

## 8. THE PURCHASE OF FOOD AND THE RURAL DILEMMA

Hunger occurs when something begins to go wrong with a society's food supply system. But the food supply system of any society consists not only of the arrangements underlying food production, but also of the market strategies used to move food from the control of the producer to the plate of the consumer. Where marketing is important, then local hunger can occur because of bottlenecks in the marketing arena, somewhat independently of problems in the production sphere (though in final analysis the two are linked). And if hunger and malnutrition are perceived by a population as linked to marketing variables, then an exclusive focus on food production patterns by planners and educators will create communication barriers between them and villagers, whose own view of the problems (and the solution) may heavily involve trading activities. The two groups may then talk past each other. The villagers of Kinanbwa are fully aware of the gradual deterioration of local agricultural production that has affected their ability to supply food. But their understanding of the sources of their hunger, and their view of the solution to this hunger, is as closely linked to the market place as it is to their gardens. Outsiders interested in problems of hunger would do well to follow their conceptual lead, and to try to get an analytical overview of the market component of the rural Haitian food supply system.

### 8.1. Principles of the Female Trading Role

The "commercialization" of the domestic economy of Kinanbwa will be seen to have evolved to a degree far beyond that of most mountain communities, and the local deterioration of food streams is perhaps a coming attraction of what may happen in other regions.

To understand the current food-flow crisis in Kinanbwa, the best starting point is to examine the economic role of village mothers. Traditional rural domestic organization allocates to the Haitian wife and mother a series of income generating activities that go far beyond the

cooking, washing, sweeping, and child-care activities to which Hispanic traditions would limit her rural counterpart across the Dominican border. The Haitian peasant female is expected to be the principal generator and manipulator of cash in the rural household. There are four rights-and-duties which the tradition economy gives to her.

1. Marketing home-grown produce. The produce grown by the husband and children will be marketed by the woman of the family. This will either be done by physically transporting the produce to the nearest town market, or by at least being the negotiator of prices with traders who come to purchase food at the farm gate.
2. Investment of capital in the purchase of produce. It would be inaccurate to limit, as some descriptions do, the role of the woman to the marketing of her own husband's produce. In addition it is seen as perfectly proper -- indeed as admirable and even perhaps somewhat obligatory -- for the woman to be a purchaser and reseller of commodities. The woman who purchases and resells has gone a step beyond the woman who merely sells homegrown produce. The former has become a professional trader and has entered the highly admired ranks of those who fè kòmès, who "do business". Many Latin American village traditions place a negative value on women whose poverty forces them to enter trade. But in the value system of rural Haiti, the woman who enters trade has not stepped down, but has rather "moved up" and has begun filling one of the most important roles appreciated in the rural wife and mother.
3. Absenteeism from home. Her involvement in trade lead the woman into long distance travel. Trading sorties may involve only short travel and daily return to her own home. But they may also involve overnight and extended stays away from home. Such absences, far from being viewed as a violation of her role as wife and mother, are considered by most husbands as a sign that he fè youn bon afè, "has found a good wife for himself".
4. Direct supply of domestic food from her trade. In theory the woman could carry on trade but the family garden could continue to be the main source of domestic food. As can be predicted, however, it is an easy step from carrying on simple trade to shift into the direct supplying of at least some foodstuffs to the family cooking pot. The items which the woman supplies will, of course, be purchased in large part during her trading excursions.

## 8.2 Evolution of the Trading Role in Kinanbwa

The above-mentioned cluster of permitted behaviors can, for purposes of this discussion, be viewed as underlying principles that frame the female role in rural Haiti. But the particular role which emerges in a given region will be an elaboration and crystallization of these four guiding principles. Regions will differ in terms of how far they take the principles to their logical conclusion. The women of Kinanbwa have pushed them to their limit.

As the crow flies, Kinanbwa is only several hours away from Port-au-Prince by mule. In the days before regular vehicle transportation became available in the nearby town, village women had already begun to make trading excursions to Port-au-Prince. For reasons that are lost even to the memory of the villagers, the women had for decades specialized in the purchase and resale of beans in Port-au-Prince itself. Thus long before the current generation of female traders was born, the village economy had already capitalized on the four trading principles mentioned above to involve the village women in urban-based cash-generating commercial activities.

1. Women continued to market the produce of their husband's gardens at harvest time and would be physically present in the village to assist in planting and harvesting/processing tasks.
2. But at the same time women came to view it as part of the "normal" adult female role to purchase and resell produce in Port-au-Prince.
3. These commercial activities involved extended absences from the village because both the purchase and resale of their stock was geographically independent of their home community.
4. But though these extended absences caused readjustments of traditional child care and domestic patterns (husbands and children would remain in the village), a particularly heavy value came to be placed on the sending of regular food shipments back to the village. Thus the sending of food from far away came to be a central part of the maternal role in the village.

