

Costa Rican Cacao Economy: An ethnographic study of social justice observed

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Abstract

In this paper I focus on the working-class residents of the Osa Peninsula, located in southeastern Costa Rica, and these people's ability and inability to cultivate sustainable farming methods partially funded by the Costa Rican government. The Osa Peninsula lies within the Puntarenas Province consisting of 11,265.69 sq. km. with a population of 357,483 inhabitants, providing a unique opportunity to explore a 'thinly-peopled' Rainforest ecological/agricultural dynamic. The Costa Rican people interviewed express both their own romantic visions of cultural sweet longing as well as their ability for personal sustainable survival within the current environmental circumstances.

Introduction

A multitude of tourist web sources ¹ state that National Geographic Magazine has declared the Osa Peninsula as 'one of the most biologically intense places on earth;' hence this reputation has catapulted the Osa as a premier tourist destination for those desiring to experience a 'pristine wildlife' eco-friendly vacation. Eco-tourism fuels both the Costa Rican economy and the Costa Rican 'image'; thereby affecting direct and indirect influence on land-use policies, government initiatives, and agricultural methodology. These parameters have also affected the everyday lives of the areas inhabitants. The locals remark that every family needs to have at least one family member working in tourism in order to survive. The current worldwide focus on a 'green economy' is also on the political forefront of global sustainability. The implied idealism in fostering an image of a pristine wildlife tourist adventure for the foreigner while maintaining the realistic livelihood of the areas native inhabitants creates a poignant dichotomy.

This paper examines these larger issues through the lens of three agriculturalists in the Osa, each attempting to 'work within this system'. I focus my study on cacao farming because this crop has a very rich Mesoamerican cultural history and the rainforest ecological environment of the Osa is the ideal environment for growing cacao within the parameters of biological sustainability. The paper develops three interrelated topics: (1) The anthropological evolution of cacao and its current significance to the Osa farmer, (2) The interplay between foreign interests

¹ govisitcostarica.com, osapeninsula.com, guariadeosa.com, phototours.com, puravida.com, encantalavida.com, theosapeninsulaproperties.com

and native survival, and (3) The underlying political conflicts inherent in maintaining both a social and an environmental balance. The information used was obtained by reference research, informal conversations, interpersonal interviews and personal observations made during November 2008 and early January 2009. I have changed the names of the people consulted for the study to protect their privacy.

Malthusian Inheritance

In 1798, Thomas Robert Malthus investigated the main question of this forum's topic: the imbalance between food production and population growth; in his famed essay he elaborated on what he termed "primitive societies" inhabiting vast areas of uncultivated lands, which he refers to as "thinly-peopled regions". The Osa Peninsula may be considered as a modern day example of such a place; no longer is it inhabited by "primitive societies" but by a mostly native rural population surrounded by protected wildlife conservation areas. Over eighty percent of the peninsula is protected Rainforest ecological reserves. There is one Indigenous Reservation, The Guaymí Reserve, at the center of the Peninsula in which the residents follow traditional Indigenous lifestyles with minimal contact with outsiders and reside in self-sustainable, self-made homes.

Malthus further comments on the ability to 'improve' their situation; he states: "The process of improving their minds and directing their industry would necessarily be slow; and during this time, as population would regularly keep pace with the increasing produce, it would rarely happen that a great degree of knowledge and industry would have to operate at once upon rich unappropriated soil." ² Clearly there is a western imperialist viewpoint apparent in Malthus' statement. The question of "*improving their minds and directing their industry*" establishes the dominance and benefit of industrialized society over non-industrialized societies. It is this aspect in which the modern-day adaptation becomes contentious and covertly subliminal.

