

“We Work Hard”: Customary Imperatives of the Diola Work Regime in the Context of Environmental and Economic Change

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Abstract: Hard work is a core value among Diola rice cultivators in Guinea-Bissau. This essay explores Diola attitudes toward work in the context of recent changes in their natural and social environment. It asks why Diola maintain a particular work regime even when they admit that it is not actually working *for* them. The intrinsic characteristics of wet rice cultivation, the tightly woven web of social relations involved in Diola agricultural practices, and the religious ideals with which these practices are linked reinforce one another and serve as powerful drivers of continuity. But given the decreasing viability of wet rice cultivation in this region, Diola work is increasingly detached from the products it is meant to generate. Because Diola farmers remain committed to these work practices in the face of their acknowledged inability to meet subsistence needs, Diola work has become a “paradox of custom.”

Introduction

Diola villagers in northwestern Guinea-Bissau have long been recognized for their capacity to grow rice in their landscape of tangled mangroves and thick oil palm forests.¹ Archaeological evidence suggests that Diola have been practicing their trademark wet rice cultivation techniques in this region for at least a thousand years (Linares 1981). Diola survival and

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success—despite periodic droughts and other environmental hazards, as well as myriad social and political upheavals—are a testament to both their complex and intricate system of agricultural knowledge (Carney 2001) and their commitment to hard work. But Diola villagers are on the frontlines of global climate change. Within the past thirty years declining rainfall, desertification, and widespread erosion in northern Guinea-Bissau have increasingly challenged Diola villagers' ability to provision themselves through the wet rice cultivation practices that have long defined them as a people. The effects of these ecological shifts are exacerbated by increased youth migration—and hence the loss of a vital source of agricultural labor—as well as national political instability, the increasing demands of a cash economy, and a decline in overall economic security.

By the time I arrived in northwest Guinea-Bissau in 2001, most of the Diola villagers' granaries were empty. Many residents regularly told me, "We used to be able to do this," referring to the complex technical, social, and ritual system through which Diola produce, consume, and revere rice. "Now we cannot." But despite their own acknowledgment of profound transformations that impinge upon their ability to produce their staple crop, the vast majority of Diola villagers continue to expend most of their efforts working in the parched rice paddies and they discourage—and sometimes punish—those who seek alternative productive activities. The question that motivates this essay is: why do Diola villagers in Guinea-Bissau uphold such strict adherence to their notion of work, even—or perhaps especially—when they become aware of ways to lessen the arduous nature of that work, or when they admit that their work is not actually working for them?

Although the topic of climate change is receiving intensified attention from scholars, policymakers, and journalists, relatively little is known about its impact on the cultures and consciousnesses of the agrarian populations most vulnerable to its effects. This article explores one such group's responses to the changes—environmental and other—that challenge its long-standing beliefs and practices. I explain why Diola see their agricultural work not simply as a means of sustenance, but also as integrally tied to their conceptions of personhood, social relations, ritual obligations, and collective cultural identity.

One of the central characteristics of Diola rice cultivation is the performance of arduous manual labor—"hard work." This article elucidates the significance of "hard work" as a cultural trait independent of actual productivity. But it also considers the consequences of Diola villagers' adherence to these practices given current environmental and social conditions. Because Diola preserve a commitment to an exacting work regime in the face of its acknowledged inability to meet basic subsistence needs, and discipline individuals who seek alternate productive activities, I argue that Diola work is becoming increasingly detached from its provisioning purposes. The idiom of "hard work" and the emphasis on the practice and

ritual mimesis of wet rice cultivation—regardless of its outcome—expose the ways that Diola work obscures its own embeddedness in a social, historical, and ecological frame. In this way, the experiences of Diola villagers in northwestern Guinea-Bissau touch upon Raymond Williams’s (1977) concept of displacement: that is, how emergent categories shift away from the conditions of their emergence. In the short term, this shift has generally resulted in worsening Diola villagers’ standard of living. But the tensions and disparities currently at the forefront of rural Diola concerns are provoking villagers to reconsider their relationship to “hard work.”

Decline in Rain and Rice

Diola villagers regularly invoke a recent past during which their agricultural practices yielded an abundance of surplus paddy rice, often stored for decades and used in great quantities for ceremonial purposes. As one of my interlocutors told me in August 2002, “My grandparents never would have eaten—let alone depended so fully upon—‘sack rice.’”² The decrease in rice stores has already had significant consequences for Diola ritual activities. Most shrine ceremonies require copious expenditures of paddy rice—“sack rice,” even if it could be purchased in sufficient quantities, would not be acceptable in most ritual contexts. During the course of my fieldwork two intervillage wrestling matches were canceled because of insufficient rice for the attendant ceremonies.³ Similarly, the previously elaborate rites during which adepts at various spirit-shrines are inducted as priests had taken on a compromised quality. Late in my fieldwork in May 2003, a small procession of adepts from the spirit-shrine Amumau danced through the village’s main street as I sat chatting with some men in a rice shop. One of the men commented, “It used to be a big deal, this business, when it rained more. A big affair, lots of rice. But now, it’s like nothing. No one has rice anymore.”

Beyond their impact on ritual life, diminishing crop yields have led to increased anxiety about sustenance. According to a household survey I conducted in 2002, for the previous decade paddy rice harvested for any particular year could feed a household for an average of three months. Some households with more paddy or fewer mouths to feed could subsist on paddy rice for up to eight months. But not a single household was able to say that paddy rice carried them through the full year.

