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## Changes in the Meaning of Age Among the Kenyan Luo: Some Elderly Male Views of Recent Social Change

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# **Transitions in the Meaning of Age Among the Kenyan Luo: Some Elderly Male Views of Recent Social Change**

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This paper summarizes local views about the meaning of 'age', of being 'old', and related issues among the Luo. It is based on a set of individual discussions with seven older Luo men in a single location in Karachuonyo District, Nyanza Province, Kenya. The seven informants had varied educational, economic, family and religious backgrounds and so can be assumed to represent a rough cross-section of pertinent views among males in the over-55 age-group. The discussions were semi-structured. They varied in length from about 1 hour to 2.5 hours. And they were conducted by an experienced university educated interviewer raised in a neighboring rural area, though at the time of the interview – the spring of 1997 – he was resident in Karachuonyo District. The interviewer also recorded, transcribed and translated the conversations.

The main focus of the interviews – the meaning of age and the transitions between one age-group and another – is, I think, a peripherally important one for demographers. First, it is difficult to study aging in Africa in any theoretically valid or innovative way without, on some level, taking note of emic definitions of age, traditional functions associated with the elderly and, therefore, traditional forms of age stratification. Second, understanding what the elderly "do" allows us to shape a more valid set of hypotheses about the type of intergenerational interactions. This has implications for other types of demographic research. For example, there is often an implicit assumption in demographic research on sub-Saharan Africa that the elderly are relatively traditional and, therefore, that they are more resistant to innovation than younger folks. This assumption is, I suspect, based on little more than supposition. There appear to be two reasons for its existence. First, relatively little is known about the elderly in sub-Saharan Africa in general and about their views, especially elderly men's views, in particular.<sup>2</sup> Second, it is part of the "culture of demography" to limit questions, including attitudinal questions, to topics with direct relevance to demographic behavior. Perhaps the furthest that demographers have moved from this is in their attempts to measure women's status/autonomy. But even in this case there is little attempt to explore a more encompassing set of views about the local social organization of production and social order. It is possible, for example, that local attitudes to

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<sup>2</sup> Nor are there signs that this gap in research is going to be filled soon since most of the recent research on the African elderly has concentrated on households (eg. Adamchak 1991; Hoddinott 1992; Apt 1993; Gist 1994; Rugalema 1998) or women (eg. Cattell 1994; Burman 1996).

funeral rites – “cremation is not for Africans!” – or agricultural production – “there’s one old man in that village who’s experimenting with a new hybrid maize seed” – may provide a useful window into more general patterns of innovation. Because they are the “clan owners”, the elderly’s attitudes in this regard are important for a range of demographic behaviors.

As noted above, however, this paper is limited to describing various features of age-stratification among the Luo. It does so in a few sections. In general, the old men’s views about age- and gender-stratification conform to Sangree (1989). For example, the elder men see themselves as being responsible for lineage- and clan-based religious and property disposal activities, while women have particular educational roles and are responsible for much of the subsistence farming activities. On the other hand, there are some interesting breaks with these types of expected gender differences and other types of normative views. One of these is the incorporation of what Cattell (1997) calls a “complaint discourse,” in this case about (a) the young and (b) new patterns of social organization that weaken the extended family and, therefore, the community as a whole.

It is also worth mentioning a few general points related to some lack of clarity in the transcripts. First, there was occasionally some confusion between the definition of ‘old’ and ‘elder’. This is probably due to the close functional similarities between the two terms. That is, elders have certain social functions and traditionally only the old could be elders (I’ll discuss below how the definition of ‘old’, and therefore the qualification for being an elder, appears to have changed or be changing).

Second, much of what I was trying to do here was to get an idea of the types of changes in the lives of people in this area over the last few decades. Temporal identities like ‘then’ and ‘now’ were not uniformly defined within or across interviews. There are some oblique, conversational references to “when you were a child” or “in your time”. The historical recollections, therefore, are not closely allied to any particular chronology. They simply reflect more general perceptions of a past era or eras.

Finally, and this is related to the second point, the picture that emerges from the interviews is an idealized one in which people may have reported old norms and ideals rather than actual behavior. This was something that both the interviewer and myself anticipated and tried to avoid by first asking a general question about how something was done, and then switching to “what did *you* do?” My impression is that this simple methodological approach often helped, but not always. Informants can consciously or unconsciously manipulate their memories of old ideals *and* behavior for any one of a number of reasons, only some of which we can hope to anticipate.

