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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/eastafrica/353>

DOI: 10.4000/eastafrica.353

ISSN: 2790-1076

Publisher

IFRA - Institut Français de Recherche en Afrique

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2014

Number of pages: 123-140

ISSN: 2071-7245

Electronic reference

Babere Kerata Chacha and Peter Waweru, "Ekebete Marriage in the Historiography of Pawnship and Female Abduction in East Africa, 1890-1945", *Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est / The East African Review* [Online], 49 | 2014, Online since 07 May 2019, connection on 09 December 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/eastafrica/353> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/eastafrica.353>

***Ekebete* Marriage in the Historiography of Pawnship and Female Abduction in East Africa, 1890-1945**

Babere Kerata Chacha and Peter Waweru¹

Introduction

In the 1960s Jan Kuhanen, Mary Douglas, and Helge Kjekshus and more recently Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson, PhilipsCurtin, Toyin Falola, and Tiyaambe Zeleza have shed light on the institution of debt bondage, pawnship and abduction in Africa. These studies illustrated how in precolonial Africa individuals were held as collateral – usually by members of the same family – in lieu of debts that had been incurred. These studies concluded that such practices exposed dependents to the possibilities of enslavement in the event of default on the loan; they placed individuals in precarious positions which could result in considerable abuse. Whether such institution existed within precolonial East African societies is a hotly contested debate among scholars. Pawnship did exist, but whether it was a form of slavery or not remains a debatable issue. The Kuria case illustrates the intersection between girl abduction and pawnship within trade networks in East African. Girls sold into *ekebete* marriage² ended up in Ukerewe, Ukara and Sese in Northern Tanzania. This paper seeks to show the significance of *ekebete* in the labour and trading processes in East Africa from the late precolonial period to the mid-1900s.

The Kuria

The ethnic group known as the Kuria has had a turbulent history. Generally referred to as ‘reluctant’, ‘backward’ and ‘litigious’ agro-pastoralists, they have often been regarded as victims of international capital after living almost isolated from market for centuries. In a perhaps harsh analysis, the Kenyan historian William Ochieng describes them as follows: ‘In almost every decade in the last century, these people have endured crises of the worst sort – transformed from a rich, haughty and independent-minded pastoralist community into petty commodity producers, cattle rustlers, and famine relief-clients’ (1971: 9).

1 The two authors teach history at Laikipia University in Kenya.

2 *Ekebete* was a Kuria practice, common at the end of 19th century and referred to as ‘child marriage’, that consisted in giving out girls to neighbouring or distant communities in exchange for food or for safe custody during famine or war.

But within such a context of flux and turmoil, one striking continuity remained: their long-standing history and complex relations with each other which points to their adaptation to forces of change. Certainly, centuries of geographical isolation had permitted the indigenous growth of a culture and social organisation different in striking aspects from those of nearby communities, and from the general cultural patterns of the East African people. The Kuria place themselves definitely above their neighbouring communities. For many years, their distinctive appearance— the Kuria men are tall, dark brown complexioned and robust, and women are shorter and somewhat lighter —and customs had made them an object of tourist curiosity as well as a subject of historical and anthropological investigation. The study of the Kuria has indeed been a rapidly growing field to which Africa or Africanist scholars have contributed by unveiling the intricate linguistic, ritual, agriculture, and social organisation of the Kuria; it also reflected upon the process of politico-economic transformation that affected Kuria society. Anthropologists identified agricultural development as a ‘problem area’ among the Kuria, pointing to the low levels of crop production and animal husbandry with opposition to land consolidation and registration (Grim, 1974). One writer suggested that economic progress had been slow because the Kuria clung to the value of the ritual system and because their wants were generally limited to cattle and wives. Thus the stereotype of the Kuria peasants as archconservatives has become well established. This section prove otherwise and illustrates that the rate of economic change in the late nineteenth century was greater than any in subsequent period.

Kuria traditions and migration patterns in the distant past linked them with the Abagusii with whom they are linguistically closely related. Even so, in much of their culture and social organisation, they may also be compared with the Agikuyu, Embu, and Meru (Ruel, 1973:1-6). The Abagusii, however, lack five of the eight names of the generation cycles which are of fundamental importance to the Kuria. Five of the eight names of the generation cycles are found in cognate form amongst the Nandi and the Kipsigis; and at least two of these common names are also found in the generations of the Agikuyu, Meru and Embu (Mwanzi, 1987; Peristiany, 1939; Sutton, 1966)³.