There is a long history of food insecurity in this region due to shifting and unpredictable environmental conditions—most famously the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s—as well as social and political upheaval.⁴ Much scholarship on the transformation in agrarian work regimes throughout Africa has explored the ways in which shifts in agricultural production during the late colonial and early postcolonial era—through the introduction of new crops and technologies, the intensifying pressures on land, and the

need to respond to increased commercialization—have significantly transformed social relations, especially gender roles, within cultural groups.⁵ This literature helps contextualize contemporary problems in Diola-land within a longer history of shifting structures and demands on agrarian populations across the continent. Increasing international concern over the effects of global climate change in Africa, particularly in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2006 U.N. Climate Change Conference in Nairobi, has focused on the unfortunate irony that even though Africa produces a disproportionately small percentage of the world's greenhouse gases, the continent and its people will bear the brunt of the problems caused by these climate-changing substances. Across the continent droughts are increasing and crop yields are decreasing. As one observer summed it up, “Despite progress in boosting democracy, ending wars, and economic growth, Africa is the only region in the world becoming less and less able to feed itself” (McLaughlin & Purefoy 2005).

There is a growing consensus that the impact and intensity of the changes of the past thirty years, and most important, the confluence of these changes, present especially dramatic challenges to people residing along the Upper Guinea Coast. On one of my first visits to Guinea-Bissau in 1999 I heard people talking about the country's membership in the Permanent Inter-state Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS). I thought they were joking. A casual observer could only be impressed by Guinea-Bissau's wetness—much of the country is literally under water for part of every year and roads are regularly washed out during the rainy season. But the same patterns of drought and desertification that have been affecting Mauritania, Senegal, Niger, and Chad for decades are now being felt in Guinea-Bissau. Guineans certainly recognize these changes; even the lush southern “rice-bowl region” of the country suffered food shortages in 2006 because of lack of rain (IRIN 2006). Scholars in Guinea-Bissau have begun to explore the impact of these pressures on agrarian societies around the country. Temudo and Schiefer, for example, note that

While mangrove cultivation still allows the production of a marketable surplus, today rain-fed production is in crisis. The Cubucaré [southern] region still produces surplus rice. But while many producers sell their surplus outside the region, more and more families inside the region fail to meet their yearly requirements in rice from their own production.... Contrary to the ritual invocations of success by development ideologists, the agrarian societies have been sliding downwards on a negative spiral since the beginning of the 1960s. (2003:401)

Likewise, in the country's northwest, environmental changes are already being felt by villagers who depend upon abundant rain to desalinate and irrigate their rice paddies. Every day, villagers complain that they are suffering because of the decline in rain and rice.

The Right Way to Work

Diola residents regularly articulate their predicament in clear terms, and are fully aware that growing rice as a subsistence crop is no longer tenable. But they continue to spend most of their time in the parched rice paddies, and they disapprove of—and sometimes punish—their kin and neighbors who seek some measure of relief in other productive activities or wage labor. “Hard work,” defined as manual wet rice cultivation, remains a significant attribute that they believe distinguishes them as Diola. Unlike many others in Guinea-Bissau, Diola have resisted adopting cashew farming as a replacement—or even a large-scale supplement—to rice farming. The transformed landscape in the rest of the country—grove after grove of cashew trees and, for several months of the year, jerry-can after jerry-can of cashew wine—is notably absent in the Diola and Baiote villages that dot the dirt road between São Domingos and Varela.

This is partly because growing cashews is much less physically demanding than growing rice; it is considered “lazy work.”⁶ Within the spatial confines of Diola villages in northwestern Guinea-Bissau, “work” refers specifically to arduous, manual wet rice agriculture and corollary efforts, and activities other than wet rice cultivation are not considered real work.⁷ Anyone engaging in alternate productive endeavors, whether as a teacher, mechanic, domestic, or even a cashew farmer—performs these activities *in addition to*, not *instead of*, wet rice cultivation. To be sure, some Diola residents in this area have planted small plots of cashew trees. But Diola men, women, and increasingly children spend most of their time engaged in the arduous activities that make up wet rice cultivation, although with ever-less rice to show for their efforts.

It should be noted here that Diola attitudes toward work are a particularly interesting subject of examination not only because of the apparent incongruity between their convictions about hard work and the practical results of their labors, but also because so much scholarship on African notions of work has focused on the opposite attitude: that of perceived African “laziness.” Most postcolonial scholarship in this vein addresses stereotypes of “native laziness” by revealing how local work practices were developed as a subversive tactic to resist menial or forced labor, or how cultural understandings of work, time, and pace conflicted with colonial notions.⁸ In a recent exploration of these issues, for example, Sodikoff interrogates French and Malagasy interpretations of Betsimisaraka laziness by explicating an “alternative work ethic which entailed a different space-time orientation.” According to Sodikoff, Betsimisaraka approaches to work differ from a Western capitalist orientation to work tied to output and individual accumulation. She demonstrates that the assessment of Betsimisaraka work habits as lazy “foreclosed the possibility of people conforming to models of work other than that of commodified labor, individual self-interest, material accumulation and future-oriented anxiety about economic and eco-

logical survival.” When others refer to Betsimisaraka as lazy, she says, “they imply a preference for a capitalist work ethic that values diligence, industry, frugality, a drive to acquire money and an eye to future income-making possibilities....” By contrast, the Betsimisaraka concept of the “right way to work” involves a strategy of occasional wage labor and piecework, which enables them to maintain customary practices linking farming with ancestor worship and familial relations (2004:367,375,380,392).

