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WOMEN IN THE COFFEE SOCIETY: THE CASE OF NYERI, KENYA

Patrick Mbataru

KENYA'S COFFEE ECONOMY dipped severely in the 1980s and eventually halted in the 1990s. Socially, the situation exploded into what the mass media called "the coffee wars," which were more pronounced in Nyeri district than anywhere else in the country. However, what have not been fully recorded were the more complex social processes ignited by the historic depression of the prices: the intergenerational, generational, sociopolitical and gender conflicts as well as the new socioeconomic strategies implemented by different actors in the industry. We can speak of a new society: the post-coffee society. This article analyses the role of women in this society.

Introduction

Characterised by a sharp decline in international prices, the lowest in forty years, the coffee crisis created a palpable reversal of gender roles at the domestic and societal levels. The capacity of men to provide for the family financially having been severely limited by the constraints in the coffee economy, women had to take over from men to

become the breadwinners. This created confusion over gendered roles, leading to conflicts and tensions in families over the control of alternative sources of money and over the division of labour.

The study of the role of women in the post-coffee society rests on the hypothesis that the new society is dominated by women. The post-coffee society is characterised by a reversal of gender roles at the household and societal levels. From a more general standpoint, the post-coffee society is characterised, firstly, by new economic activities and, secondly, by the reversal of gender domination, itself characterised by women increasingly taking over responsibilities hitherto labelled "masculine." Consequently, the post-coffee society threatens both male "potency" and social morality. In studying the post-coffee society, the status of women becomes important because their economic activities form an essential cushion against increased risks that farmers face in the wake of the critical fall in coffee prices. It enables us to understand the pattern of emerging social conflict, in and out of the household, and to explore the changing patterns of dominance in labour and intergenerational relationships.

Ten years after the coffee crisis, indicators pointed to an increased role by women in contributing to the family economy. Their elevated status as providers, a position usurped from men by default, pointed to a different socioeconomic configuration emerging in place of the coffee society, if we define "society" as an agglomeration of people living by commonly defined roles and pursuits.

Women in production: from complementarities to antagonisms

To understand women's domination in the post-coffee society, it is important to analyse its cultural basis. Among the Kikuyu, men were responsible for the production of drought-resistant crops such as yams and bananas as well as produce of ritual significance like honey and medicinal herbs. Consonant with nutritional knowledge, women in Central Kenya (as was the case in most agrarian societies) had intricate ecological knowledge, matching men's mastery of fauna and flora. Partly referring to Jean Fisher's work, A.D. Mackenzie [1999] analyses women's knowledge on soil classification depending on fertility, texture, and colour as well as topographical location and hence the value of dispersing holdings (*kugarurira*) over different topographical locations. However, the gist of this paper is that the introduction of coffee made this knowledge irrelevant until the coffee crisis in the 1990s. Coffee rapidly exhausted already diminishing land resources so that by the 1990s, there were signs of imminent food shortages in Nyeri. After the coffee crisis, food shortages led women in the post-coffee society to reinvent traditional knowledge.

This development of knowledge is also attributable to the precolonial economic differentiation between the right of access and locative rights, which guaranteed women's use of land [Mackenzie 1999]. It is in this context that gender complementarities in the division of labour should be understood. Men's knowledge of foods was limited but they wielded political power. But the traditional political

economy depended on subsistence farming, mainly based on millet and sorghum production. Although men controlled land rights through the *mbari*¹, the very existence of these rights depended on the provision of labour, sustained by surplus food, which was only possible through the effort and knowledge by women. "Feminine" clout allowed women to negotiate implicit rights on land and participation in the political process. This may have led early anthropologists to suggest that early Kikuyu social structures were formerly matriarchal and wrongly interpreting the chieftaincy of Wangu wa Makeri and the "female husband"² practice as justifying it. It is nonetheless true that childless women would improve their bargaining power regarding land rights by "marrying" other women to beget heirs who could stake their "mothers'" claim to property.

However, women's contribution in the political process was not always set in a dyadic frame. The responsibility of trading through barter in grains allowed women a sizeable amount of autonomy [Clark 1980] which was boosted by the emergence of early urban markets for eggs and milk. In the 1920s, women were already being "enlightened" by *mjini*, urban culture.

