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We Pray for Them:

Christian Women's Groups Negotiating Male Domination in Tanzania

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"We pray for them": Christian women's groups negotiating male domination in Tanzania[1]

> "After Sunday mass I speak to the women in the church. I teach them how to take care of their husbands, and how to show them respect. Most women here live alone on the farm with their children. Their husbands are working outside the area, and many only visit their family at Christmas time. Men seek their homes like butterflies sweet flowers. But they do damage, although out of love. While at home they spend a lot of money and when they leave, the wife is pregnant again. I teach the women how to handle our husbands at Christmas, so that they can get something out of them. The wife should behave politely and not show any anger; she should wash his clothes and make sure that he is nicely dressed, when he goes out. The women are very much interested. We try to pray for our husbands. We feel pity for them because they have forgotten their responsibilities, lost their culture". Interview with Mama Agnes, leader of Msangi women's group, Kilimanjaro, December 1992.[1]

INTRODUCTION

Within gender studies women's informal associations represent important potential channels for transforming gender relations and increasing women's strength and autonomy. A crucial question in the debate has been whether women's associations provide a power base from which unequal gender relations can be challenged, or whether they are mere survival strategies. With its roots in feminist research the discussion has typically followed a theoretical line where authors distinguish between defensive associations based on passive solidarity versus associations that are progressive and active (DAWN 1985; Molyneux 1986; March & Taqqu 1986; Thomas 1988; Moser 1989,1993). The former are seen as women's response to immediate and pragmatic concerns and as social groups with no wider transforming potential. By contrast the latter are categorised as active in creating separate resources and autonomous influence for women as well as changes in women's rights to landownership and inheritance.

Studies of women's groups in East Africa show that rural women typically organise around everyday activities and basic problems like health facilities, transport and lack of water, and that women's groups have not led to any broad political awareness or consciousness among women (Thomas 1988; Mwaniki 1986; Riria-Ouko 1985; Wipper 1995). An increasing number of women also engage in income generating activities, but as these activities generally remain small and insignificant in scale they are considered to have little or no impact on existing gender relations (Feldman 1984:84).

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1. This paper is based on fieldwork carried out from August 1992 to August 1993 with a short revisit October/ November 1994 in Kilimanjaro Region, Northeastern Tanzania. The work was undertaken with the assistance of Rose Maro, Esther Damball and Mathew Diyamett, Cooperative College Moshi. Funding for the research project was provided by the Danish Council for Development Research, Copenhagen.

Kilimanjaro women's informal associations are no exception to this general picture. Although some groups are engaged in even very successful large-scale economic projects, the women do not use their groups to challenge gender inequality to any visible extent. The women say: 'we are no fighters'. Rather, they represent themselves as good subservient housewives and spouses in accord with Christian ideas about women's role in the family and the household. Mama Agnes's words to the women's group in Msangi exemplifies this. By choosing such a strategy the women seem merely to comply with and reinforce the very structures and institutions that subordinate them as women.

In this paper I question whether categories like defensive-passive versus progressive-active are useful as analytical tools to understand the meaning of women's groups and the implications of their collective action for gender relations in a wider perspective. It is a categorization that inherently implies that gender struggle takes the form of tangible or explicit opposition and resistance. However, such an approach tends to ignore the ways that gender identities and gender relations are continuously constructed and reconstructed through women's and men's actions. Neither is it sensitive to women's more subtle forms of negotiating their subordinate position and to widen their room for manoeuvre. Nor Does it take into the account women's groups and their collective action within their historical and socio-cultural setting.

Hence, rather than looking for pre-fixed categories, I investigate how Chagga women actively construct themselves as gendered persons and the ways in which women's groups act as a forum for women's collective action.

As noted by March and Taqqu women's groups are not merely functional instruments for women's social or economic activities. They express and consolidate also women's cultural identities (March and Taqqu 1986:67). However, I want to take this idea even further and argue that women's groups through their discursive social practices and collective struggles impart new meaning to what it means to be a woman, a spouse and a housewife in Chagga society. Dominant discourses within Chagga society are influenced by Christian ideas and ideologies about gender and reflect on the one hand notions about female domestication and on the other women's economic contribution to national development.

Drawing on Moore's discussion of competing discourses and women's and men's negotiations and bargaining over gender definitions (1994) I demonstrate that when Chagga women represent themselves as good Christian housewives and spouses, this should not just be interpreted as an expression of women's internalisation and reiteration of pervasive male dominated ideologies.

Rather, in their collective action they draw on competing and contradictory ideas about gender, engaging them as actual resources in their negotiations with men. In this way they manage to negotiate access to resources and to widen their room for manoeuvre under harsh socio-economic conditions without openly challenging male domination. Thus, in a wider perspective women's groups contribute to redefining gender identities and gender relations through their bargaining. However, differences between women mean that this process is not straightforward but subject of negotiation and struggle.

The discussion draws primarily on my own fieldwork material from a study of women's groups among the Chagga of Kilimanjaro in northeastern Tanzania. In the paper I bring examples from two women's groups typical of the large majority of women's groups in the region regarding organisational form and activities.

THE CHAGGA ON KILIMANJARO

Mount Kilimanjaro has been the home of the Chagga for more than 300 hundred years. Chagga economy is a mixture of livestock keeping and agriculture with bananas, millet and maize as the main crops. Also, coffee has been cultivated since around 1920 and is grown in the banana groves situated on the higher mountain slopes, also housing the homestead as well as stall-fed cattle and goats. Water from mountain streams is led down the slopes through a vast network of irrigation channels enabling cultivation on a permanent basis throughout the year. Maize and millet are cultivated in the lowlands and on the plains, where also grass for animal fodder is cut. Division of labour is organized according to gender and age. Customarily, men and women have separate but mutually interdependent tasks in agriculture. Household chores and child rearing are women's work together with more labour intensive tasks such as maize cultivation and grass cutting (Raum 1967:180). Such tasks as house construction, harvesting of millet and weeding of maize were previously done by labour groups based on exchange and reciprocity among kin and neighbours but have today largely been replaced by paid labour (Semiono et al 1993:46).

