Cattle Culture in the Brazilian Amazon

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The majority of research on the expansion of cattle raising in Amazonia focuses on political economic drivers and resultant deforestation. The cultural constructions surrounding cattle raising, which are central to understanding the appeal of this livelihood in other parts of the world, have yet to be described in the Brazilian Amazon. This paper examines “cattle culture”—the positive cultural constructions associated with cattle raising and analyzes the paths that brought it to one of the “greenest” corners of Amazonia. In the western Amazon state of Acre, Brazil, the rubber tapper movement protested the arrival of cattle ranching in the 1980s, capturing worldwide attention with a message of sustainable forest-based development. Across Amazonia, groups who once opposed or were displaced by cattle are now adopting it—including Acrean rubber tappers and colonists. Drawing on primary data collected among rural and urban groups in Acre, I explain how cattle culture emerged in a state with a short and contested history with cattle raising. I focus specifically on the relationship between the cattle economy and cattle culture through analysis of three processes: local subsistence practices resulting in symbolic associations; the diffusion of market-oriented ranching and the dominant cauboi (cowboy) culture, and the ways that the two overlap and are negotiated among Acrean groups.

Key words: Amazon, ranching, agriculture, cattle culture, deforestation, development

Introduction

Cattle Conundrums in the Western Brazilian Amazon

Jatobá, Luanna, and Espimar Rocha live in a former seringal (rubber concession) in the western Amazon state of Acre, Brazil. Their home sits amid fruit trees and is surrounded by a two-hectare clearing planted with manioc, beans, and pasture. Foot trails radiate out from Rocha’s homestead through the forest, connecting them to the rubber and Brazil nut trees upon which they and their rubber tapper neighbors have historically depended. Given the role of cattle in environmental destruction and the displacement of Acrean rubber tappers during the 1970s and 1980s (Bakx 1988; Hecht and Cockburn 1989), Jatobá was naturally hesitant to adopt cattle when I first met him in 2007, but he took the plunge when he bought a young bull a year later. With each year that I visited the Rochas, I witnessed the growth of their affection for the bull, which they named “Tchoa.” The bull frequently stuck his head through the kitchen door looking for salt, which he licked out of their hands or from small heaps poured on the front step. Whenever the bull spotted one of them emerging from the forest, he lumbered over and stood while they rubbed his white and black speckled back, head, and dewlap. When Espimar knocked oranges from the trees, Tchoa was by his side to take a piece with his raspy tongue or gobble the fruit whole. They cherished Tchoa, but Jatobá told me that it was the promise of his usefulness that justified their allocation of otherwise scarce resources to the beast. In 2009, they put a ring, made of old insulated wire, through Tchoa’s nose, allowing them to tether and lead him. Espimar ran a rope through the ring to fashion reins, and often rode Tchoa to school.

By 2010, Tchoa was pulling an oxcart with a neighboring bull, carrying rubber, Brazil nuts, and other products to the pick-up point, where the rubber trails converged on a ramal (unpaved side road). The products were then taken by a truck to the market in Brasiléia some 80 kilometers away. The truck drove down the ramal lined by smallholder colonists and pastures and then turned on the paved BR-317 highway, rolling alongside large-scale ranchers’ picturesque pastures, where cowboys loll among the vast white herds. On the side of the highway are a number of rodeo arenas, including the Raio da Lua (Moonbeam), where young caboois (cowboys) clad in cowboy hats, leather boots and vests, and shiny belt buckles mounted bucking bulls in the hopes of winning a motorcycle during the summer months. After a competition one Saturday in July 2010, I sat with the caboois on a low wooden fence...
and listened as they talked and compared bumps and bruises. They devoured barbecued beef and boiled manioc root from plastic plates balanced between their knees, hurriedly stuff-
ing the last bits in their mouth as the *sertaneja* or *contri* (I use these terms interchangeably to refer to contemporary Brazilian country music) cranked up, signaling the beginning of the dance. From this little speck of light on the side of the highway, pulsating stereo speakers sent messages of an idyllic rural life floating out over the dark forest.

