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Notes de lecture —

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Rubber, War, Revolution: The SHADA Experiment and 1940s Haiti

This paper is based in large part on access to the previously little used archive of Thomas A. Fennell, President and General-Manager of the Société Haïtiano-Américaine de Développement Agricole (SHADA). Fennell's carefully organized papers outline in incredible detail the workings of perhaps the most ambitious agricultural program undertaken in twentieth-century Haiti. The story of that program, its origins, and the reasons for its collapse, are the subject of the present work and all references to the archive are cited as "Fennell Papers." I am indebted to the late Dr. Thomas Dudley Fennell, son of Thomas A. Fennell, for generously sharing a portion of the archive with me and for his active correspondence on early ideas that are developed here. I also thank his son, Jeffrey Fennell, for entrusting me with documents from his father's and grandfather's collections which have not only enrichened my knowledge of the history of SHADA, but also caused me to reassess arguments I made on

the project in earlier work. I am also grateful to the late Mark R. Finlay with whom I was in touch while he worked on his history of US Rubber projects, and who also graciously shared important documents used in this essay. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the University of Oxford and the University of Liverpool. I thank the audiences who engaged with me for their feedback.

The decade of the 1940s is now receiving serious attention in Haitian scholarship.[1] Searches for explanations for the political and security problems that have rattled Haiti since the late twentieth century, intensified by the 2010 earthquake, have contributed to steady fascination with an era before the Duvalier dictatorship emerged if not in full menace, at least in sharp outline in 1957. The nineteenth century provides clues to the direction the country would take. It established the conflictual terrain of political rule, and the type of relationship Haiti would have with its neighbours. The suddenness of US Occupation in 1915 breached this narrative. Marine control ended in 1934 without resolving the elemental problems of the state or establishing a functioning democracy and without reducing the political role of the United States. It was the nationalists of the late 1930s

1 For some of the recent histories that locate the 1940s as pivotal to understanding modern Haiti, see for example, Grace Sanders Johnson, *White Gloves, Black Nation: Women, Citizenship, and Political Wayfaring*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2023; Chantalle F. Verna, *Haiti and the Uses of America: Post-U.S. Occupation Promises,* New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2017; Millery Polyné, *From Douglass to Duvalier: U.S. African Americans, Haiti and Pan Americanism, 1870-1964,* Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 2011; Matthew J. Smith, *Red and Black in Haiti: Radicalism, Conflict and Political Change* 1934-1957, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009. There is also very good new work on the US Occupation, linking it to the changes that followed. See for example, Marvin Chochotte, "The Twilight of Popular Revolutions: The Suppression of Peasant Armed Struggles and Freedom in Rural Haiti during the US Occupation, 1915-1934," *The Journal of African American History* 103 (3) Summer 2018: 277-308.

into the forties that confronted the past and the present anew, trying to steer the republic toward a theoretically inclusive politics. They did this without the shadow of Duvalierist violence or a flawed and embittered security apparatus. It was in the 1940s that the cultural movement of the 1920s, sparked by Jean Price-Mars, developed into a national program. It was also in the 1940s that Haitian political actors chose to wrestle with various motives and outcomes, with the country's racial and colour divisions. Every aspect of Haitian social thought and political interaction was altered by this energy to create a new future for the republic. Duvalier, then a doctor with a heavy interest in Haitian ethnology, was acutely aware of the malleability of the emotional attachments of nationalism and its tributary ideas, and dangerously manipulated them to his personal profit, sundering a genuine vision of improvement that his generation had shaped.

What is just as true was that Haiti had entered a decade of material and intellectual opportunity in the forties. The *noiriste* movement that opposed the forces that undermined Haitian nationalism up to 1934, sensed a chance for Haiti to make a turn; to leave behind the rhetoric of old and chart a modern identity based on greater representation for the Haiti's majority. The 'revolution of 1946,' was the moment when all of this came to a head. The overthrow of President Élie Lescot in January was a victory for radical groups that had defined themselves based on a pronounced anti-colonialism and left-leaning visions for Haiti. It is this process that has for good reason drawn a great deal of attention. What is blurred in the dust clouds behind it, is clear sight of why Haiti of the 1940s under Lescot proved so fractured. What was it about Lescot's personality and more importantly, use of his executive state power that would lead to the revolutionary movement of 1946 that defined the remaining years before Duvalier?

This essay offers a new perspective on the Lescot era by looking closely at what has long been regarded its greatest failure—the ill-fated development of plantation rubber in Haiti through the Haitian-American company SHADA. The project began with a sincere motivation to revolutionize the Haitian peasant economy during the years of the Second World War through a unique and well-funded alliance with the United States. Its

catastrophic end in 1944 permanently damaged Lescot's reputation and intensified the forces that led to his ouster and the 1946 revolution. The rise and fall of the SHADA experiment holds larger lessons for understanding the historic challenges of externally managed policies in Haiti.

In Alliance: Haiti and the Second World War

It was not long after he assumed the powers of state on May 15, 1941, that Lescot declared his support for the United States in the war. It was hardly surprising. Lescot had been Haiti's diplomat to Washington just before his elevation and used the position strategically to build his political capital. His offer of Haitian military support was unrealistic but important. "What have Haitians to give in return for this cooperation?" Lescot rhetorically asked in July 1941. "We have, for one thing, a potentially large market for the manufactured goods and the processed agriculture of the United States…, [b]ut we have more than a market to offer. We have the friendship and good will of 3,000,000 souls who love freedom so much that they would die to defend it—as their ancestors died in the war for Haitian independence."[2]

Such waxing was part of Lescot's personality. Though overbearing, it demonstrated a willingness to offer whatever Haiti could provide for the war effort in humans and in kind. US State Department officials took careful note of Lescot's unrelenting support which came at a time when US agricultural researchers were scouring Latin America and the Caribbean to investigate what resources the countries might offer for war production. The US had outlined every possible scenario in a fast-escalating war. One of the most critical agricultural products which had to be supplied in large amounts was one of the century's most vital commodities, rubber.

Although rubber cultivation in the Americas had been around since at least the sixteenth century, the commercial boom in Amazonian farming driven by new uses for latex rubber in the late nineteenth century significantly increased world demand. Rubber, taken from the sap of tall and wide trees (known as *hevea brasiliensis*) found deep in South American forests

2 Élie Lescot, "A Word From Haiti…," *Agriculture in the Americas,* July 1941, preface.

could be richly exploited and traded.[3] The desire for more rubber was driven by accelerations in the industrial revolution. The economic effect was remarkable. Wealthy rubber barons planted more trees and claimed more land all put to the service of the industry. In effect, it introduced a modern plantation system in Latin America, one that had many features of new world slavery. Indigenous labourers were enslaved, beaten, sexually abused, and forced to work under brutal regimes with few returns. The location that suffered the most was the Upper Amazon. There the death rate was extraordinary, defined in many ways by the Putamayo genocide in Peru.

