Complex Communities and Relational Webs

Uncertainty, Surprise and Transformation in Machakos

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During the last two decades we have often addressed the relationship between people, place and ecology through the prisms of communities and commons (McCay and Acheson 1988). For the sake of simplicity we have often portrayed encapsulated communities rooted in shared territory within Cartesian geographies, neatly boxed on flat-earth maps. To differentiate common property from free access we have also focused on collections of specific resources, managed within clearly bounded social communities operating on fixed rules, including criteria for exclusion. In practice, groups of people deal with uncertainty, surprise and transformation, in communities and commons embedded in nested, interconnected and overlapping webs (see Mehta 2001; Scoones 1994; Leach *et al.* 1999).

The condition of being in a place and being in community are basically forms of being in relation. As such the location of anyone in community is contingent on relations with other people, species, landscape features and artifacts in specific places and across places (Escobar 2000; Stein 2001). Complexity theory (Ahl *et al.* 1997) and social networks offer enabling metaphors, allowing us to climb out of the boxes that have constrained our thinking about communities and local organisations. In many cases we are dealing with rooted networks with far-flung branches, as well as loosely knit and movable nets.

For flexible metaphors of thinking people, making complex choices under conditions of uncertainty, we can draw upon the rich metaphors of self-made and self-transforming pathways of information in the brain, and the flexible but structured human habits of thought. New structures (information pathways in the brain) are created and shaped through ongoing processes, much as we create, follow and constantly modify footpaths in the landscape. The connective structures created in this way, in turn, influence subsequent practice and yet are also subject to change through new practices. Likewise we can envision social networks as the patterns and processes of habit-forming connections between people (individuals and groups), other beings, physical surroundings and artifacts.

Recent work on social movements challenges assumptions that fixed biological, social and economic categories dictate in some way the definition of self and homogeneous communities of similarly determined individuals. Several post-structural and feminist theorists (Alvarez *et al.* 2000; Cleaver 2001; Escobar 2000; Haraway 1991; Harding 1998; Mouffe 1995) take a more relational view and find wider possibilities for individual and collective agency by focusing on links between points of difference and identity through affinity. These approaches emphasise the opportunities to build upon some elements of identity and downplay others, to associate by choice with persons and groups distinct in some ways from oneself. Likewise, critical approaches to communities and commons note that, even within seemingly homogeneous groups, there are significant differences of interest and, often, explicit conflicts (Agrawal and Gibson 2001; Ostrom *et al.* 1999).

Poststructural and complexity theories mesh well with models of social networks that can accommodate a multiplicity of actors whose relative positions and groupings, as well as their very definitions, are contingent and mutable. We can conceive of communities as flexible structures of social relations shaped by habits of thought and action. These habit-forming connections reflect nested and overlapping clusters of identity, affinity and activity, all subject to gradual change as well as sudden transformation.

What do these theories and metaphors of uncertainty and complexity tell us about community as a concept, and the social and ecological relations that bind people within and across places, to each other, to other species, and to their physical surroundings? We can see organisations as mediating mechanisms, often quite malleable and even disposable, as instrumental rather than elemental, as vehicles for crucial connections between people, which are sometimes rooted in place and sometimes rooted in relations of identity, affinity, exchange and reciprocity, across places.

1 Complicating the Stories from Machakos: A Case Study

The case study from Machakos district, Kenya is rooted in a landscape and a community dramatically shaped (in the last 100 years) by global empires, international economies and militaries, foreign and civil wars and changing gender and class relations (Mbithi and Wisner 1973). Within this context I focus on the changing nature of community groups, their representation of multiple and shifting local constituencies, and the changing environmental roles of various local groups defined by gender, class, age and occupation (Field-Juma 1996; Rocheleau *et al.* 1995). The Machakos story (Tiffen, Mortimore and Gichuki 1993) is in fact many stories from Machakos, and the Kathama case is not merely one such story but many, from single women to returning soldiers, life-long farmers and teachers involved in creating and responding to an unfolding ecology in a changing landscape.

The district is the home of highly visible and successful community-based organisations that drew the attention and eventual intervention of natural resource management agencies (state and NGO) in the 1980s (Ondiege 1992; Thomas-Slayter and Rocheleau 1995). The communities of Machakos district are characterised by resilience, complexity, tension and constant re-invention. The surprises they face are both social and ecological in origin and character, as are their responses and the eventual outcomes of both. The experience of uncertainty and surprise during the 1980s – the heyday of 'community participation', 'communal conservation work' and women's groups in Machakos – illuminates the workings of identity, affinity and solidarity, as well as widespread competition and conflict on household, locality and regional scales.