Throughout, Chagga society has been characterised by hierarchical relations and unequal access to power, prestige and resources. In the past allocation of all major productive and political resources took place through the workings of the formal group structure consisting of chiefdoms, clans, lineages and extended families (Falk Moore 1986: 54-5). Today, chiefdoms and clans have been weakened and have lost all political standing. Instead, decision-making power has been centralised at a supralocal level within the national government and the socialist ruling party *Chama cha Mapinduzi* (CCM) (ibid:313).

The majority of Chaggas are reckoned as Christians, although some are Muslims mainly living in the urban areas. The two main denominations are the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The first missionaries to Kilimanjaro were the Evangelical Lutherans from the German Bethel Mission settling in 1891 and the Roman Catholic missionaries who began work there in 1893 (Rasmussen 1993:31). From the early period of missionizing the two churches settled in separate areas following the boundaries between Chagga chiefdoms, in practice dividing the mountain in patches inhabited by Lutherans and Catholics, respectively. Among the Chagga men were the first to convert to Christianity, but although women joined later the number of converts has throughout the century been higher for women than for men.

Chagga society has undergone vast transformations. Social differentiation has increased as a result of commercialisation, a process which began more than two centuries ago when the Chagga chiefdoms first became involved with the trade caravans that crossed through Chagga territory on their way inland to and from the coast (Falk Moore 1986:31). Introduction of coffee in the 1920s accelerated this process. Suddenly the value of clan land rose manyfold, and together with population increase, this meant a continuous fragmentation of plots and an ever rising shortage of land.[2]

From 1921 to 1988 the population rose more than six-fold from 128,000 to 832,420, presently with average population densities of 650 people per square kilometre in the more fertile parts of the mountain (Setel 1993, Population Census 1988; Grove 1993:435). Since around the 1930s and 1940s the Chagga have increasingly been forced to settle further down the mountain slopes in less fertile areas as well as in the lowlands proper, and a rising number of men have been forced to migrate out of the area to find work in urban centres, notably Moshi town in Kilimanjaro and Dar es Salaam on the coast.

Meanwhile, women have stayed behind on the mountain, where they try to make a living for themselves and their children on plots that are generally too small to sustain a family. Hence, many women are forced to hire plots in the lowlands to cultivate maize or to seek other sources of income such as casual work and petty trade. In general, women have experienced an immense increase in their work load. Women have become responsible for most of the tasks in agriculture and at the same time women's traditional labour exchange groups have almost ceased to exist. Few can afford to hire paid labourers, nor have they access to tractors and transport of products. Women are today more dependent economically on their husbands than in the past but bear the larger burden of maintaining their families.

CHAGGA WOMEN'S GROUPS

Much of the literature on women's grass-roots organisations and associations characterize women's groups as single purpose groups involved with social, religious or economic issues. And it is commonly assumed that what is termed women's social and religious groups are defensive and passive in character. By contrast economic groups are seen to have the potential of challenging existing power structures by increasing women's economic independence and autonomy. Similarly, groups that are based on equity and have a flat and democratic structure are deemed more suitable than groups with a hierarchical and top-down structure (DAWN 1985; March & Taqqu 1986; Moser 1989,1993).

In a recent report on women's groups in Kilimanjaro MKwiezu (1992) makes a sharp distinction between income-generating women's groups on the one hand and church groups on the other. She is critical of the first kind of groups because they are top-down in structure and often suffer from mismanagement and misappropriation by leaders. The latter are described as social and spiritual groups that function well but completely lack an economic drive. She notes that in the church groups:

> "The women do not attach any economic value to them (the groups) and indeed they do not get much out of them apart from an exchange of knowledge and skills. They are organised under the church-leadership where the prime objective of the organisers is spiritual gain. ...The women participate in these activities with an unprecedented zeal and enthusiasm because of a personal commitment under-scored by faith. ... (But) Unutilised and under-utilised resources within the current church groups should be identified and activated to make them more productive" (ibid:10-11).

However, when one studies women's groups in Kilimanjaro in greater depth, it becomes clear that it is not fruitful to make such sharp distinctions between economic and social/ religious groups and to view them as one purpose groups. It is characteristic that the women attempt to meet different needs and interests simultaneously in their group activities, covering both social and economic concerns. Whether organised under the church, the National Women's Organisation (UWT) or Department of Community Development, they are all to some extent engaged in economic activities and all aspire to promote their projects by securing external funds and loans. Nor is it necessarily correct to assume that women's groups with a flat democratic structure are always and in all contexts better equipped to achieve 'economic independence and autonomy' for women than more hierarchical groups. Chagga women's forms of collectivity were never just flat and democratic in structure but governed by relations of both equity and hierarchy. Present-day women's groups draw on former ways of associating, at the same time as the women attempt to develop new organizational structures that fit the requirements of contemporary Tanzanian society.

In the past Chagga women organised their daily activities and female rituals and ceremonies on the basis of age and clan. Although loose and informal in structure with no clearly defined leadership,

they underlined seniority and superiority among women at the same time as they strengthened the unity of women (Swantz 1966). With the advent of the Christian missions customary female rituals and ceremonies gradually lost their importance and disappeared. Hence, when the missionaries introduced women's clubs in the early 1950s, these represented an important alternative. Here married women learnt to become 'modern' housewives, in the Western sense. Apart from Bible studies, women learnt home economics (sewing, knitting, cooking and cleaning), health education, child care and nutrition. In the wake of Christianity followed formal education and new career patterns as parish workers, teachers and nurses and women obtained new leadership positions within the church in the church council of elders and in church women's groups.

