

“There Was No Change”: Kenyan Women, Temporality, and Decolonization

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Abstract

While Kenyan colonial subjects became citizens at independence, women were excluded from state resources, social services, and full political enfranchisement. This was neither the decolonizing future they had been promised nor the one they had envisioned; for Kenyan women, independence often held more symbolic than material meaning. Continued landlessness – which overlapped with perpetuated structural gendered inequalities and various forms of political exclusion – coloured the ways in which Kenyan women made sense of independence. Relying on archival and oral sources, this article explores how Kenyan women were prohibited from exercising the fullest rights offered and protected by the early postcolonial state. In examining the multilayered politics of women’s marginalization, this paper elucidates how these exclusions shaped political imaginations, and in particular, Kenyan women’s notion of temporality, often marked by a sense of stasis or being placed outside of time. “There Was No Change” thus not only sheds light on the broad question of how gender shapes temporal logics, but it also contributes to an emerging literature on gendered notions of time during political transition.

Keywords: Kenya; gender; time; decolonization; land

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Introduction

Nandi farmer and Rift Valley resident Helen Kirua remembered, of Kenyan independence, “I was just living. There was no change” (interview, December 3, 2012).¹ For Kirua, decolonization entailed little transformation: just as in the colonial period, she continued to experience land insecurity and land loss, her farm and domestic labour remained substantial, her husband owned and controlled their family property, and she did not think elected officials represented her. In the post-independence period, Kirua and her family continually moved from farm to farm in search of a decent plot and greater security. On each of these farms, Kirua recounted her immense agricultural and household labour duties, while at the same time noting that she possessed few rights to property or agricultural products and was permitted little input into household decision-making. Her interactions with elected officials and bureaucrats were also limited. In other words, many of the promises of independence – land, development, equality, and democracy – did not come to fruition for Kirua. Unlike the popular framing of independence as a watershed, and unlike the Kenyans – primarily men – who did consider *uhuru* (‘independence’) a significant marker in their lives, Kirua and other women described independence as being of little consequence.

While most Kenyan colonial subjects became citizens at independence, women were excluded from state resources, social services, and full political enfranchisement. This was neither the decolonizing future they had been promised nor the one they had envisioned and, for Kenyan women, independence thus often held more symbolic than tangible meaning. The independent era, in other words, produced few material changes for many women, and the continuities of this transitional moment were not only obvious, but they shaped women’s political imaginaries. Continued landlessness,

in particular, perpetuated structural gendered inequalities, and political marginalization coloured the ways in which Kenyan women made sense of decolonization. While men commonly understood independence as a milestone in their own lives and in Kenyan history, women articulated different experiences and temporal conceptualizations. Many of the social, political, and economic realities of Kenyan women remained similar before and after independence. Women thus frequently noted that their lives did not change with decolonization. They remained disenfranchised, in spaces that stretched from their homes to that of the new nation-state and beyond.

This article engages with historical scholarship on gender, decolonization, and temporality in modern Africa. A longstanding literature on gender and feminist history has demonstrated that, in various African settings, decolonization did not usher in the promised changes for women – whether they continued to be excluded from positions of political power, felt abandoned by a postcolonial state that did not prioritize their welfare, or witnessed the perpetuation of a colonial version of patriarchy (Geiger 1997; Mutongi 2007; Lal 2015). In the last few decades, the modern African historiography, on the whole, has reassessed the periodization of the mid-twentieth century. Rather than compartmentalizing the colonial and the postcolonial, presuming two distinct periods where independence signified an automatic rupture, many historians now study the two periods within a single analytical frame. Newer works examine both changes and continuities, exploring, for example, times of economic growth and prosperity from the postwar period up until the 1970s, and analysing the legacies and continuities of colonial policy in the independent era (Haugerud 1995; Mamdani 1996; Berry 2001; Cooper 2002; Branch 2009; Terretta 2014; Bamba 2016; Aerni-Flessner 2018; Angelo 2019; Moskowitz 2019).

A rich, and wide-ranging, Africanist scholarship has approached time and

¹ All interviews were conducted by the author.

temporality creatively, exposing African modernity as being heterotemporal (Schoenbrun 2006), refusing linear narratives to write, instead, in “chords” (Marks 1986, viii), studying the reconfiguration of time towards a futurist orientation (Piot 2010), and exploring “the past’s visions of the future” (Wenzel 2006, 7). Fewer works, though, have evaluated decolonization as heterotemporal, or examined gendered temporal imaginations of this period. A developing literature on gendered notions of time during post-conflict transition is instructive. This literature shows that the “aftermath” of war is a gendered concept and, for women, can signify little change when gendered violence, inequality, and marginalization continue in “post-conflict” society (Meintjes et al. 2001; Aoláin et al. 2011). Acknowledging the gendered dimensions of temporal logics during political transitions, and drawing on the Africanist literature which has approached temporality innovatively, helps provide new insights into decolonization.

Kenyan women narrated their own histories of decolonization as ones of stasis, or of being placed outside of time. Post-independence leaders often conflated a romanticized past with an idealized future, referencing the importance of drawing on African traditions for a modern context. This rhetoric, and the policy which followed from it, contained implicit gendered coding which consigned women to modes of traditional labour – agricultural and communal work, along with childrearing and housekeeping – while giving men privileged access to modes of modernity, most often the capitalization of farming, resources, and development. While both Wenzel (2006) and Piot (2010) explore reorientations of time in eras of disappointment, these studies do not capture the fracturing of time, in this case a gendered fracturing, conceptualized as being left behind while time moves forward. The popularized nationalist chronology did not resonate with women because it did not reflect their experiences. Rather than a neat, singular, or linear narrative, a whole set of narratives,

often dissonant and in conflict, emerged after independence.