Although Diola work habits run contrary to colonial and neocolonial stereotypes of “lazy natives,” their approach to work—like that of Betsimisaraka—also clashes with Western capitalist orientations to work. Not only do Diola have a counter-ethic to that of individual accumulation, but the hard work that Diola perform in the forest and the paddies is no longer tied to output. Rather, the “right way to work” among Diola involves each individual’s adherence to the physically demanding set of activities required by manual wet rice cultivation, regardless of the ultimate outcome of these labors in terms of crop yield. Even the adoption of labor-saving devices such as draft animals or wheelbarrows would be judged critically by kin and neighbors as “taking the easy way out.” The Diola model of work emphasizes individual strength and ardor and requires participation in a labor regime that demands autonomous discipline at the household level, as well as moments of cooperation at the lineage and neighborhood levels.

In the sections that follow I discuss the basic contours and inducements to compliance (Moore 1978) of the Diola wet rice labor regime. I then provide various examples of how the notion of hard work gets expressed in Diola social and ritual life. Finally, after discussing the discourse and practices of hard work in the current context of environmental and economic transformation, I consider the ways in which contemporary Diola villagers are “caught in a custom of their own making” (Parkin 1994:61).

Rice Cultivation, Social Relations, and Spirit Shrines: The Inducements of Diola Work

The activities that make up Diola rice cultivation—as well as those of neighboring populations along the Upper Guinea Coast—have been thoroughly and richly described by many scholars and observers of their social life.⁹ In fact, the repeated cataloging, in such meticulous detail, of Diola agricultural practices is a reflection of the dominance with which these tasks define Diola lived experience.

Nonetheless, it bears repeating just how strenuous this method of rice cultivation is. The tasks involved in carving out paddies, erecting and repairing dikes, lifting heavy soil with the *budjandabu* to create the paddy’s mounds, and then planting, transplanting, fertilizing, and finally harvesting rice all require rigorous physical exertion and diligence.¹⁰ Although the intensity of work increases during the rainy season, rice cultivation is a

year-round endeavor and most days involve some activity related to growing or processing rice, especially for women.

Diola paddy cultivation practices are meant to produce a crop that has multiple valences for Diola. It is a cliché that among Diola (as among most cultural groups in this region) “one has not eaten if one has not eaten rice.” More than mere food, rice textures Diola lives in many ways; it is connected to status, social relations, and ritual activities. Ethnographers of Senegalese Diola have continually emphasized the importance of rice in Diola social and cosmological orientations. Baum notes that in Diola belief, “rice was seen as part of a covenant between *Emitai* [the Diola supreme deity] and a people, a covenant based on the Diola’s hard work in cultivating the crop and *Emitai*’s responsibility to send them rain to nourish it. . . . A Diola-Bandial proverb. . . illustrated this task: ‘The Diola was created in order that he farm [rice]’” (1999:28). Linares suggests that because rice is “embedded in networks of traditional prestations and ritual obligations. . . [,] old practices surrounding [its] production may well remain unchanged, or even become reinforced” (1985:83).

Diola arrangements of “property and product” are largely individualistic; “land [is] ‘owned’ individually and largely worked by household labor. . . [and] the crop is also stored separately and consumed separately by each conjugal family” (Linares 1992:16). Most agricultural work is performed in the families’ forest groves (*butat*) and paddies (*butonda*) in a mutually dependent, gendered division of labor. A married man and his unmarried sons are responsible for preparing the *butonda* for rice planting, and a married woman and her unmarried daughters are responsible for transplanting rice seedlings and harvesting ripe rice. But there are certain moments in the agricultural cycle when household labor is not sufficient. Although there is an informal exchange of kinship-based reciprocal labor—for instance, a married man might help his married brothers in their *butonda* in exchange for the same service—this, too, does not adequately meet labor demands at the most intensive moments of rice production.

Such needs are met through neighborhood-based, gender-exclusive work associations that can be contracted by a conjugal household for certain agricultural tasks that require more hands within a tight time frame.¹¹ Men’s groups are typically contracted for hoeing (*ewañai*) and women’s groups for transplanting rice seedlings (*borokabu*) and harvesting (*edjalai*). Given virilocality, female work groups within each neighborhood are divided between those comprising affines and those comprising agnates. Work associations can be contracted by anyone, and the contracted group need not derive from one’s own neighborhood. Typically a fixed rate is established for a day’s labor (whether the task takes an hour or a full day) according to the size of the group. In Guinea-Bissau in 2002 the rate ranged from 5000 to 7500 CFA (approximately US\$7–11) per day for men; for women, it averaged half that amount.

Villagers' participation in collective work regimes reflects, in part, the "regular reciprocities and exchanges of mutually dependent parties" (Moore 1978:63). Beyond this, productive activities are linked in crucial ways to religious beliefs and practices. In her studies of Senegalese Diola, Linares has shown how Diola politico-religious concepts—especially their system of spirit shrines—operate to enforce cooperative labor through "fulfilling socio-ritual obligations." In essence, work associations are "corporate wage earning organizations" affiliated with specific shrines that enforce members' reciprocal contributions to the group (1992:66,67). The money earned, rather than being distributed to individuals, is collected, pooled, and used to hold a feast at the end of the rainy season to propitiate the spirit-shrine that facilitates their work.¹²

The purpose is to earn enough money with which to buy rice, sacrificial animals, condiments and palm wine in order to propitiate the community shrines. On these occasions, members of the association with their guests will feast amply. Unlike wage labor that is performed in the city, associative labor is directly under the supervision of the spirit shrine....The association has practical, as well as symbolic, functions. Profits made from corporate activities are re-invested in rituals that ensure every person's productive, and hence reproductive, success. (1992:68–69,70)

Social control, according to Linares, is thus exerted through the link between a work association and the ritual obligations it is meant fulfill. To resolve the problem of how and why Diola adhere to such arduous work practices and overcome otherwise individualistic impulses to occasionally work cooperatively, all the while maintaining their largely acephalous political structure—that is, no one person or class is exerting its will, in a Weberian sense, to make them work this way—Linares demonstrates that social control can come from a different sort of politics, one rooted in religious beliefs and institutions.

