Agrarian Change at the Household Level: A Note on Investigative Styles in Research on Mambwe Agriculture (Northern Zambia)

Johan Pottier

Department of Social Anthropology, S O A S, London

Introduction

The brief to paper presenters at the series on "Institutions, Culture and Change at Local Community Level" was to focus on institutions within a geographically or socialogically confined community and to address ways in which international, national and regional institutions manifest themselves within local arenas. I chose to focus on the interface between national food policy and household organization in the context of agrarian change in Northern Zambia, where one decade ago I researched on aspects of social change in Mambwe villages (Pottier 1988). Mambwe economy has been the subject of study on three different occasions: twice by independent anthropologists (Watson in the mid-fifties; myself in the late seventies) and once through 'rapid appraisal' carried out on behalf of an international development agency (Sano in the mid-1980s).

Building upon a paper written previously for the Workshop on Rural Zambia (University of Wageningen, The Netherlands, October 1990), my Sandbjerg presentation also focused on a prime methodological tool for field research - the informal, semi-structured interview; a tool familiar to anthropologists and now in vogue with 'rapid appraisal' experts as a masterkey which promises to give fast and easy access to various aspects of household-level decision-making.[1] Whilst Sano's 'rapid appraisal' will serve as my ethnographic focus for discussion, my conclusions on methodology should have relevance well beyond the geographical boundaries of Northern Zambia.

The ideas presented here are a mixture of thoughts offered to the Sandbjerg seminar and reflections since then.

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[1] Unless I specifically refer to Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), there is no automatic link implied between the loose term 'rapid appraisal' and the methodology propagated by the London-based International Institute for Environment and Development.

Agrarian change and the household: Basic theoretical issue

During the 1980s, economic anthropologists working in Africa renewed the long-standing interest in aspects of family life (e. g. Berry 1985, Guyer 1981, Moock 1986, Whitehead 1981). Dropping the previous fascination with homogenity and functional explanations, they turned their attention to studying household-level resource management in detail, through which they became aware of differential interests (heterogeneity) and differential access to groups. Much of the 1980s research revealed the 'contractual' nature of household activity (esp. Whitehead 1981), thus providing insights crucial for a new perspective on the meaning of "income"; an issue close to the heart of many development specialists. Ethnocentric assumptions about authority and decision making at the household level were criticised to the extent that the notion of undifferentiated "income" had to make way to that of "income streams". As Shipton put it in a recent publication, 'different kinds of wealth [were] seen to be controlled by different members of the household, negotiated over, and used for competing purposes' (Shipton 1989:8).

Increasingly adept at questioning their own ethnocentric assumptions and personal inclinations, anthropologists throughout the 1980s developed an analytic awareness that households were not really the bounded entities they had seemed to be. Households did not provide everything for everyone and, on closer scrutiny ('deconstruction'), proved to have fuzzy organizational edges. In the same investigative vein, women began to show up in analysis as a truly differentiated category.

As anthropologists developed a particular interest in the interplay of market and non-market forces - an interest spearheaded by Watson in his own time - it gradually dawned that dichotomies like modern/traditional, micro/macro, or cash economy/subsistence economy were too simple to reflect the complex situations encountered during anthropological participant observation. Simple dualistic thinking, grounded in the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, became the special target of feminist anthropology. The attack on simple dichotomies also resulted, towards the end of the 1980s, in serious academic criticism of the economistic models of development that take unlinear progression for granted (see Pottier, forthcoming).

Grayzel (1990) documents the need to challenge simple dichotomies in relation to the role of the consultant social scientist, whose major

task it is to grasp 'the dialogue between ideal and real.' Referring to local administrators in Morocco, Grayzel is particularly concerned that the dichotomies they believe in, eg the distinction between small and large farms, are often 'discrepant from the full spectrum of dynamic and changing... agricultural operations "on the ground"' (Grayzel 1990: 47).

