Erick Otieno Nyambedha

Change and Continuity in Kin-Based Support Systems for Widows and Orphans among the Luo in Western Kenya

Abstract

This paper discusses change and continuity in the kin-based support for widows and orphans among the Luo in western Kenya. It shows how the involvement of external actors such as church and donor-sponsored institutions have transformed some traditional systems and created new opportunities for widows and orphans. For instance, an indigenous institution such as duol *(originally a communal eating arrangement, which has now evolved into a prayer house), now addresses the needs of widows and orphans through church and donor assistance. Widows and orphans can now choose when and for what purpose they should utilise domestic ties, and when to turn to relations outside the extended kin group. It is noted that many widows and orphans prefer to deal with relations outside the kinship system in their everyday life. This has resulted in conflict between the traditional and the modern systems, with the traditional one feeling undermined. It suggested that to understand change and continuity in the kin-based support for widows and orphans, we need to understand the new social processes that have influenced changes in corporate kin group responsibility. It is argued that donor assistance to vulnerable groups, at the local level, should take into consideration the prevailing kinship structure and other relationships if conflicts of interest are to be minimised.*

Introduction

This paper describes everyday life practices of the widows and orphans as they construct various relations to meet the daily needs of their livelihood in a changing kin-based support system. It examines how they seek support in the local community groups, the extended family system and the church, and the ways in which these affect authority structures in the local kinship system. I discuss the challenges faced by the local community, the extended family system and the donor community in assisting the widows and orphans in the community studied and describe how change as well as continuity are manifested in the attempts to support both the widows and orphans through the transformation of various kin-based structures.

Among the Luo, a patrilineal ethnic group in western Kenya, husbands are the traditional breadwinners. In addition to the husbands, the women and their children belonged to the entire kin group. They derived security and support from the extended family set up. This arrangement has its roots in the traditional marriage practices and the fact that bride wealth payment upon marriage was the responsibility of the kin members. Payment of bride wealth guaranteed children and their mothers the right to resources within the kin group and a place within the kinship structure (Nyambedha and Aagaard-Hansen 2003). While the husband had sole conjugal rights over the wife, their children were considered to belong to the entire community and socialisation was its responsibility (Kayongo-Male and Onyango 1991:19). In the same way, so was it the community's responsibility to support the children. The widows were supported to help children grow up within the extended family system where the corporate kin would have the opportunity to continue socialising the children according to their way of life. However, there have been changes in the corporate kin group assistance to the widows and orphans. When the husbands die, widows and their children have to look for alternative sources of support. Changes in kin-based support systems and general poverty in the community present the widows and children with many uncertainties, particularly at this time when HIV/AIDS is ravaging communities. In some cases, there are indications of continuity in the people's attitudes and value system with regard to support for vulnerable members and that the indigenous kin-based institutions attempt to provide support for vulnerable members. There is, however, also much to indicate that the kinship system, which rests on the extended family network, has changed because of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and other forces that can be traced back in history to the beginning of colonial influence (Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo 1989). There are now great numbers of young widows and orphans (children who have lost one or both parents). They have been left by husbands and fathers who have died of HIV/AIDS, and there have been occasions of prolonged illness and eventual death of young adults due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Barnett and Blaikie 1992; UNICEF 1994). The extended family has been unable to cope with the increasing need for support, and many people therefore have looked for other forms of support to supplement the limited help that they are receiving in the traditional kinship system. The church has been an important provider of such support, and many people therefore have developed special relations with the church. This has led some people within the extended family system to feel that the authority of the kin group is being undermined when an external organisation such as the church gives support to widows and orphans.

Methods

The research on which this paper is based was undertaken between November 1998 and July 2002. The study was initially designed to collect data on support

systems for orphaned children. However, during the course of data collection, some interesting data emerged on the survival mechanisms of widows and the orphans. Separating the two became impossible. In addition to using the techniques of participant observation during which I visited the widows and orphans in their homes or in their farming fields, and attended funerals in the study community, I collected both quantitative and qualitative data through interviews. Longitudinal data were also collected on household survival mechanisms among a few purposively selected orphan households where both the widows and orphans were monitored and interviewed. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires administered to both the orphans and the widows by trained field assistants. Some of the widows who were in acute need of assistance, for instance medical expenses, food and schooling expenses for the orphans, were given financial assistance from the project. In a few critical cases, seriously ill widows who approached the research team were helped with transport costs to seek medical treatment outside the study area.

