Convergence on Cattle: Political Ecology, Social Group Perceptions, and Socioeconomic Relationships in Acre, Brazil

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Abstract

Cattle raising is currently the leading cause of deforestation in Amazonia, and an increasingly appealing and profitable way for a growing number of smallholders to make a living in the western Amazon state of Acre, Brazil. The Acrean rubber tapper social movement contested the arrival of cattle ranchers in the 1970s and 1980s, but cattle raising has expanded among smallholder groups, including the rubber tappers, over the past 20 years. Building on the legacy of political–economic analyses of Amazonian cattle raising, this study argues for an expanded view of cattle raising by incorporating perspectives on the cultural constructions surrounding cattle and intergroup socioeconomic relationships. Data obtained from surveys and participant observation are used to examine the factors that have contributed to the expansion of cattle raising across three Acrean groups, each historically distinguished by their unique forms of livelihood and associated identities: forest-extractivist rubber tappers, agricultural colonists, and large-scale ranchers. It is argued that three factors have contributed to the growth of cattle ranching among these groups: political and economic shifts, which have made agricultural and extractive livelihoods less competitive with cattle raising; the spread of positive cultural views surrounding cattle raising; and the transition of intergroup relationships from conflict to cooperation in the cattle industry. [cattle raising, cattle culture, political ecology, Amazon]

The initial expansion of cattle into the Brazilian Amazon in the 1970s and 1980s was mostly limited to large-scale ranchers in the eastern Amazon states of Pará and Mato Grosso, and was the result of land speculation and government credit and subsidies (Hecht 1993; Mahar 1989; Schmink and Wood 1992). In areas of forest extractivism such as the state of Acre, Brazil, rubber tappers fought against the conversion of forest to cattle pasture in the name of environmental and social justice, making them symbols for an emerging global environmentalism (Keck 1995; Tsing 2005).

Recent research has documented the alarming expansion of cattle raising in the Amazon region over the past decade. With the integration of the Amazon into regional and global markets (see Perz et al. 2010), the suppression of hoof and mouth disease, favorable agro-climatic conditions, and cheaper land prices, the Amazon became an attractive destination for cattle displaced from centralized production regions (Arima et al. 2006; Smeraldi and May 2008). From 1998 to 2008, Acre experienced the greatest percentage increase in head of cattle of all Brazilian states (IBGE 2008). Improved enforcement of environmental controls has slowed Amazon deforestation since 2005 (Nepstad et al. 2009), especially among large ranchers, but smallholders, including rubber tappers, who lack support for agricultural and forest extraction activities and face strict deforestation constraints, subsequently became the main drivers of cattle expansion, which is their only economically viable livelihood alternative (Toni et al. 2007). Thus, these policy shifts have inadvertently led to a generalized tendency to adopt cattle raising, even among groups previously unaccustomed or even opposed to cattle (Ehringhaus 2005; Gomes 2009; Salisbury and Schmink 2007; Wallace 2004). Beneath these general trends, however, lie important differences in the ways distinct groups now understand and practice cattle raising.

The analysis presented here uses field data to explore how different social groups’ economic practices, the primary manner in which they use their land to make a living, have gradually shifted to cattle
raising. Three different groups are compared: forest-extractivist rubber tappers, agriculturally oriented colonists, and large-scale ranchers. I examine the manner in which these groups were positioned within a political economy from 1970 to 1990, and how they have responded to political and economic changes in 20 years since 1990. Acre presents an interesting case for analysis because of the presence of three groups that were differentiated by distinct economic practices, identities, and tenure systems, as well as the conflict between large-scale ranchers and rubber tappers over cattle prior to 1990 (Bakx 1988; Revkin 1990). Over the last 20 years, however, smallholder rubber tappers and colonists have decreased their respective traditional economic practices of forest extractivism and agriculture, and become increasingly reliant on cattle (Toni et al. 2007), joining the ranchers in the pursuit of cattle-based livelihoods. In addition to the critical role of political and economic factors, I focus on group-specific cultural factors that mediate each group’s responses, emphasizing their perceptions of cattle and concurrent changes in intergroup relationships. A framework that draws from political ecology, economic anthropology, and anthropological literature on the meanings of cattle is used to examine the spread of cattle across groups in Acre.

