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**Secondary towns in globalization: challenged position or inconspicuous key role in trade flows?
Lessons from East Africa**

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Abstract

Through examples of small and medium-sized towns in East Africa mountain areas, in Uganda and Tanzania, the paper focuses on the changing role of secondary towns through their commercial functions, acting as nodes in wide trade networks (fieldwork conducted in urban and rural markets of the studied areas). The local productive systems have turned to market gardening to face the drastic decline of cash crops like coffee and new products and productions are now inundating local markets, like fruits and vegetables but also imported Chinese or second-hand clothes, shoes or kitchenware. Trade connections are more open and complex than before with strong processes of spatial and economic differentiation and specialisation. The position of secondary towns is at the same time challenged by new roads, new (often external) actors and new strategies, with visible bypassing effects (direct connections between rural and large cities), but also remains inconspicuously important for servicing rural areas.

The paper presents the changing role of these secondary towns in globalisation, then stakeholder interplays (old and new, local and exogenous) in these new configurations, finally the redistribution of markets localisation, as an adaptation to new opportunities and challenges in globalised trading systems.

Key words

Secondary towns, commercial functions, trade networks, East Africa, Uganda, Tanzania

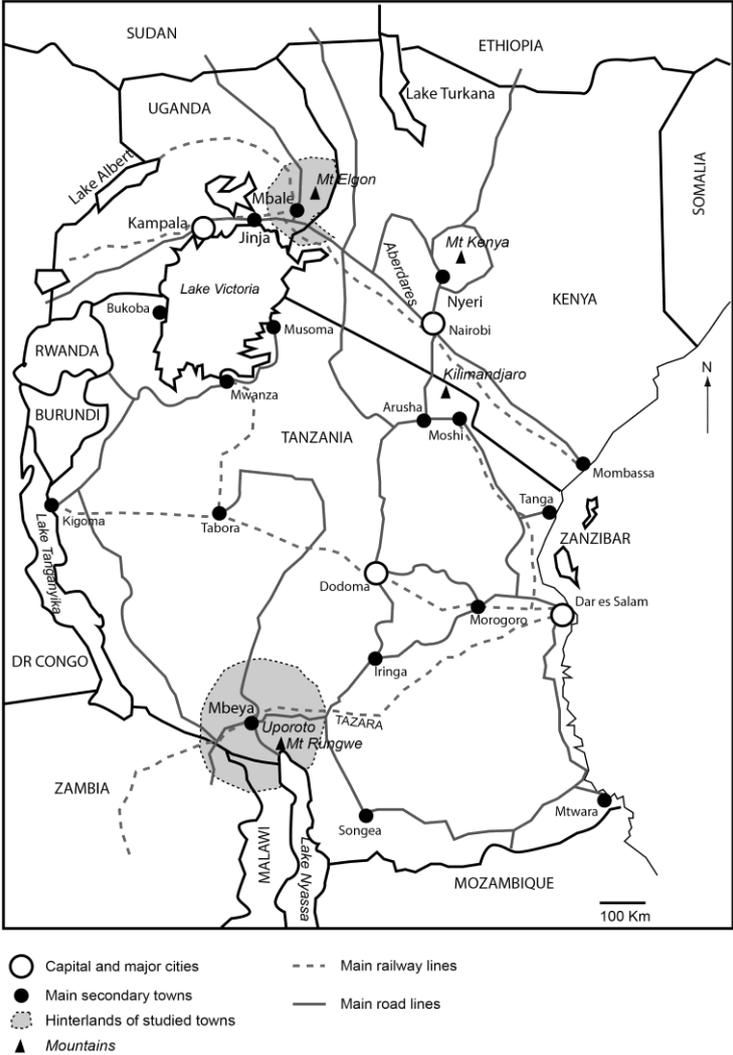
Small and medium-sized towns in Africa play an old-time part of relay and redistribution centres in trade relations between town and country. The location factors on the trade routes, the provision of rural areas with commercial facilities and equipment, and the position as intermediaries in the networks have all allowed the development of many secondary urban centres. In case of border location, these factors are coupled with transnational relational logics (interface areas, offload points, customs posts).

However, recent socio-economic changes linked to globalisation and to neoliberalisation tend to modify the acquired relational logics. New actors, including of a private and international nature, position themselves in these trade relations and influence the part typically played by actors of such urban levels. Within the context of multi-scale trading systems, market activities, arising from spatial complementarities and relying on an open-market system,

participate in the redefinition of the role of secondary towns. Although not the engines of the globalisation dynamics, they participate fully in the process, in being more than mere external logics relays. Through their integration in broader trade systems, secondary towns contribute to the structuring of their hinterland in brand new ways.

The present paper builds on results of research studies conducted within the CORUS 6165 program "Mountains and medium-sized towns in East Africa. Flows of people, resources, and management of environments", 2008-2012, and the FP7 "Rurban Africa", 2012-2016. The Mount Elgon region, on the border between Kenya and Uganda, as well as south-west Tanzania, the Uporoto Mountains and Mount Rungwe region, close to the borders between Malawi and Zambia, are particularly interesting when observing how the mutations of market relations, influenced by local developments and the logics of globalisation, transform the classic role of these urban levels as they redefine the relational scales (doc. 1). Indeed, these are mountainous areas, framed by medium-sized towns (Mbale in Uganda with 80,000 inhab., Mbeya in Tanzania with 400,000 inhab.) and small towns (Kapchorwa on the foothills of Mount Elgon, Tukuyu in Mount Rungwe), particularly structured by merchant systems related to recent agricultural developments (rapid growth of the food-producing trade) and border integrations. The article will highlight the role of interface and the integration functions of secondary towns, and then the profusion of new market players before showing the territorial dynamics related to the growth of the markets both in the urban and rural sectors.

Document 1 – Study area (source: authors)



1- Secondary towns and market activities: between local and global

The importance of small and medium-sized towns in the urban-rural relationships has been largely analyzed, especially in African contexts. The border situation allows strengthening regional integration for towns in peripheral position within their national space.