When in 1961 Tanzania achieved independence the socialist party and UWT encouraged women nationwide to join UWT and organise in women's groups with the objective of enhancing women's economic position and liberating them from all forms of exploitation. Later, since the 1970s international and national donor agencies and NGOs have joined in the chorus urging women to organize, this time for family welfare, community development and women empowerment. These women's groups are all built on the same organisational model with a leader, a treasurer and a secretary elected by the members and a committee to run group activities on a daily basis.

Women's groups that are registered with UWT or Department of Community Development represent only about five percent of all women in the region. If one adds women that are organised within the church in women's clubs and Bible study groups, the number is considerably higher and the age span much wider, including also the very young. In principle women's groups are open to all regardless of age and marital status. But in practice members tend to be middle-aged, better-off and married or widowed women. Poor women, who are mostly single, divorced or never married women, often find it difficult to join such groups because of lack of time, energy and money. Other women have difficulties with their husbands, who forbid them to participate for fear that they will become too strong-headed and independent.

Kilimanjaro women's groups obtain an important share of donor and government funds, possibly larger than other women's groups in the country (Kiondo 1994). Leaders of women's groups usually have acquired organisational experience from the church or UWT. They are often educated, middle-aged married women, who work as teachers, nurses or in government administration. Women's groups have also a patron. They seek out influential and powerful persons of the area, ministers, party leaders, members of parliament, pastors and important businessmen. And it is no secret that through their national and international networks these patrons are able to obtain approval of projects and secure funds for the women's groups that they would not otherwise obtain (ibid).

They reorganise their groups regularly in order to take advantage of new avenues to external resources like funds, loans and training. The group name may change and sometimes also leadership, but the core of the group members often remain the same over long time spans. Today and due to UWT's faded reputation and past economic failures, mobilisers of women's groups view the church as the new centre of large-scale recruitment of women . But in reality it makes little difference to the women themselves, who do not make such sharp distinctions. The women that were formerly registered under UWT now call themselves a church group, and the UWT leader continues as leader of the church group.

Today, Kilimanjaro women's groups typically operate maize mills, shops, small restaurants and engage in small-scale income generating projects like vegetable gardens, tailoring, piggery, dairy and petty-trade with maize and second-hand clothes. A handful of groups have even succeeded in setting up large-scale dairy projects selling milk and cheese to the nearby towns Moshi and Arusha, while others run a bus company, a timber production project or a gypsum plant. They count memberships of up to 400 members and are known nationwide and considered to be more modern and 'developed' than other women's groups in the country.

WE ARE NO FIGHTERS: Msangi WOMEN'S GROUP

Msangi women's group was established in 1978 and though registered under UWT, as most women's groups of that time, it has been associated with the church since its initiation. Msangi lies in a Roman Catholic area. The first ten years the group was not very active but it was revived in 1989 when a number of donor and development agencies began to operate in the area. The group has today (1993) about 100 members from age 18 to 65, the majority being middle-aged married or widowed women. Mama Agnes, who works in the district administration, is the leader of the group. She assists them in all their activities. With assistance from the church the group is running a tailor class for young girls. Another initiative is a small beer brewery run by six of the members. The group also cultivates coffee, maize and beans on a plot belonging to the church. Each of their projects has elected a leader, a secretary and a treasurer to be in charge. The women consider their group to be an essential platform for their struggles to better their own and their children's lives. They explain why women's groups assume such a crucial position in their lives today:

> "In the past the woman's role was to have as many children as possible to take care of the (clan) land. Today this is no longer important and regarding education women are left behind (i.e. they cannot take a job). For the whole year the husbands leave their wives alone, so the alternative for women is to form groups" (group interview Msangi women's group, January 1993).

As in other villages in Kilimanjaro, Msangi is prone to male migration. The village lies at an altitude of 1800 metres and borders the forest reserve. It is a cold and wet place, almost too cold for coffee cultivation, the plots are small, often less than one acre, and the area offers few other sources of income. Although the distance to Moshi town is only about 20 kilometres, it is considered a remote and underdeveloped area. Although the dirt roads are passable there are hardly any means of transport. Compared with other villages, Msangi is less developed technologically. In people's minds these factors hamper an economic and social development of the area. Therefore, many men leave. Locally, it is estimated that 60 -80 per cent of the men age 15 to 45 are working outside the area. This is probably a fair guess. A study from a nearby district cites migration rates of 60 - 85 per cent (Kilimanjaro Regional Development Report 1990). Many men return only once every year or even less often, and some have abandoned their wives completely. Others have a 'wife' and children in town and contribute only irregularly or never to their families back home.

Especially the women leaders, headed by Mama Agnes, are struggling to set up economic projects that can lighten women's work load and generate incomes that may improve family welfare in the village. The women leaders say: 'If women are liberated economically they can be responsible'. They see major obstacles to be lack of transport and technology that may ease women's work load. However, it is characteristic that women's groups cannot always obtain the types of projects they prioritize but have to take whatever projects they are offered. The church has already supported the group in several ways. And through her personal contacts and networks, including those of her husband's, Mama Agnes has managed to attract a number of donor agencies with the purpose of 'developing' the area. Through a national development agency they have received some dairy cows to improve family nutrition, and a FAO programme is running a vegetable project for poor farmers to improve the diet. A Finish Christian NGO has donated sewing machines to their tailoring project. Finally, Mama Agnes has arranged that Wawata, a national organisation for Catholic women operating in their parish, can rent a plot of ten acres from a nearby estate, where they will cultivate maize for sale. They have requested a loan of 300.000 Tanzanian Shilling from the diocese to pay rent and tractor ploughing[3]. Compared to other women's groups in the region their projects are not very impressive, but at least they have managed to make the first crucial contact to donors. Mama Agnes is impatient, she thinks that the group is moving too slowly: 'we are praying to God that people from wherever will come and help us' (interview February 1992).

