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A SMOKY AFFAIR: CHALLENGES FACING SOME SMALL-HOLDER BURLEY TOBACCO PRODUCERS IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

Tobacco production and marketing requires specific skills and knowledge of technical aspects involved in handling the crop from the field, through the curing process in the barn, to the auction floors. Tobacco production is technically more demanding than, for example, maize production, but it is financially more lucrative. Small-holder burley tobacco producers in some remote areas of Zimbabwe sometimes adopt unconventional methods of curing tobacco, but they market it together with their commercial colleagues, who are expected to have higher standards in the selected marketing system. Both types of farmers often complain of the poor prices they receive. Burley producers may share the same concerns about marketing, but they have differing problems when it comes to the production process. Small-holder farmers have problems relating to size of land-holdings and support systems available to them. Their problems may be linked both to the fact that cash crop production is not their priority activity and their general need to secure food reserves.

INTRODUCTION

TOBACCO IS ONE of the largest foreign currency earners in Zimbabwe. There are three types of tobacco grown in Zimbabwe, namely virginia, burley and oriental varieties. Virginia tobacco (flue-cured) is the most widely grown, and is popular among large-scale commercial farmers. It is also grown by some small-holder and resettlement farmers on sandy loam soils where it does well. Burley is grown by about 200 large-scale commercial farmers and a larger number of more than 7 000 small-holder farmers (*The Herald*, 14 Sept., 1995). This type of tobacco thrives on richer, heavier soils. Lack of extensive knowledge and facilities about its production and handling from the field to the barn, and in marketing either by the consortium or auction system, presents some problems to its producers.

Zimbabwe is the third largest exporter of tobacco in the world after Brazil and the USA. Cole and Cole (1994, 234) say that tobacco cultivation uses only 2,6 per cent of arable land, but is the largest earner of foreign

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currency in the country. Some commentators say that burley tobacco makes up only 2–3 per cent of total production of Zimbabwe's tobacco (Roussos, 1988, 70). The Zimbabwe Tobacco Association (ZTA) pays for training of farmers, managers, and supervisors at the Tobacco Training Institute. Small-holder farmers are trained at the Trelawney Training Institute also funded by the Zimbabwe Tobacco Association, but the centre is largely for flu-cured tobacco growers. After independence in 1980, there was a concerted government effort to improve the lot of small-holder African farmers. This saw small-holder farmers who grow tobacco starting to attend courses in Banket (a research institute for burley) in increasingly large numbers.

Most small-holder farmers are in communal areas with poor climatic conditions. More than 70 per cent of Zimbabwe's population lives in these areas. Tobacco is not the most common crop grown in such areas, but where soils and other conditions, such as water availability, allow, some small-holder farmers produce tobacco. According to Roussos, the communal sector's importance lies in the number of people who manage both to feed themselves and their families from agriculture, and to provide a share of the total marketed output (Roussos, 1988, 75).

Cole and Cole (1994), say that burley competes strongly with food crops such as maize for land and attention, and that the yield for flue-cured tobacco has increased annually by 40kg per ha over the past 40 years. It is also understood to demand less inputs than flu-cured tobacco, but needs more fertiliser (Irrigation Supervisor Run'anga, 2 Feb., 1996, personal communication). According to Cole and Cole (1994, 235f.) organised burley production started around 1960, much later than production of flu-cured tobacco.

> The quantity produced has risen and fallen with the price. The area under production in the large-scale commercial sector has not changed much but the combined area of small-scale commercial, co-operative, and communal farmers increased ten-fold in the 1980s (p. 236).

At the 1990 average price of Z$6,49 per kg, the total value of increased yields over one year represents Z$15,43 million for the 59 425 hectares of tobacco grown. Burley has become an important cash crop for small-holder, communal-area farmers who produce it. The focus within the tobacco industry as a whole has been on flu-cured tobacco for the obvious reason that it is more profitable than burley, and more large-scale commercial farmers produce it (Cole and Cole, 1994, 242).

This article, prepared at the beginning of 1996 from research carried out from 1994 to 1996, looks at some problems of burley tobacco production and marketing among small-holder irrigation farmers in Nyamaropa irrigation scheme. Although there is a limited discussion of some general problems in the tobacco world, this is not an attempt to address them all.

In particular the article does not address the problems faced by large-scale commercial farmers in the same business of burley production. The main objective here is to highlight some of the challenges faced by small-holder burley tobacco producers in an irrigation scheme and how they, with their limited resources, strive to keep up with their large-scale commercial colleagues who have more facilities to produce good quality tobacco and to compete for good prices in the international market.

THE SHANGWE AND INYOKA TOBACCO INDUSTRY

The tobacco industry in Zimbabwe dates back to the pre-colonial period. The Shangwe people of Gokwe in the Midlands District had a thriving tobacco industry and exported large quantities of the crop to their neighbours in the south, the Ndebele. Kosmin gives a detailed description of the growth and decline of the Inyoka tobacco industry. He says that they had developed fine skills of handling the crop, such as the way they hung and air-cured the leaf, placed it on wooden mortars and mixed it with ashes from wild aloe, damped it with water and pounded it (1977, 271).

