

“Good Farmers” and the Development Imaginary in Kenya

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Introduction

What shapes the conception of the “good farmer”? How has this image evolved over time, and in what way? Focusing on colonial and contemporary media resources in Kenya, along with referencing agricultural research and policy documents, this research seeks to understand what depictions of the “good” farmer are over- or under-represented in the existing literature and media. By comparing narratives from different time periods, this research aims to break down the limits within the development imaginary that primarily values efficient, high yielding and commercially-oriented farming practices as sought-after farmer attributes.

Methodology

The “good farmer” concept was assessed using qualitative discourse analysis of agricultural educational video media that were widely available in Kenya in both colonial and contemporary time periods. *The Two Farmers* (1948) was made by the British government and widely screened in colonial villages, while *Shamba Shape Up* is a contemporary Kenyan reality television show which performs weekly farm “makeovers”. Additionally, a literature review of articles focused on the impacts of both the colonial agricultural development films and of *Shamba Shape Up*, as well as news articles that focus on social conceptions of farmers and farmer “success”. The literature review allowed for defining key themes dominant in media and literature, while contributing to the longitudinal perspective which helps answer the questions: “What has evolved in the agricultural development imaginary in Kenya, and what has stayed the same?”

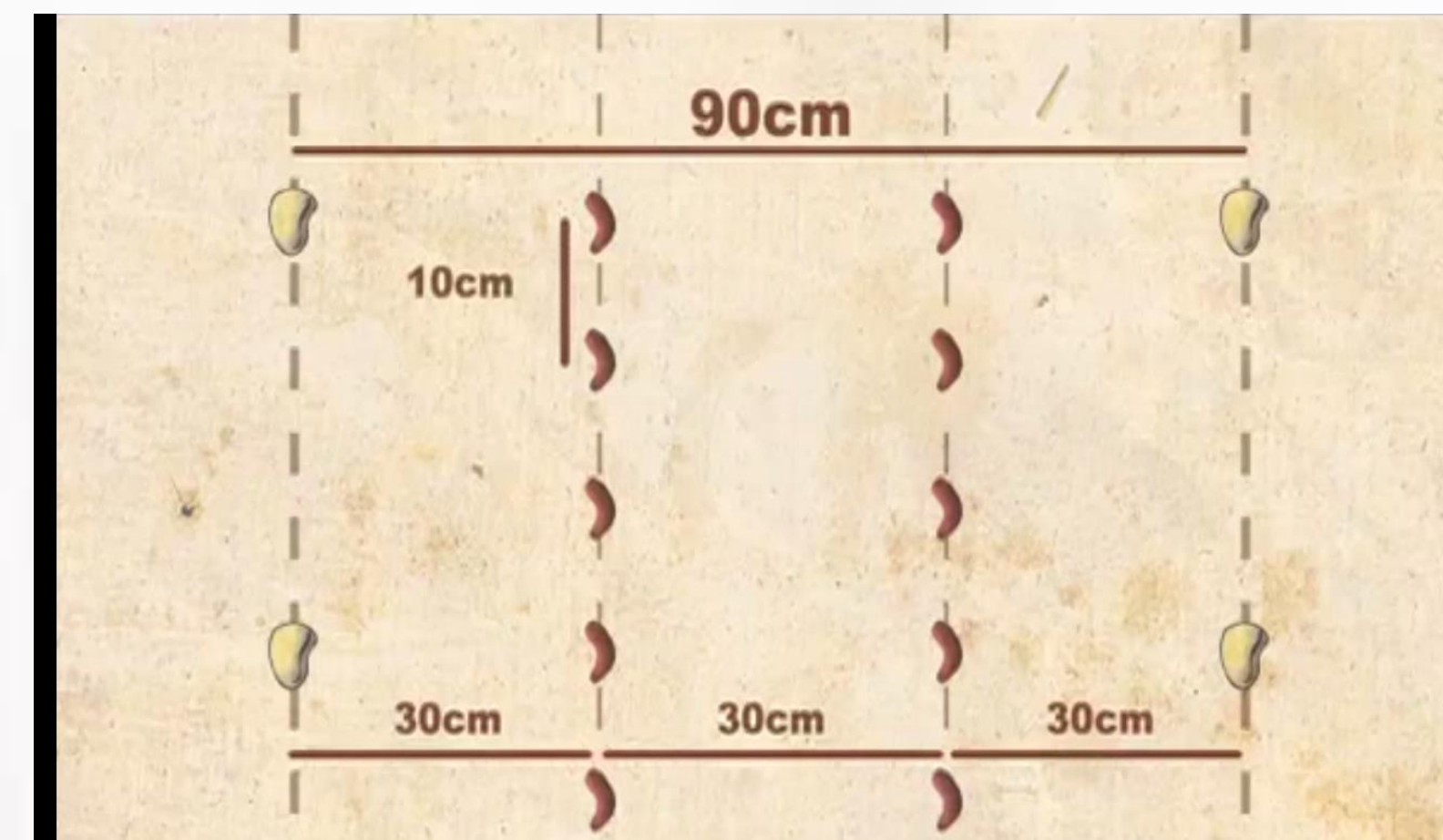
Comparing narratives: old versus new

The Two Farmers (1948)

