Kamweretho: Safe Havens or Rogue Associations? An Analysis of a Women’s Group Movement among the Agikuyu of Central Kenya

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Abstract  Women’s groups have been an integral part of the development of Africa since independence. Various groups and associations have existed with their structure, mission, and composition being determined by their respective community’s background and socio-economic status. The groups have been critical in improving the welfare of members’ families and the communities at large. This paper is based on a study whose broad objective was to investigate the structure, functions and challenges of Kamweretho – an emergent, non-formal women’s group found among the Agikuyu of Kenya. From a broad perspective, it sought to examine the thesis that women groups are an avenue for improving the welfare of group members and their families. From a diachronic perspective, the paper examines comprehensive secondary study of the historical development of the women’s movement in Kenya in general and among the Agikuyu in particular. It then narrows focus to the Kamweretho women groups in Nyeri County, whose findings are discussed. The social capital theory was used in the study. On method, convenient sampling was used to select the four Kamweretho groups that participated in FGDs, in depth interviews, and observation. A sample of respondents was drawn using purposive and simple random sampling. The study found that formation of Kamweretho groups was inspired by the desire to pay homage, and cater for the welfare of parents and guardians of group members. Findings show that Kamweretho groups’ operations and activities do not fit the conventional mechanisms associated with women groups. More so, they seem to question the authority of the traditional definition of a woman’s role and position in the Agikuyu society. As a result, the Kamwerethos are not wholly embraced by the Gikuyu populace, and are a target of sustained mockery and criticism from across the gender and class divide.

Keywords  Kamweretho, Women Groups, Agikuyu, Culture, Conflict, History, Kin

1. Introduction

Women groups are widely recognized as an important tool for development in Africa. In traditional African settings, women came together to promote their common economic, political and social interests. [1] Colonialism and urbanization, however, undermined many of these associations in Africa. In the modern context, these associations help women adjust to urban life, regulate and promote trade, extend credit, teach new social and occupational skills and provide monetary and psychological support. African women have traditionally engaged in cooperative efforts for efficient cultivation and harvesting of their crops. Cooperation was also common in social functions such as marriage ceremonies and in misfortunes such as death. The groups also served wider political and social functions, providing women with organizational bases for non-domestic pursuits. [2]

African women are active in the creation of groups, networks, programs, and organizations both locally and internationally to advocate for their concerns and rights. Women networks in Africa are commonly organized around single issues such as sexual violence, legal issues, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), welfare, among others. However, they may later widen their scope to challenge broader issues. Conferences, workshops, and meetings/gatherings arising from women’s associations create the space for women to share knowledge and create a stronger local information base. [3]

Among the Agikuyu, women have historically come together in varying kinds of associations, groups and organizations both formal and informal. Women come together for various reasons including economic empowerment, welfare purposes, social interactions, provision of labour, compliance to neighborhood agreements
among others. The membership, activities, and structure of these groups vary widely. While some groups are open and admit any interested women who fulfill certain basic requirements such as residence in a particular geographical area, age, or marital status, others are very specific about their membership. This is the case with the Kamweretho groups.

The history of women groups among the Gikuyu may be divided into three periods: Pre-colonial period, Colonial period, and Post-colonial period. During the pre-colonial period the Gikuyu society was organized around reproduction (age grades and kinship). Women’s collective action during this period is seen in the context of division of labour along sexual lines. Contrary to what is generally accepted, Gikuyu women asserted themselves during the pre-colonial period and their groups were significantly active in the control and regulation of production. [4] Colonial capitalist expansion introduced new forces for the subordination of women. The women became over burdened because in addition to their roles as subsistence producers, they also assumed responsibilities that were formerly male. Most importantly during the colonial period, Gikuyu women lost control over the produce from their farms. [4] In the post-colonial era, the state targeted women groups in a bid to strengthen them and make them relevant to the goals of the new political dispensation. The government now appreciated the great potential that women organizations held to improve the lives and livelihoods of women and their families. Formal women groups’ committee meetings, conferences, and training programs were organized widely to facilitate the interaction of women at various levels. By tying government assistance (through training and funding) to women groups’ projects, groups naturally concentrated on commercial pursuits during the post-colonial period. These projects, unfortunately, had little chances for survival as they require capital and skills often, inaccessible to African women. [1]

In the traditional Gikuyu system, activities are clearly and systematically defined and allocated to specific members of the family. For example; women do harvesting, dressmaking, pottery, weaving, grinding corn, carrying, and selling grains. [5] This strict division of labour necessitated cooperation among women in order to help each other to achieve their economic and domestic targets of production.

