Cultural Practices in Sexuality and Reproductive Health Among the Luo in Kenya

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Dedication

This piece of work is dedicated to my mother. “You may not have been to the university but without your advice and support I would not have come this far”.
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Executive Summary

The Luo are a cultural group found mainly in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and part of Southern Sudan. In Kenya they are the predominant inhabitants of Nyanza province situated in the western part of the country.

The study sought to look at the perceptions of the Luo speaking people concerning their traditional customary practices of which sex plays an integral role. The cultural practices the study explored were those that previous studies had identified as barriers to the acceptance and use of contraceptives among the Luo people. These previous studies had identified home establishment, death rites and rituals, the initiation of the agricultural cycle and the rituals involved the construction of a new house as some of the cultural practices which tradition and customs demanded sex to be integral part of and interpreted this to imply that such practices are behind the low acceptance of contraceptive use and especially the use of the condom.

An understanding of the contraceptive use debate is incomplete especially in the Kenyan case without a glimpse of the international debate and the socio-economic and political context within which the contraceptives were introduced and how culture gained prominence as a key barrier to the acceptance of contraceptive use, despite reality on the ground showing a more vibrant debate on contraceptives and the reasons for their use sometimes being different from what is commonly presented in studies on barriers to contraceptive use, where cultural practices get a blanket condemnation even where the cultural practice in question if taken within its appropriate context would further the goals of population reduction and enhance reproductive health.

The study collected data through interviews, focus group discussions and informal discussions with people from the Luo community.

The study findings indicate that the cultural practices under investigation can account for minimal instances when people use them as a justification for non-use of contraceptives, however, the respondents identified other factors as being behind the non-use of contraceptives.
Chapter one

1.1 General Introduction

The Luo are an ethnic group found in Kenya, northern Tanzania and Eastern Uganda. Historically, they are believed to have migrated into their current settlements from southern Sudan, and travelled southwards following the River Nile. In Kenya, the Luo are the third largest ethnic group estimated to have a population of over three million people (KNPC, 1999). The vast majority of the Luo inhabit Nyanza province in the western part of Kenya around Nam Lolwe. In the rural areas, the vast majority of the Luo practice subsistence farming in addition to other forms of activities they engage in for economic livelihood. Those living around the lake and rivers also engage in fishing for food and any surplus is sold for cash.

In the Luo traditional socio-cultural life, sexuality plays an important role. This role can be seen in the areas of a couple setting up a new home, the various death rites, and the rites before the commencement of farming activities. The pervasiveness of sexuality into the socio-cultural fabric of Luo society therefore implies that it plays an important role and therefore deserves to be understood if meaningful efforts are to be made in interventions aimed at behavior change communication, promotion of contraceptive use and other interventions aimed at promoting and improving reproductive health services among members of the community especially the vast majority who are still to be found residing in rural areas.

1.2 Understanding Cultural Practices in the Context of this Study

The starting point for this study was the identification of cultural practices among the Luo that other studies had identified as negatively impacting on contraceptive use. These are practices that were socially sanctioned and in which sex played an important role in the fulfillment of those rituals. The underlying factor in the rituals is that sex was seen as key. The rituals in question were those surrounding the practices in home establishment, the agricultural cycle, and the construction of a house; death rituals and the rituals after the marriage of one’s children.
1.3 Problem Statement

The low levels of contraceptive use in Kenya, at nearly half the global average indicates that the majority of the population still do not use contraceptives and even among those using them, there is inconsistency in the usage (UNFPA, 2008, Mutiso et al, 2008).

While studies have identified various cultural rituals of which sex and sexuality plays a role especially among the Luo (Jolly, 2007: 6; Shisanya, 2007; Kamau et al, 1996; Cronk, 1991; Erulkar et al, 2004; Luginaah et al, 2004, none of them has clearly demonstrated how these rituals impact on the choice of use or non use of contraceptives in lieu of the constant changes taking place in Luo culture and society. To curb the spread of Sexually Transmitted Infections and empower individuals to take control of their sexuality in terms of regulating their fertility and spacing of births, it is imperative to understand how they conceptualize sexuality and their perceptions regarding the rituals of which sex is a component part. It is on the basis of this understanding that we can design interventions that can upscale access and acceptance of contraception.

The studies reviewed have identified the role of sex in such cultural practices such as agriculture, home establishment, various death rituals, and house construction as some of the barriers to the acceptance and use of contraceptives, and consequently as factors negatively impacting on efforts to curb the spread of sexually transmitted infections. It is these cultural practices that they have identified that this study seeks to find out from the Luo people what their perceptions are of the practices and further seek to find out if there is a relationship between taking part in these practices and a decision not to use contraceptives as claimed by the studies.

It is with this in mind that this study was designed to investigate the perceptions of the cultural rituals of which sex and sexuality plays a role among the Luo and the extent to which they influence the use of western contraceptives. The study therefore sought to answer the questions:-

1. How do people perceive the traditional cultural rituals in which sex and sexuality are a component part?
2. How does this perception affect individual choices of the use or non-use of western contraception?
1.4 Objectives of the Study

The overall objective of the study was to investigate the perceptions of sexual rituals among the Luo and whether they impact on the use or non use of contraceptives

Specific Objectives

1. To investigate the perceptions of traditional sexual rituals

2. To investigate whether these perceptions influence the use of western contraceptives
Chapter Two

2.1 Background of the Study

The United Nations Population Fund observes that ignorance or marginalization of culture by development agencies has been at their own peril. Accordingly, it proposes an adoption of the ‘culture lens as a programmatic tool (UNFPA, 2008). This is a clear indication of the realization of the importance of culture in the lives and decision making process of a people. It underscores the importance of understanding the culture of a people and taking their cultural perceptions into account in the design and implementation of an intervention, whether the intervention is aimed at improving on something or is part of a social engineering process.

There are studies that have been done and demonstrated an intricate link between a high population and food crisis, health and environment (Dorelien, 2008, Thaxton, 2007). These studies show that an increase in population could possibly create a food crisis, result to increase in poor health among the population and environmental degradation. This therefore implies that to counteract these adverse effects of population growth, there is need to check the growth of population in the first place as it’s the population growth that triggers the other adverse consequences. On the other hand, a management of population growth of necessity requires an understanding of the sexuality and reproductive health perceptions of the targeted population, for the interventions to have any meaningful impact and be sustainable. Among the Luo, a high population growth is leading to land scarcity as land is continuously subdivided into smaller pieces thereby reducing availability of land for cultivation (Molnos, 1972).

In Kenya, according to the Kenya AIDS Indicator survey 2009, Nyanza province leads in the prevalence of the Herpes virus at 49.1% prevalence levels, and the province also leads in the prevalence of HIV with a prevalence rate of 15.3%. Since the province is predominantly inhabited by the Luo, it implies that most of the prevalence incidences for both Herpes and HIV are among the Luo, (KAIS, 2009). Studies done to assess contraceptive use, as part of preventive measures against the spread of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) in Kenya and among the Luo, have identified cultural factors as barriers to contraceptive use (Kamau et al, 1996; Cronk, 1991; Erulkar et al, SIDA, 2007, WAFN, 2007).
The success in prevention of the spread of sexually transmitted infections, management of population growth and the empowerment of people to have control of their sexuality for both men and women therefore largely depends on the acceptance and continuous use of such contraceptive strategies as the male condom, acceptability of vasectomy among others.

With this background in mind, this study looked at the socio-economic and cultural practices of the Luo in which sex and sexuality is said to be a key component. Sexuality in the study was looked at within the broader context within which it is conceptualized by the Luo. For the Luo, sexuality is not often discussed in isolation from its various socio-economic roles, sex is a subject not openly discussed but where a discussion is held about it, the discussion is done with pseudonyms and analogies and it is considered vulgar and immoral to discuss sex openly especially where there are younger people. A discussion of sex is therefore more likely to be held around such issues like childbirth, and the various rites of which sex is considered a key component.

2.2 Review of Literature

2.20 A Historical Background of Family Planning in Kenya

2.21 Neo-Malthusians and the International Population Movement

Contraceptive promotion and use in Kenya has to be understood within the background of family planning from where it derived its origins. To understand this background, one needs to examine the role of the International Population Movement beginning in the 1950s with its Neo-Malthusian economic policy advocating the adoption of national family programmes in the developing nations as a crucial step in slowing down population growth.

With the end of the Second World War, a significant Neo-Malthusian movement arose in the western capitalist world, this movement considered rapid population growth as an impediment to the development of regions predominantly agrarian economically and they advocated family planning to curb the growth (Chimbwete et al, 2005). However, at that time the newly independent African countries were not very enthusiastic about this ideology of the Neo-Malthusians. These countries with colonialism behind them were confident of their development potential and found the arguments and rhetoric of the Neo-Malthusians of a demographic barrier to development less convincing. At that time, the movement was less interested in Africa, as Africa lacked the huge
The early 1960s marked a change in fortune for the International Population Movement with major donor foundations such as the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation embracing a clear population ideology in favor of global population reduction. By mid 1960s, the United States Agency for International Development began providing family planning technical assistance to countries that requested for it (Harkavy, 1995). It is around this time that efforts were put in place for the United Nations to adopt a Neo-Malthusian policy, and advancements in contraceptive technology greatly enhanced contraceptive choice. The resources of the International Population Movement expanded tremendously in the second half of the 1960s and in July 1967, the United Nations Trust Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) was established and by November had funds contributed to it to the tune of $ 4.9 million dollars and by 1971, UNFPA was disbursing funds to the tune of $ 25 million dollars (Johnson, 1987:66).

By the early 1970s, the World bank under pressure to produce ‘bankable projects’ particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, increased aid significantly to countries that signed a population policy (Barret and Tsui, 1999).

The donors considered an official policy statement because to them it legitimized population activities in the given country (Gwarkin, 1970:19). It was politically expedient for the proponents of the population policy for national policies to be seen as a matter of national choice (Chiweni et al, 2005). In a 1953 letter related to a meeting which was to be held by the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP), Fredrick Osborn of the Population Council urged caution in attempts to dominate the agenda with topics of Neo-Malthusian nature. He noted, “it is the feeling of the (organizing) committee that matters of what might be called optimum population, or relation of population to resources, had better be presented country by country and in the first instance via the scientists from these countries” (Osborn, 1953).

This clearly demonstrates a well orchestrated and standardized choreography for the encouragement of adoption and implementation of population policy. The repertoire included surveys showing popular interest and demand for family planning and the establishment of population centers.
worldwide where Africans would be taught the Neo-Malthusian logic. There were also international and regional family planning seminars and workshops in addition to provision of technical assistance (Eliya et al, 2005)

2.22 The Development of Population Policy in Kenya

It is within the background of the activities of the international population movement that Kenya came to adopt a population policy. The early adoption of a population policy by Kenya was viewed by the international population movement as a great coup (Chiweni et al, ibid). It was a successful culmination of their efforts in the African continent. The accounts written about the series of events leading to this event remains silent about the role of the international population movement but gives full credit to the Government of Kenya. These accounts characterized opponents of the policy as people having “traditional attitudes” that lead them into believing in the desirability of large families and that Kenya is not an overcrowded country. Here one sees the formative stages of the birth of perception of culture and tradition as barriers to contraceptive use.

The earliest direct Neo-Malthusian effort to influence the Kenyan government was in the form of a memo from two expatriates working for the Kenyan government (John Blacker and Ed Edwards), to senior government officials in the Ministry of Economic and Planning, wherein they presented the economic implications of the demographic data and projections based on an analysis of the 1962 census (Chiweni et al, Ibid).

In 1964, the Kenyan parliament adopted Sessional paper No. 10 on African Socialism which had within it the expatriates’ Neo-Malthusian analysis. This document spelt out Kenya’s political economy and outlined the government’s free market economic policy while retaining the rhetoric of solidarity with other African countries that rejected western economic imperialism in favor of socialism. The adoption of economic liberalism by the Kenyan government has been attributed to its need for foreign capital (Widner, 1992:52; Bates, 1981:147).

It was around this time that the Kenyan government had received a lot of bad press in the foreign media related to Mau Mau activities and the exodus of Europeans with the coming of independence, and thus the government being keen on attracting foreign aid and investment and changing the negative image abroad was ready to make concessions and accept advice on the direction of its economic policy and programs. It is shortly after the adoption of Sessional Paper No. 10 that the
government sent requests for a delegation from the Population Council to visit the country (Chiweni et al, 2005).

During the visit by the mission from the Population Council, there was less enthusiasm on the part of the government for family planning despite earlier assurances there was a lot of enthusiasm for it given earlier to the mission (Saunders, 1965). The mission’s final report omitted the lack of enthusiasm and embraced Neo-Malthusian logic and the prevalent western understanding of the time concerning the type of family suitable for developing countries. This report was adopted in 1966 by the Kenyan government and in 1967 was published under the Ministry of Economic Development and Planning. Following this, Kenya was held up as a model for other African countries to emulate (Chimbwete et al, 2005).

The period between 1967 and 1978 during the presidency of Kenyatta when Kenya was hailed for its pioneering role in the adoption of the population policy, there was not much done in terms of the actual implementation of the policy. The policy remained a Neo-Malthusian rhetoric merely mentioned in the national development plans written within that period. A popular explanation for the failure of the implementation of the population policies around this time was ‘culture’. This followed in the footsteps of the colonialists’ dismissal of local cultures as superstitious and the population movement in their turn began talking of “cultural barriers”, this buzzword was later adopted by the Kenyan elites in their reports and requests for funding they noted it and argued for the need for increased funding for the dissemination of information and communication to counter the misunderstandings and misconceptions about family planning (Chiweni et al, 2005).

Given this history of the perception of culture as a barrier to the implementation of population control which apparently was not based on any sound social scientific study of the local cultures as a basis for the generalization, one is bound to think of subsequent studies funded and done under the auspices of the population movement as an attempt to prove this allegation. But as the data in this study will make clear, the cultural concepts that were identified as barriers, and specifically with regard to the Luo among whom data in this study was obtained, were taken out of context and interpreted as if they are a static phenomena with a uniformity of interpretation among all Luo speaking people.
Some of the reasons advanced for Kenya’s early adoption of a population is first, key elites in the Ministry of Economic development and planning may have been convinced of the Neo-Malthusian logic; secondly, the elites wanted to show that Kenya was not a backward nation and at the same time they wanted to improve the nation’s image abroad to attract foreign capital and aid; thirdly there may have been a financial motivation for the elites having been told by the Population Council mission of the willingness of other organizations to support the implementation of the population policy (Chiweni, ibid).