Even in the coffee economy, women continued the production of legumes, tubers and grains, giving them continued power over diet

1. The basic traditional social unit built upon an ancestor.

2. Very rare today since women, through education or personal effort, can buy their own property and adopt children.

and food security. Just as in the past, their cultural knowledge enabled them to decide what, when, and how much of a particular crop was to be grown and what food was suitable to a particular area. In case of severe deficiency women would import staple foods from neighbouring territories through a network of markets. The marketing of food also exposed women to different varieties of grains, often leading to new knowledge and the diffusion of innovations from one region to another. In the 1930s, women from Tetu would organise themselves into small groups, leave children with their husbands or older daughters and travel on foot for 50 kilometres to work for finger millet, which, by the 1930s, was becoming rare on the Aberdare highlands. Trade in maize and beans was a difficult task, requiring not only a great amount of physical energy but also long absences from home. This naturally created conflict in the households. This trade was also contested in that the increased income gave women much more power and autonomy to sell what was “easier to go” as a male respondent, commented in a thinly veiled allusion to marital infidelity.

The introduction of coffee changed the complementarities in production, making men more dependent on the cash crop economy than on food production. This contrived sanctity of the cash crop belied veritable undercurrents of tensions beneath the household bedrock. Women were only tangentially involved in these new economic configurations, only being active in the labour dimension of production.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that coffee completely annulled women's clout

in the gendered politics of production. What happened was that, although subdued as an expression of power, production at the domestic level became subterranean. Family needs were met through coffee money and women could import food from the former White Highlands. Food production became an occupational activity engaged in to minimize the existential boredom that the coffee economy created.

These social processes were to be re-enacted during the coffee boom. Gendered complementarities in production obtained in the precolonial economy. I argue here that although the introduction of coffee made women's role in the domestic economy of the coffee society redundant, it is their traditional expertise in production that women readily reformulated to support their families after the coffee economy declined in the 1990s.

Women, coffee on-farm production

The coffee economy was based on privatised production and the accumulation of property that quickly affected the way women participated in food production. The title deed concentrated land rights and placed them on the shoulders of men, not of the family. Acquisition of land itself was no longer obtained through the *mbari*. In the coffee economy, masculinity was individually extended by buying land using coffee money in the former White Highlands, property in the urban areas or starting money-making enterprises. Future insurance was no longer determined by the number of children one had, but real men ensured their security by educating their children. In the new social and economic configuration, the financial

dimension of women's production was pushed into the periphery.

In addition, the coffee economy became an instrument that corrupted social morality. Through the bank account number, the small-scale Kikuyu became a modern petty-bourgeois. The coffee bank account at the cooperative society rivalled land as the symbol of Kikuyu extreme attachment to land, so much so that by the 1970s coffee in Nyeri had become the sacred tree.

Expansion of coffee production among Africans in the 1950s greatly undermined women's participation in the local economy. While the precolonial and colonial modes of production allowed some autonomy to women, after independence, through the 1970s and until the crisis in the 1990s, coffee enhanced male economic power well beyond traditional levels. While in precolonial economies, gendered production activities complemented each other within the limits of traditional stipulations and checks and balances, the introduction of coffee economy required specific social and cultural changes. Importantly, land rights had to be privatised.

This privatisation was, however, stamped upon the already established status of the man as the sole decider of how the farm should be managed and accumulated wealth disposed of and used. The rights to dispose of the land was perhaps the most radical; wayward men would arrange secret land sales behind their wives' backs and disappear to far-off land in the White Highlands. Left to fend for themselves, the immediate economic alternative available to women was livestock. In the pre-coffee days, men could, through the control of *mbari*

instruments, control women's labour and income, and then use the money to accumulate property, further strengthening the sociocultural status of men. It is, however, possible that women had developed secret strategies to resist men's attempt to control their labour and income. This possibility increased with the emergence of markets for non-farm commodities like eggs that men thought too petty for their attention. As we shall see further on, as traditional economies moved away from the *mbari* to the family unit, women took much more control of livestock and land usage rights and were thus able to increment their private savings. A Ugandan student at the Alliance High School in the 1940s noted the thrift of the Kikuyu woman:

From Monday to Friday, these women deposited money at the local postal bank. They would fish out money from their brightly coloured *shukas*. Never did I see them withdraw or depositing. It is no wonder that these areas [of the Central Province] seem more developed than others...

