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The Curse or Fertility of Land Clearing: How Migrant Labour Modified Gender-based Division of Labour in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania

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Abstract

Gender-based division of labour is a system practised throughout the world; in precolonial times the Southern Highlands of Tanzania was no exception. Given that gender-based division of labour was established by tradition, it was feared that breaching cultural norms by transgressing labour boundaries would bring on a curse. Even so, women assumed the extra burden of tasks left by their migrant husbands. This included clearing the land, which was chiefly a man's duty, and so meant violating cultural norms. Since women traditionally had not been obliged to clear the land, they employed various tactical strategies to facilitate this, such as paying available men to perform the task. We argue in this article that this decision, despite its complexity, promoted women's decision-making and enabled them to enjoy a degree of autonomy and manage all stages of crop cultivation. In analysing the data, we use the Gender Analysis Framework, which captures the central issues of gender. The results show that, apart from other mechanisms, the phenomenon of male migrant labour boosted the status of women, as well as their decision-making and autonomy. Consequently, women gained more – the situation for them was one of 'fertility' rather than a curse.

Keywords: Tanzania, fertility, migrant labourers, women, agriculture

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Résumé

La division du travail basée sur le sexe est un système pratiqué dans le monde entier ; à l'époque précoloniale, les hautes terres du sud de la Tanzanie ne faisaient pas exception. Puisque la division du travail fondée sur le sexe était établie par la tradition, l'on craignait que la violation de normes culturelles transgressant les limites du travail n'entraîne une malédiction. Malgré cela, les femmes ont assumé le fardeau supplémentaire de tâches laissées par leurs époux migrants. Cela comprenait le défrichage des terres, qui était principalement une tâche d'homme, et impliquait donc d'enfreindre les normes culturelles. Puisque les femmes n'étaient traditionnellement pas en charge du défrichage des terres, elles ont utilisé diverses stratégies pour contourner cet interdit, comme payer des hommes pour effectuer cette tâche. Dans cet article, nous soutenons que cette décision, malgré sa complexité, a favorisé la prise de décision par des femmes et leur a permis de jouir d'une certaine autonomie dans la gestion de toutes les étapes de la culture. Pour analyser les données, nous utilisons le cadre d'analyse de genre, qui reflète les questions centrales de genre. Les résultats montrent qu'en dehors d'autres mécanismes, le phénomène du travail migrant des hommes a renforcé le statut des femmes, ainsi que leur pouvoir de décision et leur autonomie. Par conséquent, les femmes en ont bénéficié – pour elles, c'était une situation de « fécondité » plutôt qu'une malédiction.

Mots-clés : Tanzanie, fécondité, travailleurs migrants, femmes, agriculture

Introduction

Gender-based division of labour (GBDL) was a common practice in precolonial Africa as elsewhere in the world. The practice was adopted in all types of economies, such as crop cultivation, animal husbandry and iron smelting. However, the responsibilities discharged by each gender varied from one society to another, depending on various internal and external geographical, economic, political and sociological factors across time and space (Bryceson and Mbilinyi 1980; Afonja 1981; Burton and White 1984; Omari 1995; Alahira 2014). Besides, no theory has ever been able to account adequately for the origin of the division of labour (Emami 1990). It is argued that although African women's contribution to the agricultural sector is significant, they benefit very little from their production (Afonja 1981; Baumann 1928; Goody and Buckley 1973; Kinunda 2017). In response to this situation, NGOs, governments and international organisations make social, economic and political efforts to help women increase their influence in household decision-making in compensation for their labour.

Despite the significant effect of migrant labour in labour reserve regions in promoting women's social and economic status in their societies within and beyond the period of practice, very little has been said about it. Using the Gender Analysis Framework (GAF), we argue that the colonial migrant labour system disrupted the precolonial cultural and traditional division of labour and, by so doing, partly modified gender-based division of labour, consequently paving ways for women's success. The study explores the dynamics of labour during the colonial period and its association with the notions of curse and fertility.[1] Since gender-based division of labour is cultural, some exclusively male work could not be performed by women, and vice versa, for fear of bringing on a curse. We argue that the massive withdrawal of able-bodied men from the selected communities weakened the male workforce, forcing women to assume traditionally male roles despite the fact that violating traditional gender-based divisions of labour threatened their spiritual status. This resulted not only in modifying the gendered division of labour but enabled women to discover their abilities to manage their households.

This article is divided into three main parts. The introduction presents the rationale and theoretical framework and methodology for the study. The second part gives a brief background to the precolonial division of labour and the extent to which it was destabilised by the colonial masters. This section is followed by the dilemma around land clearing for the women who were left behind. This part offers useful information on traditional divisions of labour, including those that were ritualised, which reinforced the gendered division of labour. The last section discusses the reverberations of women assuming men's obligations.

