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LTC #124

# LTC Paper

A COLLOQUIUM ON ISSUES  
IN AFRICAN LAND TENURE



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THE EFFECTS OF LAND TENURE CHANGE UPON WOMEN  
IN EAST AFRICAN SMALLHOLDER AGRICULTURE

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Society is fundamentally constructed of the relations people form as they do and make things needed for survival. Work is the social process of shaping and transforming the material and social worlds, creating people as social beings as they create value. Activity defines who people are . . . . Class is its structure, production its consequence, capital its congealed form, and control its issue. (MacKinnon 1982:55)

Issues relating to land tenure, women, and smallholder agriculture are central to understanding the present state of African development and the future of the continent, particularly in relation to food production and economic growth. However, hitherto, foreign planners, economists, and local politicians "had written off 'the ignorant man and his wife with a hoe' as possible instruments for progress" (Wrigley 1976:516). The "progressive" farmer with a sizable landholding and possibly interested in mechanizing was identified with the future and modernity of agriculture in Africa. The smallholder or peasant had become unpopular because "he was considered a barrier to increased productivity on the land per capita" (Nabudere 1980:203). Among the Baganda of southern Uganda, for example, the introduction in 1900 of an individualized land tenure system created a situation whereby in 1927 it was deemed necessary to pass a law guaranteeing security of occupancy to the peasants. But the unforeseen consequences of this was a stalemate situation where most of the peasant holdings were too small to permit increased productivity and the landlord could not invest in the land occupied by peasants (ibid.). However, in general, the analysis and discussions of modernizing agriculture and increasing production omitted relating the peasants' apparent backwardness to the relative position of peasants to other groups in the social system. Recently, students of development have found explanatory value in examining the productive relationships that characterize the peasantry. Vincent has clearly restated Wolf's (1966:4-17) position of the three sets of productive relations as those between the producer and the land, those between the producer and the market, those between the producer and the state (1980:190, emphasis added). It is

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important to understand these relations if the realities of African agriculture are to be grasped. Every five years and every year, the development plans and the ministers of finance or budget planning, respectively, call upon the smallholder to work a bit harder, and to sacrifice a little more in order to assist in nation-building (over the years this has become an illusive concept). Accordingly, the smallholder agriculturists continue to produce cash crops which earn foreign exchange for their countries and incomes for them to pay taxes, send their children to school, pay medical bills, and purchase consumer goods. The most profitable way to examine the changes upon women which resulted from land tenure changes is to explore the dynamics that occurred in the household economy. The substantive question that needs addressing is--what really happened when advancing capitalism entered a working relationship with pre-capitalist societies.

Colonialism, or advancing capitalism, became necessary in order to create new markets for surplus goods and new homes for "surplus" people, and thus avoid the potential for domestic revolutions in Europe created by the industrial revolution crises (Vincent 1982:14-15). In some places like South Africa, Rhodesia, and Kenya, land was alienated for European settlement; in other places like Belgian Congo, European plantations were encouraged; and in still others the land was left to the natives, after rewarding the collaborating and sub-imperialist chiefs, and designating crown land.

At the advent of colonialism most societies regarded land as a free and unlimited good. But the establishment of the colonial order resulted in cash crop farming and individualized land tenure systems in some cases. Land became a commodity to be sold and bought. As time went on land became a scarce commodity, partly due to population pressure, partly due to people expanding their acreage, and partly due to large accumulations of land by a few individuals. The scarcity intensified individual claims over rights in holdings. In other words, with scarcity, issues of tenure became important. Gulliver (1958) found that in the 1950s court records showed that litigation, assaults, and witchcraft accusations over land dominated most of the business of the lower courts among the Nyakyusa of Tanzania. During my research between 1971 and 1974, villagers painted a similar picture for the Buganda region generally. Informants pointed out that from the 1920s onward people used sorcery to deplete the fertility of their neighbor's land; in other words, it was a zero sum situation in which the agricultural prosperity of one peasant was seen to be achieved at the expense of other, less successful neighbors. Yet most peasants aimed at being successful cash crop farmers--and accusations of witchcraft or sorcery did not seem to deter ambition. According to my informants, poisoning with local herbs, rat poison, or ground up glass became widespread. By the end of the 1940s disputes over boundaries or rights over land were being settled by homemade guns. Court records show that during the 1950s prosecutions over the illegal ownership and use of homemade guns were just as common as accusations of witchcraft.

