

## Sexual initiation and the transmission of reproductive knowledge



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### Abstract

Initiation rituals are still widely practised among the Kaguru of Morogoro district in Tanzania. Young women are introduced to the *digubi* dance at the time of puberty, and a version of the dance is performed at the time of marriage. This form of traditional theatre serves a function of education and socialization, and the question is raised of how much of reproductive behaviour is transmitted in this medium. Our informants suggest that notions of female dependence and standard of behaviour are conveyed in the process, but that information on child rearing and postpartum abstinence are transmitted by personal contact with older women at the time of the first birth.

In Africa, there are often striking differences in fertility levels between neighbouring ethnic groups living in similar environments. These can often be traced to cultural differences of an unobtrusive character affecting the proximate determinants of fertility. Diverse behaviour seems to be adopted routinely by groups without obvious reasons. For example, the normative age at marriage may be 17 years in one population, and 20 in another; it may be customary to breastfeed for more extensive periods in one group than in a neighbouring one; or the abstinence period after a birth may vary a great deal. Caldwell and Caldwell (1977) explored the importance of marital sexual abstinence in determining fertility, and African demography has not been the same since; but the Yoruba of Nigeria, which were the topic of their study, turned out to be quite different from many other ethnic groups of Africa in this respect, and the duration of postpartum sexual abstinence is one of the most important factors explaining natural fertility differentials.

How do the members of a group learn when it is proper to marry, how long a woman should nurse, or when a couple should abstain? The most likely path of transmission of rules affecting reproduction is from mother to daughter, in the daily conduct of family life or at the time when the young woman reaches certain important stages in her life, such as marriage or a first birth, to which nothing in her previous experience may have prepared her. Alternatively, it may be speculated that cultural norms, rules of behaviour, and taboos pertaining to certain life stages like puberty or marriage are transmitted in ritual ways, by special ceremonies, or in associations or secret societies, by the group's elders. Lesthaeghe (1989:Chapter 11) in particular has speculated on the importance of the latter path.

Under a grant of the Rockefeller Foundation to Etienne van de Walle, Chrysanth Kamuzora and Penina Mlama as principal investigators, fieldwork was conducted among the Kaguru of Morogoro Province in Tanzania. The work involved the collection of a small number of women's biographies (43 in all), and the administration of a structured questionnaire to about 800 women. This paper is based solely on the women's biographies. The respondents were visited twice by a woman interviewer, under the supervision of Professors Kamuzora and Mlama of the University of Dar es Salaam; they organized the tape recording, translation and transcription of the interviews. The authors of the present paper

claim no direct knowledge of the Kaguru and instead rely on the texts themselves as the single data source for analysis.

The Kaguru were studied during the 1950s by an anthropologist, Beidelman, who described puberty rituals and sexual initiation for girls in the following way:

At the onset of menstruation, girls are immediately isolated in a special house and subjected to intensive initiation rites. The purpose of these is to 'cool' the girl whose menstruation has 'heated' her, that is, made her sexually (and thus morally) unstable and potentially dangerous. During this period various substances (ashes and water infused with herbs) are put on her skin to 'cool' her. She is taught by women of her grandmother's generation and girls who have already been initiated. The girl is taught various riddles, sayings and songs with double meaning relating to proper sexual conduct and sexual hygiene. Traditionally, the girl was required to remain indoors for many months; today she is usually only kept indoors for a short period of a few weeks. In the past it was said that being immured caused her to become pale and fat, two attributes of beauty. Kaguru girls are (or were in the past) subjected to labiadeotomy. This is said to 'soften' the girl and thereby make her better able to bear children. At present this operation is not practised on all Kaguru girls... (Beidelman, in Molnos 1973:264).

One remarkable aspect of this description is that it seems to refer to a somewhat different set of Kaguru customs from those practised in the area where, and at the time when, our survey took place. Only one of the respondents in our survey seemed to echo the procedures described by Beidelman:

Normally in Kaguru culture when a girl becomes mature she is kept inside the house for some months till when she gets a fiancée, so the day they take her out, *digubi* is danced... There were no dances at my marriage; the dances were during the time when I was circumcised and when I was sent out... During my *digubi* dance I was not yet courted, so it was not directed so much towards marriage, as how to live as an adult (34-year-old Kaguru woman).

Perhaps the time which has elapsed since Beidelman's fieldwork, and changing cultural practice, are responsible in part for the discrepancy; perhaps the customs differ from place to place among people who call themselves by the common name of Kaguru. One of the researchers involved in our study, Professor Penina Mlama, wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on theatre forms, and particularly on rituals of sexual initiation practised by the Kaguru of Kilosa district in the Morogoro region of Tanzania, where our survey also took place (Mlama 1990). She drew attention in particular to *digubi*, a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood for girls, in which

the life experiences of womanhood are represented with the practical purpose of instructing the girls on how to fulfil their various roles as adults. Enactments are performed that instruct on the physiological nature of the woman and its relation to reproduction processes, marriage life, parenthood and the obligations and responsibilities of women in the society (Mlama 1990:166).

