Changing Household Reproduction in Kisii

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Introduction

Kisii is a mountainous District in the west of Kenya, lying to the east of Lake Victoria. Its population, which is almost solely composed of the Bantu-speaking Abagusii, is almost 1 1/2 million.[1] Kisii District has a high and reliable rainfall (1500-2400 mm. p.a.) and some of the best soils in Kenya. It also has the highest rural population density in Kenya at around 600 per square kilometer,[2] and the highest rural population growth-rate. Virtually every scrap of usable land is enclosed in private holdings surrounded by hedges, giving a very neat and tidy initial impression. Median farm size is not much over one hectare.[3] For many years now there has been no communal pasture left, apart from roadsides - but some of this has been squeezed out by roadside cultivation.

There can be no question of the enormous (some would say catastrophic) impact of population growth on Kisii. At the beginning of the present century, the population was little more than a twentieth of its present level. Most land was uncultivated and probably a lot of it forested.[4] Subsistence was mainly based on millet, grown by women under shifting cultivation. Cattle were herded by groups of young men in special "cattle villages". From this, Kisii has been cata-

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1 While this is their name in their own language (Ekegusii), normally reduced in English to "Gusii", they are often referred to by other Kenyans and even by themselves as "Kisiis" when speaking English. I have no data from the 1989 census. Projections from 1979 at 4% p. a. would give a population of 1.45 million, 3.5% would give 1.36 million (in 1992).

2 Projection from the 1979 census at 3,5% p.a. gives about 600 psk, and at 4%, 640 psk (in 1992).

3 A survey based on random sampling from aerial photographs, gives median farm size for "highland Kisii" (excluding the new settlement areas) as about 1.3 ha, and this may overestimate their true size. The survey takes hedge-bounded areas to be single farms, while personal enquiry among households in South Wanjare revealed that many such were in fact under "multiple occupancy". Since sons take a part of their fathers' land and remain within the original boundaries, and since farms are often so small that more hedges would waste too much space, what appears to be one farm may in fact have several nuclear units sharing it. Still further behind the times is the official land register, which records only a small fraction of the many subdivisions since land-registration was carried out.

4 Oddly enough, though, colonial reports from the 1920s and early 1930s refer to Kisii (or perhaps certain areas of it) as almost treeless. One could certainly not it describe it thus at present, though a very high proportion of the trees are exotics (eucalyptus, cyprus and black wattle) and mostly planted or (certain local species) left within enclosed farms.

pulted in ninety years, into intensive smallholder farming, on pocket-handkerchief sized plots. Millet has long been replaced by maize, which gives a higher yield and can produce two crops a year in the lowland areas, but only one in the colder highlands.[5] In spite of this, the smaller plots produce nothing like enough food for those living on them, making wage labour or other non-farm activities an inescapable part of daily subsistence, let alone reproduction in a broader perspective. Indeed, most of those families which can produce enough staple food for their requirements do so only with help from non-agricultural income invested in purchasing land or intensifying its use.[6]

This has not happened without generating tensions. Kisii has among the highest recorded rates of rape and murder in Kenya. Drunkenness and wife-beating are major social problems. The area has a reputation for theft[7] and for a high level of litigation.[8] But violence is not the only response to population pressure. Competition for education is as fierce in Kisii as in any part of Kenya. The District has the second highest proportion of income deriving from outside agriculture of any District in Kenya, the only one with an even higher proportion being Kiambu, parts of which are more properly outskirts of Nairobi and Thika.[9] Most Districts with a high proportion of non-farm income are dependent on wages. But in Kisii the most important is "non-farm-enterprise"; private business, ranging from substantial operations with fleets of transport and buildings, down to petty trading of small amounts of produce at rural markets or along the roadside. Most rural men do not define

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[5] Most of the maize in the lowlands is interplanted with beans or, less frequently, other crops, including coffee. Households which have land enough of suitable type, will often have a stand of bananas (in the lowlands) though mainly of the sweet rather than the cooking type. Wild or semi-wild vegetable plants (chinsaga) are still an important element of the relish which is eaten with maize porridge (ugali/obokima).

[6] Orvis (1988a:9-19) shows how, of a sample of households whose progress over two generations he recorded, those who had attempted to "make it" through farming alone had fared even worse than unskilled labourers who had invested little of their wages in the farm.

[7] This is recorded as a widely held stereotype rather than as being necessarily true. It seems not unusual for hill peoples to acquire such a reputation ("Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief"). One could speculate that it could relate to different styles of livestock raiding, hill peoples making use of stealth and their knowledge of complex terrain, while plains pastoralists would be more inclined to stress speed, strength and valour. On the other hand, historical accounts record the Maasai and Kipsigis as having had an edge over the Gusii especially in night raids and fighting.

[8] The latter appears not to be a direct result of population pressure since a penchant for litigation has been observed among the Gusii since the early days of the colonial period (i.e as soon as there was a formal legal system and so any possibility thereof). This of course may affect the crime statistics noted above, since the rate of reporting murder and rape may be higher than elsewhere.

[9] Kenya Government, Economic Survey 1988, Chapter 3, summarized in Raikes 1988(b).

themselves as farmers at all, but as busoinessmen, artisans or casual labourers. Even the minority of men who define themselves as farmers, and women, of whom a much higher proportion are and consider themselves farmers, spend time in trading as a means to earn cash.

It is of some interest to consider whether and if so how this relates to the slower intensification of farm production in Kisii than in some other high-density parts of Kenya. Yields of coffee in Kisii are a fraction of those in parts of Central Province. The quality of tea produced in Kisii is among the poorest in Kenya. It also seems that maize and food-crop yields are significantly lower. This raises important questions about food and other strategies. Given that land pressure is as high as in Central Province, and that opportunities for earning off-farm incomes are at any rate no better, one could expect similar incentives to and rates of intensification. Lower crop yields could reflect lower labour input, lower capital investment, failure to follow some important practice or all of these. The impact of family structure and conflict on farm labour availability is discussed below. The level of investment plainly relates to straddling, since it has seldom been possible in Kisii to accumulate funds for agricultural investment within agriculture itself. The question is whether the lower level of investment in farning in Kisii than in Central Province reflects poorer non-agricultural income-earning opportunities, or a lower proportion of savings invested in agricultural intensification. I would guess that both are the case. One important reason for preferring non-farm investment is that rates of return are (much) higher. If a man (or woman) can get established in trading and transport with the right connections and permissions, the returns enormously exceed what could be earned from farming. Simple economic calculation would thus assume family welfare to be optimized by reinvestment in non-farm activities, even if this does lead to lower agricultural yields. In reality, it is far from clear that this optimizes for **other family members** than the male head, since the others are likely to share but marginally in the income. Unlike land, investment in trade goods, transport or political influence has little impact on the household's capacity to produce food and affects its capacity to consume only through a transfer of income which is far from automatic. But before discussing such issues, it is worthwhile to sketch in, very briefly, something about Kisii history.

