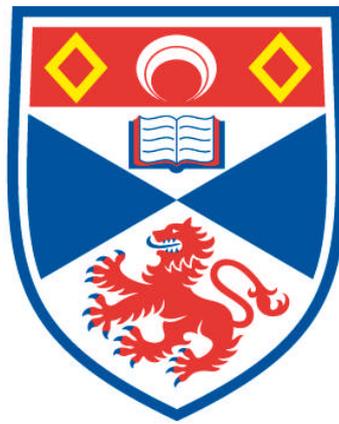


**THE SOCIAL LIFE OF MIRAA : FARMING, TRADE, AND  
CONSUMPTION OF A PLANT STIMULANT IN KENYA**

**Neil Carrier**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews**



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This thesis traces the paths and trajectories that one substance – the plant stimulant *Catha edulis* (Forssk.), known in Kenya as ‘miraa’ – takes in the course of its ‘social life’ from production, through exchange, to its points of consumption. The thesis attempts to draw out the richness in this social life through an in-depth ethnographic examination of these trajectories, emphasising in particular their socially-embedded nature. By following an approach influenced by the volume *The social life of things* (Appadurai [ed.] 1986) the thesis is able to tease out much of the significance the substance has for those people who animate its social life. The trajectories covered vary greatly in range, from those involving local consumption in the area in which it is grown – the Nyambene Hills district of Kenya – to those that take it thousands of miles away to Europe and North America. The vast range of the substance allows for the generation of many different meanings and associations, and many of these are brought out over the course of the thesis. The trade of the substance (trade that relies much on trust) and its consumption are seen as in many ways socially cohesive, while in other respects socially divisive: while substances like miraa can build bridges, they can also build fences. Of especial importance to the thesis is the character of Nicholas, whose relationship with miraa demonstrates how individuals can take on board shared meanings concerning a substance, whilst creating many new meanings of their own through processes of convergence and divergence. The study addresses both the significance of miraa and its social life for wider debates in anthropology and its significance within the lives of farmers, traders, and consumers, and anyone engaged in debating its merits.

(i) I, Neil Carrier, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 115,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

Date: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2003 Signature of candidate:



(ii) I was admitted as a research student in September 1998 and as a candidate for the degree of PhD. in September 1999; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 1999 and 2003.

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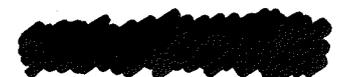
(iii) I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of PhD. in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

Date: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2003 Signature of supervisor:



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## **The social life of miraa in Kenya: Introduction**

*The one thing in this world that's right up my street is chewing veve.*

- Nicholas, December 2000

### ***Introducing miraa, veve, gomba, mbachu, khat, mairumgi...***

This thesis traces some of the many trajectories that one particular substance follows in its social life within Kenya and beyond. The substance in question is called various names, but is most famously known by its Arabic name: *qat* or *khat*. It is known in Amharic as *chat* (sometimes spelt *tschat*), and comes from a tree (or bush) with the botanical name *Catha edulis* (Forsskal). In Kenya many terms are applied to it, and the following should serve as examples: *veve*, *gomba*, *shamba*, *green gold*, *Igembe grass*, *mairumgi*, *mbachu*, *topong the power*, and, of course, *miraa*.<sup>1</sup>

### **Botanical and pharmacological properties**

Whatever one calls it, miraa consists of the young tender shoots and leaves of *Catha edulis*, which are popularly chewed for their stimulant properties in East Africa, and in the Middle East. *Catha edulis* grows in highland regions throughout much of Africa, and also in the Yemen. It favours an altitude band between 5000-8000 feet (ca.1500-2450 metres). Wild miraa can grow as high as 80 feet, although the farmed variety is kept at around 20 feet with constant pruning (see Distefano 1983: 249, and Bernard 1972: 55). Kennedy, the author of a comprehensive work on Yemeni qat, describes *Catha edulis* as follows: '[It] is an evergreen tree with a straight and slender bole and white bark. The serrated leaves, ovate-lanceolate to elliptical in shape, are generally between 50-100 mm. long and 30-50 mm. wide. The plant has small petaled white

flowers of yellowish or greenish tone. In Yemen the trees range from 2 to 10 meters in height, and some of them are claimed to be 100 years old' (1987: 177). The actual harvested commodity varies from region to region in what is considered edible, and how it is presented. Thus, in the Yemen often just the leaves are chewed, whereas in Kenya the small leaves and bark of stems are used. The stems are a mixture of green and purple hues depending on the variety; small leaves are normally quite dark, becoming greener as they mature. They can taste bitter, although the better the miraa, the sweeter the taste.<sup>2</sup> Miraa exudes a smell – compared to green peppers by one friend – although people vary in how strong they find it.<sup>3</sup> Differences in provenance of the substance are likely to cause differences in botanical and pharmacological properties, although 'it is still reasonable to assume an identity of essential chemical properties' (ibid. 178) between Yemeni, Ethiopian, and Kenyan *Catha edulis*.

Its stimulant effects are due to its constituent alkaloids. The principal alkaloid is called *cathinone*, now known to be much more powerful than *cathine* (d-norpseudoephedrine) which was once thought the main active ingredient (see Kennedy 1987: 181).<sup>4</sup> Cathinone affects the central nervous system similarly to amphetamine, 'that is, it increases heart rate, locomotor activity and oxygen consumption' (Weir 1985: 46). The comparison to amphetamine instantly makes miraa sound powerful, but just as chewing coca leaves is different from taking pure cocaine, so chewing miraa has a much more gentle effect than would taking isolated cathinone. In general, it can be said that chewing miraa renders one alert and acts as a euphoriant. The early pioneer of drug studies, Baron Ernst von Bibra, describes the effect of miraa well:

Khat seems to have a pleasantly excitant effect on the organism. People who take khat become cheerful, talkative, and wide awake. Some people also fall into pleasant dreams. The violent excitement caused by opium and sometimes by hashish does not seem to occur with khat. Khat more closely resembles coffee than those more violent excitants, although it is stronger than coffee. (von Bibra 1995 [1855]: 73)

Personally I find chewing miraa absorbs me into whatever activity I am doing when chewing and makes that activity feel right. Thus, chewing while writing up fieldnotes would absorb me into them. Similarly, chewing when sitting and chatting with friends would make it difficult for me to leave and do something else. Miraa enhances ability to persevere, even with dull chores: miraa chewing would often make me fastidious, even in cleaning my room. One can also become absorbed in introspection or watching TV. Miraa can absorb the chewer in both activity and inactivity.<sup>5</sup>

One crucial fact about miraa is its perishability. ‘Its potency degenerates quickly once the twigs and leaves are cut, and most users prefer qat that has been harvested within the previous forty-eight hours’ (Cassanelli 1986: 245). Cathinone rapidly degenerates post-harvest, and once miraa dries up the commodity becomes worthless, although some tough varieties last longer. The potency of the fresh stems and leaves is not the only reason people prefer them: miraa takes on a distinctly unappetising texture and appearance as it loses freshness.<sup>6</sup>

Miraa’s alkaloids are not the only ingredients of note, however. It contains a high proportion of tannins – which Cassanelli suggests may reduce symptoms of dysentery amongst chewers (Cassanelli 1986: 241) – and a ‘significant percentage of Vitamin C’ (Kennedy 1987: 185). Miraa consumption by those with limited access to fresh fruit and vegetables may thus be beneficial.

### **The issue of health and addiction**

I do not intend to give a definitive statement on the effects of miraa on health and the question of addiction. Whilst I take a mostly positive view of it, I am aware of the real problems that can result from chewing miraa, although many ill effects are indirect. Most emerge from immoderate

use, however, and immoderate use of anything can be harmful. However, even daily use of miraa need not be too pernicious if one takes precautions like eating before chewing, and most chewers are aware of such precautions even if not all follow them. As to its addictiveness, I would say that there are people who become dependent upon miraa, although in the relatively innocuous way that one might become dependent on caffeine.<sup>7</sup>

Kennedy (1987: Chapter IX) surveys the literature on miraa / qat and health. He mentions the research of Halbach, 'the most noted and cited medical authority on qat' (1987: 214). Halbach, he says, 'asserts unequivocally that certain ailments are "common" among qat chewers: gastric problems such as stomatitis, esophagitis, gastritis, constipation, malnutrition, and cirrhosis of the liver. He claims that anorexia, sexual problems and anemia also definitely result from chewing the drug' (loc. cit.). Other researchers add more conditions to this list, including schizophrenia (loc. cit.), and some assert qat is carcinogenic (ibid. 223). Miraa as a cause of insomnia is frequently mentioned by those opposed to it. Kennedy's research team conducted extensive surveys in the Yemen on qat and health, and the data collected led him to the conclusion that 'the argument that qat is responsible for the health problems of Yemen is exaggerated, but it also shows that they are not without foundation' (ibid. 231). This seems sound, and a similar conclusion could be drawn regarding Kenya. Kennedy also mentions potential health benefits of chewing: chewing qat might protect teeth (ibid. 223) – although the common practice of sweetening miraa in Kenya can lead to dental decay – and even protect against diabetes (ibid. 225). Kennedy also states that Yemenis themselves 'are nearly unanimous in the opinion that qat is *not* an important threat to their health' (ibid. 213). Some researchers from abroad have seemed rather too keen to prove them wrong.

### **Kenyan miraa: a brief history**

Both Weir (1985) and Kennedy (1987) offer good historical surveys of qat use in the Yemen, where it has an immensely long history, and has developed into a major social institution. Its history in Ethiopia (especially around Harar) and Somalia is also long, and is impossible to do justice to in the present work (for miraa's history in Ethiopia, see Gebissa 1997). A brief historical overview of miraa production, trading, and consumption in Kenya can be attempted, however.

Written records on its cultivation and use in Kenya start only with the writings of explorers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Chanler 1893 and Neumann 1982 [1898]) who visited the Nyambene Hills. This mountain range (see chapter one) lies northeast of Mount Kenya; it is the main Kenyan production region of miraa, and a principal source of miraa that reaches Europe and beyond. It is therefore a crucial locale for this thesis. It is home to Tigania and Igembe, two sub-groups of the Meru people; they are the main producers and traders of miraa in Kenya. More detail on these Bantu-speaking people – recently the subject of an authoritative work on age-set systems by the French anthropologist Anne-Marie Peatrik (1999) – is introduced in chapter one.

By the time Neumann reached the Nyambenes, the Igembe were already consuming and cultivating the substance. Some is also likely to have been traded with pastoralists to the north, probably for some time prior to colonial times. Early expansion of the trade beyond local markets saw Igembe traders take it short distances on foot, and between 1915 and 1930 miraa became a major commodity for them, as 'social, political, and environmental changes' were wrought by the 'inception and consolidation of colonial rule' (Goldsmith 1994: 101). The rise of Isiolo town<sup>8</sup> from about 1929 onwards spurred on the trade further, as its population consisted of many avid

miraa consumers, including Somali. Isiolo is still a principal destination for Nyambene miraa. Soon Isiolo 'became the major re-export market for miraa sold in northern Kenya and beyond' (ibid. 102). The expansion in the trade prompted more farmers to grow it.

The British administration viewed its growing consumption negatively, and drew up an ordinance making illegal the sale and use of miraa without a permit in the then Northern Frontier District, hoping this would curb the trade to northern Kenya. Much smuggling of the substance to regions north of the Nyambenes continued, however, and the ordinance was eventually abandoned. Trade to Nairobi began in the 1940s, pioneered, according to Goldsmith (ibid. 103), by an Arab trader. Muslims in the city began consuming miraa avidly. Urban consumption grew, and local traders gradually got in on the act. Improvements in infrastructure and transportation meant miraa could be transported further before perishing. By the late 1950s, miraa was being sold by Meru traders in Mombasa and beyond, the Meru gaining dominance over much of the national trade (ibid. 104).

Consumption increased greatly in the 1970s, which is put down to the discovery that bubblegum chewed with miraa neutralises its bitterness (Goldsmith 1994: 104). Soon miraa was reaching everywhere in Kenya. The international trade also grew rapidly; air transport, as well as trucks, feeding demand in Somalia. This international trade became dominated by Somali traders. The Somali market became so important for Meru farmers, that they were hit hard by a ban imposed by the Somali government in 1983 (see Cassanelli 1986: 250ff.).

Although the substance had been viewed negatively by the British, and left alone for the most part by post-Independence administrations, it did receive in the 1970s 'official recognition as an earner of foreign exchange' (Goldsmith 1994: 105). 'The Igembe date 1981 as the year when miraa finally received symbolic government recognition for its important role in the local

economy: the Forestry Department began stocking miraa seedlings' (loc. cit.). The negative stance towards the substance of many other countries – including the US where it is illegal – has precluded the government from listing miraa as an official cash-crop.<sup>9</sup> This still irks some Meru farmers who would benefit from subsidies were it declared one. The crop is still highly controversial in Kenya today, and many view it with disdain as a 'drug' (see chapter seven).

A further spur to planting miraa came with the collapse of Somalia in the early 1990s and the growth of a Somali diaspora. This led to a voracious demand for the crop as far away as Canada, and soon the network stretched to feed this demand, offering vast rewards for those able to export it. By declaring miraa illegal, the US and Canada and other countries have raised the stakes in this trade, increasing potential rewards further still. Trade to the UK remains legal and strong. Conflict has flared up between Meru and Somali over this trade, however, with accusations that Somali exporters exploit Meru farmers. This conflict has cast a pall over the miraa trade; I deal with it in chapter five of the present work.

Thus, over the course of a century, trade in Nyambene miraa, from local beginnings, came to stretch as far afield as Canada. It is the working of parts of this network, the ramifications of its farming, trade, and consumption, and the meanings attached to the substance along the networks that are the subject of the present work. Before looking at a work that helps tie my thesis together – *The social life of things* (Appadurai [ed.] 1986) – I provide a description of previous research on miraa / qat relevant to this thesis in a brief literature review.

### Literature concerning *Catha edulis*

#### **The wider world of miraa / qat:**

In the west, the consumption of miraa / qat is probably most associated with the Yemen, and, indeed, its consumption is avid in the north of the country. My knowledge of Yemeni use comes primarily from reading: in particular, the work of Weir (1985) and Kennedy (1987). Weir's book is concerned to bring out the ritual and symbolic significance of qat for Yemenis, and deals more briefly with farming and trade. She nicely evokes the atmosphere of Yemeni chewing sessions, and suggests a link between the rise in the number of chewing sessions and a period of financial prosperity in the 1970s. While Kennedy is critical of the idea of a rise in consumption (see Kennedy 1987: chapter III), his work complements Weir's. He led a research team that had the resources necessary to conduct surveys of the implications of qat use for Yemenis.

In the case of Ethiopia, an article by Getahun and Krikorian (1973) is still widely drawn upon. There has been recent work on Ethiopian cultivation and consumption, not least the historical work of Gebissa who shows how khat cultivation allows smallholder farmers to expand into non-farm economies, the best course of action where land is scarce (1997: 276ff.). As Somali appetite for the substance is large, it could not help but be the subject of attention, and the Second International Congress of Somali Studies in 1983 at the University of Hamburg looked at Somali use of qat, although the wider situation in East Africa and Arabia was also considered (see Labahn [ed.] 1984). Cassanelli's chapter on qat in *The social life of things* (Appadurai 1986: 236-257) contains much useful material, as well as pre-empting my own work by following the 'social life' of qat, although from a more macroscopic perspective than the one I take. Also of note is the recent travelogue by Rushby (1999) detailing his qat-enhanced journey from Ethiopia to the Yemen. Although not an academic work, Rushby is good on the various types of qat he came across.

Reports for the United Nations are also useful for the broader picture, especially the recent United Nations Drugs Control Programme report on the African drugs network (1999). Of course there are many more articles published on miraa / qat use in general, some of which will be mentioned over the course of my thesis.

### **Kenyan miraa:**

Miraa turns up in many writings on Kenya, usually only fleetingly.<sup>10</sup> Early travellers to the country like Chanler (1896) and Neumann (1982 [1898]) provide early written sources on the use of miraa in the Nyambenes. Material lodged at the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi provides much of interest regarding miraa trade and use in colonial times. Interest in the substance during British rule was aroused sufficiently for the *East African Medical Journal* to publish an editorial calling for control of miraa (1945), as well as an article linking miraa use with insanity (Carothers 1945). Further medical interest was shown by Margetts in an article entitled *Miraa and Myrrh in East Africa* (1967).

More useful to the present work is Bernard's *East of Mount Kenya: Meru Agriculture in Transition* (1972). This work provides a comprehensive account of agricultural conditions and agricultural change in Meru district before, during and after the colonial period. Such a work obviously benefits me by providing historical and ecological background for my own work. Miraa is itself given attention in the work, attention that strikes me as sound as far as it goes.

The Swedish anthropologist Anders Hjort has written on miraa in an article on the trade to Isiolo (1974), and in his monograph on Isiolo town (1979). Hjort's work provides an account of the miraa trade in the 1970s, allowing me to see how things have changed since his time there. Hjort's work is good on the opportunities the miraa trade affords Meru men, as well as on

interconnections between Meru and members of other ethnic groups in Isiolo. He also provides useful case-studies. Hjort's work on the substance obviously differs from mine, however. His main unit of study was Isiolo and the economic interrelations that existed at the time of his fieldwork (many of which continue to exist). My main unit of study is the substance itself and its travels through a much wider geographical region.

More recently, Paul Goldsmith, an anthropologist and agronomist, conducted research on Nyambene agriculture, concentrating particularly on the Igembe region. He focused specifically on miraa in a 1988 article entitled *The Production and Marketing of Miraa in Kenya*. Further research resulted in a doctoral thesis entitled *Symbiosis and Transformation in Kenya's Meru District* (1994). A short article in 1999 in *East Africa Alternatives* presents a potted history of the miraa trade, including details on the recent strife between Meru and Somali over the commodity. His work has helped me greatly, filling in many lacunae in my own fieldwork material.

Goldsmith is good on the significance of the fact that production and marketing of miraa is a purely indigenously developed institution, in contrast to that of tea and coffee, crops introduced by Europeans. By embracing a 'traditional' crop and 'traditional' farming methods, Tigania and Igembe have in many ways had more success in recent times than other Kenyan smallholders who have embraced imported crops and 'modern' farming practices, giving the lie to ideas that development success depends on giving up 'traditional' practices. Goldsmith usefully brings in the work of Polly Hill<sup>11</sup>: 'Miraa production and marketing in Kenya provides an example of indigenous economic initiative based within internal social organization similar to the dynamics revealed in Polly Hill's study of Ghana's cocoa farmers' (1994: 94). The indigenously developed history of the trade leads him to state that '[w]hat makes the growth of the miraa phenomenon so interesting is how radically it differs from other examples of the development of commercial agriculture in Kenya' (Goldsmith 1994: 94). This is one of his main themes relating to miraa.

Goldsmith makes much play out of the claim that '[t]he lives of Igembe Meru are still intertwined with important cultural institutions that have long since lapsed in other parts of Meru and Kenya...' (ibid. 2). While Goldsmith rather overstates the case (see chapter one), this is a theme important for my own work too. I hope my work will complement Goldsmith's, especially in distinguishing between different cultivation zones in the Nyambenes: he focuses wholly on intensive cultivation by Igembe, whilst I broaden this to cover less intensive production zones too. By the nature of his research, Goldsmith concentrates on the production side of miraa's social life, whereas I hope to flesh out trade and consumption too. This is another consequence of my focus on the substance itself and its 'social life'.<sup>12</sup>

### **The 'social life' of miraa**

Much of my thesis is descriptive in content and intent. It aims to provide the reader with a detailed account of the many paths miraa takes in the course of its life, along with the ramifications for those who come into contact with it, and the meanings it has for people throughout Kenya and beyond.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it aims to show the abundance that exists within the world of miraa: abundance evident in the many paths it takes, the number of varieties in which it is sold, the different contexts in which it is consumed, and the many different meanings and associations it has for people. A description of the rich world of miraa should make for a rich thesis in itself, even without theoretical input. However, the theory and analysis soaked nature of the descriptive procedure – merely by deciding what is relevant and merits inclusion, one implicitly indulges in analysis – means pure neutral description is impossible. Theory and analysis do not just come implicitly in the description, and I try to spice up, but not overwhelm, the descriptive passages with explicit analysis too. Although such analysis is scattered throughout the thesis, chapters five and seven are more heavily weighted in that direction.

In concerning myself with one particular substance and the way it is imbued with significance as it circulates along its pathways, my work links into the wider literature concerning the circulation of commodities. In calling the thesis *The Social Life of Miraa*, I link the thesis into one of the more famous of such works: the 1986 collection edited by Appadurai: *The social life of things*. The following ideas from this volume are useful for my thesis:

1. **Social lives for things.** Examining the circulation of miraa as if it had a ‘social life’ – even though ‘things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with’ (Appadurai 1986: 5) – and following it through various trajectories, one sees how ‘miraa-in-motion’ is inscribed with meaning and used so differently through the course of these trajectories.
  
2. **Paths and diversions.** Appadurai writes thus: ‘By drawing on certain ethnographic examples, I hope to show...that the flow of commodities in any given situation is a shifting compromise between socially regulated paths and competitively inspired diversions’ (1986: 16-17). These terms, derived from Munn’s paper on the pathways taken by kula valuables (1983), are easily applicable to my material on the miraa trade: potential markets have prompted entrepreneurs to create new paths for miraa, diverting it from more traditional trajectories. While many of these diversions have had much positive effect, we will see that conflict has arisen too, especially in the case of recent international trajectories. The creation of paths into regions previously free from the substance has led to tension between the authorities and consumers / traders: in the case of Canada, the US and Sweden, miraa has been made illegal. Traders want to protect these paths, however, and much smuggling continues: once a path is formed, vested interests mean some try to keep it open. Whilst miraa has been able to follow many new paths, as we shall see, it does come across obstructions to its path. Although many barriers and boundaries have been crossed, many more emerge in their place and are yet to be traversed. The final chapter

in the thesis will deal with some of these boundaries and barriers.<sup>14</sup> Speaking of boundaries and barriers stretches the metaphor of paths / diversions nicely. Thus, the metaphor of paths and diversions drawn originally from the pathways kula valuables follow in the Western Pacific can yield an admirable structuring and heuristic device for understanding the way in which something very different circulates thousands of miles away in East Africa.

3. **Knowledge and commodities.** Appadurai's discussion of 'the peculiarities of knowledge that accompany relatively complex, long-distance, intercultural flows of the commodities' (1986: 41 ff.) is relevant for miraa's social life, and the effects of differentially distributed knowledge through the trade networks is discussed in my thesis. For example, we see how retailers exploit delays in knowledge of lowered prices in the Nyambenes reaching Isiolo customers by continuing to sell miraa at a high rate until the information gets through to customers (see chapter four). We also see how customers show off their credentials as miraa experts to secure good miraa at a good price. One supposes that more scope exists for manipulating the miraa trade over the course of long-range trajectories where knowledge is distributed most unevenly: a middleman can profit more where his or her suppliers and buyers are separated. In Kenya, the vast network of Meru traders within the country probably keeps information flowing relatively freely from producer to consumer. The international trade sees so great a separation of producer and consumer that middlemen conceivably have much scope for profit, given their knowledge of production *and* consumption.<sup>15</sup>

4. **Cultural biographies of things.** Kopytoff's chapter, *The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process*, provides a neat perspective for observing commodities throughout their 'lives', adopting a 'biographical' approach (1986: 66-68). In considering a typical biography of miraa, one can distinguish between a biography of a tree, and one of the harvested stems. A nice contrast is formed between the timeless nature of the valuable old trees – looking

down on generations of Meru – and the short-lived life of the stems. For the latter, speed becomes crucial as they are hastened from branch to consumer's cheek before losing potency. In the one instance, maturity is desired in an ideal biography; in the other, maturity leads to worthlessness.

However, to my mind, the most important help to my thesis that *The social life of things* offers is in providing a structure upon which to hang material collected in my fieldwork, all of which involved tracing miraa's social life from production, through exchange, to consumption. From a relatively uniform origin within the Nyambenes, miraa follows different trajectories, arriving at different locations to be consumed by different people with different ideas about and knowledge of the substance: charting miraa's course along these trajectories is clearly a procedure that chimes with Appadurai's volume. The ideas and associations that Meru have of the substance – a substance of huge significance economically, socially, and culturally for them – are likely to diverge significantly from those, say, of Somali consumers I met in Manchester. A structure inspired by *The social life of things* brings out how richly varied are the ramifications and associations of the substance throughout its journey from tree to chewer's cheek.

### ***Miraa as 'commodity-plus'***

Appadurai urges us to 'approach commodities as things in a certain situation' (1986: 13), thus a commodity is not a certain type of thing, and many things can have a 'commodity phase'. He defines the 'commodity situation' for something as '*the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature*' (loc. cit.; his italics). This seems reasonable, and is obviously applicable to some moments in the social life of miraa. However, I wish to examine miraa throughout its full social life, not just in its commodity phase: miraa in my work is a *commodity-plus*.<sup>16</sup> The '*plus*' includes the significance the substance has

for people in situations when its exchangeability is not to the fore: many aspects of production and consumption are included which might be lost by looking at miraa purely as commodity.

Appadurai is criticised for focusing on exchange at the expense of production and consumption. He acknowledges this himself in a footnote: 'In starting with exchange, I am aware that I am bucking a trend in recent economic anthropology, which has tended to shift the focus of attention to *production* on the one hand, and *consumption* on the other. This trend was a justifiable response to what had previously been an excessive preoccupation with exchange and circulation' (1986: 58). He also states explicitly that '[e]conomic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged' (1986: 3). This leaves him open to the criticism that by looking at value generated in exchange during the 'commodity phase', other value-generating factors are ignored. Thus, Friedman criticises him saying that '[o]ne of the problems that arises when defining commodity as a phase in a larger social process is that the logic of the larger system may be overlooked in concentrating on a more limited phenomenon' (Friedman 1994: 12). He also considers Appadurai's approach to contain 'a fundamentally fragmentary view...due to the fact that no consideration is given to the larger context itself. In this approach, consumption and exchange are different phenomena which is, of course, true at a certain level, that of physical acts, but the logic that connects them is surely where we ought to expect to find the key to understanding the dynamics of demand' (ibid. 13).

The similarity between Appadurai's focus on exchange as the source of value and that of neo-classical economics is brought out by Dilley in his critique of the 'market' metaphor (Dilley 1992). He states that 'the market logo is an ideological representation of western capitalism in which market exchange is represented as the sole generator of value; thus production is represented as exchange and consumption' (1992: 25). In a footnote to the first clause quoted, Dilley reminds us of, and thus implicitly criticises, Appadurai's claim that 'economic exchange

creates value' (ibid. 31). Furthermore, in a paper exploring the significance of the 'visibility and invisibility' of production for value (Dilley: in press), he states that he does 'not hold singularly to the idea that exchange creates value, since it is a view which falls foul of the problem of acknowledging production as a possible source of value'.

To grasp the value of a commodity one must give due attention to its whole lifespan. In taking such a broad view of a substance, one also becomes well-placed to grasp not only its economic value within its 'commodity phase', but also its wider value – personal, social, and cultural – outside the 'commodity phase'. Thus, production, exchange, and consumption must all be brought into focus to understand the significance and value of miraa.

***Production / exchange / consumption of what by whom?***

In talking of 'production', 'exchange', and 'consumption', there is a great danger of losing sight of what is being produced, exchanged, and consumed, and who is doing the producing, exchanging, and consuming. Remarks like 'economic exchange creates value' seem to me to make little sense unless the remark is focused on a concrete example. The same goes for much of the recent debates on 'consumption'<sup>17</sup>: imbuing so abstract a concept with so much significance strikes me as dangerous, and departs far from actual social life, where specific things are consumed by specific people.<sup>18</sup> I hope to avoid such pitfalls by immersing myself in the particularities of miraa's social life.

One such particularity is the material nature of the substance itself, a particularity that might be missed through an obsession with presenting objects as simply moulded by socio-cultural forces. Objects and their material qualities influence how we perceive them, have a crucial role in generating value, and affect how objects are traded. Thus, in the case of miraa, its rapid loss of potency post-harvest means that the trade network has to be highly efficient to maintain its

economic worth. This material quality of miraa means that traders cannot use the stockpiling tactic that coffee traders indulge in to control the market (see Dilley 1992: 5). The time factor is very different in the miraa trade than, say, in the trade of medieval relics, the subject of Patrick Geary's chapter in *The social life of things* (1986: 169ff.). Medieval relics do not rapidly decay, and so this need for a quick sale does not apply. On the contrary, the older the relic, the more 'authenticity' could be ascribed to it.<sup>19</sup>

All through the course of miraa's social life one sees how the substance has much say in the way it is treated.<sup>20</sup> It requires certain types of locations in which to grow; responds to particular kinds of nurturing; its taste, texture, and effect influence the price people pay for it, and are themselves a source of value; its perishability has a profound effect on its trade; its chemical constituents influence perceptions of it and encourage consumption. Campbell usefully criticises the reduction of 'consumption to merely a process of indication or signification', and he states that 'direct encounters with the fundamental materiality of goods must surely underpin every individual's experience of consumption, no matter how much attention is paid to the symbolic or 'meaningful' features of goods' (1995: 117). To discuss a substance like miraa without an appreciation of its material qualities, especially its effects on the body, would lead to an impoverished picture of its consumption and the demand for it. The same can be said for many other items of consumption, whose idiosyncratic material qualities are likely to be highly relevant to their social lives.

Who is doing the producing, exchanging, and consuming is, of course, of critical importance too. The background and beliefs of an individual are very likely to affect how he or she relates to a particular substance, especially a controversial one like miraa. In the case of miraa, people from many ethnic backgrounds and social strata come into contact with it, and there is much divergence

in the way people approach it. The many different strands feeding into perceptions of miraa require an in-depth ethnographic approach.

The posthumously published work of Paul Feyerabend, *The Conquest of Abundance* (1999), is pertinent here. Its subtitle, *A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being*, nicely encapsulates the point I wish to get across: much of the richness of miraa's social life could be lost in a haze of unnecessary abstraction. The complexity involved in the generation of miraa's value and significance is certainly lost in a crude statement like 'economic exchange creates value'; the crude statement becomes problematic after comparison with concrete material, as 'delicate matters had been compared with crude ideas and had been found lacking in crudeness' (Feyerabend 1999: 13).

To counter over-abstraction, I try to present an account of miraa's social life that is rich in particulars and thus able to show the intricacy that goes into the generation of the substance's value and perceptions surrounding it.

### ***Divergence / convergence; paths and diversions***

By emphasising this intricacy, however, I do not mean to suggest that all we can do as anthropologists is present a mass of particulars for the reader to do with as he or she wishes. Due to divergence the particulars in miraa's life are many: individuals diverge in how they think of and use miraa, and in its significance for them; there is divergence of look and effect between different varieties of the substance and between miraa grown in different locales. However, there is also much convergence.<sup>21</sup> People can and do converge in many of their interactions with the substance, and miraa of different varieties and from different locations converge sufficiently in look, taste, and effect for one to state that they are all miraa, despite important differences.<sup>22</sup>

There is convergence not merely within the world of miraa in Kenya, but also between Kenyan production / exchange / consumption of miraa and, say, Yemeni production / exchange / consumption of *qat*. For example, traders in both Kenya and the Yemen face the same problems in getting miraa to consumers whilst still fresh. Furthermore, there is convergence between the social life of miraa and all sorts of other goods. Thus, miraa can be compared to commodities as different as newspapers which have a similarly short economic half-life (although much of the utility of such analogies emerges where they break down, i.e. in the differences). Convergence allows us to go beyond bare facts and to spot patterns and trends within and beyond the world of miraa. Although I do not attempt a full-scale comparison of miraa's social life with, say, the social life of Yemeni *qat*, comparisons are made when they illuminate the ethnographic material on Kenya. Such comparisons raise the work to more abstract levels – higher 'logical types' to use Russell's phrase so beloved by Bateson (see, for example, Bateson 1979: 212-213)<sup>23</sup> – but, I trust, not to such an abstract level that they become empty. Comparison is useful only when linked back to the concrete facts under consideration.

Convergence is caused by many factors. Regarding miraa, its material qualities and the way they influence how it is grown, traded, and consumed are again important. Miraa affects me physiologically in a similar way to my Kenyan friends, and, indeed, to the way *qat* affects Yemeni consumers. Farmers, traders, and consumers gain 'how-to' knowledge in the course of their lives, and much of this knowledge becomes shared, so bringing about convergence in the way people interact with it. The trade network relies on co-operation, and hence convergence in the way people cultivate and trade the substance, otherwise it could hardly operate as efficiently as it does. Current international rhetoric on drugs comes into play, bringing about some convergence in the perception of miraa as a 'drug' and hence a 'problem'. Social life requires communication, and through communication ways of using and thinking about miraa become shared.<sup>24</sup>

Whilst without convergence, social life would just be confusion, without divergence it would be paralysed.<sup>25</sup> Divergence is needed to generate new ways of using, and speaking and thinking about things. Such divergence is commonly generated more or less randomly by human individuals, although often innovation will be rendered necessary by the emergence of new problems to face for which old solutions are inadequate. Divergence from older ways of thinking about and using miraa led miraa traders to keep on expanding the trade network. If divergence leads to something successful – socially or economically – then other people are likely to converge in utilising the innovation.

Convergence and divergence are compatible with the metaphor of paths and diversions used by Appadurai, a metaphor that can be stretched beyond paths commodities take, to the ways people think and speak of them. People follow well-travelled paths in thinking about miraa, sharing familiar associations and meanings of the substance. People also create diversions from these well-worn paths, creating new associations and meanings. To bring out how individuals both converge and diverge in the way they interact with miraa, I end my conclusion with a real miraa consumer: Nicholas.

***Nicholas M'Mocheke: miraa connoisseur***

This young Tigania (now 26), a resident of Isiolo, was my main research assistant in Kenya: my guide, philosopher, and friend (see plate 1).<sup>26</sup> His parents both now live in a small town called Karama in the Nyambenes after spells in Nairobi and Isiolo. His father runs a café there, whilst his mother, a nurse, works in nearby Muthara hospital. His father is Tigania and his mother Igembe, and he treasures his links to the Nyambenes. His pride in these links is evident in his fondness for using his specifically Meru name, M'Mocheke<sup>27</sup>, a name given him during initiation. When we met in October 1999, he was living in Isiolo with his mother, whilst his father was in Karama. He now works as an accountant at the Isiolo Catholic Mission after a longish spell of

unemployment, and is a popular figure at the mission. In dress style, Nicholas resembles many other young Kenyan men, as well as young men the world over, having a particular penchant for sport labels like *Adidas*. He also resembles young men the world over in his passion for football (especially Manchester United).

Nicholas is formally educated to a good level (obtaining an accountancy qualification a few years ago), and has an even more substantial informal education. While he is proud of his Nyambene roots, he has learnt a great deal about people of other ethnic groups from his life in cosmopolitan spots like Nairobi and Isiolo. He attended secondary school in Garba Tulla, and learnt much about the lives and customs of Borana in that town. European guests at the Catholic Mission have also added to his exposure to those of different ethnic and geographical backgrounds. His musical tastes reflect this broad exposure, encompassing Western pop music, reggae, Congolese soukous, and Kenyan music (including Borana, Somali, Swahili, Kikuyu, Luo, Kamba styles, and, not least, traditional Meru songs of the type sung at initiations). He is ever eager to learn about lives led elsewhere, and even showed an interest in the intricacies of cricket, a game I once explained to him during a chewing session. His interest extends to religion: whilst now back in the Catholic fold, he once practised Islam for a short time, and still feels an affinity with Muslims. Linguistic fertility is one thing Nicholas possesses in abundance. His speech and writing produce verbal gems drawn from his exposure to many different languages. He collects words, often surprising listeners with the likes of ‘emoluments’, and even the odd Wodehousian ‘what-ho’. Letters from Nicholas usually contain vocabulary from at least five different languages. He is a born entertainer, and his verbal facility generates much humour. These attributes proved invaluable during my fieldwork (see below), but it is his relationship with miraa that makes using him as a final case-study a perfect device for bringing out the significance that miraa can have for an individual.

Nicholas is a self-styled ‘miraa connoisseur’ who weaves the substance into his identity with much comic effect. Miraa has influenced greatly his biography, from his days as a miraa picker when young, his family’s link to the trade (his mother owns a miraa plantation, and many of his Igembe relatives trade the substance), and his present ambition to become a miraa trader in the future. He also grows a few miraa trees at home in Isiolo. Nicholas brings many elements of the thesis together, showing how one follows well-beaten paths in dealing with a substance like miraa, as well as individualising the paths and, via diversions, setting off on paths of one’s own. Miraa’s value for Nicholas emerges through both shared and idiosyncratic associations of the substance. Ending a thesis that has an anti-excessive-abstraction agenda with a specific individual is clearly felicitous too. Nicholas not only appears in the conclusion, however: his influence is both implicit and explicit throughout the thesis. Implicit in that much of the material was collected with him and by him; explicit in that many of his witticisms and anecdotes embellish the chapters. By embellishing the thesis with Nicholas’ comments and musings on miraa, as well as ending it with a look at what miraa means to him, I hope the reader can be guided through the world of miraa by him, as I was guided by him in the field.

However, Nicholas’s presence is not meant to obscure the central character in the thesis, viz. *miraa*.

#### ***A note on collective terms and concepts***

Nicholas is not the only individual introduced to the reader in the course of this thesis. I try wherever possible to bring in real individuals as case-studies to avoid overusing collective terms and concepts like *Meru*, *Tigania*, *wholesalers*, *consumers* etc. Whenever I use such terms and concepts I merely do so as shorthand for groups of real individuals. I usually qualify such terms by adding, for example, ‘many’, ‘most’, or ‘some’, conveying the fact that I do not consider that

*all* the constituent individuals covered by the term necessarily agree on some point or act in a certain way.

Max Weber expressed nicely his disdain for collective concepts in a letter to Robert Liefmann dated 9<sup>th</sup> March 1920:

For my part, supposing that I am now a sociologist (according to my letter of accreditation), then the essential reason is to put an end to the trafficking in collective concepts that still haunts us. In other words, sociology itself can only be carried on by proceeding from the actions of an individual or of a greater or smaller number of distinct individuals, it must be strictly 'individualistic' in its method. (Max Weber, letter to Robert Liefmann, 9<sup>th</sup> March 1920: German Central State Archive, Merseberg, Repertorium 92, Nr.30)

While I cannot avoid using collective terms in this thesis I endeavoured, both in conducting fieldwork and in writing up the thesis, to follow Weber on this point, keeping in mind that it is individuals who animate miraa's social life, and who constitute social life in general.<sup>28</sup>

### **Fieldwork procedures**

Collecting the material constituting this thesis was almost embarrassingly problem-free and enjoyable. Fortune guided me to knowledgeable people, and helped ensure I followed miraa's trajectories with few problems. After undertaking a year's preparation for researching miraa in Kenya, including making a start with Kiswahili<sup>29</sup>, I reached Nairobi in October 1999. So began the first spell of my fieldwork. The first spell lasted until September 2000, and was followed up by a five-month spell in 2001 (March to August), and about a month in 2002 (April / May). Thus, my overall time in Kenya amounted to about a year and a half, although contact with Kenyan friends by letter and email has ensured that fieldwork continued once I returned for the writing process. Also, visiting Somali chewers in Manchester has enabled me to gain an insight into chewing Kenyan miraa at a distant endpoint from the Nyambenes.

My base in Kenya was Isiolo, located a short journey from the Nyambenes. This proved ideal. I could easily visit the Nyambenes, as well as observe at first hand a town where the miraa trade had already received anthropological attention (Hjort 1974 & 1979); this allowed me to see how things had changed over time. The multiethnic nature of trade and consumption in the town were also intriguing. My accommodation in Isiolo was at the local Catholic mission. The town has suffered from insecurity in recent times, and so a safe place to stay was essential. Staying at a mission also gave me insights into religiously influenced perspectives on miraa. By becoming linked to a Catholic network, I was able as well to get to many places which otherwise would have been difficult to visit: I would never have reached Garba Tulla or Kinna had I not been able to travel with mission vehicles and stay at outlying Catholic missions.

My intentions upon first reaching Isiolo were to spend most of my time studying trade and consumption there, whilst making the occasional trip to the Nyambenes. As time went on, I travelled further and further away from Isiolo. Thus, a trip to Kajiado to visit friends allowed me to meet young Maasai miraa traders, whilst trips to the coast, mainly planned for the purpose of having a rest, turned into perfect opportunities for more research. Thus, by travelling through Kenya, I found myself travelling along the same routes as miraa, and became more determined to widen the scope of the research from a relatively narrow geographical area – Isiolo and the Nyambenes – to as much of Kenya as I could visit, although special attention was given to Isiolo. So developed a multiple-trajectory research into miraa.

It is natural that a researcher will find collecting fieldwork material a slow process at first, but one that gradually quickens. A researcher is also likely to become more critical of material collected as time goes by, as he or she develops experience to know what is relevant or irrelevant, accurate or fanciful. This certainly was the case with me, and Isiolo had early pitfalls for me.

One came in the form of a curio seller who became my first fieldwork assistant. He was a young Somali whom I am glad – in hindsight! – that I met. He helped me settle, albeit uneasily, into a routine of visiting outlying areas, and meeting many people who knew a lot about miraa. He also introduced me into the world of youthful miraa consumption in Isiolo, which proved invaluable. Sadly, his imagination worked at a feverish pace in making our outings more interesting, often departing from the truth. In my first week in Isiolo he took me to visit a Meru farmer who grows a little miraa a few kilometres out of town. The fact that a farmer was growing miraa near Isiolo would have been interesting enough, but my friend, taking advantage of my then limited Kiswahili, told me the farmer was an Oromo refugee from Ethiopia growing miraa for his people so they would not have to deal with Meru, who were supposedly conning them. Embellishment, indeed.

Fortunately, I also met early on more reliable informants. Two Turkana working for a child sponsorship charity became good friends and helped set me straight on many points. A Tigania working at the Agricultural offices in Isiolo was also a wonderful help throughout my time in Kenya: accompanying me to the Nyambenes, Nairobi, and elsewhere, as well as introducing me to such crucial people for my thesis as the team working at a Nairobi miraa kiosk. His experience as an agricultural worker as well as his provenance – Kianjai in the Nyambenes – were great credentials for a guide to miraa.

My luck was holding when I met the above friends, as it was when I chanced to meet Nicholas. His passion for the substance made him passionate about my research, and his own curiosity was an impetus for the research. He was unemployed, and this piece of bad luck was good luck for the project, as it meant he could accompany me along many of miraa's trajectories. His affable manner put everyone at ease, allowing me to meet people in an atmosphere conducive to a fruitful discussion. His excellent grasp of English allowed him to act as interpreter when my

Kiswahili was not sufficient for understanding. A proficiency for note-taking made sure that between us we collected a great deal of material from our expeditions.<sup>30</sup> Nicholas's wise head also guided me away from potentially dangerous situations, and by giving me a Meru name, he increased the warmth with which Meru would greet me when introduced as an 'elder of the Nyambenes called *M'Nabea*'.<sup>31</sup>

With such a congenial companion, therefore, I got to know many important people – traders and consumers – in Isiolo, as well as visiting the Nyambenes, Nairobi, and beyond. Nicholas's father's café provided accommodation in Karama, whilst elsewhere we would normally stay in cheap lodgings. With Nicholas' help – as well as that of my other friends – I could conduct interviews with many people, visit farms and kiosks, and attend chewing-sessions. Interviews were almost all informal, and aimed to elicit patterns of behaviour and speaking about the substance, as well as meanings ascribed to it.<sup>32</sup> Usually I noted down details mid-conversation, though often post-conversation whilst still fresh in my mind. Only occasionally would I record interviews on my dictaphone. Data was noted down first in rough, then later neaten up for my main fieldwork notes: I would make carbon copies of these to send home. I kept a journal, which still proves useful to this day for clarifying timings of visits, and for freshening up memories. Many photographs were taken of locations, types of miraa, and interviewees. As I became more aware of the sort of material I would need for my thesis, I grew better at asking relevant questions. However, I knew most informants over a long period of time and so missing out an important question was not too drastic, as I could ask them another time.

In the main, informants were eager to impart their knowledge, especially to someone who was often chewing. Chewing miraa and using esoteric terms for it were crucial research techniques.<sup>33</sup> Farmers, traders, and consumers found my chewing so hilarious, and hence endearing, that suspicions almost always disappeared and talk flowed. Interviews were often

conducted under the influence of miraa, a substance that urges one to talk, and so well-oiled conversations were the norm. Some were still – understandably given miraa’s controversial status – suspicious of my motives. Nicholas told me that he heard one trader tell his friends not to say too much to me as I might be a ‘spy’ intent on stopping the miraa trade. Nicholas’s grandfather was also at first suspicious, telling Nicholas that, being European, I would view the substance negatively. He was delighted to hear that I was actually a fan of the substance and chewed too. To research miraa without chewing would prove difficult indeed.

Collecting material related to earnings in the trade was more difficult. The best method to use in this respect – hiring assistants to hover where deals are being struck and observe transactions – was not open to me as my funds did not stretch that far. Openly questioning traders as to how much they earned usually drew either overstated responses – especially from young traders wishing to present an entrepreneurial image – or an understated one. For most of my purposes this difficulty in collecting reliable hard data is not troublesome; after all, mine was a more qualitative than quantitative approach, concerned with meanings and associations more than numbers and statistics. However, it is important to have a reasonable idea of the sort of money being made from the substance, as earnings from it clearly have ramifications for miraa’s meanings and associations. Thus, I present figures where I feel they can be more or less trusted. I did sit in with many retailers, as well as accompany agents whilst they worked, and so observed transactions: thus what miraa was going for on a certain day was quite easy to estimate. My friends – immune to being charged European prices – also fed me reliable figures on miraa they bought, allowing me a fair idea of how prices changed seasonally. Harder to estimate were profits made by agents and retailers. The amount made by an agent or retailer per bundle sold is flexible, and depends on how many bundles are left unsold: even those I trusted to give me reliable numbers could not be wholly accurate on account of this flexibility. New projects on the

substance will hopefully provide more accurate figures: there are some aspects of miraa's trade that only accurate figures – that take into account all the varieties of miraa – will help clarify.

One lacuna in my fieldwork material is interviews with the elite of the trade: the Somali international exporters. These men and women are described as 'tycoons', and presented by some in a sinister light. As I did not meet any personally, I am slightly diffident in my description of the international trade. However, I did get inside views on the way this trade operates, and hope this papers over the lacuna to a certain extent. Another lacuna is also connected with Somalis. My dealings with those in the miraa world is weighted towards Meru, as it was with them that I spent most time. Thus, I have a good idea of how some Meru perceive Somalis, but little on the converse. Partly this was due to my reliance on Nicholas. Accompanied by a Meru, it would have been hard for me to ask Somalis about their thoughts on Meru. I hope this does not preclude a balanced account of the recent conflict in the miraa trade where many Meru and Somalis find themselves on opposite sides.

Easier to get were opinions of those opposed to the substance. The fact that I occasionally chewed did not seem to prevent people from opening up about their worries about the substance and its social consequences. When people discovered I was researching miraa, whether pro or anti, most would be only too keen to tell me their views, albeit after laughing that an Englishman would come all the way to Kenya to research it.

My research did not purely involve conversing with informants. With Nicholas' help, I collected much in the way of newspaper clippings, and recorded relevant news items and debates on radio and TV. A few visits to the Kenya National Archives yielded up much useful historical material. Of course, by chewing miraa myself and helping out in kiosks, I was indulging in

participant observation: soaking up the ambience of locales along miraa's trajectory. This allows me to provide the reader with impressionistic details of miraa's social life.

Whilst my fieldwork was more reliant on serendipity than any systematic methodology, it proved fruitful, and provided far more material than I can cram into one thesis. It also departs greatly from the traditional image of the fieldworker arriving at his or her research locale, then immersing him or herself over a long period into the language and customs of that locale through participant observation. My fieldwork certainly involved participant observation, but participant observation along a multi-channelled network. My own travelling and that of Nicholas and other friends, provided the material to construct an account of the way one substance follows several trajectories and links many locations, and how it is animated along the way. Thus, while my focusing on the pathways miraa takes is one reason why the thesis takes the form it does, with miraa linking various locales together, it was also the journeying of myself, Nicholas, and others that led to the thesis structure. It was our travelling that led to certain trajectories being followed and not others. It was also fortune in my coming from Manchester that led me to follow the network to that particular endpoint.

Such a multi-channelled approach in anthropology is not just as recent as works like *Sweetness and Power* by Mintz (1985), or *The social life of things*, however. One can return all the way to Malinowski and *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), to find a similar approach being taken in one of anthropology's seminal texts. Malinowski's material is linked together by the exchange of certain objects, and in collecting the material he himself travelled along some of the paths followed, observing how the objects were animated along their trajectories, and how a *kula* valuable could possess 'a personal name and a history of its own' (Malinowski 1932 [1922]: 99). Not all is new under the sun.

## **The chapters**

It is useful at this point, before plunging into miraa's social life, to give a chapter by chapter synopsis of the thesis's contents. This will prepare the reader for what is to come, and help show how the material links in with themes mentioned in this introduction. One should bear in mind that the following material does not fit perfectly into the structure that I adopt, and there is some awkwardness. In particular, it feels a little awkward to have material on the local retail of miraa in the Nyambenes in chapter two rather than chapter four, the one specifically concerned with its retail. However, I am sure the reader would be suspicious were there too neat a fit of material and structure.

The overall structure of the thesis basically follows trajectories taken from tree to consumer's cheek. Different types of structures could have been used, however. For example, I could have looked first at consumption and demand for miraa, and then traced its route back to the Nyambenes: such an approach could be justified by the fact that demand for miraa feeds back to the Nyambenes, encouraging further cultivation and the instigation of new trade routes. However, both the fact that miraa's social life only begins with production, and that historically miraa has spread out from the Nyambenes, suggests that the structure I use is neater. Also, the material could have been structured by having separate chapters focusing on one whole trajectory of miraa: production, trade, and consumption. Thus, each chapter would have a self-contained network of production, trade, and consumption. This would lead to much repetition, however, which the structure I use mostly avoids.

In writing about a cycle – i.e. of production, trade, and consumption – in a linear structure one cannot avoid difficulties, however. Cultivation of the substance is dependent on demand;

demand requires a trade network; the trade network is dependent on cultivation. One has to find the best place to enter this cycle, and for my purposes this means the point of cultivation...

**Chapter one: *Cultivating Miraa in the Nyambene Hills***

After a brief description of the Nyambenes and the Meru who farm there, this chapter goes on to distinguish between four different cultivation zones, before describing an ideal biography of a miraa tree, from root sucker to venerable old tree, so bringing in Kopytoff's notion of a 'biography' of things (1986). Next, the procedures enacted to harvest the substance are described, including details on harvesting arrangements and particular varieties picked. The different styles of presentation of the various cultivation zones are also described. The procedures enacted after preparing the bundles to sell them on are then discussed, followed by a look at the rewards growing miraa offers for farmers in the various production zones. Some case-studies of actual farmers end the chapter.

**Chapter two: *Miraa's Trajectories***

This chapter follows through some of the trajectories that miraa takes from the Nyambenes to the point of retail. A description of the middleman system is first given – a system necessary to speed miraa along the networks – with a generalised introduction to various types of middlemen and their flexibility. The chapter then turns to the four production zones, and traces miraa's routes out of them. From the local trade of miraa in less intensive zones to the international trade, the chapter shows how the reach of miraa expands from zone to zone. Descriptions of important staging posts are provided, as are case-studies of those speeding miraa along the various legs in its journeys.

### **Chapter three: *Transporting Miraa***

Transporting miraa is a profitable business in itself, and this chapter introduces various modes of transport used in the miraa trade, from shank's pony through pick-up trucks to air transport. For miraa to pass efficiently along its pathways requires efficient transportation: this section is thus crucial in examining miraa's social life.

### **Chapter four: *Retailing Miraa***

This chapter first focuses on Tigania and Igembe retailers, suggesting why they join the trade, how they become involved, and changes in the trade since Hjort's research in the 1970s. Also, the types of business premises used by retailers are discussed. Some case-studies of Tigania and Igembe retailers are provided. The chapter then turns to Borana, Sakuye, and Somali women retailers, found throughout much of northern Kenya, and looks at some aspects of their trade. Retailers of other ethnic groups are also discussed. Then a detailed description of the retail process is given, looking at retailer–customer interaction and bargaining techniques. The inconsistent profit margins of retailers are noted. Finally, Isiolo is offered as a case-study of a town where much miraa is retailed. The trade in Isiolo relies on much inter-ethnic dealings, presenting a small study of how miraa crosses boundaries of an ethnic variety.

### **Chapter five: *Trust, Suspicion, and Conflict in Miraa Trade Relations***

Trust plays a great role in the miraa trade; there are few contractual agreements. Here I show where trust operates in the trade, and suggest how this trust is reinforced. I look also at where trust breaks down, with specific mention of recent conflict between Meru and Somali over the trade. Miraa's pathways bring people together; this conflict shows how they can also break them apart. The chapter ends by stressing the socially embedded nature of the trade.

### **Chapter six: *Consuming Miraa***

Here the focus is on who consumes Kenyan miraa, how they consume it, and in what contexts consumption occurs. Thus, various groupings – ethnic, religious, social – are offered to show which segments of society are most commonly associated with the substance. Who chews which particular variety is then also discussed, as is *handas*, a word used in Kenya to describe miraa's effect. A description of the chewing process is given, followed by the contexts of consumption. Here I divide up consumption into *traditional*, *pragmatic*, and *recreational*, with the caveat that these contexts are not mutually exclusive. Of great importance is the *traditional* context, where ceremonial usage of miraa in the Nyambenes is discussed, showing how Meru treat miraa as not merely a commodity. Miraa consumption in Kenya takes a hotchpotch of different forms, giving miraa's social life many idiosyncratic endpoints.

### **Chapter seven: *Chewing Up Boundaries***

The final chapter shows how miraa has crossed many boundaries, but still faces many more which come in its wake. Thus, I first discuss the purported restriction of consumption to elders alone in traditional Nyambene society, and how this might have broken down in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I also suggest how the success of miraa might serve to strengthen respect in the Nyambenes for local traditions and history. Then I take a brief diachronic look at the spread of miraa consumption throughout Kenya, followed by a more detailed synchronic look at factors encouraging and discouraging consumption in Kenya at the time of my fieldwork. This chapter brings together many of the meanings and associations of the substance through the course of its social life, and examines the debate between those who approve of miraa and those who disapprove.

## Conclusion

Here I draw together elements from miraa's social life to show miraa's significance for debates in social anthropology and, more especially, for those who produce, trade and consume it. This significance is not just generated by its economic exchange, although this is clearly important. The generation of value is far subtler, as Nicholas's relationship with miraa shows.

### *Note on Kenya shillings:*

Throughout the time of my fieldwork, the exchange rate of Kenya shillings to Sterling pounds was roughly ksh.110-120 = £1. For comparative purposes: a small bottle of soda cost ksh.20, a small bottle of beer ksh.50, and a loaf of bread around ksh.30.

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<sup>1</sup> I am unsure of the etymology of *veve*, although one Igembe man told me it originated from a Somali mispronunciation of the Meru word for leaf. *Gomba* is a reference to the banana leaf (*mgomba* means 'banana plant' in Kiswahili) used to wrap up miraa. *Shamba* is a reference to the farms that miraa comes from (*shamba* is Kiswahili for 'farm'). *Green gold* alludes to the wealth generated from this often green-hued product. *Igembe grass* refers to the Igembe, the main producers of the substance, and suggests jokingly that miraa is as abundant as grass in the Igembe region (perhaps it also hints at the use of 'grass' as a street name for cannabis). *Mairungi* is a term often heard used on the Kenyan coast. *Mbachu* is a slang word for miraa used in Isiolo, as is *topong the power*. Cassanelli states that miraa is named 'after the Meru district, where it is cultivated' (1986: 256). This is not convincing, however, and Meru I met suggested the name comes from *kuraa* a Kimeru verb meaning 'to blossom'.

<sup>2</sup> The taste of good miraa reminded me of the taste of the skin of red apples.

<sup>3</sup> In my experience of chewing in the UK, women tend to find the smell stronger than men, although this is not a hard and fast rule. Men tend to remark that it just smells vaguely 'twiggish'. However, when in Kenya I never noticed this possible gender difference regarding miraa's smell.

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy includes a good survey of the research that went into discovering miraa's active constituents (1987: 180-188).

<sup>5</sup> Being under the influence of miraa involves only a slight shift in perspective – hardly commensurate with the bigger shift caused by the likes of cannabis etc. – and one would not want the shift to be any greater: for socialising, working, or taking a slight step back from mundanity, the effect of miraa is perfect.

<sup>6</sup> I have brought miraa back from Kenya to the UK, and kept it fresh in a fridge. I could still feel an effect from chewing it up to a week post-harvest. Thus, perhaps the degeneration of cathinone can be somewhat stabilised. Of course few Kenyans have access to a fridge. (Some kiosks have them for sodas, but drinks suppliers are strict in stipulating that only their brand soda can be stored in them.) Also, Guantai and Maitai (1982) analysed miraa dried at room temperature over the course of 7-10 days, and discovered that it still contained a large amount of cathinone (1982: 398). They therefore suggest that the potency of miraa sold over the course of 2-4 days is unlikely to change substantially, and that ‘preference for fresh *Catha* material is based on tenderness, palatability and colour appeal, rather than potency’ (loc. cit.). Better quality miraa needs to be sold quicker than lower quality, as the succulent stems of good quality miraa can rapidly turn unappealing without refrigeration: the tough stems of lower quality miraa can last much longer.

<sup>7</sup> The following might serve as evidence (albeit anecdotal) of the low level nature of miraa-dependency: Nicholas – a central figure of this thesis (see below) – has chewed most days for the last twelve or so years, sometimes chewing much, sometimes little depending on his resources and mood. In 2001, he climbed Mount Kenya with me, and had to do without miraa for five days. He suffered little ill effect from withdrawal, instead racing up the mountain far ahead of me. One can become habituated to the use of miraa – and most things, drug or not – but miraa habituation can be broken out of fairly easily. If a good opportunity for employment comes along few consumers would pass it up as a result of miraa. However, in Kenya – and even in the UK where miraa is implicated in the high rates of unemployment of Somali men – good opportunities can be scarce. See Kennedy 1987, Chapter VIII for a detailed, and sound, look at the question of miraa and addiction. Kenyan consumers talk of withdrawal symptoms after heavy consumption: general lethargy and bad dreams (commonly of being attacked by monsters; one Isioloan consumer dreams of ‘slimy lizards’ when ending a spell of consumption) are the usual ones mentioned.

<sup>8</sup> For a history of Isiolo, see Hjort 1979: 15ff.

<sup>9</sup> Goldsmith was told by an Agricultural officer of Igembe Division that the ‘official policy of the Igembe Division staff is neither to encourage nor to interfere with miraa production’ (Goldsmith 1994: 118).

<sup>10</sup> Sadly I was not able to examine all work done by Kenyan researchers on the substance, although I suspect that many dissertations have been written on it (including one by my friend Julius Likaria). Work I did see was more in the botanical / pharmacological line, and not crucially relevant to my present work. Even so, I feel this to be a real omission.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Hill (1963).

<sup>12</sup> Goldsmith uses such collective phrases as ‘the Igembe cultural system’ and the like (see especially Goldsmith 1994). I am uneasy with such terms, preferring to think in terms of individuals. See below.

<sup>13</sup> Being written by someone with generally positive views on the substance, the thesis also aims to bolster defences against those opposed to it, especially against those who see prohibition as an answer to problems associated with the substance. I hope to give positive aspects of miraa exposure, whilst not hiding negative aspects. Paul Goldsmith has already done much good work in this direction.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas and Isherwood express nicely the ability of goods to cross or build barriers, saying: ‘Goods are neutral, their uses are social; they can be used as fences or bridges’ (Douglas and Isherwood 1996 [1979]: xv).

<sup>15</sup> See Alexander & Alexander (1989) and Alexander (1992) for good discussions of markets ‘conceptualised as systems of communication or information’ (1992: 80). Geertz (1978 and 1979) is seen as an important figure in conceiving markets in such a fashion; he focuses on a Moroccan bazaar.

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<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Dr. Stan Frankland for this term.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, McCracken 1988, and Miller 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Appadurai brings out the need to return 'attention to the things themselves' as a 'corrective to the tendency to excessively sociologize transactions in things' (Appadurai 1986: 5). To my taste, however, his introduction loses sight of things and their materiality through over abstraction.

<sup>19</sup> Compare with the contrast made above between the ideal biography of a miraa tree and that of a miraa stem.

<sup>20</sup> See Goldsmith (1994: 90): '...different commercial crops influence and determine the process of commercialization and rural development in different ways. In more general terms, environmental factors condition the choice of export crops grown locally, and different commodities are system attractors that create feedback and influence the cultural-agricultural system in different ways.'

<sup>21</sup> There will be instances when convergence is socially important, and instances when divergence is socially important. For example, in understanding a racist's language it is necessary that I converge with the racist on the meaning of certain words. For the sake of my conscience it is necessary that I diverge from the racist and disagree with the statements he or she makes.

<sup>22</sup> For these reasons, I am confident that another anthropologist undertaking fieldwork on miraa in Kenya would find his or her material converges with mine in many details. Of course, there would be many differences too.

<sup>23</sup> See Bateson 1979: 37-42 for a discussion of divergent and convergent sequences. Convergent sequence for Bateson are of a 'higher logical type' than divergent ones. History is 'unpredictable into the future' as human social life involves divergent sequences enacted by individuals, and divergent sequences are unpredictable.

<sup>24</sup> Of course, all individuals who come into contact with miraa have a unique configuration of associations and meanings concerning it. One's memories of the substance are certain to be unique in many ways, leading to much divergence amongst even those who share the same homestead in the Nyambenes. The human brain provides potential for an almost infinite number of associations to develop. However, important convergence does occur, and those of similar backgrounds share many meanings and associations.

<sup>25</sup> Here I am alluding to Bateson's contrast between rigour and imagination: '...rigor and imagination [are] the two great contraries of mental process, either of which by itself is lethal. Rigor alone is paralytic death, but imagination alone is insanity' (Bateson 1979: 205).

<sup>26</sup> See Caplan (1997: 6ff.) for a discussion of anthropologist-informant relationships and the role of personal narratives in anthropology. Caplan presents the personal narrative of her friend and main informant, Mohammed. My work clearly differs from hers as I keep the focus on miraa, showing through Nicholas how a specific individual interacts with it. A famous anthropologist-informant relationship is that of Victor Turner and Muchona the Hornet (1967).

<sup>27</sup> 'The initial M. stands for *Muntu*, man. It is a general custom of the Meru to give a man this title after his initiation to manhood, which is regarded as an honour' (Bernardi 1959: viii, fn. 1). 'Mocheke' is Kimeru for 'skinny' / 'slender', an epithet which certainly befits Nicholas.

<sup>28</sup> Such an approach could be termed *methodological individualism*, for which see Weber (1981), Popper (1957), Watkins (1952-53), and Rapport and Overing (2000: 249 ff.). Regarding Max Weber's individualistic approach, see Webster (1987).

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<sup>29</sup> Learning Kiswahili and picking up snippets of other Kenyan languages was a wonderful tool for ingratiating myself in Kenya.

<sup>30</sup> His notes are wonderful both in the style in which they are written – he has a passion for using obscure English words and mixing them up with words from Kenyan languages – and in the way they demonstrate his resourcefulness. Many are written on the back of silver foil from cigarette packs, and even on pieces of cardboard. His notes are all embellished with cheeky illustrations too.

<sup>31</sup> ‘M’Nabea’ is a Meru name, common in Kaibo, a village near Mutuati in an intensive zone of miraa production. The meaning appears obscure, although a few elders proffered ‘bringer of shoes’ as a meaning.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Interview’ sounds excessively formal. ‘Chat’ would give the opposite impression. My main aim was to keep conversations relaxed, whilst being rigorous in noting down what was said and my impressions.

<sup>33</sup> Hjort seems to have found miraa chewing a good research technique too (1979: 244).

## Chapter One:

### Cultivating Miraa in the Nyambene Hills

*Mutuati's neck of the woods is bedecked with the bee's knees...Luscious khat plantations!*

- Nicholas, May 2001.

#### The Nyambene Hills

Miraa is cultivated in a few parts of Kenya: Samburu and Rendille of Marsabit, Akamba of the Chyulu Hills near Mombasa, and Embu to the south-east of Mount Kenya all grow marketable crops of the commodity. Some miraa is harvested from wild trees growing on the slopes of Mount Kenya near Timau, and from those in forests near Kericho and on the slopes of Mount Elgon. None of these locations can compete in quantity – and, most would say, quality – with miraa grown on the Nyambene Hills.<sup>1</sup> *Shambas* ('farms') there have long been planted with miraa, and the resident Tigania and Igembe have honed the technique of its cultivation to a fine art. The Nyambenes offer Kenyan miraa its ancestral home. The Nyambenes run northeast of Mount Kenya (see map 1), and form 'an elongated, extruded volcanic feature, which rises sharply above the surrounding plateau surface to a height of about 8,200 feet at its southern crest' (Bernard 1972: 18). Goldsmith describes their appearance thus:

The Nyambene region has a rather fantastic appearance. When viewed from afar the hills and caldera form a geometry of soft curves, angles, and conical shapes. Tropical alpine forest caps the peaks and upper hillsides of the range. The plains below are punctuated with lunaresque massifs dominated by the Gibraltar-like silhouette of Shaba imposed in front of the hills of Samburu country in the distance. The local farms situated in-between the forest and the plains resemble small jungles, a dense riot of vegetation with the crooked boles of mwenjela (*Cussonia holstii*) trees projecting above the canopies like fringed stovepipes. (Goldsmith 1994: 1)

One photograph (plate 2) taken above Nkinyang'a shows the stunning views to the northern savannah from a Nyambene vantage point, and also contrasts the fertile land of miraa

production with the arid land of much of its consumption (see plate 19 for the view in reverse). As long as the rains come – not a certainty, although the Nyambenes are blessed with a good amount of rain (see Bernard 1972: 19-23) – the northern slopes of the Nyambenes offer farmers highly fertile land, and different ecozones provide various options for possible crops.<sup>2</sup> Nyambene farmers have an average land holding of three acres although *shambas* of even one acre in high zones can provide for a family, such is the fertility (Goldsmith 1994: 77).

The Nyambenes are within Meru North district, the headquarters of which are located at Maua, the largest town in the district. It had a population of 15, 475 in 1999 (1999 Population and Housing Census: Central Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning), and is set at a high altitude surrounded by tree and tea-clad hills. The town consists of many shops and stalls, a Methodist hospital, bars and restaurants, and a bank, most of these situated along the main road that runs through the town and links it to Meru, the biggest town in Meru District. The town has a large Somali presence due to the importance of miraa. Other large Nyambene towns are Kianjai, Muthara, Kangeta, Lare and Mutuati (see map 2).

### **The Nyambene Meru:**

The Meru are Bantu-speakers who inhabit the mainly fertile region between the Tana and Uaso Nyiro rivers to the northeast of Mount Kenya.<sup>3</sup> They are thought to have reached the region in the middle of the second millennium AD (Bernard 1972: 33).<sup>4</sup> The Meru are divided into the following sub-groups: Imenti, Miutini, Igoji, Mwimbi, Muthambi, Chuka, Tharaka, as well as Tigania and Igembe. They make great use of the mainly fertile land of the region with agriculture, and also tend livestock.

There is unity between the sub-groups. Bernardi describes the Meru as ‘distinct territorially, linguistically, and socially’ from their Bantu-speaking neighbours, the Kikuyu and Embu (Bernardi 1959: 1). Certainly, people I met from the various sub-groups felt no

hesitation in describing themselves as ‘Meru’, and Bernardi relates that, in his time with them, ‘more than ever, the Meru form a single tribe’. He continues, however, by saying that the sub-groups ‘must still be distinguished on account of their many peculiarities, dialectal differences, variations in the initiation ceremonies and other social institutions, territorial and residential distances, and past histories’ (ibid. 3).<sup>5</sup>

Meru sub-groups were traditionally made up of exogamous clans, whose ancestry was traced back to the first Meru to come to a particular piece of land (Laughton 1944: 3). An age-set system was in place, and Laughton describes it as functioning to provide an effective military unit, and to determine ‘the nucleus of responsible elders in the clan council’ (loc. cit.).<sup>6</sup> The classical age-system of the Tigania and Igembe is comprehensively covered by Peatrik (1999). In an unpublished paper from 2002<sup>7</sup> Peatrik describes this system thus:

There are 8 revolving names of classes. If a man belongs, for example, to class 2, his sons cannot be incorporated before class 4...Sons were recruited every 4, 5 years, at the time of their initiation...Sons, after the completion of their initiation, reach the first grade of “warriors”. Each class is divided into 3 sub-classes, known by ordinal names *ndinguri*, *kobia*, *kaberia*. After the recruitment of the last sub-class, a new class must be opened while the former is closed. As a new class is opened, all the classes climb a new age-grade. For men, there were four age-grades: warrior, young father, Father of the country, [and] accomplished person (*mwariki*)...As the ruling class, the “Fathers of the country” governed the society through councils called *kiama*; they also kept a class of warriors under their control...

Women too were classified, following other principles, based on rules of affinity and not only on descent...There were three age-grades for women: young mother, Mother of *kaaria* [a symbolic emblem for women], Accomplished person (*mwariki*).

Moreover, each class in power kept a kind of religious dignitary called the *mūgwe* [see Bernardi 1959]...his function was to bless, with his left hand, the acting class of warriors, the generation classes of men and women alike, and to protect the country from the *mugiro*, a state of ritual impurity brought by the exercise of power.

To sum up, the Meru Tigania-Igembe society was not loosely structured. Its generation system was a multipurpose principle of organisation. It was the framework of an integrated political system...Generation classes organised also kinship and affinity, the domestic cycle, the life course of men and of women alike. (Peatrik: in press)

The revolving classes are called *nthukī* in Kimeru, and are for men: *Guantai*, *Gichunge*, *Kiramunya*, *Ithalie*, *Michubu*, *Ratanya*, *Lubetaa*, and *Miriti*. As the classes revolve over a fifteen-year period, this allows one to speak of a certain era – e.g. when the *Miriti* were

initiated – and to roughly date events. Peatrik (1999: 33) estimates the following dates for when initiation into one class closed and the next began: *Guantai*: closed 1885; *Gichunge*: closed 1900; *Kiramunya*: closed 1915; *Ithalie*: closed 1930; *Michubu*: closed 1945; *Ratanya*: closed 1960; *Lubetaa*: closed 1975; *Miriti*: closed 1990; *Guantai*: will close 2005...and so forth.

Goldsmith states that whilst amongst other agricultural East African societies age-set systems have lapsed in the face of ‘outside influences’, ‘[a]mong the Igembe...social organization based on the...age-set system remained intact, and circumcision along traditional lines still take place’ (Goldsmith 1994: 100). It is certainly true that *nthukî* are bandied about much in conversation and in dating events (for example, dating the development of the miraa trade), however, Peatrik seems more accurate when she says that amongst Tigania and Igembe, ‘[a]s a system the generation classes are no longer working but their ethos is persisting’ (in press). Initiation into the generations still occurs, is regarded as important by most Tigania and Igembe, and no doubt ‘gives the initiate a unique feeling of identity towards the younger boys, towards his peers and his parents’ (loc. cit.). Thus, the age-system remains significant, even if it has ceased to play a dominant role in structuring Tigania and Igembe society.

One institution important in the Nyambenes is the *njuri ncheke*, a Meru council of elders ‘whose duty was the arrest of murderers and the carrying out of the death sentence, decided in cases of...witchcraft...and in cases of parricide’ (Peatrik: in press).<sup>8</sup> Nowadays it is stronger amongst Tigania and Igembe than other Meru, and is regarded with much awe possessing as it does the power to curse. *Njuri* elders still hold sessions aimed at resolving various disputes like those arising over land ownership. How ‘traditional’ and long-standing is the *njuri* is questionable. Bernardi relates that there ‘is evidence showing that the *njuri* association is a relatively recent institution which has skilfully succeeded in superseding the traditional inner councils of the elders’ (Bernardi 1959: 25). Also, Peatrik states that some of her elder

informants 'disent que le *njuri* n'a pas toujours existé', but that 'en réalité il faut entendre que le *njuri* n'a pas toujours existé sous la forme qu'il a prise après la conquête' (Peatrik 1999: 469). In her opinion, the '*njuri* est un exemple d' « invention d'une tradition » ou plus exactement de réinvestissement d'une tradition, et il serait erroné de penser que celle-ci s'est façonnée *ex nihilo*' (ibid. 456). It seems that the rise in power of the *njuri* had much to do with Lambert, District Commissioner of Meru in 1934 / 1935 and 1939-1942. He gave this secretive and exclusive association<sup>9</sup> more prominence than it perhaps originally had by regarding it as *the* council of elders, and insisting that all Meru elders who 'wanted to be appointed at any level of the local administration had to belong to the *njuri ncheke*' (Peatrik: in press), thus increasing initiation. *Njuri* elders 'became the new local rulers', and through them Lambert operated 'a kind of indirect rule in the Meru District' (loc. cit.). The *njuri* appear to have filled a void left by earlier *kiama* of elders, whose authority was disrupted by the imposition of British rule.

I got the impression during my stay that the *njuri ncheke* was still quite strong in the Nyambenes, although Peatrik says that few new people are initiated into it (Peatrik: in press). This might be connected with the high entrance fees required (see chapter six).

### **Nyambene land tenure:**

Land tenure in the Nyambenes has undergone great changes in the past century. Bernard describes the traditional system thus:

The land tenure system which underpinned highland agriculture enabled clanspeople to hold land in usufruct in each of the mountain zones. This was possible because clans and lineages in their original upslope movement had laid claims to chains of land rights from grass-woodland country to forested high altitudes. With the transferral of rights (not "ownership") to individual clan and lineage members, almost everyone had an opportunity to cultivate in the full range of zones. (Bernard 1972: 61)

Population growth caused many problems for this system. 'Generation after generation were inheriting smaller and smaller plots still widely distributed up and down the mountain slope'

(Bernard 1972: 100). Part of the remedy was to 'introduce a modern system of farming and tenure' (loc. cit.), and a process of land consolidation began in Meru district in 1957, beginning first in the Imenti highlands. Consolidation was resisted in the Nyambenes until 1966 (ibid. 101), and Hjort stated in 1979 that 'only those parts of Igembe territory furthest out in Nyambeni Hills remain unregistered' (Hjort 1979: 160).

The issue of land was not fully resolved in the 1970s, however, and recently a new process of land demarcation has been instigated whereby land is measured out before title deeds are given to farmers. Nyambene locals told me that retrenchment in the Civil Service means there are too few surveyors for the job, although progress is being made. As one can imagine, such a process can be a contested one: accusations of corruption are common. It is claimed that some farmers are ejected from fertile land and given a rock-strewn desert in return. Such a farmer, it is said, will be compensated for each miraa tree growing on his former land with a few hundred shillings per tree: hardly equivalent to their money earning potential.

Nicholas's grandfather, M'Naituli, became embroiled in a dispute over land. His two hectare *shamba* was visited by surveyors who claimed that half of it belonged to a neighbouring school. M'Naituli was furious, and feared that he would lose many miraa trees. The surveyors offered a pittance in compensation (ksh. 100 for each tree). He chased them away, accusing them of deceiving old men and giving land to the rich and corrupt. He reported the matter to the authorities, and ardently fought his case. What saved the day, however, is that one of his sons – a primary school teacher – obtained a transfer to the very school that the surveyors claimed owned the land. The case simmered down as the son became headmaster and so was in a position to prevent the land seizure.

Most Nyambene farmers own land around their home village. Fathers often parcel off portions of land to sons, perhaps as gifts upon coming of age or getting married, or as

inheritance. Some farmers buy land; often investing earnings from money made in the miraa trade or earnings from other occupations. When buying land there is an attraction to obtain land close to ones' original home, and those who move away from home either through work or because of marriage can be tempted to invest by buying land close to their parents' homestead. Much land presently owned by older generations of farmers was land that was uncultivated before they claimed it as their own.

### **Nyambene zones of production:**

Early evidence for the cultivation of miraa by Igembe exists in Neumann's account of his hunting exploits in the 1890s. He stayed for some time with Igembe, briefly mentioning the strange habit amongst elders of chewing the leaves of a tree that they also cultivated (1982 [1898]: 32). The Igembe region covers a large area however, and it is hard to say exactly which parts were cultivating the tree at that time. Some residents of Mutuati claim that most miraa in the Nyambenes of today is descended from trees from a hill near their town: it is said that, a couple of hundred years ago, a vicious drought dried up all miraa trees in the Nyambenes except the ones on that hill. Thus, farmers came from all over to get suckers from those trees for transplantation. Nicholas likes to relate the legend of a certain M'Nabea of Kaibo village near Mutuati. According to this legend, M'Nabea had a *shamba* of ancient miraa trees from where people sourced miraa used ceremonially. He first realised the potential for trading miraa, and popularised its cultivation.

Other Meru dispute this, claiming that higher sections of the Nyambenes – particularly those above Nkinyang'a and Kangeta – are where the trees were originally cultivated. Those that maintain this point to the high proportion of very old miraa trees in these sections.<sup>10</sup> Goldsmith notes the presence of ancient domesticated miraa trees near Muringene 'which are said to precede Meru settlement in the area', saying this 'suggests that earlier Agumba and Cushitic foragers utilized wild miraa trees and passed this knowledge onto the agriculturalists

who came after them' (Goldsmith 1994: 129). Goldsmith also mentions the 'happy goat story' often told by Meru, in which a goat happily munching on miraa is seen by a herder who then chews a little too, thus becoming acquainted with its effect (*loc. cit.*). This story is told elsewhere in Africa and the Middle East in regard to the discovery of miraa and coffee.

Whatever the truth of miraa's domestication, it seems fair to say that wild miraa was domesticated in both areas at an early date: the miraa industry certainly thrives in both of them today. Nowadays, cultivation is not restricted to these areas, and farmers throughout the Nyambenes usually own at least a few trees. Miraa covers thousands of hectares in the Nyambenes and the Agricultural Office at Maua estimate that 12,675 tonnes of the commodity leave there every year.<sup>11</sup> The scale of cultivation and reliance upon miraa as a cash crop varies greatly between different sections of the district, however, as do aspects like the presentation of the harvested stems. To elucidate such differences, it is useful to divide up the district into various zones of production:

1. **Kianjai / Muthara:** Kianjai is the first large town one comes to after leaving Meru when driving along the Meru – Maua road. In comparison with towns like Maua and Maili Tatu, it is at a low altitude where tea cannot be grown. Muthara is the next big town along, and is at a slightly higher altitude. To the north of the towns the altitude lowers further into an area of scrubland where Tigania have pastured flocks and herds for many years. Around the towns are many *shambas* in which miraa is cultivated, although not on a large scale. Farmers sell their harvests, but mainly for a limited local market. Except for those with *shambas* on higher ground to the south of the towns, miraa is unlikely to be the main source of income: one Kianjai farmer I met went to the length of chopping down his miraa trees, saying all they did was attract thieves. No farmer in the more intensive zones of miraa cultivation would take such a drastic step. However, farmers in this zone with older trees – reckoned to generate the best miraa – can earn a decent sum for their miraa,

as the heat in this low-lying zone is said to increase its quality; however, the heat also serves to keep yields low. (See map 3.)

