

Female Husbands and the Tragedy of Men: *Kamweretho*, Women Empowerment and the Gendered Solidary among the Kikuyu of Kenya

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Abstract

Review Article

Women in Central Kenya are evolving and revisiting an old tradition to break barriers of modern patriarchy. Invoking the concept of *kamweretho* these women are constantly and radically disrupting male domination in their everyday life. The "implosion" of all these things makes these women's stories unique and all the more compelling to feminists who are constantly searching for unique practices of feminism that resemble, but are not engineered by, western feminism. *Kamweretho* is a movement—an emergent, non-formal highly political women's group found among the Kikuyu of central Kenya. This female based movement aims at giving excessive traverse of power to women to perform traditional male duties in rural area. Since the activation of the group, many women have used *Kamweretho* as a political platform to join competitive politics in Kenya. From a broad perspective, the study seeks to examine the thesis that women based social movements are an avenue for improving the welfare of group members and their families. Using Goran Hydén concept of economy of affection, I illustrate that *Kamweretho* groups' operations and activities have a strong feminist agenda and often do not fit the conventional mechanisms associated with women groups. The movement gives women more opportunities and tools to challenge the status quo and dominant ways the Kikuyu society operates since they seem to question the authority of the traditional definition of a woman's role and position in the Kenyan society.

Keywords: *Kamweretho*, Kikuyu women, Women's social movements, Patriarchy, Economy of affection.

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INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, the (UN) Secretary General admonished member nations to commemorate the twentieth Beijing declaration as a moment of ushering in the continuous fight against poverty by embracing of sustainable development goals by the year 2030 (United Nations, 2015). In his address he argued that the process of women's empowerment remained a key issue and though their lives had improved, the rate of improvement was still wanting among and within countries. On the other hand, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2016) report on Africa Human Development highlighted that social issues among women cannot be separated with economic opportunities in African continent if there is gainful development to be realized. Deliberate effort to do away with traditional social norms and culturally outdated practices that create negative impact on women empowerment require attention by all (Bolak 1995).

The report further suggests that as governments in Africa strive on achieving the Sustainable

Development Goals, gender equality that translates into women empowerment deserve proper support. A report by Nabarro (2016), the special adviser of the United Nation Secretary General on 2030 Agenda for sustainable Development and climate change states that, one year after the promulgation of sustainable development goals, the world was on the right track (Abraham, S., & Pillai, D. 2017). It also states that stakeholders must ensure that inclusive social participation is upheld, meaning women participation in development agenda is undebatable in achieving all the sustainable development (Bolak, 1995).

Further, the UN Decade for Women (1976-85) realized that one way in which women may increase their access to state resources, training, managerial positions, and political power is through mobilizing themselves into organizations. The *Kamweretho* women groups are Post-Decade entities, but whose objectives and operations may not align with expectations of this realization. Founded on traditional values, *Kamwerethos* are social forums with a cardinal objective of espousing

reciprocal relations, where children are obligated to take good care of their (ageing) parents (Wanjiru, 2016). Ideally, the groups do not aim to empower their members only, but through them, blood kindred of members benefit socially, financially and materially.

This study demonstrates that women affiliates to Kamweretho use of symbols, some of which are related to nature and to some extent are a backup in highlighting the struggle women undergo in reconstructing their identity (Adomako, 2004). In so doing, the study divulges the crucial role of such symbolism in portraying their totality political autonomy freedom and justice for themselves. The engagement of radical feminist theory helps in interpreting patriarchy as depicted in African culture. The Marxist Feminist perspective assisted in analyzing the capitalistic nature of oppression of perceived weaker gender by proponents of culture (Wanjiru, 2016). The paper also highlights how the women have protested the status- quo with a view to bringing out the gender identity, power relations and changing socio-economic trend. The African feminist perspective creates a fair gender rapport between females and males and attempts to appraise literature by using African's aesthetic standards, worldview and experiences (Anyiro, & Ajuka, 2014). Generally, women empowerment refers to supporting the poor to achieve quality especially giving women command over their own lives, bodies, and their social status (Adomako, 2004). Gender inequality is observed in blocking the development of women (Anyiro, & Ajuka, 2014). This breeds inequalities that derive from power dynamics, command chains of class status and socio-cultural norms, standards, and traditions.

