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WHAT ROLE CAN HISTORY PLAY FOR THE NEWLY URBANIZED WOMEN OF KENYA AND TANZANIA?¹

Loren B. Landau

Throughout the world, agricultural and social practices that have existed for hundreds of years are giving way to changes catalyzed first by colonization followed by capitalism, economic crisis, neocolonialism, warfare, and political restructuring. Urbanization must now be seen as one of the most ubiquitous and transformative processes not just in Africa but throughout the developing world. Its effects are staggering with respect to both demography as well as the power it has to separate, reorganize, and reorient its willing and unwilling participants. As Marta Tienda suggests, "...when distinct economic, social, and cultural systems are involved...migration is co-terminus with social change."² As rural women make their way from areas dedicated to agriculture and husbandry to the urban cultures of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, they cross a border between two lifestyles; worlds that may become almost entirely unrelated. For women who have long suffered patriarchy and subservience in the country, such a transition may provide an opportunity for greater wealth, control, and perhaps, by some definitions, equality. In *Technology, Gender, and Power in Africa*, Patricia Stamp argues that "the achievements of women in the past map out the possibility for overcoming the oppression that developed in the capitalist era."³ Given the failure of legislation to normalize status between men and women (e.g., suffrage, anti-discrimination legislation),⁴ women must, if they hope to eventually

¹This is a condensed version of a paper initially presented April 1994 at the Second Annual Conference of the African Activists Association, University of California, Los Angeles. The author wishes to offer special gratitude to Dr. Lucy Jarosz, Dr. Daniel Lev, and Ms. Monica Regan for their advice and support throughout the writing of this paper.

² Maria and Karen Booth, 1991, "Gender, Migration and Social Change," *International Sociology* 6.1: p. 51.

³ Patricia Stamp, 1989, *Technology, Gender, and Power in Africa* (Ottawa: International Development Research Center), p. 23.

⁴ In *Post Abolished: One Woman's Struggle for Employment Rights in Tanzania* (London: The Women's Press, 1991) Laeticia Mukurasi graphically illustrates this point. In Kenya, where such reforms have emerged more slowly, conditions are, quite understandably, worse. This criticism of 'liberal' (i.e., legalistic) reforms should not be seen as dismissing their importance but rather as an indication that such changes are not in and of themselves, solutions for any but the wealthy; they also

gain equal control over their lives, seek an alternate means to boost their status. Whether one should rely entirely on the past or simply borrow from it, is an impossible question; as the pop-culture cliché states, 'nothing is old and nothing is new.' What Stamp implies is that women should seek to recreate the social and economic structures of the past which provided them status. In the course of this paper, I demonstrate that a historically oriented campaign would necessarily be ill informed, misdirected, and ineffective. If urban women wish to seek guidance from the past, they should look not to those who lived trapped in pre-colonial systems that afforded, at best, only secondary status, but instead toward those in both the far and recent past who, for their own benefit, were able to manipulate the areas within their societies that were not regulated or controlled by men. The cities have the capacity to be a "distinct social environment," in which, by taking control over their own labor and products, poor women can acquire status equal to the men of their respective class.

The following discussion is by no means complete; it should be seen as a hypothesis based on historical examination of certain pre-colonial ethnicities⁵ and the scant information available on women's participation in the urban economic sectors (informal and formal) of Dar es Salaam and Nairobi during the colonial and post-independence periods. As with most social analyses, there are no absolutes that can be rendered regarding the position of women during any of these three periods. East Africa is a complex region composed of hundreds of ethnic groups and sub-cultures; to make claims, as I do, of even limited universality, requires one to ignore certain variables that may or may not eventually prove be significant. To avoid a thoroughly superficial and therefore meaningless analysis, as I survey changes in East Africa from the late pre-colonial period to the present, I draw comparisons both between Kenya and Tanzania and between urban East African and Latina⁶ groups. In addition to the cross-regional comparison, I employ a self-styled strain of Feminist Political Economy which through its focus on both social and economic structures, demands a more subtle and sophisticated analysis.

Of the many facets that might be explored in a study such as this, I have chosen two inter-related factors: position within kinship and family structures and the changing modes of economic production and

must be accompanied but fundamental socio-economic changes vis a vis gender relations.

⁵ Most notably the Kenyan Kisii and Kikuyu and the 'egalitarian' matrilineal people of South Eastern Tanzania.

⁶ A comparison with Latin America, while imperfect, can display some of the possible courses of action gender relations may follow in East Africa.

then used migration as a variable effecting the former two. While tying kinship to economics is often frowned upon by proponents of Adam Smith, it is evident that in the pre-colonial period "economic work and fulfillment of kin obligations were inseparable both conceptually and in practice"⁷ and therefore must be considered. The same is true today. By recognizing the innumerable influences at play while focusing on two, I hope that I expose the complex tensions inherent in migration while, in the words of Weber, "go[ing] beyond merely demonstrating functional relationships and uniformities...[in order to achieve] the subjective understanding of the component individuals."⁸

Women's Status During the Pre-colonial Period

Despite ample propaganda from revisionist historians, one cannot legitimately support the conception that pre-colonial East Africa was egalitarian and democratic. In East Africa, women as a gender or a class have, within their respective communities, never had status greater or equal to that of men.⁹ In the pre-colonial societies of Kenya and Tanzania, women's status did more to boost their value as a commodity, without providing gains relative to men. This is not to say that women's roles were of secondary economic or social importance, for they never were, only that their invaluable contributions never resulted in a move beyond a position of secondary status.

⁷ One example of such criticism is presented by Goran Hyden in Tony Waters, 1992, "A Cultural Analysis of the Economy of Affection and the Uncaptured Peasantry in Tanzania," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 30.1: p. 163. Quote is from Patricia Stamp, 1989, p. 19. Participation in a strong kinship network is not, according to neoclassicists, the only reason why women remain excluded from the formal economy. Barron and Norris suggest five other reasons why workers would remain marginalized from a capitalist economic market, all of which, given the possibilities open to women, can be readily applied: (1) they are easily dispensable; (2) some conventional difference separates them from primary markets; (3) they have low inclination to gain training and experience; (4) they are unlikely to develop solidaristic relations with fellow (i.e., male) workers; (5) they do not rank economic rewards highly. In Veronica Beechey, 1978, *Women and Production: A Critical Analysis of Some Sociological Theories of Women's Work*. In *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production* edited by Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe, (London: Routledge and Paul Kegan Ltd.) p. 176.

⁸ Max Weber in Lloyd Fallers, 1973, *Inequality — Social Stratification Reconsidered* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p.7.

⁹ Juhani Koponen, 1988, "People and Production in Late Pre-Colonial Tanzania: History and Structures," in *Monographs of the Finnish Society for Development Studies* (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Development Studies), p.377.