Overview of the Research Site

Located between latitudes 6° and 12°S and longitudes 29° and 38°E, the Southern Highlands of Tanzania (population 4,300,000) covers an area of about 245,000 km^2, which is equivalent to 28 per cent of the total area of mainland Tanzania. The region comprises six administrative regions, namely: Iringa, Mbeya, Njombe, Rukwa, Ruvuma and Songwe. Its climatic conditions favour crop and livestock production: the altitude ranges from 400 to 3,000 metres above sea level with temperatures between 10° and 22°C; annual rainfall distribution, mainly observed during the wet season from November to April, varies from 750 to 2,600 mm (cf. Guni and Katule 2013; Koskikala, Kisanga and Käyhkö 2020). Such climatic conditions make the region a grain basket for the country (Santorum and

Tibaijuka 1992; Kangalawe 2012). This study was undertaken in three different administrative districts in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania, namely: Makete, Mbinga and Mbozi, located in the regions of Njombe, Ruvuma and Songwe respectively. In each district, we selected three villages from one ward for the study. The basis for selecting the research sites was their economic activity, i.e. agriculture, and uniqueness in types of crop production, particularly Mbinga where *ngolo* farming is mainly practised, which is labour-intensive. Another reason for selecting the research sites was their participation in migrant labour.

Theoretical Framework

We adopted the Gender Analysis Framework (GAF) because, contrary to other feminist and gender theories, it provides tools that throw light on how gender roles are organised and practised in a particular vicinity. Given that gender issues are cultural, their analysis ought to be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of local perspectives. Accordingly, we were guided by the Jhpiego 2016 Gender Analysis Toolkit for Health Systems. This was found to be more appropriate than other frameworks, such as the Harvard Gender Analytical Framework, the Moser Framework and the Gender Analysis Matrix (GAM). We used the GAF framework because, unlike others, it is made up of five domains that touch on all key areas of the project: (i) access to assets; (ii) beliefs and perceptions; (iii) practices and participation; (iv) institutions, laws and policies; and (v) power, an overarching aspect linked to each of the other domains. Of the five domains, four were considered relevant to this study: (i) access to assets; (ii) beliefs and perceptions; (iii) practices and participation; and (iv) power.

The framework enabled us to examine the extent to which beliefs and perceptions about the precolonial traditional gender-based division of labour in the region were later modified by actual practices and participation as dictated by the prevailing condition – labour scarcity. This study engages the selected GAF in analysing how the very organisations of labour make and remake old and new divisions in response to challenges. In other words, gendered boundaries of labour are tentative. For example, the absence of men in the region licensed women to transgress culturally gendered boundaries and exercise power in terms of controlling the house economy as they gained access to assets that formerly were denied to them.

Research Methods

Given that the study is qualitative, we based the data collection methods and analysis on informants' accounts and documentary reviews. The main question of the project as regards this paper was, how did the migrant labour system contribute to the modification of the traditional division of labour in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania? To answer the question, we adopted the triangulation approach to collect as much information as possible. Accordingly, we used the following data collection techniques: focus group discussions, in-depth face-to-face and phone interviews, and documentary reviews.

Nine villages and a total of 411 informants were involved in the study. No specific criterion was used to determine the number of informants. The variation was mainly affected by informants' turnout. Women (221) formed a larger group than men (190), regardless of their age. The data collection took four months; three consecutive months in the first phase and one month in the second phase. Generally, an average of fifteen informants attended focus group discussions and a few were interviewed, for reasons that will be explained below. Since we aimed at collecting information from individuals who participated in the migrant labour system or whose close relatives from their households provided labour far from home, the study applied non-probability sampling, and purposive sampling in particular.

We consulted ward and village executive officers to find relevant informants. The main reasons for involving this group were twofold. Firstly, these officers were responsible for issuing research permits in their administrative territories. Secondly, they knew some old men and women, former migrant labourers or close relatives of those who had participated in the system, who were later called for a meeting with us. Since many of the former migrant labourers were dead, their sons, wives and close relatives were selected and invited to participate in both focus group discussions and interviews. Thereafter, the venue and modus operandi of meetings for group discussions were arranged. In many cases, meetings were held outside village offices. However, for some elderly informants, group discussions and interviews were conducted in their residences.

Discussions were carried out in Swahili, the national language of Tanzania, which is spoken by the majority. In most cases, there were similar responses in particular villages to all prepared and follow-up questions. This is because people in a given place have similar experiences because of their shared culture and the way they interact with the immediate environment around them. All discussions were audio-recorded for further analysis and for illustrative quotes as demonstrative evidence.