2.23 The Implementation of Family Planning Program in Kenya

Upon the death of President Kenyatta in 1978, former Vice President Moi took over as the president. He gave legitimization to Neo-Malthusianism and this has been viewed as the turning point in the subsequent success of fertility decline in Kenya (Robinson, 1992; Sinding, 1997).

Some of the reasons given for Moi’s adoption of Neo-Malthusianism were: firstly, the rate of Kenyan economic growth was slower than it had been in the 1960s and early 1970s forcing the government to look at possible factors behind this decline of fortunes; secondly, Moi was shamed into supporting population activities due to Kenya’s high profile in the international population community; and thirdly Moi unlike Kenyatta had to deal with a population community that had become disillusioned by the lack of support for family planning activities by senior government officials especially with the Health Ministry (Chiweni et al, 2005).

In 1982 when Kenya applied for funding to the World Bank for a second population project, the bank insisted on the establishment of the ‘National Council on Population and Development’ which was to be outside the Health Ministry to be responsible for directing the program. This was set as a condition before the release of the second batch of funds for the Structural Adjustment Loan (World Bank, 1992:54). With the government meeting these conditions, the funds were released and were used by the government for the implementation of family planning activities such as training of health workers on counseling their clients on the benefits of family planning. This dramatically increased the delivery of modern family planning methods by the mid-1980s (Chiweni, ibid).

It is curiously important to keep in mind that up until this time, contraceptives in Kenya were promoted only for family planning purposes, but in 1984, the first case of HIV was reported in
Kenya. This marked the beginning of the promotion of the condom for the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (Kiarie et al, 1991).

It is with historical background, complete with the intrigues of the Socio-economic and political factors and the dominant influence and role of the international population movement in mind that an understanding of the study of culture as a barrier to contraceptive use has to be conceptualized. It is within this context that studies of culture gained prominence as part of the efforts to promote the use of contraceptives. However, as the history reveals, the identification of culture as a barrier was not based on sound scientific study of culture but came across as a convenient propaganda against those who opposed the Neo-Malthusian logic and its promotion of the idea of fertility control and population reduction through family planning.

2.24 The International Conference on Population and Development and Reproductive Health in Kenya

During the international conference in 1994 held in Cairo, it was agreed that there is an intricate link between population and development and that women’s empowerment and the meeting of people’s need for education and health, including reproductive health is a prerequisite for balanced development and individual advancement (IICD, 1994).

While during the conference the need for increased donor support for the successful implementation of reproductive health programmes was acknowledged and most donors pledged their willingness to offer continued support for these programmes, there seems to be less in terms of practical support from the donors. The donors often do not match their words with action and their pledges often remain unfulfilled, this holds true for support to Kenya as for many other countries (Mayhew et al, 2004). The conference therefore in terms of direct impact on improvement of reproductive health services therefore seems to be far from the enthusiasm it generated during the build up and immediately after the end of the conference, whereby it was hoped it will usher in a new wave of funding and commitment that will eventually improve the provision of reproductive health services.

In a 2004 address to the International Parliamentarians Conference on the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action, the Kenyan Minister for health, who ten years earlier had participated in the Cairo conference observed that despite the major commitments made at the conference and
subsequent International conferences, there was very little in terms of actual progress made in the attainment of those commitments. She noted that due to limited funding for reproductive health programmes and health in general, some women have taken up abortion as a family planning measure, with the attendant risk to maternal mortality.

In her own words:

“We talk and talk but no tangible action follows. We commit ourselves to lofty, laudable goals, targets and programs—signing these with golden pens—but forgetting them as soon as we go back home. We create hope but spread hopelessness among the poor who are in dire need of these basic services. Sometimes I often feel as an African mother and a minister, that the developed world should stop making these commitments, which create false hope. It may be healthier to leave the African woman alone in her poverty instead of creating hopelessness.”

Charity Ngilu (2004)
Minister for Health, Kenya

This ministerial statement clearly demonstrates that in terms of actual direct impact on reproductive health programmes, the International conferences such as the Cairo conference are mere rhetoric not backed by any tangible actions. As such any talks about them would amount to mere rhetoric and a desire to sound educated and informed and in some cases, it they may only serve for propaganda purposes. In their study on donor involvement in reproductive health, Maylaw et al (2004) noted that, “donors’ words and actions frequently do not correlate”. Most of these donor “words” or pledges are often made in the international conferences but there is less in terms of their fulfillment.

This can be manifested in the reproductive health technologies available to the women seeking the services which have a lot of side effects compared to what one is likely to find in the western nations where the technology is developed. Often what is offered is what amounts to obsolete technology in the west which when replaced by new technology is offered as aid to the developing nations. The side-effects from the use of these products are behind some of the people choosing to discontinue their use (Simba, 2009. Study respondent).

However, in Kenya, reproductive health services are accessible to anyone who seeks it irrespective of age and marital status.
2.3 Review of Previous Studies

The World Health Organization in defining sexual health conceptualizes sexuality as “a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors” (WHO, 2006). This definition while too broad outlines the complexity and pervasiveness of sexuality into the lives of individuals and groups. It demonstrates both the individual dimensions and the social dimensions of sexuality.

Studies done among the Luo have identified some of the cultural rituals in which sex is a component part. In a 2007 SIDA trip report it was noted that according to the National Agriculture and Livestock Extension Programme, the sexual rituals surrounding agriculture was seen as having an impact on its programmes, for instance, the custom requiring the husband to have unprotected sex with his first wife before the first planting season. In the same report, Women’s Action Forum Network based on its 2007 baseline survey of cultural issues and how they relate to HIV/AIDS observed that, “the ritual role of sex remains hugely important” among the Luo. It further observes that, “unprotected sex constitutes part of the ritual for blessings as upon the marriage of one’s child, in the marking of important events in the farming calendar, “cleansing” of widows upon the death of their husbands and the initiation of activities such as the establishment of a homestead or the construction of a house” (Jolly, 2007: 6).

Other studies have identified specific cultural practices and attempted to show their impact in the spread of HIV (Shisanya, 2007). In this study the author observes that the continued existence of such practices as “wife inheritance” and “widow cleansing” have largely contributed to the spread of HIV infections among the Luo in Siaya district. However, this study did not venture into finding out the people’s perceptions on the cultural practices in question. It seemed to be more preoccupied with identifying the practice and assuming it is still practiced at the time of the study just in the same way it was practiced in the past, this despite the fact that cultural practices are constantly undergoing change. Hence the author seemed to have been more preoccupied with identifying the practice and
demonstrating how assuming it is still practiced as in the past, it would impact on the spread of HIV within the community and especially among widows and the men with whom they were sexually involved.

Other studies done in Kenya have indicated a general low usage of contraceptives. Some of these studies have identified traditional practices as the main factor behind this low usage (Kamau et al, 1996; Cronk, 1991; Erulkar et al, 2004).

In a study of contraceptive use among HIV positive women, Mutiso et al (2008) noted that use of contraception was low with only 44% of the women being on some form of contraception method and further observed that in the long term usage dropped even further. This clearly indicates that even with awareness of the fact that contraceptive use is important in the prevention of spreading HIV and re-infection, the bulk of the respondents still failed to use contraception.

Among the youth, behavior change interventions that adapt to indigenous traditions can be both acceptable to communities and are closely associated with meaningful changes in young people’s behavior (Erulkar et al, 2004). It is imperative therefore for interventions aimed at influencing behavior change among a population to appreciate the significant role of culture in shaping individual behavior.

The use of contraceptive as a method of family planning in Kenya has always been targeted at couples in long term relationships. However, even among couples contraceptive use is shrouded in secrecy and discovery of such use by a partner can be a source of conflict (Okal et al, 2008). It thus becomes evident that knowledge of, and willingness to use contraceptives is not sufficient to determine contraceptive use. There are other dynamics playing an important role in determining the use or non-use of contraceptives. The study however did not identify those dynamics and their basis.

In a study on the challenges faced by widows confronted with the direct and indirect consequences of HIV/AIDS in Nyanza,( Luginaah et al 2004), noted that none of the widows reported that their husbands had died of HIV or AIDS, but relied on the description of symptoms given as the cause of the death of the spouses as the basis upon which they insinuate that the men had died of HIV or AIDS, and that the widows were therefore either HIV infected or their status of widowhood is the result of HIV or AIDS. This insinuation is first of all misleading as the symptoms often attributed to HIV is similar to that of many other diseases such as malaria, typhoid and others, hence only
medical proof could ascertain this and in the absence of one, then these become mere allegations. Secondly, the study identified “wife inheritance” as a significant factor in the spread of HIV, it nonetheless fails to give an account of what the men’s view of the issue are and also it does not address the issue of whether the perceptions affect whether people will use or fail to use contraceptives, and specifically for the condom the male view would be important for it is them who are to use it.

There are other studies that have been done in Kenya but which focused on other aspects of reproductive health such as partner violence and its impact on reproductive health (Emenike el, 2008), others have looked at the gaps in interventions that have tried to link partner violence, reproductive health and HIV, arguing that the violence is based on a social perception of masculinity in built within a patriarchal socio-cultural context (Chege, 2005).

Some of the studies heretofore reviewed, while identifying cultural traditions in which sex played a part, they were more focused on their impact on either interventions on agriculture or in the spread of HIV/AIDS and contraceptive use. Their identification of these cultural issues seemed to have been taken as given facts binding on all Luos at all times. They therefore did not venture to find out whether these issues were still held valid by most people or whether there had been some fundamental changes in the cultural practices due to changes that have been taking place among the Luo for centuries and also some of the changes that may be attributable to interactions of members of the community with other people, or even the effects of the introduction of new ways of seeking livelihood in a changing socio-political and economic environment.

**Point of Departure**

Studies done on sexuality and reproductive health in Kenya paid more attention to the factors affecting the use of specific contraceptive methods and identified cultural influences as some of the explanatory factors (Kamau et al, 1996). While studies reviewed heretofore identified cultural influence as generally influencing the use or non-use of contraceptives, they did not highlight how the culture practice linked to the use or non use of contraception. They further failed to show how the cultural influences were perceived. They held the view of culture as nearly static and individuals being mere adopters and practitioners of the culture. Luo culture just like any other culture is
constantly undergoing changes. The constant change has been going on for centuries (Ayayo, 1976), and it would be erroneous to assume that the process of changed has stopped.

The studies reviewed were furthermore concerned with culture and the spread of HIV/AIDS and identified certain cultural practices as impeding efforts to curb the spread of the scourge. Most of the studies that have linked culture to contraceptive use have identified the cultural factors impacting on sexuality, but have not shown the ways in which these cultural factors are perceived by individuals and how they negatively impact on the spread of the scourge. None of the studies reviewed attempted to seek the perception of the individuals on the socio-cultural rituals of which sex and sexuality plays a role and whether and how those rituals impacted on their choice to use or not use contraceptives. It is these issues that those studies failed to address that the present study sought to delve into.

2.4 Theoretical Perspective

The study largely adopted a critical medical anthropological approach. The proponents of this theory are Foucault (1980), Singer (2006), Farmer (1999) and Good (1994)

Critical medical anthropology focuses on the functioning of healthcare systems at multiple levels, ranging from the individual level of the experiences of the patient, the micro-level level of the patient-physician relationships, the intermediate level of local healthcare systems, specifically clinics and hospitals and the macro-social level of global politico-economic systems. The objective was to understand how at each of these levels existing social relations structure the relationships among the participants in the systems. Critical medical anthropology particularly studies how healthcare is embedded within dominant relations such as those of gender, race and class.

The study further adopted the cultural interpretative model of Kleinman (1997). The model was used in the study to explore people’s interpretation of the cultural phenomena handed down to them from their networks of relations within the Luo community and how they perceive those phenomena and understand them. The underlying principle here is that people are not merely receiving cultural phenomena and enacting them, on the contrary, they are active participants in the creation and transmission of cultural phenomena. As such, what may have been handed down to them may be rendered impractical by the changes in the living circumstances and consequently they
have to come up with appropriate adaptive mechanisms which over time becomes part of their cultural repertoire.

Using the critical medical anthropology, I sought to understand how the culture debate gained prominence of place on the barriers to contraceptive use.

2.5 Relevance of the theory to the Study

The critical medical anthropology theory is relevant for the study in the sense that, individuals are conscious actors in their life situations. While people adopt cultural practices as part of their adaptive response to their environment and as members of a social group, they also have the agency to decide on what serves their adaptive abilities well and what hampers it. Accordingly they adjust their decisions and responses to cultural phenomena and government policies on the basis of their perceptions of what suits their needs. As cultural agents, individuals are creators as well as the actors in the cultures of which they belong. At the same time, even where governments introduce policies that have implications on people’s lives, the adoption of the policy is in most cases influenced by local understandings and hence even if the policy stems from external players, their local adoption has to be modified in line with the local perceptions.
Chapter Three

3.1 Methodology

Introduction

This section provides a description of the study site, the study design, study population, sampling procedures, and units of analysis, the methods of data collection and methods of data analysis.

3.2 Description of Study Site

The study was conducted in Rachuonyo district of Nyanza province in Kenya between the 10th June and 16th July 2009. The district headquarter is based in Kosele. The district is divided into Kasipul Kabondo and Rachuonyo constituencies. Rachuonyo district derives its name from the elder from whom the residents of the district trace their origin. The man was called Rachuonyo and his brother was called Sipul. The area is locally called Karachuonyo which essentially means Rachuonyo’s place. The constituencies in the district are therefore named after the two brothers. The district borders Nam Lolwe with Kendu bay, as the main town on the shores of the lake. The lake is shared with Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. This is the largest freshwater lake in Africa, from where the bulk of Tilapia fish consumed in the region is obtained. Rachuonyo district is one of the administrative districts of Nyanza province with a population of approximately 307,126 (1999 census). The area where the study is to be done is predominantly rural with the vast majority of the inhabitants practicing subsistence agriculture. Economically, apart from subsistence agriculture, some of the residents also engage in small scale businesses, with a small proportion engaged in casual labour from time to time in agriculture and construction work (Divisional Agriculture Office, 2009)

The area of the study has a hilly landscape with the hills seeming to meet the sky from a distant as far as the eye can see. The hills are rocky and the soil in the area is sandy. The main road in the area is an all-weather road, which at the time of the study had been destroyed by water from the hilly areas as it finds its way to lower areas following the rains that had been falling shortly and sometimes during my time in the field. The other road linking Kendu Bay and Homa Bay was at the time of the fieldwork under construction and was very dusty from the excavation done as part of the road construction exercise. With the passing of a car, a cloud of dust swirled in the air following immediately after the car.
A number of young men in the area are involved in providing transport services using bicycles a business locally called *BodaBoda*, and new entrants into the business now use motorcycles for the same business. The motorcycles in use are mainly imported from China, and with every arrival of a public transport vehicle ferrying passengers the young men scramble to get to the vehicle in the hope of getting a client to carry to whichever destination the person is going. The bicycles and motorbikes are mainly used to ferry people to destinations within the villages where there is no formal transport. They are a convenient way of getting to your destination without having to cover long distances to a home on foot walking. They are also helpful to a visitor who may know the name of a home or place where they are going without necessarily knowing the direction to the place. The people operating in this place are locals who know most of the places around the area and when they are not very sure, they ask for directions until they finally get you to your final destination.

