

BIRTH CONTROL AND REPRODUCTION IN THE KIKUYU SOCIETY: THE CASE FROM MURANG'A DISTRICT IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT This paper studies the reproduction of the Kikuyu people and Family Planning Program in Kenya.

Since the middle of the 1980's, the number of children in a Kikuyu household has decreased and the rate of contraceptive acceptance has risen. This was explained by examining the problem of land shortage in the Kikuyu area and the cultural and social change which discouraged the people from having many children.

Literature of the fertility theories has it that modernization leads to fewer children. The Kikuyu way of interpretation and choice in family planning is an important key to understand their concept of reproduction and birth control.

Key Words: Kikuyu; Family planning; Sexuality; Birth; Land shortage.

INTRODUCTION

The Kikuyu, the largest ethnic group in Kenya, has been shaped by its prosperous economy, rich history and territories.

As an outcome of the breakdown of "traditional" birth control and the improvement of medical service, Kenya experienced "overspeeding of population increase" (Asahi Shinbun, 1986).⁽¹⁾ The Kenyan government launched Family Planning Program as a part of national population policy in 1967 when it was acknowledged that population growth impeded economic development. The main agenda of the program, expanding use of contraceptives in rural area had been lagging. However, the Kikuyu sharply changed their attitudes toward birth in the 1980's. The median number of children in a Kikuyu household was 7 to 8 in the 1970's, but now, is 5 (Macro International Inc., 1994). Why have the Kikuyu started to limit birth and accept contraceptives?

Demographers and economists tend to explain the phenomenon by pointing to the degree of development in Kikuyu areas, the level of education and modernization. There is, however, another key in understanding the situation of Kikuyu adaptation to social changes, the process of oral communication, family planning and awareness of mutual aid deeply penetrating the society.

I wish to illustrate in this paper the Kikuyu idea of reproduction that lead to their acceptance of national population policy. How have the Kikuyu rearranged their sexual customs and values to a new way of procreative activity? What was its background? I wish to illustrate these points through the data I gathered in two months in 1996.

LAND LIMITATION AND THE AGRICULTURAL PEOPLE, “KIKUYU”

I. Land Shortage in the Gishiru Village

The Kikuyu, a Bantu speaking people, is the largest agricultural ethnic group comprising 20.8% of all Kenyans (Republic of Kenya, 1994a). The Gishiru village where I stayed, has about 100 households, and the main inhabitants, Wang’ombe lineage members form a patrilineal society.⁽²⁾ The critical issue for the Kikuyu whose life has an intimate relation to agriculture is land shortage. The Central Province where the Kikuyu live is a heavily populated area with approximately 235 persons to a square kilometer. The Kandara Division, where the Gishiru village is located, has as many as 846 persons, far above Kenya’s national average of 37 persons (Republic of Kenya, 1994a; Ministry of Agriculture, 1995/96).

Land in the Kikuyu society goes to sons and unmarried daughters through the father’s will. The land is subdivided by each generation because the inheritance to sons through wives is basically equal. Land shortage came early to the Gishiru village. I asked an elderly person about the Gishiru village in earlier times. The man (74-year-old, a former teacher) described how the individual estate decreased sharply over the latter half of this century:

When I was a kid (60-70 years ago), it was normal for a man to have more than 100 acres. But you see now, they don’t even have a couple of acres. It will be a big problem in a few decades when those children get independent, what’s going to happen if they don’t have any land? There are no jobs in town. Government should develop the rest of the vast land within the country for our children.

As far as he could remember, land subdivision in the Gishiru village has been serious. Such land shortage is depicted in the oral history of Wang’ombe lineage. According to the elders in the village, Wang’ombe was a nickname of a man and founding father of Wang’ombe lineage with many cows. It is said to be in the 17th century when Wang’ombe settled in this place. He sent a person with a torch in all directions until he lost the sight of its flame, demarcating an area of about 500 acres. Since then, Wang’ombe people lived here. Great-grandsons of Wang’ombe, who had eight wives, inherited six acres of land each. Their sons, the present residents, own two acres of land like the other people in the Gishiru village now. Accordingly, the average property is two acres, compared with that of the lineage founder of 500 acres just four generations back. It shows how rapidly the land has been subdivided by population increase.