The Ndebele are said to have grown some tobacco, and smoked a lot of it in pipes, but Inyoka tobacco was superior and they imported it. The Shangwe were experts in their trade, and some European farmers requested some of these experts to come to their farms to assist in training farm workers in handling or curing tobacco. It seems the Shangwe had no external influence on the growth of their tobacco industry other than the demand for the crop. They had their own internal, on-the-job-training, which was passed on like any other skills as part of their culture. They did not get much assistance from the colonial authorities. Kosmin says that in 1906, van Gielgud, the Native Commissioner for the area, tried to persuade the British South Africa Company administration to take some farmers for training in curing methods, but this was received coldly by the Department of Native Agriculture (1977, 276).

Lack of government or company support in crucial areas such as curing and marketing accounted in part for the collapse of the Inyoka tobacco industry. Kosmin, again says that 'no aid to Africans in tobacco production in the form of either demonstration advice, fertilisers, new seed, insecticides or marketing' was provided, while in Nyasaland, for example, small-holder African farmers got assistance and encouragement, and some even got training in fire-curing methods (Kosmin, 1977, 284). In the contemporary Zimbabwean situation there is evidence that small-holder tobacco producers have been getting government assistance and support from tobacco-related institutions, but some of this assistance has not been directed at some of their specific or contextual problems such as production and marketing constraints.

SMALL-HOLDER FARMERS AND TOBACCO PRODUCTION

On 22 June 1995, Zimbabwe's main daily newspaper, *The Herald*, carried a story in its headlines entitled 'Tobacco industry set to expand'. This, however, was a story about the more successful multi-million virginia tobacco industry, and not inclusive of the struggling burley crop. The same article indicated that some small-scale virginia tobacco producers were facing problems with financing their production, and were asking for a fund to be set up to assist them. Three months later, on 14 September 1995, the same paper carried a story, not in the headlines this time, entitled 'Low prices shatter plans to increase burley crop'. It indicated that the burley industry returned to the auction system in 1994, that until then, the crop had been 'sold by private treaty since 1976 to a consortium comprising Tabex and Carrington and Machauze'.

For burley producers, the 1995 season was characterised by poor prices throughout, and farmers could not get the Z$15 per kg needed to cover production costs. They got an average of less than Z$10 per kg (*The Herald*, 14 Sept., 1995). Farmers were discouraged from producing the crop, and buyers blamed the poor quality of the crop for the poor prices, and claimed that they had difficulties securing orders for a poor quality crop abroad. In some burley producing areas, such as Nyamaropa irrigation scheme, a significant number of farmers did not grow tobacco in the next season (1996) after the poor prices of 1995.

On 15 February, 1996, *The Financial Gazette* had a story about tobacco entitled 'Tobacco set for increase', but continued:

> While strength seemingly returned to the flu-cured tobacco industry, there does not seem to be any ray of hope under the blanket of gloom currently enveloping burley tobacco growers . . . there are no indications that burley tobacco prices might improve this year.

These newspaper reports only serve to highlight some of the problems the industry and particular crop face in the changing environment of marketing tobacco. Detailed information on small-holder burley production among farmers who grow the crop, and the potential of the crop to make a difference in their lives, has not been gathered.

BURLEY TOBACCO PRODUCTION IN NYAMAROPA

Nyamaropa irrigation scheme covers about 450 hectares. It was constructed and has always been managed by government. The irrigation project is located in the Nyanga District of Manicaland province in Eastern Zimbabwe. There are more than 423 households with irrigated plots on the scheme, although only a third or less of them grow tobacco each summer. The managing agency is the Department of Agricultural Technical and Extension

Services (AGRITEX). The project was constructed between 1956 and 1960 and started operating soon after completion. The irrigated area has an altitude of 850m.

The average plot size in Nyamaropa irrigation scheme is about three acres, but there are farmers with six acres and some with only one. This is a result of the historical development of the scheme and the plot allocation system. Each 'normal' family was allocated four acres, while widows were given two acres. 'Good' farmers were rewarded with an extra two acres to make a maximum of six acres, but women who lost their husbands lost part of their land and remained with a standard two acres for widows. This changed in practice after independence and widows could retain all the land their husbands had.

The common crops grown in Nyamaropa are maize, tobacco, cotton, wheat, beans, tomatoes and other vegetables. Farmers in the irrigation scheme tend to grow more food crops during seasons that follow bad or dry seasons to cater for their food needs first. Tobacco is grown by about a third of irrigation farmers, and this is on less than 100 ha per season (see Table 1 below).

Table 1
HECTARAGE PER CROP, NYAMAROPA IRRIGATION SCHEME, 1991–95.