Pre-colonial Kisii

Most accounts of the origin of the Abagusii, have them migrating from the region of Mount Elgon and having moved, some two centuries ago, from the plains into their present mountain home, under pressure from their more numerous and powerful Luo neighbours (Ochieng' 1974). The Gusii trace their ancestry back to one ancestor, Mogusii, and divide themselves into eight different "tribes" representing his descendents. These in turn were and are divided into a large number of clans, sub-clans, lineages and households, each level being significant in a different sense. (Mayer 1949). The clan (eamate) was the unit of exogamy and a defensive unit under major attack.[10] It was divided into lineages (amaiga, sing. riiga), which in turn were divided into another important unit of community organization, the risaga. This was "a section of a riiga living together and claiming the use of a set area of land..(and) defined as ...those who "recognized the mutual obligation to exchange work for beer" in communal labour efforts also called (risaga)." (Orvis 1985b:5, citing Mayer). The risaga was also a prime unit of defense and herding, since its young men lived and herded together in "cattle villages" known as ebisarate. Below this came the separate household (egesaku),[11] headed by a patriarch or group of brothers, who allocated land to women for them to produce food for their husbands and children. While this last was for many purposes the basic unit of consumption, the risaga was also an important productive and social unit (beer party labour) and crucial for livestock accumulation and defense. The above is a highly simplified version, which omits many ambiguities of terminology and variations in practice. It could generally be said that a tribe was "above" a clan, which was in turn "above" sub-clan, lineage and family; but there were clans which were larger than other tribes and the point at which any lineage or risaga split and a patriarch formed his own, would presumably have depended upon relative material success, on the availability of land in the family area and elsewhere, and upon how tense, argumentative and mutually aggressive family relations were becoming.[12] This,

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[10] Mayer (1949:10) calls the clan "the central unit of Gusii social organization", which relates to his focus on marriage and brideprice as central institutions of social organization.

[11] Mayer distinguishes between egesaku, which means house, lineage or even clan, in relation to the next larger patrilineal group, and enyomba, which refers basically to a women`s house and does not place it in patrilineal context. In current conversation, the distinction is probably less hard and fast.

[12] Another issue would seem to be geographical, with those parts of Kisii nearest to the boundaries with other peoples being more fragmented, with many different clans, sub-clans and smaller family groups. By contrast, Kitutu in the central highlands of the District, is said to be composed largely of one huge dominant clan. Another geographical issue would seem to be the impact of highly dissected terrain in either assisting individual patriarchs to

at any rate, would seem inferable from the historical account which is largely concerned with battles, cattle-raids and alliances formed and broken. These refer not only to battles with neighbours, the Luo to the west, the Maasai to the south and east, and the Kipsigis to the east and north-east, but to internal battles between tribes, clans and families.[13] The general impression one receives is of shifting patterns of enmity and alliance, in which control of women, livestock and territory (rather than land) were the bases upon which a successful family and potential lineage were built.[14]

A patriarch's overall strategy would thus involve accumulation of cattle by breeding, purchase, raiding and defense against the raids of others; accumulation of wives through exchange of cattle in bridewealth, and accumulation of children. In the latter case, sons were most highly valued, since they continued the line, looked after the cattle, raided and defended both cattle and territory - apart from the fact that men did and do consider themselves in some sense more fully human than women. Girl children were no less important to the strategy (though less valued) since their bridewealth cattle paid for their brothers' wives. Orvis (1985b:6) stresses the "exchange" aspect of the patriarchal strategy, noting that heads of household had extra fields, the produce of which could be used by them for purchasing cattle from neighbouring peoples, like the Luo and Maasai.[15] But it may be that this overstresses the importance of market exchange as means of accumulation, in comparison with raiding, while effective defence would certainly have been a condition of retaining accumulated herds.

Mayer (1949) sees marriage and bridewealth as the focal institutions of Gusii society made up, as it was and is, of overlapping kinship

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maintain their independence, or inhibiting the growth of larger social units, according to viewpoint.

[13] The scale of these can be gauged by the fact that many, if not most, resulted in less than ten deaths. One must also note that oral history has a tendency to focus on such "battles and kings" issues.

[14] I think it is right to stress territory rather than land in this respect, since for grazing animals, the important thing is secure access and right of passage rather than rights in any specific plot of land. Kisii settlement and inheritance patterns would probably have generated quite high levels of "living density" and thus small plots, long before general population pressure made this necessary. But to the extent that this was so, it would have been experienced by women and thus probably not have been a major aspect of male strategies. It is moreover not the sort of thing which would spring to an old man's mind when asked to tell the history of Kisii.

[15] Cattle received in bridewealth were, for the most part, earmarked for the bridewealth of their brothers by the same mother, though in practice probably often also at the disposal of the patriarch. Orvis cites Levine's (1964:67) assertion that household heads had virtual autonomy to dispose of household resources. Levine though, was probably referring in part to the situation in the 1950s when the bridewealth system had already partly dissolved.

circles. Marriage was clan-exogamous and virilocal so that men spent their whole lives in the same family, while women divided theirs between two different homes and clan areas.[16] Thus males grew from earliest childhood within the scope and ideology of "our" family, house, lineage and clan, while girls did not even know what group they would belong to for most of their lives, until marriage. When they did join, it was as subordinate strangers, who had to spend time gaining acceptance, absorbing and being absorbed into the life and strategy of the new household.

While the patriarchal strategy had to do with the long-term reproduction (and if possible expansion) of the family, it did not have much to do with its day-to-day aspects in the form of production of subsistence or the upbringing of children. Livestock produced meat and milk, but for most of the time, cattle were kept separately from the main living quarters in ebisarate by young men. Women took millet porridge out to them and received some milk in return, and this may or may not have been a regular aspect of the diet.[17] Meat seems to have been eaten on ceremonial occasions rather than regularly.

Within the overall male (patriarchal) strategy, many men would remain subordinate within large families or living separately (though often as neighbours to the central line) as small families for which such growth strategies were not possible. There seem to have been a number of alternative careers or life goals for men who had little hope of becoming leading patriarchs. At a relatively high level of respect would be warrior and then later, respected old man and counsellor.[18] Another way to win popularity and respect would be as humourist and raconteur - or so one can read back from current mores. There were also a number of specialists, listed by Levine

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16 Mayer (1949:7) cites various Gusii sayings related to this: "Daughters do not make an egesaku... [and since they] marry out of one's lineage and are 'lost'... "daughters are enemies."

17 Gethin (n.d.) quotes conversations with Kisiis, in the 1920s, in which they bemoaned the huge reduction in the supply of milk since the colonial incursion - in support of his observation that the people had grown more stunted. But since Gethin's 200 pages contains very little at all about the "natives" - and most of that derogatory - one has to be cautious of using him as an authority, while there are two obvious sources of bias. Being extremely conservative, he was prone to see almost all change as being for the worse. Secondly, one cannot assume the independence of answers to his question, since it would have been an incautious ("cheeky") African who dared to disagree with him.

