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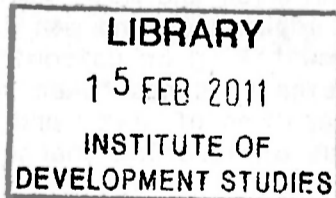
CONTESTED TERRAIN: GENDER, LABOR AND RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS IN
HORTICULTURAL EXPORTING,
MERU DISTRICT, KENYA

Working Paper No. 501

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Paper Submitted to the Institute for Development Studies
University of Nairobi

July 1995



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RN 322250

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ABSTRACT

CONTESTED TERRAIN: GENDER, LABOR AND RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS IN
HORTICULTURAL EXPORTING,
MERU DISTRICT, KENYA

This seminar will provide an overview of 18 months of Ph.D dissertation research on the interplay of gender and horticultural production in Meru District, Kenya. The significance of this project is that horticulture "traditionally" the domain of women, has become rapidly intensified and commercialized for export production. My research examines the implications of horticultural exports for women's rights to land and labor by focusing on the district's most important horticultural export crop, French beans. While French beans remain widely grown throughout the District, both production and sales have dropped dramatically since 1993. Thus, this project explores how the fluctuation of multinational capital is restructuring social life, transforming domestic relations and precipitating new class configurations.

My tentative findings include a host of social crises: a staggering population growth rate (3.9 percent) that has incited acute pressures on constricting land resources and catalyzed an escalation of clan and court cases related to land disputes; an exacerbation of domestic violence and deviant social behavior such as prostitution, rape and incest; ubiquitous occurrences of alcohol abuse; and finally, the transformation of French bean market centers into loci of corruption and duplicity. These social dynamics underscore the tensions that emanate in an atmosphere of financial disintegration that is coupled with an absence of prospects for economic amelioration.

As the panacea of French bean wanes women have turned to Christ to cope with the economic plights of their households. The omnipresence of Christianity powerfully shapes all aspects of social change, as the convictions of female submission and male dominance are propagated through variant Christian ideologies and men face the backlash of such indoctrination by women bewitching or poisoning them. Thus the material and ideational reconstruction that has taken root invokes significant queries on the gender dimensions of power and raises important questions for the gender implications of agrarian change in the horticultural sector.

I. Introduction¹

This paper² will provide an overview of 18 months of Ph.D. dissertation research on the interplay of gender and horticultural production in Meru District, Kenya. As this anthropological investigation has been comprised both of quantitative and qualitative data collection, my conclusions remain both germinal and tentative. None of the quantitative data (approximately 230 baseline household questionnaires and 1,300 bi-weekly French bean surveys) have been statistically analyzed and thus the following findings are based solely on thirteen months of qualitative interviewing and participant observation. Moreover, due to the nature of field research and the lack of available library facilities, I have yet to situate my provisional findings within current academic literature.

My research has concentrated in three locations in Abothuguchi West (Katheri, Githongo, and Kithirune), in Central Imenti Division, Meru District. Agrarian development occurred much earlier in Central Imenti than in other parts of the District due to its dynamic agricultural productivity; approximately 93 percent of the labor force is engaged in the agricultural sector on smallholdings of less than one acre. The significance of Central Imenti for this project lays in the fact that horticulture, "traditionally" the domain of women, has become rapidly intensified and commercialized for export production. Although recent research on the division of labor has documented gendered rights to land and labor (Slayter-Thomas 1992), as well as the distinct spheres of income streams in the domestic budget (Schroeder 1989), research on

¹ I thank the Social Science Research Council, Fulbright IIE and the National Science Foundation for their generous support of this research. I also extend my appreciation to my Doctoral Advisor, Dr. Peter Little, for his unwavering encouragement and commitment to me as well as Drs. Catherine Lutz, Jane Collins and Ann Stahl for their inspiration as both scholars and women. I am also indebted to the warm hearts and lively spirits of the people of Abothuguchi West.

² This paper is in draft form. Please do not cite without the author's permission.

the nexus between gender-based crop and property rights has been almost exclusively focused on non-horticultural crops in West Africa (Berry 1987; Carney 1988; Guyer and Peters 1987), and is largely absent in East Africa. This gap has provided a fertile opportunity for an in-depth local study on the interface of gender relations and horticultural production in Kenya that will hopefully provide valuable data for comparative studies of agrarian change in Africa.

Scholarly work in Africa has also undergone a potent metamorphosis as more anthropologists examine dynamics of gender transformations rather than the durability and omnipresence of women's "status" and "equality". My focus has been on how women negotiate meanings, politics and their economic well being in mutually determinative relationships, as multinational corporations, contemporary society, and Christianity constitute their subjectivities. Thus, situating gender dynamics within wider political and cultural frameworks illuminates the indeterminacies of human life, as women continue to reinvent themselves in a vacillating world economy and shifting historical circumstances.

Despite the ensuing bleak specter of an eroding horticultural market and the dissolution of contracting, the interplay between export-oriented horticulture and gender relations brings into clear relief a matrix of cultural phenomena: the motivations of global corporate expansion and IMF/World Bank policies; the maneuvers employed by French bean agents, brokers, and middlemen as well as clans and national politicians to secure their financial interests and enhance their power base; and most saliently the interface of Christian revivalism during the 1980s and 1990s with gender relations in the household. The convergence of Christianity and the vacillating market for Kenyan horticultural exports has reshaped both marital ideologies and familial practices as women turn to religion to suture the fragmentation of household and social life. Thus, this exploration of the boom in French production from 1987-1992 and the subsequent decline in the Kenyan market reveal how competing interests are contested and negotiated and illuminate the implications of global multinational expansion and

Christian intensification for local social life.

II. French Bean Production in Meru, Kenya

This dissertation research examines the implications of horticultural exports for women's rights to land and labor by focusing on the district's most important horticultural export crop, French beans. Since the late 1940s, Meru District has experienced a burgeoning of cash crop production; in the 1950s and 1960s the District was heralded as Kenya's leading coffee producer (N'gethe and Wahome 1989; Meru District Annual Report 1957) and tea has been a prosperous cash crop since the 1960s. A similar boom appeared to be arising in export horticulture: as recently as 1987 Meru District had virtually no export horticultural production, thus it provided a unique lens through which to examine gender relations as commodity systems shifted and new production and institutional relations are formed. By 1991 Meru District was one of the most successful areas in Kenya to attract both foreign and local capital and by 1992 the District had courted over 21 horticultural exporters to contract with smallholder farmers to grow French beans (Ministry of Agriculture 1990). While French beans still remain the most widely grown horticultural crop in the District, both production and sales have dropped dramatically, especially since 1993. Thus, the initial injection and lingering withdrawal of foreign multinational capital for horticultural production for the "gourmet" market in Europe is restructuring social life, transforming domestic relations and precipitating new class configurations.