Even among the most egalitarian matrilineal peoples, a woman's genealogy offered more to her husband than to her. Consideration for the position of Mwenye (Chief) was at least partially determined by his relationship to the matriarch of the village (Iwani) via his wife, the Ahano. However it was only when no suitable males could be found that an Ahano might have a chance to become the leader. Even then, she could only hold her position until a suitable male could be found.¹⁰ This relationship seems typical of many in the region during this period: a woman could benefit by associating with a successful man but could not, in and of herself, gain status equal to or higher than his.¹¹

A further example of such a relationship can be rendered from careful consideration of Patricia Stamp's belief that by acquiring an economic value, women were able to improve their status. It appears that bride-price and bride-service did not so much cause women to be valued as an asset worth maintaining simply for their own worth, but rather as an asset that could provide status to men. A man marrying a wife of a high bride price (one equivalent to an Ahano for example) could count on increased status for himself; how he treated his wife was quite a different matter.¹² This practice was indeed beneficial to parents, who could control access to and gain wealth from their daughter, and to the man who could gain status.¹³ The benefits a women received, nevertheless, remained indirect and controlled by others.

Despite male control over women's sexuality and status, women could safely count on their survival and productivity ensured by cultural practices. Households "with five or six [children] were considered large"¹⁴ and women were often not allowed to have children or even sexual intercourse while breast feeding. Herbal abortions and infanticide, while not always pleasant or safe, limited fertility and allowed women to continue their economic endeavors. Given the current debate over whether female circumcision (clitorectomy) is a cultural rite or a barbaric ritual, it is appropriate to make brief mention of the practice in this context. Wembah-Rasnid's descriptions clearly depict a situation

¹⁰ J.A.R. Wembah-Rasnid, 1975, "The Ethno-History of the Matrilineal Peoples of South-East Tanzania," *Acta Ethnologica Et Linguistica*, 32: p. 50.

¹¹ Patricia Stamp suggests that among the Kikuyu, women were in fact able to participate on a leadership council (1989, p. 79). Still, in this situation a place on the council was granted to women and men of age. For those not yet eligible for a seat on this body it was only men who could actively work to acquire status.

¹² The fact that these practices have all but been destroyed by anti-slavery legislation should be seen as true indicator of just how positively women benefited from them.

¹³ Koponen, p. 313.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

in which these rites were seen, at least by the men who encouraged the process, as a way to help protect male egos and dominance by control over women's sexuality.¹⁵

As partial, if unjust, compensation for these conditions, women were guaranteed support and protection. Practices such as Uchemela, required that widows be cared for by the husband's nephew who, while required to feed her, also acquired full conjugal rights, and was not required to provide emotional or social support. As these practices disintegrate, women have been forced into unrestrained self-sufficiency.

Polygyny is another example of a common practice that provided increased status to men by providing indirect benefits to women. The historically predisposed Stamp chooses to see the practice as facilitating cooperation and solidarity among women.¹⁶ Claire Robertson and Iris Berger suggest that while solidarity may not have been inherent in the practice, at least a women's pre-marital autonomy was preserved by a degree of material independence after marriage.¹⁷ Despite this possibility, a single women's possessions and products were rarely sufficient to support her while the cooperation and solidarity required to meet women's needs served more to improve women's value as a labor force for the benefit of men than it did to improve their stature. Schmidt goes so far as to suggest that women during the 'polygenous milieu' were unable to work together with other women for mutual benefit but were rather kept in a permanent state of competition for their husband's favor, a condition which undermined their bargaining power and chance at status through economic production.¹⁸ In this environment, refusing to work or meet the sexual demands of a husband could lead to chastisement, isolation, and a lowering of women's already secondary status. While the most successful wife could theoretically be rewarded by her husband, polygyny, like bride-service and circumcision, served to benefit men by structurally establishing control over women's activities and thus providing men both a premium work force and lifetime servants.

If the past can serve as a guide for contemporary women, one must establish what it was in the past that did allow women the opportunity to control their labor. As is true today, the little power that

¹⁵ J.A.R. Wembah-Rasnid, p. 106.

¹⁶ Stamp, 1989, p. 77.

¹⁷ Claire Robertson and Iris Berger. 1986. "Introduction: Analyzing Class and Gender — African Perspectives," in *Women and Class in Africa* edited by Claire Robertson and Iris Berger (New York: African Publishing Company), p. 6.

¹⁸ Margrethe Silber Schmidt, 1992, "Have Women Become the Weaker Sex? Changing Life Situation in Kisii District, Kenya," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 30.2: p. 244.

women had derived from trade in those areas which remained uncontrolled by men and essentially unregulated. Due to indigenous agricultural practices (e.g., inter-cropping, crop rotation) and an efficient, if unjust, division of labor, food surpluses were common and trade along the eastern and western shores of Lake Victoria...assured food to people in areas where shortages occurred."¹⁹ As they would not be killed when traveling through war zones, women were often designated as trade emissaries and were therefore able to sell their own surplus pottery and handicrafts while skimming percentages from the 'money' they received for agricultural products. Although this trade hardly negated the effects of the aforementioned cultural practices, it does provide an early example of the profits, both material and social, women could access by operating outside the male dominated sphere rather than competing against men within it. Unfortunately for women, the profitability of this trade was soon recognized and it was quickly overtaken by African and then by European men.

Women's Status During the Colonial Period

While it is not fair to say that only African women suffered from colonialism, colonial practices formally cemented East African women's secondary social position.²⁰ "Increased commodification intensified demands on women's productive efforts but paradoxically reduced women's control over their product."²¹ Meanwhile, increases in 'tribal' conflicts due to colonial boundaries, favoritism, and the disruption of trading and migratory patterns,²² along with the introduction of the slave trade robbed many villages of their strongest male workers. Still more men left to find work on colonial plantations and in mines. As missionaries moved in, polygyny and bride prices were largely abandoned as were beneficial restrictions on female fertility and assurances of women's survival.²³ With an increase in fertility, women were less able to participate economically and those who were married,

¹⁹ Bill Rau, 1993, *From Feast to Famine* (London: Zed Books), p. 24.

²⁰ Lisa Ann Cubbins, 1986, *The Sexual Division of Power: A Study of Gender Stratification in Kenya*, (Master of Arts Thesis, University of Washington) p. 71.

²¹ Buchwald in Ophelia Mascarenhas and Marjorie Mblinyi, 1983, *Women and Development in Tanzania: An Annotated Bibliography* (Motala: Motala Grafiska), p. 65.

²² Koponen, p. 183.

²³ Schmidt suggests that the fertility rate increased dramatically and suddenly with the move away from polygyny; with fewer sexual options open to men, the rates of pregnancy increased (Schmidt, p. 243).

became even more economically dependent on their husbands. This increased dependency made it more difficult for women to combat patriarchy. "[T]he colonial authorities were generally indifferent to [women's] conditions and ignored major changes occurring in women's roles."²⁴ This statement is well supported by colonial behavior. Although facing these changes was by no means easy, it is with this transformation that women had their first full opportunity to escape the *ancien regime* and work to achieve status directly through their own labor. To do this, women had to move away from the colonial agricultural system in which they were trapped.

