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Marketing Organic by Default Organic Spice Farmers and a Certification and Marketing Project in the Cardamom Hills of Kerala

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introductory Notes

Pepper, cardamom and other spices have been grown in the Cardamom Hills of south-eastern Kerala, India, for centuries. This paper portrays organic spice farmers and explores their relationship to a large Catholic NGO which promotes organic spice and markets spice products on a global scale.

The fieldwork for this paper was conducted in spring 2008 and sought to sketch a broad field that enable me to make comparisons between different strategies and take into account many of the agencies the farmers dealt with. This paper refers to the situation in 2008 and does not take later developments into account.

In order to achieve this broad perspective emphasis has been given to highlighting the social, political and historical background of the population of the hill area.

At the centre of this paper are the portraits of five rather different farmers who grow pepper, cardamom and other spices in mixed-crop cultivation. Special attention has been given to their economic strategies as well as to their organic farming techniques and comparisons have been made between organic and conventional farming concerning inputs, yields and marketing. Another focus is on the relationship of these farmers to a large Catholic NGO which promotes organic farming and markets spice products. This is dealt with in greater detail in the second part of the paper, where aspects of organic policy, promoted practices, the entrance procedures for farmers and how the spices are inspected, certified and procured are explored. Finally, the broadly based research has allowed me to make comparisons between that NGO and several other spice marketing agencies.

In order to be able to make critical comments without affecting the work of the NGO, the pseudonym Catholic Development Society (CDS) is used throughout this paper. The C for Catholic highlights the affiliation of the NGO to the local diocese, a strategy which enables me to place CDS in the context of politics and power.

CDS is a large development NGO and has several branches through which it operates. The two parts of CDS important to this paper are CDS Spice and CDS Central. CDS Spice refers to the sub-project of CDS Central, which certifies, procures and exports organic spices, and also trains their spice farmers on topics related to organic spice farming. 'CDS Central' on the other hand is located in the central office of CDS and is an umbrella organisation for the social services based on Self-Help-Groups (SHGs), as well as educational and other programmes.

The research was guided by two rather distinct theoretical considerations, both of which are

laid down in the next sections (1.2 and 1.3).

1.2 What Kind of Machine?

[...] just as the addition by a computer of 'extreme' colors to a remote scanning image does not distort but 'enhances' the photograph by improving the visibility of the phenomena we are interested in. (Ferguson 1990:257f)

The perspective for the ethnographic project presented in this paper draws heavily on the work of James Ferguson in *The Anti-Politics Machine*, which examines a failed rural development programme in Lesotho. He first looks into reasons for the failure: on the one hand a systematically wrong perception of the situation of development subjects, which lacks understanding of the local rural economy, the economic forces on a supra-national level and most importantly politics, and on the other hand the lack of power and legitimacy to intervene on a meaningful level (Ferguson 1990).

Finding that failure is not uncommon in development programmes, Ferguson goes on to look into reasons why this development project was carried out in the first place and who benefits from it. In this search he discovers important “side-effects” that were not intended by the programme, but help to understand the kind of halfway support given by local politicians: the building of a road in the mountainous terrain led to an increased military presence and a stronger hold of the government in the formerly rebellious region. Especially the unpolitical character of the development project had an important side-effect, as it camouflaged the delicate political intervention of the expansion of state power (ibid).

Drawing from the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault, Ferguson discovers that the reasons for the failure were not accidental mistakes but followed a specific pattern of power and knowledge - a specific discourse which is shaped by the convergence of power and the applied knowledge and in turn reshapes both. To be able to apply the kind of development intervention they could offer, the development agencies needed to portray the problem as “underdevelopment” - as a lack of modernity in an agricultural setting, a problem that did not exceed national borders and could be solved by a neutral government. But as Ferguson shows all these properties did not at all apply to the rural society of Lesotho (p.71ff). Why, then, was the project carried out anyway?

On the one hand development agencies have an interest to sell the solutions they offer (regardless of whether they actually fit) and they have an institutional need to “move money” - to deploy the programmes they designed and to spend the budget they received for them (Ferguson 1990:70).

On the other hand the programme worked well in the local power structure – it allowed the

government of Lesotho to expand its influence - and for the economic reproduction of this power structure, which is described as “etatization”, by Ferguson - the direct “appropriation of surplus from producers” by the ruling elite in a post-colonial setting (p.267).

In fact, the side effects may have more important outcomes than the initial aims of the programme.

In this perspective the developmental apparatus is not a machine for eliminating poverty that is incidentally involved with state bureaucracy; it is a machine for reinforcing and expanding the exercise of bureaucratic state power which incidentally takes 'poverty' as its point of entry. (p.255)

Thus, the “Anti-Politics Machine” performs an important strategic discursive manoeuvre.

However, whereas for Ferguson the failure of a project was the point of departure, this paper looks into a very successful organic spice marketing project in Kerala. It aims at tracing the themes discussed above in a rather different context and so improves “the visibility of the phenomena” as the quote at the beginning of the section suggests.

Is Ferguson's critique still valid for a (a) contemporary, (b) local Indian and (c) successful NGO? – 'Contemporary' (a) because many things have changed since the time Ferguson was in the field in the early 80s. 'Local' (b) since a local NGO is far less likely than a Western agency to carry out projects on foreign terrain in sheer ignorance of local circumstances and also local NGOs are closer to claiming being a grass roots movement - at least geographically. And (c) 'successful' since the project in Lesotho failed also in its own terms – according to its own targets, indicators, etc. - whereas CDS is in many respects very successful and does innovative, up-to-date development work.

The critical perspective taken up in this paper is not meant to belittle the achievements of CDS's development efforts. On the one hand following the critical comments of my informants is a methodical decision – following controversies and surveying battlegrounds can unfold a spectrum of strategies for the cultivation and promotion of spices, which, in spite of the incompleteness of the inquiry, allow the making of rough comparisons and permit us to ask why a specific agent acted the way he did and not in other ways that proved to be possible in the spectrum.

On the other hand, it is equally a theoretical decision to look at specific mechanics of development and whether they are still in place in a local organisation that is praised for its achievements. In other words: what goes wrong when everything goes right?

However, unlike many studies of development initiatives the perspective I chose introduced a critical distance in relation to the NGO I portrayed.

For this paper this meant

- looking into power relations and the political context of the project and
- understanding a development NGO as an institution, which follows specific institutional interests and acts in a specific discursive framework, which in turn shapes its development interventions.

In the fieldwork it was difficult to find fully satisfying answers to these questions but throughout this paper specific sections make reference to politics and power (chapter 2, especially section 2.2.2 and 4.1.1), and indicate institutional interests (4.2.1).

1.3 Organic by Default

The term 'organic by default' is the second important axis that runs through this paper. It is of special interest since it is the term most often used by organic policy practitioners to point to the mass of uncertified farmers which are (probably) de-facto organic but are not (yet) incorporated into the certification system, as Barret et al. point out in the following:

The area of land under certified organic production [in countries of the global South] is very small, with proportions of well under 0.5% of the total agricultural area being managed organically. Clearly much larger areas are organic by default, but the produce from these farms cannot be exported to the EU as 'organic', as they have no certification to demonstrate they too adhere to Regulation (EEC) 2092/91. (Barrett et al. 2002:313)

Vogl et al. mention that the term can be traced back to Scialabba (2000) and state that "often this term refers to the fact that they do not use synthetic inputs, which are forbidden in organic farming." and underline that

[...] one has to consider the contribution of many of those small farmers to what organic agriculture is today. Small farmers of traditional agriculture practice a farming system that includes, in many cases, those practices which are promoted in organic farming or included in its standards (e.g., crop rotation, organic fertilization, use of legume species, mixed cropping) when working under environmentally and socially appropriate and stable conditions. (Vogl et al. 2005:10)

In her original statement Scialabba uses the term to distinguish between those farmers who use soil-building practices and those who only reject the use of synthetic inputs.

Although traditional farming which applies soil-building practices and no synthetic inputs qualifies as 'organic', it is not usually considered as such when discussing the present status, potential for development, and related policy support of organic agriculture. [...]

Traditional systems that are organic by default, that is, that do not use synthetic agriculture inputs nor soil-building practices, are not considered 'organic'. (Scialabba 2000:2)

However, Barret et al. and Vogl et al. do not make this distinction as can be seen above and in recent debates it seems to be more common to use organic by default for both

categories, also because the existence of soil building practices is not easy to prove when talking about masses of peasants.

If we look at the quotes above, the term is either used in relation to the contribution of traditional farming practices (Vogl et al. 2005) or it highlights the potential of farmers in developing countries as possible candidates for certification (Scialabba 2000, Barrett et al. 2002). Especially the latter context is found frequently in papers regarding organic policy, which is important for two reasons:

Firstly, 'organic by default' is obviously a rather weak category in comparison to the heavily guarded label 'certified organic'. While the latter is constantly regulated, controlled and inspected for each individual farmer, the former is a mere assumption. On the level of the individual farmer it is impossible to verify claims of farmers that they haven't used chemicals (or have practised soil-building measures) in a similarly profound way. In the context of this fieldwork, farmers might for example have used chemical fertilizers on the rare occasions when they received them free of cost from the agricultural department, or sprayed pesticides in emergency situations, when their field was under heavy pest attack.¹ However, although 'organic by default' is not very useful for categorising farmers in the field, it is very relevant as a strategic term for an agency promoting organic production, as it describes farmers who (often unintentionally) distance themselves from upstream input markets (see chapter 5).

Secondly the term 'organic by default' is often used in relation to organic policy in a development context. It should therefore be examined for how it is used in the development discourse.

Following Ziai (2006) in order to make productive statements in a discourse the statements have to comply with the rules of formation of the discourse. In the case of the development discourse he identifies three major conditions that need to be fulfilled. Firstly, there is development; a specific sequence of events, that is, a specific version of 'progress', is elaborated to a norm which supposedly applies universally everywhere around the globe. Secondly, there is underdevelopment; an undesired starting point is identified, that can be changed through development intervention. Thirdly, only experts can make valid statements on development and are required for definitions on development, underdevelopment as well as a plan for intervention (Ziai 2006:45). If we look at the term organic by default, we find that it is surprisingly productive in establishing all three conditions. It establishes organic certification as the norm, as it implies that it is only logical that farmers who are organic by

¹ The lack of a deliberated decision to be organic, also meant that many might use synthetic inputs if they came into situations described above. (see Walaga et al. (2005) for a critical comment on definitions of organic by default based on the absence of a deliberate decisions.)

default get certified eventually. Secondly it indicates the undesired condition, that the respective farmers don't use elaborate organic principles, are not certified and therefore cannot tap premium markets – a default – and leaves no doubt about the solution: organic certification.

Both conditions, the undesired condition of organic by default as well as the process of certification, are defined then by development experts in certifying agencies, and by exporters and development agencies.

From this perspective two questions arise:

- What is demanded by farmers when they convert? What do they have to change in their production methods?
- What are the differences when farmers are certified from organic by default in comparison to conventional farmers?

In this paper special references to these questions are made in chapter 3, in section 4.2.3 (on what needs to be changed) and 4.2.8 and chapter 5 (on differences between conversion from conventional and organic by default).

1.4 Group Certificates

Within the organic movement many are concerned that complicated and costly certification and exporting procedures are considerable obstacles for small farmers in the Global South to market their products on global organic markets.²

In the very beginning, inspectors were flown in from Western countries, which increased the cost of certification considerably (see Barrett et al 2002:309) (FN 14.3.). But today, at least in Kerala, there is an extensive network of local certification agencies which offer various different organic certificates for various importing countries and prospective buyers (section 3.4.5). Thus the obstacles producers face “include the cost and applicability of certification, as well as knowledge concerning the choices available to them in terms of which certifier they decide to choose” (Barrett et al 2002:309). Barrett et al. also note, that

Producers may not be able to choose the cheapest certification body, as importers may insist on the use of a particular certifier because of the problems of EU approval and the demands of the customer, which in the UK market is increasingly the multiple retail chains. (p.310)³

Barrett et al., but also Courville (2006), argue that among other things⁴ group certification

² See for example Courville 2006, Vogl et al. 2005, Barrett et al. 2002

³ See also section 3.4.5 in this paper

⁴ For example participatory guarantee systems (see Courville 2006:214)

can be a solution to these problems. When a whole group of farmers certifies under such a scheme, they have to establish their own certification body, an Internal Control System (ICS), which checks compliance of the farmers. External inspectors then only need to take samples, which reduces costs considerably. However, Courville argues that,

in the initial stages of development and implementation of the ICS the human resource costs borne by the producer group are generally significant, requiring considerable human resources, strong farmer commitment and organisational capacity (2006:213).

Courville also suggests that a positive outcome might be “the empowerment of the producer group” since the farmers need to organise themselves, do capacity building and establish decision making processes, when “producers are actively involved in ICS management” (ibid).⁵

At the other end of the spectrum is an exporter-led model, whereby a buyer organises producers and controls the ICS through the implementation of external guidelines to regulate the supply chain and outsourced farmers (p.213)

This paper is to a large extent an ethnography of such arrangements. The portrayed NGO, CDS Spice, organised producers in a development initiative to market their products, but the farmers in CDS Spice's farmers group were hardly involved in ICS management.

Moreover, through mechanisms like the transfer certificate (TC) farmers have to sell their products to the organisation by which they are certified if they want to sell it at organic premium prices. If a farmers' group is organised by the social branch of an input marketing corporation, they can add inputs to this de-facto monopoly, see section 3.4.5.

From this perspective the complex certification and export procedures can add an additional dimension of dependency for small farmers if they want to realise organic premium prices.

This situation is rather unfortunate for farmers but solutions would be simple. Group certificates need to be regulated in a way that, especially when they are not cooperatives of farmers but organised by agencies in a top-down fashion, they have to comply with Fair Trade or similar standards regarding transparency and democratic decision making mechanisms to ensure a just size of the organic premium.

Similar to the argument made in the conventionalisation debate,⁶ that the reluctance of organic regulation bodies to include social aspect into organic standards allowed large agricultural businesses to venture into the formerly alternative project underbidding smaller organic pioneers, one could say, that the exclusion of social aspects from group certification

5 For an ethnographic account on changes in community labour because of this involvement see Mutersbaugh 2002

6 Julie Guthman's study on the state of organic agriculture in California has fuelled lively debate on the role of Agrobussines in organic farming and the appropriation of an alternative initiative by capitalist corporations (Guthman 2004, see also for example Pratt 2009).

scheme thwarts the often stated intention to improve the situation of small scale farmers as they might find them selves in contract farming arrangements.

Simplifying certification and export procedures would also decrease the dependency of farmers on intermediaries (see Courville 2006:207).

1.5 Notes on the Fieldwork

In the three months of fieldwork, I collected 27 hours of interviews with various interview partners – NGO staff, inspectors, farmers and their wives, sons and daughters, former employees of CDS, scientists, neighbours, etc..

I tried to carry out a fieldwork similar to what Borneman et al. propose in rejection of post-modern versions of armchair anthropology, namely:

[F]ieldwork encounters in which experiential insights are arrived at not only through visualization and observation but also through linguistic exchanges, (mis)translations, feeling of attraction and repulsion, discussions and arguments, and fights and power tactics [...].(Borneman et al. 2009:19)

I hope that by describing the process of my fieldwork in the next section, I will make it possible to locate myself in the field. The inclusion of emotional responses into the fieldwork, as elaborated further by Coleman, also throws interesting light on the process of fieldwork. Taking the work of Devereux⁷ as a starting point, he argues that positive as well as negative feelings towards the field are normal for the ethnographers and it is important to include these 'countertransferences' into the analyses. (Coleman 2009:113)

Though I lack the skill and resources for a deeper analysis, displaying the conditions under which the fieldwork took place is a first step. Two basic aspects influenced my fieldwork tremendously: language and gender barriers.

The fact that I couldn't understand Malayali,⁸ the language spoken in Kerala, and the relatively short period of my stay of three months, made it incredibly difficult for me to understand how specific statements or events resonated in the audience and to give them the weight they deserved. Being limited to the English language had considerable consequences on the quality of this research, but Malayali proved to be a hard nut to crack.

Being a young man resulted in a stronger male bias than I expected, and the result is that women are virtually non-existent in this paper. The contribution of women to the farm-

7 Devereux argues that objectivity is not so much a product of formal methodology, by which the researcher masks the processes of interaction between him and the field. Instead, 'real objectivity' is a result of an analysis of these interactions, especially of the process that he psycho-analytically termed "counter-transference". It refers to unconscious projections of the analyst on his patient or here of the researcher on his field. Since the researcher himself is the only data that he can objectively perceive, objectivity can only be established through an analysis of the processes of interaction (Devereux [1967]1998:17).

8 The term Malayali denotes both, the language spoken in Kerala as well as its population.

household is strong and female-headed farms are not exceptional. Still, the cultural and language barriers remained considerable and I had little contact with female farmers or the wives of the farmers I interviewed. A better access would surely have brought a more comprehensive understanding of household dynamics and the role of women in farming and marketing operations. On the other hand the discussions with the younger well-educated women and the nuns at the convent, that I was so warmly welcomed to stay in, were very enriching.

Another aspect worth noting, is that I put special attention on international cooperations and relationships, but in this paper there is an unusual concentration on connections to German speaking countries. One reason for this might be that interview partners put a focus on their connections with these countries when they learned about my country of origin. But it is also possible, that Austria and Germany are in fact strong in the fields of Catholic aid and promotion of organic cultivation in Kerala.

1.5.1.1 Arriving in the Field

I went to India to write a critique on the basis of Ferguson's analyses discussed above on an organic spice farming project. I knew one organic Farmer, namely Sebastian, from earlier travelling and I knew that a local Catholic Development Society (CDS) had a project for promoting organic spice cultivation and marketing. However no one had replied to the emails I had sent them. So I took a room at Kumily, a small town in the Cardamom Hills situated next to a pass between Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which is close to where I had met Sebastian. The next day I went to the central office of CDS, which was situated in a regional centre one hour by bus down the hills to ask if I could do my research with them. When I found the rather inconspicuous building at the end of a steep side street, the walls and roof were covered with moss and wet marks from the rainy season, like many older buildings in Kerala. The forecourt was well maintained and had space for cars, that were often surprisingly large and well-polished. I learned later that, behind the tidy lobby and the representative office of the President and his Vice-President, the building was filled from bottom to top with the small work desks of an amazingly large number of scientists, project managers, and participants, who worked on all different kinds of projects and some of them were addressed with titles, such as „Father“ or „Sister“, which displayed their clerical affiliation.

I got an appointment with the president a few days later and he explained to me the basic structure of CDS and the numerous activities - from watershed management to organic house gardens and women empowerment through Self Help Groups, (SHGs), which function as saving-and-credit-groups but apart from that they have many more activities as

well. I had the feeling he was used to explaining these things to guests and was very good at presenting a persuasive and homogeneous, though a little bit stylised picture of the NGO.

However, it turned out that the organic spice project, CDS Spices, acted as a rather autonomous sub-project, which certified, processed and marketed organic spices very professionally on a large scale. It was operating from a beautifully located and newly built state-of-the-art factory a few kilometres further down the hill.

In the entrance hall, large windows showed the processing unit where tons of spices were cleaned, steam-sterilised, ground and packed by large, sterile machines with few young workers in hygienic overalls and with mouth and hair covering overseeing the mostly automatised processes. Besides that, the factory comprised a well-equipped laboratory, where each incoming shipment was tested for residues, not compatible with organic norms. In the large modern office on the first floor several white-collared men worked on flat screen monitors and organised the admission, inspection, certifications of about 2000 small farmers as well as the processing, marketing and exporting of their produce.

On my first visit to the factory the export manager gave a professional interview, and explained the history of the project. It had started as a pilot project in 1990 and had its first organic shipment to Germany in 1998. It was only in 2005 that the factory was built. We also talked about the Internal Quality System (IQS) (formerly “Internal Control System” (ICS)), which was of special interest to me since this is where the main interactions between the farmers and CDS Spice takes place.

I was asked to write a formal letter to the Father who was the executive director. On that day, I also met Anthony, a long time CDS Spice staff member who currently held the position of the production manager, and with whom I became good friends over the next few weeks.

After the first few visits in the factory I was optimistic and hoped that after some formalities I would be given the list of CDS Farmers – so that my only remaining problem would be to select a proper scientific sample.

In the following weeks the inspectors of IQS took me with them to some of the important interactions with farmers. I accompanied them to a “pepper collection”, a spice purchase, and we visited some farmers. Even the problem that I was practically immobile, and was staying an hour up the hills was obligingly solved. I was invited to ride with them on their motorbikes.

Many of the CDS staff took some time off from their regular duties to explain all different kinds of things to me, a beginner in the field of organic promotion and certification.

I learned a great deal, but I felt that I was presented a friendly surface of the organisation. To do the “critical” research I had envisaged, I felt I would need to get deeper into details and attend more of the important activities, such as the delicate external certifications and at the same time become more independent and ask more critical questions.

1.5.1.2 More views on CDS

I also met several other people who worked for CDS at the local level in Kumily. Since I stayed at a convent there, one of the sisters, the secretary for the SHGs in the area, introduced me to local organisers and beneficiaries and also took me to a SHG meeting.

However, when I talked to people less associated with CDS, I sometimes sensed surprisingly strong distrust towards the NGO. There were vague rumours of corruption, and even though no details could be given, some of those people were sure that inappropriate self-enrichment must take place at some level. I also heard a story about a Dutch supporter of CDS who, was said to have been forced to leave the country after disagreement with the founder of CDS, who is now a bishop. Harry, a Bavarian, who runs a spice farm near Kumily and who is one of the most extreme critics of CDS I met, claimed that the organic premium paid by CDS was too small and that, they would, consequently “destroy the market.”

I was very unsure how to handle those accusations then, and even now, three years later, I am still in no position to evaluate them. They are, however, in sharp contrast to CDS's views and looking into them would amount to a criminal investigation, which I am in no position to carry out.

In the meantime my relationship to CDS did not develop the way I had hoped. I did not get the big list of farmers, and my research request was never formally answered. I was told my research was okay as long as I wrote “good” things about CDS – an impossible starting point for an academic paper, I thought, and even worse for the Fergusian critique I wanted to formulate.

As it became more obvious that I wanted to include also - or rather focus on? - the less flattering parts, I felt general distrust within CDS growing. On bad days I had the feeling that the reason they were still friendly with me was not to make things worse. And also I myself, frustrated by so many incredibly differing perceptions of CDS and desperate to get at least the basic facts right, was at times almost aggressively interrogative in inappropriate ways.

However, I still had good friends in CDS. I was invited to Anthony's home, went swimming with his family and celebrated birthdays and the first Holy Communion of his children.

Sometimes we had lively discussions. Anthony was not unfamiliar with the criticism I had

collected, but I felt he was getting tired of dispelling exaggerated accusations. In fact he was also debating with a remote relative of his, a lawyer, who organised former CDS tea farmers about voicing their critique and would perhaps sue CDS in the end. CDS Tea was an earlier, less successful marketing project of CDS and many of the farmers did not stay with it all the way through the rather painful conversion period of three years, in which they had to bear heavy losses without compensation. I felt his critique was too much exaggerated, that is, that of a disputatious lawyer. But it was interesting to me how vividly arguments against eco-colonialism were applied by him. He argued that, organic agriculture is not in the interest of the farmers, since they have less harvest. It is promoted on the basis of wrong environmentalist ideals.

However, to be able to talk to more farmers I bought a motorbike and independently visited the farmers the inspectors had introduced me to – an initiative the inspectors weren't too happy about. I asked the farmers if they could direct me to other CDS Spice farmers, but that wasn't very successful either.

1.5.1.3 Two other Initiatives

Since I felt I wouldn't get deeper into CDS, I was pleased when I came across two other organic spice-marketing initiatives, during my motorbike trips. In the remaining research time, I concentrated my efforts on visiting and interviewing them.

The first group was a rather loose association of organic farmers who held a group certification and who also tried to find purchasers together. Compared to the CDS farmers I met, they had relatively larger farms and for many the financial needs were less pressing, so they were able to store the pepper and wait for a good opportunity to sell. In the time I visited them, they were lacking an appropriate buyer, who would pay the price they wanted, but they were ready to wait even until the following year since they had indications of a bad harvest to come. However, I wasn't sure if all of them could afford to wait so long and some would probably sell their pepper on the conventional market.

They cultivated a rebellious attitude – e.g. they sent angry letters to the district authorities accusing a corrupt agricultural officer and they proudly told stories about how they scared government officers with harsh language. They also proudly stressed their good relations with the highest district authority, the collector.

Joss, the president, was a small, witty and enterprising type of man, but unfortunately he didn't speak English at all and so I needed an interpreter. The one I chose - or rather was chosen by - was a young neighbour of Joss, who did not translate very accurately. He liked to explain things himself rather than reiterate what had been said. And I felt he had a

tendency to amplify what he guessed I wanted to hear: criticism towards CDS and sympathy for the rebellious farmers. On the whole he was critical of organic cultivation in a rather mainstream way, and it was hard to find out what his perception was and what was actually said. I also found out later that some of the important details were simply incorrect. However, we became good friends, his family invited me several times and cheered me up when I felt depressed about the stagnating research, as I perceived it that time.

The other initiative was that of a public-private partnership between the administration of the large wildlife sanctuary next to Kumily and one of Kerala's larger business dynasties, which runs a luxurious resort in Kumily. Following a scandal on the bad condition of the sanctuary, the forest administration had started a large eco-development programme, that targeted the inhabitants of the villages bordering the sanctuary, which were often tribal, and aimed at limiting their dependence on forest resources. Instead they were supposed to find other sources of income, for instance their pepper gardens. One part of the large programme, which had been completed by the time of my visit, was the certification and marketing of the pepper at a very good organic premium, which was guaranteed by a German agency. The tasks of certification, inspection, collection, cleansing and exporting were organised by an agent of the business group, who had his office in the resort and processed the pepper on one of the family's farms and deployed manual labour instead of using machines, as he stressed in the interviews. Unfortunately the officer who organised the project on part of the forest department, a former CDS officer, was on temporary leave and I could not reach him. So, here too, my insight into the project remained limited to very few conversations and some project reports, but very interestingly revealed processes of what can happen when several development agencies have the same beneficiaries.⁹

However both initiatives worked with a rather different trade volume than CDS. A rough guess would be 10 to 20 tonnes of pepper in the first two cases, and 150 tonnes in the latter. Even though comparison is limited by these issues of scale, I will attempt further comparisons in later chapters.

1.6 Reflections

My relation to the field was strongly influenced by notions of critique, aversion and 'betrayal'.

I wanted to take up a critical position and review the successful pepper-marketing initiative through a discursive Fergusian lens. I wanted to look at what goes wrong when everything

⁹ For example though the forest department ruled out giving goats to the beneficiaries though they asked for them, due to foreseeable additional pressure on natural resources, a year later the village administration, the Panchayat, gave them the goats. In this case the agency of the "target population" increased, since there were several sources of assistance they could ask.

goes right. However, the focus on “what goes wrong” put me in a strange position. While the friendships with Anthony and the other CDS officers grew, I still searched for 'side-effects'. In the practice of the fieldwork this meant that I often waited for moments in which my interview partners stated something critical or contradictory, that is to say betrayed¹⁰ the organisation they worked for, which I considered as something real and as looking behind the façade.

Since many of them identified themselves with their project and considered their work as doing something good (and had also made considerable sacrifices for it, for example Anthony accepted a considerably lower income for himself and his family), the conflict did not remain abstract but was internalised and influenced our friendship.

On the other hand my aversion to the hierarchic structure of the Catholic Church in Kerala and its affiliated organisations surely influenced my fieldwork.

For instance I was surprised that no one found anything unusual about the fact that the guests of the parish priest were driven around by a taxi driver of that parish for several days for free. There might be a service in exchange for the taxi driver of which I'm unaware, but still in coherence with other similar incidents it paints a rather bizarre picture in which it was not uncommon for people further up the hierarchies to use these power differences and exploit the benefits. Of course this was not something restricted to Christians. Other elites in the country used their privileges in a similar way, no matter whether they were capitalist, conservative, communist or nationalist.

10 For further reflection on 'betrayal' in ethnography see Visweswaran (1994)

Chapter 2 Context: Kerala and the Cardamom Hills

2.1 Some Notes on Kerala

2.1.1 The Kerala Model

Kerala is famous for its development achievements: economic parameters – such as the gross domestic product, growth rates or the rate of investments – remained low and below Indian average. But in spite of that, social indicators – like life-expectancy, literacy, infant mortality, etc. - have been way above the Indian average since the 1980s and comparable to countries of the North. This is well documented, and numerous studies have reviewed the “Kerala Model of Development” (e.g. Franke et al. 1999, Heller 1999, Veron 2001, Ramachandran 1997). This model is remarkable for two reasons.

Firstly, it exemplifies an alternative development path in which an increased economic performance is not necessarily the prerequisite for considerable public investments into social infrastructure. “Kerala's accomplishment shows that the well-being of the people can be improved, and social, political, and cultural conditions transformed, even at low levels of income, when there is appropriate public action” (Ramachandran 1997:207).

Secondly Kerala featured the world's first democratically elected communist government, both backed up and held in check by mass movements, that led to the creation of a strong, accountable state (Heller 1999:239ff).

In what follows, I will give a brief outline of some basic features of Kerala and Idukki¹¹ district in particular that are relevant for this study. To contextualise the arguments later made about organic farming and development I will first discuss some demographic, socioeconomic, historic and political features of Kerala, with a special emphasis on the Christian Community. Later we will zoom in on the Idukki district, its history and politics.

The state of Kerala today comprises a little less than 39 000 km² and a population of 31.8 million according to the Census of India of 2001. With 819 persons per km² it has one of the highest population densities in India, which has an average density of 324 persons per km². Idukki has an area of 4 358 km², that is little more than a tenth of that of Kerala. And in spite of its mountainous topography, it has a population of 1.1 million (3.5 percent of Kerala), which makes a population density of 259 persons per km² (Census of India 2001, 2004:23).

As stated above, economic development has been sluggish throughout the 20th century compared to the Indian average. In 1995 the Gross National Product per capita was 292

¹¹ The farmers in this paper live in the southern part of Idukki District, more precisely in the Peermade taluk and the southern most part of Udumbachola taluk and I concentrated on the area around Kumily. Geographically the area lies in the centre of the Cardamom Hills.

US\$ in Kerala, compared to 340 US\$ for India (Heller 1999:2). The growth rate of Kerala's Net State Domestic Product was 0.06 percent in the 1970s and 1.4 percent in the 1980s compared to India's growth rate of 1.39 percent in the 1970s and 3.25 percent in the 1980s (Ramachandran 1997:214). In the 1990s the trend seems to have changed. In the period of 1986-87 to 1991-92 Kerala grew faster than India, with 6.16 percent against 3.79 percent (ibid) and during the 1990s growth rates were 6-7 percent (Veron 2001:607). Also in the second half of the 1990s Kerala's rate of investment per capita caught up with and exceeded that of India. In 1990 it was only 40 percent, in 1994 it grew to 61 percent and in 1996 to 106 percent (Heller 1999:233).

In spite of poor economic performance and high unemployment rates, migration to - and a considerable flow of remittances from - the Gulf States have resulted in relatively high levels of consumption since the 1970s. Referring to T.N. Krishnan (1994) Ramachandran gives estimates that remittances made about 15 to 22 percent of the state domestic product (Ramachandran 1997:219f). He further shows that data on consumption suggests, that, depending on the mode of calculation, levels of consumption are similar to or above the Indian average (ibid). Accordingly, the role of remittances in alleviating poverty should not be underestimated, when public intervention and the Kerala Model are praised (Veron 2001:605).

However, social indicators show big differences between Kerala and the rest of India. Data for 1990-92 states that life expectancy was 68.8 years for men and 74.4 years for women in Kerala compared to 59 (male) and 59.4 (female) for all India (Ramachandran 1997:225ff). In the same period birthrates were 18.5 per thousand in Kerala compared to 29.5 for all India (p.226) and infant mortality was 17 (Kerala) to 80 (India) per thousand in 1990 (p.230). The 2001 Census of India found 90.86 percent of Kerala's population older than 6 literate, compared to only 65.38 for all India (Census of India 2001, 2004:6f). Other indicators on nutrition or medical support show a similar contrast (Ramachandran 1997:207).

So compared to the rest of India we find a rather educated, healthy, and – in terms of consumption - a rather well-off population in Kerala. These features were visible in the villages and farms I visited and explanations can be found in the past.

2.1.2 History

The narrow strip in the south-west of India, that is Kerala today, was divided into three territories in colonial times. The northern part was Malabar, a district of the Madras presidency, directly under colonial rule and the most neglected of the three (Heller1999:58f). The part in the middle formed the Princely State of Cochin and the southern-most part,

Travancore, also a princely state. Travancore was five times larger than Cochin (ibid) and also had the Cardamom hills under its jurisdiction, where the research took place.

The two princely states were more autonomous and Travancore, with its more centralised state, was able to “promote public health and education, as well as [to] manage food distribution in times of shortage” and “significantly outperformed colonial India and other princely states” in these areas (Heller 1999:61).

Travancore had also probably the highest concentration of Protestant missionaries in India in the middle of the 19th century and their influence was twofold. On the one hand they influenced state policies due to their proximity to the colonial rulers. On the other hand they worked among the lower castes, stood up against untouchability and other forms of caste oppression, and opened hospitals in rural areas and the first modern schools that were accessible to all (Ramachandran 1997:303f).

One of the most extraordinary aspects in Kerala's past is the long history of social movements to overcome “what is generally considered to have been the most rigid caste structure in British India” (Heller 1999:59) and other poor conditions. Strong agrarian and labour movements, movements against colonial rule and caste discrimination and a diverse range of citizen-based campaigns contributed strongly to shape the state into what it is today. Now “half of the population is actively involved in civic organizations” (Veron 2001:608).

In Travancore social movements began as socio-religious projects. Elites from diverse castes and religious communities, who had become wealthy during land reforms and the commercialisation of the economy in the mid-nineteenth century, demanded more rights for their respective communities such as access to jobs in the state's bureaucracy or to schools; or, in the case of lower castes, the right to travel public roads. Many communities “formed associations dedicated to social reform and uplift of their communities, that built schools and hospitals and sponsored cultural and social programmes”(Heller 1999:60).

In Malabar, the first wave of Agrarian movements started in the 1830s and targeted more directly the extreme forms of landlordism and the colonial state that ruled through this regime of *jenmis*.¹² After a second wave, driven largely by the rather well off and English-educated Nairs, it was only in a third wave in the late 1930s that demands by those working the fields as tenants were expressed (p.66ff). Two decades later, after independence, this

12 In Malabar the British exercised their indirect rule through the *jenmis*, who were on top of a complex system of tenancy- and subtenancy contracts. Heller notes “If there was a caricature of a parasitic feudal ruling class, it was the Malabar Namboodiripad landlords, the *jenmis*”(Heller 1999:66f). The upper positions in this hierarchical system were held by Nairs, a high Hindu caste, who subleased the land to Muslim and Ezhavas (ibid). “Below the Nairs and just outside sarvana order was Kerala's largest caste the Ezhavas (often spelled 'Irava') and related castes [...] primarily engaged in manual occupations”(p.59).

struggle finally culminated in the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill in 1959 (Ramachandran 1997:289ff). The movement in Malabar had a strong nationalist and communist element, and was well rooted on the village level through district- and village-committees, reading rooms and night schools (Heller 1999:69).

The organisational capabilities, built while expressing group or caste grievances, were translated into broader struggles. "By the 1930s social boycotts, picketing of government offices and protest marches (*jathas*) were standard movement practices" all over the state (Heller 1999:62). And this was also the time when agrarian, labour and anti-colonial agitation became mass movements, including for example a general strike in 1938 (Heller 1999:63ff, 172ff).

One of the most striking feature of the politics of that time was that communists, often veterans from the leftist branch of the Congress who later formed the Communist Party of India (CPI), took up the leadership in many of these movements and not only linked issues of national liberation, equality, in terms of caste and class together (Ramachandran 1997:292) but also managed to frame these struggles in Marxist terms (Heller 1999:75).

However, in spite of its doctrinal distrust towards the "bourgeois state" and some rhetoric in this vein, Communist agitation has followed, after a brief insurrection period in 1948, the "parliamentary route" and stayed within the democratic framework provided by the Indian constitution (Heller 1999:15).

After independence the mass movement could be translated into electoral politics and in 1957 the first General Elections that were held in the newly formed State brought a victory for the Communist party (Ramachandran 1997:294).