II. Prolific Culture and the Government Policy

The Routledges, one of the authors of the oldest ethnography of the Kikuyu, wrote, “The Akikuyu are a prolific race. Children are much valued amongst them, and neither of us have ever seen a woman or child ill-treated” (Routledge & Routledge, 1910: 135). Before the rising cost of education and land scarcity, the Kikuyu placed high value on being prolific alike many other ethnic groups in East

Africa. Having many descendants was a symbol of honor and continuity for fathers, while mothers expected being taken care in old age (Waiyaki, 1993). Childless women were often divorced and sympathized. The people of Kikuyu around Mount Kenya have tried to have many children given the high mortality of children. This socio-cultural value of children among the Kikuyu, contributed to Kenya's highest population growth rate in the world during the 1970's.

On the other hand, Kenya started the Family Planning Program in 1967 as first of such attempts in sub-Saharan Africa. For the first 10 years the program lagged in spreading the use of contraceptives, the main purpose of the policy. Ahlberg (1991) and Greeley (1988), a sociologist and an anthropologist, pointed out that the problem came from the lack of local view on the part of the policy makers.

The "population problem" has received much talk since the International Conference of Population and Development in Bucharest in 1974, highlighting the social problems of natural environment deterioration and exhaustion of resources. Global resolution faced many difficulties and compromises were on hold due to the customary laws of different nations and ethnic groups.⁽³⁾ This illustrates the fundamental issue that it is very difficult to direct the choices of a people.

The attitude of the Kenyan government toward population policy has remained consistent since the inception of population control. The individual will on birth control was respected, because "traditional" culture was duly acknowledged, as shown in the national magazine expressing the Government (National Council for Population and Development) standpoint.⁽⁴⁾ It means that this government never thought that ethnic groups could be pressured to use contraceptives.

I believe that the Kenyan government has been sagacious, because it is not easy to introduce a new concept of sexuality into a "traditional" society, due to intimate links to other aspects of kinship, marriage, relation of men and women or sexual behavior.⁽⁵⁾

SEXUALITY AMONG THE KIKUYU

I. Polygyny

There are many societies in Africa where polygyny is practiced. The system creates many children (inheritors). According to findings in 1993, the rate of polygyny of married women in Kenya was 19.5%, and 7.5% in the Central Province where the Kikuyu lived (Macro International Inc., 1994: 63). Polygynous families in the Gishiru village represented 5 out of 60 households, and the first wife was deceased in 2 out of 5. Clearly the rate of polygyny in Kikuyu society is lower than other ethnic groups in Kenya.

The attitudes of Kikuyu women toward polygyny are varied. In former days, Kikuyu women expected less work when their husbands gained a second wife, so "wives often encouraged their husbands to marry a second wife" (Ahlberg, 1991: 182). But, "if the two wives are close in age, chances are greater for heightened conflict and jealousy" (Abbott, 1974: 67).

Today in the Gishiru village, no man answered positively the inquiry, "Do you

want a second wife if you have plenty of land and money?" They said that having one more wife meant one more problem with a wry face. Many wives and children symbolized wealth for men in the past. Now, men's esteem are measured by:

1. How much they put emphasis on education of their children,
2. How many shops they own,
3. How much land area they own.

Answers of women to such a question were almost the same. A woman remembered that her sister grieved when her husband married his second wife, because she had no say in the matter.

If a man marries his second wife these days, people tend to doubt whether his relation to his first wife went wrong. If the children of the first wife are young, people will not think highly of the man believing the children will not be educated adequately. Moreover, it is very difficult for Kikuyu men to choose polygyny in the present land scarcity and rising educational costs. Kramer (1980) mentioned that, if the Kikuyu men could afford to do so, they still may want to have many wives and children for prosperity. However, it is doubtful if most men in the Gishiru village would, even if "the situation allowed them." In sum, when polygyny has little appeal, men are not going to engage in the system, and the number of wives and children to a man would decrease after all.

