

“Because women *are* property”:

**Issues of Gender, Food Security, Property Ownership,
Quasi-Development and Religion in Sub-Saharan Africa**

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Women are critically important providers of food in sub-Saharan Africa. Largely on the level of smallholding, subsistence farming, they are estimated to produce 70-85 percent of the food grown there. Customarily, peasant women in “regions of female farming” are expected to provide for themselves and their children as well as feed their husbands. The food security of both men and women genders and all age groups therefore depends on women’s access to land.

Despite women’s important contribution to food production, poverty is becoming increasingly “feminized” in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). An observation made by Ugandan participants in a focus group on promoting gender equality offered a chilling insight into this problem. Participants identified lack of access to property as a major cause of women’s poverty. Asked the reason for this situation, they replied, “Because women *are* property.”

This paper presents examples of the ways in which the customary treatment of women in African cultures does in fact resemble property ownership.¹ I then apply a socioeconomic theory of gender and household production to account for these practices. The autarchic, subsistence-level householding characteristic of poor, relatively less developed economies is one in which the primary value of women is in childbearing. In the resulting sexual division of labor virtually all women are subordinated, at successive stages of their lives, to some male family member -- fathers, husbands, brothers or sons. Food security is thus shown to be problematic as customary gender norms assign food production to women, but control of land and of the women themselves to men.

This paper also looks at the changes in the sexual division of labor occurring in Africa today. In other work, I recount some of the changes that occur in these gender/social practices in Western countries as economic and technological development slowly but surely shifted the site of production from the household to the marketplace (Miles, 2006; Mikkola and Miles, in this volume). Looking at what continues to be versus what is no longer produced in the household in sub-Saharan Africa suggests that these economies might be more accurately thought of not so much as “less developed” or “developing”, but as in a state of quasi- or pseudo-development. In this state, the products of development – not only goods, but services such as health care and education – are increasingly available, and at far greater quality and/or efficiency than they can be produced at home. The lack of jobs, open markets, and infrastructure, however, leave many Africans with few means of acquiring the cash necessary to purchase these superior

¹ Traditional practices vary widely among the many subgroups in sub-Saharan Africa. They are also changing rapidly. In addition, this paper does not consider the added complexities of matrilineal or matrilocal practices, which are characteristic of a few areas of SSA. I believe, however, that the principles depicted in this paper are general enough to account for this variety.

products. Ironically, as food providers, women are uniquely challenged by this stage of development, as the very rules of property ownership that deny it to women end up tying them to the land. Women are additionally jeopardized as the need for cash lures men to leave rural areas for jobs in the city. These forces often leave women out of the cash economy, deprive them of the protection of husbands, expose both husband and wife to a greater risk of HIV/AIDS infection, and constrict women's involvement with the power institutions of the larger community. Understanding these dynamics is critical for understanding the general welfare of women, family, and marriage in regions in which these economic conditions still prevail. It also makes sense of some interesting, and by Western standards, unusual practices in Africa.

Women as Property

Brideprice

The most obvious way in which women are treated as property is revealed in the practice of brideprice. Unlike dowry, which can be thought of as the bride's share of her parents' estate and which usually goes to the couple themselves (or at least to the groom), brideprice or marriage payments are paid by the groom and/or his family to the parents of the bride. Informants have described brideprice as "buying a woman" (Akatukunda 2006) and African customary marriage as an "economic exchange between two *men*, one of whom is selling a woman and the other who is buying her" (Birungi 2005). Although this practice is changing, particularly among Christians and wealthier, educated urban

populations,² young girls continue to be married off to men not of their choosing and regardless of their consent.³

Brideprice does not give a man absolute rights over a woman – for instance, he cannot “resell” her, and he has specific obligations to her – but it does entitle him to food and other items she produces, most especially the children she bears (Guyer, 2005, 109 [1991]). In subsistence economies, marriage concerns more than the needs of the individual participants, including the broader interests of the extended family and community. The cost of brideprice therefore was born not just by the groom, but by his kin group. Consequently, in many places, rights to a woman’s children and reproductive capacity, like land, passes to the husband’s male kinsmen when he dies. Relatives may arrange for an orphaned girl’s marriage and collect the brideprice (Kassindja, 1999; Arinaitwe, 2007). An American colleague who married a Congolese woman reports that when her father, whom the colleague was already helping financially, failed to ask for bridewealth, his relatives insisted that it be paid to them instead (Keener 2006). The tendency to view bridewealth as a resource of the male members of a kinship group is also seen in changes that occurred in brideprice practices in Kenya in the 1940s and 50s. The death of men conscripted into labor by colonial powers created many widows, whose only asset was their daughters’ potential to generate bridewealth (Mutongi 1999, 71).

² For example, Christian Ugandan women interviewed in a recent survey about the practice said that they had all chosen their own husbands. Burundians also say that they choose their own spouses. In contrast, their mothers’ husbands had been chosen by their families. Regardless of who chooses whom, however, brideprice usually still applies. Some parents no longer ask for it, however, and I have heard stories of the bride’s parents cashing the check given in payment and returning the cash to the bridal couple.

³ The Domestic Relations Bill under review in Uganda specifically forbids forced marriage. See also Fauziya Kassindja, *Do They Hear You When You Cry?* Delta, 1999.

However, if brideprice was paid in its customary currency, cattle, male relatives would claim it. Over time, payments shifted from cattle to cash, which could be more easily concealed from male relatives (73).

