

Kenyan Khat

The Social Life of a Stimulant

Neil C.M. Carrier

AFRICAN SOCIAL STUDIES SERIES



BRILL

Kenyan Khat

African Social Studies Series

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VOLUME 15

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by

Neil C.M. Carrier



BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON

2007

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

LC Control Number: 2006050018

ISSN 1568-1203
ISBN-13: 978 90 04 15659 3
ISBN-10: 90 04 15659 3

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PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

*In fond memory of Douglas Webster
A guide, philosopher and friend*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Carnegie Institute helped fund preliminary research in Kenya in 1999–2000, as did the Department of Social Anthropology of the University of St Andrews. The main bulk of my research on miraa was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of a research studentship held 2000–2002. I conducted further research on the substance while working as a research assistant on the *Khat Nexus* project funded as part of the AHRC/ESRC *Cultures of Consumption* programme. Thanks to Frank Trentmann for all his effort on that programme. The work was finished with the help of an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship held at St Antony's College, Oxford, 2005–2006. I owe Pauline Whitehead a great debt of thanks for her kind donation in the early days of the project.

Roy Dille guided the project and me into midseason form with invariably felicitous suggestions that have shaped the work into its present form. I am forever grateful to Mario Aguilar for suggesting the project in the first place. Nigel Rapport, Elaine Baldwin, Stan Frankland, David Riches, Shelagh Weir, Anne-Marie Peatrik, Sam Hall, Kathryn Cesarz, Mark Lamont and my fellow Ph.D. students at St Andrews, have all given me ideas, time and encouragement. Thanks to William Beinart, and all at St Antony's (especially Kate Rogers and Wanja Knighton), and David Anderson, Susan Beckerleg, Degol Hailu and Axel Klein, whose work *The Khat Controversy* will be, I hope, complemented by my own. Paul Goldsmith, both in person and in his authoritative writings on miraa, has been of great assistance, while he and his family also accommodated me generously at their Meru home. Abdulkadir Araru and Hassan Arero have been fantastic help in the UK, as have Hanan Ibrahim, Nasir Warfa and all my other Somali friends. Noel Loble and his interest in the topic gave a great boost to my fieldwork at a time when it sorely needed one. Paul and Pat Baxter have helped me greatly over the last few years with off-prints, newspaper cuttings, anecdotes, cake and tea. They have also been good sports in becoming Bramhall's first miraa farmers. My parents, Irene and Michael Carrier, have helped in ways too numerous to list. Many thanks to Sasha Goldstein, and all the team on Brill's 'African Social Studies Series'. Rachael

Shepherd's artistry provided the illustrated miraa tree (plate 4), while Lila Luce at Sasa Sema Publishers (Nairobi) and Stanislaus Olonde have improved the work greatly by allowing me to use images from Stano's *Gitonga* cartoon (plate 11).

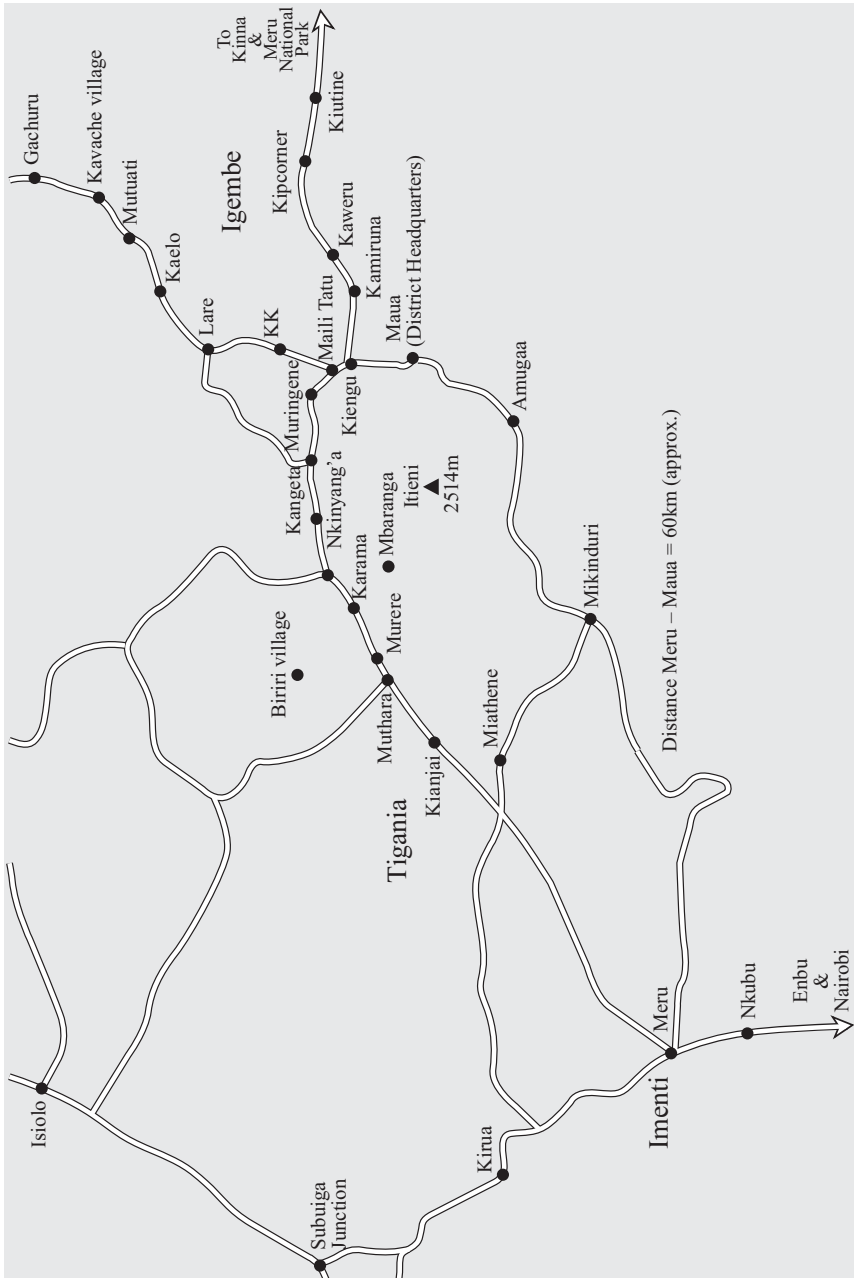
Dr Rashid Aman and the staff at the National Museums of Kenya helped forge me a path through bureaucracy and into the field with remarkable efficiency. The Catholic network looked after me wonderfully well despite my agnosticism. Thanks to: Sister Elizabeth, Anastasia, Father Mwangi, Peter, Opiyo, Mugambi, Speranza, Bety, Christopher, Sister Bertha, Sister Evangeline, Christine, Joseph, Jamila, Father Tablino, Sister Monica and all at the Isiolo Catholic Mission, Marsabit Mission, and the Flora Hostel in Nairobi. *Gratias* to Stefano Locati.

Without the following Kenyan friends and miraa-chewing accomplices I would have greatly struggled: Julius Likaria and family, Stephen Eloto and family, Wily, Kamaro, M'Ithai and all at the milk depot, the Makatas (especially Georgie), Eliud, Philemon, Musa and all at *Kimathi Kiosk* and *Sunrise*, Meshach, Gitonga and Sammy, Patrick in Eastleigh, Miaka, Kamau, Kibongi, Benson, Zakayo, Ahmed, Hassan, Rose, Geoffrey Baariu and family, Jackson and family, Charles and M'Thuranira, M'Naituli, M'Iweta, Tycoon, Moreno, Mururu, all at Karama and the Manchester regulars, Kimathi Munjuri and Mr L.N. Bariu. The Mwambia family—Andrew, Priscilla, Joshua, Judy, and Karimi—adopted me as one of their own: Karama really does feel like home from home. The other constituent of the Mwambia family, Nico M'Mucheke, is the lifeblood of this work. I very much hope he likes it.

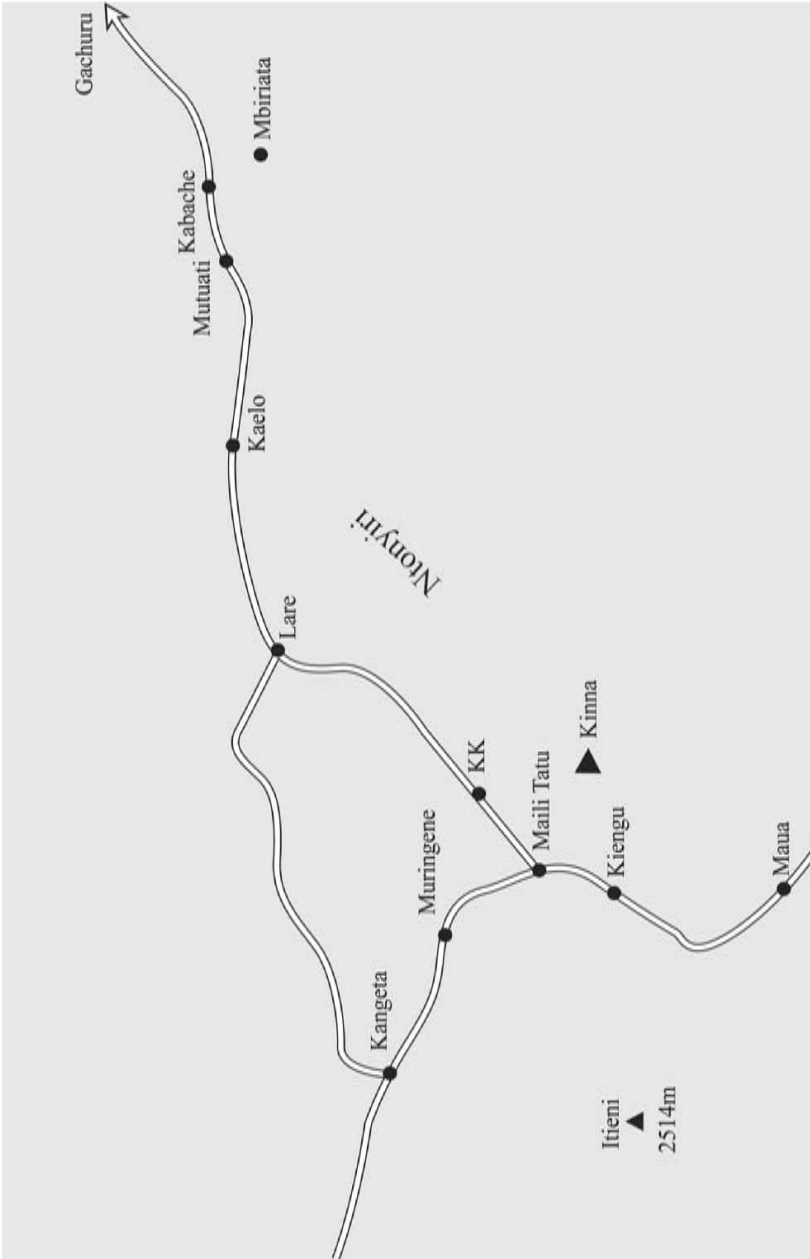
Sadly, Bishop Locati—who helped me much during my time at Isiolo—was tragically killed in 2005, and Douglas Webster—whose intellectual honesty and lucidity have inspired many over the years, including myself—died in September 2004. To them both: *nimeshukuru sana*.



Map 1: Kenya and principal towns



Map 2: The Nyambene Hills



Map 3: Main Igembe zone of cultivation

INTRODUCTION

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

—M'Mucheke, December 2000

Introducing miraa, veve, gomba, mbachu, khat, mairungi . . .

This book traces from farm to consumer some of the many trajectories that one particular substance follows in its 'social life' (Appadurai 1986) within Kenya and beyond. The substance in question is more widely known as *qat* or *khat*, and comes from a tree with the botanical name *Catha edulis* (Forsskal). In Kenya many terms are applied to it, and these include the following: *veve*, *gomba*, *shamba*, *green gold*, *Igembe grass*, *mairungi*, *mbachu*, *topong the power*, and, of course, *miraa*.¹

The consumption of Kenyan miraa has gone global thanks to the spread of a miraa-consuming Somali, Ethiopian and Yemeni diaspora. Consignments originating in the epicentre of Kenyan production—the Nyambene Hills district northeast of Mount Kenya—regularly reach consumers as far away as North America, and even Australia and New Zealand. While consumption in such far off lands is mainly restricted to the diaspora communities mentioned above, the authorities in these countries view it with suspicion. Indeed, miraa and its trade currently raise much controversy, and there are many who would like to see its social life curtailed completely. To this end some

¹ 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'.

countries have recently attempted to stop its import through prohibition: for example, in the US, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and New Zealand, miraa is decidedly unwelcome with strong ramifications for its trade network. While in Australia a permit system allows the importation of small quantities for ‘personal use’,² in the US no such concessions are made and those caught smuggling the substance face harsh penalties. Miraa has become another ‘drug’ that needs to be fought in the ‘war on drugs’, and miraa use is glibly labelled ‘abuse’.

In the UK miraa remains legal and London is an *entrepôt* through which miraa is redirected and smuggled stateside. There have been recent calls for it to be banned in the UK, even from within the Somali community, but after a review by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs the Home Office decided in January 2006 that legal measures were not appropriate (see chapter seven). Miraa has been portrayed as holding back chewers, preventing them from finding employment, and reducing attendance of Somali children at school, so tired are they after a night’s chewing. Beyond the Somali community, criticism of miraa comes from both sides of the political spectrum: those concerned with the welfare of Somalis, and who see miraa as breaking up Somali families; and those who see it as another thing for which to chastise asylum seekers. Local groups in areas where it is sold and consumed describe it as ‘anti-social’, while newspapers sell copy by publishing scare-stories of miraa inducing psychosis, and by equating the effects of chewing miraa with those of far stronger substances. In a lurid *Guardian* article (5th February 2004), a picture of a miraa bundle was shown next to the misleading headline: ‘This has the same effect as ecstasy and cocaine. And it’s legal’. Even Bob Geldof has attacked the substance: for him, ‘khat is a serious drug . . . It’s chewable cocaine. Green amphetamine’ (Geldof 2006: 39).

This substance with the ‘same effect as ecstasy and cocaine’ is far from universally viewed as a ‘drug of abuse’, however. Many point out that its effects more resemble milder stimulants, and that other

² Miraa plants are now grown in many Australian gardens, and there are concerns about trees being stripped bare by those au fait with their stimulating qualities. See, for example, news report available online at: www.abc.net.au/news/australia/wa/summer/200603/s1582112.htm (accessed 5th September 2006).

problems lie behind Somali unemployment, problems which would hardly be solved by making miraa illegal. Also, far from being a substance sold in squalid alley-ways, miraa is nowadays available in grocery stores, and even in one London branch of a UK supermarket. While US drug enforcement agents strive to keep their country miraa free, respectable herb suppliers there still sell potted miraa plants, albeit under its botanical name *Catha edulis* rather than the more familiar 'khat'.

Although, as we shall see, some Kenyans view miraa as a 'drug' to be fought, at its source in the Nyambene Hills US officials may be surprised by its status: it is a substance regarded by many locals with hearty approval. It is commonly used there as a pick-me-up imbued with little of the dark image that the word 'drug' conjures up. However, it is much more than just a useful pick-me-up for Tigania and Igembe, two sub-groups of the Meru people who cultivate it in the Nyambenes and trade it throughout most of Kenya. They strongly emphasise how miraa is both their economic mainstay—bringing in far better returns than tea or coffee—and an item of great traditional and ceremonial importance, being used, as we shall see chapter six, in initiation rites and wedding negotiations.

The disjuncture between the meanings and associations of miraa in the Nyambenes, and those conjured up when impounded bundles of miraa are shown wasting away on the Minnesota State Patrol Troopers website³ along with talk of it as being 'a new drug to battle' is great indeed. A similar disjuncture is evident in perceptions of coca amongst Andeans, and those of many crusaders on the 'war on drugs', whose view of cocaine as an evil is rarely tempered by an acknowledgement of the traditional importance of coca (see Allen 1988). Viewing such substances through the prism of the 'war on drugs' leads to a skewed perspective, and often engenders unnecessary 'moral panic'. Miraa provides an engaging case-study of a substance caught between contrasting perspectives influenced by a variety of local and global factors.

Miraa's varied meanings and associations make it fascinating to study, especially now that its trade has become a global phenomenon, where, for example, Somalis chew a commodity produced in

³ See: www.mspta.com/khat.htm (accessed 23rd February, 2004).

Kenya while watching videos of Mogadishu in a terrace house in Manchester (compare with the similar global juxtapositions described by MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga in their account of Congolese transnational traders [2000]). The present work, tracing miraa through its cycle of production, trade and consumption, examines many such meanings and associations absorbed by the substance in the course of its travels, suggesting why it is so valued by some yet disdained by others, and the interaction of global and local elements in the formation of these meanings. The work also attempts to capture how producers and traders co-operate, and sometimes compete, in exploiting their commodity, showing that producers are not passive in the face of developments in the global miraa network that affect their livelihood, but instead use the media and electronic communications to get their voices heard far beyond the Nyambenes. However, before looking in more detail at miraa's 'social life', one must first introduce the substance and its botanical and pharmacological properties.

Botanical and pharmacological properties

Miraa consists of the young tender shoots and leaves of *Catha edulis*, popularly chewed for their stimulant properties in Eastern and Southern Africa, Madagascar and in the Middle East. *Catha edulis* grows in highland regions favouring an altitude band between 5000–8000 feet (1500–2450 metres). Wild miraa grows as high as 80 feet, although the farmed variety is kept at around 20 feet with constant pruning (see Gebissa 2004: 15, and Bernard 1972: 55). Kennedy 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 Yemen often just the leaves and tender stem tips 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 dark, becoming greener as they mature. They can taste bitter, although the better the miraa,

the sweeter the taste. Miraa exudes a characteristic smell—compared to green peppers by one friend—although people vary in how strong they find it. While samples of miraa from different production regions are likely to differ somewhat botanically and pharmacologically, ‘it is still reasonable to assume an identity of essential chemical properties’ (ibid. 178) between Yemeni, Malagasy, Ethiopian, and Kenyan *Catha edulis*.

Miraa contains a number of stimulant alkaloids. The principal alkaloid is called *cathinone*, now known to be more powerful than *cathine* (d-norpseudoephedrine), once thought the main active ingredient (see Kennedy 1987: 181).⁴ Cathinone affects the central nervous system similarly to amphetamine, ‘that is, it increases heart rate, locomotor activity and oxygen consumption’ (Weir 1985: 46), although cathinone is reckoned ‘about half as potent as amphetamine’ (Zaghloul et al. 2003: 80). The comparison to amphetamine instantly makes miraa sound powerful, but just as chewing coca leaves differs 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 miraa’s effects thus:

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)

From my own experience, I would suggest that miraa would not be as popular as it is if it were more powerful. The effects are strong enough to absorb the consumer into whatever he or she is doing at the time, but not so strong as to drastically alter one’s conscious state. I consider miraa’s ability to absorb the consumer into the task at hand—whether that is socialising with friends, or concentrating on studies—to be a critical factor in allowing its use in so many different contexts (see chapter six). By becoming so absorbed, the

⁴ Kennedy includes a good survey of the research that went into discovering miraa’s active constituents (1987: 180–188).

consumer is more able to persevere with either work or leisure: one can be happily active when chewing, or happily inactive.

A crucial fact about miraa is its perishability (see Carrier 2005a). Cathinone rapidly degrades into cathine post-harvest, and once miraa dries up the commodity loses much potency (there is a growing international trade in dried Ethiopian miraa, however),⁵ although some tough varieties last longer. Consumers therefore want miraa as fresh as possible, although potency is not the only reason for preferring fresh stems: miraa takes on a distinctly unappetising texture and appearance as it loses freshness.⁶ This perishability has a huge impact on its trade.

Cathinone and cathine are not the only active constituents. A further group of alkaloids—the cathedulins—were isolated in 1979 (Crombie 1979), and more than sixty different cathedulin variants have been identified within miraa samples. The psycho-activity prompted by the cathedulins appears limited, although recent research suggests they play some role as they, like cathine and cathinone, release dopamine in the brain (*The Guardian*, 5th February 2004). While such an effect on the brain sounds dramatic and potentially dangerous, it must be realised that many substances and many human activities also cause the release of dopamine. Other constituents of miraa include large amounts of tannin, 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 range of miraa’s constituents suggests that there might be a significant synergistic action: as Weir suggests (1985: 46), ‘the effects of cathinone could be modified or counteracted by the action of the other chemical constituents of qat’.

It should be emphasised that miraa’s botanical and pharmacological properties are strongly intertwined with the cluster of meanings that people attach to the substance. The former properties

⁵ Sometimes miraa seized in the US has been described as ‘freeze-dried’, and it would be interesting to learn whether freeze-drying retains miraa’s potency better than heat-drying.

⁶ 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.).

underdetermine perceptions of miraa and its effects, allowing much scope for perceptions to be moulded by those who consume it, and consumers are especially creative in the way they use and talk about miraa, as I hope the present work demonstrates. One learns to appreciate miraa's effects in the company of friends, one learns terms for miraa that have strong cultural resonances, and chewing sessions have great social significance. It is for these reasons that Weir (1985 *passim*) takes issue with the reductive assumption that Yemenis spend much of their income on miraa because they are physically addicted to it: to understand why Yemenis value highly this relatively mild stimulant requires understanding the place of the 'qat party' in Yemeni life, and the social and cultural importance of attending. To suggest that Kenyan miraa is chewed so much because consumers are 'addicted' would be similarly reductive, doing little justice to the agency of its consumers, most of whom chew recreationally not because of addictive compulsion but simply because they enjoy time spent with friends and the sociable stimulation miraa provides.

Miraa and Health

As consumers themselves are quick to point out, miraa chewing can lead to adverse consequences for one's health, especially if one chews at the expense of adequate sleep and nutrition, and it is worth examining briefly the literature on miraa and health.⁷ Kennedy (1987: Chapter IX) surveys much of this literature, and mentions the research of Halbach, 'the most noted and cited medical authority on qat' (1987: 214). Halbach '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 in the literature and by consumers. Kennedy's research team conducted extensive surveys in Yemen on

⁷ Also see Beckerleg 2006 on Kenyan and Ugandan perceptions on the harm or otherwise done by miraa consumption. Of course, the consequences of miraa for consumers' health and miraa's social implications are intertwined issues.

miraa 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 no doubt 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). In contrast to the portrayal of qat by outside health experts, Kennedy states that Yemenis themselves ‘are nearly unanimous in the opinion that qat is *not* an important threat to their health’ (ibid. 213).

Recent research in Yemen suggests a link with miraa-chewing and cardiovascular problems, as some chewers suffered heart attacks at times of the day other than early morning, the time most patients are reportedly admitted with ‘acute myocardial infarction’ worldwide (Al-Motarrab et al. 2002: 407). This indicates that ‘khat chewing may be a risk factor for ischaemic heart disease’ (loc. cit.). Such research is at an early stage, and suggests that those with heart conditions would be better advised not to chew. However, miraa would hardly be alone in being relatively harmless *ceteris paribus*, but a risk factor to those with heart conditions.

More frightening to those unacquainted with the substance is its association with forms of psychosis. Such a link is often mentioned in the literature, and is widely repeated in non-medical accounts of miraa. However, there is in fact no clear empirical evidence to establish the existence of the condition sometimes termed ‘khat-psychosis’. Reports on individual cases—notably one from Ethiopia in the 1970s, and other more recent examples from among Somali immigrants in the UK—are frequently mentioned.⁸ In the UK much talk of miraa and psychosis is linked to the Somali community. Little is heard of miraa-related psychosis amongst Yemeni, Ethiopian or Kenyan consumers in the UK. This suggests that there are other issues behind the cases of psychosis amongst Somali consumers, although, of course,

⁸ See Alem and Shibre 1997, and Critchlow 1987. Regarding miraa consumption in the Eastern Cape, Hirst reports that ‘[n]o history of even a single episode of toxic psychosis, commonly associated with amphetamine abuse . . . could be uncovered in the Bolo area or the entire Stutterheim district [inhabited by Xhosa and where miraa chewing is common]’ (2003: 16).

excessive miraa use may be a contributory factor (especially if combined with a lack of sleep). High rates of unemployment and other social problems might well be relevant, as might post-traumatic syndromes linked with incidents in their country of origin. The rarity of cases of suspected miraa-psychosis was explained by Halbach when comparing miraa and amphetamine as potential triggers for psychosis. He stated that ‘the way in which khat is consumed does not permit the plasma level of the active sympathomimetic principle to rise high enough for a toxic psychosis to be produced’ (Halbach 1972: 26–27). A recent report on Yemeni consumers supports such remarks, concluding: ‘Overall, it appears that khat use is not necessarily linked to psychological morbidity; any association that is found may reflect an interaction with other environmental factors’ (Numan 2004: 64).⁹

As we will see in chapter six, miraa consumers (and their spouses) have much to say about the substance’s effects on potency and desire, and its association with matters sexual is a source of much humour. Such positive and negative associations are also debated in the scientific literature, and in 2004 the media spotlight fell on miraa after researchers at King’s College London announced that the substance could help fertility: cathine is apparently as stimulating for sperm as it is for humans.¹⁰ Other research suggests miraa chewing might have detrimental effects on male fertility (for example, El-Shoura et al. 1995). Also, male chewers in Kenya and elsewhere often report the phenomenon of spermatorrhoea, a ‘spontaneous secretion of spermatic fluid’ (Zaghloul et al. 2003: 82). A paper by Taha et al. reported their experiments showing that ‘cathinone administered orally in rats for 15 days increased sexual arousal (motivation) as evidenced by shorter mount latency, intromission latency and enhanced anogenital investigatory behaviour’ (1995: 301). The authors of the paper are keen to dismiss any notion of miraa as an aphrodisiac despite the positive results in terms of arousal. However, it does seem rather implausible that one can learn much about the influence of miraa chewing on something as complex as human sexuality from the behaviour of rats exposed to isolated cathinone.

⁹ See forthcoming work of Nasir Warfa et al. (2006).

¹⁰ See: <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/phpnews/wmview.php?ArtID=643> (accessed September 2006).

Kenyan miraa

Much of the academic literature written on miraa has focused on Yemeni consumption. Researchers like Weir (1985) and Kennedy (1987) have engaged readers with their descriptions of this curious social institution to which Yemenis devote time and money. Its history in Ethiopia (especially around Harar)—where its cultivation and usage probably predates that of the Yemen—has been recently covered by Gebissa (2004), while the BBC and other media outlets have reported the current drive amongst Ethiopian farmers to uproot coffee shrubs and plant the much more profitable miraa. Despite being a major supplier of miraa to consumers within its own borders and in Somalia, and the main supplier of the global Somali diaspora, for many outside the region Kenya seems not so strongly associated with the substance as other countries.

However, miraa turns up in many writings on Kenya, although usually only fleetingly. Nineteenth century travellers like Chanler (1896) and Neumann (1982 [1898]) provide early written sources on Nyambene miraa use. Material lodged at Nairobi's Kenya National Archives provides much of interest regarding miraa trade and use in colonial times. Interest in the substance during British rule was sufficient 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).

Bernard (1972) provides a comprehensive account of agricultural conditions and agricultural change in Meru district before, during and after the colonial period. Bernard gives miraa itself attention that is sound as far as it goes. More recently and more comprehensively, Goldsmith, an anthropologist, conducted research on Nyambene agriculture, concentrating much on miraa. He focused specifically on it in a 1988 article entitled *The Production and Marketing of Miraa in Kenya*, and further research resulted in his doctoral thesis *Symbiosis and Transformation in Kenya's Meru District* (1994). An 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, while a humorous piece in the journal *Iko* (2004) reflects nicely on miraa's stimulant effects (see also Goldsmith 1997 on the Somali influence on Nyambene miraa). He emphasises

the significance of the fact that production and marketing of miraa is an indigenously developed institution, in contrast to tea and coffee, crops introduced by Europeans: ‘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).

The Swedish anthropologist Anders Hjort focused on the trade to Isiolo in a 1974 article, and in his monograph on the town (1979). Hjort’s work is strong on the opportunities the miraa trade affords Meru men, as well as on interconnections between Meru and members of other ethnic groups in Isiolo. Whilst Hjort’s main focus was Isiolo and the economic interrelations existing at the time of his fieldwork (many of which continue to exist), my focus is on the substance itself and those who speed miraa along a globalised trade network. Therefore, rather than focusing on one aspect of miraa’s social life—production, trade or consumption—in this work I trace some of miraa’s trajectories from tree to cheek.¹¹ I will speak more of this ‘social life of things’ approach after a brief historical survey of miraa in Kenya. Such a diachronic survey complements the more synchronic material making up the bulk of this work.

Kenyan miraa: an historical survey

Written records on miraa cultivation and use in Kenya began with the writings of explorers in the late nineteenth century (Chanler 1893 and Neumann 1982 [1898]) who visited the Nyambenes. This mountain range is the main Kenyan production region of miraa, and the principal source of miraa reaching Europe and beyond. It is home to Tigania and Igembe, two sub-groups of the Meru, and they are the main producers and traders of miraa in Kenya. More detail on these Bantu-speaking people—recently the subject of an authoritative

¹¹ Clearly I could not follow all trajectories Kenyan miraa follows. Following in person the hugely important trajectory of miraa into Somalia was not possible, and while I try to make up for this with various other sources on miraa trade and use there, a huge lacuna remains.

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, 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 town¹² from about 1929 onwards further spurred on the trade, as its population consisted of many avid miraa consumers, including Isaaq Somali who settled in Kenya after serving as soldiers in World War One (Hjort 1979: 23; see also Goldsmith 1997). 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 with concern, and drew up Ordinance No. LIII in 1945, ‘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. It 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. This ordinance was soon deemed unenforceable as miraa was smuggled with ease, and had been abandoned by 1961 (see chapter seven).

Trade to Nairobi began in the 1940s, pioneered, according to Goldsmith (1994: 103), by an Arab trader. A special edition of the *East African Medical Journal* of 1945 reported the death of a Kikuyu trader who obtained miraa from a Meru lorry to sell among Somalis in Nairobi (page 2 of the uncredited editorial). Urban consumption grew, and Nyambene traders gradually expanded their networks as improvements in infrastructure and transportation meant miraa could be transported further before perishing. By the late 1950s, miraa was sold by Meru traders in Mombasa and beyond, the Meru gaining dominance over much of the national trade.

¹² For a history of Isiolo, see Hjort 1979: 15ff.

Consumption increased greatly in the 1970s, which some 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, and this trade became dominated by Somalis. The Somali market became so important for Meru farmers, that they were hit hard by a ban imposed by the Somalia government in 1983 (see Cassanelli 1986: 250).

Although the substance had been viewed negatively by the British, and left alone for the most part by post-Independence administrations (Kenyatta's government was to ban miraa, but decided against it after Kenyatta received a delegation of Meru elders bearing high quality miraa), 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—has precluded the government from listing miraa as an official cash-crop, to the annoyance of Meru producers.¹³ Miraa 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 good rewards for those able to export it. Miraa had become a global phenomenon. By declaring miraa illegal, the US, Canada and other countries raised the stakes in this trade, further increasing potential rewards. 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 North America.

¹³ 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).

It is the working of parts of this network, the ramifications of its farming, trade, and consumption for those involved in its social life, and the meanings attached to the substance along the networks that form the subject matter of the present work.

The 'social life' of miraa

Through a concern with one particular substance and how it is imbued with significance as it circulates along its pathways, my work links into the wider literature concerning the circulation of commodities. In sub-titling the work *The Social Life of a Stimulant*, I link it into one of the more famous works of this ilk: *The social life of things*, edited by Appadurai (1986). While it may be that 'things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with' (Appadurai 1986: 5), as a heuristic device the conceit of miraa having a 'social life' illuminates neatly how it is inscribed with meaning and value through its various trajectories, and how different individuals, groups of individuals and even governments attempt to control its flow. 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—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 cheek.

