

ABSTRACT

DAUGHTER OF ODORO: GRACE ONYANGO AND AFRICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY

by Phoebe Musandu

Since the eighties, the Academy has produced a modest amount of scholarship on African women's history. A number of these works have been limited demographically to allow for in-depth culture-specific analysis. They trace the various spaces in which women exercised power and authority, the various ways in which that agency was confronted by colonial-era challenges and how women struggled to adapt to those challenges with varying levels of success. However, works of African women's history produced thus far are limited in ethno-geographic scope and even within those ethnic groups and geographical areas they have touched, there are more issues requiring historical research. This project is thus a contribution to the process of recovering women's history in what is today Kenya. It will engage historical and ethno-historical data to demonstrate Kenyan female socio-economic and political agency, with a focus on the latter and with greater emphasis on Luo women.

DAUGHTER OF ODORO:
GRACE ONYANGO AND AFRICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

Since the eighties, the Academy has produced a modest amount of scholarship on African women's history. A number of these efforts have been ambitious attempts at covering the women's history of the entire continent in a single volume for example, Iris Berger and Frances White's *Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Restoring Women to History* (1999).¹ Others have been geared towards a certain aspect of women's history in one ethnic group to allow for in-depth culture-specific analysis for example, Gloria Chuku's *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in South Eastern Nigeria, 1900 – 1960* and Nakanyike Musisi's "Women, 'Elite Polygyny,' and Buganda State Formation."² The scholars trace the various spaces in which women exercised power and authority, the various ways in which that agency was confronted by colonial era challenges and how women struggled to adapt to those challenges with varying levels of success. This thesis is a contribution to these efforts. By looking at the political career of Grace Onyango I have been able to trace, affirm and interpret the agency of various women in Kenya from the pre-colonial to the postcolonial eras even in the face of adverse challenges.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Women's history in the U.S. and Europe became established as a discipline in the early eighties following the rise and development of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. It was during this period, as Weisner-Hanks has observed, that women began to question central assumptions made by scholars when studying the past.³ A key contribution to this intellectually retrospective exercise was the deconstruction of the use of "man" as a gender-neutral term. In addition, feminist scholars argued that it was necessary that gender be a factor in the analysis of the deeds and words of both men and women, not just the latter. Gender analyses of this sort were crucial to the development of women's history. According to Weisner-Hanks, the scholarly field of women's history thereafter developed at varying rates in different parts of the world. While in the U.S. and Canada the discipline expanded at a relatively rapid rate through the

¹ Iris Berger and Frances White eds., *Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Restoring Women to History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

² Nakanyike Musisi, "Women, 'Elite Polygyny,' and Buganda State Formation," in *Signs*, (1991) Vol. 16, No. 4, p.757-786 and Gloria Chuku. *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in South Eastern Nigeria, 1900 – 1960*. New York and London: Routledge, 2005.

³ Merry Weisner-Hanks. *Gender in History*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001.

seventies, in places like Britain, Israel and Australia its growth was slower.⁴ In developing countries, historical studies in general, and women's history in particular, grew at an even slower rate. In the sixties, research aimed at recovering African histories that indigenous and Africanist historians argued various European scholars had ignored or misconstrued during the colonial era. The histories they produced emphasized political and economic themes, and were often based on Western theoretical constructs and definitions of gender that hardly saw women as subjects of history.

From the late eighties, national economic constraints limited government financial support for higher education. This meant that historical research suffered and the situation was compounded by the fact that most scholars researching on women's history in places like Africa were "outsiders," mainly from the developed West. In the eighties, an increasing number of these scholars produced texts such as *Women in Africa of the Sub-Sahara*, *African Women and the Law*, *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* and *Women and Work in Africa*, amongst others.⁵ In 1984, the first work on African women's history was published. This was an edited volume by Margaret Hay and Sharon Stichter and was titled *African Women South of the Sahara*.⁶ This publication was followed by three other works, also largely by Western female scholars. These were Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch's *African Women: A Modern History* and a volume edited by Berger and White titled *Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Restoring Women to History*.⁷ The authors of the historical works were mainly concerned with recovering African women's histories on a wide range of socio-economic and political subjects. The third was Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi's *Women in African Colonial Histories*.⁸

Women in African Colonial Histories is crucial to the study of African women's history because by contributors limiting their papers to selected parts of a single country or one ethnic group, they were able to do in depth, culturally sensitive studies of African women during the

⁴ Merry Wiesner-Hanks. *Gender in History*, p. 9.

⁵ Majorie Bingham and Susan Gross, *Women in Africa of The Sub-Sahara*. St. Louis Park, MN: Glenhurst, 1982, Edna Bay, *Women and Work in Africa*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1982, Margaret Hay and Marcia Wright, eds., *African Women and the Law: Historical Perspectives*. Boston University: African Studies Center, 1982 and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley and Andrea Rushing, *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*. Washington D.C: Howard University Press, 1987.

⁶ Margaret Hay and Sharon Stichter, *African Women South of the Sahara*. London; New York: Longman, 1984.

⁷ Iris Berger and Frances White, eds., *Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Restoring Women to History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

⁸ Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi, eds., *Women in African Colonial Histories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002

colonial era. Most importantly, contributors to the volume endeavored to analyze African women as subjects and not as objects in the systems and times they lived in. This is notable because its style suggested a different approach to researching and writing about African women's issues. This approach is evident in the interrogation of gender, sex and feminism by social sciences scholars such as Ifi Amadiume, Oyeronke Oyewumi and Kamene Okonjo amongst others.⁹ These scholars have purposed to study African women from different parts of West Africa by contextualizing their experiences ethnically and analyzing issues and theorizing on gender within that context. For example, they have demonstrated that the concept of biological determinism that dominated Western epistemology for centuries prior to debates calling for distinctions between sex and gender was not in existence "in societies where social roles and identities are not conceived to be rooted in biology."¹⁰ Such efforts to contextualize culturally African studies relating to gender and sex have enabled these scholars to explicate better African women's cognitive views and actions.

In Kenya various scholars have produced women's history works. They include Tabitha Kanogo who has written a number of works on the Mau Mau Rebellion, Carolyn Shaw who has studied gender, class and racial issues in the country, and Margaret Hay who did a study on Luo women and economic change in colonial Kenya.¹¹ Their strength lay in their ability to revisit otherwise extensively researched areas of Kenyan history, e.g., the Mau Mau Rebellion or European missionary activities to excavate women's histories. These scholars give Kenyan women agency and some, like Kanogo and Shaw, have attempted to contextualize ethnically the experiences of these women. There are also scholars who have incorporated women and gender analyses into their works of philosophy, historical anthropology, and history. Examples of these scholars include Odera Oruka, E.S. Atieno-Odhiambo and William Cohen who apply gender as a

⁹ These scholars have authored numerous works. However, some key works are: Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Press, 1987, Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, Kamene Okonjo, "The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria." In Nancy Hafkin and Edna G. Bay, eds., *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*. California: Stanford University Press, 1976.

¹⁰ Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*, p.9.

¹¹ Margaret Hay, "Luo Women and Economic Change During the Colonial Period." In Nancy Hafkin and Edna G. Bay, eds., *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*. California: Stanford University Press, 1976. Tabitha Kanogo, "Women and Politics of Protest: Mau Mau," in S. Ardener, S. MacDonald and P. Holden, eds., *Images of Women in Peace and War*. MacMillan, 1987b and *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau, 1905-1963*. London J. Currey; Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987. Carolyn Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex and Class in Kenya*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

category of analysis to their research and pose questions relating to gender to their respondents in the field.¹²

However, works on Kenyan women's history produced thus far are limited in ethno-geographic scope and even within those ethnic groups and geographical areas they have touched, are more issues requiring historical research. This project is an attempt in that direction. It has engaged Kenyan historical and ethno-historical data to demonstrate female socio-economic and political agency, with a focus on the latter. As stated at the beginning of this introduction, the purpose of this thesis is not only to affirm the existence of female agency, but also to show its dynamics and centrality to society since the pre-colonial period.

METHODOLOGY

The primary sources used in this project include newspapers, local government archival material, as well as Hansard records (verbatim parliamentary records). Oral interviews would have been valuable but were not conducted due to time and resource constraints. To evaluate these sources, sociological, anthropological, linguistic, philosophical and historical secondary works have been used. In addition, works on non-governmental organizations in general and women's movements in particular, have been employed in the analysis of Maendeleo ya Wanawake, a nationwide Kenyan women's organization.

ORGANIZATION

This thesis is divided into five chapters. While chapter one introduces the thesis, chapter two is an overview of changing perceptions with regard to gender in twentieth century Kenya. The chapter looks first at the impact of colonial-era societal changes on women and, second, how these changes led to the codification of oral traditions – a process dominated by African males. In chapter three I analyze traditional political structures and leadership among the Luo, Grace Onyango's ethnic group, as they appear in codified tradition. In the chapter, I use Luo oral traditions in an attempt to unearth the histories of Luo women as agents in their societies as well as to analyze the relationship between power and gender in the community. The chapter sets the stage for the narration and analysis of Onyango's political career against the background of Kenyan politics in the sixties. In this section of the thesis, I also discuss Onyango's approach to

¹²Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*. Leiden; New York: E. J. Brill, 1990, Cohen, David and E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo, E. S. Siaya: *The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), p.85-110.

politics and how her cultural heritage contributed to the manner in which she fashioned her career. Chapter four is a brief discussion of the political atmosphere that prevailed at the time Grace Onyango entered politics. This covers the time immediately before and after Kenya's independence from Britain in 1964. I briefly elaborate on the ethnic tensions that surrounded the crafting of the Kenyan constitution prior to independence. In addition, I discuss the post-independence conflict that led to the formation of the Kenya People's Union by discontented members of parliament (M.P.s) who belonged to the ruling KANU (Kenya African National Union) party. Grace Onyango was at one time a K.P.U. member. In the final chapter, I focus on Grace Onyango, Kenyan and African women's histories to show, briefly, the links inherent in this triad in terms of methodology and post-1960 experiences and their implications for female involvement in national politics and development issues.

KENYA: GENDER AND SOCIETAL RESTRUCTURING Á LA GRANDE-BRETAGNE (1895-1950)

The missionaries had demanded that their converts throw away their beliefs, customs and traditions and accept, without question or qualification, a completely new way of life, social code and morals.¹

The truth is that the only way in which the multitude of East African tribesmen can hope to enjoy the benefits of civilized government, both central and local, for generations to come...is under the forms of colonial government.²

Introduction

Though a lot of effort has been put into recovering the history of the peoples of what is today Kenya, there is a need to reexamine this history in an effort to determine the effects of colonialism on gender. With a focus on women, this chapter is thus a discussion of the social engineering processes that the British implemented in Kenya in the years between 1895 and 1950. It is an examination of the British colonial government's, as well as European churches', attempts to restructure Kenyan societies for the purposes of not only altering the lifestyles of Kenyans but also of dominating, controlling and extracting their resources. I expound on these restructuring efforts in relation to colonial-era land, labor, education and administration policies. By engaging the works of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and political commentators written and/or published between 1947 and 2002, I argue that these negative processes affected the lives of both African men and women in a profound manner but more so the lives of the latter. These repercussions, I suggest, greatly reduced the socio-political power of Kenyan women in their societies. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the principles of European-engineered social change in Africa in general, and Luo Nyanza³ in particular. The aim is to show how these restructuring processes influenced the invention of traditions⁴ and the reduction to the written word of pre-colonial traditions in Luo Nyanza. I focus mainly on gender and socio-political change in Kenya since 1895 when Britain proclaimed a Protectorate over the region.

¹ A. J. Temu, *British Protestant Missions* (London: Longman, 1972). p. 107.

² Sir Phillip Mitchell as cited by M.P.K. Sorrenson, *Land Reform in the Kikuyu Country: A Study in Government Policy* (Nairobi, London: Oxford University Press, 1967) p. 73 This paternalistic comment was made in a speech to the Nairobi Rotary Club, 24 October 1947.

³ Nyanza is one of eight present day Kenyan provinces. It is inhabited by more than one ethnic group. Luo Nyanza denotes the sections of the province predominantly inhabited by Dholuo (Luo language) speakers.

⁴ Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1996, p.251.

This in turn will act as a prelude to the analysis in the next chapter of female agency among the Luo in the next chapter as gleaned from traditions and customs recorded by or largely collected from male Luo graduates of Western education or Luo males working within socio-political structures created by British colonial authorities.

Power in traditional African societies was not limited to a few centralized political offices. Historian Holly Hanson, among other scholars, has argued that women in pre-colonial Africa had considerable political power.⁵ In several ethnic groups, including those discussed below, government was acephalous and diffuse, characterized as it were by a diverse range of social categories that included age and gender. This diffusion of power enabled members of the society to check the powers of various institutions. Some of the institutions through which women exercised power in pre-colonial Africa included political offices, secret societies, title societies, councils, market associations, age-set groups and religious institutions (e.g. as spirit mediums, spirits, and goddesses). The British in Kenya and other parts of Africa failed to comprehend and acknowledge this diffusion of power and how it affected the central socio-economic roles African women played in their societies. In many ways, British efforts to fashion African societies after the nineteenth century into entities that enabled the former to exercise domination fundamentally and disproportionately disadvantaged women.

Though the start of this chapter is marked by the year 1895, it does not indicate a retreat to pre-twentieth century arguments that African societies in what came to be Kenya were in a state of “pristine”⁶ societal stasis, awaiting change from outside. The year is significant because

⁵ Holly Hanson, “Queen Mothers and Good Government in Buganda: The Loss of Women’s Political Power in the Nineteenth Century” in Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nakanyike Musisi, eds., *Women in African Colonial Historie*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 219. For similar arguments in relation to different ethnic groups see also, Kamene Okonjo, “The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria,” in Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay eds., *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*. California: Stanford University Press, 1976 and Nwando Achebe, *Farmers, Traders, Warriors and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960*. Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Inc., 2005, among others.

⁶ George Bennett, *Kenya, A Political History*, p. 2. Various scholars, including Postcolonial theorists have used their works to expose what they argue were nineteenth century European imperial, paternalistic tendencies to depict colonized peoples especially Africans and Asians as being at a rudimentary stage of human development, or state of nature and hence in need of “European Enlightenment.” See Edward Said’s groundbreaking *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1993 and *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. Postcolonial readers such as Bart Moore-Gilbert, Gareth Stanton and Willy Maley (Eds.) *Postcolonial Criticism*. London and New York: Longman 1997 provide more information on related theory from scholars in different fields. For information on the reaction of African and Africanist scholars to the same paternalistic scholarship, see Arnold Temu and Bonaventure Swai, *Historians and Africanist Historiography: A Critique, Post-Colonial Historiography Examined*. London: Zed Press, 1981 and Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David Newbury (eds.) *African Historiographies: What History for Which Africa?* Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, c.1986.

it acts as a chronological benchmark for the intensification of European socio-political activity in the interior that greatly affected the lives of its inhabitants. 1895 marked the official end of the administration of the region by the Imperial British East Africa Company whose main interest had been to establish a commercial relationship with the land beyond Lake Victoria, specifically the Buganda Kingdom. The British government, on the other hand, was more concerned with securing its hold over the region to ensure that the headwaters of the Nile – L. Victoria. Company officials had thought they could understand the kingdom's centralized political structure and felt it bore close resemblance to their own back in Britain. Unfortunately, for company officials and shareholders, the 700 miles between the Kenyan coast and the kingdom posed a spatial challenge that the I.B.E.A.C. eventually failed to surmount.⁷ Yet, in the years prior to 1895, travelers to Buganda had become increasingly impressed with the land in between the coast and the lake. The cooler climate of its highlands appealed to the British and its fertile lands appeared to be suitable “for agricultural settlement or stock rearing farms.”⁸ Kenya could, for all practical purposes, be turned into “a white man's country.”⁹ The declaration of the Protectorate in 1895 over this area set the stage for the ‘white man’ to appropriate the land of its inhabitants and to alter their societies paternalistically in accordance with Victorian ideals while at the same time forcing them into wage labor in the service of the British Empire.

Colonial-Era Changes in Relation to Land, Labour and Education

The alienation of land that began in earnest with the appointment of Sir Charles Eliot as governor in 1902 was a crucial factor in the forces that would eventually bring about the gender imbalances in accessibility to land that plagues Kenya to this day.¹⁰ Land ownership in the communities discussed in this chapter was not based on individual tenure. It was clan- or communally-owned. This was a system of land tenure that puzzled Europeans and leading to the setting up of inquiries, and government sponsored studies to determine how it worked and to pave way for government-led reforms. Examples include The Kenya Land Commission set up in 1932 by the Secretary of State for Colonies, Norman Humphrey's research on land use in what

⁷ I.B.E.A.C. was unable to raise adequate funds independently (from its shareholders) for a railway line that spanned from the East African coast, to Buganda territory. Inland trade that depended mostly on human porters to carry goods from the interior to the coast had proved unprofitable. For a more elaborate account on the I.B.E.A.C., its interaction with the British government and the motivations and struggles behind the Nairobi-Uganda Railway see Charles Miller, *The Lunatic Express: An Entertainment in Imperialism*. London: Macdonald & Co., 1972.

⁸ George Bennett. *Kenya, A Political History*, p.6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁰ For more of his own opinions see Charles Eliot, *The East African Protectorate*. London, F. Cass, 1966.

was the North Kavirondo Reserve, and H.E. Lambert's research on land tenure in the then Kikuyu Land Unit.¹¹ The puzzlement of the administration is also reflected in some of the earliest historiographical works on British appropriation of African land that were written in the sixties. For example, in *Origins of European Settlement in Kenya*, Sorrenson demonstrates that by crudely resorting to Social Darwinism, the British placed individual land tenure above clan or communal tenure.¹² Among the Kikuyu of Central Kenya, land, whether acquired by *kuuna* (cutting down virgin forest) or *mutego* (trapping in virgin forest), "belonged to the *mbari* [clan] as a whole."¹³ This meant that a clan member had a right to any part of its land that had not been claimed by another member. The only provision was that the head of the *mbari*, the *muramati* (guardian), be informed. Women had a right to use land in their natal home areas and once they married, their new families were obliged to provide them with land in their marital homelands.¹⁴ Sons eventually gained access to land through those allocated to their mothers. However, since land was owned by the entire *mbari*, it was not possible for a clan member, male or female, to unilaterally sell it. The sale of land was generally rare prior to European "influences and ideas" but an ambitious individual could obtain virgin land at the frontier to establish a home.¹⁵

The "frontier," found mainly to the north of Kikuyu country, had allowed for population expansion. But with the declaration of a Protectorate over Kenya in 1895, European settlement made its debut to the south of Kikuyu country and the alienation of large chunks of land in the area proceeded rapidly.¹⁶ For example, in the years between 1903 and 1906, about 60,000 acres

¹¹ See Great Britain, *Report of the Kenya Land Commission*. Nairobi: Government Printer, 1933; H. E. Lambert, *The System of Land Tenure in the Kikuyu Land Unit: Part 1, History of the Occupation of the Land*. Cape Town: Communications from the School of African Studies, University of Cape Town, 1949; and Norman Humphrey, *Liguru and The Land*, Nairobi: Government Printer, 1947.

¹² M.P.K. Sorrenson, *Origins of European Settlement in Kenya* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.178. For more information on indigenous land use and the impact of British land policies see the same author's *Land Reform in the Kikuyu Country: A Study in Government Policy*. Nairobi, Oxford University Press, 1967.

¹³ Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 75.

¹⁴ Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below* (Oxford: James Currey Limited, 1997), p.24. "Women were neither ancestors nor land nor its guardians. Yet without them men could not fulfill their obligations and roles; women's agriculture enabled the land to bear fruit, women's sexuality and fecundity provided sons and daughters, without women, land and men would come to an end." p.24 As will be seen in Carolyn Shaw's work ahead women were aware of this fact and did derive power from this *status quo*.

¹⁵ Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900*, p.75-77.

¹⁶ Tabitha Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau, 1905-1963* (London J. Currey; Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), p.9. Settlers favored land that had already been opened. Settling on virgin land required a huge amount of labor and capital that they were not ready or able to marshal. Kanogo also discusses the effects of land alienation on women and their contribution to Mau Mau efforts (combat and related logistics). A more recent work by the same author is "Women and Politics of Protest: Mau Mau," in S. Ardener, S. MacDonald and P. Holden eds.,

of Kikuyu territory (Kiambu-Limuru District) were alienated for British settlers and the 50 beneficiaries paid a meager Rs.3,848 to be shared among 8,000 Kikuyu.¹⁷ By July 1910, there were 11,647 Kikuyu living as squatters on 11,300 acres that had been taken away from them. The Kikuyu, with little land and having to pay taxes, were forced to labor for white settlers on land that was once theirs as the only option for bare sustenance.¹⁸ In 1912, following the insistence of John Ainsworth, the sole government-appointed advisor on Native Affairs, who wanted to protect the Kikuyu from the insatiable land thirst of settlers, the government gazetted the boundaries of the Kikuyu reserve. However, the British fiddled with these reserve boundaries from time to time thereafter to hive off more land. In a bid to curtail squatter farming (to ensure a longer working day for the African), as well as for purposes of tax collection, the British emphasized the pegging of individual and miserly plots of land to male heads of households. This does not mean that the British gave individual Kikuyu men land tenure at this time, but in accordance with Victorian ideals of gendered and individual land ownership, the male was positioned as the most suited sex for future land ownership. Such ideals were committed to paper in the 1950s under the Swynnerton Plan, “A Plan to Intensify the Development of African Agriculture in Kenya.”¹⁹

The Swynnerton Plan of 1954 resulted in exclusively male-dominated exercises of the legal registration of land which they overwhelmingly registered in the names of men. The Plan was a response to the land degradation that was occurring in African reserves in different parts of the country as a result of the overcrowding induced by land alienation. The resultant land grievances had contributed greatly to the post-World War II Mau Mau war in Central Kenya that embarrassed the British government. For example, in the Kikuyu Land Unit, demographic congestion made it impossible for Africans to conduct indigenous land utilization and conservation techniques. Land that had been previously left fallow to regain fertility or reserved

Images of Women in Peace and War. MacMillan, 1987b. See also, Cora Presley, *Kikuyu women, the Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya*. Colorado: Westview Press, Inc., 1992.

¹⁷ M.P.K. Sorrenson. *Origins of European Settlement in Kenya*, p.180.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.184.

