



MIRAA: Subsistence, stimulant and social glue

by Jennifer Leavy



Interviewing people living in the Meru-Isiolo area of eastern Kenya, ASSAR's East Africa team wants to understand how household structures change as a way of adapting to climate change.

In this photo essay, **Jennifer Leavy** describes the challenges people face when trying to make a living from growing and trading *Miraa*, a key cash crop in the region.





Miraa, or *Khaat*, is a shrub with evergreen leaves native to the Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula. People chew its stalks and leaves to feel the mild stimulant effects.

Jennifer Leavy

Miraa takes around eight years to mature and is generally grown alongside other cash and food crops, such as maize and beans. Because it can be harvested multiple times a year, it provides a potential source of year-round income.



Nitya Rao



Musa Jillo

Miraa is a somewhat controversial crop – its production, sale and consumption are legal in many countries, including Kenya, yet countries such as the UK classify it as a controlled substance. It provides a living for more than [100,000 Meru farmers](#) in Kenya, as well as countless miraa traders.



Jennifer Leavy

Miraa plays a crucial role in the lives and livelihoods of people we spoke to from both the Boran and Meru ethnic groups.

"Most of our husbands chew miraa, so most of their income goes towards the purchase of miraa."

- Women's Focus Group Discussion

"...afterwards the parents of my fiancé called my parents to come and pay dowry. The introduction was made by a bundle of miraa, whereby my parents offered them bundle of miraa. They take a piece of miraa and when they chew it shows that the girl has agreed to be married by the boy. Then my parents paid the dowry like cow, goat, sheep and ram. After paying the dowry I wedded the girl."

- Mr MM

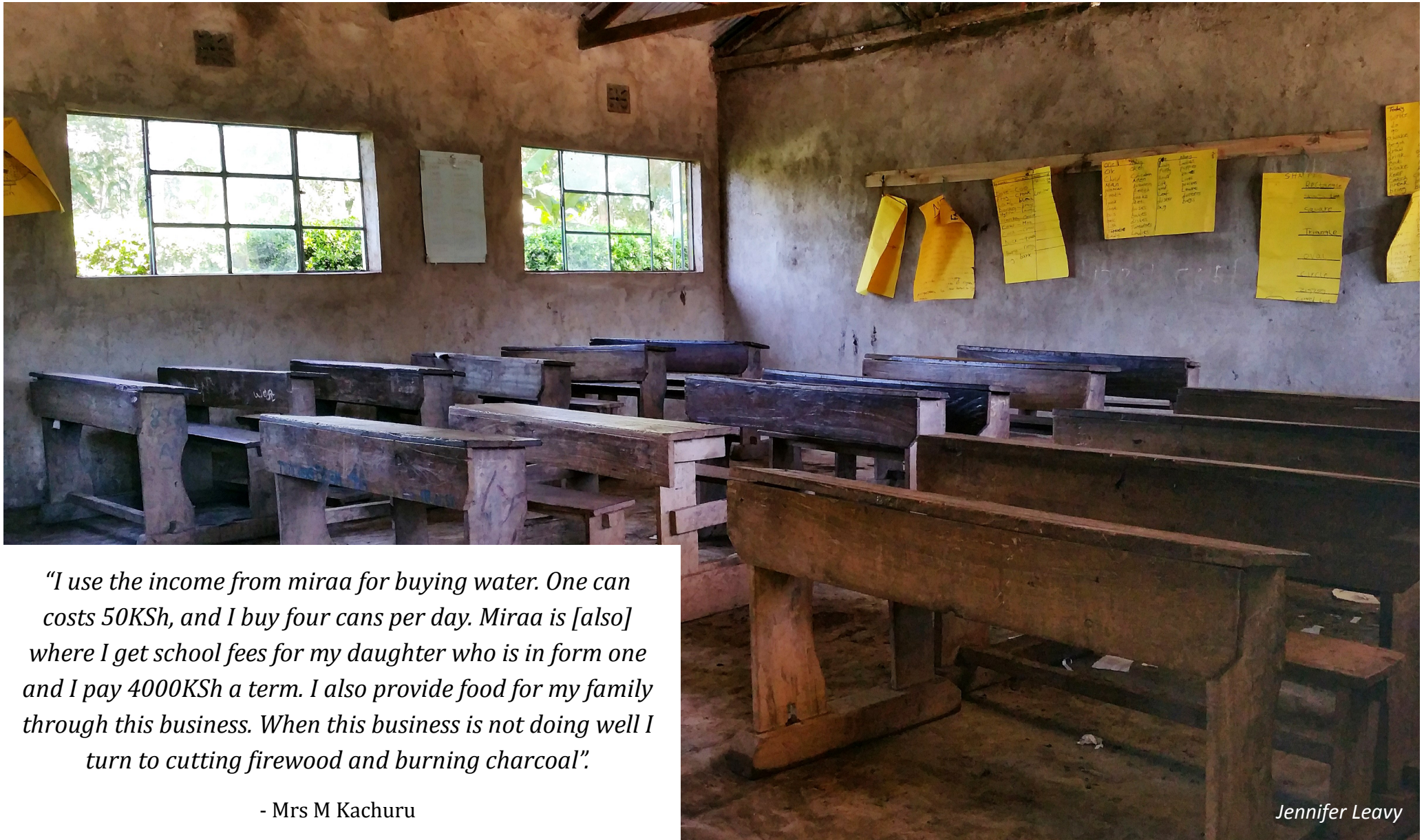
When it is ready to be sold, miraa bundles are wrapped in banana leaves. Traders then sell miraa on behalf of Meru farmers, sending the proceeds back to the farmers via electronic banking (M-Pesa), or on a motorcycle courier (*bodaboda*), and keeping a small margin for themselves.