Widow Inheritance

A part of the brideprice customs is the practice of widow inheritance is “a custom whereby the brother or son of a man who has died takes over the duties and rights of husband to his widows....The widow can object to a particular kinsman, but particularly if she is a young woman still able to bear children, the bridewealth cattle transaction that contracted her marriage is still considered to be in effect and the family of the deceased man has the right to continue to father children in his name unless the bridewealth cattle are returned” (Gruenbaum, 2001, 163). When a polygamist died, his sons rejoiced if their inheritance included healthy young step-mothers-cum-wives (Birungi 2005). Only menopausal widows or those deemed to have born enough children are allowed their independence (Gruenbaum, 163).

Exclusion from Land Ownership

Customary law in Africa held that men owned the land, and women owned the crops they produced on it (Boserup, 1970, 58). Kenyatta describes the origins of historic rules regarding land ownership by noting that traditionally local tribes collectively defended the boundaries of the land claimed by them (1965, 26). The smaller homesteads were controlled by individual men or family units. At this level, land was acknowledged as belonging to the individuals who first cleared or hunted in the virgin forest. Subsequent to the founding claim, property was acquired by purchase or

inheritance (23). When a man died, his real property was inherited by his sons or other male kin. Bamire (elsewhere in this volume) points out that in Nigeria, only property located in urban areas comes under modern statutory law.⁴ In rural areas, ownership of property remains under the control of customary practices, which have no provisions for female ownership of the land they farm.

Dispossessing Widows

The converse of widow inheritance—and consistent with the customary practice of male land ownership -- is displacement of widows from the marital home. When a man dies, right to his real property reverts to men from his kinship group. Those widows who do not remarry back into the kin group -- either because they are passed the age of childbearing, refuse to marry anyone within the group, or are disliked by the husband's family -- may be forced to leave the marital property. Note that even in the West, land inherited by the husband would be considered separate property. But whereas in the U.S. separate property would normally go to the man's wife upon his death unless otherwise

⁴ Most, if not all, countries in sub-Saharan Africa operate under two or more distinct and often contradictory sets of law. The "official" set tends to be adapted from contemporary Western legal practices. The second set follows long-standing African custom, which varies from region to region. Muslim practices may also be recognized. Uganda, for example, currently tolerates multiple versions of marital law: Christian, civil, customary, and Muslim. Two of these systems require monogamy; two allow polygamy. Similarly, laws of kinship and inheritance differ among the various systems. As Cummings writes about a dispute about the disposition of a man's body, "According to Western law, the wife is the husband's next of kin. According to tribal law, she is no blood kin and has no say in the matter. The dead man's brother, and then sons, would be next of kin." (1991, 30).

specified by will, African custom assumes the opposite. A woman's own sons may evict her from the family land (Miles 2007).

Bound to the Land

Customarily, a man was allotted as much land as he could clear and his wives could keep under cultivation. If he should abandon the land, however, his brothers or other male kin could reclaim the property (Ndayirorere 2007, Bowen 2007, Bamire 2007). When men move to urban areas to work or go to school, therefore, they must leave their wives and children at home in order to maintain their claim to property. Such rules also complicate remarriage for widows. If a woman were to remarry and move to her new husband's homestead, she would have to abandon that of her late husband's, thus cutting off her sons from their inheritance (Bowen, 2007; Ndayirorere 2007). In consequences, remarriage outside of a husband's kin group was not practical for most rural women.

Polygamy

A significant manifestation of women's status as property is found in the practice of polygyny.⁵ Prior to Christian influence and European colonization of Africa, polygyny was a highly desirable state for both men and women. High status or important men were expected to have many wives. The prototypic Kenyan family inhabited a walled compound that safeguarded the hut of the dominant male/husband/father. Each of the

⁵ Although the word "polygamy" is used most commonly, this word means "many spouses." "Polygyny" refers to one man married to more than one woman; "polyandry" is one woman married to more than one man.

several wives had a separate hut within the compound for herself and her children (Kenyatta, 1965).

Polyandry

The final aspect of “woman as property” I mention only briefly here is polyandry (one woman with more than one husband). Polygyny occurs because a wealthy man can afford many women; polyandry occurs when a poor man can afford only part of a wife. Polyandry usually takes the form of brothers pooling their resources to pay brideprice for one woman, whom they share. Such “marriages” occurred in the past among the Anakole of Uganda, and offer an interesting example of polygyny and polyandry, usually thought of as opposing systems, co-existing in the same culture.⁶

Theory:

The Sexual Division of Labor and the Subordination of Women

For centuries, if not millennia, the “universal” subordination of women to men in virtually all aspects of life has been explained as a consequence of women’s innate inferiority to men. As this explanation became less acceptable socially and academically, it was replaced in some circles with theories that instead blamed women’s low status on

⁶ When a few men monopolize multiple women, some form of polyandry is bound to occur. It has been suggested that prostitution is an informal form of polyandry (many men supporting one woman.) Although Western women might find the idea of having more than one husband attractive, polyandry is not an efficient form of marriage, as women with multiple husbands cannot bear more children than they would with just one, probably get more sex than they want, and the husbands have to compete for the services of the wife and her children.

men and their superior size, strength, and aggression.⁷ The approach taken in this paper accounts for the differential status of men and women as a consequence of their specializing in different tasks within the autarchic household (Becker 1981; Miles 2006). Gary S. Becker's foundation work traces the origins of this sexual division of labor to the demands of the demands of subsistence farming characteristic of pre-industrial economies (1981). Well into the nineteenth century, for example, American households purchased metal tools and salt, which generally could not be produced at home, but grew or made everything else (Cowan 1983). Predictably, prior to development, most of these households functioned at or only slightly above subsistence level (Diamond 1999).