In the push for eco-sustainability it is the foreign companies, foreign interest groups as well as the national government that have taken the impetus in establishing education and financial

² Malthus: 2005: 9

incentives that favor the eco-mindset. On the outset, these efforts are aimed at safeguarding the environment and improving the lives of the *campesinos* (local farmers). Many ‘nature friendly’ corporations aim at teaching the natives how to use their lands in accordance with environmental standards; favoring a traditional non-technological mindset free of chemical agriculture which essentially was originally in place prior to the introduction of chemical farming methods by mostly foreign corporations, such as the United Fruit Company. Currently the national government in an effort to maintain the eco-sustainable public image, also subsidizes many agricultural ventures that promise to maintain a ‘natural ecology’; such as reforestation farms in which the agriculturalist is given a government stipend to grow trees in their land plots pesticide free.

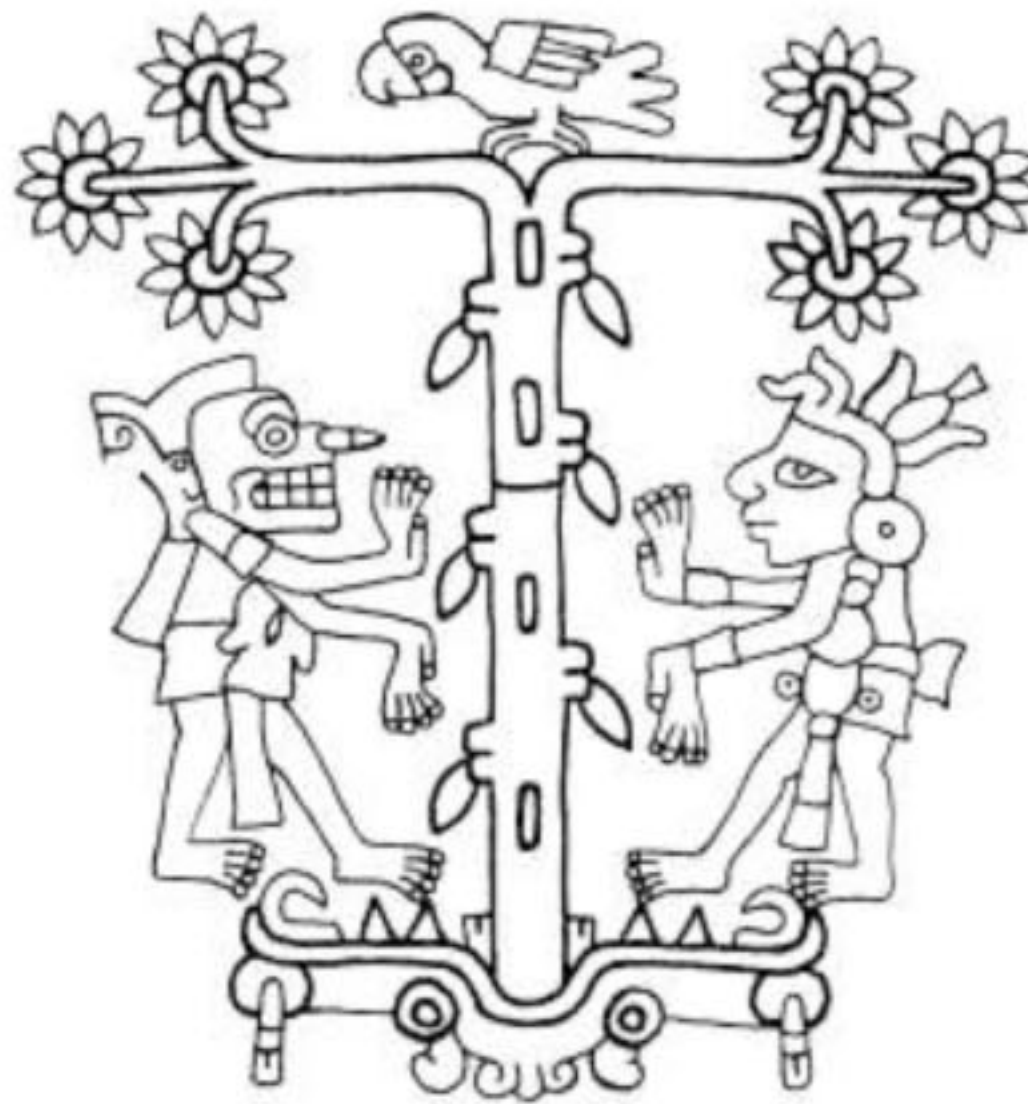
All these efforts appear very laudable and help maintain a public image of progressive and modern concerns surrounded by an economically stable and beautiful ‘native’ Latin American environment; thereby an excellent selling point for the tourist industry, which propels the Costa Rican economy. Therefore the apparently altruistic endeavor of “*improving their minds and directing their industry*” becomes envisioned as a concerted effort that benefits the nation as a whole. However, in its actualization it is mostly improving the tourist industry, which is owned and operated by mostly foreign ownerships. The *campesino* population continues to exist as low waged laborers within the economics of eco-sustainability. Also the dominant interventionist paternalistic implications imbued within this system questions the idea of an egalitarian social justice.

