Migration and Changing Divisions of Labour: Gender Relations and Economic Change in Koguta, Western Kenya

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An important advance in the understanding of agrarian change in Africa has been the growing realisation that the transformation of regions through their incorporation into the international economy has rested on changes in key domestic relationships. Gender relations—in particular, divisions of labour and rights over resources—are critically important arenas in which economic change has been registered, acted out and, often, struggled over. The emergence of, and subsequent changes in, migrant labour economies have rested on reorganisations of household forms, divisions of labour and domestic responsibilities (Murray, 1981; Hay, 1982; Bozoli, 1983; Moore and Vaughan, 1987; Sharp and Spiegel, 1990). Cash cropping has precipitated and, often, rested on changes in gendered divisions of rights over land, labour and products and in the nature of the domestic unit (Wright, 1983; Guyer, 1984).

A number of recent studies of Kenya have examined the impact of agrarian change on gender relations (Thomas, 1988; Mackenzie, 1990; von Bülow, 1992; Sørensen, 1992). The work of Dorthe von Bülow and Anne Sørensen has shown the detrimental effects of commercial farming on women's power and authority. Von Bülow argues that the growth of commercial maize and tea production in Kipsigis society (in Kericho District), bringing in its wake commoditisation and the introduction of private rights in land and labour, has adversely affected women's access to and rights in the means of production (cf. Shipton, 1988; Mackenzie, 1990). Women have become increasingly dependent on their husbands and have lost much of their authority within the household. Anne Sørensen, also writing about Kipsigis society, concludes that commoditisation has increased women's labour burdens and widened the gap between resources controlled by women and men. Barbara Thomas's work in Murang'a District points to differences in gender relations between areas where cash cropping has become established, and in which men remain in the rural area, and those in which men are commonly labour migrants. In the latter areas, women have taken on full responsibility for farming, with a greatly increased labour burden.

The present study, carried out in Kisumu District, western Kenya, builds on these insights by exploring the impact of economic change on gender relations. However, it is important also to understand the converse: the ways in which gender relations themselves shape the course of economic change in an area. This study reveals such processes. Moreover, it shows that, while twentieth-century transformations in the economy of western Kenya have been closely bound up with profound changes in gender relations, these developments cannot be summed up in a simple formula. Firstly, they have been linked in complex ways with a series of shifts in the political economy of the region. Gender relations have not moved in a unilinear direction. Secondly, they have also been deeply affected by processes of household differentiation which have themselves altered over time. Changes in gender relations have
thus been slow, piecemeal, non-uniform and non-linear. They have been the subject of intense conflicts which have centred on questions of access to and control over resources, and in which, as well as power relations, ideas about rights and responsibilities have been critically important. (For a discussion of the role of changing ideas concerning the roles of men and women in Kipsigis society see von Bülow, 1992.)
Field research was carried out between 1987 and 1989 in Koguta Sub-location, which lies on the Nyabondo Plateau in South Nyakach Location, Kisumu District, one of the home districts of the Luo people (see map). Research methods included the collection of sixty life histories and a budget survey.

Like many other parts of western Kenya, this is an area where, for decades, the vast majority of men have spent most of their economically active lives working as labour migrants. Its most striking characteristic is its poverty, compared with the other major smallholder regions of Kenya. Agricultural production appears to have been falling since at least the Second World War and today few households grow enough food grains to cover domestic consumption needs. Farm and household incomes are among the lowest in Kenya.¹

Research into the dynamics of gender relations was part of a local-level study of the links between labour migration, agricultural decline and social change (Francis, 1991). The analysis is organised around the concept of divisions of labour (cf. Pahl, 1984), which denotes the division of tasks (the sexual division of labour in the simplest sense); spheres of responsibility and authority; and contributions to the reproduction of the domestic unit. Changes in one or another of these divisions of labour have tended to produce conflicts over the others and, eventually, have led to pressure for change in other elements. In Koguta these processes have been closely linked with changes, and continuities, in beliefs and practices concerning male and female rights and responsibilities and appropriate behaviour for women and men.²

Such changes and continuities are given meaning by beliefs about appropriate behaviour and rights in specific contexts. They are founded on more diffuse beliefs about the essential nature of women and men and appropriate relations between them. Thus people hold beliefs about appropriate structures of domestic authority and decision-making, spheres of responsibility and authority and divisions of tasks. These, in turn, shape, and are shaped by, beliefs about rights of access to and control over resources. They are related to more diffuse gender ideologies (such as, in the Luo case, those concerning the loyalty and competence of women and their potential as a source of chaos)³ whose impact cannot, ultimately, be disentangled from domestic power relations precisely because they are so often mutually sustaining.

Specific beliefs may not be fully congruent with one another, or with changing social and economic contexts, however, opening up the possibility that they may be contested and modified. More diffuse ideology is less subject to the pressures of changing contexts, though it too in time can alter.

An attempt to analyse the role of ideology in social change is challenged by the tension between ideology and practice and, hence, by the necessarily problematic nature of the evidence. But such tension can also be a source of insight. For example, the concept of a ‘good husband’ appears to have changed over time. While it exerts a powerful influence on expectations about rights and responsibilities with regard to resources, it can be used to justify male control over resources and, by women, as a claim on resources.