A useful ethnographic illustration of Grayzel's assertion that simple dichotomies must be challenged is the story of tobacco production in Kenya. Shipton, who reviewed the history of tobacco in the context of agrarian change among Luo people, writes: 'Tobacco has provided an extremely lucrative crop for smallholders. They have made more money per hectare with tobacco than with any other seasonal crop they grow' (Shipton 1989: 33). So far, so good: the crop is financially lucrative as opposed to being financially disastrous. 'But,' Shipton goes on, 'the inequalities in the distribution of the profits among local growers are enormous. Men are contracted and paid in cash as individuals, though they use mainly family labor. The burden of the longer and duller tasks, especially weeding has been shifting to women. The [tobacco] scheme appears to be concentrating family wealth in male hands. It is also undermining the authority of elders' (Shipton 1989: 33).

Clearly then, a crash crop may provide "income", but there are questions to be asked about labour input, the distribution of profits and the impact on food crops and nutrition, before the social analyst can be satisfied that increased cash flows can be equated with social progress for all concerned. Where appraisals fail to adress such questions, where appraisers fail to deconstruct household organization, they will jump to unwarranted conclusions.

Understanding social change in Northern Zambia

For the 1950s, the heyday of male circulatory migration to the Copperbelt, Watson's Tribal Cohesion had portrayed a flourishing village agriculture and economy (Watson 1958), in sharp contrast to earlier studies of rural Zambia, which had presented the impact of industrialization in terms of gloom and doom (Richards 1939; Wilson 1941/42). With "income" from migrant labour, the labour-sending Mambwe reserve prospered from migration and enjoyed undeniable improvement in material culture: migrants invested in clothing and household goods, better houses, ploughs, agricultural implements and cattle (Watson 1958: 220). Moreover, with regard

to their internal politics, family life and food producing capacity, Mambwe people had preserved full integrity.
Twenty-five years on, my own understanding of Mambwe economy, limited to grassland villages, stressed declining production levels for millet, reduced community-based cooperation in agriculture, reduced cash flows, shortages of good land, general scarcity of goods, impoverishment and dry-season hunger on an increasing scale, enhanced social differentiation with a widening pool of people forced to sell their labour. An active interest in food trade notwithstanding, especially with Tanzania and the Copperbelt, much food (e.g. hybrid maize and beans) appeared to be destined for speculative transactions rather than for the producers' cooking pots.

With the decline in local millet production and the monetary value of hybrid maize and beans, I developed a rather sceptical view of food security at the household level. This scepticism was grounded not only in the way 'the market' operated, but also in the dynamic nature of gender relations and in the observation that certain staples, including hybrid maize, had acquired an ambiguous status, i. e. they were now considered sources of food and/or cash. As illustrated in Migrants No More, "income" did not accrue to the household. Rather, men and women pursued separate economic interests, each with their own budgets in mind. (This is not to argue that men and women could disregard every culturally embedded expectation about their respective duties in provisioning for the household, but it is to caution against the idea that all income would be pooled for the benefit of all household members).

Women's views on the all-female kusinza work-parties for harvesting millet are a dramatic illustration of how Mambwe women consciously pursue strategies for dealing with male attempts to control female income. As a socio-cultural institution, kusinza parties, which occurred at a time of intensive local trading in food, gave women a welcome arena for discussing "income" whilst the men were out of earshot (details in Pottier 1988). However, in spite of this collective strategy (one in many) through which Mambwe women safeguarded their income, it was equally clear, once I came to know informants socially, that some women, especially senior wives with adult sons, were in a much better position to stave off male pressures on their "income", while they also had a better chance to gain access (through men) to good land, such as riverside gardens on which to plant the crops they wanted to grow.

Whereas ethnographers working in the 1950s and 1960s, and later economists, considered households to be virtually universal units in which resources were pooled and decisions taken jointly, more recent research on agricultural organization in rural Africa has led to a convincing argument for deconstructing 'the household' in terms of the individual members' access to resources, the organization of resource management, and the profits thereof. Ignorance of the need to deconstruct 'the household', which marks Sano's 'rapid appraisal' attempt to understand decision-making in Mambwe households, can lead to serious bias in the representation of rural livelihoods.