Anthropology of Cacao

Cacao’s Mesoamerican legacy has been well documented by anthropologists and historians; its rich traditions hold significant value in terms of the area’s economy, politics and religion. Cacao seeds were used as valuable trade goods since cacao was considered an exclusive and elite status marker for the Mesoamerican nobility.³ This agricultural crop became associated in ritualized elite ceremony, therefore endowed with symbolic religious significance. Maya and Aztec royalty were envisioned as earthly gods and shared a supernatural aura with divine associations; rituals involved transformative elements between the earthly world and the divine world. *Theobroma*

³ McNeil: 2006

cacao is a difficult and unproductive crop, which grows only in favored places. The ideal environment is a shaded and heavily humid atmosphere (90%) with a heavy rainfall and moist soil. Therefore the wet rainforest of Central America became ideal growing areas for this crop. Wars were fought among competing indigenous groups for control of the best growing areas. Due to the exclusivity of this crop, its elite status flourished and cacao beverage consumption was permeated within Nobility/Spirituality aura, hence influential in maintaining the political hierarchy power structure.



Cacao as the cosmic tree of the south

From the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (Postclassic Mixteca-Puebla). Drawing by Cameron L. McNeil⁴

The above illustration's central focus is a cacao tree represented as an *axis mundi*, symbolizing the natural world's connection with the supernatural lower earth and the above heavens. The roots of the tree seep into the earth's core, the trunk exists in the fixed structure of daily life, while its upper branches and flowers touch the heavens; an implied circular sphere exists which connects the lower underworld to the upper heavens. Many interpretations exist regarding the cacao tree's association with ancient Maya figures; such as the representation of a deceased ancestor reborn as a cacao tree .⁵

⁴ McNeil: 2006

⁵ McNeil, Hurst, and Sharer: 2006

I interpret the two figures embracing the tree as dualistic images of a noble (right side) and his mirror image (left side) in a state of transformation into an ‘other worldly’ sphere – symbolized by the use of the mask. The cacao pods proliferate the trunk signifying a healthy fertile life of continuity and balance. The tropical bird situates the cacao within its tropical growing environment in the mundane world. Since the tree flourishes in dark shade and its roots dig into the earth’s core, the supernatural association is with the underworld of darkness. The noble’s ability to transcend between the earthly world and the supernatural world establishes the balance between life and death, symbolized by the fertility of the cacao tree which continues the cycle of rebirth. The dead nobility were typically buried with cacao seeds as well as with their exclusive cacao vessels to facilitate their journey into the underworld.