Later that summer, I found myself some 300 kilometers east of the Raio da Lua, in the capital city of Rio Branco. The normally tranquil setting next to the Acre River was completely transformed by swarms of men and women on horseback, the smell of diesel and roasting meat, and the sound of contri music. This was the starting point of the *cavalgada* (cavalcade), an annual parade of thousands of riders and other participants through the streets of Rio Branco. Each of the 70 *comitivas* (groups of mounted riders) followed a truck pulling double trailers decorated with palm thatch roofs and hay bales and filled with horseless revelers. These modern day chuck wagons were laden with coolers of iced beer, a grill full of sizzling beef and sausage on a stick, and stereo speakers taller than the two portable toilets at each end. Over the course of six hours, the riders ambled down the Via Chico Mendes, a street named for the martyred rubber tapper leader who brought the tappers struggles against cattle ranching and rainforest destruction to an international audience. The cavalgada inched past the “Stadium of the Forest” and the painted signs of the “Forest Government,” trailing behind a wake of charred wooden meat skewers, beer cans, and horse manure. Their arrival at the exposition grounds signaled the opening of *Expo-Acre*, a weeklong agricultural exposition with governmental and agro-industrial exhibits by day and evening rodeo competitions and concerts by popular country music artists. What accounts for the growth of this “cattle culture” in a state strongly linked politically and socially to the forest and with such a short and contested history with cattle raising?

The majority of Amazonian cattle research focuses on political and economic structures to understand the growing cattle industry, the leading driver of deforestation in the region (Arima, Barreto, and Brito 2006; Hecht 1993; Kaimowitz et al. 2004; Pacheco and Poccard-Chapuis 2012; Walker et al. 2009). A legacy of global anthropological research has shown that cattle raising is an economic and cultural practice, from the “bovine idiom” of East Africa (Evans-Pritchard 1940) to the sacred cow of India (Harris 1966) and the cowboy cultures throughout the Americas (Rivi ère 1972; Strickon 1965). Prominent Amazonianists have mentioned the cultural appeal of cattle (Hecht 2012 Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Smith 2002; Walker et al. 2000), but until the cultural features of cattle raising are examined in depth, our ability to understand Amazonian land use and cattle-driven deforestation and conflict will remain limited.

In this paper, I draw on ethnographic research in Acre as well as American and African cattle complex literature to examine Amazonian “cattle culture”—the positive cultural constructions surrounding cattle raising. My aim here is to complement the political economic research and build toward an expanded view of cattle raising as an economic and cultural practice and to show how positive impressions of cattle emerge and spread among groups, including those formerly threatened or dispossessed by cattle. The ethnographic journey across upper Acre illustrates that there are, in fact, two strains of cattle culture in Acre: one emanating from local mixed subsistence uses and an imported “cauboi” model associated with market-oriented ranching. In order to generate a conceptual understanding of how distinctive forms of cattle raising are related to unique forms of symbolic expression, I focus on three interlinked economic and cultural dynamics. I first examine how local cattle production practices relate to emerging forms of symbolic expression. Second, I chart hemispheric paths of diffusion that brought ranching and cauboi culture to this contested corner of Amazonia and attempt to understand the reasons for its appropriation. Third, I describe the ways that a range of rural and urban actors negotiate these two articulating economic and cultural features, and situate what is occurring in Acre in relation to broader processes of economic development and culture change.

Figure 1. The Annual *Cavalgada* in Rio Branco: The View from the Grill
Background, Methods, and Research Area

Acre presents an intriguing setting for examining the relationship between cattle economies and cattle cultures, given the contested history of cattle, the state’s political emphasis on forest-based development, and the varied ways that different groups use cattle in the same setting. Cattle arrived on a large scale with the opening of the Amazon to colonization in the late 1960s. The first ranchers were backed by military government fiscal incentives that established large corporate ranches in Eastern Amazonia (Hecht 1993; Schmink and Wood 1992). In Acre, migrant ranchers came into land conflicts with forest-dwelling rubber tappers, leading to violence and the displacement of many rubber tappers’ families (Bakx 1988). The rubber tapper movement argued that their forest-based livelihoods were not an obstacle to development but could serve as a model for forest-based development (Keck 1995). Following the murder of the movement’s leader, Chico Mendes, by a rancher, Acre became a site for innovative policies aimed at use-based conservation and a global symbol of an emerging Amazonian environmentalism (Kainer et al. 2003). From 1998 to 2010, consecutive administrations of the state “forest” government built on the rubber tapper legacy, encouraging forest-based development and forest citizenship, or florestania (Schmink 2011; Vadjunec, Schmink, and Greiner 2011).

Throughout the Brazilian Amazon, cattle raising has expanded over the last decade, pushing Brazil to the top of global beef exports (IBGE 2008; Smeraldi and May 2008). Despite governmental policies that encourage forest-based development and negative perceptions of cattle as symbols of displacement and environmental destruction, cattle raising has increased dramatically in Acre since 2000. Smallholder rubber tappers and colonists have adopted or increased the role of cattle in their economic strategies (Gomes 2009; Hoelle 2011; Salisbury and Schmink 2007; Toni et al. 2007).

