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Gender and African Spirituality: Repositioning Relationships for Food Security Development in the 21st Century

Eunice Kamaara,

Moi University,
P.O Box 3900 Eldoret, Kenya.
ekamaara@gmail.com

Introduction

The subject of gender relations in the context of development in any sphere of life is critical because as power is fundamental to our understanding of the human social world and energy is fundamental to our understanding of the physical world, so is gender fundamental to human development. In this key note address, I hope that I will excite appreciation of: i) indigenous African knowledge, ii) the interconnectedness of creation, and thus, iii) the centrality of relationships, and iv) the need for interdisciplinary studies, all in the context of food security in Africa in the 21st Century.

The World Health Organization defines food security as a situation where "people, at all times have physical and economic access to adequate/ sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (WHO, 1996). The Ministry of Agriculture in Kenya identifies the following dimensions of food security: Food availability, food accessibility, food stability, and food utilization/ nutrition (GoK: MoA, 2009). I unpack this concept further to underscore the relational nature of human beings and there introduce what I consider the central dimension of food security –relationships. For now am content to define food security as availability and accessibility of food to people for an active and healthy life *in community*.

The situation of food security in Africa

For the first time in history, the African Green Revolution Forum (AGRF) was held in Africa, specifically in Ghana between 2-4 September 2012. In his opening address of the forum, Kanayo F. Nwanze, the president of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), emphasized

this time as a historic moment for agriculture in Africa by pointing out the many opportunities available for the continent. I am convinced that this time in history provides an opportunity for Africa but not only to sustainably expand agriculture like Nwanze is, but also to expand our perspectives to food security. Since Africa is not homogenous I use illustrations from Kenya in this address.

Agriculture is the mainstay of Kenya's economy. According to the Economic Review of Agriculture, Kenya had a GDP of $31 billion in 2008 with agriculture accounting for 24 percent % of this GDP. The review adds that in spite of agriculture taking up 70 % of the country's labour force about half the population of Kenya lack food with 10 million of this suffering chronic food security and between 2 and 4 million requiring emergency food at any one time. This compares with USAID/GoK map of food security in Kenya presented in figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Current Food Security Outcomes & Classifications in Kenya
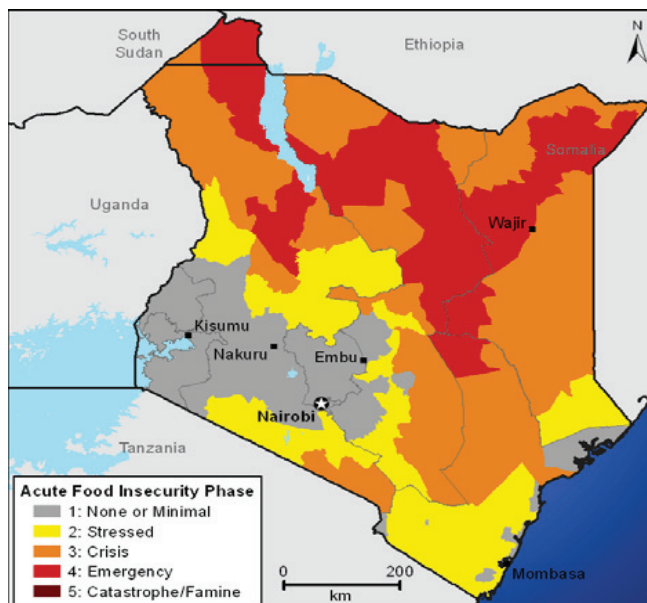
Source: *USAID/Kenya government site Accessed on 29th Sept. 2012*

One glance at the classifications of food security against Kenya's eco-climatic zones would suggest that there is food shortage. So would consideration that only about 20% of Kenya is suitable for arable farming. However, a critical analysis of the situation indicates that availability of food is not an issue; Kenya can produce enough food to feed its people. However, the great majority of the Kenyan population cannot access available food because they are too poor to afford the food. According to the Kenya National Food Policy, 2011, poverty stands at 46% with 7.5 million living in abject poverty. So, isn't poverty the single cause of food insecurity in Kenya? In this paper I draw from history to argue that food insecurity is not necessarily related to poverty: It is possible for people to have enough to eat even when they are poor. We shall come back to this point later. For now, let us focus on food shortage as one of the commonly cited causes of food insecurity.

The main cause of food insecurity in Africa: the myth of food shortage?