The account which follows shows how the emergence of a migrant labour economy, long-term agricultural decline and accompanying processes of household differentiation have been registered and acted out in domestic relationships.
GENDER RELATIONS BEFORE MASS LABOUR MIGRATION

From what is known about pre-colonial Luo communities it appears that they were in flux in the years immediately before the arrival of the British in the 1890s, with many communities shifting from an apparently predominantly pastoral economy towards one more based on agriculture as they moved from the drier areas around Lake Victoria onto higher, better watered ground. There appears to have been a concomitant increase in male involvement in agriculture, but, on the whole, the bulk of agricultural and domestic work was done by women (Whisson, 1964; Hay, 1972; Pala, 1977; Buttermann, 1979; oral evidence).

Settlement and kinship affiliation appear to have been based largely upon lineages of agnatically related males. The primary domestic units were first the compound (dala), typically containing a polygynous senior male, his wives and the houses of younger brothers and married sons, and, within the compound, the house (ot); a house for each married woman and her children. Women married into lineages, usually from quite distant clans.

Each married woman appears to have been responsible for finding most of the food for her house. To this end she was allocated at least one field for her own use. Informants relate that a woman had the power to make planting decisions and had control over the crops coming from these fields, including any surplus, even though her husband was regarded as having ultimate authority over the land. In Dho Luo the distinction was drawn between the person having authority over the field—wuon puodho—and the person with ultimate authority over the land—wuon lowo. A husband had his own field, called mondo, worked largely by his wives, and he was expected to make good any shortfall in his wives’ food supplies with crops from the mondo. Otherwise these crops were his to dispose of as he saw fit, and it was through the exchange of surplus grain for cattle, which could be used as bridewealth, that men were able to accumulate power and prestige. The ability to accumulate resources therefore ultimately depended on control over female labour.

LABOUR MIGRATION AND THE REGIONAL ECONOMY

In what is now Kisumu District large-scale labour migration began in the early decades of the colonial period. Labour migrancy was at first stimulated by force and by new cash needs (taxation, clothing and cash to purchase bridewealth cattle, for example) (Clayton and Savage, 1974; Van Zwanenberg, 1975; Stichter, 1982). In the first few decades many of the migrants were unmarried men, but by the 1930s it had become increasingly necessary for men who had married to remain on the labour market for long periods to meet growing cash needs. Agriculture appears to have been quite resilient in the 1930s, however, despite the loss of male labour power (Hay, 1972). Mass migrancy coincided with viable food-crop production, probably owing to an expansion of female labour time.

After the early 1930s Kisumu was set on a trajectory that increasingly marginalised agriculture as a source of income. As more and more labour was withdrawn from agriculture a downward spiral of agricultural decline and ever-increasing migration to maintain subsistence was initiated.

Coupled to the direct loss of male labour power through migrancy was the
slow process of a reduction of female labour time expended in agriculture. Falling food production forced women to spend increasing amounts of time in off-farm economic activities, particularly trading and handicrafts production. In the households where remittances covered shortfalls in food production, people were not forced to look for other sources of income to the same extent, but they also had a much greater incentive to invest resources in their children's education than in agricultural production (Hay, 1972; Kitching, 1980; Francis and Hoddinott, 1993).

By the end of the Second World War the region was a net importer of food and the promotion of smallholder agriculture following the Swynnerton Plan did little to change this picture. Farmers in most parts of the region were not offered a suitable cash crop and even those in areas suited to higher-value cash crops were handicapped by poor infrastructure and their distance from the major markets. Nor did changes in the labour market in the 1950s and '60s, such as the stabilisation of the labour force and the creation of high-wage sectors, promote agricultural growth through the dynamic links between urban employment and farm investment seen in central Kenya. Remittances were spent mainly on consumption and investment in education. More recently, falling urban real wages and growing urban unemployment and underemployment have put a strain on rural–urban linkages of this sort. These developments in the urban economy have also led to a degree of reverse migration by young men who have given up trying to find work on the urban labour market.

The above account suggests a periodisation of developments in the regional economy which pivots around both the decline of farming and a series of shifts in rural–urban linkages. The most important shifts occurred in the 1930s (the growth of mass migration by married men) and the 1950s (as urban real wages began to rise and significant food deficits appeared). Since the 1970s urban real wages have fallen and urban employment prospects have become much poorer. These shifts have been closely reflected in contrasts between the opportunities and constraints facing different generations in Koguta and the strategies they have followed.

LABOUR MIGRATION AND GENDER RELATIONS

Before the 1930s migrants were largely unmarried males or were squatters, who tended to migrate as whole households. Young men played a minor role in agriculture. Their main responsibilities had been cattle-keeping, hunting and warfare. The advent of colonial rule made their warrior role obsolete, while game stocks fell with rising population density. Boys took over the herding responsibilities of young men, who left to work as migrants. With growing land shortage from the 1930s onwards, stock numbers generally fell. This trend further decreased the significance of the loss of young men's labour power.