The above and other historical evidence relating to the origin of the Kuria suggest that they were a mixture of Bantu and Highland Nilotic peoples.⁴ In fact, it would seem that the Kuria were not the original inhabitants of their present territory. Writing in 1950, Cory suggested that the Abakuria were a splinter group of the Maasai who ‘migrated to their present habitat many generations ago’ (Cory, 1952). He stressed that they still had the Maasai ‘spirit’ which manifested itself in the love for cattle and great zeal in acquiring them (Sutton, 1969).

3 A section of the Abaluyia use four names which appear also in the Kuria generation cycles, see Levine and Sangree (1962).

4 The Agikuyu, for instance, use cycle names such as ‘Chuma’ and ‘Maina’, which appear in Kuria cycles. See Lambert (1956).

The manner of dress and weaponry were perhaps the most tangible assimilations from the Maasai culture. Descriptions of the Kuria warrior of the late nineteenth century reveal the striking similarities with the Maasai. More particularly, their physical location may have exposed them to political influences from the Maasai. They thus developed a politico-military system that was partly desired and partly developed from their own indigenous institutions. The Kuria kept large herds of cattle, not because they suffered from the 'Cattle Complex' of anthropological folklore, but because cattle played so many different roles. Not only did livestock serve as a medium of exchange and store of value; it was also important as prestige goods and objects of mystification articulated within a social and ideological system.

The basic value of cattle was reflected in the many roles they played in Kuria social organization. In marriage, for example, they became an issue in formal bride wealth payment; during the *isubo* (elderhood ceremony), a number of between six and twelve heads of cattle were given to the brothers of the elder's wives and some cattle required as offerings to the ancestors. In initiation ceremonies (*esaro* for example), when the girl recovered from the physical operation, the mother's brother was expected to slaughter an ox for her. If he did so, he would receive four to eight cattle on the day the girl got married. To illustrate how important cattle were to the Abakuria, one may note how many times cattle are mentioned in songs and poems, such as follows:

This Rioba of the Abahirimatara who came from the lineages of the bulls who kept Kimwamu and Kiburuha bulls ...the bulls that who chased Nyansamu while milk dripped from its udders... My father is Rioba of the stocky bulls. Even last night our bull did not sleep, it sniffed the cows till dawn, trying to find those without calf in the womb.

Therefore, cattle were affectionately looked after, readily identified with, and elaborately discussed. The wealth of an individual was measured in cattle units, and cattle fulfilled crucial ritual functions and obligations. The Kuria increased their stocks mainly by raiding their neighbours. Yet raiding was also a requirement for the Kuria youth to demonstrate courage after initiation. Whether in raiding or warfare, a warrior displayed his courage by capturing cattle or killing an enemy. Raiding was also offered as a means of obtaining bridewealth cattle. This is demonstrated in a popular beer party song, '*Nyagorio we 'ngoombu, sobokeraomokari, name nakurusiriaegoorio*'. This may be translated as 'You who long for a woman make more cows, it is women who will remove your desire.'

Cattle were carefully grazed and at the same time guarded from rustlers. Cattle belonging to close lineage members drawn mainly from one *eka* (homestead) were grazed together by a team of armed boys *abarisia*. They bore marking distinguishing them from cattle belonging to distant relatives; the marking helped establish ownership of stray cattle or those retrieved from raiders. From such description of the cattle centeredness of the Kuria, incentives for the occurrences of *ekibete* child marriage was extremely high.

The Anthropology of *Ekebete* Marriage⁵

In Kuria there exist different forms of *ekebete* marriage. One is a kind of pledge made for debt owed and promised for future payment and which can be made of dowry or materials cows, cash and so on. Another one is a kind of marriage made by receiving dowry in instalments or in full awaiting the girl child to grow and attain marriage age. At times the child can be handed over at a tender age waiting to reach a suitable age. In such a situation where trust is not granted, the girl child could be handled to the family but be sleeping with the senior mother who gives her marital instruction. There also existed a form popularly known as the *ikinyege*. This is a kind of *ekebete* whereby a man who has attained marriage age but has no dowry pledges to be given a lady who he will pay for through his strength (*ikinyege*, literally muscles) or hard work by accumulating wealth through any possible means, and thus eventually pays the dowry for the lady. By doing this, a man would be said to be ‘eating the marriage’ (*ukunyerwaekebete*). At this point there is no ceremony conducted: witness from both sides would be present and during this time there were only ordinary meals which were taken. There was a ceremony called *embotora* or agreement which was done when the girl child has attained the correct age. A ceremony would be conducted and a he-goat will be slaughtered in ritual. Generally, it was believed that those who were married through this kind of marriage experienced a lot of misfortunes.

