

# **A Mutually Complementary Relationship? The Condition of Single Women in Both Village and City in Kenya**

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## **Introduction**

It is clear that the recent drastic urbanization in Africa that promotes economic growth and has changed the forms of family and people's life styles.

In this paper, I would like to analyze the changes concerning single women's life in Kenya. Firstly, I will focus on single women's situation in rural Luo society where customary regulation and beliefs strongly exist. Secondly I will tackle on the elite single women's life style in Nairobi. Elite single women employ single women from rural areas as maids or 'house girl'. I could observe that they form a family-like relationship and depend on each other. I attempt to show these single women's life by combining the ethnographic data from rural Luo and city in Kenya.

## **Research Area and the people**

I have been doing anthropological research among the Luo of Kenya since 1995. The Luo is Western Nilotic people; inhabit the shores of Lake Victoria and its interior regions in Western Kenya. The population is 4.04million [Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2009]. People plant maize, a variety of beans, sweet potatoes and groundnuts. Sugarcane is not popular in this area as a cash crop. They do not keep many head of cattle, the average being less than five cattle per household. Many people engage in small businesses: women sell crops and home products at the local markets, while some men sell daily commodities, such as soap, cooking oil, bread, biscuits, notebooks, pencils, at the markets and kiosks, or engage in other work in towns and cities such as Homa Bay, Rongo, Kisumu or Nairobi.

## **Luo Society**

Luo society is strongly patrilineal and polygamy are relatively common, especially in rural areas. Normally, Luo people prefer to marry someone who has been introduced by a close relative or neighbour. The payment of bride wealth is a necessary condition for the approval of marriage in the community. On the other hand, the return of bride wealth is a condition required for divorce (Wilson 1954: 138; Ocholla-Ayayo 1986: 141). As with the Nuer, Luo

marital unions are considered to last even after the husband dies, which is why a widow continues to live on her late husband's property even when it has been inherited by his sons or brothers (Evans-Pritchard 1938: 319).

Marital life in the Luo community is considered to belong inside the compound (sing. *dala*), the property of a married man with authority to regulate members of his compound. Typically, two to three generations live within the compound where are a married man, his wives, their children and grandchildren. The word '*dala*' means both the compound where residents live and the residential group itself. Luo village consists of these *dala* and most of them have the common ancestors.

They also conduct '*ter*', which is the so-called leviratic relationship in Social Anthropology.

### **Luo's Customary regulations and beliefs**

In the compound, each wife and sons have a personal hut. These huts are situated in the order of birth for sons and that of marriage for wives. This order is called '*duong*', and Luo people believe that they may suffer misfortunes if they do not follow this ordering. Thus, '*duong*' is considered very important throughout daily life in the compound. At the beginning of every seasonal agricultural activity, at the death of close relatives, at the birth and death of one of their own children or on other extraordinary occasions, members of the compound are obligated to engage in special sexual intercourse in the order of this hierarchy. Failing to do so, or so they deeply believe, will result in *chira* (misfortune) brought against them by a supernatural power.

To control behaviors and keep peace in this polygamous residential group, there are other customary regulations. People say those are 'Luo's way in our life'. The regulation are known as '*kwer*' and '*chik*'.

*kwer* is the rule of prohibition. The rules that 'you have to do' are called *chik*. The Luo say that *kwer* causes *chira*' (Abe 1981: 127). Furthermore, as Abe and Parkin mentioned, '*chira*' is concerned with both sexual intercourse and seniority (Parkin 1978: 149-164, Abe 1981: 128). If people behave out of those rules, people believe *chira* will come in form of punishment. That is why the fear of *chira* makes people follow those rules. The sexual relationship out of marriage is extremely prohibited. That is why there are this kind of customary regulation and punishment.

### **The position of men and women**

In Luo society, boys start to have their own huts in their father's compounds when they become 14-15years old. They get married in these huts and then make their independent *dala* when their wives start to be given birth baby boy. A man becomes an adult when he has built a compound of his own with his father as a witness.

In the case of a woman, she gets married when she becomes 16-17 years old. And then she is regarded as an adult after she has given birth to a boy. A woman has the right to use land for agricultural or other purposes only after she has married. Conversely, her sons will inherit parts of their father's land through their own mothers. Women also can get a space where they can be buried at the husbands' home. That is saying that women can get land and space to live only through marriage. This implies that, un-married women have a lot of difficulties integrating in this society. Due to such a limited condition for women, most widows remain at their late husband's home and start to have *ter*-relationships with pro-husbands. Through *ter*-relationships, widows maintain or increase late husband's family members in his land. Very few widows go back to their natal home or go away from their late husband's land because it is so difficult to live without land to stay and dig for their living [SHIINO 2005].