It would seem, then, that from the 1920s onward the important issues concerned the scarcity of land and maximization of tenure. The most dramatic occurrences were the conflicts that arose between men and women, and the sub-rosa "revolution" by the women in different societies not only to have access

and use rights in land, but to enjoy security of tenure as well. It is important to backtrack a bit and locate the causes of the conflicts and the "revolution." In pre-colonial times most of East African women had access to land by virtue of their membership in the household, i.e., as daughters, sisters, and wives. The only record of women enjoying rights of tenure was recorded among the Amhara of Ethiopia (Hoben 1973). Elsewhere men were seen as the stable elements of society with regard to control of land. This was true in patrilineal societies (where descent is traced through males), as well as matrilineal societies (where descent is traced through females). Production was carried out by family groups. This funneling of labor and skills to exploit the natural resources in order to obtain products and goods has been referred to as the family estate (Gray and Gulliver 1964:5). Current usage refers to this mode of labor organization for the exploitation of resources as the household economy. It is worthwhile to bear in mind that the decision-making and management of labor were assumed by either men or women, depending on their areas of expertise. For example, the women whose main job was to plan and manage the family food supply would ask for help in harvesting the grain before the rains or before the birds could consume it all, or they would suggest that additional land be cleared and prepared for such and such a crop. Yet

'in nearly all the documents concerned with productivity of the small farmer, the assumption is that this small farmer, who's to produce more food, is a man . . . the farmer, he . . . .' This is a false assumption since it is predominantly the women who produce the food crops, harvest them and carry them to the market. (Economic Commission for Africa Study, n.d.)

In most areas the onset of colonialism can be identified by the introduction of cash crops. Different members of the family estate were affected differently. Cash cropping was integrated into the agricultural routine and became part of women's work. Thus a full working day for the women consisted of three parts--domestic labor and necessary productive labor (both to provide subsistence), and surplus labor (appropriated for the market). Thus cash crop production had two visible effects upon women. Firstly, it interfered with their ability adequately to feed their families as the acreage for cash crop production increased at the expense of the food acreage. Secondly, it increased women's work so that not only did they have to cultivate and weed more acreage but they had to look further for firewood or fodder for calves (ibid.) as the nearby forests and pasture came under cash cropping. Capitalist penetration affected the resources as well as relations of production--in particular the subordination of women was enhanced, and reproduced within the household. Below are some examples from Uganda from Kenya illustrating women's reactions to the new state of affairs within the colonial political economy.

The sexual division of labor that resulted from incorporating the Amba into the world capitalist economy was as follows: men and women contributed labor to produce the new cash crops (cotton and coffee), but the men controlled the product and kept the proceeds from the sales. The husband usually gave his wife a few shillings out of a hundred for her use as she sees fit. Of

course he buys her . . . cotton cloth, but these are presents from him rather than a share of the proceeds which are a woman's by right" (Winter 1955:15). Women resented contributing labor to crops which enriched their husbands at their expense. Bwamba society was characterized by a high divorce rate which meant that women were constantly having to change their place of cultivation. Everyone (men and women) had access to land as long as they cultivated it, but one suspects that women's access depended upon marriage. Consequently, women preferred working on food crops, whose products they controlled and could also sell (as in the case of rice) rather than working on perennial crops like coffee (*ibid.*).

Among the Baganda, cotton was introduced in 1904 and three or four years later the women were threatening to disrupt the family food supply if they did not get a fair share of the consumer goods, clothing, etc., which the men were enjoying (see Hattersley 1908). Agricultural reports show clearly that the women cultivated, harvested, and carried cotton to the trading posts where the men readily took charge of the cash from the sales (see Lamb 1910:7). By the 1920s women were demanding plots of land to grow cotton for their own use. Divorce became prevalent because women objected to working to enrich men without reward. It is common knowledge that an African man without a wife cannot prosper. In other words, Ganda women discovered earlier on what other African women were to discover later, that the power of "the employing class"--the males--could be disrupted if women refused to apply their muscle power to the hoes!

