THE FAMILY ENTITY AND FAMINE AMONG THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY AKAMBA OF KENYA: SOCIAL RESPONSES TO ENVIRONMENTAL STRESS

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"Ea, eeh!/ We come to get rain so that we can get food for our husbands/ Who cannot accomplish their sexual duties, if they are weak from hunger." (Akamba Women's Song To Rain-Maker; Transcribed in 1911.)[1]

"What caused to make me angry, it is the rain, to rain a little/ When it rains very little, we are deprived of the wives perfectly. . . ." (Verse from Travelling Bard in Ukambani; Recorded in 1912 as *Kyeti's Song*.)[2]

"Such famines have in the past harassed the Akamba more than any other adversity, all Akamba can tell of seven famines, some of many more. . . ." (Ethnographic Report by Charles Dundas, British Colonial Official, 1913.)[3]

"If I walked out to the edge of my homestead, I could point to the places where families came together during famine. When Kitonga was alive (c. 1840-1880), he was known for his large family, part of which he accumulated because of his selling of magical powders, . . . but part of this family came through the pressing down of *mayua*, the famines." (Free Translation of Excerpt from Oral Traditions on Kitonga Kitina; Collected in August, 1968.)[4]

Although the data presented in this article are derived from an area outside the

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An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Atlanta meeting of the American Historical Association in 1975. The author is indebted to the rigorous questioning of the members of the *Family History of Africa* panel, Marcia Wright, Margaret Stroebel, Fred Cooper, and Kristin Mann.

[1]Gerhard Lindblom (1920:276). This song expresses the anxiety over the fate of progeny and the continuity of the lineage, points that are mentioned briefly by Lindblom in his analysis.

[2]Again, G. Lindblom (1934:41-43) presented this song, a rarity; he supplemented the song with textual notes that presented data on the spread of famine and its impact on particular areas and specific high-ranking families, and offered a free translation (43-45).

[3]C. Dundas (1913:480). Cf. pp. 484-485 for Dundas' estimates of the prevalence of famine in Ukambani in the 1880s and 1890s, and his casual interpretation of the relationship between the presence of famine and the intensification of local enmity and warfare.

[4]This selection, not unusual for this particular subject, was collected as part of oral biographical materials on Kitonga Kitina, trader and diviner of the mid-nineteenth century. The characterization of his household as a wide structure encompassing large numbers of non-kinsmen can be applied to several of the long distance ivory traders of nineteenth-century society in Ukambani.

conventional province of family history studies, this essay is nonetheless an extension of the current themes within the field. It pursues the interest in determining the various configurations—the internal and external patterning—of the household and family entity in past time, in an East African community during the pre-colonial years. In particular, aspects of this analysis are concerned with delineating the procedures of enlargement in the membership of households; and with the resolutions of socio-economic pressures that this grafting-on of personnel reflects.

Although there are broad thematic continuities with recent literature in family history, this essay has a distinctive subject; the way a range of family entities were compelled toward transformation under the exigencies of frequently severe and always constraining environmental crisis; specifically recurrent society-wide famine and localized drought.[5] This essay recounts the organizational strategies that families pursued in attempting to overcome—sometimes with minimal success—the erosion of communal resources stemming from famine. Institutional maneuver, re-adaptations, shifting alliances of personnel, and structural innovations within the framework of the famine-beseiged family are the foci of attention.

Famine conditions obtaining in the territory of the nineteenth-century Akamba induced, in a narrow spectrum of instances, the creation of familial units. Through studying these examples, we shall be able to view the pursuit of the local ideal of the family and the social architecture that went into the establishment of new families from the fragments of dismembered families. Beyond these particular facets of this essay, I hope it will offer information on the organization of kin and the family as productive unit. Maurice Godelier (1975) has challenged scholars defining the functions of institutions based upon kin relations to weigh properly the productive uses of kin-based units; and to treat with greater precision the levels of multifunctionality of kinship idioms that might appear in the family. This essay attempts to.

Remarkably few exact precedents exist for this type of inquiry. Neither the literature on famine nor the research on past family structure has sufficiently engaged the problem of the famine family. Much of the meagre historical writing in English on famine (Walford, 1878; Creighton, 1891; Hoskins, 1964) has concentrated either on tallying famine occurrences over particular spans of time, or on portraying (Lucas, 1930) in graphic detail the degradations of people during famines. Passages from work of this latter variety often have been composed in an impressionistic fashion: they read like Boccacio's *Decameron*, which depicted the cruel and insidious power of the Black Death in early Renaissance Florence. More recently, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1971) has investigated the history of climate in Europe, and has brilliantly plotted the climatological dynamics tending to produce past famines. Technically arresting, his research provides the macro-ecological perspective that could

[5] William Langer (1969) has urged historians to diagnose the collective psychological impact of natural calamity and catastrophe—death-dealing epidemics, crop diseases, and famine—on past societies. I cannot trace the psychological aftermaths of famine; the historical records are lacking. The cognitive rearrangements of collective life, the distortions of sensibility, and the modifications in perceptual history within this particular community as a result of famine can not be seen with any clarity. But, regardless of that omission, this study can be classified as a limited, and belated, response to Langer's urging. In addition, much more than he probably suspected, Professor Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie helped this essay in its questions by discussing it with me during July, 1975.

become the first phase in the development of a specialized social science whose goal would be the unravelling of the complex relationship between environmental crisis and the minute, localized institutions of society, such as the family. Still, the work of Le Roy Ladurie represents a subtle background for the future analysis rather than the analysis itself. Perhaps, the shape of the future analysis of the impact of climatological factors, like famine, on the family is intimated in the work of Pierre Goubert, who has diagnosed the effects of famine and its companion, epidemic, on marriage rates and mortality trends in seventeenth-century French rural society (1968:55-89, 112-146).

This point concerning the scarcity of writing by historians on this problem can be drawn more sharply by reviewing the contents of T. H. Hollingsworth on *Historical Demography* (1969); for it is in the study of population patterns that one would expect to encounter the most intelligent and persistent inquiries into famine impact. Hollingsworth contributes a perspicuous appendix evaluating the different approaches for measuring plague mortality (355-374). By contrast, his sections on the demographic consequences of famine are mostly allusive and brief (173, 249, 265, 380, 382). Of his citations in this area, the most distinguished of the limited research is that of Eino Jutikkala (1955) on the Finnish famines of 1696-97 and R. Pankhurst (1965) on the half-decade of the Ethiopian famines in the late 1880s. The disparity in Hollingworth's far-ranging study is not so much a matter of choice, as it is rooted in the persistant unevenness of the historical research in this field. Plague as a disrupter of social and institutional order has attracted many more chroniclers than famine.

Unfortunately, this lacuna in historians' research is not relieved by the non-historical literature. Other specialists in famine studies, writing mainly from the viewpoint of the agricultural sciences (Southard, 1957; Bennett, 1968), have equally neglected the repercussions of famine on social institutions. Compounding their neglect is the lack of historical perspective in their research. What these specialists have contributed should not be overlooked, though, since they have often been more attentive to explicitly defining what constitutes famine than historians have been.

Given this paucity of writings linking discrete institutions and famine, the historian advancing into this field is in reality moving along an indistinct frontier line. What crucial aspects, which structural nodal points, should be observed in past families attempting to buffer themselves against the pressures of famine are unclear. More importantly, the historian must distinguish between those processes of change in the family that are routine, originating from traditional cultural impulses, and those that are specifically traceable to famine. What was the latitude of structural identities that the family entity assumed in years not menaced by famine? Were family responses to famine typified by novel styles of adjustment? Or did families take on forms previously serviceable in some other social sphere and which were also suited for confronting the urgencies of famine? Did a class of relations and productive forces emerge among these families that was sufficiently singular to be labelled the "famine family"? Within the conditions of famine, the history of power relations and of control over resources within a community, and the past axes of economic hegemony, might be altered, as a sector of well-protected family units further their economic and political aspirations by capitalizing on the depletion of resources. Just as essential is the need to determine the scale and depth of impact of particular famines that are reported in the historical record. Famines, of course, differ in scale

of geographical areas affected, in duration, in paths of effect, and in collective aftermaths. Apart from these problems, the record that the historian must often utilize for charting family history in famine recounts the generalized persence of famine, rather than the individual and group variations in reacting to it.