This *ekebete* marriage existed between neighbouring Kuria clans but there were incidents that overlapped to the neighbouring clans, especially during times of trouble such as famine and locust infestation. In such hard times, crops were destroyed and weak families resorted to trade exchange of young girls child with food such as finger millet, potatoes, stems and animals. Much of the ceremony was done in secrecy. The foodstuff would be transported to one’s home with security. It was prepared during the night. The eating was administered during the middle of the night so that the neighbours do not join. No wonder these would often be abused using phrases such as: ‘*nke oratotebi*’, ‘*wanyeera omona wao ekebete*’ or ‘what are you telling us’ and ‘you have eaten out of selling your child’ as well as ‘go away you *ekebete* eater’ (*tagenda nyamoreka ekebete*).

The period upon which this marriage was practiced falls between 1900 and 1945. This was a turbulent period in Kuria history. It was at the beginning of this period that hunger devastated most Kuria families. For instance, in the 1890s the Kuria, like other East African communities, experienced drought and famine which rendered farming and animal production precarious and hazardous occupation (Chacha, 1999). A decade of natural catastrophe opened when rinderpest entered Western Kenya and Northern Tanganyika. Kuria was struck by the epidemic in unprecedented proportions (Iliffe, 1979:

5 Am greatly indebted to Mzee Kerata Chacha and Taisamu Kerata for collation of the oral information on *ekebete* in Kuria and their support in obtaining other informants.

110). Kuria oral traditions commemorate the event clearly. It tells of cattle, sheep and goat skeletons strewn in great quantities.⁶

During this time, the position of poor woman and young girls was especially precarious. Food became so scarce that people were forced to cut discarded ox hides and the goats skins that they wore for clothing as devastating food. The destruction was so crippling that the children and grandchildren of survivors continued to recount the storm of the famine called *gituramahoor* "roasted skin".⁷ This famine was so harsh that women made certain kind of cry known as *ekerarati* as they saw their children and die one by one. Marriages were rarely conducted, owing to lack of livestock for bridewealth. Families experiencing famine during this period had no choice but to barter their women and children for food (Wakefield, 1870). While poor men suffered through the mortgage of their futures, female household members were literally pawned to the rich women of the Mbungu and Warutu in Northern Tanganyika (Chacha, 1999: 39). Likewise, the Bukiraclan which was last hit by the 19thc. famines received many women refugees whom they turned into wives. However the number was too high that some women ended up getting into the *ubusino* marriage.⁸ These pawned females would be redeemed at a later date with cattle or some other form of wealth. Otherwise, the future of the women or girls lay in the hands of the Bukira women bearing male children for them. As the Kuria were being hit by famine at the close of the 19th c., the Maasai (Kuria neighbours) were also under great hardship since it coincided with the "*ilaikipiak* war and the rinderpest epizootic" (Bernstein, 1996). The result was a complete disaster for a number of the Maasai. Contemporary observersestimate that the Maasaiten lost 95% of their cattle (Sharpe, 1983; Stuhlmann, 1894). This made their pastoral life impossible for years and many Maasai women took refuge with agricultural neighbours in order to survive. Those who came to Kuria, known as *abatebia*, came in caravans of between thirty to sixty women. They brought with them beads and other valuables.

According to oral narratives, these women never went back to Maasailand. Instead they were married into *ubusino* or *ekebet* in Bukira. Men would not normally take these women as wives since this would cause conflicts with Maasai. Kjerland writes about a wealthy widow known as Masoborroa Waitebe who moved from Bukira and settled in Nyabasi with her cattle and 'married' the Maasai woman. She later sent a message to the Maasai accusing them of being lazy, and was in turn raided and killed by some Maasai spies (1995: 123). The Abahirimasero clan of Bukira who inhabit present-day Ikerege are thought to have been the offspring of this woman. Many similar incidences took place between the Kuria women and the Maasai especially during the period of drought and famine.

6 For example oral narratives, see Mwita (1989), pp. 4-16

7 A similar case is illustrated by Schmidt (1992), p. 152.

8 For details of women-women marriage, see for example Blackwood (1984), O'Brien (1977), Evans-Prichard (1951), Ramet (1990), Gluckman (1970), Uchendu (1965), Krige (1974), and Oboler (1980).

Precolonial Pawnship among the Kikuyu and their Neighbours

Like in Kuria, where human pawnship and abduction persisted in deferent forms till end of the Second World War and even most recently as found in the rituals of Gold Mines of Northern Tanzania particularly in Nyamomgo and Nyarugusu. Literature on most of the Kenyan communities show that this practice was widespread and mainly involving children and women. Key examples are communities in central and south-western Kenya. It seems therefore, that considerable raiding took place between the Kikuyu and their pastoralist neighbours, but this state of affairs was influenced by other factors which also enhanced mutual understanding. First, their respective modes of life were in some ways complementary. The pastoralist needed some of the agricultural products in the same as the agriculturalists required animal products. Like most pastoralists in East Africa, the Maasai were particularly vulnerable to famine because any natural calamity – such as the vagaries of the weather or any epizootic epidemic – was a threat to their chief source of livelihood, the livestock. On such occasions they were heavily dependent upon their agricultural neighbours with whom they had either to trade or else seek refuge to avert starvation.

