Southern African Journal of Gerontology (1994), 3(1): 1-7

Gender and old age among the Samia of Kenya

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Abstract

Gender differences in old age among rural Samia in western Kenya are explored from a life-course perspective, i.e. as the outcome of gender differences in opportunities and experiences from childhood into old age. The impact of socio-economic change is considered, along with ways that lifelong gender-differentiated experiences affect old age, particularly regarding the special problems or vulnerabilities of women compared with men.

Introduction

Much gerontological research concerns a genderless "old (or older) person" or "the elderly," yet gender is salient in old age as it is earlier in life. It is time that more attention is paid to gender, for better understanding of the elderly and for addressing their problems more sensitively (Cattell, in press, a; Glasse & Hendricks, 1992; Rossi, 1985). It is insufficient to say that there are more older women than men, true though it may be; or that older women are more likely to be poor and/or widowed than older men. The cumulative and immediate consequences of gender differences in life experiences and in old age need to be fully considered.

What follows is a descriptive account of gender differences through the life course and in old age among Samia in rural western Kenya. Despite sharing an agrarian life-style and a common culture, the life experiences of females and males in Samia diverge in many respects. Age effects, or differences in historical experience by age cohorts, reflect the socio-economic changes of the past century which profoundly – and differently – have affected female and male life patterns (Cattell, 1989a; 1994) and shaped older persons' present experience of old age.

Older women's lives have sharply differed from those of men regarding residence, education, experiences outside the home area, and in other ways. The sexual division of labour (predating the British conquest) involves people, most of the time, in different tasks: "women's work" and "men's work." Whether working or socializing, people spend much of their time in gendered settings: women with girls and other women, men with other males (Cattell, 1989b). This indigenous pattern of gendered spheres of work intensified in the colonial era when education and employment for Africans were limited primarily to men.

In addition, women's lives are more closely tied to their reproductive biology – menstruation, pregnancy and lactation, the end of childbearing – than are the lives of men.

For example, adolescent Samia females are ready for marriage both biologically and socially, while adolescent males are a long way from marriage – for cultural, not biological reasons. Postmenopausal women are more "like a man" socially, and may perform certain rituals and give advice – advice-giving being a quintessential role of elders. This is not a "biology is destiny" argument; rather, it is recognition of differences between the sexes which result "from direct biological experience, rather than from the social constraints associated with biology, which are almost entirely culturally determined" (Ware 1984:6; cf. Hendricks, 1992).

Research methods

Data for this paper were obtained from ongoing ethnographic fieldwork which began in 1982 and has been carried out among Abaluyia people, particularly in the rural Samia Location of the Busia District (county) in Kenya's Western Province, and among Abaluyia in the city of Nairobi.[1] The research extended over two years, from November 1983 to November 1985, with four-to-six-week visits in 1982, 1987, 1990, 1992 and 1993. Research methods included participant observation; informal, structured and biographical interviews; and collection of other types of data (Cattell, 1989a). The questionnaire survey of 416 older Samia (200 women, 216 men, age 50 and over) which is extensively utilized in this article was carried out in four administrative subdivisions of Samia Location in 1985.

A century of change: sociohistorical context

The Samia (*Abasamia*, in their language) live around the northern shores of Lake Victoria in Uganda and Kenya. A century ago the Samia lived in small kin-based groups in fortified villages. They were subsistence farmers and herders little affected by the world economy or exogenous cultural influences other than contacts resulting from numerous local migrations – until the arrival of the British in the late 19th century (Thomson, 1885). During the 20th century Samia changed radically under outside influences such as colonialism and nationhood, cash cropping and labour migration, urbanization, and the development of European ideologies and institutions such as Christianity and formal education (Cattell, 1989a; Seitz, 1978; Soper, 1986).