1.1 An old-time role of interface between towns and country areas

If the role of secondary towns is not "limited" to the sole function of market (they are also administrative areas, service centres and places of social and economic interactions), these activities are particularly important in Africa. Researchers have shown the place of such towns in the outward orientation of rural economies (Rondinelli, 1988; Baker, 1990; Simon, 1992; Baker and Pedersen, 1992; Giraut, 1994; Owuor, 2006). This function experiences important developments related to the agricultural changes. Indeed, colonial cash crops (coffee, cocoa, tea) are largely competing with, or even replaced by, new productions. Urbanisation has become an engine of agricultural growth and the scales of analysis must incorporate the town and the country as interacting, if not interdependent, elements (Coquery Vidrovitch *et al.*, 1996; Chaléard et Dubresson, 1999; Péliissier, 2000; Tacoli, 2002; Charlery *et al.*, 2009, etc.). Market gardening and subsistence farming trade were developed by farmers and actors within the marketing channels to satisfy the urban consumer market. In the mountains and highlands of Africa, these new farming productions, enjoying the physical benefits of high altitudes, have soared (potatoes, cabbages, tomatoes, etc.). The western highlands of Cameroon, the region of Moshi at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro, and the foothills of Mount Kenya act now as supply centres for the large cities (Hatcheu, 2003; Brient, 2007).

The observed territories in East Africa draw a wide fertile crescent, the vessel of old-time mobilities for populations attracted by exceptional ecological conditions (on Mount Elgon, the Manafwa and Bududa rural districts have between 800 and 1,000 inhab./km²). They were sought-after lands for commercial agriculture, itself the engine of colonial and national economies. Today, the towns have become part of the mountain territories of East Africa which are encircled by markets, smaller communities or medium-sized towns with assertive commercial and logistics functions, a network structured a priori by the interplay of geographic scales, the proximity of the small centres giving access to the cities on the foothills. The relations between highlands and lowlands, between town and country, structure the territorialities of these "bastions of rurality" (Charlery *et al.*, 2009) and the secondary towns fully act as intermediaries. In the Mbeya region in Tanzania, the cultivation of bananas has largely replaced the coffee plantations of Mount Rungwe as a source of income, while market gardening has replaced the pyrethrum (merely residual now) in the Uporotos. In Uganda, on the slopes of Mount Elgon, there is a differential and more or less marked neglect of the coffee tree, in combination with the banana tree, in favour of vegetable crops.

The market function is essential, through the role of redistribution of food productions. In intermediate towns, markets are bustling, with several hundreds of producers selling their products or intermediaries sourcing in mountain areas and coming to the market to supply merchants and resellers. The function of redistribution of agricultural products is easily identifiable in these towns, through the omnipresence of shops and market stalls selling vegetables, fruit and dairy products (photo 1). At Mbale, resellers of vegetables are supplied three times a week from the mountain areas (with potatoes, sweet potatoes, carrots, cabbage,

onions, bananas, etc.). Intermediaries play an important part in this trade: they travel to rural areas to buy products and bring them to urban retailers. It is thus possible to find goods from the entire area of Mount Elgon, from Kapchorwa in the North to Bududa in the South. An important share of the mountain production is also sold in the other urban centres (Jinja, Kampala) and redistributed across the country via towns that serve as places of redistribution and distribution outside rural areas.

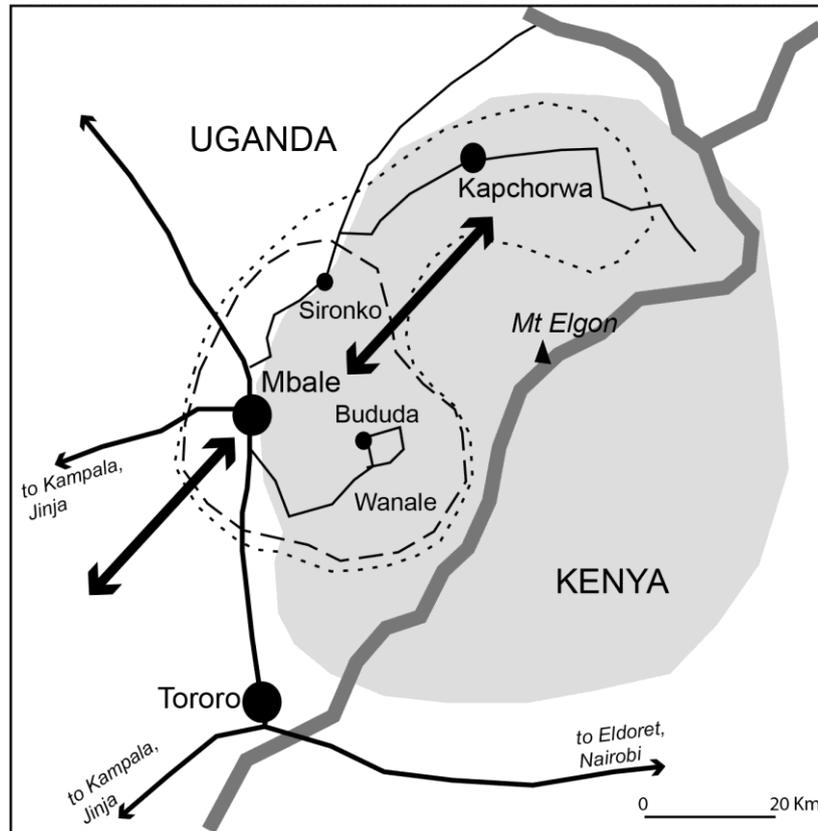
Photo 1: Mbale Main Street on market day (central market in pink building)



Source: authors

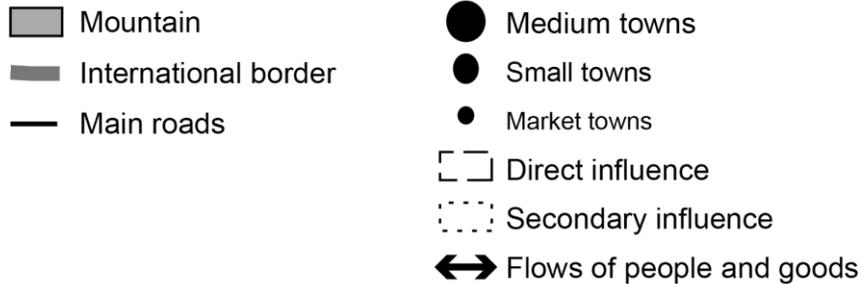
Medium-sized towns are also gateways to rural areas. They are important in the distribution of products, often manufactured, 'imported' (in the sense of external to the area, from other regions or from abroad). Many products come from outside the mountain system: in Mbale, from Kampala, from nearby Kenya or from abroad via Kampala. Mbale is thus an outpost from where products are redistributed (doc. 2).

