

WOMEN IN KENYA AT THE END OF THE UN DECADE

Bonnie Kettel

Afin de spécifier le contexte géographique pour la Conférence Mondiale des Femmes des NU et pour le Forum de 1985, nous avons demandé à Bonnie Kettel d'écrire un aperçu sur le Kenya et les femmes de ce pays. Elle nous fournit des renseignements généraux sur l'histoire de ce pays et sur sa société; elle décrit aussi la condition des femmes dans la société précoloniale et contemporaine du Kenya. Sa discussion sur les femmes de société pastorale est particulièrement intéressante et constitue un défi féministe aux études anthropologiques courantes.

Forum 85 is a small newspaper published in Nairobi for the delegates to the 1985 Non-Governmental World Meeting for Women. On the front page of one issue there is a photograph of a Women's Group from nearby Kiambu. The members have gathered to welcome a busload of NGO delegates to their community. They are dressed carefully, in matching cloths, and their skin glistens with oil. But it is their faces that catch the heart. Their smiles reveal their joy in greeting, and their arms are open. Next to the photograph is a small headline: "Welcome Sisters from the Forum."

At the end of the UN Decade for Women these sisters from Kiambu are still reaching for the future. They live in a country with a per capita income of less than \$400.00 (U.S.) a year, and an annual rate of population growth of 4%, the highest in the world today. There are now over ten million women in Kenya, and the members of the Kiambu Women's Group are like the majority of that population. Eighty-five per cent of Kenyan women live in the rural areas of the country. In the "small farming" sector, which is dominant in the Kenyan rural economy, many households survive on less than \$400.00 a year.¹ Women play a primary role in that subsistence as producers of food and cash crops, and as petty traders.

In 1968, and again in 1971-1972, I worked as a social anthropologist among the

people known as the Tugen in the Baringo District of Kenya. Like so many of my predecessors, I initially concentrated my research on men. However, my contacts with Tugen women were plentiful and intimate. For several months I made my home in a large double-roofed safari tent which I staked out in the shade of some giant fig trees. In my quiet tent I was lonely, and I arranged for a Tugen woman, a single mother with two small children, to live with me.

In the midst of that simple experience of shared domestic life I came to recognize Tugen women, and to see an unexpected element in their behaviour. When they greet one another Tugen women do so with a bold and forthright *slap* of the hands and a bone-jarring grip. I began to ask what that behaviour implied about their view of themselves and one another, and of women in relation to men. Their answers transformed my perspective on gender roles in the pre-colonial societies of East Africa, and in modern-day Kenya.

GENDER ROLES IN PRE-COLONIAL KENYA

At the turn of this century the highlands and plains of the Kenyan interior were occupied by native peoples speaking languages from three linguistic communities: Bantu, Nilotic and Cushitic. These diverse peoples pursued a common set of productive strategies based in herding and horticulture, activities which were combined in various patterns in different local environments. Throughout the region production was organized by a distinct division of labour based on gender. Men were responsible for the family herds, and women for the provision of grain crops, like millet and sorghum.

Although there were East African peoples, like the Maasai, who were exclusively pastoral, the majority had some dependence on horticulture. For many, including the Tugen, grain was the most important element in the daily diet. In

these cases women's productive labour was central to the life of the household and community. Furthermore, women also played an important role in herd management through their care of the calves, and the milking of cows. Maasai men were forbidden this privilege in a cultural prohibition that ensured their dependence on women even in this exclusively pastoral society. In these social worlds men and women were interdependent, in production and in reproduction, and their interdependence was located in the household.