Theoretical Framework

Economic practices are structured by political–economic factors, such as governmental development policies and market fluctuations, which penetrate unequally at different levels and among groups (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987). Political ecology builds on political economy to study the role of power relations in human–environment interactions, as well as the influence of capitalism on local systems and decisions (Biersack 1999:10). I draw on a comparative political ecology framework to examine the ways that political and economic factors affect different groups in unique ways across time (Gezon and Paulson 2005).

Political–economic factors delimit, but do not determine the manner in which groups make decisions and provision for their household or the market (Chayanov 1986; Netting 1993). Perspectives from economic anthropology emphasize the importance of grounded cultural phenomena in mediating social group responses to macrostructural processes and changes (Polanyi 1958; Sahlins 1972; Wilk and Cliggett 2006). The economic practices of social groups are also based on historical, socioecological, and ideological factors that are constitutive of their practice-based identities (Barth 1956).

Within a shared biophysical setting, distinct identities also clash with, and are reinforced and otherwise influenced by other groups with whom they interact, each with different ways of perceiving, using, and contesting resources (Bennett 1969; Ingold 1980; Robben 1989; Schmink and Wood 1992). The spaces that social groups exploit through distinct economic practices may be implicitly linked to their practice-based identities when they are institutionalized in land tenure systems (Schwartzman 1989; Toni et al. 2007).

The encounter between groups, however, may produce changes in both perceptions and practices (Atran et al. 1999; Rudel et al. 2002). These changes could be at odds with traditional land tenure systems and may or may not accurately reflect aspects of a group’s putative identity. For example, political economy shifts that render the traditional practices of one group economically unviable could produce tensions between cultural identity and tenure rules (Ehringhaus 2005).

Cattle engender strong cultural beliefs in settings throughout the world (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Harris 1966; Herskovits 1926). Cattle raisers are often accorded greater prestige than those without cattle, as occurs with agriculturists in Africa (Schneider 1957; Spear 1993) and the Americas (Bennett 1969). By focusing on cattle in more recent contexts, where broader connections are drawn out and constraints emanate from multiscalar political projects and capitalist markets, we gain a window into social change, conflict, and the changing role of the cattle producer in the contemporary world (Comaroff and Comaroff 1990; Ferguson 1990; Hutchinson 1996; Sheridan 2007).

In summary, this framework recognizes that several factors, political and economic structures, cultural factors, including on-the-ground identities and circulating cultural meanings of cattle, and relationships between groups may affect economic practices. Political–economic factors channel, but do not determine economic practice alone because groups within a shared setting may have identities based on different economic practices, which guide the manner in which they respond to structural influences. The establishment of distinct types of land tenure among
groups may also reaffirm traditional identities that may or may not correspond to economic practice. Although both practice and identity are dynamic, the tenure system is less flexible, a product of a preexisting configuration of political–economic factors and cultural preferences.

Changes in the political economy may then make some economic practices more viable than others. When the economic practice is cattle raising, which is a practice frequently associated with positive cultural values, the incentives may be heightened for smallholders to adopt cattle. In a context where wealthy cattle raisers interact with poor agriculturalists and extractivists, and a cattle-based lifestyle is valued in popular culture, the appeal of cattle raising is enhanced further. Changes in economic practice may or may not accurately reflect each group’s putative identity, creating tension between historical notions of identity and institutionalized tenure system rules on the one hand, and economic practices encouraged by political economy on the other.