During fieldwork I stayed in the home of a former colleague. There is a small shopping center near the home locally known as Benga. Here one finds a row of shops and small businesses known as kiosks. From the kiosks one finds fresh vegetables and fruits, there are some where you can find fish both fried and smoked and in the morning hours one can find fresh fish from the lake. The center grew to serve staff and visitors to the main private hospital situated in the area, Kendu Adventist Hospital but locally are just called Gendia, which is the name of the area where the first Seventh Day Adventist mission was established in Kenya. Ostensibly the hospital is locally called Gendia in reference to its being owned and was established by the missionaries.

The home I stayed is situated behind the hospital on a hilly area. The road to the home is a winding rocky uphill road flanked on both sides by bushes and the fences of homes. The home is full of trees and there are two houses made of stones with iron sheet roofing. The houses are situated upwards on the hill while the main gate to the home is downhill. The home has two ecosan toilets of which one is in active use while the other had just been recently completed. During the day one can hear birds’ singing but their singing is clearer and louder in the evening around sunset and early in the morning before and after sunrise. From the serene quietness of the home one can hear the sound of the river as it slowly snakes its way to the lake.

The landscape is littered with homes and from a distance one can see the roofs of different homes with vision partially blocked by trees. A home in this case refers to a compound with houses built within the enclosure or a marked territory where there is no fencing to demarcate the boundary. In
the home, the house of the homeowner is the one directly facing the main gate, with the houses of the sons built on the left and right hand sides of the main house. The house of the first eldest son is often on the right hand side nearer to the main house, while the second born side constructs his house on the left hand side directly opposite that of the eldest son. The third born son constructs his house on the right hand side next to that of the eldest son and the fourth son on the left hand side directly opposite until all the sons in their order of seniority have constructed their houses in that pattern. The house of youngest son is the one closest to the main gate. The rationale for this arrangement according to some people was that in the past in the event of an attack on a home, the youngest persons would be the first line of defense as they are still stronger and more agile.

3.3 Getting down to Business

The respondents in the study were both male and female and the main criteria used in their identification was that they had to have their own established homes, which therefore also means they were married, as only married people can establish a home. They were mainly people in their late thirties to late forties. This was mainly because these are the people one is likely to find in the village at any one time and secondly they are mature enough to have married, had children and established their homes. There were two widows who were part of the study, the two of them were selected on account of their being traditional birth attendants, though they also had children and had already established homes with their husbands before their demise. In economic terms, the respondents were predominantly subsistence farmers who also kept some livestock such as poultry, and some had goats and sheep. The respondents are members of different self help groups in the area, where they mainly meet to share ideas on how to improve their economic condition and contribute funds to a pool from which each of the members can borrow money for starting or sustaining different income generating activities they may be doing from time to time. For instance, some make sisal ropes which they later sell.

During the fieldwork, my contact who was also my host arranged for two focus group discussions from among members of self help groups in the area. The focus group discussions were designed to have at least a minimum of three men and three women, however as it turned out, in both instances I got a number larger than I needed, in one instance I got ten people made of seven women and three men and in the other one I had sixteen people comprising six men and ten woman. Women were over represented in both instances because in general, the trend in the area is for women to be
more likely to join these kinds of groupings than men. Hence it is even normal to find female only groups but one can hardly hear of a male only group. As a matter of fact, during my previous working experience in the area, I never came across even a singly male only self help group.

While the large composition of the groups could have been problematic in some cases, in this case I let group dynamics come into play by leaving it open for everyone to participate in the discussion and since the issues were more about perceptions, it went well. At the same time, in such large groupings, the normal group dynamics is such that you end up with about six people who contribute more but at the same time just to ensure I was not having any divergent opinions getting lost, I would ask those who were more quiet what they thought about what their outspoken colleagues were saying. In this way I was able to ensure to the extent possible that I do not get only biased views from the outspoken people. Secondly, even among the outspoken people, they were not in constant agreement on everything but engaged more in a dialogue aimed at arriving at a consensus on some of the issues under discussion. Furthermore, in most of the discussions, everyone who talked based their arguments on the particular context within which the ideas are to be understood and from their own personal experiences pertaining to the issues under discussion. The main reason why the number that turned out for the focused group discussions was higher, was because when the group members were informed of a visitor coming, and who was interested in doing research, most of them were keen and interested to take part in the conversation. At the same time, the groups also saw this as an opportunity to have their meeting after the discussions since the presence of a visitor would encourage most members to turn up for the meeting.

I also had direct interviews with ten people comprising of six men and four women. These were in-depth interviews. This kind of interview allows the respondents enough time to develop personal accounts of what is important to them (Green and Thorogood, 2004). While I had planned to have both men and women involved in equal numbers, it was not possible to get the fifth woman who would be involved in the study and we decided to get a man. This did not in any way skew the findings since in the focused group discussions I had an over representation of women. Furthermore, in terms of outlining the cultural practices and the context of their practice in the past and the changes that have occurred over time, there seems to have been a general consensus on most things, however when it came to the interpretation of things related to contraceptive use then the debate was about interpretations which in any way did not seem to have a gender dimension to it
but was more how individuals interpret events and actions. The focus group discussions were organized in the home of one of the members of the self help groups where they were to hold their meeting for the particular day when I held the discussions.

The interviews were conducted in the respondent’s home with me going there. The person to be interviewed was in some cases notified of my coming in advance so that they can identify what time suits them and then I would visit for the interviewed at the agreed time. On other occasions, however I just conducted random interviews, this was the case with two men whom being casual acquaintances during the time I was working in the area when I met them during my fieldwork they found the topic interesting and when I asked if they would be willing participants in the research, they were interested, one of them I met early in my fieldwork while the second one I opted to involve after I could not get a female respondent in time during the short fieldwork duration.

The focus group discussions were organized in the home of one of the members of the self help groups where they were to hold their meeting for the particular day when I held the discussions.

During the duration of the fieldwork, I also constantly engaged with informal discussions on issues related to my topic with friends. Informal interviews lie on one end of the formal/informal continuum (Nkwi et al, 2001). My host was one of the people I constantly engaged in these discussions and the discussions were very interesting as they went beyond what is happening presently in relation to the practice of culture into the future, so that for instance he was envisioning all his male children building their houses within his compound but never moving out to built separate homes to reduce wastage of land which is currently reducing in size due to increased population. He saw this as a way of ensuring his children will have land to cultivate since building a home means leaving a lot of land for the houses and a compound which is not cultivated. But by having everyone living in the same compound, the rest of the land on which they could have built their houses can be cultivated for food. I also talked with several other friends and even my parents during the times I visited them at home.

I also had the opportunity to visit and talk to two mature women who are traditional birth attendants. They have been helping women deliver their babies at home. One of them had a house within her compound from where she attends to the women who come to deliver. In some cases, the women who have complications during their pregnancy come to stay with her in her home and
she treats them using herbal medicine until the time of delivery. Upon delivery she monitors the women for a few days before they can go back to their homes. It was interesting to realize that for the women who come to stay with her she does not charge them any fees for their sustenance during their stay. They ate the same food the woman and members of her household ate and they were offered a place to sleep. The women just took part in the activities within the home that they could manage to do just like everyone else. I must say, I was impressed by the birth attendant’s knowledge. I however missed the opportunity to witness the woman at work as by the time I went to her home, the lady she had been looking after for a week had delivered and left just a day before my arrival.

The second traditional birth attendant was also very knowledgeable though by her own account she was now considering retiring from the work and was looking for a younger person to train but by the time of my fieldwork she did not have someone she considered fit for training.

Both traditional attendants at one time worked in the local mission hospital where they had been hired to help women deliver. They had been hired on account of their knowledge and expertise on women health issues and were deployed in the maternity wing of the hospital and upon retirement from employment they continue doing their deliveries at home and refer cases they consider complicated to hospital for surgery.

I also conducted an in-depth interview with a nurse who offers reproductive health services to women who seek them. The interview was conducted within the health facility where the services are offered. This interview took a bit of time to schedule because of the large number of patients coming to the facility. The facility offers both reproductive health services and offers other medical services.

The sampling procedure in the study was therefore non-probability, it was purposive to the extent that, all respondents had to be Luo speaking people and identify themselves as Luo. The study was therefore not aimed at making broad generalizations but to venture deeper into the issues under study. This is the core objective of a qualitative study like this one (Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996).
3.4 Data Management and Analysis

During the fieldwork exercise, interviews that were conducted were captured on a tape recorder and a digital recorder. The data from the digital recorder was transferred to my computer for back up. After collection the data was transcribed and I did content analysis and context analysis. I also made constant reference to the recorded interviews as they provide the basis of the information obtained.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

During the fieldwork, I conducted my work with the utmost professionalism with a lot of respect for the respondents. Since for some of the respondents I knew them during my time working in the area, it was easy to get along well with the mutual respect that had been established. I also sought the direct consent of those interviewed of their willingness to participate in the study and left the option open for them to decide if and when they wanted to discontinue their participation. I further ensured the research was conducted at the convenience of the respondents just to avoid inconveniencing them from fulfilling their daily tasks which I recognized to be more important to them as much as my fieldwork was important to me. I assured the respondents of the confidentiality of the information they gave to me, and whenever I made reference to what someone had mentioned in another interview, I made sure I made whoever said it anonymous.

3.6 Challenges faced

During the planning for my fieldwork, I had arranged with my host and former colleague that I will hitch a hike from his motorbike as he goes to do his routine work in the community. However, when I arrived for the fieldwork, the motorbike had developed mechanical problems and the organization was not keen on getting it fixed. This proved to be a major challenge as I had prepared for all worse-case scenarios but this was the one least in my mind. Based on my previous experience working in the area, I was aware that given the distances to be covered during fieldwork, it would be impossible to do much unless I figure a way of getting something with which to move around. The homes in the area are scattered and the terrain hilly and rocky. While it was going to be a lot easier to climb a hilly area, the vast distances is what was going to prove a challenge. However, after consultation with my host we arrived at a solution of hiring a motorbike for my fieldwork. I therefore hired a motorbike from someone who owns one locally and was lucky to get a young man I had previously worked with as a research assistant to ride the motorbike as he knew the homes in
the area very well. With him as my guide I managed to visit all the homes where the interviews and focused group discussions were to be conducted.

During the fieldwork, I also developed malaria. This I had prepared for knowing well that having been away for long and the area of my research being a malaria endemic zone I was bound to get it. I took the malarial drugs I had bought earlier before going to start the fieldwork and while it slowed me down for a short while; I was still able to get on with things normally. The area being a tropical zone and closer to the lake and traversed by a river with many other water pans in the area, this provides a conducive environment for the breeding of mosquitoes and hence the common prevalence of malaria and other waterborne diseases such as bilharzias in the area.

Towards the end of my fieldwork I developed flu like symptoms from the dust I was constantly inhaling while moving from one place to another on the main road in the area. The road is an all-weather road which when dry produces a lot of dust whenever a car passes. Periodic inhalation eventually led to my illness. However to cope with this I took warm water with lemon twice daily and after about a week the symptoms disappeared. The nature of this road indicates the difficulty faced in movement in the area during the rainy season when the loose soil on the road gets muddy, thereby slowing down movement by vehicles and even motorbikes. This also points to the challenge of difficulty of getting to the hospital in time in cases of emergencies especially during the rainy season.

3.7 Limitations of the Study

The study findings are limited to the extent that they cannot be purported to represent the views of all Luo speaking people. This is basically a challenge for all studies both quantitative and qualitative. However, to the extent that the study identifies trends and perceptions in changes related to cultural practices among the Luo, then its findings can be used to understand those trends.
Chapter Four

4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the issues dealt with during the fieldwork exercise. It outlines the various cultural practices among the Luo where sex was seen as part of the fulfillment of a customary ritual. Among the Luo, sex was intricately woven into the socio-cultural fabric, however, it was also a taboo subject for public discussion, nonetheless, and it could be discussed among adults but not with the young. Sex was also very much regulated and was not just for pleasure, though this has changed drastically over time. The customs and traditions have also undergone changes over time in line with changes in the socio-economic situations within which people currently live in. at present there is more openess in discussing matters of sex, though this discussion is always done with the use of several other synonyms for sex and sexual organs.

The accounts to be presented in this section are to be seen as representative of the accounts given by most respondents in terms of how the cultural practices were done in the past and the present changes that have happened in terms of what people do. During the field, in outlining what people used to do in the past, there was a great degree of unanimity in accounts of what was done in the past and the reasons behind them but the differences as will be apparent in the discussions below the accounts were witnessed in the interpretation of the appropriateness of contraceptive use. The accounts presented are therefore deliberately chosen by me as I could choose any other and still end up with a similar account. The similarity of the accounts is an indication that in terms of living experiences, there is a great deal that is commonly shared experiences among the respondents and hence the similarity of the accounts of practices in the past, and the differences in the interpretation of the use contraceptives can be seen as an on-going discourse in the community given that contraceptive use is a recent phenomena introduced from the 1980s and its position in people’s life is still subject to a lot of ambiguity.

4.2 Socialization among the Luo: Past practices and Present realities

Having previously mentioned the Luo as ‘traditionally’, which in essence means in the past though to some extent some even at present practiced subsistence farming, pastoralism and fishing as socio-economic activities. I will briefly outline the socialization of children within that context and also outline the present realities based on the current context where most people no longer own
livestock, where there is proportionately large group of Luos involved in other professional activities not in any way directly concerned with farming and the fact that at present most children have to attend school and thereby spend most of their time in school and are socialized both at home and in the school.