The South American boom did not last long. By 1912 the rapid growth of the rubber industry in Asia broke the Amazonian monopoly. The United States, the largest market for global rubber, had expanded to the Pacific and imported more than 95% of its rubber from Asia. The rise in Asian rubber did not foreclose the possibility of Latin American or Caribbean rubber. In Brazil Henry Ford set up rubber plantations to supply his booming car industry, and across the region, as they had done four centuries before, enterprising business interests searched for new territories that could reliably produce hevea rubber.

The Amazonian boom period stirred Max and Fritz Hermann, two Belgian brothers to travel to Haiti in 1903 and explore the possibility of planting hevea trees in Bayeux, located in the coastal region of Cap Haïtien. Intent on breaking into the market, they planted 90 acres of hevea trees there.[4] The effort was abandoned with the decline in Latin

3 On the Brazilian boom, see John Melby's well-known essay, "Rubber River: An Account of the Rise and Collapse of the Amazon Boom," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 22 (3) August, 1942: 452-469. The classic study of Brazlian Rubber is Warren Dean, *Brazil and the Struggle for Rubber: A Study in Environmental History,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987. See also Randolph R. Resor, "Rubber in Brazil: Dominance and Collapse, 1876-1945," *The Business History Review* 51 (3) Autumn, 1977: 341-366; Joe Jackson, *The Thief at the End of the World: Rubber, Power, and the Obsessions of Henry Wickham*, London, Duckworth and Co., 2009 and Wade Davis, *One River: Explorations and Discoveries in the Amazon Rain Forest*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1997.

4 On the early rubber experiments in Haiti, see Loren G. Polhamus, "Experimental Tapping of Hevea Rubber Trees at Bayeux, Haiti, 1924-25," in Technical Bulletin No. 65, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C, April 1928. Polhamus

American rubber and the death of one of the brothers, though the hevea trees remained in northern Haiti. Interest in Haitian rubber was revived in the interwar years when plant researchers for the USDA in Coconut Grove, Florida, became interested in new types of tropical rubber. Called c*ryptostegia grandiflora*, the plant was a wild vine native to Madagascar that was well suited to tropical conditions. During the US Occupation, USDA researchers visited Bayeux to explore the possibility of expanding hevea cultivation.

US research in Haitian rubber in these years was part of larger concerns with Haitian agriculture that had seen the development of the Haitian-American Sugar Company (HASCO) and the increase in sisal production in the 1920s. Rubber at the time did not have the same demand given the Asian production market. Still, the early exploration of Haitian suitability for large-scale rubber planting would prove important when the Second World War broke out in 1939.

The demand for rubber had become acute for Allied forces. Japan's advance in the Far East in December 1941 set back the United States especially, which long depended on Malaya as its principal source for rubber. The US government had earlier been stockpiling its rubber reserves in the event of what occurred in December. There had also been USDA sponsored programmes to bring hevea trees from Asia to the Caribbean to begin large-scale planting there.

It was then that Haitian rubber planting began in earnest. A botany professor from University of Michigan, H. H. Bartlett, brought hundreds of clones of hevea plants from the Phillipines to Haiti which were planted in Marfranc in the Grande Anse near Jérémie. Bartlett arrived in Haiti the day after the Pearl Harbour attack which brought added weight to his mission. Now that the United States was entering the war, it would need as much material sourced from allied countries as possible. Haiti by then had two modest sized experimental rubber plantations in the north and southwest with preparations well underway for more.

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would later meet and discuss his research on the earlier hevea project with Thomas A. Fennell, president, SHADA. Fennell Papers.

The operation for Haitian rubber development fell under the remit of SHADA which was formally established on August 1, 1941. Lescot, his US backers in Haiti, Minister of Agriculture Maurice Dartigue, and Minister of Finance, Abel Lacroix, secured a loan from the Export-Import bank to fund the project. The amount of US$5M (over US$100M in 2024 figures) was a major investment in Haitian agriculture. The Lescot government and Haitian public were expectedly enthusiastic about the potential of SHADA. "It is an enterprise of great importance for the prosperity of the country," noted *Le Nouvelliste*.[5] SHADA, importantly, was not exclusively devoted to rubber development. "The goal of the Society," according to article 2 of its Constitution, "is the development and exploitation of all the agricultural resources of national territories."[6] It was understood, however, that SHADA's principal concern would be rubber. The agreement gave the Society a fifty-year monopoly on sale and export of rubber and a lease of 150,000 acres of land.

Stock in SHADA was completely owned by the Haitian government. It was also governed by a Board of Directors with three appointed by the Export-Import Bank (all Americans) and three appointed by the Haitian government, including Dartigue, Lacroix, and George Heureux. All decisions were to be taken unanimously by the Board. This was a necessary feature given Haitian nationalist concerns of economic and territorial control by the United States after 1934.

The founding of SHADA was more appealing given the timing. The Haitian economy, like that of its neighbours, faltered during the depression and into the early war years which led to a drop in coffee exports. Lescot's predecessor, Sténio Vincent, had been concerned with this and appealed to the United States for technical advisers to support plans to diversify Haitian agriculture. SHADA, with considerable financing, US support, and an expectant demand for Haitian products, was the most promising economic development Haiti had in decades.

5 "Sociéité Haïtiano-Américaine de Developpement Agricole," *Le Nouvelliste*, 4 août 1941, 1. My translation. Unless otherwiswe noted, all further translations from French are mine.

6 « La Société Haïtiano-Américaine de Développement Agricole », *Le Nouvelliste*, 5 août 1941, 1.

The management of the entire enterprise was the responsibility of its president, Thomas Anderson Fennell, and much of what came to define SHADA was due to his leadership. Fennell was thirty-nine at the time but had much experience in tropical agriculture. He was born in Cynthiana, Kentucky in 1902 to a family already involved in orchid and plant nurseries. The fascination rubbed off. In 1928 he took a job at the Department of Agriculture as a labourer and propagator at the US Plant Introduction Garden in Florida. Fennell worked his way up. In three years, he was Superintendent and four years after that was Assistant to the Director at the Beltsville Research Centre in Maryland.[7] He returned to Florida from where, after steady promotions to become Operations Chief, he was transferred to Haiti in November 1939 on a one-year appointment as technical advisor on Agriculture. Fennell took to the new position as he had done in his previous jobs. He worked with peasant labourers on new farming techniques that would increase output and diversify their crops, particularly with coffee, bananas and cacao. He was enthusiastic about the challenge. "I hope to be able to suggest new and better varieties of crops and to help in the general improvement of the Haitian agricultural societies."[8]

From the beginning, Fennell was challenged to balance a response to Haitian need with US expectations. While the stated benefit was for peasant agrarian improvement, Fennell was also expected to advise the J. G. White Engineering Company which had an international contract to develop public works projects in rural Haiti.[9]