The three rural groups that I focus on were until recently distinguished by their traditional economic practices and associated cultural identities as large-scale cattle ranchers, agriculturally-oriented colonists, and forest extractivist rubber tappers. The rubber tappers have historically practiced forest extractivism, gathering rubber and Brazil nuts for local markets since their arrival in the region with the “rubber booms” of the mid-19th century and in the 1940s in response to World War II (Martinello 2004; Weinstein 1983). Large-scale ranchers produce beef cattle for market exchange. They are migrants who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s when Acre was opened to settlement and colonization. Impoverished and landless colonists also came during this period to acquire a plot of land for agricultural production in government-sponsored settlement projects.

Through a total 18 months of fieldwork conducted over the course of four separate field seasons from 2007-2010, I collected data in the upper and lower Acre region of the state. My research in lower Acre is limited to a handful of ranchers and the city of Rio Branco. I worked primarily in upper Acre because of its history of land conflict surrounding cattle, the presence of all three social groups, and the rising popularity of cattle raising across these groups. I conducted participant observation to gain an understanding of the economic and cultural roles of cattle in the lives of Acrean rural and urban groups. I lived with rubber tapper and colonist families for weeks at a time, participating in the productive aspects of their daily lives, including tapping rubber, harvesting Brazil nuts, planting crops and clearing fields, and vaccinating and selling cattle. Research with tapper and colonist communities was limited to the Chico Mendes Extractive Reserve and the Quixadá Directed Settlement Project, respectively.

Figure 2. Map of Southern Acre
The ethnographic descriptions also build on participant-observation in social events and rituals, from the relatively common churrasco (barbecue) to the seasonal rodeos and auctions, and annual municipal-level festivals, such as Expo-Acre. I include results of a survey designed to measure the extent to which different groups participate in activities associated with cauboi culture. The sample included the three main rural groups, as well as cowboys working on cattle ranches and two groups from the capital city of Rio Branco, decision makers at governmental organizations working on issues of rural conservation and development, and members of socio-environmental NGOs.

**Cattle Economies and Cattle Cultures**

The depth of cultural constructions surrounding cattle stem from their unique abilities to store value, adapt to novel environments, and convert inedible vegetation into human food, products, and services (Dove and Carpenter 2007; Rifkin 1993; Rimas and Fraser 2008). Ingold’s (1980) cross-cultural comparison of ranchers, pastoralists, and hunters examined how distinctive ways of exploiting similar animals relates to political and social organization. Harris (1966) argued that the sacred cow could be traced to a combination of factors, including a reliance on cattle for plowing and demographic and environmental constraints. These materialist interpretations are more common, though cultural constructions also surround animals with little or no functional or material value (Descola 1994; Viveiros de Castro 1998). For my purposes, the question is not so much whether the cultural constructions surrounding cattle emerge because they are “good to eat,” or “good to think (with)” (Lévi-Strauss 1969:89; Harris 1985). Rather, I argue that understanding the roots of cattle cultures requires analyzing what they are “good for” producing—be it milk, beef, bride wealth, transportation, traction, or some combination of these. The form of interaction required to harvest these products—as structured, but not determined by the mode of production and mode of livelihood—results in distinctive cultural constructions.

Introductory cultural anthropology texts commonly employ the mode of livelihood (MoL) (Miller 2008) or “adaptive strategy” (Kottak 2008), the manner in which humans exploit their natural environment to make a living, and understand broad-level cultural similarities across the world. East African pastoralism and American ranching are distinctive cattle-based modes of livelihood, each giving rise to a unique set of cultural features comprising a “cattle complex” (Herskovits 1926; Strickon 1965). Herskovits’ (1926) East African cattle area was defined by the presence of a complex of traits that were reflected in material culture, and social and symbolic realms, including myths, rituals, behavioral mandates, and taboos. The complex was the result of a sustained reliance on a specific form of cattle raising. Nomadic pastoralism is the herding animals over extensive areas in response to environments of marked seasonality. It is characterized by daily reliance on the products of these animals, usually for subsistence ends, but also for exchange in kinship-based and, increasingly, in market-based economies (Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson 1980). In the “Euro-American Ranching Complex” (Strickon 1965), cowboys drew on common Iberian practices and technologies to work cattle and structurally similar cattle cultures developed from the Canadian plains to the Argentine pampas (Slatta 1990). Ranching practices in Acre are similar to others across the continent, with market orientation and the extensive use of land, usually privately owned, and hired labor (Strickon 1965).