The difference between men's and women's incomes and the way each earned and saved money may have widened in the coffee economy though the cash-crop income was not inconsequential: it boosted family economies. It modernised domestic economies, further reducing women's need to struggle to feed the family, and reduced the trauma of long-distance trade in grains.

Despite all, I stress here that women may have maintained a secret, subterranean economy during the coffee golden era, mainly

in grain and market garden trade, savings from handouts by men from coffee money and a medley of other means including merry-go-rounds.³ This, however, seems to have been important as an insurance, in case the man neglected the family. By default, the strategy proved important when the coffee economy declined.

Gendered contest and emergence of new men

The coffee economy fomented domestic conflicts by driving a wedge into the traditional division of labour. The coffee economy set the stage for gendered contests over production and income, distinct from traditional gendered and individualised rights in the cash-crop economy – the right to use coffee income without consulting the spouse, the right to sell land – gave men leeway to maintain an unbridled autonomy.

Originally, the coffee economy subjugated women in ways that the traditional economy had not. The production of food crops as well as women participation in the social economy was relegated to the periphery. However, “feminine versatility” was to prove important when coffee prices fell in the 1990s. It was women’s skills in drawing on non-coffee financial sources that sustained families after the coffee crisis. Traditionally, gender, intergenerational, and generational tensions were tempered by in-built *mbari* systems so that the situation hardly reached a point of rupture. In post-coffee gendered tensions and politics over production, it was the versatility of women in reinventing their social and economic skills that contained an otherwise explosive situation. By

the 1980s, family land resources in Nyeri had shrunk from an average 7 acres in the 1960s to 2 acres. Over the same period, land on which coffee was grown had increased from a third of an acre to half an acre per farm. This limited the land available for subsistence crops. The coffee boom in the mid-1970s had “spoiled” women who were “pampered like settler’s wives,” as a farmer put it in an interview. Men practicing traditional patronage would accord women the pleasure of running the family economy, but only by proxy.

Food produced in Nyeri was largely for domestic use. Food security in this area and Kenya in general declined since the 1970s, which entailed a rise in poverty. According to the Institute of Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR), the incidences of poverty increased from 3.7 million Kenyans in 1972 to 12.5 million in 1997, with 47% of the latter residing in rural areas and 29% in urban areas. Women are among the poorest despite the fact that they could be the most effective actors in eradicating poverty. IPAR designates the lack of legal protection of women’s rights over access and control of resources as well of personal insecurity and insufficient educational opportunities as factors hampering poverty eradication.⁴

The general practice was to import food so as to supplement what was produced locally.

3. Merry-go-rounds were villages talking clubs where women would contribute some money and hand it to one of them, to buy “feminine” items like cups and cooking pots.

4. “Poverty reduction efforts in Kenya: institutions, capacity and policy.” Volume 8, issue 5, 2002.

Indeed, during the golden coffee years, a number of men stopped subsistence food production, preferring importation. More land was sown with coffee and fodder. Some men grew maize solely as fodder for their animals. But land was beginning to show signs of exhaustion due to prolonged exploitation and the use of chemical fertilizers, which caused undetermined externalities in health due to the diminishing nutritional value of foods and the impact of chemicals, especially on women. In the 1970s, 1 acre of land in Nyeri produced about 300 kilograms of maize and 100 kilograms of beans, enough to feed a family of five for eight months. This decline was exacerbated by the surging population increase of the 1980s and worsened by the sharp decline in coffee income, making the importation of grain much more urgent but expensive. Women, however, did not just look on helplessly as the “male economy” crumbled. Rather, they invented their own sources of income to buy food instead of relying on men.

After the coffee crisis: the reconstruction of the ancient markets

After the drop in coffee prices, women took over the family economy by adopting various strategies. Of note here is the reinvention of the grain and market garden trades. In the post-coffee society, the market places became critical in supporting women’s trade in on-farm produce. Since the onset of the crisis at the end of the 1990s, old market points were reinvented. Since colonial days, the best known traditional market places in Nyeri were, in order of importance, Karatina, Gakindu and Muthinga. Up to the 1960s, these

markets were very active. One Karatina man said that he used to hear “noisy women negotiating like bees” from his home 10 kilometres away. These market places formed an important socioeconomic structure in the post-coffee society. After the coffee crisis and the subsequent disintegration of the coffee economy, women reinvented traditional modes of earning private income.