Exploring women’s varied postcolonial experiences, their distinct conceptions of the meanings of independence, and their wide-ranging responses to their position within the economic, political, and social landscapes of independent Africa can reorient scholarly thinking on temporal imaginations and decolonization. Not only is there a stark difference between men’s and women’s experiences and imaginations, but women’s diverse experiences call into question simplistic and singular notions of independence. While Kenyan women’s conceptualizations of independence and its temporal significance differed starkly from those of men, even within a single locality, women possessed varying ideas of decolonization, depending on a number of factors, such as generation, class, social networks, familial relationships, ethnicity, and more. Scholars have long shown that the colonial state operated unevenly and intervened episodically, creating a breadth of experiences for Africans. Decolonization and postcolonial Africa still require a similar nuanced analysis to provide a more complex understanding of the period, and of the varying ways in which African citizens from all aspects of life thought about this era.

Relying on archival and oral sources, this paper explores how rural Kenyan women were prohibited from exercising the fullest rights offered and protected by the early postcolonial state, particularly land ownership. Archival sources were drawn largely from the Kenya National Archives (KNA), and contain not only information on land policy, land settlement selection procedure, and Kenya’s development agenda, but hundreds of petitions from landless women to politicians and bureaucrats. Although this paper makes use of petitions, these are complex sources to analyse, since many poor Kenyans, women especially, were illiterate and relied on unnamed intermediaries to draft their petitions. Petitions were thus a product of collaboration between the

named petitioner(s) and the unknown petition writer, incorporating the ideas of both.

In addition to archival sources, I collected oral histories in Kenya’s Western Highlands. This region sat on the periphery of what was once the White Highlands, and also occupied a peripheral space in the colonial and postcolonial economy, with the agricultural production of maize, wheat, sisal, pyrethrum, legumes, and vegetables. Large tracts of land – more fertile than in many other parts of Kenya – became available during decolonization as white settlers left, inspiring intense competition. This rural, multi-ethnic region is home to Kalenjin (primarily the Nandi subgroup), Luyia (primarily the Maragoli subgroup), and Gikuyu people. All three of these ethnic communities experienced extensive landlessness and land alienation in the colonial period and they expected, and made claims to, land during decolonization. More than half of those I spoke with were women, a few were former officials, some were squatters, some were landowners, a few were relatively well-off, but the vast majority lived modest lives. Many of the women I spoke to, and those who wrote petitions to the government, inhabited positions of precarity, some of which resulted from enduring poverty and some from life crises, such as the sudden death of a husband. None of these women were elite, and few possessed the social and economic protections to keep such crises from posing a threat to their security and stability. Oral histories offer a distinct perspective, particularly when compared to the public record. While both petitions and oral histories offer insights into women’s postcolonial expectations, aspirations, and experiences, oral histories, especially, shed light on women’s temporal imaginations of decolonization.

This article begins with the colonial context, examining the ways in which colonial rule served to marginalize and oppress women. The next two sections turn to the postcolonial realities Kenyan women confronted, particularly the continued constraints on their access to land and resources, and on their financial,

personal, and political autonomy. The fourth section then explores how gendered exclusions intersected with class and ethnicity. The final section centres on gendered temporal imaginations, largely using oral histories. In examining the multilayered politics of women’s marginalization, this paper elucidates how these exclusions shaped political imaginations, and in particular, Kenyan women’s notion of time. “There Was No Change” not only demonstrates how gender moulds temporal logics, but it also contributes to an emerging literature on gendered notions of time during political transition.

The context

As in other African colonies, Kenyan women confronted a setting in which Christian, Western, and state patriarchies were interwoven (Bozzoli 1983, 149). Women’s bodies and reproductive work became central to the “political and moral order”, and debates raged over clitoridectomy, marriage, and maternity (Thomas 2003, 4). Control over women’s reproductive labour was, of course, tied up with their productive labour, and for many Kenyan women, colonialism meant greater workloads, diminished authority in household management, and weakened economic status (Strobel 1979; Kitching 1982, 240; Mackenzie 1996). Few possibilities for African upward mobility existed in the colonial period, and women confronted extensive barriers to Western education (Kanogo 2005, 212). Schooling was not only required for the best employment opportunities, but Kenyans also used Western education to gain knowledge about navigating the colonial world and as an alternate path to achieving seniority (Peterson 2004, chapter 2). The policing of women’s reproductive labour, the expansion of their productive labour, the restrictions on women’s autonomy, and their exclusion from educational opportunities, together translated into social controls, compelling women to get

married and stay married in order to access land and resources (Hay 1982, 110–112).

For both Kenyan women and men, colonialism had created unprecedented land shortages and widespread land insecurity, as the state appropriated the fertile Rift Valley highlands for white settlers and as the African population grew rapidly. Land alienation, along with taxation and proscriptions on the growing and selling of cash crops, forced Kenyan men into the wage labour economy (Kanogo 1987, 1). The colonial state curtailed opportunities for Africans to earn income independently and imposed compulsory labour levies (Berry 1993, 81–82). As a result, the number of African labour-tenants working for white farmers in the highlands increased dramatically. During this period, Kenyans working in the highlands could only gain temporary usufruct rights on European farms, or as members of kin groups in the reserves. These policies – land alienation, taxation, agricultural prohibitions, and labour laws – served to circumscribe the financial and personal autonomies of Kenyan women and men. Even so, gender deeply structured land access, labour, and mobility. Women – excluded from pass laws that allowed men to travel – were largely restricted to rural spaces, and both colonial officials and African men vilified urban and unmarried women as unrespectable (White 1990, 143; Shadle 2006, xxv). In other words, while men travelled to white farms and urban areas to work, women remained responsible for the vast majority of the agricultural and domestic labour in the reserves.

