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**Not Yet *Soko Huru*:  
The Local Appropriation of 'Free Market' Discourse in the Coffee Industry  
of Rural Kenya, Meru District (1998)**

Mark Lamont

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Sociology and Anthropology

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## ABSTRACT

Not Yet *Soko Huru*:

The local appropriation of 'free market' discourse in the coffee industry of rural Kenya, Meru District (1998)

Mark Lamont

This study examines social change in Meru District, Kenya following the economic liberalization of the coffee sector. The empirical material presented was collected during fieldwork in Kenya from June to December 1998. The case studies demonstrate how local social actors have appropriated 'free market' discourse (*Soko Huru*) as an alibi for the illicit trade of surplus coffee that feeds into Kenya's second economy. The thesis questions whether economic liberalization and structural adjustment programmes are transforming rural social relations in Meru District. Discussions on the relevancy of age, sex, and 'class' as social categories and as analytic constructs are placed in relation to the social changes witnessed in rural Kenya in the late 1990s. The conclusion reached is that while relations based on generation and gerontocracy are renovated under the local appropriation of *Soko Huru*, those relationships based on gender and patriarchy are reaffirmed. This is demonstrated to be especially acute in relation to the social division of labour, and in relationships between individuals within households. Women, in particular, have been adversely effected by structural adjustment since the economic viability of the rural household is based on women's farm labour, yet they are excluded from participating in the 'free market'. The 'class' dimensions of social change, economic crisis, and structural adjustment are locally subsumed in relations between sexed and aged individuals organized into productive households. Gender and generation, it is argued, are necessary social axes through which to understand social change, and the illusion of social change, in Kenya.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction: Locating Meru District

#### (1) An impressionistic introduction to Meru Town, Kenya (June, 1998)

Meru District is geographically in the middle of Kenya, situated in the far north-eastern highlands of Mount Kenya. It is connected to the rest of highland Kenya by a circuitous road network that encircles the massive mountain. Mount Kenya is a symbol of Kenya's national identity, greatly popularized by Jomo Kenyatta's (1938) ethnographic book on the Kikuyu, *Facing Mount Kenya*. As one travels to Meru District along the highway the landscape is hilly and forested. Meru District is four hours from Nairobi in a 'speed Peugeot' and about six hours in the bus. In both cases, circulation to one's cramped legs gives out before the scenery grows dull. On the hillsides, often planted with green tea bushes at the highest altitudes, vivid slashes of red soils dig into the slopes as long fingers of erosion. Getting to Meru is not a problem, except for tricky passages where landslides have swept large concrete islands from the main road and where the hillsides have encroached upon the roads. The hilly landscape, long the bane of expansionist European explorers and missionaries less than a hundred years ago, has been overcome by the roadway, obscuring the actual distance of Meru District from other central Kenyan communities. Yet, for all the presence of the road, places like Meru still have the reputation for being a bit of a frontier.

*I had lived in Meru Town previously. After six years absence, a sense of bewilderment possessed me. The tarmac roads had been pot-holed and eroded in 1992, but their disintegration had been complete. They resembled roads only in so far as cars, lorries, and vans shuddered over them, spinning up throat-tightening clouds of light dust.*

*In Sheng, the argot of urban Kenya (Swahili-English) the wording of Makutano becomes "Maku-5", but in Kiswahili it means "crossroads". This word describes the place with authority. In Makutano, worlds cross over. It is a place where such categories like 'urban' and 'rural' dissolve, where people who are not linked elsewhere feel very linked, where foreigners and locals alike must negotiate the same dusty pot-holes and travel the same road. It is a place for individuals.*

*The day I arrived, Makutano was alive with the brilliant mid-day activity and expression of people in movement. Peoples' foreheads bore sweaty sashes of the sun's fierce reflection. Three competing music stores blared out top of the charts pop-music on crackling speakers; Kikuyu gospel, the Congolese Koffi Olimide, and Gansta' Rap. I leaned up against a grubby wall and tried to remember which businesses had existed, and what the place had looked like the last time I had visited. With the immediacy of Makutano swirling around me in indifference and haste, 1992 faded to less than a memory, a kind of vague familiarity with the strange and beguiling.*

*Market women in floral dresses clutched their sisal sacks of beans for sale by the scoopful, fashioned from a small weathered tin can. In Kenya, as in other places, innovation and recycling are part of the same economic dynamic. Some of these women, already finished their day's work of selling farm produce on the road-sides or in the designated municipal market-places, looked hopefully at matatu touts, urging them to toss their bags onto the roof-racks of the public transport vehicles; the ever-present matatu. The touts, as the young men working the matatu circuit are locally known, spend their days working the public transport sector soliciting passengers, and extorting the rates from people crushed into the tiny box-like vehicles. If the tired market women succeeded it would be an odd act of kindness, kindness beckoned by the women's' exhaustion and their persistent humour towards reluctant and churlish young men. The touts would stand looking proud and aloof, almost anti-social in their stance, like hardened street children well into their twenties. Occasionally, one of the*

*touts would swing the heavy bags of beans or rice or maize onto his shoulder, and push it up through the air to land with a dead-weight thud on the roof of the departing vehicle. The woman would either joke with the young man, or wearing a mask of fatigue, wordlessly climb into the back door of the vehicle (Notes: Meru Town, June 11th, 1998).*

### (1.2) Thesis content and research questions

This thesis is about the social impact of economic liberalization upon coffee farming households and individuals in Meru District, Kenya. Meru is an agriculturally productive region on the north-eastern fringes of Mount Kenya (cf. maps in Appendix C). Material for the thesis was gathered during ethnographic fieldwork conducted from June to December 1998. The thread of the argument in the thesis is woven around the issue of social change. The key issue at stake can be framed in terms the following question: Have economic changes in Kenya's agricultural communities reaffirmed previously established social relationships, or have they created radically new ones?

The empirical material demonstrates the appropriation of 'free market' discourse as an alibi for illicit trade in surplus coffee by marginalized social actors, especially unmarried young men. It also points at how the social division of labour by age and gender shapes the kinds of social conflicts and cooperation that occur in Meru households during the coffee harvest from June to August. The thesis concludes by suggesting that the elements of conflicts and cooperation that emerged out of the local response to economic liberalization, simultaneously created new social relationships while reaffirming previously established ones. As an outcome of structural adjustment policies, the Meru 'customary' division of labour is reaffirmed for women, while young men define themselves in terms of the 'free market'.

As such, this ethnographic thesis seeks to address why recently applied economic liberalization measures may have individualizing effects on the majority of rural persons, each individual having to exploit their labour power, petty-trading and food crop options more acutely. Structural adjustment intensifies the conflict and competition between individuals. These programmes have been enacted in a context of entrenched economic crisis. In such a situation of adjustment, if not outright austerity, the activities of women (of most ages) and young unmarried men become more significant to local economic activities. Jurally subordinate to male elders in the context of the Meru household, women and young men must rely on their own initiatives to make individual accumulations, or to find themselves viable economic alternatives outside of peasant farming. From the limits that economic liberalization imposes on the household and the domestic enterprise in their farming activities, these subordinated members of the household are compelled to extend their social networks and occupations beyond the homestead's gate, and into productive economic activities that compete indirectly with the interests of the household heads.

In Chapter Two several theoretical arguments about the anthropology of power and production are brought to bear upon the question of social change in Africa. The anthropological construction of difference is critically reviewed in light of the colonial history of ethnography in African contexts, where theory initially approached the question of change from the differences between groups, rather than the dynamic of internal social differentiation. The question of social change posed acute challenges to the conceptual schemes of colonial-era ethnography. The heuristic constraints of the analytic categories of race and ethnicity as facts of social difference are discussed in terms of structural functionalism's theoretical impasse over the question of social change. Through reviewing the demise of the notion of 'equilibrium', Chapter Two situates the analytic categories of age, sex, and 'class' as theoretical innovations dealing with the question of social change. The emphasis on Africa's political transformations during the de-colonization process brought about fundamental shifts in the objects of anthropological analysis. The French

Marxists are discussed in terms of their attempt to explain social change in terms of continuities and ruptures issuing from two levels of abstraction: the internal social dynamics of lineage-based polities and Africa's insertion in the world economy. Responding to the limitations of theoretical Marxism in the African context, the analytic tensions of structure and agency are investigated with critical attention to the rigidity of Marxist models and the need for conceptual flexibility in the study of social change. The rise of analytic schemes based the social division of labour in households according to local categories of age and gender, and the emergence of the individual as an economic 'unit' are explored as the theoretical constructs that properly situate this thesis in the anthropological literature. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the interplay between age and gender with 'class' as operative concepts in the explanation of how social change is experienced and acted upon by different social actors.

Chapter Three, "Neo-liberalism and 'fend for yourself' capitalism in rural Kenya" is written as an introduction to the implementation of economic liberalization programmes in Kenya and the expansion of the second economy throughout East African countries. The second economy stands for the illicit, but open, practice of parallel trade where economic activities simply do not work according to the 'official' plan of state capitalism. The crisis in Kenya's national coffee industry from 1992-1998 is described in detail by focusing on the emergence of the neo-liberal idea of the 'free market' (*Soko Huru*). Theoretically, the chapter aims to build upon Janet MacGaffey's (1991) notion of the second economy and argues for its relevancy as a key concept in studying the uneven development of indigenous capitalism in Kenya. To contextualize and complement the empirical discussions about Meru's participation in *Soko Huru* presented later in the thesis, the bulk of Chapter Three is spent on describing the internal structure of the national coffee industry. The argument presented here is that the emergence of the second economy within coffee marketing is accountable for some of the dynamics of Kenya's current coffee crisis. The chapter concludes by arguing that economic liberalization has exacerbated the parallel marketing of

coffee through introducing measures that force coffee farmers to cut back in the costs of production to retain a competitive market share. This effect of liberalization is felt acutely in local coffee producing regions, where lowering the costs of production in the name of competition has created conflicts within households and between their constituent individuals.

In Chapter Four: "Domestic enterprise and individual accumulation in the days of structural adjustment", the ethnographic focus is upon three indigenous Meru institutions that organize everyday social life: the household (*njaa*), work (*ngugi*), and local trading practices in the second economy (*Soko Huru*). The central object of the chapter is the social division of labour as found in the conjugal households and its consequences for the economic activities of their individual members. The chapter seeks to show that individual accumulation is often the most important goal of participants inside the 'free market', but highlights how economic liberalization has compelled marginal individuals towards diversifying their economic activities. The chapter seeks to provide an ethnographic assessment of the exploitation of labour at the periphery of capitalist relations of production. In the end, the chapter argues that to make an anthropological object of 'class' a theory on the emergence of the social category of individual is a necessary component.

In Chapter Five: "The local appropriation of *Soko Huru* in Meru District" the discussion centers around the coffee industry in Meru under economic liberalization for the year 1998. The chapter provides an ethnographic description of how local actors disagree over the state-sponsored definition of *Soko Huru*. The chapter demonstrates that multiple claims are made on 'free market' discourses, but that the version promoted by the cooperative marketing society is a reflection of the neo-liberal goals of the state under structural adjustment. The theoretical emphasis throughout the chapter is that these specific conflicts and competitions based on age differentials are ideologically expressed through differing appropriations of the doctrine of the 'free market' by young men and elders. The

chapter raises the significant question about who accumulates capital out of Meru's coffee industry under economic liberalization, and asks how this accumulation is made possible.

Finally, in the conclusion of Chapter Six, it is argued that the impact of structural adjustment upon Meru social organization has created a situation where young men temporarily experience greater economic freedom in their involvement in *Soko Huru*, while it adversely affects other social actors differentiated by age and gender. Affine women, in particular, experience a greater pressure to subject themselves to the acute labour crises facing coffee producing households during the harvest season. These women are denied the liberty to participate in the petty-trade of surplus coffee because of jurally-defined obligations to their husband's farm. Likewise, structural adjustment puts pressure on elder men to find the money necessary to hire labour while facing more competition for the labour time of individual household members. This creates a social tension between the household and the individual as economic units of analytic importance. The concluding discussion argues that structural adjustment has both reaffirmed previous existing social relationships while created relatively novel ones, but has not brought about radical change in the sense of creating irredeemable social ruptures between constituent members of the domestic enterprise.

### (1.3) Methodology and the context of fieldwork in Meru District, Kenya (June - December 1998)

A day after I explained to a neighbour why I had come to Meru District, word got out in Miiiriga Mieru that I was there to study *mantu ya kagua* ('all manners of things with coffee'). It was a nice introduction for me. Within a week of working on the topic of coffee farming, I had half-a-dozen 'spot-interviews' and been introduced, enthusiastically by several of my neighbour's sons, to many people whose lives were effected by the national coffee industry.

The communities of Miiiriga Mieru, where I was to live and work for seven months in 1998, are on the rural fringes of the municipality of Meru Town. They are rural



communities who interact with the town on a daily basis. The small-farms area of Miiiriga Mieru is one of the most densely populated in Meru District. The total population of Miiiriga Mieru was 52, 898 in 1996 (Kenya: 1997). The officially published statistics give an estimated figure of 726 persons to the square kilometre for Miiiriga Mieru, the division where the bulk of the fieldwork took place (Republic of Kenya 1997: 15). By comparison, the areas further away from the municipality of Meru Town, of which Munithu is illustrative, the population densities are more diffuse, averaged at 351 persons per square kilometre (Republic of Kenya 1997: 15). In taking a short walk from the tarmac road into the 'Reserves', it is relatively easy to perceive this shift, as the tightly demarcated farm holdings of Miiiriga Mieru give way to the dispersed homesteads of the more remote locations of Munithu. There is also a shift in the kinds of crops these divisions produce: coffee being the main crop of Miiiriga Mieru; maize and beans being the main crops in Munithu.

Chugu location is one of the largest administrative land-units inside Miiiriga Mieru. All of the households and individuals that figure in this thesis were situated in Chugu. About 48 square kilometers of it is inhabited by land holdings ranging in size from .25 acres to 3 acres. They are not very large holdings, the smallest incapable of supporting a household and the largest of them enough to support another generation. By country-wide standards, land scarcity in Meru is less acute than in other districts. Like many other locations in Meru District, Chugu's landscape was transformed under the Land Consolidation projects of the 1960s that went along with an explosive growth in commercialized agriculture. Each land holding, small or large, is singular and independent of its neighbours' holdings. The holdings are usually bounded by the single-track murrum roads that run grid-like throughout the location, as well as the fence-posts or hedges that mark out private property, provide privacy, and protect crops against rogue animals grazing without human supervision.

The remaining portion of the location are national forest reserves, the largest forest being the Lower Imenti Forest which hems up the far boundary between Munitu and Tigania. This forest also transects the main autoroute to Tigania and Nyambene District. The forests are some distance, about an hours' walk from Chugu, although the fieldsite is covered by a canopy of indigenous and introduced trees that intersperse both agricultural plots and living spaces. From above on the ridges that crop out from Kaaga and Runogone, the tree canopy vista of Chugu, bluish in the constant haze, appears like a forested expanse, the terraced clearings and residential compounds indiscernible against the canopy cover.

As I talked with hundreds of individuals about their participation in the local coffee industry, I found out that a healthy parallel market operated in tandem with the established vertical marketing regime. Members of the cooperative marketing societies demonstrated a high level of distrust towards the "leaders" of the cooperatives, usually based on allegations of mass deception and corruption. Through discussions with co-operative society members it was established that economic liberalization in the coffee sector has meant different things to different persons. The observation and tape-recording of meetings organized by the societies on economic liberalization form the empirical content of Chapter Five. Although people spoke of *Soko Huru* as effecting the whole of the coffee industry, they were most aware of its impact locally. Significantly, the definition of this term depended upon who was speaking. Outside of the co-operative marketing society, *Soko Huru* was interpreted as the "mandate to buy and sell coffee from anyone" or as "the free market - no one can stop you". Such interpretations of the neo-liberal agenda of the late 1990s in Kenya had led to the resurgence of an expansive, if somewhat clandestine and illicit, petty-trade in surplus coffee cherries. The arrival of Somali traders buying Miiriga Mieru coffee cherries was one external outcome of the local appropriation of 'free market' discourse. *Soko Huru* had reconstituted an inter-ethnic trading circuit between Meru-Somali entrepreneurs that had been in abeyance since 1964, a year when Kenya went to war against Somali nationalists in the Northern Province. Liberalization had also led to the rise of a new class of farmer,

estate owners whose large coffee harvests was bolstered from petty trade with small-scale coffee producers. In the interstices of the relations between Meru coffee farmers and entrepreneurs, a new category of young Meru men emerged: “coffee brokers”. These were young local men who went through the coffee growing zones on bicycles, buying up as much as they could of the farmers’ surplus coffee harvests. The local scene of the coffee industry in no way replicated the discourse and narratives of the newly liberalized Kenyan coffee industry as envisioned by the bureaucrats and capitalists that work for the Coffee Board of Kenya, or its subsidiaries.

I organized a ‘census’ as the first fieldwork activity. The census was, in my thinking, useful for two reasons: it could provide me with some background data on such topics as membership in the different agricultural societies, churches, and clans (*mwiriga*); and it would allow me to visit a wide span of households and farms to get an idea of who I could work with later on. The census itself contained superficial categories to structure the activity of visits and to provide respondents with an introduction to the scope of my research. The census was a questionnaire-style set of nine questions, given *njaa na njaa* (family to family, door to door). I hired three young men to assist me. It took us about three weeks of work, from morning to afternoon each day except for Sunday (my research assistants were Christian). I had established three criteria of information that I was seeking; population (residency and migration, age distribution, gender); social organization (memberships in church, clan, agricultural society); and agriculture (settlement history, approximate size of holding, coffee information). The exercise was important to the course of research, particularly how my identity was framed and explained. From this work, we managed to engage with some 238 established homesteads through talking with one or two respondents at each compound we visited. The spatial and demographic limit to the census activity comprised about eleven small hamlets with a population of 2161 persons.

Besides being of use for structuring further avenues of field research, the census activity proved to be the first step in understanding the complex organization of rural social

life. It was through asking hundreds of people about the clan (*mwiriga*), for example, that I built up a composite portrait of what this social institution entailed. The *mwiriga* is one of the most important social institutions that pertain to social life in Meru District. It has multiple definitions. As a social institution, the *mwiriga* represents the interests of a group of persons affiliated through descent. It was difficult to define because the clan exists at the jural level. My own assumptions that an institution should be observable were debunked when I tried to understand the role of the clan. Although the institutional life of the *mwiriga* has been transformed historically, the organization is responsible for catering to the welfare of its individual members whenever needs arise that require attention. The normative examples of *mwiriga* activities given to me by my respondents suggested that the *mwiriga* is called in to act as arbiters of disputes between kin, especially over land issues and inheritance, but also to intervene in abusive marriages and allegations of witchcraft and sorcery among its constituent members. The *mwiriga* keeps the peace and resolves social tensions where they are provoked. Its institutional boundaries are blurred into other associational features of Meru social life, such as that of the Self-Help group, but it retains a concern for maintaining persons and their social relations to others rather than building social amenities, which is properly a facet of development and carried out under an ideology of Self-Help and localized capacity building. Thus, if I had chosen not to include the superficial exercise of the census in my methodology, such explanations would be more difficult. Not only this, but the sheer repetition of facts during exercises like census taking provides the means to learn what is important to locals.

The fieldworker is often left with the task of constructing a methodology *in situ*, as fitting to the local conditions of research and the social contexts in which one works. As such, the on-farm household surveys constructed for this research emphasized the organization of farm labour according to local models of who *should* provide the bulk of the farm's labour. By the time I had moved into the household surveys, I was greatly aware of the place of young men and women in providing agricultural labour (cf. Berry

1993, Moock 1986). I specified categories for 'wage labour', 'family labour', 'trade', 'entrepreneurial and craft activities', 'migrant labour', although overlap between the categories was anticipated. I was primarily interested in how domestic enterprises organized themselves in the economically volatile character of rural life under structural adjustment, and how the possible divisions of labour were actualized in practice.

During the fieldwork, I chose a methodology that would at least highlight the labour processes involved in coffee production and provide space to discuss farm and off-farm labour from the perspective of age and sex. Central to that methodology was the notion of the household as a basic economic and social unit. This methodological choice turned out to be significant for the construction of my fieldwork activities and has implications for the arguments I make here. Jane Guyer's (1981) observation on this point is surprisingly at odds with how this analysis proceeded and indeed on the subject matter of my thesis:

With a methodology based on household as a major analytic concept, one cannot look at three critical factors, all of which seem to be changing in Africa today, with very important consequences: the relationship between older and younger men; the relationship between men and women; and the relationships amongst domestic groups in situations where wealth or control of resources vary widely. (Guyer 1981: 99)

Based on a methodology using the household as a 'unit' of some kind, the empirical chapters, especially Chapter Four and Chapter Five, speak about the changing relations between elders and young men, the reaffirmation of relationships between women and men, and competition between households in the co-operative marketing society. Although this information is only partially revealed through the presentation of the household as 'units' in a series of charts presented in Chapter Two, the application of the household model in Meru had consequences for the representation of data. I represent the following to be read with an eye to where the individuals are allocated in the household's social division of labour:

J.G. (1983 <sup>1</sup> )	Residents(Fa, Mo, So <sup>1-3</sup> , Da <sup>1-2</sup> )	Migrants(none)
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One conjugal household on small fragment of sub-divided land		
Established (1983 <sup>1</sup> )	Land (.5 acre) (rented .5 acre)	Coffee trees(200)
Does not hire agricultural workers, relies on family labour		
Fa	Construction worker, full-time <i>miraa</i> farmer: coffee, bananas, yams, macademia, avocado, sugarcane, fruits	
Mo	Farmer-trader, organizes labour on farm and grows her own commercial crops: maize, beans, cassava	
So <sup>1-3</sup>	Schoolchildren, put a lot of labour time into family farming	
Da <sup>1-2</sup>	Schoolchildren, put a lot of labour time into family farming	

<b>J.R. (1956<sup>2</sup>)</b>		
Residents(Fa, Mo, So <sup>1</sup> , So <sup>2</sup> , Da, So <sup>3</sup> )		
Domestic enterprise is composed on two conjugal households, the Fa's Mo was a junior polygamous wife		
Established(1925 <sup>1</sup> , 1956 <sup>2</sup> , 1990 <sup>3</sup> )	Land (2 acres) (10 acres shareholding)	Coffee trees(300)
Hire a great amount of agricultural labour		
Fa	Construction worker, farmer, management committee member at society, works jua kali	
Mo	Farmer-trade, organizes labour for family and communal farms: maize and bean marketeer	
So <sup>1</sup>	Mason, recently established (1990 <sup>3</sup> ) and has three children	
So <sup>2</sup>	Mason, remits to Fa	
Da	Clerk, works for co-operative union in town, remits to Fa	
So <sup>3</sup>	Welder, works in town in jua kali	

Practically, the household surveys took three months of the fieldwork period to conclude. These fieldwork exercises took place during busy periods in the agricultural calendar. The spatial largesse of rural communities in Africa played a factor in the length of these exercises. Where communication about research activities moved at the speed of my feet, catching people at a busy time of the year was often the outcome of sheer luck. My research assistants always chided me for making them "work so hard", which did not refer to the work of collecting household data and translating interviews, but from the composite hours of hard walking we were forced to do each day. "We could be crushing diamonds under our feet". one complaint went. Nonetheless, during those walks we became knowledgeable about the temporal and spatial makeup of the rural landscape as it buzzed around us busily. The work proved valuable when we were graciously granted a few hours by busy farmers who patiently answered the many mundane questions I was posing about their lives.

In addition to fieldwork activities in Meru District, I consulted the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi for a period of three weeks in late October. Using colonial archives

provided the documentation to reconstruct the commercialization of agriculture in Meru that partially informs this thesis. Archives are useful to anthropologists because they trace the state's intervention over time in the localities being studied (Des Chenes 1997: 76). Yet, there was another important reason to include archival research in my methodology. Throughout the research project I compiled the social biographies of particular elders with whom I established a relationship through my links with young men. An example is situated in Chapter Four (4.2.3). The archival record allowed me to reflect on the kinds of questions I asked elders. This combination of fieldwork with the archival record gave me a method which to approach past events. The production of historical documentation in the field has influenced the order of the argument and the choice of theoretical perspectives.

Besides specific fieldwork activities designed to collect data on the operation of the coffee industry in Kenya, I spent all of my time learning as much Kimeru as I could to understand and respond to what my informants were saying (cf. Appendix A). During the interviews with informants in the coffee factory interviews, farm surveys, and biographies, I had help with translation and interpretation from research assistants. Otherwise, I relied upon participation in as many social activities as I was invited to attend: church outings, cooperative marketing society meetings, classes in the primary schools, funerals, parties, and work. In addition, I was situated rather closely to rural life through living with A.M. and R.A., who had recently built their house in Miiiriga Mieru. Next to where I lived there was a major coffee processing factory, and a major access road that linked up to the tarmac in Meru Town.

Fieldwork activities and participation in social life were complements in coming to appreciate a sense of what life was like in rural Kenya. With the seven months of exposure to Kimeru, I was beginning to learn about Meru perceptions on the coffee industry with greater acumen when the project came to a close. By the completion of the fieldwork period I had acquired comprehensive field data on the activities of the 1998 coffee harvest in Miiiriga Mieru, including an inventory of subjective data to construct how local actors

perceived, and acted upon, the social changes structural adjustment and economic liberalization measures were provoking in their lives.

In the course of fieldwork I was positioned rather closely within the activities of young men as a result of my own age and gender. This turn of events held implications for the kinds of ethnographic data that I collected. Besides involvement in the local issues tied to the coffee industry and the social division of labour, I was fortunate enough to participate in Meru social life from the perspective of a young man. Close involvement with initiations late in the fieldwork period confirmed my passage into this category of person and gave me access to a 'secret' world of male ritual. I do not include any of this material in this thesis for reasons that the events studied have little connection with the coffee industry and for the reason that I wish to observe some of the conservative rules Meru youth hold about the secrecy of their affairs. Methodologically, my use of participant observation led me to become accepted among the activities of young men, which included wandering deep into the countryside on free afternoons and socializing in the late evening at the nearby tea houses. Keeping company with young men also brought me closer to elders, since the relationship between grandchildren and grandparents is closer and more familiar than that between children and parents. My ethnographic involvement with young men also had its drawbacks, the most notable being my social distance from the world of unmarried women and the impossibility of approaching them without sexual motives being ascribed to my behaviour. Caught inside the local dynamic, my connections with young women were limited to the few church outings and dance sessions that I participated in.

Leaving methodology aside, in the following section the historical record is called upon to compare the contemporary period of economic liberalization to that of the introduction of coffee in Meru District during the 1930s. This section contextualizes the first of a series of state interventions that have exacerbated internal dynamics of Meru social organization and provoked periods of social transformation. The historical introduction of coffee is highlighted here to give the necessary background to subsequent chapters where



the emphasis is focused more narrowly on the impact of structural adjustment upon commercial agriculture in rural Kenya.

(1.4) Coffee production in rural Kenya and the historical impact of state-sponsored agrarian policies in Meru District

The presence of coffee production in the Miiiriga Mieru zone of Meru District is profound. Every commercially active farm in the zone has a lengthy history of coffee cultivation. Through this crop, local Meru farmers are situated in relation to the world market in mild *arabica* coffee. Miiiriga Mieru is located, as it were, in the “contour line” of the “coffee zone”, where in 1937, the first Africans in colonial Kenya were allowed to cultivate coffee along commercial lines. The plans for allowing Africans to plant coffee was secretive in Meru until 1935. Prior to 1937, under the Agriculture Department’s withholding of the “Native Grown Coffee Rules”, African subjects were forbidden to grow coffee along commercial lines. Prior to that, coffee was strictly a European-only cash crop. Asians were permitted to buy licenses to purchase coffee cherries and *mibuni*, but the plantation production of Kenya coffee was almost exclusively a European settler or missionary crop.

The entire idea of planting coffee in remote ‘Native’ districts like Kisii, Embu, and Meru was highly politicized in colonial Kenya. Many African leaders were opposed to the introduction of coffee to Meru District. The introduction of a valuable cash crop like coffee, it was feared, would lead to social conflicts over land claims and tree tenure, which in Meru were controlled through the largest corporate kin group of the *mwiriga*. (patri-clan). Some claimed that the introduction of coffee trees to the ‘Reserve’ would lead to land alienation and European settlement. There were, also, the conservative European settler lobbyists who made up such statutory boards as the Kenya Farmer’s Association (KFA) or the Coffee Board of Kenya (CBK), who were unanimously hostile towards the idea of permitting African colonial subjects to plant and market coffee, produce that would compete with their own fragile grasp on the colonial market. The arguments against the 1937

'Native Grown Coffee Rules' ran from the charge of 'disease spreading' African crop husbandry, to the potential for colony wide theft of coffee cherries. Some settlers expressed the opinion that the market value of coffee be hidden from the African, lest the new 'Rules' provoked a crisis of overproduction. With the 1937 'Native Coffee Growers Rules' came the first 'experimental' harvests of coffee cherries in Miiriga Mieru, carefully monitored by the Provincial Administration's agricultural staff and marketed through the Methodist Missionary Society and a private trading house based in Nairobi called Mssrs. Dalgety & Co. The year 1939 saw the first mature bumper harvest of the new "Kent's variety" that were planted in 1935, a big harvest in which the ripe, reddened cherries served equally as sweets as they did for a cash crop.

When commercialized crops like coffee first came to Meru communities they were on an 'experimental' basis. Few persons had access to coffee in the early years, licenses being required to plant the trees. For those who wanted to plant, it would mean access to those Miiriga Mieru men who were socially and politically astute enough to be connected with the Provincial Administration. The earliest coffee planters in Meru District had an indirect link with the colonial authorities. It was members of the Local Native Council (LNC) whose powers issued out planting licenses.

There were many persons who wanted to grow coffee trees, but who lived well outside the 'coffee zones' licensed for coffee production. This often required the 'borrowing' of land inside the designated 'gazetted coffee growing areas'. One way land could be 'borrowed' was through exchanging livestock for a strip of fallow, or taking on a plot cleared by the land's custodians - the *miiriga*. In places like Miiriga Mieru, many people moved into the area as kinds of client farmers, called *nkia*. Older settlement histories during the 1940s are greatly shadowed by the land consolidation programmes of the 1960s. Verbal testimony from a score of elders suggests, however, that the "coffee contour" of Miiriga Mieru was an area of protracted settlement after the introduction of coffee as a permanent tree crop. Often, immigrants to Miiriga Mieru did not have

irredeemable rights to the land they occupied and worked, but 'borrowed' land from the residing *mwiriga* on a rent-seeking basis. Those who 'borrowed' land like this were considered *nkia*, clients to the 'rightful' custodians of the land. Land inside the 'coffee contour' was rarely the site of residency for the *nkia*, who would live in the communities of their clan, often well removed from their small coffee plantation. Yet, there were other persons whose inheritance of a land fragment through *mburago* (inheritance of land through patri-clan) allowed them to plant coffee on their own land, often the residential land where they were building a house and compound. These persons, for the most part, were the people who could claim more secure land holdings during the eventual programme in land demarcation and consolidation in subsequent decades.

(Table 1.1) Settlement histories of households coming into Miiriga Mieru (1900-2000)

Decade	Pop.	Decade	Pop.
1900-1910	1	1951-1960	26
1911-1920	21	1961-1970	64
1921-1930	11	1971-1980	16
1931-1940	26	1981-1990	16
1941-1950	19	1991-2000	23

The conflicting problems between land tenure claims and coffee became complex when 'land redemption' was sought by the wardens, or spokesman, of a clan member. Coffee production resulted in the removal of clients from the land. The clients, often newly married men, were eager to cultivate food crops like maize and yams as well as coffee. Following the previous shifting cultivation, the new principles of agriculture followed monocultural principles. Crops grown under the colonial Agricultural Department's supervision demanded open, permanent, terraced, manured, and mulched gardens. Husbandry was limited to tree crops, millet, maize, beans, and tubers; none of which

required the cutting down of substantial woods fallow, but the selective opening-up of fallow. The *nkia* were generally constrained in their use of the land, since permission to change the landscape and expand onto further fallow was sought through the clan. If an *nkia* was asked to leave land, he was only permitted the grace of a harvest. Coffee trees planted by *nkia* families were often being 'redeemed' along with their land. This was considered a costly loss since the trees continue to be productive for about forty years.

The introduction of coffee to Meru District set into motion social forces that transformed the relationships that had characterized the pre-colonial communities. It became clear to Meru that the introduction of the coffee tree, or at least the commercialization of agriculture, had significantly changed the relationships amongst one another. Its introduction provoked new relationships between *nkia* and *mwiriga* members. In recognition of these social changes, the coffee tree is often the referent of people's bitterness at the uneven course of development they have had to negotiate as an export producing community.

#### (1.5) Structural adjustment programmes as a context for social change in Kenya during the 1990s

Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Republic of Kenya Government instrumented a series of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. As 1998 came to a close, and the fieldwork that contributed to this thesis ended, the World Bank drafted its latest Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF) for consideration by Kenya Government ministries. Each year's implementation of an ESAF is essentially a kind of sanction upon the economic policies of the executive and bureaucratic apparatus of the Kenyan state. Adjustments are, minimally, broad terms of aid conditionality that reduce the state's regulatory apparatus over key economic directives: setting currency values, building monopsistic marketing boards, participating in donor projects, and investing in industrial production (Engberg-

Pedersen, Gibbon, Raikes, Udsholt 1996: 24). Some critical observers of SAP implementation have called the policies and their mechanisms a 'second imperialism', but on the whole opposition to their application have been mainly a domestic concern, or an academic outcry. As working critics of the policies and implementation of SAPs to the African continent, one Danish panel argues that these interventions were so thoroughly pervaded by neo-liberalist ideology of the 'miracle of the market' that the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) were incapable of being critical of the adjustment process, despite a growing trend of empirical studies demonstrating the socially distortive and politically volatile effects the policies are having in African countries (Engberg-Pedersen, Gibbon, Raikes, Udsholt 1996: 24). The same group of commentators offer a definition of structural adjustment as pivoting on two ideological poles:

[A] shift in economic policies from an interventionist stance, which permits and sometimes encourages state intervention in the economy, towards a neo-liberal position which aims to minimize it, letting the market allocate resources wherever possible (Engberg-Pedersen, Gibbon, Raikes, Udsholt 1996: 4).

Responses to structural adjustment throughout the world have been provocative, controversial, and ideologically charged. Criticism of the way structural adjustment is effecting recipient countries is widespread, but non-consensual. Compare the assessment of development policy analysts such as Engberg-Pederson et al (1996) to Africanists like Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Beatrice Hibou (1999), or Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz (1998). One emphasis is placed on external victimization, while the other stress falls upon internal manipulation. Despite the convincing argumentation of those who stress the 'corrupt' manipulation of SAPs and 'reform' by African state structures and agents, this author questions the methods behind the argument that African politics are necessarily criminal (cf. Bayart: 1999). This question would depend on the intimacy of the empirical material presented in the argument, its methods and ethics, as well as the privilege to found a criminology specific to the kinds of infractions being committed.

Aid conditionality is met when the recipient government is compliant, and on schedule, with the directives and mandates of programmes such as the ESAF designed for Kenya. Yet, the mandates imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank are not easily met by already weakened state apparatuses, since the SAPs usually demand an extensive investment by the recipient country in instrumenting and supervising its 'own' reforms. To pressure and enforce fiscal conformity with the international financial institutions (IFIs) in black and white diplomacy, the neo-liberal logic of the IFIs declares that there are only 'good adjusters' and 'bad adjusters' in Africa. Consequently, throughout moments in the tumultuous 1990s Kenya has been considered a 'bad adjuster' by the World Bank mission on Kenya. As an exercise in executing commercial sanctions in the full style of the *pax americana*, the Republic of Kenya did not receive any financial aid from the World Bank creditors in 1991, and has since had subsequent suspensions of credit while implementing the ESAFs as outlined by the IFIs. During a difficult decade of political transformations and economic austerity, antagonized by the low investments in multilateral financial aid and loan coordination, the early 1990s in Kenya were born out painfully in eruptions of ethnic conflict and political instability as the country hit new lows in its post-colonial history. State capitalism in Kenya survived the 1990s, unlike the state capitalism in countries such as Somalia and Zaire, whose degeneration into civil war have been well documented elsewhere.

In a period of 'fend for yourself' capitalism, the 1990s were years in which the second economy expanded in Kenya. In the literature, African economies have been described as having: an 'informal economy' (Hart 1972), a 'dual economy' (Chabal 1988), and a 'second economy' (MacGaffey 1989, 1991). Although all three terms have elements in common, such as the way in which they speak to economic activities that are not recognized or sanctioned by the state, they are not synonymous. Henrietta Moore's (1988) definition of these economic activities raises issues about their analytic separation:

The 'informal' economy, sometimes called the 'second economy', is a series of income-generating activities which are distinguished from formal, contractual wage labour. Such activities are small-scale and require little or no capital to set them up; they are often itinerant and seasonal, and are also frequently illegal. Business is risky, both because profits are small and insecure, and because participants run the risk of being arrested and fined (Moore 1988: 90)

The notion of the second economy is the most applicable of these two concepts to the empirical discussion at hand, yet they are not mutually exclusive and rigidly separated. Rather, they pivot around nuances of analysis and definition. Janet MacGaffey's (1991) work on the second economy of Zaire makes this frustrating point:

The term 'second economy' is used here on the grounds that it is preferable to 'underground' or 'hidden', because many of its activities are carried out quite openly; preferable to 'parallel', because unofficial activities intersect with official ones in many complex ways; preferable to 'informal', because this term has come to refer to the small-scale enterprises of the urban poor, ignoring large-scale activity with much greater significance for the national accounts; and preferable to 'unrecorded' because the word is too neutral and does not have the connotation of illegality that is an essential element in the political implications of this sector in the economy (Mac Gaffey 1991: 8)

The difficulty with these terms speaks to the ambiguous nature of 'economics' as a definitive field of social action, itself embedded in everyday practices and meanings that are inherently unstable. Economic understanding is often based on a series of distinctions between practices deemed permissible and prohibitive, usually constrained through legal or moral conditions of behaviour. Hence, the notion of the second economy adequately describes aspects of the Kenyan economy in the days of structural adjustment, economic crisis, and social change.