The introduction of French beans must be situated within the context of a striking collapse in the coffee market in the late 1980s. As world market prices for coffee plummeted, French beans exemplified a salvation from rural poverty and many farmers rapidly abandoned coffee (currently a lucrative cash crop since the upswing in world market prices in 1993) in favor of French beans. Because coffee is a tree crop necessitating a three year replanting period it is difficult for farmers to vacillate between coffee and horticultural in response to shifting

prices. The remodeling in the world market for fresh horticultural produce has had profound implications for the viability of agrarian households as the formerly division of labor by crop -- "traditional" cash crops such as tea, coffee, and cotton remain largely owned and controlled by men while women have usufruct rights to horticultural land -- is shifting. Prior to the advent of French beans, women's horticultural property, conventionally very small plots, was earmarked for local vegetables (cabbage, corn, tomatoes, peppers etc.) grown for household consumption and sale at local markets. The commoditization and resultant profitability of French beans for the export market eroded female control over usufruct land as men began to foster disputes over the gendered spheres of male and female property rights (see Haugerud 1984). The customary division of labor by crop and gender is currently undergoing a metamorphosis as men encroach upon the rewards associated with export horticultural production and compel their wives to relinquish either land for or income derived from French beans. Moreover, struggles over the boundaries of husbands' and wives' contributions to household subsistence have intensified as horticulture has become increasingly commercialized (Schroeder 1989).

III. The Ramifications of a Fluctuating Global Economy for Kenyan French Beans

My project was initially slated to examine the impact of contract horticulture on gender relations in the household. Bolstered by USAID and the World Bank, contracting emerged in the 1980s as one strategy to alleviate debt service and resuscitate waning export sectors through the "marriage" of smallholder development and private sector growth. This year alone bilateral aid to sub-Saharan African dropped from 512 million pounds to 452 (The Daily Nation, January 24, 1995). The IMF's Assistant Director of the African Dept., Mr. Horoyuki Hino, claimed that the challenge was for Kenya to create jobs for the 1/2 million people that enter the labor force each year, asserting that the economy needed to grow between 7-8 percent over the next 10 years if unemployment was to

decrease by 5 percent over the next decade. As Mr. Hino claimed, "This will be difficult but certainly not impossible. A number of countries in Asia have been achieving growth at this rate and there is no fundamental reason why Kenya could not achieve the same rate of growth" (The Daily Nation, May 5, 1994) -- except that perhaps Kenya has never attracted the level of multinational industrialization of Asia and the majority of people are wholly reliant on agricultural production and bedeviled by hunger, poverty and disease.

Despite IMF proclamations of an upswing in economic growth, their policy prescriptions have been unfeasible due to the absence of support from Kenyan politicians, ironically labelled as the "errand boys of imperialism". (The Daily Nation, March 27, 1994). And while President Daniel Arap Moi condemned the nefarious IMF austerity measures of the 1980s, the IMF persevered, hailing contract farming of high-value, labor-intensive export commodities as the elixir to ameliorate Kenya's flailing economy. Contract farming is a specific form of petty commodity production engendered by the articulation of agribusiness with family labor processes (Mbilinyi 1988). Many of Africa's successful cases of agricultural diversification, and horticultural production in particular, were founded on novel institutional arrangements such as contract farming, which became increasingly significant as a source of foreign exchange. Until 1993 contract farming in Kenya produced the most extensive array of industrial and export crops of any country in sub-Saharan Africa. The most dramatic expansion was in the horticultural sector, where fresh fruits, flowers, and vegetables are grown for export to Europe.

Because gender relations are frequently redefined in the face of shifting commodity relations, the delineation of power relations and social divisions inscribed in the household was key to my analysis of contract farming. In nearby areas the subsumption of women's labor in contract farming converted the household into an arena of material and ideational struggle over labor practices, property relations, and resource allocation. Thus, contract farming provided an domain through

which to explore how gender relations fashion and are fashioned by the trajectory of agroecological processes as well as how labor and property relations are constituted within cultural conceptions of gender (Friedmann 1992).

However, the manifestation of my initial project design was foiled by the vagaries of Kenya's turbulent horticultural industry and most significantly by the poignant demise of contract horticulture itself. Despite contract agriculture being touted as the cure-all for the stagnation of rural agriculture, to date most horticultural firms have abandoned the institution in favor of two options: a) a retreat to large-scale estate/plantation-style agriculture; and b) the institution of a multi-layered purchasing system which includes buying either directly from agents, and/or brokers and middlemen. This is an explicit reflection of the changing terms of trade that have occurred between commercial firms and farmers over the last five years. When I was in Kenya conducting predissertation research in 1992 contracts were omnipresent; upon my arrival in February, 1994 I was compelled to scour the country in search of French bean contracts. When the market was flourishing two years ago, companies were desperate to form contractual agreements to secure a steady supply of beans. Today, as the horticultural (exception: flowers) market shrivels in Kenya, companies have regained the upper hand and have little desire to be obligated to a particular farmer and pre-agreed price when they can buy beans from the plethora of growers that saturate Central and Eastern Kenya. From a local optic (i.e. Meru) this has been particularly disheartening. For not only is Meru located 4 hours from the Nairobi airport (companies can now buy beans within 45 minutes of Nairobi) but farmers are reluctant to grow beans without a guaranteed market. In fact, the declining performance in the French bean market is propelling many farmers back into production for the local market as farmers search for a more viable and stable alternative. Throughout my study, I have heard myriad tales from farmers who are reluctant to plant French beans during the upcoming season due to the losses they suffered within the last two years.

Today, the number of farmers who yearn to retreat to coffee production is astounding and most farmers envy those who maintained their coffee plants and are reaping the harvest of the current high price.

Moreover, the industry itself hangs in a delicate balance. First, the flight of capital for fresh fruit and vegetable production from Kenya is due to a number of factors, the most salient being the heightened competition from West Africa (Burkina Faso, The Gambia, and Togo, who are able to ship their produce at far lower costs) coupled with constraining Kenyan export policies. The latter include a onerous licensing procedure; an overvalued shilling decreasing international competitiveness; exorbitant packaging costs due to duties and Value Added Tax (VAT); and finally excessive transportation costs and lack of available cargo space (Guinette, 1994). Kenya has found itself in a situation where it is no longer able to compete in a market that it dominated two years ago. Second, the widespread proclivity toward the prepacking of horticultural produce necessitates a level of technology unavailable to smallscale farmers. Thus, in an attempt to douse the flames of cascading prices, most companies (perhaps reluctantly) forsake the smallscale farmer by purchasing large tracts of land for horticultural production. From a corporate perspective this maneuver marks a threshold in the revival of the industry since companies will not only be able to control both the labor force and the quality of production but build the facilities (prepacking and cold storage) necessary to compete on the global market. Yet despite the legitimacy of this scenario for large scale corporations, it only enhances the plight of the smallscale farmer and augments the extant social problems that characterize Abothuguchi West³. Finally, the "Kenyan French

³ On March 16, 1995 at the annual HORTEC Seminar sponsored by ABM-AMRO Bank I questioned an "expert" panelist about the implications for a retreat to plantation agriculture for the smallholder farmer. His response was that most people in the world work as wage laborers and this phenomenon should translate as well to Kenya. Yet in an area as highly-densely populated as Meru there are no possibilities for companies to purchase substantial tracts of fertile land. Thus, Kenya faces the prospects of a

Bean", once a brand name denoting superb quality standards, is suffering from the stringent pesticide control requirements imposed by European nations. Thus, the confluence of a drastic plunge in the French bean market with the trend toward estate labor should not be underestimated, not only for the decaying Kenyan economy but also for the glut of farmers who uprooted coffee in favor of French beans and have no other source of lucrative export income.