Season	Maize (ha)	Cotton (ha)	**Tobacco (ha)**	Beans (ha)	Wheat (ha)	Others (ha)
1990/1	146,2	194,1	**47,7**	119	76,9	28 (tomato)
1991/92	140	181,2	**73,7**	nil*	22	no rec.
1992/93	189,2	141,3	**61,0**	191	91,9	no rec.
1993/94	190	175,4	**62,2**	89,1	130	no rec.
1994/5	177	193,6	**65,4**	50	?	5.5

**There were negligible pockets of land with beans this season, but the crop did not do well.*
Source: Agritex, 'Nyamaropa Irrigation Scheme' (Unpubl., 1995).

The tobacco nursery classroom

Around August 1995, I visited a piece of land where farmers had cleared dirt and grass and made beds for their tobacco nurseries. There were about five families with three, four or five beds each, patiently waiting for water to arrive from the dam. The water controller had seen a snake at the canal gate (7 km away) early in the morning when he went to open it for water, and did not want to disturb it. He had come back to report the intrusion to his Agritex bosses, so farmers knew that water would be late that day, but they waited patiently, not wanting to take any chances by leaving and finding others already planting.

After about an hour of waiting, chatting and laughing, water was seen approaching from the corner of one of the tertiary canals from which farmers took it. Everybody stood up and scrambled for their containers to get water. They were using family labour to do most of the work. One of the elderly farmers said that it is good to have an adult do the work rather than sending a child or a worker: sometimes they do not know when to stop irrigating, or they do not irrigate enough especially when the nursery is covered with grass and they think that water has gone through when in fact it is just resting on the grass.

It all seemed like a big class or lesson where farmers were teaching each other how to plant tobacco. They were in rows of beds close to each other, and kept correcting each other when they saw others doing something wrong, or checking with each other that they were doing the right thing. They were planting burley tobacco varieties called Banket A1 and Banket 102. Two of the families were with their children, and they numbered about five people each, all helping each other out, especially because it was during school holidays.

I joined and worked with one of my key informants, Mai Hakutangwi, a widow, who was working with her daughter preparing four nursery beds. First, they would water the bed a little, then take cleaner water from the canal which they 'purified' using *madhuku/amaqhiye* (head covers, made out of different types of cloth), then they would take the clean water and put it in a spray bucket. The cloth would catch most of the dirt that they said would disturb the seed during germination. Then they would add the seed to the water and spray the mix onto the wet bed.

There was no soil cover put on the seed, but some more water is applied. Then the wet bed was covered with a layer of long-stalk dry grass. Farmers did these things differently: some said that you do not have to put too much grass because there would be no air and light coming in, and others said that if there is a thick layer of grass all the moisture will be retained and the temperature will be ideal for germination, while a thin grass layer will mean that the bed will dry up fast, and that would be a big risk to take especially with the little water that was there. I planted one nursery bed for Mai Hakutangwi, and was told to cover it fast or else it would not germinate. They helped me do that, and then added some more water over the grass layer. They kept arguing and teaching each other about how much water they needed to put before and after planting, at what speed they have to walk while planting so that the seedlings will not be too crowded or too spread out (one of the extension workers later explained this issue to me and said that they have to keep teaching farmers about 'seed rate' problems because some farmers plant in such a way that there are too many seedlings in one small bed, which result in poor quality seedlings). They all seemed to enjoy it, joking and laughing.

The long road through the field, the barn and the baling box to the auction floors had begun.

Agronomic requirements and the land problem

Agritex staff in Nyamaropa irrigation scheme believe that producing burley is a challenging task for many farmers. They said that farmers have to rotate the crop well with other crops and not grow it on the same piece of land for successive seasons. Johnson says that burley should not be grown more than once every two years on heavy soils or once in three years on lighter soils, and adds, 'cotton should not immediately precede burley. Maize will particularly benefit from following burley' (Johnson, n.d.).

Nyamaropa farmers have small plots and sometimes rotations are difficult to maintain, so they end up swapping plots with those farmers who do not grow tobacco for religious, labour shortage, or other reasons. But this too is not always easy to arrange. Some non-tobacco growers look for tobacco growers who need land to grow their tobacco just before the season starts, and give their plots to the non-tobacco grower to plant either their maize or cotton. After that, when tobacco is removed, the tobacco farmer usually wants to stay on in that field claiming that his or her fertiliser is still in the field, but the plotholder refuses on grounds that the deal was for a single crop only. There is a belief among farmers that tobacco producers are cheated in this way, but still need such exchanges to give their plots a chance to recover.

Agritex staff said that the normal way of planting tobacco is that farmers have to plough, harrow, break clods, make ridges or holes for planting, treat the land with EDB, a chemical that kills eelworms, wait for 21 days, then apply compound C or B fertiliser, depending on the type of soil, and then transplant. From then on the crop grows well if watered and fertilised adequately (Extension Supervisor Run'anga, 14 March, 1996, personal communication). From the field to the barn, they have to cover the ripened leaves with a damp cloth or sack to avoid sun burn. Inside the barn they have to keep *mikangara/imithando* (sticks on which they hang the leaves to cure) either close or separate depending on the weather outside. Otherwise tobacco will either dry prematurely or have barn rot (Extension Worker Mtudza, 18 March, 1996, personal communication).