Food shortage is cited as the major cause of food insecurity in Africa. Food shortage is said to result from low agricultural productivity, inadequate access to productive assets (land and capital), inadequate infrastructure, high population pressure on land and inadequate access to appropriate technologies by farmers. While food shortage may be an issue, I argue herein that it is not the major cause of food insecurity. To single out one cause of food insecurity is to assume that if it is addressed, there would be no insecurity. But deeper analysis suggests that this is far from the truth. It is possible for sections of a community or a country, for that matter, to be hungry even when there is enough food for all. Kenya for example, is capable of producing enough food to take care of its population and on many occasions there is hunger at the household level in the midst of plenty of food at the national level. In such situations as I will argue in the following pages, the issue is not food shortage but unhealthy relationships.

Do we have enough resources in Kenya to produce enough food for the country? Anybody who is familiar with food production would answer this question in the affirmative. The acreage of Kenya's agriculturally productive land is enough to meet food needs of all Kenyans. The idea that there is population pressure on land is a myth! The case of Githunguri Dairy Farmers Cooperative Society (popularly known as Fresha) in Githunguri Division bursts this myth is one of the most densely populated areas in Kenya and technology use in the division is minimal. Yet, currently the division is the country's case of best practice in small scale dairy farming (largely zero-grazing) with an annual turnover of Kshs 3 billion and an

average of 170,000 litres of milk per day. This is much more milk than all the counties of the Rift Valley province combined. (See: http://www.fresha.co.ke/home/)

Relationships and food security: A holistic perspective

In this paper, I argue that the major cause of food insecurity in Africa is unhealthy relationships, and not poverty or food shortage for that matter. In propounding the centrality of relationships, I borrow from African indigenous knowledge on spirituality to show the interconnectedness of reality. Thus, to address relationships is to address food insecurity in a holistic way. A brief exposition on relationships in African spirituality and the impact of colonialism on this suffices.

According to traditional African worldview, all creation is designed to work together in unity and rhythm: when healthy relationships flourish between the Creator and among all creation, life is promoted for all creation and all creation rejoice together but when there are unhealthy relationships, life is threatened and all creation suffer together. Life was therefore understood as unitary whole where individual elements of creation were understood as part of the whole creation.

A systematic process of formulating and passing on this education existed form of rites of passage from pre birth to ancestor hood. The rite of passage of initiation from childhood to adulthood marked one of the major levels of education. It was an elaborate process of intensive education with special emphasis on: i) The importance of maintaining the right relationships with Creator and among the created, ii) The centrality of humans in God's reign and of the earth as host and mother of all created elements, iii) The concept and practice of rights and responsibilities with clear indication that all actions have consequences, and, iv) The dignity of all human persons in the context of community and the need for self esteem and self worth. The rite of initiation from childhood to adulthood was the specific moment when this central education for holistic life in community was intensively and purposively instilled in individuals and every individual was thereafter held responsible for his/her thinking and acting. This education for holistic life was in essence education for healthy relationships.

But with the scramble for Africa and the consequent partition of the continent traditional African Spirituality was significantly disrupted. This led to alienation of Africans from land, way of life, holistic education, and worst of all, from the self (Wa Thiong'o, 2009).

Gender relations and food security in Africa

In nearly all traditional African societies, food shortage was rare and nobody ever died of hunger. Even those who lived in abject poverty, for example the *ahoi* (literally means beggars) among the Gikuyu of Central Kenya never lacked food. In line with African understanding of the centrality of relationships for life, there were institutionalized systems of charity. For example, at harvesting, farmers were expected to leave some fruits of their crops on the ground for those who did not harvest enough for one reason or the other. In this section, we narrow down to gender relationships as illustrative of the centrality of relationships in food security.

The basic resource in production of food in traditional African societies, then as now, was land. But unlike now, in traditional African societies, land was never owned. On the contrary, land was understood as host to people and therefore land sustained humans and humans returned to land upon death. In essence, the land owned people. Therefore, neither men nor women owned land. But men held land in trustee for future generations of men and women, having inherited this trusteeship from earlier generations. Within this arrangement, the piece of land on which any one person worked on is what he or she had rights over. Both men and women owned the means of as well as the products of their labour in line with a clear system of division of labour. In agricultural societies, certain crops would be grown and certain animals kept by women around the compound while men would grow other crops and herd cattle away from the homestead. Thus, both men and women had rights to use and control land. Both men and women also had control of the tools of production. However, in nearly all African societies, women were entirely in charge of the products of labour, especially of food. Thus, they determined what would be enough for their family's consumption and what was surplus and could therefore be traded for other goods. This made sense since cooking was a female gender role.