Once the Communists were in government they pushed for profound reforms. The most notable, the proposed land reform, concerned (a) the transfer land to the tenants, (b) the giving of land titles to the rural poor occupying their homesteads and (c) the placing of a ceiling on land ownership (Ramachandran 1997:294f).

However, when the Kerala Agrarian relations Bill was passed by the Legislative Assembly "a coalition of right-wing opposition groups, made up of reactionary landed interests, representatives of the private sector in higher education, the Church, caste organisations such as the Nair Service Society [...] and other anti-Communist individuals and organisations in the state, in league with the Congress Party, began a violent campaign of social disruption in Kerala" (Ramachandran 1997:295). Cyriac Thomas describes the role of the church more explicitly: "The 'liberation struggle' for which the personnel and funds were supplied by the Church and the Christian community culminated in the ouster of the first

elected Communist government and no doubt added to the political prestige of the Church in Kerala” (Thomas 1986:92). Following these events Indira Ghandi, the then President of India and member of the Congress Party, put the state under President's Rule until mid-term elections in 1960. The following Congress government tried to water down the land reform. Only after another Communist Rule in 1967-69 and general mass agitation, the land reform was implemented in the early 1970s and remains one of the most extensive land reforms in India (Ramchandran 1997:295ff). While the first two parts of the reform, (a) and (b), transferred land extensively to tenants and the rural poor, the redistribution of excess land (c) was not so successful (ibid).

Also in the field of labour relations in the last fifty years, struggles have led to an ongoing tendency towards unionisation, the regularisation of labour relations and, very importantly, towards formalising the informal sector (Heller 1999:160ff). The overall working conditions could be improved in many fields, also in the agrarian sector. For example, the struggle of agricultural workers succeeded when the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act regulated minimum wages, job security, retirement benefits, working hours and the creation of boards to settle labour disputes (Ramachandran 1997:297f).

However in spite of clear regulations for labour relations there are regional variations in the negotiated and actually paid wages, especially when it comes to unorganised groups such as Tamil migrant workers (Heller 1999:96ff), who provided the bulk of workforce in the larger organic farms I visited.

2.1.3 People's Participation Today

The latest “mass movement”, if one can call it that, was spurred by Panchayat Raj Act and the People's Planning Campaign.

Following the amendment of the Indian constitution in 1992 that called for decentralization and self-government on the local level, the Kerala Panchayat Raj Act of 1994 was enacted and in 1995 elections were held on the three local panchayat levels (village, block, and district) all over Kerala (Veron 2001:606).

Not only were administrative functions delegated to local bodies but in 1996 the state government allotted 35 – 40 percent of its budget to local initiatives (ibid). At the same time the People's Planning Campaign was set up to initiate local planning. 14147 meetings were held at the ward¹³ level, in all 991 village panchayats in which more than 2 million people discussed their felt needs and local problems. Following these discussions volunteers,

¹³ A village panchayat is divided into several wards, the lowest administrative level in Kerala.

activists, scientists, technicians, popular movements, NGOs and elected representatives wrote panchayat development reports and later plans, which were then coordinated on block, district and state levels (Veron 2001:609f). This process produced in the first year (1997-98) “nearly 68 000 projects from repairing irrigation ponds to developing cooperative vegetable gardens, to introducing water-sealed latrines, establishing women's enterprises, building houses for squatter families and reviving ritual traditions” (ibid).

However, after three years, it seems the campaign's “objectives of productive development, social improvement and environmental sustainability”(ibid) could not be fully realised. Proposals were largely consumption and infrastructure oriented and “felt needs” were often “translated into individual-beneficiary asset distribution”(ibid). Most money went into housing and roads, and the proposed allocation of 40 percent of the budget to the productive sector could only be realised in the second year, but even then investments were “consumption oriented”(ibid) (seedlings, fertilizers, cows and goats, etc.). Furthermore environmental concerns are not necessarily the most pressing on the local level (p.608f).

Also the aim of overcoming “class conflict and party politics at the local level by emphasising joint productive interests” (Veron 2001:609ff) seems to have been too ambitious. Only 10-11 percent of the electorate could be mobilised to the village level meetings and since “attendance of supporters of opposition parties was generally lower” political fractions could not be overcome (ibid).

Since “in the majority of local bodies, new project proposals were arbitrarily included just before finalization” (p.612), “favoritism and nepotism” cannot be ruled out and the plans were “likely to reflect the political power structure of the village rather than a 'common will'” (ibid).

However, where NGOs, scientists/activists, and government officers worked together dedicatedly innovative environment-friendly projects were implemented. “[D]ecentralized planning created a new space for committed government officials and social activists” (Veron 2001:613). And as one government officer told René Veron “Earlier my work of implementing single schemes was very dull. Now, I finally can use my education and technical knowledge to help designing useful projects for the good of the people”(ibid). Similarly enthusiastic, the agricultural officer of the Kumily panchayat referred to the Panchayat Raj as: “That was the beginning!” (FN 25.3.)¹⁴

The act practically installed the Panchayat as an effective agent for development at the local level and added another player to the local developmentalist scene in the southern Idukki

¹⁴ References to field notes are indicated as 'FN' followed by the date in 2008.

district as will be discussed below (sections 3.4.5 and 3.4.6).

In spite of all these successful interventions, however, Kerala is still facing a whole list of serious problems: “Industrial backwardness; agricultural stagnation; massive “educated” unemployment; persistent poverty, especially among tribal populations, the fisherfolk, Tamil labour migrants, elderly women and widows; high and still rising suicide rate among young people” (Veron 2001:606).

It shows that much of the human and social development has not been converted into economic development (ibid). The list of explanations René Veron gives includes: “overemphasis on redistribution and welfare policies; quick responses to populist demands due to political stalemate; inconsistent policies of successive state governments; discriminatory policies of the centre [Delhi] towards Kerala regarding the allocation of public sector investment; power shortage; labour militancy; inappropriate curricula of higher education; use of Gulf remittances to catch up with consumption rather than to invest in production; an excessive party-politicization down to the local level” (ibid).

In contrast to some of these explanations, Patrick Heller argues, that labour militancy has diminished significantly since the 1970s (Heller 1999:220) and stresses the new work culture promoted by the Communist Party and the “labour discipline and higher productivity” (Veron 2001:606 n.6). Heller attributes the low rate of investments to an ongoing bad reputation as a “problem state” rather than to factual reasons (Heller 1999:235).¹⁵

However, there is little dispute that the fiscal crisis endangers the welfare schemes and that there is an acute need “to strengthen the production basis and to realise economic growth in order to overcome unemployment and to sustain the outstanding social achievements made in the past” (Veron 2001:606). V.K. Ramachandran argued in 1997 that the skilled and educated labour force of Kerala would even allow “schemes for *mass* employment” in the skilled job segment (emphasis original, Ramachandran 1997:208). Since then several initiatives to attract capital to employ highly skilled labour have born fruit e.g. through the creation of several technology parks in the fields of biotechnology and electronics and IT (Heller1999, Vaidyanathan 2008).

It is important to note here that, while educated unemployment is high, the farmers I talked to reported a shortage of agricultural workers and some paid substantially higher wages than the wage negotiated at corporatist level or maintained relationships with their workers through occasional financial assistance in the off-season. The argument that was stated by

¹⁵ Capital has stayed away because in India it remains fundamentally conservative, paternalistic and risk-averse – disinclined to cope with organised workers even when profits can be made.” (Heller 1999:208)

them, on why agricultural labourers were so difficult to find was that many Tamil migrant workers who searched for employment earlier stayed in Tamil Nadu now due to a new scheme that distributed small parcels of land to agricultural workers formerly migrating to Kerala. The farmers I talked to also mentioned efforts made by contracting agencies to attract workers from states further away.

The high level of education also meant that many of the more or less well-off farmers, I visited, had adult children, who were going to or had graduated at a College or University and, in contrast to their parents, took up a white collar job, in the economic centres of India or abroad.

2.1.4 Christians in Kerala

When we take a look at the Christian community it is important to first highlight the importance of communalism, which “constitutes almost an essence of politics of Kerala” (Oommen 1995:547). As we have seen pressure groups that formed on the basis of religious or caste affiliation across the country were the first to express political dissent with the colonial regime. Political mobilisation along communal lines even intensified after independence in the politics of the newly formed Kerala state.

Demographically both Christians and Muslims form each roughly one fifth of the population, though the Muslim share grew considerably in recent years. This leaves a little less than three fifths to the Hindu majority (Ramachandran 1997:208).

For the latter, caste consciousness had a limiting effect on the ability to unite in electoral politics and two important communal pressure groups emerged among Hindus: the Nair and the Ezhavas.¹⁶ Together these four communities constitute about 80 percent of the electorate (Oommen 1995:546ff).

As a result, even bigger parties could not escape the influence of communalism and many smaller parties were formed to represent community interests, such as the Indian Muslim Union League; the various fractions of the Kerala Congress for Christians; the National Democratic Party for Nairs and the Socialist Republican Party for Ezhavas (ibid).

Since the elections are typically a head-on-head race between the Congress-led coalition - the United Democratic Front - and the Communist-led Left Democratic Front, carefully crafted support from communities is important and the withdrawal of an interest group has often resulted in the collapse of the government. (ibid)

Although spread all over the state, there is a tendency, that the different communities

¹⁶ See note 12

concentrate on the local level into a neighbourhood or “pocket borough” (Chander 1986:19). Some districts have a rather high concentration and many hospitals, schools and “almost all existing private colleges can be associated with one or another of these communities” (Oommen 1995:546). The Muslim community, for example, has a 66 percent stronghold in the Malappuram District. Christians have a share of around 40 percent in four neighbouring districts: Ernakulam (39 percent), Kottayam (45 percent), Idukki (43 percent) and Pathanamthitta (39 percent) (calculated from Census of India 2001, 2004b).

In the areas where they are dominant Syrian Christian organisations provide “services and infrastructure generally associated with the state” (Münster 2009:4) through “building institutions in the sectors of education, health and social work (charity and later NGOs) (Münster 2011:17).¹⁷

The Christian community, however, is not a homogeneous unit at all. There are numerous congregations who have complicated histories with one another, but as a basic division C.J. Fuller suggests “three broad groupings – Syrian Christians, Latin Christians and New Christians” (Fuller 1976:54ff).

Syrian Christians most commonly claim that the origin of their congregation was when the Apostle St. Thomas arrived in 52 A.D. and converted Namboodiri Brahmins. Another legend refers to Thomas of Cana, a Syrian Merchant who came to Kerala in the 4th century (ibid). The Community flourished but since the arrival of the Portuguese and their efforts to shift their fidelity to Rome in the 16th century, the Syrian Christians split into several congregations. Some of these have accepted the paramountcy of the Pope in Rome, others haven't, but most of them follow the Syrian rite (ibid).

Today the largest congregation among them is the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church and it accepts the Pope¹⁸. The second largest Syrian Christian Church, the Jacobites, do not accept Rome and then there are also three smaller groups among the Syrian Churches: the Syrian Orthodox, the Mar Thoma Church, both splinter groups from the Jacobites and the Syro-Malankara Church, that split from the Catholics (Fuller 1976:59f).

The Latin Christian Community was founded when the Portuguese St. Francis Xavier visited Kerala in 1544 and in 1549. Most converts were from fisher castes on the Travancore coast. Though belonging to the Catholic church they have a separate ecclesiastical hierarchy and in contrast to the Syrian Christian Churches follow the Latin rite (Fuller 1976:55ff).

17 Münster's comment refers to Wayanad but is also appropriate for Idukki as will be shown in chapter 4.

18 Fuller (1976:60) estimates the shares of each community of all Christian communicants in Kerala as following: Syro-Malabar Catholics (33.4 percent), Jacobites together the Syrian Orthodox (20 percent), Mar Thoma Church (7.9 percent), Syro-Malankara Church (3.2 percent), Latin Christians Community (22.5 percent), Anglican (5.5 percent) and other Protestants (7.5 percent).

The New Christians are descendants from those Malayali, who were converted by missionaries in the 19th and early 20th centuries coming from European protestant countries such as the UK, Denmark, Germany. Most of the mission effort was concentrated on the lower castes, but the prospect to overcome caste humiliation was not realised for many (ibid). As a result the new Christians (mostly Anglican or other Protestants) have a rather low status, but bear the further disadvantage of not qualifying as a Scheduled Caste and for the related benefits. Even the converts to Syrian-Christian belief cannot easily shake off their lower status and they remain largely outside the 'real' Syrian-Christian community(ibid).

All of these different subgroups are endogamous, though "Love Marriages" do occur more and more often. Fuller argues that there are strong similarities to Hindu Castes (p.62ff).

In the 1970s he found strong notions of endogamy and rules of conduct concerning purity and pollution. Moreover the different Christian communities can be placed within the caste hierarchy with Syrian Christians on top, more or less close to the status of the Hindu Nairs and the New Christians at the bottom, on a level with Ezhavas or Dalits. Correspondingly, many of the formers were landholders or traders in the past, whereas the latter are mostly labourers (ibid).

In a discussion with some of my informants, they could order the different churches very well into hierarchies and also the similarity to castes was mentioned.

2.2 More Notes on the Context: Idukki

2.2.1 A Historical Overview

The southeastern highlands, the Cardamom Hills, have a somewhat specific history. Some socio-political achievements such as land reform¹⁹ are not such crucial features in the history of the Cardamom Hills, since it is more the history of a settler colony, than that of the transformation of an exploitative tenancy system. On the other hand, the influence and the achievements of the Christian community deserve more attention.

In contrast to the densely populated lowlands, no permanent settlements could be found before the 1860s and the area was covered by thick forests. It was inhabited mostly by a tribal population who practiced among other things shifting cultivation and exploitation of the forest by outsiders was mostly limited to timber extraction and the collection of wild cardamom. Smaller cardamom gardens, where they existed, were operated mainly by Tamils living in the lowlands to the east, since the highlands were much easier accessible from there (Moench 1991:47f).

In the 1860s and 70s the first plantations were commissioned. Some influential European families received land as a free grant from the State of Travancore (ibid). First, the main product was coffee, but after a leaf wilt disease and tight competition from Brazilian coffee, many planters turned to tea (Tharakan 1998:6). Plantations, from several hundred to several thousand acres in size, were concentrated around Peermade and around Munnar. The state of Travancore endorsed these ventures with a view to exporting revenues but public criticism made granting free lands to non-Malayalis unpopular (Moench 1991:49f).

Along with the plantations came Christian missionaries, mostly to Christianise the Tamil labourers and many plantation holders were or had been missionaries, or their descendants had (ibid).

The area around Kottayam, at the foot of the Cardamom Hills had long been a centre of the Syrian Christian Community, who were also an important settler group among the Malayalis in the High Ranges. Syrian Christians often worked at the mid level of the plantations and later richer Syrian Christians were among the first to set up Malayali owned plantations (ibid).

Münster argues that reasons why Syrian Christians composed such a strong fraction of the

¹⁹Land reform legislature exempted plantation land “to protect the most productive area of the agricultural economy” (Heller 1999:78)

new settlers²⁰ can be traced back to the Travancore land reforms of 1855, which gave tenants of government land full ownership of their plots and turned it into a commodity that could be bought and sold (Münster 2011:7).

Unlike the high castes (Namboodiri Brahmin and Nayar), who had status restrictions to engage in manual labour, and the 'untouchable' castes, who were relegated to the position of bonded labourers, Christians were in a structural position to follow profitable enterprises. (p.8)

Other reasons can be found in the high population pressure among Christians, in their inheritance system (ibid) and, as Münster also notes, in their “self-representation [which] involved ideologies of hard work, progress and the entrepreneurial individualism of self-made men” (Münster 2009:12).

As a result they “emerged as a community of entrepreneurial cultivators” (Münster 2011:8) who could raise sufficient funds to colonise the hill area by selling valuable plots of land in the plains at high rates, wages from plantation work and a Syrian Christian banking system (p.8f).

However, until independence Tamils formed a large part of the population in the area. They formed the bulk of labourers on the tea or coffee plantations or owned the cardamom gardens, which were situated mostly in the area between the plantation centres at Peermade and Munnar. Most of them came only seasonally from the plains and after the monopoly on cardamom ended in 1887, most of the cardamom went to Tamil Nadu markets (ibid).

On the other hand, pepper cultivation has long been more or less dominated by Syrian Christians and so was the trade (Tharakan 1998:22ff). In the beginning pepper demanded less initial investments since it was cultivated in gardens at the lower slopes of the hills, but when cultivation was expanded to higher slopes in the 18th century, due to increased European demand the initial investment increased (ibid). However, the monopoly by the Travancore state limited further prospering, but when it was abolished in 1860, Syrian Christians profited by the increasing trade, which, according to Michael Tharakan, was a crucial factor in the cultivation decision to not return to coffee cultivation, as was common in other colonies (p.27).

Land ownership was complex, with the control resting on two different government departments until today. Since trees are administered by the Forest Department and land and hence plantation by the Revenue Department, administrative conflict has lasted until today (Moench 1991:57, see also Govind 2005).

20 Though Münster describes the internal colonisation of Wayanad, the origin of the Syrian Christian settlers is the same in Idukki.

To make supplying the growing workforce easier, in an area that was still difficult to access, the government allowed to use “wasteland” for food cultivation in 1898, which complicated ownership further. Since the exact boundary marks were unsure, encroachments by landless as well as rich individuals were hard to control even when the government tried. Limited control resulted in limited options and from the 1920s onwards encroachments were regularised repeatedly (Moench 1991:50).

Even though the first cart track over the mountains was completed in 1871, most of the area was still difficult to access from Travancore and control remained loose until independence. There was a silent concern over sovereignty about this region between Travancore and the Madras state, which got more virulent later and resulted in a bias against non-Malayali settlers and investments, and also in efforts to build a road network by Travancore authorities. The road network also improved when several dams for hydro electricity and irrigation were built in the area which opened the region for new settlers from the overpopulated Travancore plains (p.51).

In the 1940s and after independence, the migration to the Cardamom Hills increased immensely. While expansion of cardamom cultivation continued, and construction work of dams and roads drew workers into the region, two big government schemes spurred settlement in the area additionally and were accompanied by massive encroachment of forest land. When the schemes were stopped the politics of Kerala, spiced up with a good portion of new communalism, didn't allow the reversal of encroachments(p.51ff).

Firstly, grow-more-food-campaigns opened land for food cultivation, as a response to food shortage and famine in the early 1940s. Up to five acres of land was distributed on a short term lease base to individuals. Though the numbers remain questionable, already within the first year some 8000 acres were distributed (1942-43) and the programme went on for another decade (ibid).

Secondly, after independence, when states were reorganised along linguistic lines and efforts were made to keep Tamil speaking areas under Keralan rule the High Range Colonisation Scheme was started in 1954. In a climate of agitation by both Tamils and Malayalis, this scheme, which unofficially aimed at retaining the areas in question, settled 10 500 people in the border regions to Tamil Nadu, which in some cases amounted to an increase of 50 percent in population. (p.52).

Both schemes were accompanied by massive encroachments. Either the new settlers took more land than they were appointed to, or relatives and friends who came along with the settlers occupied land in the neighborhood. Also, some richer individuals took up large

areas, cleared them and either sold them off in smaller units or started plantations themselves (ibid).

The Udumbanchola taluk, the centre of the new colonies, recorded a population growth of 676 percent between 1951 and 1961. Though it was less spectacular in the neighbouring taluks, the population growth there was 48 percent in Peermade and 55 percent in Devicolam in the same period. In the decade before, during the grow-more-food-campaigns, it was lower in all three taluks, between 32 and 48 percent, which indicates that the state reorganisation scheme had a bigger impact (Moench 1991:53ff).

Between 1941 and 1971 population density increased from 13 to 247 per km² in Udumbanchola and from 45 to 112 in Peermade (ibid). In 2001 the density was 404 (Udumbanchola) and 150 (Peermade) (Census of India 2001 p.48f). A huge increase, but compared to the average population density in Kerala of 819 persons per km² (2001), it is still lower.

Efforts to limit abusive practices, to evict illegal encroachers or those whose short-term-leases had ended, were hampered by deficient land records and corrupt practices; and since evictions were also opposed by the public, politicians often turned a blind eye. Though some evictions were executed, public and political efforts against enforcement succeeded more often than not, and pressed for the regularisation of the settlements. Environmental concerns of soil erosion and forest conservation fell behind (Moench 1991:52ff).

Most of the migrants were smallholders who cultivated tapioca, rice, rubber or spices, but wealthier people saw the open land as an opportunity to start plantations. The living conditions were harsh and many died of malaria or lost their produce to wild animals (ibid).

“The majority of the settlers who came both in the grow-more-food-campaigns and during the process of state reorganisation were Christians. Centres of Catholic community adjoined High Range areas. Catholics were a strong, well organized and educated community familiar with cultivation in hilly areas. Other communities did not have these advantages. Syrian Christians now form the dominant community in the High Ranges.” (Moench 1991:56)

After the reorganisation of the state was completed, the government of Kerala started a series of more serious attempts to evict illegal settlements in the 1960s. This faced heavy opposition and shook up politics of the state, since the majority of the plots concerned were owned by Christians, eviction policies were easily framed as a politics of communalism. According to Marcus Moench,

“the governmental response [to encroachments] has followed a regular sequence. A series of strong statements and eviction attempts are blocked by popular outcry; commissions are formed to evaluate the problem; encroachments prior to a certain date are regularized accompanied by strong statements concerning the fate of subsequent encroachers [...] The cycle then starts again.” (1991:54)

However, the last cut-off date was 1st January 1977 and since then only in 2003 was there a major scandal on encroachments, which however have a rather different history as they were carried out by Adivasi groups (see Münster et al 2011:14f).

Governments, both Congress- and Communist led, faced major difficulties handling encroachments. The Communists, who were driven out of power by the “liberation struggle” in 1957, were still careful not to upset the Christian community (Nayar 1986:9). And the Congress Party, which had a strong base among Catholics since it was traditionally supported by the bishops, upset a considerable share of its electorate when it tried to carry out evictions (Thomas 1986:88).

For example in the case of the Ajjappacoil evictions in 1961 a rebel priest, who had been an important figure in the anti-communist front in 1959, together with well known members of the Communist party took up the case and opposed any eviction action as envisaged by the ruling Congress Party. In the following Lokh Sabha²¹ elections in 1962, the importance of the settler issue became obvious. Even though the Christian belt stood firm with the Congress Party following the bishops' recommendations, it lost heavily in the rest of the country (Thomas 1986:95).

Moreover, in 1964, the debate over the Churuli-Kheeritode evictions resulted in a split within the Congress party. 15 Christian Members of the Assembly of Kerala state, who withdrew their support, were expelled from the party and formed their own party, the “Kerala Congress” (Moench 1991:55). Most bishops were in Rome for the Second Vatican Council and couldn't prevent this development. So support of both of the Church's Heads and rest of the Christian community was split between the Congress and Kerala Congress in the elections of 1965. This made “the Church leaders' role in elections more complex, complicated and delicate” (Thomas 1986:89ff).

Marcus Moench concludes that by the late 1960s virtually all land was taken (Moench 1991:55f). On the role of the Church he notes that, although it did not encourage settlement on forest land, “it protected the interest of settlers once occupation had occurred” (ibid). At the local level, the first thing encroachers did was to set up a small church, since the government couldn't touch it. And priests followed them (ibid).

2.2.2 Christian Politics

These examples not only show importance of the evictions issue at the state level, but also the frictions within the Christian community. The Church's leaders have generally had a

²¹ Lokh Sabha is the Indian parliament in Delhi.

strong say in elections. Not only did they give out election recommendations, their support frequently amounted to campaigns from the pulpits, (including e.g. daily prayers on electoral outcomes) and was transported through the main Catholic daily *Deepika*, owned by the clergy (Thomas:1986). This resulted in a position where bishops had such a weight in the electoral process that at some times candidates were coordinated with Church leaders, at other times bishops could virtually dictate electoral candidates (Thomas:1986).

The bishops' support rested traditionally with the Congress and they were able to direct the electorate away from the candidates put up by the Catholic lay organisation, who opposed the Congress in 1952 (Thomas 1986:88f). Only with the advent of the Kerala Congress “the role of the Church as a political interest group”(ibid) but “practical expediency warranted the Church to have some sort of political identification with a regional party whose rank was mostly swelled by the Christians” (ibid).

Cyriac Thomas comments on the politics within the Community:

“A peculiar feature of the community and the Church is that the real leadership lies with the Bishops and the clergy and not with the laity. The Lay leadership constitutes only a second line, but in times of actual confrontations they function as agencies for implementation. The reason is that the resources of the community remain ultimately at the disposal of the Bishops and the clergy. Either in the matter of administration of Church-owned institutions or in the appointments there, the lay leadership plays no appreciable part. Because of the peculiar social structure of the community the hierarchy has in effect come to represent the Christian community [...] [E]ven social leadership lies largely with the Bishops and the clergy, and making use of their social position the Church leaders find it rather easy to influence even the political attitudes and electoral preferences of their men” (1986:103f).

He concludes that this position is likely to reproduce itself in the future (ibid).

Church-sponsored campaigns are part of the political routine in Kerala. For example the events in 2007 concerning “self-financing colleges” give a good case for what Thomas wrote more than 30 years earlier: the Church opposed the attempts of the state governments to regulate private sector education and limit corruption and launched a massive campaign including a pastoral letter that was read in the parishes of the Syro-Malabar Church, which called for the formation of “vigilance squads”, to organise protest marches, etc (Krishnakumar 2007).

There was however, also another standpoint within the Christian community: Joseph Pulikkunnel, the Director of the Indian Institute of Christian Studies in Kottayam and advocate for more democracy within the church, commented on the history of this church property since 1959: “Educational institutions that were once the property of local parishioners came under the Church's corporate control and literally became the property of priests” (ibid). And another commentator found that the clergy should not invoke community minority rights since they “had appropriated minority rights to themselves for their own

benefits". The Article ends with a comment by Archbishop Powathil, who referred to the critics as "those of people who have no followers" and do not represent "the majority of the Christian people" (ibid).

Joseph Pulikkunnel is well known for his maverick standpoint concerning the Church. In 1997, he argued in a comment on a similar campaign of the bishops – this time in favor of a reservation for Dalit Christians, which he perceived as hypocritical – he argues:

"You [the bishops] are running these schools under the protection of the minority rights [...] which are conferred on the whole community with the sole purpose of protecting the culture of the community under Article 29 [of the constitution]. But you are running these institutions without any reference to the community; there are no elected representatives of the community to sit on the Managing Boards of the Christian educational institutions, while the community pays for its establishments. There is no control over you by the Government either. So, presently the educational institutions are run in the name of Christian community, without reference to the community, by a microscopic minority, i.e. you and your priests and nuns, who belong to the upper class strata of Christian society." (Pulikkunnel, 1997)

He argues that the campaign is hypocritical because the bishops have, in spite of their power, done little to improve the situation of Dalit Christians within the community. He goes on to say that they could have reserved jobs in their institutions or set aside an amount of the "yearly income of all the dioceses, parishes, monasteries and convents", which he speculates to "be equal to the budget amount of any state in India." He concludes that instead of following their biblical mission to look after the poor, they "were more interested in the number game, increasing the number of Christians in the census reports" (ibid).

However radical Joseph Pulikkunnel's opinion is and whether or not he is right in his polemics, his comments show that in modern Kerala the powerful position of the Church is not undisputed within the Christian Community. The Church has to vindicate its position in a climate of educated, critical and politically active citizens.

As we have seen the Christian Churches occupy a specific spot in the political and social landscape of Kerala. They, and especially the Roman Catholic Church, are "a well knit and soundly structured interest-group, influential enough to have a say of its own in Kerala's politics and elections" (Thomas 1986:87). When we look at the Catholic development agency, CDS, in section 4.1.1 the rough indication of the Church's political power, given above, will provide a background for understanding its developmental efforts from a political perspective. We will then try to delineate in which way non-political development initiatives further the discrete political project of the church.

There are, however, two interpretations that I do not want to suggest. Firstly, even though speculations on why the Catholic Church involves itself in charitable work are given plenty of room in this paper, it remains unquestionable that the Christian Churches are important

agents of change, and their dedicated commitment to assist those in need has no doubt had great impact.

Secondly, I want to stress that the critical comments voiced here are not directed against the Christian community, they are cited to highlight a pattern of steep hierarchy, but steep hierarchies are not uncommon throughout the world and especially not in India.

Criticism between religious communities is not unusual. For example, unfortunately, the only place I found Pullikunnels open letter on-line was in an archive of the Hindutva, the Hindu far right who use the criticism towards Church hierarchies against the whole Christian community.

2.2.3 Tribal Settlements

The tribal²² population generally living in the lower strata of the society as well. They account for 1.14 percent of the population of Kerala but for 4.51 percent in the Idukki district (Census of India 2001, 2004:21). Many of them were settled into colonies during the 1950s by the government, where they still live on their small plots. The tribal colonies are under special regulations, e.g. the land cannot be sold to outsiders, they are allowed to grow one traditional marihuana plant per household, and they receive a number of government programmes for them, such as subsidised staple food (FN 25.3.).

However social problems like unemployment, illiteracy and bad health, remain large and call for different development interventions. Also CDS was founded with a focus on the tribal population.

As an anthropologist who was working for CDS in tribal development stated, among the biggest problems of the tribals he worked with was the inability to spend money sensibly. "They get money, and spend it within a week. [...] they just drink and then sleep and then the next day they go for collection. [...] They don't know the options for spending money. There is no entertainment, no saving, their needs are indifferent[sic! ...] If he learned how to spend the money the problem would be solved. But women are changing, women become more responsible now"(1206 J-52:00).²³

In the Kumily area especially, another big problem is prostitution connected to the tribal settlements(Ibid). And in recent years trends of class formation²⁴ and sanskritisation²⁵ could

22 Though the term 'Adivasi' is more politically correct, I use the term 'tribal' throughout the paper as it was deployed by my interview partners and most cited publications.

23 References to interviews are further explained in the List of Interviews

24 "For example some better educated [tribals ...] lend money to their own people and when they cannot pay back the debt, they take the land and so there are big land lords now. 15 to 25 acres, and then what will happen is that some people will become affluent, and others will be marginalised." (1206 J-1:03:00)

25 Sanskritisation describes the process of tribal people (and lower castes and groups in general) absorbing Hindu

be observed.

In the area around Kumily, there are two tribal settlements, one of the Paliya and one of the Mannan. While the former was a forest dependent community, the latter was oriented towards fishing and, as the CDS anthropologist noted, it is interesting to see how they came to an understanding about the division of labour (1206 J-16:36).

Since some of them cut fire wood and collected honey in the adjacent Periyar wildlife reserve, they got into conflict with the forest department. In 1999 a large eco-development programme was started to reduce their dependency on the forest resources as discussed in great detail in section 4.2.7.

However, tribal development in general is a very interesting thing:

Some anthropologists say we have to keep the people as they are ... we have to seclude the people from the outside and they will develop on their own.

But now the situation has entirely changed in relation to the modern economy: exploitation has started; some sort of class formation takes place in the tribal community. So we cannot keep away the development from them. Otherwise they will totally marginalize.

For example, Kottayam is a comparatively new city, 30 or 40 years old. Earlier it was part of the Kottayam forest and there was a tribal hunting and gathering community living there. And what happened was that because of the development of the city the forest place has been eroded. And these people don't have any alternative to live. [...] They are not skilled to take up any good job, so they ended up in the underworld of the city, in the slums. The group has totally disseminated in the lowest strata of society,

They are not skilled to adopt to ... skilled to take up modernisation. So we need to intervene, there is no question. We need to intervene - keeping the people away from development it is not practical, especially in this globalized, monetarized economy. (1206 J-07:35)

Less qualified statements summed up the imperative for development as “you cannot leave them living like animals”(FN 25.3.).

In some discussion with a regional CDS officer I had the feeling, that the perceived apathy of the tribals was hard to comprehend for her. The reference to “animals” and the contrast to other poor people (“our people in the CDS group”(ibid)), who show more initiative to change their bad situation even though they don't get special government benefits as tribal people do, point at an interesting pattern of 'othering'. Even though “there are also nice people” as the officer stated, the officers comments reflect the larger derogatory atmosphere towards tribals by the majority population, as well as a very strange situation for development operation in particular, where an uncomprehended and despised 'other' should be developed, on the grounds of a strong moral imperative. An imperative that collides with the

culture(e.g. through rejecting their traditional forest gods and turning to Hindu gods, or applying Hindu rules such as rejecting widow marriage) in an effort to become more Hindi and move up in society.(see Srinivas 1966)

perceived rejection of the development effort by the development subject, and generates disgust and despair for the 'other' who does not take the development opportunity the developers offer.

This personal reflection is not based on enough hard field evidence, it is meant to be an initiative for an interesting future investigation.

2.3 Summing Up

This - very selective - history of Kerala and the Idukki district in particular was intended to draw a rough sketch of the context. Specific features of the population in question were highlighted: They are generally literate and rather educated, and socially and politically active, but divided along political lines. Furthermore the consumption level is comparable or above the Indian average though skilled unemployment is high and out-migration common.

Following a century of mobilisation by communist, communal and other activists, deep-rooted frictions appeared. However, there can be no doubt that the activism from various sides, together with the public action it provoked, shaped Kerala into what it is today – an accountable welfare state with a strong civil society.

Attention was given to the rather recent settlement of the area, and to the politics under which these settlements occurred. In the case of most of the farmers I talked to it was only their parents' generation who had moved to the High Ranges and cleared the jungle; and many still have strong relations with their relatives in the lowlands.

Moreover the segmentation of the Christian Community was highlighted and the position of the Christian Church in society and politics was demonstrated by using examples of recent confrontations. I have shown that the Church and the clergy constitute an important centre of power in the politics of Kerala, which is strong enough to successfully challenge government action on a regular basis.

In the next section, we will look at five farmers living and cultivating spices in the Peermade- and Udumbachola Taluk.

Chapter 3 Five Farmers

In the next section the material from the fieldwork is arranged into five portraits of farmers to introduce some topics of organic farming from their point of view.

They are all certified organic farmers and were selected to show the different approaches to organic spice farming and marketing, which can be linked to their different resources: land, financial background but also social and cultural capabilities.

Some themes can be found in all of the portraits: There will be a biographical section, which roughly sketches their backgrounds, the history of the land, and makes reference to their living standards by describing their house or the education of the children; Their situation as organic farmers will be explored, displaying their own specific vision of organic agriculture, their actual farming techniques and strategies of marketing. And finally, there is a special focus on their relation to CDS and other agencies and the relations among themselves.

In order to provide context and display alternative strategies, extensive reference is made to farmers in similar situations, both conventional and organic. Also, however, the selection of the farmers opens a field of possible options, which are, of course, limited by their different resources.

The first three farmers portrayed in the chapter are members of CDS. Sebastian is a rather small farmer, who managed to use tourism as an additional source of income. Mutupathi is a large farmer, who employs 10 workers on his farm. He is also well integrated into CDS and a representative of the CDS farmers' groups. In contrast to that, Renju is a rather new member to CDS and less integrated.

The last two farmers offer examples of how farmers organise independently from large NGOs. Joss established a farmers' group himself and markets organic products himself. Finally, Harry is an exceptional German 'hippie' farmer, whose original perspective puts fresh light on spice farming and marketing.

In a final section the different strategies will be compared and the findings summed up before CDS's standpoint is dealt with in chapter 4.

The chapter is based on fieldnotes and interview transcripts. All quotes are original statements of the farmers, but the names of some farmers were changed.

3.1 Sebastian

In autumn 2004, during my first trip through Kerala, I met Sebastian, a small farmer, who grew different organic spices on his tiny plot and in addition showed his garden to tourists, like me. Among the many spice gardens in the Kumily area he was the only certified organic farmer. The tour with Sebastian and his wife was great fun, they were extremely friendly and good guides, making lots of quizzes on which spice was which. He stressed that he had always been organic and that he had his very own way of growing “naturally natural”, which was more than organic certification required.

He grew a whole variety of spices, including pepper, cardamom, nutmeg, ginger, turmeric, cocoa, four varieties of coffee, different chillies and vanilla, which he also cured himself. He also cultivated many different ayurvedic herbs, orchids, betel-nut, manioc and other vegetables, and they had goats and bees, a local variety as well as an ayurvedic one.

That first visit aroused my interest and so, when I came back in 2008, I first went to Sebastian's garden. He was still the friendly man I remembered and still dedicated his spice garden more to variety and quality than to quantity.