The following are quotations from burley tobacco growers in Nyamaropa irrigation scheme who have encountered problems in handling the crop. The quotations given by case study farmers offer their own views of the situation as translated by the author, and illustrate the various ways they interact with tobacco production and curing technology during the tobacco season.

I grow tobacco because it is one of the most lucrative crops you can grow in the irrigation scheme here . . . if given a choice and enough money to buy fertilisers, I would grow tobacco as my only cash crop . . . cotton needs a lot of labour like tobacco itself, but tobacco gives more money from the same amount of land if grown well. But it also needs a lot of knowledge on how to grow it well, cure it the right way, and bale it before taking it to Mutare to the [auction] floors . . . you need to know when to transplant the seedlings, and before that, you must treat the beds well with EDB. In the field you have to transplant it well and it must have sufficient water, not too much water, tobacco does not like too much water. You have to apply the right fertiliser at the right time, but we have had extension staff saying that we do not apply fertiliser the right way, that for the top we have to dig deep and put it near the roots, but I cannot do all that, I do not have the time and the labour to do all that, so I put the fertiliser on top, in a small hole sometimes, and it will get to the roots, but they still have to teach us well. You have to apply enough fertiliser, and know when to start harvesting, how many leaves you harvest at a time and which ones. One of the most crucial stages in the whole process is how you handle the crop inside the barn. The quality of the barn, how much air gets in, and how much moisture is around during curing is very important. We have heard the White men who came here saying that some of our barns are too open and allow too much air which dries the crop, some barns are said to be too closed and congested, which can make the tobacco rot. You can have a good crop in the field, but if you mess up in the barn, you will not get anything. We went to Banket [Research Station] for a course on growing burley a couple of years ago, and I learnt most of the tricks there . . . now I know how to cure it the right way, but you cannot get it right all the time. When I want it to turn brownish, which they seem to like, I spray it with some warm water, then cover it with some of my old bed covers, blankets or sacks, so that it cooks up nicely. Then I take it out and bale it after tying it into bundles. When you make a mistake, you will learn the hard way at the floors when your tobacco is bought at a low price. But I do not trust those people at the floors, they steal our tobacco and go and sell it with higher prices . . . They move so fast, and in a short space of time they have given your tobacco a price and they are off to the next bale . . . I spend months working on my tobacco and someone in one minute tells me that its worth US$0,30 a kilogramme . . . why do you think a lot of people did not grow tobacco this year? Its not that they do not want to, its not easy, and you have to be careful with it, but what you get may not depend on how you treated it, you have no control over the selling price . . . at the end its a gamble, and you only grow it when you think you can win . . . some years back, in the other system [the consortium system when they sold to one buyer with guaranteed prices for the crop] we would get good prices and sometimes a bonus long after we sold our tobacco . . . but now you never know . . . (Mai Hakutangwi, widow and burley tobacco grower in Nyamaropa, personal communication, 20 Feb., 1996).

Mai Hakutangwi here 'acted' as a representative of several other burley producers in Nyamaropa who faced similar situations regarding their crop. This does not, however, remove the diversity and heterogeneity of various farmers involved in tobacco production in the area. She was aware of constraints at different stages in burley tobacco production affecting farmers in different ways, together with the pitfalls and uncertainty in curing and selling the crop. She worked with her family most of the time, and hired casual labour at a daily rate of $5–$10 per person during harvesting, hanging up the tobacco in the barn and tying it into bundles and baling it. She had recently bought a baling box for $800 to avoid borrowing one from her colleagues.

In 1995, Mai Hakutangwi says she grossed $24 000 from her two acres of burley. She estimated that she spent around $6 000 on inputs, including labour. Estimates by producers of income and expenditure are often unreliable and the amounts here do not play a crucial part in the analysis. What I am more interested in is the way she interacted with the whole process of producing the crop, and with technological challenges such as those of curing.

Generally, Nyamaropa farmers have their own special or specific problems. The area is low (with an altitude of 850m), and most of the time it is hot and dry during the tobacco curing months of March, April and May. For most of the smaller producers, when tobacco is in the barn this is one of the most trying stages in the whole process of burley tobacco production. They regard barn handling as the critical time of the gamble they call tobacco curing, a time when one either creates the opportunity to make money or loses the value of the crop. While curing is a crucial part of the process, if it is done well, there is one more stage that needs subtle technical know-how on how to deal with possible failures.

In Nyamaropa some women specialised in tobacco grading and worked for, and advised, others at this stage of the process. About grading, Kille says, 'Having worked hard to produce a good crop of burley, many growers do not realise its full financial potential due to poor grading and presentation' (Kille, May, 1987, 1).