Prior to economic development, the efforts of many people were required to produce enough goods and services to survive. One source of this help is through purchased labor, such as hired servants, apprentices, or slaves. The optimal source of labor, however, is children. Children are more likely than servants to be loyal to their family, don't have to be paid, and they can be produced at home. In addition to the need for labor, in less developed economies children provide many vital services that Westerners no longer associate with the home, including care for or insurance against old age, disability, illness, widowhood, or disaster.

⁷ While it is undeniably true that men on average are stronger than are women, greater male upper-body strength does not make much sense of women's historic subordination to men. Strength is a relative dimension, and some women are stronger than some men. More telling, however, is the observation that the male status hierarchy does not depend on physical strength. Weak but rich old men have more status and power than strong, poor men do. There is no reason why possessing greater strength should make men dominant over women when it does not make them dominant over other men.

The need for large families combined with high rates of child mortality put women under a constant obligation to bear children. American fertility figures from before the Industrial Revolution (dated to around 1800) indicate that one quarter of the women of childbearing age gave birth each year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975). The average early nineteenth century American woman, like the contemporary Ugandan, bore about 7 children in her lifetime.⁸

While child bearing and rearing were woman's most important task, in subsistence economies there remain innumerable other demands for a woman's labor (Becker, 1981, 38 and chapter 2). The physical demands of childbearing, however, limit the kind of work that women can do without endangering the pregnancy or the small children in her care. The sexual division of labor arises as mothers specialize in those tasks that are compatible with pregnancy and lactation. Spinning, clothing construction, cooking, doing laundry, and nursing the young, elderly, and sick, are tasks usually allocated to women. And, most significantly for the present discussion, women also do most of the farming in regions where the plow is not used (Bleier, 1984; Becker, 43fn; Boserup, 1970, 26).

Men's Role in the Sexual Division of Labor

"Men's work" in general can be understood to be what is left over after women do what they can with children present (Sacks 1979). Historically, men rather than women were the hunters, blacksmiths, long-distance traders, sailors, and warriors. Where

⁸ Table 93, "Characteristics of Women Who Have Had a Child in the Last Year, 1995-1998," *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, Internet version, www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/statab/sec02.pdf. Uganda data from http://www.geographyiq.com/countries/ug/Uganda_people.htm.

the plow is introduced, farming becomes men's work (a transition that Boserup, 33, suggests that men resist). Obviously, pregnant women or those with nursing infants do not have a strong advantage in warfare, going to sea, working a forge, or plowing a field. Work may be allocated between the genders differently from one place to another based on the specific circumstances. For example, when fishing can be done from shore, close to home, and with technologies that do not require great physical exertion, fishing is women's work. When catching fish requires extended periods away or sustained physical effort, men become the fishers (Binh, no date.)

Another example of how allocation of work by gender changes with the circumstances is found in long-distance trade. Such an occupation, that keeps a person away from home for extended periods of time, is usually the province of men. At some times and places in Africa, however, women were long-distance traders, as men attempting this work were suspected of being enemy spies (Boserup). Boserup's data tables make it clear, however, that African women's participation in long-distance trade is an exception that proves the rule of female domestic specialization (1970, 95). The ages given for women engaged in long distance trades show them to be past their childbearing and rearing years.

Domestic Specialization and the Subordination of Women

Ironically, it is women's relative advantage in the home that resulted in the historic male dominance in virtually all other arenas of life. A woman's ability to produce children is not infinite, and her powers of production may be falling just as her husband's productive potential is reaching a peak. This gives men an incentive to discard

an old wife in favor of a younger woman. Becker writes that virtually all cultures have some form of the marriage contract, explicit or implicit, in order to prevent men from discarding women as they become less productive. Such contracts essentially state the resources that a man owes a woman in exchange for her productive services, and that he has the obligation to provide these resources for life. Marriage contracts also stipulate the financial obligations of either party should one wish to terminate the marriage.

In return for this life-time pledge, most pre-industrial cultures specified that the things that a woman produces, most especially children, belong to her husband, not to her. While a domestically-specialized woman who wished to leave a marriage might be able to return her father's home, divorce required her to leave behind all of what she had produced in the first household. Legally childless, a divorced woman in such economies strives to enter another marriage in order to "have more children to give her long-term security" (Gruenbaum, 2001, 173.) In addition, in cultures that practice brideprice, a women attempting to leave a marriage has to repay her brideprice. This requirement makes it difficult for a woman to seek divorce, as her family may have long ago "eaten" (consumed) her bridewealth.

In contrast, as the owner of a wife's produce and with his human capital less bound to his wife than hers to him, a husband had far less to lose in the breakup of a marriage. He also has greater direct control over family resources than his wife, and more access to cash and other extra-household resources, as he is not domestically specialized. This gives the man more power in the relationship.⁹

⁹ This line of reasoning is analogous to economic analyses of "firm-specific" versus general human capital. See also Margaret F. Brinig and Douglas W. Allen, "These boots

Women and Extra-Domestic Roles

The sexual division of labor explains the historic subordination of women to men in ways beyond those considered by Becker. Woman's domestic, family-centered roles meant that she has less impact in the community than a man. Historically many of the government and business issues that determine civic power were of little concern to her. A woman has less power because in traditional circumstances she had less reason to seek power. Politics usually did not affect home life directly, and so were literally none of women's business. As Paulme ([1960] 1964) observes, African women's "lack of participation in public life is as much about absorption in their own tasks as anything else" (cited in Cornwall, 2005, 3). Similarly, advocates for women in Uganda also note that the average woman's high workload prohibits her involvement in public life.

