

TYPES OF FARM LABOUR IN NORTHERN GHANA

G. Benneh

The type of labour normally associated with traditional food farming in Ghana is family labour where members of a family operate as a production unit to cultivate small scattered fields with simple tools - cutlasses and hoes - to cater mainly for their food needs. In this production system, the size of family holdings normally depends on the number of workers who farm the production unit. While this simple picture is broadly true, the need for people to cultivate larger fields to ensure adequate food supplies as a form of security against hunger and the prestige acquired by a 'big' farmer in traditional communities¹ has made it necessary for farmers to fall on people outside their family circles for assistance through co-operative working parties.

These indigenous co-operatives enable men and women to work for others usually on the basis of reciprocity. They have been known to occur in different parts of Africa.² In recent years, they have received some attention because of the significance which some African leaders attach to them as instruments for socializing their economies.³

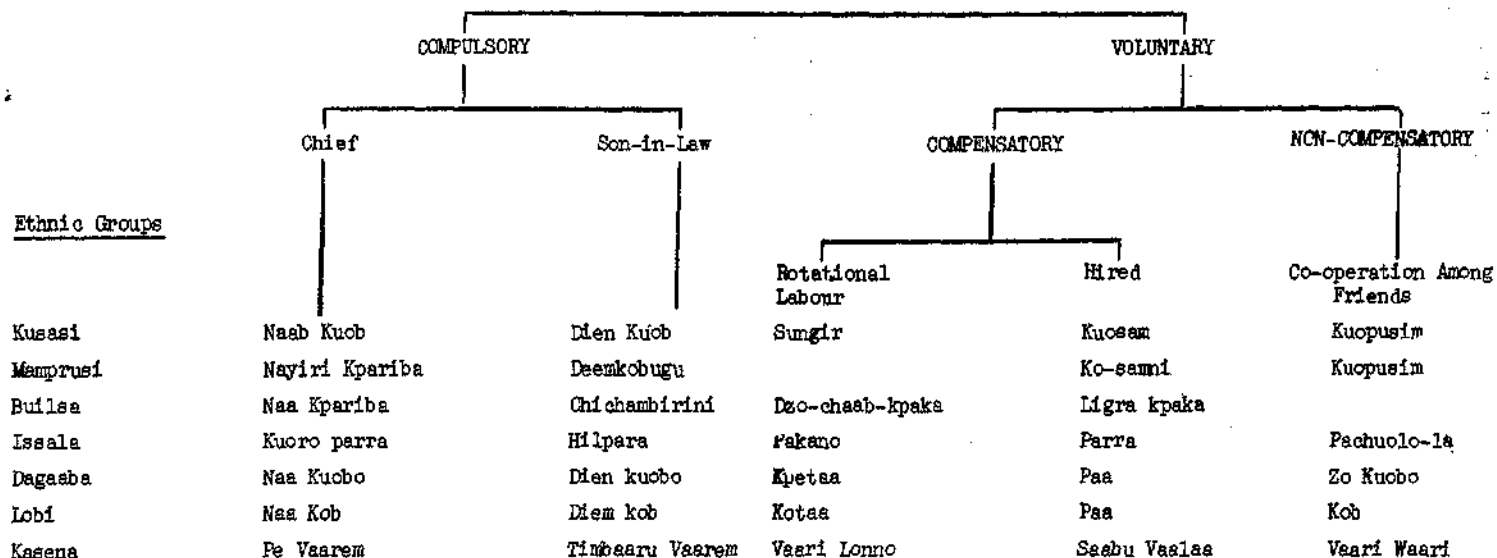
Although indigenous co-operatives have been identified in different areas of northern Ghana by research workers, there appears not to have been any attempt to classify them and to indicate the farming activities for which they are used, and how widespread are the identified types that occur in the region.