## **1. The Meaning of ‘Age’: Traditional differences between men and women**

Traditionally there was no objective, chronological conceptualization of age among the Luo. Age was a relative social term, that is, defined in relation to others in the same community (older than..., an age-mate of ..., younger than ...), as well as specifying a particular social relationship (old people, and especially ‘elders’ had certain socio-political and judicial functions).

As a method of age-categorization this worked fine for men because – a result of patrilocal marriage – they were so much more rooted in their natal communities and so always knew who was born before and after them. For women, however, who moved out of their clan’s area when they married -- there were the typically strict exogamy rules associated with sub-Saharan African societies – this relative measure was less effective.

A result of this gender difference in the effectiveness of traditional age-categorization can be seen in the markers traditionally used to define transition points in men's and women's lives. For women the markers were solely biological, in a sense, wholly objective:

- i. menarche and growing breasts = womanhood<sup>3</sup>, readiness for marriage;
- ii. having children = beginning to grow old<sup>4</sup>;
- iii. a son or daughter marries, or menopause and ceasing sex = old<sup>5</sup>.

For men, by contrast, only the initial and final markers are biological. The aging process, and therefore 'old' men, appears to be defined more by social than biological characteristics. I can think of two reasons why this might be the case. First, men's age cannot be as closely associated with biological characteristics alone as a woman's can – eg. there aren't the same rapid changes in reproductive capacity; and second, because the range of men's public, social functions is far greater, there may be more sub-conscious emphasis on men's social than biological characteristics. Thus:

- i. Growing a beard and other post-adolescent changes = JM (p.7) "...recognized in the aged people's world."
- ii. Coming of age = ability to work outside<sup>6</sup> / inheriting land<sup>7</sup> / first marriage<sup>8</sup>
- iii. Moving out of father's compound = becoming a full adult
- iv. Being *nyawawa* / eating *lep* / beads over the ears = old
- v. Elected by clan elders to serve as elder
- vi. Too old to talk = no social functions

Aside from items i. and vi., the lifetime transition markers are defined by changes in social not biological status. Lots of things affect the actual timing of these changes in social status. For example:

**A. intergenerational land transfer** — The stated norm for the timing of inheriting land from one's father is at one's marriage. But in several of the interviews the men didn't inherit at this prescribed time because (a) they inherited at the marriage of an elder brother – their father trying to defuse any sibling jealousy; (b) they or one of their other brothers was off working on plantations or in a city so that the father couldn't call them all together to tell them which

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<sup>3</sup> EOM (pp.5-6) talks about how girls could enter their parents' bedroom only until they started getting their periods. In answer to the interviewer's 'why only until then?' he says: "...because once a girl started to see her periods she was seen as a woman." And JM (pp.7-8): "Once the breasts come and they have started their periods people, especially women, will start recognizing them as old [in this case meaning 'grown-up'] people."

<sup>4</sup> PN (p.7): "Once they [women] had children they were viewed as starting to be old."

<sup>5</sup> GNO says (p.10) that a woman can be categorized as old "After their daughters are married ... or if their sons marry." But DA (p.10): "...it must be that they'd reached menopause; when they can no longer give birth. And it should also be that she has stopped her sexual life."

<sup>6</sup> PN, recalling his work history, says (p.1): "After I became of age, I just went to the white man's plantations."

<sup>7</sup> Land ownership and thus inheritance (by males only) is assumed. Every male gets land. See the summary on the land issues raised in the interviews.

<sup>8</sup> Marriage is universal, or so I thought until we interviewed NM. Apparently he never married but just inherited, in his early 60s, a wife from his deceased elder brother. Nonetheless, marriage certainly *was* a given, and procreation a necessary characteristic of the elders. Without a wife or children they could not be relied upon to give useful advice.

land was whose – traditionally, all surviving sons have to be present when the father distributes land; and (c ) the father had crops on the land at the time of marriage so wanted to wait until after the harvest to transfer ownership.

**B. Moving out of the father's compound** — Again, the prescribed time for moving out of one's father's compound is before the marriage of a daughter (because bridewealth should be brought to your own compound). But because a father may have died while the son was still a child, or nowadays, because of the high death rates from AIDS (men should be buried in their *own* compounds), sons often build their compounds much earlier. In other words, they move to the next level in the age/social stratification system at a younger 'chronological' age.