In addition to large-scale ranching, there was a range of cattle livelihood strategies practiced by smallholders in Acre. These were mixed in two ways. Many rubber tappers and colonists relied on cattle as part of a diversified livelihood strategy that included forest extractivism, swidden agriculture, and wage labor. These practices changed in response to opportunities and constraints, as did the extent to which production was targeted for subsistence and market exchange. In general, subsistence cattle provided smallholder households with milk and transportation of goods and people. Older cattle and calves were usually sold to roaming middlemen. I use the term “cattle raising” as an umbrella term for all these mixed systems as well as pure modes of livelihood—ranching and pastoralism.

**A Comparison of Cattle Cultures: East Africa, the Americas, and Acre**

In this section, I attempt to isolate the roots of different forms of symbolic expression that I observed in Acre through comparison with the cattle complex literature. For the East African sources, I limit my scope to selected foundational readings during the first half of the century (“colonial-era”) and to a handful of contemporary texts dealing with changes in pastoralism in the second half (“post-colonial”). Beyond the focus of this paper are the myriad political, institutional, and ecological variables that also play an important role in structuring cattle economies in Africa (e.g., Ensminger 1992; Galvin 2009; McCabe 2004).

In Acrean mixed smallholder systems, beloved cattle and nameless commodities sometimes grazed side by side on the same property. Given that features of the East African pastoral and American ranching complex were observed in the same setting, it is safe to assume that these complexes are more than an expression of region and mode of livelihood. Identifying the actual causal mechanism requires decoupling the imprecise mixture of economic, ecological, and social factors comprising the MoL. I look instead to the mode of production (MoP): an overarching economic system governing production, consumption, and exchange. The MoP alone is not the answer, but it provides a clear set of constituent social and ecological relations, from which we can scale down to the relations of production (RoP) (human/human or social relations) and the factors of production (FoP) (human/resource or ecological relations) (Marx [1867] 1977; Roseberry 1989; Wolf 1982).
In colonial East Africa, pastoralism was characterized by moving livestock, and the family that owned and relied upon them, in accordance with seasonal variation and resource availability (Herskovits 1926). The family unit cared for cattle and consumed their products on a daily basis. From this relationship of mutual dependence and cohabitation, deep emotional links naturally developed between pastoralists and their cattle. The Nuer, for example, slept among their cattle and in the morning washed themselves in the urine of the cow and the ash of the dung fire (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Given this intimate form of interaction between humans and cattle, pastoralists demonstrated affection to their beasts, a symbolic attachment through naming, and ate them only on socially prescribed occasions (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Herskovits 1926; Schneider 1957). In contrast, in a typical Acrean ranching operation, the economic value of cattle was realized through the delivery of cattle to market, where they were slaughtered for hides, tallow, beef, and other products. Owners (ranchers) commanded the labor of proletarian cowboys, whose aim was to secure the continued production and harvest of beef in exchange for wages. The cowboys were not invested in the cattle economically or emotionally, nor did they use them for direct sustenance or for their own eventual profit.

The difference would seem to be between useful cattle that are valued for what they produce versus cattle that become valuable when they are exchanged, slaughtered, and converted to products and currency. These distinctions in use value and exchange value are the defining characteristics of domestic or subsistence and capitalist modes of production (Marx 1977; Sahlins 1972). This is a useful conceptual tool for understanding the differences, but it is not a hard and fast distinction. For example, pastoralists eventually exchanged their useful cattle in networks of mutual obligation (Deshler 1965), most notably as a source of bride-wealth (Colson 1955). Although Acrean smallholders usually sell their cattle, there were also occasions in which they would barbecue a calf to mobilize communal labor—essentially working their own networks of reciprocity.

In post-colonial Africa, political and economic changes resulted in an increase in capitalist forms of exchange, and these were reflected in relationships between people and between people and cattle (Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson 1980; Moore 1993). Features associated with capitalist ranching appeared throughout post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa (not just East Africa), including: non-ritual slaughter of cattle, identification of cattle as commodities, and wage laboring pastoralists alienated from the means of production (Comaroff and Comaroff 1990; Ferguson 1985; Hutchinson 1996; Moritz, Ritchey, and Kari 2011). Given the deep historical and ecological roots of pastoralism, previous cultural forms have not been completely subsumed, but changes have nonetheless occurred that show that the intensification of capitalist exchange structures relationships between humans and cattle in such a way that specific forms of symbolic expression emerge—regardless of the setting.