Colonialism would come to an end abruptly, as the Second World War, trade union strikes, the Mau Mau uprising, nationalist movements, and shifting global politics all accelerated processes of decolonization. When independence negotiations began in 1960, the most heated political debates revolved around the structure of the postcolonial government, which would determine control over the distribution of land and development. These were especially contentious and significant issues.

Only a small proportion of Kenyan land can satisfactorily be utilized for intensive agriculture and grazing, and various ethnic groups articulated conflicting claims for land.

Throughout the continent, Africans expected that independence would herald greater development. These expectations initially grew out of the postwar context, which saw the passage of metropolitan development and welfare acts. The British Parliament passed the Colonial Development and Welfare Act in 1940, while the French passed the Investment Fund for Economic and Social Development in 1946. In the 1950s, African nationalist leaders made promises about healthcare, education, infrastructure, and technology, further contributing to widespread expectations for development. Postwar development programmes and increasing nationalist developmentalist rhetoric also coincided with the creation of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The United Nations declared the 1960s the “Development Decade”, the same decade that witnessed the decolonization of much of Africa.

Primarily an agrarian society, many Kenyans conceptualized development through the lens of land. In 1962, the Million Acre Scheme – the largest land transfer and resettlement programme in Kenya’s history – began. It would be just one of many late colonial and early postcolonial programmes aimed at restructuring tenure, redistributing land, and promoting agricultural development. These programmes would continue after independence on December 12, 1963, and they formed part of a broader emergence of mid-twentieth century policies increasingly shaped by transnational institutions and foreign nations, but always negotiated and reformulated by state, nonstate, and local actors on the ground.

In spite of the hopefulness of this moment, the opportunities of decolonization would not be evenly distributed. Certainly, land resettlement was structured by class and ethnicity, but it was most profoundly structured by gender. Women were systematically

excluded from the right to land ownership, especially when they were disqualified from selection for land settlement. With this exclusion, many of the most despised consequences of colonial policies continued, as women were forced to enter marriages or rely on male relatives to access resources, thus limiting their personal and financial autonomy. In other words, colonial forms of marginalization were compounded for women at independence.

Postcolonial realities: Unequal land access and ownership

On September 11, 1964, less than a year after independence, Jomo Kenyatta gave a televised speech in which he declared that land would bring Kenyans “salvation and survival” (Kenyatta 1964, 62). Widely known as his “Back to the Land” speech, Kenyatta asserted that the government had laid the foundation for economic growth based on cash crop production, and now it was the responsibility of the people to get their hands dirty. The prime minister criticized those who had “been attracted to the towns” to earn money, and who “leave their land unattended, or in the care of old mothers, wives or young brothers” (Kenyatta 1964, 62). In many ways, this speech emphasized the longstanding platform of the Kenya African National Union (KANU) party on land and agrarianism, and was part of a series of speeches, statements, and communications which raised Kenyan expectations for land. However, in focusing on the problem of absentee landownership, while deriding those Kenyans still “cry[ing] for more land”, Kenyatta revealed, but left unaddressed, the inequalities of land distribution. When he drew attention to mothers and wives who farmed in the absence of their sons and husbands, the prime minister inadvertently highlighted the gendered nature of both land ownership and agricultural labour.

Indeed, when the Million Acre Scheme opened in 1962, single women – whether

unmarried, divorced, or widowed – were ineligible to purchase land through the programme. This exclusion occurred even though women’s rights to own property were ultimately protected under the independence constitution being negotiated at the time. Women’s exclusion from this programme reflected their position within Kenyan society, where women’s standing depended on marriage and reproduction. The policy, in other words, was geared towards maintaining the gendered status quo, which not only protected men’s authority and offered them a monopoly on property rights, but also ensured the conservation of marriage institutions and the nuclear family with a male head of household (Moskowitz 2019, 99). As in the colonial period, proscribing women’s access to land forced them into positions of dependency with male relatives, most often spouses.

On the ground, colonial and postcolonial state agents enacted these policies. During the early 1960s, bureaucratic procedure specified that only “male heads of families” were eligible to be selected for land resettlement.² In a 1963 letter to the Rift Valley provincial commissioner, A. A. A. Ekirapa, writing for the district commissioner of Nandi, noted, “The policy to date appears to have been not to allocate plots to families who[se] head is a female.”³ Other correspondence between bureaucrats and local officials confirmed this policy, with district commissioners frequently informing women seeking land that they were ineligible for settlement.⁴

Kenyan women contested late colonial and early postcolonial systems of land tenure and distribution, building on a long history of resistance to their land dispossession

² J. A. H. Wolff, PC RVP, to A. A. A. Ekirapa for DC, Nandi, February 1963, DC/KPT/2/13/4, Kenya National Archives (KNA), Nairobi.

³ A. A. A. Ekirapa for DC, Nandi to PC RVP, “Kikuyu for Settlement Schemes,” January 30, 1963, DC/KPT/2/13/4, KNA.

⁴ For example: DC, Uasin Gishu to Wambui, January 18, 1962, DC/ELD/1/10/3, KNA.

(Brownhill 2009). Believing that independence represented the ushering in of a more equitable society, many Kenyan women petitioned their local officials, requesting land. While some women made the argument that they were “entitled” to land as the heads of their households, as the heirs to their husbands, and as experienced labourers, most women – similarly to men – made claims to land on the basis of their need.⁵ Almost all land petitions included a biographical narrative of progressive pauperization as a result of unfortunate circumstances. These narratives reflect the individual characteristics that land aspirants and petition writers believed the government sought in settlers.