IV. Tentative Findings

My tentative findings include a host of socioeconomic factors that contextualize the downward spiral in Meru life: a staggering population growth rate (3.9 percent) that has incited acute pressures on constricting land resources and catalyzed multiple fissures in social life; an escalation of clan and court cases related to land disputes; a rising rate of alcohol and drug abuse precipitating rape and social violence; increased occurrences of prostitution and divorce; depleting resources for education and pregnancy outside of marriage (with men now unwilling to take the responsibility for children breaking with normative Meru custom) and finally, perhaps most eminent, a Christian ideology of wife obedience that prompts women to endure dangerous physical and emotional circumstances. The omnipresence of Christianity powerfully shapes all aspects of social change, as the convictions of female submission and male dominance are propagated through variant Christian ideologies, and men face the backlash of such indoctrination by women bewitching or poisoning them.

Finally, my project has examined the strategies women employ to safeguard their interests and contend with both gender and socioeconomic oppression including the formation of women and church groups; deceiving their husbands by asserting an absence of buyers for French beans on a

disintegrated family as women (the preferred labor force for horticultural production) will be compelled to migrate to distant areas for employment. This also begs the question of the predicament of children who will be the victims of the resultant migration.

particular day and pocketing the money; and finally by either leaving, bewitching, or poisoning their husbands. The latter incidents have piqued anxiety among men in the community and Chiefs routinely summon women together to lecture them against such behavior in the name of Christianity. In conclusion, my research attempts to outline both the contradictions and convergence of three distinct social phenomena: the lives of Kenyan farmers, the global corporate credo, and Christian ideology, and how the conflation of these variant philosophies impinge upon household relations. The material and ideational reconstruction that has taken root and continues to evolve invokes significant queries on the gender dimensions of power as well as the resistance and accommodation of women, which raise questions for the gender implications of agrarian change in the horticultural sector.

The remainder of this paper will clarify the research that I have conducted over the last 18 months encompassing the local landscape of horticultural production; the gender dimensions of French bean production; the context of violence and social tension that underscores social life; and finally the pervasiveness of Christianity in defining and shaping both gender and social life in Abothuguchi West.

V. Market Centers: Brokers, Clans, National Politics, Prostitution and Administrative Intervention

French bean market centers are frequently a maelstrom of recalcitrant and tempestuous behavior; it is not unusual for altercations between brokers and middlemen, or middlemen and farmers to perform as local theater for villagers. Waning French bean prices are not the sole cause of this weekly mayhem; much more pronounced are the accusations of sabotage hurled against agents, brokers, and middlemen. From a local vantage point there is a certain level of credibility to these allegations for in periods of fervent competition, French bean markets transform into shark infested waters.

French beans are bought three days a week in Abothuguchi West -- Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. The process operates in the

following way: on the nights preceding the buying day trucks arrive from various companies bringing boxes for brokers to distribute to middlemen who in turn disseminate them to farmers (predominantly women). The following day the farmers bring the produce to the middlemen and routinely wait until the ensuing buying day to discover the price offered per carton. Because farmers are incognizant of the price upon delivery they are chronically prey to the gyrations of middlemen and brokers whose interest is clearly in garnering the highest profit attainable. Thus, the hierarchal system of French bean buying operates in a vertical structure where each player appropriates a certain slice of the pie that shrinks as it trickles down to the farmer. For instance, a company may send their agent to Abothuguchi West instructing them to buy French beans at 100 KSH per carton; the agent in turn arrives in the area and offers a broker 90 KSH per carton; the broker in turn offers middlemen who collect French beans from farmers 80 KSH per carton; and finally the farmer will receive 70 KSH per carton for their produce. There are clearly allegiances fomented between agents and brokers and in turn between brokers and middlemen, often imputing clan and political affiliation into the equation. It is middlemen who have the most to gain from the cashcow of French beans for in a climate of acute competition their tactics can remain fluid and negotiable. When produce is scarce a broker may be forced to raise the price to a middleman (thus lowering his/her own commission) to steal produce slated for other companies (Author's fieldnotes, 5/11/95).

While farmers have knowledge of how much they are losing in this multi-layered purchasing system, virtually no women have time to wait in the market center for the truck to arrive in order to negotiate a more favorable price. Thus, while farmers can defect from one middleman to another the anatomy of the French bean industry is structured to benefit the higher rung on the ladder and thus farmers are entrenched in a system that inevitably precludes an upward trajectory of agrarian change in the horticultural sector.

The ensuing tales of buying centers and French bean debacles

clarify the fervor and contradictions that emanate at a local level. All of these tales are anecdotal, emerging from interviews with farmers, middlemen, brokers and agents. While these narratives may appear incredulous and absurd, most seem surprisingly sane after 18 months of witnessing recapitulations of the same tactics. There is a protracted theme of victimization from all players in the French bean arena; agents are the handmaidens of companies, brokers are the dupes of agents, middlemen are patsy to brokers, and farmers, justifiably, are at the mercy of the entire fiasco. I will provide a few examples to offer a panorama of the machinations employed in the French bean sector, attempting to provide a glimpse of the strategies wielded by all parties to capitalize on the process of French bean buying.

1. Agitated Farmers

First, one of the most infamous riots erupted early in 1993 when the drivers/agents of 12 companies congregated at the Continental Bar in Meru town and decided to reduce prices from 180 KSH to 100 KSH per carton which incited a barroom brawl between farmers (who had descended to Meru town) and agents. One driver/agent was beaten so severely that he was hospitalized due to the injuries he sustained (Author's fieldnotes, 6/15/95). Second, two informants claimed that in 1991 farmers set a Secceta truck ablaze because Secceta had taken their beans on credit and refused to pay them. The company claimed that they did not meet quality standards, a ploy utilized consistently in the French bean scenario (Author's fieldnotes, 10/1/94). In yet another grotesque coup, Mr. Mulooki of Makindu Growers and Packers usurped nearly 1,000 cartons worth 80-90,000 KSH of French beans on credit in 1991 and upon returning to Abothuguchi West informed the farmers that shortly after the plane departed for Europe the plane door opened, thus spilling all their beans into the ocean. Local farmers, unfamiliar with flight patterns from Kenya to Europe, were entirely sympathetic praising the Lord that Mr. Muroki was still alive (Author's fieldnotes, 5/8/95). Third, in 1991 one French bean agent working for REGUME Company out of Nairobi disappeared with beans worth 40,000 KSH.irate farmers stormed

the Chief's camp who then accordingly drafted a letter to the Horticultural Crops Development Authority informing them of the matter and requesting the company to compensate farmers immediately. Evidently the letter was ineffectual since the farmers never received payment for those beans (Author's fieldnotes, 6/15/95). The narratives of pilfered French bean money are infinite: in 1990 a Vegpro agent failed to pay Kawampuungu farmers approximately 32,000 KSH and because there was no written agreement farmers had no legal recourse; in 1992 a Sunfresh broker vanished with 5,200 KSH owed to two middlemen in Githongo; and in 1993 an Indu farm middleman failed to pay 6,000 KSH owed to farmers. When the farmers seethed with rage the middleman ingested poison to commit suicide, yet was (un)successfully rescued by family members. The owed money was finally paid by the agent and the distressed middleman was deducted wages. Such cases are accompanied by sordid violence and middlemen are often brutally harassed by enraged farmers. (Author's fieldnotes, 6/19/95). Finally, to offer a glimpse of the gendered violence that occurs in markets there are myriad tales of wives being escorted by their husbands to market centers so that the husband can witness the prices per carton. This was particularly common during 1993 as prices began to wane and husbands suspected wives of swindling their precious cash (Author's fieldnotes, 6/23/95).