Today the Samia are peasant farmers who still grow much of what they eat but also engage in cash cropping, petty trading, wage employment and other income-generating activities. There are churches, schools, a hospital, telephone and electric lines, police, government administrators, roads and

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public transportation. These changes have occurred during the lifetimes of those who are now elderly. They themselves were innovators participating in the changes – especially the males. For it was boys and men who went to school, served in the military in World Wars I and II, went outside Samia seeking wage employment, spent time in newly urbanizing areas, learned to speak Swahili, and in general had much greater exposure to the new influences than did women.

But in spite of a century of complex and profound change, Samia people today are decidedly agrarian or rural in work and life-style. For example, agricultural work is done by hand labour; all roads are dirt; "footing it" is the most common mode of transportation; and private telephone and electric hookups are rare. Samia society remains strongly kin-based. Clans, partrilineages and extended families are salient in the lives of Samia people whether they are in rural or urban areas. Many today are doing as their fathers and grandfathers did: moving back and forth between city and farm, maintaining contacts with kin, and developing their rural homes (cf. Møller & Welch, 1990; Stucki, 1992).

Older Samia women and men

Samia who are old today were pioneers in the transformations wrought by colonialism. They are the ones who first learned to read and write, raised cash crops and worked as wage labourers. Men were encouraged (and sometimes forced) to respond to the labour demands of the colonial capitalist economy. Women's participation in the modern economy and access to productive resources were restricted by various means such as the emphasis on education and wage labour as male activities. Women continued their roles in the family subsistence and reproductive economies but with diminished benefits for their status and less opportunity to accumulate wealth compared to the indigenous situation (Cattell, 1989a). Thus men had much better access to resources in the modern economy. These economic differentials have continued into old age.

Regardless of these gender differences, Samia elderly focused their lives on attachments to land, to previous generations and to kin (both patrilineal and maternal). Many men who went outside for employment maintained their ties with kin in Samia and returned home to live out their elder years and eventually be buried on the land of their fathers. In spite of discontinuities, it is in their rural home that these people developed and maintained lifelong social networks.

Socio-economic characteristics of elderly Samia are summarized in Tables 1 and 2. Some categories in Table 1 are omitted from Table 2 because they are redundant, or because age is irrelevant or of little interest.[2] Presenting the material in two tables, one with gender only (Table 1), the other with both gender and age (Table 2) as independent variables, provides a picture of the pervasive influence of gender on life experiences and also allows the unravelling of some age or cohort effects, i.e. the effects on individual lives of broad socio-economic processes. This is so even though chronological age is somewhat unreliable, since many Samia elders (especially women) do not know their age in years. But even an estimated chronological age situates people at least roughly in historical time.

Samia: a life-term social arena

Most Samia live in a "life-term social arena" (Moore, 1978). Though many migrate to the city for employment, they can, and do, go home again; they are likely to return at retirement to their home village. In a life-term social arena there is a great deal of social continuity in spite of profound changes in many areas of life. Personnel change primarily through generational succession, not from migration. There is social interdependence and reliance on known individuals for goods and services through exchanges which may be deferred and are not necessarily immediately symmetrical but rather based on the principle of life-time reciprocity (Caldwell, 1982; Cattell, in press, b; LeVine & LeVine, 1985).

Samia are tied to land: men through tenure and inheritance rules, women through cultivation and burial rights acquired through marriage. Most women (93%) have lived in the same place for "many years," essentially since they married and moved to their husband's home. Only 7% of the women were born in the same village in which they now live; 22% of them were from other Abaluyia subgroups (compared to only 3% of the men). Thus most women at the time of marriage were removed (sometimes by force, as reluctant brides) from their natal group and village, and have lived most of their lives among in-laws. They will be buried on their husband's land (Cattell, 1992a).

Though nearly all older men spend time (sometimes years) living away from their home area, 73% said they had lived "all their lives" in the place where they now live. The years living away from home seem not to count. Home is the place that matters; so long as your kin are there, and you have a house on the land of your fathers, living elsewhere is temporary and "outside". Many men in old age tend to live near brothers and other male kin, and to see them often. In the survey, 49 % of the men said that they lived near brothers and/or uncles (father's brothers), compared to only 5% of women, who are "only visitors", the "strangers" who marry in.