For example, Wamoro w/o [wife of] Maina wrote to the district commissioner of Kiambu in November 1962, “I have come to understand from reliable sources that the Kenya Government has set aside a land for the inhabitants of Kiambu district for landless which I offer myself for same. I am a widow and survive in this district for the last long years without any land for gain. I am very old and have children whom I live with them.”⁶ Wamoro, like most petitioners, clearly articulated her landlessness, poverty, and obligations to dependents. Petition writing as a form of claims making was not new. In the colonial period, Kenyans had petitioned the government about self-determination, rights, development, regional boundaries, communal land, and inhumane treatment, among other topics (MacArthur 2016, 108; Osborne 2014, 478; Peterson 2008, 82; Koinange 1955, 97–98). These colonial petitions had almost always been drafted by men on behalf of an ethnic community or political organization, however, and petition writing by individual women making claims to state resources was novel.

The number of land petitions from women suggests a belief in the prospect of a positive outcome.

For Kenyan men, a petition like the one above could have resulted in a successful application for land. Yet, in conceding that resettlement would be at market rate on a willing buyer-willing seller basis, the state had resolved that poverty did not accord Kenyans with rights to state resources, and that not all Kenyans would get land. Still, men possessed the possibility of success through making a claim of privation, whereas women did not. Continually, bureaucrats replied to women’s petitions to tell them they remained ineligible but that they hoped to accept women’s applications shortly.⁷

By the mid-1960s, the Kenyan government had technically modified its policy of automatically disqualifying single women from land settlement but had done little to change the practice, and thus, to improve women’s land access. Discrimination remained rooted in the selection process. Poor women could rarely meet the stipulations for settlement programmes. Officials believed that they lacked the agricultural knowledge necessary to become individual smallholders – a skill set measured largely by time spent labouring on European farms. In addition, women often did not possess the finances for a down payment. Even when women could meet these requirements, bureaucratic procedures all but guaranteed their continued exclusion. Women tended to be largely invisible to the state. They did not have identity cards or labour cards and thus could not prove their work history on European farms or the location of their “home area” – two conditions for settlement selection. Although identity papers, or *kipande*, were especially despised in the colonial period, with independence, this documentation not only delineated the bounds of the nation and its citizens, but became requisite to acquiring rights to state resources, such as land titles.

⁵ Wambui w/o Muiruri, Ainabkoi to DC, Uasin Gishu, January 12, 1963, DC/ELD/1/10/3, KNA.

⁶ From Wamoro w/o Maina [Eldoret] to DC, Kiambu, November 22, 1962, DC/ELD/1/10/3, Kenya National Archives, Nairobi.

⁷ DC, Uasin Gishu to Wambui, January 18, 1962, DC/ELD/1/10/3, KNA.

Women’s groups brought these issues to the attention of officials. The Cherangani KANU Women’s Wing wrote to President Jomo Kenyatta in November 1968, noting that they had sought “*shambas*” [farms] since land resettlement had begun, but to no avail. In the petition, the women made clear that they had previously approached both their district commissioner and their member of Parliament, Masinde Muliro, but “they are not showing any sign of helping us.”⁸ Only after this initial effort to contact local officials and their representatives did the group approach the president. This petition reveals not only the ongoing exclusion of women from land settlement opportunities, but also the very real role bureaucrats and politicians could play in this exclusion.

At times, members of Parliament did object to women’s marginalization. In 1965 in the House of Representatives, Waira Kamau, MP for Githunguri, protested:

Many people are still landless and especially the women who are husbandless; they have nowhere to live. I would invite the Ministry to consider these people very seriously. They are settling men in various places in the settlement schemes, but I would like them to have a project especially for these widows, to be given their compensation, because what is happening today (...) that if these women are located in a plot of Mr. X (...) these people are being chased away from the villages; they have nowhere to go.⁹

Although few MPs advocated on behalf of women’s rights to land, Kamau was not the only representative in the mid-1960s to take

up this cause, particularly for widows. Others complained that widows had children “but no means of livelihood”, noting that they were “very poor indeed.”¹⁰ Still, the parliamentarians who supported women’s land ownership were in the minority and little changed.

Women petitioning for land in resettlement were, indeed, most often widows, and on rare occasions, divorcees. The author found no evidence of single women petitioning for land. The marital background of petitioners reflected societal expectations that young women should marry and remain married, along with related constraints which made it nearly impossible for single women to acquire land or property on their own.

The petitions of women illustrate an engagement with the new government and a belief that – despite policy which inhibited their land rights – independence would bring change, and women would be able to own land. When these expectations did not come to fruition, women not only recognized the continuities between the colonial and postcolonial periods but watched as many others claimed new farms. A broader set of rural women from various backgrounds also found that property rights more generally remained unequal in the independent period, making clear the continuities of the mid-twentieth century while also shaping their temporal imaginings.

Postcolonial realities: Unequal property rights

Women’s marginalization extended beyond land settlement to property rights more generally. As with settlement, widows were particularly vulnerable, and the state provided few protections (Mutongi 2007, 4). Florence Machayo, a Maragoli settler in Chekalini and a women’s advocate who attended university in the United States, noted widows’ insecure

⁸ KANU Women Wing, Cherangani Scheme, Kitale, to the President’s Office, “Request for Intervention,” November 15, 1968, KA/6/19, KNA.

⁹ Kenya National Assembly, House of Representatives, Official Report, November 12, 1965.