The Setting

This study was conducted in the Nyang'oma division of western Kenya. Nyang'oma division in Bondo district lies along the shores of Lake Victoria (Nyambedha 2000; Nyambedha et al. 2001). The local economy is mainly based on subsistence farming, though other activities, such as fishing, small-scale mining, labour migration and minor trading, are important in this 'pastoral-agrico-fishing' society (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976:18). The climate is characterised by scarce and erratic rainfall, which makes food production in the community uncertain because of frequent crop failure. To a limited extent, people earn their living as teachers or employees in the nearby public primary and secondary schools and at the local Roman Catholic mission. People, both from outside and within the community, settle at the fishing beaches to trade in fish products and to pursue other income generating activities. Besides the Catholic Church many locals are also followers of the Anglican Church. A smaller number of the local people are followers of indigenous African independent churches.

The Luo have a patrilineal kinship structure and, like a number of other African ethnic groups, are polygynous. A recent study (Nyambedha 2000) shows that the majority of Luo people in Bondo district still practise polygyny. Marriage is exogamous. As Whisson (1964) writing on the Luo put it, kinship, rather than territory, was the charter for this kind of social organisation, although kinship could be adapted to give validity to a territorial pattern. According to Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo (1989), the village (*gweng*) consisted of people who were related genealogically, and of non-agnates. Its basis was in the formation of alliances, developing from strategic considerations, including seizing and holding a given territory. The original occupants of a certain territory could invite friends or affinal relatives to stay with them in

the same village. Their smooth co-existence in the village could result in village relations that proved useful when people from the same village migrated to urban areas (Parkin 1978; Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo 1989). For these people, there are two classes of intra-familial relationships which are crucial. The first ones we call *domestic*: the kin ties which exist within the homestead and immediate locality (within *Kakwaro)*, or lineage, while the second set of relationships – called here *extended relations*, are those which exist with people outside the locality, that is, with the matrilineal kin and affines of a deceased husband or the matri- and patri-kin of the widow. In the recent past, village relations have also helped in addressing misfortunes befalling people inhabiting the same village, in particular widows and orphans.

Support for the vulnerable members of the community was the responsibility of the domestic kin groups in the past. But this support is no longer fully tenable within the larger domestic space of *Kakwaro* because of the great burdens, the lack of resources and changes in people's value systems. Under normal conditions, people only resort to the extended relations because they are unable to receive assistance from the domestic ties. Some people within the domestic sphere do not allow their children to move out to be supported by the maternal kin because it is embarrassing. A 41-year-old widower once explained to me: 'The maternal grandmother wanted to stay with the youngest but I have refused. It will appear as if I am incapable of supporting them' (Nyambedha 2000:65). Ideally, paternal relations among the Luo can lose their reputation if they are not able to support the widows and orphans within their kin network. However, with the present increase in the number of widows and orphans, many more maternal kin are supporting widows and orphans than was the case in the past.

Domestic ties – the creation of daily practice and interaction – are specific but they are also structured by traditional expectations. As Ominde (1952:69) has argued, the relationship between children of different mothers among the Luo is much less close, because the mother in each house thinks first of the future of her own children even if they share the same father. For this reason, accumulation of wealth in any particular house is viewed with alarm in other houses, and a mother will maintain a constant watch with the intention of putting up stiff competition to other sections of the family because their success could overshadow her own children. As happens in many situations, jealousy and accusations of witchcraft are generated if the competition is unbearable and one party feels that one section is responsible for their misfortune. This has worked to create tension among many people, especially among members of a kin group. Children of co-wives were more likely to be rivals for land. Furthermore, relations between full brothers who share land were characterised by tension because of their economic competition. This kind of rivalry among people who are genealogically related generates the conditions for the

construction of other forms of relations outside the kin circles for purposes of support and security in everyday life circumstances.