Document 2: Mbale, an example of urban-rural interface (source: authors)



Mount Elgon Zone

Urban hierarchy and Mbale influence



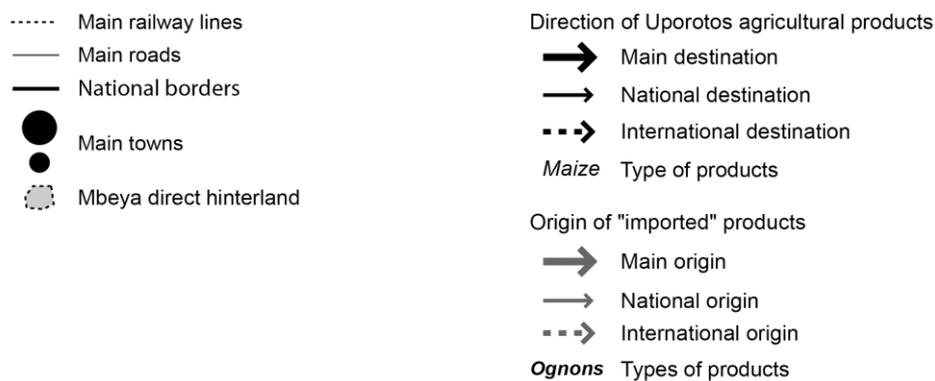
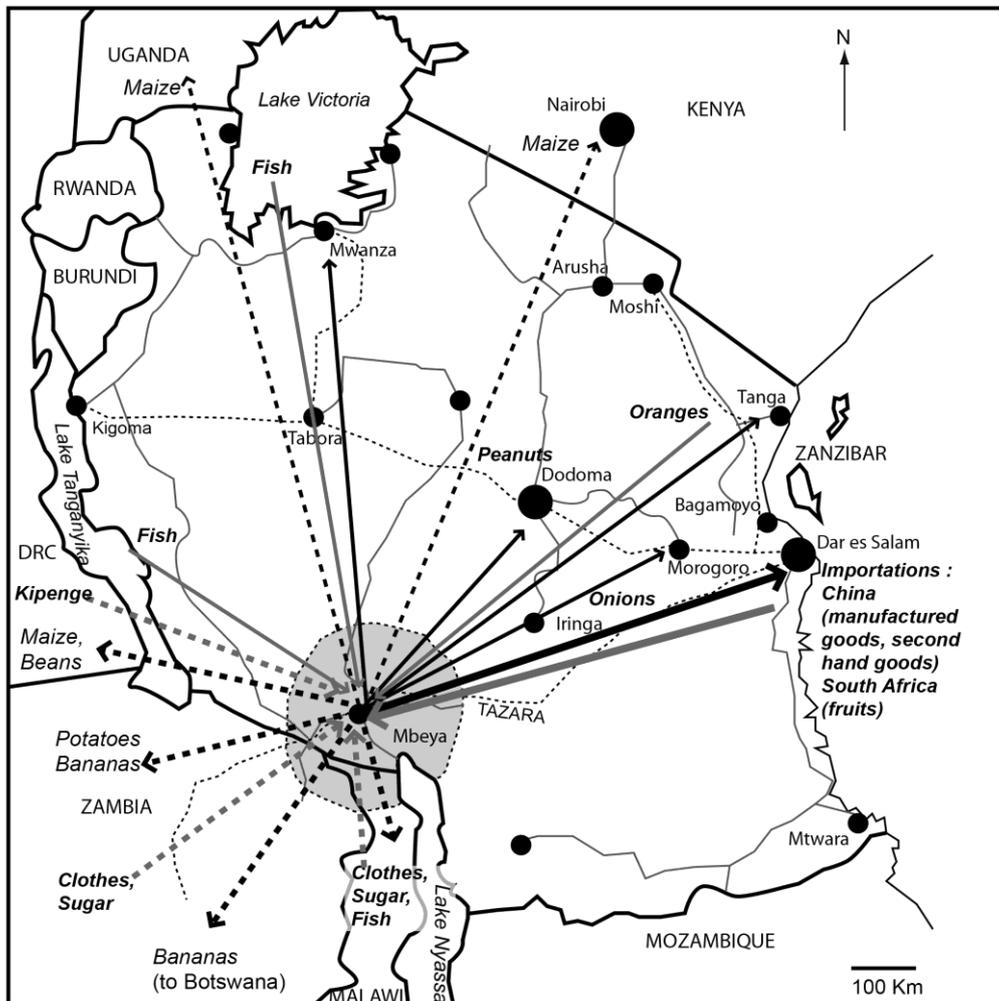
1.2 The role of intermediate towns: integration in markets and territorial integration

Thanks to market activities, secondary towns play an important role in the connection of their hinterland with national and international markets. These secondary towns intermediation role is both external (gateway to outer markets, logic of networks), and internal (towards proximity areas) with essential utility functions (service centre, influence on the hinterland, a logic of proximity). This old-time function of intermediate towns as hubs of redistribution contributes to anchor rural (in this case, mountain) economies in national and international economies. Such secondary towns are intermediate towns 'par excellence', which ensure the transition between large cities or the capital and the rest of the towns and rural areas, and vice versa, from the basic level to the top. They thus provide an intermediation role in a hierarchical structure, between an urban centre and the zone for which they constitute the hub of economic services. The intermediate town is one that is placed between extremities (between the small and the large; between the close and the distant) and that develops intermediation functions between a wide variety of spaces and scales (local, regional, national, global).

Both towns studied here illustrate well the intermediary function of these secondary towns (major regional towns) in structured urban networks, in a peripheral location, or even away from their country's economic capitals (in the case of Mbeya, 820 km away from Dar es Salaam; Mbale is 250 km away from Kampala). Their role is reinforced by the polarisation they exert on the regional urban network of small-sized towns, market towns and the surrounding rural areas. Thanks to these towns, the mountain areas are integrated in international markets and through these market activities, towns enjoy a significant demographic and economic dynamism.

Agricultural inputs, such as seeds or plant protection products, are widely used (and more and more so, taking into account changes in farming practices). In Mbale, merchants who sell such products for agriculture and livestock (food and chemical products) source from Kampala or nearby Kenya (industrial development being of greater importance there). The zone of influence of these specialty shops covers the entire district of Mbale and the surrounding areas (within a 40 to 50 kilometres radius). In the case of Mbeya, the border area location, on one of the main East African railways (Tazara) and highways (Tanzam), allows relationships with all of the sub-region. The agricultural production of the Uporotos and of Mount Rungwe are routed preferentially to the national market (Dar-es-Salaam or to other towns in Tanzania), but also exported to neighbouring landlocked Zambia and Malawi (Racaud, 2013). Mbeya is incidentally the dry port of Malawi (train/road offload point function). Further remote destinations such as Botswana or the Democratic Republic of the Congo are also significant while occasionally, in times of drought particularly, agricultural products such as corn can be exported to Kenya or Uganda (as it was the case in 2011). Conversely, Mbeya is the point of entry of products and productions from outside the region, mainly via Dar es Salaam (manufactured products imported from China, plant protection products), but also agricultural products from other regions (oranges from Tanga, onions from Iringa, etc.), fresh or dried fish from the Great Lakes, products imported from neighbouring countries (sugar from Zambia or Malawi, loincloths from the Congo, etc.).

