

AFRICAN WOMEN AND AMERICAN RESEARCHERS:

A PERSONAL NOTE

by

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It was a hot afternoon in July that decided the shape of my research experience in Kenya. The harvest was still a few weeks away and in the relative leisure of that period in-between, the women of Seme found the time to complete a number of tasks which had been postponed during the peak agricultural months. Fifteen-year old Akinyi came running to tell me that the women of several different families had gathered to help build a house and asked if I would like to come and see how the work was organized. I had only been in the village a few weeks and this opportunity to watch a work party in progress seemed too good to miss. I grabbed a notebook and set out after Akinyi.

When I arrived at the work site, I found that the women were divided among a number of different jobs. Teenage girls brought buckets of water from the river, carefully balanced on their heads. Some of the women were digging up soil and mixing it with the water and handfuls of straw to make mud. Others carried armloads of the mud and packed it into the open framework of wood and twigs that the men had assembled earlier. The side walls were already beginning to take shape. Fascinated, I sat on a slope behind the house and took careful notes on who was participating, how they divided the work, and how they were related to one another. Occasionally I munched handfuls of *nyoyo*--the snack of maize and beans--provided to feed the workers.

This idyllic scene lasted for about twenty minutes, at which point one of the older women I had been watching grumbled and called out to me, "Hey, white girl, what's the matter with you? Do you think you're too good to get your hands dirty like us?" I put down my notes and my preconceived notions of the role of a researcher and started carrying mud. In the following months I learned a great deal about women of Seme, from their words as well as their actions. If I wanted to live in the village, I would have to give up watching from the sidelines and I would have to make a number of concessions to local attitudes about the proper role for a young unmarried woman.

This anecdote illustrates some of the potential rewards and also some of the problems of conducting research among African women. Until recently, African women have been generally neglected as sources of information about the past. Students of history, for example, have a marked tendency to head for the old man. And an older generation of anthropologists, men like Evans-Pritchard and K.C. Shaw, had no qualms about basing their discussions of Luo marriage customs entirely on the evidence of male informants. Yet a greater attention to African women as informants is critical, both in order to include their evidence in any larger study, and to learn about their present and historical situation as women. One of the great unwritten chapters of African colonial history, for example, is the social history of the women who stayed behind as their men were drafted for military service or taken to work on mines or plantations. Definitions of women's work and women's education, responsibilities as citizens, wives and mothers - all of these have changed radically in the past century and deserve closer study.

In my own research, economic history - and not women's history - was the subject under investigation. But I found that Luo men and women excelled as informants in quite different spheres of knowledge. Men were generally the best informants with regard to genealogy and political questions and felt most comfortable discussing these matters, while the women were unquestionable of greater help when it came to local trade and agriculture. The differences in their accounts reflected the differential concerns of men and women in that society, and also the relative status of various activities. While food crop agriculture provides the economic base for the entire region, it is less valued than either pastoralism or wage labor, and as a consequence, many men do not feel it is a worthy topic of discussion. A number of men acknowledged quite openly that they were not familiar with past or present varieties of the staple grain crops. They advised me to ask their wives. Although this is a particular case, but in any society one would expect the perspective and expertise of men and women to differ.

Researchers sometimes assume that the oldest women of the community are necessarily the best informants. It is true that they can help establish the greatest historical depth, but I found it more useful to interview women of different ages as one means of trying to assess change over time. In terms of collecting, comparing and evaluating oral evidence, there is little difference between the testimony of women and of men. A minor problem I encountered (and this again may be a local phenomenon) was that women informants had greater difficulty assigning specific dates to past events than did men. Their sense of historical time often had a personal character. When asked when something happened, they most frequently answered in terms of their own

marriage or the birth of their children; "that was just after I bore Otieno, before he ate gruel," or "that was when I was pregnant with my first child." Obtaining reliable estimates of their children's ages (many of whom now have children of their own) or of the year of their marriage presented considerable problems. I found it more satisfactory in the long run to have worked out a rough chronology of locally remembered events (major famines, when the first plane flew over, the death of a particular chief, and so on) against which other testimony could be measured. For example, "Did the famine of Otonglo find you already visiting the market at Luanda?"

Despite the obvious desirability of using both male and female informants for any type of research, it is undoubtedly more difficult to interview rural African women, because of their relative lack of ease in dealing with foreign visitors and because of time constraints. Through their outside work experience and their usually longer years of formal education, rural Kenya men tend to feel more comfortable in their initial confrontation with a foreign researcher than do their wives. For a male researcher, this would pose an even greater problem. In this context it is sometimes helpful to bring along a friend whom the woman trusts to the first meeting, and to interview the women without her husband wherever possible. The best way to ensure stimulating and helpful interviews, of course, is for the researcher to stay in the same area for several months or longer so that the women can come to know and trust her.