Traditional women’s groups among the Agikuyu included the gitati (communal efforts) – a form of group where members contribute money to purchase assets and distribute them to the members on a rotational basis. The itati have enabled women to provide their homes with essential items such as water tanks, utensils, beddings, furniture, and other domestic necessities based on the groups’ assessment of its members’ evolving needs. One of the most successful gitati is the Nyakinyua group which was popular among the women of Nyeri County in the post-independence period. Apart from the above stated objectives, the Nyakinyua provided entertainment to the community through performance of traditional Gikuyu songs and dances. [6]

The ngwatio is yet another popular form of women’s group. This is a neighbourhood work group whose name literally means ‘cooperative work’. Through the ngwatio, women cultivate each other’s farms in turns thereby, greatly reducing the need to engage paid labour. The ngwatio, commonly referred to as ngwatiniro (cooperation) does not work on a fixed timetable of events, but rather, its activities are determined by the demand for labour among its members. Ngwatrios also provide forums for social interaction for members and their families.

Through groups, women have empowered themselves and improved their lives and those of their families. For example, the Mabati Women group in central Kenya, where the Agikuyu dominate, was formed for solely to provide better housing for families of members. As the term mabati (iron sheets) depicts, the groups’ intention was to have shelters of the group members and their families roofed with the more durable and safer iron sheets, in place of the then common grass material. [7]

Women groups in Africa provide networking avenues for women to exchange business, professional, and other important information. The groups also provide an arena for the politicization of women’s lives around issues of prime importance to their domestic role such as rising food costs, domestic violence, and the disappearance of their children at the hands of repressive regimes. [8]

The Kamweretho are a recent appearance, having emerged in the early 2000’s. The Kamweretho groupings first emerged in the Kiambu County of Central Kenya. According to Wamue and Njoroge [9] the movement was initiated by urban relatively wealthy women predominantly involved in the business of importing second hand clothes for sale. Popular opinion was, and still is, that the groups comprise single mothers, separated and widowed women, whose main drive is to use the groups to financially and materially empower their own parents. This narrative further suggests that the women, ostensibly, take ‘responsibility’ of paying ‘bride-wealth’ on behalf of their husbands – the absence of the latter notwithstanding. These are presumptions that members vehemently oppose. On this, Kuria [10] says that the Kamweretho groups are a “new cultural institution that has come to challenge the institution of marriage.” He argues that the Kamweretho is “a new addition to the marriage ceremony process among the Gikuyu people of Central Kenya.”

2. Theoretical Framework

The social capital theory was used in this study. According to Newell, Tansley, and Huang [11] the term social capital was popularized by Bordieu, Granovetter, Putman, Coleman, among others. The concept of social capital existed ever since small communities were formed through the interaction of humans with the expectation of reciprocation and mutual trust. Social capital refers to the connections within and between social networks. It facilitates individual or collective action generated by networks of relationships.
Social capital highlights the importance of social relations and cooperation in order to get collective results for collaborating individuals. Social capital results from social relations and consists of the expected benefits from the preferential treatment and cooperation between individuals and groups. It can be seen in action in the many forms of social groups for example; women groups, welfare associations and even in simple cooperative acts such as neighbors watching each other’s houses. [12] It is a popular aspect of African culture. Cooperation and mutual help is more or less obligatory among the Agikuyu in the traditional and contemporary society. [13]

Social capital is central to Kamweretho women groups which are formed with the aim of cooperating for the mutual benefit of members. Members of the groups come together to exploit social capital resulting from their cooperation to assist each other to improve their welfare and that of immediate families and parents. The groups aim at filling a gap in empowerment and welfare provision that is inadequately met by state and other societal institutions. The social capital theory is, therefore, relevant in understanding the motivation(s) that drive the formation of women groups and associations, and explaining the force behind the growing popularity of Kamweretho women groups and the dedication of women to their activities.