Information collected through group discussions was supplemented with information from interviews to obtain detailed and experienced accounts of migrant labour. Other reasons for conducting interviews apart from group discussions, included the fact that some old informants were not conversant with Swahili, such that they could hardly express themselves fully. To break this barrier, we set aside time to interview them individually at their residences with research assistants who volunteered to interpret the ethnic languages, i.e. Kinga, Matengo and Nyiha in Makete, Mbinga and Mbozi districts, respectively. We also interviewed elderly informants who were unable to attend the focus group discussions. The interviews allowed participants to express their views and reactions freely, which enabled us to gather detailed information. The male interviewees explained the reasons for their participation in the migrant labour system and how the household had developed by the time of their return. The women and children who had remained at home gave extensive accounts. Additionally, we consulted documentary and archival sources to determine the possibilities, options for and reasons for labour migration, the number of migrant labourers who had left the region, the challenges faced by the women left behind and the strategies they employed to cope with such challenges.

We coded the collected data according to response similarity, an exercise that enabled us to generate themes. The identified themes were further analysed using the selected GAF to explain how observed traditional practices proved impractical and were modified as a result of the sudden absence of men who went to labour zones.

Perspectives of Migrant Labour

The migrant labour system involved men leaving their areas of residence to go to labour zones and their wives struggling to take on the abandoned responsibilities. However, women's decisions to perform male activities have led to conflicting views amongst scholars. While some, as it will be revealed later, claim that the migrant labour system doubled women's responsibilities, others think that by taking on male responsibilities women proved their ability to control domestic affairs and above all enjoyed autonomy, statuses they had never had before. We start by reviewing regional studies to get a general understanding of the matter and later engage with the work of other researchers to glimpse what happens beyond the Southern Highlands of Tanzania.

In his account of migrant labourers from Njombe, Graham (1970) argued that due to marginalisation by the colonial administration, young people from the region had no option other than to participate in migrant labour as a chief source of income. In other words, there was a strategy to

force young men to work in production zones as migrant labourers. Similar accounts were presented by Nyakyusa women in their conversations with Mbilinyi (Kalindile and Mbilinyi 1991). A study by Giblin (2000) from the same locality, apart from giving a detailed analysis of the state of affairs that victimised women in Njombe, pointed out roles played by women to compensate for the absence of male labour in Njombe. Dinani (2019), who carried out a study in Southern Tanzania, reveals that the notion of a social institution, i.e. marriage, was reconsidered during the migrant labour system. The author argues that migrant labour affected marriage and the gendered division of labour. Other studies in other parts of the region, such as that by Lovett (1996a, 1996b), reported similar findings, that women were overburdened by agricultural tasks after their husbands and other men had left to work elsewhere. Generally, the dominant perspective by scholars of the region is that migrant labour overburdened women. In addition, labour altered several traditional practices, such as marriage and labour distribution. As such, it seems that even after men had left for production zones, women did not enjoy freedom. They were heavily exploited, so to speak.

Studies conducted elsewhere present two main views. Some argue that the removal of male labour doubled women's home obligations (Adepoju 1995; De Haas and Van Rooij 2010; Gordon 1981; Mbilinyi 1985; Stichter 1985; Kinunda 2017). Yet others assert that, in taking over male activities, apart from enjoying autonomy, women could openly demonstrate their abilities to carry out agricultural activities, manage and control resources, and make decisions about farm produce (Chant and Craske 2003; Boehm 2008; Yabiku, Agadjanian and Sevoyan 2010; Dushanbieva 2014; Ullah 2017; Thebe 2018). Other studies, nevertheless, reveal more complex situations. In her study on migrant labourers and the effect of this system on women in Egypt, Brink (1991) illustrates how autonomy was enjoyed by women in nuclear families, whereas women in extended families were under the control of their mothers-in-law with regard to the distribution of money.[2] Women who lived in extended families faced fewer challenges because of the support they got from other relatives; however, their autonomy was reduced, and vice versa (Desai and Banerji 2008). Although women enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy in the absence of their husbands, it must be stated that, in some communities, they were subjected to informal supervision, which Yabiku et al. (2010) call 'substitute authority'. It involved husbands assigning to some people at home the duty to monitor the whereabouts of their wives. The people assigned included close friends and relatives of the husband, especially in extended families (Lovett 1996b; Boehm 2008; Yabiku et al. 2010).

This article explores how migrant labour contributed to altering the traditional gender-based division of labour, and modified existing gender roles, during the British colonial administration in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania. We argue that migrant labour did not have only adverse effects on women. It opened some opportunities for women, which enabled them to discover their abilities in the absence of men. This included transgressing the traditional gender-based division of labour. This happened only once in the history of the region. In addition, the paper briefly examines the reverberations of the notions of curse and fertility associated with women's attempts to perform men's obligations, particularly in clearing the land. The gender-based division of labour was upheld by belief systems in the selected communities, and as a result, was not easily contravened. The article argues that, in shouldering the extra workload, women challenged the belief system and became empowered, and that this contributed enormously to women's emancipation in the region.