If there had been a rupture of relations beforehand, emissaries were dispatched to explore the possibilities of concluding a peace treaty before trading activities were resumed. Regarding Maasai peace negotiations, it is apparent that the initiative was mostly taken by the Maasai. Peace negotiations were not lightly undertaken, as the conclusion of peace treaty (*munyoro*) involved a protracted and elaborate procedure, culminating in a religious ceremony during which both parties took a solemn and binding oath. (Muriuki, 1976: 23).

According to Muriuki, that the oath was no idle threat is demonstrated by the fate of a warrior from Kiambu, called Wangai, who was handed over to the Maasai after he had broken a peace treaty in the 1980s. Peaceful coexistence, therefore, was duly recognized as being of prime importance to the well-being of the two communities. Indeed, the experience of the Maasai in the 19th c. is a good demonstration of the above observation. The various disasters that affected them – the cattle epidemic, smallpox and their internecine wars – culminated in a large-scale influx of refugees into Kikuyu land. In fact, this phenomenon was not confirmed to the Kikuyu alone; throughout the century Maasai refugees are known to have settled among the Taveta, the Chagga, the Arusha and the Luhyia:

Moreover, an arrangement whereby women and children could be pawned in times of misfortune existed, as it did among the Ashanti and the Dahomey of West Africa. Desperate Maasai families left their children and women in the hands of the Kikuyu in exchange for foodstuff, hoping to ransom them in better times. No stigma was attached to the pawnship and the system was commonly practiced by the Kamba, the Kikuyu and the other Mt. Kenya People's, but it was only practiced during famine time. In any case, it fulfilled an important function by ensuring that a family did not starve. (Muriuki, 1976: 46).

Among the Kikuyu, pawnship seems to have not been regarded as slavery. Indeed it was a stage towards full adoption and pawned children became full members of the Kikuyu families which had adopted them, until they were ransomed. It seems unlikely that the Maasai would have sought refuge among the Kikuyu, let alone would have pawned their children, if there had been any possibility of their being seriously ill-treated. Equally, interdependence was mutual. The agriculturalists would also call upon the pastoralists, to some extent, at times of similar adversities.

As a rule, however, people saw ethnic groupings as only one layer of the larger social and cultural system into which they were joined. Most families, lineages, and communities possessed a range of links with counterparts in other sections of the region. The clan affiliations that tied local lineages into ethnic traditions also cut across language boundaries, creating connections, for example, between particular clans in Gikuyuland and in Kamba-speaking areas. Although such links generally had little practical significance (and perhaps little basis in fact), they did provide individuals with networks of putative clan-mates in other parts of the region. Similarly, a system of sectional part of dependent labour within the region, and pawning arrangements were commonplace, particularly when food shortages occurred.⁹

Typically, a young woman whose family was experiencing hard times was sent to live with people in a different community, in return for a negotiated payment or series of payments of foodstuffs or livestock. But ultimate control over the pawned woman continued to rest with the original parent, husband, or guardian; and most of the men who pawned their dependents apparently intended to redeem them when circumstances improved. Often such women never went back to their homes, but the fact that their relatives could return and claim them provided a measure of protection from exploitation (Dundas, 1921: 290; Bernstein, 1996: 266; Jackson, 1976: 205-206).

In 1880 only the slender thread of the caravan trade linked the central Kenya region to the Indian Ocean port of Mombasa and hence to international economy. Commerce had moved along this route of elephant hunting and ivory trade (Hobley, 1929: 205; Jackson, 1976: 203-29). Merchants may also have hoped that by migrating to Mumoni they could forestall attempts by coastal merchants to consolidate their increasing dominance of trade through the region. Mumoni offered ambitious men the opportunity to amass considerable wealth, limited local agricultural resources and however, recurrent drought meant that basic foods would often be in short supply. Only the establishment of trade connections – and the security of food supplies that their existence implied – permitted men such as Kilungya to amass cattle and ultimately to concentrate wealth and power in their own hands. What

9 The pawning or sale of people during famine was widespread in Africa. See Miller (1982), pp. 28-29. Hopkins pointed to the need for further examination of pawnship (1973: 27) but despite the rapid growth in slave studies the topic has received little attention. See also Lovejoy (1983), p. 13. The most useful discussion of the issue remains Douglas (1964).

this meant for the masses of Mumoni residents is not clear. Certainly by settling in *mbenge* villages, people with few resources hoped to gain more. In the meantime, however, they found themselves part of a society in which a small number of men controlled much of the wealth, and many were condemned to periodic hunger (Ambler, 1988: 90).