Many of the early migrants continued to enter the labour market after marriage. From the 1930s onwards, most men were involved in migrancy. They left many tasks which could not await their return. It also became essential for rural households to be held together and the land protected and managed in their absence.
Margaret Jean Hay uses a distinction between women’s roles as owners, occupants and managers of property to argue that women in western Kenya during the colonial period shouldered much of the burden of household reproduction. At the same time, economic decline eliminated the grain surpluses which had formerly been one of their few avenues to control over resources and property accumulation. Instead, women took on the roles of occupants of household land, validating and protecting men’s rights in land, and de facto farm managers. Women in poorer areas have become largely place holders (Hay, 1982; see also Hay, 1976). Hay’s analysis prompts consideration of the relationship between women’s changing responsibilities, their access to and control over resources, and the origins of economic decline. Moreover, the commonality of experience in poorer areas described by Hay is complicated by a diversity that reflects processes of differentiation. These processes have been at work since the earliest years of colonial contact, although not in the ways suggested by Kitching (1980; Francis and Hoddinott, 1993). Finally, reorganisation of rural households cannot be viewed statically. Since the 1930s there has been a series of changes in the political-economic context in which divisions of labour have operated. Some of these changes have arisen through contradictions to which divisions of labour have themselves contributed. Changes in power relationships within households have been neither uniform nor unilinear.

The 1930s to the 1950s
Until urban real wages began to rise in the 1950s the vast majority of Luo migrants did low-paid work, first mainly on the European farms and plantations and later in the urban areas. However, a few men with some primary education gained access to better-paid work as teachers, clerks and other work in the administration.

Inequalities in income from employment did not at once bring about differentiation in levels of farm production or striking differences between the roles of women in different migrant households. The wives of most migrants remained in Koguta, providing the household food supply from farming and undertaking seasonal trading to meet some of their cash needs. Most wives of migrants took on this role because their husbands were too far away, for too long, to play much of a role in day-to-day household decision-making. But there was no evidence that wives of better-off migrants were able to use remittances to expand farm production to any significant extent. The suggestion that some women were able to do so is central to Kitching’s (1980) hypothesis of a dynamic link between off-farm and farm inequalities in the small-holder areas of Kenya. This hypothesis does not fit with the uses of migrant remittances and the gender relations which played a large part in determining their use.

Few migrants invested in farming beyond the replacement of their own labour power. Instead, migrant remittances were at first spent on taxation and consumption goods, and invested in bridewealth. Migrants in better-paid employment also made other investments, largely in cattle and school fees. Growing land shortage and low returns to farming discouraged much investment in additional wives, and many of the cattle acquired appear to have been invested in school fees. Most migrants would not have been able
to afford to use their wages to invest in expanded farm production, but better-paid migrants were also reluctant to do so. Low prices, poor infrastructure and distance from markets were clearly important factors limiting the returns to farm investment. But, as the existence of a small number of relatively successful resident male farmers and traders shows, they were not overwhelming at the time. A vital factor seems to have been that few migrants were willing to delegate financial responsibility and decision-making power to their wives. This reluctance stems from a deep-seated distrust of women’s reliability.

Nor could migrants easily expect resident male kin to supervise investments. Part of the story of social change in Koguta has been the growing material and ideological importance of the conjugal unit at the expense of relationships beyond the household. Such a development made it difficult for relatives outside that unit to intervene in its affairs.

In the households of migrants farming was thus replaced as a possible source of accumulation by the acquisition of cash and cattle through the labour market. This switch replicated the older pattern whereby investment activity was undertaken overwhelmingly by men, since they dominated access to the resources—education and money—which were required to undertake such activity.

Despite the fact that there were considerable differences in the wages earned by migrants, divisions of labour between migrant husbands and their wives were fairly uniform. The nature of gender relations in Koguta households—the reluctance of men to delegate much financial responsibility to their wives—was one of the factors weakening dynamic links between employment and farm income and thus slowing down processes of differentiation. Differentiation around access to the labour market was not significantly amplified by differentiation around access to farm income.

In this period, changes in the division of tasks and spheres of authority and responsibility in households where the husband was resident were considerable, however. For a few decades a small number of locally resident men were able to accumulate resources through farming and trading. Such accumulation often involved bitter conflicts over access to female labour power and control over crop income.

Where the husband relied chiefly on farming for his income, he tended to appropriate his wives’ labour and the resulting crop income. For example, Peter Odiyo’s single-minded concentration on farming enabled him to generate enough of a surplus to give his sons a secondary education. His wives’ life histories reveal a great deal of conflict over his attempts to appropriate their labour in order to expand farm production and over the distribution of crop income. His senior wife, Martha, recalled:

Odiyo divided the land when the second wife came and started a mondo... Then when I was alone (i.e. before then) I worked very hard in the [single] garden. The cattle he used to look after were being covered by my work... Before he married a second wife I used to quarrel with him, because he expected me to do a lot of work. I couldn’t leave because my bridewealth was high. He would threaten to bring another wife and I would say ‘Go ahead, then,’ because I was tired of all the quarrels.