¹⁰ Kenya National Assembly, House of Representatives, Official Report, June 3, 1966.

position with regard to family land. While widows were rarely permitted to inherit property, they often held rights to manage land until their sons came of age. Even so, Machayo recounted that women and their dependents could easily be dispossessed, particularly after remarrying or in instances where they had no children. Furthermore, many widows did not have the necessary documentation to safeguard their land (Florence Machayo, interview, November 1, 2012). Title deeds only included men’s names; most women did not have marriage certificates; and many did not realize they needed their husband’s identity card to prove their rights to the land. Similar to women’s exclusion from identification cards, their exclusion from other forms of bureaucratic documentation not only placed them outside the modern nation but circumscribed their land rights. With ambiguous land tenure and a complicated legal system, widows’ property rights were often insecure (Mutongi 2007, 166–170).

Men’s exclusive control over land could also put married women in precarious positions. While divorced or widowed women tended to seek land in their petitions, married female petitioners often sought different ends. Some married women wrote to officials asking for help to stop their husbands from selling family land. Mary Chesanga, for example, complained to her district commissioner (DC) in 1967 about her husband selling land secretly and solicited the DC’s assistance.¹¹ A couple of years later in 1973, Mrs. Kabura Maina Mwati wrote to the area settlement controller in her region about a comparable situation:

I beg to inform you that I have got 11 children in family, and sometime ago my husband was given a plot at Ngorika Scheme Plot No. 58. His name is Mr. Maina Mwati and I am his wife, he married me since I was a girl. I have been working

very hard on that plot but sometime ago due to drinks (Pombe) he was approached by a rich businessman called Kariuki Thiongo who stays at Dundori and I discovered that he is intending to sell that small land to him. Would you please be kind enough to stop this forever, because of these children and myself we have got no other land in this country (...)¹²

Like other petitioners, Mwati emphasized her work ethic and the children she supported. Importantly, women’s petitions to bureaucratic officials represent the pursuit of state intervention into household matters. While such petitions may have been an action of last resort, their existence suggests some expectation of greater rights and autonomy for women, or at the very least, greater constraints on men’s property rights within marriages.

Oral histories confirm that men often possessed singular control over household economic assets. Felistas Muriga Nasambu – a Maragoli farmer who moved to the Lumakanda settlement scheme just after independence – said that her husband made decisions about whether to buy cattle and sheep, and which purchases to make for home consumption, such as cloth, sugar, or salt (interview, November 9, 2012). Karen Misavo – another Maragoli settler at Lumakanda – recalled that she had to consult her husband before selling small amounts of maize or beans to make contributions to her church group (interview, October 31, 2012). A number of women complained that their husbands used the family’s money irresponsibly. Archival and oral evidence thus reveals men’s monopolization of land and property.

Both widows maintaining property for their sons’ inheritance and women labouring on family farmland they did not legally

¹¹ DC Nandi to Mary Chesanga, “Re: Land Complaint,” September 13, 1967, DC/KPT/2/13/3, KNA.

¹² Mrs. Kabura Maina Mwati to The ASC (C), “Ref: Plot No. 58 – Ngorika Scheme,” March 9, 1973, KA/6/20, KNA.

own inhabited wide-ranging positions of vulnerability. Though patriarchal structures limited women’s property rights, families often negotiated these rights at the household level, and women’s experiences could differ considerably. Men often managed household incomes, circumscribing their wives’, sisters’, and daughters’ financial autonomy (Fanike Chanzu, interview, November 9, 2012). There were exceptions, of course. Some women and men remembered making monetary decisions together. In other cases, when men were employed off the family farm, women achieved greater independence, making household financial and managerial decisions in their husbands’ absences. Fanike Chanzu, whose husband worked in an Eldoret office during the week, recounted that he made the payments for their land and agricultural loans at first, but she took over that responsibility with time (interview, November 9, 2012). Chanzu’s background is similar to both Nasambu’s and Misavo’s; all three women are Maragoli, originally from Vihiga, born in the 1930s and 1940s, and their families all settled in Lumakanda in 1963 and 1964. Unlike Nasambu and Misavo, though, Chanzu’s husband was employed in town, which translated into greater autonomy for her. While financial control differed among households, most men and women noted that, among married couples, husbands controlled the economic assets, deciding how to use money and resources.

Though some women enjoyed fairly secure rights to land, these were almost always usage rights rather than property rights. Margaret Wanjiru Nyanya, a Gikuyu woman who settled on a farm in the Mautuma scheme with her husband, put it succinctly: “Women didn’t have much rights to land; it was their husband’s names; they were just working the land” (interview, November 11, 2012). In fact, women’s usage rights were rarely circumscribed, since women’s labour was so central to agricultural production throughout the continent (Hay 1976, 92–109; Guyer 1978; Davison 1988; Goheen 1996; Sheldon

2002). As Nora Kasigene, a Maragoli farmer, recounted, “The women did a very good job compared to the men in building the nation. Men could just sit down because they had got land and women were working the land” (interview, October 30, 2012). Kasigene grew up in Vihiga and then moved to the Lumakanda settlement with her husband in 1963. As a family, they possessed secure land rights, but her remarks make clear that she viewed the land as her husband’s but the labour responsibilities as her own. Similarly, Pauline Ngetich – a Nandi settler in Uasin Gishu – summed up her relationship to their family farm: “The land was ours, but it was not mine” (interview, November 21, 2012). In this, Ngetich revealed the layers of land rights. She asserted that the land belonged to her family, and was hers to toil on, but her husband’s to own. Ngetich’s account correlates with ethnographic findings amongst the Nandi (Oboler 1996, 255–256).¹³ Usage rights, in other words, provided women neither with ownership rights, nor with rights to the products of their labour. Restrictions on women’s land rights extended to other farm property as well, particularly cattle (Pauline Ngetich, interview, November 21, 2012).