Legitimation is a political process. It can be achieved through consensus and shared ideals; it does not require outright coercion nor the use of force. In societies where bureaucracies are missing and there are no standing armies, as among the relatively self-sufficient rural communities of Africa, religious beliefs and ritual practices often reinforce many aspects of political economy. Cultural ideologies and symbol systems usefully provide a legitimating idiom for the values and aspirations surrounding the economics of role behavior. (1992:15)

Such an examination of social control through politico-religious mechanisms contributes to anthropological understandings of power as connected to "other aspects of the encompassing cosmological system" (Arens & Karp 1989:xiv–xv). It also corresponds to Sally Falk Moore's (1978) design-

nation of a “semi-autonomous social field.” That is, the Diola work regime reflects an internal generation of rules, customs, and symbols that serve as the “means to induce...compliance” (1978:55). As Linares demonstrates, “politics is not solely about ways of dictating policies through the use of force, but also concerns how people may be directed, through mild forms of ideological persuasion and coercion, to perform socially-sanctioned tasks” (1992:10).

In this sense, I follow Linares’s approach in emphasizing the inextricable connections among political, religious, and economic spheres in Diola social life—the trilogy of power, prayer, and production from Linares’s (1992) book title. But my problem is a different one because current conditions have now changed, such that Linares’s assertion that this all “works well” in the realms of production and reproduction can no longer be maintained.¹³ Climate change and migration patterns are diminishing the viability of rice cultivation and threatening the economic underpinnings of Diola social organization. Furthermore, while religious ideals are expressed in various dimensions of Diola productive practices, the protective and punitive power of spirit shrines to enforce the social relations of labor has diminished in importance among contemporary Guinean Diola.¹⁴ Although work associations operate in much the same way as Linares described, and still spend their season’s earnings on a collective feast, these celebrations are not necessarily connected to propitiation rites. Given this break in the link between “prayer” and “production,” what mechanisms of social control account for the continued cooperative practices of work associations?

Finally, and perhaps most important, in my experience among Diola villagers in Guinea-Bissau, the idiom and practice of “hard work” take on additional facets and expressions not explored in Linares’s otherwise resonant study of Senegalese Diola. Beyond its place within the nexus of social and ritual obligations, “hard work” is expressed as a cultural value in its own right, regardless of productive or reproductive outcomes. In this context, Linares’s concept of legitimacy is not the best way to understand Diola conformity to their strict labor regime; villagers enact hard work even when they do not believe that such practices are necessarily legitimate. Building on Linares’s important insights into Senegalese Diola society, but based on the changing conditions and different context of Diola villagers in Guinea-Bissau, the following section reexamines this ongoing conundrum in Diola social life—why Diola villagers conform to expectations about hard work—particularly given the contemporary circumstances of ecological and other transformations that make the fruits of their labor negligible.

“We Work Hard”

Diola villagers often claim “hard work” as a distinguishing cultural characteristic. In September 2002 I overheard a dialogue between two women drawing water from a well that exemplifies this point. One of the women,

Segunda, was Balanta—the majority ethnic group in Guinea-Bissau. The other was a Diola woman named Aneki.¹⁵ As Segunda lifted a heavy water-filled bucket on her head to carry it home, Aneki teased her, “You’re lazy. That bucket’s not even full.” Segunda laughed off the insult and walked away. She returned a few minutes later to refill two buckets. Aneki continued teasing her, “So, you don’t even work.” Segunda replied, “Yes, I work.” Aneki asked, “What work do you do?” To which Segunda responded: “When I get up, I sweep. Then I wash the pots and pans. Then I draw water.” Aneki laughed: “You call that work? You don’t even go to the rice paddies. You just sit at home.... We Diola, women use the machete, women even take up the budjandabu.” Segunda retorted, “That’s why you all get old so quickly,” and Aneki proudly agreed. “That’s right. We get old quickly. We work hard. Balanta, they have lots of money, so they can get people to work for them, and they just sit at home. We Diola, we don’t have money. We do the work ourselves.” Segunda left the yard and Aneki turned to me and explained: “You see, we Diola, we’re different. We work hard. We’re just not the same as those others. We Diola, our work is different.... We work hard.”

Diola judge one another’s work habits, socialize their children into a life of disciplined manual labor, and expect adherence to a strict labor regime. The treatment of a man in the Diola village where I resided underscores this point. AmpaBontai was universally disdained and shunned. He had once married, but his wife left him because he never worked, he left his children with nothing to eat, and he regularly stole household items to sell them for *sum-sum*, a potent distilled drink sold in shots in the small village shops. He would hobble down the village’s main street complaining about his poverty, looking for charity, and usually finding none. He was ostracized from Diola social life, mocked and scorned by adults and children alike. When referring to him, most Diola villagers would shake their heads and say, “What can you do? He refuses to work.” Although many villagers complained regularly about their own poverty, AmpaBontai’s grievances were dismissed; his lack of food could not be taken seriously because of his “refusal to work.” Diola recognized others who had worked hard and gained little as “unlucky,” and sometimes would help them with small donations of rice. But AmpaBontai received no sympathy at all because of his rejection of the most fundamental of Diola tenets: hard work. AmpaBontai’s case and the attitudes of others toward him continually reminded me just how little room there was for any kind of nonconformity with regard to the Diola work regime.