2. **Karama / Nkinyang'a zone:** The road after Mutuati climbs to Karama, and then climbs further to Nkinyang'a, situated just over the border between Tigania and Igembe. Although the zone covers a range of altitudes – *shambas* north of Karama drop in altitude, whilst those around the small village Mbaranga high above Karama are situated at a similar altitude to those above Nkinyang'a – the two towns are both well established in the miraa trade and most farmers grow it. The trade operates in the two towns similarly, and so it is worth grouping them together although one town is Tigania and the other Igembe.<sup>12</sup> Further up the slopes one reaches the forest covering the summits of the Nyambenes. *Shambas* located before the forest have some very ancient looking miraa trees. (See map 3.)
  
3. **Less intensive Igembe zone:** Between Maili Tatu and Maua there is a stretch of road that leads off to the east and Kinna town, the border between Meru and Borana.<sup>13</sup> This road begins at Kiengu junction near Maili Tatu, and then goes through the towns Kamiruru, Kaweru, Kipcorner, and Kiutine, before reaching Kinna. The road descends in altitude, and Kinna marks the start of the savannah. The only tourist activity in the Nyambenes is centred here, as Meru National Park is contained within. Farmers in this zone produce cheap miraa reckoned low in quality. Many nevertheless farm miraa, and some earn extra money allowing those visiting the National Park to take a look at miraa plantations. Cultivation of miraa in this zone appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon, and most miraa trees I saw there looked young. (See map 4.)
  
4. **The main Igembe zone:** Miraa is grown most intensively by Igembe in a zone that stretches from Kangeta to Maua on the main road, and another from Maili Tatu to Mutuati. The former section takes in the main wholesale market for the national trade,

Muringene, and is at an altitude high enough for tea. The latter – known as Ntonyiri – descends to the lower lying town of Mutuati, where tea cannot be grown. The road from Maili Tatu to Mutuati takes in the towns KK, Kaelo, and Lare before reaching Mutuati. This zone serves most of the national demand for miraa within Kenya, as well as that of Somalia and the wider Somali diaspora. Miraa is by far the major income earner for Igembe farmers in this zone, and most are reliant on it. Even those at higher altitude growing well respected Nyambene tea are likely to have a few miraa trees too, and many intercrop tea and miraa. The Ntonyiri stretch of this zone and Maua are host to Somalis whose miraa networks mainly rely on Ntonyiri farmers. (See map 5.)

### **The biography of a miraa tree**

Miraa can be such a money earner that Nyambene farmers, especially Igembe, are easily tempted to plant new trees where space permits. More and more people try their hand with the crop, and plantations of very young trees are common. Although marketable miraa is not produced for five years or so after planting, most farmers see these trees as a worthy investment and, as intercropping is often practised, cultivating other crops on the same land is not precluded.<sup>14</sup> Some crops are said to benefit from proximity to miraa trees: one *shamba* I visited near Maili Tatu consisted of rows of mature miraa trees springing from a base of verdantly green tea shrubs (see plate 11). The farmer assured me that the tea thrives even during a drought thanks to shade offered by the trees.<sup>15</sup> Other cash crops like coffee, pyrethrum and macadamia, and subsistence crops like maize, peas, and bananas are intercropped with miraa.<sup>16</sup> Trees ‘also pump and recycle nutrients from the subsoil, reduce leaching of nutrients by lowering soil temperature, and increase soil moisture retention’ (Goldsmith 1994: 76), thus further improving land for other crops.<sup>17</sup>

Miraa trees begin life as suckers growing up from the roots of mature trees. Suitable specimens are sought out and dug up ready for transplanting. As farmers aim to cultivate as good a tree as possible, most source these suckers from trees known to produce quality miraa in abundance. Though the age of a tree is agreed upon as being the prime factor in generating quality miraa (see below), farmers distinguish miraa by other criteria too. For example, a tree variety to avoid is called *kilantuni*, the product of which is described as having a deceptively pleasing purple appearance, but the taste and effect of cabbage. Another poor variety is *kiandasi*,<sup>18</sup> described as too potent, rendering the chewer sleepless and susceptible to the sensation of ants crawling over the skin (formication). *Miraa imiru*<sup>19</sup>, on the other hand, is regarded as perfectly balanced in taste and effect. Whether these differences are caused by variations in soil and climate, or whether the varieties differ botanically, it is hard to say.<sup>20</sup> But, in choosing a prime progenitor for a future crop from a friend's *shamba*, one would certainly make straight for the highest quality trees. No payment is necessary for collecting suckers, as these usually go to waste otherwise.

Once a root sucker is transplanted, it will not require much more tending than mature trees: although in dry seasons they might require watering, as they are susceptible to the sun. I once conducted an experiment in the hot climate of Isiolo to see whether I could propagate miraa. Sadly a combination of heat and my neglect in providing for their thirst led to three frazzled root suckers. However, the Nyambenes provide a more congenial climate and, all being well, five years later farmers begin harvesting. Young trees are known as *mithairo* in Igembe dialect (Goldsmith 1986: 159).<sup>21</sup> Trees aged five years are a metre and a half or so in height, and formed by regular pruning (or careful harvesting in the case of older trees) into what is a characteristic shape for miraa trees. The middle sections of branches are kept constantly pruned, maintaining a skeletal appearance (see plate 4): these sections provide the higher quality and more succulent varieties of miraa. At the tips of the main branches are overhanging sections of leaves, which are themselves occasionally pruned, providing other marketable, though less esteemed, varieties. A small strip of banana fibre is often tied at the

base of new shoots: this signals that that shoot is to be left unharvested to form another harvestable-stem producing branch. The more such branches, the bigger the crop.

Standard tending procedures involve occasionally setting alight piles of leaves to smoke out insects. These can be a problem for farmers, as demonstrated by a recent aphid invasion in the Igembe region. One controversial procedure used by some farmers, particularly in Ntonyiri, is to spray on pesticide and fertiliser. This boosts production, but also leaves as a residue a chemical taste which miraa connoisseurs find disgusting. A farmer near Mutuati offered me miraa from his plantation, and led me straight to one particular tree: all his trees had been sprayed except that one, and consequently it was the one he picked for his own or his friends' consumption.

It is not clear what proportion of farmers use spray, though as agricultural officers I met in Maua lamented farmers' demurrals to using fertiliser, one supposes it a small one. Perhaps it is growing, however, as during my brief stay in Kenya in 2002 I witnessed a meeting of farmers and traders who were determined to stamp out spraying chemicals. The meeting was important, attended by designated 'chairmen' acting for traders and farmers of the various Nyambene divisions. One was chairman for the whole district, and made a speech urging farmers and agents to protect miraa and not spoil it with chemicals. He said that miraa should remain unsullied, as it was in the days of ancient generations: farmers and traders benefited fully from miraa in the past without using spray. He claimed that spraying is anyway ineffective – yields are just the same with or without fertiliser – and potentially harmful as trees dry up through its use and consumers suffer through chewing contaminated stems. A rumour passed around at this time claimed some had died in London as a result of the spray's toxicity. I am unsure of this rumour's veracity, but it was making traders worry lest the British Government make miraa illegal. The issue of spraying seemed limited to miraa cultivated in Ntonyiri. Traders I met at Muringene proclaimed miraa sold there chemical-free.

Bernard mentions that farmers also weed around trees and prop up sagging branches (1972: 55), and Goldsmith mentions ‘arboreal surgery’ performed by Meru to deal with bacterial disease (1994: 124). However, I was told that on the whole miraa needs little attention apart from regular harvesting. Miraa trees, farmers assert, are hardy enough to resist many blights that afflict other trees, although outside the Nyambenes they seem more susceptible. One enterprising farmer living a few kilometres from Isiolo, where the climate is much hotter than the Nyambenes, has a miraa *shamba*, and makes some money trading small quantities. He was worried when I met him as his trees had been attacked by a fungal disease.

As miraa trees mature, the regard in which they are held increases. The older the tree, the more resilient to drought it becomes – its better established roots able to seek out water – the more miraa produced, and the better its quality: old trees are called *mbaine* and this signifies quality, as does stating that a wine is produced from grapes of *vieilles vignes*. Farmers command a higher price for *mbaine* miraa. *Mbaine* was the name of a Meru *nthukî* dating from a long time ago. *Mbaine* and another called *Ntangi* are reckoned the first generations to have undergone initiation into warriorhood (see Nyaga 1997: 20), and are linked proverbially to anything dating back to ancient times. For example, Meru have the saying *Kuuma Ntangi na Mbaine ũu nĩu Meru itwĩre* meaning ‘[f]rom Ntangi and Mbaine things have always been so in Meru’ (loc. cit.). As one Meru told me, old miraa trees were termed *mbaine* since ‘they are so old they must have been planted by the Mbaine generation’. Miraa from such trees is also termed *asili*, meaning ‘original’ in Kiswahili.

Goldsmith states that *mbaine* trees are aged twenty years or older (1986: 139), though farmers I spoke to suggested that the *mbaine* epithet be reserved for trees over at least forty years, and preferably for ones whose origins trace back through many generations. A farmer near Mutuati showed me two trees planted in the 1960s: these he called *mbaine*. The suckers from which they were propagated had come from very old *mbaine* trees in his *shamba* that had dried up in a drought. However, I suspect purists restrict the term *mbaine* for trees even

older. The oldest trees that I personally saw were those in a *shamba* above Nkinyang'a. These are four metres or so in height, and have a remarkably large girth at their base, almost as if the trunk was swollen. A friend charmingly compared this swelling to elephantiasis, and advised that in picking a good bundle of miraa one should look for the same swelling at the base of the stems as this signifies that the miraa is *mbaine*. I saw another *mbaine* growing in a *shamba* high above Karama. It seemed as if it had been cultivated before the current technique of forming miraa into its usual shape, towering as it does straight up into the air in a noticeably different way to its younger comrades.

Farmers like to put the age of their oldest trees in figures well into the hundreds. I was told of trees of three hundred and more, even eight hundred, years old. Although the latter is probably fanciful, Goldsmith states that '[t]here are trees that can be accurately dated back over two hundred years in the heart of traditional cultivation' (Goldsmith 1994: 76). Whatever the true age of these formidably impressive trees, the high regard in which farmers hold them is certain. Such trees give farmers a tangible link to their past. Bernard speaks of the importance to Meru farmers of banana trees (1972: 53):

[The banana] helped bridge food shortages between seasons; it provided famine relief in dry years; and it was a social stabilizer and a measure of time. A Meru man was not yet ready to marry until his banana plantation (*rurigo* [Kimeru]) had become established. Once growing, bananas promoted a sense of permanency to Meru existence. In describing his tenure to a piece of land a man might remark, "Look, my grandfather planted those bananas. Yes, we have been here a long time".

These remarks concerning permanency of existence and banana trees are valid for *mbaine* too: in the case of *mbaine* the tracing of time can go further back than a grandfather, all the way to forebears of the *Miriti* generation of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and perhaps further still. As Goldsmith says, *mbaine* 'stand as tangible representatives of group histories and cultural continuity' (Goldsmith 1994: 77).<sup>22</sup> Such is the prestige of their product it is no wonder these trees are so revered. For a Meru farmer the ideal biography of a miraa tree consists of it becoming a venerable old *mbaine*.

The permanence embodied by really old miraa trees provides a nice counterpoint to the regular harvesting that such trees undergo. The ephemeral nature of miraa's psychoactive constituents mean that once a tree is ready for harvesting, procedures are instigated at a frenzied pace to speed it to consumers, some of whom are on the other side of the world. We now turn from the biography of a miraa tree, to the biography of its product.

### **Harvesting the crop**

#### **Intervals between harvests:**

Miraa plantations are harvested regularly, and a harvest is known as a *mainga* (Goldsmith 1999: 19), the timing of which depends on the variety to be picked and the amount of recent rainfall. One criterion applied in distinguishing varieties is stem-length. For example, Igembe miraa is divided up into three main varieties: *giza* (around 10-15cms in length), *colombo* (around 15-25cms in length), and *kangeta* (around 25-40cms in length). Thus different varieties are picked at different intervals relative to these lengths. Amount of rainfall is obviously a crucial determinant of the size of intervals between harvestings. When the rains come, growth rate quickens. A farmer from Maili Tatu estimated the following intervals for varying amounts of rainfall:

- 21 days between harvestings in dry months.
- 17 days during scant rains.
- 14 days in the wettest months.

This is at odds with Goldsmith's statement that miraa is harvested once a month in rainy seasons and every forty-five days in dry seasons (1986: 141). His figures strike me as high.

Kenya's climate usually consists of two rainy seasons. As Bernard relates in reference to the Meru district (*italicised words are Kimeru*):

The longer of the two rainy seasons begins shortly after the vernal equinox and extends well into May. This is known as *uthima*. June, July, August, and September are dry throughout the district, but following the autumnal equinox, a shorter rainy season, known as *urugura*, commences in mid-October and persists into December. *Urugura* is followed by two or three months of predominantly dry weather, though most stations do receive small amounts in both January and February. (1972: 22-23)

Thus, at the height of *uthima* and *urugura* miraa production is at its highest, falling away in drier months. In drier months, the different zones of production are said to vary in the constancy of production: plantations in the main Igembe zone maintain a higher rate of production than those in other zones. This was put down to the higher number of *mbaine* trees there, which can seek out the needed moisture with their roots. Also, production is reckoned higher in Ntonyiri than around Muringene (see Goldsmith 1994: 107-108). Kaelo in particular has a reputation for consistent production: traders from Mutuati travel there to source miraa when that of Mutuati is dwindling. Climate is a crucial factor: lower altitude plantations near Kianjai and Muthara dwindling more rapidly than their higher altitude, cooler, and wetter equivalents.

#### **Harvesting arrangements:**

Various arrangements are made to ensure a *shamba* gets harvested. These arrangements concern who does the picking and grading (i.e. removing the unwanted leaves from stems and packaging bundles together). Three methods are commonly used:

(a): One arrangement often used in the Karama / Nkinyang'a and Kianjai / Muthara zones is that farmers mobilise friends and relatives to pick and grade miraa. Pickers tend to be young men, and payment is not normally made; one farmer whose *shamba* is located above Karama said some farmers pay ksh.5 per bundle picked and graded, but he considered this unusual.

Reciprocal relationships between farmers no doubt play a part in maintaining the fairness of such harvesting arrangements.

(b): In the main Igembe zone troops of young boys aged ten years old or thereabouts, are often hired to pick miraa. When travelling through this region at midday one can hardly fail to spot them: they are commonly seen strolling or sitting around drinking soda in groups of about seven or eight, looking somewhat dishevelled in workaday attire. If returning directly from picking, they usually carry *bundas* full of the day's harvest on their heads. A little bit of the day's harvest finds its way into their cheeks too, most being expert chewers. They are paid a small sum for each bundle that they pick and grade, but being efficient, they can collect around ksh.300 or so for their labour: a large sum indeed for young boys in Kenya. Their work tends to end at about 10-11 a.m.

Farmers I met near Mutuati all took it into their own hands, or delegated the task to a trusted family member, to hire and supervise this harvesting workforce. Arranging for the boys to come is normally done the day before a *shamba* is to be picked: pickers hang around eateries in the evening, and there farmers enlist their services for the following morning's harvest. Amongst pickers themselves, one member might be allocated extra responsibility for keeping the rest in order: one lad I saw in Mbiriata village near Mutuati clearly had some authority, chivvying his underlings along on the way to another *shamba*.

Tales abound of these young 'tycoons' and their wealth, often involving them dining in restaurants rather than at home or lending money to 'poor' fellows in the neighbourhood like teachers. A spirit of camaraderie prevails amongst them, and older ex-pickers indulge in nostalgia for days when they and friends shared banter whilst perched precariously on a branch. Some boys work when off school for the holidays, or at the weekend, whilst others work most days and consequently do not attend school: young pickers and their lack of education is a controversial topic. Nicholas used to indulge in this well-rewarded work.

When on school-holidays, he would visit Mutuati and earn enough from picking to buy him items like footballs, sports shirts, books, sweets and biscuits. He enjoyed this work so much that his uncle had a hard job to persuade him to return home. Nicholas speaks of his nostalgia for his picking days, and still feels attached to his one-time fellow harvesters.

(c): A third method still involves troops of pickers, but instead of farmers enlisting them, an agent or broker hires a *shamba* and so has responsibility to hire pickers and arrange their supervision. Some hiring is done informally: a middleman hears that a particular *shamba* will be ready the following day, and so visits the farmer to secure the right to harvest. Such a middleman is likely to know the farmer quite well: many middlemen develop good relationships with farmers and have first refusal on harvests. A middleman might pay the farmer an agreed deposit on the morning of the harvest, paying in full later.

Some *shambas* are hired on a longer-term basis. The price agreed upon for the *shamba* is based on the number and quality of the trees, and the expected harvest over the period for which it is hired. Normally the farmer gets a smaller sum than if he or she cuts out the middlemen and arranges the harvesting personally: but he or she gets money in advance, deflects onto someone else the (slight) risk of the harvest not being as bumper as hoped, puts no effort into the physical labour of picking, and need not be on hand. I was often told of such an arrangement, although farmers I spoke to around Mutuati and Maili Tatu do not hire out *shambas* regularly. Some reckoned that those hiring *shambas* take little care when harvesting, and are so keen to profit from them that they spray on fertiliser and strip all marketable stems in one go, damaging the trees. The general impression that hiring out a *shamba* risks low returns and exploitation by 'middlemen' makes many wary of doing so.

Hiring *shambas* on a long-term basis has been the source of much ill-feeling. Much of this ill-feeling has been directed against Somalis for the following reason, as described by Paul Goldsmith:

The practice of ‘renting’ where an agent pays a lower price for a specified number of *mainga* in advance had become fairly common even before the Somalis appeared on the scene. But whereas these contracts previously seldom exceeded six months, the disproportionately higher profits realised by Somali traders allowed them to rent the harvests of individual farms on a long-term basis. What this did was reduce the income realised by local farmers by half or more and it also easily became a permanent arrangement, reducing them to what [has been]...termed “proletarians on patches of land”. (Goldsmith 1999: 19)

The use of contracts in this regard has reportedly left some farmers unable to win back control of their land. Grignon has the following to say on the matter:

Totalement dépossédés, les paysans igembe peuvent rarement s’opposer au renouvellement automatique de leurs baux. Une trentaine de cabinets d’avocats installés à Maua garantissent l’enlèvement juridique de tout procès, si bien que les paysans ne peuvent souvent se défendre de leurs « locataires » que par l’établissement de contrats avec des commerçants rivaux, qui leur font rembourser lourdement, en nombre de récoltes, les frais judiciaires des procès gagnés. (Grignon 1999: 181).

Quite how widespread such contractual arrangements are is difficult to say. Grignon says that not all fall into this ‘piège’ (loc. cit.), and that many arrange harvests themselves. Most farmers I met either harvested themselves, or hired out informally on a short-term basis. Perhaps it is the case that more farmers have wrested control of their land back to reap more financial benefits for themselves (see chapter five).

One recent development throughout the intensive miraa zones is that women occasionally harvest miraa. It is not unusual to see women stripping leaves off harvested stems, but to see them actually climbing trees and picking is rare. Some Meru I met denied that this happens, saying that it is a job for young men or boys. However, one farmer, M’Iweta (see case-studies below), told me that it is becoming more common to see women picking. Another farmer said the same, although with a tone of voice that suggested that it should be regarded as surprising. However, considering that many women now chew miraa openly in the Igembe region, and that some women are active in the miraa trade, perhaps it should not be seen as too surprising.

### **The Harvesting and grading process:**

Harvesting miraa involves intensive work. *Shamba*-size varies greatly, and the number of people used in picking, and the amount of time it takes, depend on how many trees a particular *shamba* contains and the size of the trees. Skilled pickers take under a minute to strip a small tree, while large *mbaine* trees require climbing, which in itself takes time, and have more harvestable branches and hence more miraa. One large *shamba* above Karama contains, at the farmer's reckoning, 520 trees: these can produce the staggering amount of 1000 *shurbas* in rainy seasons at one harvest, and 300-400 *shurbas* in dry seasons. He estimated that to harvest these trees (most of which do not require climbing) generally takes three people three hours. Most plantations have fewer than 100 trees, whereas others are reputed to have well over 1000. I once arranged for a few *mbaine* trees to be picked for me in a plantation above Nkinyang'a. To complete the task of picking five trees and grading the miraa into twenty *shurbas* took four men only a very brief period of time: half an hour including a demonstration of how to tie *ncoolo*, a bundle of miraa used ceremonially (see chapter six). A group coming to pick a *shamba* just after dawn would finish picking and grading by mid-morning.

Before picking commences, it is decided which variety of miraa is to be harvested: this is important, as different varieties are picked from different parts of the tree (see plate 3). The best quality, and most widely sold varieties, are those picked from the main 'skeletal' branches (see plate 4). These include those retailed as *giza*, *kangeta*, *alele*, *colombo*, and *shurba ya karama* and *shurba ya nkinyang'a* (see below). Lower grade varieties are taken from overhanging leafy clumps at the end of branches when these require pruning. These varieties are not plucked from the base of the stems, but are snapped off at a suitable length: thus the name *machenge* is given to one of these varieties, from *kuchenga* meaning 'to cut' in Kimeru, and *makata*, the name used for this variety in Meru and Isiolo, from *kukata* meaning the same in Kiswahili. Also, *mashushu*, *matangoma*, *liboi*, and *murutubu* are names for varieties picked from these sections. Farmers in all zones occasionally pick and sell these

lower-grade varieties, although the Ntonyiri stretch of the main Igembe zone probably generates more than other areas, supplying considerable quantities for the northeast.<sup>23</sup> These varieties are more commonly picked in dry seasons, when there is more demand for them as prices for better varieties increase.

Another lower grade variety – called *nyeusi*, *ng'oileng* or *ngo* – is plucked from the base of the trunk. Farmers above Karama told me that on the elephantitic base of *mbaine* trees the rainy season induces such growth of this variety that one can grip and pull off in one go sufficient stems for a small bundle.

Shoots growing up from the roots can be profuse in rainy seasons, and these are sometimes harvested and sold cheaply as the variety *lombolio*. Shrivelled stems that grow in the main skeletal section of a miraa tree are occasionally picked and sold under the name *gathanga*.

Tree climbing is a regular part of life for boys and young men in the Nyambenes, and no fear is shown even at the prospect of climbing tall *mbaines*. I was allowed to climb one tree in a Nkinyang'a *shamba*, on condition that I removed my shoes so as not to harm the tree. (This was the only occasion where I saw such a stipulation applied; most other farmers seemed happy enough for pickers to climb up wearing shoes. I saw one Karama farmer hop up his trees in wellington boots.) Very young trees do not, of course, require climbing.

Expert fingers pick stems quickly, plucking them with a twisting motion. Sometimes when chewing miraa one notices that a stem is hollow towards its base: this happens when the hard inner part of the stem proves awkward to pluck cleanly, and is left still attached to the tree. (My feeble efforts at picking seemed cursed by this.) Plucking stems continues uninterrupted until a picker has a small handful. He then pauses long enough to tie up a small

bundle with a long wiry stem taken from the overhang, and throws the bundle down to the ground. Then plucking is resumed until another handful is ready for binding up.

### **Grading miraa:**

Miraa is graded and packaged with much local idiosyncrasy, but almost all varieties – except the cheapest – give the impression that endless care has gone into their aesthetics. For a novice to grade and package the stems with requisite neatness takes time; experience and techniques honed over generations mean that graders in the Nyambenes prepare whole *bundas* in just a few minutes. Appearance counts in the trade, being one of the main criteria used by buyers in choosing.

Once the plantation has yielded all it can for one harvest, pickers gather together the small bundles and sit and grade the miraa into its marketable form. Some *shambas* are conveniently close to kiosks selling soft drinks; those grading often sit in front of such kiosks, automatically removing leaves from stems whilst sipping soda. A large amount of leaves accumulate in front of kiosks popular with graders, which form an effective ground covering upon which graders sit (see plate 5). Alternatively, grading is done under the shade of a miraa tree, or outside homestead buildings. Stripping the leaves can be very much a family affair, as I witnessed at a friend's *shamba* in Karama: lots of children, a few women, and two men had all gathered together in the homestead to prepare the miraa for sale.

Grading involves these basic stages: stripping unwanted leaves, tying up stems with banana fibre into small bundles (*shurbas*), tying these into larger bundles (*kitundus* and *bundas*), and wrapping the bigger bundles up with *gomba* leaves, the leaves of the banana plant. I will give a brief description of these stages, and then describe in more detail the varieties.

Before stripping leaves, small bundles tied up in the act of picking are untied once more, so each individual stem can be given attention. Regular practice allows leaves to be pulled off with great fluency, although the speed at which hands work occasionally prevents all leaves being removed as cleanly as could be done at a more languid pace. In the procedure, the main danger to avoid is that of breaking the stem in two. The risk of this happening can be reduced by holding the stem at its tip with one hand, whilst stripping the leaves with the other. By using this technique, the stem is kept rigid and vertical, and thus the pull of a leaf being removed cannot snap the stem. One criterion used to distinguish the varieties of miraa is how many leaves have been stripped off. Those grading therefore have to know which variety they are preparing.

Once stems are in the desired state of leafy dress or undress, they are sorted into different sized bundles.<sup>24</sup> The following pattern is often used:

Most stems picked will be fairly uniform in length, given the regular harvesting of plantations. These are first tied into a *shurba* with a strip of banana fibre (an essential piece of kit for miraa graders, forming as it does such a useful thread). *Shurba* is the term the Meru usually apply to these small bundles, and in fact is an Arabic term, used also for the smallest bundles of Yemeni qat.<sup>25</sup> Another term used is *silva*, which I was told originated from the fact that when these bundles were bought at retail outlets, coins would be used to buy them, i.e. 'silver', as opposed to bigger retail bundles for which notes would be needed. *Shurbas* vary in the number of stems they contain: a *shurba* of the longest-stemmed variety (*kangeta*: see below for a full description) is usually constituted by only three stems, whereas a *shurba* of a shorter variety contains around ten to fifteen stems. Bigger bundles are normally made up out of ten *shurbas* tied together with banana fibre, making a *kitundu*, the standard retail unit. Ten or so *kitundus* are tied into a *bunda*, the usual unit for wholesale trade.

The system of grading varies according to variety, and to the zone producing it. Now I provide comprehensive descriptions of varieties I saw or heard about, including descriptions of presentation and packaging:

**Miraa varieties from the main Igembe region:**

*Giza*: This variety – the one most commonly sold within Kenya – is stripped of all leaves, except for small purple leaves at stem tips. It is often high quality, harvested from the skeletal section of the tree, and can be quite succulent. The standard retail *kitundu* consists of 8 – 10 *shurba* each made up of 10-15 stems. It derives its name from the fact that miraa used to be sold and chewed secretly – in darkness – when restrictions on it were applied by the British: *giza* means darkness in Kiswahili. Not all *giza* is high quality: it is subdivided into *giza no.1*, *giza no.2*, etc. Lower grades often have stray stems of *kata* and *nyeusi* mixed in, usually inserted in the middle of *shurbas* to camouflage them, and so as not to detract from appearance. Mixing in stems not from the main skeletal section of the trees is common in dry seasons when high quality stems are scarce, and *shurbas* require extra bulk. The highest quality *giza* is called *ngoba* (see plate 7), and contains only the most succulent stems; it is tied into bigger *shurbas* in the manner of *colombo*...

*Colombo*: This is a very high quality variety, much of which is exported to Europe. It consists of the very best, most succulent, stems of the skeletal section, and ideally is picked only from *mbaine* trees. Farmers in Ntonyiri whose trees generate *colombo* are reckoned lucky, as prices for this variety are consistently high. As with *giza*, most leaves are stripped. Its stems tend to be longer than those of *giza*, and a *kitundu* consists of five large *shurbas*, each twice as big as a standard *shurba* of *giza*: the word *muluka* (meaning ‘something big’ in Kimeru) is used by Igembe in reference to *shurbas* of *colombo*. A young lad from Karama with an encyclopaedic knowledge of miraa, explained the name etymologically thus: *colombo* is recognisable because the chunky base of *mbaine* stems curve outwards from the banana leaf wrapping. This gives a *kitundu* of *colombo* an appearance reminiscent of bell-bottom trousers. Bell-

bottom trousers are associated with sailors, and Columbus is a famous sailor: hence the name. (See plate 8.)

*Kangeta*: This variety – named after Kangeta town, but sourced all through the main Igembe zone – consists of the longest marketable stems picked from the skeletal sections. Again, most leaves are removed, although some leaves are sometimes left at the tips. As stems are long, and often thick, *shurbas* of the very best *kangeta* are made up of only a few stems. Ten *shurbas* make up a *kitundu*. *Kangeta* reaching Britain is repackaged by Somalis in Nairobi into much bigger *shurbas*, three of these making up the standard *kitundu* sold in Manchester. As with *giza*, quality varies: certainly much of the *kangeta* sent abroad is very much a mish-mash with *makata* stems inserted for bulk.

*Alele*: Like *kangeta*, *alele* tends to consist of very good quality, and very long stems. The differences are that most of its leaves are left on, and that each *kitundu* is not subdivided into *shurbas*.

*Mbogua*: This variety is only sold in Isiolo, and is named after a pioneering Imenti miraa dealer who supplied much of the commodity to Isiolo in years gone by. As with *alele*, most leaves are left attached. It contains many high quality stems of varied lengths: some stems are large and have many smaller stems still attached. For that reason, *mbogua* is described as the *mama ya miraa* ('mother of miraa'). These stems are collected together in a random fashion, and tied using a long stem of miraa from the overhanging sections of the tree rather than the usual banana fibre.

*Makata*: This variety is packaged like *giza*, but comes from the overhanging leafy sections. It is known in Kimeru as *machenge*, and most leaves are removed, as with *giza*. Another name for it is *murutubu*. (See plate 9.)

*Matangoma*: Folk etymology relates that this term means the ‘head is good’ in Borana. It is named thus as it is low quality miraa picked from overhanging sections of the tree, and sometimes only the top half of stems are good to chew: i.e. the head is good, but forget about the rest. This variety has most leaves left on, and is packaged like *mbogua*. In Kimeru it is known as *mashushu*. (See plate 10.)

*Liboi*: This variety is named after the town Liboi, where much of it passes through on its way into Somalia (Liboi being on the border between Kenya and Somalia). It is also picked from the leafy overhanging sections, and most leaves are left on. By being left with so many leaves it is thought to last longer on long hot journeys to Kenya’s northeast.

*Nyeusi*: This consists of miraa harvested from near the trunk base. It is presented like *giza*, with short stems stripped of most leaves, and made into a *kitundu* of 8 – 10 *shurbas*. Sometimes one finds *nyeusi kangeta*, which comes from the same part of the tree but consists of longer stems. *Nyeusi* means ‘black’ in Kiswahili, referring to the usually dark hue of the stems. It is also known as *black power*, *ng’oileng*, and *ng’oa*. The latter is the Kiswahili verb stem meaning ‘pull up’, referring to the manner in which it is harvested. *Ng’oileng* is a slang word formed from the same verb: Nicholas claims he originated this term amongst Isiolo chewers.

*Gathanga*: These short stunted stems are very green, and packaged like *giza*. The main notoriety of this variety is its powerful aphrodisiac effect on men: if some accounts are to be believed, it induces priapism.

*Lombolio*: I have not actually seen a bundle of this variety and am unsure how it is packaged, although I know that it consists of stems growing up from the roots in rainy seasons. Its name

is said to mean ‘watery’ in Kimeru. It is very cheap, often sold in Isiolo, and is notorious for inducing impotence in men.

**Miraa varieties from the Karama / Nkinyang’a zone:**

*Shurba ya karama*: The stems making up this variety are harvested from the main skeletal sections. Usually all leaves, including those at the tip of the stems are removed. It is made up of a large handful of usually short stems (around 12cm), though occasionally farmers leave a longer interval between harvesting, producing stems similar in length to *kangeta*; the long stemmed version is known as ‘scud’ after the large Iraqi missiles made famous in the Gulf War. Nicholas popularised the term *No.14* for this long-stemmed variety: *No.14* is the longest bladed *panga* (‘machete’) used in agriculture. It is called *shurba ya karama* as a *shurba* is the standard retail unit for this variety.

*Shurba ya nkinyang’a*: This variety is again harvested from the main skeletal sections. In presentation, it differs from *shurba ya karama* in that small purple leaves at the tips of the stems are not removed, and it is packaged in bundles three times smaller. One friend insisted that *shurba ya nkinyang’a* is usually picked from *mbaine* trees, making it very high in quality. The very best is known as *asili*, alluding to *mbaine miraa*, the ‘original’ miraa. *Shurba ya nkinyang’a* originates in *shambas* around Nkinyang’a, Mbaranga (high above Karama town), and Kangeta. As with *shurba ya karama* it comes in various stem lengths, although commonly made up of short stems.

*Alele*: Some *alele* is sourced from the Karama / Nkinyang’a zone, and is of exceptional quality. It is generally *mbaine*, and packaged in *shurbas* the size of the *nkinyang’a* variety, but still has most leaves attached. Its stems are generally short in comparison with the Igembe variety. It is rarely sold, and is expensive.

*nyeusi, gathanga, makata*: These varieties are presented and packaged like their Igembe equivalents.

#### **Miraa varieties from the Kianjai / Muthara zone:**

Some miraa from this zone is graded and packaged identically to Igembe *giza*. There are also other varieties: some similar to *alele*, and others similar to *shurba ya karama*. One variety sold in Isiolo is similar to the latter, but packaged in bigger *shurbas*.

#### **Miraa from the less intensive Igembe zone:**

Varieties sourced from this zone are packaged in *shurbas* slightly bigger than those of *shurba ya nkinyang'a*, and usually consist of fairly short stems. One variety is called *alele*, and, as one would expect, comes with many leaves left attached. Another is sold as *kathata* – this was the name of a famous Meru ‘witchdoctor’ who owned a large *shamba* within the zone – and contains greenish stems with some leaves left attached. Another variety grown in *shambas* near Kinna is named *algani* after a primary school in the town. Supposedly it was named thus during the El-Niño rains of 1998 which resulted in Kinna being cut off by flooding and consequently deprived of miraa. Desire for the twigs led some Borana men to collect miraa on foot from Meru *shambas* close to town. As they would be gone for the equivalent of a whole school day from morning to late afternoon, it was remarked in jest that they must have spent the day at Algani School. Hence the name. This variety is similar to *nyeusi* in appearance, and is notorious for causing fornication.<sup>26</sup>

#### **Post-grading procedures:**

Once grading is finished, the next task is to take the bundles to wherever those willing to buy them are waiting.

Farmers rarely retail miraa themselves. One cautionary tale warning of the dangers inherent in this was told by a small time road-side trader at Karama. He reported that one

woman farmer tried to by-pass himself and his fellows by selling miraa directly to commuters passing by on the main road. On one occasion a bus paused at Karama. The touts on board beckoned her over and asked to buy a *bunda* of ten *shurbas* at ksh.500. She agreed, and was then asked by the touts to get them change as they only had a ksh.1000 note. As she went to do this, the touts, holding on to both the money and miraa, signalled to the driver to move on. On her return she could only stare in disbelief at the bus vanishing over the horizon, feeling chagrin at being duped. The trader ended his tale with the moral of the story: that farmers should follow the customary procedures, entrusting the retail of miraa to experienced retailers. Nowadays that particular farmer sells her miraa only to traders like him.

Most farmers, however, have to get their crop to agents, and this often involves a trustworthy family member or a friend walking to the nearest town. Around Karama and Nkinyang'a, agents wait at strategic points, and in the morning men arrive in town with the product of the most recent harvest in their hands or inside a plastic bag to sell to agents.

While farmers around Karama and Nkinyan'ga have little distance to cover to reach agents, for some in the main Igembe zone it would be difficult to take their bundles straight into a main miraa centre like Mutuati town as distances prove prohibitive. In this region, therefore, there are collection points near smaller villages where agents in Land Rovers collect miraa. Thus, farmers around villages like Kabache and Mbiriata bring miraa into those villages rather than walk to Mutuati.<sup>27</sup> Some delegate for their miraa to be taken directly to bigger towns, however: normally by foot, but sometimes by bicycle. One farmer I saw at Kabache tipped a boy a few shillings to take his miraa into Mutuati on his behalf.

Wherever a farmer takes his (or her) miraa to sell there comes the point where bargaining ensues. At big miraa markets as well as at smaller collection points like Kabache, huddles of men with *bundas* can be seen at around midday attempting to get as much money as possible from middlemen.

Farmers will have a good idea of the price they can expect for their miraa. The price that middlemen pay varies according to current production rates; farmers command a higher price in dry months when miraa is scarce: for example, when production is at its highest in the rains, a farmer might get around ksh.15-20 for a *shurba ya karama*, as opposed to ksh.40-60 in dry seasons. The onset of rains has a dramatic effect on production levels, and farmers usually can anticipate the harvest by harvest increase or decrease in price per *bunda*. As the Nyambenes possess a fairly reliable set of seasons, experience teaches farmers and middlemen alike what prices to expect in certain seasons. A certain amount of unpredictability is said to creep in, however, due to miraa's susceptibility to cold, which can slow down growth rate. Also, in years of anomalous weather patterns, such as happened in the wake of El Niño (which struck Kenya in 1998 and was responsible for freakish conditions in the years that followed, including the drought of 2000), farmers realign prices to ensure a steady income; hence the very high prices of 2000. It is reckoned that farmers have the upper hand over buyers when bargaining in dry seasons, as many middlemen have orders to make up and miraa is scarce, whereas in rainy seasons the upper hand switches to middlemen, as production becomes profuse.

When price bargaining occurs at busy central points, prices for certain varieties become set as word gets around of the going rate. Thus, in Kabache I witnessed farmers selling *bundas* of *kangeta*: the going rate expected by farmers was then (late July 2001) ksh. 500. Farmers would still try and bargain with middlemen over this – one walked away from a middleman in a huff, trying in vain to attain the necessary leverage to make him raise the price – but seemed resigned to getting that particular sum.

Obviously, price parameters for a particular bundle are affected by the variety the farmer is selling, and by the age of the tree from whence it came. *Mbaine* miraa always fetches larger sums than miraa from young *mithairo* trees, one reason why farmers are so keen for their trees

to possess this appellation. Also, quality of presentation is a factor. Audun Sandberg (1969: endnote 24) talks of farmers not getting the full going rate for a bundle if packaged badly. Today it is unlikely, given the skill of graders, that a bundle would be poorly packaged. However, bundles that appear higher in quality or are particularly generous looking in size might fetch more, thus giving an incentive for farmers to make up the miraa to its best advantage, and perhaps slip in a few lower quality stems to bulk up bundles.

The actual bargaining process between farmer and middleman can be a fraught one: there is often little bonhomie. This is not always the case, however, and some interactions seem warm: one middleman at Nkinyang'a adopted an avuncular air with some farmers coming down from *shambas* to sell miraa. Many middlemen seem aware of the need for maintaining good relations with farmers, and do their best to ensure farmers get a fair deal.

Friendship works to the advantage of both farmers and buyers, mutually helping each other out as the balance of power between farmer and buyer shifts seasonally, and some farmers only deal with certain buyers, forming long lasting relationships. However, it was reported that older farmers are targeted by unscrupulous buyers who visit *shambas* personally and can use the farmers' lack of knowledge of what is currently a 'fair' price. Information about current market prices is likely to seep through to most farmers, as relatives and friends would likely advise when a buyer is being disingenuous. However, some leeway is no doubt possible, and clued-up buyers might hope that the farmer is not *au fait* with the latest state of the miraa market.

## Rewards for farmers

Farmers from different zones face different market conditions, and money to be made from miraa differs. However, it is fair to say that for farmers in all zones, miraa is financially worthwhile. A comparison of miraa with tea and coffee is useful:

### **Miraa vs. coffee and tea:**

Farmers emphasise that miraa is much more profitable than coffee or tea. Bernard reports that '[a]lthough only about 3,000 acres are grown, *miraa* is second to coffee in Meru as a revenue earner' (1972: 130). He estimates from the perforce sketchy figures on miraa's production<sup>28</sup> that farmers gained on average more than ksh.2000 annually per acre. Hjort (1974: 31) uses Bernard's figures on coffee to estimate that it brought a return of ksh.1543 per acre for farmers in Meru District as a whole. This suggests a 30 per cent higher return for miraa.

As coffee prices have dropped sharply over recent years 'equipment from the Maua coffee cooperative was sold at auction in March 1999' (OGD 1998/9: 190). Miraa is outstripping coffee more than ever in terms of profit for farmers.

Cultivating tea is more worthwhile than cultivating coffee for those with land at a suitably high altitude, and the higher cultivated zones of the Nyambenes near Maua are renowned for the quality of their tea. Bernard speaks thus of the benefits of tea for high altitude regions:

Of the many positive qualities of tea as a cash crop, its most significant feature is that it can grow at high altitudes. For the first time farmers in the former upland zone have a reliable source of income...Income levels from tea and dairy farming are now so high that upland farmers are envied... (1972: 129-130)

The rewards from tea are modest in comparison with miraa: one farmer mentioned in the UNDCP report of 1999 (pg. 27) reckoned that every shilling invested in tea brings a return of

two shillings; whereas every shilling invested in miraa gives a return of four shillings. Also, earnings from tea come only sporadically in payments from co-operatives: some farmers see this as a disadvantage, preferring the regular earnings generated by miraa each harvest.

Nyambene farmers with higher-altitude land are fortunate in that they can intercrop both tea and miraa, further boosting the land's profit potential.

Miraa farmers in the Nyambenes do not have to be 100% dependent on miraa: sensible intercropping allows breathing space in case of possible problems in the miraa trade.

#### **Rewards in the different zones:**

Some variables for how much money farmers make from miraa hold throughout the different zones: the number of trees owned; the age of the trees, *mbaine* trees being the most lucrative; how well blessed a *shamba* is in regard to soil, as this affects the quality of miraa produced; whether or not a farmer hires out the *shamba* or personally takes charge of harvests.

However, it is worth taking a zone by zone look at how well farmers do out of miraa, and how much reliance they place upon it.

**Kianjai / Muthara:** Farmers in this zone tend not to rely too much on miraa. Kianjai and Muthara farmers have not grown the crop for as long as their Igembe counterparts, and so their region did not develop as a focus for the trade. It therefore is not geared up for it.

Farmers here concentrate more on subsistence crops, and coffee and tobacco, although more reliance on miraa might develop. This depends on trade in miraa from this zone expanding beyond the local environs where it is mainly limited at present. There are signs that this is happening: some is sold in Isiolo and Meru. Some people, admittedly Tigania from this zone, assured me Muthara and Kianjai miraa is especially good, containing less juice than other varieties – the juice of miraa being reckoned to cause stomach upsets if ingested in large enough quantities. Such repute could become known further afield, increasing demand, and encouraging more Muthara and Kianjai farmers to plant miraa.

Higher altitude *shambas* in this zone, helped by a cooler climate, should produce decent sized harvests consistently. Also, I was told that many *shambas*, especially around Muthara, have trees that can be termed *mbaine*: they produce quality miraa consistently. However, for farmers with younger trees in lower altitudes, the dry seasons curb production sharply, making it hard to derive good money from them all year round. However, it seems likely that farmers attain good prices for harvests, either retailing miraa locally themselves, or selling on to others. Miraa sold in Muthara and Kianjai retails at a high price (because of its quality, according to some locals), and one certainly hopes that farmers are suitably rewarded.

**The less intensive Igembe zone:** Miraa sourced in this region is low in quality, fetching a cheap price at retail (ksh.20 per *shurba*, the standard retail unit of miraa from this zone). For this reason, it seems unlikely that farmers do especially well from it. However, as there is demand for this miraa in Kinna and Garba Tulla, and that Somali agents source some miraa for the international trade from here (see next chapter), farmers would be encouraged to plant at least a few miraa trees. Showing tourists from the Meru National Park round miraa *shambas* earns extra money for some farmers in this zone.

**Karama / Nkinyang'a:** Here few *shambas* are completely miraa-free. The trade networks for miraa that spread from these towns stretch as far afield as Nairobi and even Mombasa. Consequently demand is high. Farmers seem to get a good price too. In the trade from Karama to Isiolo, one trader reported that at the time (July 2001) he was buying *shurba ya karama* at ksh. 70 from farmers; these were then sold at around ksh.100 - 110 in Isiolo, providing the farmer with well over half of the total money raised. Lower grades of the same variety at the same time could be bought for around ksh.35-40 from farmers, and retailed for ksh.60-80. As usual, the age of the tree has much to do with the price that agents pay, and there are *mbaine* trees aplenty in *shambas* above Karama and Nkinyang'a. Trees at such an altitude maintain a decent rate of production even in a drought as severe as that of 2000.

Farmers with lower altitude *shambas* can suffer more in dry seasons, as production dwindles. For some reason not all lower-altitude farmers suffer in this respect, and older trees can maintain a decent production rate even at low altitude.<sup>29</sup>

Buyers in this zone are local men, many of them farmers too. Most miraa deals are between farmers and buyers well known to each other: this might play a part in ensuring a fair deal for farmers.

**The main Igembe zone:** In the Igembe region serviced by the wholesale market of Muringene, most money raised by a particular harvest goes back to farmers: in the case of a *kitundu* of *giza* retailing at around ksh.300 in Isiolo, the farmer receives around ksh.200-220 if he or she sells it personally at the wholesale market. The agent and retailer would split the ksh.80-100 profit. Much *giza* would not be good enough to fetch such a sum at retail: farmers really are at an advantage if their trees produce higher grade varieties. Extremely fortunate farmers with *mbaine* trees can sell varieties like *alele*, making more money both because of the quality of the miraa, and because the way *alele* is packaged means their miraa can be stretched into a larger number of bundles.

Muringene market is constituted mainly by Meru buyers, who, as with the Karama / Nkinyang'a zone, are likely to be farmers too. For this reason, it seems in their own interests to keep prices at a reasonable level, so they are well rewarded when their own *shambas* are harvested.<sup>30</sup> Whilst there probably are farmers who sell miraa at Muringene and feel hard done by, I heard no accusations of exploitation of farmers in this section of the zone. Many farmers in the Ntonyiri section, by contrast, feel exploited. Muringene agents and farmers told me that low prices paid for Ntonyiri miraa were due to the poorer quality of miraa cultivated there.<sup>31</sup> However, farmers I spoke to around Mutuati had another explanation: the Somali monopoly on miraa from this region. I was told that around 90% of Ntonyiri miraa is bought for the Somali network – and certainly a vast proportion is –and so farmers have little

choice but to sell to Somalis, or Meru brokers working for Somalis. As well as keeping prices down, Somalis are also said to demand larger than usual *kitundus*, refusing payment if they consider them small, and to sometimes return miraa bought on deposit, claiming the miraa is poor quality. Farmers might then lose out as brokers can then not afford to pay them back in full. This issue is a crucial one in the miraa's social life, and a source of conflict. For this reason, a longer section will be dedicated to this issue in chapter five. For now, suffice it to say that prices do seem low in the Ntonyiri region compared with those of Muringene: some say that in the rainy season a *bunda* of *giza* can reach as low a price as ksh.300 in Mutuati. This seems very low, and may only be for very low quality *bundas*. As in all zones, *mbaine* miraa is guaranteed to fetch a decent price: *colombo* is reckoned to never fetch less than ksh.1000 per *bunda*, and often fetches around ksh.1500. Blessed are the *mbaine* owners.

Miraa, even in Ntonyiri, is a very good earner for farmers, although only those with large *mbaine* plantations are likely to become rich from selling their produce. Most find it a vital addition to their income that makes a crucial difference to household finances. As Meru delegates who brought *mbaine* miraa to President Kenyatta, when requesting that restrictions which the government was threatening to impose on the miraa trade be forgotten about, told him, '*miraa* clothes our children and pays their school fees' (Goldsmith 1999: 17). However, agricultural officers in Maua hardly seemed enamoured of miraa when I met them in August 2000. They told me that although much money is made from miraa, more could be made from tea and coffee; they lamented that miraa is not usually treated with fertiliser, as this restricts yields; they also said they discourage farmers from growing miraa as, despite the money changing hands, in the long run it 'increases poverty' (presumably by keeping young harvesters away from school). Friends of mine dismissed the first criticism as nonsense: miraa provides far higher returns than either tea or coffee. On the second point, many farmers reckon that spraying fertiliser both puts off consumers and shortens the life of miraa trees. As regards children picking miraa, most see this as a problem for the Igembe region, but it is

defensively pointed out that children in other parts of Kenya pick tea and coffee: the problem is not limited to miraa alone.

In the UNDCP report on drugs in Africa, agricultural officers are reported to have the following concerns with miraa (1999: 26): ‘*a*) it is risky from an investment perspective to have such a concentration in the production of one and only one crop; *b*) khat cultivation displaces many of the traditional food crops; *c*) the profits for this activity are too often spent on alcohol consumption, or sent to other parts of the country, that is, there is very little productive reinvestment in the region – thus the extreme poverty that is manifest throughout Nyambene.’ The first point seems countered by intercropping. Even when a large number of young trees are growing in tight formation, subsistence crops can usually be seen planted in another section of the *shamba*.<sup>32</sup> Certainly miraa seems less likely to preclude cultivating other crops than tea or coffee. On the second point, would tea or coffee cultivation – which one senses many agricultural officers prefer – preserve traditional food crops? Miraa – certainly in Igembe – is itself a ‘traditional’ crop, and many farmers would surely be aware of methods to combine its cultivation with other ‘traditional’ crops. The third point does not ring true with my own experience, but then I might have just fortuitously met a non-representative sample of farmers. One often hears it said that miraa profits are put to little good use, and this may be so for some farmers (and traders). If it is, then surely miraa *per se* is not the problem; the problem lies in the fact that it can generate good money. However, it seems odd to criticise a crop for being too good a source of income.

Goldsmith describes well the prosperity of the Igembe in the 1980s in comparison to Kenyan farmers elsewhere who were obliged by law to continue monocropping coffee despite the ‘decline of the small-scale coffee industry’ (Goldsmith 1994: 117). ‘Nyambene society faced problems linked to the general economic down-turn in Kenya, but the Igembe predilection for self-sufficiency and their general independent nature insulated them from the more severe effects of recession’ (ibid. 118). Miraa, an indigenous crop, helped keep the

Igembe economy fairly healthy, and by following ‘traditional’ intercropping practices instead of ‘modern’ monocropping methods, food and fuel wood were also plentiful at a time when in Imenti some had only enough fuelwood for ‘one meal a day’ (loc. cit.). Bad times can affect miraa farmers too, as the drastic drought of 2000 proved when money became scarce for many. However, demand for miraa is such that farmers can bounce back once adverse conditions have abated, as indeed happened in 2000. There is a lot to be said for growing the crop.

Now it is time for us to meet some actual farmers, and so add character to the more generalised descriptions constituting the bulk of this chapter.

### **Meet the farmers**

In this section I use ‘farmer’ to refer to the person who owns and profits directly from a certain patch of land; a farmer in this sense is not necessarily the one who tends the plantation. Indeed, some of the farmers mentioned might not think of themselves as principally farmers, but instead as, say, a nurse, or as a miraa agent. Given the great importance of agriculture for Meru, however, it is likely that most regard themselves as farmers at heart.

There is talk of non-Tigania / Igembe farmers growing miraa in the Nyambenes. One such farmer was a pioneering trader in Isiolo: Mzee Mbogua. He is an Imenti. After a long stint ferrying miraa to Isiolo, Mzee Mbogua retired there. He invested in land in the Nyambenes, and owns a *shamba* that his sons tend. I was told that one European owns a miraa plantation, although this strikes me as doubtful, and that some Somali tried to buy up land in the Nyambenes: given the current tension between Meru and Somali, it is unlikely they could succeed. The vast majority of Nyambene farmers are Tigania or Igembe.

### **Case-studies of farmers and their shambas:**

(1): M'Laichenna is Tigania, from the vicinity of Kianjai. He is in his early thirties, and now works some distance away from the Nyambenes in the Government Offices of Isiolo. He is well educated, with a degree from the University of Nairobi. As well as his government job, M'Laichenna owns a kiosk selling general goods in Isiolo, and a bar. He and his wife now have a baby boy, and much of his earnings go to support him and other dependants, including brothers still going through school. Given his busy work schedule with the office and his duties at the kiosk and bar, it is understandable that he gets few opportunities to visit the Nyambenes. Despite this, he does have a *shamba* near Kianjai. He was given this land by his father, and it contains about fifteen miraa trees, some of a respectable age (around 20 years old). As he rarely is able to visit, relatives tend it and make what use of it they can. The Kianjai region is quite arid, and the trade system there is not particularly well-developed. These factors combine to preclude much money being made from such a plantation. His relatives harvest the miraa, however, and make some money selling it locally. The *shamba* appears more useful for subsistence crops like maize. M'Laichenna, therefore, has little to do with his *shamba*, although he plans to develop it further in later years.

(2): *Mdozi* is the nickname of one farmer whose *shamba* lies high above Karama, at the very edge of the forest that crowns the Nyambenes. Despite the long slog required to reach it, its location is fortunate, offering splendid views down to the savannah below. *Mdozi* is a young man, in his early thirties, and is married with children. Most of his income comes from trading miraa in Nkubu, a small town south of Meru. This is a recent venture, however, and *Mdozi* started out selling potatoes in Karama. From such humble beginnings, *Mdozi* has progressed, and now does very well from the miraa trade, earns a decent amount from his *shamba*, and has set up a café near his homestead that his wife runs. Nicholas regards *Mdozi*

as wise, as any money he makes is invested, while some miraa traders squander their cash. Mdozi inherited a hectare-sized portion of land from his father, as did his brothers. The *shamba* now boasts a wide range of *mithairo* and *mbaine* trees, numbering about eighty in total, and also provides potatoes that the family still sells, and subsistence crops for the family's consumption. Mdozi himself harvests his miraa every 21 days or so if he is not working at the kiosk, along with 10 other pickers (relatives and friends). *Shambas* in that particular location are renowned for the quality of their produce, and are not as subject to seasonal variation as others, producing a consistent supply of miraa. Traders are well aware of the quality of Mdozi's miraa, and for this reason are eager to buy from him.

(3): M'Iweta is an older Tigania of the age-class *Ratanya*, whose members were initiated between 1945 and 1960 (Peatrik 1999: 33). Long ago he was a tailor in Karama town, and lost all his teeth by chewing miraa with sugar whilst working. Now his primary source of income is miraa. His *shamba* and homestead are located in an area known as *Biriri*, in the lower lying region north of Karama. His is a very large plantation, consisting of around 1000 trees that take 10 people (normally relatives, including women and children) two hours to harvest. They are a mixture of young *mithairo* and older trees planted in 1977. It was in that year that he began to cultivate his *shamba*, obtaining quality suckers from a friend's plantation. He did not buy this land: merely by planting on it he claimed ownership as it was unused before he came along. He has another *shamba* lower down where he cultivates maize, beans and other subsistence crops. He also has a large number of livestock, and 500 coffee bushes. His miraa trees now allow him a comfortable life, providing, as he put it, *starehe* (Kiswahili: 'peace', 'lack of trouble'). This was not always so: when younger he had problems paying his children's school fees whilst waiting for the trees to mature. Agents normally visit him on harvest days, sometimes helping out with the picking, although M'Iweta occasionally sends family members into Karama to sell miraa there. He does not deal with just one agent, but with whomever either pays the most or makes the effort to reach his *shamba* first. Familiarity develops between farmer and agent, and there are three agents in

particular who buy his miraa. Such a large *shamba* as his often provides too much for the needs of just one agent. Most of his miraa ends up in Nairobi, and sometimes agents pay him in full only after the miraa is sold there. M'Iweta has five children, the oldest of whom now works with the UN in the Sudan and has provided him with several grandchildren.

(4): M'Thuranira is an elderly Tigania whose home and plantation is just across the road from Karama. He himself speaks little English or Kiswahili, and so what I learnt about his *shamba* was from his son Charles, a good friend of mine whom I met in 1999 when he worked as a barman in Maua. Nowadays Charles lives on the homestead too, together with his wife and their young daughter. When I visited there was always a swarm of children, offspring of M'Thuranira's other children and relatives: on miraa harvesting days these children help grade bundles. Hospitality ensured I was always provided with fresh miraa. I was never allowed to strip the leaves myself, however, as expert young hands always snatched it away from me, returning it ready for chewing. M'Thuranira has a large family, many of them school children requiring fees paid: Charles gets work when he can (after finishing work at the bar in Maua, Charles even ventured as far as Nairobi to work for a dairy company), and one of his brothers makes a little money hawking miraa to vehicles passing Karama. In the main, however, M'Thuranira looks to his *shamba* of about half an acre for his income. He owns 100 miraa trees, all of varying stages of maturity. The *shamba* is also home to cotton and coffee – both grown as supplementary cash crops to miraa – as well as the usual subsistence crops. Cotton, Charles maintained, provides good returns, but they come in one yearly payment, whereas those of miraa come with its harvest every few weeks. With coffee, farmers not only see returns just once a year, but these returns were also depressingly low when I visited. Miraa, thus, is the mainstay of M'Thuranira's family finances. Money raised from the crop is handled by him personally, and is used for all the usual necessities in life, including food, medicine, and school fees, as well as towards the maintenance of the *shamba* and livestock (M'Thuranira has a number of goats). Charles reckons his father makes on average ksh.500

per harvest from miraa in rainy seasons when prices slump, and about ksh.1000 in dry seasons. This suggests that the trees are normally capable of maintaining a good supply of miraa, even in dry seasons. Sadly this was not the case in 2000, where the oppressive drought left the family with little miraa. Happily they had a more prosperous and relaxed air when I visited in 2002, thanks to plenty of rainfall.

(5): Geoffrey Baariu is a retired Igembe miraa trader who formerly conducted business in Kisumu in Western Kenya. From trading miraa he made quite a fortune which he has invested in a bar and *shamba* near Maili Tatu. He is now in his sixties, and lives with his large family in the same compound as his bar. He owns the *shamba* mentioned above which intercropped tea and miraa with great aesthetic and financial success (see plate 11). His trees are all *miraa imiru*, and are uniform in size having been planted at the same time 20 or so years ago. A young lad who guided me to the *shamba* when I visited it spoke in awed tones of the quality of Geoffrey's miraa, saying that locals become excited on the eve of a Baariu harvest, knowing that the quality will be high. On the *shamba* there are around sixty trees in total all spaced neatly apart, and they cover an area of 1.7 hectares. There is a further stretch of land on which is grown maize and other subsistence crops. The *shamba* is five minutes away from his bar, and has a wooden building in which Geoffrey and his family relax and eat when working there. As Maili Tatu is at the highest point of the Meru – Maua road, the farms around it are suited for tea. I was keen to get some figures from Geoffrey on the respective amounts he makes from tea and miraa, as his crops cover exactly the same acreage. He just remarked that his miraa fetches much more money than his tea. As his miraa is regarded as special, it brings him more money than other farmers obtain with lesser quality miraa, and Maili Tatu brokers are keen to beat a path to his *shamba* on harvest day. Often his miraa is sold locally in Maili Tatu, although some is occasionally bought by agents for Nairobi.

Baariu is a good example of a retired trader who has invested wisely in many ventures. His bar is popular, as is his miraa, and the once yearly payment from a tea co-operative no doubt supplements his income nicely.

(6): Moreno is a young Igembe lad of eighteen. His home is a few kilometres south of Mutuati. He still lives with his parents, and is yet to marry. His father has a *shamba* by the homestead of 80 high quality trees, and has given 30 trees to Moreno. His trees are *miraa imiru*, and some look mature enough to be termed *mbaine*. Moreno is lucky that some of his trees produce *colombo* as it fetches consistently high prices. His trees produce one *bunda* of *colombo* per harvest, as well as one each of *giza* and *kangeta*. At one harvest in August 2002, Moreno obtained ksh.1500 for his *bunda* of *colombo*, ksh.1300 for his *giza*, and ksh.500 for his *kangeta*. Moreno hires pickers, paying them at ksh.10 per *kitundu*. He is not solely reliant on his trees for income, and is employed by the Catholic Diocese as a groundsman. Before obtaining that job, he worked at Mutuati bus stage touting for customers. Thus, being a miraa farmer is not his principal occupation, and given the little tending that miraa trees require between harvest, he normally occupies himself elsewhere. If he is going to be so busy that he will miss some harvests, then he might hire out his plantation to other local lads. He said that for ksh.500 his *shamba* could be hired for a few harvests. Understandably, Moreno is reluctant to do this, as he loses out on so much money. He also spoke of those who hired his *shamba* in the past mistreating his trees by spraying on chemicals. Experiences like that have made him wary of letting others pick his trees.

(7): Priscilla Mwambia is Nicholas's mother: an Igembe from Mbiriata village near Mutuati, who took up nursing as a profession. Priscilla has an eye for a sound investment, and in 1994 she bought a piece of land in Mbiriata, near her father's *shamba*. There she planted various crops, including 600 miraa trees: of these, many dried up and died, but around 250 survived

and are now harvestable *mithairo*. The trees still looked quite small when I visited in 2001, but even so provide a decent crop. Unlike Moreno's trees, *colombo* cannot be picked from such young trees, and only *giza* or *kangeta* are harvested. Priscilla only gets the chance to spend time at the *shamba* when she is on leave, and so rarely tends it personally. Most of the money from the plantation currently goes to those who look after it instead of to her. Rather than seeking immediate gains, she invested in the *shamba* with a view to future security, and 250 mature miraa trees will certainly contribute much to this. One suspects that she is also quite keen to keep a foothold in Mbiriata, as she often expressed a desire to move back there from Karama, where she did not feel entirely at home. Although Priscilla does not chew, she has no qualms about growing it, and knows all the techniques that should be applied in its cultivation.

(8): M'Naituli is Priscilla's father, resident in Mbiriata. He is a loquacious old man of the *Ithalie* generation, ever ready to launch into an entertaining tale of life under British colonial rule, especially if the tale consists of him getting the better of the British. As a young man he worked as a labourer at a European-owned farm near Thika, where he found himself a nemesis in the form of a young Briton who treated him badly. M'Naituli related how once the white man threw him down in a fit of pique onto a flowerbed. He exacted revenge by rolling over the flowerbed in feigned agony, destroying what had been a source of pride for the white man. Later on in life, he became a skilled operator in the miraa trade, transporting miraa on foot to Borana regions north of Mutuati. In colonial times this trade to the then 'Northern Frontier District' was for a time illegal, and so M'Naituli pretended to be a herder, carrying a milk gourd and a spear. If he saw a lorry coming, he would hide the miraa in bushes, and ask the driver if he had seen any cattle along the way. If he observed that the lorry had no police escort, then he would offer them the miraa. Later on, as he became more successful, he invested in a Land Rover, which he used to take miraa all the way to Wajir. He sees success in the miraa trade as the reason he was able to educate all his multitudinous children: he

married three times, and has so many children that Nicholas – his grandson – was unsure as to the exact number.

Eventually he settled down in Mbiriata, and marked off various sections of fertile and unclaimed land as his own, scratching marks onto trees to demarcate boundaries.<sup>33</sup> The stretch of lower lying land to the north of Mutuati where Mbiriata is situated was then sparsely populated, and so land was easy to acquire by simply cultivating it. Once his sons grew up, M’Naituli portioned out land to them, leaving himself a two hectare *shamba* which is now amply supplied with miraa trees. He has some very mature ones, although most are not *mbaine*. For this reason, M’Naituli is unable to produce the biggest money-spinner of the Mutuati region, *colombo*. These days M’Naituli is secure financially, especially as his children are all self-sufficient (a few have become teachers, working in Mutuati schools), and so he can usually afford to wait between harvests for his miraa to mature to *kangeta* length. M’Naituli hires local pickers: he never lets older boys pick miraa, fearing they would damage the trees. Once picking is complete, he sends the miraa to a local distribution point in the care of a trustworthy grandson. M’Naituli is very careful whom he trusts after the following incident involving one of his sons. There is no bank close by, and so he kept money in a polythene bag buried on his land. One of his sons who was regarded locally as a troublemaker – now dead – managed to locate the exact spot where he had buried it, and stole all the money. This taught M’Naituli to be more imaginative in finding hiding places, and to be much more secretive in doing so.

His trees normally provide him with around five *bundas* of *kangeta*, and so earn him around ksh.2500 per harvest, not a bad sum. As well as miraa, his *shamba*, like that of most miraa farmers, also provides subsistence crops, and is home to livestock tethered amongst the trees.

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In farms owned by the likes of these eight characters, miraa is nurtured prior to travelling on trajectories of various distances. The next chapter looks at some of these trajectories and the people who help it on its way.

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<sup>1</sup> In some of the literature, e.g. Bernard (1972), Nyambene is spelt 'Nyambeni'.

<sup>2</sup> See Bernard pp. 27-32 for a detailed description of various 'ecologic regions' on the slopes of Mount Kenya and the Nyambenes.

<sup>3</sup> Fortunately for me, there is a wide ethnological literature on the Meru of Kenya. The work of the former District Commissioner of Meru, H.E. Lambert (e.g. 1956) is interesting as he played quite a part in Meru history. Laughton 1944 is a brief ethnographic overview of the Meru. More substantial is Bernardi 1959 on the Meru religious dignitary called the *Mugwe*. This book inspired the structuralist analysis of the *Mugwe*'s left hand by Needham (1960) (see also Mahner 1975). More recent is the work of Fadiman (e.g. 1982, 1993) that presents a vast amount of oral testimonies by Meru elders. However, his work is criticised by Peatrik (see next footnote). A short book on Meru customs by Nyaga (1997) is also criticised by Peatrik, being 'une tentative parmi d'autres de christianisation des mœurs meru' (Peatrik 1999: 29). Rimita 1988 is more interesting, providing details on various Meru rites of passage as well as the *njuri ncheke*. Most comprehensive is Peatrik 1999, which focuses on the Tigania and Igembe rather than other Meru groups.

<sup>4</sup> The Meru have a widely held exodus story involving them escaping captivity at a place called Mbwaa, and fleeing to their present location. Fadiman (for example, 1993: 19-65) treats the oral accounts of this migration as based on an actual migration from the coast. Peatrik (1999: 410-423) criticises him for regarding the accounts as evidence of an authentic migration. She labels him *un historien en Utopie* (ibid. 410).

<sup>5</sup> Miraa itself is something that marks the Tigania and Igembe as different from the other sub-groups.

<sup>6</sup> See Bernardi 1985 for an overview of various age-class systems. Baxter and Almagor (1978) is an important work in this field, focusing more on Ethiopia and the Oromo.

<sup>7</sup> In this paper, Peatrik focuses on the intriguing problem of 'demographic drift' in age-class systems, which means many are 'born too early or late to be in time with their peers'; this is often the cause of tension as 'individual time' has to fit in with the 'time of classes' (Peatrik: in press).

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed history of the *njuri ncheke*, see Peatrik 1999: 455-470.

<sup>9</sup> Peatrik remarks on the contradiction between 'the usual age-grades with their prescribed statuses *versus* the achieved (and costly) ones of the *njuri ncheke*' (in press). See also Peatrik 1999: 465.

<sup>10</sup> Goldsmith states that really old trees are 'most common in Thuuru, Mwiyo, and Muringene, areas that border each other midway between Kangeta and Maua' (Goldsmith 1994: 98).

<sup>11</sup> Grignon gives the hectarage within the Nyambenes as 'cinq mille deux cents' in 1992 (1999: 181). In my notes written after my visit to the Maua Agricultural Office, I have written down that the estimated hectarage for miraa in the Nyambenes is 25,000. This sounds an incredible jump from around 5,000. If not an error on my part, the figure could be explained by the boom in demand occasioned by the scattering of the Somali diaspora in the early 1990s. Earlier figures might not have taken into account the cultivation of miraa in the parts of the Nyambenes outside of the main Igembe zone. See Goldsmith (1988: n.3 pg.149) for his comments on the general unreliability of figures relating to miraa cultivation and trade.

<sup>12</sup> Nkinyang'a, being a border town, however, is likely to be quite mixed, and ethnic affiliation as Tigania and Igembe is probably hazy (and perhaps not especially relevant).

<sup>13</sup> Kinna is divided into Kinna Meru and Kinna Borana, although the actual town is in the latter division.

<sup>14</sup> Goldsmith describes three stages in miraa tree agriculture (1994: 122): in the first 10 years of a tree's life, land is cleared of all but compatible crops, and miraa is planted alongside field crops. Between 10-50 years, field crops are replaced with 'bananas, yams, and other root and tuber species.' From 50 years onward, non-miraa trees are reduced, and there is '[u]nderstory planting of food and horticultural crops.' Goldsmith mentions variations to this idealised pattern.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Weir (1985: 36): 'Coffee is also less tolerant of prolonged sunshine than qat, and on south-facing slopes requires mist cover or shade trees to thrive (sometimes qat trees provide the necessary shade).'

<sup>16</sup> In Ethiopia a variety of miraa known as *chafe* is cultivated. This variety is kept constantly pruned so that plants remain shrub-sized, and plantations of it are said to resemble those of coffee. This seems to preclude intercropping in the manner of Nyambene plantations. However, intercropping miraa with sorghum, maize and sweet potatoes is practised in Ethiopia (Getahun and Krikorian 1973: 365-366).

<sup>17</sup> Goldsmith speaks thus about intercropping techniques: 'The complementary integration of other tree and crop species according to local conditions of slope, soil characteristics, spacing, and gradients in the moisture regime gives each farm a unique form. Traditional farmers rely upon an unarticulated body of local knowledge. New farmers in Ntonyiri and formal sector farmers developing new miraa holdings often appear to lack or ignore much of this specialized knowledge...' (1994: 123). This is probably fair for some Ntonyiri farmers, but certainly not for all. Much good miraa is grown by knowledgeable farmers in Ntonyiri.

<sup>18</sup> This is probably the same as the variety *kithaara* mentioned by Goldsmith. He relates that it is 'popular in Ntonyiri', but that Meru avoid consuming it as it can render one 'sleepless' (Goldsmith 1994: 123).

<sup>19</sup> Goldsmith has this as *miiru* (1994: 123).

<sup>20</sup> Kennedy relates that '[f]our different cultivars of *Catha edulis* are known, and the Yemenis recognize these by shades of colour difference...' (Kennedy 1987: 177).

<sup>21</sup> I was also told of the word *ikenye* referring to a newly planted tree in Tigania dialect and the word *kiwe* for the same in Igembe dialect.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Evans-Pritchard (1940: 101-102) and the 'cattle-clock' with *mbaine* trees and the way they mark time. Clearly they are different in scale, the former marking time diurnally, the latter over generations.

<sup>23</sup> Goldsmith (1988: 139) says that ‘Lare miraa may fetch only half the price of most of the miraa sold in Muringene, but it is more plentiful and travels better.’ Saying that it ‘travels better’ makes me suspect that some miraa he saw in Lare was actually *makata / mashushu*. This would indeed travel better, and be much cheaper too.

<sup>24</sup> Goldsmith reports (1988: 140) that ‘formerly [prior to 1965], miraa was packaged in roughly uniform “bundles”, but that one miraa dealer made the packaging more systematic in 1965 under the influence of the decimal system. But, a typed report (dated October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1961) of a District Commissioners’ meeting concerning miraa suggests that miraa’s packaging was not quite so rough and ready before 1965. The report talks of the rise in miraa consumption in Isiolo District, and gives some details of the trade, including the different sizes of bundles and their names. It relates that ‘4 or 5 shoots (sometimes less) tied together = 1 urbessa...10 urbessa wrapped in banana leaf = 1 tundu...10 tundu = 1 kifungu’ (Kenya National Archives: DC/ISO/3/7/11). The term *urbessa* is the same as *shurba*. *Kifungu* is the standard wholesale bundle for Igembe miraa, now more commonly known as a *bunda*.

<sup>25</sup> See Weir (1985): glossary, pg. 188.

<sup>26</sup> When staying at Garba Tulla in 2000, I spent a pleasant evening chewing *algani* with some Borana friends. Later on, once I had achieved the sometimes difficult post-miraa task of drifting off to sleep, I woke up with a start, convinced that a spider was crawling on my arm. Safely covered as I was by the mosquito-net, the spider was certainly a figment of my imagination.

<sup>27</sup> I was told that some farmers prefer selling miraa in villages rather than big towns, as less competition means higher prices are secured.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard’s source is the Meru District Agricultural Officer, Annual Reports, 1961-68. Lack of government involvement in the miraa trade mean most official figures are estimates.

<sup>29</sup> See the case-study of M’Iweta for an example of a farmer with a low altitude / high yield, *shamba* in the Karama / Nkinyang’ a zone.

<sup>30</sup> I do not think many agents send retailers miraa from their own *shambas*: normally they would leave the running of the farm to other members of the family, who would then sell miraa whilst the agent is busy collecting sufficient miraa of the right type to make up orders of those he supplies.

<sup>31</sup> Goldsmith’s figures from 1986, when ksh.16 = \$1 US, give the following prices for *bundas* of miraa from Muringene and Lare: 1 *bunda* of *mbaine* at Muringene fetched ksh.140-160, while a *bunda* of miraa from young trees fetched ksh.70-100 at Muringene. For Lare, Goldsmith does not distinguish *mbaine* and *mithairo* miraa, and simply states that 1 *bunda* costs ksh.30-100 (Goldsmith 1988: 142). The lower range of Lare prices might have been for varieties like *makata*, which is sold at Muringene too.

<sup>32</sup> The Igembe district seems quite famine resistant. Goldsmith talks of Igembe avoiding a famine during a drought of 1918-19, and states that ‘[d]uring the 1984 drought far fewer families in Igembe (800) required famine relief than nearby Tigania (12,000), Nithi (5000), and the two Imenti (4,598 combined) divisions’ (Goldsmith 1994: 78). He continues: ‘These figures reflect both lower ecological vulnerability to drought and greater food purchasing power’ (loc. cit.).

<sup>33</sup> One of M’Naituli’s daughter told me that many years ago land was apportioned by the following method in the Nyambenes: at the start of one’s *shamba*, one would set fire to a maize cob and then sprint in a specified direction. The boundary was marked where the cob’s flames died out.

## Chapter Two:

### Miraa's Trajectories: Nyambene to Nairobi and Beyond

*Nakuru Machakosi,  
Hata Kisumu halisi,  
Mwanza Musoma upesi,  
Na Malindi yameingia.<sup>1</sup>*

- Omari Suleiman, *Kitabu cha Mairongi* (1972).

From Nyambene *shambas*, miraa follows many different trajectories before reaching consumers. It can be very well travelled – some Igembe miraa covers as many airmiles as aircrews plying the route from Nairobi to Europe – though mostly its reach is not so great. Miraa consumption is avid in the Nyambenes themselves, and consequently much miraa only travels a few miles at most to local retail outlets. This chapter in combination with chapter three follows through a number of trajectories that miraa follows in its social life to the point of retail. (Although a later chapter examines retailing miraa more fully, local retail within the Nyambenes is covered in the present chapter.)

Before beginning a survey of trajectories miraa follows from the production zones, and before presenting some real life characters involved in these trajectories, it is as well to take a generalised look at the middleman system.

#### The Middleman System

Middlemen the world over are linked to exploitation of producers. Although the need for such organisations as *Fairtrade*<sup>2</sup> shows that producers often find themselves receiving little rewards compared with wholesalers and retailers, to assume *a priori* that the relation between a middleman and a producer is exploitative would be wrong. However, one can see how the trade in certain commodities allows a middleman to exploit his or her position: thus the ability

to store certain commodities in bulk allows middlemen with the capital to invest control over the market. Because of its perishability, however, middlemen cannot exert control of the miraa trade through this method, and Kennedy relates that in the Yemen ‘[t]he perishability factor has...contributed to the spread of the profits from qat among a relatively widespread segment of the population of the country’ (Kennedy 1987: 164). He also quotes Gerholm who compares Yemeni coffee and qat merchants. Whilst ‘one often hears of great coffee merchants...[g]reat qat merchants, however, are quite unknown. While the coffee trade seems to generate a structure with a few big merchants in control of the market, trade with qat apparently does not offer the same opportunities for a “big man” structure to develop’ (Gerholm 1977: 55; cited in Kennedy 1987: 164).

Of course, there are other ways to become a powerful middlemen, and controlling some trajectories of miraa – particularly the international trade where capital is required to set up a network quick enough to prevent miraa perishing before it reaches consumers – allows consolidation of one’s position. Miraa middlemen can become wealthy and powerful, leading to many accusations of exploitation, as we shall see. However, it should be emphasised that the nature of the commodity itself influences how a middleman secures a niche in the trade.

Three (English) terms for middlemen are often used by those involved in the trade: *agents*, *brokers*, and *wholesalers*. It seems sensible to stick closely to these terms in my descriptions. In giving ‘ideal types’ of those covered by these terms, as I do below, there is a danger of giving the impression that local usage is consistent. This is not the case: local usage is flexible. Also, not only are the terms flexible, but those signified by them are too: while some traders carry out the same routine every day, many others switch tasks often, acting as a broker one day, retailing miraa the next, and even doing both on the same day.

Most middlemen we shall meet are Meru (Tigania and Igembe), and most of the miraa network within Kenya is Meru-operated. However, other ethnic groups are involved in trade

to the north of Kenya, and the international trade. Borana women are prime movers in the trade to Marsabit and Moyale, while Somali men operate the trade to Kenya's northeast and the international trade.

### **Brokers:**

Local usage in the Nyambenes distinguishes between 'agent' and 'broker'. The latter term seems restricted to two types of individuals:

1. Young men (in their late teens or early twenties) starting out in the trade by obtaining miraa from farmers with a deposit, selling it to agents or retailers in face-to-face transactions, and paying the balance back to farmers. Their trade is generally small-scale, perhaps dealing with only one or two *bundas*, and they only cover distances between farmer and agent / retailer. Some like to keep farmers and their buyers apart, however, as the less contact there is between those they deal with, the more potential for maximising profits by exaggerating the price they paid farmers when negotiating with buyers. Such brokering, although limited in scale, is seen as a good way to learn the trade and gain knowledge and resources required to move up the miraa career ladder. Many brokers operate around Muringene, and we shall observe their activities in detail later on. Such brokers are Meru, normally from the area where they operate. Brokers of this type have great flexibility in their work as they tend not to have long term agreements with buyers.
  