Document 3: Mbeya, trade network and regional integration. Map drawn from products found in Mbeya markets.



Source: authors

The position of Mbale and Mbeya in these commercial networks, including products for/from agriculture, demonstrates their centrality within regional, namely mountain systems, but also within cross-border sub-regional areas. Mbale is an urban hub of greater importance than Tororo (yet better located on the main route between Kenya and Uganda's main towns, Jinja and Kampala, a secondary town of 45,000 inhab.). Malaba, on the border with Kenya, is only a border post. The vitality of Mbale seems clearly explained by its combining of the functions of a town polarising a dynamic rural hinterlands and the proximity of the border (which increases its influence, including by the "incoming" flows visible across the range of manufactured goods imported from Kenya or via Kenya). Mbeya displays a similar

configuration. Strictly speaking, this is not a border town (Zambia and Malawi are over 100 km away), but the town polarises the trade flows of the entire sub-region, much more so than border posts (Tunduma, on the border with Zambia, is a small-sized town of 35,000 inhab.; Ipinda, on the border with Malawi, has 16,000 inhab.).

The context of the urban consumer market supply is a very competitive one (other agricultural areas, sometimes closer or better connected, also supply the large East African cities). The border location allows diversifying trade opportunities. Through their commercial activities, these peripheral towns are thus integrated into a wide regional network. This is particularly true in the case of Mbeya, nicknamed the "Dubai of Malawi" by the people of Karonga (Northern Malawi) due to the diversity and quality of the products found or coming from there.

2. Secondary towns and actors: complementarity and competition

With intensified market relations and the implementation of neoliberalisation policies in countries such as Uganda and Tanzania, an increasing number of actors are involved in urban-rural relations, especially in secondary towns. These actors prove to be very innovative and as pointed by Walther, it is important to analyze social networks in exploring how they have progressively adapted to social and spatial changes in economic activities (Walther, 2014a).

2.1 The proliferation of actors and intermediaries

Small and medium-sized towns play an important role in the supplying of public and private services, and necessary infrastructure for the development of very small enterprises related to the economy and non-farm employment. Many rural (agricultural and non-agricultural) enterprises, involved in food processing, construction, transport, retail or wholesale, financial services and services to individuals, are located in these towns, serving urban and surrounding rural populations (Rondinelli, 1988). Services to farmers and rural populations are also a good indicator of the urban influence. All these entrepreneurs, being local or from outside of the region, have their strategies, combining economic, social and spatial aspects, using cross-border and rural-urban complementarities - which is typical of border markets, as analysed in West Africa (Walther, 2012).

With the turn to open market, the old cooperatives, like the *Tanzanian Farmers Association* (whose regional headquarters are in Mbeya), are challenged by these new (and often small) structures, offering better prices to members and better payment opportunities. Associative structures such as SACCOs (*Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies*) have developed under the impetus of non-governmental organisations, but private commercial structures are not outdone. Secondary towns benefit from agencies of national structures, often in operation for some years, which offer agricultural producers but also non-agricultural entrepreneurs of the region easy access to credit (microcredit). More broadly, the market of products for agriculture (inputs, animal feed, veterinary products) is marked by a growing privatisation of actors, visible by the proliferation of shops in urban centres (photo 2).

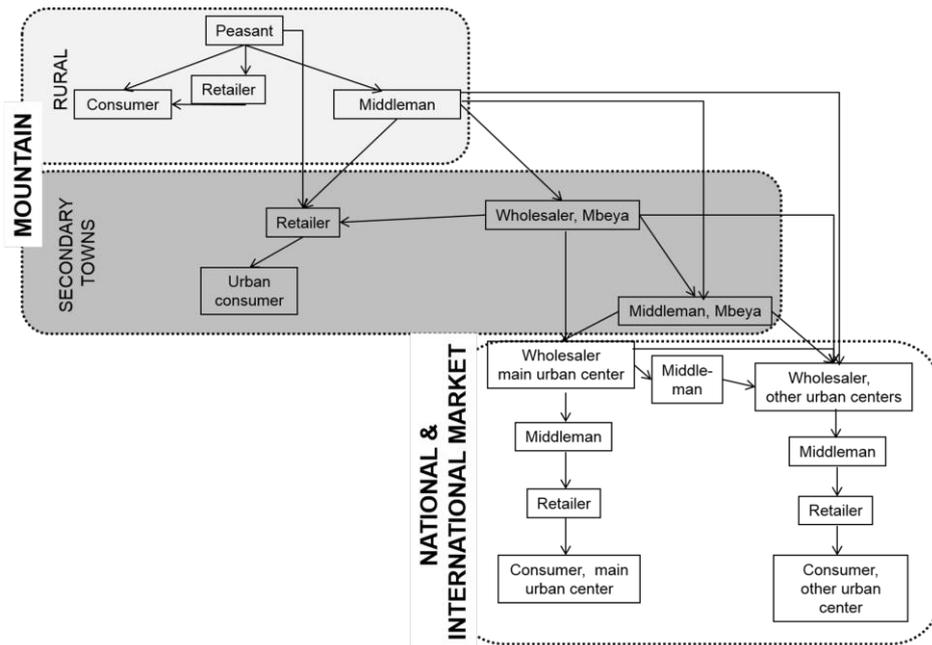
Photo 2: Agro input shop in Mbale (Uganda)



Source: authors

Furthermore, within the very market system, a multiplication of actors and middlemen can be observed, as well as more complex business practices and strategies at work between the producer and the end consumer. Mountain productions can be collected on-site, at temporary or seasonal rural markets, carried over to rural markets, to urban markets of secondary towns or directly to major urban markets. Such actors may be rural, urban actors from secondary towns, urban actors from large external cities (wholesalers, traders, contracting directly with producers, etc.) or foreign actors. A complex chain of actors is thus visible, involving producers / collectors / transporters / wholesalers / retailers and linking local markets / distant markets, mountains and towns (doc. 4).

