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## WOMEN IN PASTORAL SOCIETIES AND THE CHURCH IN KILOSA, TANZANIA

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**ABSTRACT** Given the strong patriarchal systems still evident among the pastoral Maasai society one might think that the life of the Maasai women is bleak and difficult; but this is no longer the case. First-hand observation, in-depth interviews and group discussions obtained through an ethnographic-inspired approach revealed that increasingly in Kilosa Tanzania, there is new hope for the women once regarded as servants and properties of men under the male-dominated empire. Where state structures, services and civil society are thin on the ground, the church is increasingly becoming involved in this transformation process. Women are increasingly learning to negotiate and manipulate rules and norms, to straddle different institutions, both formal and informal and to resist the oppressive culture. The church is facilitating and promoting self-awareness to women of their own value and potentials, even as widows, single women or divorcees. Local communities and women in particular are increasingly supported, educated and empowered to manage their own lives and shoulder their reproductive and productive roles as well as decision-making roles once regarded a male-only dominion. Some have even ventured into politics and are demanding their rights to land within the patriarchal-dominated system. While the church has tried to penetrate and fight the patriarchal system, much remains to be done to fight the deep-rooted system in Maasai society.

**Key Words:** Women; Pastoral societies; Maasai; Church and patriarchy.

### INTRODUCTION

The arid and semiarid lands [ASALs] of the great lakes region are home to millions of pastoralists groups (Mkutu, 2008), including the Maasai<sup>(1)</sup> located in Tanzania and Kenya. The pastoral Maasai are subdivided into a limited number of territorially based sections (iloshon). These sections include Kisongo, Loita, Salei, Siringet and Ilparakuyo, with each uniquely forming own socio-economic and political organisation. The social-political organisation of the Maasai pastoral societies is oiled by a strong patriarchal system where power is unequally distributed in gender relations, with women generally excluded from and subjected to the power held and mediated by men. This implies that, formal decision-making powers is gendered, and centers around the age-set system ‘Olaji,’ which sets framework of authoritative positions, and regulates power relations between men and women within the Maasai society (Spencer, 1988; Talle, 1998; Hodgson, 2001; Misafi, 2014). Similarly, the age-sets system sets a framework of rules relating to access and ownership of properties, division of labor, codes of conduct and social relations. For instance, it is very clear that men own property including

women and all formal decision-making powers is reserved to men including powers to decide on use and dispose of resources. Tellingly, the age-sets system is a clear manifestation of unequal power relations amongst the Maasai. Within the system, women are not structurally integrated into the age-set because they are not divided into formal corporate age groups of the Maasai society, for they are regarded as children. Decision-making powers of women lies within their own circles of women, endowed with for instance powers to decide on food and milk distribution but not on cattle and ownership of resources. By definition, then, women within the Maasai society are regarded as children because they constitute the lowest members of the society. Control of productive and reproductive resources excludes women; they at no time expected to reach the 'age' where they might make formal decisions or full control over their own bodies and procreative capacities. In fact, women are regarded as properties of men (Massoi, 2015). Consequently, women are placed in a subordinate position as second-class citizens and properties of men under the male-dominated empire (Kipuri & Ridgewell, 2008; Massoi, 2015). Such situations generated by patriarchal structures often constrain women options and capacities. However, women as mothers have control over their male children future particularly in relation to marriage. Sons depend on their mothers' advice on whom to marry and from which clan.

