

Research Article

## Social Meanings of the Tea Basket among Tea Pickers: Case of Nandi Hills, Nandi County Kenya

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**Abstract:** Tea growing was first introduced in Kenya in 1903 by GWL Caine. However the commercialization of tea was introduced in 1924 marked by the introduction of the first commercial estates. Since then tea growing has been subject to a myriad social and economic encounters. In trying to understand these effects efforts have mainly focused on the etic perspectives of the pickers hence making them passive actors. The article therefore investigated the social meanings of the basket among the tea pickers from an emic perspective. In specific the article investigated the social meanings of the basket among the tea pickers, the lived experiences of the tea pickers and their subsequent coping strategies. The study was guided by the social construction theory and the interpretative phenomenological analysis theoretical framework. The study adopted an ethnographic research design in which data was collected from seventeen respondents who were selected through convenience. The study utilized in-depth interviews and FGDS methods of data collection. The data collected was transcribed ad verbatim and thematically analyzed. The study found out that the basket was constructed as a husband, bread winner, lifetime burden, overloaded vehicle and as lifetime companion. The lived experiences centered on spouse separation and single parenthood, school dropout, HIV/AIDS and early marriages. As a consequence the study found out that most of the tea pickers responded to alcoholism, joined into self-help groups while others resorted in normalizing pain and suffering. In this regard the article concluded that in a bid to mitigate the social and economic effects of tea and tea picking it is imperative to primarily focus on the social constructions of the basket among the tea pickers while incorporating their lived experiences as the first step into solution searching.

**Keywords:** Social construction, school dropout, social meanings.

### Introduction



<sup>1</sup> In the picture are men with the tea picking baskets. They are indeed the empty full baskets that define and characterize the life and times of every tea picker. In their emptiness rests the full reality of the pickers lived experiences. These can only be understood by delving into their everyday sociology.

The silence of a basket is full of answers. With every rising sun, it is subjected to a tough, rigid and woeful shoulder back where it rests awaiting its fill with fresh, green tea leaves. It carries with it a story which it heavily bears and tells not. The pain that its master thrives in, the torture that its mistress purrs through and the tragedy they sustain is a story the basket knows in spick and span. The society in which these tea pickers live have the tiniest of idea as to why each daybreak finds them with picking baskets on their backs. It bothers not to seek a reason behind the constant tea picking despite the change of times. Nonchalantly, if asked, they conclude that it's a lifestyle of quests to survival and economic well-being. However, the basket and its carrier bears a bitter pill of truth that they tell in whispers. Listen.

When a man wakes up on each sunrise, his focus is to pass his day to its end by filling up his basket. This vicious cycle is a life he has been subjected to and it offers no alternative. The basket must be filled by a hard day work of picking tea in the plantations lest his household sleeps hungry. That might sound rational and intuitive. However, picking tea has its untold story. The heavy basket bruises his back and his fingers prick. He walks between wet tea bushes to pick the finest and mature leaf. He fills a basket and has to fill another in a bid to meet his requirement. But how did it end up this way? Perplexing is the answer.

Life throws unto us battles that we have no idea on how to fight. These battles are responsibilities for a man. As the society asks of him, he should adequately provide for his family requirements without fail or excuse. A man must be a faithful provider to his family despite the condition of the day. As such, he desperately wakes up in the morning dew and walks hastily into the fields before the dew dries off. If it does, his picking becomes hard and more tiresome. When the rainy season sets in, he is not to be excused. When in the fields, rains and drizzles find him unsheltered. Unfortunately, he has no choice or chance in this. He has to continue picking to fill his basket, one after another. His daily wage must be met despite the circumstances. His children, who are undergoing education need to stay in class by being provided with school fees. Failure to it, they may be sent back home and, sadly, end up picking tea to top up to their required school fees.