**Economics, Identity, and Tenure Systems: Background and Objectives**

Given the changing political economy in Upper Acre, the goal of this study was to disentangle the confluence of factors that have led to cattle expansion in the region, in order to contribute to a more nuanced account of cattle raising in the Amazon, which is occurring at the intersection of group-specific cultures and larger structural factors, producing unexpected and unintended consequences.

Research for this article was conducted in the Upper Acre region of Acre, Brazil, where each group resides or works in unique tenure systems associated with their traditional economic practices. Prior to 1990, each social group in Acre was dedicated to distinct forms of exploiting their environment to fulfill their subsistence and economic needs. Rubber tappers mostly relied on the collection of forest products (rubber and Brazil nut); colonists largely dedicated themselves to agricultural pursuits; and large-scale ranchers raised cattle. The creation of distinct land tenure systems in the 1970s and 1980s institutionalized group identities based on these specific economic practices in specific spaces.

The colonists arrived to take part in some of the first nationally sponsored agricultural settlement projects that were implemented throughout Amazonia in the 1970s and 1980s. They were directed by the Brazilian Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), which settled families from overcrowded and impoverished parts of the country in the sparsely populated Amazon region. These migrants were expected to convert forest to agricultural plots and produce for their own subsistence, as well as for the market (Moran 1981; Smith 1982). Acrean colonist families reported that demonstrating “progress” through forest conversion was essential to maintaining their land in these early years.

At the same time, the Brazilian government supported the establishment of large-scale cattle ranches by offering generous fiscal incentives, attracting entrepreneurs from other parts of Brazil (Hecht 1993). The Acrean state, at that time headed by Governor Wanderley Dantas (1971–1975), courted investors from the south and facilitated the sale of the vast rubber estates to the ranchers (Bakx 1988). Young members of the rural elite based in Minas Gerais and São Paulo were drawn to the new frontier in Acre where they could acquire cheap land and subsidies for cattle ranching.

The arrival of migrants in the form of affluent ranchers and colonists hungry for land resulted in clashes over land with the native rubber tappers, who were already scattered over much of southwestern Acre. Rancher legal rights, backed by governmental policy of the time, were superimposed on top of tapper use rights. When ranchers sought to claim the land that they had purchased and convert the forests to pastures, there was intergroup conflict (Bakx 1988). As a result of rubber tapper mobilization against rancher deforestation and displacement, the extractive reserve (RESEX) was created in 1990. The model institutionalized territorial and use rights for the rubber tappers around their traditional economic practice of forest extractivism (Kainer et al. 2003; Schwartzman 1989).

From 1970 to 1990, different groups with different practices came together and clashed in Acre. Through the establishment of tenure systems based on specific economic practices and political objectives, social groups became linked to distinct identities, practices, and spaces. Government policies encouraged group specific economic practices in each tenure system. Cattle were mostly confined to large-scale ranchers in Acre until the 1990s. Lack of technical knowledge and capital limited their adoption by smallholder colonists and rubber tappers, who also disdained cattle for their role in social conflict and environmental destruc-
tion (Bakx 1988; Toni et al. 2007). Political–economic factors, cultural perceptions, and intergroup relationships, however, would all drastically change after 1990, producing a rupture in the apparent unity of practice, identity, and tenure, as well as a convergence on cattle among groups.

In the last 20 years, all groups’ tenure systems have become more restrictive because of environmental laws, while their practices have continued to respond to evolving political–economic and cultural cues. On the surface, the actions of colonists, and especially rubber tappers, can be understood as diverging from their tenure systems and identities. The notion of unified social group practice based on shared identity and the institutional rules of tenure systems occludes the ethnographic fact that groups have always adapted to structural constraints within cultural guidelines, which are also subject to change.

