

“But the winds will turn against you”:

An analysis of wealth forms and the discursive space of development in northeast Brazil

ABSTRACT

In this article, I explain the unfolding of a participatory development project in northeast Brazil by exploring how local genres of public speech articulate with categories of wealth. Although development resources cannot be easily categorized into local classes of wealth, they nonetheless evoke some of the anxieties cultivators feel when dealing with wealth forms susceptible to the evil eye. Beliefs surrounding the evil eye shape cultivators' relations to material objects, and they also define the contours of safe and acceptable speech within the village development association. As a result, during association meetings, the villagers speak in ways that frustrate development agents seeking to generate “open” and “transparent” managerial discourse felicitous to project success—at least, external notions of project success. Appreciating the link between wealth and speech forms sheds light on both the local implementation challenges that participants in such projects face and the reason development agents frequently blame ostensive project failures on beneficiary backwardness. [*wealth, Brazil, development, evil eye, peasant society*]

In the backlands (*sertão*) of northeast Brazil, 24 families in the village of Caixa de Água are supposed to build chicken coops, raise chickens, and then sell the birds collectively through a village association. But the “productive project,” as many Brazilian and foreign development agents call it, will never work unless the villagers can manage the funds given them. Once a month, since July of 2003, the village's newly formed community association has met in a chapel on a hill. There, the heads of the 24 *sertanejo* households (both men and women) sit, knowing that they have work to do, decisions to make, and tasks to assign, yet they seem never to speak of the project. They come to the chapel, glance nervously about the place, and murmur a few fatalistic words about chickens that do not reproduce, about rains too sparse for a full harvest, about eagles that swoop and snatch chicks away. Four years have passed since the project began, and although some villagers have some extra chickens to eat, their association has never made a cent from the endeavor because no bulk sales have occurred.

The problems these cultivators face in the implementation of their development project are manifold. They deal with material obstacles related to limited labor time, shortage of land for the growing of forage, and poor soil quality. Unequal access to arable land within the village means that some families sharecrop fields and, thus, owe some of their harvest to others, leaving them less crop to use as chicken feed. These material challenges merit more analytic attention than I can afford them here. Rather than provide a comprehensive explanation of the multiple factors underlying the project's unfortunate status, this article focuses on the ideational and discursive factors that challenge the villagers' realization of project goals. Issues of project talk assume an ever-greater importance in light of an increasing tendency among development agencies to emphasize public, managerial speech among participants. Developers' emphasis on community speech legitimates the work of powerful institutional actors who boast of the enhanced transparency and accountability in their development projects (Gladwin et al. 1995:880–883) as well as their creation of spaces for local “people's perspective, knowledge, priorities and skills” (Cooke and Kothari 2001:5). But, in reality, demands for beneficiaries to speak publicly

about development resources can call for people to transgress the limits of safe and sociable discourse, particularly when it comes to discussions of wealth.

The stakes are certainly high for the cultivators. Many of the 24 families in the project live precariously on the corn, beans, or manioc that they pull from their fields. Some have only negligible surpluses to sell on local markets. Their little cash comes from recently gained welfare stipends or from the unreliable day wages earned either on surrounding ranches or on the slightly larger lands of their better-off neighbors. And, although most people deny that they suffer from actual hunger, the many short and wiry bodies I saw reveal real nutritional need, albeit unevenly distributed across households.

Talking to me—a U.S. ethnographer—in their homes, fields, and along the roadside, villagers spoke of their desire for Caixa de Água's development (*desenvolvimento*). They said they wanted their community to have electricity, running water, a health post, and “better things for all.” Impressed with the sophisticated technical and human-rights talk of development agents, the cultivators want to become “forward-thinking men” (*homem pra frente*), people who “understand things” and “know how to talk.” But sometimes in private (and after drinks), they tell me they fear that, in reality, they are “disunited people” (*gente desunida*). And in village association meetings, uncomfortable silences often pervade the chapel, jeopardizing the productive project and whatever good it might bring to this small corner of northeast Brazil. Why?

When I asked Esmeralda, a participant in the project, why she did not speak about her coops and chickens during the meetings, she responded,

Aaron, I don't tell anyone about my chickens, not even the others in the project. Some people say the evil eye [*olho grande*] is an illusion, but I confess that I believe. We never know who has bad blood do we? I close up [*cismar*] when people ask me about them. Because they say, “Esmeralda has good luck,” and then who knows. If I had another horn I'd put it on my coop.

The horn Esmeralda refers to is an amulet used for warding off the evil eye in northeast Brazil (and other places). Only after she made this comment did I realize that I had begun to see cow horns posted on the half-built coops, whereas, before, villagers had placed horns exclusively on their field fences and rooftops (see Figure 1). This was key: The silence within Caixa de Água's community association reflected not shyness or stupefaction but something cosmological and feared. The people of Caixa de Água inhabit a universe in which envy emanates from human actors, escapes their control, and creates risks that people negotiate through speech genres that are often antithetical to the demands of participatory development projects.



Figure 1. Cow horn posted on the perimeter fence enclosing a woman's chicken coop and range area. The woman in the background, a participant in the development project, said it protected the hens and chicks inside the coop area from “the big eye.” About two-thirds of those households participating in the World Bank development project (in all three villages) placed cow horns or other evil-eye amulets around their coops. Before the arrival of the project, villagers used such amulets almost exclusively to protect crops, cattle, and raw food, posting them in their fields or kitchens. Photo by A. Ansell.

Through an analysis of evil-eye beliefs, I argue that the villagers have two distinct forms of wealth and two corresponding systems for regimenting talk about wealth. By linking wealth forms to speech genre and cosmological danger, I illuminate the villagers' experience of risk when attempting to manage their development project. I then seek to explain the unfolding of the development project as a function of the villagers' ambivalent and conflict-ridden classification of its resources vis-à-vis these two forms of local wealth. In the process, I contribute to theories of participatory development by illuminating the genres of speech that comprise the discursive space of development and linking these genres to the conditions and categories of material production. In this way, I show how local categories of wealth and their related speech forms are central to a beneficiary community's understanding of, and engagement with, development projects—especially those that emphasize public, transparent speech.

