*Southern African Journal of Gerontology (1996), 5(2): 20-26*

# Does marital status matter? Support, personal autonomy and economic power among Abaluyia widows in Kenya

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**Abstract**

*This article considers issues of personal and economic power among African women in regard to their marital situation. Since marriage is usually crucial to young African women's gaining access to resources, in later life does marital status matter? Are widows worse off than wives, as is the situation of widows in much of the world? A brief description of widowhood worldwide is followed by material from research among older Abaluyia women in Kenya, among whom widowhood offers advantages which today are leading some Abaluyia women to choose widowhood over remarriage. Finally, the discussion is broadened to a consideration of widows in other sub-Saharan African countries. While some African women's situation becomes precarious with the loss of a husband, others prefer not to be married, for a variety of reasons relating to personal autonomy and control of resources and also because in general security in old age depends more on other kin, especially sons, than on husbands. Thus it seems that while marital status matters among older African women, the status preferred may be that of widow (or in some places "retired" wife), when widowhood results in the empowerment of the widow and does not threaten her personal security.*

## Widowhood worldwide

Throughout the world, older women are much more likely than older men to be uneducated and poor, and to have less control of material resources, and less opportunity for wage employment and pensions. Women are more likely to live longer, to become frail in old age, and to depend on children for support and care. They are also far more likely to be widowed. Worldwide, maximum rates of widowhood for older men seldom reach 20 % but rates of widowhood for older women commonly range from 40 to 70 % (see Table 1). To take just two examples from sub-Saharan Africa, in South Africa 11 % of older men are widowed, compared to 49 % of older women. In Kenya, it is 7 % of men and 50 % of women.

Given this striking difference in rates of widowhood, and the importance of marriage for women's status and access to resources, the question I am asking here is: When African women become old, does marital status matter? Are they worse off as widows than as wives? When it comes to women's roles in the family, their access to productive resources, and the receipt of family support and care, does it matter if a woman is a wife or a widow? In short, regarding older women's old-age support, personal autonomy and economic power, does marital status matter?

The answers will vary from place to place. Worldwide, the conclusion seems to be that widows are often worse off than wives. Widows are likely to have lower status and fewer economic resources than wives. In India, for instance, being widowed makes the lives of many older women very difficult indeed; they may lose their home, status and support, and be in extremely precarious situations (Dreze, 1990). Even in the United States, older widows are more likely to fall below the poverty line than married older women. But I am not trying to cover the world here, merely sub-Saharan Africa and in particular, Abaluyia people of western Kenya.

## Abaluyia of western Kenya

There are about three million Abaluyia, who are Bantu people living in western Kenya in areas north and east of Lake Victoria. This discussion focusses on two Abaluyia subgroups, the Samia and the Banyala, who together number about 100 000. Of these, about 5 % are aged 60 years and over (Kenya Population Census, 1994).

I have been doing anthropological research among Abaluyia since 1982 and most recently in June of 1996. My methods have consisted primarily of participant observation, in-depth interviews and field-designed survey questionnaires, among the latter a survey of 416 older Samia (200 of them women) in 1985. In that survey, "older" subjects were those aged 50 years and over.

As everywhere in Africa, the past century has brought many changes to western Kenya. At the end of the 19th century Abaluyia were relatively isolated and self-sufficient agropastoralists. Today their descendants must wrestle with the many tensions and problems accompanying incorporation into the world political economy and what is often called "modernization." Not least among the changes affecting everyday life are money, wage employment and poverty, new languages and religions, and formal schooling.

Although the life-style in western Kenya is changing rapidly (for example, electricity and telephones will soon be widely available), right now it is still very rural. Most Abaluyia in the rural area are peasant farmers who grow food and cash crops using hoes and other hand tools. One must be physically

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strong and able to walk in order to carry out life's ordinary activities: work in the fields, carry wood and water, go to the market and shops, and engage in ordinary social life such as visiting and attending church services and funerals.

Most people are poor. They struggle to send children and grandchildren to school. Most men, and nowadays many women, spend time (even years) in urban areas, working or looking for work, but they are likely to retire to their rural homes, often with little or no pension. Once back home, they resume a rural life-style.