Appadurai writes, 'the flow of commodities in any given situation is a shifting compromise between socially regulated paths and competitively inspired diversions' (1986: 16–17). This metaphor of paths and diversions, derived from Munn's paper on the pathways taken by *kula* valuables (1983), is easily applicable to 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, conflict has arisen too, especially in the case of recent international trajectories where

high stakes ensure that there is competition to control the trade. 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 prohibited. 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. While miraa has crossed many barriers and boundaries, many more emerge in their place and are yet to be traversed. The final chapter deals with boundaries and barriers to miraa's spread in the form of disapproval and prohibition.¹⁴

Appadurai concentrates on the *commodity phase* in the social life of goods, and has been criticised for his focus on exchange to the exclusion of other phases in the social life of things. 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). Furthermore, in a paper exploring the significance of the 'visibility and invisibility' of production for value Dilley states that the 'idea that exchange creates value is misplaced . . . since it fails to acknowledge production as a possible source of value' (Dilley 2005: 230). Therefore, I wish to examine miraa throughout its full social life, not just its commodity phase: miraa in my work is a *commodity-plus*.¹⁵ The '*plus*' includes the significance the substance has for people in situations where its exchangeability is not to the fore: many aspects of production and consumption that add to the richness of miraa's social life—and to its value—are included in the present work, aspects that might be lost by looking at miraa purely as a commodity. To grasp the full value of a commodity one must give due attention to its whole lifespan. In taking such a broad view of a substance, one 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', and the way these different forms of value interact. Thus, production, exchange, and consumption must all be brought into focus to understand miraa's significance and value.

¹⁴ 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).

¹⁵ Thanks to Dr. Stan Frankland for this term.

The particularities of miraa's social life

In abstract discussion 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' (Appadurai 1986: 3) make little sense unless the remark is focused on concrete examples. The same goes for much of the recent debates on consumption: imbuing so abstract a concept with so much significance is dangerous, departing far from actual social life where specific things are consumed by specific people. 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. Perception of objects is conditioned by social and cultural factors, but this does not mean that the materiality of objects can be ignored in analysis: material qualities of objects 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, and that traders cannot use the stock-piling tactic used to control the market in coffee (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 Geary's chapter in *The social life of things* (1986: 169ff.). In that case, the older the relic, the more 'authenticity' could be ascribed to it, and the greater its value.

All through miraa's social life one sees how the physical properties of the substance greatly affects how it is treated and perceived. It requires certain types of locations in which to grow; responds to particular kinds of nurturing; its taste, texture, and effects 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. Such a focus on the impact of miraa's material qualities on society links the present work with recent anthropological trends in talking about materiality, such as that of Miller who discusses Latour and Gell's ideas of the agency of material things (2005: 11–15).

Who is doing the producing, exchanging, and consuming is, of course, of critical importance. 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. The relationships between those involved in the substance's social life are crucial too; indeed, Dilley draws attention to the way 'political control' is exercised not just over the flow of commodities as in Appadurai's approach, but also over 'the arrangement of non-things or relationships' involved in producing, exchanging and consuming these commodities (2005: 227–228). 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 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' (cf. Feyerabend 1999: 13). To avoid over-abstraction, I try to present an account of miraa's social life rich in concrete particulars, showing the intricacy that goes into the generation of the substance's value and perceptions of it.¹⁶

Divergence/convergence; paths and diversions

Particularity can clearly be taken too far, however. Bloch (1998: 43) speaks of 'theories that stress the irreducible particularities of specific cases, explicable only by a specific and unique history, and thereby

¹⁶ See also Carrier 2006.

forget the striking regularities across human cultures'. He contrasts these with 'theories that emphasise extra-cultural or extra-historical factors such as ecology, economy, or constraints coming from the nature of human cognitive capacities'. Some balance between the two is required, and I hope I can achieve such balance through thinking in terms of 'divergence' and 'convergence'.¹⁷ The particulars in miraa's life are many due to divergence: 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. 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.¹⁸

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, both Kenyan and Yemeni traders face similar 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 that have a similarly short economic half-life (although much of the utility of such analogies emerges where they break down). Convergence allows us to go beyond bare facts and to spot patterns and trends within and beyond the world of miraa.

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. Farmers, traders, and consumers gain 'how-to' knowledge in the course of their lives, and much of

¹⁷ Given how human society is so empirically complex, it seems to me wise to keep our analytical tools as simple as possible: much theorising and jargon in the social sciences only serve to make matters more difficult through adding extra layers of complexity.

¹⁸ Alluding to Bateson's (1979: 205) contrast between rigour and imagination ('Rigor alone is paralytic death, but imagination alone is insanity'), one might say that while social life would become impossibly confused without convergence, without divergence it would become fossilised.

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 globalised rhetoric on drugs comes into play, bringing about convergence in the perception of miraa as a ‘drug’ and hence a ‘problem’.

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 consumer: M’Mucheke.¹⁹ He is not the only individual introduced to the reader in the course of this work, and I try wherever possible to bring in real individuals as case-studies to give substance to collective terms and concepts like *Meru*, *Tigania*, *wholesalers*, *consumers* and so forth.

M’Mucheke: miraa connoisseur

This young Tigania (now 29), a resident of Isiolo, was my main research assistant in Kenya (see plate 1).²⁰ His parents both now live

¹⁹ I am uneasy with what Weber termed ‘the trafficking in collective concepts that still haunts us’ in a plea for a ‘strictly individualistic’ method in sociology (Max Weber, letter to Robert Liefmann, 9th March 1920: German Central State Archive, Merseberg, Repertorium 92, Nr. 30). (Regarding Max Weber’s individualistic approach, see Webster [1987]). To my mind, a good ‘individualistic’ approach does not deal in abstract individuals of the *homo economicus* variety, but in real individuals affecting, and affected by, real situations. It appreciates how people diverge in some respects, and converge in others: it appreciates people’s individuality and dividuality. Grounding anthropology in real individuals provides the best corrective for the tendency to descend into turgid discussions of abstract concepts that relate little to people beyond academia.

²⁰ 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 M’Mucheke how a specific individual interacts with it. Of course, the most famous anthropologist-informant relationship is that of Victor Turner and Muchona the Hornet (1967).

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, now 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'Mucheke.²¹ When we met in October 1999, he was living in Isiolo with his mother, whilst his father was in Karama. He 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, M'Mucheke 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 and Manchester United.

M'Mucheke 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 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. Linguistic fertility is one thing M'Mucheke 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'. Letters from M'Mucheke 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

²¹ '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). 'Mucheke' is Kimeru for 'skinny'/'slender'.

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.

M'Mucheke is a self-styled 'miraa connoisseur' who weaves the substance into his identity with much humorous 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. M'Mucheke brings many elements 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 M'Mucheke emerges through both shared and idiosyncratic associations of the substance. Ending a work that has an anti-excessive-abstraction agenda with a specific individual is clearly felicitous too. M'Mucheke not only appears in the conclusion, however: his influence is both implicit and explicit throughout the work. 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 enlivening the work with M'Mucheke's 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.

Researching Miraa

Researching a substance that provides a good living to many thousands of people, and yet is controversial and often threatened with legal restrictions, clearly requires caution. Outsiders investigating miraa are often viewed with suspicion, and during my spells in the field some connected with miraa were understandably unsure of my motives. M'Mucheke 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. M'Mucheke's grandfather was also at first suspicious, fearing that I would view the substance negatively. However, his suspicions vanished once we met and chewed together. To research miraa without chewing would prove difficult indeed, and chewing miraa and speaking the language of consumption were crucial research

techniques:²² farmers, traders, and consumers often found my chewing so hilarious, and hence endearing, that suspicions almost always disappeared, and talk flowed.

In finding keen informants I was lucky, and made friends with many who had good knowledge of the substance. My luck was especially strong when I chanced to meet Julius, an agricultural officer, Stephen, a Turkana living in Isiolo, and, of course, M'Mucheke. Their passion for the substance made them passionate about my research, and their own curiosity was an impetus for the research. While Julius and Stephen were often busy at work, M'Mucheke was unemployed when I first met him, 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.²³ M'Mucheke'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*'.²⁴ With such congenial companions as M'Mucheke, Julius and Stephen, I got to know many important people—traders and consumers—in Isiolo where I was based, as well as in the Nyambenes, Nairobi, and beyond.

Collecting material related to earnings in the trade was more difficult. Official figures on the trade are sketchy in comparison to those available in Ethiopia (see Gebissa 2004), and for the broad picture of miraa leaving the Nyambenes and revenue coming in, one has to make do with estimates. Also, questioning traders as to how

²² Hjort seems to have found miraa chewing a good research technique too (1979: 244).

²³ 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.

²⁴ '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!

much they earned usually drew, understandably enough, either overstated responses—especially from young traders wishing to present an entrepreneurial image—or an understated one. This difficulty in collecting reliable hard data is not too 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 sat in with many retailers, and accompanied agents, while observing 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 good idea of how prices changed seasonally.

Easier to get were opinions of those opposed to the substance. The fact that I occasionally chewed did not seem to prevent people from telling me 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 fieldwork departed greatly from the traditional image of the anthropologist arriving at his or her research locale, then immersing her or himself over a long period into the language and customs of that particular locale through participant observation. My fieldwork certainly involved participant observation over a long period, but participant observation along a multi-channelled, multi-sited, network. My own travelling and that of M'Mucheke and other friends, provided the material for an account of miraa's journeying along several trajectories, and how the substance is animated along the way. Thus, while my focusing on the pathways miraa takes is one reason why the book takes the form it does, with miraa linking various locales together, the journeying of myself, M'Mucheke, and others also influenced its structure. It was our travelling that led to certain trajectories being followed and not others. It was also chance that my Manchester background led me to follow the network to that particular endpoint.

Such a multi-channelled approach in anthropology is not just found in recent works like *Sweetness and Power* by Mintz (1985), or *The social*

life of things. 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 objects, and in collecting the material he himself travelled along some of the paths they 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 provide a chapter by chapter synopsis. This will prepare the reader for what is to come, and help show how the material links in with themes mentioned in this introduction. In writing about a cycle—i.e. of production, trade, and consumption—in a linear structure one cannot avoid structural difficulties. 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 . . .

After a brief description of the Nyambenes and the Meru who farm there, chapter one distinguishes between two different cultivation zones, before describing an ideal biography of a miraa tree, from root sucker to venerable old tree. Next, the procedures enacted to harvest the substance are described, including details on harvesting arrangements and particular varieties picked. After providing case-studies of actual farmers, I look at the rewards miraa provides farmers in the various production zones, comparing the financial benefits it offers with those offered by tea and coffee.

The next 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 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 two production zones, and traces miraa's routes out of them. I show how the reach of miraa expands from zone to zone, some only reaching local consumers, some reaching Somali consumers in the diaspora many thousands of miles away. Descriptions of impor-

tant staging posts are provided, as are case-studies of those speeding miraa along the various legs in its journeys and techniques used for smuggling it over the Atlantic.

Transporting miraa is a profitable business in itself, and the third chapter introduces various modes of transport used in the miraa trade, from wheel-barrow, 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 how so perishable a commodity is expedited along its trajectories.

Chapter four focuses on retailing miraa, suggesting why young Tigania and Igembe join the trade, how they become involved, and changes in the trade since Hjort's research in the 1970s. Also, types of business premises used by retailers are discussed. Some case-studies of Tigania and Igembe retailers are provided, before I turn to Borana, Sakuye, and Somali women retailers, found throughout much of northern Kenya. A detailed description of the retail process is given, looking at retailer—customer interaction and bargaining techniques. Isiolo is offered as a case-study of a town where much miraa is retailed: trade there relies on inter-ethnic dealings, presenting a study of miraa's journeys across ethnic boundaries. Finally I discuss retailing miraa in the UK and the institution of the *mafriish*, venues for the retail and consumption of miraa.

Trust plays a great role in the miraa trade as there are few contractual agreements. In chapter five 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 the 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. In this case, suspicion festered between producers and exporters leading to much tension and sporadic outbreaks of violence as Somalis were perceived by some Meru to be operating a 'cartel' and exploiting farmers.

In chapter six 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 and sometimes even personified and ascribed agency. A description of

the chewing process is given, followed by the contexts of consumption. I divide up consumption into *traditional*, *pragmatic*, and *recreational*. Of great importance is the *traditional* context, where ceremonial usage of miraa in the Nyambenes is discussed, showing how Meru treat miraa as far more than an income-generating commodity. Miraa consumption in Kenya is a farrago of forms, giving miraa's social life many idiosyncratic endpoints. I also look at the language of consumption, itself a mixture of different elements with all sorts of origins, both local and global.

The last chapter looks at how miraa has crossed many social and geographical boundaries, while new barriers have sprung up in its wake. One barrier is the view of many that chewing miraa is not respectable. A factor strongly affecting this view is the 'war on drugs' rhetoric that colours the perception many in Kenya and beyond have of the substance. Such rhetoric and global drugs policy have had a profound effect: miraa is now prohibited in various countries while a strong campaign for UK prohibition has recently been waged. I discuss the status of miraa in the US and the UK, before turning back to Kenya and its resistance to the call for prohibition, as well as the recent campaign by Nyambene producers to persuade the British not to ban their commodity: Kenyan producers are not content to remain mute while their crop is denounced, but instead seek to increase their local and global influence over how miraa is perceived and categorised legally.

Finally I draw together elements of miraa's social life, bringing out its great significance and value socially, culturally and economically for varied people linked by a vast transnational network. M'Mucheke then concludes the work as a case-study of someone who weaves miraa into his very identity—a true miraa connoisseur.

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.

CHAPTER ONE

CULTIVATING MIRAA IN THE NYAMBENE HILLS

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

—M'Mucheke, May 2001.

The Nyambene Hills

Miraa is cultivated in a few parts of Kenya: Rendille of Marsabit, Akamba of the Chyulu Hills near Mombasa, and Embu to the south-east of Mount Kenya all grow marketable varieties. 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.¹ *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. This mountain range runs northeast of Mount Kenya (see map 1), and forms '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 its 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 lunaesque 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)

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

One photograph (plate 2) taken above Nkinyang'a shows the stunning views to the northern savannah from the Nyambenes, and contrasts the fertile land of miraa production with the arid land of much of its consumption. 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.² 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-run hospital, bars and restaurants, and a bank, most of these situated along the main road to Meru, the biggest town in the region. Maua has a large Somali presence due to the miraa trade. 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.³ They are thought to have reached the region in the mid-

² See Bernard pp. 27–32 for a detailed description of various 'ecologic regions' on the slopes of Mount Kenya and the Nyambenes.

³ There is a wide ethnological literature on the Meru of Kenya. The work of the former District Commissioner of Meru, 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. 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 Gembe rather than other Meru groups. See also the recent thesis by Lamont (2005).

dle of the second millennium AD (Bernard 1972: 33).⁴ The Meru are divided into the following sub-groups: Imenti, Miutini, Igoji, Mwimbi, Muthambi, Chuka, Tharaka, as well as Tigania and Igembe. They are mainly agriculturalists, but also tend livestock.

There is today much unity between the sub-groups, although bringing them together under that name had much to do with the British colonial administration. 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). Miraa itself is something that marks the Tigania and Igembe as different from the other sub-groups.

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). The classical age-system of the Tigania and Igembe, covered by Peatrik (1999) and Lamont (2005),⁵ consists of eight revolving classes called *nthukî* in Kimeru, and are for men: *Guantai*, *Gichunge*, *Kiramunya*, *Ithalie*, *Michubu*, *Ratanya*, *Lubetaa*, and *Miriti*. As the classes revolve over a fifteen-year period, allowing 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

⁴ 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).

⁵ 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.

2005 . . . and so forth. As Peatrik states, the generation system of the Tigania and Igembe ‘was a multipurpose principle of organisation. As the framework of an integrated political system, it bore an expression of sovereignty although the polity was acephalous and the authority diffused, or more precisely, collective. Generation classes organised kinship and affinity, the domestic cycle, the life course of men and of women alike’ (Peatrik 2005: 288).

Nowadays *nthuki* are bandied about much in conversation, although Peatrik states that amongst Tigania and Igembe, ‘[t]he generation system is both defunct and working . . . As a system the generation classes no longer function but their ethos and certain linked rules, implicit or expressed, persist’ (Peatrik 2005: 293). Initiation into the generations still occurs, is regarded as important by most Tigania and Igembe, and no doubt ‘gives the initiate a unique sense of identity in relation to younger boys, 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 established witchcraft through trial, and in the case of parricide’ (Peatrik 2005: 291).⁶ *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 H.E. Lambert, District Commissioner of Meru in 1934/1935 and 1939–1942. He gave this secretive and

⁶ For a detailed history of the *njuri ncheke*, see Peatrik (1999: 455–470).

exclusive association 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 2005: 292), 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 councils of elders, whose authority was disrupted by the imposition of British rule. Today the *njuri ncheke* still commands much respect in the Nyambenes, although Peatrik says that few new people are initiated into it (2005: 293).

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).⁷ 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, in the Imenti highlands at first. 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 the 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

⁷ Gebissa speaks of the land pressure faced by Ethiopian farmers in Harerge as being a major factor in their switching to miraa cultivation (2004 *passim*).

means there are too few surveyors for the job, although progress is being made. However, the process can be a contested one and 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.

One elderly friend in the Nyambenes became embroiled in a dispute over land. His two hectare *shamba* was visited by surveyors claiming that half of it belonged to a neighbouring school. The old man was furious, fearing that he would lose many miraa trees, while being offered a pittance in compensation (ksh. 100 for each tree). He chased the surveyors 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, and so was able to prevent the land seizure.

Nyambene zones of miraa 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. 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.⁸ Goldsmith notes the presence

⁸ 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).

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).

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. 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. In the present work I focus on the following two zones:

1. **Karama/Nkinyang’a zone:** Heading from Meru town, 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 despite one town being Tigania and the other Igembe.⁹ 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 2.)
2. **The Igembe zone:** Miraa is grown most intensively by Igembe in a section stretching from Kangeta to Maua on the main road, and another section 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 growing tea. The latter section—known as Ntonyiri—descends to the lower

⁹ Nkinyang’a, being a border town, however, is likely to be quite mixed, and ethnic affiliation as being Tigania and Igembe is probably hazy (and perhaps not especially relevant).

lying town of Mutuati, where tea cannot be grown. The road from Maili Tatu to Mutuati takes in the towns KK, Lare, and Kaelo 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 farmers in this zone, and most rely on it. The Ntonyiri stretch of this zone and Maua are host to Somali whose miraa networks mainly rely on Ntonyiri farmers. (See map 3.)

These zones provide the bulk of Nyambene miraa. However, farmers around Kianjai and Muthara also grow highly respected crops of the substance (reckoned stronger and less watery because of the hotter climate), and in one zone stretching from the town of Kiengu to Kinna, farmers grow cheap miraa for the local trade to Kinna and Garba Tulla (one variety of which is known as *algani*, and is sold in small bundles costing ksh.20), and some for the international trade. Tigania farmers from Mikinduri are also now involved in the international trade, bringing miraa to Maua for sale to Somalis.¹⁰

The biography of a miraa tree

Miraa is reputed to be so profitable that more and more Nyambene farmers 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 through intercropping, cultivating other crops on the same land is not precluded.¹¹ Some crops are said to benefit from proximity to miraa trees. One *shamba* near Maili Tatu consists of rows of mature miraa trees springing from a base of verdantly green tea shrubs (see plate 3). The farmer assured me that the tea thrives even during a drought thanks to shade offered by the trees.¹²

¹⁰ Mark Lamont, personal communication.

¹¹ Goldsmith describes thus 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 and 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 food and horticultural crops are planted around the base of the trees. Goldsmith mentions variations to this idealised pattern.

¹² 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).'

Other cash crops like coffee, pyrethrum and macadamia, and subsistence crops like maize, peas, and bananas are intercropped with miraa.¹³ Trees ‘pump and recycle nutrients from the subsoil, reduce leaching of nutrients by lowering soil temperature, and increase soil moisture retention’ (Goldsmith 1994: 76), thus improving land for other crops.

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 choose suckers from trees known to produce quality miraa in abundance. Though the age of a tree is agreed upon as being the prime factor generating quality miraa (see below), farmers distinguish miraa by other criteria too. For example, a tree variety to avoid is called *kilantune*, the product of which is described as having a deceptively pleasing purple appearance (*-tune* is the Kimeru adjectival stem for ‘red’), but the taste and effect of cabbage. Another poor variety is *kiandasi*,¹⁴ described as too potent, rendering the chewer sleepless and susceptible to the sensation of ants crawling over the skin (formication). *Miraa miiru* (*-iru* is the adjectival stem for ‘black’), on the other hand, is regarded as perfectly balanced in taste and effect (see Goldsmith 1994: 123). Whether these differences are caused by variations in soil and climate, or whether the varieties differ botanically, it is hard to say.¹⁵ 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.

Once a root sucker is transplanted, it will not require much more tending than mature trees: although in dry seasons they might require watering. All being well, five years later farmers begin harvesting. Young trees are known as *mithairo* in Igembe dialect (Goldsmith 1986:

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ 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).

¹⁵ 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).

159).¹⁶ 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 mature into a stem-producing branch.

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 sprays, but it was significant enough in 2002 that at a meeting of farmers and traders, convened in the Nyambene town of Maili Tatu, the issue was discussed vigorously. 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 traders 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 benefitted fully from miraa in the past without chemicals. He claimed that spraying is anyway ineffective—yields are the same whether sprayed or not—and potentially harmful as trees can dry up and consumers suffer through chewing contaminated stems. A rumour then current 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

¹⁶ I was also told of the word *ikenye* referring to a newly planted tree in Tigania dialect and the word *kive* for the same in Igembe dialect.

making traders worry lest the British Government make miraa illegal. The issue of spraying seemed limited to miraa cultivated in Ntonyiri, and the *njuri ncheke* has decreed that no spray is to be used; punishment for those ignoring the decree is to have their trees uprooted. There have been cases of such drastic measures being taken against those who persist in spraying. While some agricultural officers I met in Maua lamented that miraa farmers do not use modern farming techniques like sprays, it could be argued that the *njuri ncheke* are more in tune with current thinking: their refusal to countenance spraying fits well with the organic movement popular in Europe and North America.

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 Meru 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 in Isiolo market. He was concerned 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*. *Mbaine* and *Ntangi* are reckoned the first *nthūki* 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 nũ Meru ũtwĩre* 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.

Farmers I spoke to suggested that the *mbaine* epithet should ideally 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. The oldest trees that I personally saw were those in a *shamba* above Nkinyang'a. These were four metres or so in height, and have a remarkably large girth at their base, almost as if the trunk was swollen. A friend 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 (plate 5). It seemed as if it had been cultivated before the current technique of forming miraa into its usual shape, towering as it does almost 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. 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 (*urigo* [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 nineteenth century and perhaps further still. As Goldsmith says, *mbaine* 'stand as tangible representatives of group histories and cultural continuity' (Goldsmith 1994: 77). Close similarities exist in Hugh-Jones' description of the ancestral links of coca plants for the Amazonian Barasana:

Each group owns one or more specific varieties of coca, planted from cuttings and coming from a common clone. The coca plants of each group are part of their ancestral inheritance, passed across the generations between father and son and maintained by an unbroken line of vegetative reproduction which is used as one of the principal images when speaking of the group's continuity through time. (Hugh-Jones, 1995: 56)

Mbaine trees are indeed greatly revered, and it is their product that is used ceremonially on such occasions as brideprice negotiation (see chapter six). For a Meru farmer the ideal biography of a miraa tree consists of it becoming a venerable old *mbaine*, and the cultural worth of these trees is one of the most important factors in determining the economic rewards farmers receive for their commodity.

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.¹⁷ We now turn from the biography of a miraa tree, to the biography of its product.

Harvesting

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 10–20 cms in length), *colombo* (around 15–25 cms in length), and *kangeta* (around 25–40 cms 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: from 21 days between harvestings in dry months to 14 days in the wettest months.

¹⁷ See Carrier 2005a.

Kenya's climate usually consists of two rainy seasons. As Bernard relates in reference to the Meru district:

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. Agricultural officers in Maua estimated that 46 tonnes of miraa leave the Nyambenes daily during the rains, while in the drier months the figure is 23 tonnes: these figures, even if not wholly accurate, demonstrate the drop in production. 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 moisture with their deep 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.

Harvesting arrangements

Various arrangements are made to ensure a *shamba* gets harvested. These arrangements concern who picks and grades (i.e. removing the unwanted leaves from stems and packaging bundles together). Often in the Karama/Nkinyang'a zones farmers mobilise friends and relatives for these tasks. 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. Sometimes a busy *shamba* owner will hire a man to manage the harvesting of trees on her or his behalf.

In the main Igembe zone troops of young boys aged ten 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 are carrying large bundles full of the day's harvest on their heads. A little bit of the day's harvest finds its way into their cheeks too. They are paid a small sum for each bundle picked and graded, and being efficient, they can collect around ksh.300 or even more 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 farmers enlist their services there for the following morning. 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 *hotels* 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. M'Mucheke used to indulge in this well-rewarded work. When on school-holidays, he would visit Mutuati and earn enough from picking to buy himself items like sports shirts, books and sweets. He enjoyed this work so much, that his uncle had a hard job persuading him to return home.

Sometimes middlemen rent *shambas* and so have responsibility to hire pickers and arrange their supervision. Some renting 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 that *mainga*. Such a middleman is likely to know the farmer quite well: many develop good relationships and have first refusal

on harvests. Middlemen usually pay farmers an agreed deposit on the morning of the harvest, paying in full later.

Other *shambas* are hired longer-term. The price agreed upon is based on the number and quality of the trees, and the expected harvest over the period for which it is hired. 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 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 renting *shambas* take little care when harvesting, and are so keen to profit from them that they spray on chemicals and strip all marketable stems in one go, damaging the trees.

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

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 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 this was 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 required, and the amount of time it takes, depend on how many trees a particular *shamba* contains and their size. 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. Pickers first pluck enough stems for a small handful, then pause long enough to tie them up with a long wiry stem taken from the overhang, and throw the bundle down to the ground. Plucking is resumed until another handful is ready for binding up. Many plantations have fewer than 100 trees, while some 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 large 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.

Different varieties of miraa are picked from different parts of the tree (see plate 4): the best quality, and most widely sold varieties, are those picked from the main 'skeletal' branches (see plate 6). 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 off branches, but are snapped off at a suitable length: thus the name *makata*, from *kukata* meaning 'to cut' in Kiswahili, is given to one of these varieties (*machenge* in Kimeru). 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 Ntonyiri supplies more than other areas, providing considerable quantities for the northeast of Kenya and Somalia. These varieties are commonly picked in dry seasons when there is more demand for such cheap miraa as prices increase.

Another lower grade variety—called *nyeusi*, *ng'oileng* or *ngoa*—is plucked from the base of the trunk, or from the underneath of large branches. A farmer above Karama told me that on the swollen base of *mbaine* trees the rainy season induces such growth of *nyeusi* that one can grip and pull off in one go sufficient stems for a bundle. Shoots growing up from the roots are profuse in rainy seasons, and these are sometimes harvested and sold cheaply as the variety *lombolio*. Shrivelled stems growing in the main skeletal section of a miraa tree are occasionally picked and sold as *gathanga*.

Grading miraa

Miraa is graded and packaged with much local idiosyncrasy, but almost all varieties—except the cheapest—give the impression that 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 wholesale bundles in just a few minutes. Visual aesthetics are highly important in the trade, influencing consumers in their choice of which bundle to select.

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 and sharing banter. A large amount of leaves accumulate in front of kiosks popular with graders, which form an effective ground cov-

ering upon which graders sit (plate 7). Alternatively, grading is done under a shady 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.

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. One criterion used to distinguish 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 separated into various qualities and tied into units of different sizes.¹⁸ The following pattern is often used:

Most stems picked are 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 miraa.¹⁹ 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 were 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

¹⁸ A typed report (dated October 11th, 1961) of a District Commissioners' meeting concerning miraa suggests that miraa's packaging was very similar at that time. 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*. Goldsmith reports that the current unit sizes developed under the influence of the metric system, previous to which miraa was sold in roughly graded bundles (1988: 140).

¹⁹ See Weir (1985): glossary, pg. 188.

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. The heterogeneity of miraa is of great significance for its social life, and one must understand that when those in the know talk of miraa, they are often talking about a specific variety rather than generic miraa (see Carrier 2006). This variety developed over the years as the trade became more sophisticated and farmers and traders experimented with new combinations and recombinations of the stems and leaves. Such combining and recombining has been viewed as being at the heart of entrepreneurship and the creation of new possibilities for profit: for example, Schumpeter (1934: 92; quoted in Gudeman 1992: 291) observed that entrepreneurial activity ‘consists precisely in breaking up old, and creating new, traditions’. Such experimentation is evident in the many varieties of miraa, and given their importance, I now provide comprehensive descriptions of those I saw or heard about, including descriptions of presentation and packaging:²⁰

Miraa varieties from the main Igembe region

Giza: This variety—the most commonly sold one 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*, and so forth. Lower grades often have stray stems of *makata* and *nyeusi* mixed in, usually inserted in the middle of *shurbas* to hide them. Mixing in such inferior stems is common in dry seasons when high quality stems are scarce, and *shurbas* require extra bulk. The highest quality *giza* is called *ngoba*, and contains only the most succulent stems.

Colombo: This is a very high quality variety. It consists of the best, most succulent, stems of the skeletal section, and ideally is picked

²⁰ For details on pricing of the varieties, see chapters two and four.

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 removed. 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*: the word *muluka* (meaning ‘something big’ in Kimeru) is used by Igembe in reference to *shurbas* of *colombo*. The *colombo* name hints at the global linkages of drug discourse by alluding to Colombia, known for its production of cocaine. (See cover picture of M’Mucheke and friends with bundles of *colombo*.)

Kangeta: This variety—named after Kangeta town, but sourced all through the Igembe zone—consists of long stems picked from the skeletal sections. Again, most leaves are removed, except for those 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 rather different: it consists of 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 *shurbas* of *makata* 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 sold mainly 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*.

Matangoma: This variety is low quality, has most of its leaves left on, and is packaged like *mbogua*. It comes from the overhanging sections of the tree. In Kimeru it is known as *mashushu*. (Plate 8 shows a bundle of *matangoma* on sale in Isiolo.)

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: M'Mucheke 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 in Isiolo is its infamous 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.

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 mostly short stems (around 12 cm), though occasionally farmers leave a longer interval between harvesting, producing stems as long as *kangeta*; the long stemmed version is known as 'scud' in Isiolo after the large Iraqi missiles made famous in the Gulf War. M'Mucheke also popularised the term *No. 14* for this variety: *No. 14* is the longest bladed *panga* ('machete') used in agriculture. It is called *shurba ya karama* as a large *shurba*—rather than a *kitundu*—is its standard retail unit.

Shurba ya nkinyang'a: This variety is also 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 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.

Post-grading procedures

Farmers rarely retail miraa themselves. One cautionary tale warning of the dangers inherent in this was told by a road-side trader at Karama. He reported that one woman farmer tried to by-pass himself and his fellow retailers 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. 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 like himself.

Getting the crop to traders often involves a trustworthy family member or a friend walking to the nearest town. Around Karama and Nkinyang'a, buyers 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. While farmers around Karama and Nkinyan'ga have little distance to cover to reach buyers, for some in the main Igembe zone it would be difficult to take their bundles straight into a main miraa centre like Mutuati as distances

prove prohibitive. In this region, therefore, there are collection points near smaller villages where Land Rovers collect miraa. Thus, most farmers around villages like Kabache and Mbiriata bring miraa into those villages rather than walk to Mutuati.²¹ Some delegate for their miraa to be taken directly to bigger towns on foot or by bicycle, however. One farmer I saw at Kabache tipped a boy a few shillings to take his miraa into Mutuati on his behalf.