The growth of the second economy in Kenya was initially led on by an import-sustained period of trade growth, an expansion itself that was controlled almost exclusively by an emergent class of capitalists and entrepreneurs with contacts and capital in local contexts, and not controlled by the state or its marketing boards. What made this class of capitalists 'new' was that their power was largely derived from economic activities outside

the structure of state capitalism, which was under attack by the implementation of SAPs and a new global bias towards the neo-liberal agenda of the 'free market'. The emergence of the second economy in Kenya of the 1990s is similar to that described for Zaire during the late 1970s by MacGaffey (1989, 1991), and that of Uganda for the 1980s by Kasfir (1992). In short, these countries all experienced the growth of a new economic ethos that replaced earlier concerns with 'development' and 'industrialization' with that of the 'free market' and a sense that economics was ruled by a 'fend for yourself' dynamic (MacGaffey 1989). Faced with little ideological alternatives in Kenya's current political context, the neo-liberalist discourse on 'free markets' has been appropriated by peasants, capitalists, and bureaucrats alike in a struggle to economically survive and adapt to the changes SAPs are bringing to Kenya's productive regime. Yet, the localized appropriation of neo-liberalism has gone beyond reference to the official economy monitored by state capitalism and extended its meaning to the second economy.

Overwhelmingly, overseas observers of Africa's political instability and economic failure apply their own particular vision of what is happening in Africa to their interventions. As a result, some of the significant external policies issuing from European, American, and Asian institutions have focused on 'political democratization' and 'economic liberalization' as key programmes to push on Africa's state apparatuses. Far too infrequently do these institutions question how Africans experience these policies and how their lives are affected from afar. Barely six years after the first multiparty elections in Kenya, one rather blunt statement from a Kenyan barber bruisingly put the ideals of free markets and democracy into perspective; "Yes, We are freer...but much, much poorer". Except for a growing number of Africans, few have asked how such programmes are being felt locally and what they mean for local definitions of development, however truncated by years of economic struggle.

In particular concern to this thesis, the gradual and on-going implementation of SAP-required 'economic liberalization' in Kenya has not been experienced evenly by



Kenyans, some anticipating unprecedented poverty and others foretelling of untold riches. This unevenness is characteristic of the way accumulation works in Kenya, tending towards individual differentiation rather than homogenous class formations. The key to understanding the process of liberalizing Kenya's coffee industry does not lie uniquely in a sophisticated understanding of macro-economics and marketing, but in conveying the lived social contexts in which economic activity occurs to adequately interpret the economic scope and political stakes of liberalization measures.

Understanding how SAP-originated policies come to affect the everyday lives of ordinary people is not a priority of World Bank missions to Kenya, nor are its participants working among the people the policies ultimately hit hardest: the working poor and the local capitalist. Kept inside the international community in Nairobi, policy makers do not experience the austerity and vulnerability of everyday life in contemporary Kenya. The local interpretation and appropriation of policy is deemed to be irrelevant to discussions of economic growth and developments by foreign policy analysts. To further the image of control over domestic economic issues and qualify for compliance with ongoing SAPs, the policies are only irregularly challenged by Africans engaged in the process of "opening up the marketplace". Despite growing sentiments that the programmes are increasingly becoming inimical to Kenya's loose core of committed capitalists, most of whom are national politicians, out-right political criticism of the Kenya Government's policies is still being suppressed, or co-opted, through the activities of the security forces or the expansion of patronage networks .

The disregard for the lived impact of SAPs is reflected in policy maker's language use, sharply dividing market from non-market forces of structural change, without questioning what defines the 'market'. These categorically defined non-market forces are considered irrelevant to the eventual economic outcomes of these policy shifts, but they are frequently pin-pointed in the political terms of the periodically issued ESAFs. Included in the ESAF for 1998 was a mandate to set up two new statutory authorities to increase legal

capacities in making credible audits and prosecute corruption: the Kenya Revenue Authority, and the Kenya Anti-Corruption Authority. The only 'market' element of the 1998 ESAF was re-negotiations of contracts within the power industry, presumably the Kenya Power & Lighting Company's stepping down as a servicing monopoly. The ESAFs, however, rarely see their projects come to maturation. For an example, the Kenya Anti-Corruption Authority was dismantled amid public scandal and intrigue by order of the president of the republic, Daniel arap Moi, only months after its inception. Evidently, it had probed non-market forces a little too deeply. An awareness among World Bank and Government of Kenya agents that politics and economics are entwined, borne out of their experiences of dealing with one another, has gradually shown to most Kenyans that the ESAFs are foremost political and only secondarily economic.

Through a remarkably small number of key players from the World Bank and the Government of Kenya, the country's small trickle of bilateral assistance can be re-negotiated, providing the discussions do not probe the category of non-market forces too deeply. Both World Bank policy-makers and Government of Kenya officers cannot afford to consider the costs of addressing non-market forces at work during economic liberalization, for this would abandon the only feasible definition of 'development' that Kenyan state capitalism can entertain at the present moment: control over export commodities. In this formula of profiting over the control of export production and marketing there is a movement towards strengthening state capitalism, rather than weakening it, which is properly at the basis of most neo-liberal discourse. To its peril, this discourse does not address the yawning gaps opened up by the second economy as state capitalism is alienated from its monopoly over power and production. As will become clearer, this is what has happened in Kenya's coffee industry.

#### (1.6) The relevance of Kenya and Meru District to the study of social change and economic crisis in East Africa

In his autobiographical account of Kenya's liberation struggle, *Not Yet Uhuru*, Oginga Odinga was outspokenly bitter towards the colonial state of Kenya for its systematic attempt to block the emergence of an indigenous capitalism by African entrepreneurs:

Far from encouraging African economic ventures, the government seemed set on producing obstacles. The British Labour government in power after the end of the war encouraged co-operative societies, but only ringed around with restrictions and control. When groups of Africans began individually to try and run co-operatives, the authorities worked to undermine their confidence and ability. We had hindrance on all sides and little assistance. We could not raise loans from banks because in African areas communal land ownership prevented individual land title which could be offered as security and banks would accept no other security...there was a network of trade regulations designed to 'protect' Africans but which merely served to militate against their economic initiatives and leave the monopoly of trade in the hands of Asians and whites (Oginga Odinga 1967: 89, quoted in Nicola Swainson 1980: 177-8).

The title of this thesis, *Not Yet Soko Huru*, is directly taken from Oginga Odinga's autobiography. As a description of what it was like to be both *forced into* marginal economic activities and *held back* in the 'official' economy, Oginga Odinga's work overlaps with much in the area of politics this thesis addresses. This work acknowledges the role of foreign interventions in regulating the architecture of power and production in Kenya, but insists that an analysis of Kenya's economic crisis must look to how such interventions are negotiated and experienced by Kenyans themselves. In assessing the validity of local and global levels of abstraction, this thesis asserts that former theoretical preoccupations with international-state relations have seriously obscured the internal dynamics of 'developing' capitalist regimes. In the search of simplicity that these levels of abstraction encourage, the complexities of the economic crisis in Africa are reduced in analytic importance.

This is particularly relevant to scholarship on Kenya, where the terms of discourse has swung away from the over-arching debates over external dependency and towards the possibilities of recognizing how Kenya is shaped by internal struggles and exploitation

from within (Copans 1991; Kitching 1987; Leys 1996, 1975; Swainson 1980, 1987). This literature, known as the 'Kenyan Debate', argued for and against the emergence of an indigenous class of Kenyan capitalists. The debate made dependency theory look less appropriate for Kenya than had been previously affirmed, yet the literature did not make a sustained investigation into the course of struggle from within Kenya, leaving new questions to be asked (Leys 1975).

The chapters of this thesis ask questions about struggle within Kenya. It particularly looks at the conflicts that arise out of the coffee harvest in rural Meru District. These are conflicts between the household's claim to an individual's labour, as much as conflicts between leading members of the co-operative marketing society and young marginal petty-traders. Whatever the conflicts (and their resolutions), the issues of structural adjustment, social change, and economic crisis are significant social forces that act upon rural localities in surprising ways. As these issues compound one another, the conflicts that arise from tensions between the household and individual also provoke new and old forms of cooperation into being: reaffirming the sexual division of labour here, and reworking the generational divide there. As will be gleaned from the concluding remarks about the nature of social change in agricultural societies, the Meru case study suggests that asymmetrical relationships based on gender have been reaffirmed under structural adjustment, while age-based divisions are being undermined. What is significant about this impact of structural adjustment is that it effects deeply constructed social relationships at the local level.

## Chapter Two

### Theorizing power and production in Africa

#### (2) Introduction: theorizing power and production in Africa

*Power* has been recently refashioned as a central anthropological object of inquiry (Gledhill 1994). As a concept, power emerged from dissatisfactions over the way the political was conceived as cut off from everyday affairs, relationships, and constraints. The concept reconstituted political anthropology in a period when the 'boundedness' of political analysis in the humanities was dissolved by a recognition of the way power "rests on the everyday social practices which are the concrete form taken by relations between the governing and the governed" (Gledhill 1994: 22). In such open terms, discourse can be situated in relationship to practice (de Certeau 1984: 45-60). Ethnographers, in particular, have made great use of the notion of power in their sensitivity to empirical detail, and rely upon it for its conceptual flexibility in describing social situations. As one outcome of the flexibility of the concept of power, a cluster of associated concepts have had the effect of providing a language with which to criticize, or appraise the political contexts of social life. In particular, 'domination' and 'resistance' have appealed to ethnographers because they have widened the interpretive application and nuances of power (Scott 1976, 1991).

Yet, this notion of power as something waiting to happen, a tension unto itself, does not tell us a great deal about the characterization of social relationships that are seen to be dominant, and those that can be described as in resistance to the exercise of power. On its own, power cannot comprehend social change. Questions asking why certain persons dominate over others, why some people resist, cannot be answered without some kind of analytic complement to power. Without a complement to power and compulsion, human intention is rendered vacuous, and people's responses to power only appear to be conflictual. That complement, as Patrick Chabal (1990) has framed it, is the combined social "coordinates" of *power* and *production* (Chabal 1990: 99). In bringing together the

two objects of power and production, social analysis is not cut adrift from the aleatory tug-and-pull of everyday social life. Production is used throughout to refer to the social division of labour in general, but also includes other economic activities such as trade. Quite obviously, a great deal of the following theoretical discussion swings back and forth between power and production, without trying to reify the concepts and employ them rigidly. There is a degree of looseness with the concepts of power and production that they may be applied to any economic activities. The example is trade. The productive activities that comprise trade are subsumed, perhaps invisible in the act of exchange, but they are very much present in the social relationships of individuals. Although this interpretation is a response to the Marxist concept of production, it is also an attempt to dissolve the concept into a wider interpretive scheme.

This wider scheme includes the way social actors appropriate certain discourse and practices in accordance with their own point of view, their agency, and their problems. People often show flexibility in their activities so the anthropologist's concepts should take this into account. In instances where the question is social change rigid theoretical schemes are difficult to work with. This is why the categories of anthropological theory presented in this chapter are mostly decentered somewhat from their models, and the choice of new models is pivoted on their flexibility to the broadest number of cases available.

With these introductory notes, the discussion moves onto the main sections of the theoretical chapter. The sections deal with the way in which power and production connect with the categories of the ethnographer in discussing the facts of social difference and the question of social change. The work of the French Marxists in addressing social change is critically reviewed in terms of their models of social change in Africa. Finally, the chapter argues for the conceptual decentering of the household as the only economic unit of ethnographic analysis and suggests that the individual is of heuristic importance in the study of social change. Each of the sections moves between a number of theoretical

perspectives on power and production, suggesting different ways to see the interplay of social actors in the labour process and in the changes to social life.

(2.1) The anthropological construction of difference: social identification by race, tribe, class, age, and sex in the ethnography of Africa

This thesis has all the tell-tale signs of belonging to a legacy: the focus on formal age-sets, an emphasis on the commercialization of agriculture, a methodological reliance on the household model, the critique of uneven development. All of these are common features of East African ethnography. An enormous ethnographic record exists for Africa that tends to reproduce itself rather thematically. The case in point was the thirty-odd years where the concept of the lineage was at the forefront of all ethnographic representations of African societies. The legacy of constructing differences according to the ways in which categories of race, ethnicity, age, class, and sex come together needs to be placed at the forefront of new ethnography. Until the techniques, ideas, and arguments of previous ethnographers is called into account, our arguments may come to be surprisingly similar. This is so important in the context of Africa, where the identity of the ethnographic fieldworker and the relationships they have to their friends and informants is still bounded by the legacy of colonialism.

A steady focus on the differences between groups was the primary way of reifying social identity for study and control by ethnographers employed in colonial Africa (Amselle 1999:16-69). The notions of *ethnies* and *tribes*, now part of the everyday vocabulary of African citizens, were part of the ethnographer's conceptual toolbox during the colonization process of Africa and South Asia. In the late colonial period, social identity in Africa was transformed in terms of segregation by race and ethnicity (Mamdani 1998). In later anthropological discourse, the African subject of ethnography was duly categorized by race, ethnicity, class, age, and sex. These ethnological categories have left their legacies in Africa as well as in anthropological theory.

To what degree have Africans come to see themselves against the categories of ethnography? Within the colonial period, African actors appropriated many of the categories of the ethnographer-cum-administrator as legitimate identity markers for themselves, even if they made their own uses of the labels (cf. Maupeu 1990). Thus, age-sets, secret societies, and elders councils were all seen as legitimate spaces for the expression of African identity and politics by colonial administrators. Yet, Africans were also categorized by criteria that were clearly imposed by the colonial order. In Kenya, colonized by Britain for close to seventy years (1895-1963), the dialectics of identity are still premised on the fundamental racialism of British policies of social exclusion. The colonial legacy of race and ethnicity as divisory markers of social identity in Kenya is embedded in everyday life and taken for granted by all who live there. Kenyans relate to one another through race and ethnicity, social categories that few ethnographers can dissolve with ease. For the European, or *mzungu*, their social distance and cultural difference from the African carries a pedigree and a legacy from the colonial period, one that can not be forgotten in a world that still uses race as a means of social differentiation.

I am reminded of the power of race as a marker of social difference through a joke I was told while in Kenya:

"There were two African 'houseboys' working for a *mzungu*. One of them, who was relatively new on the job, was sharply told off by his White boss for bringing the 'Englishman' his cup of tea in an incorrect fashion. A bit confused, the new African begged his boss' pardon and explanation. With no shortage of snoot nor superiority, the White complained that a 'civilized' cup of tea is *never*, ever filled to the brim. Once back in the kitchen, the new African employee approached his old African co-worker and plaintively asked, "Why does the *mzungu* not want us to be generous when filling up his cup of tea? Why are the Whites so miserly?" The old African looked thoughtful, taking care to breathe a little before answering, "The secret of the *mzungu's* unhappiness? It is not that they are miserly, it is just that they burn their long white noses when they drink the hot tea" (October, 1998, Miiiriga Mieru)

The joke disarms the tensions that surely exist for Kenyans in coming to terms with their colonial past. As a cultural text, the joke refers to race as a category of differentiation, yet it inverts the divisory social category upon the colonizer.



While the British, French, Belgians, Dutch, and Portuguese may have introduced race and ethnicity to Africa through their particular systems of colonial domination, these systems have persisted as social categories in Africa. Far less attention has been placed on the internal differentiation and pluralism of these societies, especially with reference to the categories of identification through which Africans recognize themselves. This is a challenge to the anthropology of African societies, since one of the goals of the ethnographer is to represent social life from a culturally displaced point of view, normally thought of as being the "native's point of view". However, what happens to this goal when faced with social change? What is likely to happen when the terms of identification from the outsider's and the insider's perspective are both altered?

As far as social transformation concerns the anthropologist, it is a challenge to theoretically account for the multiplicity of perspectives that may converge on the meaning and the implications of social change. The anthropologist cannot predict with any accuracy how their categories are to be used or appropriated by others, whether these others happen to be their colleagues or their informants. The case of age-sets in Meru District is an appropriate example. Would Meru youth care about initiations and age-sets today, if their great-grandfathers and the colonial-era ethnographer had not taken the actions to reify the category of age as a principle of social identification internal to Meru social organization? It is a valid question given the openness of interpretive schemes left by generations of predecessors. There is a past world that already exists for the anthropologist to reconcile within their ethnographic present (Jackson 1998). In Meru, the age-sets have a pre-colonial history, but the formal organization of age-sets were significantly altered and transformed throughout the colonial period. Like many other East African societies, Meru reckon an individual's status through categories of personhood based on age differentials that transect gender and generation simultaneously. The age-sets are known as *nthuki* in Kimeru. The *nthuki* are cohorts of men and women organized into formally recognized age-sets. Anyone who matures through life to elderhood does so with a set of peers, recruited into a

cohort of people whose social age is reckoned to be the same. Social age refers to the ways in which the social category of a person is transformed in time, responding to newly introduced social responsibilities. Usually, this entails several points in the life course where major personal changes occur. Personal transformations are marked by circumcision, the birth of a child, marriage, the construction of a conjugal household, inheritance of property, and retirement into elderhood. The life course is fulfilled in elderhood and not in death.

More ethnographic studies have been made of Meru age-sets as a central aspect of Meru social life and cultural practices than any other particular topic (Bernardi 1985, Lambert 1947, Holding 1942, Peatrik 1993, Thomas 1998). Most of these studies focused on the structure and systematization of the Meru age-sets and their comparison to other age class systems in East Africa. This comparative study led to the neglect of how the age-sets internally differentiated social actors in Meru. The *nthuki* have attracted a number of representations from past foreign observers, usually identified by their vertical representation. In her study of social organization among Kimeru-speaking communities of Nyambene District in the 1980s, Anne-Marie Peatrik characterized the Meru age-set as a *fait social total* (Peatrik 1993). Peatrik, like every other ethnographer of the Meru, found their particular ethnic expression in the local institution of the *nthuki*. The earliest of these representations was delivered by Edward Butler Horne, the first District Commissioner of Meru who conquered the Kimeru-speaking communities and drew up the administrative boundaries of the district in 1908. In 1910, after conferring with elders from both Imenti and Tiganian communities he represented the men's *nthuki* as historically linear and descendent, not unlike a roll call:

"The following list of circumcision ages will give an idea of how long ago their exodus took place and how long they were on journey to their present country, and how long approximately they have been in possession. Since the occupation of Meru the following are the ages or Nthaka:

1. Barithiomo -were moran at the leaving of Mbwaa
2. Thangeri -on the move
3. Michuki -on the move

4.	Gwendaru	-fought with Ngithi (Masai) who also fought with Mwoko
5.	Mutira	-drove out Mwoko
6.	Kinyuu	
7.	Michugu	
8.	Ratanya	
9.	Elubeta	
10.	Miriti	-first appearance of Masai
11.	Gwandai	-this age took Laikipia cattle and exterminated them
12.	Ichungi	-present - beat off raid of Somalis in Igembe.
13.	Murungi	-present" (Kenya National Archives: PC 1/1/9: 1910)

Most Westerners, since this first ethnological treatment of Meru *nthuki*, have sought to represent the age-sets in variations of the above, using the generational models of the *nthuki* as a means of tracking historical events. This is certainly the way the *nthuki* were represented to me as a foreign researcher in the field. People often cited the *nthuki* to date an historical event for me. The lived experience of this social division of society is less easily classified according to the prevailing model. The enormous variety of ethnographic representations of Meru age-sets result from the differences between locations and reflect some of the idiosyncrasies of different Kimeru-speaking communities. By asking for both men's' and women's' age-sets, I arrived at the following historical model, but it needs to be emphasized that these *nthuki* are probably specific to a very small area of Meru, possibly no more extensive than the fieldsite I was working in (Miiriga Mieru). The lists are for men (*akuru*) and women (*mwekuru*) during the years their *nthuki* were ushered into adult life through marriage and permanent settlement, but do not indicate the date of circumcision. These are later dates than personal initiations and recruitment into an *nthuki*, designated to give the years that classify marriages of the individuals in the *nthuki*:

Table 2.1: Historical sequences of age-sets (*nthuki*) in Miiriga Mieru for men (*akuru*) and women (*mwekuru*)

<i>Akuru</i>		<i>Mwekuru</i>
<i>nthuki Murungi</i>		<i>nthuki Tirindi</i>
<i>nthuki Miriti</i>	(1914-1925)	<i>nthuki Ncecenga</i>
<i>nthuki Kaburu (Kiruja)</i>	(1935-1945)	<i>nthuki Nkoroi</i>
<i>nthuki Mbaya</i>	(1945-1955)	<i>nthuki Mukami</i>
<i>nthuki Kababu</i>	(1957-1967)	<i>nthuki Munyange</i>
<i>nthuki Gichunge</i>	(1967-1977)	<i>nthuki Ncurubi</i>
<i>nthuki Mung'atia</i>	(1976- )	

Of those *nthuki* present in the model, the *nthuki Murungi*, *nthuki Miriti*, *nthuki Tirindi*, *nthuki Ncecenga* have no surviving members. The youngest of the *nthuki Kaburu* and *nthuki Nkoroi* are in their nineties. Today, members of the *nthuki Mbaya* and *nthuki Kababu* are considered to be the ruling elders, men whose authority and position is maintained through gerontocratic relationships and the control of property. Note, however, that the *nthuki Mung'atia* have not married as a majority, and as such were often excluded from the lists given to me by elders. The age-set *nthuki Mung'atia* opened for recruitment in 1976 starting with those initiates (*ntaani*) of that year's circumcision. It was nicknamed *Mung'atia jwa kilo*, meaning the 'excitement of the kilogram', to coincide with the switch from calabash, *debe*, and pounds as economic measurements to the metric system. The name of the age-set is associated with social change, particularly with the later commercial 'boom' in agriculture during the late 1970s. In certain parts of Meru, like Katheri, tea and horticulture production was just beginning at the time. Most of the young men who work as "coffee brokers", represented in Chapter Four, are from the *nthuki Mung'atia*. It may also be the last such named *nthuki* since it has been 'open' for recruitment since 1976, a decade longer than previous recruitment into an age-set. There are still *ntaani* who are recruited into *nthuki Mung'atia* whose peers are twenty years their

senior. With this in mind, one widely held view in Miiriga Mieru is that the institution of the *nthuki* will not be re-lived and that its importance is now formally eclipsed.

For example, the female age-sets have not been named since the 1960s. Older women in Miiriga Mieru consider the practice to be finished, following the cessation of public female initiations sometime in the late 1950s. Although the initiation of young women through clandestine excisions is not unknown in rural Meru, it is widely condemned in the communities of Miiriga Mieru. Lynn Thomas (1998) is among the few historians of Meru to make the analytic linkage between the ethnological recognition of the *nthuki* as an institution during colonialism and the gradual domination of Meru women through the agencies of indirect rule. Contextualizing the 1928-1931 'female circumcision controversy', Thomas shows how colonial administrators came to understand the high frequencies of abortions among young Meru women as a sociological effect of the customarily late date of women's initiations in Meru. Under the ethnological influence of the District Commissioners Lambert and Vidal, certain 'progressive' African players on the Local Native Council were persuaded of the sociological link between high numbers of abortions and late initiations among young Meru women. With the assistance of some male council members, women's initiations were transformed from pre-nuptial rites, performed around the age of twenty, to pubescent rites, often carried out in public and presided over by a Tribal policeman (Thomas 1998: 137). Thomas notes that the social effects of this change in Meru 'culture' were criticized by M'Ngaine, a chief figure in the Local Native Council of the 1930s and 1940s, who argued that earlier initiations of women meant that fathers and mothers would lose the farm labour of their daughter at an earlier date than the age of twenty. After initiation, she would be socially required to marry into her affine's domestic group, work for them, and bear children. Thomas argues that since women controlled women's initiations, the colonial intervention brought about violence to the authority of elder women to exercise power over their juniors. In terms of the gendered aspects of power and production, the lowering of initiation ages for women swung local

power relations towards the favour of men as they constructed a gerontocratic patriarchy under the terms of indirect rule. For this period of social change brought about through changes in the relationships between men and women, Thomas explicitly recognized the role of ethnological categories in constructing the limits of women's' power as she describes the district commissioner's role in transforming Meru 'culture':

In the process perhaps of preventing some abortions, state interventions surrounding female initiation enabled male administrators to partially subvert the authority of women's councils and to situate themselves as guardians of 'the Meru' (Thomas 1998: 145)

As the historical consequence of this initial volley of administrative violence against women's social institutions in Meru, the initiations are no longer practiced openly in Miiiriga Mieru. Through abandoning the formal recognition of women's *nthuki*, power over women by elder women was transferred to elder men and local administrators, especially that element of governmental control called 'Native Law and Custom'. As a result of decades of indirect rule, the *nthuki* were to be codified as formal ethnological components of Meru social life and cultural identity.

Despite this sense of the tradition waning, the lived aspects of the age-set system are clearly still a dynamic part of Meru social life, particularly as young persons and elders maintain some political components of the gerontocracy that thrived in the colonial period and eclipsed in the post-colonial transition. Young men in Meru continue, however, to cherish their recruitment into an age-set as a marker of their social identity. The ethnological representation of Meru age-sets is confirmed by ethnographers and Meru individuals alike, both parties having played significant roles in making this feature of social life in Meru a *fait social total*. In the anthropological focus on age-sets in Meru District, the tensions of continuity and rupture require theoretical resolution in the *problematique* of social change, without missing the fact that Meru age-sets cannot be explained by the difference between groups. They can only be explained in the specificity of their historical context.

The argument that the work of anthropologists takes place in historically specific social contexts and that this profoundly influences their analysis is a fundamental one (Gledhill 1994: 72). Thus, when the question of social change is at the forefront of an anthropologist's work, it can be surmised that their theoretical framework will leave a legacy, chiefly because many of their operative concepts will be shown to be adequate in the explanation of phenomena that are being highlighted for the first time. Or, the new phenomena may actually consist of radical departures from social relations previously known and lack a well-trodden interpretive scheme. All in all, the place of the anthropologist in conveying social change is limited to their bounded conceptual horizons. To further this complication over the scope of social change, it is never clear whether the categories of thought that correspond to social change demonstrate the reaffirmation of previous social relationships, or whether social transformation produces radically new relationships. Interestingly, it was exactly this problem in Max Gluckman's (1963) *Order and rebellion in tribal Africa* that dissolved the categories of structural functionalism and provoked the need for theoretical positions that could account for the dynamism stemming from internal and external social relationships. It is also the sort of question that threads this thesis together.

In the framework of structural functionalism in Africa, social changes were attributed to temporary imbalances in the 'equilibrium' between wholly segregated, but internally homogenous peoples. 'Equilibrium' was an early conceptualization of the tension between continuity and rupture in the study of social change. The question of internal social change in African societies was not yet posed, whether by principles of differentiation based on age and/or sex. Class, as well, was not an ethnological category. The colonial administrations of French and British imperialism made ample use of race and ethnicity to differentiate and segregate African subjects, despite the existence of social plurality and dynamism in the societies brought under colonial rule (Balandier 1971). The classificatory schemata of French and British ethnography was based on the notion of difference between

seemingly incommensurate tribal peoples. The insistence on radical cultural difference denied that the colonized peoples of the world had a history amongst themselves until the coming of European conquest and European ethnography (Amselle 1999; Fabian 1983; Wolf 1982). This furthermore prevented anthropologists from coming to intellectual terms with the oncoming social change that would dismantle colonial rule and begin the construction of the nation-state.

Later in the colonial period social differences within groups were taken into consideration, but this recognition was always subordinated to primary group identification. Preserving the racial and tribal boundaries in colonized societies was the idea that the European's world was ill-suited for the African. A close cousin to this idea was the sociological concept of 'de-tribalization', an element of social change viewed with undisguised scorn by the colonial-era ethnographer (cf. Lambert 1947). Quickly, however, a concern for race relations and social change in the so-called 'settler' colonies like South Africa and Kenya was readily adopted by anthropologists as tensions between the colonized and the colonizer exploded. In Kenya, the late colonial period witnessed the Mau Mau Emergency degenerate into four years of protracted civil war waged amongst Africans and against the colonial regime. Surprisingly, some anthropologists working in Kenya during this period did not describe it in their monographs (cf. Bernardi 1959). Other anthropologists, elsewhere, were struggling with the question of social change and wrestling with the structural functionalist premise of "equilibrium". Much of this research was facilitated by American organizations such as the Rockefeller Institute in their mandate to fund research on 'cultural change' in Africa (Goody 1995).

The sterling example is Max Gluckman's (1958) study of a bridge opening event between Whites, Africans, and Zulus that took place during Gluckman's 1936-1938 fieldwork in Northern Zululand (Union of South Africa). Here, some of Gluckman's first words about the peoples of South Africa are illustrative of the anthropologist's ethnological categories based on differences between groups but not of the differences within groups :



"They do not form a homogenous community, for the State is constituted basically by its division into colour-groups of varying status" (Gluckman 1958: 1). In this one sentence, the ethnological categories of race, community, state, and status are linked to the question of social change and the fact of social difference. Gluckman's analysis of the bridge opening ceremony demonstrated the acknowledgment of conflict and cooperation between socially divided participants. The participants at the event were represented according to race and ethnicity : Zulu warriors and kings, a White district native commissioner, a White woman missionary, and the observant "I" of Max Gluckman. Gluckman sought to use the analysis of a particular social situation to demonstrate the multiplicity of social relationships involved in a cultural event such as a bridge opening. Gluckman's insistence on the ethnological categories of race and ethnicity, insofar as they defined the racialized reality of Zululand in the late 1930s, still made the fact of social difference analytically more important than the question of social change. Anthropologists needed wider models than the "Equilibrium" to understand the processes of social change being witnessed.

In some cases, however, ethnographers began to focus on the "problem" of social change and the role of such social categories as class, age, and sex in that transformation. Hilda Kuper's (1937, 1947) South African ethnography was critical of the internal dynamics of African societies in the course of social changes. Kuper's (1937) analysis of the colonial re-installment of the age-based military organization among the Bechuanaland Swazi was a move in the direction towards linking social change to relationships among and within social groups. A later work in 1947 focused on the changes of status inside the Swazi aristocracy, while a good deal of her descriptions of Swazi life in the 1940s included an exposure of the harsh living conditions of migrant labourers in the mining camps and towns of the South African protectorate. In Nyasaland, one of Kuper's colleagues, Monica Wilson (1951) wrote a treatise work on age-sets and age-villages during a period of social change among the Nyakyusa (Malawi). Stressing the internal differentiation of African social structure, Wilson emphasized the sociological role of categories of personhood in the

division of labour, the village, and the age-group. Such changes in the scope of ethnographic research in Africa reflected the transformations of such societies as pockets of capitalist production grew in the Rhodesian Copperbelt, migrant labour became a way of life, and the social division of 'Native Reserves' and 'Settlements' began to show the tell-tale signs of social strain: high death rates, land removals, alcoholism, and fragmented household units due to permanent migration. In British social anthropology, the epistemological fabric of structural functionalism felt the effects of this strain, to the degree that the categories of social theory required rethinking.

The shift in emphasis from race and ethnicity to class, age, and sex demonstrated a sea-change in anthropological theories. The ethnography of the colonial period was transformed by de-colonization and national independence. As an unplanned outcome of revolutionary changes in Africa, a new sociology of post-colonial Africa took root. In this sociology, the focus shifted from ascertaining the differences between groups towards accounting for the roots of social change. New units of analysis would appear in the anthropological literature that had previously not been applied to the African context. For example, the growing importance of the household as an analytic concept in Africanist ethnography was given a theoretical complement in the recognition that these institutions change, have a developmental cycle, and are differentiated according to the eventual fission of domestic groups (Goody 1958). Other theorists sought to problematize the concept of the household by introducing the individual as a social actor in African societies, including accounting for labour migration and cyclical returns to the household as part of local production dynamics (Wilson 1941). This widely productive period in anthropology changed the emphasis on ethnological categories of race and tribe as principles of differentiation, introducing such levels of abstraction as the household and the individual, concepts that accounted for social change into more dynamic terms than race or ethnicity.

With the expansion of post-war economic planning in Africa and impending political reforms to the disintegrating colonial system, anthropologists found themselves

asking new questions about how Africa was changing under capitalism, modernization, and development. It seemed that this concern would open up the conceptual tool kit once again, this time with the intention to discuss the issue of class in Africa. Yet, to situate this thesis in terms of this new direction in Africanist ethnography, the discussion parts company with the decline of British structural functionalism and the end of colonial ethnography towards the French Marxists in the 1970s and their attempt to see whether Marxism could be applied to the African continent, not only in its post-colonial rupture, but in terms of Africa's historical continuities.

### (2.2) The French Marxists and the challenges of social change in the anthropology of power and production in Africa

Inspired by the revolutionary changes in Africa itself and a creative revision of Marxism, a tight core of French anthropologists began to write about change in African societies by analyzing what was occurring within them. The French Marxists were particularly concerned with the social dynamics within economic units as an explanation for the question of social change. Yet, following Georges Balandier's (1971) insistence that contemporary African societies be viewed as the outcome of the political and social tensions between pre-colonial 'tradition' and post-colonial 'modernity', the French Marxists situated their work within a materialist framework that saw social change as a dialectic between continuity and rupture at two levels: *du dedans* and *du dehors*.

The Marxism of these anthropologists, however, was dissimilar to that of African revolutionaries, because the anthropologist spoke of the community, the lineage, or the household instead of imperialism and the class struggle. Although both the European and African intelligentsia looked at changes occurring in Africa, they did not do so on even grounds, nor did they even start off from the same premises or priorities. The European anthropologists found themselves in a new position of scrutiny (Copan 1974; Schwarz 1979). African scholars often came from the position of struggle (cf. Fanon 1952). The African scholars of the 1960s and 1970s called upon the analytic force of struggle as a

means to act upon the magnitude of conflict in their societies (Nkrumah 1970; wa Thiong'o 1977). Military officers, schoolchildren, poets, young women, and indigenous capitalists alike learned to understand their struggle with political, social, and cultural acumen. Kwame Nkrumah, the Marxist leader of Ghana's first post-colonial government, is perhaps illustrative of this time when he wrote:

At the core of the problem is the class struggle. For too long, social and political commentators have talked and written as though Africa lies outside the main stream of world historical development - a separate entity to which the social, economic, and political patterns of the world do not apply. Myths such as "African socialism" and "pragmatic socialism", implying the existence of a brand or brands of socialism applicable to Africa alone, have been propagated; and much of our history has been written in terms of socio-anthropological and historical theories as though Africa had no history prior to the colonial period. One of these distortions has been the suggestion that the class structures which exist in other parts of the world do not exist in Africa (Nkrumah 1970: 10)

During the de-colonization decades the issue of struggle was of paramount political and cultural importance to all Africans, yet it was put to the side by anthropologists as a whole, despite their political views on the revolutions taking place in Africa. In the ethnography of Africa, the notion of classes and class struggle was toned down within social anthropology as a result of the terrible political dilemmas facing 'really existing socialism', as well as the rigid nature of the relationship between Marxist theory and the goals of ethnography. To many European anthropologists working with Marxist theory in the 1970s, the memory of the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 was still fresh and posed serious questions about the implications of their project in Africa. As such, the relationship between anthropology and Marxism was relatively short lived, although it was significant enough to have raised some enduring questions about social change. The Marxist turn in French ethnology, however, was to leave behind theoretical models that have been both instrumental and problematic in the sociology of uneven development in Africa.

The French Marxists introduced their concept of the 'lineage mode of production' as the primary concept in their anthropology of power and production in Africa. In the notion of the 'lineage mode of production', the lineage was the unit through which social life was organized, where all access to land, labour, seeds, and affines was directed through the political organization of the corporate kin group. John Gledhill (1994) gives a good definition of the 'lineage mode of production' as abstracted from Meillassoux's (1977) and Rey's (1975) work in Côte d'Ivoire:

Control of resources and people remains communal, but higher status persons within the corporate kinship group exercise a differential control. This has implications not merely for intergenerational relations but for gender: tighter kin control over resources not merely weakens cognatic claims to labour and produce, but, in importance relative to wife-mother roles by the diminished contact with natal kin. Male control over marriage is strengthened, and this kind of system can generate oppressive conditions for both women and junior men though, in contrast to 'Germanic societies', the hierarchies generated are not classes (Gledhill 1994: 45)

The 'lineage mode of production' model described economic and social activities organized according to the internal differentiation of the corporate kin group. What is striking about this model is that although it is centered on the claims of gerontocracy and patriarchy to the labour of their junior or female members, it does not describe how the 'lineage mode of production' would fare as those members began to migrate to the towns, form trading relationships, and start small economic enterprises on their own. The model did not correspond to the challenge of analyzing social change from 'within' and from 'without', which was the main goal of the Marxist experiment.