The assumed unity of practice-perception-tenure also betrays the fact that groups live side by side, interact with, and are influenced by each other. The essential function of cattle in the production system of each group can be distilled as such: rubber tappers value cattle for the liquidity and function as a savings account; colonists view cattle as their last option as a result of deforestation regulations that inhibit agriculture; and ranchers continue to raise cattle on a large scale for the beef market. Although groups use and think about cattle differently, their common participation in the cattle economy facilitates exchange and cooperation between them. Given these factors, this research focused on the following questions: (1) What political and economic factors have made cattle raising a more viable economic practice than agriculture and extractivism? (2) How do these different social groups in Acre now view cattle? (3) Once a vehicle of conflict, how do cattle now mediate intergroup cultural and economic exchanges?

Fieldwork and Methods

Over the course of 18 months from 2007 to 2010, I lived with families in each tenure area within the Upper Acre region for weeks at a time, conducting participant observation in order to understand their daily lives and the social context in which they make economic decisions. The majority of my fieldwork with colonists was conducted in the Quixadá Directed Settlement Project. All ranchers were based out of Rio Branco, with the majority of them owning ranches in Upper Acre, although some owned ranches in neighboring municipalities. The rubber tappers in this sample lived in the Chico Mendes Extractive Reserve (RESEX) in the former rubber estate of São Cristovão (Figure 1).

In 2009, I conducted semistructured interviews with members of each social group (rubber tappers \(n = 7\), colonists (13), and large-scale ranchers (11)) covering their economic practices across time and the factors that caused them to change their practices; perceptions of cattle and of their own and other social groups; and the manner in which they acquired their land and their relationships with other groups. These data enabled me to understand the histories of each group and the way that they have been and continue to be impacted by political and economic developments.

In 2010, I administered a questionnaire to 20 respondents of each group chosen through purposive sampling (Bernard 2000:176). I asked respondents to choose which practice (cattle raising, agriculture, or extractivism) was most associated with a series of descriptors, including: wealth, poverty, social status, and decadence. Respondents also answered yes/no questions about their perceptions of economic practice and other social groups. These data and additional ethnographic material collected over the course of fieldwork are used to understand social groups’ perceptions of themselves, other groups, and cattle, as described below.

**Political Economy after 1990: Neoliberal and Environmental Policies**

Over the last 20 years, different social groups in Amazonia have been heavily impacted by political and economic factors that are consequences of neoliberal and environmental policies. There has been a pronounced decline in governmental support for rural family production, including decreased support of agricultural livelihoods and the removal of subsidies for rubber. In addition to government investment in roads, these actions can be understood as part of a broader neoliberal agenda by the Brazilian government (Perz et al. 2010). Environmental policies have also played a role in changing the practices of rural groups. Strict enforcement of deforestation and burning regulations in Acre, beginning around 2000 with the onset of Acre’s “forest government,” have
also seriously impacted rural livelihood strategies. Each of these interventions has produced unique and unexpected effects, but collectively, they have made pre-1990 economic practices of extractivism and agriculture less competitive with cattle raising and, in some cases, impossible.

In 1990, the government established the first RESEX in Acre, responding to the rubber tapper movement demand to secure their rights to forested land for tapping rubber. Shortly thereafter, however, the government discontinued the subsidy that had propped up rubber prices for decades, undermining the viability of extractivist livelihoods. The removal of the rubber subsidy was the final straw for many extractivist families in Acre (Salisbury and Schmink 2007). Families in São Cristovão reported that it was during the 1990s that Brazil nut became their primary source of income, replacing rubber, and cattle began to enter the picture as a strategy for storing wealth. By the late 1990s, the herd size of Acre had exploded, much of it from smallholder adoption of cattle (Toni et al. 2007). Cattle spread throughout the RESEX, particularly in households bordering settlement projects and ranches (Gomes 2009).

Some families in the RESEX were threatened with expulsion for exceeding deforestation limits to raise cattle. In the words of A Tribuna, an Acrean newspaper: “the [RESEX] was born from the dreams of the rubber tappers to be protected from cattle raising. This same activity has now returned to threaten them” (Tribuna 2008). This press account and others like it imply that raising cattle in the RESEX is a violation in and of itself, which it is not, as long as deforestation limits are observed. The move to cattle is also considered a violation of rubber tapper identity as forest conservationists, which they invoked to secure their land tenure rights. More than any other group, the rubber tappers feel the tensions of an evolving political economy that renders their tradi-
tional economic practices less viable than cattle, and they struggle to reconcile their cultural values with the material needs of their households.

