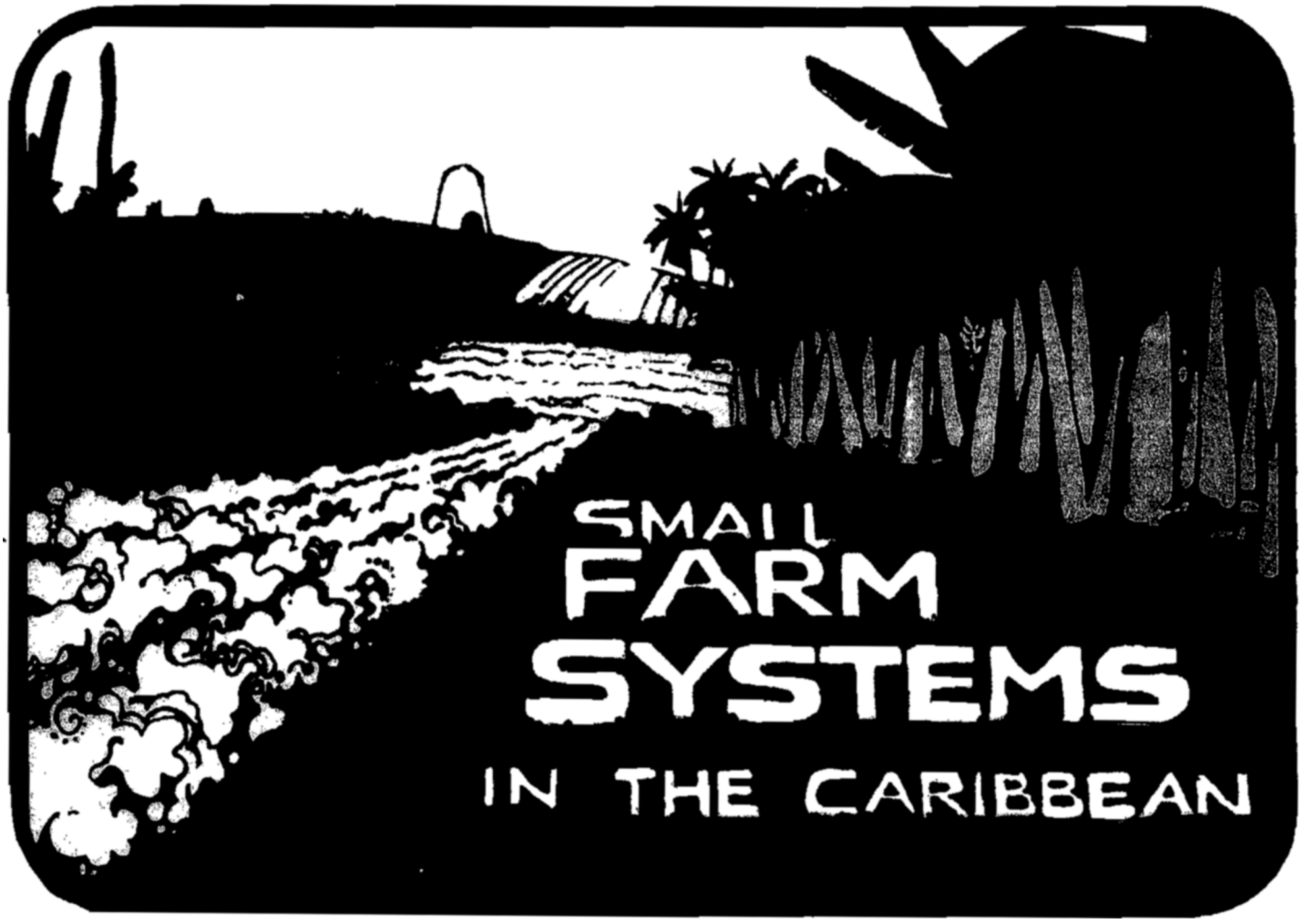
CARIBBEAN FOOD CROPS SOCIETY

Sociedad Caribeña de Cultivos Alimenticios
Association Caraïbe des Plantes Alimentaires

Vol. XX

PROCEEDINGS

OF THE 20th ANNUAL MEETING – ST. CROIX, U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS – OCTOBER 21-26, 1984



Published by
THE EASTERN CARIBBEAN CENTER, COLLEGE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS *and* THE CARIBBEAN FOOD CROPS SOCIETY

Social Impediments to the Cultivation of Trees in Jamaica

John H. Rashford
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
The College of Charleston
Chatleston, SC 29424

Small farmers in Jamaica have a distinct attitude toward the cultivation of trees in contrast to the growing of herbs, vines and shrubs. Their attitude toward trees is directly related to property relations as these are embodied in different forms of control over land. It is well-known that tenant cultivators do nor in general plant or "save" trees. This is a significant fact. A decision not to grow trees eliminates many useful plants from cultivation irrespective of their actual domestic and commercial value. The full consequences of this is, of course, dependent on the social importance of trees to Jamaicans. This paper seeks to show the importance of trees to Jamaicans and to indicate the social reasons why small farmers choose not to plant them and to destroy wild seedlings that spring up in their fields.