Wealth, speech, and development

Participatory development projects offer their beneficiaries a dual vision of social betterment. They bring material wealth that, if properly managed, will ameliorate the poverty that circumscribes people's lives, and they bring techniques of accountable and transparent management that promise a soft, behavioral empowerment. Such projects explicitly teach people to speak openly with one another, to speak up in talks with powerful development

agents, and to speak out against corruption and clientelism. Encouraging beneficiaries to use rational genres of speech when talking about objectively scarce resources, development discourse occludes the way “resources are *made* scarce within a given system of values and power relations” (Verdery 2003:16; also see West and Sanders 2003). This naive ideology of transparent speech severs the link between poverty and history, making development seem like a sacred occurrence (Bornstein 2005; Rist 1997). Its cosmological virtue derives from both its affirmation of community order and morality and its positing of a utopian future that blossoms “according to a necessity that has been present from all eternity” (Rist 1997:33). This is perhaps why ideologies linking development to transparent speech are compelling for beneficiary groups themselves.

But what if, in practice, explicit and revelatory speech about wealth objects threatened solidarity among beneficiaries rather than affirming it? What if people affirmed *communitas* through discourses of mutual suffering and want? The participants of development projects would then find themselves in a no-exit situation. They would either employ local genres that violate the tenets of good, public development talk or they would experiment with transparent and rational managerial speech forms that risk community sociability and spiritual safety.

This framing of the beneficiaries’ dilemma builds on scholarly critiques of participatory development that focus on the divergence among participants’ interests within benefited communities (Agrawal and Gibson 2001; Arce and Long 1992; Pottier 1999; Ufford 1993). Such an approach exposes the discursive norms that shape the expression of different project ambitions and highlights the way developer-sanctioned forms of public, managerial speech can aggravate anxieties about social differences within communities. With this perspective, I add to a scholarship that looks critically at the effects of participation within programs that claim to empower beneficiaries. But I do not look behind the scenes of participatory projects to find the interested parties who appropriate development resources (Arce and Long 1992; Mosse 2005b; Neuman 2005; Nuijten 1992; Utting 2000), nor do I attempt to unmask the systems of governance that use participation to siphon labor from beneficiaries (Agrawal 2005; Mosse 2005c). Instead, I return the ethnographic focus to the cultural forms that are endogenous to the beneficiary community. By exploring beneficiary culture in terms of the delicate management of speech forms and categories of wealth, I can explain the paralysis that beneficiaries initially feel, and the strategies they ultimately invent, as they absorb new resources and speech forms introduced by development projects. Thus, my discussion tacks back and forth between an analysis of endogenous beneficiary culture, on the one hand, and the “representational practices that emerge at the juncture of (development) systems” (Pigg 1992:492), on the other hand.

Wealth, as a managed resource that stores some kind of value, must always be negotiated by “culturally articulated rules” (Bell 2004). These rules regiment its investment, storage, distribution, and consumption—in short, its material economy. They also regulate the diplomacy of inequality through norms governing the way people talk about resources. In an edited volume on the *Anthropology of Indirect Communication* (2001), several authors address the link between wealth-generating labor and talk in peasant societies. Pia Christensen, Jenny Hockey, and Allison James argue that silence during cooperative farming “allows people to work . . . without publicly accentuating that their personal ascendancy” depends on their different networks and personal connections (2001:70–71). Ursula Sharma, in the same volume, writes that “lying (and) indirection . . . are the means by which one retains some sense of control over what one can do . . . and protects oneself from others” (2001:122). These studies suggest that peasants verbally conceal their wealth objects and wealth-generating labor because these point to a limited-good universe of the sort classically theorized by George Foster, “in which some people are poor while others are not, in which the well-being and power of those with plenty is visible to, and resented by, those with little” (1972:167). Indeed, for Foster, peasants are the quintessential “deprivation society” (1965:296) because they treat all that is good in the world as though it existed in finite quantity and in short supply.

But Foster’s limited-good worldview must be qualified if it is to be applied to Caixa de Água, because in this village not all wealth is seen as a portion of some finite village stock. Only a specific class of objects points to unequal possession of limited community resources. Although no local term distinguishes these wealth objects from others, I argue that the cultivators in Caixa de Água conceptualize such a class, nonetheless. They fear what will happen to certain objects (cattle, crops, and, in some cases, people) if others look on them. Thus, I call this an “ocular” category of wealth (which I contrast with cash wealth below). And so, when it comes to talk of wealth, it is only this ocular form that is “better left unsaid” (Christensen et al. 2001:76).

Moving from a limited-good worldview to a category of limited good, ocular wealth allows for consideration of other categories of valued objects that might coexist alongside those mediated through silence and indirect speech. For David Graeber (2001), verbally concealed ocular wealth would never exist *sui generis*, because value systems always require practices of display and adornment to create meaningfully contrastive actions. Concealment and display are complementary “forms of social power: the power to act directly on others, and the power to define oneself in such a way as to convince others how they should act toward you” (Graeber 2001:104). Indeed, several ethnographies of development show that beneficiary populations classify project resources in bimodal terms: the wealth objects and

productive practices that one openly displays or talks of and those that one hides.

In his discussion of the “Bovine Mystique,” James Ferguson (1994) provides an excellent study of two forms of wealth in Lesotho villages. Cash is a “selfish, household-centered form of wealth” (Ferguson 1994:153), one that women access and spend on food for their children, rather than investing in the community. By contrast, livestock (bovine) wealth is “embedded in the social relations of the community” (Ferguson 1994:152). Men are praised for storing capital as livestock (Ferguson 1994:153) because they use the animals to establish relations of reciprocity and patronage with one another (1994:158). It is because cattle wealth can circulate among households that men talk openly of (and brag about) their livestock wealth, whereas their cash wealth is “just closed up” (Ferguson 1994:153). Thus, not only are there two opposing forms of wealth in Lesotho but they are also tied to different forms of verbal expression. One might infer, then, that villagers there would find it easier to collectively manage a development project based on bovine wealth than one based on cash, because they can more readily speak about livestock holdings in public settings.