Trends in the history of long-distance trade emerge a bit more clearly after mid-century. Although ivory supplies declined, a growing demand for livestock at the coast fuelled trade in cattle, goats and sheep. This transition from tusks to animals involved more than the replacement of one commodity with another. Ivory was relatively scarce and required a substantial mobilization of people and resources to acquire. Livestock were ubiquitous and already the staple of exchange within the region. Hence, as more and more men began to take stock to the coast for sale, the boundaries of long-distance and regional exchange blurred. According to Ambler (1988: 53):

This extension of external trade into the regional exchange system forced a rapid commercialization of the transfer of female labor. Traders both from communities in central Kenya and the coast manipulated the convention of pawning to obtain women –generally refugees – who it was understood could not be reclaimed. In other words, the buyers were acquiring right over the woman themselves, not simply their labor...few were transported beyond central Kenya.

Contemporary written accounts refer frequently to the existence of slavery and an active slave trade; but histories of the Kenya interior have generally ignored this evidence or dismissed it as either the product of European misperceptions of local institutions or attempts to rationalize conquest (Van Zwanenberg & King, 1975: 178; Wolff, 1974: 43-44). But it stretches credulity to suggest that numerous and sometimes explicit reports of slave purchases can be explained away as either an expansionist conspiracy or alien myopia (Mwaniki, 1973: 54-55). Europeans travelling through central Kenya recorded many cases of young women and girls being offered for purchase, and various private and official records describe a regular movement of slaves from Gikuyu into Ulu and Kitui. These documents are clearly not misrepresenting instances of arranged marriages or pawning agreements, since such transactions were unlikely either to have come to the attention of European observers or to have earned their commendation. Even at mid-century, when Kraft reported that Kitui residents were beginning to buy slave women from Mbeere and from the coast, he was careful to distinguish these sales from the more common practice of acquiring women as captives or pawns.

The reticence of the oral records presumably reflects not only subsequent attitudes toward slavery and the relatively smallscale of slave trading, but also the speed with which slaves were incorporated into local communities. Even as the trade increased at the end of the century, the position of slaves continued to be defined in kinship terms. Slave status was not inherited, and slave women were integrated into households and communities as wives. During the late 1890s a British official in Kitui noted that the large number of

women from Maasai backgrounds living there were “not slaves in the true sense of the word, for the Wakamba make wives of them, and treat them like their own women” (Lane, 2011: 29). As outsiders cut off from their origins, these women lacked the connections that protected local distinctly inferior positions in their new societies or that they or their children experienced systematic discrimination.¹⁰ Whatever their position, alien women – with their distinctive speech and background – inevitably brought different perspectives to the families that they joined and to the children whom they raised. Moreover, the presence of substantial numbers of these ‘foreign’ women in Gikuyuland, Ulu, and Kitui illustrates the pointlessness of discussing central Kenya societies as if they were culturally and biologically static and discrete.

Accordingly, and although no slave castes developed in the societies of central Kenya, slavery was not just another form of dependency. Most enslaved women presumably saw no alternative to their situation, since many had neither home nor family to return to (Lane, *Ibid.*). But in central Kenya as in other parts of the Africa, when recently enslaved women saw a way out of their status, they often took it. In 1894 the British official in charge of the post in southern Gikuyuland wrote in a letter home that ‘the number of slaves who have run away and come to my Masai kraal is beyond all count; I don’t know whether I have the legal right, but I always refuse to give them up again’.¹¹ As the focus of central Kenya’s external trade shifted away from ivory, stations along the major routes developed as centres of regional trade, and a few local merchants – including Kilungya in Mumoni – began to see their role more as brokers than long-distance traders. By the 1880s this process was only beginning, however. Wide areas continued to be isolated from the currents of international trade, and most contacts with long-distance trade and traders remained ephemeral or superficial. Despite the growth and expansion of long-distance commerce, the patterns of regional exchange predominated and retained their essential structure and autonomy. Many people, especially those who lived away from the major trade routes, had only the vaguest understanding of the external forces that were beginning to reshape their region and their lives. They interpreted distant developments largely through the prophecies of local seers or through widely repeated tales like those in Central Kenya of the mythical Arab merchant who had been pushed into the ocean by a powerful newcomer, and whose name literally, “the person who strikes wood” – evoked the custom of hitting sticks together to signal the beginning of trade.¹²

10 See Lindblom (1920:203-04). Kraft claimed that by the mid-1800s wealthy Kitui merchants were buying slaves at the coast, but there is no evidence elsewhere of the existence of a distinct slave population in Kitui society (Kraft, 1968:259: *Journal*, 3 Dec. 1849).