In recent years research by feminist scholars working in Kenya has centred on the significance of those institutions which shaped women's lives: polygyny, bridewealth and age-organization. In her paper in *Women and Class in Africa* Patricia Stamp points out that the co-wife relationship was a basis for female co-operation in production.² That conclusion is based on her research with self-help groups organized by Kikuyu women in areas like Kiambu. My research with Tugen women indicates that the co-wife relationship was also a basis for co-operation in reproduction. Childbirth in these societies was typically followed by long periods of sexual abstinence during which a new mother restored her strength and avoided the rapid conception of another child. In a polygynous family the husband's sexual attention would be directed towards another wife during this period, which would in turn allow her to conceive, while the new mother enjoyed her young infant. Together polygyny and post-partum sexual abstinence were institutions that permitted women significant realms of personal autonomy, as well as serving to reduce the overall rate of population growth.

In the same paper Stamp also challenges the assumption that the "exchange of women" through the payment of bridewealth was a source of female oppression. Instead she points out that bridewealth is best seen as a manifestation of contractual relations between kin

groups which were maintained and furthered by the actions of the woman herself. As a consequence Stamp argues that the bridewealth institution was the context within which African women acquired a relatively powerful position in social life.

Stamp also suggests that women's power was formalized in age organization. Age organization is based in the division of the social universe into separate age categories which are occupied successively by distinct age-based social groups. The institution was widespread in East Africa prior to colonial rule. One very important aspect of social life which was structured by age organization was adulthood itself, including eligibility for adult rights and responsibilities as sexual and marital partners.

Entry into social adulthood was marked by public ceremonies of initiation. These characteristically included circumcision for men and clitoridectomy for women. Of all the issues confronting Kenyan women today clitoridectomy is the most contentious, as well as the most poorly understood. This custom involved a variety of practices in different Kenyan societies, ranging up to the excision of the clitoris and the surrounding labia. The President of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi, has publically denounced "female circumcision" and called for its abandonment across the country.

Clitoridectomy was not an operation performed by men on women. Instead it was a practice which older women carried out on adolescent girls. It was a symbolic basis for the entry of those girls into social adulthood, and the assumption of significant private and public responsibilities. In the Tugen case it was a manifestation not of submission, but of strength, just as circumcision was for men.

Relationships between men and women were not isolated from the support of the larger society. Instead they were subject to public regulation, and this responsibility was shared by women as an aspect of their participation in age organization. In certain of these societies the public authority of women was exercised in women's councils. These gatherings of women had rights of censure over gender interaction and the behaviour of men, which included both physical chastisement and the imposition of cattle fines.

The Tugen once had women's councils. These group no longer meet, and have not

done so for some time. Today in Kenya those institutions which once served women well, polygyny, bridewealth, and even clitoridectomy, which turned young Tugen girls into women of power, have all been transformed. In this new world they are, indeed, barriers to personal autonomy on the part of women.

THE IMPACT OF COLONIAL RULE ON WOMEN IN KENYA

British colonial rule in Kenya lasted from 1888 until 1963. During this period tribal peoples were largely restricted to settlement in designated "reserves." They were also subjected to a "hut tax." This tax, which was assigned to married men, was intended to force them into work on the settler farms and projects like the Uganda railway. As a result, men were drawn out of household production into a migratory pattern of employment outside the reserves. This had two important consequences for women. It meant that income from wage labour was limited almost entirely to men throughout the colonial period. It also meant that women, who were left behind in the reserves, acquired an increased level of responsibility for domestic production.

Within the reserves there were new problems in access to resources. Restrictions imposed by the colonial government prevented the theft of livestock, and made herd management dependent upon purchase and sale. Population growth led to an increased demand for land, and for the retention of communal rights in clan-held land as a form of private property. All of these resources, livestock, land and cash, became increasingly subject to male ownership and control.

It is in this new context that the people of Kenya began to pay bridewealth in cash. The Tugen, who had not paid bridewealth prior to colonial rule, now began to do so as well. In the process women's labour as wives and mothers also became subject to purchase, and thus to the control of men. At the same time the new Native Councils and Tribunals which were appointed by the colonial government began to usurp the realms of responsibility which had been assigned to women. These new bodies were composed entirely of men and, while they assumed the authority of the women's councils, they largely failed to uphold their responsibilities. Thus women also



Masai Woman

Credit: Tina Horne

became increasingly dependent on men, rather than on other women, for their protection and safety.³

WOMEN FARMERS IN KENYA

A recent government publication, *Women of Kenya: Review and Evaluation of Progress*, points out that 74% of the small farms of Kenya are presently managed by women.⁴ Over 1/3 of these women are single mothers. The rest are predominately married women whose husbands are away working, or searching for employment. However, even on those farms where the husband is a resident "household head," it is almost always the wife who is the real farmer, carrying the responsibility for the domestic food supply, and often for the care of cash crops.