The case study begins with a summary of the origin and history of community-based work in production and resource management among the Akamba, in what is now Kenya's Eastern Province. The story of one specific community chronicles how particular groups experienced a specific series of surprises during the 1980s. These encounters with uncertainty are used to demonstrate both the existence and the importance of complexity in social and ecological networks, and the implications for democratic collaboration with community-based institutions to build socially just and viable human ecologies.

2 Community and Collectivities in Machakos

The community work groups of Machakos – touted as a model for self-help groups throughout Kenya in the 1980s – grew out of a long history of multiple institutions that mediated collective action in daily life at specific events and under special circumstances. The history of Akamba social life for the last 400 years is rooted in agropastoral livelihoods and land use patterns organised within a number of nested and overlapping collectivities, including patrilineal clans (lineage based, across places), extended family compounds (lineage and micro-territory), and villages (place based).

The *mwethya*, the renowned reciprocal communal work groups of Akamba tradition, were large groups of men and women, often from entire villages, mobilised to assist with periodic tasks such as home building, or forest clearing for new fields. Men and women often carried out distinct but closely intertwined complementary tasks. Daily and seasonal activities such as weeding were also conducted by groups of extended family or neighbours. Men's and women's associations (e.g. elders) attended to the education and training of the young, the governance of clans and villages, and religious life.

When the colonial government coerced rural people in Machakos district to construct and maintain state infrastructure (roads, gully repair, dams and soil conservation structures) during the 1930s and 40s, they appealed to the tradition of *mwethya*. During World War II, most men were away in the military (many of them forced conscripts) and colonial officers mobilised women in forced labour gangs for land rehabilitation efforts at home, invoking *mwethya*.[1]

With Independence the mandatory group work ended, and a new story unfolded. In the 1970s, the independent state of Kenya promoted *harambee* (let's work together) community efforts, and in Machakos this translated into a state-sponsored revival of the *mwethya* work groups, re-born primarily as women's groups, often with men advisors or co-leaders. The majority of the men were still away, as labour migrants in Nairobi, on plantations or in the army. By 1981 local state officials were registering groups in a national women's development organisation – Maendaleo ya Wanawake – that coordinated women's development and conservation work. Local officials often selected the sites and determined group work schedules within a national soil and water conservation campaign to reduce the siltation of hydroelectric dams in Machakos and neighbouring districts. Forestry and agroforestry were added to the women's groups' agenda, in response to the 'other energy crisis' of fuelwood shortage (Leach and Mearns 1988).

The checkered history of 'self-help groups' was unknown to most of the international proponents of sustainable development, who observed apparently happy women in large groups constructing soil erosion control structures in the 1980s. Development agencies confounded community with the local administrative unit, and confused tradition with a new institution based on a fusion of contrasting precedents, from reciprocal communal work on homes and fields, to forced labour gangs.

3 Three Surprises: One Community's Experience

Kathama is home to an Akamba farming community in a semi-arid dry forest and savanna zone, nested along the Athi river, between the ridge of the Kanzalu Range, rising 300 metres above the valley, and the Yatta Plateau, 60m up-slope on the far side of the river. It is not officially a place in the designated hierarchy of villages, locations, divisions, districts and provinces within national space. It is a loose grouping of villages across sub-location lines, around a market centre on a motorable road that traverses a winding path around the ridge of the Kanzalu Range to the floodplain below.

The community embodies processes at work in large tracts of dry forest, savanna and woodland throughout Eastern and Southern Africa. The people of the area have experienced a wide range of problems and opportunities in the transition from agropastoral to mixed farming land-use systems. By 1980 the densely populated agrarian landscape – over 280 persons/km^2 – was a complex matrix of dry forest, bush, pastures, croplands and homesteads.

People in the community lived in nuclear family and sometimes extended-family households on their own land on small farms of 2 to 20 hectares in area, often distributed in multiple plots. Most farmers raised maize, beans, pigeon peas and/or cowpeas, along with fruit and vegetable crops for sale and/or subsistence. A few farmers still grew the state-promoted cash crop, cotton, this being the 'cotton zone' on official maps – but most households had abandoned the crop due to marketing and production problems. There was still one herd of nearly 100 head of cattle and many households boasted 10 to 12 goats, several chickens, a milk cow and a pair of oxen for ploughing.