11 Hall, Letter, 12 Feb. 1894. Also note Chanler, *Jungle and Desert*, pp. 489-90. Lovejoy points to the importance of evidence of slave escape for assessment of slave systems. *Transformations in slavery*, p. 247. Cited in Ambler

12 The term varied slightly according to locality, see Jackson (1972:265-66).

Famine, Migration and Children Movement

From oral sources, many people around Kitui region recall that during the famine, ‘Kamba first brought their livestock to exchange for foodstuffs. Later, they brought their wives and children’ (Mwaniki, 1973: 304). As this reminiscence attests, persistent and intense food shortages led destitute families to turn increasingly to the transfer of rights over female labour under their control – the pawning of female dependents. For the fathers, husbands, or guardians of the women and girls involved, pawning represented a practical means of obtaining desperately needed food.

By transferring their rights over dependents, men were able to supply the remaining members of their families while at the same time reducing the number of mouths that had to be fed. Consequently, during the years from 1898 to 1900, thousands of females found themselves thrust into unfamiliar communities in areas separated from their homes not only by many miles but by considerable cultural and linguistic distance as well. The transition could involve considerable trauma, but many scarcely looked back. They were grateful to exchange the insecurity and hunger that famine had forced on them for the material and psychological certainty offered by their new guardians (Jackson, 1972: 205-06).

If pawning was not intrinsically inhumane, the rapid expansion of the practice during the famine years encouraged men to view female labour as a commodity, a trend already evident in the growth of slave trading. As communities weakened and travel became increasingly dangerous, female refugees in general were left extraordinarily vulnerable to exploitation. Some men from highland communities apparently attempted to use ‘gifts’ of food and shelter to young women in order to create obligations and thus extract payments from the families of the girls involved. Women who had intended only to trade or work for brief periods found themselves held in households permanently or at best until they escaped or relatives secured their release. Others became the victims of marauders who captured and detained female migrants.¹³ Consequently, in Ndia, just west of Embu, the broker and later colonial chief Gutuwa Kibetu enriched himself by assisting coastal traders who were profiting from an active commerce in dependent women.¹⁴

In the long run, the transfer of large numbers of women from communities in Ulu and Kitui to the highlands created a simmering resentment over the loss of vital reproductive and labour resources. Once relative prosperity had returned, men from these areas began to feel considerable anger at what they saw as the unwillingness of highland farmers to relinquish their former dependents. As Ambler writes (1988: 1990):

¹³ Crawshay to Ainsworth, Kitui, 20 Jan. 1899. Also see Wright (1984: 188-89).

¹⁴ KNA: Central Province, Embu District Political Record Book.

As time passed the young women who had been pawned married and had children, the possibility that they would be repatriated became increasingly less likely. In some parts of Kitui and Ulu, men presumably found their marriage opportunities restricted by a shortage of partners. In a few cases, men hired coastal traders to kidnap and return pawns to their families of origin.¹⁵

In the years following, the continued presence of daughters and wives in distance highland communities remained a sore point in Ulu and especially in Kitui, an issue that came to be defined in ethnic terms – as the question of ‘Kamba’ women held in ‘Gikuyu’ territory.¹⁶

As already mentioned in the case of the Kuria, during the 1890s, as source of food supplies became increasingly remote and travel to and from the highlands more difficult, a steadily growing stream of refugees fled the famine zone. Relocation was a well-established response to drought, but now movement occurred on an unprecedented scale. Some wealthy men were able to keep a part of their family and livestock at home, but most people had no choice but to move with all of their property and dependents. People fled Ulu by the thousands, leaving the countryside ‘practically deserted on account of famine.’¹⁷ any areas of Kitui were left virtually unpopulated. An elder from Migwani recalled that ‘by the time the famine was over, all of the Akambawere in Gikuyu or Mwimbe’ (Ambler, 1988: 38).

Refugees-traveling for the most part in small family parties generally had little trouble establishing connection with prospective hosts. Migrants from Kitui communities sometimes made their initial arrangement for resting points or markets located inside the settled areas. Curiously, the highlands farmers who sold their produce in these places of often directed famine victims to homes where refugees would be welcome. For a fee, men from Mbeere occasionally acted as a guide and intermediaries for families from Mumoni who wished to find refugee in Embu. As a rule, however, famine refugees simply travelled directly into the highlands and negotiated their own agreements, often returning to communities where they had already come to buy food or where they had long-standing trade connections. Men frequently drew on established blood-partnership relationship (*giciaro*) to find places for their families (Ambler, Ibid: 134).

