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THE MYTH OF FEMALE SUBMISSION:  
ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF LUO WOMEN  
IN NAMUWONGO - WABIGALO, KAMPALA

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In this paper an attempt will be made to examine the idea put forward by D. Parkin in both his 1969 book (1969a) and paper (1969b), in the light of new data collected last year. He postulated that the socio-economic status of women depends on cultural differences. The "Migrant" women, particularly the Luo, have low status because of the tight control the men have over them. The "Host" women, particularly the Baganda, have high status because "the same sanctions of disapproval over issues relating to marriage and the status of women" are not exerted over them (1969a: 104). This then means that Host women are able to take advantage of economic opportunities offered by the urban scene, whereas Migrant women are discouraged from doing so.

The question, then, that this paper will address itself to is: how relevant are the rural social structures, particularly sanctions, in determining women's urban participation in economic activities?

Parkin put forward the idea that urban women differ in their aspirations because of cultural differences. For example, "The Luo at home are not hierarchically organized but have highly corporate, local agnatic-descent groups. Individual rights to land, cattle and property are vested in these descent groups (1969b:279)". On the other hand,

The development of a powerful kingdom among the Ganda offered considerable social mobility which was later encouraged by an individual land-tenure system and cash crop economy in colonial times. It inevitably weakened the practical and ideological benefits of descent group membership. Nowadays there are few large extended families or descent groups (ibid.:280-81).

As a result, in Kampala, "Migrants share a highly complicated system of negative sanctions deriving from the tribal system, which are rarely any other than those of disapproval (1969a:103)". The sanctions are enforced by

appealing to an "ideology of tribal solidarity" (ibid.:104). As a contrast, "In town, Ganda brothers and sisters are permitted a high degree of individual choice in marriage, residence, and friends and favoured relatives (1969b:281)".

All these have meant considerable differences in the status of women. The stratification based on social and economic criteria showed that Host women had a high, independent status. Luo men have control over economic and sexual services of their women and it is "rare to find them owning property of any value" (1969a:94). Baganda women not only own land and property, but "often make their way to Kampala on their own, get a job if they can, find a lover, and have children and live permanently with a man, all without any special permission of their brothers or parents (ibid.)".

A Luo woman, unlike her Muganda counterpart, is at any given time under the control of males--father, brothers, husband and affines--with a common interest in maintaining the stability of her marriage. This is due to the fact that,

At home Luo transfer a valuable bridewealth of cattle and money to the wife's family. Close agnates stand to gain from the bridewealth transferred at their sisters' marriages: it provides bridewealth for their own marriages and replenishes heritable homestead property. Since bridewealth is recoverable by the groom's family in the event of a bride or wife's elopement with another man, desertion or barrenness, brothers and fathers are keen that their sisters and daughters should maintain conjugal harmony and stay with their husbands. Before marriage they watch over the activities of these girls, exercising restraints on any tendencies to promiscuity, which is popularly associated with infertility and which may therefore lower their bridewealth value. After producing children, a wife becomes fully incorporated in her husband's family while her ties with her own are considerably weakened (1969b:279).

Thus among the Kampala Luo, "the position of women...relate[s] to the operation of tribal factors, notably the overall consequences of a system of highly corporate patrilineal descent

groups (ibid.:280)".

This explains, according to Parkin, why women engage in joint activities with their husbands, and why there are few Luo prostitutes and unattached women in Kampala.

The data that will be used in this discussion were collected during a ten month period among the Luo living in two low-income areas of Kampala, Namuwongo and Wabigalo.

The hypothesis to be tested is whether Luo men have tight economic (and sexual) control over their women. If they do not, it would seem to suggest that Luo women are adapting to the urban economic system, and despite their ethnic background have a lot in common with other urban women aspiring towards economic independence, a class that is characteristic of the areas.

African towns have for a long time been regarded as a man's world by laymen as well as by researchers. The literature available on women in low-income situations is limited (e.g. Longmore 1959, Southall and Gutkind 1957). Little is known about why women come to towns and what they do when they stay. The general reaction is to brand all African female urbanites as malaya, or prostitutes. As Southall postulates,

Since African wage employment began on the basis of migrant male labour, the towns have always been full of men, and the first women to town were inevitably the prostitutes. This has coloured the African attitude towards women in town ever since. Town women, it is felt, are bad women, and they are to be used for pleasure but not to be married (Southall and Gutkind 1957:90).

