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Article abstract

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LOCAL ORGANIZATION: CONFRONTING CONTRADICTION IN A SMALLHOLDING DISTRICT OF KENYA

by

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ABSTRACT

The objective in this paper is to link changes in productive/reproductive relations between women and men to changes in mode of local organization. It is argued that women's ability to organize local, non-kin networks at the extrahousehold level in Murang'a District, Kenya has, through time, served as a countertension to male solidarity. Evidence is presented to indicate how women have formed effective social bonds on the basis of spatial contiguity, a pattern that has been replicated through time, albeit altering as necessitated by changes in productive mode.

KEY WORDS: Local organization, gender, Kenya, rural area.

RÉSUMÉ

L'organisation villageoise et les rapports hommes-femmes dans une région rurale du Kenya

L'objectif de l'auteure est d'associer les changements intervenus dans les relations de production/reproduction entre les hommes et les femmes à ceux perceptibles au niveau de l'organisation villageoise. L'auteure démontre que la capacité des femmes à établir des réseaux au niveau des villages dans le district de Murang'a au Kenya a en fait agi comme contrepoids à la solidarité masculine. L'auteure relate des faits qui évoquent comment les femmes ont pu tisser une telle trame sociale, trame qui s'est perpétuée, avec quelques différences toutefois, au fil du temps.

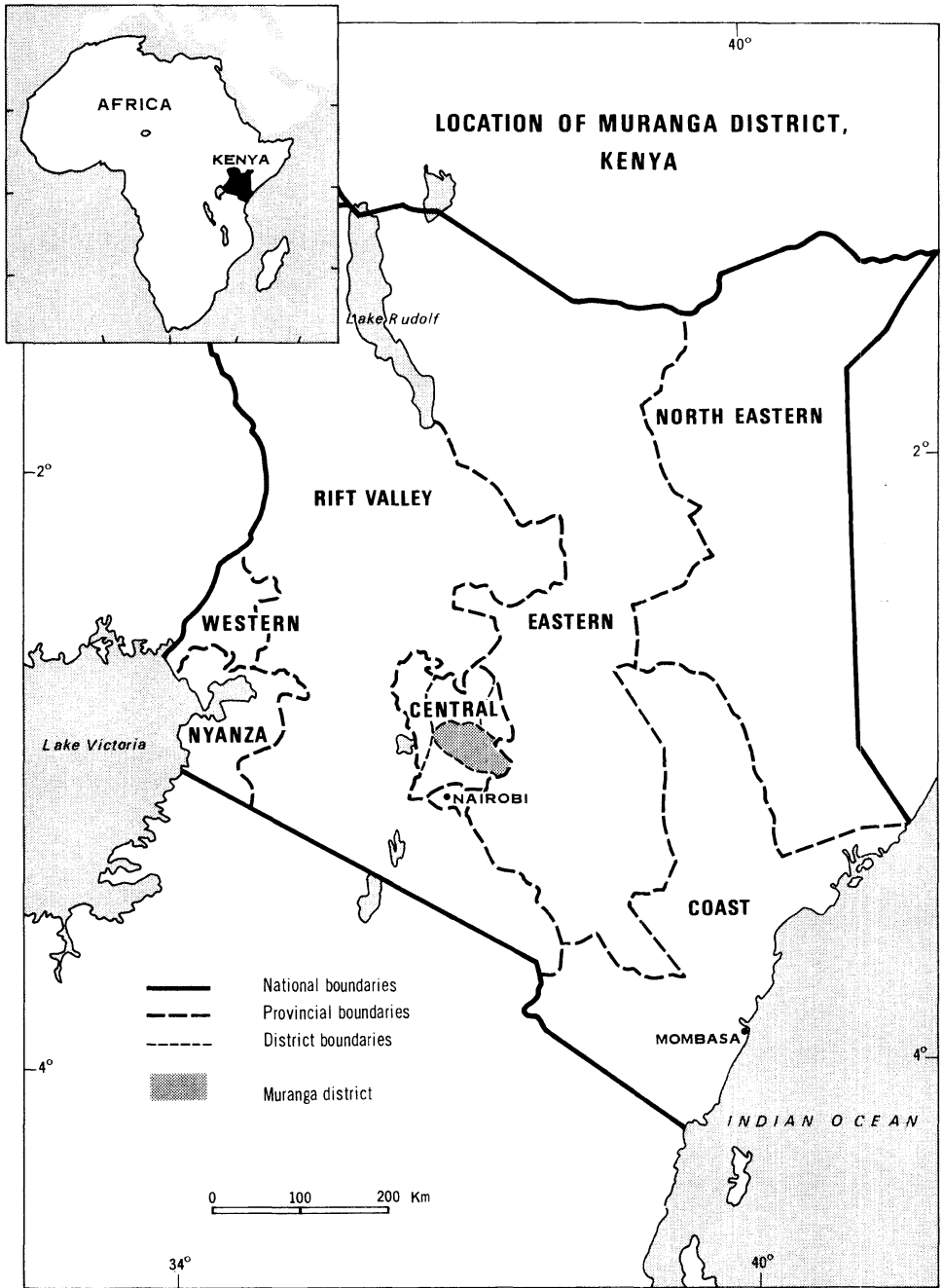
MOTS-CLÉS: Organisation villageoise, sexe, Kenya, région rurale.