A husband’s success in enforcing this appropriation of labour rested to a
large extent on his ability, or willingness, to take responsibility for giving a wife money and food. Martha stopped working on Peter's mondo once her children had left school, as Peter then stopped giving her money for school fees and clothes. Instead she got money both by selling crops from her garden and from her children.

Some locally resident men, particularly those who were older, continued to have a mondo, but others were not able to because of land shortage. In many households the field system became simplified, so that there was a single garden, worked on by the husband and his wives, over which he had decision-making power. Married migrants could not easily undertake production in a separate mondo, because it was difficult to co-ordinate their return with periods of peak labour demand. It was also hard to supervise their wives' labour from afar. They tended not to start a mondo, instead allocating land among their wives. On their return to Koguta, after a brief spell as migrants, or, in other cases, after many years, many were not able to begin cultivating a mondo because they had no suitable land that was not already under crops or needed for pasture. Others who had enough land put their energies into cattle herding, or into off-farm sources of income. Millicent Mboya, whose husband had a job locally, explained, 'My husband did not have a mondo: his work was his mondo.'

The disappearance of a separate mondo on many farms (which can also be seen as its extension to cover most, or all, of the cultivated land) was a response to land shortage. It was also bound up with the husband's taking over responsibility for decision-making about the labour process and access to crop income. Changes in the field system have been central to many conflicts within households. They called into question norms of entitlement to control over decision-making (such as over what to plant) and access to labour and crops. Before mass labour migration, being wuon puodho over her garden gave a woman responsibility for finding the bulk of her household's food, as well as the right to make planting decisions for that garden. She also had disposal rights over any of its surplus produce. Where there was no separate mondo the man could claim that he was wuon puodho over all the cultivated land. He could claim the right to make planting decisions, appropriate his wives' labour and keep the crop income. In some households with a small mondo the husband made similar claims over his wives' gardens. Where the husband or his wives wanted to sell crops, this claim also covered crop income. Such a claim by a husband clashed with a woman's claim to the right to control her household's food supplies. There was considerable conflict over these claims and the outcome varied.

According to the norm, each wife in a polygynous home (dala) was responsible for procuring food for her own household (ot). This responsibility was linked with her right of access to the means of production. The latter made it difficult to unify garden land in polygynous homes, but it has become the most common arrangement in monogamous homes. Even so, some men still cultivate a mondo.

Male control of land and crop income became most common in households where farming was the main source of income for the husband. But this was not always the case. Some women successfully made an appeal to an entitlement to a share in the fruits of labour.
For example, Peter Olal was employed by the Agriculture Department locally as a veterinary assistant from 1942 and grew crops for sale. He hired labour to work on the crops rather than ask his wives to work on them. His explanation for this arrangement was that they would, otherwise, want to take the crops to market and keep the money. A person who does the bulk of the work on a crop should get the money when it is sold. So where a husband could afford to hire in labour, conflict could be avoided.

Such cases were rare, however. On the whole, wives of men who became involved in cash cropping lost a large amount of control over the labour process and crop income, while the husband took on greater responsibility for household reproduction. Women tended to keep substantial control over the labour process and crop disposal where resident husbands were involved mainly in cattle herding or in off-farm activities. In these cases they were less keen to take over farm decision-making. Conflicts in non-migrant households parallel later conflicts in the households of migrants.

Trends since the 1950s
The most important historical trends since the Second World War have been an absolute decline in agricultural production, increasing the need for cash to buy food and, alongside it, a dramatic rise in the number of essential household items and expenses which can be met only with cash. These trends have made differences in access to remittances from the urban areas more and more important causes of inequality.

Better-paid migrants and the group of relatively successful non-migrants all made their children’s education their main investment, as it became increasingly clear that education provided the route to upward mobility. An increasingly stagnant local economy removed farm and off-farm rural activities as a source of accumulation comparable to better-paid wage employment. Some of the children—particularly those who finished their education in the late 1950s and 1960s, when the upper reaches of the labour market opened up to Africans—were able to get professional employment. Their fathers’ comparative prosperity was translated into an advantaged position for the next generation. These people are now almost all employed in the urban areas. Access to their remittances, together with pensions, is the chief factor determining the distribution of income in the community today. On the whole, though, their material links with the community are not strong.