The expense of education compounds women's indifference to public affairs. In less developed economies, few women know enough about political issues to hold political office, or even to vote. Historically, it was unthinkable that a woman should have a working knowledge of war and the military, important components of political power (hence Henry VIII's obsessive quest for a male heir). Analogously, since it has no direct impact on their work, women in pre-industrial economies tend to have little interest in manufacture outside of the home. Although a woman may hold considerable power within her domestic areas of concern, a wife typically had little decision-making authority or ability outside it.

are made for walking': Why most divorce filers are women," *American Law and Economics Association*, 2000, [Volume 2, number 1], pp 126-69.

In contrast, politics, business and tasks involving the coordination of efforts beyond a single hearth-hold are definitely men's business. Consequently, success in a man's world requires an entirely different set of characteristics than those important to the domestically-specialized women. Such characteristics include a broad base knowledge and education ("knowledge is power"), physical and military prowess, and the ability to coordinate the efforts of others. High social status, power, being a "team player" and the ability to influence others are qualities more important to men than to women. The resulting societies tend to be strongly hierarchical, as in subsistence economies power is necessarily a zero-sum game. Most men in these cultures do not achieve success as the "big man," so their survival requires sensitivity to social ranking and a willingness to be limited by that rank. Thus the economic realities of undeveloped, poor economies results in both women's subordination to men in family, society, government, and the church, and in the subordination of most men as well.¹⁰

The Industrial Revolution, the Movement of Production out of the Household, and Family Change

The technological and economic developments that radically altered the sexual division of labor in the West began to take shape around the turn of the eighteenth century with the invention of a partially automated flour mill. This method produced fine

¹⁰ Historian S. Scott Bartchy notes that while patriarchy is usually defined as the subordination of women to men, it is actually the domination of a few men over everyone else, male and female (1999).

white flour that kept well and was easily stored and transported. Soon it became more efficient for families to buy wheat flour (and eventually, ready-made white bread) than to grow their own corn (maize), the staple of the America diet prior to this development (Cowan, 1983, 47).

This and other technological developments, including cheap canal transportation, efficient stoves both for cooking and for heating, and piped-in water, “industrialized the home” in the United States, freeing men and children from much of their traditional work (Cowan, 49). As the Industrial Revolution progressed, more and more of the necessities of life – food, clothing, shelter, education, health care – could be purchased more economically than they could be produced at home. In the U.S. and in much of Western Europe households had ceased to be centers of production well before the middle of the twentieth century. These developments radically changed the interdependences among family members. Historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan writes, “Virtually all of the stereotypically male household occupations were eliminated by technological and economic innovations during the nineteenth century, and many of those that had previously been allotted to children were gone as well” (64). Rather than remain in the household, men sought paid employment and spent most of their waking hours away from it.

With most production now taking place outside the household, children needed different education and skills than they had been getting before. By the 1930s American laws outlawed child labor and made school attendance compulsory, putting even poor American children out of the productive labor market (Zelizer, 1985, 6). The cost of

education, in combination with the decline in children's productive value, triggered a dramatic decline in the birthrate in the United States and Europe. (Table 1 here)

Eventually, most of women's traditional functions (keeping the hearth fires burning, sewing, cooking from "scratch") were replaced by mass produced items and services. While there is still much work to do in the contemporary home, it is misleading to speak of it as home production at this point. By the middle of the twentieth century, a good deal of the work done by the average Western housewife was preparation for consumption rather than the creation of new products that could not be obtained otherwise – for example, heating purchased food to put on the table rather than growing, preserving and selling it. In response, the 1960s and 70s saw large numbers of American women enter the paid workforce.

(Table 2 here)

Becker writes that the marriage contract exists to protect women in their role as child bearers (1981, 30-31). With children increasingly a net loss economically, marriage and its related social institutions are also on a decline in developed countries. Age at marriage in the U.S. and Europe has climbed, and an expanding percentage of the population has not married at all. Tenure of marriage has also declined significantly in the United States and most of Europe. Of all American adults who had ever been married, the percentage that had also been divorced doubled, from 17% in 1972 to 33-34% in 1996/98 (Smith 1999, 1-2). Other indices of the collapse of the traditional family are also at high levels in developed countries, including cohabitation and non-marital births.

Understanding the Historic Sexual Division of Labor in Africa

Women

In contrast to the developed West, in much of sub-Saharan Africa, “nearly all the tasks connected with food production continue to be left to women” (Boserup 1970).

African women produce 80% of the food grown there ¹¹ as well as provide a significant proportion of the labor on the male-controlled cash crops. “Peasants” or “cultivators” – subsistence farmers – are usually women, and their labor is referred to as “digging.” For most Africans, having children is the most important motive for marriage, and women who do not “produce” may be cast off or supplanted by another wife. Some groups require that a girl demonstrate her fertility by bearing one or two children before her brideprice is paid and the marriage legally contracted. Women are also responsible for tending children and are often seen doing farm work with an infant wrapped in a shawl on their backs.

Women carry water and prepare all meals. The latter task alone can be extremely time-consuming, as preparing grain or legumes for cooking alone may require two hours of preparation time a day (Newsom and Ringe, 1992). Many women also sell surplus crops (mostly at the local market), practice crafts, prepare food stuff, work as casual laborers or part-time, or offer other services in order to generate a little cash.