2. The second type of individual I heard referred to as 'brokers' operate on a much larger-scale than those of the first type. These are Meru acting as brokers for Somalis operating the international trade. Whilst I did meet Somali agents who visit smaller towns like Kaelo to procure miraa for international dealers, the recent tension between Meru and Somalis has made it judicious for Somalis to use Meru intermediaries to deal with farmers on their behalf. Meru brokers of this type operate only in Ntonyiri. They visit

towns like Mutuati and outlying villages, loading up Land Rovers with miraa obtained from farmers at distribution points. They either pay outright for the miraa, or leave a deposit and pay back the balance in full once money is relayed to them from Nairobi. The miraa is then usually taken to Maua and loaded onto Somali-owned Hilux pick-ups for transportation to Nairobi. Most brokers of this type are men, but we shall meet Karimi, a resourceful young lady who is doing very well in this capacity. It was reported that some brokers working for Somalis are Imenti rather than Tigania or Igembe.

### **Agents:**

In contrast to brokers of the first type, agents do not often deal face-to-face with those they supply. This is because they supply retailers outside the Nyambenes, and rarely accompany miraa all the way to retail outlets. Their tasks consist of procuring miraa from farmers (or from brokers of the first type) at central distribution points like Muringene, packaging it up, and sending it off either by public transport, or with one of the Hilux services to Nairobi (see chapter three). Agents are predominantly Tigania or Igembe, and usually older than brokers, having taken time to gain experience of the workings of the trade and to develop a business relationship with retailers they supply. Many agents are men in their thirties or forties. Those I met were all freelance, supplying any retailer who might require their services. Other agents might be part of a *kampuni* (Kiswahili: 'company'), employed as suppliers to a certain group of wholesalers (see below).

Agents are paid for every *kitundu* sold by the retailer, the money being sent back in an envelope with some trustworthy fellow. Agents often become liable for miraa not sold by retailers, just as newspaper distributors become liable for papers left unsold by newsagents. Compared with relations between newspaper distributors and newsagents, however, agent / retailer (and farmer / agent) relations are usually extremely personalised, and so each party is often prepared to help the other in times of need. Thus, retailers often help out agents by splitting losses on unsold bundles with them, and agents sometimes send extra miraa as a gift

to retailers. If a *kitundu* of *giza* was bought by an agent at (say) ksh.200, and then sold by the retailer at ksh.280, the agent would expect to be sent back around ksh.230-240 to cover cost and for his own profit. To keep retailers *au fait* with the latest price changes in the Nyambenes, agents attach a cardboard label – *ndabari* – to a *bunda* of miraa, slitting two holes in the cardboard and threading banana fibre through. This label is addressed to the retailer, and on it is written the price the agent paid per *kitundu*, and sometimes the amount he wants returned to him per *kitundu*. The *ndabari* is an important communication device for the trade.

The working day for agents is not generally strenuous. Most of their work is over within a few hours: buying sufficient quantities of miraa for retailers, packaging it up, and dispatching it. Agents seem happy that their work leaves evenings free, and many visit cafes and bars to socialise and watch TV. Of course, most agents have families, and hence familial obligations. Agents have the reputation for neglecting families, and of heavy drinking. While some agents may conduct themselves in that way, those I knew ensured the welfare of their families; even if going out for an evening, they leave money at home for food and other requirements.

One hears many humorous references to agents as ‘tycoons’ at busy markets like Muringene. Becoming an agent is not a guaranteed way to wealth, however. Some agents only supply one or two kiosks, and consequently get a modest return for their efforts. But the longer an agent remains in the trade, the more chance he has of increasing the number of retailers he supplies; the more he supplies, the wealthier he becomes. Canny agents reinvest much of their profits in their business, as well as investing in property, livestock, and farmland in the Nyambenes.

Somali agents acting on behalf of large-scale international exporters operate in the Lare / Mutuati section of the Igembe region. Their procedures are similar to those of their Meru

counterparts, buying miraa from brokers or farmers and sending it on to Nairobi. Tension between Meru and Somali has made life more difficult for Somali agents, and it is likely that more are nowadays reliant on Meru brokers.

**Wholesalers:**

Wholesalers either procure miraa directly from the Nyambenes and pass it on to retailers elsewhere, or rely on Nyambene-based agents to send it to them. We shall meet a number of wholesalers who use the former method and make the journey themselves, some from as far away as Moyale on the Ethiopian border. Most wholesalers in Kenya are Meru men who follow a set-route, selling miraa to retailers along the way. Others might just serve a nearby town like Isiolo, buying wholesale in the Nyambenes, and then selling on to Borana and Somali retailers in Isiolo. Wholesalers from Marsabit and Moyale, on the other hand, tend to be Borana, Sakuye and Burji women. They often have a broker in the Nyambenes who prepares *bundas* for collection. After collection, the women take it north for client retailers.

Wholesalers often use the following system in dealing with retailers: they demand that for every *kitundu* sold the retailer returns a certain amount of money; any money made above this figure the retailer keeps. This system allows small-scale retailers to enter the trade with no financial investment. Larger-scale retailers in Nairobi and beyond might obtain miraa from wholesalers rather than going to the trouble of developing a relationship with a particular agent.

The flexibility of the trade means that many wholesalers will sell at retail themselves should the chance arise. One should not expect a miraa wholesaler to act exactly as would a western wholesaler.<sup>3</sup>

***Kampunis:***

Goldsmith in his 1988 article reports that '[w]holesalers form what the Igembe refer to as a *kampuni*' (1988: 143). *Kampuni* is, of course, the Kiswahili-fied version of the English word 'company'. For Goldsmith, *kampunis* are representative of 'successful miraa trading organizations' (loc. cit.), filling the miraa-supplying niche along particular routes. He describes them more fully thus:

Rarely officially registered or incorporated as a formal "company" by law, the *kampuni* arises around a successful businessman, usually a Lubetaa<sup>[4]</sup> trader. Originally, firms were kinship-oriented, but dependence on one's kin soon gave way to qualifications based on reliability, integrity, and friendship. Members of *kampuni* are usually Igembe Meru except for an occasional partnership, although client retailers may be from any ethnic group. In the city and towns, *kampuni* members usually operate shops where they retail and wholesale miraa in addition to a few other basic items and provisions. (loc. cit.)

I never actually heard the word *kampuni* used to describe such organisations, although I do not doubt that it is used. Two miraa kiosks I visited – one in Garissa and one in Nairobi's Eastleigh district – fit the above description well. Both kiosks were founded by older men who have now retired back to the Igembe region from where they supervise the supply of miraa to the kiosks, leaving their sons and others they trust to run them. Both kiosks retail and wholesale miraa: the one in Garissa supplying Somali women traders. However, as many kiosks just retailing miraa are similarly organised, I feel it best not to limit the term *kampuni* to wholesalers. Thus, miraa middlemen are not all freelance operators: many of the networks sending miraa from the Nyambenes to retail / wholesale outlets beyond consist of individuals working within organisations of the *kampuni*-type.

**Somali Exporters:**

Much miraa leaving Ntonyiri travels along several trajectories where Somalis have almost complete control. Somalis have developed slick procedures for speeding miraa to Nairobi, and thence to Somalia and Europe, and have such control of the network that they are often

accused by non-Somali of forming a cartel. Big players in the international trade are legendary figures, regarded with respect by some and loathing by others.

Such exporters depend on having two operational centres in Kenya, one in the Nyambenes and one in Nairobi. This allows money to be relayed easily from overseas right back to agents, brokers, and farmers in the Nyambenes. Large networks sending miraa to Europe will have an office there too, equipped with a fax machine to ensure that communication is swift despite the vast distance.

Before looking at such international trajectories, however, we begin by looking at shorter trajectories travelled by miraa from the Kianjai / Muthara zone.

### **Trade of miraa grown in the Kianjai / Muthara zone**

In Kianjai there is one particular area near the market for miraa. There is found a dark wooden shack in which around five retailers huddle, selling miraa wrapped up in banana leaves and stored in plastic bags for freshness. They are all in their forties or thereabouts, and are all locals. The miraa they were selling upon my visit was fairly long with lots of leaves: they were calling it *kisa ya kianjai*. *Kisa* is an alternative spelling of *giza*. It was different from *giza* in presentation, however. The traders claimed that much of their miraa was from *mbaine* trees of which there are some in nearby *shambas*. It was being retailed at the time (April 2000) at the modest sum of ksh.80 for a large *shurba*.

Just around the corner other traders gather on a side street. Here they sit with miraa-containing plastic bags ready to sell to passers by. They were mostly younger than those trading in the kiosk. There are also ambulatory traders, strolling around the market in search

of a sale. I bought a *kitundu* from one such trader in July 2001, paying the quite hefty price of ksh.300 for it: this *kitundu* was packaged and presented like *giza* from the main Igembe zone.

Thus, the main trajectory miraa follows in this zone is straight from *shambas* to local kiosks or hawkers for local consumption, and does not require much of a middleman system. However, its range can extend to towns like Isiolo or Meru. During rainy seasons, enterprising Muthara and Kianjai traders travel along a direct road from Muthara to Isiolo to trade small quantities. Also, my short stay in 2002 revealed that there is at least one Kianjai agent supplying kiosks in Isiolo with *shurbas* of Kianjai miraa: these *shurbas* resemble *shurba ya karama*, but are heftier in size. Although the scale of this trade appeared small, it points to the beginnings of a middleman system for this zone's miraa.

### **Trade of miraa grown in the less intensive Igembe zone**

As with the Tigania zone discussed above, most of the Igembe zone stretching along the Maua to Kinna road is not geared up for large scale or long distance trade, apart from some *shambas* near Kiengu. At those *shambas* Somali agents source cheap varieties of miraa for the international trade. Much of the trade in this zone takes advantage of a niche in the market: this niche is generated by easy access to the markets of Kinna and Garba Tulla. These towns are inhabited by Waso Borana,<sup>5</sup> many of whom avidly chew. Miraa from the main Igembe zone is sold there, but not in large quantities: some *giza* and *kangeta* is sold for wealthier customers. The majority of inhabitants find such varieties prohibitively expensive, and it is miraa from the less intensive Igembe zone that provides the bulk of the supply.

When I visited Kinna and Garba Tulla in 2000, miraa-transporting Land Rovers were plying the Maua-Kinna-Garba Tulla route three times a week (every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday). My brief return visit in April 2002 revealed that lately Kinna and Garba Tulla are supplied with fresh miraa daily. These Land Rovers are owned by Borana traders who

transport livestock (goats and sheep) from Garba Tulla and Kinna to Maua for trading. Having sold the livestock, miraa is bought by traders wholesale and driven back. The Land Rovers pick up some cargo at Maua, and from *shambas* along the Maua-Kinna road. The cheap varieties of miraa from this zone are then retailed by Borana women for the low price of ksh.20-25 per bundle.

Thus, Kinna and Garba Tulla provide a ready market for miraa from this zone, and much miraa grown commercially in this region follows a trajectory terminating in the cheeks of Borana chewers. Borana traders have played a large role in the evolution of trade in this zone's miraa.

### **Miraa from the Karama / Nkinyan'ga zone**

Nkinyan'ga and Karama become hives of activity in the morning as farmers bring freshly picked bundles to sell to agents. It is in these towns that agents make up orders for retail kiosks and send them on their way by public transport. As miraa from here travels quite far – reaching Isiolo, most towns on the Mount Kenya ring-road, Nairobi, and even as far as Mombasa – the trade system of this zone relies on middlemen. Before turning to the longer distance trade, however, I first consider local retail within this zone.

#### **Retailing miraa locally:**

As with all zones, a certain amount of trade occurs locally. I regularly visited one eatery in Karama, the *Manchester Café*, where Nicholas's father is the proprietor. He often asks a *shamba*-owning friend to harvest him some miraa. Relatives of the *shamba*-owner turn up at the eatery with a bag of unsorted miraa, and then strip the leaves and tie up a few *shurbas*,

whilst plying themselves with cigarettes and cups of tea.<sup>6</sup> As the proprietor of the eatery and the *shamba*-owner are friends, a special deal is made and miraa bought at bargain price.<sup>7</sup>

In Karama one retailer sells high quality miraa from the Mbaranga area higher up the slopes. His business is situated by the main road, and his premises consist of a wooden box, where he stores miraa. He sells *shurba ya karama* from *mbaine* trees. The trader visits *shambas* whose old owners he has befriended. As he has a good relationship with them, he procures miraa at a reasonable price. Many customers are locals to whom he might bring a few *shurbas* before settling in by his box. Lorry drivers and bus touts also form part of his clientele, seeking him out for quality miraa. As he procures miraa himself, dispensing with the need of using brokers, and pays no rent, profits are good. Also, because he sells only *mbaine*, customers are prepared to pay more than they would for lesser quality varieties. If trade is especially good, he can even make more trips up to *shambas* to restock. He takes pride in the quality of his miraa, and reported that he would sell no miraa at all if he could not obtain *mbaine*.

Some traders in this zone<sup>8</sup> hawk small quantities to vehicles passing along the Meru to Maua road. These young traders, mostly in their late teens or early twenties, lift up their bundles as vehicles approach, hoping that drivers or passengers will succumb to temptation. Buses and *matatus* almost invariably stop for passengers, and once they do the traders seize the moment. Trade varies from day to day, but can be brisk. The quality of their miraa is not generally high, coming from younger trees rather than *mbaines*, and varies in price between ksh.30-80 (depending on the season) per *shurba*.

Such traders buy miraa from farmers bringing the day's harvest into town, buying around 5-10 *shurbas*. They might pay, say, ksh.35-40 each for these, selling them on for ksh.60-80, giving them a profit of ksh.25-40 per *shurba*. These traders are locals, able to make a living by indulging in such small scale trade, probably hoping to one day become

agents for retail kiosks, or work in such kiosks themselves. One hawker estimated that there are around twenty roadside traders at Karama in rainy seasons, whilst numbers drop to around five in dry seasons when miraa is scarce and prices high. Those who drop out of the trade in dry seasons might get casual work labouring on *shambas* or earn a few shillings helping to load lorries or doing construction work. Some who occasionally sell miraa do so only when they cannot ply their main trade: one such trader I met is a trained carpenter and mason who only hawks miraa when no such work is forthcoming.

One hawker operating in all seasons is Zakayo. I met him in 2002 when he was 21 years old. He entered the trade in 1996, seeing it as a good way to avoid being idle and to earn a living. He still lives at home in Karama, and is yet to marry. In rainy seasons he retails around 20-30 *shurbas*, and around 10-15 in dry seasons. Normally he buys from farmers, mainly *wazee* (Kiswahili: 'old men'), arriving at the market early in the morning. Zakayo can spot them easily as they come with bulging pockets. Zakayo told me he enjoys his trade, although he hopes one day to run a retail kiosk.

Another hawker is slightly older: Ahmed. (Muslim friends in Isiolo gave him the nickname.) He also buys from farmers who come to town in the morning, although he sometimes personally visits farms, where he picks miraa himself. This he takes to the *Manchester Café* where he grades stems into *shurba ya karama*. He is already moving up the miraa career-ladder: he occasionally (once a week or so) acts as an agent for a retailer in Isiolo. When he sends miraa to that retailer, he buys it from brokers rather than going all the way to the farms himself.

Hawkers trading soft drinks, sweets, and biscuits to passengers on buses and *matatus* are familiar to anyone who has travelled in Kenya, so hawking miraa in a similar way is hardly surprising. In Karama, Nkinyan'ga, and Kangeta, hawking miraa in this way seems more of an institution than elsewhere in the Nyambenes, although miraa is also hawked on a smaller

scale to passing vehicles at Muthara and Muringene. This is perhaps connected with the style of miraa sold in these towns: smaller *shurbas*<sup>9</sup> might be more tempting for a passenger to buy spontaneously, being just the right size and price to chew whilst journeying. Also, small towns like Karama and Nkinyan'ga have few visitors, and so many potential customers for young traders are passengers on buses and *matatus*.

### **Longer Distance Trajectories:**

#### **Meru Town:**

For retailers in a town as near to Karama and Nkinyang'a as Meru, it would hardly be worth securing the services of an agent. By *matatu* to Karama or Nkinyang'a from Meru takes only half an hour or so, and costs merely ksh.60. Transport services are also frequent. Thus, kiosks like *Muchore Kiosk* in Meru (see chapter four) rely on one of the retailers – who lives in Nkinyang'a – to buy miraa there and bring it along to the kiosk where his business partner can sell it. Retailers in towns near Meru like Nkubu also visit the Nyambenes personally.

#### **Isiolo Town:**

Most Isiolo retailers are Tigania, many from Karama. For this reason, Karama miraa makes up a large proportion of miraa retailed there. The distance from Isiolo to Karama is short, and some retailers travel personally to buy miraa, dispensing with the need for agents. At one stage the proprietor of *Kamathi Kiosk* in Isiolo<sup>10</sup> made the journey in his own vehicle to the Nyambenes, picking up miraa from both Karama and the main Igembe market of Muringene. Other retailers use public transport to make the journey to Karama each day. One of these is a renowned trader who has retailed miraa in Isiolo for many years: M'Baiikio. His home is in Karama, and he travels back and forth to Isiolo daily. Thus, he can collect his own miraa each morning. He is an important figure in the Isiolo trade as a whole, as he is entrusted with much of the money that retailers in Isiolo send back to agents in Karama.

The majority of retailers in Isiolo do not travel daily to the Nyambenes, however, and rely on Karama or Nkinyang'a based agents to supply them. One such agent is a young man nicknamed Tycoon. His trade is not yet well-developed, and he trades only intermittently: every so often he sends *nyeusi miraa* to friends at an Isiolo kiosk. He is called into action only when the kiosk needs extra supplies. Thus, he spends large parts of his time helping out his father on his *shamba*. He is around twenty years old and yet to marry.

Other agents for Isiolo operate permanently. One young agent supplies an Isioloan retailer with *shurba ya karama* daily. His standard procedure consists of finding out which *shambas* are to be harvested the following day, reserving the right to pick one by giving a deposit. He then goes the following morning with a few friends (whom he pays a small amount) and picks enough *shurbas* to satisfy the Isiolo retailer. Once he has enough, he visits the *Manchester Café* where, sustained by tea, he finishes grading the miraa, tying the *shurbas* up neatly in a banana-leaf, and attaching the *ndabari* to communicate the going rate to the retailer. He places the *bunda* in a plastic bag, writing on the retailer's name and address. Finally he dispatches the miraa with a *matatu*. When I met him, it was especially rainy, and it had become difficult to harvest miraa. This explains why he was only sending a small number of *shurbas* – 12 to be exact – when I met him. He told me that he had hired a *shamba* the day before, but had left a few trees unharvested which he then came and picked early the following morning. He did this as he knew how wet it would be on the next day, and so how difficult it would be to arrange another *shamba* to harvest: farmers are wary of letting pickers onto their land and trees on very rainy days, as muddy shoes can cause damage. As he was sending only a few *shurbas* when I met him, his profits for that day would only be small. Each *shurba* was obtained at ksh.20 from the farmer. The retail price in Isiolo at that time was ksh.50 per *shurba*, and he would be sent ksh.30-35 for each one sold. Assuming that all were sold, he would get a profit of around ksh.150-180. Subtracting the cost of transport to Meru (the retailer would pay for the Meru-Isiolo transport), his return for that day would have

been a modest sum of around ksh.140-160. That was a particularly poor day for the miraa trade, however. I would expect him usually to make around ksh.200-300.

### **Nairobi:**

Karama / Nkinyang'a agents supplying Nairobi kiosks operate on a bigger scale than those supplying Isiolo, and tend to be rewarded better financially. Most such agents are young men in their twenties, differing from those in the main Igembe zone who are usually in their thirties or forties.

One agent supplying a Nairobi kiosk is a young Tigania born and bred in Karama: Benson. He supplies miraa for a kiosk in Nairobi run by his older cousin, Kibongi. Benson has his own *shamba* that he first harvested in 1995. This gave him his first taste of the trade, grading miraa and selling *shurbas* to local agents. He then learnt more about the trade and set himself up as a broker, buying *shurbas* from other farmers cheaply, and selling these to agents. He would get a profit of about ksh.10-20 per *shurba* sold. 1998 saw him move up the ranks from broker to agent. This was when his cousin (with whom he had at one time shared the same homestead) suggested he supply his kiosk in the Eastleigh district of Nairobi. From then on, Benson has supplied Kibongi with *shurbas*, usually daily, obtaining miraa directly from farmers; Kibongi relays money to Benson by sending it with friends heading to Karama or with Hilux pick-ups returning from Nairobi to the Nyambenes. In dry seasons he buys *shurbas* at ksh.80-100, and is sent back around ksh.120 by Kibongi. In rainy seasons, he buys at around ksh.35-40, and is sent back around ksh.60. He sends fewer *shurbas* in rainy seasons, as there is more competition (the market becomes saturated with inexpensive miraa), and there is a consequent danger that miraa might dry up and not be sold. In dry seasons, he sometimes supplies Kibongi with as many as 100-150 *shurbas*. Profit is much greater in dry seasons. When Kibongi requires Benson to alter the number of *shurbas* he sends, he encloses a note to tell him to do so in the envelope containing Benson's money.

Benson does not wholly concentrate on his trade with Kibongi: when I met him he had so much work to do in his *shamba* that he had taken a couple of days off to complete it. He said that he would resume trade once his *shamba* was tended. Kibongi is a decade or so older than Benson, and is keen to impart his wisdom to ensure Benson avoids pitfalls awaiting young men with money. He warned Benson of the dangers of drinking profits away, telling him that to succeed in the trade one must show restraint with alcohol. Benson is glad he has heeded Kibongi's advice, as he is convinced that heavy drinkers rarely succeed in the trade. Benson is not satisfied keeping his trade at its current level, and has ambitions to supply other retailers too.

In Karama many agents supplying Nairobi kiosks gather at the *Brilliant Café*, located by the main road. Agents make up orders, tying up the requisite number of *shurbas*, wrapping them in banana leaves, and attaching *ndabaris* (see plate 6). The *Brilliant Café* is a perfect location for such activity: it is right by the roadside, and agents can speedily load miraa onto vehicles once readied. It also has all the tea, bread and margarine that a hungry trader needs during a morning's work.

Agents sometimes untie *shurbas* provided by farmers, tying them up again in a different style.<sup>11</sup> Once when I visited the *Brilliant Café*, traders were swiftly untying several *shurbas ya karama* of high quality miraa from Mbaranga *shambas*, retying them as *shurba ya nkinyang'a*. Sound reasoning was on their side, as at that time (June 2001) a *shurba ya karama* was fetching around ksh.70, whereas a *shurba ya nkinyang'a* was fetching ksh.30 / 40. The latter is approximately one third the size of the former, however, and so the same amount of miraa tied as *nkinyang'a* fetches at least ksh.20 more.

Most agents working in the *Brilliant Café* supply Nairobi kiosks, principally the *Sunrise* kiosks, a chain of retail outlets that we shall encounter in chapter four. There are three main agents in Karama who supply *Sunrise*: Kaumbutho, Karethi, and Ntongai. These young men

(in their late twenties and all friends of the *Sunrise* team) operate on a large scale: I met two of them in April 2002, when they were by the roadside in Karama preparing three sacks containing 30 *bundas* to send by *matatu* to Nairobi. That was on a Tuesday: on Fridays and Saturdays the volume sent is larger still. These agents work hard in the morning. They either visit good quality *shambas* which they know are due to be harvested and buy directly from farmers, or wait in town for brokers. Sometimes they top up miraa bought from farmers by buying extra from brokers who charge a small mark-up. Once they have enough *shurbas*, the furious work of splitting *shurbas ya karama* into *shurbas ya nkinyang'a* begins. This work is normally done by the three agents in combination with a casual worker, a young lad who is the brother-in-law to one of the *Sunrise* team. More people are enlisted if it is getting late. Some *shurba ya karama* are left as they are, to be sold in that style in Nairobi.

*Ndabaris* are attached and all *bundas* sewn up in sacks – a task for the casual worker – and dispatched. *Matatu* touts are paid ksh.20-50 for transporting miraa to Meru and passing it on to Peugeot taxis destined for Nairobi (see chapter three). Usually miraa is ready for dispatch around midday, although all the day's supply for *Sunrise* is not necessarily sent at one time. Money is relayed to agents either through Peugeot taxis and *matatus*, or, if it is a large amount, one of the *Sunrise* team might deliver it personally. Each agent receives a different envelope containing their dues, and communication concerning the state of the market in Nairobi. The casual labourer is sent money by his brother-in-law in Nairobi (enclosed in one of the agents' envelope), and also receives ksh.50 from each agent.

Like Benson, these agents – as well as the *Sunrise* retailers – make their best money in dry seasons. Their business is so well established and profitable that they can buy more miraa than other agents and retailers in dry seasons when prices become expensive. In rainy seasons around 32 *bundas* (each containing 20 *shurbas ya nkinyang'a*) are sent to *Sunrise* daily, whilst in dry seasons around 60 may be sent daily during the week, and around 90 at the weekend. They also send to another kiosk in Nairobi. Given the many *shurbas* sent, and the efficiency

of the *Sunrise* team at selling them, it is to be expected that the agents are well rewarded. The *Sunrise* team keep retail prices low – by obtaining so much at wholesale – and I estimate that for each *shurba* sold in Nairobi, around ksh.10 will be sent back to the agents. Thus, supposing that all 32 *bundas* are sold in rainy seasons, then this rewards agents around ksh.2000 each. In dry seasons, again assuming all are sold, the agents might make around ksh.4000 on a very good day. (It is likely, however, that some *shurbas* will be left unsold.) *Sunrise* retailers help out the agents by splitting losses on miraa left unsold. Much money is carefully invested in land, livestock, and in the case of one of them, a café. A large proportion would go to their families – they are all married – as such high earners would be expected to help out close kin. The casual worker, impressed by the money made by agents, is keen to either set himself up in that capacity or become a retailer.

Work for agents stops once miraa is dispatched, as it does for agents of the main Igembe region too. Karama agents express fondness for the lifestyle miraa allows them in this respect: healthy profits are made in the morning, with the afternoon left free for relaxation, perhaps rewarding their exertions with a *shurba* or two for themselves.

### **Mombasa:**

The trajectory that takes Karama / Nkinyang'a miraa furthest terminates in the Old Town of Mombasa, where I was told that there is a kiosk selling Nkinyang'a miraa. Two Nkinyang'a men occasionally supply this Mombasa retailer: Kasari and Robert. They both own retail kiosks in the miraa market of Meru, and Kasari also does well out of a bar he owns in Nkinyang'a. They procure most of their miraa from farmers and brokers coming into Nkinyang'a, and most of this would be for their own kiosks. However, when requested, they also get enough to send to their Mombasa-based contacts, using public transport to surmount the large intervening distance.

These destinations do not exhaust those that Karama / Nkinyang'a miraa reaches. Nanyuki, for example, is another important town where miraa from this zone is retailed.<sup>12</sup> However, the destinations described should give the reader a good idea of the scale of trade in Karama / Nkinyang'a miraa, especially when compared with trade from the main Igembe zone...

### **Trade in the main Igembe zone**

It is from this zone that most miraa retailed both within and beyond Kenya originates. Whether one buys miraa in Marsabit, in Kisumu by Lake Victoria, in Kajiado in Maasai-land, in the coastal city of Mombasa, or near Manchester City's stadium at Maine Road<sup>13</sup>, the chances are that the miraa was plucked from a *shamba* somewhere in this zone. Trajectories that miraa from here takes are therefore many. Northbound, it travels through Meru and Isiolo before reaching Marsabit and Moyale on board lorries. Towns on the Mount Kenya ring road like Nanyuki, Embu, and Karatina are supplied with miraa from this zone through public transportation via Meru. Nanyuki also serves as the gateway for towns like Maralal. Nyeri is a large town situated west of Mount Kenya, and miraa from this zone reaches there by public transport. Miraa for towns south and west of Nairobi passes through the capital and its large wholesale market of Majengo, before shooting off elsewhere. Some miraa merely reaches the cheeks of local consumers, however.

#### **Retailing Igembe miraa locally:**

Most Igembe towns boast at least a couple of miraa kiosks: although Maili Tatu is quite small, it has around four. For local retailers, obtaining supplies is not difficult considering their surroundings contain miraa in abundance. Some buy from farmers bringing bundles into town, while others rely on brokers. Most kiosks in the region sell high quality miraa – *alele*, *colombo*, *giza*, and *kangeta* – knowing as they do that customers are likely to be connoisseurs.

Maua has the greatest concentration of kiosks, unsurprisingly given its population. Many wealthy Somalis, as well as wealthy Meru, provide a customer base for local kiosks that knows good quality miraa and can afford it.

Not all local retail takes place at kiosks. Some miraa is simply hawked by farmers whose miraa is not of the best quality and whose harvests are none too bountiful either. It would hardly be worth their while to make the journey to the main wholesale depots to compete with other farmers. Instead, it is more efficient to roughly grade miraa, slip it into a plastic bag, and hawk it. Maua seems a choice spot for the sale of miraa in this way. One man proffered a bundle of roughly-tied, long-stemmed *nyeusi* to myself and some friends through the windows of a café where we were eating breakfast, no doubt hoping he would find someone needing a post-breakfast pick-me-up. On another occasion I was approached by an elderly Igembe whilst waiting for a *matatu*. He was selling miraa – three bundles of unsorted stems from his own *shamba* – stored in a carrier-bag.

Farmers selling miraa wholesale at the main depots are not averse to selling a bundle or two directly to consumers. At Muringene during one of my visits, one woman farmer was perambulating with a bag filled with good quality *giza* from her *shamba*. She gladly sold two bundles to Nicholas at a cheap price. At big depots like Muringene, there are often visitors uninvolved in the trade passing through. If temptation strikes, and they are there whilst miraa transactions are occurring, then they can just as easily stop a farmer and buy directly rather than visit a kiosk.

### **Trajectories for Igembe Miraa Outside the Nyambenes:**

Local retail accounts for a fraction of money made from miraa: far more comes from beyond the Nyambenes. Igembe miraa sold throughout Kenya tends to pass through various wholesale depots, the biggest of which is Muringene.

## Muringene

The miraa trade is all-important for Muringene, offering the town its *raison d'être*. During the two afternoon hours when trade occurs, the town heaves with farmers, brokers, and agents. Return an hour after trading has finished, and compared to the hustle and bustle of earlier, Muringene resembles a ghost town.

Muringene has not always been the focus for the trade in this zone. The main wholesale market was once Kangeta, but 'moved to nearby Muringene to make room for the food market in the town's square' (Goldsmith 1988: 139).<sup>14</sup> The most frenetic activity takes place at the main part of town, about a kilometre from the main Meru – Maua road. It is reached by a track that after rain harbours many dangers for pedestrians with slippery mud banks and large puddles. It is in the town centre and the surrounding pathways that farmers, brokers, and agents gather *en masse* for business. A walk through town at its busiest might reveal the following scenes...

Farmers, or those delegated to sell the latest harvest for them, reach town, perhaps after a brief journey from elsewhere in the zone. They are almost all men – of varied ages – although young boys can be spotted too, perhaps pickers hired by farmers. They carry *bundas* of miraa, all wrapped in banana leaves, and make for the areas of most fervent activity to find buyers. *Bundas* vary greatly in the varieties found within, the elongated form of *kangeta bundas* contrasting with those of shorter-stemmed types like *giza* or *kata*. Several *bundas* of the latter type are recognisable by their characteristic straggly stem ends. More difficult to spot are *bundas* of *nyeusi*, with rather rough stem ends caused by being plucked from the base of miraa trees. Milling through these gathering throngs of sellers are buyers. Most are agents making up orders. Agents tend to be in their thirties or older. They roam about, flitting from seller to seller whilst searching for the right miraa at the right price. One or two heated discussions are apparent as a buyer and a seller disagree over the worth of a *bunda*.

Clusters of young men, in their early twenties or younger, leave town and make for the main road with varied amounts of miraa. These are 'brokers', striking deals with farmers for a

quantity of miraa which they will pass on to agents waiting at the main road, making a small profit from their transactions. They wear football shirts, smart trainers, and baseball caps and greet one another with a clenched fist thrust skywards and a cheery shout of ‘conquer the Babylon’ (a common greeting amongst Kenyan youth taken from reggae culture).

Not all packaging of miraa is done in *shambas*, and groups of men and boys sit beneath shady trees or outside cafes and other businesses, removing leaves and tying up *shurbas*, *kitundus*, and *bundas*. Other men cram *bundas* into large sacks. They are readying miraa for transport to Nairobi, and nearby are pick-up trucks ready to be loaded. Men heave sacks onto them, prior to securing the impressive load with rope and perhaps a sheet of tarpaulin. Individuals wielding pen and paper engage in punctilious note-taking whilst listening to agents. These are *karani* (‘clerks’) working for the pick-ups’ owners, and keeping records of miraa entrusted by agents to vehicles (see chapter three). In the front of the pick-ups lurk drivers, mostly men in their thirties, itching to be on their way, beeping their horns to demonstrate impatience.

Meanwhile, groups of women, some elderly, sit in strategic spots selling another cash-crop: the *gomba* leaves used to wrap up miraa. Other women operate stalls providing agents and farmers with roast yams and maize cobs.

Scenes like these occur each day during the two hour window when transactions are completed, and pick-ups loaded and readied for the off. Some days see more activity than others: some traders are devout Christians who refuse to sully the Sabbath with work. Also, some traders take a well-earned break on public holidays, although demand is higher on such days.

Those congregating at Muringene in the early afternoon are mostly seasoned campaigners, acting out routine behaviour. All elements required to expedite miraa’s social life from tree to *takssin* (the plug of miraa formed in the cheek whilst chewing) are present: farmers, middlemen, pick-up vehicles and drivers, suppliers of refreshment, supporting crews of banana leaf sellers, and so forth.

Muringene brokers frequent local cafes of an evening, listening out for which *shambas* will be picked the following morning. Early next day they visit one such *shamba*, offering the farmer a deposit for the miraa. Usually the deposit is large enough for the farmer to pay off pickers. Then a buyer is found from amongst the many agents and retailers at Muringene.

The 800 metres separating Muringene market from the main road creates the niche in which brokers operate. Retailers come from towns like Isiolo to stock up at Muringene. Most rarely have time to walk to the market themselves, and rely on brokers to supply them. Retailers arrive at Muringene bus stop along the main road and meet up with brokers there. They can develop stable business relations, as happened in the case of a Borana trader from Isiolo named Hassan. A relationship was forged between him and a young Meru broker, whereby the broker would visit farmers on his behalf and be poised at the main road, awaiting Hassan's arrival with the requisite miraa. Hassan would give the broker around ksh.1500 for a *bunda* that the broker secured for around ksh.1300. Hassan was therefore able to avoid the use of expensive agents and did not waste much time at Muringene. If the broker obtained particularly good miraa, then he sometimes received an extra ksh.200. The relationship was flexible, and sometimes Hassan would not turn up. The broker would wait for a little while, and then sell the miraa to someone else.

Brokers at Muringene are mostly local lads who have seen the workings of the trade from a young age, and can easily turn their hand to it. Hassan's broker began by making a few shillings selling miraa for his grandfather. The old man occasionally pruned his trees by picking *makata*. He would not bother to prepare it neatly, tying it into rough and ready bundles with leaves left on. Then he would ask his grandson to sell it at a certain price. His grandson would not sell it immediately, however, but would take it away and secretly untie the bundles, pick all the leaves off, and grade them properly. Then he would sell it at the higher price commanded by properly graded miraa: whilst his grandfather asked for, say, ksh.500, he could sell it at ksh.1500. His efforts would thus yield him the tidy sum of

ksh.1000. Such enterprise served as an *entrée* to the trade, allowing him to try his hand as a broker for retailers like Hassan.

Becoming a Muringene broker does not necessarily entail being a Muringene local. One young friend from Karama spent a month in 2001 hiding from his family after running away from school (he was fearing a scolding), and visited his friend at Muringene, the broker spoken of in the last paragraph. Finding himself at a loose end, he tried his hand at brokerage and soon learnt the skills; he managed to earn a respectable amount of money. Providing he is sharp and has contacts, it seems that little can hold back a Meru lad intent on becoming a broker.

#### **Retailers buying directly from Muringene:**

Most retailers selling Muringene miraa in Meru either visit the market themselves, or delegate a fellow retailer or partner to do so. The proximity of Meru to Muringene means that such a method is preferable to relying on middlemen, who require a cut of the takings. Transport costs from Meru to Muringene are minimal – less than ksh.100 each way by *matatu* – and the journey is not long, lasting about 30-40 minutes each way. Not all retailers at Meru reside there: it is possible for a retailer to live in the Nyambenes, returning home once business is finished.

Retailers in, say, Isiolo or Nanyuki, require more time and money than those in Meru to buy directly from farmers and brokers at Muringene. For this reason, many rely on agents. However, there are still some who make the effort. Later on we shall meet two Tigania men selling Muringene and Karama miraa at Nanyuki – Tosh and Sam – who take turns to travel to Muringene: they both reside in Nanyuki.

### **Agents for Isiolo:**

Traders in Isiolo reckoned that the commonest way for retailers there to obtain supplies was through agents. Two such agents acting on behalf of Isioloan retailers are Rambo and Kamau.

**Rambo:** This Igembe established himself as an agent after initially trading miraa wholesale in Isiolo during rainy seasons when miraa was cheap. He began dealing in *nyeusi*, popular in Isiolo, and later sold a few *kitundus* of giza too. He would arrive in town with bundles procured in Muringene, sit on shop verandas and sell them from plastic bags. He did not sleep in Isiolo, but returned home. Sometimes he did not sell all his bundles before returning. To cope with this, he asked Kamathi (of *Kamathi Kiosk*: see chapter four) to sell leftover bundles in his kiosk. The following day Rambo would pick up money made on the bundles and give Kamathi a percentage in return. Their relationship strengthened to the point where Rambo brought Kamathi extra bundles of *giza* to sell with his own. Come the dry season, however, Rambo could not afford to buy miraa and visit Isiolo everyday. Kamathi suggested that Rambo act as his agent at Muringene, sending miraa to him by public transport. From then on, Rambo operated in this way. He still visited Isiolo occasionally to check up on the state of the market, and to trade further quantities of miraa wholesale when plentiful.

He is regarded as a character by those who know him: his trademark attire is a pair of shorts worn with blazer jacket – shorts in Kenya are normally only worn by young boys – and his voice booms so loud when trading, that he can be heard from afar. His eyes are compared to those of chameleons, as when he sells miraa he appears to look in all directions, ensuring no one tricks him. These days Rambo no longer supplies *Kamathi Kiosk*, but still flourishes as an agent supplying other Isiolo kiosks.

**Kamau:** Another Muringene agent has now taken over supplying *Kamathi Kiosk*: Kamau. His homestead and *shamba* is a few minutes walk along the main road from Muringene bus stage. After leaving school, he found few opportunities, and so dabbled in the miraa trade by

the road. While conducting this small-scale trade he made contacts in the Isiolo trade, and, after saving money, began to send *bundas* off to these retailers. Nowadays he sends miraa to two Borana retailers in Isiolo, as well as to *Kamathi Kiosk*. Before forging a relationship with Kamathi, he sent *giza* to another kiosk. He terminated this relationship after realising that he was being conned: the retailer would claim that some miraa had not been sold, and would consequently not pay for it, even though Kamau knew perfectly well it had been sold. For *Kamathi Kiosk*, Kamau procures some *colombo*, as well as the main order of 30-35 *kitundus* of *giza*. He sends three *bundas* of *nyeusi* in total for his Borana retailers. He buys miraa at the main market, then carries it back to the main road, perhaps making a couple of trips back and forth until he has enough. If he has difficulty finding enough and time is getting on, Kamau dispatches some for Kamathi to be getting on with, sending the rest later. At the bus stage, Kamau packs miraa into sacks inside an empty building by a café. A friend of his also helps out here, earning himself some shillings. Kamau sends miraa for all retailers he supplies to *Kamathi Kiosk*. The two Borana retailers collect theirs there.

When I met Kamau (in April 2002), it was the rainy season, and he was paying ksh.1500 for a *bunda* of *giza*. At the same time *Kamathi Kiosk* was selling *giza* for about ksh.200 per *kitundu*, thus getting ksh.2000 per *bunda*. Kamau is sent about ksh.1700-1800 to cover the initial cost and his own profit. The *bundas* of *nyeusi* cost ksh.500 each. One *kitundu* in Isiolo was fetching about ksh.80, thus ksh.800 per *bunda*. Assuming all *kitundus* are sold, he received ksh.600-650. On a good day during rainy seasons, therefore, when all *kitundus* are retailed, he could expect to get a day's profit of over ksh.1000. *Kamathi Kiosk* sells more *kitundus* of *giza* in dry seasons – up to about 50 – and more profit might be made on each one too.<sup>15</sup> This suggests that in the dry season he makes over ksh.1000 from *Kamathi Kiosk* alone. When the two other retailers are taken in to account, one can see that the dry season offers him more potential for profit.

Being ambitious, Kamau is not content to continue supplying just three retailers: he is looking for more. He is married with five children, all requiring school fees paid. Much money therefore goes towards paying these and other familial expenses. To further improve his and his family's standard of living, he would happily expand his business. His daily work as an agent is not his sole source of income, however, and his *shamba* of 60 miraa trees provide extra money. When I visited, his *shamba* was due to be picked the following morning: we ate lunch together in a café, and there he communicated the message to other diners that a troop of boys was required to harvest his *shamba*.

Kamau enjoys his work. During my visit, he spent much time at the market engaging in banter, and while he does work hard for the two hours duration of the market, this hardly makes for a stressful life. After dropping off money for the family's supper, he escorted me to a bar with satellite TV for a chew, a beer, a chat with his pals, and an Ipswich game.

### **Longer-range trajectories: Muringene to Maralal, Marsabit, Moyale**

The more remote miraa's destinations become, the harder it is for agents to send it to retailers. To reach certain towns would require too many steps in the journey, multiplying the risk of miraa going astray in transit if entrusted to public transport. Thus, for trade to towns like Maralal (beyond Nanyuki), and Marsabit and Moyale (north of Isiolo), wholesalers usually obtain miraa from Muringene and transport it themselves.

#### **Maralal:**

In 2002 I was given a lift from Karama to Meru by a pick-up containing five or so traders bound for Maralal. They had many *bundas* of *nyeusi* and second-grade *giza* (totalling around 100 *bundas*), which they were to sell to retailers in Maralal itself and in smaller Samburu towns between Nanyuki and Maralal. They are flexible, however, and also retail miraa to ranch-workers and townsfolk *en route*. They hired the vehicle between them and spent a night

in Nanyuki before proceeding the next morning in another vehicle. They reckoned that a normal expedition to Maralal lasts three days. Much miraa would be well stored so as to be able to be sold even a few days post-harvest. Not all chewers are fussy about chewing only freshly picked stems, so they can sell stocks throughout the duration of the trip. The traders were Tigania from Muthara, and stated a preference for miraa from there: the pick-up made a special stop in Muthara to allow them to stock up with a few *shurbas* from a kiosk.<sup>16</sup>

**Merille, Laisamis, Marsabit, Moyale:**

Nyambene miraa for Marsabit and Moyale is also sourced at Muringene. Much trade along this route is operated by Borana, Burji, and Sakuye women. Most are wholesalers, passing miraa to retailers along the route. They are usually very experienced in the trade. Isiolo is an important staging-post, and much miraa is there loaded on lorries that leave at around 6:00 a.m. and travel up in convoy along a road sometimes dangerous because of banditry. They arrive in Isiolo from Meru late at night, then await the departure of lorries from a bus stage in the town centre. On one such occasion, an informant of mine spoke to some of these traders on my behalf.<sup>17</sup>

**Burji Mama:** One trader was a Burji lady from Marsabit who had been trading for 32 years. She travels to Muringene to supply retailers in Marsabit, and towns further north like Sololo. Her miraa is consumed by Borana, Rendille, and Gabra. She normally procures 20 *bundas* of *alele*, *liboi*, and a low-grade variety she termed *kathelwa chufa*. I suspect that the *alele* is mostly sold at Marsabit, whilst *liboi* and *kathelwa* is sold further north: they are tough varieties which can survive long, hot journeys, and are cheap, and hence popular where money is scarce. The notes taken by my informant are unclear as to whether she herself takes the miraa the full distance to towns north of Sololo. I doubt she does: she is likely to go no further than Marsabit – her home – and to pass on miraa to others to transport and sell. Retailers she supplies pay her back once they have sold their stocks, giving her a certain amount per *kitundu*, and keeping the rest for themselves.

When visiting the Nyambenes, she hires a vehicle with another trader to get miraa to Isiolo, and then travels to Marsabit on board a bus or lorry, paying ksh.200 for each sack of miraa. She pays cess when passing the police barrier at Subuiga Junction prior to entering Isiolo district (see chapter three) and in Marsabit. Despite such expenses, she makes good money: for a *bunda* of *alele*, she paid (in February 2000<sup>18</sup>) around ksh.2000, selling it on to retailers at ksh.3500. This gives her ksh.1500 in profit. For a *bunda* of *kathelwa*, she estimated a profit of ksh.1000, and for a *bunda* of *liboi*, she estimated ksh.1700. If we allow for an average of ksh.1300 per *bunda*, then her twenty *bundas* should provide her with a gross profit of ksh.26 000, provided all miraa is sold by retailers, which will not necessarily be the case. Deducting cess payments, transport costs, and incidental expenses, would not, I think, bring down her net profit below about ksh.18 000. Relatively speaking, this is a considerable sum; certainly a fair reward for the tiring nature of the expedition. How often she makes the journey is dependent on many factors: it seems likely that twice per week is the most she could manage, given that the full journey from Marsabit to Nyambene and back would take three days.

Problems can beset traders. She listed the following as the main difficulties she faces:

1. Insecurity. Bandits are often active between Isiolo and Marsabit.
2. Bad roads. Heavy rain can make the Isiolo-Marsabit road impassable.
3. Breakdowns. Lorries and buses often suffer mechanical problems.
4. The varying quality of miraa over the seasons.
5. Sometimes miraa is exchanged for livestock by customers with little money. Retailers delay returning money to her as it takes time to sell the livestock for cash.
6. Competition. If she arrives late, then Ethiopian miraa will have flooded local markets. In Marsabit and near the border with Ethiopia, there is a good deal of *chafe* (an Ethiopian variety) sold; it can be sold cheaply too, as it is often smuggled over the border, to evade

duty. Also, miraa grown around Marsabit is sold locally at a cheap price. However, Nyambene miraa is the favoured choice of those who can afford it.

***Sakuye mama:*** She lives in Moyale, and had been trading for 26 years. She is well established, owning a Land Rover for transporting miraa. Having her own transport is a boon, allowing her to expeditiously deliver miraa to Moyale retailers. Retailers sell on miraa to local communities of Borana, Garre, Burji, Gabra, and Konso.

She deals with Muringene brokers. She informs them of the date and time of her arrival so they will be ready with the required *bundas*. Once she has collected them, she proceeds to Isiolo, spending the night resting after preparing her cargo and vehicle for the journey ahead. She leaves Isiolo in convoy with lorries at dawn, reaching Moyale at 10:00 p.m. She sells *kathelwa*, *liboi*, and a high quality variety she termed *marduf*, of which she obtains two *bundas* at around ksh.2800 each for affluent Moyale chewers. Such a *bunda* might fetch ksh.4500-5000 in Moyale, unless cheaper varieties from Ethiopia keep prices down. She reported that cess of ksh.200 per *bunda* is paid in Moyale, double that payable in Marsabit.

She regarded insecurity, poorly maintained roads, and high costs of car maintenance as the most vexing problems. Despite these and the high rate of cess, she estimated that her trade nets her monthly ksh.40,000-60,000.

***Barbada Business Partners:***

My informant also spoke with a Rendille man from Laisamis, a town between Isiolo and Marsabit. Miraa is avidly consumed there too, and he became involved in the miraa trade with another Rendille. He and his partner refer to themselves as the *Barbada Business Partners*. They have been in business for ten years, and have a joint bank account for earnings. One partner stays in Isiolo, visiting the Nyambenes and sending miraa to his partner in Laisamis. His partner relays cash and orders back to Isiolo. They source miraa from both

Muringene and Lare, although Muringene seems far more convenient. They hire a Land Rover to ferry miraa from the Nyambenes to Isiolo, providing them with the means to visit both Muringene and Lare. At Isiolo, *bundas* are packed into sacks, and loaded onto a bus or lorry. Having departed Isiolo at dawn, their miraa reaches Laisamis at around 11:30 a.m. They sell *alele*, *kathelwa*, *liboi*, and *mbogua* (the last named they supply only when requested specifically). A *bunda* of *alele* fetches ksh.3000 in Laisamis, after being bought for ksh.2000 in the Nyambenes.

They have a kiosk in Laisamis where they wholesale miraa to local retailers. They said that some miraa is transported by others to towns like Merille and Logologo by foot: this involves serious walking over forty kilometres or so in the broiling sun of such low-lying regions. They themselves travel little, and consider their trade relaxed in comparison with traders heading as far as Moyale.

Their trade is occasionally disrupted by the region's insecurity, and they also lament that dishonesty can lead those entrusted with relaying money between Laisamis and Isiolo to pilfer some. The credit system of trade they use with local retailers can result in payment delays. Bad roads and the weather are problems for them too.

### **Muringene – Nairobi – Beyond:**

The route most commonly followed by miraa is that from Nyambene to Nairobi. Much of this miraa is sourced in Lare / Mutuati, particularly that for the international trade. However, miraa procured at Muringene is retailed on a large scale in Nairobi, and in regions supplied via the city. These include those south of Nairobi, the coast, and Western Kenya. It is along the Nyambenes to Nairobi route that most Hilux pick-ups operate (see chapter three).

Agents acting freelance or as employees in a *kampuni* work in a manner similar to Kamau and Rambo. They procure miraa at market or from *shambas*, paying in full or with a

deposit. The only difference in method is that they use Hilux pick-ups rather than public transport. Thus they pack *bundas* up in sacks and hand them to those loading the vehicles while also giving relevant details to *karanis* ('clerks') employed by vehicle operators.

**Majengo:** Nairobi is a large city, and to avoid difficulties in finding retailers and wholesalers, there is a central distribution point serving the city: Majengo, a crucial link in the trade located east of the city centre. Goldsmith's 1988 description of Majengo requires little alteration to bring it up to date: 'The Nairobi miraa terminal is in Majengo, a cramped mass of mud and corrugated iron houses lined by open gutters whose ankle-deep water is disguised by a film of dust and garbage that collects on the surface.' (Goldsmith 1988: 142). My visit to Majengo in 2000 revealed an appearance almost identical to that painted by Goldsmith.

The section of Majengo devoted to miraa is small: basically just one muddy or dusty (depending on the time of year) street. It has evolved to service the requirements of the trade. Its location is felicitous: it is close to Eastleigh, where vast quantities of miraa are consumed by Somalis and Ethiopians, but also near the city centre, and thus the many retail outlets found throughout Nairobi.

Goldsmith speaks of miraa vehicles arriving in Majengo at night (1988: 142). This is not the case nowadays. Hilux pick-ups from Muringene reach Majengo in the early evening, allowing kiosks to get supplies of miraa on the same day as it was picked. In the late afternoon, retailers make their way to Majengo. Some operate within the Majengo area itself, and consequently have only a short stroll between their outlet and the depot. Others come from nearby Eastleigh. Retailers in the centre of Nairobi obviously have a longer journey to make, although it is still feasible to walk. I visited Majengo with a young trader working for a city centre kiosk. We walked from the kiosk to Majengo – covering a few kilometres – and arrived there in the early evening. Walking there is risky as Majengo is a notorious crime hotspot. Criminals are aware that much money changes hands there, and are keen to join the

cash bonanza. Thus traders often prefer using public transport to walking. Retailers operating west of Nairobi centre have little choice but to get a bus or *matatu*: there is a taxi service that collects miraa and delivers it directly to retailers, however.

At the time of my visit, Majengo was bustling as by then the first pick-ups had arrived from Muringene, and others were expected soon. Crowds of traders surrounded vehicles while *karanis* bellowed out details written on *ndabaris*. Traders whose vehicles had not yet arrived were passing time eating, drinking, chatting, and playing board games, keeping eyes and ears alert for the arrival of other pick-ups. The pace of proceedings was frenetic. Retailers were impatient to get their *bundas* and return to kiosks, while Hilux drivers and *karanis* were impatient to unload and finish business so that vehicles could be readied for the return journey.

Many retailers collecting miraa at Majengo have an agent at Muringene who sends them miraa. They entrust agent's dues from the previous day's trade and any messages concerning the state of the market with *karanis*. Other retailers purchase miraa from wholesalers based in Majengo (using the pay-back-post-retail system).

Most Majengo wholesalers are Igembe, although Tigania traders would not be discriminated against. Such wholesalers, according to Goldsmith (1988: 143), are often members of *kampunis*. Their customers might well be small-scale traders retailing miraa from boxes or even at bus stops. Near the *Ya Ya* shopping centre in the wealthy suburb of Hurlingham (west of the city centre) is one bus stop where two young traders regularly trade. They sit on a bench, hang a banana leaf from the bus stop roof and sell low quality *giza* from a plastic bag. I reckon such traders operating without a kiosk would be the main customers of Majengo wholesalers. Those selling miraa from kiosks are more likely to deal with a Muringene agent, rather than obtain it from Majengo wholesalers. If one has the resources to rent or own a kiosk, one would presumably have the resources to deal directly with an agent.

Goldsmith found at the time of his research that there were four vehicles leaving Muringene (1988: 142), and it is likely that these served Majengo. Nowadays there are about thirty pick-ups leaving the Nyambenes for Nairobi, and I reckon around half of these ply the Muringene to Majengo route. Fifteen pick-ups deliver thousands of *bunda* between them, and one can get an idea of just how busy Majengo becomes by contemplating how many traders congregate there to collect supplies.

Many miraa traders working in Majengo stay in cheap lodgings. Goldsmith describes them as sharing 'cramped quarters' and leading a 'gaaru-like communal existence' (1988: 142). *Gaar* is the Meru word for the traditional barracks that housed Meru warriors (Peatrik 1999: 545). Such communal existence allows overheads to be kept low, allowing more money to be reinvested in the trade, and thus enabling a trader to advance his career. Certainly younger traders would perforce settle for sharing cheap accommodation, and many Majengo traders are young. Older traders, I suspect, might spend a little bit more money on accommodation, renting themselves somewhere decent. This certainly was the case with older Nairobi retailers I met, like Kibongi, Benson's cousin.

Thus, retailers throughout Nairobi rely on Majengo as a collection point for miraa. Large quantities are sold in Kenya's capital city. However, large quantities are also sent to other towns and cities via Majengo. Whilst retailers in satellite towns to Nairobi like Kikuyu or Ngong can make the short journey by public transport to Majengo, retailers in far away towns like Kisumu are not generally able to do this as distances are too great.

#### **Westward trajectories:**

There is considerable demand for miraa in Kisumu. This large city – the third biggest in Kenya after Nairobi and Mombasa – is home to many Muslim chewers, as well as a diverse

mix of other chewers. Some miraa may come from the Nyambenes in one long journey: there is a Peugeot taxi service running from Maua to Kisumu, and I suspect some passengers are miraa traders, or at least that traders entrust their miraa to the vehicle.

Larger quantities reach Kisumu by bus from Nairobi, after reaching Majengo by Hilux. One middleman operating on the Nairobi to Kisumu route is a Meru trader named Soti.<sup>19</sup> He supplies numerous Kisumu retailers, sending miraa from wholesalers in Majengo, as well as looking after miraa sent to Kisumu by Muringene agents. This he packs into sacks, clearly labelling them with retailers' addresses. Buses for Kisumu leave Nairobi near Majengo, so Soti does not have to take miraa far before loading. On one journey in 2001, Soti accompanied three sacks of miraa for Kisumu. This required dedication: whenever the bus stopped for a passenger, he would jump off and make sure no miraa was furtively taken as alighting passengers removed luggage from the underneath storage compartment. As he travelled by night, he chewed to remain alert for this task. He hoped to set up an office at the Kisumu bus stage, however, reckoning this would remove the necessity for him to accompany miraa. His cousin works for him at Kisumu, and is paid ksh.300 for being on hand to pick up sacks from the bus stage and pass them to waiting retailers. Soti not only makes money on miraa that he himself sends, but also from miraa he sends on other agents' behalf: retailers at Kisumu pay him ksh.100 to cover the costs of transport.

Towns situated between Nairobi and Kisumu – Naivasha, Nakuru, Kericho – are also supplied with miraa. Retailers in such towns probably have more or less permanent agreements with agents in Majengo, or people like Soti, to deliver supplies. For miraa to reach further than Kisumu, further steps are required. Some heading west from Nairobi sooner or later turns north to reach towns like Kitale, and even Lodwar, a Turkana town requiring a long journey from Nairobi. The stretch between Kitale and Lodwar is prone to banditry. Still, miraa is popular in Lodwar, and so traders are willing to retail it there. They probably rely on fellow retailers in Kitale to send it northbound by *matatu*, although some

may escort miraa themselves from Kitale to Lodwar. Varieties sold in Lodwar (and towns further north like Kalokol on the shores of Lake Turkana) are probably ones that can be sold even a few days after harvesting.

### **Other Trajectories of Muringene – Majengo miraa:**

Trajectories south of Nairobi to towns like Kajiado and Narok in Maasai land are short in range, and consequently easy to operate. Miraa is popular in Maasai land, and some young Maasai men even retail miraa themselves. Rumour has it that there is a *matatu* service supplying Tanzania – where miraa is illegal – with supplies, heading to the border at Namanga via Kajiado. I heard this rumour at Kajiado, and suspect that instead of smuggling miraa into Tanzania, the *matatu* in question was just supplying Namanga. However, some miraa is almost certainly smuggled through.

Thus we see Majengo's importance. It is a crucial link in the network, allowing vast regions of Kenya to be supplied miraa with relative ease. Without such a central distribution point, the trade to, for example, Kisumu, Lodwar, and Kajiado, would be difficult. However, there is one trajectory for which Muringene miraa need not be channelled through Majengo. This trajectory takes miraa to the coast. Muringene miraa is accompanied on this trajectory by large quantities of miraa from Ntonyiri, using the same mode of transportation. This provides me with an excuse to turn from Muringene miraa, to that originating in Ntonyiri. I now offer a description of Mutuati in particular, before describing miraa's coast-bound trajectory. The description of this trajectory holds for Muringene miraa too.

### **Lare / Mutuati Miraa**

It is from Ntonyiri that Kenyan miraa sold in exotic locales like Mogadishu and London is sourced. A large-scale, Somali-run network operates this trade. However, not all trajectories

that Ntonyiri miraa follows are operated by Somalis. Igembe and Tigania-run kiosks in Nairobi's Eastleigh district get regular deliveries of Mutuati / Lare miraa, and the network speeding miraa to the coast is almost wholly Meru-operated. For Garissa, Meru middlemen – agents and wholesalers – work alongside Somali counterparts. When Meru – Somali relations are good, it is possible to see people from both groups intermingling freely in Lare, Kaelo, Mutuati, and Maua. This Somali presence gives these towns a more cosmopolitan feel than the likes of Kangeta or Muthara.

All towns from Maili Tatu to Mutuati – KK, Kaelo, Lare, and Mutuati itself – are important centres for miraa. However, as it was Mutuati where I spent most time, Mutuati is a focal point for this section.

#### **Mutuati's Miraa Markets:**

The miraa trade in Mutuati has two periods of intensity. The first is at the same time of the day – late morning / early afternoon – as Muringene, and sees transactions between farmers and agents supplying miraa to Nairobi and Mombasa, as well as internationally. The second occurs late in the evening, when vehicles are prepared for journeys to Garissa and other towns in Kenya's North East like Mado Gashi and Wajir.

Scenes in Mutuati at around eleven in the morning resemble those of Muringene as the first wave of men and boys arrive with *bundas*. They approach town from all directions; from *shambas* located on the hill to the west of town, from those in the direction of Lare, from those in the direction of Kabache, and from those to the east. They are few at first, but soon numbers swell until the peak of the daytime market in the early afternoon. Land Rovers venture to villages in Mutuati's environs, and some Hilux pick-ups are readied for the journey to Nairobi. Some farmers and brokers disperse once reaching town and seek out kiosks they supply: there are many such kiosks, especially around the main market area. Most, however, head straight to a certain spot on the main road beyond the market. There are found some

cafes, bars, and shops, as well as a throng of miraa traders. Agents take it easy before business, indulging in refreshments at a café, or even chewing a little themselves. Sooner or later, however, relaxation must end. For some this point is signalled by the return of Hilux pick-ups from Nairobi. Agents supplying colleagues in Nairobi rely on Hilux drivers to relay cash and new requests, and the *karani* of a particular vehicle will hand over envelopes containing these to agents.

Farmers and brokers keep arriving, and agents apply themselves to procuring enough *bundas*: this entails good-natured and not so good-natured bargaining. Some agents get supplies directly from farmers, and come to this distribution spot to pass miraa on to transporters. Almost all this activity involves Igembe men. Although there still is a Somali presence in town<sup>20</sup>, nowadays most Somali traders rely on Meru brokers to interact with farmers.

More deals are struck, and eventually the time comes when agents have enough miraa. They then pack *bundas* in sacks, and help transporters load up vehicles: Land Rovers in the case of miraa for Mombasa, Hilux pick-ups in the case of miraa for Nairobi. Land Rovers, once loaded at Mutuati visit Lare, Kaelo, and KK, so that agents can pick up more miraa. Then they head to Muringene to load up buses bound for Mombasa. Once pick-ups and Land Rovers depart, agents and farmers disperse, perhaps relaxing in town for a little. Some brokers and agents may need to revisit *shambas* to pay farmers in full for miraa they earlier obtained on deposit. Whilst they tie up loose ends, the miraa is sped on its way to Mombasa and Nairobi. By the time Mutuati agents and farmers finally yield to sleep, some of this miraa will be heading north again, this time at high altitude. The British Airways flight to London will have delivered it to waiting agents at Heathrow before the next day's miraa-business commences.

Business does not end completely once this first wave of trading has subsided. A steady stream of farmers and brokers continue to arrive knowing that a second period of trading occurs in the evening. This is centred around a spot further out of town from where the daytime trade occurs. This spot is shaded by trees, allowing a mixture of farmers, brokers, and agents to congregate comfortably during daytime. There are normally a few vehicles parked there in readiness for a nocturnal departure. Much miraa is brought to this spot from outlying villages like Kabache by Land Rovers, and much miraa will be lower-grade varieties like *matangoma* or *makata*. As the trade to the northeast is mainly operated by Somalis, there were quite a few Somalis waiting underneath the trees there when I first visited Mutuati.

The second wave of activity becomes intense after dark when vehicles are loaded and sent on their way: some for Garissa, some for Mado Gashi and Wajir. Oil lamps and vehicle headlights provide illumination.

Such activity occurs similarly throughout Ntonyiri. Bigger towns like Mutuati, Lare, Kaelo, and KK, serve smaller villages as distribution centres. As we shall see later, Maua also serves as a main organisational centre for much of the miraa sourced in the region and destined for the international trade. First, however, let me turn to the national trade of Mutuati / Lare miraa: particularly that destined for the coast.

#### **Mutuati / Lare – Mombasa and beyond:**

The trajectory from Mutuati / Lare to the coast is one that is almost entirely operated by Igembe men.

Once agents have procured miraa, they either use Land Rovers that collect miraa in Ntonyiri prior to loading it onto buses at Muringene, or, alternatively, if they are only sending miraa from one town, they load miraa on board buses at that particular town (e.g. Mutuati, Lare, or Muringene). Agents who load miraa at Mutuati pay the bus tout a transportation fee,

rather than using Land Rovers. By late afternoon, buses are on their way, usually heavily loaded with miraa. Some traders travel all the way to Mombasa, other agents contributing to their bus fare and other costs. They act as Soti does on the Nairobi-Kisumu bus journey, looking after miraa in transit.

Most miraa for Mombasa reaches Mwembe Tayari (Kiswahili, meaning literally 'ripe mango') at dawn, Mombasa's equivalent of Majengo: a large distribution point and wholesale market for miraa. Here vast quantities of miraa are sold or passed on to local retailers or other middlemen wanting to speed miraa up or down the coast. There are numerous retail kiosks in the city centre, many around the 'Old Town' district with its winding narrow lanes. Miraa kiosks in this district blend in well with shops selling *pan*, a mild and tasty narcotic.

In a talk given in 2001 at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine<sup>21</sup>, Susan Beckerleg spoke of miraa being distributed from Mwembe Tayari all along the coast. Whilst affirming that Meru dominate this coastal trade, she also spoke of the role of Akamba, Ethiopians, and Somalis, who work as clerks at the market. Malindi serves as a central point for distributing miraa to smaller towns: Beckerleg reported that in towns like Watamu and Gongori, miraa is retailed at the price it would fetch in Malindi plus a little extra to cover the costs of the extra bus journey from Malindi.

Beckerleg also speculated on the history of the trade in Malindi and Lamu. Lamu, she maintained, had no Meru traders until recently, whereas today it has many. During a visit to Lamu in 2001, I met some of the many Igembe traders there. One I met ensures Lamu retailers are kept well stocked with the commodity: Miaka.

Miaka is an Igembe in his forties whose Nyambene home is near Lare. Much of his time is spent commuting between Mombasa and Lamu. He supplies kiosks in Lamu and smaller towns on the way. An agent in Lare sends him miraa every other day to Mombasa. He

receives two or three sacks of *giza*, and takes these to Lamu by bus, often in the company of his brother who is also involved in the trade. By about 4:00 p.m., buses reach Mokowe, the point on the mainland where motorboat *matatus* leave for Lamu. Miaka supplies retailers in Mokowe too: as the bus cruises through this small town he calls out and beckons over retailers. The bus stops in town briefly before reaching the motorboat terminus, allowing Miaka to conduct transactions with these retailers. Then the bus arrives at the jetty, and passengers alight and walk to waiting motorboats. After a short cruise, Lamu comes into view, and the motorboat docks securely at the jetty. Miaka then makes a beeline for the town centre near the old fort. On one of the main streets in this vicinity, Harambee Avenue, are most of the kiosks where Igembe men sell miraa. Miaka supplies a few of them, although his main business is with two young relatives of his named Kimathi and M'Mweti. These two men (both 26 years old in 2001) are also from Lare, and retail miraa from a spacious kiosk: Miaka was certainly the authority figure in their eyes, although one they regarded fondly. He told them to put aside a *kitundu* as a gift for me on the next day, which they did willingly.

Miaka has a home in Mombasa and a place to stay in Lamu, but his wife and children are in Lare and he misses them greatly, although he appeared fond of the coast and had many friends amongst Lamu locals. He introduced me to some local friends as M'Nabea – my Meru nickname – saying I was an Igembe like him from the Nyambenes. Despite being fond of Lamu, he lamented that the likes of Kimathi and M'Mweti had to leave the Nyambenes to trade miraa. He said that unless a Nyambene man has a large *shamba*, then there are few opportunities except those that involve trading miraa.

While Miaka sometimes longs for the Nyambenes, he knows how to make the best of Lamu's more humid climes. After a long journey up the coast, he likes nothing better than relaxing on a waterfront bench catching sea-breezes. The moment of calm is short-lived, as on the following day work begins again and he makes once more for Mombasa.

### **Garissa, Wajir: The Northeast:**

Getting miraa to retailers in the northeast is another task that begins in Ntonyiri. The most popular varieties sold in the northeast are cheap ones like *makata*, produced in abundance in *shambas* around KK, Kaelo, Lare, and Mutuati. Much trade to the predominantly Somali northeast is operated by Somali, and their network has developed most fully in Ntonyiri. Thus, most miraa sold in the northeast is from there rather than Muringene.

Not all middlemen involved in this trajectory are Somali, however. Some Igembe have links with Garissa, supplying Igembe-run kiosks. One such middleman is father to Meshach, whom we shall meet in chapter four. Meshach operates a kiosk founded by his father; his father nowadays stays in Kaelo sending miraa to Meshach. He procures miraa from farmers, occasionally hiring a *shamba*, and uses a Somali-owned Toyota pick-up truck to ferry supplies to Garissa. (In earlier days, he had to take his *bundas* to Garissa by bus: pick-ups for Garissa were not operating then.) Once miraa reaches the kiosk at around 6:00 a.m., Meshach gives the driver money to relay back to the Nyambenes, and sorts out the miraa. Some he keeps to retail himself; most he passes on to Somali women who trade it on the streets. Thus, this network from Kaelo to Garissa involves Igembe farmers, an Igembe trader, a Somali-owned vehicle, an Igembe wholesaler / retailer in Garissa, and Somali women traders. This bi-ethnic trade is possible here as Igembe have a strong foothold in Garissa, owning kiosks that serve as distribution points for the town's female retailers.

Further north in towns like Wajir and Mandera, Meru traders have no such foothold, and most of the network is operated by Somalis. To reach Wajir and Mado Gashi from Ntonyiri, Somali traders use Land Rovers. For Mandera, Somali traders use Hilux pick-ups to Nairobi, and then load the miraa onto light aircraft serving the far north from Wilson Airport. Fortunes can be made by middlemen operating on this route, and money-making opportunities are also

great for transporters. However, Ntonyiri–International trajectories offer the most profit-making potential. It is to these predominantly Somali-operated trajectories that I now turn.

### **International Trajectories:**

The international trade has operated for many years, and the appetite for miraa in countries like Somalia was a prime catalyst in the evolution of the trade. Money to be made by middlemen supplying Somalia encouraged the growth in production by Meru farmers before new markets emerged throughout Kenya. Somalia's collapse in the early 1990s and the consequent spread of a Somali diaspora created markets further afield than Somalia itself: Europe and America now became prime markets.

In earlier times, miraa bound for Somalia by road was channelled through Isiolo and Garissa: miraa through Isiolo then Wajir crossed the border at Mandera, while miraa through Garissa crossed the border at Liboi. Goldsmith remarks that '[r]evenues from the municipal tax on the reexport of miraa became so important to frontier towns like Isiolo and Garissa by the 1970s that when Somalia banned imports of miraa in 1981, they were described as "the dying towns of the miraa trade" in the local press' (Goldsmith 1988: 134). One Somali – a man mature in years living in Isiolo – told me of expeditions he once undertook weekly to take miraa to Somalia. These involved driving for 24 hours in a Land Rover after collecting miraa from Meru agents, then selling it at Mandera or sometimes at Mogadishu itself, receiving payment in US dollars. He reckoned he obtained the equivalent of today's ksh. 35,000 in profit every trip. After a three-year spell in the 1970s, he aborted this enterprise, fearing the growing problem of banditry.

Miraa vehicles for Somalia do not now include Isiolo in their route from Ntonyiri, although Garissa is still a staging post. It is impossible to give an accurate figure for the quantity of miraa entering Somalia from Kenya, or for the revenue made from its export: both figures would be huge. In 2001 President Moi closed the border with Somalia with the stated

intention of curbing the influx of small arms into Kenya. During the three months this closure lasted, newspapers reported that farmers and exporters were losing many millions of shillings.

As already stated, the Somali presence in Ntonyiri is considerable. Many live in Kaelo, the town before Lare when heading to Mutuati. Tension between Somali and Igembe sometimes leads to the former moving to Maua (where there also are many Somalis), or even leaving the Nyambenes altogether if the atmosphere becomes too heated. In Kaelo and Maua, Somalis own business premises and homes. In Maua there is a Somali-owned building that acts as the Nyambene headquarters for exporting miraa to London. This building has the appearance of a lodging-house from outside, and, indeed, fulfils this function by providing lodging for many workers. The building is owned by an international trader of some renown: Hashim. I was told that he spends much time in London, as well as in Nairobi where he has another headquarters in Kariakor that further processes miraa before it is loaded onto Britain-bound planes at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport.

Many Somalis working for Hashim are remunerated well, especially those operating as agents. Such agents are provided with accommodation at two lodgings: *The Beehive Kraal* and *The Lake Basin* hotel.<sup>22</sup> Not all Hashim's employees are quite so fortunate. Despite the general perception of Somalis involved in the miraa trade as wealthy, many attracted to Maua by the prospect of employment from towns like Isiolo lead a basic existence. Such workers carry out menial tasks around the Maua headquarters. For unemployed Somali men, casual work for Hashim offers a first step in the miraa trade. They and their Meru counterparts in more menial tasks do not get rooms in hotels. Instead, most sleep in a large room at the headquarters. Bedding comes in the form of sacks used in the trade: some sleep inside them like sleeping-bags. The sight of many bodies sleeping in random formations on the floor of this room is said to be quite something. Two cockerels are provided to ensure that employees are up early for work. Their reveille engenders coarse remarks from those who had spent the previous night chewing miraa until the early hours.

The Maua headquarters of Hashim's business not only provides cheap accommodation for employees, but is essential in running the network. The following description of the network, given to me by a young Meru friend who once acted as a clerk for one of Hashim's brokers, will make this importance clear:

This young lad (18 years old in 2002) was once at a loose end. He visited Maua to catch up with friends, and by chance met a young woman, Karimi, whom he realised to be a relative after she showed him a picture in which he spotted a mutual cousin. By the time they met, she already was doing well out of the international trade by working as a broker for Hashim. Her father got her involved in the trade. He owns a vast *shamba* near Mutuati. He asked a friend of his who had been working successfully for Hashim whether he could employ her. Work was forthcoming, and Karimi soon learnt the ropes. She became skilled so quickly that she split from him setting herself up independently. She even took away much of his business in doing so.

My friend was offered a job as a *karani* for the Land Rover Karimi uses to fetch miraa from outlying villages. Working with Karimi involved an early start, when Karimi and her employees meet at Hashim's Maua headquarters. From the office within she collects money relayed from Nairobi in payment for the previous day's miraa. This she uses on that day to buy miraa outright from farmers or to pay deposits. With the money collected, Karimi, the *karani*, and a driver, make for Mutuati. They visit certain collection points, procuring either from farmers or brokers working on Karimi's behalf. Notes are meticulously kept by the *karani*: he writes down exactly how many *bundas* had been obtained from whom, as well as whether or not payment was made in full or only in part. Miraa is packed in sacks and loaded into the Land Rover. After exhausting collection points around Mutuati, they visit Kaelo and then return to Maua to transfer miraa onto pick-ups. If time is pressing, pick-ups leave Maua and await Karimi at Maili Tatu to minimise time lost. One of Hashim's Somali agents would be in the pick-up alongside the driver, and records of the transactions are passed to him so the correct amount of money can be returned from Nairobi. The *karani* keeps a carbon copy for the Maua office.

The moment all sacks are loaded on pick-ups, drivers speed away to Nairobi. They fetch up in Kariakor, the location of Hashim's Nairobi HQ. Workers unload the pick-ups, and untie *bundas* for inspection and regrading. Inspectors use a peculiar numbering system to rate the

quality of miraa. Top quality miraa is classed as 'number 7', fair miraa as '9' to '11', whilst '15' is the lowest classification. The money sent back to Karimi depends on the classification her *bundas* receive. Miraa that only merits a '15' is likely to be returned. All *bundas* are well marked with her name, so that Kariakor staff know precisely which are hers. Kariakor workers retie all *bundas* in smaller *shurbas* to increase the number of *kitundus*, and package them all up carefully in special boxes. These are driven to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in time for the British Airways flight. Meanwhile, Karimi's money is entrusted to Hilux drivers, who soon return to Maua.

Karimi enjoys her work, and hopes to export miraa herself one day. My friend described her as extremely personable and solicitous for her workers' welfare. On occasion she gives her brokers an extra ksh.500 or 1000 as extra incentive to ensure that their miraa meets high standards. She also ensures workers are well-fed, giving them money to buy lunch. Post-work chewing sessions in Maua even see her chewing alongside her workers.

One of Hashim's sons is often on hand in Maua. He mixes well with Meru workers, driving them around town in his plush car. His temper is volatile, however, and he sometimes becomes irate upon hearing how an employee of his father's had been swindling the normally absent boss.

A Somali agent nicknamed Duma ('cheetah' in Kiswahili: he was named thus as his miraa 'travels very fast, like a cheetah') also works on Hashim's network, overseeing the collection of Kaelo miraa. He is a quiet man in his late thirties whom I met one evening in February of 2000 relaxing at the *Beehive Kraal*. He was chewing high-quality *alele* from Kaelo, and was keen to share some with me and Nicholas. He filled us in with more details of the trade. He reported that he deals in *kangeta*, which he gets each morning at Kaelo, reaching there by Land Rover. He obtains *kangeta* in the form of *marduf*-sized *kitundus*: i.e. *kitundus* about double (*marduf* meaning 'double') the usual size. Once sacks containing his miraa reach Kariakor, they are opened and the miraa is prepared for export in the same manner as that sent by Karimi. Duma reckoned that every 12 *kitundus* sent to Nairobi are transformed into 40 for London, thus increasing the profit potential by increasing the number of retail units. When miraa reaches the airport, exact details of weight, number of bundles,

and cost are provided for each carton. These details are faxed through to London agents from Kariakor, so they know how much miraa to expect.

I am unsure whether or not Duma continues to visit Kaelo at this time of poisoned relations between some Meru and Somali. He might now rely on Meru brokers to collect miraa from farmers. His work resembles that of Karimi, and it would be interesting to find out exactly how each of them perceives their position within the network. I suspect that both consider themselves independent agents who happen at the moment to be supplying Hashim, rather than as employees of Hashim's. As a Somali, Duma might be more of an insider in the network than Karimi.

Hashim's international network is not the only one supplying Europe with Nyambene miraa. Indeed, I was told that his ex-wife is now in direct competition with him. Other Somali are in on the act too, although their trade may not quite match his in scale. There was word that some Meru are getting networks up and running. The most famous example of a Meru involved in the international trade is the late Ntai Wa Nkuraru, a Tigania from near Muthara, and a former member of parliament renowned as a campaigner against corruption. He was studying law in London in 1999, and imported miraa to support himself. Some Meru emphasise that he was fairer in paying farmers than Somalis (see chapter five).

Thus the procedure used by Hashim and other large-scale Somali exporters is roughly this:

- Employ Meru brokers to procure miraa.
- Use Maua as HQ in the Nyambenes from where to load pick-ups and as a central point in relaying money.

- Use premises in Kariakor, Eastleigh, or Pumwani<sup>23</sup> as the base for operations in Nairobi. There, miraa is dropped off by pick-ups and regraded into the form appropriate (and most lucrative) for export.
- Get regraded and repackaged miraa to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport for Europe (or Wilson Airport for closer destinations like Somalia).
- Rely on agents based in the destination country to collect it from the airport and arrange distribution to retailers and relay money.

In October 2002 I found one of the end-points of Britain-bound miraa: the Moss Side area of Manchester. From a terrace house a Somali – in his early thirties – retails *kangeta*-style miraa that almost certainly originates in Ntonyiri. Fresh supplies are brought by van from London four days a week. Each *kitundu* sold consists of three *shurbas* made up of around twenty stems, mainly of true *kangeta* length, although some stems are closer to the length of *giza*. I estimate that the wholesale cost of such a bundle in the Nyambenes is around ksh.50. The bundles are sold in Manchester for £3, equivalent to just over ksh.300. The price does not change seasonally, suggesting that the Somalis get miraa in Ntonyiri at a consistent price, or that the mark-up to £3 provides enough profit even if the price paid at source increases.