Migration and Control of Land During the Colonial Period

The rapid growth of colonial Nairobi and Dar es Salaam was a result of a multi-faceted colonial campaign to establish European control of the most attractive and productive agricultural areas and to create a class of free laborers, unattached to land or kin. Through a series of taxes and land reforms, the British were successful in permanently destroying the possibility that a pre-colonial life style could survive or be recreated.

The effect of the 'chieftancy' has frequently been criticized for creating a system of unchecked power that could dovetail smoothly with authoritarian politics (e.g., Kenya's Pres. Moi). Its effects on the status of women are also worth noting: not surprisingly, the chief was, as were all European executives, male. Free of leadership councils and other such political impediments, these leaders were decidedly male-centered in their leadership and control of land. In conjunction with the British Crownland ordinances that almost permanently claimed the premium land for European owners, women living and working under the rule of the British and the chiefs, had barely any chance of controlling the ample land that had once been communally held. British introduction of a formal male leadership, simultaneously served to eliminate the possibility of women's active participation in formal politics during the colonial era. The legal and social progeny of these policies continue to exclude many women from formal economic and political affairs.

It is unfair to suggest that women were the only victims of colonial land and political policies. Facing a "considerable shortage of labor in certain areas due to reluctance of the tribesman to come into the

²⁴ Rau, p. 60.

labor field,"²⁵ male Africans were purposely displaced from their land through cash-taxes so that the British might "generate a cheap labor force."²⁶ Similar policies in Tanzania produced similar, remarkable effects. By 1924, almost 25 per cent of Ngoni males had left their reserves for 'professional purposes,' a percentage that was only to grow in the oncoming years.²⁷ As men left their villages in droves, women were most frequently left behind in charge of the farms, a pattern that fit neatly into British policy. By not providing family housing in cities or near plantations and mines, the British were able to stop African men from resettling, keeping them as 'free' labor and stopping them from organizing politically.²⁸ This separation of men and women destroyed pre-colonial kinship structures while creating a new class of men who were no longer socially tied to the villages. British involvement in the Second World War along with a series of crop failures in the 1930s and 1940s, displaced thousands causing many of the remaining men to leave their villages while forcing women, who were already straggling without the aid of their husbands and sons, to survive on the agricultural products they were able to produce or to search for money and sustenance elsewhere. As both men and women moved into the cities, women, who had not been educated in the rural areas,²⁹ became players in the cash market, learning organizational and financial skills that would allow them to survive in the new, ever growing, urban centers.

²⁵ British Government Document of 1919 quoted in Samuel M. Kobiah, 1984/85, "The Origins of Squatting and Community Organizing in Nairobi," *African Urban Studies*, 19/20: p. 37.

²⁶ Robert J. Cummings, 1985, "Migration and National Development: The Kenya Example" in *African Migration and National Development*, edited by Beverly Lindsay (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press) p. 153. Kobiah quotes the British Governor of Kenya (1922) as saying "[w]e consider that taxation is compelling the native to leave his reserve for the purpose of seeking work" (p. 39), further indication that the migration that occurred under colonialism was anything but unintentional.

²⁷ Deborah Fahy Bryceson, 1980, "The Proletarianization of Women in Tanzania," *Review of African Political Economy*, 17: p. 15.

²⁸ Tienda, p. 57. Cubbins writes that permission to relocate to the city was granted only to women workers and "did not extend to the dependents, wives, or other African who were required, via the Pass law, to remain in rural areas" (p. 145).

²⁹ An article in *The Economist*, suggests that since rural Kenya was designated as a 'trust territory', no schools were built under the auspices of preserving local culture (East Africa — Turning the Corner, 20 June 1987, p. 63).

Women's Urban Labor and Prostitution During the Colonial Period

Due to severe regulations essentially prohibiting women from working in the cities (in 1938 there were only 237 legally employed in Nairobi), many women who sought cash and freedom from dismal rural conditions were forced to make their way by working in the informal sector. What appears to have been the most profitable activity for these women, and the one that is most illustrative of urban opportunities for building status, was prostitution.³⁰ With the large influx of single men into Nairobi, prostitution was by all means a 'high-growth' industry and unlike prostitution in Europe, there was not a large network of male pimps and managers to siphon profits from women.³¹ To many women, prostitution was simply an 'illegal marriage' involving not so much sexual as social intercourse with the essence of their labor involving the reproduction of male labor power (e.g., cooking, mending, conversation), a role which was absolutely necessary to the functioning of the colonial city. Although prostitution was not a sure route to success and profit, that it allowed the possibility of such gains is a testament both to its distinct characteristics at that time and to the ingenuity and strategies of the women who practiced it.

In *The Comforts of Home*, Luise White details three forms of prostitution, *Watembezi*, *Wazi-Wazi*, and *Malaya*. The *Watembezi* form was usually a short term, temporary move practiced by women who had no other options. The *Wazi-Wazi* provided women with few lasting benefits in status as most of the profits were sent home "so that brothers and lovers could avoid wage labor."³² It is only the *Malaya* form that offered women true financial independence and the opportunity to create an environment which they could control and use to gain status in the

³⁰ The discussion of prostitution presented here takes its ideas primarily from Luise White's, 1990, *The Comforts of Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). I have adopted her perspective on prostitution (i.e., an almost harshly economic position) in order to demonstrate how it could have been a positive experience for those involved. I recognize that this is a position that may be seen as potentially offensive however, I am not in a position to evaluate the psycho-sexual tolls prostitution may have exacted nor to judge the lasting effects of prostitution on the gender dynamics of East African society. I have chosen to evaluate prostitution in much the same way as I have looked at other economic transactions, by considering who is in charge of and benefits from the exchange: who is in control of the means of production. To do otherwise is, in my estimation, to necessarily make a moral judgment where one is not called for.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 12. Although fighting a losing battle, White credits these women with saving "a generation of indebted cash crop producers" (p. 20).

society at large. It is for these reasons that the *Malaya* prostitutes serve as the subject of the following discussion.

Whereas pre-colonial cooperation (e.g., polygyny) was not directly beneficial to the participants, the early *Malaya* prostitutes built a form of solidarity around the common professional challenges, threats of violence and difficulties in collecting fees, which solely served those involved. White claims that this solidarity was "said to be more important than the wealth derived from prostitution."³³ For many, these were in fact the first inter-personal ties that were facilitated by or serving men. By creating this separate illicit network, women were, for all intents and purposes, able to unionize; to maximize profits, to offer support to successfully overcome the legal and cultural restrictions they faced, to provide credit and financial support. All of which allowed to do the unheard of, gain ownership of land. In some areas, upwards of 80 per cent of the African owned land was owned by women.³⁴

Within the culture of the *Malaya*, a system developed by which women were socialized, given knowledge and attitudes, and guided, at times even being given the land and property of their mentors. Among these bequeathed attitudes was one of self-reliance, that prostitution was not degrading, but rather an excellent way to avoid dependence on a male wage earner.³⁵ For some prostitutes, abandoning past identities was as much a part of their success as changing their professional activities. White describes how some women severed all ties with their kin, started speaking Kikuyu (the local language of Nairobi), and at times even converting to Islam. In doing this, the women were able to join a community they helped create, one that could meet their needs both emotionally and financially.