3.1.1 Land History

Sebastian's family moved here in the early 1960s and his father, his three brothers and his sister still live on farms in the area. However, Sebastian is the only one who farms in an organic way.

His youngest brother stayed with his parents on the farm as is common in the area, and Sebastian set up a new farm, where he lives today with his wife and his son Shaybu. Shaybu has recently finished at business college and is now a sales manager for a large local trader of agrochemical inputs and spice products (KPCMC). “In this generation, all the people are looking for white collar jobs” Sebastian noted (1603 S3-11:50).

When Sebastian bought the plot 30 years ago, it was wasteland. It is around 30 by 30 m (i.e. approx. 0.25 acres or 0.1 hectares), close to the main road and next to a channel leading to Kumily and the Periyar reservoir. The forest had been cut by one of the previous owners and Sebastian mentioned how important it had been for the settlers to cut the forest since the forest had brought wild fevers (e.g. chicken-pox) and many wild animals (1603 S1-12:18).

When he bought the plot, it was grassland, used by the women of the neighbouring families to wash their laundry in the channel and to feed their cattle with the grass.

First he fenced it off against the cattle with wild, thorny bamboo, and dug out a drainage system on three sides of his farm, which directs the water from the surrounding rice fields around his plot, into the larger channel. One reason for this was to dry the wet land since pepper needs a dry climate. The second, maybe more important, reason was that “the organic farm is protected against external influences”, which is important since the levels of agrochemicals are very high in the surrounding plots, Shaybu explained (1603 S3-01:05).

After installing the drainage system Sebastian planted beneficial weeds to raise the nutrient levels of the barren land, and also support-trees for pepper such as teak, coral trees, silver oak or golden shower tree, which are trimmed at the top according to the need for shading. Two years later, pepper was planted on them. And a few years later he started cardamom in another part of his plot. Today he has a whole variety of crops on the farm (1603 S3-10:30, S3/24:30).

He also has a vermicompost²⁶ unit, which is strongly promoted by CDS in the area. However, in contrast to the design promoted by CDS, Sebastian had it in a pit, and without grating against rats. Though rats come to eat the worms, “some rats will go inside their holes and will escape,” as Shaybu explained.

Since he has no cows and the dung of the goats was not sufficient he bought cow dung from his neighbour for organic manure.

On my first visit Sebastian showed me a cow horn he used for biodynamic preparations. (Timed according to the moon cycle the horn of a lactating cow is supposed to be filled with dung, fermented under ground for one month and small portions of the fermented dung are dissolved in water as a spray.) However, Sebastian had stopped this method when I was there again in 2008. “We are not up to that technology”, Shaybu explained and added that it was a lot of work and rather complicated with the moon cycles. He concluded: “We get good results with what we have” (1603 S4-11:30).

3.1.2 CDS

I wondered what Sebastian's relation to CDS might be since he holds a certificate from them and uses vermicompost and biodynamic preparations, which were also promoted by CDS.

But Shaybu said they did not use any external knowledge (1603 S4-14:00) and argued Sebastian had gained all his knowledge from generation to generation, from his father and from his grandfather. But as Sebastian showed me later, he also got many ideas from

²⁶ Vermicompost is specific composting technique in which organic matter is fed to earthworms. For further discussion see sections 3.2.1, 3.5.4 and 4.1.4.

agricultural magazines and I wondered why it was so important to him that he was so self-reliant. He also presented himself as the only organic farmer and did not want to direct me to other organic farmers.

In the same vein, Sebastian didn't tell much about his relation to CDS Spice in the beginning: "[t]hey heard of my farm. One day they came and they thought it was good so they certified it. That was all"(FN 9.3.).

However, when I showed the photos I had made, he recognised the inspector and also "Mutupathi, my friend" though they didn't seem to be close friends but rather knew each other from Church. The local inspector had come to Sebastian occasionally, he explained and also showed me his Farm Diary from CDS, which states the plot size, the number of plants and the expected and the actual harvests of his farm. Sebastian was also supposed to make notes about all the relevant farm activities.

One important question was also how much of his harvest he sold to CDS. Since he only had a small volume he sold most of his spices on the local market, Sebastian explained, and that CDS only buys when they have orders from abroad (FN 5.6.). However, the year before he had sold some cured vanilla to CDS (FN 9.3.). Access to market through CDS may in effect be a difficult topic. In fact, several other small farmers said they had sold to the open market since their yields were too tiny for CDS to bother with.

3.1.3 "Naturally Natural"

Compared to other farmers it is interesting to see how the interaction with tourists has shaped Sebastian's presentation of his garden. In the interviews, Sebastian pointed out his very own way of cultivating organically, which he termed „naturally natural“. That is "original organics - an ecosystem from minor bacteria to the biggest animals" (1603 S3-16:44).

Sebastian mentioned the abundance of fauna on his plot, pointing at grasshoppers, ducks etc. and when we heard the birds singing he proudly said "this is my natural, my organic". He pointed to the small bamboo grove, which he keeps since it is home for many birds even though it also attracts snakes - "water hen, bulbul, some kind of black bird ... the birds have a very arranged system. It is their flats". And even rabbits come and eat from the weeds of the farm (1603 S3-20:42, 20:03, 28:48).

"The ecosystem is not artificially made - like in some hotel areas, where some trees are planted and grasses are put and a waterfall etc.." Shaybu explained and that the gardens of the nearby resorts are "commercial natural. But we do original natural" (1603 S3-17:38).

Shaybu further argued that their system is also good for pest control, "Birds will be attracted

and they will eat the worms and clear the plants. That is original organic farming” (1603 S4-2:00).

He also pointed at red ants that had built a nest inside a folded leaf. “If we don't use pesticides also red ants will hide on the leaves” and they crawl everywhere and take the worms to their homestead and eat them, he explained (1603 S3-40:00, S4-01:00, FN 6.4.).

“In case we use pesticides,” Shaybu argued “the birds may die, the enemy insects may die and the friendly insects also may die. And both will be removed from our area and gradually our area will become a cemetery of plants and animals”(1603 S4-4:44).

“Why did you go organic and your brothers didn't?”, I asked. „They want more money.” Sebastian explained “I have less money, I'm working and controlling everyday, that's all”.

“My father is not living for money, he is living for working”, Shaybu rephrased it (1603 S3-32:00).

However, during my stay Sebastian asked me to excuse the state of the garden, since he was occupied with renovating his small house. He had not enough time to keep his manioc field tidy, the cardamom garden clean, to prune the trees and bushes properly and to cut the weeds. He pointed at the weeds under the low-branching coffee trees and explained: “That is not good because there will be more pests and they [the weeds] are thieves of manure” (FN 4.6.).

A perception that stands in sharp contrast to Harry's ideas on farming, as will be lined out in section 3.5.2.

3.1.4 Construction Work

Originally the raw brick house had two rooms, plus a kitchen, which was half open to the outside. With the renovation they wanted to attach a “fenced off” veranda and a third room since it was time for his son Shaybu to marry (1603 S3-33:47). They also planned to put the roof higher, plaster the interior walls and make a new concrete covered kitchen with a new sink, ovens and a chimney. (1603 S4-12.00)

Sebastian was very much a self-made-man, so he only hired a carpenter for the windows and doors and a bricklayer, and did all the assisting work. Shaybu could only assist on weekends since he worked during the week. On the one hand the self-sufficiency was a thing Sebastian was very proud of, but on the other hand he couldn't afford the renovation otherwise. “You know, I'm just a poor man.” he stated smilingly (FN 4.6.). In fact even with the extensions his house was significantly smaller and less well equipped than those of

most other farmers dealt with here.

3.1.5 Tourism

When I arrived at Sebastian's garden for the first time at the beginning of my fieldwork, two English tourists were just having a tour and I joined them. I was surprised how well Sebastian, in spite of his limited English, communicated his green vision of “Naturally Natural”, which seemed to match well with the socio-ecological imaginary of his guests.

The term “socio-ecological imaginary” is used by Goodman et al. to put a name to the “discursive resource”, the green aspiration, that is the basis for both consumers and producers of the organic movement. For example, they argue, that in 1997 it was this shared understanding, which made consumer and farmer alliances reject the corporatist assault on organic regulations by the US government, which planned to allow inputs like “municipal sewage, irradiation, and genetically-modified-organisms”(Goodman et al. 2001:101).

Since one could argue that the tourism Sebastian offers builds on the same socio-ecological imaginary, some attention needs to be given to Sebastian's side – or today possibly his main – income: tourism.

Kumily and the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary attract a considerable number of tourists and tourism-related businesses. Aside from wildlife tours, spice tours are the second most popular tourist attractions in the area. It developed from the late 1980s on, when an English teacher, Abraham, was approached by tourists (since he was one of the few people in the area who spoke English at that time) and invited them to his farm. These visits became more and more frequent and after some time, he put a signboard in front of his house (2605 A1-23:20). In the meantime, he has been featured in two TV documentaries (BBC and ORF) and he has been recommended by *Lonely Planet* since 2000. Today Abraham employs a guide and makes quite a living with his main income coming from the tours. He was also able to send his children to good colleges, who now live in different parts of India and the US (ibid).

After this success several spice gardens have been set up as tourist attractions, with different configurations. Some have rented existing spice gardens and additionally offer elephant rides etc., other guides have loose arrangements with farmers, or farmers themselves opened their farms to tourists and hired guides.

However, there have also been negative reports. At the time I was there, for example, there was a newspaper report that one spice garden owner sold a piece of wood as a fake

ayurvedic cure to a tourist.

Sebastian complained that the other spice gardens were not cultivated organically and also don't have much variety, "cardamom, pepper and coffee only. " He also said that they sometimes give misleading information: "We have nutmeg trees here [on our farm], male and female, but they show any type of wild tree and say 'This is nutmeg, it is just not growing time.' But nutmeg is always growing, it always has nuts and buds also" (1603 S3-34:40).

Sebastian kept stressing that he was the only (certified) organic spice garden that offered spice tours for tourists. The other spice garden owners are telling everyone "organic, organic. [But] that is not organic, not ecosystem, that is commercial ecosystem, commercial organic – on their name board only. We do an original ecosystem ... like wild-like" (1603 S3-27:50).

In the early 1990s tourists started to come to Sebastian's farm. "That time I didn't do the tours," he explained. Some guides simply took tourists to his farm and showed them the different spices. Sebastian watched the guides and took notes, as one of the guides recalled (FN 24.5.). But then discussion arose. The guides proposed a price of 200 Rs. each for the spice tours on Sebastian's farm and wanted 50 percent of the revenues, but for Sebastian that was too much and so he stopped the cooperation (1603 S3-37:04).

But the commissions are still a burden for Sebastian. He explained: "[i]n the case of the taxis from Ernakulam, Trivandrum, etc., the taxi drivers will say to their customers a spice tour costs 500 Rs, and then they will take them to their lodge. The taxi driver will then come to us, to the spice garden, and say: 'I have a customer he is willing to pay 500 Rs. You give me 50 percent. Are you willing?' If you are not, he will take them elsewhere" (1603 S3-38:08).

Instead, Sebastian keeps offering his tours on donation basis and concluded: "Some people are only looking for money... [But] I don't do commission so ... not many visitors are coming here"(1603 S3-39:09).

Abraham had a similar story to tell. Even though he could not complain about the numbers of visitors, he said it was not possible for him to sell his products on the farm, since there would be trouble because the tourist agents and drivers would demand high rates of commission (2605 A1 19:20).

Sebastian relied largely on word-of-mouth recommendations. Only "[l]ast year we got into *Rough Guide*" (1603 S3-40:01) he said and asked me if I could tell "the German book" to include him. He was probably referring to *Stefan Loose Travel Handbuch – Indien, Der*

Süden (e.g. Abram et al. 2009).

The income from the spice tours seemed to be a substantial part of Sebastian's income and I counted around 300 entries in his guest book for the year 2006. More than half of the entries were from European countries and most of them were from Germany - around one fifth - and India - another fifth. However, it is difficult to tell from that how many guests he had and how much he received as donation since many of the entries did not state the number of guests, and especially the size of Indian tourist groups was difficult to assess (FN.20.5.).

One entry however noted: "Sebastian, you are a true 'green man'. Your organic garden is a reflection of your great knowledge of nature" (ibid).

3.2 Mutupathi

I found Mutupathi because he was mentioned as a typical example of a CDS Spice farmer in several German magazines.²⁷ In both cases the authors were taken to Mutupathi's farm by CDS Spice and presented him as a typical benefiting farmer of the marketing strategy of CDS Spice. He is well known in his village so it was not difficult for the rickshaw driver to locate his farm.

Since Mutupathi spoke very little English, I was lucky that one of his daughters was there when I first visited the farm. I had to wait for two months to have a more extensive interview with him, that is, until his daughter was back for the school holidays and could translate for us. I asked so often about her that Mutupathi started to make jokes about my fancying her.

Finally we sat down in the rather large living room, with Jesus, St. Mary and the newly appointed Pope Benedict decorating the walls and started our 'interview triangle'.

3.2.1 Cultivation

Mutupathi's farm is situated in the hilly tea region half an hour's drive from Kumily on the slope of a hill with only a mud road connecting it to the nearby village. Covering 12 acres (around 5 ha),²⁸ the farm is rather large and comprises extensive tea grounds, with pepper vines growing on the shading trees. Mutupathi also grows several other spices, like cardamom and vanilla in mixed cultivation for CDS and there are also turmeric, ginger, clove, allspice and a vegetable garden for home use, as well as banana, coconut trees and manioc. And only recently, coffee trees had been added.

Together with his staff of 10 Tamil workers he also keeps 18 milking cows, whose manure was used for biogas fermentation and the rather large vermicompost tanks. Both technologies were promoted by CDS and were very common in the region due to government subsidies.

Biogas can replace propane gas for cooking. The fermented slurry, the by-product, which is a mixture of cow dung, urine and water, is applied to the fields. Vermicompost is another technology heavily promoted by CDS. They advise the farmers that the composting should be done by special African earthworms in concrete tanks with small water ditches on the top to protect the worms against ants and, if needed, iron grating against rats. The long tanks are located side by side so that when one is fully composted, holes in the bottom can be

27 The magazines had organic food, development or catholic backgrounds, but are not cited here to ensure anonymity of CDS.

28 The official Indian classification takes 5 hectares as the border between big and small farmers. Farmers who hold plots below 2.5 ha are considered to be 'marginal farmers'

opened to allow the worms to move to the untreated material. The worms feed on the compost matter and produce especially nutrient-rich compost (2703 S3-00:59), while releasing less climate-active methane than other composting techniques.

Mutupathi's tanks follow the guidelines of CDS very closely but are comparatively large, about 8 by 1.5 by 0.8m each and roofed. Next to them there is a concrete covered flat area for drying pepper and other spices.

Besides the cow dung, he applies external inputs such as neem cake,²⁹ trichoderma³⁰ and copper sulphate³¹. He also showed a technique to fight pests, a visitor of CDS from South America had shown him – the preparation of a spray from cow urine and water.

Since tea is a rather demanding plant and difficult to grow organically, he did use (unlike Sebastian) three biodynamic preparations consisting of eggshells, fish, cow horn and other ingredients, which he prepared on his farm.

On the whole Mutupathi was very convinced about organic farming and only after several questions on whether he experienced any problems did he voice any negativ aspects.

Unlike other farmers, Mutupathi kept books on how much input he used and also how many working hours each crop required. In comparison to conventional farming, he stated that he needed more labourers for weeding and applying organic inputs (0906 M-30:40).

He explained that organic inputs like compost are heavy to transport, whereas chemical fertilizers and pesticides come in bags, which are mixed with water right next to the field to which they are applied.

He had recently decided to plant 400 coffee trees. He made the decision because he thought the future harvest would be low in the area and so the price would be high. Other factors were that coffee is less labour-intensive and that CDS was considering marketing coffee as well.

3.2.2 Selling Products

Mutupathi's main source of income was from tea, which he estimated at my first visit roughly at about 10 tons a year and pepper (1 ton). Cardamom and vanilla were also important crops, but he didn't state accurate figures.

Mutupathi's tea was picked every fifteen days in the harvest season from May to September

29 Neem cake is the solid leftovers from neem oil pressing. It has a bitter smell and fungicidal effects. The neem tree is indigenous to India and has been used for millennia.

30 Trichoderma is a biocontrol agent, a fungus, which is applied to the soil to prevent the spread of fungus induced disease. See section 4.1.3

31 Copper-sulfate is a mineral fungicide allowed under organic regulations (see footnote 68 in section 4.2.3)

and, together with the tea from the other CDS Tea farmers in the village, directly taken to the tea factory, since it is very perishable before it is processed. He complained a little that since labourers are hard to find he couldn't produce best quality tea (that is picking the top 3 leaves every ten days) but instead his workers pick 4 leaves every fifteen days, which fetches a lower price. However the price paid by CDS Tea is still much higher than that on the open market. (Mutupathi stated the CDS price was 9-11 Rs/kg depending on the quality compared to 6-7 Rs/kg on the open market, but the prices seem to vary considerably with season.)

Since labour scarcity continued, some agents had started to organise workers from the North-Indian state of Bihar, but Mutupathi told me, the language-barriers were a real problem, since they only spoke Hindi.

Some of the pepper is processed to white pepper on his farm by soaking the pepper in salt-water for 20 days, de-hulling it and drying the remaining white capsules. He didn't process the vanilla and sold it green on the conventional market, since the fermentation process is very delicate, even though it increases the market value by multiples. Other farmers I met, like Sebastian and Harry for example, processed the vanilla themselves, but it was also very common to sell it raw and green.

Mutupathi sold a lot of his harvest to CDS Spice. They had only recently begun to market more spices besides pepper, he explained. For black pepper, CDS paid 10 Rs/kg more than the market price at the time of my stay. The market price was published in the local newspaper and fixed by the stock market in Cochin. In spring 2008 it peaked at 150 Rs. On my question, whether he was satisfied with the situation he commented "CDS should give more for pepper" but added in defence of CDS, that "CDS is the only organisation that gives a premium"(0906 M-66:25).

Though cardamom from organic cultivation brought considerably lower yields, according to Mutupathi, it fetched also a much lower price on the conventional market, because the capsules show marks of pest inflections though the quality in taste is the same. "There is only a price for inorganic." said Mutupathi's daughter. CDS Spice bought most of Mutupathi's cardamom harvest and paid almost double the prize of conventional markets (1000Rs). However I had the impression Mutupathi was in a privileged position and that other farmers, like Sebastian, had fewer chances to market their cardamom through CDS.

3.2.3 Biography

Mutupathi was in his late forties. He grew up in the lowlands, in Pala, in the Kottayam district. His family had a rubber cultivation and a processing factory there, and it seemed to me he still had strong connections to the lowlands.

He moved to the highlands in the late 1980s and bought up part of the land that became available after the former owner, who is now his neighbour, had to compensate after a fierce union strike of the tea workers on his property.

He continued the tea and pepper cultivation of his predecessor and in the early 1990s CDS approached him. "They just came," he said. In 1995 he started the conversion period and in 1998 he became certified. That was also approximately the time he started cardamom and in 2001 he added vanilla and only recently coffee.

His three daughters were in their late teens or slightly above twenty. The oldest was working in Chennai in a foreign exchange office, whereas the younger one attended a college for electronic engineering and the youngest was still going to school, and is planning to become a nurse.

"What will happen to your farm in 50 years, when all your daughters have white collar jobs and no one will be there to keep the farm?" I asked. Mutupathi laughed and his daughter explained: "He will sell it."

In retrospect I'm not sure how to interpret Mutupathi's laughter. The fact that selling his land is a real option to him is surprising, considering the intense clinging to land common among farmers in other parts of the world. One speculation why this might be so is that he might consider his farm more as a business operation, and if he had any ancestral land he had emotional bonds to, it would be the land of his family in the lowlands.

Mutupathi was a very friendly man, and I had the feeling he tended more towards harmony than conflict. He was also a well-respected member in the Catholic community. We met several times in church on Sunday, where he was often rather busy with one or the other volunteer services, such as distributing a kind of fried sweets on Easter Sunday.

3.2.4 The CDS Farmers' Consortium for Tea

Of the approximately 100 farmers in the village (Murikudy), 30 farmers were in the local CDS Tea consortium and 10 also grew spices for CDS Spice. Mutupathi was the president of the village tea consortium, which organised the transport of the fresh tea to the factory and administered the revenues for each farmer. They also decided what the yearly bonus from CDS Tea was used for. By the time of our interview, for example, the consortium paid

college fees for the children of the poorer members of the group. The farmers in the consortium also discussed the wages of their labourers.³²

In practice Mutupathi's job was to open the office of the village consortium on fixed times of the week. Together with the vice president, he tested the weight and quality of the large bags of tea the farmers brought, and entered the right amount in the books. Since they were also president and vice president for the dairy farmers' consortium in the village (which was part of a Catholic milk cooperative run by another diocese), they did the same thing for the milk: weigh it and test it for quality (fat content). After the collection, all the fresh tea was loaded on the pick-up-truck which Mutupathi rented to the consortium for that purpose and was delivered to the factory, where it was weighed again and the corresponding sum entered into the books. Periodically, Mutupathi called for a farmers' meeting, in which the balance will be paid out to the farmers: the price retrieved from the factory minus the expenses of the consortium for transport etc..

Whereas the tea consortium is kept busy over a long period with the administration of tea harvesting, spice can be stored and collected by the inspectors of CDS Spice and no ongoing group activity is needed, which explains why the farmers' groups of CDS Spice are less tightly organised.

Mutupathi is not only president of the local CDS Tea consortium but also of the zone consortium of Kumily and also president of all five zone consortiums together. So he is the link between all 500 farmers and CDS Tea.

On my question about what he did as president or what problems arose when mediating between the farmers and CDS, he initially stressed that there were no problems. After further questions, he explained: "when farmers have problems they will tell me and I will go to the factory and solve that" (0906 M-23:00). When I kept asking, he recollected one frequent situation when his intervention was needed: when the sum of the farmers' tea harvests, as weighed in the village consortium, did not add up to the weight of the total delivery at the factory. If such a difference occurred often, the farmers would have to compensate for the missing tea and the difference reduced the price they received.

At another visit I asked him if there had been any problems with organic certification. After a bit of reflection, he recalled one problem that occurred some years before with SKAL, the

32 The farmers of the village consortium put it uniformly at 100 Rs and Mutupathi said he paid 120 Rs. The local union explained the tariffs to me as following: For plantation workers working permanently at one farm the rate was 100Rs/day plus benefits like woollen clothing in the cooler seasons, etc.. The agricultural workers rate, for those working on a daily bases was 150Rs. It was not possible to assert which rate did apply to Mutupathi's workers. However, Mutupathi explained "Unions are not big any more", if they were ever really strong in the hill area and especially among Tamil workers (Heller 1999). In times of labour scarcity the collective bargaining seemed not to be that important and many farmers paid higher rates to attract new workers or keep their old workers. Wage levels were generally considered high by the farmers.

agency that issues the group certificate of CDS. “They said: ‘If you don’t have cows, where will you get the cow dung from?’” They thought it was not possible to buy cow dung and so if a farmer had no cows it was hard for him to get certified.³³ However all the people I asked told me that such problems had been solved a long time before and few other problems occurred.

However, CDS Tea faced severe problems, as the Catholic Father in charge of the project told me. On the one hand, of the original 1500 farmers only about 500 farmers had remained with the project throughout the conversion period. On the other hand, the South-Indian tea proved to be difficult to export as high quality organic tea, since it didn’t have the aroma of the famous north Indian teas such as Darjeeling, and, as another officer noted, the initial marketing manager was possibly not the best choice, and had been replaced. The tea was rather strong and suited the taste of the domestic market better, but at the time I was there the domestic market in India had not fully developed and people were not ready to pay a premium price. However, since the project had to repay the giant loan they had taken for building the factory, they had to process conventional tea and wait for the market to develop, the Father explained.³⁴

On the top of that some of the unsatisfied farmers who left the project were organised by a litigious lawyer. They were angry about that CDS promoted organic in spite of the fact that it resulted in smaller yields and questioned if organic farming was in their interest.

In addition to Mutupathi’s president titles listed above, he is also president of the local CDS Spice farmers’ group, of all CDS Spice farmers’ groups together, of a dairy farmers’ group organised by the neighbouring dioceses and of two local farmer unions sponsored by the agricultural office. However Mutupathi didn’t mention any burning issues between farmers and CDS.

33 There is a possible link to the organic concept of “Kreislaufwirtschaft”

34 Interview with the executive director of CDS (FN 31.5.)

3.3 Renju

In order to allow a more critical perspective of CDS from within and to assure further anonymity of the farmers interviewed, the case of Renju has been compiled from several interviewed farmers.

Similar to many other farmers in the area, Renju's grandfather might have moved to the area from the lowlands of Kottayam District in the 1960s during the settlement campaigns and started to cultivate pepper. The whole family helped to build the farm. Years later Renju's father bought a plot next to the family farm, which was eventually split between Renju and his brother. Several members of his family live nearby. On the farm, Renju lives together with his wife, his small daughter and his mother (1607 R-06.53; 42.33).

It is a farm of around 2 acres (0,8 ha), and Renju grows mainly cardamom, pepper and coffee, but also other crops like ginger, manioc, bananas, colocasia, musambi (a kind of orange) and vegetables. Cardamom and pepper are sold to CDS Spice and coffee is mostly sold on the local market. It brings only a low price, Renju complained, since it is not possible for him to de-hull it properly himself. The harvests of the other crops are also sold on the local market without organic premium. The vegetables are mostly consumed by the family and he proudly added that they don't buy any additional vegetables from outside (2007 R1-03.36, 1607 R-00.39).

Apart from the cooperation with CDS, Renju mentioned that he received subsidies from Krishin Bhavan³⁵ - for example 1500 Rs to start ginger cultivation on 10 cents of land (i.e. 0,1 acre or 0,04 ha) plus 500 Rs to pay workers for applying the neem cake he got as an organic farmer instead of the chemical fertilizers (1607 R-39.16).

3.3.1 Organic Cardamom

Renju had a lot of cardamom, which is much more difficult to cultivate under organic regulations than pepper. Two years ago he replanted his plot with a variety called "Njallani", (or locally "Green Gold"), which was developed by a local farmer and is used by almost 90 percent of the farmers in the area. Though it brings high yields, it is also said to be rather input intensive and vulnerable to pests (Raghavan 2008).

In spring 2008, the monsoon came very late, and so the plants didn't bear much fruit. Additionally the cardamom white fly or "Veelleecha" as it is locally called, invaded Renju's fields (2007 R1-07.07).

³⁵ Krishin Bhavan is the local office in every panchayat of the Agricultural Department of the State of Kerala.

“The pests attack them very quickly. There is a medicine for each disease, but they are all pesticides,” Renju said, “and only if you deliver a good crop you get a good price for it. For a good crop it is almost double [on the local market]” (2007 R1-04.39).

Also Thrips, a common pest of cardamom, affected Renju's fields. The small insects feed from the Cardamom capsules and leave marks on them, which grow to brown stripes by the time the cardamom is harvested. He explained, that even if the outward appearance of the capsules of the cardamom was not the shining green, the inside of the fruit would be perfectly all right. “However, in the market, it'll be less”, he stated. The local spice traders would give 300-350 Rs/kg in contrast to 600-700 Rs/kg when the capsules were flawlessly green, Renju explained. CDS Spice, however, paid a price of 1000 Rs/kg (2007 R1-13:47).

Renju took rather precise notes and calculations on what he spent including wages for workers, inputs etc. He claimed that his total costs were around 600 Rs/kg. “Now instead of 600 Rs, we get 1000 Rs [from CDS]. So we can hold on and stand without hanging our head in front of the other farmers.” he explained (2007 R3-05:11).

Even though he saw the benefits of organic farming such as the premium prices, his experience in conventional cardamom production had made him conscious about the crop loss he now encountered. I don't think he seriously doubted his decision to convert his fields to organic, but sometimes it seemed that he looked back to the times, when he had been allowed to use pesticides to combat his yield loss.

Renju said organic cultivation affected the yields considerably. He claimed that he would collect not only 600 kg, but 1000 kg of fresh cardamom in each collection and could also collect more often, if he used pesticides, “like the big estates do” he added (2007 R1-12.55, 11.49).

However the use of pesticide spray would also mean additional labour effort. He would have to spray his plants 7 times a year, or in the case of Thrips every 20 days, which is a lot of work, Renju explained (2007 R1-12.40).

When we talked about pests and remedies against them, I mentioned the biocontrol agents CDS was developing, i.e. organic micro-organisms that would limit the pests. Renju said that they hadn't found one yet and that up until now chemicals are the only thing that worked. Besides he added, he doubted that he would be able to afford them once they were available - CDS developed it for rich farmers, not for him (2007 R3-14.24).

The organic pesticides he knows of “are very costly. For one kilo, its cost is around Rs.150. Not just that, but we'll need plenty of it to completely cover the entire area of crop. It's impossible” (2007 R-34.52).

While cardamom remained a difficult crop, Renju had a positive picture of what a farmer should do:

There is no point in doing more work. We should give our attention to it and thus just see and accordingly do what must be done...We have to alertly observe it regularly, always. It's not in doing more work. It's not about doing more. Every day, we should go and observe, if we see any deficiencies, or anything missing, we will understand what's happened to it. Accordingly, basic steps can be followed, that's all. (1607 R-13.18)

3.3.2 Renju and CDS Spice

He has not been long with CDS Spice. They approached him only three years ago, so he had just finished the conversion period and sold his first shipments. He said before he had used cow dung and other organic inputs as well, but he had also used pesticide sprays, but not on the vegetables for home use (2007 R3-07.58).

"Was there ever a problem with certification? Did you have to change anything?", I asked. "Nothing" he said, the only thing that came to his mind, was that the inspectors had told him to be sure not to contaminate the pepper while it was drying in the sun with cow dung or similar pollutants (2007 R3-03:56).

Since he joined CDS he had attended several of their seminars. "Of course! I'm going." he commented on them "Whenever we are called, we go. We have taken many benefits from the classes. We learn many things we didn't know before and we put many things into practice. [...] So by doing that we can increase our yields. So we go for sure" (1607 R-36.39). He also used techniques promoted by CDS, like biogas and vermicompost (1607 R-38.52; 2007 R3-01.00).

Renju stated that he obtains around 1500 kg of pepper from his land. The difference in yields compared to conventional methods is not so marked with pepper, and so the conversion period of three years was not a big problem. Still, Renju said that farmers who use chemical fertilizers get a higher yield, so, according to Renju, "it would be good if CDS would raise the price accordingly"(1607 R-18.50).

Renju recalled that in one of the farmers' meetings with two local inspectors of CDS, some of the farmers claimed that the additional 10 Rs/kg to the market price were not enough and demanded a 25 Rs premium.

Farmers were also enraged, that a few other farmers, who had sold their pepper later, when the schools opened in June, had received a higher premium.³⁶ They said that shouldn't be the case and that conditions should be the same for everyone.

³⁶ Renju said it was 15Rs but the inspector claimed it to be 20 Rs.

Another point he made was that CDS didn't buy small quantities. He claimed that they wanted to have at least a load full (e.g. of a pick up truck). "If we can provide that much stock, they are willing to take it. But no one is ready to give like that" (2007 R1-01:04).

Reflecting on CDS, Renju explained: "CDS is an organisation oriented only upon business. Only if there is an organisation of farmers, will we have benefits. There are organisations set up by farmers, but it's rare." He mentioned Joss, who organised a group in the area and will be dealt with in the next section.

"Isn't the farmers' group of CDS Spice a little like that?", I asked. "There is a farmers' group." Renju explained, "but inside that, mainly they won't look after the needs of the farmers well. They are employed citizens. They will be foremost concerned about their business, right? That is done by employed citizens – i.e. some farmers. It's even called the Farmers' Club.... CDS is an organisation with lots of specialities. They are doing a lot of different things. But [Joss' Group] isn't like that. It is an organisation of organic farmers only"(2007 R3-10:40; 15:54).

Renju had joined CDS only 3 years ago, but when I asked Renju if he knew who the president of his local farmers' group was, he said he didn't. First he named one of the inspectors, but that was rather unlikely. "Haven't you elected a president?", I asked. "All that is given by [CDS Spice] themselves. When someone from there comes to take classes, the inspector will call us or come and tell us. That's when we go and take part in it. So, other than that we farmers don't meet as a committee or anything." (1607 R-27:36) Renju had never heard of Mutupathi or that he was the president of the CDS Spice farmers' groups.

The picture he gave of the inspectors was not too flattering, either. In his eyes, "they just do their duty and that's all. Until now they haven't even seen our entire place. You have been here three times, but these people have come just once to us. They're just doing what happens in any usual office." And Renju's mother added: "All they look out for is the cash of every person under them, those under them... We are here and they are sitting in their offices. That's what their sense of duty looks like." Renju continued, "[a usual inspection takes] about 10 minutes. Now when they come – they have come only once here for inspection – They simply roam around and after two minutes, come here [to the living room] and do everything they have to, here indoors. Then, on a hunch they said 'okay, you are a member'"(2007 R4-01:18).

Renju seemed to be uncomfortable talking to me. "Will it be a problem if I say this?" he asked, and then stated "If they come to know about this, it will be a problem" (2007 R1-01.34). He was afraid that our conversation would put "a strain on the friendly relationship",

but also that he might lose his membership in the farmers' group (2007 R3/00.29). "I just told in case," he explained "because we are in a relationship with that organisation, right?" (2007 R1-03.13).

In the interviews with the farmers who make up Renju's compiled case, I was surprised how little CDS could communicate its social mission to the farmers, even though their participation in CDS Spice brought benefits compared to their conventional past. Although Renju tackles some major problems – in aspects of participation, procurement and the immense workload of the inspectors – other statements for example about CDS's general motivation must be interpreted as opinions. They shouldn't be taken by themselves, but interpreted by what they mean for the relation between Renju and CDS:

On the one hand Renju's statements display a strong distrust towards organisations in general: they are corrupt and the officers only sit in their offices and don't do anything. This distrust seems to be against organisations in general (be they government, business or non-profit) and is also applied to CDS.

On the other hand there is the theme of service versus business. While CDS claims to conciliate both sides, Renju does not acknowledge the service aspect, but uses "only doing business" to highlight aspects of CDS's he finds problematic.

3.4 Joss

Joss' farm stretches from his rice fields at the bottom of a small valley to the small mud road that runs along the top of the hill and connects his and the surrounding farms to the village. It has the size of 7 acres (2.6 hectares), and Joss grows numerous spices, fruits, vegetables and coffee (such as pepper, nutmeg, vanilla, cardamom, allspice, turmeric, cinnamon, curry leaves, mango, jack fruit, betel nut, passion fruit, tree tomatoes, bananas, arabica coffee) (0706 J1-10:00-27:00). Unlike the other farmers we have met so far, he found a way of selling also fruits and rice with an organic premium. He also operates a fish pond and vermicompost tank and processes raw pepper to white pepper. Similarly to Renju, Joss finds it difficult to grow cardamom organically, but he leaves it "until we find a better treatment" (0706 J1-57:50).

Joss bought the plot about thirty years ago and converted to organic farming four years ago, after he had read an article in the newspaper on organic farming. He had also another organic plot in the lower hills, where, among other things, he cultivated rubber, which has seen an immense price hike in recent years. The other farmers also said the family of his wife was rather wealthy.

He seemed to be a witty and ambitious business man and had several small businesses on the side, for example wood trading. He also knew rather well what his farming expenses were since he calculated input costs and labour charges in his organic farm diary.

Joss had one son, Maneeth, who was in his early twenties and went to a college for tourism and had just found a good place for practical training at a resort in Kumily. However, he seemed to like farming better than a prestigious white-collar career.

3.4.1 The Farmers' Group

I met Joss when I looked for a CDS farmer and asked for directions. The people on the road understood that I was looking for "organic" and so they sent me to Joss. One of them was a friend of Maneeth's and since Joss did not speak English at all, I had to depend on him to interpret.

Joss was rather well known in the neighbourhood for organic growing because he had founded a society of organic farmers two years before, which consists of about 50 farmers today. He proudly showed me a map and pointed out a large contiguous grey area that marked the plots of the group (0706 J2-9:29).

Compared to CDS Spice farmers, the farmers in Joss' group seemed to be wealthier on

average and some of them had graduated at colleges. Their farms tended to be larger and another important difference to the average CDS farmer was that they had storing facilities and the financial means to store pepper for a year or longer.