Document 4: Chains of actors of agricultural trade from Mbeya region to the sub-region



Source: authors

Secondary towns are also nodes of the imported goods network, such as products *made in China* that are found in all rural markets as well as in the urban commercial landscape. Cheap items, i.e. low-value and often lower-quality products are among the main goods. Indeed, their low cost makes them of easy access, whether for consumers with low purchasing power or the diverse range of traders, from street vendors to importers shuttling between the regional metropolis, for example Mbeya, and Dubai. The development of this trade is part of a very strong growth of the bilateral trade between China and Tanzania, which are traditional partners. This trade serves as a refuge for many town residents who can start a profitable low-cost activity, even if profits remain weak. Some traders manage to jump up the traders scale and street vendors end up owning a boutique. Shopkeepers generally get their supplies in Kariakoo, the major shopping district of Dar es Salaam. Mobilities between the secondary town and the national capital are developing. Thus, for lack of significant capital and because of the strong renewal of products (especially for head-to-toe clothing), new supplies are frequently available, often several times a month. This trade structures durable links between the Tanzanian periphery and centre.

But secondary towns not only harbour small-scale vendors or shopkeepers. Indeed, in Mbeya, traders directly connect the local and regional market with the big malls overseas. Importers own several stores that they supply from their sources in Dubai or China. Some traders even have shops abroad as well as in the Zambian capital. Dozens of Chinese goods importers may operate in the capital of South-West Tanzania. They do not work together because the challenge is to keep the exclusivity of new products. Other actors take advantage of the development of this sector even if they do not have the capital needed to deal with imports on their own. They are agents who, like their counterparts involved in agricultural trade, do not collect food orders but deal with purchasing abroad for several local merchants who do not have the sufficient capital or contacts to cover the imports themselves. In secondary towns, merchants of imported goods, contribute at their own level to the flow of goods and ideas. Connections are indeed more numerous between more places of a greater variety, for example between Mbeya and Dar-es-Salaam or Mbeya and Dubai, or even Mbeya and Guangzhou. Mobile actors, more familiar with other contexts, are imbued with external ideas. On the other hand, the mass of products they bring back, for example the rapper caps, contribute to the evolution of local identities, both in towns and in the countryside.

2.2 Significant territorial impacts

The study of such actors (cooperatives, associations, traders, intermediaries) shows the importance of the urban network: regional branches are located in medium-sized towns (Mbeya, Mbale), local offices in small-sized towns (Kapchorwa, Tukuyu) and rural agencies exist in the market towns (Bududa, Wanale), as well as referents in more remote areas. These developments raise the question of the possible cooperation between such actors and of the impacts on territorial development: initially, they strengthen the weight of secondary towns in beefing up their offer of services, and broaden the range of services and prices available to urban and rural consumers. However The lasting effects are still to be assessed: challenge of the effectiveness of the framework offered by small companies sometimes weakly-structured territorially and which economic viability is not guaranteed in the event of changing economic context, the risk of actors in secondary towns being 'short-circuited' by metropolitan private contractors (carriers for example), directly connecting rural areas with more important national or foreign cities. Indeed, it appears that direct trade relationships develop between rural areas and main towns, or even global markets, which may weaken the intermediary role

of secondary towns. Studies conducted in Kenya on the place of secondary town small entrepreneurs in town-country relations (Mainet-Kihonge, 2015; Kihonge 2014) tend to show that competition for secondary town actors is most strongly felt in the outbound direction ("export" from the mountains to distant urban markets) than in the inbound direction ("import" from the outside to the mountain system).

3. The markets: interface areas and spatial differentiation factors

If rural areas polarised by dynamic small and medium-sized towns are integrated in economic markets and extended relational spaces, strong socio-spatial contrasts can be observed. Market activities are embodied by markets which geography makes it possible to observe the impacts of spatial differentiation.

3.1 The spatial anchor of markets

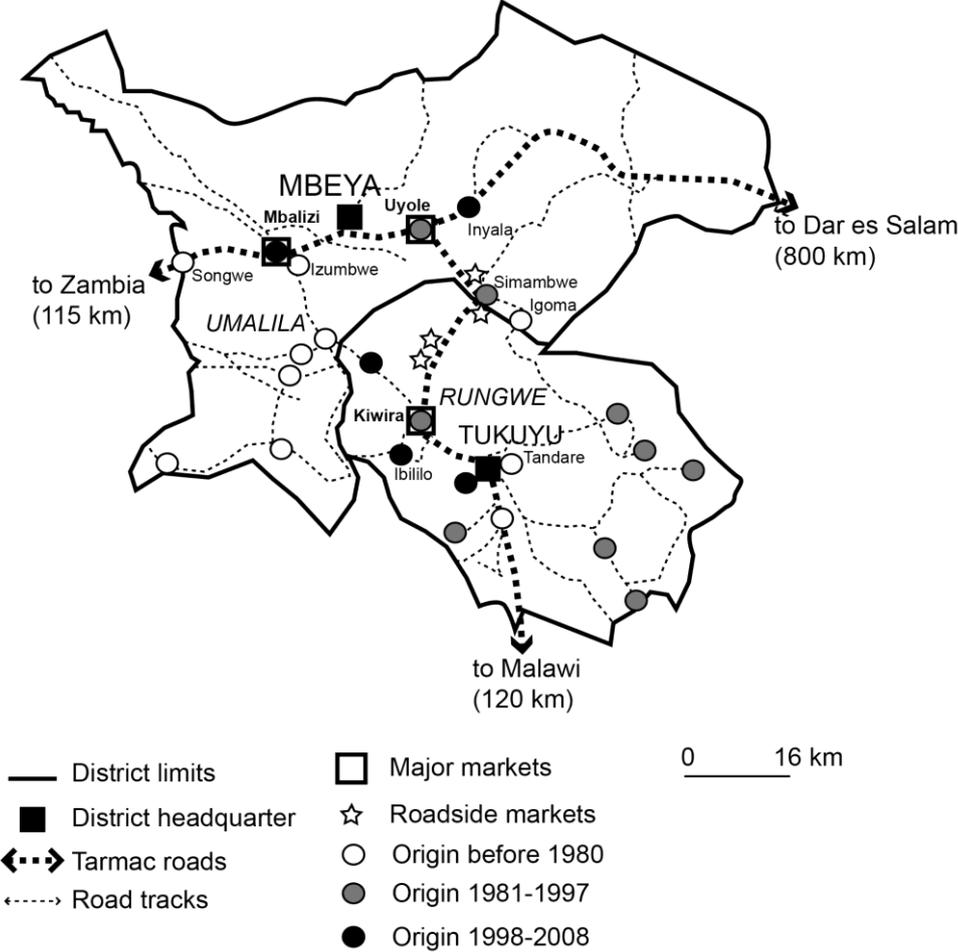
The "market" is the organised set of tangible and intangible exchanges. It consists of a system of exchange of goods organised as tenders and requests meet, but this function of economic exchange (collection and redistribution centre) is also a social function ("exchange of news"), a political function (site of power of local traditional authority) and an opening function (distribution to the "outside"). Within the African context, the market occupies a central place in the food trade (Chaléard, 1996). The African market for agricultural products remains marked by structural flaws. Indeed, for most producers (who are mostly peasants) access to the market remains problematic and unbalanced as far as infrastructure (transport and exchange), information and rules of exchange are concerned. The weakness of the standardisation of goods (measurement units, product quality control) is often to the detriment of producers, just as the lack of access to credit and the informal nature of transactions. Such factors favour the volatility of prices, volumes and quality. Markets are diverse by their nature, their spatial and temporal significance (local/international; daily/periodic), by their modes of regulation, or even by their legality (Minvielle, 1999). It is in markets "that the largest amount of trade takes place, that actors and flow of goods can be more easily identified, prices studied, circuits marked, and areas of production localised. Beyond their diversity markets are "privileged places for peasants-traders contact in the countryside, and to supply city-dwellers" (Chaléard 1996: 493).