II. Conjugal Relations

The Kikuyu believe in child bearing for married couples. Conjugal relations in Kikuyu society have changed dramatically in the 100 years since colonization. Before the Europeans came, people were almost self-supporting. Subsequently, with Western capitalism, working away from home became a necessity in the Kikuyu economy. According to Abbott, an anthropologist who researched Kikuyu village in 1971, 67.8% of men over 21 (1974) years old worked outside. The main reasons were that they had to pay taxes and educational fees, and a greater value was placed in working in the cities. The village wives said that their husbands were "like a visitor in the home," and that "most men manage to come home once a month for a weekend, but one at least gets home no more frequently than once a year . . ." (Abbott, 1974: 57). Kikuyu women continue to be, as Abbott (1974) expressed in the title of her dissertation, "full-time farmers and week-end wives" in the rural Kikuyu society.

Couples in the Gishiru village are in the same situation as above. One such husband I know was a wage worker like most other men, and returned to his wife once a week. His wife raised five children and worked in the field. She liked her way of life even though she and her husband lived apart most of the time. She explained that their division of labor must not fail in order to earn enough for the education and living expenses. The parents must pay for as many school textbooks and uniforms as the number of children. Furthermore, the food prices have risen. She said that she could talk about any problem with her husband. The only thing that concerned her was the reliability of their relationship since one stayed in the village and the other in the city.

In the village, it is not unusual for wives to be abandoned by their husband who

went to the cities and never came back. One such woman, for example, whose husband has not returned for more than three years, changed the church she belonged to and did not attend any meetings. This illustrates her difficult life in the village, being cut off from the husband's affection and income.⁽⁶⁾ The pattern of husband working away from home in the Gishiru village has increased marital stress and was overshadowing the economic benefit. But the villagers looked after such an unfortunate woman. By providing her both economical and mental support, they helped her overcome the distress.

III. Childbirth Out of Wedlock

According to an article in a national magazine "Above 20% schoolgirl pregnancies, which results in between 10,000 and 13,000 dropouts from primary schools each year; a majority of girls have had sexual relations by the age of 16, though they may not be ready to marry; 50% of children born today are born out of wedlock, mainly to adolescent girls" (The Weekly Review, 1994). There are many households with single mothers in the Gishiru village. Single mothers help their mothers with housework as well as work outside of the home. They need their mothers' help in babysitting. I found that 28 couples had daughters over 15 years old, of which 9 couples had single mother daughters, about a third of such households.

According to a traditional midwife in the village, this phenomenon peaked in the beginning of the 1970's. She said that girls have more chance to receive education since then, and parents would not think well of single mothers. Pregnant girls often stayed home until right before delivery because they concealed the fact to the parents. At delivery, they have only the services of a midwife available at their home. Without a medical examination, delivery at the clinic is not possible. The midwife remembers how busy she was for a time. She added that the punishment for breaking sexual norms was severe for unmarried girls in the Kikuyu society before single mothers appeared.⁽⁷⁾

As single mothers became common, punishment for unmarried pregnancy disappeared. Parents complain how their daughters were "being cheated by someone in the city," and many parents in the village suffer such consequences. Parents do not evict such daughters due to the Kikuyu customary law which encourages them to give a portion of land to single mothers so they are able to live without the husband's land.

Childbirth out of wedlock and couples working apart are not brand new phenomena for the Kikuyu society. But they influence the values about children and ideas of illegitimacy.

THE KIKUYU FAMILY PLANNING

I. The Kikuyu and Birth Control

Matters of childbearing are central to public interest in Kikuyu society.