3. Study Area, Population and Methodology

The following section provides a brief narrative of the area and group studied, and then proceeds to discuss the methods used in carrying out the study.

3.1. Area and Population

The study was carried out in Nyeri Municipality and Kieni West districts of Nyeri County. Locations in the former Nyeri Municipality Division (now Nyeri Municipality district) included: Municipality, Mukurweini, Othaya and Tetu. Mwiyogo, Mugunda, Gatarakwa, Endarasha and Mweiga are locations in Kieni West district. Nyeri Municipality is located approximately 152 kilometers north of Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. Within the municipality, is Nyeri town, the administrative headquarters of Central Province of Kenya. On the other hand, Kieni West district has its headquarters in Mweiga.

The main features of the county are the Aberdare ranges, River Ewaso Nyiro, and the expansive Solio ranch. Livelihood zones are divided into marginal mixed farming zone, where food crops and livestock keeping is done, mixed farming zone that entails production of food crops, livestock and horticulture and finally, formal employment zone where casual wage labour and business are the main source of livelihood. [14] The County enjoys favourable temperature and high rainfall. Added to the rich soils within the region, the County boasts of having huge land-based, economic potential. Indeed, it is Kenya’s epicenter in tea and coffee production.

Members of the Agikuyu ethnic group, the largest ethnic community in Kenya, dominantly occupy Nyeri County. The Agikuyu myth of origin traces their ancestry from Gikuyu and Mumbi and their nine daughters. Indeed, the kinship system among the Agikuyu is organized around these nine daughters (Acheera, Agachiku, Airimu, Ambui, Angare, Anjiru, Angui, Ethaga, Aitheranda). Nyeri County is thought to be the cradle of Gikuyu and Mumbi’s origins and activities. Thought to be initially matriarchal, as their myth of origin states, the Agikuyu eventually became patriarchal after a treacherous act that involved a decision by the men to impregnate their wives at about the same time and hence ending the latter’s hegemony. [5]

3.2. Methodology

In terms of information scope, the research examined the functions, membership, activities, challenges, as well as other aspects of the groups in detail. It focused on clarifying the facts about the aims and objectives of the groups. It was limited to the description of the Kamweretho women’s groups only and not any other of the existing groups.

The study adopted purposive, stratified and simple random sampling procedures. While the purposive technique was used to pick the universe of Kieni West and Nyeri Municipality, a typically Agikuyu region that was assumed to house Kamweretho groups, the simple random procedure was used to select individual respondents. The stratified random technique on the other hand ensured that Kamweretho group members and key informants were given a chance to be included in the sample. In the end, the sample size was 120 (60 from Kieni West and 60 from Nyeri Municipality), with individuals being the basic units of analysis. Similar studies that have been carried out previously have utilized a similar sample size successfully (see for example [15]). In addition, 10 key informants, with equal representation by gender, participated in the study. Four focus group discussions (FGDs) with Kamweretho groups were carried out in each district, with each FGD comprising 10 informants.

The observation method was also applied. Observation was used to learn the composition of membership, activities, conduct, roles, and functions of the Kamweretho while attending the group’s meetings. For observation to be successful it involved the researcher getting involved with group’s affairs or attachment to a group to study social action in its natural context undisturbed as it occurs. Kothari describes observation as a systematic way of scrutinizing activities as they occur in nature and which involves sensation, attention, and perception. [16]

The research made use of two interview methods; in depth interviews and formal interviews. Formal interviews were pre-planned; a pre-determined set of topics was addressed guided by an interview schedule. This technique of data collection was employed to collect both quantitative as well
as qualitative data. Questions were designed and structured in such a way that they collected only the information that was necessary, ensuring they were not too blunt or intrusive to the respondents’ privacy.