Fennell proved adept at the task he was given. He worked closely with agronomists in Damien and USDA colleagues in program development projects for Haiti's main crops, coffee and cacao. But he also conducted tests for the improvement of Haitian ginger, lemon grass, sisal and advocated for the expansion of Haitian craft items for US export. "Too often,"

7 Biography of Fennell drawn from various sources in Fennell Papers.
8 Thomas A. Fennell to Sumner Welles, 15 November 1939, Fennell Papers.
9 Sumner Welles to Thomas A. Fennell, 7 November 1939, Fennell Papers.

he argued, Haitian staple crops "are subject to depressed prices on world markets," leaving vulnerable peasant farmers with lower cash incomes.[10]

It was Fennell's favourability with his Haitian colleagues that led to his appointment as President and General Manager of SHADA. It was unusual to be sure—a US national who could only speak to his Haitian counterparts and the labourers through a translator, was given leadership of a major state organization.[11] Fennell's endorsers advocated for him based on his experience and energy. SHADA gave him a scale, remit, and funding far greater than many of his colleagues in US agriculture. On a personal level, he understood the professional value of his position to advance the agrarian economies of both the United States and Haiti and the moral value of contributing to the ending of the war.

Development of hevea rubber had always fascinated Fennell. He studied closely the work of the Hermann brothers and oversaw some of the experimental planting in Bayeux and Marfranc. It was his drafting of a report on potential commercial rubber production in Haiti that opened the negotiations that led to SHADA. Even as the charter for the company insisted on diversification, rubber planting was at its core. In his first draft proposal in March 1941, Fennell highlighted those earlier projects such as the J. G. White contracts for public works, did not go far enough in creating long-term solutions for Haiti. SHADA through its activities could provide the technical training for improved agrarian methods and, through rubber planting, provide a profitable commodity. "This country is, as you know, terribly, poor," Fennell wrote. "Its export markets for cotton, sugar, coffee and honey have been closed or greatly restricted by the war." With 150,000 acres of land for rubber cultivation, all of this could be turned around. "A large [sic] rubber planting in Haiti would be of very great value both to Haiti and the United States. I am sure that I could form and administer an organization to do this work and that I could successfully complete it."[12]

10 Thomas A. Fennell, "Haiti Makes Rubber History," *Agriculture in the Americas*, July 1941: 10.

11 Fennell's 1939 vitae included in his papers indicated only a reading knowledge of French.

12 Confidential letter. Thomas A. Fennell to E. N. Bressman, 17 March 1941, Port-au-Prince, USNA RG 59, 838.51.

For the plan to work, Fennell needed full support of the Haitian government. That was the easiest part. Lescot, by all indications, put his trust in Fennell, something Fennell mentioned in his proposal for SHADA: "We have a government that will always be responsive to the wishes of the United States."[13] The president envisioned SHADA to be a colossus enterprise that would not only bring Haiti as a major player in global exports, but put it shoulders above its Latin American neighbours. The Haitian government gave SHADA exclusivity in rubber production and trade, a lumbering project in Forêt des Pins, and the trade in other agriculture and crafts enterprises save for bananas which were still under control by United Fruit. Once in post, Fennell saw his priority as "the establishment of plantations totalling approximately 6,500 acres of bananas and 7,500 acres of rubber."[14]

This ambition raised worry about peasant land access. Ever since Haitian independence, Haitian peasant farmers had taken land as indication of their personal freedom, preferring to grow subsistence crops than work for large-scale plantation agriculture. The culture of what Jean Casimir has famously termed a "counterplantation" ethos, though making peasants susceptible to the economic downturns that Fennell discussed, still gave them a degree of autonomy.[15] SHADA required more land and labourers and threatened to overturn that. Indeed, the rubber barons of the Amazon had operated on a form of enslavement that many associated with the nature of the rubber industry in the Americas. The risk was not lost on Fennell whose earlier work with Haitian agronomists had sensitized him to the reluctance of peasant labourers to give up their lands for corporate agriculture. "It should be made clear that the new program will not in any way alter the present pattern of land ownership in Haiti." The programme he devised to ensure this was unique. SHADA would enter into contracts with peasants, supplying them with seeds and technical supervision and assistance, in return for right of purchase at harvest.

13 Ibid.

14 Thomas A. Fennell, "Haiti Makes Rubber History," *Agriculture in the Americas*, July 1941: 10.

15 Casimir's thoughts on this are outlined in several works, most recently Jean Casimir, *The Haitians: A Decolonial History*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2020.

Land for SHADA operations would be limited to its central holdings with Haitians working on the land. New and permanent job lines would open up at the experimental stations creating a new class of professional agronomists. Fennell's calculations showed him that SHADA's investment could be liquidated over two decades, opening greater profits for Haiti, greater incomes, and new markets for US goods in the republic. "If this one project alone can be carried out," was Fennell's optimistic forecast in 1941, "the national income of Haiti can be more than doubled…a prosperous Haiti, with a standard of living that rises as its income grows, will be a steadily improving market for United States products…. In Haiti, we feel that this new program has brought all the Americas to the threshold of better living on the land."[16]

Turning a promise into a reality involved tremendous effort, labour and capital. When it started, SHADA had 257 employees. By the start of 1942 it increased to 3, 348. SHADA had purchased the rubber plantation in Bayeux and were developing a large area in the Grand'Anse valley at Sources Chaude with attention on hevea production. This all seemed manageable. Lescot toured the country, meeting with farmers in the SHADA zones promoting the great value their labour was making to Haiti's future and to the war. The farmers welcomed the wages and the opportunity for steady work. Meanwhile, Fennell built a reliable administrative team to support in the further planting of hevea trees and development of a rural network to connect the corporation's various concerns.

Pressure from the United States to get rubber farming accelerating after January, 1942, led to even more absorption of land for the SHADA effort. By the spring SHADA responded to State Department initiatives by expanding to 25,000 acres for sisal production. Far more impactful was the US Rubber Reserve Company's authorization in August to diversify the hevea farming with the introduction of large-scale cryptostegia grandiflora planting. Immediately an experimental station was set up at Gonaïves and much of the new land the corporation acquired was being prepared for cryptostegia.

16 Ibid, 15.

In many ways this transition was the great test of SHADA. The vine grew easily in Haiti where it was favoured by goats which led to its local name of *korne kabrit*. But cryptostegia had never been grown commercially before. There was no precedent for what was being proposed, and it demanded such a force of concentrated energy that the corporation's investment in cash crops diminished. Turning attention so fully to cryptostegia was a greater gamble than SHADA had anticipated. Yet if it worked and if the supply and quality of the new source of rubber matched expectation, it could outperform the earliest projections. It was this potential that most excited Lescot. In a letter to President Roosevelt he promised, "my government is firmly decided to give to S.H.A.D.A. all the necessary facilities and all the land which it may need."[17] Cryptostegia raised the stakes for SHADA. It was also the aspect of the Haitian experiment that observers in the Caribbean and the United States took most seriously.