Other ethnographies also suggest that beneficiaries categorize development resources on the basis of preexisting systems of wealth and labor in which discursive and attitudinal postures correspond to material goods and practices. In her analysis of a handicraft development project in Egypt, Julia Elyachar (2005) shows how craftsmen distinguish between positive and negative forms of exchange. They ascribe positive value to long-term exchanges of wares because these exchanges affirm the craftsman’s investment in the community, showing his “generosity and popularity.” The same craftsmen view short-term exchanges as having “negative value” because they are thought to undermine community wealth. Living under the threat of moral judgment, craftsmen must engage in a delicate politics of representation in which they depict their exchanges as the long-term sort, lest they draw the evil eye, a force that punishes them for the “pursuit of their individual interests” (Elyachar 2005:158). Because the duration of exchange relations is not observable in any experiential moment, there must be a level of uncertainty among craftsmen regarding the value that their community accords to their productive and commercial labor. Katherine Verdery (2003) notes a similar temporal duality in postsocialist Transylvanian agrarian cooperatives. The leaders of these cooperatives struggle to reconcile the long-term investment strategies of the cooperative with the short-term farming orientations of smallholders (Verdery 2003:237–239). And, as in Egypt, the classificatory ambiguity of new resources and labor practices confounds local forms of participation. Smallholders relate to the cooperatives as they once did to the socialist collective farms, “not as something to be

built up but something to be plundered” (Verdery 2003:242).

I draw from these discussions the idea that beneficiaries reckon development resources through preexisting classificatory grids organized according to several domains (e.g., unit of ownership, circulability, discussability, and temporality) of wealth-related practice. An opposition seems to underlie these domains, between practices that enhance a single social unit (individual or household) and those that enhance the well-being of a group. But the location of development resources and practices within these grids may not be clear-cut. My account of the chicken project in rural Brazil reveals that, although new resources may evoke the specter of a determinate form of (ocular) wealth, the property rights and labor relations that produce and multiply project resources are anomalous. Thus, the villagers’ classification of development resources remains ambivalent. As a result of this ambivalence, beneficiaries must constantly rethink the speech forms they use to manage these resources. They must balance their need for sociability and spiritual safety with the need to manage the project collectively in a way that satisfies developers’ demands for transparent public speech.

Background and project initiation

Brazil has a dubious track record when it comes to rural development, especially in the northeast. Not only did the country never have a progressive land reform project but rural people also were often excluded from development policy during the heady days of Import Substitution Industrialization. Agricultural development projects increased during the dictatorship era (1964–85) but benefited mainly medium and wealthy farmers with considerable land and enough money to invest in expensive machine inputs (Bursztyn 1984:26). In the 1970s, several federal programs organized smallholders into cooperatives and channeled credit and technical assistance to them, arguably as a means of preempting the proliferation of the radical peasant leagues that had sprung up during the 1940s and 1950s. Unlike the peasant leagues that the dictatorship openly persecuted, the cooperatives often included relatively wealthy farmers who benefited disproportionately from the loans and whose presence ultimately led the cooperatives to collapse (L’Abbate 1989:21).

During the 1990s, the Brazilian government terminated its major northeast development agency, the Superintendência do Desenvolvimento do Nordeste (Superintendency for the Development of the Northeast; SUDENE), on the advice of the World Bank. The bank then made northeast Brazil into a virtual laboratory for new kinds of participatory development projects (World Bank Poverty Reduction Group 2008). In “community-driven development,” as the World Bank called it, project design and oversight

devolved to nongovernmental councils that would write proposals for projects specified for particular villages. To qualify for such projects, cultivators in the villages had to gain corporate status as “community associations.” NGO activists, priests from the liberation-theology tradition, and politicians of every stripe undertook to organize villagers into these associations, often for self-serving motives. Emphasizing the principles of “transparency,” “democracy,” and “civic consciousness,” organizers sought to disabuse cultivators of their stereotypic peasant patterns of verbal interaction, telling them to stop gossiping about one another in their homes and to speak “openly” in the association (Costa et al. 1997). These, they said, were the speech practices that allowed an association to put a development project “on its feet.”

Although World Bank projects are implemented throughout the northeastern countryside, the federal government has given special attention to the municipality in which Caixa de Água is located. In 2003, the left-wing unionist Luis Inácio “Lula” da Silva took office as president and launched a major antipoverty initiative throughout the northeast called “Zero Hunger.” The Lula government selected this municipality to be one of two pilot areas for the much-acclaimed program, largely because of its poverty.¹ An anthropologist from the United States with no institutional connections to the government, I went to that municipality to study the effect of local cultural forms on Zero Hunger’s implementation.

As it turned out, the community-driven development projects never became central to the Zero Hunger initiative, but they did reveal an institutional and ideological convergence of various development actors that has increasingly become the hallmark of multilateral development efforts (Mosse 2005a). The World Bank endorsed and partly funded Zero Hunger, grateful that Lula was not renationalizing formally state-owned enterprises. It placed several dozen participatory projects under the government’s control, making them officially part of Zero Hunger. Already residing in the pilot municipality, I went to study these development projects in three villages. Caixa de Água was one of the three. Whereas many of the processes I describe in that village occurred in the other two I visited, my more intimate knowledge of Caixa de Água lets me describe them there in greater depth. That said, I also draw on a brief survey that I completed with nine other associations (in a loose, group-interview format) to address questions of scale and scope when speaking of community association dynamics.

The central role that various development agents accorded to transparent, public speech in the chicken project emerged explicitly during the initial encounter between the community association and a mixed team of urbane development agents from various organizations (Zero Hunger, World Bank, etc.). It was a hot day in June of 2003, and I was

still in a scouting phase for my research. I entered the village along with the team, our jeep bouncing over miles of rocky, off-road terrain. When we arrived, the team went directly to the chapel to speak with the people gathered there. The turnout was high, as the villagers had heard over their FM radios that they would be receiving visitors that day. Once the association president called the meeting to order and introduced the guests, the team leader asked, “What do you need to live independently, without the support of government money? What could this community do if it had 50,000 *reais*?”