This attitude can no longer be justified in view of the fact that now many men do migrate to towns with their wives or allow them to visit frequently. In other words, although the sex imbalance (that is, the preponderance of men over women) still exists in African towns, even with increasing

numbers of women coming to town, the prime reason why women come is not to seek sexual pleasures, but economic independence. However, economic independence has meant in many ways sexual independence.

The Baganda women exploit urban opportunities for their economic independence. The question is whether the Luo women also aspire towards economic independence, bearing in mind their contribution to "the common domestic budget" which Parkin mentions (1969a:164).

It was observed that at Namuwongo-Wabigalo, Luo men usually ran their businesses with help from their wives, and money was sent regularly by the couple to both sets of parents. Luo men in most cases left their wives to run the shops while they engaged themselves in some regular wage employment. The four Luo women in the sample who worked with their husbands in the shops referred to them as "our" shop, meaning that husband and wife shared in its operation; the wife, however, had major responsibilities in the shop for making decisions about stocking and so on, but "the husband manages the income and retains the right to retire his wife if he wishes (ibid.:109)". Women from other ethnic groups, however, referred to the shops as either "mine" or "my husband's". The question at issue is why Luo men trust their women whereas men from other ethnic groups do not trust their women with their businesses even for a minute. As Parkin said, "By contrast, Ganda women often run the stalls as their own businesses, independently of their husbands if they have them (ibid.)".

The answer seems to lie in the fact that Bantu women-- Baganda, Ankole, Soga and Nyoro--are "sexually loose" and "money-minded". This is supposed to be due partly to the fact that many free unions, which in most cases are

temporary, involve Host women, and partly to the

independent status of Ganda and other Host women which does enable them to set up businesses more freely and extensively, but serves also to entrench their independence economically. The extent to which a wife then contributes with her husband, if she has one, to a common domestic budget depends on their personal relationship and is not dependent on the husband's insistence as a matter of right (ibid.:164).

This has led Luo and Luyia men to disapprove of any union with Bantu women, who are "not from home and therefore will not behave decently," that is, accept their husband's control over their economic and sexual services. As a 40-year-old Luo man put it:

Any Luo who wants to secure a respectable marriage for his daughter must send her home. Our men always return home to marry. We fear girls who have lived in town because if they are not diseased, they are cheats. Moreover, what hope does one have for raising up a child like a Luo if the woman is not trained in our traditions? There are a few stupid Luo men who have married girls from outside.

His attitude is supported by the characteristic behaviour of Bantu women, which is illustrated by this case study:

Yemima Namusisi, aged 27, was born at Katikamu (Bulemezi County). She came to Namuwongo five years ago after her husband sent her away with a "letter". He told her that he had been tricked into marrying a Nyarwanda--thinking that she was a Muganda. At the time of research Yemima had been cohabiting for more than ten months with a Kikuyu shopkeeper and bar owner, John Manthi.

One night a most revealing quarrel broke out between them. Manthi accused Yemima of stealing his money and property. She had bought a plot of land at Wabigalo, and had built herself a house. She took sugar and maize flour (for enguli brewing--illegal crude spirit) and money. Yemima retorted that she knew all along that their relationship was temporary and that was why she had decided to have something to show at the end of it all.

The 40 non-Luo men with whom I had detailed discussions said that whenever a shop failed, the cause was most likely to be a woman. Ten of the men were or had been



Table 1. Number of women in different economic activities, by ethnic group.

	Enguli	Malwa	Munanansi	Kwete	Cooked Food Sellers	Market stall	Shop	Bar maid	Mwenge seller	Primary teacher	Prostitute	House- owner	Cultivator	Un- employed	Total
Baganda	17	1	2	-(a)	7	5	2	2	2	1	6 <sup>(b)</sup>	4 <sup>(c)</sup>	2 <sup>(d)</sup>	2	53
Luo	10	5	-	1	-	8	4	3	-	-	-	-	-	16	47

(a) Many women had several activities; for example, one Muganda woman made 200/- from kwete, 200/- from enguli and 300/- as a prostitute each month. She was counted under "enguli". In the table the most lucrative activity was counted, except for (b), (c) and (d), where other activities were counted even if less lucrative.

(b) A woman was counted as a prostitute only if that was her sole activity.