In spite of interruptions in residence – for women, through marriage and sometimes urban residence with an employed husband; for men, through labour migration – these Samia old people have lived their lives in a life-term social arena. They were born into, and have remained enmeshed in, kin-based social environments. They are ageing among their age-mates and their descendants: among lifelong friends, among kin.

The world beyond Samia

Men have had many more experiences of the outside world, through education, labour migration and military service, while women have for the most part stayed at home.

Very few of the women had any formal schooling: only 7%, compared to 40% of the men. Of 59 women aged 70+, not one went to school; a handful of women from the two youngest age cohorts attended school for a few years – 13 women altogether. Men had the same pattern: only 16% of the oldest men had some schooling, compared to 58% of men in their 50s. No woman went beyond Standard 4, while 34 men (15%) did.[3] These patterns unquestionably reflect the gradual development of formal education for Africans, although the main reason why women did not go to school was that they the colonial government encouraged education only for males. Another reason was that parents allowed sons to try the new way but were more conservative with their daughters, preferring them to follow the traditional path of marriage. In these decisions the acquisition of bridewealth was a likely motivating factor, along with perceptions (both colonial and indigenous) of women's reproductive roles as primary.

Male labour out-migration in Samia has been high during most of this century. Only seven women surveyed were ever employed outside Busi District (county), but 87% of the men had been labour migrants. Of the women, only a third had ever been to Nairobi, compared to nearly 80% of the men. Men pursued wage labour in many places in western Kenya and 54

Table 1
Socio-economic profile of old people of Samia, by sex: percentages*

Characteristic	Gender	
	Women %	Men %
Chronological age group (years)		
50 – 59	31	28,5
60 – 69	39	38
70 – 79	22	24,5
80+	7,5	9
Cultural (self-designated) age		
Mature (*omwangafu*)	4	15
Old (*omukofu*)	74	71
Very old *(omukufo muno)*	22	14
Ethnic group		
Samia	78	97
Other Luyia	19	2
Non-Luyia	4	1
Residence **		
Lifelong	5	73
Many years	93	24
A few years	3	3
Education		
Never attended school	94	60
Standards 1 – 3	5	12
Standard 4	2	13
Standards 5 – 8	–	13
Some secondary	–	2
Adult literacy classes	17	12
Experience outside Busia District		
Employment	4	87
Has been to Nairobi	33	78
Has been to Nairobi since 1978	10	24
Language(s) spoken		
Only vernacular(s)	92	36
Also Swahili	9	56
Above and English	–	8
Religion		
Denomination		
– Roman Catholic	55	44
– Protestant	45	56
Religious school	88	91
"Saved" person	39	19
Marital status		
Married	45	92
Widowed	56	8***
Owner of home	39ø	99
Household composition		
Lives alone	4	3
Lives with spouse only	3	7
Lives with grandchild øø	7	3
Nuclear family øøø	10	17
Extended family#	78	70
Children		
Childless##	6	4
Only one living child	6	3
Two or more living children	89	93
No living daughter	10	9
No living son	14	8
Monthly income (Kenya shillings)		
< 100 Kshs	82	62
100 – 300 Kshs	18	31
> 300 Kshs	–	7
Economic activities		
Employed	–	6
Grows cotton	38	50
Makes items to sell	2	19
Petty trading	38	26
N	200	216

* Categories with few cases are usually omitted; missing values are not noted. Percentages are rounded. In some cases, percentages are not shown as a percentage distribution but represent "yes" responses.

** Time spent "outside" in employment or living with husband employed elsewhere is not deducted. For most women, "many years" means since marriage.

*** Includes three men not married because of divorce.

ø Of these 77 women, 73 were widows.