There is also a disconnection between the colonists’ traditional and current economic practices. It is important to note, however, that most colonists, especially migrants from other regions, never had an ideological problem with cattle raising. Colonists report that up through the 1980s, there was governmental support and markets for their agricultural goods, but that this is no longer the case. For most products, such as rice and corn, the costs of getting the harvest to market outweigh potential profit. Governmental support for agriculture was not removed through a conscious policy decision, but the colonists were essentially left to fend for themselves after the first big push to develop the Amazon (Smith 1982). For rubber tappers incorporated into the smaller plots (~80 hectares) of the settlement project, extractivism, which requires more extensive landholdings (~300 hectares), was never possible.

Because of the decline in agricultural support and the impossibility of traditional extractivism on small plots of land, colonists began to opt for cattle in the 1990s. Many reported farming for their own consumption through the 1990s, but this subsistence agriculture decreased in the early 2000s when deforestation regulations began to be strictly enforced.

Prior to 1998, colonists and ranchers were allowed to deforest up to 50 percent of their landholdings in Amazonia, leaving the remainder as forest reserves. In 1998, the general limit, which began to be enforced with colonists, ranchers, and other groups not residing within a conservation unit (i.e., rubber tappers), was lowered to 20 percent. Rubber tapper lands maintain the 10 percent rule that was established with the creation of the RESEX.

The creation of national environmental laws for the Amazon responded to growing national and international pressure, but the enforcement of these laws varies from state to state. The “forest” government of Acre has demonstrated the political will to combat deforestation over the past decade and is seen by all groups as an effective enforcer of deforestation laws. Technological advances have also contributed to enforcement; remote sensing and the geo-referenced mapping of property enable governmental environmental authorities to monitor deforestation in previously “invisible” or inaccessible areas.

Given that political factors distinctly affect different social groups because of tenure regulations, swidden agriculture is increasingly uncommon among colonists, but continues with rubber tappers. Most colonists have already reached or exceeded their deforestation limits, and burning, which they consider necessary for successful agricultural production, is currently highly controlled. Tappers that have not reached their 10 percent limit are still able to burn and plant one hectare a year, if they obtain permission from the state environmental authority.

Those who surpass their deforestation limits are placed in “environmental debt,” which restricts their access to credit and other government programs, further limiting their options, particularly the colonists. Many colonists sell their land and move to the city: 2 of the 13 colonist families that I interviewed in 2009 sold their land later that year to a rancher, who now uses the land exclusively for grazing his cattle. Those who have stayed are struggling, and while many of them find ways to plant, either illegally or through the use of new techniques such as green manures, they invariably report being completely reliant on cattle for money to buy staple foods that they once produced.

The concurrent application of neoliberal and environmental policies from 1990 to 2010 made extractive and agricultural livelihood strategies less economically viable among rubber tappers and colonists. The enforcement of deforestation regulations made agriculture, in particular, extremely challenging for colonists. The regulations favor forest preservation, but have not been accompanied by the development of significant markets for forest products, or sustained governmental support for alternatives to deforestation-dependent production, such as colonist swidden agriculture. In this unique configuration of factors, colonists and rubber tappers now adopt cattle or expand their herds through the conversion of former agricultural lands or clearing new forest illegally to establish pasture. For these populations, cattle represent their best or last option for making a living within current political and economic constraints.