Gender-based Division of Labour

As noted earlier, Agriculture is the main economic activity in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania. Other economic activities in the region include animal husbandry, pottery, iron smelting and lumbering (Brock and Herbert 1963; Mapunda 2011; Mende, Kayunze and Mwatawala 2014; Mteti 2016; Mbonile and Haulle 2020). Since the region has a wide range of environmental conditions, several types of crops are grown there. Although the activities for growing different crops differ, some activities are common all over the region, such as land clearing. Unlike other activities, land clearing was mainly done by men (Burton and White 1984; Koponen 1988). Women participated indirectly by preparing food and drink for the men while they worked. Other activities varied from one society to another, in being performed by women or by both men and women (Knight 1974; Mattee 1998; Kato 2001; Kinunda 2017). The fact that agriculture was the main economy in the region meant that it was also associated with rituals and religious taboos.

To ensure a good harvest, precolonial society in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania practised shifting cultivation (Ruthenberg 1964). Crops common to the Kinga, Matengo and Nyiha included maize, potatoes, beans and finger millet. However, the Kinga and Matengo mainly cultivated wheat (Kinunda 2017). Clearing the land was the initial step in all agricultural activities. Trees were felled, collected, stacked away and eventually burnt. These activities were not gender-biased; they were undertaken by men and women. Later, most of the activities in the research areas were performed by

women who were sometimes assisted by men. Among the Matengo, tasks such as ridging, planting and weeding were done by women (Knight 1974; Mattee 1998; Kato 2001; Kinunda 2017). But despite providing much of the farming labour, women did not profit much from it because the main decision-makers over the farmed products were men; women had little influence on intra-household decision-making (Afonja 1981; Baumann 1928; Goody and Buckley 1973; Kinunda 2017).

In precolonial Africa, labour division was based on age and gender (Baumann 1928; Peristiany 1951; Morton 1979; Afonja 1981; Burton and White 1984; Omari 1995; Alahira 2014). Both animal herders and crop cultivators had a clear system that defined men and women's obligations. However, the systems varied across cultures. It must be kept in mind that such systems were not all rigid. Various factors, such as natural disasters, wars and intermingling with neighbouring societies affected the division of labour (Afonja 1981). However, the one factor that brought considerable transformation was the introduction of migrant labour by the German colonists, which was later intensified by the British colonial administration in Tanganyika, as noted.

Colonialism demanded labour, but indigenous people were reluctant to provide labour in colonial projects. To deal with the problem, a poll tax was devised to be paid in cash only. Having no other means to get cash, men had to join the colonial labour force (Iliffe 1979; Mbilinyi 1985; Rodney 1983). This was the beginning of the migrant labour system. Nonetheless, migrant labourers later needed to accumulate money for a variety of other needs, such as buying imported products and, sometimes, paying for bride wealth (Graham 1970). Since the region was one of the sources of labour, the introduction of migrant labour meant the outmigration of a significant number of men. Consequently, the traditional division of labour was destabilised. Other affected areas included the West, North-West, South and Central regions (Tambila 1983; Mbilinyi 1985; Mbonile 1996; Sabea 2008).

The Southern Highlands of Tanzania were characterised by two migrant labour movements: internal and external. The internal movement of migrant labourers involved men and a few women who moved from their homelands to provide labour at nearby places. These places included a gold mine in Chunya, which hired only men for mining activities; the Mufindi tea plantations, which employed women and men for tea plucking; and lumbering, which was done by Kinga men exclusively. These activities necessitated that migrant workers be away from their homes for some months. In our research, it was revealed that brick-making was one of the most common activities for Kinga men in Mbozi (among the Nyiha people) during the dry season.

A large number of labourers, however, went outside the region, and this is referred to as external movement. They went to sisal plantations in Tanga, located in north-eastern Tanganyika, the Zambian Copper Belt and the South African goldfields (Kalindile and Mbilinyi with Sambulika, 1991; Mwakikagile 2008; Sadock 2013). As a result, by1932, the number of men in the region had diminished to 37,573 compared to 70,905 women.[3] It is also reported that, up to the 1950s, 40 per cent of Ngoni males between the ages of seventeen and fifty lived outside the region.[4] In addition, by 1937, about 20 per cent of Kinga and Bena were working outside the region, some of whom never returned.[5] The gender imbalance at this time was shocking (cf. Giblin 2000). Rodney (1983) observed that, until 1948, 13,074 Ngoni labourers from the region were scattered in the labour-receiving zones. This was only one ethnic group from the region that had flocked to different colonial investments in Tanganyika.[6] The best-known destination for a large population of men from the region was the north-eastern region of Tanga, where sisal plantation activities employed a great number of labourers. Later, in 1947, other sisal estates were established in Lindi and Mikindani, which absorbed even more labour.

