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value of bananas among the Haya people
of Bukoba, northwestern Tanzania**

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“They needed an ethnographer: That is why they missed it!” Exploring the value of bananas among the Haya people of Bukoba, northwestern Tanzania

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Introductory background

This paper is a reflection on the reality of a development intervention intended to “save the livelihoods of the people” by “updating” the banana varieties among the Haya people of northwestern Tanzania. The intervention was simply because the banana yields dropped due to pests, diseases, adverse weather conditions, and deterioration in soil fertility (de Weerd 2003:3). The estimations are that the banana yields fell from ten tons per hectare to about four tons per hectare (*idem*). From the decline, it was observed that the farmers started turning to roots and cereal crops as alternative staple food. Bananas are a staple food for the Haya people.

According to De Weerd (2003:3), most of the bananas cultivated by the Haya people are East African Highland Bananas, which consist of over 50 varieties that have been grown traditionally for centuries. Gallez *et al.* (2004:9) argue that not only are there local cultivars that have been cultivated in the area for centuries, but also the so-called exotic cultivars from Uganda (for example, the Gros Michel and Pisang Awak) and from other regions in Tanzania (for example, *Mshale* from Kilimanjaro, and *Mtwisha* from Arusha).

However, due to increased pest, disease pressures on banana production, high levels of susceptibility to diseases of local endemic varieties, and lack of chemical inputs, formal introduction of new hybrid bananas began in 1997 through the efforts of the Kagera Community Development Program (KCDP), whose goal was to increase farmers’ food and income security by improving banana productivity (Nkuba *et al.* 2006). KCDP imported, multiplied, and massively diffused Superior Banana Varieties (SBV) among the Haya people. Much as the whole activity of bringing in SBV involved 21 cultivars, a few hybrids spread most because of high acceptance by farmers: FHIA-01, FHIA-03, FHIA-17, FHIA-23, Pelipita, Tangambi KM 5, and SH 3436-9. The first banana hybrids were bred by the Fundación Hondureña de Investigación Agrícola (FHIA). The International Transit Centre (ITC) of the International Network for the Improvement of Banana and Plantain (INIBAP) based at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium supplied the plants.

The preoccupation of the interventionists was based on low productivity due to pests, diseases, and lack of chemical inputs. And as for any sound development intervention, the idea was to reverse this negative trend of low production to higher production. Already, according to Nkuba *et al.* (2006:1), there is happiness with the results of the initial on-farm testing that show that the new banana varieties yielded a bunch weight of 18.9 kg, compared with 9.7 kg for local varieties, with these varieties being acceptable

to farmers for their multiple uses (consumption as fruit; preparation by cooking, roasting, or drying; and fermentation for the production of beverages) and good marketability.

What this paper wants to bring out is the fact that for the Haya people, bananas do not have only a productivity value. In this paper I show that apart from the nutritional value, bananas have other values, such as those related to social functions (food security for children, gifting, status of had of household and visitor), ritualistic values (socialization as men and women, relationship with nature, celebrations), and teleologic values.

Much of what is presented here is part of a draft monograph (Kamanzi, forthcoming), *Connectedness in evolution: The discourse of modernity on the ecosophy of the Haya people in Tanzania*, particularly the chapter about the *Kibanja*, which literally means the banana plantation where there is a home. The paper, after this background information, presents the reality of *kibanja*, in which issues of the *musonge* (Haya traditional house), *kituulo* (Haya traditional burial grounds), and medicinal herbs are presented. In another section, there is presentation about the bananas with their different values (nutritional and social, ritualistic, and teleologic). The paper winds up with a section of what the interventionists missed.

Kibanja

Life of the Haya people is centered on a *kibanja*. This is, basically, a plot with a *musonge* (traditional Haya house), burial grounds, some shrubs/weeds, and bananas and coffee trees (some more crops depending on the season: Beans and maize). In describing the physical outlook of the *kibanja*, Reining (1962:62) writes:

The holdings average just under two acres in size; the range is from one acre to four acres. The trees of the *kibanja* are immediately adjacent to those of the neighbouring *bibanja*, but boundaries are known and demarcated by paths, special boundary plants or fences. Virtually all Haya are domiciled on land of this type in one of the thousand or more villages ...