¹¹ <http://africaprise.org/99/overview.html>; http://www.thp.org/awffi/awffi_brochure/bro_03.html)

Men

Historically, African men were expected to provide certain resources to their families, such as access to cleared land or cattle to be milked. Feeding tress was a notably male task. Africa has had a very low population density, making “shifting agriculture” an efficient form of land usage (16). Shifting agriculture involves clearing land as needed and farming it until it loses its fertility, at which point that particular plot is allowed to go fallow as the cultivators move on to clear another. Hunting and warfare (often in the form of raids to steal cattle from other tribes) were other important historical occupations of men in the regions of female farming (Boserup, 1970, 19).

Male Land Ownership, Polygyny, and Brideprice

The historic practice of polygyny makes clear the strong connections between male property ownership and women’s status as property. In the past, as there was no shortage of land, a man could clear and control as much land as he could use. Polygyny added to a man’s wealth because women do most of the farm work (“digging”): The more wives, the more land a man could control; the more workers (women and children) he could mobilize; the more food or cash crops he could produce; and the higher status he achieved due to the resources he commanded (Boserup 1970, 37; Gruenbaum 2001, 165). Having many wives, many children and a thus large pool of labor, was virtually required for a man to achieve wealth in the historic African economies.¹² Economists observe that women benefit from polygyny also, in that women often prefer to have part of a superior

¹² Indeed, as Hunt and others assert, colonial and Christian rules disallowing polygyny made it very difficult for African men to generate enough cash to pay the taxes imposed on them by colonial governments (1991).

man who can marshal substantial resources than all of an inferior man. This is especially true for the more senior wives, for whom co-wives were often a source of labor to ease their own burdens. “In a family system where wives are supposed both to provide food for the family – or a large part of it – and to perform the usual domestic duties for the husband, a wife will naturally welcome one or more co-wives to share with them the burden of daily work” (Boserup, 1970, 43; Becker, 1981).

Brideprice fits neatly into these social patterns. Contemporary explanations offered for brideprice customs include: (1) brideprice payments create more stable marriages, as a woman who leaves her husband must somehow persuade her family to return the bridewealth, which they may no longer have; (2) they compensate families for the loss of their daughters’ labor; (3) they compensate families for the cost of raising a daughter; (4) payment signals that a man has adequate resources to care for a wife; and (5) payment are simply gifts given as a token of respect to parents who raised a daughter well. All of these explanations no doubt play a part in the practice of marriage payments. But perhaps at the most basic level, brideprice arises because of the practice of polygyny in conjunction with women’s high productive value created a “shortage” of marriageable women. The customary demand for many wives and their labor created a monetary market for women. Payment from the groom to the bride’s family is a solution to the problem of how to allocate a scarce and valuable commodity ((Boserup, 1970, 44; Luke and Munshi, 2003). And in rural settings, where women provide so much of the labor that created a man’s wealth, women were a commodity worth paying for.

Although Africans have a strong preference for sons, because girls generate wealth for their families when they marry, there is no strong aversion to the birth of

daughters in SSA. The demand for women, however, means that virtually all women will marry. All of her production after her marriage will belong to her husband's family. This feeds directly into the customary rules against women owning property. Jomo Kenyatta (a Kenyan trained as a Ph.D. anthropologist under Malinowski who later became president of Kenya) attributes the rules against women inheriting land from their fathers to the lack of a system of "spinsterhood" (allowances for women who do not marry) (30). Because land must remain within the tribe or kin group, women customarily could not inherit land from their husbands either. Cummings explains the logic: "The only way clan land and wealth would stay intact was if it stayed in the hands of the men. Women, after all, might leave the clan, marry others, and build up the families of strangers" (1991, 44).

As Bamire, cited earlier, notes, under customary law it is impossible for women to purchase land that is controlled by kinship groups. Similarly, although evicting widows from their marital homes has been outlawed in some countries, these laws have proven difficult to enforce in fact. Cummings reports that many widows decide not to pursue their rights under the new civil laws for fear that their late husbands' relatives might curse them with witchcraft or physically harm them (1991, 45, 91). (She also notes that older people reason, "If a wife would profit from her husband's death, it would be a terrible temptation to kill him, wouldn't it?" (30)). The logic is consistent: if a wife is "purchased" to produce for a man and his family, in no sense does the land she cultivates in order to feed those children and her husband belong to her. Only in the cities is modern statutory law enforceable.

Men and cash

Past and present, men coordinate production and marketing of “male” crops such as coffee, cocoa, cotton, and yams. Cash crops are generally considered male crops. Understanding the pattern by which some crops are determined to be “male” as opposed to female can be puzzling, especially as women seem to provide the bulk of labor in tending and harvesting crops in both categories. When we consider information provided by Guyer (1991) in the context of the sexual division of labor, however, this pattern makes sense. Traditionally male crops require what Guyer calls “interdigitation.” In growing yams, for example, men clear the ground; women make the planting mounds; both men and women plant the seed yams; women weed; men stake and train the vines; both sexes harvest; women wash and carry; men build storage barns (104). Similarly, cash crops tend to be multi-seasonal (i.e., the plants on which tea, coffee or cocoa are grown take time to mature but then persist for years), require a lot of labor (cotton), and must be storable, transportable and not readily grown in the regions of the world to which they are exported. Only a “man of importance” can mobilize the large number of workers – wives, children, dependent clients – required to plant and bring these crops to market (105). This male advantage was recognized in Sudan’s assignment of control over land in its irrigation projects to men with large families, who could provide the number of laborers needed to produce cotton (Gruenbaum, 2001, 165). Women’s crops, in contrast, are produced in a single season and require less coordination of the labor of others. Thus men control cash crops because cash crops require extra-household activities of labor coordination and marketing – activities for which the domestically-specialized woman is at a relative disadvantage. Because men control the cash crops,

they also control the cash, a significant factor contributing to women's continuing dependence on men in less developed countries.