Although Msangi's women's group is engaged in income-generating activities, it is the religious activities that the women stress. When talking about their group, the women state that their main objectives are to define the role of the Christian woman in the church and the family. By a group they can better perform church activities and enhance 'marriage discipline'. In addition, they want

to ensure that their children are brought up in the Christian faith and prevent youth from 'roaming around'. They joined Wawata in order to strengthen this work. Through Wawata they are members of committees and councils that follow the discipline in the village and report back to the women's group. As good Christian women they feel responsible for moral conduct in the village, and they consider it their duty as married women to act as good examples for their own children and for the young generation. This has also implications for their choice of leaders, who must be women who are married in the Roman Catholic church and respected by all.

Especially, 'marriage discipline' is an issue of great concern to the women. In this context marriage discipline means that married men and women, especially their own husbands, should not engage in extra-marital relations. The women experience that there has been a relaxation in the Christian faith, and that men have changed their conduct. And this is where Mama Agnes's speeches to the women at Sunday mass come in (cited in the introduction). Like other women's leaders in Kilimanjaro she talks to the women in the church regularly. She teaches them how to behave as good Christian wives, how to please their husband, take care of him and show him respect as the authority in the family. It is a wife's responsibility to ensure that there is love and peace in the family (cf. Seistrup-Møller et al 1995). The women are eager to follow her advice. To them living in a true Christian marriage means to leave behind 'primitive' Chagga customs like polygamy and bride wealth where women were considered men's property. To be liberated culturally. Money economy and Western concepts of property and ownership have influenced the way men and women interpret pre-colonial gender relations.[4] Women say: 'Before, women were men's property, today there is equality'.

Christianity preaches that men and women are equal in the Christian marriage, that they should respect each other and discuss and share everything: 'In marriage man and woman are one flesh'. And it is characteristic that people see a connection between Christian conduct and economic and social progress and welfare. Families, who live in modern houses with tap water, cook stoves, fridges and cars, are families where husband and wife are known to respect each other and discuss and collaborate in family matters. Such people are considered developed persons. Therefore, to the women in Msangi, a Christian life and a Christian marriage means development both in the personal and the socio-economic sense. The two go hand in hand.

Therefore, when the men come home for Christmas the women strain to shape their own marriage in the image of a modern and developed Christian marriage. They effort to make their husband feel welcomed and respected as the authority of the family and the head of the household. And through their conduct they try indirectly to pressurage him to live up to the expectations for a

responsible husband. They hope to persuade him to leave some money, before departing again, and to send money for the children's education and clothing.

The women's concern about marriage discipline and moral conduct affect their choice of economic projects. When Msangi women's group decided in favour of a beer brewing project, this was not only to generate incomes for the group and its members. They saw in the project also the possibility that in this way they could help each other to keep an eye on their husbands and other men in the village. If the men go to the neighbouring village it is easier for them to see other women and 'disturb marriage discipline', than if they drink at home. Similar considerations lie behind the tailoring class for young women. The Msangi women's group set up this project to teach the young women and girls a useful handicraft. But simultaneously such a project helps to keep the girls busy with something and prevent them from 'roaming around'. Young girls with no work are more easily tempted to follow married men. Or to run away to town, where they risk ending up in some form of prostitution. The region virtually sprouts with tailoring projects for young women.

The women in Msangi women's group underline that they are no fighters. They refrain from actions that could stamp them as 'rebellious' i.e. to want to be independent of men. To them equity with men means that women have the 'freedom to meet and discuss in public', which used to be a male prerogative. And it also means to engage in economic activities to improve family welfare. When they talk about women's cultural and economic 'liberation' they mean liberation that enables women to fulfill their responsibilities as spouses and housewives, that they may gain prestige as 'good' women and be respected by others. The Msangi women have formed this group:

> "... to remove the man's mentality of the weaker sex, that women cannot organize themselves. Now men have seen that women can be given responsibilities. ... Together we (women) will overcome the problem of women's labour burden and lack of transport. And the dialogue between women and men continue, but we are up against a long tradition and changes have to take place 'pole pole', slowly - slowly". (Group interview February 1993).

The women find relief and strength in the Christian faith and in the church. They pray to God that he may help their husbands to improve and become better persons. They join other Christian women in women's groups and committees and councils in the village and the church to bring other women and men inside the church and to strengthen Christian morality. By taking refuge with God they try to bring some order into their lives, to make meaning of a chaotic and problematic life situation.

WE JOIN WOMEN'S GROUPS TO LEARN ABOUT DEVELOPMENT

Kilali is a village about five kilometres from Moshi. It is a Protestant area but certain sections of the village are inhabited by Muslims and Catholics. Contrary to Msangi the Kilali women's group is recognized as one of the more successful women's groups in the region regarding their economic projects. The group has managed to obtain large sums of money for their activities from private businessmen and fund raising activities. In addition they have received a tractor from a Christian NGO in Europe, and they are expecting a second one. Besides, they are now building a kindergarten and planning an artisan workshop for young men with funds from various European NGOs.