A loving and diligent father would dread such and will have to pick tea, despite the bruised and paining shoulders. Soon after fees are cleared, he is required to settle rent arrears as well as feed his humble family. This calls for more hours in the fields, painful backs and constant colds owing to the rains that fall on him. With each basket filled comes a short-lived relief. With each rise of the sun comes a distress. He needs to make ends meet. He has a heavy load to bear. When it becomes unbearable, he seeks a relief elsewhere. He goes to share his pain and suffering with other tea-picking men each evening. Then, in bid to relieve themselves the burden, they get trapped by alcoholism. Paradoxically, they find some relief as they squander their hard earned money. This habit repeatedly becomes a toxic addiction. Sadly, their woes are partially solved by the basket that lies behind their backs from dawn to dusk. The tea picking woman is subject to the basket's woes too. Despite the society's view of a woman as a weak gender, reality has it that in such stereotypes, she is faced with challenges of motherhood and being a faithful wife. With the upheaval that reigns in her social fabric, men give up on their father responsibility. As such, many women end up bringing up their children single-handedly. In some cases, due to lack of fees, the girl child drops out of school first and amid the societal tantrums, they end up in teenage pregnancies and end up becoming single mothers. Each morning, they wake up to the call of provision and sustenance. With their young kids, they hurriedly carry the basket on their backs with a determination to ensure their children get their basic needs. Even when the body feels weak, the spirit fights to keep strong. They overwork their weak bodies and end up in despair.

As their male counterparts, as they seek to lessen their burdens through alcoholism, they end up mispending their hard earned pennies. Women, who have their place at home expect provision from the same men. Resultantly, misunderstandings arise in families and end up in family wrangles and persistent domestic violence. In their desire to ensure the family is provided for, they sustain severe physical and psychological injuries. When aid is not forthcoming, they result into carrying the basket and crawl into the fields in order to feed their family, amid their suffering. A mother's love for her children will force them to pick tea, each day despite the pain on their backs and the torture from their spouses. When the hard work is not promising, they lie in distress and worry. Many, in quest for consolation, end up in drinking dungeons and wallow in alcoholism at the expense of their family.

Therefore, the basket is viewed as the only help available to ensure the socio-economic requirements are met. However, since it only offers a short-termed solution, it is subject to an endless quest for survival. It silently listens, shoulders and elucidates the woes of a tea picker. As I pondered on the tea basket the more I reflected on studies that have mainly fixated on the situation of the workers on the plantations, including the history of their recruitment, conditions of work and life, experience of ethnic discrimination, as well as living conditions of the tea workers (Jayawardena, 2013).

Other academics have delved into finding the social economic conditions of small holder out growers in tea farming (Lighton, 2014); (Indika, 2015). In Kenya studies have also focused on the challenges facing the small holder farms in a view to mitigate the myriad challenges facing the sector (Kagira, 2012). To further understand the Kenyan tea farming situations scholars have engrossed on financial inclusion and its impacts on the small holder farms. The studies reveal that there is a critical level of inclusion but marked with little education on financial literacy that intern places the farmers into increased economic complications (Kalunda, 2013).

As a result of these momentous fronts in dealing with important aspects of the tea plantation sector, studies have positioned on the effects of tea picking from a social economic and political perspective. In specific studies have subsumed on the experiences of tea workers from an etic perspective. However, there is a missing link on the lived experiences of the tea pickers from an emic perspective. The neglected reality points to the need to focus on the everyday sociology of the tea pickers. At a glance of every tea plantation is the vivid picture of men and women carrying the tea picking baskets on their backs. To fully rationalize on the lived experiences of tea workers from an emic perspective the tea picking basket becomes a critical entry point. In a bid to conceptualize these taken for granted reality the researcher grapples with the following questions; how do the tea pickers construct reality about the tea picking basket? Does it have the same meanings as those that bump into our eyes? What does the basket carrier go through on daily basis? What copying strategies are adopted to deal with the lived experiences?

In line with the social construction ontology realities are socially constructed; realities are constructed through language; social processes sustain knowledge, and reflexivity in human beings is emphasized. Society is viewed as existing both as a subjective and objective reality. The postulation guided the researcher on the intrinsic need to find the actual construction of the basket as constructed by the tea picker. Social constructionists focus on meaning and power. Meaning is not a property of the objects and events themselves, but a construction. Meaning is the product of the prevailing cultural frame of social, linguistic, discursive and symbolic practices (Cojocar, 2012)

Persons and groups interacting together in a social system form, over time, concepts or mental representations of each other's actions. These concepts eventually become habituated into reciprocal roles played by the actors in relation to each other. The roles are made available to other members of society to enter into and play out; the reciprocal interactions are said to be institutionalized (Cojocaru, 2012). In this process of institutionalization, the meaning is embedded in society. Knowledge and people's conception (and belief) of what reality is becomes embedded in the institutional fabric of society (Andrews, 2012). Social construction approach focuses on meanings and power. Meaning is not a property of the objects and events themselves but a product of construction. Meaning is a product of the prevailing cultural frame of social linguistic discursive and symbolic practices. As human beings, we do not respond to physical objects and events themselves, but we respond to the meaning of the events (Alexandra, 2014). Indeed from the erudite postulation and in a bid to gain insightful understanding on the everyday sociology of the tea pickers then it of paramount significance not to stop at the physical object of the "basket" but to delve into the specific meanings and constructions they associate with the basket.