TOWARDS A CLASSIFICATION

Among the suggested criteria for classifying these working groups are age, numbers involved, function, characteristics of members (family or clan members or friends) sex and the nature of benefit to the members of the group.⁴ Each of these criteria has its merits depending on the particular role of the co-operative in the society being investigated. As an instrument for furthering the production processes on the farm, the most significant criteria would appear to be (a) the procedure for assembling an indigenous working group and (b) the type of compensation paid to members of the group. The latter will determine to a large extent whether a farmer can afford the services of a working group.

Using the first criterion, farming working groups may broadly be divided into (1) compulsory, based on traditional obligation and (2) voluntary. Under the first category would come group labour performed for chiefs or priests out of respect or under traditional obligation and the requirement that a son-in-law from time to time performs a task of some magnitude for the father of his wife with his friends. The voluntary working group may be subdivided into compensatory and non-compensatory groups. The compensatory groups may further be classified according to the type of compensation received such as cash, exchange of labour or payment in kind (Fig.1).

FIGURE I
TYPES OF INDIGENOUS FARMING CO-OPERATIVES



COMPULSORY WORKING GROUPS

a) LABOUR FOR CHIEF

A paramount, divisional or village chief can occasionally ask his people to work for him freely on his farm. In the case of a village chief, he provides a meal for the workers. A divisional chief who normally cultivates a large farm can request the village chiefs under his control for men to work on his farm. Since these men come from different villages, they are provided with accommodation by the divisional chief and they may work for a week before returning to their villages. The divisional chief provides them with all their meals. In South Mamprusi people from the surrounding villages of Nalerigu, the capital, are asked to work on the farm of the Nayiri, the paramount chief.

Although this type of labour was widespread in northern Ghana, it appears to be dying out with the declining authority of the chiefs in their communities (Table 1).

b) IN-LAW LABOUR

It is mandatory for a son-in-law to perform a major piece of work on his father-in-law's farm.⁵ This may be done on request or through the initiative of the son-in-law. In the Kaleo area of northwestern Ghana, the son-in-law is expected to perform this duty at least on four different occasions and for different activities. On the other hand, a mixed farmer in Kanga Bawku informed the author that his son-in-law living in another village had been ploughing his fields for him at the beginning of every season for some years.⁶ The father-in-law had sold his own bullocks. A son-in-law who persistently refuses to discharge this duty stands in danger of his wife being taken away from him by the father-in-law. This type of labour is used mostly for arduous and time consuming activities such as weeding and making mounds.

The son-in-law is accompanied by friends. The size of the working group

TABLE I

CHARACTERISTICS OF CO-OPERATIVE WORKING GROUPS AND THE ACTIVITIES THEY ARE USED FOR

TYPE	No. of People involved	Male or Female	Age Group	Composition: Relatives Friends or Mixed	Activities used for
1. Chief	10 - 50+	Male	Adults excluding very elderly people	Mixed	Weeding Mounding
2. Son-in-law	2 - 30	Male	Normally adults over 18 years	Mixed	Weeding Mounding reshaping of mounds.
3. Rotational Working Group	3 - 5	Male	The same age group	Friends	Clearing Mounding
4. Hired	No specific number	Male	All ages	Anybody	All types of farm activities
5. Co-operation among friends	1 - 25	Male Female	Adults	Mixed	Mounding Weeding

may vary from 2 to 25. The group is normally assigned a specific task to accomplish. They may work for a day or two. Pito and food are served to the invited people by the father-in-law. There is always keen competition among the group for the prestige of being the best worker. Since this may lead to poor weeding and cutting down of crops, members of the group, especially the young ones are warned by their elders to do good work before they set out. Really good work by the group may give the son-in-law a second wife and excellent work by an individual may win such a person a wife.

