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# Between the traditional and the capitalist modes of farming



Photo: Joost Dessen

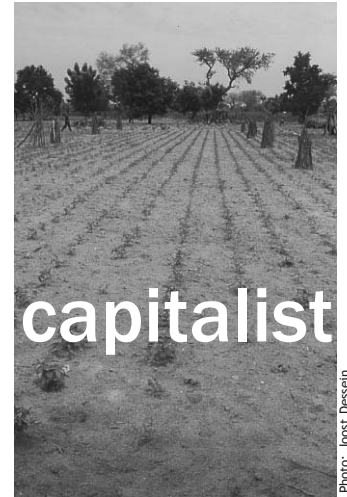


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This article describes the different forms of farming within the Birifor ethnic group in north-western Ghana. On the one hand the Birifor farmers operating within the 'capitalist mode' aim for maximisation of their production output. On the other, the majority of traditional farmers identify farming as 'movements through farmlands and fields' in their quest to become an 'excellent farmer'. Alongside these two categories there is a third category, mainly composed of young farmers, who are constantly shifting between different farming attitudes. Agricultural extension work seems to be sharpening the boundaries between these social groups.

In the first half of the 20th century, the Birifor migrated from Burkina Faso to the vast savannahs of north-western Ghana, south of the regional capital Wa. The Birifor live in extended families in compound houses. The compound is headed by the landlord, in most cases the oldest man of the family group. Unlike several other population groups in the region, who have converted to Islam and Christianity, the Birifor south of Wa have largely stuck to their traditional religion and beliefs.

## Traditional farming

Birifor agricultural practice is principally based on a bush-fallow subsistence farming method. Using the hoe they cultivate mainly millet, sorghum and yams, as well as beans, groundnuts,

rice and maize. Most recently, soybeans, cashew and cotton have been introduced on a small scale. The average Birifor farmer has several cattle, mainly used in marriage-transactions. Other domestic animals include goats, poultry (mainly chickens and guinea-fowl), pigs and sheep.

The 'dance of the farmer' is a special ritual dance performed during the funeral of someone referred to as an 'excellent farmer'. Before sending the deceased to the realm of the ancestors, the community honours him by dramatising his successes in farming in this world. It requires a lifetime of effort to become an excellent farmer, which indicates the central importance of farming within traditional Birifor society. The status of excellent farmer is not

conferred on an individual at a particular time of his life or at a particular age. This status can only be achieved through a gradual process of recognition within the society, based on social and cultural mobility rather than on production aspects.

fields' on which millet and sorghum are intercropped each year with groundnuts or cowpeas. These fields are owned by and worked on by all members of the compound house. Harvests from these fields tend to serve the basic nutritional needs of the whole compound community. Culturally, these home-fields have a female connotation. Not only are they often cultivated by women and their young children; they also represent symbolic feminine attributes. These fields are cultivated on a regular and cyclical basis, and do not have to be cleared, unlike other fields that are left fallow. Moreover, the crops cultivated on them are predictable in yield, and provide food security for the household members

The 'bush-fields' lie behind the home-fields and the furthest of them may be located several hours' walking distance away from the compound. These are fields which men have claimed from the bush or the fallow lands, and represent their success in increasing the acreage of their farmland. Culturally, they are predominantly fields with masculine gender attributes, and yams are the most common crop. The farmer has to make an annual decision as to which fields to leave fallow, which ones he should cultivate and which portion of the farm he should extend.

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## Home-fields and bush-fields

Each of the compound houses is surrounded by a number of 'home-

## Land: source of identity

Besides the differences in gender, there is also an age-based difference between the various cultivated fields. The bush-fields closest to the homestead are usually cultivated by young men who are



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aspiring to become excellent farmers, while the furthest bush-fields are exclusively farmed by the elders. One could say that, for the Birifor, farming involves a lifelong process of development. A boy will begin his farming career from the home-fields and gradually grow into maturity by farming the bush-fields. In his old age, he tends to occupy the most remote parts of the bush field as his private domain. Here the farmer would seem to have reached his highest status of excellent farmer.