With colonialism and neo-colonialism, registration of land was introduced and with it the concept of land ownership. Land was no longer distributed in terms of need and ability to manage it, but on the basis of political power and influence. So who owns land in Africa now? A handful of Africans own land while millions are landless. In Kenya for example, three families own nearly half of the rich agricultural land in the country! By and large, pieces of land are registered under male names so that they exclusively belong to individual men. Additionally, as bona fide owners of land, men control the tools of labour as well as the products of labour. Unlike in traditional African societies where food was a basic right for all human

persons and therefore not a product for sale until everyone had enough to eat, food became first and foremost a product for sale even before families have enough to eat. We then have a transformation of food into means for wealth (for males) rather than wealth being 'surplus food'. Thus, family food will be sold leading to household food insecurity.

Generally, unlike in traditional African societies whereby a clear system of division of labour existed, today, women basically provide all agricultural labour at the household level. Yet, they have no control over the land, the tools of production or the products of labour. In fact, women have largely been transformed into tools of labour owned by men. With materialism, individualism and consumerism, food has become a good for maximizing profits and therefore like all goods, it is controlled by market forces. Against this background, shortage must be created to increase the demand and therefore increase the cost of food. In essence, with sale of food, human life is put up on sale. Food insecurity in Africa occurs against these realities.

The need for interdisciplinary perspectives

Sadly, development has never been a local initiative; it is always donor driven. In relation to gender relations, gender empowerment programs from WID to WAD to GAD have been prescribed and promoted with disastrous results. In terms of food security, foreign solutions are based on the mythical understanding that food shortage is the major cause of food insecurity in Africa. Thus the solutions have been towards increasing production such as use of indiscriminate technology. But whose technology is this?

The challenge of following foreign solutions lies in that we get compartmentalized solutions each relating to only one aspect of the problem. This compartmentalization leads to new challenges e.g. climate changes, conflicts, gender violence, etc which we then pursue in compartments. The result is there for all to see: increase food insecurity. Why is Africa expected to compensate for all development challenges? When there is climate change, Africa has to engage in carbon trading and when there is food insecurity Africa should adopt biotechnology. In whose benefits and at whose expense are these prescriptions? We need to change our perspectives. We need to look for African solutions to African problems. Inter-disciplinary approaches are about relationships: How do we relate with that which is greater than us? How do we relate with ourselves, with fellow human persons, with fellow creation? There is need for inter-disciplinary teaching and learning with community.

The Case of School of Arts and Social Sciences at Moi University

SASS offers interdisciplinary programs in all its programs. The programs are structured in a way that all students in the School take a minimum of 27 units from a set of required school wide courses (coded SAS). These courses are carefully chosen from all the departments in the School and distributed throughout all semesters of the four academic years of undergraduate studies. The first numeral in ach course code denote the year of study. Examples of SAS courses (each course has 3 units) include: SAS 104: Social Science Perspective in HIV/AIDS, SAS 202: Introduction to Critical Thinking, SAS 301: Contemporary Gender Issues, SAS 402: Planning Policy Analysis and Project Management.

Besides these SAS courses students have to take required courses from a clusters of disciplines which form an academic degree program. These are coded as per the program for instance BAS for BA in cultural studies which comprises of History, Religion and anthropology. For this program, a student is required to take a total of 45 BAS units. The following are examples of BAS courses: BAS 202: Social Statistics, BAS 304: Social Change and Development, and, BAS 401: Issues in Social Ethics.

Figure 2: Consolidated table showing the distribution of courses for any student taking a BA degree in the SASS

YEAR	SCHOOL COMMON COURSES (SAS)	DEGREE PRO-GRAMME COURSES (E.G. BAS)	DISCIPLINE OF SPE-CIALIZA-TION (E.G. RELIGION)	ELECTIVE (ANYWHERE WITHIN UNI-VERSITY)	TOTAL
ONE	9	12	12	9	42
TWO	6	12	15	9	42
THREE	6	9	18	9	42
FOUR	6	9	18	9	42
TOTAL	**27**	**45**	**60**	**36**	**168**

Beyond teaching, all academic staff in SASS engages in research and extension activities. For SASS, all knowledge generated in research projects should be integrated into teaching but also into community development. Thus, action research and community based teaching and learning are part of the SASS programmes. Both students and staff may be

attached to specific community projects for teaching, research, learning, and community service. The African Christian Initiation Program presents a case of such a project under the SASS.

Conclusion

Agricultural development in Africa has to become a local initiative drawing form indigenous African knowledge systems to embrace interdisciplinary approaches to various challenges. Indigenous African knowledge identify the centrality of relationships in human life so that healthy relationships lead to good while unhealthy relationships lead to evils, in this context to food insecurity. Compartmentalization of knowledge and development need to be appreciated as a foreign concept and materialism, individualism and consumerism highlighted as evils that lead to food insecurity. There is need to detach food insecurity from poverty so that in spite of poverty, all persons can access food as a basic human right. Otherwise, with human life on sale in African markets as in global markets, food insecurity will continue unabated no matter how much food we produce!

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