



## Review of Stefan Ouma's *Assembling Export Markets: The Making and Unmaking of Global Food Connections in West Africa*.



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**Stefan Ouma. 2015. *Assembling Export Markets: The Making and Unmaking of Global Food Connections in West Africa*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. 264 pages, ISBN 978-1118632581 Paper (\$39.95).**

For markets and supply chains to emerge and persist, entrepreneurs must confront an unending onslaught of “sociotechnical puzzles” (5). They must connect intricate assemblages of people and things in the midst of social, economic, political, technological, biophysical, and semiotic flux. *Assembling Export Markets (AEM)* brings an array of such sociotechnical puzzles to life and powerfully demonstrates that how market participants attempt to solve these puzzles often proves at least as important in shaping market consequences as do the macrostructural dynamics more commonly emphasized by political economists.

Stefan Ouma draws on fieldwork in Ghana to deconstruct the emergence of two value chain segments — one for cut pineapples and the other for mangoes — at the “frontiers” of the global fresh produce market. He seeks to show “how global agrifood market connections are carved out from a heterogeneous world, how they are rendered intelligible and technical, and what opportunities, costs, risks, and disciplinary forces accompany them” (206). Packed with tireless theorizing and vivid ethnographic description, this book makes for a challenging but more than worthwhile read.

*AEM*'s central project is to draw on interpretive analytic techniques and methodical empirical examination to reconstruct the interactional stories that are often missed within the global value chains (GVC), agrarian political economy, and development studies literatures (among other bodies of work). Ouma pushes back against the widespread tendency toward

“abstracting markets,” instead focusing his book on “how markets...come into being *practically*” (3). Achieving this aim requires close observation of the “organizational forms, resources, technologies, strategies, and practices” (5) from which market strands emerge. The study is explicitly designed to answer *how* questions rather than *what* or *why* questions about market formations. Nonetheless, after reading the book I was convinced that the former project has important implications for the latter.

In attempting to excavate unseen layers of value chains, Ouma draws on tools from the “social studies of economization and marketization (SSEM).” SSEM consists of strands from economic sociology and science studies including performativity, actor-network, and convention theories. The book offers relatively little critique of SSEM literature itself, except to occasionally note that SSEM tends to lack empirical engagement with developing-world settings and that the field can have a tendency toward relativism and depoliticization that Ouma does not wish to share. Yet the book spends more time discussing the SSEM literature than it does the GVC and political economy of development literatures that it seeks to productively critique. I would have preferred that the SSEM discussions be slightly condensed to make room for more of the book’s constructive criticism of GVC and development studies, but this comes down to a matter of taste and interest.

The book’s two case studies each center on a (respective) firm relying on local contract farmers for supply. The first is Tongo Fruits (TF), a just-in-time pineapple processor-exporter in relatively prosperous and well-connected southern Ghana. The second firm, Organic Fruits Limited (OFL) exports mangoes from comparatively poor and insulated northern Ghana (both company names were changed to protect anonymity). The fresh produce sector constitutes a substantively important arena for study since many development agencies have recently chosen high-value crop export as a strategic leading sector for development. In Ghana as elsewhere, the development establishment and government agencies have invested heavily in such chain upgrading schemes. The two firms studied in this book have themselves been held up as examples of successful exporters in various agency reports.

From the constellation of similarities and differences between these case studies Ouma takes advantage of abundant opportunities for productive comparisons and contrasts. On one hand, both firms operate at the “frontiers” of the global agrifood market—geographic spaces in which connections to global markets remain thin, sketchy, and contested (see Ouma et al. 2013 for a more in-depth discussion of the frontier concept). Both firms are heavily embroiled within the discourses and practices of corporate social responsibility, investing in host communities and at times blurring the lines between business and development work. TF and OFL faced similar challenges in “creating” contract suppliers they could work with from the subsistence farmers

and spot market traders who predominated before the arrival of these firms. On the other hand, the two cases represent two different contract farming models. And they operate within about as dissimilar socioeconomic environments as can be found within the Ghanaian export agrifood sector.

The book takes the firms as starting points, and then zeroes in on links between the firms and their suppliers. Although buyers (primarily Western European retailers) regularly come up in the analysis, downstream elements mostly remain outside of the author's direct empirical eye. In focusing on the firm-supplier links, the book seeks "to reconstruct crucial market encounters" among diverse actors at this nexus, including the firm's management and staff, external consultants, and farmers, as well as influential stakeholders from global development NGOs to local chiefs. Ouma asks questions like "How are such encounters organized? How (un)equal are they? How are prices being constructed? What sociotechnical arrangements structure these processes? What controversies arise during such encounters?" (43-44).