Ganda women began to own land unobstrusively until by the 1950s it had become an accepted social practice for women to own land and to bequeath it to their daughters or sisters if they so wished. Even fathers with only daughters began to leave the estate to them instead of passing it on to brothers. Today women regard land as the most valuable investment. Women work hard to save money for it, sometimes achieving the end by hook or by crook. The Ganda customary law had never categorically stated that women could or could not own land and women cleverly seized on the loophole.

The argument for not allowing women to own land has always rested on the fact that it would make them independent as a result of their ability to grow cash crops and use the money to repay bridewealth. Evidence from the Toro and Nyoro of western Uganda, and the Akamba and Kikuyu of central Kenya, shows that the male fears were realized despite lack of official recognition of women's rights to land tenure. The ultimate result of this subrosa revolution in these societies is the independent female householder. She owns land, owns her house, organizes her own family labor, and is jurally responsible like the men who enjoy the same rights.

The following case studies are important because they are instances where the ideology stated clearly that while women could have access and usufructuary rights in land as wives and mothers, they could not own the land they tilled because it belonged to the lineage. Among the Luo, the principle of economic gerontocracy, i.e., the principle whereby on the one hand it is the oldest men in the lineage who possess control over property and authority, and on the other it is the father who is preeminent with respect to property rights in the family, prevails.



When cotton was introduced as a cash export crop in 1908, failure resulted. Luo women preferred to concentrate on the food crops which they fully controlled. It is no accident that Luo women very early on came to dominate food trading in all the major urban areas of East Africa. The nontrading women did join the "egg circles" (cooperatives) started by the government between 1947 and 1949 to market ghee and eggs to the urban centers and to the army barracks. But these collapsed due to organizational misconception and mismanagement. Each cooperative had a male secretary who was in charge of marketing and paying the members. It did not take long for the cooperatives to collapse finally when in 1956 the women realized that they were being cheated by the secretaries who paid them less for their eggs which they had switched with the bad ones of their own, etc. (Fearn 1961:2111-12).

The experiences of the Luo women are further interesting from another aspect of capitalist penetration. The Luo area (Nyanza province) as well as most of western Kenya have been, especially since the 1940s, labor-exporting areas. Although the colonial policies generally created labor-reserve areas to serve the cash crop growing areas, the European farms and plantations, in the case of Nyanza high male migration was due to chronic land shortages. In this situation the work burden of Luo women increased because not only were some growing surplus food crops for sale but with the males migrating to the towns where they were underpaid, the women had to subsidize them by regularly providing food. As Jorgensen has argued, migrants are proletariats because

Migrant labour is semi-proletarianised labour in that the worker has not yet been 'freed' entirely from possession of land as a means of production and subsistence. Migrant labour is paid at a level below the subsistence level required for the maintenance and reproduction of labour power (the cost of raising a family and providing for old age) and hence remains tied to the soil to make up the difference between wages and the subsistence level (1981:109-110).

The underdevelopment of the Uganda "labor reserve" areas came to a head when in Ankole and Toro the taxes collected in 1926 could not cover the salaries of chiefs. In that year the colonial state officially ended its policy of discouraging cash crops in labor-producing areas (*ibid.*:110). But the expatriate commercial community even by 1937 still continued to press the colonial government to revert to the former policy (*ibid.*:111).

It is clear from many accounts that food production was threatened by the household labor reductions in the labor-exporting areas. This problem is illustrated by the numbers of adult males who migrated in 1952 alone--from West Nile, 28 percent; Kigezi, 46 percent; and Toro, 16 percent (*ibid.*:113). In most of East Africa the women abandoned the traditional time-consuming, but nutritious, crops like millet and adopted maize, cassava, and potatoes, which are less labor intensive. This adversely affected the health of those left behind in the villages.