On the flip side, during the last season (February - June 1994) an array of farmers were compelled to feed French beans to their cows due to the lack of buyers. Whether buyers ceased coming to the area because of political factors (see below) or merely because of supply-side economics, farmers remain pawns to an industry that not only embodies deceit and corruption but also mimics the fluidity and flexibility of multinational capital, which is capable of obliterating the sustenance of Kenyan smallholders by fleeing to another country.

2. Clans and French Beans

In Abothuguchi West there are two predominant clans -- Karuku and Abogeta. These major clans are subdivided into smaller sub-clans but affiliation to fellow members is based primarily on the two umbrella

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clans. While the two clans originally coexisted in relative placidity, fragmentation emerged during the 1969 general elections when each clan put forth a candidate for a seat in local parliamentary elections. Clan alignments are profoundly entwined with political allegiance: Karuku is notorious for its opposition fidelity while Abogeta are conspicuous supporters of KANU. When French beans are hotly contested for clan affiliation defines the buying and selling process yet when there is a dearth of available beans agents furtively disregard clan affiliation in favor of financial considerations. Nonetheless, agents invariably purchase beans from members of their own clan during periods of French bean saturation. Agents and brokers also stake out their buying territory by clan confederation and offer highest priority to farmers of their own clan. Over 90 percent of KESSFA members belong to the Karuku clan and are also supporters of the Democratic Party of Kenya. Since KESSFA is obligated to buy beans from its organized farmers, their clan affiliation prevails over economic factors. While this dynamic is omnipresent in Katheri location it is also prevalent in Githongo and Kichirune. Yet the perception of clan factions wholly determining buying practices and triumphing in the French bean industry based on clan affiliation is somewhat misleading. In actuality, it is national party politics that form the backbone of local export horticulture and are far more determinative in the complexity of economic interactions. (Interviews with Victoria Nkatha 9/21/94 and Patrick Gitonga 5/11/95).

3. French Beans and National Party Politics

Prior to 1993 French beans entailed profound economic gains and individuals involved in the marketing process (agents and brokers in particular) were perceived as vestiges of power whom hosts of politicians sought to court. Because of the commission agents and brokers garner, many began to harbor political ambitions. Moreover, local politicians began to insert themselves into the buying process, both directly and indirectly, in order to amass votes and attain affluence. The following cases illustrate the convergence of French bean production with national politics and the price that is paid for

political allegiance.

The first company to instigate French bean production in Abothuguchi West was Vegair in 1987. Although members of the Mitunguu Irrigation Scheme had already begun growing Asian vegetables for export and had approached Vegair they were denied access to Vegair's market due to the common form of patronage that epitomizes the mechanics of the Kenyan economy. Instead, Vegair bestowed the purchasing of French beans to a close friend of the managing director, a Nairobi based businessman.

Ironically, the latter is the son of the entrepreneur who introduced coffee production in Abothuguchi West in the mid 1950s. The motif of nepotism became more intricate when control of Vegair was awarded to the brother of the Nairobi-based businessman.

The 1992 multi-party elections were the canvas on which the confrontation of French bean production and national politics were drawn. Prominent French bean agents were approached to campaign on behalf of KANU, as national politicians were aware that grassroots strategies were highly effective in garnering votes. French bean brokers that were concomitantly stolid members of both Ford Kenya and the Democratic Party (DP) were evicted from the sector due to their political passions -- all interested oppositional parties in Abothuguchi West harboring intentions of infiltrating the French bean sector were thwarted by administration officials and Chiefs. The extradition of political adversaries from the French bean arena lay the groundwork for an invasion of KANU into conventionally "opposition" territory and the temporary annihilation of opposition camps from joining the French bean caper -- at a time when French bean prices struck record highs. For example, Kenya Small Scale Farmer's Association (KESSFA), was foiled from participating in French beans because of their alleged connection to opposition politics. Moreover, there is undoubted veracity to the propensity of agents to buy from members of their own political camp, platforms which have often been personally costly.

Thus, the convergence of multi-party politics and the French bean sector crafts the trajectory of agrarian change. This dynamic is

slightly diminishing due to the downward market trend causing French beans to be much less attractive to powerful politicians who are seeking other vehicles to appropriate power and money.

4. Prostitution in Market Centers

Evidence of women French bean brokers involved in prostitution appears indisputable. As one interviewee claimed, "All female brokers of French beans are prostitutes (one might be spending the night at home but she is a prostitute)" (Interview, Eunice Kiende Magambo 3/8/95) and another asserts that "prostitution increased immediately with the spread of French beans." (Interview, Muthomi Kinoti 6/14/95). This may be hyperbole but over 60 informants claim that between 20-50 percent of women French bean brokers are prostitutes. French bean agents coming from Nairobi to purchase produce often seek out young women who will simultaneously satisfy company requirements and their own sexual desire. There is an unequivocal penchant for Nairobi agents to hire young, beautiful girls as brokers in order to ensure tacit sexual agreements. A common ploy wielded by these agents is to tell women that they have improperly graded French bean produce to meet quality standards and must return with them to Nairobi to complete the task under presumed company supervision. Unmarried women who are both vulnerable to and desirous of the resultant gifts bestowed upon them willingly accompany these agents to Nairobi. Cherished presents such as jewelry and shoes seem a small price to pay for sexual intercourse in an area that is swarming with unemployment. Most agents also offer women brokers higher prices for French beans in the hope of attaining sexual satisfaction when business transactions are culminated. On the other hand, young female French bean brokers frequently offer sex to agents or brokers in order to avoid the arduous and tedious task of grading produce.

A more tangential relation to French beans and prostitution lays in the context of middlemen. Swaths of these men foster prostitution in the local area by spending their commission on alcohol, which propels them to entice barmaids to spend the night with them. This dynamic inspires young, unemployed girls to flex their adolescent muscle and

practice prostitution in a culture that reigns in the sexual appetites of women at a very young age. Moreover, because French beans are often bought quite late at night, young girls are conventionally escorted home by men who offer them money for sexual favors.

Women are neither the victims nor the exclusive benefactors of this phenomenon. The numerous married prostitutes who engage in French bean brokering to garner additional money are simply "dissatisfied with their husbands or else feel that they need a change -- one cannot be eating *githeri* all the time, you need to change to *ugali* the next day and *chapati* the next -- thus, women change to know who is better, their husbands or others." (Interview, Eunice Kiende Magambo 3/8/95).

5. Intervention by Chiefs and Local Authorities

In 1990 the Chief of Githongo convened a meeting with all agents of French beans and administered the following conditions: a) He (the Chief) must be informed of the price during the arrival of the truck; b) companies should issue farmers receipts; and c) every buyer should have a board in the market center listing written prices. Needless to say, the agents disregarded these conditions entirely.