Cory and Hartnoll (1945:137) point out that clan-land can be acquired by inheritance only. This customary land is handed to one member of the family as owner who, if he wants to dispose of it, he is restricted by the rules of the family tenure because he may not sell or give away the plantation without the consent of the members of the paternal family; he is simply a custodian of the land. According to Reining (1962), some 66% of Haya land is re-allocated through inheritance or pre-inheritance gift between landowners and their designated primary heirs. The percentage distribution of occupancy of *bibanja* is such that 83.5% is owner-occupant (the landholder is at the same time the owner occupier) and 16.5% tenant occupant. In the tenant occupant system, an owner of the land can let it out to the tenant; again, the owner can hire it to a tenant. The following table gives details of the *Kibanja* tenure system in terms of percentage distribution of occupancy:

Table 1 Distribution of occupancy

	Occupant type	Percentage
Owner-occupant	By inheritance	48%
	By gift	18.5%
	By purchase	17%
Tenant occupant	By letting out	9.5%
	By hiring	7%

Source: Adapted from Reining (1962:63)

Mushonge

In the *Kibanja* there are two types of homes: The home for the living and the home for the dead. The home for the living is called *Mushonge*: An integrated house, that is, the wall and the roof are undifferentiated, all constructed out of reeds, poles, and grass. The word *Mushonge* originates from the word *Mushongole*, which in Kihaya language literally means somebody who is wealthy, powerful and authoritative. In fact, the *Mushonge* is only for the head of a household; once it is for this purpose, then it is called *Nyaluju*, literally meaning the “big house”: This implies that this becomes the centre of everything (order and status) for the family. It is a permanent icon as seat of the head of the family; it is occupied by the head of family for all generations. *Nyaluju* is sacred; all important events, such as sending off a bride, receiving dowry, wedding ceremonies, etc. take place in it.

Figure 1 *Mushonge* house



Source: Lwamayange (2008:64)

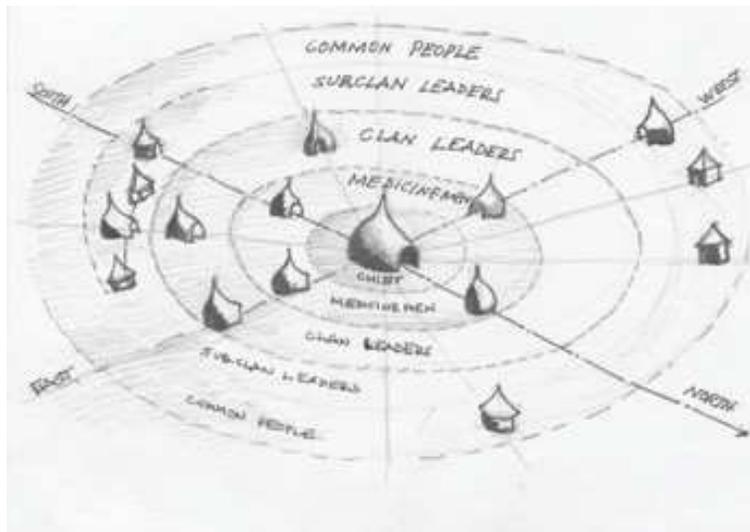
The *Mushonge* is surrounded by a banana plantation; in a homestead, it is the biggest and *Orushwi* (the apex) is highest in the settlement. *Eilembo*, which is an area in front of the house used for relaxation and food drying, is kept free by being cleaned every day.

During the construction of *Mushonge*, every stage was accompanied by spiritual functions. For example, land acquisition and setting out the construction required sacrifices to the ancestors: A goat was slaughtered; during the supply of materials for construction, they were to be cleansed by smearing charms; other smaller stages, such as finishing the apex, reed weaving, and others, goats were slaughtered and beer was drunk.

The poles in *Mushonge* are used to define spaces. There is a permanent definition of spaces for men and women: Men always stay in front and women at the back of *Mushonge*. There are also permanent spaces for cooking, for animals, and for honouring ancestors. Letting aside the permanently defined spaces, other spaces are created according to the need. For example, sleeping space for the visitors will be put in place using movable screens. In actual fact, during the day the front part of the *Mushonge* is not partitioned; it is filled with several poles, which generally, are positioned in designated positions that can easily facilitate space composition when needed.