Kilali women's group was established in 1991 as a family welfare programme initiated by one of its patrons Mama Kimaro. But the group has a long history. Their first group was a church group. Nobody can really remember when they first started, but the first activities were an adult education programme and a stoves project. In the mid 1980s they began a tailoring project. They are no longer organised under the church as the present group is for all women in the village and cuts across religious affiliation. However, the church continues to play a prominent role in relation to the group. The pastor acts as the group's adviser and his wife is also the group's patron. In addition, the women hold many of their meetings in the church.

They decided to reorganise the church group and to form a family welfare programme with the aim of obtaining loans. After a while, the group's patron Mama Joyce managed to persuade a rich businessman of the area to offer the group 2.5 mill Tanzanian Shilling, half loan and half donation. The money is distributed as loans to group members to start their own individual projects, and the intention is that the programme shall operate as a revolving fund. Initially the group had 50 members, but today membership has expanded to 250. The group is open to all regardless of age, marital status, ethnic background or religious affiliation. The majority are married women age 30 - 50, but the group includes also young women and single women who have been abandoned or separated by their husbands. These are very poor women with hardly any land, no animals and very poor housing. The fifty women from the original church group make up the core of the group, constitute its leadership and sit on the committees. It is also women from this core group who have received the loans for income-generating activities. Within the programme they have a number of sub groups engaged with dairy, farming, poultry, business and a milling machine. The remaining women have joined the group first of all to obtain loans, but the programme has not yet extended loans to these women. They are still waiting.

Like Msangi many men from Kilali are working outside the area in Moshi town or much further away. Individual plots are small and the soil is exhausted. Those who can afford it rent plots in

the lowland to cultivate maize or rice. The women are left to do most of the farm work, and few can afford to hire labourers and tractors. Contrary to the women in Msangi they have easy access to the market in Moshi, and many are involved in some sort of small-scale enterprise to supplement the income from farming.

While the Msangi women stress the religious activities within their group, the Kilali women's group emphasizes that their activities are for family welfare and 'development'. The women say 'this group is for family welfare', and they explain that they joined the women's group because 'we want to develop ourselves' and because we want to 'learn about development and to be educated'. Through membership in the women's group they are able to meet other women and discuss and learn from each other. In addition, they learn sewing, embroidery, knitting and modern cooking and housekeeping which enables them to become better housewives. Like the Msangi women it is very important for them to demonstrate to their husbands and the wider community that they are good housewives. Finally, it is easier for women's groups than for individual women to receive training from extension workers in agriculture, gardening and livestock keeping and to participate in training courses at training institutes.

Although some of the women are today running dairy projects and large-scale business enterprises, the Kilali women point out that they discuss everything with the husband and that he is involved in all decisions, even if far away. Furthermore, it is not unusual for the more successful women to organise prayer groups in their homes to invoke God's protection of their property and to avoid jealousy from other women and witchcraft. When business fails or the cows die it is often explained as witchcraft, and there is a belief that prayers are very effective towards preventing this.

There is a difference here between Catholic and Protestant women's groups, but the resulting picture remains very much the same. For both it is most important that they are looked upon as good Christian and respectable women who can be an example to others. And they are very eager to demonstrate that their engagement in income-generating activities does not mean that they are striving to become independent of men or that they consider themselves 'bigger than men'.

Mama Joyce, the leader of Kilali women's group, explains how she thinks that women should be today, and how important it is that women are able to combine their domestic roles and responsibilities with their economic activities:

> "Our wits to this is ourself. Let's leave out the men. Anything a woman does she has to do twice as well as a man to be considered half as good. Fortunately this is not difficult. Norms and values are maintained by yourself. There are things which used to be done by men, so when you do things like housebuilding you think you are now like a man. If you are an administrator and do your job

100 % and leave 0% to be a housewife, this is not good. We should combine. Female ministers behave like men. That is a sin that they are doing to themselves and to other women". (Interview October 1994).

DEFENSIVE OR PROGRESSIVE WOMEN'S GROUPS

At first glance Christian women's groups like Msangi and Kilali fit the characterization of defensive groups. In their social practice they seem simply to reiterate the prevailing ideologies about women's domestic roles and subdued position in the household. They aim at projects that can lighten their work load and generate incomes to improve the family welfare. And there is little indication that they question or consciously struggle against basic structures, such as women's lack of inheritance rights and rights in property, that subordinate them as women.

Much of the discussion of defensive versus progressive women's groups draws on Molyneux's (1986) distinction between women's practical and strategic gender needs and interests. Women's practical gender interests arise out of their position in the division of labour and their everyday needs, while strategic gender interests grow out of an analysis of women's subordination. According to Molyneux practical interests do not challenge male domination unless they become the object of feminist politicization and are transformed into strategic interests (ibid). Other scholars have pointed out that women's practical gender needs may lead to a more clearly directed objective and collective empowerment of women (Young 1993; Moser 1993). By organising around practical issues, women will become more experienced and gain more confidence to act as a collectivity and use their new strength to fight against male domination.

In a critique of this distinction between women's practical and strategic gender interests Tripp (1994) points out that it tends to assume that poor rural and urban women "...cannot transform every day struggles for the betterment of their communities into struggles that challenge sexual subordination without the help of outside 'more enlightened' feminist influences" (ibid:3). The author argues that because of its rigid dichotomization it does not account for situations where struggles over practical interests are in essence political conflict for power.

In Tripp's own case from Uganda, poor urban women's struggle for a health unit develops into an open conflict with male leaders of the community that also involves high-ranking government officers, the minister of agriculture and a parliamentary women's representative. As an example of gender struggle it exemplifies clearly how gender subordination is overcome in real world contexts and not in an imagined or theoretical world. As Tripp writes "It occurs within negotiations, accommodations and conflicts over access to resources and power" (ibid:4). It is a struggle which

inherently involves contestation of definitions of gender, in that women through their collective action "renegotiate their gender position and establish new bases for gender identity" (ibid:11).