This lack of financial autonomy and lack of participation in household financial decision-making left women in a vulnerable economic position. It represented another aspect of the organization of postcolonial society which perpetuated the disenfranchisement of women, and in which the actions of the postcolonial state followed closely from those of the colonial state (Boserup 1970; Robertson and Berger 1986; Stichter and Parpart 1988; Berger 1992). These experiences deeply shaped women’s political imaginations and sense of time. However, it was not just gender,

¹³ Regina Smith Oboler studied a similar phenomenon in spousal negotiations over cattle ownership, detailing the remarks of a Nandi clergyman on this subject: “A woman must never say, ‘Those cows are mine.’ Once she has been married she has no property of her own any more, but all the property of both of them belongs to the family, which means those cows are her husband’s.”

but ethnicity, class, work history, place of origin, family status, and more which shaped women’s material experiences, and thus, their political imaginations.

The intersections of gender, class, and ethnicity

Gender and class – closely tied to property ownership – had initially defined African political rights in colonial Kenya. In 1957, Kenya held its first elections allowing Africans to vote, but offered franchise neither to women nor the landless nor the poor, while at the same time allowing wealthy and well-educated men up to three votes (Branch 2006, 28). Even when these rights were amended as franchise was extended and no longer weighted, gender, class, and ethnicity continued to determine land ownership and the spectrum of rights accessible to different citizens.

Since land was not made available to everyone during decolonization, resettlement put Kenyans in competition with one another. Class represented one of the clearest fault lines differentiating those with privileged access to land and those excluded from land. African settlers were required to possess capital for a down payment, they needed to be deemed creditworthy and knowledgeable about agriculture, and they had to navigate a complex bureaucratic system (Moskowitz 2019, 47), all of which benefitted the wealthy and well-educated.

In short, the poor experienced exclusion from land opportunities. Poor women were doubly marginalized. The intersections of class and gender were not lost on those affected by these policies. For example, in February 1963, ten months before independence and a year into the Million Acre Scheme, Kuria s/o [son of] Kimani wrote to the district commissioner of Uasin Gishu on behalf of the employees of the van Rensburg farm in Ainabkoi:

We are very sorry we women and we poor men because we don’t get any help from you. We had thought that we have to get money from maize we shall sell and now we have no where to get money if we have to sell our maize shs 16.50 per bag also we don’t have a lot of maize that we may get for school fees, transport and for the train fares and if we do so even we cannot get for the new settlement. We cry for you to get us a help. Secondly we women with no husbands we have no where to go or money to settle new settlements because no body to help us and now many people have gone to built their homes, sir, when shall we go to build ours?¹⁴

Women’s collective identity is discernible in this petition, both in opposition to certain men – and the opportunities they were afforded – and as a marginalized group organizing themselves. At the same time, the language identifying the petitioners is significant: “we women and we poor men.” Few pieces of evidence so clearly illustrate solidarity across gender, but this petition reveals the important intersections of gender and class. Women and the poor experienced systematic exclusion from land and other resources. Indeed, poor, landless men at times shared comparable temporal views of decolonization with women.

Nonetheless, the district commissioner’s reply contained little evidence of sympathy:

(...) Mr. Van Rensburg’s men workers have been allowed to apply for settlement schemes (...) If you have been so foolish as not to save enough money (...) there is nothing I can do. I cannot change the price of maize but I am hoping women

¹⁴Kuria s/o Kimani for the Adam’s Employees (A. J. Van Rensburg, Ainabkoi) to DC, Eldoret, February 10, 1963, DC/ELD/1/10/9, KNA.

without husbands will be able to apply for settlement soon.¹⁵

Like many bureaucrats at the time, the district commissioner conceded he could do nothing to help women access land. Perhaps more importantly, he dismissed the very real issue of former labour-tenants’ impoverishment, and thus, their inability to make a down payment. In this case, the petitioners pointed out the impact of low maize prices. Many Kenyan farmers complained about maize pricing in the early 1960s; prices were set by the government and essentially taxed farmers to pay for famine relief when needed. Already much less profitable than other crops, such as coffee or tea, low prices could certainly keep farmers, especially those with small plots, from saving any substantial sum of money (Moskowitz 2019, chapter 5).

It was not just gender and class identities that intersected, but also gender and ethnicity. Different ethnic groups made competing claims to land, drawing on ideas of restitution, autochthony, development, and need. At the same time, settlement programmes preserved ethnic segregation as selection for land settlement was often organized by ethnicity, and Kenyatta used land distribution to ensure “political loyalties” (Angelo 2019, 190). In turn, land policy not only fuelled resentment about ethnic inequalities, but on the whole, probably overly benefitted the Gikuyu (Kanyinga 2009, 336–337). Women articulated these ideas in oral histories. Helen Chepkuto, a Nandi squatter living in Sosiani, said that she was disappointed that “other people were given land.” She had expected that her family would gain access to a settlement plot because they had lived and worked on a white farm, but instead, “someone from far – a Gikuyu – was given land and we were left out...” (Helen Chepkuto, interview, November 30, 2012). Chepkuto acknowledged her family did not have the money for the down payment, which

contributed to their exclusion. In this case, gender, ethnicity, and class all intersect, shaping Chepkuto’s experiences and her imaginations. While Chepkuto recognized how her gender and poverty impacted her access to land, her understanding of land resettlement was deeply inflected with a sense of ethnic inequality and injustice.

Like others, Chepkuto makes clear that she had expected land at independence, and the exclusion thus shaped her temporal imagination of decolonization.