Processes of differentiation have given rise to a fairly wide spread of incomes and striking contrasts between the ways in which rural households get cash. There are households in which the bulk of the cash comes from remittances (mostly from husbands and children, or as pensions). Other households have no access to remittance income, and get cash from their farms, a medley of off-farm activities, and transfers from kin and friends. Most households lie between these extremes, their cash income coming from a number of sources. The material links between rural and urban households are coming under increasing strain, however. Remittance incomes are often low and intermittent, because of falling real incomes in the urban areas and the crisis in the urban labour market. A household’s endowment of land and the ability of its members to undertake more labour-intensive cash cropping, or off-farm activities, to a large degree determine whether it can meet its cash needs.
In their efforts to get cash, not all people have followed similar strategies. Also, the effectiveness and popularity of the various strategies available have altered in response to the changing political-economic context. Farming was never a source of large-scale accumulation in Koguta, although a few households successfully combined farming and rural off-farm activities. Their children then moved into relatively well paid urban employment. For most, farming has been a backstop which, combined with labour migration, is becoming more precarious as farm production and urban job prospects fall. Poor returns to rural off-farm activities, and low remittances from their children, have prompted some retired migrants to try to get an income from intensive cultivation of vegetables. They have recently been joined in this activity by some of the younger men who have given up trying to survive on the urban labour market. In these households farming is much more than a holding activity. But cash cropping is a strategy demanding great effort for low and risky returns. Also, prematurely returned migrants usually have the smallest land holdings of all, because they belong to a generation which is inheriting a portion of the already small holdings of their fathers. Many younger men are not prepared to follow a cash-cropping strategy and rely for money on odd jobs and petty trading. Their wives grow a small amount of food on tiny plots and otherwise rely on petty trading and transfers from relatives and friends for food. The precariousness of this way of life hardly needs to be pointed out. After experiencing it, many young men return to try their luck again on the urban labour market. It remains to be seen whether return migration by younger men will eventually become permanent, as they decide that the search for urban employment is hopeless, or whether they will continue to move back and forth between the rural and urban informal sectors.

CHANGING SPHERES OF DOMESTIC AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

The erosion of women’s authority

The transformation of the basis of the household economy from the farm to cash income has changed expectations and deepened conflicts between men and women over spheres of domestic authority and responsibility. It also provides the context of differentiation between rural households today. All these changes have been the subject of intense conflict.

In a few households the growing need for cash has been met largely from remittances. Some of these households consist of the wives and children of migrant men doing clerical or supervisory work. Others contain men retired from similar work who now receive a pension. In both types of household the bulk of remittances tend to come from a single source and to be received by one household member, the woman in the former case, the man in the latter. Either arrangement leaves the wife financially almost entirely dependent upon her husband and responsible for only the details of budgetary management. There is less pressure on her than there is on other women to engage in independent economic activity, and many such women play a very passive role in their household’s financial affairs. They simply receive a regular allowance to cover food purchases. Household reproduction is fundamentally dependent on male earnings. Women’s role in reproduction is limited to
providing domestic labour and a security function through their farm production.

Many informants, male and female, cited a pattern in which the man provides the cash income for the household as the ideal distribution of financial responsibilities and power. A ‘good husband’, dichwo maber, gives his wife enough money for her to feed the household, as well as providing clothing, household goods and school fees.

This ideal is very different from the pre-colonial norm of female responsibility for the bulk of day-to-day household provisioning. Its origins lie partly in the fact that avoiding poverty depends so greatly on a resource—paid employment—to which men dominate access. Another important source of this changed ideal is the model of domestic relations with which Africans came into contact through missionaries and European employers. Studies of missionary activity in many regions of British colonial Africa have shown how Victorian ideals of domesticity were promoted through proselytising and formal education. These ideals stressed the desirability of monogamous marriage and a division of labour in which women’s responsibilities lay in the care of children and the home, men’s in provisioning them. They also privileged the authority of the male household head over all other members, and male authority in public affairs. Men working on European farms or as domestic servants in European homes were exposed to domestic relations in which women were wholly dependent on men financially and in which men made the major household decisions (Richmond, 1985).

Women’s growing financial dependence on men has meshed with these new models of domestic relations. This dependence has helped to change the ideal of a good husband and a proper division of responsibility for provisioning the household. The pre-colonial ideal in which the woman enjoyed relative autonomy in the sphere of food provisioning has been replaced by a more unified model that assumes ultimate male authority and responsibility. For many women, trading carries the stigma of poverty, and women getting an adequate income pride themselves on not being obliged to ‘sit in the market’. Acknowledgement of male authority and financial responsibility constitutes a claim, by women, on men’s resources, as well as a justification, for men, of male control.

These changes reflect a significant erosion of women’s decision-making power within the household. Informants’ accounts of appropriate spheres of decision-making power (tekọ) for wives and husbands also reveal that women have fewer spheres of decision-making power, at least at the level of stereotypes. Women, it is said, have tekọ (and always have it) over matters to do with cooking and bringing up the children. Men have tekọ (and, it is said, have always had it) over, inter alia, the acquisition and disposal of land and stock, housing, the marriage of children and bridewealth, the organisation of funerals, and women’s travel. It is also often said to be appropriate for men to have tekọ in many new issues which have arisen since the growth of the cash economy, such as decisions concerning children’s schooling or major outgoings on furniture or medical fees. Women have also lost much of their ability to gain domestic power over the life cycle. With the decline of polygyny fewer and fewer older women gain access to the labour of, and authority over, younger wives (as they did to a considerable extent
in the past). With the growing tendency of younger women to spend the early
years of marriage with their husband in town (and the general lessening of the
authority of elders over juniors promoted by labour migration), older women
have also lost the labour power of, and authority over, their daughters-in-
law. Moreover, male *teko* in farming, at least ‘where the husband is inter-
ested in farming’ (Millicent Mboya), is now considered the norm. In the
stereotypical pattern, men have taken on new powers of decision-making,
while women have lost some of their most significant spheres of authority.