3.1 The nature and composition of groups in Kathama

The reciprocal labour exchange institutions such as the *mwethya*, once revived and assimilated by the state into a new politics of rural conservation and development, shifted away from equal relations of reciprocity toward a patron/client relationship with local officials and more prosperous farmers. NGOs and donor agencies assumed, in error, that the women's groups were homogeneous, representative and permanent. The groups were products of a specific historical moment and a set of pressures and opportunities determined as much by the state and bilateral interests as by local needs and aspirations. They were located in diverse communities and reflected increasingly unequal power relations between people linked by history, proximity and experience. Groups were simultaneously tools of empowerment for women and tools of power wielded by local officials and wealthier residents to mobilise the labour of active women from smallholder households. The groups themselves became both sites and tools of struggle, for a shifting constellation of interests.

Among the uncertainties that people here confronted during the 1980s, I elaborate three surprises that dramatically affected the role and composition of community groups, the terms of community membership, individual and group connections to land, water and related resources, and the very definition of community:

1. The drought and famine of 1984–85
2. The controversy over secret balloting and election results in 1988
3. The re-organisation of the Kenyan military in the mid-1980s.

4 The Drought and Famine of 1984–85: Environmental Source/Social Surprise

In Kathama, major cleavages and points of solidarity in the community, as well as the relations between community and commons, emerged clearly during the 1984-85 drought. The women's groups and their members displayed creativity and resilience in their efforts to restore connections and complementarity across lines of difference, distance and conflict. They resisted unfair external demands and served the interests of their leaders and members. The women's groups in Kathama experienced intensified mobilisation by state officials in the early 1980s, and then had to cope with the growing state of emergency in the countryside in 1984 as drought gave way to famine.

4.1 Within-group differences

The class division between women's group members became more visible in 1984 when local officials let it be known that they would distribute relief food through groups. Criteria for food distribution would include the number of people, the frequency of work sessions and the results of their work. The designated activities included roadwork, small dams and land rehabilitation at highly visible and degraded sites. The group leaders passed on the pressure to poor women and their families to participate in work sessions, to keep the group high on the food distribution list. Chronically absentee wealthy members remained officially registered with the active groups, reaping the relief food benefits from the increased performance and presence of the less powerful members.

Wealthy individuals (men and women, members and non-members) also managed to attract groups to their property more frequently and to complete substantial construction tasks. As the drought deepened, the community tacitly declared a state of emergency, the groups explicitly called upon those with greater resource endowments to share an increasing proportion of their resources with others.

4.2 Differences within and between households and communities

As drought gave way to famine, the gendered division of labour became more apparent. Rural communities with up to two-thirds of adult men residing in cities, the army and distant workplaces, experienced the feminisation of drought response and famine survival. Young and middle-aged women were, in two out of three households, responsible for maintaining their families and livestock in the midst of crop failure, water shortage and one of the worst fodder shortages of the century. The cash from the city could not purchase food where there was none to be purchased. This double bind was captured in the Akamba name for the 1984–85 famine: 'I shall die with the money in my hand' (Rocheleau 1991).

The separation of households and extended families was also a source of complementarity across climate zones and across the rural/urban divide. People maintained contact with migrants in cities as well as in more arid regions of Machakos and neighbouring Kitui district. Households in Kathama sent family members to the capital (Nairobi) or to more well-watered rural areas. The people in the villages and sublocations of Kathama also shared their own homes and grazing lands with relatives from communities in more arid lands. The elders' guidelines for numbers of 'guest' non-resident people and livestock simultaneously defined and expanded the limits of the community, and provided for increased sharing of resources with the extended community, across places, at a time of scarcity and uncertainty.

4.3 Relations between groups and the state

During the course of the drought it became clear that the seemingly communal work in progress at officially designated soil conservation sites in Kathama was often state appropriation of group labour. The groups (mostly women) were often diverted from their chosen agenda for reciprocal labour exchange between women's group members, on what had become private, nuclear-family plots. The groups did serve women's own interests; they provided a vehicle for women to re-invent and recover formerly shared, communal resources from a fragmented landscape of privatised holdings. Through a revival and intensification of reciprocal labour on each other's farms, women stitched together a patchwork commons from the separate plots of complementary and unevenly distributed resources (grazing, tree fodder, fuelwood, charcoal trees, wild foods, water) on private land owned primarily by men. They re-inscribed the commons onto the maps of private property, through social relations cemented by reciprocal labour.