In June of 1992 a second meeting was convened by the District Commissioner, involving District Officers, Chiefs, farmers of various locations, exporters, and officials from the Horticultural Crops Development Authority in Nairobi. During this assembly agreement was reached that during the following season farmers would organize themselves into groups and take their produce to designated buying centers where all exporters were to arrive. This strategy was designed to eliminate middlemen and boost the prices given directly to farmers while concurrently eradicating the exploitation incurred by both exporters and farmers. It was also hoped that such a plan would enhance quality control since the exporters would review quality standards directly. Consequently, it was declared illegal that either a farmer or a buyer conduct any transaction related to French beans outside the buying centers. Yet the meeting failed to address the ominous fate of middlemen and brokers implicit in such a scheme and by October 1992 at

the onset of the buying season there was absolutely no enforcement of the consensus. Because brokers and agents were not included in the meeting failure of the plan was imminent, specifically since myriad agents/brokers were also politicians and opinion leaders in the area. Simultaneously, the October 1992 buying season coincided directly with the infamous multi-party elections and attention was diverted from local problems to the national political climate. The Chief of Githongo, realizing the defeat of his designs, reconvened yet another meeting to address approximately 40 middlemen from his location. He urged them to cease slashing prices and cheating farmers from their welfare. While they all agreed in his presence this never materialized. Thus, images of market centers are symptomatic of a dicey industry that is terminally exposed to the fickle winds of international trade. If one peers through the looking glass of 1987-1992 it is evident that the comeuppance in French beans could have transformed that agrarian sector into the "Promised Land" of IMF projections.

V. Gendered Dimension of the Labor Process

The exacting quality standards that most horticultural commodities must meet—texture, fragrance, color, weight, shape, and odor—render them resistant to mechanization and extremely labor intensive: French beans are among the most exigent, demanding 500 labor days per hectare (Little 1991). This intensification of the labor process is internalized within the farm household: the strict timing of work regimens spawns new production schedules, thus reorganizing household labor in different spatial and temporal forms (Carney 1988).

The household is the site where horticultural firms, the state, and global food markets converge. Horticultural production harnesses the labor of an entire family to global agroindustrial production, effectively requiring that labor allocation and obligations be negotiated within the household. Women, in particular, are compelled to invest more time in specific tasks, such as planting and weeding, yet remain categorized as unpaid labor. They are, in effect, subsidizing the

horticultural sector by shouldering the burden of production for no wage and social reproduction.

Because gender relations are constantly redefined in the face of changing commodity relations, the delineation of power relations, social divisions, and cultural expectations inscribed in the household has been imperative to this analysis of horticultural production (Guyer and Peters 1987).

Finally, when women have opportunities for positive benefits from commercialization, (such as in the French bean sector) turmoil is generated over new divisions of labor and access to and control over resources. The household and normative conjugal relations become the terrain of conflict as women defend their material and physical interests. The ideology of "household" mutual interest eclipses the way in which gender shapes labor obligations, property rights, and access to income as culturally ascribed gender roles both collide or coincide with the infusion of external capital and refigure the domestic landscape.

The experience of horticultural production affects men and women differently: my research reveals that men reap higher benefits from export horticulture than women, primarily through their expropriation of either land or income. If women perform horticultural labor for a wage on plantations in the far environs of Meru District (Timau), they are paid substantially less than men for equivalent work and output; companies justify lower wages on the grounds that a woman's income is supplemental, rather than central, to the family income. Women, incorporated at the lowest occupational levels, are relegated to such tedious and physically debilitating tasks as weeding and picking, whereas men are designated for fertilizer application and plowing (which on large-scale estates involves a tractor). As horticulture firms restructure the production process they manipulate gender ideologies (Beneria and Roldan 1987; Fernandez-Kelly 1983), creating a new division of labor increasingly based on gender. The feminization of the horticultural work force has been realized in the ascription of socially constructed gender traits to differentiate tasks and workers.

Agribusiness frequently "naturalizes" gender inequities by legitimating the natural fitness, dexterity, and docility of women as ideal characteristics of the assembly line (Ong 1987), agribusiness imbues women with qualities compatible with production goals. As the chairman of Kenya Horticultural Exporters claimed: "Women are better bean pickers. Their hands are smaller and they have more patience for the work than the men" (personal communication, August, 1992). This sentiment has been echoed by multiple importers, exporters and male farmers throughout my stay in Kenya.

As my interviews of over 80 women performing wage labor on horticultural estates demonstrate, withdrawing their labor from household production and migrating to another area does not protect them from male domination or abuse. Over 80 percent of women complained of an extraordinary degree of sexual harassment by both company managers and male cohorts in the fields. In this context, while women's voices are shared amongst each other they are silenced in the multinational environment, for they cannot, without the certitude of losing their jobs, articulate their grievances with their employers.

VI. Social Crises: Land, Domestic Violence and Alcohol/Drug Abuse

The rural landscape of Abothuguchi West has not remained immune from the rising tides of social violence raging throughout Kenya. The most common problems this area faces are a "shortage of land, lack of employment for youth, and increase in criminal offenses such as thuggery and murder." (Interview, John Anampiu 2/1/95).

1. Land

As the Meru District Development Plan for 1992-1993 stated, there is currently a complete absence of land for settling people in medium to high agriculturally-potential areas of Meru District. As early as 1953 Local Native Council elders proclaimed land consolidation of vital importance, promoting the division of economic landholdings throughout

the District. The committee agreed that title deeds should be given to various Mwirigas (clans) since Meru land had belonged to the Mwirigas since time immemorial (Land Purpose Law discussed by Njuri Ncheke, Local Native Council Minutes, August 4, 1953). In 1955 a pilot scheme of land consolidation was initiated. Foundations for improving agriculture "were laid down in this period and by the end of the year, sufficient progress had been made to attract the interests of some Nairobi firms" (Meru District Annual Report, 1955). Yet the onset of land consolidation stimulated boundary disputes between locations, the most notable occurring in Upper Abothuguchi (Ibid). By 1956 problems related to the redemption of land impeded the progress of land consolidation, as original land owners made claims to their land (Meru District Annual Report, 1956). While throughout the 1950s population density in Meru was relatively low, following Independence there was a rapid escalation in the region's population and a subsequent squeeze on environmental resources (Local Native Council Minutes, February, 6 1956). Thus, the issue of land disputes emerged relatively early during the consolidation period and remains one of the most hotly contested and unmitigated controversies in Abothuguchi West to date. Between 1983 and 1994 the number of land disputes in Meru District escalated from 460 to 946, with no end in site (Meru District Country Court Records). Rather than recapitulating data ascertained from over 200 court records related to land disputes, I will summarize the most typical cases.

In Abothuguchi West, the population density is 420 persons per square kilometer, and grows more intensely populated everyday (Meru District Development Plan, 1994-1996). Because of a diminishing resource base, land is considered the prized possession among all people. The situation is complicated by normative inheritance laws in which sons inherit land from their fathers, leaving women at the mercy of marriage to secure land. While women are legally permitted to purchase land, there is virtually no available land to be bought. The most common cases of land disputes exist due to the following reasons: a father dies before willing sons his land; sons contest a father's will

believing that they deserve a larger or more fertile section of land; boundary disputes arise between neighbors over fencing lines; trees from neighboring shambas shade agriculturally productive areas; and finally co-wives quarrel over rights of their deceased husbands' land for their children and themselves. The latter becomes particularly inflamed when one co-wife has only borne daughters and thus has no viable vehicle for economic security.