Similar to the farmers we have dealt with so far, the plots of the farmers in Joss' group had either been cut out of the forest one or two generations before or had bought in that generation. Some said they got the legal entitlement only after they had settled. "Long back, this land belonged to the government. We cut and cleared the forest and entered the area. It was after that, that we were given the first and original record about the ownership of the property. It was at least 60 years ago." (1607 I1-00.36)

3.4.2 Certificates and Organic by Default

The first farmers in Joss' group certified separately. But about 30 of the farmers who joined in later, now hold a group certificate together, which was a much cheaper way for certification than the individual certification. Joss estimated the cost at 500 Rs per farmer as against 3500-4500 Rs for the individual certification (1606 J1-33:20; 1607 I1-17:00).

However, some farmers, for example Joseph, saw advantages in relation to tourism in their individual certificates, since they had them at their farms and were able to show the original certificates to their visitors and home-stay guests, and also sell their products to them (1606 J1-33:20).

Joseph also stressed that he had his own way of growing organic which involved more than just complying to the norms. He referred to it as "natural organic", left parts of his land fallow and limited external inputs even when he expected his yield to be substantially lower (1606 J1-00:34, 15.40). In fact, Joseph and other members of the group stated they had not used synthetic inputs before they became certified.

Joss had used synthetic inputs before and doubted that there were many who hadn't. In his opinion there weren't many organic by default farmers today, while there had been more in earlier times. He said that many had applied synthetic inputs only if they got them from Krishin Bhavan as a subsidy. "Sometimes", he continued "they don't even have a pump for spraying or anything. There are some who use lots of dung from goat and cows, ... [but] won't even use copper sulphate" (an allowed input under organic regulations). "There are people who don't even use that. Instead they'll give it to someone else or sell it", he said (1007 J3-19:58).

Not all farmers who were organic by default, that is, who rejected the use of synthetic inputs, were sympathetic to certification. One of the farmers quoted a neighbour, who didn't

use pesticides, as saying “I don’t have money to waste for certification” (1606 J1-32:44).

As we can see here organic by default is an ambivalent category, especially when compared to the well guarded label “certified organic”. There are farmers who by conviction don’t use pesticides, but there are also those who wouldn’t reject fertilizers if they were given to them by the local agricultural office, which had happened occasionally for years. Additionally, farmers may feel resistance to admitting to having used fertilizer, given the prestige organic agriculture has received in recent years in Kerala.

One of the farmers explained that the heavy use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides was a relatively recent phenomenon, “If we look at our past, chemical fertilizers were not used for pepper and coffee at all and only 10 years ago chemical fertilizers started to be used in cardamom cultivation on that scale” (1607 I1-13:13).

3.4.3 Why Organic?

When I asked, why they had converted to organic, the reason that was given most frequently was health. There had been an outcry in the media when the medical department reported that the rate of cancer was the highest in the areas where cardamom was grown, especially in the Kanchiyar panchayat, which was rather close by (1607 J1-29:30).

Another reason mentioned was that some had participated in a workshop of an NGO promoting organic farming, which had used arguments like ‘all the money you have earned on your farm with pesticides will be worth nothing, when one of your children will get cancer and asks you why?’ (FN 11.6.). Many of the farmers shook their heads about one farmer in the neighbourhood, who still heavily sprayed pesticides even though he had cancer (FN 10.6.).

Besides health considerations the farmers mentioned resource depletion and market opportunities: “first of all, in our Idukki [district], the main thing is we’ve destroyed natural resources. Then the next thing is, organic products have a big market scope in the world market” (1607 I2-15:16).

Organic products are, one farmer explained “items for export. There is demand outside. And you get a good price. That’s my calculation... That’s the main reason.” Another farmer explained, “it depends on the order from foreign countries. In India, it isn’t of much use, so the price is very low. We only get a good price if there is demand from outside” (1707 T2-03:16; 10:13).

However, when I asked about one farmer standing in the group and discussing with the others if he was organic as well, they explained that he was on “temporary leave”. He asked

to be excused; his children were going to college and he had to pay the fees, so he couldn't afford to be organic (FN 11.6.).

3.4.4 Selling Pepper

Joss and the others tried to sell their pepper collectively only for the second year. The year before they had got 175 Rs/kg for their organic pepper while the conventional price was around 130-135 Rs. This year they had around 12 tons of organic pepper in stock and bargained for 200 Rs since the conventional price was around 145 Rs. (1606 J1-53:00). This means the premium they expected was 30 percent or more.

However, in spite of the relative price peak at that time, several of them complained about the state of the market in general. "With these prices, we don't have any benefits. It's because, if you get a good price one year, you don't get it for the next two"(1707 T2-06:07). They said there had been a peak in the market price in the year 2000 but from then on it had gone down (1707 T2-08:34). They also found it was unfair that the price they got was a fraction of the price the end customers abroad would have to pay in supermarkets (0706 J1-45:00).

Still, Joss expected a better market price for the coming year. Because of the delayed monsoon the pepper had not pollinated well and so the harvest was expected to be small. Joss even thought about storing this year's pepper for one year if he didn't find a better purchaser. Others in the group expected even higher prices for the years to come (e.g.500 Rs), since they observed that many farmers in the district moved out of pepper production (1606 J1-28:42). The belief that local conditions determined the pepper price in the Cochin stock market was shared by several farmers about different products, for example also about coffee.

Another important factor determining the pepper price, the farmers claimed, was the time of the year at which it was sold. One of the farmers in Joss' Group reported he got a very low price when he had to sell his pepper in April during harvest season. An instalment of the loan he had taken up for the medical treatment for his parents had been due and so he had had no choice (1606 J1-39:09).

However, the question of market access seemed also to be prevalent within Joss' group since one of the farmers stated that it was normal that Joss sold his pepper first (1607 I2-09:45).

3.4.5 Different Agencies

Joss and his group had business relations with several agencies which offer organic certification, agricultural inputs, or work as purchasing agents. Some of them work only in one sector but some combine two or three. For example from this perspective CDS Spice works all three: they certify, procure products, and while CDS Spice offers inputs for quality enhancement for free, CDS Central develops and markets vermicompost and biocontrol agents at subsidised rates.³⁷

In the interviews, Joss and the other members of the group were not very precise when referring to specific agencies and treated them as whole complexes. For example in the case of Lacon (see below) they did not distinguish between the certifying agency and the (independent) purchaser demanding the certificate of that agency. But since several of the agencies had close links to each other, it was not unreasonable to refer to them as complexes (see table below).

They were certified by Indocert - both those with individual and with group certifications. They came twice a year and conducted additional surprise visits. They also published a list of permitted inputs the farmers could use (0706 J1-40:00).

Another agency was Plantrich, which offered a whole variety of rather expensive organic inputs, such as fertilizers (e.g. packed, condensed compost granulate) or biocontrol agents.³⁸ There was, however, a society under the same management, MSSS (Manarkaadu Social Service Society), which procured organic products and manufactured pickles and ground spices, and packeted and marketed them with a focus on the domestic market (1007 J1-00:50). Though the office of Joss' Group was full of advertising material for Plantrich, they said they rarely bought the expensive inputs (0706 J1-54:50) but instead, MSSS was important to them as a purchaser. They had sold pepper and 400 kg of mangoes for pickle the previous year and hoped to sell pepper this year too.

One of their agents had come to inspect their farm, Manesh explained, but Joss didn't want to participate in the certification programme of MSSS, even though it would probably be cheaper than the certification of Indocert, because then the farmers would have to sell all their product to MSSS, he said (0706 J1-41:35).

MSSS was not a certifying agency, but operated as a farmers' group and certified and

37 Since there is a trend that transnational corporations try to gain control of all aspects of productions, by supplying GMO seeds, corresponding petrochemical inputs and controlling the trade of the produce, a process Kearney calls a new domain of 'agroindustrialisation' in reference to Wolf's four domains to surplus extraction (Kearney 1996:127, Wolf 1966:50ff), combining control of certification, input and output is even more problematic.

38 During the time of my stay there were rumours that some of the inputs of Plantrich were under investigation by Indocert, the agency it was certified by, because they allegedly contained substances which did not comply with organic regulations.

inspected the members of their group. But it did not issue 'transaction certificates' (TC) for outside buyers, which is needed for every transaction of organic products to assure the volume of sales matches the farm yield or – several links further up the supply chain – that the volume purchased matches the exports.

From the perspective of Joss' group CDS Spice had a similar problem because once farmers participated in the CDS Spice programme they could only sell to them. Aside from that important difference, agencies operating farmers' groups were handled a lot like certifying agencies by Joss and his group.

Besides Indocert and Plantrich, Joss also bargained with another agency: Lacon, the Indian branch of a German certification agency operating internationally. During the time of my visit they had just found a purchaser who offered a very good price for their pepper but demanded that they were certified by Lacon. Since they referred to both as Lacon, even after asking several times I was unable to find out the name of the purchaser. However the manager of the Lacon India assured me that they were only a certifying agency and did not procure products of any kind. And he said it was incompatible with business ethics to use the information of certification for the procurement. He believed it was problematic that the wife of the director of Indocert ran an exporting firm (Indian Organic Farmers Producer Company Limited - IOFPCL) for organic products.

When Joss called Lacon for the first time, Lacon made an offer to certify 20 members of the group individually which was however too expensive in their eyes (0706 J2-45:24). But Joss and his Group were very creative in finding a solution for that, e.g. they tried to get around the second, additional certification by offering a margin of 2-3 Rs per kg to the purchaser (1606 J1/53:00) or thought about selling both organic pepper and "in-conversion" pepper for different prices (e.g. 200 Rs and 170 Rs) and then share the average price in solidarity (185 Rs) (0706 J2-48:43). In the end it turned out to be a misunderstanding and Lacon made an offer for a group certification and when I left it seemed they would accept that. For the additional certification no conversion period was needed.

When Joss compared Indocert and Lacon, he perceived Lacon as foreign and preferred Indocert because of notions of independence and national sovereignty. While both are legally private companies registered in India, it seems Indocert could establish itself as a standard agency by using the term 'indo' as part of its name, at least for Joss.

Joss and the farmers in the group were also members of KADS - Kerala Agricultural Development Society, a private initiative located in the district capital, which had ties to the district administration. They ran one of the rare organic farmers' markets in Idukki and also exported pepper and other products. Some farmers of the group sold different items to

them.

Joss also showed me his membership card of the Fair Trade Alliance Kerala, which in turn is linked to the Swiss marketing agency Pakka. However, it seemed his membership didn't mean that he had actually been fair-trade certified and sold fair-trade products to them.

Joss' group sold most of their coffee with organic premium via the coffee project of Harry, the farmer dealt with in the next section. Harry's partners in Germany set up two shops where the high quality coffee is sold exclusively. However, they decided not to market it as organic coffee, which required the whole export chain to be certified, but to market it simply as high quality coffee.

Agency Complex	Certification	Inputs	Sales	Other
Indocert (plus IOFPCL)	Joss' group was certified partly individually, partly as a group	-	IOFPCL is informally linked to Indocert and packages and exports Spices	-
Lacon	Joss' group was soon to be certified as a farmers' group	-	-	A purchaser demanded Lacon certificate
Plantrich (plus MSSS)	MSSS offers group certification as a farmers' group	Plantrich's core business is the marketing of organic inputs	MSSS manufactures ground spices and pickles and markets them	
KADS	Group certification as Farmers group		Operates a farmers' market and exports spices.	
Fair Trade Alliance			Markets fair-trade products via Pakka	For Joss the Fair Trade alliance had mostly an information purpose so far.
Harry's Coffee project			markets organic coffee in Germany	
Spice Board (Central Gov.)				Gives subsidies
Krishin Bhavan (Kerala Gov.)				Gives subsidies
CDS Spice and CDS	Group certification as farmers' group	Offers free materials for quality enhancement	Processes and markets spices	

Joss' groups perspective on organisations dealing with organic -certification, -input-sales and spice-procurement

Harry had proposed to make a fixed prize for the coffee harvest of 100 Rs/kg, claiming that that was a fair price and everyone would benefit from the stable arrangement. However he complained that Joss and his group didn't want such an arrangement. They would leave the project as soon as they found a purchaser willing to pay more (FN 11.6.). Due to good market development, Harry bought the coffee at 110 Rs/kg in the end, one farmer recalled

(1606 J1-103:40).

It is interesting to mention that while Harry preferred fixed arrangements, Joss and his group did not seem bothered by volatile markets. Instead, they seemed to always hope for higher prices. In addition to the organisations mentioned so far, two government agencies subsidise spice farmers: the central Indian government (Delhi) via the Spice Board and the Kerala Government via the Krishin Bhavan, the agricultural office in every Panchayat.

Comparing the two, Joss complained that despite of recent efforts at a state level “there is no [real] policy for organic in Kerala.” According to him the Krishin Bhavan focused too much on maximum yields regardless of the method of cultivation, and so favoured conventional farmers (0706 J1-07.50). In his eyes the Spice Board gives better subsidies for organic cultivation than the Krishin Bhavan (0706 J1-06.10).

One farmer in Joss' group also complained that there were so many agencies, which conducted seminars and workshops because of the available subsidies by the government. However in his opinion the large amounts of money spent in those programmes for classes should be better given directly to the farmers (1607 I2-19:07).

Even though Joss had been involved in organic agriculture for only a few years, he had made links to an impressive number of agencies. From his perspective, as a clever market-embracing farmer, all-in-one offers like the initiatives based on farmers' groups had the decisive disadvantage that they bound their members to one agency. Instead Joss enjoyed the freedom of looking for the best offer, but this also resulted in complicated negotiations, uncertain outcomes and unsure future markets. Most importantly it required a 'long breath' financially and the ability to store the product – abilities which cannot be taken for granted for smaller farmers and also not within Joss' group.

3.4.6 Government Officers and Stories about Corruption

One interesting feature about Joss' group was the rebellious attitude they cultivated.

For example they enjoyed retelling a story about one farmer who got angry with an official of the Coffee Board³⁹ during a meeting and shouted: "I'll stab you to death if you don't collect my product in time,"(FN10.6.) And they laughed about how scared the officer had looked.

Joss had also sent a letter to the district collector, complaining about a corrupt senior officer of the local Krishin Bhavan. The complaint was also about falsely allocated organic inputs, i.e. they were distributed among all farmers and not only to organic farmers. The complaint

³⁹ The Coffee Board is an agency of the central Indian government in Delhi, which promotes the production and marketing of Coffee, similar to what the Spice Board does for Spice

was successful and the government officer was replaced. Joss was obviously pleased about that and claimed that this had also resulted in better relations to the district collector.

One of the farmers also stated how corruption could take place during inspection. "The people from the agency would come here for inspection, and say 'This is all false front and not up to standards.' and refuse to accept its genuineness. They would want bribes [...] to show a positive result" (0706 J2-30.31). However no actual case in which this happened was mentioned.

3.4.7 Joss and CDS

Joss was rather critical of CDS, but some issues, which he mentioned, were exaggerated and in fact wrong. For example he suspected CDS Spice to take products from non-organic farmers as long as they would be within a specified organic area and blend the products with organic shipments to deceive their customers (1007 J3-2:14). Similarly he feared that CDS farmers could take advantage of the fact that certification was bound to plots and not to whole farms and that a farmer could have several plots, some organic and others not, and then mix their products (0706 J1-03.45). He was sure that CDS Spice was unable to check whether a product was organic or not and was surprised when I told him about the laboratory that CDS Spice maintained and that every shipment was tested for non-organic residues (ibid.).

Regarding the farmers of CDS, he was of the opinion that they don't know much about the politics of certification and he seemed to doubt that CDS farmers were as well informed about organic requirements as his farmers, who were certified under Indocert (1007 J3-1.10).

To Joss the benefits of organic farming were clear, but he considered CDS Spice a competition. He said the reason the farmers joined CDS (and not him) was that they didn't need to spend anything for registration, certification and so on. They also didn't know much about CDS, he explained, they thought CDS was a social organisation that would help the poor but that was not true. And he claimed that after realising this, now farmers would turn to Indocert these days and join his group (1007 J3-8:13).

Joss' relationship to CDS had been troubled and he complained that CDS didn't cooperate with them and regarded their harvest as low standard (1007 J3-09:56). In one instance they asked CDS Spice to give a transaction certificate (TC) (it must have been after a farmer certified by CDS had joined their group) but CDS refused to give it to them. He said, that now with Indocert they could write it (almost) themselves and that if they were with CDS,

“we would have to go for each and everything to CDS [...] We are independent. We don't have to ask anybody” (1007 J3-9:34).

“CDS was the first organisation that came here with the term 'organic', but there are some limitations with them.” Joss explained (1007 J3-10:25). For example, in the beginning CDS Spice procured the products only once a year, he said, and if a farmer didn't want to sell at that time and at that price he had to wait for another year. He also complained about the fact that the finances of CDS were not transparent to the farmers (1007 J3-13:50).

However, Joss explained that since CDS was not the only agency any more and competition arose from other agencies, CDS Spice now had to offer better conditions and farmers started to argue with CDS (1007 J3-11:36). There was also one farmer who quit CDS and joined Joss' group (1007 J3-12:34), but Joss obviously expected more in the future.

I asked why he didn't voice his critical view publicly as he had done with the corrupt agricultural officer. “The bishop is the secretary of CDS, what can we do? We cannot do anything against it [CDS]. But we won't support it” (1007 J3-14:26 or FN).

Both my research strategy of looking for critical comments as well as the dynamic with my translator friend, contributed to offering Joss a stage for presenting his critical notions about CDS. But out of the crude polemics, several important points can be filtered out.

The last quote especially is significant as it highlights the importance of the bishops patronage for CDS. Joss was seriously concerned about criticising CDS publicly because of the powerful patron.

While Joss' understanding was wrong in some aspects (e.g. in relation to CDS's quality standards and their technical means to assure them), he understood well that CDS's arrangement with farmers conflicted with his wish for independence. From his perspective, CDS's offer was patronising and he preferred to stay independent, even though this meant a lot of work with an unsure outcome.

3.5 Harry

Harry is well known in the area because he and his farm were the object of several local TV programmes and newspaper articles. He is a Bavarian, who moved to Kerala in 1992, and has operated an organic farm since then.

Sebastian, the first farmer portrayed in this chapter, described Harry jokingly as “the milkman of the area”, since he had held a relatively large herd of cows for dairy farming, which he had reduced only lately. Sebastian had also been impressed by how hard Harry worked and by his technical skills, since he used a cable on his steep land to bring heavy goods to his farm, which is otherwise accessible only by a narrow footpath (FN 4.6.).

Harry's wife told me that Harry was against the road the government was planning to build, because then there would be even more visitors coming to his farm, he feared. She told me there had been more than 300 Europeans visiting his farm the year before. Together with Indian reporters and farmers there would sometimes be 12-15 visitors a day, she said. Many of them asked for Pyrethrum, a spray against pests made of chrysanthemum (FN 5.6.). After the last newspaper article, so many people phoned that Harry had to disconnect his phone for two weeks, he complained.

Sebastian pointed out he respected him “because he survived in a new climate” and made the comparison “like when one puts a plant from the hills to the plains it is hard for it to survive” (FN 4.6.).

However, I had the feeling it was exactly this tendency towards exoticism that annoyed Harry sometimes when he was approached by Malayali farmers. He wanted to be known for his knowledge and achievements in natural farming and not for being German and surviving in India.

On the whole, Harry's relation to his surrounding context was rather complicated. He spoke fluent Tamil and understood Malayam well, but it seemed he was frustrated by the numerous bigger and smaller incidents of corruption and betrayal that he had encountered. He often talked about “those Indians” (“die Inder“) in general and said that they lacked “character” (“Anstand“) and, together with his interest in conspiracy theories, his attitude sometimes seemed to amount to a general distrust of almost everything outside his farm aside from a handful of friends - a pattern of suspicion, that seemed to strike many Europeans I met in India. However, Harry also was the only European I knew of in India who carried out hard manual labour and earned his living that way.

He also actively used the media and invited them when he had something to present. For

example during the time of my fieldwork he was just working on being energy autonomous, that is, he was making himself independent from the unreliable and partly corrupt energy suppliers. He had installed solar panels and batteries but he had some problems to solve before he could cut the main supply line because some of his machines (the water pump and the milking machine) needed an initial amount of high voltage to start up. So he worked on adapting a diesel generator in such a way that it would run largely on biogas, which he produced on his farm. For the day on which he would cut the main electric supply cable, he had invited camera teams to broadcast it on a local TV station (FN 5.6.).

3.5.1 From Bavaria to India

Harry grew up in a village in Bavaria and made his first agricultural experiences with bee-keeping when he was a teen. He recalled:

I found out I had no idea about the forest, not even what the trees were called [...] but also the bee-keepers who study it scientifically don't understand the bee colony. I can't explain that properly, but as a bee-keeper you need to become the colony, you have to try to think like it. And then, like in acupuncture, you only need to put some needles on the right spots, so to say, and not in the way conventional bee-keepers do it: if the bees have this illness, give them that medicine. They sit in front of the hive and try to catch the colony when it swarms out [...] But they don't understand the pattern. Why does it swarm? When you find out, you need to change the conditions or try to contribute to an equilibrium, in a way that it doesn't swarm. (3005 H1-03:55)⁴⁰

In Harry's tale the experiences he made with bee-keeping also shaped his way of farming. He talked a lot about the principles he found there and stressed the contrast with conventional and scientific ways of bee-keeping and farming:

They lost the perspective of the whole picture. Science analyses it in a way that tears it apart into different spheres and disciplines. They move exactly in the opposite direction of where they want to get ... I mean look at our society. It has totally lost its basis – nobody knows where the milk really comes from. (3005 H1-04:51)

In the forest he found a way to understand that „everything follows the same patterns“, he explained. “[These patterns] operate in every micro- and macro- organism, in every country, in every human, in every government“ (3005 H1-05:32). To Harry, the same basic principles were applicable to all kinds of systems.

In the late 1980s he had had the largest yields in the district. He recollected with a smile on his face how surprised the old men were when the young, long-haired guy of twenty years („Bimpf“), at whom they had laughed earlier had the highest yields in the district (3005 H1-06:35).

However the 200 bee colonies required a lot of work. They needed to be transported on a

⁴⁰ The interviews with Harry were recorded in German, and the quotes in this paper are my own translations.

truck to the collection sites, and it involved a lot of heavy lifting, which strained his back. At the age of 21 he sold the bee-keeping business and moved to Kerala, one of the destinations he had travelled to in the off season (3005 H1-06:52).

And then I thought I should settle there. I married and bought the pepper farm with the naive idea: I have a piece of land, I'll pluck pepper and sell it and I will make a living from that. But that didn't work of course, because the products sold so cheap that you couldn't live from it. And then also the farm was totally exhausted, because of intensive farming! (3005 H1-7:52)

Harry tried out different things. In the first year he followed the advice of other farmers to use chemical fertilizers and cow dung, with the effect that he spent the same amount purchasing cow dung as he earned from his farm. He recalled his frustration: "I said: 'No way! It can't work like that!' You know I worked like a beast for a year and I had to pay workers of course" (3005 H1-12:11).

Another thing that had frustrated him were the contradicting advices he received from other farmers, until he had concluded at some point that:

"They had no idea themselves! They learned something from books, scientific knowledge about agriculture, but since they had lost the perspective of the whole system, they saw only parts and made a system that was totally unnatural. First of all they destroyed everything and then they built it up again and tried to imitate nature. (3005 H1-13:00)

I just left it and did my own stuff. I learned from observing the forest. I also don't have the ballast of tradition: a father who is farmer and tells me some kind of nonsense about farming. I see that as a huge advantage because I can be much more objective. (3005 H1-27:10)

After years of trial and error Harry could make a living from his farm and, by Indian standards, live in modest luxury. A few years ago he had bought his neighbour's farm and so today he lives together with his wife and three children in two houses. However most of the year the children attend an alternative boarding school in Kodaikanal.

Of course, we only have had that for a few years. I had some savings in Germany, but for the first 13 years I had a deficit. ... At some point I was in the situation that I couldn't pay the school fees for my kids any more. All my savings were spent. (3005 H3-6:00)

Harry's wife had told me they had recently purchased 80 ha of wild forest in Tamil Nadu. I wondered how he could raise that money by farming. But Harry said he did not. "That was money, that came from outside. That wouldn't work. Today I have got some connections, which developed through the years. They helped me." (3005 H3-1:27)

In spite of his rhetoric about being a self-made man his financial background remained unclear, including the extent to which the investments from outside contributed to the present rentability of his farm. It is however obvious that the other farmers worked under very different conditions.

3.5.2 Natural Farming

Harry had a very specific view of how farming should take place. First, according to him, it should be considered from a holistic perspective. The focus should be on furthering a healthy system rather than on the yields of a certain plant.

Meaningful agriculture can only be pursued if you 'create' a functioning ecosystem, or rather, leave it so it develops by itself. And the knowledge that is actually needed is how the plants affect each other, how they grow together.

You know, the [average] farmer usually isolates one plant. He carries that to an extreme and thinks he somehow 'breeds' it. So he starts a war against nature, because nature simply doesn't want that. (3005 H2-3:13)

Harry also rejected, as he perceived it, farmers' tendency generally only to pursue agriculture to make money and to make a living. Instead, the prior goal should be caring for the land, because: "if you have a healthy farm - a healthy soil, a healthy system, with healthy plants – then obviously you will have a good yield. A plant that is healthy has to yield something. That is a law of nature" (3005 H1-16:00).

Similarly, plant health should circle less around antidotes for specific pests or diseases, but rather involve a deeper understanding of why specific symptoms occur, Harry noted.

[When there is a problem with a pest or disease] some kind of imbalance is prevalent, otherwise the effect wouldn't occur on such a scale. So a balance has to be established. Nature always establishes balances. So you have to rely more on Nature. The more work is left to nature, that is, the less the farmer does, the healthier will be the system. (3005 H1-22:00)

Harry understood the occurrence of pests and diseases to be signs of an imbalance in the ecological system. If one focuses on getting rid of them e.g. by spraying pesticides on them, one does not change the imbalance but often contributes to further unrest which often amounts to a "war against nature". According to Harry, this results from a segmented view of farming to which science has contributed. Instead, one should give as little impetus to the system as possible so that it can establish a balance by itself.

Harry used the term "Natural Farming" for his way of farming, a term coined by Masanobu Fukuoka in the 1980s. Fukuoka developed his way of farming in the highlands of Japan and stressed that what natural farming means in each specific context needs to be redefined for each climatic and environmental situation. Therefore, it is difficult to assess how close Harry's agricultural practices followed Fukuoka's "Do-Nothing Farming". However several elements correspond in their argumentation: the stressing of a holistic perspective; the critical perspective on scientific knowledge with its divided disciplines and on typical organic farming; the assumption that natural farming can bring the same or higher yields compared to conventional farming, and the repudiation of chemical fertilizers and pesticides as well as tilling.

And also in practice Harry followed in many aspects the ideas and techniques of Fukuoka. But as far as I understood, Harry did not concur in all aspects. For example he did use a formula made of chrysanthemums, Pyrethrum, which, as an organic pesticide, does not comply with Fukuoka's principles in the strictest sense. Instead of dogmatically following Fukuoka's principles, he seemed also to keep an eye on effectiveness.

Harry had even made plans to travel to Japan to meet Fukuoka in person, plans which were thwarted by Fukuoka's unfortunate demise in August 2008.

Though Harry didn't make explicit reference to them, specific discourses of alternative agriculture in Germany might have strongly influenced his techniques as well as his arguments, especially the ideas of organic no-till or minimum-tillage advocates.⁴¹ In her ethnography on Upper Austrian minimum-tillage farmers and a workshop of the German minimum-tillage proponent Manfred Wenz, Lehner (2008) records ideas towards soil and nature that have striking similarities to Harry's explanations⁴² and they share many assumptions:

They both understand nature as an organism, a system in a dynamic equilibrium, and consider that plants and the creatures living in and on the soil cannot be viewed separately. In this context nature is seen as a perfect order, and farming can only mean accepting this order and working with nature. Breaking the rules of natural laws only falls back on the farmer, as it is sanctioned by nature through lower yields etc. (Lehner 2008:40ff).

Similar to Harry these farmers also stress that their techniques lead to a better energy balance (p.59), labour reduction (p.57) and the need for the farmer to hold back and let nature do the work (p.92).

And they also reject scientific knowledge as fractured and stress the importance of understanding the whole system. One farmer even makes a similar statement to Harry's notion of the ballast of tradition when he states that he thinks it is an advantage that he had little prior agricultural knowledge before organic farming and minimum-tillage (p.95).

Even though Harry worked in a very different climate he considered local forms of tillage

41 No-Till methods are often used in combination with herbicides and organic application is classified as "möglich [...] aber schwierig" ("possible [...] but difficult")(No-Till 2011, cited in Lehner 2008:15). Manfred Wenz proposes to limit tillage operations in grain cultivation to cutting the land surface to a depth of 3-5 cm with a 'grubber' attached to a tractor (p.19).

42 The resemblance is sometimes almost word by word, e.g. when Manfred Wenz talks about the necessity "aus der Sicht des Bodens zu denken" (to think from the perspective of the soil) (Eco-Dyn 2011, cited in Lehner 2008:18) or in statements of the farmers: "In da Natur wird da Boden nie um'draht" (In nature soil is never turned.) (Lehner 2008:title); "[...] wenn der Boden g'sund is, is a die Pflanze g'sund." (If the soil is healthy the plant will also be healthy) (p.77); "... so wenig wie möglich in die Natur eingreifen, weil die wird schon wissen was sie tut" (... interfere as little as possible with nature because it knows what it does) (p.39); "Das Ziel kann nur sein, im Endeffekt möglichst wenig Energie einzusetzen und möglichst viel Energie [sic] zu ernten" ("The aim is to put in as little energy and harvest as much energy [sic] as possible.) (p.59).

problematic, in a way similar to the no-till proponents above. He did not dig up his land unless he planted something and rejected the way the farmers around him used the hoe in spite of the heavy erosion because of the monsoon.

The farmers in the area got used to practices which are passed on from generation to generation. But in fact they are wrong. [...] The average farmer believes he has to loosen the soil, he has to bring the fertile soil from the top to the bottom. [...] He constantly turns it around. And he only has to do that because his soil is in such a terrible condition. If his soil were full of worms and everything else, he wouldn't need to loosen up the soil because then it is done by the worms. And so one thing leads to another and it goes further and further away from nature and people think certain practices are a must, are reality. [...]

But that is not true! In the long run, if you do it right, if you don't care about the stupid plants or the stupid yield, but if you care for your soil - care in the sense that you have as much life in the soil as is really possible - Well then you don't need to till any more. I haven't tilled for 12 years now. And I do intensive agriculture, I really get respectable yields out of my farm. It is a myth that natural agriculture results in less yield. That is totally wrong. (3005 H1-16:00)(17:20)

Earlier they grew Pepper, coffee, tapioca and rice here in the area, Harry explained. „Do you know how tapioca is cultivated?“ he asked. I had seen it at Sebastian's farm, where he maintained rows of small cone-shaped hills with a piece of tapioca stem sticking out of the top of each cone.

I saw it once in South America. The farmer I saw didn't have a fork or a shovel, there. He only had a stick and punched it four times into the soil. Then the earth was loose and he stuck the tapioca stem into the ground. And that was it. He came back to harvest, nothing more.

In contrast to that, Harry explained, Malayalis kept “scratching” around with their hoe, to maintain the “totally unnatural” small hills, to get rid of the weeds and to loosen the soil. “You shouldn't dig up soil anyway but especially not on a mountain slope” he explained (3005 H1-7:52).

That is the best way to ruin the farm. Of course, since they only came 50 years ago, there was enough left in the soil that things grew. You can fuzz around with nature and the soil for some time. You see, it can cope with a lot. But when I came here things were really going down already. (3005 H1-10:31)

In reference to Kaltoft (1999) Lehner also distinguishes between different methods of organic agriculture. Some are merely “non-poisonous” while other focus on “[sustaining] soil fertility and crop quality” (Kaltoft 1999:49). The former follows a paradigm of nutrients which is “basically conventional farming thinking”(p.51) and works well with organic regulations, reduced to technical definitions and the conventional academic training of agronomists. The latter kind of organic agriculture is often based on diverse ethical concepts and value systems, which shape the farming practices of the farmers (p.41) and which Kaltoft classifies into different paradigms – the paradigm of soil fertility, the biodynamic paradigm and paradigm of communication (p.50).⁴³

43 In contrast to Lehner, I think minimum-tillage does not form a new paradigm but can be accommodated within the

Following this division one can interpret Harry's extensive polemics against organic farmers who “come from conventional agriculture and simply go one step back” as an argument against another paradigm.

For example if somebody has a banana plantation, a huge monoculture, without a single tree and no weeds at all. And then he goes to the certification agency. He has to wait three years. If he doesn't use chemical fertilizers or pesticides in these three years he will be certified as an organic farmer. You know I can't accept that. That is nothing but conventional agriculture with a small step back. You reduce the negative effects, but you are far from having positive effects. You have got a reduction of the damage but the damage still goes on. He ruins his land. It just takes 10 years longer until it is destroyed compared to a conventional farmer. But the direction is the same. (3005 H1-14:00)

Harry rejected the idea that organic agriculture brings generally lower yields, but he considered it not surprising that those who farmed organically on the basis of “scientific knowledge” did get smaller yields.

“They don't see the whole picture”, but also “don't want to see it”, he commented and voiced his frustration about farmers who only came to his farm to ask 'what else can I spray?' and were not interested in a deeper understanding.

The average farmer who comes to my farm only sees the problem: the insect and that's what he want to kill. And that has to be organic so he gets his certification. He is not interested in a real solution of his problem. (3005 H1-21:00)

Harry's vision of farming was very compelling to me, and comparing him to other farmers was difficult.⁴⁴

It was an irony of fate that while Harry wished for more people to pursue agriculture in a more natural manner, it was at the same time pretty unlikely that his vision and techniques would spread in a comprehensive way and not solely certain limited aspects of it, such as the appliance of Pyrethrum.

Harry held the opinion that natural farming would be far more elaborate if there were as many farmers developing natural farming, just like him, as there are in the conventional field (FN 30.5.). I wondered why he did not make more efforts to spread his knowledge, but on my enquiry he answered that when he had had something to say, he had written articles, which was all he could do.

3.5.3 Natural Cardamom Farming

Even though his initial tale of tracing his method directly to the bee-keeping of his youth is rather unlikely, as it does not take into account the other influences stated above, Harry

paradigm of soil fertility as it focuses on “care” for the land and is based on an extended notion of soil ecology “which transcends the scientific concept of ecology”(see Kaltoft 1999:43).

44 Similarly Lehner writes about her enthusiasm for the ideas of minimum-tillage and her problems of retaining a neutral position as anthropologist. (Lehner 2008:5)

does receive full credit for translating the rather philosophical ideas into a new context in a way that is bearing fruit: The yields from his cardamom garden are impressive and contributed to his local fame. Harry also published an article in “Spice India”, the magazine published by Spice Board.

I was the first farmer in India who grew cardamom organically. You know, the scientists from the Malabar Research Center in Mailadumbara, [a large cardamom research institute], came to my farm. They had heard something about me, or maybe saw me on TV, or so. I don't know, but until then they had told the farmers, in accordance with the official position of the government, that it was not possible to cultivate cardamom organically: you don't have much yield, it doesn't work. After they had seen my farm they revised their view.(3005 H1-18:20)

Harry claimed he got yields which were comparable to conventional farmers - 0.5 kg per plant on average. People who claim to have 1-2 kg only count the highest yielding years, he explained. But since cardamom has a five year cultivation cycle, one has to divide the total yield of a plant by five, in order to account for the years without yields – the first two years when the cardamom is planted and “pushed up with everything possible” and the fifth year when “the plant is dead”(ibid).

In his article in 'Spice India' Harry writes, that „a very important point is the fact that **pests affect healthy plants less than weaker plants**“(Harry, 2007, emphasis in original).

To achieve healthy plants he advises farmers to restrict the use of hoeing to the planting alone and the use of farmyard manure. If fungal diseases or root grubs occur he recommends the appliance of neem cake and micro-organisms (pseudomonas and trichoderma) (ibid).