øø Includes households with one (widowed) or both (married) grandparents plus a grandchild.

øøø Includes ten women and one man in single-parent homes.

Home *(edaala)* with three generations, which may, and often does, include unmarried children, daughter(s)-in-law and grandchildren.

Includes those with no children ever born (5 women, 6 men) and those with no surviving children (6 women, 2 men).

men in neighbouring Uganda;[4] many went to the Kenyan cities of Nairobi (60), Mombasa (27), Nakuru (37), and others; to other African countries (7), Norway (1), the Far East (6). The few women who had worked outside, had stayed within Kenya, except for one who worked in Uganda.

Some of the outside employment was little different from the subsistence work at home; however much of it was new and of course done in "foreign" settings and among strangers. Some men did office work, some were professionals (e.g. a priest or a teacher), and some semi-professionals, but most had engaged in manual labour. Of all the types of work done, 33 men had worked for the railways, 24 for the police or army, 17 had worked on farms, and 12 had been watchmen. A great variety of other work was also done. Of the women, one had worked on a farm, two had been cooks, two had been housemaids, and one had been a shopkeeper.

In these experiences of the outside world, gender differences are striking; differences among age cohorts are minor. Of the few women who had worked outside, six of the seven were in the younger cohorts; similarly, more younger women had been to Nairobi. While neither finding is statistically significant, the pattern may reflect the beginning of social and moral acceptability to Africans of African women going to school, living in urban areas, and getting jobs. For the men, outside employment was common in all age groups, ranging from 83 to 94%, with about four-fifths of the men in each cohort having been to Nairobi at some time in their lives. Much higher proportions of men (especially those in their 50s and 60s) than women said they had been to Nairobi recently (i.e. since 1978, the year in which the first president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, died).

One of the many consequences of literacy and outside experience is linguistic. Most women (92%) spoke only their Luyia mother tongue (some knew several local languages); fewer than 10 % knew Swahili, the national language; none spoke English, the official language. Of the men, 56% spoke Swahili, and 8% also knew English; at their insistence, interviews with two men were conducted in English. Not surprisingly, Swahili-speakers have had more education and, among men, more employment outside the district, although nearly a quarter of those who worked outside did not speak Swahili. The educated sometimes read newspapers and were more likely to listen to the radio, which broadcasts in Swahili and English. Many more men than women attended local government meetings (*baraza*), which are mostly conducted in Swa-

Table 2
Socio-economic profile of old people of Samia, by sex and age cohorts: percentages*

Characteristic	Age cohort 50-59 years %	60-69 years %	70-79 years %	80+ years %
Education				
Some formal schooling				
– Women	10	9	–	–
– Men	58	40	26	16
Attended literacy classes				
– Women	19	18	14	n=1
– Men	13	20	n=1	–
Experiences outside Busia District				
Was employed outside district				
– Women	n=4	n=2	n=1	–
– Men	86	83	94	84
Visited Nairobi sometime in life				
– Women	39	37	27	n=1
– Men	81	73	79	84
Visited Nairobi since 1978				
– Women	13	9	9**	
– Men	32	26	14**	
Language				
Speaks Swahili				
– Women	16	8	n=1	–
– Men	63	59	51	37
Religion				
"Saved"				
– Women	36	44	39	33
– Men	18	21	17	16
Marital status				
Currently married				
– Women	68	46	18	n=2
– Men	100	93	83	90
Household composition				
Lives in nuclear family household***				
– Women	13	n=1	–	–
– Men	29	15	n=3	n=2
Lives in extended family household[ø]				
– Women	77	77	80	87
– Men	61	72	77	68
Monthly income				
< 100 Kshs[øø]				
– Women	74	81	86	100
– Men	40	70	72	74
100 – 300 Kshs[øøø]				
– Women	26	18	11	–
– Men	50	25	21	21
Economic activities (women and men)				
Employed (all men)	5	3	n=1**	
Grows cotton	57	42	33**	
Makes items to sell	13	11	8**	
Petty trading	39	33	23**	
N	124	160	97	34
N women	62	78	44	15
N men	62	82	53	19

* All numbers are rounded percentages, except where cells have a frequency of five or less. Missing values are not noted but are never more than three.