**Table 1**

Widows and widowers in selected countries: percentages of men and women aged 60+ who are widowed

| Region/Country | Percent widowed | |
|---|---|---|
| | Male % | Female % |
| **Sub-Saharan Africa** | | |
| Cameroon | 10 | 62 |
| Sudan | 6 | 54 |
| Zaire | 9 | 54 |
| Botswana | 9 | 53 |
| Kenya | 7 | 50 |
| Senegal | 6 | 54 |
| South Africa | 11 | 49 |
| Zimbabwe | 6 | 48 |
| Tanzania | 8 | 48 |
| Uganda | 9 | 48 |
| Mali | 5 | 46 |
| Malawi | 6 | 43 |
| **Less developed countries** | | |
| Indonesia | 17 | 68 |
| Bangladesh | 8 | 66 |
| India | 19 | 64 |
| Korea, South | 13 | 64 |
| Morocco | 7 | 62 |
| Egypt | 12 | 60 |
| China (PRC) | 27 | 58 |
| Brazil | 12 | 47 |
| Mexico | 12 | 38 |
| **More developed countries** | | |
| Germany | 15 | 51 |
| Japan | 12 | 49 |
| Israel | 14 | 47 |
| France | 13 | 45 |
| Australia | 12 | 43 |
| United Kingdom | 14 | 43 |
| Canada | 11 | 40 |
| Sweden | 12 | 37 |
| United States | 6 | 26 |

Sources: United Nations, 1993; US Bureau of the Census, 1991.

## Older Abaluyia women as wives and widows

Rural Kenyan women are accustomed to hard work from girlhood on and women work longer hours than men (see Table 2). Even quite old women continue to work, including cotton farming and other income-generating activities (see Table 3). Older women regardless of marital status are likely to have fewer economic resources than older men – not because they are old, but because of lifelong discrimination against women in the economic sphere. In my 1985 survey of older Samia a few men but no women were employed. More men were growing cotton, the most lucrative cash crop, and were engaged in craftwork, another relatively good source of income. More women were traders, which may in fact mean selling a few bananas or other farm produce for very little money.

Aside from their own economic and self-support activities, older women depend primarily on children for old-age support and also personal care if that becomes necessary. Older women expect and often receive help from both daughters and sons, but especially from sons and sons' wives. The responsibilities of daughters and sons exist independently of their mothers' marital situation. In fact, nearly all older Samia women (N=200) in my 1985 survey were receiving at least some assistance from their children: 96 % of the women (excluding eleven women who were childless). The majority of these women were widows: 111 women out of 200, or 56 %.

**Table 2**

Rural Kenyan women's and men's work over the life course, 1988: average hours per week spent in work,* by gender and age group

| Age group (years) | Women | Men |
|---|---|---|
| 8-14 | 20 | 15 |
| 15-19 | 32 | 28 |
| 20-24 | 50 | 20 |
| 25-29 | 60 | 40 |
| 30-34 | 60 | 43 |
| 35-39 | 59 | 46 |
| 40-44 | 57 | 48 |
| 45-49 | 58 | 40 |
| 50-54 | 56 | 38 |
| 55-59 | 50 | 39 |
| 60-64 | 48 | 35 |
| 65+ | 37 | 32 |

* Work includes domestic labour, carrying water and wood, farming, including unpaid labour for others, wage employment, non-farming and self-employment but does not include childcare.

Source: Adapted from Njiro, 1993: 69.

**Table 3**

Main income-generating activities of older Samia women and men (aged 50+), 1985: frequencies and percentages

| Activity | Women | | Men | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % |
| Employment | 0 | | 12 | 6 |
| Growing cotton | 75 | 38 | 106 | 49 |
| Craftwork | 4 | 2 | 40 | 19 |
| Trading | 75 | 38 | 56 | 26 |
| N | 200 | 100 | 216 | 100 |

Source: Cattell, 1989.

While wives provide food and personal care to husbands, the reverse is not the case. However, a husband should build his wife a house if she needs one (indigenous mud-and-thatch houses need to be replaced about every ten years). Few women own land, but widows are entitled to live and farm on their husbands' land until their death, a right that at least up to now remains secure.

According to custom a widow should be inherited as a wife by a male of the dead husband's family. Many widows in my survey told me they had been inherited but also said they were

*not* married. Probably they said this because with postmenopausal women, a marriage is usually for ritual purposes only, to clear the pollution of death. Thus women's marital status can be ambiguous. However, even if the new marriage is only symbolic, the inheritor should help the widow to some extent, at least by building her a house if she needs a new one. If there is no inheritor, provision of a house is the responsibility of sons.