Beyond its political and economic social significance, cacao was also prized for its highly nutritive content, medicinal qualities and beautification properties. The epicenters of Aztec (Mexico City, Mexico) and Maya (Copan, Honduras) cultures are situated north of Costa Rica. Steinbrenner (2006) points out that the Greater Nicoya area (an archaeological subarea comprising modern Pacific Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica) was mostly comprised of migrant populations from the northern Mesoamerican areas as well as with some South American influences. It is assumed that Costa Rica’s geographical position away from elite control enabled cacao usage to compromise a slightly more egalitarian atmosphere with emphasis on its nutritive, medicinal and beautification properties. Steinbrenner referring to Bergmann and P. MacLeod states: “Cacao production in Nicaragua and Costa Rica appears to have been geared towards meeting the local demand rather than to producing an export luxury good intended only for elite use/and or trade.”⁶

Cacao has been grown in Costa Rica since ancient times; the farms that are currently operating are sparse and scattered throughout the country. It is assumed that the cacao seeds originated in the outlying southern areas of the Americas & brought to Costa Rica by diffusion of seeds via monkeys. During the Spanish conquest the Spaniards took over most of the cacao growing areas but cacao production was still in the hands of the indigenous. Cacao was also a choice product of

⁶ McNeil: 2006: 264

consumption for the Spanish therefore its traditional production continued throughout the conquered areas.

Cacao History and Culture in the Osa Peninsula

Currently in the Osa very few cacao farms are in use. The local population state that in past times, the agricultural areas of the peninsula sustained many cacao farms and the crop had a boom period in the 1980's in which the surplus exceeded the demand. At present the price for cacao seeds are considered good at \$2 to \$4 per kilo, but the supply is very low. Local cacao production suffered a wide-spread loss after an invading fungal contaminant known as *monilla* diminished the Osa's cacao industry in the late 1980's⁷. Most farms were left to fallow after the *monilla* spores contaminated the seed pods of the trees. The tree and foliage survives but the cacao pods become affected which is the source of the seed and pulp of the chocolate. It would appear that all of the local farms became affected by the fungus which also proliferates in the same dark, humid and moist conditions in which cacao thrives. During my field research I encountered three actively producing cacao farms in the Osa: (1) a 5 hectare backyard farm owned by *Fernando*, (2) a 28 hectare eco-tourist farm owned by *Benicio*, and (3) a 50 hectare agricultural venture owned by *Victoria*.

In my visit to the Guaymí Indigenous reserve there were some minimal cacao trees associated with adjacent homes. In this situation, the ties between the past cultural history of cacao and the present have remained. One indigenous person encountered, *Talí*, revealed that in the Reserve they all have their own cacao trees but only for home usage and they do not sell their seeds or seed pods. When questioned further as to its usage, *Talí*, informed me that it is used for their own reasons, which were private, religious, and very important for the continuation of their culture. He declared that if he were to divulge all its secrets the potency in the cacao would be lost and perhaps since many in the past have revealed its powers, that this might be the cause for the devastation of the crops. *Talí* stated: "I cannot tell you what I know because then I would be betraying my people. Cacao is very personal and very sacred for us. We only use it for special reasons. Perhaps someone like you might know some of these things, but for me it is better to

⁷ Reinaldo Aguilar, Director, *Los Charcos de Osa, Centro de diversidad de Plantas Regionales/Center for the diversity of Regional Plants*

keep our secrets secret and in this manner the power within the cacao remains safe.” In respect for his wishes and in agreement with him I did not wish to know any more.

Economically the Guaymí live a complete self-sustainable lifestyle in small single multi-family dwellings which from an outsider’s perspective can be perceived as an impoverished life. Their homes are minimal and basic yet their sense of family and culture seem very strong. *Tali* was rocking his newborn child in a hand made sling while his young wives stood behind him, one making a simple meal over a rock stove and the other smiling in agreement with her husband and curious about the outsider company. They grow most of their food sources and keep a supply of chickens nearby. The women make artisen crafts for sale to outsiders, which the men bring by horse to the nearby village and trade for tortilla flour or other needed supplies. The homes and furnishings are constructed from the local trees. It is a unified community in which neighbors aide each other and a one room schoolhouse teaches the approximately 20–30 children their Ngöbi language. Their cultural group is mistakenly referred to as Guaymí, but they refer to themselves as Ngöbi.