Drastic change? Two generations, one reality

Notwithstanding the broad contrast between Watson's account of Mambwe rural economy and my own, a contrast originating in developments over time in the ethnographic approach to household analysis, it is still necessary to ask whether my follow-up study pointed in the direction of drastic change.

When separated from previous research by a decade or more, it becomes tempting to resort to the notion of dramatic change. If at times I have myself written along such lines, as in my account of structural transformations at village level, there have also been occasions during which I was aware of evidence which suggested that change did not affect villages uniformly (1988: Chapter 6), and that there were traces of 'change through continuity'. As shown in my case study on how trading/cropping alternatives were locally perceived (Pottier 1986), the analyst would make a mockery of the complexity of villages life if she or he were to go along with the view, often expressed by local bureaucrats, that the 'maize or beans?' question was a simple either/or matter.

Informally, bureaucrats claimed that village producers could easily reduce their interest in maize (with its problematic state-controlled marketing) in order to concentrate more on beans (a 'free', profitable alternative). This 'official' advice, based on a simplistic either/or dichotomy and directed at 'the people', was often ridiculed by producers, because they were well aware that not everyone related to these crops (the choice) in the same way. Chief Mwamba's diplomacy in settling a potentially damaging conflict (involving Watch Tower, representatives from local government and many desperate villagers) was a direct response to that awareness.

Villagers knew, for instance, that the bureaucrats' perspective and advice ignored the fact that some women had negotiated with their husbands the right to own and sell part of the maize crop (and would therefore not take the advice), whereas others had not secured such deals and would take the advice more happily (Pottier 1986: 55). In other words, what bureaucrats saw as a simple transition, a step towards 'modernity', was a model which omitted to consider some firm local views on land ownership and control. (I shall return to this).

Whereas the choice between one cash crop and another may seem an unproblematic, 'rational' issue in the eyes of 'modern' bureaucrats, that same choice is bound to become more problematic as soon as 'cultural' notions about the rights and duties of individuals (complete with doubts and ambiguities) are taken into account. Once the researcher has gained that kind of insight, once he or she is able to link economics and culture, it quickly becomes apparent how difficult it is to conclude that drastic change has come about.

Nevertheless, twenty-five years on from Watson's study of the Mambwe economy, I felt I had reason to believe that far-reaching changes had occurred in some areas of social organization, especially regarding the genealogical make-up of villages, the availability of good land and the squeeze of difficult-to-control market forces. When I sent Watson the manuscript of my book, he accepted the idea of drastic change (see below), yet he proved equally keen to point out, much to my delight, that significant continuities were also manifest. Living conditions were different, the quality of life was different, but the 'spirit' of the place was still there; some 'large truths' lingered on.

It may be instructive to hear how Watson viewed the overall image which my book conveys, as his concern was to highlight the continuity of some key institutions. In the "Comments" I received, in 1986, Watson suggested the following link-up between his work and my own:

> The historical experience of different groups cannot be subsumed under any one great generalization. That the Mambwe are firmly embedded in a money economy, your own fieldwork shows superbly; equally it shows that the Mambwe retain a 'tribal' identity (whatever word we substitute for tribe).

Watson also referred to other continuities:

> For instance. Your report on how Aron (the Watch Tower headman) reacted when he obeyed Chief Mwamba in his role as headman, as against his role as representative of the 'new' central government authority, gave me an eerie feeling, for I had observed many occasions when actions ordered by African officials of the colonial administration were ignored by the people if the chief gave a counter-order.
>
> I believe an important question is: Why do chiefs still exist? After all, UNIP represents a "modern" concept of progress and development. Like the Arabs and the British, the new ruling elite has not abolished chiefs. This is not to say that they are as powerful as in the past; but there they are.

In explaining the continuing influence of the chiefs, Watson pointed without hesitation to the land issue, to the question of access - that essential ingredient so elusive to the 'rapid' investigator and, as will be seen, so conspicuously lacking in Sano's representation of living conditions in Mwamba. It is here that we touch on 'basic truths'.