¹⁹ The Swynnerton Plan was implemented after World War II. The British came up with the plan to enable government define and streamline African land ownership (without a commitment to returning appropriated land). It was felt that such policies would help prevent African land grievances that in the extreme resulted in the Mau Mau guerrilla war waged in Central Kenya. See Anne Thurston, *Smallholder Agriculture in Colonial Kenya: The Official Mind and the Swynnerton Plan*. Cambridge: African Studies Centre, 1987. The author gives an account of the Plan from the perspective of British administrators. See also Judith Heyer, et. al., *Agricultural Development in Kenya: An Economic Assessment*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1976 for a collection of works some of which deal extensively with the pros and cons of the Swynnerton Plan.

for grazing came under unrelenting crop cultivation. During World War II, demand for food in Europe exacerbated the over-cultivation of land. The Plan, hatched during the Mau Mau war of liberation and amidst ever-growing demands for African representation in the Legislative Council, was supposed to raise the annual cash income of each African family. It aimed at raising the African family's income to about 100 pounds by facilitating the consolidation of the numerous tiny African plots into larger holdings that were suitable for the cultivation of high-priced crops. The majority ended up with modestly sized plots of land while well-placed individuals were able to acquire up to 100 acres of land. The Plan rendered many others, male and female, landless. African women were particularly disadvantaged because the land reforms were conducted at a time when years of interaction with the British had increasingly individualized traditional land ownership that emphasized male ownership and eroded female customary rights to land.

The Plan and its related Acts after independence (*Registered Land Act of 1963* and *Land Adjudication Act of 1968*), researcher Lorenzo Cotula has argued, did not legally discriminate against women, but the processes under which the government implemented them did so.²⁰ These processes included the design and implementation of the Plan by men, land registration largely in the name of male heads of households and the lack of recognition of gender as a factor in development planning. As a result, Cotula notes, in places like Kanyamkago in Nyanza a mere 7% of registered plots were in the name of women as “joint or exclusive right-holders” while only 4% of women were exclusive owners.²¹ This statistical scenario was repeated with little variation in different parts of Kenya and the male domination of land adjudication committees was a characteristic of virtually all the administration bodies that the British set up all over the country.

African administrative bodies like Local Native Councils, set up by the British, were also male-dominated and, as such, they undermined indigenous socio-political structures that had diffused power along a wide range of social categories. This resulted in the subjection of women and the less affluent males of African societies to structures of authority that wielded more power over them than was previously possible before British colonialism. The colonial

²⁰ Lorenzo Cotula. “Women’s Rights to Land and Other Natural Resources,” in *Gender and Law: Women’s Rights in Agriculture*, Section 2.4.2. Kenya. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organisation, Office of Director-General. PDF Version, FAO Legal Study 76. www.fao.org/documents/show_cdr, (February, 2006) Cotula is a researcher with the International Institute for Environment and Development.

²¹ *Ibid.*

government, in a bid to control, fully harness, and exploit the resources of these societies, used such administrative structures.²² The under-staffed British colonial government utilized local-level administrative authorities to collect taxes and meet labor quotas for colonial projects that invariably benefited the British. Thus, the British sought to restructure existing structures of African governments to meet their administrative needs. Since most societies in what is today Kenya had decentralized systems of government, the British attempted to fashion centralized authorities within these ethnic groups. For example, among the Kamba, the *King'ole* (highest level of government formed by clan elders) was used for the purposes of administration in the late nineteenth century.²³ However, after some Kamba raided a railway camp for food during the *Mapunga* famine of 1898-9 and *King'ole* elders refused to hand them over to the colonial authorities for punishment, a new administrative entity was born; the village headman. Since the colonial government generally lacked an understanding of the distribution of power within indigenous systems of government, the imposition of such centralized authorities caused social strains and more often than not led to intra-ethnic conflicts. The headman according to the *Village Headman Ordinance of 1902* was directly answerable to the colonial administration and had to enforce orders made against his own society. Headmen had the immensely unpopular duties of drafting labor and tax collection. Where the office of the chief was already in existence, the powers of holders of such offices were increased greatly contrary to pre-colonial customs. In many instances, the British ensured that individuals more amenable to their will ascended to chieftaincy contrary to custom and some became authoritarian. The fate of African women was worse since the British failed to recognize the role of African women in the political life of their societies. For example, in a trend that was to continue through the 1950s, African women were absent from Local Native Councils.²⁴ The British sought to confine them to the Victorian

²² For a more extensive study of British use of colonial-era, local level, structures of African authority to control Africans and their wealth as well as African use of such structures to dominate their own people in the face of atrophying pre-colonial power check systems see Marshall Clough, *Fighting Two Sides: Kenyan Chiefs and Politicians, 1918-1940*. Colorado: University of Colorado, 1990. For another study on "the creation of chiefs," see Robert Tignor. "Colonial Chiefs in Chiefless Societies," in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. Vol. 9, No. 3, October, 1971, p. 339-359.

²³ J. Forbes Munro, *Colonial Rule and the Kamba: Social Change in the Kenya Highlands 1889-1939*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 55-56.

²⁴ Donald G. Schilling, "Local Native Councils and the Politics of Education in Kenya, 1925-1929," in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 9, No.2, 1976, p. 218-247, 1976. Schilling goes into a more elaborate analysis of the motivations of both the colonizer and the colonized in setting up and working within L.N.C.s most of the time, both parties were interested in mutually exclusive goals. For other related arguments, J. M.

‘private sphere’ (the home) that promoted what Anne McClintock, a scholar of English and Women’s Studies refers to as a “cult of domesticity” for women, a cult that curtailed the participation of European women in broader socio-economic and political affairs and by extension, for African women.²⁵ The colonial education system was a crucial tool in the perpetuation of Victorian values of gender and power.

Colonial education gendered the goals of secular and religious education in Kenya to the socio-political advantage of the African male. This meant that educational goals resulted in the constriction of the social areas of activity as well as the initiative and wide-ranging influence that various African women had exercised. Mission schools were the sole providers of education up to 1913 when the government opened its first school. Before then, the government had found it fiscally and administratively convenient to leave the education of the African entirely in the hands of the church. As a result, by 1916, 31 out of 32 schools in the country were established and run by missionaries. The central goal of the church was “to enable each person to learn for himself and to understand the record, the character and the teaching of Jesus and the chief doctrines of historical Christianity.”²⁶ Missionaries expected their African students to abandon their customs, which they viewed as repugnant and backward. Learning was largely by rote and it aimed at equipping African youth with basic literacy skills primarily for purposes of enabling them to memorize religious dogma. In some schools, missionaries incorporated technical education and agricultural training into the curriculum. John Anderson, a professor of religion, describes missionary training at this time as “very superficial.”²⁷

Following proposals by J. Ainsworth, the advisor on Native Affairs, put forth to the government in 1917, the colonial government agreed to give grants to support mission education efforts. Once the government entered the education sector in 1913, it incorporated mission school instructional methods and was able to place emphasis on the provision of simple academic education, agriculture and technical education. The government had encouraged mission schools to devote a greater portion of their curricula to technical education, but progress in this area was slow because mission schools were also financially constrained. Such skills were

Lonsdale, “The Politics of Conquest: The British in Western Kenya, 1894-1908,” in *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 4, December, 1977, p. 841 – 870.

²⁵ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Imperial Contest*. London: Routledge, 1995.

²⁶ A. J. Temu, *British Protestant Missions*, p. 140

²⁷ John Anderson, *The Struggle for the School* (London and Beccles: William Clowes and Sons, Limited, 1970), p.17.

necessary because the colonial government aimed at equipping African men with just enough education and a servile mindset suited to its labor requirements.²⁸ However, in historian A.J. Temu's study on British Protestant missions and Anderson's study of colonial education in Kenya, it is evident that the education of the female was geared toward restricting her activity to the domestic scene or to activities gendered feminine and that of the male to work outside the home.

School curricula were carefully constructed to suit gender ideals that both the colony's government and churches thought suitable for the African male and female. For example, by 1903, the subjects taught at Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) schools were "Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Scripture, Map Drawing, Grammar, English and Needlework."²⁹ Older boys were also expected to do agriculture in the afternoon. However, the education of girls was "mainly in sewing and handicrafts, all aimed at preparing them for domestic work and motherhood."³⁰ This was because missionaries viewed the home as the sole and appropriate destination for girls and another historian Tabitha Kanogo argues that, for girls in mission schools, "academic training was given secondary attention, as it was anticipated that the majority of girls would get married as soon as they left the mission."³¹ She explains that in general, the prevalent attitudes towards education in colonial Kenya closely mimicked those prevalent in Victorian England. Then, it was thought inappropriate to equip girls with a wholesome education as "it might tempt them to try and enter professions of a higher station than the order of the world will permit them to engage in."³² Moreover, the parents of such girls were hesitant to have them invest more time in educational activities as it deprived their homes of their labor, a testament to the indispensability of female labor for the economic well-being of families. Therefore, agriculture in which African women had always been engaged in extensively, was gendered male in accordance with British sensibilities and hence the insistence that older boys participate in this activity. British sensibilities were evident in a 1942 letter that writer Elspeth Huxley sent to her friend Margery Perham, who had devoted two years of travel in Southern and Eastern Africa to study colonial administration. In this letter, Huxley explains that, "Englishmen,

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.38.

²⁹ A. J. Temu, *British Protestant Missions*. Longman: 1972. p. 142.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³¹ Tabitha Kanogo, "Mission Impact on Women in Kenya," in Fiona Bowie, Deborah Kirkwood and Shirley Ardener. *Women and Missions: Past and Present: Anthropological and Historical Perceptions*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1993.

³² *Ibid.*

brought up (in those days) to believe that women were scarcely able to open a door for themselves, were really upset at the spectacle of native women bent low under tremendous weights of firewood or grain, while their husbands stalked along carrying nothing heavier than a spear.”³³ Elspeth Huxley, like those Englishmen, believed that “it would be good for these young men to learn to work, as well as being good for the settlers to have the labour to open up the land” that they were rapidly appropriating from Africans. It follows that agriculture, long considered a key income-generating activity for the African male and female, was in the colonial period reconstituted as a male domain.

In general, British land and labor policies upset African male and female production patterns. Anthropologists Middleton and Kershaw’s study of Central Kenya, African labor patterns makes it possible to analyze the effect of male labor lost to settler/government projects upon African farming. One may infer that the per capita acreage of land under cultivation for sustenance must have declined when women not engaged in the provision of labor to European farming had to work to make up for the loss of male labor.³⁴ The following is a list showing the division of labor in existence among nineteenth century Kikuyu, Embu, Meru, and Kamba that Middleton and Kershaw distilled from the works of colonial era anthropologists (amateur and professional) dating from 1904 to 1938:

Men were responsible for

- a) Tending of cattle, in all its aspects, and trading in livestock;
- b) Clearing the fields, breaking up the surface for the women, cutting drains and water-furrows; building roads and bridges (men might cultivate fields if for any reason the women could not: *it was not considered derogatory*);
- c) Planting certain crops: bananas, cutting and bringing home sugar-cane for beer, and straining the juice;
- d) Scaring birds; pruning bananas;
- e) Uprooting the grain stalks after harvest and burning them to fertilize the ground and kill pests;
- f) Collecting honey;
- g) Hunting and fighting;
- h) Cutting and erecting timbers in house-building; building fences and granaries; working iron; tanning leather and making clothes of skins; making the string used in beer-making and hunting, and binding the sweet potato tops which are given to the ram kept for fattening in the hut;

³³ Elspeth Huxley to Margery Perham, 30 October 1942, *Race and Politics in Kenya: A Correspondence Between Elspeth Huxley and Margery Perham*, ed. Elspeth Huxley and Margery Perham, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1956), p.93.

³⁴ Perham to Huxley, 16 October 1942, *Race and Politics in Kenya*, p.88.

- i) Legal and ritual duties.

Women, in addition to taking care of children, were responsible for

- a) planting maize, millet, beans and other crops, hoeing and weeding, harvesting crops;
- b) Storing and caring for the food supply, cooking; fetching water and fire-wood, grinding grain and pounding sugar-cane for beer; tending hives and making honey;
- c) Thatching and plastering in hut-building;
- d) Sewing skins; making pottery; collecting iron ore; making baskets and bead-work;
- e) Trading in grain;
- f) Certain ritual duties, depending on the social status of her husband.³⁵

I have italicized the words “it was not considered derogatory” because Huxley, like colonial settlers and administrators, asserted that the African man had always “looked down on women’s jobs” and needed the British to teach them the dignity of agricultural labor.³⁶ It is evident from the above list that men in these societies were not just “carrying nothing heavier than a spear” or waiting to be rendered idle by “Pax Britannica” which would enable them to “learn to work.”³⁷ In addition, as Carolyn Shaw, an anthropologist explains, men and women sometimes engaged in the same activities of production and Kikuyu agricultural labor was collective.³⁸ Shaw’s view is supported by Greet Kershaw’s explanation that among the Kikuyu, “male and female roles were different, but as long as each fulfilled his [or her] proper role, they were essentially equal, each other’s counterpart.”³⁹ This meant that Kikuyu households recruited male and female workers

³⁵ Emphasis added. John Middleton and Greet Kershaw, *The Central Tribes of the North-Eastern Bantu* (London: International African Institute, 1965), p. 20-21. The authors have distilled the division of labor from works by Routledge, Kenyatta, Dundas, Hobley, Cagnolo, Tate and Orde-Browne. See also Carolyn Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex, and Class in Kenya* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 34. Shaw produces a condensed list of these activities to argue that women were primarily responsible for subsistence activities. The full list as it was originally published enables one to see how the colonial extraction of labor of one sex (particularly men) disadvantaged the other.

³⁶ Huxley to Perham, 30 October 1942, *Race and Politics in Kenya*, p.94.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 92 and 93.

³⁸ Carolyn Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex, and Class in Kenya*, p. 34.

³⁹ Greet Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below* (Oxford: James Currey Limited, 1997), p.23. Carolyn Shaw and Greet Kershaw’s ethnically contextualized analyses of gender contradict the presentation of Kikuyu women as equal to property in the work of Claire Robertson, *Trouble Showed The Way: Women, Men and Trade in the Nairobi Area, 1890-1990*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. See also a review of this book by Jean Davison and Kinuthia Macharia, in *Africa Studies Review*, Vol. 41, No. 2, September, 1998, p. 208 -212. Robertson’s response in the same journal (Vol. 42, No. 3, December 1999, p. 81 -83) did not address the issues raised by Davison and Macharia on the necessity of ethnic contextualization of research.

from within and outside the clan depending on the amount of labor required at a particular time. The above list is not exhaustive. For instance, men worked the iron collected from open-sites by women and children. Women made baskets but unlike the making of pottery, men were “not debarred from any contact with the process.”⁴⁰ However, the preference for African male labor for settler farming and public works from societies all over the country and not just the above four certainly increased the responsibilities and workload of the African female. The colonial government and settlers assumed that the labor of these men’s wives would make up for the miserably low wages they were paid. As Margery Perham explains:

Employers can thus pay the wage and provide quarters for their labour as single men, while their wives support themselves and are kept in a state of suspended animation between their existence as peasant farmers in the reserves and that of temporary labourers in the white areas. What hope does this hold out for them in either sphere of the full progress of which they are capable?⁴¹

We also know, however, that during periods of peak labor demands or for the cultivation of crops such as pyrethrum, the settlers put aside their gender sensibilities with ease and used female squatters and child labor on their farms.⁴²

One cannot under-estimate the effect that the hemorrhaging of male labor onto settler farms and administrative projects had on women. Land alienation affected regions such as Central Nyanza minimally; however, a different fate was reserved for its inhabitants. “Central Nyanza was regarded as a reservoir of cheap labor.”⁴³ It was also not uncommon for the British to restrict the amount of land available for African farming to encourage labor migration. In addition, by the mid-fifties, “in order to obtain still more labour the Imperial Government,” Perham explained, had “now gone back to the bad old practice of allowing forced labour for private employers.”⁴⁴ Margery Perham, using figures produced by the Committee on the Conscription of Labour in the British House of Commons during the mid-fifties shows that up to 55.5% of African males were employed (i.e. working on settler projects since work on African farms was not recognized). She believed that the actual figure was “dangerously high” since the above percentage did not include those who had been most recently drafted to meet settler labor

⁴⁰ John Middleton and Greet Kershaw, *The Central Tribes of the North-Eastern Bantu*, p.22.

⁴¹ Perham to Huxley, 16 October 1942, *Race and Politics in Kenya*, p.87.

⁴² Tabitha Kanogo, *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau, 1905-1963*, p.37, 48-49.

⁴³ Bethwell Ogot, “British Administration in Central Nyanza District of Kenya, 1900-1960,” in Toyin Falola and Atieno-Odhiambo, eds., *The Challenges of History and Leadership in Africa: The Essays of Bethwell Allan Ogot*, (Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2002), p. 275

⁴⁴ Perham to Huxley, 16 October 1942, *Race and Politics in Kenya*, p.88.

demands. Furthermore, British arguments that those laborers were in a position to return home were, in her opinion, not reassuring. She writes:

The Committee suggest that as some of these are squatters and some can get back to their homes at night, the percentage away from home is not quite so high as it seems. But this does not apply so much to the Kavirondo [from present day Nyanza and Western Province] who do not provide many squatters and who mostly work away in the Central Province or even further away on the coast.⁴⁵

The colonial government, therefore, preferred to keep the female African's significant efforts towards the subsidizing of the male African labor market under wraps.

Gendering Leadership: The Link between Politics and Education

The difficulties that African women faced were further compounded by the different goals and emphases the colonial government and the church built into education. In some areas, the first mission schools were for boys. In Luoland for example, Ogot explains that mission schools were originally built for the sons of society's indigenous elite. It is in keeping with this tradition that the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) constructed a secondary school at Maseno in Nyanza. In the first years of missionary education, students all over the country could only hope to access primary level education. Missionaries saw in secondary school education the opportunity to train young African men as future Christian leaders of their societies.⁴⁶ This was a policy that lent support to the colonial government's efforts to create offices and install, almost exclusively; male leaders whom they hoped would be amenable to British policies. Such education opportunities also enabled African youth to take advantage of socio-economic opportunities with little competition from their age mates of both sexes.⁴⁷

Secondary education in Nyanza produced the first crop of male African leaders who eventually formed the Young Kavirondo Association in 1922, the first African-led political party in the province inspired by the Young Kikuyu Association, formed in Central Kenya a few years earlier. Similarly, secondary schools such as Alliance High School, established in 1926 by an alliance of the major Protestant denominations in the country, produced a large crop of male African colonial and post-colonial era leadership. At the school's fortieth anniversary in March, 1966, President Kenyatta gave a speech in which he acknowledged that "the great majority of my

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.88.

⁴⁶ John Anderson, *The Struggle for the School*, p. 21-22.

⁴⁷ Bethwell Ogot, "British Administration in Central Nyanza District of Kenya, 1900-1960," p. 247.

colleagues in the [all-male] Cabinet today have attended this school, and many have later contributed by teaching here as well. Many of our senior Civil Servants and Officers of the Administration can thank the Alliance, not merely for scholastic training but also for qualities of wisdom and judgment and national pride.”⁴⁸ Thus, most girls entered mission schools, which presented them with far fewer options as far as the school curriculum was concerned and as adults, would have to work harder to succeed in various fields outside the home in British-governed Kenya and after independence.

Furthermore, the social norms of missionaries influenced the manner in which Africans viewed gender in their societies. John Anderson notes that while Catholic missionaries depicted little of what comprised European family life, Protestant missionaries presented more to the African in this regard. A handful of dedicated Protestant missionary wives and government-hired women teachers championed the early education of African women. However, in addition to their pedagogical work, the manner in which missionaries treated their wives, their attitudes towards the education of their own children and their general lifestyles gradually seeped into African societies.⁴⁹ As argued above, for the British missionary and administrator, it was generally desirable that African men undertake a more dominant role outside the home. However, the cumulative effects of colonial-era government policies in most cases simply created for the African woman an ever-growing number of hurdles to leap before and after independence.

Having instituted a series of laws and measures to extract male labor from African societies, it was left to women in these communities to restructure their lives to make up for its chronic absence.⁵⁰ Historian Margaret Jean Hay’s research on Luo women and economic change during the colonial period which she conducted in Kowe, a rural area in Nyanza, Province, highlights the agricultural innovations adopted by the women of Kowe in the face of increasing male labor migration to towns and plantations from 1900 to 1945.⁵¹ Male labor migration meant that women had to shoulder a greater load of homestead and agricultural responsibilities. To cope, the women incorporated new crops into their cultivation routines (e.g. white maize,

⁴⁸ Jomo Kenyatta as quoted in John Anderson, *The Struggle for the School*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.26.

⁵⁰ For a more detailed analyses of colonial labor laws and policies see B. J. Berman and J. M. Lonsdale, “Crises of Accumulation, Coercion and the Colonial State: The Development of the Labor Control System in Kenya, 1919 – 1929,” in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*. Vol. 14, No. 1, 1980, p. 55 – 81.

⁵¹ Margaret Hay, “Luo Women and Economic Change During the Colonial Period,” in Nancy Hafkin and Edna G. Bay, eds., *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*. California: Stanford University Press, 1976.

cassava and groundnuts), invested modestly in modern farm equipment and used the time and money saved to trade.⁵² The novelty lay not in their trading or agricultural activities, but rather in the incorporation of new ideas and crops and the range of commodities traded. Colonialism had confronted women with a labor challenge, and they redoubled their efforts to cope with the demands of the British-imposed economy.

Labor and land policies analysed above had other consequences for women. As a result of having a lesser foothold in the new cash economy, impoverished women, in some cases, ended up being victimized by the use of what society falsely perceived of as age-old customary law for civil purposes. For instance, Luo wife inheritance, pre-conditioned by a widow's consent and choice of partner as a social mechanism used to care for her and her children has been used in independent Kenya as a weapon against economically weak women. These women are coerced into such unions and in such cases, have lost their right to the late spouse's property; an act traditionally disallowed by custom. In novelist Margaret Ogola's *River and the Source*, Akoko Obanda, born in the 1870s, is widowed when her husband, a recruit of World War I British Army efforts, dies at war.⁵³ Obanda successfully resists being inherited by her brother-in-law by appealing to Kisumu law courts for help, which she eventually receives. When her own daughter Nyabera is widowed, she departs from her matrimonial home to join her mother. The rapidly developing urban world becomes their next destination and offers them the opportunity to work and start their lives all over again in a new environment. However, one may argue that their labor had been stripped of much of its pre-colonial politico-economic power.

The diminution of the politico-economic power of African women after the end of colonialism can be understood by looking at the processes of governance and the exercise of power. Among the Kikuyu for example, Carolyn Shaw has explained that women did not hold political offices. Nonetheless, they "were crucial in turning land and its products into political resources."⁵⁴ In addition, they had their own councils in which they "could act independently of men and held sway over some men."⁵⁵ Female politico-economic power was possible because Kikuyu wealth in pre-colonial times was measured in terms of livestock, land, and people.⁵⁶ While livestock husbandry was in the hands of men, women were crucial in turning land into

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.100.