The questionnaire as a tool of data collection enabled the gathering of a wide array of information. The study used various sections of the questionnaire to collect data that answers all the research questions adequately and was employed on informants selected through random sampling.

4. Findings and Discussion

The following section discusses formations of the Kamweretho groups. It pays specific interest on the type of women who characterize the membership, and the main activities and functions of the groups. The section ends by examining the challenges, attitudes and perceptions of the Kamwerethos by group and non-group members.

4.1. Membership, Activities and Functions of Kamwerethos

Kamweretho groups fit the non-formal category of women organizations that are strongly founded and bonded based on social capital and socio-cultural networks. None of the groups represented by the respondents was duly registered by the Government of Kenya. The structures of the groups were observed to owe very little features of Kenya’s modern nation-state. As a result, the groups do not benefit from government programs intended for women’s groups and associations, such as the Women Enterprise Fund (WEF) and UWEZO fund.

The study findings showed that a majority of membership in the Kamweretho groups were women aged between 41-50 years. This comprised 43% of the respondents, and was closely followed by those between the ages 31-40 (37%). Of the total members, 86% were married. The rest were either widows (4%), or single women (10%). Marriage is observed to be a push factor in joining Kamweretho groups. Ostensibly, the groups would cater to interests of the married. Pre-existing relations, passion, and commitment to common agenda determined who is accepted as a member.

The study established that majority of Kamweretho group members owned and operated businesses and small farming enterprises; meaning, most were self-employed. However, membership did not seem to be influenced by occupation of the women, but rather, social bonding seem to have been the overriding factor. While focus group discussions held in the peri-urban Nyeri Municipality district indicated that women in the lower income bracket generally shied away from establishing or joining the Kamweretho movement, those in the essentially rural based, Kieni West district, unanimously agreed that financial standing of an individual was not decisive in joining Kamweretho. From key informant sources, we were able to gather that the economic factor in the composition of Kamweretho in Nyeri Municipality was necessitated by its membership being largely dominated by emigrants. In this case, members have to contribute more for transport and accommodation to their natal homes than their counterparts in the rural areas.

Economic challenges, thought to be core to women enhancement, may imply that their groupings would be hinged and driven towards this important goal. It is not so in the case of the Kamweretho. Among these groups, the main activity that members were involved in was paying homage to their own parents – a largely social event, but underlined by a strong reward system as demonstrated by the goodies given to them. During the visits, Kamweretho members gave gifts such as clothing, utensils, and foodstuff to their parents and, at times, other kin members and neighbours. In the study, the consensus by respondents was that Kamwerethos were solely founded for purposes of these visitations. Where members did not have any surviving parent, the Kamweretho group visited a parent figure nominated by the benefiting member. In most cases these were aunts (along maternal lines), or former close female friends of their mothers – particularly those regarded as mother figures by the member. In cases where women came from polygamous unions, and their biological mother had passed on, they took their Kamweretho visits to their oldest brother’s (if he agrees) or sister’s homes as opposed to their stepmothers’ homes.

Homage was paid on a rotational basis. To prepare for this, members would raise finances through merry-go-rounds. Monies raised from members would then go towards purchases of clothing, food, and other domestic consumables, to be given to parents. Kamweretho groups also gave monetary gifts to their parents during the visits. In the study, the amount given ranged from KSh. 5,000 ($50) to KSh. 20,000 ($200), a figure dependent on the size of membership. While critics see in the gifts and cash payments a form of bride-wealth, hence undermining the responsibilities and capabilities of their spouses, Kamweretho members saw in this a symbolic gesture of appreciation to their parents for their role in nurturing and developing them to what they were. Blessings received from the parents visited were further thought to create some bond among members of the groups. More so, the study found out that those members of the Kamweretho who stayed far apart from their parents, and hence took considerable time before paying them routine visits, rationalized this aspect of conspicuous consumption as compensatory for their long absence.

Groups often disintegrate after completing a cycle of visiting the women’s parents. Few transform themselves to welfare entities that take care of members. Particularly for the married members, this presumably egoistic nature of the Kamweretho – that of attending to members’ blood kin without regard to those of their spouses - has, indeed, been its main critique. This approach has been interpreted as a challenge on the patriarchal authority of the Gikuyu family.