In light of the social changes Africans experienced in the 1960s and 1970s the model was static. To the complexity of transformed social relationships brought on by the 'encroachment' of capitalist relations of production in rural African contexts, theoretical Marxism sought to reconcile the tensions between the 'within' and the 'without' through the notion 'articulation'. The question, "articulation to what?" was seldom posed in the literature produced in the period (Gerschiere 1985). One of the reasons the models failed to

present dialectic analyses of historical processes effecting the relationships of power and production in Africa was that they were created from the anthropologist's reconstruction of 'traditional' modes of social organization. Another reason was that in raising the issue of internal exploitation of a corporate kin group's junior male and female members, the model failed to take into account the agency of these members *vis-à-vis* the gerontocratic and patriarchal relations of the domestic group. Henrietta Moore (1988) points to the invisibility of women's domestic labour in Meillassoux's (1977) work on the Gouro (Moore 1988: 52). The empirical absence of women's labour was a major theoretical default of the 'lineage mode of production', despite its emphasis on the reproductive role of women in the development of the corporate kin group. The French Marxists did not indicate how the labour processes in the 'lineage mode of production' were socially and historically constituted. Unable to be more flexible in their theory towards the social division of labour in African societies, especially between different individuals in the context of the domestic group, the Marxist project did not answer why different members of the 'lineage mode of production' were being effected differentially by social change. Although their attentions to gerontocracy and patriarchy could explain the roles of elders, their blindness to the economic and social activities of youths, women, and children did not allow them to place theoretical importance on individual agency, the impact of wage earning, and the absence of key household members through migration. In other words, the models presented were not dialectic.

A dialectic model would account for the social action of individuals and their strategies within political arenas and social organizations (Vincent 1990: 342). The dialectics required for an anthropological analysis of power and production entail the complex interplay between agency and structure, without necessitating a hierarchy between the two levels of abstraction. The French Marxists did not pay attention to the agency of individual social actors, choosing to dissolve such considerations into the structure of the 'mode of production'. Such a stance taken towards social change had the negative effect of

completely effacing the social actions of individuals within the actual production of their social organization, and hence, the structures which Marxism sought to explain. The case is particularly evident in respect to the silence of the Marxist project on analyses of women in African societies. In her theoretical work on African women as key agents of social transformation, Christine Obbo (1980) argued that the issue of 'economic autonomy' is a prevailing concern for individual African women. In a rare move to emphasize women's agency in societies where social, economic, and political arenas are dominated by men's' priorities to monopolize power, wealth, and status for themselves, Obbo demonstrates how dialectics cannot be captured by structural analyses alone, lest they mask and mute the protagonists of social change:

The need to control women has always been an important part of male success in most African societies. The women, however, whether married or single, had definite strategies for achieving economic autonomy and hence improved social conditions - strategies such as migration, hard work, and manipulation. *Migration* involved mobility and hence escape from obstacles to individual progress in favour of creating or taking up more options. *Hard work* brought direct rewards for their labour and enabled them to feed, support, and rear their children. Through *manipulation* the women engaged in 'strategic planning' and thus mobilized needed resources and engaged in certain actions that led to institutional change. The women put pressure on traditional ideologies to create options that enabled them to share in the resources and alternative life-styles available in their societies (Obbo 1980: 5)

Because the French Marxists were incapable of speaking to such instances of agency within the confines of their model, they were unable to deconstruct the lineage as a collection of tensions between social action and social organization. This was a particularly grave oversight due to the nature of social change in Africa, where according to George Balandier (1971) change was characterized by "[l]e décalage entre les valeurs, les normes, les règles qui fondent la société "officiel", et celles qui se manifestent par la pratique des divers agents sociaux" (Balandier 1971: 16). However, there were also materialist arguments against the static model of the 'lineage mode of production'.

Having failed to situate the individual between the labour requirements of the corporate kin group and the growth of African capitalism, the French Marxists also failed to

account for social relationships that stood outside the organization of the lineage. For example, although the studies were mostly carried out in West Africa, there is no extended analyses of trading or credit associations that may cross the jural-political boundaries of lineages. Particularly problematic were the missing concepts of the individual and 'class' that exist as central props of other Marxist sociologies. Other versions of Marxism have made great theoretical and analytic considerations of what has been called the 'free worker': the individual in the capitalist division of labour. The problems faced by the interpretive scheme of the 'lineage mode of production' model demonstrate that the relationships between the individual and 'class' must remain open categories *vis-à-vis* all the other social relationships that define them as separate from the corporate group (Marie 1997). The open character of the relation between individual and 'class' is no more than a recognition of the decentering of all units of analysis in the study of social change in Africa. Patrick Chabal (1989) stresses the significant political consequence of individualizing the African subject under colonialism:

The colonial political economy redefined the economic identity of the individual. The individual was no longer simply a constituent member of the community but he became primarily an individual economic agent. Whatever his place, his rights and obligations within the existing political economy of his community, he was now considered by the colonial masters to be a discrete economic unit. Taxation, labour and production were all conceived in terms of the economic production, value and cost of the individual colonial subjects. It was thus not so much the introduction of monetary taxation but that of the tax *per caput*, not so much the obligation to labour but forced individual labour, not so much the requirements of colonial production but the necessity to produce as single units, which undermined the existing political economy (Chabal 1989: 105)

The individualization of economic matters (free workers, free peasantry) brought on by the colonial encounter cannot be thought of as monadic. The emergence of the individual as an economic unit both reaffirmed the social division of labour in the domestic group, just as it brought about social transformations in the relationships that constituted the corporate kin group. The emergence of the individual subject alongside the wage packet led to new forms



of accumulation among selected household members, even as it eclipsed the economic significance of other members. The minutes from the Meru District Local Native Council meeting of 1937 is illustrative of this problem, where a number of prominent Chiefs argued that younger persons should not be jailed under colonial laws for being unable to pay the taxes of their old people, especially in situations where it was one member of a family paying taxes for others (PC CEN 2/1/7: KNA: 1937). This was a large accommodation for elders to make in a society characterized in the ethnographic literature as a staunch gerontocracy! In Meru, the category of the individual emerged out of the domestic group's limitations in protecting a small segment of their constituent members, usually young unmarried men, from the labour and taxation demands of colonial capitalism.

What is surprising, however, is that the debate on the 'mode of production' in Africa did not seize upon the most challenging theoretical question that the French Marxists left behind: What constitutes classes in Africa? This question has to be approached critically and with caution. Theoretically, the concepts of 'class' and 'culture' pose significant problems in analyzing social change between people of the same 'cultural' or 'class' identity. For example, does the use of class categories silence those based more ostensibly in age and gender differentials? Or, vice-versa, does preoccupation with age and gender distinctions blur instances where class is an implication in the outcome of social change? Does the Marxist concept of class accommodate cooperation between 'proletariats' and 'capitalists', or must they be forever viewed as different, incommensurate, and threatening to the other? Must the relationships between 'elders' and 'juniors', or 'men' and 'women' be viewed in this light?

Fortunately, Gerald Sider (1986) offers a salient observation on these kinds of theoretical questions when he says: "Culture and class are, after all, simply abstractions from the same tissue of social life" (Sider 1986: 6). Of importance to anthropologists seeking theoretical guidance on 'classes', Sider argues that class is defined and defining by its internal dynamic:

[S]ocial and historical processes *within* a class - as people reach out for, or turn away from, a range of potential alliances and oppositions, and as issues become understood and acted upon in ways that include and exclude in new combinations - are as crucial to defining what happens as are the struggles *between* classes (Sider 1986: 8)

In other words, classes are comprised of alliances and oppositions that are uneven, temporal, and indeterminate.

However, this deconstruction of the Marxist conception of class provokes a fundamentally deeper question: What epistemological tensions have historically prevented anthropologists from making an ethnographic object of class, when they have been relatively unhampered in constituting race, ethnicity, age, and sex as social categories of identification and differentiation? It may be that in the expansion of Africanist ethnography under colonialism neither Europeans nor Africans were constructing African realities in these terms (Illife 1983). In fact, this observation has some resonance with the difficulty of using 'class' analytically in rural African contexts. During fieldwork in Meru District, local references to what could openly be interpreted as conflicts over the labour process, or unequal redistributions were carefully phrased through selective social idioms of race, gender, generation, and ethnicity. Class was not appropriated locally as a social category. From this experience, the question of class in Africa, or its place in the interpretive schemes of Africanist ethnography, must be treated with a degree of flexibility.

Yet, there is another aspect to the problem of 'class' when applied to the anthropology of power and production in Africa. This concerns the way in which 'class' as a social category of identity conflicts with a notion of 'class' that is constructed to contain the relationships constituting the labour process. Although the detailed distinctions between these will be further explored in the following section on the household and the individual, reserving 'class' as the dynamic that constitutes the social division of labour does not reduce the significance of age and sex differentials in the organization of production. The use of 'class' as a social category, or as an identity does subsume other principles of social

differentiation, particularly those categories that ethnographers have shown to be socially significant in the African contexts they describe: race, ethnicity, age, and sex. As the interplay between these categories and 'class' are bound to be complex, especially in reference to the way individuals are situated within households, the concept of 'class' being emphasized here is one that is present in the social division of labour, but removed from the categories of identification that socially allocate this labour. In other words, 'class' in this thesis is about the interplay of all social categories in the social division of labour. It is treated in terms of labour categories.

### (2.3) Theories of the household and the individual in Africa: decentering the units of economic and social analyses

Jane Guyer (1981) considers the household to be an inappropriate 'unit' of analysis for understanding African economies. Her critical evaluation of the concept observed that determining household composition is problematic given the movement of people in African contexts, where members may be farming a distant plot of land, working as a driver, or running a hair salon in town. With the complexity of the movement and different social activities that each individual undertakes in the course of living, Guyer doubts that the household is as central to social and economic life in Africa as it promises to be: "People's mobility is indicative of a more profoundly important fact: that individuals can exercise rights and be subject to obligations which are normally thought of economic beyond the household in which they live" (Guyer 1981: 98). A much more flexible way to deal with these problems is to re-conceptualize what is meant by the household in terms of the activities and movements of its constituent members, especially in light of seasonal labour migration or changes in personal economic circumstances. The household might be conceptualized following Sylvia Yanagisako's (1979) definition where: "[T]he term refers to a set of individuals who do not only share a living space but also some set of activities" (Yanagisako 1979: 164-65). These activities, Guyer reasons, are carried out in terms of rights and duties already established between the constituent members. These rights and

duties are usually figured out according to principles laid out in the jural relations that are created from births, circumcisions, marriages, and property transfers. With this definition, the relationships formed in household activities may be cooperative or conflictual, but not characterized by a "total subsumption of the members into a solidary unit whose internal relationships can be taken as given" (Guyer 1981: 99). For African social contexts, Guyer points to the inadequacies of the household model as a "black box" into which the dynamicism of different social actors is abruptly subsumed. The definition of the household, if it is to have any analytic utility beyond a category in the anthropologist's conceptual tool-box, must be deconstructed in terms of the particularities of the local conditions that influence the organization of the domestic group. The household is not a "black box", but in local terms neither is it an empty box. The boundedness of the household used in this thesis is deliberately constructed to show how internal processes are configured within an economic unit of some kind, but that the individuals who work within its boundaries are differentiated as units of their own. In this sense, the model of the household employed here consists of a recognition of both cooperation and conflict in the activities of household members.

This definition of the household as activity through which a number of obligated individuals converge is appropriate to the kinds of household 'units' found in Meru. Although I refer to the household model as the domestic enterprise to retain its essentially economic meaning, the Meru household should be thought of as dissolvable into its individual members, who are also economic units of sorts. This warrants a decentering of the economic unit of analysis. The interplay between the economic agency of the individual and the productive activities that are organized by the cyclic, but temporary coming together of jurally defined household members is split at two levels: the social and the economic. It is social in the sense of being a conjugal household based on the marriage of a man and a woman with the presence of children; and it is economic in the sense of being a domestic enterprise where the goal is accumulation and development. These two levels of meaning

are maintained throughout the thesis where stress is placed on the social and the economic aspects of the household.

As for the place of the individual as a economic agent, and thus, a unit of analysis, the case is less definitive. The question of social change and the individual developed by Norman Long (1968) is interesting on this question, because he refused to center his analysis on the place of the individual in the locality being studied. Instead, he insisted on accounting for the external changes that made the modern form of individualism possible, particularly the role that religion has in the process of individualization (Long 1968). His analysis found that changes to the social composition of the domestic group, inclusive of several households, is as linked to the external processes of commercialization as it is the rise of the individual as a social category stemming from the construction of religious identification. This has resonance with the literature on the transformation of the corporate kin group towards smaller units in the commercialization process, as well as the appropriation of religious idioms for identifying ethnicity (Maupeu 1990).

According to Ken Swindell (1985), the development of commercial agriculture in African contexts was dependent upon the changed social composition of the domestic group. Described as a historical transformation in social organization from extended joint-families to conjugal or nucleated ones, many African farming households were organized into tighter social units for production and consumption. The key historical result of this transformation is that internal labour resources of the smaller units are less flexible and require heavier deployment of household labour to avoid the steep costs involved in hiring labour from outside the group (Swindell 1985: 76). Elsewhere he argues that:

The introduction of new commercial crops and the increase in non-farm employment have been influential in eroding production relations based on extended kinship groups, leading to a radical alteration of the size and composition of domestic groups. The demise of large complex units and their replacement in whole or part by simpler conjugal-based groups is a crucial issue in the organization of farm labour, which is part of the crisis facing many agricultural producers in Africa at the present time (Swindell 1985: 80).

New constraints, which effect the labour processes inside the domestic enterprise, have put pressure on both men and women towards weakening the former division of labour. Significantly, however, it must be kept in mind that another aspect of this process has been the individualization of the economic subject. The altering of the composition of the domestic group and the individualization of the economic subject are linked in the commercialization process, where a new stress occurs between household and individual that simultaneously provokes complementariness in the social division of labour. just as it increases competition among individuals of the household for scarce resources. In commercial agriculture these resources are often land, labour, and money, and since individuals are unevenly situated in the household context, the result is a certain shake-up of the economic unit.

This decentering of the household and the individual in economic activities has been theorized in terms of the concept of 'straddling' (Kitching 1980, Orvis 1998). The analysis of household surveys undertaken in 1998 in Meru District suggest that the concept of 'straddling' is a salient feature of the contemporary organization of domestic enterprises in rural Kenya. Central to this notion is the capacity for small-holders to combine the productive labour of their home farm with employment in fully commoditized relations of production. This straddling is a combination of waged off-farm employment, and re-investment into the domestic enterprise and members of the conjugal household. All of the households in the Miiiriga Mieru survey had adult members who worked in some formal employment throughout the historical development of their domestic enterprise.

The straddling of the domestic enterprise in Meru entails only a partial integration into the capitalist market economy. In rural East African contexts, this feature of the relations of production has been carefully noted and flagged as critical to an understanding of the incomplete process of separating rural production relations from pre-capitalist modes of production (Hyden 1982). This is a generally accepted feature of agricultural labour in Africa, especially where labour can be recruited through non-commodified means, such as

payments in kind that are arranged to cover the recruitment costs of socially necessary labour time (Berry 1993; Gerschiere 1985; Meillassoux 1977; Swindell 1985). This is a feature, however, that produces measures of social conflicts in the jural obligations towards cooperation.

With some stress, the observation that rurally recruited agricultural labour stands outside the formal subsumption of labour to capitalist relations of production need not diminish the validity, or analytic value, of labour-based social analysis. Straddling, in this observation, does not need to correspond to class categories where other social categories such as sex and age dominate the division of labour. Following Gavin Kitching's (1980) close application of Marx's method of analyzing labour processes in Kenya, the concept of straddling at work in this thesis describes labour categories and not class categories. All too often the notion of straddling, which Kitching (1980) preferentially defines as a labour category, is used by scholars as a class category (cf. Orvis 1998). To take straddling to be equivalent to class categories is to impose labels upon social agents as straddlers. From fieldwork in Meru District, no Kimeru term could be discerned for groups of people who could be locally defined as straddlers: the term did not arise. The term is being used as an explanatory scheme for the back and forth nature of economic activities between the individual and the household.

In summary, the development of theory on the transformation of the domestic groups under the commercialization process has pointed towards the need to blur the economic analysis of rural production between individuals and households. One avenue that remains open is to ask what constraints are present in the organization of the domestic enterprise that prevent individuals from attempting to enter social relations on the basis of their individuality as an economic agent (i.e. 'free worker'). Another flexible way to deal with this problem is to recognize the loose interplay between the household and the individual as economic units of analysis, without attempting to establish a hierarchy between them at the level of theory, as a test to the breadth of the limits based on analyses

that privilege either structure or agency. Since the question at stake is social change and its impact upon social relationships, the theory need not speak about the rigidity of either concepts, but provide a space for a variety of definitions.

#### (2.4) Some new questions to ask in the anthropology of power and production in Africa

The theoretical discussions above sought to establish an interpretive scheme for analyzing the changes in social relationships between individuals of the domestic enterprise. Calling for conceptual schemes based on social action allows the theoretical models to account for the economic agency of individual social actors differentiated through idioms of sex, age, and 'class'. The idioms are invested in the social division of labour, meaning that both power and production are socially constituted through the actualization of creative processes, no matter how mundane or novel these processes are. The emergence of the individual as an economic unit has the theoretical effect of decentering the conceptual primacy of the household model. The individual, however, is not that of methodological individualism, making 'rational choices', but rather socially constituted as someone whose life is punctuated with degrees of freedom and relations of bondage.



## Chapter Three

### 'Free market' discourse and the Kenyan coffee crisis of the 1990s

#### (3) Introduction: neo-liberal mandates, economic crisis, and the uses of 'free market' discourse

This chapter is about the decline of the Kenyan coffee industry over the period of 1992-1998. More specifically, the chapter retraces the historical emergence of neo-liberalist discourse on the 'free market' as the ideological banner of struggle between competing factions in the scramble over marketing coffee for export<sup>1</sup>. To contextualize the Kenyan coffee crisis of the 1990s, the discussion opens by placing some weight on the tensions between the regulated coffee industry and its secondary markets. The latter are usually ignored as part of the actualization of economic liberalization, or viewed as incidental and insignificant. One of the central arguments of this chapter is that the decline of the Kenyan coffee industry in recent years has been linked to the growth of the second economy in East Africa. The failure of Kenya's state capitalism to monitor and regulate the trade of the second economy, or even process surplus agricultural produce into marketable commodities, creates an unknown quantity of surplus product and information deficits. Because of these factors of unregulated goods and illicit traffic, the second economy creates opportunities for those outside of the official marketing regimes. Specific to the local scene of Meru District, it is argued that the local usage of 'free market' discourse in the form of *Soko Huru* is an alibi for the illicit trading of coffee. This reading of the neo-liberal mandate in Kenya by local actors has been one contributing factor to the coffee crisis at the national level. It is further argued that these second economy activities in the coffee sector promise temporary benefits to some local actors, although they are inimical to the interests of other local actors in the long run.

Faced with little ideological alternatives in Kenya's current political context, the neo-liberalist discourse on the 'free market' has been appropriated by peasants, capitalists,

and bureaucrats alike in a struggle to economically survive and act upon the changes SAPs are bringing to Kenya's productive regime. As such, the localized reconstruction of neo-liberal thought was gone beyond its reference to the official economy monitored by state capitalism and extended its interpretative field to include the second economy. Yet, during the 1990s this discourse was not described in the media as having an ideological presence and influence in the expansion of the second economy, nor upon the way that 'free market' ideology was playing into an extensive and illicit secondary market for Kenyan coffee. The statistics for the decline in coffee production from 1992 onwards stand at a 40% fall in recorded and processed coffee (EIC Kenya 1998: 4th Quarterly). It is clear that this figure does not account for the explosion of private trading in coffee that swept through the countryside's of rural Kenya in the wake of industry disorder and briefly rising prices.

Among local people in Meru District this encroachment of second economy activities into the coffee industry was considered to be an instance of *Soko Huru*. Masked behind the façade of economic liberalization, the second economy expanded into the coffee niche and took advantage of the industry's grave information deficits. The graduated expansion of *Soko Huru* into formally regulated markets is likely to be interpreted by local farmers and businessmen alike as the legal coming of age for parallel markets and illicit trading. One might go as far as to say that 'free market' discourse has been appropriated as an alibi for illicit trading activity and is represented locally as the liberty to act in contravention to Kenya's existing legal code regulating production and trade. For some local actors, this interpretation provides the chance to negotiate periodic surpluses and scarcities through petty-trade without the moral sanctions on black-marketing that most communities recognize.

In fact, this thesis argues that local interpretations of *Soko Huru* are as significant to Kenya's development as the material outcomes of such policies. Although the interpretations of *Soko Huru* are crafted through activities in regulated markets like that of the coffee industry, often re-inventing local social institutions such as the co-operative

marketing society, it is the way that unrecorded marketing combines with regulated markets that are significant to its eventual social outcome. Methodologically it is extremely difficult to produce macro-economic assessments of such trading activities since, frequently, they are too diffuse and embedded to be monitored by the state. In addition to the problem of information, there are real challenges to Kenya's regulated marketing regimes for exercising dominance over illicit trade, particularly since no commissions or quality controls can be enforced. And finally, with a touch of irony, some of the surplus traded in what is termed 'parallel markets' would ultimately find its way back into officially sanctioned markets, as is the case with Kenya coffee marketing.

In this chapter, every effort has been made to describe the recent historical relationships between structural adjustment programmes, economic liberalization, and the Kenyan coffee crisis of the 1990s<sup>2</sup>. My methods in reconstructing events and processes could not possibly witness the entirety of the relationships between these three elements. Beyond the fragments of information I gathered while in Meru and on trips to Nairobi, I made extensive use of the public relations literature offered by the KPCU and the CBK. I also kept a file on newspaper articles pertaining to the coffee industry while in the field, collected from the two main English-language dailies (*The Daily Nation* and *The East African Standard*). Another source that helped me to reconstruct the events prior to 1998 was the *Economist* publication of the *Kenya Country Report*, issued every financial quarter. Despite contradictory information contained in each of these sources, working with the contradictions gave me a glimpse of the complex structure of the issues being dealt with in the course of my research. The argument presented in this chapter does place some emphasis on the use of statistical representation vis-a-vis the production and distribution inside the Kenyan coffee industry. The coffee industry in Kenya is a regulated market that has the appearance of being in a precipitous decline according to statistical representation. I, however, argue that the lowered rate of production, although real, has not accounted statistically for the unrecorded activities of the second economy and that what the figures

represent is not the end of coffee production in Kenya, but the temporary collapse of centralized regulation on coffee production in Kenya.

### (3.1) Structural adjustment and the coffee industry in Kenya 1992-1998

Coffee has been one of Kenya's chief agricultural exports for many decades. For these decades there has always been short-term business cycles of 'boom' and 'bust'. Research has been conducted on the patterns of these cycles, reaching back historically to the long 'boom' of the early 1950s, the 'slump' of 1956-1966 (Hyde 1999), the relative 'booms' of the 1960s, into the 'mini-booms' of the mid-1970s (Castro 1995: 366). Each of these periods deserves a social history on its own, but it is the latest period of activity that is of historical importance here. The recent period of Kenyan coffee production, from about 1992 to 1998, has been one of entrenched crisis in the industry, a 'slump' touched off by structural adjustments, but intensified through internal struggles within the industry itself, chiefly over the control and marketing of green coffee. Given the intensely politicized focus of coffee production and marketing in Kenya, the following discussion is included as a guide to the rest of the thesis.

Spokespersons for Kenya's coffee industry insist that large-scale marketing boards, like that of the Coffee Board of Kenya, are responsible for keeping the sector intact during the economically hampered and politically tumultuous 1990s. They say that they have managed to survive during price fluctuations and policy constraints by merit of what its own offices call 'Kenyan coffee's comparative advantage', which are the unusually high quality controls and measures that have regulated the internal marketing of coffee in Kenya. On a capricious world market dominated by the International Coffee Organization's (ICO) 'quota systems' or 'retention schemes', Kenyan marketers have often argued that they have survived by quality and reputations alone. This is almost certainly the ideology of the monopolist, covering up the fact that the Kenyan coffee industry has survived periodic economic crises through expensive short-term borrowing from the international financial

institutions to subsidize its crouching industries, and recently through elaborate detours into the second economy. To boot, the survival of Kenya's mild coffee industry has had more to do with the internal structure of its industry than it does with a quality product.

The internal structure of the national industry minimizes the costs of labour through keeping 65% of Kenya's production in the control of small holders organized into co-operatives (Coffee Board of Kenya 1993: 5). Small-holders are producers who exploit labour at bare and restricted remuneration, often recruited as forms of 'family labour' within the organization of the domestic group. To explain the crisis in Kenya's coffee industry on the fluctuations of the world market in coffee without analyzing the internal structure of the industry, which is where dependency theory would begin, does not explain why the crisis has proceeded the way it has. Nor does it hint at why the coffee industry in Kenya is declining beyond the scope of economic control. In short, the coffee industry in Kenya appears to be approaching its death-throws as state capitalism tries to save itself through 'reforms', although it may be too early to predict the extent of its decline, or the cost of this to Kenya. The forms of conflict over the terms of coffee's decline are intensely localized, a characteristic of the industry itself which exploits a large labour force at the margins of indigenous capitalism, often in rural areas of the country.

It has been observed that the internal structure of the Kenyan coffee industry is characterized by the predominance of a vertical marketing regime (Hyden 1973; Bates 1989). In an increasingly critical climate towards state capitalism in Africa, western scholars have tried to analyze Kenya's economy without strong reference to the internal structure of its economic crisis. Keeping within the perspective of dependency theory and viewing Africans as victims, some of these scholars have reproduced arguments favorable to the current swing towards neo-liberalism and the doctrine of the 'free market' (Barkan et al. 1994). Limited to pointing the finger at ethnicity and 'corruption' as the chief social antagonists of Africa's enduring crises, the consensus remains fixated on criticizing the

centralized and bureaucratized nature of the Kenyan coffee industry (Hyden 1994; Lofchie 1994). Well positioned within the liberal paradigm, Robert Bates (1989) once advised that :

"[a]nyone studying Kenyan agriculture quickly notices the limited role for competitive markets. In many industries, vertical integration is the rule, with production, processing, and sales concentrated in a single firm. Public agencies commonly regulate the production and marketing of crops. And where one might expect decentralized trading in open markets, one often finds bureaucracies instead" (Bates 1989: 73).

Accompanying the economic liberalization of Kenya's agricultural industries are efforts to temper such a situation where "vertical integration is the rule" (Bates 1989: 73). The aim has been redefined towards opening up the potentials for "competitive markets", the *sine qua non* of neo-liberal economics. Liberal analyses find grave fault with the continued workings of the vertical marketing regimes in Kenya. A vertical marketing regime is an institutionalized network of primary-producers, co-operative marketing societies, co-operative unions, and statutory marketing boards that the state officially sanctions as the only possible marketing blueprint, all others being deemed illegal. As such, an element of coercion can be threatened, if ever employed, to deter rural producers of agricultural commodities from selling their produce through what is considered private treaty, that is, through middlemen and entrepreneurs. In competition from private treaty the statutory marketing boards, like that of the Coffee Board of Kenya (CBK), continue to politically back their vertical marketing regimes with the protection of the Kenyan state. Both the CBK and the Kenyan Government are sensitive to the potential threat of losing control over exchange. Quite unscathed, however, the CBK still enforce their legal control over crops produced in specialized markets for mild coffee. In this situation, the proliferation of de-regulated markets poses a dire threat to the continued existence of the powers entailed in the statutory marketing boards. Liberal analysis, however, has done a poor job in explaining the decline of coffee production in the wake of economic liberalization, long held to be the certain tonic for the industry's sustained crisis. This is largely because their ideological bias

for the "competitive market" refuses to recognize the internal conflicts and illicit activities that occur over the process of economic liberalization. Taking labour to be the most important factor behind agricultural production in Kenya, the rise of competition among firms in the industry forced capitalists to cut back the costs of production, which largely meant heavy downwards pressure on wages (costs of labour). In rural contexts, where labour is exploited at low cost and largely consigned to women and young men, this depression in wages paid for labour is sharp. The competition that was being sought amongst capitalist firms vying for larger marketing shares in the coffee industry meant far more than just "opening up the marketplace". It meant seeking to intensify exploitation at all levels in the industry. As this chapter will show, such a scenario would turn out to be costly to the integrity of the industry, especially for the vertical marketing regime that supports it.

### (3.2) Economic liberalization and the Kenyan coffee crisis of the 1990s

The coffee industry has only recently been eclipsed in importance by other agricultural sectors in the international export markets, the two most important being tea and horticultural produce. Prior to structural adjustment policies coffee production was the most important agricultural factor in Kenya's accumulation of foreign exchange, seconded only by years of growth and expansion in the tea industry (Lofchie 1994). Structural adjustment, however, has reversed the prominence of coffee in Kenya's productive regime: a story which is outlined firstly through the presentation of a table, and latterly through a description of changes in the structure of the national industry from 1992-1998.

**Table 3.1: Volume of coffee production from 1982-1998 in metric tonnes**

<u>Seasons</u>	<u>Output in metric tonnes</u>	
1982/83 <sup>a</sup> 86, 064		<sup>d</sup> 82,000
1983/84 <sup>a</sup> 129, 625		<sup>d</sup> 90,000
1984/85 <sup>a</sup> 94, 089		<sup>d</sup> 120,000
1985/86 <sup>a</sup> 114, 881		<sup>d</sup> 89,000
1986/87 <sup>a</sup> 104, 940		<sup>d</sup> 100,000
1987/88 <sup>a</sup> 129, 637		<sup>c</sup> 140,000 <sup>d</sup> 120,000
1988/89 <sup>a</sup> 104, 940	<sup>b</sup> 111,000	
1989/90 <sup>a</sup> 87, 291		<sup>d</sup> 110,000
1990/91 <sup>a</sup> 90, 322 <sup>b</sup> 88,000		
1991/92	<sup>b</sup> 75,000	
1992/93	<sup>b</sup> 75,100	
1993/94	<sup>b</sup> 80,000	
1994/95	<sup>b</sup> 93,000	
1995/96	<sup>b</sup> 95,000	
1996/97	<sup>b</sup> 82, 900 <sup>c</sup> 80,000	
1997/98	<sup>b</sup> 65,000 <sup>c</sup> 65,000	

Sources: <sup>a</sup>Coffee Board of Kenya Statistics, <sup>b</sup>The Economist Country Report: Kenya (1991-1998), <sup>c</sup> Business in Africa (Oct-Nov 98), <sup>d</sup> Michael Lofchie (1994: 143).

As Table 3.1 outlines, the officially regulated output of coffee in 1997/98 has hit a sustained low, comparable with production volumes during the severe crisis of the early 1970s. A regular short business cycle (roughly seven years in length) saw production fall during the 1990s to a level not seen since the economic crises of the early 1980s. The defining feature of the recent crisis, however, is its inability to raise production at the end of the business cycle. The figures for the last three seasons (1995/96, 1996/97, 1997/98) are irregular when set in historical relief, they do not show the increase in production at the end of the cycle which has characterized the 'boom' and 'bust' record of the Kenyan coffee industry for three decades. It should be noted that the first implementations of economic liberalization in the coffee sector were in effect in the marketing season of 1995/96, continuing to the end of the period. Clearly, something happened to the industry that precipitated its decline, but what exactly?



Perhaps the recent decline has its roots in Kenya's deepening crises of political accountability during the decade, which many Kenyans date as having started in 1992. In 'official' economic terms, the year 1992 witnessed a collapse in world prices of green coffee, but did this collapse provoke a later crisis of underproduction that still had not recovered to pre-'bust' levels by 1998? Why did 1992's 'bust' not recover in the close of the business cycle? What is irregular about the last few years of coffee production? So infamous was the collapse of coffee prices in 1992 that it is remembered today as a "bad year", not only because of hypertrophied bank accounts, but also because of uncertainty over the survival of the single-party KANU regime in the wake of multi-party elections. In the course of this socially chaotic year some farmers reported not receiving any payment for their coffee and blamed the situation on the political climate of the year, steeped as it was in the historical buildup to the first multiparty elections in decades since the KANU outlawed political opposition in parliament. In 1998, one observer of the local coffee industry in Meru told me coolly, "If you had come in 1992, nobody would have wanted to talk to you about coffee". The 1992 debacle set in motion a persistent 'slump' that most farmers have been mired in since, particularly because capital for re-investment has been spent and exorbitantly high interest rates make it prohibitive to seek out credit. The period starting from 1992 can be viewed as a kind 'fend for yourself' capitalism in which people were doing all kinds of difficult and risky things to survive, including abandoning the countryside and selling land. Even capital admitted defeat at the onset of the 1990s in Kenya. Large multinational firms operating as estate growers such as Brooke Bond Kenya, a UK-based company, were forced in 1992 to tell their shareholders that their coffee plantations had not turned a profit in four years. Certainly among the majority of Kenya's coffee producers, the small holders and their co-operative marketing societies, the collapse of prices meant that they could not afford to obtain the credit necessary to buy important inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, and fungicides. Furthermore, the implementation of import controls and a re-valued Kenyan currency in the wake of early ESAFs sent the cost

of chemical inputs skyrocketing, products that are strictly necessary to the maximal productivity of coffee trees. An unknown but large number of farmers did not spray their trees throughout the 'slump' and fungal diseases like coffee berry disease (CBD) and leaf rust have spread wildly.

The crisis among small holders was exacerbated by the overall organization of the industry within Kenya, where statutory marketing boards have legally dominated the marketing of processed coffee throughout the post-colonial period. This dominance over the national industry has been sanctioned under the Coffee Act of 1977. Under this act, the primary co-operative union of the Kenya Planters Co-operative Union (KPCU) was responsible for managing and milling 85% of the coffee produced in Kenya (Kenya Planter's Co-operative Union 1996: 4). This organization itself was under heavy scrutiny by a number of agencies including the World Bank's 'Second Coffee Improvement Project' (SCIP) and the small holders themselves, who by 1992 were growing militant about inefficient and slow payment systems that were inimical to small holder production. Inquiries into the fiscal state of KPCU brought about massive allegations of corruption and possible instances of high-level graft. As one report from London testifies, the management from the KPCU allowed its accountants to "approve large and fictitious expense claims by field extension officers, the value of which was deducted from farmers' accounts" (EIU Country Report on Kenya: 1990). Set against the backdrop of the ESAF which targeted 'corruption' inside Kenya's centralized bureaucracies and government, the KPCU, in particular, was singled out for reform. In rapid succession, the other significant organization dealing with Kenyan coffee, the Coffee Board of Kenya (CBK), was also targeted as part of an ESAF mandate to tackle the problems of inefficiency, corruption, and irregular distribution in the internal structures of Kenya's coffee industry. The changes that were suggested call for a greatly transformed industry under economic liberalization policies, which were 'officially' aimed to reform the powers of the KPCU and the CBK

under proposals for an amended Coffee Act, but 'unofficially' intensified the levels of conflict and competition that these reforms encouraged.

In the localities where most of Kenya's coffee is grown, and particularly in Central and Eastern Province where the majority of small holders are concentrated, internal struggles during the period took on multiple forms. An understanding of the forms of these struggles is key to an understanding of the period. From 1994 onwards, many small farmers defied laws banning the uprooting of coffee trees, a sanction that had been enforced since its inception under colonialism. Coffee was uprooted for tactical and symbolic reasons. As an act of defiance against the relatively powerful Provincial Administration, the practice grew in frequency until no single administrator, locational Chief, or police officer would enforce the law. The movement among small holders to uproot their trees was given some symbolic force to championing over what some Meru farmers saw as a "colonial hangover". The enforcement of agricultural laws by the Provincial Administration that prohibited African farmers from opting out of coffee once it was planted was rather quickly abandoned by the state authorities. Behind this demonstration of the tense, but opened, political relations between the rural peasantry and the state apparatus lay an economic alternative. The alternative was to plant food crops in place of uprooted coffee, a tactical choice that increasing numbers of small farmers were making. In light of briefly expanding domestic markets in beans, peas, maize, and even bananas, many small farmers decided to end coffee production. A more subtle answer to the risks entailed by switching production away from coffee was found in the increased practice of inter-planting coffee trees with food crops, keeping the coffee trees as a back-up hope in the next business cycle from 'bust' to 'boom'. The movement towards alternative crops, often indigenous crops well adapted to the possibilities of drought, was not made without struggle with elements of the Provincial Administration, nor without making compromises to local capitalists or conflicting with senior administrators in the co-operative movement. Since these instances of struggle formally broke the laws, and did so in an

organized and public manner, the farmers used them to their political advantage, testing the weight of the Provincial Administration's alliance to the national "coffee barons" that peasant farmers deemed to be working inside the KPCU and the CBK, the chief villains of the struggle. Yet, sometimes the anger of small coffee farmers was vented more overtly, aiming their struggle at local actors who were often committee members of the local co-operative marketing societies. Some of these men had their homes and businesses ransacked, or torched, by organized bands of farmers in revolt. Although the intense confrontations following the 1992 events have become rare in the late 1990s, there are still occasional reports of violence from Central Province districts like Murang'a where organized coffee farmers have earned a reputation for being fiercely politicized.