The UK is also a staging post for miraa smuggled into the US, Canada, and Sweden, countries where miraa is illegal. This murky business is highly profitable – a *kitundu* of *kangeta* reportedly fetches the equivalent of £30 in Toronto, a tenfold increase – and high stakes have led to the arrest and deportation of many who were offered a free holiday in return for smuggling a suitcase of miraa. According to a report in the *Guardian* (May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003), one successful trip can net £15,000: the amount paid farmers in the Nyambenes seems almost irrelevant when such profits are to be made. Whilst Somalis and Ethiopians are the main consumers in North America and Sweden, smugglers often operate by using Asians or Europeans to ferry the substance.

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These long-range trajectories seem the most dramatic: compare the local cycle of production-exchange-consumption around Kianjai, with that of Ntonyiri miraa consumed illicitly in Toronto. The proportion of the retail price going to farmers certainly undergoes a remarkable transformation: from a large proportion in the former case, to a negligible one in the latter. The niche for specialised transporters also increases with the increase in range of miraa's trajectories. It is to them that we now turn.

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<sup>1</sup> '[Miraa] enters Nakuru and Machakos, even Kisumu truly, Mwanza and Musoma with speed, and Malindi...' This is a verse from a Kiswahili poem praising miraa and listing all the many places where it is chewed.

<sup>2</sup> *Fairtrade* is an organisation that strives to pay producers a decent wage for tea, coffee and other goods. There is now a considerable selection of *Fairtrade* tea and coffee available in the UK.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander and Alexander discuss the 'assumption that the wholesaler / retailer distinction is salient for traders in all markets' (1991: 499). They point out that few distinctions believed to inhere between the English concepts 'wholesaler' and 'retailer' actually inhere in two Javanese terms glossed in the literature as 'wholesaler' and 'retailer'.

<sup>4</sup> 'Lubetaa' is an age class, estimated by Goldsmith (1988: 133) to have been initiated during the 15 year period between 1945 – 1960. Goldsmith's estimate is out of step with Peatrik's, who gives 1960-1975 as the Lubetaa initiation period (1999: 33). Goldsmith appears to have missed out a class in his table in his early paper. In his thesis (1994: 101), he seems to miss out the class *Gichungî*, although his dates for the classes from *Kiramunya* onwards – including *Lubetaa* – tally with Peatrik's. 1960-1975 seem the right dates for *Lubetaa* initiation.

<sup>5</sup> See Mario Aguilar 1997, *Being Oromo in Kenya*. This work focuses on the Waso Borana of Garba Tulla where Aguilar conducted fieldwork in the early 1990s.

<sup>6</sup> One of my favourite photographs was taken there. Two young men were sorting miraa for the proprietor, seated comfortably at a table, cigarettes gracing mouths, both wearing sunglasses and smart sportswear: looking 'cool' and unflustered, doing men's work. Fortuitously, an old lady was making her way past the window just as the camera's shutter opened. She looked the personification of drudgery, weighed down almost double with two heavy loads, whilst facing a climb up the steep slopes beyond town. The photo contrasts perfectly the work of men and that of women. (See plate 14.)

<sup>7</sup> This particular eatery is described fully in chapter six.

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<sup>8</sup> Roadside traders selling mainly *nkinyang'a* style bundles and *giza* also operate at Kangeta bus stage. As their trade is identical to those of Karama and Nkinyang'a, I shall not deal with them separately.

<sup>9</sup> Most hawkers at Kangeta sell *shurba ya nkinyang'a* style miraa, rather than the *kangeta* style for which the town is famous.

<sup>10</sup> See chapter four for a detailed description of this kiosk.

<sup>11</sup> Bundling up miraa and untying it only to bundle it up again is a common feature in miraa's social life, as agents, retailers, and exporters exploit the manner in which miraa is packaged to boost profits. One sees in this sort of instance how the wholesaler / retailer distinction cannot capture the subtleties of the way miraa is aggregated and disaggregated, packaged and repackaged, at almost every point in its circulation. Retail is etymologically derived from Old French *retaille*, meaning a piece cut off (Oxford English Dictionary), suggestive of trade in cloth and the like. The packaging of miraa allows its aggregation and disaggregation in a way that cloth does not.

<sup>12</sup> We shall meet two Tigania men running a Nanyuki kiosk retailing miraa from Muringene and Karama in chapter four.

<sup>13</sup> This is where many of Manchester's Somali community live.

<sup>14</sup> Goldsmith does not give a date for this switch from Kangeta to Muringene. Both Bernard (1972) and Hjort (1974) speak of Kangeta as the main market, and so it must have taken place in the late 1970s or early 1980s.

<sup>15</sup> Kamau reckoned a *bunda* of *giza* in dry seasons costs around ksh.2200-2500 at Muringene market. *Kamathi Kiosk* sells each *kitundu* at around ksh.300.

<sup>16</sup> Miraa for Maralal can be taken via Isiolo. It arrives there from Meru by Peugeot taxis, and is loaded on to a bus that runs three days a week between Isiolo and Maralal.

<sup>17</sup> I was keen to go and meet the traders myself, but this was at the time of much insecurity in the Isiolo region, and friends warned me against wandering the streets of Isiolo at such a late hour.

<sup>18</sup> The cost of miraa was high at that time due to lack of rain.

<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, I did not personally meet Soti. Nicholas met him when escorting a British friend of mine who visited in 2001. Nicholas noted down the details mentioned in the text.

<sup>20</sup> During a visit to Mutuati in 2002, when there was much tension between Meru and Somali over the miraa trade, I saw far fewer Somalis than I had on previous occasions. See chapter five.

<sup>21</sup> *Miraa (Khat) in Kenya: social mediator or menace?* The talk was given on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2001 at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

<sup>22</sup> *The Beehive Kraal* is my favourite place to stay in Maua. More and more Somali agents lodged there over the course of the three years in which I visited Kenya, providing a secure income for the owners.

<sup>23</sup> Pumwani was the operational base for another exporter I met in Nairobi in December 1999.

## Chapter Three:

### Transporting Miraa

*As a concord driver one has to be audacious...*

- Nicholas, August 2002.<sup>1</sup>

To speed miraa to retailers, full use is made of public service vehicles plying routes throughout Kenya, and a whole system of specialised miraa-only transport has developed: Toyota Hilux pick-ups zoom along the route to Nairobi. The trade has both attached itself to pre-existing transport options, and caused further options to be created.

Different destinations require different means of transportation, depending on the proximity of the destination to the Nyambenes, and other factors like condition of roads and security. A few examples will serve to highlight this fact:

(1): Miraa sold at kiosks or hawked to vehicles within the Nyambenes requires little more than legwork or a bicycle ride to reach the retail destination.

(2): Miraa retailed at Meru requires the use of public transport.

(3): Miraa for towns near Meru – e.g. Isiolo, Nanyuki, Nkubu – has a journey of two steps: public transport to Meru, and public transport from Meru. Isiolo is only an hour away from Meru by public transport; Nanyuki is slightly further. Nkubu is a ten minute drive from Meru.

(4): Miraa for Nairobi has just one step in its journey if Igembe miraa transported by Hilux pick-up. Once miraa reaches Nairobi, it is distributed from a central collection point (Majengo) to various retailers, perhaps using legwork, public transport, or taxis. Miraa from

Karama and Nkinyan'ga has a two-step journey to Nairobi: public transport to Meru, and again from Meru to Nairobi. Hilux pick-ups are non-stop and high-speed and reach Nairobi more rapidly than public transport, which often take a while to find passengers.

(5): Miraa for Marsabit and Moyale must overcome unpredictable roads. It has a multi-stage journey, reaching Meru by Land Rover, coming to Isiolo by public transport, and then heading north by lorry. Such a journey takes a long time, miraa reaching Marsabit after around ten hours.

(6): Miraa for Garissa travels non-stop from the Nyambenes on board special pick-ups. Other northeastern towns like Wajir and Mandera are less easily accessible, and although some is transported by road, much is nowadays taken by pick-up to Nairobi's Wilson airport, and then flown on light aircraft.

(7): For Mombasa, miraa is often transported by bus services from Nyambene that run all the way to the coast. Mombasa is a centre of distribution, and towns like Malindi and Lamu receive miraa via Mombasa by public transport.

(8): Miraa for export to Somalia and further afield is flown from Nairobi after pick-ups bring it from the Nyambenes. Miraa for Europe is loaded onto planes at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport; miraa for Somalia is loaded onto planes at the smaller Wilson Airport.

**A note on cess:**

As miraa crosses district boundaries, those transporting large amounts sometimes have to pay cess.<sup>2</sup> Transporting *bundas* into Isiolo, Marsabit, and Moyale districts requires payment of a certain amount per *bunda*. Subuiga junction is where cess is paid for miraa entering Isiolo district. All large amounts of miraa leaving the Nyambenes were once charged cess at Murere barrier near Muthara. However, nowadays miraa vehicles pass Murere without paying: buses

and pick-ups can make their way more rapidly. One retailer reported that money traders gave to the council as cess seemed to be having no impact on the region's roads<sup>3</sup>: the main road from Maua to Meru is deteriorating. This, combined with rather arbitrary-seeming rises in the charge led traders to demonstrate near the Maua council offices, and to refuse point blank to pay cess. This unified action worked, allowing miraa vehicles (and vehicles transporting other produce) to leave the Nyambenes tax-free. Newspaper reports in 2002 spoke of the Nyambene county council losing millions of shillings without the cess payments, and it is likely that some other way to tax miraa will soon be instigated.

Before looking at petrol-powered means of its transportation we first look at more lowly means of getting miraa from A to B.

### **Legwork:**

Much of the trade, especially that within the Nyambenes, merely requires legwork. Young pickers working in Igembe carry bundles from *shambas* to distribution points as part of their job. Indeed, not just young pickers, but also many farmers trek each morning into towns with *bundas* balanced on their heads. Luckily, carbohydrate-rich food in the form of *ugali* (cornmeal boiled into a stiff porridge) as well as more local specialities fuel this human effort.

In earlier days, the trade relied on legwork for longer distance trade too. M'Naituli, mentioned in chapter one, spent much of his youth carrying miraa from Mutuati to towns to the north like Gachuru. Also, much early trade to Isiolo from Nyambene relied on legwork.

### **Wheelbarrows:**

Wheelbarrows can generate a handy income for enterprising young men around Muringene, as it is almost a kilometre from the main road. Many agents rely on public transport vehicles that stop at the main road where there is a conglomeration of kiosks and restaurants. Some agents

carry miraa themselves, or buy from brokers who come directly to the main road. A few, however, make use of a service that a friend provided when he stayed in Muringene for a short period: ferrying sacks of miraa from town to the main road on a wheelbarrow. He and a friend charged ksh.50 per sack of miraa, and could transport four at one go. Ksh.200 is a decent sum to earn through such easy work.

### **Bicycles:**

Sturdy Indian-made bicycles form the mainstay of cyclists in Kenya, and the sound of a bell warning pedestrians that a cyclist is hurtling towards them is not rare in the Nyambenes. The steep hills above Karama and Nkinyang'a give cyclists an opportunity to reach exhilarating speeds, and allow miraa distribution points to be reached quickly. Often tied to luggage racks will be bundles for agents waiting in the towns below. In more remote areas of Kenya where miraa is sold, bicycles are also used by retailers to reach outlying villages: I was told this was quite common around Maralal.

### **Land Rovers:**

Many agents rely on Land Rovers. These serve distribution points like Kabache near Mutuati, collecting miraa and bringing it to more accessible locations, where it can be loaded on to buses or pick-ups. Much potential exists for those with the requisite capital to buy a Land Rover: Nicholas speaks wistfully of when he can buy a Land Rover and earn money transporting miraa. To each Land Rover is assigned a *karani*, whose job it is to keep track of miraa picked up along the way, and to ensure that it is safely loaded onto waiting vehicles. Nicholas has an uncle called Philip who works as a *karani*. He lives in Mbiriata village near Mutuati, and each morning joins up with a Land Rover, collecting miraa from Mutuati's environs. Once miraa from around Mutuati is loaded, he accompanies the Land Rover to other collection points between Mutuati and Maili Tatu, picking up miraa from Kaelo, Lare,

and KK. The Land Rover then proceeds to Muringene, and here miraa is unloaded and transferred to a Mombasa-bound bus. Philip is paid by the owner of the Land Rover.

Land Rovers have always played a large part in transporting miraa. In earlier days they ferried it to northern towns like Wajir, their all-terrain capability proving invaluable on treacherous roads. Nowadays, aside from providing the link between plantations and Hilux pick-ups, Land Rovers also ply the route from Maua to Kinna and Garba Tulla, providing much miraa for those two towns, and some still reaches Wajir by Land Rover.

### **Lorries:**

From Isiolo to Marsabit and Moyale the road is poor, so limiting options for reaching such places without a four wheel drive vehicle to very occasional bus services and, more commonly, lorries bringing various goods up from Nairobi (to return there with livestock). Borana, Burji and Sakuye women from Marsabit and Moyale taking Nyambene miraa to Marsabit, Moyale, and other towns, are a common sight on lorries heading north from Isiolo.

### **Public Service Vehicles:**

Public service vehicles in Kenya come in three main forms: *matatus* (normally minibuses, many of which were formerly used for taking tourists on safari), Peugeot taxis (these have three rows of seats and wait to fill up with customers before speeding off non-stop to destinations), and buses. The trade makes use of all three.

(i): *Matatus* are the main means of ferrying miraa from Karama and Nkinyang'a to Meru, the first stretch of its journey to such destinations as Isiolo, Nanyuki, and Nairobi. During the day, these often garishly painted minibuses disturb the peace along the Meru to Maua route, blasting out reggae and rap and emitting musical horns to attract the attention of customers.<sup>4</sup> On such vehicles there is an individual called a *manamba*. This is a slang word for the tout

who rides along in the vehicle, often hanging outside when it is very full, squeezes in passengers, and collects fares. Agents entrust miraa to *manambas*, asking them to pass it on to other vehicles. A small sum of money is handed over by the agent to the *manamba* for the service. Agents sometimes escort miraa as far as Meru, passing it on to the next vehicle in person.

Special *matatus* are laid on for miraa dealers in the Igembe region. They traverse the short stretch between Maua and Muringene, picking up many agents along the way. Farmers and brokers also make use of these special miraa-only *matatus* to reach Muringene from towns like Maili Tatu and Kangeta. It is only in the early afternoon when these operate, as it is only then that the trade requires such a service. Once business eases off for the day, they switch to other routes.

Beyond the Nyambenes, *matatus* play a role in distributing miraa from central points to outlying towns. Miraa sold in Watamu on the coast comes from Malindi, the nearest big town, sent by *matatu* or bus. Such miraa sold there is sold at a price that takes into account the extra cost in transport, and so is slightly more expensive than that sold in Malindi. Also, miraa sold in towns like Kajiado or Naivasha is often sent from Nairobi by *matatu*.

I have heard it said that traders who are regular customers of a particular *matatu* are occasionally given a free ride: they are described as travelling *sare* (a slang word for travelling without payment). Such generosity is rare, and anyway those most commonly allowed to travel *sare* are *masupuu* ('attractive girls').<sup>5</sup>

(ii): Few Peugeot taxis operate between Maua and Meru, and so within the Nyambenes they are little used by those involved in the trade. For relaying miraa to other destinations from Meru, they have their own niche, however. Miraa for *Kamathi Kiosk* in Isiolo and miraa for *Sunrise* kiosks in Nairobi is sent by Peugeot. In both cases, the driver himself brings miraa

directly to the kiosk, earning a small sum in return. In Nairobi, *Sunrise* staff give drivers ksh.100. Drivers would expect a smaller sum in Isiolo as the distance covered is much less.

From Meru to Isiolo, Peugeot taxis seem more popular with traders than *matatus*: they are quicker and more reliable. One tout for the Peugeots at Isiolo once used impeccable logic to persuade me to travel by Peugeot rather than *matatu*. He declared that Peugeots must be safer as miraa traders entrust the valuable commodity to their care, not risking the poor safety record of *matatus*.<sup>6</sup> He continued that I would be taking my life in my hands should I yield to the pressure being put on me at the time by another tout who was trying to persuade me to board a *matatu*.

For *Sunrise* kiosks the system of using Peugeots from Meru to Nairobi works smoothly. Other than Hilux pick-ups (which only transport miraa from the main Igembe region), Peugeots offer by far the quickest service to the capital.

Once when returning to Isiolo from Nyambene with Nicholas at a late hour in 2000, I became anxious at Meru as *matatus* had ceased business for the night, and I feared that we would be stranded there. Fortunately one Peugeot was about to make the journey and we were able to get a cramped amount of space for us both. This lack of space was caused by numerous *bundas* which two Borana women were transporting to Marsabit. The roof-rack and back seats were heaving with miraa.

(iii): There are bus companies operating services from the Nyambenes to Mombasa, and most miraa for Mombasa travels by bus these days. Buses like the Meru Millennium not only serve Maua, but also reach Mutuati, one of the furthest points of the Nyambenes from Meru, along a road which for the past few years has not been in the best of conditions. At one stage vehicles had to make a detour using narrow lanes whilst sections of the main road were repaired. The road repairs are nearing completion, and the main road is open once more. However, for bus

companies the hassle of reaching Lare, Kaelo, and Mutuati was worth putting up with. So profitable is miraa for them, that, according to one trader, they find it worth their while to make the long journey to the coast even when passengers are few: their cargo of miraa always provides profit. Buses leave the Nyambenes at around 4 p.m., reaching Mombasa at around 6 a.m.

By far the biggest loads for buses consist of sacks of miraa transferred from Land Rovers. In the case of the Land Rover for which Philip acts as *karani*, this transferral takes place at Muringene. Bus operators are experienced in loading up the sacks, and it does not take long for an entire Land Rover's load of miraa to be securely fastened with rope on the roof.

The fee a bus charges for transporting one Land Rover's load of miraa was, in 2001, ksh.4500. Judging how much miraa counts as one Land Rover worth is arbitrary, and heated arguments can ensue. Once Nicholas witnessed a fierce verbal exchange between bus touts and agents whose miraa was to be loaded onto a bus from a Land Rover. The touts argued that the Land Rover was vastly overloaded, and consequently its cargo would have to be charged at a higher rate: they demanded ksh.6500 from agents. Much verbal vitriol was spilt before the two parties agreed on a ksh.5000 charge for the Land Rover. This agreement did not resolve the tension completely, however, and agents who were escorting miraa to its destination continued a slanging match with the bus touts.

The rise in popularity of bus services for Mombasa amongst miraa traders forced down the price charged by Hilux vehicles: buses charge ksh.50 per *bunda*, and nowadays Hilux pick-ups charge the same. Smaller scale traders dealing in a few *bundas* of miraa are charged at this per-*bunda* rate, whilst larger scale traders using Land Rovers to get miraa to buses pay their share of the ksh.4500.

Up until 2001, vehicles transporting large amounts of miraa out of the Nyambenes were subject to the cess payments at Murere. As buses convey many sacks of miraa, they were subject to this tax. Tension surrounded the taxation of miraa vehicles, and matters came to a head when the Nyambene County Council raised the cess charged up to ksh.1000 for each bus or Hilux full of miraa. Council officers at the barrier often became embroiled in arguments with miraa traders over how much a vehicle was to be charged. One such incident in July 2000 was again witnessed by Nicholas, who happened to be at Murere:

Some Igembe traders were using a bus to convey a large amount of miraa to Mombasa. When the bus reached Murere, council officers said that the cess would be raised as the bus was loaded with twice as much miraa as normal. This incensed the traders: many had only relatively little miraa and told Nicholas that if they were charged double, then their profit for the trip would vanish in one fell swoop. One trader became so worked up with fury as he listened whilst chewing, that he requested one of the police officers to shoot him, presumably to put him out of his misery. The furore took on an ethnic dimension as some Igembe traders accused the Tigania officials of increasing cess for miraa as they envy Igembe success with miraa. One trader ironically suggested that perhaps the Igembe should leave miraa to the Tigania, who could not possibly make much money from it as their region is so arid and cannot generate enough miraa.

As council officers were using the standard load of a Hilux pick-up to gauge the amount of miraa, saying that the miraa was equivalent to the load of two Hilux trucks, some traders suggested that the council men bring along their own pick-up so the miraa could be loaded on and the true quantity estimated.

A stalemate developed with both sides proving unyielding. The bus driver and touts became impatient, wanting to be on their way. The driver beeped his horn feverishly, and threatened to bypass the barrier should the councilmen not let the bus pass. Eventually the council officers realised that little good would come of arguing further and relented, saying the bus could pass with just the usual cess payment. However, if the bus should be as full next time, then more would have to be paid.

Such was the brouhaha engendered by this incident that an opportunity was seized by a Hilux to pass by without paying cess. The pick-up was not greatly laden with miraa, and so the councilmen did not spot that it was transporting it until the driver had slipped past the barrier and made off into the distance.

Buses bound for Mombasa are not the only ones transporting miraa. Once when I was travelling between Isiolo and Meru, Peugeotts loaded with large quantities of miraa passed by in the opposite direction. Traders were using them to reach Isiolo to catch the Babie Bus which every other day travels from Isiolo to Maralal. On the coast, miraa for Lamu is brought up by bus from Mombasa: much is bought wholesale from Mwembe Tayari and then taken up to Malindi, Lamu and smaller towns along the way.

### **Pick-Up Trucks:**

The vehicle most associated with the trade is the Toyota Hilux, a type of pick-up truck. Most are driven at terrifying speeds from central points like Maua, Mutuati, and Muringene to Nairobi, where they fetch up at either Majengo or Eastleigh. These vehicles are notorious for their reckless speeds,<sup>7</sup> and a visit along their route swiftly reveals why: newcomers can scarcely fail to notice the doppler shift as yet another white blur of a vehicle flashes past.

Private entrepreneurs own Hilux vehicles, and many of them will have made their money by trading miraa themselves. I was informed that there are thirty Hilux vehicles serving Nairobi in the rainy season that leave Nyambene during the day, whilst a further twenty Toyota Landcruiser pick-ups leave by night: these are the preferred choice for those transporting miraa to northeastern regions. Of the Hilux vehicles, those serving the Muringene to Nairobi route are Meru-owned, whilst those that begin their journey from Mutuati or Lare are mainly owned by Somalis. I was told that Hashim, the Somali trader mentioned in chapter two, owns some of these pick-ups, and uses them to transport miraa (for retail in the UK) to Nairobi. Much of his miraa is sourced from Ntonyiri, and is brought by Land Rover to Maili Tatu. The miraa is transferred to the Hilux vehicles and hurried on to Nairobi. Owners do well out of their investment: one former driver estimated that his ex-

employer was making ksh.15, 000 for each trip when the vehicle was fully loaded. Within a few months, he reckoned that the owner could afford to buy yet another Hilux.

Hilux drivers are always in a hurry. They are paid a wage by vehicle owners, but make extra money from tips and bonuses donated by employers and waiting traders in Nairobi. The main criterion used when awarding bonuses is speed. All those connected with the trade like to see it operating efficiently, and it is the skill of the Hilux drivers that ensures much of this efficiency, and thus traders are glad to lubricate the system further by bestowing an encouraging tip on the driver. One former driver told me that he earned around ksh.1000 in tips on a normal day. When he reached Nairobi particularly early, this sum might even be tripled. As he was also being paid ksh.10, 000 weekly by the Hilux owner, one can see that rewards can be great for drivers. Canny drivers can invest their money in other enterprises: one driver on the Muringene to Nairobi route is known by the nickname of Kanda Bongo Man,<sup>8</sup> and has earned so much money from his job that he has been able to invest in a *matatu* operating between Meru and Maua. He has been driving miraa vehicles now for about fifteen years, and shows no great urge to retire.

The danger inherent in speedy driving can lead to tragedy, however, and such a risk is one reason why drivers expect good money. One tragic tale involves the recent death of a much-loved Tigania called Mbaya:

Mbaya first got involved in the trade when he was in his early twenties. He had befriended some Somalis who gave him a job as a broker in the Igembe zone. Later he switched jobs and began to drive miraa from Ntonyiri up to Wajir, driving all night to arrive early next morning. Once the delivery had been made, he would about-turn and drive all the way back to Nyambene on the same day. He gained a reputation as a skilful driver through a near-drastic accident with a DC's Land Rover. He was speeding around a sharp bend, when all of a sudden he found himself on collision course with the Land Rover coming the opposite way. Those in the vehicles were thinking the end was nigh, when Mbaya, by deftly disengaging the gears and using clutch control reduced the pick-ups speed, and raised it up so it landed gently

on the Land Rover, causing only a minimum of damage. This manoeuvre was acclaimed as miraculous, and Mbaya was rewarded by all those whose lives he had saved with wads of cash.

After a couple more years, he started working on the Nyambene to Nairobi route, ferrying miraa bound for Jomo Kenyatta International Airport and Europe on a daily basis. This proved so lucrative that he could marry, buy land and build houses in both Tigania and Chogoria. He then gave up driving for a while, and opened a miraa kiosk in Isiolo. He even bought land there too, and built a residential compound for himself and his family.

Competition amongst retailers became fearsome, however, and he lost money. He was compelled to give up the kiosk, and sell *nyeusi* outside. Despite his popularity as a raconteur amongst his clientele, he was still not managing to make ends meet financially. Therefore, at the beginning of 2002, he secured himself a new job as a pick-up driver on the route between Muringene and Majengo. He worked non-stop for several days, chewing vast quantities of miraa to keep himself going. He got little time to rest, driving to Nairobi, returning to Muringene, and then back to Nairobi. On the fifth day of this routine, he was worn out, but still carried on. He was driving back to Nyambene, and began to feel sleepy at the wheel, just as he had to tackle some sharp bends. Although the traders travelling with him in the passenger seats attempted to keep him awake, he was finally overwhelmed by exhaustion and lost control. The vehicle ploughed into a ditch; he and a trader were killed instantly.

Needless to say, this is not the first tragedy to befall a miraa Hilux: one Somali agent in Maua estimated that there are 99 sharp corners on the road between Meru and Embu, and although the road is in good condition, the speed of Hilux drivers inevitably creates dangers that sometimes even skilled drivers cannot handle. Hospitals along the Meru – Embu road are said to admit many road victims, and a Catholic Sister working in Garba Tulla reported that nurses in those hospitals attribute much of the blame to speeding miraa vehicles. Whilst it is true that road accidents are desperately frequent throughout Kenya as a whole, one can see that the Meru – Embu road is especially dangerous given its winding nature and that it plays host to vehicles of such fearsome repute. Not everyone would be tempted by a career at the wheel of a Hilux: I spoke to one Peugeot driver who most days is driving somewhere between Meru

and Nairobi with his passengers. Despite his experience on the route he shook his head vigorously when I suggested he might switch from driving a Peugeot to driving a Hilux: the look on his face suggested the sentiment 'never in a million years...'

I witnessed one accident involving a miraa Hilux. In July 2001, I was travelling from Nairobi to Meru by Peugeot. Another Peugeot was just ahead, with a private car between us. Just before reaching Embu, a green miraa Hilux coming in the opposite direction pulled out on to our lane to overtake, giving the Peugeot in front little option but to brake suddenly and pull onto the grass at the roadside. Unfortunately, the driver of the private vehicle did not react quickly enough, and slammed into the back of the Peugeot. No one was physically hurt, although those inside the cars that crashed were shaken up. The nonchalance of the Hilux driver was perhaps the most revealing aspect of the incidence: he coolly gestured with his arm for the Peugeot to let him pass as he was approaching in line for a head on collision, and then once he had overtaken and pulled back on to the left hand side of the road, he sped on, seemingly indifferent to the plight of the vehicles that collided. The Hilux driver involved in that incident originates from Karama, and is highly regarded by Hilux owners after he managed one time to avoid an almost certain collision which could have been very serious: his cool kept himself and his vehicle in one piece. The drivers of the Peugeot and the private car that collided might not hold him in such high esteem.

Such bravado in the face of danger has earned these drivers a reputation as either exceptionally brave or exceptionally reckless. Many of them probably enjoy presenting a daredevil image; some no doubt are less concerned by image, and more concerned with the high financial rewards of the job. Successful drivers can be as famed in the Nyambenes as *grand-prix* drivers.

Hilux drivers like to travel in convoy so that if one should meet with difficulties, then help is close at hand. Between Lare and Maili Tatu, I and my fellow passengers in a bus were

taken aback at the sight of a Hilux on its side: it had hit another car on the road and landed in that position. Two other Hilux pick-ups were soon on hand, however, and their occupants set to work assisting those of the troubled pick-up to tip it back on to its wheels. The bus left before the vehicle was righted, but I was told that experienced Hilux drivers would easily sort out such a situation. (Miraa vehicles do have one advantage over ordinary vehicles in such situations: their usually immense load of sacks can provide protection so that if a vehicle is thrown upside down it has cushioning to land on.)

Most drivers manage the few hundred kilometres from Nyambene to Nairobi in about two hours. A bus travelling the same route would more than likely take double the time. The punishing daily routine takes its toll on vehicles, and it is estimated that within one year of leaving the dealer's showroom many a Hilux will be ready for retirement. Meticulous attention is paid to the vehicles within their working lifespan, however, to maintain them in the best possible condition.<sup>9</sup>

Hilux drivers are entrusted with much responsibility, as not only do they have miraa to look after, they are also given the money on the return journey to pass on to agents back in the Nyambenes. Hilux owners employ *karanis* to keep records of all transactions. For each vehicle there is one *karani* who travels with the vehicle to, say, Muringene, and who writes down whilst making a carbon copy the names of agents whose miraa is being loaded up, the quantity, and to whom the miraa is destined. Once all these details have been noted, the *karani* gives the sheet of paper to the driver, keeping the carbon copy. Upon arrival in Nairobi, the driver hands out the sheet to another *karani*<sup>10</sup>, who proceeds to read out the names of retailers whilst the miraa is unloaded. Yet another *karani* notes down all transactions, and writes down a new list containing details of money sent back to Nyambene agents. This list is sealed up so that it cannot be tampered with, and is given to the driver along with envelopes addressed to individual agents containing their money. The exact

amount of money is also written on the envelope, providing the system with further immunity from unscrupulous types.

I met one *karani* working with a Hilux that collects miraa from Muringene. He is in his thirties and comes from Muringene. He looks after figures for one Meru-owned Hilux. He related that his Hilux transports 350 *bundas* to Nairobi on an average day, whilst the largest possible load is 812 *bundas*. Sundays see the smallest load transported (200 – 250 *bundas*); fewer agents work then as many are devout churchgoers. From his jacket pocket, he drew out a crumpled piece of paper on which were written the checklist of names and money of agents using his Hilux. Usually there are around 35 of them, hence his estimate of the average load being 350 *bundas*, calculated by supposing each agent sends ten *bundas*. It is his responsibility to ensure each agent gets his dues, and it is he who hands out shilling-stuffed envelopes, as well as compiling a new list for miraa sent to Nairobi. He enjoys his work, appreciating the fact that he only has to work for two hours: he arrives at Muringene market at around noon in the Hilux, and performs his duties until the vehicle speeds away. The rest of his day is free for relaxation.

Miraa for Nairobi leaves the Nyambenes by day, while miraa for Garissa and Wajir in the northeast leaves at night. Miraa sold in Garissa is packed in Land Cruisers at a small town on the outskirts of Maua, and then speeds off at midnight reaching Garissa at 6:00 a.m. The six-hour journey follows a route through Meru, down to Embu, and then through Kiambere, Kanyonyo, and Mwingi, before descending into the hot environs of Garissa. The low altitude of Garissa and Wajir make them two of Kenya's hottest towns, and this provides one explanation for travelling at night. (Miraa sent by Hilux to Nairobi is occasionally returned by Somali agents on the grounds that it has been damaged by the sun through careless packing.) By nocturnal transportation the miraa arrives in a fresh state the next morning, ready to be passed on to Somali women retailers. Miraa transported to Somalia by road is sometimes

unpacked en route at sunrise and sunset to separate the contents, thus alleviating the effects of tight packing and a virulent sun.

Miraa bound for Wajir is also transported by night. One section of Mutuati town sees much frenetic activity by lamplight from about 8:00 p.m. onwards in the evening as vehicles are packed with their cargo (see previous chapter). I was told that most vehicles for Wajir travel along the road from Maua to Kinna, and then on through Garba Tulla and Mado Gashi, before reaching Wajir. It seems likely that some use the road from Mutuati to Gachuru, reaching Garba Tulla and Mado Gashi more directly than heading in the opposite direction to Maili Tatu, before doubling back in the right direction on the Kinna road. Both routes would take vehicles into territory where *shifita* bandits have been operating ever since the Secessionist War in the 1960s: a specific route might be chosen, I suppose, to circumvent a rendezvous with bandits in light of recent news reports.

In recent years, miraa vehicles have come under suspicion for being involved in the trafficking illegal firearms. In 2001 the Kenyan Government placed a temporary ban on transporting miraa by road in Isiolo and Garissa districts. The Kenyan newspaper *The People* (20<sup>th</sup> February 2001) reported that this ban would 'greatly affect the lives of many, as most residents of the two districts are dependent on the crop as their source of income'. This particular ban was short-lived, and transportation was soon allowed to resume: certainly when I visited Garissa in June of that same year Landcruisers were bringing their early morning deliveries. The same article highlights the dangers faced by those transporting miraa from bandits in such regions, although the report's sources were suggesting that the vehicles and their cargo was the causal factor in the trouble.

Further rumours of the trade being linked to weapon-trafficking were spread in July 2001. These led to Hilux vehicles being stopped and searched at the police barrier at Murere. One old gentleman I met in Maili Tatu was stunned by the news, fearing that should the police

hold up Hilux drivers too much, drivers might lose patience and try to speed past the barrier without stopping. This worried him as it could provide an excuse for the police to shoot at the vehicles.

Despite the occasional vehicle meeting with disaster, the northern regions of Kenya offer such good business for traders that many are willing to transport it. Nowadays aeroplanes have taken over much of the transportation of miraa to towns like Moyale and Mandera, and to Somalia itself, although there still are regular road deliveries. Competition between dealers receiving miraa by road and those receiving miraa by air can lead to nasty incidents...

### **Air Transportation:**

The *Daily Nation* reported on February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2001 how a Kenyan pilot narrowly avoided death when delivering miraa to Kismayu in Somalia. The high stakes of the trade in Somalia combined with easy access to guns can lead to dangerous confrontations, and as traders at the airport were discussing how to divide up the delivery, gunshots were fired, and the pilot only just escaped unscathed. The root cause of this incident was that dealers who get miraa delivered by road wanted to put those receiving miraa by air out of business, and they saw scaring off or even killing the pilot of the aircraft as a reasonable way to achieve this goal. The pilot stated that 'this was a lesson to other pilots not to fly to the area'.

This was not the first time that that pilot had become caught in crossfire. Two weeks earlier he had flown the plane back to Nairobi with bullet holes, and twice in 2000 his plane had been hit by bullets as 'warring factions' were active around Kismayu airfield. A colleague of his has also been threatened, receiving a letter telling him to desist from delivering miraa or be killed. A bullet was slipped into the envelope as evidence of these intentions. The pilot reported that '[s]omeone vowed to shoot the pilots and dismantle the

plane so that no one takes miraa to Somalia by air again. Indeed, they are not far from achieving their goal’.

The heady combination of a profitable commodity, automatic weapons and political instability make transporting miraa to Somalia risky.

July 2001 marked the start of a crisis for traders caused by the Kenyan Government closing the border with Somalia. The border was shut to curb ‘the flow of small arms into the country’ (*Daily Nation*: 6<sup>th</sup> November 2001) and to make the point that the Government ‘would not deal with political factions fighting for power in Somalia’ (loc. cit.). The border was closed for three months, and in this time is said to have cost farmers and traders millions in lost trade: photographs of downcast miraa traders watching as their miraa dried up at Wilson Airport made the newspapers. Many people involved in the trade felt the move unfair, suggesting that to curb the flow of arms into Kenya surely it would be less disruptive to improve security at Wilson Airport. The miraa business has a knack of overcoming all obstacles, however, and some traders bypassed the closed Kenya-Somalia border by flying miraa first to Uganda, and then on to Somalia. The quantity of miraa transported to Somalia dwindled despite such canny procedures, and President Moi’s announcement of the reopening of the border in November was greeted with relief.

Flights delivering miraa to Kenya’s northern towns do not face as much danger as those transporting it into Somalia, although there is much insecurity around borders with Ethiopia and Somalia.<sup>11</sup> In a piece for the magazine *East African Alternatives*, Araru describes a typical morning scene at Mandera and Moyale airstrips:

Judging from the number of people waiting at the airstrip at 8:00 o’clock in the morning, one would be forgiven for concluding that the townsfolk are awaiting the arrival of a dignitary. On a morning like this even the *Muezzin’s* call to prayers from the local mosque appear to go unheeded. Indeed, the Imam rushes through the prayers so he can also rush to the airstrip.

What's happening?, you ask. No one wants to miss the arrival of the *Miraa* plane. (Araru 1999: pg. 21)

It is from Wilson Airport in Nairobi that these flights depart once miraa has been transferred from Hilux pick-ups. Several charter companies specialise in flying to Wajir, Mandera, Moyale and other northern towns, and miraa traders provide much of their business. The *Rough Guide to Kenya* (Trillo 1999) speaks of the importance of miraa flights for Mandera: 'The town, more even than Wajir, has only the most tenuous lifeline to Nairobi – and this thanks to one or two daredevil light aircraft operators who fly in daily shipments of *miraa*' (ibid. 592). Chaotic scenes greet onlookers once a plane arrives:

Getting on the plane to return to Nairobi [from Mandera] is quite an entertainment: amid the confusion of activity centring on the pilot and the *miraa* big shots, the potential passengers vie for seats – or rather places, since some of the seats have been removed. The big bales of *miraa* are off-loaded, sped into town in a Land Rover and exchanged for huge volumes of banknotes, which are then brought back to the pilot for the purchase of the next consignment. The scene is fraught with confusion but if there's a seat you'll be offered it by the Somali charterer, not the pilot. There are usually two or three flights a day, but during public holidays and Ramadan – when lots of *miraa* is chewed – there's a whole flock. (Trillo 1999: 593)

The *Rough Guide* (ibid. 599) also points out that in travelling by air to and from Mandera, it is difficult to get a seat as miraa is more profitable than passengers: to get a seat when miraa is being transported one would have to pay more than could be made from one's weight in miraa. Returning to Nairobi presents fewer problems.

Of course, miraa finds its way further afield than Northern Kenya and Somalia. In Britain miraa is legal and tonnes reach London every week on British Airways and Kenya Airways flights from Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport.<sup>12</sup> Miraa transported on these flights is brought by Hilux pick-ups from the Nyambenes to the Kariakor district of Nairobi and sorted into special cartons.

When all cartons are prepared, they are taken to the airport to be dealt with by the airlines. Whoever drops off the miraa at the airport receives a receipt with the weight of the cartons and their costs written on. Back at the Nairobi office this document is faxed through to agents waiting for miraa in London or in whichever European city the miraa is destined for. Those agents in Europe either collect the miraa themselves from the airport or have it sent on to them by courier. In the case of Manchester, miraa is sent from London by van: the van drops miraa off in Birmingham first, and goes on to Liverpool after Manchester.

It is obviously easier to transport miraa to London where it is legal than to Toronto, where it is not. However, miraa agents are still rather shy when it comes to describing the nature of their commodity on official documents. An agent in Nairobi showed me his receipt for a shipment to London. On this receipt provided by British Airways, the agent had filled in a section asking for details of the shipment: the agent had simply written 'vegetable'. Terming miraa as 'vegetable' certainly allows agents to avoid mentioning miraa's pharmacological constituents, and this perhaps makes the commodity seem more legitimate in the eyes of the airlines and European customs officers.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas refers to miraa pick-ups as 'concorde', alluding to their great speed.

<sup>2</sup> Cess is a word still commonly used in Kenya for a small tax or levy.

<sup>3</sup> Although the Maili Tatu to Mutuati road has recently been repaved.

<sup>4</sup> *Matatu* operators are often devoutly religious, and put up stickers in prominent places inside their vehicle with religious messages of the 'Jesus Saves' variety. This contrasts with the most un-Christian 'Gangsta Rap' that many drivers play through the sound system.

<sup>5</sup> *Matatu* drivers and touts not only appreciate the company of *masupuu*, they also reckon that having them in their vehicle attracts customers.

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<sup>6</sup> The poor safety record of *matatus* is encapsulated in the commonly heard assonant witticism: *matatu ni matata* (Kiswahili: 'matatus are a problem').

<sup>7</sup> There is word that police tolerate the speed of these vehicles because of bribery.

<sup>8</sup> Kanda Bongo Man is the name of a Congolese musician famed for purveying quality soukous.

<sup>9</sup> See Cassanelli (1986: 246). He details some of the customised features of miraa pick-ups.

<sup>10</sup> Paid not by the owner of the Hilux, but by the retailers in Nairobi whose miraa arrives with that particular Hilux.

<sup>11</sup> I was, however, told of the lack of maintenance administered to planes transporting miraa north, all of which fly from Wilson Airport in Nairobi. One plane is said to have crashed due to the ground crew forgetting to top it up with sufficient fuel, although I have no confirmation of this incident.

<sup>12</sup> An article in the *Daily Nation* (10 / 09 / 02) reports that *Kenya Airways* had temporarily stopped transporting miraa 'after claiming of corruption and cheating by the exporters.' This reduced the tonnage of miraa leaving Kenya for Europe and beyond from 48 to 15, which *British Airways* continued to transport. The move by *Kenya Airways* had severe ramifications for farmers, losing them over a billion shillings, according to the paper.

## Chapter Four:

### Retailing Miraa

*Since I have an old hand for the mauve medicine and am au fait with agents and plantations, plus assiduous, purist, philanthropic and gregarious, hysterical and attract more customers, and, moreover, I'm transfixed by miraa tidings and trade, I'd be over the moon if I got into the trade... Inshallah!*

- Nicholas, February 2002.

In previous chapters we have met some retailers – those retailing miraa within the Nyambenes – and discussed the retail trade as far as was necessary to understand the operations of middlemen. Now is the time to take a closer look at retailing. In so doing, I describe price parameters that retailers work within, bargaining procedures in retailer-customer interaction, and introduce several retailers and retail outlets. The retail trade in Isiolo provides a case-study. I begin with general information concerning miraa retailers, describing several real retail outlets and the people operating them. Most retailers within Kenya are Tigania and Igembe, and we turn to them first.

#### Tigania / Igembe Retailers

Many Tigania and Igembe men (and some women) find themselves retailing miraa in places often far from the Nyambenes, and working long hours that require great concentration. What leads them into such a career? One can talk of *positive* reasons for becoming a retailer, as well as *negative* ones.

#### **Positive reasons for retailing miraa:**

- Potentially lucrative earnings. Many retailers make good money, and many more earn a more modest, but still decent, living. Obviously enough, this will be attractive to many.

For some unmarried men the need to raise money for brideprice may be a factor (see Hjort

1974: 42). (Retailing miraa is not risk-free, however, and hopes of riches can rapidly fade.<sup>1</sup>)

- Adventure and excitement. Tigania and Igembe miraa retailers operate throughout much of Kenya, even in locations as different from the Nyambenes as Lamu. The chance to venture off to such places and sell a highly perishable commodity to a wide range of people is likely to appeal to the young and adventurous.
- Miraa kiosks are often social centres steeped in what I term a 'youth ethos': 'cool' music blasts from many kiosks, whilst most young retailers dress in the latest 'cool' fashions. Miraa itself is steeped in 'cool': thus retailing it might imbue retailers with 'cool' too.
- Young 'apprentice' retailers often begin retailing miraa at kiosks belonging to relatives or friends. This means the trade is accessible to many.
- An 'urbanism' ideology. Hjort mentions this as a factor leading young men into towns to trade miraa. This connects to his remark that school-leavers 'almost invariably value white-collar jobs higher than subsistence farming on a small-scale' (Hjort 1974: 40).

**Negative reasons for retailing miraa:**

- A retailer might conceivably be more or less compelled to retail miraa through familial pressure. A father might use contacts to get his son a post in a kiosk, leaving the son with little choice but to accept.
- Lack of educational qualifications. School drop-out rates are reckoned high in the Nyambenes, and so many would not be qualified for other careers.
- Lack of other opportunities. The Nyambenes – especially the Igembe region – is geared up for the miraa trade, and entering this trade has become a principal career path. So geared up is the region that young men and women yet to inherit or invest in land have few other openings.

I would imagine that for most retailers, the balance would be tilted toward the positive reasons listed above, although I expect negative ones play a part too.

### **Becoming a Meru miraa retailer:**

Contacts – whether kin or friends – are a primary resource for potential retailers. One young Nyambene friend described the following mechanism for entering the trade:

When a son is at a loose end with limited potential for embarking on another career, his father might help him get started in the trade by having a word with a friend whose son is already operating as a retailer. The father might suggest to his friend that their sons join forces so that the experienced retailer can show the other the ropes. Thus, a son might be sent to, say, Mombasa to work alongside a retailer. Accommodation is inexpensive, as he can share lodgings with the retailer. The retailer would take him to Mwembe Tayari, where vital lessons can be learnt in choosing quality miraa and in dealing with wholesalers. In working in a kiosk, the ‘apprentice’ also learns skills necessary for successful interaction with customers. After gaining all the skills of a retailer, the father back home then has a chance to construct his own miraa network, setting himself up as a supplier for his own son.

Hjort’s 1974 comments concerning the pressure on retailers to take on assistants still ring true: ‘Regular traders are, for social reasons, often forced to take on assistants, who can refer to a kinship relation and demand help according to customs. In this respect the traders are a resource with great advantages for assistants-to-be: they are found all over Kenya and their trade implies contacts with many people’ (1974: 34). As with the hypothetical Mombasan retailer-to-be, an apprenticeship with an experienced retailer offers a good start. The apprentice can tap into certain resources possessed by the retailer which Hjort succinctly describes thus (referring to Isiolo):

The most important...are know-how and contacts. As *miraa* is storeable for such a short time (it must be consumed within 3-4 days after harvest), important decisions must be made quickly and because there is so much money involved, they must be made correctly. It is generally considered that it takes one or two years to learn these skills, especially how to offer right prices at the markets in the Nyambene Hills,<sup>[2]</sup> whom to buy from there and how much *miraa* should be brought to Isiolo. (1974: 36)

How much miraa to obtain is rendered difficult for retailers by the seasonal variation of miraa production. Markets can be flooded by cheap miraa in rainy seasons, and gauging how many *kitundus* one can sell on a particular day requires expertise. Some retailers order more miraa in rainy seasons as it is so much cheaper, whilst others order less, knowing that as there is more competition, so selling miraa is more difficult. Successful retailers often order more in dry seasons, as they know there is less competition and so large profits can be made by those able to afford the outlay. Experience surely helps a retailer develop such strategies suited to his / her retail location and scale of business, and hence there is much sense in starting as an apprentice to one who already has such experience.

One can start retailing as a solo-operator, rather than by helping out an established retailer. One might begin like those selling miraa to passing vehicles in Karama, Nkinyang'a, and Kangeta. Such retail trade is not hard to enter, and by selling alongside more experienced traders, one can still learn much. Other traders might begin trading in rainy seasons when miraa is cheap, venturing with a bagful of *makata* to either Meru or Isiolo, spending the afternoon and early evening retailing it in the open. Working as a broker within the Nyambenes might also provide one with the initial outlay and knowledge to venture further afield as a solo-retailer.

#### **Types of Meru traders; Hjort's three categories:**

Hjort suggested that miraa traders can be divided up into three categories:

1. Permanent traders who 'employ a "safe" strategy with low return' (Hjort 1974: 39). Hjort reckoned such traders were mostly old men some of whom had been in the trade since the 1940s. 'They purchase small amounts at the markets in Nyambeni Hills transporting them a relatively short distance and selling almost the whole stock of each delivery...They

hardly accumulate any capital and certainly not more than is needed to invest in a small *duka* [wooden kiosk]' (loc. cit.).

2. Occasional traders who only enter the trade in rainy seasons when prices are low. They 'do not accumulate enough capital to continue the trade when costs go up. They have a client-relation to regular traders; they rent the right to use these traders' shops on a daily basis, being officially assistants to the ordinary shop-owners' (loc. cit.).
3. 'Gambling' traders. Those in this category invest 'all the money they can possibly get together in one large stock which, if sold altogether, will give them a high profit' (loc. cit.). They generally have served as assistants for established retailers to learn the skills, and enter the trade on their own in rainy seasons. '[T]heir ambition is not to make a permanent living out of the *miraa* trade but to accumulate money quickly in order to start other retail business on a large scale sufficient for a family to live on, e.g. preferably with a proper stock of a variety of food and household items sold in a cement stone house or the ambition is to save money to pay bridewealth...' (ibid. 41).

Today the second category of retailers – those entering the trade only in rainy seasons when costs are low – are still operating. Their trade is probably limited to towns like Meru and Isiolo, both close to the Nyambenes. There are nowadays so many retailers throughout Kenya, that it would probably be too risky for rainy season retailers to travel to far-flung towns to sell *miraa*, when the chances are that permanent retailers provide sufficient quantities already. At the time of Hjort's fieldwork there were fewer retailers, and so entering the trade in rainy seasons and travelling far to retail it might have been feasible. Still, avid Isiolo chewers are a target of occasional retailers, who might buy a couple of *bundas* in the Nyambenes and then venture to Isiolo to retail *miraa* in the open. They do not nowadays need to trade from a kiosk: at the time of Hjort's research, retailers required a licence to trade legally in Isiolo. Occasional traders could circumvent the need for the licence by retailing in a permanent trader's kiosk: they then were classed as 'assistants' to the permanent retailer, and as such would not need a licence. A case-study of Hjort's ('Mr. Mugambi'; Hjort 1974: 36-

38) shows how the number of retailers at one particular kiosk fluctuates as the owner allowed more assistants to use his kiosk in rainy seasons. In chapter two, I mentioned how the number of roadside hawkers at Karama fluctuates too throughout the year, as more people enter the trade in rainy seasons. For an occasional trader of that region it might be tempting just to retail in the Nyambenes rather than further afield, although higher prices can be charged elsewhere.

The first and third categories of miraa retailers appear rather different today. There are still many permanent retailers of mature years operating in Kenya, but nowadays permanent retailers seem more varied in age than in Hjort's day. Some kiosk owners are fairly young, and even where the kiosk owner is older, his or her young assistants can be classed as 'permanent' themselves. Most of those who join experienced retailers in an apprentice-like capacity would hope to build a lasting career out of miraa. Retailing miraa at the time of my research seemed considered a decent career by the Nyambene people, and, one may add, a 'cool' one. It may not be as decent as becoming a teacher, nurse, or civil servant, but miraa traders hardly appeared frowned upon by fellow Tigania and Igembe, and, on the contrary, were seen as perfectly respectable by most. This contrasts with the picture drawn by Hjort in his 1974 article. He reports that the '[c]ommon consensus in [the] Meru community is that trading in *miraa* is not quite decent' (1974: 41).<sup>3</sup>

Rather than young men hoping to make quick money by 'gambling' on a large one-off assignment of miraa to set up in a non-miraa related business, today retailing miraa itself is a good career to embark upon. One still hears of people making one-off attempts at selling large amounts of miraa, however. Nicholas tried this for himself a few years ago. He invested in a large amount of miraa of different varieties, and took this to Gilgil (a town between Naivasha and Nakuru), selling it over a few days. He gambled on selling miraa not for any specific goal beyond adventure, however, and money raised went on living expenses and transport.

Hjort's description of old Meru men in Isiolo making small returns in the permanent trade differs from my impression of the retail trade. Permanent retailers vary much in how much miraa they deal in, and in the profit they make. Many permanent retailers of today – including some young ones – do very nicely by dealing in large quantities. The case-studies of various miraa-kiosks later in this chapter show the potential wealth to be made retailing miraa permanently.

#### **Tigania / Igembe women retailers:**

Hjort states that Meru miraa merchants are 'without exception males' (1974: 33). This is not the case today. Meru women retailers are still rare, but do exist. I met two women retailing miraa in kiosks in the main miraa market of Meru, both married women, but separated in age by numerous years; we shall meet the younger of the two, Rose, in the case-studies. I met another trader operating in Nakuru,<sup>4</sup> Paulina. She is Igembe, whilst the others are Tigania. Any social sanctions preventing women entering the trade that may once have operated seem to have evaporated. I quizzed a few informants on whether there would be negative feelings in the Nyambenes concerning female traders, but they all were convinced that even if some older Tigania and Igembe would rather they were not trading, most would see the necessity of earning a decent living. Later we shall see how Rose got involved in the trade and the general reaction she receives.

Female traders do chew. Rose is rarely seen without a plug of miraa when working, and Paulina told me that she chews, although only when bored or feeling the need for miraa to deal bravely with customers.

#### **Geographical distribution of Tigania and Igembe retailers:**

Aside from towns in the far north and northeast of Kenya, Meru miraa retailers operate throughout Kenya. The trade has formed in such a way that Tigania and Igembe traders

separated somewhat from each other: certain locations have more Tigania traders, and others more Igembe.

Hjort noted this separation in the context of Isiolo. 'Competition between the traders of these two sub-tribes mounted into open hostilities in the 1940s, causing the Igembe traders to shift to Gachuru [a small town to the east of Isiolo] and leaving the Isiolo trade to the Tigania traders' (Hjort 1974: 29).<sup>5</sup> Today, the miraa market in Isiolo is still mainly Tigania-run, although some Igembe occasionally trade there. Hjort also suggests in a footnote that Isiolo is 'the only *miraa* market in Kenya where Igembe traders do not outnumber the Tigania traders' (ibid. 42). This is not strictly true, however. In Nairobi, while Igembe traders dominate Majengo, Tigania traders dominate in Eastleigh. Tigania traders also dominate in Kajiado and Narok in the south of Kenya. Most other places have a majority of Igembe traders, however: Mombasa, for example, has very few Tigania retailers. The miraa market at Meru town has a good mixture of both Igembe and Tigania traders.

While the predominance of Tigania traders in Isiolo can be explained by the conflict mentioned by Hjort, I suspect that in other locations the predominance of one sub-group or the other was generated as miraa networks were established. One trader might have started retailing in a particular town, encouraging relatives and friends to come and join him, so leading to a concentration of traders from the same part of the Nyambenes.

Even though towns like Narok and Kajiado have plenty of Tigania traders, the miraa they sell will almost invariably have been sourced in the Igembe zone. It is only in towns nearer the Nyambenes – like Meru, Isiolo, and Nanyuki – as well as in Nairobi and, in small quantities, Mombasa, that Tigania miraa is sold.

### **Renting premises or retailing *al fresco*:**

Premises used by miraa traders are varied, but can always be spotted by the banana-leaf 'flag' that is the trade's equivalent of the barber-shop pole. Once a trader receives fresh supplies, he or she removes the banana-leaf covering and hangs this up conspicuously. A fresh banana-leaf announces that fresh miraa is available.

Not all Tigania and Igembe traders rent or own kiosks. Some pay kiosk-owning retailers to trade alongside them. Although this seems to have been more common in Hjort's day, it was still a method used at the time of my fieldwork. One trader at Isiolo used this method. He became so annoyed at having to pay money to use the kiosk, however, that he stopped doing so, and now trades from a box underneath a tree in Isiolo's bus stage. This he jokingly calls his *soko uhuru*: Kiswahili for 'free market'.

Wooden boxes are a common resource for retailers. We met the retailer in Karama who stores miraa in a wooden box near the main road. Wooden boxes are also used by Meru, Somali, and Borana traders, in Isiolo. These boxes protect the miraa from the sun, which would otherwise soon dry up the thin stems. They provide a handy counter, and a storage place for belongings. They are also rent-free.

Some traders use even more rudimentary premises: sitting underneath a shady tree. In this case, all the retailer needs is a plastic bag in which miraa is stored. Bus stops in Nairobi are used as make-shift retail outlets. In Mombasa, the area near the Likoni ferry terminal is popular with miraa retailers. Here Igembe traders gather in clusters of five or six traders, with their wares laid out in front of them. However, wooden shacks are strategically placed where retailers can shelter both themselves and their wares in case of a downpour.

Meru retailers using boxes or a tree in the above way operate on a small-scale basis: some would enter the trade in rainy seasons only. Occasional traders might even take their

miraa along to an establishment like a disco or video lounge and retail it outside or inside. Nicholas on his trip to Gilgil sold miraa inside a disco, persuading the DJ to announce that miraa was available on the premises.

Permanent retailers both near to and far from the Nyambenes require more substantial premises. There is a range of such premises corresponding with the scale of trade. This begins with basic stalls that merely provide a useful counter, and ends with stone-built kiosks stocking not just miraa, but other provisions too. Some wealthy traders build up an empire with a chain of kiosks. Most kiosks in Kenya are rented (in Isiolo traders pay ksh.1500 per month in rent), either from the local council, or from the owner of a particular building.

In some cases, business premises also double up as sleeping-quarters to keep down costs: we saw in an earlier chapter how traders at Majengo in Nairobi often do this, leading Goldsmith to compare their lifestyle with warriors billeted to a *gaaru* (Goldsmith 1988: 142). Not all retailers have such basic sleeping-quarters: many rent flats or buy property in towns where they trade. Retailers in towns close to the Nyambenes have the option to return home to the Nyambenes once business is completed.

#### **Case-studies: Tigania and Igembe retail kiosks:**

**Rose's Kiosk:** There is a section of Meru devoted to the sale of miraa. Here, traders sell a wide variety of miraa, with, perhaps, traders and miraa from Karama / Nkinyang'a being in the majority. Some rent wooden kiosks, and others trade in the open either sitting at tables or perched by a wall with their stock kept in plastic bags. Throughout the market good humour reigns, traders indulging in playful banter. A large amount of banter is directed towards Rose. She is a Tigania originally from Mbaranga, and traded from 1995-1998 in Isiolo before moving to Meru. She is now 25, married, and mother to a young daughter (who often, when not in school, enlivens the market further by treating it as her playground). Her kiosk is popular,<sup>6</sup> selling *shurba ya nkinyang'a* of varied lengths and of high quality, although in times

of miraa shortage, she also sells *makata*. Unlike many other miraa kiosks around Kenya which sell items like soda and basic household items, hers stocks only miraa.

Her kiosk has a sign saying the following:

Muchore Kiosk

Miraa Asili

Mbaine Pasi

*Muchore* means 'friend' in Kimeru, while *asili* means 'original' in Kiswahili (thus describing the miraa as *mbaine*, i.e. from really old 'original' trees). *Pasi* is from the English word 'posse', picked up from Hip-Hop culture.

She is not the only woman trader selling at Meru, and there is one other well-known female trader. She is older than Rose, however, and Rose takes pride in being unique as a young female trader. She is good-natured, and good-humoured, arguing that it is essential to join in with the sometimes rude banter. While I was visiting her she was pushed and shoved a little in jest by other traders, but still remained jovial, giving as good as she got. However, she has a formidable side that can be unleashed when necessary. She asserted that customers give her no more hassle than other traders as they know she is strong and drives a hard bargain. Most customers are regulars and so are used to her, although she said that new customers from rural areas can be shocked to see a woman trader; some fear to buy from her lest she be involved in witchcraft.

Her father lives in Isiolo, and she maintains that he is perfectly happy for his daughter to trade miraa: he appreciates that it brings good money, and he knows that she can take care of herself.

She does not work alone, and is partnered by an Igembe man in his thirties. Each morning he comes from Nkinyang'a – where he resides – after purchasing miraa from farmers. He travels by public transport and arrives at the kiosk shortly after 11.00am with a bag full of *bundas* (containing around 200 *shurba ya nkinyang'a* in the rainy seasons).<sup>7</sup> Rose reckons that most days she sells all stock by 5.30-7.00pm,<sup>8</sup> claiming she rarely, if ever, has leftover miraa. Her trading partner flits around, but spends some time sitting with her in the kiosk, helping out with the trade.

Rose's entry into the trade was facilitated by her husband, also from Mbaranga. He worked for two years as a Hilux driver, and was able to inject capital into the kiosk. More recently he has been driving Peugeot taxis from Meru to Nairobi. Rose and her husband live in Meru.

***Kamathi Kiosk:*** One retail kiosk that normally relies on agents to procure miraa is *Kamathi Kiosk* in Isiolo. This enterprise evolved from an earlier venture of Mr Kamathi, a Tigania from Muthara. He began trading miraa *al fresco*, sitting underneath trees in Isiolo with a box of miraa. Trade flourished so much that he could move his business into the kiosk that now bears his name: this was established in 1987. Today the kiosk stocks many other goods apart from miraa, selling bread, milk, sodas, and household goods. Kamathi himself leaves the running of the kiosk to his wife and two young relatives – one his brother, the other his brother-in-law – while he engages in other business.

The kiosk is situated amidst a block of shops (*maduka* in Kiswahili) on the east side of the main road running through town.<sup>9</sup> This block is owned by a Somali lady, to whom Mr Kamathi pays rent. The kiosk on an average day sells 40 *kitundus* of high quality *giza*, and around 120-140 *shurbas ya karama*. Despite its operators being Tigania, *Kamathi Kiosk* is better known for its Igembe *giza*. Most of its *giza* is now sent from Muringene by Kamau, an

agent we met earlier. Agents based in Karama send the Tigania stock. Miraa arrives in batches, delivered by Peugeot drivers who are paid a small sum for dropping off *bundas*. For a while in late 2001 / early 2002, Kamathi and his brother took it in turns to escort miraa from the Nyambenes as there was trouble transporting it: one *matatu* stole miraa, and Peugeot drivers at one stage refused to transport it. These matters are now resolved.

On one occasion (June 2001) when I joined the staff inside the cramped but welcoming kiosk, they were aiming to sell *giza* sent by one agent at ksh.300, although they often agreed to sell for ksh.270-280 after bargaining. As the agent had bought the miraa in question at ksh.250 according to his *ndabari*, it appears that the kiosk would not be making all that much money from each *kitundu* as they would have to send over ksh.250 back to him.

The young men working there know how to boost profits. If a *kitundu* is fat in appearance, they sometimes untie it and remove a *shurba*. Once eight or nine *shurbas* have been removed, a new *kitundu* is formed. Money from this *kitundu* is all for the kiosk. Sometimes customers cannot afford to buy a whole *kitundu* anyway, but buy a *shurba* or two of *giza* instead.

Kamathi's younger brother is called Musa (of the *Guantai* generation, as is Jackie, Kamathi's brother-in-law), and first got involved in the trade in Nanyuki. He had gone to stay there needing somewhere to live and work, and was taken on by his miraa-trading uncle. He gradually perfected trading techniques. He joined his brother in Isiolo in the late 1990s after this apprenticeship. He starts his shift in the early afternoon, and works until the early hours of the morning, although most miraa is sold by 7.00pm (trade after this is of other stock). He personally does not like to chew until later in the evening, as he finds himself quarrelling with customers if he chews whilst the kiosk is busy. Musa appreciates miraa's stimulant qualities when it comes to the night shift however. His remuneration comes in the form of a split of miraa profits along with Jackie and Kamathi himself.

Musa enjoys his work, despite the fact that he works long hours with few days off. However, he is not entirely sanguine about the future of the miraa trade, reckoning that with more people trying their luck in the trade competition is becoming fierce. As he worries about this, he hopes to gain further qualifications to open up other options. Musa was due to marry a girl from Kianjai in September 2002.

At peak times for the trade, it is deemed essential by the staff that both lads are on hand to deal with the trade. They regard some customers as crafty characters who will pull off all sorts of tricks to steal miraa when Musa is not looking. Having two traders reduces the chance that customers could get away with stealing.

Whilst miraa transactions occur at one side of the kiosk, Mrs Kamathi looks after trade in other products. After school finishes on weekdays, the kiosk fills up further with their primary school-aged children, who enjoy relaxing in the kiosk with soft drinks and sweets after a day at school.

*Kamathi Kiosk* is a success, almost always clearing its daily stock of miraa, and being well thought of by miraa connoisseurs as a place where quality is sold. Profits have swelled to such a degree that recently Mr Kamathi bought a brand new car.

***Gitonga's Kiosk:*** Located amongst a line of miraa and clothes kiosks flanking one side of Nanyuki's bus stage is an unpretentious establishment selling nothing but miraa. The founding father of the kiosk is a man in his forties called Gitonga. As well as earning money from the kiosk he works as a prison warder in Nanyuki, and so has to fit his kiosk shifts around his prison shifts. He is a Tigania, originally from Muthara, although he now lives permanently in Nanyuki with his family. His partner at the kiosk is a friend called Sammy, a Tigania from Karama. Sammy is younger than Gitonga, and also resides in Nanyuki.

The kiosk sells no other goods as miraa profits them sufficiently without risking the kiosk being broken into at night by thieves after stock. Without the fridge and groceries common in other kiosks, Gitonga's looks rather spartan. However, there is enough space inside for two benches where regular customers sit and while away time. At its busiest – when fresh miraa has just arrived – about ten people sit inside choosing good bundles from the latest batch. The traders have a small sectioned off area where they sit and store miraa. As long as the kiosk is open, one can always find a few customers keeping the traders company. Such a kiosk is a social club in its own right.

Sammy and Gitonga take it in turns to visit the Nyambenes, leaving at dawn, and returning mid to late afternoon with *giza* and *nyeusi* from Muringene, and *shurbas* from Karama. They usually stock up with around five *bundas* of *giza*, and three *bundas* of *shurba ya karama*. The *nyeusi* is not for them to sell: a couple of other traders in Nanyuki rely on Gitonga and Sammy to pick up their supplies too. There are brokers at both Muringene and Karama who have miraa ready for them to collect. If there is some particularly good *alele* or *colombo* on offer, they sometimes obtain a few *kitundus* of these, too. When I visited them in May 2002, they were buying a *kitundu* of *giza* from Muringene at ksh.150-170, and retailing it for ksh.200-250 (most customers were buying at nearer ksh.200 than ksh.250). *Shurbas* were obtained for ksh.30-35, and retailed at ksh.50. On the Meru-Nanyuki leg of the journey, they

pay the *matatu* tout ksh.10-15 for each *bunda*, plus their own fare. Most bundles are sold soon after arrival; *barehe* bundles – bundles that are *barehe* have ‘slept’ from the night before, i.e. the leftovers – can be sold next morning before the fresh arrives.

Most of the kiosk’s customers are personnel from the Kenya Air Force base at Nanyuki, soldiers, *matatu* touts and drivers, Mount Kenya guides, and some Somali women. Relations with customers are good, the traders engage in much banter. When I visited, one customer joked that with all the money Sammy and Gitonga take off customers, they will soon have enough to invest in their own Hilux. Sammy and Gitonga are amenable, itself a factor in good customer-relations. One customer was allowed to select choice *shurbas* from different *kitundus* to pick and mix their own *kitundu*. Few retailers would allow this.

***Igembe kiosk, Garissa town:*** North east of Nairobi, and due east of Meru, lies the Somali town of Garissa. It is an important town in a region notorious for insecurity and has a large police presence. Many residents are Somali refugees – some of whom are so newly arrived that they speak no Kiswahili whatsoever – and police are thorough in checking ID cards to verify that residents are not illegal immigrants. Despite these problems, Garissa town has a remarkably developed air about it, and came as quite a surprise to this anthropologist. A well-paved road leads to Garissa from Nairobi, and roads in the town are well-paved too. Also, *maduka* lining the streets have a more sturdy appearance than those in towns like Isiolo. One *duka* in the town centre reminded me of a British junk shop, containing as it does shelves bedecked with all sorts of dusty implements. Such implements belong to the owner, however, and are not for sale. What is for sale is miraa and tobacco.

The kiosk is more spacious than usual, with plenty of storage space and shelves positioned behind a long wooden counter. Behind the counter lurks Meshach whose home is

Kaelo in the heart of Ntonyiri. (All Meru miraa retail kiosks in Garissa are operated by Igembe, with the majority coming from Ntonyiri. There are no Tigania miraa traders there.)

The kiosk in Garissa has been in business for many years, and was founded by Meshach's father who used to trade there himself. He set up the kiosk in partnership with a man from Igoji town (located on the Mount Kenya ring-road south of Meru). At first his partner concentrated on selling tobacco from his home region, whilst Meshach's father sold miraa. The partner was so impressed with miraa's profitability, that he began to sell it too. The pair became successful in their joint venture, and were both able to return home. They now send miraa and tobacco to their sons who have taken over the kiosk's running. The Igoji trader raised sufficient funds from miraa to give his children a good education, and now one of his daughters has secured employment as a Government officer. Meshach's father has links with the international trade, and hires *shambas* and pickers to provide miraa for this trade.

Meshach himself underwent an apprenticeship, learning the trade from his father. At first he traded in Nairobi, then in Busia (a town bordering Uganda), before moving to Garissa. He is fond of Garissa, and even enjoys its hot climate, which he regards as healthier than that of Busia. Also, business in Garissa is booming.

Upon the arrival of the kiosk's miraa at around 6:00am, Meshach's first task is to distribute some to Somali women. They generally sell lower quality varieties, like that known as *liboi* (at the time of my visit in July 2001, a *kitundu* of this variety was retailing at ksh.120), and pay him a certain amount for each *kitundu* sold, keeping anything above this. Money the women give him after their trading is added to profits made at the kiosk from miraa Meshach has retailed himself, and is placed in envelopes to be sent back the next day with returning pick-ups.

Meshach retails high quality miraa at the kiosk. His main varieties are *giza*, *alele*, and *colombo*. He claimed that his *alele* consists of the same premium quality miraa that is used in an *ncoolo*, the ceremonial bundle of miraa (see chapter six). When I visited, *colombo* was unavailable. Meshach told me that this was because supplies of *colombo* were going abroad for the international trade, rendering it scarce.

The organisation of this kiosk (and the next one) tallies with Goldsmith's description of a *kampuni* (1988: 143), described in chapter two. An older trader has forged a network along one route, and now sends miraa to his son: keeping the network in the family.

***KK Provisions:*** Few places in Nairobi are as associated with miraa as the suburb of Eastleigh. Consumers abound in this chiefly Somali area, with the considerable Ethiopian population swelling the ranks of chewers. To satiate demand, many miraa kiosks line the streets. A chain of three kiosks all go by the name *KK Provisions*. Only one of these kiosks sells miraa. In June 2001 I visited this kiosk and talked with Patrick, a man of 32 years from KK who works there.

Patrick's uncle founded these kiosks. He traded miraa with Meshach's father in Uganda in the days of Idi Amin, but this venture came to a sad end as the partners lost their money and were forced to return to Nairobi with barely a shilling to their names. Fortunately, Patrick's uncle was on friendly terms with other traders in Eastleigh, and was able to obtain miraa for retail in advance of payment. He represents yet another miraa success story, as his entrepreneurial acuity brought him from his penurious post-Uganda period to the wealthy days of the present.

His staff at the kiosks consist of ten Igembe men, most of whom, like Patrick, are relatives. Five men operate the miraa-selling kiosk, the rest operating the others. In the miraa

kiosk four look after the miraa trade, and one deals with the other goods, of which there are many. Patrick related that miraa is sold only at one of the kiosks as it requires particular skill in trading, and so those to be entrusted with it are few.

Patrick's uncle left Nairobi in 1992, and now lives at home in KK, looking after his *shamba*, sending miraa down to Majengo where it is picked up by Patrick. The uncle left the running of the kiosk to his son and Patrick upon his departure. Patrick receives a certain percentage of the profits from the kiosk, as does his uncle and cousin. The rest of the staff are paid a fixed wage. If he is in financial trouble (perhaps needing to pay school fees, etc.), he can explain the situation to his uncle who is well-disposed enough to allow him to take his share of the profits too: his uncle can easily get by on money raised from other business interests.

Much miraa sold at the kiosk is high quality *kangeta* from *mbaine* trees. When miraa is at its cheapest and most plentiful during rains, the kiosk trades around 40 *bundas*, whilst when miraa is scarce, they sell 15-20 *bundas*.

Patrick likes Nairobi, saying he enjoys the chances it offers to meet a wide range of people, as well as the business opportunities it offers. Although he clearly is not unhappy with his lot, he expressed rather ambivalent attitudes to the trade. He never had any great desire as a child to become a miraa trader, but was left with little choice as his father died before he could finish his education: aside from miraa, the Nyambenes offer little to those without qualifications. He also said that he would not encourage his children to get involved in the trade, preferring that they complete their education. His children go to boarding school in Nairobi rather than a school nearer home, as he feels they will do better away from the influence of Nyambene and the allure of miraa.

*Sunrise*: Much of my time in Nairobi was chewed away with traders at *Sunrise Veve Promoters* (see plate 17). This successful venture is built around one inconspicuous kiosk on a busy street in downtown Nairobi. The street in question is a transport hub where many *matatu* touts try to attract passengers travelling to various Nairobi suburbs. Restaurants, hotels, and shops line both sides of the street, while hawkers sell fruit from boxes on the pavement. In the centre of the street is a bar of great notoriety, where a continual stream of men enter, often emerging moments later with a furtive looks and women, prior to disappearing into the hotel next door. This bar was described to me as a *thoko ya aari* (Kimeru for 'girl market'). Over the road from this bar is situated the main kiosk of the *Sunrise* chain.

The kiosk seems constructed out of an old doorway and staircase, and is sectioned off in two parts. At the back there is a small storeroom for crates of soda bottles, and a bed used after late shifts. The front part is dominated by a fridge provided by the Coca-Cola company, and by shelves lining the walls. These are filled with various provisions (bread, milk, medicines, condoms, napkins, stationery etc.). At the front is a counter with a small gate through which one enters or leaves. On the counter are sweets and cigarettes for sale, and above it are more shelves with a rarely-silenced stereo, a land-line phone, and a couple of mobiles.<sup>10</sup> On the floor besides the counter is a box in which the kiosk's principal commodity is stored.

Whilst the kiosk stocks Muringene *giza* (which one team member collects from Majengo), its main stock is sourced from Karama and consists of many *shurbas* of both *nkinyang'a* and *karama* style. A high quality variety sold at the kiosk is tied in the *nkinyang'a* style and is referred to as *asili*, alluding to its provenance from *mbaine* trees: this tends to be a very beautiful purple hue, and comes in various lengths. The best is only sold at weekends: *alele* from *mbaine* trees. The kiosk sells around 200 *shurbas* each day.

The founding father of this kiosk is an Igembe from Nkinyang'a called Gideon. He is in his thirties, and established the kiosk in the mid-1990s in partnership with two brothers. Gideon first traded miraa in Majengo, sharing a big kiosk with traders from all over the Nyambenes. Trading there allowed him to raise enough capital for *Sunrise*. The success of the first kiosk allowed for expansion, and when I first got to know the *Sunrise* team, they had three kiosks in Nairobi. These kiosks are more or less independent, although mutual help is provided: if a staff member of one kiosk was going up to Nyambene, he might be entrusted with cash from the other kiosks to relay to agents, and whoever was visiting Majengo to obtain *giza*, would obtain it for the other kiosks too. Gideon took charge of the original kiosk, whilst his brothers looked after the other two. At the original kiosk, he often works a shift in the morning and afternoon, whilst other team members take over in the evening.

These other team members include Mike, Maurice, and Philemon. One or two of them tended to be on duty whenever I visited. Mike is in his early twenties, from Karama, and a good friend of Gideon; Maurice is the same age, also from Karama, and a cousin of Gideon; Philemon is slightly older (late twenties), is from Nkinyang'a, and is Gideon's brother-in-law (married to Gideon's sister). It was Philemon I got to know best. He originally traded miraa in 1992 in Meru. He had wanted to enter the miraa trade from an early age, and to this end had built up a good rapport with traders in Nkinyang'a. As they trusted him, they provided him with miraa on credit, which he would then sell in Meru. He gradually honed his skills, working in three different kiosks in Meru prior to 1998. It was then that he joined Gideon at the original *Sunrise*. Philemon married in 1997, and has two children.

The traders receive a share of money made from miraa. Profit from the other goods goes to pay rent and electricity. It was estimated that *Sunrise* retailers make around ksh.1500 per day. Smart attire and accessories like CD Walkmans suggest that figure is fairly accurate, although it varies seasonally. The *Sunrise* team obtain more supplies in dry seasons, while

retailers with less income are forced to curtail their trade: profits are large indeed at such times of the year.

The original *Sunrise* serves a variety of clientele. Some wealthier customers (often Asian men) put in advance orders, and sorting out these orders is a priority for the staff. They need to have these set aside to avoid selling too much miraa to on-the-spot customers and not having enough left for orders. Such customers are clearly valued by the *Sunrise* team, and are treated with respect: they often pull up outside the kiosk in cars, prompting with a beep of the horn one of the team to come and hand over the miraa. Sometimes customers appeared dissatisfied with miraa set aside for them, and asked to see the remaining stock hoping there would be better bundles still available. The number of special orders depends on the day of the week: on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, there are usually a lot of orders to make up as customers look forward to a weekend's chew. The kiosk also stocks up extra supplies for special occasions, as I witnessed on the 11<sup>th</sup> May 2001: 'Bob Marley's Day'. It was a Friday anyway, but the extra incentive for chewing provided by the popularity of Bob Marley meant that a vast number of bundles were delivered. All the staff were on hand at the moment of delivery to package up special orders, and on-the-spot customers grew impatient on the other side of the counter: the clamour for miraa was great.

Many less wealthy customers are *matatu* touts: one regular is a Kikuyu tout, who always engages in earthy banter with the team. Often his manner suggests disdain for them, although he always returned the next day. Prostitutes are also regular customers. Sometimes they brought their own customers in tow, buying a *shurba* or two, a condom, and a napkin. Many men returning home from the city centre stop at the kiosk for miraa, as do many commuters. The occasional curious tourist also chews for the first time with *Sunrise* miraa. A hotel popular with backpackers is nearby, providing the source of most of these customers. Trade continues most of the day: up until the fresh miraa arrives, *barehe* miraa is sold. Trade is

most intense when fresh deliveries arrive, and then gradually peters out until midnight when the kiosk is locked up by the trader on nightshift.

Most customers favour *asili* and *nkinyang'a*: these retail at *Sunrise* for ksh.30-60, making them quite affordable. Supplies of Muringene *giza* sell briskly too, at around ksh.250-300 per *kitundu*. Wealthy customers who are miraa-connoisseurs might opt for *alele*. A *bunda* or two of this is often obtained at the weekend, and retails for ksh.1000-1500 depending on the time of the year: traders reported that it is normally Asians who purchase *alele*.