18 Respected elders were known as abatureti (sing. omotureti), also the word for the entertainment section of a hut, implying that these men who were often visited for their advice. The position seemed to depend only on respect and not (formally) on wealth or power. Nor was there any formal means for enforcing the advice of an omotureti.

(1966:524) as "medicine men, head surgeons,[19] sorcerers, witch-smellers or witch-detectives, circumcizers, clitoridectomizers and rain-makers," though some of these would be women. In some parts of Kisii, there were also iron-makers, who appear to have been among the more wealthy members of the community.[20] Other means of getting by (hardly career choices) for the poor, would probably have included begging and serving as the butt for others' humour.[21] None of these have much to do with the provision of basic subsistence, which was regarded as largely if not solely the responsibility of women. Most sources indicate that, apart from initial field clearing, crop cultivation was women's work.[22] It could be though that men who cultivated formed a "silent minority", so unremarkable as not to figure in historical accounts - indeed excluded from them as being out of line with ideological norms.

The basic subsistence food was millet, though a variety of other crops (beans, sorghum, bananas) and wild plants also entered the diet. Most of the work was done by women, sometimes alone, most often in family groups (ebisangio) and less frequently in larger (beer party) groups (amasaga). Control over this labour was exercised, partly by individual women, partly by the household female hierarchy and of course to some extent by men, directly by command

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[19] Kisii traditional medicine was apparently well-known in western Kenya. It included, and still does occasionally, an operation somewhat like trepanning, in which the skull is opened with a saw to release pressure and relieve chronic headache and other ailments.

[20] Moture & Kieya (1976:51) refer to one jembe (digging hoe) having cost one cow which, as they point out, explains why local iron-working died out so quickly with colonial incursion, when imported hoes cost a tenth as much or less.

[21] External observers of Gusii disagree on the extent of socio-economic differentiation, but most agree on the unusually open (not to say brutal) terms in which the wealthy express their contempt for the poor (who for obvious reasons are more circumspect in expressing their envy and hatred of the rich, though poisoning and witchcraft are among the means). Levine (1967:10-11), writes "Wealthy men are respected and poor men despised: indeed the term for poor man is an insult in the Gusii language." I have observed at least two different sorts of "humourist". On the one hand are those respected persons who are also good raconteurs and increase their social standing thereby. Down at the bottom end of the scale are those who deliberately court the contemptuous laughter of others for the pennies and food they earn. For example, near where I stayed, there lived an old man who had lost both his land and his testicles during the 1950s, when he was imprisoned and tortured by colonial troops. He had been lent a small plot to live on but with insufficient land to cultivate and no wife to grow crops or cook for him. To me he seemed dirt poor, partly because we never met without his begging for a few shillings. But people to whom I spoke did not see if that way. He had no problems with getting food. Indeed "he could eat meat every night" if he wished. He was popular comic, singing little songs about himself as "king of the eunuchs" and doing a "funny dance" to go with it - not a performance for the weak-stomached. It seems worth noting that not all male strategies are for domination, that there is a way of surviving precisely by giving up all pretensions thereto.

[22] Levine (1966:521) does say "work was organized according to age and sex. Women and middle-aged men worked the fields... [but]... agriculture was primarily women's work and thus less prestigeful than the care and disposal of cattle, a male activity." It is unclear whether he is referring to pre-colonial period or to the 1950s, when he was in Kisii.

and through their control of land. These factors intertwined in a complex sequence which started after marriage with the woman being "told where to cultivate" within the husband's mother's plot on the family farm. This involved her working in a group with the other family women, under the control of the elder ones, and initially contributing to a common food store and cooking pot. As the wife bore children, she would achieve the autonomy of her own hearth, then store, each involving a greater degree of independence in production. This would also enhance her standing within the group of women and, if the children were boys, with her husband. Once she had male children, the allocation of the plot became firmer, in the sense of being her sons' on inheritance and thus "held in trust" for them by her in the event of her husband's death - though the size of the plot would be vulnerable to his taking another wife (or wives) and to her (their) bearing sons. This was a crucial turning point, though a woman's security would not be fully assured until she had reared several sons to adulthood, by which time, if her wifely career had been otherwise successful, she would have achieved a position of some respect and authority within the household. By contrast a widow without sons would have no rights to land within the homestead, though in some cases she was taken over by one of her late husband's brothers.[23] During the pre-colonial period there was no absolute shortage of land, so a widow could probably also move to unused land outside but near to the existing large household, though probably to a life of insecurity and poverty.

A woman's "food strategy" was thus embedded in a broader strategy to retain access to land and to achieve respect and status within the female world and beyond it. Her land-rights only persisted beyond the husband's death once a she had borne sons, which was in any case another obligation to her husband. Compliance with the various customs thought to assist in the delivery of healthy sons (and avoidance of practices likely to lead to their death) would have been important parts of a survival strategy for a married woman.

So underneath the overall (patriarchal) household strategy, partly supporting and partly undermining it, there would be a series of male and female sub-group and individual strategies. For women, the household as such was represented by group work, usually under the supervision of the senior wives, where the women of a family worked together in rotation on each other's food-crop plots.

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[23] There have been cases where sons threw their mother off the land, but they are not common and definitely not socially approved.

While wives were allocated their own plots, most actually cultivated the land in groups (known as ebisangio sing. egesangio) made up of the married women within an extended household or related group of neighbouring households.[24] Each retained the produce of her own plot, though she would be obligated to lend or give some to other women in the group in times of need or for certain rituals. Food security could thus be seen as depending on effective work and social relations within such groups, together with observation of required ritual practices to achieve luck and ward off ill-fortune. But the situation was usually more complex than this, for polygamy was common, and since production groups involved people in potentially tense and conflictual relationships like co-wives or mother-in-law to daughter-in-law, one would hardly expect them to have followed an overall optimization strategy, except rather approximately.

From available accounts, the status and obligations of women within a household or risaga were more formalized and institutionalized in the pre-colonial period, than is the case today. Bridewealth was central to Gusii society and its payment strictly controlled. Marriage involved a series of ceremonies defining different stages in payment of brideprice and the woman's status. According to Levine (1966:21), a man's ideal number of wives was four, while ekegusii, has separate names for up to four wives defining their tasks and status.[25] The impression one receives is of a regularized institution with clear definitions of what was acceptable and of the respective obligations of the different parties and separation of spheres. This impression of regularity comes over even more strongly in the work of the Mayers (1949, 1965). There is doubtless some truth in this, though such accounts, focusing on the rules as told by informants, may tend to overstate the extent to which they were actually kept. Moreover both the Mayers and Levines stress, the importance of conflict and competition at all levels. The Mayers quote the saying "brothers fight for the mother's breast" as a favourite axiom indicating the acceptance of conflict as natural (1965:53). Given this, the dissected nature of the terrain and the high degree of autonomy of individual patriarchs, one could expect considerable variations between places, clans and households. But all sources make clear that men had most of the rights and women a disproportionate share of the duties.

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[24] Even today, in many parts of rural Kisii, a person's close neighbours are also likely to be close relatives.