_Akoko’s Account:_

Akoko is one of the respondents who participated in the study. He is in his late forties and lives with his wife and five children in his home. He has already established a home of his own. He is a subsistence farmer and also does small business to supplement his income and also occasionally takes contractual jobs for landscaping. His children are in school. He keeps chicken in his home like many people in the area do, the chicken are kept using the free range method whereby they are enclosed in the evening and in the morning they are left to walk around the village scrounging for food.

_In the past when were growing up, upon the birth of children, they were constantly with their mother until they reached around three or four years when the boys would occasionally be sent to spend more time with their father as well though they would still be under the direct care of their mother. At this point the children would begin to learn very basic tasks by seeing what others are doing and trying to do them as well. So for example a boy would join a bigger brother when he is looking after livestock and he would also try to control the animals but they only did this when the animals were within the home. They would never be left to accompany those going to look after the livestock away from home as they were still too young and needed the constant attention of their mother. Girls on the other hand would spend most of their time in the company of the female members of the household especially their mother. They would also try to imitate what they see being done by their mother and older sisters where there were some._

_Upon reaching the age of ten, the boys would start to accompany their elder brothers to look after livestock outside the home but would still not go to far off places. Girls on the other hand would accompany the female members of their household as they undertook household related chores and when they went to fetch water from the river, spring or stream._

_However, farming was done by both men and women together, so when the children are young and under the care of their mother, they would be brought along to the farm to play around under the watchful eye of the mother and other adults. In farming, however the clearing of bushes or cutting down of trees was_
work reserved for men as they were considered heavy tasks. Women left the farm earlier than the men to go and prepare breakfast for the family while men continued to work and when the breakfast was ready it was either brought to the farm or the men would be called back home to have breakfast.

Upon reaching the age of say between twelve to fourteen years, boys were kept under the tutelage of their grandfather and father though it must be understood that for the Luo, the brothers and male cousins to your father are all called father. For the immediate brothers of your father, how one referred to them depended on their relative age to your own father, so that if they were older than your father you would call them “Big father” and if they were younger than your father you called them “Small father”.

In terms of gender and the division of labour between the sexes, the Luo divided work between men and women in terms of the amount of physical labour required to get the work done. Tasks that were viewed as demanding a lot of physical effort were done by men. These included such tasks as the construction of houses, taking care of and looking after livestock, cutting down of trees for firewood or for any construction work, hunting, and fishing among other duties that involved long periods of being away from home and required physical strength to undertake. On the other hand, women were tasked with the duty of taking care of household related chores and looking after children. Women prepared the meals, fetched water from the river, spring or river; they collected firewood around the home and its surrounding environs. Thus there was traditionally a clear division of roles between the sexes among the Luo with each role serving an adaptive purpose in the context of the traditional Luo, agro-fishing and pastoralist lifestyle context.

The socialization of girls was done by their grandmother in whose house teenage girls lived while boys were socialized by their grandfather on their different roles. Each evening, the girls congregated in the kitchen with their grandmother and they held their conversations while the boys congregated in the grandfather’s house which was known as Abila. In these contexts socialization was done through stories, the praising of bravery and castigation of cowardice, riddles among other methods. Learning and socialization went and in hand and was a continuous process throughout an individual’s life. This sharply contrasts with learning nowadays which is structured in terms of lessons with timeframes.

This account of socialization of males and females in the past conforms to that outlined by others who have written about socialization among the Luo, among them, Ayayo (1978), Mboya (1938). The socialization process prepared boys and girls for their roles in society in childhood and
adulthood. It is their ability to competently fulfill these roles that determined their social standing within the society.

However at present, socialization is done in a different context which has been necessitated by the changes in the socio-economic context in which people live. Colonialism and its handmaid the missionaries were at the forefront in introducing the changes that are currently witnessed. The missionaries introduced the Christian religion and the school system currently in place. The British colonialist also introduced the current system of government with the executive, judiciary and the legislature which even today is modeled along the lines of the British system (Adede, 2009. Study respondent).

With the children having to go to school where they spend most of their time, the traditional institutions of socialization no longer play much role in their socialization. Some children even stay with their parents in urban areas which mean they even rarely get to see most of their relatives. Most people in rural areas, while still practicing subsistence farming and few of them owning livestock, they have to contend with the fact of the children being away from home during school days. As such socialization in this context is radically different from what it used to be in the past. Today, parents teach all their children irrespective of gender such skills as cooking, washing clothes, cleaning the house among most other duties which traditionally was the domain of females. Nonetheless, in most households, whereas both boys and girls may know how to cook, the girls will tend to cook more often than the boys, something which may be explained partly by the fact that their mothers were brought up and accepted cooking as part of their duties as wives even among those who are working, and so the daughters follow suit by learning from their mothers. Thus currently, socialization varies greatly among parents and where they live. For instance, among some parents who live in urban areas, they bring up their children speaking only in English with the children never getting to learn Luo, some speak only English and Swahili with their children while others speak only Luo with their children at home, however at the same time the children spend most of their time in schools and their parents also spending most of their time at work with both meeting only in the evenings. In some households especially in urban areas they hire a house help who does all the cooking and cleaning with the children not learning to do these by themselves.

In the rural areas, both boys and girls learn to do most things for themselves irrespective of gender as well, so that boys will learn to cook, clean their own clothes, and girls will also learn to look after
livestock if there are any. There is in most cases no strong emphasis on a specific gender learning specific things like was the case in the past. However, as earlier mentioned in terms of practice, girls are more likely to do the cooking in the house compared to boys, and boys more likely to do such chores like looking after livestock on weekends or after school and such like tasks. At the same time, childcare is predominantly a female domain though men occasionally assist with feeding and carrying the baby. Some families hire someone who does most of their household chores and looking after children).

Therefore, in lieu of the difference in socialization as done at present which greatly differs from what was the practice in the past, in terms of lessons regarding sexuality and contraceptives, young people get most of their knowledge from peers, some from their parents especially girls from their mothers, the media also plays a prominent role in shaping people’s views on relations and sex, and relaying information on contraceptives. While generally sex is still encouraged within the framework of marriage, in terms of practice young people engage in sex as part what they perceive as being in a loving relationship. The current approach to relationships, love and sex is more of individual (Spronk, 2005).

4.3 Home Establishment among the Luo

Among the Luo, a man who is married and already has children was and to some extent even today is still expected to establish a home of his own outside the home of his parents where he grew up. This is what is commonly referred to as Goyo Dala, which loosely translates to establishing a home. The only condition was that the couple planning to establish a home had to have a son. This was mainly because it was the sons who would eventually build their houses within the home, while the daughters lived in the home with the parents until the time they got married and moved to live with their husbands. In the rare instances where a woman was not married or in the event she got married and for some reason she left the husband and moved back to her parent’s home and refused to go back and live with her husband, her parents would construct a house for her within their home and she stayed there. However, such instances were extremely rare, as very few women remained unmarried and those who for whatever reason left their husbands, eventually got married to someone else.
**Yuanita’s Story**

Yuanita is a mother of six grown up children, the eldest son already has a house within the home. She lives with her husband in the home and they practice subsistence farming. In the past they used to do small business and at the time of the interview they were in the process of starting another one. They have been residing away from home for several years in places where her husband used to work and just about a year back returned to permanently settle in the village. In their home they keep chicken and some goats.

In the past, when someone was to establish a home, first it was the father of the man to identify the spot where the son was to establish the new home. As a sign that he had selected a specific spot, he would tie together grass on that spot. After that, they would take three chicken eggs that had failed to hatch and they would put them on the spot where the new home was to be established. The reason for this was that it was believed some people would try to do witchcraft in that place ensure the establishment of the home would not be successful and even if people started to live there they would have a lot of sufferings. The three eggs were therefore meant to ward off such witchcraft attempts and it was believed that if anyone made such attempts, their efforts would fail to materialize in the same way the eggs failed to hatch. The eggs were left on the spot where the new home was to be established for three days.

After three days, the man who is to establish the new home would set off from his father’s home very early in the morning, with the man at the front, his son behind him carrying a chicken and his wife in tow carrying foodstuff. The man who is to establish a home had to have an axe, a chicken and a machete. The idea behind having these three was that chicken was for keeping in the new home, as each home was expected to have some chicken for food in the event that a visitor came unexpectedly. A visitor in this was someone like a brother-in-law, parents-in-law and the like. Villagers were seen as people who could walk in any time and share in meals and were therefore not considered visitors. In any case, most if not all the villagers were related in some way, calling each other either brother, father or grandfather or aunty, mother or grandmother depending on how they were perceived to be related. The axe was for cutting trees that was to be used in the construction of houses and splitting wood for firewood while the machete was for clearing bushes and cutting shrubs to ensure the cleanliness of the home. On reaching the spot where the new home is to be constructed the man was to be the first to cut down a tree that would be used as the beacon of the house, he would then dig a hole on the ground and put the beacon in place. After this other people would join in the building of houses in the new home. These people would be villagers who would either have been invited or some who would just happen to
pass by but join in the work. In most cases two houses would be built and completed on the same day. That very night, the man and his wife would not go back to the parent's home but would spend the night in their new home. It is by spending the night in that house and the husband and wife joining together (euphemism for having sex) that the house would be considered officially theirs. During the construction of the house, after men had finished putting up the overall structure of the house and roofing of the house, the women joined in smearing the walls with mud. The woman whose house is being constructed was to be the first to smear the house first and then others would join her in finishing the job. The Houses in those days were grass thatched and mud-walled.

For a woman who had reached menopause, if she wanted to establish a home, she got one of the men whom she would call her Yuro which can be translated as brother-in-law to establish a home for her. The man came and cut the trees and oversaw the construction of houses in the new home, when everything was finished, in the night, he would light a fire in the house and they would both sit round the fire chatting and when it was time to sleep, he would leave his cloth in the house and go back to his house. The following day he would come back to check on the woman. This is how such women had homes established for them. With them the man did not have to spend the night with them.

But today things have changed, for example when we were establishing our home, we did not follow all these procedures, but instead after deciding on where our new home was to be established, we just called people from our church and we prayed at that spot and then we had artisans who were hired and they build the houses and when the houses were ready we moved into our new home and started living there. Most people no longer follow the practices as they were done in the past because times have changed. In the past you had to first build a small house on the day you move from your father's home and later on build a bigger one. But nowadays someone just hires people who build a house for them and when it is complete they just come and move in. Most people now also use iron sheets for roofing and some build houses with bricks so it's difficult to tell that person to leave that house and build another one because they may not have the resources.

Myself we have tried using condoms but stopped using it after it slipped and remained inside my body and had to be removed in hospital, I have also tried injections but stopped using them after I started growing fat and lost interest in sex and this was affecting our sexual life. We resorted to using natural methods.

As to whether the having sex upon establishment of a new home would prevent someone from using a condom, I think first of all there was no condom among the Luo, condoms are things that came just the other day and it is because of diseases that people actually use them. If someone has a disease or fears getting it then I do not see any problem if they decide to use a condom. But that is something they have to decide on their own. But if there is no disease why would
someone want to use a condom? If it about avoiding pregnancy the man and woman can just avoid sex during certain days and have it when it’s safe. One cannot die by abstaining from sex a few days. But if one partner sees that it is a good idea to use a condom, then that is something they have to discuss and agree about and then they can use it.

This account which is resembles most of what other respondents gave pertaining to home establishment clearly outlines the procedures and the activities that were involved in traditional home establishment among the Luo. As becomes clear from what was involved, there is a clear context within which things were done and a purpose either real or perceived why things were done as they were done. What becomes apparent is that indeed sex between a couple was part of the cultural ritual in home establishment. However as to whether it impacted on condom use, both in the view of some respondents during the interviews and in discussions that ensued during focus group discussions, there was a division of opinion where some said using a condom was acceptable as part of the ritual while some others argued that it was not acceptable. But it is also evident that the cultural practices were in existence long before the introduction of condom use with the advent of family planning programmes which took root in the 1980s.

For those who argued that condom use was not acceptable, their rationale was that, when a couple used a condom, the semen was thrown away. By throwing away the semen these people argued, that the man was putting his children at risk because if any of his sons eventually constructed a house in that home and had sex with his wife in the home without using a condom, then they will be the ones who will have fulfilled the customary ritual, since the son’s semen will go into his wife. As a lady put it during the group discussions:

“When you use a condom and your son does not use a condom with his wife, then it can be considered that he is the one that fulfilled the Kwer mar dala (customary ritual of the home). This is because his semen will go into the wife while yours you threw away”

Adhiambo

They argued that if the man is to use a condom then his children will also have to be using a condom each time they have sex in their houses within the home. To understand why these people were insisting that the use of a condom by the father will require that the sons do the same, it has to be understood that among the Luo there was a lot of protocol in the way things were done, such that for instance, if there are two or more brothers, they have to marry in the order of seniority from
the eldest to the youngest, the construction of houses was done in the order of seniority, the establishment of homes and in many other things the order of seniority was to be followed. Even for girls, the older girl had to be married before a younger one could be married. The rationale given for this insistence that most things follow the order of seniority was that it ensured there was respect, as the younger people came to realize that unless they respected the older people, most of the things they may want to do such as building a house, marrying and so on could be delayed by the older people. At the same time, it ensured that the younger people who had more resources would support the older people, so that if an older sibling had less resources to go pay dowry for instance, his younger brother could support him since by so doing he would have the freedom to marry anytime from the time the elder brother was married. Some also noted that the problem with using a condom is that if the couple are still having children, by throwing away the semen, they may be throwing away what may have bestowed them with the best children in that the semen thrown away may have been the ones with the best genetic combination to give the couple the most talented children. They considered it wasteful to throw away semen.

For those who held the view that using a condom was acceptable, their rationale was that there were many other things that were purely symbolic that could be used during home establishment such as the leaving behind of a cloth, hence to them having sex with a condom was acceptable since in this case there was even penetration with the only thing not happening is the man’s semen remaining in the woman. As another lady stated during the group discussions:

“If even a cloth could be used to symbolically Tieko Kwer dala, why would using a condom which still involves actual entry of the man into the woman be seen as inappropriate?”

Atieno

These people are essentially saying that, whereas others may emphasize the importance of semen during intercourse, to them the fact sex was involved is sufficient and as such condom still allows for sex to happen.