⁵³ Margaret Ogola, *River and the Source*. Nairobi: Focus Books, 1994.

⁵⁴ Carolyn Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex, and Class in Kenya*, p.29.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.37.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.37.

wealth and the reproduction of labor which contributed to the acquisition of livestock. Shaw also demonstrates that women were central players in the distribution of a family's wealth for the generation of more wealth. For example, women helped establish societal networks that were needed for labor-intensive efforts such as frontier land clearing. Society charged them with the responsibility of maintaining appropriate food reserves and their consent and cooperation was thus necessary when families wished to open up virgin land. Furthermore, while men dominated the society's political structures, Shaw argues, that Kikuyu women did have authority to make decisions such as the allocation of the season's harvest. The women could also make others comply based "on their spiritual powers, strength of character, ability to use kin lines of influence to their advantage, and knowledge of the indispensability of their household services."⁵⁷ In addition, livestock obtained from female trading activities were attached to the household of the woman who had made the exchange.

However, during colonialism, the British altered the dynamics of wealth acquisition and male ascension to power and influence. For instance, some Kikuyu men who had exploited long-distance trading opportunities with the coast used their wealth and European power to ascend to power as chiefs in a society that never before had this office.⁵⁸ Thus, actions of colonial administrators elided the role women had played in the process of wealth creation and its attendant social influence. In addition to these processes, education acted as a potent tool in the hands of colonial administrators and missionaries for purposes of fortifying these socio-cultural changes that they continuously instituted in African societies. It served not only as a tool of socio-cultural indoctrination, but also further disadvantaged women through its gendered curriculum and their (women's) disproportionate access to the new system of education.

European Socio-Engineering Processes and The Invention of Tradition in Africa

Thus, the new system of education and European attitudes towards leadership added to the socio-cultural changes that altered the power balance in favor of men. As demonstrated above, men had greater access to land and education, and hence were better positioned to make more money in independent Kenya. Since the British were unable to comprehend the African female's politico-economic power, they continuously placed whatever limited power it gave to Africans solely in the hands of men. This meant that men, unchecked by traditional gender, age

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁵⁸ Refer to discussion on the invention of tradition ahead.

and spiritual roles not only dominated Local Native Councils and Courts but were also the sole sex nominated to the LEGCO from 1944 onwards.⁵⁹ Such appointments, coupled with the socio-cultural changes discussed above, made it more difficult for women to ascend to political office or influence government policy in pre- and post-independent Kenya. It also meant that the use of these local government political structures to facilitate the collection of oral narratives would exclude female participation from a vital socio-political process, the production of knowledge, as will be seen in the case of the Luo. One may view the social engineering processes discussed in this chapter as well as their impact on African societies in general or women in particular as part of what historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger call “The Invention of Tradition,” a societal process that is generated internally or externally to cope with change. Hobsbawm describes invented tradition as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity of the past.”⁶⁰ Traditions, therefore, are not always rooted in the past and can be powerful instruments of control and influence in the hands of those who create and oversee their uses.

The British invented several traditions in an attempt to dominate completely their African colonies. As seen in this chapter, these included the invention of new political traditions (chieftaincy and ethnic territories), property ownership, gender roles, and pedagogical philosophies. According to Ranger, one of the main reasons for the institutionalization of new traditions can be traced to a late nineteenth century desire by Europeans to make their activities in Africa “more respectable and controlled.”⁶¹ In the opinion of the British, the formalization of colonial rule in the continent had to be accompanied by the setting up of “whites into a convincing ruling class, entitled to hold sway over their subjects not only through force of arms or finance but also through the prescriptive status bestowed by neo-tradition.”⁶² The neo-traditions to which Ranger refers entailed the creation of new ethnic identities and leaders, geopolitical territories, cultural norms, and the writing down of what the British perceived to be rigid customary law and ethnic histories passed down from generation to generation from time

⁵⁹ With the sole exception of Priscilla Abwao who was nominated to the LEGCO just before independence.

⁶⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) , p.1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁶² Terence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa,” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 215.

immemorial. Such traditions were largely for the purposes of satisfying British needs for fragmented but centralized African ethnicities, which they could control for purposes of land appropriation, tax collection, and labor extraction as seen above in the case of the Kamba, Luo and Kikuyu.

Ranger also argues that the British at times sought to preserve African traditions as a way of preventing the total dismantling and subsequent destabilization of African societies and therefore colonial interests. That is, it was in the interest of the colonizer to design traditions of governance that resulted in a hierarchical society in which “Europeans commanded and Africans accepted commands” within distinct political frameworks.⁶³ This helps to explain the setting up of Local Native Councils whose jurisdiction was limited to specific ethnic groups, but subordinate to colonial administrative institutions. However, the colonial government’s insistence on defining African societies according to European cultural norms e.g. geopolitical territories and coded law (the promotion of the writing down of customs and traditions as static customary law) was in conflict with the cultural norms of indigenous peoples. This is because customs in pre-colonial indigenous contexts constantly evolved to cope with change and “new balances of power and wealth.”⁶⁴ The formation and modification of customs in a society would be undertaken across several social categories including age, gender, profession and social role. The codification of customs, therefore, turned them into ossified legal structures that failed to reflect societal dynamics and placed their implementation in a limited number of social categories and institutions e.g. educated or elderly males in Local Native Councils.⁶⁵ Moreover, one may argue that since the British encouraged the codification of laws in a colonial context in which they were dictating new social norms and institutions, the codified customs were unlikely to reflect comprehensively the complexities and subtleties of power, indigenous constructs of gender and other socio-cultural norms that the British did not understand, or simply discouraged. Among the Luo, the work of codifying societal customs was undertaken by the first African graduates of the missionary schooling system that was a crucial site for the transmission of

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 250

⁶⁵ See David N. Beach, “The Rozvi in search of their past,” in *History in Africa*, vol. 10, 1983, p. 13-34 for his analysis of how oral traditions were manipulated by various people in a bid to position themselves for various benefits in colonial Zimbabwe. A similar argument is made by David Cohen, “The undefining of oral tradition.” *Ethnohistory*, vol. 33.1, 1989, p. 9-18, for a similar argument relating to the Soga of Uganda. The authors do not use gender as a category of analysis. However, doing so enables one to determine the disadvantageous position of the gender that did not participate in such activities..

British values and colonial policies, as well as by a British sociologist, Gordon Wilson, whose study of Luo customs was sponsored by the government.

Bethwell Ogot, also a historian, gives the main goal of the first codifiers of Luo customs as the preservation for future generations the traditions and the customs of the Luo and that is, “how our ancestors lived.”⁶⁶ However, these codifiers inaccurately saw traditions and customs as bodies of knowledge that had remained immutable for centuries prior to the coming of Europeans to Nyanza. He also explains that these codifiers were not only the first to move Luo customs from the realms of orality to those of script, but they were also the first to attempt the construction of a single Luo identity. Thus, these codifiers embraced a rigid and British-inspired definition of Luo geopolitical structures, institutions and customs in a manner and social environment that the British promoted and dominated. Since contemporaneous British norms and attitudes were ill-positioned to comprehend indigenous African female agency or power, codification of ethnic traditions and those from whom those traditions were collected not surprisingly intentionally or unintentionally ignored women.

All colonial-era codifiers of “authoritative” works whose records of Luo traditions are employed in the next chapter were either mission-educated Luo men or male European sociologists and anthropologists. A look at the sources and methodologies used by these codifiers reveals that women were excluded from the process. For example, the locales of Gordon Wilson’s government-sponsored and endorsed “Luo Customary Law and Marriage Laws Customs” study were government-established, neo-Luo political institutions, that contemporaneous conditions implicitly gendered male. Writing in the fifties, Wilson acknowledges the invaluable assistance of “Mr. Shadrack Malo, President, Appeal Court, Central Nyanza and Member of East African Court of review. His time was graciously given by the African District Council of Central Nyanza.”⁶⁷ Wilson also explains that his brief was to “record Luo Laws and Customs...faithfully.”⁶⁸ That is, Wilson was apparently not aware that the Luo had never adhered to a rigid system of laws and that collecting them from a single sex denied the other sex the opportunity to take part in codifying ethnic traditions that would govern them. Prior to codification, the process was a never-ending creation of traditions that was closely related to

⁶⁶ Bethwell Ogot, “The Construction of Luo Identity and History,” in Toyin Falola and Atieno-Odhiambo, eds., *The Challenges of History and Leadership in Africa: The Essays of Bethwell Allan Ogot*, (Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2002), p.231.

⁶⁷ Gordon Wilson, “Luo Customary Law and Marriage Laws Customs.” Republic of Kenya, English Version, 1968.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.4

ever-changing political centers of control and influence, a political process in which, as will be shown in the next chapter, Luo women did take part. Wilson and his sponsors were therefore not aware that custom had always “concealed new balances of power” and hence the scripting of customs made them “rigid and unable so readily to reflect change in the future.”⁶⁹

Nevertheless, these codified Luo customs are an invaluable source of information for the histories of the Luo in general and the agency and power of Luo women in particular. They enable one to study the diffuse nature of power in one ethnic group; the Luo. However, extracting the histories of Luo female agency demands an awareness of the socio-political contexts in which the codification of Luo customs took place. As Randal Pouwels explains, “the key to understanding traditions may lie...not in the historical period the traditions purport to be about but in the period and conditions that gave rise to the traditions themselves.”⁷⁰ The next chapter, therefore, is an exposition of Luo female agency drawn largely from a critical analysis of codified oral traditions. These will serve as a prelude to the discussion of Grace Onyango’s political career. I have chosen to focus on Luo women because Onyango, the main individual subject of this thesis, is a Luo.

⁶⁹ Terence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa,” p.251.

⁷⁰ Randal Pouwels as quoted by Thomas Spear, “Early Swahili History Reconsidered,” in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Volume 33, No. 2, 2000, p. 257 - 290.

WOMEN AND POWER IN THE LUO COMMUNITY: CONTEXTUALIZING GRACE ONYANGO ETHNICALLY

A woman, surely, is the strength of a man
Because a woman is the house
And a woman is the home.
Bless these sorghum grains
So that tomorrow
Owiny's house may also find a fire-lighter
The potent fire which does not die out
Until the day breaks.
Aa...a woman, indeed, is a mystery of the world!¹

Introduction

This chapter is a demonstration of Luo female socio-political power in the pre-colonial era. The dynamics evident in gender relations vis-à-vis politics and socio-cultural issues in Kenya, examined in the previous chapter, go a long way to show that societies before colonialism were not static. This is contrary to colonial-era arguments that African societies were calcified societal structures awaiting “enlightenment” and sparks of dynamism from the West.² Since the nineteenth-through to the middle of the twentieth century, European powers used the arguments of prejudiced colonial-era scholars to justify their imperial activities in Africa. The Luo community just like any other human society was not static socio-culturally or politically. In addition, in this literature, the assumption that all societies were patriarchal more often than not meant that African women were innately passive.³ Such an assumption makes Grace Onyango, the first female Member of Parliament (M.P.) in postcolonial Kenya an abrupt cultural eruption when she was actually part of a dynamic system in which women who were ambitious, wealthy and eloquent, could exercise considerable influence and power within society.

¹ Grace Ogot, *The Strange Bride*. East African Educational Publishers: Nairobi, 1989. Translated by Okoth Okombo. Okul, a Luo elder, prays to Were Nyakalaga (God who flows everywhere) in *The Strange Bride*, a Luo myth first published by Grace Ogot. The above prayer is excerpted from p.51.

² J. Ki-Zerbo, “General Introduction” in *General History of Africa I: Methodology and African Prehistory*. (California: University of California Press, 1981), p. 13-14 The author criticizes the “presupposition of linear evolution, with Europe, Pioneer of civilization, in the van of human advance, and at the rear the primitive ‘tribes of Oceania, Amazonia and Africa,’ that dominated nineteenth and early twentieth-era anthropological studies.

³ Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1997, p.127.

The Luo, like many pre-colonial Kenyan communities, did not have “griots” or “court historians.”⁴ However, they did have communally acknowledged specialists on the Luo past. These specialists instructed the society’s young in institutions such as the *chir* and *duol*.⁵ Such people focused on imparting knowledge in their various areas of specialization such as climatology (rain makers), *sigana* (history), war, customary law, lineage, spiritual matters, etc. In addition to these specialists, there were a small number of individuals who the Luo recognized as experts on local history. According to Ogot, these individuals studied a wide variety of traditions and then used them to construct histories of their communities. Pender Cutlip called them “encyclopedia informants” to reflect the wide spectrum of knowledge they collected, collated and preserved.⁶

The first Luo encyclopedia informants to publish their works after World War II got their formal education from Christian mission schools and served as officials in the new administrative structures, which Europeans had created. Some of these works, which have since been interpreted and re-interpreted by historians, anthropologists and philosophers, are crucial to any analysis of not only male attitudes with regard to gender relations, but also of what they silence about these relations. Though these works are by both Luo and non-Luo scholars, they are overwhelmingly male because of the inequities inherent in colonial era education discussed in the previous chapter. This notwithstanding, they are an indispensable reservoir of information on Luo society and, used critically, provide valuable ideas for any scholar interested in gendered analyses of the society. In this case they enable us to understand the different socio-cultural and political spaces in which Grace Onyango was born, educated and functioned.

In many scholarly works, Luo women, particularly in the traditional setting, are presented as either being disinterested in or unable to participate in political processes that fundamentally shape their society. The first anthropologist to both study and publish on the Luo was British anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard. In his paper, “Marriage Customs of the Luo of Kenya,”

⁴ Bethwell Ogot, “The Construction of Luo Identity and History,” in Toyin Falola and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo. *The Challenges of History and Leadership in Africa: The Essays of Bethwell Allan Ogot*, (Asmara: Africa World Press, 2002), p.229.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 225-226. The *chir* was an informal school whose location was determined by leaders from different settlements in a certain neighborhood. It was usually located under a big tree at the junction of a number of paths. Ogot gives the duration of a normal session as being from ten o’clock in the morning to two o’ clock in the afternoon. The *duol*, on the other hand, was a hut constructed at the centre of *gunda bur* (multi-clan or multi-lineal village) and periods of learning ran from around seven in the evening to bed time. Older girls were instructed in *siwindhe* which was the house of a respectable elderly lady in a given village.

⁶ Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 230.

first published in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* in April of 1950,⁷ Evans-Pritchard focused on Luo courtship and marital ceremonies. By his own admission, the paper was “a short general account of the Luo based on a rapid survey made in 1936.” However, his arguments on marital custom closely resembled those in the works of Luo encyclopedic informants published about the same time. Though Evans-Pritchard’s main sources were amateur anthropologist, Father Hartmann and K.C. Shaw who had published a paper, “Some Preliminary Notes on Luo Marriage Customs,” in the *Journal of East Africa* 1932, his paper was a break from the works of prejudiced colonial-era anthropologists including missionaries.⁸ In Ogot’s opinion, the anthropological works of missionaries were characterized by accounts of Luo religious beliefs and cultural practices with the aim of portraying them as “poor slaves of ignorance” who were “unchristian and bad.”⁹ Evans-Pritchard’s paper, though devoid of such judgments, focused on descriptions of Luo marriage ceremonies with little explanation of the significance of the various rites and rituals. There is little in his paper that points to the crucial and influential socio-political role the married Luo woman played in her marital home. In addition, Evans-Pritchard’s paper was not written as a historical document and thus has no historical depth. The lack of historical depth means that there is no analysis of gender issues through time. It also means that what a scholar perceives as ‘women’s problems’ and subsequently attributes to long-running traditions is without an examination of the extent to which traditions may have previously worked to the advantage of women. For instance, twenty-eight years after the publication of Evans-Pritchard’s paper, Betty Potash, an anthropologist and sociologist, published yet another paper on Luo marriage in the same journal.¹⁰ In this paper, Potash makes a scholarly effort to examine the contribution of Luo female resilience and customs to the stability of marriages in a rural community in South Nyanza. However, the Luo women examined appear to be helplessly trapped in troubled, largely polygamous, marriages

⁷ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, “Marriage Customs of the Luo of Kenya,” in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1950), p. 132-134.

⁸ K. C. Shaw, “Some Preliminary Notes on Luo Marriage Customs,” J.E.A. and U.N.H.S. 1932 (as footnoted by Evans-Pritchard).

⁹ Bethwell Ogot, “The Construction of Luo Identity and History,” p.227.

¹⁰ Betty Potash, “Some Aspects of Marital Stability in a Rural Luo Community” in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (1978), p. 394. For example, the author refers to Ugandan anthropologist Christine Obbo’s work (1972) and argues that women who refused to return to rural homes with their husbands or widows who refuse to enter levirate marriages have “ceased to operate by Luo norms,” implying that such actions have always been impossible or are impossible for women living according to Luo customs.. As will be seen in this chapter, such actions were indeed possible and did occur. In addition, “Luo norms” did allow such actions in pre-colonial societies.

mostly as a result of custom, perceived of as unchanging and historically disadvantageous to women.

In her paper, Potash argued that the Luo women in the community she researched “frequently voice complaints about their husbands’ behavior” or “make more general comments on the difficulty of marriage for women” yet there was little “divorce or separation.”¹¹ Apparently, such commentary was unique to women in this particular part of the world. She also admitted that it was difficult for her as an investigator to witness actual marital disagreements or measure their intensity. Besides, Potash did not examine what constitutes a “divorce” or “separation” for both men and women in any Luo cultural context.¹² Though she argues that “problems of human relationships are found in any society,” the paper is essentially a wholesale critique of the Luo polygynous, marriage system. She uses case studies of obviously dysfunctional marriages to support her thesis and looses the distinction between functional and dysfunctional Luo polygynous marriages. Moreover, a gross cultural misinterpretation is present in her work in which she dubs ritualized and ceremonial marital abduction, *meko*, which was preceded by a bride’s consent and interfamilial deliberation, as marriage by “ambush,” then downplays its ritual function and presents the ambush of a woman as a deed that could be expiated following payment of dowry.¹³ Furthermore, while one may assert that no human culture is perfect, in the paper, Luo customs and traditions, as far as marriage is concerned, make women appear as chronic victims of their socio-cultural milieus in both their marital and natal homes. It therefore appeared that pre-Christian and pre-colonial Luo women were unable to

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.380. A Luo marriage could be definitively ended and this was marked by the return of dowry to the husband by the wife’s family. However, according to Humphrey Ojwang’ in an interview with Jane Achieng, marriages in traditional Luo society did not “break up” but “broke down.” That is “a slow deterioration” occurred which eventually led to separation. Yet, even after dowry was returned, custom obliged a man to bury his wife in his home. See Shadrack Malo, *Luo Customs and Practices*. Nairobi: Rekar Investments, 2003, p.91, translation by Jane Achieng’. Also, while the definitive end of a marriage was less common, “separation” (desertion)...has it seems always been relatively common.” This was probably because a woman’s legitimate children retained inheritance rights no matter how many lovers she had after leaving her marital home. While inheritance rights for illegitimate children were problematic, this was not enough to stop a woman determined to desert her marriage from doing so. Refer to Gordon Wilson, *Luo Customary Law and Marriage Customs*. Republic of Kenya, English Version, 1968, p.134, paragraph 168.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.380.

¹³ See Betty Potash, “Some Aspects of Marital Stability in a Rural Luo Community,” p. 382. *Paul Mboya’s Luo Kitgi Gi Timbegi*. Nairobi: Atari Joint Limited, 1967, p.67, translated by Jane Achieng’. Even after a general consensus was arrived at for a marriage to proceed, it was forbidden for *meko* to occur in the absence of a woman’s parents. In addition, the grandmother in whose hut she slept had to be informed just before *meko* proceeded. Gordon Wilson. *Luo Customary Law and Marriage Customs*. Republic of Kenya, English Version, 1968, p.98. Even in ages gone past if *meko* occurred before the families had arrived at a consensus, a girl was not to be molested. If defloration occurred without the involvement of her clan, it was considered rape; an act which led to war.

exercise agency in their societies. One would then have to argue that Grace Onyango rose to political prominence solely because the tools to ascend the political ladder were facilitated by the Christian faith and British colonialism.

In contrast, Nancy Schwartz a scholar of religion has argued, not only do women in patrilineal societies “have certain powers precisely because they are in patrilineal societies, or *patrilineal societies of certain kinds*,” but also that “polygyny...and the house property complex can make for highly matrifocal and matricentric patriliney which can be positive for women both as living actors and as ancestors.”¹⁴ She has proceeded to show how the reverence for ancestors, male and female, by both the Luo and the Luyia could work to the advantage of living women in relation to the securing of rights and privileges, because “ancestral spirits and properly buried bodies can support claims to land in various ways.”¹⁵ Schwartz’s research however, was based on case studies that focus on Luo and Luyia women exercising agency within the context of the Legio Maria Church of Kenya, an indigenous church established in the sixties after breaking away from the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, her notion of female agency is important to this thesis as she is not only cognizant of female agency, but also the diverse forms in which it is manifested.

From the foregoing, it is necessary to analyze pre-Christian and pre-colonial Luo marital and familial spaces, which for both men and women were the first locales for power building and influence-peddling. In addition, for the vast majority of Africans, the adoption of a non-indigenous faith does not mean a complete divorce from one’s own culture. This is because the product of contact between two cultures is often a *mélange* of the two at both communal and individual levels, a process which results in the creation of new traditions. In addition, and as argued above, some authors have portrayed the Luo home as a socio-cultural space that is a site of patriarchal hegemony into which Luo women, the passive and chronically helpless victims of the system, were locked. It is therefore important to visit the pre-colonial Luo home not only to understand female agency in this context, but also to study it as the foundry in which wealth and power were forged.

¹⁴ Nancy Shwartz. “Active Dead or Alive: Some Kenyan Views about the Agency of Luo and Luyia Women Pre- and Post Mortem” in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 30, Fasc. 4, p.434 – my italics.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.436.

Luo Female Power As Distilled from Oral Traditions

One of the earliest encyclopedic informants among the Luo people to publish his work and record the link between wealth and power was Paul Mbuya.¹⁶ His book, *Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi (Luo Customs and Traditions)* was first published in 1938. He was a Seventh Day Adventist clergyman who later became Chief of Karachuonyo and also served as the Secretary of the African District Council in South Nyanza.¹⁷ His portrayal of the link between political power and wealth among the Luo gives one the impression that the two were exclusively held by men. Mbuya at one time observed that “the Luo respect wealthy people and they say that the community cannot be stable without them.”¹⁸ Those of considerable means were viewed as “the backbone or strength of the society.”¹⁹ These people were admired for their diligence and generosity, and were viewed as unlikely to be tempted into illegally acquiring wealth once they had ascended to power. Known as *jopith*, they included the chief who was often the wealthiest man in a given settlement. Those known as *okebe* were almost if not equally wealthy, and they owned large amounts of livestock, crops, and had “a reasonable number of children, wives, workers and sojourners.”²⁰ Such a man was supposed to be self-sufficient in everything and was often a village elder. According to Mbuya, during planting seasons, people were sure of getting seeds from him even after famine. *Ogayi* came next in rank and, depending on his charisma, he could ascend to any position of leadership. There was also a social designation known as *jamoko* occupied by those who had adequate amounts of crops and livestock but no children.