One of the interesting things to know about the *Mushonge* is the reflection of social hierarchy among the Haya people. A simple principle is: The larger the *Mushonge*, the higher the person is in the hierarchy. The one who had the largest *Mushonge* was the chief, followed by the medicine men, after whom came the clan leaders, sub-clan leaders, and finally the common people. And this had influence on the settlement of the Haya people: The higher in the hierarchy, the closer to the chief. Thus, at the centre, it was the chief, close him the medicine man, followed by the clan leaders, sub-clan leaders, and the common people. Lwamayange (2008:62) captures this reality of hierarchy in a sketch.

Figure 2 Hierarchy in the *Mushongo* organisation in the Kibanja



Source: Lwamayange (2008:62)

Kituulo

The home for the dead is called *kituulo*. The word *kituulo* comes from the word *kutuula* meaning “to live”. So, basically the *kituulo*, in reference to death means “where dead people live”, the burial ground. Another word that is near to the burial ground is *enyanga*. This notion, specifically, refers to a grave in construction or finished, but before someone has been buried in it. The moment there is someone ‘living’ there, then it becomes *kituulo*.

Every family has got its burial ground. It is this way that every Haya is assured of a place to live in after death. This implies that the issue of lack of space of where one can be buried is taken care of. There is another important role for burial grounds: The identity question. One’s family burial ground is highly determined by where one’s placenta was also buried, which becomes one’s home. The placenta is considered to be a brother or dead brother of the child born. That is why he is taken care of by being wrapped in bark cloth or the *Mulinzi* (*Erythrina Abyssinica*) leaves and buried either in the house or somewhere outside near the house. Attached to this issue of identity is another role of the burial place: Justification for ownership of land. This is linked with the land tenure system of the Haya people, which is patrilineal. Claim to family land or clan land is based on the members of the families (who are male) in the burial ground. On this regard, Reining (1965:169) notes:

Continuity on the land and the appointment of an heir is caught up with the man’s fate after death ... if he is buried in his *Kibanja* and if the line of heirs succeed him his spirit is at rest. For the living, the most convincing statement a man can make justifying his ownership is to say that his father is buried on his *Kibanja*.

One final role, not least important, is that burial grounds are a place where one can go to encounter the ancestors. People in the burial grounds are alive: They can be consulted; they can be talked to. And when one wants to link up with the dead people and precisely someone, he/she goes to the burial grounds where the person was buried.

Medicinal herbs

In order to sustain the health of the body, the *Kibanja* is famous for the growing of different kinds of medicinal herbs. When one looks at *Kibanja*, he/she can be able to observe that there are shrubs. In actual fact, one would think that the shrubs are unwanted and deserve to be removed. It is true, some should be removed, but some not: They are part and parcel of the medicinal repertoire of the Haya people. The *Kibanja*, as home for the Haya people, is characterised by many types of medicinal herbs to cure different diseases.

I have most of the medicines that I need for my people; women who are pregnant; those who want to get pregnant; those who have delivered; for the sick babies; for sick men with shameful diseases (sexually transmitted diseases ... I have all of them here in this *Kibanja*. Some are far in the corners of the *Kibanja*: Do you want someone sick to come at night and I go very far for the medicine? No, it should be near, especially for the diseases that happen very frequently like diarrhoea, stomach upsets, bleeding, and others. ... I have so many of them.

There are so many kinds of medicines that the Haya people use. While in one study among the Haya of Bugabo, Moshi *et al.* (2009) talk of 94 plant species representing 84 genera and 43 families being commonly used in the treatment of a variety of human

ailments (malaria, skin diseases, maternal illnesses, sexually transmitted diseases, respiratory diseases, yellow fever, Herpes simplex, and peptic ulcers), in another study among the Haya people of Katoro, Moshi *et al.* (2010) note 33 plant species used for treatment of 13 different diseases (malarial, microbial, and inflammatory).

Using Rugalema *et al.* (1994:57-58), together with verification from interviewees, a list of some medicines found in the *Kibanja* and used by the Haya people has been generated.