Normally, women's struggles for 'practical gender interests' do not take the form of open and clear-cut conflicts. But this does not mean that women's struggles against male domination are restricted to single outstanding situations like the one described here. Women's renegotiation of their gender position takes place through their everyday struggles over access to economic resources. As defined by Moore (1994) the struggle over access to economic resources is simultaneously a struggle over definitions and meanings. Cultural ideas and interpretations of femaleness and maleness interact to define gender identities and gendered divisions of labour including women's and men's differential rights and needs. Hence, struggles over entitlements and rights have implications for gender definitions, for what it means to be a wife, a husband and an dependant. "Thus, social identities are fully engaged in the processes of bargaining and negotiation that shape access to economic resources, as well as the direction of resource flows both within the household and beyond" (ibid:104). Cultural ideas and norms are therefore best understood as actual resources engaged in the process of bargaining and negotiation, rather than as norms which determine the outcome of such processes. It is through this bargaining that social identities are themselves reproduced but also opened up to potential change (ibid:105).

DOMINANT DISCOURSES IN CHAGGA SOCIETY

At this level of abstraction the Msangi and Kilali women's groups and their collective action take a new meaning. The women construct themselves (and are constructed by others) as subjects with multiple and potentially contradictory identities within a range of co-existing and competing discourses and social practices (ibid:58-9). In the Chagga social setting it is possible analytically to distinguish between two dominant discourses: a local discourse about being Chagga, influenced by Christian ideas and ideologies about gender and the family, and a development discourse of economic development, national ideology and gender (Swantz 1966; Falk Moore 1986; Kerner 1988; Setel 1995; Rubin 1996). As discussed here, the discourses are not coherent systems of ideas produced by any single or distinct author. They are the conglomerate of several authorships stemming from Chagga women and men themselves, the state, the CCM and UWT, the churches and national and international donor agencies and NGOs - and *notably* also the women's groups.

The two discourses tend to intermesh, overlap and borrow from each other. Both draw on more enduring cultural ideas such as those relating to women as mothers, wives and providers of food. In this way they contribute to a process of 'naturalising' gender differences that function to shape and also restrict women in their ways of constructing themselves as engendered subjects.

Simultaneously the discourses contain components with a contradictory meaning. Writing about the development discourse Rubin notes that "As development objectives have shifted from those of *ujamaa* to those of structural adjustment, there has been an accompanying shift in ideas about gender" (Ibid:247). Economic liberalization during the late 1980s and early 1990s has promoted capitalist economic development, individualism and political democratization, while downplaying the former ideologies of President Nyerere's 'African socialism', cooperation and gender equality.

National as well as international development agencies make women the target of special attention through attempts to develop their productive and entrepreneurial capacities and point to empowerment of women as a crucial step in national development. However, simultaneously economic restructuring and cutbacks in public expenditures make them stress women's 'natural responsibilities to family'. Hence, the new terminology reflects and accentuates a tension between, on the one side, the ideology of women's empowerment, and on the other, an ideology of female domestication (ibid:262-3). To women this implies a situation of conflicting images, but it widens also significantly the repertoire from which they may define themselves and leaves room for interpretation and negotiation.

HARD WORKING AND BUSY WOMEN

Prevailing local ideas and norms about appropriate female and male behaviour are based in Chagga conceptualizations of personhood that link moral character '*tabia*' with desire '*tamaa*'. A person's moral character is shaped from early childhood throughout one's life time. These ideas are not only employed in a religious setting but also in contexts affecting all other aspects of personal life. Prominent factors in shaping a good moral character and guiding desire in a proper direction are 'good' work and for women also the notion to 'be busy'. Good work means in this context work that requires the maximum expenditure of physical and mental energy. Some types of work are deemed more industrious than others, especially agricultural work that makes one sweat. The opposite, idleness and laziness lead to a bad moral character and immoral conduct associated with 'roaming around' and 'to be loose' i.e. engage in extra-marital sex (cf: Setel 1995:182-91).[5] Appropriate behaviour for women relates, furthermore, to the dichotomy between the domestic and the public sphere, relegating women and women's work to the domestic and private sphere and men to the public sphere. A woman is subject to her husband, who is the legal authority of the family and the head of the household. She is therefore dependant on his approval in all matters concerning the family and the farm and needs his permission to leave the home.

Within the local discourse business is virtually the antithesis of work. Setel (1994) points out that this opposition exists partly because business 'doesn't tire the body or the mentality'. It is not honest work. Secondly, business is associated with easy access to money that spurs excessive desire that will find an expression in illicit forms of sexual activity and drinking. Of all occupations small businessman/ market woman, bar worker and guest house worker are considered the lowest ranking occupations followed by non-agricultural manual labour (ibid:190-92). Contrary to the rural markets that are run by women, the markets in urban areas, near main traffic junctions and at the borders to Kenya are to a large extent male domain. They are generally considered an unsuitable or even dangerous place for women because of their association with depravity, i.e. bars, prostitution and other kinds of 'dirty' things like dope-smoking and stealing. Finally, business is considered unproper for women because it involves travelling alone and staying away from home overnight.

Furthermore, women's association with control over money threatens men's social status and authority as heads of households. If a woman invests in a piece of land or a house and registers it in her own name, it is taken as a sign that she is preparing to break up her marriage. It is in this double sense that women's income-generating activities constitute a challenge of male prerogatives and prevailing gender definitions. Economic necessity has changed men's view on their wives' economic activities. Some support their wives with starting capital or help them in other ways e.g. to get funds and to find a market for their products. However, generally men oppose the idea that their wives should be economically independent. They fear that the women will become too wilful and consider themselves 'bigger than men'. In particular, they oppose to women's involvement with business because of all the negative connotations that it involves.