Mbuya’s account omits an important point of diffusion of political power – marriage. For among the Luo, it is a well-known fact that a male leader had to be married even though Mbuya does not state this explicitly. To this end, it was impossible for an unmarried man to ascend to any leadership capacity. This was because the wife of a leader was viewed as a moderating influence on him. A wife was in the best position to offer positive advice to her husband especially at crucial moments, particularly about matters affecting the community in a profound manner. The Luo believed, and still believe, that if a man (a leader) was unable to reach a decision on a crucial matter, he would ask those present to give him a little more time to think or

¹⁶ Paul Mbuya is often referred to as Paul Mboya. I will use the former in this thesis which is actually the way his name should be spelt.

¹⁷ Bethwell Ogot, “The Construction of Luo Identity and History,” p.231.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.159

¹⁹ Jane Achieng’, *Paul Mboya’s Luo Kitgi Gi Timbegi*, p. 159

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.159

consider the matter overnight. It was taken for granted that in fact he needed to consult his wife for an opinion. Therefore, the husband recognized his wife's intimate knowledge and wisdom on matters affecting the community at large. This included matters on issues such as incest, divorce, and orphans. It is therefore evident that wealth and marriage were indispensable to those who aspired to a high socio-political status. Thus, land and labor were crucial to wealth acquisition and accumulation. The two were obtainable, though not exclusively, through marriage and, as will be seen, they were not out of reach for women.

By looking at what constitutes the roles and rights of a married woman in oral traditions, one can see that Luo women in polygynous marriages considerably influenced the management of familial wealth which, as argued above, was crucial to the acquisition and exercise of power. Both husband and senior wife were deeply involved in the marriages of their offspring, and as explained by Shadrack Malo, a son needed the permission and support of his parents to marry.²¹ Parental support was vital because a bachelor's parents funded his dowry obligations and he inherited land from his mother. In addition, marriage was a communal affair in which clans played crucial ceremonial and ritual roles. A woman's consent to marriage was vital and the process was unlikely to proceed if she declined in spite of her parents' support for the union.²² A polygamous man constructed a circular homestead with the house of the first and most influential wife at the upper centre of the compound with its door facing the main gate. Wealth was important for males who wished to have multiple wives because not only did each wife have her own house within the homestead but she also had a right to lands outside it (the homestead) for her own use and to pass on to her male children. According to customs collected by Mbuya, the construction of houses followed seniority in marriage: *mikayi* – first wife, *nyachira* – second wife, *rero* – all the other wives who came after the second wife and *chir ruako lawu*, the last wife.²³ According to Mbuya “Nothing would happen in the home without the knowledge of the first wife. The husband could not do anything without consulting the first wife.”²⁴ Furthermore, from customs Mbuya recorded in the fifties, the husband had to consult the *mikayi* when he wanted to start land preparation and all other subsequent agricultural practices from planting to

²¹ Malo is yet another Luo encyclopedic informant who, in the early 1950s, authored four works on Luo customs, traditions, lineage and grammar: *Jaluo (Luo Customs and Practices)*, 1999, *Dhondi Mag Central Nyanza (A History of the Clans of Central Nyanza)*, 1953 (*A History of the Clans of Central Nyanza*), *Sigend Luo Maduogo Chuny (Merry Luo Stories)*, 1951), and *Luo Without Tears*, 1952.

²² See for e.g. Paul Mboya's *Luo Kitgi Gi Timbegi*, p.66 and Shadrack Malo, *Luo customs and Practices*, p. 33-34

²³ Paul Mbuya, p. 54

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.54

harvesting. She was also vital to the successful completion of rites and rituals necessary for the proper establishment of a home “as she was the owner of the home.”²⁵

Mbuya explained that even after menopause, her status as the senior wife remained and she could take the status of *pim*, an elderly, trusted, and respected woman who was entrusted with the education of young girls. However, the crucial role the *pim* played in Luo society has received inadequate attention because, as Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo explain, historians and anthropologists have tended to pay more attention to ‘masculine’ structures and ‘masculine’ processes of segmentation within the ethnic group. The *pim*’s role was not restricted to the education of young girls as she also took care of young boys. According to the two historians, her knowledge was very broad and part of it contributed to the expertise required in the social aspects of fishing expeditions to Lake Victoria and marketing of the products of such expeditions.²⁶ In addition, the scholars point out that it is in the *siwindhe* which she managed that she passed on valuable information about individual and household migrations as well as settlement of new areas. Besides, Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo argue that it is only when one takes into consideration the importance of social knowledge in the construction of middle and long distance relationships in the west of Kenya that we can comprehend the central role the *pim* played in the socialization of Luo children and in the fostering of regional “consciousness and corporateness.”²⁷ They add that the knowledge that the *pim* passed on in its entirety was crucial to the formation of *oganda* identities – identities which provided the foundations for the formation of an active Luo identity.²⁸ The status of the first wife was such that even after death, the second wife who took over could not ascend to the level she had occupied and only a sister, married to her husband after her death, “could reach the full esteem held by the first wife when a new home was built.”²⁹

After marriage, a new wife underwent a period of close supervision from her mother-in-law with whom she lived for a certain period and while there, she built social networks that were vital to her socio-economic life in the marital home. According to Simeon Ominde, the length of

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54

²⁶ David Cohen and E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo, “The Powers of Women” in *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), p., 94-5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.95.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.95.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.54.

the time “depended on mutual feeling between wife and mother-in-law.”³⁰ She was supposed to educate herself on all the aspects of life of the family into which she had married which entailed everything from their modes of housekeeping to their lineage system. The new wife was under constant scrutiny from all quarters in her new family and other women of the home had the authority to send her on errands, “the idea being to test her character in the communal life of women.”³¹ Even so, the system had various checks and balances for there was nothing to be gained by a failure of the marriage. The conduct of the mother-in-law, for instance, was also under scrutiny by the other village women who could censure her.³² Besides, if she had daughters, they would move to other homes after marriage and as she aged, she would increasingly rely on her daughters-in-law. However total conformity was not the only result of such patrilocal unions. Women did act as one of the conduits for the transmission of various cultural innovations in their marital homes and the stronger their personalities, the more the influence they could wield.

Miaha is a Luo myth that was first published by Grace Ogot in 1983, and is symbolic of societal recognition of the role of women in cultural change and their contribution to the Luo economic base.³³ It can also be seen as a female contribution to the community’s stock of oral traditions that not only emphasizes the economic contribution of women in Luo society, but also underscored that role in the face of colonial-era changes in relations of production. In this myth, a woman of mysterious as well as unmatched beauty, Nyawir daughter of Opolo and Awino, married Owiny, the son of Were Ochak, chief of Got Owaga and husband to Lwak. The myth is based upon a time when the people of Got Owaga depended solely on poultry and white ants for protein and on crops that were supernaturally cultivated by the almighty Were Nyakalaga. Nyawir, newly married, is troubled by the idyllic life the people of her new home lead and wonders “what was man supposed to do with the tremendous energy which Were Nyakalaga had

³⁰ Simeon Ominde, *The Luo Girl from Infancy to Marriage* (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1952), p.51. This publication is based on field work conducted while studying at Makerere University

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.51.

³² *Ibid.*, p.51.

³³ Grace Ogot. *The Strange Bride*. The Luo word *Miaha* which was the actual title of the Dholuo version published in 1983 means “bride.” “Strange” is an addition to the title in the English version. The myth may have been inspired by the Biblical story of creation in the Book of Genesis i.e. the idea that the people of Got Owaga had to till their land after they fell from Were Nyakalaga’s favor.

Grace Ogot published two short stories in 1964 and 1964. A novel *The Promised Land* was published in 1966 when Florence Efurū also published her first novel. Ogot was therefore first African woman writer to publish a work of literature in English. Michigan State University Press website (<http://msupress.msu.edu/authorbio>).

given him?”³⁴ The newly married Nyawir purposed to change the lives of the people of Got Owaga and with forceful determination, compelled Lwak to hand over Got Owaga’s divinely-ordained hoe whose power she then proceeded to break. The people of Got Owaga were thereafter, forced to shift to full-fledged agriculture. Nyawir was initially shaken when she went blind temporarily and was banished from her new village along with her loyal husband. However, she recovered faster from her affliction as well as social and emotional set-back than he did and even had the audacity to attempt a return to the village to request for their magic axe which eventually lead Owiny to discover fishing and cattle keeping, which were crucial components of the traditional Southern Luo economic base. *Miaha* is also an articulate portrayal of Luo cultural dynamism and the dynamism that is therefore inherent in the production of oral traditions: Nyawir changes customs even as the chief argues “anyone who tries to alter customs is like someone who despises Were Nyakalaga and our ancestors.”³⁵ After banishment, a persistent Nyawir tells her husband that “I know that even you realize that the changes I want are not bad” and that “generations succeed one another...what an elder did...his own child will one day try to do better and in an easier way.”³⁶ Through Nyawir, the people of Got Owaga learn to cultivate the land and harvest the earth’s resources on their own.

Luo women acquired inalienable usufructuary rights to land by marriage. These lands were those a husband inherited from his mother’s matrifocal unit within a polygamous household. Women cultivated these lands to sustain their children and were in charge of the livestock attached to each matrifocal unit. Land was the basis of the community’s economic life. It provided women with products to exchange at community markets though they also produced a wide variety of handicrafts for domestic use or exchange. They particularly sought livestock and women who were most “industrious and economical thus acquired considerable wealth.”³⁷ If a man died when his children were still young, his full or half brother and/or other relatives inherited his wives “but not all of them since they may not accept.”³⁸ As argued in the previous chapter, this is a practice that has been misinterpreted and abused by some Luo men in post-colonial Kenya and must not be read as a cultural norm handed down immutably as custom. According to the customs Malo collected, the widow (*chi liel*) or widows and their children

³⁴ Grace Ogot. *The Strange Bride*, p. 75.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.38

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.123

³⁷ Simeon Ominde, *The Luo Girl from Infancy to Marriage*, p. 53

³⁸ Shadrack Malo, *Luo Customs and Practices*, p. 50

retained the rights to the lands in their original home. The inheritor, *jater*, could live in the home of the dead man or move the widow to his own home. In the event that his own home was far away from the widow's home, he was obliged to provide her with land to cultivate to which she had no rights, but she still retained rights to the lands which her children stood to inherit.

Furthermore, although the Luo are patrilineal, it is from the matricentric and matrifocal home within the homestead that clans emerged and within this set-up, there was plenty of room for women to peddle influence and power. In 1955, sociologist Gordon Wilson after working closely with Shadrack Malo, published his government-sponsored report on *Luo Customary Law and Marriage Law Customs*. The report was a detailed account of Luo customs with case studies of civil disputes settled according to what was by that time upheld by government and local councils as the standard Luo customary law. Wilson also reported on various cultural ceremonies and included their significance. By studying the report's account of the Luo genealogical structure it is possible to place the woman at the heart of Luo power-generation processes. This is possible since the report details how Luo lineages were formed through segmentation that began in the home of a woman since "each individual claims right to the family food and land because he issued forth through the door of his mother's hut."³⁹ That is, the mother was the center around which those within the house defined themselves. This house, shared with full siblings, is referred to as *jokamiyo/joot achiel/joka dhako* - those of a common mother. This matrifocal unit together with other matrifocal units formed the *jokawuoro* - those of a common father - and hence the extended polygamous family. The *jokawuoro*, descended from a common great-grandfather, formed a *keyo*, the basis for a council that arbitrated land, and boundary disputes. The *jokamiyo* referred to other matricentric units within the same household as *jokanyiego*. *Nyiego* implies a rivalry of sorts in Dholuo and though this does not mean that the homes were engulfed in perpetual warfare, the rivalry was crucial to lineage segmentation processes that resulted in new socio-political units.

Thus, according to coded Luo tradition, matrifocal segmentation was reflected in the second-generation lineage level called *jokadiyo* - the people of a common grandmother. It is also evident that wives were strategically positioned at the centre of the social mechanisms that powered segmentation because all women who married into the household after *mikayi* and *nyachira* were attached to one of them as helpmates - *nyi udi* - even though they had their own

³⁹ Gordon Wilson, *Luo Customary Law and Marriage Customs* (Nairobi: Government Printer), p.8.

homes. As a result, “groups of *nyi udi* also stand in juxtaposition and compete with each other.”⁴⁰ This meant that *nyi ut mikayi* and *nyi ut nyachira* “co-operate in daily tasks and compete with *nyi ut nyachira* in acquiring land, marketing and cultivating.”⁴¹ There were also women’s organizations that existed amongst related families. These took the form of family councils that arbitrated disputes among women.⁴² The spirit of initiative and independence of action in polygamous households vis-à-vis monogamous households is reflected in Ominde’s argument that “although it is generally assumed that the focus of family life is the father, the degree of initiative and freedom among women is greater in polygamous families than in monogamous ones.”⁴³ This was because of less dependence of a wife and her children on the father since “the father of a polygamous household is relatively free from the many responsibilities imposed upon the heads of monogamous families.”⁴⁴ If a man was dying without a son, a Luo woman could enter a woman-to-woman marriage to bear him a child to carry forth his name.⁴⁵ In addition, women used this type of marriage to acquire and control property as well as to perpetuate *limbemni* - lineages - in their own names. From these traditions, we can infer that women had access to wealth and marriage (to women), the crucial ingredients for the attainment of political office. The assertions of Oginga Odinga to this end (see further below) are thus not far fetched when he says that both Luo males and females were eligible for leadership. What one needs to remember is the socio-political environment in which Luo traditions were coded and that women were not involved in colonial-era writing of these traditions.

According to the customs collected by Wilson among the Luo of Central Nyanza, it was possible for a woman to obtain a wife and often she selected one from her natal home. The

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁴² Simeon Ominde, *The Luo Girl from Infancy to Marriage*, p. 53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 68

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67-68.

⁴⁵ For an analysis of similar unions in a different cultural context see Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Press, 1987. Also important is Oyeronke Oyewumi’s “Ties that (Un)Bind: Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations. In *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, 2001, p. 12, (18 June 2006) The author criticized scholars such as Audre Lourde who in 1983, used the practice to justify her homosexuality. Oyewumi’s attack was directed not at Lourde’s sexual orientation, but towards her misrepresentation of African cultures (including Dahomean female soldiers who Lourde most erroneously termed as a lesbian sisterhood). These practices must be examined within their respective ethno-cultural contexts.

female husband then chose a close male relative of her husband to cohabit with her wife. The male relative had no rights whatsoever over the children resulting from such a union. They were regarded as belonging to her and her legitimate husband, dead or alive, and they had a right to inherit his wealth and her lands. These children carried the name of her husband into the future and kept her property within her matrifocal unit.

In his 1955 report, Wilson also pointed out that “modern conditions” had “produced” a small class of women who “accumulated wealth through various professions” despite never having been married or once married women but the unions had broken down (‘divorced’).⁴⁶ These women could turn part of their wealth into cattle and thus marry wives in their own names, that of their husbands or their fathers. Colonial-era elders, from whom Wilson collected traditions, did not support such wealth acquisition schemes but this notwithstanding, they went on. What he failed to see was the fact that this was not a wholly new, modern, phenomenon and that though colonial Kenya presented women with different social and economic conditions, Luo women had been engaging in such practices for quite some time. It is therefore important to note that Wilson was also informed by his sources that “traditionally” a wealthy woman who was not married could marry in the manner explained above or choose a member of her *libamba* to conceive children with a woman of her choice “in order to perpetuate her name in the lineage.”⁴⁷ Such women socially transcended cultural lines between sex and gender. To marry, they became men, were “regarded as men”, and were thus able to “establish lineages as if they were men.”⁴⁸

Luo society like other societies had people who aspired to positions of affluence, influence and power. Not all were successful but ambitious men and women could attain their desires. The position of women in pre-colonial society as actors at the nascent stages of power formation and their ability to aid in and personally accumulate wealth are important to note in this regard. This is echoed in one of the very few Kenyan works that makes specific reference to Grace Onyango, the subject of this thesis.⁴⁹ Oginga Odinga, independent Kenya’s first Vice-

⁴⁶ Gordon Wilson, *Luo Customary Law and Marriage Customs* (Nairobi, Government Printer, 1968) paragraph 133, p.128. See footnote 89 on the ending of a Luo marriage.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, paragraph 133, p.128.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, paragraph 133, p.128.

⁴⁹ Odera Orika, ed., *Oginga Odinga: His Philosophy and Beliefs*. Nairobi: Initiatives Publishers, 1992. This book was part of University of Nairobi’s African Sage Philosophy Project. The project was Orika’s attempt to counter the position European scholars had adopted, arguing that Africans were incapable of producing philosophy. The definition of *Ker* has been taken from Odera Orika

President but also a respected Luo elder and *Ker* - ultimate moral or spiritual leader -, argued that Luo women who exhibited certain skills were considered “complete equals of men in decision-making.”⁵⁰ These included oratorical skills and rational decision-making. In addition, a woman could ascend societal power structures if she was wealthy. Odinga argued that Onyango was elected because of her own hard work and “the Luo did not mind that she was a woman.” As far as he was concerned, her sex was irrelevant and “people sometimes forget that men are not given leadership or recognition just because they are men.”⁵¹

Grace Onyango: Ethnically Contextualized

Grace Onyango is one of the most prominent women in modern Kenyan political history. Born in 1927 at Gobei, Sakwa Location in the Nyanza Province, she occupied various positions of responsibility in the course of her working life. She started as a teacher but gradually steered her career towards politics. Onyango became the first East African woman to serve as a councilor (1964), mayor (1965), official of the Luo Union of East Africa (1969), Member of Parliament (1969) and temporary speaker of the House. A *Kenya Times* journalist, John Mugo, once described her as “a woman of many parts,” who “is at once modern, while she is also versed in Luo *kitgi gitimbegi*, a term depicting culture and etiquette.”⁵² It is interesting to note that when Grace Onyango became mayor of Kisumu (this term in the English language is masculine and initially referred to a male incumbent), she enlisted a mayoress to play the role of “mayor’s” wife. Phililia Olang’ took up that position and served Onyango in that capacity throughout her term in office.⁵³ Grace Onyango attended various functions in the company of both her mayoress and her husband Onyango Baridi.⁵⁴ Her actions were reminiscent of the traditional woman-to-woman marriage.

Thus as Grace Onyango operated within the larger political context, she also functioned within the changing political space of the Luo community. According to Paul Mbuya’s *Luo Kitgi Gi Timbegi* political structural set-up, the occupation of political offices among the Luo appears

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 110

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 110

⁵² *Gi timbegi* are actually two different words in Dholuo. *Gi* means “and.”

⁵³ Features, “Grace Onyango: A woman of ‘Firsts’”, in *Sunday Standard*, Nation Media Group Archives. Nairobi, p.11,

⁵⁴ John Mugo, “The Woman with a Mighty Capacity to Stay in Power” in *Kenya Times*, Nation Media Group Archives, Nairobi, p.9

to be solely a male affair.⁵⁵ In *Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi*, he described the largest Luo administrative political unit as a *piny*, which was headed by a *ruoth* -chief. The responsibility of appointing *jodong dhouidi* -clan leaders - was the responsibility of the *ruoth*. These leaders subsequently became members of the paramount decision-making body of the community, the *buch piny* (supreme council). Mbuya also identified the *ogulmama* (standing force/policemen), *jodong' oteke* (junior elders), *ogayi* (peace maker) as well as the *osumba mrwayi* (military commander) as the other key political players in the community. His description of the Luo political system reveals a decision-making process that was by consultation and deliberation, for the *ruoth* does not seem to have wielded a substantial amount of political power. The members of the *buch piny* were probably very conscious of their responsibility to the community. After all, they each represented diverse segments of the community to which they were genealogically linked. At the same time, the interests of other clans had to be taken into consideration in the spirit of political reciprocity. Also, the community at any one time was bound by the code of *maling'ling'*, sacred secrets. According to Shadrack Malo, "there was not a single Luo who could discuss or talk about a matter that the elders were still reflecting on or trying to find a way out of."⁵⁶ Conflicts had to be solved in a *bura* (a meeting place of wisdom and deliberations).

In his discussion of the Luo political system, Mbuya did not explicitly state that these positions were exclusively for men. In fact, and as is the case in various parts of Africa, the terms are all gender neutral in the Luo language.⁵⁷ Yet, the male pronoun and noun is used throughout in the English translation of his description of the system. This is probably because in the historical context in which the traditions were collected, men were deemed the rightful occupiers of formal political office. That is, European colonization had made its impact on Luo societal dynamics resulting in traditions that favored male leadership. Mbuya acknowledged the new factor of change and this is reflected in his remarks that "society should use its good customs as the foundation upon which foreign customs and practices can be laid."⁵⁸ Since Grace Onyango

⁵⁵ Jane Achieng'. *Paul Mboya's Luo Kitgi Gi Timbegi* (Nairobi: Atari Joint Limited, 2001), p.1-2, Achieng' is the translator. The traditions were originally collected and condensed by Paul Mboya in 1938. He was originally an S.D.A. padre before becoming a civil administrator. (Identity source: Bethwell Ogot, "The Construction of Luo Identity and History,")

⁵⁶ Shadrack Malo, *Luo Customs and Practices*, p.13.

⁵⁷ Oyeronke Oyewumi. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. This author noted that certain leadership positions in Yoruba tradition had always been presented as male when they were actually devoid of gendered nomenclature. While Oyewumi was referring to the Yoruba, I am making a similar argument in relation to Dholuo.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. vii

understood these traditions, she probably also recognized that though times had changed, the essences of these traditions lived on and could not be ignored. The success of her career would therefore depend on a sagacious balance of the elements of change at both the ethnic and the national level.