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A visible and dramatic instance of the ability of women to organize collectively in Murang'a District (Kenya) is cited in the Annual Report for that district (then named Fort Hall) in 1948. Women were protesting against a decision taken by the Local Native Council in March 1948 that all women should return to soil conservation work, an activity for which they had previously supplied their labour. Two thousand women from

Figure 1



Chief Peterson's location rallied at the district headquarters on 14 April of that year. The District Commissioner (DC), the local representative of the colonial government, met with the women on 17 April to try to persuade them to return to work on the construction of terraces designed to combat the increasingly severe problem of soil erosion. His words were in vain. In May, the women announced a further withdrawal of their labour from measures aimed at promoting soil conservation: they would no longer plant grass. The DC recorded the subsequent events as follows:

"(Chief Peterson) issued orders to certain women to plant grass on their own particular land and they refused. He promptly arrested them on May 4th and they were as quickly released by a large crowd of their own sex brandishing sticks and shouting Amazonian war cries. I was in the area and served all the women with summons to appear before the Native Tribunal Fort Hall on May 7th. The cases were heard on May 8th and despite the fact that the sympathizers had been warned not to come and create a disturbance in the station, nevertheless after a fine of sh. 10/- had been imposed on each delinquent, a large crowd of angry females descended on the offices. By this time we had had enough of this monstrous regiment of women and after warning them twice to leave peacefully they were forthwith driven out of the Township by the Police using light sticks" (Kenya, 1948, p. 2).

The women explained their action in terms of impossible demands on their time: their agricultural and household responsibilities left them no time for the two mornings a week of communal labour on soil conservation. In contrast, the DC considered their "revolt" as inspired by subversive elements, "young men" from Nairobi whose aim was to disrupt "progress" (*Ibid.*, p. 3).

Any attempt to evaluate the relative autonomy women exercised on this occasion must be centred not only in the context of the increasingly volatile political climate in Kenya, but also on the particular circumstances and environment of Chief Peterson's location. It is likely that, in this area of relatively poor agricultural potential, exceptionally high rates of male outmigration — estimated at 59% of the adult male labour force for the district as a whole in 1943 (Kenya, 1943) prevailed, and that women's agricultural tasks which had always involved virtual exclusive responsibility for food crop production for use and exchange, now included tasks generally assigned to men. In common with the invisibility of women's ability to organize in their own interest in the historical and anthropological record (see, for example, Hobley, 1922; Kenyatta, 1938; Lambert, 1956; Muriuki, 1975), the colonial administrator's myopia led him to adopt a unilateral explanation.

Through an analysis of past and present modes of organization in Murang'a District, my objective in this paper is to link changes in this domain with changes in productive/reproductive relations between women and men. I will argue that although the nature and activities of such organizations have changed through time, they can be most adequately understood within an historical framework of the contradictions generated by gender productive/reproductive relations, as these have been articulated both within the individual household and as this scale interfaces with the wider economy. Of broader theoretical implication, I would suggest that this notion of inter/intra-scalar organization of relations of production and reproduction is one which may provide a powerful perspective for the analysis of processes of change in rural African environments.