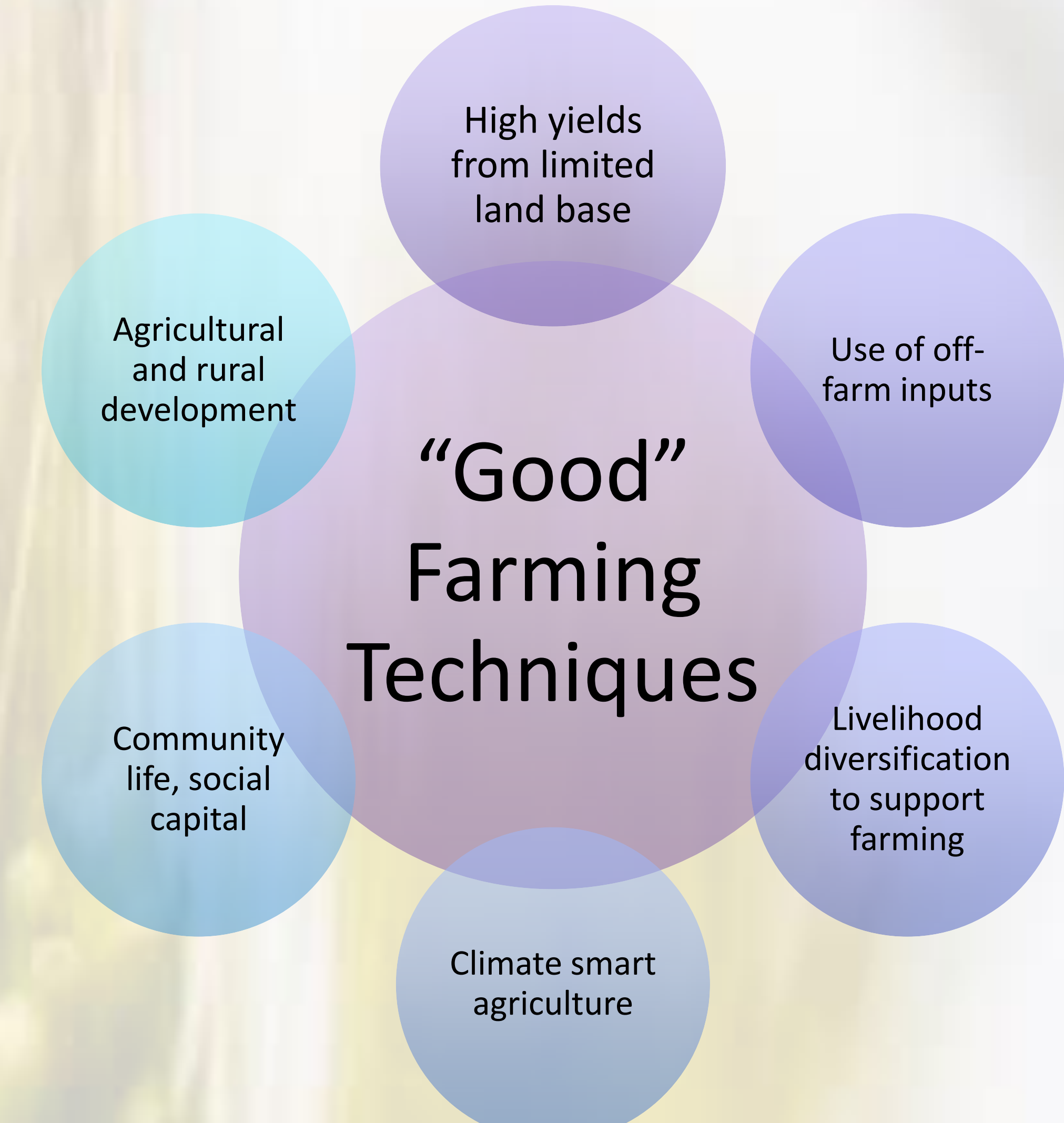