Three Cacao Agriculturalists

Fernando is an older working-class Osa agriculturalist in La Palma, who grows cacao in his home yard. He comes from a family of agriculturalists and has lived in this, his family’s home, all his life. He manages and does all the manual labor, machete technology, on the farm himself; states his children do not like the agricultural lifestyle therefore he takes pride in his efforts and states he keeps doing this because it makes him feel alive. He does not process the cacao seeds into chocolate products, but dries them naturally in the sun and sells the seeds to the local buyer. *Fernando’s* farm seems to be *monilla* free and his trees were fruitful and highly productive, growing all three varities of cacao—*criollo*, *forastero*, and *trinitario*. He manually removes any diseased pods prior to the spore build-up of the *monilla* and in this manner he prevents any fungal spread; he fertilizes his soil with dried cacao pod shells and this helps maintain the soil’s moisture as well as providing fertilizer to the growing trees. His farming techniques have been handed down to him by family agricultural history and trail and error. He thins his trees to allow a certain amount of sunlight to filter through the dark shade as he says this keeps the trees healthier and prevents the *monilla* fungus.

In terms of past cultural affiliations *Fernando* personally does not have any indigenous ties but acknowledges that cacao does have a fascinating Mayan history and recalls that the Maya used the seeds as financial currency. Economically, *Fernando* is considered middle class and lives in a comfortable home; his farm produces most of the family's food supply and can be considered organic and self-sustainable. He was eager to make contact with any other cacao growers in the area since their numbers have been diminishing. While he does not have any cultural affiliations with cacao his farm produces many healthy and high quality seed pods and since the current market price for cacao is good he is anxious to keep cacao agriculture going and envisions a financial profit in maintaining the continued production of cacao. He states that the ancient cultural associations could be used as a good marketing tool for enhancing the local cacao production since the Osa is such a popular tourist destination.

The second agriculturalist encountered was *Benicio*, an enthusiastic young Costa Rican entrepreneur in Palo Seco who manages a bio-diverse cacao farm for education and tourist purposes. *Benicio* like *Fernando* also descends from a family of Costa Rican agriculturalists; unlike *Fernando*, *Benicio* does have some indigenous roots; however his personal heritage does not play a role in his cacao industry. He was trained as a cattle farmer using conventional farming machinery and methods. Seven years ago, *Benicio* attended an eco-tourist educational course given by CATIE (*Centro Agrnómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza*—Tropical Agronomic Center of Investigation and Education) in which he learned about organic farming methods and used this as a catalyst for organizing and working a purely eco-sustainable farm; a personal dream he always cherished and with his father's investment in a traditional cacao farm in the Osa he was able to actualize.

Currently he manages the only visible cacao production farm in the area. He combines the economic advantage of the tourist trade with his personal efforts at eco-sustainability using a marketable popular product—chocolate. *Benicio* conducts tours in which he instructs on the co-viability of wildlife, rainforest and human sustainability. His tour includes a guided walk through traditional cacao cultivation and processing method. He sells 100% unadulterated ground cacao to tourists and local stop-by consumers. He also practices machete and manual technology, hand

shelling the seeds prior to grinding. *Benicio* employs only one part-time assistant but does most of the farming labor on his own. Currently, he does not receive any government subsidies and avoids the ‘Certified Organic’ official seal since this affiliation requires a heavy licensing fee as well as other outstanding fees, which he must provide for, such as the association’s visits and lodgings. His is a small business which operates on a minimal budget and it is his personal enthusiasm for what he does which keeps him viable.

The final agriculturalist is late middle-aged Canadian born *Victoria* in Cañyaza. She migrated to Costa Rica approximately 10 years ago and currently runs the largest hectare cacao farm in the area. Although her farm is the largest in size (58 hectare), she is less locally visible than the previous farmer because she avoids local buyers, local consumers and tourists, instead selling processed chocolate bars to high-end hotels and Internet sales. She manages her expansive mountain top farm by hiring local employees at a wage of about \$2 per hour, the current minimum wage. Her self-proclaimed “organic and self-sustainable” farm utilizes only hand methods including use of *mano* and *metate* for grinding the cacao seeds.