A significant but subsidiary objective of Kamweretho groups was the support rendered to members in times of financial needs – particularly on issues pertaining to school and hospital levies, and funeral expenses. This was
particularly so for the potentially vulnerable segment in its members; the few single parents. Seen in this perspective, Kamwerethos were thus an avenue for women empowerment through financial support to the needy cases.

Kamwerethos also provided members with a social forum where members shared jokes, exchanged pleasantries, took Bible studies, sang and danced, and drank and wined. A typical Kamweretho meeting would not shy away from any or all of these. Such interactions are important in group socialization and bonding, and are critical in building trust and confidence among members. The groups would also use this forum as a conflict resolution arena for members perceived or seen to be in disagreement. In this regard, Kamwerethos would be seen to be important as instruments of social cohesion.

Were Kamwerethos gender sensitization platforms? Did they undermine traditional social institutions that defined and regulated social interactions and relations through their activities? Indeed, this was the sort of narrative created on the Kamwerethos.

The traditional gender roles in the family in Nyeri, as in other parts of the country, have changed due to various socio-economic reasons. Women are increasingly taking up traditionally defined male roles in order for them to meet basic subsistence for their families. This has been interpreted as aimed at upsetting the status quo. Popular opinion on the Kamweretho from non-members suggested that the Kamweretho groups had ‘sinister’ intentions of emancipating women from men’s control. While some key informants thought that Kamweretho groups were simply an avenue for women to jointly care for their ageing parents, others had the idea that these were exclusive clubs of women who had hidden anti-social and anti-men agendas. The assumption that Kamwerethos were intent to challenge the status quo was a source of resentment and discomfort by other members of the body politic as will be discussed later in here.

4.2. Attitudes, Perceptions and Challenges of the Kamweretho

Epha Maina’s popular Gikuyu beat, ‘Kamweretho’ seems to capture the general perceptions among a large cross-section of the Agikuyu, on the Kamweretho women groups. Enjoying considerable airtime in local FM stations, the song brings out the Kamwerethos as entities for women escapades, where members engage in anti-social behaviours such as illicit sexual affairs and alcoholism. [17] In the study, 60 non-Kamweretho members were asked to give opinion on the worth of the Kamweretho groups. Of these, 30 were women and other members or had never joined Kamwerethos. The rest were men. Eighty three percent of this group had negative opinion on the Kamweretho. Men, in particular, felt that the groups’ activities were meant to undermine their positions as household heads. Indeed, to them, the spiraling cases of violence against men in Nyeri, a well documented scenario in Kenyan media circles, can be attributed to the Kamwerethos, among other factors. In Focus Group Discussions, it emerged that dissent of the groups by women was because the Kamwerethos were perceived to be elitist and of no economic value to the common Gikuyu woman. Issues pertaining to illicit/extra marital sexual affairs and drunkenness, both associated with Kamwerethos, featured prominently in discussions by both genders.

It was clear from the discussions, like in Epha Maina’s song, that Kamwerethos were thought to steer women away from the acceptable values of the Agikuyu. A key informant, a social worker in Nyeri Municipality, pointed out that suspicion towards the groups mainly came from the fact that it is an exclusively women’s club where members travel to their natal homes and, often, return home late or spend the night away. To him, Kamwerethos are simply excuses for women to go out and engage in alcoholism and extra-marital affairs. To bring his point home, the informant quoted a chorus in the song that says, gari cia guthii Kamweretho cithukaga igicoka (vehicles carrying women to Kamweretho activities only break-down on the way back home).

Focus Group Discussions were held with members of the Kamwerethos on some of the criticisms leveled against them. From the discussions, it was clear that members view the Kamweretho meetings as a break from their usual grind of life. For majority of these women, this is the only day that they can enjoy each other’s company away from their usual places of work and residence. In essence, this may lend credence to claims of escapades as earlier stated in this paper. Members were of the view that they were justified to spend as much as it took to finance the activities of the Kamweretho activities; men (read, spouses) needed not be necessarily put in picture when spending money for their blood kindred.