At the end of his life, the farmer returns to the compound where he will eventually die. To mark the end of his life cycle on earth, a figure, which represents him as an ancestor, is carved in the form of a forked stick. This is placed in the most female part of the house or, more precisely, in the room of the first wife of the acting landlord at the time of his death.

In this way, in traditional Birifor farming there is a flow of movements at several levels: from home-field to bush-field, from boyhood to excellent farmer, from femininity to masculinity, and from collectivity to individuality. This flow tallies with the Birifor worldview, which is centred around the land as a 'regenerative source of life'. To the Birifor, the fields are not merely soils to be tended, but represent the essential link between the land and the farmer, upon which the farmer defines his identity.

### Capitalist farming

Among the Birifor today one also finds, alongside the traditional mode, a more capitalist mode of farming. Although the number of such entrepreneurial farmers is rather small, their share in



*In traditional farming the man aims to become an 'excellent farmer', which implies a gradual process of recognition based on social bonds and the movements on the land, rather than mere productive aspects.*

the total agricultural production is definitely not negligible. In this farming system the land is parcelled out to individual farmers and viewed as a factor sustaining an agricultural system. In other words, land is allotted, bought or sold and turned into personal property. For the capitalist farmer, farming is neither a temporary domestication of the land nor a lifetime movement between fields. The ultimate objective of farming changes from 'striving for the status of excellent farmer' to the desire to be 'recognised as an entrepreneur'. The entrepreneur focuses on the production of cash crops such as cotton, soybean, cashew and maize mainly for regional, national and international markets.

The typical entrepreneur farmer, of Birifor origin or of other ethnic groups, is found in urban settings, like for example Wa, Jirapa, Nandom, Lawra and Tumu. He usually lives with his nuclear family in a square brick house roofed with iron sheets. The family enjoys modern facilities, such as electricity and modern education. In most cases, the entrepreneur is a convert to Christianity or Islam, and leads a public life that does not link him directly with the traditional Birifor farmers. In the urban centres the Birifor are depicted socially as backward, conservative and lazy. Hence, most Birifor entrepreneur farmers associate themselves with the Dagaaba tribal group, who are more eager to engage in modern activities and social life.

### Eclectic farmers

In practice, entrepreneurial farmers often cultivate fields in small villages with heavy equipment. Some Birifor farmers, especially young farmers, feel attracted to these new practices, and try to shift from the traditional to the capitalist mode. They can be seen as 'eclectics', who have a foot in both practices in their efforts to become entrepreneur farmers.

Many of these eclectic farmers occupy special positions within their societies: for example a retired government employee coming back to the village, or the cook of the Catholic mission who lives with his nuclear family. Their school education and religious conversion contribute to their more marginal position within their own com-



*The widows of the deceased traditional farmer mourn around the forked stick, which represents him. This 'second funeral' can take place several months or years after his physical death.*

munity. This also gives them a degree of freedom, and allows them to experiment with more risk-bearing activities, such as new cultivation techniques and using capital from the local credit unions. On the other hand, they feel the need to maintain bonds with their web of social relations. This forces them to behave in more traditional ways and ensures that they become excellent farmers in the Birifor way.

Yet, it is the readiness of eclectic farmers to try new innovations which makes the capitalist farmers living in the urban centres want to delegate part of their farming activities to them. In the Wa area, Plantations Development Ltd. and Ghana Cotton Board, both cotton companies, are most active in this regard. This attitude also makes the eclectic farmers a target-group for the government agricultural extension officers, to engage them as 'contact farmers'.

### Seasonal labour migration

Birifor farming is thus neither static nor unchanging. On the contrary, in traditional farming the channels for experimenting with innovations, for taking up challenges, and for the transfer of knowledge are inherent in the development process of the farmer into a fully-fledged excellent farmer.