The literature on gender and rural or agricultural change in Africa has grown rapidly since the mid-1970's (for a review, see Mackenzie 1986a). Frequently, this literature has focused on men and women's relative access to and control of the means of production as these have changed according to productive mode, first, under

colonialism and subsequently under post-Independence governments. Women and men have often been portrayed as the passive recipients of action originating outside their societies rather than being themselves perceived as agents active in the process of change. Thus Boserup (1970), for example, assumes the universal demise of female power and authority as new cash crops and agricultural techniques were introduced to men under colonialism. Women's continued production of subsistence crops, she argues, was no longer as highly valued by society, as these crops were not the main source of cash.

More detailed research specific to local cultural context has sought to correct this viewpoint and to restore women and men as actors shaping their environments. Hay's (1972, 1976) work among the Luo in Western Kenya, Young's (1977) research in Southern Mozambique and Mandala's (1982, 1983) discussion of peasant cotton agriculture in Malawi's Lower Tchiri Valley are evidence of this trend. Mandala's (1983) analysis of the rapidly changing relations of production and reproduction from the mid-19th century to the time of independence is a particularly sensitive account of the ecological, economic and ideological components of change as they affected gender and generation and varied with socioeconomic stratum and household type (male headed polygynous and monogamous households and those headed by single women). Further, Mandala discusses changes in gender political organization, particularly among the Manganj'a, within the context of changes in mode of production resulting both from the Kololo incursions of 1862 and the subsequent imposition of British colonial rule.

There is a dearth of research, however, which seeks to trace a link between, on the one hand, present day gender-specific organizations at the local, rural, level and past bases for gender solidarity and, on the other, between such forms of organization and changes in productive mode. Both Okonjo (1976) and Van Allen (1976), with reference to Igbo society in Nigeria, suggest important starting points for such research. Stamp (1985), discussing women's self-help groups among the Gikuyu of Kiambu (the district to the south of Murang'a) provides an historical framework within which these relationships may be studied.

Stamp's argument that such groups may be analysed in terms of the contradictions women face and the "double subsidy" women pay (to capital as they provide labour for export crop — coffee — production on their husband's holdings, for which they receive no direct wage, and to their husbands who appropriate their labour) is a useful one. It does, however, require modification in recognition of the increasing degree of rural stratification and the phenomenon of both *de facto* and *de jure* female household hands in Central Province (Kenya).

My purpose here, after identifying historical antecedents to the type of organizational ability women displayed in the colonial context cited earlier, is to focus discussion on recent changes in the activities of existant women's groups in Murang'a District. In 1983, approximately 20% of the female population aged between twenty and sixty years belonged to such groups. Further confirmation of their significance is given in the present Murang'a District Development Plan (MDDP) 1984/1988 where they are listed as a "Development institution" together with such diverse entities as the district and sub-district development committees, local authorities, the Joint Loan Board, the Murang'a Union and the Agricultural Finance Corporation. There is no comparable mode of organization for men.

LOCAL ORGANIZATION IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

Gikuyu society near the end of the 19th century was, in the view of the historian Godfrey Muriuki, "patriarchal, uncentralized and highly egalitarian" (1975, p. 110). This, he argues, was the result of the interaction of two somewhat contradictory societal forces: the one based on the *mbari*¹ (subclan), the basic kinship and territorial unit in which solidarity for men was achieved through rules of inheritance, residence and descent which followed patrilineal, exogamous (virilocal) lines; and the other based on the *mariika*² (sing, *riika*), the age set system, which provided the basis for political structure, military organization and the judicial system. The *mariika* frequently cut across boundaries defined by lineage and produced thereby a countertension to a solidarity based on kinship ties. But where the jurisdiction of the *riika* coincided spatially with the territorial unit, the *mbari*, men's basis for organization will have been particularly strongly reinforced.

Through the practice of *mbari* exogamy and virilocality, together with the rules of inheritance and descent women were placed, on marriage, in a subordinate position to men in terms of a basis for solidarity. Their relationship to their husbands' *mbari* and the land, the means of production, was a contradictory one. Whereas a woman's main productive relationship was as a producer-nonowner in her husband's *mbari* (she was responsible for food production), his role as a husband and a brother in the owning collectivity was as a nonproducer. His responsibility, both with respect to land and livestock, focused on goods of ritual and ceremonial significance, rather than day-to-day subsistence (or exchange) (Kershaw, 1976; Fisher, 1954). This contradiction between producer-nonowners and nonproducer-owners, as Sacks (1982) has explained in the context of a kin corporate mode of production, was central at that level of the household, the basic production unit. As Clark (1980) argues with reference to the organization of large scale work parties to carry out tasks such as the clearing of land, the contradiction had implications for the wider economy.