But even in cash cropping areas the previously more diversified economies were destroyed, the peasants were deskilled, i.e., forced to perform compulsory labor for government public works, and even forcibly recruited for carrier

corps for the war. At the same time it was important to cultivate cash crops in order to pay taxes, etc. Vincent has documented for Teso, the emergence of a rural proletariat<sup>1</sup> between 1909 and 1920 (1982:212-31). The argument put forward is that the class emerged out of the labor process and not out of production and marketing processes (ibid.). This is true for most of Africa. The peasant maintained the colonially created chiefs by contributing labor and taxes. In Teso the alienation of labor apparently involved one sector of the population--males. Men over eighteen years were obliged to maintain compulsory cotton acreages, to perform compulsory labor services,<sup>2</sup> and many of them to serve out of the district in military drafts. Meanwhile the majority of the population--women and children--remained tied to small plots of land within a nonexpanding domestic economy (ibid.). The costs of reproduction within the capitalist economy were largely borne by these domestic households (ibid.). It is no secret that household production fostered by the circumstance of nascent capitalism was regarded as cheaper than settler or plantation production. The former would not disrupt the colonial order whereas the latter were costly because they depended in most cases on government subsidies, and were also regarded as politically awkward (Jorgensen 1981:64).

The household economy not only supplemented inadequate urban incomes but also absorbed the underemployed and unemployed people. The issue of female proletariats has never been discussed, but from my research experience I feel that they deserve attention. The oversight may be partly due to the way female and male labor were commoditized in the capitalist system. Men had to earn wages and ensure the production of cash crops; women, on the other hand, in their roles as wives and mothers, were in charge of subsistence production (and cash crop production is often delegated to them as well). Thus all the time women must ensure that people were fed despite the fact that less land and labor are available to them.

Colonial as well as present-day officials have never openly admitted to the existence of a rural proletariat or a landless class. In 1953-55, the East African Royal Commission recommended, among other things, that as an incentive to economic progress holdings should be individualized and the titles registered in both rural and urban areas, that urban wages should be increased, and that rural incomes had to be increased so as to raise the standard of living and thereby curb some of the migration to the cities. In short, people from areas with land shortages would be encouraged to settle in the urban areas and those from other areas would be ensured security of tenure so that they could get on with the business of cash crop production. But usually it is not only

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1. Proletariat--Lenin defined rural proletarianization as "Insignificant farming on a patch of land with the farm in a state of utter ruin, inability to exist without the sale of labor and an extremely low standard of living." Lenin, The Development of Capitalism in Russia, Collected Works, vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), p. 177.

2. The compulsory services such as road maintenance were often in practice fulfilled by women as members of the household. This was particularly so if the men engaged in some wage-paying labor locally or in nearby townships.



the officials who refuse to face the reality of land shortages; most societies still idealize the pre-capitalist era and regard land as a free and plentiful good. Yet land was a central issue in colonial political crises and definitely important in domestic politics as women demanded the right to control the products of their labor. In sum, agrarian societies lead to increased economic differentiation within the population so that there is betterment for a few at the expense of many. Women fare even less well. (Vincent 1982:162).

However, even in well planned and seemingly successful land usage projects, women do not seem to fare better. A few examples given by Chambers (1965:174) will suffice. In the Zambian Kariba project, women were expected to lose their cultivation rights in land. The success generated by the Gezira project in Sudan led to some women being veiled. This led to loss of the traditional sources of income, i.e., food sales--but men controlled the new source of income. In the Mwea Rice Scheme in Kenya, women did not know what their husbands received for the paddy, and bitter family quarrels have arisen from the husbands' monopoly over the new income. In the Nachingwea project in Tanzania, that old problem of division of labor between the sexes along modern and traditional methods and techniques reappeared. Although the tractors seemed to lessen the chores connected with ground-breaking for both sexes, the women found that they now had more ground to weed and the tractors had apparently done men's work. This increase resulted in domestic upheavals that caused otherwise successful tenants to leave the scheme.