The songs and the content of the instruction may vary from performance to performance, but the style of execution involves common elements: song, mime and dances backed by the beat of *nhunyi* drums, and a characteristic dance step:

The dance in *digubi* involves a fast, circular shoulder movement. The shoulders move up, back, down, front and up again. There is no stop between one complete circular movement and another. While performing this shoulder movement, the dancer moves in a circle with the other dancers in short and fast walking steps (Mlama 1990:172).

The participants mime the content of the song, and include the new initiate or initiates in the actions of mature women of the community.

Mlama's field investigation of actual *digubi* performances was completed in the late 1970s. She witnessed performances and collected *digubi* songs. The rituals serve vital cultural functions. They introduce new adult members to the cultural traditions of the group, and they help integrate them into the community. Mlama found that *digubi*'s function is both to impart information and to provide a means for socialization. At a material level, the focus of the instruction is on menstruation and sexual hygiene, on how to conceal menstrual blood, dispose of sanitary napkins, keep the body clean, etc. Moreover, in addition to the initiation which occurs normally shortly after menarche, there are also *digubi* dances at the time of marriage. Here the *digubi* performances introduce the new bride to the details of the sexual act, and teach her how to behave towards her husband and her in-laws.

Almost twenty years later, in 1994, we found that 92 per cent of the adult women interviewed in a survey of two villages (which constituted the second stage of our survey) reported having danced *digubi*. This number is extraordinarily high in comparison to the women interviewed in depth in our small sample of women for whom we collected birth histories, but it indicates that the *digubi* rituals are alive, and potentially important. In the collection of women's biographies that was completed in 1993, we asked questions on the *digubi* and its content. We were interested in learning whether it was an information medium through which instructions about abstinence and child care were transmitted. It turned out that it was not. We also asked how the respondent had learned about child care and sexual abstinence after a birth. It is on those materials from the biographies that the present study is based.

### ***Digubi* in the biographies**

The first element that strikes us in the interviews is that the term *digubi* is used somewhat loosely by the respondents. Sometimes, it refers to the initiation ceremony itself; sometimes, to the song and dance that is the means used to convey information to the young girls who undergo the passage into adulthood. *Digubi* refers alternatively to the puberty rituals or to the sexual initiation that occurs at the time of marriage. One woman said:

There are several *digubi* between puberty and marriage, and the last one is for giving lessons to the girl, when the girl is about to get married (56-year-old woman).

Furthermore, a great many other puberty or marriage rituals that are not technically part of *digubi* are sometimes lumped together under the name. For example, one woman gave the following account of her wedding:

There was a type of *digubi* known as *chilondolondo*. The bridegroom's relatives came to our home one day before the wedding to dance *chilondolondo*, a dance which needs the bridegroom's relatives to search and find the bride where she is hiding... That dance taught me how to live with my husband... I was taught to respect my husband... My husband's relatives told me that when [they] visit you, you should show respect and love them (37-year-old).

But another woman contrasted *digubi* and *chilondolondo*:

*Digubi* was not popular during that time in my area, so people danced *chilondolondo*... There was *digubi* too, but it did not last long. This is because people were afraid of the church because any local dance was a sin (56-year-old).

Several respondents alluded to *chilondolondo* (literally 'search and search'), a dance which is performed at the time of the transfer of the bride to the groom's family and is not a *digubi* dance (Mlama 1990:146).

Another woman did not dance *digubi* because she belonged to the church, and there was no *digubi* at her marriage in 1922. There were, however, dances at the time of paying the bride price:

When they come with the bride price on the way they sing a song, there was a special song, when they enter the compound they create chaos threatening to destroy the house, creating a lot of dust, they are given hand hoes and begged to cool down... Then they pay the bride price, they say 'we need a clay plate for carrying fire' [i.e., the bride]... 'Which one do you want? There are many girls here', then they mention 'so and so — a fire plate'. 'Okay, we like it this way as our bride price', then they take out the bride price and present it.. Then the dancing starts, the mothers celebrating that their daughter has got a man, 'I thought my daughter was ugly but she is beautiful, I didn't know'. 'I did not get womb pains for nothing' kind of dancing and singing (85-year-old).

Several of our respondents alluded to the battle that Christian authorities were waging against traditional dances in general, and *digubi* in particular, because of its sexual content. The opposition of the churches to traditional rituals is not a new phenomenon in the region, and it is difficult to ascertain how much the customs have changed since the 1970s.