Observing the markets in their spatial anchor allows analysing a number of parameters for integration in and by the market. The market (place) helps understanding the economic and territorial integration. Mbeya and the Uporotos are very interesting to observe the changing configurations of places and new trade routes. The trade dynamics of the mountain rely on an exchange network some nodes of which do not always correspond to urban centres. Thus, Kiwira, a village of about 4,000 inhab., plays a far more important role in agricultural trade than the small town of Tukuyu (50,000 inhab.), yet a district capital (Racaud, 2013). The markets collection and distribution function creates a network of places of exchange which hierarchy is organised on the basis of commercial criteria such as the availability of products, accessibility, price and quality.

An intensification of the periodic markets network (*gulos*) can be witnessed in the Uporotos (it can also be observed on Mt. Elgon, in the Mbale region). A market is created at the local community initiative, when the volume of transactions and the number of actors are sufficiently important for the district to deem it appropriate to collect taxes (the thus formalised market is then provided with a Committee that collects taxes for the district and

ensures the basic tasks of management of space, such as infrastructure maintenance and cleaning). The map of market creation shows three subsets (doc. 5). The oldest markets are concentrated in the rural Mbeya district and the Umalila area (slightly landlocked agricultural table-lands) while in the Rungwe, the majority of markets date back to the 1980s (beginning of the massive conversion to market gardening). Markets along the Dar es-Salaam/Zambia route constitute one last set. The recent settlements emphasize the structuring effect of the road (main Tanzam highway and Mbeya-Malawi road). The six markets made since 1998 are located within 10 km of the tarred route, which is an indicator of the amplification of interactions between the mountain and the town and of the integration of areas of production in the domestic and international markets.

Document 5: Periods of creation of markets in Uporoto Mountains (Tanzania)



Source: authors

3.2 Specialisation and differentiation of rural markets

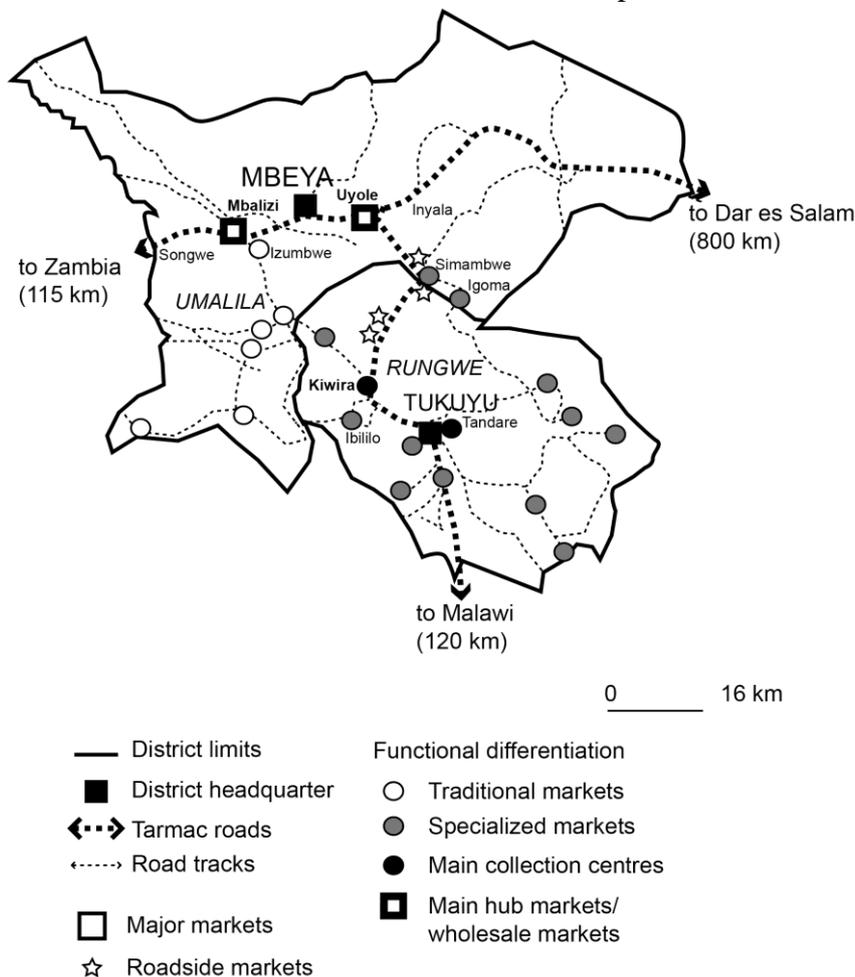
There is a total of 38 markets officially registered in the Uporotos area (12 are urban and daily markets; 26 are rural and periodic markets). A typological analysis allows to differentiate these markets based on hierarchical logics (size of markets based on the traded volumes), more or less strong specialisation parameters and criteria of differentiated integration in local, regional, national and international market. This results in a network combining traditional periodic markets, collection markets and urban *hubs*.