## Frailty and old-age security

As their strength declines in old age, many older people need help in the form of money, goods and services as well as personal care. The ideal is that in old age an elder can just "sit and eat," that is, relax without working and still get food. For most men, this means being cared for by wives, since most men, even the very oldest, are married, often to women much younger and more vigorous than themselves. The reverse is the case for women, with over half of women age 60 and up being widowed and nearly all women being over the age of 70 (see Table 4).

### Table 4

Widows and widowers in Samia, 1985: frequencies and percentages of older men and women in survey who were widowed, by gender and age group

| Age group (years) | Women | | Men | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N[a] | %[b] | N[a] | %[b] |
| 50-59 | 62 | 32 | 62 | 0 |
| 60-69 | 78 | 54 | 82 | 7 |
| 70-79 | 44 | 82 | 53 | 17 |
| 80+ | 15 | 87 | 19 | 10 |
| Total | 200 | 55,5 | 216 | 8.0 |

a Number of subjects in the age group.

b Percentage of subjects in age group who were widowed.

Source: Cattell, 1989.

A brief case study of a widow whose care in old age came close to the "sit and eat" ideal is given in Case 1.

Case 1 represents the ideal in action. Teleka could indeed sit and eat in her final years of widowhood. Things could scarcely have been better for her even had her husband been alive; indeed, she might have been burdened with his care at a time when her own strength was failing.

Not every woman's old age is so well catered for. Some families have very limited means and everyone in the family is suffering. A few old women are outright neglected by their families. However, the crucial variable is not likely to be the presence or absence of a husband. More often what makes the difference is the presence or absence of a son or sons, and a woman's relationship with her sons' wives. Teleka was helped by her sons and her daughters-in-law. Another woman who was dying of breast cancer was cared for devotedly by her daughter-in-law who left her husband in Mombasa and returned to Samia. For a number of months she fed and bathed her mother-in-law, washed her clothes, helped her move about, cooked food and carried water for her, and provided companionship and conversation. However, when a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law do not get along, a frail older woman may suffer, as happened with Lucia. See Case 2.

**Case 1**
**Tekela Musungu "sits and eats"**

Tekela was born in Uganda in 1908. She was baptized in 1924 and was married the following year to Musungu. Tekela saw the world as few women her age have. She was head singer of a dancing group which performed several times for President Kenyatta in Nairobi in the 1960s and 1970s. She was a woman of curiosity and action, known for being "always on the go." Though she never went to school, Tekela was active in developing a local primary school; her son later became headmaster there. She was a regular attender at Nangina's Catholic church about 10 kilometres from her home. She reached the church on foot.

Tekela's husband Musungu died in 1973. She remained in the "semi-permanent" house he had built until her own death many years later. She continued her many activities and even took on something new when Nangina Hospital inaugurated its Community Health Worker programme in 1976. Tekela, then 68 years old, was one of the first volunteers. In 1985 she led a two-week seminar for Community Health Worker trainees. She was active in the programme until 1987, when dizziness and difficulty in walking began to keep her at home; by 1990 she was blind. She also had to give up attending church though she regularly received communion at home from the priest or his catechist.

Tekela gave birth to many children. In her old age five sons and three daughters were living. The two oldest sons were "lost" in the city; they did not even build houses at home. The other three sons had large brick houses in the Musungu homestead, near Tekela's modest house. One son lived in the city of Kisumu about 100 kilometres away, when Tekela needed medical care, she went to him. The other two sons were employed near home and their wives were Tekela's primary caregivers. Many grandchildren also lived near Tekela and often spent time with their grandmother and ran errands for her. All in all, Tekela was cared for well and with great affection for a number of years until her death in April 1991.

**Case 2**
**Lucia sometimes waits in vain**

In August 1985 Lucia was about 70 years old. She was a very small woman, short and slender. From her mother-in-law Lucia learned how to make clay pots. When she became a widow "many years ago," Lucia earned money for school fees by selling her pots and thus educated her three children. In 1985 Lucia was still making pots though she had given up making the five-foot-tall beer pots. She had become too weak to make these giants, even too weak to walk very far. Her difficulty with walking had serious consequences for her physical wellbeing and her potmaking.