At big miraa markets as well as at smaller collection points like Kabache, huddles of men with *bundas* can be seen at around mid-day attempting to get as much money as possible from buyers. Farmers will have a good idea of the price they can expect for their miraa. The price paid 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, and farmers can anticipate the harvest by harvest increase or decrease in price. As the Nyambenes possess a fairly reliable set of seasons, experience teaches farmers and buyers 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, as production becomes profuse.

When 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 angrily from a buyer, trying in vain to attain the necessary

²¹ I was told that some farmers prefer selling miraa in villages rather than big towns, as less competition means that higher prices are secured.

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 being sold, 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, 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 bargaining process is not necessarily a fraught one, and some interactions seem warm: one buyer I met at Nkinyang'a adopted an avuncular air with farmers coming down from *shambas* to sell him their miraa. Most buyers are aware of the benefits of 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 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.

Meet the farmers

Such are the procedures enacted at harvest time. To add some colour to the preceding description, I now introduce some actual Nyambene farmers. All the following farmers are Tigania or Igembe, although there is talk of farmers other than Tigania and Igembe growing miraa in the Nyambenes. One such farmer was a pioneering trader in Isiolo: Mzee Mbogua, 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 seems unlikely they could succeed.

Case-studies of farmers and their shambas

(1): Mdozi is the nickname of a Tigania farmer whose *shamba* lies high above Karama, at the very edge of the forest that crowns the Nyambenes. Mdozi is 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 first sold potatoes in Karama. He 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. M'Mucheke 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. He and ten other pickers (relatives and friends) harvest his miraa every 21 days or so. *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.

(2): 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 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, he said, of 1000 trees that take ten people (normally relatives, including women and children) two hours to harvest. They are a mixture of young *mithairo* and older trees planted in 1977, and can make him around ksh.10,000 per harvest. 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. Buyers normally visit him on harvest days, sometimes helping out with harvesting, although M’Iweta occasionally sends family members into Karama to sell miraa there. He does not deal with just one buyer, but with whomever either pays the most or makes the effort to reach his *shamba* first. Familiarity develops between farmer and buyer, and there are three in particular who buy his miraa. Such a large *shamba* as his often provides too much for the needs of just one buyer. Most of his miraa ends up in Nairobi, and sometimes he is paid in full only after the miraa is sold there.

(3): M’Thuranira is an elderly Tigania whose home and plantation is just across the road from Karama. I was introduced to him by his son Charles (see plate 9) whom I first met in 1999 while he worked as a barman in Maua. Nowadays Charles lives on the homestead too, together with his wife and their young daughter. Whenever 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, giving him only the small amount of ksh.1000 per harvest. 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^rThuranira'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^rThuranira has a number of goats).

(4): Mzee 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 3). His trees are all *miraa miiru*, 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 the Mzee'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 for maize and other subsistence crops. The *shamba* is five minutes away from his bar, and has a wooden building where Baariu and his family relax and eat when working there. As Maili Tatu is at the highest point of the Meru—Maua road, farms around it are suited for tea. I was keen to get some figures from Baariu on the respective amounts he makes from tea and miraa, as his crops cover exactly the same acreage. He did not offer an exact figure, but simply remarked that his miraa fetches far 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 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 supplements his income nicely.

(5): Moreno is a young Igembe lad of eighteen whose home is a few kilometres south of Mutuati. He still lives with his parents, and is yet to marry. His father has a *shamba* of 80 high quality trees,

and has given 30 trees to Moreno. These trees are *miraa miiru*, and some are 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 a 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. 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.

(6): Priscilla is M'Mucheke's mother: an Igembe from Mbiriata village near Mutuati, who took up nursing as a profession. 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 were 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 just *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 and not 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. Although Priscilla does not chew, she has no qualms about growing it, and knows all the techniques that should be applied in its cultivation.

(7): 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, later on becoming 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 M'Mucheke—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.²² 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* 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), 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 good quality *kangeta*, giving him

²² One of M'Naituli's daughters told me that many years ago land was apportioned in the Nyambenes by the following method. 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.

around ksh.3000–5000 per harvest. 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.

Rewards for farmers

Farmers from the different zones face different market conditions, and money to be made from miraa differs. However, for most farmers, miraa is financially worthwhile. One article on nutrition in the Nyambenes reports that an average household in Lare ‘earns about Ksh 12,000 (US \$200) per month from the crop, as compared with a gross national product of US \$295, per capita per annum based on 1998 figures’ (Meme et al [undated and unpaginated]). This is quite a high figure, and to make such a sum from farming alone would require plenty of high quality trees: the likes of M’Thuranira in the above case-studies make far less. The figure must also include off farm income from trading miraa, the main employment of the region. It is certain, however, that farmers earn far more from miraa than they could do from either tea or coffee.

In the early 1970s, miraa was already giving farmers a better return than coffee. Bernard wrote that ‘[a]lthough only about 3,000 acres are grown, *miraa* is second to coffee in Meru as a revenue earner’ (1972: 130). He estimated from the perforce sketchy figures on miraa’s production²³ that farmers gained on average more than ksh.2000 (at 1970 rates) 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. Nowadays, miraa is outstripping coffee more than ever financially: coffee prices have dropped so sharply over recent years that ‘equipment from the Maua coffee cooperative was sold at auction in March 1999’ (Observatoire Géopolitique des Drogues Annual Report 1998/9: 190).²⁴ One Nyambene farmer was quoted in a recent news report as saying that while

²³ 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.

²⁴ Report available online: http://bbsnews.net/research/ogd99_len.pdf (accessed April 2002).

miraa gave him ksh. 30,000 a month, coffee gave him ksh. 20,000 a year.²⁵ To reap such benefits from miraa, the farmer must have a very large *shamba*, but smaller scale farmers like M'Thuranira also strongly emphasise that coffee's rewards are currently slight.

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 high quality tea. Yet the rewards from tea are also modest in comparison with miraa: one farmer mentioned in the UNDCP report of 1999 (pg. 27)²⁶ reckoned that every shilling invested in tea brings a return of two shillings; whereas every shilling invested in miraa gives a return of four. Also, earnings from tea come only sporadically in payments from co-operatives. Nyambene farmers like Mzee Baariu with higher-altitude land are fortunate in that they can intercrop both tea and miraa, further boosting the land's profit potential.

Money raised from miraa varies between the different zones. In the Karama/Nkinyang'a zone, few *shambas* are completely miraa-free and the trade networks for miraa spread from these towns as far as Nairobi, and even Mombasa. Demand is high, and farmers get a good price. 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 could be bought at that time 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 buyers 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 maintain a decent production rate even at low altitude.²⁷ Buyers in this zone are local men, many of them

²⁵ Report available online at: http://www.news24.com/News24/Africa/Features/0,,2-11-37_1522073,00.html (accessed September 2006)

²⁶ UNDCP (United Nations Drugs Control Programme): *The Drug Nexus in Africa* (1999). Available online: http://www.unodc.org/pdf/report_1999-03-01_1.pdf (accessed May 2002).

²⁷ 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.

farmers too. Most miraa deals are between farmers and buyers well known to each other, playing a part in ensuring a fair deal for farmers.

In the Igembe region serviced by the wholesale market of Muringene, most of the money raised by a particular harvest also 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 middleman and retailer 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. While 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 Ntonyiri, by contrast, feel exploited. Muringene buyers and farmers told me that low prices paid for Ntonyiri miraa were due to the low quality of miraa cultivated there.²⁸ However, farmers I spoke to around Mutuati had another explanation: exploitation. Most miraa from this region is sold to Somali networks and so farmers have little choice but to sell to Somalis, or Meru brokers working for Somalis. As well as keeping prices down, some Somalis are said to demand larger than usual *kitundus*, refusing payment if they consider them small, and sometimes return miraa bought on deposit, claiming the miraa is poor quality. Farmers might lose out as brokers cannot then afford to pay them back in full. This issue is a crucial one in the miraa's

²⁸ Goldsmith's figures from the 1980s, 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, stating that one *bunda* costs ksh.30–100 (Goldsmith 1988: 142). The lower range of Lare prices might have been for varieties like *makata*, also sold at Muringene.

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 appear 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 poor quality *bundas*. As in all zones, *mbaine* miraa is guaranteed to fetch a decent price as the cultural value of the trees translates into economic value: *colombo* is reckoned never to fetch less than ksh.1000 per *bunda*, and often fetches around ksh.1500. Blessed are the *mbaine* owners.

Most farmers find money made from miraa makes a crucial difference to household finances. When the government once threatened to impose restrictions on the miraa trade, Meru delegates brought *mbaine* miraa to President Kenyatta when they requested that the restrictions be forgotten about; they 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 (this statement was met with bemusement by actual farmers); as mentioned earlier, they lamented that miraa is not usually treated with fertiliser, thus reducing yields; they also said that they discourage farmers from growing miraa as, despite the money changing hands, in the long run it 'increases poverty' by keeping young harvesters away from school.

In the UNDCP report on drugs in Africa, Nyambene 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*.²⁹ Certainly miraa seems less likely to

²⁹ 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

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 fortuitously have just 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 miraa *per se* is not the problem; the problem lies in the way the money it generates is used.

Of course, miraa is not an unalloyed blessing for farmers and the Nyambenes—the tension between Meru and Somalis, and such issues as child labour are obvious and genuine concerns—but it is possible to be far more sanguine about the crop’s effect on the Nyambene economy. For example, Goldsmith describes well the prosperity of the Igembe in the 1980s in comparison to Kenyan farmers elsewhere who were obliged by law to continue mono-cropping 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 much to be said for growing the crop, especially as part of a diversified strategy of both on and off-farm income generation.

Nyambene miraa may in the future face increased competition from Chyulu miraa and that grown in other locations, especially as

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.).

trees in such regions become more established. Indeed, in recent years trade of Nyambene miraa to Marsabit has dwindled somewhat in the face of competition from the locally produced product. However, the fame of Nyambene miraa insulates it somewhat against this risk, as consumers often perceive the Nyambene product as superior to that from other regions, and for now Nyambene miraa is the one in demand from Meru to Manchester. The next chapter examines this network in detail, tracing the trajectories miraa follows from the Nyambenes and introducing the people who speed it on its way.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM MUTUATI TO MANCHESTER: MIRAA'S TRAJECTORIES

*Nakuru Machakosi,
Hata Kisumu halisi,
Mwanza Musoma upesi,
Na Malindi yameingia.*¹

—Omari Suleiman, *Kitabu cha Mairongi* (1972)

From Nyambene *shambas*, miraa follows many different trajectories before reaching consumers. It can be very well travelled, reaching as far as North America and Australia, though mostly its reach is not so great. Miraa consumption is avid in the Nyambenes, and consequently much miraa only travels a few miles at most to local retailers. This chapter, in combination with the next, follows through a number of miraa's trajectories to the point of retail, and is very much a tale of two diasporas: the Meru diaspora within Kenya who leave their Nyambene homes to trade miraa throughout the country, and the Somali diaspora now spread throughout the world. Before beginning this survey of miraa's trajectories and those who operate them, we take a look at the middleman system.

The Middleman System

The term 'middleman' has negative connotations, linked as it often is to exploitation of producers. Although the need for organisations like *Fairtrade* 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

¹ '[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.

would be wrong. However, one can see that trading in certain commodities allows a middleman to exploit his or her position: thus the ability to store commodities like coffee in bulk provides middlemen able to invest capital with some 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 comparing 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 powerful middlemen, and controlling some trajectories of miraa—particularly the international trade where a particularly fast network is required because of the distances involved—allows consolidation of one’s position.

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 I do not imply that local usage is fixed: on the contrary, such 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 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, Somalia, Europe and beyond: the Europe and American trajectories are mainly operated by Isaaq Somalis, and that to Somalia by Darood and Hawiye Somalis (Goldsmith 1997: 477).

Brokers

Local usage in the Nyambenes distinguishes between 'agent' and 'broker'. The latter term seems restricted to two types of individuals. The first are usually 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 just one or two *bundas*, and they only cover short distances between farmers and agents. They often try to keep farmers and their buyers apart, 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 local area. Brokers of this type have great flexibility in their work as they tend not to have long term agreements with buyers.

The second type of individual I heard referred to as 'brokers' work on a much larger-scale. 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 in dealing with farmers. Meru brokers of this type operate mainly 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 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. 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 business relationships with retailers outside the Nyambenes. Many agents are men in their thirties or forties, and those I met were 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 Goldsmith 1988: 143).

Agents are paid for every *kitundu* sold by the retailer, the money being sent back in an envelope with someone trustworthy. 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, with each party often prepared to help the other in times of need. Thus, retailers might help out agents by splitting losses on unsold bundles, and agents sometimes send extra miraa as a relation-strengthening 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 back per *kitundu*. The *ndabari* is an important communication device for the trade.

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 sup-

plies, the wealthier he becomes. Canny agents invest their takings 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. 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 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, like the thousands of women retailing miraa in the north of the country, 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, and Alexander and Alexander criticise 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'.

Somali Exporters, Distributors and Re-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 dominate this export trade, although there are some Meru exporters. Around forty Somali exporters are based in Nairobi, of whom only five or so trade on an especially large scale. 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.

In the UK there are several distributors based at Southall in London who send miraa on to client retailers throughout the country. These are a relatively new group of middlemen, who according to a former London trader only emerged about a decade ago. There are also a number of re-exporters who send on miraa from the *entrepôts* of London and Amsterdam all over the world, including countries where miraa is illegal: USA, Canada, Sweden amongst others.

Miraa from the Karama/Nkinyang'ga zone

Nkinyang'a 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 requires middlemen. Of course, much miraa does not get further than the cheeks of consumers in the Nyambenes: some local retail is dealt with in chapter four. The following are important destinations for the trade in this zone's miraa and the strategies used to serve them:

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* minibus to Karama or Nkinyang'a from Meru takes only half an hour or so, and costs merely ksh.60. Transport services are also fre-

quent. 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 *Kimathi Kiosk* in Isiolo² 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. Most Isiolo retailers 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*.

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 and reserving the right to pick one by giving a deposit. He goes the following morning with friends (whom he pays a small amount) and picks enough *shurbas* to satisfy the retailer. Once he has enough, he visits the *Manchester Café* where, sustained by tea,

² See chapter four for a detailed description of this kiosk.

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, and dispatches the miraa with a *matatu*. When I met him, it was especially rainy and consequently difficult to harvest miraa. This explains why he was only sending a small number of *shurbas*—twelve 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*, his profits for that day would 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, and usually he makes around ksh.300–400.

Nairobi

Karama/Nkinyang'a agents supplying Nairobi kiosks operate on a bigger scale than those supplying Isiolo, and tend to be better rewarded 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 was born and bred in Karama: Benson. He supplies miraa for a Nairobi kiosk 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. In 1998 he moved 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*, and so gets much more profit. 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 told me that he 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 10). 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. 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 *Sunrise*, a chain of kiosks we shall encounter in chapter four. There are three main agents in Karama supplying *Sunrise*: Kaumbutho, Karethi, and Ntongai. These young men (in their late twenties and 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 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 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. The casual worker, impressed by the money made by agents, is keen to either set himself up in that capacity or become a retailer.

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, and they both own retail kiosks in the miraa market of Meru, and one 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.³ 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.

³ We shall meet two Tigania men running a Nanyuki kiosk retailing miraa from Muringene and Karama in chapter four.

Trade in the main Igembe zone

It is from this zone that most miraa retailed 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 old stadium at Maine Road,⁴ the chances are that the miraa was plucked from a *shamba* somewhere in this zone. 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 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. Local retail in this zone is strong, but 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 economic *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).⁵ 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

⁴ This is where many of Manchester's Somali community live.

⁵ 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.

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. 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, 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 *makata*. *Bundas* of *makata* 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, and 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 miraa packaging 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 *karami* ('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: for example, many traders refuse to sully the Sabbath with work.

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, having visited farmers, would 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 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 and keep the extra money raised by his initiative. 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, managing 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. One such agent acting on behalf of an Isiolo retailer is 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 Isiolo, and, after saving money, began to send *bundas* to retailers there. Nowadays he sends miraa to two Borana retailers in Isiolo, and to *Kimathi Kiosk* (see chapter four). Before forging a relationship with Kimathi, 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 *Kimathi 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, he dispatches some for Kimathi to be getting on with, sending the rest later. At the bus stage, he 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 *Kimathi Kiosk*. The two Borana retailers collect their suppliers 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 *Kimathi 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. *Kimathi Kiosk* sells more *kitundus* of *giza* in dry seasons—up to about 50—and more profit might be made on each one too.⁶ This suggests that in the dry season he makes over ksh.1000 from *Kimathi 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

⁶ Kamau reckoned a *bunda* of *giza* in dry seasons costs around ksh.2200–2500 at Muringene market. *Kimathi Kiosk* sells each *kitundu* at around ksh.300.

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 English Premiership football match.

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 for their own consumption.

Merille, Laisamis, Marsabit, Moyale

Nyambene miraa for Marsabit and Moyale is also sourced at Muringene.⁷ Much trade along this route is operated by Borana, Burji, and Sakuye women. Most are wholesalers, passing miraa to retailers along the route, and 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 late at night on my behalf.

Burji Mama: One trader was a Burji lady from Marsabit who had been trading for over thirty 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 twenty *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)⁸ around ksh.2000, selling it on to retailers at ksh.3500.

⁷ As mentioned in chapter one, Marsabit may soon become self-sufficient in miraa, as production has taken off there.

⁸ The cost of miraa was high at that time due to lack of rain.

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. This particular trader reckoned her business was challenged by the following:

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.

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, informing them of the date and time of her arrival so they can 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 also regarded insecurity, poorly maintained roads, and high costs of car maintenance as particularly vexing problems. Despite these and the high rate of cess, she estimated that her trade nets her monthly ksh.40,000–60,000.

Laisamis 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. 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 is 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 smaller, outlying towns by foot: this involves serious walking over many 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 lament that dishonesty can lead those entrusted with relaying money between Laisamis and Isiolo to pilfer some. The credit they give local retailers can result in payment delays, and bad roads and weather are problems for them too.

Muringene—Nairobi—Beyond

The route most commonly followed by Kenyan 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 to the 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). Nyambene agents supplying Nairobi work in a manner similar to Kamau, procuring miraa at market or from *shambas*, and paying in full or on deposit. The only difference in method is that they use Hilux pick-ups rather than public transport to take their consignments to Majengo, a crucial miraa distribution point located east of Nairobi 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 almost identical appearance. The section of Majengo devoted to miraa is small: basically just a few muddy or dusty (depending on the season) streets. It has evolved to service the requirements of the trade, and its location is felicitous: close to Eastleigh, where vast quantities of miraa are consumed by Somalis and Ethiopians, but also to the city centre, and thus the many retail outlets found throughout Nairobi.

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 walking is still possible. I visited Majengo with a retailer working for a city centre kiosk. We walked from the kiosk to Majengo—covering a few kilometres—and arrived there early evening. Walking later than this 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, and so traders often prefer using public transport to walking. Retailers

operating west of Nairobi centre have little choice but to get a bus or *matatu*, although there is a taxi service that collects miraa and delivers it directly to retailers.

When I visited, 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. Retailers were impatient to get their *bundas* and return to kiosks, while Hilux drivers and *karanis* ('clerks') 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 operate there too. 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, as well as kiosks. 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 and sell low quality *giza* from a plastic bag. However, Igembe selling miraa from kiosks are more likely to deal with a Muringene agent, rather than obtain it from Majengo wholesalers.

Goldsmith found in the late 1980s 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 *bundas* 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). *Gaaru* 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 prefer to 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.

Retailers throughout Nairobi rely on Majengo as a collection point for miraa, and 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 cannot do this as distances are too great. For westward trajectories such as Kisumu, sacks of miraa are loaded on to public transport and generally escorted by a miraa trader who looks after his own supplies over the course of the journey, as well as other supplies entrusted to him. Nyambene miraa also reaches far-off places like Lodwar: presumably, retailers in such towns have arrangements made with retailers also acting as wholesalers located at somewhere more accessible—perhaps Kitale—from where they can send someone to collect it or entrust to public transport. The distances covered from the Nyambenes to places such as Lodwar are great indeed, and it is testimony to Meru ingenuity that miraa is one of the few commodities delivered efficiently and regularly to such towns.

Thus we see Majengo's importance. 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.

Lare/Mutuati Miraa

It is from Ntonyiri that much Kenyan miraa sold in exotic locales like Mogadishu, London, Manchester and New York is sourced. A large-scale, Somali-run network operates this trade, although 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 Eastern district 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*, approaching town from all directions. 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 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 where a throng of traders gather. Farmers and brokers keep arriving, and agents apply themselves to procuring enough *bundas*. Almost all this activity involves Meru men, although there still is a Somali presence in town.

When agents have enough miraa, they 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.

Business does not end completely once this first wave of trading has subsided. A steady stream of farmers and brokers continue to arrive as 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. Miraa is brought to this spot from outlying villages like Kabache by Land Rovers, and much of this 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 outlying areas 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 men from Ntonyiri. Once agents have procured miraa, they either use Land Rovers that collect miraa in Ntonyiri prior to loading it onto buses at Maili Tatu. By late afternoon, buses are on their way, usually heavily loaded with miraa. Some traders travel all the way to Mombasa, looking after their own and other agents' miraa in return for contributions to their bus fare and other costs.

At dawn, miraa for Mombasa reaches Kongowea (see chapter three for a description), Mombasa's equivalent of Majengo: a distribution point and wholesale market for miraa. Here large quantities of miraa are sold or passed on to local retailers or other middlemen wanting to speed miraa up or down the coast. In a talk given in 2001 at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine,⁹ Beckerleg speculated on the history of the trade in Malindi and Lamu. Lamu, she maintained, had until recently no Meru traders, whereas today it has many. During a visit to Lamu in 2001, I met an Igembe miraa trader who ensures Lamu retailers are kept well stocked: Miaka. He is an Igembe in his forties whose Nyambene home is near Lare. Much of his time is spent commuting between Mombasa and Lamu, and 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 a trader. 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 after the ferry docks at the jetty, Miaka makes straight 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 has a home in Mombasa and a place to stay in Lamu, but his wife and children are in Lare and he misses them, although he appeared fond of the coast and had many friends amongst Lamu locals. However, 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 opportuni-

⁹ *Miraa (Khat) in Kenya: social mediator or menace?* The talk was given on 28th November 2001 at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

ties 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 Somalis, 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, who 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 many female retailers. Further north in Wajir and Mandera, Meru traders have no such foothold, and most of the network is operated by Somalis.

International Trajectories

Those who can gain a strong foothold in the international miraa trade can make very good money, and the ambition to become a

large-scale exporter is common amongst those involved with miraa. 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 first reached Wajir, then 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. Goldsmith describes thus how the miraa network to Somalia worked in the early 1980s after it was banned: '[Siyad] Barre banned the import of *khat* in 1981, and then allowed political allies to smuggle it into the country. Soon afterwards Meru *miraa* was being collected at a depot in Kaelo, deep in the Nyambenes, sent by land and air to Mandera on the Somali border. Camels transported the *miraa* from Mandera to pick up points twenty kilometres inside Somalia. Army land rovers then sped it on to Kismayu and Mogadishu, where it was marketed by individuals from clans supporting the government' (Goldsmith 1997: 476).¹⁰

¹⁰ Dool (1998: 46) speaks of the great resentment that built up amongst Somalis in the north of Somalia when miraa was banned there in the early 1980s, as they

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, outstripping miraa sent to Europe. 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 millions of shillings. Miraa in Somalia is often linked to warlords, and is reckoned to be a source of much of their revenue and a means to keep their militia loyal through supplying them with the substance: the trade in miraa is seen by many as a 'conflict trade'.¹¹ As Goldsmith wrote in 1997 (476): 'The warlords in Somalia ended up using miraa in the same manner [as Siyad Barre before them]. Both Ali Mahdi and General Aidid controlled miraa import and distribution to generate revenue, and at one point it was one form of currency distributed as a reward and as a lever of control over the irregulars forming clan militias'. It is also reported that Osman Ato, a financial backer to one faction, 'reputedly earned US\$ 128,000 a day from *khat* imports' (Cooper 2002: 936). With Mogadishu and the surrounding area under the control of Union of Islamic Courts at the time of writing, it will be very interesting to see how the situation with regard to miraa develops, as there have been rumours that the Islamists aim to shut down the trade. In September 2006 it was announced that the sale and use of miraa during Ramadan would be prohibited, prompting demonstrations against the measure in Kismayu, recently captured by the Islamists.¹² As so much miraa leaves Kenya for Somalia, such moves are likely to have great ramifications for farmers and traders in the Nyambenes.

saw it as a way for the southern based government to get at them, miraa chewing having been regarded as mainly a northern habit. See also Vouin-Bigot (1995: 136–137).

¹¹ Some commentators claim that achieving stability in the Horn of Africa would be helped by curbing miraa production and consumption (see, for example, Shinn 2004: 7–8).

¹² See report of September 22nd, 2006 on BBC website: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/5369958.stm> (accessed September 2006). Also, see report of September 25th, 2006: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/5377626.stm> (accessed September 2006).

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 has sometimes led to the former moving to Maua (where there also are many Somalis), or even leaving the Nyambenes altogether. 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: Abdi. 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 Abdi 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.¹³ Not all Abdi'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: some carry out menial tasks around the Maua headquarters. For unemployed Somali men, casual work for Abdi offers a first step in the miraa trade, and many Somali refugees—as opposed to Kenyan ethnic Somalis—work on such networks, many of whom do not know Kiswahili or English. 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 where 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.

The Maua headquarters of Abdi'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

¹³ *The Beehive Kraal* is my favourite place to stay in Maua. More and more Somali agents lodged there over the course of the years in which I visited Kenya, providing a secure income for the owners.

young Meru friend who once acted as a clerk for one of Abdi'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 Abdi. Her father—who owns a vast *shamba* near Mutuati—got her involved in the trade. He asked a friend of his who had been working successfully for Abdi 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, taking 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 Abdi'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 Abdi'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 Abdi'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 is well regarded by her workers. 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.

A Somali agent nicknamed Duma ('cheetah' in Kiswahili: he was named thus as his miraa 'travels very fast, like a cheetah') also works on Abdi's network, overseeing the collection of Kaelo miraa. He deals mainly 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. Repackaging at this stage also involves mixing up *shurbas* from different *shambas* (see below), making up *kitundus* with a couple of good *shurbas* mixed with some distinctly poor ones (*gathanga* and *makata*). 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 distributors from Kariakor, so they know how much miraa to expect.

In the UK miraa is always sold at £3 a bundle (with an occasional hike in price to £4): this differs substantially from miraa sold in Kenya, which has a flexible retail price dependent on supply. *Miraa* for Europe is generally sourced in regions of the Nyambenes not as subject to drops in supply as others, but even so, price at source varies, and this can eat into potential profits. To cope with this, a flexible quality of *miraa* is used. *Miraa* from three main locations in the Igembe region of the Nyambenes supplies the bulk of

the international-bound crop: these locations are the towns of Kaelo, Mutuati and Kiengu and their outlying *shambas*. *Miraa* from around Kaelo is reckoned high quality, that from Mutuati mediocre, and that from Kiengu poor. Consequently *miraa* from the three different locations varies in price. In the rainy seasons when *miraa* throughout the Nyambenes is cheap, *kitundus* for the UK are made up mainly of good quality *shurbas* from Kaelo, perhaps with a *shurba* of Mutuati too. As supply dwindles and prices at source rise, poor quality *shurbas* from Kiengu are also added: UK consumers then receive a mixed blend, with one or two *shurbas* from Kaelo and Mutuati, and one or two cheap *shurbas* from Kiengu. Also, some of these *shurbas* contain more *makata* stems than succulent ones from the main skeletal zone of the tree. In this way, exporters in Nairobi, and distributors and retailers in the UK still profit with *miraa* sold to UK consumers at £3.¹⁴

I witnessed such mixing of varieties in Nairobi at a place in Eastleigh where bundles of *giza* destined for Holland were being sorted. It consisted of a courtyard where *miraa* was laid out under the sun to dry off moisture, and a dark shed where ten young Meru men were seated. Five Somali men were overseeing operations, one of them brandishing a whip to deter anyone from coming along and slowing down the process. Once excess moisture was dried off, the *kitundus* were inspected, and any viewed as below standard were discarded. They were then handed over to the Meru workers who swiftly tied *kitundus* of three *shurbas*. The Meru graders were paid at piece rate for every *kitundu* tied, and were hired by Somalis as their background in the Nyambenes gave them great skill in tying up *miraa* bundles.

There are now several Somalis exporting *miraa* to Europe and beyond, although their trade may not quite match Abdi's in scale: out of forty or so Somali exporters in Nairobi, only five are said to work on a large scale. There are some Meru attempting to get international networks up and running. The most famous case of a Meru involved in the international trade is the late Ntai Wa Nkururu, a Tigania from near Muthara, and a former member of parliament renowned as a campaigner against corruption. He was studying law

¹⁴ For more on this, see Carrier 2006.

in London in 1999, and imported miraa to support himself. Some Meru claim that he was fairer in paying farmers than Somalis (see chapter five). However, the procedure used by Abdi 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 Pumwani¹⁵ 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), and pay the freight company they use.
- Rely on distributors based in the destination country to collect it from the airport and send it on to retailers and relay money using *Hawala* money transfer agencies. Nairobi exporters estimate that they make ksh.3000 profit per carton of forty bundles.¹⁶

In the case of miraa for the UK, consignments arrive at Heathrow, usually early in the morning, and after freight companies have cleared the consignments through customs, they are taken to a distribution depot at Southall. At the depot, Somali distributors obtain boxes of forty bundles for which they send £50 to the Nairobi exporter,¹⁷ and then despatch them on to their client retailers in London and throughout England and Wales. For a box of forty bundles, retailers pay distributors £80, a fixed amount.

From Southall miraa is distributed throughout the country. The Somali communities of Cardiff, Leicester, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool all contain many miraa consumers. In the case of Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool, vans are used to transport boxes up the motorway, delivering first to Birmingham, then Man-

¹⁵ Pumwani was the operational base for another exporter I met in Nairobi in December 1999.

¹⁶ Thanks to Nuur Sheekh for this information.

¹⁷ As Nairobi exporters make around ksh.3000 (around £25) profit per carton, and that they are paid £50 by the UK importer, then costs of buying miraa in the Nyambenes and running their network amount to about £25.

chester, and finally Liverpool. Transport costs are not reflected in the retail price of the bundles that tend to be £3 throughout the country with little fluctuation (see chapter four). Not all retailers rely on London distributors, however, and the price might be kept stable by dealing directly with Nairobi exporters, perhaps relying on friends in London to arrange the transport.

The Somali network supplying the UK with Kenyan miraa does not have a monopoly on the UK miraa trade, however. Ethiopians import substantial quantities of miraa from Hararge province in Eastern Ethiopia. This trade seems more formalised than that of the Somalis: suppliers of Ethiopian miraa in London are listed in the 'Abesha Business Directory' (a pocket-sized list of Ethiopian businesses in London), and imports from Ethiopia have even reached a mainstream store in the guise of a *Costcutter* near Kings Cross. The organised nature of the Ethiopian trade seems to reflect the more co-operative organisation of the trade in Ethiopia (see Gebissa 2004) compared with the individualised nature of the Somali trade in Kenyan miraa.

Onwards from the UK...