Extended Relationships: Moving Beyond Kinship

Apart from the fact that there are few resources to support vulnerable groups within the kin network, widows and orphans have other reasons why they do not always approach their kinsmen for support and prefer to deal with other institutions such as the church and other donor supported initiatives. Many people do not want to be indebted to their kin relations in the future. There is usually gossip within the families and many people within the extended family kin network would want to lay claim to the success of those who grew up as vulnerable members. Such claims are usually expressions of kinship obligations and expectations that a particular kin group would place on its successful members the burden of sharing their resources with a chain of kin members who are also needy. People would therefore prefer to obtain support from external sources. By doing so, in their adult life they do not have to bear the burden of supporting many other people who want to lay claim to their resources. Other reasons why vulnerable groups look beyond kinship for material assistance include rivalry between close kin members, and the problematic economic situation. However, the new modes of economic support available outside the kin network have opened up more opportunities for many people who are in need of assistance.

The Luo community was traditionally homogenous, with an egalitarian social system. This rested on the mutual social responsibility under which support was readily available for the disadvantaged members of the community (Whisson 1964). Assistance of various kinds and hospitality were given to members of the family and the clan. Hospitality and generosity were also extended beyond the family, and no one was ever left to starve as long as there was food to share. Indeed, the elderly widows were helped with the cultivation of crops and given young grandchildren, especially girls, to assist in household chores (Nyambedha et al. 2003a). In some cases, there was the practice of *Kisuma*: people who did not have food could request free donations from other relatives. There was also a communal eating arrangement in *duol,* the old man's court and *siwindhe,* the old woman's house. In these central eating places, orphans and widows and other young women ate together. The communal eating arrangements therefore served as security for the disadvantaged members of the society (Mbuya 1965; Nyambedha 2000). However, recently, the term *duol*, which had already fallen into disuse, is now being adapted by the mainstream churches among the Luo to mobilise people to respond to the new challenges of contemporary life. These challenges include those brought about by the effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Nyambedha and Aagaard-Hansen forthcoming). The present activities of *duol* now move beyond the domestic

and kinship ties to include extended relationships with members who share common residence but not kinship ties.

The Luo practised levirate marriage, in which a distant cousin or younger brother might enter into a union with the widows of a deceased cousin or brother to help socialise children and continue child-bearing on behalf of the deceased (Whisson 1964; Potash 1986). Children born out of levirate unions belonged to the deceased man and inherited his property alongside his own biological children. The men in levirate unions were in most cases already married and with their own families and they were only expected occasionally to visit the young widows. They did not exercise any control over the property of the deceased, especially if they were distant cousins. Thus many widows preferred to choose consorts from distant cousins who would not desire to control the late husband's property, as the younger brothers would do. In my earlier research in this community, I found out that a few younger brothers were controlling property of the deceased without considering the needs of the widows and orphans. However, recently, because of HIV/AIDS and the uncertainty surrounding the death of many young men in the community, some young widows have not been able to find young men within the community for levirates. They therefore resort to outsiders (*jokowiny*) (Nyambedha 2000), since the young men within the lineage are suspicious of the circumstances that led to the death of the young husbands. Many widows therefore move out to different places where there could be unsuspecting young men and sometimes remarry or indulge in casual sex mainly for money. This practice has resulted in more orphans who are without the support of either kin members or biological fathers. It has also led to an increase in the number of adults or young men infected with HIV/AIDS, particularly along the fish landing beaches on the shores of Lake Victoria.

The community experienced social and economic changes during the colonial period with the introduction of migrant labour in urban areas, and the adoption of a monetary economy (Whisson 1964; Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo 1989). This change occurred when young men left the villages to look for wage employment in urban areas. The influence of money and external ideas derived from Western values and lifestyle from the urban areas, which emphasised small family size, significantly contributed to social and economic change among the Luo. One of the casualties of this change was the domestic economy, initially characterised by egalitarian relations, and the breakdown of the moral values that held together such indigenous institutions as *duol* and the practice of *kisuma*. The extended family and the kin network were thoroughly weakened. Compounding this problem was the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the community during the past two decades. My earlier fieldwork showed that the mortality rate among young men was higher than that of the females, and many young men have died leaving behind orphaned children and young widows. The rampant deaths of young and productive young men has also