The Social Construction Approach aims to account for how a phenomenon is socially constructed through perceptions, thoughts language and beliefs. In common with constructionists, interpretivists in general focus on the process by which meanings are created, negotiated, sustained and modified (Schwandt, 2003). Hence in a bid to exhume on taken for granted realities on the tea basket the researcher took guidance from the social construction ontology and the interpretative phenomenological analysis with an aim to fully delve into the world of the tea picker.

## Methods

This article adopted the ethnographic research design. The ethnographic research design safeguarded an indistinct roadmap through which the participant's actions were viewed. It was key in outlining the participant's everyday realities within their diverse settings. The ethnographic research design was also resourceful to the article as it allowed the researcher to collect first-hand information and hence build a deeper understanding of what the research target population does in their day-to-day life and specifically in their natural context<sup>2</sup>. Equally the ethnographic research was pivotal for the collection of the much desirable qualitative data because it allowed the researcher write about the research participants along specific cultural context such as "language<sup>3</sup>, rituals, economic and political structures, life stages, interactions and communication styles" (Creswell, 2008).

For this qualitative and ethnographic study the researcher collected primary data from a sample of 17 participants who were conveniently selected from within the tea picking farms. In such the researcher selected respondents who were accessible and met the requirements of the research and were willing to participate. The study population included both men and women tea pickers and their field supervisor's. The researcher conducted in-depth oral interviews with all the selected participants with the aid of probing questions that ensured the enquiry gathered the much needed in-depth understanding on the everyday sociology of the participants. Two FGDs were conducted each having at least five members. These was made possible through administration of open-ended and unstructured interviews that allowed collection of a wide range of responses to ensure probing that allowed the much needed in-

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<sup>2</sup> Natural environment refers to the actual plantations where the researcher met the research participants who were in their daily activity of picking tea. This is critical as it ensured that the researcher was able to observe the reality as told by the participants.

<sup>3</sup> The accurate words or *ad verbatim* as used by the participants in describing their world.

depth understanding (Lewis, 2015). The first group discussion comprised of four women who were tea pickers in an out grower farm in *samoeli village* in Nandi county, they were of the ages between 20-40 years. The second comprised of five members who were men between the ages of 25-40 years. The men were from the same village.

Data analysis includes data management. It is a long process that began right at the first step of designing research questions and continued to the end of this article. From the onset of this article, several analytical QDA<sup>4</sup> decisions were made, which include the choice of literature reviewed, the theory that guided this study, the methods adopted and questions to ask and whom to ask. Similarly the researcher continued making some analysis by systematically reading through each group of transcript and making line-by-line analysis. In this the researcher was interested in identifying and highlighting key aspects that indicated they are examples of some thematic idea on the key questions of study. These aspects were first obtained from the participant's direct voices hence informing the much looked-for emic understanding. The researcher grouped similar analytic codes into categories which finally enabled the determination of relevant themes related to the key study questions. The Final interpretation was made as guided by both the social construction ontology and the interpretative phenomenological analysis.

## Results

The findings in this section are largely based on the participant's perceptions and specific constructions about the tea basket. I hence obliged to record thematic concerns on how the participant's constructed reality on the tea basket. The identified thematic concerns were then examined and the different cases compared to get the meanings of the topic of study (Lewis, 2015).