Within these pastoral societies, the Maasai in this context, there exists a unique system of religion<sup>(2)</sup> providing social cohesion and control of the behavior for the society and their relationship. Such functions of traditional Maasai religion is also manifested and maintained in numerous practices and beliefs including the blessing of male assertions of power over women. Men are endowed with religious powers including powers to bless and curse that are linked to moral superiority. The men 'Laibons' does the offerings and communicate with God 'Enkai' through sending prayers and offerings, and perform all religious matters in the society. Therefore wherever there is problem, which requires Enkai's attention and intervention, Laibons are consulted by the society elders on the same. Again, this is a typical of gender inequality, which has continued to exist even in modern religion within the Maasai society. In other words, the existing asymmetry in pastoral gender relations manifested and maintained in numerous practises and beliefs including in their own traditional religion. Patriarchy as a culture does provide a room for unjust hierarchical and dualistic system of life that discriminate against women (Kipuri & Ridgewell, 2008; Klinken, 2016). This is to say; patriarchal religious system of the Maasai assigns power and authority to men and creates a hierarchical relationship between men and women. Maasai religion is used as a mechanism that subjects women to strong patriarchal system that offers male dominance over women. This is based on the fact that, it does not provide a room for women, nor does it recognize women as part of the society, but rather as children and properties of men by allowing widow inheritance, polygamy and discouraging monogamy.

In recent decades, however, there has been dramatic mushrooming of Pentecostalism, which has extended to remote areas of the country, including

the marginal lands of the pastoral Maasai societies. Where state structures, services and civil society are thin on the ground, the church is increasingly becoming involved in this transformation process. Importantly, there are many other factors in this transformation than the influence of the church, and a full analysis of the factors leading to the reduced influence of the patriarchal system amongst the Maasai is beyond the scope of this work. The work draws on extensive fieldwork conducted in Kilosa, Tanzania between October 2010 and March 2015 on pastoral conflicts and livelihood of pastoral women.

## I. Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical standpoints exist in literature in the context of women and the religious institutions, the church. On the one hand, scholars view the church as transformative mechanisms for negotiation within the society. The church is viewed as transformative when bible preaching discourages polygamy, injustices to women, inequalities and abuse (Riesebrodt & Chong, 1999; Uchem, 2001; King et al, 2015; Klinken, 2016). On the other hand, religion is viewed as oppressive when it gives hope or illusion to those suffering. Most religions reinforce male dominance in spiritual matters (Spinks, 2003). This work concurs with the argument that, church is a transformative mechanism that provides a space for negotiation for women much easier than as were.

## INTRODUCING KILOSA

Kilosa is a district geographically located in east central Tanzania approximately 300 km west of Dar es Salaam. Kilosa borders the following districts: Kiteto (Manyara Region) and Kilindi (Tanga Region) to the North; Mvomero (Morogoro Region) to the East; Kilolo (Iringa Region) and Kilombero (Morogoro Region) to the South; and Mpwapwa District (Dodoma Region) to the West. The total population size is 438,175; of whom 219,797 are women (URT, 2013; KDC, 2016). The major ethnic groups are the Pogoro, the Kaguru and the Sagara. Other ethnic groups include Hehe, the Bena, the Nyakyusa, Ngoni, Chagga and Pare, Maasai, Barbaig, Gogo and some Sukuma as well as Kamba. This study however focused on the Maasai communities located in the Twatwatwa village because a large proportion of Maasai pastoralists reside there, characterized by being semi-nomadic, polygamous and subsist in marginal lands and increasingly Christianity is gaining pace in the area. There are five (5) dominant churches in the area, which are Catholic, Lutheran, Full Gospel Bible fellowship, Twelve Apostles church, and Calvary Assemblies of God. The most populated church in the area is the Calvary Assemblies of God with about 300 believers, out of a population size of 3,050. A total of twenty (20) respondents were involved in this study, whereby ten (10) women constituted two (2) Focus Group Discussions, Seven (7) women [randomly selected] and three (3) men purposely selected in Twatwatwa village, one of the most dominant Maasai pastoralist village Kilosa

district. Collected information was analysed through content analysis.