Even elderly Diola continue to “work hard” at a time in their lives when similarly aged members of neighboring ethnic groups would typically be exempt from manual labor and supported by younger family members. I was often told that even grown children are not allowed or expected to work for their elderly parents. This assertion is typically backed up by various versions of the following story:

A long time ago, there was an old man who had several children. All of them had married and were living in their own houses or those of their husbands, except for one son, who had not yet built his own house. This son, seeing that his father was old and tired, spoke to him: "You should stay at home now. I will do all of the work. I'll hoe the paddies and tap the wine. You should not go to work anymore." The old man accepted, and the son worked hard, leaving nothing undone. This continued for several years, but in the fifth year the son died. The man returned to the paddies, but when he picked up the heavy budjandabu to till the rain-drenched soil he started to cry. He cried and wailed so powerfully that people working nearby came to see what the matter was, and when they saw the old man's pain, they helped him in the paddies. But the following year, when the same thing happened, people left him alone—they had their own paddies to tend, after all—and the old man continued to cry and was unable to work.

For Diola narrators, the point of this story is that providing help that alleviates the labor of others—even that of the elderly—is actually a disservice, as it will ultimately render the person incapable of toiling in the fields and undermine the self-sustenance that is so crucial to Diola notions of personhood.

I was introduced to the centrality of Diola wet rice agricultural work immediately upon my arrival as an ethnographer in a Guinean Diola village in late 2001. On my second day of fieldwork I went to harvest rice. Marijai, the mother of my adoptive family, and I joined her work association in a member's paddy and I spent a long, hot day cutting ripe rice with a small blade. By midday an older woman demanded that I take a break under a shady tree, but I already sensed that I was being evaluated on my ability to stick it out so I continued cutting, tearing, and gathering the rice stalks into large bundles. It was early evening by the time we returned to the village, each woman carrying several large bundles of harvested rice on her head, and I was exhausted. But as we wended our way back along the village paths my coworkers excitedly told curious passers-by that I had stayed the whole day and cut rice in muddy water up to my shins, refusing to take a break. For the next several days wherever I went in the village I was greeted enthusiastically by my workmates, and they would repeat their narrative of my participation in the harvest to whoever happened to be around. It was work—especially the willingness to work hard—that provided entrée into a group of women who would become my closest friends and confidants throughout fieldwork.

Of course, the hard work did not stop after harvesting. I continued to spend most of my time for several months working in the forests and fields, both with my adoptive family and with the women's work association. We harvested dry rice in the forest groves and wet rice in the paddies; clear-cut sections of thick bush with machetes; planted rice seeds in prepared forest

nurseries; transplanted rice seedlings from the bush to the rain-flooded paddies; carried heavy baskets of home-made fertilizer to feed the fragile seedlings; and, when the dry season came around again, harvested rice once more. In between the primary labors surrounding rice cultivation we cut and braided dried thatch for roofing; made salt on sweltering days out in the sticky mangrove flats; and carried heavy objects from the forest to the village and back. In the first flush of fieldwork I rarely knew what each day would bring. But I learned quickly that it would involve walking and hard work in the forest or the paddies. With Marijai as my guide I joined in the day's activities, gradually grasping the rhythms of Diola life, learning just how much work it takes to grow rice, and trying to maintain the efforts that had won me camaraderie and a sense of inclusion from the first day in the paddies.

In fact, I often struggled throughout my residence in Diola-land to maintain a balance between participating in Diola agricultural work—with my adoptive family and work association—and getting any other kind of “work” done, like conducting interviews and surveys, or writing fieldnotes. While my initial days and weeks of work in the paddies and forests provided me with a wealth of data and a sense of legitimacy among my neighbors in the village, they also set up a standard that became difficult for me to sustain for the following two years. I had shown myself capable of manual labor, and I was therefore expected to show up for work association work days, which I usually did. But on the days when I had scheduled other activities, members of my work association chided me for missing work and I felt the sting of their disapproval.

This is not to say that Diola are unrealistic about the difficulties of their lives or that they speak of their work as pleasurable. Indeed, these attitudes are mixed with complaint. During the course of my fieldwork I heard villagers sigh every day that Diola life is only hardship and drudgery. Once, when I asked my neighbor about Diola notions of hell, he replied, “We cannot believe that hell exists after death, because our life on earth is hell, so what kind of god would make yet another hell after this one?” A typical condolence offered to the bereaved relatives of someone who has died, or even in consolation to oneself in anticipation of death, is: “At least she is resting now. At least now she can relax.” For Diola, the end of work means death. Indeed, hard work is performed not only in the paddies, but also in the context of ritual mimesis. For instance, at certain moments during a funeral, dancers hold an object evocative of Diola work—such as a stick, machete, budjandabu, or a bunch of unhusked rice—as they dance in a circle around the corpse. This simultaneously signals honor for the dead person's lifetime commitment to work and visibly distinguishes the living from the dead. By carrying objects that represent work, funeral dancers are performatively marking their status as living beings.¹⁶

A corollary to such ceremonial moments is the villagewide ban on work during funeral proceedings. This ban is one of the key characteristics of

a Diola funeral, and it is often brought up by development workers and urbanized Africans as one of the greatest obstacles to “modernization” and “progress” among Diola. During a layperson’s funeral the prohibition on work lasts only during the day of the funeral itself, but for a shrine priest or ritual elder it can last up to three months.¹⁷ It is precisely because work—in the form of wet rice cultivation and the collateral agricultural efforts that support and complement it—is such a defining feature of Diola lives that a funeral work ban sets in relief the essential difference between life and death. The ways in which work gets evoked, performed, or prohibited illustrate how Diola work is a complex of values that cuts across economic, religious, and social domains. For Diola, to be a living human being is to work.