Akamba Society and Its Family Unit

Let us turn now from the problems of the theme to our subject: the family in Akamba society, a community with a present population of slightly over one million persons (Kenya Population Census, 1969:25-33). Since the opening years of the seventeenth century, the Akamba have inhabited an extensive territory beginning in south-central Kenya and stretching far into the southeastern portions of the country. At least since the 1850s, this region has been referred to as Ukambani by the Akamba: this name appears in fine Gothic lettering on the first maps prepared of the Kenyan interior by missionary-explorers at mid-century.

Although this zone is variegated in its micro-ecology, a crude division can be made of the territory into western and eastern sectors. Western flanks of the territory contain prominent interlaced hill arrangements, which if projected onto a topographical map would resemble a system of swirling hills interspersed with valleys and plains. By 1750, agricultural settlements had entrenched in these hills, and were becoming thickly settled. To the east, this interwoven hilly region abruptly changes into a large, expansive plateau, carrying a natural vegetation of desert grass-bush, with a landscape that gently undulates as it proceeds further east, possessing an external appearance of a quasi-arid area with its often deeply-hued terra-cotta soils. Nothing is more striking in the geography of Ukambani than this opposition between a verdant hilly region and the sometimes stark dryness of the plateau. Whereas a livelihood of agriculture with a secondary strand of pastoralism has always dominated the western country, the eastern communities historically have shown more of allegiance to pastoralism, with their agricultural activity being secondary. According to geographer S. H. Ominde (1968:20), the eastern dry plateau country "has for long been regarded as one of the traditional famine regions of Kenya." In actuality, when famine entered the life of the eastern plateau in the nineteenth century, the more fertile agricultural enclaves in the western hills did not escape the effects of disaster. Directly and indirectly, they were ensnared as well. Seldom were these agricultural communities subdued in the manner of the famine-struck eastern villages. Because of their relative security at moments during famine, they acted as a resource area for the disoriented village economies of the plateau. But when famine jeopardized that security too, the transactional options between the regions—within the entire society—were narrowed decisively.

Morphologically, Akamba society might be thought of as a decentralized ethnic grouping, or acephalous in its institutional patterning. Across the whole of its history in this territory, no over-arching agencies of political control and authority were generated. Many commentators (Decle, 1886:484; Oliver, 1966:421-424; Muthiani, 1973:16-21, 80-97), alien observers and insiders alike, have suggested that this lengthy history of decentralization has resulted in a fluid, mutable character in Akamba customary norms and institutional performance. If this conclusion is interpreted as meaning that Akamba customary and institutional definitions are essentially formless, and thus potentially erratic, then it would be a mistaken impression. What would be closer to the truth is that a spectrum of alternatives and possibilities—in a word, a versatility—has

operated at the center of Akamba institutional formalism.

Understanding this is a prerequisite for comprehending the blend of regularities and irregularities that has prevailed in the Ukambani past, and still survives. For those Akamba deeply versed in their history, this is a fundamental axiom of folk sociology, occasionally invoked with a gravity befitting a primary postulate in a philosophical or scientific paradigm. Frederick Barth (1969:12-13) has assaulted the simplistic notion that ethnic groups can be identified as holding in common a uniform culture. In different language, Akamba folk sociologists when making an inventory of their cultural and institutional traits echo the remarks of Barth. Much of this is valuable in comprehending the responsive roles assumed by Akamba families during famine.

The myriad village-communities that are spread across Ukambani are basic to this structured decentralization. One of these village communities is called an *utui*. A collection of these communities is called *motui*. *Motui* are self-contained territorial organizations, and each of these miniscule organizations performs a number of specialized, localized functions as governance units, in protection, and as bodies of small-scale ritual. In the *motui* territories are lodged the traditional family components of Akamba society. The publics of the *motui* can always be divided and sub-divided into family entities. An Akamba homestead is called by the name of *musyi* (*misyi*, plural). In terms of local definition, the homestead in Ukambani constitutes an extended family. Usually, the extended family consists of an eldest male and his spouses, and a generation of offspring. Generally, it is assumed in Akamba society that the household is the "same" as the extended family; and generally, this is a correct assumption. Thus, the physical homestead, the extended family, and the household are co-terminus units, and, in analyzing Akamba family functions, these terms can be employed interchangeably without violating seriously the anthropological reality of the community. The extended family is most frequently designated as a *mbaa*. To the word *mbaa* is added the name of the male head of the family. Hence, for a family unit presided over by a male named *Ngao*, meaning "shield," the extended family was classified as *mbaa-Ngao*.

Of course, when we speak of the extended family in Ukambani, we are isolating a unit within a larger lineage. Within each *utui*, several large lineages co-exist. Each of the extended families belongs to a wider genealogical structure that traces its ancestry back to a distant male founder, probably four or five generations removed; that is comprised of representatives from at least three generations of living kin; and that numerically dwarfs the individual extended families. The extended family—with its male head, his spouses, and children—is but the smallest genealogical particle in one of these large lineages. To underscore the difference in the genealogical scale between the large lineages and the extended families, the former can be defined as the maximal lineage, the latter as the minimal lineage. These are the entities important to a discussion of famine and its affects on the family.[6] At

[6]The concern with the strategies of compensation employed by Akamba families confronting famine was suggested, from a different context, by Phillip Mbithi's pioneering research on famine crisis and the means of social and agricultural innovation (Undated). An intriguing sub-section of this presentation mentions songs, sung by women during routine labor, which recount the difficulties of local communities among the Akamba during famine periods. Civil discord, cleavages within the nuclear family, the abandonment of farms and fields, the forsaking of wives and children, the migration of men to other areas, and the rise of insubordination within the ranks of the young are the difficulties that are

some points in the history of famine, responsive activity involved the large lineages, and at other instances the small extended family proved to be the pivot of response. At still other junctures in famine times, portions of large lineages became the critical institutional variable in resolving famine plight at the local level.

It would be rash to contend that this description of present family structure was the absolute norm for Akamba life before the nineteenth century; or even the strict rule for the family in Ukambani after 1800. Projecting the ethnographic present into the past is a substantial danger here. However, evidence suggesting that the family structure of the Akamba community was of a radically different structural order in the past does not appear in the oral sources collected on the family. Nonetheless, an argument would be guilty of premature closure if it came to conclusion on this note. For the family in Ukambani has been consistently—to borrow a term from the physical sciences—a multi-valent body. Institutional capacities of the family have been called upon to serve many functions. Whether or not the structure has altered in the past in a decisive way is, thus, secondary to the consideration that it has entered phases of mutation—some so temporary as to be evanescent, a few distinct aberrations that were not repeated, and many others long-term. The multi-directional migrations that criss-crossed Ukambani in the eighteenth century were led by lineages. Pioneering treacherous new regions was a burden and an opportunity that fell to the Akamba family. Several varieties of nineteenth-century trading organized themselves around the hubs of numerous large lineage structures. Even the profession of disorder, and it did become a profession for some in the mid-nineteenth century, was captained by banditry groups and vigilante organizations centered on the lineage. The conduct of families during famine does not merely reflect these past changes, but encapsulates another variation on this theme.