However, during individual interviews and during the focus group discussions both those who held the view that using a condom was acceptable and those who held the view that it was not acceptable unanimously agreed that where there was a case of either of the couple having a disease, then it was acceptable to use a condom if it could prevent the spread of disease. This is a curiously interesting
idea since it appears there is an ambiguous position in relation to condom use in the context of home establishment.

The debate on whether the use of a condom in the context of home establishment is appropriate underscores one common feature in the debate on culture and the interpretation of practices, while the practices under discussion were clearly done in a past with a clear context and rationale, the introduction of contraceptives which is a later development in the course of people’s lives, introduces a new experience which on the one hand people try to find its place and make sense of it within the framework of their past experiences, but at the same time they live in a context that is to a large extent different from the context within which things were done in the past.

In the discussion that ensues, condom use is subjected to value judgment of whether it is right or wrong to use a condom within the context of home establishment. The value judgment of appropriateness or inappropriateness in this case is on the one hand thrown back into a past when the contraceptive never existed to examine its appropriateness within that context, which automatically leads to its dismissal as inappropriate. At the same time it is reflected upon within the context of the present reality within which people are living and the changes in practices related to home establishment and the prevalence of diseases and in this case it gets a nod of approval as appropriate. There is therefore an inherent contextualization of the value judgment attached to condom use. Failure to realize this mental contextualization of the value judgements and the eventual responses given can easily mislead one into deciding to take the position that because of taking part in cultural practices, people are bound not to use contraceptives. That position would be deceptive in the sense that within the continuum of value judgements on the appropriateness of contraceptive use, there is the contextual denial of its appropriateness and the contextual acceptance of its appropriateness.

During the interviews and focus group discussions, it became apparent that home establishment has undergone a lot of changes, both in terms of the process and the actual practice.

“When I was establishing my home, I hired people who constructed the houses and when everything was ready I moved in. Sleeping with your wife is something you do anytime the two of you want. For me it is not like culture dictates what I do, and in any case I myself decided where to establish a home, it was not my father as would be the case in the past”
What this demonstrates is the fact that in terms of current practice, the strict procedures that were
followed as narrated by Yuanita as the past practice is no longer adhered to. This despite the fact
that people will still say that to establish a home in the strict sense of Luo customs and tradition one
would have to follow the customs as they were practiced in the past. Given the current practice
where some people buy land away from their parents homes and establish their homes there, and the
fact that the materials used in constructing houses today are also different and people no longer
strictly adhere to the order of seniority in doing most things, it becomes apparent that there has
been a lot of changes in what people do when establishing a home. The role of sex in the current
practice of home establishment is at best ambiguous in the sense that some may see it as not
necessary and others may see it as necessary. Perhaps this because the respondents were partly
brought up in a context where some were informed about the practices and perhaps some of their
parents underscored their importance. In my informal discussions with younger people of my age
and younger, they did not see the relevance of the ritual role of sex in home establishment. For the
younger people, perhaps this is because of a difference in how they look at what amounts to a home
at present and what was seen as home in the past. For an interesting discussion on the difference
between a home and a house one can look at the SM Otieno saga case in Kenya.

During the focus group discussions it was noted that at present, it is possible even for a woman to
establish a home in the absence of a husband with members of her church presiding over the
ceremony. In the past it was possible for a mature widow to have a home established for her but
there was a man, in most cases someone she considered a brother-in law who presided over the
whole event, though he did not have to have sex with her, but upon the completion of construction
of houses in the home, he would leave his clothe in the house of the woman to symbolically signify
that there is a male head of the house. This was done for widows who had reached menopause, for
women who had not reached this stage they were encouraged to re-marry on the basis of the fact
that they were perceived to be still sexually active and would need to get someone who would meet
their sexual needs. It becomes apparent that the change in the practices related to home
establishment is in some cases given a religious dimension, there are some cases that were pointed in
the community of widows who at the time of establishing their homes, the ceremony was presided
over by the church members. This means there are currently more avenues people choose to follow in the establishment of a home.

In the past the practice was for a couple to establish their home when they were still young and strong and the argument was that this was the time when they were still strong enough to do many things in terms of developing their home. At present it is common for people especially those who are doing some form of work to wait until the time they are preparing for their retirement for them to establish their homes, especially if they are planning to settle in their rural homes. Some also establish their homes by just buying land or taking the land issued to them by their parents and hiring masons and artisans who build the whole house after which they will move into the house once they retire (Adede, 2009).

If we examine the practices in the past and the present, there seems to be overriding emphasis on a couple having a house and a home of their own. This perhaps is rooted in the belief that a couple forms the foundation of the society and their stability is crucial to the stability of the society. The establishment of a home also underscores one’s sense of belonging to the community, as in establishing a home one stakes their claim to the land and affirms their belonging to the community. This is despite the difference in how things are done, and the differences in the perceptions of people on the role of sex.

On the overall, if we examine whether the customs and traditions involved in the establishment of a new home would impact negatively on contraceptive use, it needs a stretch of the imagination for one to consider its impact to be that huge. This is mainly because home establishment was in most cases a once in a lifetime event which was only done by married people, and the sex involved was only for the night when the home was established. As such, its overall impact on the contraceptive use in general, if any, would be in general terms very minimal. It is probable that those who see this as a major barrier to contraceptive just sought a cultural explanation, and seeing the discourse about condom use acceptability opted to take the side of those who argued for its inappropriateness and saw this as an explanatory factor. Another possibility is that the questions asked were aimed at identifying what cultural practices involved sex and these practices therefore were interpreted as negatively impacting on condom use. This possibility is more likely if one looks at the history of family planning in Kenya where right from the beginning, even before any meaningful studies had been done; those who expressed divergent views from those who promoted family planning were
castigated as traditional. It therefore followed that to back this claim of traditionalism something had to be done to identify cultural practices that involved sex and portray them as negatively impacting on contraceptive use.

4.4 Luo Customs in the Construction of a House

The difference between home establishment and construction of a house is that, a home means having a separate land and compound from your parents. A home has its boundaries and within it resides members of a nuclear family or where the man is polygynous, the home is where he lives with his wives and their children. A home also is identified by the name of either the husband or his wife. Where a man has several wives, some establish different homes for each of his wives and in such cases the homes are known to belong to the man, but for ease of identification they are called by the names of the woman for whom it was established. A home had houses in it. However, a house is a building which can be within your parent’s home or in your own home. In other words, a man established a home with houses in it, but one can also have a house without a home. The process and customs in establishing a home is therefore different from that of building a house, depending on whether the house is built in your own home or in your father’s home.

Among the Luo it was common in the past for a man to construct several houses over his lifetime. This was necessitated by the materials used in the construction of houses which underwent wear and tear and over time needed constant repairs and eventually a new house was constructed and the old one brought down. Houses were also constructed at different stages in a man’s life. There was the house which a man constructed when he was still single, which was called Simba, and then there was the house which one constructed after marriage which was to signify that he was now married and the house belonged to his wife and he could no longer bring any other woman into that house and sleep with her. Then there was the house one constructed when establishing a new home. There were other houses which one constructed periodically when an old house was old and needed to be replaced. But as will become clear from the respondent’s accounts, it was not in the construction of all the houses that sex was outlined as part of the ritual to accompany such construction.

Otieno’s Story

Otieno is married and has four children. The eldest two are no longer in school, one having left after primary education and the second one having finished high school and moved to urban areas to
work. His other two children are still in school. He keeps some cows, goats and chicken within the
home and also practices subsistence farming. He is also involved in church activities where he is a
teacher of the gospel. This is a position where one is like an assistant to the main pastor, and can
officiate church activities in the absence of the main pastor. According to his account:

In the past, the first house a man built in his parent’s home was the Simba. This was the house of a bachelor where he
spent his nights and entertained his friends. A man married while still living in the Simba. After marriage, the man
built a house for his wife. The Simba was constructed with the help of one’s friends and there was not much associated
with it customarily. It is the house that someone built for his wife where he had to sleep with his wife thereby indicating
that the house belonged to that wife. From then on it was not acceptable for him to bring another woman and sleep
with her in that house. It was believed that if he did that even without the knowledge of his wife, harm may befall his
wife, and what was likely to happen was that his wife will not be able to conceive. Men therefore respected their wives’
houses and they would never bring other women to those houses and have sex.

If a man wanted to have another wife he just organized to marry her and then build her a house. But he could not
bring another woman into a house that already belonged to the wife he already had. Even if the wife leaves him, be just
had to leave that house to stay in its place until the day it gets old and collapses on its own. The only thing he did was
not to repair it and this is what would ensure it eventually collapsed.

The subsequent houses a man constructed was when his house which he is living in got old and he felt instead of
constant repairs it was better to build a new house. This was because, the houses were grass thatched and needed
periodic repairs of the roof to prevent leaking of water during the rainy season. Initially, you just needed to cover the
leaking points but after sometime you need to do that so frequently and it only makes sense to build a new house. At
the same time the walls of the houses were made of mud, this also needed periodic repair to keep it in good shape.

The customary requirement of sleeping with your wife only applied to the building of the house you construct for her at
the time you marry her. For subsequent houses this was not very necessary because it was just a matter of moving from
one house to another and it was well known whom the house belonged to, and in any case you will still end up sleeping
with her in that house. However some people would say it is necessary to have ritual sex with your wife even for
subsequent houses you built for her to replace one that was old and dilapidated.

However, nowadays things have changed, some men will build a semi permanent Simba and marry in it and continue
living in it without building another house until the time they decide to establish their own home. Others build a small
Simba and after marriage they build a Semi permanent house for their wife and they don’t need to build another house.
but occasionally the house walls have to be repaired. In terms of changing a house after establishing a home, people are nowadays building either semi-permanent or a permanent house which makes it unnecessary to change a house. For instance, the house I currently live in was built after I moved from the Simba which was just a short distance from it. I got some artisans who built it and I paid them and when it was finished I moved in. As to whether the custom would prevent anyone from using condoms, I don’t think so; the decision to use a condom is for a couple to decide upon. They have to talk and the person who want that a condom be used must convince the other why they need to use it and if they agree then they can use it.

From this account it is apparent that indeed sex played a part in the construction of a new house. This was particularly the case at the time a man built a house for his wife. What was highlighted during the focus group discussions was that, sex in this case was to signify the ownership of the house by the woman and from then henceforth the husband could not bring another woman into that house. This was in contrast to the Simba, which a man built as a bachelor and could bring his female lovers there. In the very past lovers were female friends a man had and who could visit him in his house but they would never have penetrative sex. However, over time, when the insistence on a girl being a virgin at marriage was relaxed, young men started having penetrative sex in their Simba. Therefore it seems condom use has notions of promiscuity attached to it and hence people who do not see themselves as promiscuous and especially when they are already married do not see the need to use it. As one man put it:

“Now people use condom more because boys and girls start having sex very early. They use it to prevent pregnancy and getting diseases. Nowadays both boys and girls have many partners. For us, there was no condom and the only diseases we knew about was gonorrhea and syphilis, they were rare but when someone got them there are traditional herbs used to treat them. Now as a married man, we don’t use condoms because with my wife we don’t see the need”

Ojwang

The change can be traced to the time of colonialism when the traditional social system started getting weaker in terms of its influence on people’s behavior and people also started moving away from their ancestral homes to live in far-away places. The anonymity of living as an outsider provided people with an opportunity to experiment with things they would not do. The advent of Christianity also impacted greatly on the weakening of the social institutions. The early Christian
missionaries together with the colonialists constantly portrayed African cultures as barbaric and savage, and through the school system taught the children who went to school to leave their barbaric cultures. It is this group that spearheaded the change in culture as they were also the people who began to move from their ancestral homes to live and work in far off places. (Ogot, 1989)

From the group discussions it was seen that changes over time and the adoption of new technology in the construction of houses coupled with changes in the socio-economic lifestyle of people have led to significant changes in the practices surrounding the construction of a house. The use of iron sheet roofing radically changed the practice surrounding the construction of a new house. Whereas in the past the construction of a new house could be done periodically after a few years of between three to five years, the use of iron sheet for roofing has made this unnecessary as it lasts much longer. Further, the use of bricks and cement in the construction of walls has also had significant impact. For instance, whereas in the past a woman whose husband died had a new house constructed for her, now if the husband left her with a brick house with iron sheet roofing, the man who re-marries her does not have to build another house but they will continue to stay in the same house left by the dead husband. There are cases in the community of widows whose husbands had died and upon remarriage, had only one sheet of iron changed on the roof of the houses as symbolic of the change of house. The implications of changes in materials used in the construction of a house to the overall practice of sex ritual surrounding house construction is that, whereas some people would ritually have sex in the past each time they changed their house, with the materials currently in use making the houses last longer, the ritual slowly becomes less common in practice. As such its significance becomes less. To the best of my knowledge, among some young people, they talk of “opening a new house” in reference to having sex in their new house, even when the house in question is rented. However, in terms of condom use, their approach to it is also different.

As to whether the practice of sex as mandated as part of the ritual after the construction of a new house would prevent anyone from using a condom, during the interviews and in the focus group discussions the respondents were of the opinion that it would not. On the contrary, in their view it was up to a couple to decide on whether to use or not use a condom. There was the prevalent view that sex between a couple was something they could only do when both parties were happy and each was interested in it and trust was a very important element in the relationship between a couple.
“Using a condom is something you have to discuss and agree about. Sex is something you only have when both of you are happy. Where there is mistrust, even having sex becomes difficult, so you cannot just come and say we have to use a condom today, because your wife will ask you why today and not any other day before when you never used it and the same for you, when your wife just says one day, we need to use a condom without explaining to you the reasons you would think they are suspicious of you and that is why they are insisting on it. But if you talk then it is easy to use it when both of you are convinced.”

Oketch

Some observed that when a man was unhappy with his wife, if he was polygamous he would avoid her house and he would not have sex with her until the issues between them were resolved. The same case applied to the woman, if she was unhappy with her husband she could prevent him spending the night in her house and the man would take this as a cue that things were not okay and they had to find a way of resolving the outstanding issues. There is a lot of responsibility apparently being placed on the couple in terms of their sexuality. This indicates that perhaps just as there were cultural rituals and regulations around the issue of sex, the couple also had a lot of autonomy in how they conducted their sexual affairs.

