

BRIDEWEALTH INFLATION AND MARRIAGE CRISIS IN COLONIAL KENYA

doi:10.1017/S0021853707002964

'*Girl Cases*': *Marriage and Colonialism in Gusiiland, Kenya, 1890–1970*. By BRETT L. SHADLE. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 2006. Pp. xliii + 256. \$92.95 (ISBN 0-325-07092-X); \$29.95, paperback (ISBN 0-325-07094-6).

KEY WORDS: Kenya, marriage, colonial, law, family.

Girl Cases is a very satisfying book to read. It is rich in detail and insight and based on a wide range of sources, some of which, such as local court records, are not easy to work with. Moreover, the book has considerable comparative significance. At the centre of Shadle's study is the Gusi 'marriage crisis' that lasted from the 1920s to the 1950s. Simply put, it was a matter of bridewealth inflation, not unknown elsewhere but especially serious here. Daughters brought in livestock that in turn helped their brothers to marry. Fathers could not risk accepting less than they expected to have to give. The average level of bridewealth payments thus tended to rise, pushed up initially by the opportunist few and supported by a growing cash economy that was spreading wealth unevenly. The same mechanism, however, made it difficult to limit marriage payments by general agreement. Increasingly, young men were priced out of the marriage market and young women were given to men who could still afford to pay. Unlucky suitors and discontented brides sought other means to achieve domesticity, through elopement, adultery and abduction. This challenged patriarchal authority and raised vital questions about what, in fact, made marriage, and it is this debate, argued out both in the pre-emptive actions of the young and in the local courts that judged them, that lies at the core of the book.

Unlike the colonial administrators who tried to intervene, Shadle avoids simple oppositions of generation and gender. He argues that to divide women into those who rejected and those who apparently submitted to patriarchal authority is to misunderstand local realities. Most of the women in 'girl cases' did not see themselves as either rebels or helpless victims. He is also sceptical of unexamined notions of generational conflict. Many of the men in 'girl cases', and almost all the women, were seeking a respectable, and consensual, domesticity. Moreover, the tensions of the marriage market divided young men as brothers and suitors and gave fathers and sons a common interest.

Plaintiffs and those they accused shared much common ground. This made the debates both bitter and complex. All agreed that the transfer of livestock was essential to the making of marriage, that formal marriage was itself the foundation of adulthood and that bridewealth inflation made the institution coercive and unstable and contributed to wider social malaise. There was also an acknowledgement that fathers had authority over their daughters and the right to negotiate their marriages. Shadle's postscript, dealing with more recent times, when 'come we stay' cohabitation began to challenge 'traditional' marriage to the further disadvantage of women, suggests how important that common ground was. Yet there was sharp disagreement over how and how far a father's authority might be exercised. In answering their accusers, defendants argued that a woman's consent was also essential to the making of a marriage. At this point in Shadle's account, women emerge as active participants in their own 'cases', not merely as resources to be managed or argued over. In court, they stated that the elopement or adultery had been entered into jointly with their partner, frequently as a strategy to force a father to give his consent to a desired marriage, or at least to escape an intolerable one. Sometimes they were successful, for, as Shadle shows,

court elders were themselves uncertain of where right lay in difficult and changing times. Plaintiffs, defendants and court elders, however, were not the only actors in these domestic dramas. Administrators and, more distantly, officials and critics in London also played a part, in the construction of 'crisis' if not in the resolution of disputes. Shadle provides the larger context. Whether or not he is right in seeing a conservative turn to administrative thinking in the inter-war period, colonial and patriarchal/generational authority were assumed to be mutually supportive. However, the Colonial Office found itself caught between activists at home who demanded an end to the 'sale' of women and local officials concerned that 'girl cases', and the disobedience that they apparently demonstrated, were undermining a basic cornerstone of 'tribal life'. Local officials were also aware both that they lacked the power to intervene effectively and that legal remedies – criminalizing adultery, for example – were themselves problematic.

Amongst the wider issues, beyond marriage itself and its discontents, that *Girl Cases* raises, two in particular speak to the comparative dimension and complement recent studies elsewhere. The first concerns the working of local courts and, especially, the gap between 'custom' in theory and its determination and application in practice. Courts did not 'make' or enforce a fixed custom so much as provide a focus for argument, even though inequalities of power and authority still shaped the debate. The other concerns female agency. Shadle shows how ordinary women (and men) struggled for some control over their own lives without rejecting established norms. Indirectly, their struggles again demonstrate how inadequate an unproblematized 'resistance' paradigm is in understanding gender issues and the complexities of individual lives. Court records well handled, as a number of pioneering studies have shown, provide us with one of the few remaining paths to an understanding not only of what people argued intimately about but of how they did so and why it was important to them. Shadle has given us much to think about here and, indeed, the general Gusii background might have been abbreviated to give even more space to 'girl cases' in court.

Bucknell University

RICHARD WALLER

THE CHALLENGES FOR POSTCOLONIAL LEADERS IN EAST AFRICA

doi:10.1017/S0021853707002976

Transformational Leadership in East Africa: Politics, Ideology and Community.

By ERIC MASINDE ASEKA. Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2005. Pp. viii + 464.

£29.95; \$39.95, paperback (ISBN 9970-02-480-9).

KEY WORDS: East Africa, culture/cultural, ethnicity, ideology, politics.

This is a serious, angry, erudite and challenging work. The author is as unsparing of his readers as he is of the failed leaders of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania but repays their close attention. Professor Aseka teaches political history at Kenyatta University and knows at first hand of what he writes. He asks why postcolonial leaders have achieved so little by way of transformation of their societies in the past forty years and more, but first admits that they had enormous problems to overcome. They had to transform a colonial inheritance that offered them scarcely any assistance. Their states were by origin arbitrary occupying forces, 'imposed on a mosaic of ethnic traditions' (p. 407) with varied legitimizing