## PATRIARCHY, WOMEN ROLES TRANSFORMATION AND THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Like other pastoral societies in the region, pastoral Maasai are known to be a polygamous society operating within a very strong patriarchal system (Hodgson, 2000), which has historically been produced, developed and maintained through existing social relations of power between men and women. The development of the existing patriarchal structures within these societies is multi-dimensional (Wangui, 2008), with Maasai traditional religion amongst the cause. Patriarchal structures which granted women a subordinate position in the society was also translated into the traditional religion which embraced domestic and sexual violence against women, widow inheritance and polygamy by discouraging monogamy. Increasingly, however, the local Pentecostal church in Kilosa has played a significant role in challenging the patriarchal system, polygamy is increasingly viewed as a sin and immoral. Church is promoting women full dignity and equality in marriage. A pastoralist woman from Kilosa offers an illustration:

Pentecostalism has helped my community. Before my husband and I became Christians and baptized in 1999, we were three women married to him. We used to be brutalized by him. But soon after converting into Christianity, he denounced other women and married me. The other two were taken back to their parents, without claiming back the cattle paid earlier to their parents as bride price. My man is a member to the church council. Ever since that time, we no longer live into traditional rituals for they are against God. He even told his children that they should never marry more than one wife because it is against God's commandment.

Supporting the above testimony is an interview with an elderly Maasai woman who revealed that, Christianity has compelled men to denounce their traditionally married wives. Consequently, some women re-married while others out of a shame decided not to get married again. Some of these women were provided with few livestock and an area to stay with their children. Others who had children with their husbands could not re-marry and decided to stay with their in-laws family. Sadly, certain women were left unattended despite having children.

A detailed look into the rise of these processes and changes is the influence of the biblical teachings and preaching of the vibrant Pentecostal church in the area which placed much emphasis on abstaining from sins, adherence to Christ teachings which in the end reinforces individuals to abstain from adultery, fornication and drunkenness. In this regard, any person who attended to these preaching especially the Maasai who are traditionally polygamous, find themselves guilty. As per Christ teachings, a man was meant to have or marry one woman.

With this view, Maasai who wanted to follow Jesus was compelled to denounce his other traditional wives and remain with one. Christianity as a way of life is apparently not a very new ideology within the Maasai society. Missionaries during the colonial era introduced cardinal churches to these communities and it has been propagated ever since. Nevertheless, these contacts in most cases the emphasis seems to be on civilization and not on transforming traditional values, customs and practices that placed women in marginal positions against men. In other words, rituals such as baptism and weddings that went hand in hand with religious teachings did not transform the existing unequal gender relation between men and women. For instance, it was common to find church elders and believers with multiple wives and children from multiple mothers. Similarly, previous churches concentrated not in the most interior, remote and inaccessible areas such as those of the mobile communities like the Maasai. Whereas the cardinal churches often used to preach and let the individual believer to decide, the current church is very vibrant, and tends to use psychological mode of teaching, persuading and attacking individuals. Campaigning to get more followers and to convert people of the Maasai who were initially untapped and not easily to convert.

A detailed look into the motive behind the baptism was due to the fact that the church provided incentives to the man. These incentives included paid trips outside Morogoro Region and some other privileges that were given by the church leaders to most of the people who developed interest and intention to be converted to Christians.

Moreover, persisting conflicts, lack of grazing areas, marginalizing policies, were also among the driving forces behind the conversion of the Maasai from believing on their 'Enkai' into Christ teachings. The Maasai viewed church as a place of refuge in the midst of the above problems. This resulted into society to change and transform from example having multiple wives into having only one wife.

An elderly Maasai pastor (male) noted:

Traditionally, our customs and practices view a woman as someone who is just there to look after the livestock, milk the cattle, alongside with taking care of the children and the elderly people at home. In short, a Maasai woman is regarded as a servant under the empire of a man, thus one can marry as many of them as he can to assist in productive and reproductive works. But thanks to Christianity, things are changing our status slowly because men and older people are studying the Bible and learning practices, which are contrary to the existing practices. I had to leave my other two wives and only kept the first one. The Maasai who read and practice what the bible says learn how to respect women. Our women are also slowly beginning to realize themselves.<sup>(3)</sup>

The church is indeed seen as an instrument for the transformation of patriarchal culture, which disrespect women dignity and value in the society.

