
Village Responses to Food Marketing Alternatives in Northern Zambia: The Case of the Mambwe Economy

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Introduction and Summary of the Argument

The objective of this paper is to assess the relative merits of two styles in food marketing — one state-controlled, the other free — from the perspective of African producer-sellers. The terms of the debate are those used by Mambwe cultivators in Mbala District, near the end of the 1970s, when Zambia experienced its first serious problem with ensuring food security. The crisis affected both urban and rural populations. Mambwe cultivators, among whom I did anthropological fieldwork (October 1977–November 1978), were presented with two alternatives: either to follow national policy and grow hybrid maize for sale to the parastatal Northern Cooperative Union (NCU), which liaises with the National Agricultural Marketing Board, or to grow beans and sell them on the free market to long-distance entrepreneurs from the Line of Rail towns. NCU did not handle beans; nor were private traders interested in maize.

On the face of it the two market structures were sufficiently separated and the choice was clear-cut. The production of surplus maize was hampered by environmental constraints (e.g. acid soils), erratic supply of seeds and fertilisers, low producer prices, late collection of crops, and late payment to producers. The marketing of beans was a happier story. Beans grew well, prices were in tune with inflation, long-distance traders or their local contacts paid on the spot (much appreciated by the cash-starved Mambwe), while the availability of beans was boosted by a flourishing cross-border trade which attracted produce from Tanzania. The free-market producer price for beans was double the price paid by state monopoly buyers in Eastern Province.

In spite of the separateness of the two strategies, and the advantages of the bean trade, actual responses to the choice were less clear-cut. As I researched food-related issues, it soon transpired that many peasant households preferred to keep both options open. Initially, this was something of a surprise. Not only

were the terms of trade for beans much more favourable from the point of view of the producer, but United National Independence Party (UNIP) politicians too, including the local Member of Parliament, endorsed the bean alternative. When not officially engaged, Party politicians in the district showed much sympathy with Mambwe villagers for whom the ailing NCU bureaucracy was a constant headache.

The contrast between 'official' advice (which went against the national food programme) and the producers' apparent indecisiveness will be demonstrated in the first part of this paper. A search for the root causes of the contrast will be undertaken in part two, where I shall conclude that the politicians' advice to invest only in free-market beans was that of the typical outsider whose rationality is based on a simplistic either/or strategy.

If planners wish to predict local responses to future changes in national policy (including e.g., the decision, following Berg, to spread the burden of infrastructural responsibilities), they will need to concern themselves with the *perceptions of village-based producer-sellers*, and not just with the views of the politicians who represent them. In the context of the state/maize versus free/beans alternative, I shall argue that producer-sellers (unlike district-level politicians) perceive alternative styles in food trading not from an either/or perspective, but in terms of their understanding of the local history of village agriculture. This local history is based on shifts in the selection of staples, shifts in the division of labour by gender, and most important, shifts in the control over produce. The latter shift too touches on gender lines.

Once the local history is understood, planners will be able to understand not only the position of Party officials, but also the position of leaders who hold traditional office. I wish to stress here that local-level politics involves both 'traditional' and state/Party representation; a point which is sometimes overlooked [e.g. Van Donge 1982:98]. The co-existence of

'modern' and 'traditional' styles of leadership within the realm of local-level politics cannot be over-emphasised, since the two cadres work with different evaluative criteria when assessing the relative merits of marketing alternatives. In the opening part of this paper, then, I juxtapose the pro-beans attitude of higher-ranking politicians with the behaviour of branch leaders. Branch leaders, I show, side with their local chief and take it upon themselves to make sure that both marketing options remain open. The village mode of thought will be documented with case material about the organisation of an Agricultural Show in the chieftaincy of Mwamba.

