

NGWATIO: A Story of CO-OPERATIVE RESEARCH ON AFRICAN WOMEN

Patricia Stamp and Rebecca Njeri Chege

Patricia Stamp, qui a mené au Kenya des recherches approfondies, parle d'un projet de recherche sur les femmes d'un village kikuyu. Ce sont les femmes du village elles-mêmes qui ont orienté et dirigé le projet, ce qui laisse entrevoir avec optimisme les possibilités que renferme un travail de collaboration. Rebecca Njeri Chege, travailleuse sociale (qui est longuement citée tout au long de l'article) a rendu, par son apport inestimable, le projet possible.

This article is dedicated to the women's self help groups of Mitero, Kenya, who collaborated with us in 1974 and 1981. They are: Mukuyuini Women's Group; Riakarime

Women's Group; Mitero Catholic Church Women's Group; Gikindu Women's Farming Group; Murata wa Mugonda Women's Group; Kang'ei Women's Group; Ngwata-mirwo Women's Group; Kianganga Women's Group; Mitero Maendelao Women's Group. Special thanks to Chief Samuel W. Githimbo, Mutege Lineage Muthamaki (leading elder, chief spokesman).

Ngwatio is the Kikuyu word for the cooperative work by which each woman's farm is cultivated in turn. This is the story of a research project on the women of a Kikuyu village, that was dreamed up in a

classroom at York University, made possible by the collaboration between a North American scholar and a Kenyan social worker, and given shape and direction by the village women themselves. The story is an optimistic vision of the possibilities created by such co-operative work, both for scholarship and for relations between women from widely separated cultures. It is also an affirmation of the contribution made to a social scientist's work by the subjects of her study—a contribution often downplayed in the process of transforming the collaborative experience of field research to the individually owned published product.



The leaders of the Mitero women's self-help groups

Credit: Patricia Stamp

Patricia speaks:

The project arose from the heady experience of opening up Women's Studies at York University. In 1972 I and several other women in the Faculty of Arts started the first social science Women's Studies course, to which we each brought our embryonic critiques of the disciplines in which we were trained. My section of the course attempted a comparative approach to the study of women, with a special focus on Africa. It quickly became apparent that women were as invisible in the literature on Africa as in all other areas of social research.

Out of my lectures, seminars and student essays arose certain questions begging to be answered. Did women ever have more power and autonomy in the past than they have today? Under what conditions? Does women's power and autonomy ever persist in the present, and if so, how? How do *women themselves* perceive social change, and organize a response to it?

In formulating these questions, my students and I were aided by two great studies: Denise Paulme's edited volume on *Women of Tropical Africa*, translated from the French in the early 1960's; and Ester Boserup's *Women's Role in Economic Development*, published in 1970. These, and the articles in a special issue on women of the *Canadian Journal of African Studies* in 1972, established the presence of women in African political economy as a central reality, and provided comparative evidence of the conditions for women's power and autonomy. Boserup's comparative survey established a correlation between the level of women's economic contribution and control over their work on the one hand, and the degree of equality for women on the other.

As a scholar studying politics and local government in Kenya, I became concerned

at the dearth of analysis on Kenyan women. In 1974 I received a Faculty of Arts grant of \$750 to fund a research project on Kikuyu women in the rural area close to the town where I was conducting my doctoral research in the summers. The anthropological literature on the Kikuyu was shamefully silent on the subject of women in society. For example, H.E. Lambert, in his study on *Kikuyu Social and Political Institutions* of 1956, was content to dismiss women and politics with the comment that "men say they do not know for certain whether gatherings of women are . . . *ad hoc* committees or permanent and organized *chiama* (social and juridical councils)." Nevertheless, it was clear that Kikuyu women fell into Boserup's category of advantaged women, in that they were hoe agriculturalists, central to the economy and substantially in control of their work and its product. Further, there were clues in the literature to the former presence of powerful, age-based organizations among women.

I resolved, therefore, to attempt to clarify this picture and to test Boserup's thesis in the context of Kikuyu women's rapidly changing lives. From the outset I believed that the women's own opinion about their past and present circumstances was central to sound analysis: it was time for their silenced voices to be heard. My main problem was the fact that I am not a Kikuyu woman, or a farmer. How could I know what was central to their experience, and thus how could I ask the right questions? I knew I needed a Kikuyu research colleague: even if I had studied the language for five years, I would not have presumed to have access to the subtleties of language among a people who invest their intelligence and art in speech rather than in writing.