** Age 70+ years.

*** Includes ten women and one man in single-parent homes.

ø Home *(edaala)* with three generations, which may include unmarried children, daughter(s)-in-law and grandchildren.

øø Twenty-one women and 12 men reported no cash income, income-generating activities, or money from children.

øøø In addition, two women (one in her 60s, one in her 70s) and 16 men reported incomes exceeding 300 Kshs per month. Eleven of the men were younger than 70 years.

hili. Thus in old age, men's experiences of the world beyond Samia, through travel and various means of communication, continued to exceed those of women.

Marriage and family

In Samia, at least in the old days, everyone married. Of the 416 men and women in the survey, not a single person had failed to marry. Marriage marks the beginning of adulthood and, in the indigenous political economy, is the social framework for developing wealth, power and a network for support and security throughout the life course (Cattell, 1989a; cf. Udvardy & Cattell, 1992).

Experience of polygynous (polygamous) marriage was widespread among Samia elderly: 61% of both men and women had been polygynously married at some time. At the time of the survey, about half the currently married women (n=89) and a third of the currently married men (n=199) were polygynously married. Men married and divorced more often than women, for whom marriage appears to have been quite stable in that few women ever divorced or married more than once.

Many women in the survey were widows. Widowhood for older women is, of course, a worldwide phenomenon – a universal in human aging (Cowgill, 1986; Holmes, 1983). It is perhaps particularly so in a polygynous society, where men have more opportunities to marry and women are likely to be widowed when fairly young. So it is in Samia. Of 200 women in the survey, 111 (56%) were widows; only 8% of the men were not married at the time of the survey. About two-thirds of the women in their 50s were married, less than half of those in their 60s, and very few over the age of 70. By contrast, all the men in their 50s and most older men were married. This is largely a consequence of polygyny, spousal age differences,[5] and the unlikelihood that postmenopausal women will remarry, in contrast to men, who may remarry at any age.

Widowhood may give older women the status of *omwene daala*, "owner of the home." This is not the registered landowner, who is almost always male, but the person in charge of a home (*edaala*, or family compound), i.e. the household head or manager. All but one of the men said they were owners of the home, compared to only 77 women (39%). Of these 77 women, all but four were widows.

When it comes to the composition of domestic groups, there was more variation among younger cohorts. The great majority of the oldest old lived in multigenerational family compounds. Residential and inheritance patterns which bring in daughters-in-law and keep sons with fathers promote the development of multigenerational households and living at close quarters on small plots of cultivable land (the plots are small because of demographic pressures on land). Other living arrangements were clearly related to the domestic cycle and gender differences in the marital status and ages of children.

The overwhelming fact is that the great majority of elderly Samia is 1985 were living in an extended family or multigenerational household: 78% of women and 70% of men.[6] Of the remainder, 10% of the women and 17% of the men lived in nuclear family situations; the others lived with a grandchild or spouse only, except for the 14 who said they lived alone.

However eight of those 14 were well known to the investigators; they in fact lived in their own separate compound but near kin. In any case, living alone seldom means being alone. Year round, life is lived outdoors and very publicly. The many footpaths go right through the compounds, and passersby, greetings and impromptu visits are numerous.

Samia people are explicit about the value of children, especially educated children, in old age. As one man in his 60s said: "It is important to educate your children, for a good child who has gone to school and has a good job will send a money order or clothes or something to his parents." Many Samia share his opinion. Of course there are other reasons for having children than providing for one's old age; but the importance of children for support in old age is not only a cultural ideal but a practical fact (Cattell, 1990; cf. LeVine & LeVine, 1985; Rubinstein & Johnsen, 1982).