Chiefs are sometimes believed to be conservative, or interested in intensified agriculture only 'when their authority will be maintained and [the] traditional way of life be left intact' [Nelson Richards 1982:159]. Others, also reporting on Zambia, indicate that traditional authorities are quite capable of becoming successful farmers themselves [Van Donge 1982:96]. What I attempt to argue in the case of political reactions from Mwamba is that the chief's position towards 'development', even if sometimes ambiguous, does make sense when it is seen in the light of the local history of food production. Chiefs may occupy ambiguous political positions, but their views on state intervention in agriculture are not inherently ambiguous. Their views may well reflect, as in the case study which follows, the dilemmas with which the local peasantry are confronted.

I Local-Level Political Responses to Alternative Marketing Strategies

Throughout the 1970s Zambia's leaders strived to achieve national self-sufficiency in maize. The national food strategy, based on the promotion of a hybrid (SR-52), was supported by the Agricultural Finance Corporation (AFC) and strengthened by the Party message that 'feeding the nation' was no less than the duty of every citizen. In peripheral regions like the Mambwe area, state intervention was made possible through the provision of AFC credit. AFC assistance, however, was confined to the allocation of short-term, seasonal loans.

Responsible for implementing the hybrid programme was a multi-level grid of development committees; a patchwork organisation with elements from traditional institutions, Party politics, and government [Bratton 1980]. From a local-level point of view, two committees stood out as crucial to successful implementation: the Village Productivity Committee (VPC) and the Ward Development Committee (WDC). The latter in particular was designed as a forum for bringing together representatives of the party [e.g. UNIP branch leaders, the Ward Councillor],

traditional authorities (headmen, the local chief), and field-based agricultural extension workers. In theory, the WDC programme is substantial. As one Ward Councillor put it to me, 'the task of the WDC is to discuss development in all its aspects'. In practice, though, WDC activity amounts to little more than the sorting out of AFC seasonal loans.

Committee activities in Mwamba, the chieftaincy where the case study is set, are equally restricted. But the annual meeting does coincide with preparations for the annual Agricultural Show. So more is at stake than seasonal loans. The Show is an important event and is generally thought of as a means of monitoring local commitment to government, to UNIP, and to 'modernisation'. A poor Show would not go down very well with the visiting bureaucrats and politicians; it might even have repercussions. In the crisis years of the late 1970s, staging a good Show at ward level was doubly important. It was most necessary to impress the 'officials' from Mbala town, since such people were believed to influence the timetabling of NCU collections. In the late 1970s the services of NCU could no longer be taken for granted.

Case Study

The Mwamba show organisers hit a problem when they raised money towards the Show. The systematic collection of money, 5 ngwee per household, was opposed by the villagers of Aron, a Watch Tower community. Opposition from Aron was an old story, going back to the early 1950s in fact, when the Witnesses disobeyed the colonial administration [Watson 1958:200-1]. What was new, this time, was that non-Watch Tower people had become reliant on good relations with Watch Tower for the sales of their free-market beans. The free trade in beans was mainly organised by long-distance entrepreneurs who themselves relied upon Watch Tower contacts, who ran local buying-up depots. Most peasant households in Mwamba would have some beans to sell in the not too distant future, and these sales were often the only sure way of making fast cash. A similar 'rapprochement' between Witnesses and non-Witnesses has now also been reported for other parts of Zambia [Long 1984:5].

I note, in passing, that government officials in the district tolerated the free market. They were well aware of the problems the national food strategy posed, particularly since NCU, as it operated from Mbala in 1978, relied on private entrepreneurs for the collection of surplus maize [GRZ 1977:28]. Their awareness was communicated to village cultivators whenever the politicians were 'off duty'. The Member of Parliament for Mwamba, for instance, would be heard telling locals:

The surplus maize you have grown this year is still awaiting collection. NCU has transport problems,

and we all know that they are serious. Rain is certain to destroy half of our surplus harvests. No such problems with beans! Copperbelt traders or their associates from Mbala will drive up to your villages and collect at your doorsteps. They will pay you good prices too.

The mood of the villagers in Aron reflected their growing confidence that the agricultural prosperity of rural Mbala now depended solely on the smoothness with which 'their' people managed the long-distance trade in beans. Even UNIP leaders acknowledged this. But would the Witnesses get away with their refusal to contribute to the agricultural show?

