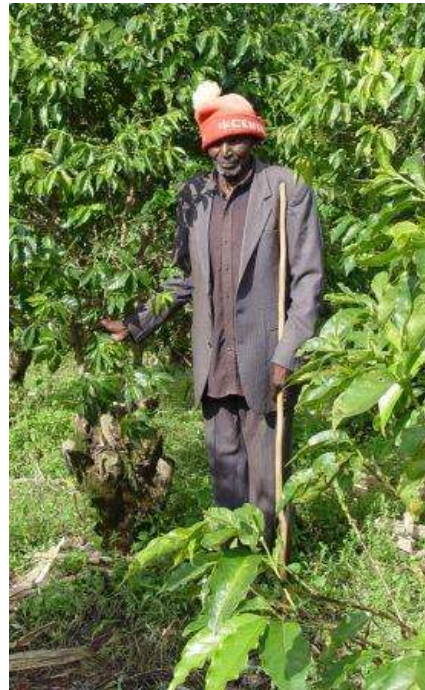


Suleman Mwita, Mara

I am ninety-eight years old and was born right here in Nyantira. My father was a farmer and also kept a few cattle. I am a Kuria; the Kuria and Maasai people have a long history of fighting each other for cattle and my father was killed by the Maasai when my mother was pregnant with me. She did not marry again and therefore I am the last-born of six. I didn't go to school as there were no schools in the area then.



I was the second person to plant coffee in this village. I was motivated to plant coffee by my good friend Mzee Marco¹: his crop looked so good - so green and so healthy - that I wanted to have my own coffee. So I planted my own seedlings and by 1960 I was picking coffee. The first year I produced four bags and made sixty-four shillings from them. I bought three goats, and then the money was finished.

I did not have my own farm until I was in my forties. Before then, I was helping my mother on the farm and trying to get the cows I needed to marry, because you could not have your own farm until you were married. In those days, you needed nine cows to marry: eight to give to the woman's family and one to slaughter for eating at the marriage party. My two older brothers got their cows from farming, and the third and fourth brothers got theirs from our sister's marriage², but I had to struggle. In the end I went to Kenya to work on the sisal plantations to get enough money to marry. I came back from Kenya in 1950 and two years later I married Ryoba Mwita. Then my mother gave me one and a half acres of land, and I planted coffee on the whole lot.



Coffee has helped me: it helped me marry three times, because I bought the cows I needed to marry my second and third wives from the sale of coffee. And my coffee farm is still helping me: it was stumped and regrew, and last year I got fourteen bags of coffee which sent one of my sons to secondary school.

¹ Mzee is a term of respect for an older man in Kiswahili.

² The cows given to the family by the men who married the daughters would, in turn, be used as marriage gifts by the sons.