**C. Eating *lep*** — *Lep* is the main part of the tongue of a cow or bull and is supposed to be eaten only by the older men of the clan (everybody else is restricted to eating the back of the tongue, where it joins the throat). There is one exception to this norm, however. When men die their firstborn sons — who are what the interviewer refers to (on p.6 of SO's interview) as the “..elders of their families by birth..” – appear to inherit the responsibility of representing the family among the elders. With this comes the right and in certain ways the obligation, to eat *lep*. And anybody that eats *lep* is, by definition, an elder, irrespective of chronological age, since they are “clan owners.”<sup>9</sup>

**D. Serving as an elder** — The particular qualities associated with elders are explored in greater detail below. For now, however, we should note that the timing of one's nomination to this position depends (and depended) on a number of things. For those who weren't “..elders of their families by birth..” the most important things were: (a) how old one's children were; (b) one's general character, especially as it affected how one talked and interacted with others in the clan; (c ) how one handled one's own family; and (d ) one's wealth;

In conclusion to this section, then, I re-emphasize the fact that the markers traditionally used to define transition points in men's and women's lives are *essentially* different. Men's tend to be social, and women's biological. This is important because if we are to look at the effects on 'age' systems and the position of the elderly of socio-economic and epidemiological changes, we should expect differences in the way a single change acts across gender.

One example of this may be a differential gender effect of labor migration, extremely high in this area of Kenya. In certain ways this has undermined the rootedness of men in their natal communities.<sup>10</sup> It has upset the timing of certain transitions, like their land inheritance and apprenticeship to the 'elders'. But it has also increased their financial independence from their families and clan and their ability to make money. I show below that wealth is believed to be an important predictor of 'elder' status. But based on this idea, men who work “outside” but then come back to retire are both more

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<sup>9</sup> GNO, born in 1933, says (p.9): “Like me, again my father died in 1965 and that's when I began to eat *lep*. Earlier than that I couldn't eat it because I'd not taken his responsibilities. Even now I have my elder brother who I respect as old because if a cow is slaughtered here they eat *lep* and me, I'll only eat that part of the tongue where it joints the throat. This is where oldness was, and it was until this point when you eat the tongue is when you could even be called up to talk on clan matters.”

Similarly, SO, born in 1936/7 says (p.8): “Now I'm in the old group but still I eat the back of the tongue of a cow. This is because the person I'm following [SO is an ‘apprentice elder’] is still alive. If he dies now is when I can start eating the tongue. Like now old people call me when they are eating the tongue but they will only give me my part.”

<sup>10</sup> Talking about the characteristics of today's old, SOO says (p.8): “You find that someone goes to school, finds a job in Nairobi, comes back and builds their home. What does such a person know about the clan? Zero!”

removed from and independent of their original communities, while also being more likely to be coopted into clan leadership. Again, this can change the age-balance within the community because the man has not gradually moved through the traditional stages but has speedily attained a seat in the *dul*, where old men used to sit and discuss clan matters. In other words, economic changes may be affecting the timing of social transitions associated with ‘age’, as well as the qualities associated with people who make those transitions. But again, because women are formally barred from these decision-making bodies such changes will not affect their age-social status.<sup>11</sup>

## **2. Functions, Roles and Characteristics Associated With the Elderly<sup>12</sup>**

### **A. Men**

The main function of an elderly man was what PN calls (p.6-7) “leading his own family perfectly”. This was part of a proving ground for community leadership. It involved subsidiary roles (for elderly men *and* women) like educating/socializing the young<sup>13</sup>, and the smooth transfer of wealth – mainly land and livestock – to sons of the right age.

During this phase men were also expected to serve as what can be called ‘apprentice elders’. SOO puts this best (p.6):

These older people in age are the people who could be consulted on issues of the family because they’ve been in the world for a longer time. And it was such people who always sat in the *dul* so they are really informed on issues of the community. Old men of that time used to meet in people’s homes to discuss issues. Again there were those who followed them in age, those who’d also built their own compounds and were now eating *lep*. Such could come near the old men at the times of discussion but could not join them. Only if one of the old men dies or becomes too old to talk, the oldest of their followers in age gets appointed to join the older group. In the group he gets taught on issues so you find that in those days the old men were very co-operative people. Whenever they were consulted on issues they all said the same things.

