The Operation of an Informal Market: Bolgatanga's Goat Market
(working research note)

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Abstract (165)

Research on price trends in informal markets relies on visits to these sites and utilizing some kind of survey instrument. This paper begins with a broader question and adopts a more grounded strategy, asking: what are some elements of an informal commodity market in a developing country, such as a goat market, that can be identified in an ethnographic approach? Based on 18 months of field observations, the paper narrates the presence or absence of formal documentation and informal rules across three categories (price, care, and transportation) at its case study site of the goat market in Bolgatanga, Ghana. It finds that there is an almost complete lack of standard documentation seen in the everyday life of developed countries. It also notes the relatively stable, yet informal, practices with respect to bargaining and exchange and organized transportation to a point of sale. These social and cultural practices are likely important to any planned adjustment or intervention to ensure food security or simply improved market operation.

Keywords: informal, market, Ghana, goats

Introduction

While some scholars question the utility of the “formal-informal dichotomy” in development policy and research (e.g. Guha-Khasnobis, Kanbur, and Ostrom 2006: 2), many operate on the idea that informal markets will persist in the immediate future. In developing countries, informal markets are seen as important for economic forecasting and, indeed, understanding the economy as a whole. Yet, they present a set of obstacles for policy makers because they are unregulated, unofficial, and undocumented. In short, it is a data-starved context in a data-driven world (see e.g. Fourcade and Healy 2017). In response, many entities in the global governance architecture (states, international organizational, and NGOs) have sought to formalize informal markets through mapping processes involving data collection (see e.g. McNeill 2004; UNDP 2004).

Research on price trends in informal markets relies on visits to these sites and utilizing some kind of survey instrument. This was noted in the World Food Programme’s food security bulletins across three regions in northern Ghana.¹ This paper begins with a broader question and adopts a more grounded strategy, asking: what are some elements of an informal commodity market in a developing country, such as a goat market, that can be identified in an ethnographic approach? Rather than collecting data on already operationalized concepts, whose direction, trends, and meaning are already fixed (see e.g. Mitchell 2005), this paper first examines how these concepts are instantiated in the informal context.

In particular, two categories of inquiry are offered. First, is there regulation and documentation, if any? Second, what are stable patterns of action with respect to the interactions within the market and about the commodity in question? Based on 18 months of

¹ See the World Food Programme’s database of publications, particularly their Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis, online: https://www.wfp.org/publications/list?term_node_tid_depth=1649&tid_3=All&tid_2=All&tid_1=All (accessed 8 November 2018).

field observations, the paper narrates the presence or absence of formal documentation and informal rules across three categories (price, care, and transportation) at its case study site of the goat market in Bolgatanga, Ghana.

This paper notes that there has been some scholarly work on informal markets in developing countries, particularly on food safety (see Roesel and Grace 2015). While a participatory method is not employed, this paper agrees with these scholars that there are advantages to a longer-term, grounded approach not afforded by most survey data methodologies (see Helmke and Levitsky 2004 on fieldwork and informal institutions in comparative politics; Vande walle 2008 for an excellent overview).

The presentation of this particular case demonstrates what value can be generated from this research approach toward studying informal markets. In particular, by experiencing informality one is able to observe and understand both the lack of regulatory procedures, but also the great amount of rule-based behavior and patterns of action that are also present and allow the market to function in the way that it does. In particular, this paper notes first the almost complete lack of standard documentation seen in the everyday life of developed countries (regarding goats, compare with Barkely et al 2017), such as receipts and certifications. Second, this paper notes the relatively stable, yet informal practices with respect to bargaining and exchange and organized informal transportation to a point of sale. These social and cultural practices are likely important to any planned adjustment or intervention to ensure food security or simply improved market operation.

Analytical Narrative: The Operation of the Bolgatanga Goat Market

This account is based on the author's experiences and field notes living in Bolgatanga (known as Bolga) over the course of 18 months (September 2009 through March 2011). Bolga, the

capital of Ghana's Upper East Region (UER) is not considered rural by any definition, but is in the under-developed region in the north of the country.

Its market day occurs every third day. The evenings of those preceding “market days” often consists of trucks (or lorries) filing into the town. One can observe the goods that will be in the stands, stalls, carts, and wagons the next day. They are transported in sacks and distributed to various vendors, often by men using flatbed push wagons or women carrying stainless steel basins on top of their heads. Thus, food products, are seasonal: watermelons in October, mangoes in March, onions and greens nearly all year round.