Periodic rural markets of the Uporotos combine dry goods from productive non-mountain areas (peanuts from Dodoma, rice from Kyela), fresh food items from zones some ten

kilometres away or from the nearby hinterland, (new or second-hand) imported manufactured products. There is a strong specialisation of some of these markets, according to the productive characteristics of their close-by environment. Thus, the market of Ibililo is known to offer different varieties of bananas (*Matoki, Marindi, Kambani, Uganda*, etc.). The most important of these markets bring together between 200 and 1,000 trade actors (professional traders and peasants selling food), with significant attendance gaps, ranging from several hundred individuals up to 15,000 for Kiwira. These values fluctuate depending on the seasons. There is a strong complementarity between the markets. Thus, the Ibililo market takes place on the same days as the large Kiwira market: external transporters and collectors are sure to find sufficient quantities of foodstuffs which collection is facilitated in space and time (they rotate between markets to fill the trucks).

Beside the official markets (where taxes are collected), there are informal exchange sites in the vicinity of road connections, some of them being genuine institutions (Ntokela for potato, Simambwe for cabbage). Such roadside markets do not have a logistical framework or a local regulatory framework. They are present on the essential asphalt axis, linking Mbeya to Malawi.

Document 6: Markets differentiation in the Uporoto Mountains



Source: authors

Next to the specialised *gulios*, two market places stand out clearly thanks to their collection and redistribution functions, and their retail and wholesale practices. These are the Uyole and Mbalizi markets, located at the interface of the rural and urban markets, at major crossroads, giving them obvious comparative advantages (doc. 7). They have a multi-scale production

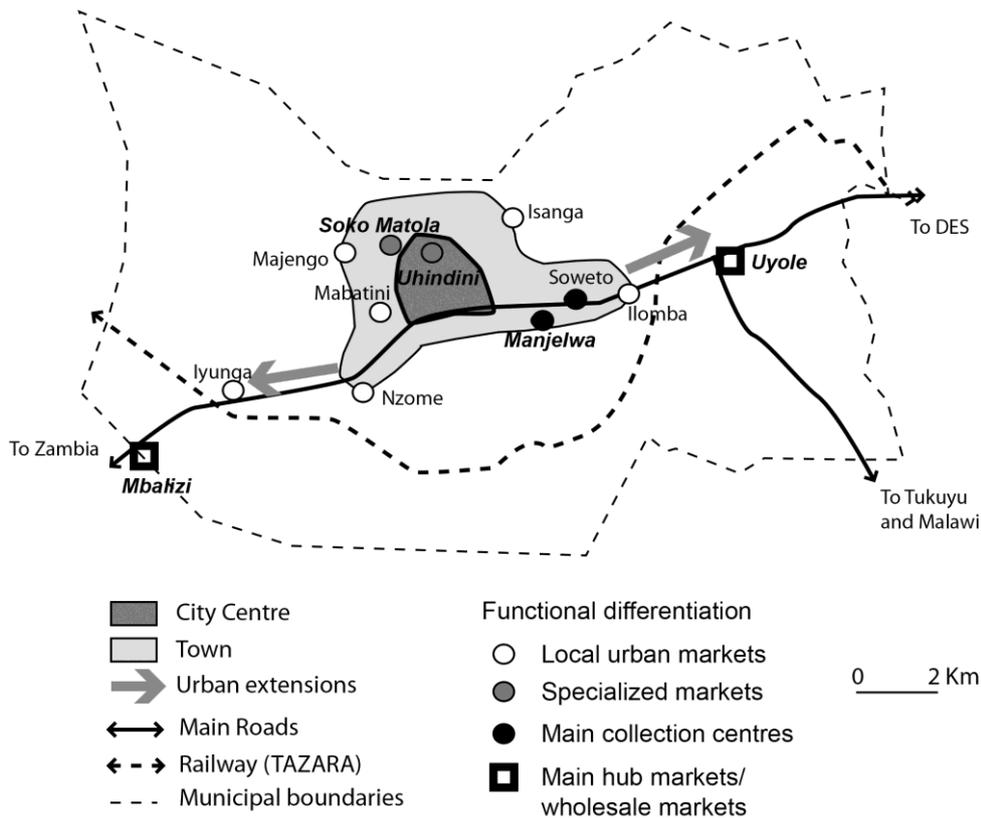
supply, composed of mountain hinterlands and respective production basins which replenish their collection and redistribution centre (the Uporotos and Mount Rungwe for Uyole, the Umalila plateau for Mbalizi). These locations give Uyole the privilege of a more favourable position, its local production supply being wider, its productions more diversified and its volumes larger. In addition, the presence of the road link to Malawi offers facilitation of access to the market and of product flow, when only dirt tracks are available south of Mbalizi. The location of Uyole, at the intersection of the two international routes, is a crucial asset.

3.3 Secondary towns that become original commercial centres

As pointed by Walther, "the presence of a border market and transport infrastructure is crucial for trade communities and producers because it allows the combination of trading and production activities to conjointly benefit the regional economy" (Walther, 2014b). In turn, the impacts of markets structuration are also visible in towns, through the spatial organization and evolution of urban zones. In the Uporotos and Mbeya, market activities structure the flows and differentiate locations. The case of Mbeya is particularly original (important specialisation and differentiation) and is hardly reflected in Mbale where the central market is particularly important and lively (the town is smaller and the number of urban markets lesser than in Mbeya). The location (major all-weather roads), the proximity of a border and the accessibility of supply-rich hinterlands and catchment areas are important factors of spatial and functional differentiation.

The urban markets of Mbeya meet a clear differentiation. The dozen registered markets are located in the older parts of the town and on the Tanzam road axis, where population densities are highest. Some markets are specialised, as is Soko Matola whose fame is built on the availability of fresh fish, Uhindini renowned for fresh beef meat (the market burned down in 2011, as many urban markets in Africa where "accidental" fire is a shameful way of urban management) or the Soweto market known for its substantial stock of low-priced clothing. Mwanjelwa-Sido is the largest urban market of Mbeya (with close to 1,600 registered shops). Urban markets correspond to their catchment area, market prices adapt to customers, the least expensive being practiced outside the old town centre. Uyole offers the lowest prices for foodstuffs. Urban markets are organised in a hierarchical operation; some of them supply the others. This makes sense for large peripheral central squares directly supplied by the production basins: merchants in downtown markets refuel in such hubs as Uyole and Mbalizi. Nevertheless, although located in the town, Mwanjelwa supplies goods to other urban markets. This is a particular market as many on-site traders get foodstuff in periodic rural markets (as in Kiwira, Ibililo, etc.). On the other hand, a Soko Matola trader does not frequently source in the countryside. Urban market places are secondary markets since, most of the time, products do not come directly from the farming area; such sites are dedicated to retail.