> The fundamental importance of the chiefs, even in a money economy, lies in their relationship to rights in the use of land. Chiefs would disappear tomorrow (except perhaps as a sentimental relic of the past) if individual land rights were granted to ordinary Africans [i.e. the villagers referred to as 'commoners' in Tribal Cohesion]. But as your work... shows, it is rights to the use of land that is the crux of the Mambwe situation at the moment. As you analyse so well, the patrilineal organisation of Mambwe villages is no longer the case; and the emergence of those groups of co-operating women is something new. However, it is their kinship ties with male kin which makes this development possible. And where do the male kin get their rights from? From 'tribal' membership of course; and the chief is bound up inextricably with this (Watson, 7 April 1986; emphasis added).

Watson's 'However,...' appropriately cautions against exaggerated, one-side claims about drastic change. The caution almost reads as if social analysts should consider the idea that no account of socio-economic change can be acceptable unless accompanied by clear evidence that the researcher has understood those areas where conceptual or institutional continuity prevails. (My inference may be extreme, but it is a tantalizing thought).

Maize boom in the 1980s: Drastic change?

Food security and the role of maize have now been reconsidered by Sano (1989) on the basis of one-off interviews in and around Mwamba village. Sano's interest in Mwamba stemmed from the fact that the area had been chosen in 1979, as the centre for IRDP

activity in Mbala District. However, in spite of the 'maize boom' which resulted (or perhaps because of it?), funding for this IRDP programme was stopped in 1983. Sano's visits in 1987 (interviews) and 1986 (pilot interviews) took place among speculation that the programme might be resuscitated.

From a national point of view, Zambia's IRDP (or LIMA) programmes aim to promote development in remoter provinces. This general aim is not really different from the IDZ programme which preceded;[2] the contrast, from a producer perspective, is primarily one of scale. IRDP programmes try to encourage maize production on small acreages (i.e. 0.25 ha upwards), thus attempting 'to turn the peripheral labour exporting areas into food exporting areas feeding the towns' (Crehan and Von Oppen 1988: 116). At the launch of IRDP, Zambia was unable to shoulder the burden of this gigantic restructuring of the economy and needed to bring in foreign capital. It also needed to convince the rural population of the value of this new 'small is beautiful' road to development. This was necessary because Zambian food producers were well aware of how agriculture in the 1970s had become less and less attractive due to the deteriorating rural-urban terms of trade. Out of necessity and to add appeal to the new scheme, Zambia then agreed 'to let foreign donors take over the responsibility for the IRDPs [in outlying provinces], while Zambian sources were directed more towards the central provinces' (Crehan and Van Oppen 1988: 116-117).

The following extracts from Sano's CDR Working Paper[3] provide useful background data on the importance of IRDP at District level.

> In Isoka, Mbala and Kasama Districts, the SIDA-DANIDA financed... IRDP started operating as IRDP in 1979 (IRDP Kasama). Until then the programme had been run as part of the IDZ programme. The concept of IRDP meant a broadening of scope in comparison with the former IDZ in the sense that more emphasis was to be put on health and education services... IRDP was also supposed to have a wider geographical extension. This meant, for instance, a widening of the project area in Isoka and Mbala Districts (Sano 1989: 6: 19).

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[2] IDZ stands for Intensive Development Zone.

[3] Sano's CDR Working Paper (Sano 1989) consists of two chapters, 6 and 7, with page numbers restarting from 1 in chapter 7. This explains why I indicate both year and chapter. The Working Paper continues from an earlier account of macro-level policy -making in Zambia (Sano 1988). In this respect, I should like to state emphatically that it is not my intention to discredit Sano as a policy analyst competent in handling international, national or regional aspects of policy intervention; it is with household level issues that my critique is concerned.