Land scarcity has crucial implications for women, especially those who never marry and have children, and also for those who were growing French beans but have lost their usufruct rights due to their husband's appropriation. Thus, in many cases women either hire their labor out for daily agricultural work or turn to prostitution to safeguard the well-being of their children. The difficulties for women in acquiring land stem from the facts that inheriting land from a step father is impossible; land is scarce, expensive and there is a lack of financing; and whereas a woman can buy land from a certain person the seller may later refuse, denying not only the land allocation but financial reimbursement (Author's fieldnotes, 3/9/95).

Because agriculture is the backbone of this economy the issue of land is critical for the sustenance of the household economy. As the birth rate continues to soar, there is no longer space available for continued subdivision of land among sons. Currently fathers have been searching for land in other areas, which are less agriculturally-productive, to ensure the existence of land for their sons. The social crises that erupt in such a scenario are evident. There is not only intrafamilial contestation over inheritance rights but also social tension between neighbors as most people vie to encroach -- ever so slightly -- on land bordering theirs.

Ironically village leaders who buttress Christianity and land rights were unable to camouflage the maneuvers of nepotism that rocks Kenya's current political climate. In early June all chiefs and subchiefs of Abothuguchi West were suspended until further notice by the District Commissioner due to their fraudulent allocation of land in the

Mt. Kenya Forest. Codified by law this land is to be apportioned under a free lease to individuals for seven years. The chiefs of Abothuguchi West, jaded by political power, grafted their clan affiliation onto village politics, decreeing that individuals belonging to both *Kiraita* and *Mwintiria* clans could purchase forest land for a price of KSH 7,000 for one half an acre, thereby precluding any pretense of equity and justice in the Division. Moreover, they extended boundaries beyond their jurisdiction fomenting hostilities among both leased land holders and chiefs of other divisions (Author's fieldnotes, 6/6/95).

2. Domestic Violence

The theme of domestic violence (in Abothuguchi West this entails primarily physical abuse of women) has become a cultural norm. While most women attribute alcohol abuse as the cause of wife beating and rape, the fact remains that I did not encounter one woman in my sample who had never confronted physical spousal abuse. Both men and women conceptualize domestic violence as a cultural reality, although there are some women who advocate leaving a husband who perpetuates wife beating (primarily due to the indoctrination of children into a culture of violence). Ninety percent of the women I interviewed concurred that a wife deserves to be beaten by her husband if she dissatisfies his yearnings in any way. These women believe they deserve punishment for failing to meet the standards of a "good" wife; precepts that are prescribed by Christianity and do not allow for the autonomous voices of women. This is reinforced by the Kimeru term *kimatha* which connotes a bad woman who neglects her husband and children (Author's fieldnotes, 1/13/95). The 10 percent of women who disagreed with the ideology underscoring wife beating were either single or divorced.

Understandably, most men interviewed agreed that wife beating was a necessity in most circumstances. "Wife beating brings respect to the household -- women become more disciplined due to beating." (Interview, William Mbogori 1/12/95). Referring to the past the same man claimed that "some wives were beaten until they became cripples. And after that the wife started to show enough respect to the husband...it was

discipline" (Ibid). And yet another man asserted that "women of the past had great respect for their husbands and were not like these of the present day." (Interview, Nathaniel Itunga 1/12/95). "In the case that your wife is bad and you are not strong enough to beat her, you have to request the force of the clan. She is to be beaten until she obeys you even if she is much stronger than you." (Interview, Ikiugu M'twerandu 11/1/95).

Unsurprisingly, accounts of rape resonate with parallel dogma. Over 50 percent of women interviewed professed that a man cannot rape his wife as opposed to 5 percent of men interviewed. Yet one woman said that a man can rape his wife only if "the wife may be having her monthly period and not willing to have sexual intercourse with her husband." (Interview, Eunice Nkatha Kaaria 2/25/95). Moreover, from over 100 interviews with women, the majority claim that an average of 50 percent of women are raped, although they largely attribute it to alcohol abuse. From my own personal experience, I know of men that have professed their desire to rape me while drunk and then disguise their motives as alcohol-induced. Finally, most women (over 75 percent) believe that gang rape is becoming increasingly more common due to the high unemployment rate in the area. While rape is largely unreported, the number of court cases involving rape increased from 10-27 within one year (Meru District County Court Records). Incest (father/daughter and brother/sister rape) has also become more frequent because "the Meruian culture is changing and a lot more men share the same houses with their daughters unlike the olden days when they lived in different houses and highly respected each other. This increased in the Mbaabu age-set when they got educated and learnt the European way of staying together in one house." (Interview, Mary Kithuni Kibunja 3/4/95).

As a result of the proliferation of violence against women, it is certainly credulous that there are spates of women either leaving or divorcing their husbands. For a husband the loss of a wife has few implications since he is free to marry again and also has rights to his children. Thus, the prevalence of women divorcing and leaving their

husbands is quite poignant because while they are escaping from marital oppression, they are also losing rights to their male children, who provide them with security during old age. While clans mediate the majority of marital disputes, there is an explicit rise in divorce cases despite the infusion of Christianity. Divorce cases increased from nine to thirty-six between 1982-1992 (Meru County Court Records), an astounding escalation due to the religious norms suppressing the process.

While I have not yet calculated prostitution figures it is also a distinctly rising phenomenon. Most women declare that prostitution began increasing in the 1960s and 70s following the introduction of family planning yet that it has become more entrenched as a survival strategy since the late 1980s. The average percentage of women involved in prostitution (culled from over 100 interviews) is 45-60 percent, of which 40 percent are married.

3. Alcohol and Drug Abuse

Most women, not men, attribute alcohol and *miraa* abuse as the precipitant to the rise in social and domestic violence. Alcohol abuse is considered more common since the 1970s because local brewing is very cheap and people can afford it. As one female interviewee said, "alcohol is a great social disease, especially in Githongo. Fifty percent of the men who drink alcohol will beat their wives when drunk, won't pay school fees, or provide any food for the home. They just think of themselves." (Interview, Mary Kathuni Kibunja 3/4/95). Court records verify the dynamic of alcohol abuse. Between 1982 and 1993 arrests for drunk and disorderly conduct rose from 324 to 776 cases (Meru County Court Records). While *miraa* is not accredited with a propensity for increased domestic violence, it is often ascribed a role in inciting social crime such as breaking and entering and thievery. As one interviewee claimed men will stay up all night and then creep into people's homes to pilfer whatever they can to purchase additional quantities of *miraa* (Author's fieldnotes, 2/25/95). Women also feel that *miraa* use is an obstacle to economic growth as men will lounge in village centers for hours chewing

miraa rather than tending to the fields.

Thus, the synthesis of the above social crises: a contracting land base, an exacerbation of domestic violence and deviant social behavior such as prostitution, and finally the ubiquitous occurrences of alcohol misuse underscore the tensions that emanate in an atmosphere of economic disintegration that is coupled with an absence of prospects for amelioration. In light of such a lackluster scenario the penchant toward Christian revivalism is easily grasped for not only does Christianity offer salvation and forgiveness (two concepts that are undeniably salient in a climate of oppression) but it also fosters the formation of a community among women, one that is vital amidst such uncertainty.