The extent to which women will have been able to manoeuvre within this structurally disadvantageous position — the extent to which they will have been able to exercise autonomy or authority — will to a considerable extent have depended on their ability to establish effective non-kin extrahousehold bonds. Expressed differently, it will have depended on their ability to organize space at the local level to effect unity in the face of social (kin) fragmentation.

On the basis of existing evidence, collected retrospectively, much of it biased and ahistorical, it is difficult to reconstruct the nature and jurisdiction of women's extrahousehold organizations. In contrast to the extensive discussion of the complexities and roles of men's organizations in the literature (for example, Hobley, 1922; Kenyatta, 1938; Lambert, 1956; Leakey, 1977; Muriuki, 1975), very little is published about women's institutions of this period. As Kertzner and Madison (1981) point out with respect to age sets, it is not easy to ascertain whether this reflects the absence of such institutions or ethnographic bias. Muriuki (1975), Kenyatta (1938) and Leakey (1977) do refer to woman's age sets and their significance in the immediate period after the *mariika* ceremony. But the extent to which such bonds will have been sustained after marriage will have been conditioned both by the distance moved on marriage and whether a woman remained within the area of her *riika*.

Writers such as Hobley (1922) and Lambert (1956) refer to women's councils, but their mandate is not clear. Lambert considers that the councils' authority was restricted to the "women's sphere" (*Ibid.*, p. 100), although Hobley intriguingly notes that: "The

men fear the women's *kiama* (council), as it is believed that the members of it have the power to bewitch people" (1922, p. 274). On the basis of more recently collected material, Stamp (1985) discusses the role of councils of women elders which were concerned with economic, social and juridical matters. The effective basis for such organization, according to Stamp, was the division of married women into two age grades³, based on the stage of life of the eldest child. The more senior group, *nyakinya*, comprised of women whose first child had been initiated, was able to command the labour of the second, younger, group, *kang'ei*. She suggests that this control "... represented a legitimate authority counterbalancing patrilineal control of women" (*Ibid.*, p. 20). From her data, it is unfortunately not clear to what extent this authority prevailed at the extra-household level.

Much more clearly stated in the literature are the forms of local organization which women (or men) could call on for, generally, agricultural labour. Most commonly this took the form of *ngwatio*, an arrangement whereby two or more people would agree to assist each other, in turn, on agricultural work. *Gutumana wira* was organized on a much larger scale for a particular task and was not immediately reciprocated (Fisher, 1954). Both forms of work organization will have allowed women to maintain some degree of extra-household solidarity, thereby countering men's organizational base.

The many references to women's organizations, however fragmentary, indicate that women were able to mobilize and organize at the extra household level, even if there remain questions as to the frequency or formality of such organizations and the parameters of their authority.

CIRCA 1900 TO 1952

For men, solidarity based on the *mbari* or *mariika* decreased from the early 1900's with the imposition of colonial rule (for example, see Kenya, 1948). But it will by no means have been eliminated. Additional bonds were created, for the male elite, through ties based on formal (mission) education and employment in the colonial administration (Kitching, 1980, p. 194). For the majority of men, links were forged on the basis of popular political organizations, such as the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) and its successor, the Kenya African Union (KAU), formed to oppose the colonial administration (Sorrenson, 1967). Within both types of organization which gained visibility in the historical record of the period, women appear to have had no visible role.

No research has been carried out to determine the degree to which women's political organization which predated this era survived and functioned after 1900. The incident cited in the introduction is one of only four instances in which women were visible to the colonial record. The other occasions concerned a strike by women tax payers in 1937 (Kenya, 1937); a protest by 1 500 women against anti-plague measures in 1941 (Kenya, 1941); and active dissent in 1951 by women against a rinderpest inoculation campaign, in this instance linked to KAU activity (Kenya, 1951). There is thus evidence that however informal or spontaneous such activities were, women were able to organize effectively on an issue — related basis on a wide scale. On a more sustained level, as indicated in the introduction, the colonial administration relied for its soil conservation programme on women's labour organizations.

Women's protests during this period, while directed in each case towards the colonial administration, provide evidence in a very real way of the intensification of the

contradictions they faced as producer — nonowners *vis-à-vis* men and nonproducer owners in the rural environment. This resulted both from the individualization of male authority over household land, linked in turn to male access to nonfarm income, and the commercialization of production, the outcome of female labour intensification.