The problem

Self-help groups, (SHG) plays an important role in making women realize their importance of empowerment. SHG makes women to bring out their potentials and capabilities and make them confident to face the challenges more effectively. The SHG brings a paradigm shift in the dynamics of women's status and makes women have financial independence and social placement. Through SHGs, women participate in socio-economic activities to empower them (Eyben, Kabeer & Cornwall, 2008). Empowerment is a process whereby individuals psychologically think and act positively while acquiring skills on issues that affect them individually and at social levels. This includes individual self- efficacy, positive self-image, perceptions, personal control and competence (Zimmerman, 2000). Self-help groups enable women to access credit, trainings, loans and capital for initiating small businesses (Nabarro, 2016). These resources make women to have a boost in their income, savings and ability to repay borrowed loans through group support (Anyiro, & Ajuka, 2014).

Study Methodology

This study is largely descriptive in design (cf. Creswell, 1998; Babbie, 2001; Bogdan & Bilken, 2003). The desk top review concentrated on literature related to women empowerment. This study is based on broad objective of investigating the concept of moral economy and or the economy of affection, functions and economic significance of Kamweretho – an emergent, non-formal economic women's group found among the Kikuyu of Kenya. Broadly, the paper sought to examine the idea that women groups are an avenue for improving the financial welfare of group members and their families. The documentary sources used included published books, journal articles, magazines, as well as unpublished materials such as dissertations, and conference and seminar proceedings.

When grassroots empowerment becomes social justice

The concept of social capital existed ever since small communities were formed through the interaction of humans with the expectation of reciprocation and mutual trust. Social capital refers to the connections within and between social networks (Wippen, 1975:99). It facilitates individual or collective actions generated by networks of relationships. Studies on women grassroots organizations among the Kikuyu of Central Kenya highlights the importance of social relations and cooperation in order to get collective results for collaborating individuals.

Social capital results from social relations and consists of the expected benefits from the preferential treatment and cooperation between individuals and groups (Anyiro, & Ajuka, 2014). It can be seen in action in the many forms of social groups for example; women groups, welfare associations and even in simple cooperative acts such as neighbors watching each-others houses. It is a popular aspect of African culture (Bolak, 1995). Cooperation and mutual help is more or less obligatory among the Kikuyu in the traditional and contemporary society. Social capital is central to Kamweretho women groups which are formed with the aim of cooperating for the mutual benefit of members. Members of the groups come together to exploit social capital resulting from their cooperation to assist each other to improve their welfare and that of immediate families and parents (Wanjiru, 2016). The groups aim at filling a gap in empowerment and welfare provision that is inadequately met by state and other societal institutions. The social capital theory therefore, provides insights to understanding the motivation(s) to formation of women groups and associations, and explain the force behind the growing popularity of Kamweretho women groups and the dedication of women to their activities (Wippen, 1975:99).

Women groups have been an integral part of the development of Africa since independence and even more vicious after the end of Cold War in the 1990s. Various groups and associations have existed with their structures, mission and composition being determined by their respective community's background and socio-economic status (Wipper, 1975:99). The groups have been critical in improving the economic welfare of members' families and the communities at large.

Merry-Go-Rounds (MGRS) for example are informal groups of people who come together usually for purposes of saving together and borrowing from one other in a rotational manner but also for sharing news, knowledge, ideas, tradition and also helping each other out in times of need. In Kenya, informal groups are usually referred to as '*chama*' which is a Kiswahili word for 'association'. They typically allow their members to save and borrow in a rotational manner. In Kenya, MGRS are very popular in many parts of the developing world as documented by various studies. They are extremely widespread and found from 5th century Japan (Rutherford, 2000) and 16th century Yoruba practices (Seibel, 2000) to late 20th-century Taiwanese offices (Besley and Levenson, 1993). Members of merry-go-rounds are often persons who have close social relations in one way or another. Traditionally, members of such groups were female but with time men have also started participating either by joining the female groups or even forming their own. The phenomenon is however still largely a female one though the participation of men now brings about some interesting dynamics.

Women's organizations and the paradox of informality in Kenya

A large majority of women in developed countries engage in economic informality (ILO 1972: 5). Economic informality is an enigma in cities in Africa and has attracted a wide range of scholarship trying to operationalize and theorize it. Economic informality is assumed to be an economy of the poor where people who are unemployed, partially employed, casual laborers, street subsistence workers, street children and members of the underworld derive their livelihoods (Bayat 2000: 534).

The informal economy is deeply rooted in people's cultural practices, such as those relating to personal grooming (hair fashion, for example), indigenous food and entertainment (Kinyanjui 2010). Economic informality should be seen beyond the slum culture of helplessness and hopelessness for it drives action among the ordinary or subaltern populations (Nijman 2001). Keith Hart, an anthropologist introduced the concept of informality in the analysis of small scale business activities in developing countries through his work on small businesses in Accra, Ghana in the early 1970s. According to Hart, informal enterprises were characterized by the following attributes: low capital

requirements for entry into the market, reliance on locally available resources, family ownership, small scale of production, labor intensive technology, acquisition of skills outside formal schooling, unregulated markets. ILO picked up the concept and undertook a full scale study of informal activities in Nairobi in 1972 that introduced informal activities in development literature and policy with a view to solving acute unemployment problems experienced in most African countries.