The UK is also a staging post for miraa sent on to many parts of the world, including Australia where importers must acquire a permit to bring in the commodity, and are allowed to import up to five kilograms per month.¹⁸ However, in the case of the US, Canada, and Sweden all trade is illegal. Dreams of the money to be made from smuggling miraa to North America encourages many to consider getting involved. I have myself been asked by Somalis in the UK to consider acting as a miraa courier to the US, with the incentive of a free ticket and spending money (an offer I politely declined!). Those who asked me to consider this were not big-time drug smugglers: they had clearly heard about the money to be made, and opportunistically wanted a piece of this.

A Kenyan friend living in London described his experiences of relaying miraa to Toronto in the early 1990s. At the time miraa was not illegal in Canada, but to import such goods legally required a licence that the importer did not have. He never met his Somali

¹⁸ See: www.tga.gov.au/docs/html/khatapp.htm (accessed June 2004). 294 'annual permits' had been allocated in 2003, as well as 202 single use permits.

contact in Canada face to face, and was put in contact with him through friends aware that a London-exporter was sought and that my friend was reliable. Communication was limited to telephone conversations. His involvement in the trade was as a vital link between Toronto and the Kenyan supplier: he would pick up the miraa from the airport, then take it back to his house and 'let it breathe' before repackaging it for Canada.

The couriers he dealt with were all Canadian nationals—mainly young students—paid by the importer in Canada: they were not paid much as risks were low then as all that would happen if they were caught was that the miraa would be confiscated and burnt. As well as a fee, the couriers would also receive a bonus if they were successful. Up to four couriers might be used on the same flight, each carrying one or two suitcases. My friend would accommodate the couriers well at his home and pick them up from the airport: they would even pay him a little for accommodation, so boosting his income. There was meticulous planning involved in timing the deliveries: through reconnaissance at the airport in Toronto it was known which customs officers were 'friends' and which ones 'enemies', and deliveries were made to coincide with the shifts of the former. Flights that arrived at particularly busy times were also preferred as then customs officers would more than likely be preoccupied. Despite this planning, the success of the deliveries was not guaranteed and several consignments were confiscated: however, it was fairly certain that if at least two of the couriers got through the importer would break even. My friend had previously worked as a cabbie in London, and made far more money in the miraa trade, although he did have to work hard in his role.

In the end, after about two years in the trade, the importer stopped contact without sending money for the last consignments, just as my friend was attempting to set up his own links to Maua to ensure a smoother network and cut out the Nairobi exporter. He later heard that the importer—regarded as a 'Mr Big'—left Canada as the police were becoming suspicious of the large sums of money he had in bank accounts despite claiming social welfare benefits: he had apparently become involved in the murkier world of smuggling illicit drugs over the US/Canada border. Once his network disintegrated, my friend gave up on the miraa trade and enrolled at a UK university.

Nowadays the stakes are higher as miraa is illegal in North America. In the US, miraa at its most potent is a Schedule I substance mean-

ing that those caught importing it face harsh penalties. However, factoring in the risk involved in smuggling the substance means that the substance retails at a high price: so high that the price paid for it in the Nyambenes is insignificant by comparison. Estimates of how much can be made from smuggling miraa into America often sound exaggerated—for example, the *Guardian* newspaper in an article of May 11th 2003 reported that one successful trip can net £15,000—and real amounts made are likely to be much less. Miraa is reported to retail in the US at anywhere from \$20–\$50, and if one supposes a courier takes over 100 bundles—a just about feasible amount in one or two suitcases—then retail takings would be \$2000–\$5000 (assuming all bundles are sold, which is not necessarily so. From this must be subtracted the costs of a ticket for the courier and his or her spending money (say \$700) as well as the money paid to the Nairobi exporter (say, \$250). Once profits have been split between the London exporter and US importer/retailer, the sums involved would not make the mafia envious. Also, it is clear that not all miraa consignments get through: money lost through these will bring down overall profits further. Still, profits must be good enough to encourage trade, and regular successes in getting consignments through can no doubt lead to accumulation of a fair bit of wealth.

Recruiting couriers for various destinations in the US continues, and to speed up the process some America-bound miraa is pre-packaged in suitcases in Nairobi so couriers can pick up the consignment at the airport in Europe and board a plane soon after. Those caught can face severe penalties: according to a *Scotsman* article of June 5th, 2003, a US Customs officer told the reporter that there is no maximum sentence for miraa smuggling, and life imprisonment is a possibility. A BBC report of March 24, 2004,¹⁹ investigated the case of a teenager from Kent facing six years to life imprisonment after being caught smuggling miraa at JFK airport in New York. In the end his parents got him home, but at a cost of \$5000 and a twenty year ban from entering the US. Press reports suggest that shady British gangs are moving into the business of recruiting couriers for North America: bizarrely, one town where miraa couriers have been

¹⁹ This report can be viewed online at: www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/extra/series-1/smuggling_drugs_khat.shtml (accessed March 2004).

recruited is Stranraer in Scotland (*Sunday Mail* August 15th 2004). In the *Scotsman* article, a young reporter posing as a would-be courier met a Somali man in his twenties in Southall who would arrange for her to deliver two suitcases to New York. She would take them to a ‘first-class’ hotel in the city where a contact would meet her and pay for her two nights at the hotel. Her air ticket would also be paid for, and she would be given £250 spending money. The Somali apparently told her that it would be the ‘trip of a lifetime’. Some Somalis resident in North America are prepared to personally smuggle miraa, and there was a case of a Toronto police officer of Somali origin who in 2002 smuggled 219 grams of miraa into Canada on board a KLM flight from Amsterdam. He was sacked from the police force for trying to use his officer status to bargain his way out of trouble once the miraa was found by a customs officer. His appeal against dismissal was rejected in June 2006.²⁰

Despite the ongoing use of couriers, it seems more common nowadays to send miraa through the likes of DHL or Federal Express. Case notes for an appeal hearing in 2003 of a Somali man convicted of ‘knowingly possessing and intending to distribute khat’ in the District of Maine gave the following insight into the smuggling operation:

The story began on March 22, 2002, when three packages marked “Documents” arrived at the Federal Express office in Portland, Maine. Noticing that they were wet, Federal Express employees opened them and saw green. Leafy plants. Mistaking the contents for marijuana, the employees summoned representatives of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) . . . After testing, DEA agents determined that the leafy substance was . . . khat.

DEA agents planned a controlled delivery and watched as the appellant picked up one of the three boxes . . . The arrest followed . . . The ensuing interrogation uncovered the existence of an elaborate distribution scheme . . . The appellant was sent to retrieve the package by a friend . . . who peddled khat to the Somali community in Lewiston, Maine for \$6 to \$8 a bundle [21]. [The peddler] had used the appel-

²⁰ Thanks to Sam Hall for bringing this case to my attention.

²¹ The size of the bundle is not stated: by the price one would think such a bundle would be a *shurba* rather than a full *kitundu*. Some customers might be unable to afford a full *kitundu* at smuggling-inflated prices, and four *shurbas* (*kitundus* for international export normally have this number of *shurbas*) would add up to around the usual prices quoted for a bundle in the US of \$20 plus.

lant's former address as the intended destination when arranging to ship the package and gave the appellant the Federal Express tracking number to facilitate the retrieval. This was the appellant's second or third such mission . . . and the way in which it was structured formed part of the pattern. [The peddler] routinely used fake addresses as intended destinations for khat shipments and recruited different individuals to pick up the packages. [The appellant was to be paid] in khat for his services.²²

As both methods of smuggling miraa—courier and parcel delivery—are used, both must have their merits, although one would imagine that using parcel delivery companies would be cheaper as there would be no air fares or fees to pay to couriers. However, it is possible that couriers can transport a larger quantity than can be sent by post.

Whatever means are used, miraa reaches the US in large quantities. Figures from the 'El Paso Intelligence Center' show that seizures of miraa have risen in the US from 17.6 tons in 1996 to 37.2 tons on 2001. A considerable rise, although DEA employees I spoke with admitted that it is not known whether this reflects a real rise in the amount reaching the US or an increase in awareness on the part of customs officers. Demand for miraa amongst large Somali communities in cities like Minneapolis is clearly strong despite its illegality and high price, and while there is demand resourceful traders will find a way through despite the risk. In fact, risk offers further encouragement given that it plays such a role in inflating the price miraa fetches. I was told that one trader in London is actually hoping the UK government bans miraa so he too can reap the risk-enhanced financial benefits.

Our look at such varying trajectories reveals great differences in the scale of trade and the rewards traders can get from the trade: generally these rewards rise the greater the distance it travels from the Nyambenes. Prices paid for miraa at source fade into insignificance in comparison with a \$20–30 retail price in the US, and those who can position themselves at important nodes in such a network can certainly make very good money, even if not quite as much as sensationalist articles in the British media suggest. Such middlemen rely enormously on others in speeding miraa along these networks before

²² United States Court of Appeals, no. 03–1310.

it perishes: in particular, transporters bear a heavy responsibility in expediting a crop with such a short economic half-life, and they are the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

TRANSPORTING MIRAA

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

—M'Mucheke, August 2002.¹

There is a pronounced need for speed in the miraa trade, and to expedite miraa to retailers full use is made of public service vehicles plying routes throughout Kenya, and a whole system of specialised miraa transport has developed: Toyota Hilux pick-ups zoom along the route to Nairobi. The trade has thus 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, and this chapter offers a survey of these means.

A note on cess

As miraa crosses district boundaries, those transporting large amounts sometimes have to pay cess.² 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. One retailer reported that money traders gave to the council as cess seemed to be having no impact on the region's roads, especially the main road from Maua to Meru, then rapidly deteriorating.³ This, combined with rather arbitrary-seeming rises in the charge led traders to demonstrate near

¹ M'Mucheke refers to miraa pick-ups as 'concorde', alluding to their great speed.

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

³ The road is now repaired, and this has apparently reduced accidents as vehicles no longer swerve to avoid potholes.

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 for a time. Newspaper reports in 2002 spoke of the Nyambene county council losing millions of shillings without the cess payments, and recently a system where cess is paid by bus and pick-up transporters in advance at Maua has been introduced.

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. In earlier days, the trade relied on legwork for longer distance trade too. MⁿNaituli, mentioned in chapter one, spent much of his youth carrying miraa from Mutuati to towns to the north like Gachuru, and much early trade to Isiolo from Nyambene also 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 partner 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 Nkinyan'ga give cyclists an opportunity to reach exhilarating speeds, and allow miraa distribution points to be reached quickly. 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: M'Mucheke speaks wistfully of buying a Land Rover and earning 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. M'Mucheke has an uncle called Philip who works as a *karani*. He lives in Mbiriatu 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.

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),⁴ 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 emitting musical horns to attract customers. 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 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. These operate in the early afternoon, 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

⁴ See Rizzo (2002) on the *dala dala*, the Tanzanian equivalent of the *matatu*.

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).

(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 *Kĩmathi Kĩosk* 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* traders pay drivers ksh.100 for their effort. From Meru to Isiolo, Peugeot taxis seem more popular with traders than *matatus*: they are quicker and more reliable. One tout working for a *Peugeot* service between Isiolo and Meru persuaded me to travel in his vehicle rather than a *matatu* with the argument that *Peugeots* must be safer as they are the vehicles of choice for Isiolo *miraa* traders: few would risk the safety of their *miraa* consignments in *matatus*. 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.

(iii): Bus companies operate 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 that 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. 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 worthwhile 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's Kongowea market at around 6–7 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 M'Mucheke 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.

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 charged cess 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 M'Mucheke, 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 M'Mucheke 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 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.

In September 2004, M'Mucheke and I made the journey from Maua to Mombasa on board the *Autobus* service, one of the three or so who run the route. The service is owned by an Arab from the coast, as is *Mombasa Raha*, another service competing with *Autobus* for miraa business; there is now another bus owned by a Meru that also offers such a service. We paid ksh.1000 each for tickets, and left Maua for Maili Tatu at 2:30 p.m. It is at Maili Tatu that the bus waits for Land Rovers to come from such towns as Lare and Mutuati with coastal-bound miraa. Two Land Rovers met the bus there on that day, and their contents were transferred to the roof of the bus: its load was estimated at two tons. On that day, *Mombasa Raha* would have carried a similar load, and there are also two *Hilux* vehicles serving Mombasa (see below), meaning that around six tons in total would reach Mombasa the next morning, a total that would increase substantially in the rainy season. The bus conductor kept track of all the miraa entrusted to him with a list entitled 'consignment note', while a miraa trader made sure the miraa was packed well and so would not be crushed by other cargo: many traders prefer *Hilux* vehicles as they only carry miraa, with consequently less danger of the commodity becoming damaged.

The bus left at 4 p.m., reaching Meru an hour later; it waited another hour while it was loaded with some non-miraa loads, and then sped off for Nairobi. Nairobi's River Road was reached at 10:30 p.m., where we stopped only briefly, before a longer stop four hours later on the Mombasa road. Some miraa traders alighted at Voi at around 5 a.m. with their *bundas*, before the final leg of the journey

to Mombasa. We reached Kongowea just before 7 a.m.: the large market north of Mombasa island was already busy, as goods of all descriptions were traded at wholesale and retail. *Autobus* and *Mombasa Raha* stopped at a part of the market dedicated to miraa: they each had their own spot, and traders were crowding around, eager to procure consignments. The miraa was thrown down as a *karani* waited to ensure the right miraa reached the right trader while noting all transactions in a book. Traders opened up *bundas* of *giza*, *kangeta* and *makata* to ensure the quality and number of *kitundus*, while some wholesalers passed on stock to Meru and Somali women retailers with much money changing hands.

In the midst of all these many transactions, some rather dishevelled-looking children were wandering through the crowd picking up stray stems that fell out as traders checked bundles. One filled a plastic bag with stems that, no doubt, he would soon sell. No one seemed to mind their enterprise. However, a fight did break out at the height of the activity as a suspected thief was chased away. Eventually, the conductor of the bus was then given money to pass back to traders in the Nyambenes, and, with cess paid to a local council officer, the bus left Kongowea to head into Mombasa town. The crew could then rest before journeying back to the Nyambenes. There are two *Autobus*, so the company can offer a daily service.

Buses also transport miraa to other towns. 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* that 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 Kongowea and then taken up to Malindi, Lamu and smaller towns *en route*.

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 Maua, Mutuati, and Muringene to Nairobi, where they fetch up at either Majengo or Eastleigh. These vehicles are notorious for their reckless speeds, 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. The fearsome reputation of these vehicles is evident in the cartoon book *Gitonga* by Stanislaus Olonde (1996), popularly known in the Kenyan press as Stano. The eponymous hero is a miraa trader whose business relies on a pick-up truck to transport miraa to Nairobi. The pick-up is illustrated frequently as loaded up to twice its height in sacks of miraa, which might be thought of as cartoonish caricature (see plate 11): this is no caricature, however, and many miraa pick-ups—especially in the rainy seasons—can really be seen loaded so high. On the back cover, a cartoon illustrates the full miraa network from the Nyambenes to Nairobi to the jets taking the commodity to its international destinations. Within this cartoon there is a depiction of two miraa pick-ups, both brimming with sacks, trying to outdo each other for speed. As both speed towards a corner, the driver of the pick-up bringing up the rear states ‘huyo haniwezi kwa mbio, wewe ngoja uone vile nitamuovertake kwa corner’, which translates from *sheng* (a mixture of Kiswahili and English) as ‘he will not outdo me for speed, just wait and see how I overtake him at the corner’. Hurtling towards the same corner in the opposite direction is a lorry certain to be hit by one of the racing pick-ups. Such accidents have not been uncommon in the history of the miraa trade, and there is much concern in Kenya with the high levels of road traffic crashes in general, and for good reason: ‘Over three thousand people are killed annually on Kenyan roads [and there has been] a four-fold increase in road fatalities . . . over the last 30 years’ (Odero et al. 2003: 53).

Private entrepreneurs own *Hilux* vehicles, and many of them made their money by trading miraa. Most vehicles are bought new for over a million Kenya shillings (around ten thousand pounds sterling), although second-hand models can also be bought in Kenya. One driver reported that new vehicles last four or five years on the miraa run if well maintained, while second-hand ones last two to three years. Others are much less sanguine on the prospects of a *Hilux* having a long life, and suggest that the miraa run takes such a toll that many vehicles are retired after only a year. This is perhaps an exaggeration derived from the vehicles notoriety. Meticulous attention is paid to the vehicles within their working lifespan, however, to maintain them in the best possible condition (Cassanelli 1986: 246).

I was informed that there are thirty *Hilux* vehicles in the rainy season that leave Nyambene for Nairobi during the day, whilst a

further twenty-five Toyota Landcruiser pick-ups leave by night: these are the preferred choice for those transporting miraa to northeastern regions and to Wilson Airport in Nairobi for onward flight to Somalia. There are also two Hilux vehicles ferrying miraa to Mombasa. Of the Hilux vehicles, those serving the Muringene to Nairobi route are Meru-owned, whilst those beginning their journey from Mutuati or Lare are mostly owned by Somalis. I was told that Abdi, the Somali trader mentioned in chapter two, owns some of these pick-ups, and uses them to transport miraa to Nairobi. Owners do well out of their investment: one former driver estimated that his 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. That was some time ago: one Hilux driver recently reported that he transported 900 *bundas* at ksh.50 each. This means the vehicle owner was receiving ksh.45,000 for the load. Enough fuel for the Hilux to make the return trip to Nairobi costs ksh.4800, and the driver and his assistant were paid ksh.2200, while the local council levied a fee of ksh.1000. Deducting such expenses still leaves the Hilux owner making ksh.37,000 for a full load, which is a considerable sum indeed (around £300 at today's rates). Some successful miraa traders and Hilux drivers have invested in their own pick-up. One Igembe man nicknamed Kanda Bongo Man followed such a career trajectory: he has worked as a *matatu* driver on the Meru-Maua route, a miraa Hilux driver, a broker for such pick-ups in the Nyambenes (acting as a middleman between miraa traders and Hilux owners), before investing in his own *matatu*, and most recently his own Hilux.

Many aspire to buying a Hilux and getting involved in miraa transportation, although owning such a vehicle is no guarantee of business: some Hilux pick-ups have regular clients, while others turn up at Muringene—the main wholesale miraa market in the Nyambenes—hoping that there will be more business than regular transporters can handle. The amount of business for transporters is seasonal, as when the rains come there is a significant increase of miraa growth, and consequently much cheap miraa to transport to traders and consumers. The day of the week also affects the amount transported: a much larger volume is consumed on Fridays and Saturdays and on holidays, while Sundays see a decrease in volume as many traders attend church.

Hilux drivers are generally in their thirties or forties, and are usually Meru. Many are Tigania and Imenti (another sub-group of the Meru), while there are said to be only a few Igembe drivers: this was explained by one driver as a result of Igembe elders advising Hilux owners not to employ local drivers as so many had died, and suggesting Tigania and Imenti drivers were employed instead. A Tigania driver explained the lack of Igembe drivers with the argument that Igembe men are notoriously heavy drinkers, and vehicle owners are therefore reluctant to entrust their property to those liable to be under the influence. Many, like Kanda Bongo Man, begin their careers as *matafu* drivers, gaining sufficient experience to impress Hilux owners. Drivers are not only paid a wage by the owner (around ksh.1000–1500), but also make money by carrying passengers for a fee on the way to Nairobi, and passengers and luggage in the back on the return trip. One well-known driver from Karama reported that he was paid ksh.1000 per trip, and also given ksh.500 for the small bribes given at police barriers (known by the acronym *TKK*, which stands for the Kiswahili *Toa Kitu Kidogo*, meaning ‘remove something small’).⁵ He also made an extra ksh.1000 by carrying passengers to Nairobi, and another ksh.1000 by carrying passengers on the return trip, and up to ksh.3000 by carrying luggage on the return journey. He estimated his average income per round trip as ksh.6000, quite a large sum, although well-merited given the responsibility of carrying such a valuable yet perishable commodity. He also reported that drivers avoid carrying passengers if they make the return journey at night as there is a danger that they might turn out to be thugs.

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 Munene:

Munene 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

⁵ There is a joke in Kenya that *TKK* began as *toa kitu kidogo* (‘remove something small’), then developed into *toa kitu kubwa* (‘remove something big’), before finally becoming *toa kila kitu* (‘remove everything’).

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 back to Nyambene on the same day. He gained a reputation as a skilful driver through a near-miss 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. Using a manoeuvre considered miraculous by the passengers, Munene managed to avert a serious collision.

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 married, bought land and built houses in both Tigania and Chogoria. He then gave up driving for a while, and opened a miraa kiosk in Isiolo. He 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 amongst customers, he was still not making ends meet. Therefore, in 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 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 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 the passengers were shaken up. The nonchalance of the Hilux driver was perhaps the most revealing aspect of the incident: 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. Bravado in the face of danger has earned these drivers a reputation as either exceptionally brave or exceptionally reckless.

Recently there does seem to have been a change, however: Hilux drivers report that thanks to better road conditions there are fewer accidents, and also that bonuses for quick driving are no longer paid reducing the incentive to speed. Nowadays, according to these drivers, there is also less competition between drivers as they travel in convoy so that if one should meet with difficulties, then help is close at hand. Between Lare and Maili Tatu, my fellow passengers in a bus and I 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. (Miraa vehicles have one advantage over ordinary vehicles in such situations: their usually immense load of sacks provides protection so that if a vehicle is thrown upside down it has cushioning to land on.)

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, the quantity, and to whom the miraa is destined. Once these details are noted, he 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*,⁶ 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 behaviour.

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, and related that it transports 350 *bundas* to Nairobi on an average day, whilst the largest possible load is a massive 812 *bundas*. Sundays see the smallest load transported (200–250 *bundas*). 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 speeds off at midnight reaching Garissa at 6:00 a.m. The six-hour journey follows a route through Meru, down to Embu,

⁶ Paid not by the owner of the Hilux, but by the retailers in Nairobi whose miraa arrives with that particular Hilux.

and then through Kiambere, Kanyonyo, and Mwingi, before descending into the hot environs of Garissa. The low altitudes of Garissa and Wajir make them two of Kenya's hottest towns, and this provides one explanation for travelling at night. 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.

In recent years, miraa vehicles have come under suspicion for 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* (20th 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 soon resumed: certainly when I visited Garissa in June of that same year, Landcruisers were bringing early morning deliveries. 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.

Recently experimentation with a new vehicle ended: Somalis had taken to bringing Europe-bound miraa to Nairobi in the back of Toyota Corolla saloon cars. These vehicles hold about 300 bundas of miraa, and reached Nairobi quicker than pick-ups, making them ideal for the operations of many Nairobi-based exporters as they could cut down on the expense of paying Hilux transporters. They are also much cheaper to insure than pick-ups, and used only ksh.3000 worth of petrol for each return journey from the Nyambenes to Nairobi. These vehicles were introduced in 2003, and their numbers rose to about 24, diminishing the business of some Hilux operators, although some traders distrusted them as they offer little ventilation for the miraa, and some stem tips could dry up in the heat and become unappetising. However, the Transport Licensing Board clamped down on their use for transporting miraa, as their capacity is less than a ton, making them unfit for transport licenses. In

April 2005, many such vehicles were stopped by government officials on these grounds; all their miraa cargo had to be offloaded, disrupting the trade that day. There is some suspicion that other transporters forced the government to act on this matter, such was the impact they were having on business.

Air Transportation

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. The *Daily Nation* reported on February 3rd 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: 6th 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 traders watching as their miraa dried up at Wilson Airport made the newspapers. Many involved in the trade felt the move unfair, suggesting that to curb the flow of arms into Kenya surely it would be better 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.⁷ 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 eight 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.⁸ Several charter companies specialise in flying to Wajir, Mandera, Moyale and other northern towns, and miraa traders provide much of their business: one company, *Bluebird Aviation*, has around fifteen aircraft serving

⁷ 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.

⁸ There is word that Isiolo airport might be upgraded so that miraa flights can depart from there rather than Wilson, cutting out the need for the journey to Nairobi.

Somalia. 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). 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 cargo and scheduled *KLM* flights (via Amsterdam) from Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. An article in the *Daily Nation* (10/09/02) reported 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 per week, 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. More recently *British Airways* has also ceased to transport miraa, apparently over claims of payment irregularities, but *KLM* still accepts the commodity.

There is much competition for freight space on flights, and often a consignment of miraa will be held up in Nairobi, stored in a refrigerator to keep it as fresh as possible. Miraa transported on these flights is brought by Hilux pick-ups from the Nyambenes to the Nairobi repackaging plants (see last chapter) and sorted into special cartons. When all cartons are prepared, they are taken to the airport to be dealt with by freight companies who are reckoned to make much money out of the trade. 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 will reach. 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, making the commodity seem more legitimate in the eyes of the airlines and European customs officers.

From a commodity that had only a very limited local range at the beginning of the last century, Nyambene miraa has become a global phenomenon making full use of modern transportation. Transporting miraa is an industry in itself, with many flight companies, pick-up owners and others benefiting from its trade. Although there are glitches, miraa usually reaches its end-points in good condition, then placing the onus firmly on to retailers, the subject of the next chapter, to sell the consignments before they go *barehe* (stale).

CHAPTER FOUR

BARGAINING OVER BUNDLES

Since I have an old hand for the mauwe 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, I'd be over the moon if I got into the trade . . . Inshallah!

—M'Mucheke, February 2002.

In previous chapters we have 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 trade in Isiolo provides a case-study, following which I end the chapter with a description of retailing miraa in the UK. 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) retail miraa in places often far from the Nyambenes, and work long hours requiring great concentration. Various factors—both positive and negative—encourage involvement in the trade. Obviously potentially lucrative earnings are one factor. Many retailers make good money, and many more earn a more modest, but still decent, living. 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.)¹ There is also the chance to travel all throughout Kenya and meet a wide range of

¹ One retailer told me that many try their hand in the trade, but *wanachomeka*: 'they get burnt' (Kiswahili).

people through trading a substance that many regard as *poa* ('cool': see chapter six). Indeed, miraa kiosks are often social centres steeped in *poa*-ness: music blasts from many kiosks, whilst most young retailers dress in the latest fashions. The trade is also accessible, as young 'apprentice' retailers can begin selling miraa at kiosks belonging to relatives or friends. However, there is a degree of ambivalence to the trade amongst Meru, and some give more negative reasons for becoming retailers. Opportunities for work outside the miraa trade are few in the Nyambenes as the district is so geared up to satisfy demand for the crop. Those involved in picking the crop as youngsters often drop out of education, further cutting themselves off from work beyond miraa.

Becoming a Meru miraa retailer

Contacts—whether kin or friends—are a primary resource for potential retailers (see MacGaffey and Bazenguissa Ganga [2000: chapter 5] for an account of the importance of personal ties in transnational networks of Congolese traders; also, see the next chapter in the present volume on 'trust' in the miraa trade). One young Nyambene friend described the following mechanism for entering the trade:

When a lad 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 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 Kongowea, 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 store-able 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,^[2] whom to buy from there and how much *miraa* should be brought to Isiolo. (1974: 36)

How much *miraa* to obtain is complicated 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, selling is more difficult. Successful retailers often order more in dry seasons as there is less competition and large profits can be made by those able to afford the outlay. Experience surely helps a retailer develop such strategies suited to her or his retail location and scale of business, and hence there is much sense in starting as an apprentice to one who already has that experience.

One can start retailing as a solo-operator, rather than by helping out an established retailer. One might even begin like the young men hawking *miraa* to passing vehicles in Karama, Nkinyang'a, and Kangeta. These 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. 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

² 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.

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 one day to become agents for retail kiosks, or work in such kiosks themselves. 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 loading 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.

Such small-scale trade is not hard to enter, and by selling alongside more experienced traders, one can learn much. Others 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. Such traders buy small quantities of miraa and usually sell all their stock, but make only modest profits.
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' (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 hoping to make a quick profit for investing in other—non-miraa—enterprises.

Today the second category of retailers—those entering the trade only in rainy seasons when costs are low—are still operating. Their trade is 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. Those constituting the first and third categories appear rather different today. There are still many permanent retailers of mature years operating in Kenya, but today permanent retailers seem more varied in age. Some kiosk owners are young, and even where the kiosk owner is older, his or her young assistants can be classed as ‘permanent’ themselves. Rather than young men hoping to make quick money by ‘gambling’ on a large one-off consignment of miraa to set up in a non-miraa related business, today retailing miraa itself can be a good career to embark upon. One still hears of people making one-off attempts at selling large amounts of miraa, however. M’Mucheke 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 well dealing in large quantities. The case-studies of various miraa-kiosks later in this chapter show the potential wealth to be made retailing miraa on a permanent basis.

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 several years; we shall meet the younger of the two, Rose, in the case-studies. I met another trader operating in Nakuru, 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.

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).³ 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). Nowadays, while Igembe traders dominate Majengo in Nairobi, 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: 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, in other locations the predominance of one sub-group or the other was likely generated as miraa networks were established. One trader might have started retailing in a particular town, encouraging relatives and friends to

³ 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.

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 it 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 commonly used by Meru, Somali, and Borana traders in Isiolo. These boxes protect the miraa from the sun, provide a handy counter, and are rent-free. Bus stops in Nairobi are also used as make-shift retail outlets, and in Mombasa the area near the Likoni ferry terminal is popular with miraa retailers. Igembe gather in clusters of five or six traders, 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. Occasional traders might even take their miraa along to an establishment like a disco or video lounge and retail it outside or inside. M’Mucheke 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, and there is a range of such premises from basic wooden stalls to stone-built kiosks stocking miraa and other provisions. Some wealthy traders build up an empire with a chain of kiosks. Most kiosks 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, although many retailers rent flats or buy property in towns where they trade.

Case-studies: Tigania and Igembe retail kiosks

Rose's Kiosk: There is a section of Meru town devoted to the sale of miraa. Here traders sell a wide variety, 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. A large amount of banter is directed towards Rose, a Tigania originally from Mbaranga, who traded from 1995–1998 in Isiolo before moving to Meru. She is now 28, 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, 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 cus-

tomers 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 11.00 a.m. with a bag full of *bundas* (containing around 200 *shurba ya nkinyang'a* in the rainy seasons).⁴ Rose reckons that most days she sells all stock by 5.30–7.00 p.m.,⁵ 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.

Kimathi Kiosk: This enterprise evolved from an earlier venture of Kimathi, 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. Kimathi 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 on the east side of the main road running through town. This block is owned by a Somali lady, to whom Kimathi 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, *Kimathi Kiosk* is

⁴ 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.

⁵ She said that traders dislike lingering in the miraa market after 7.00 p.m. or thereabouts as after dark the area becomes unsafe with many thieves roaming about.

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 *shurbas ya karama*, and miraa arrives in batches, delivered by Peugeot drivers.

On one occasion (June 2001) they were aiming to sell *giza* sent by one agent at ksh.300 per *kitundu*, 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, however. If a *kitundu* is fat in appearance, they sometimes untie it and remove a *shurba*. Once eight or nine *shurbas* have been removed from different bundles, 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.

At peak times for the trade, it is deemed essential that two traders are on hand. They regard some customers as crafty characters who will pull off all sorts of tricks to steal miraa. Having two traders reduces the chance that customers could get away with stealing. Whilst miraa transactions occur at one side of the kiosk, Mrs Kimathi looks after trade in other products.

Kimathi's younger brother is called Musa (of the *Guantai* generation and consequently in his twenties, as is Jackie, Kimathi'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. After this apprenticeship, he joined his brother in Isiolo in the late 1990s. He starts his shift in the early afternoon, and works until the early hours of the morning, although most miraa is sold by 7.00 p.m. (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 Kimathi 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.

Kimathi 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 Kimathi bought a brand new car. (See plate 12 of M'Mucheke and Musa inside *Kimathi Kiosk* with *kitundus* of high quality *giza*.)

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 other 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 chat 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* (leftover) bundles can be sold next morning before the fresh arrives.