increased poverty levels in the community. This has seriously impaired the ability of kin members to support their vulnerable relatives. These factors have made it necessary for the widows to invest in other relations outside their kin network in order to cope with the complexities of their present situation. In doing so, the widows and orphans have acquired more external ties, such as embracing church values and denouncing some cultural practices. Some children have moved to stay within the church or in some cases, with people or some institutions within the locality that help orphans. Due to their hierarchy within the family set-up, children can easily move to stay elsewhere if that can enable them to access assistance. In other cases, orphaned children have declined to stay in foster homes and prefer being assisted within their deceased parents' homesteads. Some of them cite problems of being exploited and having little time for studies. Children have deployed their agency in negotiating for assistance through their own local connections and found ways of dealing with their situation. For the young widows, this has not been a common practice. They have responsibility towards their young children who need guidance and care in addition to other expectations such as holding the family together after the death of their husbands. If they have to move out, then the entire household has to migrate. But there are no institutions that can accommodate entire families. However, in the past few decades, elderly widows with no one to support within the extended family move to stay within church premises in order to obtain assistance.

Everyday Life Practices of Orphans and Widows among the Luo and the Changing Kin-based Support Systems

In this section, I will describe the daily life practices for orphans and widows and attempt to show how these life practices have embraced the changes in kinship obligations. I also discuss how some external actors, mainly the church and donor agencies, influence the practices of widows and orphans.

The African concept of kin-based support faces great challenges during this time of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This is because the values and moral bases that ensured support for vulnerable members have become increasingly strained. Among the Luo, and specifically in the community studied, orphanhood is remarkably high. At least one out of three children under the age of eighteen years has lost at least one parent (Nyambedha et al. 2003a). There are few resources to share, and members of the extended family are not able to embrace the values of the egalitarian mode of life. Kinship has to a great extent become symbolic, and occasionally finds its expression mainly in the performance of normative kin obligations, such as rituals.

Many women and widows have joined various community-based groups such as the *duol* and the *nyoluoro* (rotating credit scheme), which are mostly formed on the basis of the patronage of the mainstream churches in this community, particularly the Catholic and Anglican churches. Apart from

acting as structures for perpetuating Christian values, the churches are also widely considered as vehicles for community development. Earlier studies conducted in the community showed that these groups are capable not only of supporting the orphans and widows, but also of helping to pass on knowledge useful for the prevention of HIV/AIDS (Ouko 1999; Nyambedha and Aagaard-Hansen forthcoming). The present *duol* and *nyoluoro* systems represent community collaborative efforts based on kinship structures and common residential boundaries. The activities of such groups also show efforts by the transformed structures of the past to address present problems.

Unlike the traditional *duol* described earlier in this paper, the present kinds of *duol* frequently transcend the traditional confines of kinship, such as a grouping of people either related genealogically or by marriage. Thus *duol* and *nyoluoro* are partly based on kin relations due to territorial boundaries, but many of them are also based on other forms of relations outside the kinship structure. Specifically, they include members of a particular church residing in a common territory. In these territories or villages, people have formed various relations which begin as church relations and expand to deal with most spheres of the everyday life of the followers. These relations are highly cherished as they help members face the challenges of poverty at the household level. They also spearhead community development initiatives. For the widows and orphans, they offer material support. They are also very instrumental during times of misfortune, as when a church member or a close relative of a member passes away. In such cases, the groups assume responsibility for the bereaved relatives when members of the extended kin are unable to do so. Orphans and their caretakers sometimes go to these organisations for assistance, especially for schooling expenses.

Locals sometimes find security, both during their lifetime and at an impending death, in the relations developed in church and outside the extended family network. In these forms of relations in this community, experiences of peril and responses to them are socially mediated in ways that are shared among various relationships. For example, women, the youth and other members of the community share their experiences of sadness, happiness and give support of any nature within their means to members of such groups. In the past, these responsibilities rested on the extended family. But these days with the numerous deaths due to HIV/AIDS, funerals and burial rituals are performed every weekend. Almost every household is affected and the burden is unbearable for the extended family kin network.

