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# MAMBO!

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## The Role of Rites of Passage in Women's Market Based Land Access The Case of Two Villages in the Rufiji District, Rural Tanzania

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**The author:** Rose George Mbezi is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Rose is writing on women's access to land in the context of multiple users of land in contemporary rural Tanzania.

**Abstract:** This article seeks to explore how neo-customary practices, such as kitchen party ceremonies, are enabling women to derive financial power to purchase land in Tanzania. Using Mohoro West and Mohoro East villages situated in Rufiji District as case studies, key findings show that the reinvention of kitchen party ceremonies, which operate on a rotating credit scheme, has given women financial power to be able to purchase land from the developing land market in the villages.

**Keywords:** Land market, *Kinyamu* rite of passage, kitchen party, rural women, Tanzania

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## Introduction

Borrowing from Ribot and Peluso's "Theory of Access" (2003), women's access to land refers to their ability to use and benefit from land for themselves, their families, and their communities at large. In contemporary rural Tanzania, Mwaipopo (2021) and Massay (2017) maintain that the recognition of women's land ownership is of paramount importance as land is women's main source of livelihood. In fact, according to the Integrated Labor Force Survey (2020/21), more than 70% of women engage in subsistence agriculture in Tanzania. It is against this background that this article examines the reinvention of the rite of passage of the kitchen party ceremonies as a tool for women to raise financial capital so as to access land, and demonstrates that women use this capital to purchase land from developing land markets in their villages. Kitchen party ceremonies refer to a neo-customary practice associated, in the Rufiji District, with the age-old *Kinyamu* dance rite of passage, a traditional dance performed by girls also known as *wali* (plural for *mwali*, meaning a young woman) after their first menstrual period known in Kiswahili as *kuvunja ungo*. The dance symbolises their social reintegration into the community of adult women after a period of isolation.

Some studies, such as Chimhowu (2019), underline that neo-customary practices, which have their roots in historical, social, and cultural settings, can be a key factor in enabling agency for women to access land in some rural areas of Tanzania. This paper aligns with a reading of neotraditions as age-old practices transformed to adjust to present needs (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012) and which can serve the purpose of circumventing or subverting, partially at least, authority and power, or, more generally, the gendered social order (Onyebueke and Ikejiofor 2017). The demonstration is based on the case study of two villages in Rufiji District, in the Coastal region, Mohoro East and West.<sup>1</sup> The first section of this article discusses the trajectory of land use patterns in the study area, while the second discusses development of the land markets in the villages and the role of kitchen party ceremonies as capital-raising events that enable women to purchase land. The last section gives concluding remarks.

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<sup>1</sup> The study is part of a PhD project; empirical research was conducted from April 2021 to May 2022. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participant observation were the methods used to collect data. The study employed purposive sampling to get different respondents for the study. The study included a total of 38 female respondents. Two focus group discussions were held to triangulate information gathered from other data collection methods.

## Trajectory of land use patterns in Mohoro East and Mohoro West villages

Founded in 1967 during the first stage of implementation of the *Ujamaa* Policy (literally meaning the “village of *Ujamaa*”: see Figure 1), Mohoro East and West villages were merged and known as Mohoro *Ujamaa* Village with registration number 1975 PW/KIJ/209 (Massay, 2017). Presently, the two villages are administered under a governmental infrastructure comprising several institutions such as the village council, the land council, the village assembly, the market place, and two land use plans (of 2008 and 2011) (Ibid.). Mohoro West consists of six hamlets: Old Mohoro, Sungapwani, Sungabara, Nyandote, Nyakikai, and Mwanani, while Mohoro East is composed of five hamlets: Nyampaku Bara, Nyampaku Pwani, Nyampaku Mashariki, Nyamidege, and Nyautika.