The Land Clearing Dilemma for the Women Left Behind

Owing to the loss of labour, the women who were left behind had two options: rely on the belief that undertaking men's activities such as land clearing reduced one's fertility (or brought on a curse), or violate this belief by doing male activities to ensure food security, amongst other things. Since the region is typically agricultural, taking on agricultural activities was inevitable. However, of all these activities, land clearing presented the greatest challenge because it was the domain of men. As one participant emphasised:

> A woman holding an axe felling trees in a virgin land! That is unimaginable! Maybe if you are mad or cursed. This is a man's work. Even nowadays, you can never see a woman clearing a virgin land unless she is mentally unfit. That is a curse! (Emphasised by a woman in Mbozi)

So, since women could not physically participate in land clearing, they hired men to perform the exercise. Payment took different forms, such as food crops or reciprocal labour. Among the Kinga, hired men were given wheat, which was by then the staple food of the area. In most cases, however, women and their children had to provide a different kind of labour in compensation, such as sowing, weeding, harvesting and the like.

Another strategy involved women seeking help from neighbours. The men and women who came for the land clearing activities were to be given food and brew, which was prepared by the women who hired them. Among the Kinga and Nyiha of Mbozi, the organisation of land clearing was commonly done through a co-operative working system, known as *ingonve* and *indanjila,* respectively. Some women among the Kinga were lucky because they were assisted by their brothers-in-law. Underscoring the point, Mr Cheche, who happened to live with his sisters-in-law when his brothers set out for colonial employment, had this to say:

> A woman of good character, respectful and hardworking would just ask for help. Usually, she comes in during the evening with well-cooked bread which symbolises humility. She kneels and asks for help from her brother-in-law, often the elder brother. No one dared to turn down the request. We used to organise ourselves and help her to clear the land (Face to Face Interview, 2020).

The Matengo women of Mbinga had other options for land clearing. After the departure of a husband, elders appointed his closest kin as a supervisor of the household. The supervisor played several roles, which included clearing the land. This system partly relieved women's burden. Some women preferred their freedom, and so decided to remain alone unsupervised. However, women who accepted household supervisors reduced their autonomy considerably. This is quite similar to what was observed in Egypt, where women who lived in extended families did not shoulder arduous tasks but had less autonomy (Brink 1991). However, grievances and conflicts between household supervisors and migrant labour husbands upon their return were not uncommon, but they were peacefully resolved by elders.

Aspects of Fertility Linked with Clearing the Land

In this study, fertility is used as an umbrella term that refers to all that gives life and enhances wellbeing at the individual and community level. It is the ability to propagate human beings and other forms of life, such as animals, plants and inanimate entities (cf. Mazama 2009), which have a function in enhancing human life. The notion of fertility in this context is synonymous with blessings and prosperity. It is a product of people maintaining good relationships among themselves, with nature, the ancestors and gods, as well as other metaphysical beings.

This section details aspects of fertility and of the notion of curse as unleashed by women who embarked on predominantly male activities, especially felling trees on virgin land. Generally, women who assumed most

of the male obligations, either physically or materially, prepared themselves for fertility. Shouldering male tasks assured households of food security, which, in turn, guaranteed their productivity. Households that demonstrated a hard-working attitude and good character received more support than less productive ones. Financing the outsourcing of male activities required wives, with or without their children, to produce a surplus of crops. It meant using a substantial amount of stored food and sometimes employing a workforce. The bigger the area to be cleared, the more crops were consumed in the forms of payment, food and local beer preparations.

Sometimes, due to conflict between the women and their husband's relatives, women were obliged to depend on themselves to manage their households. Although it was not true in all circumstances, often, children brought up by hard-working women on their own were better at performing activities than others. Therefore, while we do not disregard arguments by Graham (1970), Giblin (2000), Lovett (1996a, 1996b) and Dinani (2019) on Tanzania, and other studies elsewhere (Gordon 1981; De Haas and Van Rooij 2010), that the removal of men and young men during the colonial period doubled duties at home, in the context of the region in question, we accentuate the significance of women who performed male duties in gaining recognition for their ability and as powerful individuals in society even in the absence of men.