The people of the community studied have continued to use existing patterns of sociality like the church-based *duol* and the practice of *nyoluoro* to mobilise local resources to alleviate their problems. Widows and orphans have had to struggle with the effects of prolonged illness suffered by their husbands, and the expenses upon death when cattle have to be slaughtered to feed people during funerals. These further reduce the resource base of families that the

orphans and widows can rely on in times of difficulty. In some cases, elderly widows are severely affected, especially when they have to support many orphaned children after the death of their sons and daughters. These situations of misfortune cause uncertainty, particularly when such people have to act and deal with relations both within and outside their kin network. In November 1998 when I began my fieldwork in the community, I met a 72-year-old widow and grandmother of nine double-orphaned children whom she supported. Her two sons on whom she had depended for her livelihood had just died, as had their wives. The children had been transferred from an urban area to the rural village where they now lived with her. Her features conveyed expressions of anxiety. She was uncertain whether her younger brother-in-law would be willing to continue to assist her in paying the required school fees for the grand-children. She explained to me:

> When they were sent away from school due to lack of books, I went to my brother-in-law who teaches in a secondary school in Ugenya [a neighbouring locality]. But now I fear asking him anything else. He will complain that this woman's sons did not die for her to disturb me (Nyambedha et al. 2003b).

The old widow's sentiments exemplify feelings that are running throughout the community. Kin relatives alone can no longer be relied on for assistance in times of misfortune and those who give sporadic assistance do it half-heartedly.

Duol is a source of hope for many locals who live in situations of misfortune and poverty. Its re-invention has created new spaces for the many widows and orphans of today. It is also a source of hope for the sick who expect assistance towards the end. The members of *duol* pray for people when they are sick, die or are being buried. In many cases, they also help by buying coffins and feeding members of the church and others who come to the funeral on the day of burial. A few months before her death, Beatrice,[1] a widowed informant whom I had followed for four years, came to our research office to seek help for her trip to Mombasa, where she was receiving treatment for her illness. She was suffering from tuberculosis with persistent headaches due to her cough. Her local church prayer group, which now fulfilled functions similar to the *duol* of the past, had already agreed to help with part of the transport costs. She noted that she had moved to a new home built for her through the assistance of the local prayer group without consulting or requesting any assistance from kin members: 'I moved out of my house and built my own home because it was discovered that this sickness of mine is because of the house and the home where I have been staying'.

In dealing with her misfortune, Beatrice found it more satisfying to deal with relations outside her husband's kin, such as the church, our research office and many others who were of material benefit to her. This did not, however, go down well with her husband's kin who wanted their position as kin recognised, especially when she was building a new home. According to Luo traditions, the brother-in-law and perhaps other relevant persons within the late husband's kin

should have been present to order the construction of the house, and the kin members should have legitimised its construction by performing certain rituals commensurate with the establishment of a new home. At Beatrice's funeral, one of the senior brothers-in-law declared the new home illegitimate because rituals were not followed. He gave as his reasons for not visiting the deceased during her time of illness, as is expected of such kinsmen, that he was not consulted when the new home was being built. Instead, the deceased relied on the local prayer house for advice and material assistance. As he declared the home illegitimate, Beatrice's only son, by then 17 years old, was uncertain about many things in his life. He was uncertain not only about how his life would be without his mother, but he had no idea about what it would be like to live in the unfamiliar environment in Mombasa where he was moving to stay with his younger uncle who had struggled to get medication for his late mother. Other orphaned children, who had stayed with Beatrice for the past five years and seen how she struggled to feed them like her own biological children, are now living with different relatives within and outside the community.

Families or kin groups within the community feel that their authority is undermined by the influence of the church activities and material assistance from the donors, because they only help if the receivers comply with certain requirements determined by the church or other donors. These requirements contradict some of the customary practices with regard to widows. For example, those who want to access assistance channelled through the church are not allowed to be inherited by the cousins or brothers of a deceased husband or any other man. If they fulfil this condition, the church can assist them together with their children who are orphaned. They have to be identified through the local 'prayer house' which is constituted on the basis of kinship structures and territorial boundaries. Such structures incorporate current Christian values. Many widows turn to the church to help them in constructing houses, to access credit through the groups, and to obtain assistance for their children, thus abandoning some of the cultural values of their people. This is when the other kin members who have not been exposed to these challenges feel undermined, and it has led to conflicts in the value systems of those who have embraced change and those who want to continue with the old values in a shared locality.

In contemporary life, relations are sometimes kept alive only to the extent that they can (potentially) satisfy vital material and symbolic interests. This is why it is normal to hear members of a certain lineage, the cousin of the late Beatrice's deceased husband for example, demand recognition while in other instances people withdraw from certain relations because they are no longer relevant to their needs at a particular time in their life. The interests here include recognition as an important member of a kin network who should be consulted when significant matters are being decided, or the ability to engage in exchange relations with other locals as happens in *nyoluoro* (rotating credit scheme).