After IRDP/Kasama secured SIDA-DANIDA support, money started pouring in:

> ... the overall programme spending under the IRDP (Kasama) increased 2.5 times between 1978 and 1981. This happened as a result of the re-definition of the programme as an IRDP and as a result [of] SIDA taking over all operational costs from 1979. Expatriate manpower costs were covered by DANIDA from that year, while the GRZ [the Zambian Government] continued to finance the Zambian staff (ibid: 6: 20).

In Northern Province, as elsewhere (see Crehan and Von Oppen 1988), the IRDP/LIMA programme had clear political significance. Sano realizes this and writes:

> [Lima] did not only mean a national drive to grow maize at the small-holder level, but also renewed resources for the extension service... [there were prospects for promotion]. In the Northern Province there were 210 extension officers by 1975 and 243 by 1979. By 1983, there were 334, i. e. an increase of nearly 100 between 1979 and the post-boom year of 1983 (ibid: 6: 34).

Sano's objective in carrying out his 'rapid appraisal' in Mwamba was to answer:

> questions concern[ing] the size and character of agricultural production, the use of services by the farmers, their mode of transporting inputs and produce, and their application of technology. In short, the questions were designed for a rapid appraisal of the extent and level of hybrid maize cultivation in relation to production for subsistence (Sano 1989: 7: 9; emphasis added).

Some questions were also deemed not suitable. There were no questions

> concerning intra- or inter village disputes, clan structures and their changing importance and the changing political coalitions within the villages (ibid: 7: 9).

In Mwamba, Sano's interviews were conducted through 'the Block Supervisor of the extension service,' who 'acted as the interpreter from Chimambwe to English' (ibid: 7: 8).

On the basis of this 'rapid appraisal', the details of which I shall consider elsewhere, Sano argues that virtually all villagers in Mwamba have become interested in growing commercial maize, 'even under conditions of deteriorating terms of trade' (1989: 7: 45). This is a formidable statement - and 'light years' removed from the

more nuanced assessment of maize popularity in other provinces (e. g. Crehan and Von Oppen 1988: 141-142). While the 'maize boom' itself is somewhat impressive throughout Zambia, a point with which Crehan and Von Oppen (1988) agree, there is still a need to look critically at the actual range of the social categories involved in the adoption of maize cash-cropping, the conditions under which they did so, and the benefits thus derived.

The rationale for the widespread eagerness to grow hybrid maize, Sano explains, is that commercialization 'indicates a growing capacity... to retain food production even in the marginal group' of producers (1989: 7: 44) - a group he defines as made up ofhouseholds producing less than 9 bags of marketable maize per season. On the basis of his statistics on how much food is sold and how much retained, Sano rejects 'Pottier's allegations of decreasing food security,' proclaiming instead that

> the food security of the farmers [in Mwamba] is enhanced through maize, because [maize] increases both the level of incomes and the retainment of crops for household consumption (1989: 7: 46; emphasis added).

Sano's assertion was derived at via some 30 open-ended interviews, conducted over 'one week with some interruption... due to the breakdown of the car' (ibid: 7: 11), and in the presence of the Block Supervisor/interpreter, who had personally selected the sample of interviewees. As interviewers, the Block Supervisor and Sano were perceived to be 'authorities and outsiders', that is, 'agents of commercialization... who could facilitate the flow of donor money' (ibid: 7: 11).

Given Sano's recourse to 'rapid appraisal', his unfamiliarity with the local area and culture, and his blind faith in the absolute neutrality of the Block Supervisor as social investigator ('there was no attempt on his part to manipulate the interviews', ibid: 7: 9), it is very difficult to attach much significance to the 'finding' that the production of commercial maize would aid the retainment of household foods (ibid: 7: 47).

On the contrary, there are strong reasons for rejecting Sano's 'finding', since the circumstances under which he conducted his 'rapid appraisal' were clearly not conducive to in-depth interviewing and neutrality. Also, social analysts who read Sano's update on Mambwe agriculture carefully, are likely to experience alarm at his handling of 'the household'. Intended, no doubt, to

clinch the argument about drastic change and improved food security, the following contradictory statements about household interaction rather testify to a profound analytic naivety.