Of course, there always was a dense network of small market places throughout the region. Many of these were strategically situated in peripheral zones on the border with neighbouring communities. Kamakwa market just outside Nyeri was an interface between the Kikuyu and the Purko Masaai of Laikipia. The others were Wanguha at the Kikuyu Mbeere, Embu, Kamba border, and Kiru, which linked Nyeri, Muranga and Kabete. Without going into the sociology of the market place, as in the past, women controlled these market places, as a casual look at a typical market place shows. A closer study, at least in Nyeri, reveals that even the supply chain in market garden products and grains is a woman’s trade. There are big-time grain “mamas” who hire trucks to source grains from as far away as Kitale, 500 kilometres to the west of Kenya or Laikipia. Interestingly, it seems that the role of men in the grain trade is largely to ferry the grains from the farms. Women employ men to carry the maize on bicycles from inaccessible villages in Laikipia to collection points where women take over the commodity, but, as “middlemen,” the women traders skim off all the profit once the grain reaches Nyeri. In Nyeri, the grain is distributed through small village markets, again dominated by women. Small

rooms, formerly used as lodgings during the golden coffee years have also been converted into small groceries, although men claim that the market places were used by “liberated women” as brothels.

In the post-coffee society, migrants in the White Highlands turned out to be crucial in cushioning families back in Nyeri against food insecurity. The White Highlands became important sources of grain. However, the near collapse of the coffee industry meant that available money no longer sufficed to import food from outside the region. But women still found means to import food from the White Highlands by using established trade patterns. Women, using kin in Laikipia, would buy grain and sell areas where food supplies were inadequate such as Tetu and Mukurweeni [Droz 1997]. Although the grain trade was originally financed through the “tears” of coffee money, the trade planted a germ from which favoured the emergence of a class of independent women traders in the post-coffee society. These women came to be known as the tough *atimia a thoko*, women grain traders.

Throughout Nyeri, one notes an increasing number of new market points and the resuscitation of old ones, some of which were rendered dormant by the coffee boom in the 1970s. It is significant that just as precolonial market networks enabled women to gather intricate knowledge on a variety of foods, these post-coffee markets play a similar role. Nutritional knowledge has not been lost, but rather has been complemented by modern knowledge on foods. In the wake of the coffee crisis, markets places like Karatina became significant in accessing food crops, especially types of grains that have

virtually disappeared from coffee-growing areas. The importance of these markets has been enhanced by the tremendous shift in eating habits over the last twenty or so years. However, these markets play a much more important role as alternative avenues through which women finance the domestic economy. In the absence of coffee income, women exploit the economic opportunities presented by these markets to get money to finance family expenditure previously paid for by coffee money.

It would be interesting to analyse further the control of income from trade in these markets. Control is, however, indicated by the testimony of head-teachers of secondary schools: it is mostly women who pay school fees. Historically, men always wanted to control trade in grains and market garden products, as pointed out above, for fear that women would slowly become independent. This was often played out at the market place. But these attempts were firmly resisted. Women would wail or shout at male officials so that “nothing short of brutal force would have moved them.” [Mackenzie 1999] In the post-coffee society, as in the past, the grain trade has a symbolic and economic meaning. It allows women a means to resist both male and administrative control.

Seeing the profitability of alternative source of income in desperate economic situations, men in Cameroon staged a fight for increased control of grain and market garden trade [Courade ed. 1994]. I would argue that Kikuyu men did not succeed in controlling the post-coffee economy. In Nyeri, men seemed resigned to their fate as women became the “new men,” acquiring property and taking over roles hitherto deemed masculine; hence, *indo riu ni*

cia atimia, wealth now belongs to women, a comment made by several men during this study. One reason why coffee men did not try to control the women's trade is that the effect of the coffee crisis in Nyeri was not as dramatic as it was in Cameroon. In Kenya, the decline of the coffee economy was rather "graduated" compared to the steady and dramatic slide observed in Cameroon, symbolised by uprooting coffee and the closing down of some factories and cooperatives. The second reason is related to the first, indeed a possible cause of it: the interurban network in West and Central Africa is much more elaborate than in East Africa. In this context, the oil economies of West Africa drew people away from farming in the 1970s into the burgeoning cities. After the coffee crisis, Cameroonian farmers had ready markets for market garden and grain products in the many urban centres of Nigeria.