**Positive Perceptions of Cattle**

Although cattle were disdained in the 1980s for their role in rubber tapper/rancher conflicts and forest destruction, most rubber tappers now agree...
that raising cattle is an appealing way to make a living. The barrier to cattle ownership was less ideological for colonists; it was a matter of cattle becoming more available and affordable and then creating pasture. Acrean smallholders are increasingly likely to view cattle in a positive light, given the material success of cattle raisers and the decline of extractivism and agriculture. In addition to the daily interactions between social groups that highlight the socioeconomic distinction of ranchers, the development of “cattle culture” in Acre reinforces positive images of a cattle-centered rural lifestyle.

Despite Acre’s image as the land of the rubber tappers, and the social conflict and environmental destruction brought about by the arrival of cattle in the region, positive messages about the cattle-raising lifestyle are increasingly reinforced in popular culture. When I arrived in the region in 2007, there was one rodeo on the side of the highway in Upper Acre; there are now five rodeos in the region catering largely to colonists, but also to rubber tappers. In a survey of 20 members of each group, 85 percent of colonists, 65 percent of ranchers, and 50 percent of rubber tappers agreed that they enjoy attending rodeos.

The cultural constructions that surround the rodeo draw on and reinforce “cattle culture,” a specific vision of the rural lifestyle in which cattle, cattle raisers, and cowboys are privileged. Positive messages about this cattle-centered lifestyle circulate through sertaneja music, contri (country) dress (boots, tight jeans, and plaid shirt), rodeos, and rural-themed festivals. The annual Expo-Acre fair in the capital of Rio Branco, the state’s biggest festival, is largely a celebration of a cattle-based lifestyle, with hulking bulls and prize horses on display, performances by national sertaneja acts, and cowboys from all of Brazil competing in rodeo events. Smaller, municipal-level celebrations, also centered on a rodeo, have spread throughout Upper Acre, as have stores selling contri clothing, belt buckles, and smokeless tobacco. This cattle culture is present in tapper communities, such as São Cristovão, where rubber tappers have been exposed to the culture through their labor for ranchers as cowboys, the rodeo circuit, and television and radio. Members of each group report that they enjoy listening to sertaneja music (95 percent of colonists and ranchers and 90 percent of rubber tappers). The cultural messages that express a preference for a cattle-based rural livelihood reach members of each group.

While the rodeo cowboy is the symbol of cattle culture, the rancher is a model of socioeconomic success in Acre. Smallholders assume that the rancher’s wealth directly comes from cattle. There are also narratives of upward social mobility enabled by cattle that are recounted throughout the countryside. These stories center on the poor colonist or tapper who started with one cow and is now wealthy.

Twenty respondents in each group were asked to choose which of the three principal economic practices (extractivism, agriculture, or cattle raising) was most associated with the words “wealth,” “poverty,” “progress,” and “decadence.” The top (sum of most chosen) responses of each group are presented in Table 1.

These findings indicate that positive attributes of wealth and progress are associated with cattle raising among all groups. Conversely, poverty is even more strongly associated with extractivism among all groups. Ranchers, and a little over half of rubber tappers, believe that extractivism is associated with decadence or decline. Colonists associate their traditional economic practice, agriculture, with decline. These practices extend to the members of social groups associated with them: all colonists, 90 percent

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<td>Rubber tappers</td>
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<td>Colonists</td>
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of ranchers, and 85 percent of rubber tappers surveyed said that raising cattle is most associated with high social status.

The rancher is also precisely esteemed for the fact that most think that he doesn’t really “work,” but is above the toils of physical labor. Smooth hands imply a socioeconomic position of privilege and the “good life” in the minds of all smallholders. Seventy-five percent of ranchers and 68 percent of rubber tappers said that ranchers do not have calloused hands, an indicator of physical labor. Conversely, only 30 percent of colonists agreed that ranchers have calloused hands. In responding to this question, they often referenced former colonists who had built up enough land and cattle to be considered “ranchers,” although other groups might not consider the same person to be a rancher.

