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RURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH PROJECT  
RURAL CRIME IN EAST AFRICA - SOME THEORETICAL ISSUES  
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I. Absence of Crime Statistics

If crime in this context can be defined as any act outside an urban or industrial area which is contrary to local norms of behaviour and which may affect rural agriculture, then the basis of this enquiry cannot be existing criminal law and police statistics of offences and offenders. Thus any enquiry must be related to sociological reality and its theoretical consequences rather than to government statistics of crime and law cases.

Crime in the rural areas, much more than in the towns and industrial areas, will not be reported to the police unless it is convenient. There is a direct relationship in reporting crime between the distance to the Police station and the cost of all the alleged crime in terms of money or prestige. Available crime statistics largely represent offences in the vicinity of police stations and a police station built in a new area will mean an immediate rise in reported crime. The low murder rate of 1.37 per 100,000 population in Kigezi in 1963 may well be related more to the absence of police, of whom there were only one per 7726 people as against one per 645 people in Kenya, rather than to the peaceful nature of the Kiga people.

Crime will also not be reported unless the police are sympathetic and useful. In the former case the police may be either more or less totally alienated from the people, as in Buganda as a result of the continuing May 1966 emergency, or in role conflict with the people because their attempts to be their protectors from crime conflict with their role of taking positive action against tax and licence defaulters. In the latter instance, the police cannot be useful as their numbers only permit attention to a limited number of serious crimes in the context of the general difficulties of detection where finger prints cannot be obtained and where the constable on the case often can do no more than ask who is suspected. These factors are also augmented by more individualised inter-tribal tensions.

Crime will also not be reported unless the legal system encourages the hope that malefactors will be punished by the courts. Criminals all over East Africa are usually devoted admirers of the English-based legal system which is currently used. There are difficulties over the giving of evidence when the court rules require non-Bantu customary procedure and the frequent use of an alien language in front of an alien magistrate.

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There are also high cost of attendance at court, when there may be prolonged delays before giving evidence, involving both loss of time which cannot be retrieved by an agriculturalist at planting or harvesting, and money because he may have to pay for accommodation as well as food during the hearing. The more serious the case, the more distant the court of hearing will be from the site of the crime. There are also insuperable difficulties over sentences in court in which the compensatory provisions of a customary law sentence are almost totally ignored. The victim gets nothing out of the fine or imprisonment sentence and the result of this depersonalised revenge may well be a feeling of impotence easily transferred into outbursts of violence such as those responsible for some 325 homicides of suspected thieves in Uganda between 1961 and 1963.

Finally, crime will not be reported unless it is politically convenient to do so. In any area there is a dominant political flavour and to go against this would be to suffer serious social penalties without any reasonable hope of getting effective police support for the case. In general Ganda do not complain about Nyoro in Bunyoro and vice versa in Buganda. There are similar patterns everywhere in the rural areas and also patterns involving economic and political dominance which the underprivileged go against at their peril.

#### I. Difficulties of Crime Control

While being virtually unnoticed by government agencies responsible for law and order, rural crime is likely to have serious effects on the economy, but it is not easy to see increased police action as an answer to the problem. Even if it were possible to increase police coverage in rural areas to ten times their present strength, it is unlikely that there would be much reduction in criminal activity because of police action.

1. Identification of stolen property: Unless thieves are caught in the act, stolen property is usually so common-place as to be unidentifiable. Just as a milk tin has no identifiable characteristics so agricultural produce cannot be identified except by related circumstances. Even reasonably well-policed Kampala has an undetected rate of over 30% for housebreaking and burglary cases for this reason.
2. Exposed nature of the victim: Ugandans do not live in villages and their house are widely dispersed. They are thus living in circumstances making attacks easy, particularly when the only available light is in the house and a visit outside for calls of nature makes the individual particularly vulnerable. Although neighbours might hear calls for help, they would be unlikely to come outside until dawn unless the household contained several men feeling a personal obligation to help a relative rather than a neighbour.