On the contrary, commerce in market garden products and grains in East Africa is much "regionalized" in the sense that cities rely directly on the established, nearby supply areas: Nairobi, for example, relies on Kiambu and Kiung'u, barely 30 kilometres away, for the supply of grain, cabbage and potatoes, while Nakuru is supplied by the highly productive nearby Njoro, Moro and Subukia areas. Nyeri itself is situated in a high-yield area. Over time, these towns have developed their own town-rural market and supply liaisons. Even then, towns in East Africa are smaller and far between. In Kenya, the coffee crisis merely created more traders in grain and market garden produce and not more market openings. It is safe to say that women tried the grain trade mainly because there was hardly any other alternative,

since these areas were sufficiently supplied even before the coffee crisis.

Although we have talked at length about the grain trade and given the impression that it is the most important factor, the post-coffee economy relies on multiple economic activities, but mainly on market garden trade and dairy farming. These activities are characterised by strong feminine participation. In all, through their activities, women were increasingly relied upon as financial providers, taking over roles that in the heyday of the coffee economies were deemed masculine. It should be noted that this is a significant indicator of a changing society. In addition, money earned through the sale of market garden and grains is used to sustain an elaborate social capital network.

Women and groups: the promotion of social capital

An outstanding characteristic of the post-coffee economy is non-family social capitalisation. The end of the coffee economy accelerated the death of family-based social capital. In its wake, women revamped their networks that had developed during the coffee economy as an alternative fall-over insurance against a male-dominated economy. These were mainly merry-go-rounds locally called *itatis*.

Reinvented, these groups became major fulcrums upon which social activities in villages were organised after the coffee crisis. Women groups, further confirm the strong "feminine" character of the post-coffee society where men "coil their tails," as one respondent put it. There are few men groups in the villages. 93% of the 40 women interviewed in Nyeri said they belonged to women groups.

60% said they belonged to two or three groups falling in three categories: family, village and church. Only 30% of men said they belonged to *itatis*. The group villages could further be categorised into contingency groups (groups created to assist during emergencies like deaths) and quasi microcredit groups. Under the family category, we put the *nyumba*, i.e. the nuclear family and the clan. The importance of latter as a pole of social and economic mobilisation had greatly diminished since the 1970s. Groups' modes of operation varied. There are the "five-member-one-week" outfits pooling around 50 Kenyan shillings (Ksh⁵) a week to give to one member in a merry-go-round arrangement. There were serious, large women groups running small-scale businesses like goat-keeping or renting houses at the market place. There are also microcredit groups that offer financial assistance for small-scale programmes. The proliferation of women's groups should be seen within the larger context of the social process that occurred after the coffee crisis. These groups increasingly substituted for the clan and family as crucibles in which variegated socioeconomic interests were contested. The coffee economy temporarily supported kinship organisation in the 1970s and 1980s. Originally, it seemed possible that family enterprises would grow out of kin-based organisations, as clans transformed themselves into social welfare organisations. However, there is little evidence of clan-based entrepreneurial culture in Nyeri. To the contrary, after the coffee crisis, clan-based organisations seem to have collapsed due to weak structures.

As instruments of socioeconomic mobilisation, family groups were based only on mutual faith not institutional capacity. 97% of respondents in Mukurweini division, for example, said their clan or family group was merely a contingency network, meeting only during emergencies such as death or social occasions like marriages. In Othaya, only 20% said their group contributed money regularly or sustained the family group as an organisation. Clans began breaking up as early as the 1960s, this being the culmination of an exogenously generated process that started with the individualisation of means of production, especially the privatisation of land. Although the nuclear family may still be the locus for social and economic mobilisation, there is evidence that even it is dissipating. The crash of the coffee economy deprived families of the crucial financial sap that would have catapulted them into becoming vehicles for socioeconomic advancement. Starved of financial coffee money and the few other sources of cash, many family organisations simply collapsed in the face of debts and the lack of institutionalised regulatory structures. Indeed, the disintegration of family organisations illustrates well what goes into the construction and deconstruction of microlevel institutions.