Part of this emphasis on hard work is bound up with characteristics integral to wet rice cultivation. As we know, certain kinds of production regimes require certain kinds of workers (Chakrabarty 1988; Thompson 1963, 1993). Hard work is part and parcel with the particular demands of wet rice agriculture. It is simply not conducive to partial disengagement; one cannot decrease one’s participation in it or engage in it minimally or symbolically. As I have discussed above, wet rice cultivation requires not only physically taxing individual labor, but also participation in a set of social relations—at the household, lineage, and neighborhood levels—that weave Diola together in a nested series of interdependent obligations. If individuals attempt to extract themselves by seeking out alternatives, their neighbors and kin sanction them partly because they rely on their participation in moments of collective labor.

Neighborhood work associations exemplify this dynamic. Although work associations have long been a central way of organizing labor needed for the most intensive and time-sensitive aspects of wet rice cultivation, they are becoming an even more important part of the agricultural workforce as the rainy season has become increasingly shorter, and the labor required to complete certain critical activities during the ideal period of time usually exceeds the capacity of the conjugal family or extended kin. But the increasing importance of collective labor coincides with the recent phenomenon of urban migration of youth, which has only become a major factor in Diola social life during the past fifteen years.¹⁸ Since the local school stops at sixth grade, young people who are able to continue their studies must go to either São Domingos or Bissau. More often than not, they return to their home villages during the rainy season to help their families during this particularly intensive phase of wet rice agriculture. But within the past decade young people have started to stay in Bissau or other urban areas even during the rainy season.

Youth work associations in the villages have used their importance in the work system to force absent youth to return and do their share of labor. For instance, a man whose son has not returned from Bissau contracts a youth work group to work in his paddies. They give him his assigned day,

but when that day comes they fail to show up. The family recognizes their absence as a form of punishment for the fact that the man's son is not among them, and is "taking it easy" in Bissau. The man, losing an important day of agricultural labor, puts pressure on his son to return home; when he does the youth group is contracted again, and this time it fulfills the commitment. Thus, in response to the challenges that increasing youth migration pose for both agricultural production and social solidarity, work groups have leveraged their crucial role in the cultivation cycle to compel their wayward members back to the rice paddies. In this way work associations have become an important mechanism for the social reproduction of Diola agricultural production, in some respects more so than the previous control exerted through the spirit shrines.

The Paradoxes of Custom: Uncoupling Production from Its Products

In many ways Diola incitements to and practices of "hard work" have become what David Parkin calls a "paradox of custom." That is, "in the short term they seem to maintain the status quo of custom and authority and so are publicly approved, but in the long term they serve to mask the development of a fundamental cleavage" (1994:6). This cleavage separates the performance of hard work—and the social and ritual mechanisms that enforce it—from the realities of a changed physical and social landscape that make wet rice cultivation, as it is currently practiced, increasingly untenable as a way to provision Diola households.

The intrinsic characteristics of wet rice cultivation, the tightly woven and often tangled web of social relations and obligations involved in Diola agricultural practices, and the religious ideals with which they are linked reinforce one another and serve as powerful drivers of continuity. This gets expressed most clearly in Diola orientations to hard work, which refract across these economic, social, and religious realms. Currently Diola villagers experience and enact this configuration as a kind of hegemonic lock, a dominant social formation in Raymond Williams's sense as the "ruling definition of the social" (1977:125). It is through the idiom of work that Diola villagers talk about being a member of this society. These notions of hard work as expressed through self-sufficiency, participation in a particular social organization of labor, and performative ritual evocations are the index of who is an accepted and acceptable member of their society. One is essentially outside the social order if one is not participating in and reproducing this mode of work. Opting out of the wet rice labor regime requires physically removing oneself from the spatial zone of rural Diola villages, and even then—as in the case of would-be urban migrants—pressure can be exerted to retrieve far-flung work associates at critical junctures in the agricultural cycle.

The particular process of wet rice cultivation, the social organization of labor, and the cultural ethic that values hard work were once elegant solu-

tions to an especially inhospitable environment. But in the current context of environmental change and the decreasing viability of Diola agricultural practices, these attitudes and practices around hard work get unyoked from the products they are meant to generate. Diola work is taken as given and fixed, rather than as a particular social form that arose under certain historical and environmental conditions. It is perfectly acceptable—even commendable—for Diola villagers to toil in the rice paddies for many months of the year with little or no yield in rice. As the constraints and limits in the natural world are more keenly felt, Diola are perhaps stressing the ways in which enactments of their work ethic and the moral obligations they reinforce might be all the more important. What gets reproduced, though, is an increasingly detached social form—a commitment to arduous manual work—even while the conditions that it is meant to safeguard—the capacity of households to provision themselves—are disintegrating.

Conclusions

This article has explored how recent broad changes in the Diola natural, social, and political landscape have led to a kind of uncoupling. Decreasing rainfall, increasing erosion, escalating urban migration, and national political instability have coalesced to make it ever more difficult for Diola farmers to grow enough rice to sustain themselves. Although Diola residents in Guinea-Bissau acknowledge that their capacity to cultivate sufficient rice has diminished, their commitment to—and sometimes reinforcement of—their core agricultural practices signals a growing separation of their work regime from the conditions of its emergence.

In exploring these dynamics I have presented a rather uniform picture of the Diola work regime as a seemingly hypostasized system. I have minimized internal differences and emphasized conformity around these practices for the sake of highlighting the overriding dominance of this work ethic among the vast majority of Diola villagers. Although it is imperative to appreciate the normativity of these attitudes, they are neither completely consensual nor uniform in their practice. Even while villagers engage in hard work and censure their neighbors and kin who attempt to resist it, they simultaneously, as we have seen, complain about such obligations. The appearance of consensus also masks differences along gender, generational, and other social distinctions, especially as changing conditions and new opportunities propel individuals toward different trajectories and increase differentiation along these and other lines. Various competing activities—such as cashew farming, schooling, and wage work—currently do not replace the hard work of rice cultivation, but they increasingly take place alongside it. These parallel endeavors, as well as the increasing poverty of those most on the margins (such as widows), provide new opportunities—and sometimes moments of crisis—through which people are reassessing their beliefs and practices.