Everyone tells you, in cardamom cultivation you have to loosen up the soil with a pitchfork and when the cardamom roots come to the surface, you have to cover it with soil. Their fields look as clean as a table. (3005 H1-19:30)

I don't do any of that. I let the weeds grow until they grow into the cardamom plants and then I cut them and leave them there or feed them to the cows. So I have about of 30 to 50 percent of the labour effort of conventional farmers and yet get the same yields. I'm talking about the average: certainly there are farmers who get higher yields than me, but most farmers get less. (3005 H1-20:00)

“And what do you do when the stemborer attacks your plants” I asked, wondering what Harry's pest control was like in practice. “That's a great example!” Harry answered and explained:

The stemborer is a butterfly. It lays its egg on the node where the leaf springs from the stem of the cardamom. There it hatches and the larva goes into the stem and bores upwards inside the stem. That means the stem will be ruined.

So, conventional farmers use systemic pesticides. They cannot use contact pesticides which kills the pest through contact. You have to spray it directly on the animal, you see. But how can you spray the larva there inside the stem. It doesn't work, you won't get inside.

Systemic pesticides are chemicals which go into the plant. They kill everything that eats from the plant. That means every insect, every caterpillar, everything that comes and nibbles from the plant after you sprayed will die. That's what 'systemic' means, it works inside the system of the plant, you don't have to spray the little beasts directly, they'll die anyway.(3005 H1-24:15)

But systemic pesticides are no real cure either, because the larva is already inside and the stem is already dead, Harry stated. He had no solution for killing the stemborer either. There is no point in spraying the egg, because it hatches the next day and the larva goes up inside the stem and dies from the poison, but the stem is already dead. And it is also impossible to catch the butterfly, Harry concluded.

Then, I have found out another thing: When the stem is at the age when it bears fruit already, the stemborer causes little harm because the stem lives on. If it is a young stem then the inner sprout is damaged, so it won't grow on any more. But that happens anyway, no matter how much you spray.

But when the stem is bearing fruit already, the stemborer doesn't really do any harm any more. The capsules may get a little bit smaller, or maybe the stem has one or two leaflets fewer. The yield is not really affected.

I found out that the stemborer is absolutely no problem for the cardamom. (3005 H1-25:25)

According to Harry the reason why stem borers were perceived as such a big problem was that farmers panic about every damaged stems and don't see the whole picture”(ibid). The stemborer only affects a portion of the stems, but when a farmer fights for each stem he does more damage than if he leaves it and cares for the plant in a way that it gets many more stems, as Harry does.

For years now I haven't done anything [about the stemborer]. I can show that to everyone. The stemborer always comes season-wise, like invasions. And when the season is over, the plots of those who have sprayed like mad look the same as mine. They have maybe the same or even more damage although I didn't do anything.

Cardamom has a whole range of pests and diseases. It has taken me 10 years to get as far as I'm today. You know I don't come and say you have to do this and that and then it works. I grew into it because at some point I found out the other farmers had no idea and stopped taking their advice.

In his article Harry writes that, while “stemborers do much less damage to the plants than estimated by most farmers“, thrips control is of great importance: “If not treated, they can reduce the yield to almost nothing.“ However, since thrips is only dangerous in the short period after flowering, when the capsules are still covered, the spraying of Pyrethrum can be reduced to that period (Harry, 2007).

What does that mean when we compare this approach to Sebastian's practices, one of the most dedicated farmers on his small cardamom plot?

As we have seen, to Harry weeds are part of a healthy system, which should only be cut

when growing into the cardamom. He also he recommends applying farmyard manure - not only around the plants but to the whole farm.

In contrast to Harry's, Sebastian's tiny cardamom plot really looked as clean as a table. I did not see any weed, since he considered them as „thieves of manure“ and breeding spots for pests as he had told me. For Sebastian the generous application of farm yield manure was not an easy task since he had no cattle and he had to buy it for 1 Rs/kg whereas Harry's large biogas unit was virtually overflowing with slurry from his cattle.

3.5.4 Composting and Energy Input

Harry explained that he didn't compost much on a compost hive. Usually he left the waste from the pruning or the cleaning of the cardamom on the spot, and only for special use did he compost the cow dung and the littered straw from his cow shed. However, Harry might be a special case because he had more cows than most others.

Debating on compost and farming in general Harry stressed that for him energy efficiency was most important – in terms of workforce needed, material input and especially fossil fuels. Calculating his way, conventional agriculture has a negative energy balance, since the energy inputs, in the form of machines, fuel and fossil-fertilizer, outweigh the output by far. He was sure that, even if they are profitable in terms of money, the hidden costs for the environment make it a loss.

Harry offered an alternative view: to start with, the positive effects basically come from the sun and the plant that grows on that energy and at some point bears fruit. The question whether an additional input is beneficial and outweighs its cost and negative side effects has to be evaluated not only in terms of money but also in terms of energy.

In our discussion Harry drove this approach quite far and was sure it would be possible to calculate the energy in- and output, say, in kilojoules. He also held the opinion that in practise the approach promoted by CDS did not stand up to such a calculation.

As an example, Harry described his neighbour. He was a proper farmer and proud of his new techniques of vermicomposting, but his plot and the rest of his farm were distant from each other. So he collected organic waste, carried it to the road, drove it on an auto-rickshaw to his farm, where he had built the concrete pit with all the protection against ants and rats as recommended by CDS. He composted as he had learned at CDS and finally transported the wet and heavy compost back to the place he had collected it from. It was a tremendous effort and required a rickshaw, petrol and a concrete pit and, of course, lots of work.

Of course this is a parody of the techniques actually proposed by CDS. The rickshaw was quite unusual and stands in sharp contrast to what CDS suggests. But even in the case of a smaller farmer with his one plot close to the compost, it takes quite some work to collect and transport the waste.

Harry's approach to soil enrichment was the following: he left what he cut on the spot, and he also cut far fewer weeds than the farmers around him. For special cases he piled the best cow dung he had (mostly from calves) together with the used straw from the cows right next to the cowshed. He started on one side and piled the new dung on the other side so he got a windrow, 1m high. The local earthworms native to that region love this mix and so move from the older to the newer waste. The worms multiply so rapidly, Harry claimed, that half a dozen chickens can stand on top of that hill and pick all day, with thousands of worms left. With this method Harry needed much less transport and energy input and also doesn't need to care about any loss of worms (FN 30.5.).

Harry's criticism of the "scientific" way of farming, as he observed it on his neighbours' farm, is targeted on how the promoted techniques are used by the farmers without considering the whole setting, and leads to an "unnatural" condition. It is a condition, however, of which CDS officers are also critical. On the whole, the scientists at CDS seemed to agree with Harry on a lot of things as we will see in section 4.1.5 where this debate is taken up again after discussing CDS programmes.

3.5.5 CDS and the Market

Harry's attitude towards the church was rather critical on the whole. He criticised the accumulation of power by the clergy, and did not at all trust in the fair use of this power as many of the loyal Catholics did. He also mentioned that he was surprised by how many members of the committees promoting organic agriculture, that he had been invited to, were clerics.

So, it will be no surprise that Harry has a rather critical stand towards CDS. He had been approached by CDS Spice several times. Some time ago one of their agents had wanted to buy organic pepper and offered the regular CDS premium of 10 Rs/kg extra, but Harry declined. Harry had the impression they were desperate to find organic pepper at that time, because they came back several times and improved their offer slightly.⁴⁵ But even after several visits no agreement could be reached and Harry decided to sell his pepper on the local market without a premium rather than accept such a low premium by CDS.

⁴⁵ In the debates with the inspectors on this incident it became clear that they were in no position to make large concessions to Harry, because they could not justify large price differences to the farmers inside the project.

“They are destroying the market.” he commented, furiously, “You know, if you farm organically you have extra expenses. Aside from additional investments, you also have less output. And if somebody buys organic pepper for 150 Rs, it destroys the market.” He went on: “What kind of social project is that if in the end the farmers have to pay for it? There is no incentive and it slows the movement. The price is one big joke!” (FN 18.6).

Following this logic a low premium does not so much hit farmers who have been organic by default before, but conventional farmers, for whom a low premium is no incentive to convert. In turn a low premium slows the movement, especially the conversion of conventional farmers.

According to Harry the organic spice market has developed in a way that 190-200 Rs were considered to be a fair price for pepper in spring 2008, which means a premium of about 30 percent. He had just sold 600kg to an agency in Kodaikanal and 25kg of cardamom to Plantrich, he stated and stressed that many networks had developed. For example, if Joss were to get 200 Rs/kg for pepper, he would sell Harry's as well. Similarly Harry sells their coffee via his coffee project. “But what would happen if everybody started wanting a commission?” he said, criticising CDS.

The dependence on the world market was another thing Harry complained about: “India is dependent on the world market. If some jerk in Singapore starts to speculate on pepper, our prices will fall, even if that pepper doesn't exist.”(FN 18.6)

Harry could not fully avoid the volatile prices of the world market, but he had found two venues for marketing his products more independently: the coffee project, mentioned earlier, and 'ebay'.

Through his account with the German branch of online market-platform 'ebay' Harry offers pepper, cardamom and vanilla. The German description matches the alternative outline of the product well: “directly from the farm”, “no steam-disinfection or radiation”, “plugged by hand” and “mixed cultivation” are phrases used in the product description, which ends with “let the planet live a bit longer”.

To keep his “100 percent positive feedback” Harry also guarantees for the shipment with the unreliable Indian Mail service, which means he also replaces lost shipments. But with around 150Rs per 100g, depending on the conversion rate, the direct marketing is pretty rewarding, since that is the tenfold of what he receives in the local market.

It has to be noted that Harry occupies a special position on ebay. He is the only person offering organic off-farm pepper on the platform. And it is important to stress that none of the other farmers in this chapter come close to having the cultural, social, and technical

resources to market their product directly to customers in Europe.

3.6 Comparing the Farmers

After portraying farmers separately, this sections highlights similarities, common conditions and tries to put them in relation to one another and to locate them in the field.

3.6.1 Income, Financial Resources and Life Plans

In the interviews it was difficult to talk about income and financial situations, however some observations can be made.

The farmers presented in this chapter had either bought the land themselves or their fathers or grandfathers had cut down forest and established the farms – no farm was older than 60 years. In many cases they still had ties to their relatives in the lowlands, and people seemed to move back and forth quite often. However the elder sons who had had to move out, since usually the youngest son remained with the parents, often lived nearby, contributing to a settlement pattern of neighbourhoods, where different religious or ethnic communities were dominant in each neighbourhood.

While none of the farmers interviewed had to face severe deprivation of any kind, as many people in Kerala do, there were noticeable differences in their financial backgrounds and living standards.

Classified by the size of the land they owned, Sebastian and Renju would be “marginal farmers”, whereas Joss and Mutupathi were almost too big for the next category “small farmers” (5 ha). Harry's farm may have been even larger. That also means the latter three each owned considerably more land than the average CDS Spice farmer ⁴⁶. However, since the returns were relatively high in spice cultivation, often even “marginal farmers” could make a good living from their land.

On the other hand, financial assets were also distributed rather unevenly among the farmers interviewed. While Sebastian's assets were heavily burdened by the purchase of building material for the small renovation of his house, Mutupathi, and especially Harry, seemed to have considerable resources available to back them up and ran relatively large farming operations with several workers employed. While Mutupathi employed ten workers throughout the year, Harry only hired a few, because he said he couldn't monitor them

46 When CDS Spice started in 1997 the average farm size was 2.85 ha and in 2008 it was 0.95 ha. Since these numbers are calculated from total area certified under CDS divided by number of farmers, as stated in a project description I received, they remain rough, and do not state any kind of distribution, if tea gardens like those of Mutupathi are included, nor how many of the farmers have too small plots to make a living in agriculture, like Sebastian and other CDS farmers. (1997: 555ha/195=2.85; present 1953ha /2053=0.95)(FN 2.6.)

properly. Still, all of the farmers, even Sebastian, hired workers for specific jobs, for example, during the harvesting of pepper, which requires a lot of relatively dangerous work several metres above the ground.

Another indication for living standards was the level of education of their children. All of the farmers in this chapter were able to send their children to colleges. However, the different financial backgrounds were also reflected in the careers of their children. While Sebastian's son, Shaybu, had had to come home after his bachelor degree to find a job nearby, Mutupathi was able to send all three daughters to college and after her degree the oldest daughter managed to get a good job in Chennai.

The likelihood that the next generation would not continue farming was not considered negative, but rather seen as a chance for social ascent.

My interview partners were mostly full time farmers who only had small businesses on the side, which however contributed substantially to their income (e.g. Sebastian's Spice tours, Joss' wood trading, Harry's online marketing, etc.). During my fieldwork I met however many farmers who had regular occupations and ran their farms on the side. And CDS Spice seemed to accept many part-time farmers, even when they supplied small volumes.

Apart from spice farming as a part time occupation and different forms of pluriactivity, spice farming had also a specific place in the life plans of some people I interviewed. Several people I met in Kerala, including Anthony stated that they used, or planned to use, spice farming as a kind of retirement activity. Anthony explained that once his children were out of college, he didn't have to earn money to pay the college fees any more and was finally free to take over his father's, rather remote cardamom garden. He would probably be in his mid-fifties then. Since there seemed to be no other retirement fund, spice farming was also a good way to organise financial support in old age, especially since it was common to hire workers to carry out strenuous jobs.

Another noticeable aspect was that farmers stated that selling the land was a possible option. Mutupathi mentioned that he would sell his land eventually, and as will be seen in section 4.2.2.3 the fluctuation of CDS spice farmers seemed to be rather high for the same reason.

3.6.2 Different Strategies

Each farmer had a distinct social and economic strategy, based on his specific limitations. Sebastian, for example, made use of the proximity of his garden to the main road to establish a show spice garden for tourists. He used his organic certification not so much to

sell his yields but to distinguish himself from other show spice garden operators. However, as we have seen, the strategy had its limitations, since the field of tourism was dominated by large influential agencies, a few popular travel handbooks, and by guides and drivers who demanded considerable commissions. Consequently Sebastian was not dependent on the relation to CDS for large parts of his income (as other part time farmers in CDS Spice were).

In contrast, Mutupathi's strategy was dominated by organic tea and spice farming. On his rather large holding he employed ten workers throughout the year and produced considerable quantities of tea and spices. Aside from his farming activities he was also well integrated into organising the CDS farmers, for both CDS Spice and Tea, concerning the collection and transportation of tea as well as the establishment of a basic structure of representation and participation. I don't know how much compensation he received for his work as a president, but the fact that he rented his truck to the farmers' group indicates he might have received some financial benefits from that position.

The fact that he was a good Catholic, well integrated into two parishes may have been conducive for his appointment to several president positions within the farmers' groups.

Compared to the other farmers, Mutupathi was more dependent on an external workforce, which put him in a different position to those farmers who carried out most work themselves (e.g. Sebastian). With the background of an increasing labour scarcity, Mutupathi sensed the additional work required for organic production and as a reaction replanted part of his plots with coffee, which needs less care. The consequences of labour scarcity are severe in Kerala, thus CDS's policies need to be evaluated also in terms of how they influence the workload of farmers, especially when it comes to organic techniques.

Renju's relation to CDS was obviously less fortunate than Mutupathi's, also because he was more dependent on his cardamom yields. Although the interviews we made focused on an aspect of his life in which he was rather powerless, he seemed to be a dedicated farmer. Selling his product, however, was rather problematic for him and it had important effects on his income. Even though he considered Joss' group as more authentically pressing farmers' needs, as a small farmer it was probably better for him to stay with CDS since he didn't have the financial means to stick with Joss' search for buyers.

Joss, however, had the financial background to take time to search for buyers as well as a surprising amount of self-esteem in the negotiations with possible buyers. His witty attitude brought him the respect of the group, but not all members of his group were well enough endowed and some had to sell their products to the open market before Joss found a

suitable business opportunity.

The network Joss had built in just a few years was impressive - he was in contact with several buyers, certification agencies, and organic societies. Although he navigated through this network with great self-esteem, it seemed he was not considered as a full player by some agencies because of his occasional rather unconventional ideas and lack of experience i.e. his cultural and social capital for marketing the spices was heavily contested.

Harry was obviously in a very different starting position, since he had several advantages as a result of his German background: he had brought considerable savings with him; he had friends there who helped him financially and in terms of marketing; and he had the cultural skills to market his spices online to a German green audience, which contributed substantially to making his farming operations viable. He was able to go through 13 years of deficit experimenting with natural farming and currently worked on energy-self-sufficiency.

But even though he spoke the local languages, there was a cultural distance to the surrounding world, which also shaped his relationship to his workers (e.g. he did not give occasional money gifts off-season to ensure workers would come in-season as other farmers did).

On the other hand his exotic stand in the district made him well known locally, as he had appeared several times on local TV channels and as a result he could speak up in cases where he encountered corruption, etc.

3.6.3 The Motivations to Convert and the Appropriation of Organic Ideas

From the material collected several aspects can be identified which influenced the decision to convert to organic farming.

First of all, it is important to note that Kerala is a special case. As a result of the high level of education and literacy farmers are well informed and generally know what organic farming is. A certifying officer stressed, he didn't have to argue with farmers as much as he had to in other parts of India, since farmers in Kerala understood the requirements for conversion. He also pointed out how well informed farmers were about allowed and forbidden substances and gave jokingly an example how this high level of information was used in disputes with neighbours. He had recently received a call from a farmer who said that his neighbour used a spray that was on the list of prohibited inputs. Surprising to the inspector was that the farmer not only knew the exact name of the spray and the contained non-complying substance, but that he also stated the exact farm code of his neighbour. Even though the

benefits for the neighbourhood were limited, the inspector concluded that the general climate resulting from high levels of education was beneficial to organic farming.

Health issues were strong because there had been news reports on high cancer rates in areas with cardamom estates, where workers were exposed to agrochemicals a lot (the issue was especially important in Joss' group, as they lived close to that area).

Joss' group also explicitly stated environmental concerns and it seemed that they were better briefed on arguments for organic conversion than CDS Spice farmers, who were generally less explicit in their reasoning on conversion.

One aspect frequently stated was that farmers expected higher revenues, since organic products promised good prices on the global market. However for farmers outside CDS Spice it was not easy to deliver on this promise.

Farmers did state that the costs for synthetic inputs are high in conventional production, but some complained about the fact that they had to abstain from them, since they found it credible that such measures would effectively increase their yields and net revenues.

Information on how much organic inputs promoted by CDS (especially vermicomposting) contributed to the yields and income of the farmers could not be gathered during the fieldwork, but the wide-spread use suggests that they have positive effects.⁴⁷

In contrast to other farmers, Sebastian did not expect organic production to bring more money, but instead accepted the fact that he earned less money than his brother who used conventional inputs.

Sebastian's and Harry's decision cannot be accounted for by different aspects of motivation, since the decision to farm organically seemed to have been very natural for them.⁴⁸

While Sebastian had set up his farm from the beginning in a way that limited external influence of chemicals, and had never used chemical inputs, Harry had followed the advice to use chemical inputs in the first year but stopped when he found them to be ineffective and costly.

Sebastian, and obviously to an even larger extent Harry, (but also other farmers) stressed that they had developed their own ways of organic farming - "Natural Farming" or "Naturally Natural" and had turned to organic cultivation long before it had been promoted on a large

47 Bolwig et al. try to give a rough quantification on the impact of organic farming techniques on the yields in their study about coffee farmers in Uganda, who sell their pepper under an arrangement similar to that of CDS Spice. They quantify the increase of coffee revenue at about 9% per recorded organic farming technique, but also find that farmers gain much more through the alternative marketing arrangements (2009).

48 Especially for these two farmers reason for conversions can be described much better in terms of ideology and paradigms (see Kaltoft 1999) than in lists on motivations (see e.g. Beban 2008:127ff)

scale. All farmers underlined that they did much more than what was required by organic standards and it seemed this creative appropriation of organic principles was a very important process.

But what is the basis for this creative appropriation? From where have they acquired their agricultural knowledge?

Workshops on spice cultivation organised by CDS - and other agencies in the case of Joss' group – and Sebastian's local farming magazines were important sources of knowledge, but cannot account for all their agricultural practices, and the character of the underlying basis of knowledge is difficult to grasp. While some, like Sebastian, claimed that had they learned most things from their fathers and grandfathers, Harry called this a 'ballast of tradition' and saw it as a great advantage that he had had none.

Since this area with its distinctive climate was colonised by the majority population on a large scale only in the 1950s and 60s, the character of their 'traditional knowledge' is difficult to assess. It is not clear if farming practices from the lowlands were adapted to the new climatic conditions, if plantation techniques were taken up by smaller farmers or other influences played important roles.

There were, however, claims that the good soil had been a heritage from the forest, and doubts about whether farming practices were appropriate to preserve and cultivate that level of fertility.

Due to their specific historical background, the agricultural knowledge of the settler-farmers in the hill-area has a rather different character to that of the knowledge of other farmers in India. For example, compared to the farmers described by Gupta (1998) the knowledge of the farmers described here seems to be no less 'hybrid', but less rooted in a distinct 'indigenous knowledge', which in Gupta's case, for example follows principles of what Gupta terms a 'humoral agronomy' (1998:158ff).⁴⁹

3.6.4 Different Crops

All farmers had some kind of mixed-crop cultivation. While pepper can be cultivated easily by organic means, conventional cultivation of cardamom uses a lot of synthetic inputs and so the crop loss is often high after conversion to organic due to various pests. Additionally, cardamom capsules with marks from pests, which are often visible on organic cardamom, fetch a lower price on the conventional market. As a result, farmers with cardamom plots

⁴⁹ Gupta is critical about equating Indian indigenous knowledge with Ayurvedic plant science as for example Mahale (2002:77) does, because he is interested in the practical application (Gupta 1998:158) For reflections on 'indigenous knowledge' see also Agrawal (1995)

are hesitant to convert them to organic. Those who certify their whole farm often leave their cardamom plots de-facto untreated, until they found a solution for pest management. Others certify their farms as 'split operations' and leave the cardamom plot out of the certification. However, as Harry pointed out, there are also viable ways to cultivate cardamom by organic means and he was satisfied with his yields.

In comparisons between organic and conventional cultivation, many different numbers were stated for what an average yield in conventional farming was per cardamom plant, ranging from 1 to 4 kg. But Harry stated that, when one takes the average over the whole production cycle, his yields of 0.5kg per plant were very good, also compared with conventional cultivations. The difficulties in cardamom cultivation were accounted for in the CDS Spice premium, which was fixed at 1000 Rs/kg.

Tea was cultivated by Mutupathi but it was rather demanding and in organic cultivation bio-dynamic preparations were applied.

Coffee was used by some farmers, for example, Mutupathi in response to scarcity of labour.

Most farmers in this paper only tried to market high-value, non-perishable spice products and grew vegetables merely for their own consumption. Only Joss produced rice, fruits and vegetables for selling them on the market.

3.6.5 Markets and Marketing

The farmers had a specific discourse on the prices they received. Complaints that they were too low were frequent and the estimates of when the price would be enough to pay for their actual costs seemed to be above the price they received, even though the price in spring 2008 was relatively high.

However the volatility of the market was anticipated with optimism and the farmers believed that prices would generally rise, (which they did, as we know today). A marketing arrangement with fixed prices, as Harry had proposed it for his coffee project, was not perceived favourably.

Arguments about market developments often took local factors into account for a relatively global price formation. Local climate conditions leading to a smaller yield in the coming season seemed to be taken as a good sign for a higher price in future, and on the basis of that, Mutupathi decided to grow coffee, and Joss decided to store pepper.

However prices are only one factor that needs to be considered. The access to organic markets is at least as important. Within the marketing projects (both CDS and Joss' group)

the question of whose pepper is sold is an important one – who has a volume big enough to bother, and who is asked first.

As we have seen finding buyers who pay a good organic premium independently from large organisations like CDS was not easy and demanded a long search because, as the case of Joss' farmers group shows, there were only limited numbers of different exporting agencies, who demanded different certificates depending on the country they exported to.

Direct marketing via the internet (and bypassing the certification chain usually required for organic export) was also possible but required cultural skills, which only Harry had.

The marketing of organic products to European premium markets exceeded the cultural and social capital of small farmers by far and so for many, CDS Spice's offer was the only way to tap premium markets. However, the offer was not considered to be beneficial by some farmers (notably Harry and Joss' group) because they had the opinion that it resulted in dependency and that premiums were too low.

Chapter 4 CDS - A Catholic Development NGO

4.1 CDS Central

CDS was founded in 1980 by a dedicated priest, who has now become bishop of the dioceses. Initially it was oriented towards alleviating the situation of tribal communities and started with only one employee. Today, three decades later, it has become a rather big and well known model NGO, which employs more than 390 people and maintains about 2300 Self Help Groups (SHG) for women, through which numerous programmes are implemented. The current managing director of the development programmes explained the gradual evolution and the shift of the focus over the years in four stages:

Everything started with [1.] charity work: we would simply give. If a person doesn't have food and clothes, we gave food and clothes. But the problem is the next day he will come back again. In the beginning this is OK, it is a good way to get in touch with a person, but then you should slowly teach him how to find food for himself, [...] that is why we started developmental work.

In [2.] developmental work you have to teach him some skills through which he can earn some money and buy some food for himself; buy clothes for himself. You are teaching how to develop himself - to find means for himself.

Then still [3.] the empowerment level is something a little more different. Empowerment is to make a person capable of doing anything by himself - even without our help. There he asserts power, [...] he can gain sufficient knowledge by himself. And in the case of women it also means a stronger voice in the home, in the community.

The first and best thing to empower a woman is to make her an earning person. A woman who works in the home 15 hours is not considered an earning woman, but if a woman goes out and works for three hours and brings home ten rupees. People will say "Oh, she is earning". Who will be heard more? The earning woman.

Then we have [4.] knowledge-based programmes, it is about taking up innovations, taking up what they know, and develop it and give it back to them. We develop the knowledge of the people and they have lots of knowledge. That is one of the most important aspects in the programmes we start today. Actually it includes all the other stages, and the local innovators get real benefit from this. (1803 H2-22:06)

For its developmental efforts, CDS relies heavily on SHGs. Typically a SHG is founded by 8 – 16 women and starts as a savings group, but later other activities are added. Aside from enabling them to take up micro-credits and to establish their own micro enterprises (such as keeping a milk cow, running a small grocery shop or offering home-stays to tourists), the SHGs are also a good recruitment point for the trainings CDS offers in numerous programmes (such as healthcare, family planning, homestead vegetable and medicinal gardens, and various crafts like wool knitting, umbrella making, electronic repairs, carpentry etc.).

To establish participation and good communication between the 2300 SHGs for women and 400SHGs for men, they are organised on three administrative levels (SHGs; Village Development Councils (VDCs); and three Regions) with representatives meeting regularly

on all three levels, connecting more than 30 000 people to CDS (FN 18.3).

Many programmes are organised via the SHGs but some are not, such as: the innovation programme, watershed development or the biotechnology lab, which develops and propagates biocontrol agents. CDS also makes many government programmes available to its clients.

Aside from the social sector⁵⁰, which implements most of the development programmes, CDS operates in four branches, which were founded in the course of the years by CDS, when specific activities grew too large to be contained within the central social sector:

- CDS Spice, which is the focus of this paper and will be explored in further detail in the following section.
- CDS Tea, which seeks to certify farmers and to procure, process and market tea in a rather similar way as CDS Spice does. However, the efforts in tea were less successful, as was pointed out in section 3.2.4.
- The ayurveda branch runs large ayurveda facilities, which cultivate and process ayurvedic plants and medicines; trains doctors, nurses and masseurs; operates an ayurvedic hospital and resort and offers franchise to hotels, spas, cruise ships etc. in many parts of the world.
- And finally one branch operates plantations.⁵¹

Each branch is headed by an executive director, who is in turn responsible to a central governing body, a board consisting of priests, sisters and laymen as well as the bishop, who is the patron of the organisation.

The officers at CDS stressed that the various sub-projects supported each other and some activities overlapped. For example, the training courses organised by CDS Central on various topics of organic farming (vermicomposting, biocontrol agents, homestead herbal medicinal remedies, nursing, etc.)⁵² are open to all interested farmers while training courses of CDS Spice focus more on the specific needs of the farmers in its programme. Also, the diverse projects are not offered as packages, but are offered separately. Some interested farmers, like Mutupathi, end up participating in many programmes while many only join CDS in one project.

⁵⁰ The “social sector” and “CDS Central” are used interchangeably in this paper.

⁵¹ This branch was only mentioned once and as far as I recall it was mostly cashew plantations. Since the social beneficial aspect is not obvious to me, I assume the plantations are some kind of endowment. In the reflection on convergences of development efforts and politics of power, (see section 1.2) this effect adds an interesting wealth conserving aspect to CDS as a whole.

⁵² CDS received government funds to carry out residential trainings in organic agriculture for 450 farmers a year (10 one week courses for 45 farmers each). But CDS trainers also conduct courses in villages etc.

CDS is financed through project-oriented funds from various donor agencies from India and abroad. However, since Kerala is now generally considered to be a less urgent candidate for development assistance, it becomes more and more difficult to obtain funds from international donor agencies, as several CDS representatives stated (FN 31.5.). To compensate for this, CDS has had to cut down on programmes and employees and tries to tap more national funds of the Kerala state aimed at the uplifting of minorities. Another strategy of CDS is to generate funds in the profitable branches and channel them to the social sector, but this strategy has its limitations since these projects have social objectives themselves. The latter limit profit extraction, as will be shown for CDS Spices, or they do not generate any profit at all, as in the case of CDS Tea (ibid.).

Another important feature is that CDS, as an established model NGO, offers consultancy services to other NGOs and government agencies. Since CDS employs a large number of developers and offers internships to people who want to get a foothold in this field, it occupies an important position in the generation and dissemination of knowledge about development. For instance, many of my interview partners working in the organic field – at certification agencies, or in projects promoting organic agriculture – have, in some way or another, worked for CDS. In this way CDS plays an important role in building a human resource pool of developers and at the same time forms the nodal point of a large net of development experts. As one CDS officer stated, concerning the fact that the staff in CDS changes a lot:

[Typically people] work for 2 or 2,5 years and then they change.[...] 50 percent percent of the people remain in the development field, 50 percent go somewhere else into a totally different field. Actually, people often try for a government job because security, pension, and benefits are there, but some will also go to other funding agencies, where the salary is good. [...] In one case a person] started his own firm. He was more into that so he started his own certifying agency. (1206 J-35:00, 43:00)

The disadvantage of this fluctuation is the lack of continuity, as it was explained to me in relation to tribal development, since tribals put more weight on face-to-face relationships than on agreements with abstract organisations (ibid.). However, higher positions, such as the executive director, seemed to be appointed for a much longer period of time.

4.1.1 Excursus: What is Catholic about CDS?

Because Christians ... they believe in the service. And now all the other communities come to these services. (0907 D1-20:00)⁵³

As was pointed out in the sections 2.1.4 and 2.2.2 Christians, and Catholics in particular, form a large segment of the population in the hill area, and also have some political influence in the politics of the state. The question is then what position a Catholic NGO has in such a context, and what are the distinguishing aspects of being Catholic for CDS.

From my observations, the Catholic affiliation does not mean CDS would use its charitable work for missionary purposes.⁵⁴ Also, everyone from CDS stressed that being Catholic does not mean CDS would give preference to Catholic clients in any way. One representative noted that there are such suspicions among certain politicians, but he attributed this to the fact that CDS was in some way a competitor for political parties, which “want to bind people to politics and their party client base” (FN 12.6.). In fact, all major parties have established SHG-based organisations themselves. He also underlined that, unlike some political parties and their connected organisations CDS is highly professional and not corrupt (ibid). From my observations this statement was verified as a public belief, when I met the representatives of an independently founded SHG joining CDS, so they could gain access to funds and bank loans at the least “cost” in comparison to other NGOs: they stated that CDS is not corrupt and requires no political agitation from its members (FN 1.4.).

The representative also noted that being Catholic is a big asset since a large local network of parishes and priests can be utilised for the informal monitoring of social problems and the progress of CDS projects (ibid).

Another CDS officer noted that this network also simplifies mobilisation: “If you are an NGO it is very difficult to mobilise people – to communicate with people, to organise meetings, etc. – but the church network is very strong. You know when the Pope decides one thing, it can reach to the remotest village in Kerala in only one week. And the network is also very well organised” (1206 J-48:19).

However, the linkage to this network also causes some limitations. Even though some diocesan organisations in India are very strong in the field of HIV prevention, CDS does not engage in this field for “ethical reasons”, the officer noted, and even though many

53 The quote is beautiful manifestation of one aspect of the self-representation of the Syrian Christians. Münster notes: “Syrian Christians consider themselves to be the prime force of 'development' in the region.” (Münster 2011:17)

54 Mission is a politically sensitive topic. From the material I collected I think CDS cannot afford to be perceived in that way and therefore doesn't make missionary efforts. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that on a personal level the contact with some of the many clerics working with CDS inspires people to become Catholic.

Christians use condoms and other contraceptives, the church still holds the position that “artificial prevention of pregnancy is against Christian policy” (ibid).

The linkage to Catholic networks with its many dioceses, different orders, lay organisation etc. is also highly important on a national level, e.g. as a human resource pool, especially when considering that many of the clerics are transferred every second or third year to other positions in the country.

On a global level, the Catholic network is of high importance to CDS. E.g. in the case of Austria, even though there are no Austrian donor agencies directly funding CDS, there is a lively exchange. For example, many visitors from Austria come to CDS regularly and sometimes stay in the ayurvedic facilities for recreation (1803 H2-34:40), but they also try to follow their Christian aspiration and help. In turn the bishop is well known in Austria; Malayali priest novices help out in Austrian parishes, and Austrian church newsletters regularly display the work of CDS. Most notably Austrian parishes have organised fund raising activities and sponsored CDS projects in significant ways.

Finally aspects of the Catholic affiliation with CDS need to be reviewed in terms of prestige and power.

Firstly, can the prestige the dioceses and the bishop gain with their successful development work be translated into influence and power? For example, when they are invited to advise the government on organic policies and other programmes.

Secondly, what weight do the tens of thousands of CDS beneficiaries have in the political arena and in which ways can it be utilised in practical terms? For example, are the SHGs used as a forum for church politics? Are the members of SHGs asked to participate in protest rallies as described in section 2.2.2?⁵⁵

Thirdly, did the prestige gained by establishing a successful NGO affect the career of its founder, who has become the bishop of the diocese? How is the social commitment rewarded within the clerical community? Did it influence the decision to appoint him a bishop?

And fourthly, How does the political weight of the organisation in conjunction with religious authority, affect the internal decision making structure of CDS? For example, are beneficiaries afraid to speak up against the bishop? We have seen that for an outsider of CDS like Joss this was the case, but how does that play a role among members?

55 E.g. while comparing CDS to the SHG based organisations of political parties, which often require their members to take part in demonstrations etc. an officer claimed that: “With us [CDS] they have to go on less [sic!] marches!”. However, considering the difficulties in our communication, it is not reasonable to make a case on the basis of this statement.

In all the four dimensions I found vague indications that aspects of power and prestige might explain specific manifestations of CDS, but to be able to make informed statements on the exact nature of these aspects further data is needed - data, which might prove difficult to obtain since it is a very sensitive topic.

Though it is very likely that CDS's development efforts have effects on the standing of the Catholic Church in Kerala and its politics, the empirical evidence available here on the character of such effects is thin, and does not allow conclusions about how prestige gained in development work might be translated into power. Further explorations on this topic could however examine the role of SHGs for political mobilisation, and look into the role CDS representatives play as government advisers (see 4.1.1).

However the questions posed in section 1.2 on how development interventions are connected to the context of politics and power also point towards interesting limitations of CDS's policies when connected to political issues of the Christian Community.

Being a Catholic NGO means that there is a tendency that CDS's projects target social problems in the way they are perceived from the perspective of Catholic priests or in the way they are highlighted by Catholic petitioners – as solving the problems of 'our' people. Given the dominant position the Christian community has in the hill area this perspective might be rather specific. For example, it is rather unlikely that CDS traces social problems to a history of “plunder and accumulation by dispossession[...] by an emergent class of [Syrian Christian] capitalist producers” (Münster 2011:2) as Münster does in section 5.1. The Catholic perspective of CDS can therefore limit its involvement with tribals in such a way that it cannot include questions of historic injustices in the distribution of land and property rights, but must stick to easing their current situation through social and development work.