Since the reforms in Kenyan Law in 2010, women also get a land right. But, because this Kenyan Law is opposed to most of customary laws, women should apply to the court if they want to get their land. It is not easy for villagers who are not good at writing and do not have enough money to pay for lawyers to appeal in the court.

### **The position of single mother and kids in rural society**

There is a strong moral belief that, mature women<sup>1</sup> must have husbands. Moreover, it is believed that unmarried mature women may bring misfortunes especially to their married female relatives, because unmarried women are believed to harbour a strong wish for a husband even when they die. For this reason, people fear the death of an unmarried woman. In fact, the spirit of a dead unmarried woman is the most feared in Luo society. In the event that an unmarried woman dies, her bereaved family tries to find a man who will accept her dead body as his wife.

Traditionally getting pregnant before marriage is also prohibited. The child out of marriage is called *kirumira*, and who is highly discriminated in the village. If a mother get married to a man with her *kirumira*, who does not have good condition and could not inherit land and property as same as any son. Most of the time, a single mother left her baby at her parents' home and she went to marry another man. Before colonization by British, *kirumira* would be killed by a mid-wife on request from the mother's husband.

Since around 1990s, the rate of single mothers has been increasing. There were grandmothers called '*pim*' who stayed with the girls and educated them on sexuality. But after colonization the western school system was introduced and girls started to go to school. Girls lost time with '*pim*' to learn sexuality and adulthood in Luo society. And then girls started to have sexual relationship with boys and men without knowledge of how to protect themselves. This is one of the reasons why nowadays there are higher rates of school dropouts among girl students.

But still because the customary regulation is strong, single mothers' and their children's situation is very hard in the village. Abortion is illegal in Kenya, therefore, many girls go to illegal clinics or traditional doctors to abort but the bad sanitary condition often causes the death of many. Unmarried girl's pregnancy should be highly hidden, so going to the hospital and even burying her is done secretly. Unmarried woman is not supposed to be buried in the father's compound, so the body is buried in the bush.

It is not so easy for a single mother with her kid(s) to get married to another man. The condition is changing in the last 10 years though at a slow pace. As I mentioned, Luo women do not have land rights. Women get a right to stay, right to dig on a land only through their marriage. Unmarried women should look for the space where they can stay and earn for their living. If she does not have special skills to earn money, it is very difficult for them to live in towns. Most of them should attach prostitution to their survival. If she is running a small business, like a kiosk, *hoteli* (diner), or selling fish etc., to raise more income, they have relationships with businessmen [Béné and Merten 2008]

As detailed above, the position of single mother is quite difficult in the village and local towns.

### **Single elite women in Nairobi**

The big modern city like Nairobi has quite different conditions. Here there are many single people who have some different backgrounds and reasons why they are single.

Especially highly educated women have difficulties to find men who match them. Because the women want men who are also highly educated with better salary to match their social position and pride.

Late Professor Wangari Muta Maathai (1940-2011) was the first lady to become a female professor in Kenya. She was born during colonialism but she got several chances to learn abroad, and then she got a doctoral degree. But her husband became very jealous about her career and fame when her social activities were getting active and powerful which influenced a lot of people. He even became her serious political enemy. After fighting in the court they finally divorced [Maathai 2008]. The cause was male-domination, which is still common among most Kenyan men. This idea affects highly educated women a lot. And also these elite women have very strong pride. That is why most of them have difficulties to get partners who match their education and position.

Most of singles that I met in Nairobi either graduated at least college, University with first degree or some with master's degrees. One of them said 'I am looking for a man, but he should fit my CV. At first, I will show him my CV so that he can see whether or not he is fit for me. Another lady told me, 'I am tired of Kenyan men. They are very jealous and they want a lot of things. Basically they think women should do everything at home.'" But it is interesting

that not all single women are unmarried. Some of them gave birth without marriage, others divorced after giving birth.

### **Discussion: The relationship between an elite single woman and ‘house girl/maid’**

These elite single mothers look so proud and self-independent. Are they really managing their life both as mothers and working ladies in the office by themselves? Or do they have somebody assisting them without the kids’ fathers? —Those are ‘house maids’ or ‘house girls’. Most elite women choose women as their ‘house girls’ from the same ethnic group as theirs. They try to look for maids through their relatives in home villages. Most of them say they cannot trust any other tribe other than their own. ‘I cannot ask somebody I do not trust to take care of my children’ one of the women said.