Although this case-study derives from East Africa and even though we are exploring the family unit as it responded to the burden of famine, we should bear in mind the parallels between this research and other studies of the African family, in particular the skillful analysis of anthropologist Jack Goody (1972; 1973a; 1973b). Obviously, there are some differences between the objectives of Goody's research and this writing, as well as considerable differences between the types of data that he has at his disposal. In all of his work, Goody has been inclined to study the African family within a broad comparative framework. For example, in his exploration of the relationship between the rates of polygyny in family structures and the participation of women in agriculture and trade (1972:112-114; 1973a:181), he calls upon evidence from West Africa, Islamic North Africa, and Asia. If more refined evidence on the family in famine conditions existed, a comparative analysis could be launched on this theme. That, at this point, is not feasible. Apart from this, a second difference between Goody's writing and that possible on famine families in East Africa is that he is able to put forward a variety of quantitative measures of family functionings. Pre-colonial records from the Akamba do not permit venturing quantitative estimates of family processes. Yet, there is one general issue on which the Goody essays and this research join. Specifically, he has continually considered patterns in the African family—such as the size of the farm family (1972:122) and the appearance of polygyny (1973a:179-182)—as determined by context, rather than governed by absolute norm. In fact,

reflected in these songs. Cf. also Mbithi and Wisner (1972:15-16) for an ingenious and comprehensive discussion of adjustment behavior in Ukambani famine areas.

his work is most agile when exploring the intricacies of situation that structure patterns of family organization. His work, in this respect, strengthens the consideration of the family as a process. By isolating certain correlations between family structure and economy, he has illuminated the variability of types of African family structure (1972:122), the role of individual members of the family in household economy (1973a:185-189), and the diverse procedures of achieving marriage (1973b: 20-22). When Goody's work has been thoroughly incorporated into studies of the African family, we will possess a model of the sub-Saharan family that is highly sophisticated and certainly more variegated. This work on the Akamba family reacting to famine presents a model that attempts to apply through a modest case study the general methodological illuminations pioneered by Goody.

The Akamba Family in Famine and Simple Alliance

Famine was the specter that haunted Akamba society during the whole of the nineteenth century.[7] J. L. Krapf (1968: 142-143, 169), the German missionary who travelled briefly in Ukambani in 1849 and 1851, wrote in his journals of the massive devastating blow dealt the citizenry by famine in the 1830s. Crossing the tip of the Ukambani drylands in 1883, the explorer James Thomson (1968:339) moved rapidly, seemingly blind to all other than his objective of reaching the Kenya coast, but he was sufficiently startled by the misery left by famine to record it. Laconic passages in his travelogue report on the hunger, the plaintive begging, the lethargy of the villages, and the wearied fields. In 1911, the Swedish ethnographer Gerhard Lindblom (1920:339) calculated that seven famines had plagued the Akamba between 1836 and 1898, one every seven years. Evidence from recent collections of oral traditions has increased the Lindblom estimate, by adding several famines of regional scope to this tally.[8]

A measure of the impact of famine on this area is found in Akamba legend and lore, which has enshrined past famine in a prominent thematic position. Each of the nineteenth-century famines bears a metaphorical name that suggests its horrific dimensions. The famine of 1883, which traditions assert to have first appeared to be gentle, eventually took such a toll that it earned for itself the name of *Nzana*,[9] a signifying that the population was reduced to consuming the scaly monitor lizard for survival. An extension of this naming procedure reveals additional facets of the conceptualization of the trauma of famine in Ukambani. Often, a famine will be labelled *Ngambu*, though no specific famine is known precisely by this name. But for contemporary Akamba, this name conjures the correct history, because the

[7]Inclusion of famine data in works on pre-colonial East African history and anthropology is relatively infrequent. Still, a number of authors have presented information on this subject, which will be of future value in extending the environmental history of famine in the region. References to famine can be located in Cohen (1972:25); Dyson-Hudson (1966:232, 235); Feierman (1974:18-19, 23-28, 34, 49, 53, 87, 187), particularly worthwhile information being offered on the correlation between wealth and famines on p. 34; I. M. Lewis (1961:88, 213); Muriuki (1974:30, 47-48); and Spencer (1973:190).

[8]Cf. the revised Event Calendar—Kitui District; and Calendar of Memorable Events for Use by Supervisors and Enumerators During the 1969 Kenya Population Census; D. C.'s Office, Embu.

[9]Famines, in Kikamba, are collectively termed *mayua*. Individual famines are referred to as *yua*; and this prefix, together with a conjunction (*ya*) is placed before the specific labels for various famines. Thus, *Yua ya Nzana*. The period after famine is referred to as *mumo wa yua*, meaning the departure of famine. Six famines are generally agreed upon as important to Ukambani in the nineteenth century: *Ngovo* (1868); *Ngeetele* (1870); *Kiasa* (1878); *Ndata* (1880); *Nzana* (1883) and *Ngomanisye* or *Muvunga* (1898).

word signifies "grabbing" or "trespassing" or "squeezing." The allusion captured in the word is to thievery, and specifically to the land thefts, that were made possible by the disorganization of village societies in famine. Traditions other than those of famine-names tell in bleak detail of famine seasons in the territory. They speak of emptied homesteads; of wayfarers who died along the paths while undertaking journeys for food; of the widespread dying of children and the aged, two of the most vulnerable age populations during famine; of desperate foraging for wild tubers to eat; of the stench that rose over once prosperous villages as their cattle lay dead; and of the living who were deranged by the merciless hunger and who were given to strange utterances, which must have resembled for the Akamba of the day the traditional glossolalia that had characterized the pronouncements of past seers and diviners. Even with famine, however, it is possible that the scenarios of famine impact painted in these oral traditions frequently magnified the harshness of deprivation (cf. Appendix). Despite this exaggeration, famine in Ukambani brought concrete difficulties: minimal rainfall during planting seasons; the failure of staple food crops, or crops bearing only a fraction of their potential; livestock dying, or losing weight, or being unable to bear new livestock; dramatically impoverished diets for the living, and death for those of fragile physical capacities; weakened communities that were easy prey for disease; and an unsettling of the territorial preserves belonging to various sub-regional cultures.

In those areas where famine was most fierce, migration was an alternative to which many resorted. From historical evidence derived from the eastern plateau and the south of Ukambani, families appear to have occupied the foreground of famine migration movements, particularly the extended family. As the nineteenth century progressed and famines became recurrent, it was this unit of kin that most frequently unhinged itself from its niche in the quest for a more secure ecological position. By the famine of 1880, this practice of extended family movement during famine had developed from a temporary strategy to an expected process, sometimes possessing a set of quasi-regulations and obligations. Entire village-communities did not move en masse during the years of famine, mainly for the practical reason that few of the more secure villages could have absorbed an infusion of considerable numbers. Incorporation of such a magnitude would have shattered the delicate balance of resources that was prevalent even in the best-placed villages in famine. At the other end of the scale, individuals were reluctant to chance fortune on their own and move alone—even though many were compelled to—for they were certain to be buffetted about by the competing forces unleashed by famine.

On first glance, very little seems surprising about this migratory process and the leadership of the extended family in it. But, when the mechanics of the process are probed, an intriguing adaptive style can be discovered. Within the records of a sample of 34 migrating family units from the nineteenth century, a clear pattern asserts itself. It indicates that Akamba families moving from the confinement of famine followed a reasonable systematic course of alliance with other comparable entities of kinsmen whose areas might offer temporary refuge. What, therefore, seems an incoherent pattern—frightened, spasmodic movements by families—had a remarkable degree of purposive choice behind it. Migrations of families might seem random, but the quest for alliance directed and governed their course. Lindblom (1920:115) mentions the existence in the Akamba past of what he dubbed *grossfamilie*, the

families of augmented personnel resulting in unusually large households. The famine years witnessed the multiplication of extended alliances with this swollen character.

If a flow-map of the extended family movements were constructed for our sampling of lineages, it would show a predictable set of geographical routes for these movements. When, for example, in the 1870s famine sent eastern populations fleeing in a swirling pattern, a high proportion of the extended families comprising these populations found reprieve in the hill-country of the west—where a district held itself aloof from the disaster and existed in relative prosperity and peace. At other times in this century, families from the east camped in valleys where kin-families lived near river beds and the mouths of streams, though those waterways had become scarcely more than trickles, if that. Families living in forested areas—regardless of their location—were also favored as alliance-mates by migrating lineage units, for good reason. The convoluted interiors of the forests offered a maze of protection, and their thick canopies retained the moisture necessary for growing forest-bed wild crops, which could provide a diet of sorts. The secret groves of the forest offered sites for sacrifice and propitiation, important rites even to those outside the forested zones. Of course, some of the migrating families in these decades did not trust the promise of prosperity that a few areas held out for newcomers, for prosperity could be illusory in famine years. These hard-calculating families staked their hopes simply on security. They settled in with communities ensconced in hills at the highest elevations, in an attempt to avoid marauders. As mentioned earlier, these times brought a double-edged tragedy: famine and incidents of social rapacity.

