First-Marriage Traditions:
Extent, Consequences, and Causes of Their Loss Among Young Urban Kenyans

by

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Chapter One: Introduction

Objectives of the Study

A popular perception is that longstanding marriage traditions are dying out among Kenyans, especially among young urban Kenyans. The objective of this study was to examine both the perceptions and the practices of a sample of Kenyans with regard to marriage traditions. I expected to find that those participating in the study would not have followed, or do not expect to follow, those traditions, and that they would agree that such traditions are becoming extinct, especially in urban centers like Nairobi. The research question was, “Which first-marriage traditions are in practice among young urban Kenyans?” Corollary questions were (a) Which traditions are not being practiced? (b) What are the consequences of not practicing the traditions? (c) What is the cause of the traditions’ not being practiced? (d) What are the perceived roles of husbands and wives?, and (e) What are the perceptions of Kenyans about whether marriage traditions will persist?

Methodology

Process. I interviewed 11 individuals (also known as respondents in this paper) whom I selected by purposive sample (Palys, 2015), in face-to-face sessions of about 1 hour (two individuals were interviewed in follow-up sessions as well), in the company of a Kenyan field assistant who had arranged most of the interviews beforehand. The interviews began with a broad descriptive question (What was the process of your first marriage, starting with your rite of passage and courtship, and ending with the first year
after?), followed by questions of a structural, personal, or clarifying nature as necessary. I took notes during each interview and later rewrote the notes as narratives. I combed the narratives for the themes related to the research questions and then briefly summarized each interview (Appendix B) and created a chart of responses (Appendix A). Finally, I arranged and summarized the data thematically for presentation in Chapter 2, Field Research Findings.

**Ethical considerations.** I disclosed the purpose of the interviews to each respondent and requested permission to use the information for that purpose. I asked for permission to take notes. Whenever requested, I used a pseudonym for the respondent, and, to further protect privacy, I used only initials for surnames in the paper. I told all respondents that they need not answer any question that caused them discomfort and infringed on privacy. I was careful not to show judgmental reaction to any statement that was either unfamiliar or unsavory in my own cultural context.

**Sample**

Four women and seven men comprised the sample. Nine individuals were young adults, two were tribal elders. Seven were Kamba, and one each came from the Kisii, Luo, Meru, and Luhya communities. Although traditions vary somewhat in details among those communities, they were considered sufficiently similar for purposes of this study (see Kilbride & Kilbride, 1993, p. 53). Of the individuals interviewed, six were married, one was planning to marry soon, one was an unmarried priest, one was an unmarried mother living alone, and two were unmarried mothers—one of whom had lived with, and the other of whom was living with, fathers of their children. Seven had some post-secondary education or degrees, two had secondary school degrees, and two
were informally educated but literate. The sample likely included more individuals at the bottom of the income scale than individuals in the middle.

Limitations and Scope

The research questions applied to young urban Kenyans, and not to those living in rural villages, and to first marriages, thus excluding questions about polygamous marriages. The sample included neither Muslims nor non-Christians. The traditions under focus in this study included (a) rites of passage in preparation for marriage, (b) parental/family permission to marry, (c) courtship, (d) type of wedding ceremony, (e) location of marital home, (f) primary family after marriage, and (g) roles of husband and wife. The limited time span over which the interviews were conducted (3 weeks) meant that the sample was small and that in-depth interviews were not feasible. The researcher was American, not Kenyan, and relatively new to Kenyan philosophy and traditions and to ethnographic study; however, the presence of an experienced Kenyan field assistant and translator somewhat mitigated those weaknesses. The small sample size and the fact that it was non-representative mean that results cannot be generalized but can only serve as a stimulus to further research.

Definitions

Bridewealth. Bridewealth is the payment of animals, food, household goods, and labor (or the equivalent in cash) by the prospective groom and his family or community to the family of the bride. It is intended to bond the two families, seal the marriage proposal, and express appreciation to bride’s family for her upbringing (Kirwen, 2005). Without bridewealth, the marriage is not binding and the woman cannot be buried with her husband and establish herself and her children in his lineage. The terms brideprice or
dowry are sometimes used interchangeably; however, the former can be somewhat offensive to some, and the latter can confuse Western readers, for whom dowry refers to the wealth that the bride, not the groom, contributes to the marriage.

**Family relationship names.** In Western parlance, the terms mother, father, brother, sister apply either to biological or to legally adopted kin. In-law refers to someone related by legal marriage. In East Africa, however, the terms have more fluidity. A married woman becomes the daughter, not daughter-in-law, of her husband’s father and mother, who are also called mother and father by her. The brothers of one’s father are also called father. If a child loses or leaves his parents and goes to live with, say, an aunt, that aunt and child are regarded as, and called, mother and daughter; and the aunt’s children are sister and brother to the child—even though no Western-style legal adoption has taken place. To prevent confusion to Western readers, I have substituted Western family appellations for East African ones. Africans will have no problem following the family relationships I have described in Western terminology.

**Lineage.** Lineage is the connection to one’s ancestors. It is “the lifeblood of a person, the continuation of the family line, and the life energy of a person” (Kirwen, 2005, p. 260). It connects the living to the spirits of the dead and those not yet born. One achieves reincarnation through ancestorship in one’s in lineage, achievable by participation in all rites of passage (including marriage), procreation, clan membership, and having a descendant take one’s name (Kirwen, 2005).

**Living dead.** Living dead are those who have died but whose relatives are still alive to remember them. Their spirits remain present to guide the living relatives.
**Marriage.** In Africa, according to Kirwen (2005), marriage is the union of two people of the opposite sex for the purpose of procreation and companionship. Marriage is an essential rite for continuing and extending the lineage, which in turn is the spiritual and cultural crux of the individual and the community. Married women and their children are absorbed into the husband’s lineage and community. The traditional community expects everyone to marry and procreate.

**Traditions.** Tradition can be a problematic term to describe practices that exist in a large and ethnically-varied area because what may be a tradition in one group of people may not be a tradition in another. Kilbride & Kilbride (1993) defined traditions as “similarities of custom rather than ethnic differences typically found in social organization” (p. 51). In other words, traditions are practices that transcend minor ethnic differences. Gyekye (1997), on the other hand, defined traditions as practices that are passed down and persist over at least three generations within an ethnic tribe (p. 219). Gyekye compared tradition to cultural practice, pointing out that two are not interchangeable. A cultural practice is not yet a tradition without the specified time and persistence elements. A cultural practice may arise and die within a generation or be passed down between generations. If it endures over three or more generations, it can then be called a tradition (Gyekye, 1997). For this study, I combined the definitions of Kilbride and Gyekye to denote practices that are similar across ethnic tribes and have been passed down across generations.
Chapter 2: Findings From the Field Research

Rites of Passage in Preparation for Marriage

It appears that premarital rites of passage were practices and valued among the men in this study. The women in this study, for various reasons, followed fewer of their gender's traditional rite-of-passage traditions than did the men.

Traditionally, the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood (and eligibility for marriage) involved three main steps: ritual circumcision (or other physical mutilation requiring pain endurance and bravery), instruction on the responsibilities of manhood and marriage by elders and/or uncles, and the moving from one’s parents’ home and the building of one’s own house nearby. Circumcision (cutting away the foreskin of the penis) was traditionally performed on a group of village boys, ages from 8 to teens, by a village elder with village men in attendance. The conditions were not sterile, the instrument was often not sharp and not cleaned between circumcisions, and the boys received little or no anesthetic. The rite of passage for girls traditionally included ritual circumcision (clitoridectomy and infibulation), performed by a designated village woman without anesthetic or sterilization, and instruction on sexual and household duties of a woman.

Circumcision. Five of the seven men interviewed said they had undergone circumcision (Appendix B, #1, #6, #7, #8, #10). One man (#3) declined to say, and another man (#5) was Luo, among whom the rite of passage once involved extraction of the lower six teeth (a practice no longer observed among the Luo). The five who had been circumcised thought the tradition an important one, not only because it taught one to face hardship stoically—the original purpose—but also because circumcision is thought
to reduce the risk of HIV infection, which is very high in East Africa. All the women interviewed reported that their husbands or partners had undergone circumcision. Two of the men interviewed (#7, #8) had their circumcisions in a hospital at ages 8 and 12 respectively. Even in the hospital, however, they observed the traditions of having uncles present, of being part of a cohort age-mates, and of enduring the pain without anesthetic.

A man cannot marry without circumcision, according to Chief O (#2). All but one of the men interviewed (and the husbands or partners of the women interviewed) held this tradition in high value and thought it widely observed and likely to persist.