The method and the opportunity manifested themselves through my work

in the Thika Town Hall. I had learned that there was much to gain from open-ended interviews in which politicians and administrators largely defined what was important about local government and their place in it. Their answers had generated the questions one needed to ask in order to shape a thesis. More important than the methods acquired, however, was the colleague and friend I found in the course of my research, in the person of Rebecca, at that time a social worker in the Thika Municipal Council. An experienced civil servant, widely respected for her leadership on women's issues in the town, and a Kikuyu herself, she brought practical insights and skills to the project. Moreover, she had recently returned from a two-year university Social Studies course in England, and was at home in the language of social science. Finally, like many Kenyans, she was fluently bilingual.

We came together to shape the project. I presented to her a set of guidelines for in-depth interviews, and a checklist of demographic, social and economic data on the village that it was necessary to obtain. The interview questions I had devised centred on four concerns: women's economic activity, past and present; political activity, particularly participation in women's groups; what women thought about their position nowadays, compared to earlier times; and their opinion on current issues such as family planning, self help, development, and national politics.

Following a pilot study of ten interviews in Thika, we refined the questions and discussed the logistics of the project. We agreed that Rebecca was in the best position to decide on a suitable community for study, and that she should have sole responsibility for organizing and carrying out the interviews.

Rebecca speaks:

After Patricia and I had our discussions on the research, I realized I should choose a rural community where less structural or valiative changes had taken place. By this I mean an area where not many people have immigrated to the area or emigrated elsewhere. Mitero Sub-Location seemed to be a pure rural community where some generations of the Kikuyu people have lived. The interviewees each gave in-

formation about their lineages and clans, and it appears that most of their husbands belonged to the lineage of "Mutegeo." Mutegeo was the great-grandfather of these women's husbands' grandfathers. He had many offspring and plenty of clan land: the lineage occupies about twenty-four square miles.

I chose this particular area because it is near my place of residence, Thika – about

fifteen miles away. I could travel there and back every day. Mitero is not my place of origin, though I am a Kikuyu. Although Mitero and my place of origin have similar rural backgrounds, I could not choose my place because I emigrated from there many years ago, and people who should know me very well as myself, instead would treat me like a stranger. To avoid this kind of feeling and for the success of

my research I decided on a different area. Secondly, Gatundu Division (under which Mitero falls) is in the same political constituency as Thika, my place of residency. With this sense of belonging I felt it might make everything easier in case questions arose as to why I did not choose another area.

Although I had visited this area before, I had not done so in such an official capacity. For this reason I had to find ways and means of introducing myself and the research. The method used was to contact the Community Development Officials first. The main reason for this was that they are Government officials who, in providing their services, have closer contact with the ordinary people than other public officials. Secondly, in my profession, Social Work, Community Development workers and social workers come under the same employer, i.e. the Ministry of Social Services, though in Thika I am an employee of the local authority. The knowledge of the profession has brought us together, so it was easier to contact them and through them get close to the people.

There was no problem in introducing the type of research we were doing to these officials, as they understand the meaning of research. The Community Development officials took me to a local women's leader by the name of Mrs.

Wambui Thiongo. She is the Director of the Kirimo Ngenda Women's Corporation, in Ngenda Location. I was informed by the officials that the woman would introduce me to women in a certain locality of the Ngenda Location, as she was a leader of women in various activities. Mrs. Thiongo told me all about her women's group. Together, we chose Mitero Sub-Location, and we then decided to see the chief of the Location (as the Government Administrator) to inform him of my being in his location as a formality and for security reasons. The Chief and Mrs. Thiongo referred me to the Chief of Mitero Sub-Location, whom I worked with hand-in-hand until I completed my research project in the area.

On 8th August 1974, the Chief, Mr. Samuel Githimbo, called a group of women to meet with me at the Nursery School building, which had been funded by the women's groups. About forty to fifty women were present. He introduced me to the women and requested that I inform them about the research, and tell them that I was interested to know the changes they have experienced since their early lives when they were girls or newly married, and in the rest of their lives, compared with their present life. I explained all these details and I told them that to get a clear picture of these types of changes I had to interview every woman individual-

ly, about forty women from the Sub-Location, as not every woman would say the same thing as the other.

They seemed very much interested with the individual type of interview. I then decided I should select women who could be interviewed. They told me that I should select women from each group. I told them that I was interested in women from the area who did not belong to any group. The Sub-Chief told me, in their presence, that nearly all the women in this Sub-Location have organized themselves into small self help groups, the main purpose of these small groups being to cultivate for each member, and to help one another in the *shamba* (family farm plot) work. Sometimes these groups are employed for money by someone in their locality or on a nearby coffee estate, and they earn money for the group. With the money they either buy shares of land, business or residential plots, buildings, or they join a farming co-operative society.