3. Exposed nature of agricultural products: Even more than the house, the fields of grain or plantations of bananas and coffee are completely unprotected after sundown. In a few minutes several years work can be destroyed by slashing. Unharvested crops or crops stacked for winnowing can easily be burnt.
4. Exposed nature of housing: The vast majority of houses are made of mud and wattle with flimsy doors; such a construction can never prevent a thief getting in and the isolation of the houses almost everywhere means that he can do so at leisure whenever the occupants are away. Further the housing materials do not retain finger prints. Property is stored in wooden or fragile tin boxes fastened with a simple padlock, whilst the burial of money under the bed may be no more secure from a determined and vicious thief.

### III. Causes and Consequences of Rural Crime

In considering crime amongst rural agricultural communities a clear distinction must be made between 'natural' and 'induced' crime. In this context 'natural' crime is taken to be the amount of criminal behaviour that can be expected in any community and which will never be eradicated by changes in morality, improved police techniques or social services. These crimes are normally constant in number and have a strong dyadic element between the sexes, beer shop quarrels and general community tensions. Society usually keeps such crimes under restraint and there are usually no outbreaks, although there may be peaks related either to temporary oversupply of wealth at harvesting time or to periods of severe deprivation which both raise tensions. Some areas and communities have a long established pattern of violence which may affect the agricultural output of those who choose to work there because these crime rates are more or less constant. For example police statistics suggest that Mengo has a consistently high rate of homicide and Bunyoro has only one tenth of the Mengo rate the relationship tending to remain constant.

Induced crime is taken to be deviant behaviour occurring in an area because of some observable social, economic or political changes affecting the population and over which they have no immediate means of control. Crime tends to be assessed in terms of an individual's losses and such losses can be set against another's gain so that theft may involve an agricultural community in little net loss in the short run. Property is being transferred by illegal means; stolen property is sold and the money enters the economy while it can be eaten so that productivity has at least served one of its purposes. However, any community can withstand only a small amount of regular loss; a study of cattle theft in Musima, Tanzania, showed that an annual loss of 1% of all cattle owned did not cause serious social reactions but 31% brought about strong organised retaliation. If crime accounts for

about 5% of existing production, future productivity will be inhibited so that attractive stealable crops in terms of saleable value, ease of disposal and weight: value ratio will tend not be produced.

1. Climate: An agricultural or pastoral community bases its social life on the assumption of reasonable rainfall. If there are floods or droughts the balance of their social life will be distorted and criminal activities may well result. Famine conditions make theft of grain and crops common offences. Some farmers take greater protective measures over their fields while pushing numbers of potential delinquents into the urban and industrialised areas where they cannot buy food at high prices. The strain of a serious food shortage or famine is so serious that the social consequences will last much longer than the climatic ones and may well result in prolonged delinquency. Such conditions also consume capital which could have been used for agricultural production or for personal emergencies and give rise to social costs through causing the break-up of families and marriages.

Too much rain may also cause crime by destroying standing and stored crops while at the same time preventing the sale of the available surplus because of disrupted communications. The 1963 Kenya floods broke both road and train routes to Mombasa leaving up-country producers with unmarketed surpluses of milk, vegetables and flowers while at Mombasa, itinerant sellers and distributors were cut-off without warning from their only source of income. In the long run, an adverse environment such as that between the Tsavo National Park and the coastal belt of Kenya or in Ugoga, Tanzania, where only one harvest in five is estimated to be plentiful, inhibits effort. This results in an attempt to get a steadier income from cattle theft and poaching which further destabilises those who attempt to earn their living from agriculture.

Amongst pastoralists, a good year invites the envy of others and subsequent cattle raids, whilst a shortage of water and grass will result in the community looking on their neighbours as the only possible source for replenishing their stock totals. It would perhaps be a mistake to think of shortages and delinquency only in terms of the physical needs for survival. Even the most isolated farmer or pastoralist is more a social than a biological unit and it may be that it is social rather than biological shortages which cause the trouble and lead to crime. Rice along the East African coast and cattle among the Masai, Samburu and Karamojong, are not strictly necessary for biological survival but they are certainly necessary for everything which makes life socially important and interesting - feasts, marriages and religious ceremonies. It is the absence of the ability to carry out these social activities which lead the coastal Swahili to theft and

the pastoralist to the complicated organisation of a cattle raid.