The four women interviewed did not undergo the traditional rite-of-passage circumcision, which The Catholic Church has forbidden for moral reasons in some communities like the Kamba, and which the government later made illegal in Kenya because of its health risks, which could impede conception and birthing. (The Catholic Church has encouraged the establishment of more benign rites-of-passage for women and girls.) Nevertheless, female circumcision is still practiced, mainly in rural areas but much less so in urban areas. Lack of circumcision did cause a problem for one woman (Appendix B, #9), whose prospective mother-in-law rejected her partially for that reason. Also, Chief O (Appendix B, #2) attributed the promiscuity of modern women to the lack of female circumcision:

Above all, the women should be circumcised. The circumcision indicates that she is valued and respected by her people and that she is ready to assume the responsibilities of a wife.

Musia (#6), the Kamba elder, said he would not have married his wife had she not been circumcised but now accepts the “civilizing” (his word) dictum of the Catholic Church against it. Most of the other men, however, did not value female circumcision so highly
and all respondents thought the tradition was dying off. As a rite of passage in preparation for adulthood and marriage, ritualistic male circumcision is still valued among most respondents, but female ritualistic circumcision is not.

**Marriage role instruction.** All the men interviewed had had some premarital instruction about the responsibilities of manhood and marriage, and in some cases, about the sex act. In most cases and by tradition, that information was provided either by tribal elders (Appendix B, #2, 3, 6, 10), or by relatives, particularly paternal uncles (#7, 8). The exception was George (#5), who received only the premarital counseling of the Catholic Church, which he thought inadequate.

One woman, Eve (Appendix B, #4), said that she had received instruction on womanhood and marriage from her sisters (her mother having died) and from the Catholic Church, but the latter was not as helpful as the former. Two women (#9, #10) received no traditional instruction because their mother had died young, and they were somewhat estranged from their extended families.

Overall, information from the interviews suggests that traditional marriage role instruction, ritualistically provided by elders, mothers, and fathers, is dying out and being replaced formally by the Church, informally by friends, or not at all. None of the respondents said that they received their sex education or role instruction from popular media.

**Move from parental home.** All of the men had moved from their parents’ house after circumcision and had built their own houses (usually with their own hands) in their home villages, which were intended to be their homes after they married. Women, by tradition remain in the parental home until marriage, but two of the four women
interviewed (#9 #10) lived apart from their families prior to marriage because their families could not support them. All of the men said their wives had remained with their parents until marriage. Although the move-from-parents-home tradition was maintained by nearly all respondents, their perception is that the tradition is weakening for women who want to move to move away prior to marriage to pursue education and careers in urban areas.

**Parental or Family Permission to Marry**

Failure to obtain parental permission to marry has serious consequences in East African culture, including estrangement from the family (Appendix B, #11) and the possible curse of a witch (#9). Said George (#5), “Couples need the blessing of their families, who in return support the couple if they encounter difficulties in their marriage.” The assumption is that parents will consider their children's marriages carefully and act in the best interests of their children and the family. All of the men felt strongly the importance tradition and said they followed it, would follow it, or thought it should be followed. Eve (#4), on the other hand, brushed aside the tradition as archaic (but she said she was glad her father approved of her marriage). Diana (#1) felt bitter about her mother’s refusal, which Diana believed was based on her mother's selfish motives (wanting Diana at home to help with household duties and child-rearing) and not in Diana’s best interest. Nevertheless, Diana obeyed her mother for fear of the consequences of defying her. The lover of Beatrice (#11) defied his mother’s refusal of permission for marriage, and he instead moved in with Beatrice, fathering her child. He suffered a great deal of anguish, however, from the resulting estrangement with his
mother and lack of extended family support. It seems that parental permission is still a persistent and valued tradition among the individuals interviewed.

**Courtship**

Traditionally, “courtship starts with friendship with a girl in the community. The girl is known to others in the community,” said Musia, the Kamba elder (Appendix B, #6). Traditionally, cross-tribal courtships were not common, but they are becoming more so—a practice that George (#5) thinks is good for strengthening inter-tribal relations. By tradition, family opinion on the appropriateness of the couple is important if the couple appears to be getting serious. Chief O (#2) said that the man’s parents would send family members to “make a report” about the woman. They would note how hard and how competently she worked and watch her to see what hours she kept and where she would go. They would ask questions about her family. If the report was favorably received by the man’s parents, they (but especially the father) would go the woman’s house to meet her parents and ask for their daughter. The woman’s family would likewise investigate her suitor and his family. George’s parents sent his sister to visit the young woman in order to “investigate” her and her family. The woman, in turn, visited George’s family (#5). Daniel (#3) and his wife courted for three years. She was then living with her parents, whom he knew. Jonathan (#7) described his courtship a bit more dramatically:

> We glanced at each other, something powerful overcame me, and I knew then that she was special. Looking at her ‘made me forget my name.’ I courted her and fell in love. . . . My family investigated her and her family, and then she visited again with my parents.

Eve (#4) had known her husband for 10 years. Paulo (#8) said that a village diviner can be consulted to see if the couple is a good match, and if not, can veto a marriage.
All of these descriptions sound quaint and traditional, even that of the avowedly Westernized Eve. Couples usually knew each other—or each other’s relatives—for years, and serious courtship could not progress far or long until families approved. However, courtship among the individuals interviewed did not always fit such a pattern, especially if the individual’s situation was considered to be outside the cultural norms, as was Cynthia’s (Appendix B, #9). Cynthia never knew her father, who had abandoned her unwed mother before Cynthia was born and who had never provided for Cynthia and her mother. Neither Cynthia nor her mother neither had a secure lineage, nor did Cynthia’s two sisters, who were born later. Cynthia described what happened when her mother died, leaving her and her sisters nearly destitute:

I met a man I had known as a child in grade school. I had taken a part-time job cleaning for his mother. I liked him well enough, but he fell in love with me. He started giving me money, which I desperately needed. In time, he asked me to move in with him, agreeing to let my young sisters come also; but in return he wanted sex. The man was from the Kisii community, where female circumcision was required before marriage. As a Kamba woman, I was not circumcised. My lack of circumcision, my status as the daughter of an unmarried woman, my poverty, and my lack of paternal identity and family support, made me an undesirable wife in the eyes of the man’s mother. Without parents [or surrogates], I could not obtain bridewealth, and without bridewealth I could not obtain a marriage. (Appendix B, #9)

She continued to live with the man, and had a child with him, until he started abusing her. One day he beat her unconscious, and she took her child and left. Both Diana (#1) and Beatrice (#11) likewise had difficult and non-traditional courtships. They were difficult because of poverty, broken homes, and lack of secure lineage; they were non-traditional because the traditions seemed to work against the women. Tradition set a trap for women in such situations: Once the women were set outside traditional circumstances, they could not practice the required traditions for community inclusion. Because of those situations,
none of the three women was able to attract marriage partners despite that fact that they
had earned, or later earned, college degrees—an accomplishment that should have made
them more "valuable" as partners.

In the practices of those people interviewed, the men seemed to adhere to
traditional courtship, but the women did not.

**Bridewealth**

Bridewealth is defined and described on p. 5. All of the men interviewed paid
bridewealth. Most viewed it as a very important tradition. Daniel said, “Without it, she
is not mine, and she cannot be buried with me” (Appendix B, #3), and Musia (#6)
concurred. Paul said that once the bridewealth has been negotiated and settled, the
acceptance of marriage is sealed and the families are united (#10). George, however,
although he paid bridewealth, believes it is a tradition that needs to end (#5). He lost his
first choice of bride, a woman he loved deeply, because her “greedy” father demanded an
exorbitant amount. He thinks bridewealth in modern times is a kind of extortion, a way
to get wealth in a way unrelated to its original purpose of bonding the families.

Eve (Appendix B, #4) is another who in her interview expressed disdain for
bridewealth. Both she and her father thought bridewealth demeaning. She said her father
avowed that he would “not sell his daughter.” In the end, however, he paid bridewealth
(in cash, not animals and goods) to appease his rural, traditional family, who thought Eve
would otherwise be discredited and the marriage invalid. Beatrice (#11) and her lover,
after giving birth to a son, eventually gained permission from her lover’s mother to
marry; however, Beatrice's calculating family demanded bridewealth well beyond her
lover’s ability to pay, and the couple still has not married.
As with other traditions described in this study, in regards to bridewealth the woman once again are nonconforming. Bridewealth is in some ways preventing adherence to other cultural norms. Diana, for example, hopes to marry the man whose child she is carrying, but since bridewealth cannot be paid while the bride is pregnant, she must wait until after the child is born to secure the union (#1). Cynthia, whose difficulties with bridewealth are described above, is almost certain to remain unmarried, because of the bridewealth tradition.

Bridewealth is an embedded tradition in Kenya that, according to the respondents, is unlikely to vanish soon. Although its original purpose is not always fulfilled, it is a way of redistributing wealth and is adhered to for economic reasons. In the views of the individuals interviewed, bridewealth payment options are changing (from household goods and livestock to cash), but the tradition of bridewealth persists despite criticism by men and women whom it does not serve well.