### The Tea Basket As a husband

The basket was seen as a husband<sup>5</sup> as it ensured respondents were provided for and could get their basic needs. Through the basket the respondents got their basic needs and hence became go about their day to day life. Emily a single lady of thirty two years, who is a class eight dropout earning between three hundred and five hundred shillings a day narrates;

*"You see my son these men when problems arrive home they just run away and go pick the young girls of town where they drink alcohol. Now when the husband is not there to provide for his family I must pick the basket which now becomes the husband and indeed the head of the family".*

When probed further on why the basket is the head of the family she says

*"Now you see through picking tea you get the money needed to run your family, you can buy food, pay rent and other life demands".*

Naliaka a single female respondent aged thirty five years who is a form three dropout observed that;

*"My husband left home seven years ago, from that time this basket has ensured my children go to school, I get food other life demands. You see through the basket I am provided for".*

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<sup>4</sup> QDA; Qualitative Data Analysis.

<sup>5</sup> Husband, in the natural context a husband is seen to be the head of a family and too the provider. In this case the basket is seen as a husband as it takes the role of a provider and through it the respondents meet their basic needs.

Similar views were reverberated by Mary a single lady aged forty years;

*“The basket ensures that I get my daily needs, to me it is the ultimate bread winner as it ensures that my children have food on the table. The basket secures our daily needs and all that I need for in life”.*

Cheptoo a single lady aged fifty confirmed deeply that of the basket is a provider when she narrated;

*“I dropped out of school after class eight, I have now have three children. All my entire life the basket has been my husband. It pays my rent, buy our food and too helps me pay y children’s schools fees.*



### **Basket as a bread winner**

The basket was also understood as a bread winner in that it provided the means that allowed the tea pickers support their families. Njeri forty years of age says;

*“Through these basket me and my husband who are tea pickers are provided for and get our daily bread. These tea basket is like a parent that provides his/her children”.*

Her views are further reinforced by Susan who strongly observes;

*“For the last thirty two years the basket has ensured that I get my daily needs, I have educated my children from the basket and even now I support the younger ones and my grandchildren. To me the basket is simply a daily a breadwinner”.*

### **Basket as a lifetime burden**

The basket was seen to be a lifetime burden forever being part of the of the tea pickers life. The basket was identical to pickers and too that part they cannot do away with no matter their desires. Jane a female respondent of thirty three years, who is a class five dropout narrates;

*“My son inside this basket there are serious issues and we carry it every single day”*

When probed further she says,

*“These basket is a load we carry every day, you see, inside it you have rent, you have your children, you have your food, school fees and simply just say everything you need as a human being and science there is no other way I just have to carry it every single day and perhaps for the rest of my life”.*

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<sup>6</sup> In the picture is the researcher in a group discussion with female tea pickers.

Janet a married woman aged thirty five years with class eight education shared Jane's experience:

*"For me the basket is like your skin, no matter how much you try you cannot jump out of it. This life has so many problems and since you cannot run away from them you just have to live with them".*

*Silent! As if numb, then narrates;*

*"If I may ask you, what can I do with eight children? They want to eat, sometimes medication and like any other go to school. As a result of all these I just have to get glued to the basket and try just settle these life events".*

### **The basket, an overloaded Vehicle**



To other tea pickers the basket was associated with an overloaded vehicle. Indeed it did not matter its carrying capacity and the damage caused as long as it moved from one point to another. Juma a married man of forty years elucidates;

*"My son the issues that I have gone through with these basket cannot be told even in a year. This basket is like a car that is overloaded and cannot take anything onboard.*

Stops, silently looking at the tea field as if getting answers, deeply sighs then he says

*"I have carried these basket for over twenty five years, my hands are bruised my shoulders and back pain but ahead awaits a family eager for food, shelter, clothing and school fees. I have no Sunday or Monday! My last twenty five years have passed by behind these fields and the unforgiving basket upon my shoulder.*

Juma's reality is lived by Waithera who strongly holds the view that;

*"My son for you these is just a basket but to every tea picker there is a compelling reason that makes them carry it on their backs every single day. Some do it even for fifty years or even for a life time. With rains or scorching sun, the basket takes its position on a pickers back.*

Researcher; what are some of the reasons

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<sup>7</sup> An overloaded truck. In reality the truck may never tell the tale as it is perhaps silenced by nature! What would it say if it were to talk? Is it okay? To the driver and the general public the truck seems okay and moving but if it were to talk which unfortunately it will never, I doubt its reply would be similar to that which begets the eyes.