During the six year period from the announcement of 'reforms' to the Coffee Act and the re-structuration of coffee marketing and processing in Kenya, the instances of conflict and competition among peasant farmers took on more elaborate ideological dimensions than that required for uprooting one's own trees or participating in a lynching. From within Central Province, alliances between peasants and local capitalists were forged around the political possibilities given to ethnicity, especially its capacity to organize dissent against other large ethnicities. Western academics have been quick to draw an analysis on the role of ethnicity in Kenyan politics. On the question of ethnic conflict, Kenyan daily newspapers are chief sources of information about ethnic conflict on the interstices of Kenyan societies. In reference to the controversy over the faltering coffee industry, the newspapers followed how Kikuyu producers organized themselves to retain important controls over key sectors in Kenya's coffee industry. The Kikuyu were portrayed as particularly active and influential within the administrative apparatuses that monitor these sectors on behalf of state capitalism. However, the newspapers began to describe how Kikuyu producers were entering into loose alliances with co-operative societies and capitalist firms outside of the KPCU and CBK cartel. In contrast, Meru coffee farmers did not organize themselves around the principle of ethnicity in the 1990s, although *miraa*

farmers have done so in the Nyambene District (Grignon 1999). Many of the Meru coffee farmers that I spoke to on the matter were critical of the political mixture of ethnicity and trading coffee that the newspapers were reporting on. The Meru I worked with traded coffee with non-Meru capitalists and Somali traders alike. The political vulnerability of a movement launched around ethnic lines, however, was marked by its exclusion of alliances beyond the parochial, but powerful, lobby of ethnicity and localized social identity. Within a relatively short period after 1996, opposition to this form of mobilization came from many businessmen and politicians who stood at risk when the conflict was being steered towards the spectre of ethnicity, and away from the question of forming interest-based alliances. The majority of farmers and capitalists involved were, after all, far more interested in having their enterprises survive the period than having their livelihoods turned into the front lines of civil conflict.

Although this thesis is more concerned with the struggles among small holders who came under increasing pressure to act upon social change in the economic and political crises of the early 1990s, some attention must be paid to the conflicts and competition taking place between entrepreneurs, capitalists, and bureaucrats (where such distinctions can be made). These groups of actors were attempting to move into the economic vacuums created by the reforms and mandates of economic liberalization. The struggles for economic dominance between the bureaucracies involved in the national coffee industry (KPCU and CBK) and a number of capitalist firms (Thika Coffee Mills, Brooke Bond Kenya, and Socfinaf) are part of the larger historical processes that have defined the coffee industry's importance in the development of capitalism in Kenya. What is significant about the recent struggles over the industry is that they began from below. These were comprised as two decisive struggles: firstly, between angry small-scale farmers organized into co-operative marketing societies and their regional unions; secondly, between loosely aligned private coffee millers and the CBK.

Since the rest of the thesis is set aside for discussing social differentiation in the free peasantry and the local appropriation of neo-liberal discourse in Meru District, the remainder of this chapter will follow the Kenyan coffee crisis of the 1990s mainly from the perspective of the struggles between capitalist firms and the main bureaucracies of the industry. By 1998, an ideological turn towards the discourse of the 'free market' had captured producers. The dominant idea of the time was that changes in the industry were immanent and that a deep re-structuration of the marketing of coffee within Kenya was the only pacific solution to crisis. The remainder of this discussion will try to answer: (1) Why has the political struggle over the national coffee industry in Kenya from 1992 to 1998 pivoted around a neo-liberalist discourse?; (2) And, how did this ideologically mask the emergence of the second economy at the end of the period?

As early as 1993, a government task-force ordered amendments to the Coffee Act that would re-organize and 'reform' the positions of the CBK and the KPCU. In theory, the amendment was envisioned to facilitate greater degrees of competition among capital to control 'free market' elements of coffee processing. It is difficult to trace the origins of the neo-liberal discourse that Kenyans employed in their struggle with the coffee crisis of the 1990s, mainly because of the complex ways in which social actors apply the meanings of 'free market' discourse to local circumstances. The public terminology for economic liberalization in Kenya is *Soko Huru*, which is a point-blank reference to the idea of a 'free market'. This term resonates with Kenyans because of its family resemblance to the notion of *Uhuru* (Freedom), which was Kenya's nationalist logos for independence from British colonial domination during the 1950s and 1960s. The play on the public logos of *Soko Huru* from *Uhuru* is an ideological force in a country that shares so few political symbols, particularly among a population organized and identified through an historically complex ethnic partition. As shall be demonstrated later in the thesis, however, the appropriation of the term throughout Kenya's countryside cannot be considered equivalent in each coffee growing locality, largely because the struggles for the 'free market' are specific to the kinds

of struggles taking place in the localized industry. In this view, the appropriation of *Soko Huru* by capitalists in Thika and Nairobi will not be the same as that appropriated by coffee farmers in rural Meru. Although that is part of the ethnographic object presented in the last chapter of the thesis, the use of neo-liberalism by capitalists and bureaucrats outside of Meru will provide necessary contextual background on its origins and its ideological manipulations at the national level.

Under the new mandate for economic liberalization, the Kenyan government was to ensure that the recommended changes were being implemented. The immediate change to the industry, where coffee auction sales were limited to US dollars, was linked to the government's attempts to retain sufficient incomes in foreign exchange while re-regulating the Kenyan currency. Rather than being a buoyant turn of events for indigenous capitalists this restriction brought major set-backs as "the first foreign currency auctions were dominated by the multinational trading houses, while the smaller Kenyan houses without access to pre-auction dollar financing watched on as lots were sold at prices that did not reflect the rise of world prices" (EIC Kenya 1994). Tensions between capitalists and bureaucrats were aggravated by the sustained 'slump' and by the way SAP-influenced policy changes were favouring international capital. Distrust and open hostility pervaded the relationships of indigenous capitalists to the state apparatus, where previously, under some forms of protectionism, there had been 'unofficial' routes to take when faced head-on with economic constraint.

For the ailing small holder sector which comprised 65% of coffee production in 1995, the government moved towards intervention, announcing reforms to payment and credit schemes (Coffee Board of Kenya 1998: 5). To appease the growing tensions between the state apparatus and coffee farmers in the countryside, a new payment system was put in place where the co-operative marketing societies were paid through the Co-operative Bank rather than through the accounts of the KPCU. To deflate the antagonism between small holders and the offices of their co-operative unions, a new credit scheme for

the purchase of subsidized farm in-puts was separated from the payment scheme itself, enforcing the legal restrictions of commissions withdrawn from farmers' accounts to their legislated 20% (The Coffee Act 1977). From the perspective of small holders this meant that the 'official' capacity of the KPCU to control the payment system was reduced, but meant that 'unofficial' or illicit transactions which had been integral to the relations between co-operative unions and the KPCU for decades would not be addressed candidly. Although the reform was enacted in the "best interests of the farmers", some of the Meru informants that participated in my research pointed out that payments had still been made to them through their co-operative unions, after the KPCU had finished with their accounts. Anger and judgment was locally reserved for the "crocodiles in both ponds", and not reserved exclusively for the KPCU nor for the government. Conflict over the coffee industry began locally and then spread to the national industry, mirroring the production and marketing processes.

For whatever reasons internal to the highest level of government decision making, the CBK was favourably positioned in the reforms of economic liberalization. By 1995, it became clear to most small farmers and capitalist firms that the CBK would retain its monopsony and centrality in the bureaucratic structure of the industry. After the CBK refused to issue them the "A" dealers permits they were anticipating to get as a result of the amended Coffee Act, a ripple of anger was reported to have crossed those parties eager to obtain licenses to legally export coffee. The CBK were publicly accused of seeking to protect its own interests in an atmosphere of uncertainty over the future outcome of the industry in reform. Under the amended Coffee Act, all producers were still required to send coffee to the KPCU for milling, although the CBK was empowered to issue milling licenses to private millers under the mandate of "opening up the marketplace". Organization within the KPCU criticized the amended act with the argument that the economic liberalization of the coffee milling sector would sink their capacity to absorb the bulk of Kenya's milling requirements, standing at 130 000 metric tonnes, whereas competitors'



capacities would be only a fraction of this until they could financially afford to expand their output (EIC Kenya 1996: 4th Quarterly). The strongest argument put forward by the KPCU was that declining trends in the farm production of coffee and the expansion in the number of private millers would be suicidal for the industry. A faction inside the KPCU came out in public criticism of the CBK, exacerbating tensions between the two corporations. Despite this conflict growing between the CBK and the KPCU, the board granted milling licenses to Socfinaf and Thika Coffee Mills shortly after the gazetting of the amended Coffee Act (December 1995). Socfinaf, a division of the French-based multinational Sasini, had been a major producer of plantation coffee in Kenya since the 1950s. Thika Coffee Mills is an indigenous firm under the chairmanship of Pius Ngugi, whose active support of economic liberalism won him a special focus in the daily newspapers for being a spokesman of the 'free market' movement. With the liberalization of milling services established, an increasingly neo-liberal vision of the fate of the CBK, foremost in the eyes of local capitalists but including the perspectives of some peasant producers, intoned that the powers of the CBK would be swept away, and that the 'market' would be opened up, 'freed' from the control of the statutory marketing board. Thika Coffee Mills, now in direct competition with KPCU, appealed to the government to push on with reforms to the Coffee Act that would allow them to pursue a role in marketing coffee, urging that the government make a move to dismantle the CBK's control over the Kenya Coffee Auction (KCA). In response to political pressure from many quarters, the finance minister, Simon Nyachae recommended that the centralized auction system remain in place and that the KCA be legislated to be the only authorized auctioneer in the country. In addition, however, the government claimed that the CBK should issue dealer's licenses to any parties interested in exporting coffee from the country, provided that the coffee is graded by the CBK and purchased at the KCA. While their monopoly over the market share of coffee milling was threatened by competition from private millers, the KPCU criticized the reforms by arguing that the CBK was still favourably positioned in its role by

retaining full control over the grading and marketing of coffee. In defense of their interests as millers that wanted to move into marketing the growing political lobby for economic liberalization of marketing coffee, containing farmers, financiers, and millers pledged to offset the CBK's monopsony under the banner of *Soko Huru*. Within a short period of time factions within the KPCU and Thika Coffee Mills conspired to legally contest the CBK's control of marketing under the amended Coffee Act (December 1995). The rift between the KPCU and CBK was followed closely by observers of the industry, who reported on the ideological differences at work in the process of economic liberalization: "One stand of opinion, supported by the World Bank, is pushing for full liberalization of the agricultural sector, while another is resisting change. This second group stresses the need to protect the quality of Kenyan agricultural exports through some form of government involvement" (EIC Kenya 1996). This rift was essentially between the proponents of the 'free market' and those who turned towards the protectionism of state capitalism. CBK launched an offensive against the threat of losing its control over marketing by demonstrating to the government that competition amongst newly licensed millers had not had the effects that were predicted. The CBK also argued that while international prices for coffee had risen the farmers were seeing appreciation in their incomes. To the small holder farmers, the CBK made an unprecedented show of populism, insisting that the board was representative of small farmers against the exploitation of private traders. In an appeal for government intervention, the CBK made the ideological move towards the small holders claiming it would sell part of its 70% share holding in KCA to "planters, co-operatives, and other industrial parties" (EIC Kenya 1997: 1st Quarterly). The CBK also moved towards the government, asking that they legislate the KCA as the single authorized party to auction coffee in the country, while the CBK retained the licensing of dealers' licenses which they saw as "in the best interest of the farmers". Once the political support from the government was secure, the CBK refused to issue Thika Coffee Mills a permit to market coffee, defending its marketing share through its

close relationship to the KCA. To capitalize on the discourse of economic liberalization, the CBK offered a number of innovations to the industry from their role as statutory marketing board: electronic auctions, a direct payment scheme for farmers, introducing new shareholders to the KCA, a proposal to finance a new Coffee Bank.

Seeing the protectionist tendencies of the government, the KPCU faction put its weight behind the private millers lobbying to have a crack at marketing, claiming that "if they have marketing rights, they will be able to offer a range of services to farmers, including crop finance, storage, and advisory services" (EIC Kenya: 3rd Quarterly). These were aspects of production that had formerly been coordinated through a consortium of industry bodies and government agencies. At the top of the marketing monopsony, the paramount statutory marketing board, the CBK, clashed politically with the KPCU, leaving the immediate future of both in jeopardy and exposing their long-lasting conflicts between one another as instruments of state. However, things were not to go in the favour of the KPCU faction, which was routed by the internal politics of its own union and resulted in the dismissal of the key lobbyists aligned with Thika Coffee Mills in the campaign to secure marketing licenses from the CBK. In severe financial crisis, the KPCU could not secure off-shore credit, nor would its bankers offer it overdraft facilities and by October 1998 the union ran out of funds. The CBK made its victory over the KPCU by paying its debts, absorbing its costs through a financial takeover of the milling process. Alarmed at the scale and intensity of in-fighting throughout the industry and recognizing the greater danger of a dramatic fall in production, the government decisively countered the crisis with an announcement to overhaul the entire Coffee Act of 1977 and replace it during 1998.

#### (3.4) Concluding remarks about economic liberalization in the Kenyan coffee industry

As stressed earlier in the thesis, the recognition of the lived effects of economic liberalization in Kenya is not dependent on macro-economic perspectives, but may issue from an ethnographic grasp on the situation. Structural adjustment is a process that is

usually abstracted in the literature as a kind of life-less policy. Its formal name of 'structural adjustment' is distant from its very localized and human impact, where it transects with local social dynamics to produce its own unique outcome. When it comes to the question of how these policies are to be practiced, most of the literature is quiet. The ethnographic approach, in contrast, includes how the policies are experienced by ordinary citizens during rather regular things like making a living, educating children, or attempting to marry. The coffee harvest illustrates the lived impact of structural adjustment in Kenya nicely. Economic liberalization in the coffee industry is understood and acted upon in very different manners in Meru District by a broad consortium of social actors. The next empirical chapters take issue with the different ways that the 'free market' discourse and the practices of the second economy coalesce. Through describing the coffee harvest in Meru and its social aftermath, the thesis moves on to a closer look at local dynamics, and considers the local appropriation of *Soko Huru* as an attempt to understand and act upon the ideological and material aspects of imposed social change.

## Chapter Four

### Domestic enterprise and individual accumulation in the days of structural adjustment

#### (4.1) Introduction

Although staying close to commercial coffee production and farm labour on the land, this chapter takes into account the compulsions upon Meru individuals to diversify their activities in the current expansion and competition of the 'free market'. Within rural households, individuals are often pressured into wage labour, or pushed towards trade activities as key productive members of their domestic enterprise.

One of the arguments of this chapter is that a significant contribution to the crisis in the coffee industry stems from the difficulties farmers face in organizing labour when challenged by a marked differentiation amongst households and their individuals. As shall be seen shortly, this puts social pressure on all productive members of the domestic enterprise to compete with one another more acutely for scarce domestic resources, including food in some severe cases. The increased exploitation of the productive labour of women and junior men within the organization of rural households has resulted in greater movement towards trading activities among these categories of household members. As is recalled from the theoretical discussion in Chapter Two, this movement away from the household as the sole economic unit has been called 'straddling'. Socially frustrated from personally accumulating from within the domestic enterprise in a period of economic crisis, these women and young men are compelled to straddle between farm labour and trade activities. From the point of view of labour-categories, young men and women are full-time farmer-traders that generally must work outside the realm of wages. In lieu of wages paid to them by their elder household heads, internal exchanges of food and surplus cash-crops are offered based on personalized evaluations of their individual contribution to the

socially necessary labour that materially provide for the continued reproduction of the domestic enterprise.

For Meru households, it is not only migration that qualifies as straddling. Trade with merchant capital is an economic activity that is not closed off to anyone. Children, old grandmothers, and junior men can all participate in trade as an important source of accumulation dependent on a degree of straddling. As a social consequence, individual members of a domestic enterprise split their time between the town and the household seeking to either bring home wages or foodstuffs. Petty trade also allows an individual to control their own accumulation, but also puts new demands upon them as members of a household. Sometimes these demands lead individuals towards the second economy as an illicit route to greater freedoms of economic activity. Certainly exacerbated by commercial slumps in the coffee industry and the rush to implement economic liberalization measures in the countryside, the most pressed members of rural households are seeking relief through trading in the second economy as it grows more advanced in organization. Although this subject will be explored later in the chapter, a turn towards discussing the social organization of the conjugal household and the domestic enterprise will be central to an understanding of how individuals come to participate in straddling between farm labour, wage labour, and trade.

The social tensions between the household and the individual provoked by the changes to the Kenyan economy in the days of structural adjustment will be situated in terms of the Kimeru notions of *njaa*, *ngugi*, and the local interpretation of *Soko Huru*. The extensive focus on *njaa* as an indigenous ideal and as a feature of local social structure leads the chapter into a section on the role of women's and young men's trade and labour within the organization of the domestic enterprise. The discussion of labor leads on to an analysis of local labour categories which is seen in Meru simply as work or *ngugi*. Yet, the notion of *ngugi* is socially more complex than the idea of menial labour. *Ngugi* refers also to the division of labour within the conjugal household. The way local categories of age

and sex differences construct the division of labour in rural Meru is critical to an appreciation of the centrality of *ngugi* in everyday life. The distinctions that come out of division of labour are socially rigid in Meru, where the most but least awarded amount of labour is expended in agricultural production. The chapter will show that this rigid character of the division of labour plays a significant role in the decision of women and young men to turn to the second economy and to the illicit trade of coffee as an individual economic action. It will be argued that activities initiated inside the domestic group's division of labour (*ngugi*) lead social actors towards participation in *Soko Huru*. Locally perceived as entrepreneurialism based on petty trade of small amounts of accumulated goods, the discussion shows how the idioms of age and gender in turn define *Soko Huru*..

#### (4.2) *Njaa*: power and production in the conjugal Meru household and the division of labour

The Kimeru term, *njaa* refers to the economic and social institution of the conjugal household. *Njaa* roughly corresponds to the English notion of a yeoman homestead. The Kimeru concept of the *njaa* is cross-referenced with 'house' and 'family', usually entailing the presence of a married couple with children, who occupy a land holding of their own (*munda*). While *njaa* is restricted to the conjugal household and its dependents, affines are regularly distinguished as *athoni* (strangers), reinforcing the control of property relations within the patri-clan (*mwiriga*). With *njaa* there is a sense of permanence and of establishment. A family without land, say, one living in town in a rented home, would not necessarily be classified as *njaa*, the linkage to land being implicit. It is thus a kind of valued cultural model of the rural domestic group in Meru District.

The actual structure of a house is known as *nyomba*. The house is typically a rectangular building made from planed timber and roofed with commercially available tin sheets (see photograph). The clusters of Meru houses in any given compound are usually built over time, marked by the relative successes of each conjugal household's developmental trajectory. Water cisterns and electricity are two indicators of success in

Miiriga Mieru. Another marker of success is the length of time a family have spent developing their homes and holding, often demonstrated by reference to ancient *muringa* trees that where planted by a pioneer ancestor. A conjugal household usually comprises one house in Meru, although when the elder sons are initiated and become *nthaka* a special house is built. In the lives of dependent sons, their initiations and subsequent building of sleeping and eating quarters removed from their parents marks their entry into social adulthood. Likewise, marriage transforms the conjugal household through the introduction of an affine and the construction of a new house. Unmarried (and sometimes divorced) daughters continue to live in the home of their parents for a longer period, but some build



(Photograph 4.1) M.K. and his grandchildren outside of his youngest son's house, Miiriga Mieru

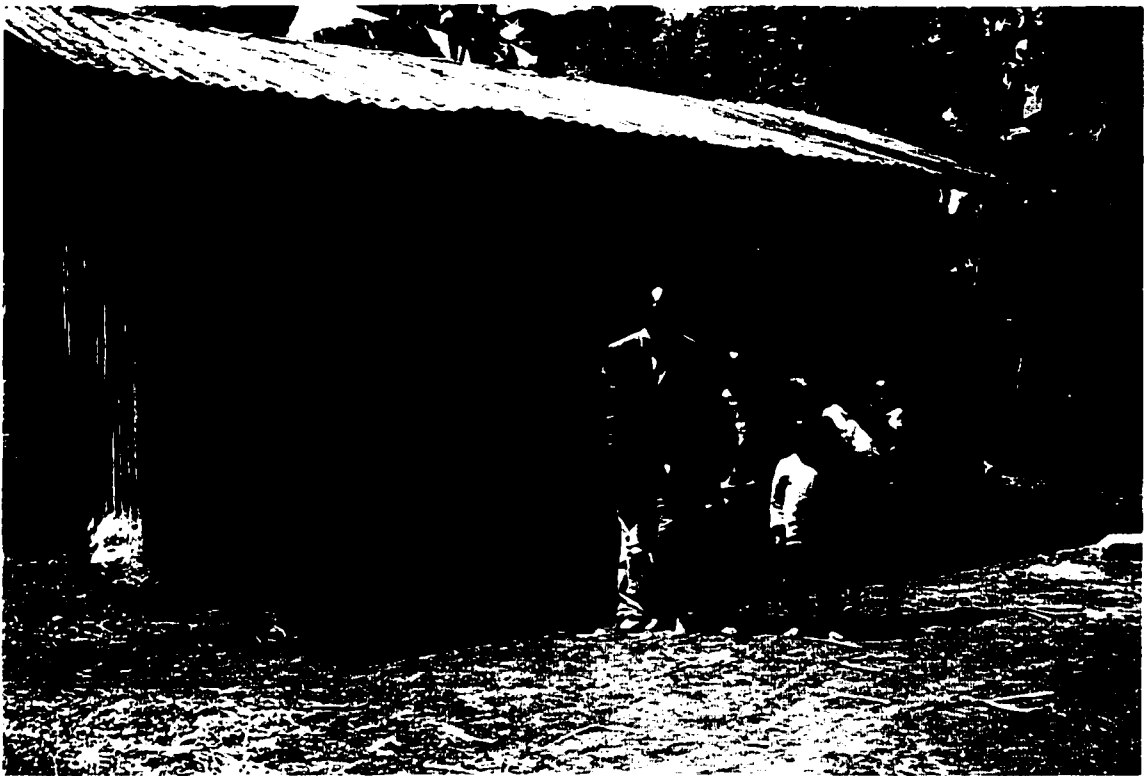


housing for themselves adjacent to their parent's house if they can provide for its construction. In most cases, it takes the *njaa* many years before houses are completely built, and the site of construction material and unfinished building is a frequent part of the residential landscape. Once a young man has made enough of an individual accumulation to begin building and to claim a fragment of his father's land, he typically appeals for help in finding a wife to start their own conjugal household. Large multi-generational compounds can claim as many as twenty individuals, while newly established conjugal households can contain as few as three persons.

The notion of *njaa* is applied with difficulty to the few individuals who for whatever social reasons were living alone in a small shelter. A few divorced, or widowed mothers with small children, lived on small fragments of land that their own kin had helped them to move onto. Often living in tent-like structures of banana leaves, these women were largely rural refugees whose marginal circumstances kept them marooned on small patches of land that were their only material and social asset. In other instances, elder women struggled alone to survive the distresses of entrenched poverty at the end of their developmental cycle. Sometimes the widows of deceased polygamous men have faced the peril of having the conjugally worked land sold or inherited, often by the patrilineal kin of the dead husband. Elder men rarely ended their days living alone, although several elder men lived alone on land they had sub-divided among sons who have permanently left the land to live in the towns. Often these isolate elder men have land but no farm. These elder men usually command services, although rarely labour, from any affines and grandchildren who may still reside on the land. A frequent tale being told about the twilight of the rural domestic enterprise, and the disaggregation of the conjugal households of a domestic group is how old people, too elderly to work their land and socially estranged from their sons and daughters living off the land, begin to sell fragments of their land holdings in order that they eat food. According to several elders I spoke with, this pattern of desperation greatly accelerated during the 1990s, a decade into the lived effects of structural adjustment and

agricultural decline. Several of my elderly informants feared the collapse of the *njaa* under the stress of poverty and spoke of the present as the hardest period they had lived through. Both men and women elders, however, tend to rely on the status given to them as elders (*juju*) over their dwindling economic resources as a means of coping with growing old.

Significantly, the labour processes of households and individuals have always been configured within local categories of personhood, particularly along the lived axes of age and sex. A description of the economic and social positionality of women and young men neatly outlines the organization of labour within the domestic enterprise. Women and young men are compelled to accumulate wealth on an individual basis, rather than through the domestic enterprise, which formerly organized all elements of their labour and its redistribution. Although young men have involved themselves in the illicit trade of coffee, a consideration of women's' weighty contributions to the economy and their domestic enterprises must foreground any discussion on the division of labour in Meru. It should be noted that little of the work that junior men and women do for the domestic enterprise is actualized in the exchange of money between individuals inside the conjugal household. Although small exchanges of cash occur within households, the farm's labour process is generally unremunerated. The value of their labour is subsumed into the total labour time of the domestic enterprise, which only seasonally appreciates substantial inflows of money and credit apart from regular wages being remitted to the household heads. Women who have managed some kind of individual accumulation can, however, claim particularly large shares over surplus agricultural produce. They are generally strengthened in these claims by their greater proportion of labour time in the workings of the family farm, sometimes absorbed into decades of labour (Kitching 1980).



(Photograph 4.2) K.K. and his grandchildren outside of his new plank and tin house, Chugu

(4.2.1) The domestic enterprises of Miiiriga Mieru and their labour processes

The following charts are presented in an attempt to illustrate some of the features of straddling already outside. They also present the occupational differences among individual members of the domestic enterprises. These rough portraits of different domestic enterprises are taken from the data provided by the farm surveys conducted with Miiiriga Mieru households. They are taken from 17 of the conjugal households that participated in on-farm surveys in Chugu Location, Miiiriga Mieru, Meru District. They are included here to represent; 1) the frequency of straddling as an economic activity, 2) migration and

residency patterns, 3) the array of labour categories to be found in the rural domestic enterprise.

**Table 2.1: The domestic enterprises of Miiriga Mieru and their labour processes**

<p><b>M.M and K.R.(1977<sup>2</sup>)</b> Residents(Fa's Mo, Fa, Mo, So<sup>1</sup>, So<sup>2</sup>, Da)</p> <p>Established (1935<sup>1</sup>, 1977<sup>2</sup>)</p> <p>Conjugal household: unmarried children, and elder . 7 persons</p> <p>Fa's Mo lives on fragment of Fa's .5 acre holding.</p> <p>Fa's brothers have moved elsewhere to found conjugal households after Fa's Fa subdivided land holding.</p> <p>Does not hire agricultural labour.</p> <p>Fa's Mo (Elder, may help in the farm work and runs her own household chores: maize, beans)</p> <p>Fa (Farmer, 4-5 hrs per day except Sunday: bananas, coffee, yams, cassava, macademia, sugarcane)</p> <p>Mo (Farmer-trader, cooks morning and afternoon meals, organizes farm labour: maize, beans)</p> <p>So<sup>1</sup> (Street hawker-used clothes trader, works in Meru Town, stays on farm: coffee)</p> <p>So<sup>2</sup> (Agricultural labourer, works as kibarua at peak times: coffee)</p> <p>Da (Student, assists Fa's Mo and Mo in all household work and farm labour)</p>
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<p><b>R.K. and F.M. (1979<sup>2</sup>)</b> Residents(Mo, So<sup>2</sup>, Da<sup>2-6</sup>) Migrants(Fa, So<sup>1</sup>, Da<sup>1</sup>)</p> <p>Established (1937<sup>1</sup>, 1979<sup>2</sup>, 1979<sup>3</sup>)</p> <p>Extended conjugal household: three conjugal household in domestic enterprise, 16 persons</p> <p>The land holding is that of the Fa's Fa.</p> <p>Heavy use of agricultural labour.</p> <p>Fa (Worker, construction foreman working in Kisumu: sends remittances to Meru)</p> <p>Mo (Farmer, organizes all farm labour for her husband's land holding and works her own affine farm in a different agricultural zone: coffee, maize, bananas, cassava, beans, pigeon peas, cows peas, oranges, guava, avocados, passion fruits, macademia, livestock, chickens)</p> <p>So<sup>1</sup> (Student, attends college in Kisumu and lives with Fa, comes home to assist in farm labour during vacation)</p> <p>Da<sup>1</sup> (Domestic worker, lives with husband, returns to assist Mo with her farm)</p> <p>So<sup>2</sup> (Schoolboy, assists in the farm labour, especially grazing the household's cow)</p> <p>Da<sup>2-6</sup> (Schoolchildren and pre-schoolers, assist in the cooking, cleaning of household)</p>
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<p><b>E.K. and K.M. (1984<sup>2</sup>)</b> Residents(Mo, Da<sup>1-3</sup>, So) Migrant(Fa)</p> <p>Established (1964<sup>1</sup>, 1984<sup>2</sup>, 1991<sup>3</sup>, 1994<sup>4</sup>)</p> <p>Households: Three extended conjugal households in separate domestic enterprises, 11 persons</p> <p>Fa's Fa has not sub-divided the land holding, but each household has some access to other land fragments.</p> <p>Does not hire agricultural labour for small residential holding, but do for additional farmland that they rent.</p> <p>Fa (Policeman, works with Provincial Administrative Police elsewhere in Kenya: sends remittances and assists in farm labour during peak seasons: coffee, yams, bananas, miraa, macademia)</p> <p>Mo (Farmer, organizes family farm labour at Miiriga Mieru and Ruiiri: coffee, maize, beans, sweet potatoes, passion fruits, macademia, mangoes)</p> <p>Da<sup>1</sup> (Student, assists mother in all farm labour, food preparation and marketing)</p> <p>Da<sup>2-3</sup> (Primary schoolchildren, assist in household chores, scare birds)</p> <p>So (Infant)</p>
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**G.T. (1975<sup>2</sup>)** Residents(Mo, Da's So, Da's Da) Migrant(Da)  
 Female headed household and landholding, 4 persons  
 Land holding was provided by *mwiriga* after Mo's divorce, an inheritance of two sisters (1.5 acres).  
 Mo was formerly employed in a government ministry, Nairobi.  
 Relies on hired labour and assistance from Da and Da's husband.

Mo (Farmer, organizes farm labour for residential farm and for an extended family farm elsewhere, does all weeding, planting, and harvesting: coffee, avocados, macademia, beans, maize, cow peas, pigeon peas, sweet potatoes, cassava, sukuma weeki, tomatoes, bananas, napier grass)  
 Da (Teacher, married and lives with husband in Nairobi: sends remittances)  
 Da's Da (Student, attends college in Meru Town, stays on land of Mo's Mo)  
 Da's So (Student, attends secondary school in Miiiriga Mieru, helps with farm labour on weekends or holidays)

**G.K. (1969<sup>2</sup>)** Residents (Fa, Mo, So<sup>1</sup>, So<sup>2</sup>, So<sup>3</sup>) Migrant (Da)  
 Fa's Fa practiced polygamy, G.K.'s conjugal household stems from the Fa's Fa's second wife's landholding.  
 Established (1940<sup>1</sup>, 1969<sup>2</sup>) Land (2.5 acres) Coffee trees(500)  
 Hire labour when money is available, but face labour shortages

Fa Worker, night watchman and farmer: coffee pruning, tilling, planting napier grass.  
 Mo Farmer-trader, organizes all hired labour and household work: maize, beans, cassava, bananas  
 Da Farmer, married and lives with husband's family  
 So<sup>1</sup> Worker, crushes rocks to make ballast: remits wages and assists in farm labour  
 So<sup>2</sup> Worker, trained as a welder: remits wages, grazes cattle and harvests coffee  
 So<sup>3</sup> Preacher, mildly estranged from family, works as evangelist.

**F.G. (1969<sup>2</sup>)** Residents(Fa, Mo, So<sup>1-2</sup>, Da<sup>2-4</sup>) Migrant (Da<sup>1</sup>)  
 Conjugal household and the residence of Fa's Mo  
 Established (1939<sup>1</sup>, 1969<sup>2</sup>) Land (1 acre) Coffee trees (100)  
 Does not hire labour

Fa Entrepreneur, transports agricultural produce to markets with wheelbarrow, former agricultural worker  
 Mo Farmer-trade, organizes household work and markets cereals in town  
 Da<sup>1</sup> Farmer, married and lives with husband's family  
 So<sup>1-2</sup> Schoolchildren, assist in all farm labour: coffee, bananas, cassava  
 Da<sup>2-3</sup> Schoolchildren, assist in the homestead to cook and clean  
 Da<sup>4</sup> Infant.

**H.M. (1944<sup>1</sup>)** Residents(Mo, So<sup>1</sup>, So<sup>2</sup>, So<sup>3</sup>) Migrants(Fa, Da<sup>1</sup>)  
 Domestic enterprise is composed of four conjugal households  
 Mo is estranged from polygamous, Fa who lives with his junior wife  
 Established (1944<sup>1</sup>, 1982<sup>2</sup>, 1992<sup>3</sup>, 1997<sup>4</sup>) Land(4.5 acres) Coffee trees(1000)  
 Hires agricultural labour during tilling, planting, weeding, and coffee harvest

Fa Retired Ministry of Health driver, elder  
 Mo Farmer, looks after compound, weeding, cooking: coffee, maize, beans, pidgeon peas, bananas, macademia  
 Da<sup>1</sup> Farmer, married and moved to husband's landholding  
 So<sup>1</sup> Worker, full-time with Forest Department (has 4 children, wife works at Forest Dept)

So <sup>2</sup>	Worker, coffee factory manager (has 2 children, wife is farmer-trader)
So <sup>3</sup>	Worker-farmer, does construction work and looks after most male farm labour for 1944 <sup>1</sup>

<b>J.M. (1985<sup>2</sup>)</b>	Residents (Fa's Mo) (Fa, Mo, So <sup>1-2</sup> , Da <sup>1</sup> , Da <sup>2</sup> ) (worker) Migrants (Fa's brother of 1992 <sup>3</sup> )
Domestic enterprise is comprised of Fa's Mo (1939 <sup>1</sup> ) and Fa (1985 <sup>2</sup> )	
The domestic enterprise keeps 500 coffee trees	
Established (1939 <sup>1</sup> , 1985 <sup>2</sup> , 1992 <sup>3</sup> ) Land (4.5 acres) (2.5 acres at Kithoka) (3 acres at Ruiri)	
Hires almost all farm labour, keeps a full-time agricultural worker for cows and shamba	
Fa	Merchant, retail shopkeeper and rentier, uses Land Rover to transport goods to and from town, field committee member, owns barber's kiosk: coffee, maize, macademia, potatoes, bananas
Mo	Farmer-trader, assists Fa in shopkeeping and organizes farm labour for their three shambas, assists Fa with the management of the domestic enterprise.
So <sup>1-2</sup>	Schoolchildren, assist in shopkeeping, farm labour, and household tasks
Da <sup>1</sup>	Schoolchild, assists Mo in all work except marketing
Da <sup>2</sup>	Infant

<b>S.T. (1983<sup>3</sup>)</b>	Residents (Fa, Mo, So <sup>1</sup> , So <sup>2</sup> , Da <sup>1-2</sup> ) Migrants (none)
One conjugal household in a domestic enterprise shared with deceased brother's children and wife.	
Established (1937 <sup>1</sup> , 1975 <sup>2</sup> , 1983 <sup>3</sup> ) Land (3 acres) Coffee trees (700)	
Do not hire labour, but sell it	
Fa	Farmer, seeks construction work, but often works as agricultural labourer with brother's eldest son
Mo	Farmer-trader, performs agricultural work: markets maize, beans, sweet potatoes, cassava, pigeon peas
So	Schoolboy, assists in all farm work and grazes cow on holidays, gathers fodder
Da <sup>1-2</sup>	Schoolchildren, assist in cooking and cleaning.

<b>M.N. (1984<sup>2</sup>)</b>	Residents (Fa, Mo, So <sup>1</sup> , So <sup>2</sup> , Da <sup>1-2</sup> ) Migrants (none)
One conjugal household of unspecified second generation	
Established (1984 <sup>2</sup> ) Land (2.35 acres) (.5 acre) Coffee trees (600)	
Hires labour during peak season	
Fa	Farmer, provides all farm labour for residents: coffee, yams, bananas, avocado, fruits, horticulture
Mo	Entrepreneur, works as private trader of potatoes in Kirua, reinvests her money into other businesses
So <sup>1-2</sup>	Schoolchildren, assist Fa in the farm work on holidays
Da <sup>1-2</sup>	Schoolchildren, assist Fa in the farm work on holidays.