Many 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 as Sammy and Gitonga are amenable: 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: Northeast 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 me. 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. Instead, it is miraa and tobacco that are sold.

The kiosk is more spacious than usual, with plenty of storage space and shelves positioned behind a long wooden counter. In the kiosk 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, but 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 6:00 a.m., 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 sent back the next day with returning pick-ups. Meshach retails high quality *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). 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 Stores: Few places in Nairobi are as associated with miraa as 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 Stores*. Only one of these kiosks sells miraa. In June 2001, I visited this kiosk and talked with James, a man of 32 years from *KK* who works there.

James's uncle founded these kiosks. He traded miraa with Meshach's father in Uganda in the days of Idi Amin, but this venture ended when the partners lost money and were forced to return to Nairobi with barely a shilling to their names. Fortunately, James'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 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 James, 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. James 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. Much miraa sold there is high quality *kangeta*. 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*.

James's uncle left Nairobi in 1992, and now lives at home in KK, looking after his *shamba*, and sending miraa to Majengo where it is picked up by James. The uncle left the running of the kiosk to his son and James upon his departure. James receives a certain percentage of the profits from the kiosk, as does his uncle and cousin, while 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.

James likes Nairobi, saying he enjoys the chances it offers to meet a wide range of people, as well as the business opportunities there. Although he clearly is not unhappy with his lot, he expressed 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: like Miaka in chapter two, he feels the Nyambenes offer little besides miraa 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 the miraa trade.

Sunrise: Much of my time in Nairobi was chewed away with traders at *Sunrise Veve Promoters*. This successful venture is built around one inconspicuous kiosk on a busy street in downtown Nairobi (plate 13). The street in question is a transport hub where many *matatu* touts collect 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 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'). Across the road from this bar is situated the main kiosk of the *Sunrise* chain.

The kiosk is 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.⁶ 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), most miraa 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 *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 central 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

⁶ 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.

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 when I first visited *Sunrise* included Mike, Maurice, and Philemon.⁷ One or two of them tended to be on duty whenever I visited. Mike is in his 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, from Nkinyang'a, and 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 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 children.

The traders receive a share of money made from miraa. Profit from the other goods goes to pay rent and electricity. Smart attire and accessories like CD Walkmans show that the traders are doing well out of their business, although profits vary seasonally. The *Sunrise* team obtain more supplies in dry seasons, while retailers with less income are then forced to curtail trade: profits are greater 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, 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

⁷ Mike recently left the miraa trade, attended teacher training college and obtained a post at a school in the Nyambenes.

also stocks up extra supplies for special occasions, as I witnessed on the 11th 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 is Kikuyu and 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 small *shurbas* of *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 large *kitundu* 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* had expanded. Another kiosk—*Sunrise 2000*—opened opposite the original, operated by another young relative of Gideon’s. Also, Philemon and Mike were then usually found in a kiosk round the corner from the original on Nairobi’s busy River Road. This was *Sunrise 4000*, and by operating in shifts, Philemon, Mike, and another trader kept it open permanently. It was conveniently located next to a bus office where many passengers depart for Mombasa: the kiosk did 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. *Sunrise 4000* had 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. Sadly, a fire in 2006 burnt down the building

where *Sunrise 4000* was located. *Sunrise* traders are irrepensible, however, and Philemon and a younger assistant soon opened up another kiosk a block or two away.

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*, and the chain now even has its own range of T-Shirts, all of which give great prominence to the iconic image of a *kitundu*: purple stems poking out of a green banana-leaf wrapped bundle.

Borana, Sakuye, and Somali Women Traders

In northern Kenyan towns with a large proportion of Somali, Borana and Sakuye, women operate much of the retail trade. While in Isiolo and Garissa there are plenty of Meru retailers, 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 extravert 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.⁸ Thus Borana and Somali women trading *miraa* can be dated back over thirty years, and nowadays it

⁸ Violence still lingers on: there is a pattern of reciprocal cattle-raiding involving much bloodshed between Somali and Borana which shows little sign of abating.

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,⁹ 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 population as a whole. Their numbers fluctuate seasonally, however, as 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: 40ff.). 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 mem-

⁹ Somali MPs are usually the ones who call for a ban on miraa; Tigania and Igembe MPs, unsurprisingly, are vociferous in its defence.

bership, 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. 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.).

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, that some disapprove of the substance and its trade is 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, 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 *makata*. 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 wholesaler demanded this before he would give her any 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. 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 Retailers

Not all retailers are Meru, Borana, Sakuye or Somali. In Isiolo several Turkana men and women sell cheap varieties like *lombolio*, *matan-goma*, 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 spoke of how he trusts Maasai. He compared them with the Kikuyu, stereotyped as *bahili* (Kiswahili: 'mean'). As Kikuyu are regarded both as mean and untrustworthy, he stated that Meru would never let them enter into the trade. I have certainly never met a Kikuyu miraa retailer, and as Meru can easily reach the main Kikuyu regions of central Kenya, it seems unlikely that the opportunity for a Kikuyu trader would arise. Another Igembe trader told me there are no restrictions on who can enter the trade: he worked on the pragmatic basis of 'business is business'.

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. This stated that the price for a *shurba* had been raised to ksh.70, but in effect seemed only to raise the figure at which negotiations started. Most customers were still just paying ksh.60 per *shurba* after brief bargaining. In the main, however, retailers do not advertise fixed prices for miraa. 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

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.

Other factors restrict, in a loose way, the maximum figure in their range of prices. Most obviously competition. In 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 tempering 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.¹⁰ 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 almost all *kitundus*. However, there are some days when trade is not brisk, and the danger of being left with *barehe* miraa looms. Such danger might prompt retailers to reduce prices to boost trade.

However, the thought of being left with *barehe* miraa is not as depressing as one might think, and some customers will buy *barehe* miraa. As fresh miraa normally reaches kiosks by late afternoon (though this can vary: for example, fresh miraa reaches Garissa and Mombasa at about 6.00 a.m.) those who fancy a chew before then must be satisfied with *barehe*. 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

¹⁰ Although some jokingly say that *barehe* miraa is better as it has the *handas*—miraa's stimulant effects (see chapter six)—of today and yesterday.

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 prices fell considerably, whereas upon returning to Isiolo, the price for a Karama *shurba* had remained constant. 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 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 M'Mucheke 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 they 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. I was told 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. Obviously, where customers are on good terms with retailers, the need for hard bargaining is reduced.

Choosing a bundle

To demonstrate knowledge and ensure the quality of the miraa, customers usually go through a routinised 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.¹¹ M'Mucheke 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 *makata* by flexing stems. If they straighten easily, then that is a good sign. Consumers in the UK told me that shaking a *kitundu* is a good way to see how fresh it is: the more leaves that fall off, the less fresh is the miraa. *Kitundus* are not entirely uniform in size, and many people pick out the thickest ones.¹² 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 M'Mucheke when he suspected that miraa he was tasting had been sprayed with chemicals. Despite a convincing portrayal of a poisoning victim, he still bought the bundle.

Customers often examine most 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

¹¹ 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.

¹² M'Mucheke 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.

minutes later he was back at the first kiosk buying at a slightly reduced price.

M'Mucheke reckons that many retailers keep their best miraa underneath the counter, reserved for either their own delectation or that of special customers. He recommends saying *nipe veve ya kula, si ya kuuza* (Kiswahili: 'give me miraa for chewing, not for selling') when buying miraa. Another line I commonly heard used to persuade traders to bring out their best stock was: *nataka miraa na maana* (Kiswahili: 'I want miraa with meaning', i.e. the best).

The bargaining

Throughout this examination routine, retailers usually remain impassive. When bargaining begins, however, retailers often engage in rude 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 *nchabu* ('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 of *Kimathi Kiosk* 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 down below ksh.270 for a particular *kitundu*. Musa 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. Musa merely smiled. On occasion it is retailers who become agitated. One time in Kianjai a friend and

I were 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. At this 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!

Retailers have varied techniques to avoid prices 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 Shanu, 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 often 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 formed and strengthened, 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, 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.

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. One customer of *Kimathi Kiosk*, a soldier, left his identity

card—an essential possession for Kenyans¹³—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 12th May 1939:¹⁴ ‘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 Isiolo trade, as well as the great 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

¹³ I was told later on that a soldier could get away without the card, presumably possessing other forms of ID as well as the uniform.

¹⁴ Kenya National Archives: DC/ISO/2/2/13 H.Public Health 1936–1945.

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 called Mbogua, a name immortalised in a variety he popularised. 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, and traded for forty years until 1969. 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. Miraa-chewing was undoubtedly popular in the Isiolo of the mid-1970s, but one suspects demand has increased markedly since.¹⁵ Luckily, as licences are

¹⁵ 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).

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 1 p.m. 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*. 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 traders, 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 count of permanent kiosks in the market area and along the main road found twenty operating in 2000, compared with the twelve of Hjort's day. Of these twenty, two were run by a Somali and a Borana and eighteen by Meru traders: mostly, as in the 1970s, Tigania men from Karama, Muthara, or Kianjai. As with staff at *Kimathi Kiosk*, it is still the case that kiosk owners and their assistants are likely to be closely related. Most kiosks sell a wide variety of goods as well as miraa, though the scale of this other trade varies, and kiosks vary in which varieties they sell. Musa at *Kimathi 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 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*, *makata*, *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, everything changed, and the focus of attention switched decisively from me to miraa. One trader had gone to Muringene on behalf of all traders there, obtaining a few sacks. 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 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 14). Other women retailers now have their own Igembe agents acting for them: Kamau, the Muringene agent who supplies *Kimathi Kiosk*, sends two *bundas* of *nyeusi* to a Borana woman. Her miraa is sent to *Kimathi 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. Accompanying them 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 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. *Kimathi 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, *Kimathi Kiosk* sells high-quality *ngoba*, *giza*, and *shurba ya karama*, and tends to attract only customers sufficiently well-funded to buy such miraa. Those living a penurious existence who want to chew are drawn more to retailers selling the likes of *makata*, *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 M'Mucheke who bought 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 *mataka*, 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 (in periods of drought quality *kitundus* can fetch up to ksh.500):

	Dry	Rainy
<i>Alele</i>	300–400	200
<i>Giza</i>	300–400	150–200
<i>Kangeta</i>	200–250	150–180
<i>Shurba ya karama</i>	80–150	50
<i>Shurba ya nkinyang'a</i>	50–80	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.¹⁶ 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:

¹⁶ 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.

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 strife occasionally breaking out along ethnic lines.

Retailing Miraa in the UK

First reports on the sale of miraa in the UK emerge in the 1970s, although it may very well have reached these shores earlier. An article in the *Observer* (18th October 1987) reported that miraa was available at £2.50 a bundle in East London, and that it was imported into the UK three times a week from both Ethiopia and Kenya. Miraa's UK price has not changed much since then, and presently the usual price—which does not fluctuate seasonally—is £3 for a bundle of Nyambene miraa (four *shurbas* of generally low-quality *kangeta* with stems of cheaper varieties mixed in; a smaller-stemmed variety is also available marketed as *giza*), while Ethiopian bundles retail at £5. I have heard reports that some high quality Nyambene miraa is available in some parts of London retailing at £7 per *kitundu*, but such trade appears to be on a small scale. Nyambene miraa is mainly retailed by Somali men, although some women are also involved in the trade. Retailers operate in all cities with a substantial Somali population: London, Cardiff, Manchester, Liverpool,

Leicester and Birmingham amongst others. Gaining access to the retail trade does not appear to be hard for UK Somalis, and if one has suitable premises for its sale, then one can make arrangements with distributors in London to be supplied with the commodity. Making a success of one's trade is more difficult, however.

Most Somali retailers operate out of private homes. One trader sells miraa from a terrace house near the old Manchester City football ground. This serves both as a retail outlet and as a chewing-venue: a *mafrish*. Some customers buy their supplies and then leave, while others stay and chew (see chapter six). The trader is originally from Mogadishu, while many of his customers are from Brava, a town on the Somali coast situated south of Mogadishu. Some Somalilanders also make up the numbers. The trader has a direct link to a Nairobi exporter, and relies on contacts in London to redirect his miraa to Manchester using a van which also delivers to other British cities *en route*. He usually receives two or three boxes of miraa—more at the weekend or on special occasions—which arrive four times a week: Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. As boxes contain forty bundles each retailing at £3, should he sell all his stock (which rarely seems to happen: there are always bundles waiting for collection by the council bin men when I visit) he would make £120 per box. Each box costs £50 from the Nairobi exporter, giving him £70 profit per box, some of which would cover the costs of transport from London to Manchester. Also, he shares profits with friends who help out in the trade. They sit in the *mafrish*, making a note of how many bundles each customer had, and asking for payment before they leave. Some customers buy miraa on credit, however. Allowing for unsold bundles, I would expect the business to raise about £400–600 weekly, much of which would go on renting the premises (the trader has his own home a few blocks away) as well as the cost of renting satellite TV for customers and providing free tea and plastic cups. This trader is not the only one operating in the area, and four or so others also cater for Manchester's chewing contingent.

London contains many miraa outlets, and one retailer I met operates a *mafrish* in Peckham, South London. He is a Somalilander in origin who came to the UK in the early 1990s: his wife had a relative in London, which made migrating somewhat easier. He rents out premises in Peckham that are only used for miraa chewing: he

lives in another house with his family. Given overheads such as rent, costs of satellite TV and tea, he only just manages financially, and trading miraa is his only work. He usually sells three boxes bought from London distributors at £80, making £40 profit if all bundles are sold. The boxes are delivered straight to him from the Southall depot. To raise some extra money, he also sells bottled water. He employs a friend to help him out in the trade, looking after the *mafri-ish* when he is away: sometimes he stays up until early morning clearing up after the session, and so relies on his friend to open up while he sleeps. There are three other retailers in Peckham, one of whom has begun something of a price war. Whilst others still retail at £3, this retailer has managed to reduce the price to £2 by getting his own link direct to Nairobi. He had apparently got so fed up with customers buying on credit but then never paying in full that he decided to charge £2 to those who paid up front. As a consequence his establishment is now very popular.

Not all retailers sell out of private homes, and in Cardiff I visited one general store where miraa was on sale at its usual price. This establishment also sold Ethiopian miraa—known as *Haveri*—which is the miraa of choice for older Somali men in the area. These men would originally have come from Somaliland, where the only miraa available is that supplied from Ethiopia, which perhaps accounts for their preference.

As we saw, the stability of the UK retail price at around £3 (occasionally upped to £4) is interesting in comparison with the flexibility of retail prices in Kenya.¹⁷ There is no seasonal variation, and miraa is sold at the same price even when the Nyambenes are suffering from drought. While this is connected with the varying quality of the UK supplies (see chapter two), and with the fact that it comes from Ntonyiri where supplies are fairly consistent even in dry spells, some also claim that the Somali network exploits farmers and Meru middlemen to keep prices down. This has created tension in Meru-Somali relations, and this tension will be looked at in the next chapter after first turning to a ‘soft variable’ that is said to glue much of the miraa trade together and has been implicit in much of the foregoing material: *trust*.

¹⁷ See Carrier 2006 for more on miraa pricing.

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.

—M^cMucheke, February 2002

Traders I met considered honesty an essential trait for one of their number. Honesty is essential, as so much of the trade relies on trust.¹ 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 other people’s future actions, defining it as ‘a bet about the future contingent actions of others’ (1999: 25) a definition that will suffice for present purposes. Distinctions are made between *faith*, *trust* and *confidence*, involving different degrees of certainty based on different types of evidence (see Hart 2000: 187). I conflate such terms in concentrating on factors leading those in the miraa trade to entrust miraa or money to others, whether one strictly speaking has *faith*, *trust* or *confidence* that in entrusting one will not be let down. Such verbal considerations are interesting, but beyond the scope of this chapter. To begin with, it is useful to draw out transactions where trust in others is required:

¹ 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. Of course the work of Cohen on Hausa networks are classic anthropological texts on issues connected with trust (e.g. 1969).

- 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. Nyambene agents are paid back by retailers post-sale, and wholesalers supply Borana and Somali women retailers with miraa on credit. 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, and ideally trust the agent's discretion in picking out the best miraa available.
- 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. Also, agents rely on retailers being competent salesmen. Miraa is such a perishable commodity that incompetence in its trade or transportation might lead to heavy losses in the network.
- 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 sent²—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

² See chapter two and case-study of Kamau.

for miraa. Some default on payment for miraa obtained on credit. The international network is certainly not immune from deceit either, and some Nairobi exporters have sent over a consignment only for the London contact to cease communication without relaying money:³ we saw in chapter two that London based re-exporters are also at risk in this respect. Such are the tales of deceit that some stereotype all miraa traders as untrustworthy. 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 pre-dating the formation of a business relation come into play. These supporting factors provide information as to whether someone is trustworthy, or at least make those trusting more sure that they will not be let down: miraa traders could not succeed for long if they were naïve, and most rely on supporting factors rather than trusting *blindly*:

Kinship: Much of the trade is constituted by co-operation between kin relations. The *Sunrise* kiosks are a case in point: almost all those involved are related in some way to Gideon. Many trade networks developed by fathers pioneering a trade route and then retiring to the Nyambenes to act as suppliers for their sons. One is likely to have reasonable knowledge of how 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 prove 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.⁴ Hart refers to the ‘trust generated by shared experience, mutual knowledge and the affection that comes from having entered a relationship

³ This is a very real fear for such exporters, and such deceit can put out of business smaller operators (Nuur Sheekh, personal communication).

⁴ The concept of friendship is one that has received anthropological attention: see, for example, Bell and Coleman (eds.) 1999. Amongst the Meru, what might

freely, by choice rather than status obligation' (2000: 185). 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: one might like someone's company despite not trusting them with sums of money), but not trust his or her competence. However, friendship certainly provides a foundation upon which bonds of trust can be forged.

Reputation: A well-established agent of good repute in the Nyambenes inspires trust: a good reputation offers a great deal of 'social capital'. Even though one might not have met a particular agent, reputation can provide evidence of honesty and competence sufficient to give that agent a try. The linking of *Kimathi Kiosk* with Kamau occurred in such a manner: it was the good reputation of Kamau that drew Kimathi to him rather than friendship, although they are now friends.

Strengthening trust

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. Many such techniques work by creating stronger social bonds between individuals, hence creating stronger obligations not to deceive. 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

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'.

a surer footing, and might very well be a common practice amongst those linked in the trade.

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 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 might 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 more than usual in times of need.

Gifts: Sometimes agents send well-liked retailers gift batches of miraa. The money raised from this batch is kept by the retailer alone. Soti—a trader sending miraa to Kisumu whom M'Mucheke met—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, although it clearly creates further reciprocal obligations in turn: 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 hopes to elicit more trustworthiness in return.

Sanctions: Whilst the above trust reinforcing techniques are positive in form, negative sanctions are spoken of. 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.⁵ 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 might have a powerful effect upon the offender.⁶

Impersonal trust

There are procedures in the miraa trade for reducing the possibility of deceit by someone one does not know but has to rely on. For example, one might not be acquainted with 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: 'procedural trust' (Sztompka 1999: 44). As described in chapter three, 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 the details, 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.

Self-interest is also relevant in making a decision to trust someone

⁵ 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.

⁶ Not everyone fears the *njuri ncheke*, however. M'Mucheke's wayward uncle (who stole from M'Naituli, see case-studies, chapter one) once appeared before the *njuri* charged with assaulting a woman when drunk. He drank heavily before the *njuri* session, and menaced the assembled elders with a *panga*, accusing them 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 going to calm down, and so they all fled. 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 the elders on behalf of his son, having been accused by them of bringing up his children badly.

of whom one has very little knowledge. Without wishing to get into the technicalities of game theory, nor to suggest that 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.⁷ Making off with a batch of miraa or some money would be rash when the business relationship offers good potential for a prosperous future. In Hart's experience in Accra, 'economic life depended on the discovery of complementary or shared interests which might make commercial agreements self-reinforcing in the short and medium term' (2000: 185). For the likes of Nairobi or London exporters supplying miraa to people they have never met personally, the chances of creating social obligations to prevent fraud are low as relationships are impersonal. Some traders might visit those they supply to personalise the relationship; however, this is often not possible. Where dealings are with unknown characters, traders like the London-based Kenyan who used to supply a Somali in Toronto (see chapter two) rationalise the risk by supposing that self-interest will keep both sides more or less honest. Of course, in this particular case, such rationalisation proved to be on shaky ground.

'Prudent risk'

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 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 daily 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.

⁷ Of course, long-term petty swindling no doubt provides a sizeable reward.

Most 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.

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). 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. 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 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, 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' an 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, there thankfully are options: Kamau could disassociate himself from the soured relationship and form a new one with Kimathi. If a farmer is treated unfairly by one broker, he or she can often find another to deal with.⁸

For some, however, options are 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.' Or, in the words of 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.' 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.'

Such resentment might be directed at particular individuals. 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. In recent

⁸ 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.

years, much uneasiness on the part of some Meru focused less on particular individuals, however, and more on a collective: Somali traders. Suspicion festered in relations between some Meru and Somali to such a degree that the past decade in the trade has been noted for conflict. Latest reports from the Nyambenes suggest that relations between Meru producers and Somali exporters are now much better, but as the tension between them was such a major factor in the trade until recently, I deal with it in some detail.

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 cess and those arising over land allocation. But in recent years much media attention concerning miraa has been focused on tension between Meru and Somali. 1999 was a particularly tense year in this regard, and so, when conducting my fieldwork, many spoke of the issues behind the tension. 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. Recently, most anti-middleman feeling was directed against Somalis and sometimes against Meru working 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 Isaaq-controlled trade to Europe and beyond. Profits from this trade allowed Somalis to consolidate their position within the network and dominate the international trade to the point that they have been accused by some Meru as forming a 'cartel' and monopolising the international miraa market. 'Cartel' is a very loaded term, which suggests that Somali exporters are far more organised than they actually are, as the export trade is rather fragmented involving several independent Somali exporters in Kenya and several importers in Europe. There is much competition between

these Somali traders. However, whether the term is accurate or not, some Meru considered that these Somali 'tycoons' reap 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.'

While 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 6th 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 in 2000, 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 were stereotyped as mean by some Meru (Kiswahili: *bahili*), Somali were 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 claimed he 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 very little.

Suspicion and resentment did not dissipate entirely once 1999’s turmoil had simmered down, and there was more to come in 2002. I was in the Nyambenes on Saturday, 20th 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 Association, and is a Meru organisation registered as a welfare society to look after Meru interests. It is a formal society, with offices in Maua and Nairobi, and has representatives from all over the Nyambenes. It was formed in 1975 to counter the influence of a Somali-run miraa organisation that was described to me as dominated by ‘foreigners’. The role of *NYAMITA* in promoting and defending miraa will be dealt with in chapter seven. 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:⁹

1. **The use of fertiliser spray.** All were urged to desist from spraying for the reasons mentioned in chapter one.
2. **Somalis allegedly returning miraa that they are not satisfied with, is in excess, or late for a flight, and accepting no liability.** This was said to leave Meru brokers who arranged for miraa to be sent suffering losses, while 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 Ntonyiri.** Somali agents were said to force 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.

⁹ Feelings were running so high, that some Meru were even accusing Somalis of spreading HIV and hard drugs in the Nyambenes.

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 trade¹⁰ 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. They considered that profit offered to some Meru by Somalis prevents this happening.

NYAMITA 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.'

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.¹¹ 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

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ *Daily Nation* 3rd June 2002.

meeting did lead the way for the resumption of trade between Igembe and Somalis, but tension remained: a Meru broker I met who worked for several Somali exporters claimed in 2004 that profit for Somalis often came at the expense of Meru farmers and brokers. Somalis in Nairobi sometimes claimed that their contacts in London had received miraa but failed to make payment, and therefore the Nairobi exporters had no money to pay back Meru brokers for miraa obtained on credit. The Meru broker believed that some Somalis claimed this even when they had received the money, although I have heard of Somali exporters being tricked by disappearing importers in Europe. For *NYAMITA* and the *njuri ncheke*, the solution suggested was that Meru farmers and brokers should only supply miraa when money is paid up front, and it will be interesting to see how feasible such a measure is, and how far it succeeds.

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 dominent 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,¹² 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

¹² Eastleigh has Igembe retailers too, for example *KK Stores*.

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,¹³ but usually Tigania and Igembe are happy enough to call themselves *Ameru*, the Meru people. However, Grignon is right to view dubiously 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 20th 2001). Also, as Fukui and Markakis show, analyses of conflict in the Horn of Africa in their edited volume 'illustrate the variety of motives and goals involved in what is simply and obscurely labelled "ethnic conflict"' (1994: 2).

Grignon also claims that Somalis were reputed to pay higher prices promptly to farmers for their miraa (1999: 183), thus how could the trouble be anything but an attempt by Tigania to force out Somalis? He goes further, suggesting that the conflict revealed 'soubassements politiques' (*ibid.* 184). He lists several Meru politicians who had a

¹³ See chapter four for details of the early conflict between Tigania and Igembe over the Isiolo trade.

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 Nkururu, perhaps hinting that this shows the true motives behind the conflict. But, he claims, '[l]a tentative des commerçants meru a finalement échoué.' The Somali were able to return to the trade because '[l]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).

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 recent dispute. However, there was 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. Some reckon Somalis in fact send much money back for farmers, but Meru middlemen prevent farmers getting their fair share. However, the renting of *shambas* was a main grievance then, 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.

Some Igembe farmers and agents certainly did have anti-Somali feelings, reinforced by what some Igembe saw as ongoing '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 as Somali traders in Nairobi reckoned the miraa was sun-damaged 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 Somalis were said to refuse to accept liability, meaning Meru brokers, and occasionally farmers who might have sold the miraa on deposit, lose out. The low prices that Ntonyiri miraa fetches also seemed a genuine problem: only a small fraction of the £3 at which *kitundus* retail in the UK goes to farmers (probably less than a tenth). Farmers serving Muringene appear to make more from their crop than do those in Ntonyiri, although this is connected with the quality of the product. Goldsmith suggests that Ntonyiri miraa has always fetched less than the Muringene equivalent (Goldsmith 1988: 139 and 142), and the miraa that I have seen sold in the UK is generally poor quality. Even so, prices fetched by *bundas* in Ntonyiri did seem low: miraa from the main skeletal sections of the tree in Ntonyiri was often fetching less than that from low quality sections sold at Muringene.

What some termed a 'trade imbalance' reflects 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.¹⁴ 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 became 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 given miraa's perishability. The ability to lower prices paid to producers, as Somalis reportedly did after their boycott, further stressed their commanding position.¹⁵

¹⁴ 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 miraa at Ntonyiri markets with those obtained by farmers supplying Somalis. 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. 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 useful 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.

¹⁵ 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. Also, most Somali abroad seem to much prefer Nyambene miraa to that from Ethiopia.

Some Meru conceived of Somalis as having nothing but disdain for Igembe farmers, and actions like lowering prices are suggestive of a desire to put farmers in their place. Somali traders were reported to have denied exploiting farmers, citing mutual trade agreements: this cut little ice with some Igembe, who pointed out how skewed the trade is in favour of Somalis. Igembe did not have a monopoly on grievances in this situation, however. Obviously Somalis in the Nyambenes were 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.

The pattern of the tension might be viewed in terms of Batesonian *schismogenesis*,¹⁶ as suspicion on both sides festered with occasional outbreaks of violence. Resentment grew amongst some Meru over a perceived trade imbalance blamed on Somalis operating the international network; violence was sparked by such incidents as the death of Nkuraru; Somali traders felt aggrieved that this violence targeted them and their families, showed more contempt for Meru, and were consequently more willing to exploit their commanding position and demonstrate their power. This only served to render more acute Meru resentment. The strong association of both Meru and Somali with miraa added more potential for contestation: just whose crop is it? Tigania and Igembe associate miraa with their history, traditions,¹⁷ and economic well-being; while some Somalis see themselves as miraa connoisseurs *par excellence*. Coffee and tea, although perhaps more 'respectable' crops (see chapter seven), do not have such a strong cultural resonance for Kenyan farmers and traders. Certainly, the symbolic link of miraa with Nyambene cultural heritage is often mobilised by Meru when talking about, and defending, miraa.

The situation was one of genuine grievances mixed with dubious motives and an unsavoury 'ethnicised' rhetoric, all combining to generate suspicion and make trusting difficult and sometimes, given the apparent powerlessness of farmers, almost irrelevant. The lack of formal regulation in the trade made it hard for the authorities to intervene and resolve the situation, although given the woeful state of

¹⁶ See Bateson 1936: 175 for a definition of *schismogenesis*. See also *Culture Contact and Schismogenesis* reproduced in Bateson 2000 [1972]: 61–72.

¹⁷ See chapter six.

the coffee sector, where there is regulation, it is perhaps better for producers and exporters to sort out the situation to their mutual benefit amongst themselves. While this is easier said than done, the tension appears to have diminished somewhat in the last two years, and hopefully will continue to do so. Meru farmers and Somali exporters with established links to Europe certainly need each other, and the pragmatic urge to make a good living out of the commodity ensures that suspicion raised by stereotypes of ‘Somalis’ or ‘Meru’ is often dissolved in personalised trade relationships between actual Somali and Meru.

It should be emphasised that many Meru and Somali in Kenya were not caught up in the resentment, and maintained healthy trade relations and friendships, some Meru doing so even at the risk of being termed ‘traitors’. Others may have spoken ill of stereotyped Meru or Somali at one moment, only to 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 had no problems dealing with Somalis. Also, Rose in Meru and Gideon at *Sunrise* both have good Somali friends and customers. Such people were not really at the sharp end of the conflict, however, and so are not affected much by it, but they nonetheless demonstrate the possibility of good inter-ethnic relations revolving around miraa.

Of course, conflicting interests in the trade do lead to tension, but the desire to open new markets for miraa, and the mutual benefits of forming business relationships, also have the opposite effect: bringing people—even those living across geographical, social, and ethnic boundaries—together peacefully. During the conflict, the trade still rewarded farmers financially far more than either tea or coffee: even farmers in Ntonyiri who felt exploited were better off persevering with miraa rather than switching to, say, coffee (see chapter one). The trade provides a living for people as far removed as hawkers in Karama, Borana women in Garba Tulla, and Somali men in Manchester, and the trade operates with an efficiency rarely seen in other goods: such efficiency requires cooperation, most of which is based on sound, trust-infused, relationships. The recent tension and concomitant suspicion should not be thought of as representative of the miraa trade in its totality.

CHAPTER SIX

CHEWING

What a tip-top exhilarating experience which makes me lavish affection on the mauve medicine always and forever!

—M'Mucheke describing a chewing session on his birthday. November 2001

After following miraa's trajectories from farmer to retailer in previous chapters, it is now time to look at consumption and those whose demand drives on the network. This chapter discusses the language of miraa consumption, the process of consumption and describes three different types of consumption: *traditional/ceremonial*, *functional* and *recreational*. Miraa is used in many different ways in many different contexts: to mention just a few, it is used by Meru in brideprice negotiations, by devotees of the Sheikh Hussein in spirit possession ceremonies, by militia in Mogadishu and by Somalis relaxing in a terrace house in Manchester. This chapter will describe the variety in patterns of miraa use, after first describing the variety of people who constitute its consumers.

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 some convergence, however, and one can, albeit roughly, describe various groupings of people amongst whom miraa is popularly consumed. The groupings I use are: ethnicity, religion, occupation, youth, 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 strongly deterministic relationship between the grouping and an individual's decision to chew. However, they are useful in showing where the popularity of miraa is centred.

The groupings are not mutually exclusive, and overlap in many instances.