Examples of the alliances between extended families would be helpful here, to illustrate the specific character of the linkages between families, and illuminate the social and economic undergirding in many of these alliances. In the 1860s, traditions hold that Mwithui—an audacious warrior who had amassed sizable herds through raiding—marched his family and the remnants of his herds through the parched eastern zone to shelter in the western Iveti hills, where he joined a distant kinsman's family. Holding a moderately large herd, he was placed in an advantageous economic position vis-à-vis the recipient lineage whose herds were much less sizable. In return for shelter and precious grazing rights, Mwithui provided cattle to the sons of his Iveti partner-family in order that they might contract lucrative marriages. Eventually, he gained the reputation of being a "cattle-giver" and "cattle-lender" owing to these gestures. Staying for nearly a decade in the same area and skillfully cultivating his resources during that time, Mwithui increased the sphere of his operations as a cattle-broker for local and regional marriages, until finally his new economic standing exceeded the status he had commanded at the time of entering the hills of Iveti.

Another instance of family alliance comes from the family history of Love Kamuti, also a warrior, and a prominent leader of defensive warfare groups in the southern reaches of Ukambani in the 1880s. His extended family, consisting of at least four wives and of three ruthless sons who were also aspiring to renown as warriors, settled with kinsmen near the Athi river. (The Athi river runs a diagonal path dividing unevenly west from east Ukambani.) In this example, it appears that the units brought into alliance were a desperate extended family and a better situated maximal lineage. In payment for welcoming and maintaining his destitute family, Love and his three sons aided kinsmen in rebuffing raids from surrounding villages anxious to replenish their

dwindling cattle stocks and household provisions. Just as in the case of Mwithui, Love eventually trained and peddled guardian personnel to other fearful lineages in the area. These warriors were trained in the tactics of thwarting raids through semi-apprenticeships organized by his sons.

Elaborating this theme of alliance still further is a set of traditions taken from Ukambani of the 1840s, at least two decades earlier than either of the histories presented above. Muyanya, an eastern ivory trader whose past commercial success had suffered reverses in the 1840s, refused to submit to the local famine of the 1850s by moving his family. But two of his sons—possessing a flair for trade and hunting—did become itinerant hunters, exchanging their expertise to kin-families in return for sustenance for their own families who accompanied them on their dizzying journeys. Legends say that for a long time beyond the famines, people talked of this peripatetic band: they were the archetypal waifs of their day.

A final example of this type of alliance accents certain facets of the coupling process and presents a few new variables that occasionally operated in this form of pairing. Three families joined in a single homestead at the foot of the Mbooni hills, in west central Ukambani, during the 1870s. One family had attained regional eminence based on its agricultural prowess, in particular as a result of its successful pioneering of a difficult hillock. The other two families were trading units by tradition; and were added through migration. A careful analysis of their shadowy genealogies, and a tracing of their histories through narratives, suggests that all three units had come close to ruin during the famine of *Ngeteele* (c. 1870), losing many children and some significant males in the household. We cannot say, though, with any certainty whether these units had lost male heads of the families. As the famine called *Kiasa* ("the long famine") tightened its grip in 1878 and showed no signs of relenting, these families merged temporarily. Throughout the famine period, this enlarged community produced and marketed village crafts over a small radius of territory. In addition, the increase in personnel permitted this grouping to supply a far-reaching trade in protective talismans and amulets, a trade that at its broadest compass touched communities far beyond the perimeters of Ukambani. Interestingly, in this case, it was the migrating families that changed the economic nature of the prominent welcoming family, and changed its economic scale as a unit. These families held together in this economic formation through the famine, and remained fastened together for nearly a decade, with the agriculturally-based lineage occasionally reverting fully to its previous livelihood, and the other two families steadily advancing their commerce. This enlarged grouping, stimulated into development by famine, represents an example of both consolidation and of differentiation; an amalgamation of family parts of growing specialization.

The Akamba Family in Famine and Complex Alliance

For the most part, simple alliance is illustrated in these examples.[10] But within

[10]It would be worthwhile to address a different issue regarding the pre-colonial Akamba from the perspective of these family unions during famine. Several scholars (Beidelman, 1960-62:181-182; Lamphear, 1970:78; Salim; 1973:31) have noted the formation in the nineteenth century of Akamba colonies beyond the perimeters of Ukambani. And, S. Feierman (1974:127) has now deepened the time-scale of Akamba expansion by proving that the Akamba were active as traders in the Shambaa region of Tanzania in the eighteenth century as well. Except for the Shambaa case, the other presentations on Akamba colonies argue that the famines in the nineteenth century coerced movement of this order. Perhaps, the conjecture could be ventured here that

this simplicity of kinship design, certain additional factors exist. It is obvious that each of these examples involved the sheltering of a threatened or sabotaged extended family by a patron kin-entity. (An informant once described this aspect of these systems as a *musina* arrangement, which traditionally is a relationship in which a man lives with a widow and protects her [Penwill, 1951:118].) Equally clear is the reality that between the temporary patron family and the client passed valuable skilled services or commodities that assisted in the resolution of the problem of survival. Partners on both sides of this alliance stabilized their positions by the exchange of resources and institutional support. Yet, *a degree* of intricacy intrudes in these examples as one takes into account the fact that the patron families utilized the resources of the client families to regain control over the deteriorating circumstances brought by famine, or to further their position in their local society. This intricacy becomes more complicated when it is understood that these examples indicate that the inferior partner in these family couplings often achieved a measure of autonomy with respect to its sheltering partner—marketing its skills and goods in an adopted area—while still retaining its client rank. Each example has its unique quality, but the fact of exchange permeates a majority of these cases of simple alliance. The promotion of a patron family's ambitions through manipulation of the resources of its received family is also fairly characteristic of the entire collection of family histories. Moreover, what appears to be reflected in each of these examples (and in others not cited here) is the search for a miniature, self-sufficient community through use of the idiom of kin relationships. Each of these examples attests to a vigorous attempt to create compact, rounded, and functional entities that would be self-sustaining within the severities of famine. The very nature of these alliances displays the quality of Akamba society during periods of environmental stress: they suggest a moderate fragmentation and atomization of local communities. One is tempted to speculate that the ideal that was being sought in these alliances was that of the *motui*—the traditional village communities—which in less stressful times had the properties of these newly-born alliances.

Alliances in which two more or less equivalent kin units formed "famine pairs" were the most frequent during famine episodes. Nevertheless, alliance modes of greater internal sublety, in which more parts were coordinated and with a greater range of diversity in the coordination, occurred as well during famine. And even though these cases were a distinct minority, we are fortunate to inherit an oral record for these units that offers uncommon depth of portrayal. Perhaps, a review of the cases for which there is the most detail will demonstrate the levels of complexity in these unions:

Case #1 (c. 1868-1875; During the Famine of Ngovo, 1868, and Ngeteele, 1870):
Two families, inhabiting the far eastern frontier in their hilly area near Endau, withdrew from their home-areas after encountering the first seizures of the famine of *Ngovo*. While their memberships were still intact, they returned to their natal areas in the west for the duration of the famine, areas in which they possessed deep kin roots. In the past, these two families had garnered renown for their discovery of water-holes and underground water-caches in the hills of the east, a dry area during most seasons. Their recipient maximal lineage in the west had attained an equally broad reputation for collecting large stores of wild plants and forest floor medicinals from the top of the Mbooni hills. Combining their local expertise, these families were able to survive two different famines in a prosperity that was the envy of locals. Soon, their prosperity attracted a loose group of five families who worked on their behalf.

these colonies have been initially rooted by the development of family coalitions: by Akamba families gradually joining other related Akamba lineages living outside Ukambani.