Whereas there were socio-cultural rituals which mandated the practice of sex, it appears most people currently approach the issue of the practice of sex with the view that it is the responsibility of the couple. As one respondent clearly put it:

“When I built my house, the one I am living in now, it was after I got married and the Simba was too small, when it was complete I moved in and started living in it. The question of whether I had sex because the rituals mandated it was not important for me. With my wife we can have sex whenever we want, I could as well decide to have sex on the first night we move in or even after a week”

Ouma

Just like the case of home establishment, house construction among the Luo was a very periodic activity which for one couple took place in a space of years, how this could negatively impact on the use of contraceptives is something that requires a stretch of facts. At as now, it is acknowledged that there is a lot of changes that have happened with relation to the construction of a house that have rendered most of the cultural rituals that were practiced in the past redundant. Condom use is not
something that is a standard practice for couples in any society as far as I know. According to estimates based on a survey by the John Hopkins School of public health, worldwide condom use for family planning among married couples constitutes about “4% of all couples in which the wife is of reproductive age, and about 7% of married couples who are using some method of family planning. Worldwide, condoms rank near the bottom among contraceptive methods used by married couples. About as many couples rely on vasectomy.” (Population Report, 1999). Condom use therefore seems to be seen an artificial object whose use is based on certain purposes it is intended to serve, such as prevention of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections where people perceive themselves to be at risk.

4.5 Customs in the Agriculture cycle

Farming was one of the main economic activities undertaken among the Luo. The crops predominantly cultivated were sorghum, millet, beans. It was through farming that the community ensured its self sufficiency in food. In the past, someone was considered to be wealthy if they could ensure their family was food sufficient and he had surplus with which he could feed visitors he hosted and even give them some at the end of their visit on their return to where they came from.

**Mama Esther’s Story**

Mama Esther is a widow with five mature children, one of whom already has a home of his own. She is a subsistence farmer who also doubles up as a traditional birth attendant. Within her home, she has a separate house where she helps women deliver their babies. She is also treats several illnesses and pregnancy related complications. In her home she keeps chicken and cows. She also has a donkey for carrying heavy loads. According to her account:

> In the past, before the commencement of the agriculture, initially the eldest man in a clan was to invite people he calls his brothers. These are the people we today would call cousins and they came with their hoes. A fire was lit and the tips of the hoes were placed in the fire while the men roasted a chicken and ate while sipping beer. They chatted until late and then went to sleep. The following day, in a polygamous home, the eldest wife left to start cultivating her land. On her return home, the husband that evening went to spend the night in her house. This was the customarily mandated practice. If on the day the woman went out to cultivate the land, her husband tried to go spend the night in another woman’s house, those other women would reject his advance as they believed that if they slept with him Chira would
befall them. The day after the man had spent the night in the elder wife’s house, the following day the other women are free to go and prepare their land.

When it was time to plant, the elder wife was the first who went to plant. That evening the husband went to spend the night in her house. From the day she went to plant, all the married children who lived in the same home with the parents were to refrain from sex until the day when the planted crops had germinated and have at least three or four leaves. This would normally take four to seven days. It is after the crops had germinated that they were free to resume their sexual activities.

During the time of weeding, it was the first wife who initiated the weeding and on the evening when she went to start weeding the husband went to spend the night in her house. At harvesting it was the same. However, after harvesting it was the first wife and the husband who had to be the first to eat the newly harvested crops. Where a man had only one wife as opposed to being polygamous, then everything was done with just his sole wife.

However, nowadays things have changed a lot, some few people and I think they must be very very few still try to follow some elements of these customs. For the most part, people don’t follow most of these customs. For example, myself in this home we don’t follow those customs, we just start farming. As a widow I never remarried after the death of my husband and hence I don’t have to wait for anyone as would be the case in the past. I start work on my land and my sons and their wives who live with me in the home can only come to help me but they are not bound by any customs that would require that they abstain from sex when I have planted seeds on the land or any of these customs that were practiced in the past. Nowadays people just farm throughout the year hence there is nothing like the beginning and end of the agriculture cycle. It is up to the individual to decide when to start farming but in the past it was the elders who decided when this was to be done. Some of the crops that the Luo used to emphasize on such as sorghum and millet are also not so much produced by people like was the case in the past, in fact nowadays some people don’t like Ugali prepared from sorghum for example, they prefer maize but maize was not a very important crop to the Luo because at first it was not there and later on when the Mzungus introduced it, people accepted it and got used to it. These crops were important to the Luo because the harvest from them was good and they were also stored for use during the dry season.

As to whether the use of a condom at any of these stages is acceptable, I can say that it would not be appropriate if we look at it in terms of how it was practiced in the past. This is because when someone uses a condom they throw away the semen. This would be unacceptable because the man planted his seed in the woman and the woman planted crop seeds on the ground to germinate. Nonetheless, nowadays with the prevalence of diseases and the fact that people don’t
take good care of themselves then it is not a bad thing to use condoms and even for women to use contraceptives to prevent pregnancy. But the contraceptives for women are not the best thing; they bring them so many problems, such as constant bleeding, tiredness and pain in the lower abdomen.

From this account and others which were largely similar to it and the insight from the focus group discussions, one gets to comprehend the stages in the agriculture cycle where sex was involved as part of the customary rituals. It indicates that sex was very much controlled as much as it controlled certain socio-cultural practices in the realm of agriculture. To some extent one would say that the practice that required that married sons who lived in the same home with their parents were to abstain from sex after the planting of seeds until after they had germinated was a way in which the practicing of sex was customarily regulated within the agricultural cycle. Agriculture was apparently seen as an individual as well as social activity. It was individual to the extent that it was individual persons taking part in the farming and working on the production of crops, but at the same time it was social to the extent that it was undertaken in cooperation with other people. The cultural ritual in agriculture involving sex was also bounding on married people, and was mandated at periodic stages within the agriculture cycle. As to whether these cultural rituals prevented one from using a contraceptive, there were two viewpoints. There are some who were of the view that, interpreted in the strict traditional sense, it would be inappropriate because according to them, the man planted his seeds in the woman after which the woman participated in planting seeds on the ground. The analogy here is that the man’s semen could make a woman pregnant and result to the growth of a baby, in the same way; the seeds are planted on the ground and germinate to produce food. This analogy is interesting if one looks at the way children were viewed in the society. In the past, children were as much the responsibility of the parents as they were the responsibility of the rest society. It was the duty and responsibility of everyone in the society to look after the welfare of the child and socialize it to be a responsible adult. One can see some sort of parallels in the way those who argued about the seed being planted in the woman and the planting of seeds on the soil, in the sense that, just as children who resulted from the womb of a woman were hers as much as they belonged to the community, the food that resulted from the soil belonged to those who planted them but they also had a social responsibility to share it with other members of the community. This was done by offering those who visited the home food, making food donations whenever there was a social function where food was to be prepared and providing food to those who did not have enough. There is also an underlying perception of the women as being productive just like the earth.
One could argue that the Luo perhaps regulated the practice of sex as part of the wider look at conservation or preventing exploitation, just in the same way they had regulations preventing the exploitation of other resources in the environment. However, others may see this analogy as perhaps an illustration of the subjugation of women as mere producers. In my view, the position one will adopt depends very much on their agenda and motivations.

There are also those who argued that the use of contraceptives in the agriculture cycle was appropriate because to them, the most important thing was the unity of the couple. They also noted that to the Luo, a couple sleeping together did not always mean that one had to always have penetrative sex. They noted that for instance in cases where a woman had reached menopause, they just slept on the same bed with the husband but they never had any sex and this was considered appropriate in the past. They also note the use the case of a man leaving his cloth in the house of a woman as illustrating that for the Luo, sex as part of the ritual was not always to be interpreted as implying that there had to be penetrative sex, to them, this very much depended on one’s age, health and preference.

From the debates about the use of contraceptives in the agriculture cycle, it becomes clear that penetrative sex was very much emphasized among younger couple and especially those still in the childbearing age, while for those who were older, especially for women, it was not. Here it becomes clear that penetrative sex was tied to the period in a woman’s life when she still had her menses and after that it was optional.

Nonetheless, there was an agreement by both groups that, at present, most people do not follow the sex rituals of the agriculture cycle and as such, the choice over whether to use a contraceptive or not, is a matter that only a couple can decide. As one man put it:

“Nowadays to start farming we do not need to have the ritual sex. For example, I start farming whenever I want but in the past an elder was to initiate the farming. At the same time, people keep moving to moving to urban areas to work and their wives who remain the village will just farm without waiting for the husband. If you were to wait for anyone now, you will starve. Personally, I have been away in town working and my wife went on with farming even in my absence.”

Odongo
4.6 Customary Rituals associated with death

Death among the Luo was seen as a transition stage from the world of the living to the spiritual world. There was a belief that those who died could influence the lives of those who were living, and periodically communicated to people through dreams. In the event of the death of an old man or woman, a child born around that time was named after him or her and it was believed that in so doing, the spirit of the dead person would enter into the life of the child and the child would exhibit the good character espoused by the dead man or woman after whom they are named.

Opiyo’s Account

Opiyo is married and lives with his wife and four children. He is a subsistence farmer who also keeps some cows. Two of his sons have built their houses within the home, and one is married and lives with his wife. He also keeps some chicken within the home and occasionally he takes up manual contractual jobs to supplement his income. In his account:

Among the Luo in the past, there were rituals that were practiced in relation to the death of someone. When a child died, on the night of the day when the burial is done, the parents of the child spent the night together; this was part of the customary ritual that accompanied the death of a child.

If someone’s wife died, the husband who remained as a widower was avoided by all women generally. Even if he was polygynous, he could not go into the houses of any of his other wives. He had to live in the house of the dead wife. During all this time he had to abstain from sex. This went on until the day he dreamt during the night that he was sleeping with his wife who died, like they used to do when she was alive. When this happened, the wife who died was thereby seen as having released the man and set him free to get married and have sex if it was a monogynous marriage and if it was polygynous marriage, it was from this time that the man was free to go to the houses of his other wives. This was the reason why someone had to maintain good relations with his wife, because if the relations were sour I would be difficult to dream of her and you will have to stay in her house for a longer period before she can release you.

On the other hand, when a man died, if he has recently married and his wife had not given birth, on the day of the burial, there was a meeting with elders where she was asked if there was any of the men she called brothers-in law with whom they were getting on very well and would like to live with, if there was someone whom she preferred, then after the burial, she went to live with that person as his wife from then onwards. This was done because, since she did not have any child with the dead husband they were trying to ensure she gets to continue with her life after the burial instead of
spending all her time thinking of the dead man. However, she did not have a preferred choice, the elders decided on someone with whom she could stay. By elders here should be understood old men and women. The decision on who was to stay with her was made on the basis of a person's ability to provide for her material needs and the extent to which the person was seen to be responsible in managing his family affairs.

On the other hand if the man died leaving behind a wife with whom they had children, the widow continued to stay on her own for as long as she wanted to mourn her husband and during all this time she abstained from sex. When she finally decided she wanted to get re-married, she chose among the men whom she called brother-in law and approached one of them or if any of them had approached her and she likes him she decided to live with him as his wife. The man she decided to settle with, first went to her house and they spent the night together, this is what was referred to as Chodo Okola. The following day, the man set to build her a new house where she would stay. If the dead husband had established a home for his wife, the man with whom she decided to remarry came to the home and built another house for the woman within her home. If the man has another home with his own wife, he operated between the two homes. The duration of time a woman took before getting remarried entirely depended on her. However, if the woman was younger, then she was encouraged to remarry sooner, say within a year of the death of her husband, this was because it was known that she may have sexual needs and she could only get this within the institution of marriage. However, a woman who had reached menopause was not remarried in the same way as a younger woman. For her, the marriage was only symbolic and there was no actual sex involved. In such a case, the woman got a man and he came to her house and they sat in the house having a meal and chatting, when it was time to go to bed, the man left his clothe in the woman's house and left for his own house. The following day, he came back and started to build her a new house.

At present, things have changed a lot. Nowadays, some women decide not to remarry at all after the death of their husbands and again most men nowadays do not want to marry the widows of their brothers because of the responsibilities that come with such a marriage. This has led to a situation where if a man dies leaving behind his wife with some money and material goods, the woman will look for another man from wherever she can find, but the problem this has created is that, there are now men who are just on the lookout for women whose husbands are dead and were left with some wealth, these men then approach these women and start to live with them as if they are married but their intention is just to exploit the resources in the hands of the woman, when the resources are finished they move to the next woman with resources they can find. Such men, will even oversee the construction of a new house for the woman, though nowadays people actually don't construct new houses as was the case in the past, they just change one sheet on the roof of the house and this symbolically indicates that the house has been changed.
In the past, a man whose wife had died or a woman whose husband had died was shaved as part of the ritual associated with the death rites to signify the start of a new life and the end of the rituals related to the death of the spouse. This was also the practice when for instance one’s parent’s died, however, nowadays after burial people who live in urban areas just leave for their places of work and people no longer get shaved as was the practice in the past.

This account which resembles those of others during the interviews and focus group discussions clearly demonstrates that indeed among the Luo, there were cultural rituals related to death in which sex was involved. The rituals were binding to a married couple either upon the death of their child or the death of a spouse. In the case of death rituals involving sex, just like the other rituals where sex was part of, since the practice was binding among married couple, the issue of whether it prevented them from the use of contraceptives was seen as immaterial. They noted that, just like in the case of other cultural rituals involving sex, some people may say it is not appropriate but then with today’s realities of diseases that are sexually transmitted, it would be acceptable if one decided to follow the cultural practice as they were done in the past. On the issue of condom use a lady put it thus:

“In these current times, you are the one to decide what to do. If you want to use a condom no one will stop you, if you don’t want no one will force you. In any case, what happens behind closed doors only the two of you get to know so it’s up to you.”

Achieng

They noted that the cultural rituals around death have undergone a lot of change and nowadays individuals decide what they will practice and what they will not, or even how they will approach the whole death, burial and life after the burial of their spouse or child. For instance, a respondent noted that after the death of her husband, she decided not to remarry and instead continued living on her own in her home and did not have to go through the Chodo Okola or have a new house built for her.

The respondents argued that the use of contraceptives was a matter that only a couple can decide upon and no external forces can compel them either to use of not to use. Death was also something that happened very infrequently in the past. In comparative terms, the respondents observed that there are more deaths nowadays than used to be the case.
We can perhaps attribute the high number of deaths to the fact in the past there were generally less people with plenty of food and a relatively good environment whereas at present there are more people and the environment is relatively more polluted and also there are more diseases that are the direct consequence of population growth, the factors are varied but they are related to the relatively high number of people.