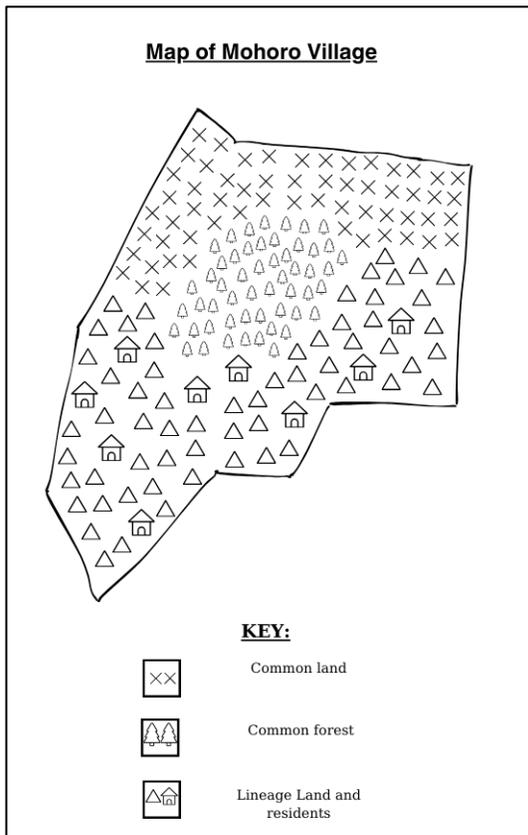


**Figure 1: Study Area—Mohoro East and Mohoro West villages**

Source: Mohoro East and Mohoro West Village Office, 2021.

In Tanzania, before the colonial period, there were two kinds of land tenure regimes: common land and lineage land (Massay, 2017). Ostrom (1990) has generally defined the commons as land that is collectively or communally used and managed by a group of people, as opposed to being privately and exclusively owned by a single person. In the area of study, before the advent of

colonisation, common land was located where we find today some parts of the hamlets of Nyakikai , Nyandote and Nyamidege along the Rufiji River. Additionally, there was a common forest where we find today some parts of Nyandote, Mwanani and Nyautika, mainly occupied by pastoral communities including the *Wasukuma*, *Wamasai*, and *Wabarbaig*, who were evicted from the Ihefu basin (Mbeya region) and Kilombero wetland (Morogoro region). The lineage land, which according to Chimhowu (2019) is family land passed down through the generations were found where we find today the hamlets of Nyampaku Pwani, Nyampaku Bara, Nyampaku Mashariki, Sungabara, Sungapwani, and small areas of Nyautika, Nyandote, and Mwanani.



**Figure 2: Common land and lineage land before the colonial period**

Source: Author, 2022.

As a result of the interviews conducted with the area residents, it was found that, subsistence agriculture and fishing used to be the main livelihood activities. Most men used to engage in fishing and used the common land for fishing-related operations, such as scaling fish and frying. They also constructed shelters that served as rest houses before or after they retired from fishing. On the other hand, women utilised the common land to gather wild vegetables, create vegetable gardens and engage in rice cultivation. Some areas of common forest land at Nyandote, Mwanani,

and Nyautika were used as sacred spaces known as *Mkoleni* for performing the *Kinyamu* dance rite of passage. It was also found that lineage land was mainly used for subsistence farming by most women and some men who were not full-time fishermen.

Futhermore, men used to access land by clearing forests: this practice was referred to as *kukecha*, meaning clearing virgin forest. Conversely, married women accessed land mainly through marriage, whereas unmarried, widowed, and divorced women accessed land through direct lineage land allocation through inheritance or gift. Usually, a married woman was given a *wigane* farm after she became pregnant with her first child. The *wigane* farm (literally meaning “the farm of the married”) was allotted by the husband—or his family—to his wife for her to cultivate and produce food crops. In this system, the wife and husband had their own separate farms. The wife was expected to ensure there was enough food for the household as women were and still are more actively involved in reproductive tasks, including cooking. Therefore, the wife was granted complete control over the *wigane* farm management and produce. The husband’s produce was used for seed and stored in case the wife’s farm did not provide enough food for the whole year.

Important changes occurred during the colonial periods: the Germans (1880s–1919), then the British (1919–1961) introduced the plantation economy. This required the Mohoro residents to cultivate cotton on some common land in the Nyakikai, Nyandote and Nyamidege hamlets. A head tax for people over 18 years old was introduced to force people in the village to grow cotton that was to be transported to Europe (Sunseri, 2005). Interviewees explained that the Mohoro residents also converted their lineage land into cotton farms to earn more cash income upon selling the cultivated cotton to be able to pay head taxes. During this time, women’s access to land through both *wigane* farms for the married, and lineage allocation for the unmarried, divorced, and widowed women was restricted. Because women were primarily involved in subsistence farming, this jeopardised the food security of households. Additionally, it prohibited women from activities such as gathering wild vegetables, growing rice, and creating vegetable gardens on the common land located in some of the hamlets of Nyamidege, Nyandote and Nyakikai, where compulsory cotton farming was practised.

After the Arusha Declaration of 1967, Tanzania’s independent government established the *Ujamaa* village policy through a vast programme called *Vijiji Vya Ujamaa* (literally meaning the “villages of *Ujamaa*”). *Vijiji Vya Ujamaa* required the collectivisation of the villages for the benefit of all (Duncan, 2014). The state-run *Ujamaa* programme sought to provide people with basic amenities such as social services and agricultural supplies, aiming to increase agricultural productivity and production for the nation’s socioeconomic development. This was implemented through collective agriculture, through the *bega kwa bega* programme, literally meaning

“shoulder-to-shoulder.” This initiative allowed the government to more easily supply agricultural inputs to *Ujamaa* village residents (Nyerere, 1968).