Case #2 (c. 1880; During the "Famine of the Star"): Four eastern maximal lineages—probably the most important pastoralist lineages of the decade—allied themselves in an effort to preserve their large herds. Long-distance herding was a necessity during this famine and in this region. Herding of this order required moving herds distances sometimes exceeding 100 miles. Long stays in alien territory were necessary too. Teams competent in guarding herds had to accompany the herding. Male personnel from these lineages were consolidated to undertake the arduous journeys. After this famine, revivals of the union for herding recurred at regular intervals. But later, one of the lineages separated from the union, and formed another with less powerful lineages.

Case #3 (c. 1880; During the "Famine of the Star"): One extended family with limited trade experience in the areas outside of Ukambani joined the households of prominent warrior figures in the northern country of the territory. Previously, the warrior-families had been involved in assisting trading efforts, but their involvement had not been sustained. It is unclear what size a unit this was after alliance. Nor can it be determined the number of households that were spatially joined. From the period of the "Famine of the Star" forward, these units conducted a trade for food among neighboring communities. As was common at the time, these groups were known as *athusi*, meaning "the people who search for food." The trade itself was known as *kuthuua*, meaning "food searching." (Sources: cf. Appendix.)

Some of the principles delineated in the organization of simple alliances are repeated here, albeit in a context of considerably more variety and with several variables acting in unison. Special emphasis is given, in these cases, to attempts to cope with the crisis in resource maintenance that famine often posed for the Akamba community. In all of these cases, the consequences of family alliances can be seen to have reached beyond the mere union of family groupings. The unification of the labor capabilities at the family level allowed not only for the augmenting of personnel, but also permitted the development of diverse labor specializations in larger groups of this type; allowed family groups to pair their traditional talents with others; and probably, most importantly, permitted households to organize activities that could only have been conducted by more than a single household. For example, the trade for food was always hazardous during famine seasons, and the trading parties rarely completed their journeys without being ambushed. To have launched such a mission without proper personnel, and without the appropriate conditions of experience and trust operating, was to invite a routing by bandits. Viewed from a narrow perspective, these alliances forged in famine expressed the normative comprehension of kin obligations and kin assistance. They arose out of a world heavily committed to certain forms of kin mutuality, if not reciprocity. Viewed from a wider perspective, though, these alliances constituted elaborate systems of exchange, transaction, and labor-bargaining that were enacted along the lines of kin premises and the ideological tenets of familial conceptions. Coalition theorists (Gamson, 1966: 529-534) do not sufficiently recognize the resource coalitions of this nature, but these family partnerships bear the classic marks of a coalition, a joint use of resources to achieve a goal within a competitive arena.

Although these alliances are repeatedly documented in the oral records of famine that can be collected among the Akamba, it is impossible to establish their representative quality conclusively. Typicality for these alliances is not an argument being advanced in this essay, nor, is proof of typicality absolutely necessary to examine this process. The problem arises because of certain historiographical features of the oral record. Family alliances appear in a fundamental parochial record. To assemble a full record of family alliances during famine, to give that record society-wide spread, to construct a full and plausible typology of variations within family alliance would require the gathering of an essentially particularistic record, and a record overwhelming in its proportions.

Traditions on the macro-demographic shifts in Akamba society during famine do not preserve interactions within local universes of response, such as those present in family alliance. When writing on this particular aspect of Akamba family responses to famine, the historian relies on a record that in its scope of viewing—of perception—is provincial or insular, which means that the record is replete with local detail and local embellishments. Inevitably, this local bias raises the question as to what the record characterizes, and how effectively. That question can be answered in part by noting that these instances of alliances appear in the most critical regional and sub-regional cultures of the nineteenth century and that their frequency increases from the mid-1860s after the famine of *Ngovo* in 1868, and decline in number after the final famine of the century in 1898.

While migration and coupling proved efficacious for numerous Akamba families, others clung tenaciously to their natal areas, drawing closer to the resilient lineages of their *motui* territories and seeking *ad hoc* adjustments for particular difficulties. One of these *ad hoc* adjustments in these cramping circumstances pertained to the system of pawnship that operated at several levels of the society. When pawnship becomes integral to Akamba customary arrangements and when it actually enters the field of tactics used to foil famine can not be detected with any certainty. Its origins as an institution, or more accurately as a sub-institution, is cloaked in obscurity. Akamba lorists conjecture that in the dawning years of the century—soon after the repetitive gnawing famines of the late eighteenth century—pawnship forms had achieved more than an embryonic stage of evolution. Even if this dating falls wide of the mark by being too early, traditions have been preserved that speak of the destiny of pawns that clearly have the ambience of the period from 1800 to 1850: the interiors of these traditions have been reconstructed from details from the principal events of the times.

Pawnship as Family Response in Famine

Pawnship covered a range of social alternatives that had a semi-legal quality to them, and its elementary mechanics can be sketched here as a set of unarticulated legal propositions. For the nineteenth century, pawnship involved persons being left in another family's keeping during the seasons of famine. Additionally, that family was granted control over the pawn's labor, if the pawn was of sufficient age to labor. Ultimate control over the legal person of the pawn remained vested in the pawn's original family. The unstated code of pawnship assumed that the individual pawn could not be demoted in legal status while in the protective keeping of a family. However, the pawned individual could be raised in certain specific circumstances to full membership in his community of placement without a stigma being attached because of his past history. In keeping with this implicit code of guarantees, being pawned did not initiate the process of being incorporated into a legal status of domestic slavery. It hardly needs stating that subordination was contained in the status of being a pawn: one's fictional social family was dominant. But, it was not a permanent subordination with legal entrapments. The rights one was assured of as pawn in this system were on the order of the premises of *jure humano*. Still, if the family placing the pawn was decimated in the course of famine, leaving the pawn bereft of important kin, the pawn could become in time a member of the recipient society through the role of fictive kin. Added to these features, this sub-institution had both internal and external dimensions. Or put differently,

Akamba pawns would be placed in neighboring societies or within Ukambani, in a foreign society or among the Akamba. The geographical domains of this system were different from one another. But, the common denominator of both internal and external pawnship was the reality that families employing the institution of pawnship were utilizing a structural conduit to place valuable members beyond famine areas. Pawnship was a passageway to relief. Individual relief from the rigors of famine was not the only issue here, for in many cases the purpose of pawnship was the preservation of the line of descent for families whose futures might be undone by famine. A final attribute of the system of pawnship was that persons could be restored to their families by the simple act of reclaiming, and by the presentation of a token payment in kind. The only ceremony demanded at the moment of claiming pawns was festivity, a conscious testimonial to amity and solidarity.

At this point, we should separate the external and internal systems of placement, discussing the external system first. One of the oldest avenues of external placement was the attempt to place family members among the Kikuyu, a community to the northwest of the Akamba. G. Muriuki in his fine recent work *A History of the Kikuyu: 1500-1900* asserts (1974:55) that across the entire inter-regional history of the Kenyan nineteenth century, pawnship was utilized as a logical, indeed natural countermeasure to the effects of famine on families. Reviewing the evidence from a number of societies, he sees this system as involving the transfers of persons between most of the major groups of the central, west, east, and south-central Kenya. This circle of communities embraced the Kikuyu, Maasai, Embu, and the Akamba. Pawnship must thus be seen as a regional circuitry through which persons moved as particular communities were visited by famine. This is a broad picture of the working of pawnship. The connection between the Kikuyu and the Akamba had the greatest longevity, the most developed sense of protective assurances, and accounted for the movement of the largest number of persons. It was this connection, across an enormous territory, that was used and re-used for the passage of pawns.

