LIMITED OPTIONS
CONTINGENCY AND CONSTRAINT IN THE ECONOMY
OF THE POKOMO OF NORTH-EASTERN KENYA

BY

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ABSTRACT

The Pokomo of north-eastern Kenya farm the banks of the Tana River, which form the only cultivable area in this otherwise semi-desert part of Kenya. If the monsoon is regular, the Tana should flood its banks twice a year, and on the moist soil as the water recedes the Pokomo grow bananas, rice, maize and a few minor crops. This study aims at uncovering the rationality of traditional farming methods, and focusses on the devices by which the Pokomo cope with the extreme unpredictability of the physical environment, where, for example, the river might not flood for up to seven seasons in succession, or it might flood and stay high for several months. Many factors in the physical environment, such as the river and animal pests, combine to limit productivity. Land is divided up in such a way that linear connections can be read from the pattern of holdings. The production and consumption unit is the nuclear family; there is no joint farming between brothers, or between father and son. Village-based work parties are occasionally called out, but wider kinship ties are not stressed. Clans are not exogamous. The traditional political system was not centralised; it was based on a hierarchy of men's secret societies, and a series of age sets. The need for flexibility and mobility presumably explain all this apparent atomism. The traditional political system began to be undermined with the introduction of colonial administration, and younger men used a new-found faith in Islam to challenge the traditional gerontocracy. Later, with the introduction of taxes, the expansion of cash-crop marketing, and possibilities for wage labour within and beyond the district, the economy began to be linked more closely to the national economy. In
general, however, the District was ignored by Government, so that its poverty is more residual than structural. The general frustration and powerlessness of the Pokomo are explored, and the paucity of options open to them at the local level for generating any cash income is demonstrated. At present, the only valid alternatives are to become an irrigation scheme tenant, or to sell one's labour. An irrigation scheme, using the river water, was begun in 1955, and now covers 800 hectares, with about 2000 Pokomo tenants. Plans are afoot to expand irrigation and thereby drastically reduce the flow of the river, so that traditional agriculture will no longer be possible. Thus, by becoming tenants, or wage labourers, the Pokomo will have completed a transfer of dependency from the river to the market. My data indicate that the relative backwardness of the Tana River area is due not to exploitation, or to innate conservatism, or a lack of aspiration, but to a lack of outside investment, and a general scarcity of opportunities.