All Samia want sons. Men want sons to carry on the lineage and stay on the land of their fathers. Indeed, one man lamented his childlessness throughout the interview; it was a thread tying together many of his responses: "I have no son to leave my wealth to." But it was more serious in terms of support in old age for a woman to be without a child, and particularly to be without a son, for it is sons' duty to support their old mothers, as is true in many societies (Cattell, 1992b; Foner, 1985; Rubinstein & Johnsen, 1982). Everyone wants to have daughters, because daughters bring bridewealth to their fathers and brothers, and because they are likely to maintain relationships with mothers through visits and assistance, and also through their children (Cattell, 1994). Women also have lifelong ritual and decision-making roles in their natal lineages.

Only 19 of these older Samia had no living child; the majority (83% of the women, 90% of the men) had three or more surviving children. The women were slightly more likely than the men to have no child or no son. Of the women, 28 (14%) had no living son; six had no child at all. Even with the advantages of polygyny, 17 men (8%) had no living son, eight had no living child.

Substantial proportions (about two-thirds) of both women and men had at least one son living at home. Age made little difference: in each age cohort, 74 – 84% of both women and men had a son at home. Older women were much less likely to have a daughter at home, though the number of men with daughters at home also declined with increasing age. For women, daughters-in-law often replace daughters as work companions: 64% of the women had a daughter-in-law in their *edaala* at the time of the survey.

Subsistence and income-generating activities

In Samia people still grow much of their own food; only the most frail give up work in the *shamba* (field). There is no retirement from subsistence activities; the participation of both children and elderly is important. Everyone, female and male, farms through much of the life course, as is common in subsistence economies (Halperin, 1987). Other work, especially women's work (collecting firewood and water, preparing food, washing clothes, child care), also continues. Even a very old woman may do little things such as sweep the yard of the compound or shell kernels from corncobs. Some men, even the very oldest, continue herding cattle.

But "today it is a world of money," as many people said. Cash is needed for small necessities, for blankets, clothes and some foods, and for big expenses, especially the school expenses of dependent children and grandchildren, including children born of daughters' premarital pregnancies. Such grandchildren often become the responsibility of grandparents, especially grandmothers (Cattell, 1994). In the survey men, who were more likely than women to have children in school, mentioned more frequently the need for money; but both women and men engaged in many income-generating activities which, for most, resulted in just getting by.

Like younger men, older men have income-earning advantages over women. Most women (82%) reported incomes under 100 shillings per month, compared to 62% of the men.[7] For most, growing cotton (the chief cash crop since the early part of this century) was the most lucrative activity. Of the 181 persons in the survey who grew cotton, 46% had an income of 100+ shillings per month (29% of the entire sample have that high an income). Half the men and 38% of the women raised cotton. Even among those aged 70+ (men and women combined), a third grew cotton – a very labour intensive crop. Overall, the women were more likely to engage in petty trading (38%), the men to make items to sell (19%). All income-generating activities declined with increasing age.

Religion: some impacts of Christianity

Christianity has had an enormous impact on Samia people. Almost everyone in the survey attended religious school, which taught Christianity and sometimes literacy. Considerable effort was often involved in attending religious school. For example, those attracted to Roman Catholicism in the early days walked from Samia to the mission at Mumias – a distance of 60 or more kilometres – to go to religious school, attend mass, and be married in Christian weddings. By 1932 a large brick church had been built in Samia at Nangina, and other denominations also had missions in Samia.

Many other things (notably schools and hospitals) accompanied Christianity, as happened at Nangina. However Christianity is first of all a religion – a moral system – which has not always rhymed with the indigenous moral systems. So there have been conflicts over beliefs such as the causation of events, health and healing, and what happens after death, as well as conflicts over behaviour in matters such as polygyny. However despite church opposition, in 1985 about a third of Samia men of all ages were polygynously married (Nangina Hospital, 1986). Today many indigenous beliefs and customs co-exist with Christian beliefs. For example, most people, including educated young people, say that they can, and sometimes do, receive messages from the spirits of ancestors, especially in dreams.