Undoubtedly, the Kikuyu areas were not free of famine in the nineteenth century. Yet, recent dating of famine in Kikuyu areas (Muriuki, 1974:49) shows that famines there did not always coincide with those in Ukambani. This had significant liberating consequences for the Akamba lineages confronting the deepening of the resource crisis. At the time of these confrontations with famine by the Akamba, Kikuyu territory—at least, some harboring places—might have been spared the brunt of famine. Women and children—and not necessarily in that order—were favored by the Akamba as the persons to be placed among the Kikuyu. Typically, arranging the placement of women and children was contingent upon inter-family negotiations. Negotiations followed the routes of previously established inter-community contact. Akamba renewed their contacts from past trading associations with the Kikuyu to gain places for favored family members. Where there were common ties between Akamba and Kikuyu in the domain of kinship, they were exploited for placement. The camaraderie that had been generated during joint hunting ventures was often a pivotal advantage in gaining placement. Sometimes, no more than the affection won through an act of charity could assure placement. One vivid tradition reports a placement arranged for the reason that an Akamba warrior once thwarted the slaying of a defeated Kikuyu war-leader. It was not uncommon for Akamba families lacking bonds with Kikuyu to rely on the services of a broker who, owing to his

knowledge of Kikuyu society, was entrusted with the task of placement.[11]

Within Akamba society itself, a parallel system operated. In contemporary local parlance, the institution is known as *nduwa*. *Nduwa* status carried with it comparable functions in famine to the inter-community pawnship. (As an institution, it was not used solely by families seeking to rescue their members from famine, nor exclusively during famine seasons.) But there the similarity ends, because the paths to *nduwa* were more diverse than the one of inter-family negotiation. In fact, a family intervening on behalf of its members is only present in about one-third of the cases for which there are verified traditions from the famine years of the nineteenth century. Perhaps, it would be more suitable for conceptualizing the institution of *nduwa* to distinguish between those instances in which families oversaw the placement of persons and those cases where the person sought his own admission to the status. (There are instances, both actual and rumored, of children being found during famine years and being placed in a household as *nduwa*.) In the latter instances, where the person was his own agent for incorporation, certain features cause it to resemble an institution of clientship.

Like the system of inter-regional pawnship, families could gain *nduwa* rank for a person by trading on the strength of kinship connections, even remote ones. Comparable to the inter-community pawnship, families could establish a case for acceptance of a person in another Akamba household by exploiting the ties created through common activities, such as efforts in trade, hunting, and herding. Yet just as easily, a person could perform an act of service for a family and recommend himself to the status. This often occurred in the nineteenth century. A person could also forge an informal pact between himself and a family, and through this pact become a *nduwa*. Frequently, this was a means of securing placement. But, there were odd cases in this system, no less instructive for their oddity. Families originating from males who had been *nduwa* were often open to the acceptance of others to similar status during famine. Trading families of clout were frequently porous structures, with boundaries that were penetrable by persons seeking *nduwa* status for themselves and for others. Widowers of respectable status, and with resources of support during famine, occasionally began a second household through acceptance of a male *nduwa*, who later married but remained at the patrons' homesteads.

There is a salient nuance to *nduwa* status in famine that should be considered in this discussion. In the nineteenth century, this nuance had considerable consequences for the changes that emerged within a sector of households in Ukambani. Because numerous *nduwa* were not placed by families, they were not expected to be claimed by kinsmen after famine. These unclaimed *nduwa* became permanent parts of their new families. The sentimental bonding between these *nduwa* and their adopting families was intense, the ties engendered intimate, the responsibility for protective guardianship of the *nduwa* weighty. John S. Mbiti in *Akamba Stories* (1966:131-132) presents a parable epitomizing this structure of sentiment active in the institution. Applying a structuralist critique, we could reasonably contend that the story was not only a piece of lore, a design of the imagination, but also a legalistic argument advancing the suppositions held by Akamba society on *nduwa* status.

In this story, with its ornate logic, the enduring values attached to the institution

[11]For information on Kikuyu working in Ukambani for Akamba, refer to G. Lindblom (1920:84).

are spoken through the plot. What are the duties of the adopting head of an Akamba household toward *nduwa*, asks this fable? The unfolding of the story occurs in this fashion: a disinherited man becomes a *nduwa* in the homestead of a rich man during years of abundance. In payment for his labor, the rich man supplied the *nduwa* with food and shelter. When famine struck, the wealthy man turned into a local ogre, miserly and suspicious. He began to see the routine demands of the *nduwa* as unscrupulous exactions. He grew antagonistic to his ward, eventually banning him from the household. Rejected, the poor man is reduced to savoring the smells of the rich man's food that drifted over the wall of his household. The story ends with the rich man being cautioned, by a local legal tribunal, that he may not deny the *nduwa* the right of access to his household, nor to his larder. Communicated in this story is the deep sense of duty, constraint, and honor that supposedly animated the relationship between the *nduwa* and his asumed household. It is a cautionary tale, too, in that it warns a person not to forsake the *nduwa* of his household because of the expediencies encouraged by famine. Persons who become permanent *nduwa* in families benefited from this set of ideals: it was a local ideology that defended their rank.

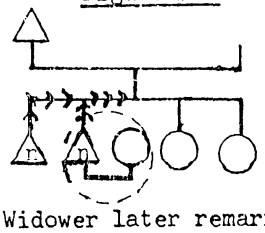
What consequences did the permanent *nduwa* of which the story speaks have on the structure of the Akamba family? Males who entered a household at a young age during famine constituted a plurality in the ranks of the permanent *nduwa* of the nineteenth century. They were cared for during their early growth. Local rites of passage transformed them into social adults. With the assistance of their adopting family, they married and brought their spouses to the lineage territory. By marrying, the male *nduwa* added another branch to the lineage—actually a scion, for their families were grafts onto the structure of the extended family. (Females who entered a household at an early age did not create through marriage an additional branch: they "married out" according to the norms of this patrilineal society.) Traditions provide data on a number of interesting variations to this type of addition. A few of these have been presented in the accompanying diagrams. Figure 1 portrays the addition of two males to the household of a widower. In this case, taken from the latter part of the century's famine history, both males married, thus adding two extended families. Figure 2 illustrates a similar incorporation, except in this context, the *nduwa* male started a family which, in turn, brought in two *nduwa* males. Figure 3 illustrates a somewhat different case in which barrenness in a marriage prompted the acceptance of three *nduwa* males during the famine of 1898. Two of these males married. One died in an epidemic. Figure 4 shows a family begun by a couple in which both partners were *nduwa*. They also accepted two *nduwa* males in a famine. The last case (5) comes from the history of a long-distance trader, Kithusi, who is said to have collected a large number of *nduwa* during various famines and droughts. Many married, and some remained as a part of Kithusi's realm of kin. *Nduwa* entering a family could alter the numerical character of an extended family, and in time, enlarge the kin scope of the larger lineage universe.

Famine, Marriage, and Fictive Families

Until now, this essay has stressed the types of household formations and family organization—basically, compensatory forms—that were stimulated by famine conditions. Less discussion has been presented, thus far, on the efforts to ensure family continuity beyond those generations close to the history of famines. However, the theme of the placement of persons broaches this larger problem; the

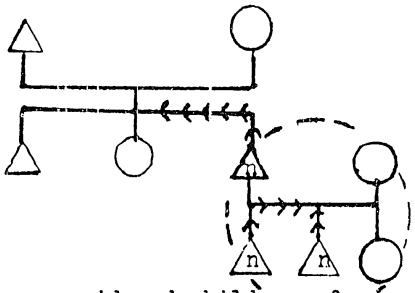
Simplified Diagrams of Nduwa Linkages:

Figure #1:



(Widower later remarried.)

Figure #2:



(Nduwa considered children of one wife, though two waves in extended family.)