Given the magnitude of resentment by men, it is no wonder that they constitute one of the major obstacles in the operations of the Kamwerethos. Though Kamwerethos are exclusive women groups, all male informants in the study objected to their operations, indicating that they would not be willing to participate in Kamweretho fetes, even if their own sisters brought the groups to visit their parents. Basically, men saw in these organizations a form of deliberate attempt by women to alienate husbands from their parents-in law. How, for instance, would you rationalize a group of amorphous women, unknown to the husband, handing over cash and other goodies to his parents-in law? They argued.

Leadership of Kamweretho groups is determined by factors such as relationship with other members, age, and level of literacy. Leadership rows and wrangles were yet another challenge faced by the Kamweretho groups. Leadership rows are considered a characteristic of many informal women groups. [18,2,19] Among the Kamwerethos, these conflicts were expressed in form of disagreements on choices of leaders, lack of consensus among group leaders, differences based on personalities, alleged arrogance and obstinacy of appointed/elected leaders, among other reasons. Another significant challenge was lack of trust among group
members. This would usually lead to dropouts or withdrawals by members from the groups before a complete cycle of visits to each member’s parents, hence hampering their activities. The study found out that aggrieved members, however, feel tied to the groups either because their families are yet to be visited or to avoid damaging pre-existing relations with other members as colleagues, church mates, neighbours, and old friends.

Though Kamwerethos were thought to be a preserve of the relatively affluent members of society, the study, in fact, revealed a situation otherwise. Inadequate finances to fund their activities were observed to be a challenge; thus indicating that members did not necessarily belong to the economically endowed segment of society. Using a ranking system of response, 75% of the respondents rated finances as ‘inadequate’, while another 17% rated the finances as ‘very inadequate’. The respondents claim to have been torn between investing in personal initiatives and meeting the demands of the Kamweretho – the latter being largely social. The respondents admitted that though economically burdensome, Kamweretho activities were of social value as they served to keep them in tabs with their blood kindred, and offered them an opportunity to support them materially and financially. They sustained social ties and social capital among women and their natal families. In this quest, the women did not receive or expect any financial support from their husbands or other members of their families – for reasons already stated earlier in the paper.

The great concern of contemporary women’s groups and associations that their achievements should not seem to surpass those of their husbands seems to contradict traditional Gikuyu concepts and values about success. Traditionally, the success of a Gikuyu man was directly related to the achievements of his wife or wives. A man acquired high status if his wife was able to produce enough food for her family and have surplus for trade and enough to entertain visitors generously. The contribution of Gikuyu women was not only recognized and emphasized but men had to work alongside women to acquire high status and respect. [4]

5. Conclusions

The UN Decade for Women (1976-85) realized that one way in which women may increase their access to state resources, training, managerial positions, and political power is through mobilizing themselves into organizations. The Kamweretho women groups are Post-Decade entities, but whose objectives and operations may not align with expectations of this realization. Founded on traditional values, Kamwerethos are social forums with a cardinal objective of espousing reciprocal relations, where children are obligated to take good care of their (ageing) parents. Ideally, the groups do not aim to empower their members per se, but through them, blood kindred of members benefit both financially and materially. Since these welfare relations are skewed to the advantage of blood kin of group members alone, Kamwerethos lose support from the male population and a cross-section of women. The ideals and activities associated with Kamwerethos are seen to be a threat to family stability. Kamweretho visits made to the women’s natal home (with all the material and financial accompaniments) to the exclusion of their male counterparts are thought to undercut the patriarchal authority of the Agikuyu family system. More so, the ‘celebrations’ associated with such fetes – such as partying, wining, drinking and dancing – are thought to challenge the moral positioning of the woman within the Gikuyu social fabric.

Still, Kamwerethos can be thought to be women’s havens, where members take recourse away from their daily challenges to unwind. The sideshows that characterize Kamweretho activities can be contextualized this way. Yet, these are the very factors that engender dissent towards the group, and which lead critique to consider these as a conglomeration of rogue women.

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