

Spreading Economic Disparity and “Piecework Jobs” among Households in Agrarian Villages of Bemba-speaking People in Northern Zambia

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Research Background

The Bemba-speaking people who live in the northern part of Zambia have maintained their subsistence farming economy. They use two different types of farming systems. One is traditional slash and burn cultivation called “citemene.” The other is maize cultivation, called “faumu,” which was introduced by the Zambian government in the 1980s. Maize is main cash crop in Zambia. Some households have recently stopped traditional slash and burn farming and begun to concentrate on maize cultivation. In addition, they begun expanding their economic activities. These households can earn more cash than other self-sufficient households. Previous research has explained that the Bemba people tended to avoid differentiating themselves for fear of making others jealous. This behavior resulted in minimizing economic gaps between households, and has been called a “leveling mechanism” by other researchers (Kakeya and Sugiyama, 1985). The present situation, however, shows increasing economic gaps.



Maize farming field

Research Purpose

The aim of this research is to document the actual economic disparity that exists, and examine the relationship between the employers' households and employees' households. This research focuses on the wage labor called "piecework," for which some villagers employ other villagers. The ultimate goal of the research is to clarify recent use of the "leveling mechanism."



Villagers working on "piecework" in a large maize field

Results and Findings

The villagers were busy with maize cultivation from December to March, so more job opportunities were available at that time. The work involved performing agricultural tasks in the maize farming fields. The workers could receive any type of items as compensation, including cash, maize, fish, and alcohol. The employer households could afford to pay for piecework because they sold their surplus maize. They relied on their neighbors' labor to keep their large farms. The employee households did not have enough money or food, because they did not produce enough to be self-sufficient. During the period of pre-harvest, these villagers could not sustain themselves without the cash or food earned from piecework. This meant that each side depended on the other side to survive. In this sense, mutual dependence through piecework was the key to food security in this area.



After piecework, these women received maize as compensation

Implications and Scope for Further Research

In future research, I would like to consider how the “leveling mechanism” works in the present situation. On the one hand, employee households were busy doing piecework, and they had no time to cultivate gardens for their own use. As a result, they could not maintain their livelihoods without piecework. On the other hand, the employer households expanded their maize farms by using the piecework of neighboring villagers, and they could grow more maize to make more profits. This led to greater economic disparity.