ORGANISING FOR DEVELOPMENT: TANZANIAN WOMEN'S GROUPS CONTESTING DISCOURSES ON FEMALENESS[1]

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Abstract:
In the wake of the economic crisis in Tanzania development agencies, including the church, have increasingly encouraged women to organise for income-generating activities and empowerment. This has accentuated a situation of conflict for Chagga women of Kilimanjaro Region who stand to loose respectability and prestige if they show themselves to be too entrepreneurial and independent of men.
By organising in modern income-generating groups that are closely linked to the church women are able to legitimate economic activities which are otherwise at the borderline of acceptable female behaviour. Through the church, members of women's groups obtain moral protection at the same time as they retain their respectability and prestige. Hence, in their discursive practices women's groups tend to embody Christian values and ethics, emphasising more conservative images of women as the submissive and loyal wife and housewife. However, the women embark on a double strategy; while playing the role of the respectable Christian woman they engage simultaneously in a contestation of images held by development agencies and local bureaucrats, which portray women as ignorant, traditional and lacking in agency. Through their activities and manoeuvring of discourses they manage to maximise space and room of manoeuvre without directly challenging male dominance.

[1] The paper builds on a study of women's groups among the Chagga of Kilimanjaro, North-eastern Tanzania. Fieldwork was undertaken August 1992 to August 1993 with follow-up studies October 1994 and summer 1996 in collaboration with staff from the Cooperative College in Moshi: Rose Maro, librarian, Esther Damball, sociologist and head of women's section, and Mathew Diyamett, sociologist and head of training section.

1. Introduction: Donors encourage women to go public

In Africa, the 1980s and early 1990s have been marked by shifts in donor policies away from more welfare-oriented policies that conventionally have focused on women´s reproductive roles and domestic activities within the home. Instead, policies now increasingly emphasise women´s production for the market, stressing their capacity to increase agricultural output and to operate as entrepreneurs within a free market. Women are urged to organise in women´s groups and to engage in income-generating activities outside the home, that is, lending an expression from Bryceson, women are encouraged to 'go public' (Bryceson 1995). International donor agencies and NGOs see this strategy as an efficient means to further economic growth and simultaneously increase equity for women. Women´s involvement in production for the market is a way of enhancing their status and increase their control over productive resources, which in turn is seen as sustaining a process of women empowerment (Moser 1989; Bryceson 1995). Women are encouraged to organise because women´s groups are seen as channels for alternative development and to have the potential of challenging structures and processes that reproduce their subordinate positions as a gender (Elson 1991; Jackson 1992; Moser 1989:1815, 1993:74; Young 1993: 158-9; Bryceson 1995).

In Tanzania, which is the case to be discussed here, national NGOs and women's groups have virtually mushroomed since the mid-1980s as a direct response to this donor interest. Donor support to women´s groups activities is one of women´s few avenues to funds, credit and other productive resources. Women´s groups projects make up 60-70% of all community development activities today, covering a wide range of income-generating activities like dairy, piggery, gardening, tailoring, transport, restaurants, shops, and small-scale business (Kiondo 1994). Overall, only 5% of all women are members of such women´s groups but compared with the age group 40 to 60 years, that conventionally makes up the largest percentage of women´s groups members, the figure is a nice 20 % (own research 1992-93, Kiondo 1995, Population Census 1988, Kilimanjaro Regional Development/ Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre 1990).

However, economic crisis in Africa together with shifts in policies have created a situation for women which in many ways is both contradictory and conflictive. Women should operate as independent, out-going, entrepreneurial women in the male-(dominated) 'public' market and at the same time appear as home-bound, submissive and dependent (house)wives. The literature abounds with examples of how economic crisis in Africa has meant that a rising number of rural and urban women have been forced into extra-domestic economic activities as paid labour or as self-employed in the informal sector; how this has given women greater autonomy; and how men more or less enthusiastically have had to accept this new state of things (Tripp 1989).

But women´s market-oriented activities and control over productive resources lie at the borderline of acceptable female behaviour in many communities. To 'go public' is often seen by men as a threat to their position within the household. Tensions arise easily between the genders and unless women can legitimate their extra-domestic

activities they may become the object of harassment from men (and other women) and loose status and respectability (Andersen 1992).