[25] Levine (1966:21) gives these names as 1. the "ash-sweeper", 2. the "helper, 3. "above the cattle-pen", 4. "the gate". I must admit that I have no idea how (in terms of what rituals, tasks, or perhaps sleeping places) these names assign status. To northern European eyes, it is curious to see "Cinderella" (Askepot) at the top.

Changes with colonialism

The above still seems largely true. But otherwise, virtually every aspect of life in Kisii has undergone enormous change since the beginning of the century. The area has been colonized, integrated into the cash economy in several stages, population has increased drastically and land availability correspondingly fallen. The importance of livestock has fallen drastically and that of employment and education risen. Most of the rules by which Kisii society was ordered have changed, though not out of recognition. Kisii remains recognizably different from neighbouring societies - and proudly and self-consciously so. This is reflected in a low rate of out-migration as compared with other densely populated areas in Kenya like Western Province.[26] Young men (and some women) from Kisii migrate, but they tend not to stay away so long as people from (say) Kakamega (Raikes 1988b:32). From casual conversations it emerges that people miss home, its physical surroundings and social interactions.[27]

Kisii was subjugated to British rule in 1905-8, and was among the places in Kenya where there was armed resistance to colonial incursion. This provoked a punitive response so brutal as to provoke questions in the British House of Commons. A number of Gusii were killed and heavy "fines" in cattle collected. (Maxon 1971: 38 & ff). In 1914, Kisii was briefly captured by the Germans from neighbouring Musoma in the then German East Africa. In a confused game of musical chairs, the British left before the Germans arrived and the latter then left before the British returned. The second of these two occasions allowed time for sacking and looting of the government station by local people, this again provoking punitive action and a fine of ten thousand cattle. (Gethin n.d.). The colonial state abolished "cattle-villages" and imposed poll-tax and large-scale forced recruitment of young men into the Carrier Corps, whose fatalities were far higher than among the fighting troops. After the War, the labour recruiters moved in, making agreements with chiefs and headmen to "supply" labour to the estates and plantations, as often by force as freely.[28] When plantation tea production started in

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[26] Billetoft (1989: 13 & 20) compares Kisii's 9% of population living outside the District with Kakamega's 30%.

[27] Here one is reminded of Sally Belfrage's marvellous book on Northern Ireland, The Crack, where the title phrase refers to peoples' own term for what is special about their way of talking, joking and interacting and thus why people would rather be there than elsewhere, despite the troubles and hardships.

[28] Gethin (n.d.: 138-40) describes how recruiters traded whisky for bodies with the chiefs, making massive profits in the process (cost per recruit 2 Rs. price delivered Mombasa 40Rs). Gethin was himself a recruiter, miller, transporter, hunter and general businessman in Kisii in 1914 and from 1918 onwards. He records with some disgust the complaints of an inquisitive missionary ("very pro-native") who saw some of Gethin's own recruits "all tied together in

neighbouring Kericho district, most of the labour-force came from Kisii. While this took a lot of men away for substantial periods, it is hard to gauge how much extra labour was imposed upon women, since it is unclear how much men did before. It did however significantly change family relations in another respect. Young men now controlled resources of their own, which they could use to pay at least part of their own bridewealth, so reducing parental control.

Another significant change concerned land tenure and accumulation. The colonial administration fairly rapidly divided Kisii up into tribal, clan and lineage (risaga) areas. This left quite large unallocated areas within many amasaga as well as much larger disputed and unsettled border areas, especially towards the Kipsigis and Maasai. Rapidly growing population led to pressures for settlement of these areas, while colonialism itself provided new mechanisms for doing this. In the first place, the British had appointed chiefs where none had previously existed.[29] These were involved in the definition and codification of Kisii land-law and, of course, did so to their own advantage. Secondly, colonial administration and Christianity generated a few jobs at higher wage-levels, making possible the first acquisition of land through straddling.(Orvis 1985). This seems to have started in the early 1930s and to have gathered strength throughout the decade. Mayer records that the focus of law-suits (and by implication most important form of property) had shifted from being cattle to land by the post-war period.[30] This land-scramble seems to have intensified further in the 1950s, and as previously by foul means as often as fair. As Levine (1966:12-13) put it, "Often a rich man uses his influence (or wealth in the form of bribes) to establish legal claims to property belonging to less influential persons".[31] Since then the process has continued and all land is now registered private property. As in many other peasant areas of Kenya, this has **not** led to the use of

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the normal way to keep them from deserting" and lodged a complaint. He records no significant change in practice.

[29] Getutu in the central highlands of Kisii had developed a rather larger scale and degree of formal political structure than other Kisii "tribes". But even here, chiefship seems to have been no more than a few generations deep.

[30] Mayer (1965), referring to fieldwork done before 1950.

[31] Unlike Mayer, who stresses the egalitarian nature of Kisii society, Levine refers again and again to the respect accorded to wealth and contempt for poverty and the poor. "The wealthy live in fear of poisoning, witchcraft and sorcery (but) fear does not inspire (them) to share with their less fornunate neighbours... On the contrary, they use their wealth to dominate others through loans and threats of expensive litigation... In spite of covert jealousy and resentment... the poor... automatically accord their wealthy neighbours a degree of respect and deference which ensures their domination" (1966:12). While this is a useful corrective to Mayer's picture, it may be affected by the fact that Levine did fieldwork close to the compound of the most powerful and acquisitive chief in Kisii history - whose son was, at least for a time, the richest and most powerful Kisii in Kenya.

land as collateral for loans, because of local pressures against foreclosures. In some sense, this is just as well. Had it been possible to take land in repayment of co-operative debts, the "development credit" fiasco of the 1970s might have turned into a real catastrophe. As things stand, land is officially the private property of individuals and fully alienable, though in fact clans and kinship groups retain some influence. The "internal" allocation of land to wives continues unchanged (except that there is usually less to allocate).

Already before the colonial period, Kisii women had traded grain with the neighbouring Luo for clay pots and other items. With its high and reliable rainfall, Kisii exported grain at high prices when others were affected by drought. During the 1920s, the requirements of the plantation economy for cheap food for its workers increased demand and hastened the shift from millet to maize.[32] Opportunities for sale of crops expanded in the 1930s, with the first small programmes for African coffee production, though this was first significant (and even then mostly produced by a few chiefs) after World War II.[33] Even at that time, maize was probably still the most important earner of cash, though the colonial government was at least as concerned to protect settlers against African competition as to encourage peasant production.[34]

During the 1950s and 1960s, the growth of cash-crop production accelerated, as did population growth and land-shortage. Coffee remained the major export-crop, but tea and pyrethrum production spread in the highlands. More recently the commercialization of agricultural production has continued, though the major growth has been in crops for the domestic market like sugar-cane, sweet bananas, fruit and vegetables rather than export crops. In the case of coffee, low international prices since the end of the coffee boom of the late 1970s, have been aggravated by inefficiency in the co-ope-

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[32] Gethin (n.d.:65) states that "at this time the Kisiis grew a large quantity of wheat, selling it to Indian traders in Kisii and Kisumu."