**Type of Wedding Ceremony**

Daniel (Appendix B, #3) described the wedding options available to Christian Kenyan couples: (a) Christian church wedding, (b) traditional village wedding, (c) civil ceremony, or a combination of a and b or b and c. Daniel and his wife chose a traditional Kamba wedding in his wife’s village in order to uphold the traditions of the community. Chief O, Musia, and Paulo also had traditional weddings (#2, #6, #8). (Musia’s, by tradition, was held in the dark of night so that another man could not see the bride and steal her [Musia’s words].) Eve had a Western-style church wedding (#4), and George (#5) had a church wedding after keeping the marriage traditions of his Luo community. It should be noted that the Catholic Church urges its members to follow marriage
traditions (except, of course, for female circumcision) prior to the church wedding in order to gain community acceptance and support for the marriage. Only Beatrice (#11) wants just a civil ceremony when she marries, a civil ceremony being the only option that will allow her to legitimize her marriage without bridewealth. A lawful wedding is important to her in order to secure herself and her children in their father’s lineage and allow her to be buried on his family’s land so that her children have access to her spirit when she is a living dead.

It appears that the most of the married respondents, rather than supplanting traditional weddings, simply extended them to include non-traditional practices rooted in Western culture. Among the married respondents, only Beatrice rejected any aspect of a traditional wedding in favor of a lawful but non-traditional ceremony. Ironically, her reason for a legal marriage at all was to uphold other East African traditions of family life.

**Location of Marital Home**

Traditional community traditions situate the married couple’s home in the husband’s community near his parents, in part so that the wife can fulfill her role as his parents’ (now her parents’) caretaker and helper. In every case except one among the married (or soon-to-be-married) individuals interviewed, the men built houses in the family villages, which are—or will be—their marital homes. In some cases, (#5, #8) the couple has, or will have, two homes: one in the city, where one or both spouses work during the week, and one in the village. Jonathan (#7) said he is looking forward to leaving Nairobi and living full time with his wife on the farm he has started on land he purchased in his village. “To me,” he said, “Nairobi is just houses. My ancestral land is
home.’” Paulo (#8), who is temporarily in Nairobi, said that his wife, Maria, will live in his village and help take care of his mother if that is what his family wants. Both statements reflect a profound connection to family and village tradition (though possibly also insensitivity to the wives’ preferences, which were not specified).

The Westernized Eve and her husband, on the other hand, will continue to live full time in Nairobi, where both have careers. Both have strong attachments to his family and stay with them in the family village at least one weekend a month, but Eve and her husband do not have their own house there (Appendix B, #4). Beatrice’s future mother-in-law lives in the Kibera slum in Nairobi, but Beatrice will not move there to care for her. Beatrice likes her mother-in-law but defies tradition when she says she believes the mother-in-law's care should be a shared responsibility of the family and should not fall alone on the daughter-in-law. The other two women interviewed live permanently in Nairobi with no plans to leave (unless, possibly, if Diana is able to marry) because they are estranged from their father's families (their parents not having married) and have no other home to go to.

Among the respondents, the men felt more strongly than the women that their home after marriage should be in the village (or urban neighborhood) of the man's family. The women in this study, once again, behaved in a non-traditional manner and lived away from the families of their fathers of their children because their situations (unmarried or having careers in the city) left them no option.

**Primary Family of Focus After Marriage**

Statements by the men interviewed for this study indicated that primary family, to them, meant the extended family. Note, for example, these comments:
My wife becomes my parents’ daughter, and I became her parents’ son, but not as much as I am my parents’ son, and not to the extent my wife belongs to my family. (Daniel, #3)

My wife’s sister brought her to my house, where she would become my parents’ daughter. (George, #5)

My wife will stay in my village and help take care of my mother if that is what my family wants. (Paulo, #8)

The men had built homes in their communities of birth, near their parents and extended family. By bringing their wives to live there whenever possible, and by recognizing her relationship as daughter (not daughter-in-law) to his parents, they express a view of their marriages as extensions of existing families rather than as separate new families. The fact that the wives and their children will be absorbed into the husband’s family is one reason that traditions of parental “investigations” and marital permission persist so strongly among these men.

Compare the men’s attitudes with that of the women. Eve, for example, said,

I have a good relationship with my in-laws. I feel closer to them than to my father’s family (except for my father). However, my strongest family bond is with my nuclear family: my husband, my two children, and myself. (Appendix B, #4).

Eve lives in Nairobi with her nuclear family, rather far away from her husband’s family. She also lives at a distance from her father’s extended family, whom she does not know well. Beatrice (#11), who like Eve is in a stable, lifelong relationship, said, “The primary focus of my energy is my nuclear family—husband and kids. Next most important are my husband’s family and my sisters on my mother’s side.” Cynthia (#9) does not know her father’s family, is estranged from the family of her child’s father, and is cordial with, but emotionally distant from, her maternal extended family. Her daughter is her focus.
Diana (#1) still lives with her mother and has nothing to do with her father’s family. Her son is her focus.

Among the respondents, men's more traditional view of *family* included the extended family—his parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles—along with wife and children. The women, however, defined their families as nuclear, with extended family being secondary.

**Roles of Husband and Wife**

Regarding the roles of husbands and wives, the views of the men interviewed were similar to those of Musia, the Kamba elder, who said that the husband should “provide for his children and live so that he was respected,” while the wife should be “grateful, humble, welcoming, and hardworking,” (Appendix B, #6). Chief O’s view of the wife’s role was even more traditional:

A good wife is hard working, loyal, able to bear children, and above all, circumcised. The circumcision indicates that she is valued and respected by her people and that she is ready to assume the responsibilities of a wife. (#2)

A shared view among men was that wives should be willing and able to take care of the husband’s extended family, especially his parents. Jonathan added that a good wife should also have kindness and love, presumably romantic love—“the ability to make me forget my name,” as he expressed it.

All the women and men acknowledged the husband’s role as provider, but Beatrice (Appendix B, #11) recognized a need for her to provide for herself. When her maternity leave ends, Beatrice wants to return to work in order “not to beg for money” and “to be independent.” She also saw husband and wife as shared decision-makers and soulmates (“talk and listen to one another, confide in, comfort, and emotionally support
one another”). The women also acknowledged the man’s role in providing access to patrilineage for them and their children.

The men I interviewed emphasized the role of wife as bearer of children and caretaker of the husband’s parents. Her duties mainly revolve around the home. Her conduct reflects on the man's reputation. The women, on the other hand, saw wives as more autonomous and as having more opportunities for self-development outside the home. The women saw wives as co-supporters of the family alongside their husbands or partners.

**Causes of Loss of Tradition**

Every person interviewed expressed the view that marriage traditions were dying out. They pointed to the hedonistic influence of the Western media as the prime factor influencing change (e.g., Appendix B, #2, #8) but also to poverty (#2, #11), urbanization and dislocation (#2), technology (#5), the Catholic Church (#6, #7, #11), education (#4, #6). In two cases (#1, #11), the departure from one tradition led to stigmatization, which in turn (and somewhat ironically) prevented those individuals from following other traditions. As to the consequences of not following tradition, the respondents mentioned, in addition to those already identified above, loss of identity, alienation, and immorality. Not all respondents, however, view the loss of traditions as negative: George, Eve, and Beatrice (#4, #5, #11) want to see bridewealth eliminated; all the women and most of the men are relieved that female circumcision is gone; and George (#5) thinks tooth extraction as a right-of-passage to adulthood was rightly abandoned. As he put it, “Cultures need to adapt to change and the reality of the modern world.”
Conclusions

Although the expectation at the start of this study was that the individuals interviewed, most of whom were young adults living in an urban setting, would have departed (or planned to depart) from all or most marriage traditions, but that was not the case. Nearly all the men kept nearly all the traditions. The women, however, reported much less adherence to tradition, either by choice or by circumstance. The men’s unexpected behavior and attitudes towards traditions, and the disparity between men and women might be due to sampling weakness: an unrepresentatively high level of education, for example, or simple coincidence. The coincidence was that three of the women were daughters of unmarried women whose husbands had abandoned them (unusual in traditional East Africa societies); and in the cases of two of these women, the mother had died. Their circumstances of birth had left these women impoverished and, in the case of two, alienated from extended families. The very traditions they said believed in and hoped to embrace, appeared to be the ones that kept them stigmatized and excluded from traditional life. They in turn became single mothers themselves. Their departures from tradition seemed related more to unavoidable circumstances (unavoidable because poverty and family alienation seemed to leave them no alternative) than to choice. The men, on the other hand, could have fathered and then abandoned children and not been held accountable or stigmatized as the women had. They would still have had the opportunities to follow tradition and gain access to the privileges afforded them by doing so. In fact, this double standard seems to exist in at least one example among the respondents, Cynthia. If the sample had included an equal number of
women and men, perhaps the disparity between the sexes would have been less striking because a broader spectrum of women might have been represented.

Also of some surprise was the disparity between the respondents' perceptions about the dying off of marriage traditions and their own practices and attitudes regarding the traditions. All of the respondents are subject to the same influences they said undermined traditions: Western media, poverty, urbanization and dislocation, technology, the Catholic Church, education. Why then did nearly all these individuals (Eve and Beatrice being exceptions) value most traditions and act on them to the extent possible?