However, the proliferation of non-family social capital inversely implies that many groups have disappeared. But bound by the need to see the family survive the coffee crisis, women held together more at the social level outside their families than men. Women

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5. About 0.60 euro.

attributed this to men's "inherent incapability to organise anything collectively." As scions of the *mbari* system, men had long been deprived of the authority to preside over *mbari* courts. The authority of men over their families even during the coffee era was reduced to vestigial *mbari* rights, only enhanced by coffee money. Once the money was no longer forthcoming, men naturally lost even this symbolic position in the family and their power was severely dented on the home front. Women quickly transformed *itatis* into vehicles of domestic accumulation such that these groups became recognised as important instruments of social change in the rural areas. After the coffee crisis, however, women started channelling that money into meeting crucial family needs like paying school fees. After the crisis, these microgroups were mainly financed through savings from the grain trade or market garden products or family contributions from some of the well-off children working in urban areas.

Church groups also became important sources of social capital in the post-coffee society. Although most do not engage in financial transactions like *itatis* and microcredit groups, they nevertheless became important cushions during moments adversity or on social occasions such as weddings. At a time when the impact of the Aids pandemic was beginning to be felt in the villages, these groups became important in organising moral support groups. However, even in these, women participate more vibrantly than men, especially in the small Christian communities organised by the Catholic Church.

Still, indebtedness is a common trait of the post-coffee groups. Most respondents are

indebted to another neighbour, a shopkeeper or a group. How do they pay? Most are in a rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul situation. This is not surprising as there is very little money in circulation and, more importantly, there is little production going on.

In all, women strategies were generally affiliated to the village and church organisations which become the new modes of social mobilisation. Belonging to two or three different organisations seemed to be a risk-distributing strategy. Women therefore seem to dominate the socioeconomic scene.

Women and the production of milk

In the cash-crop economy, much of the off-farm sector was controlled by men, leaving women to take over on-farm production. By default, women became effective farm managers and crucially controlled the family farm economy [Orvis 1993]. Over time, this gendered separation, accumulated domestic tensions around the gender identity of family property and the accrued income after the coffee crisis. Important here is the control of dairy farming.

Traditionally, livestock was the accepted currency and therefore the symbol of well-being. Masculinity was measured according to the heads of cattle one owned. Having many wives and daughters meant acquiring much bride wealth in the form of livestock and labour. However, livestock lost much of its economic importance in the context of the coffee economy.

Just as in the past, women and children still form the basic unit of household production not only because they perform virtually all the farm work, but also because the

financial contribution made by most rural men range “from the miniscule to the non-existent.” [Kongstad and Monsted 1980] The cow demeaned by men as not so important a measure of financial and social worth, women “acquired” it as an important source of family income.

Several factors favoured milk as an important commodity in Nyeri. The rise of the milk culture in Kenya in general was fed by rapid urbanisation characterised by drinking tea with “a cloud of milk,” a practice inherited from the British. The result is that although 70% of Nyeri farmers produce coffee, local consumption of the beverage is meagre. This is related to the hyped campaign going back to colonial days discouraging local consumption on the pretext that Kenyan coffee is best for export and blending purposes. The effect of this campaign is that many Kenyans cannot tell the difference between good and bad coffee, hence perhaps the lingering problem among small-scale farmers over quality and quantity. As a result, Kenya has a very weak coffee-drinking culture, unlike the neighbouring Ethiopians whose coffee culture is deep-rooted. Many small-scale farmers own on average 2 grade cows, producing about 4 litres a day at between 15 to 20 Ksh per litre. This translates into about Ksh 100 per day, Ksh 36,000 a year compared to about Ksh 10,000 a year from coffee at the time of compiling these data. This may indicate why a grade cow had increasingly become an essential asset in the household as well as a potential source of gendered conflict. A good dairy cow costing about Ksh 20,000 is indeed the easiest asset to dispose of in an emergency.

This has sustained a rural-based dairy industry not usual in many African countries. There developed in many parts of Kenya a vibrant dairy industry with potential turnover of over 30 billion shillings, allowing families to keep dairy cows expressly for commercial purposes. But we stress here that women controlled this trade in terms of labour and the use of accrued income.