The patch-work distribution of wealth should also be remembered. Average rainfall figures from widely separated recording stations give an entirely unwarranted impression of climatic uniformity. Adjacent areas may have totally different harvests as minor and isolated events may bring serious consequences. In Usukuma, Tanzania, one adjacent parish may have droughts at planting and sprouting time and the other a thunderstorm at harvesting; the growth of attention to cotton at the expense of food crops or their increasing preference for maize which is relatively drought-sensitive may result in a growth of crime, possibly inducted by the present crime wave in Mwanza coinciding with a very poor initial rainy season.

2. Overpopulation: The constant increase in East African population will mean the gradual movement of agricultural people into less and less favourable environments. In some cases, a high level of population overflow can be absorbed for a time but it is inevitable that eventually people moving into these areas will be a cause of serious delinquency.

In Ngara, Tanzania, the overflow moves from a hill top existence with two crops per annum and a high population density to the valleys, with a one crop, low density economy, where the cycle of isolation, poor crops, too much vermin, illhealth, and famine leads to more movement, accusations of witchcraft and arson. Movement off Kilimanjaro has meant cultivating in lower altitude dry country with the regular possibility of drought and food shortages whilst the social ambitions of the cultivators are cast in terms of high standards of living based on cash incomes from coffee, bananas and vegetables. The movement off the north-western slopes of Meru has meant not only cultivating in a very dry area with highly friable soils but the occupation of land which up to this time has been a component of the local Masai grazing cycle; this has already given rise to serious inter-tribal tensions and its resulting crime.

Before World War II, the population structure, while probably beginning to show some increase, was not abnormally distorted. Since that date the number of young people surviving to adolescence has steadily increased, without any equivalent rise in employment opportunities. The maximum number of criminals in Western Europe and North America when analysed by age has always been related to the period immediately after leaving school, round 15 to 17 years for boys. The fully adult criminal has always been a small minority.

In East Africa, the ages of convicted criminals seems to be unrelated to any probable school leaving age at the moment, which is probably between 22 to 25 years. The numbers of known juvenile delinquents in court cases has been very low in Uganda and Tanzania, so low in fact that it cannot be considered a problem at all. In Kenya the figures may well be higher when the preventative work of the Nairobi Starehe Boys Centre is considered but it still cannot be parallel the enormous Western figures.

The effect of the population bulge, with over half the population under 16 years, and the inability of the East African countries to fulfill the school leavers expectations of paid employment must mean that many thousands of young people will be forced back involuntarily into an agricultural environment. The situation is more extreme with pastoralists where even primary education makes the child quite unsuited to returning to an essentially non-western pastoral existence. This situation must lead to substantial increases in crime, firstly of a petty nature involving minor thefts and peculations and then gradually increasing to professional criminality as the intelligent but unemployed youth begins to make use of his brains in response to his own and other economic needs. These crimes will involve theft of crops and money, housebreaking, border-jumping for smuggling and the marketing of stolen property. The next decade will see a substantial lowering of the average age of the criminals and an equally substantial increase in the amount of crime both in value and occurrence, the increase being greater in the rural than urban areas. In the event of crime becoming widespread in rural areas, either because of political uncertainty or the reduced ability of the central and local governments to maintain effective control, agricultural production is certain to be affected. The planting of long-term cash crops such as coffee will be halted; few would see any point in planting when years of growth can be slashed down by an enemy. Short-term cash crops will be reduced to the amounts that can be exchanged locally for wanted commodities such as food, salt and tobacco. Even though buying agents may appear at the markets, it might be unwise to draw attention to oneself as receiving cash and similarly there might be very little in the shops to buy.

3. Political disturbances: Economists have tended to deal with this problem almost entirely in terms of its effect on the non-agricultural sector, especially the overseas investor or capital provider. The agricultural sector, the foundation of the economies of all the East African countries, is very sensitive to such troubles and slow to recover. The failure to obtain finance for a cement plant has long-term consequences but the failure to plant either food or cash crops, is an immediate as well as a long-term problem.

There are many areas in East Africa which have recently, in the post-independence period, suffered serious disturbances such as Toro Buganda, Karamoja Marsabit and the refugee reception areas of Ngara, Tanzania, and Ankole, Uganda. Similarly there are potential tensions which may cause future trouble such as the borders of Luo areas and the inter-tribal boundaries around Mt. Elgon.