A "Haitian Miracle": Promoting SHADA

Haitian rubber needed public as well as diplomatic support if it was to make the gains it hoped. Fennell was a tireless believer that SHADA, in its broadest vision, would be a model project and so was willing to do what he could to promote it. In September, 1942, he travelled to Washington to discuss the progress of the project with President Roosevelt. Fennell brought with him samples of the gummy rubber extracted from the Haitian vine. The State Department organized a public relations campaign which in itself was notable for raising positive US press about Haiti. A report from Washington that received wide circulation noted that SHADA was "an experiment in Haiti which promises to alter radically the entire economy of that Caribbean country and set an example for other countries of the New World to follow."[18]

An outstanding feature of US press coverage of SHADA was its consistent interest in Haiti and its history. A release that made the rounds

17 Élie Lescot to Frankiln D. Roosevelt, 19 September 1942, Port-au-Prince, Fennell Papers. See also, Élie Lescot, "Circulaire," *Le Moniteur*, 22 April 1943, 1.

18 "Haiti Economy Solution Seen in SHADA Plan," *Woodward Daily Press* (Oklahoma), 26 May 1942, 4.

called SHADA a "fundamental change" for Haiti that could set a new course for hemispheric economic relations.[19] Russ Symontowne, a science writer for the New York *Daily News,* visited Haiti in 1943 to observe the SHADA operations. In a series of syndicated articles, he praised Fennell's work as nothing short of a "miracle" for Haiti. He noted the work methods encouraged by Fennell, of having the workers play drums and chant impromptu work songs as they went about the clearing, planting, trimming, and watering of the crypstotegia plants. Symontowne had an audience with Lescot whom he regarded, "a far-seeing and liberal man with a strong liking for the United States." What impressed Symontowne the most was the method SHADA advanced in obtaining the by then 100,000 acres for rubber cultivation. "It expropriates the land on a lease basis, taking it from private owners on payment in advance for a yearly rental based on land value."[20]Another US visitor to Haiti who returned with praise for SHADA was celebrated Howard University history professor, Rayford Logan. Logan had recently published his well-known book on the history of US relations in Haiti. On his 1942 visit he met with Lescot and was given a tour of SHADA's plantations and offices by Fennell.[21]

African American newspapers imagined SHADA would be a conduit for improving exchanges between the US and Haiti that would be to the long-term benefit of Black people in the diaspora. A *New York Age* report praised this prospect of the project by concluding that "increased cultivation of rubber in Haiti should bring about a more prosperous era for the Haitian people and should open up opportunities for Negro technicians to that country."[22] An even more celebratory report was published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*. At a time when racism in the United States was tightening, US Blacks looked to Haiti and the anti-colonial

19 The piece appeared in several US papers in the spring of 1943. See for example, "Little Haiti Proves Big War Help," *The Richmond Independent*, 16 March 1943, 7.

20 Russ Symontowne, "Haiti Miracle: Water Turns Vinesap to Rubber," *Daily News* (New York), 3 April 1943, 12.

21 "Dr. Logan Finds Caribbeans Support War Effort," *The Black Dispatch*, 25 July 1942, 11; and entry of 6 April 1942, Logan Travel Diaries, Box 9, Library of Congress. Logan's book was an early study of Haitian-US relations: Rayford W. Logan, *The Diplomatic Relations of the United States with Haiti, 1776-1891,* Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1941.

22 "Closer Relations Between The U.S and Haiti," *The New York Age*, 9 May 1942, 6.

movements in the Caribbean and Africa for ideological support. SHADA added to this a practical plan for Black progress. The *Courier's* feature on Haiti in April, 1943, traced the country's history from its triumphant independence through to the economic transformation that SHADA was bringing, concluding that even though it was for the war effort, its longer implications bode well for the republic's future. "Haiti stands to benefit by the creation of additional sources of wealth through an effective program of economic diversification" in addition to its "lessened dependence on outside sources for many necessities."[23]

In neighbouring Jamaica, Haitian consul F. Martin sounded Haiti's rubber revolution as a major step for the Caribbean. The local press picked it up and praised SHADA which made it "likely that in the not-too-distant future Haitian and Brazilian rubber may be a very useful source of supply for the Allies."[24]

The greatest emissary of SHADA was Lescot himself. In a much publicized visit to Canada and the United States he spared no occasion to rail against the Axis powers and proclaim SHADA was Haiti's unyielding support for the war effort. A report from Canada praised Lescot's leadership in taking Haiti from its association with "voodoo, black magic and witchcraft," to "the more prosaic rubber, sisal and food for the Allied war effort."[25] Haitian officials would have overlooked the prejudices in such reporting to focus instead on how the economic program was shifting foreign perceptions. By placing SHADA within the wider effort of solidarity, the Good Neighbour Policy, and a trust in the United States, Lescot was in his own way attempting to tie Haiti to a larger cause. In New York he made this very clear in a speech that was given wide coverage. "The people of Haiti would rather be destroyed than submit to the enemies of the united nations…my country is at war with all the countries with which the United States is at war."[26]

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23 "Farming is Secret of Haiti's Amazing Progress," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 April 1943, 5.

24 "Rubber in Haiti," *The Daily Gleaner*, 5 May 1943, 1.

25 The Canada visit was reported in Jamaican press. See "Haitian President on Visit to U.S. and Canada," *The Daily Gleaner*, 4 October 1943, 5. See also, "Haiti President, Party, in Montreal," 12 October 1943, *The Montreal Gazette,* 12 October 1943, 14.

26 "Says Haiti Will Not Submit to the Axis," *The Black Dispatch*, 18 April 1942, 12.