Things had been fine until her older son decided to move his wife and children near his place of work about 20 kilometres from Lucia's home in southern Samia. Lucia had been well cared for by this son's wife. But with her departure Lucia was left with only Pauline, the wife of her second son, a woman with whom she had never got along well. Pauline's hostility had led her to neglect Lucia, who needed help in daily necessities and also in getting clay for potmaking. The food which the daughter-in-law provided was often inadequate, though there was enough in the home. Water, carried from a distant stream, and clay, brought from far, were slow in coming. The daughter-in-law even forbade her children to assist their grandmother, thus denying Lucia help and companionship of grandchildren.

Probably the most unfortunate older women are those without a son, like Manyuru, who had to depend on her extended family network for a meagre subsistence. (See Case 3)

**Case 3**
**Manyuru: a sonless widow struggles to eat**

Elizabeth Manyuru was born about 1900. She was one of the many wives of Anyango Kang'ara, a colonial chief and a man of wealth and power when he died in 1964, leaving 30 widows to be inherited by men of his family. Of her inheritor Manyuru said scornfully: "Mine was not a real husband. He only did the rituals and left. All he did was eat my son's inheritance."

When I met her in 1984 Manyuru had been a widow for 20 years. She was living near two younger co-wives, Aguje and Magoba. Each woman had her inheritor, chief Anyango's sons Alubala and Munana. But Manyuru – her only son dead, her inheritor not helping her – lived in a tiny tumbledown house built for her by Nangina's Community Health Workers. In the hills surrounding the homes of these three widows lived many of their husband's sons. Manyuru called these men "my son" – but such sons were not the same as her own. They did not feel as strong an obligation to care for her as her own son would have. Her only daughter Anna lived a day's walk away. Anna came to see her mother once or twice a year to repair her house and to give other help. Occasionally she sent a small sum of money. But she could not help on a regular basis.

Manyuru had been a potter in her younger days, and of course a farmer, but she was doing neither of these things by 1984. She no longer had the strength. She was thin and bony, partially blind by cataracts, and could walk only with the help of a walking stick. Her co-wives sometimes shared the food they grew and prepared but on most days Manyuru hobbled to a stepson's home for a meal. Most often she went to the home of Tadeyo, whose children carried firewood and water to her house. Manyuru was often hungry. "We old people only think about food," she said.

By 1987, blind from cataracts and untreated eye infections, totally unable to walk, she was confined to her house. She continued to receive minimal necessities through her extended family, especially from her stepson Tadeyo. Another stepson, Ochwila, built Manyuru a new house to replace the decaying structure in which she had lived for many years. She died in her new house in 1992 when the thatch roof caught fire one night. A thatch roof burns and collapses into the house in just a few minutes. Manyuru was unable to crawl out nor could her co-wives (asleep when the fire started) reach the house in time to rescue her. She was buried not far from her house, next to her husband's grave.

## Widows and personal autonomy

Another aspect of widowhood for Abaluyia women is that they may have greater freedom and power as widows than they had as wives. Older women, married or not, have more decision-making power and get more respect in their families because of their greater age and high kinship status, especially as mothers and grandmothers, and perhaps also as a senior wife in the polygynous family (Cattell, 1996a). They may gain further status by becoming community-health workers, certified midwives or religious leaders. But as widows, women may consider themselves to be the "owners" (managers) of the home – as few married women do – and assume greater leadership roles in their families.

Many older women were forced into their first marriages, as they recall with bitterness. Today many of these women are refusing another forced marriage in the form of widow inheritance (Cattell, 1992a). "I don't want another husband coming into my house and eating my food," as one old woman said in an interview. And another: "I'm now an old woman and don't want another burden." Even if the marriage would be primarily for ritual purposes, these women want it clear who is in charge in their homes. So they are refusing widow inheritance. See Case 4.

**Case 4**
**Anjelina: "We old women can control our own homes"**

An elderly widow, Anjelina, spoke against widow inheritance in the public forum of a funeral speech. This happened in Samia in December 1984, at her brother-in-law's funeral. Anjelina's resistance to the custom rose from her being a saved or born-again Christian. The saved people reject various local customs, including widow inheritance, as things of darkness, things of Satan.