Moreover, in the wake of the famine caused by the conflict between Tanzania and Uganda of the late 1970s, the government encouraged every village to increase the production of cash and food crops to meet the country's demands (Ergas, 1980). The Mohoro *Ujamaa* village began producing *sukari guru*—jaggery—using sugarcane. Subsequently, every household was requested to produce two hectares of sugarcane on communal cultivation basis through the *bega kwa bega* programme in what would eventually become the present-day hamlets of Sungabara, Sungapwani, Nyampakupwani, Nyampakubara, and Nyampaku Mashariki. Most lineage land was designated by the state for communal sugarcane cultivation under the supervision of an agricultural extension officer and the village chairperson. This diminished the land holdings of some lineages, and ultimately altered women's access to land through lineage allocation for the widowed, unmarried, and divorced women, as well as *wigane* farms for the married women.

After the demise of *Ujamaa* in the late 1980s, the Tanzanian government liberalised its economy in accordance with the requirements of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB), to access their loans; this implied a strong emphasis on opening up the economy to foreign investment and market-oriented policies across all sectors, including land. The liberalisation policy encouraged local investments from both foreigners and middle-class Tanzanians in several villages, including Mohoro East and West villages (Massay, 2017).

It is at this time that the resettlement schemes of pastoral communities mentioned earlier took place. Interaction with the incoming communities resulted in intermarriages, also known as *ndoa za mkeka*, and cohabiting unions. *Ndoa ya mkeka* describes the union of unmarried men and women. This promiscuity changed the practices related to intimacy and, as a result, the institution of marriage as it was intended before has become less frequent, along with the land endowment that women used to receive through it. This is because both *ndoa za mkeka* and cohabiting hinder interactions between the families of the bride and bridegroom, as envisaged by the customs.

Furthermore, land availability has drastically declined for most families, which has made it difficult for both male and female children to inherit. Overall, the findings of this study have confirmed that the transformations in social practices and land use not only led to the deterioration of women's traditional land access granted by marriage and inheritance, but they also facilitated the development of land markets due to an increase in demand for land as the population grew.

## The land market in the villages and the kitchen party ceremony as financial capital raising events

The 1995 land policy in Tanzania permitted land transactions, including purchasing, selling, and leasing, which were prohibited in the framework of the *Ujamaa* policy. As a result, land markets developed in most parts of the country, including Mohoro East and West villages, whereby people, groups, and investors are at liberty to engage in land transactions (Mwaipopo, 2021). Findings show that in the villages, there are two types of land transactions, including informal land sales and rentals (not formally recorded in the land registries). The incoming pastoral communities are the ones acquiring the land via informal purchase, while middle-class Tanzanians from Morogoro and Dar es Salaam regions tend to lease land mainly for watermelon farming. Both are more financially powerful than most of the village residents.

The hamlet chairperson, who is assumed to know the condition of the parcel of land being sold or rented, is frequently present during property transactions. In order to formalise land purchase, the written contract is frequently stamped by the Village Executive Officer (VEO) to seal the land sale or lease. It is, however, noted that some women fail to effectively engage in the land market due to lack of financial power. Besides the loss of land access due to the phenomena presented in the earlier section, women in the villages are still required by society to perform all of the reproductive tasks in the home in addition to subsistence farming to ensure household food security. Both are very demanding, making it difficult for women to engage in economic activities that would enable them to raise enough money to buy land. However, the reinvention of the kitchen party enabled these women to participate in the land markets.

In fact, the kitchen party, one phase of the *Kinyamu* dance rite of passage, operates under a rotating credit scheme and is widely used as a capital-raising event in Mohoro East and West villages. The women interviewed for this study reported that kitchen party ceremonies became more prominent in the late 2000s as land access became more competitive and the population grew considerably. A few women started a kitchen party group out of the *Kinyamu* dance rite of passage to help each other raise a significant sum of money at once to cater for various household needs and, in some cases, to buy land due to the decline of marriage and inheritance institutions that used to enable women to have access to land. Since then, kitchen party ceremonies have become more widespread and become one of the main capital-raising events for women.