Figure #3:

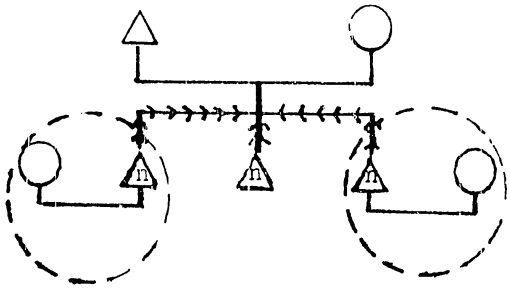


Figure #4:

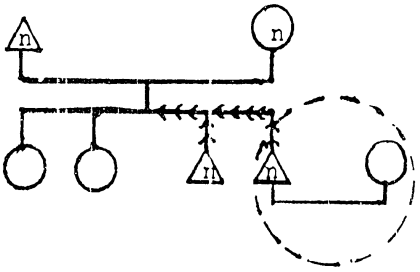
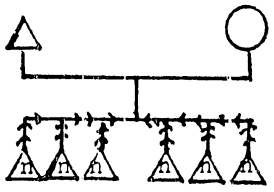
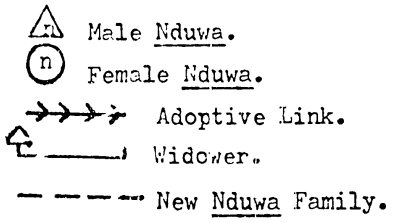


Figure #5:



(Numerous families came from this collection of nduwa, some attached to adopting family, others independent.)



Note: Full range of polygyny is not shown. Conventions of illustrations adapted from Schusky (1965:6-11) and Laslett (1972:41-42).

impact of famines on other efforts to assure continuity of the family group, particularly the process of marriage. One does not have to mine the oral traditions deeply to discover that marriage was a problematic social process for famine-stricken families in Ukambani. The lines excerpted from Kyeti's song (opening the essay)—though eliptical in their full meaning—convey this sentiment. His song laments the lack of wives during famine.

Traditions vouch for the social truth embodied in Kyeti's verses. Famine not only depopulated areas, stripping families of their marriageable members (Lindblom [1920:88] estimated that the mortality rate for young children during the famine of *Ngomanyisye* [1898] was exceedingly high) but also complicated the execution of the stages leading to marriage—the phases of betrothal, bridewealth negotiations, and the changes in residence stipulated for females in this patrilineal society.[12] With domestic animals coveted by families for survival, it was no mean task for young males to raise their accustomed portion of bridewealth payments. Persuading families to release animal property for the purposes of the pursuit of brides became a delicate art. *Mbaa-Mutio* in the west-central Ukambani consistently refused to allot the requisite movable property (i.e., in cattle) for the marriage of two sons for fear that another famine of the severity of *Ndata* (1880) would soon strike. With families demanding greater quantities of goods for bridewealth, in the hope of dramatically profiting from the transactions, marriage had its difficulties compounded. Jack Goody (1973b:3) has cogently argued that in African societies "the relative size of payment was linked with the quantum of rights transferred." Thus, in famine, the size of payment was a variable related to the quantum of labor that families saw as being transferred through the loss of daughters to marriage. With families either unwilling to part with the labor of daughters or, in the case of males' families, ambivalently disposed to taking another person into a strapped household, individuals desiring marriage suffered. The never-simple search for marriage reached the proportions of a dilemma, becoming a real struggle at times in the nineteenth century.

Yet, the desire to guarantee permanence for the family unit probably did not alter with the urgencies introduced by famine. On the contrary, that yearning might have gained more force. It would be a simplification, and historically inaccurate, to claim that Akamba families surmounted all these difficulties. Just as family alliance and the placement of persons were but partial resolutions of more generalized duress, the responses to the restrictions on marriage were mixed in their success. Substitute "currencies" arose to replace standard bridewealth payments. In this manner, commodities deriving from the coastal long-distance trade supplanted cattle payments in some areas. But these goods—cloth, beads, shells, knife-blades—were occasionally difficult to come by, as northern Ukambani traditions report for 1870-90. As among the Nuer of the Sudan (Beidelman, 1971b:397), many Akamba young men embarked on raiding to acquire cattle for bridewealth. (In fact, some of the accounts of endemic raiding in famine periods can be explained by understanding the distortions of the marriage process during these periods.) The course to marriage was smoothed in a number of areas by extending generously the period of marriage negotiation, allowing the families with eligible sons to move toward marriage at a much slower pace, a concession which made the accumulation of marriage goods a less-pressured undertaking. Some fami-

[12] Solid discussions of the process of Akamba marriage are contained in K. Ndeti (1972:66-95) and J. Muthiani (1973:42-44).

lies suspended regular bridewealth to facilitate marriage, though documentation is thin here.

One of the most interesting possibilities presented by traditions is that of the negative impact of famine on the routine practice of patrilocality. Shifts of females after marriage to the homestead of the spouse were not strictly adhered to, at least in a few cases. Rather than lose the labor capacities of daughters during famines, families stalled the moves. Once famine relented, the physical transfer was made. Another interesting facet of the oral data extends these few cases to a second dimension. By mid-century, what we might call dispersed families existed in Ukambani. The dispersed family differed from the characteristic organization of the extended family because the wives of a man were scattered within a region, and possibly, throughout Akamba territory. Tentative connections are drawn in the sources between this phenomenon and the appearance of famine. In 1911, Lindblom (1920:81) discovered an example of wife-dispersion. True to his habit, he did not over-generalize its range and attributed no cause to it. If wife-dispersal was a feature of famine times, though, it offers limited confirmation for the hypothesis that there were deviations from the practice of patrilocality in these years.

We should also look briefly at the obverse side of this history. Were we to overlook those familial units that were unsuccessful in surmounting the difficulties of famine, it would lead to a flawed image of the history of the family within the environmental stresses of nineteenth-century Ukambani. Our history would end on a false, sanguine note. To perceive the family solely in corrective stances, or ameliorative maneuvers, is to be a hostage of functionalist reasoning: assaulted by famine, the Akamba family strove to combat these assaults. This perspective, while empirically sound, neglects those instances where the conditions of famine over-taxed the capacities of family units. Family dissolution must, then, be included in this discussion. Scarcely a subject receives as much attention in the traditions as the dismembering of families; but there is hardly a topic that is more diffusely treated and more superficially documented. Nevertheless, we possess examples of dissolution.

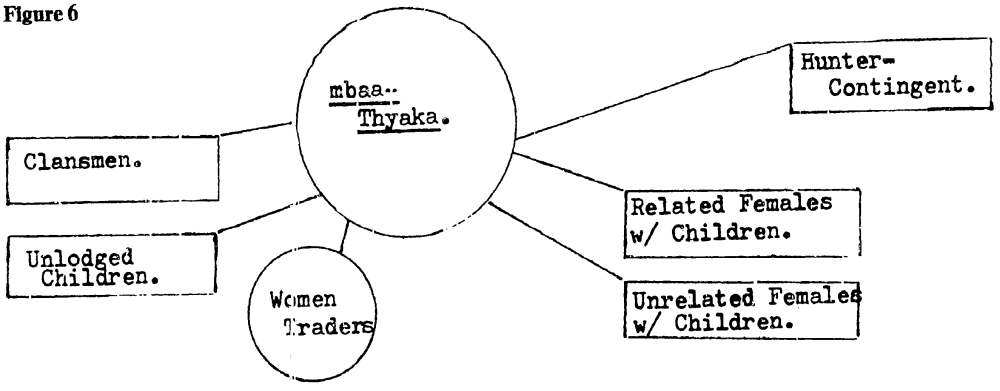
Itanga and Kavoi, two wealthy pastoralists of the eastern plateau, witnessed in the 1860s the decimination of their families' herds during famine; and until they rebuilt their kin-groups and holdings, they entered a life of herding cattle for the more fortunate. The sprawling *mbaa-Ngenya* in central Ukambani appears to have had but one male survivor after the famine of 1880. And, the flourishing household of Muiinda was left one diviner as a survivor, almost, it appears, as an emblem to its history of specializing in divination as a family. These instances are repeated, either in more tragic ways or in less, in many other traditions. The most profound response to dissolution was the creation of artificial families or fictive families (Wheaton, 1975:616). Artificial families arose in Ukambani out of the dismembered remains of collapsed families; from persons who had lost familial anchorage; and from a situation in which persons were unable to find lodging for themselves in the interiors of other families. The oral record for the entire nineteenth century mentions 23 such unifications of persons. Usually, these fictive groupings were not bound together by kinship ties--though they might have been related through the wide-ranging sets of clanship ties that wove in and out of Akamba society. These unions did not possess orthodox parental structures, sometimes being headed by females or unmarried males. They were nearly always large. We are told that in some cases these families remained together long past