In Acre, the overarching capitalist ranching context structures most human-cattle interactions, but depending on the way that cattle are used, different forms of expression emerge. Ranchers often name cattle that fulfill important functions, such as stud bulls and sinuelos (Judas cows). In large-scale ranching systems, cowboys found it necessary to push around and at times abuse the nameless cattle that were little more than a mobile and at times obstinate cash crop. Much of their attention was focused on the herd as a collective entity, and individuals were only singled out when they were troublesome, in need of attention, or performed specialized tasks. On the other hand, cowboys’ horses were usually named, never eaten, and often received affectionate strokes, pats, and nudges. Why? Horses transform a relatively frail but intelligent biped into a taller, stronger, and faster centaur capable of managing the herd. For the cowboy, horses are a factor of production; specifically, they are an instrument of production, an essential tool for the production of beef cattle.

This ecological relationship between humans and cattle, when taken within the social and economic structures that dictate relations of production, help us to understand how distinctive forms of expression emerge that place symbolic value on cattle or treat them as depersonalized money on the hoof. When an animal’s value as a tool or source of daily sustenance outweighs its value as meat or money, symbolic associations form between humans and these animals—be they horses or cattle, even in the heart of a capitalist ranching operation. This holds true as long as there is some form of sustained interaction required to harvest live products or use the animals.
Despite this painful memory, Bahiana said that she had no bitterness toward her two aged bullocks, which were usually tethered to a mango tree a few feet away from her front door. Her sons used the oxen to carry firewood or other cargo. In the late afternoons, after the day’s work was done, Bahiana gave them a handful of salt before releasing them to join the rest of the herd, which was fenced in on the hill above her home. Bahiana developed a strong connection with her oxen, but she did not name them, referring to them simply as meis bois (“my cattles.”) Her sons worked the 80 head of beef cattle, distinguishing them by color and markings, sex, reproductive status, and age.

Schneider (1957:278) asserted that the essence of the African complex resides in a “kind of identification with cattle which leads to their association with ritual.” Whereas subsistence pastoralism reinforced interdependence between people, and between people and their cattle in the realm of ritual (Evans-Pritchard 1940), the capitalist relations and factors of production expressed in ranching reinforce commodified relations based on transforming labor, privately owned land, and animal flesh into currency. The conceptual distinction between humans and cattle is recreated in popular rituals, such as rodeos, in which humans symbolically assert their superiority over animals (Lawrence 1990).

An examination of a ritual that is present in both societies—the ritualized consumption of beef—illustrates how distinctive economic relationships with animals transition to the realm of ritual. In colonial-era East Africa, the slaughter of cattle was highly regulated and restricted to ceremonial occasions, although this is changing in post-colonial times (Hutchinson 1996). In Acre, the churrasco is a cherished social institution centered of the ritualistic consumption of meat that is commonly used to celebrate important events, such as holidays and important soccer matches.

Over the course of the month before she moved to the city, I lived with Bahiana and her sons and was able to observe how she ended her relationships with her beef cattle and useful bullocks. She sold all of her beef cattle without much consideration. She could not reconcile, however, the thought of her two oxen heading to the slaughterhouse. Although she could have sold them for a handsome price, she made her son promise that he would allow the oxen to graze out the remainder of their years on his property. Bahiana threw a farewell churrasco a couple of weeks before she moved. In addition to being protected by Bahiana’s directive, the oxen were too big and old for the occasion and not as appetizing as the calf she bought from one of her neighbors. Essentially the same animal, the oxen were defined through years of use and interaction. They were unsellable, but the unnamed calf was bought, slaughtered, hung from a tree, and carved up. Her sons roasted the strips of beef on a grid of barbed wire covering a pit some six foot long and four feet deep and filled with smoldering coals.

Bahiana’s churrasco shows how forms of cattle economy and symbolic expression overlap, are reconciled, and remain

Bahiana’s Barbecue: The Articulation of Cattle Modes of Production and Cattle Cultures

The Amazonian frontiers of the 1970s and 1980s followed a familiar pattern of intensification of capitalist relations of production, alienation from the means of production, and the displacement of preexisting social formations (Foweraker 1981; Schmink and Wood 1992). Capitalist relations have increased in intensity across time throughout the world, but the reach of capitalism is imperfect, and thus there is variation in local economic practices (Cleary 1993; Ferguson 2006; Wolf 1982). Different MoPs may coexist in a setting, articulating with one another in unique ways (Meillassoux 1980; Wolpe 1980). Throughout Amazonia, groups have adopted cattle raising and incorporated it to their mixed production systems (Loker 1993; Rudel, Bates, and Machinguashi 2002). How do these actors then reconcile the cultural constructions emanating from different economic uses of their cattle? The case of Bahiana, who had both useful and exchange cattle, shows how smallholder groups in between the domestic and capitalist MoP negotiate overlapping forms of cultural expression.

