



Wheat, maize, and papayas

AGRICULTURE MAKES UP HALF of Tanzania's gross domestic product. Most of what we plant in Kambi ya Simba, though, we eat ourselves or feed to our animals. Roughly half the village land is arable. Three-quarters of that is cultivated. Wheat is the closest thing we have to a cash crop, but *mahindi* (maize) covers 50 percent of our fields. We also grow *mbazi* (pigeon peas), beans, barley, and millet; and we raise sunflowers for their oil.

We have two growing seasons, November to February and April to July, which follow a set routine. We “inter-crop,” growing crops in pairs and in rotation. We plant maize and pigeon peas in one season, wheat and beans the next. On the road into our village in May, gold and red nasturtiums sometimes carpet a field.

For a farmer, how much a crop yields matters more than anything else. In the past thirty years, our village has watched its crop yields fall. In 1974, wheat yielded 12 to 14 metric tons per acre. Now it yields less than three tons. The yield from maize has dropped to one-third of its former level.



Jacob Dallan, our village agricultural expert, explains:

Many factors affect harvest. Rain is one—not just the amount, but also the time it falls, neither too late nor too early. Fertility is second. Tired soil needs compost and fertilizer. Third comes good planting habits, like rotating crops. Then, there is seed quality. Basic seeds, where one year’s plant produces next year’s seed, do not compare well with the new, improved seeds you can buy with enough money. But the improved seeds do not produce more like them, to use in the following year.

Several women in our village have received small loans from a local development organization, to grow vegetables and fruit for sale. They have turned acres of land into bounty. They show the power of irrigation, fertilizer, strong seeds, and caring hands. “I grow papayas, tomatoes, spinach, carrots, lettuce, onions, even coffee,” Lusía Antony boasts. “My customers, they make a parade. They ask, ‘What is fresh today?’”

Living with livestock



IN OUR VILLAGE, LIVESTOCK COUNTS as family. We include animals in our yearly census. Records show that in 2004 we had 1,923 sheep, 1,910 goats, 1,900 chickens, 1,855 cows, 229 donkeys, and 75 pigs. We use cattle for milk and labor, chickens mostly for eggs, and sheep and goats for their hide. We trade livestock at the *mnada* (monthly market) that passes through our village. We rarely use our livestock for meat, except when a special occasion calls for a feast. When a family owns just a few animals, one sick cow spells hardship. The cost of veterinary medicine can exceed a month’s income.

Joseph Tarmo is the agricultural and livestock field officer for Kambi ya Simba. He knows better than anyone how land, water, agriculture, and livestock mix in our village. What he says may come as a surprise.

The issue with livestock is not what you think. We have too many cattle, not too few. When we use cattle for their labor and milk, that is fine. But when we keep them for

their value as property, maybe as a bride price, maybe to sell in times of trouble, this creates problems. It is a tradition across East Africa that makes us poorer, not richer.

Too many cattle stress the land, the water, the crops. When cattle graze freely, they also share diseases more easily. They produce poor breeds. “Fewer livestock. Zero grazing.” In village seminars, this is what I teach. I see progress, but it is slow. You cannot tell a farmer in one day how to change a lifetime of habits.

One homestead, just north of the village center, puts “zero grazing” on display. In front of the house are five trees, with a pile of hay and an animal tied to each, so it may not graze freely. Each of them—two cows, a goat, a sheep, and a donkey—has a purpose, the old man, Anthoni, who owns them explains. “My wife, when she was younger, she carried the water. Now the donkey does.”

If you think roosters crow only at dawn, you surely do not live with one. They sing *kokoreka* whenever they please.



Ugali

NOON AND NIGHT THE STIFF PORRIDGE *ugali* warms our stomachs. We make it from our maize, drying its kernels in the sun and then grinding



them into flour. Once a week, rice and beans or chicken may change place with *ugali*. When we can, we eat spinach, carrots, potatoes, and other greens from local gardens. The sweet bananas from our trees are the length of an adult's middle finger. They sell for as little as 20 shillings (two cents) in the village center.

We wake in the morning to *chai* (tea) with milk, sometimes accompanied by *chapati*, a fried bread resembling a pancake and made with wheat flour. The restaurant, up a short hill from the village center, serves two dishes for dinner: rice and beans, and *chips-mayai*, a scrambled egg cooked with French fries. At school, we line up for our meals with a metal bowl in hand, scooping *ugali* from big pots into our dish.

Mama Elena, a primary school teacher who rents a room in the village center, describes the routine for cooking *ugali*:



First prepare the fire, from charcoal or small woods. Put a pan with water over the fire and allow it to boil, slightly. Start adding maize flour, stirring gently, gently with a *mwiko*. Add more flour, still stirring, gently, gently. Stir until it gets solid but not hard. When it is ready, the *ugali* separates from the sides of the pan. A sweet smell should touch your nose.

In times of scarcity we ration our food, sometimes eating just one meal a day. We share with those who have nothing. At weddings and funerals, especially after a harvest, everyone contributes to the table. Boiled sweet potatoes fill one bowl, rice and goat meat another.

In Tanzanian villages like ours, the average adult's daily caloric intake is estimated to be 1,900. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations recommends an adult daily minimum of 2,400 calories.