Despite a sustained program by the Acrean Government to valorize the rubber tapper way of life and heritage, only 35 percent of rubber tappers, 15 percent of colonists, and 50 percent of ranchers agreed that rubber tappers were more respected in Acrean society than ranchers. Colonists and rubber tappers are aware that their economic practice and lifestyle are not valued in popular culture to the same extent as cattle raisers.

In summary, cattle raising and those who practice it are more positively viewed across groups, signaling that cultural perceptions are linked with the expansion of cattle ranching across all groups. The emergence of cattle raising as a viable economic practice during a time of decline in agriculture and extractivism, and the expansion of cattle culture has led to positive perceptions of cattle raising and cattle raisers. It is not clear if perceptions paved the way for a change in practice, or if their perceptions followed positive experiences raising cattle. It is apparent, however, that as the cattle economy becomes more central to Acrean social groups, so too does cattle culture assume a more central role in Acrean society, combining with and overtaking other cultural traditions.

Twenty years ago, rubber tappers were hesitant to adopt cattle, a symbol of habitat and livelihood destruction. It was only through time, as the memories of the conflict faded, younger generations took control of households, and political–economic factors came to overwhelmingly favor cattle, that they took the leap to cattle. There were also preconditions, knowledge of cattle raising and the availability of cattle for them to buy, both of which were facilitated by a social context that transitioned from one of intergroup conflict to one of interaction, cooperation, and exchange in cattle.

**Socioeconomic Relationships: From Conflict to Cooperation in the Cattle Industry**

Interactions between groups facilitate the spread of cattle, cattle know-how, and the belief that cattle is the route to a better life in comparison to traditional agricultural or extractive livelihoods. With the help of government fiscal incentives, ranchers paved the way for the expansion of cattle by bringing cattle and a cattle industry to Acre in the 1970s and 1980s. The growth of the ranchers’ herds made cattle more available and affordable to smallholders, and also increased local perceptions that cattle were the route to a better life. Additionally, a service industry sprouted up to support cattle raising in small towns of Upper Acre, from agricultural supply stores to slaughterhouses, butcher shops, and intermediaries to pick up and deliver cattle.

Government supported research on improved pastures, cattle breeds, and techniques also helped, to the point that Acrean cattle raising has achieved levels of productivity unparalleled in other parts of Brazil (Valentim and Andrade 2009). Credit was available for the purchase of cattle. Smallholders also used credit destined for agricultural pursuits to invest directly and indirectly in cattle (Toni et al. 2007). The state government went to unprecedented lengths to secure the cattle industry in Acre against hoof and mouth disease by establishing the Institute for the Defense of Agro-Cattle Raising and the Forest (IDAF), which is part of a sustained effort by the federal government to avoid an economically catastrophic outbreak (Smeraldi and May 2008).

Essential information on basic cattle raising, such as castration, general health, vaccination, and birthing generally flows from migrants to native Acreans, who have less experience with cattle raising. For example, native Acrean rubber tappers in São Cristovão call their colonist neighbors, who live along the dirt road, leading to the RESEX, to help them vaccinate or castrate their cattle. Although many rubber tappers still lack knowledge of basic cattle-raising skills, some who have worked on ranches can perform these services. Many rubber tappers admit that their lack of
knowledge in cattle raising and environmental restrictions are the main factors that prevent them from adopting cattle.

It is common for youths in the settlement projects or rubber tapper communities to seek work on the large ranches, where they may start as general laborers and work their way up to peão de fazenda, or cowboy, the most highly esteemed rural laborer. When cowboys return to their communities, they spread an enthusiasm for the labor arrangement of the ranch, where they eat meat every day and are protected by the labor code, and for cattle, which they believe gave the rancher his wealth.

Ranchers, or their gerentes (ranch administrators), also enter into direct contact with smallholders, particularly colonists. These arrangements aim to secure calves to be fattened on rancher land or to rent pasturage on smallholder land to fatten their cattle. Tappers and colonists who raise cattle usually sell the calves to ranchers and intermediaries (usually members of smallholder communities) for ranchers and private entities. Selling calves, although not as economically advantageous in the long run for smallholders, makes sense because they usually have a limited amount of pasture, which is strained by raising calves to slaughter size. The calf sold for around $250 after eight months will fetch around $700 for the rancher two years later.