Nowadays most people in Samia are at least nominal Christians. All but six of the interviewees identified themselves as Christians. Substantially more women were Roman Catholics. However religious affiliation probably was not related to gender so much as it was an artifact of the survey sample selection. Nevertheless women seem to have been disproportionately attracted to the "saved" movement – a manifestation of the East African Revival dating from the 1930s which appeared in Samia in the early 1970s.

The saved are born-again Christians who emphasize a conversion experience, an orientation toward Jesus, spiritual renewal, and living a more intensely Christian life within established churches or sometimes breakaway churches. The saved reject many local customs such as drinking local beer (or any alcoholic beverage), sacrificing to ancestral spirits, widow remarriage in leviratic unions, and indigenous funeral practices. This leads to conflicts and tensions between the saved and those who are not saved and wish to continue Samia customs along with Christian practices.

Apparently the saved movement has no unusual attraction for elderly on the basis of age: there were similar proportions of saved people in all age cohorts. However 39% of the

women said that they were saved, compared to only 19% of the men. Saved people are sometimes referred to collectively as *Abadada*, a loan word from Swahili *dada*, "sister". Being saved also appeals to males, for religious and other reasons, including the attraction of a personally empowering religion in the face of structural poverty and the powerlessness of most Samia (men as well as women) relative to the larger society, to the government, and to economic forces over which they have no control.

However women may have special reasons for becoming saved – a process which is not necessarily spontaneous but may be planned and prepared for. Being saved offers women leadership roles within saved groups and can help them to maintain personal autonomy through a widow's rejection of widow inheritance (leviratic remarriage), in which she is supported by her saved compatriots. Widow inheritance gives a man claim to a woman's possessions and at least nominal authority over her – just when she has things the way she wants them, as one saved woman in her 60s said openly during a funeral speech. Some saved women, especially older women, use this religious movement to reject remarriage because, as the same woman said, "God has made it that old women like us can control our own homes" (Cattell, 1992c).

Gender and old age: some conclusions concerning old-age security

Individual lives are history writ small. This article identifies patterns in the effects of gender throughout their lives on Samia who have reached the social category of "old age" (roughly 50 years and older). This is history writ larger. The article also makes clear that Samia elders differ not only along gender lines but also along age lines. They are not homogeneously "old people," nor even "old women" and "old men." They differ among themselves in age-related characteristics arising from variation in cohort experiences of social, economic, political and cultural developments over their lifetimes. As a result, experiences of old age vary along many dimensions including "outside" contacts, marriage, family and religion, and also in regard to the old-age security of Samia elders and their needs for support and care. Overall, women are more at risk than men.

Many elderly Samia – even many in the oldest cohorts – are economically productive and active in family and community life. However, as with elderly around the world, physical frailty constitutes a major threat to the individual and an added burden on family resources (Albert & Cattell, 1994). Frail Samia elders depend primarily on family members for material support and personal care. Men are less likely to lack caregivers, since wives provide much personal care to husbands. Since personal care by men is inappropriate, husbands do not reciprocate even if they are available – which is unlikely since most older women (especially in the older cohorts) are widows. Women depend more on daughters and especially daughters-in-law for hands-on care, and on sons for material support. Most unfortunate are women without children, especially those without sons, who must depend on other kin with a weaker sense of obligation. Fortunately, few older Samia women are without sons and daughters-in-law.