To some extent the nature of the contradiction will have varied according to socioeconomic stratum and Kitching (1980, p. 144–146) has demonstrated how significant stratification had occurred between households in Central Province in general, and in Murang'a District in particular, by the early 1950's. This process, he argues, was dependent essentially on the "closely intertwined and interdependent criteria" of size of off-farm income and size of landholding.

Differential access of households to nonfarm income was critical in fuelling the process of individualization of the land tenure system and patterns of accumulation/marginalization. As part of this process, the contradiction between women's and men's rights to land became more apparent, neither usufruct (women's) rights nor inheritable "ownership"⁴ (men's) rights being subject any longer to *mbari* authority. The balance of power between the *mbari* and the individual had been initially upset following the imposition of colonial rule. On the one hand this was related to the restriction of *mbari* territorial expansion caused by the creation of "Reserve"⁵ boundaries. On the other, the growth of a migrant male wage labour force, a necessary response to the demands of the colonial economy for hut and poll taxes, furthered individual, rather than corporate, interests. Kitching has estimated that migration affected 41.7% of the adult males aged between fifteen and forty-five years in the district in 1928 (1980, p. 250). By 1943, 59% of the adult male labour force was registered in employment off the Reserve (Kenya, 1943).

With the spatial division of labour that this entailed, women became increasingly solely responsible for agricultural production. An intensification of agricultural production was achieved during this period both through a quantitative increase in women's labour input into agriculture (Kitching, 1980, p. 29–32) and changes in crop type from millet to maize (Fisher, 1954), the latter being of exchange value in the colonial economy.

POST "LAND REFORM"

Evidence suggests that in the general context of growing socioeconomic inequality in Murang'a District (for example, see Kenya, 1979), a further intensification of gender contradiction in productive relations has resulted from, first, institutionalization of individual rights to land under the freehold tenure system introduced under the Swynnerton Plan, 1954,⁶ during the "Emergency" of the 1950's and second, through further commercialization of production on the basis of increased female labour input. Both have been associated with structural changes in the economy as this has been characterized in the post-Independence (1963) era with further integration into capitalist relations of production both nationally and internationally (Buch-Hansen and Kieler, 1983).

In the case of "land reform", the registration of freehold title meant that individual men (very rarely was a title deed held by a woman) became the outright owners of land and land became a negotiable asset to a far greater extent than previously. The rapid increase in land sales in the post-reform period attests to the significance of this (Mackenzie, 1986b). Through the undercutting of women's usufruct rights to land

previously guaranteed by *mbari* authority, a point which Smock (1977) argues in the more general Kenyan context, women's ability to fulfil their economic and social responsibilities (which included providing the basis for subsistence) was rendered insecure.

Women's rights to land were also threatened through the introduction of export crops such as coffee and tea. Introduced in the district as part of the Swynnerton Plan to support a landowning peasant class more interested in economic gain than in further politicization of issues which led to Mau Mau (see Lamb, 1974; Leys, 1975), the crop strategy initially focused on male "better farmers" (Kenya, 1955) at a time when male outmigration from the "Reserve" was curtailed. Male control over the crops, particularly coffee, was institutionalized through processing and marketing arrangements for the crop.

Briefly, this was organized cooperatively, the landowner registering as the cooperative shareholder. Thus, membership in the twenty-six coffee societies of the Murang'a Union, totalling 61 000 in 1983 (Kenya, 1984, p. 39), is overwhelmingly male. In one coffee society, whose registers were analyzed, Njora Cooperative Society, only 10.4% of the total membership was female in 1984 (Mackenzie, 1986a). For the purpose of the argument in this paper, it is important to note that with a return to high levels of male outmigration in the post-Independence period, in some parts of the district affecting 60–70% of the total households, many women are now solely responsible for labouring on export as well as food crops. Payment, however, has at least until very recently, been made exclusively to the cooperative shareholders. Evidence from data collected by the author in Murang'a District in 1984⁷ and by Patricia Stamp (1975) in Kiambu District to the south indicate that in response to the inconsistencies of remuneration from their husbands, women have to varying degrees withdrawn their labour from coffee production. Problems associated with this, including a deterioration in coffee quality in the district have led, in the last three years, to a drive on the part of the four Savings and Credit Sections of the Murang'a Union (through which coffee payments are made), for joint accounts, so that women can access this money (Mackenzie, 1986b).