VOLUNTARY WORKING GROUPS - COMPENSATORY

a) ROTATIONAL GROUP FARMING

This is a voluntary working association of people in the same age group who work on each other's farm in rotation. The group is usually small (2 to 5) and is temporary. Apart from the pleasure of meeting friends, the group enables work which would normally have taken several days to accomplish if a farmer were working on his own to be done by the group in a day or two. This type of labour is used on fields individually owned by members of the group. The insistence on age group is to ensure that members are of equal strength and can work in harmony.

b) HIRED LABOUR

A farmer may employ a person or a group of people to perform a specific task in return for cash payment or employ people on daily basis. Formerly, payment was in cowries. The current rate ranges from 150 to 200 cedis in the region. On the other hand, a farmer in need of help such as money, a fowl, goat or sheep to sacrifice to his ancestor or a smock may exchange his labour for the required item. In this case the farmer who comes to his aid comes to agreement with him as to the number of days he has to work on his farm.

NON-COMPENSATORY WORKING GROUPS

a) CO-OPERATION AMONG FRIENDS

Farmers normally help one another on their farms. A farmer who requires some assistance on his farm informs compound heads at least two days prior to the day he needs the labour. On the selected day every compound head contacted sends a worker to help the farmer. They work for a day. The farmer provides the workers with lunch. If he is wealthy he may also provide an evening meal at about 4.30 p.m. When this is done, fowls or a sheep or a goat are slaughtered. Although there is no obligation for the one who benefits from such labour to reciprocate, in practice a compound head who does not help his friends will not normally benefit from this type of arrangement.

This type of group labour may also be used to help a farmer who is ill or who is too old to do the hard work of preparing his field for planting and has no one to call to his aid. Here again, the old man would have been known to participate in this type of group activity during the earlier years of his life, or if he happened to be a young man and ill he would be expected to continue this co-operation when he got well.

b) FAMILY LABOUR

The indigenous farming co-operatives are supplementary to family labour and not substitutes. The basic farm labour unit is the family which is the primary social unit in any society. As Rourke (1971) pointed out with reference to the whole country, "In agricultural production family labour may be described as the farmer's most important fixed input and hired labour as his most important variable input."⁷

The size of family labour varies. It may consist of a father, his wife and children or may be a larger unit which includes brothers, their wives and children and sisters, depending among other factors on the degree of under-

standing in a compound house. A quarrelsome or lazy member of the family may be given his own piece of land to cultivate independently.

With the exception of large compounds such as the chief's, where individual nuclear families usually farm separately, it is normal for inmates of a compound house to constitute a production and consumption unit. The head of the compound is the head of the unit. He controls the labour of the members at the critical period of farming operations and exercises some control over the harvest. In the Kusasi area, the harvested grain which is stored in common granaries is rationed at intervals of a week or two among the different pot families which make up a production unit.

While members of a family may work together on farms which are communally owned, individual members may establish their own farms, on which they work alone or with the assistance of any of indigenous working parties or hired labour. The use of family labour for cultivation therefore depends on the type of farm being considered.

Two basic types of farms are found in northern Ghana. These are the compound and the bush farms. In addition to these some ethnic groups make a distinction between a bush farm normally used for grains and valley farms for rice and yams. The compound and bush farms are at times combined in a land use system in the sense that members of a production unit may each have one type and severally own the other type, or the same production unit may possess both types of farms.

In the Kusasi, Frafra, Talensi, Namnam, Kasena-Nankani areas where increased population pressure has virtually eliminated bush farms, compound farms are family farms and thus jointly cultivated. On the other hand in less densely settled parts of the northwest such as the Lambussie area where bush farms are the

dominant type, the larger family unit works together on bush farms while individuals or nuclear families till their own compound farms.

Cash crop farms such as groundnut or rice fields are usually individually owned and the owner uses his or her own labour and hired or group labour.

SEXUAL DIVISION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR

Although Africa as a whole is notable for the extent to which women participate in cultivation, their role in northern Ghana is less significant even though there are differences in their levels of participation in the different ethnic areas.

Women are however generally associated with the cultivation of vegetables. This may be explained in terms of the traditional responsibility of a wife to provide the ingredients for preparing the soup or stew which goes with food prepared from grains supplied by the husband. Among the Kusasi *dawadawa* soup is a specialty and married women desirous of pleasing their husbands rent *dawadawa* trees from their owners in order to have ready access to the fruit of the tree.