Since most elderly Samia, especially the oldest old, live in multigenerational family compounds, culturally appropriate caregivers may be resident when the need arises. But living arrangements by themselves are not an entirely satisfactory proxy for elder care. An enumeration of persons or types of households does not reveal the actuality of relationships. If there is tension in an older woman's relationship with a daughter-in-law, the frail elder may be poorly served by someone whose house is a few hundred metres from her own. A son or daughter living at some distance may be more attentive. Further, in some cases a relative will be called home from "outside" to provide care.[8]

Relationships within a family compound are important because this is the fundamental kin group and unit of production, co-operation, exchange and daily living. But other relationships with nearby kin and neighbours, and with kin who live at some distance, are also part of elderly persons' social networks and life-term social arenas. For some, extrafamilial support from friends, community health workers, and comrades in religious, work and other groups makes a difference in material ways (treatment for illness, co-operative work in farming, other types of mutual aid) and in non-material ways, such as the all important sociability of daily life and moral support.

The example of older widows refusing leviratic marriage with the help of saved colleagues also reflects women's readiness – in the face of their many disadvantages – to adapt, to create new strategies for empowerment in their personal and family lives. They have also had to be clever in the economic sphere. In the indigenous system women probably had more opportunity to accumulate resources. Denied access to many modern opportunities, they have had to create their own niches through petty trading and parlaying their marital land use rights into money through cash cropping. However the struggle is unequal; in general women have lower cash incomes, lower status, and less power over others (especially control of others' labour) than men at all life stages.

However widespread material poverty in Samia masks this gender poverty along with the poverty of old age which occurs when elders become too frail to continue trading, craft manufacture such as making pots and blacksmithing, and raising cash crops. Even though men have more opportunity to acquire resources, few can actually accumulate much in the way of savings, since cash income is generally small and most economic resources are consumed immediately. Further, the kinship exchange economy keeps money and goods in constant circulation. The only real solution to the poverty of women and elders is genuine economic development in Kenya (and the entire African continent) which will raise everyone's standard of living. However, even if that happens, the potential contributions of older persons, and especially older women, might be overlooked (Treas & Logue, 1986). This is a shortsighted mistake, given elders' experience and their willingness to work and make contributions to kin, and families' needs to have as many productive members as possible.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the invaluable help over the past decade of my Abaluyia field assistants, especially John Barasa "JB" Owiti from Samia, who has been with me throughout and, since 1985, Frankline Teresa Mahaga from Bunyala. Thanks also to the Medical Mission Sisters, Holy Family (Nangina) Hospital, Nangina Girls Primary School and Samia officials, among others, as well as to my husband, Bob Moss. Above all, *mutio muno* to the many people of Samia and Bunyala who allowed me to share their lives in various ways. Research funds were provided by the National Science Foundation (grant BNS8306802), the Wenner-Gren Foundation (grant 4506) and Bryn Mawr College (Federica de Laguna Fund grant). I was a Research Associate at the Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi in 1984 and 1985.

Notes

1. The Samia are one of 16 or 17 culturally and linguistically related groups in Kenya, collectively referred to as Abaluyia. Abaluyia number several million; at the time of the 1979 census there were about 45 000 Samia in Kenya.

2. Many findings are statistically significant but significance levels are not reported here; even where they are not significant, the pattern is usually in the expected direction.

3. Some older women (17%) had attended adult literacy classes, including six women in their 70s and one in her 80s; 12% of men had attended adult literacy classes but only one man age 70+.

4. Samia and eastern Uganda are geographically and culturally continuous, and many Samia live in Uganda.

5. In a household census in one village spousal age differences ranged from husbands being older than senior wives by 4–32 years and older than junior wives by 15–34 years.

6. A household is an *edaala* or family compound which may include several houses whose occupants form a recognized family unit.

7. This is a very small amount of money. Income data was especially difficult to get, as Samia are secretive about their assets (in part to avoid jealousy and dunning requests); this data is therefore not reliable. However it is beyond question that poverty is widespread in Samia. When visited by Thomson (1885) in the 1880s, Samia was a prosperous land of many cattle and plentiful grain and other food. By the 1980s, Samia had become a place of poverty, food shortages and undernutrition (K'Okul, 1991).

8. For a number of case studies of old age and elder care, see Cattell (in press, b).

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