Bahiana, a colonist, lived on a side road about 50 kilometers up the highway from Jatobá. Her father was an agriculturist in the arid northeast, and she grew up around cattle before marrying and leaving home in her teens. She and her husband, who often worked as a cowboy, followed the frontier through the states of Goiás and Mato Grosso before settling near Rio Branco in the early 1980s. She bought a parcel of land in the Quixadá Directed Settlement Project in 1986. There she lived with her sons and grandson until 2009, when she sold her land to a rancher.

Shortly after she and her husband arrived in Acre, he was thrown from his oxcart and crushed under its wheels. Despite this painful memory, Bahiana said that she had no
Table 1. Comparison of Participation in the Cattle Economy and Cauboi Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Have/do you…”</th>
<th>Rubber Tappers</th>
<th>Colonists</th>
<th>Ranchers</th>
<th>Cowboys</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>NGO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>own cattle?</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wear a belt buckle?</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listen to sertaneja music?</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=20 members in each group

distinct. Cultural constructions emanating from distinct uses of cattle coexist in the same setting, but useful cattle with which symbolic connections were formed may not transition into rituals, such as the churrasco—an expression of the commodified exchange relationships. This example also underlines an important point: forms of symbolic expression emanating from subsistence cattle, although paralleling many features of the East African cattle complex, have not reached this level in Acre. These subsistence features of cattle culture are largely subsumed by the dominant cauboi culture based on ranching, which does constitute a cattle complex because relationships with cattle have been institutionalized in the realm of ritual.

To what extent have behaviors associated with cauboi culture actually penetrated within a cross section of Acrean society? Table 1 shows the results of a survey of 20 members of six groups on measures of participation in the cattle economy and cauboi culture.

Wearing a belt buckle is the most ardent expression of cauboi culture, while listening to sertaneja music is more common among the general population. The cowboys, who work with cattle on a daily basis and are the symbols of cauboi culture, also have the highest levels of participation in both of these categories. Only a third of cowboys own cattle, which indicates that cattle ownership is less important than working with cattle and relying on them economically, be it through wages, subsistence, or market exchange. The participation of colonists and rubber tappers supports this by showing that subsistence use of cattle does not preclude the appropriation of features of the dominant cauboi culture.

The rubbers tappers score the lowest out of the groups that work with cattle. This finding can be explained by their historical opposition to cattle and their recent adoption of cattle. Perhaps most importantly, their relative geographic and socioeconomic marginality in comparison with other groups limits their exposure and access to popular culture events and consumer goods. As expected, the urban NGO workers have a lower degree of participation in these activities. This is due to their lack of participation in the cattle economy and is also related to their ideological opposition to cattle raising and cauboi culture, which many find to be “low” culture.

Overall, this examination shows that production (relations of production) matters in the production of culture, even with the spread of global cultural forms of consumption. The dominant cauboi culture, which is less about an immediate relation of production and more about a remote or partial articulation with a wider mode of production, nonetheless provides an outlet for the expression for the more intimately produced forms. Subsistence cattle production, while creating culturally autonomous forms of expression, also provides an opening for these broader forms of cauboi culture to take root as the cattle industry grows through the eventual sale of useful cattle.

The Diffusion and Appropriation of Cauboi Culture

The comparative study of cattle frontiers focuses largely on the historical diffusion of Iberian cattle raising practices and traditions (Slatta 1997). A focus on Acre fills a gap in the comparative literature through an examination of the diffusion of the North American cowboy model to one of the Americas’ most recent and fastest growing cattle frontiers.

Iberian cattle arrived in the Americas in 1494 and were introduced to present-day Mexico in 1521 and to other parts of North and South America over the next century (Bishko 1952; Dary 1981; Jordan 1993). The techniques and cultural features of cattle raising in the Americas were drawn from common Iberian roots but became distinguishable as cattle raisers adapted to novel ecological, political, and economic contexts (Butzer 1988; Slatta 1990). In Brazil, two main regional cowboy traditions emerged: the vaqueiros of the arid northeast and gaúchos of the southern campanha (pampas or temperate grasslands), each with unique material adaptations and worldviews (da Cunha 1944). Secondary cattle cultures developed as gaúchos and vaqueiros migrated and adapted their practices to distinctive social and ecological contexts (Mazza et al. 1994; Rivière 1972).