As a corollary, with changes in land use from food crops to export crops, as the latter were accorded priority in the postcolonial economy, women have produced food crops on a reduced land base. Again, the significance of this will vary according to size of land holding. But, overall, this has meant less surplus for sale in local markets, and thus reduced access for women to cash. Given that approximately 60% of smallholder's needs are now met through cash expenditures (Kongstad and Monsted, cited in Barnes, 1983), that the majority of Murang'a women lack access to reliable sources of nonform income, and that women are generally solely responsible for the provision of food, if not more general household expenses, this has major implications for the question of insecurity women face in the rural situation.

It is against this background that recent changes in women's local organizations must be viewed. The remainder of the paper will consider the nature of these changes, specifically from objectives which focused on "welfare" projects to those of income generation, in the context of the argument that the changes are directly related to the intensification of gender — and socioeconomic — contradictions outlined so far. The analysis draws on data from an unpublished Women's Bureau/Central Bureau of Statistics, Survey of 1977 (Kenya, 1977), unpublished Women's Bureau data for 1978 and material collected from the Department of Community Services and woman's groups in Murang'a in 1984.

Of the 505 groups identified in 1978 (with a membership of 22 093 women), the majority indicated that their formation in the late 1960's was encouraged by suggestions emanating from Community Development Officers or Chiefs that, in congruence with the state ideology of *Harambee* (literally, pull together), they organize collectively to address needs expressed in terms of their heavy work load. This, it was considered, had increased in the post-Independence period both through male outmigration and through the withdrawal of child labour as growing numbers of children attended primary school.

The early groups were, in the main, *mabati* groups, so called because of their purchase of metal roofing, *mabati*, for members. Ninety percent of the groups surveyed in 1978 were of this type. Such groups acted as local revolving loan and savings associations, financed through the monthly contributions of members, amounts which varied between Kshs.2 and 25 per person (\$ 0.20 to \$ 2.50 Canadian). Once the required sum had accumulated, it was allocated to a member for a purpose determined either by the group, or the individual. Membership in such groups averaged 45, but a range from 7 to 352 members is evident from 1978 data.

Revolving loan groups predominated until the late 1970's. In 1978, 456 of the 505 groups focused on non-income generating activities. Table 1 indicates the distribution of activities, *mabati* groups being the most common, followed by those whose main objective was the purchase of water tanks. Frequently, groups had more than one activity, and 89.6% of the groups indicated that they also provided a social service. The latter included providing labour for community self-help (*Harambee*) activities, such as the construction of cattle dips, nursery schools and dispensaries, paying school fees for destitute children and meeting members' expenses for funerals and weddings.

Just under 10% of the 505 groups surveyed in 1978 were classified as "economical". Although a variety of activities were undertaken, as indicated in table 1, handicrafts predominated. These were, however, of limited potential value because of severe marketing problems.

By 1984, the number of women's groups had increased to 582 with a membership of 31 977. Data compiled for 1984 (table 1) illustrate the great increase in percentage of activities involving in income generation (44.6% of the total). The change in direction of the groups is characteristic both of new groups formed in the 1980's and of older groups which have adopted this new objective. Activities range from those connected with agriculture (livestock rearing, poultry keeping, crop production for sale) to buying a plot with a view to constructing a shop, running a hotel or store, operating a *posho* (maize) mill and the purchase of landshares or land. Handicraft activities, while still relatively common, have decreased in relative importance.

Group agricultural activities represent resistance to male control over woman's earnings within the household in that they facilitate members' control over the proceeds of their labour (and members do not reveal amounts earned outside the group). But an activity such as the running of a store, a *posho* mill or land purchase indicates more radical consciousness of their subordinate position in the economy. The two *posho* mills in Kandara Division, run by the Kiawa Mbutu Women's Group and the Muruka Women's Group, provide a service to women in their communities, but they also represent a move to regain access to and control over technology concerned with food processing which, with a change from hand to machine processing, they lost in previous decades. Both mills are very successful in terms of generating income.

