Storyline of Danish article 3: ‘En rigtig træmand’ (a pun on the Danish language, meaning approximately: ‘A very dry (woody) man’).

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[Texts in sharp brackets are summary of paragraphs in the text. Other texts are approximate translations].

As is often the case when you visit a Kenyan small farm it is good to know in advance that you are coming near one, since it will look a bit anarchistic at first sight. Right here at the John Rono place in Tvyobei village, Kericho country, it is even more difficult to locate the farm. His land is situated on a rather demanding hillside with grassland and scrubs gradually developing into a regular wood lot at his fence.

We have arrived at a plot of farmland with trees, agroforestry is the term. Lots of trees, as many as 500 on his few acres, with a mixture of ‘shadow trees’, fruit trees and ‘fertilizer trees’. And on top coffee bushes galore, healthy dark green and most of them here by late morning well shadowed over by trees, as it should be.

The short version of the history of the place is that bwana Rono took over this land from his father around ten years ago and practised farming in accordance with well-established traditions growing a bit of everything: some grains, some vegetables and coffee. It worked in a normal year and just exactly during the bad ones.

During 2008 local farmers organized themselves into a ‘self-help’ group, by the name of Tobengaa, comprising an equal number of female and male farmers, today altogether 45 members. [The reason for establishing the group: United we stand].

ICRAF, meaning no less than the World Agroforestry Centre, presented in 2009 a package of options to this place. The ingredients were first of all advice and follow-up to give smallholders a better understanding of their farming and the economy of their plots. A ‘professionalization’ of their trade, so to say, working as a virtual eye opener: The traditional way of farming was far from optimal, as a matter of fact a losing concern, often with low or no liquidity and need to borrow at high cost to make ends meet from one growing season to the next.

Agricultural researchers have over the years, here and all over Africa, strived to transfer results from their labs and demonstration plots to far away farmers. It has worked to a certain degree but not so much as hoped for - and as required to make
a real impact. Reluctance was apparent in many places; it was easier to continue with same procedures as always.

The campaign by ICRAF from 2009 appears to have been helped by two kinds of boosters, which here in Tviyobei and neighbouring districts have speeded up things: ICRAF and other centres in the respected CGIAR family have approached the communication task in a broader manner, across agricultural subjects and involving new types of professionals to activate interest among smallholders. And climate change has no doubt – for this specific purpose – been useful by providing public acceptance that things cannot just go on the usual way. Everyone realises that rains are these days unreliable, at least in one year out of three, and in an already hot spot days tend to get warmer.

[On the way to mobilize farmers, building up basic agricultural training course by course, emphasizing the benefits of trees in farming. Underlining how farmers like Rono and neighbours are active partners in fighting climate change].

But back to the ‘professionalizing’. One important element in the training is the (somewhat pompous sounding) concept of ‘the ledger’. A more adequate term might be the ‘bookkeeping page, a notebook size sheet with printed columns: The months of the year across, lengthwise open spaces to be filled in with text and numbers: Type of costs and income over the year, like cost of seed, sale of eggs, copper sulphate for spraying coffee, sale of mango, fertilizer, etc., etc. It might sound simple but with a basic primary education as background, it does require all your efforts. The numbers, however, are not too difficult to interpret, because the result of the year will end with a final plus or minus at the bottom of the page. Every member of the group keeps their own ‘ledger’, pretty shocking reading to many before they started to follow advice and adjust their farming.

These sheets are a very good basis for consultation and advice, the more advanced farmers supporting others. At the same time the sheets make up a simplified agricultural diary, helping out in diagnosing what to do when.

[John Rono is very pleased with how he has been able to teach his father how to improve coffee farming, on pruning amongst others, with visible results. But in particular, he takes pride in giving advice to the coffee factory on the corrects way to fertilize – in contrast to what they used to advice people. He is trusted, his coffee trees can these day produce eight kilos a year as compared to the two kilos a few years back.
Members accompanying us round the farm add their comments, reflecting the same pride in working better these days. Adding that children in the families are better fed now, and we can afford to let the brighter ones continue to secondary school. They will be better qualified than we were.

Not too many of them will stay in agriculture, most are bound to go to town. But maybe some of the smarter ones will continue as farmers, as it is obvious that farming carries more prestige in rural life with the new skills introduced.]