These questions began a two-hour event in which the team tried to get the villagers to decide on their own that a chicken-raising project—as opposed to a sheep or beekeeping project—would probably be the best idea for their economic salvation. It was a frustrating meeting. The villagers were mostly silent, forcing the team to rephrase its questions over and over. The association president, João da Silva, repeated them to the members of the community (perhaps to make them feel more at ease in responding). But, for a long time, there was only silence, broken occasionally by scattered mutterings of self-deprecatory comments such as, “Here nobody knows how to converse.” The team leader asked socratically, “If not everyone has a lot of land, how can we raise sheep or cattle?” Silence. “Does everyone here have at least five hectares of land?” Silence. The speaker pointed to a woman, “You, Senhora. Do you have land?” The woman giggled, looked at her feet, and then quietly said, “I plant on the lands of others.” The speaker then said, “So, am I wrong in saying that we must create a project that does not require much land? Chicken raising, perhaps?” Nobody answered. “Those who would like a chicken-raising project, raise their hands.” Nobody did. The team members then scolded the association, saying, “You must speak your minds, trade ideas. If nobody talks, you can’t put a project on its feet. . . . Now, can you build the chicken coops if we give you the material?” A faint “Yes” from someone. “Will you work collectively to build them? Will you work collectively to manage these projects and make a better life here?” A few say, “Yes.” The development team repeated the vote two more times until enough people raised their hands to begin the paperwork.

There is perhaps nothing noteworthy about a group of poor Brazilian farmers who abstain from opining in the company of educated, wealthier (and more light-skinned) people. In subsequent association meetings, however, other patterns of topic avoidance and indirect discourse occurred that cannot be attributed to the insider–outsider engagement. One might object that I was an outsider at such meetings, and indeed, at first people looked at me cautiously before they spoke. But after the first few weeks, villagers seemed not to notice me; my clowning and performed inattentiveness seemed to lead many to dismiss me as innocuous.

The stated goal of the development project was for the cultivators to intensify their chicken production, increasing both domestic consumption and sale of the animals. In addition to the provision of dozens of well-bred cocks for each household, the intensification rested on two pillars: The first was the coops, which would improve the chickens' viability and fertility by sheltering them from the sun and also by making it easier for villagers to monitor the birds' diets, administer their vaccinations, breed them, and protect them from predators. The developers informally suggested that the village women tend to the birds because, prior to the project, women fed the few family chickens by tossing uncooked beans and corn at their feet as the birds gathered in the doorways at the noon hour. The second pillar of the project involved the improvement of chicken diets by interspersing supplementary plants within the cultivators' fields and by grinding up all the harvested crops destined for feed in a shared forage grinder, rather than feeding the birds whole grains and legumes. Like all work in the fields, the cultivation of this mixed diet would be men's labor.

The maintenance and expansion of the project would require money, and the funds were supposed to come from the association's bulk sale of the chickens. Once the project was up and running, each family would sell some of its chickens to the association each month for 80 percent of the bulk-sale value. The association would then sell the bunch to an outside market, retaining 20 percent of the sale price.

The production process did not actually require too much verbal coordination among the households once it got off the ground, but setting up the project did. Building each household's coops and the shared forage grinder facility meant labor contributions. Moreover, because the project funds were disbursed in stages, as separate phases of the project were completed, all the participants had to be finished with each phase (coop construction, initial planting, vaccination, etc.) at the same time. In his attempt to make all this happen, João (the association president) created four work groups of five or six men who would trade service days to build the coops. The teams he devised comprised men who had little experience working together; usually, senior men of an extended bilateral kin group organize collective farmwork (*mutirão*) in the village (Borges 1992:47; Cândido 2003:242). João, as a young president of a new village institution, lacked the authority to assemble and command collective labor groups. The responsibility for building the coops soon devolved to each individual household. Families would pay one of five village men who had masonry skills. But this was expensive; the daily wage for a mason is twice that for standard farmwork. And the process still dragged out past the deadline for completion of the first phase of the project.

By the time I set up residence in Caixa de Água in January of 2004, the lumber, blocks, and fencing had been lying around in people's yards for over a month. Only one

or two of the coops had been started. The villagers rarely spoke of their slow progress, and João claimed (with a tone of moral rectitude) that he never asked anyone about it. In two association meetings, I saw him advise the participants of the deadline (March) for the coop-construction phase of the project. The members answered him with silence and downcast eyes. He then went on to talk of budgetary matters (how much they had spent on nails and such), and the members readily commented that such prices were fair or expensive. Then nobody spoke for moments on end. Finally, somebody said that God had blessed the association, a sentiment that others echoed before falling once more into silence.

When I approached villagers outside the association meetings to ask about the coops, they responded deferentially, "Oh Dr. Aaron. I will build it soon." Even João's coop was no more than a pile of lumber, brick, and cement lying behind his house. I stopped asking people when I realized that many saw me as a project authority, a live-in development agent, an outside overseer. João often confided in me as a friend, but when I asked him why he, a mason himself, did not set an example for the association by building his coop first, he replied, "Let some time pass. I am no better than anyone else."

In late March of 2004, shortly after the deadline for the construction of the coops, a state agent from a rural development bureau, Moises, came to Caixa de Água and addressed the association members gathered in the chapel.

Moises: I've been walking around to each of your houses and I can see that most of your chicken coops are not done. Now you'll finish them. I'm not worried. These things happen. But tell me, what are the problems you've been having? (Silence) I know I talk too much. (He smiles) But now I want to listen to you. Now please. . . . Let's go around and ask each one. You, sir, what is the state of your chicken coop?

Village man: Well, huh. This is an excellent project. I'm very grateful to you sir for bringing it to us. Ugh. . . . The rains did come and we had to go to the fields, so we didn't quite get to the chicken coops on time—

Moises: Fine. That's fine. You, sir?

Moises went on like this, pointing to individuals—"You, sir; You, sir"—and getting mainly the same answer: "the rains." Everybody had to deal with the rains. One person said that her coop was nearly ready, and then other people included this statement in their answers, while continuing to reiterate that the rains had caused them to delay.