Therefore, the disorder experienced in the informal sector especially in developing countries stem from the fact that planners have failed to come up with models to accommodate the sector. The planners have assumed that economic informality will disappear from the landscape of African cities given the arguments by dualists, structuralists, legalists and labor market dynamics. Nonetheless, the informal economy has largely been successful in Nairobi, where open-plan shops have been subdivided into stalls and cubicles (Ngwala 2011). This is in agreement with the African indigenous market concept of a gathering of traders with strong social relations and associations based on friendship, kinship and ethnicity. The concept applies the principles of solidarity entrepreneurialism whereby traders reduce transaction costs by sharing space, transport costs and rents. A fundamental principle in informality, is where the traders offer financial support to each other, as well as social insurance in the form of emotional and material support in times of crisis such as sickness and or even death.

Moral economy and or economy of affection?

The concept of Kamweretho can be understood from the framework of moral economy and or economy of affection. Moral economy may have originated from three sources with elements of comparisons among them to be discussed. First, a South East Asia source (James Scott, 1976) states that any peasant has a specific behavior centered on subsistence because conversely to the case of a capitalist enterprise, he is both a producer and a consumer. Second, in industrialized countries, the key author is Karl Polanyi (1947) and his analysis of the Great Transformation dividing political economy from moral economy. According to him economy is no longer embedded in the social and the cultural but the reverse is true. The third source is Africa and the abundant literature from economic and social anthropology about kinship systems and the social organizations from them (Atieno, 2017). Informality in cities in the global South has attracted significant scholarship. From a theoretical and policy point of view, informality is a problem that impacts on urbanization and the welfare of the people. It affects the formal order of urbanization in most of the cities in the global South (Roy 2005); it reflects the developmental nature of the cities in the global South that are characterized by underdevelopment, poverty, environmental degradation and disease (Robinson 2002).

A French anthropological tradition focuses on modes of production and their consequences on the process of value formation: Meillassoux (1964, 1975) and Coquery-Vidrovitch. Whereas, Kopytoff (1987), Berry (1993) and Peters (1994) question the sustainability of local traditional institutions and instead show the ingenuity with which African actors invent anew, discuss, and adapt the values to deal with the challenge of their lives. But it is relevant to consider a complementary concept "the economics of affection" - for a better understanding and analyzing the choices and behaviors in countries where capitalism is not pervasive in the whole society, up to now, and where the dominant form of organization is based on small units and general reciprocity (Adomako, 2004). The question is how do these organizations embed the culture of women within this informality?

***Kamweretho* and Kikuyu social justice system**

Kamweretho is derived from a Kikuyu word *kweretha* which means to speak out or explain something. *Kamweretho* involved women visiting their places of birth, paying tribute to their mothers, expressing gratitude to their parents and seeking their blessings (Wanjiru 2016: 130–32). Through *Kamweretho*, they renegotiated the position of motherhood in society, created women rights awareness, moralized womanhood and educated the masses about their identity. They brought the forgotten rural people and 'new woman' who are taking up new roles and responsibilities in the family and community to the limelight.

The women attracted much criticism from churches and fundamentalists who alleged they were usurping the male hegemony in disguise (Ogola, 2004). Ironically, the Presbyterian Church that had ordained female clergy fought against the *Kamweretho* movement with a vengeance, accusing it of showing off and usurping the male roles of paying dowry. While *Kamweretho* is about mothers liberating mothers, it was also about women constructing their own identity to befit the newly acquired roles they were playing in the household and community (Ogola, 2004). They first dealt with the unfinished business of their marital status due to the poverty that was ignited by the structural adjustment programmes. The latter saw many marriages fail to be formalized due to poverty (Wanjiru 2016: 133). The price of commodities such as pots, blankets, beer and household goods which were also part of the dowry payment rose considerably (Ogola, 2004).

In a song: *Uthoni wa Kanyenyeini*, a young man laments about the high cost of dowry and explains the reasons for terminating his wedding negotiations abruptly. Many women feel insecure in their marriages if dowry is not paid. They think that they are likely to be disinherited if the spouse passes on and also without parental blessings. Custom demands that a mother should

not receive dowry for her daughter unless her own dowry has been paid. By paying their dowry through *Kamweretho*, they open the doors to receive a dowry for their children. By paying dowry to their parents, their singlehood is recognized. They can thus inherit property from their fathers (Ogola, 2004).