In this context, the cow then easily becomes the most contested property in a Nyeri household. Since men controlled much more money from coffee, carefully constructed as a male crop, they originally considered milk revenue as feminine. The demand for milk rose in the 1980s, just as the coffee economy sharply declined. One reason for that was the steady rise in population. There arose a substantial working class in the rural areas due to rapid urbanisation and increased provision of modern services like schools, hospitals, etc., that employed young, educated people, mostly immigrants, but nevertheless requiring milk. There were also those who owned land, who found dairy farming expensive and preferred to buy milk rather than keep dairy cows.

An indicator of the raised activity in the dairy industry in the district was the increased number of dairy product operators. There were the Shama, Mwitha and Brokeside dairies. The government had also refurbished the public-owned Kenya Cooperative Creameries, raising hopes for more a reliable dairy market. However, a quintessential effort in the dairy industry is the Wakulima dairy in Mukurweini. This is local idea involving over 200 farmers delivering about 10,000 litres of milk daily. Lines at the collection points show a strong

female participation, as does the one at the reception at Mukurweini offices.

Nyeri is geographically well situated, for dairy farming. As pointed out above, the availability of land has shrunk in the last thirty years, consequently reducing pastures and fodder production. More and more families shifted to "zero grazing," which greatly favoured women because they did not have to take the cows to pasture, an activity traditionally carried out by men. With zero grazing, women could feed a cow as part of their domestic routine and chores, which further reinforced women's control of farm earnings. Although statistics are scanty, there is evidence of raised milk production associated with zero grazing.

Asked who owns the family cow, husband or wife (in terms of feeding and controlling the money from milk), 90% of women respondents said it was the wife. Women have mastered the details of dairy farming, including marketing of the milk and the knowhow required to get the maximum yield from an animal. This had been the practice since the 1970s, when men abandoned dairy farming to women. Any attempt by men to control dairy farming and income is firmly but subtly resisted. Where men managed to take control of the milk trade, they soon find themselves unable to sustain the cow. The control of the milk production therefore becomes one of the most contested areas of family production, which leads to frequent domestic conflicts.

Conflict and gendered contestation

The post-coffee household is a woman's turf. But the corresponding inversion of roles inevitably created a set of gendered conflicts.

Consequent to women's assuming traditionally masculine roles, husbands must feel edged out of the household economy. The situation did not, however, become easier for women after the hypothesised inversion of roles. Women still had to fight for the survival of the family. They could even be worse off in than in the coffee economy, when men derived regular income and could pass down some of the latter to women. In addition to what they did formerly, women must now shoulder the responsibility of ensuring that the family is educated, shod clad and even housed. The wife becomes the new man, now in charge of accumulation and improving the general welfare of the family. However, what is important here is that women could be the ones in charge of production and income. But in controlling the post-coffee economy, the woman standing her ground to maintain her position is faced with gender conflict as the man tries to amass cultural ammunition to reclaim his status.

The psychological torment of a man having to depend on his wife to cover financial needs in a cultural milieu still steeped in tradition fuels conflicts. Much of the conflict in the post-coffee families relates to how the man finances his personal needs, e.g., cigarettes, beer, or clothes. Women have to subsidise these needs from milk income, often under duress. Mostly, it is cultural considerations that keep the family together and balance gender relationships.

8% of respondents in the study could give at least one example of a homestead wrought with conflicts attributable to the new-found autonomy of the wife. These were situations in which husbands felt threatened by the enhanced "masculinity" of their wives, which led

to perceptible marital strain. “*Kumera hia*” (growing horns) was the expression used by several respondents to illustrate the increasing autonomy of women. This is analogous to what occurred at the onset of the market economy when family unity and morality were severely tested. Respondents in a village mentioned seven cases of broken marriages owing to conflicts related to the sharing of money obtained by the wife from microfinance groups. The interest for these soft loans known as *ngumbacho* ranged from 10 to 30% when compounded. While there is no doubt this money is intended to be used for small-scale projects, most of the cases involved misuse of the loans through the acquisition of luxurious domestic items.