According to the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (Macro International Inc., 1994), the Central Province where the Kikuyu live showed a peculiarly high rate of contraceptive usage compared with other areas. I also found that within the Gishiru village contraceptives were commonly used.⁽⁸⁻⁹⁾

In the Gishiru village, there are several family planning services that give out contraceptives, providing "population education" on advantages for the small family. Those are available to the people when they:

1. see the health educator of the Ministry of Health for health care,
2. visit hospitals or clinics,
3. see the Community Based Distributor (CBD) hired by the largest women's organization in Kenya, Maendeleo ya Wanawake,
4. hear a lecture by the field worker from the Ministry of Agriculture.

Many field workers living in the villages successfully spread contraceptives out in Indonesia and Nepal.⁽¹⁰⁻¹¹⁾ This approach is applied in rural Kenya as well.

How do the field workers give out information on family planning to the local people? How the government guidance on birth control was interpreted and developed by the Kikuyu way of family planning may clarify how the Kikuyu themselves accepted them to create their own population policy.

II. Mrs. R., a Health Educator from the Ministry of Health

What Mrs. R. tries to convey to the local people is the importance of birth spacing. She says that the ideas came from Kikuyu ancestors, although people now may need to modify them. The following is her explanation.

Sexual norms related to the childbirth was rigid in "traditional" Kikuyu society. The fundamental importance was to have "healthy children." In former days, Kikuyu couples were prohibited from sexual intercourse while the mother breastfed for 4 to 5 years.⁽¹²⁾ This resulted in birth spacing. Also, the health of mothers and children were of utmost importance. Postpartum mothers were given plenty of soup of goat-meat or black beans high in protein. Having unhealthy children yearly was completely worthless.

Mrs. R. tells her people to have another look at what the ancestors did. It is impossible to return to the ancestral way of life and have many wives now. But it is possible to use the philosophy behind contraception to the benefit of the health of both mother and children.

Mrs. R. advises birth control, but she is a Catholic. Generally, the Catholics reject modern contraceptives explaining that "(it) will enable the youth to indulge in what the church calls 'sex without responsibility,' making an act that would essentially be for procreation an instrument of pleasure and immorality . . ." (The Weekly Review, 1994). Field workers say that it is hardest to persuade the women to use contraceptives when beliefs are different. Mrs. R. tries to make her ideas of birth control harmonize with the local dominant religion, Catholicism. According to such original interpretation, she:

1. does not pass out contraceptives because she fears side effects and immoral acts, i.e. prostitution,
2. advocates practicing natural family planning by avoiding sexual intercourse

around ovulation.

Since Mrs. R. is employed by the Ministry of Health, she cannot deny access to contraceptives. But, she is also a Catholic and she does not forget her place. She dispenses her message as a Catholic and the Kikuyu fully accept the government intervention toward their reproductive activity through Family Planning Program.

III. CBD of Maendeleo ya Wanawake

A female Community Based Distributor (CBD) said that when she talked to an older man about procreation, she experienced defiance, because he did not approve of “such a person who is like my daughter talk about sex” Age difference was a barrier and she found it “meaningless to talk earnestly for a long time.”⁽¹³⁾ In such cases, she utilized the network of women’s groups, a gathering of wives whose network reached any person in the community. Through this channel, the person to whom one hesitates to talk to can be reached.⁽¹⁴⁾ CBDs visit women’s groups and discuss matters on sexuality as a way to help AIDS patients or to lecture importance of family planning. It helps to spread knowledge. Moreover, she says that she can use the Kikuyu language to gain acceptance when she talks about procreation. One example is the word, “vagina,” which she cannot mention in Kikuyu. If somebody refers to the word, people will “run away.” If children use that word for play, the mother will scold them severely, saying, “Who told you that? You never use that word, OK?” A CBD would not tell me what the word was, because, if somebody found it in my notebook, it was scandalous. When a CBD needed to talk about the “vagina,” she would say “an important place where children pass through in delivery.” The word seems to merit such deliberation.

CBDs who have to talk about unusual words or attitudes have to find original solutions. In other words, CBDs have to invent suitable ways for the Kikuyu society when they are faced with the “shame” words or intergenerational taboos.