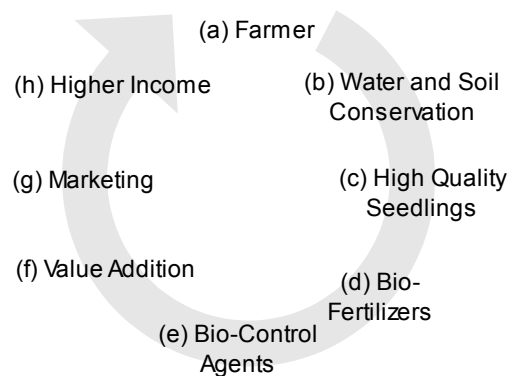
However, in contrast to the project described by Ferguson in section 1.2, the discursive effects of the political context, where they exist, do not undermine CDS's projects to an extent that they fail. In order to fulfil important 'instrumental effects', the projects have to succeed – only then can they eventually bring prestige in the political context of Kerala.

4.1.2 A Broad Organic Vision

Organic cultivation is part of CDS's general policy and it is rooted in the Christian idea of preserving God's creation. It is promoted on many levels: e.g. the ayurvedic branch cultivates its medicinal plants according to organic principles, and recently homestead vegetable gardens as well as small organic vegetable shops have been established.

The vision is, according to the managing director's claims, to create an “organic lifestyle”. This means not merely to produce and market organic products, but it includes notions of subsistence. People should support themselves more from their vegetable gardens, grow medicinal herbal remedies in these garden and live in harmony with nature. It does not mean they will be independent from staple foods, but the vision of a better lifestyle for rural people should not be limited to a better income (3105 S1-00:40).

As for agricultural production, the director presented a model that situates the farmer as the starting and the ending point of a circuit. Organic production is not merely leaving out chemicals, he explained, but it starts with (a) the farmer, (b) goes on with water and soil conservation, (c) the use of high quality seeds and seedlings, (d) the application of bio-fertilisers and (e) biocontrol agents and cumulates with (f) post harvest value addition and (g) marketing to generate a higher income for the farmer (h) (1803 H2-00:00).



The model is a beautiful rhetoric figure for including many of the diverse projects of CDS and its sub-divisions under the theme of organic farming: (a) CDS trains farmers. (b) It promotes water and soil conservation in the watershed programmes. The CDS's biotechnology lab develops and offers (c) high quality planting material, (d) earthworms to equip vermicompost units, and (e) biocontrol agents to farmers. Finally CDS Spice (and CDS Tea respectively) organises (f) value addition processing (e.g. white pepper or cured vanilla) as well as (g) marketing the products at (h) premium prices.

While some aspects are unusual in relation to organic farming – like watershed

development⁵⁶ – many of CDS projects intervene on important strategic points in organic agriculture. Aside from marketing produce, which will be dealt with in further detail later, the research and dissemination of biocontrol agents is key to the further popularisation of organic cultivation because biocontrol agents enable farmers to fight pests and diseases in a similarly potent way as conventional chemical appliances without poisoning their land and the surrounding ecosystem (and frequently themselves) even for pest-prone crops like cardamom.

4.1.3 Biotechnology

Sanju, the officer in charge of the biotechnology lab and the training centre, explained that they are working on several biocontrol agents⁵⁷ in the lab and are also testing botanical combinations - herbal mixtures which are used by farmers traditionally to fight pest attacks and which are now refined in the laboratory (2603 S1-13:30).

As far as biocontrol agents are concerned, Sanju explained that they have found more solutions for treating plant diseases than for fighting pest attacks, among other things because pests are spreading more easily.

One example of a biocontrol agent that is multiplied by the lab is *Trichoderma*, he stated – a beneficial fungus which is natural in the soil. Usually it wraps around – and so limits the spread of – another fungus that causes a common disease on pepper plants after the monsoon season (quick wilt). When fungicides are applied it is often the *Trichoderma* fungus which is eliminated from the ground, resulting in the spread of the disease-causing fungus. So in the biotechnology lab, *Trichoderma* is collected from the local soil, multiplied and so farmers can reintroduce it to the soil on their plots. *Trichoderma* is applied to coffee husks which can be applied to the soil as a preventive measure or as urgent control against quick wilt, Sanju explained, also stressing that no fungicide should be applied afterwards (2603 S1-14:00; 2703 S1-04:40).

The most ambitious project is to develop a package of practices (POP) for organic pest management in Cardamom. POPs are the standard measures to bring agricultural research by universities and other research institutions to the farming community and contain required cultivation practices as well as a list of possible pests and diseases and recommended remedies.

However since most of the POPs focus on conventional means to exterminate pests and

⁵⁶ The watershed programme has only a more general connection to organic farming via environmental concerns and is not restricted to organic farmers but is carried out on a community basis.

⁵⁷ Biocontrol agents are organisms (predators, parasites, or pathogens) which are applied to the field to limit the spread of other organisms that affect agricultural production.

diseases, no POP for organic pest management in cardamom is available yet and this has major consequences, Sanju explained: In spite of pro-organic initiatives of the State government, most agricultural universities and research facilities focus on conventional methods and many of the first hand advisers of the farmers, including for example the local agricultural officers of the state government, rely on conventional pest control and are not trained in organic solutions (2603 S2-05:20; 16:00).

While an agricultural officer I interviewed stated that conventional farming was important because it fetched higher yields, Sanju argued that instead of the yields one should compare farming methods on the basis of an input-output ratio, taking into account the high costs of synthetic inputs used in conventional farming (2603 S2-18:00).

While the research is in the final phase for many crops and different types of diseases, the project to publish a comprehensive POP for organic pest management in Cardamom will take at least two to three more years of further research Sanju explained: “We cannot give 100 per cent answers to all the questions yet” (2603 S2-02:00).

One component of the POP, for example, will be the control of a cardamom pest called “root grub”. This insect lives on jackfruit trees, which are frequently used for shading cardamom. It puts its eggs in the soil close to cardamom plants, so when the grubs hatch they will go into the soil and feed from the cardamom roots (2703 S1-07:00).

The biotechnology lab, in collaboration with the the research centre ICRI, has worked with two fungi – *Metarhizium* and *Beauveria* – as well as nematodes to control the pest at different stages of its life cycle. While the *Metarhizium* causes a fatal disease on the grub and is applied to the soil, *Beauveria* attacks the beetle and can be sprayed on the jack fruit trees during pruning. However Sanju explained that they had also developed a solution using entomopathogenic nematodes which might be easier to apply. The farmer would simply put 3-4 nematode infested dead wax worms into the ground, which is easier than spraying the tops of jack fruit trees (ibid).

As we have seen many of the farmers we discussed in the foregoing chapters had doubts about whether biocontrol agents would be available to them at a reasonable price once CDS offers them.

Sanju explained that biocontrol agents were rather specific in their application – too specific, for example, to be used in homestead gardens, where botanical combinations are more appropriate tools of pest control (3105 S1-03:11).

However, he stressed, that his department was available to farmers – the farmers could call them and if they can't help he will call the Indian Cardamom Research Institute (ICRI) with

which they cooperate. In some cases when the problem could not be identified via the phone they would make field visits and examine the farmers' plots. Of course also the CDS Spice inspectors can contact him on behalf of CDS farmers – “It is multichannel”, Sanju explained (2603 S2-01:40).

However, he also noted that the big goal of the POP was to popularize organic practices and to make conversion interesting for the broader farming community including large cardamom farmers and estates (2603 S2-15:00; 3105 S1-05:00).

The problem is that cardamom is mostly cultivated by big farmers – 5ha or more [...] and bigger farmers are mostly profit oriented and not concerned about the health of other people or so. So they will come only to organic if it brings profits.⁵⁸ (3105 S3-7:00)

The big plantations, here, will never convert to organic. They have a big boss somewhere in the north [of India], the subordinates will be doing the work and the only motive will be profit. In Udumbanchola taluk [the most important Cardamom cultivation area in the Idukki district] the plantations owners are often from Tamil Nadu. They have 10 – 20 acres or more and employ labourers. And they are not concerned about anything here. They just have a simple calculation: we put that much in, we want that much out. (3105 S3-12:00)

4.1.4 Vermicompost

The biotechnology lab also carries out research in vermicomposting, trains farmers and operates a facility to multiply earthworms on a large scale.

CDS started with that in the 1980s, when it was relatively unknown. Since the bishop is “a very open minded man and always looking for new developments”, as Sanju explained, the bishop invited a retired professor from an agricultural college, who had done some research on vermicomposting, to further develop the technique (3105 S3-25:00).

Today vermicomposting is well disseminated in the district and could be found in almost all farms I visited. There has also been a government programme giving a substantial subsidy on the construction of the tanks, which CDS made available to its clients.

CDS trains the farmers on two types of worms: a slightly bigger variety, called the “African night crawler”, is promoted for the composting of domestic waste. It feeds from top to bottom and so the composted top won't attract flies. The other variety – referred to as “red worms” - is propagated for agricultural use. They feed from bottom to top, so whenever farmers have organic waste they can put it on top, up to a maximum of two feet, as Sanju explained (2703 S3-00:59).

He also stated that before, they used to work with single tanks. But because of the obvious

⁵⁸ Sanju made this statement when contrasting the profit oriented bigger farmers to the smaller farmers CDS was working with. A contrast that implies CDS farmers are not profit oriented and can be motivated to convert to organic even if it is unprofitable.

limitations, due to the composting period of 20 days in which no additional waste can be deposited, today they propagate a new model with two tanks built side by side, so there is always one tank available for disposing organic waste. When single tanks were used, the separation of the worms from the compost was also a more complicated process. The compost, which is usually watered during the composting period, needs to dry up in order to drive the worms to the bottom part, where they await the next composting cycle. When twin tanks are used, the worms can travel from the finished compost to the uncomposted matter through holes at the bottom of the partition wall.

However, Sanju explained that they were developing it still further:

We are trying to make it more and more scientific, like reducing the time, increasing the efficiency of the vermicomposting pit and of the multiplication of earthworms, the faster production of compost – those sort of things are not sophisticated research, but basic research which benefits the farmers much ... Maybe a small modification in the composting process might influence it in a great way to get the compost faster.(2603 S2-12:20)

4.1.5 Excursus: Harry vs Sanju - Natural and Scientific Farming

Sanju didn't want to comment on Harry's farming practices directly since he hadn't met Harry and so far hadn't been to his farm. He had only found out about him a few months earlier and stated, "Harry is doing [organic cardamom cultivation] but we are not so sure if one can maintain that viably. He is taking so much pains etc." (3105 S2-1:05).

With Harry's comments on scientific agriculture in mind (section 3.5.4) one would think he would not share much common ground with Sanju, a trained scientist in botany and microbiology. But in fact there were several points of agreement.

For example, both opposed Sebastian's way of keeping his cardamom plot 'clean as a table', as described in the sections 3.1.3 and 3.5.4.⁵⁹ According to Sanju this practice is recommended for conventional farming, where a clean field makes the harvesting of the green capsules easier as well as the application of chemical fertilizers, since the soil then can be easily "opened", treated with fertilizer and then "closed" (3105 S3-26:28). In contrast to that, Sanju explained, he strongly recommended mulching to the farmers to keep the moisture of the soil, especially in the dry season, when farmers cut the dry leaves anyway.

In contrast to Sebastian, who perceived weeds as "thieves of manure and a breeding herd for pests and diseases", Harry cuts weeds generally only when they grow into the cardamom plants and treats them as part of a healthy ecosystem. He held the opinion that a farmer should rather farm the soil than the plant.

Sanju in principle approved of this idea and explained that "in organic farming you are enriching the soil. You make the soil bubble from nutrients [sic! ...] You make it rich in humus and you make more microbiological activity in there" (3105 S3-23:30).

For a more detailed discussion on which "weeds" or what kinds of microbiological activity they referred to exactly, I lack the botanical background knowledge. But it is interesting to compare their general ideas on farming and interventions in nature within the framework of different paradigms as suggested by Kaltoft (1999). While Harry's ideology can be classified in the paradigm of soil fertility, based on an extended concept of ecology. Sanju's approach is not so easily classified as he takes from two paradigms, that of soil fertility and that of nutrients.

On the one hand Sanju is based in agronomy and the paradigm of nutrients as can be

⁵⁹ Other farmers, like Joss, complained that since cardamom wasn't profitable, there was no point in maintaining it properly, but seemed to share the same ideal of a clean cardamom plot.

seen in the statement above where he translates Harry's notion of "farming the soil, not the plant" into a matter of nutrients. On the other hand he also has a deep understanding of ecology and stresses, for example, the importance of a high microbiological activity in the soil.

However Harry's ideas about ecology seem to exceed the scientific definitions of ecology and he even extends it to weeds. Sanju seems to be more rooted in agronomy and 'only' proposes mulching as soil covering.

On the whole both attempted to discuss farm intervention on a more holistic basis, but it seemed that Harry's idea of bringing nature back into balance leads to a rather different kind of intervention than the deployment of biocontrol agents to fight pests, as developed by Sanju. Even though he used some biocontrol agents (e.g. *Trichoderma*) himself, he stressed the importance of identifying the cause of the underlying imbalance which leads to the emergence of a pest or disease. He hesitated, for example, to call his approach 'permaculture' because in workshops on permaculture trainers would also teach models of farming and not the actual skill of generating a deeper understanding of nature, he explained.

Even though Harry tried to present his approach in the interviews as well as in his article as simply logical and technically sound, the skill he wanted to spread also required a serious shift in the 'paradigm' of the farmers, which may explain why he was so frustrated with sharing his knowledge, since farmers mostly asked him about the chrysanthemum spray.

In contrast Sanju focused on creating an easy step-by-step guide for the farmers. Ironically, he seemed to be unhappy with the solution he had on how to treat stemborer in cardamom.

Lacking a good biocontrol solution, he had to advise farmers instead to resort to identifying the stemborer in the season before its outbreak and taking precautionary measures (3105 S1-08:12), a solution similar to that of Harry (see section 3.5.3).

4.1.5.1 Input-Output-Calculation

Another area where Harry and Sanju concurred was that farm calculations should be more comprehensive, especially when comparing organic to conventional practices. They should include more factors than their general focus on yield and yield loss.

For example, in a discussion with the local agricultural officer, he seemed to share my general sympathy towards organic cultivation, but stressed that in the end conventional

cultivation is superior in the yield dimension (FN. 25.3.).

In opposition to that, Sanju argued in line with many CDS officers that one should look at the input-output-ratio instead and include the expenses for chemical inputs, labour inputs, and other material inputs. He argued that if a farmer reduces his input costs, he can also increase his profit margin even if he gets a lower yield (3105 S3-01:15).

He stressed that he preferred the concept of “Low-Input-Sustainable-Agriculture”, with as many inputs coming from the farm, or the village, as possible. Because “even the term organic is commercialised now [..., since it is] even promoted by Monsanto now”(3105 S3-06:00).

While Harry would basically agree with that view, he stressed that he did intensive cultivation even though the external inputs were limited. Harry also proposed an additional calculation reflecting the hidden costs in terms of energy, for example in kilojoules, as pointed out in section 3.5.4. On the positive side there is basically only the sun and the plant growing from its energy, while every input – (fuel, fertilizers, labour) - is accounted negatively in the energy balance. Hence a positive balance is rather difficult to obtain, and can be achieved mostly by leaving out ineffective measures.

On the basis of that calculation, Harry criticised CDS above all for the vermicompost tanks as they are made of concrete, supplied with African worms and covered with a metal mesh against rats. And also, vermicomposting requires that farmers transport organic matter to the tanks and the heavy wet compost back to the field. Instead, he leaves most of the organic waste for mulching right on the plot and composts only part of the cow dung and littered straw from the cowshed on a heap⁶⁰, which is naturally infested by thousands of local earthworms (see section 3.5.4).

He criticises that techniques like vermicomposting are taken out of the context, developed under laboratory conditions and are then propagated among farmers without taking their whole situation into account.⁶¹

Sanju, however, stressed that vermicomposting was highly appropriate for the farmers he proposed it to. He explained that this kind of composting was especially apt for this region, because “other composting techniques, like windrow composting, don't bring so much

60 Even though the heap was windrow shaped, Harry's composting method has nothing to do with the windrow composting referred to by Sanju, where organic matter is arranged in a windrow and sealed airtight with a plastic cover.

61 An argument similar to that of Scott (1998), but while Scott's counter-concepts 'metis', the practical or tacit knowledge, can only be taught through work, typically from a craftsman to an apprentice, Harry's counter-strategy includes dissemination of knowledge to other farmers, through articles etc.. While it is difficult to analyse the kind of knowledge Harry proposes, and the hurdles he faces in disseminating it, it is clear that a concept of knowledge largely defined by the inability to spread it in other ways than apprenticeship is far less useful for this analyses than e.g the discussion of different paradigms, as proposed by Kaltoft (1999).

humus and don't have that much micro-organism activity. And moreover getting organic matter, like leaf litter, for example, is not that difficult here, in contrast to open places like Tamil Nadu. [... Also], all farmers have cattle. So mixing in cow dung and getting vermicompost is easy for them.”(3105 S3-16:00) He also noted that the red worms used for agricultural vermicomposting were also recently found native in India.(3105 S3-24:00)

On my question of whether the carrying of the compost wasn't still a rather laborious task he said: “Smaller farmers [...] will produce one ton in two months. That's not much. [...] Even when they do windrow composting it is as labour intensive. They have to dump [the organic matter] on top and close it with some plastic. So if one is ready to go for composting it is all equal. (3105 S3-18:00)

Again, I lack the biological and agricultural background knowledge to make informed judgements on efficiency or appropriateness of technologies in terms of composting speed, climate gas development or energy balance. Nor am I an expert in the special needs of the different farmers, for example, how they can minimise the workload, which is becoming more and more an issue in Kerala, since workers are becoming scarce.

Instead, I want to focus on the institutional applicability of the two approaches. Which one fits better into the economics of developmental NGOs - a heap or a concrete tank – in terms of writing project proposals, convincing donor agencies, setting up training courses, and acceptance by the farmers? Although this is rather speculative, I think there are very different parameters for the large-scale multiplication of skill-oriented techniques on the one hand and input-oriented ones on the other hand.

Is the skill to make a proper heap harder to commodify than the construction of concrete tanks?

I believe governments, and other donors would be harder to convince to promote the techniques Harry proposes, precisely because they are skill-oriented and not input-oriented, and therefore harder to account for.

4.2 CDS Spice

Efforts by CDS to inform, organise and convert spice farmers date back to the early 1990s. By 1997 many spice farmers had converted and become certified organic and CDS established a separate unit, CDS Spice, which from then on worked rather autonomously in organising, certifying, inspecting farmers as well as procuring, processing and exporting organic products on a very professional basis (CDS Spice project description).

For several years the spices were processed in a hired facility, but in 2005 CDS Spice shifted its operation to its own newly built facility, where it processes the organic spices in compliance with ISO 22000 standards and maintains a lab to check compliance with organic norms. The facility has the capacity to process one metric ton per hour, and the spices are stored, cleaned, sterilised, dried, ground and packed for export and domestic markets. If requested, CDS Spice also organises the whole export procedure for its clients, handling all custom-, port- and shipping-procedures. While most materials are exported in bulk, a brand has also been established for retail in supermarkets in India and abroad. Among the products are steam-sterilised black and white pepper, green pepper in brine, dry ginger, turmeric, clove, nutmeg, nut-mace, rosemary, thyme and oregano (FN 17.3.). Pepper, however, is the most important product in terms of quantity and although the officers were hesitant to state precise numbers the volume must be well over 100 tonnes per year.

In order to access markets, CDS is certified according to organic norms of several countries: NSOP (India), BIOSUISSE (Switzerland), JAS (Japan) and US NOP (USA), and EU regulations 2092/91 (EU). All these certificates are issued by one certifying agency, SKAL, which is based in the Netherlands.⁶²

Aside from a division that organises the processing and export there is also an Internal Quality System (IQS) division, consisting of 7 inspectors, who visit the more than 2000 farms regularly, purchase their products, identify new members, conduct training courses and maintain all the required documentation – in fact almost all interaction with the farmers is assigned to the IQS inspectors, each of whom has his respective region.

Following the objective of “attaining sustainable agricultural production and a healthy environment through organic farming which will provide the farming community adequate returns to maintain a decent standard of living”⁶³, CDS Spice's offer to the farmers is simple: it bears the complete costs of inspection and certification, and no entry fee is required; it

⁶² For review of certification procedures necessary to export to EU countries, see Barret et al. (2002)

⁶³ The quote is taken from CDS Spice's project description.

buys the spices at a premium price above the conventional market price and additionally an annual bonus is paid at the end of the year to the farmers' groups. It offers training in organic cultivation and post-harvest techniques and together with CDS Central, it makes various government programmes available to the farmers such as vermicomposting, or rain water harvesting. And it also provides inputs for free, (good planting materials, bamboo mats for drying pepper, pepper threshers, rocket sprayers, tanks for making white pepper), or at subsidised rates (e.g. biocontrol agents).

CDS Spice targets marginal farmers since they are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to marketing their products. Although the quantities are small the marketing effort is the same and spice agents generally pay less for small quantities (0609 N1-41:12). On the other hand, they are often more promising candidates for conversion since, according to Sanju, they are generally more concerned with their environment, less profit-oriented and more often de-facto organic, i.e. organic by default (3105 S3-8:53). The numbers given in a project description show that CDS Spice started with the slightly bigger "small" farmers and only later the focus was shifted towards marginal farmers. In 1995 the average farm size of the then 195 CDS farmers was 2.85 ha while today it is below one hectare (FN 2.6.) (see also footnote 46 above).

4.2.1 A Development Intervention for Tribals

Another aspect worth mentioning is how well the objectives of CDS Spice match with the needs of tribal development. As was discussed in section 2.2.3 social problems, like illiteracy, unemployment and poor health are severe in the tribal settlements, but there are also structural problems concerning dependencies on outsiders. An anthropologist, who worked for CDS Central on a community farming project in the tribal area from 1995 to around 2000, explained the strategic importance of spice marketing for their project as follows⁶⁴:

Earlier the tribals in the area were cultivating food crops - mainly paddy and so on - but during the course of time they changed into cash crops: pepper, cardamom and other products. Actually that transition has occurred because outsiders came and stayed in the tribal area. Slowly money has become valuable and people are compelled to shift to cash crops, that is a process called monetisation. I think 1980 that shift has started. [...]

Initially in the rainy season they had supplies - some paddy or tapioca - but when they shifted to cash crops this short period became very severe and they borrowed money [and pledged their crops to the money lenders ...] and when the cropping time came they had to leave all the crops to these people, usually non-tribals. [...] So, slowly the control of the moneylenders increased in tribal area. [...]

And also before in food crops they had lots of community labour - when they were

64 Gurukkal (2003) makes very similar observations.

cultivating paddy, people were coming together, cultivating together, harvesting together. When people were shifting to cash crops community ties slowly disseminated and individualism developed. [...]

So the major idea of the community farming project was to revive community ties, produce commonly, market commonly, and so eliminating money lenders. [...] That kind of community ties are very difficult to revive, once they are individualised, but in the marketing part we have succeeded. That was a major problem before.

Even though the project was not so successful in total, [...] we were able to link up with the marketing project of CDS. And we also promoted a level of organic farming and we helped to spread cultivation practises of vermicomposting and others. [...]

CDS Spice came in in 1998, but even today people give their produce to CDS spice. CDS certified their land as organic and they have a marketing network.

Actually our project has helped CDS Spice to enter into that scene.

And in turn CDS Spice helps the tribals, because actually for pepper the market price is usually about 80 Rs. The money lenders will give only 70 Rs - 10 Rs less than the market price... and CDS is giving 10 rupees more. So the people are getting a net profit of 20 rupees. So that is why people are interested. (1206 J1-2:00, 7:00)

The strategy of marketing pepper for tribals and as a consequence reducing the dependency on moneylenders was very successful and has been replicated by other agencies, for example, the eco-development project in section 4.2.7.

The account above also sheds light on the institutional logic of “entering the scene”. In contrast to the common discourse used by most CDS officers during the interviews – a discourse of help and good deeds, which completely ignores institutional and economic strategies – the statement on “entering the scene” gives a rare insight into another discourse – that of an institution concerned with expanding its activities, an institution which needs to get a foot in the door.

4.2.2 Interacting with Farmers

During the field work I focused on the interaction between CDS and its farmers – especially on the entering procedures, on what had to be changed during conversion and the procurement system, but also on aspects of participation.

4.2.2.1 Inspectors

Since the IQS inspectors of CDS Spice deal with most of the interaction with the farmers, this chapter is largely based on the interviews with Deepu, a young IQS inspector who was stationed in a region further away from CDS Spice's factory. He shared the local office, which was located on a church compound, with another CDS employee, who administered social programmes.

In contrast to most of the CDS Spice staff, who had often been with CDS Spice from the

beginning, he had only worked for CDS for some years and had plans to move on since his uncle worked in the military service and said he would find a job for him. Deepu held a PhD degree in chemistry and had also studied agriculture and planned to marry soon.

At that time he lived with his family, who had moved to the area during the settlement campaigns like most people in the area. His parents didn't use chemicals on their farm but only compost and cow dung. When I asked why they hadn't joined CDS, he said: "They prepare to. All farms try to get certified under CDS" (0906 D3-09:22).

Each IQS inspector is responsible for one of the seven areas. Deepu is responsible for around 300 farmers, who he claims to visit around ten times a year. Together with all the other duties as an inspector, like admission, inspection, procurement, documentation, etc. the workload of the inspectors seemed to be rather large.

4.2.2.2 The Farmers' Groups

The second pillar of interaction between the individual farmers and CDS are the farmers' groups. CDS Spice farmers are required to be members of such a group and, depending on the area and how many CDS Spice farmers live close by, these groups vary in size and may have around 16 members (0906 D1-08:22). Every group has a committee and there is also a central farmers' committee.

The groups have a specific role in the formal admission procedure of farmers and also in the expelling of non-complying farmers. Deepu mentioned that aside from these general tasks they became, for example, also active when a pepper disease endangered their plots, and requested that the inspectors find a solution (0609 N1-11:03).

CDS Spice farmers' groups are not formally connected with the SHGs of CDS Central or the farmers' groups of CDS Tea. While the SHGs form an integral part of CDS Central's development efforts, and CDS Tea farmers' groups organise shipments to the factory, the farmers' groups of CDS Spice are not such an integral part and therefore don't need to be that tightly organised.

In practice, meetings mostly seemed to be scheduled by the inspectors and they are mostly used for announcements by the inspectors, or for training purposes.

Anthony admitted weaknesses in organising farmers' groups and said that CDS Spice had plans to improve the organisation of the farmers' groups⁶⁵ (FN. 2.6.).

⁶⁵ At the time of the fieldwork in 2008 CDS Spice was not fair trade certified. Anthony stated that there had been short negotiations which were not completed successfully. Although democratic participation is required in fair trade standards (FLO 2011) I have no knowledge on whether issues of participation were relevant in these negotiations. However in 2009 CDS Spice became fair trade certified and it is likely that there had been changes in the organisation of the farmers' groups and participation.

Though the farmers' groups seem to be set up to serve a participatory function, judging from the interviews with the farmers, they don't seem to have been an effective means for voicing problems and pressing farmers' interests so far (see section 3.3.2).

Farmers' groups don't seem to have a strong voice in important decisions made by CDS Spice as in the case of the organic premium. This substantial issue would have been handled with far more care and attention if the farmers had had a working representation in the decision-making process.

In other cases, however, CDS Spice has made concessions to the farmers. For example, earlier procurements used to be carried out only once a year but now they are carried out more often (see section 4.2.4).⁶⁶

In the interviews with farmers less integrated into CDS Spice, it was quite obvious that the representational structure was not transparent to them; they didn't know who their representative was, they didn't know there were meetings aside from trainings and they didn't think the farmers' group representatives worked on behalf of the farmers.

This led to a perception of CDS Spice as a relatively abstract agency and those farmers who knew Joss and his farmers' group seemed to consider him as more authentically fighting for the case of the farmers, even though what he offered was probably far less reliable.

Judging from the interview with the president of the farmers' groups, Mutupathi, it seemed that there were no critical issues for him. He seemed to be a rather pious man, avoiding conflicts with the Church.

It is also notable that Mutupathi was president of several participatory bodies or 'consortiums' related to Catholic development work (CDS Spice and -Tea on various levels, as well as a dairy consortium and a farmers' group sponsored by the agricultural department).

It is however important to note that these aspects of participation are not uncontested. Renju's statement, that there should be "an organisation of organic farmers only" (2007 R3-10:40) as a condition that farmers really receive benefits of organic marketing, as discussed in the case study above (3.3.2), makes reference to the lively history of collective action in Kerala as laid out in section 2.1.

On the basis of this, several questions arise which cannot be dealt with sufficiently here: What is the relative importance of participation within CDS Spice? How is this influenced by

⁶⁶ Joss stated that at some point CDS Spice had only procured spice once a year (1007 J3-09:56), which was unfortunate for farmers since they may have considered the price too low at that time, or were unwilling to sell all in one lot.

what can vaguely be defined as a Catholic organisational culture? And in a wider development context, what role has a participatory body to play in a modern development project that needs to appeal to donor agencies.⁶⁷

4.2.2.3 Joining CDS Spice

Many of the farmers I talked to (e.g. Sebastian and Mutupathi) joined CDS Spice rather early. The inspectors scouted actively in the whole district, they selected promising farmers, visited them and asked them if they wanted to join. Today however, CDS Spice's strategy is to train the farmers who have joined CDS Spice to produce more on their plots. Even though there are more applications, CDS Spice only replaces the number of farmers who leave the project. Farmers leave for various reasons, Deepu explained, for example, they close their farm and move somewhere else. He estimated the fluctuation that year to have been 300 of the 2050 farmers, which I found surprisingly high. As a result he had to identify 30 farmers for admission, while there were maybe 50 more interested in joining (0906 D2-01:00).

Today the formal admission procedure is as follows: if a farmer is interested in participating in the project, he must contact a local CDS officer or the local CDS Spice farmers' group and discuss the basic details with the members of the committee, including his farm size, crops and inputs used. On the basis of that, the group's committee will then make a petition to CDS Spice for admission of the new member (0609N1-11:34, 17:50). However, in Deepu's statements it seemed to be a mere formality and that the effective decision lay with him, in the following steps of the admission process.

4.2.2.4 Inspections

The next step is that an inspector of the IQS will inspect the farm and report to the central farmers' committee of CDS Spice. During this first visit inspectors will gather all the information required for the certification, for example, whether the farmer has used chemical inputs, when the last use of chemical inputs took place, if there is a farm boundary to a conventional farm and in that case if there is proper fencing to prevent the drift of agro-chemicals. They will record relevant farm activities such as the pruning of trees for shading, ploughing or digging. They will also gather data on previous harvests and expected future harvests (0906 D1-12:32).

⁶⁷ Maia Green observes in her article on participatory workshops in Tanzania similar notions: “[P]articipants, even in smaller NGO projects are overwhelmingly drawn from among the local elites, who come to the attention of project staff and of public servants and whose level of education and familiarity with group work required of the workshop make them ideal participants. The relativity of poverty and of developer versus developpee [...] means that they] are perceived by largely elite project staff and expatriates alike as ‘poor’, while communities themselves perceive them as lower-tier officials and as patrons [...] ‘The real poor are invisible. They don’t come to the meetings’, a project manager Dar es Salaam told me [...] The structure of development workshops, in any event, probably precludes the kind of input from ‘stakeholders’ that would significantly alter the conception of the project [...]” (Green 2003:134f)

However, in this first inspection many of the applicants are found non-compliant, Deepu stated. In most cases it is simply because they are not ready to stop using synthetic inputs (0906 D2-02:00).

Once a farmer is accepted to the programme he will be certified as „in conversion“ for three years and only after that can farmers sell their products to CDS Spice (0609 N1-11:34, 17:50).

IQS Inspectors will come for inspections several times a year, and also SKAL will inspect randomly selected farmers. Deepu described the SKAL inspections as follows:

First they examine the house premises, they go around the house. [...] They examine where the farmers keep their tools, the composting facility, storing area. [...] Then they go through the farm area and check e.g the organic fencing [...] They take samples from the soil, from beneath the trees, from different parts of the plants, etc.

Then they will check their form [the farm diary]. All the farmers write in that form what they use in their farms, what they buy from outsiders, what they sell, the details of the plants which they have cultivated, like pepper, coffee, etc., how many of each, and the expected yield. (0609-N1 00:25)

There seems to be an important difference between the external SKAL inspection and the internal IQS inspection. While both basically inspect the same things, SKAL inspectors take up a very critical stand towards the farmers and CDS, with special attention given to the correct and complete documentation. On the other side, gathering the complete documentation is part of the responsibility of the IQS inspectors. So in practice they are often the ones to fill out the farm diary for the farmers.

The IQS Inspectors of CDS Spice had an important role in mediating organic standards. They explained the necessary steps to the farmers and often helped with the documentation.

However the inspectors were responsible for around 300 farmers each and all interaction with farmers (admission, certification, inspection and procurement) was de-facto concentrated in their hands, thus farmers were dependent on their relationship with one person.

4.2.3 Conversion Problems and Organic by Default

As many of my interview partners at CDS Spice stated, the most frequent issue during the inspections is the use of synthetic inputs which are non-compliant with organic standards,.

In some cases farmers used urea and potage, which they received from government programmes via the agricultural officer. In other cases it is possible that farmers will resort to chemical measures when they see their cardamom plots under stress from a pest or

disease (0609 N1-03:57).

One option to solve the problem with cardamom is a 'split operation' farm, with one organic plot, usually for pepper and other spices, and one plot in which cardamom is grown by conventional means. Though it is possible, as Deepu stated, it is difficult to control and inspect, since separate storing and processing areas are required to prevent contamination of organic products etc. (0709 N2-29:09).

The question concerning what a farmer who has used little or no synthetic inputs before (i.e. an organic by default farmer) has to change when he gets certified, is of special interest here. Aside from restricting himself to the allowed inputs⁶⁸, the changes most commonly concerned minor aspects of hygiene and environment conservation.

For example, farmers have to stop manuring three months before harvesting, they must avoid polluting the pepper while drying, and in order to raise hygienic standards, CDS supplied five electrical pepper threshing units, free of cost to the farmers, so farmers wouldn't thresh the pepper with their feet any more (0709 N2-16:21, 0709 N1-26:30).

There also must be a fence against drift where the organic plots border on non-organic plots of neighbours to prevent contamination of the product (ibid).

And although it is not clear whether it is part of organic regulations or CDS Central's policy of watershed development, Deepu mentioned that farmers should be aware of erosion and use soil conservation measures, such as small stone walls or grass bonding, and they should not plough or dig up in the rainy season (0709 N2-16:21).

On the whole, certification did require some minor investments (fences etc.), but farmers who were de-facto organic before did not have to make radical modifications in their production processes.

In some cases it seemed to be an advantage that CDS was a large NGO and could settle problems with a certification agency on an almost equal footing. Several years ago SKAL had made it a requirement for organic farmers to keep cattle, based on the assumption that without that farmers had no way to fertilize their fields organically and would resort to chemical inputs, but ignoring the possibility of farmers buying cow-dung from their neighbours, as Sebastian did, for example. Now this regulation has been changed but the question remains whether an individual farmer, or a small farmers' group, like Joss', would have the social and cultural capital to articulate their situation.

⁶⁸ Deepu stated that this also included external inputs such as the Bordeaux mixture, a mix of copper-sulfate and lime, which is used to prevent fungus growth. He explained that its use is limited to 6 kg in 1 hectare. (0609-N1 07:47)

4.2.4 The Procurement System

The second big area of interaction between CDS Spice and the farmers is the procurement of spices, which is also carried out by the inspectors and usually Saturdays were the collection day (FN 29.3). In the early period of my research I was taken to one of these collections:

Usually the two inspectors responsible for the adjacent zones I concentrated my research on went together with a rented pick-up truck. The truck was half full when we met because they had been to some collection points already, collecting from 11 farmers but they had more than that to come for the day.

After half an hour's drive we stopped at a church compound, where a small room on the side was used as the local CDS office equipped with a large scales and some basic office furniture.

The two farmers had also arrived with their large bags of pepper packed on the back-seat of an auto-riksha and started to bring them in with the help of the riksha driver.

Then the pepper was weighed and the inspectors checked the quality by tasting one or two berries and examined the outward appearance on whether the pepper berries were dirty or had small white spots indicating mould.

The farmers had brought 100 kg and 150 kg respectively and at rate of the Cochin stock market of that day (141 Rs/kg) plus 10 Rs/kg organic premium from CDS this amounted to 15000 Rs and 23000 Rs respectively which they received in cash on the spot.

Only later did I understand that while it was probably only a part of the farmers' harvests, the money constituted a substantial amount of their income, which explained the slight nervousness on their part.