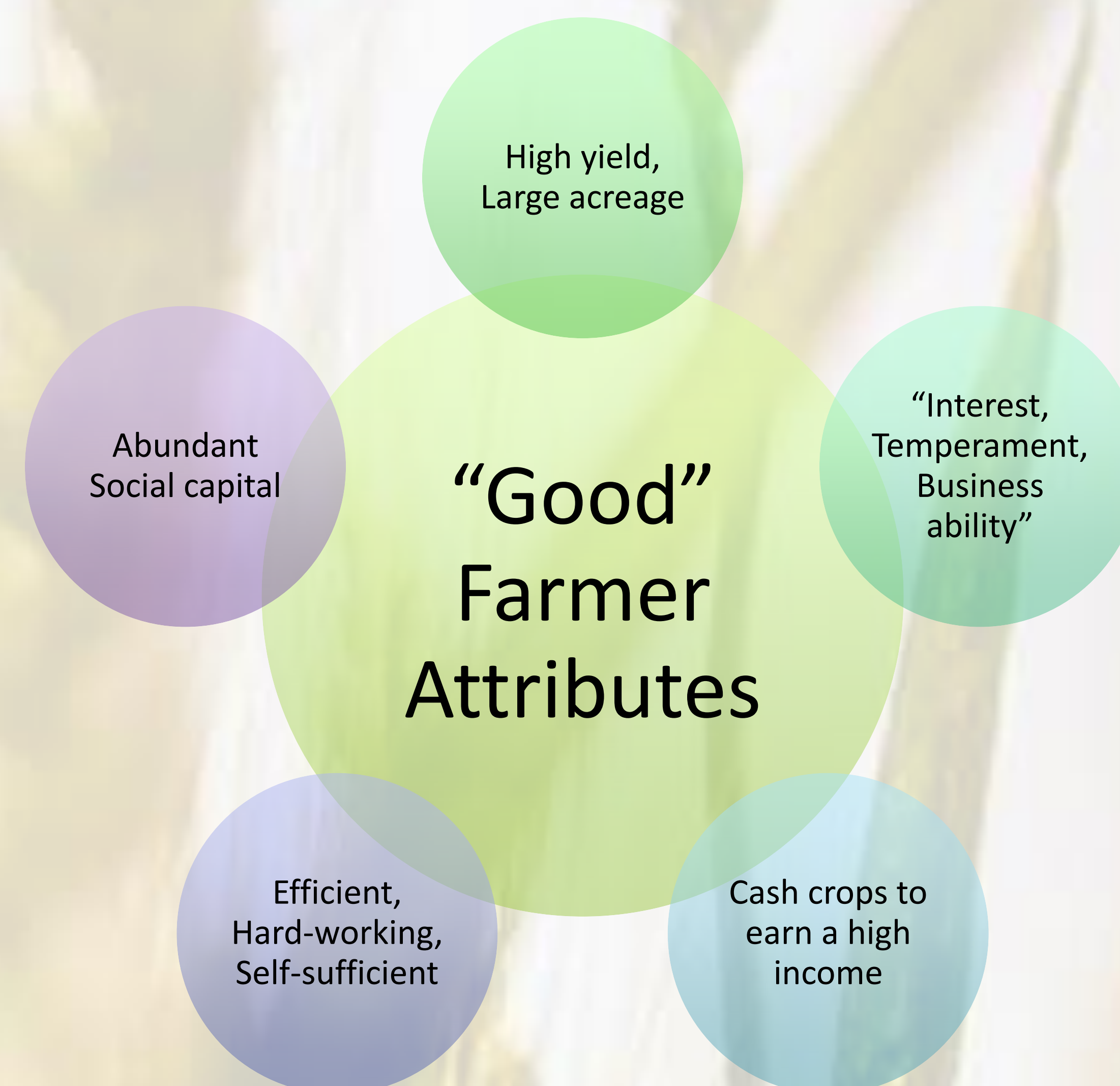