Small farmers in Jamaica have a distinct attitude toward the cultivation of trees in contrast to the growing of herbs, vines, and shrubs. Their attitude toward trees is directly related to property relations as these are embodied in different forms of control over land. It is well-known that tenant cultivators tend not to "save" or plant trees. This is a significant fact. A decision not to grow trees eliminates many useful plants from cultivation irrespective of their actual domestic and commercial value. The full consequence of this is, of course, dependent on the overall importance of trees to Jamaicans. This paper argues that trees are of great importance to Jamaicans and indicates the social reasons why small farmers choose not to plant them and to destroy wild seedlings that spring up in their fields.

Many of the most useful trees of the tropical world are now to be found growing throughout the settled areas of the island. These native and exotic trees contribute to the wide range of vegetable products available to Jamaicans and provide many of the most valuable commodities for the national market and for export. They are a source of food, spice, medicine, fuel, animal feed and fiber. They provide lumber for making boats, dwellings, furniture and fence posts; they are grown and protected for their shade and beauty. Trees play an important part in the traditional religious beliefs of Jamaicans and they are an element of the island's folk culture as expressed through sayings, phrases, riddles and proverbs.

To fully understand the importance of trees we must consider them in the context of intercropping, growing of two or more crops together in the same field, which is the traditional practice of many Jamacian farmers. The value of intercropping is that it simultaneously achieves three essential objectives. The first objective is to produce, on as continuous a basis as possible, a diversity of products for household use, for gift-giving and for sale by growing different species and varieties of wild and domesticated vines, herbs, shrubs and trees. The second objective is to accomplish this production in the most efficient way with respect to labor, time, money and the intensive use of available resources. The third objective is, by means of the interplanting as an efficient system of cultivation, to achieve a relatively independent way of life, free from exploitative relations with estates and small farmers, and free from dependence on charity and state welfare.

Growing trees is an essential part of a fully developed system of intercropping: the ultimate result of trees intercropped with other forms of growing plants is the creation of what the agricultural census (1973, p.8) identifies as a "food forest."

> *This was the definition given to cases where a canopy of tall economic trees existed (breadfruit, star-apples, mango, avocado, pear, etc.) in association, with or without a lower canopy of cocoa, coffee, citrus and other small trees and shrubs and sometimes a third layer of herbaceous crops in spaces where the light permits such as kale or calaloo.*

"Food forest" is what others have identified as "a harvestable forest" (Geertz, 1971), "artificial woodlands" (Adams, 1971, pp. 5-7), "polyculture," "mixed planting" (Clarke, 1974, p. 58), "tropical jungle garden" (*Daily News*, July 28, 1977), and "a tangle of productive vegetation" (Money, 1972, p. 10). By adding to the diversity of plants cultivated, trees make an essential contribution to the efficient production of a variety of products on as continuous a basis as possible. Farmers view this as a necessary component of an independent life.

In studies of small farming in Jamaica it has long been recognized that the cultivation of trees is a symbol of land ownership and security of tenure. Their existence in yards and fields reflect a concern aimed at investing for a lifetime and for the benefit of succeeding generations. Growing trees reveal the desire farmers have to be free from want, charity and dependence on exploitative relationships. Tree cropping reflects their efforts to plan for the future and their concern with old age and with a reduced capacity for hard physical work (Edwards, 1961, pp. 105-9). In their youth, farmers tend young trees which require care but provide no fruits. In their old age, farmers expect to be supported by their trees with little or no outlay of labor. This was, in fact, exactly what happened. The labor associated with trees is the harvesting of fruits and in the districts I studied in eastern Jamaica, "higglers" (subsistence merchants) were responsible for providing their own pickers. On several occasions I saw farmers paid for crops that they had not themselves harvested.

Given the importance of trees, why would farmers choose not to plant them and to destroy wild seedlings that spring up in their field? One very important answer to this question is tenancy.

There are primarily two kinds of small cultivators in Jamaica, tenants and proprietors. They share in common the control over small areas of land cultivated for household use and for sale. They differ, however, in the form of control they exercise over land and

the way in which this influences their decisions to cultivate vines, herbs, shrubs and trees. Proprietors grow trees and most tenants do not. Tenancy is an underlying cause of great insecurity in farming. The uncertainty of cultivating trees on rented land is simply the possibility that one will be able to harvest and enjoy the fruits of one's labor. Tree cropping is a major investment, both in terms of the period of time before the trees become productive (and have to be "carried"), and the period of time over which they remain productive. The cultivation of trees indicates planning for a lifetime. After years of labor, and just at the point of benefiting, access to the land and all that has been invested in it might cease.