Abandonment then Revolution: The End of the Experiment

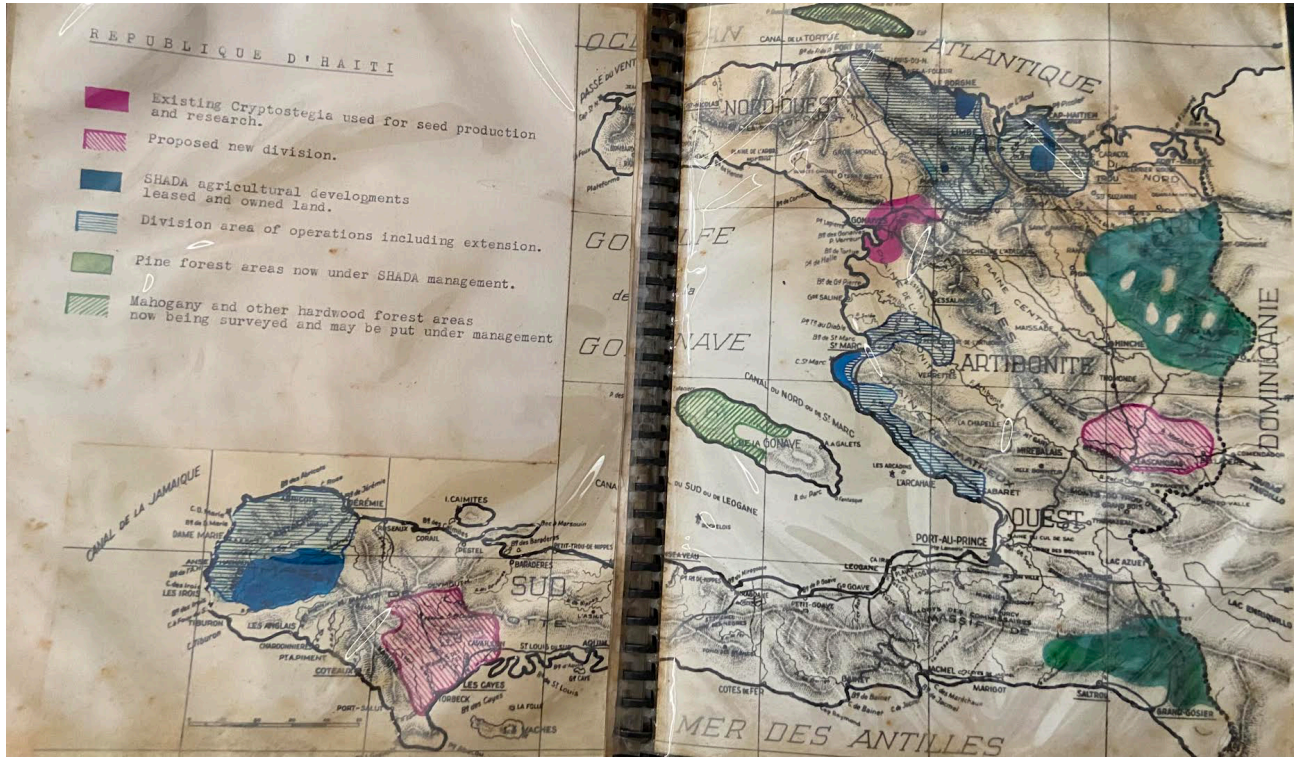
Even the most optimistic press reports hinted that the proof of SHADA's viability lay in its production levels. Fennell had touted Haitian-grown cryptostegia as being highly productive, maturing in six months and producing a rubber quality as good as hevea. That claim was inserted into many press articles based on interviews he gave during his visit to Washington which, by his own admission, were "uninteresting as I thought it best to keep the rubber matter as quiet as possible until it is well along."[27] Fennell knew better. He had access to charts based on careful projections that appeared in an RDC study of Haitian rubber, that showed it would take at least a year for the plants to reach maturity.[28] And to ensure success development to that stage required close tending of the vines, more planting with access to water, and, most of all, a reliable method of tapping the vines for the latex sap.

In the first report on the cryptostegia project Fennell was hopeful. An amateur photographer, he documented the moment the first seed was planted and tracked in photographs their growth over several months. More arresting were his images of the plantations themselves. Vast acres of budding cryptostegia vines in neatly arranged beds and SHADA researchers in khaki and pit helmets supervising the growth. Several photos featured Lescot on one of his many visits to the plantations with knotted brow as he surveyed his country's arboreal future laid out in perfect symmetry in shallow ridges. The enterprise included all the requisite supplies. Fennell photographed SHADA's impressive field offices, the wide nurseries in Bayeux, the plantation buildings in Sources Chaudes, the hevea plantations in Plaisance, the dormitories and two-story guest house at the research station in Gonaïves, and the busy chain of workers bent shirtless in the heat planting more seeds.

27 Thomas A. Fennell, "Memorandum to Vice-President Wallace from Thomas A. Fennell Regarding his Talk with President Roosevelt on Wednesday March 25," 27 March 1942, Fennell Papers.

28 Based on charts in the Report on the Cryptostegia Program, 11 December 1942 (commonly known as "The Baruch Report"), enclosure to Fennell to Atherton Lee, 10 February 1943, Fennell Papers.

1943 Map of SHADA properties in Haiti.

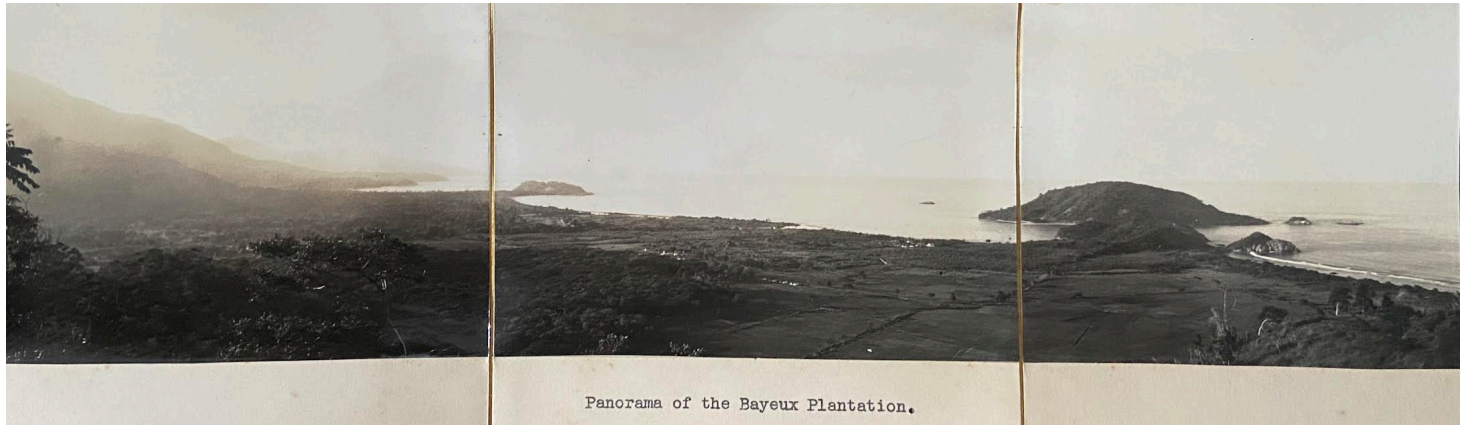


Cryptostegia planting.

Cryptostegia planting 1943.

Cryptostegia Research Station, Gonaïves, Living Quarters for Science Staff.

Tapping Cryptostegia for rubber.



Panorama of the Bayeux Plantation.

SHADA Base office at Chambellan, 1942.

Thomas A. Fennell (left) and President Lescot beside him in hat.