Although such re-invention of self is perhaps not the most attractive survival strategy to those now seeking cultural pure 'zoos,' it does indicate the potential benefits of rewriting one's history. In creating common symbols and identities among Nairobi's prostitutes, women were able to begin to move beyond a culture of male dominance into one in which they controlled their own labor.³⁶ Women in colonial East Africa, initially forced into the informal economy, used, and continue to

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64. In an interview with Julia Mulaha (July 1994, Washington D.C.), director of the women's programmes of the National Council of Churches of Kenya, it was made clear that inability of many women to gain outright ownership of land is still one of the primary obstacles to women's independence. Given present condition, the fact that women in the early twentieth century were able to own land becomes even more remarkable.

³⁵ White, p. 123.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

use, its flexibility, and lack of patriarchal institutions and regulations to take control of the products of their labor and adapt or abandon their past affiliations in favor of an organic, urban identity: one that can be used to actively and successfully improve their status.

Women in Post-Colonial East Africa

Despite their fundamental differences in development strategy, over the past twenty years both Kenya and Tanzania have continued to experience rapid rates of urbanization with somewhat differing effects on the status of women. Specific economic policies and the omnipresence of patriarchal attitudes continue to manifest themselves in women's interminably inferior levels of status. Women are categorically rejected from many, if not most, forms of wage employment. Furthermore, they are stereotyped in or excluded from public school textbooks and schools while the legislation designed to protect women's rights (both domestic and international), has predictably benefited only the middle classes who can afford lawyers and an elite education. It is in the shadows of these legislative failures that poor urban women have begun to take it upon themselves to improve their status by organizing with the goal of independent survival; a process that requires overcoming pervasive ideological and economic oppression.

Despite women's high level of involvement in the struggle for independence,³⁷ women comprised a very small section of the urban population eligible for positions of authority within both the public and private sectors. Many women remained, and remain, involved in the agricultural pursuits that have occupied them for centuries. Swantz suggests that in the Tanzania of 1973, fully 90 per cent of women who were "economically involved," were involved in an agricultural capacity.³⁸ Even today, 71 per cent of Tanzania's agricultural labor, both commercial and subsistence, is done by women.³⁹ Despite the focus on agricultural pursuits under Nyerere's Arusha Declaration (1967), women farmers gained very little wealth or status from their work. Ten years after the declaration and the Ujamaa villages (government planned and operated communal villages) had failed to produce the kind of socialism and agricultural self-reliance originally

³⁷ Robert B. Edgerton, 1989, *Mau Mau: An African Crucible*, (New York: Ballantine Books).

³⁸ Marji-Liisa Swantz, 1985, *Women in Development: A Creative Role Denied*. (London: C. Hurst and Company).

³⁹ Ruth Meena, 1990, "The Impact of Structural Adjustment Programs on Rural Women in Tanzania," in *Structural Adjustment and African Women Farmers* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press) p. 17.

intended, Nyerere formally recognized that "...many of our leaders knew nothing about agriculture; what is more, they don't want to learn."⁴⁰ Undoubtedly the failure to consider the importance and voices of the women who these policies relied upon in the formulation of policy was significant in the perpetuation of such ignorance. The pattern of marginalizing and ignoring women continues today in both countries.

Meena, Bujra, Riddell, and Rau, all credit the policies of economic liberalization, especially those encouraged or required by the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programs, with building a final and insurmountable barrier between women and control over rural agricultural production. These policies and projects have resulted in terrific inflation and a lowering of 'real income' from agricultural product prices sold on the world market. This has made it impossible for women farmers to afford required farm inputs confirming Meena's assertion that "women have always been the shock absorbers of socio-economic crises."⁴¹ As part of the wage and spending freezes associated with the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), the Tanzanian, and to a lesser degree, the Kenyan, governments have cut their already insufficient social service spending. Between 1980 and 1987, Tanzania's spending on social services dropped from 25.5 per cent to 17.5 per cent of its total budget.⁴² Health care spending alone was almost halved from 9 per cent in 1974 to only 4.9 per cent in 1985.⁴³ Predictably, many villages have not been able to piece together sufficient funding to attract medical care-givers and as a result, have suffered massive declines in their health care services.⁴⁴ During this period, there has not been a significant drop in fertility or disease to ease such a drop in social service spending. Combined with a lack of education, and the persistence of patriarchal attitudes which limit alternative economic activities many women, when faced with the increased burdens of an agricultural lifestyle, are being forced to move away from the fields and into the cities.

Despite the focus on cash crops, production continues to rely heavily on women's labor power, similar patterns are evident in Kenya. Without the cooperation afforded by the pre-colonial village and

⁴⁰ Julius K. Nyerere, 1977, *The Arusha Declaration Ten Years Later* (Dar es Salaam: The Government Printer) p. 20.

⁴¹ Meena, p.173, 176

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 176.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 177. These cuts came under the Economic Recovery Program's (under advisement from the IMF).

⁴⁴ The ratio of rural health centers per capita has dropped from 1:75,732 in 1982 to 1:84,231 in 1986, a decline that has since continued (Meena 177).

polygyny, women who do not have significant education or ties to wealthy families have become agricultural laborers too poor and with too little access to credit to buy their own land and farming tools. Even for those with money, land purchases must almost always be made in a husband's or brother's name. As a result, single women, or women on poor terms with their families are quite effectively excluded from land ownership.⁴⁵

With marriage often representing an end to the possibility of personal economic gain, many women find it "wiser to remain unmarried."⁴⁶ Stølen's documentation supports this claim by correlating marriage and the almost certain arrival of progeny with an almost 100 per cent drop in women's wage earning capacity.⁴⁷ As the nuclearization of the family structure has led to a yet unmet increase in the demand for child care, remaining economically self-sufficient in the rural areas often means remaining childless. A woman unwilling to mother is, at least in rural areas, likely to remain unmarried and unattached from the security of a kinship structure and a male wage earner.⁴⁸ Without such security, and with the alienation that frequently characterizes the life of single women, remaining single in the villages becomes both a psychological and material challenge. Due either to a relative absence of men in the rural areas or a desire to remain economically independent, many women are moving to the cities.

Political changes within the two countries are further accelerating the process of urbanization and a corresponding expansion of the informal sector. In the five years after Tanzania's 1985 break from Nyerere's 'African-Socialism,' the percentage of Tanzania's population living in the urban centers has jumped almost ten per cent from 21.14 in 1984, the last year of Nyerere's rule, to 31.12 in 1989.⁴⁹ Although the Kenyan numbers have not been as startling, from 18.98 per cent in 84 to 22.82 per cent in 1989, they do indicate a continuing and rapid process of urbanization. In 1989, the Kenyan government formally recognized the importance of this sector in the economic development of

⁴⁵ Mulaha.