Two meters by three

S EVEN HUNDRED FAMILIES LIVE IN OUR VILLAGE. Homesteads stand next to fields and footpaths and dot hillsides and valleys throughout the 40 square kilometers of Kambi ya Simba. Our land is wide, but our homes are small. They may be just one room, two meters by three. You will not find a house with four rooms here.

We build our homes in several ways, depending on what we can afford. Houses with burnt brick walls and a corrugated iron roof are best. They last forever. But they are rare in our village. You must buy the iron roof and bricks in Karatu and then find a way to haul them up and down the hills to Kambi ya Simba. Houses with walls made from trees and soil or clay, topped with an iron roof, are next best. The wood adds sturdiness, but it is a precious resource. Most common are houses with grass roofs and walls made of dirt or cow dung. Both need refreshing every couple of years, though soil cakes more quickly than dung.





Volcus Clavery Mkamba, a student at Awet Secondary School, explains more:

Most homes in our village consist of two or three small rooms shared by six family members, usually two parents and four children. The rooms are in a line, with a sitting room in the middle and a door at the center. The sleeping rooms are on either side. Most often, the males sleep in one, the females in the other. At night, the livestock joins the family and the sitting room becomes theirs.

Sometimes a family will hang newspaper as decoration on the inside walls of the sitting room. It shows they are prosperous. When a daughter or son marries and moves to a house of their own, their families write good wishes in white paint on the outside walls, for everyone to see. If it is a son, they say *bahati nzuri* (good luck). If it is a daughter, they write *kwa heri* (farewell). They draw flowers to show their love.

After a strong harvest, we may use the extra income to expand our homestead. We might build an outhouse in the back or a small room for cooking by the side of the house.

The village dispensary

UNDER THE SHADOW OF HIV/AIDS, the average life expectancy in Tanzania has dropped to 44.5 years, by a 2005 estimate. In our village it is higher, close to 54 years. The same rough road that slows travel to and from our village also helps keep HIV/AIDS at a distance. Still, poverty and disease hold hands in our village, as they do across our country and all of Africa.



We practice vigilance as best we can. Yet bacteria infect the water we drink. Water-borne illness strikes a family member every three months on average, a recent village health survey found. When we cook inside, smoke from the burning coal or firewood fills our lungs. Malaria, which strikes all of us at least once, can turn chronic. Hepatitis, Rift Valley fever, typhoid—we know all their names.

We take simple illnesses to the village dispensary. For anything more, we find transport to the Lutheran Hospital in Karatu, if we can. We put on our best clothes, to show and receive respect from the doctors there.

Tanzania has only one doctor for every 50,000 persons. They are far outnumbered by traditional healers, and our village has two of these. If you visit Charles Mattay, you might find a large pot sitting on hot coals, bubbling away. Look inside and you will see vegetation, roots, and bark forming a dark liquid. A pungent smell fills the room.



Most of us put our faith in modern medicine, though. We count on the aspirin and cough syrup sold at the village's small *duka la dawa* (drugstore) when we have a fever or a sore chest.

Amaniel Msemo has been the village doctor for ten years, working from a two-room dispensary three kilometers from the village center:

Lower respiratory infections, diarrhea, malaria, intestinal worms, these are the diseases I treat most. Antibiotics are my weapons and I never have enough. Poor, overcrowded housing means that one family member's illness quickly becomes everyone's. Education helps. I hold workshops for the village. I dispense health education as much as I give out medicines and listen to hearts. As for poverty, I have no cure.

Twenty customers a day

SOME OF US YEARN TO BE ENTREPRENEURS. In a country so recently socialist, this may seem strange. But we welcome commerce, however modest.

Our stores come in three sizes. *Dukas* are the largest, made of sturdy walls and a roof, with goods stacked on shelves and maybe a brass scale for weighing rice. *Kiosks*, smaller wooden shacks, have fewer items for sale. *Bandas* are the smallest, narrow stands made with sticks that sell fruits and vegetables.



A small concentration of stores, perhaps a dozen in all, lines the dirt strip in the village center. Most stock basic household goods. A few specialize, like the drugstore for animals. Outside the center, *dukas* and *kiosks* appear wherever homesteads collect. Each carries a few staples, like sugar, kerosene, and hard candies. At the north end of the village, there is a *kiosk* whose keeper sells dried anchovies and potatoes.

For the many things that we cannot buy from each other, we use the traveling market that passes each month. We look and barter, maybe for a new aluminum pot or a pair of manufactured trousers.

Kornelia Damiano and her husband are among our village's entrepreneurs. Above

the cooking oil and toothpaste in their small store, a sign reads, “*Kukopesha ni kupoteza wateja*” (“To loan is to lose clients”). Kornelia says:

We know our customers’ needs. We sell a little of a lot. Sugar, soap, magazines, soda, candles, notebooks, vegetable oil, flashlights, pens, toothpaste, biscuits, batteries, tea, matches—flip-flops, too. We open at seven in the morning and close at nine at night, when a kerosene lantern lights our shelves. We receive twenty customers a day—enough, but we wish for more. Sometimes people do not buy, but just visit. They make company.

For customers who want to wrap their purchases instead of carrying them loose, Kornelia sells a page of newspaper for ten shillings (a penny).