This sexual complementarity of labour in the provision of the food for the family may have originated from the days when men were actively engaged in hunting. According to Goody and Buckley, "If at the hunting stage women were the ones who collected vegetable produce, they would tend to be the ones concerned with cultivating the domestic varieties of these plants; just as men who had formerly been concerned with hunting wild animals would tend to take over the husbandry of domestic livestock."⁸

Women do also cultivate groundnuts and rice for sale, on borrowed lands. In such cases the work on the farm is done solely by them, or at times with the help of their husbands.

On the farms cultivated jointly by the family, the main female tasks are sowing, scare-crowing, harvesting, carrying the produce home, threshing and winnowing of grains. In areas where compound farms are

TABLE II
DIVISION OF LABOUR ACCORDING TO SEX

Ethnic Group	COMPOUND FARMS			BUSH FARMS			VALLEY FARMS		
	Men	Women	Both Sexes	Men	Women	Both Sexes	Men	Women	Both Sexes
Isaala	Weeding	Harvesting	Transplanting	Weeding Mounding Threshing	Winnowing	Harvesting	Weeding Mounding Harvesting	Rice Sowing Scare-crowing	Harvesting
Dagaaba	Weeding	Sowing	Transplanting Harvesting	Clearing Weeding Mounding	Sowing	Harvesting Transplanting	Weeding Mounding	Sowing rice	Transplanting Harvesting
Kasena	Weeding Harvesting	Sowing Winnowing	-	Clearing Weeding Harvesting	Sowing	-	-	-	-
Dagomba	Clearing Ridging Weeding	-	Sowing Harvesting	Removing stumps Mounding Ridging	-	Sowing Harvesting	As On Bush Farms		
Kusaasi	Clearing Weeding Ridging	Sowing	Harvesting	-	-	-			

less important, female labour is used on them for transplanting. Male labour is generally used for preparing land for planting, weeding, making yam mounds and reshaping of mounds. Men also help with harvesting of grain. The differences in the division of agricultural labour based on sex among the ethnic groups in the region are shown in Table II.

CONCLUSION

Although family labour is the basic type of labour used on food farms in the north, there is a great deal of co-operation among farmers in the region. With the introduction of cash crops, it is likely that hired

labour will increasingly become more important than the indigenous non-compensatory working group as the experience in Southern Ghana shows. As long as these traditional co-operatives exist, there is the need for studies on them to be carried out with the view to using them as instruments of rural development. The main constraint on the use of these sources of labour appears to be that since the characteristic seasonal hunger in the north coincides with the period of active work on the farm the ability of the average farm family to provide hospitality to work groups is limited.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. In the days before chiefs were created by the British administration in the Sissala district, a successful farmer was given the title Kere. Among the last respects paid to a kere were the simulation of the various stages of farming and citations by bards who held high a cockerel tied to a hoe handle.
2. See M. Herskovits, *Bahamoy an Ancient West African Kingdom*, Vol.1, New York 1938, pp. 71-5, S.F. Nadel, *A Black Byzantium, the Kingdom of Nsop in Nigeria*, London 1942, pp 248-251.
3. The foremost thinker in this field is Tanzania's President, Julius K. Nyerere. See in particular his *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, 1968.
4. W. Chipeta, On the classification of African indigenous co-operatives, *African Studies Review*, Vol. XIV, No.1, April 1971, pp. 95-100.
5. This practice appears to be widespread. See M. Herskovits, op. cit.
6. G. Benneh, The response of farmers in Northern Ghana to the introduction of mixed farming: a case study. *Geografiska Annaler* Vol. 54, Ser. 8. Vol.2, 1972, pp. 95-103.
7. B.E. Rourke, *Wages and Incomes of Agricultural Workers in Ghana*, ISSER, Technical Publication Series No.13, Legon, 1971.
8. Jack Goody and Joan Buckley, Inheritance and women's labour in Africa, *Africa*, April 1973, pp. 108-121.