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<sup>11</sup> Another example of how the differential definition affects the way that social change acts across gender may be a differential gender effect of AIDS. For example, a man and his wife (wives) should be buried in his own compound, and the age at which men have been moving out of their fathers’ compounds (to build their own) appears to be falling. According to the interviewer, this is a result of the high AIDS-related mortality in this area (adult HIV+ rates are ~20%). If this is the case – such changes may also be the result of ideational trends such as growing individualism – then we have, from the emic perspective, a population aging effect brought about by epidemiological change, because being a compound head is a pre-requisite for being old and an elder, and that section of the population is growing. DA, for example, claims that (p.9): “..today people .. become old at a much younger age.” This point is also made by others. This is only true for men, however. AIDS does not effect a woman’s age at menopause, the main determinant of her classification as old. So AIDS is not affecting the average (emic) age of the female population.

<sup>12</sup> By ‘elderly’ I refer to a man who is a compound head and a woman who is post-menopausal.

<sup>13</sup> Asked how he classifies people as old, part of NM’s answer is (p.7): “I ... see how they are leading their families after marrying and having children.” Similarly, on the roles of the elderly, SOO (p.7): “They [the elderly] had to see that their sons and daughters and grandchildren were really well-versed in the ways of the clan. These were the responsibilities given only to those who were old enough.”

Similarly, GNO talks about how (p.10) elders “slowly.. accepted people of good character .. those classified as old-wise.” In short, there seems to be a belief that people should spend time learning the local judicial ropes, that is, learning from the local committee of experts, the existing elders. That is exactly why SOO rails against those who come back home from Nairobi and build a house then expect to become elders (footnote 9).

### **Elders: The traditional view**

The traditional ideal re: elders was as follows: new elders were elected/appointed by existing clan elders from a pool of ‘old’ people, that is, all those who are compound heads and therefore the heads of their own families. Because traditionally men didn’t become compound heads until their children were ready to marry, this places the youngest in the available pool in their mid-40s (most of these men married their first wife in their late 20s or 30s).

The particular choice appears to have been determined by the characteristics of people in the pool. Certain qualities were necessary, related to the specific functions and roles of the elders.

The primary functions of the elders were to lead the community -- though in a much less autocratic way to the way that they led their family -- to advise people in the community, and to mediate between parties in intra- and inter-family and clan conflicts, the most common of which appears to be/have been conflicts over land use and ownership. The main quality necessary for elders, then, was the ability to talk well and be sociable. These qualities were repeatedly associated with being ‘old and wise’ by all seven of the respondents.<sup>16</sup>

But other qualities were also mentioned. First, there was wealth. DA is the only one to mention it as a factor in the nomination process but he thinks it is the *most* important characteristic. Asked how people were classified as ‘old’ in his ‘earlier days’ he replies (p.9):

In the old days and even now those who have wealth are put into the elderly group faster than their years could qualify them. The wealthy become old because people fear them. At times they lack the character to qualify but because they have wealth they are considered to be old and wise. Even in the old days there were those people who spoke the truth but they didn’t have wealth so were just seen to be still young and not old enough. Because such people lacked the food needed. Even if they knew how to talk well you’ll hear in a meeting such a person being told, “*ngane linguru matin jaduong owuo*” [ “so and so please be quiet so that this old man (the rich one) can talk”].

He is then asked: “How were these clan elders chosen in the older days?” His answer: “Maturity and

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<sup>16</sup> NM (p.7) says: “..they must be organized in their talk and only talk sense.” EOM (p.8): “How they talk is the most important thing. They must talk well. Clan elders should be old and wise.” JM (p.8): “They must have pleasant characters. They must be kind [ie. generous] in food. And ... no one could be considered old if their behaviors were anti-social. Who could see a witch as an old man who can be talked to? No one.” SOO (p.6): “These older people in age are the people who could be consulted on issues of the family because they’ve been in the world for a longer time. And it was such people who always sat in the *duol* [where old men used to sit and discuss clan matters] so they are really informed on issues of the community. Old men of that time used to meet in peoples’ homes to discuss issues.” PN (p.6): “..you must have a good voice [ie. polite language].” And GNO (p.10): “You must have had respect in your clan, village and community. Again, one had to know how to talk to people especially the older people. If you say things people see to be helpful then those older than you will propose you to get involved in discussing things with them. Those old people couldn’t directly tell you now are old because you’ll be disrespectful to them. So slowly they accepted people of good character.”