As we all filed out of the chapel, João beckoned me to speak with him privately on the side of the building, still in full view of the exiting villagers (and Moises). He asked me to speak to Moises as a peer, as a fellow "man of position,"

and to tell him that the people of Caixa de Água “have worth” (*tem valor*). Unsure of what he meant, I began to prod him, but he cut me off and told me that, when I returned, he would talk to me about why people were not building their coops.

I tailed Moises's jeep out of the village on motorcycle, following him to a small restaurant in the center of the neighboring municipality, Paulistana. As I pulled up a chair, I offered the words that João had given me. Moises told me to sit and then began to vent his frustration that the villagers of Caixa de Água (and those of other associations with similar projects) did not speak openly of project issues in the association meetings. “They gossip about it in their houses when the meetings are over. That's not productive! Find out why. You tell me why. That's your job.”

Like many other development agents I met in northeast Brazil, Moises saw the villagers' willingness to engage in collective managerial discourse as both a precondition and a goal of the project: a precondition because it was a means of production, a verbal technology that coordinated and synchronized the process and standardized the product of the village enterprise; a goal because open speech signified the achievement of an objective, self-evaluative mindset, a valuable bit of human capital that might help the villagers maintain the project once the year was over and the state withdrew its technical support.

In the following section, I analyze the villagers' talk in the community associations with respect to the development agents' ideal of open, managerial discourse.

Community association discourse

Although the villagers complain that they do not know how “to converse” in the community association, they engage in several discernible genres of discourse during association meetings. These I refer to as “budget talk,” “drought murmur,” and “Christian admonition.” Taken together, these speech genres suggest that the villagers more readily reveal differences in individual cash holdings than they do holdings in land and livestock. When it comes to land and livestock, villagers practice speech genres that emphasize commonality through referential content and polyphonic form.

Community association meetings occur monthly in village chapels (mostly Catholic, a few Protestant). An association's membership consists of no more than one representative of each village household (usually the senior male), although members' spouses may also attend meetings. The survey I administered to ten associations showed that between 38 and 100 percent of the families residing in a village are members (mean percentage = 74, $n = 14$). As formal corporations, the associations have bank accounts and budgets, which are ritually reported on during each meeting. All association members in attendance freely comment

on the expenditures of the prior month, some complaining that certain items (e.g., fencing for all the chicken coops) could have been bought at a better price. Moreover, meeting participants discuss members' dues—who is up to date, who needs to pay (see Costa et al. 1997:144). There is a consciously performative dimension to this exposure of their cash wealth. People take out currency bills in full view of others and give them to the treasurer or say that they are short on cash and will pay the following month. And on several occasions, I heard calm debate about whether a particular payment brought a member up to date. Another time, a man who could not make his payment said to the members gathered there that he would “make transparent” (*deixar transparecer*) his situation,² which he characterized as being “without a bill in the wallet.” In short, budget talk is a genre in which people readily make assertions of fact about certain individuals' cash statuses, and these assertions are subject to frank, although not particularly heated, dispute.

The villagers' facility in revealing matters of cash in the association meetings resonated with their general willingness to talk about the cash grants that they received through the Zero Hunger Program. Women, the primary beneficiaries of these grants, would openly compare the relative amounts of their stipends (which varied on the basis of poverty and number of children), and they would show their magnetic benefit cards to one another. These conversations occurred less often among men but often happened in plain view of husbands, fathers, and brothers from different households. It seemed, therefore, that there was very little sacred or secret about money.

By contrast, people do not make statements of fact regarding differential holdings in land and livestock, nor do they subject to criticism any statements about such property. They talk about land and livestock in other ways. Before the president of the association calls the meeting to order, the adult men and women seated in the pews talk about the lack of rainfall on their fields. They always speak about their household property using first-person-singular constructions, but no one person's voice dominates the conversational space at any time. Rather, multiple voices overlap, with people sometimes repeating verbatim what their fellows have said (e.g., “little falls on my fields,” “nothing grows on my ground,” “nothing this year,” etc.). The talk usually ebbs and flows in periods of one to two minutes. Sometimes this kind of drought murmur occurs in the middle of the meetings, especially if no outsider development agents are present to address the association. Like the *caipira* duos that Alexander S. Dent studies in Brazil's southeastern hinterlands, drought murmur relies on polyphony to create the sense of a shared rural predicament. Emphasizing a mutual vulnerability to nature, polyphony in the meetings “cancels the need for the detailed consideration of social relations” (Dent 2007:465) that fragment idealized representations of solidarity.

Villagers invoke a related but slightly different form of commonality through a third genre of association speech. They inject religious commentary into their association meetings, perhaps in part because the space of the chapel evokes the genre of the Catholic mass. Some meetings begin with the reading of biblical passages—a practice reflecting the origin of some of these community associations in the liberation theology and base Christian community organizing of the 1970s and 1980s (Adriance 1994; Alves 1984; Brandão 1980; Burdick 1993; Doimo 1992). Even at meetings of associations founded more recently, however, I heard admonitions to “return to Christ,” to “trust in God,” and to give up vanity and egoism. In this way, people assure one another that God will provide for them by bringing rain to their fields and making their crops grow and their livestock fatten. At other times, however, this talk declares that it is God’s will to punish the village as a whole (“if we become non-believers and sinners”) by withholding the rains. Focusing on the renunciation of individual aspiration (see DaMatta 1991:207–217), this Christian admonition emphasizes the subordination of all villagers to divine law and suggests that their fate is, indeed, a collective one, resulting from the aggregate virtue of the community as a whole.

All three genres presume different models of group solidarity and speaker intention, regardless of whether speakers actually intend anything. Christian admonition presupposes a stable, explicit, and already achieved “we.” Drought murmur constructs an implicit, tenuous, and still-being-constructed “we.” In drought murmur, individuals’ successive statements calibrate their personal poverty and (mis)fortune as equal to those of others. Speakers convey that they are forgoing assertions of material strength and status for the sake of an egalitarian sociability. This is unnecessary in Christian admonition because the basis of group solidarity is not sociability but mutual subjection to God. In the budget-talk genre, speakers do not perform solidarity so much as personal commitment to the association as an institution. By making themselves “transparent,” that is, by specifying detailed and explicit information about their personal balances in membership dues, each asserts that he or she is doing his or her part to bring about a secular form of social betterment.