"I also do mixed trade, people from Meru do come with miraa and I buy from them at a better price then sell it to Boran here at Kachiuru and get profit. When I bought one bag during the rainy season it cost 1000KSh and I sold for 1500KSh. When it is dry season it is so expensive. It costs something like 5000KSh which I can't afford."

- Mrs M Kachuru



People rely on income from miraa for general day-to-day living costs and it can be crucial for larger, less frequent expenses such as school fees. Even though Kenya has free universal primary education, low investment means that parents must subsidise the schools.



"I use the income from miraa for buying water. One can costs 50KSh, and I buy four cans per day. Miraa is [also] where I get school fees for my daughter who is in form one and I pay 4000KSh a term. I also provide food for my family through this business. When this business is not doing well I turn to cutting firewood and burning charcoal".

- Mrs M Kachuru

Jennifer Leavy



Musa Jillo

“With one product and many community members engaged in the same business, the buyers often dictate the price. This makes the business problematic. The product is also perishable.”

- Men's Focus Group Discussion

“I sell miraa and also camel milk every day but receive the camel milk money on monthly basis. I get the miraa stock from Meru people and I sell here, sending the money back to them by M-Pesa. For each 2kg I sell I get 100KSh profit. My main customers are livestock keepers. Sometimes there is a problem in that they get the miraa on credit and then I don't see them. The most I can sell in a day here is 2kg because the market is flooded.

[Have you ever thought about doing something else?]

Everything is flooded, we are all more or less doing the same activities.”

- Ms T

In one of our study sites we were told that, because lots of people are selling miraa, the price remains very flat, and there is not much profit to be made.



Jennifer Lévy

Where Miraa sellers rely on trade to pastoralists, their sales can suffer during times of hardship. For example, during droughts, nomadic herders not only need to travel farther and stay away longer to feed and water their animals, but they also have less disposable income.

"I recently reduced the amount of miraa I was selling because the business wasn't that good. I will increase after the herders get back to this place since they are the one making the business profit... Miraa business depends on the livestock herders, so now as they have moved, the business is down again... We disbanded our savings group in March because miraa business doing badly and we didn't have enough money to save... Some end up not selling and the miraa go bad."

- Mrs A Kachuru



“When livestock herders are in town business was good because they sell livestock produce like milk, fat and meat and so they had money to buy miraa.

When they move with their animals the business almost collapses... if it's not sold the owner allowed us to give back the miraa to him. If there are no sales that meant sleeping hungry that day”.