Ironically, the real work of the community – and the commons – had moved to private plots, and the faux communal work was conducted on 'communal' sites in 'no-man's land'. These were often badly gullied and highly visible abandoned private holdings that took on a function as billboards advertising the national mobilisation of rural people (women) in the joint task of soil conservation. The large visible work parties of women reclaiming land became a metaphor for nation-building by a loyal and united citizenry under the direction of the state, an image cultivated for both national and international consumption. As in many co-opted organisations and social movements, there were a number of strategic reasons for women's group members in Kathama to support and reinforce the simplified identities, stability and permanence ascribed to them by powerful state and market forces. Through strengthened and expanded relations of reciprocity – both within groups and between groups, the state and largeholders – the group members fashioned safety nets from networks, connecting simultaneously to state and private resources through collective work and contacts.

From a distance it would be just as easy to paint the women's group members as victims as it was to assume that they were part of a timeless, unchanging, traditional institution of communal work. Because they were not 'simply good', egalitarian, strictly democratic, altruistic, homogeneous and autonomous, does not mean that the groups were bad, or that women were passively mobilised resources of male-headed households, the community and state. Women also parlayed the groups into a political and economic force for their own benefit, that of their families and the broader community. The groups, for all their layers of exploitation, also constituted an inviolable place for women's parallel self-government and mutual aid. Nowhere was this more evident than in the contrast between many women's public persona in the group context and near silence in their households. The groups became a kind of mobile equaliser, a portable device for invoking the commons or the moral economy, where and when needed, within households and across property lines, to ensure survival of the drought and famine, even by the most vulnerable.

Women encountered new possibilities for technical skills and leadership at community level, especially under the extraordinary conditions of drought and famine. Intensive mobilisation in groups affected women's practices and expectations long after the 1984–85 drought was over, and enabled greater social choice for some women relative to the past (Thomas-Slayter and Rocheleau 1995; Wangari *et al.* 1996).

5 Grassroots Below Ground: Surprise Restructuring from Below

The second surprise was one of the least predictable and most significant events in community life in Kathama, and – for this discussion – the most germane example of complexity: the disbanding of the women's groups. The groups in Kathama, as elsewhere, were revived, reorganised, and captured once again in the 1970s and 1880s by a new set of state actors. In the late 1980s most of the groups then dissolved/disorganised themselves, and eventually restored women's and broader self-help groups in Machakos 'under new management'. This surprising change resulted from a convergence of national political actions and a cumulative grievance at local level over the disproportionate mobilisation of women's group labour for state work. The saga illustrates the assimilation of communal work groups by the state as well as the rural women's groups' strategic use of the national conservation and development mandate to serve women's and community interests. The ability of groups to restructure their own public identity and the terms of collaboration with outside entities was contingent on the conditions prevailing in local and larger political contexts.

By 1987 there was widespread disillusion, even in the most active groups. Women's contributions were recognised but still not reciprocated through local support for women's priorities and inclusion in decision making. Some groups were distressed by the heavy demands during the drought and famine of 1984–85, compounding their hardship during a difficult time. Others were disaffected in 1986 when KANU (the ruling party in a then single party state) took control of Maendeleo ya Wanawake, the national women's group, on the grounds of alleged corruption and financial mismanagement. Many group members resisted the uniforms, party songs and political slogans at group meetings, yet continued to participate in the group activities. Local officials took an increasingly direct role in group activities and mobilised them more frequently for construction projects.

Meanwhile, the unpopular single party system persisted, secret balloting was suspended, and national election campaigns proceeded amid widespread allegations of electoral irregularities. Controversy over the election led to widespread public disaffection with government in Eastern and Central Provinces. In some areas people shunned public events organised by local state officials. This widespread public questioning created the space for women's groups to resist state capture and management of their labour. In Kathama the leaders and members of several women's groups decided to disband the groups in order to protect themselves from over-exploitation of their labour by the state. Most of the groups simply dissolved, each asserting, through their absence and their announcement of dissolution, that they could not be mobilised.

The people of Kathama continued reciprocal work on each other's farms, in twos and threes and sometimes fours. When questioned about the 'new groups' people answered that they were simply working with a friend or neighbour or family member. While it looked like the end of communal work from the outside, the community had actually grown strong enough to reclaim control over its labour and its symbolic representation. By

1993 many of the groups reconvened and reconstituted themselves, under new terms of relationship with state agencies. Several of the eldest and most respected leaders met with the chief and sub-chiefs and requested that they mobilise one adult from every household to do the public works, rather than selectively exploiting the most organised and active women's groups. They demanded relief from the previous practice of diverting communal labour to engage in work more properly seen as public.