This goes to show how important this stage of burley production is for farmers. The gender dimension in this respect needs special mention in that this is a major cash crop, and the tendency is that men take over crops that have more commercial value and leave the rest to women to deal with. The expertise that women control in this regard should give them some advantage in decision-making within their homes.

Farmer Matombo had been growing burley tobacco since the mid-sixties. He was known to be one of the good producers of the crop, but had had some lean spells in recent years. He was keen to take up farmer-friendly technological methods of curing the crop when all conditions did

not seem conducive to a good curing atmosphere. I had detailed interviews with him about his methods.

> When you are a farmer the one important thing you have to bear in mind is that you are taking a big risk. You may have enough fertilisers, but it may not rain, and the irrigation scheme's dam may not have enough water, so you lose out. But this may be okay in that in the case of maize, you may get a few cobs. When you grow tobacco as your main cash crop, then you must know that your risks of low returns are doubled. This is not a crop for experiments. I will tell you something . . . tobacco is a very good crop if you know how to handle it, but the trick is that you must know exactly what you are doing. When you plant the nursery, you have to treat the beds with EDB nicely, and you must let it cool off well before you put down the seed, then you have to cover it with grass and then water it. You have to keep watering otherwise if it dries up the seed may not germinate. When tobacco is in the field you have to apply the right amounts of fertiliser. Then comes the crucial part of harvesting and curing in the barn . . . I will tell you a story that took place here. There was a time here when it was very hot and dry, and it became very difficult to cure tobacco. The Whites in their big farms and barns have the things they need to produce good quality tobacco, but we have to try other plans. So I heard from one of them in the first auction sales for the season that he had put his tobacco in hot water to 'cook' it so that it would get the right colour which buyers seemed to prefer. He got a good price and I saw it, so when I came home, I took large bundles of my tobacco, and put hot water in a big dish and then dipped it in. I then hung it out to dry a bit, and put it in a closed place to retain part of the moisture. Later I baled it and took it to the floors. It got good prices, except that prices were generally low, but it did better than the bales that had not been 'cooked' . . . the thing is that you have to try something new to get your way around those guys, sometimes it is not clear what exactly they want, is it the colour? Is it the weight? What is it? If they tell us we will give it to them if we can? (Matombo, 19 Aug., 1995).

Official proclamations of what to avoid in tobacco production, especially at the crucial curing stages, and how farmers' mistakes were picked, do not often address the farmer's specific needs, the constraints they face, and do almost nothing to help understand the various ways in which the farmer tries to tackle his or her tobacco-related problems. In a letter to burley producers, a burley tobacco specialist from Banket Research Station once pointed out that farmers should follow advice they get from specialists and Agritex staff in their areas (Agritex files, 1989).

Within their circles, however, farmers have their own experts on tobacco production. During the early stages of the 1996 curing season for example, I learnt that there were women in Nyamaropa who were specialising in tobacco grading. One extension worker in the irrigation scheme told of how women had become specialists in the trade, and were being contracted by other farmers to grade their tobacco for a price

(Extension worker Sithole, 18 March, 1996, personal communication). These are areas of specialisation that the extension department or the tobacco association itself can exploit for the benefit of farmers in the area by giving such local experts a chance to teach others their skills and help the external experts learn something from them. Joint workshop-type of training where there is exchange of knowledge can help both parties (local and external tobacco experts) share vital information. Farmers may especially learn about what buyers of their crop really look for when they buy tobacco in the auction floors.

Organisational issues

The organisation of tobacco farmers has been a problematic area in Nyamaropa. There is the Air-Cured Tobacco Association (ACTA), which has elected representatives, called tobacco councillors, resident in various districts where there is burley production. They are supposed to liaise with farmers on one side and dealers or merchants on the other, while representing farmers' interests.

In Nyamaropa, farmers say that they do not get to hear much about tobacco marketing systems because their councillor does not communicate very well with them on what is taking place in the industry. The President of ACTA, together with the Chief Executive, visited Nyamaropa irrigation scheme after the 1995 season, which turned out to be a disaster for many farmers. There had been word that many farmers wanted to stop growing tobacco because of its poor prices. Some smaller tobacco growers expressed concern about representation at national bodies or associations. This sprung from the fact that they are in the same organisation of burley producers with large-scale farmers. The feeling was that they have different interests, and may not be fully understood by their bigger colleagues whose priority in farming is to make money, and not just to survive. Plot sizes were cited as the main distinguishing feature between the two types of farmers, and the hint was that they were too different to be in the same organisation.