VII. The Interplay of Christianity and French Beans

A previously unforeseen yet over-arching theme to emerge during my 18 months of research is how gender ideologies are being recast and molded as a potentially lucrative commodity sector intersects with the values and norms of Christianity.

It was not until the early twentieth century that mission influence began to penetrate Central Kenya. The onset of missionization in Meru was dominated by five different Christian denominations: Methodist, The Church of Scotland, The Salvation Army, The Consolata Catholic Mission, and the Presbyterians. The Methodist Church spearheaded mission activities in Meru District in 1912 launching extensive crusades for Christ and extolling the largest Christian membership in Abothuguchi West. The East Africa Revival Movement began to flourish in Meru in the late 1940s and came to a climax in the 1950s with the onset of Mau Mau and the subsequent colonial abolition of African Independent Churches (AIC). During the "Emergency" the *Wameru* of AIC joined other mission churches, which advocated by the central government, remained undisturbed. To date there are over 25 distinct Christian denominations, including the revitalization of the AIC, 43 churches, and an astounding escalation of new churches being erected

within Abothuguchi West.

The introduction of French beans set the scene for a revitalization of the gender roles initially propagated by the civilizing mission of Christianity during the 1920s and a consequent resuscitation of distinctly patriarchal practices. There is rampant proselytism of ideologies of wife obedience and female compliance by both village leaders and church congregations, inculcating women with puritanical notions of wifedom, sexuality, and maternalism. The burgeoning of Christian sects in Abothuguchi West within the last decade is testimony to the social crises that underpins the lives of both men and women.

While the crusade toward being "saved", "born again", or "converted" to a life of Christ varies substantially by religion its prevalence has reverberated throughout Abothuguchi West within the last decade. The archetype of saved individuals originated among the Methodists and the East African Revivalists in 1947-1948 and the pervasiveness of "saved" Christian women continues to spread in Abothuguchi West: my sample of 200 randomly selected households is comprised of 95 percent "saved" women in comparison to 35 percent "saved" men. Most women claim that they have turned to God to bear with the perpetual marital and intrahousehold struggles they experience and a principal marital problem cited is contestation over French bean income. Christian norms of wife obedience have allowed an escalation in domestic violence as the infusion of external capital is contested for within the household and women who disobey their husbands conventionally encounter physical spousal abuse.

Moreover, there is a swelling movement toward an atypical enclave of saved Methodists in Abothuguchi West -- the *mirigo* -- who have segregated themselves from other saved Methodists due to their orthodox strictures that are perceived as dichotomous to fundamental Christian principles (Author's fieldnotes, 4/15/95). As one interviewee noted, the *mirigo* claim that it's a sin to go to a wedding ceremony of an unsaved girl or boy" regardless if it is their own child (Interview,

Elizabeth Shauria 2/22/95); behavior that is clearly aberrant for the social norms of the *Wameru*. Yet the *mirigo* are a small cabal of obscurity in an environment that is teeming with saved individuals. And despite this anomalous sect, the transformative power of becoming "saved" codifies a woman and serves not only as a coping mechanism but as a milieu of collective experience. For my research, the phenomenon of "saved" Christians has become a microcosm through which to examine the construction of gender ideologies and the intricate linkages between cultural, economic and political life in Meru.

Simultaneously, Christianity is so intertwined with propaganda proselytized by village leaders that it is impossible to disarticulate Christian values from social life. The politicization of Christianity is illuminated by the plethora of *barazas* called to lecture women in the name of Christ. Village leaders and politicians employ Christianity to reinforce the hierarchy of gender relations as well as to assuage their paranoia of women's potential utilization of witchcraft. A meeting held in Githongo Location on February 1, 1995, impelled by a wife poisoning her husband in the neighboring location, Kithirune, elucidates this. The following are excerpts culled from that meeting.

The meeting was comprised of over 200 women and community leaders. The Division Head of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (a national organization whose reputation totters between the acclaimed and rebuked), Tabitha Kiambia, was the first to speak. Her rhetoric was imbued with a collage of gendered issues: the principal thrust of her sermon embraced the necessity of women's servility to both husband and children in the name of Christ. The following selections encapsulate her views. "Wives must constantly say thank you to their husbands and show them their love. If you get any money from your labor you should buy a shirt or socks to show your husband your love. If your husband is angry and quarrelling, don't argue back, just show him love. If you quarrel with him you will only drive him away to another woman...a woman must be clean at all times and never wear the same pair of underpants two days in a row. You must take cleaning your home above your shamba work. A clean home is

the most important aspect of your work. Children learn from the behavior of their mothers so you must obey your husband, keep a clean house, and keep yourself and children clean. Think twice before speaking. Instead of verbalizing your anger pray to God for the problems in your house. God has given women the power to carry children for nine months, bear through the pain of labor and provide milk for them. Women must be strong through God's will."

The second speaker, Zipporah Gatobu, a teacher, reiterated analogous moral strictures. As she preached, "The bell at the top of your wedding invitation should always remind you of your wedding vows, which you must maintain until you die" and proceeds to ask women "what is women's work?" The woman respond: "obey your husband; cook; clean and welcome guests." Zipporah emphasizes that the main work of a woman is to take care of her husband. She declares that "men have two stomachs, one for their sexual appetite and one for food" (all the women in the crowd laugh). "Giving them only food is not enough. You must please your husband at all times sexually. A woman is chased back to her parents if she doesn't fulfill her husband's sexual needs and the husband will simply say 'she didn't feed me well' as his reason for chasing her away." She says that there is no work that is not a woman's. "You must never say that you will not do something because it is a man's job...Women can do all work." She warns women against chasing rich married men..."you must take care of what God has given you -- your husband and children. You must accept your husband whether he is good or bad to you. No matter what he does you must accept him (the men in the area clapped). You must always appreciate your husband. If he comes in late or has been with other women you must not quarrel but accept and appreciate him. Never chase him away just pray to God that he becomes better. You must never move about with other men; if you do you deserve the abuse that your husband serves you."

"Always serve your husband first. You must be a good manager of your home: wake up early and prepare the fire for tea before your husband awakes. It is very important that you manage your household

well. You must take time to eat yourself so that you can keep yourself fit to work and take good care of your husband and household. Thin women are a sign of poor household managers. In some homes women have more power than men and that is very bad and a sign of terrible management....If a woman is a poor household manager, she tries to kill her husband or make them crazy by feeding them medicines or poisons."

A local Chief reiterates the same lecture. "No other man is better than your husband. Your husband is first and that is all." The Chief introduces the third speaker, Tabitha Gerald from Githongo. She asks if everyone is Christian and the entire crowd of women raise their hands. She reads a verse in the Bible (Proverb 30) about being a good woman and asks the women if it is right to put poison in their husband's food? All the women answer no. She persists by saying "all good women call their husband the blessed one when she goes to wake him up. A husband is a first from God even if he is a bad man. You must pray to God that he will make him good for you. You shouldn't worry if men move about at night, they will always come back. Instead, pray to God that he will make your husband good for you. You will not be happy if your husband leaves you and your sons have no father so just pray to God." She asks, "Why are you killing your husbands? Let them stay with other women and they will come back to you. Your husband protects and guards you so don't try to kill him. If you have an affair with another man and kill your husband and tell your lover that you have done so your lover will think you will kill him too."