On market day, the fenced yard near the Zuarungu taxi rank, perhaps 30 meters from one of the main streets, the goat market (a rectangle approximately 70 meters by 30 meters) teems with activity in the early morning hours.² Indeed, none of the other towns in the area have a goat market as large as this one, and it deals in a variety of goats and sheep, male and female, adult and juvenile.³ It is an important landmark and one which can hardly be avoided if one uses “public transportation” (taxis) to go to the market.

Behind this yard lay what is at first glance a maze of dirt pathways lined with a variety of shops ranging from mobile wagons to constructed make-shift wooden stalls to immobilized metal containers with concrete patios. Different areas of the market sell different products: clothes, fruit, vegetables, shoes, kitchenware, and so on. Like all markets, there are buyers and sellers. Even in the UER, where levels of development are lower than in the more modernized south, buying and selling goes on.

² Distances are author's estimates. It should also be noted that this market area was razed to construct a more substantial, perhaps permanent market area. The new temporary market, when the author left the country, was, in fact, the old market.

³ The fencing appears to be not well maintained in some parts with bits of metal jutting out and some noticeable barbed wire in a few spots.

When one enters the yard of the goat market there is a strong smell of animals, dust, and dirt. To the left is covering, where water (filtered “pure water”) and kola nuts are sold. A small yard under cover sees some goats that are tied up. Men sit under the cover observing the exchanges. The majority of the yard is not under cover and extends north from the path I often walk to get to other parts of the Bolga market. At the end of the yard is another covered area where one frequently sees bicycles parked. Along the main path through the yard are short, planted stakes where goats are tied. Along the perimeter, but still inside the fence, are ropes for tying goats. Indeed, on the non-market days, a few goats are tied, mainly in the middle area of the yard. A few men are there to look after them. On market days, the yard is full of goats, all tied to stakes or fencing in loose rows and columns, or held by men or boys (one hardly ever sees a woman in the yard, and if one does, she is selling drinks, mostly non-alcoholic). The noise is not deafening, but loud enough that one knows as one approaches: this is the goat market, here is the yard. Indeed, there is no sign proclaiming “Bolga goat market”, no sign with a government office attached to it or with a sponsoring international organization or agency that has made it possible. In this sense, the market is informal, unofficial, yet few things could be less widely known.

The buying and selling of goats (exchange) is common in the yard.⁴ Much is done in the local language (Frafra/Gurune), though occasionally I hear English. Cash is the dominant currency, though I believe not the only one. I have on only one occasion seen a truly malicious disagreement in the practice of exchange. Much conversation occurs, as does much bargaining over prices. This is based on sex, size, and the quality of the goats. Men do inspect goats, and go around to greet buyers and sellers. It is generally good-natured. Indeed, it seems that everyone involved wants to facilitate economic transactions. These patterns of behavior and the

⁴ Goat hides are also a commodity, but are located in a different part of the market.

lack of contestation at all concerning any of these practices suggests that the rules for buying and selling goats, as well as the appropriate price for that day, week, or time of year, are probably well-known.

I observed no market formalities concerning transactions. Of course, the municipality recognized the operation of a large goat market within its jurisdiction, but as far as I could tell, it made no effort to regulate or even monitor the transactions themselves. There were no, for example, registration papers of goat traders (whose behavior would not be unlike those on the floor of a stock exchange), or legal records of goat trading volume. There are no receipts and I have not seen a system for grading goat quality. There are no scales or measurement instruments. Again, this does not mean that informal rules do not exist. Indeed, men usually test the reflexes of goats (light striking) and check their anuses (for signs of illness in excrement). This suggests that the goat market is highly informal, and that cultural understanding and social networks play a vital role, even in the identification of buyers and sellers. A Ghanaian who I knew to be an electrician advised me of a trusted seller of goats: his brother.⁵

The transport of goats is conducted in a variety of ways. Taxis or pick-up trucks that double as taxis are sometimes used to transport goats. These vehicles often come right up to the entrance of the yard to unload goats, where many men frequently gather to inspect the new animals first-hand. Tro tros (or bush taxis, communal van-like vehicles) load them onto their roofs. Motorcycles and bicycles are also commonly used to transport goats. A large basket and some rope are all that is necessary. I observed no regulations concerning the transport of goats.

One notices that some goats are not particularly well-fed, some appear quite malnourished. This suggests an inefficiency and a common practice at work when goats are about to be sold. In order to save costs, it is plausible that goats are not well-fed if they will be

⁵ In this case, I could not verify if he meant a good friend of his or actually his brother.

sold soon. Indeed, this practice can be claimed to be common because if it were not these particular sellers would probably not be competitive. The other explanation, of course, is that there are two price ranges for goats, ones that are well-fed (and perhaps ready for slaughter) and ones that are not. However, I did not notice this. I observed only a handful of well-fed goats (or any other animal, for that matter), so perhaps there is some unspoken agreement among the goat traders.