The element of change in relation to oral traditions is important because it helps explain Grace Onyango's electoral victories, made possible by electorates comprising of both Luo men and women. According to Bethwell Ogot, an eminent Kenyan historian, African oral traditions were dynamic and while they were human-based records of a community's history and heritage, they were flexible enough to reflect societal changes. As historians, we now know that a specific oral tradition has within its structure its own composition history, since the custodians of that tradition reworked it to reflect contemporary epistemological postures. This was so until encyclopedic informants began to write down these traditions. Ogot argues that therein lay the roots of the gap between contemporary Luo realities and traditions. He explained that written oral traditions came to be "sanctified as the final authorities on Luo cultures and traditions."⁵⁹ As a result, cultural changes in the lives of the Luo in post-independent Kenya were not reflected in the now-calcified stock of communal oral traditions that were authored from male perspectives in a social environment that was under the influence of European epistemologies. These changes included the entrance of women such as Onyango into actual offices within the political sphere.

Luo Men Comment on Luo Women

Opinions from a small sample of Luo men on the societal role and status of Luo women, Onyango included, in post-colonial Kenya reveal the conflicting intersections between social realities, the invention of tradition, and individual perceptions. The first example is from Oruka Rang'inya (b.1900) of East Ugenya, Siaya District, in an interview that was part of philosopher Odera Oruka's sage philosophy project.⁶⁰ Rang'inya at one time served as a Locational Councillor and Chairman of traditional courts on land and marriages. In Rang'inya's opinion, the woman was obliged "to heed her husband's warning about matters concerning the home and beyond" while the husband was expected to "respect his wife."⁶¹ It was also "part of his duty to provide all necessary amenities, including food for the home" and where "he failed to make

⁵⁹ Bethwell Ogot, *"The Construction of Luo Identity and History,"* p. 231.

⁶⁰ Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*. Leiden: New York: E. J. Brill, 1990. The project started in 1990 and was still ongoing at the time of his death in 1995.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

available all necessary provisions, the woman may justly despise him.”⁶² As argued above, women were vital generators of food and wealth within the home and it is not clear where Rang’inya drew the line between the “home” and “beyond,” or between wealth generated by the male and female within the home. Rang’inya, in his *personal* opinion, considered “the man generally superior to the woman” in matters of the intellect.⁶³

Women, according to this sage, used their hearts to judge as compared to men who used their heads. Even so, he argued that there were “some exceptional cases where the woman shows a better and more mature judgment than her husband.”⁶⁴ Paul Mbuya, who was also polygamous with several children, in yet another interview conducted by the same philosopher, had a different opinion. Mbuya argued that “there is a popular Luo belief (at the time he was interviewed) that the man is the owner and master of the homestead, the whole homestead, but I think this belief is wrong.”⁶⁵ The actual scenario in his opinion was very different “for, when we come to the house, the woman is in control there. In the house, the man can only ask for things. He cannot do as he pleases without any restraint.”⁶⁶ In the same vein, “the woman too cannot do anything without asking her husband.” Mbuya argued “where peace is desired, each person tries not to overstep the boundary which common sense determines in relationships.”⁶⁷ He admitted that there were inequities between men and women but these were socio-political inequities which were not innate and could be solved in various ways e.g. better access to education. In his view, “man and woman are inherently equal, we see that woman can be more intelligent than a man just as a man can also be more intelligent than a woman.”⁶⁸

Other bits and pieces of male social commentary from a younger generation of Luo men recorded in 1989 are equally revealing of social realities in relation to gender. Casual conversations recorded by anthropologist and historian David Cohen and historian E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo reveal tacit admissions from rural Luo men in Siaya District of “the Powers of Women” which not only Luo women of the stature of Onyango, but others of less socio-economic status, have utilized for centuries.⁶⁹ The two scholars point out that in casual,

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.140.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.140.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.140.

⁶⁹ David Cohen and E. S. Otieno Odhiambo, “The Powers of Women,” p.85-110

generalized, conversations about women there were “remarkably ambivalent and variable conclusions on the place and power of women.” For instance, on a given market day, a conversation by men strolling on a rural road may result in one of them suggesting “proper women are women who know how to subordinate themselves to men,” and that “this is the way it should be.”⁷⁰ Yet another may remark that “this is hardly the way women behave.”⁷¹ The authors explained that this was because “there are uncountable examples of women assuming major roles, of seizing the initiative from the men – fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons – around them.”⁷² The conversation could then proceed with some men declining the notion that women are powerful while at another moment express pride in the achievements of a certain woman.

Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo also used famous Luo songs and sayings to demonstrate their point. The sayings include *Odhako Rachieno* - the woman can dare you - and *Dhako halabotene ok hep* - a man cannot successfully duck the darts of a woman.⁷³ In his *Luo Customs and Traditions*, Shadrack Malo uses a story from his book *Sigend Luo ma Duogo Chuny*, a record of Luo oral literature, to demonstrate his assertion that a Luo man (and I would argue not uniquely so) found it difficult to accept defeat at the hands of a woman during a wrestling encounter. Wrestling was a popular sport in Luo culture. In the story, when the daughter of Odoro was beaten by her husband, “she would take hold of him with great anger and trip him and thrown him on the ground. Then she would boast, saying, ‘Have you seen the daughter of Odoro?’” and the husband would reply, ‘What daughter of Odoro? Can’t you see that it is the shoes that tripped me.’ When the woman threw him down a second time, he claimed that he had been tripped and held by creeper grass. When he was thrown down for the third time, he claimed that he had slipped on cow dung.”⁷⁴ Generally, the shame from being defeated in a wrestling encounter by a woman was only comparable to the shame from being defeated in a wrestling encounter by a non-Luo. These conversations demonstrate the necessity for one to see through the fossilized body of scripted Luo traditions and societal perceptions that observers and individuals within the community may take for granted.

Conclusion

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.85.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.85.

⁷² *Ibid.* p.87.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, “Hep” may be replaced by “leng” in Dholuo. This however does not change the meaning in English.

⁷⁴ Shadrack Malo, *Luo Customs and Practices*, p. 67.

Onyang'o and other "Daughters of Odoro" have been in existence since time immemorial. Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo's observations of the dynamics involved in the roles of rural Luo women were restricted to the colonial and post-colonial eras and to socio-economics. For example, they observed that migrations of male labor in these eras resulted in many rural women becoming heads of households. They explained that prevailing local interpretations of such women who were "assuming authority from their male kin or husbands" ranged from those who saw them as defying male authority or "a remaking of gender relations."⁷⁵ The two scholars concurred with historian Margaret Hay that "in a sense, as women enlarge their roles, they are showing how material demands may overcome culture."⁷⁶ These observations are indeed valid. However, it is important to note that just as in other African societies, change was part of the Luo society in the pre-colonial era too. The Southern Luo migrated from present-day Southern Sudan eventually settling in East Africa.⁷⁷ They fought wars, losing some and winning others, clans were both fissured and united with others several times. The Luo also interacted with those they encountered in the course of migration and were part of several cultural exchange processes in movement or in areas of settlement in varied ways, for instance, through trade or intermarriage. In addition, they were affected by environmental and climatic changes be it drought, famine or lifestyle adaptations to maximize the potential of fertile lands. Through all these activities, social, economic, and political changes continuously altered societal roles at an individual and societal level. The roles of women were no exception and there have always been "Daughters of Odoro" in both times of relative stability as well as those of change. The political career of one "Daughter of Odoro" in mid-twentieth century Kenya will now be examined more closely.

⁷⁵ David Cohen and E. S. Otieno Odhiambo. "The Powers of Women," p., 87.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷⁷ See Bethwell Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo*. Nairobi: East African Pub. House, 1967 for a detailed account of the migration.

LOCATING GRACE ONYANGO IN KENYAN POLITICS (1964-1983)

As a politician, I wanted to prove to the ‘just government of men’ that women can do as well if given the chance...which I think I did.¹

Introduction

In the second chapter, I addressed the challenges to female agency in colonial Kenya while in chapter three, I expounded on female socio-political agency in a broad manner and in the era prior to European colonization in the context of a single ethnic group. In this chapter, I narrow down my demonstration of the agency of ‘Odoro’s offspring’ even further to the individual around whom this thesis revolves: Grace Onyango. This is because after having established that Luo women could exercise agency depending on a number of social factors, e.g. economic and marital status, Onyango’s career enables us to study, in depth, one woman’s political agency in post-independent Kenya.

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Grace Onyango initially set out to pursue a career in education but was later attracted to the world of politics. The second of nine children, she attended local primary schools in Sakwa before joining Ng’iya Girls Secondary School and later training as a teacher. Between 1951 and 1964, Onyango became the principal of Ng’iya Women’s Teachers’ Training College, a Girl Guide Assistant Commissioner in Kisumu District, as well as the Chair of the Kisumu Branch of the Child Welfare Society. Grace Onyango was married to Onyango Baridi, a teacher who later joined the Kenya News Agency as a journalist, and they had six children.² Though successful in her chosen career, it appears that she was constantly drawn to community service and soon entered electoral politics. Her career – as teacher, social worker, and politician - provides us with an insight into her leadership challenges, duties and roles, as well as how she grounded her attitudes towards gender and politics within the Luo cultural context and in relation to contemporaneous Kenyan politics.

Onyango as part of Local Government

The town in which Onyango started her political career is located on the shores of Lake Victoria, the world’s second largest freshwater lake. According to the country’s 1962 Population

¹ Features, “Grace Onyango: A woman of ‘firsts.’” May 7, 1989, in *The Sunday Standard*, Nairobi: Nation Media Group archives. Onyango is referring to a plaque that hangs on one of the walls of the Kenyan Parliament. The plaque reads, “FOR THE WELFARE OF SOCIETY AND THE JUST GOVERNMENT OF MEN.” Men have at various times used the last four words out of context to chide women.

² *Ibid.*

Census, the port town of Kisumu had a population of 23,000. However, in the minutes of a 1965 Council meeting, members disputed this figure.³ Kisumu had between 15,000-20,000 registered male tax payers and 6,500 children in school. Members calculated that the town's actual population was between 40,000-45,000 people taking into consideration women, children below school-age, the old, and the infirm.⁴ The Kisumu Municipal Council was charged with the management of the town's public services which entailed the management and provision of public housing, municipal roads and drainage systems, healthcare facilities, remand prisons, daycare facilities, educational institutions, the municipal dairy, entertainment facilities, and town cleanliness and hygiene among other functions. Kisumu, today a city, has always been a *mélange* of different peoples. However, it is located in what is demographically Luo Nyanza. Onyango understood well the culture of the majority of its people, the Luo, and this understanding was crucial to her career at both local and national levels of government.

Well before her 1964 election to the Kisumu Municipal Council as a councilor, Onyango was aware of the gender imbalance therein. She and a group of local women formed the Gill Women Group under the chair of a Mrs. Shabir.⁵ The group served as a meeting place and problem-solving arena for its members. At this time, Onyango recalls that "there was no woman in the municipal council, not even a sweeper!"⁶ Women found the *status quo* untenable and organized a demonstration in the streets of Kisumu to agitate for representation in the Council. Soon after, Grace Onyango and Masella Osir were nominated to run for one of the municipal council's seats. According to Onyango, "many men" opposed their nomination and argued that the council was no place for women.⁷ Onyango explained to journalist Karama Baraka that the opposition against their nomination was so immense that Marsella Osir opted to step down from the race leaving Onyango to do battle with the other nominees.

Kenya had changed a great deal in the years before and after independence. Ethnic political structures and ideologies, though still important, had not only undergone drastic British-dominated alteration but were now subordinate to national structures of government. This meant that Kenyan men and women, including Luo women, who wished to enter politics and articulate

³ Municipal Council of Kisumu, *Annual Report, 1965*, Section 30 "Kisumu's Population." Nairobi: Kenya National Archives, p.8.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Mrs. Shabir, mother to Shakeel Ahmed Shabir who became mayor of Kisumu in 2000.

⁶ Karama Baraka, "Grace Onyango: Reflections on Politics and Leadership." In the *East African Standard*, November 25, 2000, Nairobi: Nation Media Group archives.

⁷ *Ibid.*

issues of importance for them and for their communities had to work towards accessing post-independence structures of government. In addition, one year after independence, the Council was still undergoing the Africanization of its staff and there were just three Africans in it: Otunge Moso, Onyango Radier and Peter Abwajo. There was therefore a spirit of all-inclusive representation that women could exploit. In 1964, Onyango contested for a council seat alongside three male candidates and emerged the victor, a victory that put her in charge of Kaloleni ward.⁸ This was a ward with a number of schools and Council members thought her background in education made her the most ideal person to serve the area. Thus, by 1965 she was not only a councilor, but was also the Chair of the Education Committee in the Municipal Council. In that year, she was among four councilors who were elected to serve as aldermen.⁹ Onyango's political career made fast progress and not long thereafter she became mayor of the town.

Grace Onyango was formally elected East Africa and perhaps Africa's first female mayor on April 1, 1965, when the incumbent Mayor, Mathias P. Ondiek, died. Ondiek, elected in 1961, was the first African mayor in Kenya.¹⁰ After Ondiek's death, Onyango sent an application to the relevant council committee to act as deputy mayor for a period of 90 days which was approved.¹¹ Perhaps, due to personal charisma, the Municipal Council was recognizing her potential and ability to assume greater leadership responsibilities. On the other hand, the Council members may not have expected Onyango to do much in the course of the 90 days. Onyango was then just 27 years old and while acting as deputy mayor, she continued to teach. She taught at the Union School of Kisumu during the day and attended council meetings in the evening.¹² However, Onyango was interested in the mayoral seat and this meant that she had to face the electorate once again and not so long after her first electoral victory. Time was short and she remarks that "this was the only time that I could prove my capability."¹³ Thus, she used the 90 days as acting

⁸ A ward is the basic administrative unit of local government.

⁹ John Mugo, "The Woman with a Mighty Capacity to Stay in Power." *Friday Magazine, Kenya Times*, August 16, 1985, Nation Media Group archives. Aldermen were a rank above councilors.

¹⁰ Municipal Council of Kisumu. *Annual Report, 1965*. Nairobi: Kenya National Archives.

¹¹ Karama Baraka, "Grace Onyango: Reflections on Politics and Leadership." In the *East African Standard*, November 25, 2000, Nairobi: Nation Media Group archives. Baraka reports that Onyango was acting mayor though council minutes say otherwise. The deputy mayor acted as mayor and Onyango was probably acting as deputy mayor and not mayor.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

mayor to lay the ground work for her election campaigns by making the provision of housing her central campaign platform.

In the mid-sixties, one of Kisumu Municipal Council's main concerns was the provision of housing for the rapidly growing town and Onyango, a mayoral candidate, was quick to latch on to the issue. Perhaps, the fact that she was the sole female in the Council pressured her into working even harder to prove her worth as a leader. In a 2000 interview with journalist Karama Baraka, it emerges that Onyango was concerned that there was only one formidable residential estate¹⁴ in Kisumu, Anderson, and it was exclusively white, a heritage of Kenya's colonial legacy. The end of racial segregation after independence eventually resulted in the opening up of such areas to Africans who could afford to do so. Before then, Africans were relegated to lesser abodes in Obunga, Manyatta, Nyalenda and Kaloleni areas. According to the Council's Annual Report for 1964, it (the council) was optimistic that the city's housing problems could be solved. The council's Social Services and Housing Department reported that "prospects of providing housing accommodation to alleviate the acute housing shortage in the town was bright."¹⁵ This optimism was pegged on a loan of £50,000 that the Kenya Central Housing Board had made to the Council. Plans were "in hand to build 82 houses of various types, either for rental or tenant purchase according to demand."¹⁶ The Council planned on completing construction by early 1965. The municipality in 1964 was also engaged in negotiations with the Government and other financial institutions with the goal of raising about three quarters of a million pounds to build houses for Kisumu Cotton Mills (KICOMI) employees. KICOMI was a large textile industrial investment that the municipality was aggressively pursuing. Construction was to be spread over four years and part of the money was to be used for slum clearance.¹⁷

The areas the council targeted for slum clearance were those very areas that Africans occupied including Grace Onyango's Kaloleni ward. The slum clearance project must have been of great concern to Onyango. Slum clearance without the provision of alternative and affordable accommodation for Kaloleni residents, and therefore her electoral base, would certainly have angered them and wrought negative repercussions on her budding political career. As is evident

¹⁴ A housing development location.

¹⁵ Social Services and Housing Department. "3. Housing" Municipal Council of Kisumu, *Annual Report for 1964*. Nairobi, Kenya National Archives, p.2.

¹⁶ *Ibid*,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, KICOMI stands for Kisumu Cotton Mills.

from the council's *Annual Report for 1965*, Kaloleni was actually one of the main targets for slum clearance:

Following its policy to clear the town buildings unfit for human habitation and other slums the Council considered the condition of Plot No.16 in Kaloleni Village and Plots No.32 and 33 Section XXIX Accra Street and agreed that these dwellings should be condemned for slum clearance under the Public Health Act (Cap.242) and that the necessary nuisance and demolition notices be served upon them along with the 53 plots previously condemned in Kaloleni.¹⁸

The council had actually initiated slum demolition and clearance by 1965, but these efforts had stalled “due to difficulty of finding alternative accommodation.”¹⁹ The admission was symptomatic of the council's failure to respond to Kisumu's housing problem. Prior to independence, the British paid minimal attention to African housing. They had pegged urban African housing on urban labor demands, particularly the single African male. With the coming of independence, local government councils now had to expand their budgetary obligations to provide acceptable urban housing for African families. The financial means to meet these obligations were difficult to obtain. The optimism of the Social Services and Housing Department in 1964 had quickly evaporated. Onyango ascended to the office of Mayor in the year that the Council admitted that “the acute housing shortage continued to be one of the Council's greatest problems during the year and approximately 1,000 people were known to be genuinely in need of housing accommodation.”²⁰ By 1964, the Council had a total of 442 houses in the African estates of Lumumba, Ondiek, Pembe Tatu, Kibuye and Mosque. 122 of these houses were for tenant purchase and would soon be out of the Council's management.²¹ In addition, of the 95 plots the council had allocated to private developers for residential or commercial purposes, only 34 had been fully developed. The Council was eager to assist developers probably because the completed projects would generate revenue for the municipality through taxation. Hence, in the same year (1964), the Council had sent a £10,000 loan application to the government's Central Housing Board with the hope of re-lending the money to

¹⁸ Municipal Council of Kisumu, *Annual Report, 1965*, No.28. Nairobi: Kenya National Archives.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, No. 28, p. 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, No.27, p. 7.

²¹ Social Services and Housing Department. “3. Housing,” Municipal Council of Kisumu, *Annual Report for 1964*. Nairobi, Kenya National Archives, p.2.

private residential plot developers.²² Getting Kisumu Municipality's housing development plans with minimum dislocation to inhabitants was, therefore, to be high on Onyango's agenda, both during her campaigns for mayorship and after she had won the election.

Under Grace Onyango's leadership, the council made significant progress towards solving the Municipality's housing shortage. By 1966, the council's housing waiting list had grown to 1,500 and there was concern that 8,000 people living in the peri-urban areas of the municipality and working in the city, could not get houses that they badly needed. However, there was reason for the optimistic note in its 1967 report. The municipality reported that "the year 1967 showed a lot of good progress in the town and a fair deal of capital work was carried out throughout the town."²³ In this year, the council had succeeded in marshalling and utilizing a total of £95,000 for both low and high cost housing, a sum that was above the £50,000 in which the Municipality had placed so much confidence in 1964:

Buildings²⁴

Low-cost houses	£35,000
High-cost houses	£60,000
Shops in housing	£10,000
Staff quarters and stadium	
Improvements	£8,000
Total amount spent on Building Works	£113,000

In addition to housing, Onyango's administration was faced with several infrastructural projects. Other capital works carried out in that year (1967) included roads (constructed on contract or Council labor), the extension of water mains, the extension of the main sewerage drain, and street lighting. These works cost, respectively, £30,000, £5,000, £5,000, and £100. The Council had approved the extension of the sewerage drain in 1965 following the recommendation of its Engineering Consultants. The extension of the drain's disposal capacity was to be increased to one million gallons by 1969 and a further one and a half million gallons by 1971. The estimated total cost of the work was £168,500. Its inclusion under the 1967 capital works investments is an indication that work had commenced on schedule. In relation to housing,

²² *Ibid.*, Section 3, p.3.

²³ Municipal and County Council Matters, Chapter III, Section 1a), expenditure for 1967, Nairobi, Kenya National Archives, p. 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the Council had constructed a total of 502 low cost houses for rent and a further 124 houses for tenant purchase.²⁵ However, since the Council was well aware of its financial inability to meet the housing demands of Kisumu, other development sources had to be sought. The provision of adequate and affordable housing was to remain a chronic struggle not only for Kisumu but for all other urban centers in post-independent Kenya.²⁶ Funding from the Central Government was not forthcoming and the Municipality had to encourage private investment in real estate.

Furthermore, Onyango, as mayor, had to deal with the politics that came with being at the helm of a municipal council, particularly in the second half of her term (1967 and 1968) when Kenya's national political scene was mired in heated Kenya African National Union (KANU) – Kenya People's Union (K.P.U.) battles.²⁷ K.P.U. had a socialist political orientation, and was highly critical of the manner in which the KANU government was functioning in the years following independence. It was the only opposition party in existence then and therefore its only check. As a result, it found itself on the receiving end of repressive tactics deployed by both KANU and the government.

See the Daughter of Odoro's Wrestling Tactics

Between 1967 and 1968, Onyango was embroiled in vicious battles to maintain her seat at the Municipal Council largely owing to national party political conflicts that seeped into local government structures. Conflicting accounts of what was going on during this period are a reflection of the volatile nature of the contemporaneous political scene. According to the minutes of the Social Services and Housing Committee of 17 May 1967, the Mayor of Kisumu is listed as Alderman Farjallah.²⁸ Furthermore, in her November 2000 interview with journalist Karama Baraka, Onyango said that she left the council in 1967 because two senior Luo leaders and elders, Oginga Odinga and Paul Mbuya, were pressuring her for political support. She says she decided to leave the council because "I did not belong to any party."²⁹ According to this particular journalist, Onyango retreated to her home and emerged determined to jump into

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Section 1c), p. 12 and Municipal Council of Kisumu, *Annual Report, 1965*, Section 19 "Main Drainage Extensions," p. 6. Nairobi: Kenya National Archives.

²⁶ See, for example, Joe Muwonge, "Urban Policy and Patterns of Low-Income Settlement in Nairobi, Kenya," in *Population and Development Review*, 1980, vol. 6, no. 4, p. 595-613 and Richard Stren. "Urban Policy and Performance in Kenya and Tanzania," in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 13, 2, 1975, p. 267-294.

²⁷ These battles are dealt with more extensively in the next chapter.

²⁸ Social Services and Housing Committee. Minutes of 17 May 1967, Municipal Council of Kisumu.