famines; and after a period of stability, were accorded the label of lineage. Once achieving this conceptual position, they entered the process of negotiating marriage for their younger members, thereby fulfilling the expectations of it as a lineage. Sources from the famine of Ndata in 1880 present two examples of this reconstituting process, though they do not exhaust the range of instances. Apparently, in the still-dreaded season of this famine, a number of families became so eroded in membership that only fragments remained of the original groups. Only a few of these families were related internally by kinship ties. Through a procedure no longer clear in the records, these disparate parts—dispersed around the sub-region of the east—were brought together in a newly-formed homestead. Eventually, this group of fragments was considered a regular family formation, and given the name of *mbaa-Thyaka*, which means the "family of the quivers," since one of its eldest male members had been laurelled as an exceptional hunter. Diagrammed, the sources of the personnel comprising the household of *mbaa-Thyaka* can be seen in Figure 6. The household of *mbaa-Misenge* contained a similar spectrum of non-affiliated persons as *mbaa-Thyaka*, but it had in contrast a core of vaguely related kinsmen. Also, in contrast to *mbaa-Thyaka,* this household spawned a host of families that appropriated the assumed name of the family, and later moved into other areas of Ukambani away from the household estate. In this family's history, we see a proliferation of real units from an essentially fictive creation. To some extent, each case of fictive families arising from the components of ruined families is *sui generis*. Extending the history of instances is just to catalogue unique cases. What is more important is that these reconstituted instances suggest the pliability of the ideology of family, and the kinship idiom on which the family often rests. From these extremes of the collapse in the family, we can glimpse a feature of the ideology of the family that resonates back over this essay.

Conclusion

Throughout the nineteenth century, Akamba society was stalked by famine: it was threat and actuality, future possibility and past history. Family units within the community entered reactive modes and structural refashionings during the years that famine bore down. At one end of these refashionings was the model of family alliance, a form of institutional complementarity that was aimed at preserving family entities through amalgams of labor, expertise, and the resources to be found in the quantity of family personnel. In the middle-ground, families sought to place their valuable members with more secure families—through the intricate circuitry of pawnship—and to sustain the process of marriage in order to

Figure 6



assure continuity of lineage lines for posterity. At the far end of these responses was the creation of fictive or reconstituted families. How prevalent these refashionings were is less certain than the fact that they were clearly short-lived occurrences. When famine was not menacing the family entities, they generally—but not in all cases—reverted to their historic pattern of compact extended households or pared-down large lineages. It would be correct to say that there was an entity in Ukambani during these periods that can be singled out as a famine-induced design; and this elasticity of function and union that can be discovered in the records of famine does not resemble except in its gross anatomy other re-workings of the family that appeared in other periods and for other functions. It would be no less correct to add that the famine family of the Akamba evinced an elasticity of design that was singular, and part of this singularity lies in superstructural elasticity of the ideology of the family that facilitated these designs, and in the cases of the fictive families, hallowed them with a legitimation.

One point that this study presses is that the family should be studied as an institution and as a process simultaneously; as a formation concurrently prescribed and capable of permutations; as a body that convention and collective ideals fix in a basic mold, but which can be flexibly maneuvered in its parts. Institutional stabilities in the family might be set in clearer relief by observing the extremes of family situations. Instruction about what we consider normative might be forthcoming if we focus on the family in contexts of stress. At a practical level, this essay is an appeal for studies of the famine family, as well as families operating under other types of environmental crisis. Scholars should not overlook such environmental variables when they are firmly within the area of their studies, as did C. Arensberg and S. Kimball in *Family and Community in Ireland* (1968:95) who entered a single, uninformative line on the disruptions to the family caused by the Irish famine. Many specific questions are on the future agenda, for pre-colonial East African family history.

Appendix: Sources

Except for the written evaluations of famine impact among the Akamba, the bulk of the material cited in this essay derives from oral sources, collected during fieldwork by this author in 1967-68 and again, in 1973. That oral source material falls into several categories: (1) the traditions commemorating particular famines, which might be called "naming traditions"; (2) the chronological traditions of the Akamba for the nineteenth century that are employed to divide the century, and to measure the duration of processes and events; (3) the corpus of Akamba folk literature—anecdotes, proverbs and folk sayings, songs with historical allusions, stories, and local "story-theater"—that contains information on famine and its consequences; (4) the histories of the development of the Akamba regional societies that comment on the incidence of drought in the various sub-sectors of the community; and most valuable of all, (5) the histories of nineteenth-century lineages. In the text of this essay, these traditions are employed in several different ways. For general information on the nature of famine in Ukambani, and the consequences of famine on a society-wide level, the traditions that commemorate particular famines (listed as category #1) and the history of the regions of Ukambani (listed as category #4) have been particularly helpful. In creating a chronology of famine history in Ukambani, the traditions that contain specific references to datable events (listed as category #2) are of great assistance to the historian. Generally, these traditions refer to important military

engagements, shifts in populations, important innovations in agriculture, homestead architecture, technology, and the development of trade. Narrators of Akamba pre-colonial history use these markers to divide segments of past time, just as they use particular famines to differentiate periods. The material from folk literature (listed as category #3) is only of secondary value to the historian. It reveals social attitudes and perceptions of famine history, and thus, must be used with great caution. When references are made in the text to the reactions of lineages to famine, the primary sources being utilized are lineage histories. At several points, these sources are combined in portraying Akamba society in the nineteenth century. But, each of these sources has a distinct place in the reconstruction.

With lineage histories constituting the superior evidence for this period—superior in particularity, in verifiability, and incisiveness—an inventory of their properties should be presented here. The lineage histories forming the core of this work have been assembled from 67 lineage studies, and from the intensive study of six different *motui* territories (from c. 1850-1880) possessing together a past population of 21 large lineages. Hence, a total of 88 lineages provide direct evidence for this essay. The method by which these histories have been assembled and collated involves the use of the genealogical narrative. Through collecting genealogical narratives for the major components of each of the lineages, information on the origin of the lineages can be obtained, materials on the evolution of the lineage in several fields can be culled, decisive personalities in the lineages' evolution are painted in brief biographies, and factors jeopardizing lineage growth and security, such as famine and epidemic, are outlined. It is these factors leading to attrition in the lineage population that have special import for this study.

Apart from the lineage histories, information assisting in the plotting of the general movement of famine in the nineteenth century can be had through the careful use of maps designed in the nineteenth century and the early part of this century. They indicate areas of population concentration, geographical territories that are unsettled or sparsely settled, and areas that were possibly evacuated because of famine. Maps of particular value for this essay were: Map Illustrating an Expedition Up The River Tana and To Mount Kenya (1892); Das Gebiet der Schneeberge Kilima-Ndscharo und Kenia in Ost-Afrika (1864); Sketch Map of the IBEA Co's Kenia Expedition (Hobley, 1891); and Imperfect Sketch of a Map from 1° North to 10° South Latitude [of Kenya Interior] (Rebmann, 1850). Lastly, interesting for reasons that they suggest the nature of rainfall distribution over time, are: the Monthly Rainfall Tables (1920-72) as collected at the Machakos Station and the Monthly Rainfall Tables (1904-71) as collected at the Kitui Agricultural Office. (All the maps are from the Map Collection at the British Museum.)

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Readers are invited to contribute Research Notes concerning ongoing research projects in family history, social history, or historical demography.