Very little attention has been paid to women farmers in Kenya and, in spite of new government policies designed to recognize their importance, they are still denied access to crucial resources and services. The most important of these is land itself. During the 1950's the colonial government hoped to create a new middle-class of African farmers. This policy was reflected in the Swynnerton Plan which called for the registration of land



Kenyan Dancers at Forum '85

Credit: Sylvia Spring

within the reserves, and for the introduction of cash crops, extension services, and access to credit for small-scale farmers. At Independence the major features of the plan were adopted by the Kenyan government.

The great dilemma in the plan, and its subsequent implementation, was that it was addressed to men. Title deeds were awarded to male farm owners. As a result, women were frequently cut off from direct access to land and to the income from cash crops, which are "for men," as well as the support of government services. This situation has had very serious consequences for food production in Kenya, as well as for women themselves.

Land registration also furthered the creation of a landless class, an outcome which has been exacerbated by Kenya's high rate of population growth. In 1980 there were 400,000 people without land in the small-farming areas of Kenya, and many more with fragments too tiny to support a family.⁵ In order to make ends meet rural women participate in the "informal economy." They do seasonal agricultural labour, often at the expense of their own farms. They also market food crops and handicrafts, brew beer, and run tiny tea-shops and local bars. These activities account for about 41% of household income in the rural areas.⁶

The rural poor form a vast reservoir of migrants moving to the towns and to the city of Nairobi. Today there are many women who join this stream. Some are

young and childless. Others are single mothers looking for a better way to feed their children, or young wives who are accompanying their husbands. They enter the city as squatters in one of the many shanty-towns that dot the urban periphery. From there they look for employment, often as low-paid domestics, or they search for an opportunity in petty-trade. Few succeed in raising their income above the urban poverty line of \$500.00 a year.⁷

WOMEN OF NAIROBI

The city of Nairobi is the cosmopolitan centre of present-day Kenya. It has a population of 900,000 residents. However, every year it receives thousands of overseas visitors. The majority of these guests are tourists, but Nairobi is also an international city of some importance. It is the permanent headquarters for the United Nations Environment Programme, and for Habitat, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements.

Kenya is also a major recipient of bilateral and multilateral aid from a number of agencies including CIDA, USAID, the World Bank, UNDP, FAO, UNICEF and WHO. All of these donor groups import administrative and technical staff from abroad. As a result Nairobi offers all the luxuries of Zurich next door to a national game park. In Nairobi you can rise at 5:00 a.m. to watch the sun come up on the open savannah, and the wildebeest go

down to the river for water, and you can follow your moment at the heart of the world with breakfast at the Hilton.

The women of Nairobi are predominantly African, but there are also a significant number of Asians and Europeans. Together with the Arabs on the Indian Ocean coast, Asians and Europeans make up only 2% of Kenya's total population, but they are clustered in distinct social and residential communities within Nairobi.

In the city centre you will find the African women who have the time and the money to shop, to attend the charity fashion shows, and to have their hair done. In the beauty salons on Mfangano Street you can get a haircut for fifteen shillings, or a "curly kit" for three hundred and fifty. There are also a number of places to work out and sauna in Nairobi, including the fitness club at the Hilton. For about \$100.00 (U.S.) you can get a curly kit, spend a month shaping up at the Hilton, and have enough left over for tips. It will cost you 1/4 of the annual per capital income in Kenya.