Social Reputation

Women who attempted to shoulder agricultural male activities ultimately became successful by getting good harvests. Of great salience is not just the amount of produce their farms yielded, but also its effects. In rural life, especially during the colonial period, food security was the most valuable thing. One of the differences between the rich and the poor, the hard worker and the lazy, was the size of the harvest: having extra food at home guaranteed the economic strength of a household; socially, a good harvest earned women considerable respect. Women with successful harvests became more confident. 'No man, due to his richness, could convince me to divorce my husband because he is rich; we almost had similar amounts of harvest. In this regard, we were all rich,' stated a woman in Mbozi Administrative District. Of course, she did not mean richness in the sense of financial wealth. Without help from their husbands, women were able to meet their domestic economic and social requirements. As underlined by a woman in Makete, 'Buying home tools such as *kinu* (mortar) for household use was no longer a matter of negotiating with a man. You just exchange with the stored crops.'

Social and economic strength was translated as fertility bestowed on those who crossed traditional boundaries and began carrying out male tasks. Similar examples were reported by Dushanbieva (2014), who found that women left behind gained respect from their children for their ability to manage a household. On the other hand, it did not take long for women who continued to wait for their migrant husbands or male relatives to cultivate the fields to start experiencing food scarcity. Besides, these women were regarded as lazy. Therefore, assuming land-clearing roles drew a clear line between hard-working and lazy women. Going against traditional beliefs by participating in male work as per the selected GAF enabled women to gain social status and gain the power to lead their households.

The size of the harvest had other social effects, too. For example, it determined the ability to hold traditional rituals such as girls' rites of passage and the commemoration of the dead. When a woman needed to commemorate the dead, she could do so in the absence of her migrant husband because she had all she needed, particularly food crops, the main ingredient in local beer preparations. However, it was cautioned:

> Of course, a husband was informed and would, if given the opportunity, attend the commemoration service. This was very good. If not, male relatives participated fully in the preparations, although the crops to be used were all cultivated under the supervision of a woman. And that was not a secret … All people knew... hard-working women.

Most people in the region relied solely on agriculture, and so reaping adequate food crops assured household members of good health. Women with good harvests were thus 'fertile', 'blessed' and able to cast away curses, and as a result, they escaped hunger, instability and above all, a decline in social status.

Good Health

Feeding children and the whole household properly was regarded as an aspect of fertility brought by women who dared to assume male roles. Having adequate food at home translated into having relatively healthy household members and improved motherhood and childcare. For example, compared to malnourished women, food enabled pregnant women to give birth to healthy babies. Sufficient food also meant the availability of nutritious food. Owning abundant crops permitted women to buy whatever they needed to prepare food for their babies and other children.

Food security guaranteed good health physically and mentally. When asked whether they were eating a balanced diet, informants insisted that although they did not pay attention to the components of the modern

balanced diet, they had their traditional knowledge, and that possessing abundant food made them psychologically settled and physically fit, as evidenced by an old woman in Mbinga district who offered the following explanation:

> We were not aware of the modern concepts of a balanced diet but we can firmly say that having enough food crops in the store meant everything. Children could eat until they were full. For mothers, this was a great success. Moving around begging for food was so shameful. Even young people could easily embarrass you.

Poor Health

It was revealed that during the rainy season lazy households ran out of food. It was a season that marked the affluent and the poor. It also had a direct impact on the health of household members, as a man in Mbozi explained:

> … During the rainy season, one could easily spot people who have food and who faced serious food shortages. You could see a person becoming very thin and their skin getting very dry as if they did not take bath … no, it is because of food shortage. They did not have enough to eat! You know, you can ask for food … but for how long?

It was clear in the group discussions that households that suffered from food shortages experienced never-ending social conflict. Furthermore, conflict between clan members were not uncommon because even malnutrition-related problems were associated with witchcraft, which, in turn, fuelled social tensions within and across clans. Of course, women who reaped abundant harvests were not safe, either. Occasionally, they were alleged to have witchcraft behind their success:

> You can see … laziness is the source of all sorts of evil in society. The inability to fulfil your obligations poses problems even for those who are fully committed to work. One could see your household is happy … you eat, feed your domestic animals, and laugh with your children … they think you laugh at them. To disturb peace in your household, they create such fictitious claims. It is very sad.

This was underscored by a woman in Mbozi who maintained that most accusations of witchcraft were based on false allegations and were used as excuses by lazy individuals. She insisted that such improper behaviour persisted: 'If you look carefully, they come from the same kinds of people.' The cursed women turned out to be those who did not work hard enough to be able to finance land clearing and reap a good harvest.

Social Celebrations

All social functions in the region involved eating and drinking. In this region, and more likely the whole African continent, hosting a considerable number of people at a social event, such as a funeral or celebration, rituals performed for children, girls' rites of passage and weddings, was an indication of, among other things, the success of the event. Usually, people would go to a social function where they believed they would eat and drink until they were satisfied. For that reason, most often, more people went to social events at households that were food secure.