sensible talk, but mainly they looked at wealth.”<sup>17</sup>

Second, there was the relative age of the men in the pool. Two of the seven informants claim that when there was a position available among the elders the oldest available member of the pool was nominated.<sup>18</sup> A later statement by SO, however, seems to indicate how this is merely *one* of the criteria. Asked how clan elders were elected, he answers (p.7): “The older people will elect someone who is energetic... [But] if they have [several] good people of around 60 years, then they’ll choose the eldest of them in years.”

In other words, the ideal that it is the oldest man who should become an elder is little more than a preference. It can be easily ignored if younger men have the more important qualities described above.

### **Elders: Today**

Along with other features of social organization, the range of elders’ functions has been significantly undermined over the last few decades. First, the leadership role has been attenuated as (a) traditional micro-level political structures are subsumed into the state, which makes appointments based on very different criteria,<sup>19</sup> and (b) the younger generation has adopted a much less reverent attitude to the old institutions and the people who head them.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Dalmas’ view fits with one of the more famous Luo folktales, the story of Nyamgondho son of Ombare. The part of the story relevant to us is as follows: Nyamgondho is a poor fisherman bachelor. He prays to G-d and the next day he finds an ugly old woman in one of his fish traps. She persuades him to free her and take her home. He builds her a house and the next day his home is full of animals. Now a wealthy man he marries many more wives and, crucially for our purposes, becomes “eligible to sit and drink with the elders” since “in those days the elders and the rich used to meet for beer parties” (Onyango-Ogutu and Roscoe 1974: 140).

Dalmas’ view also fits with some of the other informants’ accounts, however, even though they don’t mention wealth. Ndege Musa, for example, while claiming that wealth does not matter, says that old people should be (p.7) “organized and disciplined because you never know at what time visitors may come from where sons and daughters have married.” The ‘organized and disciplined’ referred to here seems like a none-too-subtle allusion to ensuring a sufficient supply of resources/money to show hospitality to visiting in-laws. The same point can be made about other informants’ recommendations that elders not be “anti-social”.

<sup>18</sup> EOM (p.7): “You must be the most advanced in years, more than all the rest in the group or the area. And when you die, the person that follows you in age takes over than position.” And SOO (p.6): “Only if one of the old men dies or becomes too old to talk, the oldest of their followers gets appointed to join the older group.”

<sup>19</sup> GNO (p.10): “Look at today’s headmen, like even the assistant of West Kamagak, these are children today. A headman is supposed to be someone of over 40 years of age. Because it was such who will then know how to handle cases. But what can a 28 year old chief handle in terms of disputes. Again a chief as the elder of the people must have their own homes and have more than one wife, today it’s the opposite. A monogamous person was such a child he couldn’t talk where people are, today even bachelors talk. Even the government itself is lost today, people just work in it because they are educated. In our times old men could sit down and decide who they see possesses the quality to be a chief for the people. Because an old man was the one who even knew people together with where they came from. But today’s people leave school, read or talk to a few old men and they think they are also old enough to lead people. Even you [the interviewer], now, you can just be an elder of this sublocation provided there is someone who knows you who can push for you and not that you’re qualified because you’re still so young.”

<sup>20</sup> EOM (p.8): “People of today are so different. Most of them despise their clan members. Nowadays they can’t even solve disputes because whoever is trying to advise them [the elders] is seen as water-brained. And women, even their mothers, are not supposed to talk to them when they are angry.”

Second, the judicial functions have been largely taken over by the state. Several of the informants asserted that intra-family land conflicts these days can easily end up in a court-based legal battle. Similarly, the advisory roles of the elders within their communities has been undermined.

Indeed, almost all the interviews are full of complaints about the disrespectful and iniquitous behavior of the youth, their breaking of taboos, loss of Luo cultural identity etc.<sup>21</sup> SO laments this reformulation of the general age-social stratification system as follows (p.8): "Today everybody wants to be old at the same time."