The Two Farmers contrasts two farmers in Rhodesia. One who takes the advice of the colonial Agricultural Officer and achieves “success” in the form of a higher income and an ox cart. The other farmer is portrayed as a lazy drunkard who does not improve his farm because he didn’t listen to the colonial officer. This film does little to actually give useful farming advice and instead perpetuates stereotypes.

Shamba Shape Up (2012 – present)



Shamba Shape Up does not rely on stereotypes but showcases good farming techniques as an idealized package. Agricultural development is presented as a multi-dimensional process: “Climate smart” and adopting technologies to increase efficiency and yield (e.g. fertilizers, manure, seeds purchased from agricultural corporations). Participants become “good farmers” by adopting these practices, even while diversifying their livelihoods to be self-sufficient.



What has changed? What has stayed the same?



The old narrative presents African farmers as cartoonish stereotypes (as “Mr. Wise” vs. “Mr. Foolish”), with no knowledge of how to farm “properly” without outside guidance. “Good farming” is framed as stemming automatically from using the European colonial expert’s knowledge and technology. The “good” and “bad” farmers’ differences are rendered in terms of personalized characteristics: (un)willingness to listen to the expert, a desire for more income (or not), attitudes towards self-discipline, leisure, traditional crops, and property rights.

The new narrative is more multidimensional: “good farming” still requires applying “proper” techniques but agricultural development is situated within wider rural development. This shifts attention from personal characteristics towards marketing certain ideas or ideals towards which the farmers should aspire. The “good farmer” in more recent media is concerned with climate smart agriculture, creating a diversified livelihood to be self-sufficient and earn income, as well as seeking out new technologies and options to grow their farm.

In both narratives, “development” success is imagined in terms of growth or improvement: growing and selling more crops, using new technologies (fertilizer, seeds, tools, solar power), and taking personal responsibility for overcoming challenges.

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- Image sources: piktochart.com

Conclusion



In the media and literature reviewed, the “good” African farmer is framed as someone who embraces the Western colonial model of success. In colonial times, this meant compliance with the European expert and a rejection of “foolish” traditional practices so that they can grow more crops for personal and collective gain. The contemporary narrative assumes farmers already aspire to running their “farm like a business” and instead focuses more on the broad range of practices needed to do so. In both cases, the “good farmer” negates any pre-existing local or cultural norms about “good” farming, and reinforces Western values like growth, integration into a market economy, and individual responsibility for overcoming challenges.

Acknowledgements



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