To illustrate some of the points I have mentioned so far, I would like to present the perspective of two tenants on a 1,700-acre estate in eastern Jamaica and their attitude toward wild pimento seedlings that spring up in their rented fields. The pimento tree produces a crop of great value to small farmers in Jamaica.

Mr. Mac's cultivation, largely for household use, was primarily devoted to root crops and included some bananas, sugarcane and beans. Scattered through the field were coconut trees planted by the estate, three pimento trees, a grapefruit tree, a jackfruit tree, a mango tree and a clump of bamboo. The pimento trees were the result of seedlings that sprang up in Mr. Mac's field and were saved. The first year they bore a good crop; Mr. Mac harvested four pounds. He said the estate did not trouble him because the trees were young. During the second season he had already collected eight pounds when he was stopped by the estate. "Sake of dat," he said, "whenever me see dem (the wild pimento seedlings) me chop dem down." For Mr. Mac, the pimento tree was transformed from a valuable economic crop plant to a weed. As he explained, "Me have plenty young tree but me no care dem again; me no worry wid dem again."

Unlike Mr. Mac who is more typical of other tenants, Mr. Ben is unique in being the only tenant to consistently plant and protect fruit trees on rented land. Wise, generous and hard-working, he is always described as "de boss of farming." One of his early schoolmates describes him as "a tough working man." Whenever I asked people of the district about farming, I was always instructed to talk to Mr. Ben; everyone described him as "a real farmer," one who studied farming and planted everything. Mr. Ben did not allow his position as a tenant to prevent him from engaging in the most productive farming practices, and for Mr. Ben this definitely included the planting, saving and transplanting of trees. Mr. Ben was determined to put farming first by farming productively and he was willing to grow trees despite the conflict with the estate that would result from his effort to harvest the fruits of his own labor. Here, in his own words, Mr. Ben tells of one episode in his ongoing confrontation with the estate over the fruits of pimento trees that he had saved. When I asked him if he had harvested pimento from the trees he cared for, he said:

> *Fe years. Nuff nuff years. All de property a run jostle wid me fe come bruck dem. But me got better brain more dan dem. All me deh ya with me mule load of pimento out de me two hampa black, Buckley the ranger man come deh, 'Mr. Benny yuh reap pimento?' I say yes! (Me a man no fraid or fear yuh know; me a dangerous worker). And him a go round, him a go round and da look, look, look pon dem. And dat was one day. About three or four days after dat the two hampa black again and me deh pon top of de mule. Burger him come now (a de pimento dem a watch yuh know), hear Burger to me, 'But Mr. Benny, yuh a reap pimento.' And me seh yes, but (hear the lie me go tell him now), me seh but eh me leave pimento tree here Saturday (because me no come a bush Sunday day) and when me come Monday morning me see man bruck pimento all 'bout all 'bout. But no man no bruck none, a lie me a tell* (laughter) *All right. Him seh . . . here him to me (now yuh know pimento carry strong smell, so him smell it. Dat time the two hampa load and me cover dem down with plastic). Hear him to me 'All now yuh have pimento in deh.' Me seh yes! See me two hampa black ya. Me two hampa black, because me no care a me plant dem. See pimento pon de tree deh; see pimento deh. From now till next week me a bruck dem.*

In this paper (particularly in my remarks concerning Mr. Mac and Mr. Ben), I have tried to show that trees are important to Jamaicans and to indicate the social reasons why small farmers choose not to plant them and to destroy wild seedlings (like the pimento) that spring up in their field. In our effort to develop farming in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean, we need to know the ideal physical requirements for the most successful cultivation of plants, but we must also understand the social relationships within which decisions are made to grow or not to grow certain plants. It is the social relationship between people that transforms the pimento from a valuable economic crop to a weed. Given their usefulness, it is significant when farmers choose not to cultivate trees and to destroy wild seedlings. Although this is a great loss to farmers as well as consumers, it is a greater loss to the society as a whole. In a mountainous country like Jamaica, anything that stops farmers from growing trees becomes a contributing factor to the damage done by erosion.

References

1. Adams, Dennis C. 1971(a). The blue majoe and other bush, an introduction to plant life in Jamaica. McGraw-Hill Far Eastern Publishers, Ltd.
2. Agriculture Census Unit, Department of Statistics. 1973. Census of agriculture 1968-69, Jamaica. Kingston, Jamaica: Govt. Dept. of Statistics.
3. Clarke, Colin. 1974. Jamaica in maps. London: University of London Press.
4. Daily News. 1976 (July 28). Tropical jungle garden.
5. Edwards, David. 1961. An economic study of small farming in Jamaica. Mona, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research.
6. Geertz, Clifford. 1971. Agricultural involution. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
7. Money, E.C. 1972. Patterns of settlement. London: Evan Brothers Ltd.