15 PRO: Hardinge to F.O., 7 Jan. 1990, FO 2/284.

16 KNA: Kitui District, Annual Report, 1915, DC/KTI/1/1/1; Minutes of a meeting between the P.C. and Kitui chiefs, 14 June 1912, Kitui District Political Record Book, Miscellaneous Statistics (pre-1914), DC/KTI 7/2.

17 For evidence of migration, see PRO: Ainsworth to Hardinge, 28 Dec. 1899, in Hardinge to F.O., 7 Jan. 1990, FO 2/284. Bangert to Hurburt, Kangundo, 8 April 1899, Hearing and Doing (May 1899), p. 6.

Pawnship and Trade around Lake Victoria and Western Kenya Region

The works of Hartwing (1970, 1976; see also Tosh, 1970) and those of early travellers show that, in the 19th century, there was considerable trade among the peoples of the shores and islands of Lake Victoria. This of course is true of the trade directly or indirectly inspired by Zanzibaris, but it is also evident that there was trade along the lake in locally scarce products which paralleled this externally-oriented trade, and probably before that such a trade began. Hartwing (1976:105 and *passim*) points to trade in iron, salt and foodstuffs in the south-eastern and southern lake. Roscoe indicates a trade in salt from the eastern lake into Buganda, though he does not state where the salt originated points to a nexus of trade in a number of products between the Ssesse Islands, coastal Buganda, and coastal Busoga (Thomson, 1968: 290; Hobley, 1902: 27). Wagner for example identified a regionally important trade in iron in the northeast of the lake based upon smelting activity in the Samia Hills near the Kenya Uganda border (1956, vol. 2: 9; see also Cohen, 1972: 99).

Iron and salt were generally scarce in East Africa and they are therefore natural items of trade regardless of other local conditions. But trade in food is somewhat different since the need for it can be intense but problems of transporting it, under pre-colonial conditions, much greater than with the highly portable iron and salt. Trade in food therefore requires adequate transport and, if it is long-distance trade, presumably also a high return, one which could be attained if traded for iron, salt, or similarly valuable and portable items – such as human beings.

The transport itself was present in the form of the sewn-canoe, possessed by the Kerebe, Ganda, Soga, and the lacustrine Suba – among others. This canoe was the instrument which made bulk trade possible in the broken and insular terrain of western South Nyanza District, facilitated trade of all kinds, and rendered it more secure, since traders could avoid contact with potentially hostile landmen; as some of my accounts have it – ‘when there is war there cannot be trade.’² The canoe was of enormous value in its own right through the specialized and labour intensive nature of its construction; hence it had a value enhanced by scarcity, and especially so in the eastern lake where the trees necessary for its construction do not grow (Kenny, 1977).¹⁸ These trees may be found in coastal Busoga where improved rainfall favours their growth. According to Michael Kenny:

18 The significance of the sewn-canoe is revealed in the fact that the royal clan of Ukerewe, the Silanga, is believed to have been the one to introduce its use to Ukerewe. In this regard the Silanga may be viewed as culture heroes such as those in other parts of the interlacustrine region who are held to have introduced important cultural items like fire, iron, and domesticated crops. Though it is not impossible that the Silanga are the ones to have actually introduced the canoe, it is often found that much more clearly mythological figures are also said to have been cultural innovators of the same sort. Whatever the answer, it is clear enough that the Karebe valued the canoe highly and associated it with royalty (Hartwing 1976:43).

Famine is mentioned in a considerable number of oral accounts, and relative to a number of different situations which I take to pertain to different periods of hunger. In one case the famine is reported as having driven people to eat hides... in this same account it is also said that people would give their own children away in order to get food, and this is repeated in other stories in which people would give themselves or their children in order to survive. The economic meaning of such an expedient will be considered below, since here I wish only to emphasize the importance of famine to local trade relations. In fact, one Gwasssi did not have the salt deposit.

The oral accounts have it that the iron traded into Kaksingiri came from Ukara, Ukerewe, and Kome Islands, from Uzinza and Buhaya on the southern and western mainland, from 'Sese', and to a much lesser degree, from Buganda or Samia.

I am uncertain about the geographical identity of 'Sese' in certain cases; some say that 'Sese and the Ssesse islands of the north-western lake are the same, but 'Sese' is also the collective name of the ruling clans of Ukerewe (Hartwig, 1976, p. 51), and one account (D43) explicitly identifies Sese with Ukerewe. However, Uzinza and, particularly, Ukara and Ukerewe are dominant in the accounts. (Kenny, 1988: 350).