(c) Houseowners were counted only if they had no other means of support, except cultivation.

(d) Cultivators were counted if this was their sole activity.

in Kisenyi, moved to Makerere Kivulu for one year (both are dense, low-income areas), and then to Namuwongo.

When they first arrived, her husband had no job. They sold charcoal and roasted groundnuts. At the same time she brewed malwa (millet beer) and before long they were able to rent a stall at Wabigalo market. In 1967 they decided that they had made enough money to open a shop. They had a prosperous business from which they realized a monthly profit of 600/-

So far the story fits Parkin's idea of cooperative activity by Luo couples. But here the story deviates:

In 1971 her husband decided they should return to the village. She refused because she knew her husband had found a younger girl whom he wanted to marry. The shop was closed down, the man returned to Kenya, and Maria resumed brewing malwa. Her husband took all their savings but she did not seem worried at all. Instead she proceeded to tell the researcher not to trust men. "No woman these days trusts men. I bore my husband four sons and two daughters but see what he has done to me. If I had been stupid like some women who do not keep some money for themselves, where would I be? Every month for five years I put away 20/-. He never suspected or else there would have been trouble.

It is clear from the above example that Luo women are responding to urban economic opportunities just like women from other ethnic groups. Maria was just as interested in becoming economically liberated as Yemima was. This suggests that Luo women are experiencing insecurity in their marriages, and are therefore aspiring towards economic independence, which has tended to put Luo men in the same position as their counterparts from other ethnic groups who have no control over their women. It seems there is no cause for Bantu men to express frankly their envy of the greater control Migrants have over their women, as Parkin described (ibid.: 95). From the two tables below Migrant women (Luo) show characteristics similar to those of Host (Baganda) women.

Table 1 shows the number of women involved in the different economic activities. The number of unemployed Luo women is high because 50% of the 47 Luo respondents spent



three months alternately in village and town. While in the village they planted, weeded and harvested, so when they joined their husbands in the urban areas some regarded it as a holiday. Some of the women, however, in the group shuttling between town and country, insisted on doing some money-making jobs (and were counted under the appropriate activities) while they were in Kampala.

House-owning is important in view of Parkin's statement that Luo women do not own property in their own right whereas the Baganda women do. The numbers show that 17 of the 53 Baganda women in the sample, or 32%, are house owners as compared to seven of 47, or 15%, of the Luo women. The larger number of Baganda is to be expected, but this is a biased comparison since this is Buganda and so the Baganda should own many more houses than strangers do. When the Luo women are compared to Bantu migrants, the extent of house ownership is similar; thus of 25 Nyarwanda women four, or 16%, owned houses. This also suggests that migrant women as a group are very much involved in the house business.

Table 2 below shows the difference between Luo and Baganda couples who pool their earnings from those couples who keep their incomes separate.

Table 2. Income relations of (claimed) married couples, by ethnic group.

	Pooled earnings	Separate earnings	Total
Baganda	7	34	41(a)
Luo	18	27	45

(a) By  $X^2$  there is a better than 95% probability that Baganda and Luo are from the same population; by a more discriminatory difference of proportions t test there is a 20% probability that these two samples are from the same population. This means that there is no significant difference in the behaviour of Baganda and Luo couples.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that the number of Luo women who said that they pooled income with their husbands was lower than that of those who kept separate savings. The same was true of the Baganda.

Luo men, however, will go to any extent to protect their women from the evil influences of the town epitomised by women from other ethnic groups. An over-protected Luyia woman nearly died of influenza because her Luo husband had forbidden her from communicating with neighbouring women, not even his brother's Muganda "wife" who lived in the next room. Once when he found a Nyankole woman teaching his wife embroidery, he tore the tablecloth to shreds.

One finds situations where all the men residing in a block of houses talk to each other frequently, and even occasionally drink together, but their wives are not encouraged to associate closely with each other. The women play up to men's expectations. They prepare the evening meal in silence, thus giving the impression that there is no connection between them. In actual fact the women, while the men have gone to work, spend the whole time gossiping. Parkin found that at Naguru and Nakawa, "even when the women of the gossip set interact harmoniously by offering and receiving advice and by setting norms of behaviour, tribalism is not significant (ibid.:64-65)". It is true at Namuwongo as far as the women are concerned, but the men would rather see them not talking to anyone or talking to fellow Luo women only. Hence Luo women are involved in many relationships with other women, but this remains a secret from their husbands.