All this work occurred in an atmosphere of great pressure. It was not only in Haiti. When the cryptostegia mandate arrived, the war was at a critical stage. The Allies were beginning to turn the tide once the United States joined the North African invasion that would lead to the retreat of German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's forces, the beginning of a series of crucial victories for the Allies. The European theatre remained active though over the next year there would be a decisive push into Italy and France. The need for more supplies on the frontline increased significantly putting global supply lines including the Haitian rubber concerns with even greater expectation. By the start of 1943 SHADA's aim was to have 100,000 acres of Haitian land under active rubber cultivation. The Lescot government could be relied on to offer as much land as SHADA needed. But it was not always up to the state. The corporation had to confront peasant farmers from whom they expropriated lands in northern Haiti from Port de Paix to Fort Liberté. The SHADA operations, supplemented by further US funding, offered fair rental prices for the land. Still, the possibility of resistance to how the land was being used was real enough for Fennell in November 1942 to apply to the US Navy Department for a side arm for his personal protection.[29] The fear might have been overstated and a reflection of how Fennell was handling the greater tension of shepherding the enormous rubber empire that they were building. Fennell had enough experience and conviction to know that the small-scale production system of agriculture should not be overrun in Haiti. Good policy could hardly alleviate the surprise that the Haitian peasantry must have endured witnessing thousands of acres of prime cultivable land being stripped and their trees felled and cleared to make room for monocultural farming. If the US representative was bearing the weight of his role, the Haitian officials and especially an anxious Lescot knew that their reputations rested on rubber cultivation which had to at least match projections if not surpass them.

Fennell had to be agile when it came to labour management. Because Haitian peasants did not need to work on SHADA lands and had a strong sense of their worth, labour had to be organized in such a way as to

29 J. E. Kearley, Naval Attaché, Confidential Intelligence Report, 16 November 1942, USNA, RG 59 Decimal Files, 1940-1944, Box 4718.

incentivize workers. Fennell adjusted his approach to this several times, eventually settling on what he called the "SHADA Cooperative System" which drew on Haitian rural labour systems. In the Cooperative, groups of twenty work units were organized with one chief as the head of each. The chief was responsible for the contracts and disbursement of the wage payments to the workers paid in multiples of eleven gourdes. The chiefs received two shares, one for their labour and the other for their management of the unit.[30] It was a sound plan. Labourers could work without US officials supervising them in a fashion they were comfortable with and could adjust their hours as they saw fit in accordance with standardized costs. Nonetheless, the execution of the plan depended heavily on good diplomacy which was not always in supply. Reports that workers were pushed to plant up to three million seeds per day and were sometimes supervised by members of the Haitian Garde, stoked apprehensions that the project was thinly disguised forced labour.[31]

Haitian rubber was a large plantation undertaking and like all such businesses, was susceptible to the climate. Droughts, floods and unexpected natural calamities could easily sunder all carefully drawn plans. This was a lesson that plagued eighteenth-century sugar planters and the situation was not far off in the 1940s. When an unusually long drought hit Haiti in 1943, it had deleterious effects on the rubber plantations.

Greater still was the technical challenge of realizing the rubber yields. Despite a well-run operation and the presence of a team of US researchers, the absence of any comparable experience with this type of rubber planting meant that when problems arose in the field, the solutions were derived by trial and error. This was not an optimal situation for a business expected to turn a return on its investment quickly. A report conducted in May 1943 highlighted present troubles in methods that would only exacerbate as the year went on. "It is almost impossible to arrive at the final correct solution for recovering this rubber whether in latex form or by

30 Thomas Fennell, "Cryptostegia Report," 28 June 1943, Henry A. Wallace Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Reel 15. The system was discussed at length in the first issue of a newsletter that the company put out: "Shada Introduces Cooperative System for Field Workers," *A Propos De Shada*, 1 June 1943, Fennell Papers.

31 Finlay, *Growing American Rubber,* 208.

extraction methods in the short time which has passed. The methods of recovery, both the latex method and extraction method, are so intimately interconnected and entwined with the manner of the planting that it is very difficult to predict which plan to use."[32] To this was added minute questions such as the size of the stump, the temperature of the plants, the type of water and equipment for extraction that could only be learned through trials. The advantage of cryptostegia became a problem when it was spread so extensively. The vine grew easily but wildly and required constant attention to keep it from becoming an entangled mess.

Less problematic but still worrisome were some personnel tensions within the company. Fennell had developed a close personal relationship with Lescot and at times went directly to the president when he needed, a gesture that, according to a confidential report, upset SHADA vice president, Maurice Dartigue. Among the two US officials, Fennell and C. Reed Smith, there were also differences over management of the operations sufficient to lead US ambassador to Haiti, John C. White, to comment in November 1943 that the "lid is threatening to blow off the high command at SHADA."[33] There was also a decentralization of management. On the surface this was necessary to keep a giant machine of several moving parts in motion. The trouble came when there were disputes over instructions from the central office and breakdown in communication between US staff—which included units of scientists, surveyors, agronomists in constant movement around the sites—and Kreyòl-speaking and independent-minded Haitian workers, all of which affected speed. For SHADA to work, the coordination had to be well-tuned and since Fennell was responsible for ensuring this, the sheer scale of his charge meant disconnection could interrupt even the best plans. Workers sensed the disorder and in some areas in the field and in Port-au-Prince, anti-US propaganda emerged throughout 1943.[34]

32 "A Brief Study of the Cryptostegia Problem in Haiti, A Special Report submitted by J. McGavack and Sam R. Hoover at the request of the R.D.O. of W.P.B and the R.D.C.," 15 June 1943, Fennell Papers.

33 John C. White to Willard F. Barber, 30 November 1943, Port-au-Prince, USNA, RG 59, 838.51.

34 Finlay, *Growing American Rubber,* 210.

SHADA had to push forward despite whatever tensions its mandate produced. Fennell oversaw the building of roads and electricity and water projects to the largest SHADA areas in the Grand'Anse Valley and Bayeaux in the north. The corporation even purchased a former railroad station with the intention of reviving and expanding rail transport. Fennell travelled to the US, excited no doubt by the early promise of his corporation, carrying samples of essential oils, ginger, and cacao, the last he took to the Hershey Chocolate Corporation in Pennsylvania with a view to them sourcing chocolate from Haiti.

In a private letter from February 1943, a US agronomist who spent several weeks in Haiti to assess SHADA and who was taken by Fennell to the various plantation sites, commented on the visual spectacle of the operation: "Mountainsides loom bare of vegetation and great gangs of men swarm over them, all working in unison and chanting their weird, synagogue-like chants." He was enthusiastic with what he found. "The more I see of the operation the more convinced I am that it is well conceived and executed…nothing like it in magnitude has even been undertaken in tropical agriculture." The agent ended with a warning: "If Tom is left alone until late Fall he will have his acreage planted…meddling from Washington could ruin it now."