Waithera: In deep silence, and her looks describe a drown in an ocean of thoughts, looks at me and says,

*“My son these is a car that is overloaded with the everyday suffering of a tea picker, I was married and we got blessed with six children. As life got hard with child upbringing my husband left. I was left with no choice other than picking the basket to ensure the survival of my children”.*

Silent and in deep thoughts

*“I need to feed them, I have medical bills that I have to sort as I must take medication every single day, I have to pay my rent and pay school fees. Similarly I need to do the household duties and also at times take care of my aging mother who now lives with me. All these and many more I have to do despite the very little pay I get from tea picking and my ailing health. My son these is a car that I do not know the stage to alight at. It is perhaps on a highway to death”.*

A similar view is strongly held by Mwangi a married man who re-counts

*“I can simply say this basket is a car used by any tea picker to get to his/her destination. I say this because it is the only means around this area that we can use to address our needs such as food clothing and getting rent. In this area if you do not board these car then what will you do? You have no education and again as you see around this is the only office”*

Mwangis reality is mirrored by Amos who says;

*“As a man you have to take care of your family. And like you when you want to go work I know you must board a car, now to me this is the car I board to ensure I meet my manly obligations. Now you see we have so many issues that I must admit these car is always overloaded as it helps me carry all the issues that I must solve every day. Like any full car that cannot carry everyone some of the issues I just leave them and try sort those that I can”.*

Wanjala a twenty six years old man who is married observed that;

*“The basket is just like a car as it is the one that carries the so many issues that I have to go through every day. I come from Western Kenya, now I have to rent a house as I stay with my wife and our seven children. Because I have no much money I cannot afford big house and hence we have to fit in the small two bedroom house. With such I must feed my children, cloth them, take them to school, meet their medical bills among so many issues. My brother you see even my car is simply overloaded but what options do I have? I cannot alight! I just have to struggle to a point where the older children who at least can write drop out to come help add up to the feeding basket”.*

### **The Basket `as Lifetime Companion**

To other tea pickers the basket was a lifetime companion and was at all times part of their life. Achieng a single lady of thirty two years clearly narrates;

*“You see to me these<sup>8</sup> is a life time companion, It is more than a child, these is because a child is only on your back for a short time of your life, but for the basket it is with you for a life time”.*

Similar views are held cheptoo who holds the view that

*“It’s a lifetime companion as its more than any other partnership that you can walk out, these is because you have to be faithful to it to sort your life demanding issues”.*

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<sup>8</sup> Pointing at the basket which is hosted on her back

Kimtai a twenty eight years old man who is single narrates;  
*"You can divorce your wife if she is bad, I can even go into another relationship but you see my brother even if the basket is bad I have no other option rather than the basket, even if it gets torn I simply get another one and its forever on my back."*

His views are similarly held by kimani a forty eight years old man who says;  
*"My brother once you start picking tea the basket remains part of your life, you have it in the morning when it's cold, daytime under the scorching sun and in the evening chill. You only remove it when you get home and even then it's just next to you"*.

### **Lived Experiences of the Basket**

As eminent from realities and the social constructions of the tea pickers on the basket, it is clear that the tea pickers face many social and economic difficulties which emanate from tea picking. This complications expose the tea pickers to several realities that intern shape their everyday life. Consequently, they become vulnerable to spouse separation, school dropout, early marriages and HIV/AIDS.

#### **Spouse separation and single parenthood**

The basket was greatly referred as a bread winner, lifetime companion and as a husband. Of interest to the researcher was the fact that the respondents who constructed the basket as so were women who were divorced hence picking the care giver roles for their families.

Emily a single lady of thirty two years narrates;  
*"Life in these fields is not easy, with the pressure to support a family's basic needs with very little salary my husband left to enjoy life in town. Most of the times we fought and quarreled to the last point when we parted ways, I now have to take care of my children and ensure their basic needs are met no matter how hard"*.

Similar reality is lived by Mary a forty year old single lady when she says;  
*"You know men are that way<sup>9</sup>, once you get children then leave and run away from problems. When life became challenging my husband left to the town leaving me to support and feed his children"*.

As if reading from the same script Cheptoo a fifty years old single lady narrated;  
*"There is nothing you can do to a man, you see when there is pressure at home they go to the centers to take alcohol, when he comes home he becomes violent as he has no money to buy food or meet other home needs. Such life is not good hence I saw it better to struggle alone with my children"*

### **School Dropout**

As significantly pointed by the construction of the basket as an overloaded vehicle and as a lifetime burden a vivid picture of increased socio-economic constrains is drawn. The reality is brought to life by Jane who is forty years class five dropout when she asks;  
*"How could I go to school when we could not afford food to eat"?*

In a similar reality as if explaining Janes question, Naliaka a form two dropout narrates;

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<sup>9</sup> Men are that way, the respondent normalizes the event of men abdicating their roles and responsibilities. These gives a hint into understanding why majority of the women in the area are single and left for caregiving roles.