Table 2 Medicinal herbs in the *Kibanja*

	<i>Local name</i>	<i>Scientific name</i>
1	Omuziru	Pseudolachnostylis spp
2	Omugango	Senecio multicornybosus
3	Omumembe	Magnifera indica
4	Omuchenza	Citrus sp
5	Omuchunkwa	Citrus sp
6	Omudimu	Citrus sp
7	Omupera	Psidium guajava
8	Omulinzi	Erythrina abyssinica
9	Omudalasinini	Cinnamomum zeylanicum
10	Omujuna	Ricinus communis
11	Omwita njoka	Cassia hirsuta
12	Omutobatobo	Solanum incanum
13	Omufenesi	Artocarpus heterophyllus
14	Omuvakedo	Persea Americana
15	Etaaba	Nicotina spp
16	Omuhoko	Baphiopsis spp
17	Omushulaijwi	Cyperus dives
18	Etangawizi	Zingiber officinale
19	Omumwani	Coffea canephora
20	Entongo	Solanum sp
21	Entura	Solanum sp
22	Omulili	Amaranthus spp
23	Eshwiga	Solanum nigrum
24	Entuntunu	Physalis spp
25	Ekitatelante	Leonotis nepetifolia
26	Kataiwa mubazi	Galisonga parviflora
27	Omuguruma	Capsicum annum
28	Omubirizi	Vernonia amygdalina
29	Enkaka	Aloe sp

What becomes more interesting is that some of these medicines do not treat only human beings; they also treat animals. They can also be applied in combination, with the reason that one disease can be a manifestation of many other health problems.

Sometimes you have to put different medicines together. One comes with a disease, but you know it is because of so many problems. Then you combine them. They bring a baby with diarrhoea; you know it is because of worms; you need to give medicine for worms; you need to give medicine to stop diarrhoea; you need to give medicine to add more blood because worms take blood; you need to give medicine for food because the kid will have lost appetite; you need to give medicine which the kid should take with a lot of water because diarrhoea removes water from the body. ...

Finding the medicines in the *kibanja* is convenient because they are easily accessible. Not only are they easily accessible, but it is a chance for many people to know them, and to learn how to use them. These traditional medicines play different roles from preventive to curative and from getting pregnancy, nursing it to delivering and taking care of the delivered baby.

Bananas

In order to sustain the energy of the body, *kibanja* is famous for the growing of bananas. According to Maruo (2002:150-151), the introduction of bananas in the interlacustrine area, where the Haya people are found, might have occurred between AD 800 and 1300, with the intensive farming pattern developing after the Hinda brought the long-horned cattle known as ‘Ankole’ to Buhaya by the 15th century. The use of cattle manure is critical for the maintenance of soil fertility for stable banana production. It is for this reason that the banana-based culture might have thrived only after they had cattle in their farming system.

Nutritional and social values

Bananas are source of nutrition for the Haya people. Gallez *et al.* (2004) highlight on how bananas are source of nutrition:

In this region (Kagera), the most important banana types are “matoke” ... that represent 85% of the total banana production. These bananas are steamed and eventually mixed with beans, meat or fish. Ripe fruits are also used for preparing juice and banana beer. Brewing bananas represent 5% of the total production in the region ... Sweet bananas represent 5% of the production. There are exotic varieties The remaining 5% are plantains.

Bananas among the Haya, can be categorised into three groups according to how they become part of the nutrition. There are bananas for cooking, for drinks, and bananas for fruit. While the bananas for cooking have to be steamed in their preparation, those for drinks have to be ripened and squeezed in order that the juice comes out. *Omulamba*, which is banana juice can be taken as it is, or can be processed for banana wine/beer after fermentation. When bananas are taken as fruits, they are ripened first and then eaten raw. The table below summarises the types of bananas and their different characteristics in terms of names, size, preparation, edibility form, content and taste.

Table 3 Types of banana and their characteristics

Names	Size		Preparation	Edibility form	Content		Taste
	<i>Finger</i>	<i>Bunch</i>			<i>Starch</i>	<i>Water</i>	
Enyooya	Big	Big	Steam	Steamed	High	Less	Very tasty
Kinunu	Medium	Medium	Steam	Steamed	Medium	Medium	Medium
Enshakala	Big	Big	Steam	Steamed	Less	High	Not tasty
Enjubo	Big	Small	Steam	Steamed	Less	High	Medium
Entobe	Small	Medium	Steam	Steamed	High	Less	Very tasty
Enshansha	Medium	Medium	Steam	Steamed	High	Less	Medium
Enchoncho	Medium	Medium	Steam	Steamed	Medium	Medium	Very tasty
Embirabile	Small	Big	Steam	Steamed	High	Medium	Medium
Endekule	Medium	Medium	Steam	Steamed	High	Less	Very tasty
Enkundi	Medium	Medium	Ripen & Squeeze	Juice/wine/beer	Less sugar	Medium	Bitter/sour
Akashukari	Very small	Small	Ripen	Raw	High sugar	Less	Very sweet
Njoge	Long	Big	Ripen	Raw	Medium sugar	Medium	Sweet
Kishubi	Very small	Small	Ripen	Raw/juice/wine/beer	High sugar	Medium	Very sweet