Yet even this observer was alert to the misfit between scale and mission. For SHADA to accomplish what it proposed, it needed over one billion stumps planted on over 100,000 acres of land. It also needed tested and reliable methods for dealing with the health of the plants and the extraction of the rubber. In a facetious remark he noted that the methods of tapping he saw being used at the farms "would work well in Aunt Sophia's herb garden," but not in a multimillion-dollar corporation. His conclusion was that even with the best efforts that Fennell was conducting, "[e]verything about SHADA is against its finding a solution. They are the wrong men, working in the wrong place. They have the wrong viewpoint."[35]

It was at this point of widening that the project reached its tipping point. Another survey was undertaken in 1944, this time by the RDC. It concluded that only 65,000 of the 100,000 acres for cryptostegia had been

35 Unknown to "Dick," 14 February 1943, Port-au-Prince, Fennell Papers.

planted and of those only 36,000 were producing anything. The project was further suffering from the delays caused by the drought, infestation, and the late realization that the shrubs had to be developed first in nurseries.

The RDC had with the effort in Haiti also been expanding rubber supplies in US and elsewhere. Synthetic rubber produced from petroleum was increasingly more successful in the United States. In 1941 the US produced 231 tons of synthetic rubber. Heavy investment with petrochemical industries and university chemists and labs revolutionized production at the same time Fennell was putting thousands of Haitians to work on the plantations in the north of Haiti. By 1944 the US was producing over 70,000 tons of synthetic rubber.

In February 1944 a delegation from Washington visited Haiti and immediately terminated the cryptostegia contract. Fennell was directed to return all lands to Haitian tenants. An additional US$400,000 [approximately US$7.2M in 2024] was granted to oversee the burning of all cryptostegia plantations.

The shock of this was hard for all who had believed in SHADA. Lescot begged Washington to reconsider given the damage it would cause to his government and his prestige. Millions had been pumped into the project and he had worked tirelessly to present Haiti as a friend to the war effort. Now, even before the war was over, the rubber project was being forced to close. He met in April with US chargé d'affaires, Vinton Chapin, to plead for continuance of the cryptostegia project at least until it produced rubber. "He asked with considerable emphasis," wrote Chapin, "time and again that every effort be made not to give the impression that the whole project had collapsed completely, and that no announcement be made of its discontinuance until some opportunity had been given to see either what could be salvaged or how the land could otherwise be profitably cultivated."[36] The news came at a heightened time of internal political tension for Lescot who was facing opposition in the Haitian parliament and

36 Chapin to Hull, 14 April 1944, Port-au-Prince, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1944, The American Republics, Volume VII*, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1967, 1169.

on the streets.[37] His pleas found no support. Nor did Dartigue's request, on Lescot's behalf, that the RDC fund US$1,000,000 to the Haitian government for a rehabilitation program for the return of the rubber lands back to the peasantry.[38] The RDC, under its own fire, was categorically told by the State Department to keep all costs associated with SHADA to an absolute minimum. Secretary of State Cordell Hull on May 13, 1944, told US representatives in Port-au-Prince to "effect liquidation of the project in an orderly manner."[39]

In Washington, as the war began to tilt further toward an Allied victory, an assessment of all wartime projects and expenses was carried out. SHADA emerged in discussions that stretched into 1945 as a colossally wasteful endeavour. There was much blame to throw around. The president of the RDC, Francis Truslow, gave evidence that the rubber project was undertaken with "considerable reluctance." The press made much of the failure. A *Baltimore Sun* report called SHADA a "failure" that cost more than US$6M without "getting so much as a single tire out of the project's output."[40]

Fennell took this outcome as a personal betrayal. He believed that the real reason was that US rubber developers now wanted to protect US rubber from overseas competition. Within months all cryptostegia plantations were burned and cleared and returned. Some hevea continued to be grown in Bayeaux and sisal production continued. The US government gave Haiti US$175,000 [US$2.9 million in 2024 figures] for rehabilitation of families displaced on lands that were turned over to cryptostegia.

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37 The tensions over Lescot's rule are discussed in detail in Smith, *Red and Black in Haiti,* 51-70.

38 Ibid. Dartigue, to be sure, had earlier written to Fennell with concern over the expropriation program of peasant land. He also shared a twelve-point plan for how SHADA might go about its work more conscientiously so as to stave off attacks and a harsh fallout. See Maurice Dartigue to Thomas A. Fennell, 16 February 1943, Port-au-Prince, Dartigue Papers, Schomburg Centre for Research on Black Culture, New York. The proposal is discussed in Smith, *Red and Black in Haiti*, 46-47.

39 Hull to Chapin, 13 May 1944, Washington, D.C, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1171.

40 Paul W. Ward, "$6,733,000 Haiti Rubber Plan Fails," *The Baltimore Sun*, 1 February 1945, 1.

Embittered by the experience, Fennell resigned in September 1944, packed up his belongings and the following month left Haiti forever. Just before his departure from Haiti, Lescot gave him the Haitian Order of Merit for his service and efforts to improve Haitian agriculture with SHADA.

Public indictment against SHADA came very quickly after that. Fennell was blamed for the fallout as a self-interested modern colonizer who exploited the Haitian people then left them without anything. From Puerto Rico just months after leaving Haiti, he wrote a private defence of his work: "It is obvious that [they] make no attempt to present the facts in the case but merely to smear my record with totally unsupported statements." He noted that 80% of the US$6M of SHADA investment went to labour costs. The net result, in his calculation, was that "the Haitian economy is approximately $5,000,000 richer as a result of the cryptostegia program." Lescot's conferment of the Order of Merit on him was done "under no compulsion" by a man "who knows what he does and who acts only after due consideration." "Even the most naïve would know that he certainly would have not done so had my operations there been unsatisfactory."[41] Fennell issued no apparent public corrections, preferring to focus on his work in Puerto Rico where he helped set up the Puerto Rico Agricultural Company. He eventually returned to Florida where he worked on the family orchid business in Homestead and in the years before his death in July 1977, was taken with a return to the idea that cryptostegia was still the answer to the future of rubber.[42]

The criticism of Fennell and SHADA in Haiti, however, expanded and echoed loudly after he left. SHADA and all the people who were associated with it were by 1945 synonymous with exploitation of Haitians. That narrative only deepened after 1946 and the election of Dumarsais Estimé and the renewed black consciousness that defined Haiti's late forties and its cultural legacies.

41 "Statement of Mr. Thomas A. Fennell," undated, Fennell Papers.

42 Fennell kept up research and correspondence on this point, often returning to the SHADA experience for evidence. See, for example, Thomas A. Fennell to Noel D. Vietmayer [National Academy of Sciences, Washington D.C.], 16 October 1975, Fennell Papers.