IV. Mr. K., a Filed Worker of the Ministry of Agriculture

Mr. K., a field worker of the Ministry of Agriculture, has attended the population education seminar sponsored by the government in 1993 for a week. Since the leaders of the Ministry of Health and Family Planning Association of Kenya (FPAK) are the driving force behind the national Family Planning Programs, there is no doubt that the 1993 seminar supported the population policy in Kenya. He visits village people to instruct cultivating crops or domestic economy. He knows that people’s attitudes toward childbirth hold the key toward the management of the economy. Referring to his notes from the population education seminar, Mr. K. said that it was desirable to inform people of Family Life Education, including methods of nursing children, facts about nutrition and the balance between farm size and family members, at *baraza* (political meetings) or when he visits local people.

What Mr. K. worries about are the subdivision of land and poverty. He knows that “what they have planted” back in the long history in the Kandara division where the Gishiru village is located resulted in the relationship between people and land as we see now. He says, “Since Kandara is located on a hillside, it has a wide range of

geographical plant distribution. We have a good harvest of tea and vegetables in higher altitude areas, and coffee, maize, beans and bananas grow well in lower places. In the coffee zone, main crops such as maize and bananas can be harvested twice a year. The productive ability will raise carrying capacity, and the subdivision of land gets intense."⁽¹⁵⁾

The population education which Mr. K. provides the village people is to encourage people to reflect on their method of maize cultivation in relation to that of child-bearing. When they grow good maize, they have to give 6 grams of fertilizer to each seed planted 75 centimeters apart. Planting 2 seeds at a time requires double the fertilizer. Raising a healthy child requires 2.5 years at least, enough food, health care, and the necessary protective inoculations. If they have a child yearly with no care, the child will be unhealthy like thin maize. Mr. K. wants the people to look at the real problem which they know readily, such as the land shortage.

CONCLUSION

The prolific culture of the Kikuyu based on once abundant land and natural resources, helped to expand Kikuyu influence in the nation despite chronic land shortage and provided them with agriculturalist pride. This has been a history of prosperity, and is apparent by the Kikuyu population all over the country. Meanwhile, the population of the Kikuyu as seen in the Gishiru village, has overflowed and the land became smaller for a person during the last four generations. At the same time, the socio-cultural system which influences the Kikuyu procreative activities has taken a new turn. This is shown in the lower rate of polygyny and change in values of children, mostly due to economic pressure. Nowadays people even limit the number of children.

Years of study on fertility in sub-Saharan Africa have focused on "why people do not prevent conception." Researchers believed in the 1960-70's that it was due to the supply of poor-quality contraceptives and services. Later in the 1980's the argument turned to the socio-cultural systems supporting high fertility and rejection of birth control (Price, 1996: 411-412). However, in the 1990's, Caldwell declared the "starting of new fertility transition in sub-Saharan Africa" founded on statistical facts (Caldwell, 1992: 211). It was found that social-economic changes, medical improvement, and increased opportunity for education have decreased the demand of children, resulting in the smaller number of children through proper use of Family Planning Programs (Kelley & Nobbe, 1990).

Many economists and demographers have focused on the degree of development and social-economic situation in the Kikuyu society. Also, Price (1996) found from his recent Kikuyu research that the collapse of traditional family planning, the wider change in marriage patterns, household structure and belief systems led the Kikuyu to desire smaller number of children. In short, current literature highlights the "modernization" in causing the drastic social changes and a diminished value of children in the Kikuyu society.

Those points account well for the situation surrounding the Kikuyu birth, especially in terms of the "progress" in the medical facilities and change in ideas of

reproduction. If I can supplement the existing theory, I would like to emphasize the “thinking and choosing” aspects of the Kikuyu in terms of controlling birth. To understand the reason why the Kikuyu control birth, one needs to see the collective positive action in coping with the changes within the society.