True, the Catholic Church has helped sustain some of the traditions by folding them into preparation for Catholic weddings, but that fact is only a partial explanation, especially in the face of other countering influences.

Not surprisingly, this study raised as many questions as it answered. Some answers may be found in the literature. Certainly, new research could address such questions as these:

1. Why do some people persist in keeping marriage traditions while others not?
2. What are the influences that most undermine keeping of traditions?
3. How can those influences be counteracted, or should they be?
4. How does one decide, both individually and communally, which traditions support dignity, equality, and quality of life, and which should be discarded?
5. Is there a disparity between men and women regarding adherence to traditions, and if so, what are the causes of the disparity? Do they need to be addressed? How?
Some of these questions, of course, may be better addressed by philosophers than by researchers.

Chapter 3: Review of the Literature

Kirwen (2010) wrote that in Africa, “marriage continues to be an essential part of the human cycle of life” (p. 42). He said that every African man and woman is expected to marry and procreate in order to sustain the lineage, which is the underpinning of existence. Following marriage traditions is perceived as essential to securing a binding and productive marriage that supports the couple, the extended family—including ancestral lineage—and the community.

Are these traditions breaking down? If so, what is the cause of their demise? What are the consequences of their loss? Do the traditions align with the needs of modern Kenyans? These are the questions posed in this literature review. Unfortunately, no large body of literature exists to address these questions, and what does exist is not as current as one would like.

A perception exists that Africans’ increasing familiarity with Western culture is undermining African traditions that once served Africans well. Are marriage traditions in Kenya dying out due to the incursion of Western culture? Kildare and Kildare (1993), in addressing a range of traditions associated with family life said, “The modernization process has overall resulted in both cultural persistence and change” (p. 51). By that they meant that cultures naturally change over time and that by adapting traditions and absorbing new ones, social organizations make them more relevant and vital, thereby allowing them to persist, but perhaps in altered form. So, for example, one might celebrate a rite-of-passage ceremony but substitute another marker, such as tattooing in
place of circumcision, so that the rite-of-passage persists in altered form—a form that
benefits, among other things, women’s health—and acknowledgments that modern
science, even if Western driven, can support the public good.

Western attitudes about sex, perceived as far too permissive and open by many
Kenyans, are thought to have led to a decline in moral behavior. Gichinga (1996, p. 13),
for example, attributed the increase in pregnancy rate among unmarried African women
to “contemporary standards” (by implication, Western), erotic literature, films, and
“records” (lewd music and lyrics). However, she offered no evidence of cause and effect
between exposure to these influences and behavior changes as a result of them (and
attempts to do just that in the West have failed). Gichinga looked also for other
causes within her own society: lack of adult guidance, misinformation and peer pressure,
deception by older men (an unsubstantiated claim), and institutional over-strictness.

Given the variations in attitudes among Westerners themselves, and the varying
degrees of exposure Africans have to them, as well in internal influences that also act on
African behavior, examining the degree of influence from the West may be fruitless.
Even if Western culture is having an impact on African behavior, is that impact only
negative, and is it preventable? Sometimes Kenyans take actions that are pointedly
against Western values, such as their criminalization of homosexual behavior—up to 14
years in prison (Westcott, 2015) and their poor record on women's rights (Wanjiru,
2010). Kenya also recently legalized the ages-old tradition of polygyny, allowing men as
many wives as their tribal customs allow, and Kenya passed this law despite protests
from the West as well as internal African groups ("President," 2014). This is an example
of how Kenyans affirm tradition despite direct influences of the West. (Whether
Kenyans can persuade Kenyan women to maintain these traditions remains to be seen—though with the passage of the polygyny law, women will have little recourse if they do not.)

Spronk (2012) affirmed effects of Western media on traditional values on Africa. However, she avoided glib and facile conclusions. For example, she commented on “the emergence of the intimate”—by which she means the Western notions that sex is about more than procreation, that it is related to companionship, that it should be part of public discourse, that it is about both individual pleasure and mutual pleasure, and that it is natural and “intrinsically located within the person” (p. 129]. Such notions about sex can cause monumental social shifts for populations existing in the liminal zone between communitarianism, in which needs of the individual are subordinated to the need and customs of the community, and individualism, in which self-exploration, creativity, and self-satisfaction are encouraged. Because “the West,” for a variety of reasons, is under suspicion by Africans, the quick and often negative reactions to its customs “are channeled into the notion of ‘westernization,’ which has become a generic concept to account for a variety of different anxieties regarding social transformation and cultural identity” (Spronk, p. 89). This is not to say that Africans should accept Western cultural norms as their own but that they should examine them confidently and examine their own cultural practices in light of those from the West—or for that matter, from any region of the world. Changes in sexual mores or in traditions such as marriage do not necessarily lead to risky or immoral behavior, and could, if integrated judiciously, contribute to the common good.
Economic factors are another reason for changing traditions. Hetherington (2001) studied marriage patterns over three generations of Kenyan Kikuyu women on three domains: circumcision, age of marriage, and bridewealth. Within those three generations, circumcision was almost eradicated (largely by Christian churches), age of marriage rose (as did education levels), and fewer women obtained bridewealth, though the tradition persisted. Although colonial administration tried to regulate marriage, the most significant factor of change was economics. As Kenya switched to a capitalist model and land became scarcer, women’s reproductive value (in purely economic terms) declined and they moved into the marketplace, where reproduction ability was generally not an asset. They delayed marriage to get jobs (and education) that paid, sometimes supporting husbands/partners who had been displaced with the decline of the agrarian-based economy. The trends Hetherington described have less to do with the influence of Western social values and more to do with Kenya’s desire for a capitalist economy.

Spronk (2012) linked changes in marriage traditions to historical upheavals in Kenya (“alienation of African land, the establishment of overcrowded ‘native reserves,’ . . . patterns of labour migration, and missionary activities” [p, 93]). Cultural changes do not take place in a historical vacuum. She pointed out that “if economic or political processes affect these institutions [like marriage], invariably gender roles shift, which, in turn, affects the relations between women and men, as well as the larger moral system” (p. 93).

Hattori & Dodoo (2007) likewise saw the association between individuals' economic situation and their sexual behavior. They said that risky sexual behavior is higher in slums urban slums (Hattori & Dodoo, 2007), and that such behavior, especially
multiple partners, increases the likelihood of HIV infection. Hattori and Dodoo (2007) confirmed that women in monogamous marriages had a lower risk of HIV, but the risk was higher among non-married cohabiters (who, presumably, do not feel the same commitment to single-partner restrictions, as do married couples). Slum women in polygynous marriage were found likely to have multiple partners themselves, hence a greater risk of HIV. The reason for their multiple partners, the researchers surmised is probably related to economics. Because women in polygynous marriages have to share their resources with co-wives, they may offer sexual favors to other men in return for resources (Dodoo, Sloan, & Zulu et al., 2003; Longfield, Glick, Waithaka, & Berman, 2004 as cited in Hattori & Dodoo, 2007); therefore, the slum-dwelling woman in polygynous marriages may be seeking multiple sexual partners for economic reasons, and at risk to their health. Hattori and Dodoo confirmed that breaking tradition—in this case the exclusivity rule for married women and unmarried women alike—is attributable to an internal economic factor, namely poverty.

Conclusions

The literature suggests that traditions change and expire for a variety of reasons, from both inside the culture and out. Some of the changes improve the quality of life, and some create conflict and stress. It is possible to conclude that the individuals interviewed for the study were at least partly correct in their assertion that marriage traditions are changing if not dying (though many of the respondents themselves were examples to the contrary). Moreover, they correctly identified, if only superficially, some of the causes of those changes—causes supported by the literature reviewed: poverty, urbanization and dislocation, the Catholic Church (and by extension other Western
ideas), and education. What the respondents did not express was the complexity and synergy of the “causes” and the context in which they interact. Continued research can surely provide additional factual information on which to make decisions about social changes. For a critical, reflective, and coherent analysis these changes, philosophy as well as research needs be applied.