Although Aron's village was in a strong position, its refusal to contribute was not acceptable to their local chief. Chief Mwamba, who had fought many 'battles' with Aron (and, ironically, just as many with UNIP) became enraged when he heard of the refusal. He was informed of it by a UNIP branch leader who, cleverly, had judged that it was inappropriate to bring pressure upon Aron via the channels of either the Party or the Ward Development Committee. The branch leader reasoned that only Chief Mwamba himself, as a traditional ruler, would succeed in settling the dispute.

Chief Mwamba accepted. He instructed the villagers of Aron to pay up, (in his words) 'even should their headman continue to refuse'. He added emphatically that 'should the villagers also refuse, then, I shall expel them from my territory and will depose their headman'. A messenger informed the headman of Aron, and the whole village agreed to pay up.

The question now is, how can we make sense of this show of strength by the traditional authority? How could he so successfully challenge the stronger party in the dispute?

Mwamba's recourse to customary sanction was not just a way of implementing the wishes of the new men in power (UNIP politicians, bureaucrats). The clue to the riddle lies in the branch leader's request that the matter be solved by the traditional authority. The request was a face-saving diplomatic move. By taking the dispute to the 'traditional' chief, the branch leader was able to avoid a community clash (and a personal clash) with the Watch Tower congregation. He could have left the Chief out of the procedures and could have attempted to settle the matter through pressure from 'officials' (himself, other branch leaders, the Ward Councillor, other WDC members). However, that option would have put too much emphasis on the issue of allegiance to UNIP and to the nation-state. That would have been dangerous. The branch leader chose to solve the dispute outside the Party and outside the 'official' development structures, for it was

in his own interest (as the prominent shopkeeper of a large amalgamated village), and therefore in the interest of many other villagers, that he maintained good relations with local Watch Tower groups. Aron was a test case. The involvement of the traditional chief was also welcomed by Aron's headman (who, note, had been assigned a low-level function in the Party), since his decision to contribute after all did not result in any loss of face. Within the terms chosen for settling the dispute, Aron's headman had merely given in to 'our chief' (*mwene mwitu*), to someone senior in the organisation of his own lineage.

But there is another dimension to the way this dispute was settled. The chief himself had been anxious to make Aron contribute, in order to be seen to be towing the Party/development line. He knew, what local politicians ignored when *they* sympathised with the bean option, namely, that his people could ill-afford to provoke the Party. No contributions from Aron would have brought down the wrath of UNIP, and this, in turn, could have resulted in NCU blacking out Mwamba when maize collections were timetabled in Mbala. A black-out would have resulted in vital cash losses, for the people of Mwamba still grew maize and did not intend to switch entirely to bean cropping in their attempts to earn cash. Their most basic view on marketing was that they should invest in both systems. To sum it up, the political manoeuvres that finally persuaded the Watch Tower headman had been successful because the chosen strategy blotted out all possible hints of UNIP involvement. The people of Mwamba had averted a crisis by safeguarding their trade connections, with Watch Tower *and* with the Cooperative.

II Understanding Local-Level Political Responses

The case material above shows that the 'traditional' chief and UNIP's branch leaders join hands to safeguard good relations with the community which so successfully organises free/bean trading. That is clear enough. The question that still needs answering though, is why the chief bothered at all about the government/maize option. Why did he judge it wrong to de-emphasise the need for NCU/maize trading? The answer, I will now show, must be sought in the specifics of the agricultural scene.

Village responses to Zambia's national food strategy can only be understood after grasping the broad principles of the many *region-specific* farming systems found in that country. The importance of local conditions (physical and social) and the need to plan for location-specific environments are increasingly emphasised [Eicher and Baker 1982:90-94; Richards 1983:2]. In a similar vein, I suggest that political

responses to alternative styles of marketing can only be fully understood when set in the context of the local food production system. This implies paying attention to recent transformations the system may have undergone. In its most rudimentary form, the argument is that maize cropping is pursued in the face of NCU's organisational problems, because peasants living in harsh environments can only survive by spreading options and risks. Though basically sound, such a view remains simplistic. It is inadequate because it neglects site-specific circumstances and historical developments within food production at the regional level.