Mano and *metate* are a heavy stone mortar-and-pestle long used throughout ancient Mesoamerica for grinding corn kernels. A smaller version is still used commonly today in many Hispanic kitchens, and it seemed curious to find these implements in *Victoria’s* modern chocolate processing kitchen. *Victoria* does not have a familial agricultural background, having learned all her farming skills on-line. She boldly asserts that she has self-taught herself all she needs to know. *Victoria* also proclaims that the locals really do not know anything about organic farming or chocolate processing methods and that she has taught them everything they know. This statement echoes the social implications of the previously cited ‘Malthusian Inheritance.’

Underlying Political Conflicts

The foreign-born *Victoria* acquired her premier mountainside farming land, which borders the Corcovado National Park (a National landmark wildlife protected reserve), from a local Costa Rican farmer. This transaction has a murky and contumacious history. Because the land borders the country’s most pristine ecological reserve, the Costa Rican government has stipulated that the land must be used by a native agriculturalist for traditional farming purposes conducted in an

eco-friendly manner, which would be partially subsidized by the National government. There is also a questionable land encroachment issue, in which the border between *Victoria's* farm and the wildlife reserve is unclear and currently in legal dispute. Since *Victoria* is a foreigner making a private financial gain as well as possibly encroaching on the protected wildlife reserve—how does this square with the national initiative to keep land ownership in the hands of locals and to help subsidize their living expenses while encouraging sustainable eco-farming?

When advertising her gourmet chocolate bars, *Victoria* makes a concerted effort to associate her products with Maya iconography and religious/spiritual symbols.

Her labels quote a prayer entitled 'The Holy Law', which reads:

Thou, O Holy Law, The Tree of Life That standeth in the middle Of the Eternal Sea,
That is called, The Tree of Healing. The Tree of powerful Healing, The Tree of all
Healing And upon which rests the seeds Of all we invoke”.

In addition to indigenous artistic references, she draws upon Christian iconography, including a fig leaf Adam and Eve and a haloed Christ figure juxtaposed with Maya ceremonial art. Clearly *Victoria* is catering to a 'New Age' mentality, establishing a connection with an artifice Mesoamerican past while also expanding her marketing agenda to include religious/spiritual affiliations of a much wider audience with broad and non-specific messages of 'spiritual healing'.

Embedded in *Victoria's* webpage is her 'mission statement' that reads:

“Our goals are towards a sustainable community including our surrounding community that aims towards new skill development amidst the local work force. Our other objective is to promote diverse cultivation of marketable products among our local farmers. We see seven timeshare luxury homes and a small healing centre plus six mini-suites and full spa with pool in the future that will be under legal obligation during construction and landscaping to ensure ecological compatibility with the environment surrounding. In pursuit of grant monies, our hearts' passion would for the establishment in the future of a permanent biological station for study groups, volunteers and researchers. We also see our property as a perfect place to recuperate as a wildlife habitat. Thus far we are self-sufficient in our beginning and are working hard towards a community beneficial, lucrative business.”