On the other hand, some of the old men appear to have recognized that there are different sources of wisdom these days. JM (p.8):

Now even a young person can be elected to be a clan elder. Because nowadays people are more clever. So provided one is polite, knows how to judge cases and is respectful and knows how to talk to people, then they just get elected.

DA even makes the same claim about modern women (p.10):

Today there is no age-limit to look for because today's women are so clever till they die with their brightness. This means that even when still young they tell things with facts and truth. They are clever in writing, talking English and in their brains. They are even exposed [to new things]. You see, old women didn't go to places like Nairobi but today's women have gone there and come back with quite new ideas. So such people: what can deter them from being advisers?

## B. Women<sup>22</sup>

As mentioned above, women became 'old' once they were menopausal. Henceforth their primary social function - ie. tasks other than those related to managing the household - was to (a) socialize and educate young women, whether daughters, daughters-in-law, or granddaughters; and (b) to serve in some medical capacity. SO remarks (p.7):

..as I told you, they were to teach their grandchildren on the ways of the family. Again they are the ones who are allowed to advise the wives of their sons on various issues they may have. They were also consulted by any younger woman who was married there [to the same husband] after her. And you'll also find that it was only old women who could assist younger women in giving birth. Again they were the only ones who could give traditional herbs to younger women, especially *Manyasi* [a herbal remedy believed to wash away diseases related

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<sup>21</sup> JM (p.9): "The Luo children of today are so disrespectful. They don't have discipline at all. Because when they reach your size [George is about 6' 1"] they think they are now grown-up and able to do whatever they want, including what even you, a father, can do. A long time ago when Majak was chief, when he was on the road with fellow elders and you were going to meet him, you just hid in the bushes. The chief was highly respected. But today the younger Luo just sit with chiefs and headmen anyhow. You can't even see the difference that the government is represented there."

These things we didn't see before. Today people are total strangers."

<sup>22</sup> Note that this section is based on interviews with men. They may well have ignored mention of women-only status questions. Eg. Which women have higher and which lower status in the community?

to the breaking of taboos].<sup>23</sup>

They were also called in as ‘expert’ witnesses in broader disputes, especially those relating to land. DA, for example, is asked about the areas where old women were allowed to participate in elder’s deliberations. He replies (p.10):

Land boundaries. They can say: ‘Our boundary with so-and-so is here just like the father of so-and-so had said.’ Since its they who cultivate most land they can correct people who’ve lost the memory of the boundary.

He continues: “Even in women’s disputes they could give an opinion like saying, ‘Daughter of so-and-so, you are the one who wronged so-and-so,’ since at such ages they were known not to lie.”

In fact, this idea of women’s specific expertise is tied to their heavier (re: time) set of responsibilities (Watkins [1997] confirmed this by collecting several “time use” schedules while in the field). Not only do they seem to work more on the basic household maintenance tasks but they don’t have time to develop the expertise necessary to be a real elder. EOM sums this up as follows: after saying that young women can serve as advisors so long as they don’t “move around”, a moral qualification for a position as communal advisor that is not stipulated for the men, he remarks (p.8): “And women don’t sit with clan owners [elderly men]. If they hear people talk about something, they know that they can throw in a word as they’re passing.”

The point is: being an elder is time-consuming and women spend a lot of time just “passing”, running errands. By contrast, men have a lot of time to *tanga-tanga* [explained to me as “going lawyering”].

### C. Dietary markers between generations

Aside from *lep* there were two dietary differences between the old and the not-old. First, only the old were allowed to drink the traditional liquors *mare* and *kong oseke* (these apparently differ in brewing process but are both mild intoxicants and both drunk with straws, from a single pot, and by several men).<sup>24</sup>

Second, women whose daughters married were supposed to stop eating chickens and eggs. The informant who reported this, GNO (p.10) did not know why.

All of these dietary markers appear to be being undermined. First, I personally know several people who have eaten *lep* who are not supposed to, younger people, both men and women, all university educated. Moreover, because there are now new determinants of elder status introduced by the state, it is easy to imagine a situation where it may be eaten by ‘younger’ headmen and chiefs. Second,

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<sup>23</sup> JM cites the reduction in this role as one of the reasons for the indiscipline of the young. He says (pp.7-8): “In old times, girls were being educated by their grandmothers so they went into womanhood quite wise, thus earning recognition, unlike these girls of today who grow up in *simba* [a boys house while they are still in their father’s compound] instead of in the old people’s houses where they could be learning.”