The African women who can afford these services are primarily the wives of the urban male elite, the members of parliament, the high-level civil servants, the physicians, judges, lawyers and the occasional university professor, who dominate public life in Kenya. Very few of these high income earners are women.

Access to these positions is largely dependent on education, as well as political support, and in both areas women are at a disadvantage. For some time discrimination against women was furthered by an educational system which required parents to pay school fees for their children at both the primary and the secondary school levels. This policy encouraged selection against girls by parents with little income at their disposal. Between 1974 and 1978 primary school fees were abolished in Kenya. By 1984 48% of the students in Kenyan primary schools were girls. However, once in school girls still have a higher drop-out rate than boys. As a result only 30% of Kenyan university students are women.⁸

While education is becoming more accessible for women in Kenya, the question of political support for high-level positions in commerce and government still confronts them. By 1982 only 18% of employees in the formal sector in Kenya were women, and they were clustered at the lowest end of the wage ladder. Discrimi-

mination against women in government exists at every level. Women hold only 2% of the seats on county and municipal councils in Kenya. Out of 157 elected members of parliament, one is a woman.⁹

WOMEN AND SELF-HELP IN KENYA

In spite of the cleavages of gender, class in ethnicity, Kenyan women share a vibrant confidence in themselves and a hopeful enthusiasm for the future. This outlook is reflected in the high level of participation by women in local self-help groups. There are now over 16,000 women's groups in Kenya, with a total membership of 630,000.¹⁰ They participate in a variety of development-related activities including farming, livestock management, handicraft production, and small-scale trade.

One of these groups is the Ngusuria Women's Group. The members are Tugen from the semi-arid Kerio River valley. In this area the soil is thin, the vegetation sparse, and the rainfall infrequent. When the rains do come to Ngusuria the thorn trees bloom, and the valley is filled with butterflies. The rest of the year women and children used to search for water in the dry river bed. Now there is a water system in Ngusuria with a small dam, holding tanks, and fifteen kilometres of steel pipe. The members of the women's group were centrally involved in the planning and implementation of the project. The water line reaches several distribution points, including the primary school and the new clinic which was made possible by the project. Now the women of Ngusuria are making stoves designed to reduce their need for firewood.¹¹

In the context of local self-help groups like this one Kenyan women have an opportunity to participate directly in the development process. At their meetings they often dance and sing, expressing their desire to work together with other women to make life better for all of them. Their enthusiasm is contagious.

My daughter, Sarah, was born in Kenya. Before her arrival I used to sit with Tugen women in the heat of the afternoon. Together we would watch her tiny feet push their way across my stomach. Then they would slap their hands and mine, and laugh: "This one is a girl. See how she prepares for her work in life."



Kenyan dancers perform at Forum '85

Credit: Sylvia Spring

⁹Norman Miller, *Kenya: The Quest for Prosperity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), p. 73.

¹⁰Patricia Stamp, "Kikuyu Women's Self-Help Groups." In C. Robertson and I. Berger, eds., *Women and Class in Africa* (Holmes and Meier, in press).

¹¹Bonnie Kettel, "The Commoditization of Women in Tugen Social Organization." In C. Robertson and I. Berger, op. cit.

¹²Republic of Kenya, *Women of Kenya: Review and Evaluation of Progress* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1985), p. 39.

¹³Miller, p. 74.

¹⁴Miller, p. 56.

¹⁵Miller, p. 73.

¹⁶*Women of Kenya*, pp. 9-11, 17.

¹⁷*Women of Kenya*, pp. 33, 42-43.

¹⁸*Women of Kenya*, p. 49.

¹⁹Kenya Water for Health Organization, *Women and Water in Kenya* (Nairobi: Ministry of Water Development).

Bonnie Kettel is an assistant Professor of Anthropology at York University. Her research deals with gender roles in precontact African societies, the impact of colonialism on the lives of women, and the cross-cultural significance of interpersonal violence. She did field research in the Baringo District of Kenya in 1968 and in 1971-72. She is the author of a forthcoming book *Time is Money: Capital and Class Formation Among the Tugen*.

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