Thus, without violating any of the basic principles underlying the rural Haitian female trading role, the village women of Kinanbwa elaborated these principles into a widely shared traditional economic career one of whose important nutritional effects was to make regular shipments of food from Port-au-Prince a central element in the diet of the village. Their trading activities continued to unfold in close coordination with the agricultural activities of their husbands. Not only did they market many of the crops planted by their spouses. More importantly much of their trading capital was raised largely through the sale of these crops, to such a degree that part of the village "husband" role became that of providing capital to the wife for her trading activities, a norm that continues in full force today at least in village ideals.

### 8.3. Dependence on Female Food Shipments in the Village Food Supply

The situation in the contemporary village is fundamentally similar to that described in the preceding paragraphs. The presence of vehicular transport, and the recent improvement of the road between Port-au-Prince and the nearby town, have led to an abandonment of mule trips and an almost total dependence on the trucks. Furthermore women have expanded their trading operations to include other grains, especially rice, in their trading stock (though at a given point in time a trader will generally deal in only one product). There has in addition been an internal role differentiation between the women with more capital and those with less capital. The former actually ride the trucks to distant towns and purchase produce, playing thus the traveling intermediary role of madam sara. Those with less capital, in contrast, will continue to play the humbler revandèz role, purchasing and reselling their smaller quantities of stock right in Port-au-Prince.

But all women involved in trade will continue to absent themselves from the village for long periods of time and to send back regular shipments of food. There has been a local institutionalization of these food shipments, in that all the women will now make the shipments on the same days

of the week. The largest shipment will be made on Sunday. A smaller (but nonetheless nutritionally critical) shipment will in addition be made each Wednesday. And thus each Wednesday and Sunday there is a steady stream of Kinanbwa children who walk the two kilometers from the village to the town to await the trucks that bear the provisions which they know their absent mothers will have sent them from Port-au-Prince.

These food packets will differ both in size and in contents by season of the year. The guiding principle that determines the mother's behavior in this matter is the need to ensure that her husband and children back in the village have enough food to last them through the next food shipment. When the harvest has just come in, the packet will be smaller -- and the absent woman may in fact be the recipient of food from her husband in the village. But during most months of the year the flow is in opposite direction. The woman is the one that must send food, and to an increasing degree, during the "hunger season" of July and August, most households in the entire village are totally dependent for their survival on these twice-weekly food shipments. The underlying dependence on purchased food will be little different from what is found elsewhere in Haiti. But the Kinanbwa variant has two features -- purchase in Port-au-Prince and bi-weekly shipment of domestic packets in trucks -- which are unusual products of a region-specific economic evolution.

In determining the content of the package which she will send to her family back in the village, the woman is guided by the food categorization scheme which prevails in the village. There are three major types of foods -- Viv, Vyann, and Legim -- and a number of other categories as well. The meanings of these food-categories will be discussed in a later section of the report. In general the category of "viv" corresponds to bulky carbohydrate foods; the traditional village category of "vyann" corresponds in an astonishingly precise way to foods that modern nutritionists recommend as high in protein and includes milk and eggs as well as meat and fish; and the category legim includes those vegetables which are commonly used to make sauces and which do not fall into either of the other two categories.

Even poorer women will try to include at least one vyann in their package, in addition to the basic staple viv, which is cornmeal. If this is not possible, beans will be sent. Though beans consumed as grains are considered vivs, village tradition recognizes a higher nutritional power to beans that are consumed as a liquid sauce, to such a degree that sos poua is considered to be a vyann, and not just a simple viv. Thus a woman who ships cornmeal and beans is giving at least the basic raw ingredients of what in the village would be the equivalent of a "square meal" in English. Food types and meal classifications will be further discussed below.

Figure 3 presents information on two types of packages that would be sent from Port-au-Prince to Kinanbwa on a Sunday during the month of August when the family is totally dependent on purchased food. One is the package that a well-off trader would send. The other is the package that a woman with little money might send in order to meet the minimum requirements that village opinion imposes on the marketing wife-and-mother. More of the food packages sent tend more toward the poorer variant than the ideally well stocked package. The quantities of each item in either package will be a function of both the amount of money the woman has and the ages and number of family members that depend on the package for their food. The purpose of the Sunday package will be to get the family through till the arrival of the Wednesday package.