²⁹ Karama Baraka, "Grace Onyango: Reflections on Politics and Leadership." In the *East African Standard*, November 25, 2000, Nairobi: Nation Media Group archives.

national politics in 1969. The Council minutes referred to above support the timeline present in the *East African Standard* report but it is certainly not supported by the journalism contemporaneous to the sixties. In addition, interviews Onyango herself gave to journalists in the eighties, including one to the *East African Standard*, also do not support the above timeline.³⁰ Besides, there have been council leadership battles in independent Kenya when two people claimed to be mayors at the same time. Certainly, by mid-1968 Kenya's Central Government still recognized Onyango as Mayor of Kisumu. Not only did the government recognize her as Mayor, but it also perceived her as a political threat due to her K.P.U. leanings and it unleashed one of its most articulate and well-known cabinet ministers, Tom Mboya, to get her out of Kisumu Municipality's Council. The government, however, in the person of Mboya, was about to meet its match in this Daughter of Odoro.

In her last years of service at the local government level, Onyango constantly, had to constantly mediate between KANU and KPU officials who brought their political battles into Kisumu's Municipal Council Hall. There was a severe contraction of democratic space to the disadvantage of the opposition KPU party during that time.³¹ In addition, the mayor increasingly encountered opposition from Tom Mboya. Mboya was then arguably the best-known national politician and the influential Minister for Economic Planning and Development as well as KANU's Secretary General.³² He was convinced that Onyango had become a KPU member and accused her of having bought a KANU membership ticket and then refusing to admit that she had done so. Mboya wondered: "Is she KPU or is she KANU?" He demanded that Onyango "Tell us where she stands and we will know where we [the government party] stand."³³ He doubted her allegiance to KANU and asked "How long can she go on bluffing?"³⁴ The mayor, in all her political shrewdness, initially chose not to reveal which party she belonged to. This enabled her to manage successfully the frictions within the municipality without sabotaging its functions. In addition, she avoided alienating herself from those in her electoral base who would

³⁰ For example, John Mugo, "The Woman with a Mighty Capacity to Stay in Power." *Friday Magazine, Kenya Times*, August 16, 1985, Nation Media Group archives and Features, "Grace Onyango: A Woman of Firsts." *Sunday Standard*, May 7, 1989. See also Joe Ombur, "There's no Match for this 'daughter' of the Forest," *Sunday Nation*, October 21, 1990.

³¹ For further elaboration of this contraction, see the next chapter.

³² Nation Reporter, "Mrs Onyango attacked on Loyalty." *Daily Nation* July 13, 1968, Nation Media Group Archives, Nairobi.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

have been offended had she taken a partisan stance against Odinga, who was one of the top leaders of KPU, a party that had by then gained considerable grassroots support in the municipality. The Luo people also regarded Odinga as *Ker* – ultimate moral and spiritual leader – and Onyango had to be careful not to offend her people’s sensitivities. However, she was also a leader in her own right and recognizable as such according to Luo customs and Kenyan politics. She was at an ethnic and national political crossroads and her survival as a politician depended on the successful balancing of the two important interests. When KANU officials started attacking her in public rallies, as is evident in press reports, she rose to the challenge and retaliated in the same manner. Onyango fell back on her local government career and presented herself as a hard worker and a hands-on official.³⁵

Onyango appears to have been confident of her council record and by 1968 it is clear that she was a KPU civic nominee.³⁶ In July 1968, Mboya took the battle to Onyango’s own home turf. The minister opened a campaign office at Kaloleni, the mayor’s own ward.³⁷ Opponents accused the mayor of having shown “her true colors.”³⁸ According to an article in the *Daily Nation*, Kenya’s major newspaper, Mboya “pointed out that KANU’s campaign in Kaloleni ward would be conducted as strongly and as effectively as possible and he was convinced that Kisumu would at the end of August have a KANU mayor.”³⁹ Onyango, the daughter of Odoro, was undaunted and challenged Mboya, who was famous for his oratorical skills, to a debate that “would settle the question of his popularity as a leader of the town”⁴⁰ Mboya surprisingly declined rather haughtily. Onyango retorted in jest. She remarked: “it appeared that the honorable Minister seemed to be over-excited about my political influence in Kisumu.”⁴¹

The KANU government, however, was determined to smother KPU. By 1968, it was engaged in a relentless battle against the party that only ended in 1969 with its banning and the

³⁵ Standard Correspondent, “Mayor of Kisumu defends Council.” *East African Standard*, August 26, 1968 and Nation Reporter. “Mboya’s ‘No’ to Debate in Kisumu.” *Daily Nation*. August 9, 1968, Nation Media Group Archives, Nairobi.

³⁶ Kenya News Agency, “Mboya again raps KPU and Mayor.” *Daily Nation*. July 22, 1968, and Nation Reporter. “Mrs. Onyango’s Challenge: Mboya’s ‘No’ to Debate in Kisumu.” *Daily Nation*, August 9, 1968. Nation Media Group Archives, Nairobi.

³⁷ A ward is a local government administrative unit. Several wards form a municipality.

³⁸ Nation Reporter, “Mboya Again Raps K.P.U. and Mayor.” *Daily Nation* July 22, 1968, Nation Media Group archives, Nairobi.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Nation Reporter, “Mboya’s ‘No’ to Debate in Kisumu”, *Daily Nation*, August 9, 1968, Nation Media Group archives, Nairobi.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

detention without trial of some of its leaders. Before then, its members were intimidated and constantly harassed in all manner of ways. It is amidst such anti-KPU activities that the government disqualified Onyango and 21 other KPU candidates from the Kisumu civic election campaigns of 1968. The mayor argued that she had filed her nomination documents correctly and “in full compliance with the law.”⁴² KANU, led by Mboya, intensified its attack on Onyango. Mboya even played the gender card arguing “Mrs. Onyango is reaping the fruits of what she herself had sown.” He added: “if she is asking for sympathy as a woman then she should leave politics alone.”⁴³ In saying so, Mboya seems to have been implying that the Mayor was going against Luo ethnic norms that frown on women using their sex as grounds for preferential treatment. Mboya was actually addressing potential Luo voters who he hoped would buy into his verbal portrayal of the Mayor. Onyango kept her sex out of campaign rhetoric. At this point, it appears from newspaper reports that Onyango played the KANU card – membership ticket - she had had up her sleeve all this time.

Onyango managed to stay on as Mayor to the end of her term in 1968 with a determination to further her political career. On 26 August, 1968, she addressed the last municipal council meeting of the year in a speech that both defended her record and left her with the ability to choose between either side of the political divide. The mayor said “she was pleased with the co-operation shown by councilors and council officials.”⁴⁴ It is, however, unlikely that all councilors had been co-operative in light of the political battles that had been waged in the council’s hall. She also thought it important to defend the council against accusations of corruption and herself against accusations of not having helped develop the municipality since her ascension to the mayoral seat because:

In any case mostly these remarks have been made by someone who does not live in the town and, therefore, not in the best position to assess what has been going on. I shall, however, reply on your behalf to the allegations because although made during the heat of an election campaign they may permanently smear the good name of the Kisumu Council.⁴⁵

⁴² Nation Reporter, “Mrs. Onyango’s Challenge: Mboya’s ‘No’ to Debate in Kisumu.” *Daily Nation*, 9, August 1968. Nation Media Group Archives, Nairobi.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Standard Reporter, “Mayor of Kisumu defends Council.” *East African Standard*, August 26, 1968. Nation Media Group Archives.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Addressing the council's relationship with government, she said amid cheers that, "I would like to put it that these have been excellent...Our object has always been the same, that is to deliver the goods of independence to the people."⁴⁶

The Central government, particularly in the mid-sixties, had indeed supported two large-scale healthcare and industrial investments in Kisumu.⁴⁷ Still, one can conjecture that the Mayor had another reason for her congenial words for the government. Onyango had probably sensed that the repressive, contemporaneous anti-multiparty atmosphere created by the government would soon leave politicians like herself with no option other than to battle for national office as KANU members. Significantly, the media at this time also reported her alleging that "attempts had been made to remove her and all councilors before their time expired."⁴⁸

Onyango was not able to continue her local government career because in 1969 the Kenyan parliament put in place an act that limited the number of terms a mayor could serve in office to four. Onyango believed she was the target of the term limit, part of a plan hatched by her political opponents to cap her ever-growing influence in the Kisumu region. Furthermore, KPU was banned in October 1969 and all those who wished to continue with their political careers had to face the electorate once again in December 1969 on KANU tickets. In that year, Kenya became a single-party state and remained as such until 1992. Thus Onyango used her council record to take her political career to the national scene, a move that saw her easily win a seat as Member of Parliament (M.P.) in the Kenyan parliament.

It appears that the mayor became popular not only because of her council duties but also because of her exemplary political skills that had enabled her election to the same position four times. When *Kenya Times* journalist John Mugo interviewed her in 1985, she told him that she was confident that she could have garnered more electoral victories at this level (mayoral) because she had an enviable performance record. As in other interviews she has given to the press, she was more than ready to talk about development projects, which she oversaw. These included the construction of over 700 houses in Kisumu Municipality by 1968. Onyango also

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ On 28 July 1965, President Jomo Kenyatta laid the foundation stone for a 200 bed hospital that was to be constructed with Russian Aid. (Municipality of Kisumu, Annual Report, 1965, Kenya National Archives.) Oginga Odinga, the Vice-President, played a central role in cultivating the diplomatic relationship between Kenya and Russia. The industrial investment was the Kisumu Cotton Mills (KICOMI).

⁴⁸ Standard Reporter, "Mayor of Kisumu defends Council." *East African Standard*, August 26, 1968. Nation Media Group Archives.

argued that she had fanned real estate investment by private entrepreneurs. She insisted that the council under her leadership had kept the town spruced up and had provided incentives to encourage private investors to construct several middle-income housing units to supplement municipal housing efforts.⁴⁹ She was thus able to serve until the last year of her last term, 1969, when she walked out of the Council undefeated, ready for the next challenge over which she triumphed – winning elections to Kenya’s parliament.

Grace Onyango viewed her first electoral contests as political battles, not as referendums on gender. She appears to have been comfortable in using society’s structures to navigate her career. That she chose to deemphasize the role of her sex in the fashioning of her political platforms at municipal and later at parliamentary level is thus not surprising. On December 21, 1969, Enid Da Silva, a newspaper journalist, interviewed the M.P.-elect Da Silva was surprised at Onyango’s responses to questions that were addressed to her as a woman.

Q. Do you feel that you have something special to do for the people of Kisumu which another elected member would not be capable of doing?

A. Well, it is the representative’s duty to see that things are done according to the *wishes of the people*.

Q. Do you have any plans of what you propose to do for the people of your constituency once you become an M.P.?

A. I think it is for the people to tell me what they want done.

Q. As one of the pioneer women in Kenyan politics, what are your views on the role of women both in the political life of a nation and in nation building?

A. As an elected representative of both men and women, *I will not represent women only in Parliament*. I don’t think I could say anything directly to the women because it was not only women who elected me.⁵⁰

Da Silva then went on to ask her to respond to the then recent abolition of the *Affiliation Act*⁵¹ and to claims that a woman’s presence in the house would have prevented this or at least had it amended but not abolished. Onyango was unmoved from her stance. She had been elected by a

⁴⁹ Standard Reporter, “Mayor of Kisumu defends Council.” *East African Standard*, August 26, 1968. East African Standard archives, Nairobi. Also, Municipal Council of Kisumu *Annual Report, 1965*. Section 38) “Town Cleanliness and Beauty.” Nairobi: Kenya National Archives, p.10. During this year, the Council had mounted a town cleanliness and beautification drive which included tree planting. The drive was supported by the District Commissioner and the Prisons Department.

⁵⁰ Enid Da Silva, “Place for Women in Kenyan Politics.” *Sunday Nation*, December 21, 1969 Nation Media Group Archives, Nairobi. Emphasis added.

⁵¹ The *Affiliation Act* enabled single women to sue the fathers of their children for paternity support but was repealed in 1967.

community and was going to serve as an M.P. for everybody, male and female, and would not confine her parliamentary career to gender issues. If people felt a woman was necessary to represent female interests, then “we must as elected Members ask the President to kindly nominate a lady who will serve this purpose.”⁵² Such a position was not what she had aspired to hold. Also, she appeared to have been very conscious of the need to accommodate the interests of all. She was aware of the diverse nature of her power base and knew she represented an area she understood very well. Her constituency in Kisumu was located in the heart of Luoland and she was not blind to the nature of her community’s social structures.

A female politician in another part of the world could have made Onyango’s 1969 remarks in the above interview. However, her political attitude towards gender issues needs to be examined within the context of her own national and ethnic environment. While the nature of her ethnic traditions appeared to have left little room for women to politick there were, as is evident from the previous chapter, various ways in which women influenced or made decisions, and these variously contracted or expanded with time. For example, differential provision of education during the colonial era had favored Luo men but women who could and did access various institutions of learning added education to their socio-political toolkits. Though she had accumulated a considerable amount of socio-political power, Grace Onyango still had to acknowledge the importance of those with whom she was working and these included political friends and foes whether male or female. At the local government level, she valued teamwork and by 1969, her ever-growing political stature was undeniable. In early that year, the executive committee of the Luo Union (East Africa) “unanimously elected” Onyango to act as secretary-general of the organization before the elections scheduled for later that year.⁵³ The Union, founded in 1922, took its inspiration from the *buch piny* which, as pointed out in the preceding chapter, was a council of elders (masculinized by tradition). The election of a female by its committee to serve in such a prestigious position is a testament to the presence of non-gendered Luo leadership ideologies which weaken political positions that a Luo political leader could take purely on the grounds of gender. More importantly, Onyango had to interact closely with Luo elders and leaders. These included Oginga Odinga (former Vice-President), Paul Mbuya (author

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Standard Reporter, “Luo Union Post.” January 30, 1969 *East African Standard*, East African Standard archives, Nairobi.

of *Kitgi gi Timbegi*), and Tom Mboya, the articulate politician and KANU ideologue she had ‘wrestled’ in 1968 in Kisumu.⁵⁴

We can find further explanation of some of Onyango’s political choices in the recent works of Asian and African scholars. Enid Da Silva in her interview with Onyango, appears to have expected Onyango to adopt a feminist approach in her political career at the national level. Subaltern studies and postcolonial theory have brought to the fore the complex issues that have led to the problematic engagement of feminist advocacy by African women. Scholars such as literary theorist Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak and Women’s Studies professor Chandra Mohanty have been critical in urging scholars to rethink the way the academy has for a long time analyzed third world women in various fields of studies. The latter, for instance, published her renowned paper, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in 1988, in which she criticized the contemporary and historical representation of third world women. She argued that the concept “third world women” had been set up as a homogenous construct that was used to study women as chronically helpless and passive objects of oppression. The results of such scholarship include works such as Rosa Cutrufelli’s *Woman of Africa: Roots of Oppression* in which African women are homogenized into a sociological grouping characterized by helplessness.⁵⁵ Feminism, as contentious a term as we know it to be, has in the last few decades come under scrutiny by African scholars.

African scholars such as anthropologist Ifi Amadiume, sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi, and Africana Studies professor Nkiru Nzegwu among others, have undertaken the interrogation of the meanings of gender and feminism and their applicability to different African cultural contexts. They too, since the 1980s, have produced significant works on the subject. In one of her works, “African Women and Feminism: Reflecting On the Politics of Sisterhood,” Oyewumi has for example noted that the conflicts that have surrounded the concept of feminism (e.g. White Feminism, Black Feminism, Third World Feminism etc.) have been replicated all over the world. She attributes this to the articulation of feminism in the West and how it was then “carried

⁵⁴ Tom Mboya was assassinated soon after her election to the position of Secretary-General on 5 July 1969.

⁵⁵ Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. Maria Cutrufelli. *Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression*. London: Zed Press, 1983. See for example, Cutrufelli’s concluding remarks in which she argues that “truly enough, the African woman lives in a context of ‘general’ dependence.” p. 174

forward in an imperial march across the globe.”⁵⁶ Oyewumi defines feminism as the “struggle for female equality” and says that feminist “describes a range of behavior indicating female agency and self determination.”⁵⁷ Feminism, therefore, can be said to encompass a wide range of female initiatives against sexism. At the foundation of the concept, however, is a Western-based perception of what it means to be a woman within a specific part of the world – the West. It engenders a woman’s self-identity first as a female in opposition to a male in a hierarchically structured relationship that favors the latter. More importantly, the female believes that her status in society and the challenges posed by patriarchy can be addressed by taking the initiative to seek parity by directly confronting the benefactor of the gender disparity. For Oyewumi, it is important to recognize that not all women view themselves as such.

Oyewumi went on in ways that further elucidate Onyango’s experience. She argues that in much of Africa, “womanhood does not constitute a social role, identity, position or location.” This is because “each individual occupies a multiplicity of overlapping and intersecting positions with various relations to *privilege* and *disadvantage*.”⁵⁸ These include age-sets, age groups and commerce based social groupings. Moreover, despite the recent construction of gender as a social category in Western epistemology “gender cannot exist without the body since the body sits squarely at the base of both categories.”⁵⁹ Hence gender is always inevitably traceable to the human body. She argues that a distinction between the anatomical body and gender can be found in many African societies since there are several social categories that are not based on the “bodily distinctions of gender.”⁶⁰ Oyewumi uses Ifi Amadiume’s elaboration of the concept of “female husband” in Igbo society in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in the African Society* to demonstrate her point.⁶¹ These arguments have particular resonance with

⁵⁶ Oyeronke Oyewumi, “Introduction: Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations” in *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting On the Politics of Sisterhood*. Asmara: African Worldwide Press Inc. 2003. See also the collection of papers in Oyewumi, Oyeronke (Ed.) “Introduction: Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations” in *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting On the Politics of Sisterhood*. Asmara: African Worldwide Press Inc. 2003, Nkiru Nzegwu, “O Africa: Gender Imperialism in Academia,” in *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting On the Politics of Sisterhood*. Asmara: African Worldwide Press Inc. 2003, Oyeronke Oyewumi ed., “Introduction: Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations” in *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting On the Politics of Sisterhood*. Asmara: African Worldwide Press Inc. 2003, Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Press, 1987.

⁵⁷ Oyeronke Oyewumi, “Introduction: Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations,” p. 2

⁵⁸ Emphasis added. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁹ Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 9

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9

⁶¹ Oyeronke Oyewumi, “Introduction: Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations,” p.2.

Onyango who clearly saw herself within an African context rather than as part of a universal feminist movement. As seen in the previous chapter, not only did Luo women have a distinguishable sense of self-worth and identity and the ability to influence decision-making but they also inhabited a wide variety of social spaces.

Significantly, the “female husband” was not uncommon among a number of ethnic groups who inhabit modern day Kenya and Grace Onyango’s actions help to illuminate the varied constructions of gender in Africa. It is with such gender constructs in mind that she thought it important to recruit a ‘woman’ to serve alongside her as mayoress. The gender concept in African society is thus part of a complex network of social categories that need to be analyzed and understood within diverse social systems, each with its own specificities. For this reason, Oyewumi argues that “it would be counterproductive in an African setting to single out gender...as the primary source of political agitation.”⁶² Onyango was thus an individual who was well aware of her society’s social set-up and the dynamics of its peoples’ varied social roles. Though she was a member of parliament during the 1970s when feminism was at its height in the West, she was still part of a society in which women defined themselves as, first, an inextricable part of the community. Their interests as women were ultimately tied to the interests of the family and community. They had to utilize ingeniously their social structures to exercise initiatives for change and development. It follows that once in parliament, Grace Onyango raised and contributed to a wide range of issues, a few of which did relate to women in particular. I choose to focus on just two of her female-centered contributions to the Kenyan parliament to further demonstrate her meshing of gender issues with community or national interests. Furthermore, Onyango broached these issues as a member of Kenya’s parliament and not as a female. Such an approach helped her gain considerable support from male M.P.s. some of whom also raised matters of concern to women at other times.

To begin with, on 6 November 1970, she raised question No. 815 on “Paid Maternity Leave.”⁶³ It was posed to the Minister for Labour:

Mrs. Onyango asked the Minister for Labour if he would tell the House whether he would consider awarding employed married women leave when they proceeded on maternity leave since it was a period when financial aid was greatly needed.

⁶² Oyeronke Oyewumi. “Introduction: Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations,” p.2

⁶³ Republic of Kenya, *The National Assembly, Official Report, First Session (Continued)*, Tuesday, 22nd September, 1970 – Friday, 6th November, 1970. Nairobi: Kenya National Assembly Library.

The Assistant Minister, Mr. Peter Kibisu, responded that since Kenyan women at the time were agitating for equal pay for equal work, “to grant full pay for maternity leave, therefore, would render women more expensive to employ.”⁶⁴ He added that some unions had made considerable progress in winning women partial payment during maternity leave and the Industrial Court had been supportive of women in this respect. The minister then argued that the matter was best left to unions to negotiate with individual employers. This response did not please Onyango and she persisted, with the support of other M.P.s:

Mrs. Onyango: Mr. Speaker, Sir, will the Assistant Minister agree with me that in some occasions you can only be paid while you are on maternity leave and only if the doctor approves that you were sick as well as being on maternity leave?

Mr. Kibisu: Mr. Speaker, Sir, maternity leave is not structurally speaking illness. It is a natural hazard.

This is what other M.P.s said on this issue:

Mr. Kanja: Mr. Speaker, Sir, would the Assistant Minister take into consideration that it is only that our ladies have to bear children otherwise if they do not, we shall have no nation? Would he consider that they should also be given privileges when they are delivering babies for this country?

Mr. Wanjigi: Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the Assistant Minister repudiating the fact that bringing forth children is a part of nation building and without children there is no nation?

Mr. Karungaru: Mr. Speaker, Sir, arising from one of the Assistant Minister’s reply, is he denying the fact that when a woman gives birth to a child, that is better than when somebody is receiving full pay because he happens to be sick? This is because this lady has brought a child into this world and it is high time that she were paid for maternity leave.

The wording of her question on “Civil Service Terms of Employment for Married Women” (Question No. 783) ⁶⁵ is also of interest in the above regard:

Mrs. Onyango asked the Minister of State, President’s Office, if he would tell the House in view of the fact that the *Government had always advocated the*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Republic of Kenya, The National Assembly, Official Report, First Session (Continued), Tuesday, 22nd September, 1970 – Friday, 6th November, 1970. Nairobi: Kenya National Assembly Library.

policy of equal treatment for all its citizens and in view of the fact that women in the Civil Service as well as other women working in offices were honest, genuine and hardworking:

- a) Why married women were not eligible for appointments on pensionable terms.
- b) Why a pensionable woman officer was required to resign on marriage.
- c) Since all Government jobs which were advertised in the Press were on permanent appointment or agreement terms, why women officers were offered employment on agreement terms only and not on permanent terms.