[33] From the early 1929s Kikuyu spokesmen had been requesting to be allowed to grow coffee - and were consistently refused with the usual excuses (disease transmission, likelihood of theft from European farms), covering the fear that cheap African production would compete settlers out of business. As a sop to African opinion, three much smaller and dispersed groups in Kisii, Busia and Meru were allowed to produce under strict supervision (thus keeping costs up and production down). When the Kikuyu were eventually allowed to produce coffee from 1955, it took them only a few years to overtake all other African producers combined. In the mid-1950s however, Kisii was the most important African coffee-producing District.

[34] Getugi (1982:13) gives the price for "native" produced maize in 1942 ad Sh 5.50 for two bags, versus Sh 7.50 per bag to Europeans. Levine (1962:526) writes, referring to the mid-1950s, "Nowadays large quantities of Gusii maize and eleusine are exported to various parts of Kenya, and much of it is sold illegally at two or three times the prices set by the Government's Maize Control Officer."

ratives and the costs of "development credit" during the 1970s. (Raikes 1988b). It is forbidden to uproot coffee in Kenya without permission from the state. But while this is strictly implemented in Central Province, no such control has ever been possible in Kisii, where it would involve fining or jailing much of the population, as would enforcement of rules forbidding people from interplanting coffee with other crops.[35] Because of low prices, but also because of the long delays in making payments and because people feel they are being cheated by the co-operatives, there has been little new investment in coffee in recent years and not much maintenance of existing trees.[36] Another issue may be the unwillingness of women to work hard on coffee when the returns go to their husbands as owners of the plot and co-operative number. Much of the above seems applicable to tea, except that world prices have held up better, the local agency (KTDA) is more efficient and popular and that it may be easier for women to collect the proceeds.[37] In any case, tea production continues to increase. At the other end of the scale is pyrethrum, where the bottom fell out of the market in the late 1970s and production almost disappeared until a small recovery from 1988 onwards.

Domestic cash crops are sold in various local markets. Many of the sweet bananas are transported to Nakuru and Nairobi. Sugar-cane is sold for consumption as chewing-cane (mostly "exported" from Kisii) or local brewing of chang'aa (illegal distilled liquor).[38] Vegetables are mainly sold in local markets or in Kisii Town market, though some are moved as far as Kisumu where the prices are better. More would be sold to the main urban centres, if Nairobi did not lie the other side of the highland areas of Central Province, where production of fruit and vegetables is much larger and more developed than in Kisii. Vegetables are particularly important to women. They are grown almost solely by women, on small plots (ebiticha) which have been recognized as "theirs" for many years, as are the products and their proceeds. Future markets for fresh vege-

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35 On first arrival in Kisii, I was surprised how little coffee there was around my rented house. Then my neighbours harvested their maize and little stunted coffee trees emerged from the stubble. Not surprisingly, coffee yields in Kisii are among the lowest in Kenya.

36 Some of this can be attributed to further co-operative mismanagement, since they are often contracted to spray members' coffee trees, and collect money for this but do not deliver. Even my landlord, one of the most influential people in the area, had not had his trees sprayed in several years.

37 Dorthe von Bülow reports that in Kericho District, KTDA officers were, under certain circumstances, willing to transfer tea licences to the wives of men who were known wastrels. (Personal communication).

38 Little of the sugar cane grown in Kisii is sold to factories, which buy only from registred growers in their areas of operation. A few farmers in the extreme southwest of the District sell to SONY at Awendo.

tables depend largely on the expansion of non-farm production, employment and incomes in Kisii and western Kenya.

Another major impact of colonial development was the increasing importance of education. This grew very slowly in the pre-war period, due to colonial parsimony in setting up state schools and Gusii objections to missionary control. (Maxon 1971:Ch 8). But it increased rapidly after the War, and accelerated further after Independence. Since then, education has been important, both as a means of access to jobs and as a source of employment itself. Teachers are the largest single group of employees in Kisii, followed by health workers and other state employees. Their wages, housing loans and health schemes have significantly affected both investment and employment,[39] outweighing in both extent and security the relatively few factory-scale industries in the District.[40] On the other hand both together are probably outweighed by small businesses of one or other sort, ranging from trading in and transport of crops or processed products, like cakes, beer or brewing grains,[41] to setting up of shops, hotels (tea-shops-cum-restaurants), maize mills and artisanal activities like tailoring or carpentery.

Thus the 1981/82 Rural Household Budget Survey indicated that 28% of household income in Kisii derived from "non-farm enterprise", and 25% from "other sources",[42] as compared with only 16% from wages and salaries. But this comparison is in some respects misleading, since it ignores the strong relations between wage employment and private business. Most of the richest people in Kisii have (or have had) professional or senior civil service jobs, which they combine with investment both in Kisii and elsewhere. Much larger numbers work further down these scales both in and outside the District and many of them too combine employment with business and agriculture. Apart from this, income from formal employment forms much of the market for business activities. In

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[39] Teachers in Kisii receive a substantial housing allowance, payable only for permanent houses. This allows them to borrow sums for house-building which require the deduction of most of their pay in repayment, while they live on the allowance (and for men, on their wives' farm production). Similarly a hospital insurance scheme for employees above a certain wage-level, spends more in Kisii than in any other District and supports the operation of several large private hospitals.

[40] As of 1989, two of the largest of these, a bakery and nail factory, were non-operational. Their proprietor was a former presidential right-hand, more recently out of favour and no import licenses for vital inputs and parts had been available since the fall from grace.

[41] One means of adding value to millet grain is to let it sprout and than sell it as "instant" brewing malt.

[42] Comparative figures show "other" to vary between districts in very much the same way as "non-farm enterprise", from which one may assume some overlap between the categories. (Kenya, Economic Survey 1988, p. 34, Table 3.12)

short, to a large extent, these are complements rather than alternatives, each with its place in an overall (mainly male) strategy. A job gives regular income, social status, contacts and often access to employee loan funds.[43]

Nor are investment in agriculture and "business" real alternatives, for the returns on the latter are very much higher. Many trading ventures are expected to repay themselves in a matter of days and profit-rates of 100% and over are not uncommon, especially where the trader has privileged access to items or licences. Land prices in Kisii are currently so high that purchase of land can hardly be seen as an economic investment at all. Successful men invest in business and politics and then, when they have made their pile, may purchase land for security and to provide for their families and children, in much the same spirit that they invest in education. Those interested in land as a paying investment, generally prefer to buy or rent it in some other part of the country, though there are businessmen who buy valley-bottom land for production of sugar cane and some who buy land speculatively, since its price is expected to continue rising.

But of course only a very small minority are this successful. Returns on business may be high, but so are risks - and limits on entry to the more paying branches. In assessing the importance of wage or business income for food security, one must note that by far the largest proportion accrues to men and that of these a very significant proportion feel (or at any rate state) themselves to have no responsibility for the provision of food for the family beyond the provision of land. Even men who willingly accept responsibility for long term "strategic" payments like school fees, will often refuse to contribute any of their wage or business income to purchase of food for their families.[44] This they see as having been achieved through the allocation of land to the wife, even where the amount may be plainly inadequate to the task. But the more serious problems of food security occur lower down the income scale, where men have relatively little cash to contribute, in fact contribute almost nothing and where food strategy is overwhelmingly a female concern.