There were a spate of speakers recapitulating the same recitations but these examples provide ample evidence of the interface of Christianity with social norms of wife obedience. The recurrence of these assemblies is astonishing, particularly because men have never been beckoned for such gendered lectures (although the Chiefs claim that they have slated such gatherings for men in the future).

The above sermons vitally intersect with an article in the East African Standard written in the context of the upcoming Beijing Women's Conference. The author wrote: for women "words like "women's rights"

and "women's empowerment mean nothing, because she has been brought up to believe that a woman belongs to a man and any decisions affecting her day to day life and that of her children must be sanctioned by her husband. In essence, he is the source of her security and identity as a woman...so she puts up with unbelievable disregard from her husband. Her resilience is what holds the family together" (East African Standard, July 5, 1995). In too many ways this echoes the lives of the women of Abothuguchi West.

Thus, while the origins of Christianity are situated historically, its intensification during the last decade appears directly related to the intersection of familial and religious ideologies with the introduction of a high-value export crop controlled by men coupled with a striking rise in social problems.

VIII. WITCHCRAFT

During the 1920s and subsequently in the 1950s officials in Meru District conceptualized local institutions such as *kiamas* and the *njuri ncheke* as bulwarks of witchcraft and paganism, an anathema to Christian principles. (Local Native Council Minutes, 1957). Local Native Council Minutes in the mid 1950s are permeated with admonitions for Christians against joining secret societies or adopting lurid oath-taking practices.

While Christianity prospers, Kenya is also rife with a potent trend toward witchcraft. As Reverend C.B. Peter of Moi University wrote, "Talk of the devil is a market clincher these days. Whether it is an editorial in the Daily Nation or a couple of well-researched articles by Abdullah Latif, or a freelance motion sailing through Parliament, anything to do with the devil or devil worshipping is selling like hotcakes" (The Daily Nation, August 1, 1994). While the notion of witchcraft appears incongruous with the collective consciousness of Christianity, fascination with the esoteric and satanic cults is so in vogue that it has saturated even the smallest of villages; people in Abothuguchi West regard strangers as agents of the devil until proven otherwise (Author's fieldnotes, 9/18/94). For

instance when I first arrived in Abothuguchi West I was unanimously perceived as a devil worshipper and spent weeks attending meetings proclaiming my Catholicism to mediate their concerns.

In Meru District, as in Kenya nationally, the obsession with witchcraft, while diametrically opposed to Christianity, simmers with equivalent fervor. Yet bewitching is a highly sensitive issue and its omnipresence (to which the numerous accounts in *The Daily Nation* and *The East African Standard* attest) should not be overlooked. Because it is delicate and potentially politically volatile I have attempted to steer away from very specific cases, selecting only a few to highlight the dimensions of the practice.

Witchcraft is blamed for missing persons; deviant social behavior; illness, death and natural catastrophe; and people are lynched, mobbed and slaughtered because of their "perceived" predilection for the occult. Politicians also prey on people's phobia by invoking satanism to win votes. For instance, during the 1992 elections a DP politician sprinkled a potion in the ballot boxes professing that individuals who failed to vote for DP "would be haunted by the bottle." (*The Daily Nation*, May 24, 1995).

Yet my interest in witchcraft is rooted in its relationship to the construction of gender ideology in Abothuguchi West. The spate of women either giving their husbands *kagweria* -- a substance that transforms men into dolts, inducing psychosis and causing them incapable of making decisions, thus leaving control of the household to the wife -- or poisoning their husbands to death originated in Meru during the age set of Mbaya but essentially permeated the society in the 1970s. *Kagweria* is a liquid ascertained from certain trees merged with a bouquet of sedative drugs. Presently, *kagweria* can be bought from knowledgeable women (largely in Chuka and Embu areas) and is a therapy that is rapidly being taught to Meruian women. Women's use of the practice heightened when men started usurping coffee and tea income, under male control, which was also intended to sustain the economic well being of the household. Currently the practice is embodied in conflict over French bean income,

which was entirely under the control of women until most recently. Other rationales for "demasculizing" men through *kagweria* include adultery; one co-wife becoming jealous of another if the husband is favoring the latter's children; poverty and women's oppression in the household (Author's fieldnotes, 6/19/95). Examples of *kagweria* are blazing throughout Abothuguchi West. During 1993 a case was heard in Githongo Location, whereby a 35 year old woman administered the potion to her husband aged 39. Yet the man suffered not only from common dementia but a severe psychotic state, which following hospitalization implicated the wife. The woman under investigation disclosed that there was a group of four women in Kiithe Village, Githongo Location, who had mastered the recipe and were disseminating it to other women (Author's fieldnotes, 6/9/95).

Many women claim that poisoning has diminished within the last ten years but bewitching is on the rise due to men's adultery and appropriation of familial income. One particular interviewee knows of seven cases of bewitching within the last two years, all provoked due to intrafamilial struggles over French bean income (Author's fieldnotes, 6/19/95). Last week Chiefs and Church leaders organized a meeting for women in Kathiranga Village, Katheri Location to preach against the issue. (Author's fieldnotes, 6/19/95). Churches regularly organize women's seminars to pontificate against the practice (Methodists particularly) and teach women how to ameliorate familial contestations with less aggressive strategies. Men, for apparent reasons, are terrified of this thriving campaign as the number of cases continue to mount. Men have no reason to believe that their wife will be an exception in the recent movement. Their fear has also translated into suspicion of women's groups, which men have recently begun to perceive as bastions of subterfuge against men. (Author's fieldnotes, 6/20/95).

IX. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to present a local ethnography of the global phenomenon of transnational capital and its infusion into the

lives of smallholder farmers in Meru District, Kenya. The cast of players that contextualize the French bean industry reveal the cacophony of cultural complexities that arise when clan affiliation, national politics, and religion are entwined with the lives of smallholder farmers. As noted, the declining standard of living in Meru and subsequent exacerbation of social tensions has included: constraining land resources catalyzing an escalation of clan and court cases related to land disputes; soaring alcoholism spawning social crime and disorder; and upward spiral in cases of prostitution, domestic violence and ultimately divorce; and finally conflict emerging between the oppositional fields of Christianity and witchcraft. Neither, the boom in Christian sects nor the spread of witchcraft that characterize cultural life can be isolated from these rampant social crises.

The repercussions of dwindling French bean production have unquestionably reinforced the cultural constructions and gender formations of the missionization period but continue to reinvent themselves as social realities shift and new relationships are fashioned. Yet from a cultural optic the enigma of an industry gone awry and the concurrent social phenomena is perplexing, begging two poignant questions. Why did the economic boom of French beans coincide with social turmoil and domestic upheaval of the worst type: wife beating, incest, land disputes, rape, prostitution, all of which continue to metastasize in a national context of laissez-faire values; and secondly, why (despite obvious functionalist theories) is Christianity chosen as a mecca of tranquility in a sea of uncertainty and witchcraft employed as an equally-charged coping strategy? While both assuage social agnst the pendulum of the French bean industry hangs in a delicate balance, raising more questions with each swing.

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