Table 1
Murang'a District: Women's Group activities, 1978, 1984

	% of groups listing an activity ¹	
	1978	1984
Non-income generating		
mabati	80.2	14.8
home improvement	5.0	11.2
water tanks	26.1	3.3
water pipes	0.8	0
purchase of ploughs/tools	0	0.3
cultivating land	0.4	0
poultry/pig keeping	1.4	0
purchase of cows	4.0	0
contributions	7.1	20.8
Income-generating		
agricultural: livestock rearing	1.8	13.2
bees	0	2.1
tree nursery	0	0.2
poultry	0.4	2.7
crop production	0	5.3
land purchase	0	0.3
land shares purchase	0	0.2
nonagricultural: handicraft ²	6.5	12.0
selling firewood/charcoal	0	3.8
selling paraffin	0	0.5
trading	0	0.7
buying plot	0	1.5
building shop	1.0	1.4
house rental	0	0.5
posho (maize) mill	0	0.3
block making	0	0.3
running hotel	0	0.2
store	0	0.5
buying house	0	2.6
banking money to start business	0	0.2

Source: Women's Bureau, unpublished data 1978; Community Development Officer, Murang'a District, December 1984.

¹ As groups frequently list more than one activity, the columns do not total 100%.

² Includes: sewing, knitting, basket making, pottery and silkscreen.

The purchase of land by Utheri wa Methi Women's group in Makuyu is similarly important in terms of control over the means of production. This particular group began in 1981 with 80 members. By 1984, contributions sufficient to purchase 0.2 ha. per member had been collected. The land was registered in the group's name, although it is individually cultivated, in order to "protect the women's interests" (Community Development Officer, Kandara Division, December 1984).

Data were not available by the end of 1984 to assess the relative success of women's groups' income-generating activities. Handicraft production, pig rearing and

poultry projects have certainly run into problems, the first two connected with marketing, the last because of problems with purchased foodstuffs during the recent drought. But some recent initiatives in group activities are proving to be highly successful. Beekeeping, house rental, the sale of firewood and charcoal, and the making and sale of building blocks fall into this category. With the exception of beekeeping, these activities have arisen in direct response to local need: there is a lack of rental accommodation in Murang'a and as the local supply of woodfuel decreases in the coffee-growing belt, firewood and charcoal sold by groups from the higher altitudinal belt are in great demand. Nyakinywa ya Muruka Women's Group, one of the two building block enterprises in Kandara Division, is particularly successful. The blocks, made of ballast and cement, are in great demand locally, being considerably cheaper than stone, the alternative permanent construction material. The group with fifty members owns its own block-making machine at Kirere trading centre and employs five casual labourers and a watchman.

In the past, and particularly in association with the evaluation carried out of the Women's Programme of the Special Rural Development Programme of the early 1970's (Pala *et al*, 1975), questions have arisen regarding the degree of self-reliance of the groups and the social class of their members. Data from Murang'a for 1977 indicated that, in order of decreasing importance: monthly contributions, the sale of labour and membership fees were the main source of funds for the 283 groups which answered this question (Kenya, 1977). No central government funding was available; three groups received some funds from local government sources. Another two groups obtained some money from voluntary organizations. In 1982, 3.8% (22) of the groups received in total Kshs. 173 000/- (\$ 17 300 Canadian) from the central government, channelled through the Women's Bureau. At least in Murang'a, therefore, there is no support for Feldman's (1984, p. 84) conclusions regarding the "lack of power" of these groups and their dependence on the government. It is suggested that her results are inordinately biased by the small size of her sample (fifteen groups drawn from several districts) and her criteria for selection of the groups.

With respect to the social class of members, in contrast to the earlier findings of Pala *et al* (1975), (which were not based on data from Murang'a) that membership was virtually confined to the middle peasantry, more recent data specific to the district suggest a relatively wide range in membership. Unfortunately, Thomas' (1982) analysis of groups from Mbiri and Weithaga locations in Murang'a excludes consideration of the "landless", a group which is likely to include the poorest of the population (15% of the population of Mbiri, 39% in Weithaga). Thus, her calculation that 62% of group membership in "resource-poor" Mbiri comes from the "lowest" income group, i.e.: those involved in subsistence production, must be qualified. But, additional evidence based on literacy rates for two locations indicates that membership does draw strongly from the lower socioeconomic strata, 20% the members in Mbiri being literate, compared to a locational figure of 50% for female literacy. Comparable figures for Weithaga are 40% for literacy among members, 77% for females in the location as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The objective in this paper has been to link changes in productive/reproductive relations between women and men, in the context of the wider economy, to changes in mode of local organization. Further, in terms of the development of theory which seeks

to be not only culturally and historically contextual (see Hyden, 1983; Leys, 1975), but which also recognizes men and women as active agents of processes of rural change, I have suggested that focusing on the organization of production (and reproduction) as this is articulated at several scales is useful analytically. This perspective has been applied in the paper to a discussion of gender-specific forms of organization in Murang'a District, Kenya.