We have observed that at least some women, in their Port-au-Prince shipping, keep in mind the nutritional needs, not only of their husbands and their children, but also of the family livestock. Our next door neighbor's pig was the grateful recipient of weekly shipments of wheat chaff purchased by the thoughtful woman of the house in Port-au-Prince. The animal's afternoon meal was prepared each day by the husband with a thoroughness and solicitude that left no doubt as to the importance of the animal to this family. Thus the commercialization of the local economy has even affected the food supply of at least some livestock.

Figure 3

Contents of Abundant and Meager Sunday Food Packages

Well-stocked  
package

"VIV"

- Cornmeal
- Rice
- Plantains
- Beans
- Malanga

"VYANN"

- Aransel
- Powdered Milk

"LEGIM"

- Tomatoes
- Onions

"BLE"

- Biswit
- Bread

Other

- Sugar
- Seasonings
- Coffee
- Kola

Poorly stocked  
package

"VIV"

- Cornmeal
- Beans

"VYANN"

- Aransel

"BLE"

- Biswit

Other

- Sugar
- Coffee

#### 8.4 The Role of the Town Market in the Village Food Supply

In the town located some two kilometers from Kinanbwa there is a large regional marketplace which meets twice a week (on Mondays and Thursdays). Why do not villagers use this closer market as their source of purchased food rather than the markets in Port-au-Prince? The most obvious reason is: those responsible for purchasing the food — the village women — are physically in Port-au-Prince.

But there is an even more important reason. Food purchased in Port-au-Prince will be substantially cheaper than food purchased in the village itself or the nearby town, and the package can be shipped back to the village either free (if a friend or relative is going) or for a minimal charge on one of the many trucks that now make daily trips between the nearby town and Port-au-Prince. This phenomenon of lower food prices in the capital city and higher food prices in the rural areas is one of the unfortunate but cross-culturally common effects of the operation of internal market systems in countries such as Haiti. Regional specializations occur as rural communities become habituated to selling their own produce and purchasing some products from other regions. But food that reaches Kinanbwa from another part of the country will first have passed through Port-au-Prince. Thus, though the "rural areas" are where food is produced in general, in most specific instances food purchased in these rural areas will not therefore be priced lower than food purchased in the city. On the contrary, basic foodstuffs will cost more because of the urban circuits through which they will have flowed on their journey "back" to the countryside.

There are a few items, however, that will be purchased in the town markets. Meat is virtually never shipped from Port-au-Prince to Kinanbwa. Goats' meat is rather purchased from butchers who man stalls on Monday and Thursday in the town market. Likewise fish caught in nearby lakes are purchased in the town. And finally the increasing number of villagers who depend on charcoal for their fuel needs will almost always purchase this charcoal in the town. Simple price differentials explain this preference for local purchase in the case of these three items. The region supplies



the items to Port-au-Prince, and as a result then price is lower in the town than in the capital.

There is a small subgroup of houses, however, who will in fact be heavily dependent on the town market for much of their food. These are generally the poorer families in the village whose income level is too low to permit trading activities in Port-au-Prince on the part of women of the house.

Such families will in fact have to purchase their food in town. They have nobody in Port-au-Prince to make purchases for them. Such households are particularly hard up. They have less capital to start with; otherwise they would have somebody in Port-au-Prince doing commerce. And to make matters worse, the little money that they can scrape together has to be spent on food which costs substantially more than similar items in Port-au-Prince.

This paradox reveals an important pattern about life throughout much of rural Haiti. Participation in active marketing activities by a rural woman will be positively correlated with wealth, not negatively, as in certain other New World rural settings. The role-model toward which the rural woman in many regions strives is not the image of the woman who stays quietly at home tending her children and dedicating all her time to their personal supervision and feeding. The rural Haitian woman has in addition something else to attend to, and something else on her mind. The programs designed to reach her must accept as a given the basic economic orientations and behaviors that govern her life.

#### 8.5 The Role of Village Boutiks in Local Food Supply

The food-supply chain described above is one of the ways that rural Haiti differs from most Latin American villages that have become involved in food purchase. In these latter settings, most food purchased by rural households is purchased directly from stores located in the villages themselves. In Kinanbwa, and through most of rural Haiti in contrast, we

have seen that it is not the village store but the regional or urban open-air market that is the major supplier of foods.

But there are also village stores in rural Haiti that supply foodstuffs directly to village homes. Several such boutik function in Kinanbwa. They arise and survive because they perform at least two useful functions for which people cannot count on the open-air market system which handles the bulk of foodstuffs.