<sup>24</sup> NM notes (p.6): “Young people were not allowed around them. Even if they could be given it was only a small calabash and they leave immediately.” And JM (p.6): “This was only for the old people. No young man could come around such places. But today you find a boy leaving his home, who goes and takes a lot of *changaa* [illicit home-brew, often with very high alcoholic content].”

alcohol is no longer the preserve of the old. Indeed, several of the men blame the intergenerational conflicts on the wide and cheap availability of alcohol, mainly *changaa*. The implication of their argument is that only the old are wise enough to use these drugs properly. Indeed, this argument extends to other intoxicants. Asked about the use of *bhang* (marijuana) in the old days, JM replies (p.6): “*Bhang* was taken only by older people who were able to control it.”

#### **D. Difference in religious functions**

There seems to be very little differentiation in religious functions across age-groups. NM claims that the old are responsible for keeping members’ contributions properly. But I’m sure that he’s not right. My impression is that there are parallel trends within the church as there are re: community leadership generally. That is, the younger people are assuming more authority. Indeed, GNO (p.10) laments:

In those days no young people could be given church responsibility as is done today. Me I was baptized in 1960 with the SDA church when I was so old but I couldn’t even step on the altar to even read a verse but this has changed today. The altar was only for aged women and men and not girls and boys. In the old days no woman could stop at the alter, it’s only today that women crowd the alter. Today they baptize even kids of 7 years, what do they know? Today a man of 20 years becomes a church elder, what do they know? Nothing. A church elder should be someone who’s built their own homes, whose ages are so great that they are nearing their deaths. Today’s church elders don’t know even a thing and that’s why you even find that church leadership today is lost. I can’t even consult them.

#### **E. Adult Mortality**

One of the main comments about life today is a perception of higher mortality. In the Watkins survey we asked whether children were more likely to die today than in earlier times. No more than a handful replied that they were *less* likely. A similar sentiment emerges from these discussions with the old men re: adult mortality. Only PN (p.7) thinks that mortality is about the same. All the rest confidently assert that today’s adults suffer from higher mortality.<sup>25</sup>

This perception may well be based in fact. A seroprevalence study conducted on a random household sample in urban and rural areas of Kisumu municipality, an hour away from this part of Karachuonyo, in 1997, found HIV prevalence of 40 per cent. These high infection rates lend themselves to high AIDS-related mortality. Indeed, between the first and second waves the Watkins survey lost 6 per cent of the male sample, a threefold increase over the expected life table mortality (Weinreb 1999).

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<sup>25</sup> DA (pp. 10-11): “..today we have a big death just sitting at people’s verandahs just looking at people and deciding who to take in the family. Today cars kill people; airplanes came which today kill people.” NM (p.8): “Today for people to grow to old age simply depends on luck. Very few of today’s people make it to old age, unlike the olden times when most of them made it to old age .... Those who die today at say from 82 to 90+. Those are the very lucky people. Still even if they die then there is no problem because very few people can manage to reach such an age.” EOM (p.8): “Today it’s the younger people who die, leaving the older ones like me behind. We are left dying of hunger in front of our houses while younger energetic people die. In the old days a woman could grow too old till I think people of today could not even go near her. That’s the stage I saw my grandmother grow into .... Today people died so fast; they don’t have enough years.” JM (p.1): “Those days young people who had not yet married did not die early. But today’s world has turned against younger people; they really die. The world of today is spoilt.”

The reasons to which the old men ascribe the higher mortality are varied. NM (p.8) does not specify a cause: “I’m not sure ... it’s just the world has changed so much.” A few of the others, however, are more definitive.

James Muma (p.9) blames changes in diet.

We used to eat cold *ugali* [a starchy maize product, the staple food among most groups in Kenya] and food. People grew to great ages till they couldn’t even walk but just sat the whole day on their verandahs. This doesn’t happen today because the government has brought a lot of oils [ie. cooking fats]. In the old days we used only fat from cow’s milk which had no disease at all.