In *Kamweretho*, women speak out the politics of motherhood and constructing a discourse which is likely to shape the future of motherhood among the Kikuyu. In *Kamweretho*, motherhood is presented in an institutional context with clearly defined tasks, rules, and regulations. The dominant image of a mother in the Kikuyu context is one who is self-sacrificing, strong, persevering and who endures all odds to bring up her offspring. *Kamweretho* therefore brings to the fore the politics of motherhood in the open space of politics, economy, and culture. One of the songs during a *Kamweretho* dance narrates that motherhood is a painful experience (Wanjiru 2016: 129). When expectant, she experiences loss of appetite, nausea and poor mobility. After giving birth, she has to experience sleepless nights tending to the crying baby. The song thanks the mother for not procuring abortion or family planning because if she had done so, she would not be a beneficiary of being feted. Through *Kamweretho* women are challenge marginalization and disempowerment, becoming agents of positive modernity and reclaiming control of their granary.

Basically, *Kamweretho* was mainly started by unmarried single mothers who felt a sense of incompleteness as no dowry has ever been paid for them. Women with grown up children who are about to get married join for the sake of receiving dowry. Through *kamweretho*, a woman has enough critical mass of money and numbers to 'marry herself' so that she can receive dowry when her children get married. In Kikuyu customs, a parent can't receive dowry if none was paid for her. The same customs however allow women to 'marry themselves' and *kamweretho* thus becomes the ideal *chama* to raise money through merry-go-round sessions before a woman seeks blessings from her family through *kwigura* ('buying herself,' meaning paying her own dowry) in a ceremony akin to the traditional *mburi ya ihaki* in which the man produces a ceremonial dowry goat (*ngoima*). *Kamweretho* is therefore, an emergent, non-formal women's social-economic groupings found among the Kikuyu of central Kenya. *Kamweretho* women groups fundraise to sustain the poor widows or mothers in the society at the same time attaining moments to make themselves happy. The concept was started by the rich urban, not so educated ladies who have made it through starting businesses in Nairobi and elsewhere and want to show their poor rural mothers (and the public) how far they have gotten in the city of lights (Ogola, 2004).

The basic organization of the *Kamweretho* is the popular women's merry-go-round and cooperative; ideas which have been central in financial empowerment of women. Each member of the group contributes a certain amount of money each month which is invested or used as a lump sum by one member at a time. Many women have benefited greatly by these merry-go-rounds. In the *Kamweretho* the women organize to visit the rural home of each of the members at a time (Ogola, 2004). There are many different shades of the *Kamweretho* and the ceremonies differ according to region and religion. The bottom line is that Kikuyu's last daughter Wamuyu is still very much alive and actively adding more members to the Aicakamuyu clan (Atieno, 2017). Many '*kamweretho*' groups are not just about going to visit parents. They have incorporated things like table banking, merry-go-round financing or even cooperatives. Many women in these groups have benefited financially as a result.

It should be observed that *Kamweretho* is a movement made up of many women's groups (Ogola, 2004). It is activist in nature, addressing several concerns of women and society, such as women's rights and entitlements, issues related to the politics of motherhood in the context of development, and providing social protection and insurance to its members and parents. The movement also negotiates the positioning of women in the household and community through mass education (Atieno, 2017). By doing so, women are gradually disrupting male domination that operates in their everyday lives. Their stories may begin with rituals, money and struggles over material resources, but they are also stories of love, commitment, sexual freedom, vulnerability, and empowerment. The implosion of all these things makes these women's stories unique and more compelling to African feminism.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, traditional gender roles and family structure in the family among the Kikuyu of Kenya have indeed changed. Contrary to the negative perception of *Kamweretho*, these groups fill a once existing socio-economic vacuum to women's emancipation and empowerment. However, some activities, in particular, "visiting parents, paying dowry and physical investment, contradict traditionally perceived gender roles. In particular, dowry payment and physical investment are exclusive male issues. Traversing gender lines by doing "manly duties" compromise the male ego, hence the discernment of *Kamweretho* by men from all spheres. Indeed, it demonstrates the very essence of the paradigm gender shift in modern Kikuyu family.

As an informal institutions *Kamweretho* also serves numerous functions. It facilitates interaction with other bodies in pursuit of social and economic actions, which includes community cohesion, behaviour

regulation, basic social services provision, and social policy and justice, as well as social finances. Women use this informal institution to engage with society, the local authority, the state and the market. Cohesion and solidarity give members the authority to act beyond the individual household when advancing a course or making investments. As already seen, *Kamweretho* performs more than one task. Thus it is involved in market regulation while at the same time being engaged in social finance concerns.

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