There are so many types of bananas for cooking, with different nutrition status. Cooking bananas are always soft. They have to be cooked while still green. The moment they ripen, are specially cooked and are called *Entotomya*, which will be eaten by children. Ripened cooking bananas cannot be eaten as fruits or cannot be used for making juice. In this category of cooking bananas, there are the *Enkonjwa*, which some people refer to as plantains. They are rather hard and should only be steamed or roasted or fried when ripe. It is rather a hard banana, compared to the normal cooking bananas, which can actually not be roasted or fried.

There are also those cooking bananas with a lot of starch (*Enyooya* and *Entobe*, for example); these are very precious. *Enyooya*, for example, will be eaten on special occasions, such as celebrations at home or when there is a visitor or when there is *okuzirima* (visiting someone with gifts); *Entobbe*, on the other hand, a type of banana not liked by women (who are perennial cooks among the Haya) because one needs to peel many of them to have just a handful enough for a person, is normally cooked to be taken by the head of the household. Other bananas with medium starch content, and therefore with less taste, according to the Haya, are taken on a daily basis and don't have any special function. Bananas to be taken as fruits, commonly called *Obushukari/Obunana* can never be cooked; but they can be added to the brewing bananas to improve on the sweetness of the juice. Fruit bananas have to be taken ripe. Common practice among the Haya is that it is children who eat such bananas. Sweet bananas are a safety net for children never to be hungry.

Bananas to prepare juice, which can also be fermented to make beer/wine, can never be cooked because they are sour/bitter. They can only be made to ripen and squeezed to produce juice. In order for them to become sweeter, other sweeter types of bananas, particularly the ripe *Kishuubi*, can be added during the process of squeezing. This will make the *Munene* (concentrated banana juice) very sweet. In the *Munene*, water is added to increase the volume of the juice. The banana juice after addition of water is called *Mulamba*.

In a word, there are so many types of bananas with different nutritional values. There are bananas to be taken as a warm dish; there are bananas to be taken as drink, and; there are bananas to be taken as fruits. Bananas have social functions as well: Some are for entertaining visitors; some are to be eaten by the household; others are for gifting, and; others only for assuring absence of hunger to children.

Ritualistic value

This is the most interesting part of the story with regard to the use of bananas. I shall give particular examples of birth rituals and general observations on marriage practices. The Haya people had a ritual called *kushobekera*. The idea behind this ritual is to support the child's growth. This is how the traditional birth attendant narrates how the ritual is performed:

A few days, like four, after the baby is born, his/her head is shaved; you need to put the first hair shaved in the hands of the baby together *Muriri* (some kind of shrub, eaten as greens; the word *muriri*, however, means literally, one who cries). This will prevent the baby from frequent crying.

Then, you wash the baby and put him/her on a young girl's back, who should be holding *ndilalila* (banana flower); they move with the mother in the plantation. If they are carrying a baby boy, he is made to lie on *enkundi* (banana for brewing); if a girl, she is made to lie in

front of *enchoncho* (type of banana for cooking). Afterwards, the baby was made to touch the roots of the banana trees in front of which they were lying.

In this ritual, the child is augured to cry less, on the one hand, and he/she is introduced to gender identity issues, on the other hand. The *nkundi* is a sour/bitter banana; it can only be use for brewing when it is ripe. The Haya are trying to construct a man, already at this age, as a tough man (as *enkundi* is sour/bitter) and they are already introducing him to alcohol (Haya men are supposed to drink). *Enchoncho* is a cooking banana; the girl is introduced to the notion of preparing food at this early age as Haya women are expected to cook for the men and family. Again, the choice of that kind of banana, *enchoncho*, is purposeful: In Kihaya, *ekichoncho* means “something nice; something beloved”. Already, at this age the girl child is introduced to this notion of beauty. Similarly, in another ritual of *kweya*, where the hut is cleaned, the fecal material of the baby boy is thrown on *enkundi*, and for the girl, on any banana plant. *Enkundi* carries the same significance of man being tough; other bananas take the same significance of women preparers of food.