Ethnicity

Tigania/Igembe. Many Tigania and Igembe avidly chew their home-grown commodity. Early European travellers like Chanler and Neumann commented on miraa consumption by Igembe elders in the late 19th century (Bernard 1972: 42; Neumann 1982 [1898]: 32–33). Meru often emphasise that miraa chewing was once restricted to married elders only, and this is backed up by Chanler’s observations on chewing amongst the Igembe in the 1890s: ‘The young men among the natives are not allowed to eat it, the reason assigned for this restriction being that if the young men were allowed freely to indulge in this plant, they would be apt to remain awake at night, and be tempted, under the cover of the darkness, to gratify desires which the light of day forces them to curb’ (1896: 190). Such a restriction disappeared over the course of the twentieth century, and at the time of my fieldwork most Tigania and Igembe men I met (including older teenagers) were chewers, as were some women, and a few young boys. Most agreed that post-circumcision, young men were free to chew. Elders who spoke of the former restriction did not seem too perturbed by today’s situation, and, indeed, many of them also chewed when young.¹ However, there clearly was anxiety on the part of elders in the 1930s, when the ‘Meru Local Native Council passed a resolution prohibiting the use of khat by people other than those traditionally permitted to use it, particularly by the younger generation’ (*East African Medical Journal* 1945: 9). Nowadays, miraa consumption permeates most of Tigania and Igembe society: even those with respectable government positions or teaching jobs often chew. Miraa has much resonance for Meru ‘traditions’, and is used in both recreational contexts, and in many ceremonial/ritual contexts (see below).

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

¹ See Wilson 1971, and Willis 2001 and 2003 for discussions of the purported restriction of alcohol to elders amongst some East African groups.

for the diaspora as far away as Australia. Miraa is now illegal in the US, Canada, Sweden and elsewhere, but even that has not stopped Somalis chewing. Not all Somalis have an especially long association with miraa, however: while in northern Somalia—Somaliland—miraa supplied from Hararge province of Ethiopia has been popular for centuries, miraa's popularity in the former Italian colony of Somalia is more recent. Cassanelli relates that until the late 1960s, 'southerners had previously viewed qat chewing as the somewhat eccentric and amusing habit of northern nomads and traders' (1986: 240; see also Goldsmith 1997). Miraa supplied from the Nyambenes is now very popular in Mogadishu and other southern cities and towns. In a Kenyan 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.² 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 16th August 1940, Gerald Reece, Officer-in-Charge of the Northern Frontier District, spoke of Isiolo miraa consumption, lamenting: 'One will never stop the Alien Somalis here using it'.³ Somali reverence for miraa and its role in reinforcing hierarchy is enshrined in the phrase *lanta boqorka* meaning 'the chief's twig': when chewing it was once *de rigueur* to offer the finest stem—the 'sultan's twig'—to an elder.

Borana. Borana are inveterate chewers too. 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 11th October 1961,⁴ reports that 'miraa [is] consumed in all townships where there are Somalis or Boran'. Such is the regard in which many Borana hold miraa that it is known by some as *muuk jilaa*, the 'sacred tree'.

² Cf. Almedom and Abraham 1994 [p. 254]. They talk of khat chewing amongst Gurage women in Ethiopia: 'It is not customary for girls to consume *chat*; they start only after they both reach womanhood (after menstruation) and are married.'

³ Kenya National Archives: DC/ISO/2/2/13 H. Public Health 1936–1945.

⁴ Kenya National Archives: Report of DCs' meeting on miraa, 11/10/1961: DC/ISO/3/7/11.

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: some of them unable to afford better grades. Many Turkana men and women chew openly in Isiolo, although more well-heeled Turkana women do not chew. Amongst men, however, it is common to find fairly wealthy individuals chewing.

Yemeni/Omani Arabs and Swahili. 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. 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. Miraa is also popular amongst Swahili of the Kenyan coast, although how correct it is to use the term ‘Swahili’ as a name of a particular group is debatable (see Constantin 1989: 145).

Religion

Miraa is associated with Islam, an association commonly explained by the fact that as the Koran forbids alcohol, miraa has become the equivalent social stimulant, although many Muslims question whether miraa should be *haram* (see next chapter). Kenyan 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 Asian Muslims are also chewers.

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 in towns like Isiolo, are also 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 well the image that drivers and touts often present: that of *upoa* (‘coolness’). This is dealt with in the following section on ‘youth’ . . .

Youth

Miraa is popular amongst many young Kenyans—predominantly male—who fit in with what can be termed a ‘youth ethos’ (Carrier 2005b). 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*. This is a Kiswahili word meaning ‘cool’ (in a literal sense), which has been incorporated into the *sheng*⁵

⁵ *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’.

language fashionable amongst youth, and now refers to ‘cool’ in the colloquial sense used in Britain and America. 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, and a sticker affixed to a miraa kiosk in the Nyambenes states *miraa ni poa*. 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*.⁶ *Upoa* surrounding miraa make a *takssin* seem congruous with the latest *FUBU* brand clothing, and even the latest *gangsta rap* songs.⁷ Thus, miraa—a very ‘local’ substance—is integrated into the lives of many Kenyan youth permeated by external—or ‘global’—influences.

Location

Most Kenyan towns have their fair share of miraa kiosks. However, despite the spread of the trade network, miraa is far more popular in some areas than others. A UNDCP report on drug use in Kenya (Mwenesi 1995: 46) interviewed 383 ‘drug abusers’, asking them what drugs they took. A region by region breakdown of drugs taken supports the notion that miraa is more popular in some areas than others. The proportion of users in the particular region who chewed were as follows: 42 out of 65 in Nairobi; 47 out of 51 on the coast; 20 out of 46 in the Rift Valley; 59 out of 76 in Eastern Province (where Meru is located); 22 out of 77 in Western/Nyanza; and 10 out of 68 in Central Province.

- **The Nyambenes:** The main miraa-cultivating region in Kenya is a major consumption zone.
- **Northeast:** Many associate miraa with Kenya’s northeast, where 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 (NFD), that an ordinance was instigated restricting the sale and consumption of miraa there to permit holders

⁶ Adding the prefix ‘u’ to the front of *poa* turns it into an abstract noun.

⁷ Hip-Hop style music is very popular in Kenya, and there are now many home-grown acts purveying this style of music. Lyrics to their songs contains much *sheng*.

only.⁸ Money spent on the substance has been an issue for many years, with one Isiolo DC concerned in 1961 that chewers of the NFD spent ‘at least £250,000 per year on miraa’.⁹ He also estimated that £800–1000 was spent weekly on miraa in Isiolo alone. 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. Miraa is also much used in northern refugee camps (Beckerleg and Sheekh 2005). 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 explanation: many young men are educated and aware of riches to be had in the world, but feel powerless to attain them. *Handas*, he continued, takes the edge off such a predicament, giving consumers the feeling that wealth is attainable.

- **Urban areas:** Miraa outlets in many bigger towns and cities are concentrated in certain areas, normally around bus stages. Such areas are usually ethnically heterogeneous, and consumption easily crosses ethnic boundaries. Also, *sheng* and other elements of the ‘youth ethos’ seem particularly rooted in urban settings—*sheng* is said to have evolved in 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 10th 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).

⁸ 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.

⁹ Typed report of District Commissioners’ Meeting on miraa, October 11th 1961, Kenya National Archives: DC/ISO/3/7/11.

Who chews which variety?

There is some hazy convergence regarding who chews a particular variety: many people limit themselves to one variety (Carrier 2006). Such varieties are sometimes referred to as ‘brands’ by Isiolo consumers, and even command ‘brand loyalty’. An example of this is a young soldier brought up in Isiolo but stationed in Mombasa. He only likes to chew *nyeusi*, and because it is not sold in Mombasa he resists chewing, even when the opportunity arises, until he returns to Isiolo on leave. Like many consumers, his relationship is not with generic miraa, but with one of its specific forms. 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 cheap variety, although being watery and notorious for causing impotence, few find it appealing. 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. Closely related to *matangoma* are *murutubu*, and *liboi*, varieties exported to the northeast and sold cheaply to Somali customers.

Makata is also cheap, and in Isiolo, where much 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 its effect. They regarded it as stronger than other types: 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 effects 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. *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, and is the main variety exported to the Samburu region around Maralal, providing cheap miraa for cash-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 M'Mucheke, 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 their 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. M'Mucheke'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 *Kimathi Kiiosk*, whose *giza* is of very high quality. Much *giza* sold in Kenya, however, is low-grade and relatively cheap.

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.150–300. Older Somali men are often keen on *kangeta*, and for this reason Eastleigh is one of the main centres for its sale. *Alele* has the reputation of being a refined variety, popular with wealthy men and women. *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 often 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!

Prestigious varieties are not the only ones conspicuously consumed. For some young men, consumption of lower-grade, but 'cool', varieties like *makata* can also be done for show, although the image given off is not one of wealth. Just as drinking cheap lager can give off a very different message to drinking champagne, so the particular varieties of miraa can also send varied messages. It is a heterogeneous substance with heterogeneous cultural meanings.

Handas: the language of consumption

There are specific words for the effects miraa has upon the body. The most common term used in Kenya is *handas*, which has spawned the verb *kuhandasika* meaning '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*.¹⁰ *Mirqaan*—a Somali word for the effects—is often heard in Somali populated towns like Isiolo and Garissa. 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'). 'Steam' entered Kiswahili over a century ago as a general word for drunkenness (see Saavedra 2004: 200), and in the case of miraa people talk of 'steam' rising through the body as it 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. Another word 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

¹⁰ See also Goldsmith 2004.

of fornication. Higher quality grades, on the other hand, are seen as smoother in effect. *Handas* is often described in terms of temperature, and the stronger the miraa the hotter it is said to be.¹¹ 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, which they brought along for the journey. None knew Spanish, but claimed *handas* would confer understanding. *Handas* is ascribed other marvellous properties, including the ability to save lives. M’Mucheke 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, badly injuring many passengers and killing the driver. M’Mucheke, however, had been chewing, so could anticipate the danger and secure himself with a firm grip. He escaped with only bruises.

A degree of ambivalence is shown by consumers towards *handas*, as is the case with the effects of many psychoactive substances cross-culturally and throughout history as some effects are perceived as beneficial and others as troublesome: alcohol is a good example, as Horace shows in his address to a wine jar capable of ‘bringing complaints and jokes, fights and crazed love affairs, or easy sleep’ (Horace Odes 3.21).¹² 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 M’Mucheke’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 M’Mucheke’s. Thus I returned to look for it, only to find it was in my pocket all along. M’Mucheke laughed this off as *handas*-induced

¹¹ Chewers often remark that it is not good to chew in cold places: cold neutralises *handas*.

¹² Author’s translation.

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, just as Horace did with his wine jar. I first noticed this with M’Mucheke, but was assured by him and others 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. Ascribing agency to *handas* has wider significance; after all, it is not uncommon for agency to be taken from the person and ascribed to another power, and much recent work in the social sciences seeks to emphasise that objects should indeed be viewed as having agency (Latour 2005; Miller 2005).¹³ Personifying *handas*, as well as being humorous, reflects the fact that in chewing miraa one is allowing into one’s body another form of agency that can affect one’s thinking and behaviour (albeit to a far milder degree than harder substances). This agency is of course an amalgam of the potency of the active constituents of the substance, and the potency of ideas of just how one should feel and act when chewing miraa. That ideas influence the efficacy of psychoactive and medicinal substances is, of course, well-known, and the ‘placebo effect’ has been given anthropological treatment by Moerman (2002).

For M’Mucheke, *handas* seems like a guardian angel. In Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1992 [1958]: 121) there is the following

¹³ I am a little uneasy that talk of the agency of things could be put in another way: things affect people. Hardly a profound notion when stripped of the word ‘agency’!

scene: ‘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 M’Mucheke’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. This quality of *handas* may also reflect the perception that while miraa gives a consumer power in the form of stamina and ability to persevere with tasks, miraa can also gain power over the consumer, diminishing the consumer’s own agency: the mischievous ability to make consumers obsessive about tasks and forgetful about other duties gives *handas* a trickster-like quality. This trickster-like quality is also evident in humorous stories regarding people ‘under the influence’ of miraa in Ethiopia. Gebissa recounts one story thus (2004: 8):

[A] man was chewing khat alone in his home. As most chewers do, the man plucked off the tender shoots and leaves to chew and threw away the leathery leaves. The unwanted parts piled up and covered most of his feet except for the toes, which he wiggled unconsciously. The chewer was charged with the effect of the khat and his vision was blurred to the extent that he mistook his toes for a mouse. Scared, the man quickly grabbed a machete and chopped off his toes, only to realise after the high wore off that he had mutilated himself.

Unsurprisingly, M’Mucheke has an extensive repertoire of such tales. One involved a man chewing *kangeta* who was so affected by *handas* that a long miraa stem pierced his cheek without his feeling it. He caught sight of the stem in the corner of his eye and thought it was a *rungu* (truncheon) wielded by a thug approaching him from behind. No matter how fast he ran he could not escape the attacker and feared the killer blow would strike at any time. He had run many a mile until he realised it was not a *rungu* but only a miraa stem. Another popular tale in Isiolo involved a man who thought a hedge was an elephant while chewing *gathanga*, while another man became so absorbed in his housework while chewing the same variety that he spent the night washing all his sheets; by the time the *gathanga* wore off in the early morning he could not go to bed as they were all damp.

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'oiling* (a recent term that evolved for *black power* at M'Mucheke'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').¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ *Side-mirror* is also used humorously for the plug of miraa in the cheeks that sticks out and so resembles the side-mirror of a car. A favourite term of mine is *handasometer* (a mirror used to view the state of the eyes to see how much *handas* one has: the wider the eyes, the bigger the *handas*!).

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 Arab influence on miraa worldwide is evident also in the use of the word *yazzina* in Madagascar for both miraa chewing and the stored cud.¹⁶ The Cushitic word *quodhadhi* is employed in the north of Kenya for a habitual consumer of miraa, almost equivalent for 'addict' although used jocularly in my experience. Some claimed that the word refers to the motion of the hands when transferring a miraa stem from bundle to cheek.

Obtaining handas and avoiding insomnia

A European might expect the first procedure when about to masticate stems possibly sprayed with chemicals, and touched by numerous

¹⁴ *Kukwachu* appears to be *sheng* in origin; *kubamba* is pure Kiswahili for 'to arrest/catch', but has come to mean 'hug' in colloquial usage. *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*.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Susan Beckerleg for *sagaday*, which she mentioned in her 2001 talk.

¹⁶ I spent three weeks in Madagascar in 2006 looking at miraa trade and use in Diego Suarez. The anthropologist Lisa Gezon has researched miraa in Madagascar more thoroughly and will be publishing her findings soon.

people—farmers, traders, and often other consumers who handle bundles in examining them—would be to wash them. Not so in Kenya.¹⁷ 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. It is said that washing miraa ‘washes away *handas*’. Instead, 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. 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 *barehe* 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’.

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. 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. 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. Varieties like *makata* provide the opportunity to strip all chewable material in one go, and 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.

¹⁷ 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.

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. While Kenyan chewers rarely construct *takssins* on the scale of Yemeni and Malagasy chewers,¹⁸ the distended cheek draws attention to the mastication process in a way that many might find disgusting: Miller (1997: 96) states that ‘[c]hewed food has the capacity to be even more disgusting than feces’, and a cheek full of masticated miraa—combined with the spitting and hawking of some chewers—attracts much disdain from non-chewers in Kenya and beyond. However, amongst miraa chewers such sensibilities are little in evidence and the attention-grabbing *takssin* is something of a celebration of the chewing process, highlighting the strong cultural element in what one finds disgusting or appealing. Some chewers are even known to remove their *takssin* when eating a meal, storing it temporarily behind the ear, before returning to it after eating. There are also toothless consumers willing to place *takssins* pre-masticated by younger relatives in their mouths.

¹⁸ Some Malagasy friends reckoned the huge *takssins* evident in Antsiranana were due to the local miraa not being especially potent, so requiring a greater concentration of masticated leaves. However, as I found the miraa there producing similar effects to the Nyambene product with only a Kenyan-sized *takssin*, I would subscribe to the alternative theory that the extreme *takssin*-size is more due to fashion and the influence of Yemeni cultures of miraa-consumption.

Fizzy drinks like *Fanta* and *Coca-Cola* are popular with chewers: caps of glass bottles are not removed, but pierced with a suitable implement (many establishments geared up for chewers have a large nail handy). 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.

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. 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'¹⁹ (Goldsmith 1988: 136).

Chewers often spit out excess liquid while chewing. This generated the joke that when walking through Eastleigh (where many chew miraa) 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 signifier of miraa chewing.

After chewing some consumers like to fill up with a good meal: if one stops chewing an hour or so before bed, and then has a meal, insomnia is usually avoided. High quality miraa is reported not to

¹⁹ 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 *takssin* together.

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.²⁰ The feeling of lethargy that can trouble a chewer the morning after a session—the miraa ‘hangover’—is called *ajiis* (an Arabic 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, including work: miraa is a substance whose use can be incorporated into different contexts. 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*, *functional chewing*, and *recreational chewing*, and 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.

Functional 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*

²⁰ Beckerleg reported the use by some consumers on the coast of heroin to ‘come down’ from miraa in her November 2001 talk.

touts, miraa traders, prostitutes, and lorry drivers whilst working is considered. The section on medicinal use considers the healing, restorative and aphrodisiac properties of miraa 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: Obviously, these contexts are merely structuring devices for the following material, and 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.

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.

—M'Mucheke, December 2000.

The importance of miraa for the Meru has often been noted by outsiders, and did not escape British colonial officers. McKeag, District Commissioner of Meru, reports in a document dated 14th March 1945²¹ 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

²¹ Kenya National Archives: BB.PC/EST/6/12 Miraa—general.

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 25th April 1947 was written by three Meru men and addressed to the 'Hon. Chief Native Commissioner'.²² 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'.

In such discourse, Tigania and Igembe emphasise that miraa used ceremonially must be *mbaine*. There is also a time-honoured way of presenting ceremonial miraa in a special bundle called *ncoolo*.²³ 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,²⁴ and given the shape of an *ncoolo* bundle (see plates 15 and 16), 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 as *ncoolo* is also used in rites of passage. Whatever the correct etymology, *ncoolo* is a gift considered *de rigueur* on important occasions, including those concerning solving disputes and marriage negotiations.²⁵ 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.

²² Kenya National Archives: loc. cit.

²³ The 'c' in *ncoolo* is pronounced as 'ch'.

²⁴ In the Tigania region this seems especially so: Tigania friends would often say 'milaa' rather than 'miraa'.

²⁵ Mark Lamont (personal communication) learned in Mikinduri of the presentation of *ncoolo* bundles by a wife to her husband 'kuingua maciara', that is 'to show that her last child was big enough to carry water and gather wood', at which point a period of post-partum avoidance was over (observed by Meru until the 1950s), and the couple could engage in sexual relations once more.

In discussions with Nyambene elders—and amongst Tigania and Igembe in general—I found much emphasis placed on miraa's role in rites of passage. The first such role is connected with circumcision, and two elders of Kianjai explained it 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 (*mūtaanî*: 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 *mūtaanî*.

When taking *ncoolo* 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.

Also, during the actual circumcision ceremonies miraa plays a role, albeit a more 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. In 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 then used to tie up the *ncoolo*. This 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. Whether or not this is true, one Nkinyang’a elder I met randomly whilst carrying an *ncoolo* confirmed this by saying that I must be courting 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: some said 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. Kola nuts in West Africa are used similarly, and 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.

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. To join each stage requires a man to pay a fee and undergo initiation:²⁶ '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* 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 claim 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

²⁶ 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).

marriage alliances. More interestingly, miraa's use can 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. However, discourse about Nyambene traditions emphasises 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 Husseinīya' (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 *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 Husseinīya . . . 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], 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.

The effect of miraa might not be just stimulatory at such sessions: lack of sleep and the spirit-infused atmosphere surely enhance the

sensation of *handas*. Dr. Hassan Arero—himself a Borana—tells me that miraa ‘also gives some form of hallucination ideal to the theatre of healing at the ayyana’ (personal communication): 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. A 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’. Also, an Isiolo ritual specialist said 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 in such contexts.

Functional chewing

Chewing on the job

Miraa is seen by many Kenyans as something unseemly (see chapter seven), and this has stopped miraa functioning in more ‘respectable’ offices as coffee does in offices in the UK: many bosses would frown on their staff chewing at work. However, there are some work contexts where miraa is not unwelcome. A miraa kiosk owner would hardly object to staff chewing whilst working. If miraa was an intoxicant like beer, then an employee selling miraa discouraged from 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 can aid 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, makes chewing extremely common amongst them, and tolerated by employers.

Some chew miraa in what might strike many as inappropriate contexts. One doctor I met in Isiolo chews whilst ministering to patients. He claimed that it keeps him focused 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 chew throughout Kenya. 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.²⁷ 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. *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 and rappers. Drivers and touts often speak *sheng*, their garb generally consists of labelled sports-wear, vehicles are driven at great speed with bravado, and they tend to be young. Miraa consumption not only sustains the crew through long shifts, but also fits in well with their image and lifestyles. Miraa’s popularity with touts and drivers means it can be useful as an alternative method of payment. M’Mucheke, when travelling to Ethiopia a few years ago, secured his seat in the front of a lorry plying the Isiolo-Moyale route

²⁷ Cf. Ameen and Naji 2001. This article concludes that Yemeni qat ‘consumption can increase the risk of road accident fatalities’, but ends with the remark that ‘the results prevented here are by no means conclusive’ (ibid. 561). Also, surely the effect of keeping drivers awake might be considered to *prevent* accidents, falling asleep at the wheel being a big killer itself.

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 awake whilst studying. Some Kenyan students use miraa similarly. In Isiolo I was told of ‘academic tourists’: students who throughout the academic year do not bother with classes, but borrow notes when exam time comes from more diligent friends, and study these intensely while chewing. Some claim that ‘academic tourists’ even better the grades of students with perfect attendance records.

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, just as young militia known as *mooryaan* chew miraa in Somali towns, helping them cope with soldiering in hazardous urban environments. Many of *Sunrise’s* customers are prostitutes, and urban centres throughout Kenya contain miraa-chewing sex-workers. For such women, whose working hours are usually nocturnal, miraa sustains them, as well as keeping them alert to the wiles of customers. Some Kenyans strongly associate female miraa consumption with prostitution, and women who chew openly are sometimes tainted by this association.²⁸

Miraa as medicine

M’Mucheke 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 consuming countries, reports that:

²⁸ 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.

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 can thus cross into the category of food when the need arises.

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, Gitonga, a knowledgeable healer who describes himself with the term ‘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 feel compelled to 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. Throughout the miraa-chewing world the substance is associated with sex. Some male chewers in the UK boasted to me of how their wives were happy with their sexual performance after chewing, although this contrasts with accusations that miraa causes impotence from Somali women (see chapter seven). In Madagascar, too, men told me that chewing miraa was to be followed ideally by a night with a beautiful lady, and a

similar effect was attributed to chewing kola nuts with ginger. One Meru farmer interviewed for a *Daily Nation* article of the 17th 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'. Somali chewers in the UK often contrasted the effect on sexual performance of chewing different varieties: one Somali man in Manchester told that if he chews *giza* he can last ten minutes with his lover, while if he chews *kangeta* he can last thirty minutes. 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 (chapter seven). The issue of agency and miraa's control over the consumer is clearly relevant: one miraa consumer reported that he rarely chews, as whenever he does he needs the company of a woman and yet does not want to engage in casual sex given the dangers. A Somali friend who once lived in the US claimed that the dried miraa often sold there is an especially potent aphrodisiac: he was compelled to drive six hours to the neighbouring state to satisfy his desire with his girlfriend after sampling some.

I was told—admittedly by men—that miraa also acts as a female aphrodisiac. A Turkana man in his thirties in Isiolo spoke of miraa in this way, reporting that some men—himself included—like women to chew as they lose their *haya* (Kiswahili: 'bashfulness'), and because it 'dries them up' vaginally, increasing friction during sex, and thus increasing pleasure (presumably for men rather than women). The connection with female libido is further evidenced by a remark made to M'Mucheke 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* (attractive young women). Of course, this may have just been sales patter.

It is not only male consumers who talk up a positive link of miraa and sex. There is a highly respectable garden centre in the UK that sells miraa plants propagated from ones the owner—a medal winner at the Chelsea Flower Show—imported from Lebanon. A tag that comes with the plant gives helpful advice on growing it indoors, and also offers the following brief, but alluring, description of the plant's effects: 'In Africa chewing the leaves is considered a potent aphrodisiac'.

Recreational Chewing

A recreational chewing session is termed *majlis* in the following pages. This is a transliteration of the Persian word for ‘assembly’, and is often used in Isiolo to refer to a group chewing session. Another common term for such a session is *fadiga*, a Somali word for a seated gathering. Many 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, and there seems to be no exact term for a chewing session in Kimeru: one is more likely to use the verbal phrase *kuria miraa* (‘eat miraa’) rather than a noun.

The word *majlis* should not suggest anything too formal: its usage in Isiolo 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 it is not. 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 those attending 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,

consuming 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 football’. Some gatherings are given the heading ‘miraa session’, or *fadiga*, or *majlis*, but far more are focused on some other activity.²⁹

Chewing miraa recreationally is not necessarily a group activity: some chew recreationally while alone. M’Mucheke, 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 chews 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 miraa *majlis* consists of people chewing together.

The Kenyan Majlis: general characteristics

While some *majlis* are planned in advance, especially if holidays or celebrations are in the offing, many arise 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 towards fellow chewers. The importance of chewing together was nicely expressed by one chewer who joined myself and M’Mucheke for a chew in a Maua bar with the words ‘miraa needs company’. Other *majlis* form out of habit, as people regularly gather at certain spots—usually a café, bar, or miraa kiosk—when in the mood for a chew.

The flexibility and informality of Kenyan *majlis* are reflected in the demographics of those participating: sessions are often constituted by people of different ages, social backgrounds and ethnicities,

²⁹ 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’.

while mixed-sex *majlis* are not unknown. In cafés and bars in the miraa-growing region of the Nyambenes, members of different generations often converge to watch TV over a chew and some tea. However, if one spots one's *bamo* or *bamungo* (Kimeru: 'age-mate': cf. Peatrik 1999: 245), 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. Some *majlis* in Isiolo are made up of age-mates only. At a café near the Isiolo secondary school, a group of young class-mates often meet in their free time: here they indulge in *nyeusi*, *makata*, spiced coffee and banter.

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, although in Maua members of the sizeable Somali community often mix with Meru chewers at nightspots. In cosmopolitan towns and cities like Isiolo, Nairobi and Mombasa, many chewing-sessions are similarly mixed, especially amongst youth. Smaller towns like Garba Tulla and Kinna are less mixed 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 provides recruits for some more diverse sessions.³⁰

In the Igembe region some women chew publicly, and informal gatherings at cafés and bars see a mixture of mainly male and occasional 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 women 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, as the notion that women who chew are immoral and not respectable is still quite prevalent. In fact 'respectable' women do chew miraa: one wealthy Borana woman allowed M'Mucheke and me to chew at her Isiolo home, alongside a younger

³⁰ M'Mucheke attended Garba Tulla secondary school and recounts how Borana bandits would sometimes ambush Somali miraa vehicles. On one occasion, a successful ambush resulted in the town being flooded with cheap, yet good quality, miraa, and students at the school indulged greatly. For a miraa connoisseur like M'Mucheke, this was the equivalent windfall to that involving whisky in the film *Whisky Galore*.

Borana woman and a Meru man. Mixed-sex *majlis* are especially common in Isiolo near the miraa market—and *chang'aa* dens—where some women chew alongside their husbands. The combination of *lombolio* and *chang'aa* has a powerful effect, and incidents like the following—related by M'Mucheke—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.

Most participants in my experience brought along their own supplies of miraa if they could afford it. Popular characters like M'Mucheke have a knack of procuring miraa despite penury: during his unemployed spell, trader friends often gave him *shurbas*, as would friends in town. 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.

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 near Muringene. He ensured that everyone who sat around him at the table at least had a few stems from his pocket. Amongst Tigania and Igembe it is 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.

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; those without work are less constrained regarding when they chew, although more 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 shown by the report of a British colonial officer dated 27th May 1953 concerning a Somali man who wanted to obtain miraa in Meru but was refused entry despite holding a trade permit.³¹ 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 duration is exceedingly flexible. They usually peter out—along with miraa supplies—at around 10–11 p.m.³² Longer sessions lasting until after midnight are not uncommon, although those allowing participants to boast that they chewed *mpaka che* (Kiswahili: ‘until dawn’) and have *waa ishii shaley* (Somali: ‘yesterday’s eyes’) are rare. Chewers vary in how much miraa they consume in the course of a session, some chewing at a much faster rate than others. In my experience a *kitundu* of *giza* or a couple of

³¹ Kenya National Archives: BB.PC/EST/6/12 Miraa—general 1945–57.

³² In Antsiranana, Madagascar, miraa can only be bought around midday, after which most stock has been bought up. This has the effect of limiting most consumption to the afternoon, creating a different pattern of consumption. Chewers there seemed surprised when I mentioned that some miraa sessions last late into the night in Kenya: Malagasy consumers emphasised that one should chew in the afternoon, stop at around 7 p.m., then eat before bed a few hours later.

shurbas of *karama* are sufficient for one person during an evening's session. Some can get through far more, however: one Arab customer of *Sunrise 4000* startled me by buying twenty *shurbas* which he claimed were all for himself. He said that he did not want a mere 'toothpick' (i.e. just one *shurba*), but a 'full meal'.

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 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.).

Majlis Location

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 a relaxed atmosphere, then one's *handas* is likely to be content. However, 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. This is connected to *miraa*'s unseemly image (see chapter seven), but also to the economic

consideration that chewers can clog up cafés and bars for hours on end while purchasing little except soda. There are establishments that place prohibitory signs up (see plate 17), forbidding miraa chewing on the premises, whilst some locations might not forbid miraa chewing explicitly, but would not welcome it.

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 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: many settings used in Kenya are decided upon randomly.

Majlis often take place outside, for example under a miraa tree in the Nyambenes or on Malindi beaches. In Mombasa many chewers congregate in the evenings for a session on the steps of a cinema specialising in *Bollywood* movies. Long bus journeys are also rendered more enjoyable by indulging in miraa: traders taking supplies on

board buses from the Nyambenes to the coast chew much during the journey. Chewers relate that *miraa inapunguza safari* (Kiswahili: ‘miraa shortens the journey’): *handas* certainly reduces the possibility of feeling bored, as hands and minds are kept active by the twigs and a sensation of comfort envelops the chewer. Miraa kiosks often function as chewing venues: a good 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. 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.

Cafes—known as *hotelis* in Kenya—host many sessions, and some like the *Manchester Café* in Karama, make most of their money from chewers. The *Manchester Café* is popular with chewers, graders and traders all day long (see plate 18), but is at its fullest in the evening when benches fill up and Mzee Mwambia (the proprietor) 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. 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. If the TV is on, conversation dries up as customers focus on the screen, only opening mouths to request a refill of tea. 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 eat at home, and come to a café with the aim of socialising. 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.

Private houses are also used as venues, and 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 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. 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.³³ 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. 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.

My favourite setting for a *majlis* was a former milk depot in Mutuati (see plate 19). Whilst the establishment no longer sells milk, it is used as a social club for the owner and his friends. In the evenings a

³³ Miraa is often criticised for generating many ideas and plans in chewers that never come to fruition. I am a little wary of this argument as chewers and non-chewers alike are constantly developing ideas, the majority of which will prove unworkable. Some human ideas bear fruit, most become 'castles in the air'.

group of chewers—and some non-chewers—gather to converse, watch the TV above the counter or play *baa*, a traditional board game. Such a *majlis* departs very much from the image of sessions in the Yemen, yet its informality should not suggest that it is any less socially significant for those in attendance.