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[43] Nor should one necessarily assume that it pre-empts all of the employee's time. A maize-trader friend, employed by the Ministry of Agriculture, seemed to attend his workplace (in another District) only around pay day, expect at times of year when he could combine "extension" with purchasing maize.

[44] A phrase not infrequently heard from men drinking during the last days of every month (i.e after payday) is "four days of living and 26 days of survival." That is, all the pay packet which has not already been deducted for savings or loan repayment gets spent during the first weekend after payday. After that, the man depends on what his wife produces on the home farm (or buys from her wages if she has a job). Obviously, only some men behave this way, but their number is not small.

The situation of women has changed considerably, but in varied and ambiguous ways. While the loss of young males to labour migration may not have increased their labour-burden much, the subsequent addition of export-crops to the farming calendar has more so. So has increasing land pressure, since it requires more work to maintain fertility under permanent cultivation than where long-fallowing is possible (and shifts it from clearing, often a male task, to weeding which is usually seen as a woman's job). Most of the income from export crops has accrued to men, though in some cases with a degree of "moral marking" for the payment of school fees. But the market for fruits, vegetables and other food crops has remained largely in the hands of women. While export-crops are sold to agencies which pay the money into the man's account, maize and vegetables are sold in the market for cash. Sitting at a local market for hours on end to sell 10/- worth of onions is hardly a way to get rich quick, but it does allow women to accumulate their own funds.

Another set of changes has been similarly ambiguous. The loosening of bridewealth regulations, with reduction in the amounts paid and ever increasing delays in doing so, have made it much easier for men and somewhat easier for women to marry from own rather than parents' choice. But, since a woman's sons are not legally the father's until he has started to pay bridewealth, her security in the land, as holding it in trust for them, awaits the same transaction. Until then, she can be turned out without recourse or compensation. Thus women have a bit more autonomy and a lot less security. In some cases women save up and pay their own bridewealth for this reason, though it is not an option open to many (Haakonsson 1985:103). But as Haakonsson makes clear, one option - that of avoiding marriage altogether and living alone with their children - is much less available and acceptable to Gusii women, than is the case among the Kikuyu, for example.[45] Even women who had jobs and incomes allowing them to purchase land, preferred marriage. Indeed, precisely these women used their economic status to pressure the men they lived with to pay bridewealth and regularize their status, so achieving a higher rate of marriage (as opposed to cohabitation without bridewealth) than their non-employed sisters. The reasons given included respect in the community and freedom from the harassment, theft or other removal of property, which

[45] Here he cites Parkin (1980). Without having read that work, it still seems possible that part of the difference may be locational or urban-rural. That is, it is much easier and more acceptable to be a single working mother in Nairobi than in smaller towns, let alone the countryside.

single women tend to suffer. In Kisii as elsewhere, marriage is regarded as "normal", whatever the reality, by both tradition and Christianity. Unmarried women are not "proper" women and thus vulnerable to harassment, insult and violence. So relatively few women subsist outside some form of cohabitation or marriage with men, and still fewer choose to do so.[46] But while this forms the framework for their strategies, expanding education, wage employment and market opportunities have changed the strategies themselves, not to mention that the traditional "food strategy", of producing subsistence food on the land allocated to them, is simply not possible for the large majority, because of land-shortage.

Household reproduction and food strategies in modern Kisii

Steven Orvis (1988) makes straddling the focus of his model of household reproduction in Kisii. Male non-farm income is invested in education and farming, that is land-purchase and the intensification of production on land already held. He links straddling to the 1950s introduction of export-crops and Swynnerton Plan increases in productivity, though in a previous paper (1985) he showed that land accumulation, based on straddling and chiefly use of position pre-dated the introduction of coffee. But the expansion of export crop production, especially after Independence certainly accelerated the process markedly, as did the accelerating expansion of jobs and education after Independence.

In seeing straddling as a "model" of household reproduction, Orvis intends it as not only a social process but a normative model, a "conscious process and a frame of reference within which household members' behaviour is judged as socially acceptable." (1988:6). But, as he also makes clear, successful straddling, is an option only for a small and declining minority. Those who first invested non-farm income in education have prospered, and in accumulating resources, have pre-empted opportunities for others. The successful accumulate income, land and means of production to the extent that they require and can afford hired labour to work their farms and produce a surplus for sale. At the other end of the scale, those whose parents could (or did) not afford education are shut out from well-paid work, are usually those who cannot produce subsistence from their land and are forced into low-paid wage labour simply to survive. They thus enter the next round of the process without either

[46] Haakonsson found that among the separated or divorced women he interviewed, in almost every case the husband had taken the initiative for the separation.

educated children or non-farm income to invest in farming. Two major shifts since the 1950s have hastened this closure. Firstly, while primary education would assure a job in the 1950s, there are now thousands of unemployed secondary school leavers. The other is the price of land. Real wages have risen significantly since the 1950s, in terms of ability to purchase consumer goods. But land prices have risen much faster than wages, so that savings will no longer purchase so much. So straddling does not ensure the reproduction of most Gusii families, if by that is meant maintaining a given level of income and security. On the contrary, a large and growing proportion of the rural population is declining into poverty.

Orvis sees a number of other problems with straddling as model or household strategy, especially for women. It introduces an element of tension into household relations, since men have several options for the use of their non-farm income - they can invest in either agriculture on non-farm activities or they can consume it (often in liquid form)- while women's security is more closely bound up with the farm than men's. Their off-farm income opportunities are poorer and they are responsible for providing food, at least much of which comes from the farm. In short, straddling in the strict sense may not even be a man's strategy. There are often good economic reasons for continued investment outside agriculture. A man may quite "rationally" follow a career strategy which at some point involves dumping his "country" wife and family, for a smarter, more educated town model, more in keeping with his success. And if he has not paid bridewealth for the first wife she has no recourse and can scarcely even mobilize public opinion against him.