Marketing blues

The next section looks at the 'trials and tribulations' of tobacco marketing encountered by small-holder farmers in auction floors, based on two visits to the Mutare auction floors for the 1995 marketing season. Mutare is almost 200 km away from their homes. Some farmers could not afford to travel to and fro if their tobacco was not bought on the first day of auctions, and had to find accommodation somewhere in town. I travelled with one tobacco farmer, whose production, handling and marketing I was following closely. We left Nyamaropa at 5 am, other farmers had already gone by buses which left as early as 3 or 4 am. We got to the floors at 8 am.

and found people waiting for the business to start. When it did, there were low prices for almost all grades, small-holder farmers were complaining. They argued that their representative was not helping them at all; that their large-scale commercial colleagues were getting all the help they needed and their prices were always high. Some employees at the floors said that there was war among buyers concerning who wants to buy how much and how. The story was that Tabex wanted to push farmers towards a monopoly of the market, others wanted the market to be open, some wanted the auction floors closed.

Some buyers were said to have links with some bigger farmers to keep their prices good. These were just allegations going around the floors among small-holders. Some said that large-scale farmers applied too much fertiliser, and their tobacco had high nicotine content. Small-holders' tobacco was better in that respect because of less chemical inputs. Some small-holder farmers were withdrawing their bales claiming that their tobacco did not get the price it was worth, and they waited for another auction day with better prices. The licensed buyers, class A, were as follows: Tabex, Zimbabwe Leaf Tobaccos, Stancom, Dibrill Brothers (jointly with Mashonaland Tobacco Company), and Export. Then there were what were called Pin Hookers — merchants who bought tobacco, stock up, and then resold to larger buyers when prices were good. Some farmers were saying that Tabex was 'killing' auction prices on purpose so that it would force the industry to revert to the old consortium system that they used some years back, when it had a lot of control over producer prices. At the close of business on 26 June, the maximum price at which tobacco had been bought was US$2, 70 per kg, and the minimum was US$0, 05 per kg.

Most of the tobacco was bought before mid-day. Some of the smallholder farmers from Nyamaropa did not have anywhere to sleep since they had no relatives in town. There were times when there were mix-ups in selling days and they had to spend longer periods sleeping either at relatives' or friends' places around town, or in the open sheds at the bus terminus.

To add to the suffering, tobacco sales take place in winter in Zimbabwe, and farmers have to withstand the cold from the bus stations to the auction floors and then to the bus terminus for the night bungled up together, especially women farmers, to share the warmth. Normally, after selling they can get their cheques in the afternoon of the selling day, between 1 and 3 pm. However, it is still not easy for them to make bank transactions and then catch the bus home in a few hours. Some of them prefer to take the bus home instead, and give their cheques to local businessmen with whom they make special arrangements about payments.

After mid-day at the auction floors, only Black small-holder farmers can be seen loitering around the auction floors, mainly at the reception

area. Here there is a restaurant from where they hardly buy any food because they say it is too expensive. Instead, they go to a kiosk outside the auction floors yard for refreshments, waiting for their cheques to be processed. When the time finally comes, names are called out, the farmer goes and signs for the cheque (they can pick up a relative's or a friend's cheque that way too) and leaves. Some of them smile at the figures on their cheques, others grimace, and almost all of them are curious to know what the next farmer got. This becomes big news at home back in the irrigation scheme where some figures are purposely inflated.

In Nyamaropa itself, the rest of the 1995 marketing season was characterised by complaints from farmers some of whom said that they were not going to grow tobacco during the next season, but they would wait and watch how others perform. The ACTA leaders came to meet Nyamaropa farmers after the end of the marketing season to discuss their common problems as farmers. The following section is an extract from the meeting they held with growers in Nyamaropa.

Before the meeting I met the tobacco councillor. He told me that the Zimbabwe Tobacco Association (ZTA) is based in Harare and is the top organisation for all tobacco growers, including growers of both burley and virginia. Then there is the Flue-Cured Tobacco Association (FCTA) and ACTA. He went on to point out a few things about their industry to me:

'Auctions are mainly for burley and virginia. The marketing system has been the sore spot for most tobacco growers; in 1980 there was a consortium system dominated by one buyer, Tabex. There were problems with time, the buyer never bought more than 2 000 bales a day. Auctions are faster, but there are problems with buyers too. Some buyers know each other and seem to set particular prices for the day, and there is not enough competition among them, with Tabex still dominating. The Burley Marketing Association (BMA) is the marketing agency for ACTA.'

He went on to say, 'Small producers are not in a good position, they have small pieces of land, small production levels, less knowledge of the crop as seen by their poor grading skills. To make matters worse, buyers are said to link up and discuss how to get the best deals from farmers who do not seem to be that united. Some foreign buyers are rumoured to have been refused entry to buy tobacco (but this could not be confirmed), with the excuse that there was very little tobacco this year. Councillors deal with all aspects of tobacco production and marketing, recruitment of labour, training, and payment, etc. They basically lead districts. I am in district 9, and I have been here as a councillor for 14 years. I have also worked in the same capacity in Malawi, where small-holder farmers produce a lot of high quality tobacco. The structure of our organisation is such that at the bottom there is the grower, then the tobacco committee which organises farmers on grievances, on transport, etc. At this level Agritex assists farmers in production, treatment and handling of the crop. We work with Agritex although they think that we sideline

them . . . There are about 300 burley tobacco growers in Nyamaropa irrigation and dryland area' (Basira, tobacco councillor, Nyamaropa area, 19 Sept., 1995, personal communication).