At this juncture it is appropriate to mention religion as an institution that attempts to uphold the control by Luo men over their women. It would seem that Luo migrants

in particular find urban life in Kampala so culturally corrupting that they have found it necessary to import some forms of violent (messianic) religions from their home area to act as a form of social control. Confessions in particular keep members within the control of the ethnic group because cases of deviation are revealed before it is too late. Thus messianism seems to be a response to an ambiguous situation prevalent in Kampala. People are aware of some sort of insecurity over the control of the members of the ethnic group, and men in particular realise they are losing control over their women; consequently women are made aware that their "sins" have a negative effect on society. By participating in confessions, members show readiness to accept one of the methods designed to restore normality.

In the area, there were eight revival, independent African Churches: Hera (the Church of Christ in Africa, a breakaway from the Anglican Church); Ayem (the Inland Mission Church); the Voice of Salvation; the Voice of Healing; the African Holy Spirit Church (Dini ya Roho); the African Israel Church; Nineveh; and Legio Maria.

Besides claiming a 99% Luo membership, the Churches, particularly the last two, preach among other things the obedience of the wife to the husband.

In a period of six months I witnessed 20 incidents in which women possessed by the spirit confessed to having thought and performed bad deeds. These included 15 confessions of women who had secretly saved money, although they knew they should have given it to their husbands or told them about it, and five confessions of women who had planned to run away from their husbands because they were cruel, that is, beat or abused them.

The confessions reinforce male control but show how the

behaviour of the women actually approaches that of their urban sisters utilizing the same opportunities. However, these women may confess every week yet continue to persist in what they are doing. It is interesting to note that five of the nine market women were involved in these confessions. Market trading is an area where the emancipation of Luo women is most shown.

Market trading in Kampala was an activity dominated by the Luos until about 1968. As Table 1 shows, 50% of all market women at Namuwongo and Wabigalo are Luo. Previously, so people kept on saying (which perhaps explains Parkin's findings), a man would own a stall in the market and his wife would act as his assistant selling any of the following items: fish, cassava, potatoes and meat. Nowadays, however, many Luo women own stalls in their own rights. Only three out of eight market women owned stalls with their husbands. Even in cases where husband and wife work at the same market, the tendency is to have separate businesses.

Luo men are alarmed by the money-making tendency in their women. Otieno's complaints below are common among men with wives working at the market.

"Those free town women are ruining our marriages. Previously a Luo woman would work under her husband's supervision. For example, she would help at the market or with enguli distilling and selling. These days women want to have money which they must keep a secret from their husbands. I don't know why. My wife, who sells vegetables at the market, pays school fees for our three daughters and I do the same for our two boys. But I feel cheated."

Another group of women who are posing a threat to male control are the widows. Although there was only one widow in the sample, I observed five similar cases, which I thought were significant enough to merit discussion. Anna Anyango refused to return to the village to marry her dead husband's

brother. She stayed at Namuwongo, borrowed money and started an enguli business. She says she has never regretted the decision. Luo women are defying the levirate institution with all its implications of keeping women subservient.

It is not only the wives and widows who are defying male control over their sexual and economic services but there are also rural girls who have never been to Kampala or were born in town but returned to the village before they were five years old, who are challenging male domination.

Although I knew only seven cases, my informants insisted that marriages by elopement are very common. When boys or men from Kampala return to visit Kenya they persuade girls to come and stay with them in Kampala. The men cannot raise the money to pay bride price because the majority are involved in casual wage employment, and those who have a steady income find they are left with nothing after deducting money for rent, food and clothes. The girls are bored with rural life and hope to exchange the life of "toil" for that of "leisure". So the elopement arrangement suits both parties. If the girl's relatives insist on bride price, the man asks the girl to leave. The girls usually stay on. But if bride price demands persist, the man mistreats her until she is forced to move out and rent a room or lodge with a friend. But in most cases the relatives will ignore the fact that the couple is not married because they do not want their sister or daughter to join the category of unattached, "loose" women.