Others, however, blame changes in behavior that have undermined Luo traditions, a sort of biblical “divine wrath” argument. SOO (p.8), for example:

In the older days people took longer times in the world because they had respect and followed the tradition unlike today when people disregard such traditions. Today people don’t even know which side of the land they should build their houses. Today people have started building their homes like the whites, with total disregard for tradition. This has brought a lot of deaths. This is because today’s old people did not get the wisdom which in the old times was taught to coming old men. So today they come from the outside with their own thought to bring to the society.

And George Nguka Otigo (p.11), who also introduces the (imported) Bible into a discourse about the deterioration of local customs:

Today people die at very young ages because of the sins that have multiplied in the world. Most younger people who live today had been cursed by their fathers because of disrespect. Me, I can say my father died when he was 120 years old and my mother was 81, but today people die at 16, 18, but mostly at 30 years of age.

Today there are a lot of sins people have done. People like Luos have left their customs. Again I think we are nearing the end of the world as has been predicted in the Bible. Today every death is placed to be AIDS but there are also ones which come because people don’t follow their traditions. You see, even in the old days, once a girl was married they were not to enter their parents’ bedroom which they do today. Even teenagers were not to enter their parents’ bedrooms. Today mothers-in-law even expose their breasts in front of their sons-in-law. Such things people do but they bring *chira*.<sup>26</sup>

## F. General issues

One of the main themes that emerged from the transcripts is pretty well summed up in SOO’s assertion that (p.7) “today everyone wants to be old at the same time.” This is a direct reference to the grand ideas underlying social change. The interviews suggest that as new systems of authority emerge among the Luo – allowing the young and women to play a greater social, public role than they

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<sup>26</sup> *Chira* is the Luo name for a disease caused by breaking traditional taboos whose symptoms – mainly wasting – are often confused with AIDS. Unlike AIDS, however, it can be treated with traditional herbs if they are prescribed and applied properly.

once did – the traditional age-social stratification system is being put under considerable stress. To a large extent this is occurring because the material success that propels people into public roles has become less contingent on rootedness in local life or in the clan than on non-traditional markers of status, especially modern education.

This does not mean that there will be some sort of convergence to the conjugal marital unit as the old modernization theorists once predicted (eg. Goode 1963). But it will likely change the type of interactions between old people. A few of the old men, for example, complain about the increasing selfishness of today's elders. While this may well be a projection onto an idyllic past, it fits the general story of social transition in Africa. First, the old may be less *able* to serve as elders since they may have skipped the long apprenticeship that elders in previous times served them and so may have fewer of the collectivist inclinations that supported these institutions than their predecessors. Alternatively, they may also be less *inclined* to serve. A good example is the case of SOI, not interviewed because the interviewer was not introduced by the D.O. or chief (see footnote #4 in SOO's interview). He told George that his wisdom is a family resource and he guards it closely.

### **Conclusion**

Wistful recollections of the past are common; it's one of the characteristics that we consistently apply to the old, at least anecdotally. And indeed, all seven of these older, rural, Luo men have fond memories of a time when community was stronger, social ties more predictable, the young more respectful, cattle more plentiful, food supplies more reliable and mortality lower. They are typically 'old' in this sense.

But from a historiographic perspective they may also be largely right – the likely exception is their view about the shift in mortality. Changes in Luoland through this century suggest that, in all these things, their recollections are essentially accurate. As in other areas of Africa and, indeed, the developing world more generally, local patterns of social organization have been increasingly subject to what Cattell (1994) calls "delocalization." This refers to two related processes: (a) the shifting of power from local people to institutions or distant centers like centralized bureaucracies, the government, or even (inter)national economic élites; and (b) the loosening of family bonds and the development of more dispersed residential patterns. Insofar as the traditional authority of the elderly is related to the level of delocalization, this general transition has clearly undermined their role. It may also have undermined what Erikson called the "ego-integrity" of the elderly, that is, their sense of meaning and order.

That said, few of these elderly men appear to be in a vanguard of repressive patriarchs. They were not dismissive of all changes. All, for example, claimed to value education. One of them even took pleasure in modern women's greater education and "intelligence". All also claimed to be involved in some way in the cash economy to the extent that they buy different types of seeds and fertilizer. In short, the direct or unofficial narratives from these elderly show a great deal more ambivalence in "attitudes to modernity" than is often assumed in the demographic literature. Modernity may well have stolen some of their functions, and also reduced the social significance of age-differentiation. But this does not undermine the elderly's ability to innovate, even as the nature of these emic categories changes.

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