The Sexual Division of Labor in Africa Today

What Do Men Do?

Informants in rural Uganda and Burundi said that peasant men expect their wives to provide children, work, food and sex. When asked about the male half of the sexual division of labor, however, both men and women in Matana, Burundi, insisted that it did not exist. They claimed that women did everything, pregnant or not, and that the men did nothing. "What the African man does," they quoted a proverb as saying, "is wait to be fed." When I went through my list of activities generally not considered women's work – soldiering, metal work, butchering large animals – they insisted that in Burundi, women did them all. Women even perform much of the labor involved in growing the "male" or cash crops.¹³ One young educated woman spoke easily and at length about a number of family practices in Burundi, but became embarrassed and simply could not answer when I asked what women received from husbands. Ugandan informants make similar claims about lack of male occupation. Boserup also wrote about European colonists' historic frustrations with the "lazy African man" (1970, 19).

Boserup answers part of the puzzle of the role of African men with her observation that, "Gradually, as felling and hunting became less important, and inter-tribal warfare was prevented by European domination, little remained for the men to do"

¹³ As a Ugandan informant told me, "Women grow the coffee, women harvest the coffee. Men take the coffee to market and keep the money."

(19). In other words, African men's seeming lack of occupation in the household or unique place in the sexual division of labor stems from the fact that male tasks in Africa's historic division of labor have left the household, just as they did in the West in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Protection

The Burundians' difficulty in identifying just what it is that men contribute in the household, however, begs the question of why marriage continues to be of great importance for women in these traditional cultures (Bowen 2007, Ndayirorere 2007). Further, if men have lost their place in the household economy, why do they continue to hold the dominant position in African society? Most importantly, if women are the ones farming, largely without the assistance of men, what explains the ongoing difficulty in assigning land ownership to women?

I suggest that, appearances to the contrary, men continue to make a significance contribution to the household, one that again relates directly to issues of property ownership. As noted earlier, because girl children are useful for household help and will generate bridewealth, there is no strong daughter-aversion in Africa. However, families prefer sons in large part because of the "security" afforded those with a houseful of strong men. Families with sons feel more secure in their ability to fend off invasion of robbers or quarrelsome neighbors (Arinaitwe 2006). A man who is embarrassed in a fight or quarrel with another man will send "his boys" to seek revenge (Birungi, 2007). Exacting vengeance for slights was important historically in maintaining a man's status and in turn his influence in society. Further, since sons cannot fight their own fathers,

women with difficult husbands call on brothers and nephews for protection and mediation in assuring fair treatment within their marriages (Birungi 2007). Mugalavai (2007, in this volume) found that, “women would rather be under the ‘protection’ of a men even when household burdens such as feeding the family are left to them [the women]” (3). Some of this protection is protection of reputation: A woman living on her own and known not to belong to a man may be assumed to be a “public woman” and have difficulty fending off men would want to have sex with her (Ndayirukiye 2004; Cummings, 1991, 35).¹⁴

Thus, while African men may not “provide” for their families in the Western sense of providing food or contributing to food security, their function as defender and protector continues to be an important one. This may continue to be true even if a man rarely or never has an occasion to exercise this role, as long as this threat exists. Note, however, that protection, while vital, is not a positively productive role.

¹⁴ When my colleague, an American woman who is separated from her husband, was speaking during a recent trip to Burundi, the young Burundian man sitting next to me leaned over and asked if she had difficulty with men coming to her for sex. He said that in Burundi, divorced women “who still look young” are subject to such visits. It is not clear if this problem is the result of divorced women becoming casual prostitutes, or if women without a defender have little means of denying men sex.

Pseudo-Development, Cash, the Role of Men and the Welfare of Women

Looking at development in terms of the movement of production out of the household yields a troubling picture of conditions in Africa. This perspective suggests that African economies are not so much “less developed” or “developing”, but in a state of quasi- or pseudo-development. Many of the products of technically advanced Western economies are available in Africa, although more so in urban rather than rural areas. This includes a wide range of high-tech goods, communication technology (telephones, computers, and televisions) and services such as health care and treatment for devastating tropical diseases. Ready-made fabrics and items of clothing make home production of clothing inefficient, and commercial pots and pan have replaced handmade baskets and pots.¹⁵

The availability of technologically-advanced products looks like development. Most of these products, however, are not being produced in Africa (although South Africa does produce some). Just as it became more efficient in the West for first men, then women, to purchase the products they needed rather than make them themselves, from an economic perspective it is currently more efficient for Africans to purchase foreign-made products rather than reconstruct an entire manufacturing infra-structure

¹⁵ A recent tour of a supermarket in Kampala revealed that most manufactured items for sale there (plastics, toiletries, shoes, towels, etc.) come from China, Pakistan, or other extra-African sources. Some of the “African” clothing I purchased in Africa turned out to have been made in Thailand. China’s investments in developing Africa as both a market for its products and as a source of raw materials are causing alarm in some circles.

from scratch. Thus “quasi-development” leaves Africans have an increasing need for cash, but with limited means to generate it.