The groups *dis*-organised themselves, which suggests that there was a core outside or beneath the formal organisations that could decide to transform them or to shed this particular, now dysfunctional, shell. The dissolution of the formal groups actually led to a reassertion of women's and citizen roles in local decision making and governance and the eventual reconstitution of formal groups. However, the ability to take such action was contingent on the constellation of political conditions at local and national level. Groups used prevailing political uncertainty on a regional scale to create uncertainty about their own identity as a tool to increase control over their labour in the local landscape.

6 Amphibian Boys and (Extra) Terrestrial Girls: Gender and Generation Surprises

In a third case, the major local actors were not formally organised women's groups but rather the less visible council of elders, guiding a shift in community consensus on gendered terms of connection to land, place and community. At a time when women's groups were officially dissolved, when many outsiders would have characterised institutional networks as lacking, the 'community' dramatically restructured the gendered and generational relations of people to each other, land and place.

The redefinition of family and home in Kathama had roots in some very public and political happenings at national level. In 1982 Kenya's president, Daniel Arap Moi, thwarted an attempted military coup, a victory widely attributed to the loyal, mainly Akamba, army. The incident highlighted the vulnerability of the President to the allegiance of a single ethnic constituency (not his own). Subsequent efforts to shift the ethnic composition of the army resulted in the practical exclusion of young Akamba men from recruitment from the mid 1980s, and left many families without the cash income from military service that had financed farm investments in the past.

Reduced military employment coincided with the drought and famine, factory closings, the tightening of the urban job market and rising costs of living in the cities. These stresses left many households with little land, no livestock for traditional marriage gifts to the bride's family, no resources to build a house, and no way to acquire these without income from wage labour. These conditions gave rise to new gendered terms of access to land, relationship to home, place and family, terms of community, and family membership and inheritance among the generation that came of age in the 1980s.

The least expected outcome and perhaps the most far-reaching impact of the major role of Akamba men in the army throughout the twentieth century was the change in the gendered relationship of people to their land. The decision to 'diversify' (or shift) the ethnic composition of the army in the 1980s reversed the prevailing role of the military as a major employer and once again affected gendered relationships to land. This surprise contributed to the appearance of the 'amphibian' boys and the single-mother/girls and the eventual change in the local customary inheritance laws in Kathama.

David Mutiso Kiilu, a prominent teacher from Kathama, observed in 1993 that two new kinds of people had emerged:

> The people have new names for them. The first are amphibians, young men who come and go with the rains. Their fathers have not got enough land to subdivide and allocate new plots to them and they have no resources to build a house and no steady work. When the rains come they return home, when there is work and food. When the rains finish, they leave, and we're not sure where they go – plantations, towns, cities – and what they do.

'The second new kind of people are the girls who give birth at their fathers' compounds.' The girls are the age-mates of the 'amphibian' boys, who, along with some older local men, are the fathers of the babies. The young women were at first a source of major embarrassment, if not a target of fury, ridicule and rejection, followed by exile to plantations. For decades the plantation workforce of Kenya included many thousands of women who spent the rest of their lives, along with their children, as permanent 'exiles' and 'temporary workers' after leaving their villages as single mothers, divorcees and abused or abandoned wives. They were displaced persons, homeless by virtue of severed or incomplete ties to men, who in turn connected them to land, place and community. Young women changed families and homes at marriage; they were all expected to marry, and no one was expected to have children outside of marriage.

Over the span of two decades (1980s and 1990s) the people of Kathama responded with a new customary practice to accommodate these children and grandchildren, so that they would have a place to call home and legitimate claims to social connection. The elders began in the 1990s to advise fathers to grant land (if they had it) to their unmarried daughters with children, to prevent their being cast adrift without a home, or forced into permanent residence on plantations. While some unmarried mothers still went to work on plantations in 1993 (daily, seasonal and even longer term), their children were more likely to stay with their grandparents. The women, in turn, were treated similarly to sons who had gone off to work and sent remittances to support their children and the family as a whole. Abused, abandoned, and/or divorced women, having once been fully assimilated into their husband's families, were not deemed homeless and so did not benefit from this specific decision by the elders.