There was *digubi* at my marriage. ... almost all traditional teachings were cut short... They said that there were religious people there, so they did not like to teach each and everything in the traditional style... I was taught how to live and respect my husband (50-year-old).

Our brother was a Church teacher, so he did not allow us to dance *digubi*... We attended dances when children were circumcised, in such ceremonies we danced *shilanga* (40-year-old).

The mother of this last woman had died, and she was raised by her brother. Having missed the *digubi* initiation, she was totally ignorant about sexual matters, and did not understand that she was pregnant when her periods ceased.

In a population that is very largely Christian, it is possible that the traditional ritual has lost some of its meaning and that its explicit sexual teachings have been softened. Moreover, fewer women are exposed to the dance and it is possible that society does not rely on this medium to transmit information as much as it did in the past. Although Mlama insists that only women who had been initiated themselves in *digubi* ceremonies could participate in the instructions of others, some women in our sample reported participation without having been initiated at the time of puberty or marriage.

I danced *digubi* when I was already married... I had never done that before marriage, but I saw other people dance *digubi* (35-year-old).

I play the small drums (*nhunyi*) when *digubi* is performed... I was never involved in *digubi* when I was married... I got religious knowledge earlier, so I didn't want to be involved in it... But all my sisters passed through *digubi* (29-year-old).

Others had only witnessed the dance as spectators. One respondent had been ambushed as a girl by other women and circumcised by force, because the church was against circumcision. At her marriage, she did not know how to dance *digubi*, so she simply watched. Even among those who had been initiated, some expressed doubt about the meaning of the ritual.

I can't see the meaning of *digubi* dance. Parents say it should be danced in order to show the girl some womanhood. A stiff porridge is made in a clay pot. You dance while

somebody is shaking the pot like making it dance, but actually I can't see the reason for that (49-year-old).

Most women were reluctant to describe the exact content of the dances. Traditional *digubi* danced at the time of puberty was described most explicitly as follows:

*Digubi* is a dance for teaching a girl to take care of her body... you are taught ways of taking care of yourself and body cleanliness...

Traditionally I was taught before I was courted... (43-year-old).

As for *digubi* at the time of marriage, it seem to have become more and more a joyous celebration involving hours of dancing and feasting. Some women (reluctantly and discreetly) allude to miming of the sex act to instruct the new bride, a feature which was an important component of the ceremonies witnessed by Mlama. Some instruction on behaviour towards the husband and the in-laws is imparted, but it is not always clear how much of that is featured in the dancing, and how much is actually part of a more private session of sexual initiation of the bride which is conducted in a restricted circle of relatives:

During the *digubi* ceremony... they told me marriage life... They told me to care for my husband when I get married. I should consider his body as my body. I should prepare him bath water and wash him and also have sex with him (35-year-old).

They taught me when you go to your husband work hard. You must respect your mother-in-law. If a guest come give him/her bath water and prepare him/her food and prepare him a bed to sleep. You will meet with your brothers in law they will crave you don't accept them (49-year-old).

[The relatives of the bridegroom] eat and then take off your hair and in the night teach the girl how to live with her husband... They teach you that you should take care of your husband and the most important one is that you should respect your mother-in-law... you should respect and obey your husband. You must wash his clothes. You should take care of him in everything. You don't have a child but your husband is your first child, that is how they emphasized.. They teach how to live with your husband, but when you realize that you don't get your menstruation, then inform your husband and your in-laws... The first person to teach me was the wife of my grandmother's brother; when she was finished, the in-laws came to teach me. [Her mother was the last to come, and spoke only a few words.] (67-year-old).

One gets the impression that the purpose of the instruction is double. First, in a society where there is a great deal of sexual segregation and little open discussion of sexual matters it is necessary to resort to solemn and ritualized means to convey information that had until then not been accessible to the new bride. However, in a number of instances, our informers had had premarital sexual relations, and it was therefore assumed that they did not need instruction.

My father said that he did not see the point of performing such teaching because I had children (32-year-old).

The second function is one of socialization. The wife is told about her future duties, about her obligation of fidelity to her husband, and the rules of etiquette regulating relations with her in-laws. She learns that her proper place is one of subordination. Allusions are made to the link between intercourse and the future pregnancy. Our materials reveal no specific references to the young woman's vocation as a reproducer or the prospect of spending the rest of her adult life pregnant and bearing children for a man and his kinship group. It can be assumed,

however, that the context is pronatalist. Finally, our informants were emphatic that no information is imparted in *digubi* rituals about care of the child.