What becomes clear from the narrative of Owino is that, remarriage among the Luo was based on a broad spectrum of needs that it was meant to achieve. It was both voluntary to the extent that one had the first priority on the partner they opted for, but it was also social to the extent that where there was no preferred choice on the part of the woman, the elders in the family intervened in the selection of a suitable partner. Their decision was based on the practical aspects that such a remarriage could achieve which was to ensure the woman’s sexual and material needs were met. However, the breakdown of this system of remarriage as was practiced where brothers in-law are no longer interested in marrying the widows of their deceased brother has apparently led to the rise of men who habitually move from one woman to another on the pretext of remarrying them but their main target is whatever wealth was left by the deceased to the wife.

It must be borne in mind that the man who remarried the wife of his deceased brother or any man who remarries a widow for that matter is in Luo language referred to as Jater and the act of remarrying a widow is referred to as Ter, which is what has been termed by other writers as “wife inheritance”. As such, the men who remarry widows for the sake of the material and financial resources left by their deceased husbands are sometimes referred to as “Professional Jater”, but this is not a common term among all Luos but is mainly used among the circles of educated people in reference to the behavior of these men who remarry for wealth.

4.7 Practices and Customs related to Marriage

Among the Luo, marriage was one of the key stages each person had to pass. Upon maturity each one male or female was expected to get married and start a family of their own and eventually establishes their own home. Everyone was expected to marry, as this is how the society ensured continuity.

_Auma’s Story_
Auma is married and lives with her husband in their home. She is a subsistence farmer and occasionally does some small businesses. She has four children who are mature and only one resides with her in the home. Others have left home for urban areas where they live and work. In her account:

*Among the Luo in the past, everyone had to get married when they were mature. For men, one could stay single until they were in their twenties or even thirties when for men and for women at least they had to be from around eighteen to twenty. People took long because one had to be mature before they could be allowed to marry. When someone was mature, they talked to their aunt to look for a partner for them. This was the case for both boys and girls. However, in most cases, it was the boys who initiated the search. There were two approaches, where a boy had identified a girl whom he thought could make a good wife for him, he just talked to her and got to know a bit of her but after just getting basic information from her, he approached his aunt to do a background check on her, whether she was of good character, whether her family was known to be upright people with no history of such evils as laziness, stealing, witchcraft and the like. If from her search, the aunt damaging issues pertaining to the girl’s background, this signaled the end of the relationship. At the same time that the boy’s aunt was doing a background search on the girl, the girl also informed one of her aunts who did a background check on the boy to ensure he was of good character, responsible and hardworking. In such cases the boy and girl may have met when either of them was visiting a relative.*

*The second approach was where a boy or girl did not have anyone in mind but felt they were ready for marriage. In this case they approached a trusted aunt to do a search for them and link them up with a good girl. The aunt upon identifying a suitable partner and convinced that her background was okay, she arranged a secret meeting between the duo where they were introduced to each other and got to see each other and talk. After this secret meeting if either party did not like the other, this signaled the end of that search and the beginning of a new search.*

*When a match was found and both parties were satisfied, then the formal process began where the family of the boy approached the family of the girl for the hand of their daughter in marriage to their son. During this time, the two never met anymore. The family of the girl talked to that of the boy and they gave a date when they could meet again for further discussions. During the time before the next meeting, the family of the girl did a thorough background check on the family of the boy to be certain that they are of good character and that their daughter will be in good hands if married there. When satisfied by what they found, then on the day of the meeting as earlier agreed, they invited the family of the boy to start the formal preparations of marrying their daughter. If the results turned out to be unpleasant, then during this meeting they made it clear that their daughter cannot be married to their son and stated the reasons based on what they had unearthed.*
The boy and girl's families negotiated the bride price, in those days it used to be tens of heads of cattle. The boy's family then gave the bride price as agreed after which the girl was to be officially married off to the boy. On the day when she was to be taken to the home of the boy, a mock kidnapping was organized. The boy organized with some of his friends to “kidnap” the girl, however the girl’s family was also aware of everything that was to happen. The girl was sent somewhere but on leaving the home, the bridegroom’s party “kidnapped” her and she made noise while they carried her to the boy’s home. On hearing the noise, if the girl had brothers, they came out to attempt to stop the bridegroom’s party from taking their sister, however eventually the sister went. On reaching the boy’s home, the girl was taken to his house and stayed there, however the boy did nothing to her. The following after her arrival into the home, an old woman and some aunties to the girl came to the boy’s home to witness the first night when the girl was to have sex with the boy to confirm that she was a virgin. In the night after dinner, the boy went with the girl to his house, whereupon penetrating her and she bled, the old woman came in and took the blood stains as evidence that indeed the girl was a virgin.

The day after her first sexual experience, the girl made a demand that had to be met. For instance she could demand to be given a cow and this had to be given to her and she could refuse to eat if this demand was not met. Whatever she demanded and was given was for her to decide what to do with it, for instance she could decide to give it to her favorite brother or uncle or whoever she wished. There were also celebrations on the day that news reached her parents that their daughter was found a virgin. It was the pride of the parents for their daughter to be found a virgin as it showed they had been successful at teaching her to take good care of herself.

On the night when the girl was to officially start sexual relations with the husband, her parents and the parents of the boys in their respective homes also slept together. The father and mother of the boy in their home slept together and the mother and father of the girl also did the same on that very night. This was believed to bring the newly-weds good luck in their sexual relation.

However, nowadays things have changed very much. Today, boys and girls meet in school, places of work or even in the urban areas where they live and just get married. Even as a parent they may marry and have children long before you get to know they have been together. Nowadays no one cares whether a girl is a virgin or not and it is actually even difficult to get girls who will take good care of themselves and remain virgins until marriage. These days you even find a single man marrying a girl who already has children something that would never happen in the past, as such a girl could only be married to someone who already had a wife as a second or third wife.
As to whether the sexual rituals surrounding the marriage of one’s children would hinder one from using contraceptives, I don’t think so. This is because this practice is not practiced. As I just said nowadays the whole process of how people get married is very different, the only thing that to some extent is still practiced now in relation to marriage which was there in the past is the payment of dowry, but even this is different because in the past you paid dowry before starting to live with a girl but today people who pay dowry some do it after living with a girl and having children and only much later pay dowry. And again nowadays some parents don’t even ask for dowry, they just want their daughters to get a nice man and live in peace.

This account which is similar to the accounts of the other respondents in the study, demonstrates that sex was part of the cultural ritual during the marriage of a couple’s child. The ritual was on the night the son or daughter got married. The respondents noted that dating and marriage has undergone a lot of changes. As a lady put it:

“Nowadays who knows where the young people get their partners. You just realize that they have been dating when one day they tell you they are planning to get married. Some even inform their parents they are already married and even have a child. We even see some living together like husband and wife saying they are testing if they can get along before deciding to formally marry”

Simba

During the interviews and group discussions, the respondents observed that, at present a young man and girl will meet either in school, at work, in entertainment places, social functions, through social contacts or any other way they may meet and start dating without the knowledge of their parents or involving any of their relatives, and when they are ready to settle down in marriage, they just inform their parents and then some will plan to pay dowry and marry under customary law or others will organize for a church wedding and marry there. However, it is also increasingly becoming common to have a boy and a girl cohabiting in what has come to be called a “Come we stay” relationship wherein they live as a couple without being formally married. Some use this as a test of their compatibility before finally deciding to formally get married. Unlike in the past when it was far more common for a man to be polygynous, nowadays this is not very common due to the economic pressures of maintaining several wives. They observed that even in the past only a man who was wealthy by the standards of that time, which meant he had large tract of land, and had several livestock and plenty of food could have many wives. The reason given was that such a person
needed to have a large family so he could have more hands to assist with the maintenance of the wealth. It must be kept in mind that in the past, production was done by members of a household and at other times the larger family. As one man succinctly put it:

*Having several wives was not just for anyone, you had to be wealthy, with a large and land several heads of cattle. It is members of your household who worked on the land, so if you have a big land you could have many wives and allocate each her piece. But a man whose land was small what would be allocate? And how would be ensure his family has enough food?*

*Adede*

There is also more pre-marital sex at present, something that was very rare in the past and even incidences of girls having children before marriage is much more common nowadays. There is no longer insistence that at the time of marriage a girl has to be a virgin and neither side of the family either of the boy or girl seeks to find out. The background check which constituted part of the dating practice before marriage is no longer in existence as was the case in the past. At present it is up to the young man and woman to decide whether they will proceed with the marriage or not. In certain circumstances, where the parents or relatives of the girl or boy have information regarding certain bad characteristics of their partner before the marriage, they try to use that information to advice him or her of the risk posed to the union in the face of the information they have.

“At this time, if you see your daughter or son with someone whose character you do not approve, you may try to talk to them about why they should avoid such a man, but you cannot force him or her to leave because they will tell you they are in love and since you know nothing about how they met you just hope they will get their senses back and see what you are telling them. This is because if you try to force them apart they may just elope to the town and then you have not solved the problem.”

*Aoko*

However, ultimately it was the individual to decide whether they will decide to continue with the marriage, in the light of the information they have or not, this sharply contrasts with the past as the family on getting negative information would automatically call off the relationship and the boy or girl had to accept that decision. But this was also possible because right from the beginning of a
relationship in the past the family was very much involved and dating was not an individual’s affair as it is currently.

At present there is a more incidences of pre-marital sex for both boys and girls a situation that has also resulted to incidences of teenage pregnancy being more common; this has led to more cases of single parents and girls who get married while already having children. However, this is something that is socially not encouraged, and pregnancy is even more discouraged as it complicates matters for a girl especially when it comes to the time of marriage, as most men would prefer to start a family without any children and have their own children. As one unmarried girl put it to me during my informal conversations with her:

"Am telling you getting a man who will to love you and accept your baby as well is so difficult, I think I may end up as a single parent forever. The moment a man gets to know you already have a kid they just vanish. And my parents and aunties just told me to forget getting a man, that there is no man will want to marry someone who has a child"

Akinyi

The respondents noted that nowadays people do not take good care of themselves and that is why there is a high prevalence of sexually transmitted disease. By this they meant that people have fewer prohibitions with regard to their sexual behavior and engage more in casual sex as compared to the past. The reduction of the level of involvement of parents and other relatives in the whole relationship of their children has effectively made it difficult for them to sometimes know when their child decides to get married or even when they do, it is no longer the case that, on the night of the marriage, it is the first time they are having sex which renders the whole purpose of the reason why the parents had sex on the night of the marriage of their children a non-issue. As one respondent noted, “when my daughter got married I didn’t know about it initially because she just moved to town and I started hearing stories that she is living with someone. Its only later that she came home and told her mother about it and then I got to know about it”. This clearly demonstrates the actual changes in the marriage practice of people today.

Contrary to claims by some, the respondents are insinuating that the changes that have led to the liberal attitude towards sex and the abandonment of cultural rituals that governed sexual relations is at the core of the problems associated with sex such as the prevalence of sexually transmitted
diseases and increased incidences of teenage pregnancy. If we take it that indeed there was a lot of emphasis on the value of chastity and restraint in sexual behavior then indeed, one can argue that moving away from the traditional practices has led to increase in promiscuity and with it a rise in incidences of sexually transmitted diseases. However, whether a “return to traditions” can be instrumental in reversing the casual approach to sexual relations, I am convinced that is a pipedream. This is mainly because; in my view the social superstructure is to a large extent influenced by the economic substructure. Hence, since it is nearly impossible to reproduce the economic substructure of the past, then the social superstructure that supported it cannot be recreated. The current economic substructure in which people are engaged in different activities in terms of work has its social superstructure in the current system where the school, media, to some extent religious institutions, the state, peers and many other institutions of the present play a role in shaping people’s ideas and practices.

Marriage was not an individual affair but by the involvement of other relatives, it was a communal affair, and as such the parents of both the boy and the girl became involved in it. This involvement of relatives from the earliest stages of the dating made it possible for everyone to monitor the progress until marriage and the parents could thus partake of the symbolic sex meant to wish a happy sexual life to the newly married couple.

4.8 Why contraceptives are not used

In my interviews and focus group discussions, according to the respondents in my study, the reasons why people choose not to use contraceptives are; first is the issue of trust between a couple. In their view, sex between a couple is a matter of trust and in most cases people who are in a marriage do not use condom for instance, hence a challenge arises when the couple who have not been using a condom all along in their relationship, one of them all over suddenly brings up the issue of condom use. The first question this raises is why at that stage in the relationship it becomes necessary to use a condom when all along it was unnecessary.

They observed that, if the party that suggests condom use explains to their partner why this is necessary and they are both convinced then it is easier for a couple to adopt condom use and frequently use it, but where the issue is based on suspicion that the other partner is having affairs and that is the reason that condom use is demanded, that would signal the beginning of the end of
the relationship as it would be an indication of lack of trust in the relationship. So for instance if a couple agree that for the sake of planning their family they would resort to condom use, then it was up to them to decide on how often. Sex and relations are in most cases structured around trust, and any breach of the trust automatically affects the sexual relation of a couple and can easily lead to their break up.

Secondly, some observed that condom use is also seen as reducing the sexual pleasure between couples as it reduces friction during intercourse. This combined with the fact that when using a condom one had to change it frequently after every ejaculation made it inconveniencing. They further noted that the condoms tend to come in one size fits all which is impractical as some people have larger penises than others and as such the condoms tend to break. Others pointed out that when using a condom, one has to consciously pay attention that it is not broken or has not slipped off the penis and that this spoils the spontaneity of the sex and instead makes it become more a manual exercise. In terms of whether the perception of risk would make people perceive sex with a condom as still more pleasurable, in my view it very much depends on the nature of the relationship in question. A couple married couple assesses their level or risk differently from those who are single, so does and even among those who are single, their assessment of risk depends on whom they are having a relation with. In general however, human behavior especially in relation to seeking pleasure does not always seem to be driven by any what we may term as “appropriate” choices even where the effect of the pleasure has health consequences, as demonstrated by such habits as smoking, consumption of junk food etc. In relation to sex, my professor during my undergraduate studies referring to a statement by a doctor put it thus:

“The desire for sex is stronger than the fear of death”

Dr. Omoka

This essentially summarizes the complexity of human sexual behavior.