Women in the villages reported that before colonisation, after their first menstrual period, girls used to be confined indoors—called *kuwekwa ndani* in Kiswahili—for one to five years. They were kept at *Mkoleni* in a common forest in present-day Nyandote, Mwanani, and Nyautika hamlets. Currently, the *Kinyamu* dance rite of passage only lasts two weeks. It comprises four

phases. During the first phase, the *wali* are kept indoors, either in one house chosen by the *wali*'s parents or at caregivers' homes or in their separate family homes. While indoors, the *wali* are taught by *Makungwi*—older women—about general hygiene, especially during menstrual periods, and how to manage different social functions such as being a good mother, wife, in-law, neighbour, and so forth.

The second phase is the release of the *wali*—called *kumtoa mwali* in Kiswahili—which is done on a Friday morning at the end of the second week of seclusion. The third phase is the enclosed dance, which is done in the evening of the same Friday. The enclosed dance is performed in an area encircled by traditional mats known as *mikeka*, and no one, not even the top village leaders, is allowed to enter the circled area. Different kinds of songs are performed during the enclosed dance. These songs convey teachings about how *wali* are supposed to behave in the community. Men who play drums often stay outside of the circled area. It is a requirement for all *wali* to attend the enclosed dance together with their mother or female caretakers and all other women who have gone through the *Kinyamu* dance rite of passage. I noted that it is taboo for women who had not been through the *Kinyamu* dance rite of passage to attend the enclosed dance. As a researcher, I was allowed to go through all phases of the *Kinyamu* dance rite of passage. In doing so, I engaged in non-participant observation and carried out in-depth interviews with ten women, especially those who engaged in the organisation of the kitchen party ceremonies.

After the Friday evening dance, a kitchen party ceremony is organised on a Saturday evening, which involves members of the kitchen party group, usually comprising around seven to ten women. The ceremony is frequently performed by the mother or female caretaker of the *mwali*, who is hosting the event and also part of the kitchen party group. All the women who throw a kitchen party appear to be engaged in different income-generating activities, including food vending, frying fish, and selling bananas along the main road to Mtwara and Dar es Salaam Road.



**Photo 1: Women selling bananas along the main road to and from Dar es Salaam to the southern parts of the country, in Mohoro East and Mohoro West, 2021**

Source: Photo by author.



**Photo 2: A female-run food vending store, in Mohoro East and Mohoro West, 2021**

Source: Photo by author.

Each kitchen party group member gives the host an agreed amount of money so that the latter raises a large sum of money at once. Usually, one of the host's dependable friends or family members keeps meticulous records of the money given to the host. This is done to maintain good records, as the host is required to pay other kitchen party hosts the same amount of money she was given by each member of the kitchen party group. The groups are named: *tupendane*, meaning "let us love one another"; *umoja*, meaning "togetherness"; *juhudi*, meaning "hard work." Depending on how many kitchen party groups a host is involved in, she may collect between three and seven million Tanzanian shillings, the equivalent of USD 1,200 and USD 2,800, respectively. Taarab music from the coast is played during the ceremony. Often, the kitchen party group members select a song from the DJ to accompany them as they gift the money to the host

(this part is known in Kiswahili as *kutunza*). In an interview, it was revealed that the majority of women engaging in kitchen party ceremonies use the money to purchase land. One woman said:

I benefitted greatly from kitchen party ceremonies. I am a member of two kitchen party groups. They helped me get a large amount of money at once. I tell you that six out of ten members of one of my kitchen party groups bought pieces of land using the money they collected from kitchen party ceremonies (Young woman, resident of Mohoro East village, 2021).

The evolution of this cultural custom echoes Gluckman's (1954) analysis of how the reinvention of ritual activities can be geared to social transformation. Gluckman thus illuminates the dual conservative and transformative nature of rituals. Borrowing from Onyebueke & Ikejiofor (2017), I argue that the reinvention of the *Kinyamu* dance rite of passage, renewing the social meaning of the kitchen party ceremonies, is evidence of the transformative nature of ritual in enabling women to access land through purchase in Mohoro East and West villages.



**Photo 3: A kitchen party host collecting money from her group, in Mohoro East and Mohoro West, 2021**

Source: Photo by author

## Conclusion

I have used historical narrative to identify the structural factors and power dynamics that have led to women's decreasing access to land in Mohoro East and West villages. This historical perspective sheds light on the interconnected socioeconomic and political factors that continue to shape land tenure systems and distribution patterns today. It also highlights the need for inclusive land reform policies that address gender inequality and promote equitable access to land resources. Rural women's land access does not seem to be enhanced by the development of the land market following the land policy of 1995 because women still lack the necessary financial power to purchase land. Yet, this paper has shown that women in rural areas can come together and collectively reinvent their long-standing traditions, such as the rite of passage, to derive financial power and thus purchase land.

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