- Mrs GK

Musa Jillo

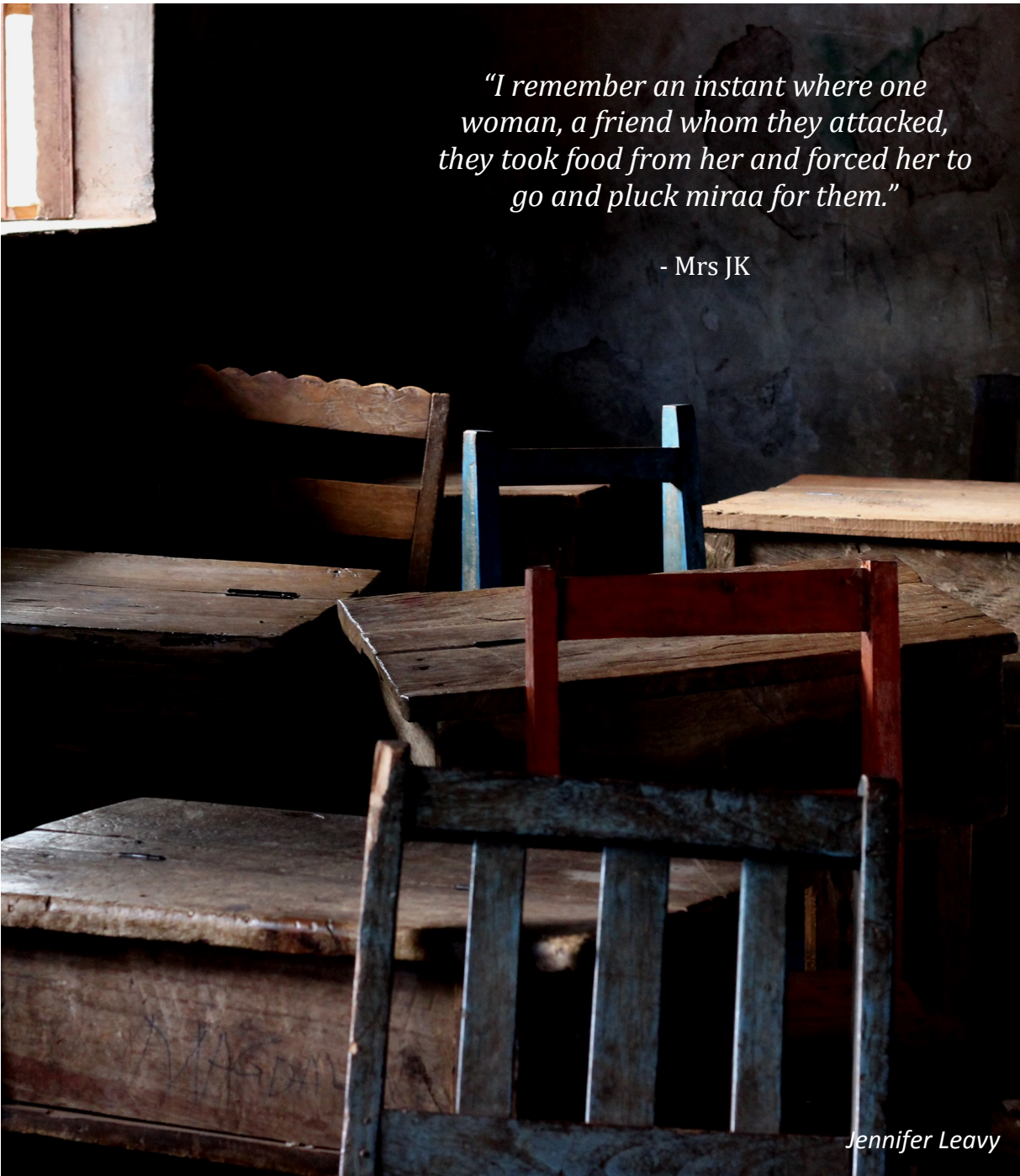
As a generally rain-fed crop, cultivated in an area prone to severe water shortages and drought, Miraa trees are vulnerable to environmental shocks and stresses.

"Pest and drought affect crops including miraa. Production was severely affected in a number of years; for instance, yield was poor in 1999, 2000, 2011 and 2015. In Gituli, Miraa is the main livelihood activity. Because of no rain and no fresh miraa, men are sitting idle, becoming drunkards."

- Mother of Mrs B



Nitya Rao



"I remember an instant where one woman, a friend whom they attacked, they took food from her and forced her to go and pluck miraa for them."

- Mrs JK

Jennifer Leavy

For many of the people we spoke to, both producers and traders, we learned that the miraa trade has also been affected by conflict. During times of conflict, crops are stolen, and trade is disrupted by road closures and the dangers of travel.