The Family Planning Program in the rural area is constant governmental intervention directed towards the local villages. The Kikuyu has accepted these initiatives to work within their social-cultural system by favorably interpreting the acceptable remarks of certain local officials.

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NOTES

- (1) An investigation showed the total fertility rate at 7 to 8 children per mother (population growth rate at 4%, the highest in the world) in 1978 (JICA, 1992a; 1992b).
- (2) An agricultural village whose residents are all Kikuyu. It is located about 100 km north from Nairobi.
- (3) At the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, 1994, there were detailed reports of difficult situations, and criticism was voiced from the Catholic and Islamic nations regarding various plans of action.
- (4) The following explains the Government standpoint: “. . . has been pursued continuously by making family planning acceptance wholly voluntary and at the same time respecting the cultural values, norms and traditions of individuals. . . . as rational and responsible human beings we must decide the number of children we want to have and when to have them” (Republic of Kenya 1994b).
- (5) In the history of anthropology, culture of sexuality has been neglected. Davis and Whitten also explain, “Anthropology has long had a love-hate relationship with the study of human sexuality. . . . generally moved away from consideration of the ‘erotic and exotic’ into more respectable and less controversial kinds of topics” (Davis & Whitten, 1987: 69).
- (6) There are some wives who prevent conception by having contraceptive injection at hospitals because they are afraid of being impregnated by a husband who rarely comes back with little cash.
- (7) In the Gishiru village, if a daughter was pregnant before marriage, she received a new name, Wamuonjo, meaning “a rule breaker,” to precede her real name, and she could not be a first wife. When the village people made a new home for her marriage, they left the rooftop for her to make. Finishing the rooftop had to be done by the Wamuonjo as she was branded a “rule-breaking bride.” The punishment for men were either to be wrapped in dry banana leaves and put on fire, or placed in a beehive inside a large log and rolled down a high cliff.
- (8) The rate of current use of contraceptives in the Central Province (the Kikuyu) is 56%,

- whereas 32.7% is for all Kenya. Total fertility rate (number of children a mother bears in her life time) decreased from 7.4 children in 1978 to 3.93 in 1993 in the Kikuyu area. It apparently shows that the Family Planning Program is "effective" in Kikuyu society (Macro International Inc., 1990; 1994).
- (9) I found that 70% of couples in reproductive age practiced various kinds of birth control in the Gishiru village. The remaining 30% had some health problems or wanted more children.
 - (10) Field workers know how the local people live and solve problems. Since they know their culture and the language well, they can convey their messages accurately and smoothly.
 - (11) Volunteering mothers help local mothers in medical services in a village of Bali, Indonesia (Nihon Keizai Shinbun, 1992).
 - (12) According to Mrs. R., a wife and husband did not share a bed because he slept in a men's house called *thingira*. During sexual abstinence, husbands were able to approach other wives of a polygynous couple. Lambert described that monogamous husbands were allowed to approach the wives of the members of his same age group (Lambert, 1956: 66). When wives wanted to have more children, their youngest child was told by the mother to bring food to its father. If successful, it proved that the young child had grown enough, and the couple started having sexual intercourse again.
 - (13) The relation of "joking and avoidance" was seen among various generations in "traditional" Kikuyu society. Between the grandparents and grandchildren, the "joking relation" is common and both are allowed to act rude and talk about anything. On the other hand, the people among the adjacent generation sets cannot talk directly or even look at each other (Matsuzono, 1987). This relation appears to be lessening in Kikuyu society now.
 - (14) There exists many self-help groups in the Gishiru village. The women's group (*Gikundi gia atumia*), a meeting of married women from the same area, is a typical network to help with certain economic problems and information exchange. An old lady in the village says that the concept of a self-help group relates to the traditional idea of mutual aid. Farming requires much labor, such as for clearing new fields and building sheds. Women knew that helping others was helping oneself.
 - (15) The statistics show that the average size of land for a household is 0.8 acre in Kandara division. It is not enough for the average families with 6 to 7 family members (Ministry of Agriculture, 1995/1996).

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