My visit to Kenya in April 2002 revealed that *Sunrise* has expanded further. Another kiosk – *Sunrise 2000* – has opened opposite the original, operated by another young relative of Gideon's. Also, Philemon and Mike are now usually found in a kiosk round the corner from the original on Nairobi's busy River Road. This is *Sunrise 4000*, and by operating in shifts, Philemon, Mike, and another trader keep it open permanently. It is conveniently located next to a bus office where many passengers depart for Mombasa: the kiosk does good business with them and the crew. For this reason, the kiosk supplies much *giza*, as this is what such commuters are used to chewing. The kiosk still gets miraa from Karama, however, and as it has its own name, agents address *bundas* to it, allowing Peugeot drivers to drop them off there directly. *Sunrise 4000* has a similar range of other goods for sale, although condoms do not sell so briskly: the nearest *thoko ya aari* is not as popular as that near the original. A further venture of the *Sunrise* empire is a hairdressing salon run by Gideon's wife, again in central Nairobi. Despite this venture, one suspects that miraa will always be the mainstay of *Sunrise*.

### Borana, Sakuye, and Somali Women Traders

In towns in the north of Kenya with a large proportion of Somali, Borana and Sakuye, women operate much of the retail trade. While in large towns like Isiolo and Garissa there are plenty of Tigania and Igembe traders retailing miraa, there are also a large number of these women too. In smaller towns like Kinna, Garba Tulla, and Wajir, almost all the retail trade is operated by these women. Such trade is not a recent innovation; Hjort speaks of it in his 1974 article on the Isiolo trade:

Some petty trading in *miraa* is...carried out by Borana and Somali women who act as middlemen between the Meru kiosk owners and the Boran and Somali customers. This trade has developed after the Shifta war, when many people were killed or impoverished. The women then started trading *miraa*, thus entering a new, formerly prohibited, sector out of economic necessity. Their trade is often on a very low level; they purchase a few bundles from a Tigania market trader and sell in town, or, more often, borrow *miraa* on credit and pay back after the miraa has been sold. Many husbands do not approve of their wives trading *miraa* as it implies a socially too extrovert occupation. Therefore, most of the Borana and Somali women who trade *miraa* are not married. (Hjort 1974: 33)

The Shifta – or Secessionist – war refers to the period of violence between 1963 and 1969 sparked off by the British refusal to secede the then Northern Frontier District to Somalia, despite the preponderance of Somalis in that region.<sup>11</sup> Thus Borana and Somali women trading miraa can be dated back over thirty years. The trade had been ‘formerly prohibited’ by the British to all but a few licensed traders in Isiolo, but after the Shifta war, no restrictions applied, and women could turn to the trade. Nowadays the many women trading miraa in northern towns suggests it is a prime source of income for many households. Indeed, whilst men are away tending herds, miraa offers a convenient source of money for female relations left in towns and villages. Meshach, operating the Garissa kiosk mentioned above, reckoned that despite occasional efforts by Somali MPs to restrict miraa,<sup>12</sup> they could never succeed as Somali families are so reliant on the trade and would be angered by restrictions imposed.

Hjort further expands on these women retailers in the Isiolo of the mid-1970s in *Savanna Town* (1979). He reports that there were then about twenty Borana and Somali women trading miraa: this number has grown considerably, as has the town population as a whole. Their numbers fluctuate seasonally, however: more enter the trade in rainy seasons, earning money the rest of the year selling other commodities or brewed tea and coffee at Isiolo market. Hjort speaks further about reactions to such traders:

A miraa trader is much exposed to contacts with male customers, and married women and unmarried girls are often forbidden by their husbands or fathers to venture into this trade...Selling miraa slightly taints the reputation of a woman, and a "righteous" husband may disapprove of his wife associating with miraa traders. Women were traditionally prohibited from consuming miraa, but today its use among women is gradually spreading. Many of these female miraa traders, however, are very popular personalities, having many male and female friends. They are also in great demand as second or third wives, but seldom remain in long-lasting marital unions. Within the female sphere they are often socially influential and may have religious positions demanding respect...The trade makes unmarried urban life a realistic alternative for women who resent the restrictions of married life, and it is considered both more respectable and less ephemeral as a secure source of income than prostitution. (Hjort 1979: 123)

Hjort here paints a more ambivalent picture of perceptions of these traders: whilst 'righteous' men may disapprove, their social status can be fairly high. The 'religious positions' he refers to are probably those connected with the *tariqas*, Sufic 'mystic orders' that Hjort talks about earlier in his book (1979: 40 ff.). One *tariqa* in particular – the *Husseiniya*, a sect 'founded by Sheikh Hussein, a missionary to Ethiopia around 1300' (ibid. 41) – is described as having high female membership, and reference is made to a Somali woman as 'one of the high-ranking ritual experts' (ibid. 42). The popularity of some of these traders is still evident today: one young Borana trader called Shanu is well-liked by male chewers, who appreciate her good looks and pleasant demeanour. Rose, mentioned above, told me that many of her friends are Borana and Somali women traders she befriended when trading at Isiolo.

The women not only make friends and win popularity from the trade, but also make decent money. One trader with whom Hjort spoke was able to live well from her earnings in a well appointed house. 'When one comments upon her standard, she laughs proudly, stating

the “miraa is my husband” (Hjort 1979: 124). Another of his informants, a 45-year old Borana, also enjoyed a decent income, and, though she and her five children had been deserted by her husband, she had no desire to marry again. She reckoned that while a husband would prevent her socialising and would not even feed her well, miraa provides for her financially without restricting her freedom (loc. cit.).

I suspect that some disapproval of these traders remains, evidenced by the occasionally defensive tone they adopt: a Catholic Sister I met in Marsabit told me how she spoke with a Borana woman trader whilst travelling to Marsabit from Isiolo. This woman said she had to trade miraa out of necessity, and pitied customers for actually chewing it. It is likely that the trader would have regarded the Sister as someone who viewed miraa disapprovingly, and so felt she had to mitigate the fact that she supplies a ‘bad’ substance. Of course she may genuinely dislike miraa and pity customers, but the positive view of miraa given by Hjort’s two informants suggest that not all women traders regard it negatively as something to trade only out of necessity. Also, the fact that some disapprove of the substance and its trade can be countered by the fact that trading it makes them popular with certain others as well as providing income. Trading miraa may exclude them from certain social circles; it includes them in others.

Their system of trade is little different from the time of Hjort’s fieldwork: most still obtain miraa on credit and repay wholesalers post-sale. In Garissa and Isiolo, these wholesalers are mainly Meru men, while elsewhere Borana and Somali act as suppliers: Borana, Sakuye, and Burji women in the case of Marsabit and Moyale. In Isiolo women retailers obtain miraa from the main miraa marketing area, and then take it to the northern part of the town centre, retailing it from boxes outside shops along the main road. One cluster of Borana women sell cheap varieties like *kata*, *nyeusi*, and *matangoma* alongside Borana men. Another cluster of both Borana and Somali women near the bus stage for Moyale sell *alele* and *liboi*. In Garissa, Meshach supplies women with *murutubu*, another term for *kata*.

Women disperse all through the town's streets, sit down on the ground, and retail the *murutubu* from plastic bags. In smaller towns like Kinna, Garba Tulla, and Wajir, they shelter under *herio* screens made from grass and sticks.

Not all interactions between Meru wholesalers and Borana / Somali women traders are trouble-free. The first time I sat in on an Isiolo market stall in 1999, one Meru wholesaler refused to part with miraa that should have gone to a Borana woman. The woman had not paid back money for the previous day's miraa, and the Meru trader demanded this before he would give her more. She became agitated, making several attempts to grab the sack from the grip of the Meru man, saying she would pay him for the lot later on. He remained firm, however. Despite the occasional heated scene, the system seems to benefit both sides, as Borana / Somali women attract customers from their own communities who might not wish to deal directly with Meru, thus allowing miraa a wider market.

### **Other Traders**

Not all retailers are Meru, Borana, Sakuye or Somali. In Isiolo several Turkana men and women sell cheap varieties like *lombolio*, *matangoma*, and *kata*, widely chewed by Turkana. In Kajiado there are Maasai men operating kiosks, and there is word that Samburu have entered the trade.

While miraa retailed by Meru, Somali, and Borana traders forms the bulk of that sold throughout Kenya, the contribution of traders from these other ethnic backgrounds is not insignificant. It is interesting to note how some Meru speak of wider trade links. One Igembe trader I met in Nairobi spoke of how he trusts Maasai. He compared them with the Kikuyu, stereotyped as *bahili* (Kiswahili: 'mean'). As they are regarded both as mean and untrustworthy, he stated that Meru would never let them enter into the trade. I have never met

or heard of a Kikuyu miraa retailer, and as Meru retailers can easily reach the main Kikuyu regions of central Kenya, it seems unlikely that the opportunity for a Kikuyu trader would arise.

One Igembe trader at Muringene told me there are no restrictions on who can enter the trade: he worked on the pragmatic basis of 'business is business'. Some business links are probably easier to construct than others, however.

### **The Retail Process**

The nearest thing I ever saw to an actual price label was a notice placed on the counter of the main *Sunrise* kiosk.<sup>13</sup> This stated that the price for a *shurba* had been raised to ksh.70. but seemed in effect to only raise the figure at which negotiations started. Most customers were still only paying ksh.60 per *shurba* after brief bargaining. In the main, however, retailers do not attach price tags onto *kitundus*. Instead, they bargain with customers over how much to pay for a *kitundu*. Various factors impinge upon these discussions and limit somewhat the prices that retailers charge.

### **Price Parameters:**

To profit from miraa, retailers bear in mind a minimum price below which no profit will be made. For some, this minimum price is set by the figure written by agents on *ndabaris*: this figure will either be the price paid by the agent, or the amount he wants the retailer to send him per *kitundu* or *shurba*. Thus, a Muringene agent might write that he paid ksh.220 per *kitundu*. The retailer would then aim to sell it for more than ksh.250, so both parties profit. The retailer might sell it for ksh.280, keep ksh.30, and send ksh.250 back to the agent. For retailers who make the journey themselves to the Nyambenes, the minimum price is set by the

amount paid at source and transport costs. Borana and Somali women traders tend to be told how much the supplier wants per bundle, and then keep money made over and above that.

Retailers therefore approach dealings with customers with a minimum figure in mind. Other factors restrict, in a loose way, the maximum figure in their range of prices. Most obviously competition. In a town like Isiolo where miraa can be bought from many retailers, customers have much choice, and retailers charging exorbitant prices will soon be found out by alert customers. Prices tend to become standardised throughout the market depending on the variety sold and its quality. As retailers in a particular town obtain miraa from the same region at about the same price, it seems likely that they would sell to customers at similar prices. This can break down when miraa production is at its highest. Then some Nyambene agents bring miraa to towns like Isiolo to sell it retail themselves. According to one kiosk-based trader in Isiolo, this floods the market with cheap miraa, forcing permanent Isiolo traders to reduce prices.

Another factor that tempers the amount charged is the rate at which miraa is sold. Miraa is a commodity that people want to buy before it goes *barehe*. Though miraa keeps fairly well when wrapped up in banana leaves, and can still look presentable the next day (and still possesses active ingredients), it loses value the more time elapses since harvesting. Therefore traders hope to sell as much as possible on the day they obtain it. Most have considerable expertise in judging how much to order on a particular day and would expect to sell most *kitundus*. However, there are some days when trade is not as brisk as expected, and the danger of being left with *barehe* miraa looms. Such a danger might prompt retailers to reduce prices to boost trade.

The thought of being left with *barehe* miraa is not as depressing as one might think. Some customers still buy miraa even when *barehe*. As fresh miraa normally reaches kiosks by late afternoon (though this can vary: for example, fresh miraa reaches Garissa at about 6.00

a.m.) those who fancy a chew before then must be satisfied with *barehe*. Before fresh deliveries reach *Sunrise* in Nairobi, there is still a stream of customers willing to buy *barehe*, though numbers are moderate. Customers sometimes bargain for a reduced price for *barehe miraa*, though not usually below the amount the agent expects to be sent. Many retailers pass off *barehe* as fresh, and thus make as much money from it as from fresh. This relies on the customer being inexperienced in the art of buying good miraa. Also, woody low-quality stems keep for a reasonably long time, especially those with large leaves left attached. One variety sold in Samburu regions is nicknamed *roho saba* ('seven spirits') in recognition of the fact that it can still be sold a week after picking. For some retailers supplied by agents the fact that miraa is left unsold is not directly damaging to themselves, as they do not pay agents for unsold bundles: the agent takes the liability. Many retailers help agents by splitting losses, however, thus strengthening relations.

Most retailers pride themselves on being left with little or no *barehe*. The perishable nature of miraa as a commodity presents a danger for a trader, but one that can be obviated at most times through skill and experience. In rainy seasons when production reaches its zenith the danger increases as more miraa is dealt with. At these times I was told that the customer has the upper hand in negotiations. However, the early stages of rainy seasons provide a bonus for traders, especially those in towns some distance away from Nyambene. When Nyambene prices fall quickly with increased production, retailers have direct knowledge of this drop. For customers there might be a delay in receiving such information, allowing traders to maintain a high price. Once when staying in Karama I found that prices had fallen considerably, whereas upon returning to Isiolo, the price there for a shurba from Karama had not. This only provides a temporary bonus for Isiolo traders, however, as many people move back and forth between Nyambene and Isiolo allowing information to spread swiftly. Alexander and Alexander speak of such windfall profits in Javanese markets caused by a delay in the spread of information (1991: 505-506). Much of the Javanese traders' income depended on such profits rather than 'the very small returns obtained in most transactions'

(loc. cit.). This seems applicable to the miraa trade, where retailers often sell miraa at a price allowing little profit. Prices charged can vary from customer to customer, and perhaps a significant proportion of profits come from overcharging some while undercharging others: I have seen traders boost prices by a third for some customers while the likes of Nicholas are charged at bargain rate. Price margins are flexible.

#### **Customer and Retailer Interaction:**

Prior to dealing with customers, therefore, retailers have a fair estimate of the best price he / she can get for a particular variety with customers reasonably knowledgeable about current prices. Some retailers take advantage of less knowledgeable customers or those unwilling or unable to bargain hard. In my earliest experiences at buying miraa I was charged extravagant prices, being clocked straightaway as a European chump. I also heard it said that herders buying miraa in Isiolo after selling livestock are seen as inexperienced and unaware of current prices, and so as targets for overpricing. A few retailers admitted they tailor their starting price according to the perceived status of the customer, and expect to make up a little profit lost to hard bargainers by doing so. Thus, if a customer new to a particular retailer desires to get a good price then ruthless bargaining and a demonstration of knowledge is essential. Where customers are on good terms with retailers, the need for hard bargaining is often reduced.

#### **Choosing a bundle:**

To demonstrate knowledge and to ensure the quality of the miraa, customers usually go through a routine inspection procedure. This involves flicking through stems to see if there is consistency amongst them (some bundles are bound up with high quality stems on the outside and lower quality ones hidden inside). One experienced buyer in Isiolo advised me to check the bundle by inspecting the lower half of stems: less experienced customers only check the upper half. It is considered essential to taste a stem too, and this is accepted practice.<sup>14</sup> Nicholas emphasised the importance of using both sight and taste in choosing a bundle, as

some miraa looks beautiful, yet is insipid in both taste and effect. Customers can also gauge the quality of the *makata* variety of miraa by flexing stems. If they straighten easily, then that is a good sign. Miraa bundles are not entirely uniform in size, and many people pick out the thickest ones.<sup>15</sup> A Borana man from Garba Tulla told me that high quality miraa ‘smells like puff adder’. However, it would surely be courting danger to seek out a puff adder to learn its aroma.

Whilst examining the bundle it is not unusual for customers to appear dissatisfied, perhaps grimacing as if considering the miraa noxious. This reaction was once taken to extremes by Nicholas when he suspected that miraa he was tasting had been sprayed with chemicals. He managed a convincing portrayal of a poisoning victim. He still bought the bundle.

Customers examine all bundles of the desired variety that a particular retailer offers, and often venture to other kiosks to examine their offerings too. This both fulfils the pragmatic purpose of finding the best miraa, and presents an image of a miraa expert. A friend in Maili Tatu went to great lengths to ensure I got a good deal. Once he began bargaining over one bundle at a kiosk, only to walk off to visit other kiosks after much intense deliberation. Ten minutes later he was back at the first kiosk buying at a slightly reduced price.

Nicholas reckons that many retailers keep their best miraa underneath the counter, reserved for either their own delectation or that of special customers. This led him to recommend saying *nipe veve ya kula, si ya kuuza* (Kiswahili: ‘give me miraa for chewing, not for selling’) when buying miraa.

### **The bargaining:**

Throughout this examination routine, retailers usually remain impassive. When bargaining over price begins, however, retailers often engage in earthy banter – Goldsmith remarks

(1999: 19) that generally miraa transactions 'are notable for the crude and insulting language used during negotiations' – and *Sunrise* traders are not averse to calling clientele of their own age or younger terms like *nhabu* ('foreskin' in Kimeru), albeit lightheartedly. Customers generally take this banter well, perhaps responding with a salvo themselves: one young man asked a trader in Isiolo, 'are you saving up for a lorry?' suggesting his disbelief at the high price asked. An older man jokingly referred to the same retailer as a *mchawi* ('wizard' in Kiswahili), saying in jest that the miraa sold at that kiosk was bewitched and had twisted his mouth.

The susceptibility of male retailers to attractive female customers is well-known. Musa once attempted to be tough when bargaining with two Borana *masupuu*. They were trying to buy a *shurba ya karama* at ksh.40, when the average retail price on that day (in April 2002) was ksh. 50. Musa could not stand his ground, as he would almost certainly have done with customers of less allure, rapidly capitulating.

Customers can become bad tempered. One fellow tried to beat Musa of *Kamathi Kiosk* down below ksh.270 for a particular *kitundu*. The trader was insistent that ksh.270 would be the final price, saying that it was the *mwisho* ('the end': i.e. the end of negotiations) after bargaining had already brought the price down by ksh.20. The customer was having none of it, slammed the *kitundu* back down onto the counter before storming off in a rage. The retailer merely smiled.

On occasion it is retailers who become agitated. One time in Kianjai I was attempting to purchase a *kitundu* from an itinerant salesman whom we met in town. He offered the miraa at ksh.300, and we suggested he lower the price. He angrily sped off leaving us bemused. We ran after him, caught up, and bought the miraa for ksh.300, then departing on good terms. Itinerant salesman have an advantage in that they can use this technique of running away in mock disgust, whereas for stationary colleagues it is customers who can do the running away.

There is no set protocol as to who opens bargaining. Some customers place the sum they expect to be the going price (or that they hope to get away with) on the counter. This could be met with a sharp rebuke from the trader, who might ask for more. Others ask the trader what is the price of the chosen bundle, and then suggest the retailer thinks again and offers it for less. There is more room for manoeuvre with larger quantities: customers buying five or six *shurbas* from *Sunrise* had a chance of a reduction of ksh.20 or thereabouts from the total. An attempt at bargaining the price down for just one *shurba* would be less successful.

Retailers have varied techniques to combat the danger of the price falling too low. A Maua retailer claimed that a certain *kitundu* then being bargained over was actually reserved for a prestigious Somali trader. This showed the customer that the miraa must be high class and priced accordingly. We met earlier the attractive Borana woman trader in Isiolo popular with male chewers. She speaks so sweetly and alluringly to her male clientele that they do not bargain hard as they wish to impress with their wealth, or at least not appear thrifty. If customers bargain too hard an exasperated trader might go to the length of showing them the *ndabari* received with the miraa, proving there is indeed a price below which he or she cannot go.

Customers can develop loyalty for a retailer or kiosk. This is linked to both the quality of miraa and the congeniality of those offering it. Many kiosks welcome favoured customers inside the safe surroundings of the kiosk. In the sociable atmosphere of a kiosk like Gitonga's in Nanyuki, good friendships are often formed and it is not unusual for sentiment to influence bargaining. A *kitundu* might be sold at a discount, even under the price written upon the *ndabari*, and a *shurba* might even be given free of charge. This was rationalised by one trader who said that such kindness tends to be reciprocated over time: the customer might help him in the future. However, if a customer is particular about quality, and regards the present stock of the frequented kiosk to be below par, then sentiment would not prevent him or her

searching elsewhere. Most traders never seemed perturbed by this, considering it normal for someone to seek out the best miraa available. Traders who know Nicholas even tell him as he approaches if their miraa is not up to his standard so he can look elsewhere.

If customers are unable to pay but still desire miraa, it is possible for the retailer to provide them with miraa on credit. If the customer is a friend or relative of the retailer, then with a little persuasion the retailer often allows this, though he or she would expect prompt payment. By leaving a deposit, other customers can procure miraa before payment. One customer of *Kamathi Kiosk* left his identity card – an essential possession for Kenyans – as a deposit for a *kitundu*. He still had not returned to settle up when I visited in 2002, some months after leaving his card: it was left waiting for him underneath the counter.

### **Isiolo town: a case-study**

The trade of miraa to Isiolo from the nearby Nyambenes began a long time ago. Malcolm Clark of the Native Civil Hospital at Wajir lamented the high miraa consumption of Isiolo in a letter dated 12<sup>th</sup> May 1939<sup>16</sup>: ‘All the people whom I have questioned agree the worst place for the use of kat is Isiolo as it is nearer Meru and [users] are able to get their supply’. It still is a major market for miraa, and many Nyambene agents supply the town regularly. The sale of miraa is far more conspicuous in Isiolo than other Kenyan towns, so the trade there is not really representative of Kenyan towns in general. However, the multi-ethnic nature of the trade there, as well as the staggering number of miraa varieties available, make it an interesting case-study of the retail trade. The fact that Hjort provides a clear picture of trade there in the 1970s, also allows for a temporal contrast.

### **History of the Isiolo miraa trade:**

Hjort reports that ‘regular trade to Isiolo began in the 1930s parallel with the actual growth of the town’ (1974: 29). Somali merchants acted as the main retailers while ‘Igembe and Tigania traders, coming from Lare or Kangeta, transported miraa from these markets to Isiolo, often illegally by foot at night’ (loc. cit.). After restrictions imposed on miraa by the British in 1945 were lifted, five Somali merchants controlled the trade, buying the substance from the Meru Traders Society, a co-operative given legal permission to sell miraa that went bankrupt in 1959. They ‘also purchased from...private [Meru] traders as it was impossible to tell which miraa came from the cooperative and what came from these traders’ (ibid. 30). Most such traders were now Tigania, as Igembe had switched attention to Gachuru, leaving Isiolo for the former.

The trade was legalised for private traders when the co-operative went bankrupt, and it was not just Tigania who made the most of this. One famous resident of Isiolo is an Imenti *mzee* called Mbogua, a name immortalised in a variety that he popularised in Isiolo. I met him in 1999, and he told me of his history in the trade. He claims to be one of the first men to supply miraa to Isiolo: he told me he traded for forty years up until 1969 when he had an accident. In his youth, he bought about thirty bundles – tied up in his trademark style (see chapter one) – from farmers in the Nyambenes, and carried it on foot to Isiolo. Mbogua eventually settled in Isiolo, and married a Muslim Borana: he himself is a convert to Islam. He still lives there with his family.

The ‘Shifta war’ influenced trade to Isiolo. ‘Miraa was declared illegal once more in Isiolo and north thereof, as it was useful in warfare; fighters could go long without food or sleep by chewing miraa’ (Hjort 1974: 30). Once fighting subsided, Tigania traders took over from Somali merchants, and at the time of Hjort’s fieldwork, ‘[a]ll twelve traders with a licence at the Isiolo market are from Tigania. Out of these, seven are from Karama sub-location’ (ibid.34). The other five were from Muthara and Kianjai (loc. cit.). Thus, trade in

Isiolo in the 1970s consisted of these licence-holding Tigania traders with kiosks, and their assistants – usually of the same sub-clan as the licence-holder except for one Borana and one Turkana assistant (*loc. cit.*) – the number of whom fluctuated seasonally. These traders also supplied Borana and Somali women retailers.

**The Isiolo miraa trade of today:**

Nowadays, the scale of trade is much larger, as the maps of kiosks and clusters of *al fresco* retailers show. Miraa-chewing was undoubtedly popular in the Isiolo of the mid-1970s, but one suspects demand has increased markedly since.<sup>17</sup> Luckily, as licences are no longer required for miraa retailers in Isiolo, many more people enter the trade relatively freely, thus increasing supply.

Money goes into the council's coffers from kiosk rent and from cess. Those transporting large quantities into Isiolo District are charged cess at Subuiga. Once miraa reaches Isiolo, further cess is levied by a council official, who inspects each arriving Peugeot and *matatu* after 1pm to check for miraa, visiting each kiosk and wholesaler in turn. Cess charged varies according to the particular variety, though roughly it works out at ksh.20 per *bunda* (see plate 16 for a cess receipt).<sup>18</sup> The cess collector keeps a record of each kiosk and how many *bundas* or sacks they have received on a particular day. The current cess collector knows all permanent traders well, and allows them to pay later if trade has not been good: he is popular with the staff at *Kamathi Kiosk*, which is perhaps surprising given his role in taking money off them. His work is frenetic – running from one side of town to the other in search of miraa – and he himself chews to get him through his shift.

A rough count of permanent kiosks in the market area and along the main road shows there were about twenty operating in 2000, compared with the twelve of Hjort's day. Of these twenty, eighteen were operated by Meru traders: mostly, as in the 1970s, Tigania men from Karama, Muthara, or Kianjai. As with staff at *Kamathi Kiosk*, it is still the case that kiosk

owners and their assistants are likely to be closely related. The other two were run by a Somali and a Borana. Most kiosks sell a wide variety of goods as well as miraa, though the scale of this other trade varies. Kiosks also vary in which varieties they sell.

Miraa for these kiosks varies in how it reaches Isiolo. Musa at *Kamathi Kiosk* reckoned that kiosks selling *shurba ya karama* and *shurba ya nkinyang'a* (only Tigania-run kiosks sell these) rely on agents sending them supplies, while kiosks selling cheaper Tigania varieties – *kata* and *nyeusi* – rely on one of their number personally visiting the Nyambenes to obtain supplies. Whether an Isiolo member of staff goes to collect the miraa personally, or an agent sends bundles by public transport, miraa arrives at about the same time mid-afternoon.

As well as these kiosks, there are several wooden market stalls, especially in the western side of the main market area, selling miraa at both retail and wholesale. Most miraa sold there consists of cheaper varieties like *nyeusi*, *kata*, *matangoma*, and *lombolio*. Traders here are also mainly Tigania, although one Borana also trades there, and one stall is run by Turkana men. In November 1999 I sat in on one Meru-run stall, and witnessed the scenes as miraa arrived. I sat next to a trader called Eliud. Before the delivery at 3 p.m., Eliud and about five traders sitting alongside him were selling *barehe* miraa. Business was slow, however, and I became the centre of attention. Once fresh miraa arrived, however, all changed, and the focus of attention switched decisively from me to miraa. One trader had gone off to Muringene on behalf of all traders there, and obtained a few sackfuls. Much of the trade involved Borana and Somali women who were picking up supplies on credit. This wholesale trade was looked after by the trader who had fetched the miraa, whilst the others engaged in retail trade with a crowd of men from various ethnic groups. As the rains had recently arrived, miraa was in profusion. Because of this, extra hands were enlisted to help. One recruit was Georgie, a young Imenti (nineteen or thereabouts) who normally works as a *matatu* tout. He was very much enjoying trading *makata* on that particular day, repeatedly informing me that '*makata* is very powerful'. He reported that he and friends are often called up in rainy seasons to help

sell the extra miraa that traders bring: he used the familiar method of getting miraa on credit, and paying back a certain amount for each *kitundu* post-sale.

Some Borana and Somali women retailers get supplies from Meru wholesalers there, and venture off to various parts of the main market area, also clustering at certain spots along the main road (see plate 15). Other women retailers now have their own Igembe agents acting for them: Kamau, the Muringene agent who supplies *Kamathi Kiosk*, sends two *bundas* of *nyeusi* to a Borana retailer called Habiba. Her miraa is sent to *Kamathi Kiosk* from where she collects it. In the main market area are also found clusters of Turkana men and women selling cheap varieties obtained on credit from Meru wholesalers.

Borana and Somali men also trade miraa along the main road, sometimes in partnership with their wives. Also found trading here are seasonally fluctuating numbers of Meru – mostly Tigania, although some Igembe are found too – who do not wish to pay kiosk rent, and sell from bags or from boxes. Such *al fresco* traders sell mainly cheap miraa. Their trade can continue into the night, when, by strategically positioning themselves near bars along the main road, they sell much stock to revellers. As the area around the market is notorious for nocturnal insecurity, Meru traders decamp from kiosks and stalls there and continue trading along the safer main road.

For the sake of completeness, I should mention that the sale of non-Nyambene miraa takes place in Isiolo too. We met in chapter one the Meru farmer with a miraa *shamba* a few kilometres west of Isiolo. He occasionally brings his pickings into the main market area to sell, although the region's insecurity may have put a stop to his trade: Borana bandits kept disturbing him at night in search of miraa in early 2001, and he moved closer to town for safety. The drastic drought of 2000 raised the price of Nyambene miraa so much, that some *chafe*, an Ethiopian variety, was brought down from the border to sell cheaply to Isiolo

customers. It was retailed at ksh.50 for a bundle: much cheaper than the then scarce Nyambene miraa.

Even before customers interact with retailers, miraa has linked together people from several different ethnic groups. Tigania traders venture to the Igembe market of Muringene to obtain supplies. Some of these supplies are passed on to Turkana men and women to retail. Hjort speaks of good relations between Tigania and Turkana thus: 'Tigania and Turkana call each other "brothers" and have a common myth about their origin. This is often referred to in negotiations, implying a kind of joking relationship' (Hjort 1974: 34). Other supplies go from Igembe to Tigania to Borana or Somali hands. Of course, a great deal of miraa is sent to Isiolo by Tigania agents and then sold by Tigania retailers, thus remaining in Tigania hands until retail. However, it remains true that disparate groups of people are connected through involvement in the miraa trade.

Purchasing bundles for consumption makes further connections. Many interactions between retailer and customer take place between members of the same ethnic group, and it seems likely that those just coming to town for trade purposes – for example, pastoralists arriving to sell some livestock – seek out retailers from their own ethnic groups. (As stories exist of Meru traders inflating prices for out-of-town customers inexperienced in bargaining, it is perhaps understandable that this should be so.) By sitting in on a miraa kiosk in Isiolo, however, one quickly sees that customers come from the whole range of ethnic groups. *Kamathi Kiosk* deals with Meru, Somali, Borana, Turkana, Kikuyu, Samburu, Rendille, Ethiopian, Asian, Arab, and even European customers.

Divisions of a non-ethnic variety can be seen, however, in the customers who patronise particular kiosks and solo-retailers. Most retailers tend to specialise in miraa of a certain price range. Thus, *Kamathi Kiosk* sells high-quality *ngoba*, *giza*, and *shurba ya karama*, tends to attract only customers sufficiently well-funded to buy such miraa. Its customers tend to be

middle to high-earners. Those living a penurious existence who want to chew are drawn more to retailers selling the likes of *kata*, *nyeusi*, *matangoma*, and *lombolio*. There is one further option available in Isiolo: the *matako* of miraa. *Matako* is the Kiswahili word for ‘buttocks’, and refers to the ends of *makata* trimmed off by some retailers to smarten up the look of a *kitundu*. One friend of Nicholas who bought up these small segments of stems – equivalent to the sweepings from a tea warehouse – was earning a pittance working at an Isiolo petrol station. Five shillings of his wage always went on *matako*, and he derived much enjoyment from chewing them. Prices lower considerably when rain reaches the Nyambenes, and one miraa chewer offered praise to Allah in anticipation of lowered prices. For some, rainy seasons offer opportunities to chew miraa other than the cheap varieties many get used to when prices are high. The following is a rough comparison of retail prices (in Kenya shillings) at Isiolo for varieties of miraa in rainy and dry seasons (per *kitundu*, except *shurba ya karama* and *shurba ya nkinyang’a*):<sup>19</sup>

	Dry	Rainy
<i>Alele</i>	300	200
<i>Giza</i>	300	150-200
<i>Kangeta</i>	200-250	150-180
<i>Shurba ya karama</i>	80-100	50
<i>Shurba ya nkinyang’a</i>	50	20-30
<i>Nyeusi</i>	180	100
<i>Matangoma</i>	70	30-40
<i>Makata</i>	100-130	50-70

For a town notorious for insecurity, the trade in Isiolo seems remarkably free from conflict, and the usually smooth interactions between wholesalers, retailers, and customers that I witnessed back this up. However, strife can rear up in exceptional circumstances such

as those of May 2000. Then Isiolo, suffering from renewed tension between Borana and Somali, also saw tension arise between Meru and Borana.<sup>20</sup> Some Borana claimed Isiolo as their territory, suggesting that outsiders, including the Meru who operate many of the town's businesses, should depart. This drew an angry response from Meru, who counterclaimed that Isiolo was originally a Meru town: a claim they said they could back up with documentation. The government line that Isiolo did not belong to any ethnic group in particular had little effect. The situation became yet more heated when a sniper fired at the motorcade of a Meru MP. The Meru became so riled that they closed down their businesses, including, of course, miraa kiosks and stalls. The supply of miraa dried up so much that if one fancied a chew one had to inquire surreptitiously before being pointed in the direction of skulking Meru traders. Some Borana went on the rampage, trying to ransack some of the closed businesses: this led to running battles between stone-throwing Meru and Borana. The police moved in with tear gas. After a few days, the tension dissipated, and did so quickly: so quickly, in fact, that when I reached Isiolo a few days after the clashes (I had been away at the coast for a week) the town was back to its usual self. Borana youth who had been throwing stones at Meru were buying miraa from Meru, and engaging in the usual banter as if nothing had happened.

Thus, for all the apparent calm in the running of the Isiolo trade, tensions can bring out ethnic divisions. Despite binding people together to a great extent, the miraa trade cannot prevent these occasional outbreaks of ethnic strife. Also, while miraa binds those involved in its trade and consumption together, there are many Isiolo residents who view miraa negatively and so distance themselves from it. Such negative attitudes of those opposed to miraa will be looked at in more detail in chapter seven. Suffice it to say that despite the much higher than average proportion of traders and consumers in Isiolo, there is still anti-miraa rhetoric heard in town.

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Retailing miraa with all its intricate social detail, leads us almost to the point of consumption. However, first we turn in chapter five to a ‘soft variable’ that is said to glue the miraa trade together: *trust*.

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<sup>1</sup> One retailer told me that many try their hand in the trade, but *wanachomeka*: ‘they get burnt’ (Kiswahili).

<sup>2</sup> Hjort does not mention agents. At the time of his research, it seems that retailers in Isiolo relied on one of their number obtaining miraa personally in the Nyambenes.

<sup>3</sup> If by the ‘Meru community’ Hjort includes the Imenti, then his remark certainly still bears scrutiny today: many Imenti disapprove of miraa, as we shall see in chapter seven. Tigania and Igembe diverge from Imenti (who grow little miraa) in terms of perceptions of miraa.

<sup>4</sup> I did not meet this retailer in Nakuru, but in a Peugeot taxi travelling from Maili Tatu to Lare in the Nyambenes.

<sup>5</sup> I saw few signs of tension between Igembe and Tigania traders. However, comments made by Tigania and Igembe friends suggest that there is a certain amount of rivalry – albeit of a gentle kind – between some members of the two sub-groups.

<sup>6</sup> Her kiosk is decorated with pictures of *masupuu* (Sheng: ‘attractive young ladies’) which she claims help entice male clientele to part with money.

<sup>7</sup> These she is likely to sell in the rainy season at around ksh.40, making around ksh.10 profit for each *shurba* sold. Provided that she sells her entire stock, this means that she makes around ksh.2000 per day, split with her partner.

<sup>8</sup> She said that traders dislike lingering in the miraa market after 7.00pm or thereabouts as after dark the area becomes unsafe with many thieves roaming about.

<sup>9</sup> This main road is part of the ‘Cape to Cairo Transafrican Highway’, although one would not suspect so from looking at it.

<sup>10</sup> Mobile phones may become important for the miraa trade as the Nyambenes are now within range of a signal. They might back up the *ndabari* for communicating alterations in orders etc.

<sup>11</sup> Violence still lingers on: there is a pattern of reciprocal cattle-raiding involving much human bloodshed between Somali and Borana which shows little sign of abating.

<sup>12</sup> Somali MPs are usually the ones who call for a ban on miraa; Tigania and Igembe MPs tend to be vociferous in its defence.

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<sup>13</sup> See Alexander (1992) for an excellent discussion on pricing. Alexander points out how Western-style pricing with fixed price labels does not necessarily make for more efficiency than that found in markets where bargaining over price is the norm. Just how prices are fixed in Western markets is often a very opaque matter.

<sup>14</sup> It was said that some go from kiosk to kiosk testing bundles without intending to make a purchase. This way they get a healthy supply of miraa without paying.

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas disdainfully reported that the average Isioloan consumer picks out bundles on grounds of quantity rather than quality. He was fond of using the phrase 'never mind the quality, feel the width', in this respect.

<sup>16</sup> Kenya National Archives: DC/ISO/2/2/13 H.Public Health 1936-1945.

<sup>17</sup> Hjort estimates the population of Isiolo at the time of his fieldwork (1973-74) at about 6000 inhabitants (Hjort 1979: 15), a lower figure than that given by the 1969 census, which reported 8300 inhabitants (ibid. n.1 pg.60). The most recent census (1999) gives a figure of 32,684 for the town (Central Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning: 1999 population and housing census).

<sup>18</sup> A *bunda* of *giza* appears to be the standard measure for the cess collector. It has been worked out for each variety what amount equals a *bunda* of *giza*. Thus, four *shurba ya nkinyang'a* are regarded as equivalent to one *kitundu* of *giza*, and so ten of these four *shurba* units are regarded as one *bunda* (i.e. 40 *shurbas*), and are charged ksh.20. Varieties like *matangoma*, less evenly packaged, are examined by the cess collector, who uses his judgement to work out the charge.

<sup>19</sup> These figures are just to give a rough idea of seasonal variation. Varieties vary in their quality even in the same season, however, and so price varies for other reasons too. Nicholas spotted that prices for *shurba ya karama* tend to rise or fall in gradual steps of ksh.10. If rains are especially heavy prices can drop dramatically, however.

<sup>20</sup> Tension between Meru and Somali / Borana is not uncommon around election times. Most Borana and Somali vote KANU, whilst Meru tend to vote for others. There are rumours that the ruling party moved large numbers of Somalis into the environs of Isiolo in 1997 to counter the large number of Isiolo Meru voting for the opposition.

## Chapter Five:

### Trust, Suspicion and Conflict in Miraa Trade Relations

*An agent in Karama told me that a miraa trader should be candid. He can succeed if he shells out all dues promptly, and can even buy veve on the nod if farmers and agents trust him.*

- Nicholas, February 2002.

Traders I spoke with considered honesty an essential trait for one of their number. Honesty is essential, as so much of the trade relies on trust.<sup>1</sup> Goldsmith (1988: 143) relates: 'Trust, rather than a contract, is the essential nexus of miraa transactions from field to consumer.' This needs developing somewhat, however, as the parameters within which trust operates, and just what constitutes these parameters, varies within the miraa network. Sztompka links trust to the unpredictability of the future actions of others, and so defines it as 'a bet about the future contingent actions of others' (1999: 25), a definition that will suffice for present purposes. Regarding the miraa trade, it is useful to draw out transactions where trust in others is required:

- In the course of miraa's life as a commodity, there are numerous occasions where the trade operates on a pay-back-post-retail basis. Thus, some farmers are paid in full once the agent or broker has received money from retailers. Agents in the Nyambenes are paid back by retailers on a post-sale basis. Also, wholesalers supply Borana and Somali women retailers with miraa in advance of payment. Obviously, one ideally trusts that the agent or retailer is honest, and will not misappropriate the earnings. Compare the system whereby a retailer only pays back an agent for bundles sold with the system used by newsagents and suppliers in the UK. Whereas a newsagent has to send back unsold newspapers with evidence of how many were actually sold, the miraa retailer does no such thing, simply keeping *barehe* miraa under the counter in case the agent asks about it.

- When a farmer hires out a *shamba*, ideally he or she is confident that the broker hiring the *shamba* will not damage trees by over-harvesting.
- Retailers rely on suppliers being honest about how much they paid for miraa at source. They also need to trust the agent's discretion in picking out the best miraa available, and putting in the requisite effort to find the best.
- Agents rely on retailers being competent salesmen.
- Much miraa is entrusted to the care of *matatu* and *Peugeot* touts and drivers. Traders ideally trust it is delivered honestly and efficiently.
- *Hilux* drivers have the responsibility to transport miraa without accident and swiftly. Thus, one ideally trusts the skill and bravery of the driver.
- Money ploughed back to the Nyambenes is usually entrusted to known individuals: as large sums are often involved one trusts that the individual will not steal the cash.

Trust might not be so important an ingredient in the trade were it not for the fact that tales of deception and broken trust are common. One hears of scams – like presenting a bundle of *barehe* miraa to an agent and passing it off as the miraa he sent<sup>2</sup> – as well as occasions when *matatu* touts fail to deliver *bundas*. Retailers sometimes lament that agents are not honest in how much they claim to have paid for a batch of miraa. If one is to overcome the fear that such talk of petty pilfering might engender and *trust* – rather than *hope* – that an individual will not deceive, certain supporting factors that pre-date the formation of a business relation might come into play. These supporting factors provide information as to whether someone is trustworthy, or at least make those trusting more psychologically sure that they will not be let down: miraa traders could not succeed for long if they were naïve, and most rely on such supporting factors rather than trusting *blindly*. For example:

- **Kinship:** Much of the trade is still constituted by co-operation between kin relations. One is likely to have reasonable knowledge of how far trustworthy a relative is – both in

terms of honesty and competence – even before forging a business relationship. While established traders are often obliged to help relatives start out in the trade, those they help would be obliged to make the best of the opportunity, and not let down the benefactor. Of course, if one is obliged by kin relations to help an individual, this might prove a burden should the individual turn out to be untrustworthy or incompetent. Kinship links – even close ones – are not wholly successful in precluding deception, as shown by the example of M’Naituli and his wayward son (see case-studies in chapter one).

- **Friendship:** Many deals in the trade are struck between friends, and many long-term associates are linked by friendship.<sup>3</sup> One would suppose that with friendship also comes knowledge of a friend’s character, and his or her suitability as a business associate. Just because someone is a friend, one would not necessarily trust them in this regard: one might trust a friend’s honesty (though even this is not a necessary requisite of friendship), but not trust his or her competence. However, friendship certainly provides a foundation upon which bonds of trust can be formed.
- **Self-interest:** Without wishing to get into the technicalities of game theory, nor to suggest that miraa traders calculate their best ‘moves’ like a computer plotting the most rational course in the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’, one can observe that forming a long-lasting co-operative relationship will be more in one’s interest than risking the termination of the relationship for a little short-term gain derived from swindling.<sup>4</sup> Making off with a batch of miraa or some money would be extremely rash when the business relationship offers good potential for a prosperous future.
- **Reputation:** A well-established and well-thought of agent in the Nyambenes is likely to inspire trust through reputation. A retailer needing a new agent might consider setting up an association with an agent of good repute, even though they might not have met. The linking of *Kamathi Kiosk* with Kamau occurred in such a manner: it was the good reputation of Kamau that drew Kamathi to him rather than friendship, although they are

now friends. The benefits of a good reputation in securing deals to supply miraa is another reason why it is in the self-interest of an agent to be honest.

There are ways of reinforcing the level of trust in a miraa trade relationship, that give a trustworthy impression, and reassure that one's associate is also trustworthy. These include the following:

- **Gichiaro:** This is a Kimeru word defined by Peatrik thus: 'lien de parenté, sous la forme d'une fraternité de sang, qui interdit de se marier et de se battre, et oblige à une forme d'entraide' (1999: 545). Goldsmith relates that this form of fictive kinship plays a part in the trade by enabling 'Meru to incorporate outsiders into their firms over the demands of less industrious kin' (1988: 145). However, I did not hear of *gichiaro* used nowadays.
- **Intermarriage:** I was told that when Somalis first came to the Nyambenes to procure miraa, there was intermarriage between Somali men and Meru girls. Forming a marital alliance might put trust on a surer footing, and might very well be a common practice amongst those linked in the trade, although the current tension between Meru and Somali means marriages between members of these ethnic groups are rare nowadays.
- **Deposits:** To show one's willingness to pay it is usual to give a supplier (whether farmer or agent) a deposit. Retailers often give agents a deposit at the start of their association. Brokers and agents almost always leave a deposit with farmers when they procure miraa in advance of full payment. A deposit functions as a token of good faith, and farmers at least get enough to pay off hired pickers.
- **Mutual Aid:** Traders I spoke with related that good relationships between farmer / agent or agent / retailer are marked by mutual help in times of need. If an agent sends too much miraa and little is sold, retailers on good terms with agents split losses on *barehe* miraa, rather than letting the agent suffer alone. Likewise, if a retailer is in financial difficulty, an agent might allow him or her to keep a larger proportion of money raised than normal.

Some agents and brokers ensure farmers are well provided for, perhaps paying a higher than usual rate in times of need.

- **Gifts:** It is not unheard of for agents to send well-liked retailers gift batches of miraa. The money raised from this batch is kept by the retailer alone. Soti – the Kisumu trader mentioned in chapter one – passed on a gift batch to a Somali woman retailer in Kisumu from her agent: he was apparently exceedingly happy with her business and so wanted to reward her. Such a gift goes beyond a mere perfunctory fulfilling of obligation: trust is supported by a deepening of the relationship.
- **Allocating responsibility:** By giving someone one needs to trust extra responsibility, one might elicit what Sztompka terms ‘evocative trust’ (Sztompka 1999: 28). Here one trusts ‘intentionally to evoke trust’, a technique to strengthen bonds that is ‘characteristic for the close, intimate relationships, among family members, friends, and so forth...’ (loc. cit.). By entrusting an employee with a significant amount of miraa or money, one shows trust in the employee, and would hope to elicit more trustworthiness in return.
- **Negative sanctions:** Whilst the above trust reinforcing techniques are positive in form, negative sanctions also play a part. In the Nyambenes, one risks violence by attempting to deceive a farmer or trader. Petty thieving of miraa can be met with severe punishment, and some repeat offenders face the prospect of having hands chopped off.<sup>5</sup> Should one be swindled by a known person, one could try the police, but this is unlikely to result in much action. Better in the Nyambenes to bring a case before the *Njuri Ncheke* (see chapter one). The threat of being cursed by the elders of this institution is likely to have a powerful effect upon the offender.

The factors listed above relate mainly to personalised dealings, where one ideally trusts a certain individual. This is not always possible. For example, one might have little knowledge of a *Hilux*-driver who will drive a batch of miraa and return money resulting from its sale. Lack of knowledge precludes one from putting too much faith in his honesty, although to

become a *Hilux* driver takes skill, and so one would have some confidence in his driving anyway. However, instead of having to trust the honesty of an unknown person, one puts trust in a system.<sup>6</sup> This system is that described in chapter three whereby a clerk is employed by the vehicle's owner to take down details of those sending miraa, the amount sent, and to whom it is destined. The clerk writes down details on paper, and makes a carbon copy. One copy is sealed before being handed to the driver, ensuring he cannot tamper with it. Records of money returned with the driver from Nairobi are also noted down and sealed to prevent tampering. Of course, such meticulous record keeping also precludes honest mistakes occurring, and give clients faith in using the *Hilux*.

Most transactions referred to above occur over a relatively short period: miraa is dispatched and money returned from retailers usually within 24 hours. This limits the risk that those entrusting miraa to others take. If one is not paid for a batch, then one can simply cut one's losses and stop sending miraa. Money lost from one or two batches might be annoying, but is unlikely to permanently damage trade: many can risk trusting someone with limited knowledge of their trustworthiness as not all that much will be lost anyway. The stakes are not high. For an agent to trust a retailer in this instance is a 'prudent risk' in the words of Stzompka (1999: 33). Agents dealing with miraa most days clearly have less to lose from being swindled on one batch than farmers: farmers only harvest miraa every few weeks or so. For them to lose a batch would be more drastic.

Most miraa dealings are still contract free, allowing for aggrieved parties to cut losses and find others to deal with. However, we have seen reports that contracts are sometimes drawn up between agents and farmers in hiring *shambas* (see chapter one, and Grignon 1999). Such legally binding documents mark a move away from trust-based personalised relations, and judging by the controversy they have created, a move that is not welcome. Contracts for multiple harvests limit a farmer's choice, making it hard to leave an arrangement. The farmer potentially loses out on more than one harvest.

### **When trust breaks down:**

There exists an asymmetry between trust and distrust, whereby '[w]hile it is never that difficult to find evidence of untrustworthy behaviour, it is virtually impossible to prove its positive mirror image' (Gambetta 2000: 233).<sup>7</sup> An occasion where one's trust in someone is *not* let down is unlikely to be as dramatic as when trust is broken. In that case, suspicion often results. Relationships can continue on a suspicious footing, or can break down completely.

If one discovers – or suspects – that a trading associate is untrustworthy, what measures one takes probably depends on the scale of deceit. I met agents in the Nyambenes who seemed stoical of petty deceit occasionally perpetrated by retailers, perhaps using such deceit as an excuse to be a little deceitful in return. It is likely that these agents remain on amicable terms with retailers nonetheless, being prepared to accept a slight dent in their earnings. Individual actors in the trade no doubt have different threshold levels after which suspected or known deceit can be tolerated no longer. This does not necessarily mean the relationship will be terminated straightaway, as confronting the suspected offender might be a better solution, potentially resolving tension without needing to seek out new associates. The success of such a tactic is no doubt dependent on many factors, one of which may be the relative seniority of the trading associates. Seniority might confer extra leverage for 'disciplining' a more lowly offender.

Maintaining trade relationships despite suspicion and bad feeling is likely to prove impossible in the long run, and breaking point may soon be reached. Thus, the relationship between Kamau and the deceitful Isiolo retailer, which soured over time, eventually had to be terminated. Of course, whether one terminates a sour trading relationship or not is limited by how many alternative options are available to continue trade outside that association. For many farmers, agents, brokers, and retailers in the trade, thankfully there are options: Kamau

could disassociate himself from the soured relationship and form a new one with Kamathi. If a farmer is treated unfairly by one broker, he or she can often find another to deal with.<sup>8</sup>

For some, however, options are more limited. One may have to put up with dealing with someone one is suspicious of just to make a living. As Alexander and Alexander remark (1991: 502), '[w]here parties are not equal, the weaker partners persist in the relationship, less because of some anticipated long-term benefit, than because they are powerless to forge a more beneficial association.' One might very well have perfect trust of – and amicable relations with – a trading associate even though one had no choice but to deal with him or her. However, there exist those who would much rather deal with someone else, but whose limited options provide no escape route. A combination of the nature of miraa as a commodity (which makes a quick sale essential) and a lack of trusted people to sell to means that some farmers and traders are coerced by circumstances into making a sale. Here, as Gambetta puts it (2000: 220), 'an asymmetry [is introduced] which disposes of *mutual* trust and promotes instead power and resentment.'<sup>9</sup>

Such resentment might be directed at certain individuals alone. For example, a farmer caught up in one of the self-renewing contracts mentioned by Grignon (1999: 181) is legally obliged to continue dealing with one particular broker despite unhappiness. At the moment, much uneasiness on the part of some Meru seems less focused on particular individuals, however, and more on a class of individuals: Somali traders. Suspicion has festered in relations between the Meru and Somali to such a degree that the past few years in the trade have been noted for conflict.

### **Meru-Somali Conflict**

Over the course of the previous chapters we have seen tension in the trade, and even some conflict (in the case of competition between Tigania and Igembe over the Isiolo trade). We

have also noted disputes over the charging of cess and those arising over land allocation. But in recent years almost all media attention concerning miraa has been focused on tension and conflict between Meru and Somali. 1999 was a particularly tense year in this regard, and so, when conducting my fieldwork, many people spoke of the issues behind the tension. Unfortunately, few of these people were themselves Somali, whereas many were Meru. I hope I still can put across a balanced view of the situation, although detailed knowledge of insider-Somali perspectives is a vital ingredient that I lack.

The structure of the tension fits in with the all too common polarisation of producer versus middleman, and, indeed, not just Somali middlemen have been accused of exploiting farmers. Sandberg (1969: 11) speaks of the situation in the late 1960s where Igembe middlemen were accused of exploiting farmers by 'njuri elders, agricultural assistants and educated christians.' The 'able and tough middleman between farmer and market' (loc. cit.) was the one making the biggest profits. Today it appears that most anti-middleman feeling is directed against Somalis and sometimes against Meru who work on their behalf as brokers.

Somalis have been involved in the trade for a long time, supplying northeastern Kenya as well as Somalia. The tension of late is linked to the more recent trade to Europe and beyond. Profits from this trade are reportedly huge, allowing international Somali agents to consolidate their position within the Nyambenes, and form what is referred to as a 'cartel', monopolising the international miraa market. Amongst some Meru the feeling soon grew that these Somali 'tycoons' were reaping large profits at the expense of exploited Igembe farmers. Strike action was called in 1995, as Goldsmith (1999: 19) relates: 'The inevitable backlash caused by the penetration of Somali capital into the Meru *miraa*-growing areas encouraged Meru traders based in Nairobi to launch a strike in 1995. This top-down action fizzled out when the rural producers sided with the Somali traders who they claimed paid higher prices.'

Whilst the strike action may have fizzled out, resentment and suspicion certainly did not, and an event occurred in January 1999 that was to bring ill-feeling back to the surface in dramatic fashion. This was the death in London of a Tigania from Muthara, who has become something of a martyr for the Meru cause: Ntai wa Nkuraru. He was a man of influence, described by Goldsmith (1999: 15) as ‘a former university student leader, Safina party founder member and Democratic Party candidate for Tigania East in the 1997 general election’. In 1999, Nkuraru had begun a law course in London, and to help pay for his studies he got involved in the London trade. On January 6<sup>th</sup> 1999, he ‘sat down in his London flat to have a cup of tea with a neighbour...Nkuraru started shaking his head vigorously and foaming at the mouth. He died in the ambulance that was rushing him to hospital’ (loc. cit.). The suspicion that he had been poisoned by Somali led to the following consequences back in Kenya:

In Nkuraru’s Meru rural home, angry locals quickly rose up against local Somali *miraa* traders in the area, forcing them to flee the district for safety. Things were especially explosive in the Igembe area. Two weeks later after tempers had cooled somewhat, the Somalis started returning but locals insisted they should base themselves in the district headquarters of Maua town from where they would wait and buy the crop. Others argued that the Somalis should be expelled from the area totally because they were ‘exploiting local farmers’. (Goldsmith 1999: 15)

A Spanish priest I met in 2000 in Maua remembered the trouble vividly. He was returning from Kangeta to Maua, when his vehicle was stopped at a roadblock manned by young Meru angered at Nkuraru’s death. He was caught up for a considerable length of time while some demanded money from motorists. He reckoned there was no evidence that Nkuraru had been poisoned. This is backed up by the following remarks of Goldsmith:

[Nkuraru] apparently entered the London *miraa* market with little difficulty. He was not, however, a big player. Nor did he pose a major threat to the so-called ‘Somali cartel’. Informed sources now explain that sometime in May 1998 a Somali retailer, dissatisfied with the apparently ‘poor condition’ of a consignment of Nkuraru’s *miraa*, told him he would die for his actions. Nine months later in January this year [1999] Nkuraru visited the same client’s house, they went out for dinner together, and it was when he returned home that he collapsed and died...Two British autopsies, however, failed to find evidence of foul play.

Negative post-mortem results have done little to allay suspicion that ‘foul play’ was at work. One (non-Meru) Kenyan police officer I spoke with about Nkuraru, when I told him of

such post-mortems, suggested that ‘the coroner could have been bribed’. Not all Meru considered Somalis responsible for Nkuraru’s death, however. One Tigania trader reckoned those with the main interest in assassinating Nkuraru were the government, as he had done much to fight corruption. Conspiracy theories abound.

The poisonous atmosphere after Nkuraru’s demise was manifest in how some Meru spoke about Somalis and their ‘dirty tricks’. During my main stint in the field (1999-2001), anti-Somali sentiment was expressed strongly by many Meru, Tigania and Igembe. Whilst Kikuyu are stereotyped as mean (Kiswahili: *bahili*), Somali are stereotyped as ‘ruthless businessmen’ and *wajanja* (Kiswahili: ‘cunning’), a stereotype reinforcing the notion of a Somali ‘cartel’. An Igembe trader – many of whose customers are Somali – described them to me as ‘like animals’, and did not chew or socialise with them. A Tigania friend maintained Somalis once tried to claim the Nyambenes as their land, hoping to force the Meru away and so gain control of miraa’s source. One Tigania farmer claimed Somalis, when they first arrived in the Nyambenes, paid flattering visits to old farmers, asking to rent *shambas*. The money they offered sounded like a lot to naïve farmers, when in reality it was a small amount.

Suspicion and resentment did not dissipate entirely once 1999’s turmoil had simmered down, and there was more to come in 2002. Fortuitously, I was in the Nyambenes on Saturday, 20<sup>th</sup> April of that year, a day when the *Nyamita* organisation called for a suspension of trade and for a general meeting of Meru miraa farmers and traders at Maili Tatu. *Nyamita* is an acronym, standing for Nyambene Miraa Traders, and is a Meru organisation registered as a welfare society to look after Meru interests. It is a formal society, with an office in Maua, and has representatives from all over the Nyambenes.<sup>10</sup> One suspects that much of its work recently has concerned relations with Somalis. I was able to reach Maili Tatu on the day of the meeting and witnessed a large gathering on a field by the main road. The following issues were raised:

1. **The use of fertiliser spray.** All were urged to desist from spraying for the reasons mentioned in chapter one.
2. **The habit of Somalis of returning miraa that they are not satisfied with, is in excess, or late for a flight, and accepting no liability for it.** This leaves Meru brokers who arranged for miraa to be sent suffering losses. Farmers suffer too if the miraa was bought on deposit by brokers expecting to receive money from Somali agents.
3. **The perception of Somalis as sharp operators.** Meru were urged to be alert when dealing with Somalis, to keep written records of transactions, and to introduce invoices that Somali traders must sign on receiving miraa, providing proof in case of misunderstanding.
4. **The disproportionate wealth derived by Somalis from the trade.** The chairman said one particular Somali had only entered the trade recently with limited capital. Within three months of trading, he invested in two *Hilux* pick-ups.
5. **The plight of farmers in Mutuati, Lare, KK, and Kaelo.** Somali agents were forcing farmers to tie bigger *shurbas* and accept low prices. The chairman remarked that Somalis could get a *bunda* of *giza* for as little as ksh.300 in rainy seasons, and then make ksh.2000-2500 from the same *bunda*. Also, by getting farmers to tie large *shurbas*, they further increase profits by re-tying miraa into smaller *shurbas*, thus multiplying the number of *kitundus* and profits.
6. **Misbehaviour of Somali traders.** The chairman claimed some Somali traders lure local girls into sexual relations with gifts, thus spreading HIV. Somalis were also accused of introducing hard drugs to Nyambene youth.

In Mutuati later that day I met several friends, including a *Nyamita* representative. They analysed the day's events with mixed feelings. The representative reckoned the day a moderate success, viewing the large meeting as a show of Meru unity. Others were sceptical, citing the fact that not all Meru abided by the suspension of trade<sup>11</sup> as evidence of treachery, saying Meru will never speak with *sauti moja* (Kiswahili: 'one voice'). All agreed that if the

Meru united, then inequities in the trade could be sorted out. Sadly, they considered that profit offered to some Meru by Somalis prevents this happening.

Further developments seem to have weakened *Nyamita*.<sup>12</sup> The society applied for a permit to hold another meeting in May. Just before the meeting was due to commence, the police stepped in and called a halt to proceedings on security grounds. This caused chaos. In the words of an Igembe friend: 'The crowd refused to disperse, and the police used tear gas and batons to disperse them. They engaged the police in stone throwing battles and in the end two people, a man and a woman, were shot dead. The police denied responsibility. The crowd ran amok, and went on a looting spree to Maua, beating every Somali on sight. They burnt some vehicles and a mosque before they were again dispersed by police. After the fracas, police arrested some of the meeting convenors and charged them.' As of October 2002, some *Nyamita* officials were still waiting for their case to come to court, charged with the murder of the man and woman killed at the ill-fated meeting.

Following this, Somali agents and transporters boycotted buying miraa for a week. Somali owned miraa vehicles were moved away from the region lest locals destroyed them.<sup>13</sup> Somalis supplying Wajir, Mogadishu, and Europe joined in the boycott, and three high-powered dealers, acting as representatives of the Somali cause, stated they would resume buying the crop only when the situation had calmed down, claiming they had lost two million shillings already paid out to farmers before the trouble began. When they resumed buying a week later, it is reported they reduced the amount paid to farmers in revenge for the trouble.

A 'reconciliation' meeting was held at Maua District Headquarters. As *Nyamita* representatives were banned from attending – and publicly criticised for inciting violence, and for being 'tribalists' – the meeting was seen by some Meru as a pro-Somali stunt organised by 'self-seeking' Meru in high positions bought off by Somalis. The meeting did lead the way for the resumption of trade between Igembe and Somalis, however.

### Exploitation or envy?

Some consider that behind this tension lies envy at Somali success in the international trade. Grignon advocates this view, ascribing much of the blame for the 1999 conflict to the Tigania. He relates (1999: 182) that ‘[j]usqu’au début des années 90, le commerce de la miraa était contrôlé par des opérateurs tigania... Ils achetaient à l’avance un certain nombre de récoltes ou s’approvisionnaient directement auprès des intermédiaires igembe contrôlant les transports acheminant la miraa vers Nairobi. Les commerçants tigania dominant en effet le marché urbain du détail. La quatrième avenue du quartier d’Eastleigh à Nairobi était autrefois appelée Muthara street, du nom d’une unité administrative tigania des Nyambene.’ This depiction of Tigania as the big players in the national trade seems odd. As noted in chapter four, Tigania and Igembe retailers both operate throughout Kenya: in some locations more Tigania are found than Igembe, in others vice versa. The idea of Tigania being dominant overall fits ill with my experience. Whilst Eastleigh and Isiolo may have more Tigania retailers than Igembe<sup>14</sup>, Igembe dominate almost completely the coastal region. There are plenty of Igembe agents and retailers: the Igembe are not merely producers and transporters.

Grignon also claims that the influx of Somali traders post-1993 altered the complexion of the trade, with the supposed dominance of Tigania replaced by that of Somalis. This, and a desire to move in on the international trade, according to Grignon (ibid.183), is what led to the trouble of 1999:

Les échauffourées de janvier 1999, qui ont pris la tonalité d’un nouveau conflit ethnique, ne sont en fait que les manifestations d’une lutte commerciale entre commerçants somali, transporteurs igembe et distributeurs tigania. Ayant perdu localement des parts de marché et se trouvant dans l’incapacité de pénétrer les réseaux internationaux de distribution, ces derniers en sont venus à invoquer la sanctuarisation ethnique des collines de Nyambene. Utilisant comme prétexte la défense des intérêts meru, un groupe ethnique façonné par le colonisateur et réapproprié à des fins d’accumulation primitive et de mobilisation politique par les *big men* locaux, ils sont le symbole de la dérive ethniciste des élites kenyanes, qui masquent trop souvent leurs stratégies d’enrichissement derrière la mobilisation violente des solidarités communautaires.

The remarks here concerning 'Meru' ethnicity seem inspired by Grignon's suspicions about Tigania motives. Many links hold together Tigania and Igembe, one of which is assuredly miraa itself. Others include the pan-Meru council of the *Njuri-Ncheke*, a common language, and much intermarriage. There has been, and no doubt remains, some tension between them,<sup>15</sup> but usually Tigania and Igembe are happy enough to call themselves *Ameru*, the Meru people. However, Grignon is right to be suspicious of talk of 'ethnic conflict' for broader reasons: Charles King, reviewing a book on Yugoslavia, remarks:

[T]he very term "ethnic conflict" usually obscures more than it reveals. Placing an easy label on conflicts covers up the ways in which ethnicity, ideology, strategic goals and personal ambition work together to fuel violence and undermine peace. (*Times Literary Supplement*, July 20<sup>th</sup> 2001)

Grignon also claims that Somalis were reputed to pay higher prices promptly to farmers for their miraa (Grignon 1999: 183), thus how could the trouble be anything but an attempt by aggrieved Tigania wanting to force out Somalis? Grignon goes further on the next page, suggesting that the conflict revealed 'soubassements politiques' (ibid.184). He lists several Meru politicians who had a hand in calling for the expulsion of Somalis from Nyambene, and reports that some of them lamented 'l'impossibilité pour tout non-Somali d'entrer sur le marché international du khat' (loc. cit.), as did Ntai wa Nkuraru, perhaps hinting that this shows the true motives behind the conflict. But, he claims, '[I]a tentative des commerçants meru a finalement échoué.' The Somali were able to return to the trade because '[I]eurs protections politiques étaient trop fortes.' He then lists Somali MPs of the KANU party involved in the trade, and hence likely to stand up for Somali interests through vested interests of their own, and mentions an Igembe KANU MP who is an associate of a Somali international exporter (loc. cit.).

Thus, Grignon presents a bleak picture in which ethnic conflict is instigated by Tigania (and other Meru) *big men*, hoping to force out well-connected Somali traders, whilst Igembe

producers are pawns left stranded in the midst of the social problems that Grignon claims miraa causes (ibid.185).

This picture is startling, presenting those who claim to be the farmers' friends as opportunists looking to make a killing on the international trade. Whilst there are Meru who hope to get involved in the international trade, and who resent what they see as a Somali monopoly, Grignon's case seems weakened by his depiction of Tigania as instigators of the conflict. Perhaps he read too much into the fact that Ntai wa Nkururu was Tigania, seeing this as evidence for Tigania machinations. In the passage quoted above, he claims that Tigania lost some parts of the market locally – i.e. within Kenya – and were thus aggrieved. He does not tell us which parts of the market however, and it seems unlikely that the influx of Somali traders could have forced Tigania out of sections of the Kenyan market: Somalis connected up to consumers in the newly spread diaspora, rather than moving in on already established national markets. Also, Somalis derive most of their miraa from Ntonyiri, whilst Tigania agents and retailers mostly source theirs at either Karama or Muringene: it is mainly Igembe agents and retailers who procure miraa from Ntonyiri alongside Somalis. Thus, Tigania national traders are unlikely to have been pushed out by Somali traders.

That politicians can be swayed by vested interests is hardly questionable, and there are undoubtedly powerful people on both sides of the Meru–Somali divide involved in the current dispute. However, there is much genuine resentment on the part of Igembe farmers and agents concerning a trade imbalance. The question to ask, therefore, seems to be whether there is just cause for this resentment, or whether resentment is more the result of the machinations of *big men*? Much hinges on the veracity of Grignon's statement (ibid.183) that Somalis 'ont le réputation d'acheter la miraa à des prix légèrement supérieurs et surtout de toujours payer les paysans avec exactitude et sans délais.' This may have been true before Ntai wa Nkururu's death – Goldsmith remarks that the 1995 strike ended when producers claimed Somalis paid higher prices than Meru (1999:19) – although the extreme reaction of

many farmers suggests that resentment had been growing against Somali. Many deals between Meru farmers and Somali agents are brokered by Meru middlemen, and this further complicates matters. (Nicholas reckons Somalis probably send much money back for farmers, but Meru middlemen prevent farmers getting their fair share.) However, as renting *shambas* was a main grievance at that time, and as so many rented *shambas* were supplying miraa for Somalis, it seems reasonable to assume that the poor deal many farmers were getting by renting was blamed on Somalis rather than Meru middleman who brokered the arrangement.

Today many Igembe farmers and agents have anti-Somali feelings, reinforced by what some Igembe see as ongoing Somali 'dirty tricks'. These involve the issues mentioned above, especially returning miraa from Nairobi and elsewhere. I have witnessed such a return: two *Hilux* pick-ups were sent back fully loaded to Maua – where I saw them – as Somali traders in Nairobi reckoned the miraa was damaged by the sun after faulty loading, and so looked *barehe* and unmarketable. In that case, the pick-ups were re-routed to Kenya's northeast where the miraa could be sold. Thus, not all the money was lost on that consignment. In some cases, however, miraa cannot be sold elsewhere, and as Somalis are said to refuse to accept liability, the ones who lose out are Meru brokers, and occasionally farmers who might have sold the miraa on deposit, expecting full payment once the brokers had been paid. The demand to increase *shurba*-size or risk not selling a harvest appears to be another just cause for resentment. The low prices that Ntonyiri miraa fetches also seems a genuine problem, although Goldsmith suggests that Ntonyiri miraa has always fetched less than the Muringene equivalent (Goldsmith 1988: 139 and 142). Whilst farmers receive what can seem a small sum for miraa, most consider that Somalis profit far more, leading many to consider this a trade imbalance. Many lamenting this imbalance are not just Meru eyeing up the international trade, but good hearted people whose concern really is for Igembe producers.

The trade imbalance emerges from the lack of options for farmers in Ntonyiri as to whom they supply. Whilst there are Igembe networks taking this zone's miraa to Nairobi and

the coast, by far the largest proportion finds itself on a Somali network. A Mutuati friend estimated that 90% of Mutuati / Lare miraa feeds Somali demand, and many farmers were prompted to begin cultivating miraa in this region by increased demand post-1993 and the spread of the Somali diaspora. Farmers would find it hard to take miraa to Muringene to sell even if a better price could be secured: for most it would be too far, and regular suppliers to Muringene would be annoyed by an influx of miraa from elsewhere. The trade imbalance becomes evident in efforts to secure a better deal through striking. Somali dealers are reckoned to have enough investments to allow them to just sit back and wait for Igembe farmers to crack. Many farmers have little in the way of back-up funds, and the time would soon come when they had to sell their miraa or risk a harvest going to waste. Somali control is further evidenced by the effectiveness of their boycott: they have the resources to boycott buying Meru miraa for a week and not suffer. For Igembe farmers whose trees are ready for harvesting such a boycott is devastating. Lowering the price paid, as Somalis reportedly did after their boycott, further stresses their commanding position.<sup>16</sup>

It is reported<sup>17</sup> that some Somali consider Meru as their *punda* ('donkeys') and even as 'slaves', who should get on with the labour of tending and harvesting miraa trees while Somali sort out the important job of the international trade.<sup>18</sup> Some Meru conceive of Somali as having nothing but disdain for Igembe farmers, and certainly actions like lowering prices suggest a desire to put farmers in their place. Somali traders are reported to deny exploiting farmers, citing mutual trade agreements: this cuts little ice with some Igembe, who point out how skewed the trade is in favour of Somalis.

Igembe do not have a monopoly on grievances in this situation, however. Obviously Somali traders in the Nyambenes are going to resent attacks on their families and being thrown out of the region. When Meru mobs burn down a mosque in Maua, they are bound to be met with Somali anger no matter how genuine the grievances and frustrations that led those Meru to behave in that way.

This situation appears poisonous. Grievances grow amongst Meru and occasionally lead to violence; Somali traders feel aggrieved that this violence targets them and their families, show more contempt for Meru, and are consequently more willing to exploit their commanding position in revenge and to demonstrate power. This only serves to render more acute Meru grievances. The system spirals viciously in a style reminiscent of Batesonian *schismogenesis*<sup>19</sup>, as suspicion on both sides festers. The strong association of both Meru and Somali with miraa adds more potential for conflict: just whose crop is it? Tigania and Igembe associate miraa with their history, traditions<sup>20</sup>, and economic well-being; some Somali see themselves as miraa connoisseurs *par excellence*. Coffee and tea, being crops brought in by the British, do not have such an age-old link to the ethnic identity of Kenyan farmers. For the Meru, however, miraa is a crop that their ancestors domesticated and incorporated into their social life well before the British reached the Nyambenes. Miraa farmers are likely to be even more aggrieved at perceived exploitation by outsiders when the crop they are growing has so much of a link with their identity as being Tigania, Igembe, or even Meru.

The full picture of the Meru-Somali conflict in all its complexity would require more research into miraa production and trade. For example, more data on pricing at Muringene and Ntonyiri markets would show how farmers supplying the Somali network at the latter markets fare when compared with those supplying fellow Meru at Muringene. Also, it would be interesting to make a comparison of prices farmers supplying Igembe networks to Nairobi and the coast obtain for their miraa at Ntonyiri markets with those obtained by farmers supplying Somalis.<sup>21</sup> The issue of hiring *shambas* is another one that would benefit from further research: farmers I met did not hire *shambas* out for long periods, but as this issue is supposedly a factor behind the trouble of 1999, it would be good to know how many farmers still rent to brokers working for Somalis. If few do nowadays, then this could be a sign of Igembe farmers wresting back control of production.

The situation is one of genuine grievances – on both sides – mixed with dubious motives, all combining to increase suspicion and make trusting difficult and sometimes, given what seems the powerlessness of farmers, almost irrelevant. The lack of formal regulation in the trade makes it hard for the authorities to intervene and resolve the situation, although given the woeful state of the coffee sector, where there is regulation, it is perhaps better for Meru and Somali to reconcile themselves equitably and to the benefit of all. This, of course, is far easier said than done. For a true reconciliation to occur between the Meru of Ntonyiri and Somali international traders requires a restoration of trust in the relationship, and this requires that Igembe farmers and agents feel they get a fair deal, and that Somalis feel safe conducting business in the Nyambenes. True reconciliation will be impossible if a Meru society like *Nyamita* is excluded from negotiations.

Perhaps *Fairtrade* miraa might be the answer? After all, the *Fairtrade* system relies on an increase of trust between producer and distributor, something that would be highly beneficial in the international trade of miraa.

### **On a more positive note...**

This poisonous situation does not represent a comprehensive view of relations between Meru and Somali, however. Many Meru and Somali in Kenya are not caught up in the resentment, and maintain healthy trade relations and friendships. Others may speak ill of stereotyped Meru or Somali at one moment, and then go and spend a few hours chewing with a Meru or Somali friend the next, giving away by their behaviour the dubious nature of stereotypes. Many miraa traders themselves seemed on excellent terms with Somali customers and business associates: witness Meshach in Garissa, who seemed to have little problem in dealing with Somalis.<sup>22</sup> Also, Rose in Meru and Gideon at *Sunrise* both have good Somali friends and customers. Such people are not really at the sharp end of the conflict, however, and so are not affected much by it. Even so, they demonstrate the possibility of good inter-ethnic business relations.

Conflicting interests in the trade do lead to tension, of which the most conspicuous example at present is the situation described above. However, the desire to open new markets for miraa, and the mutual benefits of forming business relationships, can have the opposite effect, bringing people – even those living across geographical, social, and ethnic boundaries – together peacefully. Indeed, many miraa deals are made in the most cordial manner. The trade also benefits farmers financially far more than either tea or coffee: even farmers in Ntonyiri who feel exploited are better employed persevering with miraa rather than switching to, say, coffee (see chapter one). The trade benefits agents, brokers, and retailers, offering opportunities for people as far removed as hawkers in Karama, Borana women in Garba Tulla, to Somali men in Manchester. All this should be obvious and would not be worth saying, if it were not for the fact that the miraa trade is associated by so many with conflict and social disruption. Such associations are reinforced by the fact that press coverage of miraa – with some exceptions – is almost wholly negative, concentrating on issues like the Meru-Somali conflict, the use of child labour, or the supposedly evil social consequences of miraa consumption. Of course, it is trite to note that what gets media coverage is almost always bad news, as the good or mundane is often not newsworthy, and, in miraa's case, the recent conflict deserves serious attention. But, by not providing examples of positive aspects of the trade, one is in danger of giving far too strong a case to anti-miraa propagandists whose representation of miraa is unrealistically negative.

### **Socially embedded economic exchange**

The workings of trust in the trade, conflict between Meru and Somali, and more socially beneficial aspects of the trade are interesting in themselves. However, such issues also serve to show a wider point: just how socially embedded is the exchange of a commodity like miraa. Trust is an eminently 'social' concept, one concerned with relationships between people: in

much of miraa's circulation, with whom one trades depends on whom one trusts, and this depends on all sorts of social factors. The international trade of miraa has suffered recently because of fraught relations between Meru and Somali: this suspicion has evolved in a social context too. The smooth operation of the trade in Kenya relies on good social relations: miraa's exchange helps constitute, and is constituted by, such social relations.

The circulation of miraa is not in the abstract, and is not carried out by abstract individuals of the *homo economicus* variety. The trade revolves around *real* individuals and their co-operation (or lack of it) within *real* social relations.

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Miraa is a commodity in great demand, demand served by the trade network considered in the first five chapters. Now the final part of miraa's social life is considered: consumption and the myriad reasons why consumption is popular. To understand demand for miraa, one must understand its consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> Sztompka (1999) speaks of trust's 'rich and continuous tradition in philosophy, social and political thought, and ethics, represented by Hobbes, Locke, Ferguson, and others' and how it has 'troubled the classical masters of sociology – Tönnies, Simmel, and Durkheim – as well as contemporary classics such as Parsons or Riesman' (1999: 11). Recent important work on the concept includes that by Gambetta (2000), Luhmann (1979), Misztal (1996) and that of Sztompka himself.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter two and case-study of Kamau.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of friendship is one that has received anthropological attention: see, for example, Bell and Coleman (eds.) 1999. Amongst the Meru, what might be termed 'friendship' in the west is often expressed in the idiom of the age-set system: thus *Bamo* – age-mate – is a term that might be used to describe one of similar age with whom one has a 'friendship'.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, long-term petty swindling no doubt provides a sizeable reward.

<sup>5</sup> One fellow who had met with such a fate demanded money from me as I boarded a bus in Mutuati. As I had little change, I offered him miraa that he gladly accepted. His stumps had been covered with two portions of twisted metal, and he was able to grip miraa between these while stripping edible sections with his teeth. Nicholas was impressed by his technique and plied him with yet more miraa. He became talkative, and spoke of how he makes much money begging in Nairobi. Some Europeans had taught him a little English to use in his trade, and he is so successful that he has been able to holiday on the coast.

<sup>6</sup> See Sztompka (1999: 44) on 'procedural trust'.

<sup>7</sup> This asymmetry is isomorphic with that Popper claimed exists between verification and falsification of scientific hypotheses. '[A] set of singular observation statements... may at times falsify or refute a universal law; but it cannot possibly verify a law, in the sense of establishing it' (Popper 1983 [1956]: 181; see also Popper 1959 [1935]: 41). What this means is that a number of occasions when an agent treats us honourably may help predispose us psychologically to trust him next time; but let him cheat us only once and we see he is untrustworthy. Once bitten, twice shy.

<sup>8</sup> Although farmers still have to deal with a member of the class 'broker', and on occasion a broker and a farmer's interests may conflict even when they are on reasonable terms.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Sztompka (1999: 23): 'If I have complete power I can enforce expected actions, I can coerce others to act as I wish, I do not need to trust them.'

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to M'Ithai of Mutuati for this information.

<sup>11</sup> One Somali-owned miraa pick-up arrived in Mutuati, apparently with the intention of procuring miraa. It was stoned by locals angry that the driver should dare show up on such a day.