Men

In the United States and Europe, the movement of men’s productive work out of the household was associated with the early stages of economic development. Although for individuals the transition must have been painful, men as a whole eventually replaced their work as smallholding farmers with paid employment, generating the cash needed to purchase the newly available items and services and further fueling economic growth. Unfortunately, this transition from household to marketplace employment has not happened yet on a significant scale in sub-Saharan Africa. There is relatively little paid employment available, and virtually none in the rural areas. Those looking for work must seek employment in the cities. This move means leaving behind their wives and the care, food, and sex their wives provide. For most men, the costs of generating cash may therefore exceed the benefits they derive from it. Economically marooned in remote rural areas, men have little to do and may infamously spend their days drinking.

Children

The “quasi-developed” state of the SSA economy can also be seen in what is happening to the productive value of children. The historic motives for having children – as a source of labor, security, insurance, and care in old age, widowhood, or disability – persist in Africa today. These motives, however, are increasingly offset by new forces pushing in the opposite direction. African parents, like American parents in the nineteenth century, recognize that in order to be competitive in this new economy, their

children need a different kind of education that can be provided in the home or villages. Education, however, is expensive, requiring cash outlays for fees and uniforms. Moreover, parents lose the value of the time the child spends in school or walking to school. Urban dwellers no longer need large families, and as Becker points out, children can be expensive even for rural families, who have to transport their children longer distances to school (1981, 97). In addition, although not universal throughout Africa and not uniformly enforced, laws regulating brideprice and forbidding child-marriage are gradually making female children less profitable. The spread of Christianity has challenged customary attitudes towards children, requiring parents to expend more resources on each child and to consider the child's welfare in addition to the larger needs of the household (Agaba 2007). It is probably for these reasons that while the birthrate in SSA is high relative to Western standards, it is slowly dropping in many countries.

Women

The fact that the majority of food produced in sub-Saharan Africa comes from smallholding plots cultivated by women for use by their families reflects another aspect of "quasi-development". The shift to factory farming that characterizes American agriculture is still a long way off in Africa. The continuing economic value of children, combined with women's critical role in food production, keeps African women within the narrow confines of their traditional role. Customs regarding land tenure and inheritance also discourage women from accompanying their husbands to urban areas in search of jobs.

Male migration to the cities without their wives leaves women bereft of male help and protection. Such separation can lead to polygyny (formal or informal) as the city-dwelling men take city wives. Men may also visit prostitutes or maintain casual lovers, liaisons that leave even fewer resources for the rural families. Wives may entertain casual lovers who provide resources that the absent husband cannot. All of these practices contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

While her workload may be alleviated somewhat by the availability of ready-made clothing, cooking utensils, or plastics, as primary food provider and caregiver of children the African woman continues to face formidable demands on her time. At the same time, “quasi-development” and the growing need for cash for school fees, medical care, and consumer goods, puts women in a particularly difficult situation. If her husband can generate cash and she cannot, a woman becomes even more dependent on the relationship. Further, the growing demand to generate cash makes it even less likely that the average woman will have the time to participate in the public arena, leaving women even farther behind in the struggle for equal rights with men.

“Lack of will”: Why Attempts to Promote Gender Equality through Legislation Are Not Immediately Successful

The same focus group that said that African women face disproportionate poverty because they are regarded as property identified governmental “lack of will” to enforce laws protecting women as another obstacle to achieving equal opportunities for women. They mentioned as well as women’s own “lack of confidence” in pursuing those

opportunities. Under pressure from the educated African elite, international aid agencies, and other NGOs, many governments are passing laws protecting women and their rights to property ownership. As long as large numbers of women remain bound by their traditional heavy workload, however, incentives to enforce these laws will be lacking. For too many women in developing countries, literacy, civil, and property rights remain irrelevant to the grinding demands of their lives. In 1970, Boserup used an example of women's own support for polygyny that illustrates this point: "In a family system where wives are supposed both to provide food for the family...a wife will naturally welcome one or more co-wives to share with them the burden of daily work. Therefore, educated girls in Africa who support the cause of monogamous marriage as part of a modern outlook are unable to rally the majority of women behind them" (1970, 43, quoting UNECA, *Polygamy*, 32). Such resistance or lack of wide-base of support for modern Western notions of women's rights means that there will be limited demand for government enforcement of the new laws allowing them property and inheritance rights.

Normative Change despite Economic Disincentives

Despite this dismal picture of the lack of economic motivations for immediate change, normative forces do seem to be having an impact on family and gender norms in developing countries. A recent study in India, for example, found that viewing television programs depicting well-educated, emancipated female characters who controlled their own money and had fewer children resulted in substantial changes in attitudes. "After a village got cable, women's preference for male children fell by 12 percentage points. The average number of situations in which women said that wife beating is acceptable

fell by about 10 percent. And women's attitudes about whether they should make their own decisions...jumped substantially...." (Waldfogel 2007, citing Jensen and Oster)

Similarly, participants in a focus group held in Kampala, Uganda (Miles 2007) identified religion as both a cause and solution to the problem of gender inequality. On the causal side, religion has an unfortunately tendency to co-opted by its social environment, coming to support rather than challenge traditional practices and thus becoming a substantial source of resistance to social change (Reeves, 1996; Yinger, 1946). On the other hand, since religion is, by definition, in the business of enforcing norms, religious support of a new practice or policy can act powerfully throughout society.