Already existing relations are reinforced by these acts of exchange and by the performance of rituals of the kind that are enacted when putting up a new home, as is the case among the Luo. People value more than anything else relations that help them in the struggle to meet the demands of a livelihood. Through exchange relations such as joining the local church prayer houses, thereby adding more substance to relations that are perceived to be more helpful in times of need, the sick in the Luo community do not only secure a decent burial upon death, as we have seen in the case of Beatrice, but also various kinds of help during the difficult time of illness. But we also meet cases where the widows have reduced their interaction with members of the kin network. Perhaps they had lost faith in such relations particularly with regard to any material support they might need to alleviate their suffering.

Turning to relations outside the kin group may be preferable to seeking assistance from people whose willingness to help may be uncertain. People therefore resort to forms of relations developed in church and other informal groupings that are found in many villages. Such relations are formed as a way of insuring against misfortune in the present as well as the foreseeable future. For example, the old grandmother of the nine orphans had to turn to the church to deal with changing realities because she felt the kin relations would not be willing to continue assisting her.

Common sad experiences of losing children who are also breadwinners have worked to bring together and consolidate relations among people who previously were not very close. Such new forms of relations also encourage sharing of the few resources available as we have seen in the case of the old widow. The church has been very central in cementing such relations and has offered some orphans and widows support. Organisations that seek funds from donors to help widows and orphans have mainly used churches as the link to connect them with the local people. This explains why many widows have become regular participants in church activities; it is presumably for their own benefit and that of the orphans even after the death of the widows. These organisations, for example, have in the recent past helped to raise registration fees for orphan assistance projects through the Catholic Church. However, this change in previous practice should not be taken to imply that church relations have replaced the kinship relations. Rather, these practices should be seen as strategic attempts by the widows and orphans to use existing structures introduced from the outside to create some form of relations that can be of use during times of misfortune. Everyday life experiences have shown that they stand to gain more from such relations than what the kinship relations can offer to meet the material and spiritual needs of their life conditions.

Within the area, the Catholic Church now co-ordinates activities for home-based care for the sick. Two years ago a 15-year-old female orphan, who had stayed at the orphanage taking care of her male infant after the death of her parents, was offered an opportunity to continue her schooling in one of the

mission primary schools. She was again, through the same church, offered sponsorship for secondary school. Other people within the community have also registered at organisations that provide help for orphans. Orphans who are uncertain of where to go to for assistance visit these institutions on their own, particularly those having difficulties with paying school fees. One elderly woman whose organisation helps to connect orphans to donors who can pay school fees, particularly at secondary level, related:

> When I came back in the evening, children told me that I had a visitor and when I entered the house, I found her seated at that corner. She told me that she wanted me to take her to people who help orphans with fees.

She was talking about an orphan whom I first met in 1998 when both of her parents had died, and who was a female head of household. She was assisted by her elder brother, who then was 17 years old and had dropped out of school to be a 'turn boy' (a young man who carries loads and collects fares from commuters in passenger vehicles popularly known as *matatu* in Kenya). When she passed her primary examination, she and her brother approached our research office with a suggestion to organise a fundraising to get her started in secondary school. No one was certain about how future school fees would be paid after we helped them organise the fundraising to pay for the initial down-payment at school. In some cases, people struggle to secure their children's admission into the schools. It is then easier to negotiate for other sources of support, including donor assistance for the school fees of the orphans. Another source of support is the government's bursary scheme for students in government schools. At the present time, the Kenyan government has decentralised the administration of these bursaries to constituency level (political units with parliamentary representatives). This is because there has been a general complaint that in the schools the bursaries were awarded to undeserving cases and many orphans did not benefit. But even with this new development, local connections still play an important role in gaining access to the funds.