Interestingly, one peculiar case, which is pro-patriarchy, was also noted. A pastoralist man had this remark:

This Pentecostal religion is a very bad religion to our Maasai culture. How can it ask us to have only one wife? I don't see its value to our culture because we marry several women in order to have many children to care for our livestock wealth. With one wife, it is impossible to keep several cattle, sheep and goats. Women need to be under our dominion, we can never be equal to them!

Nevertheless, some women also value the patriarchal structures:

The preachers of this new religion are misleading our societies. Our ancestors have been living in this culture without any problem. My mother was a 4th wife to my father, and she was okay for her lived as a big family with her fellow wives. Being inherited is good for women who lost their husband, because if they are not inherited. Who will re-marry them?

A critical analysis of the above findings indicates that, even among women themselves, they still believe in patriarchal system and they perceive Pentecostalism as an instrument that offers illusions to the society.

## THE CHURCH AND REALIZATION OF WOMEN POTENTIALS

The local Pentecostal church in Kilosa has also played a significant role in promoting awareness by women of their own value and potential, even as widows or single women or divorcees. This is viewed as liberation to the pastoral Maasai women. Likewise, where significant vagaries of climatic variability, large scale investment of land, and land use conflict dynamics are increasingly experienced by the local communities (Mung'ong'o & Mwamfupe, 2003; Benjaminsen et al., 2009; Massoi, 2015), local communities and women in particular have been supported, educated and empowered in coping strategies and search for alternative livelihood strategies. Notably, there are few civil society organizations in the area, which is very rural.

Mama Anna Oloishuro, the sister of the pastor and a divorcee noted:

Things are increasingly changing, albeit very slowly. If I have to speak of my case, very often men would seek an advice from me before they hold their meetings and make decisions that affect the entire community. Thus, I believe as our customs and traditions are slowly influenced partly by religious faith and beliefs, abusive treatments on women will also change. I was once married and my husband married other women. But I refused to be mistreated by him and the younger wives, and decided to

live by myself with my children. It was very hard in the beginning, but now everyone accepts and respects me. I have my own shop and a restaurant and life goes on.<sup>(4)</sup>

Women noted that some of their fellow women are now managing their own shops, restaurants, and beadworks. They also noted that contrary to the past, some are now engaging in public debates particularly in the constitutional review meetings.<sup>(5)</sup> In one of the focus group discussions with women in Parakuyo sub-village, women noted that although divorce is rare in their societies, increasingly it is becoming visible and a thought through way among women. Single parents are present, and are able to manage their livelihoods better than when they were co-wives.<sup>(6)</sup>

These testimonies imply that in the midst of the melting of the Maasai livelihoods as a result of land use conflict, migration of men further and further away to look for work, and other related factors, some women have been able to adapt and manage their own lives and care for their children.

#### ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

During my field visit in the area, I also noted that the penetration of Pentecostalism in the Maasai society has also eased the barriers, which women used to experience in their efforts to access and acquire resources such as land through their respective village authorities. Women are increasingly learning to negotiate and manipulate rules and norms, to straddle different institutions, both formal and informal and to resist the oppressive culture. Property ownership by women is increasingly possible. Women have been exposed to education and their rights to resources in similar weight to men, and at the same time, men who constitute part of the village committees are increasingly realizing that women are also citizens and have the rights to resources in similar weight with men. In other words, the church preaching on equality for all and respect of women has helped the transformation process.

An interview with one of the pastors of one of the Pentecostal churches in Kilosa offers an illustration:

In the past years, it was impossible for women to even approach village authorities in order to acquire land. Traditionally, women are properties of men, and a property cannot own property. So how were they to own properties? But day-by-day, such false perspective is diluted. Women are increasingly having their own land for building houses, making business, and even farming.