### **Learning about child rearing and abstinence**

As do many sub-Saharan populations, the Kaguru observe a period of postpartum abstinence. Beidelman mentions the abstention from sexual relations during nursing in the beginning of his account, but he implies that the Kaguru abstain for precise and specific reasons, and that they clearly connect intercourse and 'poisoning of the milk':

Indeed it is considered rather shameful for a nursing mother to become pregnant... Such a woman is said not to have enough consideration or proper affection toward her present child and to show lack of discipline and undue interest in sexuality, rather than in her obligations as a mother. The Kaguru say that pregnancy dries up the mother's milk, and advocate a long period of nursing for infants, always over a year and possibly between two and three years. Although ideally, a couple with an infant should not have sexual relations, many and perhaps most do so, while practicing various forms of contraception, such as coitus interruptus and the use of certain herbal medicines (Beidelman, in Molnos 1973:262).

In the interviews on which we report here, the women were asked how they had been taught about caring for their first child. The answer was generally that some older female relatives had instructed them, either when they were close to delivery, or after the birth of the child.

I was taught how to care for children when I was about to get the first one. Mama Sarah and my sisters participated (56-year-old).

I was taught [about child care] after I got my first baby ... by the grandmother of my husband... My father's mother was present during the process, so the instructions were provided by the two grandmothers on behalf of my parents (36-year-old)

I was not taught how to care for children... My mother told me that since you have a baby you should not have sexual relations with your husband, otherwise you will lose your child (31-year-old).

I was not taught, so I had to get another baby the following year (35-year-old).

The obligation to abstain after a birth appears to be the major piece of information that is conveyed by 'experts' (i.e. other women with childbearing experience) after a birth.

My grandmother taught me that because now I have a baby, I should not entertain sleeping with my husband the way he likes it, but if he needs other things I should give him (60-year-old).

...they told me when you get your child you should care for it. You should not have sexual relationship with your husband (56-year-old).

Almost all women mentioned this, in the same breath as they said that they had had no other instruction on child rearing. There was no mention of withdrawal or herbal contraceptives, as in Beidelman's account. The women who reported using contraception seemed to use modern techniques obtained from the local family planning.

The exact duration of postpartum abstinence was not spelled out in a consistent fashion: abstinence should last 'until the child has grown up', 'until the time she started to have teeth', 'until the child is about five or six months old', 'till the baby is able to walk'. Abstinence was an almost universal recommendation, but the duration recommended was not particularly

long, perhaps because the marital situation of the abstaining woman becomes untenable. As one woman said:

I was taught at home before birth: take good care of the baby and don't involve yourself with the man. But if he demands strongly you have to agree what else can you do? (58-year-old).

Incidentally, for many women the period of abstinence appeared to be a time of vulnerability, where the husband may have been revealed to be drinking or going out with other women. The strains that the abstinence period places on the life of Yoruba couples have been discussed at length by Caldwell, Oruluboye and Caldwell (1991). A similar phenomenon appears to prevail among the Kaguru.

The reasons given for abstaining were not particularly explicit. In most accounts, the young mother had been instructed to do so, and accepted the authority of an older woman without debate, perhaps until it was countered by the higher authority of the husband. In only one instance was a reason given: the child would die if relations were resumed too early.

## **Conclusions**

The place of rituals in the diffusion of reproductive modes of behaviour remains poorly investigated. Our main tools, the fertility surveys, have not touched the topic. The anthropological literature has often provided tantalizing glimpses. Dances in particular serve several functions. They can provide an opportunity for girls and boys to meet in an inhibited fashion. A good illustration is provided, in East Africa, by Davison's (1989) account of the Gikuyu, whose dancing parties lead to non-reproductive physical contacts among young people that strongly evoke the bundling of European lore. Dances can also serve to disseminate serious information among women. And finally (perhaps most importantly among the Kaguru), they serve to instruct women about their proper place in society.

Others have described similar initiation rituals in the region, and noted their decline (see for example Lockwood 1989). Their role in transmitting culture is certainly worth studying. Is their function mainly 'the control of women's reproductive capacity' (Lockwood 1989:319)? Is it similar to the collective support for the regulation of sexuality and fertility by Kenyan women's groups described by Ahlberg (1991)? Is there in these matrilinear societies of Tanzania, a strong 'sisterhood of women' transmitting female lore for the benefit of its members, and secretly undermining the authority of men? Or are the rituals mainly a means of strengthening the authority of husbands and that of the power structure in the new family where a young woman is introduced? All these questions deserve an answer.

We note the success of missionary churches in capturing a great part of the popular following that at one time attached to traditional rituals, often by using the same type of instruction techniques by song and dance. In doing so, the churches have weakened the traditional family and the ideology of women's subordination.

A final issue is raised. How might a particular family planning message be diffused in the population by techniques that borrow from traditional rituals, in the same fashion that soap operas are used in Latin America, and puppet shows in South-East Asia?

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