The two tobacco executives had come to talk to farmers about how the previous season had gone, how the crop was bought and problems related to production and marketing. The first to speak was the President, he said:

> Thank you for coming to the meeting. Why are there so few women in the meeting? They are the farmers and they're the best . . . This year we had a poor season. Many people are being blamed for many things. Last season the main problem was poor rains, we had rains to plant the crop but no humidity to cure it. Due to the poor weather we had a poor crop. We must remember that an early crop is better . . . We get our money better than the way we get it for other crops, and that is as soon as we sell. If everything is good, with a good crop and good grading, you get good money. Last season prices were low as a result of a poor crop from a poor rainfall season. All you experienced farmers will agree with me that our last crop was bad. Some farmers now want us to go back to the old consortium system. We changed from that system because one buyer could do what he wanted with prices. Only in 1991 did we get good prices from that buyer. Since then rains have been poor, leading to poor prices, so we cannot blame the marketing system because of the weather. If we have a good rain season and a good crop, prices are going to be better. We have to keep the present auction system and see how it performs. Its an expensive system, but we are assisted by the Tobacco Trade Association. They are keen to get good tobacco to sell abroad, so they are assisting us to try and improve. We need you to assist us through your local representatives and tell us what you would like us to do. Your views will be taken into consideration. There are people growing seedlings to help supply those who have no water to prepare nurseries, and some of them are even offering transport. They will help you help yourselves, so you can talk to your representatives about it. Next month on the 20th of August we are having a congress in Harare where we will talk about the marketing system, some farmers want to go back to the consortium system, so we want you to discuss it and select two people to represent you at the congress, to be three with your councillor. They will be taken care of, but anyone who wants to come on their own funding can certainly do so. They will be free to listen, discuss and talk about tobacco business, but they will not be allowed to vote. Each district will be allowed to have private discussions. It is unfortunate that we cannot accommodate all of you in the congress. We understand that this area has some internal problems, so we are here to discuss them with you, you live here and experience the problems. Thank you for listening to me.

Farmers did not immediately respond to what he said. There was an air of dejection among farmers. They had expected to hear some good

news such as promises of better prices for the following marketing season. The Irrigation Extension Officer then stood up and urged farmers to select their representatives for the congress. Again there were moments of uncomfortable silence with grumbling among the men. Then the Chief Executive, apparently in an attempt to break the silence, said, 'I know that you say that you do not get enough representation in the congress and in other meetings in town.' He explained the costs of having a congress and the fact that they cannot afford to have many people.

Afterwards there was a heated exchange between farmers and the president on several issues. First, there was the issue of representation. One farmer questioned the lack of representation of farmers' interests during the selling of their crop. The president's response was that farmers should liaise more with their elected representatives themselves, and not expect anyone to do it for them. He added, however, that he was going to look into the issue.

Second, there was the issue of speed during tobacco auctioning. One of the prominent tobacco farmers in Nyamaropa, Dziwira, asked why buyers seemed to rush through a line of bales without much deliberation of what a bale might cost. The president said that they are even faster where bales are the same quality, and are slower where there is more variety. There were more questions from farmers about poor prices for seemingly good quality tobacco.

Third, farmer Matombo asked why one particular buyer, Tabex, was dominating burley tobacco buying, and why producers could not boycott him if he tried to set low prices. The president said

> That's a good point, many farmers feel that way, and say he has taken advantage of us. But again when small buyers do not buy our crop, he is there to take it. This year one company bought one third of the crop, Tabex bought half of all our crop. In 1992/3 Tabex bought everything. In 1993/4 it bought 75 per cent of it, and this year 50 per cent, showing a gradual drop and a bit more competition. Hopefully, with a good season and a good crop this coming season, we can get good prices.

After this there were nominations for representatives for a congress to discuss marketing problems for burley producers. Two men were selected for the task.

The proceedings in the congress were all in English, and although small-holder farmer's representatives could follow the discussions, they did not take any active part. Those who did, did not sound comfortable with it, and were laughed at by other participants. What became clear was that some of the problems affecting burley tobacco producers are peculiar to each group of farmers. That is, there are problems that affect small-holder producers, such as land size and crop rotations, barn construction and curing methods, which do not necessarily affect large-scale producers.

at least not the same way. Small-holder tobacco producers have smaller units of production and their scale of operation is therefore restricted by the amount of production. When they see what their large-scale colleagues receive from their tobacco sales, they feel that it is not fair. They know that they have smaller pieces of land, and argue that at least the quality of the crop should give them higher prices than they normally get from buyers.