Hard work remains a central social value, but the widening chasm between Diola rice cultivation practices and the ability of villagers to provision their households, as well as escalating internal variation and the expansion of possible productive activities, all lead to a new set of questions and perspectives. As social relationships are reorganized on the ground and people continue to evaluate and reconsider this core ethic and practice in relation to new pressures and possibilities, key moments of ambivalence and fissures represented by variation may become sources of possible transformation. In the meantime, Diola villagers in Guinea-Bissau are maintaining the very social forms that exacerbate—however unwittingly—their central problem.

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Notes

1. See Almada (1964); Baum (1999); Coelho (1953); Lauer (1969); Linares (1970, 1981, 1992); Mark (1985); Pélissier (1966); Thomas (1959, 1963). Diola are most often referred to as "Felupe" in Guinea-Bissau, but I have opted to call them Diola as this is currently preferred among Diola themselves, who consider "Felupe" to be a Portuguese misnomer. The word "Diola," though, most likely came from Mandinga travelers to the area, and only became accepted internally in the nineteenth century; other spellings include *Jola* and *Djola*. Although Diola populations in The Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea-Bissau share fundamental social and cultural principles, there is significant variation among

and within these communities. There are three major dialects among the Diola: Fogny in the north, Kasa in the middle, and Edjamat in south, including Guinea-Bissau. Even within these dialects there is a great deal of linguistic variation, sometimes from village to village. Furthermore, Diola in The Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea-Bissau were subject to different colonial regimes—British, French, and Portuguese, respectively—each of which, to varying degrees, left its particular legacy on Diola populations. Religious conversion has also affected Diola across these countries in distinct and uneven ways. The northernmost population of Diola, north of the Casamance River and along the Gambian border, were Islamicized by the 1930s (Mark 1978, 1992). South of the Casamance River, but still within Senegal, several Catholic missions have had—and continue to have—significant influence (Baum 1990). The southernmost subgroup of Diola, in Guinea-Bissau, has remained most impervious to religious missionization on both Islamic and Christian fronts, although this is beginning to change with the presence of foreign Catholic and Protestant evangelical missionaries. Religious conversion among Guinean villagers across the Upper Guinea Coast is a complex, dynamic, and varied phenomenon, and the ways in which Diola have incorporated new elements from Islam and/or Christianity while maintaining (and sometimes strengthening) traditional Diola religious practices have been the subject of several scholarly works on Senegalese Diola (Baum 1990; Linares 1981, 1992; Mark 1978, 1992). Differences in external pressures—whether from the colonial and postcolonial state or from religious missionaries—have had implications for diversity in Diola social organization, gender roles, and agricultural practices, and it is difficult to generalize very much regarding Diola populations across this swath of West Africa. For the purposes of this essay, I use the term “Diola” to refer to the residents in the cluster of villages in northwestern Guinea-Bissau, except when noted otherwise.

2. Diola refer to imported rice as “sack rice” or “store rice.” Most imported rice in Guinea-Bissau currently comes from Vietnam and China. Asian rice is a different species (*Oryza sativa*) from indigenous African rice (*Oryza glaberrima*). (See Carney 2001; Fields 2001; Hawthorne 2003; and Linares 2002 for discussions of African indigenous rice.) All conversations referred to in the article were conducted in Crioulo, with comments translated by the author.
3. Diola wrestling matches involve ceremonies to honor village ritual elders (*ai-i*). These ceremonies require, among other expenditures, abundant rice for collective feasting.
4. See Carney and Watts (1991); Chazan and Shaw (1988); Cohen (1988); Commins et al. (1986); Franke and Chasin (1980); Glantz (1987); Linares (1985).
5. See Berry (1984, 1989); Carney and Watts (1991); Guyer (1978, 1983); Hart (1982); Linares (1981, 1985); Weil (1973).

There was and still is a relative absence of statelike structures in colonial and postcolonial Guinea-Bissau. Portuguese colonialism was a violent endeavor (see Birmingham 2006; Chilcote 1967; Forrest 1992, 2003; Hawthorne 2003; Lobban & Forrest 1988; MacQueen 1997), but compared with the neighboring colonial practices of the French and English, and even Portugal’s flagship African colonies of Angola and Mozambique, the tentacles of colonial power did not reach as deeply and extensively into Guinean social life. This is partly because Portuguese activities in this region were headquartered in Cape Verde and, according to Crowley (1990:103–4), “communications between Cape Verde and its

dependency were infrequent. During the entire period of colonial rule only six governors posted in Cape Verde ever visited Guinea.” Even during the period of Portuguese “pacification” campaigns and intensified domination (roughly 1915–60), Portuguese Guinea was never a settler colony; there was no massive reorganization of land and there were relatively few attempts to shift agricultural practices. In many ways the decade-long war of independence (1963–74) caused more fundamental disruptions across Guinean societies than the several centuries of colonial presence that preceded it, and it remains the defining event in a generation of Guineans’ lives. The independence period has been characterized by partisan political upheaval, government irregularities, and a civil war (1998–99), which wrecked the already fragile economy and has been followed by several years of political instability and economic decline. The impact of these dynamics is felt unevenly throughout the country, although in general the postcolonial state, with the exception of a few military personnel stationed throughout the country, has also played a limited role in its citizens’ social lives (see Forrest 1992, 2003). In Diola-land no taxes are collected, most conflicts are resolved through local channels and adjudication at spirit shrines, and state services—such as public schooling, building roads, providing water, etc.—simply do not exist. Although Diola villagers sometimes lament their unfortunate membership in what they perceive to be an incapacitated state, most residents in contemporary northwestern Guinea-Bissau do not factor the state into much of their thinking, planning, decision-making, or even anxieties. For this reason, I do not spend much time in this essay considering the state’s role (or lack thereof) in Diola villagers’ responses to the decline in rain and rice.