Today it is commonly accepted that the soils of Northern Zambia are ill-suited for the commercial maize crop they carry [Dumont and Mottin 1983; Hedlund 1984]. Nor are they suited for cereal monocropping. A first warning signal was given during the 1950s, when circulatory wage migration for men was at its peak. William Watson, the anthropologist who then researched on the Mambwe economy, expressed his concern: 'the soil is not rich enough and could not stand a continuous cereal crop' [Watson 1958:24]. But Watson saw little need for immediate action, since the area did not have a 'proper' cash crop. The discovery of SR-52 hybrid maize in the mid-1960s changed the scene. By the late 1970s, when I started my own research, the flow of migrant labour had come to a standstill, population figures were up, and pressure on the land had increased. The turning point had been the implementation of a policy to stabilise the industrial labour force, shortly after independence. From then onwards, the Mambwe area was increasingly cut off from the industrial complex [Pottier 1983]. The 'obvious' alternative to wage labour was to follow government advice and to take up commercial maize cropping.

Watson's descriptions of the grassland fallow system and the woodland *chitemene* technique, the two systems found in Mambwe-land, are testimony of how cultivators on the Northern plateau used to respond intelligently to the various environmental constraints, especially with regard to the unreliability and paucity of rainfall receipts. The mounded grassland system, which dominates grassland agriculture, combined crop rotation with adequate resting periods and ensured satisfying yields and full restoration of soil fertility. The testimony left by Watson revealed harmonious human interaction with the environment and self-sufficiency for village communities. Even under conditions of substantial outmigration for men and rising population density [2.32 per cent annual increase between 1933 and 1952; Willis 1966], an adequate food intake could still be ensured.

Twenty-five years on, finger millet had become displaced by cassava and hybrid maize; a transition then not yet known in southern Tanzania. (The latter point is important since international borders *are* part of the make-up of peripheral economies.) The displacement occurred when cultivators found it increasingly difficult to meet labour requirements for millet. Its ultimate cause was the ever-increasing pressure on the land, leading to shorter fallow periods. If continuous monocropping is also practised, cropping will activate the growth of weeds and heighten the need for weeding — which invariably is a task for women.

Substitution of cassava, a crop which does not have any peak labour periods, came about throughout the 1960s, after a transition period during which the Northern Grassland system dropped its emphasis on crop rotation in favour of millet monocropping. Hybrid maize was introduced from the late 1960s onwards. The heightened pressure on female labour power made the substitution of cassava and of hybrid maize seem like reasonable alternatives. The later date at which hybrid maize became available has led recent observers to describe the current system as semi-permanent and based on 'cassava, usually intercropped with maize or millet' [Mansfield 1975:3]. For the purpose of my argument, the important observation is that Mambwe households had become dependent upon hybrid maize, not so much for its cash value but for its suitability as a food crop. Maize had solved a labour problem. Under the circumstances of the late 1970s, with growing land shortage and more continuous cultivation, it was not possible to reduce or drop maize production. At the same time an acute cash shortage had also developed, and was felt by both men and women. The cash needs of men related to the collapse of the system of circulatory migration; those of women related to the loss of fertility in kitchen gardens (*ivizule*). It was from those gardens that women used to earn an independent income during the heyday of migration for men. Through the loss of earning power the cash constraint became endemic. The need for cash thus added to the importance of maize. By the late 1970s maize had become an ambiguous staple, being both a food crop and a cash crop. Mambwe villagers, then, had two good reasons for not dropping the state/maize option, and their chief (in the case study) had acted in accordance with those reasons.

The long-term ecological dangers of hybrid maize cropping, which depends heavily on inorganic fertilisers were not in evidence during the early stages of adoption. Even in the late 1970s, potential dangers such as soil salinisation or decline of organic matter concentration, both of which may be caused by repeated use of nitrogen [Bury 1983:284], were not

locally recognised. What did matter was that the grassland Mambwe had relegated millet to a subsidiary crop, whereas their Tanzanian neighbours continued with 'traditional' millet farming. Consequently, the higher reliance on cassava and maize could easily be countered through imports. Southern Tanzania at that time was known for its 'black market' surpluses [Bury 1983:274].