<b>F.K. (1980<sup>3</sup>)</b>	Residents (Fa's Mo) (Fa, Mo, Da <sup>2-3</sup> , So <sup>1-2</sup> , So <sup>3</sup> ) Migrants (Da <sup>1</sup> )
One conjugal household that includes the house of the Fa's Mo and a full-time worker	
Established (1898 <sup>1</sup> , 1932 <sup>2</sup> , 1980 <sup>3</sup> ) Land (?) (Fragments elsewhere) Coffee trees (1500)	
Hires day labourers and maintains a full-time worker	
Fa	Locational Chief, also involved in marketing and transporting milk to creameries in town
Mo	Nurse, full-time position in the hospital in town
Da <sup>1</sup>	College student in Nairobi
Da <sup>2-3</sup>	Schooleavers, assist Fa's Mo to do domestic work
So <sup>1-2</sup>	Schoolchildren, assist in farm labour during coffee harvest
So <sup>3</sup>	Infant

**I.K. (1992<sup>4</sup>)** Residents (Fa, Mo, So<sup>1-2</sup>) Migrants (none)  
 Domestic enterprise is composed of four conjugal households some of which reside away from the farm  
 Established (1965<sup>1</sup>, 1974<sup>2</sup>, 1991<sup>3</sup>, 1992<sup>4</sup>, 1994<sup>5</sup>) Land (.5 acre) (3 acres Timau)(Ruiri 15 acres)  
 Have one full-time agricultural worker (at Ruiri), hire day workers, one full-time domestic worker  
 (1974<sup>2</sup>) this household has a prison worker, wife is a farmer-trader  
 (1991<sup>3</sup>) teacher, wife is a clerk with Methodists

Fa Headmaster, manages farm labour and sales in coffee  
 Mo Clerk, works full-time in agricultural bureaucracy  
 So<sup>1-2</sup> Schoolchildren, assist to rear rabbits

**G.A. (1957<sup>2</sup>)** Residents (Fa, Mo, So<sup>3</sup>, Da<sup>1-3</sup>) Migrants (So<sup>2</sup>, So<sup>4</sup>)  
 Extended conjugal household on residential holding that exploits farming commercially on other plots  
 Established (1928<sup>1</sup>, 1957<sup>2</sup>, 1974<sup>3</sup>, 1984<sup>4</sup>)  
 Head of (1974<sup>3</sup>) is deceased, wife stays with (1957<sup>2</sup>)  
 Head of (1984<sup>4</sup>)(So<sup>2</sup>) lives elsewhere  
 Hire agricultural workers for commercial plot in Ruiri

Fa Trader in livestock, former employee of Municipal Council: coffee, bananas, yams, macademia, sugarcane  
 Mo Farmer-trader, organizes most farm labour, cultivates her commercial crops: maize, beans, pigeon peas  
 So<sup>1</sup> Deceased  
 So<sup>2</sup> Construction foreman, the company is his own, works from different towns in Kenya  
 So<sup>3</sup> Teacher, stays unmarried in Fa's extended conjugal household  
 So<sup>4</sup> Worker, migrates to do construction work for elder brother, assists in farm labour periodically  
 Da<sup>1-2</sup> Schooleavers, contribute most to farm labour at Fa's household at (1957<sup>2</sup>)

**D.M. (1952<sup>2</sup>)** Residents (Fa, Mo, Da<sup>1</sup>, So<sup>3</sup>) Migrants (So<sup>2</sup>, So<sup>1</sup>, Da<sup>2</sup>)  
 Conjugal household with one other junior household (1991<sup>4</sup>)  
 Established (1938<sup>1</sup>, 1952<sup>2</sup>, 1986<sup>3</sup>, 1991<sup>4</sup>) Land (3.5 acres) (?) Coffee trees (200)  
 The So<sup>1</sup>(1986<sup>3</sup>) lives in Nairobi and is estranged from (1952<sup>2</sup>)  
 Hire agricultural women, and have reliance on labour of affine women

Fa Farmer, formerly worked as agricultural labourer, volunteers to weigh coffee at society, craft work  
 Mo Farmer-trader, organizes labour on farm for her maize and beans at plot in Ruiri  
 So<sup>1</sup> Estranged  
 So<sup>2</sup> Electrician, lives in Nairobi and sends remittances to Fa  
 So<sup>3</sup> Worker, watchman at supermarket in town, his new wife assists in all farm work, head of (1991<sup>4</sup>)  
 Da<sup>1</sup> Worker, full-time job at Coca Cola bottling plant in town, assists in farm work

#### (4.2.2) "Mwekuru ti mwiriga": the gender dynamics of the conjugal household in Meru Mieru

The off-farm economic activities of women have been understudied in contemporary East Africa, resulting in a tendency to view the African woman as an exploited subject without purchasing power or social networks (Robertson 1996, Haugerud 1998, Davison 1996). During the busiest periods of the agricultural cycle one of the most common sights in Meru District are small gangs of female agricultural workers, sometimes seen walking to and from farm plots, but typically caught working in the fields tilling, digging, weeding, and planting on a great number of commercial crops. Women are the largest body of agricultural workers in Meru Mieru and organize themselves into work parties to earn money in the busy periods of the agricultural cycle. They are also paid significantly less than men labourers, some 70 KSH per day opposed to 100 KSH (\$1.75 CDN per day). The pressure to earn money to buy food often leads women to spend the majority of their days during the busiest times of year in paid agricultural labour. A common understanding among affine women living away from their father and mother's household is that they work for free for her husband and her parent's holdings, greatly intensifying the pressure upon women to provide labour and foodstuffs to more than one household.

With economic liberalization, rural women are moving further into the marketing of their cereal crops (beans, maize, peas). Along the roadways and in municipal marketplaces throughout Kenya women sell foodstuffs, usually the surplus produce of their own farms and household productivity, but occasionally they sell processed foods like porridge and beer, formerly carbohydrate staples in Meru diet. With this as an indicator of wider processes inside Kenya's economy, women are struggling to accumulate as individuals within the structure of the domestic enterprise, if not from within the conjugal household.



Outside the context of the conjugal household, a job as a domestic worker or prostitution represent more marginal paths to individual accumulation. As we will touch upon briefly, affine women are sometimes to be found straddling the domestic enterprises of their own natal family (*njaa*) as well as that of her affines (*athoni*), exposing women to an array of social networks. Women usually keep friendships with the people of her father's *mwiriga*, while an elder woman may often identify with the *mwiriga* of her husband, linking some women to quite an extensive network of purportive kin. As such, women can sustain their livelihoods as an individual economic actor through balancing obligatory farm labour and trade activities with the social networks they maintain over time.

Some women, however, experience intense social challenges. Culturally, the division of labour is accompanied by local notions of women as naturally suited to the farm labour required in a peasant household. In a male dominated society, the heavy work of agriculture is relegated to women because the households of her parents and her husband have the jural power to make demands of her labour time. In Meru, the loose remark of "*Mwekuru ti mwiriga*", or a "woman has no clan" seeks to ingrain gendered ideologies about the rootlessness of local women, who happen to leave their parent's compound upon marriage. It also seeks to confer the idea that women are jurally marginalized by the patri-clan, although this is not necessarily experienced in the lives of all married women. Some married women exercise considerable power within their conjugal household, and in the domestic enterprise. Daughters generally move away from their parent's conjugal household at marriage, but many younger women seek work as domestic workers, farm labourers, or help the affine women of her married brother's conjugal household with the marketing of their cereals, legumes, and root crops. The household work of young unmarried women is continuous from morning to evening, ranging from taking care of and feeding children to fetching firewood and water. Even though the daily activities of young unmarried women were observed, information about how they saw themselves vis-a-vis others was rare owing to a display of shyness in social interaction between myself and

younger women. Young women would often seek a deferral to older, and more senior household members when I approached them with questions about their lives and their activities. From my observations of how young women acted in the context of rural society, I noted two aspects of their unique position in Meru rural society; they tended to be very active in the church; they occupied a central role in the domesticity of the conjugal household of their parents and the households of her brothers. The church activities were social events where young men and young women could meet one another. The youth church groups organized day trips to distant dance performances and plays, as well as transporting church members to faith conferences organized by larger church groups. While at home, the young women find themselves responsible for a great deal of domestic routines. The most frequent tasks young unmarried women undertake are the supervision of infant children, collecting woodfuel and water, cooking meals, and washing clothing. Many are sent to find work as domestic workers in distant communities after their schooling is finished or discontinued. The unmarried status of these young women may continue for many years where they play a critical role in the daily running of the conjugal household, yet the expectation of each young woman is that she will attain an adult status through marriage and bearing children of her own. During fieldwork, it was a rare sight to see young unmarried women "hanging out" together, while their male counterparts are conspicuous in their public show of leisure time. For young women the distinction between "labour time" and "leisure time" would seem to overlap as they go about their domestic work with other young women, affines, and children. Young unmarried women are centered around the household and do less agricultural work than married women. Marriage, however, greatly intensifies the labour time of Meru women, as they are made responsible for a great deal of the conjugal household's food supply which they must provide through farming or trading activities.

Marriage and child rearing is the confirmation of adult status for both men and women. Without the notion of marriage, the idea of a domestic group and the

developmental cycle of this group would be incomplete. Marriage in Meru is increasingly monogamous following new principles for the conjugal relationship, although polygamy has not ceased as a form of marriage, albeit it controversial in Miiiriga Mieru where Methodism is the dominant arbiter on social morality. Furthermore, many married individuals stress the simplicity and affordability of monogamous conjugal relations as opposed to the complexity and headaches that they attribute to polygamy. Stories are told about the intense conflicts over land inheritances where polygamous men had to sub-divide small acreages between the sons of different wives . I was told stories of such conflicts by the adult sons of deceased polygamous men. Twice these narratives included commentary on the relationship between a conniving co-wife and the use of witchcraft in securing the polygamous husband's property for her and her sons, at the expense of the other wife's sons. The junior wives of polygamous men were particularly prone to being accused of witchcraft, while senior wives were often portrayed as having much to lose. A common feature of polygamous marriages today is a situation where the marriage of an elder man to a second wife is seen to constitute a kind of socially legitimate divorce from a first wife. E.K., one woman I knew particularly well in Miiiriga Mieru, was married to a polygamous man, but estranged from him. In fact, E.K.'s estrangement and social distance from her husband was known locally as an example of the difficulties of polygamous marriages. From listening to E.K. talk and then listening to other people talk about E.K. I got the idea that people really enjoyed gossip about polygamy. But rather than being a soap-opera, some significant arguments for and against polygamy were being made. It was public knowledge that her husband lived with the second wife on another land fragment. The husband rarely visited E.K., although the sons met with him frequently in Meru Town where he lives. From her point of view, she claimed that the husband did not care about her any longer and expected his sons to look after her with money. According to one of E.K.'s elder sons, however, money from the husband was remitted to the sons to care for their mother's farm. In addition, the husband had formally given a coffee shamba to E.K. who

took care of the small coffee plantation with the help of her grandchildren. In one local interpretation of such situations, estrangement in the polygamous unit is preferable than divorce and the break-up of property

Monogamous marriages, however, serve the small farms of Miiriga Mieru well. The conjugal household of one husband and one wife as the dominant model for marriage grew in popularity after the 1940s when the commercialization of agriculture was more or less complete. External social changes brought about a transformation in social relations inside the Meru conjugal household. Biographical sketches of social life and marriage in Meru District during the 1930s were given to me by M.R. and his younger wife N.N. Their grandson, M.M., translated all of the Kimeru I could not get into English for me during sessions when we sat with the elder couple. The narratives that were collected speak to the way the social division of labour was constituted by gender during the early 1920s (M.R.'s narrative) and the late 1930s (N.N.'s narrative). The following narrative is included to give some idea of the subjectivity of these two old individuals when they retell events about the 'Olden Days'. M.R.'s recollection on his livelihood as a trader as a young man is contrasted with N.N.'s attention to her work as a woman farmer whose married life time overlapped with the first expansion of commercial agriculture in the 1940s.

(4.2.3) 'Old Time traders': M.R. and N.N. on the eve of the commercialization of agriculture in Meru District

M.R. and N.N. are an elderly couple who have lived at Kirwiro market since the demarcation period in the early 1960s. Prior to that, they lived closer to Karieria, near the site of Chugu's present coffee factory. They maintained strong links to their land fragment at Kirwiro by farming there. In the 1940s, when M.R. began to buy small fragments throughout Chugu, land holdings had not been adjudicated, demarcated, or consolidated. The small-holding, as such, where a group would build a home and an 'economic farm' from the same land holding was rare. Fragments of land, often situated in differing ecological zones, were multiply exploited. One generally lived where the residential group

held their livestock. The distances between the fragments of land were negligible, about ten minutes walk along the main feeder road, but by the early 1960s they had been compelled to choose a residential plot during the consolidation of their holdings. They chose to re-settle in Kirwiro because it was planned to be on a main road. Kirwiro eventually became a growing local marketplace sometime in the 1970s. M.R., then in his late sixties, wanted to continue to do what he had always done: trade agricultural products for livestock, livestock for money.

N.N., like many of the elder women in Miiiriga Mieru, is a veteran trader. In her late seventies, she continues to market *nchabe*, *marigo*, *nchugu* from the road-side of her home. “*Njira ni thongi*”, she would tell me, “Roads are good”. Her strategy was simple: keep enough of everything; sell to the foot traffic on the murrum roads during municipal marketing days; give freely to good friends. On the main commercial market days in town, N.N. would be helped by her youngest grand-daughter to stay with her road-side wares throughout the day. N.N. would spend the rest of the time visiting her women friends in the hamlets that line the main feeder road in Chugu. If the money was available, she often helped her peers by buying small amounts of produce. Commercial relationships are not necessarily impersonal.

The couple were too aged to cultivate the many fragments they had acquired throughout Chugu. Although N.N. can still work during harvests and in processing their foodstuffs, she claimed that digging and weeding exhaust her. The couple are dependent on hiring labourers for maintaining their shambas. M.M. often provides money to his grandparents for this, particularly at critical times in the agricultural cycle. M.R.’s sons and grandsons often help in such a way, providing they can meet the labour requirements for their own farms.

M.R.’s land has been sub-divided many times during his life. M.M., for instance, was recently given an allotment inside Chugu, a fragment that is planted with coffee that M.M. has tended most of his life. M.M. was about twelve years old when his father and

uncles replanted the fragment with coffee trees destined to provide the cash for M.M.'s school fees. The consolidated holding M.R. was allocated during the 1960s in Kirwiro has now been inherited by his youngest son, a school teacher of about fifty years old named K.R. This son's compound is behind M.R.'s divided by a small wire fence and a tall grove of banana trees. There the son has built a stone house and pays for electricity, two public displays of wealth and success. This family, who are cousins of M.M., have two commercial farms in Kibirichia where they grow maize, potatoes, and some horticultural produce. The shamba of this family, once that of M.R.'s, is neatly interplanted with coffee, maize, and sweet potatoes. M.R.'s remaining portion, no larger than the space of his weathered compound, is a chaotic thicket of decrepit coffee trees, entangled with one another on the washed out and overgrown terraces that are covered by densely woven weeds and pumpkins. The coffee trees no longer flower, some having been planted in the late 1950s, but the couple still manage to get some small harvests of *mibuni* out of the trees each year. Even though M.R.'s sons and grandsons claim around 4000 coffee trees between themselves, he cannot manage to maintain his own. For some elders in the age-set younger than M.R.'s, pruning their coffee trees is a kind of leisure activity, much like keeping a rose bush. For M.R., however, coffee had no enchantment. It was, in his opinion, "*Gintu mucunku*" or "a white man's thing".

I asked M.R. to explain what he did as a youth.

"When I was an *nthaka*, my father was poor. At home there was nothing. Many *nthaka* could earn rupees to pay Hut Tax to the colonials, but that life was no good. I went away. At first, I had no idea where to go, but wandered and stayed a bit in Meru, down in Tigania, where some other young men had gone. We were not allowed to leave the reserve then without *kipande*, and the stories we heard from the *nthuki Miriti* were no good. I didn't think too much, but went in search of tobacco leaves" (Interview with M.R., November 1998, Miiiriga Mieru, Meru District)

M.R. had gone to his father's people in search of tobacco snuff (*mbaaki*), millet grains (*mwere*), and sometimes maize (*mpempe*) for trade purposes. However he arranged the supplies of goods, he transported them from Miiiriga Mieru to Tigania, where organized

trading parties, mostly comprised of younger men, set off towards what is called the Northern Frontier District (NFD). It seems that the enforcement of the *kipande* system of 'Native Registration' prevented young men like M.R. from leaving the 'reserve' through the road-ways, controlled as they were by the Provincial Administration. A popular route to take was to pass through the Tiganian plain to the north of Meru as descend down through the scrub and bush into the hot, dry hinterlands of the north. One risked arrest traveling anywhere near the roadways the colonial administration controlled.

The trading parties that M.R. supplied did not bring him any appreciable income or individual accumulation. Anticipating a life of poverty in the 'Meru Native Reserve', as well as the inability to accumulate the wealth necessarily for his own impending dowry and marriage, the young man clandestinely set off towards the NFD alone, carrying huge loads of tobacco snuff on his back. He did not to return to Meru until the late 1930s, after living as a petty-trader among the peoples of the north, mostly Borana and Samburu.

"The Samburu were good to trade and live with", *M.R. recounted*, "Not like the Somalis. And I made some money with them. When Meru came, I showed them who to talk with and who to avoid; when Wazungu came, I disappeared. I could pass as Samburu. Life was like this for years" (Interview with M.R., November 1998, Miiiriga Mieru, Meru District)

At the interstice of Meru-Samburu relations, M.R. survived as a petty-trader, middleman, and translator-negotiator. His peers inside the 'Reserve' were often forced to labour under the Compulsory Labour Ordinance enforced by the ascendant Local Native Council (LNC) to 'develop' the district's infrastructure. M.R. stressed that many of his age-mates languished in the conditions of poverty that gripped Meru District in the 1930s. By contrast, M.R. became relatively wealthy, particularly in rupees and livestock. He supplied the dowry (*ruracio*) he needed to marry through his years as a petty-trader among the Samburu.

M.R. first married in 1937. His first wife was not N.N., but another woman whose life did not figure in M.R.'s biography. He built a house many local people admired. It was complete with a *mabati* roof, wood timber walls, and drainage. It was a "modern" house, but with a tin-sheath roofing "it was as hot as hell in the sunny dry season" (*thano*). The *mabati* roof was put together from *debe* cans of motor oil that the administrators, military, and businessman sold, or traded for agricultural produce. Only a few houses built during this period remain, usually the homes of very elderly people. The present abject poverty of these elders lives belies the former up-and-down wealth of their past. Poorer people, I was told, continued to build the cooler wattle, daub, and thatch homes until the late 1970s. By the close of the 1930s, most of the more influential, chiefly, or wealthy members of M.R.'s age-set (*nthuki Kaburu*) had acquired land, built a homestead, married, and started families. There were also a large presence of client-elders whose relationship to their land fragments was based on the rights of *nkia*, or the 'poor', of a given *mwriga*. M.R. entered adulthood through the means of his petty-trade, and accepted the position as a 'peasant' farmer only in so far as he had to compensate for having nothing to trade. He became a 'farmer' as he became a *mukuru*, that is, a 'household head'. He had to accept the terms of a newly married man, *mukuru*, which included putting his land into productive use. M.R. took the role of *mukuru* seriously and was one of the first to plant coffee trees when they became available to Meru farmers.

Coffee was, among the first coffee planters in Miiiriga Mieru, a product they would personally market to agents buying in town. In the absence of an efficient vertical market in the mid-1930s, petty trade in coffee cherries was virtually the only option available to local people for marketing their produce. Yet, petty trade was relished by a large number of Meru men and women, preferring it to back-breaking work on the land growing the food crops the colonial administration was pushing. With the growing marketplace offered under the LNC Market and the informal transactions with Asian traders, small-scale producers of crops like coffee were satisfied that they could grow coffee and trade it for cash, almost



immediately after harvesting. Petty trade in coffee cherries or *mibuni* was a swift trade, most of it was purchased by Asian businessmen, while the surplus could be sold to the local 'Native Hotels' for consumption. For a while, there was even a taste for coffee itself, providing it could be taken with lots of sugar.

I was greatly surprised one day when N.N. brought M.M. and I two glasses of hot, sweet, black coffee. Despite being the primary producers of coffee, most of the Meru people I spoke to about coffee told me that they did not drink the stuff, preferring tea in almost every case. I learned from N.N., however, that quite a few elders took the drink to "ward off the cold". N.N. testified that drinking coffee, prepared at home from surplus *mibuni*, was popular when she had been a young woman. In the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, so-called 'Native Hotels' served coffee as refreshment, supplied by the petty processing and trade of roasted coffee. N.N. testified that making 'ready-to-use' coffee for the hotels in Meru Town was a way of making some money from their low-quality coffee surpluses. Asking N.N. to show me how the *mibuni* was processed into a liquor, she obliged by going through the process with me step by step, telling me throughout anecdotes about the early days of Mieru's expanding coffee industry.

N.N. had first learned how to make coffee in 1939, the year M.R.'s coffee trees produced their first harvest. Gathering a small pile of *mibuni* together on a piece of sisal sacking, N.N. told me that the *mibuni* were not good, being too moist to process easily. "When we first began the coffee", N.N. said while running her hands through the *mibuni*, "We would take it in *debes* up to that *mzungu* at Kinoru". A *debe* was an empty jerry-can, the kind Meru used for making *mabatiroofs*. It could take up to about 10 kilograms of coffee cherries. The *mzungu* had been a DAO (District Agricultural Officer) named Benson. Other elders remembered Benson well, since the entire Meru 'experiment' of coffee production had been under his administration from the mid-1930s until his retirement in the 1960s. Most of the documentation in the Kenya National Archives on coffee production in Meru had been written under his instructions and administration.

Benson had given up the posting of Meru District's AO for becoming the first chairman of the Meru Farmer's Co-operative Union which he worked to organize.

*"There was no society then", N.N. claimed as she started to grind the dry husks off the mibuni with the strong kneading of her 'sharpening stone', "We were just to take the cherries up to that mzungu during the harvest. We sold most of it to him, and then kept what he would not buy. There were not so many people growing the trees then; and the prices were good, better than the prices for maize" (Interview with N.N., November 1998, Miiiriga Mieru, Meru District)*

Benson did not make serious provisions for the development of marketing co-operatives until 1945 when the political and economic means for developing the local coffee industry were facilitated through changes in colonial policies towards 'cash crops' in the 'African Reserves' and LNC financing.

Asked to comment on their first harvests, N.N. explained "For each debe we brought, that mzungu gave us three coins...you know, the ones with the holes in them". The coins were Indian rupees, which were officially withdrawn as East Africa's currency in the late 1920s, replaced with the sterling based shilling, the currency base in Kenya prior to structural adjustment and the re-regulation of the Kenya Shilling. Bruce Berman (1990) noted that this conversion from rupees to shillings was 'horribly mismanaged', which is not surprising given the use of surplus rupees to pay coffee growers inside the 'Meru Reserve' almost a decade and a half later (Berman 1990: 200). By paying the coffee growers in a limited currency, it is more than suggestive that coffee payments during this 'experimental' period in African coffee production entailed some degree of chicanery on behalf of colonial agencies. The rupee probably remained the unit of currency exchanged for coffee until the establishment of the marketing co-operatives replaced petty-trade and direct marketing with the accredited pay-out system, plied through a number of statutory agencies such as the KPCU, who undoubtedly would have operated on the sterling-based East African shilling. Paying coffee farmers with the coins "with the holes in them" would have allowed coffee brokers, in this case a colonial officer, to maximize on their purchases

of primary agricultural produce, since the rupee was, essentially, value-less outside the 'Reserves'.

Within several minutes of conversation, N.N. had used a stone pestle to grind the hard parchment husks from the *mibuni*. Gathering up the mass of detritus into her hands, N.N. skillfully blew the husks away through the space between her cupped hands, leaving behind small and irregularly shaped green coffee beans.

*N.N. always chatted as she worked, "In the old days, people would learn to use the milling machine to do this, that machine that husks nuts. We bought nuts as well to take to town, but we did not have a machine. I used the grinding stone instead, the ones to make porridge" (Interview with N.N., November 1998, Miiiriga Mieru, Meru District)*

N.N.'s grinding stones, flat granite slabs well worn by decades of use, were placed in conspicuous corners of her compound. "We will need the stones after", *she said while continuing to separate the ground mibuni husks from the beans*. Grinding stones are associated with aged and elderly women. In several compounds I visited, these stones were found just outside the kitchens (*ruiko*). They seemed to be practically placed close to the kitchen, but somehow always made visible. The male equivalent, often tucked away in the dark corners of a man's house, were long wood and iron fighting spears. With some of young men I knew, producing a grandfather's or even great-grandfather's spear was a conspicuous event, meant to reveal a 'traditional' identity that was taken more seriously than a mere relapse into nostalgia. Few material traces of Meru's past remain. Although such tools are generally relics, people take great pride in them and enjoyed telling me about them as evocative, material reference to the 'olden times'.

In N.N.'s small kitchen, a separate construction from their sleeping quarters to avoid the possibility of a house fire, a small stove hearth was stoked to a fierce heat. N.N. kneeled in front of her stove, a clay and iron affair she had built as part of a self-help project. A cast-iron *chapati* pan was placed over the flames, and from a plastic tub of

cooking fat, *Chipi*, N.N. oiled the pan heavily. When the pan smoldered with heat, N.N. tossed the coffee beans onto the pan. The beans were roasted while N.N. turned them over and over in the pan with a spoon. The smell of freshly roasted coffee was stronger than the pungent charcoal smoke. “The beans are ready when they make this noise”, *N.N.* explained while the beans popped and expanded under the heat. At the end of the roasting, barely five minutes, N.N. picked up the hot *chapati* pan with two thin strips of cardboard and poured the lightly burned and crisp coffee beans into an aluminum pot. “They need to cool down”, *she intoned while agitating the pot with circular flicks of her wrists and forearms.* N.N. removed the last charred skins of the husks by tossing the beans over the lip of the pot, forcibly blowing away the rejected material, and letting them clatter back into the vessel lightly before she would toss them up again. This she did about a hundred times as the beans cooled down in the pot. This job requires considerable endurance and co-ordination.

The last step was to grind the roasted beans into a fine powder. Taking her grinding stone and its pestle, N.N. began to crush the beans by grinding them between the surfaces of the stones, using a kneading motion to keep up the rhythm of the hefty job. Soon, a dark brown powder, slightly oily, began to collect on the grinding stone. Using a feather brush N.N. made from picking up a few nearby chicken feathers, she swept the ground soluble coffee into plastic packages and cleaned the grinding stone. At the end of the process, N.N. had about one hundred grams of coffee from about three or four kilograms of dried *mibuni*. She made four small packages from the amount, divided into small clear plastic bags ready for exchange. The four small bags were exchanged with me as a gift from my ‘grand-mother’. *N.N. with her toothy smile, looked happily at the coffee she had made and said, “Now, I have work to do”.*

#### (4.3) The division of labour in the domestic enterprise by principles of age and sex and the straddling tactics of individual household members

During some points in the developmental cycle of the *njaa* , especially where the domestic enterprise can combine and orchestrate the labour processes of several conjugal households, these domestic enterprises are capable of accumulation. This viability, however, is fully dependent upon the division of labour. It should be noted that the sexual division of labour is quite rigid in Meru District, where women have been the cultivators and marketers of beans, maize, and peas, while men have tended to produce coffee, yams, and bananas. In Meru, all of these products are potential cash crops, leaving the divisions of 'food-women'/ 'cash-crop/men' made elsewhere too simple a distinction. Yet, it is exactly this dichotomy which is locally considered as the "customary" division of labour which came about through the commercialization of agriculture. In social practice, women and men do different work and, thus, are differentially positioned within the organization of the domestic enterprise and its division of labour. While it may be said that a greater exposure to work in the towns on behalf of men increases their capacity to accumulate as individuals, women's positionality on the farm gives her access to far more flexible trading ventures in foodstuffs, for which there is always a market. A woman's wide claim to the food crops that she farms is important to the economic viability of the domestic enterprise in times when the husband's or son's coffee crops are performing poorly on the market, or when the collapse of the labour market constrains the men's activities in the household's division of labour.

Although most farm crops are the products of a cooperative household productivity, the production of beans and yams are rigidly separated according to gender. Besides having value in the economic sense, beans and yams are symbolic of the distances between the sexes in everyday life. Beans are associated with women's fertility throughout central Kenya, and yams are meaningful to Meru men as symbols of their claim to the land they occupy.

For many years coffee was a main source of income for the domestic enterprises of Miiiriga Mieru before its decline in the 1990s. In the practical, this has meant movement

towards marketing all farm produce, albeit through radically different marketing channels. Coffee marketed through the co-operative society tended to represent the most complementary farm crop that draws together elders, affine women, and junior men into a long-term labour process. All members of the domestic enterprise are involved in coffee production because of its intense requirements of labour and its money value relative to other crops. Although this money value was almost exclusively controlled by elder men maintaining payment accounts and membership in a local co-operative marketing society, women and junior men have always been involved in the labour processes coffee entails. Complementarity in the division of labour, however, was excluded at the level of coffee marketing and subsequently the course of re-distribution within the domestic enterprise. As a rule, both sexes produce and exchange commercial crops, women trading their foodstuffs and men their coffee surpluses.

This movement towards marketing all crops as commercial crops and securing food through purchase has intensified the pressure upon Meru individuals to straddle - that is, acquire off-farm incomes without necessarily re-investing or remitting portions of the income back into the domestic enterprise. Straddling activities change according to shifts in the division of labour at work in the national (even global) economy. However, they are also subject to the configuration of local relations of production. With this in mind, individual accumulation in Meru District is now something of a normative experience and straddling itself something of an unavoidable social compulsion on adult individuals of both sexes (excepting the elderly). The exception to this, however, is the case of elder men. The elder men are prescriptively the social 'head' of the homestead, issued as they are with the legal and symbolic means to be politically dominant over the domestic group. The elder men frequently have the 'title deed' of their land holding as one such means; while the dividends and registration numbers that they hold as a society member carries with it the power to decide how to control and budget the farm's income. Those persons who are marginalized from claims over the homestead's income must seek their livelihood through

means that are not centered around the homestead's main commercial crops, which are usually controlled by the *akuru* and only in cases of seniority, the *mwekuru*.

Table 4.2: Categories of personhood recognized in Kimeru-speaking communities by age and sex

<u>Masculine categories</u>		<u>Feminine categories<sup>(a)</sup></u>	
<i>mwiji</i>	non-initiated boy	<i>nkendi</i>	girl
<i>ntani</i>	an initiate	***	an initiate
<i>nthaka</i>	young man	<i>muka</i>	young woman
<i>murumi</i>	adult man	<i>mwekuru</i>	adult woman
<i>mukuru</i>	elder	<i>mwariki</i>	senior woman

Source: Peatrick, Anne-Marie (1993), "Age, génération, et temps" chez les merus tigania-igembe du Kenya, *Africa* 63(2), pp. 244. Note (a): Under the feminine categories I have omitted the Kimeru term for an initiate girl because informants in Miiiriga Mieru refused to discuss terminology regarding the circumcision of young girls. Peatrick (1993) includes the reference where she collected her data among the Nyambene Meru.

The labour of young men would be difficult to control if it were not for fairly recognizable and systematic age-sets, dividing the male social world into junior and elder men. These age-sets are institutions that gradually came to be one of the defining features of Meru ethnic identity and the principal prop of gerontocracy as it developed in Meru during the colonial period. In respect to the socially defined domestic group, the youths live apart from the households of their parents, often practice avoidance of their fathers and mothers, and are called *nthaka*. Although youths in Miiiriga Mieru told me that the category of *nthaka* meant "beautiful", the word in Kimeru literally refers to "bush", the latter having connotations of distance and wilderness. Real or symbolic social conflict can be recognized in societies that maintain formal age-sets in their own social organization and

where these categories have been merged with the division of labour. Open conflict between generations is a remarkable feature in the growth of parallel coffee marketing, where young men are spending less time devoted to farm labour in the small-scale coffee plantations, and have moved into the illicit marketing of coffee. The dubious, but present, opportunities of the second economy have hived off young men's labour time from the domestic enterprise as they become middlemen and brokers for the emergent parallel trade in surplus cash-crops. Many young men work in the local quarries, try their hand at street hawking in town, or submit themselves to working as a day labourer (*kibarua*). For many younger men, this movement into economic activities that are not organized by the domestic enterprise is the first in a series of compulsions towards individualization and waged labour.

N.J. is a twenty-six year old man who wants to learn how to repair electrical appliances like radios and television. He knows of courses being offered on electrical craftsmanship in Meru Town and visits a cousin's small repair shop to learn the trade. N.J. is unmarried and lives in his grandparent's compound. Like most other rural young men, he spends a good deal of his time leisurely moving between the town and the village in search of small jobs, trade opportunities, and contacts for jobs. "If you want to find work, there are plenty of jobs", *N.J. told me*, "but not good ones". For several years now, N.J. has worked off and on as an agricultural labourer and an apprentice mason. He also tried a stint at a quarry but complained that the work had made him go "crazy" and get himself into trouble with cannabis and booze. Unlike other young men of his age who travel throughout Kenya in search of adventure, work, and girlfriends N.J. has not left Meru for any appreciable period of time. N.J. often struck me as motivated to take control over his own life and try to break out of his station in life as a labourer, but also struck me as quietly frustrated with the life he was leading. N.J. was not very assertive about his dreams in the presence of his grandfather, the principal man in N.J.'s family. His family was not poor by any means, affording to run farms spread throughout Mieru and Kirua, but N.J.



himself did not have access to their wealth. He was very much on his own. Yet, during fieldwork, I met N.J. at work on his grandfather's roadside coffee *shamba*. In June, he and his male cousins harvested coffee from six separate coffee farms owned by their uncles, fathers, and grandfather. After the harvest, N.J. usually dispenses of any crop surpluses he acquires to get "quick cash". N.J. explained that he does not have the means to be a coffee broker and admits that it was too large a risk with his grandfather to be seen publicly "roaming around on a bicycle looking for coffee". Rather than strike out on his own, N.J. accepts the jobs his kin ask of him but secretly dreams of learning how to do electrical repairs. His hope is that somebody will sponsor him to study in town, but he has not seriously campaigned among his family to assert this goal. Without the means to a sizable individual accumulation, which can never be provided through unremunerated labour, N.J.'s dreams of a formal training or an apprenticeship cannot be actualized. Relatively junior in his domestic group, N.J. cannot make strong claims to the available resources that the group provides and spends his time between unremunerated and waged jobs.

Considering the implications of N.J.'s story for the social division of labour inside the domestic enterprise the following discussion goes into coffee production and its labour process in greater detail. At stake is an understanding of the way the domestic enterprise is under considerable constraint to mobilize labour for the coffee harvest, particularly as other economic activities and opportunities conflict with the capacity of the group to make claims over its members labour.

#### (4.4) Ngugi: Socially necessary labour and the labour processes in coffee production

Small-holder coffee farming was long considered to produce the best quality berries, providing farmers could meet the many requirements of commercial agriculture. The three pressing issues of commercial coffee husbandry were continual land usage without fallow, the high costs of agri-chemical inputs, and the scarcity of labour in the

countryside owing to seasonal shifts in rural demography and labour bottlenecks. With the recent challenges posed by economic liberalization and the sustained coffee 'slump', these requirements have been more difficult to meet for small-holders. To analyze how domestic enterprises in Miiriga Mieru approached coffee production for the June 1998 harvesting season, it is absolutely necessary to isolate the three main concerns effecting coffee production (and marketing) in Meru District. Coffee farming in rural Kenya is first of all characterized by the prominent role of commodities in the production process. This involves a deep use of commodified in-puts that span beyond such things as spray pumps and commercial pesticides, to the use of hired labour and the payment of wages. Small-scale coffee production (less than 1000, but more than 100 trees) is also characterized by a complex composition of labour. Among all crops, it has the most broadly organized labour process that involves the waged and the unwaged, as well as all members of a domestic enterprise regardless of their position in the conjugal household. Coffee production is only partially subsumed into the merchant capitalism that feeds off of Kenya's heightened agricultural productivity. Lastly, the patterns in land usage and the complementary roles of subsistence and cash-crops in that land usage, such as monocultural planting or intercropping, have a relation to the productivity of coffee and the amount of labour time to be invested into crops. In the abstract, these elements of coffee production have their logic in the social relations of production that characterize the farm and off-farm labour of a given domestic enterprise. Empirically, however, the labour processes that go into coffee production and marketing differ remarkably from case to case, as each domestic enterprise must face the requirements of commodities, labour, and land according to its ability to successfully straddle farm and town.

At the level of commodities, the domestic enterprise is under constraint to purchase commercial farm in-puts. Besides setting tools into motion (such as saws, shears, and hoes) coffee requires deliberate and timely applications of chemical products. In the 1998 harvest in Meru District one of the most frequently heard complaints from household heads

(not always men) was the high costs of the insecticides, fungicides, and herbicides recommended for monocultural coffee plantations. Although these in-puts were available on a credit basis through membership in the co-operative marketing society, fewer household heads were participating in these schemes due to the overall depression of prices for their coffee. Without insecticides and fungicides the instances of black ant (*nthingiri*) and stem borer (*mang'inon*) predations, as well as sharp increases in the devastation of coffee trees by fungal diseases like leaf rust (*Hemileia vastatrix*) and coffee berry disease (*Colletotrichum coffeanum*) have led to a precipitate decline in the quality and quantity of coffee production. In some of the *shambas* of Miiiriga Mieru, the coffee trees barely produced any fruit owing to the scale and extent of fungal diseases and insect predations. Although far from being obvious to policy makers, the economic consequences that overlap between collapsed coffee prices and the lack of purchasing power to buy agri-chemical inputs have brought about changes in the labour process.