Specifically, it has been argued that women's ability to organize local, non-kin networks at the extra-household level has, through time, served to counter male solidarity. Women have been able to form effective social bonds on the basis of spatial contiguity, a pattern that has been replicated through time albeit altering as necessitated by productive mode.

At times, such organization has been of an *ad hoc* nature, as indicated by the "revolt" of women cited in the introduction. Most recently, less dramatic but equally significant action of an *ad hoc* nature on the part of women has occurred first, as labour has been withdrawn from a husband's coffee trees as a result of inadequate levels of remuneration for their labour and second, as complaints have been made to chiefs or subchiefs where land has been sold without a wife's knowledge. In both cases, policy changes have been made, in the case of the former with respect to the coffee society savings accounts already mentioned, and in the second, through a directive issued to Land Boards in 1982. Since that time, the spouse of a landowner wishing to sell land must appear before the board to indicate her/his knowledge and agreement with the sale (Chief, Muthithi Location, November 1984).

But, women's ability to organize has also been evident through more durable forms of organization, whether these concerned councils of female elders as discussed by Stamp (1985) and others, or groups formed since the late 1960's. Recent changes in the latter, from an orientation of mutual assistance through the rotation of savings among members to one of income generation for many groups, indicate recognition by women of, on the one hand, contradictions associated with socioeconomic change and, on the other, of the support provided by a group to confront these contradictions.

NOTES

¹ *Glossary of Gikuyu terms:*

gutumana wira — relatively large scale mode of organization, formed for a particular task such as house construction.

kang'ei — classification of junior married women whose first child had not yet reached the age of initiation.

kiama — council of elders.

mabati — metal roof.

mariika (sing. riika) — age set system.

mbari — subclan.

ngwatio — small-scale form of organization, generally 2-5 people, who arranged on a reciprocal basis to assist each other, e.g. in agricultural tasks.

nyakinya — classification of senior married women whose first child had undergone the rite of initiation.

N.B.: *Posho* is a swahili word meaning "maize".

² Muriuki (1975, p. 117-119) notes that the word *riika*, the age set, refers to four different groupings in Gikuyu society. Here, it is used to refer to an initiation set comprised of all men and women who undergo this rite in a certain year.

³ Kertzner and Madison (1981, p. 110) define the age grade system as one based on the strata (childhood to old age) through which each person normally progresses during the course of a lifetime, each of which levels has specific responsibilities and expectations.

⁴ Under the *Ng'undu* system of land tenure which preexisted individualization of tenure, *mbari* rights and individual rights to land were held in dynamic balance. While cultivation rights to land of the *mbari* were inherited by individual sons on marriage, individual power over the land was less than absolute, and final authority was vested in the nominal clan head together with the *mbari* council of elders. Through them, rights of other household members to the land were guaranteed and contractual arrangements such as tenancies were legitimized. The irredeemable sale of land was unknown in this area prior to the period of colonial rule (See Kenya, 1929; Sorrenson, 1967).

⁵ With the "alienation" of several million hectares of land from 1897 onwards and their designation as "Scheduled" areas for European agriculture, Africans were restricted to "Non-Scheduled" areas or "Reserves". By 1963, over 8 million ha., comprising 75% of Kenya's high potential land, was in European hands as large scale farms (for example, see Okoth-Ogendo, 1981).

⁶ The Swynnerton plan — *A Plan to Intensify the Development of African Agriculture in Kenya* — set out policy which aimed to intensify African agriculture on the basis of land tenure reform and production for the urban and export market. It was introduced as a political measure to counter the force of Mau Mau (see, for example, Lamb, 1974; Leys, 1975; Sorrenson, 1967).

⁷ A recent random sample of 300 households carried out in two sublocations in Murang'a by Hoorweg, Niemeijer and van Steenbergen (1983) indicated that in households where men had regular employment in government or industry (35% of their sample), or where men were self-employed off the farm (a further 17%), men would contribute money for school fees and clothes for children. They might also contribute more generally to household expenses. But even in these households, woman were generally solely responsible for the provision of food, whether grown themselves or purchased. On half the sampled farms, women alone bore the burden of the provision of all necessities.

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