This question also received considerable support from members.

Though only women were affected, Onyango had chosen to present the issues as those of concern to all, a deficiency of the State that was a problem for everybody and not just a single gender. As French and Women's Studies professor Obioma Nnaemeka, writing about Malicounda women and female circumcision, argues, African women seek to include men in issues of concern to them "because they are culturally attuned to such thinking." Such an approach was a crucial component of female political agency among the Luo. This was because women in these societies are "coming from an environment in which women's issues are village/community issues requiring the participation of villagers regardless of sex." She adds that "the women are politically astute in ensuring the participation of all branches of local authority, regardless of which gender holds the authority. They also believe, as many African women do, that if the men are part of the problem, they should be part of the solution."⁶⁶ One may therefore argue that Onyango's contributions as well as the contributions of male M.P.s who supported her were given in this spirit.

It is important to note, however, that Onyango's experience is not an indication that Luo or Kenya's history is devoid of women taking more overt and drastic measures to address unfavorable situations. Indeed, some of the most popular anti-colonial uprisings in Kenya had women playing central roles in them. Mekatilili wa Medza of the Giriama people in Kenya's Coast Province rallied her people to revolt against the British before 1920.⁶⁷ She, however, saw her effort as a communal one and actually recruited two members of what was then left of the Mji-Kenda's highly gerontocratic and male-led council to her cause. The same can be said of the

⁶⁶ Obioma Nnaemeka, "What's in a Name?" In Susan Perry and Celeste Schenck, Eds., *Eye to Eye: Women Practising Development Across Cultures*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2001, p. 187.

⁶⁷ Cynthia Brantley, *The Giriama and Colonial Resistance in Kenya, 1800-1920*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981. The Giriama are one of the nine (*kenda*) groups of the Mji Kenda ethnic society.

Mora Moka Ngiti of recent popular memory in Gusiland, a traditional healer and diviner who mobilized her sub-clan against the British. Women were also involved in the Mau Mau guerilla movement in Central Province in the late 1940s – early 1950s. Again, female Mau Mau veterans interviewed by historian Cora Presley in the late 1970s, though fully aware of their enhanced political participation, were arguably thinking of themselves more as community activists and not as women bent on overturning patriarchy.⁶⁸

As compared to the definition of feminism given above, female advocacy in Kenyan history was thus structured for the attainment of a wide range of goals not necessarily tied to sex or gender. It may be viewed not as an inferior way, but a different way, of achieving goals, some of them similar, others different; goals forged in varying cultural and historical contexts. Grace Onyango's story provides a clear indication of how this role unfolded in one ethnic group at one level and in Kenya as a country at another level.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the career of Grace Onyango in a bid to recover the history of independent Kenya's most prominent female politician and her contribution to those she represented in various capacities. I have also analyzed her career to illuminate the societal dynamics through which she had to navigate in order to succeed as a leader in addition to being diligent at her official duties. As a politician, Onyango had to have an understanding of the interplay between her ethnic culture, the cultures of those with whom she interacted as well as the dynamics of newly independent Kenya's local and national politics. This understanding enabled her to contextualize her roles as elder, female, wife, politician, teacher and so on appropriately and thus, enabled her to apply herself sagaciously in various scenarios which in turn enabled her to ascend politically and make her mark on Kenyan politics. Her understanding of the non-gendered approach to leadership that was intrinsic to her ethnic heritage led her to steer away from a political stance that would have resulted in her occupying political offices and broaching issues as a female instead of as a leader of both males and females. In the next chapter, I look at the activities of other Kenyan women engaged in public affairs at the time of Kenya's independence. My examination of such activities demand a focus on women outside parliament

⁶⁸ Cora Presley, *Kikuyu Women, the Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya*. Colorado, Westview Press, Inc., 1992, p.126.

at the time Onyango was serving her first term in parliament as the sole female Member of Parliament.

WHERE ARE THE WOMEN? THE KENYAN POLITICAL SCENE (1960 – 1975)

This grassroots business is as complex as an onion – you peel one layer, only to discover yet another below it. It takes a truly dynamic leadership to build bridges across the board. It has happened before and can be done again.¹

Introduction

Grace Onyango's entrance into the Kenyan legislature as the first female elected Member of Parliament in 1969 suggests a reexamination of the Kenyan political scene between 1960 and 1975 and the general absence of Kenyan women in national electoral politics several years after attaining independence from the Britain in 1963. This chapter is a brief discussion of the political atmosphere into which Grace Onyango immersed herself. It will span the years immediately before independence in 1963 to 1975 when Grace Onyango was joined in parliament by 3 other women. I intend to elaborate, briefly, on the ethnic tensions that surrounded the designing of the Kenyan constitution prior to independence as well as the post-independence conflict that led to the formation of the Kenya People's Union by discontented members of parliament (M.P.s) of the ruling KANU (Kenya African National Union) party. As seen in the preceding chapter, Grace Onyango was at one time a K.P.U. member. With the exception of Onyango, women were absent from these political conflicts as they were not in positions of power in the post-independence Kenyan political scene. Thus, the last section of the chapter focuses on the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organisation that by 1969 provided Kenyan women with the sole national vehicle through which they engaged in public affairs.² My focus on the women's organization sheds light on how it functioned in the volatile political atmosphere mentioned above. I will use two key papers written in 1971 and 1975 by sociologist Audrey Wipper both of which highlight the question of women's rights in Kenya, as well as the performance of the Organization.

The Kenyan Political Scene (1963 – 1969)

1963 was a momentous year in the political history of Kenya. The country not only attained self-government from Britain, but also witnessed the surfacing of long-simmering issues about ethnicity and gender in that year. In the latter case, questions were asked and answers

¹ Lucy Oriang', "Who will Reinvent Maendeleo?" In *The Daily Nation Newspaper*, 14 May 2004. Nairobi: Nation Media Archives. Oriang' is quoting a remark made to her by a friend.

² *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* is Kiswahili for Women's Development.

sought on what was, and should be, the role of women in the period leading to Kenya's self-government and in the new political dispensation. At the Second Lancaster House Conference of 1962 where the post-independence constitution of Kenya was cobbled together, Priscilla Abwao, the sole female delegate, argued that African women were "not asking for a special position for ourselves." What women wanted in the soon-to-be independent Kenya was to "be treated as equal partners in the new society which we are creating, as well as the endeavors to create that society."³ Abwao was representing women who had been marginalized in representative politics right up to the 1962 conference. For example, in 1957 the colonial government under pressure from Africans organized the LEGCO (Legislative Council) elections in which Africans were for the first time to participate as voters and as candidates, albeit under measures that restricted their full participation. All eight candidates who participated in this election to represent African interests were African males. Up until then, the colonial government had insisted on nominating an even smaller number of non-Africans and Africans to serve as representatives of Kenya's African populace in the Council.⁴ Both the colonial government and African men, who were persistent in their demands that African representation be increased, did not address the lack of women in the government's legislative arm. As a result, African men ignored women who had been active in independence struggles in various parts of the country. That is why it seems reasonable for political scientist Maria Nzomo to argue that Abwao's inclusion in the delegation that went to the 1962 conference was too little, too late. She opines that Abwao's inclusion was a

³ Abwao's words above are taken from her *Memorandum on Behalf of African Women to the Kenya Constitutional Conference in London*, February 1962 cited in Atsango Chesoni, "Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Women and Constitutional Reform 1997-2002." FIDA Annual Report 2002, p.7.

<http://www.iweb.co.ke/fida/reports/fidaannualreport2002.pdf>. Chesoni argues that former President Daniel arap Moi and sixty-five members of the legislature who attended the Lancaster House conference of 1962 were nominated. Moi was initially nominated but was one of the few nominated LEGCO incumbents to win re-election in 1957 under the Lennox-Boyd Constitution. Elections in 1958 resulted in an additional six Africans joining the LEGCO. After the 1961 elections, the total of elected African representatives further increased since 33 of the contestable seats were "open" and majority of the voters were African. The British colonial government reserved twenty seats during the latter elections for minorities (10 European, 8 Asian and 2 for Arabs). See Robert Maxon and Thomas Ofcansk, *Historical Dictionary of Kenya* (Lanham, Md., and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 2000), p. 151-152

⁴ The first African to be nominated to the LEGCO was Eluid Mathu, in 1944, whose appointment was occasioned by the retirement of Rev. J. W. Arthur. In 1947 he was joined by Benaiah Ohanga who replaced Canon Beecher. Before Ohanga joined the LEGCO, Fanwell Odede had served in an acting capacity in what became Ohanga's position in 1946. In 1957 Mathu and Ohanga both lost their seats in the first elections in which Africans were restrictively allowed to participate as voters and candidates. Other LEGCO nominees include former President Daniel Arap Moi, who was nominated to LEGCO in 1955 to replace the Rift Valley Province nominee, J. K. Tameno and Wyclife Awori (North Nyanza 1952-1956). See Bethwell Ogot, *Historical Dictionary of Kenya* (Metuchen, N.J. and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1981), p.24, 142 and 165. Also, "Debut of African Membership of Legislative Council," in *Parliament of Kenya: Official Website*. <http://www.ski-pix.com/parliament/history.php#debut>.

political act of tokenism and “an afterthought and could hardly be expected to effectively represent women’s gender concerns at that historical moment.”⁵

The conference resulted in the production of a new constitution under which general elections were held in 1963. The victorious party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), thereafter engaged itself in consolidating a hold onto power as the sole political party in the country. Kenya had attained self-government on June 1, 1963 (Madaraka Day) with a constitution that diffused power from the central government to regional blocks or *majimbo*s. It also had a bicameral legislature with an Upper House, the Senate, and a Lower House, the National Assembly. KANU’s main opponent had been the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU). Leaders from ethnic groups that were numerically smaller than those who they argued were dominating the political world within KANU had formed the opposition party. KADU favored a federal system of government, which its proponents viewed as a buffer against the potential excesses of the majority upon the minority. The government of Prime Minister Jomo Kenyatta, however, was determined to fortify the powers of the central government. By December 12, 1964, when Kenya became a Republic, the Kenyatta government succeeded in getting KADU leaders to dissolve their party and to join the KANU government. Kenyatta became President of the Republic after the necessary constitutional amendments. The country became a *de facto* one-party state and the Kenyatta government dissolved the bicameral legislative system. Though there was no formal declaration of one-party status, the government viewed any future attempts to form an alternative party as a hostile act. According to political scientist Jennifer Widner, KANU failed to develop systems that could deal with internal dissent.⁶ There was thus no alternative political platform to act as a check on the government. When opposition boiled over in the mid-1960s, it split the government.

In 1966, Oginga Odinga and Bildad Kaggia, Vice-President and Assistant Minister respectively, led 27 KANU M.P.s in a rebellion against their party. The M.P.s argued that the government had become too powerful, rich and self-serving and had distanced itself from the citizen at the grassroots. Kaggia was particularly irked by land redistribution efforts that had followed independence. He argued that only a select few had benefited from the distribution of

⁵ Maria Nzomo, “Engendering Governance Through the Constitutional Review Process.” *Constitution of Kenya Review Commission: Official Website*; <http://www.kenyaconstitution.org/docs/09cd.002.htm>

⁶ Jennifer A. Widner, *The Rise of a Party State in Kenya: From “Harambee!” To “Nyayo!”* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992), p. 30-31

formerly British settler land.⁷ These two politicians formed the Kenya People's Union (KPU), which Grace Onyango later joined. The Kenyatta government immediately branded Odinga and his colleagues communists. The former Vice-President had openly used Soviet funds to set up the Lumumba Institute, which had been officially opened by President Kenyatta when Odinga was still in government. In his autobiography, Odinga argues that the Institute's goals were to train KANU leaders with the aim of bringing them closer to the citizen at the grassroots level. He also maintained that while he respected some of the goals of communism, he was, in fact, not a communist.⁸ The government abruptly called for a by-election soon after the formation of KPU and employed the might of government machinery to frustrate the campaigns of KPU candidates.⁹ Some like Onyango survived the onslaught; many others did not. In 1969, the Attorney General Charles Njonjo deregistered the party and all its members, Onyango included, who wished to continue their careers in politics, were obliged to re-join KANU and she was successful in her first attempt to enter the Kenyan Parliament in 1969. Yet, even though women were largely absent from these political battles they did find a place to voice their opinions in public under the auspices of the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organisation (M.Y.W.O.).

Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organisation

In the early 1950s the colonial government founded M.Y.W.O. with the central objective of encouraging "the advancement of African women."¹⁰ Wives of British settlers and officials in the colonial government initially led the organization. They received governmental support in the form of staff from the office of Community Development and Rehabilitation. This support was to continue after independence.¹¹ According to one observer, the aim of the organization was to "groom the wives of the first generation of Africans who would inherit leadership from departing colonialists into perfect home-makers."¹² In the opinion of Joanna Lewis, at the time when the organization was set up, the colonial government had just started to gain an appreciation of how

⁷ For more of Kaggia's views see Bildad Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom, 1921 – 1963: the autobiography of Bildad Kaggia*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1975.

⁸ Oginga Odinga, *Not Yet Uhuru*. London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books Limited, 1967

⁹ The by-elections were carried out only in those constituencies whose M.P.s had joined KPU. It was known as the Kenya Little Election.

¹⁰ Audrey Wipper, "The Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization: The Co-Optation of Leadership" *African Studies Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Women in Africa (Dec., 1975), 99-120. p. 99

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 99.

¹² Lucy Oriang', "Maendeleo never had it so Bad." *Daily Nation Newspaper*, 14 November 2003. Nairobi: Nation Media Group Archives.

women's clubs could work as "vital centres of social engineering."¹³ To achieve its objectives, the organisation's leaders planned a wide range of activities for its members. On the programme of activities for the new M.Y.W.O. was everything, from cookery to embroidery. A journalist recalls the days her mother attended regular M.Y.W.O. meetings and "occasionally, she would come home with cake. It was sugar, spice and all things nice and every woman in the estate looked forward to the outing."¹⁴ According to Audrey Wipper, "expatriate women, knowing how inexperienced African women were in running a modern association, supported them during the transition to independence."¹⁵ Once African leadership was in place within the M.Y.W.O., Wipper observes, the organization bore "more resemblance to a western women's philanthropic organization than to an African self-help organization."¹⁶ In a few years, the agenda of the organization broadened under new leadership. Cookery, embroidery, and similar activities remained on the agenda but as skills that could be fashioned into income generating activities. Kenyan newspaper reports suggest that the cause of these changes was not the benevolent handing over of the reigns of administration to Kenyan women, but these women's determination to seize and alter the organization's agenda.

By the end of the fifties, M.Y.W.O.'s Jael Mbogo and other pioneer African members began to advocate for the "liberation" of M.Y.W.O. from the minority leadership of British women. This was at about the time when African members of the LEGCO were pressuring the government to increase African representation within the legislative body. These women's efforts resulted in the organization's first African president, Phoebe Asiyi (1960-1962), with Jael Mbogo as Secretary-General.¹⁷ The organization's new leaders entered an aggressive membership drive that involved the use of churches to create awareness about the organization and enabled it to establish branches in villages.¹⁸ It also broadened its agenda and adopted an approach that was essentially one of "practical problem solving." For example, it provided women with knowledge to enable them care for orphans of the Mau Mau guerilla war that had

¹³ Joanna Lewis, *Empire State-Building: War and Welfare in Kenya, 1925 – 1952*. Oxford: James Currey Ltd., 2000.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Audrey Wipper, "The Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization: The Co-Optation of Leadership" *African Studies Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Women in Africa (Dec., 1975), 99-120. p. 102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 99.

¹⁷ Gakuu Mathenge, "From Cookery and Knitting to Key Role in Big-League Politics," in *The Sunday Nation Newspaper*, 18 April 2004. Nairobi: Nation Media Group Archives.

¹⁸ Kwamboka Oyaro, "From an Old Wives Club to a Mass Movement" in *The Daily Nation Newspaper*, 11 April 2003. Nairobi: Nation Media Group Archives.

been waged against the British in the fifties.¹⁹ Audrey Wipper argues that in the 1960s, the organization's leaders had also taken "a critical position towards the government," and were urging it to incorporate women into government and policy formulation processes. This later changed, as the organization increasingly "tended to accept the status quo and accommodate itself to the political elite."²⁰

Wipper traces this change to the social status and attitudes of certain M.Y.W.O leaders. She believes that by 1970, two distinct "types of leader" had emerged in the movement. The "patron" was the type who poured tea and opened art exhibitions while the "militant" was one dedicated to what she defines as "deep-rooted changes in women's roles that would give them full equality with men."²¹ The former was urban and more dominant due to her links to the political and professional elite either by birth or marriage while the latter was rural-focused, or with no links to the political elite, and was less powerful in steering M.Y.W.O's agenda. Wipper saw in Jael Mbogo, and Ruth Habwe, who in 1968 became M.Y.W.O.'s fourth president, the "militant" leader who was determined to empower diverse women to better their standards of living.²²

In contrast, M.Y.W.O.'s President from 1971-1984, Jane Kiano, married to a prominent cabinet minister, Julius Kiano, was in Wipper's opinion illustrative of the "patron" leader steering M.Y.W.O. towards a "patron" agenda i.e. fundraising at social events and a limited commitment to seeking equality with men. Such an agenda was one which eventually allowed the ruling party to 'co-opt' M.Y.W.O., making it less an independent women's organization and more of an instrument in the hands of KANU, with the party's interests dominating the organization's agenda. She argues that Kiano was less vocal and active in articulating issues that

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 99

²¹ Audrey Wipper, "Equal Rights for Women in Kenya?" *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 9, No.3, 1971, p. 339-441 and "The Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization: The Co-Optation of Leadership" *African Studies Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Women in Africa (Dec., 1975), 99-120

²² *Ibid.* p. 438 Ruth Habwe is quoted as having "lectured," at a gathering, what the *Reporter* (in Whipper) described as "a row of rather sheepish looking Masai tribesmen [who] rattled their earrings and uttered confused 'aahs' and 'ees'." Habwe (not Masai) tells them to "start taking better care of your wives" who "because we wear skirts" you "regard...as your slaves." At the same time, their 'enslavement' had ended because "the women are on the march." The Masai men are supposed to have gone back "to their *manyattas* [homes] with an air of having finally decided that this civilization is definitely something which is an affair of God and in which they should not interfere." Habwe's remark and the *Reporter's* article were both culturally insensitive and patronizing (for both Masai men and women). Traditionally, dressed Maasai men wear two-piece wrappers (the inner piece looks like a toga) while women wear long wrappers draped over the shoulders that do not qualify as "skirts." To-date, the Maasai (male and female) are known for proudly displaying their culture (material and lifestyle). For Jael Mbogo, see p.441.

“bore directly on women.” Her other critiques of M.Y.W.O were perceived financial misappropriation or misapplication of funds as well as the isolation of rural women from the center of the organization. Thus, a question arises as to whether by the time Grace Onyango got to Parliament and in the course of her first term as M.P., the most promising attempt to organize women outside parliament was failing.

M.Y.W.O.’s Leadership Mix: a Critique of Wipper’s Dichotomy

To begin with, it is important to address the role of European women in the organization of Kenyan women under the auspices of M.Y.W.O. Wipper creates the impression that Kenyan women were incapable of organizing themselves when she argues that African women were in need of European female benevolence to enable them run a “modern association.” Political scientist Mojubaolu Okome argues that the tendency of certain Western feminist writing to direct its gaze at African women, justifying its intrusion as “helping” African women “to help” themselves, is reminiscent of what Frantz Fanon saw as “colonialist-native relationship, and missionary-native prosletization,” in his analysis of “colonialistic evangelism in Africa.”²³ Wipper’s analysis is reflective of Western notions of feminism, and as argued in the preceding chapter, Kenyan women have a long history of organizing themselves and their societies for different purposes. Similarly, Oyeronke Oyewumi has argued that “organizing-associating to attain a purpose – is the process by which traditional Africans wove the very fabric of their societies.” Due to the value people placed in community and the sense that an individual could best actualize himself/herself therein, age grades, occupational guilds as well as religious, social and political organizations in addition to kinship groups were an integral part of life for both men and women.²⁴ These organizations morphed to cope with change, for instance, during the colonial era. During this period, some women fashioned their organizations and other organizations in existence within their ethnic groups into crucibles of resistance.²⁵ In Western Kenya, Ominde argues that Luo women’s organizations within the home later changed into co-operative societies.²⁶ Therefore, Kenyan women already had experience in organizing

²³ Mojubaolu Okome, “What Women, Whose Development? A Critical Analysis of Reformist Evangelism,” in Oyeronke Oyewumi. *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2003), p.69

²⁴ Oyeronke Oyewumi, “Introduction: Feminism, Sisterhood, and other Foreign Relations,” in Oyeronke Oyewumi. *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2003), p.17-18

²⁵ See for instance the women mentioned at the end of chapter 2.

²⁶ Simeon Ominde, *The Luo Girl from Infancy to Marriage*. London: Macmillan, 1952.

themselves. But what about Wipper's patron/militant dichotomy? Can this be viewed as purely oppositional?

Though Wipper is highly critical of Jane Kiano and other "patrons," according to Kenyan press reports she (Kiano) "is widely considered the most successful Maendeleo chairperson ever."²⁷ Maria Nzomo also argues that it is in fact during her term in office as the president that the organization underwent a period of revitalization. As a result, M.Y.W.O. was able to recover its position as the leading mobilizing institution for women particularly in the rural areas which were inhabited by the majority of Kenyan women.²⁸ Her argument together with Wipper's argument that the organization was facing a period of decline by the late sixties shows that M.Y.W.O. was experiencing problems even with "militants" at the helm. From the foregoing, what emerges is the fact that though with marital links to the national elite, Jane Kiano as a leader was also rural-focused. This is evident in both her personality and her other achievements while in office. For example, Wipper finds it disturbing that in the seventies, Kiano "is probably the most photographed woman in Kenya" and that she traveled regularly and extensively in what she admits were efforts by the organization's leaders to "promote international contacts through visits to other countries."²⁹ In contrast, "militant" M.Y.W.O. president, Jael Mbogo, is depicted as having taken an unpaid leave of absence from her job in 1964 to visit women's branches.³⁰ However, one can also argue that Kiano was adept at manipulating her public appearances and links to the national elite to garner attention and support for M.Y.W.O.'s activities in a manner that "militants" were incapable of, be it in terms of garnering widespread publicity or marshalling financial resources. Moreover, the West, too, has a history of elite women whose marital links to male members of the political elite have enhanced their ability to influence policy at international bodies such as the United Nations Organisation or within the governments of their respective countries.³¹

²⁷ An example of such a report is Leo Juma's, "Why Men Ogle Women's Organisation," in *The Daily Nation Newspaper*, 9 May 2004. Nairobi: Nation Media Group Archives.