Hartwig shows that the central east coast and the Kavirondo area were within the orbit of Kerebe trading activities. The peoples of this shore are interconnected ethnically and historically. The majority of the clans of Kaksingiri know themselves as the 'Wakune' and this term was applied to their area by others, before the Luo name 'Kaksingiri' was adopted for their present administrative area (Stanley, 1878:166). These clans believe that they stem from a single ancestor who fled from 'Rienyi' near the Tanzania-Kenya border, and it is assumed that they are related to those they left behind in that region.¹⁹ Relationship of another kind existed in the recent past with Ukara. Women were brought from Ukara and other places in Tanzania as wives and a few of these women were alive into the 1970s. According to Hartwig:

It is said that they were mainly brought in a sewn-canoe of Uganda origin called 'Nunga', and to a lesser degree in one called 'Asembo' respectively belonging to the Kakrindo clan, one of the Wakunegroup, and to the Kamwangenya, belonging to the Kakrindo clan, one can easily imagine that an in-lawship relation or putative kinship was useful between traders... relation or putative kinship was useful between traders and one account states that people did indeed intermarry with trading partners and used hoes for bridewealth.²⁰

Deeper examination of the question of trade in human beings, a matter closely related to trade in food, is in question. As noted above it is believed that persons, in time of famine, would sell themselves away. How this is viewed depends on who they 'sold' themselves to,

19 On March 17, 1875, Stanley passed this way during his circumnavigation, of Lake Victoria. He states that an area called 'Irieni' is to be found just south of Mori Bay (1878:163-64), and my oral accounts point to the same area.

20 Hartwig (personal comm.) states, in reference to Ukerewe that "they had a difficult time getting the hoes from Buzinza and placed a high value on them. Hoes, in oral remembrances, were only given up in bride-wealth exchange.

and what the motivations of the buyers were. By the latter part of the 19th century slaves were being sent down to the coast from the Lake Victoria area. However, the accounts from Kaksingiri of transactions in human beings do not seem to directly relate to this kind of commercial slavery. Rather they seem to implicate institutions of domestic slavery and clientage, at least to the extent that the Kaksingiri accounts articulate with those of Hartwig. He points out that there was a considerable 'servile' (i.e. client) population on Ukerewe, and that this population mainly consisted of the 'Ruri', a group comprised of individuals from a number of places on the mainland, 'Bururi' being a general region on the coast north-east of Ukerewe, and these 'Ruri' including Suba.²¹

Accordingly, the servile Ruri were usually children brought to Bukerebe and sold by men "needing food during time of famine" (Hartwig 1976:53). Before 1870, men identified as Ruri brought individuals – almost invariably children – to the chiefdom in exchange for millet – presumably *owuwere* – "particularly during one of the not infrequent droughts". Hartwig also reports that there was a colony of people from 'Ugaya' – a Kuria word for Luo – settled on Ukerewe, Bugaya being the former generic name of western South Nyanza. But only one Kaksingiri account has it that children were taken south – in this case to Ukara; there is no specific mention of Ukerewe, though one may surmise, on the basis of Hartwig's information and the density of trade links to the area, that such exchange did indeed take place.

Conclusion

Debt bondage, bonded labor, or peonage, slavery or even pawnship are terminologies that have beclouded the study African history for long. We have tried to unpack this controversy by using the anthropology of the Kuria form of pawn marriage popularly referred to as *eketebe*, review literature on pawnship in central, eastern as well as western Kenya to illustrate the deeper meaning of this practice and its place in current historiography of human pawnship in Africa. We have shown that this practice involved the use of people as collateral against debt. Labor was used often to provide the person who owes the debt, or a relative (typically a child or a woman). It was unusual for a bonded laborer to escape their debt, since further costs would accrue during the period of bondage and it was not unknown for the debt to be inherited across several generations. We have argued that this was not a form of slavery, as in other cases, the pawned females or children being redeemed at a later stage when debt was settled. Afrocentric academics claim that this was a much milder form of debt bondage compared to that experienced elsewhere, since it would occur on a family or community basis where social ties existed between debtor and creditor.

21 In Gembe location immediately to the East of Kaksingiri are to be found the 'Ruri Hills'. Part of Gembe was settled by groups from the 'Rienyi' area in Tanzania who perceive a close kinship to the Wakune group of lineages in Kaksingiri. I do not know if this is significant, but the occurrence of the name 'Ruri' in both places may indicate a historical connection as well.

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