On this occasion the dead man left two widows, Anna who was saved and Elizabeth who was not saved.

The big issue at the funeral was whether the widows would accept or refuse inheritance. In their own funeral speeches the new widows had already rejected inheritance, to the open approval of the saved and the obvious disapproval and anger of those who were not saved. Then their sister-in-law Anjelina rose to speak on the widow's behalf. Anjelina is a tough-minded outspoken woman who herself had refused to be inherited several years earlier when her husband died.

In her speech Anjelina presented the saved view, then recalled her own forced marriage as a girl. But now, she said, now we have seen God's new path. She went on to speak of the practical benefits of refusing widow inheritance. She said: "When the inheritor [the new husband] comes and finds my son has brought me a kilo of sugar, he comes in and prepares tea for himself. And when I tell him to go out he refuses. But now God has made it that old women like us can control our own homes. May the Lord be praised!"

Even younger widows are refusing to be inherited, though if they have children to raise, it is more difficult for them to refuse inheritance. What people say is that widow inheritance guarantees that a widow and her children will be cared for. However, since most inheritors probably have at least one wife already, these younger widows may be assessing the likelihood of support from an inheritor quite realistically. See Cases 5 and 6, and 7.

**Cases 5 and 6**
**Two younger widows, Florence and Margarita:**
**"Men would just eat me"**

My friend Florence is in her early forties. Her husband died in December 1994, leaving Florence with eight children to raise on her own. She is staying on her husband's land. She is a hardworking farmer who grows much of her own food and also owns a cow her brothers gave her a few years ago. In addition, she works as a patient attender at Nangina Hospital. In June 1995 Florence and I had a few moments to ourselves as we stood in the cool shadow of a cashew tree. "Are you going to be inherited?" I asked her. "No. I chase my brothers-in-law away," said Florence. "Men would just eat me. They know I have a job and that is their aim. They would come and eat and contribute nothing."

Margarita, another recent widow about the same age as Florence, has six children (three of them in school) and two grandchildren in her care. She has no job but she does have a right to cultivate her husband's land and will get help with house building when needed from his brothers. Though her husband died in March 1994, she has so far received nothing from his pension. Life is a precarious struggle. But Margarita is equally adamant about not being inherited. Why let some man eat her husband's pension when she finally gets it?

**Case 7**
**Silingi: "Widow inheritance is useless"**

"Is widow inheritance a good thing?" I asked Silingi. "It is useless, completely useless," was her immediate reply. Silingi then told me that when her husband died three years ago he left three widows. The older wife was inherited symbolically by a grandson, the younger wife was inherited by a son of the husband's brother. Silingi herself refused to be inherited. She told me: "I have found that those who were inherited are just the same as me who was not inherited. We are all working hard and all surviving. So inheritance is useless."

Thus the practical experience of a woman like Silingi and the ideological stand of a woman like Anjelina come to the same conclusion: widow inheritance is useless. The inherited widow with her new husband is no better off than the woman who does not remarry. She may even be worse off. Another husband is just another burden. And the old women like being able to control their own homes. Even for younger widows with families to raise, another husband is likely to consume the meagre resources which are needed to feed and educate their children. Does marital status matter? Of course it does but many Abaluyia women today are choosing widowhood and its greater autonomy over remarriage.

## Widows, wealth and power

My final case study illustrating the increased autonomy of widows is the story of Paulina Mahaga, who took advantage of widowhood to build a family business dynasty. She developed for herself a position of wealth and power, thus becoming a role model in her family and community. At the same time she did not neglect traditional roles such as that of grandmother (Cattell, 1994). The extent of Paulina's achievements is unusual among Abaluyia women. Nevertheless, her success, while dependent in part on her own energy and creativity, also took advantage of the same cultural factors open to many women. See Case 8.

## African widows: does marital status matter?

Kenyan Abaluyia are only one of society in Africa. Even in that one society, experiences of widowhood vary, as we have seen. But for the most part, older Abaluyia women find that it is sons, not husbands, who make the crucial difference when it comes to old-age security. Indeed, widows may look upon another husband as undesirable, simply another burden. And they may find greater freedom and autonomy in widowhood than they did in marriage. So for many older Abaluyia widows, it seems marital status indeed matters – but that given a choice, many choose *not* to be married.