**Recommendations**

Well into the 20th century, the idea persisted, even among prominent scientists and academics, the Africans were incapable of philosophic thinking. The idea was consistent with colonialism, which required believing that Africans were inherently inferior to Europeans. Near the middle of the century that idea underwent severe scrutiny. Oruka (2013) described the research that established the validity of the philosophic thinking--mostly expressed and passed on orally--that existed among African sages, even though there is no written historical record of their thinking. He called African philosophers *philosophic sages* to set them apart from *folk sages*, the familiar African stereotype among Westerners, and to distinguish these African philosophic thinkers from Western philosophers whose ideas have been preserved in archived texts. Although the line between philosophic sages and folk sages is not cleanly marked, Oruka characterized the former as having *didactic wisdom*—that which is rational and explained rationally—and the latter as having *popular wisdom*, based on popular beliefs, aphorisms, and traditions (p. 33). Philosophic sages can view traditions critically and assess their value in terms of current reality: i.e., which traditions are worth maintaining because they add to the quality of life in its present context? Folk sages can only communicate traditions as they exist, not justify them. Traditions not examined do not enable and
enhance human endeavors but rather shackle them. In this current study of changing marriage traditions, folk sage wisdom has shown itself in the utterings of, for example, Chief O (Appendix B, #2) and Gichinga (1996), who tends to justify his positions by repeating aphorisms and citing tradition. Such people have not been helpful in answering important and complex social questions. They seem to decry the loss of some traditions and advocate the maintenance of others not because these traditions contribute to the existing quality of life but merely for the purpose of keeping the status quo, which may serve only a narrow (and possibly, selfish) purpose. Philosophic sages, however, are capable of addressing these questions of loss and maintenance in useful, reasoned ways within a variety of contexts.

Insofar as African philosophic sages have been identified, it is they I recommend to lead African society in coming to terms with changes being imposed from within and without. Philosophic thinking (what is called critical thinking in some societies) is inherent to Africans as it was to Greeks, whose contributions are the recognized foundation of Western philosophy. Philosophic thinking should be the foundation of African education, and it can begin to be formed in the schools in the early grades if philosophic leaders bring their influence to bear. It is, of course, a threat to established powers because it analyzes, and sometimes recommends, the need for change. It is the enemy of corruption because it works for the common good and the dignity of humans.

Customs and traditions have changed in every generation, but it is difficult to see modifications that took place in the past. Change is inevitable, and it is advancing at a more rapid pace as global communication is enhanced. Many Africans who now feel threatened by the possibility of losing or modifying their traditions can be reassured by
learning to think and explore philosophically—critically—and be led to make better informed decisions about those changes. East Africans, Kenyans specifically, need to invest more in education with an emphasis on history and critical thinking, keep schools free from political corruption, encourage public discourse, and manage change confidently.
References


### Appendix A

#### Table 1. Summary of Profiles and Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Rite of Passage</th>
<th>Parental Permission</th>
<th>Bride-wealth</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Focus Family</th>
<th>Husband Role</th>
<th>Wife Role</th>
<th>Status of Traditions</th>
<th>Consequences of Loss</th>
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<td>extended</td>
<td>provider</td>
<td>children/household</td>
<td>dying out</td>
<td>instability, insecurity, poverty</td>
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<td>protector/provider</td>
<td>children/household/in-laws</td>
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<td>unstable families, promiscuity, no reincarnation</td>
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<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
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<td>protector/companion</td>
<td>children/household/in-laws</td>
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<td>unstable community, no spiritual life</td>
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<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
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<td>protector/provider</td>
<td>children/household/in-laws</td>
<td>dying out</td>
<td>failed marriages, unhappiness</td>
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<td>yes</td>
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<td>extended</td>
<td>protector/provider</td>
<td>children/household/in-laws</td>
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<td>Failed marriage, loss of family</td>
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<td>children/soulmate</td>
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Appendix B

Interview Summaries

Interview 1: Diana (Kamba)
Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya; Language, English; June 20 and July 2, 2015

Diana N is the college-educated, single mother of a 5-year-old son and is close to delivering her second child. She lives in a small shanty dwelling of one room divided by a curtain. Seven people share the space: Diana, her son, and four other relatives; the children sleep on the floor. She has never married.

All in all, she seemed somewhat dissatisfied but also resigned to her living conditions. Her mother was a single mother. Diana met the father of her first child in an informal setting. He wanted to marry Diana and sent his mother to get permission, but Diana’s mother refused. She wanted Diana to first finish college and then get a job before marrying. The bridewealth was not a consideration for Diana’s mother because, as an unmarried single mother herself, she could not accept it anyway. The bridewealth would be paid instead to the brother of Diana’s mother.

Diana believes that the real reasons her mother denied her permission to marry were that, first, her mother had already invested money in her education and wanted to get her investment back; second, Diana’s services were needed at home, where she cooked, took care of younger siblings, and worked in her mother’s vegetable stall; and third, the man was not from the Kamba community—in fact, he was not Kenyan. Nevertheless, Diana did not want to marry without her mother’s permission because she would be an outcast. By tradition, her mother would not help her if the marriage, or Diana, ran into trouble.

Diana later got pregnant again by another man, a member of Diana’s Kamba community. He said he would marry her and accept her first child as his own. However, the marriage cannot be secured without a bridewealth, and by tradition, the bridewealth cannot be paid while the woman is pregnant. Diana is waiting for her child to be born in the hope that the father will follow through on his proposal and that her mother will accept the offer.

Diana is not completely without a paternal family. She at least knew her father, even though he did not marry her mother, and she gets along well with him and his family. They will allow her to be buried on her father’s land unless she marries, in which case, she will be buried with her husband’s family. This acceptance gives her a measure of security and a degree of status above that of a single mother with an unknown father.

For Diana, only two traditions are important: obtaining her mother’s permission to be married, without which, she would be “cast out” of her maternal family; and securing a marriage so that she has the status and security of belong to her husband’s family.

Interview 2: Chief O (Kisii)
Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya; Language, English; June 23, 2015

Chief O believes that maintaining all the marriage traditions is important for the welfare of the individual and the community. Courtship starts after rite of passage. If a man is interested in a woman, he will get to know her a little and, if he thought her a good prospect for a wife, he would tell his parents about her. It is important that he speak
with his parents before proposing to the young woman. He must obtain parental
approval. This is the way it is done.

His parents would then send family members to “make a report” about her, noting
how hard and how competently she worked, what hours she kept, and where she went.
They would ask questions about her family. If the report was favorably received by the
young man’s parents, they (but especially the father) would go the woman’s house to
meet her parents and ask for their daughter. If their proposal was accepted, the two sets
of parents would negotiate a bride price and make arrangements for a wedding, which
would take place in her village with feasting and singing. Then the women of the family
would escort her to her new husband’s home.

Young men, at about the age of 9 or 10, undergo circumcision, an indication that
they have entered manhood. After that, he is allowed to enter only the sitting room of his
house but not the parents’ bedroom or the kitchen. Because he is now considered
independent, he now must build a home for himself. If he has an older brother or
brothers, they may all live together on their own. He cannot marry without the rite of
circumcision. Young women must also undergo circumcision in order to marry.
Circumcision keeps young women virtuous. At the time of circumcision, both young
men and young women receive instruction from their elders about how to be a good wife
or husband

A good wife is hard working, loyal, able to bear children, and above all,
circumcised. The circumcision indicates that she is valued and respected by her people
and that she is ready to assume the responsibilities of a wife. Circumcision ceremonies
are conducted each December, and a girl undergoes her circumcision in the first
December following her coming-of-age, so the age of a girl’s readiness to marry may
vary. In the past, girls did not marry until the age of about 20.

Young people are increasingly ignoring marriage traditions in the city. As a
result, girls are marrying at a younger and younger age—some as young as 13 or 14.
They drop out of school in order to marry, and they sometimes do not ask their parents’
permission. These marriages often do not last. The young people separate and then marry
again, but the marriages are not good. Without education, these young people are unable
to build lives for themselves.

The major causes of the loss of marriage traditions among urban young people are
(a) poverty, (b) lack of parental teaching and supervision, and (c) Western media that
broadcast age-inappropriate material. Poverty distracts parents from their duties. They
are so busy trying to survive that they do not have time to properly teach their children.
Education is the most important thing. Parents need to sacrifice in the present to ensure
that the children finish their educations. This is the thing that will maintain the
community in the future.

**Interview 3: Daniel (Kamba)**
Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya; Language, English; June 23, 2015

Daniel N is a teacher at a grade school in Kibera. He met his girlfriend in Kibera
and at church. They courted for three years. He had courted other young women before
her. She lived with her parents, whom he knew. When he decided he wanted to marry,
he first informed his parents. They questioned him closely about her and, when satisfied,
his parents set a date to meet her parents. Daniel’s parents, not he, informed her parents
that Daniel wanted to marry their daughter. Daniel did not propose until he had his parents’ permission.

Daniel and his betrothed had three options for marrying: (a) Christian wedding, (b) traditional Kamba wedding, (c) civil ceremony. They chose a Kamba wedding to in order to uphold the traditions of the community. Daniel’s parents negotiated a bridewealth of three goats, beer, food, honey, sorghum, blankets, and a small amount of cash. This bridewealth was important, said Daniel, because without it, “she is not [mine]” and she cannot be buried with her husband. Once settled, the bridewealth was taken to the bride’s family and the traditional wedding was held in her village.

In preparing for marriage, Daniel had had instruction from elders on how to be a husband. Both parents met with the couple to instruct them on how to live in a marriage, but Daniel declined to describe either form of instruction because they involved “private” information. Because of his sensitivity about sexual matters, I did not ask him about the rite of circumcision. Female circumcision was not a factor in his wife’s marital preparation because it is no longer practiced by the Kamba people.