*“You see my mother could not afford to send me to school, being a first born I had to stop going to school to help my mother with the household duties”.*

As if scripted Achieng a form two dropout elucidates;

*“With increased pressure at home my mother despite her wish to see me through school, she could not manage with my seven siblings. Most of my siblings too had to drop out after class eight as it was not possible to afford secondary education”.*

### **The basket and early marriages**

Education and school going has too been affected by the financial constraints and the environmental predisposition that seems to encourage majority into tea picking. The reality is lived by Janet who narrates;

*“You see with these environment it is difficult to concentrate in school, after class eight I joined tea picking and because I was young two years later I got married. I now have six kids, and there is no other way to provide for my family other than me and my wife picking tea”.*

Similar reality is lived by Mary a class seven dropout who re-counts

*“My son, what would I have done, my parents lived in a two bedroomed house with my siblings. As they grew older and the space became more congested I was left with no option than to get married and move out”.*

Waithera a form two dropout narrates;

*“I got pregnant when I was in form two, my parents could not accept this as it was viewed as an ungodly and a shameful act. With no other hope I had to get married and since we both had no formal education nor employment we had to engage in tea picking.*

### **The Basket and HIV/AIDS**

As elucidated by the social meanings of the basket and largely the resultant lived experiences the tea picking environment is marked with a myriad of social problems ranging from divorce, spouse separation and alcoholism which eventually act as pre disposing factors to HIV/AIDS. Kiptanui a male supervisor in a malty national tea farm profoundly narrates;

*“HIV/AIDS remains a great complication in the tea sector, you see we provide housing in terms of divisions within the farm. We have four divisions each having four villages. One village houses up to three hundred tea pickers. With such an environment there are numerous cases of unprotected sexual behaviors which result in high prevalence of the virus”.*

When probed further he says;

*“You see most of the tea pickers are either divorced, separated or not married at all. In such they end up having relationships or even multiple sexual partners which predisposes them to HIV/AIDS. The reality is as recorded in our dispensaries on infections”.*

Similar views are held by Nasike a field supervisor in an out grower farm who narrates;

*“You see these tea farms are vast and full of the tea bushes, most of the workers who are not married engage in unprotected sexual relationships thus putting them at risk of infection”.*

When probed further he says

*“You see most of the women are single and the men are not married, in such they engage in multiple sexual relationships. With such environments then the spread of HIV/AIDS is very high.*

The notion is captured by a conversation between the researcher and Kimtai a male respondent aged twenty eight years who narrates;

*“Now my wife went away, how would you expect me to stay without a woman?”*

When probed further on the ABCs of HIV/AIDS prevention he says

*“Man<sup>10</sup>! If a crock cannot stay with one hen how do you expect a man to be satisfied with one woman?”*

Researcher: What do you think of Condom Use?

*Kimtai “Bro<sup>11</sup>, that is a European way to prevent a african from feeling sexual pleasure, how can one ask you to eat a sweet when it is covered. My brother there is no more HIV/AIDS people already took all of it and now it is out of stock”.*

Similar reality is reflected by Kimani male respondent of thirty four years who says;

*“My brother a man cannot stay like a tree, even if you are not married you still have your desires. With this you have to find a way to address them either in town or just here at work”.*

When probed further on the use of protection he says

*“My brother when will you run for that and the opportunity has just presented itself. You know even the virus is caught unawares at that time and by the time it realizes you are done”.*

### **The Baskets Lived Experiences and its Everyday Action in Relation to Tea Picking**

Undeniably the tea pickers face many social problems as they go about their everyday life. As a consequence, they come up with various coping strategies that help them mitigate through the realities. The strategies adopted are lived through;

#### **The Basket and alcoholism**



Mwangi a male respondent aged thirty four years narrates;

*“My brother you see a man must look for his friends so that they can take one or two as they talk and think about life.*

<sup>10</sup> Man, a term used to refer to age mates in the sheng language. The sheng language is borrowed from Kiswahili and often used by the youth.