One of the results of being unable to afford hired labour and being unable to afford chemical inputs has been the fallowing of coffee trees. As we saw in the previous chapter, abandoned coffee became a common sight in some parts of Kenya following the sustained 'slump' and the disorder in the industry during the adjustment to 'free market' structures. In most cases, abandoned coffee is taken over by disease and insects. Where inter-cropping has been introduced in place of abandonment, farmers grow maize, beans, and sweet potatoes planted and spaced out amongst the rows of coffee trees. Although most farmers practice inter-cropping with their coffee, some farmers complained that the yields to their coffee trees are lowered through competition with maize. Commercial fertilizers have been used extensively to balance the nutrient deficiencies that incur to the soils through competing commercial crops, and some farmers who have been applying chemical and organic fertilizers to their land for years have complained of lowered fertility of the soil and the poor productivity of their principle crops. Some of the more optimistic farmers recommend sweet potato rotations to compensate for nitrate deficiencies, and have taken

steps to plant more indigenous crops. To compensate for the lack of inputs, which greatly reduce the labour time of organic crop husbandry, the farmers who could not afford insecticides or fungicides would revert to traditional cultivation techniques (*kienyeji*). For instance, a handful of farmers borrowed a technique from lowland tobacco farmers by making home made "insecticide" (*dawa*) by mixing together noxious concoctions of local pepper and vegetable compost which protected coffee against insects such as mites. Another trick borrowed from *miraa* farming was to smoke the coffee trees with a variety of aromatic leaves said to "chase" insects.

Yet, the most common response has been to intensify the pressure on women and young men to divert their labour time into coffee production. When coffee provided a sufficient cash income to the household heads with membership in the co-operative marketing society this labour situation would have been avoided by hiring neighborhood labourers. Recently, however, coffee earnings have been unable to cover this expenditure in the form of wages, and the internal exploitation of individuals residing on the home farm has intensified. The intensification of labour in coffee production effectively means an increased labour time for all members of the conjugal household. Reversion to organic crop husbandry, requiring painstaking attention to hoeing, mulching, fertilizing, pruning, and weeding, greatly increasing the working day. If a household can afford to hire labour, its members may be free to do other work. From the sample of 24 domestic enterprises in the farm surveys, five groups could not afford to hire day labourers (*kibarua*) during peak periods of activity, and were compelled to call upon "family labour" to get past the bottleneck. The remainder of households were reliant on hired agricultural labour to make their domestic enterprise feasible, but who were dependent on off-farm remittances from waged household members. From interviews with household heads, it became clear that one factor raising the costs of labour was the length of time required for crop husbandry following the decline in the use of commercially available inputs. The under-consumption of chemical inputs is owed to their prohibitive costs on the liberalized agricultural

marketplace, a fact that local Miiiriga Mieru farmers were well aware of. By removing subsidies for purchases of chemical inputs, the domestic enterprise is forced to subsidize its production through intensifying the length of the labour process, and compelling its dependent members to divert additional and unremunerated labour to the domestic enterprise.

For a cash crop like coffee that is marketed through the co-operative marketing society, a great deal of unremunerated labour is subsumed into production, especially in the "donation" of women's' and young men's labour to the coffee factory during the harvesting season, which runs from May until the end of June. Without any exceptions, each domestic enterprise in the survey sample pledged some form of "voluntary" and unpaid labour to the coffee factory during the May to June harvest, labour that was overwhelmingly performed by junior men, affine women, and school children. A fieldnote taken from my journal for the period is illustrative of such a division of labour:

Kaaga's official 'village headman', J.I., showed me how his wife would use a weighted hook to bend the tall *arabica* branches to the ground to get at the cherries beyond her reach. He had made the weighted hook out of a piece of twisted and rusting re-bar embedded into an old paint can filled with cement. The cemented weight held the branches down while the tree could be harvested, without strain or unnecessary delay. Most of the women I watched harvesting were deft and mechanical in stripping the trees of their product. Many made a point of telling me that harvesting was womens' work.

J.I.'s wife, who I knew only through frequent offerings of food and roadside greetings, would take her husband's coffee cherries to the coffee factory on the designated days of Monday, Thursday, and Saturday depending on the volume of cherries left in their trees. The primary agricultural cooperatives, who manage the factories, or pulping stations, on behalf of the cooperative's members, designated these days as harvesting and registering days to make the process more efficient; retain the tart quality of the picked cherries; and avoid interfering with the local market days, which habitually fall on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays in Meru Town. The latter aspect is significant for organizing the gendered division of labour that characterizes commercial agriculture in Meru District along the Miiiriga Mieru zones. Women, almost exclusively, are responsible for marketing and trading surplus agricultural produce, usually through the municipal market-places, but equally, along the roadways from small wooden stands.

During the May and June coffee harvest, on Tuesdays or Thursdays, the women and junior men of agriculturally productive households begin their days early with picking the cherries, break for other activities, and transport the burlap sacks of cherries to the factory where they will be sorted, recorded, and pledged to the cooperative's increasing and amalgamated yield.

Although the early morning work of harvesting coffee cherries can be quite a solemn affair, the afternoon's participation on the factory grounds, picking out the dross from the acceptable in the small heaps of autumn-colored cherries, is characterized by a social conviviality. People converse with loud voices across one another as they busily remove the poorer, diseased fruits from a pile reserved for its quality and value. Sometimes the junior men who are busy alongside the women, selecting the best from their harvest to give to the factory as recorded pledge, have spent the afternoon's pause from agricultural work drinking local booze: the clear moonshine locals call *kanga*, but most Kenyans call *chang'aa*. Drunkenness is accepted at this collective job, nobody seems to mind, since the idea is to get through the tedious task in as pleasant a manner as possible.

Those whose yield was small, or who worked fastidiously, quit their work a bit earlier than the others, staying on for some time chatting under the corrugated tin shade of the factory's *kibanda* (a hangar). While discussing the harvest and comparing its small output to other harvests in the past, a woman reprimands her small child for digging through the trampled earth below and adding desiccated, hardened and forgotten beans from previous harvests to the collective heaps. The child's mimicry of the adults' behaviour marks the beginning of her familiarity with the coffee harvest, a pattern that may remain into her own adulthood (Miiriga Mieru, June 20th 1998: a journal entry).

The women and junior men who work for the domestic enterprise during the coffee harvest are rarely co-operative marketing society members themselves. It is normatively fathers or grandparents who are shareholding members of the co-operative society and who have a registration number with a credit account. For women, it is usually their husband who retains the society membership and control over accounts. As the affine women become elders within the domestic enterprise, however, their own entrepreneurial control over their cereal crops develops. As elder women, often working land from her husband's kin as well as fragments of her brothers' pledged to her, the complementarity of husbands and wives over coffee production is gradually separated into distinct spheres of production and marketing grounded in principles of gender. As a mature woman develops her cereal and food trade, she is less active in the running of her husband's farm. The separation in productive activities eventually allows wives to accumulate as individuals outside of the conjugal household.

For children old enough to do more technically proficient jobs than carrying jerry cans of water and fetching woodfuel, their participation in the labour process for coffee production is likely to be reserved for carrying cherries to the processing factory on the

organized harvest days. They are also expected to assist in harvesting the later cherries that mature after the peak labour process of May and June. If they are schoolchildren, this is labour they perform after school or on their days off school.

In the actual harvesting of coffee cherries during the busy months of May and June, the appropriators of the valuable coffee crop are not present, save in the form of managing those whose labour has been recruited during the season. The registered owners are normatively men of elder status, invariably the holder of a title-deed to their land holdings, and usually those whose crop husbandry and labour time has been subsumed in the agricultural year leading up to the harvest season. Their absence from the labour of the harvesting period, although sometimes due to off-farm employment, is frequently the public expression of the internal organization of the household and its hierarchical composition.

It is an absence, however, that entails its social costs. As mentioned previously, the co-operative society member is the last person to receive payment for coffee processed through the vertical marketing regime from factory to auction. The actual payments are generally so slow that farmers are compelled to organize the labour of their domestic enterprise in such a manner that they avoid paying workers in cash. They recruit purportive family labour to prevent paying out wages, but enter into relations of reciprocity with family members. Although agricultural workers (*kibarua*) may be paid in kind if wages are judged to be less valuable (which happens during drought or cereal stockpiling), the majority can command about a 100 KSH per day of work (\$2.50 CDN per day) and a supplementary meal during the workday. Family labour, as we have established, is unremunerated but may be subject to other forms of exchange. The generalized exchange that takes place between individuals within the organization of the domestic enterprise often takes on the forms of promises to distribute money or agricultural goods in the future.

Within the domestic enterprise a considerable effort is needed from each participant to negotiate the terms of deploying family labour (cf. Berry 1993). In the wake of the

coffee harvesting, redistribution within the Meru conjugal household takes place through dividing the surplus coffee cherries among those whose labour was subsumed in the crop's production. This is done through subjective and prescriptive lines, often indicating the uneven relationships that comprise the domestic enterprise through age and sex differentials. As such, when the petty-trade of coffee cherries picks up pace in the harvesting period, there are invariably accusations of theft of potential coffee surpluses. It is clear that this negotiation over coffee cherries destined for the markets of the second economy are punctuated by claims and counter-claims over the domestic enterprise's productivity, and that these claims are riddled with tensions that leave few household members uninvolved.

The seasonal trade in surplus coffee produce is effected through a number of very different practices carried out by different persons. For presenting each of the cases of petty-trade in coffee surplus ethnographically, it is necessary to describe the social relations that make such trade possible. In this trade, it is not women who are the main social actors, but the junior men of coffee producing homesteads who are the most active traders. This fact should not be taken too lightly, for it is indicative of the social tensions within Meru between those generations of elders who restrict membership to the co-operative marketing society to their peers, and deny young men access to potentially lucrative agricultural crops, save through an exchange of a son's labour for a possible surplus. Whereas women are generally marginalized from co-operative marketing societies and the property rights that go along with society membership, women extend property rights into the distribution and marketing of foodstuffs. It is rare that the younger men of a household would gain any rights over harvested foodstuffs, save the right to be fed as a member of an extended conjugal household organized around a father or grandfather. Their claim is over a share in the surplus of coffee cherries that are not marketed through the co-operative.

The final sections of the chapter focuses on the petty-trade of coffee surpluses. In understanding the straddling activities of Meru's farmer-traders, most of whom are married



women or unmarried young men, a consideration of how surplus coffee enters the 'free market' outside of the vertical marketing regime is presented. This is a necessary step in discussing the local appropriation of *Soko Huru* in Meru District's coffee growing zones in Chapter Five. With this in mind, the discussion moves towards petty-trade in coffee cherries and its significance to the localized economics of everyday life as well as to the wider national economy this is related to.

#### (4.5) Trading surplus coffee after the harvest: petty-trade, individual economic activity, and the attractions of *Soko Huru*

A great deal of Miiiriga Mieru's coffee harvests do not proceed into the vertical marketing regime. Instead, as produce rejected by the quality standards of the local coffee factory's management, or set aside and stored during harvests to dry in the fruit as a 'surplus', a considerable volume of coffee hits markets that the Coffee Act of Kenya fails to acknowledge and the Coffee Board of Kenya fails to endorse. No figures are available on the amount of coffee surpluses, but they are judged to be significant enough to make a parallel market thrive for several weeks after the official coffee harvest. Each coffee growing family knows that the factory will not take all of their coffee harvest. This is chiefly because their voluntary labour of sorting and selecting the coffee cherries at the factory grounds is the same labour that brings home the rejected produce. In the compounds of many homesteads during July and August when the coffee harvesting season is over, men and women dry their rejected coffee cherries in the fruit, spread out thinly on tarpaulins laid out on the ground exposed to the sun. Some people prefer to use an elevated granary, or else cover the desiccated cherries with mats of banana leaves to act as readily available de-hydrators, but most use tarps. When the cherries cure inside their own fruit they are classified as *mibuni*. The Coffee Act (1977) recognizes *mibuni* as a form of marketable coffee, chiefly because it is sold internally to other African countries, such as Uganda, as an *arabica* blend. When the Miiiriga Mieru people cure their surplus cherries at home, they do so to prepare themselves for the intensive 'parallel' trade in

*mibuni* that continues well into August and sometimes September. According to the Coffee Act (1977), what is rejected by the coffee factory management during harvests cannot be legally marketed. Significantly for the primary producers of Kenya coffee, a considerable volume of coffee cherries brought to the pulping station return to the households as unwanted, surplus produce. No figures for the amount of rejected produce relative to the processed volumes are available from the records of the co-operative marketing society. As a challenge to most studies of economic procedure, an assessment must be attempted through the use of the qualitative.

From many years of coffee harvesting, the normal practices for a producing household is to make provisions for the anticipated surpluses. A household involved in the selecting of coffee cherries at the factory calls this process *matoro* in Kimeru, meaning the removal of the “good from the bad”. This practice relates equally well to the harvesting and processing of foodstuffs such as maize and beans as to coffee. Coffee cherries selected as *matoro* are excluded from the vertical marketing regimes which are the basis of the workings of effective economies of scale. The selected *matoro* produce represents the bulk of the coffee that will dry in the fruit and qualify as *mibuni*, the desiccated coffee that has long been peddled in alternative markets in Kenya.

In the case of coffee cherries, there is usually a considerable surplus. It is not only that Meru farmers “cannot eat coffee”, but that its surpluses are denied a legal marketing outlet, thus the surplus from the coffee harvest is unlike that of surplus food production. With food surpluses, an individual may market them through many open channels, and failing their sale, they may be stored for a later market or can be eaten. With coffee, being a “cash crop”, its only value lies in its exchange-value. Thus, payment of junior or subordinate persons living in the homestead with a potentially marketable surplus (maize, beans, as well as coffee) fulfills the obligations of the senior members of the domestic group towards their juniors. Considering that it is the young men and the junior (or affine) women who do the most amount of agricultural work, the non-monetized payment for their

labour in surplus coffee cherries represents a clear way that elders may avoid using cash reciprocities within their own homesteads and compounds.

Petty-trade in coffee surpluses takes place in the following social conjunctions. A small proportion of women turn towards barter as a medium for exchange, using small measures of coffee surpluses to obtain basic household supplies. More importantly, however, a relatively large cadre of young “coffee brokers” turn towards buying and selling coffee surpluses on behalf of larger wholesalers. These wholesalers tend to be larger farmers trying to maximize their output through the deployment of greater amounts of capital. The economic relationships between local traders and middlemen leads to the subsidization of larger estate plantations by the surplus produce brought by the “coffee brokers”. In addition to the presence of larger farmers buying surplus coffee from smaller farmers, there has been an increase in coffee trading between Meru middlemen and Somali trader-merchants. Using brief ethnographic examples, each of these cases of petty-trade will be examined in contrast to the regulations of the national coffee industry.



(Photograph 4.3) A coffee farmer takes stock of the *matoro* in the weeks after the harvest.  
Munithu

(4.5.1) Women and shopkeepers: everyday needs, domestic relationships, and barter in the wake of the coffee harvest

The main forms of exchange based on money, credit, and barter all come into account in the economics of coffee marketing. In some instances when money is scarce and coffee cherries (or *mibuni*) plentiful, the options to acquire small amounts of household goods through barter are available to local people. Typically, a few surplus kilograms of coffee cherries can be exchanged for such goods as sugar, tea, UHT milk, matches, and paraffin that are available at local stores (*duka*). For petty-trade during the late coffee harvest, the local *duka* are depositories for a number of transactions dealing in surplus coffee, places that are conveniently located near homesteads and coffee factories alike.

Barter involving coffee cherries is usually a form of exchange between female household members and the male proprietors of small *duka*. Whereas the larger official marketing structure of Kenya coffee deals exclusively in relations of credit and money, local women are often marginalized from both of these forms of exchange by not acquiring society memberships or from being denied direct access to the coffee harvest *en masse*. Women's responsibilities for securing the consumption needs of their households are well documented in the ethnographies of rural Kenyan life (Haugerud 1996; Davison 1996). Since women are more likely to be excluded from the pay-outs from the formally marketed coffee crops, their ability to access both money and credit are highly circumscribed. More often, their access to unwanted surpluses of coffee cherries, acquired through having the right to claim something back from their own labour expended on coffee, shirks the highly constrained logic of waiting on money and credit when immediate needs confronting the household are demanding some form of action from them as individual women. Without exaggeration, in the communities this study is based on, the absence of basic foodstuffs in a household can incite an excuse for a husband to abuse a wife, either verbally or violently. Here, barter may serve as a solution to the problems of money that face rural women in Kenya. As Humphrey and Hugh-Jones (1992) admit, recourse to barter may be much more

than a simple aversion to monetised exchange where “people may be so poor, may need things so much in order to carry on daily life, that they cannot afford to hold any of their assets in money” (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992: 4). In rural Meru, it was less likely to be poverty, *per se*, that led people to choose to barter, but rather the temporary lack of money.

The use of barter was revealed to me mostly through conversations with shopkeepers and from spending quite a lot of leisure time with young men who tended to congregate around the shops (*madukane*) in the afternoons and early evenings. One time, J.K. and I were lounging at the *duka* when I noted the use of barter. J.K.'s cousin, a woman I had never seen before, arrived at the store carrying two plastic bags. J.K. waited for her to greet him and then accompanied her to the store's counter. The story came back to me that J.K. would have to go away with his cousin and help her bring something back to the shop. The event was so mundane I probably would not have noticed it, except that J.K.'s absence from the shop for the following hour led me to question his whereabouts. As it turned out, J.K.'s cousin was exchanging a fairly sizable amount of coffee her mother had dried in the fruit, about twenty kilograms, for about three kilograms of rice. J.K. later confirmed with me that the rice was for his brother's pre-wedding party and that neither he nor his cousin had any money to buy rice with. His mother had asked them to help her with the party preparations, and as a last-minute resort the two cousins had opted to sell some of the left over coffee. The shopkeeper had refused to trade the amount that J.K.'s cousin originally brought, asking for a larger exchange. J.K. felt confident enough to take additional coffee from one of his mother's tarpaulins, a collection that J.K. had contributed towards throughout the harvest period himself. It struck me that the cousins could come up with rice, or money if they needed to, relying not just on their own claims on the surplus coffee crop, but the claims of other as well.

During the months of June, July, and August shopkeepers are focal players in the exchange of coffee cherries for other goods. The owners of *duka* are particularly aware of

the impossibility of offering credit to their customers. Many keep commercially produced signs deterring people from asking for credit, the most prolific of which depict nineteenth-century European caricatures of two merchants, one being the neer'-do-well merchant dressed in rags saying "I sold on credit", and the other sitting fine in sporty clothes smoking a pipe claiming "I sold in cash". The motif is backed up in the refusal of shopkeepers to go anywhere near the subject of credit. Another sign that was popular with shopkeepers in Miiriga Mieru was one that proclaimed in red ink, "Credit is business poison". Yet, barter and money were an integral part of everyday transactions for the small entrepreneur running a rural shop. According to one young shopkeeper, R.J., barter is "all a part of doing business". For about five years this shopkeeper has never foregone a profit in bartering his shop goods for coffee cherries, or macademia nuts:

"In the five years I've been here, the coffee harvests have brought me good fortune. You know, I don't buy coffee from people, they bring it (and between us )we know what it is worth. This year, I can get rid of any coffee at the (normal) rate. This is the same thing as last year. When I sell to the coffee brokers (mibuni), there is money in it. So, when people come, I take their coffee and they go with the tea (or whatever)" (Interview with R.J., Miiriga Mieru, July 1998)

Small-scale merchants like this one know the exchange ratios, and can often use this knowledge to their advantage. In the conversations I held with *duka* owners, most considered themselves apart from the traffic in coffee because of the negative moral associations around selling outside of formally sanctioned channels. All in all, however, these pivots in the informal coffee trade set the precedent for a rapid distribution of coffee surpluses, and most would probably discontinue the practice if it were not profitable. The fact that no payment in money is incurred for their deposits of coffee cherries, and trade is slow in general, generally puts shopkeepers in an advantageous position when the "coffee brokers" come to buy the coffee from the shopkeepers, making as much money from the deal as if they were the primary producers of the commodity.

(4.5.2) Young men and the second economy: "coffee brokers", Somali traders, and capitalist farmers

Beyond the trade between individuals and shopkeepers there is a category of trader that is locally specific to the illicit marketing of surplus coffee. These are the "coffee brokers", as they are called in Miiriga Mieru. Coffee brokers are those who deal in coffee during the post-harvest period. The activities of traders whose capital is greater than that of the coffee brokers, such as the local capitalists who have coffee estate licenses and the clandestine Somali traders, intensifies the bids on relatively lucrative produce in ungraded and unmonitored coffee. Both the local estate planters and Somali traders have different ways of finding their markets, but both rely on the role of the local coffee broker, usually young Kimeru-speaking men with considerable networks of dealers and players inside rural locations. These young coffee brokers are the first linkage in the parallel market for Meru coffee that connects it to the second economy in Kenya at large.

The case of twenty-five year old E.J. is illustrative. Despite working many different small jobs to come across cash, most of which are *kibarua* (daily wage work), E.J. counts on getting enough of the coffee cherry surplus every year to start a small accumulation. He is a small player in the "coffee broker" scene, but getting his hands on a few dozen kilograms from his grandparents eventually leads him to make cash within several weeks of hard work in buying and selling coffee cherries. E.J.'s father gave him a coffee *shamba* as an inheritance when his father moved permanently to Nairobi, but the grandfather is the only registered society member. The bulk of E.J.'s coffee is amalgamated with that of his grandfather's and his three uncle's. Unlike the uncles, who receive a proportion of the cash the grandfather receives, or get their children's school fees in advance through the grandfather's bank account, E.J. does not receive cash for the coffee he tends to throughout the year. Even during the harvest, when the factory manager has rejected some of their crop as inferior, or if the cherries had been picked too early and were curing on their own, E.J. regards the surplus coffee as rightfully "his". On this score, there are only one of his cousins, a young woman, who is given a share in the surplus. Taking an active



economic interest in acquiring as much of the coffee cherry surplus as he can, E.J. promises to pay his cousin in cash if she pledges him the coffee that the grandfather says she is entitled to. With this kind of pledge, E.J. builds upon his ability to be a successful middleman in surplus coffee, eventually selling quite large quantities to other brokers with whom he has maintained contacts with.

The typical coffee broker is young, unwaged, and Kimeru-speaking. They normally own (or have access to) a bicycle, usually cast-iron Chinese or Indian imports with carrying frames on the front and back for transporting the produce they buy. Two of the coffee brokers I spoke with were using borrowed pick-ups to transport the coffee. These traders who had the vehicle, could work within the district at large, moving from Chogoria to Njeru buying up as much coffee as they could. This range is over 70 km by tarmac and murrum roads. For the majority of traders, however, the bicycle was the ideal way to get around, particularly since the rural access roads are often no more than foot-worn pathways, and a bicycle allows one to get off the main feeder roads. By comparison, the bicycle could ostensibly give the broker a range of hundreds of kilometres! However, given the limits to the amounts of surplus coffee available in a short period of time, speed is the essential quality for successful trading. The trade is marked by its seasonality and the hectic pace whereby it is exhausted. In late July, when the first digging begins in the shambas, young coffee brokers are busy from morning until sun-down canvassing the rural landscape for unsolicited coffee cherries. By early August they are left buying the last of the *mibuni* in very low quantities. For the coffee brokers, the trade is only worthwhile for a few weeks of the year. These are weeks of heightened tension over personal freedoms and labour in the domestic enterprise.

The local coffee trade of June and July is linked to the macro-economics of Kenya through two intermediate economic activities; (1) purchase of surplus coffee by the large-estate planters of Meru District who sell as competitive players in the national industry; (2)

purchase of high quality *mibuni* by unlicensed traders. These two linkages between local actors and the second economy in Kenya coffee are outlined below.

In the Miiriga Mieru localities of Chugu and Munithu, the isolated market place of Kienderu serves as the depot for the Somali traders. Kienderu was formerly a thriving market place when the road to Maua passed by it from Meru Town, but with the 1981 building of the main tarmac road connecting the Nyambene Range to Meru Town it eclipsed as a market. In the last few years, with the return of Somali traders to Miiriga Mieru after almost thirty years, Kienderu has become a significant trading center once again, albeit seasonally determined. Besides the short, but lucrative trading season, Kienderu is capable of being an economic center for most of the year. In the small market there is a large Ntima coffee factory, a diesel maize mill, a few abattoirs, and a variety of tea shops and retail stores. The arrival of Somali traders in Kienderu eager to buy coffee under the sanctity of *Soko Huru* spread throughout the countryside as a call to action and a potential source of needed income. The Somali traders come from Isiolo in their diesel-fed Toyota Land Cruisers to buy *mibuni* at Kienderu, where it is alleged they have hired a storehouse and a manager. Traveling by night along roads that are not patrolled by the Kenya Police, the Somalis make their way to Kienderu through back-roads connecting Ruiru and Isiolo (that do not appear as roads on the map). Once there, they give money to their principle coffee brokers to purchase more *mibuni* and then take their purchases back towards Isiolo for marketing in the Northern Province and beyond. Since Somali are large consumers of coffee, I estimate that the coffee is purchased for sale among Somali nationals and Kenyan Somalis living in the northern communities and towns near Wajir and Garrissa.

The close proximity of capitalist farmers who run small coffee processing plants and maintain their own medium-sized coffee estates allows the local coffee brokers a comparable advantage by selling their collected produce at a higher price. Brokers add 'value' to coffee collections simply through transporting them directly to the plantation buyer. Most of the coffee brokers I spoke with expect the high prices being paid for coffee

in the second economy to fall dramatically. In this case, it is the local “big coffee farmers” who buy the surplus and add it to their own production. When the returns are favourable at the central auctions, bigger producers maximize their sales to the millers in other parts of the country by buying up local surpluses. The local coffee plantation owners are something of a novelty, particularly since Meru District was envisioned by the post-colonial Special Rural Development Programme (SRDP) in the 1970s to be a ‘small farms area’. This development strategy ruled out the vision of Meru District as an environment for large farms requiring capitalist relations of production. An indication of this is found in the lack of large-scale irrigation schemes. In the case of one prominent local capitalist, N.N., who owns one of the largest coffee estates in Meru District, speculation and investment into coffee began with the initial liberalization measures allowing licensed planters to own and operate coffee pulping stations under the amendments to the Coffee Act in 1993. Practically, however, N.N. had become a successful local capitalist through his exploitation of the Imenti Forest and his near-monopoly over the district’s timber and saw-milling industry. When restrictions on logging and milling timber came down through legal protection for forest reserves, N.N. switched to another profitable Meru industry: coffee. His exploitation of the Tiganian coffee farmers’ out-put during the years of 1995 onwards is something of a local legend, since this encroachment led to a wild selling of Tiganian coffee produce exclusively to N.N. Within a short three years the marketing co-operatives defaulted on loan payments and were disbanded and legally liquidated. In Miiiriga Mieru, N.N. purchases a considerable amount of coffee, but it is one of his competitors, M.J., whose presence has been felt there. M.J. emerged as a local businessmen involved in buying coffee after his high-ranking post in Kenya Post and Telecommunications was annulled. Whatever the particulars of these businessmen’s accumulation of capital, they are emerging as a new form of coffee farmer in Meru District; those who can by-pass the usual logistical restrictions of the economies of scale that face co-operatively organized coffee producers; those who have the capital available to purchase additional coffee to add

to their own industrial out-put; those who sell directly to the appointed miller or even to the Coffee Board of Kenya.

In terms of the national economics of the coffee industry in Kenya, capitalists of this size compete with the productivity of the small-scale farmer organized into co-operative marketing societies. Yet, there may be an argument that these kinds of middle-sized coffee farmers are dependent upon the additional accumulation of high quality coffee that is considered only feasible by the attentive and careful small-holder (Bates 1989: 173). The costs of commercial inputs and waged labour make it crucial that the middle-sized coffee farmer, such as N.N. or M.J., purchase the high quality produce that is characteristic of small-scale coffee farming in order to keep their own out-put competitive on a market renowned for its strict quality controls. This is the marketing strategy employed by estate planters throughout Kenya, who would otherwise produce an inferior grade of coffee.

#### (4.6) Conclusion

The chapter described how the individual accumulation that is characteristic of the 'free market' (or the second economy) is in social tension with the labour requirements of production in the domestic enterprise. Invariably, the degree of power that elders exercise over young men's and women's farm labour during the coffee harvest creates social tensions within the household. The coffee harvest is a period of negotiation and compromise between individuals, but it is also a period of time when individuals are compelled to donate labour to a crop that is usually controlled by the most senior men in a domestic enterprise. The tensions arise most acutely when there is a sharp use of the 'customary' division of labour by age and sex, and when the hierarchical relationships of the conjugal household are most visible. For junior men and women, a response to these tensions involves the exploitation of their given resources more acutely, calling upon immediate access to surplus crops in the absence of wages, and making demands upon their elders to reciprocate in the future. The widespread use of surplus coffee as a means of

payment allows those who are excluded from the cooperative marketing society to accumulate some money from the harvest through deals of coffee in the second economy.

Although the coffee industry is in decline it still provides opportunities for some social actors in rural districts like Meru. Outside of the local capitalists and Somali traders, the 'free market' in surplus coffee largely assists the unwaged to accumulate money from their own economic agency. The labour process during the coffee harvest and the trading of coffee surpluses allows marginal individuals of households to make small personal acquisitions of necessary goods or money. In some cases, it leads to genuine individual accumulation. The constraint is that trading coffee is illegal within the legal framework of the State. From within the moral, social, and juridical relationships that are maintained within the household the participation of junior individuals is generally frowned upon, although tolerated. Problems arise when an individual's absence from socially necessary labour within the domestic enterprise during the coffee harvesting season is explained in light of their involvement in *Soko Huru*. This is what happened to the group of young men that have been identified as coffee brokers. In taking on this identity, the coffee broker embraces a social role that is not entirely acceptable to their family and their elders. In some cases it can be interpreted as a threat to the domestic enterprise. In these cases, conflicts rather than cooperation occur. Yet, at the same time these individuals tailor the meanings of *Soko Huru* to their own economic needs, apart from the needs of the domestic enterprise. Their activities in the second economy are creatively situated in the discourse of the 'free market'. *Soko Huru* is both an alibi and a legitimization of their economic individualism and the illicit nature of their trade activities.

The creative response to marginalization in the current economic crisis on behalf of youth is challenged, however, when other social actors in the co-operative marketing societies speak of *Soko Huru*. Here, the most prominent members of the co-operative marketing societies have their own use of the 'free market' discourse. This discourse is part of a public debate within Miiriga Mieru about Kenya's economic crisis. Many voices lay

claim to *Soko Huru*, but it is the privileged tiers of the co-operative marketing society that have the loudest voice. Inside the co-operative, the 'free market' that facilitates illicit trade is radically opposed to the version the management committees defend. As Chapter Five explores *Soko Huru* in the context of the co-operative marketing society, the multiple appropriations of 'free market' discourse found in Miiriga Mieru come to conflicting terms as local and State issues collide. The ethnographic objects of Chapter Five are the various appropriations of 'free market' discourse from differing positions within the co-operative marketing society.

## Chapter Five

### **The local appropriation of *Soko Huru* inside the co-operative marketing societies**

#### **(5.1) Introduction**

The positions taken on *Soko Huru* and the local coffee industry in Meru differ according to who one speaks with. Coffee brokers, by and large, take *Soko Huru* to mean the lifting of moral sanctions on petty-trade of coffee cherries, an expansion in the market for coffee that is part of the second economy and still technically illicit. However important for the outcome of the economic liberalization programmes under SAPs, the interpretation of *Soko Huru* as a legal coming of age for parallel markets and illicit trading is particular to a marginal economic positionality not generally held by active members of the co-operative marketing societies. Inside the co-operatives, *Soko Huru* is appropriated by prominent individuals who have positions of power inside the structure of the co-operative marketing society. They use the discourse surrounding *Soko Huru* to represent changes in the industry that will impact upon those who are less powerful and less productive in the society. The members promoting *Soko Huru* are small-farmers specializing in the intensification of coffee production through the use of hired labour and through attempts to expand the scale of production through the organizational power of the co-operative marketing society. As such, participants in the co-operative societies, from the waged labourers at the coffee factories to their employers in the form of the management committees, have a stake in the way that 'free market' discourse comes to have an impact on the local co-operative marketing society.

Social actors appropriate *Soko Huru* in ways that reflect their positionality within the industry. Discussion on this point opens with ethnographic fragments from an

interview with a coffee factory manager. If the coffee factory manager's position led him to defend economic liberalization and criticize the disorder that is ensuing in its wake, what are some of the other perspectives local actors have constructed on the changes within the coffee industry? The following discussions focus on how *Soko Huru* is appropriated by agencies with close relationships to the state apparatus. A great deal of the ethnographic situations presented throughout the chapter are concerned with the question of who has the power to define 'free market' discourse at a national level. Here, the local appropriations of *Soko Huru* have little resonance with the discourse of economic liberalization as defined and implemented by policy makers. However, the definition of *Soko Huru* issuing from the agents of the State is adopted by the key "active" members inside the co-operative marketing society as their own. The appropriations of 'free market' discourse by this latter category of commodity producer, although by no means uniform, express their own social positionality in the coffee industry at both local and national levels.

The following discussion represents the most dominant voices from within the co-operative marketing society as members debate the meanings and consequences of *Soko Huru*. Highlighted below is the conservative idea that one ought to "stick with the society", especially when confronted by competition and greater complexity of the social division of labour following the sudden shocks of liberalization measures. Silenced by the dominant ideas surrounding the appropriation of *Soko Huru* within the co-operative marketing society are those discourses on the 'free market' that stem from the most marginalized in the social division of labour. The mild empowerment of social marginals like coffee brokers through 'free market' discourse threatens many coffee farmers within the co-operative marketing society. Some feel that to encourage illicit trade outside the tightly constrained vertical marketing regime is to participate in their own demise as farmers. Still others feel that they are being manipulated and lied to by the leading agents of their co-operative marketing society and quietly encourage illicit trade through keeping a low profile. In turn, members of the co-operative society's management committee



consider their members to be too ignorant to understand the 'true' consequences of *Soko Huru* and berate them for failing to produce high quality coffee. What is important from the point of view of the ethnographer, however, is not the meaning of *Soko Huru* , but rather what these definitions tell about the people who coin them.

In order to represent the differences in meaning attributed to *Soko Huru* , I have relied on the reconstruction of the discourses drawn from several interviews with society members and through attending two meetings on economic liberalization held by the co-operatives. In presenting these views ethnographically, my own impressions articulated in my fieldnotes and discourse recorded by different speakers converge in a series of narratives. Recorded dialogue appears as quotations taken from direct speech. Where a portion of the narrative stems from a re-working of my fieldnotes, the passage will be italicized for contrast. This distinction between direct speech and my own impressions accommodate the distinct points of view coming into play in the construction of this narrative. By doing this, I avoid attributing to the narrative the entirety of my own perspective and allow for some direct quotation, albeit translated from Kiswahili and Kimeru to English. In other words, this style is sought out to preserve the intersubjectivity invested in Meru responses to *Soko Huru* and to represent the multiplicity of social tensions that *Soko Huru* provokes.

The next discussions look at social situations where irregular practices have led to social antagonism within the social structure of the co-operative marketing society. The first situation involves the use of the society's accounts to exchange amounts of coffee between society members during the harvesting. The second explores the moral opprobrium that stems from the disorder in the marketing of coffee following the intensification of competition and exploitation among participants in the market society and those from without. The last discussion briefly touches upon a failed attempt to organize struggle clandestinely in the society with the intentions of ousting a particular faction from

leadership positions. These discussions are included in the chapter as ethnographic prompts, demonstrating the level of conflict following the public issue of *Soko Huru*.



(Photograph 5.1) Parchment coffee curing on the coffee factory's drying tables, Kienderu

(5.2) A coffee factory manager speaks about *Soko Huru* and the co-operative marketing society

Coffee factory managers demonstrate a considerable practical knowledge about the production and marketing of parchment coffee. They hold insightful comparative knowledge about the social conflicts inside the co-operatives between parties of members aligned to particular factions within the organizations. M.M manages Kaaga's Ntima factory. He lives within walking distance to the Kaaga factory at Karemene, one of the densely populated hamlets inside Miiriga Mieru. I met him during a session where members were bringing their coffee cherries to the factory. For several weeks during the

harvesting we had moments together, free from the busy pace of the factory work, when he would answer questions about the local dynamics of the coffee industry. M.M. was always willing to speak to me about the services of the co-operative society from a technical perspective. This was the case because, as a manager at the coffee factory, he spoke daily with members, addressing the problems of hundreds of local people growing coffee.

One of the topics I pursued with M.M. was the meaning of *Soko Huru*. Although I had already been sensitized to economic liberalization in agriculture by talking with farmers throughout the hamlets in Miiriga Mieru on other occasions, talking about it with M.M. placed it in the context of the cooperative agricultural society. *Soko Huru* would remain a concern of the society and local farmers throughout the length of the fieldwork. It was, locally, a kind of public issue.