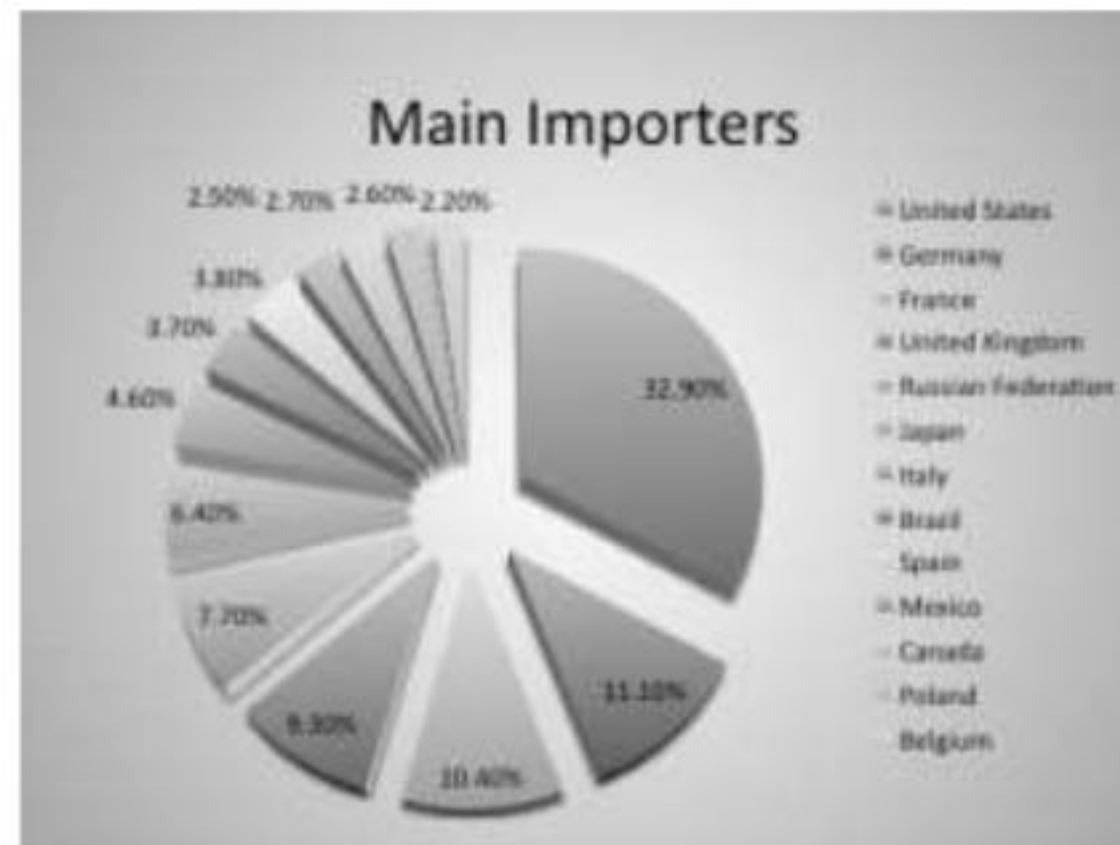
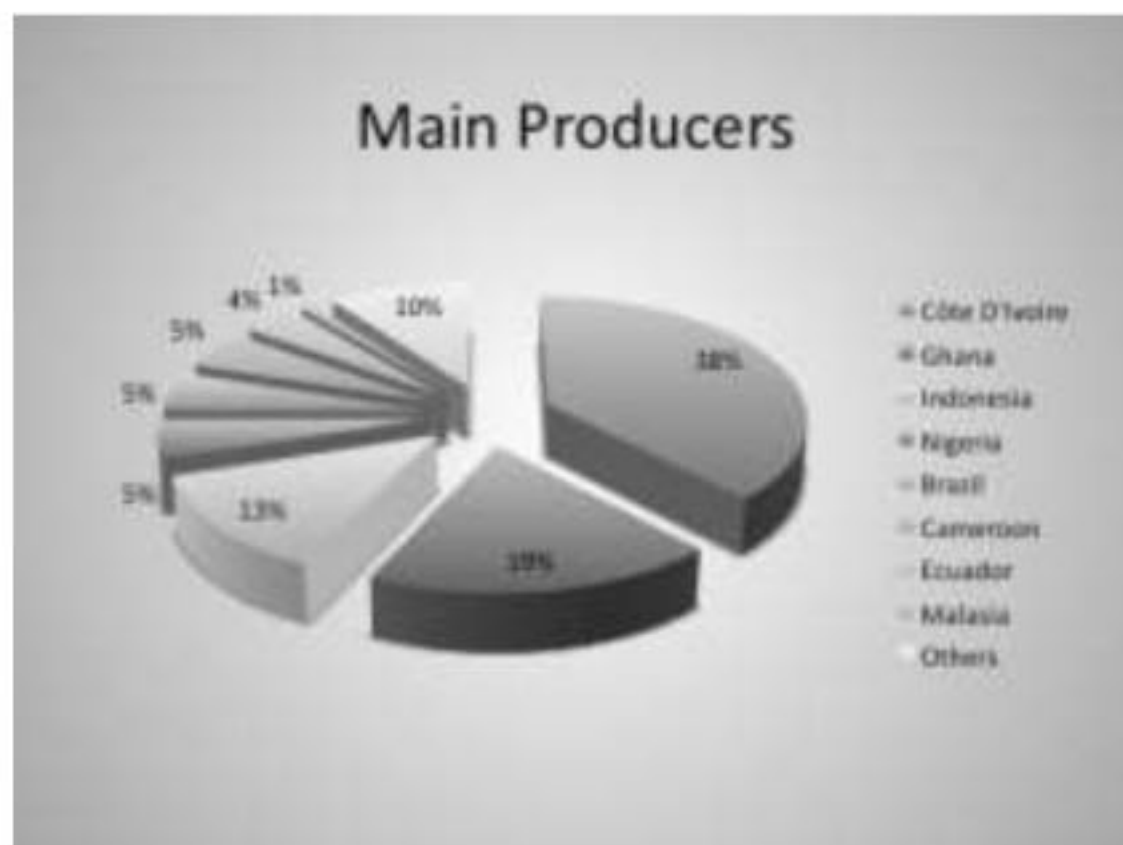
During our informal interview, *Victoria* emphasized her interest in finding 'people with money who will support her future construction projects as she feels that such a venture in this prime