The way widows and their children experience the situation in which they find themselves depends on many factors, one of the most important being a common community of experience and a life-world characterised by limited opportunities due to their vulnerable position in society. To act on their situation, they have taken advantage of the new opportunities offered by the external actors. Consequently, their plight dominates the local and international discourse on the perception of widowhood and orphanhood as one of the gravest effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the developing world. This discourse underlies the view that it is the moral obligation of the donor community to help such communities by channelling funds through the churches and other community-based development initiatives.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show how widows and orphans deal with the changes in kin-based support systems among the Luo in western Kenya. I have indicated that whereas there is change in kin-based support, there are also traces of continuity, such as the *duol* and *nyoluoro,* which combine past and present features with the aim of supporting widows and orphans. Donor support is now being channelled through the church and indigenous systems, such as *duol*, in the process transforming local social relations. Locals have resorted to investing in a wide range of relations as they strive to cope with situations of misfortune and uncertainty in their daily lives. Church-based relations, relations with other people based on common experiences of stress, and relations with other organisations and individuals who provide support, have taken the upper hand as compared to relations based on genealogical kin networks. Organisations that deal with assistance to orphans and widows ought to have a proper understanding of the dynamic relations in people's daily lives that exist in a community for any intervention to be feasible. Donor help therefore should work with existing systems of kinship to minimise tension between the traditional practices and modern values.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1.   The name is fictitious.

References

Barnett, T. and P. Blaikie. 1992. *AIDS in Africa: Its Present and Future Impact,* London, Belhaven Press.

Cohen, D. W. and E. S. Atieno-Odhiambo. 1989. *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape*, Kenya, Heinemann, London, James Currey.

Kayongo-Male, D. and P. Onyango. 1991. *The Sociology of the African Family*, London, Longman.

Mbuya, P. 1965. *Luo Customs and Belief*, Kendu Bay, African Herald Publishing House.

Ntozi, J. P. M. 1997. 'Effects of AIDS on Children: The Problem of Orphans in Uganda', *Health Transition Review*, vol. 7 (supplement), pp. 23-40.

Nyambedha, E. O. 2000. 'Support Systems for Orphaned Children in Nyang'oma Sub-Location, Bondo District, Western Kenya', Unpublished MA thesis, Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi.

Nyambedha, E. O. and J. Aagaard-Hansen. 2003. 'Changing Place, Changing Position: Orphans' Movements in a Community with high HIV/AIDS Prevalence in Western Kenya', in K. F. Olwig, and E. Gullov, (eds.), *Children's Places: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, London, Routledge, pp. 162-176.

Nyambedha, E. O. and J. Aagaard-Hansen. Forthcoming. 'The Re-Invention of *Duol* as a Potential, Community-Based Solution to the Problems of Orphanhood in Western Kenya', Paper submitted for publication.

Nyambedha, E. O., S. Wandibba, and J. Aagaard-Hansen. 2001. 'Policy Implications of the Inadequate Support Systems for Orphans in Western Kenya', *Health policy*, vol. 58, no. 1, pp.83-96.

Nambedha, E. O., S. Wandibba, and J. Aagaard-Hansen. 2003a. 'Changing Patterns of Orphan Care Due to the HIV Epidemic in Western Kenya', *Social science and medicine,* vol. 57, no. 2, pp. 301-311.

Nyambedha, E. O., S. Wandibba, and J. Aagaard-Hansen. 2003b. '"Retirement lost": The New Role of the Elderly as Caretakers of Orphans in Western Kenya', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 33-52.

Ocholla-Ayayo, A. B. C. 1976. *Traditional Ideology and Ethics among the Southern Luo*. Uppsala, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies.

Ominde, S. H. 1952. *The Luo Girl: From Infancy to Marriage*, London, Macmillan.

Ouko, A. G. 1999. 'Potential of a Local Community in HIV Preventive Strategies and Care: The Case of "Nyoluoro" in Usigu Division, Siaya District', Unpublished MA thesis, Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi.

Parkin, D. 1978. *The Cultural Definition of Political Response: Lineal Destiny among the Luo*, London, Academic Press.

Poonawala, S., and R. Cantor. 1991. *Children Orphaned by AIDS: A Call for Action for NGOs and Donors*, Washington, D.C., National Council for International Health.

Potash, B. 1986. 'Wives of the Grave: Widows in a Rural Luo Community', in Betty Potash, (ed.), *Widows in African Societies,* Stanford, Stanford University Press, pp. 44-46.

UNICEF. 1994. 'AIDS and Child Victims', in *The State of the World's Children*, New York, Oxford University Press.

Whisson, M. 1964. *Change and Challenge: A Study of the Social and Economic Changes among the Luo,* Nairobi, Christian Council of Kenya.

Erick Otieno Nyambedha
Department of Sociology
Maseno University
Kenya