²⁸ Maria Nzomo, "The Impact of the Women's Decade on Policies, Programs and Empowerment of Women in Kenya" in *Journal of Opinion*, Volume XVII/2, 1989.

²⁹ Audrey Wipper, "Equal Rights for Women in Kenya?" *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 9, No.3, 1971, p. 339-441.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14.

³¹ Eleanor Roosevelt (U.N.) and more recently, Hillary Clinton (U.S. government) amongst others. See also Maria Nzomo and Kathleen Staudt, "Man-Made Political Machinery in Kenya: Political Space for Women?" In Barbara Nelson and Najma Chowdhury eds., *Women and Politics Worldwide*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994. In discussing the Women's Bureau, Nzomo and Staudt argue that links to male elite had contradictory

One may also argue that since M.Y.W.O. was established to encourage “the advancement of African women” it was going to have to accommodate African women of diverse socio-economic backgrounds, interests and equally diverse modes of contribution to the organization’s goals. This would include women such as Jane Kiano who is credited with having mobilized women to contribute a modest sum of Kshs.20 that went towards the construction of the nine-floor Maendeleo House that Wipper in 1975 doubted was possible. The building became M.Y.W.O.’s headquarters and a source of rental income for the organization. This put an end to the capricious reliance on an annual government grant of “\$1,500 to \$2,200, for office space in a shed-like building” to which Wipper refers.³² In yet another instance, she shows Kiano (albeit in the company of Dr. Kiano) commending the efforts of Chuka women who had independently undertaken to construct a vocational training institute. Since Wipper argues that a dependence on government funds or the expectation of funds from the Executive contributed to the co-optation of the organization by government, Kiano’s efforts to internally generate funding as well as encourage women’s groups to fund their activities independently are therefore crucial when examined in this context. In the opinion of some journalists, therefore, Kenyans also recognized Kiano for contributing to projects to advance the lives of women and their communities as well as “raising the public profile of the organization locally and internationally.”³³ She was central to efforts that resulted in the bringing of the 1985 conference that marked the end of the United Nations Decade for Women to Nairobi. During that conference, Nzomo explains, M.Y.W.O. assumed the role of voicing Kenyan women’s position on a wide range of issues.

M.Y.W.O. as an organization has had other achievements. Most female leaders who made it to parliament after Grace Onyango were active members of the organization, causing one journalist to correctly note: “few women have made it to Parliament and the cabinet without passing through M.Y.W.O.”³⁴ These include its first President, Phoebe Asiyo, who was elected as an M.P. in 1974. M.Y.W.O.’s second President, Jael Mbogo, stood as a candidate in 1969 but lost narrowly to Mwai Kibai, later became Vice-President and President of Kenya. Her feat caused the future president to move to his native constituency, Othaya, in Kenya’s Central

effects e.g. male political patrons in competing for women’s support, created an environment in which women bargained and secured some gains, p.421.

³² Ibid. p.103.

³³ See for instance, Gakuu Mathenge, “From Cookery and Knitting to Key Role in Big-League Politics,” in *The Sunday Nation Newspaper*, 18 April 2004. Nairobi: Nation Media Group Archives.

³⁴ Ibid.

Province for the 1974 general elections.³⁵ The contribution of the organization in this respect is important since women need to be “at strategic decision making tables where national economic policies are charted and allocation of budgets made.”³⁶ Even at its lowest ebb in the years following 1985, the organization promoted the development and use of an energy saving *jiko* (portable, indigenous cooker) that is still in widespread use at the time of writing of this thesis, and later pioneered alternative rites of passage in a bid to stop female circumcision. These rites have thus far been the most successful and respectful mode of putting an end to the practice. This is because organizers recognize that female circumcision is but one aspect of a process that many communities value for educating their youth in several aspects of life and an approach that compelled them to abolish the practice in a wholesale manner was not helpful.³⁷

The other concern raised by Wipper that needs to be addressed here is that Jane Kiano spoke less on matters of interest to women and more on matters revolving around “major social problems such as road accidents and negligent drivers, inflation, and the need for cheaper food.”³⁸ Wipper preferred previous leaders who had “confined public pronouncements to topics that bore directly on women – their inferior status, laziness and drunkenness among men, prostitution, and lack of political representation.”³⁹ It is surprising that Wipper did not consider road accidents, inflation and food prices as matters that were important to Kenyan women, many of whom invest their time and energy in the country’s agricultural sector. If they got the political representation they desired, what exactly were they going to use their national platforms for? Were Kenyan women only capable of representing a single sex? It would appear therefore that Grace Onyango who was already in Parliament was to be considered a failure if she was not focusing on the issues delineated above. Moreover, in light of the broad range of activities M.Y.W.O. leaders undertook, it is doubtful that the above were the only issues they addressed in their “public pronouncements.” Besides, Wipper falls into the trap of what gender studies scholar Amina Mama called a “groin centered” perspective of African womanhood and what Olufemi

³⁵ Dennis Onyango, “He Never Saw a Problem He Could Not Flee From,” in *The East African Standard*, Online Edition, 25 July 2004. Also discussed in Mathenge’s article.

³⁶ Maria Nzomo, “Engendering Governance Through the Constitutional Review Process.” *Constitution of Kenya Review Commission: Official Website*; <http://www.kenyaconstitution.org/docs/09cd.002.htm>

³⁷ See L. Amede Obiora, “The Little Foxes That Spoil the Vine: Revisiting the Feminist Critique of Female Circumcision,” in Oyeronke Oyewumi. *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*. Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2003.

³⁸ Audrey Wipper, “The Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization: The Co-Optation of Leadership” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Women in Africa (Dec., 1975), 99-120. p. 105. Given the broad age

³⁹ *Ibid.* p.105.

Taiwo, a philosopher, decries as the demonization of African men in various Western feminist writing.⁴⁰ For example, Wipper argued that male roles in the continent had changed because “the colonial Government’s gazetting of tribal boundaries and abolition of inter-tribal fighting made the warrior obsolete; but the woman’s role as the maintainer of the domestic economy remained largely intact.”⁴¹ Prostitution, while a concern in Kenya, was certainly not a part of the lives of most M.Y.W.O. members particularly the majority at the “rural base” that Wipper was so passionate about. It would therefore not be alarming if “patrons” in M.Y.W.O. did not dwell on the issue. Oyeronke Oyewumi associates the scholarly focus on African women and prostitution as reflective of the European tendency to associate the African with hyper sexuality going several centuries back.⁴² In addition, M.Y.W.O leaders who were conscious of the realities of life the majority of their members and their families had to face as well as the dangers of generalization would certainly have and voice a different perspective on African men. They would probably not share the opinion that the African male prior to European colonialism was chronically lazy, exclusively and incessantly embroiled in “inter-tribal fighting” (presented as a timely savior for a people with sub-human intellect and cultures). The demonization of the African man, as argued in the first chapter, has enabled scholars to characterize the African woman as a servile and helpless “beast of burden” lacking in agency.⁴³ It enables scholars to make arbitrary observations that consistently place the labor of diverse African women hierarchically below that of men without a closer analysis of the cultural context in which women perform. For instance, Wipper observes that the wife “cooks and serves food for her husband and his friends, but it is forbidden to join them.”⁴⁴ Such are the inequalities she wanted M.Y.W.O. leaders to stress and fight. However, these observations are partial because there is no culture-specific, value-driven analysis of the duties, responsibilities, labor and social restrictions

⁴⁰ Amina Mama as quoted in Oyeronke Oyewumi, “The White Woman’s Burden: African Women in Western Feminist Discourse,” p. 36 and Olufemi Taiwo. “Feminism and Africa: Reflections on the Poverty of Theory,” in Oyeronke Oyewumi, ed., *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*. Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2003, p.53.

⁴¹ Audrey Wipper, “Equal Rights for Women in Kenya?” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1971, 429-442, p. 429.

⁴² Oyeronke Oyewumi, “The White Woman’s Burden: African Women in Western Feminist Discourse,” *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*. Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2003, p.36.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.35-37 and Olufemi Taiwo. “Feminism and Africa: Reflections on the Poverty of Theory,” p.49-63 in Oyeronke Oyewumi (Ed) *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*. Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press, 2003.

⁴⁴ Audrey Wipper, “Equal Rights for Women in Kenya?” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1971, 429-442, p. 434.

of the male. In many ethnic groups on the continent, it was also not possible for a man to join a gathering of women or to direct their conduct therein. M.Y.W.O. had a socio-culturally diverse membership and it was erroneous to expect its sagacious leaders to focus on such critiques.

Lastly, it is important to underscore the fact that funding was a big problem for M.Y.W.O., and this led its leaders to try to encourage grassroot groups to raise their own funds for development projects. For example, Ruth Habwe (President from 1968-1971), like Kiano is remembered for having mobilized village groups to raise funds by pooling resources “to uplift themselves economically through small enterprises.”⁴⁵ Some of its leadership also sought to foster ideological stances that did not alienate the organization from whatever government support was available. Their membership base did attract a lot of attention from mainstream politics and this attention also provided them with a potent bargaining chip. In light of the arguments above, it is difficult to say that sound M.Y.W.O. leadership was definitively lacking by 1969 when Grace Onyango was elected to parliament and through her first term. Also, given M.Y.W.O.’s multifaceted roles as the sole women’s nationwide development organizer and national lobbyist for a wide variety of issues that affected their lives, it is difficult to draw a line defining how much interaction between the organization and the government was appropriate, at least up until 1975. Kenya was a single party state and M.Y.W.O.’s leadership had to work within that political set-up.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have underscored the importance of M.Y.W.O. as the sole vehicle for mobilizing Kenyan women nationally during the period under consideration. This is because in addition to encouraging and helping to organize members’ development activities, it provided women who aspired to leadership roles with a space to exercise those aspirations outside parliament. Using Wipper’s papers in addition to other documents, I have acknowledged the presence of a group of women linked to the elite. However, I have gone a step further to argue that M.Y.W.O. did benefit in various ways from the presence of “patrons.” That is, the actions of “patrons” were not purely inimical to those of “militants.” I see the strategies adopted by some “patrons” including their use of their ties to the ruling and professional elite for M.Y.W.O.

⁴⁵ Gakuu Mathenge, “From cookery and knitting to key role in big-league politics,” in *The Daily Nation*, Nation Media Group Archives, Nairobi.

activities as complimentary to those of some “militants.” It was a tactical mix that helped keep M.Y.W.O. going during the period under examination in the reality that was a one-party state

CONCLUSION GRACE ONYANGO, FEMALE AGENCY, AND AFRICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY

As we share with our man folk in the upbringing of our children and the improving of our country. And as partners, we seek to share in the policymaking, which affects our children, our country, and us.¹

In principle, responsibility for action to correct historic disadvantage of any social sector, including the gender ones, lies with the entire society, not just those affected. But those affected must show the way.²

Challenges of Postcolonial Africa: Underscoring Female Agency

One of the issues I have endeavored to shed light on in this thesis is Kenyan female agency in history. This is because understanding female agency and the challenges that this agency has faced over time is crucial to addressing the problem of the increasing feminization of poverty in postcolonial Africa. This thesis has surveyed pre-colonial to postcolonial era societal changes that disadvantaged Kenyan women. This is because history shows that women in post-colonial Africa have had to continue shouldering a disproportionate burden of national socio-economic problems. Take, for instance, the introduction in the 1980s of the infamous Bretton Woods Institutions' Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) which compelled countries seeking economic aid from the Institutions to implement neo-liberal economic policies. The policies were supposed to help developing countries service their debts. In an effort to meet SAP provisions, African governments curtailed public expenditure on sectors such as health and education. As a result, women were affected most because they as key managers of domestic affairs, sources of agricultural labor, as primary caregivers to children, the aged and the infirm. History does more than just document such problems: it also sheds light on the indispensable and wide-ranging roles of African women, how they have changed and adapted to different times, as well as the necessity of involving them as central actors in decision making and planning at all levels of governance. This necessity leads me to re-visit the question of why African women,

¹ Priscilla Abwao, "Memorandum on Behalf of the African Women to the Kenya Constitutional Conference in London, February, 1962." In Wanyiri Kihoro (Ed.) *A Vision of the Future From the Past: Essential Public Documents in the Making of the New Kenya Constitution*. Nairobi: ABANTU for Development, 2002, p.29.

² Maria Nzomo, "Bleak Prospects: Why Women Candidates did Poorly," in the *Daily Nation Newspaper*. Nairobi: Nation Media Group Archives, 2002.

who have always been key community actors (in both obvious and less obvious ways) find it difficult to win elections when it comes to politics.

Despite their favorable quantitative demographics, few women in Kenya have made it into local government and/or parliament as Grace Onyango did. Just before independence in 1963, Abwao noted that African women “represent two-thirds of registered voters in Kenya.”³ That women have not been able to translate their demographic advantages into female electoral victories is a question that has been raised all over the world and not just in Africa. Grace Onyango was elected in 1969 and served in a parliament that had just one other nominated female M.P. Twenty nine years later, Kenya’s Eighth Parliament had just 4 elected female M.P.s and the other 5 were nominated by various parties. Thus, the Eighth Parliament had just 9 female M.P.s out of 222.⁴ Maria Nzomo attributes the historical parliamentary gender discrepancy to the small number of Kenyan women at high levels of political party structures. For instance in 1992, out of 50 female candidates, only 20 made it through party nominations. Furthermore, she argues that Kenyan women have had a weaker lasting power on the political scene and thus fail “to acquire experience and entrench themselves in the various power structures.”⁵ Moreover, as Ambassador Bo Goransson points out, even though women in Sweden comprise half of the country’s parliament and government, “women do not enjoy the same opportunities as men do.”⁶ In Goransson’s opinion, culture and tradition were to blame for continued violence against women and discriminatory practices against them in the private sector. However, in light of my analysis of female agency in pre-colonial social contexts, culture and tradition cannot be blamed in a wholesale manner. This is because, as I have shown, some cultures and traditions did in fact accord women power and influence and it is their pervasion that has led women to fight against the resultant oppressive forms of neo-traditions. There is therefore a need to be cognizant of the processes that lead to the ‘invention’ of traditions and how these impact the lives of women.

³ Priscilla Abwao, “Memorandum on Behalf of the African Women to the Kenya Constitutional Conference in London, February, 1962.” In Wanyiri Kihoro (Ed.) *A Vision of the Future From the Past: Essential Public Documents in the Making of the New Kenya Constitution*. Nairobi: ABANTU for Development, 2002, p.29.

⁴ Gladys Kemunto, “Dwindling Numbers of Women Candidates,” in the *East African Standard*, Monday, December 23, 2003. All figures relating to Eight Parliament are from this article.

⁵ Maria Nzomo. “Bleak Prospects: Why Women Candidates did Poorly,” in the *Daily Nation Newspaper*. Nairobi: Nation Media Group Archives, 2002.

⁶ Paul Mwangi, “What Wanjiku Really Needs is Power-Sharing in Her Home,” in the *Daily Nation Newspaper*, Monday, March 15, 2004. Nairobi: Nation Media Group Archives. Bo Goransson made these remarks as Swedish Ambassador to Kenya during the commemoration of the International Women’s Day the Monday before.

However, the modest ascension of post-independence Kenyan women to larger political venues has not always been accompanied by the immediate and direct betterment of life for all women at the country's grassroots. For example, it is evident from Chapter 3 that Onyango was in parliament at a time when government did not consider it proper to give women paid maternity leave or pensionable employment once married and was not interested in a proactive approach to the matter. Yet, we have also seen that there were men and women pushing for change and have continued to do so in all manner of ways e.g. through trade unions and industrial courts. Thus we can also argue that some progress has indeed been made. For example, Paul Mwangi, a Kenyan lawyer, argues that over the years, Kenya has enacted laws that do contribute to leveling the playing field for ordinary Kenyan women. He explains that The *Married Women's Property Act* and several Court of Appeal judgements "protect a woman's right to property that is registered in the husband's name if she has contributed to the acquisition of the property."⁷ He adds that "a housewife's duties are now recognized as proprietary contributions."⁸ Unfortunately, since independence it is also evident, as Mwangi argues that few women have been able to take advantage of such laws because they remain ignorant of their legal rights. We may attribute such ignorance to historical inequities in the access to government, education and capital that have worked against women. However, my analysis of female agency in Kenyan history, also shows that women can and have used their varied social roles for example, as wives or entrepreneurs to rally those around them to improve the lot of their communities, as well as to change societal attitudes that work against women and by extension, their societies.

In the writing of this thesis therefore, I have remained conscious of the complexity of the roles of African women and their potential for powering change. This complexity of women's roles is reflected in Abwao's remarks at the Lancaster House Conference of 1962 where she argued that the concern of Kenyan women was "the proper care and development of Kenya's human resources. As mothers, women perform the traditional role of guiding the young, keeping the home, and contributing to the general social welfare of the community."⁹ One may argue that

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Priscilla Abwao, "Memorandum on Behalf of the African Women to the Kenya Constitutional Conference in London, February, 1962." In Wanyiri Kihoro (Ed.) *A Vision of the Future From the Past: Essential Public Documents in the Making of the New Kenya Constitution*. Nairobi: ABANTU for Development, 2002, p.29.

the duties and power inherent in “keeping the home” or “contributing to the general social welfare” are very broad and far reaching indeed in any society. These activities have provided women with innumerable and invaluable socio-economic and political networks over centuries. They include the counsel of *pim* and relationships built in the course of commercial activities.

Writing in 2004, Maria Nzomo’s recommendations for female Kenyan political hopefuls are reflective of a scholar who is cognizant of the potent nature of the networks African women have developed. They read like a document designed and endorsed by female leaders and community actors who are replete in Africa’s past:

There is no short-cut for women seeking political office. They must learn the art of *realpolitik*. They must learn to exploit women’s numerical strength combined with the larger political space occupied by the mushrooming women’s associations and lobbies, to strategically and adequately translate this huge potential into political power and influence. Female candidates need to develop staying power and a sense of political professionalism.¹⁰

One may argue that Nzomo’s recommendations are unduly targeted at women and that society in its entirety must respond to gender imbalances that disadvantage any section of its female membership. However, that African women must and can play a central role in such efforts is not far fetched in view of the findings of this thesis whether it be in the person of Grace Onyango or in pre-colonial and colonial era Luo women or Kenyan women of other ethnicities. This thesis has demonstrated that African women have always been adept at influencing politics, community development and mobilization. These women have endowed the descendants of the continent with a rich heritage to draw from.

African Female Agency and African Historiography

In addition to serving as an attempt to recover Kenyan women’s histories, this thesis has also re-visited works of scholarship in different fields of the humanities that are central to the analysis of African women’s history. Through Grace Onyango, the thesis sheds light not only on women as key actors in their societies and subjects in these societies’ histories, but also on how changing theoretical trends in the humanities and the social sciences are crucial to our understanding of these histories. This is because, as I have shown in this thesis, works by scholars such as Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi contextualize the experiences of African

¹⁰ Maria Nzomo, “Bleak Prospects: Why Women Candidates did Poorly,” in the *Daily Nation Newspaper*. Nairobi: Nation Media Group Archives, 2002.

women in a manner that is culturally and situationally specific. As a result, they offer a formidable base for the analysis and interpretation of women's experiences. It is from a cross-cultural analysis of African women in such works that I have found two points at which Luo (and Kenyan¹¹) women's experiences and histories intersect with those of other African women.

Firstly, for Luo women just as for Yoruba women as studied by Oyewumi or Igbo women as studied by Amadiume, sex did not provide the primary base upon which they defined themselves.¹² This is important because not only does it demonstrate how they perceived themselves, but also because it influenced the ways in which they acted and the grounds upon which they did so. In Chapter 4, I argue that Grace Onyango did not base her political career or ideologies on her sex and the sex of her fellow women. This is because the Luo woman as an individual was in reality (and still is) the occupier of several social positions and so what Oyewumi refers to as anatomical sex did not provide the sole source of self-identity nor was it a privileged source of self-identity. Thus, women variously occupied social positions as wives or husbands, wives or husbands to a lineage. In addition, they were part of age groups, kin and a host of other interest-based organizations. In Chapter 3, for instance, I show Luo women as husbands to other women, as wives of men, as mothers, members of wives' (and not women's) associations, leaders and establishers of lineages. It is important to note that even within wives' associations, women did not organize themselves on the basis of sex. As Oyewumi points out, in many an African society, marriage is a social contract and it is not limited to relationships of which sex is a part. Among the Yoruba and Igbo as for the Luo, a woman marrying into a certain clan was also a "wife" to the males and females (including children of either sex) of that clan. Her position as a lineage "wife" was lower than that of her "husbands," and hence the need for lineage "wives" to organize themselves accordingly so as to protect and pursue their interests. Similarly, the lineage "wife" enjoyed a position of advantage as a lineage "husband," in her natal home. African women therefore, occupied positions and were members of groups that they did not found on the bases of "womanhood," or "gender consciousness."¹³

¹¹ I use the term Kenyan while acknowledging that over forty different ethnicities, exist therein and that Kenya as a country and state only came into existence after the arrival of Europeans.

¹² I am referring here to Oyeronke Oyewumi, "Ties that Un(Bind): Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations," in *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, Vol.1, No.1 (2001) as well as works by the same authors in previous chapters of this thesis.

¹³ Oyeronke Oyewumi, "Ties that Un(Bind): Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations," p.14.

The second point therefore, is that “womanhood,” or “gender consciousness” did not provide grounds for political action in Kenya’s women’s histories as for many African women. In Kenya, the histories of women from various ethnic groups to whom I refer in various chapters such as female Kikuyu Mau Mau, Giriama’s Mekatilili wa Medza, M.Y.W.O. and Grace Onyango had at their root, interests that went beyond those of a single sex. It is for that reason that M.Y.W.O. leaders thought it important to discuss food prices and road accidents, a former Kenya African Union activist Muthoni wa Gachie joined the party in 1945 “to make the Europeans go from the country,” while Onyango saw herself as an M.P. for all the people of Kisumu Town.¹⁴

From the foregoing therefore, scholars of African women’s history need to be cognizant of the cultural variations inherent in the conceptualization of sex and gender of those upon whom they base their works. It is only then that the proper contexts for women’s actions may be established. It is with this in mind that what I have done here is not a biography of Grace Onyango; my analysis of her political career is fully embedded in the cultural context of her ethnic group as well as the changing social and political landscape of 20th century Kenya. This in turn has allowed me to contribute the experiences of Kenyan women from diverse sociological categories and backgrounds to the existing literature on women’s history.

¹⁴ Cora Presley, *Kikuyu Women, the Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya*. Colorado, Westview Press, Inc., 1992, p.126.

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