The association forum thus appears as an “intergeneric tension field in which various discourses with different implicit and explicit models of subjectivity play off and compete with one another” (Lee 1997:12). In this “tension field,” the villagers’ facility in discussing matters of cash stands in sharp and unexplained contrast to their verbal treatment of individual land and livestock possessions. Clearly, talk within the association is linked to different classifications of wealth, but why cash and cattle should evoke such different discursive treatments remains unclear. Moreover, cash, land, and cattle are economically interchangeable; they are all capital, buyable and sellable. Why, then, should villagers

repress rivalry in relation to their land and livestock wealth only? The answer requires a look at the cosmological beliefs that are attached to these two forms of wealth in Caixa de Água.

Evil-eye belief and two forms of wealth

English “envy” stems from Latin *invidia* (which survives unchanged in modern Italian, and almost unchanged in Spanish *envidia*). Latin *invidia* is related to *invidere*, a verbal form compounded from *in-* (“upon”) plus *vidae* (“to see”), i.e., to look maliciously upon, to look askance at, to cast an evil eye upon.

—George Foster

As in many small cultivator societies, the villagers of Caixa de Água believe that some people possess the evil eye and can destroy property by virtue of an inherent condition (Roberts 1976; Spooner 1976). The giver of the eye performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. The act is a psychic one, the active consequence of a passive emotion, envy. By looking at the cosmological forces associated with envy, one can understand the villagers’ differential categorization of land and livestock wealth, on the one hand, and cash wealth, on the other hand. Understanding this difference allows one to understand both the speech genres of the community association and the villagers’ more general understanding of, and engagement with, the chicken project.

Envy, for the villagers, is an ocular experience. It is tied to a system of social stratification based on visible and visually impressive forms of wealth, that is, to certain media in which people store capital. In Caixa de Água (and elsewhere), the giver of the eye does not necessarily feel any ill will toward the possessor of a coveted object (Maloney 1976:vii–viii), but his or her envy has a power of its own. Envy dries crops, slays cattle, fells trees, pollutes food and water, causes houses to collapse, and can even kill small children.

Although cases occur of accusations directed against a person believed to have sent the evil eye to another, explanations offered by villagers often stress that individuals should not be punished for particular instances of the evil eye. In the first place, some say, envy itself is not sufficient to bring the eye to life; envy must be coupled with an inherent condition of “bad blood” (*sangue ruim*). It might happen like this: A bad-blooded person who stands overlooking the lush field or handsome animal of another person is overcome with envy. Invisibly, his or her eye stretches toward the coveted object. The eye enters the general area surrounding the object and pollutes the air there. From then on, it is only a matter of time before the object wilts, sickens, breaks, or dies. The owner of the property might wonder who it was

that caused this to happen, but because bad blood in no way manifests itself either on the body or through behavior, she or he cannot know for certain.

Adding to the ambiguity surrounding the eye's provenance, villagers told me that a single instance of the evil eye may not be sufficient to cause destruction. Instead, ambient air retains the energy from multiple instances given off by different persons, accumulating their negative psychic forces until a threshold is reached that brings calamity to the observable world (Rebhun 1994). Noting similar beliefs among the Ixtepeji (a Zapotec people), Michael Kearney (1976:180) suggests a symbolic link between air and the evil eye, one based on their key common features: ubiquity, invisibility, and dangerousness. For the cultivators of Caixa de Água, the eye, carried by the air, becomes a socially general phenomenon, like a sickness "going around." As a result, villagers live in a constant state of low-grade danger that comes from their general social surround in addition to suspected envious individuals.

Beliefs in the air as a passive receptacle of the evil eye are connected to another form of individual culpability as well as to another level of cosmological danger. The "wind," spoken of as a conscious and moral force, distributes and reallocates the destructive power that resides in the ambient air. Envious people and ambitious people (those who inspire envy) are morally reprehensible, and the winds (sometimes spoken of as "God") may punish their boastful conduct or envious displays by setting the envy-polluted air against them. And, although boastful or envious people are seen neither as evil nor as collusive with demonic forces, as they are elsewhere in northeast Brazil (Kottak 1983:148), they are teased and gossiped about and often experience problems finding people willing to exchange days of service in the fields with them.

The evil eye can be removed by a prayer sayer (*rezadeiro*), but preventative care is usually better, and so one sees a wide range of protective amulets in Caixa de Água and elsewhere in the northeast (Pierson 1967:253; Rebhun 1994:370) as well as in southern rural communities (Reily 2002:130). Throughout these regions, cow horns are posted on the fences of fields to protect the crops and grazing livestock, pepper plants are placed at doorways or on roofs to protect the house, and garlic wreaths hang over the stove to protect food from evil contamination. These amulets are used to quell different kinds of evil-eye anxieties, which vary according to a given family's position in the village's economic hierarchy (Galt 1982:130; Sharma 2001:121). Those who possess land or livestock in relative abundance must conceal or degrade its worth and follow the rules of hospitality by occasionally inviting neighbors to eat in their homes, and so forth. Villagers with negligible landholdings, who either sharecrop the fields of others or work for them as laborers, must conceal their hunger and reject hospitality so as not to suggest their envy (Scheper-Hughes 1992:130).

The evil eye, whether manifest in the use of cow horns, trips to prayer sayers, or outright accusations of envy, is the folk theory through which Brazilian villagers understand and negotiate the rivalries that emerge within a particular social milieu (Herzfeld 1981; Rebhun 1994). Much-feared gossip about the eye, which usually occurs within the nuclear family and, occasionally, among siblings, constitutes a metasocial discourse, that is, talk about social inequality, its affective consequences, and the means people have to change their lots in life.³ But this metasocial discourse is confined to the household. Villagers say—and my observations confirm—that in common space and in front of guests, no one mentions the eye. No one comments on the cow horns or garlic wreaths. Furthermore, and more fundamentally, talk outside the household never touches on the obvious inequalities in land and cattle ownership in the village.