Chewing in the diaspora

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: a *mafrish*. 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. Tea is provided in flasks along with disposable plastic cups at no charge. 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. One regular is a musician who keeps those attending happy with famous Somali songs. The combined effect brings a little bit of Mogadishu to the very different location of Northwest England.³⁴

Mafrish vary considerably. Some cater for a more upmarket clientele, supplying more expensive miraa than usual. I was told of one such *mafrish* in London where miraa is sold at £7 and where there are two rooms, one for women and one for men. Others leave a lot to be desired in terms of hygiene: one friend frequents a *mafrish* in Peckham which he appreciates not just for the congenial company, but also because the toilet is admirably clean in comparison with other venues. Also, most sessions I have attended in the UK have been made up of a mixed range of people, although in terms of gender there is no mixing at a *mafrish*. Chewers from the south and north of Somalia mix at sessions I have witnessed. Where Nyambene miraa is chewed participants are almost all Somali:

³⁴ Compare miraa's link back to home in the Horn when used in the diaspora with the way young Somalis talk of their hopes and dreams of success in the west at miraa sessions held during their premigration wait as refugees in Africa (Rousseau et al. 1998).

Ethiopians and Yemenis prefer chewing miraa from their own countries of origin. There is an Ethiopian establishment in Camden where Somalis also chew: there are separate rooms for Ethiopians and Somalis, however, as linguistic differences preclude too much mixing. The age of those attending range from eighteen to sixty: younger boys are said to chew, although there is word that some young Somalis see miraa chewing as a staid habit of the elders, and, unlike their Kenyan counterparts, not as something *poa*. Many older chewers speak little English, speaking mainly Somali and perhaps also Kiswahili, and many have little in the way of work. Others have fluent English, however, as well as good education levels and good jobs. Some younger attendees appear more assimilated into UK culture, and at one session in Peckham young chewers discussed the latest series of *Big Brother*: their interest had been stimulated as one contestant was Somali. Where most did converge was in a dedication to one Premiership football side or another: one session in Manchester became quite tense when a Manchester United fan ripped down a sticker of Thierry Henry that an Arsenal fan had stuck on the wall. Of course, such a dedication to English football teams is common in East Africa too. In the UK—as well as in Kenya—many sessions include a screening of a Premiership game on satellite TV.

Research conducted on behalf of the Home Office in 1994/1995 revealed that a majority of men and women out of 207 London-based Somalis interviewed had tried miraa (Griffiths et al. 1997: 281). Most of those interviewed chewed in the company of friends, and miraa ‘was generally used two or three times a week, often during the evenings or weekend’ (ibid. 282). 76% of the sample ‘reported using more or much more now than they did in Somalia’ (loc. cit.). The researchers hypothesise that miraa being ‘taken from its original socio-cultural context and transplanted to a foreign setting in London where previous roles and restraints may be less effective’ might be a factor in this increase in use. This talk of previously effective ‘restraints’ appears based on shaky foundations: Griffiths in the Home Office report of 1998 states that miraa ‘problems do not appear evident where its use is acculturated, as with the Mehru [sic] and Isiolo tribal people of Kenya, where only the elders are permitted to chew it’ (Griffiths 1998: 13). As we have seen, the last statement could not be further from the truth. Factors that restrict use are more likely connected to employment than cultural restraints: as is the case in Kenya, those with jobs are often resist chewing

until they have free time at the weekend. For the unemployed, miraa chewing fills in time and alleviates boredom. The Home Office research reveals that only 17% of those interviewed had work (Griffiths et al. 1997: 281), leaving the majority with time on their hands and few pursuits available besides chewing miraa, hence the perceived increase in use. The Home Office research also revealed the strong feeling amongst Somalis that ‘the use of qat helps to maintain cultural identity’, a statement with which 66% of the sample agreed (ibid. 282). In an alien environment with few jobs on offer it is hardly surprising that many Somalis would seek solace in the company of friends and in the warm embrace of *handas*.³⁵

Such cultural importance is clearly not restricted to the UK contingent of Somalis. In the US, Canada, Sweden and elsewhere, miraa—despite illegality—still has much cultural resonance and acts as a social adhesive for displaced communities. In the case of Australia, Stevenson et al. report that already miraa ‘is proving to be important as an identity marker. Through their use of *khat* East Africans are able to assert their desire to preserve distinct identities within a culturally diverse community’ (1996: 80).

There are many cultures of miraa consumption, and this chapter has highlighted some of the most important, from the traditional presentation of *ncoolo* in the Nyambenes, through functional use by *matatu* touts, to the *mafrish* of UK Somalis. These cultures of consumption bear little resemblance to those associated with ‘harder’ substances, and yet miraa is often lumped together with the likes of cocaine by those calling it a ‘drug’. There is debate as to whether miraa can be so labelled, and this debate is focused on in the next chapter on miraa and the ‘war on drugs’. However, it is worth ending this chapter with the reflection that miraa, apart from its more functional use, is a substance eminently social in its use: miraa is seen as something better when shared. Of course, other substances are used in social contexts too, but in many cases the emphasis is on the individual’s experience with the substance: for example European or American clubbers seeking powerful isolated chemicals for their ‘head rush’, or ‘psychonauts’ exploring their minds with

³⁵ Besides than the Home Office research, there have been a few other articles on miraa use in the UK: Ahmed & Salib 1998, Nabuzoka & Badhadhe 2000. On chewing in Australia, see Stevenson et al. 1996.

hallucinogens. In this respect, miraa is far more akin to the likes of tea, coffee and moderate amounts of alcohol, all of which enable easier social interaction. Those used to very different types of drugs who were encouraged to sample miraa by media reports in the UK comparing miraa to cocaine and ecstasy would almost certainly have been disappointed by its actual effects, usually too subtle to be noticed when first encountered. As one Somali told an American reporter, '[t]he pleasures others are looking for, they won't find in khat'.³⁶

³⁶ Article posted online: www.hamarey.com/index.php/article/articleview/716/1/4 (accessed May 2004). Article originally published in the *Columbus Dispatch*.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MIRAA AND THE WAR ON DRUGS

Miraa haipingiki ('miraa cannot be blocked')

—Comment made by Meru to Paul Goldsmith
(1988: 137)

Miraa's social life takes it a very long way from its Nyambene home: it has now spread as far as Australia when, a century before, its range hardly took it beyond its homeland. While many social barriers and boundaries have been crossed by miraa, others have arisen in its wake: some would like miraa to have no social life whatsoever, and it is a substance that meets with strong denunciation and even prohibition. This chapter considers attitudes towards miraa both in Kenya and beyond, discussing how miraa is accorded great respect by some, while others view it as unseemly, immoral and as something to suppress. The chapter first focuses on the strong approval of miraa in the Nyambenes, then considers how miraa is viewed much more ambivalently outside the Nyambenes, and ends by examining its reception in other countries and how this feeds back into Kenya. Much criticism emerges through its recent absorption into the globalised discourse of the 'war on drugs'; indeed, much criticism comes about through what might be termed the 'Reefer Madness Effect'. *Reefer Madness* was, of course, the unwittingly comical film of 1936 that sensationally portrayed the supposed descent into violent insanity of cannabis smokers. The *Reefer Madness Effect* nicely captures the combination of over-hyping of a substance's dangers, moral panic and compulsion to prohibit that accompanies media flagging of a new 'drug menace'. Miraa farmers and traders are keen to counter such a bad press, fighting against the notion that miraa is not respectable, a fight which the Meru miraa association *NYAMITA* has taken directly to the UK and US governments, and even to the World Health Organisation.

*Miraa Validation**The green gold of the Tigania and Igembe*

If one were to imagine a continuum of approval—ambivalence—disapproval in regards to attitudes towards miraa, then most convergence on approval would certainly be found amongst the Tigania and Igembe. It is a vital source of personal income in the Nyambenes, and obviously vested economic interests mean that many Tigania and Igembe give it their support. But miraa has much cultural resonance too, being incorporated into Tigania and Igembe customs, a fact many are keen to emphasise.¹ The Meru are associated throughout Kenya with the substance, so much so that the host on a KBC game show, when chatting to a Meru contestant, joked that as the contestant was Meru, therefore he must also be a miraa dealer. For this joke to work there must be a strong association of Meru with miraa: this is hardly surprising seeing that Meru miraa traders can be found in most corners of Kenya. The cultivation, trade and consumption of miraa are intertwined with Tigania/Igembe history and traditions: the reverence with which *mbaine* trees are treated through their link to Meru generations long departed is testament to this. Despite the fact that consumption of miraa in the Nyambenes is no longer the preserve of the elders alone (if, indeed, it ever really was: see chapter six and Carrier 2005a), the substance's special link with the elders appears undiluted. Prestations of miraa to elders still continue, in wedding negotiations and in requests for circumcision to go ahead, reaffirming a gerontocratic hierarchy in theory, if not necessarily in practice. That the miraa used for such prestations has to be the highly esteemed *mbaine*, and that it has to be presented in the *ncoolo* style, further insulates such traditional usage from more mundane pragmatic and recreational use.

For many Tigania and Igembe youth, miraa's *poa* status is of special significance (see Carrier 2005b). It is a substance that roots them in being Meru through its link with their ancestors, the elders and Tigania and Igembe traditions, whilst also linking them into a modern ethos—an ethos originating outside the Nyambenes—of *poa*-ness

¹ I have been tempted on occasion to write of miraa being a constituent part of Tigania and Igembe identity. I now feel this too strong, running the risk of essentialising Tigania and Igembe and their attitudes towards miraa.

(‘coolness’: see chapter six). Young Meru like M’Mucheke often use sheng in describing miraa and enjoy chewing while listening to the latest tunes; however, they also take pride in the hallowed traditional practices involving miraa: M’Mucheke speaks wistfully of the day that *atafunga ncoolo* (‘he will tie up an *ncoolo* bundle’) to secure an engagement, and lovingly recounts tales like that of a farmer called M’Nabea he claims pioneered the miraa trade.

One can see an analogous situation in regard to whisky and Scotland. Scotch whisky, a traditional product of Scotland, is regarded as special throughout much of the world, and brings much wealth to those engaged in its trade. Many Scotsmen at home or in exile are enthused by ‘having a dram’ and their satisfaction with all things Scottish is increased. Similarly, once when visiting Mutuati I was shown a great pile of high quality miraa, packed up into bundles and awaiting transportation to Nairobi. The traders were pleased to inform me that that pile of miraa was destined for London. That a commodity grown and consumed in their part of the world by their ancestors for centuries (unlike, say, introduced crops such as tea and coffee) is now desired in such far-flung places as London and is regarded as *poa* by many in Kenya, is a source of pride.

Tigania and Igembe approval of miraa 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’. Tigania and Igembe are all too aware that miraa is viewed as controversial by many beyond the Nyambenes, and reaction to negative viewpoints is often one of defensiveness. Tigania and Igembe are quick to counter its negative press: for example, they 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 is responsible for child labour is countered by saying that ‘approved’ crops like tea and coffee are also picked by children. That miraa puts children through education, puts food on Nyambene tables and funds medical treatment means that much rhetorical ammunition is available to those arguing in its favour: ammunition used by those Nyambene elders who brought *mbaine* to Kenyatta to urge him to allow its legal trade at a time when a ban was being considered (Goldsmith 1988: 137). Schools in the Nyambenes often have their own miraa plantations

to teach students about tending the trees and to earn extra income for the school. Approval of miraa is so strong in the Nyambenes that its consumption can even be insulated from religious denunciation. Thus, M'Mucheke'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 might well have given up miraa too. Also, M'Mucheke 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 is usual in the Pentecostal church, 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 play a part as most churches in the Nyambenes rely on miraa earnings to keep them solvent.)

Broad generalisations require subverting, however, and it must be pointed out that most Tigania and Igembe are aware that excessive miraa consumption can bring problems—though most also point out that moderation prevents them—and some avoid chewing altogether: Willis states that in East Africa, 'drink has always been regarded with ambivalence' (2002: 9), and the same can be said of miraa in the Nyambenes. Some Tigania and Igembe do in fact abstain from chewing on religious grounds, especially those 'born again': one Mutuati local who had become a preacher upset his flock by urging them to give up their miraa plantations. When I met him and expressed surprise that someone from Ntonyiri would disapprove of the crop, he asked rhetorically 'why must someone from Mutuati like miraa?' Newspaper articles sometimes report the complaints of Nyambene women that money from miraa is misspent by husbands. Some lament the violence that often goes along with the money made in the trade, and the recent tension over the international trade has generated more ambivalence. Also, miraa might be approved of, but that does not mean that using miraa is acceptable behaviour for everyone. Young boys are seen chewing, and not everyone frowns upon this—one friend allowed his baby to attempt toothless chewing—but some do. A young Igembe lad entertained me with his skilful chewing techniques, and later on was keen to procure a stem from me. One man dissuaded me from giving him miraa, however, saying that the lad's chewing would give off the wrong impression.

Nyambene women, while not discouraged from chewing, are not encouraged to do so as strongly as men are. However, it is fair to say that despite such qualifications, miraa is highly regarded by Tigania and Igembe in the main; one can even say that for many, being Tigania and Igembe has much to do with this one substance.

Approval beyond the Nyambenes

Attitudes towards miraa beyond the Nyambenes become far more mixed, and many regard it with ambivalence or outright disapproval. However, there are many others besides the Nyambene Meru who view it favourably. These include many Somali who see the substance as a source of income (for a whole range of their people from the small scale trade of street-side sellers in Garissa to wealthy international exporters in Nairobi), as a focal point for social gatherings, and as a marker of Somali-ness. 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? Through their long-standing association with it, many Somalis have great knowledge of the substance and all its varieties. This knowledge means that miraa consumption will not necessarily be seen as a low-class habit of the poor by Somalis, as they are aware that there exist high-class miraa varieties. One can be distinguished by which variety one chews and gain prestige: thus, wealthy and powerful individuals can chew safe in the knowledge that fellow cognoscenti will realise one is not chewing the cheap stuff. Just as in the UK one does not necessarily associate alcohol with poverty—there is cheap alcohol and extremely expensive alcohol—so Somalis, most of them being *au fait* with miraa, know the image of wealth that they can project to cognoscenti in chewing the likes of *alele*.

The situation regarding Somalis and miraa is similar to that for coastal Muslims, other Northern pastoralists like the Borana, and also Asian Muslims. Miraa is chewed by members of these groups from all social levels, not just the poor, and prestige is derived from elite varieties. A different type of prestige can be derived from chewing the likes of *makata*, and many Kenyan youths approve of miraa sufficiently to accord it the epithet *poa*. Amongst the global accessories of the young and 'cool'—*Adidas* trainers, Manchester United shirts, *hip-hop* and *ragga*—the very local commodity of miraa sits easily (see

chapter six). That miraa is so controversial, and that so many 'respectable' types disapprove of it, perhaps gives consuming the substance a daring image liked by many youth. Its ability to bring together many of the young in enjoyable chewing sessions is another reason it has found favour amongst them.

Discourse of Disapproval: the Kenyan miraa debate

Of course, miraa does not meet with total approval amongst Somalis, Borana and Kenyan youth, and disapproval amongst them can be quite pronounced. For example, although many Somali women chew, there is a perception that miraa chewing is a male vice that women have to bear. Such a perception was evidently behind an anti-miraa march in Isiolo in the 1970s: participants were in the main women (Hjort 1983: 203). 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.). Some Somali women put the blame for marriage break-ups, male unemployment and male impotence—both sexual and in a wider sense—on miraa. Indeed, talk of a diminution of male sexual potency metaphorically hints at wider male impotence in looking after their families. Women lament that some men prefer miraa to their wives. Criticism of miraa by Somali men is not uncommon either. Feelings of approval or disapproval are often intense among Somalis: they are directly exposed to both positive and negative effects and so feel greater urgency regarding the substance than would, say, a 'respectable' Kikuyu businessman in Nairobi, who is likely to disapprove of it whilst feeling little sense of urgency.

Whilst disapproval of the substance may be quite intense amongst Somalis, disapproval is also noticeable in wider Kenyan society. Many *hotels* and nightclubs in Kenya display signs asking clientele to refrain from chewing miraa on the premises (see plate 17). Whilst in my experience such prohibition is not always strictly enforced—an Ethiopian café in Eastleigh (in Nairobi) 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 represent—and help constitute—the common perception of miraa-chewing as something unseemly. The material qualities of miraa are clearly relevant in this regard too, feeding into how 'respectable' miraa is seen to be. The sights and sounds of chewing—bulging cheeks, green teeth, the discarded

waste, spitting and hawking—are hardly likely to endear miraa to Kenyans not traditionally linked to the substance, especially when chewers are commonly compared with ruminant livestock in jokes. While miraa consumers find great humour and much to celebrate in the chewing process, it is clear that by drawing attention to mastication miraa chewing can generate reactions of disgust (see Miller 1997: 93–98). This is a major reason why fears of a miraa-chewing ‘epidemic’ in the west are probably unfounded, as few people there are accustomed to such a mode of consumption for a stimulant (excepting tobacco-chewers). While unusual modes of consumption—notably smoking—have caught on in the past, today not many westerners are likely to put in the effort required to discover the pleasures of miraa in cultures where stimulants are usually consumed as pills and beverages.²

Miraa consumption is also associated in the eyes of many Kenyans with the likes of prostitutes and *matafu* touts: hardly the sort of people many middle-class urbanites would wish to emulate. The association of miraa with all that is antithetical to middle-class lifestyles is explicitly clear in the following quotation from Thomas Akare’s *The Slums* (1981: 139):

This place has the history of the whole town. It is the mother of Nairobi. And that is true, though some call it a two-shilling city because of those two-shilling women, others Majengo, Pumwani, Matopeni because of the mud buildings with brown rusted roofs, or Mairungi City or Miraa because of the drug. . . . That is the Slums.

The situation in Kenya is somewhat different from that in the Yemen, where miraa use is institutionalised to a much a greater degree throughout society, and where even Presidents are known to chew: sometimes American embassy staff in the Yemen find themselves having to chew what is a Schedule I substance in their own country

² Preparations derived from miraa that can be consumed in pill or liquid form—in line with stimulants more common in the west—may find a niche market (and a pill known as *hagigaat* derived from miraa was popular recently among Israeli clubbers), but stronger stimulants are so easily available that it would only remain a niche market. Of course, taking miraa in pill or liquid form would lead to a very different culture of consumption from the relatively gentle experience of chewing gradually over the course of a session among friends. In Antsiranana, Madagascar, many bars serve *rum special*, rum in which miraa, sometimes along with kola, has been steeped: not a beverage likely to have been devised in mainly Muslim chewing regions.

(see below) for ‘diplomatic’ reasons.³ A Kenyan President could hardly get away with chewing without controversy: the following snippet from the regular *Watchman* column of the *Sunday Nation* of December 15th 2002 shows one reaction to the sight of a political candidate 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 is nicely illustrative of the cluster of negative perceptions of miraa that are common in Kenya. Miraa can be seen as a ‘drug’, the consumption of which is aesthetically unpleasing, unhealthy, a burden on household economies, disruptive to family life, a cause of violence, and contrary to religious teaching. Negative perceptions of the substance are hardly new, however: the substance was viewed with great suspicion by British officials in colonial days, and their view of miraa as incompatible with development set the tone for future perception of the substance.

The colonial legacy

British attitudes to miraa were not purely the result of experience in Kenya, but were also influenced by involvement in Somaliland and Aden. Many considered miraa to have a harmful effect in these countries and were hence worried about its effect in Kenya. As Malcolm Clark of the Native Civil Hospital in Wajir says in a letter dated 12th May 1939:

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)

³ One should not portray all Yemenis as pro-qat. Many would see the President as setting a bad example by chewing. There is a vigorous debate in Yemen too over miraa consumption (see Weir 1985; Kennedy 1987; Varisco 2004).

The consumption of miraa led the Officer-in-charge of the Northern Frontier District to the point of despair, as evidenced by the following letter dated 19th 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 first seems to have been mooted 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 those consuming and trading it 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. The ordinance was difficult to enforce, and many took to smuggling with avidity: supplies for Marsabit were even brought up on police lorries and by the DC’s driver.⁴ By 1961, a DCs’ meeting on miraa was able to conclude that ‘it is impossible to prohibit miraa. Therefore it is best to tax it and get the money for the local authorities’ (Communication from DC of Isiolo, 11/10/1961: KNA: DC/ISO/3/7/11).

Despite the attempts at prohibition and the passionately anti-miraa stance of some, it would be wrong to speak of British attitudes towards miraa without mentioning less hostile 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. In regard to Ordinance LIII, the District Commissioner of Isiolo recommended

⁴ Paul Baxter: personal communication.

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 the substance.

Miraa and the Kenyan media

Today disapproval of the substance is widespread, and the media play a large role in promulgating negative views of the substance. 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’,⁵ and little space is given to positive aspects of the substance. 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’.⁶ 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 such 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 negative articles too. The most disapproving article that I read was printed in 2000 in 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 as to 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

⁵ Cf. Weir (1985: 59ff.) on the constant presentation of miraa as a ‘problem’ in the literature on it.

⁶ See introduction for a discussion of the health implications of miraa.

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 are self-reliant. Many . . . depend on friends and relatives to get money to buy the drug.' Note the use of the word 'addict' in discourse very similar to that applied to 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 hazard [sic] as 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 [sic] treated for tuberculosis (TB) some show the signs of noticeable mental disturbances which need treatment.'

Those more favourable to miraa fight back against such views, and there is often vigorous debate as to miraa's pros and cons. For example, the Kiswahili-language paper *Taifa Leo* allows correspondents space for their views in its *Wasemavyo Wasomaji*⁷ section. On the 20th 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 the health and has held back development in the regions where it is popular. On the 3rd of February 2002, a response to this viewpoint by an Igembe miraa trader based in Mombasa was

⁷ 'What the readers say', or 'reader's opinions'.

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.

As with newspapers, coverage of miraa on news programmes is often negative, reflecting the trade conflict of recent years, as well as such incidents as the closure of the border with Somalia and the 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 2000.⁸ 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 that miraa used to be used in positive 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 the different varieties of miraa, and thus not noticing that certain ill effects are limited to certain varieties. The doctor rejoined by describing the 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 year⁹ 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 that 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.

⁸ The show was broadcast on 29th March 2000.

⁹ 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'.

Miraa and religious denunciation

Miraa consumption is a common source of inspiration for sermons in Kenya, and a negative view of the substance is spread by representatives of various religious groups. The most extreme denunciation of miraa 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. Other Christian denominations are less hardline towards miraa, although one suspects that most would urge their congregation to at least moderate their chewing. Certainly the Catholic Bishop Locati of Isiolo—tragically killed in 2005—viewed miraa with concern, although as something that—like beer—was unlikely to be eradicated given its popularity. He seemed more or less resigned to this, and even on occasion playfully joked about the subject: he would often tease M’Mucheke by suggesting he spent all his time at the miraa market. 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 the substance. There is much debate 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 as *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 anti-miraa campaign is partially funded by Iran’ (1988: 137).¹⁰ A Kiswahili tract published at around the same time in Mombasa by an organisation known as *Ansaar Muslim Youth* (1992 [1988]) suggests the type of arguments used by anti-miraa Muslim elements. The tract attempts a balanced presentation of the situation, listing both the *manufaa* (‘benefits’) of miraa, as well as its *madhara* (‘harmful effects’). However, the latter (mainly

¹⁰ Links with Saudi Arabia are quite common these days, as much charitable money reaches Kenya for Muslim projects. Miraa is illegal in Saudi Arabia.

health problems) far outnumber the former (wealth from its trade, alertness, forging friendships). Case-studies of chewers are provided, all of them lamenting their consumption, fitting in with the tract's description of miraa consumption as *wraibu* ('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*').¹¹

Some are prepared to fight back against those arguing on religious grounds that miraa is bad. Thus, one convert to Pentecostalism 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. Also, not all 'born-again' Christians spurn miraa. M'Mucheke reported in a letter that he met a 'born-again' Christian at *Kimathi Kiosk* who was chewing avidly. M'Mucheke reported that when quizzed about miraa the young man '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 miraa plantations were planted by the Lord. There are Muslims who dispute the contention that miraa is *haram*. A Borana lady (admittedly a miraa chewer herself) whom I met in Isiolo 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.'

Miraa as 'drug'

Labelling miraa as a 'drug' is common in Kenya and throughout its social life beyond East Africa. Clearly this potent word is not meant in the relatively neutral sense of a psychoactive substance—in which case caffeine could be so termed—but alludes primarily to the extreme end of the spectrum and the likes of heroin and cocaine. I was on a number of occasions in Kenya asked the question: 'is miraa a drug . . . like cocaine?'. The global reach of 'war on drugs' rhetoric ensures that perceptions of miraa are clouded by this one word, inducing the *Reefer Madness Effect*. The word often leads to an exaggerated view

¹¹ See Beckerleg 2006 for more on Muslim anti-miraa sentiment.

of the agency of chemical constituents at the expense of the agency of the individual consumer and awareness of the social and cultural context in which consumption occurs. As Hugh-Jones remarks (1995: 47): 'Debates about the 'drugs problem' are often characterized by an explicit or implicit assumption that demand for drugs is psychological or physiological in origin. This view of demand is especially prevalent in those many discussions of drugs which focus on the issue of addiction and which see the 'drugs problem' more in medico-legal than in socio-political terms. This reified emphasis on substances rather than people results in a shift in attention away from the social forces that lie behind the consumption and prohibition of stimulants and psychoactive substances . . . on to the apparent power of the substances themselves'.

Africa is now a major battlefield in the 'war on drugs'. International anti-drug agencies focus much attention on the role of Nigeria as an *entrepôt* for cocaine and heroin, and Southern Africa as the source of much cannabis sold in Europe. Consumption of drugs within Africa is widely reported to be on the rise, whilst the trade in drugs—including miraa—is reckoned to help finance and render loyal the militia of many a nasty warlord. 'Rapid Assessment' reports on the drug situation in various African countries are undertaken, despite the fact that the rapidity with which they are conducted makes their worth uncertain. In most such works focusing on the miraa-consuming regions of Africa, miraa is generally placed alongside the likes of cannabis, heroin and mandrax. The equating of miraa with such substances has permeated Kenyan society in general, and newspaper articles demonstrate and reinforce the general linkage of miraa with other substances. Few words are as effective in producing moral panic in the West as 'drug', and nowadays this efficacy is equally evident in Kenya. The power of the word condemns any substance so labelled to notoriety with simple syllogistic logic: drugs are bad; miraa is a drug; therefore, miraa is bad. Western rhetoric condemns miraa in the minds of many Kenyans.

In the case of miraa, many of the physically and socially harmful effects associated with drugs are associated with miraa too. Thus, many associate miraa with violence, unsurprisingly considering the recent conflict in the trade. The Tigania and Igembe—linked with miraa in the minds of many—are stereotyped as having volatile tempers, as depicted in a cartoon in the *Sunday Nation* (May 7th 2000) showing a farmer chasing a man from his miraa tree shouting 'You

had better rob a man of his wife but not his miraa!!!'. This cartoon accompanies a humorous article recounting the exploits of a man conned into hiring a miraa plantation from someone who did not own it. Like other drugs, miraa is associated with familial breakdowns, as husbands are said to spend more time chewing miraa than they do with their families, and fritter away the family finances in doing so. Chewers are also supposed to become lazy, losing all motivation to seek out work be productive. Women are said to be denied their 'conjugal rites', principally because miraa is supposed by many to induce impotence, just one of the health problems associated with it: malnutrition and insomnia being two of the main ones. In short, if one believed all the scare stories, miraa turns its victims into haggard, sleep-deprived zombies, whose drug induced-indolence makes them as unlikely to find work as to satisfy their wives.

Miraa as unseemly

Given such disapproving discourse on miraa—discourse with the full weight of Western, and, in some cases, conservative Islamic rhetoric behind it—it is easy to see why members of the Kenyan middle-classes, perhaps aspiring to Western influenced models of what being respectable in today's 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 seems capable of gaining the approval of other forward-looking people. Imenti attitudes to the Tigania and Igembe, as well as to miraa itself, are pertinent here. I have spoken to Imenti, a Meru sub-group who do not have the same tradition of miraa cultivation and consumption as their Nyambene neighbours, who lament the backwardness of the Nyambenes, pointing out that witchcraft, polygyny, and female circumcision are all still rife there, whilst the Imenti have in the main jettisoned them. For many Imenti, miraa's association with the Tigania and Igembe, and its general controversial status, make it seem out of place for more 'modern' people such as themselves. Miraa consumption, without the same cultural and economic importance for the Imenti as for Tigania and Igembe, is thus seen as backward, and as something to avoid by those living a respectable life in the new millennium. Whilst some Imenti youth indulge in miraa, the likelihood is that if one meets a Meru man who claims to dislike miraa, he will be Imenti. This is

striking given the proximity of the 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 to missionaries than did the more isolated Nyambenes. Whilst the indigenous crop of miraa provided Tigania and Igembe with a way of surviving, the Imenti turned more to introduced crops and outside farming techniques.

The same can be said for many other Kenyans, particularly the middle classes of Nairobi, for whom miraa can also appear 'backwards-looking': a middle-class—and upper-class—lifestyle in Nairobi is difficult to combine with a controversial 'drug' consumed in a manner aesthetically unpleasing to genteel eyes. The *Kenya Times* article quoted above illustrates perfectly how urban ideals of life in the modern world leads some to view miraa farmers and traders as 'undeveloped' as they do not wear the latest fashions or live in 'modern' style housing. (The snappy dressing style of many miraa traders shows up the descriptions in the article as partial.) For many 'respectable' types in Kenya, the association of miraa with the Muslim north also influences attitudes towards it: my first informant in Kenya was a Kikuyu taxi driver who became quite concerned for me when I told him I would be researching miraa in Isiolo. For him, miraa was a Muslim drug that 'makes people lazy'; although he owned a farm, he would never, he claimed, grow miraa. The feeling that northern districts of the country are not quite Kenya still seems to exist amongst some in central parts of the country, mirrored by the expression used by some northerners that they are 'travelling to Kenya' when they head south.¹² The north of Kenya is an alien land for some, and perhaps miraa consumption remains an alien pursuit.

Such perceptions of miraa hardly endear it to those aspiring to a 'respectable' status. They constitute barriers to miraa's further spread in Kenyan society. Disapproval of the substance does not stop at a mere personal rejection of the substance for oneself and one's kin, however, and there are many who wish to enshrine their disapproval of miraa in the statute books with prohibitive legislation.

¹² Hassan Arero: personal communication.

Prohibition and Rumours of Prohibition

In the 'war on drugs' denunciation of a 'drug' quickly leads to calls for prohibition. As we have seen, restrictions on miraa in Kenya have already been tried by the British with the ordinance designed to control the substance in the Northern Frontier District. Attempts to prohibit miraa elsewhere go back even further. Mohammed Abdille Hassan—dubbed the 'Mad Mullah' by the British—banned miraa amongst his followers after committing himself to strict interpretation of the Prophet's laws under the influence of the Salihya brotherhood (Beachey 1990: 36–38). More recently, in the 1980s Somalia experimented with a ban on miraa: Cassanelli (1986: 250ff.) describes well the political motivations behind the ban in a climate where miraa's trade and use was associated with 'disaffected elements' in society. Other countries in East Africa—such as Tanzania, Zambia and Eritrea—prohibit the substance at present (many Meru are said to be languishing in Tanzanian prisons on account of smuggling miraa). There have also been calls for the substance to be banned in South Africa, where miraa chewing is common in large towns in the Eastern Cape (Hirst 1997).

The legal status of miraa in Western countries now reached by the commodity is of great significance for its social life. Various European countries including Sweden, France and Germany have banned miraa, as have the USA and Canada. A history of prohibition in all these countries is beyond the scope of this book, and for the present I limit the discussion to miraa's reception in the USA, before considering miraa's legal status in the UK and calls for its status to be changed.