Another indication of a changing society is the seasonal labour migration to the cocoa plantations around Kumasi, the southern part of the country. Many Birifor young men undertake this, although the work is extremely hard and scarcely rewarding. During such migrations, status-bearing symbolic objects such as watches and small portable radios are earned and transported back home. Many young men who engage in the seasonal migration are not primarily motivated by the desire to become rich. The significance of the migration can be seen as a non-



*Selected harvest, which will be used during rituals or as seed for the upcoming cropping season.*

institutionalised form of 'rite of passage' from juvenile to adult, comparable to a stay in the wilderness where the social rules of the community are no longer operating. After some months the young man returns with renewed vital force.

The agriculture practised in the south is technically much more advanced than the traditional hoe farming of the farmers south of Wa. The traditional Birifor farmers do not consider these farming practices as real farming activities, however. Analogous to the temporary conquest of the bush-fields of the elderly Birifor farmer, they are considered 'wild' activities, which can only be temporarily domesticated and incorporated into the male sphere of activities. In terms of status and honour, however, they contribute only minimally to the status of an excellent farmer. In contrast to the entrepreneurial farmer, who picks up the new technologies and incorporates them permanently in his farming practices, the traditional farmer leaves the innovations acquired during seasonal migration behind after his return to the compound.

### Agricultural extension

In this rural context, the aim of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture and its extension staff is to reshape the traditional mode of farming into a more capitalist one. In their extension work they explain to the traditional Birifor farmers that using new techniques, such as high yielding varieties, will lead to increased production. It is automatically assumed that this, in turn, will open up the path towards social promotion.

Moreover, the 'training and visit' method applied in extension assumes that the eclectic farmers are the best

candidates for training as contact farmers, and for acting as the communication link between the extension officers and the rest of the Birifor farmers. It is expected that knowledge about modern farming transmitted to these contact farmers will automatically influence the core of the traditional mode. At the

same time one might wonder whether, by choosing culturally marginal figures within the society as contact farmers, the new farming practices will be considered worth adopting by the large group of traditional farmers.

The Ministry of Food and Agriculture, however, puts the blame for the apparent ineffectiveness of their activities on the traditional farmers. Their supposed conservatism and backwardness are seen as impediments to the transfer of knowledge between different social categories.

### The way forward?

Agricultural extension work within Birifor society not only tends to make the dichotomy that exists between the two modes of farming apparent, but it also seems to inadvertently sharpen the



*Instead of working through trained contact farmers, extension services could become more effective by getting in touch directly with the traditional farmers, and build on their experiences, strategies and experimental attitude.*

mental and social boundaries between these different social categories. It would be good if the extension work were critically reviewed on the basis of the outcome of this research on the various farming modes.

In the first place, one could say that it is not the modern technology itself which does not fit in with traditional farming, but rather the concepts behind the production-oriented mode of farming. Traditional farmers are not primarily driven by the craving for material production as a condition for social promotion. As we have seen, the farmer's desire to become an excellent farmer is a central element in their actions. This has to be fulfilled by the creation of social bonds and the movements on the land. In this system, modern agricultural technology seems to be acceptable as long as it is applied outside the indigenous cultural context.

Secondly, the teacher-student model of transferring knowledge is alien to Birifor society and has resulted in a one-sided mode of communication. It is not my intention here to develop an alternative mode of communication as far as extension is concerned. But it would seem to be advisable to recast the extension paradigm from an exclusively uni-directional transfer of knowledge, towards a more brokerage oriented paradigm. In that way the extension officer might become a facilitator rather than a service desk. Because each mode is based on different postulates, it is essential to understand both traditional and capitalist Birifor agriculture and culture in their own terms.

Finally it would be good to review the way in which contact farmers are chosen for training. By getting in touch directly with the traditional farmers, and building on their experiences, cos-movision, perceived needs and experimental attitude, the agricultural extension work could become far more effective.

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