These regional Brazilian traditions have exerted limited influence in Acre. The Acrean version of the cowboy will most commonly refer to himself as a peão (peon), a general term applied to proletarian cowboys throughout Brazil, or a cauboi, a more recent name that is also used by urban populations that participate in a cattle-oriented popular culture referred to
as cauboi, contri, or sertaneja culture. The first two terms, as well as the boots, tight jeans, and other popular cultural elements point to the circulatation of broader influences emanating from North American cowboy or country culture. These traits were channeled through traditional cattle ranching centers in the São Paulo region of Brazil, localized and adapted to Brazilian traditions, and then transported to Acre, through direct (migration) and indirect (media and rodeo) diffusion.

Most large-scale ranchers in Acre came from the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais. These sulistas (southerners) or paulistas (natives of São Paulo state), as they are referred to in Acre, established the economic and technical infrastructure necessary for the spread of the cattle industry, beginning in the 1970s. Cicero is one of Acre's biggest ranchers, with more than 50,000 head of cattle. He is from a part of São Paulo state where the King Ranch of Texas operated for many years (Lea 1957), and Cicero said that he learned a lot from working with Americans when he was a young man. His office is adorned with trophies that his sons earned in rodeo and roping competitions organized by the Americans. Cicero came to Acre with plans for a cattle ranch as well as a love of rodeo. Through his training of native Acreans as cowboys to work on his ranch, he spread ranching practices, material culture, and an interest in rodeo and other cultural traditions.

Direct diffusion through migrants planted the seeds for cauboi culture, but indirect paths catapulted it to another level. Since the early 1900s, Barretos, São Paulo was the end of the trail for comitivas driving livestock to market, and cowboys entertained themselves by competing against each other in tests of skill. These informal events were institutionalized in 1955 with the Festa de Peão de Barretos (Barretos Cowboy Festival) (Dent 2009; Gonçalves and Iacomini 1997). At the end of the 1980s, local businessmen transformed the festival into a sort of “Texas tournament” to attract middle-class patrons who would never attend a caipira (hick or hillbilly) festival but would happily come to a “country” event (Gonçalves and Iacomini 1997).

Despite the land conflicts and the international attention heralding Acre as the greenest state in Amazonia, the cattle economy gained a foothold in the 1990s. In the 2000s, cattle became more available to smallholders while extractive and agricultural products declined, and many smallholders transitioned to cattle raising, urban wage labor, or became cowboys. The paving of the BR-317 through upper Acre in 2002 facilitated connections with urban centers. From 2007-2010, I witnessed firsthand the growth of this cauboi culture. An electrification project brought access to television and popular culture messages from the power centers or Brazil. Rodeos sprung up on the side of the highways of upper Acre, drawing amateur caubois from smallholder properties just up the dirt roads. Expo-Acre in Rio Branco grew larger with each year, attracting the biggest names in sertaneja music and the national rodeo circuit. Similar municipal-level celebrations based on the “Expo” model were established in the cities of upper Acre, complete with Rainha do Rodeio (Rodeo Queen) competitions. Contri clothing stores opened, selling shiny belt buckles and tins of imported smokeless tobacco.

**Development, Displacement, and the Country**

The immediate connection with the cattle ranching economy provides an opening for cauboi culture to grow, but its widespread appropriation is related to broader socioeconomic transformations. Many Acreans say that modernity, development, and progress arrived in the state when it was linked with the rest of Brazil through the construction of the BR-364 highway in the 1970s. From this point, the state started to “develop”—muddy paths became paved roads, water and electricity became more consistent, and scarce goods became more available. The arrival of migrants also spurred land conflict and the displacement of the many rubber tappers to the city. Others later left their rural homes in the search for a better life in the city (Schmink and Cordeiro 2008), paralleling general trends in Amazonia and Brazil in the late 20th century (Browder and Godfrey 1997).

In Acre, development produced the demographic, economic, social, and political consequences for cauboi culture to resonate, even among urbanites with no land or cattle. Bahiana, who made several stops along as the frontier in search of land, was eventually drawn to the city by the opportunities for health care, education, and security. She and others who have moved to the city have romanticized visions of what they left behind. For many, this saudade, which connotes a mixture of longing, missing, and nostalgia, has found an outlet for expression in cauboi culture, which presents a way of symbolically reconnecting or connecting with an idealized rural past or less complicated present.