M.M. explained that Ntima Farmers Cooperative Society had begun to send their coffee to Thika Millers Limited in 1996 as an alternative to the Kenya Planter's Coffee Union (KPCU):

" It's up to the management committee to choose which miller to send the parchment to. The co-operative society is free to choose the millers now. *Soko Huru* has been with the society for about three years, but we don't know its benefits yet. We've had four pay-outs since then, but the union has not finished making its assessment" (Interview with M.M., Miiriga Mieru, June 1998)

Prior to this date, all semi-processed coffee from Ntima had gone straight to Nairobi's central KPCU milling plant. Thika Millers Limited is a commercial firm, rather than a so-called statutory organization or 'parastatal', to which the KPCU is a sterling example. M.M.'s opinion was that the management committee had done this in good faith for the society's members. The management committee's decision to try out Thika Millers Limited as an alternative to the KPCU as a miller was, in his opinion, an attempt to see if competition can bring about better prices for farmers' produce. The blame for the crisis, M.M. surmised, lay outside of the management committee. M.M. explained to me that the

pay-outs from coffee sales through the Coffee Board of Kenya were volatile throughout the 1990s, sometimes failing altogether to reach the pockets of the small-scale farmers. M.M. offered an explanation of the uncertainty of coffee prices I heard from other individuals in Miiriga Mieru, although he put a unique twist on local knowledge:

“You know, Kenya does not set the prices for our coffee. It can even go up and down when the European buyers at the central auction in Nairobi go for their annual holidays. When they go back to Europe the prices go down” (Interview with M.M., Miiriga Mieru, June 1998)

M.M. qualified this explanation by suggesting that regardless of the externally imposed pressures on ‘boom to bust’ pricing, the new regulations under *Soko Huru* were about making changes in the co-operative society’s own marketing activities:

“It is the marketing that is important as well. Competitive marketing is the key factor in keeping coffee auction prices high. That’s what *Soko Huru* is really about” (Interview with M.M., Miiriga Mieru, June 1998)

The rationalization of “opening up the marketplace” through “competition” that M.M. outlined in our interview was recognizably uncertain, since M.M. alerted us to the actual danger that the coffee industry is in the throes of such an acute crisis that its future is in question. M.M. was anxious about *Soko Huru*, despite being convinced of the overall necessity for economic reform of some measure. The season 1998/1999 was the smallest harvest he had seen pass through the Ntima factory he managed. When asked, M.M. revealed that the most pressing problem facing his factory was the low productivity of members. The scale of production had slumped so low that the coffee factory was forced to hire only a few permanent workers and had to put extra effort into encouraging disillusioned co-operative members to provide additional ‘volunteer’ labour. Although he gave the reasons for low productivity as stemming from the freak rains of El Niño in 1997, as well as the increase of insect predations and fungal diseases killing off old trees, M.M.

also revealed that some farmers have been pressed towards marketing their produce outside of the co-operative marketing society out of immediate want and impoverishment. Yet, with worry, he also revealed that the activities of local entrepreneurs had managed to purchase a significant portion of members' out-put that could have bolstered the factory's small harvest:

*Looking grave when he spoke, M.M. claimed that the "small farmers cannot compete with large capitalist farmers like N.N., yet there has been a lot of defections from the societies. The societies have to work out solutions against losing members to the private traders, especially those who need quick cash. Those farmers who want money quickly and sell their coffee at 10 shillings a kilogram to a coffee broker can bring a society down. It has happened like this to some societies in Meru" (Interview with M.M., Miiriga Mieru, June 1998)*

His example focused on the collapse of the Tigania Co-operative Society in early 1997, which was mentioned in the previous chapter. M.M. claimed that delays in pay-outs from the co-operative's marketing regime had convinced a significant number of the Tiganian farmers to sell their harvests wholesale to N.N.'s coffee brokers and that the remaining members could not survive through the society. The co-operative marketing societies involved in N.N.'s expansion were bankrupted and liquidated within a short period of time. What happened followed a clear trend in the development of agriculture based on capitalism, large owners of capital expropriate small producers and make use of economic disorder to expand their market (cf. Lenin 1946). In this case, as combined but competitive elements of Kenya's capitalism, the second economy made a small triumph over the vertical marketing regime.

M.M. was optimistic that the coffee farmers can help themselves to keep the prices high through better society management of the processing and marketing systems. He argued that the co-operative society acts in certain ways to ensure that small-scale producers of coffee cherries can continue to grow quality produce. M.M. outlined six factors that contribute to a profit-making co-operative marketing society: (1) the use of key agricultural

in-puts like commercial fertilizers and insecticides; (2) maintaining the high quality of coffee cherries brought to the factories through careful, labour intensive crop husbandry; (3) striving to achieve uniform quality in the factory's lot to assure good prices; (4) discourage petty-trade in coffee among members or brokers; (5) continue to take quality harvests to the co-operative society for vertical marketing; (6) no 'corruption' among the elected society representatives and the graded union employees. Given the current state of antagonisms and constraints facing those coffee farmers who cannot afford to hire labour or use commodified farm inputs, these factors can only applied to the farmers who hire labour, use chemical inputs, and obtain regular seasonal credit to see the crop remain productive and worthwhile. M.M.'s factors also show the high expectations that industry spokespeople and leaders hold over the majority of rural domestic enterprises.

### (5.3) Educating co-operative members on the policies concerning Kenya's economic liberalization

Following the legal introduction of the amended Co-operative Societies Act 1998, the Meru Central Farmers' Co-operative Union, the umbrella organization for all the district's co-operative societies, arranged to spend money on several programmes aimed at educating the marketing co-operative members on economic liberalization and its implications for the co-operative movement. These programmes were aimed at two categories of co-operative members; (1) the management and field committees of individual marketing societies; (2) and the ordinary society members. It needs to be noted that the second category of society member are a social majority, even if dominated economically.

In the first case, the union selected committee members to participate in an educational tour to Uganda. The union's co-operative education and publicity officer, S.M., had told me that the pressure on Uganda and Tanzania under SAP directives had been so intense that they took on radical programmes of trade liberalization. The process of economic liberalization had been so abruptly implemented in Uganda and Tanzania that

most marketing co-operatives had been forced into redundancy. The union decided that both management committee members and the field committee members of their constituency should have the opportunity to compare the situation in Uganda with that looming on the horizon in Kenya. In casual discussions with society members about the tours, at least four condemned them as an extravagant waste of their commissions to the central co-operative union. The union representatives, however, thought the tours would demystify the conditions facing the market co-operatives and their leaders, that is, combat local interpretations to save the integrity of the vertical marketing regime.

For the ordinary members, the union took on the initiative to arrange a series of educational seminars on *Soko Huru*. The union does not have the personnel to conduct these educational out-reach meetings since its graded employees are largely accountants and recording clerks, persons whose knowledge on policy shifts is comparatively narrow. S.M., for an example, could provide this service to the marketing co-operative but is, effectively, "doing the job of three persons" in his post (Interview with S.M., July 1998, Meru Town). The union had to look to securing Government and NGOs resources to turn out effective educational seminars on issues as abstract as economic liberalization. Teaching farming is cheaper than teaching farming theory.

At the national level, however, the co-operative movement employs specialists and educators who are able to discuss with members the public consequences, and implications, of agricultural and economic policies on small-scale production and co-operative marketing. To date, the most important institutions in co-operative education are the Provincial Administration's co-operative development officers and the activists within institutions like the Kenya National Federation of Co-operatives (KNFC) or the Kenya Coffee Growers Association (KCGA). These institutions represent the agencies of the state and civil society at a national level, but have relatively weak relationships to the localities in which they work as educators. As agents working for the state apparatus, these educators and specialists have an interventionary role.

On two separate occasions I was fortunate enough to witness the society level educational seminars on the coffee industry, co-operative marketing, and economic liberalization. Soon after the new Co-operative Societies Act went into effect, Ntima Farmers' Co-operative Society held a meeting on *Soko Huruat* their Kaaga coffee factory grounds. About a month later, towards the end of August, the Nyaki Farmers' Co-operative Union held their seminar. In both instances, my notes on the scope of the meetings differed in their emphases. At the Ntima meeting, I focused on the activities of the Provincial Co-operative Development Officer who had come with the educational tour of the KNFC from Nyeri. At the Nyaki meeting, I paid attention to the KNFC delegate himself. There was also a great deal of overlap between the two meetings. In what passes as one meeting below, it is actually a composite description of the two. For descriptive effect, I have made free use of my fieldnotes, the chief material from which the ethnographic texts were constructed:

3:20 pm. The speaker stood up to his full height and rebuked the society members for not showing up in the dozens for an important, big meeting on Soko Huru. This concerns all of us, he declared, sweeping his arms in a wide gesture over the sitting audience. There, on the couch grass that runs wild throughout the Kaaga factory grounds, he was addressing a group of men and women whose age marked them well into elderhood. The men and women sat separate from one another facing a table, slightly off-kilter on the bumpy ground, and a row of seated officials were presented front and center: union representatives; a delegate from the KNFC; a patron or two; an educator from the Provincial Administration. Everyone was wearing their Sunday-best. The speaker re-iterated the importance of such meetings to the survival of the co-operative movement, punctuating his passionate plea for participation with an exaggerated attack on those members whose productivity and effort was nil. I learned from the man sitting next to me, with his head resting languidly on the post of a drying table, that the speaker was an unpopular character, but the best walking joke the society could share with its members. He turned out to be a field committee member (Fieldnotes, Kaaga coffee factory, Ntima Farmer's Co-operative Society, Miiriga Mieru, July 12th 1998).

The scope of this meeting was markedly anti-entrepreneurial. In each of the speaker's turns there was a sense that the current difficulties in coffee producers' lives were linked to the activities of private traders. The society chairman harangued the seated members for not marketing all their produce through the society. He criticized a number of



common farm practices; buying expensive imported farm in-puts when they were available through the marketing society's 'consumer shop' "at a fraction of the cost" ; losing in the long run through sales to private coffee brokers because they would not provide credit facilities or protect the farmer from competition; creating local monopolies over certain produce, whether it be maize or beans, due to the principle of exorbitant off-season trade of amassed food surplus back to the farmers who originally grew the foods. Private traders were caustically denounced as kinds of local parasites, including a reference to the colonial past when European and Asian businessmen hedged Africans out of competing in an open market. The society chairman's ideological appeal to the benefit of co-operative marketing set the cadence of the seminar.

The Provincial Administration's Co-operative Officer was a Kikuyu woman who called herself 'Mama Soko Huru'. Hailing from Nyeri, where she has her office as an official in the Department of Co-operative Development, she apologized for her difficulties in Kimeru and asked whether she should attempt the difficult 'sing-song' leap to that language from Kikuyu or Kiswahili. The members called out to her to go on in Kikuyu, one man joking that there was nothing wrong with Kikuyu except for the funny way it sounded flat, unamusing, and disinteresting. As a response, this witty woman with years of experience as a teacher, accosted the outspoken and chauvinist man with a counter joke that Kimeru was only 'sing-song' in so far as it made a Kikuyu cry tears and see tragedy. Meru, she acclaimed, were only famous for their drama.

'Mama Soko Huru' asked the members sitting before her to tell her what *Soko Huru* was all about. Although society members often shout out their agreement or displeasure over something said in a society level meeting in the anonymity of verbal interjections, many of the men 'Mama Soko Huru' called upon to answer what *Soko Huru* could possibly mean were visibly uncomfortable:

*The first man who tried to answer said that Soko Huru was the "mandate to sell and buy from anyone now-a-days" was corrected by Mama Soko Huru in a*

*teacher's sharp voice. "There is no private treaty in Kenya as yet" , she declared, "just a new Co-operative Societies Act" (ibid)*

These men are not used to being publicly wrong. For many of them, in their households and in their villages their age carries a kind of social authority rarely questioned. Perhaps seeing gerontocratic distance and dignity waver as she poked fun at the men's' unease:

*Noting their shyness and reservations she joked that it had been such a "long time since old men were in school". When this joke did not provoke the reaction she wanted, 'Mama Soko Huru' told the members that "the co-operative movement needs Viagra to re-vitalize the members' participation" (ibid)*

This broke the ice a little, but the reservations of the members belayed their fears of appearing ignorant among their peers. A few other members gave their interpretations and definitions. With each offer, 'Mama Soko Huru' would add to the definitions something the farmers had not mentioned. This tactic worked because within a few minutes there were dozens of eagerly raised hands waving about to be recognized:

*Signaled to respond, a man in his sixties stood up and faced his peers. Many were enthusiastically blethering about Soko Huru among themselves. The man cleared his voice and implored, "We've got to see Soko Huru as a serious thing, not just some way to make a quick shilling. I sell to the society because I've got the dividend to secure me. Do you have this when you sell coffee to a broker? No. You just have a handful of shillings that will be spent the same day you get it. The society takes its commission from us...this much is true, but the leaders know how to use this money. They brought us the consumer shop. Many of us have shares in this new enterprise. We have to think like M.J., like N.N., the ones who are getting our coffee for a cheap price. We have to think like them." The delivery of this view impressed his peers. some of whom came in with cheers and affirmations of his message, "Stick with the co-operative" (ibid)*

The few comments given by the seated members were in defense of the society's position under *Soko Huru*. I took this to suggest that most of the people who were present at Ntima's seminar on economic and policy changes in the coffee sub-sector were active members, perhaps even representing a large amount of management and field committee members. Although my days were spent listening to some acute attacks on the society and the union on behalf of marginalized members, the members present at the educational

seminars on economic liberalization were well established socially within the co-operative society and within village affairs in general. As many ordinary society members had informed me, critically, the society meetings are generally in ideological alignment with the agenda of the society's management committee. In the course of everyday life in the hamlets, there was a particular virulence of critique towards the marketing co-operative annual meetings. Allegations of 'corruption' in the social aftermath of these annual society meetings take months to lose their bitterness. During those months fantastic stories about the extravagance of scandal in the coffee industry are a kind of stock in trade of conversation items. "The meetings are always rigged", one embittered middle-aged man told me (Interview with J.J., November 1998, Miiiriga Mieru). For those whose marginality and curiosity leads them to openly criticize the society at these forums, the intolerant response from other members is usually an intolerant orchestrated riposte. This happened to a young man in his twenties at the Ntima seminar on *Soko Huru*:

*'Mama Soko Huru' had given an opportunity to speak to a young man who, although standing legs akimbo, remained some metres away from the cohorts of elder men and women. The young man started, "You say that the society can work better than private trade. But who does this work for? Not me. I grow coffee but I can't have an account with the society. What choice do I have? Grow something that big fish will eat up? Better to have the freedom to sell to whoever you can...quickly" A roar of disapproval followed the young man's phrasing, "Don't be so sure of yourself!", one older man rebuked. Another told him never to interfere with society meetings, which are reserved for members. A chorus of "Sit Down" and "Shut Up" unsettled the young man, who hid behind his dark sunglasses and sat down some distance from the bristled elders. Mama Soko Huru cut in to suggest that the "fathers had seen a lot", that the "younger generation needs fast things", but that the co-operative members would need patience while their co-operative societies adjust to the new environment of Soko Huru (ibid)*

Seeing a possible wave of unwanted controversy coming her way, the Provincial Co-operative Officer wanted to wrap things up a bit. She thanked the members for their responses but mentioned that they needed to study harder if they wanted to have a better understanding of the changes in Kenya's marketing regimes:

*“Soko Huru is here”, she called out, “It is not for an individual. You can’t make it alone as a farmer with Soko Huru, you are too small. The individual is always exposed to the exploitation of middle-men and stronger farmers under Soko Huru”* (ibid)

Here, she was condemning the illicit trading of coffee with private merchants, a thread throughout most ideological principles of co-operative marketing. Private traders have often been described as a kind of parasitic class in rural Kenya, a prejudice that was first fostered under colonialism .

Mama Soko Huru went on to provide some other characteristics of a liberalized marketplace for agricultural produce:

*“Soko Huru is a less restricted market than before. This means that the farmer has to be more responsible. Liberty carries responsibilities. To be free to market your coffee through a choice of millers, your society is deciding to negotiate the prices and commissions between seller and buyer. Your society provides you with all the necessary means of competing in the Soko Huru. One, there are credit facilities, like the CPCS. Two, the society makes sure your produce is graded and priced as a collective sale. Third, you cannot survive on your own as a small-scale coffee farmer. You must pay attention to the advice of the co-operative leadership to get through the beginnings of Soko Huru, especially on how to use money and loans”* (ibid)

She was speaking in a manner familiar to rural people, although in a didactic tone. Yet, this is how she introduced herself, as a teacher and as an officer from the Provincial Administration:

*Her exercise continued, “Soko Huru is a market based on transparency. Both the producer and the buyer should be informed about the buying and selling exercise and its consequences. Soko Huru depends on a good knowledge of what is agreed on between buyers and sellers. Finally, it is a market governed by laws. Staying within the laws and regulations is vital for the survival of small-scale coffee growers. The society can provide you with the means to survive under the new marketing regime”* (ibid)

These characteristics always reflect on the meanings of *Soko Huru* in relation to the co-operative movement. Mama Soko Huru works with the Provincial Administration whose

relationship to the District's co-operative unions is part of the state's presence in rural areas. The maintenance of the present marketing regime is the responsibility of the Provincial Administration and the Department of Co-operative Development. These state agencies act on advise from the Kenya National Federation of Co-operatives (KNFC). The seminar had been organized by the Meru Central union in conjunction with the Provincial Administration and the KNFC. The Kenya National Federation of Co-operatives is the apex organization of the co-operative movement in post-colonial Kenya. When it emerged alongside the Co-operative Societies Act of 1966 it was designed to be an organization capable of representing co-operative unions and societies without a great deal of government subsidies. Although the KNFC, at one time, had wide responsibilities, it is an institution whose main supporting positions within the co-operative movement is to: (1) advise the Ministry of Co-operative Development on the national development of co-operative marketing; (2) establish a workable and universal system of accounting and auditing for institutions as large as, say, KPCU or as small as the local co-operative society; (3) and provide major co-operative education seminars on shift in legislation, proposed policy, or adjustment programmes that effect the Co-operative movement in Kenya. The emergence of trade liberalization in the agricultural sectors and the new Co-operative Societies Act of 1998 motivated the KNFC to carry out extensive and costly outreach services. The KNFC is a bureaucratic organization maintaining institutional links to the state apparatus, its recent concern has been the threat of small-scale producers' withdrawal from petty commodity production, the material mainstay of the co-operative movement.

The co-operative education officer concluded that *Soko Huru* could only be understood in addition to the above characteristics; (1) economic liberalization does not mean the individualization of marketing coffee; (2) there are legal restrictions on the choices to market co-operatively or privately; (3) success under the new economic liberalization

measures depends on the farmers' knowledge about the business of their marketing co-operative; (4) the new laws will be enforced:

*'Mama Soko Huru', knowing the members to be speaking about Soko Huru publicly for the first time, offered a moral definition: Soko Huru she intoned, "means greater personal contribution and responsibility of farmers in the co-operative movement. Unless co-operative members are fully involved the benefits of Soko Huru will be frustrated. The one thing you absolutely need to know is that once the new policies are institutionalized, the practices and consequences of Soko Huru will be permanent. Now, this is Soko Huru" (ibid).*

As an agent of the state, 'Mama Soko Huru' took the position that locally élite entrepreneurs and their patrons do not count for much. In the presentation of her short argument about the course of the 'free market' in Kenya, local experiences of economic policies do not count for much, so long as the members of the co-operative marketing societies continue to market their produce through the vertical marketing regime and that they understand the present limits imposed by *Soko Huru* are temporary in character, just another 'slump'. So long as the lines of co-operation between local administration, civil society agencies, and the statutory institutions can continue to regulate the marketing regimes that define the coffee industry in Kenya, many institutions can re-invent themselves without contradicting the post-colonial ethos of Africanized agrarian capitalism. They are dependent, however, on the productivity of locally disparate populations of small-scale farmers.

'Mama Soko Huru' was followed by another key-note speaker, this time a representative from the KNFC. The second half of the educational seminars were given over to explaining the new Co-operative Societies Act, which was the job of the KNFC's speaker, A.A., a lawyer by profession. K.A. started off the meeting:

*4:34 pm. K.A. of Meru Central Farmers Co-operative Union announced himself in a booming voice, "I am K.A. I am standing in for the union's co-operative education officer, S.M. He is on a tour to Uganda with many delegates from the marketing co-operatives to see the effects of economic liberalization there. Kenya is the only country in East Africa left with a nationally representative marketing co-operative movement" K.A. left this sentence hanging before he continued, "This*

is important because in Kenya, for the time being, we have not failed“ (Fieldnote, taken at Chung'ari Methodist Church at Nyaki Co-operative Marketing Society meeting on economic liberalization, August 1998, Miiiriga Mieru)

The pews of the church creaked as the society members settled in for a long meeting:

*The union man resumed*, “This is an important meeting. We expect our members to participate and learn from this seminar on *Soko Huru*. A.A., from the Kenya National Federation of Co-operations, is here with us today to speak to us about the coming of *Soko Huru* and the new Co-operative Societies Act” (ibid)

A.A., *sitting at the table reserved for speakers and representatives, waved his hand to the members for identification. K.A. boomed*, “Are you here to farm coffee, or learn about coffee? Are you not students just now, sitting there like that? Are not Mama Soko Huru and A.A. our teachers?” *There was a general murmur of affirmation*. The members took the small slips of paper that were being distributed around the pews, instructed to take notes on relevant information on *Soko Huru* and the new Co-operative Societies Act. Taking the stage, K.A. warned the members that defecting from the co-operatives and entering into trade with private buyers would bring only failure to develop the farmers’ farms and families. The union makes sure the farmers can acquire in-puts to raise productivity, quality, and prices. The union, he emphasized, is responsible for the accounts of the members from which they receive loans and other credit schemes. A few of the members who were in front of K.A. tried to be outspoken about the union’s alleged mismanagement of credit facilities and accounts but could not raise attention to themselves:

*To punctuate and end his propaganda, K.A. slowed down his voice and spoke with deliberation*, “You all know well that the future of the co-operative movement belongs to you through your hard work. In this alone, rest assured that the co-operatives are the way forward. The capitalist buyers like N.N. will not support you to pay your children’s’ schoolfees. But the co-operative will.” (ibid).

The members did not stir, well versed in the co-operative union's incitement to action and solidarity at public meetings. This was explained to me by a cynical farmer as a kind of ritual haranguing, "They always say things are going the way they are because we are not farming. But, we are farming!" (Interview with K.J., October 30, Miiiriga Mieru, Meru District).

The KNFC speaker, A.A., was a man in his early forties, whose knowledge of Kenya's Co-operative Societies Acts were comprehensive and his ability to communicate sharp. His credentials, introduced by K.A., impressed the members sitting next to me:

*With a professional*

*smile A.A. introduced himself through the institution he represents:*

"The KNFC's main function is to advocate for farmers' rights and to change certain legal statutes that discriminate against small-scale producers. We have been instrumental in the Constitutional and Statutory Law Review that brought us the new Co-operative Societies Act. In these talks, for example, we fought for the legal change to the powers awarded to the DCO, the Provincial Administration's District Co-operative Officer, whose power over local co-operative development was a disincentive to progress. Similar changes in the law, like the reduction of the locational Chiefs' powers, are part of sweeping changes in Kenyan democracy. The KNFC's agenda in this process has been to argue for those changes that would protect and maintain interest in Kenya's co-operative movement" (ibid)

*Few of the members were taking the notes they had been advised to take, although several of the committee members sitting at the table with A.A. kept their heads down taking heed of the lesson A.A. was giving. With white chalk he wrote "Co-operative Principles" on the free-standing blackboard:*

"The co-operative movement is international", *he said turning to his audience, "In Kenya, we have adopted principles worked out by the International Co-operative Organization, which has its headquarters in Europe. The Manchester Sitting of the organization gave us new principles for better co-operative development"* (ibid).

The principles he announced were more restrictive than those that circulated earlier, especially during the relatively prosperous decades after the Second World War. The



principles were explicitly drawn out for understanding; (1) open and free membership, entailing free entry and free exit; (2) 'one man, one vote' in electing their representatives; (3) 'active' or 'economic' member participation, meaning that no farmer should receive money for produce he did not grow; (4) maintaining formal commitments in educating, training, and informing co-operative members; (5) maintaining the principles of each society's autonomy and independence of decision making powers; (6) a concern for the community in general, such as helping to provide disaster relief or promote community development.

A.A. announced his objectives; (1) to inform farmers of the recent amendments in the Co-operative Societies Act of 1998; (2) to explain the new legal positions of co-operative members in light of the new legislation and its historical precedents. He encouraged the members towards action, advising them to support a new by-law movement for small-scale producers' rights that would go hand in hand with the on-going constitutional review:

"The KNFC is concerned that farmers' knowledge of *Soko Huru* is limited. You need to know what *Soko Huru* means. Economic liberalization is the transformation of a very restricted amount of regulations that currently govern industries like the coffee sector. It does not mean the end of co-operatively marketed produce, but changes in the way that such marketing is done. It also means changes in the co-operative societies themselves, as outlined in the new Co-operative Societies Act. It is absolutely crucial that all members are made aware of the changes in national policy and regulation for co-operative societies to remain competitive under *Soko Huru* conditions" (ibid).

*The KNFC representative took a glass of water, drank, and then wrote 'Co-operative Societies Act' under his chalked in 'Co-operative Principles'.* He told the members that he wanted to take some time to outline the scope of the newly introduced regulations governing co-operative marketing. In a little over two hours, he highlighted five important elements of the new regulations that accompany *Soko Huru*.; (1) Under the notions of 'omissions' and 'amalgamations', part of the vocabulary on 'economies of scale', A.A. underscored the need for individual co-operative societies to have a series of checks on

their members' quality of produce and their efficiency in productivity. What this meant, in short, is that each marketing society will be compelled to uphold principle (1) and ask for some members' continued participation and other members' defection. The idea behind this would entail allowing poor producers an 'exit option' with the intention of maintaining high quality produce by 'buying out' members whose consistently poor quality produce would ultimately lower the aggregate quality of the society's collective out-put; (2) Strict regulation against petty trade of members' produce outside of co-operative marketing. A.A. revealed the gravity of this regulation by saying, "Any co-operative member selling his produce away from the society can, under the proposed by-laws, face a fine of no less than 5000 shillings". This outraged a number of the members behind me who, implicitly knowing the local realities of petty trade outside of vertical marketing regimes, claimed the sanction to be heavy handed. "This is not *Soko Huru!*", *one younger man belted out, while his older peers intoned the severity of the proposed by-law with private chatter amongst themselves.* A.A. cautioned the members that such measures were in the best interests of co-operative marketing societies, since it reduced competition over local pricing, a bane to small-holder survival in his opinion; (3) A legal provision for allowing members of co-operative societies to acquire the services necessary to audit the society's accounts for irregularities and frauds. This, A.A. reasoned, would mean tighter accountability of management committees to their constituents, thus making it easier for members to file suits against those who would use their positions inside the co-operatives for personal profit. At Nyaki society, this proposed by-law brought out a cheer from a number of its members, since factional complaints of 'corruption' at the factory level had caused a rift among the members. Others made cynical comments that the by-law would never work; (4) *When the members had settled a bit, A.A. motioned with his hands that he was going to continue and said,* "And if there are any members found in contravention to the above, in accordance with the Co-operative Societies Act by-laws (Section 92), they can be fined 10000 shillings and possibly a jailing for up to two years"

*A large cheer went up from the members in their pews. A.A. ended this laundry-list of new regulations by announcing the setting up of a co-operative tribunal. This was going to be arranged and financed specifically to handle co-operative society suits and execute audits. The KNFC man told the society that these regulations are what defines *Soko Huru* at the co-operative level:*

*“The KNFC”, A.A. claimed, “sought to define *Soko Huru* by these regulations. The purpose is to increase the co-operative society’s efficiency and accountability. When this is achieved, firstly, then it will allow the seller, the marketing co-operative, to have some influence of getting the right price from the buyer” (ibid).*

The theory was that increased market competition under *Soko Huru* will break apart the monopolizing structure of the current marketing regime in Kenya. This, A.A. reasoned, was the origins and purposes of the amendments to the Co-operative Societies Act and the by-laws.

*A hand came up in the back of the church wanting to ask a question. The society member stood up and after clearing his voice questioned A.A., “What is the purpose of asking some members to leave the society? That doesn’t sound like a good idea to me. And what about that rule about fines? How can this be *Soko Huru*?” There was a general hum of approval among the members.*

*A.A. thanked the man for his question and looked thoughtfully for a moment before answering, “Here, I think, you can understand. If another members’ coffee cherries have not been good, small, and maybe diseased; and you, on the other hand, have really looked after you trees and you get nice big cherries, the two of you will be paid the same amount of money. The society markets collective lots. Why should the poor farmer disadvantage the good farmer? With the by-law, the society allows the poorer member to leave freely and provides opportunities for the better farmer to better services in the marketing of their produce” (ibid).*

Every small-scale producer knows that their coffee is marketed in collective lots. Although few of the farmers at Nyaki co-operative will have seen their own coffee at a millers like KPCU, they all know that their milled coffee bears the stamp of the particular factory and that their society is like a brand-name. The co-operative members understand that their

produce is rarely of a uniform quality, but the question of asking a member to leave the society is difficult. The other member may be an age-mate, affine, clansmen, or perhaps even a client to many other society members. Noting the sensitivity surrounding public talk on the petty trade that farming households engage in, the members did not push for discussing the question of stiff fines. Here, discourse and practice part company. The KNFC's sponsored co-operative tribunal would go willy-nilly after committee members on the take, as well as the common member trying to make a living.

Public conformity is often the safest alternative rural persons have when faced with strict regulations and sanctions, but James Scott's (1990) concept of the hidden transcript is useful for describing what reception 'Mama Soko Huru' and A.A.'s seminars had locally, where inevitably unpopular policies engender a "critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (Scott 1990: xii). Not only is there a "critique of power" in Meru over the co-operative's policies, but there are attempts to circumvent its power, often through recourse to irregular practices, chicanery, and theft. With this we need to turn to the next discussion on the local appropriations of *Soko Huru* that these educators did not acknowledge as significant to the outcome of economic liberalization policy nor its social consequences.

#### (5.4) Irregular practices and social antagonism in the co-operative marketing societies

Part of the dominant discourse on *Soko Huru* is the notion of 'market transparency' and the crusade to end practices that are deemed as constituting corruption. As we saw, members of the society themselves target corruption as part of their struggle with the confines and constraints of the coffee industry and the growth of the second economy. Illicit trading is not the only target of this discourse, but is also aimed at reducing the level of social practices that are irregular to the charters of the co-operative marketing societies and their respective agricultural unions. Under the revised versions of the Coffee Act (1998) and the Co-operative Societies Act (1998), the threat of tougher regulation on illicit

coffee marketing has specifically targeted the widespread use of “harvest swapping” between individual co-operative members. Harvest swapping is a form of petty-trade that uses the institution of the co-operative society and its record keeping outside of the co-operative’s formal interests and functions. During the harvest, a sale of coffee cherries between society members takes place involving the exchange of money and the buying member’s registration number. An exchange of actual coffee cherries is not necessary to this transaction. hence its lack of 'transparency'. Instead, the two members negotiate between themselves the volume of coffee to be purchased at a below market price, which tends to reflect the motive of profit making behind such a transaction. In honouring the deal, the seller takes the negotiated amount of coffee cherries to the factory on the regular harvesting days and the registration number of the buyer is recorded in lieu of the seller’s. Harvest swapping means that within the co-operative marketing society, the more wealthy and active society members can purchase coffee cherries from other farmers and boost the volume of their out-put on record. At pay-out time from the co-operative marketing society, the buying member is accredited with a larger weight of coffee than they actually produced themselves.

One 61 year old man’s explanation of how harvest swapping works was exceptional in its candour, most elders keeping such illicit practices a secret. This man had membership in both Nyaki and Ntima co-operative marketing societies, a practice that has been locally deemed improper and in violation of the Co-operative Societies Act (1998). As a former employee of the Meru Municipal Council, he had seen his mandatory retirement as a challenge and sought to overcome the constraints of a meager pension through ventures into small businesses of “any kind”. This included the buying and selling of coffee cherries and *mibuni* when his pocket book allowed for it. He also bought and sold macademia nuts as a private trader, but this was before the liberalization of the farm-nut industry provoked fierce competition over prices and the trade slipped from being lucrative to being ruinous for the small businessman. Fishing a 1000 KSH bill (\$20 CDN) from his shirt pocket to

demonstrate his willingness and preparation to buy coffee from other farmers, he asserted: “If they come I will buy”. He kept a registry of all the coffee transactions he would make in a small notebook, something learned from years of business mistakes. The records went as far back as 1987, a year after a major boom in the Kenyan coffee industry. In his opinion, which differed radically from official perspectives within the co-operative movement, lending out his society registration number as he “swapped” coffee was “working for the society as well as the farmer” (Interview with J.M., Miiiriga Mieru, July 1998).

Although frank about his participation in harvest swapping, this elder did not disclose the received logic of most society members on the topic of swapping and using registration numbers in the petty-trade of coffee cherries. The majority of society members I spoke with about the practice condemned it, claiming that its continuation harms individuals in the society as much as it helps a select few. Many individuals recognized that within the society the capitally endowed farmers can purchase cherries from less well off farmers needing immediate money and irregularly boost the recorded harvests of the more wealthy members. The negative consequences of this were explained from the ideological premises of the co-operative marketing society: that members participating in harvest swapping would qualify for being “active” members and as such could acquire CPCS (coffee production credit scheme) loans through merit of their outstanding out-put, while less able farmers would not qualify for loans of any kind. The beneficiaries of harvest swapping were seen to be navigating the loopholes in the society’s system to their own advantage, bringing down the poorer farmers’ chances of benefiting from the credit facilities the society provides. From the wider response to such irregular (but widespread) practices, elements of the ‘free market’ discourse found in official versions of *Soko Huru* were appropriated by disadvantaged members of the co-operative marketing society where they felt that ‘market transparency’ was what the current marketing regime lacked and that irregular practices tended to further obscure necessary market information, without which, coffee production becomes dangerous speculation.

However touched by morality the accusations of corruption within the co-operative marketing society were, the full social force of moral condemnation was locally held for the instance of theft in coffee. The tendency towards criminalization in Miiiriga Mieru during the coffee trading season was blamed by some alarmed elders on the “younger generation”, and particularly on the coffee brokers. This is consistent with a trend in the ethnographic literature that has demonstrated the moral deprecations of middlemen elsewhere in the world in different historical and cultural contexts (cf. Dilley 1992: 3-4). That does not mean, however, that accusations towards youths are not telling of existent tensions between the brash young men who work as coffee brokers and the dominant elders who set a public precedent on local morality. Instead, public gossip on the extent of the irresponsibility and immorality of the coffee brokers gives way to culturally appropriate scapegoats for allegations of theft. Instances like these are worth looking at in detail, because they point to the tension points that the coffee industry invites.

Theft of coffee cherries during harvests is usually thought to be the actions of young men corrupted on money. According to some more vehement elders, these youths “roamed around on their bicycles looking to steal from others”, while others castigated the “young generation” for “stealing from their parents”. Another common slur poured onto the young brokers was that they were “hungry for fast things” and “quick cash”. Similar to this one was: “they do not know work”. Whatever the provocation these elders sought from their younger men, the very generation they criticized and accused of theft were in most cases their grandsons, men whose labour the *akuru* were highly dependent upon when strapped for cash or time. The seemingly potent condemnation of young men by elders hides an unsaid vulnerability. The structure of gerontocratic authority in fully commercialized economies is cracked. The lines of between the domestic group and the individual are more difficult to delimit. Even though the elders occasionally spite their juniors they are often dependent on the labour of junior men during critical points in the agricultural cycle.

Yet, the thieving of coffee was not always blamed on the coffee brokers. On several occasions it was the co-operative marketing societies themselves who were criticized on grounds of organized chicanery. Often enough, in the climate of local competition that was erupted in the wake of *Soko Huru*, the co-operatives have unofficially engaged one another in a contest to win over defectors. The defectors are usually farmers who live between two coffee factories run by the opposing co-operative societies of Ntima and Nyaki. In between Chugu and Kienderu, the Nyaki coffee factory built a concrete slab into the side of the road to act as a weighing station. Locally, such weighing stations are known as *gatuo*. It was used to weigh maize in the mornings during the harvest of that crop, and schedules afternoon weighing sessions for coffee. The idea was to intercept the coffee brokers and competing agents for the Ntima factory at Kienderu, by establishing a half-way station for buying coffee that otherwise would reach parallel markets, posing a threat to the continued productivity of Nyaki Chugu factory. The Ntima people accused the Nyaki people of organized chicanery, and under their breaths some adherents to the Ntima society claimed they would act along similar lines if such activities were to continue. One informant cautioned me on the interpretation that it was the locally competing societies who introduced the weighing station, and told me in vehemence “It’s the damned union doing this, it is the lions and the crocodiles waiting for the lambs. You know, divide and conquer is their motto”. Whatever the exact details, local coffee growers no longer trust that their produce is safe from either theft or chicanery, blaming the troubles on the new appearance of “quick money”.

Public outrage over the state of the industry was uncommon in Miiriga Mieru, although an electrifying topic of conversation was the removal of corrupted society members from leadership roles. Gossip about the corruption within the society consumed leisure hours of those following the political dramas of the co-operative society. Often these conversations were between people of roughly the same age or gender categories, so that elders tended to discuss their own political views amongst themselves, shielding out other



parties who were also discussing such issues amongst themselves. Among a group of junior members of the Nkaki co-operative marketing society, their conversations led to an organized attempt to oust the management committee and replace them with representatives from the dissident faction. They were young men who still took their coffee to the factory for processing and marketing, rather than venturing into the second economy. Some of the young men behind the organization of political opposition to the society's management committee had been trying to elect their own representatives onto the committees for several years. It had been explained that the fathers of the three key dissidents had threatened to disown them should they have pressed on with their demand for "fast things". Such are the intimate politics of rural class struggle, fractured through the authoritarian social division of labour anchored in age and sex categories. The second attempt to elect a new management committee, organized by the young dissidents within the co-operative society, began at the coffee factory under considerable social tension and under fear of being interrupted by the Provincial Administration's police force. One young man, a welder by occupation, expressed his relief that I was there to witness the meeting, "If the police come and see you, they will be a bit softer. But you never know...". The group was waiting for a letter to arrive from the Chief's camp, soliciting the public meeting and avoiding the 'sedition laws' prohibiting public gatherings of a political nature. The letter would have to be signed by representatives from the Provincial Administration, the Administration Police, the co-operative union, and finally the management committee of the local co-operative marketing society. Such a letter did arrive after several hours of waiting at the coffee factory grounds, giving permission for the society members to hold their public meeting and "air their grievances". Taking the opportunity to follow procedures outlined in the Co-operative Societies Act (1966) on replacing management committees through open elections, the dissident group called a quick vote of some thirty elders (only three were women) and about sixty young men. The dissidents were duly voted into management positions and the group summarily made plans to occupy the co-operative society's offices with immediate

effect. The gossip of the day was about the possibilities and probabilities that such a move would be feasible. In the end of the day, after an exhausting attempt at mobilizing practical political support for the usurping of the management commitment, it was defeatingly revealed that none of the authorities had signed the letter allowing their meeting and that the vote was disorderly and void. The young dissident farmers lost face as the elders who had opposed the movement from its inception persuaded their age-mates to withdraw their support for the younger men's' efforts at undermining the key faction inside the co-operative. Within several days, the reality sank in that nothing had changed and that the Provincial Administration, the co-operative union, and the majority of society members did not support the struggle of dissident junior members.