<sup>12</sup> Once again, I am indebted to M'Ithai for the following information.

<sup>13</sup> *Daily Nation* 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Eastleigh has Igembe retailers too, for example *KK Provisions*.

<sup>15</sup> See chapter four for details of the early conflict between Tigania and Igembe over the Isiolo trade.

<sup>16</sup> Grignon reports that Somali traders threatened to stop buying Nyambene miraa altogether, and procure it from Ethiopia instead (1999: 184). Given the many investments Somalis have made in both the Nyambenes and Nairobi, it seems unlikely that they would do so: more a rhetorical device to show Meru that there are other sources for miraa.

<sup>17</sup> I only have reports of such Somali sentiments: this is where I wish I had more direct knowledge of Somali perceptions of their relations with the Meru.

<sup>18</sup> The traditional pastoralist antipathy towards agriculture might be relevant here.

<sup>19</sup> See Bateson 1936: 175 for a definition of *schismogenesis*. See also *Culture Contact and Schismogenesis* reproduced in Bateson 2000 [1972]: 61-72.

<sup>20</sup> See chapter six.

<sup>21</sup> Such comparisons would have to take into account the variation in price received for different varieties and qualities of miraa, as well as the differences in yield between *shambas* in the different growing zones.

<sup>22</sup> Although it is obviously in his interest to maintain good relations, as so many of his dealings are with Somalis, and he lives in a predominantly Somali town.

## Chapter Six:

### Consuming Miraa

*I whizzed hugely with actions (toing and froing of hands), got big handas, good frame of mind, very effusive, hysterical and funny walking style (lurching). What a tip-top exhilarating experience which makes me lavish affection on the mauve medicine always and forever!*

- Nicholas describing his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday party. November 2001.<sup>1</sup>

As is now evident, a sophisticated network exists that efficiently delivers miraa from Nyambene to far-flung corners of Kenya and beyond. For this to have developed there must be sufficient people willing to buy it, and, indeed, miraa does not lack admirers. The first section of this chapter provides a broad, and necessarily incomplete, answer to the question ‘who chews miraa?’ The second section looks at contexts in which miraa is consumed.

#### Who chews miraa?

Miraa consumption has crossed ‘religious, ethnic, and social boundaries’ (Goldsmith 1988: 121) over the course of the last century, and one cannot pinpoint a particular category of people – whether Muslims, Somalis, or Igembe – and declare them *the* miraa consumers: there is too much diversity amongst them for that. There is convergence, however; sufficient convergence to allow one to state that a young Igembe miraa-retailer is more likely to chew than a middle-aged Kikuyu journalist, or that a young Kikuyu prostitute in Nairobi is more likely to chew than a female Luo university student in Kisumu. In profiling Kenyan consumers, one can, albeit roughly, describe various groupings of people amongst whom miraa is popular. The groupings I use are: ethnicity, religion, occupation, age, and location. By no means do I imply that all members of a particular

grouping chew: amongst them all are non-chewers. Thus, they do not suggest a deterministic relationship between the grouping and an individual's decision to chew. However, they are useful in showing where in Kenyan society the popularity of miraa is centred. The groupings are not mutually exclusive, and overlap in many instances.

### **Ethnicity:**

1. **Tigania / Igembe.** Tigania and Igembe avidly chew their home-grown commodity. Early European travellers like Chanler and Neumann commented on miraa consumption by Igembe and nearby groups in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bernard 1972: 42; Neumann 1982 [1898]: 32-33). By the time of my fieldwork, most Tigania and Igembe men I met (including older teenagers) were chewers, as were many women, and some young boys.<sup>2</sup> Miraa consumption permeates most of Tigania and Igembe society: even those with respectable government positions or teaching jobs are often chewers. However, it is my impression that chewing is more prevalent amongst Igembe than Tigania.<sup>3</sup> Miraa has much resonance for Meru 'traditions', and is used in both recreational contexts, and in many ceremonial / ritual contexts.
  
2. **Somali.** Somalis are inveterate chewers, and, indeed, probably the main impetus for the construction of the trade network: their appetite for miraa being so prodigious that an international network emerged for the diaspora as far away as Canada. In a town with many Somalis like Isiolo, Somali men of about sixteen years and upwards chew openly. Some Somali women chew, although usually in private. They are mainly married women: younger women rarely chew.<sup>4</sup> As with Tigania and Igembe, consumption permeates much of society, and high earners in respectable jobs are as likely to chew as *matatu* touts. Somali passion for miraa did not escape the British. In a letter dated 16<sup>th</sup> August 1940, Gerald Reece, Officer-in-Charge of the Northern Frontier District, spoke of Isiolo miraa consumption.<sup>5</sup> He states:

‘One will never stop the Alien Somalis here using it – (and in their case it has been observed facetiously that the effect of kat, which causes impotence, might eventually be of benefit to the Colony by exterminating them!)’.

3. **Borana.** Borana are also inveterate chewers. Consumption in Borana towns like Garba Tulla is widespread, and many Borana in Isiolo, Marsabit, and Moyale chew. The popularity of miraa amongst Borana was also noted by the British: a note by the then District Commissioner of Isiolo dated 11<sup>th</sup> October 1961<sup>6</sup>, reports that ‘miraa [is] consumed in all townships where there are Somalis or Boran’.
4. **Turkana.** Turkana are more recent converts to miraa. Hjort reports that Turkana have ‘recently also started to consume miraa’ in his 1974 article (pg. 34). At the time of my fieldwork, many Isiolo Turkana chewed, and were associated with lower grade varieties: many of them are too poor to afford better grades. Both Turkana men and women chew openly in Isiolo, although some of these might be regarded as lowly representatives of the group by other Turkana. Most well-heeled Turkana women probably do not chew. Amongst men, however, it is common to find fairly wealthy individuals who chew.
5. **Samburu.** Trade to towns like Maralal is on a large scale as miraa is popular amongst their Samburu inhabitants. Much miraa reaching Maralal is low quality, suggesting Samburu have little money to buy it with. Traders often exchange miraa for skins with Samburu customers.
6. **Yemeni / Omani Arabs.** There is a large Arab population in Kenya, mainly of Yemeni and Omani descent and concentrated on the coast, although there are many inland too. The popularity of *qat* amongst Yemenis and other Arabs goes back centuries (see Weir 1985, and Kennedy 1987), and Arab traders based in towns along the Tanzanian and Kenyan coast

would no doubt have had knowledge of *qat* from an early date. Mutoria, a one-time Igembe MP and passionate defender of miraa, took part in a televised debate concerning miraa broadcast on KBC (Kenya Broadcasting Corporation) channel on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 2000. In a potted history of miraa, he claimed that it was in fact Arabs, coming to the Nyambenes on trading expeditions, who saw miraa growing wild and suggested Meru cultivate and consume it. This is speculation, but shows the close association of Arabs and miraa in Kenya as well as in the Yemen. As Somalis proved an impetus for trade to the north, it seems Arabs proved an impetus for trade to the coast. Certainly, Arabs provide Meru traders with some of their best customers on the coast, and many kiosks are strategically positioned close to the Arab populated Old Towns of Mombasa and Malindi.

7. **Swahili.** Miraa is also popular amongst Swahili of the Kenyan coast. Just how correct it is to use the term 'Swahili' as a name of a particular group is open to question. Constantin, in an edition of the journal *Africa* devoted to the Swahili (59 (2), 1989) says he does 'not regard the existence among them of the Swahili language and culture as conclusive proof that they are an integrated social group, since, historically, much apparent Swahili distinctiveness emerged from an attempt to integrate with another social group, i.e. to cross a barrier and become – or be considered as – Arabs' (1989: 145). It is beyond the scope of my work to become involved in debates over Swahili identity. I hope I may be permitted to use the term as short-hand for those coastal people commonly called Swahili, whether accurately or not.

**Religion:**

Miraa is associated with Islam, an association explained by many by the fact that as the Koran forbids alcohol, miraa has become the equivalent social stimulant. However, the connection between Islam and miraa is not uncontested: there is debate about whether or not miraa is *halal*. For now, suffice it to say that Muslims from many different ethnic backgrounds (Somali, Borana,

Swahili etc.) chew miraa in Kenya today. One politician – a vice-chairman of the party Ford-Kenya – is spoken of by Grignon as saying that ‘près de 80% des membres masculins de la communauté musulmane de Mombasa consomment quotidiennement du khat’ (Grignon 1999: 183). The politician was attacking miraa in saying this, and so his testimony might not be wholly reliable; however, the figure of 80 % is indicative of miraa’s popularity amongst coastal Muslims. The percentage of male Muslims in the north of the country who chew might be even greater. Many of Kenya’s Asians are Muslim, and a high number chew. Whilst many Christians also chew, the fact of their Christianity seems not to be a large factor in their chewing.

### **Occupations:**

As we shall see in the section *Chewing on the job*, miraa is used in a work context to provide alertness and stamina. One occupation where almost all workers chew is, of course, that of miraa trading. ‘Beach Boys’ or tourist ‘hustlers’ on the Kenyan coast, as well as itinerant curio sellers of towns like Isiolo, are enamoured of miraa. Robert Peake speaks of ‘Beachboys’, describing them as ‘youths and young men to be found in any coastal resort, ranging in age from mid-teens to mid-thirties and living from the ‘unofficial’ services they provide for tourists’ (Peake 1989: 210). These include ‘male prostitution for female and male clients, tour guiding and companionship, the selling of crafts and souvenirs on commission, as well as illegal foreign exchange dealing’ (loc. cit.). ‘Beachboys’, according to Peake, like to present the image of a ‘playboy’, and one way to do this is to project ‘an exaggerated air of affluence’ by publicly distributing ‘large amounts of miraa at public chews’ (ibid. 211). Miraa is popular amongst workers in the transport industry, especially *matatu* operators. *Matatu* drivers and touts work long hours, and so miraa’s stimulant qualities are beneficial; however, the image of chewing miraa fits in well with the image that drivers and touts often want to present: that of *upoa* (‘coolness’). This is dealt with in the following section on ‘age’ ...

**Age:**

Although Meru claim that originally miraa use was restricted to elders (see chapter seven), nowadays it is popular amongst many young Kenyans – predominantly male – who fit in with what can be termed a ‘youth ethos’. This ethos seems constituted by the following elements: a high regard for activities that seem daring, flamboyant, defiant and full of enterprise; a desire to adopt the latest fashions popular with the young, including musical, sartorial, and linguistic fashions. One can call this a quest to look *poa*.<sup>7</sup> This is a Kiswahili word meaning ‘cool’ (in a literal sense), which has been incorporated into the *sheng*<sup>8</sup> language fashionable amongst youth, and now refers to ‘cool’ in the colloquial sense used in Britain and America. A sticker attached to a kiosk in Maili Tatu proudly announces that *veve ni poa*: ‘miraa is cool’. Of course, traders would want to present miraa as something ‘cool’, but the image of it as *poa* – especially in urban areas – has taken hold. Miraa is somewhat frowned upon by many in ‘mainstream’ Kenyan society (see chapter seven), and so chewing can be imbued with daring and defiance, and hence *upoa*. Also, the relaxed feeling of sociability that miraa induces fits in well with many youthful activities, allowing them to pass many hours with banter. *Upoa* surrounding miraa make a *takssin* seem congruous with the latest *FUBU* brand clothing, and even the latest *gangsta rap* songs.<sup>9</sup> Thus, miraa is integrated into the lives of many Kenyan youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

**Location:**

Most Kenyan towns have their fair share of miraa kiosks. This might suggest that geographical location has little relevance for Kenyan chewing patterns. However, despite the spread of the trade network, miraa is more popular in some areas than others.

- **The Nyambenes.** The main miraa-cultivating region in Kenya is obviously a major consumption zone.

- **Northeast.** Many associate miraa with Kenya's northeast, where many Somali and Borana avidly consume it. This association is justified, and has been for some time: such was the British colonial government's concern with miraa consumption in the then Northern Frontier District, that an ordinance was instigated restricting the sale and consumption of miraa there to permit holders only.<sup>10</sup> Miraa's stamina-boosting and appetite-reducing properties are useful for those tending flocks and herds away from home, pastoralism being the main mode of survival in that region. In more remote towns few amenities exist, and miraa facilitates social interaction. Also, some explain the popularity of miraa by its ability to distract the mind from contemplating the poverty in the region. One Borana friend from Garba Tulla used this to explain why some chew there: many young men are educated and aware of riches to be had in the world, but feel powerless to attain them. *Handas* takes away the distress of such a predicament, giving consumers the feeling that wealth is attainable. Whilst this argument can be overdone – the idea that miraa consumption is indulged in merely to provide an escape from reality seems too simplistic – desperation may be a factor in some people's consumption. Whatever the reason, miraa is enormously popular in Kenya's northeast.
- **'Downtown' urban areas.** Miraa outlets in many bigger towns and cities are concentrated in certain areas, normally around bus stages. These are often 'downtown', with usually an ethnically heterogeneous population. In such areas consumption easily crosses ethnic boundaries: perhaps because so many in such areas are occupied in jobs associated with miraa. Also, *sheng* and other elements of the 'youth ethos' seem particularly rooted in urban settings – *sheng* is said to have evolved in 'downtown' regions of Nairobi – and as miraa fits into this 'youth ethos', it is at home.

- **The coast.** Miraa's popularity on the coast is indisputable. In Mombasa alone consumption is huge, as Grignon relates (referring to a 10<sup>th</sup> July 1987 article in the *Daily Nation*): 'Une enquête de gouvernement kenyan, menée en 1986, permet ainsi d'établir que la ville de Mombasa comptait au moins 50 000 consommateurs réguliers, pour lesquels trois tonnes de miraa étaient acheminées quotidiennement sur la côte' (Grignon 1999: 178). As elsewhere its popularity here is not confined to particular ethnic groups although the number of chewers may be greater amongst certain ones.

### **Who chews which variety?**

There does appear to be some hazy convergence regarding who chews a particular variety: many people limit themselves to one variety, although others chew the best quality they can get on a certain day whatever the variety. Perhaps the most obvious factor in this regard is that of relative wealth: price varies dramatically according to variety, and most budgets are catered for. The cheapest is undoubtedly the *matako* ('buttocks') of miraa sold in Isiolo, and one supposes that only those with a desperately low income would consider chewing it. *Lombolio* is another very cheap variety. Being watery and notorious for causing impotence, it is hardly the ideal choice. Its link with impotence is possibly why it was described to me by one Turkana chewer as a 'woman's variety'. In Isiolo (one of the few places where it is sold) it is reckoned popular with poor Turkana men and women who often chew it near the *chang'aa* (illicit and extremely potent moonshine) dens behind the main market.

Another variety associated in Isiolo with poorer chewers is *matangoma*. These tough stems are presented in a rough and ready mass, and are priced accordingly: just ksh.20 can buy enough for an evening's chew. Turkana nightwatchmen at the Isiolo Catholic Mission often chew this

variety. The poorest *matangoma* chewers even chew large and exceptionally bitter green leaves more usually discarded. *Matangoma* was described to me as ‘a woman’s variety’, although it was normally men I saw chewing it. However, as women tend not to chew as openly as men, female *matangoma* chewers may simply be less visible than their male counterparts. Closely related to *matangoma* are *murutubu*, and *liboi*, varieties exported to the northeast and sold cheaply to Somali customers.

*Makata* is also cheap, and consequently usually bought by those with few shillings to spare.<sup>11</sup> In Isiolo, where much *makata* is sold, it is especially popular with young men. A *shurba* of *makata* often retails for just ksh.20, allowing many Isiolo youth to indulge. It seems that price is not the only attraction, however: young *makata* chewers often praised *makata*’s effect. They regarded it as stronger than other grades: one young man dismissed *shurba ya karama* – normally regarded as superior – by saying ‘*haina handas*’ (‘it has no *handas*’. *Handas* is a word for the effect of miraa: see below). The notoriety of *makata* for causing insomnia allows its consumers some bravado in chewing it. The same goes for *gathanga*, a variety rarely sold even in Isiolo. This variety is regarded as so potent as to be almost hallucinogenic, and for this reason allows those brave enough to chew it a degree of swagger.

*Nyeusi* (also known as *ng’oa*, *ng’oileng*, and *Black Power*) is another variety popular with young men. It too has a reputation for being strong yet inexpensive. This is one of the main varieties exported to the Samburu region around Maralal, providing cheap miraa for poor consumers.

*Shurba ya karama* is popular in Isiolo with young men who can pay a little more. It is more expensive than *makata* or *nyeusi*, but its usually short stems are perfect for slipping into one’s pocket, making it ideal for chewing discreetly. When I first met Nicholas, this variety was his

preferred choice: even though he was then unemployed, friends would always help him out with a few stems of *shurba ya karama* here and there. Despite his penurious state he was always loath to chew *makata* and *nyeusi*, unless the situation was desperate or the *makata* and *nyeusi* especially good. In Nairobi, *Sunrise* does well through the custom of *matatu* touts keen on *shurba ya nkinyang'a*. As with *shurba ya karama*, this variety fits well in the pocket, leaving a tout's hands free for hanging on to the side of the vehicle. The high grade variety of *shurba ya nkinyang'a* sold as *asili* is popular with Asian customers.

*Giza* is sold so widely that it surely qualifies as the most commonly chewed miraa. It varies much in quality and price. As it is so commonly chewed, it is hard to generalise about it being more popular with one group than another. In Isiolo, where the choice of miraa is vast, *giza* – especially the high-grade *ngoba* – appears popular with wealthier consumers. Unless buying a couple of *shurbas* rather than a whole *kitundu*, the ksh.250-300 required to buy it would put off poorer residents who would sooner buy cheaper varieties. Nicholas's taste altered during the latter part of my spell in Kenya, transforming himself from a *shurba ya karama* chewer into a *giza* chewer. This was in part due to the friendship he forged with *Kamathi Kiosk*, whose *giza* is very high quality. *Sunrise* customers who ignore *shurba ya nkinyang'a* and buy *giza* are often wealthy – and often Asian – and those from areas where the only miraa sold is *giza*.

*Kangeta* also varies in quality, although even lower grades of this variety would be beyond the price range of poorer chewers. The best quality is sold in Eastleigh for about ksh.150-200. Older Somali men are often keen on *kangeta*, and for this reason Eastleigh is one of the main centres for its sale. Being a long-stemmed variety, it cannot be stored easily in the pocket: instead it will often be laid conspicuously on a table, and given the often beautiful appearance of *kangeta*, there is perhaps here an element of conspicuous consumption.

*Alele* has the reputation of being a refined variety, popular with wealthy men and women (like *matangoma*, a friend described it as a ‘women’s variety’). *Alele* from *mbaine* plantations above Karama and Nkinyang’a is the most exclusive variety sold by *Sunrise*. Always of exceptional quality, their *alele* is usually snapped up by wealthy Asians. They tend to buy a *bunda* of twenty *alele shurbas* for around ksh.1000-1500. I met one Asian businessman at his shop in Meru; he was sitting at the counter watching his staff working away whilst chewing stems from a huge bundle of top grade Nkinyang’a *alele*. I asked him if the miraa was for his staff as well. He smiled and said, ‘No, it’s just for me’. Conspicuous consumption indeed.

The idea of ‘conspicuous consumption’ is not just relevant for more prestigious varieties. Just by being seen to chew any variety of miraa, one is capable of giving off certain signals, positively or negatively received depending on the observer. For some young men consumption of lower-grade, but ‘cool’, varieties like *makata* can still be done for show, although the image given off is not one of wealth.

### **Handas and the language of consumption**

There are specific words for the effect miraa has upon the body. The most common term used in Kenya is *handas*. Although it appears to be *sheng*, its exact etymology escaped me. It is commonly used throughout Kenya, and has spawned the verb *kuhandasika*. This means ‘to feel *handas*’, and hence ‘to chew miraa’: for example, *utahandasika usiku huu?* means ‘will you be chewing tonight’ in Kiswahili / Sheng. The word is also occasionally encountered spelt *andasi*.

Another word for the effect is *markhan*. This seems restricted to regions with a large Somali population – I mainly heard it used in Isiolo – and is Somali in origin.<sup>12</sup> Also, *steam* is used for the effect: *miraa hii iko na steam nyingi* (‘this miraa has lots of steam’, i.e. ‘this miraa is

very strong’). People talk of ‘steam’ rising through the body as miraa starts to work. It is not uncommon to hear the word *irie*, heard in reggae songs referring to a marijuana high, used to describe the miraa high, even though the effects are very different. A word common on the coast for miraa’s effect is *nakwah*, which seems to be of Arabic origin. I shall keep matters simple, however, by restricting myself to the term *handas*.

Experienced chewers relate how different varieties offer a differently nuanced *handas*. Lower quality miraa is said to preclude sleep completely, and to be very strong in effect, uncomfortably so for some chewers. It is also lower grades that cause the unwanted side-effect of formication. Higher quality grades, on the other hand, are seen as more refined in effect. *Handas* is often described in terms of temperature, and the stronger the miraa the hotter it is said to be.<sup>13</sup> Despite such differences, most chewers agree that generally *handas* wards off sleep and fatigue, renders one talkative, imparts energy, stimulates the intellect, and acts as a euphoriant. Isioloan chewers told me that *handas* ‘keeps you busy’, ‘elates you’, and makes you believe that ‘you have to do something and do it now’.

Some young Igembe men I met on a bus in Mutuati stressed that *handas* makes the impossible possible: *yote yawezikana na veve* (‘everything is possible with miraa’, a phrase more commonly heard with ‘Yesu’ instead of ‘veve’). They had found an old edition of a Spanish newspaper, and brought it along with them for the journey. None knew the language, but they claimed *handas* would confer understanding. *Handas* is ascribed marvellous properties, including the ability to save lives. Nicholas was once involved in a car crash: he was travelling in the front seat of a Peugeot taxi near Isiolo when the vehicle swerved to avoid a cyclist. Unfortunately, the Peugeot hit the cyclist (killing him instantly), and careered off the road, injuring badly many passengers and killing the driver. Nicholas, however, had been chewing, so could anticipate the danger and secure himself with a firm grip.<sup>14</sup> He escaped with only bruises.

A degree of ambivalence is shown towards *handas*. Many consumers – especially of cheaper varieties – speak of *handas* having effects that one would not consider desirable. Thus, the confusion that can befall a chewer is often remarked upon. Such confusion was at work when I once left Nicholas's home in Isiolo to return to my lodgings after chewing. I suddenly remembered that I had had a letter with me and was sure that I must have left it at Nicholas's. Thus I returned to look for it, only to find it was in my pocket all along. Nicholas laughed this off as *handas*-induced forgetfulness. Such occasional symptoms of *handas* never seemed off-putting to chewers, just as drinkers are not put off by forgetfulness induced by alcohol. It is interesting to note that while *handas* is a catch all term for such side-effects as well as more desirable effects of euphoria, alertness, and sociability, in the Yemen chewers appear to make more distinctions. There the word *kayf* and others 'refer to pleasant and comfortable aspects of mood, to the desired state' (Kennedy 1987: 111). *Kayf* is divided into stages, however, and during a prolonged session, 'a second stage of the *kayf* is reached which is referred to as *khedra* or being "drugged."' The *sa'at al khedra*, which described the waning period of the qat session, literally means "the hour of being drugged.'" (ibid. 112).

One endearing part of miraa discourse is a tendency to personify *handas*, ascribing to it agency. I first noticed this with Nicholas, but was assured by him that it was not just idiosyncrasy, although the jocular effect of giving agency to *handas* suits him. This phenomenon often takes a form similar to: 'my *handas* does not like noise, and urged me to find a quieter spot'. A chewer transfers likes, dislikes and feelings when under the influence of *handas* to *handas* itself.<sup>15</sup> While not unusual to hear a statement like 'he found himself a slave to the bottle' regarding alcohol, it would be odd to hear 'my inebriation told me to do such-and-such', or 'my *high* does not like crowded places'.

Ascribing agency to *handas* may have wider significance, after all, it is not uncommon for agency to be taken from the person and ascribed to another power. One hears of ‘guardian angels’ being given credit for rescuing one from perilous situations. In Africa this conception of the person as being under the sway of wider powers appears widespread. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1992 [1958]: 121) provides a nice example: ‘Everybody [at the market] was killed, except the old and the sick who were at home and a handful of men and women whose *chi* [‘personal God’] were wide awake and brought them out of the market.’ It was not the men and women themselves who were wide awake, but their personal gods. This resembles Nicholas’s story of *handas* protecting him in the car crash. *Handas* took care of him, just as the *chi* did for those who escaped in Achebe’s novel.

The playfulness of miraa language impressed itself upon me. Much of this playfulness is due to the linguistic fertility of chewers: not only are new terms for varieties constantly generated – *black power*, *scud* (named after the Iraqi missiles; referring to long stemmed *shurba ya nkinyang’a*: something of a rarity), and *ng’oileng* (a recent term that evolved for *black power* at Nicholas’s instigation) – but so are ways of expressing the influence of *handas*. Examples of this are *handas imenikwachu* (‘*handas* has trapped / caught me’) and *handas imenibamba* (‘*handas* has hugged me’).<sup>16</sup> More playfulness is evident in Malindi chewers renaming Saturday *sagaday*. *Kusaga* is a Kiswahili verb meaning ‘to grind’ often used in reference to ‘grinding’ miraa, and Saturday is a popular day for chewing.<sup>17</sup> *Side-mirror* is also used humorously for the plug of miraa in the cheeks which sticks out and so resembles the side-mirror of a car.

The language surrounding miraa is indicative of the mix of ethnic groups associated with it. Thus, the word *veve*, equivalent to ‘miraa’ and commonly used throughout Kenya, was reported to have emerged through a Somali mispronunciation of the Kimeru word for ‘leaf’. *Takssin* is commonly used for the wad of miraa stored in the cheek, and is from the Arabic verb meaning ‘to

store'. The word *quodhadhi* is employed in the north of Kenya for a habitual consumer of miraa, almost equivalent for 'addict' although used jocularly. I was told that literally the word refers to the motion of the hands when occupied in chewing; it seems to be a Cushitic word, although I am unsure as to whether it is Somali or Borana.

### **Obtaining *handas* and avoiding insomnia**

Once a consumer has procured miraa, he or she engages in certain procedures whatever the context in which consumption occurs.<sup>18</sup> A European might expect the first procedure when about to masticate stems possibly sprayed with chemicals, and touched by numerous people – farmers, traders, and often other consumers who handle bundles in examining them – would be to wash them. Not so in Kenya.<sup>19</sup> For one thing, few people have access to clean water: washing it in unsafe water may spread diseases. Most Kenyan chewers rarely consider the possibility of washing miraa, although one occasionally meets someone who thinks it wise to do so.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the conviction that it would be good to wash miraa seems more common amongst medics, although this is not true of all of them. One Tigania doctor I spoke to in a Nyambene hospital reckoned that as miraa is a dry product no bacteria could survive on it for long, and so consumers are at little risk. Anecdotal evidence amongst consumers suggests miraa acts as a prophylactic to various diseases: a cholera epidemic in Meru is said to have left unscathed all at the miraa market. There is also talk of miraa harbouring 'friendly' bacteria, which would only be rinsed away should one wash the substance. More than this, the act of washing miraa is said to 'wash away *handas*'.

If one purchased a variety with many leaves left attached – *alele*, *matangoma*, *liboi*, etc. – then the first act is usually to strip unwanted large and bitter leaves. Most consumers strip several stems in advance. Varieties sold with large leaves removed often have a few inedible ones left

on: these are removed one stem at a time. When miraa is not fresh – i.e. *barehe* miraa – even small leaves become unappealing, and are usually discarded, leaving only the stem for mastication. Poorer chewers sometimes stretch out supplies by even chewing large leaves: sugar or sweets are used to sweeten the taste. In Isiolo small wraps of sugar are sold in the shape of a trumpet. One tears off the end of the wrap, holds it up to one's mouth, and taps on it to generate a flow. This tapping action is called 'playing the trumpet'. Using sugar can cause dental disasters.

The next procedure is to use one's teeth to remove all that is good for chewing from the stem. This includes smaller leaves left near the tip of a stem, the succulent tips, and the soft bark. One is left with the hard inner spine, which one discards.<sup>20</sup> Discarded stems and leaves are known in *sheng* as *chakaas*: the remnants of a chewing session. Normally *chakaas* is thrown on the floor, although fastidious chewers collect it together in a pile in an ashtray or on a piece of newspaper to be cleared away: a chewer is more likely to be fastidious when chewing in someone's home. Short stems of *shurba ya nkinyang'a* are often wholly succulent: with such stems one is only left with the butt of the stem to discard. A chewer normally holds the stem in one hand only.<sup>21</sup> Varieties from overhanging sections of a tree like *makata* provide the opportunity to strip all chewable material in one go. The hand action involved in this is known in Kimeru as *kuru kuru*. This is a general term referring to such a movement, also applicable to eating ribs, where one pulls the rib across the mouth when removing meat from the bone. It is commonly used by Tigania and Igembe to refer to the swift stripping of a miraa stem. This movement acts as an emblem for miraa chewing. If one sees a known chewer in the distance, one might mime the motion to ask if he or she is chewing or will chew later. This seems universal in Kenya, acting as a cohesive element amongst chewers.

Once a stem is stripped, mastication and forming the mush into a *takssin* begins. *Takssin* seems to be the usual word used for the plug of miraa, although Meru have the word *kambi* to refer

to the same thing. Forming a *takssin* does not come naturally: it requires using the tongue to move the masticated mush over to the pocket formed between the lower teeth and the cheek: this sounds simple, but requires practise to ensure all miraa goes into a *takssin* rather than being swallowed. Most chewers have a preferred side of the mouth for their *takssin* and become so used to chewing on that side that it feels unnatural to use the other. Unaccustomed gums can be rendered sore through chewing, and it takes a few sessions to harden them up and prevent this. Chewers tend to form only one *takssin*, although it is not unheard of to form one in both cheeks simultaneously. This is jokingly referred to in *sheng* as chewing ‘in stereo’; to form one is chewing ‘in mono’ (Araru 1999: 22). One chewer told me of someone who formed three *takssins*, the third underneath the tongue. For the average chewer, as more stems are stripped, so the *takssin* gets bigger. At a certain point a chewer may remove it and start again to prevent it becoming uncomfortable.

One common side-effect of chewing – one made acute by a hot climate – is dehydration. To counter this chewers accompany *takssins* with beverages. Fizzy drinks like *Fanta* and *Coca-Cola* are popular with chewers for slaking thirst: caps of glass bottles are not removed, but are instead pierced with a suitable implement. By drinking soda through a small hole the drink stays carbonated longer, and hence can be sipped infrequently during a chewing-session. A chewer might still be drinking the same bottle two hours after opening. The term used for piercing is the Kiswahili verb *kutoboa* (‘to bore a hole’). Tea and coffee are popular with chewers, and flasks are kept within easy reach. Some chewers combine miraa with alcohol, and *Tusker* (a Kenyan brand of lager) refreshes the mouth as effectively as soda.

Beverages are not the only extras enjoyed by chewers. Many men smoke when chewing, and some say *sigara ni rafiki ya miraa* (Kiswahili: ‘a cigarette is a friend of miraa’). Certainly I have friends who are quite restrained smokers when not chewing, but who lack restraint when

chewing. Tobacco is the ingredient in some other optional extras: many kiosks retail sachets of an Indian mix of betel nut, tobacco, and other spices; these sachets are popular with Asian chewers. *Pan* is a mixture of betel nut, spices, tobacco (sometimes), syrup, and other ingredients wrapped up with the leaf of the betel vine. This delicacy is also called *tambu*, is mildly psychoactive, popular with Arabs and Asians, and sold in many outlets on the coast, in Nairobi and other towns like Meru. Many combine *pan* with miraa. Spices – especially ginger and cardamom seed-capsules – are also chewed to enhance miraa’s taste.

Varieties like *makata* can be so tough in texture that consumers buy small packets of ground-nuts (*karanga* or *njugu* in Kiswahili) and crunch these whilst chewing. These soften miraa, preventing the mouth becoming sore. Mints known in *sheng* as *puru* fulfil a similar function, and are commonly chewed. They also sweeten the bitter taste of cheap miraa. The use of bubble-gum known as *Big G* is common: it ‘neutralizes miraa’s bitter taste while holding the cud of masticated miraa together in the mouth’<sup>22</sup> (Goldsmith 1988: 136). As Goldsmith also reports, Meru ‘purists’ disapprove of using *Big G*; they say it is unnecessary if miraa is good quality. However, its popularity amongst chewers ensures that most miraa kiosks stock it.

In rainy seasons miraa can be watery, and too much liquid slipping down the throat upsets the stomach.<sup>23</sup> During one chewing session a friend actually vomited after swallowing too much liquid. To combat this, chewers often spit out the excess. This is not universal, but common enough to generate the joke that when walking through Eastleigh (where consumption is high) one should carry an umbrella. Particles of miraa can disperse and be caught in the throat no matter how skilled the chewer is in forming a *takssin*. This is the cause of the rasping sound that punctuates sessions when chewers clear their throats. So associated is this sound with miraa consumption, that one worker at the Isiolo Catholic Mission used the sound as an onomatopoeic emblem for miraa chewing.

The rate at which a chewer gets through his or her supply varies. I was chastised by friends for chewing too quickly; almost as soon as one stem is finished I reach for another. Experienced chewers prefer a more relaxed pace, especially once the *takssin* is built up. It is necessary to chew relatively swiftly at the start to ensure that the *takssin* becomes solid; chewing slowly can lead to the *takssin* crumbling and never being built up. A single stem of a long-lengthed variety can build up a *takssin*, whereas a few stems of shorter varieties are required for this: thus, the rate at which stems are consumed varies. With *takssin* in place, the rate of consumption slows. Nicholas savours each stem, in contrast to my compulsively quick rate of consumption. Even the speediest consumers have periods during a session when the rate slows: for most chewers there are moments when no further stems are added. During these, the consumer remains content chewing the *takssin*. As the rate of consumption varies, it is hard to say how much an ‘average’ chewer would consume in a given period. However, from my experience, a *kitundu* lasts two consumers a few hours.

Chewing is stopped for a variety of reasons: the chewer may have a meal prepared and stops to eat; work might beckon in the morning, necessitating sleep; jaws might get tired; supplies might run out. The latter is not that common: most consumers do not feel compelled to finish supplies in one go. On the contrary, many keep a *shurba* which can serve *kufungua macho* (Kiswahili: ‘to open the eyes’) after breakfast the following morning. Although miraa, especially when high quality, is moreish, and sometimes urges chewers to continue chewing, most consumers I knew were capable of ending a chew when necessity demanded.

Stopping involves removing the *takssin*: it is discarded along with other *chakaas*. As particles remain in the mouth even with the *takssin* removed, it is common to rinse the mouth with water, and even use a toothbrush or ‘toothbrush twig’ (Kiswahili: *msuake*). Some consumers like

to fill up with a good meal: if one stops chewing an hour or so before bed, and then has a hearty meal, the chances of avoiding insomnia are increased. High quality miraa is reported not to induce insomnia anyway, but lower-grade varieties like *makata* can preclude sleeping. To avoid this, other post-miraa tactics are used: some drink beer to overpower *handas*; some milk (especially traditionally pastoralist peoples); whilst others are said to take drugs like Valium and Piriton (an anti-histamine with depressant qualities), and even cannabis and – rarely (one hopes) – heroin.<sup>24</sup> Many chewers simply put up with a little insomnia: most reckon one can fall asleep within a couple of hours of terminating a session, even without the above techniques. I suffered from insomnia on some occasions after chewing; sleep always catches up with the chewer, however.

The feeling of lethargy that can trouble a chewer the morning after a session – the miraa ‘hangover’ – is called *ajiis* (a Somali word), and, in Isiolo at least, *bablass* (a *sheng* word). *Bablass* is the antithesis of *handas*, and is caused by miraa indirectly through lack of sleep. The lethargy can be dispelled by a nap, or by more stems. Sometimes the latter is the only choice, especially if one is feeling *ajiis* but has to work. I once travelled from Mutuati to Maili Tatu in a Land Rover, and the driver had overdone miraa the night before. To dispel *ajiis*, he requested me to give him a few stems from my *kitundu*.

### **Contexts of consumption**

*Handas* absorbs consumers into whatever activity – or inactivity – they are engaged in, and this includes work. The use of miraa to aid work will form a part – along with chewing for medicinal purposes – of one of three contexts I use to structure the following material. These three contexts are: *traditional / ceremonial usage*, *pragmatic chewing*, and *recreational chewing*. These may be defined thus:

**Traditional / ceremonial usage:**

This context looks at miraa's use in 'traditional' practices – especially those involving Tigania and Igembe – and ceremonial usage. Thus, for example, miraa's use in wedding negotiations in the Nyambenes is discussed, and miraa's use at meetings of the Sufic cult of Sheikh Hussein.

**Pragmatic chewing: *chewing on the job, and miraa as medicine***

This context consists of using miraa to boost stamina and ward off fatigue whilst working. Thus, consumption by farmers, doctors, *matatu* touts, miraa traders, prostitutes, and lorry drivers whilst working is considered. The section on medical use is less extensive, considering miraa's healing and restorative properties spoken of in Kenya.

**Recreational chewing:**

Miraa consumption is more often thought of as recreational, and a large proportion of bundles are sold to customers intending to chew recreationally. The general features of a chewing-session are considered, and a section describing various settings in which miraa is chewed – and descriptions of a few actual chewing-sessions – within Kenya provides an idea of what a recreational chewing-session is like.

**Caveat:** These contexts are structuring devices for ethnographic material; they are not designed to reflect perfectly how Kenyan chewers frame contexts in their lives. The lack of precise boundaries between the contexts illustrates this well. For example, the distinction between *pragmatic* and *recreational* breaks down as one cannot rule out the possibility of someone relaxing so much at work through miraa that use becomes recreational. Also, the etymological origin of the word 'recreation' is suggestive of the renewing of health, thus medicinal use might

appear to fit in with recreation also. Recreational use overlaps with pragmatic use, as miraa's pragmatic effect is appreciated in recreational contexts too: warding off fatigue that might otherwise bring the recreation to a premature end, and serving to keep the chewer sociable. In some recreational contexts, miraa's pragmatic effect might be more to the fore than in others. For example, when attending a disco, miraa helps a dancer last the course in a similar – though milder – way to amphetamine used by European clubbers.

### **Traditional / ceremonial usage:**

#### **Miraa's integration within Tigania and Igembe traditions:**

*Many moons ago, miraa was regarded by the Meru community as very precious, luscious, and special...a fact that can't be controverted.*

- Nicholas, December 2000.

The importance of miraa for Meru was noted by the British. McKeag, District Commissioner of Meru, reports in a document dated 14<sup>th</sup> March 1945<sup>25</sup> that Meru are the 'only people for whose tribal customs miraa has a place'. Amongst other ethnic groups where chewing is popular, the importance of miraa for the Meru is appreciated. A Borana lady I met in Garba Tulla saw miraa as having little role in Borana traditions, and advised me that the Meru were the ones to concentrate on in this respect. Of course, Meru do not shy away from emphasising miraa's importance, and this has been so for some time: a letter dated 25<sup>th</sup> April 1947 was written by three Meru men and addressed to the 'Hon. Chief Native Commissioner'.<sup>26</sup> This letter eloquently complains of the injustice of Ordinance LIII. 1946 prohibiting miraa's cultivation and sale. The three men spoke of the importance of miraa for the Meru economy, but also the importance for Meru customs: 'it is offered to the elders in circumcision, dowry and other ceremonies'.

Miraa used in Tigania and Igembe customs is always high quality *mbaine*. There is also a time-honoured way of presenting ceremonial miraa: in a special bundle called *ncoolo*.<sup>27</sup> The etymology of this word remains uncertain (for me), but perhaps a clue is provided by Peatrik. In her description of a song sung during a ritual performed by women at the approach of a transition in the age-set system, she describes how ‘[l]es femmes au pouvoir détiennent un cor de forme allongée mesurant un mètre environ, appelé *ncoro*, qui est à l’origine du nom de classe Ncororo’ (1999: 321). *Ncoro* is similar to *ncoolo* when one considers that ‘r’ and ‘l’ are interchangeable<sup>28</sup>, and given the shape of an *ncoolo* bundle (see plates 10 and 11), it seems conceivable that it was so named because it resembles a horn. The significance of the horn in a ritual connected to transition suggests a deeper resonance: *ncoolo* is used in rituals connected to transition.

Whatever the correct etymology, *ncoolo* is a gift considered *de rigeur* on important occasions, including those concerning solving disputes and marriage negotiations. There are special ways of tying *ncoolo* for marriage negotiations, and these are dealt with later. Standard features involve the quality of the miraa (*mbaine*), *kangeta*-length stems, the shape of the bundle, and the fact that the bundle is tied up with runners from a yam plant rather than banana fibre.

In discussion with Nyambene elders, I found much emphasis placed on miraa’s role in rites of passage, a role that lives on. The first such role is connected with circumcision. Two elders of Kianjai explained this role to me thus:

There is a pre-circumcision stage known as *nciibii*, which lasts from around the age of fifteen until circumcision. Boys at this stage can propose marriage to their chosen girl, but are not able to marry until after warriorhood; for this reason, girls chosen would often be young so they would be the right age after ten years of waiting. When members of this stage think they are ready for circumcision, they give miraa to elders to request that the circumcisor (*mûtaanî*: cf. Peatrik 1999:

547) be called. If elders give the go-ahead, the next stage would be to take miraa to the warriors, who would then call for the *mûtaani*.

When taking *ncooloo* along to elders to make the request, if you meet any other elders along the way you are obliged to offer up the bundle in your right hand so that they can take a stem or two. If one reached the elders with a still complete bundle, your request may be rejected on the grounds that you are not generous. Thus, if one failed to meet any other elders along the way, it is advisable to throw away a few stems to give the appearance of being suitably generous.

A young man from Mikinduri – a Tigania town on the southern side of the Nyambenes – told me that this practice still takes place, as does the danger of being judged mean by not doling out stems to elders along the way.

During the circumcision ceremonies themselves miraa plays a role, albeit a pragmatic one: initiates – those that do not opt for a hospital circumcision, as many do nowadays – are taken to a camp in the bush once the actual circumcision has taken place. During this period, initiates are inculcated with Meru ways, and even taught a secret language. All the while, initiates are looked after by warriors. These caretaker-warriors chew much miraa over the course of the initiates' time in the camp.

Rimita mentions using miraa in the course of a post-circumcision rite known as *kioro* (Kimeru: 'burning'). According to Rimita, this is such an important rite that Meru 'do not recognise any circumcision where the ceremony of burning known as "KIORO" has not taken place' (1988: 34). This is the ceremony that makes the initiate a 'man'. As a part of the ceremony, the initiate is supposed to make some confessions, and at this juncture miraa leaves are used along with those of other plants. They are thrown onto a fire and crackle; the initiate is told that the crackling sound shows he has not yet confessed fully (Rimita 1988: 35).

Once a new generation of young men are ready for circumcision, the present warriors are also expected to give miraa to elders to request the changeover of stages be effected. Once this changeover has taken place, former warriors are allowed to marry. In order to secure a girl in marriage, the suitor must take *ncoolo* to his prospective father-in-law, who, by accepting it or not accepting signals his acceptance or rejection of the suit. Peatrik mentions this use of miraa in forging an alliance (*uthoni*) through marriage: ‘Le soupirant, ou son père, apporte une botte de *mirra* au père de la fille pour engager la conversation et signifier par là qu’il “désire l’alliance” (*kwenda uthoni*). S’il accepte le présent, le père de la fille, déjà mis au courant par un proche, fait comprendre qu’il consent à aborder le sujet’ (Peatrik 1999: 155).

I was shown how to tie an *ncoolo* for such marriage negotiations by a man living in Nkinyang’a. He emphasised that miraa should be exceptionally clean, and *mbaine*. The miraa is wrapped in one banana leaf, whilst three or four stems are kept separate. These are then sandwiched between the first banana-leaf layer and a second. A runner of a yam plant is procured, and used to tie up the *ncoolo*. This yam runner is knotted three or four times down the shaft of the bundle.

What determines how many stems are to be placed between the two banana leaf layers, and how many knots are tied, is whether or not the prospective bride is circumcised. If she is, then four stems and four knots are used, if not, three are used. One Tigania friend suggested this shows the higher respect accorded to circumcised ladies in the Nyambenes.<sup>29</sup> Whether or not this is true, one random Nkinyang’a elder I met whilst carrying an *ncoolo* told me that I must be wanting to marry a circumcised girl as the *ncoolo* had four knots and four separate stems.

As with miraa that young men take to request that elders make preparations for circumcision, a man taking *ncoolo* as part of wedding negotiations must hold the miraa upright

along the way, offering miraa up to any elders he passes: I was told this was so these elders could bless the marriage. Once the young man reaches the homestead of his prospective in-laws, he offers it to the father of the household. If the father takes one of the separated stems to chew, this signifies acceptance. If the young lady agrees to the marriage, she also takes a stem, as will the young man himself. It is interesting to compare this with the use of cola nuts in West Africa. Rudgley (1993: 117) notes that '[a]cceptance of cola orally symbolises the acceptance of a husband vaginally. Among the Bambara of the Niger river a bachelor seeking a marriage partner would send his prospective father-in-law ten white cola nuts. Should the receiver accept the man as worthy of his daughter's hand, he would reply with white nuts; were he to refuse, the answer would be a single red nut'.

Married Tigania and Igembe men I met readily confirmed they had given this ritual gift of *ncoolo* prior to marriage; furthermore, young Tigania and Igembe men seem enamoured of the prospect of securing a bride with *ncoolo*. It is an institution that does not appear at risk of extinction.<sup>30</sup>

Once married, the next step for a man hoping to play an active role in the 'traditional' system of governance in the Nyambenes is to join the *Njuri Ncheke* (see chapter one). The *Njuri Ncheke*, although referred to generally by that name, is actually composed of three stages – *kiama othaa*, *njuri ncheke* (or *njuri impingere*), and *njuri imbere* (or *roerea*) – with fewer elders eligible for each successive stage.<sup>31</sup> To join each stage requires a man to pay a fee and undergo initiation<sup>32</sup>: 'The fee was a he-goat for the first stage, a bull for the second stage, and another bull for the third stage' (loc. cit.). My informants – including a Tigania elder of *njuri imbere* – told me that miraa (and *marwa*: 'millet beer') are required as part of the fee to join the various stages.

At *njuri* meetings, miraa, I was told, is always on hand, as it seems to have been for an elders' *shauri* (Kiswahili: 'counsel', 'discussion') for some time: Neumann remarks how a long *shauri* with Igembe elders was spoilt for him by their chewing. He goes on to say that such chewing was 'apparently indispensable' for the elders' enjoyment of the *shauri* (1982 [1898]: 33). Elders of today tell me that even Imenti chew when attending Meru wide *njuri* meetings. Miraa trees also act as shade for *njuri* members: 'Small groves of mbaine continue to serve as the meeting place for local *njuri*' (Goldsmith 1994: 77). In dispute solving, miraa functions as both part of the elders' fee for hearing cases – along with locally brewed beer and livestock – and as a balm for mollifying contesting parties. There was a general consensus amongst Nyambene friends that whenever and wherever *njuri* gather, miraa is provided in plenty.

Most Nyambene traditional / ritual uses of miraa can be seen as drawing people together through communal consumption, its use in healing rifts between disputants, and in bringing families together in marriage alliances. More interestingly, miraa's use can perhaps be regarded as signifying gerontocratic hierarchy: miraa is almost always offered up to elders by those less senior. How powerful this really is in strengthening hierarchy is questionable, but it seems effective in maintaining elders as the wielders of power in theory, even if not in practice.<sup>33</sup> However, the above uses certainly emphasise miraa's importance for Tigania and Igembe, not just economically, but culturally. Miraa occupies a significant role for many in *being* Tigania or Igembe.

#### **Traditional / ceremonial usage elsewhere:**

Miraa has infiltrated marriage negotiations of people outside the Nyambenes. For example, Turkana around Isiolo use miraa when discussing brideprice. One Turkana friend reported that where once a goat or bull was brought by the bridegroom's parents at such a discussion, nowadays *alele* is offered. He suggested that poverty prevents the sacrifice of livestock at such

meetings, leading to reliance on miraa. Borana and Somali friends reported using miraa in brideprice negotiations; unsurprisingly given its popularity amongst Borana and Somali. There is also mention of miraa being used as a grave offering in northern Kenya (Margetts 1967: 359).

The last ceremonial use of miraa dealt with here is one that could easily fit into the pragmatic consumption section: the use of miraa by members of *Tariqas*, defined by Hjort as ‘mystical or Dervish Orders in Sufi movements’ (Hjort 1979: 250). One such *Tariqa* is the *Husseiniya*, a ‘sect founded by Sheikh Hussein, a missionary to Ethiopia around 1300’ (ibid. 41). Furthermore, ‘[t]he syncretistic ayana cult with its roots in Borana culture, is adhered to by the members of the Husseiniya’ (ibid. 41-42). The *ayana* are spirits – ‘Every creature, people, animals and plants, have their own *ayana*’ (Bartels 1983: 112) – in ‘traditional’ beliefs of the Oromo, one group of which are the Borana. *Ayana* can be malign (see Bartels 1983: 120ff.) and can take possession of individuals causing illness and other misfortune. Meetings of the *ayana* cult are designed to rid those possessed of such spirits. The connection of the *Husseiniya* with a cult like the *ayana* is ‘one reason that elite men disapproved of the devotees [of the *Husseiniya*]’ (Baxter 1987: 140). Disapproval in Isiolo in the 1970s meant members of the *Husseiniya* ‘were not allowed to enter the mosque’ (Hjort 1979: 41). In Isiolo, ‘[r]ecruitment to the Husseiniya...is conducted both among the poor and destitute Borana and Somali Muslims’ (ibid. 42), and women form a large proportion of members. Baxter speaks thus of the spread of the *Husseiniya* in Kenya:

In Northern Kenya in the early 1950s, the Saint had no followers at all among the pastoral Boran. In the 1960s, a period during which the Boran suffered intensely from the restrictions imposed on them during the undeclared ‘shifita’ war between Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya...and from drought, the cult of the Saint [Sheikh Hussein of Bale] spread rapidly, especially among the many destitutes who had been driven to relief camps or to the shanty towns. (Baxter 1987: 139)

Meetings of the *Husseiniya* continue to this day. At the time of my stay in Garba Tulla, the drumming accompanying meetings could be heard at night, and west of Isiolo I met devotees and a ritual expert who had travelled far for a meeting. Miraa is useful as a pragmatic stimulant at these nocturnal meetings and Baxter describes it as ‘required to keep the congregation wakeful throughout the night’ at Sheikh Hussein meetings in the Arsi district of Ethiopia (1987: 143). At a meeting he attended, the congregation began arriving at the host’s house around 8.00 p.m., and ‘[m]eanwhile, the host and his wife pounded coffee, maintained the fire, and laid out the *chat*, in two lines of neat small bunches...’ (ibid. 143).

In the context of Garba Tulla, Aguilar describes one *ayana* session for a sick woman believed to be possessed by a spirit (Aguilar 1998: 197ff.). Preparations for the session involved, as usual, purchasing various provisions: ‘Incense and coffee beans are essential, while *miraa* is very welcomed by the participants in the session’ (ibid. 202). Drumming began at around 10 p.m., ‘and people walked in silence to the *Mola* [a space set apart for the *ayana* session<sup>34</sup>], in order to attend the first session’ (ibid. 206). The meeting consisted of three stages: ‘In a first stage, the *ayyaana* is identified. The second stage, which is the most difficult, relates to the isolation of the problem [with the patient]. An “apology” is given by the possessed person, and a possible remedy to the problem explored. In a third stage, there is the “fulfilment of promise”, consisting of the actual offering and pacification promised to that particular *ayyaana*’ (ibid. 207). However, only a part of the session directly involved healing, ‘[m]ost of the session is spent singing and praising Sheikh Hussayn’ (loc. cit.). Some hours later, the session was ended with prayers.

Is miraa chewed at such sessions purely to keep awake? The effect of miraa might not be just stimulatory: lack of sleep and the ritualised ‘mystical’ atmosphere surely add to the sensation of *handas*. Dr. Hassan Wario Arero – himself a Borana – tells me that miraa ‘also gives some

form of hallucination ideal to the theatre of healing at the ayyana' (pers. comm.): this is surely conceivable given the nature of the sessions. Arero mentions another role of miraa at these proceedings: that of a fee for ritual experts, along with tobacco and coffee. Experts are not paid money for their services.

The link between miraa and the *ayana* / *Husseiniya* may go deeper still, however. One young Borana man who has attended sessions near Isiolo, reported that an old man at a session described miraa as a 'blessing stick', and Arero tells me that 'among Borana there is the belief that veve came from the tree of *Qallu* ['ritual leader of the Boorana in Ethiopia' (Aguilar 1998: 256)] or sacred tree'. One Isiolo ritual specialist told me that miraa should only be used for prayers, lamenting the lack of respect shown in its use: some, he claimed, even chew whilst having sex. Of course, miraa's stimulant qualities are important in all-night sessions, but miraa is loaded with more than pragmatic importance.

### **Pragmatic chewing:**

#### **Chewing on the job:**

The acceptability of coffee and its stimulating qualities is such that offices in Britain keep a percolator primed throughout the working day. Miraa is more controversial than coffee (see chapter seven), and yet in Kenya it fills a similar niche. Few Kenyans drink much coffee – it is quite expensive, and generally only available in instant form – most preferring chai. Few rush for coffee if energy levels flag. The use of coffee to boost energy is perhaps limited to affluent, middle-class Kenyans in Nairobi, Mombasa, and other large towns. Chai is appreciated as a refreshing brew, but does not appear to be drunk purposefully to ward off sleep or remove lethargy. Miraa, on the other hand, is especially sought by some Kenyans for these purposes.

Miraa's controversial status precludes it becoming commonplace in offices. Even if the recreational use of miraa was acceptable throughout Kenyan society, it is unlikely that establishments like banks would allow staff to chew at work: bosses might consider the aesthetics of chewing out of place at work. Maua, the biggest town in the Nyambenes, has a bank and the Nyambene council offices. Despite their location in an important town for miraa where it is regarded highly, it is unlikely that bank and council staff would be permitted to chew whilst working. Employers would be keen to show their professionalism, and perhaps might feel miraa chewing would detract from this, although Nyambene employers are unlikely to condemn recreational miraa chewing out of hours. If they were locals, they would almost certainly chew miraa recreationally also.

I did come across one office where occasional miraa-chewing is tolerated. This was the Isiolo office of an NGO helping local children find international sponsors. Towards the end of the working day one or two male workers sometimes made a start on a bundle. Such restrained chewing in the informal and relaxed atmosphere of that office hardly generates any reaction from colleagues, the local manager, or parents of sponsored children who sometimes drop by. Head office staff from Nairobi and from abroad make occasional visits to the Isiolo office: then chewing miraa would be unthinkable.

Miraa is commonplace in Isiolo, and tolerance amongst some employers might derive from that fact. In regions of Kenya where miraa use is not so prevalent, then no matter how informal and relaxed an office may be in atmosphere, it is unlikely that workers would be permitted to chew.

Employers no doubt have a good idea of the sort of image they wish staff to present. Whether or not miraa-use detracts from that image depends on what sort of work is done. If one

placed working in a bank at one extreme where miraa chewing would be discouraged, then perhaps working in a miraa kiosk would be placed at the other extreme.

A miraa kiosk owner would hardly object to staff chewing whilst working. If miraa was an intoxicant like beer, then an employee selling miraa would be frowned upon for indulging during trade: whilst trading one has to be constantly alert for signs of sharp practise by customers. A drunk miraa retailer would be a liability. However, miraa aids concentration, allowing traders to remain alert throughout their shift. This combined with the fact that retailers are hardly likely to put off customers by indulging in miraa themselves, makes miraa chewing extremely common amongst them, and easily tolerated by employers.

Some get away with chewing miraa in what might strike many as inappropriate work contexts. One doctor I met in Isiolo chews whilst ministering to patients. He claimed that it keeps him alert and so benefits patients. Although one would receive a thorough examination from a miraa-enhanced GP, it seems unlikely that doctors from parts of Kenya where miraa chewing is less prevalent than Isiolo would chew whilst working.

Nightwatchmen throughout Kenya chew. In Isiolo, those on duty at the Catholic Mission are keen on miraa *kukaa macho* (Kiswahili: 'to remain alert'). Even far from the Nyambenes, in areas not especially associated with miraa, nightwatchmen chew: around Lake Naivasha, watchmen on duty at tourist campsites use miraa pragmatically. Miraa can be chewed discreetly, and chewing at night means one can hide one's chewing: thus, even nightwatchmen working for organisations where a boss might disapprove can generally get away with it.

Miraa use by drivers – of lorries, miraa pick-ups, passenger vehicles, and private cars – is one that raises some concerns. Whilst it certainly helps drivers remain alert, some consider that

its effects lead to recklessness, and hence to accidents.<sup>35</sup> The danger involved in taking a hand off the wheel to prepare a stick for chewing has also been pointed out: Kenyan police considered cracking down on this, as their British counterparts do in the case of using mobile phones while driving.

Despite concern, such a useful resource for those whose work requires sustained concentration is bound to be utilised, and throughout Kenya many drivers chew. *Matatu* drivers and touts in urban centres are especially fond of miraa. The strategic positioning of miraa kiosks near bus stages illustrates the good custom *matatu* operators provide miraa retailers. *Matatus* are often mobile representations of the 'youth ethos' mentioned above: great skill and imagination goes into painting them. Many are adorned with garish images of Bob Marley, footballers, rappers, and even Monica Lewinsky. Drivers and touts often speak *sheng*, their garb generally consists of labelled sports-wear, vehicles are driven at great speed with bravado, and drivers and touts tend to be young. Miraa consumption not only sustains the crew through long shifts, but also fits in well with their image.

Miraa's popularity with touts and drivers means it can be useful as an alternative method of payment. Nicholas, when travelling to Ethiopia a few years ago, secured his seat in the front of a lorry plying the Isiolo-Moyale route by sharing miraa with the crew. Once, when returning from Garissa to Nairobi, I was a little short of money: a few *shurbas* proved an adequate substitute for the Somali conductor.

British students often buy caffeine tablets to keep them awake whilst studying. Some Kenyan students use miraa similarly. In Isiolo I was told of 'academic tourists'. These are students who throughout the academic year do not bother with lectures / classes, busying themselves at play. When exam time comes, they borrow notes from friends who attended

classes, and study these intensely while chewing. These students sometimes even better the grades of more diligent students.<sup>36</sup>

It is not unheard of in some parts of Kenya for police to chew whilst on duty. This seems more likely in the north, where police often face up to bandits who are almost invariably sustained by miraa too. A Catholic priest at Garba Tulla once told me that bandits between Isiolo and Garba Tulla let one continue unscathed if offered cigarettes or miraa. Miraa is considered by some an aid to bandits, allowing them to endure hardship in the harsh savannah.

Many of *Sunrise*'s customers are prostitutes, and it is not just prostitutes frequenting there who chew: urban centres throughout Kenya contain some miraa-chewing prostitutes. However, prostitutes vary in whom they target and where they establish themselves, and this probably is a factor in whether or not they chew. If a woman targets rich businessmen in the bar at the Nairobi Hilton, then she is unlikely to chew; if she targets less wealthy clients in downtown Nairobi, she is more likely to do so. Other factors are relevant in whether or not a prostitute chews, personal taste not being the least of them, and one hesitates to generalise about a category of people. However, for such women, whose working hours are usually nocturnal, miraa sustains them, as well as keeping them alert to the wiles of customers. There is an association of miraa chewing with prostitution, and women who chew openly are sometimes tainted in the eyes of some by this association.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, in the Nyambenes, those tending *shambas* and carrying other such tasks often use pragmatically the commodity for which their region is famous.

### **Miraa as medicine:**

Nicholas dubs miraa the ‘mauve medicine’. Although he uses this phrase jokingly, there is more behind it than humour. Possible medicinal uses were consistently suggested by consumers I met – some assumed that finding medicinal qualities in miraa was my research aim – as were suggestions as to how it might be effective medicinally. Cassanelli, speaking generally of miraa / qat consuming countries, reports that:

Popular lore suggests that qat has important medicinal properties...It is widely believed, for example, that qat affords protection against malaria; helps remedy coughs, asthma, and other chest ailments; cures stomach problems and rheumatism. The Maasai...say it helps “chase hunger.” In Somalia, qat is used to stimulate urination and to help cure genital and urinary infections. In Ethiopia, qat is believed to cure 501 different kinds of disease. (Cassanelli 1986: 238).

The idea that miraa ‘chases hunger’ is widely held, and it is universally noted for curbing appetite. According to some Meru, in times of drought miraa is taken by men, leaving what little food there is for women and children. One Igembe elder of Mutuati told me that years ago, when food supplies had dwindled completely, *shurbas* of miraa were boiled up to provide full bellies for hungry families.

Miraa’s euphoriant and stimulant properties, have led many to view it as a general tonic. This is similar to Yemeni beliefs that ‘qat can alleviate the unpleasant symptoms of minor ills such as colds, fevers, headaches, body pains, arthritis and depression’ (Weir 1985: 44). One Borana lady of Isiolo told me that miraa leaves boiled into soup make an excellent cure for stomach-ache. In Karama I met one man who described himself as a herbalist. He showed me his notebook, which listed many different herbs and the ailments they cure. Miraa, in his view, has different effects depending on the part used: boiled leaves are good for diarrhoea; twigs are useful painkillers; roots can be used in treating certain sexually transmitted diseases.

Miraa is reputed to be an aphrodisiac. One variety sold in Isiolo, *gathanga*, is reckoned to powerfully boost male sexual potency; in fact too powerfully, as some reckoned that a man chewing this variety would have to rush out and seek sexual liaisons, so spreading HIV. It is not just this variety that is connected with male virility: miraa in general is reported by some to have this effect, contrary to the common notion that it induces impotence. One farmer interviewed for a *Daily Nation* article of the 17<sup>th</sup> May 2001, a 36 year old man with four children, said miraa makes him alert and that '[t]here is also this instant erection which does not die easily'. Consumers associate watery miraa with impotence: *lombolio* – only sold in the wet season – is notorious in this respect. It should be noted that some male chewers speak of miraa increasing sexual desire but spoiling performance; others dispute this.

I was told – admittedly by men – that miraa also acts as a female aphrodisiac. A Turkana man in his thirties I met in Isiolo spoke of miraa in this way, reporting that some men – himself included – like women to chew as it 'dries them up' vaginally, increasing friction during sex, and thus increasing pleasure (presumably for men rather than women). He spoke thus:

When women chew miraa, they produce less *maji* [Kiswahili: 'water'] down below, and this makes sex with them more pleasurable. Once I was at home with a woman whom I liked, but she was not in the mood for sex. After chewing together, however, she gradually sat closer and closer, until she willingly assented to sex. It was most enjoyable as there was little *maji*. Women in Kenya feel much shame [*haya* in Kiswahili] about sex, but if they chew they feel much freer.

The connection with female libido is further evidenced by a remark made to Nicholas by one trader. He was selling *shurba ya nkinyang'a*, and described it as *kang'a*, a Kimeru word used to refer to the very best miraa. He reckoned that the aroma of *kang'a* miraa is irresistible to *masupuu*. Of course, this may have just been sales patter.

One trader reckoned that miraa once played a part in ‘family planning’ for Igembe. He related that miraa kept men chewing and chatting in their huts away from wives, helping men obey a custom whereby, after the birth of a child, one should not have another baby until the previous one was old enough to carry food from the wife’s hut to the father’s. That was when the time had come for another child. The trader expatiated further, saying that if Meru had not been chewing but instead drinking more beer, the regulation might have been broken, with men succumbing easily to the temptation of visiting wives.

### **Recreational Chewing**

The context of recreational chewing encompasses social occasions where a group of people gather to pass a few hours away chewing in relaxed conversation, perhaps fitting in some television viewing too. An occasion of that type is termed in the following pages a *majlis*. This is a transliteration of the Persian word for ‘assembly’, and is often used in Isiolo to refer to a social chewing session. Another common term for such a session is *fadiga*, a Somali word for a gathering where people sit. Many of the youth in Isiolo – especially, but not exclusively, Somali – use this term. Neither word is likely to be used in the Nyambenes by Tigania or Igembe. However, as there seems to be no exact term for a chewing session in Kimeru – if one is arranging a session using Kimeru, one is more likely to use the verbal phrase *kuria miraa* (‘eat miraa’) rather than a noun – I use *majlis* to refer to even chewing-sessions where attendees are all Meru.

The word *majlis* should not suggest anything too formal: its usage in Isiolo is very flexible, and implies nothing more than a get-together where miraa is chewed. This perhaps encapsulates much of the difference between miraa sessions in Kenya and ‘qat-parties’ famous from the Yemen. The latter appear far more formalised: Weir states that ‘the qat party is an event with a

name, and has a structural identity which the informal, casual gatherings it has largely replaced did not possess to anything like the same degree' (Weir 1985: 144). The focus on qat at these Yemeni sessions is clearly evident in photographs: Yemenis are seen arrayed around a bed of discarded qat leaves, with qat still to be chewed visible and cheeks distended to a far greater degree than is usual in Kenya (ibid. plates 21, 22, 23). Weir also paints a vivid picture of ritualised elements in qat-parties like seating arrangements, suggesting that 'the seating order reflects and affirms, to a greater or lesser degree, the ranking of the participants', though she cautiously states that how scrupulously observed such aspects of a qat party are 'depend[s] on the social position of those present' (ibid. 131). In my experience with sessions in Kenya, while there are occasions where miraa chewing is more the focal point of a gathering, and miraa-chewing the explicit reason for gathering, more often miraa is not the focal point. For example, one might attend the showing of a football match on TV at a café and chew with friends: the overt purpose of the gathering is to watch football, not to chew. At many occasions which chewers dub *majlis*, chewing is similarly not the overt reason for gathering, and not all attendees chew.

Of course, in the context of a Yemeni qat party, people gather not just to chew qat. Qat chewing is the stated purpose of the gathering – the focal point – but one does far more than merely chew at such sessions: one socialises. Like a suburban tea party in the UK, taking the stimulant – tea / qat – is merely the heading under which social interaction is framed, although qat's stimulant properties facilitate sociability. In Kenya, one also does far more than just chew when gathering with fellow chewers, but in Kenya miraa is more often chewed recreationally at gatherings described by headings other than 'miraa sessions', e.g. 'watching the football'. Some gatherings are given the heading 'miraa session', or *fadiga*, or *majlis*, but far more are focused on some other activity.<sup>38</sup> Other differences with Yemeni chewing should become evident from the descriptions below.

Chewing miraa recreationally is not necessarily a group activity: there are people who chew recreationally while alone. Nicholas, for example, often spends evenings chewing a *shurba* or two while writing down stories, or transcribing lyrics to songs heard on the radio. His father, the proprietor of the *Manchester Café* also sometimes chews recreationally alone: mainly while absorbed in front of his TV at night. Although such solo-chewing is common, I concentrate in the rest of this section on recreational chewing in company, as, by definition, a *majlis* consists of an assembly of people.<sup>39</sup>

### **General features of a *majlis*:**

#### **Planned / regular / spontaneous chewing sessions:**

If a holiday is coming up, or if one wants to congregate with friends at the weekend, one may very well plan a chewing-session in advance. If a *majlis* is to take place at someone's house, then such pre-planning is necessary to allow the householder to make suitable preparations (although such preparations are not generally laborious: perhaps tidying up, and preparing tea, coffee, and sometimes food). Many people regularly gather at certain spots – usually a café, bar, or miraa kiosk – when in the mood for a chew. Attendees at such *majlis* are unlikely to feel compelled to attend at a certain time, but shifts at work and their habits are likely to lead to certain patterns forming. A *majlis* can also spring up more or less spontaneously. Someone might begin chewing and lead others to follow his or her example. Those who join in would usually be friends, although this is not necessarily so: a fondness for miraa can form a bond even between strangers, who often gravitate to fellow chewers.

#### **Numbers of participants:**

How many attend a *majlis* is dependent upon location: obviously few can join sessions inside a cramped kiosk. Larger gatherings in Isiolo often involve curio hawkers sitting underneath a tree

in the town centre whilst waiting for tourists. In Malindi, ‘beachboys’ (as described by Peake; 1989: 209ff.) gather at an open air bar in the tourist area for a chew which ‘can consist of up to fifty youths at any one time with regular comings and goings’. Such numbers are about the upper limits for a recreational chew.

#### **Age of participants:**

Many chewing-sessions I attended were constituted by people of varied ages. In cafés in the miraa-growing region of the Nyambenes, members of different generations often converge to watch TV over a chew and some tea. This phenomenon is also common in Nyambene bars, where chewers of different ages often find themselves sharing the same locale. However, if one spots one’s *bamo* or *bamungo* (Kimeru: ‘age-mate’: cf. Peatrik 1999: 245: ‘ceux qui ont été circoncis en même temps que lui’), one is almost certain to look for a nearby seat. For this reason age-mates tend to cluster, even when sharing the same general space with those younger or older than themselves: this is hardly surprising, given that it is with age-mates one usually has most in common, and with whom one often feels most at ease. The traditional importance ascribed to age-mates in Meru society lingers on in the camaraderie generated by the word *bamo*, even though one does not nowadays share a *gaaru* with them. Pre-planned *majlis* are likely to be arranged between *bamos*, and so are likely to be more homogenous.

Outside the Nyambenes mixed-age chewing sessions also take place, although the same clustering of age-mates tends to occur. Thus, at a celebration of the blessing of the marriage of Nicholas’ parents in 2000, many people of all ages gathered at their Isiolo home. Many were chewing, but it was noticeable that young men and some young women – not just Meru, but Borana, Turkana, and Somali too – gravitated towards each other, forming an enclave of miraa-chewing youth.

Many regular *majlis* in Isiolo are made up of age-mates only. At a café near the Isiolo secondary school, a group of young lads meet often in their free time: here they indulge in *nyeusi*, *makata* and spiced coffee. All attendees are the same age, give or take a year or two.

### **Sex of participants:**

Mixed-sex *majlis* are not unusual: in the Igembe region many women chew publicly, and informal gatherings at cafés and bars can see a mixture of male and female chewers. In the Tigania region, women seemed more reticent in regard to public chewing, and, perhaps, are more reticent in regard to chewing in general.

Amongst young Isioloan chewers there are young ladies who chew with male friends; such a mixed-sex *majlis* usually takes place at someone's home rather than in public. Although many Borana and Somali women chew, they mainly do so privately in the company of female friends or family. There are exceptions, however, and myself, Nicholas, and another Englishman spent an afternoon chewing at the home of a wealthy Borana widow. She also invited a younger Borana lady, and a male Meru friend along.

Unfettered mixed-sex *majlis* are common in one part of Isiolo: near the miraa market – and *chang'aa* dens – where a mixture of Turkana men and women chew. Women chew alongside their husbands there, and as the combination of *lombolio* and firewater has a drastic effect, incidents like the following – related by Nicholas – can occur: a Turkana woman had indulged in both stimulants, and was consequently excitedly garrulous. Her husband was sitting next to her in a position that, as he was wearing a *kikoi*-like garment, was inadvertently revealing his genitalia. Catching sight of his penis, she struck it with a stick, loudly lamenting its woeful state: 'What good is this thing for me? *Lombolio* has made it useless.' She was highly satirical about her husband's inadequacy for some considerable time, much to his embarrassment.

Despite the apparent growth in consumption by Kenyan women, it must be said that men remain the main consumers, and most *majlis* are constituted by men alone. However, a sprinkling of female chewers amongst men may become yet more common in years to come.

### **Mixed ethnicities:**

How mixed a *majlis* is ethnically depends upon location. In the Nyambenes, most chewing-sessions are constituted by Tigania and Igembe, and the occasional Imenti. In Maua, however, members of the sizeable Somali community often mix in with Meru chewers at nightspots.

In an ethnically mixed town like Isiolo – and in a city like Nairobi – many chewing-sessions are similarly mixed, and this seems to be the case amongst young Isioloan chewers. Smaller towns like Garba Tulla and Kinna are less mixed ethnically anyway, and so most *majlis* in such places will be ethnically homogenous, although Garba Tulla school – which draws students from far and wide – and the army garrison surely lead to some ethnically diverse sessions.

### **Who supplies veve?:**

Most participants in my experience brought along their own supplies of miraa if they could afford it. Popular characters like Nicholas have a knack of procuring miraa despite penury: during his unemployed spell, trader friends often gave him *shurbas*, as would friends in town. Nicholas said that this was because friends like to provide him with *handas* to put him into raconteur mode. Nicholas is generous with friends when he has a decent supply of miraa, and always offers up at least a few stems to friends yet to procure their own. Such prestations no doubt also account for the willingness of his friends to reciprocate. Small-scale prestations are enshrined in the institution of *kupiga start*. This is a *sheng* expression meaning ‘to give a start’ (*kupiga* is the Kiswahili word for ‘to strike’ etc., although it has many indefinite uses with nouns to express

various actions), and is commonly heard in Isiolo. It refers to offering some stems to someone with none. Thus, one hears *nikupigie start?*, 'may I give you a start?'. It might also be used as a request: e.g. *unipigie start*, 'give me a start.' Someone arriving at a *majlis* with no miraa would likely be offered a few stems in this way, and if enough people do so, he or she might soon have enough to last a while. Such prestations are made not just between people of similar economic means, or from richer to poorer, but are also offered from poorer to richer. Basically, anyone who is a known chewer and has not yet procured miraa is likely to be offered a *start*.

Generous giving of miraa is mentioned by Peake as one way in which 'beachboys' cultivate the desired image of successful 'playboys'. Peake claims that the image of a 'playboy' is conferred by dressing in European clothes and in using the town's tourist facilities, and by being seen as generous miraa givers at communal chewing-sessions. Thus: 'Typically the playboy, dressed in his best clothes and with an exaggerated air of affluence, distributes large amounts of *miraa* at public chews. The trick is to give the appearance that such behaviour is normal. The etiquette of the display aims to give the impression that wealth and its enjoyment are mantles that naturally array the beachboy's shoulders without being actively worked for' (Peake 1989: 211). Amongst those involved in the miraa trade bestowing miraa in a similar manner can be witnessed: a *karani* employed by one of the *Hilux* pick-ups seemed keen to show generosity to his fellows when they met up for a post-work chew at a bar-cum-hotel near Muringene. He ensured that everyone who sat around him at the table at least had a few stems from his own pocket.

Amongst Tigania and Igembe it appears ingrained that miraa is something to be shared. This was emphasised by a Tigania friend, who told me that a Meru cannot refuse to offer up a few stems if requested by a fellow Meru.

### **Timing and duration of a *majlis*:**

Miraa is not so powerful a substance that consumers become desperate for a daily fix: on the contrary, many defer chewing until weekends, thus leading to the coining of the *sheng* word *sagaday* on the coast, and to kiosks ordering more at the weekend. Those with jobs are likely to leave recreational chewing until weekends, so as not to be tired at work the next day. There are those who chew recreationally daily, perhaps in the evening if they are workers, although those without work are less constrained regarding when they chew, although constrained financially. Special occasions, religious festivals, and public holidays are popular times for a *majlis*. For Muslim chewers, Ramadan is the time for much chewing. This has been so for some time, as illustrated by the report of a British colonial officer dated 27<sup>th</sup> May 1953 concerning a Somali man who wanted to obtain miraa in Meru but was refused entry despite holding a trade permit.<sup>40</sup> The report relates that he wanted miraa as it was Ramadan, and quotes him thus: ‘miraa is very much needed by members of the Somali community as you are well aware that it’s a religious month and we must have some miraa’.

Most *majlis* begin in the early evening (Muslims often defer chewing until after afternoon prayers), and their duration is exceedingly flexible. They tend to peter out – along with miraa supplies – at around 10-11 p.m. Longer sessions lasting until after midnight are not uncommon, although those allowing participants to boast that they chewed *mpaka che* (Kiswahili: ‘until dawn’) are rare.

### **Majlis moods:**

There is often variation in atmosphere over the course of a *majlis*. This variation is obviously dependent upon the vagaries of the individuals who constitute a particular chewing-session, but operates between poles of playfulness and earnestness. Playful *majlis* are often made up of young men, eager to join in with *sheng*-infused banter. Earnest *majlis* are those where serious issues are

debated. Such debates might be on topics like elections, trouble in the miraa trade, the spread of HIV, a friend's illness, etc. Most chewing-sessions alternate between these poles, and earnestness can replace playfulness very quickly as a random digression leads into a serious topic that absorbs participants. Often an equally random joke thrown into the midst of the discussion leads back to playfulness.

That a *majlis* is playful does not necessarily mean all participants are at ease with each other. Peake (1989: 212) relates the critical importance of the chewing-session for 'beachboys' cultivating a 'playboy' image:

A *miraa* chew can make or break a playboy. It can be the scene of a successful status display, but can also be the occasion for a humiliation. During *miraa* chews there is a constant competitive banter, during which beachboys exchange insults. Often these are at a jovial level, but they can become aggressive. The insults become geared to exposing the falsity of the outward playboy image...Defeat in the banter can lead to periods of exile from public playboy life. (loc. cit.)

How at ease a participant feels in such a competitive situation depends on that individual and his confidence, however, it is clear that many might feel uneasy. Most chewing-sessions I attended were easy-going affairs; however, tension infrequently arose if an obnoxious character joined the previously placid gathering.

Earnest moments I witnessed could develop a slightly competitive edge too, with both sides to an argument wanting to win, although this was always kept within limits. It should be noted that given a Goffman-esque perspective on social interaction<sup>41</sup>, one can see that participants would wish to give their best in such a social context, and score a good 'performance'. Rarely in my experience did this reach the level of competitiveness noted by Peake amongst Malindi 'beachboys'.

### Locale and sample sessions:

When a group of people gather for a *majlis*, there are many possible options for the session's location. Providing it offers access to refreshing beverages, decent seating, and an atmosphere of relaxation, then one's *handas* is likely to be content.

Regarding settings for *majlis*, Kenya differs greatly from the Yemen. There a tradition of separate miraa rooms has developed amongst wealthier members of society. These rooms – known as *mafrajs* – are often ornate, especially those in Sanaa. Shelagh Weir describes the most 'elegant and beautiful ones' thus:

The Sanaani *mafraj* may stand alone on the roof of the house or it may be one of several rooms occupying the topmost storey. It is a spacious lofty room usually about six metres long and four metres wide, and entered through folding doors from a lobby about four metres square... The walls are decorated with plaster mouldings in curvilinear designs, and ornamental shelves hold the various utensils for qat parties [hookah pipes, radios etc]. There are small cupboards in the walls with richly decorated doors; a rich man's window shutters may also be decorated with lacquerwork and paintings. (Ibid. 111-114)

Whilst less wealthy Yemeni chewers hold qat parties in more modest rooms or even in the open (loc. cit.), and *mafraj* owners do not use them for all qat sessions, it seems characteristically different from miraa sessions in Kenya that such specialised rooms exist in the Yemen. In Somalia too, settings reserved specially for qat parties emerged in the 1970s when a financial boom encouraged more people to spend money on chewing (Rudgley 1993: 120). These settings, Rudgley describes as 'qat houses', and he states that they 'are usually owned by divorced or widowed women and tend to attract specific classes of customer: certain qat houses are frequented almost solely by truck drivers, others by civil servants, and so on' (loc. cit.).