My informants were very particular to stress the fact that there were no prostitutes among the Luo. In fact Parkin states that there "are very few 'prostitutes' and unattached Migrant women in Kampala (ibid.:96)". But men at Namuwongo and Wabigalo used to complain that their wives bought nice clothes which they wore for other men in the evenings. This



is understandable when we realize that 25% of the 47 Luo women in the sample had husbands who were night watchmen. While the men worked during the night and slept during the day, the women were left free to roam about.

Luo men lament the impotence of the Luo Union, which in the fifties and early sixties used to exercise great control over women in Kampala by repatriating those who misbehaved or were "loose". The Union has lost its welfare and political functions and therefore people see no point in joining just for the sake of having their bodies repatriated. (The only function of the Luo Union now is to return dead members to Kenya.) This explains why religion is gaining popularity as a form of control among the Luo. But women argue that if "virtue is lost only once," nothing is going to stop them from retaliating against their men who allegedly neglect them to sleep with other women.

In conclusion I suggest that the so-called "control over women" among the Luo is an ideal which is cited by the Luo because it makes their society seem to be untouched by foreign influences. In actual fact, the Luo are aware of the many changes that have occurred. Thus we find situations where women are playing up to men's expectations of obedience while at the same time behaving in exactly the same fashion as other urban women.

One gets the impression that the Luo do not envisage changes in the male-female relationships, clearly ignoring an obvious social fact that "A woman's position is stronger when she has a job (Goode 1965:153)".

Parkin found an economically independent class of women developing and he interpreted this as an urban status system in which the Bantu women responded to urban economic opportunities whereas the Luo women were prevented from totally



entering the system because of the cultural controls of their ethnic group. This paper, however, shows that Luo women are also participants in the system of urban self-employment, aimed at providing them with an independent source of income. My impression was that as soon as women arrived in Kampala, they readily adapted to the urban environment.

The differences in the findings may be due to the fact that Parkin talked to elite and high class Luo whereas my data are based on low-income women. This is shown by his conclusion that the differences between Host and Migrant women may decrease in the future: "Clearly with more education for women and with a larger number of girls who are born and bred in town, this will change...(1969a:96)". Perhaps if he had dealt with low-income women in an area like Namuwongo-Wabigalo he might have observed their aspiration towards economic and sexual independence, because this group of women is characterized by an independent spirit, unlike their educated and high class counterparts. As Oscar Lewis found, there may be important differences in initiative and resourcefulness between lower and upper class women; upper class women had much more to lose by leaving a marriage and striking out on their own (see his description of Isabel, 1959:16).

It may be that at the time of Parkin's study, ten years ago, Luo women were not as enterprising as they are today, or they did not feel inclined towards "revealing all their secrets" to a male researcher. I am almost convinced that women confided in me, although they knew I was doing research, because they figured we were in the same category--we were urban women.

## Footnotes

- 1 When a man sends away his wife, he sends a letter to her father, guardian or brother to show that he is no longer responsible for her. A woman who is not given this letter can always expect trouble from her ex-husband, because of his claim on her.
- 2 The statistical tests in this paper were calculated by Philip Halpenny.

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shopkeepers; six of them had been victims of the "greedy town women" and as a result their shops had collapsed; the remaining four had never allowed women to mix themselves in their shop's business.

In the sample the two Baganda women had obtained their shops because one was left a widow while the other had a rich boyfriend. Out of ten additional Baganda women shopkeepers not in the sample, three had pinched money from their partners; three had previously had successful enguli businesses and the shops were a result of their savings; three had influential boyfriends who not only gave them financial backing, but made business contacts for them; one had been accused of witchcraft and her husband had sent her away with all the things from his shop. The two Nyarwanda women in the sample had acquired their shops, one by saving from an enguli business, and the other by pinching money from her previous husband.

It would seem then that since most free unions and temporary cohabitation involve mainly Host women, it is to be expected that they will try to get as much as possible out of the marriage because they have no responsibility towards their partners. On the other hand, "Migrant women ...rarely enter into a conjugal union in which the husband has not agreed to customary marriage, with the full transfer of bridewealth (ibid.:97)". This type of marriage sounds permanent and therefore women can be expected to have the welfare of the husband or family at heart. It is necessary to look at the case study below to understand the situation that is frequent among Luo couples. The case study is typical in broad outline although not in detail.

Maria Adhiambo, a Luo aged 40, came to Kampala with her husband in 1954. They lived for two years

and roast groundnuts. They br  
(eer) and before long they were able to



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