Like the Indian peasants Sharma studies, cultivators in Caixa de Água use silence and secrecy to secure reputations for dignity and honor. Men from separate households who pass and greet one another by the side of the road converse for a few moments, usually about the lack of rainfall on their respective fields. During these conversations, one man might ask the other where he is headed or when he plans to go into town. These questions are nearly always prefaced by statements like "this is a bad question, but," "forgive my questioning," or some such apology. When asked why they preface their questions this way, men and women told me, "Because I'm not interested in other people's things." The respondent to such a question invariably answers opaquely, claiming uncertainty or the intent to merely amble about the village. These apologetic prefaces and misleading answers, however, are fairly rare, because cultivators generally abstain from questions about farming, intention, and personal movement. Through avoidance, apologetic preface, and indirect speech, villagers represent themselves as moral beings, untarnished by envy and ambition. The subtext of these silences, and the underlying story that each person tells about him or herself, is "I want only what is mine" [*Só quero o que é meu*]. And yet, even as they profess their virtue, the villagers communicate their formidability, letting it be known that they are "difficult to con, liable to retaliate if crossed, and well connected to influential allies" (Sharma 2001:121).

If the cultivators of Caixa de Água maintain a form of ocular wealth that is susceptible to cosmological danger, they also have one that is immune to it: cash. Talk of cash, quite notably, does not entail any cosmological repercussion, and people treat the bills in their wallets with very little ritual avoidance, indirection, or silence. As noted above, villagers even talk about the origins of their cash, whether it comes from one of Brazil's recently established family stipend programs or the sale of a goat. Thus, although villagers do not talk explicitly about "ocular" and "cash"

wealth forms, these terms grasp a local (emic) distinction between two kinds of valuable and managed resources.

Cash probably falls outside the moral universe of the evil eye because it typically comes to villagers from sources that distribute money evenly across households—or, if not evenly, at least without regard for their differential land and livestock wealth. Cash first gained a significant presence in Caixa de Água in the 1960s. The standardization of rural wages in 1963 (Pereira 1997:33), coupled with the opening of government-subsidized plantations in the nearby city of Petrolina around the same time (Chilcote 1990:147–153), opened up seasonal wage earning for all young village men. In the early 1990s, the Fernando Collor government enforced the federal dispersal of rural retirement funds equal to a minimum wage (Schwarzer 2000:73). (The value of these pensions stabilized with the Real Plan of 1994 [Araújo 2004:357].) The initiation and augmentation of welfare stipends under Presidents Cardoso and Lula further increased and regularized household cash (Hall 2006). Those running for political office are another source of cash wealth within the towns. If a candidate has been unable to sway voters with promises of future resources (public or private), then he or she may pay people cash in exchange for their votes.

None of these cash sources exacerbate, perpetuate, or call attention to intravillage material inequality. Rather, every family with senior citizens earns the same retirement, most men can find work on the plantations in Petrolina, and the only current differences in welfare stipends (from the government's Family Grant program) come from the number of coresident, dependent children (Takagi 2006:161–163). Unequal cash flow, to the extent that it exists, reflects remittances a few village men receive from kin in the big cities or higher mason wages, but both are rare. Thus, it seems to the villagers that external human forces provide them with roughly equal access to cash, whereas local cosmological forces allot them vastly different fortunes in land and livestock. This does not mean that cash wealth in Caixa de Água operates just as bovine wealth does in Lesotho (again, see Ferguson 1994). Cash is not the medium of inter-household ties, but it is certainly more neutral and innocuous vis-à-vis the indexing of village inequality, and thus it does not pose the same cosmological danger as ocular wealth.

In light of these beliefs, the villagers' relation to project resources would seem to rest on how they assimilate these new resources to the categorical distinction between ocular and cash wealth. On the one hand, the villagers often talk about the project in a way that resembles the drought murmur they practice in their association speech, for example, each saying in unison with others that his or her coops housed only skinny, barren, and moribund chickens. On the other hand, in some ways, the chicken coops resemble cash wealth. Moreover, too many people are desirous of project

success to allow the discursive limits associated with ocular wealth to jeopardize their chances for development. Below, I consider the way certain events in the project's unfolding point to the villagers' ambivalence and internal divisions regarding the classification of the chicken coops.

Ambiguities of wealth form and the negotiation of association speech

To the villagers, the project coops have features of both ocular and cash wealth. Like ocular wealth, they are visually impressive, are products of household labor, and are vulnerable to the destructive power of envy. Like cash wealth, though, these resources come from outside development organizations that distribute them on the basis of villagers' poverty and allocate them to any households wanting them. Moreover, project resources are both private and shared property. Although each family was supposed to raise and sell its own chickens, the success of this venture depended on others doing the same. (This is because sales were to be done in bulk and technical assistance provided only if all participants completed the various stages of labor.) As a result of this classificatory ambiguity, villagers were often unclear about how they should talk about their chicken coops in the association meetings. And selecting the appropriate speech genres in many instances became a matter of political contestation.

In early 2005, a conflict broke out that resulted in the alteration of project resource ownership. Jorge and his wife, Marta, had decided that João was "meddling in our house" by asking Marta to reveal to the assembly her method of protecting her chicks from predatory eagles. Jorge said he was leaving the project and the community association. At the following association meeting, João told Jorge and Marta that, were they to leave, they would have to dismantle their coop and give the materials to José and Elena, a recently married couple who wanted to join the project. After José and Elena confirmed verbally that they would accept the coop, Marta reared toward the two and yelled, "For shame! Blatantly talking of our things. You may get my coop, but the winds will turn against you."⁴ José then protested that the coops belonged to the association and that development belonged to "whoever had the courage to run after it." João then initiated a vote, and the assembly ratified a policy that anyone who withdrew from the project would have to dismantle his or her coop and give the materials to another village family that might wish to join the project. (Jorge and Marta then decided to remain in the association.) Since that day, the chicken coops, although individually managed and controlled, technically have been owned by the association.