In an interview conducted in Mbozi, a man aged sixty to seventy years old told us that, when he was young, they used to go where they knew they could eat until they were full. Even his parents preferred to attend events at which they were assured of drinking much beer. This meant that a household was expected to prepare large quantities of beer, which, in turn, reflected the amount of food it had grown. 'Even today, one is not interested in attending celebration held in a poverty-stricken household because he or she is not sure to eat and drink, so was the case, especially when one was regarded as lazy.' Traditional instructors (who taught girls the rites of passage) and midwives were not paid as such, but a token amount of food or chicken could be given to them in exchange for a service. They were rewarded much more by households that had enough food.

Basic Needs

Food crops were used to meet other auxiliary and basic needs. Women who had been left behind needed to address basic household needs such as shelter, clothes and education in the absence of their male partners. It must be noted that they were also required to pay tax in the absence of their husbands (Tambila 1981). Wu and Ye (2016) found similar findings in their research on women in rural China who took care of their children in the absence of their migrant husbands.

In focus group discussions held in the region, women confirmed that if they had not taken steps to address these issues, upon their return their husbands would not have saved what they had earned for other important matters. Supported by her daughter, who interpreted some of the Matengo words used by her mother, an old woman aged approximately eighty to ninety years old (in Mbinga) stated:

> When a kid asks for a blanket, would you wait for his father? Remember, sometimes, we were even not sure of their return … Some never came back ...[7] (Laughter!) Left alone at home, you are a mother at the same time a father.

> If you were a responsible woman, you would make sure that your children get what they needed. If you are a drunkard … ooh yes, if you drink too much, you do not care!

Speaking happily in a focus group discussion in Makete, one of the former migrant labourers testified how he came to respect his wife after realising that she had built a house. Unlike others, this man worked in the timber and lumbering industry within the region but used to spend up to ten months away. Once, when he came back, he was surprised to see a big beautiful house in front of him. He admitted that he had never thought something like that could happen. 'I realised that my wife used intelligently the money I sent her … I did not believe this!'

For women farmers, the only source of income was selling harvested crops. It was only those who reaped large amounts of food who managed to provide for the household's needs. On the other hand, households of lazy women who did not attempt to clear the land for agriculture would starve. Alternatively, they had to rely completely on their husband's relatives, who might not be reliable, let alone inclined to support lazy women.

Activities undertaken by women at home had a far-reaching practical impact on their marriage upon the return of their husbands. Of course, some were happy as noted earlier and others were unhappy. Therefore, during this period, cases of separation were frequent, as presented in the next subsection.

Marital Status upon the Return of Migrant Labourers

Another aspect of fertility is the status of marital relationships between women who were left behind and their migrant husbands. Upon the return of husbands, some households were joyful, whereas for others this was a bitter reunion. In an interview held in Makete, Mr Cheche, an old man who had been a migrant labourer, explained that some households rejoiced and celebrated whereas others witnessed family conflicts over laziness, misuse of resources and infidelity, which were resolved by separation. Similar accounts were noted by Lovett (1996b) and Dinani (2019) in western and southern Tanzania respectively. Some husbands were unhappy upon realising that their wives had not effectively discharged their obligations, amongst other things, compared with other women in their villages.

> It was not all peaceful. Remember others got information that their wives did so and so while they were still working Therefore, they took a decision long before they met their wives. Others had even warned their wives of misbehaving. All these led to serious family conflicts upon their return.

This is similar to what Boehm (2008) and Yabiku et al. (2010) found in their studies, that women who were left behind did not enjoy complete freedom, as any unacceptable behaviour would be reported to the husband. It was the faithful and hard-working wives who enjoyed full support from their husbands. Upon their return, some husbands found waiting for them a new house, new crop fields, healthy household members and other good things. A woman in Mbinga explained how her household was happy when her father arrived, bringing back many gifts from Tanga.

> We could spend two days enjoying the reunification and children asking many questions regarding the foreign place. Talking and talking … Sometimes, we hated neighbours who came home frequently because we wanted to hear strange stories from Tanga.

Apart from women who committed themselves to work, there were also lazy and irresponsible women. The next section explains in detail this other category of women.

Irresponsible Women who were Left Behind

Not all women successfully bridged the gap left by their husbands. Some of them relied on the fruits of their husband's labour. A few of them, probably due to frustrations and stress, opted to drink. Accordingly, these women never attempted to perform male activities. The collected data revealed that most households headed by these women suffered from hunger and other misfortunes because they were incapable of solving any challenges that faced them. Looked upon as indolent in society, they were considered incapacitated, abnormal and less human. Consequently, they denied themselves the rain of blessings and fertility. And because working hard was one of the features that unmarried young people had to display to attract 'life' partners, hard-working young men could not dare to marry women from lazy households, and vice versa.

