Neoliberal reforms in Africa aim to create and consolidate neoliberal market societies. Such restructuring thus targets not just economy, but also polity, society and culture. While the economic and political repercussions of neoliberalism have been studied extensively, neoliberalism as a cultural programme has received less scholarly attention. This thesis therefore analyses the cultural political economy of embedding neoliberalism in a country via a restructuring of the prevailing norms, values, orientations and practices (hereafter: NVOPs).

It is argued that the neoliberal reforms have to undermine, overwrite and displace pre-existing non-neoliberal NVOPs among the population, and foster NVOPs that are in line with neoliberal ideology and its goal of market society. Particularly noteworthy is the attempt to change moral norms of behaving and relating to each other. To examine how this process works and what is political about it, Uganda, which is regarded as the African country that has adopted neoliberal reforms most extensively, has been selected as the case study.

The thesis uses mainly a moral economy approach to analyse the process of moral restructuring in Uganda since 1986, when the 1981-86 guerrilla war ended and the current ruling party, the National Resistance Movement, rose to power. It investigates how the reforms have changed the moral economy of rural agricultural trade in greater Bugisu in eastern Uganda. It studies which NVOPs were promoted by the reforms and how these have interacted with and reshaped the prevailing NVOPs. It also analyses the link between moral economy and political economy aspects in the process. The research tracks, explains and interprets the changes in the NVOPs by exploring people’s experiences, views and interpretations regarding the changing moral economy of trade. It does so by tracing the history of rural trade relationships and practices in the country. The relationships between people’s orientations, motivations, actions, justifications and explanations and the respective action context are also explored. The research draws on about 180 individual and group interviews which were held between October 2008 and March 2009. These interviews were complemented by some observations of market trading and attention to news and debates in newspapers and periodicals.

The key research finding is that the neoliberal reforms and their effects have negatively affected the trade relationships and practices between smallholder farmers and traders. Since the onset of the reforms, face-to-face rural trade practices have been characterised by (a) higher levels and changing forms of ‘malpractice’, and (b) a respective modification of their moral underpinnings. Overall, the thesis offers a field research-based analysis of (i) the cultural political economy of neoliberal reform, (ii) the rise of the neoliberal moral economy to relative dominance in a specific locality and the implications thereof for the people affected by the process, and (iii) the moral properties of neoliberal capitalist markets in the study area. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the implications of the work for study of neoliberalism, market society and moral economy in Uganda and beyond. The planned submission of the thesis is early 2011.

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