Orvis also asserts that straddling has been partly responsible for an increase in the risk women face in achieving household reproduction, citing the threefold risk of bad weather, changing market prices and failure by men to contribute to the household. This in turn, he asserts, has led to an exaggerated degree of diversification which reduces productivity and leaves the household eventually worse off than before. I think it is probably right that women's situation in rural Kisii is increasingly precarious, but am less sure about the reasons given and even less sure of the necessarily deleterious effects of diversification. One obvious focus of insecurity is increasing land-shortage and insecure access to land for the increasing numbers of women living in unions where they are vulnerable to being kicked out without recompense. To the extent that weather is an increased risk, this can only be in relation to land and labour shortage preventing production of a "normal

surplus".[47] While it is true that changing market prices introduce an extra element of uncertainty - and one which tends to work against the poor (food prices rise when supply is short and when their deficit is larger than usual), this has to be balanced against the emergence of new markets which, I would claim increase women's opportunities as well as their risk. Finally, for the poorest women in Kisii, the "risk" of a husband's not contributing to household expenditures is often so near 100% to make the term inappropriate. The real risk is as often of his reducing household income, by smashing things when drunk or beating her to get her savings.[48]

Diversification on the other hand is, as Orvis shows with examples, a widespread aspect of household reproduction and accumulation strategies at all income levels in most African countries, and relates in no small part to political factors - both the risk that any one activity might fall afoul of some regulation or official and the importance of cultivating allies by joint ventures. True, diversification (considered as the reverse of specialization) may reduce productivity, but it does not seem to me to be that which keeps poor women poor. To cite the well-known economic saw, specialization is limited by the extent of the market, and where markets are limited, increased productivity merely results in the exclusion of some producers/traders - and no prizes in this case for guessing who. As pointed out at the beginning of the paper, one of the ambiguities in the whole issue of food/income security is that for poor people, reliant on petty-trading, their capacity to get by may well depend on residual inefficiencies in markets. Moreover, for both men and women, diversification is not just a means of risk reduction, but a means of keeping one's income secret from others, notably spouses. Diversification may reduce economic efficiency but has served well as a strategy for households and entrepreneurs up and down the income scale throughout Africa. I would assert that the problem is less one of diversification as such than of short-term coping strategies pushing out longer-term considerations. I would accept that diversification (and the maintenance of support networks) can reduce agricultural productivity. But to show the superiority of specialization, one must demonstrate prospects of

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[47] W.R.Allen's (1965) term for the production of sufficient food to cover family needs, even if the weather is poorer (and yields lower) than normal - leading to a surplus when the weather is normal.

[48] This is particularly true of men at the bottom of the income-scale, whose landholdings are too small to live from, and whose life is often made up of just enough casual labour or petty trade to earn the price of the day's drinking. This round may originally be rooted in lack of prospects and the fellowship which gets them jobs but, as with any form of physical addiction, gradually comes to be based on the continued need for alchohol "to allow me to sleep" or "to keep my problems away."

investment in expanded employment and incomes, since otherwise increased proeuctrivity may have no other effect than to deny people work and incomes.

So how does a strategy for a poor Gusii household look ?

Firstly, food security is primarily a woman's strategy. All concerned, herself included, accept that it is primarily a woman's responsibility to provide and ensure enough food for her husband, children and herself. She will probably also have to provide children's clothing and other basic necessities and save or have access to money for trips to hospital. Her husband is unlikely to provide much labour, and even less money. School fees are more likely to be paid by some man, whether this be a husband, elder son or uncle. The fact that enrollment in the first class of primary school is almost universal means that nearly all families scrape together some money for this.[49]

Secondly one of her major priorities will be defined in part **against** her husband - that is, she will seek to "tie him down" to paying at least some bridewealth to secure her continued access to land. Though at the same time she will be concerned to "give him" male children. Both of these will involve following those forms of behaviour seen as "correct" for a wife, so as to pressure him to follow the "correct" behaviour for a husband. So her situation may define her security and strategy to achieve it, in terms of fastening onto the most traditional norms of marriage, even though they are evidently crumbling. In certain cases, her strategy will also be defined against rival women (widows, co-wives, girlfriends),[50] and once again, by referring to traditional and/or Christian norms. It needs stressing that these strategic factors affecting continued access to land etc are at least as important for long-term food security as, for example, the details of agricultural production.

Thirdly, since food production from her farm will be most unlikely to cover the year's food needs (not to mention clothes, medical bills and other basic necessities), and since her husband cannot be relied on for a contribution, she will have to earn money in one or other way. Casual labour is one means to this end, and one which seems more

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[49] There are no fees, as such, for primary school in Kenya, but there are a number of other payments which have to be made, in addition to uniforms, which are usually compulsory. Children are as often sent away for lack of uniforms as for non-payment.

[50] For a more extended discussion of such issues (in the different context of urban Zambia), see Schuster (1979)

acceptable when done in women's groups than alone. Others include growing and selling vegetables or other cash crops (other than export-crops, for which her husband collects the money); growing, processing, cooking and selling cakes, snacks and brewing-malt; and brewing or distilling alchoholic drinks. These three groups of options are listed in roughly declining order of social acceptability but increasing order of profitability. Least acceptable of all is distilling and selling chang'aa, which is illegal, can imply sex (whether involuntary, casual or commercial) with the customers, and adds to the problems of other women by getting their husbands drunk. But even a relatively small chang'aa bar can earn good money.[51]

Fourthly, any poor woman will need some safety net, in the form of a source from which she can borrow or beg. Orvis[52] implies the complete breakdown of extended kinship linkages. But, while there is not doubt that there has been considerable erosion, it is in my opinion wrong to ignore both what remains and the emergence of new networks. It is still not uncommon for women to work in small (egesangio) working groups, and in these the members have at least some obligation to help one another in time of need.[53] It may be that such mechanisms survive mainly among households other than the very poorest, but even in the latter, it is usually to close relations that a woman will first turn for a tiding-over loan, which may in certain cases be an involuntary gift (however grudgingly given)

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[51] One that I visited was run by an old woman with two helpers and had, when visited, about 15 customers, but only two glasses, which we all shared. I was told that this widow had put three children through secondary school. Thus I cannot agree with Haakonsson that distilling is risky and poorly remunerated. On the first point, it is mainly risky to those who do not have their protection in order and this is not so hard to achieve, given that far from all local officials are teetotallers.

[52] He refers to "multisectoral households who diversify investment of their limited resources in rather uneconomical ways in order to avoid the insecurity they face as a result of integration into the market economy and the concomitant breakdown of communal institutions" (1987:3). In this paper he also asserts that a peasantry has been created and destroyed, referring in part to the breakdown of the "peasant community's guarantees against absolute disaster" (p.11).

[53] An interesting "traditional" story told by an old woman in Prisca's egesangio, indicates limits to this help even prior to the penetration of commodity production. Two women are coming in the evening from some occasion. One tells the other that she has failed to collect any firewood.
- "Neither have I," says the second.
- "What shall we do then?"
- "I will burn grass and dried maize tops."
- "But will they burn properly?"
- "Oh Yes".

The first goes home, tries to light a fire and fails. Her children are crying from hunger and in desperation she goes round to the other - who is sitting in front of a blazing log fire. Moral - don`t flash your wealth around or others will come and scrounge it.

from a richer to a poorer relative.[54] Of course this is not automatic, but then it probably never was, even in pre-colonial times. Analyses of social and kinship structures tend to omit that some kinswomen are close friends while others cannot stand the sight of each other.