The third reason given as to why people choose not to use contraceptives, especially those used by women, is the side-effects associated with them. During the focus group discussions, the women observed that using hormonal contraceptives led them to grow big and at the same time lose interest in sex, and this negatively affected their sexual lives with the husbands. As one lady put it:
“I was using the injection then I changed to the pills. In both cases my body grew big and I was not interested in sex. But my husband would still be interested and this started putting a strain in our marriage. I also had constant bleeding though in very small quantities. So after sometime I stopped using them. I never wanted to try other methods because my experience with the two methods was not so good”

Anyango

Some noted that this was the reason they had opted to stop using them and tried other methods with some eventually deciding to use the natural method of counting the monthly cycle and the withdrawal method. Others noted that they had to discontinue using the injection because while using it they had constant bleeding though in very small quantities but it was on a daily basis and this was bothersome and they discontinued its use.

As for the coil, some noted that its major problem was that while using it, they had a lot of pain in their lower abdomen which made it difficult for them to perform their daily chores but on having it removed the pain disappeared.

“I tried using the coil and during that time I constantly felt tired and could not do much work as I used to, I also had constant pain on my lower abdomen so I decided to have it removed and when this was done, the pain disappeared. That is why I now avoid using them.”

Awino

They further observed that the problem with the contraceptives is that they are normally designed with the assumption that they will work for all women in practically the same way which is not actually the case as different people react to them differently. For the women who eventually stopped using the contraceptives altogether, they noted that they had tried several methods but on realizing that all had side effects, they resorted to not using them.

“The contraceptives come as if everyone has the same type of body. For the ones that are inserted in the uterus, the size is the same yet some women have big bodies and some have small bodies. People also react to the pills and the injections differently. Some will have no problem and others may have many problems. I think the before someone gets a contraceptive they should be tested and the hospitals need to have a way of knowing which contraceptive is suitable for someone before issuing them to avoid the side-effects.”
According to a traditional birth attendant in the community, she noted that based on her experience attending to women both during pregnancy and delivery, she could say that the contraceptives women use are not good and that the women who use them tend to have more pregnancy related complications than those who don’t. She noted that the women who use contraceptives, at birth when she looked at their amniotic fluid it was more think and not very clear, while those who don’t use them the amniotic fluid was very clear. She noted that:

“What I have seen is that women who use pills or injections when they are giving birth, the amniotic fluid from them is not very clear and is a bit thicker in appearance. They also tend to have more pregnancy related complications. But I just treat them with herbal medicine and they get well and deliver their babies”

Mama Esther

She however said she could not advice the women whether to use them or not as that was a decision they are better off making on their own. For her she only used herbal medicine to treat those who came to her with pregnancy related complications and also those who came for delivery services and when she considered a case more complicated and needing surgery, she referred them to hospital.

The fourth reason given for non-use of contraceptives during the interviews and group discussions was that, according to the women, when one is using contraceptives and they decide to stop so that they can have a child, it normally takes longer for the body to adjust appropriately for them to conceive.

“When you have been using a contraceptive to prevent getting pregnant, when you want to have a child it takes sometime before your body adjusts and you can conceive. That is why it is better to decide on the number of children you want and have them, and then you can start using contraceptives to prevent any further pregnancy”

Akinyi

Because of this, they said they always advice their friends who want to plan their families to decide on the number of children they want to have and after reaching the number they go to tubal ligation. However both the men and women were opposed to the idea of a vasectomy for men. The men
noted that they could not go for it as it could affect their sexual performance and the women expressed the same fear, that perhaps after the vasectomy the man may lose his sexual abilities and then he would be “sexually useless”. This fear is perhaps heightened by the fact that vasectomy is a relatively rare procedure in terms of those who have undergone it and because no one is sure of its side effects, nobody is willing to take the risk, and because no one is willing to try it, then again there is no one whom people can refer to as an example of someone who underwent it and afterwards had a healthy sexual life. The hurdle here lies in breaking this cycle, for in the absence of someone people can look up to as a case of successful vasectomy with no side effects, no wants to risk taking chances. Among the Luo, part of what constitutes the making of the identity of a man is the ability to perform sexually. Inability to perform sexually was rare and was derided upon though for the men who could not have a child, an arrangement whereby his wife got pregnant with his brother but the children belonged to the man whose wife had conceived. This was socially easy because the upbringing of children was a collective social responsibility involving all adults, though when children were still young, they spent most of the time in the company of their mother. This contrasts with the present family structure which revolves more around the nuclear family of the parents and their children.
Chapter Five

5.1 Summary of Findings

On the basis of the accounts of the respondents which forms the basis of the findings of this study, it can be said that, indeed among the Luo in the past and to a very small extent at present, sex was very much part of the ritual that accompanied such cultural practices as the construction of a house, the establishment of a home, rituals in relation to the marriage of a couple’s children, the agricultural cycle and certain aspects of rituals related to death. There was a social context and socio-cultural beliefs that were related to those practices. At the time when the beliefs held the most sway, Luos were predominantly an agricultural, pastoral and fishing society and the Luo people lived predominantly within the areas they considered their ancestral lands within Nyanza province of Kenya.

However, with the passage of time and the change of the socio-economic context in Kenya which began with colonialism and the advent of missionary activity and continued long after political independence, there were dramatic changes in the socio-cultural life of the Luo. With some people converted to Christianity and striving to live the Christian life as advocated by the missionaries, this marked the beginning of fundamental changes in the cultural practices among the Luo, though this is not to suggest that prior to that there were no changes in Luo culture. On the contrary, the culture had been undergoing changes for centuries with every contact the Luo had with their neighbours and at different stages in their movement southwards from Southern Sudan following the River Nile.

With the introduction of western education during the colonial period and the introduction of the money economy, children began to be enrolled in schools and this reduced the amount of time they spent at home under the tutelage of their grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles who had earlier been their primary agents of socialization. The school and church came to play an important role in the socialization of children. It has to be noted that, during and after the colonialism all schools in Kenya were run by missionaries and those that were owned by the government were in some way attached to a church which oversaw the “spiritual growth” of children in the schools.

With people moving from school to white collar jobs, and some moving from their homes to take up jobs in urban areas either with the corporations established by the colonial government or even
in farms and companies started during the colonial times, this marked a significant shift in the economic life of the people. During the colonial times there were taxes imposed on the people, such as the hut tax, the payment of these taxes forced people to move to urban areas in search of jobs.

In terms of the perception of culture as a barrier to contraceptive use, an examination of the history and role played by the international population movement in the introduction of a population policy in Kenya clearly demonstrates that, the perception of culture as a barrier to contraceptive use began more as part of the propaganda between contesting viewpoints. Those who favored the population policy, and were supportive of the Neo-Malthusian rhetoric branded those who opposed their arguments as traditionalists who were still in favor of large families. It is to be kept in mind that contraceptive use in Kenya was initially for family planning with the aim of population control and as protection against sexually transmitted infections. At this point there is no evidence that their statements were based on any sound scientific study of traditions as opposing or preventing people from using contraceptives. Studies done after these allegations were made subsequently came up with ideas suggesting that indeed cultural practices were hampering the adoption of contraceptive use. However, two things to be noted are, first, all the studies that highlighted this were either fully sponsored or partly sponsored by the very people who were promoting contraceptive use. Some of the previous literatures reviewed in this study were based on research done by either Non Governmental Organizations working in the field of reproductive health or those working with HIV/AIDS related issues. The studies identified cultural practices involving sex among the Luo in the area of establishing a home, constructing a house, rituals surrounding death, rituals in the agricultural cycle and rituals around marriage, and explained what they entailed in terms of how sex was involved, but none of them provided the context within which the practices were undertaken and what changes were happening and how this was affecting perception and decisions on contraceptive use or non-use. They tended to portray Luo culture as if it is a static phenomenon which is not subject to changes over time and subject to differences in interpretation by Luo speaking people.

When we examine the cultural practices that the studies identified as barriers to the acceptance and use of contraceptive among the Luo, what becomes clear is that, some of the practices were once in a lifetime events where the sex involved was a one-off thing. For instance, a man established one home and built houses for his wives within the home, others who were polygynous established
different homes for their wives, and the others such as constructing a house, marriage of a child were periodic activities where sex was also mandated as one-off as was also the case in those that involved different stages such as the agricultural cycle. The cultural rituals were also binding only on those who were married and not people who were still single irrespective of their age. As a matter of fact, among the Luo in the past, someone who was not married irrespective of age was considered to be a child and could not participate in certain discussions or sit in certain meetings. As such, according to those interviewed, the blame frequently put on the culture is in most cases unfounded and based on a misunderstanding of the culture by outsiders and some people who are also Luos but perhaps grew up in urban areas and therefore do not understand how the culture was practiced, but base their views on rumors. What is clear is that the practices of the past were done in a context that is different from the context of today, with the changes that have happened in terms of what people do in relation to home establishment, the agricultural cycle, marriage, house construction and death rituals.

5.2 Conclusion

When we examine the cultural practices under investigation in this study, in terms of home establishment, at present, in terms of practice it is apparent that what is done is essentially different from what was done in the past. As such, under these circumstances of differences in practice and awareness of the presence of sexually transmitted diseases then it is difficult or nearly impossible to say that participation in the sexual ritual in home establishment is a barrier to contraceptive use. As the findings of this study points out, the present context is different from the context of the past. At present the prevalence of diseases is higher than was the case in the past. This also applies to the case of the practice in house construction. The circumstances in which people own houses at present are different. While it may be easier to pinpoint a cultural practice as a barrier because it is easier to talk about, decisions on whether to use or not use contraceptives are made on the basis of a complex mix of factors, some of which may include such issues as trust, risk perception in terms of both the risk of contracting a disease and the risk of using a contraceptive. Trust is crucial if a couple is to decide on using a contraceptive method that requires the participation of both and which may be laden with the notion that it reduces the pleasure of sex, such as condom.

In terms of the role of sex in the agricultural cycle, the findings of the study point to the fact that presently most people do not follow this. Farming is now a continuous activity, whereby people
harvest one crop and immediately commence on planting others. It is also more common nowadays for men to move to urban areas in search of employment leaving behind their wives who continue with farming their land. As such, one cannot argue that at present it is a barrier to contraceptive use.

The sexual rituals surrounding death have also undergone changes to the point whereby most men are no longer interested getting married to the spouses of their brother. An offshoot of this change is the rise of a crop of men on the prowl, seeking to exploit women whose spouses have died. These men pretend to remarry the women but their aim is to have access to the resources in the hands of the woman left by her dead husband, and at the same time have sex with them. These men are locally termed “Professional Jater”, essentially translating to professionals in remarrying. Some people have called the practice of remarrying “wife inheritance”, however this term has no meaning to the Luo, for a wife was not seen as an object to be inherited. The Professional Jater, are characterized by their lack of material support for the woman they cohabit with, yet in the traditional practice of the Luo, remarriage was meant to ensure the woman got material support and her sexual needs were also met. There are also women who upon the death of the spouses do not remarry but maintain multiple sexual partners. In terms of the potential for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, these present practices pose more risk. In one sense because the Professional Jater can move from one woman to another and if he is infected with a disease, then he can spread it, on the other hand a woman who decides to maintain multiple partners could also spread infection among his partners.

On the basis of the findings of this study, we can say that to a large extent, the cultural practices that previous studies identified as key barriers to contraceptive use, the people interviewed noted that those could account for some few cases of people using them as a justification for not using contraceptives however, it also becomes clear that the debate over contraceptive use was right from the beginning a heated debate with a lot of propaganda from both its opponents and proponents, and in all this culture was caught at the crossroads and this was done without both sides of the debate clearly expounding on what they meant by the use of the term culture, but instead used the term culture in a very broad sense and pulled out certain cultural practices, some taken out of context and using as ammunition in their debates. By its very nature, culture is dynamic and it is this dynamism that often escapes the grasp of most people. Often culture is portrayed as something static and unchanging, despite knowledge of the fact that culture serves an adaptive role and for it to
effectively do this it must of necessity be very dynamic and adaptive to the changes in people's living conditions.

On the basis of the findings of this study, it also becomes clear that sometimes what is seen by others as the key cultural reasons why people do not use contraceptives is very different from the reasons that the people in question see as the main barriers. Failure to bridge this gap in understanding can have a huge negative impact on the success of any intervention aiming at promoting the acceptance of contraceptive use. This is so because, if the interventions are designed on the basis of ideas that are peripheral to the people concerned, they will see it as irrelevant and not of concern to them. But on the other hand, where the people’s perception of the barriers form the basis of the design of an intervention, it stands a higher chance of addressing the fears and knowledge gaps of people in terms of what the contraceptives do and cannot do. It is also imperative if the intervention has implications on how relations are structured to thoroughly ensure the people do not see this as a threat, so for instance the success of vasectomy will very much depend on the success of interventions to convince people of the fact that it does not affect a man’s sexual abilities. At the same time, vasectomy has another challenge in the fact that while in the past divorce was rare, nowadays it is a reality people have to confront and men may fear that in the event of a divorce and they have to re-marry, they may have a problem having children if their spouse wants to have any. Nonetheless it is clear that there is a difference in terms of what others see as barriers to contraceptive use and what the people interviewed see as the barriers.

References


Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide for Direct interviews and Focused Group Discussions

1. What are the Luo customs with regard to the agricultural cycle? (Probe for the role of sex and views on use of contraceptives)

2. What customary practices are involved in the establishment of a new home and the construction of a house? (Probe for the role of sex and views on use of contraceptives)

3. What are the customary rituals performed upon the death of a spouse, a parent of a child? (Probe for the role of sex and views on use of contraceptives)

4. What do you and the people do when in relation to the cultural practices at present

5. Does participation in these rituals have any influence on whether someone will use a contraceptive such as a condom or not? (Probe for reasons)

Appendix 2: Question Guides for interviews with Traditional Birth Attendants

1. What kind of services do you provide?

2. How long have you been providing these services

3. What changes have you noticed in women over time in terms of the changes in their bodies or complications during pregnancy and childbirth?

4. Do you attend to both women who use contraceptives and those who don’t?

5. Are there any changes or differences you have noticed in the women who use and those who do not use contraceptives during pregnancy and childbirth? (Probe for changes or differences and probable reasons)
Appendix 3: An artistic expression of traditional Luo house construction

Pictures Courtesy of the National Museums of Kenya

Appendix 4: A picture of a Luo Traditional House