Mary Mumbi, a leader of a group, said:

She took Ksh 100,000⁶ behind her husband's back from the microcredit. She bought a sofa set and expensive cutlery, a wardrobe and side board. But soon the creditors came and demanded the money... I think 150,000: she did not have... Then 180,000: she did not have... The money reached 300,000... She ran away to Kieni in the former White Highlands and when she came back they demanded 500,000... It had multiplied a lot... We were worried when she got sick. Then the microgroup attached the family land. She became depressed and later died... We did a *harambee* (fundraising action) but that did not help much...

This is a common script in the villages. With considerable autonomy offered by *itatis* microgroups, or trade, a wife may “disappear for long,” another allusion to marital infidelity. “*Nimaaramukire maitho*” (they have

become wiser) observed a man who depended on his wife for the upkeep of the family. In this context, there are cases of men who prohibited their wives from joining the groups, but this does not prevent the woman from joining the *itatis*, albeit secretly. In such cases, the other women members conspiratorially hide the membership of the threatened women from the husband. Thus, the family may be sustained.

Conclusion

An outstanding feature of the post-coffee society is the increased participation of women in the family economy. The breakdown of kinship ties and specialisation in the off-farm economy favoured women in gaining control of the emerging economy.

The trade in grain and market garden products as well as dairy farming is favoured by the fact that maize and bean production in Nyeri has declined over the last twenty years, creating a need for imports. A network of markets resulted from the growing market for grain and market needs based on population increase and changes in food tastes. The household budget was partly financed through groups that have proliferated in the rural areas. The fact that Nyeri is a good place for milk production and the increased demand for it may have boosted dairy farming in the post-coffee society. A more thorough analysis is needed to gauge the control of money obtained from the milk trade, market garden and grain sales as well as from groups.

6. About 1,100 euros.

The argument developed here is that given the independence gained by women since and before the coffee crisis, women generally controlled these sources of revenue. Even before the crisis set on, men seem to have accepted that money accrued from sale of grain, market garden and milk products is a woman's affair. Indeed the relative wealth that coffee brought should have led men to regard "women affairs" as petty trade, which it really was in comparison to the coffee income. There is definitely tension in homes over the control of this money. But production and income control have been female affairs ever since the disintegration of the *mbari* units in the early part of the 20th century. What is of interest here is the heightened role of women in trade, labour, and production in the context of the

coffee crisis. In the past, men had alternatives and their only worry was that of women might become too rich, thus causing social conflict.

No longer able to provide for their families, men saw women take over as the "new men." Since the introduction of market economies, men's identity in Nyeri was reconstructed through coffee income, which entailed several roles: paying school fees, buying land, building a modern house (whether permanent or semi-permanent), and other masculine provisions. The crisis deconstructed this identity. There is a caveat, though: coffee has not completely disappeared from the economic picture in Nyeri or elsewhere in coffee-growing areas. It still forms part of the family economy, but along with several other activities.

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Résumé

Patrick Mbataru, *Les femmes dans une société caféicole : le cas de Nyeri, Kenya*

Une société se construit sur des normes, des pratiques, des orientations morales et physiques, qui mettent en jeu toute une série de symboles, cette structure constituant un mode particulier d'existence. Dans toute société, un glissement dans la répartition du rôle économique entre les hommes et les femmes traduit un glissement dans le mode d'existence. Après une crise économique et sociale se posent des questions sur les conflits de genre et sur les tensions qui existent entre les jeunes et les vieux. Ces questions portent sur l'émergence d'un nouveau capital social et économique ainsi que sur la réorganisation du territoire. Cet article explore les conflits de genre dans une économie caféière en mutation.

Mots clés

café, capital social, conflits de genre, Kenya, rôle économique des femmes

Abstract

Patrick Mbataru, *Women in the coffee society: the case of Nyeri, Kenya*

A society is built upon norms, practices, mental and physical orientations, which entail a gamut of symbols, a structure which shapes a particular mode of existence. In any society, a shift in gendered economic roles symbolizes a shift into a different mode of existence. After a social and economic crisis, a set of questions emerges on gender conflict and tensions between the old and the young. There are questions on emerging social and economic capital and even a shift in the way people organise their territory. This paper will explore the gendered conflict in a changing coffee economy.

Keywords

coffee, social capital, gender conflict, Kenya, women's economic role