Drawing on material from the Chagga of Kilimanjaro I will here demonstrate how modern income-generating women's groups imply more than simply securing access to donor funds for some women. Women's access to and control over productive resources have been curtailed severely over the century due to major socio-economic changes such as introduction of cash crops, integration into the world market, land scarcity and male migration. Women are economically dependent on often absent husbands; and they bear the burden of agricultural work as well as the maintenance of their families. By organising in modern income-generating women's groups that operate under the moral protection and sanction of the church, women are able to legitimate economic activities and control over essential productive resources like cattle and capital that husbands would otherwise see as severely challenging their authority as men and as heads of households. Men's absence from the area does not mean that they cease to control their wives' behaviour and movements.

Women's groups enable women to 'go public', in the sense that donors expect and encourage them to do, in the longer perspective contributing to their room of manoeuvre and their recognition as modern, development-minded women. At the same time they are able to retain their respectability and prestige as good and honourable Chagga women.

2. Business woman: respectable or rebellious?

But why women's groups projects and not individual enterprises? Here we have to look at the norms that circumscribe women's behaviour and activities in Chagga society. A Chagga woman who engages in income-generating activities on an individual basis risks being looked upon as rebellious and/or loose. That is, if she shows herself too eager to control her own economic resources, this is taken as an indirect sign that she considers herself bigger than men, and that she may plan to divorce her husband. She should always secure her husband's approval and only operate on a small scale that aims to benefit the family. Business is not considered proper work for women because it does not involve hard physical work and is comparable to idleness. A woman should be hard-working and never show herself to be idle. In addition, it means moving around in the public alone or with other men. Hence, women's engagement in business is contrary to Chagga norms where a woman should never leave her house without her husband's permission or without having a specific purpose. To be seen 'roaming around' is bad because it shows that a woman is not properly controlled by her husband. Women working outside the home should engage in tasks that are an extension of female work within the household, such as child care, cleaning and teaching. But first of all, a woman should concentrate on family and marriage, and her prestige and respectability is measured according to her diligence and industry. She should demonstrate that she is a good wife and mother; that she is capable of keeping her home neat and clean and

can provide for her family; that she is a loving wife who obeys her husband, is peaceful and avoids quarrels in the home.

Women who do not live up to these norms run the risk of being chased away by their husbands or his kin, and to be forced to leave their home and their children with nothing but their most personal belongings. Options for such women are very few. They can turn to their parents or brothers, if they are at all accepted there, or they can try their luck as businesswomen or prostitutes. None of these conditions are at all attractive to Chagga women.

The majority of Chagga are Christians, and contemporary Chagga norms and values about female behaviour are heavily influenced by Christianity and the Victorian-based Western dichotomy distinguishing between a male public and a female private sphere. The Christian monogamous marriage has replaced polygamy, and Chagga organisation of production and reproduction in separate and mutually interdependent male and female spheres have been substituted by this public/private dichotomy. It resembles former Chagga male and female spheres of domination, since it also refers to production/reproduction organised around the homestead. But it differs in certain crucial aspects in that it relegates women to a home and a nuclear family that are vested with quite different meanings. Women are subordinated morally and legally to the authority of husbands, who are recognised as breadwinners and heads of households. Former female spheres of domination like female rituals and the market have either ceased to exist or become public male (dominated) space. Although gender relations were hierarchical in nature in the past, women had substantial means of negotiating their positions within the conjugal unit and the household (for a fuller discussion see Bülow 1996a). As a consequence, women experience today different and often harder restrictions on their movements and activities compared to the past.

3. Embodying Christian norms about femaleness.

It is here that modern church-based income-generating groups for women come in. And it is no coincidence that church-based NGOs sponsor a larger part of all community development activities in this area. Women´s groups are either organised directly under the church or they have close links to the church. Often the pastor or his wife act as patrons for these women´s groups, and the members hold their meetings in or near the church. Members of women´s groups tend to be (church)-married, middle-aged, better-off women. Leaders of women´s groups are usually well-estimated women of the area married to economically and politically influential men, who are often also active within the church (see also Kiondo 1995). Frequently they have more than average formal education and work as teachers or social workers in the government administration. In addition, they have usually organisational experience from leadership positions within the church and membership in UWT, the national women's movement.