Under the worst possible conditions of political uncertainty, there will be results which go beyond those already suggested for situations leading to widespread rural crime. There will be a movement away from roads which will be used by both the forces of order and disorder, so that these areas become neutralised strips - no one wants their crops to be taken without payment or for themselves to be called upon to work for nothing as porters or labourers clearing or building road-blocks and destroyed bridges.

In such a situation migratory labour will not be available so that there might well be a labour surplus in one area and a serious shortage elsewhere with consequent effects on clearing, harvesting and weeding; even when the labourers are available the farmer might well be reluctant to give them scarce food in payment or show that he keeps money in the house. The wider aspects of trade will also come to a complete standstill as buyers refuse to move out into the country for markets and those already in outlying trading centres move into the greater security of the towns. A localised outbreak of violence has always meant an immediate evacuation of Arab and Indian traders and the closing of shops - robberies with violence in Tanzania at Musoma in 1959 and Ngara in 1965 have had this effect; as a result farmers had to travel long distances both for selling and buying. In general there will also be a marked reduction in food production to minimal needs as any production above this will make the cultivation liable to political or criminal impositions.

A noticeable feature of serious disturbances is looting. It is very doubtful whether this is a means of redistributing assets and it is certainly not as effective as theft. Firstly it is non-selective - that is available is taken and not what the individual wants or thinks sell - and secondly it is highly destructive though burning and breaking - possibly the destruction to redistribution ratio is of the order of ten to one.

4. Changes in supply and demand: Economic changes, from whatever cause, are bound to cause fluctuation in criminal activity, which may, indeed respond far more quickly to such opportunities than normal economic responses. It is clear that the rate of theft is related to the quantity of goods available to be stolen; the often repeated statement that theft did not occur in the olden days may have been true because there was little to steal other than livestock rather than

that East Africans in the recent historic past were more moral than they are at the present time.

Clearly, at the present time there is more to steal so that the numbers of bicycles available plus the unrequited need for bicycles amongst non-owners is in ratio to the number of thefts. The incentive to better agriculture is the accumulation of property so that more property is available for potential criminals to consider, whilst at the same time the inability of the economy to provide even a small part of what the people want in property and money to meet their obligations for tax and education means that more people are tempted to become criminals. It is noticeable that in Buganda where private property and a monetary economy has very largely replaced traditional procedures there is the highest number of armed robberies reported to the police.

Theft itself is easy and almost any stolen property can be sold on the open market, provided that it is not too conspicuous, without having to resort to professional fences.

Large-scale theft and the breaking of marketing laws may be caused by selling restrictions and price fluctuations between adjacent areas within the country or over international borders. Particularly in the latter case there will be no police enquiries so that stolen coffee, for example, will not even have to be rebagged whilst the receiver's price will be correspondingly higher since he is in little danger.

#### 5. Centralisation and bureaucracy

On various political and economic grounds, marketing has become increasingly centralised under marketing boards and co-operative societies. Whilst the economic grounds for these institutions may be sound, their staffing provides considerable problems as so far there is no parallel system of controlling office-bearers until it is too late. The amount of dishonesty in co-operative societies in Tanzania has already had to be investigated by a special Presidential Commission. Whilst it may have been politically necessary to remove Asians from crop marketing, the combination of monopoly buying with a widespread anticipation of corruption, embezzlement and theft in a buying agency largely staffed by elected officials, the drive for increased production has been depressed.

#### IV. Anticipated Increases in Rural Crime:

The combined effects of weather, overpopulation, political disturbances, changes in supply and demand, and centralisation and bureaucracy taken together with rural isolation and the problems of policing suggests that the existing probable high level of rural crime will rise very much higher in

the immediate future. Whilst this may effect agricultural production, particularly of cash crops and in isolated areas, it is anticipated that there will be no reduction in gross output, but rather that crime may contribute to a reduction in per capita productivity unless its increasing incidence causes communities to institute local protective measures. It is not considered likely that the central governments will be able to control this anticipated increase because of continuing political problems and their inability to finance the cost of a greatly increased police force.

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