These relationships underline not only cooperative participation in the cattle industry but also the difference in socioeconomic positions between ranchers and smallholders. Ranchers are able to make a greater profit, operating at an economy of scale with direct links to the market, while smallholders are unable to engage the market on such terms. Ranchers generally have greater economic security, and can weather ups and downs, and usually have investments in the city as well. For smallholders, cattle are sometimes the only source of income, a savings account that must be liquidated in times of need.

Ranchers also have access to technologies and the capital to implement them, which enable them to raise more cattle per hectare than smallholders. In the past decade, ranchers have employed herd rotation, high labor inputs, and improved grasses to increase their production. Colonists and rubber tappers do not have enough land or capital to invest in many of these improvements. The rise in cattle among these populations has resulted from conversion of agricultural land or forest to pasture.

The socioeconomic disparities between these groups remain, but have, in some cases, and can be, in the minds of many, overcome through cattle, further contributing to the appeal of cattle raising. The lines that once neatly delineated social groups along the boundaries of their tenure systems are less discernable. The shift from intergroup relations of conflict to those of cooperation in the cattle industry has, in addition to political, economic, and cultural changes, facilitated the spread of cattle ranching among many Acrean social groups.

**Conclusion**

The relationship between political-economic factors, cultural perceptions, and intergroup relationships, and the manner in which they collectively promoted cattle raising among different groups in Acre underwent a number of transitions over the past 40 years. The period from 1970–1990 was a formative time of intergroup conflict in which separate and distinct tenure systems were established within a political, economic, and cultural context that encouraged group-specific economic practices. The vision of separate groups within their respective tenure systems, economic practices, and practice-based identities downplays the inherent fluidity of groups and the complex interaction of general and group-specific cultural, political, and economic factors that have led to a rise in cattle.

The foundation laid in the period from 1970–1990 paved the way, both intentionally and inadvertently, for the explosion of cattle after 1990. Beginning around 1990 the retraction of government policies for agricultural and extractivist livelihoods made cattle an appealing economic practice for colonists and rubber tappers. This trend was further reinforced at the end of the 1990s by the enforcement of deforestation regulations, which pushed colonists toward an almost singular reliance on cattle.

During this period, ranchers began amassing their wealth through the growth of their herds. An industry developed to support them, and young rubber tappers and colonists sought employment on ranches. Cattle became more available, and knowledge of how to raise cattle began to circulate. The rancher also became a model of success in rural Acre, while agriculture and extractivism went into decline. In the past decade, popular cultural constructions based on a cattle-centered vision of the rural livelihood spread...
throughout Acre through the diffusion of music, rodeos, and dress. Cultural perceptions across groups now indicate overwhelmingly positive perceptions of cattle and cattle raisers. This confluence of cultural factors, the evolution of intergroup relations, and political-economic incentives all contribute to a context that now favors cattle raising over other livelihood strategies.

Political-economic and policy-oriented analyses dominate the study of cattle in the Amazon, often with a concern with slowing cattle-driven deforestation. Research on the cultural meanings of cattle in other settings can be used to formulate a multipart theoretical framework that takes into account group perceptions of cattle and political-economic determinants to provide a more complete understanding of the expansion of cattle in the Amazon. In Acre and throughout Amazonia, cattle are concurrently disdained for their role in social conflict and environmental destruction and desired for their singular ability to provide economic security. A cattle-centered vision of the rural lifestyle, celebrated in festivals, music, and dress, has entered the region and is growing alongside the cattle in the fields of smallholders. Incorporating these cultural considerations into the analysis could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the expansion of cattle in Amazonia, which is occurring at the intersection of group-specific perceptions, broader cultural constructions, and political-economic structures.

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