If women challenge too openly male authority and definitions of gender they are exposed to social sanctions and risk exclusion. Women act not as detached individuals but as members of social units, i.e. the household, the clan, the women's group, the village community, the church and the party. Notions about what it is to be a woman or a man are not just ideas, they have both material and social force and are bound up with accepted power differences and ideologies. Individuals who challenge or resist the dominant discourses find that this is often at the expense of social power, social approval and material benefits (Moore 1994). Social control is exercised not only by men but also by other women, notably by women who are members of church committees and by the women's groups. Means of coercing or inducing compliance from members are through withdrawal of access to resources and threats of ousting. And in case of fellow women also withdrawal of reciprocity. If a woman is chased away by her husband the social and material costs are enormous. She must leave everything behind including her children, and she loses prestige and respect. Women

have a strong interest in safe-guarding their position within their marriage because to most women it is their only source of access to housing, land and other productive sources.

Chagga customary law defines women's and men's rights and entitlements. Through wifehood and motherhood women obtain rights of residence on the husband's land together with rights of access to the means of production, land and animals. Women have no inheritance rights. All property including the coffee bushes and housing is controlled by men, and women are considered dependants of their husbands or fathers and as jural minors. The Marriage Act of 1971 provides for women's rights to hold and dispose of property and aims at protecting the family by specifying the conditions for divorce. However, in practice the law has had an negligent influence on women's lives as many women are ignorant of their legal rights, and the courts have tended to let customary laws take precedence over statutory law (Tenga & Peter 1996).

Marital problems rank high in the cases that the District Reconciliation Board deals with. The board reports that about one third of its cases concern divorce and marital problems [6]. Half of the cases are men who want a divorce. They have married another woman or want to get rid of the family because of quarrels or for economic reasons. The other half are women complaining about wife-beating and/or the husband's drinking. Increasingly, women too seek divorce if they have their own income or have found another man, who is willing to support them economically. But the majority of women do not have this option. Even without a formal divorce women risk being chased away from their home. In addition, it happens that in-laws attempt to chase away a widow or an abandoned wife in order to gain control over her husband's land. A household survey counting 70 households in the outskirts of Moshi town and 67 households in a rural community showed that 1/3 of the urban households and 1/4 of the rural households were female headed. Among these about half were women abandoned by their husbands or chased away by husbands or in-laws. Some of these women have taken refuge with relatives living in the rural areas where they stay on a favour and grace basis. Other women seek to the urban areas, where they rent a room and maybe a small piece of land for cultivation. Otherwise, they survive on petty business, casual labour and sometimes also some form of prostitution (own survey material April to July 1993).

NEGOTIATING ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE AND RESPECTABILITY

When the Msangi and the Kilali women's groups represent themselves as good Christian subservient women they do in a sense reproduce the prevailing ideologies about gender and the patriarchal structures and institutions that work to subordinate them as women. However, it is a strategy which enables them to sustain their rights in the household and the family and to strengthen their

respectability as women. Simultaneously, by constructing themselves as modern, progressive and development-oriented women they negotiate a right to run income-generating activities independently of men and to have access to money in the form of funds and loans as well as to training. They deal with government institutions, donor agencies, foreign experts and recently also with banks; they handle funds and bank loans, and they operate technical equipment like dairies, maize mills, tractors and lorries.

Husbands are more willing to accept that their wives engage in income-generating projects when these take place within the framework of women's groups. It is less threatening than if the women initiate economic projects on their own individual basis. It is implicitly understood that the former are for the benefit of the family and the community and not for personal satisfaction. In this way they combine very contradictory images of femaleness, i.e. the domesticated versus the empowered woman.

Besides, it is a strategy that carries with it both social recognition and prestige for the women, especially for the leaders of women's groups. The women are thus not simply reproducing dominant discourses on gender, but in the very process of negotiating access to resources they actually redefine what it means to be a good modern Christian woman in contemporary Chagga society.

The Christian women's groups lend themselves exceptionally well to such a strategy. Conceptually, they fit into both discourses. They represent a legitimate extension of women's domestic sphere into the male-dominated public sphere. Participation in women's groups offers an excuse for women to leave their home and to rest (sic!). The women members remarked repeatedly: 'I joined the women's group to keep myself busy' and 'the only time I rest is when I attend meetings in my group'. The church and the pastor or the priest proffer legitimacy to their activities and moral protection.

In their discursive social practices the women are careful to demonstrate that their extra-domestic activities aim at welfare and development. Especially the leaders are eager to couch their women's groups activities in words that correspond to the prevailing ideologies relating to women's domestic roles and responsibilities. Repeatedly they stress the aspects of family welfare and morality. They point out that they discuss and agree with their husbands in all matters, that they have no quarrels. They organise within or are closely associated with the churches; and they construct their groups as family welfare programmes with the pastor or other prominent men of the area as patrons. Business activities take on a different meaning within the women's groups as well. In discussions within the groups or in public the leaders point out that 'business is okay for women'. In addition they strive to remove the bad connotations that are associated with business by chastising those

business or market women from the community who stay out late at night or visit bars. They call them to meetings in the church, where the pastor and the women leaders order them to reform. Participation in women's groups increases the women's self-esteem in a double sense. They are able to be a good example to others and simultaneously feel that they are 'empowered' women. They say: 'Women are the centre of the family and therefore also the centre of any activity which takes place in society'. The women are proud when they manage to attract donor funds and projects to their community. It gives them respect from others and they feel empowered because they bring development to their families and the community. In this sense they have taken over the role of men as leaders and managers of the family.