Gendered temporal imaginations

Landless and land insecure women made meaning of independence in a context where the postcolonial state reproduced the inequalities of the colonial state. Many rural Kenyans expected land redistribution at independence. However, rural experiences of acquiring and utilizing land during decolonization differed markedly, particularly for men and women, producing heterotemporal imaginings of this critical moment. These divergent experiences generated wide-ranging understandings of the temporal significance of independence, marked by dissonance, fracturing, and ambiguity. Women recognized that Kenya had changed: Kenyatta became president, they achieved self-government, men acquired land previously owned by white settlers, and many of their husbands and male relatives spoke of independence as momentous. Yet their own positions remained stagnant, even as the world around them transformed.

Male landowners commonly understood independence as an important marker in their own lives and in Kenyan history. Some men emphasized the freedoms of *uhuru* (‘independence’). Joseph Dugere Munge – a Gikuyu farmer employed on a white estate for many years before settling at Mautuma – recalled that “during colonialism, we worked like slaves”, but after independence, “I had the freedom to do anything for myself” (interview,

¹⁵DC, Uasin Gishu to Kuria Kimani, February 18, 1963, DC/ELD/1/10/9, KNA.

November 11, 2012). Nandi farmer Stanley arap Songok purchased 20 acres of land in Uasin Gishu. After *uhuru*, there were many positive changes, he said, noting specifically that Africans were allowed to keep grade cattle, get loans, produce cash crops, and above all, lead themselves (interview, November 20, 2012). Here, Songok implicitly referenced detested colonial policies, which had constrained Africans’ ability to compete in the agricultural market by prohibiting them from accessing cash crop licenses and farming loans. David Tororei – another Nandi farmer – purchased 50 acres of land at independence on a settlement scheme. He recounted how much his life changed after *uhuru*, noting in particular that Kenyans became independent, his children went to university, and he was able to produce from his land (interview, December 3, 2012).

It was land that men brought up most often. Many male landowners equated independence singularly with land. When Alan Maikuma – a Maragoli agriculturalist who settled in Lumakanda – assessed the significance of independence, he compared the land he had farmed back in the reserve to what he purchased in settlement, and noted that the new land was “very good” (interview, November 3, 2012). Tiengik arap Sawe, a Nandi agropastoralist who settled in Tapsagoi, Uasin Gishu in 1968, said simply of independence, “Our lives changed because we got our own land” (interview, January 12, 2013). Landless men, on the other hand, articulated different ideas. Daniel Kibeney Bitok – a Nandi farmer who squatted for many years – recounted, “It was as if there was no independence” (interview, November 26, 2012). Land was not just intimately connected with Kenyan imaginations and expectations of independence, but it also signified a material, social, and cultural resource.

Women’s recollections tended to be tinged with ambivalence. Ruth Malakwen Cheptekeny, whose Nandi family moved around the Rift Valley before purchasing land in Leseru, was one of a few women who described independence as significant:

Before independence, I really don’t know how people were getting on in their lives. But after independence everything changed. Africans were responsible, because Kenyatta became the president, and they were proud of that. During the colonial era, they just heard from people that a certain person was the governor or the leader, but we did not have a chance to know who that person was (Ruth Malakwen Cheptekeny, interview, January 9, 2013).

Though Cheptekeny saw independence as an important temporal rupture for national politics, she described numerous continuities in her own life, particularly the gendered inequalities and exclusions of the independent era. Cheptekeny noted that few women were allowed to attend *baraza* (public local meetings) with bureaucrats and elected officials. She thought this was unfair, criticizing men for “dominating responsibilities” and treating women like children. She recounted, in addition, the unequal division of work between men and women, another carryover from the colonial period.

Similarly, Nandi farmer Rael Serem expressed uncertainty about *uhuru*: “Yes, we were really free”, she said, but continued, “We got independence. But, still we were under our husbands. So, freedom was not there to us yet” (interview, December 3, 2012). She noted, in particular, that “everything belonged to the husband” and “women were not entitled to own anything.” Here, Serem – a Nandi woman who had moved to various parts of Kenya with her husband and children before they bought a small piece of land in Sosiani in 1974 – referred to the inequalities within her marriage. Serem’s family had been in a position of economic insecurity prior to becoming landowners, but they had prospered enough in the first decade after independence to purchase land. Still, Serem complained about women’s extensive responsibilities and heavy workloads.

She recalled that it was difficult for women to advocate for themselves at the time, but that they went to parents and in-laws to negotiate, and “women got rights, little by little.” This temporal conception of continuity between the colonial and postcolonial periods extended to Serem’s understanding of government. She recounted, “When we got independence, the *serikali* [government] was strictly following the rules of colonialists, but it has changed as they got knowledge.” In her accounts of both her personal life and of the nation, Serem refers to colonial legacies, but in each, she also notes that change did occur, just more gradually than she had expected. For her, the early postcolonial period shared much in common with the late colonial period, and yet she also acknowledged the importance of Kenya’s independence and freedom. Serem’s temporal imaginings thus reveal dissonance.

Like Serem, many women spoke about the inequalities of their marriages. Helen Kirua was quoted at the start of this article, saying nothing changed at independence. She went on, “Everything belonged to my husband, even the children. I was just there. I owned nothing” (Helen Kirua, interview, December 3, 2012). Her phrasing here is critical, suggesting a feeling of not just paucity but stasis, perhaps even invisibility, while the world around her changed. Women’s independence, inextricably tied to their rights to land, labour, and property, was nuanced, but certainly also limited. Kirua’s description parallels many women’s descriptions. Though they were often largely responsible for agricultural, domestic, and household labour, few women achieved formal, legal land ownership. The continued proscriptions on women’s ability to own property, and thus to have personal and financial autonomy, contributed to conceptualizations of stasis or timelessness.