In Kenya, I came across no such specialised settings for miraa chewing, although similar settings may be found on the coast: a Muslim tract concerning various substances including miraa

reports that one expense involved in chewing in Mombasa is ‘kodi ya nyumba itumiwayo kwa kutafunia mairungi’ (‘rent of a house used for chewing miraa’) (Ali 1992: 10). Such a house might resemble Yemeni qat-houses, but I have no experience of them. Whilst some chewers host sessions in their homes, the room used is normally the living room, also used for many other purposes. Other settings might be used purely because that is where chewers happened to begin chewing, or because chewers were going to be attending a venue anyway, and decided they may as well have a *majlis* there. In other words, many settings used in Kenya are decided upon randomly. This is not to say that all settings are decided upon in this way, or that settings cannot be decided upon randomly in the Yemen, but more *majlis* in Kenya seem of this nature.

Chewers do not have complete freedom to choose where they chew. Some otherwise perfect locales for a chew are rendered off limits by negative attitudes towards miraa held by café and bar owners (see chapter seven). There are establishments that place prohibitory signs up, forbidding miraa chewing on the premises, whilst some locations might not forbid miraa chewing explicitly, but would not welcome it. Chewing miraa in mosques or churches would be unthinkable for most chewers (although Nicholas has chewed during church services).

There follows some descriptions of *majlis* settings, interspersed with examples of actual chewing sessions:

*Majlis al fresco*: Kenya’s climate encourages outdoor miraa-chewing, and what better location for a chew than underneath a suitably shady tree in a miraa *shamba*? Many gatherings in this setting are connected with preparing miraa for trade, as pickers and farmers indulge in freshly picked miraa to ease through work, chatting all the while: such gatherings are more suited to the *pragmatic* context. Recreational gatherings occur too, however, with people gathering for a chew after lunch: I passed an hour or two in conversation with two elders and other friends in a *shamba*

near Kabache village in July 2001. Sustenance in the form of a meal was kindly provided, after which our host donated fresh miraa picked straight from the *shamba*. It is difficult to say how frequent such informal gatherings are in the Nyambenes: perhaps not very frequent as work occupies the time of most people during the day, leaving the evening free for relaxing with miraa. Then, given cooler temperatures, people would more likely chew indoors, either at home or in a café, rather than outside. However, Nyambene chewers sometimes gather outside for an evening *majlis*: a group of around twenty young miraa traders occasionally sit on a heap of bricks and stones outside a Mutuati café.

In other areas of Kenya *al fresco* sessions are common. The urge for a *majlis* can be spontaneous, leading to friends chewing miraa in such settings as the bus stage or under a nearby tree. Acacia trees on the road through Isiolo are popular in this respect. Beaches make idyllic settings for a *majlis*. When visiting Malindi I saw two men chewing whilst sitting underneath a beachside palm-tree, with an outlet for sodas close by.

In Mombasa many men – including Asians – relax in the evening outside the main cinema in the centre of the city (a cinema that specialises in Bollywood movies). Whenever I walked past, they were assiduously chewing *giza*. They did not seem to be queueing for a film, rather they were having an informal *majlis al fresco*.

**Miraa kiosks:** Many miraa kiosks are not just retail outlets, but fulfil the function of social centres. Good friends of traders are often allowed to enter and chew on the premises. Especially welcome are customers like Nicholas, who prides himself on keeping the staff at *Kamathi Kiosk* ‘in stitches’, and is often rewarded with a free *shurba*.

Perhaps the best example of a kiosk that keeps its customers on site is Gitonga's kiosk in Nanyuki (see chapter four). Once ensconced on the benches provided, and stimulated by *handas*, customers engage in hearty debates on all possible topics. On one of my visits these ranged from the current weather conditions on Mount Kenya to the suggestion that condoms in Kenya are spiked with HIV.<sup>42</sup> Those engaged in these debates were a cross-section of locals: police officers of various ranks, *matatu* touts, mountain-guides, and other miraa traders. Their ethnic backgrounds were diverse, with Meru, Kikuyu, Borana, and Somali all interacting amiably.

***Majlis on the move:*** Bus journeys in Kenya can become adventures of epic length, especially in remote regions. In rainy seasons already bad roads become worse: journeys to Mandera can last days with buses becoming embedded in mud. Not only the crew benefit from miraa, but so do passengers. Holding an informal *majlis* on board a bus is an ideal way to while away time enjoyably.

Perhaps the most zealous bus-bound chewers are miraa traders travelling on the route between Nyambene and Mombasa. Buses plying this route leave in the afternoon, reaching their destination at around 6:00 a.m. Most traders position themselves at the back of the bus and become absorbed in *handas*-enhanced conversations. Miraa traders ensure they procure miraa for their delectation prior to boarding the bus. One trader I met on the *Meru Millennium* bus bound for Mombasa joked that traders often forget they are travelling on business, so carried away do they become with *handas*.

Bigger buses offer the best opportunities for a decent *majlis*. *Matatus* and minibus vehicles generally are so crammed that one finds it challenging to comfortably flex one's arm sufficiently to ply oneself with twigs, although many manage to do so. However, most chewers appreciate a certain amount of comfort, comfort that can be lacking when squashed tightly against another

passenger. Also, inedible inner stems provide a useful means of attracting the attention of *matatu* touts: some chewers throw these at them.

Cars also offer a mobile location for chewers. Hilux pick-up trucks ferrying miraa from Nyambene to Nairobi take passengers: alongside the driver another couple of people fit in the front, keeping him company, and sharing in the miraa chewed by the driver to keep him alert. One agent dealing with the international trade assured me that some chew whilst on board planes for Europe.

***Hotelis, bars and discos:*** The term *hoteli* in Kenya refers not to hotels, but to eateries. This term covers a wide range of establishments, from basic shacks to western-style places. They often offer TV facilities to encourage guests to linger. Many such locales are ideal for chewers to sit together and masticate time away. Miraa's dehydrating properties are allayed by readily available sodas and *chai* (tea). Indeed, in the Nyambenes, evening trade for many *hotelis* consists of little apart from tea and soda.

The *Manchester Café* in Karama is popular with chewers all day long, but is at its fullest in the evening when benches fill up and Mzee Mwambia and his helpers make rounds with flasks, topping up the cups of chewers. Mzee Mwambia's compound consists of living quarters with five separate rooms (one of which is rented out to a local teacher), a small *shamba* where much of the food eaten by the Mwambia family is grown, a pen housing three goats, and the café itself. The café obtained its name because of Mzee Mwambia's affection for Manchester United – he has been a fan since the days of George Best – and because of my provenance. Many customers are also big fans of Manchester United, and find his café conducive for chewing, liberally bedecked as it is with United memorabilia. Once the café fills up in the evening, he sets up his black and white TV so customers can watch the news and such delights as the 'Omo Pick-a-Box' game

show and 'The Bold and the Beautiful', an imported American soap opera. More popular than these, however, are sporting fixtures: televised football matches are popular with chewers, especially if it is a Manchester United match. When the TV is on, conversation dries up as customers focus on the screen, only opening mouths to request a refill of tea. When televisual entertainment is not provided conversation tends to be more effusive: most of Mzee Mwambia's customers are all friends, and so are interested in each others' tidings.

When I first visited the *Manchester Café* in 1999, dishes like a local stew were available, but nowadays bread and *mandazi* (triangular snacks baked on the premises) are the only extras sold alongside *chai*. When miraa is plentiful locals have more money to spend in such establishments, although most still have their main meal at home, and come to a café with the aim of relaxing. As miraa reduces appetite few chewers break off from forming *takssins* to fill bellies. Thus, Mzee Mwambia realises that it is hardly worth cooking up sufficient quantities of food to feed anyone other than his family, making tea the mainstay of the café.

Most Nyambene cafés serve chewers in this way, but not all. There are some eateries where more people actually eat in the evening than chew miraa. The only hotel (in the English sense) in Mutuati has a café attached which sells delicious *chai*. Few miraa chewers make use of this establishment for an evening chew, although they are not discouraged. This café does not have a TV, however, and this perhaps puts off some chewers. *Hotels* outside the Nyambenes are popular with chewers too.

*Handas* is often combined with alcohol. As both miraa and alcohol increase sociability, the two go together well. Some chewers assured me that miraa prevents one getting too drunk even when drinking large quantities. In the Nyambenes, one can be fairly certain that miraa will be combined with drinking in bars. This is especially true of regions where miraa production is

intensive: in Maua many traders visit their favourite bars once work is done, and almost certainly chew as well as drink. Miraa traders have the reputation for being heavy drinkers, and while this is an unfair generalisation, it is true that a fair proportion of some traders' earnings are spent on *Tusker* (Kenyan lager).

As with cafés, chewers often seek out bars boasting a TV screen. Many Muringene traders like nothing better after work than to visit the *Kiengu Lodge* (a hotel and bar establishment) and relax with miraa, soft-drinks or beer, and a football match on satellite TV. In periods of non-play, conversations might revolve around goings on at the market, or the latest news of the ongoing Meru-Somali tensions. When I visited, a minority of attendees were the most vociferous, others content to soak up the conversation silently. All traders seemed keen to buy their share of drinks, as well as being generous with any surplus miraa they happened to have.

Many bars outside the Nyambenes also welcome chewers, though as with cafes, the proportion of chewers decreases the further away one goes from miraa's source. In Nairobi an infamous drinking den known as *The Modern Green Day and Night Club* opposite *Sunrise* offers its clientele an almost never-ending service. Many drinkers make *Sunrise* their first port of call, buying miraa before joining the pell-mell of the *Modern Green*. Other bars in the same area are popular with miraa traders in post-business hours.

It is common for chewers to make discos the setting for a *majlis*. Miraa can absorb people into merely observing life and passing the time in conversation with friends, but it does not preclude its users from exerting themselves on the dancefloor: chewers do not just spectate, they also participate.

**Private houses:** People's homes are a common setting for a *majlis*. Throughout Kenya, chewers invest in supplies and then adjourn home either to chew with family or invited friends. How frequently one's home is chosen as a *majlis* setting depends greatly on alternatives available locally. Where bars, discos, and *hotelis* are few and far between – for example, in isolated towns of Kenya's northern savannah like Garba Tulla east of Isiolo – more chewers end up chewing at a friend's home or their own.

Hospitality dictates that chewers are provided with tea or coffee, and even a meal. At sessions in Borana or Somali homes, hospitality also includes the use of incense also: a pleasantly aromatic addition to the atmosphere of a *majlis*. Most homes have a radio or TV, usually switched on during a session.

Whilst few Kenyan homes offer surroundings resplendent enough to match a Sanaani *mafraj*, the comfort of the chewer is normally guaranteed, as well-cushioned couches and armchairs are the mainstay of Kenyan living rooms: when chewing at someone's house, Kenyans almost always sit on seats provided, rather than semi-reclining on the floor in the style of Yemeni chewers. (I was told that Borana chewers often sit on a special rug whilst chewing, although I never witnessed this.) A table is conveniently placed near at hand, covered with newspaper on which chewers may place *chakaas*.

I attended a memorable *majlis* in 2000 at the home of a driver for the Garba Tulla Catholic Mission: a young Borana man in his mid-twenties who has managed to save up enough money for a nice home in a Garba Tulla *manyatta*, not far from the mission compound. He was living there alone at the time, still being a bachelor. The house was built of traditional materials in a rectangular design. There are two rooms: the bedroom and the living room. This *majlis* was timed for a day when Garba Tulla obtained fresh supplies, and my friend made the necessary

preparations, including purchasing several bundles of *algani* from Borana women retailers. He then escorted me just after dark from the Mission to his home, where there were another two young Borana men awaiting us. Also provided were bottles of soda, heated milk, and some coffee.

My friend had a hi-fi system, which allowed us to hear local Borana music. This *majlis* also saw the attendance of a non-chewer: my friend's neighbour – a middle-aged Borana man – dropped by just to say hello, and ended up staying most of the night. Conversation ranged widely, from music, to football, and money-making possibilities. Many chewers speak of how miraa makes one 'build castles in the air', and this was perhaps evident then. Precious gemstones are known to be available locally, and, indeed, one mining company now operates in the region. The potential for local men like themselves to benefit from such gemstones was discussed. Another possibility raised involved harvesting truffles said to grow abundantly in the Garba Tulla region. I had mentioned how valuable truffles were in Europe, and this led to the question of how to export Garba Tulla truffles to Europe. It would be wonderful if they could benefit more from local resources, and I hope that such plans become more than mere 'castles in the air'. But such discussions of future plans are common amongst chewers, and probably only a fraction come to fruition. Enthusiasm, perhaps enhanced by the miraa, led to such hopes and plans; even the non-miraa chewer was engulfed by this enthusiasm.

The *majlis* continued while supplies lasted, with a short interlude when an unwelcome guest in the form of a large spider infiltrated the gathering. Supplies were finally exhausted at around 3:00 a.m.

**Other Settings:** Some settings do not fit into the above categories. One such setting is my personal favourite: an old milk depot in Mutuati (see plate 18). This was once used to store cartons of milk freshly arrived from dairies, but now seems obsolete apart from its use as a venue for a *majlis*. It belongs to a retired Igembe teacher who formerly taught at a school in Kenya's northeast. His home is accessed through the milk depot. Next door is a carpenter's shop, and on the other side, Mutuati's only hotel.

For most of the day, the milk depot is locked up. It is only once the sun goes down that chewers gather behind the counter, the sound of the TV and the general banter drawing in others. This depot functions like an informal gentlemen's club, where those attending can be sure of congenial company and conversation. Most spending evenings there are older married men. Some regulars are teachers and government officers, while others earn their income through miraa farming. Another regular is a 'born-again' Christian who works in the hotel next door. On a usual evening, there will be at least six or so men all chewing (except the 'born-again' Christian, and Jackson – a secondary school teacher – who seldom chews as he dislikes the insomnia that miraa causes). Some chewers enjoy playing a traditional board game.

Conversations can become intense. The 'born-again' Christian's presence on one occasion sparked a profound discussion on the finer points of eschatology. News concerning the miraa trade is always avidly discussed, affecting as it does the livelihood of most of those present. Such debates, although intense, are always good-natured.

Sessions last until late at night, even to the early hours of the morning (especially at the weekend); those chewing having an advantage over those refraining in lasting the distance. Sessions in the milk depot are a daily occurrence, and most regulars no doubt become habituated to a certain pattern of attendance, arriving and leaving the session at around a certain time.

Patterns are flexible, however, and a gripping game, debate or film might make them defer departing for a little while.

Clearly, miraa is not the sole reason why people gather there, as the fact that some of those who come along do not actually chew demonstrates. Men gather there as that is where their friends relax of an evening. Miraa merely enhances the sociability of those using it. *Handas* is certainly not a requisite for deriving enjoyment from attending. On one occasion, I refrained from chewing as I wanted to sleep early, and yet felt as at home as I ever did when indulging.

One last setting that deserves a mention is the video or satellite TV den. In many small towns where there are no cinemas, enterprising businessmen and women operate lounges equipped with videos and / or satellite TV, charging patrons a small entrance fee to watch a movie or a popular sports fixture. Those lucky enough to have such a business in towns like Meru and Isiolo, attract many chewers. In both towns kung-fu films are especially popular. In Isiolo, there is an establishment called *Super Sports*. Its satellite dish provides patrons with exactly what is suggested by its name, and most fixtures of the English Premier League, European and African championships, and the Olympics and Commonwealth Games are shown. Some movies are also shown. A blackboard outside the wooden building in which it is housed lists, menu-style, all the coming day's attractions. Most clientele are young men in their early twenties, and aficionados of miraa.

Just like the milk depot in Mutuati, *Super Sports* acts as a social club, in this case, for young men. Here they meet, communicate the latest tidings, and while away hours with a *takssin* or two. Most regulars are friends; anyone uncongenial to regulars would soon feel unwelcome, and seek out company elsewhere. That *Super Sports* is a popular setting for a *majlis* is demonstrated by the

fact that one Karama miraa trader comes and hangs up his banana-leaf flag outside the establishment, doing good business with *shurba ya karama*.

***Chewing in Manchester:***

Nyambene miraa leaving Kenya for the UK is often consumed in a setting not unlike the one I have seen in Manchester. The terrace house that a Somali miraa dealer operates from in the city also serves as a social centre for him and his customers. Prior to a delivery of miraa, the lower floor of the house is vacuumed, and cushions laid out against walls in both the front and back room of the house. Some customers buy *kitundus* and leave, whilst others take off shoes and relax with *handas* and friends. Miraa provides a direct link to lives they led in Somalia itself, a link further enhanced by the video and TV in the back room that play recordings of family events in Mogadishu. The combined effect brings a little bit of that city to the very different location of Northwest England.<sup>43</sup>

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Thus, miraa oils the wheels of sociability for countless people in Kenya and beyond. It also plays a larger part in stimulating Kenya's workforce, and hence its economy, than many critics would let on, and has much cultural resonance, especially for Tigania and Igembe. It is to the spread of consumption over the course of the last century and to miraa's controversial status that we now turn.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas incorporated 'whiz' into his vocabulary after I told him it was a street name for amphetamine in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> I have even seen a young baby boy chewing in the Igembe region.

<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps connected to the greater antiquity of miraa cultivation in the Igembe region, and wider cultivation there.

<sup>4</sup> When chewing with a Turkana friend in Isiolo, a young Somali lady known to both of us passed by; I asked whether I should offer her some miraa. My friend replied negatively, saying she was young and so would not wish to chew. I suspect that there was more substance to his reply than merely not wishing to deplete our supplies by bestowing it on others.

<sup>5</sup> Kenya National Archives: DC/ISO/2/2/13 H.Public Health 1936-1945.

<sup>6</sup> Kenya National Archives: Report of DCs' meeting on miraa, 11/10/1961: DC/ISO/3/7/11.

<sup>7</sup> Adding the prefix 'u' to the front of *poa* turns it into an abstract noun.

<sup>8</sup> *Sheng* is a mixture of Kiswahili, English, and other languages. It is spoken widely by the young, and is perhaps intended to be too arcane for parents to understand. Purists regard it as a corruption of Kiswahili, just as purists in France regard *Franglais* as a corruption of French. Indeed, by analogy with *Franglais*, in a synopsis of a course run by the University of Nairobi entitled *Varieties of English*, the combination of English and Kiswahili is termed as *Swanglish*. A good example of *sheng* is the phrase *feelanga mos mos*. This is a combination of the English word 'feel', with a Kiswahili-like suffix 'anga', and the Luo 'mos mos' which means 'steady'. The whole amalgam comes to mean 'feel at ease'.

<sup>9</sup> Hip-Hop style music is very popular in Kenya, and there are now many homegrown acts purveying this style of music. Lyrics to their songs contains much *sheng*.

<sup>10</sup> Ordinance No. LIII, 'A bill to control the sale, cultivation, and consumption of miraa' was originally drawn up in 1946, and seems to have been originally intended to prohibit completely the sale of miraa, although this was seen as impracticable, and led to the trial of permits for traders and consumers.

<sup>11</sup> *Makata* and *nyeusi* vary in quality. Some farmers prefer chewing *makata* to better varieties when harvesting miraa: other varieties are watery when first picked, and can cause stomach upsets.

<sup>12</sup> Somali chewers in Manchester are familiar with this term.

<sup>13</sup> Chewers often remark that it is not good to chew in cold places: cold neutralises *handas*.

<sup>14</sup> Peugeot taxis rarely have seatbelts.

<sup>15</sup> This reminds me of Wodehousian transferred epithets of the 'I balanced a thoughtful lump of sugar on my spoon' variety.

<sup>16</sup> *Kukwachu* appears to be *sheng* in origin; *kubamba* is pure Kiswahili for 'to arrest / catch', but has come to mean 'hug' in colloquial usage, being normally applied to a hug between lovers. *Kutara* is another verb used to refer to miraa's effect, as in *handas imetara* ('the *handas* has become strong'). I am unsure as to the origin of this word, although I suspect it is *sheng*.

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Susan Beckerleg for *sagaday*, which she mentioned in her 2001 talk.

<sup>18</sup> Many chewers emphasise the importance of eating a hearty meal before chewing, and this is the first procedure for many. Miraa reduces appetite, and one can forget to eat when gripped by *handas*. Some insist that *handas* is more pleasant when combined with a full stomach.

<sup>19</sup> Nor in the Yemen. Shelagh Weir tells me that despite the common use of chemical sprays consumers do not wash qat, claiming that rain washes it sufficiently.

<sup>20</sup> One Somali chewer in Manchester only chewed succulent sections of *kangeta*; the bark attached to the hard inner stem he merely discarded. He said that the tougher bark hurts his teeth. One cannot imagine an Isiolo chewer doing likewise.

<sup>21</sup> I sometimes would unintentionally hold the stem with two hands whilst stripping it, bringing to mind a squirrel's manner of eating. This two handed approach was much criticised by an Asian friend, who reckoned it unbecoming for a chewer to use two hands rather than one.

<sup>22</sup> Particles of lower-grade miraa can break up and be accidentally swallowed; consumers try and avoid this, hence the use of *Big G* to keep the *taksin* together.

<sup>23</sup> For this reason, some chewers prefer *barehe* miraa, which will have lost much excess liquid.

<sup>24</sup> Beckerleg reported the use by some consumers on the coast of heroin to 'come down' from miraa in her November 2001 talk.

<sup>25</sup> Kenya National Archives: BB.PC/EST/6/12 Miraa – general.

<sup>26</sup> Kenya National Archives: loc. cit.

<sup>27</sup> The 'c' in *ncoolo* is pronounced as 'ch'.

<sup>28</sup> In the Tigania region this seems especially so: Tigania friends would often say 'milaa' rather than 'miraa'.

<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the differentiation in 'traditional' Meru societies was between negotiations concerning a girl who had not *yet* been circumcised, and one already circumcised and therefore marriageable.

<sup>30</sup> For Tigania and Igembe men marrying outside the Nyambenes – as many now do – an *ncoolo* is unlikely to be required.

<sup>31</sup> A Tigania friend described the *kiama* as corresponding to a junior magistrates court, the *njuri ncheke* to the main magistrates court, and the *njuri imbere* to the high court or court of appeal.

<sup>32</sup> The initiation can be quite an ordeal: 'Des sévices particulièrement dégradants sont imposés à l'impétrant: le candidat est battu avec des branches épineuses, obligé de descendre dans une fosse remplie de matières fécales humaines, et il n'est pas interdit de penser que l'ordalie allait jusqu'à l'ingestion d'excréments' (Peatrik 1999: 460).

<sup>33</sup> See chapter seven for more on Nyambene elders and their authority.

<sup>34</sup> I visited such a place near Isiolo, which consisted of a rounded area underneath an ominous looking Acacia tree. A small area underneath the tree was demarcated with stones: I met the expert who was to officiate later that night sitting in the demarcated area.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Ameen and Naji 2001. This article concludes that Yemeni qat 'consumption can increase the risk of road accident fatalities', and offers two reasons: 'Firstly, the anxiety and tensions that happen to Qat users after several hours of use. Secondly, drivers who consume Qat would often be busy drinking water, smoking or preparing and cleaning the Qat leaves while driving' (2001: 561). However, the article ends with the remark that 'the results prevented here are by no means conclusive' (loc. cit.). Also, surely the effect of keeping drivers awake might be considered to *prevent* accidents, falling asleep at the wheel being a big killer itself.

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<sup>36</sup> Miraa certainly seems to aid memory. Vocabulary I learnt whilst chewing almost invariably lodged itself in my brain.

<sup>37</sup> The same seems true of cigarettes. Few women smoke in Kenya, and those that do risk being tainted in the minds of some onlookers by an association with prostitution.

<sup>38</sup> In regard to Yemeni qat chewing, there no doubt are gatherings where qat is chewed recreationally although some other activity is the stated purpose of the gathering. One should not generalise too much about the Yemeni material. However, far more sessions appear to converge under the heading 'qat-party', than do in Kenya under the heading 'miraa session'.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Cassanelli (1986: 242): "[Qat] is not a good thing for the solitary person," one Somali said; "rather it encourages you to share your ideas, to talk about anything and everything."

<sup>40</sup> Kenya National Archives: BB.PC/EST/6/12 Miraa – general 1945-57.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Goffman 1990 (1959).

<sup>42</sup> It is not unusual to hear speculation that HIV is spread by condoms: HIV became a big issue simultaneously with increased promotion of condom use. Some consider a sinister plot is afoot to wipe out Africans.

<sup>43</sup> See Griffiths et al 1997 for a report on Somali chewing in the UK.

## Chapter Seven:

### Chewing up boundaries: the spread of miraa consumption

*Most young men today think that elders all those years ago were selfish, and only wanted special things for themselves, and that's why they refused the young men the freedom to chew.*

- Nicholas on the age restriction on miraa chewing.

Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century consumption of Nyambene miraa in Kenya was mainly limited to the local Meru population<sup>1</sup>, although pastoralists to the north and members of Arab trading caravans are likely to have consumed some too. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Nyambene miraa was consumed throughout Kenya, and had crossed into other East African countries and beyond, reaching as far afield as Europe and Canada. Although much of this expansion can be explained by those with a long tradition of miraa consumption leaving East Africa and taking their habit with them – miraa has crossed some geographical boundaries by merely accompanying long-term associates – miraa has also become absorbed into the lives of many non-traditional chewers too. Thus, in so doing, miraa has crossed not just geographical boundaries, but social and ethnic ones too.

This chapter examines this phenomenon, firstly by looking at the historical development of consumption amongst Tigania and Igembe. For them, miraa was once reputedly an item of consumption restricted to elders, and I suggest various factors that might have caused consumption to breach this restriction. I also consider miraa's spread throughout Kenya, although in less detail. Following this, attention is given to factors influencing whether or not an individual chews in today's Kenya. I do not attempt to try and explain *every* chewer's motives for chewing – after all, some motives will be as unusual as my own. My initial motive for chewing was that I was conducting anthropological fieldwork on miraa, and few others would share that.

### **Breached Boundaries**

During my fieldwork, I often heard Meru say that consuming miraa was once the sole prerogative of the male elders amongst Tigania and Igembe.<sup>2</sup> By elders, most meant those who had married after ending their spell as warriors. However, exactly which ages could chew and which precluded from doing so appears hazy. A Meru elder interviewed for an article in the March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1996 edition of the *Daily Nation* is quoted thus: ‘Men only tasted the twig’s magic after circumcision and subsequent graduation into warriors.’ This contradicts most of my informants who suggested that post-warriorhood was the time the restriction lapsed. A reason given for preventing warriors chewing is that miraa was seen as deleterious to the peak physical condition required by warriors, the same reason given for why warriors were prevented from drinking beer.<sup>3</sup>

Others suggest that miraa consumption was only sanctioned after a man had fathered children, that is to say, later on into elderhood. The reason given for this is that miraa might interfere with a man’s ability to sire offspring, perhaps alluding to the oft remarked side-effect of miraa: impotence. Only mature elders with large families could chew as impotence would not be such a drastic issue. Also, it is said by mature elders of today, that only their equivalents in the past were capable of handling consumption: younger men were liable to misbehave if they chewed.

So, accounts of the restriction are not wholly consistent. This is hardly surprising: elders with whom I spoke came from various age-generations, and how miraa was consumed in days of yore is often a matter of conjecture. The varying accounts may be combined, however. Possibly the restriction was not a blanket ban on miraa chewing by anyone apart from mature

elders: perhaps on certain occasions others could also chew. Thus, at certain times warriors might be allowed to chew – e.g. when looking after and teaching members of the next generation of warrior initiates – as could recently married men too. Perhaps it was just consuming *freely* that was the preserve of mature elders. Goldsmith supports this view when he states that '[c]onsumption outside ceremonial occasions was limited to senior elders and the gerontocracy' (Goldsmith 1994: 91).

The early reference to miraa by Arthur Neumann in 1898 suggests that it was mature elders who chewed freely:

Some of the old [Igembe] men are never without their mouths full of this green stuff [i.e. miraa]. They carry a quantity of the tender shoots in a dirty old skin satchel slung from their shoulders, together with bits of tobacco, bananas, and other treasures, and every now and then strip the bark and leaves from several of these soft twigs and, throwing away the woody interior, cram the handful into their capacious mouths. (Neumann 1982 [1898]: 32-33)

If one assumes there was some kind of restriction in operation, one should consider the nature of the restriction. Partly the restriction could have passively emerged from the fact that miraa was not grown intensively or especially widely in the Nyambenes of pre-colonial times, and that those with access to *shambas* growing the crop would have been married elders who had been provided land by the clan which happened to include miraa trees. Thus few others could easily procure supplies of the crop, and elders had control over who could consume it. This might also explain why consumption was once mainly limited to special ceremonies in Meru society: supplies were such that few could chew except on special occasions when miraa was provided. The restriction may therefore have been rooted in the fact that elders had easiest access to – and control over – miraa.

The restriction appears to have been supported by ideas of what substances were suitable for which age-grades. The support lent by such ideas would have allowed the restriction to be

rendered explicit and enforced by sanctions. Such sanctions are likely to have been both positive and negative:<sup>4</sup>

- **Positive sanctions.** Some scope for speculating on the nature of positive sanctions that could have helped enforce the restriction is provided by the comments mentioned above concerning the unsuitability of miraa for warriors. If miraa was thought unsuitable for warriors to consume, and given that many young men would hope to gain glory by excelling as warriors, and that miraa was associated with old men, then this might encourage some to avoid the substance. Reward in the form of validation as a warrior could act as a positive sanction aiding the enforcement of the restriction. Praise of those well-behaved enough not to chew might also have acted as a positive sanction, encouraging one to show restraint until reaching the age when miraa chewing became respectable.
- **Negative sanctions.** According to my sources, those caught flouting the restriction on chewing miraa were likely to meet with severe corporal punishment. It is reported that at the time the restriction was in operation, if elders caught a young man chewing (or drinking *marwa*: millet beer) they would inform a representative of the offender's age-group – *mugambi*: the spokesman for a group chosen for his eloquence<sup>5</sup> - of his age-mate's misdemeanour. He would then gather his *bamos* (age-mates) at their *gaaru* and appraise them that one of their number had erred from proper behaviour. The offender was then punished by his *bamos*, who would tie him in a Y-shaped tree and administer lashings. Once the *mugambi* reckoned the offender sufficiently punished, he would order that the beating cease. I was also told that anyone contravening the restriction would be stripped naked, smeared with white ash, and paraded for all to see; his father would have to produce a bull to expiate fully his son. Harsh sanctions indeed<sup>6</sup>, and ones that would at the very least have persuaded a young miraa chewer to conceal his habit well, even if not to desist completely.

Just how effective sanctions were at enforcing the restriction is a moot point: that harsh negative sanctions are said to have existed for those caught chewing suggests that many were still tempted to chew.

### **From elders' privilege to the privilege of all:**

A brief visit to the Nyambenes today would suffice to show that miraa is consumed freely by many: it is no longer the preserve of elders. In the Igembe region many women – and even some children – chew regularly, as do the majority of young men, who face no risk of undergoing the fierce lashings that their earlier counterparts might have faced if caught. It is said that young men today reckon that circumcision, rather than marriage, is the rite that gives them *carte blanche* to chew, though even some young boys chew publicly. This change occurred over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and although it appears dramatic, it is hardly a unique phenomenon. There are reports that miraa was originally used just by elders in Ethiopia too, 'even then only in connection with religious rites' (Getahun and Krikorian 1973: 370). Restrictions against any but elders drinking beer have supposedly faded too in the Nyambenes, as elsewhere in Africa.<sup>7</sup> As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century brought radical changes to the Meru, perhaps patterns of consumption could hardly escape change.

Exactly when the restriction began to be eased is hard to say, although the British colonial administration was aware that miraa use was spreading beyond elders as early as 1945. In a report from the Office of the District Commissioner of Meru (V.M. McKeag) dated 14<sup>th</sup> April, 1945, the educational and tribal authorities were reported to be concerned that miraa use was 'even spreading to children'.<sup>8</sup> Obviously some elders were aggrieved about this as the report mentions that attempts to regulate the production and trade 'at source to bring effective control' would have the 'backing of the elders'.

That elders had to turn towards the colonial administration to deal with an issue they were unhappy with suggests control over the mores of Meru society had been disrupted by the

imposition of British rule. Other forms of authority were now operative, and this is surely one factor that facilitated the spread of consumption. The Nyambenes were a fairly isolated part of the British colony, attracting no European settlers, unlike regions west of Mount Kenya, and so European influence impinged at a slower pace than elsewhere. However, by about 1910, the British desired Meru to become ‘fiscally responsible people’ (Bernard 1972: 76), and so attempted to create a market system, building roads and trying to increase surplus food production by introducing new crops and techniques. This attempt began in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but apart from the area around Meru town – the district headquarters – change occurred gradually: according to Bernard (*ibid.* 79), the Nyambenes were ‘only very loosely within the sphere of the district’s economy’. However, the speed of change quickened, and by the 1950s the region had good roads, hospitals, missions and many trading centres. Independence brought more changes, and Bernard describes the ‘milieu of transition’ for the Meru region as a whole thus:

Agricultural changes east of Mount Kenya have occurred in a national milieu of transition from colonialism to independence, from traditional lifeways to modernization, from subsistence farming to commercialization, from local spheres of influence to territorial integration, from isolation to increasing spatial interaction. (1972: 141)<sup>9</sup>

Such changes as these, along with new ways of thinking brought by missionaries and schoolteachers, deeply affected the fabric of Meru life, and it is in the context of these changes that consumption grew in the Nyambenes. Non-elders were introduced to alternative sources of authority to elders, perhaps undermining the ability of the latter to enforce negative sanctions against young chewers. This was not the only factor in operation, however, and all the following must be taken into account:

- **The end of warriorhood.** Warriorhood as an active institution was abolished by the British in the early days of colonial rule. This would have removed the need for young men to abstain from beer and miraa to keep in peak physical condition for defending clans and mounting raids.

- **The expansion of the miraa trade.** This is perhaps the most crucial factor. As demand for miraa within the Nyambenes and beyond grew, more people started growing the crop, increasing the number of people who could access it (although most farm owners were still married elders). Young men, no longer tied to a *gaaru*, travelled further afield to trade. This inevitably brought them into contact with chewers from different ethnic groups without the restriction once found in the Nyambenes: perhaps in sealing trading relations, young Meru chewed with new found customers. The stamina and concentration required in trading miraa would certainly have encouraged many to chew a stamina-boosting substance. Habits originating outside the Nyambenes could then have seeped back into them, leading to the sight of young men chewing becoming commonplace. Goldsmith remarks that the ‘development of commercial production...created a demand for labor that eroded [the] injunction [that only elders handle miraa], and the similar restrictions on consumption’ (Goldsmith 1994: 99).
- **Younger marriages.** As young men began to benefit financially from miraa and other money raising activities, so some could then afford to pay brideprice themselves, and marry without relying on their fathers for help. Early marriage led to some getting an early green light to chew miraa. *Bamos* who were yet to marry might then have been encouraged to chew with married age-mates, breaking down the restriction against non-married men chewing.

Attitudes of Nyambene elders today suggest only slight concern at this spread of consumption. Some elders expressed mild concern at widespread use, considering it unfortunate that consumption was not more restrained, but such opinions were rarely expressed, and seemed more wistful than anything else. Of course, most of today’s elders would have themselves chewed when young, the concerned elders of the past mentioned by McKeag in his 1945 report having been silenced by the passing of time.

The spread of miraa consumption to the point where it pervades much of Nyambene society is not necessarily a sign that nowadays little respect is shown for elders and Nyambene traditions. Quite the opposite. Miraa is still used in traditional ceremonies in the Nyambenes, and widespread consumption hardly lessens its worth within such contexts. The contextual power of such ceremonies imbue miraa with a similar worth to that provided to wine by its use as a sacrament in communion, distinguishing it from its more mundane equivalent. The different varieties of miraa also protect miraa from losing cultural value: miraa used ceremonially is always of the highest quality – *mbaine* – and usually presented in the *ncoolo* form, again distinguishing it from miraa chewed mundanely. Ceremonies involve the presentation of miraa to elders, suggesting deference to them on the part of those giving the miraa.

Miraa might help strengthen respect for Meru traditions amongst young Tigania and Igembe. Validation of traditions might be provided by the fact that miraa – a distinctly Meru commodity – is now so respected amongst many in a wider youth ethos: this respect rebounding back on to traditions associated with the commodity. Miraa consumption is not seen by Tigania and Igembe youth as a staid habit of their ancestors to be rejected, but as a ‘cool’ activity that gives cause for pride in being the commodity’s producers. Also, the fact that a commodity steeped in Meru history is now desired outside the Nyambenes – even as far afield as London<sup>10</sup> - allows the same sort of pride as that provided a Scot by the fact that a product so steeped in Scottish-ness as Scotch whisky is popular throughout the world. Tigania and Igembe have done well out of an indigenous product, not one introduced to the region from elsewhere like tea and coffee.

So, the seemingly radical change in miraa consumption patterns have perhaps had a less drastic effect on Nyambene traditions than might be supposed. In the Nyambenes, the fact that today not only elders chew has not lessened the ability of miraa to signal respect for them and local traditions. Whilst dissent and disrespect to elders is to be found amongst younger

generations<sup>11</sup> – as indeed it surely always has been<sup>12</sup> – most young Nyambene men I met spoke respectfully of elders, and the *njuri ncheke*.<sup>13</sup> Peatrik (in press) speaks of the ‘ethos’ of the classical age-system surviving: miraa might be a powerful force in maintaining this ethos.

### **The spread of miraa consumption throughout Kenya**

Whilst miraa was breaking down barriers in the Nyambenes, consumption was also spreading throughout Kenya. As trading routes were initiated to towns with a ready demand for the substance – amongst Somalis and Yemeni Arabs with a long-standing knowledge of the substance – others became familiar with it and experimented with its use. It is difficult to say how much promotion of miraa occurred, although it is reported that Arab café owners on the coast once offered free samples to customers along with coffee.<sup>14</sup> Those with miraa-chewing friends may very well have sampled through curiosity.

Goldsmith describes one material factor in miraa’s spread:

Consumption has grown steadily since Independence. Miraa dealers I spoke to say that by 1975 the volume was double that of the early 1960s. In 1975 consumers discovered “Big G,” a locally manufactured chewing gum that neutralizes miraa’s bitter taste while holding the cud of masticated miraa together in the mouth. Big G sparked a major consumer revolution, and some dealers estimate that miraa consumption doubled in the years following its discovery. Although Meru and other purists view it as an adulteration, Big G popularized miraa chewing by making it accessible to numbers of people formerly repelled by its bitter and astringent taste, and it has become a standard item wherever miraa is sold. (1988: 136)

The stimulant properties of the substance soon became valued by many non-traditional chewers, and its integration into the lives of *matatu* and bus touts, nightwatchmen, prostitutes and so forth, was soon complete. In terms of the previous chapter, it appears that miraa’s usefulness within the pragmatic context was a driving force behind its spread. Miraa’s euphoriant qualities no doubt quickly encouraged consumers to use it within recreational contexts too. As Goldsmith comments: ‘Chewing miraa for work and recreation has become a

virtual social institution over the last two decades' (1988: 137). The recent integration of the substance into a youth ethos offered further encouragement for many to sample the substance.

However, miraa faced impediments to its spread in the form of negative attitudes. What worked most to slow down its spread in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was probably the views of the British administration towards the substance. Such views were not purely the result of British experience in Kenya, but were also influenced by involvement in Somaliland and the Yemen. Many considered miraa to have a harmful effect in these countries and were hence worried about its effect in Kenya. A letter dated 12<sup>th</sup> May 1939 written by Malcolm Clark of the Native Civil Hospital, Wajir, shows concern over consumption:

My experience is that people under the influence of kat live in a "dream world" and lose all sense of reality. In large doses kat makes them excitable but not, in my experience, violent...A kat addict gradually becomes a listless, lazy, "good-for-nothing" person who lacks all energy and ambition. Kat addicts also lose sexual desire. In Somaliland, where it was worse than here, it was usual to dismiss any domestic servant found eating kat because of its bad effects on their work. (KNA: DC/ISO/2/2/13)

The consumption of miraa led the Officer-in-charge of the Northern Frontier District to the point of despair, as shown by the following letter dated 19<sup>th</sup> September 1946:

The sale of miraa is rapidly increasing and I was glad to have the opportunity of showing to the Chief Native Commissioner a large number of Meru natives who had just arrived here to sell this filthy drug and also a man in hospital indescribably emaciated as a result of chewing it...It seems to be rather a waste of time and effort providing medical services for the betterment of the health of the local people while we allow them to destroy their physical and mental health with miraa. (KNA: ARC (MAA) 2/5/167)

Such concerns led to action in the form of Ordinance No.LIII. This ordinance was drawn up in 1945 as 'a bill to control the sale, cultivation, and consumption of miraa' (report of 30/11/1945: KNA: ARC (MAA) 2/5/167). The ordinance took effect in 1946, requiring that consumers and traders obtain permits. The ordinance was aimed particularly at consumption in the then Northern Frontier District, and an amended Ordinance LIII of 1951 absolutely prohibited the sale and consumption there. Such an absolute prohibition never seems to have

been seriously applied, and the use of a permit system allowed trade and consumption to continue. By 1961, a DCs' meeting on miraa concluded that '[I]t is impossible to prohibit miraa. Therefore it is best to tax it and get the money for the local authorities' (Communication from M.G.Power, DC of Isiolo, 11/10/1961: KNA: DC/ISO/3/7/11).

Despite attempts at prohibition and the passionately anti-miraa stance of some, it would be wrong to speak of British attitudes towards miraa without mentioning more reasonable views towards it. For example, the 'Director of Medical Services' is quoted in a memorandum of a Provincial Commissioners' meeting in February 1949 as saying 'there is nothing inherently deleterious in miraa any more than there is in tea, coffee etc., unless taken to excess' (KNA: BB.PC/EST/6/12). The memorandum also questioned the worth of legislating against miraa on the grounds that miraa might not be all that bad, and that legislation would prove hard to enforce. Regarding Ordinance LIII, the District Commissioner of Isiolo recommended in 1953 that it 'be removed from the statute book on grounds that: (a) The drug can do no real harm; (b) The law is very difficult to enforce in the NFD and its environs only' (KNA: BB.PC/EST/6/12). Such attitudes, whilst scarcely enthusiastic about miraa, serve to show that those serving in the British administration of the time were not all wholly opposed to it.

The views expressed and debated by the British certainly aided the development of miraa's current controversial status in Kenya, and today most views on miraa are hardly neutral, and are often strikingly similar to those of the British. Such views have slowed down the spread of the substance, making many perceive it as something not respectable. The following section looks at what encourages or discourages an individual in today's Kenya to chew miraa or not. Some of the factors would have been relevant for chewers in the past also, whilst others are more restricted to the time of my fieldwork. The section thus aims to provide a synchronic snapshot of factors influencing individuals to chew or not in the Kenya of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

### Encouraging and discouraging consumption

Certain factors act as catalysts and barriers to the miraa's spread. To facilitate a discussion of what encourages and discourages a potential miraa consumer to become an actual consumer, one can imagine the former asking him or herself the following four questions:

1. *Does one like the effect and other material qualities of miraa?*
2. *Is chewing miraa respectable?*
3. *Is one allowed to chew?*
4. *Can one afford it?*

These questions correspond to the structure of this section. Firstly I look at the influence of miraa's material qualities on potential consumers. Next I take a perspectival approach, examining various attitudes and associations connected with miraa: will a potential consumer view chewing miraa as an appropriate thing to do? Then I look at the issue of control over consumption habits: a potential consumer's choice might be more or less controlled by others. Finally, an individual's ability to afford a supply of the substance is considered. No strong deterministic link is suggested between the factors examined and an individual's consumption decision; I merely suggest that such factors exert some influence over potential consumers. Individuals often have the power to ignore such factors, and even, on occasion, to subvert them: individuals might very well influence certain of these 'influencing' factors in turn, perhaps creating new perspectives upon the substance or subverting old perspectives and power relations.

One reason for chewing that seems relevant in the case of the Yemen (North Yemen at least) is perhaps less relevant in Kenya: social advancement. In the Yemen, ‘qat parties became a medium for trying to improve social standing through the intensive building of personal networks and the deployment and display of qat’ (Weir 1985: 168). Whilst many deals are probably struck over a *shurba* or two in Kenya, chewing sessions hardly function in quite the same way as in the Yemen. Few outside those groups with a long history of consumption would need to join a chewing session for the purpose of social advancement.

### **Miraa’s material qualities**

Campbell (1995: 117) draws our attention to the dangers of neglecting the material qualities of goods in analysing consumption habits: ‘[D]irect encounters with the fundamental materiality of goods must surely underpin every individual’s experience of consumption, no matter how much attention is paid to the symbolic or ‘meaningful’ features of goods.’ This point is well taken regarding miraa, a substance with definite material qualities.<sup>15</sup> A potential consumer is highly likely to be influenced by the material nature of such a substance – either through chewing it or observing someone else chewing – and the following material aspects seem relevant:

#### **Aesthetics:**

Expert fingers in the Nyambenes grade and package miraa with a finesse that comes easily through practice.<sup>16</sup> All but the cheapest varieties are retailed in bunches which possess great aesthetic appeal. This is enhanced further by the attractive hues of the substance itself: the better qualities a mix of purple and green, *rangi mbili*. The almost wholly green stems of the lower grades tied with little care for aesthetics hardly have so much allure.

The aesthetics of chewing miraa itself are likely to draw a range of response from attraction to repulsion. The sight of cheeks bulging with green mush is one that can become

associated with the good life, as seems common in the Yemen,<sup>17</sup> and a potential consumer who has grown up where bulging cheeks are familiar might share positive associations even before chewing. For others, such a sight can be repulsive: one nurse working at the Catholic Mission in Isiolo told me how unattractive she finds the sight of a man with a mouthful of miraa, especially if flecks of green coat lips and teeth.<sup>18</sup> The constant hawking and spitting that some chewers engage in is also likely to prove less than alluring to the unfamiliar, although they would be familiar to many Kenyans through chewing another substance: tobacco. If there were a more genteel way of chewing, one may suppose that more would try miraa than do presently. Mastication in general generates mixed feelings, as happens in Britain in regard to chewing gum: the constant chewing of the likes of Sir Alex Ferguson is viewed with scorn by some.<sup>19</sup> Miraa consumers are compared to ruminants by some non-consumers (and perhaps by some consumers): some chewers in Wajir told a friend of mind that they are dismissed by ‘down-country’ Kenyans as being ‘stupid like cattle, just chewing all the time’. Chewers are often likened to goats. Anything that makes the mouth take on a peculiar form is likely to be viewed with suspicion by many. The removal of the *takssin* and flecks emanating from the mouth can be seen as having traversed a bodily boundary, and so consequently might even be viewed as ‘polluting’ by some (Douglas 1996 [1966]: 122). Those who view with disdain the aesthetics of miraa consumption may be those influenced by western notions of ‘respectability’ (see below for a discussion on ‘respectability’, ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’).

### **Taste:**

The taste of miraa covers a broad range depending on the variety, from bitterly astringent to more or less sweet. Mintz in *Sweetness and Power* informs us that ‘[a] liking for bitterness, even extreme bitterness, falls “naturally” within the normal range of human taste response and can be quickly and firmly developed’ (1985: 109). Of course, ‘[t]urning this into a preference usually requires some culturally grounded habituation, but it is not difficult to achieve under certain circumstances’ (loc. cit.). ‘Sweet tasting substances, however, appear to insinuate

themselves much more quickly into the preferences of new consumers' (loc. cit.). One can see how high quality varieties could therefore 'insinuate' themselves quickly 'into the preferences of new consumers', but such high qualities are not likely to be the ones that most consumers experience first, whereas cheaper, bitter, varieties are. I have seen new consumers rapidly giving up on miraa due to *uchungu* (Kiswahili: 'bitterness'), and have been told by a certain anthropologist that he never persevered with miraa for the same reason. New consumers can get around the problem by using a sweetener – *Big G*, sugar, sweet fizzy drinks – although by persevering one can acquire the taste of unsweetened miraa. The interwoven nature of taste and background is admirably illustrated by the scant use of sweeteners made by Tigania and Igembe: they are quickly habituated to the taste. Interestingly, Mintz tells us how in the countries of origin, bitter substances like tea and coffee are usually taken without sweeteners: '[t]o this day tea is drunk without sugar in China and by overseas Chinese' (loc. cit.). It seems that it is when a bitter substance is incorporated into a new cultural setting that sweeteners become desired.

### **Smell:**

Miraa has quite a characteristic smell – although some find the smell stronger than others – and while few find the smell offensive, some seem particularly sensitive to it, and find it overpowering. I did not hear much talk in Kenya about the smell, however, so it is perhaps not an important factor in encouraging or discouraging consumption there.

### **Texture:**

A common complaint of first time chewers is that *takssins* hurt the mouth. Low quality varieties of miraa are often woody and tough in texture, and can inflict damage on gums unaccustomed to chewing miraa. The risk of sore gums can be circumvented by using *njugu* ('groundnuts') with lower quality miraa, however. High quality miraa offers a very pleasant texture by comparison: some stems are so succulent that they can be merely sliced off with the teeth until the butt of the stem.

**Forming a *takssin*:**

New consumers can find it difficult to form the masticated stems into a *takssin*, and many swallow much of the mush: this can induce nausea. Watery miraa can also induce nausea if the liquid is swallowed rather than spat out, although drinking soda or tea while chewing helps greatly in this respect. New consumers might very well be uncomfortable with the feel of the *takssin* in the cheek, especially if it becomes substantial. The mush of some miraa varieties binds together more easily than that of others, and this means miraa varies in how easily one forms a *takssin* from it.

***Handas*:**

*Handas* is usually pleasant and relaxing, as well as potentially useful for work. Enjoying the sensation whilst socialising with friends or keeping alert on the job is liable to encourage one to chew again. Not all first-time users feel *handas*, however, and to expend time and money on something that produces little in the way of effect and may hurt the mouth might very well discourage one from chewing again. In many ways one has to learn both how to achieve *handas* and to distinguish the desired sensations that people term *handas* in a manner similar to how marijuana users learn to achieve a ‘high’ and to regard the sensations of the ‘high’ as desirable (as depicted by Becker [1953]). However, *handas* is a much milder sensation than a marijuana ‘high’ and has few potentially unsettling properties compared with marijuana (which can induce dizziness, nausea, and, for the susceptible, paranoia), and so perhaps requires less learning to appreciate it as good.

The stimulation of some varieties is stronger than others, and insomnia due to *handas* is quite common. This side-effect is one that can discourage regular consumption of miraa. Jackson – a teacher in Mutuati with many good things to say about miraa – refrains from chewing for that very reason, fearing insomnia would leave him feeling tired at school. The feeling of *ajiis* the morning after is unpleasant, though some boast of feeling ‘really *ajiis*’ in

the way that some drinkers boast of being ‘really hungover’. Other side-effects might also discourage consumption: headaches, impotence, fornication etc.

### Pro or anti miraa?

Many *hotels* and nightclubs in Kenya display signs asking clientele to refrain from chewing miraa on the premises. Whilst in my experience such prohibition is not always strictly enforced – an Ethiopian café in Eastleigh had such a sign displayed when I visited, but on my quizzing a waiter about it, he tore it down with a chuckle – such signs do illustrate – and help constitute – the common perception of miraa-chewing as something unseemly. The material qualities of miraa are clearly relevant too, feeding into how ‘respectable’ miraa is seen to be. The sights and sounds of chewing – bulging cheeks, green teeth, discarded waste, spitting and hawking – are hardly likely to endear miraa to Kenyans not traditionally linked to the substance. The situation in Kenya is different from that in the Yemen, where miraa use is institutionalised to a much a greater degree throughout society, and where even the President chews.<sup>20</sup> A Kenyan President could hardly chew without controversy: the following snippet from the regular *Watchman* column of the *Sunday Nation* of December 15<sup>th</sup> 2002 shows one reaction to the sight of a political candidate observed chewing in Mombasa:

Shouldn't aspiring leaders be role models in almost all aspects? poses Sam \_\_\_, who was stunned by what he saw at a recent NARC campaign rally at Miritini Primary School, Mombasa. “One candidate displayed his prowess as a chain smoker on the dais in full view of the crowd. And another continuously chewed miraa (khat),” Sam reports.

That a candidate chewing miraa is seen as a bad role model nicely illustrates the cluster of negative perceptions of miraa common in Kenya. This section examines factors feeding into such perceptions, as well as into the opposite perceptions of miraa-chewing as being a positive activity, even *respectable*. Such factors include the associations people have with the substance, the debate as to whether miraa is good or bad, and how one’s social background

affects how one perceives the substance. Perceptions of the substance are critical to the decision of a potential miraa consumer to chew or not.

A potential consumer in Kenya is unlikely to approach miraa free from preconceptions. Most Kenyans would be exposed to the substance – or discourse concerning it – at some point early in their lives. The degree of exposure to miraa and talk of miraa will obviously vary enormously, as will the nature of associations formed around miraa in the minds of individuals. With a fairly controversial substance like miraa, its associations are likely to be felt as either good or bad depending on the individual, though, obviously, associations such as ‘miraa comes from a tree’ are likely to be common, neutral, and fairly uninteresting.<sup>21</sup> Associations that may influence a potential miraa consumer can perhaps be grouped as follows into ideas about what sort of people trade and chew miraa, why people chew, and the consequences of chewing for the individual and society:

1. Many Kenyans associate miraa’s trade and consumption with the Meru. Thus, the host on a KBC game show once chatted to a Meru contestant: he joked that as the contestant was Meru, he must therefore also be a miraa dealer. For this gag to work, there must be a strong association of Meru with miraa, hardly surprising seeing that Meru miraa traders can be found in most corners of Kenya. Those with more detailed knowledge might be more exact and distinguish between the different sub-groups, associating miraa more with Tigania and Igembe, and not associating it with, say, Imenti. Many associate miraa with Somali, as they are inveterate chewers of the substance. Some ‘down-country’ Kenyans consider miraa a habit of poor people in the northeast, and consequently view the substance negatively.<sup>22</sup> Miraa chewing is also associated with Muslims, and with Arabs of the coast. Whilst some associate chewing with ‘lowly’ types – prostitutes, *matatu* touts – others have the knowledge to associate miraa with wealthy types: miraa tycoons, Asian shopkeepers, even some MPs. Many might associate miraa with *poa*-looking young men who are often seen chewing.

2. Ideas about why people chew miraa are centred on miraa's effect: *handas*. Many know that *handas* keeps people awake and is thus helpful for work, and most know that miraa has an effect upon consumers. The exact nature of this effect is less widely known; many non-chewers are curious to know about it, and I was often asked *unasikiaje wakati unaveveka?* ('how do you feel while chewing?'). An even more common question – even asked by chewers – is whether miraa is an 'addictive drug' like 'cocaine'. This points to the widespread association of miraa with 'hard' drugs, a connection enhanced by the loaded nature of the word 'drug': the word 'drug' in Kenya (and elsewhere) tends not to be used in a neutral sense that might include caffeine and aspirin, but conjures up for many cocaine and heroin. This association of miraa with harder drugs is certainly one contributing to a negative image for miraa, although the fact that people ask whether miraa is a drug or not suggests uncertainty as to exactly what a drug is other than something 'bad'.
3. Many consequences for a consumer and society at large are associated with miraa. Positive consequences are not unheard of, and certainly exist in regard to the economic well-being of the Nyambenes and miraa traders in general. Some in contact with friendly miraa chewers might associate chewing sessions with happiness and bonhomie, perhaps contrasting the atmosphere of good chewing sessions with that of drinking sessions. For many Kenyans, one suspects miraa is associated with personal and social ills. The idea that chewers are all 'addicts' is commonplace, as are ideas concerning the woes miraa brings to a consumer's health. Miraa might be associated with economic well-being by some, but others associate it with poverty: the association of miraa with under-development is linked to issues like the use of children as harvesters. There also exists an association of miraa with violence, especially following all the recent trouble between Meru and Somali over the trade.

Such associations are likely to impinge upon a potential consumer's attitude to miraa, and hence upon his or her decision whether or not to chew. These associations are not merely passively lodged inside people's brains, however, but are actively discussed. There is debate within Kenya concerning its pros and cons, a debate that plays a role in constituting attitudes towards it. The following are common arguments often heard for and against the substance:

**Arguments for miraa as a 'good' substance:**

*Miraa is a good money earner:* Miraa provides an income for thousands throughout Kenya, not just Tigania, Igembe, and big-time Somali traders, but also for Somali and Borana women who have few money-making alternatives, as well as many from other ethnic groups like Maasai. For the country as a whole, miraa is a source of foreign earnings.

*Miraa is of cultural significance to the Meru:* Most acknowledge the prime importance of miraa for Tigania and Igembe traditions.

*Miraa helps people work:* Many rely on miraa as a pick-me-up in the *pragmatic* context of consumption, and it enhances intellect and concentration.

*Miraa helps form friendships:* Friendships are cemented by the shared experience of *handas*, and many such friendships are formed between people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Nicholas often recounts how he made friends in Ethiopia through sharing miraa, despite not sharing a language.

*Recreational usage provides pleasure and relaxation:* A day at work can be rewarded admirably by a chewing session, providing rest and enjoyment. For those living hard lives, miraa provides some relief (the 'escapist' argument of consumption).

*Handas boosts the imagination:* Time spent chewing can be productive in generating plans aplenty for the future, as well as aiding in the creation of stories.

*Miraa is far safer than other substances:* Alcohol and the like create far more problems than miraa ever could. The peace of miraa sessions is often compared to the violence associated with alcohol consumption. The popularity of miraa consumption might even act to stop demand for other drugs as miraa is sufficient for most people.

*Veve ni poa:* Miraa is ‘cool’. It is a substance that suits well the image many young Kenyans are keen to cultivate.

#### **Arguments for miraa being a bad substance:**

*Miraa is a drug:* The fact that miraa can be termed a ‘drug’ is used by many as an argument in itself for its baleful nature. Also, other drugs – valium, cannabis – and alcohol are used by many to counter the effects of miraa, creating yet more problems. The fact that miraa is banned by certain countries adds further weight to this argument: why would it be illegal if it is not bad?

*Consumers build ‘castles in the air’:* Chewers spend valuable time discussing plans for the future that are unfeasible and never come to fruition.

*Consuming miraa causes laziness:* Chewing miraa diverts people away from work – or looking for work – and post-miraa hangovers make them too tired to work the next day.

*‘Addicts’ spend money on miraa rather than food:* Household finances are diminished as men prefer chewing to eating.

*Miraa chewing is a dirty habit:* The aesthetics of miraa mastication are not to the taste of everyone.

*'Addicts' become absentee husbands and fathers:* Male chewers are reportedly rarely seen by families as they are so often away chewing with friends.

*Miraa causes health problems:* Insomnia, lethargy, impotence etc. are usually mentioned in this regard.

*The trade exploits children:* The use of child labour is commonly mentioned to illustrate the problematic nature of the substance.

*The miraa trade causes violence:* Rivalry between Meru and Somali is a blight that causes violence. Miraa is also vilified for causing violence more generally, especially in harsh punishments meted out to those caught stealing from *shambas*.

*Money made from miraa is spent on alcohol rather than the home:* Meru miraa traders are often portrayed as heavy drinkers who prefer supping away profits to spending money on improving the welfare of their families.

*Trade and consumption of miraa increase the spread of HIV:* Meru traders spending time away from home and visiting prostitutes risk catching HIV, which is then brought back to the Nyambenes when they return. Miraa consumption is also linked to prostitution, and hence HIV.

*Farmers would be better off growing food crops:* The Nyambenes are a 'net importer' of food as so much fertile land is occupied by miraa trees. As a result, Nyambene residents are at risk of starvation in times of hardship.

### **Spreading the debate:**

The promulgation of the above arguments – some of which are little different from those used by the British (see above) – occurs in various ways using different media. People can be heard debating miraa in face-to-face discussions, the arguments can be read in newspaper and magazine articles, in books and scholarly works, heard on TV, and in sermons at places of worship.

Face-to-face discussions are especially common where many people consume miraa, and miraa kiosks provide a forum for such discussions. Towns like Isiolo see much face-to-face debating about miraa, as consumption is such a big issue there. Some discussions even take place at workshops where trained outsiders help members of the local community with various problems.<sup>23</sup> A town like Kajiado, where miraa is less widely consumed, probably sees less in the way of such discussions as chewing is less of an issue. As many Kenyans are illiterate and have little access to televisions (though most have access to radios) such discussions are where much knowledge of the debate surrounding miraa is spread.

Newspapers in Kenya devote a large number of words to miraa, especially in recent years when the Meru – Somali conflict has rendered it newsworthy. Like the approach of much academic debate on the substance, miraa is commonly presented as a ‘problem’,<sup>24</sup> and little space is given to its good points. Thus it is not surprising that one article reporting recent research into miraa’s active constituents was called ‘The dark side of chewing miraa’ (*Daily Nation*, May 17, 2001). The article was rehashed for the *East African Standard* (April 20, 2002), and opens describing how a chewer ‘does not know that the greenish “fluid” he excitedly swallows contain chemicals that surreptitiously affect him’. The article seems a little circular in suggesting readers and chewers should be surprised that a substance chewed for its effects on the body and mind has an effect on the body and mind. The article –

although blessed with an ominous title and a negative overall feel – strives for some balance in its approach, providing both positive and negative case-studies of chewers.

Newspapers are known to print yet more disapproving articles. The most disapproving one I read was published in 2000 by the *Kenya Times*, a newspaper notorious for its strong links to the then ruling party, KANU. It was titled ‘The Meru ‘gold leaf’ continues to cause havoc in city homes’. After dismissing speculation on miraa’s health benefits as unscientific, the article boldly states that ‘our research showed that the only gain obtained from *miraa* is “madness”, poverty to the coastal people who are the main consumers and wealth to the people of Meru’. The reporters highlight ill effects on families: ‘The consumers’ families are sometimes starved or underfed and often suffer from malnutrition. Very few miraa addicts [note the word] are self-reliant. Many...depend on friends and relatives to get money to buy the drug.’ This discourse is similar to that regarding heroin consumers in the West. The article plays up the link with miraa traders, alcohol, and the perceived poverty of the Nyambenes: ‘It is not a surprise to find visitors to the area wondering why the locals would spend so much on alcohol while living in utter poverty’. The reporters seem fond of fashionable urban living, haughtily commenting on the ‘shabby dressing style’ and ‘shambles of grass thatched huts’ of miraa traders, sceptically described in inverted commas as “millionaires”. A wife of a miraa trader is described as ‘shabbily dressed and unkempt’, and quoted thus: ‘Don’t ask me where miraa money goes because we women don’t see it. My husband runs two Toyota pick-ups...to Nairobi but look at my health and manner of dressing. Do you think I would hate to wear the latest in fashion?’ Emphasis is also placed on the lack of education amongst traders and how this prevents ‘development’ in the Nyambenes. Children of consumers are said to go without adequate nutrition. The article concludes with the following warning: ‘Miraa has more cons than pros, among them health hazards as with any other narcotic drug, *miraa* poses a danger to the chewers in their quest for health. The chewer loses appetite and in most cases are treated for tuberculosis (TB) some show the signs of noticeable mental disturbances which need treatment.’

Very often miraa will be spoken of in articles about the growing use of drugs in Kenya without differentiating it from harder drugs, thus encouraging linkage of miraa with pernicious substances.

Correspondence pages of newspapers are sometimes used as a forum for debates on miraa. The Kiswahili-language paper *Taifa Leo* allows correspondents space for their views in its *Wasemavyo Wasomaji*<sup>25</sup> section. On the 20<sup>th</sup> January 2002, this column was used by a coastal resident to state that a ban on chewing and selling miraa in the northeastern and coastal regions should be considered, referring to miraa as a ‘dawa hatari ya kulevya’ (‘a dangerous intoxicating drug’) that is bad for health and has held back development in regions where it is popular. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 2002, a response to this viewpoint by an Igembe miraa trader based in Mombasa was printed in the same paper: the column was headed simply ‘miraa haidhuru’ (‘miraa does not harm’), and attempted to refute many of the claims of the previous column.

The humour inherent in miraa’s trade and consumption is often brought out to good effect by cartoonists. One cartoon shows a Somali overjoyed having taken to keeping his miraa fresh by storing it in a flask. More darkly humorous is one showing a farmer chasing a man from his miraa tree shouting ‘You had better rob a man of his wife but not his miraa!!!’ (*The Sunday Nation*, May 7<sup>th</sup> 2000). This cartoon accompanies an article recounting the exploits of a man conned into hiring a miraa plantation from someone who did not own it. The article plays up associations of miraa farming with violence and the stereotypically short tempers of Tigania and Igembe.<sup>26</sup>

TV and radio are media for spreading debate. As with newspapers, coverage of miraa on news programmes is often negative, reflecting the trade conflict of recent years, as well as incidents like the closure of the border with Somalia and ramifications this had for farmers

and traders. Kenyan TV has debate shows similar to those shown on British TV. One such show on KBC devoted a whole episode to miraa in March 2000.<sup>27</sup> Alongside the host was a consultant psychiatrist, a graduate student in biochemistry and botany, and Joseph Muturia, a former MP in the Nyambenes, known for his passionate pro-miraa stance. The psychiatrist took the most anti-miraa stance, saying miraa used to be used in good ways, but now has become a 'drug of abuse', a 'drug that causes a craving'. He compared cathinone to amphetamine, and stressed that amphetamine was an illicit drug. The graduate student defended miraa, describing its valuable work-enhancing properties, as well as its value in helping elders solve disputes (presumably in the Nyambenes). He accused miraa's critics of failing to distinguish between different varieties, and thus not noticing that certain ill effects are limited to certain varieties. The doctor rejoined by describing insomnia associated with miraa as a 'disastrous effect'. Muturia joined the fray, relating the history of miraa use, and pointing out that he had chewed the substance since 1958 without deleterious side-effects. When asked by the host about social problems caused by miraa in the Nyambenes, he replied that people had been paid to 'smear miraa'. The host remarked that 7.9 million hours per year<sup>28</sup> were spent chewing in Mombasa alone: this was countered by the graduate student pointing out that not all these hours were spent in idleness. The psychiatrist made the last point, saying impotence and malnutrition were the consequences of long-term miraa use. The programme ended with Muturia complaining that he had much else to say. The whole tone of the debate was very similar to that of British debate shows discussing the decriminalisation of cannabis.

Academic research into miraa is not necessarily left to gather dust in libraries, and articles about it feed into the debate; researchers are consulted by newspapers and the like when miraa hits the headlines. The Kenyan research cited in the newspaper article about miraa's chemical effects (mentioned above) is one case in point; also, Paul Goldsmith's name was bandied about in articles written about a ban on air transportation of miraa in September 1999. Reports like that by the UNDCP on drugs in Africa are available on the internet, and

may be consulted by those able to disseminate ideas and arguments more widely in Kenya. Such articles might also encourage the association of miraa with other drugs by dealing with the substance alongside the likes of cannabis and heroin.

Miraa consumption is a common source of inspiration for sermons in Kenya, and disapproval of the substance is promulgated by representatives of various religious groups. The most extreme denunciation emanates from Pentecostal denominations, of which there are many within Kenya. Many Kenyans greet visitors to the country with the line 'Hi, I'm born again', and most who do so have converted to a clean living lifestyle, spurning the pleasures of alcohol, cigarettes, and miraa. Pentecostal preachers – and those of similar denominations – urge abstinence from such substances for the sake of salvation in the afterlife. One convert regularly tried to convince friends of mine in Mutuati that miraa consumption is an evil that would lead them to *mwanki* (Kimeru: literally 'fire', and therefore, 'hell'). These friends rejected his arguments. Not all 'born-again' Christians spurn miraa, however. Nicholas reported in a letter that he met a 'born-again' Christian at *Kamathi Kiosk* who was chewing avidly. When quizzed by Nicholas about miraa the young man said 'he supported it strongly and quoted the book of Matthew (15: 11,17) saying "It's what you think / say that makes you unclean and not what you chew / eat". He went on to say veve plantations were planted by the Lord.'

Other Christian denominations are less hardline towards miraa, although one suspects most would urge congregations to at least moderate chewing. Certainly the Bishop of Isiolo (an Italian) views miraa as a menace, although one that – like beer – was unlikely to be eradicated given its popularity. He seemed more or less resigned to this. The one time I heard a Catholic congregation urged to avoid miraa was at a service requesting people to fast for Lent.

Miraa's popularity amongst Muslims means that Muslim clerics often have much to say about it. Debate exists as to whether or not miraa is *halal*, a question that seems pertinent given that miraa is sometimes dubbed as a Muslim substitute for alcohol. More 'conservative' elements in Kenya's Muslim community argue that miraa should be considered *haram*. In Goldsmith's 1988 article, he considered that the 'most organized opposition [to miraa consumption] is centered on a faction of the Muslim religious establishment on the coast whose antimiraa campaign is partially funded by Iran' (1988: 137).<sup>29</sup> A Kiswahili tract published at around the same time in Mombasa by an organisation known as *Ansaar Muslim Youth* (1992 [1988]) suggests the arguments used by anti-miraa Muslim elements. The tract attempts a balanced presentation of the situation, listing both *manufaa* ('benefits') of miraa, and *madhara* ('harmful effects'). However, the latter (mainly health problems) far outnumber the former (wealth from trade, alertness, forging friendships). Case-studies of chewers are provided, all lamenting their consumption, fitting in with the tract's description of miraa consumption as *uraibu* ('addiction'). On the question of whether or not miraa is *halal*, the tract argues that it is not (1992: 5): miraa changes the mental state, and according to the Prophet Mohammed, 'Kila kinachobadilisha akili...ni Haramu' ('everything that affects reasoning / the mind is *haram*').

Not all Muslims share the same view, however, and many would agree with a Borana lady (admittedly a chewer herself) I met in Isiolo. She interpreted the Koran in relation to miraa as meaning that 'if you chew miraa and it makes you lazy and late for prayers, then it is bad for you...If you chew and are not affected negatively by it, then you can continue to chew it, as many committed Muslims do.'

Another forum where miraa is sometimes debated is Kenya's parliament. Both pro and anti miraa sentiments are represented, the latter often shown by Somali MPs of the northeast, perturbed by the avid consumption of those they represent. Needless to say, Nyambene MPs are more than willing to stand up for the substance, and there is little danger of miraa –

regarded by many MPs as, in the words of Nicholas, a ‘curate’s egg’ – being subjected to legal restrictions in Kenya.<sup>30</sup>

### **Taking one side or the other:**

Obviously people vary in the degree to which they engage with such a debate: for many it will be more or less irrelevant, while for others it will be more urgent. The former are unlikely to engage with the debate in anything but the most superficial way, whilst the latter might engage in depth, although vested interests might be more influential in swaying one’s opinion the more urgency there is. Some might passively absorb arguments on one side of the debate, whilst others might actively deliberate over the issues. There exist plausible arguments on both pro and anti-miraa sides of the debate, and so many have mixed views of miraa. However, the following factors might play a role in swaying one’s opinion to one side or the other:

*Trust in experts.* The authority of those engaging in the debate can lend weight to arguments. For example, a consultant psychiatrist speaking negatively about the impact of miraa on physical and mental health – as in the televised debate on KBC mentioned above – might encourage belief in the veracity of his remarks simply because of his status. In turn, a respected MP such as Muturia speaking favourably of the substance might lend weight to the opposite side of the argument through his status. The authority invested in religious dignitaries no doubt encourages some acceptance of their views too.

*The power of words.* In the debate surrounding miraa powerful words are mobilised. The most loaded of these are probably ‘drug’ and ‘addiction’ (and the Kiswahili equivalents: *dawa* and *uraibu*), coming as they do with bad associations with the ‘war on drugs’ and substances like heroin. This explains the interest in whether or not miraa can be defined as a ‘drug’ or not, even though innocuous substances like tea and coffee can also be termed ‘drugs’. More encouraging to potential consumers might be the application of the term *poa* to miraa.

*Social allegiances.* Social ‘allegiances’ are likely to influence one’s stance towards a controversial substance like miraa. An individual can have allegiances to many different people and groups of people – family, friends, ethnic group, co-religionists, fellow fans of Manchester United etc – to such diverse things as ideologies – socialism, Islam, Christianity etc – and to styles of music and dress.<sup>31</sup> Whilst there is convergence between some individuals’ allegiances and those of others, there is great divergence too, even between individuals from similar backgrounds. Such allegiances are relevant here, as if one has a strong allegiance to a person or group of people who approve of miraa, then this allegiance might influence one to approve too, and be more critical or dismissive of negative views of the substance.<sup>32</sup> One obviously can be aligned both to people who are pro-miraa and those who are anti-miraa, and thus be pulled in different directions: one’s parents might disapprove, while one’s peers approve. The tension inherent in such a situation leads to some ambivalent attitudes to miraa.

Attitudes towards miraa vary in the passion with which they are held, but most can be lodged on a continuum running from approval, through ambivalence, to outright disapproval. It seems fair to say that a potential consumer is more likely to view miraa positively if he or she has more exposure to the approving side of the continuum than the disapproving.

To illustrate the application of a continuum of approval / disapproval, it may be worth considering attitudes to cannabis in the UK. In this case, one might consider Rastafarians as a group whose approval of cannabis – as a sacrament – is extreme. More ambivalent attitudes might converge amongst university students, many of whom espouse the positive virtues of the substance whilst being aware of its negative side, or at least are aware of arguments stating that there is a negative side. Downright disapproval can be found amongst many advocates of a ‘war on drugs’. Attitudes are often in a state of flux, and where there is convergence on the

continuum is likely to vary greatly over the years: in the case of cannabis – and perhaps most ‘soft’ drugs – attitudes are perhaps gravitating towards ambivalence.

In miraa’s case, approval of miraa in Kenya is strongest amongst the Tigania and Igembe of the Nyambenes, where miraa is the foundation of the local economy as well as a diacritical element of local identity and customs. Their approval is encapsulated in the title given by a Mutuati teacher to a draft version of a book he has written on miraa: *Miraa: The Noble Plant*. For him the role miraa played in paying for his education and that of his siblings makes it well worthy of the epithet ‘noble’. Most Tigania and Igembe are aware that miraa is viewed as controversial by many beyond the Nyambenes, and reaction to negative viewpoints is often one of defensiveness. For example, Tigania and Igembe counter claims that miraa causes impotence by pointing out that the Nyambene population shows no sign of dwindling, and that those who say miraa causes impotence do not distinguish between different varieties; also, the accusation that miraa causes child labour is countered by saying that ‘approved’ crops like tea and coffee are also picked by children wherever they are grown, hence focusing the accusation on miraa is another example of bias against the crop.<sup>33</sup> Most Tigania and Igembe are more susceptible to positive arguments than to negative ones. Approval of miraa is so strong that certain types of people, who if they were not Tigania or Igembe would be unlikely to chew, actually do so. Thus, Nicholas’s father a few years ago deepened his commitment to the Catholic faith, becoming highly devout. He gave up both smoking and alcohol, but would not give up miraa. A non-Tigania and Igembe man would probably have given up miraa too. Also, Nicholas enjoys telling a story of how he spent one Christmas day in the Nyambenes, attending a Pentecostal service. Rather than the pastor being anti-miraa, as an Igembe, he had actually embraced the substance wholeheartedly, preaching his sermon enthusiastically under its spell. Negative religious views of miraa can be neutralised by its high approval rating in the Nyambenes, despite their efficacy in curbing miraa consumption elsewhere. (Vested interests may play a part, however, as most churches in the Nyambenes

rely on miraa earnings to keep them solvent.) Thus while many devout Tigania and Igembe chew, devout Imenti are unlikely to do so.

Broad generalisations require subverting, however, and it must be pointed out that most Tigania and Igembe are aware that miraa consumption can bring problems – though most also point out that moderation prevents them – and some abstain from chewing altogether. Some Tigania and Igembe do abstain from chewing on religious grounds, especially those claiming to be ‘born again’. Newspaper articles sometimes report the complaints of Nyambene women that money from miraa is just misspent by husbands. Some Tigania and Igembe lament the violence that often goes along with the money made in the trade. Also, miraa use might be approved of, but that does not mean that using miraa is acceptable behaviour for everyone. Some young boys are seen chewing, and not everyone frowns upon this – one friend allowed his baby to attempt toothless chewing – but some do. One young Igembe lad entertained me with his skilful chewing techniques, and later on he was keen to procure another stem. One man dissuaded me from giving him another, however, saying that the lad’s chewing would give off the wrong impression. One suspects that Nyambene women, while not discouraged from chewing, are not encouraged to do so as strongly as men are. However, for Nyambene men, one might say that they almost require a reason *not* to chew.

Beyond the Nyambenes, ambivalence to the substance becomes more marked. Amongst residents of Isiolo – a prime destination for the commodity – there are those who approve wholeheartedly of it, and those that disapprove, but in the main attitudes seem to converge on ambivalence. Such ambivalence can lead to the paradox of someone enjoying a chew whilst at the same time condemning the substance as a social evil: at a chewing session at the house of a Turkana friend, his wife proceeded to express abhorrence of miraa while herself chewing on a hefty *takssin*.

The ambivalence towards miraa in Isiolo allows for much cheekiness in regard to its consumption. Knowledge that many disapprove of it, and that its consumption can be taken to excess leads to cheeky remarks like ‘you’re not chewing again are you, you *quodhadhi*?’ (a Cushitic word referring to a habitual miraa chewer).<sup>34</sup> This is similar to the sort of remark – common in student bars – that playfully alludes to alcoholism thus: ‘you’re not drinking again, are you, you sot?’ Knowledge that a substance can be used excessively provides the background for the humour. A similar gag about an innocuous substance – such as ‘you’re not eating a piece of fruit again, are you?’ – would only work as a gag in a topsy-turvy way. In the case of alcohol, the gag is likely to be directed at someone who enjoys a drink but not pathologically, unlike a true alcoholic. To direct the gag at a true alcoholic would be dark humour indeed. With miraa, those playfully cheeky to chewers know of its negative associations, but are also aware that those targeted by the humour are unlikely to have a serious problem with chewing. Hence the ambivalence, and hence the cheekiness. In regard to a substance like heroin, a remark along the lines of ‘are you chasing the dragon again, you junkie?’ would be extremely dark, and perhaps only socially acceptable coming from an in-member of a heroin using group.

