, you'll sell the wood and you'll be drinking bouillon. Trees are like a monthly check.

#### 9.6 The Long-Term Future: Concern for Unborn Generations

The payoffs of soil conservation projects, particularly the reforestation component, are frequently phrased in terms of the welfare of future generations of Haitians. Is this future orientation compatible with the thrust of Haitian peasant culture?

In the first place, it must be remembered that as is true of most aspects of human culture such concern with the distant future, especially the future that will continue after one is dead, is the product of training from parents. But the parents of the present day generation of Haitians have had neither the skills nor,



perhaps as a consequence, the concern to prevent the destruction of the nation's trees and the erosion of the island's soil. There is no realistic basis for expecting the present generation of Haitians to manifest a spontaneous ecological concern vis-a-vis the environment in which their own children or grandchildren will have to live.

Secondly even in cross-cultural perspective such concern is rare, especially when it entails uncomfortable alterations in one's own behavior. One need only look to the behavior of the man in the street of industrialized nations in the face of the petroleum crisis--increased consumption, hoarding, and myopic, self-serving denials that the crisis is genuine--to exempt the Haitian peasant from cultural criticism on the grounds of ecological shortsightedness.

The major cultural imperative governing Haitian peasant parents with regard to their children is that of leaving them land. So strong is this imperative that a great deal of the feverish land-transacting which characterizes economic life in most parts of rural Haiti should be understood more as an attempt to secure land to leave to one's children than to augment one's own immediate personal income. Both motivations are present, but the frequency with which one hears the theme achté té pou pitit-yo ka lèvé-jwenn ("buying land so that children will have something to inherit") suggests the primacy of the former.

This norm is sustained by patterns of very strong social pressure exerted, not only by the children themselves, but also by neighbors who keep a keen lookout on the inheritance status of each other's children. For the obligation to give land begins not only at one's death, but when one's children--especially one's male children--are in their late teens and will begin clamoring for land on which to grow gardens of their own. That is, the parent who scrambles to acquire land may be obeying the demands of a cultural imperative, but it is an imperative supported by the threat of very real and embarrassing negative social sanctions. It is effective enough to motivate maneuvering for land acquisition.

But in its present functioning, the norm to leave land appears to focus more on the quantity than on the quality of the land. It is here that simple educational messages could inject a new dimension involving trees. Projects could promulgate the theme that the mountain parent who leaves his child half a carreau of forested land is leaving a more valuable patrimony than the parent who leaves a child a full carreau of denuded, eroded land. Children should be encouraged to enquire of their parents as to the provisions that are being made to provide them with trees as part of their patrimony. The theme of trees will be the unusual component of these educational messages. But the theme of filial expectations of parents is in perfect harmony with expectations that are currently central elements in the value system of Haitian peasants.

The preceding pages have undertaken a brief discussion of certain aspects of Haitian culture as it relates to the success or failure of soil conservation projects. The basic thrust of the discussion has been optimistic as to the capacity of Haitian peasant culture to support soil conservation programs. I have argued that the destruction of the environment has come about not principally as a result of Haitian peasant culture, but as a result of the combined interaction of environmental, economic, institutional and political variables. Likewise the failure of projects to succeed is due less to cultural factors than to a failure of the projects to present convincing material payoffs. If this need for material payoffs is to be considered a "cultural weakness", then American culture would have to be judged as extremely weak as well.

The theme of material payoffs should be at the center of projects. But in addition I have suggested additional ancillary messages and themes which should form part of the educational component of soil conservation programs. The argument has been,

in effect, that the success of soil conservation projects depends, not on changes in Haitian peasant culture, but rather in positive changes in the cost/benefit calculus that surrounds the tree planting economy. If peasant tree planting can be presented in a profitable fashion--and this is now technically feasible--the profit motive that is close to the core of Haitian peasant culture will at last find an outlet that restores, instead of destroys, the Haitian environment. But the profit motive itself, as well as most other important features of Haitian peasant culture, should be viewed, not as detriments, but as assets.