Document 7: Hierarchy of urban markets in Mbeya



Source: authors

Secondary towns and Mbeya in particular, are not only agricultural trade networks nodes; they are also "shopping malls" which supply their periphery with imported manufactured goods. In this field, Mbale plays a much smaller part than Mbeya. This is explained by several factors. Mbale has less than 100,000 inhab., while the population of Mbeya is approximately 400,000 inhab. What's more, Mbale is located 225 km away from Kampala, itself located just 215 km from the Kenyan border. Mbale remains in the area of economic polarisation of Kampala and cannot be a shopping centre selling goods imported from Mombasa, the largest port of East Africa. Mbeya is in a totally different situation. More than 800 km from the port of Dar es Salaam, Mbeya, with its logistical facilities (including the dry port) is a sub-regional commercial and logistics centre for its landlocked neighbours. This peripheral relation to Tanzania, but central to the sub-region, is a structuring factor of business development which translates in a specific urbanisation.

While the agriculture of the mountain hinterland is still the engine of Mbeya's development, imported goods trade develops rapidly and affects the urbanisation of the Tanzanian regional metropolis. Commercial activities are concentrated in the Mwanjelwa district along the highway that runs through Mbeya where the commercial function takes precedence over the residential function. This dynamic is the result of private operators, although local authorities have tried to take part in the trade. Since 2009, a project initiated by the town (public-private partnership) is to give birth to a shopping mall of over 20,000 square meters but work was put on hold in 2013 and in 2015 the building was not completed still. Hence, market activities, the main function of the Mwanjelwa district, are being developed by private operators.

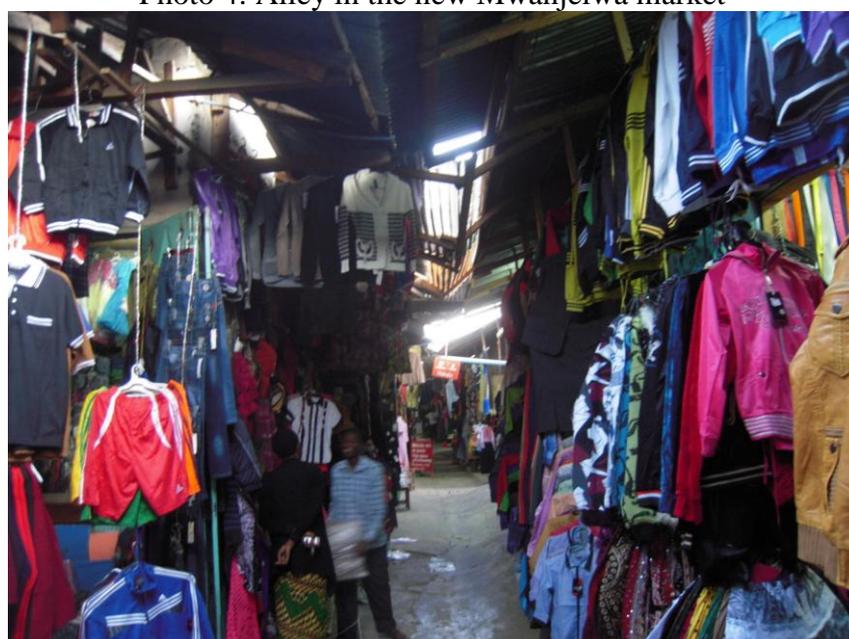
Photo 3: Mwanjelwa Market Street and the building site of the shopping mall in the background (Mbeya)



Source: authors

Facing the shopping mall, a souk-like interleaving of shops spreads out at the expense of old houses. Over ten years, shops penetrated more than 100 m. into the living area, spread out along a street on over 200 m. This includes several blocks separated by narrow dark alleys.

Photo 4: Alley in the new Mwanjelwa market



Source: authors

This market sector holds all the goods consumed by urban and rural populations: clothing, shoes, blankets, perfumes, baby wear, fashion accessories, loincloths, suitcases, household accessories, mostly from China. This place is truly central to the merchant network of imported goods; it radiates in the Mbeya region but also beyond national borders. It performs retail functions for the local population, but also wholesale functions for traders from the hinterland, from regional towns as well as from Malawi, Zambia and the East of the DRC.

This market district became the centre of the town at the expense of the old town centre with its administrative functions. As Mbeya's commercial functions strengthened, a shift from the centre to the Dar es-Salaam/Zambia road occurred. In addition, other commercial establishments settled along this axis in the Mwanjelwa district (banks, hotels, etc.), acting as a commercial showcase created by private actors. With the urban restructuring observed in this major sector of the town, it seems Malawian traders gave Mbeya a well-founded nickname: the "Dubai of Malawi".

Conclusion

Local changes (shift from commercial agriculture to food-producing trade) as well as global changes (turn to open market and globalisation) led to an amplification of market activities and to more complex market and network systems. Urban-rural relations seem more important than ever. Depending on the level of analysis, complementarities, competing logics, differential benefits appear and differentiate rural and urban territories, some being characterised by comparative advantages, others remaining at the margin of the dynamics of external openness. The road, and all it induces, i.e. access to the market, appears as a structuring factor of "terroirs" and markets.

Secondary towns, each at their own level, perform a structuring role on their locality which reaches as far as their production supply areas. Indeed, "border markets are more than places of flows; they also play a crucial regional role for the organization of agricultural activities" (Walther, 2014b). Periodic markets are showcases of their hinterland and act as interfaces between the nearby and the distant. The densification of the market network is an indicator of the changed mountain agricultural model and of the integration of the mountain ranges in broader trading systems. The commercial functions performed by private actors are engines of the urbanisation of these towns. The case studies of Mbeya and Mbale show the importance to develop analysis on the role of secondary towns as intermediate between rural and urban networks, thus following Bell and Jayne's recommendations on their role in urban studies (Bell and Jayne, 2009).

The dependence of these mountain systems on external economic logics reveals the frailty of the integration model based on the development of commercial food crops. The integration into the regional market is an axis of development that seems relevant to the Uporotos and Mount Elgon. This is particularly true for the Mbeya region by virtue of its strategic location at the gateway to landlocked countries (the differential is reversed in the case of Uganda which depends largely on supply from Kenya). The structuring of the potato and banana sectors at the regional level, much in demand by Malawi, Zambia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and even Botswana, may be an instrument of regional integration and strengthening of the centrality of a town such as Mbeya at such scale and of reduction of its remoteness at national level. The international border acts as an amplifier of the growth of the commercial functions of these secondary border towns that are nodes of a more global merchant trading system. However, this perspective, if made their own by private actors, including exogenous, may just as well merely reinforce the dependence of these border regions with regard to external centres of impulse and decision.

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