Stateside: Miraa and the war on terror

After years of international concern and conferences on miraa,¹³ cathinone and cathine, the main constituents of miraa, were added to the list of scheduled substances in the UN Convention on Psychotropic Drugs of 1971, obliging countries signed up to the convention to put them under control. One signatory to the convention was the USA—the chief crusader in the war on drugs—and to fulfil

¹³ See Weir (1985: chapter four) for a good account of the attitudes of international agencies and outsiders in general to what is usually dubbed the 'qat problem'.

its international obligations it declared cathine a Schedule IV substance in 1988 (Federal Register vol. 53, no. 95) and cathinone a Schedule I substance in February 1993 (Federal Register vol. 58, no. 9). To be added to Schedule I a substance must be considered to have a high potential for abuse and to have no accepted medical use in the USA: it was deemed that cathinone fulfilled these criteria. So as to avoid confusion, the entries to the Federal Register made it clear that by scheduling the chemicals, miraa was also being scheduled: 'When khat contains cathinone, khat is a Schedule I substance . . . When khat does not contain cathinone, but does contain cathine, khat is a Schedule IV substance'. In practice this means that miraa becomes less illegal over time, as cathinone is unstable and degrades into cathine: thus Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) officers are advised to get miraa to the laboratory as quickly as possible while cathinone is still present. This state of affairs is nicely illustrated by the story of Mohamud Abdi, arrested in New York for possession of 100 pounds of miraa in his car.¹⁴ However, Abdi did not face a charge for possession of a Schedule I substance: 'Abdi's charge of possession of a controlled dangerous substance was downgraded because that khat had lost its potency'. As Sgt. Ron Kushner of the New York police remarked: 'As the drug gets older, it becomes less illegal . . .'.

How countries interpret their obligations under the UN Convention seems quite flexible, and other countries—including the UK (see below)—make a distinction between the alkaloids and the substance in plant form, allowing miraa to remain legal. However, by conflating miraa and its isolated alkaloids, a substance viewed by many as more akin to coffee than anything stronger was, by February 1993, placed on a legal par with LSD, and now customs officers nicknamed the 'khat busters' strive to keep the US miraa-free (see plate 20 of a humorous novelty patch made by US Customs). These changes to miraa's legal status occurred just as thousands of refugees from Somalia began to arrive in the US and trade in miraa to the US was increasing in scale. Furthermore, events in Somalia were to raise miraa's profile amongst Americans (although—understandably enough—most are still unaware of the substance). Simplistically linking the bloodshed in Somalia with miraa use became a theme in much

¹⁴ Story found online: 'Portland NORML News—Friday, December 18, 1998'. See: <http://www.pdxnorml.org/981218.html> (accessed 22/06/2004).

reporting on the conflict. In the words of Aidan Hartley, a journalist in Mogadishu in the early 1990s, '[o]ne of the common clichés produced by journalists and the US military at the time was that Somalia's war was fuelled by qat and that 'qat-crazed gunmen' were destroying the nation' (Hartley 2004: 236). The US had become afflicted with what Vouin-Bigot terms 'Khatophobia' (1995: 141).

Miraa had become a Schedule I substance months before the raid on Mogadishu in October 1993 that led to the death of 18 US soldiers (and many, many more Somalis). This raid has further damned miraa as far as some Americans are concerned. One extreme example can be found on an unofficial US Border Patrol website that laments illegal immigration into the US.¹⁵ After a long diatribe against Mexican illegal immigrants, the authors turn to Somalis and the events of Mogadishu: 'Almost all of the barbarians who attacked the UN peacekeepers and the barbarians who hacked them into chunks and the barbarians who then—by the thousands—attacked our rescue forces all chewed a narcotic called Khat'. One photo on the website shows a Somali militia man with the caption 'Khat eater waiting for a new target'. The piece ends by suggesting that '[t]he number of violent and illegal aliens in America at this moment from that part of the world can be calculated by the amount of this drug being smuggled into the country. The narcotic is an acquired taste and certainly not for an American palate'. A link with immigration is explicit here, and this link has also played a role in condemning miraa in the US and elsewhere in the West: miraa is not like exotic substances such as tea, coffee and tobacco that entered the West without representatives of the indigenous groups who used them. Miraa is not so disembodied, and has entered the West in the company of migrants and refugees, giving those who dislike refugees and migrants much scope for disliking the substance as well.

The connection of miraa with Muslim countries, 'failed states' and with violence has seen miraa become linked to the latest global 'war': the 'war on terror'. In a BBC report on the recruiting of miraa smugglers from Deal in Kent, a 'special agent with the US Dept of Homeland Security' is quoted as follows: 'We are looking at the funding, the money, where's it going? It could be used to fund terrorism because it's being sent back to countries that support terrorism

¹⁵ www.borderpatrol.com/borderframe900.htm (accessed May 2004).

like Yemen and others'.¹⁶ An American academic has even devoted a whole chapter of a book (Kushner 2004) to a link of miraa to the funding of terrorism, based on the dubious logic that because US officials are unsure where miraa money goes, and because those associated with miraa are Muslims from 'failed states', therefore miraa must be funding Osama bin Laden. Despite such claims, DEA officials that I met reckoned miraa still to be low on their 'radar', although the rise in seizures over the past few years (see chapter two) suggests customs officers are becoming more alert to smugglers. There have recently been 44 miraa-related arrests in the US and a seizure of '25 tons of khat worth more than ten million dollars', arrests linked in the media coverage to the 'war on terror', again with little evidence for such a link.¹⁷ DEA officials also emphasised that making miraa illegal was merely a consequence of fulfilling their UN obligations, rather than as a result of any worries of miraa use in the USA. However, there appears to be no doubting amongst them that miraa should be a Schedule I substance. Meanwhile, many Somalis, Ethiopians and Yemenis—and some British couriers—face the force of US law for importing and possessing the now highly lucrative contraband commodity. Those who wish to keep up a familiar social institution in an unfamiliar environment risk imprisonment and have to pay exorbitant prices of around ten times the UK price.

In effect, US legislation has criminalised members of an already socially deprived minority group whilst encouraging a new contraband trade. Prohibitionist measures—especially those affecting only a minority—are liable to become entrenched, making them very difficult to reverse. Prohibitionist measures can also create vested interests, and not just for the smugglers: with miraa illegal, US Customs show their efficiency in seizing 'tons' of a Schedule I substance. It is rarely admitted that as it is cathinone that is illegal, the actual amount of Schedule I material seized is miniscule.

The UK: recent calls for prohibition

The UK is also a signatory to the 1971 UN Convention, and cathine and cathinone have both been declared as Class C substances, putting

¹⁶ www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/southeast/series4/khat_smuggling.shtml (accessed May 2004).

¹⁷ See media report available online (accessed September 2006): http://cbs11tv.com/topstories/local_story_207215042.html

them on a par with the recently downgraded cannabis. However, miraa in leaf and twig form remains perfectly legal. It is highly controversial, however: lurid press coverage compares miraa to cocaine and even calls it 'legal crack' (*Sunday Mail* August 15th 2004). Right wing commentators see miraa as an anti-social nuisance that immigrants spend their benefits on,¹⁸ while the left agonises about the damage done by miraa to vulnerable minorities. BBC reports speak in worried tones of the impact of miraa chewing on Somali families as men focus more on miraa than their familial obligations. Even the Royal Horticultural Society gets itself worked up over the substance: a herb grower exhibited her miraa plants at a recent Chelsea Flower Show only to have her knuckles rapped for showing such a supposedly noxious substance.

Much condemnation of miraa emerges from the Somali community itself. Some comes from adherents of Wahhabism, and their condemnation was disdainfully treated by chewers of my acquaintance aggrieved that such strict Muslims should try and speak for all Somalis. However, the most engaging criticism comes from women's groups, and the plight of families neglected by miraa-chewing men has been given much prominence in media coverage of the substance, including a slot on Radio 4's 'Woman's Hour' programme.¹⁹ While there is criticism of male miraa use by women in Africa, this seems more pronounced in the Somali diaspora. In the recent report of Patel et al. (2005: 38), 49% of Somalis questioned were in favour of a ban, a figure widely seized on by the press, although 73% of actual chewers were against a ban (there were 337 non-users to 192 recent users in the sample, skewing the figures against chewers). However, overall, '50 per cent male respondents were against banning khat, compared to 25 per cent women' (ibid. 39). I attended one meeting in London of a Somali family group where miraa was discussed. There was healthy debate, with many prepared to defend the substance, although some women felt that miraa took their husbands

¹⁸ Exactly why miraa is regarded as anti-social is illuminating. Whilst many say that alcohol is 'anti-social' as it is blamed for much of the violence in UK cities at pub-closing time, miraa is 'anti-social' for a less dramatic reason: the 'Save Our Streatham' website which has run an anti-miraa campaign declares that in chewing miraa 'the user must spit regularly—an aggressive and anti-social action'. Spitting hardly seems the most evil of crimes. The website is at the following location: www.save-our-streatham.co.uk/khat.htm (accessed May 2004).

¹⁹ Programme aired on Friday September 5th, 2003.

away, the men preferring miraa to them. What was noticeable, however, was the humour of the occasion: even those speaking against miraa at the meeting saw much comic value in it, especially in relating the sexual dysfunction of their husbands,²⁰ humour that gets lost in the solemn reporting on miraa of the BBC and other media outlets. This link to impotence appears metaphorical as well as literal: it is common to hear of how roles are reversed in the diaspora and women get to grips with life in the new locale soonest having been the first to arrive, becoming the main breadwinners in the process. McGowan (1999: 93) paraphrases the president of the Somali Youth Association of Toronto thus:

[He] maintains that the problems with marriages can be traced to qat chewing. The husband arrives in Canada, accustomed to being the main breadwinner, cannot find a job, loses hope, and chews qat, which exacerbates his problem because he is not employed but neither is he contributing to the work of the home. He does not help with the running of the home or with the children's homework, which is all the more problematic in cases where the mother is illiterate. After some months of this situation, the wife is distressed and wants him out of the house.

Thus talk of impotence might very well reflect a broader male economic powerlessness (see Carrier: forthcoming). Interestingly, miraa is not alone as a stimulant criticised by women for taking away their men's potency: a wonderful seventeenth century tract recounts the woes of women whose men are not the 'lusty ladds' of old, but instead 'run the hazard of being *Cuckol'd* by *Dildo's*'. The cause of this 'very sensible *Decay* of that true *Old English Vigour*': coffee!²¹

In response to the controversy MPs have raised questions in parliament asking what measures the government will take to control miraa: the *Reefer Madness Effect* has struck hard in the House of Commons. One Liberal Democrat MP used condemnation of miraa to gain leverage in arguing for the decriminalisation of cannabis, asking rhetorically why this harmful 'hallucinogenic' substance is legal when the much less harmful cannabis is not (Hansard 15th June

²⁰ The husbands were quite old, however, and so impotence might not necessarily be the result of miraa chewing!

²¹ The tract of 1674 is titled: 'The women's petition against coffee representing to publick consideration the grand inconveniences accruing to their sex from the excessive use of that drying, enfeebling liquor: presented to the right honorable the keepers of the liberty of Venus'. It is available from *Early English Books Online*.

1998: column 16). The MP misleadingly reported that miraa users ‘become stoned and unable to do anything’: hardly accurate considering its functional use. An MP for Newport (where miraa is used) did make the case for the defence, however: ‘Is not the lesson clear—that the prohibition of khat would not decrease but increase its use? It would increase the amount of khat crime, and would drive a wedge between the Somali and Yemeni populations and the police’ (loc. cit.). More recently, Stephen Pound—Labour MP for Ealing North—in a parliamentary debate of 18th January 2005 on a new drugs bill, spoke of his own knowledge of miraa, labelling the substance assonantly as ‘corrosive, vicious and pernicious’. As the bill intends to tighten up the law on psilocybin-containing mushrooms, Pound also urged members to ‘consider *khat* because it is a problem that will grow’. From his comments, one would imagine the present situation of miraa use in the UK is desperate enough. He reported that a ‘plane disgorges its load of khat’ which is then sold to ‘large numbers of people in west London’ who ‘chew khat all night long, becoming increasingly aggressive’. Those in the thrall of this ‘vile narcotic’ then ‘come home in the morning, beat up the wife and try to sleep through the day’. To cap it all, ‘detritus’ in the form of miraa leaves are left ‘scattered around the streets in the morning’. Michael Gapes—MP for Ilford, South—was prompted on the 8th June 2005 to raise the issue of miraa in the House after seeing some young, ‘clearly intoxicated’ Somalis chewing miraa in London. He described miraa as a ‘growing social and community problem’, and reported that chewing over several hours ‘can result in manic behaviour, grandiose delusions, paranoia, hallucinations and other effects’.

However, the UK’s Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs conducted a review of miraa’s legal status, and on their recommendations the UK Home Office decided that miraa should remain legal.²² Certainly, their own earlier research findings in the 1990s suggest that prohibition would be a mistake: the research found that miraa use can ‘be seen as playing a positive role in supporting the cultural identity of the Somalian community’ and that ‘[s]evere problems were rarely reported’ (Griffiths et al. 1997: 281). Their findings also suggested that many Somalis would continue to use miraa even if it

²² The recommendations of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs—which the Home Office accepted—are available online at: <http://www.drugs.gov.uk/publication-search/acmd/khat-report-2005/>

were illegal (Griffiths 1998: 48). Thus, banning miraa would not stop its use, would disrupt a social institution and criminalise a vulnerable minority. Banning miraa would certainly not solve the social problems that Somalis face: with miraa out of their lives, Somali men would not suddenly find themselves with full employment and become wonderfully attentive fathers and husbands. Indeed, more of the household money would go on the substance as some continue chewing and pay the inflated cost of smuggled miraa. A few Somali friends reckon they would turn more to alcohol and other substances in the search for social stimulants, replacing a substance of which they have great experience with those with far more potential for pathological use: this was a major concern of Somali respondents in the research of Patel et al. (2005: 40). All the evidence from countries where miraa is banned bears out the inefficacy of such measures, as miraa continues to find its way into the US, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden amongst other. Problems associated with immoderate use of miraa are much better tackled through improving leisure facilities and job prospects, campaigns for moderate consumption and perhaps some non-draconian regulation to counter use by the very young. Of course, this is easier said than done, and there will always be some who overdo miraa chewing, just as there are some who overdo every pleasurable activity, whether taking psychoactive substances, drinking, eating or even playing computer games.

Developments in the UK are relevant not only for Somalis in the UK, but also for Meru producers in Kenya. Miraa is a globalised commodity and ramifications of anti-miraa legislation in the UK might be felt strongly amongst farmers whose crop would lose even more international legitimacy. Disruptions to the miraa trade would certainly drastically affect farmers in Ntonyiri, much of whose crop travels on international trajectories. Therefore some thought for the economic well-being of Nyambene and Ethiopian farmers should also be a consideration for legislators in countries with miraa-chewing diaspora communities: the legality of miraa in such countries as Britain is far more than a parochial issue. The global nature of miraa networks have led the Meru to attempt to increase their influence over the fate of their commodity beyond Kenya: in the run-up to the Home Office's decision, *NYAMITA* (see chapter five) mobilised the Kenyan government, the media and contacts in Kenya and the UK to urge the British government to avoid a ban. *NYAMITA* contacted the Home Secretary and the Advisory Council on the Misuse

of Drugs, sending them a lengthy document explaining miraa's importance for farmers and traders in Kenya, as well as the cultural and social aspects of miraa chewing. Quite what impact they had on the decision remains unclear, but it seems only fitting that Meru producers in the Nyambenes should have their say in the global fate of a commodity that is so important to them economically and culturally. *NYAMITA* have also campaigned for the US to legalise miraa, urging a review of the evidential basis of the ban, have made contact with the World Health Organisation,²³ and are highly active within Kenya fighting for their commodity to gain respectability and to fight any call there for prohibition.

Kenya and the call to prohibit: local resistance to global discourse

Calls for miraa prohibition are not unknown in Kenya, and Somali MPs in the north often raise the issue in Kenya's parliament, although as many of their constituents earn money from its trade, it is unlikely that they would campaign especially hard to secure a ban. Recently a spokesman for the Kenyan *National Agency for the Campaign Against Drug Abuse*, who often denounce miraa in the press, called for a ban after a Kenyan boxer was sent home from the Olympics for testing positive for cathine, allegedly from miraa chewing. The spokesman 'stressed that the legal status of miraa in the country was tantamount to the government courting death and destruction for its citizens . . . and appealed to the government to ban the drug, adding that it is one of the most abused drugs in the country' (*Kenya Times* 14th August 2004). However, miraa is destined to remain legal in Kenya for the foreseeable future. As well as there being a sprinkling of powerful MPs who enjoy a chew and stand up for the substance and its producers and traders, economic factors play a large role in this: as Kenya is a miraa producer, its trade creates employment and is a good source of foreign exchange earnings (estimated to be in the region of \$250 million per year). As Cassanelli points out, 'while governments at the consuming end of the qat network have quite regularly responded to the rising curve of qat use with prohibitionist legislation, authorities at the production end have tended, on the whole, to look the other way' (1986: 254). This is true in microcosm

²³ One plea on behalf of *NYAMITA* urging that the miraa trade should be unrestricted is available at: www.fda.gov/ohrms/DOCKETS/dockets/05n0479/05N-0479-EC10-Attach-2.doc.

within Kenya: calls for a miraa ban—from the British colonial era onwards—have always emerged most strongly from areas where miraa is consumed and not produced.

Miraa is rarely condemned by the international community as unreservedly as the likes of opium, and so Kenya does have some room to manoeuvre. However, as Weir states, ‘in the prevailing climate of opinion [that miraa is bad] any Third World government wanting aid from international development and welfare agencies must voice anti-qat sentiments and demonstrate the intent to control or eradicate qat’ (1985: 65). The Kenyan government has not gone as far as that, but has certainly not given the substance overt approval, never declaring miraa an official cash crop or openly promoting its trade. The chairman of *NYAMITA* insisted to me that the Kenyan government has not been able to promote miraa because of ‘noise from the United Nations’.

However, the situation shows some signs of change. In the Kenyan press it was recently reported that a delegation of Tanzanian representatives of the East African Legislative Assembly were taken round plantations in the Nyambenes. Their Kenyan counterparts were attempting to persuade the Tanzanians to lift their ban on the substance to allow it to be sold freely throughout whole East African Union of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. One of the Kenyans, Ochieng Mbeo, had the following to say: ‘We want Kenyans to start selling the crop in Tanzania. That is why we brought the MPs to see the crop and how it benefits locals’ (*Daily Nation*, June 29th 2004). The globalised rhetoric of the ‘war on drugs’ may be powerful, and has certainly helped in giving miraa an unsavoury reputation in Kenya and beyond, but it has not forced Kenya into banning miraa, and, should Kenyan MPs continue campaigning on behalf of miraa farmers and traders, it might yet be said to have suffered a reverse.

Miraa farming, trade and consumption will continue in Kenya—*miraa haipingiki*—whether one likes it or not: *mbaine* trees have been growing for centuries in the Nyambenes, and will withstand the current global controversy over their stems and leaves. Accepting this and devising ways to manage its production and trade to the benefit of all parties, and to minimise the potential harmful consequences of excessive consumption, is surely the way forward. Legitimation of the crop would be a move in the right direction, as Goldsmith argues in a recent article for the *East African* newspaper (May 16th, 2006): ‘Legitimation would encourage institutional support for best practices,

e.g. the sophisticated agroforestry system that makes Meru miraa the best in the world, and discourage monocultural production on small farms. This would be a first step towards consultation on legal and voluntary controls for juvenile consumption and places where miraa is sold and consumed.’ Certainly if *NYAMITA* have their way miraa will no longer be a crop about which the Kenyan government feels it should remain mute, but instead one given its full support. And after all, if producers of wine—a substance many would argue has far greater potential for ‘abuse’ than miraa—are supported by authorities in France, Australia and other wine-producing countries, why should the choice product of Nyambene farms not be similarly supported by the Kenyan government?

CONCLUSION

*I'm as right as a trivet, still wallowing in mauve medicine
... whizzing!*

—M'Mucheke, June 2003.

Our object focused and multi-channelled examination of the paths taken by Nyambene miraa from tree to *takssin* has revealed it to have a social life rich in significance. The product, from being a crop of only local significance at the beginning of the 20th century, is now a globalised phenomenon linking producers and consumers from Mutuati to Manchester. It is testament to the efficiency of the trade network that miraa—a very perishable commodity—reaches such far off consumers in a sufficiently fresh condition.

The increased range of miraa's national and transnational trajectories has seen it emerge as a prime economic resource for many in Kenya and beyond. Nyambene farmers obtain rewards from miraa far outstripping those offered by tea and coffee, while off-farm trade offers good employment for many Tigania and Igembe. Women in the northeast of Kenya—especially Somali and Borana—have also secured a niche in the miraa trade: most trading on just a small-scale basis, although others earn more as wholesalers. The international trade offers lucrative business opportunities to many Somalis, and miraa's illegal status in North America and elsewhere means that those willing to take a risk in trading in the substance gain even greater rewards if successful. Reports of couriers being hired by British drug gangs in Kent and Stranraer suggest that smuggling miraa is not just the preserve of Somalis. Miraa does not just benefit financially those directly involved in its trade, but also offers further business opportunities for sellers of banana leaves, owners of pick-up vehicles, air-transporters and many others. Its functional use also helps in work contexts, allowing many people to persevere with their tasks.

Of course, not everyone is successful in the miraa trade, and some *wanachomeka* ('get burned') as one Isiolo trader told me. The lack of contracts in the trade mean that many rely on trust, and yet not everyone is trustworthy: good business acumen is required to survive

in the trade. The high stakes in the international trade are also a source of tension, particularly in the aftermath of the death of Ntai wa Nkururu in London. Miraa brings people together in its trade, but obviously it—or rather the money to be made from its trade—can also break them apart. However, it would be a rare commodity whose trade offers unalloyed good, and miraa certainly benefits many in Kenya and beyond who would otherwise be poorly served by other goods in the global economy. The recent campaigning of *NYAMITA* also provide a rich example of the way ‘local’ producers in Africa can make their feelings felt throughout the globalised networks their commodities follow through canny use of the media and contacts.

Miraa’s significance, as we have seen, stretches beyond the economic: miraa is a *commodity-plus*, and much of its value derives from its social and cultural importance.¹ From the giving of *ncoolo* in Nyambene marriage negotiations to Somali prestations of *lanta boqorka* (‘stem of the chief’: see chapter six) miraa is loaded with cultural and social significance. In the Nyambenes, *mbaine* trees link back the present generations of Tigania and Igembe to their ancestors of long ago, while the ascription of the epithet *poa* by today’s youth gives it validation in an ethos linked very much to present times. In its consumption, miraa also acts to bring people together, enhancing sociability through its effects and through the perception that it is something to be shared: prestations of the *kupiga start* variety oil many social relationships. Miraa can even overcome linguistic barriers in uniting fellow chewers: M’Mucheke likes to recount the tale of how when he visited Ethiopia he made friends easily by sharing miraa despite not sharing a language. As with its economic significance, so miraa’s social life is not all social good, and we have seen how miraa is implicated in the break-up of families and in encouraging child labour amongst other things. Miraa consumption can also erect barriers between people, most obviously between those who consume it and those who denounce it.

Miraa is not a uniform commodity perceived by everyone in a uniform manner, if such a thing could possibly exist: individuals possess particular configurations of meanings and associations with

¹ In talking about ‘economic’, ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ aspects of the social life of miraa, I divide up miraa’s significance into artificial categories: clearly all three are mutually constitutive and intertwined.

things through their particular backgrounds. Even within its Nyambene birthplace, this lack of uniformity is evident: miraa is packaged in different varieties according to various criteria: from which part of 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 this book, referring to the varied types of miraa and the varied associations and meanings it has: see Carrier 2006.) 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 associate it more exactly with Tigania and Igembe, rather than, say, Imenti. Others associate it more with Somalis, Arabs, Swahili and the like, or Muslims in general. The association of miraa with the loaded word 'drug' conjures up images of the shady world of 'hard drugs', tainting miraa with an image it hardly deserves. It is associated with tradition, and even 'backwardness', as a 'dirty' habit of the impoverished north. Others view it as well adapted to the modern world, reflecting its role in developing and supporting 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 curse it for encouraging child labour, while others praise it as the source of income with which to educate children.

Meanings and associations diverge significantly the further miraa travels and as more people from different backgrounds come into contact with it.² 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 Somalia: 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. The associations miraa has for the

² 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* is interesting indeed.

creators of the US Border Patrol web-page linking the incidents of 1993 in Mogadishu with the substance (see chapter seven) also diverge greatly from its associations in the Nyambenes.

A full list of all such associations is impossible, as each individual would have so many idiosyncratic ones. However, the above examples illustrate the varied—and contradictory—nature of miraa's associations. Individuals constantly feed off the richness in miraa's social life, 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 M'Mucheke.

*M'Mucheke: The compleat miraa connoisseur*³

M'Mucheke'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. M'Mucheke 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 *ncoolo* 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. M'Mucheke is as happy chewing alongside a Borana, as he is chewing alongside a

³ The idea of miraa connoisseurship suggests interesting similarities and contrasts with connoisseurship of another, much more 'respectable', yet potentially more damaging, commodity: wine. The arbitrariness of international policy towards stimulants and psychoactive substances means that connoisseurship of the latter is usually seen as acceptable, even praiseworthy, while miraa connoisseurship would more usually be described in such terms as 'addiction'. There is much concern that farmers in Africa are uprooting coffee and planting miraa, but would there be quite so much concern were vineyards being planted instead?

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, M'Mucheke 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. M'Mucheke 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 the 'youth ethos', as is Nairobi, where M'Mucheke has also spent much time. He is well integrated into such an ethos—loving his *Adidas* clothing,⁴ hip-hop, reggae, and *sheng*⁵—and often chews alongside fellow youth in an atmosphere punctuated by *sheng*, music, and banter.

But M'Mucheke has not just absorbed the pre-existing richness of miraa's social life: he adds much to it. He adds new words for miraa—*mauwe 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, humorously applying it to miraa: in one letter M'Mucheke 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 *Kimathi Kiosk* in Isiolo, M'Mucheke's storytelling ability is treasured. Many of his stories are inspired by miraa, such as that recounted in chapter six 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 went into orbit. 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 . . .'

M'Mucheke's creativity and his knowledge beyond miraa both combine

⁴ In *sheng*, Adidas is known as 'Adidanga'. The 'anga' suffix gives the word a Kiswahili feel.

⁵ M'Mucheke enjoys speaking *sheng*, and invents many new words and phrases himself. However, he also prides himself on knowing how to speak perfect Kiswahili.

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 M'Mucheke alone—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 M'Mucheke than miraa—he is a strong character and would be a strong character 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. Miraa sustains him physically and intellectually, and is intertwined with his very identity. M'Mucheke 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 M'Mucheke: 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 M'Mucheke, and the way he perceives himself.

Just as miraa helps to constitute M'Mucheke's identity, so M'Mucheke helps constitute the present work. It was usually in his company that I travelled along many of miraa's trajectories, and his contacts and knowledge guided us 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. M'Mucheke 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 like Appadurai's about economic exchange creating value say precious little about the value of miraa for M'Mucheke. To learn about that requires one to immerse oneself both in the social life of miraa, and, of course, in the social life of M'Mucheke. The social lives of miraa and M'Mucheke in all their abundant particulars are not reducible to a few lifeless abstractions.

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

Ajüs: Term derived from Arabic used for the lethargic feeling the day after a chewing session.
Asili: 'Original'; used to refer to *mbaine* miraa.
Bablass: Slang word in Isiolo for a miraa 'hangover'.
Barehe: Miraa that is not fresh, leftover miraa. Literally means 'left over night' (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.
Gaarü: Kimeru word for the warriors' residence in traditional Meru society.
Gomba: Slang name for miraa, alluding to its common packaging of banana leaves (from Kiswahili *mgomba*, a banana plant).
Handas: Common word for miraa's stimulant effects.
Hoteli: Term generally used in Kenya for a café.
Kambi: Kimeru word for the plug of miraa stored in the cheek.
Kampuni: Kiswahili-fied form of 'company'.
Kang'a: Term used 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 chewing miraa/feeling *handas*.

Kupiga start: Slang term for presenting a few stems of miraa to 'start' someone off.

Kuweeka: Slang verb for chewing miraa. From *veve*.

Mainga: Miraa harvest.

Mairungi: Generic term for miraa, often heard on the coast.

Majrishi: Somali establishment for both retailing and consuming miraa.

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'.

Mauwe medicine: Phrase of M'Mucheke's for miraa.

Mirqaan: 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 Kimeru term for age generations (*Miriti*, *Guantai* and so forth).

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.

Shamba: Farm (Kiswahili).

Shauri: Kiswahili for 'discussion'.

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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Plate 1: 'M'Mucheke, cat and khat tree, at his home in Isiolo, 2001'



Plate 2: 'View from Nkinyang'a to savannah below'



Plate 3: 'Mzee Baariu and his wife in their *shamba* of intercropped miraa and tea'

Section 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 lower quality varieties
Nyeusi (ng'oa)
- (4): Away from trunk
 - Very lower quality varieties
Lombolio

Plate 4: 'Sections of a miraa tree (illustration by Rachael Shepherd)'



Plate 5: 'Tycoon picking miraa from an ancient *mbaine* tree, Karama, 2001'



Plate 6: 'M'Mucheke picking miraa, Mutuati, 2001. Notice the skeletal shape of the top section, and the overhanging clumps of leaves from where varieties such as *makata* are picked'



Plate 7: 'Anthropologist, Moreno, M'Mucheke and graders chewing miraa on a bed of leaves stripped from miraa stems when preparing them for market. Near Mutuati, 2001'



Plate 8: '*Matangoma*, a low quality variety of miraa on sale in Isiolo'



Plate 9: Charles, son of M^oThuranira, harvesting miraa from a young miraa tree, Karama, 1999'



Plate 10: 'Preparing *shurbas* at the *Brilliant Café*, Karama, 2001'



MARA BAADA YA MIPAKIA, KUMAGILI ALIA, KAIMENYI ALIA, MRISHA IPAKINE NDANI YA GARI LAKE KUTOKA KWENYE LAND ROVER.

Plate 11: 'Cartoons copyright Stanislaus Olonde. First published in 1996 by Sasa Sema Publications Ltd., P.O. Box 13956, Nairobi 00800 Kenya in *Gitanga* by Stanislaus Olonde ("Stano"). Reproduced here with the kind permission of the publishers. The text might be translated thus: 'After packing please bring the sacks to Maua in your car'; 'Soon after the miraa reaches Maua, Kaimenyi orders that it be transferred to his car from the Land Rover'; 'Now Munene, let's give it some speed until Wilson Airport.'



Plate 12: 'M'Mucheke and Musa inside *Kāmāthi Kiosk*, Isiolo, 2001'



Plate 13: 'Philemon outside *Sunrise Kiosk*, Nairobi, 2001'



Plate 14: 'Borana men and women retailing miraa in Isiolo, 1999'



Plate 15: 'Preparing *ncoolo*, a special ceremonial bundle of miraa, Nkinyang'a, 2001'



Plate 16: '*Ncool*: the finished product'



Plate 17: 'M'Mucheke looking downcast at the anti-miraa prohibition in a Marsabit café, 2004'



Plate 18: 'Grading miraa at the *Manchester Café*, Karama, 2000. Notice the man's work of stripping leaves from some twigs, and the women's work visible through the window of lugging heavy loads of water up a hill!'



Plate 19: 'A chewing session in Mutuati, 2001'



Plate 20: 'A humorous badge of the US Customs Service'