I told them that for the moment they should select forty women for me to start with from their groups if they wished to do it that way. Every leader or chairman of her group selected five women from her group. I recorded their names and arranged the dates and the times of the interviews. Of the ten groups, the project covered eight.

Patricia speaks:

The women had, in effect, taken charge of the research. To them, the groups were the most important fact of life in the village: the groups' leaders were in the best position to decide who, besides themselves, should be interviewed. By determining the sample to be interviewed, they immediately gave a focus to the study: instead of a general 'survey' of village women and their attitudes, it became an investigation into the strategies for coping with change among the women who had organized themselves for co-operative endeavour, and who were thus at the heart of the community's struggle for survival and betterment.

The sampling was not random, as originally intended: the women's wishes regarding who was to be interviewed challenged my Western assumptions about the appropriateness of a random sample in a society with such a different concept of the individual. People are ideologically and socially constituted as members of

their family, lineage, clan: they are not constituted as individual egos. Thus, the community is not the sum of random, individual wills, but is a corporate entity. What, then, is 'objective' research into a community's attitudes?

Out of Rebecca's interview notes and demographic survey emerged a picture not at variance with Boserup's broad hypothesis. The women's self help groups were the direct descendants of the age grade organizations of earlier times, by which women not only cultivated co-operatively, but participated fully in the political and juridical lives of the community. The self help groups, in addition to their old functions, had taken on new ones, such as co-operative capital accumulation for the development of community amenities. Interestingly, the term *ngwatio* is applied to the modern form of co-operative agricultural work, while *matega*, formerly meaning group support for a woman in childbirth, now refers in

addition to group savings activity, out of which each woman receives a capital sum in turn, for the purchase of a major item, such as a water tank, a cow or a table and set of chairs.

I quote from my summary to the article published in *Rural Africana* (Winter 1975-1976), titled "Perceptions of Change and Economic Strategy Among Kikuyu Women of Mitero, Kenya:"

The aim of the new groups, then, is to extend the old co-operative patterns for new social and economic goals . . . Women, through the effective marshalling of their small earning capacity, and the small cash productivity of their shambas, are providing themselves with some economic security. In the process, they are ensuring through their own solidarity a measure of control over their resources and a measure of stability to the community. They are able to mitigate the disadvantages of the new patterns of property ownership which favour men . . . and the disruptive effects of modernization.

As for my own responsibilities to the community, I was expected to take part in a formal meeting for the purpose of prayer and international diplomacy – held in the

Nursery School financed by the women. Kind wishes were extended to my Canadian students, for whose benefit the women had contributed their time. In

turn, I was requested to keep the village in my thoughts and prayers, and help materially in whatever way I could, in the spirit of *matega*.

Rebecca speaks:

As a whole, I enjoyed myself conducting this type of research, whatever its outcome was to be. I felt I made use of the theoretical knowledge of my profession, and gained experience on research methods. It also gave

me a wider knowledge and understanding of the ways of life of my own people and my own gender (community of women as a pride), which I had never dreamed of trying to study. I have taken courses in Develop-

ment Studies, yet I never got a chance to practise my skills from them. The Mitero project kept me alert, and afterwards I was enabled to make some progressive changes in my job.

Patricia speaks:

In 1981 I returned, on my sabbatical, and picked up the thread of my relations with Mitero once again. My thinking on women's self help groups had developed in the interim; the groups themselves had evolved. The aim this time was to conduct a fresh set of interviews, to chart this

evolution in the context of my new theoretical ideas. In particular, I was interested in the vigorous savings activity of the groups and their umbrella investment organization, Kirimo Ngenda Corporation. Moreover, I had an important commitment to fulfil: I brought with me

an old hand-powered Singer sewing machine, worth its weight in gold in an electricity-less Kenyan village, as my promised gift to the women of Mitero. Once more I approached Rebecca, who by now was Supervisor of Family Welfare in Eastlands, a borough of Nairobi.

Rebecca speaks:

At first I felt I was unable to take on the research again, given the weight of my commitments in Nairobi City Council. But then I decided to take the leave time owed to me, and work with Patricia again. I could not imagine anyone else taking my place on *my* research! Generally speaking, I may say that I carried out the work assigned to me by Patricia successfully. I thought at the start I would do much better than in 1974, since the study was a

continuation of the 1974 interviews. The interviews were strenuous however: there were more questions than in 1974 and the answers provided were long, so that it took between two to three hours to interview one person. Towards the end of the day, during which I interviewed three people, I became tired. Also, it was hard reading the questions in English, asking them in Kikuyu, then recording the responses in English. My lack of shorthand

and typing meant I had to write rough notes, then rewrite them in the evening. This was very tiring. On the whole though, I thought I did a good job. Finally, I may say that I had no problem introducing the research. People and government officials were very co-operative and I had no problems with anybody. As in 1974, the women of Mitero kept on feeding me while I was working at the Nursery School.