Accusing Elena of "talking of our things" and warning her of the retribution of the winds, Marta moved the argument to a metadiscursive level, setting the boundaries

of admissible and safe speech by implying that the coops are ocular wealth. In effect, by rejecting Marta's enforcement of the regimenting speech genres associated with ocular wealth, José asserted that the coops belong to a different category of valued objects. The coops, for José, are something for which one can legitimately express desire even if one does not already own them. Their rightful owner is the one who "runs after them," that is, one who puts in the effort and follows the project rules.

That same month, another incident arose when the state technical agent responsible for assisting the villagers with the chickens showed up for an association meeting and asked if the hens were producing viable eggs. (I had observed from my daily walks around the village that roughly a third of the coops had chicks in them.) When the agent asked the group, several members of the assembly, including one man (Edilson) who had chicks, responded that the eggs were not hatching. The treasurer of the association then called into question the utterance of that individual, "Edilson, you have some chicks. What are you doing to make them hatch?" A long silence followed before Edilson replied, "A couple hatched a few days ago. They're little weaklings." The technical agent was very happy to hear this. He assured the others that their chicks would soon hatch as well and encouraged them to notify one another once they did.

In this case, Edilson and the treasurer had conflicting understandings of the nature of project wealth, or at least conflicting interests with regard to its discursive treatment in a given interaction. Both men subjected themselves to some risk: the treasurer by potentially conveying the appearance of envy of Edilson because of his hatched chicks, and Edilson by potentially bragging or otherwise conveying ambition. But the treasurer's comment also gave Edilson some license to reveal his hens' success by assuring him that it was acceptable to discuss project resources. Ultimately, Edilson tried to feel his way to a middle ground in which he shared the chicks' existence with his peers while preempting envy by minimizing their quality ("little weaklings").

Events such as these reveal the way the classification of the chicken coops as one form of wealth or another was ill defined and inchoate. Villagers were never sure exactly how susceptible they were to cosmological danger, and consequently, how stringently they had to practice speech genres that concealed differential project wealth among households. They might one day make the chicken coops into a categorically stable form of wealth, one linked to a determinate set of speech genres that regiment its public discussion. Indeed, the fate of the project, which, until now, has not stimulated any collective sales, might well depend on it. But some people believe that, if the association becomes too powerful, its president will dominate individual house-

holds, interfering in their choices as to what, when, and how they produce. People who experience this threat might challenge attempts to relax the regimentation of public talk about development wealth, seeking to contain such speech with genres similar to drought murmur and Christian admonition. And yet the potential material loss that could result from a poorly coordinated project may lead others to challenge such strict regimentation of talk about project resources. Thus, the villagers' classification of project resources could play out dialectically in time, oscillating between ocular and cashlike categorizations: As an ocular treatment of these resources begins to jeopardize the cooperation necessary for project success, villagers might begin to treat their coops as cash wealth; but as a cash treatment leads to cosmologically dangerous incitements of envy and ambition, they might reinforce the restrictions associated with ocular wealth (see Leach 1977). But the project is young, and so, at best, these suggestions are only informed speculation.

The dynamic categorization of project wealth might also interact with more general transformations occurring throughout the Brazilian countryside. An important study of rural economies in Brazil claims that agricultural labor is diminishing as a percentage of overall rural work, whereas masonry, housekeeping, school lunch catering, gardening, and work in health services are increasing (Campanhola and Silva 2004:21). As village economies become more cash oriented, cash wealth may come to signify social inequality and individual household interest (as it does in the Lesotho villages Ferguson describes), and land wealth may come to signify communal tradition. How this will affect the way people in Caixa de Água think about and manage development resources in their association forum is unclear, but some impact is likely. For now, however, grasping development wealth's awkward and tentative combination (and recombination) of the two local forms of wealth is the key to understanding the conflicts surrounding participatory development in Caixa de Água.

Conclusion

By illuminating the linkage between wealth forms and speech genres, I have sought to deepen understanding of the discursive space of development. By recalibrating this linkage, development projects alter local ideological systems at their point of nexus with local material production. New resources and work arrangements (that are still slight and incipient in Caixa de Água) pose classificatory problems to beneficiaries that begin to register within genres of speech. Classification problems are manifest in at least two (and likely more) ways: as explicit metalevel debates regarding the extension of speech conventions to new topics of discussion (e.g., chicken coops) and as the accenting

of experimental discursive forms (transparent, managerial speech) with the prohibitions associated with preexisting genres. Although the confounding categorical status of development resources manifests itself quite readily in these ways, the actors involved are motivated by more than just a concern for proper classification. Anxiety about the susceptibility of development resources to evil-eye danger (and the retribution of the winds) reveals that, for them, the stakes of classification are partly cosmological. And underlying these cosmological concerns is an implicit, collective effort to maintain egalitarian sociability among households whose economic statuses vary and whose variable positions are jostled by the development project. Although the cultivators' concerns are grounded in the conditions of the local political economy, it is the speech genre that is "the most sensitive *index of social changes* . . . still in the process of growth . . . and not as yet accommodated into already regularized . . . ideological systems" (Vološinov 1973:19). Thus, rather than push beneficiaries into changing their ways of speaking in participatory development forums, developers might do well to listen for the shifts and arguments that occur through the community's process of resource absorption. Instead of dismissing this talk as irrational or self-destructive, they might hear it as an indication of the social and spiritual pressures that they themselves induce. Those pressures are, after all, just as much a part of the development experience as chickens and chicken coops.

Notes

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1. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 43.7 percent of households in Acauã, the municipality in which Caixa de Água is located, have zero income, 29.8 percent earn a minimum wage, and 8.9 percent earn less than one half of a minimum wage. These figures must be regarded with skepticism, however, given that virtually all crop and livestock sales occur informally and likely go unreported to census takers.

2. I am uncertain if the man's use of the verb *transparecer* constituted a voicing of development agent discourse. Although it is certainly possible, many northeastern (and other) Brazilians use this term to refer to the revelation of affective states.

3. John Burdick's (1993) analysis of religious preference in Brazil also stresses the importance of people's fear of gossip, asserting that this fear often determines affiliation with Catholic or Protestant churches.

4. This saying was fairly common among villagers during moments of conflict. I heard it uttered in several contexts during the association meeting and, specifically, in relation to the development project.

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