<sup>11</sup> Bro; used to mean a brother.

When probed further he says

*"You see now our houses are small now you have to come and pass time so that the kids go to bed, in such you take one or two with your friends as too say sorry to your body for a hard days job"*

Similar views are lived by Wanjala a male respondent aged twenty six who says;

*"You see this life is not easy, we go through a lot and hence we must relax our mind with one or two to ensure we retain our sanity.*

As if speaking to Wanjala, Kimtai a male respondent aged twenty eight years narrates;

*"Out of the hard life we go through, to me I drink for alcohol lifts my spirits high and I feel free, alcohol gives me the courage to face life.*

When probed further he narrates;

*"Back at home my family thinks I am a failure band do not think. To avoid thinking about them and to move on with my life I drink for it gives me the courage to face their problems".*

Amos a married man aged fifty two years elucidates;

*"In this life, you face many issues. Once you conceive all these thoughts in your mind, you have to take some alcoholic drinks to free yourself and feel happy. Alcohol makes you forget your problems and offers peace in a way that you can enjoy life with your friends"*

### **Joining into self-help groups**

To other tea pickers the basket provided a great opportunity for them to engage into self-help groups that provided them an opportunity to address their financial uncertainties. Susan a married woman aged thirty two years narrates;

*"My son, you see most women face the same problems, for us a group acts a social security as we can take small loans that can allow us meet our daily needs and requirements.*

A similar reality is lived by Achieng a single lady aged thirty two tells;

*"You see I do not have money to go to banks for a loan, now I joined other women and now am able to keep my savings and pick small loans that I can take care of my children school fees".*

Mary a forty year old single female narrates;

*"You see now that I am the bread winner in my family, I have to save something in a group to be used as school fees and too when any emergencies comes such as medication".*

When probed further Mary narrates;

*"You see I have children and no one to help me bring them up. I hence have to save some small amount of what I earn to be able to raise my children's school fees as I would not wish them such a life".*

### **Normalization of pain and suffering**

The major postulation in the sociology of pain and suffering is that Human beings spend most of their times trying to avoid suffering as it is perceived a treat to their sense of self. In a bid to avoid suffering most tea pickers seemed to accept and normalize their reality as a strategy to manage and move on with life despite the myriad challenges they faced. Cheptoo a fifty years old single lady elucidates;

*“You see my now I have all these<sup>12</sup> children and so many responsibilities, I cannot go back to school since my time has passed on. With such I have no otherwise other than to accept this life and move on”.*

Similar actuality is lived by Susan a thirty two year old married lady who narrates;  
*“What can you do, can I throw away my children? Again who can help you with our children, to me it’s only death that will separate me from the basket! This is just the way my life is and there is nothing I can do.*

As if confirming Susan’s reality Waithera a fifty years old divorced lady says;  
*“Son if it was written that I would die in this situation then I have accepted for there is very little I can do, I have children and a family to protect and as you can see there is no other way in this area to meet my demands. I just have to accept my fate”.*

Similarly Kimani a forty eight years old single man says;  
*“My son man must accept his reality or be destroyed by it. This mine and if I lie to myself of any hope I will only stress myself and end up frustrated”.*

And as is summarizing Kimani’s reality, Mwangi thirty four years old married man elucidates;  
*“I am already in this and such is my life, my father and mother were tea pickers, I became a tea picker, It seems this is our fate around these area and not unless I commit suicide there is nothing I can do to escape these” (pointing at the flat tea table).*

## **Discussion**

The researcher at this point remains nostalgic to the realities lived by the tea pickers, indeed what exactly is in a tea picking basket? Does it carry the same meanings as gets our eyes on a daily basis? In what ways do the meanings influence the day to day lives of the tea pickers? As I grappled with this taken for granted realities the more I focused on the main dispatch in the sociology of pain suffering that despite pain being a medical problem, it is an everyday experience shaped by both the individuals and their socio-cultural context. Human beings spend most of their times trying to avoid suffering as it is perceived as a threat to their sense of self. Suffering can be physical, social and existential. The subject on social suffering brings an accumulation of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the overwhelming injuries that social forces can inflict on human experience. In specific social suffering results from what political, economic and institutional power does to people and reciprocally from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems.