"Whoever goes for the miraa he is killed on the way. Even recently we had someone killed and others lost some cash in the process. "But when miraa prices rise up...[I] get a lot of challenge guarding my shamba against thieves. The thieves will come and steal all miraa in your shamba and beat you and leave you to die. Once they attacked me in my plantation, cut me in my head and left me unconscious... This year many others came to my shamba and cut 60 plant of miraa down. This was done at night so I was not in the shamba at that time to know who did so. As for now when miraa price raises up I am very careful because the thieves can kill you when you are guarding your shamba. From the time I saw that I do employ somebody to guard my shamba up to the time I will harvest, when I then pay the watchman. I pay him according to the amount of miraa I sell. If I sell for 5000KSh I give the watchman 1000KSh after guarding for 30 days. Due to price fluctuations I sometimes am unable to pay the watchman. In this case I agree with my watchman to wait for another harvest to get paid." - Mr MM

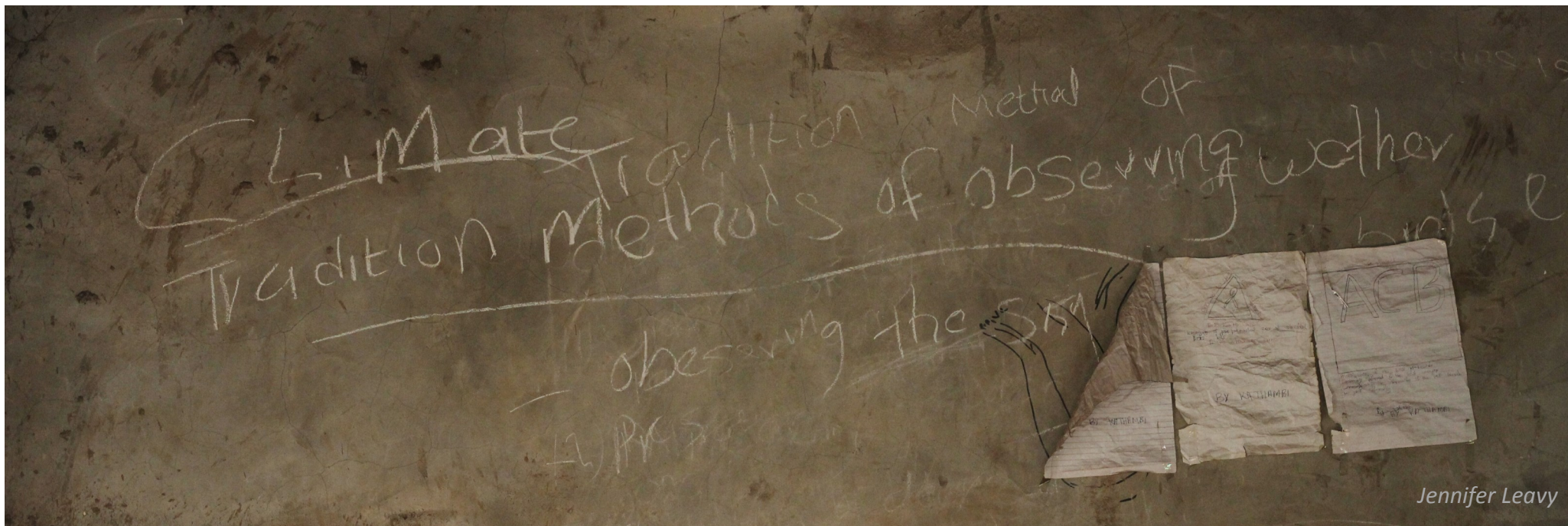


Miraa is a lifeline for young Meru men, with few other employment opportunities available.

In the context of climate variability and repeated droughts it is, however, making livelihoods insecure.

It is also a lifeline for many pastoralist women, especially those left to survive on their own. Yet here too returns appear to be declining.

Alternatives are urgently needed, but at present, few are in sight.



ABOUT ASSAR

ASSAR uses insights from multiple-scale, interdisciplinary work to improve the understanding of the barriers, enablers and limits to effective, sustained and widespread climate change adaptation out to the 2030s. Working in seven countries in Africa and South Asia, ASSAR's regional teams research socio-ecological dynamics relating to livelihood transitions, and the access, use and management of land and water. One of four consortia under the Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA), ASSAR generates new knowledge of climate change hotspots to influence policy and practice and to change the way researchers and practitioners interact.

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