However, the women's collective action should not be seen simply as representing 'strategies' to achieve certain objectives. It reflects first of all the women's own self-images and constitutes a conglomerate of their multiple identities as mother, wife, Chagga, Christian, modern and development-oriented women. It is the product of the women's "own interpretation and reconstruction of (their) history, as mediated through the cultural discursive context to which (they) have access" (Wieringa 1995:6).

THEY TELL US TO BEHAVE AS GOOD WIVES

The women's groups are not democratically organised but structured hierarchically, and they do not function as homogeneous units. Undoubtedly leaders and committee members benefit more in economic terms than other women. They are the first to receive the bank loans and the dairy cows and to have access to tractors and lorries. The leaders use the women's groups to further their own individual interests and to secure themselves resources that they can only acquire through women's groups.

As a consequence not all women are necessarily in agreement with the leaders regarding their collective strategies. Some of the ordinary members in the Msangi and Kilali women's groups are complaining that their efforts to please the husband and to live up to the norms for wifely conduct have no effect. Even though they try hard, the husband does not change his attitudes and habits. The women see no improvement in their own personal situation:

> "The women leaders and the priests tell us to be respectful towards our husbands and behave as good wives, but even if we are trying and give him smiles, prepare tea for him etc., it makes no difference. He leaves to drink beer. Also we have too much work to care for /ourselves. How can we compete with those young women who run around with our married men? The only thing we will get is poor health" (group interview with married members of Kilali women's group, November 1992).

Similarly, they do not always passively follow the approach or the strategies that are laid out by the leaders. Rather they may try to press their own interests if they see a chance to do so. This happened once when the Msangi women's group held a meeting with the village leaders in front of the village office. The women leaders had arranged the meeting to ask for assistance with their transport problems. Incidentally the newly elected CCM chairman, a resident of the village, was also present at the time. The meeting became a discussion of women's problems, in general. This spurred one of the ordinary members of the group, a younger unmarried woman, to raise her hand and put a question to the men: 'Is it really fair to women that a woman cannot stay on her parent's land when not all women can marry today?' (Village Meeting, Msangi Village, Jan. 1993).

Immediately, several of the women joined the discussion which lasted for about one and a half hour. Some of the older women remarked that it was impossible for women to inherit land from their fathers because the brothers would never allow this, even if it is possible according to the 'modern laws.' Other women gave examples of women who had actually inherited their fathers. The men tried by all means to avoid the question and referred instead to the clan elders. Finally, the issue was 'shelved' when the CCM chairman directed the discussion back to the original topic by saying that the women should come and see him in town about their transport problem. Afterwards, the leaders of the women's groups expressed their surprise that this topic had been raised. They had never discussed it before, and apparently, it was not in their interest to discuss the issue. They saw to it that the next meeting took place inside the church with the attendance of the priests. At this occasion the ordinary members hardly said a word.

Much later the same issue was raised again, but this time in a completely different setting. One of the members of the group, an unmarried woman in her forties working in town and mother of two children, asked her clan elders at a clan meeting why unmarried women cannot be buried in clan land. Her question was slightly different from the first question as it concerned a burial place, but the essence was the same, viz. women's lack of inheritance and property rights. The clan elders were highly astonished and refused her request by referring to clan customs. However her father, whom she had assisted with money over the years, stood up at the meeting and declared that from now on all his children, whether male or female, should have a right to be buried in clan land. The other clan elders tried to prevent it, but the father insisted and made sure that it was written down.

Such incidents exemplify the heterogeneity of women's groups. They underline that women's contestation of their gender position does not reflect homogeneous processes but rather a plurality of processes that demonstrate the diverse and contradictory realities in which women find themselves (Vargas 1992).

CONCLUSION

In contemporary Chagga society women's groups constitute an essential platform for women's collective action and strategies, whether these are economic, political, religious or social in scope. As examples of women's agency the cases show that we cannot easily classify women with reference to predetermined categories and define women's strategies and representations as expressions of either progressive or defensive world views.

When the women's groups emphasize the welfare-oriented aspects of their economic projects, they do not just passively reiterate the prevailing ideologies about their domestic roles and subordinate position. They do not simply reproduce particular social relations. They manage simultaneously to combine very contradictory images of femaleness that enables them to negotiate access to essential resources and to widen their room for manoeuvre. The cumulative effect of their collective action is a renegotiation of definitions of femaleness and a contestation of their gender position. However, differences between women imply that this negotiation and contestation involves bargaining not only with men but also with other women. And the outcome of this negotiation may well be much more challenging that the women's leaders ever planned them to be. However, to understand the meaning of such events and their consequences for gender definitions and gender relations, it is necessary to situate them in their socio-cultural and historical context and not just regard them as isolated phenomena. Otherwise, they lose their analytical significance.

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Notes

1. Names of people and women's groups have been changed as well as minor details in the description of personal backgrounds and geographical situation to afford anonymity to the people who participated in this research project.

2. Average plot sizes in the 1940s were between 3 - 5 acres per household. Now they are as low as 1/2 - 1 acre.

3. 500 Tanzanian Shillings was equivalent to 1 US$ in 1993.

4. In pre-colonial Chagga society a man should not greet a woman on the road - out of respect for her and her husband, to whom she belonged. Today people say that in the past men did not greet women they met on the way, because women were considered men's property - just like a shirt. And certainly, a man would not greet a shirt, would he?

5. This analysis owes much to the work by Dr. Philip W. Setel, Boston University who studied youth and AIDS in Kilimanjaro region during the same period as my own fieldwork. His theory of personhood and moral character among the Chagga corresponds very well with my own research findings although from a different entry point.

6. Personal communication with Mrs. Ofunguo, Assistant Administrative Officer and Elizabeth Minde, Lawyer and legal adviser in Kilimanjaro Women's Information Exchange and Consultancy Organization.