To look just a bit further in western Kenya, the Luo (next-door neighbours to Abaluyia) say that women whose husbands die are *chi liel*, "wives of the grave." People say, "It is just bad luck the husband died," but such women are still wives and cannot remarry. However, they are expected to accept a leviratic "husband," and most Luo women in practice do this. The levir does not reside with the woman. He does not support her or her children. His only obligations are to father children on behalf of the dead husband and his patrilineage. The "widow" is expected to support her children entirely on her own. The kicker is that she remains on her husband's land and is likely to gain sole control of her husband's estate (house, land, livestock) on behalf of her son or sons. Or if she is past childbearing age, she may turn farm management over to her adult son or sons, counting on close ties with them to insure her support. Thus a Luo wife of the grave is likely to have more economic power and personal autonomy than she had as wife of a living husband (Kirwen, 1979; Potash, 1986a).

**Case 8**
**Paulina Mahaga: from widowhood to wealth**

When businessman Fabianus Mahaga died in 1970 he left four widows and many children. All the widows were inherited but the two senior wives, Paulina and Marita, sent away the man who had inherited them. As Paulina said: "I didn't want another man because when you get a man you have to take care of him." The third and fourth wives each had a daughter with her inheritor, after which the relationships faded. All four widows stayed in the Mahaga family compound under the leadership of the first wife Paulina.

Paulina was about 45 years old when Fabianus died. She already had her own trading business and now added to her developing "empire" her husband's restaurant and his small shop selling food and household items in the small lakeside community of Port Victoria. A strong determined woman, Paulina managed the family along with the businesses. Not for nothing had her husband nicknamed her "The Major"! Paulina saved money, bought land, and made sure her own and her co-wives' children were educated.

Paulina took on other responsibilities too. When her first grandchild, a girl, was born in 1971 to her unmarried son, Joseph, Paulina took responsibility for little Frankline. Frankline lived in her grandmother's house and Paulina became the girl's chief adviser and supporter. Abaluyia grandmothers have long had important roles in educating grandchildren, especially granddaughters, and Paulina saw to it that Frankline got an excellent education.

In June 1995 a proud and happy Paulina was present when Frankline received her Master's degree in Business Administration from a Nairobi university. Paulina is pleased that Frankline is employed as a sales executive for a computer supply firm in Nairobi in a modern transformation of Paulina's old career.

Today Paulina continues to live in Port Victoria, in a large new house built for her by her oldest son, Joseph. She is still the family head and is consulted frequently by her middle-aged sons. Joseph continues to expand his father's store. Another son (employed in Nairobi) recently built a modern motel and disco night spot on land his mother gave him in Port Victoria. Paulina passed on the restaurant to a co-wife and "retired" to a small roadside stand where she sells vegetables, fried fish and the doughnuts which she gets up before dawn each day to cook. Though her sons keep trying to persuade her to give up this work, Paulina says: "I still like to do a little business so if I want to eat cake, I don't have to ask anyone, I can just buy it for myself." Is it any wonder that her son teased her that 'You should be going to [the United Nations' Women's Conference in] Beijing, Mama.'

Of course, a sonless Luo woman has problems and may lose her rights to the land – which is also the case with another society in western Kenya, the Gusii (Hakansson, 1994). Since women in both these societies have few rights with their natal kin groups, a sonless woman can be in a perilous situation. Yet among the Nandi, another western Kenya group, few women accept a levir although that is the culturally acceptable solution to widowhood. Some Nandi women choose to remain widows, others marry another woman in what is called "woman-woman" marriage and through this wife acquire children and/or property just as men do (Oboler, 1986). Thus Nandi widows have various options which enable them to make choices for their economic and social benefit which are related to property rights which are more secure than among

the Gusii and Luo, and also stronger rights in their natal (maternal) kin groups.

These Kenyan variations occur in just one small geographic area. If we took the whole of sub-Saharan Africa the variations would multiply, even though the literature on African widows is rather scant. Nevertheless, some patterns emerge, patterns of "African widowhood" which are rooted in African sociocultural contexts. Certain aspects of African cultures and social organization give an African flavour to women's experiences of marriage, widowhood and old age – and perhaps unexpected answers to the question: does marital status matter?