So, the women that I speak of here belong mainly to the age group 40-60 years. Through their activities and discursive practices the women´s groups members, and especially their leaders, attempt to manifest themselves as exceptionally good Christian Chagga women. That is, they represent themselves first of all as house(wives) and mothers, combining in their group activities women´s reproductive and productive responsibilities with their economic projects. Contrary to the literature´s usual categorisation of women´s groups as either social, economic, political or religious in scope, these women´s groups are multi-purpose groups (Dawn 1985; March & Taqqu 1996; Moser 1993). They organise bible studies; they cook and clean for the church; they sit as church elders; they campaign for UWT; they engage in social community welfare work; and they establish income-generating activities as a community-activity.

Simultaneously, however, through their income-generating activities they do manage to obtain access to critical resources like dairy cows, machinery, credit, new knowledge, extension service, networks to influential persons within government bureaucracy and donor agencies. These are resources that they could not easily obtain as individuals either because this would be too challenging of male authority or because donor agencies and government institutions have chosen to address women as members of women´s groups and not as individuals. Such resources may in turn be channelled into personal enterprises, often couched as group ventures, especially by women´s groups leaders.

Hence, members of women´s groups are very visible and active in community public life. But they avoid as far as possible to appear as a challenge to male authority through their ways of dressing, behaving, speaking and moving around in the public sphere. They embody, so to speak, Christian values and norms about femaleness. Especially, leaders of women´s groups, who are the most 'public' and out-going of the women, do everything to demonstrate - when in public - that they are wives and housewives first and only second public and professional women. For example they demonstrate their loyalty as good wives: when the husband is present he may 'naturally' take over and speak on their behalf; they condemn publicly women who fail to behave correctly according to the standards set by these women themselves: e.g. petty business women who are known to move around alone and only come home after dark because their business takes them away from the area; at church mass these women´s groups leaders speak to their fellow-women about how to please the husband when he returns on his yearly visit at Christmas time; and they control the agenda of the women´s groups and decide which gender issues to bring out in the open and which ones to avoid. For example, it may be alright to discuss men´s extra-marital sexual relationships and beer drinking, while women´s lack of inheritance rights and subsequent access to land is avoided as too provocative issues.

4. Manoeuvring gender discourses.

Presenting themselves as exemplary Christian (house)wives and mothers, these women demonstrate to their husbands, other men and the public, in general, that they are

respectable women who concentrate on marriage and family. By acting in this way they, in a sense, confirm the images that donor agencies and local bureaucrats tend to hold of rural women as traditional housewives lacking in agency, empowerment and ability to analyze their own situation. However, the women embark on a double strategy walking a delicate balance between different images and discourses on women: that of Chagga 'traditional' Christian femaleness and that of WID - women in development.

This becomes apparent especially in interface situations with donor agencies. Although donor agencies (since the mid-1980s) expect women to act as independent entrepreneurial women, they treat them in typical top-down, paternalistic ways, as if these women were nothing but ignorant housewives or children that need supervision from husbands, local authorities, donors, etc. In such interface situations women group members react by actively contesting and defying such images. First, they protest against this kind of treatment through collective counter-actions demonstrating that they are far from being simply passive and ignorant housewives. And they show themselves capable of mastering the development language necessary to deal successfully with donor agencies and to manoeuvre a complex hierarchy of development aid institutions and government bureaucracy by taking steps to e.g. bypass the local power hierarchy and instead approach directly the international donor agency. Steps which may take considerable insight and also courage (for a fuller discussion, see Bülow 1996b).

Hence, it is through their activities and actions as women´s group members and a skilful manoeuvring of gender discourses that Chagga women manage to maximise their own space and room of manoeuvre without loss of status and prestige. However, they do this very much through a cementing of the predominant stereotyped images of women as housewives and mothers while in effect underplaying their equally important roles as producers and independent entrepreneurial women. In this way they tend to limit their repertoire for strategic action, also bearing upon other less resourceful women´s ability to act, and with decisive consequences for the types of changes that may derive out of donor agencies´ intervention to sustain processes of women empowerment. Only occasionally, do these women, as in interface situations with donor agencies, realise the potential force that lies in women´s collective action.

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