First we read:

> The growing command of resources, which are increasingly vested in the male farmer population, implies... an increase of subsistence cultivation and a growing retainment of food crops.

Then:

> in this perspective, the food security of the farmers is enhanced through maize, because it increases both the level of incomes and the retainment of crops for household consumption (1989: 7: 46; my emphasis).

Sano pays a heavy price for his (in part deliberate) ignorance of social and political institutions at the village level. The idea that 'retainment of crops' would automatically equal 'enhanced household consumption' must never be assumed: it is a hypothesis to be examined, even under the most egalitarian of circumstances, and certainly in an environment where the command of resources is known to be 'increasingly vested in the male farmer.' Food provisioning at the household level, for all I know, remains a woman's responsibility. It requires careful planning and often difficult negotiation (e. g. when visitors come at inappropriate times), and is a task not made easier under conditions of maize cash cropping (Muntemba 1982; Wright 1983). Food security within households is a gender issue, a contractual issue, and the investigator must not fail to address this. No one, I hope, will be persuaded by Sano's final conclusion:

> I consider it likely, even among the patrilineal Mambwe, where husbands more easily can draw on the labour force of their wives, that the interest of the generality of wives is for the maize economy to continue... [Despite] the exploitation to which the wives may be subject[ed], they will still, when asked, opt for the maize economy... rather than its abolishment (1989: 7: 47; my emphasis).

Conclusion

The above statement is one of the most painful 'rapid appraisal' findings I have ever come across. How can statements about household-level decision-making, collected by outsiders in authority, be

accepted at face value? The short answer is that Sano has fallen the victim of a series of assumptions: firstly, that social analysts still treat 'the household' as an undifferentiated unit; secondly, that informants do what they say they do (and that there is no need to juxtapose one-off statements with longer term observation); thirdly, that field-based agricultural staff are free from bias because they live among 'the people'.

Sano's failure to appraise rural economy and agricultural decision-making within households with due consideration of context, may be an extreme case (which is why it highlights so neatly the methodological problems involved in investigating change at the local community level), yet, he is of course not alone in wanting to cut methodological corners and failing to grasp elementary principles.

Ultimately, though, it is imperative to ask why social scientists agree to take on 'rapid' consultancies when they know that their working conditions (especially the time factor) will be inadequate for answering the questions they wish to explore. The absolutely central 'Why?' issue has just come to the fore in the latest edition of Rapid Rural Notes (London: IIED). If 'rapid appraisal' experts are to gain (or maintain) credibility in the eyes of the presumed beneficiaries of planned intervention, they will need to respond very frankly to some 'personal' questions when next in the field; queries like 'What on earth am I doing here?' and 'Why should poor people answer my questions?' (Scheuermeier 1991: 25). If the investigator's intention is to make an honest attempt at unravelling life's complexities - with its political, economic and symbolic aspects all interwoven - then the so-called challenge of 'rapid appraisal', and the underlying faith in 'optimum ignorance' (Chambers 1985: 38), will need to be replaced with what I would call relational appraisal: a more time-consuming analytic exercise based on linking people to institutions, people to crops, crops to cultural values (including new ideas), social-science investigators to politics (local and international), and so on. Only a relational analysis can do full justice to the growing awareness that formulating the 'right' questions for a semi-structured interview takes time and that 'if the interviewer wants to learn a little, he or she had better stay round - watching and living' (Mitchell and Slim 1991: 21).

Being familiar with the slow and painful approach to comprehension, it is my honest belief that there are no short-cut ways for entering into the discourse of an agrarian culture. Only through mastering the vernacular language and by becoming relatively unobtrusive as a physical presence, can researchers hope to begin to

build up any understanding of that discourse, its subtleties, sensitive areas, and the nuances of everyday life. Any researcher who does not fulfil the conditions of language competence and unobtrusiveness will remain by the sideline. What such researchers can hope for is, at best, to have the experience of polite conversation; but, failing even that, they will end up with the experience of a deep sense of ignorance and frustration, possibly coupled with private embarassment.

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