The community dealt more readily with the girls, their children and their attachment to land, than with the 'amphibian' boys. Even though the young men represented an infusion of labour for intensified farming, the terms of their presence were fraught with uncertainty. They were generally viewed as a liability, even a threat. The community was less in control of the young men's oscillating cycles of independence and dependence, in comparison to the more demanding and yet manageable situation of the young women with dependent children.

Under prevailing conditions of land scarcity, the council of elders made an ethical and widely heeded decision to expand the definition of community and home to include single mothers and their children. This decision was not developed by the national or local state, nor by an NGO or a formal religious organisation. It issued from the village elders, a barely visible, unofficial, but respected body that decides matters of community morality, values, governance and practical strategy.

7 Conclusions

Conversations about environmental and landscape change in Kathama repeatedly turned to culture, community and the integrity of the social fabric. The overall message from a diverse group was that environmental recovery would hinge on restoration or reinvention of viable social institutions. However, viable institutions should not be equated with fixed and formal organisational structures. It is crucial to grasp the contingency of organisational power and legitimacy, and the primacy of underlying, invisible and changing sources of connection and solidarity. In the case of the women's groups in Kathama the formal organisations may change or even disappear, but the fundamental connections between people do not depend on those entities. People may rely on these organisations to facilitate and support their relations, but it is the pre-existing ground of rich and complex social relations that gives rise to such groups and survives them when the formal structures change or crumble or merge with other entities.

The deep connections between people in Kathama have no more disappeared than the grass or the trees stop growing without forestry and pasture projects. The key point, however, is that some organisational forms and processes can constrain people while others enable them to expand and deepen social relations, to maintain connections under conditions of economic and spatial restructuring, or to transform them to fit new circumstances.

Complexity theory allows us to embrace instances of uncertainty and surprise, and the transformations they can bring. Within the framework of complexity theory, uncertainty is not the exception, but rather the rule. It is not an emergency but rather the reality of living in an emergent world, where every moment gives birth to new possibilities and new categories, where existing items constantly create, dissolve and reconfigure themselves, meshing with others to make new entities and new classes of things. It is not only ecologies and economies that introduce uncertainty and rock the stable boats of social and cultural life. Both social structures and cultural practices are in constant flux as well, and can also be sources of surprise.

In Kathama, the social networks are complex in several senses. The community is multiply located, literally, in geographic space. It is both place-based and networked across places. The membership is clearly marked by multiple subjectivity, as in the case of several women's groups and their leaders. The claims on leadership derive from multiple sources of credibility, connection and legitimacy, ranging from churches to traditional religion and from market-based connections to political party affiliation. Moreover, the braided governance of women's and men's organisations and separate institutions provides for a kind of parallel processing of social information and decisions on issues of shared concern, as well as in cases of divided interests. The response of the community to the needs of non-residents during the drought suggests a high degree of sensitivity to context and adaptability to contingency. The ability of the women's groups to deal with uneven development and drought, and later to disband and reinvent themselves, shows political sophistication. The decision by the elders to recognise single mothers and their children demonstrates moral depth. In each case people manipulated identity in response to contingencies, reinventing or transforming public expressions of self and community.

The community-based organisations in Kathama also developed internal differences that intensified under conditions affected, in part, by outside intervention, and the groups underwent self-dissolution and transformation in response to external conditions as well as internal rifts and realignment of identity, affinity and solidarity. The alliances and coalitions among people were substantially reconfigured, both formally and informally, within and outside of the official organisations. What are the implications for state and NGO actors? Do we read this as a caution against trusting movements and groups? The external agencies operating in Machakos first saw the groups as perfectly altruistic and communal and then later felt betrayed by their dissolution and disappointed by their apparent failure.

The lesson is that the community organisations and membership were their own sources of surprise, rather than simply mechanisms to weather or respond to external surprise, such as the closure of military employment options or the constriction of other labour markets. In view of this we might think of communities as robust categories for entities that are themselves complex, contingent and constantly changing. However, external agencies often based their interventions on erroneous perceptions of homogeneous communities. This, in turn, exacerbated some existing inequities, excluded some groups and missed important opportunities by failing to account for uncertainty, diversity, dynamism and complexity in rural communities.

Note

1. The elder women in Kathama reported having to participate in women's group meetings and being forced to sing insulting and degrading songs (in Kiswahili, not their own language, Kikamba) about hygiene, bathing and how to avoid parasites. They noted that the contemporary group songs were 'more traditional, songs in praise of people'.

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