Daniel said that keeping tradition is important for establishing one’s place in society. The couple’s families became united. His wife became her in-law’s daughter, and Daniel became his in-law’s son, but not as much as he was his parents’ son, and not to the extent his wife belonged to his family. Daniel said that even if he and his wife had held a church or civil wedding, they would have followed the other traditions. Not only did they think the traditions important, but also not following them could result in their families’ stopping the marriage or not recognizing it.

Interview 4: Eve (Luhya)
Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya; Language, English; June 23, 2015

I spoke with Eve O, who holds a bachelor’s degree in accounting and is an administrator at a Kibera grade school. She said right off that she and her family were Westernized. Her father was a professional, and she had lived in Nairobi all her life. Her father had worked with a British firm and had adopted Western values from the British. She knew very little about Luhya traditions even though her father had been reared “upcountry,” and his very traditional grandmother had played an important role in his life.

Eve had finished college before she got married. She had two unmarried older sisters, and community tradition required “paying them off,” but her father did not require that. Her decision to marry was entirely her own, and she “married for love.” Neither she nor her boyfriend sought parental permission but were very glad to have their parents’ support and approval. Eve had not dated other many other men or very often before her engagement. Her mother had died, and she was not close to her stepmother. Her older sisters took the role of mother/advisor. Her only formal premarital counseling was through the church. She said it was brief and less helpful than the advice her sisters gave her. However, since she had known her boyfriend for ten years as a friend, she felt confident about her impending marriage.

Eve and her father wanted no tradition and no bridewealth. Eve sees no importance in tradition. Both she and her father thought a bridewealth was demeaning. Her father avowed that he would “not sell [his] daughter” and that all he wanted from her marriage was for her to be happy. To Eve’s surprise, some of her father’s relatives,
whom she had never met, intervened and demanded a measure of tradition for family honor. They said that lack of bridewealth would make her future in-laws think her worthless. Her father wanted to accommodate his relatives to avoid family trouble, and she agreed. The relatives suggested a bride price, and her father paid cash to her future in-laws. The bridewealth was cash.

One tradition that Eve enjoyed very much was that of receiving her future husband and his people at her father’s house, where she appeared completely veiled among a group of young women similarly covered. The task was for her betrothed to pick her out among the group. Doing so was a sign of deep love and good luck. Failing to do so would earn him a fine. To Eve’s delight, he was able to identify her, allowing him to remove her veils and reveal herself to him. Eve had a Western-style church wedding.

Eve had a professional career as an accountant that she did not want to give up, and her husband supported her decision. Only when she had her first son did she decide to take a leave of absence from work, and consult from home, but the decision was her own. She thought having children was important largely because motherhood gave her respect.

Eve has a good relationship with her in-laws. She feels closer to them than to her father’s family (except for her father). However, her strongest family bond is with her nuclear family: her husband, her two children, and herself.

**Interview 5: George (Luo)**
Tangaza, Nairobi, Kenya; Language, English; June 25, 2015

George O, a college graduate, is a staff member at a Nairobi college. He lives in Nairobi but keeps ties with his village and visits there whenever he can. Although he lives and works in Nairobi, he does not consider it his home. His real home is his village, which “has more meaning” because his “own people, own house” are there.

George said he had little preparation for being a husband except for the Catholic Church’s premarital counseling, which was minimal. Mostly he used his parents as models for how to be a husband. The rite of passage for Luo, both for men and women, used to involve extraction of the bottom six front teeth. Bearing the pain of extraction was thought to prepare boys to endure the challenges of manhood and prepare girls for the pain of childhood. Moreover, extraction allowed access to the mouth of a very sick person when he or she needed medicine. Tooth extraction was abandoned by the community when Western education required people to learn English, which could not be spoken properly when lower teeth were missing. In addition, the eradication of many diseases diminished the need to administer oral medicines. As a result, neither he nor the woman he married underwent this traditional rite of passage.

A rite of passage that George did keep, however, was to build himself a traditional house and live apart from his parents when he came of age. He said that sex is not discussed much in his community, and he thinks this is a bad thing. He thinks young people need formal instruction. He told me that what prompted him to seek a wife was pressure from peers and from married adults in his community.

George did “fall in love” with a young woman, but his first attempt to marry did not end well. She was from another community and insisted on obtaining her family’s permission before consenting to marry him. George’s older brother represented George’s
father in bridewealth negotiations. The young woman was educated, as was George, so her father asked for a bridewealth that was exorbitant. Although George had a graduate degree, he was unemployed at the time, and the asking price was far beyond his and his family’s reach. The young woman’s family would not lower the price, so George and she parted ways. George feels bitter about this. He thinks that the dowries no longer stand for respect, gratitude, and family bonding, as they once did, but now are more about greed and wealth. He thinks dowries are no longer relevant in modern society.

Eventually, George met another woman, less educated, who also insisted on obtaining her family’s consent. George supported her decision and said he would not have wanted to marry her without her family’s agreement. George also sought his parents’ consent as tradition required. Parental permission is important, said George. Couples need the blessing of their families, who in return support the couple if they encounter difficulties in their marriage. Without parental permission, the couple would not get that support if they needed it. They would be on their own, somewhat outside their families.

George’s parents sent his sister to visit the young woman in order to “investigate” her and her family. The woman, in turn, visited George’s family. With his parents satisfied, George then proposed to her. The woman’s family, accepting George and settling on a bridewealth, released their daughter to live with George in the home he had built for himself on the promise that he would pay the bridewealth over time. The young woman’s sister brought her to George’s house, where she would become his parents’ daughter.

This arrangement was something of a “trial period,” wherein the couple would test their compatibility and have an opportunity to leave one another (the bride returning to her parents) if the marriage could not be worked out, but not before both families tried to reconcile the couple’s differences. If the marriage was dissolved, both were free to marry another person without stigma. If she chose to marry another man, he would be responsible for returning any of the bridewealth that George had already paid.

At first George’s wife had trouble accommodating to his family. She had a more professional, urban background, and village life was difficult for her. However, both families helped her with the adjustment, negotiated between her and her in-laws, and eventually the situation worked itself out.

George thinks young people are moving away from marriage traditions, or, more precisely, “cherry-picking” the ones they wish to follow. George believes this is not such a harmful trend because cultures need to adapt to change and the reality of the modern world.

**Interview 6: Musia (Kamba)**

Kamba village, Makueni County, Kenya; Language: Kiswahili, translated to English by a field assistant; June 27, 2015

Musia K, a chief elder, began by describing his own marriage and the traditions he and his wife followed. He was married in 1969 and remains married to his first wife. He told me that courtships starts with friendship with a girl in the community. The girl is known to others in the community. He decided to marry when he saw a need for someone to help his parents in their home. When he found a prospective bride, he
brought her home to introduce her to his parents. When his parents’ approved, they began bridewealth negotiations with her family.

Musia said that bridewealth was essential as a symbol that she “belonged” to him, and its payment ensured that she could be buried with him. It also meant that she would become the daughter of his parents. He agreed to pay the bridewealth in one year, with help from his father. Her bridewealth was a standard one: three goats; sacks of maize, beans, and sugar; bananas; honey; home-brewed beer; and blankets and sheets.

Both he and his wife completed rites of passage preparing them for marriage. Elders taught both him and her how to be a good husband and wife. The elders taught them that a husband’s role was to provide for his children and live so that he was respected. A good wife should be “grateful, humble, welcoming, and hardworking.” Both were circumcised (he was seven years old). He then built his own house. He said he would not have married his wife if she had not been circumcised. However, he said that girls were no longer circumcised because the Catholic Church had forbidden it, and he was a Catholic. He said that circumcising girls was against God’s will, but boys are still circumcised. I asked him if he thought there was a loss to his community with the decision not to circumcise girls. He replied no, because the community was now “civilized Musia then continued with the description of his marriage. After his circumcision, he built his house apart from his parents and was then able to marry when he wished. When the time came, and with his parents’ approval, he brought his wife home to the house he had built. The wedding was held at night “to protect his bride from being snatched by other men.”

During the one-year period in which he had to pay the bridewealth, his marriage was being tested. If he and his wife (and wife and his family) could not learn to get along, he would have sent her back to her parents, and she would be free to marry again. Their marriage worked out, and she became a daughter to his family.

Musia said he recognized that some traditions might not last and that some of these are not important. The most important ones, he said, are bridewealth and parental permission, which legitimize the marriage and joins the families. Not following these traditions brings bad luck. Musia also stressed the importance of children, noting that they are God’s blessing. He and the other villagers introduced me to Musia’s brother and his brother’s wife, who have 10 children. This village is proud of this family.

**Interview 7: Jonathan (Kamba)**

Nairobi, Kenya; Language: English; June 27, 2015

Jonathan G, a taxi driver and fledging farmer from Nairobi, has close ties to his family’s community in rural Kenya. He has already purchased land a small number of animals to begin farming. He is married to a woman from the Luhya community, who lived in a village, not in Nairobi.