But beyond that, at least in South Wanjare, there has been a blossoming of women's groups in recent years, with significant effects on women's savings, borrowing, incomes and security.[55] Many are communal working groups which hire themselves out "on contract" (piecework terms) for agricultural or other labour. In the first place this is more socially acceptable for women than individual casual labour, which can arouse jealousy and suspicion from a husband. Secondly, many such groups involve some pacing of payments, when they do not involve outright savings. As in other places where pay will not suffice for both necessities and "luxury" consumption, people seem happy to allow group pressures or rules to force them into savings by stop-order.[56] In addition to this, both work groups and others (church groups, for example) operate rotating and non-rotating savings schemes, the latter providing funds for group lending to members. This latter is another important source of tiding-over loans and although the rates of interest charged (10% per month) are high, at least in some cases, they are waived in cases of genuine need.[57] In short, it seems to me an overstatement to assert that in modern Kisii nuclear families face the untender mercies of the market entirely without wider social networks. Indeed, I would assert that some of what Orvis refers to as "diversification" has precisely to do with maintaining networks which bear on household security.[58]

At the same time, if there are positive social relations which serve to offset risk, so are there negative relations which aggravate its ef-

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54 Field notes of interviews by Mark Ombiru with a variety of lenders and borrowers in South Wanjare, to be presented in more detail in a forthcoming report on informal credit.

55 And in some cases men's, since most working groups have a significant minority of male members. This seems a combination of several factors. Among them are that it is more politically acceptable to form women's than men's groups in Kenya's currently paranoid atmosphere, and that men who wish to save money or simply not spend it straight away, find the social pressures less strong (or rather different) than among most groups of male casual labourers.

56 During my last few months of military service, when I was a pay clerk, I discovered the prevalence of saving by stop-order, among men who had never given the slightest impression that they were interested in saving so much as a penny.

57 It seemed a common practice for women borrowing money on such terms to borrow a few shillings extra for vegetable seed, which they would plant specifically for the purpose of loan repayment.

58 In some cases, like attendance of funerals, which is a rather strict social obligation, and which can take perhaps 20 working days per year, at arbitrary and sometimes inconvenient times, there seems to be a real loss of production potential to set against not just security but continuation of the life of the community.

fects. The intra-household gender tension, to which Orvis refers is certainly a reality and can take the form of mutually (or self-) destructive behaviour by both men and women, beating, poisoning and arson being the respective extremes. Again, while groups of related women may co-operate and help each other, co-wives (or wives and girlfriends) often indulge in antagonistic behaviour potentially harmful to both. Rivalry between different halves of a family may continue past the division of the farm between two wives and their progeny.[59]

But more generally, one cannot just look at the positive side of extended kinship relationships. In the very process of favouring, including and contributing to the security of "members", they exclude others - and not just in formal terms. For example, children of poor families without contacts are far less likely to succeed than a better-connected child of inferior performance let alone ability and job markets are riven with similar factors. So there is no intention to romanticize in asserting that non-market relations still persist.

"Prisca's Diary", which relates to the activities of a small egesangio in the 1980s, demonstrates both of these tendencies.[60] Although several of the members were educated employed women, it was in some respects a very conservative group, much concerned with the transmission and implantation of norms and family-based values. A wife should be respectful of and obedient to her husband, no matter how worthless he may be. Men are largely fools and to be manipulated - but at the same time, their manipulation by other women is strongly to be resisted. Widows are dangerous - and the state of childless widowhood to be avoided at all costs. Women of the egesangio felt some responsibility for each other, though there was plenty of conflict. Much of the conversation consisted of a lurid do-it-yourself soap opera of drunkenness, beatings and fights, poisoning and witchcraft, within the extended family and in the neighbourhood.[61]

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[59] Among a small sample of farms interviewed in South Wanjare, that which looked the largest and wealthiest on the surface, was rent with dissension between the sons of different wives. This has resulted in several fights between the half-brothers with clubs and to the father's having, through intercession with the Chief, had one of his sons arrested and badly beaten by the Administrative Police. The main bone of contention was a strip of land about twenty metres by two.

[60] I had originally intended to quote extensively from the diary, but constraints of time and space make it necessary to postpone that until later - by which time, I hope, it will be available in published form, edited by Carolyn Barnes.

[61] Of course this does not represent any sort of statistical norm. Lives of hard work, co-operative endeavour and steadfast purity make dull conversation.

Such groups certainly do not represent uncomplicated examples of "traditional co-operation", which is almost certainly a golden-age myth in any case. Quarrels, including physical fights, between the different members, especially co-wives, was a regular feature of group interaction. Co-wives share certain essential functions, like feeding the husband, and sleeping with him, which might at first sight be thought of as areas for co-operation and spreading the work-load. In reality it often seems not to work that way. The family is not purely an economic or productive unit, and a man is more likely to favour the wife he finds most charming or sexually attractive than the one who produces most or is the best housewife. So co-wives tend to compete for men's affections and men tend to sleep with, treat better and reward the same wife whose food they eat; the other one getting the worst of any quarrels or beatings going. Yet neither is co-wife necessarily or in fact a purely negative relationship. One cannot "read off" the specific power relations to be found within a family from its structure and the socio-cultural rules and norms which surround it. In one sense, these form the context within which social relations are played out; of co-operation, competition and control, friendship, enmity and adjudiction. Yet the rules and norms are themselves also formed by the interplay and specific power constellations. Friendships, alliances and lines of conflict form and re-form; story telling and jokes make the day go more pleasantly, while forming and reinforcing stereotypes and norms. Bonds are renewed while spite and envy are taken out on the disliked and the weakest, again reinforcing group norms and the "pecking order".[62]

So too with food and general security strategies, these are part of a multi-faceted series of relations, transactions and labour processes, which will differ - and be re-formed - under different circumstances. But is that all one can say ? To draw theoretical conclusions from the above would require lengthy further discussion of important issues relating to secular processes in the Kenya economy and rural class-formation. That will not be attempted here and now. How about policy conclusions ? One can only agree with Orvis' conclusion that female labour needs better remuneration if agricultural production is to be expanded in Kisii. But it is less easy to see how this could be achieved by policy. One "obvious" conclusion might seem to be support to women's groups - but the reality is far less obvious. It is only too easy for donor funding (which is inevitably huge in relation to the income of any rural woman's group) to turn a group which has

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[62] See Ortner (1984) for a more thorough and theoretical discussion of the points I am getting at.

come together to achieve some aim by common effort, into a group whose main aim is to attract foreign funds. Indeed, given that donor agencies reach women's groups via the state, party and aid-mediating institutions, those funded can well be founded solely for that purpose. If there is any policy conclusion to this paper it is that those making policy over food security and especially local projects or programmes for its achievement, should take rather more different factors into account than is normally done.

In conclusion, it may seem to some readers that I have dwelt unnecessarily on the more lurid aspects of Kisii society. There may be some truth in that, though it is to some extent dictated by the topic. Household food security is inevitably the most serious problem for tyhe worst-off and weakest. Moreover itr is not my intention to imply that such processes operate only in Kisii. Far from it, I use the example to include what seem to me normal but neglected aspects of food security in any poor society. Indeed much of it involves no more than including aspects of family life which may be as familiar to the reader as to the author. The point is that factors do have significant effects on household security. It also has the effect of pointing out the ambiguity of so many of the process considered. Perhaps this is best encapsulated by the effect of kinship or other networks, including and ordering the lives of insiders while excluding others.

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