Ouma refers to his method as "critical ethnography of marketization." As he puts it, "'knowing the market' can be understood as the capacity to effectively align human and nonhuman elements so that a good can be qualified and objectified to a given modality of valuation, calculated, and detached. What I did during my research was to trace how people performed these alignments during interviews or their daily work" (86). Analyzing transnational connections requires expansion beyond traditional place-bound ethnography. Ouma instead sees his method as "a way of arranging sensitizing questions, sites of interest, and different methods of text generation and analysis in a recursive and reflexive manner...in order to unsettle the taken-for-granted of global capitalism" (79).

While the first four chapters introduce the book's goals, cases, methods, and theoretical concerns, chapters 5-9 constitute the empirical and analytical core of the book. Of these, chapters 5 and 6 explain how the case study firms were able to create and stabilize the respective circumstances in which they were able to operate. Chapter 5 takes a broader perspective of how entrepreneurs envisioned their nascent market niches and brought them into being at the macro-level—for example, how founders were able to mobilize the necessary capital and make the necessary local connections; how they created the necessary "ontological reconfigurations"; and, how the two firms established their respective business models and gained the (relative) trust of producers. Chapter 6 takes a more ground-level perspective on how Ghanaian farmers emerged as market agents through their interactions with the firms. Although these chapters are full of insightful theorizing and instructive empirical accounts, they proved a bit unwieldy for this reader, and I found it difficult to extract cohesive arguments. More interpretively inclined readers, however, will feel right at home with these chapters.

On the other hand, Chapters 7 and 8 are much tighter and more focused. Each deals with a core theme (power and crisis, respectively), and each fleshes out its theme with reference to a central example from each of the two cases. Chapter 7 attempts to transcend homogeneous conceptualizations of power as a “substance,” instead exploring the micro-level interactions and “(anti)politics” through which power struggles actually play out. Ouma highlights “qualculative” power as key, i.e., the power to quantify and judge quality according to prevalent market norms, often with the use of technologies and algorithms.

I found the most memorable discussion within this chapter to be a section on power struggles between TF and its contract farmers that occurred through “valorimeters,” the mechanisms used to value the fruit purchased from contract farmers. Because of volatile demand from retailers, the company sometimes rejected higher than usual quantities of pineapples, and these rejections “were often not justified on grounds of under-demand or canceled orders, but by advancing technical arguments” (157). TF employees rejected pineapples because of low demand but claimed that they were doing so because of low quality. He points to the example of tests performed with refractometers—devices the company used to test sugar content. Because farmers generally did not own refractometers, there was not much they could do to argue when told that their pineapples had the wrong sugar content. This is a dimension of power that would be neglected by most political economy analyses.

Chapter 8 considers crises that occurred within each of the case studies. Here, I found OFL’s story to be the more interesting of the two. OFL’s crisis came about largely as a result of its flawed reading of “nature,” and resultantly faulty agronomic and business strategies. The company’s consultants estimated vital parameters of inputs required and outputs expected, and then based their production plans, finance and investment plans, etc. around these estimations. These “calculations became a linchpin for the mango project. Everything was based on them” (192). When it became clear that the equations had underestimated the number of years it would take mango trees to bear fruit and the years for which they would need irrigation, the entire project fell into an existential crisis. The company was forced to reconfigure and rebuild its operations, and could easily have gone under.

*AEM* is careful to maintain focus on the areas that its research design is best equipped to address, i.e., the *how* questions, and Ouma explicitly seeks to “move beyond an instrumentalist critique of actually existing value chain development.” Yet the book presents a wealth of insights that, if followed up on, could provide useful policy implications relating to often overlooked mechanisms. For example, NGOs striving to increase the bargaining power of small farmers in global value chains would do well to pay close attention to the subtle knowledge/power interfaces that the book highlights, for instance in its discussion of “valorimeters.” Supply chain-

oriented development strategists concerned with the well-being of small farmers would do well to heed Ouma's suggestion that "regional markets, which require a less demanding and costly *agencementization*, should be considered as viable alternatives...in the context of Africa agrifood industries" (212-213). While readers inclined toward political economy and policy-relevant development studies may struggle with this book more than those oriented toward interpretive SSEM-type theory, it is perhaps the former readers who have most to gain from this thoroughly eye-opening and perspective-changing text.

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