In present-day society it is this forces that govern how individuals make sense of their suffering and also how they cope with it. Political and economic power suffering is ventilated through policies that have over time left the tea pickers at a disadvantaged point. Despite the tea industry fetching great incentives in terms of profits and price, great disincentives are felt by the tea pickers who get very little pay for the hard labor. Specifically pickers in Nandi tea are divided into two, those who pick for the multinational large scale companies and the out grower small scale farms. The company pickers are payed thirteen shillings and sixty three cents per kilo while the small scale out grower pickers are payed an average of eight shillings per kilo. As a result of this many tea pickers have continuously been exposed to social

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<sup>12</sup> Cheptoo is single with seven children. The word these is used to refer to the number of her children.

economic risks that have intern seen them vulnerable as they endeavor to meet their means of self-sufficiency.

Determined to secure their basic needs such as food, rent fees, medication, and proper clothing a myriad of suffering is lived by the tea pickers. This is ventilated through financial hardship and poverty, family tensions and breakdown, early pregnancies and marriages, spread of HIV/AIDS, high rates of involuntary school drop outs and increased loss of hope in life hence abandoning themselves to life as it is.

As a result of these realities the basket has largely been constructed as a husband. Tea pickers holding the view have mostly gone through divorce. In such the basket is seen as a substitute to the husband who would have occasionally been the provider. Through tea picking the women and their children are provided for through the wages earned. Similarly women who have undergone early pregnancy hold a similar construction as they believe the basket is a life time companion. In such the basket is seen to take a husbands position who would have otherwise been a lifetime companion. To other tea pickers the basket was seen as a bread winner. Such construction is inspired by the baskets ability to provide for their means of self-sufficiency. Indeed through the basket they are able to earn food, fix their children's education requirements as well as other economic demanding events.

To other tea pickers the basket was constructed as lifetime burden. To them the realities in life were inescapable and hence the only choice was through tea picking. Indeed life did not provide any option rater that of picking tea and hence the basket was constructed as a burden that was to last an entire lifetime. In a similar fashion the basket was constructed as an overloaded vehicle. In such the tea pickers experiences and realities were symbolic to a car that was overloaded. In reality an overloaded car as no option despite its abused capacity, such is the reality of the tea pickers who have no option to the realties they face in their day to day life.

Indeed pain and suffering is as a result of what political, economic and institutional power does to people and reciprocally from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems. The reciprocal relation is lived by tea pickers who coped with the reality through alcoholism. To these pickers alcohol was seen to be an escape route from the stressful environment that was full of poverty, further alcohol allowed them build courage and lift their dampened spirits while too presenting a rear opportunity to socialize with friends. To tea pickers who found no solace in alcohol resorted to joining into self-help groups that indeed provided an opportunity to save towards the responsibilities that waited them. The groups allowed for opportunities to loans that allowed them see their children to school and too acted insurance in times of medical risks. Similar to alcohol the groups too presented an opportunity to wind out and socialize with friends. To other pickers normalization of pain and suffering allowed for the acceptance of their reality and too an opportunity to shut down the normal world as their situation appeared permanent. To the pickers there was no other world apart from picking tea and hence with normalization of their experience became normal and them hence abandoning themselves to life as it is.

## Conclusion

From the study it is clear that the basket is a way of life for the tea pickers and as a result the basket holds an ocean of realities and experiences lived by the tea pickers. Hence in this regard to understand the tea pickers and tea picking it is pertinent that efforts be centered on the emic understandings of the tea pickers on the basket. Similarly from the study findings

the meanings held by the tea pickers are inspired by the experiences they go through in their everyday life and it is from a combination of these that the various behavioral copying strategies such as alcoholism are adopted. Therefore, to realize any meaningful change it is important that policies aimed at mitigating the social economic effects of tea and tea picking should primarily incorporate the emic understandings and lived experiences of the tea pickers.

### **The Way Forward**

From the study it is clear on the need for a full study that will adopt a wider sample frame. These will allow for more in-depth information that will widen the understanding on the social meanings of the basket and resultantly widen the scope on the lived experiences of the basket among the tea pickers. Similarly a full scale study will be pivotal in ensuring deeper conceptualization of the copying strategies adopted by the tea pickers in their everyday life. Finally a full study will give deeper in-depth understanding that is not only of serious policy ramifications but too of deeper literature buildup.

### **Conflicts of interest**

Author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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