#### 8.5.1 Rural Consumption Credit

In the traditional internal market system of Haiti, it is extremely rare for a retailer to give out foodstuffs on credit to a consumer who arrives without cash. The credit relations that exist are generally found between traders, who will give and take stock for later payment, or between traders and moneylenders. But the consumer in rural Haiti who has no cash can rarely walk into a marketplace and ask for several pounds of rice and beans on credit.

He can however walk into a village boutik and get this type of consumption credit for short periods of time. The prices he pays for such items will be slightly higher than those in the marketplace. The prevailing rules of the game in Kinanbwa entail repayment before the boutik owner (always a female in Kinanbwa) makes her weekly purchases of stock. If the borrower cannot repay any or all of the debt, he must at least approach the boutik owner and explain the situation.

This short term consumption credit is extremely useful in village life. It helps tide a family over any small delays in expected cash flows that would jeopardize the family cooking pot for a few days. Probably about half of the volume sold by village boutiks is sold thus on credit. (This accounts, of course, for only a small percentage of the village's food supply, most of which comes from Port-au-Prince).

### 8.5.2 Unexpected Short-term Food and Fuel Shortfalls

The Port-au-Prince market is far away and food shipments arrive only twice a week. The town market is also several kilometers away and is likewise limited to two days a week (Monday and Thursday). The village boutik serves as an easily accessible, convenient source of supplies. A well-stocked village boutik will have at least some quantities of all the major foodstuffs consumed in the village: cornmeal, rice, beans, millet, aransel, and biswit. In addition it will have the spaghetti and macaroni that are becoming an increasingly important supplementary element in the rural diet. It will also stock canned milk, cooking oil, butter, tomato paste, sugar, coffee, and rapadou. The major foodstuffs will be bought in greatest volume from the boutik on Tuesdays and Saturdays. These are the two days preceding the arrival of the food shipments from Port-au-Prince, and are thus the days on which villagers are likely to run short of basic foodstuffs. They are also days on which there is no market in the nearby town.

But in addition to these foodstuffs the boutiks also stock a varied supply of non-edible items. The major such item is charcoal. As will be seen below, the village has become increasingly dependent on the purchase of charcoal for cooking fuel, and women and girls are constantly underestimating the precise amount of charcoal that will be needed for a meal. Last minute purchases of charcoal to finish the cooking of an already half-cooked meal are daily occurrences. There are also regular supplies of other nonedible items such as soap, starch, kerosene, tobacco, and cigarettes. In short, even those households that do not need consumption credit will nonetheless have frequent occasion to make small purchases in these convenient village boutiks.

### 8.5.3. Overview of the Organization of Boutik Commerce

The volume of sales and overall profit margin from boutik commerce is substantially lower than can be had from the "real" kòmès which most village women carry on in the markets of Port-au-Prince. For this reason the half dozen or so boutiks that function in Kinanbwa generally are run by older women or by younger girls who for one reason or another cannot leave the village to carry on urban trade.

One such boutik owner is a 20 year old woman who began her trade at the age of 14 with money made from the sale of rice which she had been given in repayment for help at harvest time. At that time her total capital-in-stock came to \$4.00, and her major items were biswit and kerosene. Over the years her capital has built up and her total stock may now come to as much as \$80.00 at a given moment. The boutik is run from a simple one-room depot, and the items are carefully arranged on two tables in this depot.

The young woman knows that she could make more money, with the capital she already has, carrying out the same type of urban retail trade that most village women do. But her mother is carrying on trade in Port-au-Prince, and thus the young woman must stay in the village to take care of her two younger brothers who are still in school there. As soon as she can, she will sell off all her village stock and join her peers on the dusty streets of Croix Bossales.

But even women with virtually no capital will -- to the admiration and astonishment of visitors -- somehow find a place for themselves in some marginal niche of the village food-marketing economy. A teenage girl we knew would sell boiled corn in the village. She hardly broke even, but in the process she was able to give some of the corn (which she purchased) to her siblings and to other household members, and to purchase little snacks such as cassava bread and avocado for herself. Another acquaintance of ours was in the business of selling manje kwit