⁴⁶ Schmidt, p.251. Upon marriage, most of the money women earn has a tendency to go into a household 'pool' which is then controlled by the husband. Any money a woman is able to retain control over must first go to meeting nutritive, educational, and other family costs, before it can be used directly on her behalf whereas with men, their first financial priority has a tendency to be themselves or the entertainment of the friends and relatives (Stølen 97).

⁴⁷ Stølen, p. 75

⁴⁸ Silber Schmidt, p. 246.

⁴⁹ *African Statistical Yearbook* 1990.

the state for the first time. Nevertheless, only a year later, it continued a long tradition of slum clearances in the Mathare valley, an area in which perhaps 20 per cent of Nairobi's population live.⁵⁰ Although urbanization present the possibility that proletarianization, democratization, and equality through work may, as Bujra suggests, be occurring at some level, these processes are not readily apparent.⁵¹ What is clear is that while the urban environment may eventually provide women with more control over their labor and lives, its draw is mainly as an escape from the rural environment.⁵² The indigent women who are benefiting from urbanization are primarily not those who are becoming proletarianized, but those who are working outside the formal state political and economic structures (i.e., by taking control of their own labor in the informal sector).

Along with all of the new obstacles of urban living and the persistence of pre-colonial patriarchal attitudes women continue to encounter, they must often deal with cultural isolation and separation from the traditions which would have, albeit at the cost of their independence, guaranteed their survival. Within the newly expanded urban areas, bride-service which once offered women a small level of indirect status, has all but disappeared. Without these explicit matrimonial responsibilities, women are left without the guaranteed support of their husbands. Uchemela, which passed spousal responsibility to a nephew, has also long disappeared; dependent widows now must face an uncertain future as the pre-colonial family structure fades from memory, men too are left without certain parental privileges. Schmidt suggests that as men become increasingly distanced from their children and the family structure designed to care for them, they are not only less likely to support the mother, but will frequently abandon their children as well.⁵³ With women in the non-agricultural sectors still earning far less than men,⁵⁴ they are increasingly being pushed to find new non-agricultural ways to maintain economic independence.

Even with the apparent disintegration of the family structure, kinship ties continue to be an integral, if not fully positive, ingredient in the experience of urbanizing women. Ninety-six per cent of Tanzania

⁵⁰ Kinuthra Macharia, 1992, "Slum Clearance and the Informal Economy in Nairobi," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 30.2: p. 229.

⁵¹ Janet M. Bujra, 1990, "Taxing Development in Tanzania: Why Women Must Pay," *African Review of Political Economy* 47: p. 4.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 10.

⁵³ Schmidt, p. 251.

⁵⁴ *Year Book of Labour Statistics*, 1993 (Geneva: The International Labour Office).

women coming to the cities appear to be following an already urbanized male relative.⁵⁵ Although these men certainly foster their own particularly urban form of sexism, they are able to provide information about housing and employment opportunities and provide immediate short-term shelter to newly arrived migrants. Mook's findings show that 70 per cent of Kenyan women rely on their urban kin to help find work when they first come to the cities. This figure drops ten-fold to 7 per cent in the search for subsequent positions indicating women's need to break from these relationships.⁵⁶ In accordance with Bujra's claim that by remaining in a kinship network the chances of truly escaping patriarchy are limited, many women are remaining single and breaking away from reliance on the kin they initially contact and are often remaining single.⁵⁷ Of women now working in Tanzania's urban centers, 63 per cent are single compared to a national rate of 24 per cent.⁵⁸ Without a husband's support, women must quickly find a means of economic support.

Even with the help of family members, the search for employment is hampered by conservative conceptions of the working women. Swantz states that a "woman's way to employment in town is beset by sexual harassment...[and] in order to get a job, even a woman with a reasonable education, may have to purchase her position by sexual means."⁵⁹ Even with the benefits of supportive kin, a woman's position in the urban economic environment is tenuous.

Women must find ways to strengthen their position if they are to overcome the attitudes and restrictions they face. Even in the face of shared adversity, unity does not come easily. Learning from their British predecessors, the government of Daniel Arap Moi has played favorites among Kenya's innumerable ethnic groups creating a great deal of tension between ethnic groups and impeding the secularization of

⁵⁵ Swantz, p. 146. Although no comparable data was available for Kenyan women, it seems safe to assume that a great majority of women there are also following already urbanized relatives.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵⁷ Not only are most women breaking away from their urban kin; because maintaining contact with rural kin more than a half day's bus ride away is both physically or financially taxing, most people quickly lose extensive contact with those in the rural areas (Ross 363). Oddly, if not understandably, for women who do find economic success in the cities, contact is likely to increase with their rural kin (Ross 367). As this situation of success is fairly rare, most women must rely only the relationships they can foster in the urban areas.

⁵⁸ Bryceson, p. 23. This percentage has steadily grown: In 1950 it was 13 per cent and in 1970, 33 per cent.

⁵⁹ Swantz, p. 127.

Kenya's population (i.e., becoming Kenyan).⁶⁰ Such divisions hamper cooperation between women. In Tanzania, the government has been somewhat more successful at creating a national identity, yet this has yet to manifest itself in an egalitarian society vis a vis men and women. To gain a position of status in the East African urban centers will require impressive, positive reformation of existing social structures and attitudes regarding women and ethnicity. The following section describes both successful and failed efforts by the government and by women themselves, to overcome extant discrimination and social structures that are limiting poor women's status and their integration into the state and the economy. In the contemporary rural, and urban milieu, of disparate people and cultures, the security of pre-colonial social structures is but a nostalgic vision. For new status gaining efforts to succeed, a break the pre-colonial past be accompanied by a new, urban, sense of self that will provide women the support and guidance they need to overcome the obstacles they face.

Efforts to Improve the Status of Women: Legislation, State Organizations, Women's Groups and the Creation of an Urban Identity

D) The Failure of Legislation to Correct Gender Inequalities

In the absence of efforts to comprehensively reform patriarchal attitudes among all classes, progressive legislation has not been a singular solution to inequality. In Tanzania, such legislation still leaves women all but excluded from political spectra.⁶¹ More than twenty years after Tanzania began its legal reforms, a man in Bagamoyo, when asked if women were being treated fairly, responded with, "[w]omen don't need property of their own, we take good care of her, like we take care of good cows."⁶² This sentiment is supported by Swantz' claim that "men [still] consider women as equal to children in thinking capacity."⁶³ While these statements' can certainly not be seen as reflecting the attitudes of the male population *in toto*, they do represent part of the resistance women inevitably encounter as they try to break

⁶⁰ See Human Rights Watch, 1993, *Divide and Rule* (New York: Human Rights Watch).