#### (5.5) Conclusion

From these short instances of irregular practices and struggles within the co-operative marketing society, it can be appreciated that the meanings employed to *Soko Huru* vary considerably in terms of their positionality within the coffee industry at a local level. In relief, the meanings of *Soko Huru* presented by industry officials and the dominant members of the co-operative marketing society do not resonate with those who are marginalized within the existent structures of the vertical marketing regime. This leaves open the possibility that differing appropriations of 'free market' discourse relate to social practice insofar as each interpretation of the term is specific to a given social position vis-a-vis power and production. As alluded to above, in Meru District, the local manifestations of these positionalities are fractured through the culturally ascriptive division of labour by age and sex. This feature is of analytic importance to any examination of social changes in rural places like Meru District. Social change, like that of *Soko Huru*, has reaffirmed some relationships, while at the same time transformed others. Although individuals may accumulate outside of the household as an economic agent by themselves, they are still limited by the way age and gender transect with the division of labour. Transformations

throughout the life-course for men and women alike suggest that age and sex as principles of social differentiation are transformed, but that their asymmetry and different relationships to power and production are reaffirmed. To conclude the empirical analysis, the relationships between the local divisions of labour needs to be addressed from the point of view of the life trajectory. As will be appreciated from the concluding remarks of the thesis, this necessarily means the suspension of the idea that class always corresponds to class categories, such as the 'peasantry' and the 'working class'.

## Chapter Six

### Not Yet *Soko Huru*: limits to the notion of 'social change'

#### (6) The 'free market' as the individual's assertion of economic independence: the case of young men and *Soko Huru*

Young men are the particular social actors in this thesis. They figure so prominently in the thesis because of two factors: my positionality during fieldwork and the positionality of young men in their domestic situations. Evidently, as a young man myself I was socially positioned rather closely to young men and this category of personhood. This accounts for the slant of the argument, but not its point. Young men did not figure so centrally in the ethnography because they are of more sociological importance than other actors. In fact, they are marginalized in the extended conjugal household. Often, their claims over that unit are limited to rights of access to their sleeping house and food. In addition, at critical points in the agricultural cycle, the few obligations that they maintain to the household are called upon as a means of recruiting farm labour and young men are set to work by their grandfathers, fathers and uncles. However, it is their marginality that accounts for their marked place in this thesis. They figure so predominately in the analysis because of their flexibility as social actors in economic activities.

For an individual, few jural rights means few domestic obligations. The irony of gerontocracy as a means of control over young men is that they become elders through changes in the life course. The irony of gerontocratic domination is lived out earlier as well. The deprecation and belittlement of young men by elders in public makes them appear socially unimportant and even useless. Interestingly, however, by discounting young men as valuable social actors and giving few jural rights to them until marriage and fatherhood, elders pretty much secure them a considerable degree of personal freedom that other individuals do not have. A young man may disappear for a decade and come back to the

domestic group with the same few jural rights, but much closer to the age of marriage where his jural position would change.

A woman's more complex assortment of rights and obligations would make such a disappearing act difficult, and it would be impossible for an affine. In the social division of labour, other individuals exercise their rights in balance with their obligations while acting alongside household goals. For example, a young woman would not be asked to dig up yams as part of her domestic work. Likewise, an affine woman may be forgiven on occasions when the labour requirements of her parents oblige her to take leave from her husband's farm. The particular social flexibility for youths, however, allows many young rural men to travel into other parts of East Africa, sometimes in search of wealth, other times in search of adventure. They mostly intend to return to Meru for marriage and adult settled life.

As was described through the activities of the coffee brokers, working at the margins of legitimacy, young men seem to have constructed a space for themselves through open, but illicit, trade. What is striking about the case is not that the brokers trade coffee in the parallel market, but that they do so openly and in defiance of current sanctions on behaviour exercised by the co-operative marketing society. Many young men have become coffee brokers to assert their rights to act as economic agents outside and beyond the household. Part of this assertion is the use of locally transformed notions of *Soko Huru* to legitimate their practices as individual economic agents. They need to defend their activities because other actors perceive them as threats and the 'free market' discourse can be publicly defended in the context of structural adjustment and economic crisis. *Soko Huru* acts as an alibi for the coffee broker and their autonomy from the vertical marketing regime that their parents are locked into. The notion of *Soko Huru* practiced by the coffee brokers is also a critique of the vertical marketing regime and a challenge to its capacity to control all of the effects of economic liberalization. The 'free market' discourse asserts the economic processes of individualization that young men experience at the margins of the

jurally defined conjugal households. In one sense, their adaptation and transformation of 'free market' ideas echoes historically precedent instances in Meru history when youths appropriated terms of identity and aspiration from elsewhere. Methodism is a case in point, where generations of men and women sought to define themselves in terms of evangelicism. In Miiiriga Mieru, the eldest people are predominantly Methodist. It was pointed out to me on several occasions that "The history of the Methodist church in Meru is the history of Miiiriga Mieru". It has even been argued that Methodism was one of the means by which many local actors rose up in power, wealth, and status within the colonial structures of indirect rule, and upon which the modern version of Meru ethnic identity was formed (Maupeu 1990). The rise of Methodism accompanied the emergence of commercial agriculture, the building of literacy schools, and the beginnings of capital-intensive investments into Meru District's infrastructure. Methodism re-oriented Meru actors towards schools, apprenticeships, and applying for administrative jobs, while providing a forum for individual identities affirmed through baptism. It was a novel alternative to the traditions of the 'Native Law and Custom' which dominated the countryside.

Through the use of 'free market' idioms, young men legitimize their trade activities, which remain technically illegal. What is particularly provocative about this interpretation is that the vehicle for expressing their social agency is 'free market' discourse. This is an uncomfortable observation, given that the idea of the 'free market' has been seen as a cultural pillar of western liberalism and the code-word of global capitalism. Another difficult issue with this is that this specific social change may be interpreted as a kind of process where local structures and issues are irrelevant to the outcomes of structural adjustment, reinforcing the priorities of the West. In context, this twist of the 'free market' by fairly marginal social actors in Meru District, Kenya has little to do with the West. The local uses of 'free market' discourse differ according to who is employing it and to what ends. In this, the meanings that are generated only speak to local issues: about power relations between rich and poor, individual accumulation, the relationship of individuals to

households. At the same time, however, *Soko Huru* is about modernity in Kenya as well. Modernity in Africa, as in Europe, plays on the question of continuity and rupture. Although a full discussion on the idea of modernity cannot to be explored here, one facet of its relevance to African contexts is the way that new forms of individualism combine with previous forms. This leads back into the original question of the thesis: Does social change reaffirm some relationships, while recreating other relationships?

In Meru District, a new form of individual is emerging that has greater freedoms from the labour requirements of the household. With reference to the emergence of the individual as an economic subject in Africa the household is not diminished, but rather restructured. This has occurred in a context where peasant farming is not viable as the sole economic strategy. The individual has also emerged from a context of intensive economic crisis. Because the relationships of individuals to their household activities vary a great deal, the focus on the individual and the household as economic units must be de centered for analytic purposes. This shift is an analytic response to instances where social change make predominant social science models clumsy and inadequate in explaining or accounting for change.

Simply because a small number of young men are creating opportunities in the cracks of economic liberalization to carve out their own economic niche, it does not necessarily mean that structural adjustment works miracles. On the contrary, while economic liberalization has provided minor trading opportunities for some kinds of people, such as young men and mature women, it has created poverty and strife for other kinds of people. The particular stress that has fallen on women under structural adjustment measures is heavy. This is an area of research that needs investigation. Without money to pay wages for agricultural labourers a household's women will be the first called upon to work for the domestic enterprise. In a vibrant rural economy, most domestic enterprises could afford wages, yet the economic crisis makes this difficult to assume. When wages disappear, the jural bonds over a married affine woman allows her husband's kin to strengthen their

control over her economic agency in times of crisis. Inversely, young men do not experience these kinds of jural pressures. Young men are socially more "free" than other actors. They experience little social barriers to straddling activities, while their female counterpart may experience stronger jural claims over her labour. This is as true of the comparison between young men and women as it is between unmarried sons and fathers. The jural primacy of the elder in the household prohibits them from long-term economic independence from the conjugal household. A mature woman, in contrast, can exercise quite a degree of economic autonomy, especially where she has full jural rights over food crops she produces. For younger women, however, the social division of labour allocates a heavy obligation to yield labour to the households when it is called for. For these women, the 'free market' is unachievable.

The 'free market' ideal is limited to those categories of person who can exercise some measure of economic autonomy from the jural power of the household over someone's labour and produce. Its neo-liberal version which is found among the more powerful coffee farmers in the co-operative marketing society is very opposed to the economic activity of individuals: it is about competition amongst households and between co-operative marketing societies. In one sense, this dominant appropriation of *Soko Huru* is the limit to the success of the coffee brokers in applying their ideas about the 'free market' beyond the temporary trade in surplus coffee cherries. The whole trade is likely to vanish as an entrepreneurial opportunity once the competitive framework of the neo-liberal agenda is put into effect in the structure and organization of local co-operatives. The poorer farmers who sell their surplus to the coffee brokers may be forced out of coffee farming, especially by the new legislation which fosters high levels of competition between society members to produce, or purchase, larger yields of coffee. The temporary accumulation of the coffee brokers is not sustained for more than six weeks, a cycle that is complete well before society members start to receive money for their crops. In its temporary nature, the limits to *Soko Huru* also create the tensions within the household. The coffee harvest places



a high demand of the labour of subordinate household members. Many young men are under jural constraint during this period. To assert one's individual rights to trade coffee and shirk working in the harvest is a decision that carries consequences. Most coffee brokers, it was observed, balance their entrepreneurial activities with their obligations to the conjugal household of their parents. The individual as economic unit is a temporary affair, and working for oneself and working for the family farm may overlap in a day's productive activity. Fortunately for young men, they have the time to do so.

#### (6.2) Limits to the notion of 'class' in the anthropology of power and production in Africa

The question of social differentiation is central to the anthropology of power and production. In the various sociologies of Africa that recognize sharp differentiation between the power, wealth, and status of households, there has been an attempt to interpret this inequality in terms of income and accumulation, often with reference to the idea of class formation (Kitching 1980). Much of this literature has concentrated on Africa's economic crisis. Scholars point to Africa's failure to develop along the anticipated trajectories foreseen in the post-colonial period, whether based on socialist or capitalist planning, and envision little hope for the continent's immediate future. This body of literature has developed a rather sophisticated theoretical scheme around the question of 'social change'. With some frequency, the interpretive schemes of western modernity are grafted onto African societies as attempts to understand the social dynamics of change there: class formation, liberalism, individuality, and market production all find their place in the sociology of social change in Africa.

Africa has, however, been studied in terms of its purported economic backwardness and social victimization in this kind of sociological literature. This is part of a conceptual legacy rooted in the social and historical specificity of European constructions of African realities. Deep teleological assumptions about 'social change' and 'development' have led anthropologists following this bead of thought into a sort of persistent habit of

viewing social dynamics in evolutionist terms. This is as applicable to all the critical western sociologies of Marxist, Durkheimian, and feminist inspiration as it is to the so-called mainstream sociologies. Such perspectives on 'social change' and 'development' in Africa stem from a particularly Western vantage point, and frequently bear upon the contentious discussions of 'class' in anthropology.

For example, Henrietta Moore (1988) speaks of class formation in developing countries as an incomplete process. This comparative notion of "incomplete class formation" is problematic because it assumes that class formation elsewhere is complete, rather than being in constant renovation through conflict, competition, and cooperation among social actors. Moore, however, recognizes the difficulties facing the empirical determination of class in the subject matter anthropology finds it application, as she concedes:

[W]hat is clear is that if occupational status, level of education, and relations to the capitalist mode of production are used as indicators then, in many developing countries, a significant proportion of households contain individuals from a range of different classes (Moore 1998: 210)

Moore's definition of class can be seen to transect age and sex where these categories define the organization of the household unit. It also cuts across the analytic division between households and individuals. However, analytic confusion can come about in studying the nexus of relationships that cross over from households to individuals in terms of class. Based on the way that age, sex, and class categories are often regarded in the ethnographic literature as conflictual, especially in reference to power configurations in economic activities, there results a theoretical hierarchy among these categories. As the conceptual arbiters of the outcome of social change, i.e. 'peasant farmers' and 'capitalists' are organized around the differences among households to constitute class relationships, the validity of the class analysis on the position of individuals is under worked. 'Class' is consistently applied as a category of social identification in anthropology, rather than as the

outcome of social relations pivoting around access to power, wealth, and status. If the latter emphasis is chosen, 'class' may be seen as the social transformation of local idioms of age and sex into organizational principles for the social division of labour. Yet, the common conceptualization of class is to make it a principle of social structure, a part of the teleological process of 'class formation'. 'Class' is usually presented as an outcome of unseen social forces, where no individuals figure in the final analysis.

Christine Obbo (1980) laments the tendency to portray social changes as immanent in social structure, rather than the lived outcome of social conflict and cooperation between social actors whose relationships are structured. Dissatisfied with the conceptual horizons of anthropology's treatment of social change she argues:

It is unfortunate that social scientists often describe and analyze past social change, rather than the on-going purposive social change in the lives of individuals. When changes are actually in process, they are defined as social *problems*, rather than social *opportunities*. Yet, if the people being studied are treated as actors playing a game manipulating other players and circumstances, then an attempt can be made at describing and analyzing on-going social change (Obbo 1980: 5)

The ethnographic treatment of the 1998 coffee harvest in Meru District demonstrates that the combination of economic crisis and structural adjustment produces both problems and opportunities for local social actors. While structural adjustment is a particularly heavy sanction against women's ability to maintain themselves as economic units, and indeed strive for economic independence from affine men, it has produced opportunities for certain categories of young men, particularly those who have identified themselves with some of the values behind the ideal of the 'free market'. The problems and possibilities resulting from the re-structuration of the coffee industry under economic liberalization opened an economic niche in the second economy that young men in Meru could fill with some degree of social legitimacy. There is a certain consistency in this moment of social change with earlier moments in the history of the Kimeru-speaking peoples. In the colonial days, when Meru was subjected to the Union Jack and indirect rule, local people lived

through instances where Meru 'custom' was constantly re-constituted: some people struggled with the terms of social identification they inherited from 'tradition' (*kienyeji*) and others sought to re-construct themselves through appropriating Methodism as a key vehicle of their ethnic identity (Maupeu 1990).

In anticipating and participating in social change, local actors appropriate the terms of their social movement for themselves. They do this to construct a legitimate space in the institutional character of social life. In Meru, this appropriation has often been made through economic innovations. The early innovators in the commercialization of agriculture met with some success. The 1930s planting of coffee trees can be interpreted as innovative, introducing changes in the structure of relationships between individuals in Meru. Coffee and the commercialization of agriculture promised some newly married men some kind of balance between financial and jural access to power, wealth, and status. At that point, however, the coffee trees were appropriated as a man's crop, while women's movement towards beans was encouraged, even enforced, under colonial prescriptions for development (Robertson 1997). These examples demonstrate that local 'class formation' in Meru District was dependent upon the internal transformation of social relationships based on generation and gender, particularly where this change led to shifts in the way labour and production was organized.

## Notes

### 3 Notes to Chapter Three:

1. In the sociological literature, the notion of discourse is without a definition based on consensus. There are two principal authors whose work on discourse and social process bear upon the arguments made here about the local appropriation of 'free market' discourse in Meru: that of Michel Foucault (*Discipline and Punish* 1977) and Pierre Bourdieu (*Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* 1972). With Foucault the notion of discourse is political through its power to craft the legitimizing framework of knowledge that supports any social institution's capacity to dominate through persuasion and through subjection to a dominant frame of references. Since such a definition of the political dimensions of discourse is invariably suitable to institutional life ("technologies of power"), it is of less theoretical value than the definition given to discourse by Bourdieu, who situates the term within the field and meaning of social practice. Bourdieu's sense of discourse is concerned with the way practices come to be legitimated through discursive means. Analytically, this is the definition of discourse being worked out through the local case study on Meru coffee brokers and their counterparts in other positions in the national coffee industry. As Michel de Certeau (1984) suggests, subordinate actors may appropriate discourse to legitimize their practices vis-à-vis other social actors, allowing the subordinate to use tactics to challenge the strategies of the dominant: "Tactics in discourse can...be the formal indicator of tactics that have no discourse" (de Certeau 1984: 45). In interpreting young Meru social actor's use of *Soko Huru* to move into the parallel trade in coffee, their appropriation of global discourse on the 'free market' is a tactical response to their economic marginality.

2. In the course of examining the literature on structural adjustment it is apparent that working definitions do not cohere, but may remain specific to the contexts being extrapolated. Although the proper object of study in this thesis is economic liberalization, some effort is made to link this to prior policy-oriented processes organized as ESAFs (or SAPs). An SAP is a process of international policy adjudication and fiscal auditing brought upon a government running a high deficit on 'aid' loans and transfer payments. Economic liberalization is one of the elements in this process, but holds its own definition outside of the SAPs because it may or may not be implemented in conjunction with the former. When these terms are used in the thesis, they are meant to refer differentially to levels of abstraction that are linked at the level of policy, but which diverge at the level of practice. Their differences are significant in reference to the subject matter of the case study, but convergent when seen from the perspective of social change (or even the illusion of social change). Thus, the dichotomy between SAP: economic liberalization should not be reinforced too stringently.

## Appendix A

### A Glossary of Kiswahili and Kimeru Terms

#### **Kiswahili**

<i>chai</i>	means tea, but in everyday speech means a bribe
<i>chang'aa</i>	distilled moonshine
<i>debe</i>	literally a cannister, but became a commercial measurement in colonial Kenya
<i>Dubai</i>	slang term for the importation of inexpensive industrial equipment
<i>duka</i>	small commercial store
<i>fimbo</i>	a cane, or walking stick (public symbol of elderhood)
<i>kibanda</i>	a hangar
<i>kibarua</i>	a job paying a daily wage (to the worker each day)
<i>kipande</i>	ticket de travailleur journalier
<i>jembe</i>	the three-pronged iron hoe that is considered the 'modern' cultivating tool
<i>jua kali</i>	refers to small industry workshops, literally 'hot sun'
<i>mabati</i>	corrugated tin sheets, usually used for roofing
<i>magendo</i>	term for blackmarketeering, originated in Ugandan context
<i>matatu</i>	the public transport vehicles in Kenya
<i>mboga</i>	cabbage
<i>mibuni</i>	the 'low quality' coffee, usually dried on tarpaulins for parallel trade
<i>mzungu</i>	a European, a white
<i>samjok</i>	the hippopotamus whip used by South African and Kenyan security forces
<i>shamba</i>	generic term for any farmed piece of land
<i>panga</i>	the cutlass-like cultivation tool used throughout Kenya
<i>posho</i>	milled maize flour, makes the staple food of <i>ugali</i>
<i>Sheng</i>	Kenya's urban argot, slang
<i>Shifita</i>	refers to Somali nationalists, or sometimes even banditry in the NFD (1960s)
<i>Soko Huru</i>	term for the free market, or economic liberalization
<i>uhuru</i>	refers to Kenya's Independence, meaning freedom
<i>unga</i>	maize flour ready to make <i>ugali</i>
<i>wananchi</i>	citizens

#### **Kimeru**

##### ***Gintu Ikirima*** (Agricultural)

<i>buun</i>	same as <i>mibuni</i>
<i>gekwacii</i>	sweet potatoe ( <i>Ipomea batatus</i> )
<i>mpio</i>	cold weather period of July, temperatures drop
<i>ngaine</i>	the (long) rains
<i>kauga</i>	same as <i>kahawa</i>
<i>mbaaki</i>	local tobacco ( <i>Nicotiana tobacum</i> )
<i>miraa</i>	stimulant stems of <i>Catha edulis</i> , grown throughout Nyambenes commercially
<i>marigo</i>	generic local bananas
<i>mburago</i>	an inheritance of a particular allotment of land
<i>munda</i>	term for a land holding
<i>mung'au</i>	haricot bean ( <i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i> )
<i>mpempe</i>	white maize ( <i>Zea mays</i> )
<i>mwere</i>	bulrush millet ( <i>Pennisetum typhoidium</i> )
<i>marenge</i>	pumpkins ( <i>Curcubita pepo</i> )
<i>nchabe</i>	hyacinth bean ( <i>Dolichos lablab</i> ) (called <i>njahi</i> in Kikuyu)

<i>nchugu</i>	pidgeon pea ( <i>Cajanus cajan</i> )
<i>ngwato</i>	(archaic) when a person claimed land through clearing, cultivating, building
<i>nthoroko</i>	cow pea ( <i>Vigna uginculata</i> )
<i>rukwacii</i>	cassava ( <i>Manihot utilissima</i> )

*thano* the hot, dry period of September when it is digging, sowing time

### **Antu Bonthe (People)**

<i>baamu</i>	slang Kimeru for an age-mate
<i>kamachunku</i>	in colonial times this referred to a 'de-tribalized' Meru
<i>kiama (biama)</i>	an elders council, sometimes called <i>ngaaru</i>
<i>kiama kia nkomango</i>	the Imenti version of the <i>njuri nceke</i> , or the paramount council of elders
<i>muthaka (nthaka)</i>	the 'warrior' age, refers to young men before they marry
<i>mburago</i>	term for an inheritance of land through clan or father's compliance
<i>mugwe</i>	office of a public dignitary (archaic and defunct)
<i>mukuru (akuru)</i>	an elder 'father', usually passage into elderhood is accompanied by the man's sons being of initiate age or <i>nthaka</i> .
<i>munda</i>	a land holding, refers to the land itself
<i>moran</i>	archaic term for <i>nthaku</i> , or young men warriors (from Samburu <i>muuran</i> )
<i>munda</i>	a land-holding
<i>mumeru (ameru)</i>	an individual Meru, in the plural it refers to communities of Meru
<i>muthoni (athoni)</i>	refers to a stranger, but is also used for affines
<i>mwekuru</i>	woman elder, usually defined by the status of mothering
<i>mwiriga (miiriga)</i>	this is the largest corporate grouping of people
<i>njaa</i>	a homestead corresponding to ownership of land
<i>njama</i>	archaic term for the so-called blanket chiefs of the conquest decades
<i>njuri nceke</i>	the paramount elders council for all Kimeru communities (not defunct)
<i>ntaani</i>	an initiate male, usually quite young
<i>ntuiko</i>	ceremonial handing over of the gerontocracy between competing age-sets
<i>nyomba</i>	a house
<i>ngwato</i>	term for an inheritance through clearing fallow land (archaic)
<i>nkia</i>	a client farmer squatting on land communally held by an <i>mwiriga</i> (archaic)
<i>nthuki</i>	an age-set

### **Gintu (things)**

<i>gatuo</i>	a weighing station for agricultural produce
<i>iuku</i>	a book, usually refers to the Bible
<i>kanga</i>	moonshine
<i>kienyeji</i>	refers to things traditional, such as farming techniques
<i>makara</i>	woodfuel, always charcoal, opposed to <i>mku</i> , or firewood
<i>matoro</i>	mainly the surplus from a harvest
<i>mborea</i>	manure used for fertilizer
<i>mpara</i>	literally a hunger, but means a famine (e.g. <i>mpara ya Kariamuu</i> in 1918)
<i>mpio</i>	cold season during July
<i>njia ng'ombe</i>	footpaths, usually for making shortcuts
<i>nyaki</i>	couchgrass, a kind of grass cover found in Miiriga Mieru
<i>ruiko</i>	an extended kitchen away from a living quarters
<i>ruracio</i>	the bridewealth before marriage can be carried out
<i>thano</i>	the hot-dry period of the agricultural seasons during August
<i>thigenki</i>	wire fencing

## Appendix B

To highlight some of the discourse throughout the period under consideration, lengthy quotations on the process of re-structuring the 'official' economics of Kenya's coffee industry from 1993 to 1998 are presented, in whole, show the extent to which outside observers were biased by neo-liberal discourse. Where the presence of neo-liberalist thought has been noted the passages have been italicized for emphasis. The following passages are normative in that they follow the events without reference to the growth of the second economy, and only indirect allusion to the class struggles that sprung up in the wake of re-structuration and information deficits of the 'market':

"The CBK retains its marketing role despite the government's announcement in October 1992 that the function was being transferred to the KPCU. There has been increasing criticism from farmers that the CBK is delaying licences for private coffee exporters. *They are also unhappy with being overregulated and burdened with fees and costs to pay.* The CBK deducts a 3% general commission, a marketing fee of up to 10% and a 5% presumptive tax. It also makes charges to cover the costs of its auctions and administrative overheads. *The KPCU deducts a 1% agency fee and a milling fee, while at the local level farmers pay hefty contributions to their unions and societies.* Those farmers grouped into small societies tend to suffer most of all, since they normally do not have their own retention accounts" (EIC Kenya 1993: 2nd quarterly);

"A notice in the Kenya Gazette in mid-December amended the Coffee Act with a new role for the CBK. The act required planters to give all coffee for milling to the KPCU, but the CBK is now empowered to licence and supervise private millers. All coffee must be handed over to the board within 48 hours of milling. *The board expects the new millers to compete with the KPCU, which has the capacity to mill up to 130 000 tonnes per year and does not welcome the amendment of the act*" (EIC Kenya 1995: 2nd quarterly);

"By early June the CBK had granted licences to two firms: Socfinaf, which is milling on behalf of the Sasini company, and Thika Coffee Mills, which has constructed a new plant. *The KPCU had a monopoly until an amendment to the coffee act*" (EIC Kenya 1995: 3rd quarterly);

The finance minister's *"pledge to de-regulate coffee marketing should be seen against the background of disillusionment of many farmers with the monopoly of Kenya Coffee Auctions, which acts on behalf of the CBK.* Thika Coffee Mills, one of the three firms with a licence to compete for milling business with KPCU, is seeking the go-ahead to enter marketing, and has the support of some 14000 small farmers grouped into two co-operatives in Murang'a district" (EIC Kenya 1996: 1st quarterly);

The finance minister "received the report of a task force set up in December to examine the coffee industry. Its main recommendation is that the central auction system should remain, with KCA still the only authorized auctioneer. *It does, however, suggest that the government should withdraw from KCA, as well as from the CBK and the Coffee Research Foundation, all of which should be owned by the farmers.* The licenced coffee millers should be allowed to export coffee as long as they have had it graded by the board and have bought it at KCA" (EIC Kenya 1996: 3rd quarterly);

"The KPCU is in dispute over its role in the industry. *The milling of coffee has been opened to competition but marketing and grading have remained effective the preserve of the CBK.* Both the KPCU (which had a 75% share of the milling market in the 1995/96 crop year) and Thika Coffee Mills (12%) are contesting the board's control of marketing. For its part, the board maintained at the start of the 1996/97 season that millers could carry out marketing and export business provided that had the appropriate licence (issued by the board). *One stand of*



*opinion, supported by the World Bank, is pushing for full liberalization of the agricultural sector, while another is resisting change. This second group stresses the need to protect the quality of Kenyan agricultural exports through some form of government involvement. It is also eager to point out the flaws in reforms already instituted. A report from the agricultural ministry has noted that the liberalization of milling has not yet brought genuine competition in pricing. It found that in 1995/96 the KPCU and Socfinaf charged farmers KSh 3.770/kg, and that Thika Coffee Mills charged KSh 3,480/kg" (EIC Kenya 1996: 4th quarterly);*

*"A recurring complaint of farmers in co-operatives is that they have seen little if any benefit from the higher prices for arabica coffee because of the enormous levies they pay to industrial bodies. The co-operatives themselves charge up to 25% of sale proceeds to cover their costs. Other charges include: levies by the coffee board for marketing, which totalled KSh 1.2bn in 1994/95, and for research and development at a rate of 3% of the gross realization (ad valorem levy); presumptive income tax of 2%; cess at 1.5% collected by the board on behalf of local authorities, which are supposed to use the funds to maintain rural roads; and milling charges. The burden on farmers is enormous, at up to 60-70% of gross proceeds according to some estimates which appear to include loan repayments and the cost of fertiliser and insecticides. The chairman of Thika Coffee Mills, Pius Nguigi, has made the valid point that farmers expect to see proper accounts to show how the funds gathered by the industry bodies are utilised. He argued that the government's production target of 354,000 tonnes per year by 2000, set out in Sessional Paper No.1 of 1996, is not attainable without complete liberalization of the industry" (EIC Kenya 1996: 4th quarterly);*

*The finance minister attested that "the CBK would sell all or part of its 70% shareholding in Kenya Coffee Auctions (KCA) to planters, co-operatives, and other industry parties. KCA, however, will remain the sole auctioning body, although it is to invest heavily in modern technology to enhance the transparency of its systems. Planters and millers will be free to trade and export coffee as a separate function once they obtain from the board an "A" dealer's licence to participate in the auctions. The commercial millers, led by Thika Coffee Mills, had sought liberalization of marketing but this was resisted" (EIC Kenya 1997: 1st quarterly);*

*"The CBK is vigorously defending its marketing monopoly through the Nairobi auctions, and has sought to raise its popularity with farmers by introducing direct payment, rather than payment through agents. The KPCU and the milling companies are campaigning for liberalization, arguing that farmers should be able to choose their marketing agents. This lobby has made much of the fact that the board has still not published its accounts for the 1992/93 season, and claims that the board earns at least \$25 million from its marketing role without incurring overheads. The milling companies argue that, if they have marketing rights, they will be able to offer a range of services to farmers, including crop finance, storage, and advisory services. Coffee politics are unlikely to be resolved quickly, not least because farmers are divided, often by their ethnic loyalties, over whether they support liberalisation" (EIC Kenya 1997: 3rd quarterly);*

*"The KPCU, having fought a running and continuing battle alongside the smaller milling companies against the marketing stranglehold enjoyed by the CBK, is now riven by its own internal politics. On August 13 a special general meeting called by the directors of the KPCU was marred by heckling of the managing director, James Nyagah, who was criticized for working with the independent Thika Coffee Mills (TCM) against the CBK. This was called at short notice in an unsuccessful bid to defuse a meeting called for the following day by opponents of Mr. Nyagah. At the "rebel" gathering on August 14th, the 300 planters present voted to sack three directors and to recommend the dismissal of Mr. Nyagah, who was accused of having a "detrimental" association with Thika Coffee Mills. His defence that he was only working with the TCM to combat the monopoly of the coffee board made little impression" (EIC Kenya 1997: 4th quarterly);*

*"The country's leading coffee miller, the KPCU, ran out of funds in October. Its cheques to farmers, said to total KSh50 million, were returned unpaid after its bankers declined to extend any more overdraft financing. The CBK came to the KPCU's rescue and said that it would recover its money from milling charges. It added ominously that its support was in line with its plan to develop into a broad-based farmers' organization. The board has traditionally blocked the demands of the KPCU and the licenced private-sector millers that farmers should be free choose their own marketing agents. This could prove an interesting challenge for the reforming instincts of the new agriculture minister, Mr. Mudavadi" (EIC Kenya 1998: 1st quarterly);*

*"The chairman of the CBK, John Ngari, has warned that coffee output this year will continue the declining trend (the provisional figure for the 1997/98 season is 65,000 tonnes compared with 82,900 tonnes in 1996/97). He blamed complacency and uncompetitiveness in international markets, but said that he was satisfied with recent achievements in liberalizing the coffee industry"(EIC Kenya 1998: 2nd quarterly);*

*"A sharp fall is predicted in Kenyan coffee output this year, with an estimated decline from 1.3 million bags to 1 million bags. Producers blame the poor weather and the scarcity of farm credit. Revenue from the sector is also*

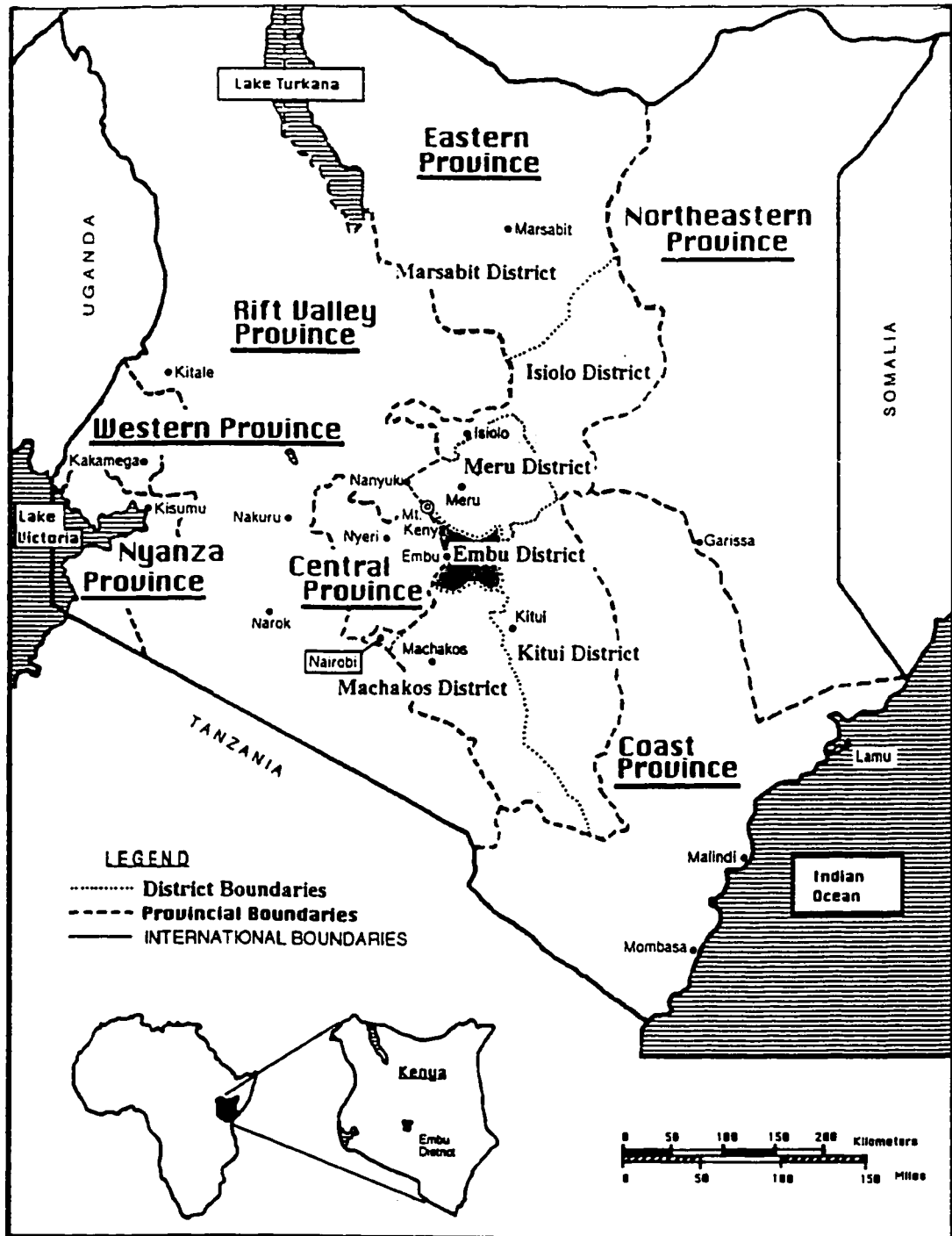
likely to suffer from an expected fall in world coffee prices as a result of a forecast bumper Brazilian crop this year. There are also increasing worries over the long-term decline of the industry. The Coffee Research Foundation is conducting studies into higher yield varieties of coffee, and producers are calling for greater progress in the liberalization of the industry whilst maintaining a government support cushion against adverse weather conditions and fluctuating world prices" (EIC Kenya 1998: 3rd quarterly);

"In a dismal year for agricultural production (the sector is expected to record slightly negative overall growth for 1998), the coffee industry has fared particularly badly. Continuing its long-term downward trend over the year, in the months to July 1998 coffee production fell over 40%, and between January and July this year, the value of coffee exports declined by 20%. Poor weather, along with deeper-rooted structural problems within the sector, have contributed to this dire performance. Acknowledging the decline, the Ministry of Agriculture has agreed to review the basis of the existing Coffee Act in an attempt to restructure the industry. Many local farmers have already uprooted their coffee bushes and opted for more profitable crops" (EIC Kenya 1998: 4th quarterly).

## Appendix C

### Maps of Kenya and Meru District

(Map 1) Kenya (provinces, major towns, and districts in Eastern Province, mid 1980s)  
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