When transported to its destination, goats are generally let to roam free. Given that the price of goats, relative to other goods and sources of food, can be quite high,⁶ this is something of an oddity. The goats gather under the shade, graze, or, as I observed on occasion, use their front legs to pull down branches to eat fresh leaves. Goats have “stolen” portions of greens sold in the market. They roam in the market itself, on the streets of Bolga, even sometimes finding themselves in the open gutters that line many of the main roads.

Outside the city center, they roam the fields. The males fight, head butting each other over females, shady areas, or piles of dirt. Some are more skittish of humans than others. “Free range” goats either veer away from a human or will stare at a human if it is approached. A few dead goats are seen on the side of the road, probably roadkill, but most drivers manage to avoid goats and most goats avoid cars. They are common on the streets and drivers know to watch out for them, though this hardly deters vehicular speeding. On occasion, I have seen a goat with an injured leg, but this does not prevent their sale or purchase. In general, the practice of utilizing veterinary services is not widespread.⁷ Indeed, in a nearby field to the author, one small goat appeared to be physically disabled and was continuously bleating. Within the hour, the goat was carried off and was not seen again.

⁶ One small goat can be had for not much less than 30 GhC.

⁷ Goats are sometimes taken to a veterinarian, where mange is often treated. The author was acquainted with a foreign veterinarian.

Female goats populate and roam the open (non-enclosed) area adjacent to our residence in Bolga. These goats are the biological sources of goat production, affecting supply. Male goats also roam the area, sometimes in pursuit of suitable females to impregnate. In instances where the mother has rejected a juvenile, it will attempt to bond with a female for milk (bonding can occur between females and non-biological juveniles). The females generally do not permit milk to be taken indiscriminately, and juveniles have been observed to demonstrate their fitness to females by running and jumping. These goats tend to look well-fed as the fields have crop stems and organic matter from the various houses in the area produce sustenance for goats (these include fruit peels from mango, avocado, or banana, or leaves/flowers used in making various teas). Though in the dry season, food for goats decreases severely, leading some juveniles to be extremely malnourished, and possibly abandoned.⁸ Again, I observed no regulation concerning care or municipal intervention or policy regarding the roaming of goats.

In general, goats are treated as a valuable commodity, perhaps to be sold in times of widespread crop failure, flooding or drought, though the practice of permitting goats to roam would appear to be an obstacle in ensuring the goat's safety and security (stealing). Indeed, improved treatment and care for juveniles, goat nutrition, and so on can reap economic benefits in the long-term. Moreover, managing the population and improving goat-rearing practices can have positive effects on goat prices. Goats are looked after in a fairly passive, though not completely unorganized, way. Goats are often struck to be pacified, but goats were never observed to be harmed in such a way that would appear to decrease their value at the market.

Goat meat is sold in the market, as freshly slaughtered and skinned goat is transported in large stainless steel bowls, normally on the top of some young man's head. Butchers in the

⁸ To be clear, no access to the minds of goats is claimed in making these observations. Rather, the behavioral manifestations are contextualized and interpreted to produce the observations. In this manner, this is also the case when observing humans, such that researchers have no direct access to the minds of humans, only shared language and practices.

market then chop these up, with organs and skulls ready for sale as well. I observed no records of vaccines, and there are no known health regulations to the general treatment of goats or slaughtering practices.

Summary

Concerning prices, care, and transportation, there was no apparent regulation by any government entity. However, particular patterns of action related to these categories were observed. This demonstrates how informal practices are not only involved in the operation of this goat market, but actually provides the foundation for, and makes possible, its operation.

	Price	Care	Transportation
Absence of formality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No listed prices • No receipts given • No scales for weight • No identifying paperwork for buyers/sellers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No certification of quality or health • Very little branding • Hardly any veterinary services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No branded or uniform transportation vehicles
Presence of informal rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every 3rd day • Transactions involving bargaining occurring without violence • Social networks appeared to facilitate exchange 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goats were transported and (rudimentarily) examined at point of sale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized and varied distribution network of vehicles • Organized, regular point of sale

Table 1. Summary of field observations.

Table 1 above summarizes the how the field observations can be presented to show the absence of formality and the influence of informal rules. Such a table can be challenged by another researcher's field observations or confirmed.

The analysis here provides a starting point for understanding the operation of an informal market. It suggests (see Roesel and Grace 2015) that informal markets are not necessarily bad

or without order, and are likely to develop on their own terms by adapting or modifying informal rules already in place, rather than a wholesale systemic shift.

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