location will surely be successful.’ Still, the future construction enterprise would seem somehow in conflict with maintaining a pristine wildlife ecological environment. And the dichotomy of ‘community beneficial’ and ‘lucrative business’ leaves one wondering who will end up ‘beneficial’ and ‘lucrative’—the community or the business owner?

Conclusions

The contrasting cases of the cacao farmers in Costa Rica highlight the covert interplay between foreign interests and native survival. This process is “covert” because of its public ambiguity, reflected in the subliminal transparency of the advertising blurb: “Our goals are towards a sustainable community including our surrounding community that aims towards new skill development amidst the local work force.” This statement is filled with dualistic opposites. The public facade is steeped in the language of ecological political correctness, but there lingers a sinister element of capitalist Imperialism harkening back to the Malthusian rhetoric that urged: “*improving their minds and directing their industry.*” But unlike Malthus, *Victoria* seems more motivated by individual economic gain and less concerned with issues of global starvation or over population.

These studies also reflect the subtle dichotomy between First World power influences on Third World economics. Cacao is not a product that will feed the global population, but it is a product of cultural indigenous heritage that transcends basic nutrition. In ancient Mesoamerica as today, cacao has always been a product designed for elite consumption. While modern Third World countries are the major producers of cacao, the major consumers live a First World existence.



This unequal social relationship parallels the relationship between unequal foreign economic gain and the *campesino* labor force. Such social inequality does not go unnoticed by the Osa residents. When asked about the current ‘state of affairs’, one of the *campesino*’s smiled, shrug his shoulders and admitted: “Yes its true, but I have my life here and I would not trade it for another. They have their problems too, like we all do. We are survivors and we are happy doing what we do. Did you know that Costa Ricans have the longest life? I work when I need to, have the things I need and that is all good enough for me. I do not want to walk in another man’s shoes.” Not all locals share the same sentiments, but there does seem to be a sense of co-viability within the present set of circumstance; for the most part, they go about their daily lives as they state, *just trying to survive*. And according to global world statistics,⁸ Costa Ricans do outrank other nations in terms of longevity.

Perhaps the social realism of the Land of Sweet Waiting is not too distant a translation from the romanticized Land of Sweet Longing.

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⁸ Costa Rica – Population, Health and Human Well-being – Country Profile in: *Earth Trends: The Environmental Information Portal*.

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