Supporting this view is another pastoral women:

Many of us are illiterate and not very informed of the changes and rights



in law for women. Through my own initiatives, I have attended several trainings organized by the Land Rights Research and Resources Institute (LARRRI), Tanzania Network for Indigenous Pastoralists (TANIPE) and Community Based Livestock Initiatives Programme (CLIP) on land issues and rights. Through my participation, I became aware of our rights to land as women and even of the legal provisions regarding our rights as women. I learnt a lot about land issues from fellow Maasai women in Kenya, and how important land is for a woman. I am also trying in a very discreet way to raise awareness to my fellow women in our village.<sup>(7)</sup>

A new hope for women is the support offered by the church<sup>(8)</sup> in facilitating self-awareness and alternative sources of livelihood, helping women to shoulder their reproductive and productive roles. However, very few women are realizing this open space, leaving majority of the Maasai women in a very desperate and vulnerable positions.

## CONCLUSION

The Maasai society is dominantly known as a polygamous society with a very dominant patriarchal structure that mediates gender relations and society orientation to spiritual values and rituals. Such structures have historically been produced, developed and maintained in the society through unequal negotiation and struggles. Much of this situation have remained distinct, due to web of factors including presence of thin contribution by the state structures, services and civil societies given the nature of the livelihood system of the Maasai. In a community of the voiceless, where the state structures and civil society is less dominant, and the local church emerge to offer an open space, is there an alternative way? In a community where the church focuses on transforming patriarchal culture rather than tapping from the community [contributions], is there an alternative way? In a community where church interventions also support fights against HIV/AIDS, is there alternative?

While there are several churches on the ground, the most dominant in the transformation process is the local Pentecostal church. The biblical teachings are increasingly penetrating into Maasai society and men for instance are increasingly married to one woman. Widow inheritance is increasingly seen as a sinful act 'taboo' and property ownership by women is increasingly possible. Women are increasingly self-aware, empowered to demand their rights over resources and deploy their skills such as making beads and medicines. The new dynamic offered by the local church has opened up a space for the voiceless and the women, and is potentially contributing to bringing in the new life that women in pastoral societies have for decades struggled for. This is a potential space, which can be used in the entire marginalized communities. With more women attending church services, due to the fact that women are the socializing agents in the family, the coming generation is likely to change because women are

passing these new values onto their children. The coming generation is likely to change due to women engagement. When patriarchal structures are breaking down, religion is likely to offer women with a stronger voice, wider space and greater opportunities to re-negotiate gender relations than do legalistic ones.

## NOTES

- (1) The Maasai pastoralists are one of the mobile livelihoods who derive majority of their income and food from keeping domesticated livestock in conditions where most of the feeds that livestock consume comes from natural forage rather than cultivated fodders and pastures (Baxter, 1994).
- (2) Religion refers to ‘a conceptual and moral framework for understanding and ordering lives and communities (Skidmore, 2007: 4).’ It also includes Christianity fueled in by the vibrant local pentecostal church of Kilosa, located in Morogoro Region of Tanzania.
- (3) Interview with an elderly male pastoralist, also a Pastor held in Morogoro, October 18, 2010.
- (4) Interview with Mama Anna Oloishuro, Parakuyo sub-village, October 19, 2010.
- (5) Tanzania is currently undergoing a process to review the current constitution, and increasingly Maasai women including those of Kilosa such as Mama Esther Juma Lapani, Mama Anna and few others are taking part in the constitutional review debates. And interestingly, Mama Esther is a female representative, to the constitutional assembly representing Maasai women of Iparakuyo, Kilosa district.
- (6) Focus Group Discussion with women held in Twatwatwa, Parakuyo sub-village, October 19, 2012.
- (7) Interview with Anna, Parakuyo, January 24, 2015.
- (8) As noted earlier from the results in this paper, the church is the main active civil society organization on the ground helping these women.

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