Actually a ‘house girl’ is expected to do a lot of house work—washing clothes, cleaning the rooms, buying food, cooking, washing plates, feeding kids, caring of kids, and helping the kids sleep and so on. Since a ‘house girl’ starts to stay at home to do such work, kids get used to be with her and they become fine even though their real mum is not at home. Even young baby can stay without mother for several nights to weeks. In most cases kids like to sleep with ‘house girl’ even when mother is around. For the elite woman, she goes to work early in the morning and when she comes back home in the evening, she finds her dinner ready, clean rooms and cheerful kids. That is why elite women can leave their kids with ‘house girls’ at home and then they can go out after work for drink and dance with friends.

These women who become ‘house girls’ or ‘house maids’ are mostly single mothers, widows or women who have reasons to leave their natal homes or (late) husbands’ homes. Some women want to run away from customary regulations in the village and, others want to start a new life in a new place where nobody knows about their past. People believe that generally customary regulation can only be effective in the village setting. Most single mothers leave their kids at their parents’ homes or relative’s homes to be ‘house girls’ or ‘house maids’ in towns.

### **Conclusion: Matrifocal ‘Family’?**

As mentioned above, women do not have a right of land ownership except if she can buy it or get married. Generally women have difficulties to be independent herself through working in town if they don’t have at least secondary education. That is why working and staying with elite women and kids is a very good opportunities for uneducated women that cannot stay in the village. As for the elite single mothers, they need ‘house maids’ to go about their life. There is a mutually complementary relationship between elite single mothers and single women from the villages. And since they start to stay together in the same residence, they become ‘family-like’ connected. When they are in trouble, they try to solve each other. For example, when

the house girls' kids, parents or close relatives get sick, elite women give financial and moral support.

They live together just like as a matrifocal family' in which the elite women are the center who have authority and economical power, kids, and 'house girls' as the 'second mothers' for kids in the house. This way they depend on each other. Elite women and single women from the village find their way of life in this type of family life.

But it is obvious that, this mutual relationship is based on the background of Kenya characterized a strong patrilineal ideology and gender bias as well as the big economic and education gap between the village and town elite women. There is strictly patrilineal ideology in the village, but if women enter the highly educated elite course, there is somehow gender equality in terms of salary etc. Looking at the ranking of *The Global Gender Gap Report*, Kenya is 34th, Japan is 104th, and Korea is 117<sup>th</sup> among 142 countries in the world [The Global Gender Gap Report 2014]<sup>2</sup>. It is clear that for any single person, it is not easy to work fully and play the role of a mother at the same time. It can be possible when especially single working mothers have the assistants so-called 'house girls'. As for women with reasons to leave their villages, finding elite women's homes to work is a great opportunity to start a new life.

What is the big difference between Japan and Kenya? It is easy in Kenya to employ 'maids' not only for the rich people but also for working middle class people including primary school teachers. Kenyan elite women can just give birth even though they are not sure about marrying the men. On the other hand, they are so sure about themselves because they have good salaries and they can employ maids to help cater for the kids without fathers. Japanese single women face the big wall when they think about 'their own children' without the role of the father. They have to choose a childless life when they cannot get 'right' men. While Kenyan single mothers never give up searching for the 'right' men. That is the biggest difference between Kenya and Japan. A Kenyan single lady told me 'I am now checking a man from Ghana. He is very intelligent and gentle. He is different from Kenyan men. I got tired of Kenyan men, so I will see men from other countries.'

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The Global Gender Gap Report 2014

<<http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/rankings/>> Accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2015.

## Notes

- 1 In traditional Luo society, there appears to have been seven stages to life. However, due to the decline of certain customs, such as teeth-pulling and shield-making by men, and the effects of western culture, people have stopped paying attention to such initiation rituals. In theory, an adult women is ‘a woman who is mature enough to get married (nyakomoromo kendo)’, but generally, a woman is understood to have attained womanhood when she is married and has a son in the rural Luo community.
- 2 Every year World Economic Forum do research about ‘The Global Gender Gap’ since 2006. They make a framework for capturing the magnitude of gender-based disparities to track their progress. They said ‘The Index benchmarks national gender gaps on economic, political, education and health criteria, and provides country rankings that allow for effective comparisons across regions and income groups.’ (<http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/part-1/> accessed on 30<sup>th</sup> Sep 2015)