There is often a gap between this model of the household as an economic
unit and the behaviour of individuals within households, even where the man
is the main earner of cash income. Indeed, the question of the extent to which
households are units and the strategies of members conform to common
goals is an issue which lies just below the surface of discourse in Koguta.
Women complain about husbands who do not support them and their chil-
dren, while parents complain about uncaring children. In this respect the
ideal of an economically unified household can be used as a claim on
men’s, and children’s, resources by other household members.

But the ideal is also a justification of women’s restricted access to cash
incomes. Many men feel great ambivalence about independent economic
activity on the part of their wives. Although many women are becoming
increasingly involved in off-farm activities, men who are just able to meet
their households’ cash needs prefer not to give their wives scope for gaining
an independent income.

Although the wife of a migrant almost inevitably plays a greater manage-
rial role in the household than the wives of most non-migrants, a greater de-
cision-making role for women is considered to pose a threat to the authority of
men. It threatens the unity of the household and, ultimately, the whole social
order (Parkin, 1978). It is a topic that men quickly warm to. They use a dis-
course that combines fear of the supposedly chaotic potential of women’s
sexuality with a stress on the divided loyalties of a woman who must always
marry in from another clan.

Luo men do not like their wives to trade, because they think that they will walk
around. [Judith Achieng]

Women don’t know how to look after money properly. They take the money, leave
the house and wander around the country— to Mombasa, Nairobi— and they want
to show off, for example by buying clothes, but a man will want to use the money
properly, for example by paying school fees . . .

Very few Luo women trade, because they are weak [compared with Kikuyu
women]. Their husbands are not willing for them to trade, because of what they
might do when they are away from home, like going with other men. Some women
are trusted and they do trade like that, but it is better for the woman to be older.
[Philip Ojwang]

Luo men take their wives’ trading income . . . a Luo woman who travels around
trading is called a prostitute. [Mary Anyango]

There are not many ways for a woman to get money around here. So when a man
sees his wife with money he gets suspicious. [John Obala]
These comments convey a basic distrust of women—their loyalties and their sexuality. A woman is an outsider who has married in from another clan. She can rarely be completely trusted. She has a rampant sexuality that needs to be closely controlled, and that is best done by restricting her movements. A mobile woman is suspect. Movement and sexual laxity are practically synonymous. Both threaten the cohesiveness of the marital home. A woman with her own resources may leave her husband for another man.

But, as well as being based on fears of women's latent sexuality and unreliability, the wish to control the movement of women has origins in the reorganisation of the sexual division of labour on which labour migration has depended. For the rural household to be maintained, it is essential for someone to remain to hold it together. Regular trading, with the continual travelling it requires, threatens this pivotal role.

The disquiet felt by many men at the thought of allowing women to acquire economic resources independently also arises from a fear of power struggles between a man and a 'strong woman' (dhako ratego). Relations within the household are sometimes described as a zero-sum game:

When the man is up, the woman is down, and when the man is down the woman is up. [Helen Awuor]

And the key to who is up or down is relative economic power.

It is income that makes a woman strong. The thing that makes a man strong is that he does not want to be conquered in terms of getting income for the family. [John Obala]

As one would expect in any collection of beliefs, Luo gender ideologies are not all congruent. People voice contrasting attitudes to domestic relationships in different contexts. When describing ideal domestic relations, both sexes draw on the concept of winjruok, 'understanding'. In a home where there is winjruok men and women co-operate according to their expected roles. In the man's case this amounts to the benign use of his ultimate authority. When describing this ideal in English, Luo people often use the word 'co-ordination'. It can be achieved only if women accept the authority of men. It can be undermined by an overtly-assertive woman.

Because of the decline of farming, off-farm income, particularly remittances, has played an increasingly central role in household reproduction. Men have dominated access to this resource because it is they who have undertaken wage labour. Until recently few men have been willing to allow their wives to engage in independent trading or cash cropping. These processes have eroded women's spheres of authority and responsibility in household decision-making. Many households have become increasingly unified under a male head. Ideological change has both promoted and reflected these changes.

New divisions of labour
Because of growing rural cash needs and falling urban real wages and employment prospects, for a growing majority of rural households, remittances are nowhere near enough to cover reproduction. Many households do not receive remittances to any significant extent. Reproduction of many
households has therefore become increasingly dependent on members’ ability to earn a cash income through off-farm activities. These include petty commodity production, trading and farm labouring and, to a lesser extent, transfers from beyond the household. Economic roles are in flux to an extent that in some cases amounts to a transformation of gender relations and household structures. These changes challenge received gender stereotypes. The ideal pattern of male ‘breadwinner’ and dependent wife is far from the necessities of survival in most households.

In many households where the husband maintains active contact, or is even resident, he finds it extremely difficult to play this role. If a migrant, he often cannot send remittances. If he is resident, he has few ways of earning a regular income.

Some women have altogether lost access to their husbands’ income. They have taken on full financial responsibility for themselves and their children. Where the man is a migrant, this uncoupling of the rural and urban components of the household leaves the woman as effectively head of the household but, unless she is a widow, her authority is provisional—attendant on the possibility of the husband’s intervention. Women therefore usually lack the ability to acquire or dispose of household assets as they see fit.