Lescot suffered the greatest indictment. In a typical comment, Joséph Pierre Louis in a 1950 publication blasted the former president as a conspirator of foreign exploitation of the Haitian peasantry. "Mr. Lescot, by acting in this way, acted to the detriment of the community…. This major trafficker trafficked with all foreign companies to the detriment of the Nation, such as Shada, Standard Fruit, etc."[43]

Less vituperative but no less damning was Vinton Burns, UN Forestry expert in Haiti, in a 1954 essay on SHADA. Written when the nationalist movement and achievements of the late forties still resonated, Burns blamed the corporation for having a colonial attitude toward Haitians who, he claimed, were treated as inferior. SHADA, he argued, had the means and support to really make a revolution in Haitian agriculture. No serious attention was given to using all its funding and expertise in improving coffee, Haiti's mainstay. The decision to diversify with smaller crops, then quite rapidly turn full attention to rubber, was ultimately harmful to the Haitian economy. The acres of fallow and overgrown former rubber plantations were, for him, a painful site. What was worse was the organization's failure to institute a lasting modern agrarian industry in Haiti. "SHADA had a duty to work on the economic and *social* structure of the country: it never gained the trust of the Haitian people. It was even said that the letters SHADA stood for, in English: Stop Haitians! Americans do All."[44]

Remember SHADA: Conclusion

The extent to which this view was a true reflection of the relationship between Haitians and SHADA is debatable. Fennell's papers indicate throughout the five years of his work in Haiti an awareness that small holdings would not be affected. He said as much to Roosevelt in his 1942 meeting with him: "Haiti's large percentage of operator-owner farmers who raise their own food and a small cash crop made up a very sound base for their agriculture—a base that I thought should not be disturbed but could

43 Joseph Pierre-Louis, *La situation Haïtienne : R*evue *corrigée et augmentée,* Port-au-Prince, Imprimerie Active Presses, 1950, 17.

44 Vinton Burns, « La Faillite de La SHADA », *Optique*, no. 7, septembre 1954, 31.

be improved."[45] What is likely closer to the truth and better appreciated in retrospect was that the vastness of the undertaking was more than the corporation or its president could manage. Mark Finlay's conclusion is most balanced. "In any analysis, cryptostegia research in Haiti proved an embarrassing waste of time, effort, and money, a quintessential example of a well-intentioned but failed government program."[46]

War time expedience ingrained whatever problems existed. SHADA did not recover from the loss of 1944. It continued for another two decades with the Bayeux plantation still producing hevea rubber. It was there that the famed Haitian agronomist and journalist Jean Dominique first worked on his return to Haiti from France in 1965 shortly before SHADA finally shut down.

What remained was memory. Historians picked up on the anger of the 1946 revolution and its aftermath, dismissing SHADA as the most expensive disappointment in Haiti's twentieth-century agriculture. Historiographical memory built on the notion of failure caused by avaricious and unthinking US officials. In *Written in Blood*, Robert and Nancy Heinl were unforgiving in their verdict of the SHADA experiment. "Fennell and SHADA ran roughshod over peasant proprietors, condemning choice agricultural plots, bulldozing huts…everything Fennell touched went badly."[47] This view has been repeated many times over in the literature, reducing in the process the original vision of SHADA as a project for agrarian improvement to its bitter legacy.[48]

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45 Thomas A. Fennell, "Memorandum to Vice-President Wallace from Thomas A. Fennell Regarding his Talk with President Roosevelt on Wednesday March 25," 27 March 1942, Fennell Papers.

46 Finlay, *Growing American Rubber*, 211.

47 Robert Debs and Nancy Gordon Heinl, *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People, 1492-1995,* revised and expanded by Michael Heinl, Washington, University Press of America, 1996 , 511.

48 For other examples, see Smith*, Red and Black in Haiti*, 44-47, Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History,* New York, Metropolitan Books, 2012, 314-315 and Robert Rotberg, who argued that SHADA caused "untold peasant hardship," in Robert Rotberg, *Haiti: The Politics of Squalor,* Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1971,169. A more extensive critique of SHADA is offered by Myrtha Gilbert who highlights the long-term soil erosion and destruction of the farming culture of the peasantry. See Myrtha Gilbert's self-published, *SHADA: Yon kokenn chenn manti,* Port-au-Prince, 201.

The more definite memory is the one that remains in Haiti today. There is in Cap Haïtien not far from the company's former site, a well-known neighbourhood called Shada. There a local football club carries the name of the defunct corporation on its jersey, proudly representing their quartier. Nearer the capital, in Pétionville, there is a market called Shada, which also bears the name of an idea birthed in the dream of Haitian modernity, thrust into the cauldron of war, and unravelled in the fiery vision of revolution.

SHADA work songs of the 1940s resonated for decades. In the eternal wisdom of popular Haitian lore, the songs have travelled down the years carrying with them the name SHADA, which has come to represent something else entirely than what its creators intended; less a symbol of peasant improvement but of generational rural hardship. Gesner Henry, better known as Coupe Cloue, enshrined this oral memory in a song released thirty years after SHADA was founded. The lyrics of his *Shada* is a slow tempo bolero that tells a tale of a poor labourer leaving Aux Cayes to work on the SHADA location in Jérémie. Coupe Cloue sings a song much larger than SHADA; it is narrative that presents in yodels and emotive melody, a fragment of the archive of the Haitian peasantry, Haiti's ultimate historians.

Mwen soti O Kay
M ateri Jeremi
Kisa m al fè m al travay nan Shada
Se hach map voye, se pikwa map jete
Se wòch m ap kraze
Menm m travay anpil, lajan m piti
Kijan pou m fè pou m al nan peyi m
…
Pitit mwen malad, men wi madanm mwen kouche
Mwen gen preskripsyon, yo bezwen manje
Solèy ap brile m, mwen pa gen lajan
Lapli ap mouye m, mwen pa sa pare

Men m travay anpil lajan m piti
Kijan pou m fè pou m al nan peyi m

I am leaving O Kay (Les Cayes)
I reached Jérémie
What did I go to do,
I went to work for SHADA
I am swinging an axe, I am swinging a pick-axe
I am breaking the stones
Even though I work a lot, I have little money
What can I do to get home?
…
My children are sick, my wife is in bed
I have the prescription, they need to eat
The sun is burning me, I have no money
The rain is drenching me, I am not ready
Even though I work a lot, I have little money
What can I do to get home?[49]

49 Trio Select, "Shada," *Plein Caille*, Marc Records, 1971, MARC-215. Kreyòl lyrics taken from https://www.wikimizik.com/lyrics/1383/Coup%C3%A9-Clou%C3%A9-Shada. I thank Chantalle Verna, Alex Verna and Florence Surpris for help with the translation of this song. I recall a Boukman Eksperyans concert at Café des Arts in Port-au-Prince in 2000 at which the group's lead singer, Lolo Beaubrun, in the throes of his performance spontaneously ad-libbed chronological references to the forces responsible for Haiti's halting progress. He began in the eighteenth century with French colonialism and by the time he arrived at the 1940s, covered the period only with a brief, but telling remark on the long memory of the rubber project— 'nou sonje SHADA.'

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