The betrothal and wedding periods among the Haya people is a period of celebrations geared towards exchanging gifts to the girl’s and the boy’s families. Celebrations during betrothal included: *Ekitera nyigi* (opening of the doors); *kwanjur’omwojo* (making known the boy); *kusimbur’emihunda* (celebrations to notify the public that the girl is already engaged); *kwatur’akanwa* (pronouncing what the in-laws desire); *kutem’eirembo* (girl’s clan members knowing the ‘go-between’); *kukwat’amaguru* (holding the legs of men and/or holding the breasts of women as gesture of appreciation); *kujuga* (bringing demanded gifts to the father and mother of the girl). Celebrations during the wedding included *kalaile katai* (coming to see how the girl is health-wise and bringing brew for use for use during the wedding); *kusiim’eka* (praising/thanking the family); *kutah’amagenyi* (giving away the girl – send off party); *kukor’amajuta* (sealing marriage by smearing oil); *kugurusha* and *kukaikura* (official visits of the father and mother of the bride, respectively); *kweranga* (bride going to her parents’ home for the first time she was married); *kugarura rwerango* (bride coming back from her parents’ home). In all these celebrations, bananas and banana beer in calabashes were a must.

Teleologic values

Bananas are not simply found in the *kibanja*: They are organised in the way they are planted. There is a purpose as to why bananas are planted the way they are planted: There is a *telos*. With reference to the *Mushonge*, the *kibanja* can be divided into four main parts: *Omwibanga* (front part of the house), *enyumanju* (behind the house), *omungemu* (in the plantation), and *omurubibi* (on peripheries of the plantation). The placement of the types of bananas in these parts is dependent on some reasons.

Omwibanga that is where most people are found; that is where visitors pass; that is where even the head of the household always faces. So, this is the reception, which in principle, should give good impression of the household. The image of the household is important. It is for this matter that it is here that precious bananas such as *Enyooya* and big sized bananas such as *Enshakala* and *Enjubo* are planted.

Another part is *enyumanju*. This is a part behind, but close to the house. This is a place where bananas which need close attention are planted. These include *Enkonjwa*, which needs attention as it needs to be manured regularly with organic material from

the kitchen; again it is in this area that bananas with special functions, such as those related to birth rituals, are planted.

Omungemu refers generally to the banana plantations. In here, there are all types of cooking bananas. However, the more you get going towards the *Rubibi*, that is, the peripheries of the *kibanja*, then the plantation gets to have more *Mbiile*, *Bushukari* and *Bishuubi*. There are several reasons for this. These are plants that do not need much care; so they can as well be far from attention; secondly, these are plants that should be harvested when they are ripe already or they have started getting ripe. The riper they are, the more invitation to monkeys, birds, and insects they are. So, in order to keep these animals, birds, and insects from the cooking bananas, the precious bananas, those bananas which need special attention and those with special functions, such bananas which need to get ripe before they are harvested are kept on the periphery of the *Kibanja*.

In a word, therefore, the organisation of the bananas in the *kibanja* have the purpose of taking care of the image of the household, having close attention to the bananas that need more care and those with special functions, taking care of the security of the general welfare of the *kibanja* from invasions of monkeys, birds, and insects.

What did they miss?

In trying to address the banana problems among the Haya people, the interventionists missed a couple of issues, which were fundamental. The first thing they missed was that bananas are within a bigger context of the *kibanja* which bears the livelihood system of the people. Another thing they missed is the fact that bananas have more than nutritional and economic values: They social, ritualistic, and even teleologic values.

What is interesting is why they missed it. They were caught up in the middle of the discourse of modernity: They fell short of reflections outside science and technology which higher learning institutions and laboratories were offering; they could not see beyond economic growth. For them, biological and experimental researches, together with some economic analysis, were enough to think that they would get to address the problems of deteriorating banana production. They never realised that behind bananas is the whole world attached to the very bananas. At the end of the day, the bananas are not doing fine; the world behind the bananas is collapsing, and of course, you have an unstable Haya society which should get to re-construct itself differently, without even knowing why it is in shambles. If there were an ethnographer, I guess things would have been different!

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