The congress voted for the continuation of the auction system, and some farmers thought that they were not going to get anything from it this time. But still they prepared their land for the next crop.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The fact that most of the tobacco grown in Zimbabwe is grown by large-scale commercial farmers does not necessarily reduce the importance of small-holder tobacco production among communal area farmers. The role played by small-holder farmers in keeping the fluttering burley industry alive is not clearly discernible for want of detailed data not only on the role tobacco plays in their lives, but also on how they perceive technology for tobacco production. This also involves how they handle the crop in their fields, in barns and in the auction floors where they assume the most passive roles in the whole process.

The Shangwe people and their Inyoka tobacco industry, are an example of a people with their own type of indigenous crop processing technology. They had developed a lucrative business and could have grown bigger had they adapted their technologies to the new demands of a growing urban market and new tastes for different varieties of processed tobacco. They might have developed into a modern tobacco growing region had they been accorded the necessary institutional and infrastructural conditions given to large-scale farmers who went into tobacco production after them.

Their tobacco was in demand, and the way they secured their markets showed some dynamism before the demise of the industry. Admittedly, their technologies, especially in curing the crop, were not developed by modern western standards, and were overtaken by new tastes. However, it must be emphasised that there are lessons to be learnt from the Shangwe tobacco producers. One gets the impression from Kosmin (1977) that they were not assisted in any fundamental way. The denigrating attitude to their whole industry can be seen as a deliberate strategy to bring the industry to its knees, and it worked. Today it seems as if they hardly had anything to offer in tobacco production, curing and marketing.

Burley tobacco production in Zimbabwe today plays second fiddle to virginia tobacco, not just because the latter is grown largely by commercial

farmers but because it is more lucrative to produce than the former. Small-holder farmers who are burley producers have been hit hard by poor prices and some have decided to abandon the crop for a while, taking stock of their losses. Their main problem, as identified by Agritex staff and tobacco farmer's representatives, is in poor quality tobacco.

Mai Hakutangwi's interaction with tobacco technology in the way she perceived the crop's production shows that she was aware of the pitfalls that waited for her in the process, and saw tobacco production as a challenge and a gamble. Her use of water to spray and then cover the crop helped her get the expected quality of the leaf which could sell better. Like Matombo who 'cooked' his tobacco in hot water, she aimed at meeting standards which were set by international buyers of the crop.

Tobacco marketing had been an uncertain part of the industry for some time. Nyamaropa farmers believed that they were getting a raw deal from tobacco merchants. The reason why they felt robbed was that they did not understand why buyers rushed through their bales and seemingly randomly gave unjustifiable prices to their tobacco in a flash. Their marketing blues were compounded by lack of accommodation in towns and the process of payment which had another problem of making them spend about two nights in the streets of Mutare, waiting for their cheques to be cashed so that they could buy some groceries and farming inputs before going back home. It could take several months before farmers got their full earnings from crops such as cotton, although they did receive part of the payment when they sold the crop.

On a related note, one can see that the technology of tobacco production, while easy to grasp by some farmers, requires a lot of learning. It is a scientific process in which farmers themselves are involved from the day they plant the nursery to the auction floors. There is the technological facet which has a physical face to it, involving, for example, barn construction, curing methods, and grading. Then there is the cognitive side of technological knowledge which some women in the irrigation scheme seem to have captured. Gendered relations surrounding the curing and grading of tobacco have a significant bearing on several technological aspects of the process of handling tobacco. For example, the larger part of barn construction is a male preserve because it involves cutting huge logs and climbing on top of the barn to thatch it, and women are traditionally not allowed to climb on trees, huts and other high structures. But who uses the barn most when it is complete? It is the women who have the technical knowledge of curing tobacco. This does not, however, mean that men cannot cure tobacco: some of them are quite good at it too. Probably as a result of the monotony involved in the process, most men were not as active as their women counterparts when it came to the curing stage. Those who were active were the well-known producers who had a

reputation to keep. Most men delegated that task to women who were known locally to be better at it than men. However, there were differences between households in the allocation of tasks.

On the whole, tobacco production as a farmer's full-time activity is a scientific endeavour with a skewed bias towards the need to understand its sometimes complex technological requirements. A good tobacco crop in the field can turn out to be nothing in the auction floors if it is not cured the right way, and a well-cured but mixed crop that is poorly graded can earn a farmer far less than the whole crop is worth. Small-holder farmers have various technical, labour and social problems in their process of tobacco production. They have adapted new ways, sometimes unconventional or radical, to deal with the need to produce a good crop that meets the high standards of international buyers. Those who 'cook' their tobacco are no different from those who just spray water on it to turn it to the required shade of colour and texture.

Basically, it is a matter of trying to achieve a certain acceptable level of curing the crop. Farmers have different resources available to them in the production process, and those who have depth of one or the other of different technical skills will use it to their advantage when the need arises. They all seem to know that tobacco production is an inherently technical process, but are willing to play the game as knowledgeable and capable beings able to find their own niche within the myriad of other possibilities of how to handle tobacco in the field, the barn, into the bale and to the floors.

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