In my own case, I found that living with an African family rather than setting up a household of my own made it considerably easier to fit into the local community and to make friends. Bear in mind that "fitting into a local community" carries with it responsibilities as well as opportunities. In addition to the demands for my labor services mentioned above, I was frequently asked to help write letters or interpret official communications, to get teenagers out on bail, to drive sick people to the nearest hospital, to carry grain or chickens to relatives in Kisumu and so on. As one of my informants pointed out, "After all, it's only fair. You're asking for our help in your research; you should be prepared to help us in return."

A more serious problem, I found, was the time constraints faced by Luo women. In western Kenya, as in many parts of Africa, women are responsible for much of the agricultural work, and their days are quite full with working in the fields, marketing, fetching water and firewood, housecleaning and child care, and preparing meals from the time they get up which is often just before dawn. To some extent, it was an imposition for women to have to talk to me during the day. This is probably a fairly common problem for researchers, and there are a number of ways it can be handled. One way is simply to plan several brief visits rather than one long one which would take out a large chunk

of the working day. The researcher can plan her own schedule to take advantage of those times which are most convenient for the women. I found that early morning (after breakfast but before going to the fields) and late afternoons (before going to market) were the best. Older women with daughters-in-law in the home often do not have the same time pressures as younger ones. Intensive field work can also be planned to coincide with the seasons of relatively lighter agricultural work.

Another approach which is still better, is for the aspiring researcher to accompany local women to their farms and to market, help out with some of their tasks and chat at the same time thereby gaining a closer personal understanding of their lives. I picked up several useful skills in this way, everything from planting, weeding and harvesting maize and sorghum, smearing the floors and walls of houses with mud and cowdung, preparing and serving massive quantities of food for marriage and funeral ceremonies. I also enjoyed waiting on customers who came to the shops to buy what seemed like infinitesimally small amounts of various goods: one cigarette, a spoonful of oil or of salt, one aspirin, a slice of soap. People chuckled to see a *mzungu* (European) taking part in all of those activities, and I'm sure it all helped to make me seem more familiar and less strange than I might otherwise have been.

There were other, less tangible benefits. A certain bond developed among us as women. My new friends spent a fair amount of time discussing the plight of women in that area, and lamenting the degree to which women had to depend on their husbands for social as well as financial security. They observed closely (sometimes too closely!) the progress of my romance with a fellow American and urged me to maintain friendships with other men. It was foolish to gamble too much on any one relationship. They were very interested to hear comparisons between American society and their own, and delighted in the notion that American men could be imprisoned for polygamy! These conversations arose spontaneously, as I certainly made no attempt to influence their "consciousness" or to impose my own prejudices. After all, my continuing presence in that region depended on the tolerance of the men as well as that of their wives.

It did not take me long to develop profound admiration for the women of Seme, and respect for their courage and stamina. Ultimately my contact with them helped to shape the quality of my experience in Kenya and also the content of my research. I had come to learn about local economic history; they helped me to understand the particularly important role of Luo women in rural economic change, a topic which had not been included in my original research design. (Some of the results of this investigation will appear in "Luo Women and Economic Change during the Colonial Period." in Edna Bay and Nancy Hafkin, *African Women in Changing Perspectives*, forthcoming - Stanford University Press).

They taught me the names of all their crops and the technology associated with them. They were exceptionally helpful in recalling what goods they had taken to which markets in the past, and what they bought in exchange. Above all they helped me to understand the particular fabric of their lives - the relative lack of bargaining power they have vis-a-vis their husbands and the emotional precariousness of that relationship, the difficulty of trying to live as a single woman in that society, and more than anything else, the hopes they invest in their children, particularly their sons, for whose comfort and education they make countless sacrifices and in whom ultimately their security will lie.

Up to this point the problems of being a woman researcher as opposed to doing research about women - have been neglected. On the whole I do not believe that such problems are terribly important. If some of the elders treated me less seriously than they would have a male researcher, this did not emerge clearly either during the interviews or in their testimony. For better or worse, being white was probably more overwhelming as a status consideration than being female. And to tell the truth, it seemed on occasion that being young, single and female actually made it easier and more pleasant to gain access to district and agricultural officials, who were unfailingly helpful if sometimes paternalistic.

Of course there were minor annoyances. I had to be exceptionally discreet in my personal relations with local men and to avoid situations which would lead to gossip and suspicion of ulterior motives. All of this could be true in any research situation, however. As for the interesting and important research which needs to be done with regard to African women, I believe women researchers have a distinct advantage. The problems are minor and the rewards are very real.

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