#### Concluding Remarks

Issues relating to land are central to social change or what is currently referred to as development. A development plan for Uganda that is regarded as progressive even today was published in 1946. But the first officially sponsored intellectual appraisal of British colonial Africa in its last phase before independence was the 1953-55 East African Rural Commission (MacMillan 1976). It was commissioned at a time when it was apparently still possible to take a long-term view of development within the colonial framework. The recommendations dealt at length with issues concerning land tenure, security and tenure, and security of residence in the urban areas. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, imported "experts" and World Bank reports did not go beyond the recommendations of the Royal Commission. In fact, even current discussions on East African socialism have not grappled with some of the Commission's recommendations.

It has become increasingly obvious that, given the periphery capitalism that dominates East Africa, modernization or development could not continue to be viewed as positive progressive emulation of Western development. Recent studies have shown how asymmetrical the development that took place between nations and regions was. However, the issue of women benefiting less than men from development is constantly being reduced to a mere footnote by national planners and politicians. Certainly, no government has confronted the issue of land, preferring to refer to the peasants or masses as if there were no division of labor by sex and competition for the basic resources on which depends the achievement of power, wealth, and prestige. If indeed development should

be concerned with solving societal problems, i.e., search for means and ends to better peoples' lives, then I think it is foolhardy not to pay attention to women's attitudes toward land. Although in many African societies women lack security of tenure, land is nevertheless regarded by the majority as something worth saving for and acquiring. I feel that the time, energy, and money usually spent on the acquisition of land would, if directed into proper channels acceptable to women, lead to phenomenal African progress. Most women and men nowadays acquire such small plots of land, between .5 and 2 acres, that one feels that governments must develop national land policies which will make people secure.

There is need to understand the household economy that evolved under capitalism as well as how men became the managers of labor (employers) while the women (workers) became invisible. Despite the fact that women's work increased as they met the market requirements of cash crop production, and subsidized the economy by feeding the urban migrants as well as the rural proletariats with the shrinking and unproductive rural resources, women were never regarded as central to development by planners. At the local level, however, the smallholder male farmers and the other family members were very much aware of the women's contributions. For example, although Mafeje and Richards (1973:183-84) contend that family labor does not seem to play a key role in cash cropping in Buganda (southern Uganda), evidence points to the contrary. They claimed that it was rare to find a husband and a wife receiving help from growing boys and girls as in most peasant societies. The reality of most Ganda household labor is that everyone is expected to contribute to the chores connected with coffee production. Children in boarding schools usually stay at school during the vacations because the chores connected with farming would interfere with their schoolwork. Children attending day schools do not look forward to Saturday farmwork and during the week try to reach home after dusk in order to avoid picking just one more basket of coffee before sunset! As women divorce or desert their husbands in order to avoid, among other things, backbreaking hoeing, their children are raised by stepmothers who expect the children to contribute more than their fair share of household labor.

In a study on the constraints of labor time availability in the Bukoba district of Tanzania, researchers found the major constraint to be time spent on activities related to morbidity and mortality, but the men perceived the constraints as due to the time women spent on domestic chores, particularly food preparation. In fact, women prepared food, fetched water, and collected firewood and breast-fed the children during the so-called "leisure" periods, i.e., while men rested and socialized (Kamuzora 1980:130-33). The issues raised by this case study are all important and point to the fact that women should receive high consideration in agrarian reform programs. If women are going to spend three hours a day preparing food, if women are going to grow on marginal land food that is less labor intensive and less nutritious, there will be less time for cash crop production, because not only will they be malnourished, but their families too will be. Consequently, time and energy will be taken up mostly by diseases (spending between six hours to several days to visit a medical practitioner), and deaths (in most places not only is the attendance at funerals mandatory if good relations between people are to be maintained, but agricultural work is usually suspended for a few days).

There is need, further, to examine the decision-making practices in the household economy. In a smallholder situation it is possible that men and women enjoy different spheres of activity management, and that women assume more management responsibilities when men migrate and leave them behind. But as has been well documented, women are denied access to agricultural information (Staudt 1978) as well as the primary resources in agricultural production --land and labor (Sachak 1980). In many ways the subrosa "revolution" conducted by women is supposed to achieve access and control over land and labor.

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