Conclusion

In I above we looked at 'traditional' and 'party official' reactions to state intervention. The regional setting was marked by low cash flows and inadequate assistance for implementing the maize-based national food strategy. Local-level party politicians displayed two distinct attitudes, depending on context. When sharing official platforms they backed the national programme and joined in the exhortations for 'feeding the nation'; in their day-to-day contacts with villagers the same politicians sympathised with the people's need for better remuneration and more immediate rewards for their labour. The politicians' unofficial advice, their urging people to invest in the more lucrative bean trade (stressing *production* of beans) was well-intended, but was also based on the erroneous assumption that such investments would end all problems. Yes, switching to beans would ease the desperate need for cash, which is an increasingly important aspect of Africa's agricultural crisis [Pottier 1985:23ff]; but what about labour? And is maize locally perceived as a cash crop?

The contrast between the chief's concern to keep both trade options open and the politicians' advice to stop producing surplus maize was explained in II above. Here I argued that villagers, and their traditional leader, cannot possibly conceptualise the marketing alternatives as an either/or issue. In spite of the obvious advantages that accrue to investing in beans, villagers are reluctant to drop maize production, since maize — unlike any other staple — had the ambiguous status of being both a cash and a food crop [see also Wright 1983]. Maize, moreover, when it was first introduced, had alleviated the problem of weeding in fields carrying millet. Some of the 'magic' of hybrid maize cropping lived on.

But not all aspects of maize production were thought to have been positive. Although women too had welcomed maize when it was introduced, the hybrid had been responsible for taking away the women's prerogative of maize trading. As a result of this, some women were less explicit about the virtues of growing hybrid maize. Men, in contrast, still valued maize as a labour-saver, but they reasoned that women's labour ('saved' in millet fields) could be redeployed on the commercial fields which they (the men) controlled.

Therefore, when Chief Mwamba acted in the interest of 'his people', he acted essentially from a man's point of view. Women who had negotiated with their husbands the right to own/sell part of the maize destined for cash purposes approved of the chief's strategy, but many others did not. Women who had lost their hold over maize trading cared less about whether or not the state/maize option was kept alive. Moreover, the AFC parastatal did not (and still does not) provide credit to women household heads.

The following conclusions deserve to be stressed. A traditional authority who takes his people's problems to heart will view the marketing alternatives in terms of a frame of analysis which includes elements from marketing *and from the production process*. Local-level politicians, in contrast, are more likely, if they sympathise, to take a view which leaves out the total context of a given food culture. Secondly, the knowledge behind the chief's position, though richer than any understanding achieved by the 'outside' politicians, remains essentially a male point of view.

Finally, I am not attempting to justify the Mambwe emphasis on extensive trading, because current practices (e.g. insufficient crop rotation and inadequate resting of land) pose far too serious a threat to long-term survival prospects. As an outsider I am concerned about the negative consequences of overreacting to the market incentive. Over-cultivation is beginning to make its mark. On the other hand, I accept the villagers' viewpoint that under present circumstances (i.e. no migrant remittances; NCU inefficiency), cooperation with Watch Tower and/or other private traders is the best short-term antidote to rural impoverishment. Their view is a true local-level recognition of the need, formulated by Berg, not to overburden public sector institutions with the responsibilities of organising an adequate marketing and input strategy [World Bank 1981].

Planners must respect people's views. In the case of the Mambwe, these views translate as something akin to a Bergian perspective. Planners should also, however, address the grim fact that long-term ecological stress may set in if the desire for competitive trading becomes too *laissez faire*. A further recommendation, therefore, is that programmes for conscience raising must be embarked upon. Ensuring that all food producers control, at the very least, the product of their labour would be one of the objectives of such a programme [see e.g. Muntemba 1982:48]; ensuring that future generations too will be entitled to work the land would be another.

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