Like Kirua, many women remarked that little changed with *uhuru*. Even those women who lived comfortable and prosperous lives, unmarked by precarity or tense marital relationships, noted the continuities between

colonialism and independence. Nandi agriculturalist Susan Rono, for instance, described a happy family life, working together with her husband on around 40 acres of land. Nonetheless, she detailed how, after independence, “There were not many changes; everything was the same” (Susan Rono, interview, November 22, 2012). Rono did not complain about inequalities in her marriage or her lack of control over family property, and she even recalled attending the meetings of the agricultural cooperative, which was rare for women at the time. In a polygynous marriage, she likely possessed greater autonomy than others, as she managed a farm with less oversight from her husband. Even so, Rono was aware of the inequalities within early postcolonial Kenyan society. Much of her disappointment revolved around social services. Not only did she credit *wazungu* (‘whites’) with introducing schools, Christianity, and hospitals, but Rono noted that she had expected healthcare and education to be free after independence. She was frustrated that women continued to struggle for transport to take children to clinics and hospitals. Thus, although she occupied a position of relative privilege compared to many others, Rono’s temporal imaginings of independence as continuity reflect disappointment with expected government services.

Similarly, Deina Iboso – whose Maragoli family settled in the Lumakanda scheme – felt fortunate to receive land. Unlike Rono, Iboso recounted the importance of purchasing 15 acres of land in the Lumakanda settlement scheme, comparing this land to the “very small piece” of land they had had back in Vihiga. In spite of this, Iboso said that she could not see any changes since independence, aside from land, and she did not think Kenyans were better able to help themselves (Deina Iboso, interview, November 12, 2012). Together, Iboso and Rono show that, although owning land was significant for women, as opposed to men, it did not completely reshape their temporal understandings. While male landowners almost always described independence as a rupture,

women whose family or husbands owned land still tended to emphasize the continuities of *uhuru* – whether their property and management rights were extremely circumscribed or not – in the narration of their own lives.

Although gender was the broad fault line dividing the temporal logics of independence, conceptions of time were also deeply marked by class. Landless rural women, who almost always became further impoverished as a result of their land insecurity, were especially marginalized. Their temporal imaginations were moulded by experiences of gendered discrimination, exclusion, and poverty. At independence, Helen Chepkuto and her family continued to stay on the farm – previously owned by a white settler – where her husband had been employed. The European owner eventually sold the land to a farm-buying cooperative, but because Chepkuto’s family did not have enough money for a down payment, they were unable to purchase a piece of land. This precipitated a life of squatting, initially in the same region, but eventually in a squatter community just outside of Eldoret. These experiences deeply shaped Chepkuto’s life and her understanding of the independent era. She recalled, “I was expecting to be given settlement, bearing in mind that I was living in a *mzungu*’s [white’s] farm before... Though we had no money, the government could have stood by us and given us a loan” (Helen Chepkuto, interview, November 30, 2012). She went on to note that, at independence, because everyone was African, she thought they would all be treated equally.

Nandi squatter Mary Kitur shared similar experiences and ideas. During the postcolonial period, Kitur has been displaced countless times. From 1976 up until today, she has been landless, squatting illegally first in a forest and, since 1984, in the same illegal settlement as Chepkuto. Kitur said, “After independence, nothing looked good to me, because even before independence I was a squatter and at the moment I am still a squatter, so I do not see its importance” (interview, November 19, 2012).

In particular, she directed blame at the government for not endowing every Kenyan citizen with the right to land, for not providing social services, and for not protecting property rights. For Kitur, though, the continuities of landlessness and squatting, more than anything else, contributed to her temporal imaginings of decolonization.

Kitur and Chepkuto expressed disappointment and unmet expectations in relation to independence. They also described experiences of perpetuated landlessness and precarity. Their narrations not only make clear the importance of the intersections of gender and class, but also the specific continuities they traced between the colonial and postcolonial periods. If, for many Kenyans, colonialism was marked by displacement, paucity, and marginalization, those who continued to experience these issues in the postcolonial period – particularly poor, landless women – often conceptualized decolonization as a period of continuity and articulated a feeling of personal stasis, even if much around them changed.

Conclusion

Many Kenyans understood decolonization both as an emancipatory project and as a reparative one. Thus, the freedoms and recompense Kenyans sought would not be realized with the departure of the colonizer alone. The promises of decolonization were intimately connected to development and land, and likewise, to greater economic, political, and social autonomy. For many Kenyan women, these promises remained largely unfulfilled, moulding their temporal imaginings of this period.

In early postcolonial Kenya, a spectrum of rights existed, continually shifting and often tenuous. Many Kenyans were neither given access to land ownership nor to property rights writ large. With expectations of land redistribution during decolonization, continued landlessness and land insecurity deeply shaped political imaginaries, as marginalized

Kenyans made sense of the independent moment largely through their exclusion from accessing the resources of the state. In turn, for land insecure and landless women, independence signified little political or economic transformation. And, when they narrated their lives, independence featured much less than other moments of local and personal significance.

This article tracks how, after independence, the experiences of men and women differed considerably, particularly with regard to accessing land. Consequently, they came to understand the significance of this historical period in distinctive ways. Women were largely excluded from formal political spaces, and they had few avenues for accessing the resources of the state, especially land, but

also social services. Yet decolonization had been largely envisioned through the promise of development and resources. As the inequalities introduced during colonialism were perpetuated, and gendered exclusions further entrenched, women began to express distinct temporal imaginings of decolonization as a period where “nothing changed” for them, even as they acknowledged the transformations occurring around them. The dissonance between their own feelings of stasis and a changing context shaped a sense of being placed outside of time. The evidence demonstrates that time was gendered, while also suggesting the need for greater attention to gendered notions of time during political transitions, and particularly during decolonization.

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