Amongst Somalis, attitudes towards miraa are very mixed. Many chew the substance and gain pleasure from it, and some gain great financial profit from it. Many are willing to speak favourably of miraa, seeing it as a marker of Somali identity. One Somali I met in an Isiolo kiosk was surprised to see me chewing, and joked that if *wazungu* (‘Europeans’, or ‘whites’ generally) chew nowadays what will there be left that is a special Somali-thing? However, the high rate of consumption amongst Somalis leads some to view it extremely negatively, as something that breaks up households and encourages men to fritter away resources. In 1962, Somali women in Isiolo went to the length of demonstrating ‘against their husbands’ high level of consumption’ (Hjort 1983). As Hjort says, ‘[t]here must have been strong sentiments involved to convince these women to come out in the streets and demonstrate’ (loc. cit.). Disapproval is probably at its strongest amongst Somalis directly

exposed to negative effects who feel greater urgency regarding the substance than would, say, a middle-class Kikuyu businessman in Nairobi, who is likely to disapprove of it whilst feeling little sense of urgency.

One suspects that affluent suburbs of Nairobi or, say, Catholic retreats are places where attitudes converge more towards disapproval, even though for many in such places miraa would hardly be an issue. As always, exceptions are found. For example, there are Catholic priests from the Nyambenes, and I met a few such individuals who approved of the substance and actually used it. However, the negative associations of the substance, the aesthetics of its consumption, and arguments used against it are strong enough to taint miraa in the eyes of many Kenyans, making it hardly 'respectable'.

**Miraa, 'respect', 'respectability', and modernity:**

The word 'respectability' carries 'middle-class' connotations to British ears, conjuring up images of a genteel life in the suburbs. Members of Kenyan middle-classes, perhaps aspiring to Western influenced ideas of what being respectable in the modern world actually means, often view miraa as something incompatible with their lives in modern, forward-looking, Kenya. Hence, because of its associations with 'up-country' Kenya, and lowly types, miraa hardly can generate respect from other 'forward-looking' people. Imenti attitudes to Tigania and Igembe, and to miraa itself, are pertinent here. I have spoken to Imenti who lament the backwardness of the Nyambenes, pointing out that witchcraft, polygyny, and female circumcision are all still rife there, whilst Imenti have in the main jettisoned them. For many Imenti, miraa's association with Tigania and Igembe, and its general controversial status, make it seem out of place for 'modern' people like themselves. Miraa consumption, without the same cultural and economic importance for Imenti as for Tigania and Igembe, can be thus seen as backward.

Whilst many Imenti youth indulge in miraa – particularly those aspiring to *poa* status – the likelihood is that if one meets a Meru who claims not to chew, that man will be an Imenti. This is striking given the proximity of Imenti to the Nyambenes. But, the Imenti are located around the large town of Meru itself, and have been exposed to outside influences longer and more intensely than their Nyambene neighbours. The British were based at Meru town, and its location ensured an easier access for missionaries than did the more isolated Nyambenes. Whilst the indigenous crop of miraa provided Tigania and Igembe with a way of surviving in modern Kenya, Imenti turned more to introduced crops and outside farming techniques. Just what modernity means to many Imenti was perhaps moulded more by outside influences.

The same can be said for ‘down-country’ Kenyans, for whom miraa can also appear ‘backwards-looking’. The *Kenya Times* article quoted above illustrates perfectly how urban ideals of modern life lead some to view miraa farmers and traders as ‘undeveloped’ as they do not wear the latest fashions or live in ‘modern’ style housing. (Of course, the snappy dressing style of many miraa traders shows up the article’s descriptions as partial.)

The situation in the Nyambenes is different. The high approval rating of miraa, as well as its extreme familiarity, make it perfectly respectable (for a man, at least), and even members of Tigania and Igembe ‘middle-classes’ are unlikely to feel contempt for it. Furthermore, Nyambene isolation combined with miraa’s economic success perhaps allowed a more home-grown vision of modernity to emerge, one that is financially successful while still rooted deeply in ‘traditional’ farming techniques (Goldsmith 1994) and ‘traditional’ cultural practices. The fact that miraa holds its own while introduced crops fail in the present world market offers further proof to Tigania and Igembe that being modern in their own way is not as backward-looking as some might maintain.

Also, the adoption of miraa by many Kenyans of *poa* status presents yet another vision of what gains ‘respect’ in the modern world. Just because miraa is traditionally rooted in the

Nyambenes and associated with elders, has not prevented it being linked with modern markers of youthful *poa*-ness that have come from abroad: hip-hop, reggae, Nike and Adidas sportswear etc. This has allowed miraa to gain a type of respect very different from the genteel type of 'respectability': respect that emerges precisely because miraa is not 'respectable' in the genteel sense.

Knowledge plays a part in generating respect. Those with little knowledge of the substance are likely to be unaware of the different varieties of miraa, and to regard it as just a cheap substance used by the likes of prostitutes and *matatu* touts. Those in the know, on the other hand, are able to differentiate between varieties and the price paid for each one. This suggests that conspicuous consumption of elite miraa has symbolic meaning for cognoscenti, although communicating different messages to non-cognoscenti. Amongst individuals who know about miraa, therefore there exists potential for communicating one's status through chewing high-class miraa, thus gaining respect for oneself reflected off that given to miraa. For one hoping to be perceived as *poa* amongst the young of Isiolo, chewing a *poa* but cheap variety of miraa like *makata* might also provide the desired respect.

These different forms of 'respect', 'respectability', and different ideas of what constitutes 'modernity' show just how divergent are reactions to Western influences, and also how divergent are these Western influences themselves. Some sit easily with genteel living in the suburbs, while others speak more of the youthful defiance evident in much of the western music popular with Kenyan youth. Perceptions of which of these influences are good and which bad, and how they fit in with local 'traditions' are varied indeed, rendering ideas of 'globalisation' as some overwhelming homogenising force dubious indeed.<sup>35</sup>

### Controlling consumption

No legal restrictions are nowadays applied to chewing in Kenya, although some anti-miraa elders decreed Lamu a miraa-free zone in 2001: a measure doomed to be short-lived on an island with so many chewers. Without legal restrictions, for someone to control whether or not a person chews requires other measures.

The above factors feeding into perceptions of miraa as an acceptable or unacceptable substance to consume are obviously relevant here too. In a context where chewing is approved of to a high degree, there may very well be some pressure on an individual to chew, although most chewers I met were always willing to welcome non-chewers. For the sake of fitting in, however, one might feel one ought to chew.

More potent is the knowledge or perception that someone finds miraa chewing unacceptable, and this can play a role in discouraging consumption. One is likely to refrain from chewing in the presence of someone who disapproves of it and who either wields authority over oneself or is someone with whom one wants to keep on good terms. Even though I regularly chewed elsewhere, I was always careful not to be seen chewing in the Catholic hostel where I stayed in Nairobi, as I knew several Sisters there would not approve of miraa. Many friends in Isiolo – including Nicholas – are uncomfortable with the thought of chewing in front of the Bishop, even though he is resigned to some of his congregation chewing. Several friends remove *takssins* if there is any danger of running into him, fearing they may lose their jobs if caught. Such fear was not wholly effective against chewing at the Mission. One watchman felt no restraint and made little effort to hide his consumption whilst on duty. The Bishop going away for a few days often had a dramatic effect, with previously covert chewers now feeling free to chew openly: *takssins* aplenty. The desire of young men to impress a girl might potentially restrict consumption too: if a young lady one likes

disapproves of the substance, some young men might abstain to impress her. For Nicholas such a move would be unthinkable: his future wife might very well come second in his affections to miraa.

To prevent miraa being consumed on the premises, many cafes and other establishments put up signs prohibiting chewing. While these are not always obeyed – or taken seriously by those who put them up – they are likely to put many off breaking the prohibition. Sanctified places like mosques and churches are likely to deter chewing without making a prohibition explicit: one Turkana friend refused to enter the grounds of Isiolo cathedral when chewing as a sign of ‘respect’.

Perhaps those with most potential influence over someone else’s consumption are parents. Children of those opposed strongly to miraa might very well be discouraged from chewing by the anticipation of an angry parental reaction. Obviously parental control over a child’s consumption has its limitations, and there are those who go against the wishes of their parents and chew anyway, albeit secretly. One Imenti girl living in Isiolo had parents who disapproved strongly of miraa, and yet she enjoyed chewing and would do so when there was little risk of being caught.

### **Financial cost**

How significant cost is in someone’s choice to chew or not depends partly on where the potential miraa consumer lives. For example, in Isiolo different varieties available provide low cost and high cost alternatives. Thus one can indulge in *matangoma* with little expenditure. Higher-class varieties are obviously beyond the price range of many, especially given the high rate of poverty in a town like Isiolo. Increased production in rainy seasons

makes higher quality varieties affordable for more people, however: the rains are a cause of celebration for penurious chewers.

In most Kenyan towns the bulk of miraa sold is *giza*, which comes in different grades. The lowest grade *giza* is still more expensive than varieties like *matangoma*, and so outside of towns like Isiolo the cost of chewing might prove more influential as cheap varieties are not readily available, and most chewers would need to be on some sort of income. Varieties from elsewhere often undercut Nyambene miraa in price, increasing the number of consumers further. One such variety is *mugoka* from Embu, sold in towns like Karatina around Mount Kenya, and in Eastleigh in Nairobi: As Goldsmith reports (1994: 111): 'Muringene miraa has become too expensive for many long-time consumers, opening up a niche in Majengo [in Nairobi] for the rough *mugoka* miraa from Mbere in Embu District.' Towns bordering Uganda also offer cheap varieties grown in that country. Cheap varieties sold in towns like Garba Tulla and Kinna show how the trade can be tailored to the economic means of different regions.

One's conscience can obviously make one think twice about chewing miraa in times of dire financial need, when money is better spent on food for the family than on miraa, a substance people can survive without. Certainly dismal circumstances prohibit chewing for many, and Goldsmith is no doubt right when he says that 'famine, the collapse of the state, and theft of international food relief and UN property is pushing local miraa prices beyond the financial means of many local consumers in Kenya' (loc. cit.). However, being utterly penurious does not necessarily preclude consumption, as wealthier friends might always come to one's aid, even if just on a *kupiga start* basis.

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The above influences on consumption are clearly interwoven. Preconceptions of miraa and chewers influence reaction to miraa's material qualities; material qualities help form perceptions on miraa and chewers; perceptions of the substance influence people to tolerate chewing or to restrict it; attempts to restrict it may make it seem a daring substance to consume, so encouraging consumption; the less affordable miraa (or a variety of miraa) is, the more 'exclusive' it might seem, so becoming perceived as desirable; perceptions of certain varieties as 'exclusive' allow for higher prices to be charged, thus reducing affordability. The situation is extremely intricate, and made more so by individual divergence in ways of interacting with miraa, as Nicholas will demonstrate in the conclusion to the present work.

### **Boundaries demolished; new barriers built:**

The spread of miraa consumption has to a large degree, as Goldsmith notes, 'outstripped any earlier religious, ethnic, and social boundaries' (1988: 121). This is not the whole picture, however: not everyone in Kenya feels free to chew. Miraa's trajectories over the course of the last century have surrounded it with controversy: many associate it with poverty and addiction, and many regard it as unseemly. Factors discussed above that discourage or preclude chewing provide barriers to its further spread. Thus, while miraa has crossed boundaries, it still faces obstacles, many of them relatively new, having emerged in the course of crossing earlier ones. Miraa's spread beyond groups linked to miraa from early times seems to have been as a result of its pragmatic effects, making it popular with those whose work involves long arduous hours: nightwatchmen, prostitutes, *matatu* touts etc. Miraa has not become popular with the likes of 'middle class' businessmen, and others from non-traditional chewing groups who aspire to 'respectability'.

The *poa* status of the substance might encourage sufficient numbers of young people from backgrounds not normally associated with the substance to become chewers, even if

chewing is kept secret from parents. Once a taste has developed for the substance, such young people might well continue chewing into adulthood.

In Kenya, as miraa chewing appears to many as a 'lower class' activity, it would seem that to become a more mainstream pursuit, miraa chewing has to 'trickle-up' the ranks of Kenyan society. The 'trickle-up' phenomenon of consumption is hardly unheard of, given examples like jeans, once workaday attire for labourers and now worn casually by many in the higher echelons of European and American society, albeit with a designer label attached (cf. Campbell 1994: 110).<sup>36</sup> But, miraa's unseemly reputation inhibits its 'trickling-up' in this way. Perhaps an increase of knowledge concerning the substance and its varieties would help it break down further barriers. As a chewer one can still distinguish oneself from other miraa chewers by the variety one consumes, and where knowledge of the substance is widely spread a similar situation to the Yemen arises, where '*Yemenis can tell even from across the room what kind of qat a man is chewing and estimate how much he paid for it*' (Weir 1985: 160. Italics in original.). If more Kenyans become aware of elite varieties of the substance, then it seems possible that miraa might 'trickle-up'.

Of course, boundaries exist beyond Kenya too. In the UK miraa chewing seems restricted to Somalis and others with a long tradition of consumption: it has not yet spread substantially into the wider population. Perhaps the time-consuming nature of chewing, the fact that it is an acquired taste and that its consumption method is of dubious appeal aesthetically may keep this boundary intact. As members of consuming communities become more integrated into Britain, then maybe miraa will become more integrated too. Further increase in consumption beyond Kenya would encourage further cultivation back in the Nyambenes,<sup>37</sup> but may not be wholly desirable for farmers and traders: wider consumption in the UK might induce the British authorities to reconsider its current legal status.

Such prophesying of miraa's future is of course mere conjecture, and the part that contingency will no doubt play renders it fairly futile. Some Meru maintain that miraa *haipingiki* ('cannot be blocked') (Goldsmith 1988: 137), and given miraa's long history of breaching boundaries, perhaps this confidence will prove well-founded, and miraa will chew up yet more barriers. Of course, yet more are likely to be spat out in its wake.

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<sup>1</sup> By Meru population, I include here the Imenti, at least some of whom would have chewed in those days, even though many nowadays have quite negative opinions of the substance.

<sup>2</sup> Probably amongst the Imenti and other Meru sub-groups too.

<sup>3</sup> This sounds a little strange given miraa's stamina-boosting qualities: a potential boon for warriors.

<sup>4</sup> The classic text on social sanctions is by Radcliffe-Brown: *Social Sanctions* in Radcliffe-Brown 1952 (205-211).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Peatrik (1999: 547). She defines a *mugambi* thus: '[D]ans un conseil de Pères du pays, individu que se distingue sa capacité à s'exprimer, à trouver des solutions et à ramener la concorde'. I do not think the term is restricted to elders alone.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Nyaga (1997: 71-72): he mentions that warriors caught drinking beer suffered similar harsh beatings.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Willis 2001. In this article, Willis questions the supposed relaxing of restrictions on any but elders drinking beer amongst the Nyakyusa of Tanzania. He is following on from the work of Monica Wilson (see Wilson 1977: 92-3, 131).

<sup>8</sup> Kenya National Archives: BB.PC / EST / 6 / 12 Miraa – General 1945–1957 By-laws.

<sup>9</sup> The term 'modernization' is questionable given debates in anthropology today about 'tradition' versus 'modernity' and all the different ways to perceive just what is 'modernity'. See below for how miraa straddles the 'traditional' and the 'modern' as a traditional crop successful in the modern world (also see Goldsmith 1994).

<sup>10</sup> I once spoke with some traders in Mutuati who were waiting for a vehicle to take away *bundas* of *kangeta*. When I asked them the destination of their miraa, they seemed distinctly proud of the fact that it was destined for London.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas always showed respect for Nyambene elders, although this respect was nicely tempered by cheekiness. One of his uncles is notorious for showing little respect to elders, as shown in the following story:

One of Nicholas' uncles, known for being a heavy drinker, met a neighbour's wife whilst on his way home from drinking in Mutuati. He accused her of allowing her goats to eat his crops, and physically assaulted her. Her husband then confronted him, but was soundly thrashed in a fight. Rather than risk being beaten again, the couple decided to bring Nicholas' uncle before *Njuri* elders. When he heard that a case was being brought against him, he started drinking again and went to see the elders carrying a sharp *panga* [machete]. His father and two brothers were also present, having come to hear the case. Before the procedure started, the defendant – now very drunk – started verbally abusing the elders, threatening to kill them. He drew the *panga* out and

menacingly chopped at the surrounding grass as his anger grew. He accused the elders of doing little except feasting on bulls and rams wheedled out of others, and even of judging cases unfairly. The elders saw that he was not calming down, and so they all fled, even leaving behind them some miraa which the defendant's father had brought as a token of peace. The defendant himself disappeared, and it was left to his father to pay a fine in the form of a ram and a bull to *Njuri* elders on behalf of his son, having been accused by them of bringing up his children badly.

A clear example of dissent and disrespect. Peatrik quotes an extract from a British report lamenting the languishing state of the *kiamas* (council of elders) in 1919-1920, criticising them in a similar way to Nicholas' uncle: '[the *kiamas*'] sole preoccupation is to obtain a bullock or a goat from both parties to eat' (KNA: PC/CP. 1/9/1. 1919-1920; cited in Peatrik 1999: 432).

<sup>12</sup> Willis states regarding Nyakyusa drinking and the supposed restriction to elders that '[p]re-colonial authority and drinking patterns were more contested than [Wilson] argued' (Willis 2001: 387-388).

<sup>13</sup> Though see the tongue-in-cheek remark of Nicholas's that heads this chapter.

<sup>14</sup> Beckerleg reported this in her 2001 talk.

<sup>15</sup> In glibly talking of the 'social construction' of, say, perceptions towards miraa one is in great danger of glossing over the effect the substance itself can have in influencing these perceptions. To talk of something being 'socially constructed' is not to say anything in particular unless one specifies exactly what 'social' aspects are doing the 'constructing'. 'Social constructive' perspectives are all very well as a corrective to over reliance on 'natural' or 'universal' factors in explanation, but surely one must strike some sort of balance to reflect the great complexity of factors that do play a part in our lives.

<sup>16</sup> Shelagh Weir emphasises the aesthetic quality of Yemeni miraa: 'After qat is picked its fresh, crisp leaves still gladden the eye. Merchants select and trim the branches like florists arranging a bouquet, and men proudly unwrap their newly purchased bunches to display them to friends' (Weir 1985: 158).

<sup>17</sup> Weir remarks that while foreigners often dislike the distended cheeks of consumers, 'Yemenis, however, draw attention to the consumers with the most swollen cheeks with amusement and admiration' (1985: 118).

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas advises only chewing with one *takssin*, as then one side of the face remains mush-free. This is handy in case one bumps into an attractive lady: one can smile at her out of the miraa-free side, so not repelling her with green flecks. Chewing with two *takssins* would obviously preclude this.

<sup>19</sup> Miraa chewers joke that Ferguson is himself chewing miraa rather than gum.

<sup>20</sup> One should not portray all Yemenis as pro-qat. Many would see the President as setting a bad example by chewing.

<sup>21</sup> Although the fact that it comes from a tree would be seen as a positive thing by many drug consumers in a country like Britain: it is common to hear people stating a preference for natural drugs like magic mushrooms over synthetic ones like LSD.

<sup>22</sup> My first outing in Nairobi allowed me to make the acquaintance of a Kikuyu taxi driver who described himself as devoutly Catholic. He was a little taken aback when I mentioned that I was going to research miraa, consumption of which he dismissed as a habit of Muslims, and one which makes them lazy.

<sup>23</sup> I attended a couple of such workshops at the Isiolo Catholic Mission, and miraa was discussed.

<sup>24</sup> See Weir (1985: 59ff.) on the constant presentation of miraa as a 'problem' in the literature on it.

<sup>25</sup> 'What the readers say', or 'reader's opinions'.

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<sup>26</sup> The author of this and many other high quality humorous pieces – Wahome Mutahi – sadly died recently.

<sup>27</sup> The show was broadcast on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2000.

<sup>28</sup> Talk of man-hours being lost to qat chewing is well-known in the Yemen too. See Kennedy 1987: 21, where he refers to the assertion that ‘two million hours per day [are] wasted on the drug’.

<sup>29</sup> Links with Saudi Arabia are quite common these days, as much charitable money reaches Kenya for Muslim projects. Miraa is illegal in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>30</sup> Pressure from abroad may yet be felt by the Kenyan government in regard to miraa. Susan Beckerleg raised in her 2001 talk the possibility that the US government might look at the miraa trade with a jaundiced eye given supposed links of Somali warlords with the trade. They might possibly begin to see the trade as funding terrorism. I am still hopeful, however, that miraa will continue to be legal in Kenya for the foreseeable future.

<sup>31</sup> Nicholas is an example of someone with a strong allegiance to miraa itself.

<sup>32</sup> I do not imply a deterministic link between having an allegiance to a consumer and becoming a consumer oneself. After all, one might, say, be married to a heroin user. That does not mean that one will become a heroin user too.

<sup>33</sup> Tigania farmers also point out that child labour in miraa production is an Igembe problem.

<sup>34</sup> I was often subject to such remarks myself, and witnessed them made about others. One Borana gatemán at the Isiolo mission was partial to a chew, and often chewed on duty. A priest (originally from Mbaranga above Karama) was driving through the gate one time and saw the Borana man chewing. He shouted out from the car ‘unakula miraa?’ (‘Are you chewing miraa’), playfully feigning shock.

<sup>35</sup> This all connects with recent debates on modernity, and such notions as ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt 2001). In anthropology, Miller (e.g. 1995b) has brought out how varied are visions of what constitutes ‘modernity’: local visions are multiple indeed. See also Appadurai 1996 on ‘modernity’ and ‘globalisation’, and Piot 1999.

<sup>36</sup> A nice example of a ‘trickling-up’ is provided by Richard Mabey in the *Flora Britannica Book of Wild Herbs* (1998: 12). He relates that ‘in Britain it is now not uncommon to find samphire, nettles, dandelions, bitter-cress, borage, wild strawberries, bilberries, and ramsons served in...both smart metropolitan restaurants and local pubs...they are no longer regarded simply as rough peasant foods, but are being used as ingredients for modern *styles* of cooking’.

<sup>37</sup> Increased consumption of miraa in the UK would also encourage further cultivation in Ethiopia and the Yemen, where much miraa sold there is sourced.

### **The social life of miraa: conclusion**

*I'm as right as a trivet, still wallowing in mauve medicine...whizzing!*

- Nicholas, June 2003.

In investigating the social life of miraa, my thesis has entered territory associated with economists: it deals with the circulation and exchange of a commodity. However, I am not a professional economist, have not engaged with economic theory, and did not collect the sort of hard data that an economist would desire. Instead, my approach has aimed to be rich in ethnographic detail, viewing the miraa trade as constituted by social relations in all their complexity. Economic exchange is embedded in such social relations, as the need for trust in the miraa trade demonstrates: trust emerges through, and helps strengthen, social relations. Exchange is also strongly influenced by many cultural factors as seen in the customary exchange of *ncoolo* in the Nyambenes; these social and cultural factors are especially clear in miraa's case. Approaching the trade in this way is more in tune with the work of 'cultural economists' than economists; indeed, the work of cultural economists like Dilley (1992, and 'in press'), the Alexanders (1991), and Appadurai (1986) has been formative for me.<sup>1</sup> Also, the thesis departs from a narrow concern with economic aspects of miraa's social life, and, courtesy of Nicholas, examines how miraa is incorporated into individual worlds of meaning. I do not analyse miraa's social life as an abstract system of exchange, but instead look at how it intricately plays a part in the lives of actual individuals and becomes significant for them.

Our look at miraa's social life shows that nuanced ethnography illuminates much that might be missed in an abstract analysis of economic exchange: thus the thesis is useful to wider debates in economic anthropology. Further relevance for wider debates comes in the form of the analysis

of ‘trust’, an important concept for economic anthropology; in our look at the inconsistent price margins of traders where lags in the spread of pricing information allow windfall profits; in the flexibility of the trade and its traders which defies neat categories like wholesaler / retailer; and in how customers use various techniques to show their knowledge of miraa while hoping to secure a good price. Such issues offer engaging comparative material for cultural economists. Also, by discussing the importance of the material qualities of goods in their trade and consumption, how miraa links to ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, the way it breaks down social barriers whilst erecting new ones, patterns of convergence and divergence, the dangers of over-abstraction, and the benefits of an object-focused approach that leaves room for real individuals, my thesis is given a wider importance beyond a narrow focus on miraa.

However, my thesis is mainly concerned with the significance of miraa’s social life for its own sake, and our object-focused and multi-channelled examination of paths miraa follows – paths from tree to *takssin* – has elicited an integrated understanding of this significance. Much of this significance is benign; however, few things in life offer unalloyed good, and some is malign too. Here follows a summary of this significance, divided up artificially into the categories ‘economic’, ‘social’, and ‘cultural’,<sup>2</sup> artificially because all three – as is now evident – are mutually constitutive and intertwined.<sup>3</sup>

***Economic:***

- For Tigania and Igembe, miraa offers opportunities aplenty for securing a reasonable income. Goldsmith (1994: 95-96) summarises these opportunities: ‘The nearly complete absence of land sales in the miraa growing area, the high productivity of a small plot under miraa, and high opportunity for off-farm income in the harvesting, marketing, and other aspects of the industry give considerable options to the Nyambene peasant cultivator compared to many other Kenyan smallholders. Free entry to the market lessens the power

concentrated in patron's hands. Because the miraa industry largely operates independently of state control or involvement, politicians, famous for manipulating access to the state and local resources, have had little scope for interference.' Not all Tigania and Igembe become wealthy from the trade – although many do, particularly those who reinvest income soundly – but miraa provides a degree of financial security not matched by other agricultural cash-crops.

- Not just Meru benefit financially from miraa. Entry into the national trade is fairly unrestricted, and with the system of procuring miraa on credit from wholesalers, many enter with minimum expenditure. The hundreds of Borana and Somali women retailers who make an income from miraa are witnesses to this. While the majority of such traders are unlikely to become rich from miraa, those who can invest enough to start up as wholesalers can become relatively wealthy. People of other ethnic groups are in on the act too, including those Maasai retailers we met in Kajiado.
- For many members of the vast Somali diaspora, miraa also offers a lifeline. The international trade is large in scale, and offers plenty of work within Kenya and in destination countries. The high stakes of this trade, especially the illegal trade to the US and Canada, mean that fortunes can be made. An unlucky few end up languishing in prison on smuggling charges. Profits are such when miraa is successfully smuggled that prices paid farmers in the Nyambenes seem almost insignificant in comparison (though obviously not for the farmers).
- Some argue that miraa consumption induces indolence, keeping chewers away from work, so exacerbating poverty. Thus, chewers are said not only to waste money on the substance, but also to earn no income through idling. Whilst there may well be many who waste both time and money on the substance, we have also seen the more positive role miraa can play in a pragmatic context. Many are actually helped in their desire to work by its stimulant properties.

- Some also argue that miraa holds back development in the Nyambenes by encouraging children to give up on education and pick miraa instead. Certainly many school-age children are employed as pickers in the Igembe region. This is almost universally seen as a bad thing. The flip side of the coin is that many children are put through education because of miraa: we met in chapter seven the school teacher who has written a draft of a book on miraa, praising it as it paid for his education and that of his siblings. Some schools in the Nyambenes even have their own miraa plantations which help raise funds for students.
- All the following benefit financially from miraa: farmers, pickers, brokers, agents, wholesalers, retailers, and transporters. Their earnings from miraa are direct, and obvious. Women trading banana leaves at Muringene and elsewhere are reliant on miraa traders for their business. Local councils throughout Kenya earn valuable shillings from cess and licences for kiosks. Miraa provides foreign exchange for the country as a whole. Its trade and consumption also offer rewards for the likes of retailers of soft drinks and other accessories for chewing, owners of cafes and bars where chewers or traders congregate, and even prostitutes, whose services are said to be used by some chewers and traders. Toyota Hilux dealers also do well out of miraa. Money made from it is spread far and wide.

***Social:***

- Ethnic boundaries are bridged in the course of miraa's circulation, bringing together Meru, Borana, Somali, Maasai, and many others in personalised relations that often involve trust. For example, the trade to the north of the country witnesses efficient and well-integrated trajectories passing from Meru to Borana, Somali, Gabra, Burji, Rendille and others. Chewing sessions in many Kenyan towns and cities see a mixture of people of different ethnic backgrounds interacting in a usually peaceful manner: the mix of ethnicities evident amongst chewers who gather peacefully at Gitonga's kiosk in Nanyuki demonstrate this. Miraa in many ways is socially cohesive.

- Of course, the converse is also true: miraa can erect barriers between people. The high stakes of the trade, for example, has led to tension between Meru and Somali. Also, by interacting with miraa one may make oneself closer to some people while distancing oneself from those who disapprove of it. For example, in chapter four we discussed those Borana and Somali women retailers who often become popular figures with customers, but whose trade can bring disapproval too. Miraa, and especially the money to be made from it, can be socially divisive and even incendiary.
- One divisive aspect of miraa, some would claim, is the way men chew away from home, keeping families apart. This aspect is often highlighted by Somalis, and there is certainly strong feeling about it. (However, it seems rather naïve to expect that men who presently neglect their families would suddenly become attentive husbands and fathers should miraa be removed from the picture.)
- A comparison with institutionalised consumption of qat in Yemen is revealing. The impression gleaned from Yemeni material is that the institution of the qat party is fairly fundamental to the running of Yemeni society. Of course this impression may be exaggerated, but it does make for a striking contrast with the Kenyan material. In Kenya miraa acts as a social facilitator – just as it does in the Yemen – but usually in much more informal contexts where miraa is not the focus of proceedings. Should miraa be removed from the equation, socialising in Kenya would mainly follow similar patterns, albeit without a prime resource for social life. Removing qat from the Yemeni context would probably have a more drastic effect on how people socialise.

***Cultural:***

- The importance of miraa culturally for Tigania and Igembe is hard to exaggerate. Miraa is a diacritical marker of Tigania and Igembe identity, intimately linked to their traditions and

history. The fact that miraa is a success economically – and more of a success than many introduced crops, as Goldsmith emphasises – only reinforces further the respect with which it is held in the Nyambenes. As a traditional crop that is a success in the modern world, miraa sustains respect for traditional institutions; for example, helping maintain what Peatrik terms the ‘ethos’ of the generation classes. To be successful in the modern world, therefore, does not require one to sacrifice traditional practises and incorporate western practises, which others may regard as more ‘modern’ and hence superior because of their western provenance.

- Miraa’s incorporation into what I termed a ‘youth ethos’ is also an important aspect culturally. Its status as something *poa* no doubt plays a role in encouraging consumption amongst youth. Its lack of ‘respectability’ in a middle-class sense accords it ‘respect’ amongst some youth aspiring to look *poa*. For Tigania and Igembe youth, its *poa* status might also reinforce respect for traditions: a traditional crop associated with Meru heritage is now respected in a wider youth ethos, many elements of which are derived from beyond Kenya and are distinctly ‘modern’. Miraa for Tigania and Igembe youth can therefore be seen as a bridge connecting Nyambene traditions with the modern world. ‘Tradition’ and ‘modernity’ are not necessarily mutually exclusive.
- Miraa is also associated with Somali culture, forming a diacritical marker of Somali identity too. They are inveterate consumers of the substance in Somalia itself, in Kenya, and in the wider diaspora. Maintaining the institution of the *majlis* in the UK and elsewhere might help preserve a Somali identity in the face of a predominantly non-Somali environment.

Thus, miraa’s significance is great indeed. Its significance is made yet greater by the sheer richness of its social life...

### **Richness and abundance**

Miraa is not a uniform commodity perceived by everyone in a uniform manner, if such a thing could possibly exist: individuals possess unique configurations of meanings and associations with things through their unique backgrounds. Even within its Nyambene birthplace, this lack of uniformity is evident: miraa is packaged in different varieties according to various criteria: where on the tree it is picked, the age and quality of the tree, and the zone in the Nyambenes where it originates. (Variety itself could stand as a keyword for the thesis, referring to the varied types of miraa and the varied associations and meanings it has.) These varieties then follow different trajectories, are expedited by different people, and then consumed at various endpoints by people from all sorts of backgrounds.

The associations it picks up whilst circulating are many indeed. Miraa is associated with certain groups of people: the association with Meru is common, and some distinguish more exactly, associating it with Tigania and Igembe, rather than, say, Imenti. Others associate it more with Somalis, Arabs, Swahili and the like, or even Muslims. The association of miraa with the loaded word 'drug' brings in wider associations with the shady world of 'hard drugs', tainting miraa with an image it hardly deserves. Some associate it with tradition, and even 'backwardness', perhaps as a 'dirty' habit of the impoverished north. Others might see it in a more 'modern' light, reflecting its role in developing the Nyambene economy, and in its link to a modern 'youth ethos'. Some associate miraa with violence (and the stereotyped short tempers of Tigania and Igembe), while others associate it with peace, comparing chewing sessions with drinking sessions and finding the latter have more potential for violence. Some associate it with child labour, while others see it as the source of income with which to educate children. Places might also be associated with the substance: e.g. the Nyambenes, Mogadishu, Isiolo, the coast, the north, or cities.

Meanings and associations diverge significantly the more distance miraa travels and the more people from different backgrounds that come into contact with it.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the trajectory from Ntonyiri in the Igembe region to Manchester sees miraa associated not only with Nyambene heritage and the economic significance for those operating its network, but also with chewing in Mogadishu: many Manchester chewers no doubt associate the substance with chewing back home in the Somali capital. Few of them are aware of its cultural significance for Tigania and Igembe in Kenya. Further research into miraa's terminal points in North America would complete the cycle of production-trade-consumption nicely by providing details on the meanings attached to the substance in a territory where it is illegal.

A full list of all such associations is impossible, as each individual would have so many idiosyncratic ones: for example, my association of miraa with the process of writing a thesis in St Andrews is not shared by many. However, the above list should illustrate the varied – and contradictory – nature of miraa's associations.

Individuals constantly feed off the richness in miraa's social life, adding more richness by creating yet more trajectories, meanings and associations. There is convergence in the world of miraa, but individuals diverge, forming new paths for miraa to follow: either new paths for its trade, or new mental paths in the creation of new ways to think and speak about miraa. One individual who creates more new paths than most is Nicholas.

**Nicholas: *The complet miraa connoisseur***

Nicholas's background and experiences give him a wide repertoire of meanings and associations of miraa to feed off. His lineage roots him firmly in the Nyambenes: his mother is Igembe, and his father Tigania. Nicholas has spent much time in Mutuati and Karama, soaking up Nyambene

perspectives on miraa, and has been intimately caught up in its social life, cultivating, picking, trading, and consuming it. He takes pride in Nyambene customs connected with miraa, often speaking of the day when he will take along *ncooloo* for his bride, and recounts the legendary tale of the pioneering miraa farmer *M'Nabea* with a passion that speaks volumes about his enthusiasm for miraa's Nyambene history. Much of his life has been spent in Isiolo, an extremely cosmopolitan town. There he interacts with people of varied ethnic backgrounds – Borana, Somali, Imenti, Turkana, Samburu, Kikuyu, Asian, Arab, European and more – and commonly chews alongside members of these various groups. Nicholas is as happy chewing alongside a Borana, as he is chewing alongside a Tigania. He consequently has soaked up many of the terms applied to miraa in various languages, as well as many ways of thinking and speaking about the substance different from those common in the Nyambenes. For example, Nicholas was gripped by a story an Arab once told him of how one should not go out and pick miraa at night, as that is when the spirits pick their miraa, and one might inadvertently anger them. Nicholas delights in hearing about the chewing habits of others. He also delights in hearing about and sampling non-Nyambene miraa: for example, he enjoyed trying Ethiopian miraa when visiting Moyale, and Ugandan miraa on sale in Western Kenya. Isiolo is infused with what I termed a 'youth ethos', as is Nairobi, where Nicholas has also spent much time. He is well integrated into such an ethos – loving his Adidas clothing<sup>5</sup>, hip-hop, reggae, and *sheng*<sup>6</sup> - and often chews alongside fellow youth in an atmosphere punctuated by *sheng*, music, and banter.

But Nicholas has not just absorbed the pre-existing richness of miraa's social life: he adds much to it. He adds new words for miraa – *mauve medicine* – and for its varieties, popularising amongst Isiolo chewers the terms *No. 14* for long stemmed *shurba ya karama*, and *ng'oileng* for *nyeusi*. He draws vocabulary from his wider reading, applying it to miraa: in one letter Nicholas describes miraa as his 'Elysian Fields', and in another uses a phrase derived from a Wodehouse novel I gave him to describe the way miraa makes him feel: 'bumps a daisy as Billy-O'. Amongst

the likes of the staff of *Kamathi Kiosk* in Isiolo, Nicholas's storytelling ability is treasured. Many of his stories are inspired by miraa, such as one involving a chewer piercing his cheek with a sharp twig of miraa, and then fleeing as he thinks the twig is in fact a truncheon wielded by someone behind him. Another involves the leaping dance of the Samburu: so much miraa had some Samburu warriors chewed that when asked to dance by tourists, they jumped so high that they disappeared. Stories not directly involving miraa are still often prefaced by remarks like 'I was chewing miraa with *stereo takssins* and talking the hind legs off a donkey when...'<sup>7</sup>

Nicholas's creativity and his knowledge beyond miraa both combine to generate novel ways of talking about and thinking about miraa. Some of this novelty will become used by others – although some will remain used by Nicholas alone – thus adding more to a repertoire of miraa terms, ideas, meanings and associations accessible to many. Thus, idiosyncrasy becomes convention.

Even though there is far more to Nicholas than miraa<sup>8</sup> – he finds so many other things fascinating that he would hardly be at a loss without it – it does play a large role in his life, to the degree that he flavours his descriptions of it with religious language, often adding 'amen' to the end of miraa stories. Also, his description of miraa's role in protecting him in the car crash (see chapter six) presents a personified *handas* as his saviour, albeit humorously. Miraa sustains him physically and intellectually, and is intertwined with his very identity. Nicholas is a self-styled *handas buff*, dedicated to the cause of quality miraa just as a member of the Campaign for Real Ale is to the cause of quality beer. He is so associated with it that when some people in Isiolo think of miraa, they also think of Nicholas: before I knew him, another Isiolo friend had put him top of a list of people whom I should meet in researching miraa. Miraa and the humour that can be derived from it are constitutive elements of the way people perceive Nicholas, and the way he perceives himself.

Just as miraa helps to constitute Nicholas's identity, so Nicholas helps constitute this thesis. It was usually in his company that I travelled along many of miraa's trajectories, and his contacts and knowledge guided us effortlessly along these trajectories. Also, his biography brings together many of the elements covered in the preceding chapters, including as it does involvement in most aspects of miraa's cycle of production-trade-consumption. Nicholas now hopes to get more deeply involved in the trade of miraa, and is considering setting himself up as a miraa retailer. Thus, miraa may brighten his future financially too. He is a miraa-man *par excellence*, and as such can show us just how intricate someone's relationship with a substance can be. This returns us to a theme of the introduction: the dangers of excessive abstraction. Dry abstractions about economic exchange creating value say precious little about the value of miraa for Nicholas. To learn about that requires one to immerse oneself both in the social life of miraa, and, of course, in the social life of Nicholas. The social lives of miraa and Nicholas in all their abundant particulars are not reducible to a few lifeless abstractions.

Nicholas always urged me to, as he phrased it, 'take up the cudgels' for miraa. As a keen apprentice to the master 'miraa connoisseur', and as someone who sees the good in miraa as outweighing the bad, I certainly do not shy away from this task. However, I hope that the master himself can speak through this thesis, and charm a few readers into seeing the joy of good company, good banter, and a cheek full of good miraa...*Amen!*

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<sup>1</sup> Gudeman (1986) speaks of 'economics as culture', and is another important 'cultural economist'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Health' would be another category added here if I had the expertise to comment on it. Certainly detailed research into the health implications of miraa use in Kenya along the lines of the research conducted by

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Kennedy *et al* in the Yemen (Kennedy 1987) would be beneficial. One clearly sees miraa implicated in the dental disasters that befall chewers who use sugar, and with the indirect problems of malnutrition and sleep deprivation for those who overuse it. The link of the miraa trade with HIV should also be examined: some claim there is a strong link between the spread of Tigania and Igembe traders throughout Kenya, and the increased rates of HIV in the Nyambenes. However, research into the health implications of miraa should not assume *a priori* that they will all be malign: just as research shows a moderate intake of red wine is good for the system, it may also show that a moderate intake of miraa has benefits too.

<sup>3</sup> Clearly there are profound issues surrounding these categories. How applicable they are as isolated categories is questionable: the wider applicability beyond western market economies of an isolated 'economics' is at the heart of the old formalist / substantivist debate (see Isaac 1993). I retain these categories merely as heuristic devices. Of course, the notion of 'culture' should also be treated with caution to avoid reification, and the concept is open to much criticism (see Kuper 1999).

<sup>4</sup> A commodity with an extreme disjunction of producer and consumer, and hence divergence of meanings and associations, is *Buckfast* 'tonic' wine. This is brewed by monks at an abbey in the south of England, and popularly drunk on streets by teenagers in the west of Scotland. The social life of *Buckfast* would be interesting indeed.

<sup>5</sup> In *sheng*, Adidas is known as 'Adidanga'. The 'anga' suffix gives the word a Kiswahili feel.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas enjoys speaking *sheng*, and invents many new words and phrases himself. However, he also prides himself on knowing how to speak perfect Kiswahili.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas's stories are told with intricate detail: they are impossible to do justice with only limited space. For this reason I provide the reader with one of Nicholas's favourite stories in Appendix III.

<sup>8</sup> Obviously, Nicholas would focus more on miraa with myself, a researcher interested in the substance, than with those not so interested in the substance.

**Appendix I**

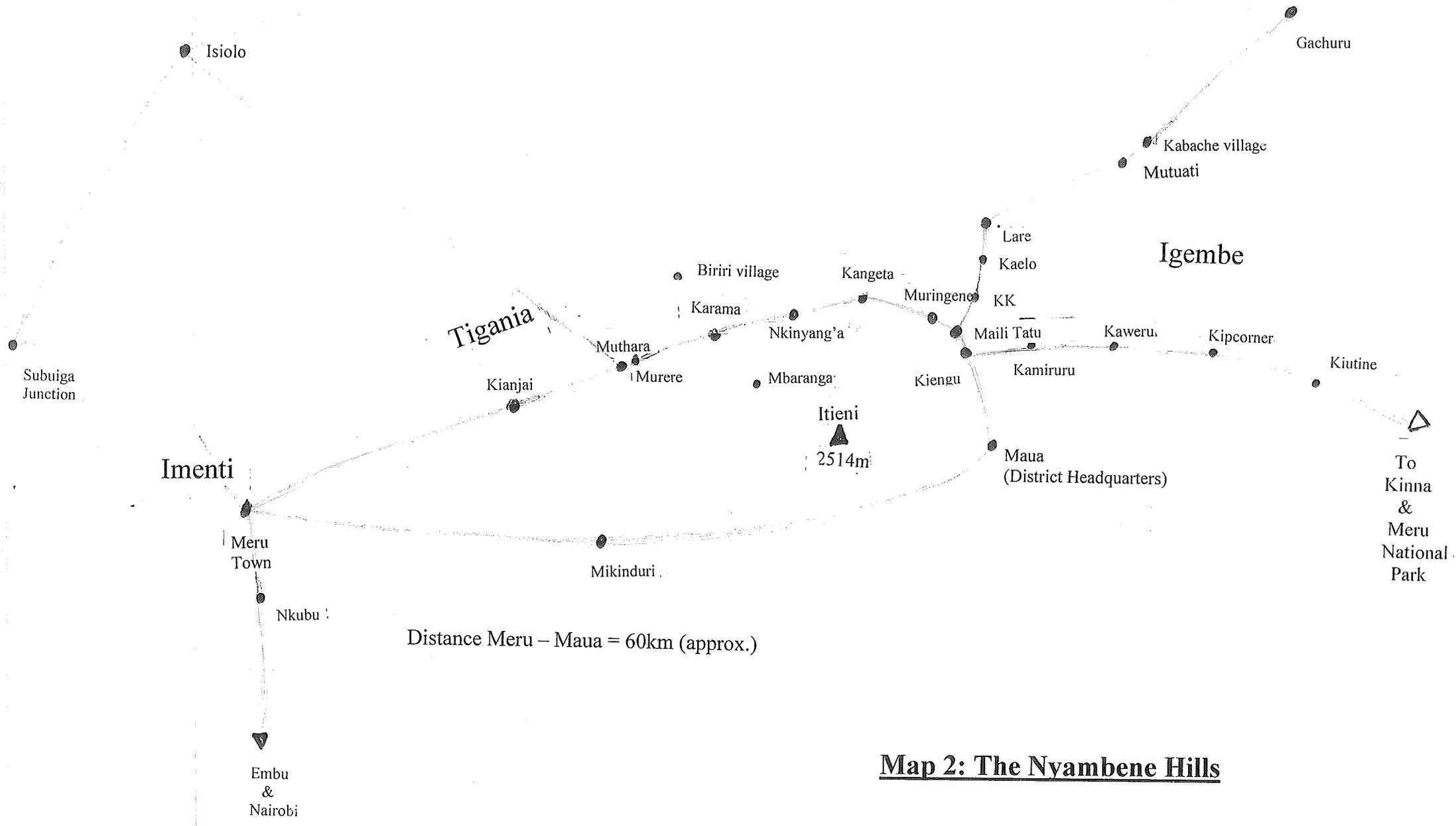
**Maps**

# Map 1: Kenya and principal towns

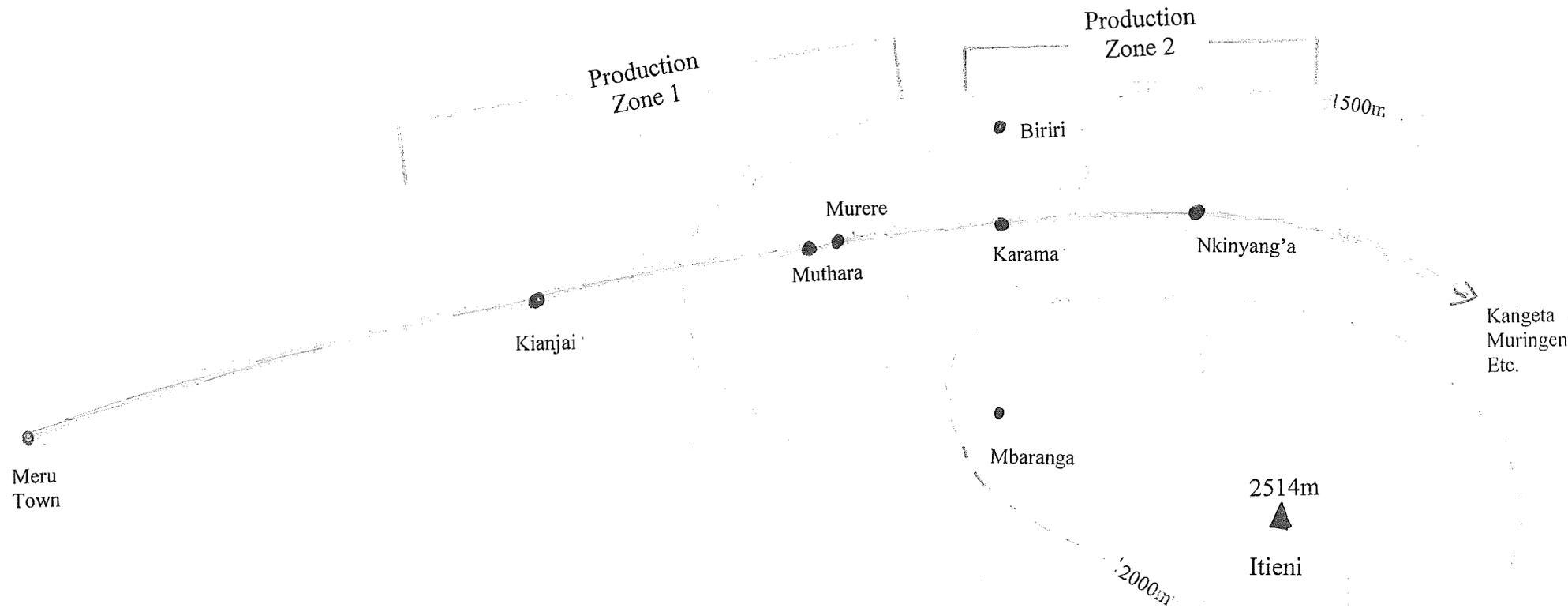
0 200km



= Miraa producing area  
▲ The Nyambene Hills



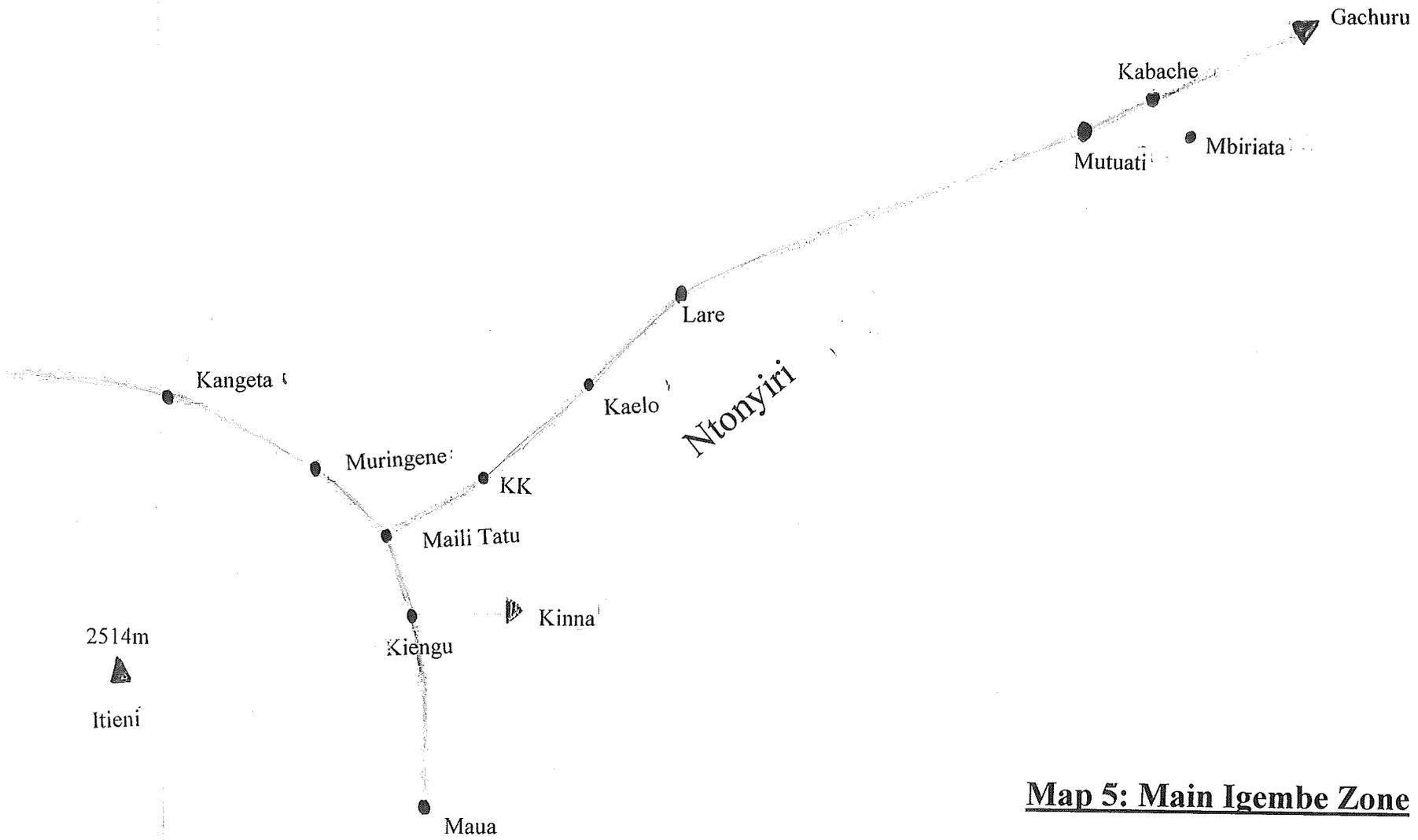
**Map 2: The Nyambene Hills**



**Map 3: Kianjai / Muthara & Karama / Nkinyang'a Zones**



Map 4: Less Intensive Igembe Zone



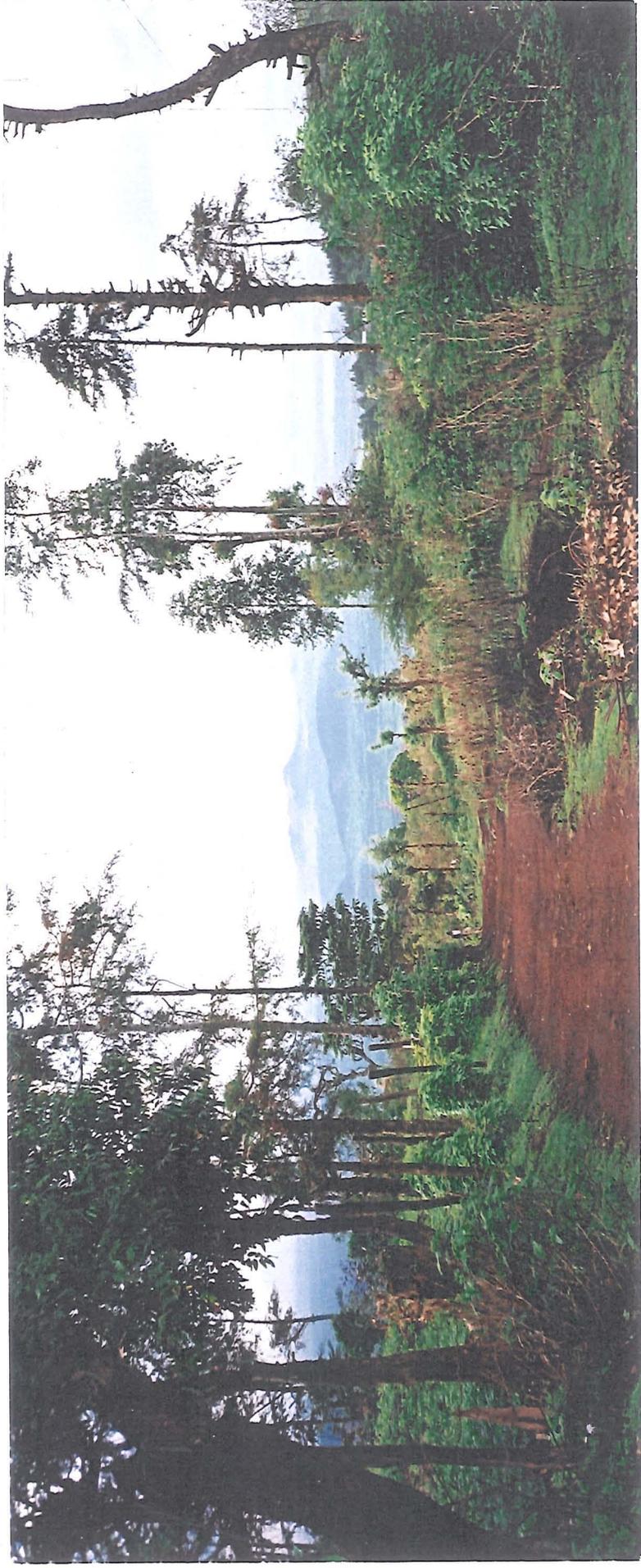
**Map 5: Main Igembe Zone**

## **Appendix II**

### ***Plates***



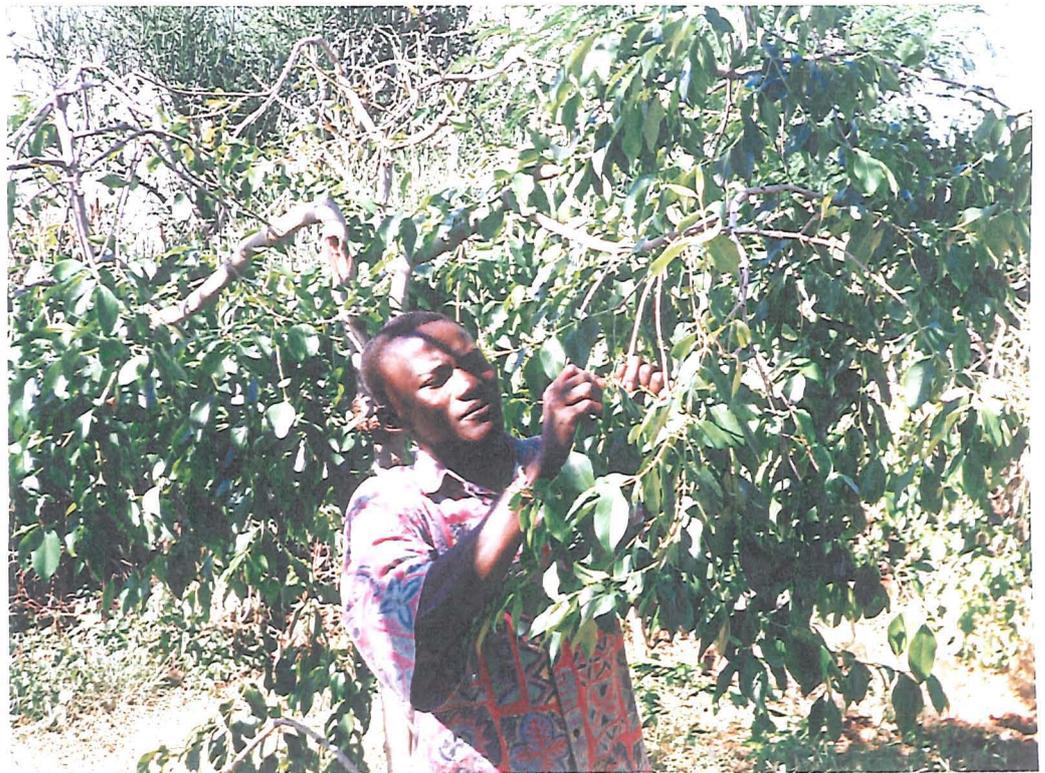
Plate 1: Nicholas delighted with stem of Mbaine



**Plate 2: View from Nkinyang'a to savanna below**



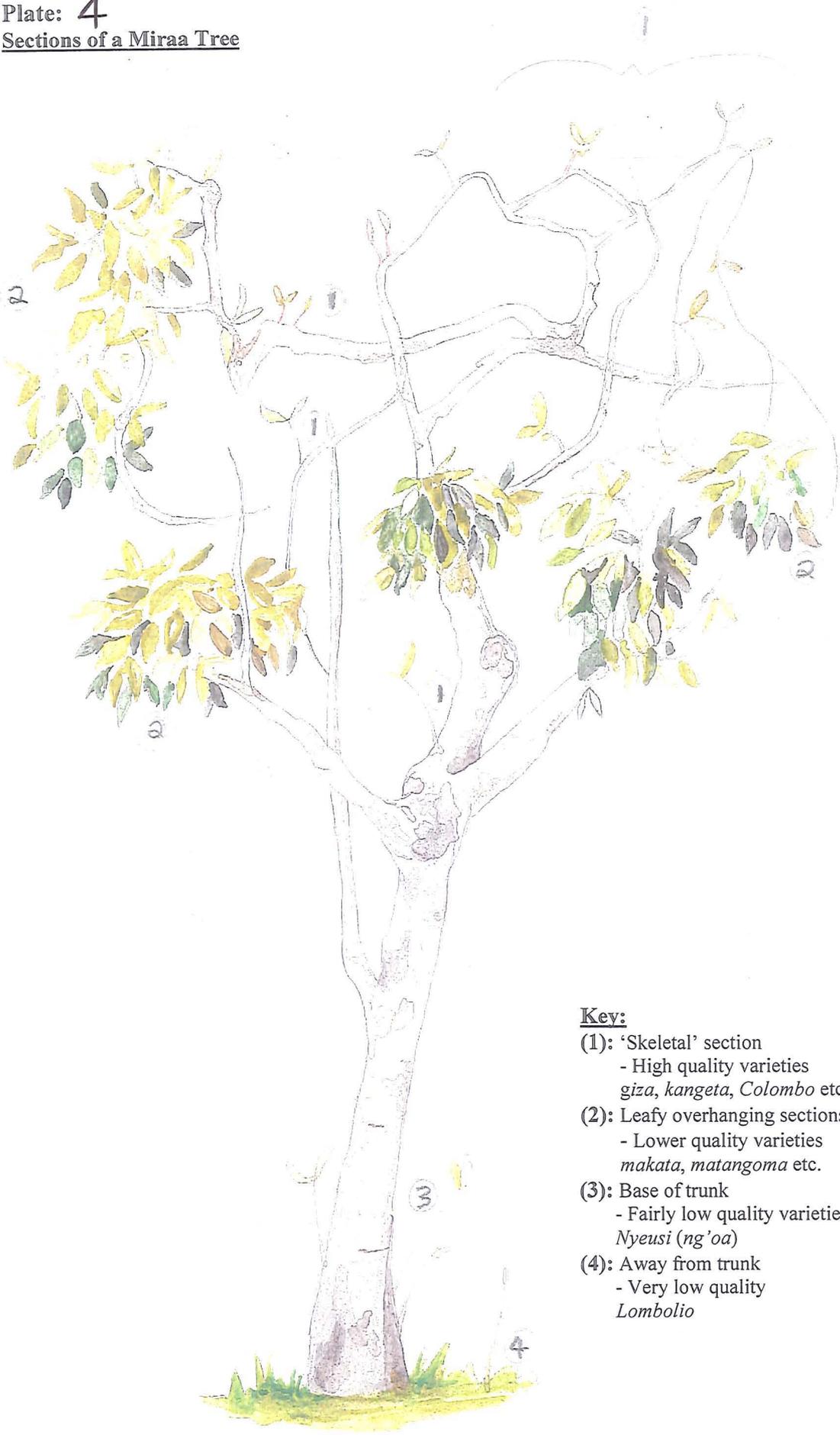
(a)



(b)

**Plate 3: Nicholas harvesting miraa stems**

Plate: 4  
Sections of a Miraa Tree



Key:

- (1): 'Skeletal' section
  - High quality varieties  
*giza, kangeta, Colombo* etc.
- (2): Leafy overhanging sections
  - Lower quality varieties  
*makata, matangoma* etc.
- (3): Base of trunk
  - Fairly low quality varieties  
*Nyeusi (ng'oa)*
- (4): Away from trunk
  - Very low quality  
*Lombolio*



**Plate 5: Anthropologist with miraa chewing graders**

(Note bed of discarded leaves from the grading process)



**Plate 6: Regrading shurbas in Karama**



**Plate 7: Ngoba (high quality miraa)**



**Plate 8: Colombo (high quality miraa)**

(Note the delighted smile of the *handas buff*)



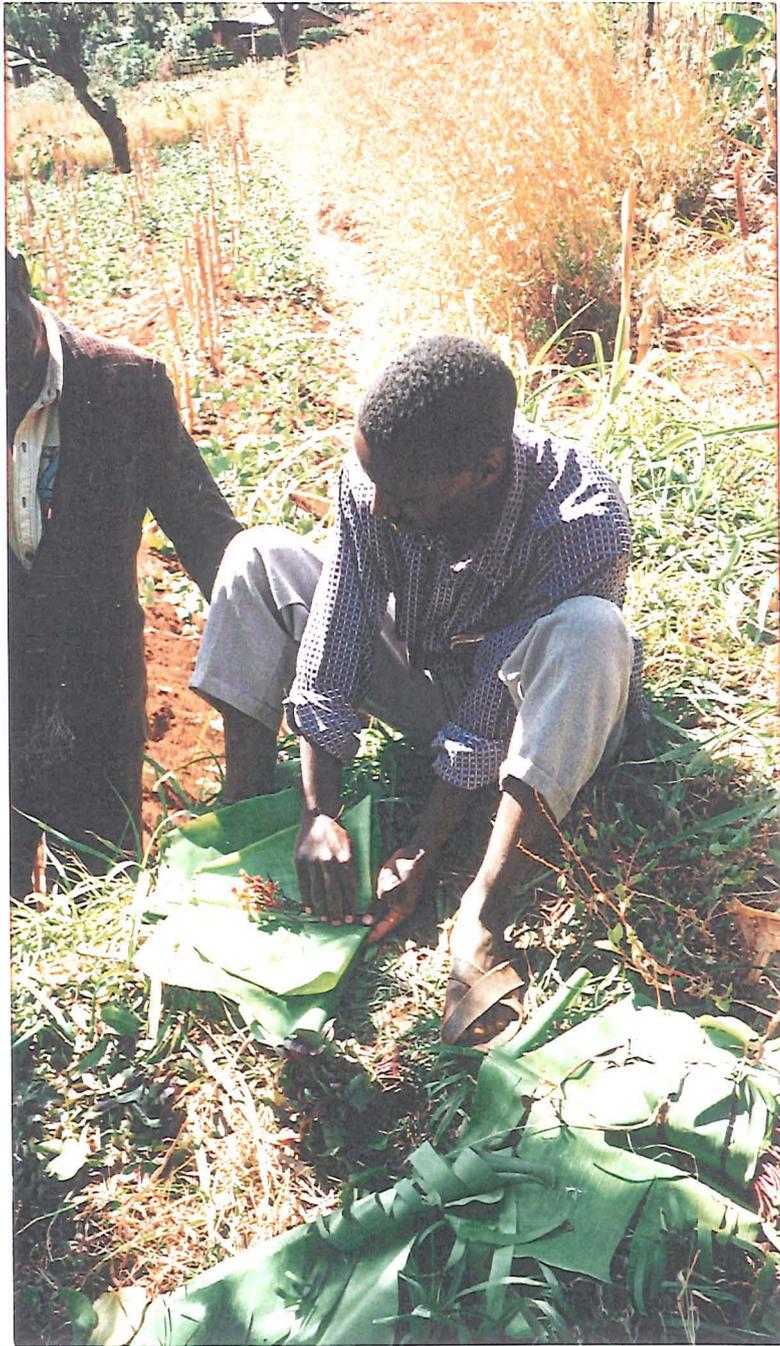
Plate 9: Makata (low quality miraa)



Plate 10: Matangoma (low quality miraa)



Plate 11: Mzee Baariu, wife, and their tea and miraa shamba



**Plate 12: Tying up a bundle of ncoolo**

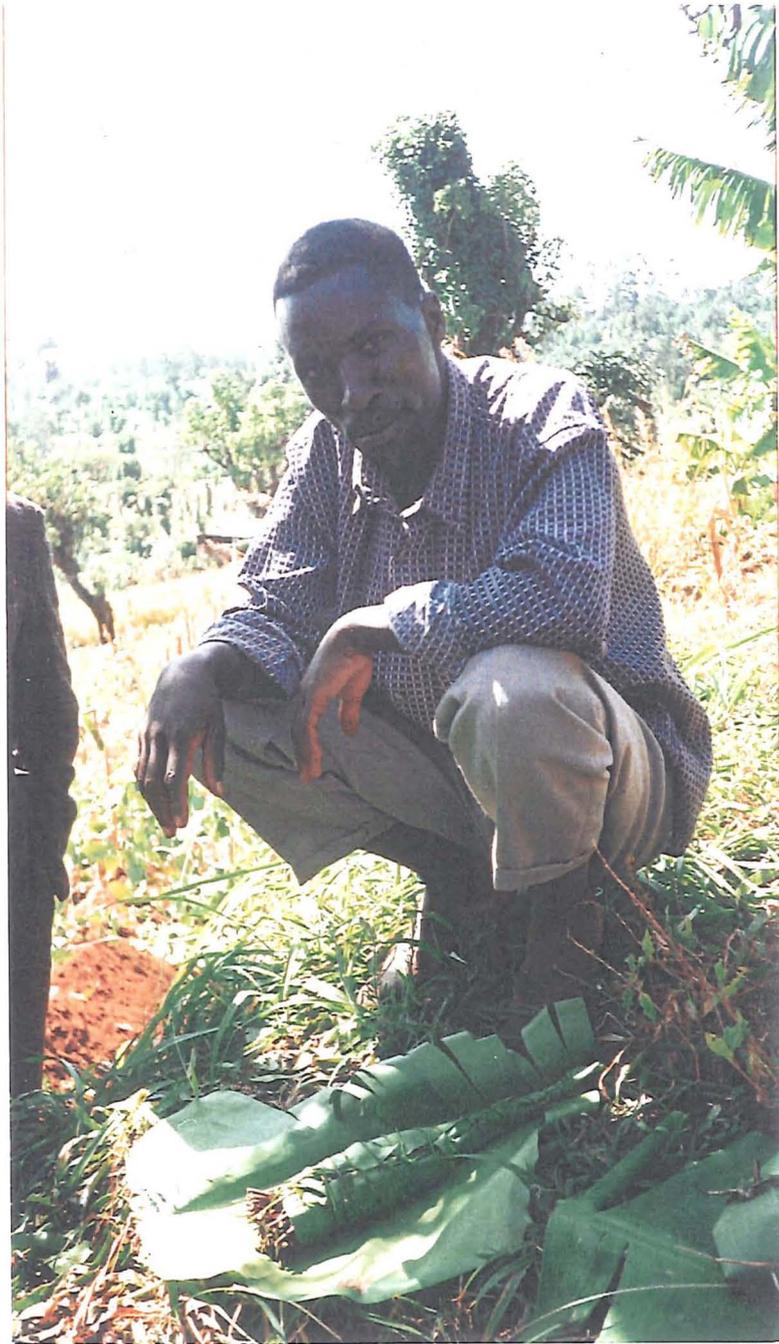


Plate 13: The finished product: ncool



**Plate 14: Grading miraa in the Manchester Café**



**Plate 15: Borana women and men retailing miraa in Isiolo**

No. **17361**

**ISILO COUNTY COUNCIL**

**MISCELLANEOUS RECEIPT**

**BDGWA/KANGETA/SURBA (PER 10KG)**

Date **17/12/2023**

Name **Mr. [Signature]**

Quantity **10 kgs**

Amount Shs. **20/=**

Cess Collector **[Signature]**

This receipt is valid for **Trip only**

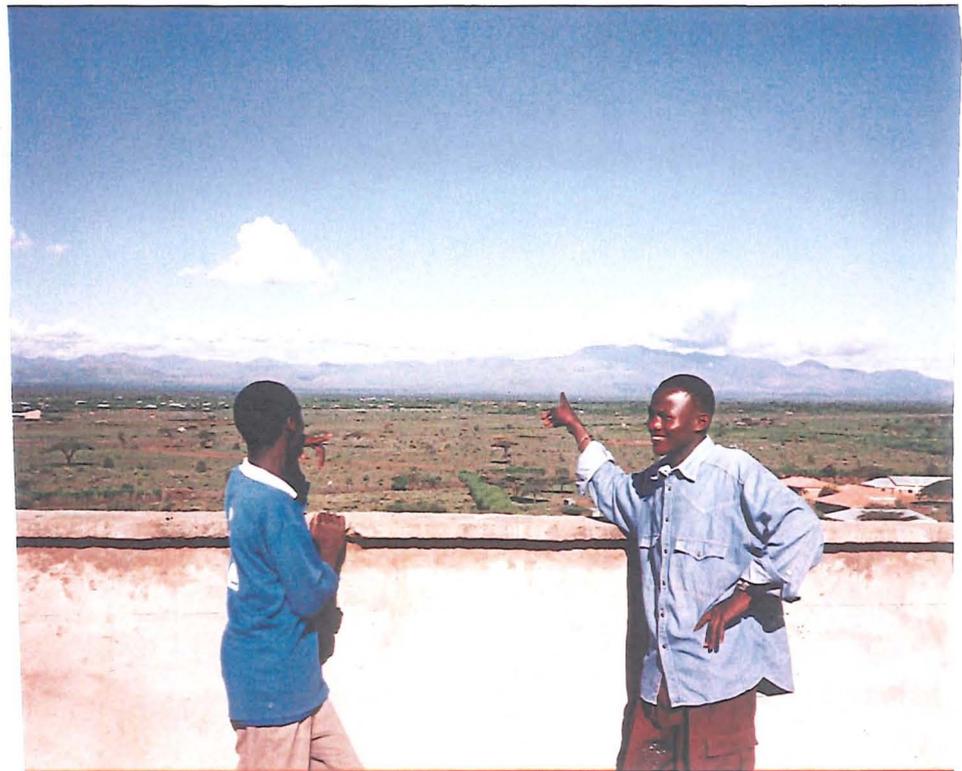
**Plate 16: Cess receipt**



**Plate 17: Sunrise Kiosk**



**Plate 18: Chewing miraa inside Mutuati's former milk depot**



**Plate 19: Nicholas and friend on top of Cathedral tower, Isiolo**

(Pointing to the centre of production – the Nyambenes – from a centre of avid consumption)

### Appendix III

#### *Nicholas and the Talking Cat*

*The following is Nicholas's own account (written in April 2001) of an incident that took place in Meru town. Nicholas enjoys telling this story, especially delivering the Kimeru phrase with a distinct miaow. He claims the story to be true...*

In bygone days I had an excursion to Gakoromone market in Meru town to fleetingly pay one of my mates a visit and go on the tiles. I fetched up a bit on the tardy side and my mate had left a message to one of the attendants saying I should chill for him. He (the waiter) was waiting for me hand and foot whereby he brought me a dram of whisky and a few bottles of Guinness.

I burned myself on the booze and veve and started whizzing hugely. Forthwith a 14 stone ray of sunshine black cat walked with jaunty steps on the pavement as it conversed with me, saying *nchobi hii nchionthe niciauu?* [Kimeru: 'whose beers are these?' in best cat voice]. I was dumbfounded and my hair stood on end like quills upon the fretful porpentine<sup>1</sup> in disbelief. Ultimately I answered *niciakwa* [mine] and kept one bottle aside for it as I drank the other beers like a fish to the dregs while watching the cat to see how it will pick up its beer. In a lightening speed it disappeared from the scene and it came to my mind that it was a 'Jini'.<sup>2</sup>

In truth, I became more confused and made an exhibition of myself by turning on the waterworks. I ran amok and made my all-out effort to get out of that place by hoofing it. On reaching the town, I hailed a cab to Makutano where I decided to go in a discotheque *mpaka che* ['until dawn'] in fear that if I went to sleep in a room alone the *jini* might come and beat me. Thanks to the almighty, nothing happened to me later even though I never met my mate.

*Amen!*

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas derived this Shakespearean phrase (*Hamlet* 1, v, 20) from *Cocktail Time* by P.G. Wodehouse (1987).

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas associates people from the coast with 'Jini' (or 'djinn'), and said that the Gakoromone market area of Mombasa is home to people originally from Mombasa. Cats are often thought of as possessed by 'Jini', and Nicholas often offered lurking stray cats food to appease them.

## Glossary

### ***Miraa varieties:***

The following are names of miraa varieties. See chapter one for details.

*Alele*  
*Algani*  
*Black Power*  
*Colombo*  
*Gathanga*  
*Giza*  
*Kangeta*  
*Kathata*  
*Liboi*  
*Lombolio*  
*Machenge*  
*Makata*  
*Mashushu*  
*Matangoma*  
*Mbogua*  
*Murutubu*  
*Ng'oa*  
*Ng'oileng*  
*No.14*  
*Nyeusi*  
*Scud*  
*Shurba ya karama*  
*Shurba ya nkinyang'a*

### ***Other terms:***

*Ajiis*: Somali term for the lethargic feeling the day after a chewing session.

*Asili*: 'Original'; used to refer to *mbaine* miraa.

*Bablass*: Slang word for a miraa 'hangover'.

*Barehe*: Miraa that is not fresh, leftover miraa. Literally means 'slept' (Somali).

*Bunda*: wholesale unit of miraa. Normally made up of ten *kitundus*.

*Chafe*: Ethiopian variety of miraa.

*Chakaas*: slang word for the detritus left after a chewing session.

*Duka / Maduka* (pl.): Shop / kiosk in Kiswahili.

*Fadiga*: A Somali word for a seated gathering. Used for a chewing-session in Isiolo.

*Gaaruu*: Kimeru word for the warriors' residence in traditional Meru society.

*Gomba*: Slang name for miraa alluding to its common packaging which is made up of leaves of the false-banana.

*Handas*: Common word for miraa's effect.

*Hoteli*: Term generally used in Kenya for a café.

*Jiti*: Kimeru for a stem / twig.

*Kambi*: Kimeru word for the plug of miraa stored in the cheek.

*Kampuni*: Kiswahili-fied form of 'company'.

*Kang'a*: Kimeru term for extremely good miraa.

*Karani*: 'Clerk' in Kiswahili.

*Kiama*: Kimeru for a 'council', e.g. of elders.

*Kitundu*: standard retail unit of miraa. Normally consists of ten *shurbas*.

*Kuhandasika*: Slang verb for feeling *handas*.

*Kupiga start*: Slang term for presenting a few stems of miraa to start someone off.

*Kuveveka*: Slang verb for chewing miraa. From *veve*.

*Mainga*: Miraa harvest.

*Mairungi*: Generic term for miraa, often heard on the coast.

*Majlis*: An assembly. Used in Isiolo for a miraa chewing-session.

*Manamba*: A tout working for a public service vehicle.

*Manyatta*: Word derived from the Maasai language: used widely in Kenya for 'village'.

*Mauve medicine*: Phrase of Nicholas's for miraa.

*Markhan*: Somali word for miraa's effect.

*Matako*: 'Buttocks'. Used for the ends of miraa cut off when neatening up bundles for retail. Sold cheaply in Isiolo.

*Matatu*: Kenyan public service vehicles.

*Mbachu*: Generic term for miraa heard in Isiolo.

*Mbaine*: Very old miraa trees are called *mbaine*. From these come the best miraa.

*Mithairo*: Young miraa trees.

*Mzee*: Kiswahili for 'old man'.

*Ncoolo*: Kimeru word for a special bundle of miraa used ceremonially.

*Ndabari*: cardboard label attached to *bundas* of miraa with price details written on.

*Njuri Ncheke*: Pan-Meru council of elders.

*Nthuki*: Generic term for generations like *Miriti*, *Guantai*, etc. in Kimeru.

*Panga*: Machete-like knife used for many purposes, especially in agriculture.

*Poa*: Colloquially used in a way similar to the colloquial meaning of ‘cool’ in English. From the Kiswahili verb *kupoa*, meaning ‘to cool down’. *Upoa* is an abstract noun formed from the adjective.

*Quodhadhi*: Cushitic word for a habitual user of miraa.

*Riika*: General Kimeru term for age-sets.

*Shamba*: Farm (Kiswahili).

*Shauri*: Kiswahili for ‘discussion’; usu. with a specific problem or purpose in mind.

*Sheng*: Slang language popular with Kenyan youth. Mixture of various languages; sometimes also termed *Swanglish*.

*Shurba*: Smallest unit of miraa. Standard retail unit of miraa from Karama / Nkinyang’a zone.

*Supuu / Masupuu* (pl.): *Sheng* for an attractive young lady.

*Takssin*: Word derived from Arabic verb for to store. In common usage amongst Kenyan chewers to refer to the wad of masticated miraa stored in the cheek.

*Upoa*: see *poa*.

*Veve*: Common generic term for miraa.

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