6. There are other reasons to resist the wholesale adoption of cashew farming, given massive fluctuations of the value of cashews in the international markets, as well as unpredictable shifts in national policies that regulate the cashew market. Some Diola villagers factor these risks into their decision-making, but most express more concern over the “laziness” that growing cashews would cultivate among Diola farmers. To some extent these concerns are well-founded; according to Temudo and Schiefer’s observations of Balanta in Guinea-Bissau’s south: “The forced exchange of rice for cashew nuts which was promoted by the government increased the difficulties to mobilize Balanta youth for rice production. They turned instead to the production of cashew which requires less physical effort and is not as dependent on the weather as rice production.... Thus, the introduction of the cashew culture reduced incentives for rice production” (2003:398).
7. Such attitudes are clear in Diola evaluations of their non-rice cultivating neighbors. A comment I often heard from Diola about the Fula merchants in their midst was: “They don’t like to work, they just sit around and sell things.” Linares (1987) noted similar attitudes among Senegalese Diola, although with important distinctions, given the more frequent and longer-standing migrant labor patterns among this population. She asserts that “Being a full-time cultivator is a different matter from being a full-time salesman or middleman. When it comes to the Jola selling their labor power as salaried workers by migrating to cities, which they are doing in great numbers nowadays, the Jola see this as work (*burok*). On the other hand, they do not see *funom* (a word which means both ‘to sell’ and ‘to buy’) as work” (1987:139).

8. See Atkins (1993); Coetzee (1988); Sodikoff (2004); Adas (1986); Comaroff (1985); Ong (1987); Scott (1985); Taussig (1980); Cooper (1992); Pickering (2004); Povinelli (1993).
9. See Almada (1964 [1594]); Baum (1999); Brooks (1993); Coelho (1953 [1669]); Crowley (1990); Dinis (1946); Gable (1997); Hawthorne (2003); Linares (1970, 1981, 1985, 1992); Lopes de Lima (1836); Mark (1985); Pélissier (1966); Taborda (1950); Thomas (1959, 1963).
10. The *budjandabu* (Crioulo: *daba*) is the trademark iron-tipped fulcrum shovel used by Diola and other cultural groups in the area to till the rice paddies. Usually this is considered quintessentially male labor, but there are some circumstances (such as widowhood) which lead women to use the heavy instrument to cultivate borrowed land.
11. In Diola villages just a few kilometers closer to the Senegalese border these collective work groups are called *société*. Incorporation of Portuguese/Crioulo or French words into Diola typically follows this pattern of proximity to the Senegalese border. Diola in the forest villages where I resided most often use the Crioulo word *asosiason* when referring to these work groups. Even when Diola co-produce with extended kin and/or cooperative work groups, the rice crop is always stored in the household granary of the conjugal family whose fields were cultivated. There are no communal granaries beyond the household level.
12. Although they are primarily defined by their collective work activities, work associations are also important social groups and constitute the closest-knit set of relations beyond the family. Most Diola do not get deeply involved in one another's lives and troubles, but members of work associations take on a more active role in terms of providing advice and counseling. When I became inducted into a work association I found that I had suddenly acquired a group of people who felt it was their right and duty to advise me on all kinds of things, often reprimanding me when they thought I had made a social error; they did this much more than my adoptive family ever did. Furthermore, in addition to pooling their labor to work one another's fields and pooling their earnings for a collective feast, the work associations sometimes collect dues from their members which they hold for other purposes, whether as a trust for medical or other emergency needs or as a way to save money and collectively buy a desired item, like matching cloth skirts that they wear at festive occasions to mark their members as belonging to the same association.
13. This is also where I depart from Netting's (1993) account of smallholders. Although Netting rightly refuses both evolutionary and economically maximizing models to evaluate smallholders as a social form, I believe he romanticizes intensive cultivation as an adaptive—even ideal—type, glossing over the fact that some intensive cultivators can no longer maintain their practices in a sustainable way. Most of the characteristics that define smallholders, according to Netting, certainly apply to Diola. However, the aspects of high crop yield and sustainability so central to Netting's argument for a "smallholder alternative" (1993:9), at this juncture in Diola history, do not apply to them.
14. The reasons for the waning power of spirit shrines in Diola social life include the increase of Christian missionary influence among a certain (although still relatively small) segment of the population; the influence of state and missionary schooling on the current and previous generation; and the impact of general economic decline on costly ritual activities and recruitment of adepts.

These are complex and uneven processes in terms of how they affect Diola religious affairs, and a full consideration of these dynamics is beyond the scope of this paper.

15. All personal names have been changed.
16. Ritual performances that evoke work, particularly during life-cycle transformations such as marriage and death, have symbolic dimensions that relate to productive and reproductive activities more generally. I provide more details on the symbolic aspects of funerary and other ritual activity in Davidson (2007).
17. This work ban applies to the entire village and can have grave repercussions for every family's crop yield if it occurs during important moments of the agricultural cycle, such as the particularly labor-intensive phase of the rainy season.
18. Senagalese Diola have been migrating to urban areas—especially Dakar—for many decades (see Linares 1987, 1992).