(cooked food) in the town market on Mondays and Thursdays. She earned little from this activity, but on those two days she and her children ate well. A girl who had left Kinanbwa to live with relatives in a nearby village would astound us by coming back with small quantities of avocados to hawk in Kinanbwa. But though such activities entail much labor and little profit, they allow women to supplement their diet and that of their children from small quantities of the items which they sell or from purchases made immediately with the profits from the sales. We suspect that this may be a common survival strategy among truly undercapitalized households. That is, if you have little food at home and little money, the "temptation" would be to purchase your own food with the money. However, if you purchase instead small quantities of food items and "pull in your belt" for a few hours, you may have made enough sales either to warrant eating a bit from your stock or purchasing other foodstuffs with the receipt from the sales. The goal will be to reach the evening, not only with at least some food in your stomach, but also with at least the same amount of capital with which you started. If you can make a small profit, so much the better. But if not, you at least try to avoid "eating all your money" (manjé tout lajan-ou). Persons at this level of economic existence, of course, can scarcely afford to be concerned with the niceties of the "balanced meals" so prettily portrayed on nutrition-education flipcharts. But here we are dealing with two sets of lenses to see the same phenomenon. The nutrition educator may be horrified that these market women feed their children so little during the day. The ethnographer, in contrast, stands in awe at the microeconomic maneuvers that people have devised to get themselves through one day with enough remaining capital so that the same survival maneuvers can again be tried tomorrow.

#### 8.6 Food Gifts in the Village Food Supply System

Besides garden produce and purchased food, a third important source of food in the village diet was identified above: food gifts. These are an extremely delicate matter in Kinanbwa and would be "dismissed" by informants as occasional good-will gestures rather than being assigned

the important food-supply role which our own observations suggest that they in fact have.

There are two ways of making food gifts: in uncooked form and in cooked form. By far the overwhelmingly more important of these two modes is the widespread customs of sending out plates of cooked food from one's own kitchen to that of close relatives and neighbors. These plates of cooked food are usually always sent out to the same households. That is, villagers get involved in a rather small number of dyadic exchanges. But once a household is involved in such a network, it will be the frequent recipient of cooked food, but must also be the frequent giver of such food as well, even when one's own cooking pot may be meagerly stocked. We decided against collecting survey data on this locally sensitive topic, but our observations indicate that most households are involved in such exchange relations.

There is another form of quasi-disguised interhousehold food gift which also takes place with impressive frequency in the village -- gifts of cooked food given directly to other village residents who "happen" to be near one's kitchen when food is being spooned out from the cooking pot. Again, there are two general modes in which this takes place. The visitor may be an adult, in which case he or she will get a plate of food. Or the visitor may be a neighbor's child, in which case the gift may take the form of a handout of cooked food placed directly in the palm of the visitor. There are subtle but strictly followed rules governing this behavior. As a child you learn quickly that you may appear at the kitchen door of only a small number of households, whose children will then be able to appear to your kitchen door. Thus these apparently sporadic food gifts are also in fact controlled by rather small exchange networks

The workings of these food gifts will be discussed in more detail in the section on food distribution practices. Here we wish merely to indicate that, whereas such gifts of course do not increase the total supply of food available to the village, they do serve as a mechanism to circulate food in such a way that a household involved in such dyadic food exchanges will be partially buffered against the effects of a sudden shortage of food in its own cooking pot.

### 8.7 Short-term Food Supply Fluctuations: Seasonal Variation

The preceding pages have presented the major features of the food supply system which constitutes the lifeline of the particular Haitian peasant community in which we did research. Despite the particularities which can be found to characterize any community, the basic three-pronged food-supply system -- home grown food, purchased food, and food gifts -- servicing most Kinanbwa households is in many specific ways similar to the system found in other regions in Haiti and, in its broadest outlines, not unlike the multi-faceted food-supply system characterizing other peasantries as well.

But this system, far from being static, is characterized by constant patterns of change and internal adjustment. The most immediately visible changes take the form of seasonal oscillation between relatively greater and lesser dependence on the different food-supply options at different times of the agricultural year.

Figure 4 schematizes the three major options, with their more specific suboptions and gives a highly impressionistic estimate of the relative importance of each of the options in January and June of a "typical year". The most significant trade-off is between homegrown food and food purchased in Port-au-Prince. During months when rice, beans and sweet potatoes are available in local gardens, village households will depend less on food purchased in Port-au-Prince. But at no time in the year will home grown food even account for half of the food (in terms of the market value of the items in the cooking pot) consumed by the typical family.

FIGURE 4

Relative Importance of Different Food Sources

At Two Points in the Year

		<u>Month</u>	
		January	July
FOOD	Home Grown	40%	2%
	Gardens		
	Gifts	8%	8%
	Cooked Food Gifts		
	Uncooked Food Gifts	2%	2%
	Purchased		
	Village Shops	5%	8%
	Nearby Town Market	15%	10%
	Port-au-Prince	30%	70%
		100%	100%