⁶¹ Papart and Staut in Bessie House-Midamba, 1990, "The UN Decade: Political Experiment or Increased Marginalization for Kenyan Women," *Africa Today* 37: p. 39.

⁶² Bujra, p. 56. Bujra suggests that the Ujamaa policies of Tanzania have "not only not contributed to the liberation of women but had indeed heightened their oppression" (p. 56).

⁶³ Swantz, p. 146.

away from a 'traditional' life in favor of economic participation for their personal benefit. It is the dominance of such conceptions that initially drive many women to the cities and it is just these views that women must work to overcome if they wish for self-sufficiency and economic survival.

Due in part to external pressure, Kenyan law has slowly overcome its backwardness and reached a position where women have what amounts to full legal equality.⁶⁴ As in Tanzania, this process of equality has been meaningless for all but the elite.⁶⁵ House-Midamba argues that even elite women who have put their time and energies behind male candidates have been frequently disappointed by the new incumbent's non-feminist positions.⁶⁶ Unless legal reforms begin to suddenly upset social and economic inertia, women must look toward other strategies to improve their status.

II) Women's Groups and Organizations

It is in the diversity and flexibility of informal groups that women are able to create an environment, outside of male regulation and dominance, in which they may combat patriarchy and economic deprivation. Mainstream groups have already been moderately successful at broadening perceptions and opportunities among the elite, yet little is known about the structure, strategies, and effects of the groups organizing among the urban poor.⁶⁷ Excluded from the formal sector, women continue to organize within the informal sector using strategies similar in structure and goals to those employed by the colonial era *Malaya* prostitutes. Judging from random accounts of their initial successes, these organizations may provide the basis for unity that will allow poor women's voices to be heard in the political spectra. This

⁶⁴ Even without domestic legislation ensuring women's equality, both Kenya and Tanzania, as State Parties to the United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, have technically agreed to ensure women's rights to property and political participation. It was not until 1987 that the Law of Marriage and Divorce gave women any legal rights in the case of divorce.

⁶⁵ In a meeting with the Kenyan Embassy's Information Officer for Washington D.C., I was essentially told that women in Kenya are already valued at a very high level as key members of the family. She suggested that such a position alone ensured respect and authority. There was no mention, despite questioning, of any efforts to improve the status of women who were not part of a conventional family.

⁶⁶ House-Midamba, p. 45.

⁶⁷ In 1987 Tanzania's women already held approximately 20 per cent of their government's ministerial positions, although only one had made it onto the central committee (Mukarasi 7). In Kenya, these numbers are not so encouraging.

achievement may result in improved living conditions and a recognition of the indispensable, if understated role played by women in the Kenyan and Tanzanian social, political, and economic arenas.

In the absence of extensive data describing the operations of the aforementioned organizations, I draw from similar and better documented urban Latina groups as a way to suggest what may be allowing contemporary women's groups in Africa to succeed, and what role history is playing in their operations. Although women in both the past and present have found their power by manipulating the fringes of standard mores and structures, the women of today do not appear content to remain on the margins. They are instead working in such a way as to re-define the operations of the structures themselves.

III) Government Organizations and Programs

The governments of both Kenya and Tanzania have cultivated and funded organizations with the specific mission of incorporating women into the development of their respective states and economic programs. While the goals and methods of the *Umoja Wanawake ya Tanzania and the Kenyan Maendeleo ya Wanawake*⁶⁸ have differed and changed over time, both have become increasingly coopted and manipulated by their patron states. In an effort to impress western feminist organizations and government's as well as indigenous upper and middle class women, the two groups have followed a decidedly 'liberal' agenda, accepting its strong focus on legal equality and inability to provide immediately for the urban poor.

Audrey Wipper's discussion traces Maendeleo's failures to its inception in the early 1950s at which time a group of European women founded the group and set its course: one that bared "more resemblance to a Western women's organization than to an African self-help organization."⁶⁹ Despite the middle class focus of Maendeleo, many poor and middle-class African women joined the group in the hope of working within the government's parameters to exchange experiences, acquire new information and skills, and help build an independent Kenya. Over the past ten years, Jane Kiano, the executive director of Maendeleo, has guided the organization even more toward the middle classes by focusing its energies not on small scale projects but on the building of showy museums and shops. Such projects are motivated not

⁶⁸ Maendeleo means "Development for/of Women" and will be referred to as Maendeleo of MyW. Umoja is Kiswahili for "One Women of/for Tanzania" and will be referred to as Umoja or UWT.

⁶⁹ Audrey Wipper, 1975, "The Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization: The Co-option of Leadership," *African Studies Review*, 28.3: p. 99.

so much by the needs of the populace but by a desire to give foreign donors the impression that progress and development are well under way, a process that has alienated many of its members.⁷⁰ In lieu of assistance from the MyW, many urban poor women have turned to smaller self-help groups (*harambee* — Swahili for 'let's pull together') funded indirectly by the government, or through community fund raising.

Following the character of the government at large, Tanzania's UWT has been somewhat less elitist. They have, nevertheless, fallen into many of the patterns familiar to Kenyan women. As the largest women's organization in Tanzania, the UWT suffers from a distinct lack of communication between its directors and constituents. Funding for small-scale development projects has been rare and there is little indication that the organization fully understands the productive and reproductive roles undertaken by poor women. At all levels, the projects it does fund are undertaken without proper resources and under the leadership of those with inadequate education and training.⁷¹ As with Maendeleo, UWT's greatest triumph has been the liberalization of Tanzanian legal statutes. One again sees that without economic and social assistance, and a significant change in attitudes among the population at large, these political changes have yet to be of great benefit to the women among the urban poor.

IV) Non-State Organizations

Hundreds of women's groups have been forming across both Kenya and Tanzania. Many of these groups are experimenting with new approaches and strategies to take control over their labor power and increase their status. Between 1976 and 1987, the number of women's groups in Kenya grew from 4,300, with a membership of 156,892, to 23,000 and a membership of 1,400,000. In Tanzania, 7,567 women's economic groups existed in 1979, 80 per cent of which were on communal farms. Another 1,412 groups of mixed gender were involved in 'development related' activities, a number which has almost tripled to 3,263, 40 per cent of which are in urban areas.⁷² In both countries, a

⁷⁰ 1954 membership, according to the Government of Kenya, included 37,000 women involved through 300 clubs. In 1969, 3000 member clubs were reported with a membership totaling more than 80,000 (Wipper 102). Due both to numeric inflation in early statistics and the aforementioned alienating behavior of the organization, 1974 numbers were down to 40,000 members.

⁷¹ Koda in Mascarenhas, p. 178.