The declining ability of most rural households to satisfy their food requirements from farming has also thrown up a contradiction. Many men still try to provide their wife with a cash income that allows her to remain at home but face a growing need for her to find off-farm sources of cash. Although there is resistance to independent economic activity by women, many men have eventually abandoned their hostility. Women who trade typically commented that their husband had not at first liked the idea, but when he saw that she could bring money home he no longer objected.

Where a wife of a resident man trades regularly, she typically has much more authority than women who do not. Their command of a cash income gives them a greater voice in household decision-making. A dhako ratego plays a much greater role than others in making strategic decisions for the household (concerning the acquisition or disposal of assets, major farming matters, and the children’s schooling, particularly where she is contributing financially to these activities). This greater authority derives not only from sheer financial clout but also from the assertiveness that an independent income seems to promote.

Women at different stages of the life cycle face different constraints on their effort to earn cash. Many of the younger women have heavy child-care responsibilities and a very small plot of land for growing crops. Older women, though freer to trade or do farm labouring, are often far more burdened by the need to pay school fees. Women also differ in their ability to earn a regular income. A few are regular traders, but a more common pattern is for a woman to juggle several activities.

Most households where the husband has returned to live at home receive only small, infrequent remittances. The various income-earning strategies the men follow have already been described. The pressing need to find a cash income has led some men to appropriate their wife’s labour for cash cropping in a manner similar to the conflicts played out in the 1930s and ’40s in the households of the rural elite. In other households the failure of the
man to engage in farm work or find a reliable source of income has prompted the woman to take on most of the farm work and decision-making. In this situation the wife often assumes most of the financial responsibilities. Men who are involved in farm work describe themselves, and are described by women, as ‘helping’. The role involves entitlement to a role in farm decision-making and a share of crop income and it is then only a short step to full appropriation, justified by the man’s greater financial responsibilities and his ultimate ownership of the land. An older woman has more authority to resist full appropriation and work out a compromise whereby she and her husband share crop income and financial responsibilities. Younger women are still seen as newcomers to the community, and are less able to resist.

When a man does not fulfil expectations of what constitutes a ‘good husband’ his wife takes on most day-to-day financial responsibilities by default, but she usually lacks the resources to do more than keep her head above water. Women find it very difficult to accumulate capital for large-scale trading or for sinking into seeds and hired labour for cash cropping.

Relations within households in contemporary Koguta, and the ideology which legitimates them, are therefore in a state of flux. Severe strains are exerting pressure for change.

The inability of growing numbers of men, migrants and returned migrants, to meet their households’ need for cash originates first in a crisis in the urban labour market that has stemmed the flow of remittances. It also stems from a long-term decline in the local economy that has undermined the ability of farming to meet the food needs of most rural households, while also limiting opportunities for earning a cash income. Decades of labour migration have given rise to the expectation that men and women will follow a division of responsibilities in which the husband acts as ‘breadwinner’. Economic necessity makes the division contentious and often unsustainable.

New divisions of responsibility, sometimes amounting to new household forms, are appearing. Households with no male head, resident or migrant, are increasingly common. There are households with an older woman head, with unmarried or divorced daughters, and their children. There are households where an older woman is fostering the children of an unmarried or divorced daughter based in town. Male involvement in finance and decision-making covers a spectrum from considerable control to desertion. No clear break can be made between male- and female-headed households.

In the households where husbands’ remittances and visits are so irregular that the wives are effectively household heads, male involvement is often intermittent; women’s authority is provisional. This point applies with even greater force when the husband lives at home but does not contribute much to the household food supply. Negotiating spheres of authority in such cases is a delicate business. Women gain access to most productive resources through their relationships with men, husbands and sons. Their power over such resources is therefore temporary and subject to challenge. Indeed, another trend which may grow is towards the appropriation of a woman’s labour power by her husband in households where the man has given up trying to survive on the urban labour market and is attempting to get a cash income from farming.
The one avenue to accumulation by women on their own account, trading, is severely limited, for several reasons. Women face low demand in the local economy and a heavy farm and domestic work load. Men are hostile to the threat trading carries of loss of control over women and disruption of the rural household. Many rural women have therefore seen their economic responsibilities increase, but find it almost impossibly difficult to fulfill them.

The less a man can contribute to the household budget the weaker is his case against his wife’s trading. Some men now acquiesce and even encourage their wife to start trading. In one case the decision was taken as part of the husband’s strategy for household income-earning. More commonly it reflects pragmatic acceptance. If the woman becomes a successful trader, her domestic power grows with her responsibilities. She may successfully challenge the material and ideological constraints which so hem in other women. Women like this are a small minority. Trading is such a low-earning and risky activity that few can hope to emulate them. It is still far from clear whether their example will legitimate more widely the growing need for women to seek off-farm sources of income.