Although my research on this topic is still in the early stages, there is no doubt that Christianity is having a profound affect on customary African family practices. Some of my findings are similar to that of Elizabeth Brusco's findings in her anthropological work in Columbia: Christianity raises the status of women and the provision of resources to children (including increasing food security) by constraining the behavior of men. Brusco found that the behavioral changes required when Columbian men converted to conservative Protestant Christianity meant that men stopped spending their income (often the only cash available to the family) on their personal consumption of alcohol, gambling, womanizing, and personal clothing expenditures, and began working together with their wives to care for the family. This translated into more children in school, and better nutrition and clothing for the family as a whole. Interviews with "saved" African men show a similar process at work in the Protestant Christian

communities in SSA.¹⁶ Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to conduct such data collection, because it is so obvious to African Christians that “salvation” requires a wholesale behavioral change.

Beyond constraining men’s personal behavior, Christianity seems to be a force behind the burgeoning transformation from women *as* property to women as holders of property. Yvette Inamahoro Ndayirukiye, reporting on interviews she conducted in Burundi, writes that following the Christian revivals there in the 1930s and 40s, “Women were set free from cultural bondage that they had lived for long.... Many girls joined school [T]his promoted literacy, especially among children of brethren.... Wives of born-again brethren were no longer bothered [abused] and other women wanted to be like them. They experience a sense of love and harmony between their husbands and children. They love and respect one another. For those women who were already beyond school age, they were encouraged to attend adult literacy group in order to learn how to write and read at least scriptures.

“At home, men showed much love for their wives up to the extent of calling them sisters in Christ Jesus[. W]ives inherited property from their husbands[, which] they used...until death and then passed them to the children[.T]hey owned land as men.”

In interviews, African Christians also recognized the need to challenge customary cultural practices regarding brideprice, son preference, male dominance, treatment of children, and the number of children born. Ugandan Mercy Agaba, for examples, said that, “As Christians, we have to move out of culture in working out what God wants us to

¹⁶ Conversion to Catholicism seems to produce less of this affect, perhaps because Catholicism does not confront alcohol consumption the way that conversion Protestantism does.

do. You have to live as Christ, not as people who are following culture. One time in the Christian fellowship group, a man talked about people saying his wife bewitched him because he washed the children, clothes, because he carried the children in church. He said, 'If my wife has bewitched me to love her, then let her bewitch me the more. All I need to do now is to love God and my wife and family members. It takes a man to understand.' Otherwise we can't live in culture." Similarly, she notes that customarily, "If you are a man and you just get only girls [children], you don't feel comfortable. You would prefer to have 3 boys rather than 3 girls. But from a Christian context, we should now change our thinking. We believe children are gifts from God, whether boys or girls" (Agaba 2007).

Regarding brideprice, Agaba's Christian parents told her future husband that he need only bring whatever gift he had. She recognized that, had her parents chosen otherwise, she was bound to obey them ("The Bible says so") but that, "I would not have loved someone I wouldn't love in order to get big dowry." Fortunately, as the daughter of Christians, "God gives me a way out." Regarding asking for bridewealth for her own daughters, she said, "If you have a gift of appreciation, bring it. But it is not a matter of negotiation. [That] is like selling her. There is nothing you can pay for my daughter." (Agaba, 2007).

As a Christian father, John Ssenyonyi agrees: "Brideprice is being wiped out with Christianity, because of the perspective we have about why we are bringing up children. Traditionally, one brought up daughters because you would get cows, money, a car, a washing machine. My interest is not in what am I going to get from a child getting

married. That is not the point. I want my child to be happy, to bring up her own children. That changes the whole aspects of brideprice” (Ssenyonyi 2007).

Conclusions

Looking at development as the movement of production out of the home provides important insights into the present situation in sub-Saharan Africa. Just as happened in the United States over 100 years ago, it is no longer efficient or even possible for men to carry out their traditional roles in household production. There is increasing pressure to educate children, which exerts downward pressure on the birth rate. Unlike the U.S., however, Africans experience a continuing need for the labor and long-term security afforded by children. They face a situation in which they can buy but do not yet produce the superior products of developed countries, a condition that I call quasi- or pseudo-development. It has become inefficient to produce these items and services domestically, but at the same time most African economies do not offer their citizens the ability to earn the cash necessary to purchase these superior products.

In Africa, food security is heavily linked to the condition of women. Needing cash, but still tied to the household by the persisting need for children and food production, women are heavily affected by quasi-development. African governments, NGOs, aid agencies and other activists advocate civil rights for woman, including changes that free her from being treated as property. These include laws that guarantee her right to own property, and thus assure food security for herself and her children. But while advocates blame custom and culture for resistance to these laws, the theory

presented in this paper suggests that traditional, discriminatory practices persevere because they continue to reflect the underlying economic reality.

The influence of custom and culture will diminish quickly when the factors supporting them change. Until this happens, however, the only support for such extension of civil rights and equal opportunities for women – including the simple ability to feed themselves and their children – will be normative. Religion appears to be a strong force for such change. As Africans decide that gender equality is a good in its own right, they will increasingly push for equal opportunity for women even if the material, economic forces that keep them relatively powerless remain the same.

Tables

Table 1

Percentage of Americans Employed in Agriculture and the Average Number of Children Born by American Women, 1800, 1900, and 2002.

• 1800	74%	7.04
• 1900	39%	3.56
• 2002	2%	< 2

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Population Profile of the United States: 2000"

Table 2

Percentage of married American women employed outside the home with children under the age of 17:

1950	12.6%
1994	69%

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