⁷² Fausta Lema, 1988, "The Structure of Tanzania's Cooperative Movement and the Involvement of Women," in *All Are Not Equal: African Women in Cooperatives*,

new breed of organization is forming, one seemingly capable of creating long-term positive changes along the lines of those March and Taqqu's categorize as 'active associations.'⁷³ Largest among the Tanzanian associations of this nature is *Jua Kali* (Swahili for Hot Sun), a broad based and semi-legal association of informal business men and women, artisans, sewers, and food producers working together to set standards of quality, price and practice within Dar es Salaam's informal economy.⁷⁴ With most of the financial services provided to the non-corporate sector taking place in the informal sphere, such an alliance has access to significant economic power. Because there is so little documentation of *Jua Kali*'s beneficiaries, or the beneficiaries of any comparable organizations in Nairobi, it is difficult to know whether women are in fact retaining control over their own labor and products. It does seem however, that the presence of strong women's organizations within the informal sector is likely to do much to protect their interests.

Supporting March and Taqqu's contention that "the greatest potential for planned change lays...[in those groups founded on]...economic goals,"⁷⁵ many of the more resolute women's organizations do indeed seem to have formed on an economic platform. In certain industries within the informal sector, women have created informal networks similar to those used by Nairobi's colonial era prostitutes. Women use these networks "for the buying of *buzaa*⁷⁶ wholesale, obtaining credit, exchanging information concerning the reliability of credit customers (male and female), putting up bail and collecting money for fines, and extending help in serious emergencies."⁷⁷ In other places, rotating credit organizations have formed to allow women to make capital intensive purchases they would not otherwise be able to afford given women's inaccess to bank loans. These credit cooperatives run without the benefit of formal banking or police enforcement; the credit for their low levels of default and corruption goes solely to social pressure and the threat of economic isolation. Women who receive credit are not only allowed more control

reprint of Conference held at the Institute for African Alternatives (London: Institute of African Alternatives), p. 67.

⁷³ Kathryn S. March and Rachele L. Taqqu, 1986, *Women's Informal Associations in Developing Countries, Catalysts for Change?* (Boulder: Westview Press), p. 46.

⁷⁴ Macharia, p. 221.

⁷⁵ March, p. 45.

⁷⁶ Homebrewed beer.

⁷⁷ Nici Nelson, 1979, "Women Must Help Each Other: The Operation of Personal Networks Among *Buzaa* Brewers in Mathare Valley, Kenya," in *Women United, Women Divided*, edited by Patricia Caplan and Janet M. Bujra (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 86.

over their economic activities, but they become part of a community in which shared goals and situations offer opportunities for unification, even, if infrequently, between ethnic groups.⁷⁸ These fora act not only to help ensure economic survival, and solidarity but foster leadership and strategy training.

No discussion of East African women's groups would be complete without mention of Dr. Wangari Maathai's Greenbelt Movement. Although started by a middle class woman, this group has managed to synthesize the needs for economic and social opportunities present in the lower classes in such a way as to successfully interface with the knowledge, capital, and clout of middle class women. As such, it represents a new generation of women's organization, one that can allow for lower class community while uniting women of all classes to work against broader socio-economic impediments. Since its birth in 1977 as the 'Save the Land Harambee,' Maathai's project has spawned over a thousand nurseries involving 80,000 women growing seedlings to sell to the government and other environmental organizations. Maathai's strategy has deliberately discouraged direct participation by high-powered technicians and managers from the outside so as to allow women within the group to become confident in their own abilities and to form an indigenous 'home-grown' identity. This participation has not only allowed the women involved a significant degree of economic independence, it has provided a symbol for uniting across ethnic boundaries. From this foundation, women can parade their ability and successes as a way of challenging the persisting sexism and patriarchal policies which remain the greatest obstacle to improving women's status.⁷⁹

It is not clear from my U.S. based research whether organizations like Maathai's rural Greenbelt movement are in fact forming in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. However, judging from the sheer numbers of urban women's groups, one might assume that if these groups are not yet fully formed and functional, they are at least beginning to take shape.

V) Latin American Women's Organizations

Despite the differences between Latin American and African states (e.g., a greater degree of ethnic homogeneity, a longer post-independence period, a different colonial history), poor women in both areas share a dearth of political power, access to credit, lack of control

⁷⁸ March, p. 41.

⁷⁹ Kanets Adagala, 1988, "Gender Issues in the Cooperative Movement: The Kenyan Case," in *All Are Not Equal*, p. 46.

over their labor and constant conflict and challenges from an overarching patriarchal society. As is to be expected, Latina groups have formed first among the middle classes: lawyers federations, journalists' associations, doctor's organizations and the like.⁸⁰ Like the liberal middle class groups of Africa, many of the Venezuelan women's liberation organizations formed in the 1940s and 1950s have been co-opted by a government which has rarely applied the principles of equality enshrined in its statutes.⁸¹ In response, as in Africa, Latinas have based many of their organizations outside of the state sphere.

Although both Guadilla's and Cornelius' graphical representation of the formation and course of popular action are state oriented, it is still possible to use their descriptions to understand what must first happen if African women are to successfully organize to take control over their own labor power. Cornelius' depiction follows five steps:⁸²

- Existence of objectively defined needs
- Perception of needs as requiring ameliorative action
- Perception of needs as susceptible to satisfactory through government action
- Perception of channel for influencing government
- POLITICAL ACTION

This list indicates, per Weber's suggestion, that the key to successful action is perception: Before action can occur, a common denominator must be shared within the identity of those in need. The first stage in overcoming current oppression then is to establish an identity and schema from which all can agree that action is needed, this is then followed by a process of figuring out how to take such action. For Guadilla, this process is catalyzed by the formation of what she labels "symbolic-cultural organizations."⁸³ These groups, especially when led by women, "tend to be more flexible, horizontal and less 'personalist'" than official organizations.⁸⁴ These traits allow the leadership to remain

⁸⁰ Maria-Pilar Garcia Guadilla, 1993, "Ecologia: Women, Environment, and Politics in Venezuela," in *Viva: Women and Popular Protest in Central America*, edited by Sarah A. Radcliffe and Sallie Underwood (London: Routledge) p. 69.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁸² Wayne Cornelius, 1988, *Urbanization and Political Demand Making: Political Participation Among the Migrant Poor in Latin American Cities* (Cambridge: Migrations and Development Study Group). Emphasis added.

⁸³ Guadilla, p. 74.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

close to the majority constituents without a hierarchy that can be easily corrupted by government saboteurs or international agencies. Their horizontal nature creates a sense of commonality by uniting and homogenizing the understandings of a group already loosely united around a shared need or desire.⁸⁵

For Guadilla, the Venezuelan group AMIGRANSA epitomizes the symbolic-cultural genre. In their efforts to protect the environment, the women of AMIGRANSA have perceived the problems they face and potential solutions as tied to, "the role of motherhood, and survival."⁸⁶ By associating an objective need (i.e., protecting the environment) with a powerful and shared emotive symbol, the women involved were able to move through the steps of Cornelius' model. Jennifer Schimer describes a similar process among the *CoMadres* of El Salvador and the CONAVIGUA widows of Guatemala. In both of Schimer's examples, women organized against the government's practice of 'disappearing' their sons and husbands. Through simple methods (e.g., donning almost identical clothing as a sign of solidarity), the women were able to circumvent restrictions on political protest while garnering the attention of the population and underground media. In time, the women were not only able to communicate their dissatisfaction but also to alert men to the power latent in women's solidarity.⁸⁷ Francesca Miller suggests that in Argentina, women were similarly able to transform "mothering and [transfer] it from the private to the public sphere."⁸⁸ By building a horizontal movement around a shared occupation or belief, Latin American women have been able to exert their political will. The question then is "is this a model for the urban women of Africa?"