Like older women in other developing regions, elderly African women (married or not) have a high dependence on married sons for support. Mother-son bonds are of greater emotional salience than marital bonds. Mother-son bonds are also of greater practical value in regard to old-age support since husbands do not provide care to wives, and sons usually are responsible for the care of ageing mothers – though it is sons' wives who provide the personal care. A woman's daughters and grandchildren also often provide support and care. However, some women have no son, or labour migration removes the son from the home area; a few have no daughters either. Though such women provide for themselves so long as they can work, frailty is likely to mean struggle to get even the barest necessities. Nevertheless, for most African women it is likely to be sons, not husbands, who are most crucial for their old-age security.

There are other alternatives to husbands. Polygyny, which is widespread in Africa, may provide an additional source of support if co-wives get along and are accustomed to co-operating with each other. A widow with a co-wife may be as well off as a woman with a husband, especially given that African women generally work harder and produce more food than African men. A woman's natal group, even patrilineal societies, may be a source of support in old age through various mechanisms including her return, as a widow or a "retired" wife, to her home village and her brothers, sisters and other maternal or matrilineal kin (e.g. Stucki, 1992).

Other variations on the African theme include polyandrous societies and Muslim societies. In the former, if one husband dies the woman is a widow in that home but still a wife in another; and she may choose to live in either home as she pleases or even marry yet another husband (Muller, 1986; Sangree, 1992). Among Muslims – for example, the Hausa in Nigeria and the Swahili of the East African coast – divorce and remarriage are common throughout life, with women having a great deal of choice in marriage decisions, including the decision not to be married – which may well be their choice, especially if it interferes with business. Their decisions are also influenced by bilateral kinship systems with strong ties among maternal kin and female inheritance of property under Islamic law (the Sharia) (Coles, 1990; Landberg, 1986; Schildkrout, 1986).

African women may not experience a lowering of their social status when their husbands die because they have other sources of recognition in their own achievements. While a woman may miss her husband, she may welcome the fact that as a widow she no longer has to consider a husband's wishes nor provide care for him, nor does she have to submit to the wishes of other men in the family. If anything, widows, especially older widows, may head her household and manage her farm. As an older person and a senior in the kinship hierarchy, she benefits from strongly held beliefs about the respect due one's elders. If she is postmenopausal she may be freed from behavioural taboos which apply to younger women and/or have the opportunity to take on ritual or other roles not open to women who are still menstruating.

Thus women's rights and opportunities vary in different African societies according to descent and inheritance patterns, the strength of a woman's ties with her natural kin group, marriage and residence options, and the security of her personal rights on productive resources (as opposed to rights dependent on a living husband). All these factors affect widows' degree of personal autonomy and control of both economic and social resources. In addition, beliefs about the roles and value of women, the sexual division of labour, gender relations, family organization and the family as a support system affect African women's everyday experiences of widowhood in culturally specific ways. (See Cattell, 1996b, for fuller discussion of these matters.)

Does marital status matter for older women in sub-Saharan Africa? Oftentimes not. Either it makes little difference in everyday life, or to old-age security, or widows may actively choose not to remarry even if this choice is contrary to custom. But older African women are not alone in their efforts to renegotiate marriage to their best advantage. Looking at marriage across the life course suggests a larger context of changing patterns of marriage among Africans of all ages (Bledsoe & Pison, 1994; Parkin & Nyamwaya, 1987). Yes, marital status matters. But which marital status African women prefer, and why, varies across the life course and in different sociocultural conditions. Marriage is not always the first choice.

## Acknowledgement

An earlier version of this article was presented at the International Conference on Dynamic Ageing, Cape Town, October 1995, with the title, "Does marital status matter? Widows among Abaluyia women of western Kenya." As always I am grateful to those who have made my Kenyan research possible over the years, especially my late husband Bob Moss; John Barasa Owiti, my Samia co-researcher since 1984, and his family; Frankline Teresa Mahaga and her family; the Medical Mission Sisters and Holy Family Hospital at Nangina, Kenya. Above all, *mutio muno* to the many people of Samia and Bunyala who have allowed me to share their lives – and tell others about them. The research in Kenya was partially funded by the National Science Foundation (grant BNS8306802), the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (grant 4506) and Bryn Mawr College (Frederica de Laguna Fund grant). Additional research on widows was part of a project for the World Bank (see Cattell, 1992b).

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