Then a lot of paper work was to be done. A form was attached to each bag indicating its origin. The inspectors wrote several receipts, filed the purchase in their documentation for each farmer⁶⁹ and finally filled out a tax file. In the meanwhile the farmers sealed the bags by sewing them up.

All that took little more than half an hour – from the arrival at the office until the bags were loaded on to the truck – and the inspectors went on to the several other appointments scheduled for that day. (FN 29.3)

The standard procedure for making such procurement appointments was that farmers when they wanted to sell their product phoned the inspector, and in turn he scheduled a procurement as soon as possible. Since the farmers would receive the money on the day of the procurement, at the day's rate of the very volatile Cochin stock market, this urgency is very important for them, but seems to be difficult to fulfil for the inspectors sometimes. The inspectors had a lot of tasks and might not answer the phone (especially during price peaks they may face numerous pleas for procurement)⁷⁰ or they weren't able to organise a procurement (e.g. because there weren't enough farmers interested in procurement that the

⁶⁹ The actual yield, especially in relation to the projected yield, is of high importance in the documentation because the amount that a farmer can possibly legitimately supply is based on these numbers.

⁷⁰ In fact even though Deepu said he was always available to the farmers he turned down their calls while talking to me several times.

effort for renting a pick-up could be justified.)

In contrast to the inspectors, the local spice traders were always available, which made them a viable option for the farmers, even though they paid a price below the rate of Cochin stock market and paid no organic premium but on the contrary often paid less if the visual appearance of the crop was slightly poorer.

For CDS Spice the problem was that farmers still sold part of their products to the local spice agents and so the expensive certified products were lost to the open market. CDS Spice also preferred larger procurements over smaller ones to keep transaction costs low, which means farmers should ideally sell all their harvest in one lot. Also, since some small farmers (e.g. Sebastian) found that their harvest was not big enough anyway, the preference for big collections might result in a bias towards bigger farmers⁷¹.

Even though Deepu claimed that he had made efforts to be more easily available to farmers for procurement and as a result far fewer farmers would sell to the open market at least in his zone, it seemed the problems were still prevalent.

The reason why farmers often wanted to sell at short notice was that farmers often kept their product as a kind of insurance or saving at home. According to Deepu as well as the farmers interviewed, farmers generally sell their products in three situations (and very often only part of their harvest):

- (a) directly after harvesting and drying. They often don't have the possibility to store the produce and might also need the money to repay a loan etc.
- (b) When they have pressing financing needs (illness of a family member, school fees etc.) (0907 D2-1:03).
- (c) When they see that the stock market in Cochin offers a good price, (or when they have an option for a good bargain, as in the case of Joss (see section 3.4.5)).

Whereas the procurement system clearly favoured collection after harvest (a), it was not well designed to cover emergency sales (b) and the broker attitude of the farmers (c). By the time the inspectors had organised the collection, the emergency might have been resolved (b) or the price peak over (c).

Since almost all interaction of the farmers with CDS Spice went through the inspectors, a lot depended on their relationship with the inspector in their zone. For the procurement a good relationship might mean that inspectors are more lenient, e.g. that they squeeze in a

⁷¹ Although this topic was brought up by several farmers, I couldn't collect related comments from the CDS Spice officers.

procurement even for a rather small volume.

On the other hand a bad relationships with an inspector can lead to bizarre situations: one farmer suspected that the inspector would come weeks later on purpose, to collect the pepper at a lower market price. In another case a farmer felt under surveillance: for example, he suspected that the reason for a surprise visit from the inspector was to check if the amount he had stated for procurement on the phone was actually the total amount he stored.

There were also occasions when CDS Spice needed more pepper than they had in stock. Deepu explained that they then would either “promote more cultivation on the same plots or include new farmers to the project” (0907 D1-01:03). However, there seemed to be situations when a shipment was so pressing that inspectors would call the farmers and ask if they had spices in stock for sale. And as the section on Harry showed, they occasionally would approach organic farmers outside the project to sell organic pepper as well (see section 3.5.5).

The officers at CDS Spice knew their procurement system was not ideal and they planned to set up several storage facilities in the zones, which would make it easier to organise procurements at short notice because then organising the transport was less complicated (0907 D1-3:45).

Although it is difficult to assess how relevant the amount lost to the open market is, the argument I want to make here is that the understanding of the economic strategies of the farmers (as mentioned above as (a), (b) and (c)) and the adaptation of the project accordingly is key for marketing intervention.⁷²

Another possible approach, one that is congruent with free market ideologies, would be to raise the premium and so raise the incentive to sell within the CDS framework.

⁷² This argument is very similar to Ferguson (1990:135ff).

4.2.5 *Excursus: Fieldnotes on a Rubber Procurement System*

On one of the evenings I spent with Anthony's family at their house in the lowlands near Kanjirapally, his brother called and asked Anthony to come over to do a quick job.

We rode on Anthony's scooter to one of the rubber plantations of his brother and brought a pile of raw rubber sheets to the rubber trader. I was treated as a special guest there and invited into the large and beautifully equipped living room of the house for dinner, while Anthony's brother and the rubber trader did their business.

As Anthony explained to me later, the terms of this trade were as follows: the amount of the rubber of Anthony's brother was entered into the books of the trader, who in turn was able to further process it, i.e. smoke the rubber sheets and sell them on the market, but no price was fixed for the rubber yet. Anthony's brother had six months time to decide on which day he wanted to actually sell his rubber and receive the money - that is, on which day the market price rate would set the price for the rubber. He would simply call the trader and say "today".

So the trader had the product early and the farmer could wait for the right moment to sell, thus his "broker mentality" was satisfied.

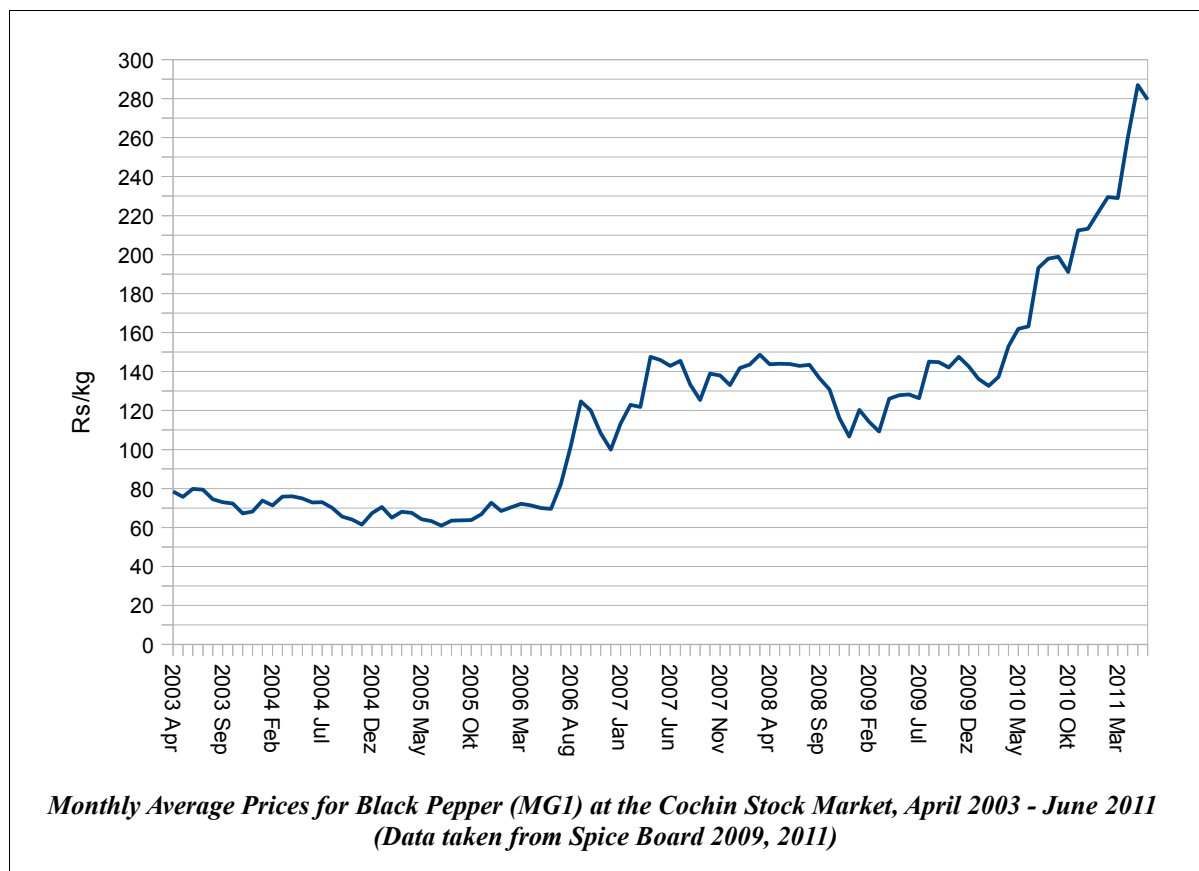
Even though rubber is a very different case, especially since the price multiplied by double digits in recent years, but also because the financial situation of the plantation owners was rather different, this system would cater to the needs of the farmers of CDS Spice in all three situations shown above. I don't know what this system means in economic terms but when I asked Anthony later that evening if that would be an option for CDS Spice, he replied that this system was rather costly and CDS couldn't afford such a system (FN. 2.6.).

4.2.6 Prices, Premiums and Costs

As was pointed out in the previous chapter, the organic premium paid by CDS Spice on pepper was the subject of fierce debates. Harry and Joss sold their organic pepper at around 30-35 percent above the market price of conventional pepper, and Harry claimed that CDS Spice “destroys the market” because it purchased pepper at a premium of only 10 Rs extra per kg. But if and how CDS Spice's premium really had effects on the rest of the organic market is not clear.

However, it should be noted that finding exporters who are willing to buy at this rate takes much effort for Joss and Harry and the results are uncertain, which means that members of Joss' group also frequently sell to the open market. In contrast to that, CDS Spice was very reliable.

At the time of my fieldwork in spring 2008 the pepper price at the Cochin market was around 140 Rs/kg, which was considered to be rather high compared to the years before – between April 2003 and April 2006 the price was at an average of 70 Rs. As shown in the diagram below, the price exceeded 150Rs/kg in April 2010 and has risen since then considerably.



Deepu explained that the decision on the organic premium for pepper is made each year after the calculation on the previous financial year is finished (which in India ends in March) (0907 D1-16:40). Since the organic premium is set at a nominal amount there are some difficulties in comparing it to premiums calculated in percentages (while 10 Rs makes a 14 percent premium on a 70 Rs/kg price, it shrinks to only 7 per cent on a 140 Rs/kg rate). My fieldwork also fell into a time when a new premium, that probably would take into account the higher pepper prices, was to be announced a few months later, which means the discontent I recorded among CDS farmers with the premium might be partly temporary.

Deepu recalled that the premium had been 3 Rs/kg a few years before, it was then set at 10 Rs/kg. He stated, that it had been put at 20 Rs for two months (see also in section 3.3.2) and he expected it to rise again this year (2008). (0907 Deepu 16:00).

Farmers also received a bonus at the end of each year. It consisted of one third of the profit CDS made, which was refunded to the farmers' groups on a per-kg basis. Another third was saved for reinvestment and the last third was remitted to CDS Central to finance its social projects (FN 2.6.). The bonus last year was around 4 Rs/kg and was used to support the groups' social activities.

Though Deepu was probably not well informed on that matter he estimated that inspection costs and all the other expenses for CDS Spice related to farmers were about 10-15 Rs/kg.

If one considered the bonus and part of CDS Spice's expenditure for inspection, as an addition to the premium, a rough estimate indicates that CDS Spice premium would still be below the 30 to 35 per cent premium Harry and Joss demand for their product. Only if a pepper price of 70 Rs was taken as the basis it would be in a similar range.

Defending the size of the premium, Deepu stressed that "the farmers have no money loss in this project. There is no registration fee, they just come and join us. All the needs in terms of money are met by CDS" (0907 D1-16:40).⁷³

Another thing that affected the premium was that CDS Spice faced heavy price competition on the international market. Deepu stated that there had been much less competition previously (0907 D1-18:36) and Anthony noted that CDS had lost some of their earlier clients to cheaper organic exporters from other countries and explained that some of them had returned to them later because of the high quality CDS Spice offered (FN 2.6.).

Neither of them made any statements regarding the CDS Spice's margin or the actual amount they exported and also at what a rate they sold the pepper or who their clients

⁷³ One aspect Deepu neglects in this statement is the lower income farmers have in the conversion period. But as we will see, since CDS Spice targets organic by default farmers, who experience little crop loss, since it is not so important. This ideally a little problem as CDS' ideal target farmers has little crop loss.

were.

Anthony explained that CDS had not much room for raising the premium because it had a lot of expenses to meet and in one of our discussions he mentioned some of them:

• transport costs • processing costs • charges for the plant • labour • power • depreciation of machines • return on investments	• export and stuffing • packing material costs • customs expenses, fees, taxes • trailer charge • duties • CHA – custom house agent	• port expenses • insurance • documentation • certification charge • material costs • our overhead expenses • our margin (FN 14.7.)
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In a discussion with an officer at a partner organisation in Germany which promotes organic farming and also helped to raise funds for the CDS Spice factory, she mentioned that, while they could raise some of the capital in Germany, CDS Spice also had to take up a large loan from an Indian bank and she pointed out that the interest rate they demanded was far more than she expected (FN 24.3.2009). Again, precise numbers are not available, but I think the interest burden must be a big item in CDS Spice's expenditures.

4.2.7 Excursus: Another Model – Eco-Development and Pepper Marketing

From 1996 to 2001 a large and well-financed eco-development project was carried out in the area around the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary. Studies indicated that the biodiversity of the sanctuary was endangered since the neighbouring villagers depended on the forest resources in various unsustainable ways, which “included heavy biomass extraction of non-timber forest products⁷⁴], poaching of wildlife, felling of trees, cultivation of *ganja*, and so forth” (Gurukkal 2003:9).

In the case of the tribal settlements Mannakkuti and Paliyakkuti, located close to Kumily, the participatory microplanning under the auspices of the Forest Department showed that the dependence on exploitative moneylenders was one of the major problems⁷⁵. “The land the tribals held and the pepper and coffee crops grown were already pawned to the local traders for meagre sums taken as advance. As a result their actual earning from the farm was meagre” (p.15f). As a result of the poor revenues from their plots they depended on forest resources – partly to meet their immediate subsistence needs, but mostly to sell the collected forest products to supplement their income (ibid).

Among the many projects in the eco-development programme, which aimed at establishing sustainable and self-reliant ways of generating income, the initiative for marketing pepper collectively was outstandingly successful. A centralised storage facility was built, collective auctions were held and with the aid of politicians and the police the debts were settled with the moneylenders (p.41). The revenues of the project were distributed via bank accounts to the farmers and as a result of these efforts the income of the tribal pepper farmers increased four times (p.34). After completion of the project in 2001, the sustainable activities like the pepper marketing, were transferred into a foundation.

Since the Forest Department, as a government agency, cannot act as a trader, a public-private-partnership with Casino Group and later Ecoland was arranged for three tribal areas. Natural Harvesting Ltd. was founded to handle the group certification, inspection and processing of the pepper and is a subsidiary company of the Casino Group, a family owned corporation, which operates among other things several luxurious tourist resorts in Kerala. One of the resorts is located close to the park entrance in Kumily and this is also where the office of Natural Harvesting Ltd. is located.

74 The list of products extracted includes: “honey, cardamom, *telli*, *channa* leaves, pepper, *vayana* bark fodder grass, fuel-wood, cane and reed”(Gurukkal 2003:15).

75 The observations were very similar to that of John in section 4.2.1.

The cooperation with the Forest Department was not the only project of the Casino Group with green aspirations: the resort in Kumily is advertised as especially ecofriendly and has organic parks, its own organic vegetable gardens and a natural sewage system. Also all the farms of the family are certified organic⁷⁶ (1507 G2-6:50).

Aside from some tribal inspectors, who carry out the internal inspections and look after the needs of the farmers, and some workers hired for the processing of the pepper, Natural Harvesting Ltd. basically consists of one manager, George.

He explained that they handled a volume of around 15-20 metric tons of pepper and processed it into black pepper, white pepper, green dehydrated pepper, or green pepper in brine. He also mentioned they marketed other spices as well.

The processing (sieving, cleaning, packaging, etc.) is carried out at a farm belonging to the Casino Group family, and George underlined that “all our processing is carried out manually. We are not using any machines because we also want to support the local people by giving them jobs. But we are losing some money actually.” He explained that machines would be cheaper and faster (1507 G2-25:22).

The other partner in the project is Ecoland, a German agency which markets the pepper in Germany. They pay a premium of 33 percent on the market price to the farmers⁷⁷ and buy the pepper from Natural Harvesting Ltd. at the net cost price i.e. they cover all costs for inspection, processing and export. So Natural Harvesting has no risk and in such a way it is also “not profit oriented”, as George stated (1507 G2-00:32).

Aside from that they also give donations for social projects and festivals. From George's statements it seemed Ecoland considered the project as much more than a business opportunity, but took up a general sponsorship: They visited the project regularly, talked with the tribal farmers and asked if they had problems or if they needed help or scientific assistance, and they also raised the premium on their own initiative (1507 G2-05:32).

It seemed that some frictions emerged, between the Forest Department and the Casino Group. The Forest Department wanted to renegotiate the arrangement and was critical about the way the Casino Group advertised the project in its resort.⁷⁸ In turn, George stressed that the project was mostly the work of Natural Harvesting.

It is interesting to look at why CDS Spice was not involved in the pepper marketing even

76 Some of the spices produced on these farms are also sold through the project, but according to George this was only 1-2 percent of the total volume (1507 G2-6:50).

77 The premium started at 25 percent, was raised to 30 percent and for the past two years it has been 33 percent.

78 An officer at the Forest Department put it as follows: “They make profit and use their little engagement as a kind of shield – and the tribal issue is a strong case” (FN 17.6.).

though it had the expertise. John (from CDS Central) explained that while CDS was interested, “the Forest Department wanted to do it by itself and avoid the NGOs in the area” (1206 J-39:20). He also mentioned some “personal things” and “some ego-clash”. However, a former CDS officer was in charge of organising the pepper marketing. He was still employed by Forest Department at the time of this research, to carry out a similar pepper-marketing project in a wildlife sanctuary reserve in the Munnar area.

CDS only promotes vermicomposting in the respective area and John mentioned that the cooperation with the Forest Department was not easy since the director changes every six months (ibid).

4.2.7.1 Different Approaches towards Spice-Marketing.

Looking at the different starting conditions, but also at the different decisions made in the two marketing initiatives, opens a field of possible options for spice marketing. Even though my insight into this project is far less extensive than that into CDS⁷⁹, three areas of divergence can be identified:

Firstly, in contrast to CDS Spice, a strong farmers' consortium for collective marketing was set up in the eco-development project prior to the certifying and marketing of organic pepper. Farmers were required to sell all their products at the yearly auction, which was broadly accepted as it was a large improvement over their experience with moneylenders. Today the pepper is still sold at auctions, where Natural Harvesting buys the products from their certified farmers and the Forest Department forwards the revenues to the bank accounts of the farmers.

Also, the extensive participatory microplanning workshops held at the beginning of the project lead to a very different relationship with the tribal farmers in terms of trust and participation.

Trust, participation and a good relationship are also matters of scale. Since the IQS inspectors of CDS Spice are responsible for a great number of farmers each, they have little time for each individual farmer. Although Natural Harvesting is much smaller, it employs a similar number of inspectors. Moreover, it operates within the tribal colony, which forms a rather self-contained community, and employs inspectors from the tribal community.

Secondly, the direct partnership with Ecoland and the guaranteed purchase lead to a very different financial situation for Natural Harvesting Ltd. Whereas CDS Spice felt the

⁷⁹ I could not carry out extensive interviews with the beneficiaries and survey their reaction to the fact that they were asked to close down their cardamom plots by Natural Harvesting

international competition for organic pepper, and had to keep an eye on costs, including the premium, Natural Harvesting seemed to have a much freer hand concerning the premium, the production process, as well as the sponsorship of social projects.

On the other hand, although George talked about expansion, the volume of the exported pepper was limited to the marketing capabilities of Ecoland alone, while CDS Spice's volume was far too big for one marketing agency.

Thirdly, the choice between manual labour and a high-tech factory was a politically charged issue in Kerala since unions often fought against replacement of manual workers by labour saving machines (see Heller 1999).

And finally it is also a question of quality. Thomas stressed that CDS Spice was advised by many of their partners abroad to ensure high quality production (F.N. 2.6.).

This choice depends on how the world market and the position of organic products in the current global food regime is evaluated.

Is it enough to be certified as organic or does one need to comply with quality and hygiene norms such as ISO 22000 or ISO 956 for black pepper? What quality is demanded by importers? And what technical level is required to achieve those standards?⁸⁰

Here understanding the character of the global food regime is of great importance. The term emphasises that global food chains are not only shaped by markets and business agents but also by food policy – by political decisions on trade regulations and, to an increasing amount, by quality standards and their execution through inspection and certification (see Atkins et al.:2001).

In contrast to the food regime before – the productionist food regime, which focused on the production of high volumes for the mass markets – at present the post-productionist food regime which has shaped global food chains since the 1980s diversifies into different directions. While large parts of the global food industry take mass production of food items to a new level (GMOs etc.) and cater for the needs of the masses, other parts of the industry diversify into high quality products for a (mostly western) elite, who is concerned about food safety. This segment is developed in the interplay of governments, certifying agencies and business agents (to a large extent transnational corporations) (ibid).

Organic standards are part of detailed high quality standards, demanded by the large retail

⁸⁰ Courville argues that “[a] further challenge to developing countries is the growing number of voluntary product standards that have the potential to become non-tariff barriers to developing country exports, particularly for smallholder producers. Such barriers include significant information and managerial demands, higher capital requirements and certification costs” (Courville 2006:208)

corporations, which enable them to exercise control on the production process from the farm to the food processing and marketing – in western countries and to an increasing extent in the South (ibid).

It is important to see that in this set-up organic products cater for a high quality market and are required to comply with high food standards as they are marketed in high quality retail lines of the large food retailing companies. This set-up is specifically shaped in neoliberal ways.⁸¹

Alternative marketing channels in which these standards do not play such a role are of course still existent (on the very micro level this might be Harry's ebay outlet) but large scale marketing requires quality certification from the beginning of the production chain to the shelves of the supermarkets.

These standards require a high technical level and are another obstacle for small-scale farmers who seek to market their products.

⁸¹ To understand the specifically neoliberal outline of organic production and marketing in the present food regime it can be contrasted to alternative initiatives. For example early fair trade initiatives understood their engagement with alternative agriculture and marketing explicitly as a “critique of world capitalism and unequal exchange and [... emphasised] the need to develop an entirely new economic order” (Fridell 2007:39). Thus Fair trading was not meant to be restricted to a western elite and the whims of the free market, but to regulate all market interactions, also the production and distribution for the mass market.

4.2.8 An Orientation on Organic by Default

In the discussions with Deepu we agreed that the crop loss of the farmers who used conventional inputs was much higher when they converted to organic than the loss of those who had been organic by default. I asked if CDS was more an organisation for people who came from organic by default and Deepu replied that it was so, adding: “that is easy. Otherwise it is not so easy. We cannot convince the farmers [who were conventional before] for the benefits of organic farming, it is not easy.” (0709 D2-19:21)

Sanju explained this point as follows:

In the history of organic farms, when it was not promoted as it is now [i.e. organic by default], the farmers who could not bear the cost of chemical inputs slowly turned to organic. So obviously those were the marginal farmers. So it is easy to convince the marginal farmers and bring them to organic.

And then also the marginal farmers are not as profit oriented as the bigger farmers. They are a little more into that ecofriendly aspect. [...] Bigger farmers will only come to organic if it brings profit. [...] Only when they get that they can be convinced to return to organic. (3105 S3-8:53)

As the quote shows, Sanju makes a clear distinction between 'marginal farmers' and 'bigger farmers' and attributes different economic strategies to each of them. Bigger farmers are 'profit oriented' and they have an entrepreneurial approach to farming, which involves the application of fertilizers. “They dump a lot of chemicals and want a lot of yield” (3105 S3-8:53).

Sanju depicts the marginal farmer as different, as 'less profit oriented' and 'more ecofriendly', and argues that the lack of capital resulted in little or no use of chemicals, which made them de-facto pioneers in organic farming. By using notions like 'less profit-oriented' and 'ecofriendly' he points to a different economic strategy, which will be analysed with reference to peasant studies in the next chapter.

What does the orientation on organic by default mean for the work of CDS? The collected material suggests that there is quite a difference in working with farmers who were de-facto organic before and those who come from conventional farming.

Organic by default farmers who had not used synthetic inputs before, and in many cases had also used organic methods like composting, experienced much less crop loss during conversion than farmers who had relied on synthetic inputs. Apart from minor investments into hygiene and protection from drift from neighbouring conventional fields, organic by default farmers did not have to change their production process, apart from the required additional documentation.

However, the transition from the weak category 'organic by default' to the hard category 'certified organic' is a difficult process. Organic by default farmers joining CDS Spice must be treated the same way as conventional farmers and gain little benefit from the fact that their plots are de-facto organic, since they cannot skip the conversion period of three years.

While Harry could prove to Indocert that his plots had been organic for a long period and after a long correspondence reached an agreement to skip the conversion process (FN 30.5.), it is very unlikely that CDS Spice finds a viable system to skip the conversion period for their organic by default farmers on a larger scale – especially if one considers the discussions CDS may face with other farmers claiming to be de-facto organic.

Concerning such a system Deepu noted, “if we reach the government officials, they might support it, [...] But, how can we believe the farmers? In our case we wait three years, then we are sure ” (0709/2 14:02).

From the perspective of the next generation of organic farmers like Joss and Harry, who try to market their products themselves, CDS' focus on organic by default farmers has implications for their own marketing initiatives. They argue that since the de-facto organic farmers experience fewer conversion costs, they will find it easier to convert and will be content with almost any premium they gain from certification, especially since certification is free of charge to them. In contrast, farmers who have used chemical fertilizers etc. will experience more crop loss and a more painful conversion period, and so a higher premium is needed to compensate for their smaller harvests.

From their perspective CDS exploits a niche by focusing on organic by default farmers. Since CDS can purchase at a lower premium⁸², it can increase its margin and still sell organic spice on the world market at competitive rates.

With no organic market available, projects targeting organic by default farmers may be beneficial for promoting the ideas of organic, but as soon as an organic market develops a new generation of marketing projects emerges, and conventional farmers can be motivated to enter the field, but only when organic farming proves profitable.

However, Harry argues that the lower premiums paid by CDS Spice may result in fewer farmers converting to organic.⁸³ To put it in Harry's words: “what kind of social project is that when in the end the farmers have to pay?”(FN 18.6.).

To them the danger is that when organic farming is not profitable it remains a luxury and demands ecofriendly idealism. One day, when I met some of the farmers of Joss' group, I

⁸² See above 4.2.6

⁸³ If one follows this logic the solutions would be simple. The organic premium for organic by default farmers needs to be should be raised to the same level that converting conventional farmers need to compensate for their yield loss.

asked whether all of them were organic. They laughed a little embarrassed and pointed at one of them. "He is on temporary leave from organic." they said and he gave the following excuse: „my children have to go to college and I have to pay the fees ... but then I will join the group again." (FN 11.6.)

CDS officers generally didn't perceive CDS Spice as a competitor in the local organic market. Most CDS officers believed CDS was the only marketing organisation for organic spices, and consequently that there was no local organic market. Only Deepu and a few other officers saw competition arising in the future - for products as well as for farmers. (0906 D1-16:22)

Chapter 5 Conclusion

Throughout my fieldwork I had problems classifying the farmers. Their plots were relatively small but compared to other farmers in India they were much wealthier and all of them could send their kids to colleges.

However, the term organic by default proved to be very useful as it allowed me to understand the strategies of the organic farmers as well as the policies of CDS within the framework of peasant studies. As I will show in the next few sections, the term organic by default can be understood as an important peasant strategy of distantiation in reference to van der Ploeg (2010).

5.1 Are these Farmers Peasants?

Theorists of peasant studies set out to describe smallholders and looked for similarities among them. For a start one important orientation for the term was that 'peasant' was used in juxtaposition with 'farmer'.⁸⁴

„farmers, or agricultural entrepreneurs [... who run] primarily a business enterprise combining factors of production purchased in a market to obtain a profit by selling advantageously in a product market. The peasant, however, does not operate an enterprise in the economic sense; he runs a household, not a business concern.”
(Wolf 1966:2)

Looking at the obvious diversity of this huge category, which constitutes a large portion of the world population⁸⁵ and has large internal stratifications, it comes as no surprise that academics debated for several decades on whether peasants as a generic category exist, if such a category bears any analytical benefit, and also what properties they share (see Shanin 1990).⁸⁶

While highlighting that “a peasant' does not exist in any immediate and strictly specific sense” (p.51) Shanin finds a wide range of shared similarities of peasants around the globe, which distinguish them from other social categories. For example, in the economic dimension peasants share a “distinctive blend of extensive self-employment (i.e. family labour), control of own means of production, consumption of produce and multidimensional occupational expertise” (p.52).

84 Apart from situations where a specific 'peasant-ness' is pointed out the terms 'farmer' and 'peasant' are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

85 One estimate is 2,6 billion in 2010 (van der Ploeg 2010:20, n.33).

86 Generally speaking there are two camps in this controversy: peasant study proponents who argue in favour of the category 'peasants' because of characteristics peasants share (see van der Ploeg (2010) as discussed below). However the broad category 'peasants' is too ambiguous to be useful in class analyses and studies of class formation as the Marxist camp argues. Their interests are on the peasant's role in capitalist formation (either “as passive fodder within 'primitive accumulation'” in the “prehistory of capitalism” as Shanin remarks polemically (1990:69) or as an impediment for both communist and capitalist transformation that surprisingly does not disappear (see p.55, 57f, Harris 2005:425)) or Marxist discussions circulated around whether peasants share class interests, a class consciousness and ultimately the potential for class struggle or why they don't (for India see e.g. Das 2001 or Brass 1995).

Shanin further states that also their economies are deeply rooted in the ecosystem, and “planning of production and calculation of performance differ consistently from those of capitalist enterprise” (ibid). Peasants are often subject to poverty and oppression, but have their specific ways to deal with such situations – e.g. limiting consumption and self-exploitation (i.e. increase of labour)(ibid). Their general politically or economically subordinate position is exploited through similar ways of surplus extraction, which are different from wage labour relations (p.53).

But also in other dimensions Shanin finds important similarities, such as internal stratifications and exploitation among peasants, similar patterns of political organisation, similarities of conformist and traditional norms, the household-based social organisation and social reproduction (p.53f).

He concludes that the concept of peasant is not useful in itself but only when it offers insights that can explain a specific behaviour rooted in peasant-ness. He states “peasants are a mystification; the problem is when, how and when not” (p.73). One important characteristic is the 'inbetweenness' of peasants, as they have to balance the demands from outside with the consumption needs of their households, which Wolf calls “ the peasant dilemma” (Wolf 1966:15).

Newer theorists highlight the various economic activities and the enormous flexibility peasants display when moving between market and subsistence spheres to keep their autonomy. Harris, for example, shows how, depending on the opportunities, Amazonian peasants move into – or out of – market relations. “There may be multiple income-generating and subsistence activities taking place in one household, which involve them in different class relations” (Harris 2005:426). He argues further:

[W]hen peasants get a good return for their products, their economy will expand and the focus of economic activities will tend to narrow down to producing one product [in Harris' case jute cultivation and fishing]. However when the market of the central product declines, their economy will contract and they will return to a more diverse exploitation of economic options. In other words the weaker the market opportunities for peasants the stronger their internal, non-market relations have to be.” (Harris 2005:434)

Harris also stresses the varying success of these strategies, which leaves some peasants better off than others, and the role of family labour and consumption (p.35).

To include all these economic strategies Kearney argues that the term 'peasant' is not enough but introduces the term 'polybian' to encompass the diverse economic relations smallholders (and their household) face in a globalised world (in his case Mexican farmers migrating to the US): different forms of on-farm activities and petty commodity production, but also transnational (illegal) migration etc. He argues that in these complex relationships

the polybians find themselves most often in subordinate relationships and diverse ways of surplus extraction but also find ways of resistance (Kearney 1996).

Van der Ploeg uses various concepts from peasants studies to make sense of the present situation of peasants in a globalised world and also incorporates nature as the base of farming and multifunctionality into his analyses. He argues that global capitalism and the corporate food regime pushes farmers out of the modernised agriculture into peasant-like diverse economic strategies. Following this he does not see peasants disappearing, but, on the contrary, re-emerging and increasing in numbers (van der Ploeg 2010:2).

With reference to Shanin, van der Ploeg argues that peasantry is a 'process' that "is constantly being reshaped" (p.2) and that in the last decades this reshaping was mostly done by agrarian modernisation,⁸⁷ which "not only excludes the majority of the farmers, but [...], in the end, it also tends to destroy those farmers who have followed the modernisation script and converted themselves into agrarian entrepreneurs" (ibid). Following this script has become unattractive, if not financially impossible for farmers, since "relatively small scale, peasant-like farms are generating incomes that are often superior to those of far larger, entrepreneurial farms" (ibid).

In a similar argument to that of Harris above, van der Ploeg argues that farmers actively reduce their market involvement and shape agriculture in peasant like ways, both in developed and developing countries. Based on peasant studies he describes this process in six avenues and grounds his arguments on empirical data around the globe (p.2f).

Van der Ploeg's work is cited here because it offers a good framework to discuss the farmers strategies and as well as the policies of CDS.

1.) From land to ecological capital

While the possession of land was central for peasants' livelihoods earlier (and connected to many other necessary resources: animals, crops, water, irrigation structures), van der Ploeg argues that during modernisation it became a commodity and the main collateral for credit. "Land ceased to be the bastion of autonomy" but instead "tied the farmers to exogenous and often more powerful interests" (p.4).

During modernisation synthetic fertilizers and globally traded animal fodder decreased the importance of land for production and reduced agriculture "to a mere conversion of commodities into other commodities"(ibid).

However as peasant struggles for land and 'land-grabbing' indicate, land is

⁸⁷ 'Agrarian modernisation' means here "continued scale enlargement, specialisation, intensification based on increased input use, introduction of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), internationalisation of regulatory schemes" (van der Ploeg 2010:2).

important, but re-emerges today as ecological capital, as unpoisoned land with an intact ecosystem, that needs to be cared for. “The interaction with nature is not unimportant [since] the more that farming is grounded in ecological capital the lower the monetary costs of production will be” (ibid) and this is also reflected in productivity and income. Van der Ploeg stresses that the active choice by the farmers to care for land is a new element, and is not restricted to organic farming (p.5).

Van der Ploeg argues that peasant cultivation based on ecological capital also leads to “a reconstruction of local knowledge (and the associated networks)” and “also helps to differentiate the new peasants from agrarian entrepreneurs” as the latter replace “natural growth factors [...] by artificial growth factors obtained on the market”(ibid).

2.) From subsistence to self-provisioning

Self-provisioning is another way to regain autonomy for farmers. However, van der Ploeg argues that today this trend is not so significant in the consumption sphere (subsistence-orientation), as older peasant theorists observed, but in the production sphere as input substitution (p.6).

The emergence of the “corporatist food regime” in the 1980s “led to a considerable sharpening of the 'squeeze on agriculture” (ibid). As a response the farmers used self-provisioning as a way of “reducing dependency on external resources while simultaneously enlarging and improving the stock of internal resources, including ecological capital” (ibid).

Van der Ploeg argues that neoclassical economics “help to obscure such strategic differences” and notes that this strategy is referred to in the South as 'low external input agriculture' (ibid).

[The resulting cost-reduction is] diametrically opposed to the entrepreneurial script (in which cost reduction is a function of scale increase). Self-provisioning [...] reduces monetary cost while overall levels of production are maintained or even slightly improved. (p.6)

Self-provisioning also has a symbolic value as farmers look at “their own craftsmanship [as] superior to the artefacts and recipes offered by agribusiness” (p.7).

According to van der Ploeg self-provisioning should be seen as one important circuit of reproduction, but also part-time wage labour (pluriactivity) and diversification of on-farm economic strategies (multifunctionality) play important roles in the reproduction.