Patricia speaks:

We interviewed local government officials, and a number of women who previously gave fluent, informative interviews. Several chairwomen from a neighbouring sublocation, some younger, educated women who were not group members, and some leaders of Kirimo Ngenda Corporation, were also interviewed. The questions were more focussed and detailed, seeking to obtain more concrete information on the self help group activity, its achievements and problems, and the local government's attitudes towards women's projects.

A part of this rich lode of material formed the core of empirical material upon which I constructed a theoretical paper on changing gender relations in Kenya.² The article, entitled "Kikuyu Women's Self Help Groups: Towards an Understanding of the Relation Between

Sex-Gender System and Mode of Production in Africa," suggests that under certain circumstances women in Africa may organize to resist the double oppression they experience as peasants and as women.

I argue that the women of Mitero, as wives of the Mutege lineage residing in the lineage village, and as members of age grade organizations in their new form of self help groups, have a fortunate continuity with the structures and practices that gave women power and autonomy in the past. Upon these they build resistance to the negative effects of commodity production for export. Among the Kikuyu, the commodity crop is coffee, and while women cultivate the coffee bushes planted on almost every family *shamba*, it is their husbands who collect and control the coffee income. The process diverts

wealth from the local community. Women, seeking to retain control over their work and its product by channelling their efforts and small earnings through the self help groups, retain a measure of the community's productive wealth and energy in the service of community sustenance and development.

The effects of these efforts were much in evidence the day in April 1981 that Rebecca, my husband Stephen Katz and I were invited to participate in village ceremonies celebrating the national Tree Planting Day. With local officials and the leaders of the women's groups, we celebrated in speech, dance and the planting of seedlings near the beloved nursery school, a sense of community and well being founded in and fostered by the spirit of *ngwatio*.

Mitero women speak:

17 April, 1981

Mrs. Patricia
Assistant Professor of the Division
of Social Science

Dear Madam,

The Chairman and Members of the Gikindu Farming Group all welcome you. We can't forget you and Rebecca N. Chege for the time that you were here in 1974. We received your message from Rebecca that you will be coming from London to Kenya in March and after you arrive, you will come to visit us and we were glad and we prayed God to guide you on your journey. Also you told us that you might bring us a sewing machine as a gift from Canada.

Our Gikindu Farming Women's Group Projects are:

(1). Plot No. 14 at Mitero Market on which we built five rooms from stones, 80 x 20

feet. (2). We keep a business for Tailoring and Handcrafts and now we want to buy another plot called Ngenda/Mitero T160. (3). After buying this plot we want to build a poultry house and pigs house. (4). We have 6 company shares – the capital is KShs 60,000 (Can. \$8,600). That's all we have done.

Thank you Madam.

Yours Faithfully,
Mrs. Monica Wababi Gachuki
Chairman

'Lineage' is a descent group tracing back its kinship ties to a founding ancestor in the relatively recent past. Mutego lived in the mid-nineteenth century. A 'clan' is a wider descent group, tracing descent back to a distant, often mythical, ancestor.

²This paper was presented at the 1982 conference of the Canadian Association of

African Studies, and will appear as the first chapter of *Women and Class in Africa*, edited by Claire Robertson and Iris Berger (scheduled for publication by Holmes and Meier in 1985).

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Rebecca Njeri Chege has been involved in Kenyan local government for over twenty years, holding posts in social work and family welfare in the cities of Thika and Nairobi. She holds diplomas from the Machakos School of Social Work and the University of Swansea Program in Social Development and Administration.

NANA

Kneading bread, I think of her breasts
Mottled brown, hanging, spent, flabby.
Looking then, I thought of bread,
Brown bread, midway in the kneading,
Not yet risen from the working of the yeast,
Waiting on time and warmth.

She waited for death,
Those old breasts hanging, or
Hitched up in sturdy cotton cups.
Foundation garments they were called.
What foundations? Those had gone.
My hands cup the dough, pressing, moulding,
Making bread. I use her recipe.
Old breasts, fresh bread: dust and yeast.

Judith Rutledge
Toronto, Ontario