Lifetime urbanites and caubois de vitrine (shop window cowboys) are not immune to this saudade; in fact, being unfamiliar with the hardships of rural life makes it an even more appealing escape, one of purity and tradition in contrast to the “crime, noise, and hustle” of the city, reflecting critiques of modernization in other parts of Brazil (Dent 2009; Oliven 2000). Between the sweltering city and the dark forest, Acreans speak of an idyllic countryside. This country is a compromise that also denotes a golden age (Williams 1975) of “tradition,” as opposed to the “stone-age” forest or the city as a site decadent modernity.

Cauboi culture is the only form of rural identity that is positively valued and thoroughly institutionalized throughout Brazil. It is a rebuff to the historically backward “interior” and the folklore caipira with missing teeth, freckles, and patched clothes. Participants in cauboi culture are a part of assertive rural folk celebrated from Acre to São Paulo and beyond the borders of Brazil. These international connections bolster the appeal and legitimacy of cauboi culture throughout rural Brazil and especially in Acre, a place still described by its residents and outsiders as the “end of the world.”

Many who remain in the countryside find that it bears little resemblance to the sertaneja songs or the cauboi “costumes” that they see in the city. Nonetheless, cauboi culture gives voice to a specific form of ecology in which humans demonstrate self-sufficiency through their transformation of the wilderness to anthropogenic landscapes. These messages
resonate with the developmentalist ideology and policies that encouraged Amazonian settlers to convert the forest to productive spaces. Acrean enforcement of deforestation regulations frustrates the drive to “develop” and “progress,” and many rural Acreans reported that they feel unjustly constrained by environmental laws limiting burning and deforestation (Hoelle 2012). Cauboi culture provides an oppositional voice to environmental preservation as an affront self-reliance that is central to the identity of many rural producers. Cauboi culture may not represent or speak for any one person, but it—or some part of it—fits better than the alternatives, for rural groups and even displaced city dwellers with no land or cattle.

Sertaneja is booming in popularity at a time when Brazil sits atop many agricultural production and export indicators, and rural populations are moving to the city (McCann Forthcoming 2015). In my brief time in Acre, I have seen many people move from marveling at all of the products in the supermarket to complaining about the lack of taste of store-bought corn and chicken. The very medium that is supposed to valorize this bygone rural life sometimes seems even more plastic and formulaic than the food. The slick new sertaneja singers are not like the old timers, who may have had bad voices, but also had “heart” and rural sensibilities. In the minds of many Acreans, rural cultural production is moving away from the livelihoods that it ostensibly represented toward a commodified, mass produced package, be it tasteless corn and contrived music.

**Conclusion**

I set out to describe cattle culture and explain how it arrived in this unlikely corner of the Brazilian Amazon. This required analyzing not only distinctive productive strategies giving rise to local forms of cultural expression but also to the diffusion of ranching and associated cowboy popular culture and meanings, and the ways that these two economic and cultural packages overlapped and interacted. By comparing foundational East African literatures with my findings from Acre, I showed how cattle economies give rise to symbolic features across contexts. Among those raising cattle for market exchange, a feature associated with but not exclusive to ranching, relationships between humans and cattle tended to be impersonal. Cattle cultures may be structured, but they are not determined by the broader economic and ecological context. In the end, it comes down to an animal’s designation as having use or exchange value and the constituent relationships between people and cattle required to harvest specific products. Even though Acrean subsistence uses of cattle do not share the same historical foundation and longevity as the colonial-era African cases, the intimacy of interaction and dependence produces similar results with cattle across contexts.

The locally originating forms of expression are largely secondary to the dominant cauboi culture, which arrived via indirect paths of diffusion, including television, music, and the rodeo circuit. It brought messages of an idyllic country life and an assertive rural people that appeal to urbanites displaced from the countryside and dissatisfied with urban decadence. Although it may not map directly on to their experiences, it fits better than the alternatives.

The growth of the cattle economy and cattle culture in Acre can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, a rural underclass has appropriated a key symbol of capitalist intensification and used it to hold on to some forms of economic determination, despite the force of regional and national and global economy. On the other hand, subsistence cattle production, while creating culturally autonomous forms of expression, also provides an opening for these broader forms of cauboi culture to take root. The content of cauboi culture is inextricable from economic processes occurring throughout Brazil and the commodified, mass marketed production of both food and culture.

Cattle raising is an economic activity with deleterious environmental effects on a global level. It is also an increasingly important source of economic flexibility for Amazonian smallholders who could not survive on forest extractivism or agriculture alone. It is important to bring culture into the conversation in order to understand the full complexity of cattle raising in East Africa, India, and even Amazonia. Applied researchers and practitioners concerned with mitigating cattle-driven environmental degradation and land conflict must contend with prices and policies, as well as the cultural features that contribute to the appeal of cattle.

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