CONCLUSION

Several themes run through this analysis of changing relations within households in Koguta. In the background are the series of transformations in the political economy of western Kenya which have taken place since the beginning of colonial rule (the emergence of mass labour migration, economic decline and the impact of the crisis in the urban labour market). These transformations have both rested on and precipitated a changing household division of labour, in the narrow sense of who actually does what and in the broader sense of the division of domestic responsibility and power. Labour migration involved upheavals in domestic relationships, but they have not been unilinear. Broadly speaking, the advent of a migrant-labour economy initially threw much of the burden of household reproduction on to women. Declining agriculture and rising urban real wages in the 1950s and 60s together promoted a growing role for remittances from migrant males in the reproduction of many households. More recently, rising urban unemployment and underemployment, together with falling urban real wages, have put an enormous strain on the links between the urban and rural Koguta people. Many women, again, are shoulderering responsibility for household reproduction.

A second important theme has been differentiation. In the above outline of the changing divisions of labour the term ‘many’ has been used several times. Patterns of change have been far from uniform, being bound up with processes of accumulation and impoverishment at the household level. These, in turn, have been subject to profound long-term changes. Constraints, opportunities and individuals’ strategies have altered. Very broadly speaking, some women have become economically more dependent on their husbands. They have lost control over decision-making. Other women have been largely cut off from access to male incomes and have become substantially independent of male authority. Many women have found themselves in intermediate positions, where spheres of responsibility and control are subject to conflict.
In some households resident men have appropriated their wives' farm labour power. In others the woman works the farm on her own account. In yet others a division of gardens, crops and crop income has been negotiated.

This case study shows how the changes in the political economy of western Kenya, together with processes of economic differentiation, have been registered, and struggled over, within households. Although they sometimes obscure these processes, changing gender ideologies can provide insights. They throw light on the terms on which struggles within households have been played out. A key element linking the different levels of analysis has been the concept of spheres of responsibility, since these have formed the arena in which domestic struggles have taken place. The ability, and willingness, of women and men to play expected roles has been profoundly affected by the interaction of changing circumstances and ideas about rights to resources and appropriate roles.

While, in some respects, these ideas have changed over time, in others they have proved more enduring. In particular it appears that distrust of women's commitment to both the marital and the natal home and a propensity to associate women with forces of disorder were long reinforced by the threat that female mobility poses to the pivotal role women have played in keeping rural households together in the absence of their husbands. Now, though, these ideas are under challenge from women with a pressing need to find off-farm sources of income.

Successive changes in the regional political economy, altering processes of accumulation and impoverishment, and a variety of responses to changing circumstances have given rise to flux in key domestic relationships and the ideologies which justify them. That is why the relationship of changing ideology, behaviour and circumstances in Koguta is so difficult to analyse. But it is an analysis worth attempting, because it affords an opportunity to study economic change as social process.

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NOTES

1 The latest available figures cover 1981/82. In that year average net monthly farm income (cash and kind) in Kisumu District was KShs 183, while total net monthly household income was KShs 536. For some central Kenya comparisons: farm income was KShs 514 and total household income was KShs 1,191 in Embu District and the corresponding figures in Nyeri District were KShs 489 and KShs 999 (Rural Household Budget Survey 1981/82, in Republic of Kenya, 1988: 32). In 1987 £1 sterling = KShs 27.

2 This approach has been stimulated by Jane Guyer's work (1984) on gender and agrarian change among Beti communities in Cameroon. Guyer isolates key elements of the division of labour in agricultural production, distribution and consumption. This analytical framework enables her to separate out and then explore the connections between the technical, the sociological and the cultural aspects of changes in the Beti farming system and also between changes in the farming system and other aspects of domestic relationships.
REFERENCES


**Abstract**

A case study from western Kenya is used to explore the links between labour migration, rural economic decline and changes in key domestic relationships. Twentieth-century transformations in the regional political economy, together with processes of differentiation, have been closely bound up with changes, and continuities, in relationships within households, and in the ideologies which justify them. A central concept in the analysis is that of divisions of labour, which covers the division of tasks, divisions of spheres of responsibility and authority and contributions to the reproduction of the household. Changes in all these have shaped, and have been shaped, by the
trajectory of economic decline in the region. Changing divisions of labour have been slow, piecemeal, non-uniform and non-linear. They have been the subject of intense conflicts within households which have centred on questions of access to and control over resources and in which, as well as power relations, ideas about rights and responsibilities have been crucially important.

RÉSUMÉ

Une étude de cas à l'ouest du Kenya est utilisée ici afin d'explorer les liens entre la migration de la main-d'œuvre, le déclin économique rural et les changements au sein des rapports familiaux principaux. Les transformations au vingtième siècle dans l'économie politique régionale, ensemble avec les processus de différenciation, ont été étroitement liés avec les changements et continuités dans les rapports au sein des ménages, et dans les idéologies qui les justifient.

Un concept central à cette analyse est celui des divisions du travail, qui recouvrent les divisions des tâches, les divisions des sphères de responsabilité et d'autorité et des contributions à la reproduction du ménage. Des changements dans toutes ces sphères ont formé et ont été formés par la trajectoire du déclin économique dans la région. Les divisions du travail ont changées lentement, petit à petit, sans uniformité, et d'une manière non-linaire. Elles ont été le sujet de conflits dans les ménages qui ont du faire face à des questions d'accès et de contrôle se rapportant aux ressources, et dans lesquels, les idées concernant les droits et responsabilités, aussi bien que les rapports de pouvoir, ont été extrêmement importantes.