Conclusions

If the women of Kenya and Tanzania's informal sector are indeed to build unity, they must accomplish three primary tasks: identify and objectively define their needs which require remedial action, determine a means by which to amelioration their situation, and act. As the examples of Latina 'cultural-symbolic' organizations indicate, in order for this process to occur, some symbol must be extracted that can

⁸⁵ I employ the term 'homogenize' in the sense in which it is used within Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991 London: Verso).

⁸⁶ Guadilla, p. 85.

⁸⁷ Jennifer Schimer, 1993, "The Seeking of Truth and the Gendering of Consciousness: The *CoMadres* of El Salvador and the CONAVIGUA Widows of Guatemala," in *Viva: Women and Popular Protest in Central America*, p. 47.

⁸⁸ Francesca Miller, 1991, *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice* (Hanover: University Press of New England), p. 2.

form a horizontal unity among the poor women of East Africa's informal sector. The apparent solution, as it has worked with such success in Latin America, is to somehow fashion a strategy to meet economic needs around the almost universal symbol of motherhood. Although this may prove tenable, it would first require a reinvention of the role of mothering. One must not forget that it was the needs of family preservation and child care that were the root causes of many women's migration to the informal sector. To build a movement around this institution is therefore to build around a limiting factor, a practice that has hampered women's efforts to gain economic status, and a reminder of male irresponsibility. Additionally, mothering and family preservation has its roots in the rural setting. The maintenance of urban-rural ties means both a constant connection with one's ethnic history, a factor that may serve to divide more than unify, and with the 'pre-colonial' socio-economic patterns which afforded women status only indirectly through other members of the society. Lastly, if women rely on mothering as their symbol of unity, they run the risk of further alienating the urban men who have shown so little interest in preserving the family.

While such separatism may be successful in countries where women already hold a modicum of power or are lauded and earn status as part as conventional family (i.e., as a wife), in Kenya or Tanzania, activities perceived as separatist may only more firmly and permanently lock the 'doors to opportunity.' Although it is impossible to predict, I would suggest that alternate symbol must be found. Ama Ata Aidoo argues that this alternative should be found in religion. For Aidoo it is Islam that will unify women in their quest for status.⁸⁹ If one can overcome the typical Euro-american paranoia regarding the spread of Islam, Aidoo's argument does, *a priori*, warrant merit for it is, in its Korannical form, fairly egalitarian. Unlike Christianity, it does not share an association with Europe, capitalism, colonialism, nor neocolonialism. Additionally, through marriage contracts and its focus on law, it has helped women gain status in other parts of the world. Islam is, however, not a particularly viable alternative for Kenya and Tanzania: Although it is not directly associable with European colonialism, it was one of the banners which flew over the nineteenth century Swahili slave traders of Zanzibar as they made their way into the continent; a form of tyranny none the less severe because it was executed by other Africans. An even more fundamental problem is the pre-existing tension and conflicts, in both Kenya and Tanzania, between the coastal Muslim Swahili and the Christian inland majorities. To ask

⁸⁹ Ama Am Aidoo, 1993, "The African Woman Today," in *Africa*, compiled by Ramsey Jeffress (Guildford: Dushkin), pp. 219-222.

urban women to convert is liable to be seen as an overt form of cultural imperialism, a crusade not likely to be tolerated.

Without a movement based on religion, or family, there are few ways left to actively include, as Stamp proposes, pre-colonial history in the lives of contemporary urban women. The solution and symbol I suggest closely parallels the Marxist conception of 'Praxis': a shared identity formed through common economic activity. A movement based on participation in the contemporary urban informal economy is one founded on tenets shared by all its potential participants: poor housing, government hostility, lack of education, lack of credit, and dominant patriarchal attitudes within the judiciary, administration, and society generally.

As most women have either migrated from the rural areas or had a parent or close relative who has done so, the shared drama of migration may become a symbol of unity, of joining into a new urban women's identity relatively free of the past. Much as White describes the colonial era prostitutes shedding their past associations in favor of a new urbanity that could help ensure economic success,⁹⁰ women within today's informal economy can look to their common needs, experiences, and activities as the basis for their unity. Such an identity may be able to provide the 'symbolic-cultural' organizations capable of remaining flexible enough to meet a variety of needs, while emotively powerful enough to attract middle class and government attention. The formal economies of both Kenya and Tanzania firmly rest on the almost free labor the poor provide to the wealthy. By organizing, poor women can demand better working conditions as they fill the domestic needs of middle-class women. This will in turn create a situation in which the middle class will almost be forced to acknowledge the poor's condition inspiring them to offer remedial assistance. With the help of the middle class, poor women may be afforded the credit and technical education they need to actively improve their lives and the lives of their dependents.

Relying on the pre-colonial past would mean depending on methods of achieving status that were at best, only marginally and indirectly effective in their own milieu. These strategies were not, and are not, designed to cope with the urban conditions hundreds of thousands of women now face. The Pan-Africanist policies of many African states and the Organization of African Unity have all met with severely limited success in part because they have looked for guidance to a golden age of African egalitarianism which never existed. Simply because revisionist historians and government propagandist chose to believe in a fictional past, as appealing as it may be, one can not escape

⁹⁰ White, p. 62.

the inequity and subjugation of women which has characterized the social structures of Kenya and Tanzania.

Through this brief feminist history of women's migration in Kenya and Tanzania, I hope to have shown that contemporary women must break from their rural heritage to form a new kind of solidarity within the cities. In Rhoda Howard's words, "'Modernization' and colonialism have altered the status of women in Africa to such an extent that perhaps only 'modern' ideologies of women's liberation can provide the intellectual organization necessary for the struggle for equality of women."⁹¹ These new ideologies appear to be coming into place from the will and action of urban East African women. Echoing Ugandan President Museveni's declaration, I also wish to suggest that the urban women of Kenya and Tanzania, "see the viability of Africa. I think, eventually, governments will follow the people's example."⁹² There is hope for the future of the women of Africa, a hope that will remain only an abstraction if the people are forced to blind themselves to the present and future by turning to the past to search for guidance.

⁹¹ Rhoda Howard, 1982, "Human Rights and Personal Law: Women in Sub-Saharan Africa" *Issue 7.1& 2*: p. 45.

⁹² Rau, p. 124.