For some farming families pluriactivity offers the possibility to combine the best of two worlds [...], for others it is a means to 'getting started' [...] and for yet another group it allows them to continue farming in a relatively autonomous way. (p.8)

Van der Ploeg argues that multifunctionality includes activities connected to agriculture and value addition, like “high quality production, on-farm processing, direct selling, etc.” (p.8) or newly added non-agriculture activities like “energy production, agro-tourism, nature management, etc.” (ibid). However, multifunctionality doesn't mean “making a mere addition. It involves using one and the same set of resources to provide an *enlarged* set of products and services” (emphasis original, p.8, n.12).

Van der Ploeg notes that many farmers in developed countries and developing countries engage in several circuits of reproduction, but is also aware of that these strategies where they are done out of necessity “to avoid becoming even more impoverished” can include massive self-exploitation (p.7, 9).

3.) From partial integration to actively constructed distantiation

Van der Ploeg stresses that in both developing and developed countries, farmers are involved with markets that are far from free or undistorted and are governed by large corporations. However, the extent of integration into these markets varies considerably from farmer to farmer, within regions, countries, continents and also time. Ploeg argues that “there are many different mechanisms that farmers can use to govern, adapt, and change the balance of commodity and non-commodity relations” (p.11). Many of the strategies discussed above contribute to an active distantiation from up-stream markets, but, especially in relation to sophisticated equipment and machines, pooling and repairing must be interpreted as important strategies (p.9ff).

4.) From fixed regularities and routine to dynamic co-production

For van der Ploeg the arguments above also lead to a new arrangement with nature. While “the modernisation paradigm [...] sees agriculture as the application of physical and economic laws, which feed into the design of new resources, that embody new and optimised use of these laws”(p.13) the new arrangements with nature can be characterised as “[g]rowing (as a co-activity of humans and nature)” (ibid) or as co-production - “the ongoing combination, interaction, and mutual transformation of social and material resources which constantly differentiates and transforms agriculture” (ibid).

Ploeg stresses that this shift also has far reaching consequences on a theoretical level as farming cannot be understood as working within fixed regularities precisely

definable in a “Cartesian space” but must be reinterpreted as practice characterised by specific social, historical and ecological conditions (p.14).

5.) **From subordination to multiple resistance**

The subordinate position of the farmers was pointed out by many theorists and so were their efforts of resistance. Van der Ploeg argues that today farmers' resistance takes not only forms 'outside' or 'at the margins' of work – “open” (as demonstrations, strikes etc.) or “covert” (as described by Scott 1985) – but also within work (p.15f). A multitude of resistance is reframed as practice and everyday politics, which question “the techno-institutional structure of labour and production processes” as a whole and not just unfavourable exchange relations (ibid).

Van der Ploeg in his conclusion writes that “peasantries [...] should be conceptualized and understood in terms of resistance [...] [but] in a *relational* perspective”(emphasis original, p.21) which include:

(1) the construction of autonomy in order to resist subordination, dependency and deprivation;

(2) the creation, reproduction and development of a self-controlled resource base that allows for co-production;

(3) the multiple interactions with downstream markets that aim to secure survival and which facilitate reproduction of the resource base. [...]

Resistance and the search for autonomy are evident in the types of cattle that are bred [...], the varieties that are sown [...], the cropping patterns that are designed [...], the technology that is chosen [...], the grasslands that are created [...], and the knowledge and skills that are developed. (p.22)

6.) **From community to extended networks and new marketplaces**

While the communal character of the market (as in marketplace) has diminished, agricultural products are dominantly traded on deregulated global food markets, which are governed by food empires, that strategically control ever larger parts of the “*interrelations* between the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food.”(emphasis original, p.18)

However, according to van der Ploeg, the re-emerging alternatives – local marketplaces (e.g farmers' markets) and new food networks⁸⁸ – are based on new forms of community which are based on shared values, and contribute to a relative autonomy of farmers. This autonomy also demands the “re-integration of skills and competences (such as the arts of processing and marketing) that have been externalised to (if not appropriated by) middlemen, agro-industries, supermarkets

⁸⁸ When van der Ploeg writes about 'new food networks' it seems he does not refer to organic or fairtrade initiatives as they can be easily incorporated in the food empires, but forms of direct marketing and regional networking, not made for export markets (van der Ploeg 2010:18f).

and, later, the large food empires”(p.19).

Van der Ploeg concludes that processes discussed above all have important implications for the level of commoditisation, or in his words they are “reshuffling the balance of commodity and non-commodity relations” (ibid).

“Farm units are actively pursuing de-commoditisation on the upstream side, while a seemingly opposite tendency is observable on the downstream side where [...] non-commodities, such as hospitality, nature, landscape, local provisioning and care, [are] being turned into commodities (p.19).

This seems contradictory at first, but allows farmers to increase autonomy: “the more the farm is distantiated from the large upstream markets the larger the room for manoeuvre to construct the new alternatives on the downstream side” (p.20). In contrast to that entrepreneurial farms are “increasingly dependent on upstream supplies and downstream demands” (Shanin 1974:189 quoted in van der Ploeg 2010:21, n.37).

When comparing the collected material to van der Ploeg's analyses many similarities with the farmers emerge.

Ecological capital does indeed re-emerge as an important factor in the cardamom hills since land productivity has become an important issue because after decades of overuse of synthetic inputs many plots have become poisonous, eroded, and incidences of cancer among farmers rose.

The organic farmers portrayed in this paper 'care' for their land, their rhetorics indicate an ethic of co-production and they deploy measures to actively build ecological-capital (Sebastian's drainage system is a good example). They also try to develop new locally adequate knowledge and engage in networks associated with this.

Many farmers engaged in various forms of self-provisioning. All the farmers in this paper had small vegetable gardens with crops for self-consumption.

In the production sphere for example, Harry and Mutupathi used biogas to reduce their dependency on bottled propane gas. Vermicomposting also fits into this category (both techniques are promoted by CDS).

Furthermore, the way Sebastian renovated his house is a good example of self-provisioning, as he did as much as he could himself, and was very wary of what he bought from outside. He was also able to self-exploitingly dedicate large amount of work to that project and could also rely on his family, which however was limited by its size and the fact that his only son worked six days a week.

Sebastian's ventures into tourism are also a good example of multifunctionality, as they fetched additional income from the same resources base, even though this resource base was partly altered to match the taste of tourists, as I have argued above.

Throughout the portraits of the farmers I have stressed the diverse ways farmers employ diverse economic strategies: on-farm activities related to agriculture such as value addition (e.g. pepper or vanilla curing), direct marketing (Harry's ebay account); on-farm activities not related to agriculture (tourism, homestay, wood trading, etc.); or activities outside the farm (e.g. Mutupathi's CDS representative work and other similar part time occupations). However many of these activities are very well paid or involve extensive capital investments which makes them rather difficult to compare to the examples stated above (e.g. Kearney's Mexican migrants working on large US farms).

The decision of farmers to become organic by default or get certified organic can be interpreted as an actively constructed distantiation, as they refuse the use of synthetic inputs, which, in the absence of large machinery because of the terrain, are the main investments in agriculture and also the most important points of interaction with agroindustrial corporations.

The farmers also engaged in extended networks as defined by van der Ploeg. Joss' group and Harry's coffee project could be interpreted as such local networks, but local face-to-face marketing opportunities for alternative products were scarce and only Joss managed to sell products like fruits and rice to an organic farmers' market.⁸⁹

5.2 Or are they entrepreneurial Settler-Farmers?

There are several characteristics of the farmers in this paper that do not fit in the peasant typical framework.

On the one hand the orientation towards the household is limited, both as a source of labour and in terms of long term reproduction.

While family labour is usually of great importance to peasants, the fact that, for my examples of farmers the new generation seeks higher education and white-collar jobs limits their engagement in farm work. Instead labour that exceeds the capacity of the farmer (and his wife) is instead carried out by hired workers which makes farming more entrepreneurial

⁸⁹ Organic marketing channels are of course important for the farmers in this paper, but there is nothing specifically peasant about them per se, because organic marketing is easily incorporated by food empires. Van der Ploeg points out that extended networks and alternative marketplaces “offer a range of qualities that are difficult for food empires to meet (at least in a non-virtual way)” which often includes “direct social contacts, since peasant marketplaces are meeting points where producers of food and consumers meet face to face”(2010:19). From a commoditisation perspective organic marketing through certificates is part of the corporate realm and seems less useful for characterizing peasantry.

and also enables older people to run farms as a retirement activity.

The move to white collar jobs and the frequent out-migration of the next generation also has implications for the long-term reproduction of the farm household. Farmers are often comparatively well-endowed, have middle class aspirations and eventually may sell their land as their children have other, often very rewarding, incomes (see Mutupathi, but also the fluctuation of farmers in CDS Spice). This tendency is also connected to rising land prices.

On the other hand their economic strategies also have rather entrepreneurial elements.

Farmers in the area are generally cash-crop oriented and often rely on large amounts of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, which makes farming rather capital intensive (e.g. Joss' group and Renju before conversion). They are well aware of market development and shift quickly between cash crops according to market perspectives. There is also a relatively strong broker attitude in the way they gamble on prices for their products on the stock market, and a reluctance to accept fixed price arrangements (as, for example, proposed in Harry's coffee project).

Also on the upstream side, observations of resistance, distantiation and input substitution must be reflected. Since, for example, many of the farmers in Joss' group converted from conventional farming for health and environmental reasons and not so much for reasons of distantiation, it is not implausible that some of them would purchase condensed organic inputs, as marketed for example by Plantrich, if they proved useful.

Even though Münster analyses Wayanad, a hill district in northern Kerala that differs in various ways,⁹⁰ several aspects can also be applied to the farmers in this paper because of the strong position of Syrian Christians in both districts.

Münster is critical about the use of the term 'peasants' in the context of Wayanad and argues that "[s]implified notions of 'peasants' and 'tenants' obfuscated" the history of the area, a history of "plunder and accumulation by dispossession at Kerala's forest frontier by an emergent class of capitalist producers" (Münster 2011:2). Instead he argues that analysing the history as "the formation of a class of capitalist cultivators counterweighs the implicit romanticizing and homogenization of the plight of 'the' Indian 'farmer' or 'peasant'" (p.6).

[In the beginning of the internal colonisation, they] were a peculiar type of cultivators, more like "rural entrepreneurs" who Eric Wolf differentiates from "peasants". The latter are, according to Wolf, owner-cultivators oriented towards

90 Wayanad is a hill district in northern Kerala. The tribal population forms larger part of the population in Wayanad and also constitute a large segment of agricultural labour force (Münster et al. 2011:12f) which makes the historic dispossession a bigger issue. In Idukki the tribal population is smaller and the farmers I talked to employed other groups on their farms (e.g. Tamils). Also the character of the tourism in Wayanad is largely targeted towards domestic new rich groups from urban centers which has important implications including higher prices on the real estate market.

subsistence, while "rural entrepreneurs" are producing cash-crops, hence commodities for capital accumulation. (ibid)

The (ecological) possibilities for capital accumulation even for small holders laid the ground for a speculative and capital oriented agriculture during the 1980s and 90s. [...] It is a form of production that does not centre on the family farm and its reproduction through long term cropping strategies but is in its extreme form directed towards a fast realisation of profits, (often shared) venture capital investments, flexible choice of crops informed by speculations of future prices, investments made on the basis of credits (formal and informal) anticipating good yields and prices, and an utter disregard for sustainability in its overuse of chemical input. (p.4)

Münster argues that the prosperity gained in these operations lead to a social ascent into middle class, diversification of economic strategies and high levels of education in the next generation,⁹¹ which is very similar to what could be said of the farmers in this paper. Münster makes reference to Morrison, who understands this process as the "embourgeoisment of the Kerala Farmer":

[The emergence] a new capitalist rural class, owning land used to raise money to invest in off-farm income-earning, investing in the education of children, converting fields to low labour crops and being oriented away from the local community towards developments in major cities. (Münster 2011:20)

To a great extent, this can be considered "post-agrarian" as many "diversify into non-agrarian investment possibilities like used car sales, or real estate brokerage/speculation"(p.4), but it also influences farming methods as it reshapes agriculture in neoliberal ways: "Certified organic production, with its complex navigation of international standards and markets; new technologies in so called "future farming", shareholder investments in ginger; short term cropping of annual cash crops (banana, tapioca, ginger) according to anticipated (world) market prices" (p.20f).

On a household level this diversification is even stronger, as "Mature children and wives are increasingly engaged in non-agricultural careers" and leads to a situation in which many "Christian spice traders, car dealers, real estate agents, tourist guides, NGO workers have also retained some agricultural land but find it difficult to recruit labourers for cultivation."(p.20)

This class of entrepreneurial small holders has today strong aspirations towards what might be called a post-agrarian middle class, economically partially rooted in cash-crop agriculture but envisioning (at least for the next generation) mobility to neoliberal consumer citizenship. (Münster 2011:4)

To the second and third generations of settler colonizers, agriculture is seamlessly integrated into other aspects of the new economic order in India: consumerism, new urban middle classes, tourism, real estate markets, privatization of education. (Münster 2011:21)

91 "[T]he younger generation is eager to leave agriculture for any kind of urban employment. For the second and third generation of Syrian Christians in Wayanad social mobility is exclusively aspired through education, preferably with College degrees from Tamil Nadu or Karnataka. International migration to Europe or the US (as nurses) is the goal for the younger generation" (p.19f).

Münster stresses that although the specific manifestations of these forms of neoliberal agriculture are related to market liberalisation of the 1990s and recent political trends, they are congruent with the history of the Syrian Christian settlers. Features like entrepreneurship, risk-taking and capital-intensive cash-crop cultivation can be traced back to their emergence after colonial land reforms in the mid 19th century and their colonisation of the forest area (see 2.2.1). Although he notes that there was a period of “re-peasantisation” during the encroachment era, when the settler-farmers faced insecurity of tenure rights and often material scarcity and as a result farmers cultivated for their subsistence needs (paddy and tapioca) and only cultivated annual crops, there are strong continuities for entrepreneurial cash-crop cultivation.

In the 1970s, the majority of the settlers shifted to perennial cash crops such as coffee and pepper. [...] During the 1980s, with the advent of "green revolution" inputs migrant cultivators transformed agriculture into an intensive, market oriented, chemicalized and speculative enterprise. Lured by the prospect of fast accumulation, and due to sheer ignorance about the dangers of chemical fertiliser and pesticides, many indiscriminately overused chemical inputs. The consequences of these new practices were Micro nutrient deficiency, soil erosion, micro climate change and new fungal diseases. By the end of the 1990s, the boom in Wayanad's cash crops came to a sudden halt, with the simultaneous crash in world market prices for Hill Produce and a sharp decline in productivity (due to diseases and infertile soil). (p.18)

Despite better prices, agriculture is now in a gloomy state. The production is low, and the costs of cultivation – especially labour costs – are high. (p.19) Pepper, once the glory of Wayanad, has almost completely vanished. (p.18)

Münster writes that farmers moved intensive farming to unspoilt tracts in Karnataka, where they lease land often for a one time ginger cultivation with immense (often shared) capital investment and astronomical returns in good years. On the other hand, especially smaller farmers turn to more extensive agricultural practices and “for lack of labour and capital, many now shift to areca palm, coconut palms and rubber: crops that are least labour intensive, least risky and yield a steady income (p.19).”

Münster concludes that the specific history of internal migration of the settler-farmers “intensified and accelerated the classical processes of the "Great Transformation" in Wayanad: The commoditization of land and labour and capital” (p.4) (See Polanyi 1944).

In recent years the changes in these markets had dramatic effects. On the one hand real-estate prices have dramatically increased in Wayanad with the result that selling the land is attractive to farmers and expansion of agriculture on new land is almost impossible (p.19).

On the other hand, labour is scarce as the “younger generation of labourers are equally seeking employment outside of agriculture” and “the personal connections needed to recruit rural labour, especially Adivasi labour [...] are] difficult to maintain.” (p.20)

Münster's description of the situation in Wayanad has some obvious parallels to the organic farmers in Idukki portrayed in this paper. Recent developments might have affected them less extremely, but the basic direction of embourgeoisment, that is, the social ascent into middle-class at least for the next generation is similar for several farmers (e.g. Joss' group).

Other farmers, like Sebastian and Renju, are less successful in gaining wealth. For them, middle-class fantasies remain difficult to realise.

Their resource base today depends on the extent to which their forefathers were successful in land acquisition (through grants, purchases or encroachments) during the encroachment era.⁹²

The plot size is of course important, but since in spice cultivation even small plots can bring considerable yields when cultivated intensively (at least for some years) the way farmers cultivate their land – with or without heavy capital investments in external inputs - is similarly important.

Sanju refers to the different farming strategies as 'bigger', 'profit-oriented' versus 'smaller', 'more ecofriendly' farmers (section 4.2.8), but a better indicator than the plot size might be their orientation towards organic by default. For the farmers in this paper, organic by default indicates not only that they don't employ highly capital intensive chemical inputs (distantiation) but also, that their farming economies rely on building up ecological capital. The significance of building ecological capital (not only distantiation) shows when farmers don't use chemical inputs even if they receive them free of costs.

Even for slightly bigger farmers like Joseph the improvement of ecological capital is important as can be seen in his experiments with fallow periods (which is not a common practice in the area).

Peasant strategies as described by van der Ploeg are not strictly limited by class boundaries, and (organic) middle class farmers also engage in forms of pluriactivity, multifunctionality, distantiation, self-provisioning and the building of ecological knowledge (to the extent of their organic aspirations).

Even though Münster speaks of an entrepreneurial class, they remain flexible to move into - and out of – subsistence activities.⁹³ At present, the importance of land for cultivation declines, especially for the younger generation, but to the extent to which farmers keep their land they keep the possibility of 're-peasantiation'.

92 Münster notes: "Emergent class differences between the settlers depended on their initial capital they were able to raise from Travancore, but further fortune was also determined by the time of arrival (the most fertile plots were taken first), the size of the family (family labour and the ability to defend claims) and the legal status of the property (security of tenure). (Münster 2011:14)

93 See Harris (2005), as discussed above.

5.3 Peasant Policies and Notions of Critique

It is interesting to note how well CDS's policy matches van der Ploeg's arguments. In this light, CDS institutionally promotes peasant strategies.

Both, CDS Spice's and CDS Central's policies largely target the creation and care for ecological capital and the dynamic co-production with nature – on an ideological level translated into Christian notions of preserving God's creation but also through practical interventions via watershed development, organic agriculture and the promotion of local knowledge and innovation. Via organic cultivation (oriented towards low external input agriculture and organic by default farmers) CDS also promotes self-provisioning and independence from synthetic inputs (active distantiation). But self-provisioning is also encouraged by CDS Central on smaller levels, for example, through organic vegetable- and medicinal gardens at home.⁹⁴ The diverse occupational trainings actively promote pluriactivity and multifunctionality (e.g. knitting, food supplements, petty shops, home stays for tourists), which is also aided with starting capital via micro-credit programmes. Women in SHGs are also encouraged to run small organic farmers' shops, which very much resemble van der Ploeg's definitions of extended networks.

Similar to van der Ploeg, CDS understands this process as multidimensional which in all dimensions aims at enlarging their clients' autonomy via upstream de-commodification and downstream commoditisation. When the CDS president sketches an 'organic lifestyle', he is sketching a new peasant lifestyle, as laid out by van der Ploeg.

However, the dilemma CDS faces when applying peasant strategies on a large scale institutional basis surfaces when CDS institutionalises not only the promotion of such strategies but directly intervenes in the peasant economy on an institutional basis.

For example, the development of biocontrol agents in the biotechnology lab can be interpreted as an institutional high-tech version of 'actively constructed distantiation' from agrochemical inputs as defined by van der Ploeg, and CDS officers treated their research efforts largely as a kind of working on self-provisioning with the peasant community. But farmers (e.g. Renju) contested this self-representation in their critique as they didn't think they could afford these inputs once they were available and pointed out that CDS was not part of a peasant community but as an NGO, related to them through business interactions.

Also the marketing project of CDS Spice can be understood as an attempt to institutionalise the new peasants' extended networks. The officers of CDS Spice had the self-representation of working with peasants (and in their interest) and aiding them to market

⁹⁴ However in contrast to van der Ploeg, who mostly discusses self-provisioning in the production sphere, CDS also strongly targets the consumption sphere and subsistence.

their products in a global alternative agricultural food network. But this glossed over class relations, over different interests, and at times it suppressed conflicts. CDS Spice and the farmers were situated in very different points of the economic structure of production and distribution (producers versus a processor and trader) as Renju criticised.

CDS Spice did not consider itself as market actor in relation to the farmers but as merely collecting organic products and marketing them on a competitive global market, but as the criticism of farmers involved with pepper-marketing themselves (Joss and Harry) highlighted, CDS Spice was acting on the local market as a competitor, which potentially endangered their own ventures.

To a large extent, the criticism of the farmers can be interpreted through the question of whether the farmers are peasants or agrarian entrepreneurs. On the one hand, bigger entrepreneurial farmers criticise that CDS neglects the business character of their farming operations.⁹⁵ On the other hand, small farmers concerned with peasant autonomy insult CDS Spice as 'only doing business' (see Renju 3.3.2). Renju was concerned about the fact that CDS was not a cooperative owned by farmers and that he wouldn't be able to afford CDS's biocontrol agents, once they were available.

The criticism of the larger farmers was presented in various sections throughout this paper (Joss and Harry) and most often it targeted aspects of CDS Spice which collide with the entrepreneurial character of the farmers.

For example, the procurement system, as discussed in section 4.2.4, does not accommodate the 'broker attitude' of the farmers.

Or the few critical remarks of Mutuphati point to the fact that organic low-external-input-agriculture or self-provisioning as promoted by CDS increases labour efforts because organic inputs, like manure, are more labour intensive in their application. This has very different implications for those farmers who rely on their own workforce and that of their families and those farmers who employ agricultural workers, like Mutuphati, which is clearly reflected in higher costs.

Similarly, Joss' criticism of a lack of intransparency targeted not only CDS Spice's internal finances, but he also rejected CDS Spice's offer to the farmers (no entrance fee, free agricultural inputs, lower premium) as patronising as it was hiding the actual costs and he argued he could do it in a better way.

And finally the farmers often criticised that the appraisal of organic farming, especially for

⁹⁵ Some aspects of CDS's programme was beneficial for bigger entrepreneurial farmers, e.g. biocontrol agents, but these aspects were not criticised by the bigger farmers.

farmers coming from conventional practices, must include the crop-loss farmers experience. Especially Joss and Harry claimed that the premium paid by CDS did not compensate for that and made organic farming unattractive for conventional farmers.⁹⁶

However the critique of Joss and Harry must be interpreted as that of bigger middle-class farmers, who have rather different needs than smaller farmers. What collides with the entrepreneurial strategies of bigger farmers is a very beneficial offer for smaller farmers, who happily outsource marketing.

CDS Spice's target groups are small-scale farmers, and CDS Spice's work is important for them as it generates additional income for them with few extra investments especially for those who are already organic by default.

Before the foundation of CDS Spice, farmers had no possibility of accessing premium markets overseas, and other agencies entered the field only much later. The process of this appropriation of global organic ideas and paradigms allowed the farmers to articulate their position and identities in relation to global knowledge (see Kearney 1996).

⁹⁶ While they reflected organic farming in many arguments on an environmental and ethical basis, they stressed that organic farming and marketing should also be designed in a way that is profitable and superior to conventional in the economic dimension. It is interesting to compare these notions to Sebastian's motivation for being organic, since he accepts a lower income compared to his brothers. The comparison points to rather different attitudes towards profitability.

List of Interviews

Throughout this paper quotes from interviews have signatures, which start with a four digit code referring to the date in 2008, followed by an abbreviation for the Informant and the number of the interview-file, and end with the time of the quote in the interview-file.

Interviews in Malayalam were carried out with a translator and later transcribed and translated by another assistant. Interviews in German were translated by myself.

Date	Code	Informant	Location	Language	Duration
14.03.2008	1403 C1	CDS Regional Officer	Regional Office	English	00:17:03
14.03.2008	1403 C2	CDS Regional Officer	Regional Office	English	00:21:01
14.03.2008	1403 C3	CDS Regional Officer	Regional Office	English	00:01:29
16.03.2008	1603 S1	Sebastian	Farm	English	00:04:16
16.03.2008	1603 S2	Sebastian	Farm	English	00:42:16
16.03.2008	1603 S3	Sebastian	Farm	English	00:15:53
16.03.2008	1603 S4	Sebastian	Farm	English	00:04:48
18.03.2008	1803 H1	CDS President	CDS Central	English	00:18:31
18.03.2008	1803 H2	CDS President	CDS Central	English	00:36:08
18.03.2008	1803 H3	CDS President	CDS Central	English	00:00:19
18.03.2008	1803 H4	CDS President	CDS Central	English	00:06:03
26.03.2008	2603 S1	Sanju	CDS Central	English	00:17:58
26.03.2008	2603 S2	Sanju	CDS Central	English	00:33:29
27.03.2008	2703 S1	Sanju	CDS Training Centre	English	00:14:39
27.03.2008	2703 S2	Sanju	CDS Training Centre	English	00:10:24
27.03.2008	2703 S3	Sanju	CDS Training Centre	English	00:01:33
22.05.2008	2205 V1	Tourist Guide	Tourist Office	English	00:08:02
22.05.2008	2205 V2	Tourist Guide	Tourist Office	English	00:04:44
26.05.2008	2605 K1	Agricultural Officer	Kumily Panchayat Krishin Bhavan	English	00:30:00
26.05.2008	2605 A1	Abraham	Farm	English	00:14:38
26.05.2008	2605 A2	Abraham	Farm	English	00:39:30
26.05.2008	2605 A3	Abraham	Farm	English	00:28:31
30.05.2008	3005 H1	Harry	Farm	German	00:28:02
30.05.2008	3005 H2	Harry	Farm	German	00:05:29
30.05.2008	3005 H3	Harry	Farm	German	00:40:29
31.05.2008	3105 S1	Sanju	CDS Central	English	00:14:06
31.05.2008	3105 S2	Sanju	CDS Central	English	00:03:39
31.05.2008	3105 S3	Sanju	CDS Central	English	00:28:27
07.06.2008	0706 J1	Joss	Farm	Malayalam	01:05:40

07.06.2008	0706 J2	Joss	Farm	Malayalam	00:58:41
09.06.2008	0906 D1	Deepu	CDS Regional Office	English	01:22:38
09.06.2008	0906 D2	Deepu	CDS Regional Office	English	00:00:53
09.06.2008	0906 D3	Deepu	CDS Regional Office	English	00:14:44
11.06.2008	0906 M	Mutupathi	Farm	English	01:39:48
11.06.2008	1106 G1	George	Spice Village	English	00:56:45
12.06.2008	1206 J1	John	CDS Central	English	01:11:03
12.06.2008	1206 R1	IQS-Inspector	CDS Spice	English	00:10:16
16.06.2008	1606 J1	Joseph	Farm	English	01:05:49
16.06.2008	1606 J2	Joseph	Farm	English	00:29:39
18.06.2008	1806 B1	IQS-Inspector	CDS Regional Office	English	00:49:45
04.07.2008	0407 B1	Lacon Officer	Lacon Office	English	00:54:11
04.07.2008	0407 B2	Lacon Officer	Lacon Office	English	00:41:03
04.07.2008	0407 B3	Lacon Officer	Lacon Office	English	00:07:45
04.07.2008	0407 B4	Lacon Officer	Lacon Office	English	00:21:21
09.07.2008	0907 D1	Deepu	CDS Regional Office	English	00:31:16
09.07.2008	0907 D2	Deepu	Farm	English	00:38:05
10.07.2008	1007 J1	Joss	Farm	Malayalam	00:41:59
10.07.2008	1007 J2	Joss	Farm	Malayalam	00:01:03
10.07.2008	1007 J3	Joss	Farm	Malayalam	00:26:35
10.07.2008	1007 J4	Joss	Farm	Malayalam	00:18:23
15.07.2008	1507 G1	George	Spice Village	English	00:17:47
15.07.2008	1507 G2	George	Spice Village	English	00:41:55
16.07.2008	1607 I1	Marginal Farmer	Farm	Malayalam	00:20:38
16.07.2008	1607 I2	Marginal Farmer	Farm	Malayalam	00:48:40
16.07.2008	1607 R1	Marginal Farmer	Farm	Malayalam	00:46:27
17.07.2008	1707 R1	Marginal Farmer	Farm	Malayalam	00:31:20
17.07.2008	1707 R2	Marginal Farmer	Farm	Malayalam	00:03:08
17.07.2008	1707 R3	Marginal Farmer	Farm	Malayalam	00:24:41
20.07.2008	2007 R1	Marginal Farmer	Farm	Malayalam	00:25:08
20.07.2008	2007 R2	Marginal Farmer	Farm	Malayalam	00:01:12
20.07.2008	2007 R3	Marginal Farmer	Farm	Malayalam	00:16:07
20.07.2008	2007 R4	Marginal Farmer	Farm	Malayalam	00:03:57

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English Abstract

This ethnography explores the economic strategies of five organic spice farmers in the Idukki district in Kerala, India and their relationship to a certification and marketing project of a local Catholic development NGO.

'Organic by default' describes farmers who don't use synthetic inputs for various reasons even when they are not certified. The term proved to be very useful as it allowed an understanding of the strategies of the organic farmers, as well as the policies of CDS within the framework of peasant studies, as an important peasant strategy of actively constructed distantiation (see van der Ploeg 2010).

The hill area has a very specific history because it has experienced a massive population growth through internal migration, and Syrian-Christian settler-farmers have played a dominant role in this process. Many of the latter cultivated spices, tea and coffee under immense use of chemical inputs and were able to amass considerable wealth. In contrast to many other farmers in India they are ascending towards the middle-class. However, at the same time, plots are now often eroded and cancer rates in some areas have become alarming.

Some of the organic farmers dealt with in this paper have rejected the use of synthetic inputs long before they were certified. All of them, however, stress that they found their own ways of organic cultivation which allowed them to articulate their position in relation to global organic debates. The farmers were selected to present a diverse field of agricultural practices, different marketing channels and various ways of generating additional income, for example via tourism.

Three of them occupy different positions within the organic Spice marketing project. While Sebastian uses the certificate he received through the project mostly for his tourism venture, Mutupathi, a bigger farmer, represents the farmers on various administrative levels of the project. Renju, however, is relatively new to the project and is rather critical of it.

Also critical are the two other farmers, who are outside the project. They consider it as a competition to their own marketing strategies and claim that paying lower premiums the project "destroys the market". One of them has founded a farmers' group for marketing organic produce himself, while the other, a German expatriate, makes use of the internet and his connections to Germany for marketing. He has also developed an interesting method of organic cardamom cultivation, which is influenced by permaculture, Fukuoka and No-Till ideas.

The second part of the paper focuses on the Catholic development NGO and reflects on the political context of the hill area, in which the Church occupies a dominant position.

The NGO promotes organic cultivation on many levels, for example through developing and propagating techniques such as vermicomposting (a way of composting with earthworms) and biocontrol agents (a way of organic pest and disease control which makes use of natural enemies of the pests). The NGO also tries to export organic tea and spices through sub-projects.

Worth noting is that the spice marketing initiative is very professional and successful, and operates its own very modern processing and packaging facility. More than 2000 farmers are certified through a group certificate and the inspectors of the Internal Control System support and control them. The inspectors also handle the spice purchases from the farmers.

This paper discusses the pros and cons of this form of marketing based on a group certificate and investigates the project's orientation towards organic by default farmers who experience a much lower crop loss during conversion.

Keywords: India, Kerala, Idukki, pepper, cardamom, organic by default, organic certification, marketing, small farmers, peasants, Catholic, Syrian Christians, post-development,

German Abstract

Diese ethnographische Arbeit untersucht die ökonomischen Strategien von fünf Bio-Gewürzbauern im Bezirk Idukki, Kerala, Indien und ihre Beziehung zu einem Zertifizierungs- und Vermarktungs-Projekt einer ansässigen katholischen Entwicklungsorganisation.

Der Begriff „organic by default“ beschreibt Bauern, die auch wenn sie nicht biologisch-zertifiziert sind aus verschiedenen Gründen keine Pestizide oder chemische Dünger verwenden, und er hat sich als nützlich erwiesen, um sowohl die Strategien der Bauern als auch die der NGO einzuordnen, da er die aktive Distanzierung von externen Betriebsmitteln eine wichtige bäuerlicher Strategie beschreibt (vgl. van der Ploeg 2010).

In der speziellen Geschichte der Hügelregion, die größtenteils erst vor 50-60 Jahren, teils illegal, besiedelt wurde, haben syrisch-christliche Siedler eine recht dominante Rolle gespielt und viele konnten durch kleinflächigen Anbau von Gewürzen, Tee und Kaffee unter teils massivem Dünger- und Pestizideinsatz einen gewissen Wohlstand erwirtschaften, was sie von vielen anderen indischen Bauern unterscheidet. Mittlerweile sind aber viele Böden ausgelaugt und auch die Krebsraten sind in gewissen Gebieten alarmierend.

Als Biobauern grenzen sich die in dieser Arbeit porträtierten Bauern vom Einsatz chemischer Betriebsmittel ab und betonen, teilweise schon lange vor ihrer Bio-Zertifizierung eigene Wege gefunden zu haben. Für diese Arbeit wurden sie ausgewählt um ein breites Feld von verschiedenen landwirtschaftlichen Praktiken, unterschiedlichen Vermarktungswegen und die Rolle von Tourismus und anderen, nicht-landwirtschaftlichen Tätigkeiten aufzuzeigen. Außerdem wurden unterschiedliche Ideen zu Natur und Landwirtschaft untersucht und gezeigt, wie sich die Bauern in globalen Debatten des biologischen Landbau verorten. Alle Bauern betonen sich weit über die vorgeschriebenen Richtlinien hinaus eigene biologische Anbaumethoden angeeignet zu haben.

Drei der porträtierten Bauern sind in unterschiedlichen Positionen in dem erwähnten Vermarktungsprojekt involviert. Während Sebastian wenig damit zu tun hat, außer dass er dadurch seine Zertifizierung bekommt, die er für Tourismus nützt, ist Mutupathi, ein wesentlich größerer Bauer, auf mehreren Ebenen als Repräsentant der Bauern im Projekt engagiert. Der dritte Bauer, Renju, ist erst relativ neu im Projekt und kritisiert es teilweise heftig.

Auch die anderen zwei Bauern kritisieren das Vermarktungsprojekt, weil sie es als Konkurrenz für ihre eigenen Vermarktungsstrategien sehen und ihm vorwerfen die mit einer zu niedrigen Bioprämie den lokalen Markt zu zerstören. Einer von ihnen hat selbst eine

Gruppe zur Vermarktung von Gewürzen gegründet, während der andere, ein bayrischer Aussteiger, seine Beziehungen nach Deutschland und das Internet zur Vermarktung nützt. Er hat auch eine interessante Methode Kardamom anzubauen entwickelt, die sich an Permakultur und Minimalbodenbearbeitung orientiert.

Im zweiten Teil der Arbeit wird die katholische Entwicklungsorganisation näher beleuchtet und in den politischen Kontext der Hügelregion gestellt, in dem die Kirche ein wichtiger politischer Akteur ist.

Die Entwicklungsorganisation treibt biologischen Anbau auf mehreren Ebenen voran indem sie z.B. Vermicompost (eine Kompostiermethode mit Erdwürmern) oder Biocontrol Agents (biologische Schädlingsbekämpfung mit Hilfe von natürlichen Feinden der Schädlinge) weiterentwickelt und propagiert. Darüber hinaus vermarkten Teilprojekte Tee und Gewürze. Besonders das Gewürzprojekt wird sehr professionell und erfolgreich geführt und verfügt über eine eigene high-tech Verarbeitungs- und Verpackungsanlage. Die mehr als zweitausend Bauern sind durch Gruppenzertifizierung zertifiziert und werden durch sieben Inspektoren des Internal Control Systems (ICS) kontrolliert und unterstützt. Auch der Einkauf bei den Bauern wird über die Inspektoren abgewickelt.

Die Arbeit reflektiert auch die Vor- und Nachteile dieser Art der Gruppenzertifizierung und untersucht die Orientierung der Projekts auf Kleinbauern, die bereits „organic by default“ waren und deshalb nur geringe Ertragseinbußen bei der Umstellung haben.

Schlagworte: Indien, Kerala, Idukki, Kleinbauern, Biologische Landwirtschaft, Pfeffer, Kardamom, „organic by default“, Zertifizierung, Vermarktung, Entwicklung, post-development, katholische Kirche, syrische Christen.

Curriculum Vitae

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