When I asked him about the traditions he followed in his marriage and why he followed them, he replied, “I have ancestors. I didn’t just spring up.” Following his community’s traditions was important to Jonathan in order to keep the lineage intact and continuing. He was born and reared in Nairobi, the son of educated professionals who taught him community traditions. Over the years he has visited relatives and his village.

When he and his brothers and cousins were between the ages of eight and ten years old, his uncles came from the village to Nairobi to conduct the rite of passage into
manhood. The boys were taken to a Nairobi hospital to have their circumcisions performed, and his uncles (and his father, as uncle to his cousins) stayed at the hospital to witness and support. His father had explained the circumcision ceremony and given him advice about how to conduct himself. His uncles taught him to be a man. They told him no more child’s play and fighting. After the ceremony, he and his brothers went back to the village to stay with their uncles, who taught them the responsibilities of manhood.

He said he saw his future wife by coincidence when she visited his home. They glanced at each other, and he said something powerful overcame him, and he knew then that she was special. Looking at her “made him forget his name.” He courted her and fell deeply in love. He proposed to her and then took her home to his family. His family investigated her and her family, and then, with his family’s approval, he and his brother visited her family. He visited again with his parents. He said his wife had had instruction on womanhood in her village, but he did not elaborate.

When the bridewealth was settled, he took three goats to her house in the village, along with maize, beans, and other gifts. He is looking forward to leaving Nairobi and living with her on the farm he builds in a rural area on land he has purchased in his village. To him, “Nairobi is just houses.” His ancestral land is home. What he values in a wife is good morals, kindness, and love—“the ability to make me forget my name.”

He thinks that young people who do not follow community traditions are outsiders and alone. They are missing important things. Their marriages won’t last. Their heads will be turned by wealth and they will live selfishly, caring only about themselves. He thinks this is sad.

Interview 8: Paulo (Kamba)
Nairobi, Kenya; Language: English; June 29, 2015

Paulo M is a security guard born in a Kamba village and now living in Nairobi, where he settled to find work. He has been in Nairobi for seven years. He frequently returns to his village for visits. His mother is a living dead, and he feels very close to her. His mother was married, then separated from her husband and moved back with her parents. Her husband had been abusive and beat her; Paulo remembers the abuse. After the separation, his father married another woman. His father had paid a bridewealth for Paulo’s mother, but her family returned all of it after the separation because they did not like him and wanted to sever ties with him. Paulo has not seen him since.

With the bridewealth returned, Paulo was free to live with his mother’s people. His mother went to work selling cloth in order to support herself, and Paulo’s grandmother and aunts took care of him. They paid for his schooling and helped him get a job. Paulo feels grateful to them and is glad he can be buried with his maternal relatives.

Having undergone his rite of passage for manhood, Paulo feels ready for the responsibility of marriage. He underwent circumcision at 12 in a hospital rather than the village because “the technology in the hospital” would be better. His grandmother and aunts explained to him the importance of marriage and advised him how to be a man. People in his village gave him goats and a cow, a chicken, money, and food to help get started in the house he built for himself, the one that his bride will come to when they marry.
Paulo, who is now 26, has found a 23-year-old woman, Maria, whom he wants to marry. He met her in high school, and the couple has been friends for five years. He has not yet asked permission from his family, but eventually he will tell his grandparents so that they can visit her family and make a report on their/her suitability. Then he will make marriage plans with Maria. His grandmother and aunts will negotiate a bridewealth for Maria. Before he marries, he wants to start a career in the Kenya Defense Force so that he can provide a stable life for his family.

A village diviner will also be consulted about the marriage, which the diviner can veto if he believes the couple is not a good match. If the diviner approves the marriage, he protects the marriage and is consulted on the name of the first child born of the marriage. If the diviner’s name is not accepted for the child, the child will die.

For a bridewealth, Paulo expects to pay 32 goats, 18 cows, 40 liters of drink, 40 liters of wheat-and-maize porridge for the woman, fruits, and maybe more. The woman’s education is taken into consideration when families negotiate a bridewealth, and Maria is educated. In his community, the man gave give only an even number of animals. If he gives an odd number, one has to be killed and eaten to even the number.

Paulo said the sex before marriage is acceptable as long as the couple has pledged to wed and the bridewealth payment has started. (Female circumcision is not an issue in the case because Kamba people have abandoned the practice since embracing Catholicism.) Maria will stay in his village and help take care of his mother if that is what his family wants. The marriage will undergo a trial period. If one of the partners wants to leave the other, this partner will inform his or her parents who in turn will notify the other set of parents. The parents will try to help the couple resolve their problems, but if that is not possible, they will give the couple permission to separate. The wife can return the bridewealth and both are free to marry again. If the parents refuse permission to break off the marriage, neither of the two can remarry.

Paulo believes a good wife is one who will bear children and respect both him and his family. She must be able to work hard in the household and be able to able to help his family when they need it. Being in love with one another is important because it means they will stick together through problems.

Paulo thinks all these marriage traditions are important. He thinks young people are moving away from the traditions because they are marrying for wealth rather than love and family. The spouse may not honor the parents. These marriages, he thinks, will not last. As a result, these people will lose the respect of others and may even be cursed. The cause of the lapse in traditional practices is Western influence, which values wealth more than family.

**Interview 9: Cynthia (Kamba)**

Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya; Language: English; June 26 and 27, 2015

Cynthia M is a part-time facilitator of a women’s support group and a part-time staff assistant at a college. She was born in Kibera, Nairobi, where she still lives as a single mother of an 11-year-old daughter. Her grandmother came from a rural Kamba village, where she led a mostly traditional life and where she is now buried. Her grandmother eventually moved to Kibera with her husband and daughter (Cynthia’s mother). Cynthia’s mother was raped in Kibera when she was a young teen, and Cynthia was born of this rape. Her father did not marry her mother and later abandoned her after.
She bore two more daughters by another man, who also abandoned her. Cynthia does not remember her father and does not know who he was because her mother refused to tell. When Cynthia’s mother died, Cynthia’s auntie (her mother’s sister) took in Cynthia and Cynthia’s half-sisters, raising them in Kibera. Without knowing her father’s identity, she could not seek help from his family. Cynthia and her sisters felt the stigma of being the daughters of a single, unmarried mother, and their prospects for marriage were dim without paternal identity or family and community support. Cynthia took her grandfather’s name as her surname.

When Cynthia graduated from high school at 18, her auntie (now her surrogate mother), told her she would have to find her own home and, as the oldest child, take her younger stepsisters with her and keep them in her care. Her auntie had a new husband and several of her own children, with whom she lived in a tiny shanty in Kibera, and said she could no longer take care of so many children. With a very small inheritance her mother left her, Cynthia found barely adequate lodging and took over responsibility for her half-sisters. She was in a desperate situation. She had little money, no job, and no close family to turn to for help. She lived far from her mother’s village, and even there she had only two great-uncles. She had a lot of responsibility but no resources.

Cynthia then met a man she had known as a child in grade school. She had taken a part-time job cleaning for his mother. She liked him, but he fell in love with her. He started giving her money, which she desperately needed. In time, he asked her to move in with her, agreeing to let her sisters come as well; but in return he wanted sex. The man was from the Kisii community, where female circumcision was required before marriage to ensure the virtue of the bride. As a Kamba woman, Cynthia had not been circumcised because Kamba people had given up the practice. Her lack of circumcision, her status as the daughter of an unmarried woman, her poverty, and her lack of paternal identity and family support, made her an undesirable wife in the eyes of the man’s mother. Without a mother or father, Cynthia could not obtain a bridewealth for herself, and without bridewealth she could not obtain a legal marriage. Nevertheless, she and her half-sisters were dependent on the man. She became pregnant by him. His mother was furious about the situation and, in Cynthia’s words, “cast a spell on me,” causing her to lose her first baby. Cynthia thinks his mother was a witch.

She became pregnant again by the man and bore a daughter who, though born prematurely, survived. The man’s mother continued to treat her cruelly and turn the man against her. He began to abuse her. When she enrolled in college (with the help of the Catholic Church) and took a part-time job, he became suspicious of her every time she left the house. He subjected her to humiliating body searches, accused her of vile acts, and belittled her and beat her. Her half-sisters feared his rages and eventually moved out. Cynthia went back to her auntie for help, but her auntie said she was not in a position to help and that she, Cynthia, would have to make the best of the situation with the man. Cynthia began to fear for her life and for the wellbeing of her daughter. One day the man beat Cynthia unconscious, and she spent two days in the hospital. She reported him to the police, but his mother paid a bribe to get him off the hook. At that point, she knew she had to flee with her daughter. She left him and went back to Kibera to live on her own as best she could and continue college.