> It is as if you live in a village of people but not considered one of them. Not considered an enemy but simply just being ignored! It is because you do not live up to people's expectations. Even your relatives despised them. Of course, they (lazy women) knew what made them turned down, but did not care.

Women who plunged their households into poverty were largely regarded as cursed and brought shame to their households. Laziness was also associated with drinking habits and prostitution, characters that often were inseparable. These women were discriminated against, to say the least. As noted earlier, upon the return of their husbands, some of these households ended up separating. However, it was emphasised in focus group discussions and interviews that some husbands were polite and forgiving; they never separated.

Reverberations of Fertility beyond the Colonial Era

Aspects of fertility and curse reverberated into the postcolonial period. Women who physically or materially assumed men's obligations paved their way to success, fertility and abundant blessings not only for their households but also for their children's future. Women who were left behind with children worked relatively harder than others. These women ensured food security and ultimately had healthy family members who could themselves be productive and fertile.

Children brought up in these households were proud and could marry whomever they wanted in society. Having enough food in a household guaranteed that various social and economic needs would be met. For instance, it meant that a woman was able to pay for the medical needs of all her household members, school fees for her children, and prepare food and brew for rites of passage for her daughters. No one wanted to marry a lazy, defamed person. Consequently, a household with hard-working people attracted both men and women because such people guaranteed food security, which had significant social and economic outcomes in the region. Having parents to finance one's education assured children of a promising future, such as being employed in white-collar jobs. Also, it was found that hard-working children are socially successful and confident.

But some women struggled to maintain their households' wellbeing, and not all children raised by successful households were hard workers; others were indeed lazy. This only highlights the complexities of role-modelling and family issues that are beyond the present paper. However, some children of lazy women did try to shape their destiny. In some households, young women struggled to restore honour to their household by migrating to tea plantations located within the region, especially in Mufindi. Some of the most successful people in the region came from very poor families headed by lazy women. Thus, an existentialist stand was strongly emphasised in focus group discussions in Makete. Overall, children from poor households were despised by everyone in society and suffered from the painful label that marked them as coming from cursed households. All this started with land clearing as a symbol of success, although in this context land clearing represents any predominantly male activity.

Conclusion

This study explored the dynamics of the division of labour in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania, as instigated by the women who took on men's activities when able-bodied males left home as migrant labour. The main

argument stems from the evidence that women in the region shouldered arduous tasks after the massive withdrawal of men and young men from the region, and places it between opposing views of whether the migrant labour system only increased women's work or, in addition, led to women's emancipation in terms of decision-making and autonomy. Apart from compensating for the loss of labour by migrant husbands and performing their usual daily home chores, women had to carry an extra burden in that violating the traditional gender-based division of labour norms was believed to bring a curse on their households.

Evidence testifies to the intensive and sometimes challenging work carried out by the women who were left behind. But despite assuming this heavy burden, the absence of men enabled women to enjoy greater autonomy and exercise decision-making in almost all household matters, such as budgeting and allocating resources. The paper has associated the actions of these women with notions of fertility and blessing on the one hand, and curse and misfortune on the other. Using the GAF, we found that in rescuing the wellbeing of their society the women did not violate beliefs and perceptions. In comparison to those women who were fearful of embarking on male tasks, hard-working women, who were regarded as cursed, gained fertility despite crossing cultural boundaries.

Notes

1. Fertility in the context of this paper refers to individual and household wellbeing, fortunes, bearing children, getting a good harvest and prosperous life in general. It is synonymous with blessing. Fertility is brought about by observing social values, which include obeying cultural norms as noted by Kratz (1989). A curse is a misfortune that falls on people for violating cultural norms, being disrespectful to parents and other closely related elders, and failure to discharge one's obligations to elders and spirits. These attributes can be muttered by parents, elders and spirits (Whyte 1988; Idang 2015). They can be removed only via special rituals, as similarly noted by Whyte (1988).
2. According to Brink (1991), a nuclear family consists of a husband and a wife (and child or children if there are any), while an extended family involves, apart from a husband and his wife, the husband's parents and their daughter-in-law.
3. TNA, Southern Province, 23/1/32
4. GVT, African Census Report, 1957
5. TNA, District Officer's Report, Njombe District 1924–1937: 10.
6. For quite a long time, Ngoni and Matengo were assumed to be one group. So the data might also include the Matengo people discussed in this paper.
7. According to archival reports, some of the men from the region never returned to their places of origin (TNA, Songea District Book, Vol. II, no date; TNA, District Officer's Report, Njombe District 1924–1937: 10).

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