The man’s mother found her son a new, young bride from her village who was circumcised and traditional. The man left Cynthia alone after he married and satisfied his
mother. She has heard no more from him, and he does not provide for her daughter. She visited his village but received a cool reception from his relatives, who feared she wanted to make an inheritance claim. She discovered that her auntie knew who her father was, but her auntie promised her mother that she would never divulge the father’s name. Cynthia felt betrayed by her auntie, and alone and abandoned. One of her younger stepsisters got pregnant by a man who paid no bridewealth and then abandoned her, a recycling of her mother’s situation. That sister moved back with her auntie, for whom she provides childcare and lends a hand in the auntie’s small business; but the sister also feels hopeless. Only one of the sisters has managed a stable marriage so far.

Cynthia visited her village on her mother’s side. Her maternal grandparents, now deceased, had bought a parcel of land there and allowed her mother to build a house on it. However, the village elders would not allow an unmarried mother to be buried there in violation of a clan taboo. Breaking taboo would bring hardship on the village. As soon as Cynthia’s mother died, the village torn down her house and gave the land to a “legitimate” grandson. Cynthia’s mother had to be buried outside the village.

Cynthia believes that the breaking of tribal traditions by her mother and unknown father jeopardized the stability of not only their lives, but also those of their daughters. The daughters had no patrilineal connections so vital to community inclusion. They are all “outside” their traditional communities and could find no way back in. They had no one to support and protect them or guide them to stable marriages. Their poverty was crushing them. While she was in despair, Cynthia met a South African priest who suggested that she re-connect with the spirit of her mother, a living dead. He told her to pray and to ask for forgiveness for her mistakes. Cynthia traveled to her mother’s grave to pray and ask her mother’s forgiveness. She immediately “felt relief,” and she believes that her mother’s spirit is now protecting her. Cynthia visits the village of her maternal line from time to time and has established a relationship with her grandmother’s two elderly brothers, one of whom is a village elder.

Cynthia still struggles but is managing. She moved to a small flat just outside Kibera and near her sisters. She rents out one of the rooms to produce some income. She manages to send her daughter to a boarding school, which affords her daughter some protecting from the night crime in Kibera. Her daughter will not be raped or succumb to the diseases that overtake many children in Kibera. Cynthia takes temporary jobs when she can find them, but she is afraid she will lose her flat if she does not find full time work soon. She believes that the fact she is a single mother and that she is not from the community of the ruling political party will make securing a job more difficult for her. She thinks she has a lead on her father’s whereabouts and continues to search for him in hopes that if she finds him or his family, she will be acknowledged. That acknowledgement might enable both Cynthia and her daughter to establish lineage on her father’s side, connect them to that family, and help them secure a more stable future.

**Interview 10: Paul (Meru)**

Nairobi, Kenya; Language: English; Date: June 29, 2015

Paul M is a Catholic priest in Nairobi. He was born in a Meru village but now lives in Nairobi, though he expects the church to reassign him to a different country soon. Paul followed traditions regarding rite of passage, including circumcision, elder instruction, and house building; but as a priest he of course did not marry.
Meru people no longer circumcise young women but do expect all young people to follow other traditions. Ear piercing, for both boys and girls, is another mark of coming-of-age. Courtship begins with a young man presenting himself to a young woman only in friendship. After they have gotten to know each other sufficiently and he thinks the match would be a good one, he informs his parents. He does not have to obtain permission from his parents, but he does seek their approval. Parental approval strengthens the marriage. Although elders used to provide instruction on being a good husband/wife, that responsibility has shifted to the Catholic Church for those who marry within it (most couples).

The families meet and assess each other. The young man traditionally visited the woman’s family and, to the woman’s father, offered miraa (also known as khat, a mild narcotic found in the leaves of a plant). If the father chewed the leaves, he publicly declared his acceptance of the marriage proposal. However, miraa is now illegal in Kenya, so the tradition is supposed to have ended. Once the families approve of one another and bride’s bridewealth has been negotiated and settled, the acceptance of marriage is sealed and the families are united. A common bridewealth is 10 cows, 4 goats, sheep, 20 kilos of honey, and a sack of sugar. Modern, wealth families want the equivalent in cash. Cash dowries are becoming more common.

The young woman is supposed to be a virgin to in order to get engaged. Once the engagement is secure, she may have sex with her betrothed. In fact, her virginity is tested (by evident of blood on the bedclothes) before the actual ceremony takes place. If the test discloses that she is not a virgin, her bridewealth is reduced. At the wedding, the man gives his mother-in-law a gift as a sign of respect and to unify the family. Elders conduct the ceremony. Those who marry in the Catholic Church are urged to follow their community traditions before the church wedding. The Church has allied with the community elders. Paul said that couples who marry in the church are more likely to marry for love; those who marry outside the church marry as a cultural requirement.

A good wife is one who has good morals and is not promiscuous. She is a good mother to her children. She participates in, and values, the community culture and teaches it to her children. A good husband provides ancestors and necessities to his children and protects his family. He participates in the community. He does not beat his wife.

**Interview 11: Beatrice (Kamba)**

East Nairobi, Kenya; Language: English; July 3, 2015;

Beatrice M is a strikingly attractive Kamba woman with two children. She and her husband, a member of the Meru community, are both college educated. He is an accountant, she a social worker. She is the daughter of an unmarried mother and grew up with her auntie in Kibera, where she met the future father of her children. He was at university at the time, and she was in secondary school. They fell deeply in love. He could not obtain permission from his widowed mother to marry Beatrice, however, because of Beatrice’s poverty and lack of family and because she was still in secondary school.

Beatrice’s lover took his mother’s refusal very hard, knowing that remaining with Beatrice would cause him to be cast out of his family. He loved his mother and was torn by the decision. Nevertheless, he and Beatrice established their own home after she
graduated from secondary school. His mother, who was well off, immediately stopped paying for his schooling, and mother and son began a long estrangement. He struggled to get enough money to take care of Beatrice and continue his education.

Beatrice, too, was estranged from her maternal family. He father had abandoned her and her mother, and sister. He had married another woman and provided no support for the three of them. When her mother died, Beatrice and her sister were taken in by her maternal auntie, who was not welcoming. Her auntie and uncles were greedy and wanted a big bridewealth for Beatrice, which of course was impossible for Beatrice’s lover. She did not want a bridewealth, which would go to the auntie and uncles because she had no father, and her mother was dead. She felt bitter towards her auntie and uncles because they had been unkind to her and had never supported her. Her auntie and her uncle had been negative about her relationship with her lover, and had made life difficult for them.

Beatrice’s lover eventually got his degree and obtained a good job. He was then able to put Beatrice through college, and she also got a job. They had a baby boy. His mother came to see the baby, and, because the baby looked so much like his father, she was smitten. She ended the estrangement from her son, and she accepted Beatrice. Beatrice now has a second child. She and her children’s father plan to marry, partly in consideration of his mother, who wants it. Beatrice and her husband want a civil marriage, which will legitimize the marriage even without a bridewealth. She does not care about following the traditions that had not served her well. She wants a wedding to secure her children’s place in their father’s family, to which she now feels a close attachment, and because she would “feel happy about having a special day and having her friends there to share it.” Her children’s father has also eschewed most traditions, in part because of his education. He had received the ritual circumcision at 14 and was eligible for community membership if he married.

Beatrice said that nobody had told her how to be a good wife, and that she had not had good role models. She said that being a good wife had “come naturally” to her. She thinks the primary role of a good wife is to take care of her husband and children. When she was young, she had never wanted to marry; she dreamed of becoming a model and traveling the world. She met her lover, however, and he was against the plan. She married out of love for him. As a wife, she comforts him and supports him. When Beatrice’s maternity leave ends, she wants to return to work so as “not to beg for money” and “to be independent.”

Beatrice visits her husband’s family often and wants to be a good daughter-in-law to his mother, whom she likes very much. She said her mother-in-law is relatively young and independent. Although her mother-in-law is wealthy, she chooses to live in Kibera (against her family’s urgings), where she knows, and is known in, the community she loves. When the time comes for Beatrice’s mother-in-law to be taken care of, Beatrice believes that her care should a shared responsibility of the family she raised. The primary focus of her energy is her nuclear family—husband and kids. Next most important are her husband’s family and her sisters (maternal side).

Beatrice said that the role of a husband was to be a provider, but more: She thought he should be a confidant and give emotional support. She wanted someone who could listen, talk to her, and empathize. She does the same with him. They make decisions together. She notes that he wanted her to be educated, and in return for her
giving up her modeling dream, he had sent her through college, which she thinks was a better choice than modeling.

Beatrice said that when it comes time for her daughter to marry, she wants her daughter to make up her own mind about following traditions. She does not think departing from traditions has been a big loss—certainly not for her. On the other hand, she sees some value in traditions, especially those that bind families. She said people should not forget who they are or where they came from. She would like to see traditions maintained in a modified, more symbolic form—for example, the giving of three goats, as a symbolic sealing of the relationship, and to ensure the wife’s burial site and children’s place with the father’s family. Otherwise, “the bridewealth should go,” she said. “It’s like you’re buying somebody.” She said that her burial would be important to her children so that they could “know where I am” and “have access to my spirit.”