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## **Gender and Culture: Some Reminiscences of Sulmena Adek Otula from Childhood in a Rural Set up to Residence in Post-colonial Nairobi, 1949-2006**

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### **Abstract:**

*This study focuses on some reflections of Sulmena Adek Otula born in Ugenya location Siaya County in 1949. Using episodes from Adek's life history, the enquiry looks at her socialization process within the Luo culture in which she was born and bred. Concomitantly, it assesses ways in which Adek's life history is a demonstration of the female body as a man's colony, sometimes with the cooperation of other women. The study further examines how, as illustrated by Adek, women's movement to the more cosmopolitan towns such as Nairobi, got them exposed to multiple oppressions of gender, race and class. Further still the study uses Adek's example to attempt to elucidate on women's struggle for independence and the some of the methods they employed to achieve that goal in the period stretching from the 1950s to 2006. The research is also an exposition of some of the challenges women face as they struggle for autonomy from the male and other dominations entrenched within their cultures. The study proposes that in cultures such as Adek's where male superiority was entrenched, men constantly invoke culture to resist women's nationalism, hence to maintain the status quo. In an attempt to locate Adek's situation in the wider context of gender and development, the study analyses the interaction between her and culture by employing a number of discourses on gender, nationalism and the body. Such debates include patriarchal domination, intersectionality of oppressions and agency and resistance.*

**Keywords :** Culture , patriarchy, gender, agency, resistance, positioning, intersectionality.

### **1. Introduction**

Culture is crucial to the understanding of gender issues especially as some of the most important aspects of people's lives are a by-product of cultural gender typing. Society largely determines the talents people cultivate, the conceptions they hold of themselves and others, the socio-structural opportunities and constraints they encounter and the social life and occupational paths they pursue. The resultant social differentiation promotes in females and males certain ascribed roles which generally subordinate the status of women to that of men (Bussey and Bandura, 1999: 2).

This article attempts to reflect on the life and times of Sulmena Adek, wife of Otula Adwer. It adopts the method of life histories as a way of understanding the interface between the individual and culture. According to Robertson, "a life history is a story or stories told to another person by its primary author, whose life it represents" (Ndambuki and Robertson, 2000:xi). In the view Ngaiza and Koda "it is an extensive record of a person's life told and recorded by another , who then edits and writes the life story as though it were an autobiography" (Ngaiza and Koda, 1991:1). The study attempts to demonstrate that many stereo-typical attributes and roles associated with gender differences are largely a result of cultural design. In analysing gender role development and functioning, it also touches on class and race relations as experienced by women in their interaction with men and other women in society, and how women negotiate their way around their oppression to cut out a niche for themselves in the social, political and economic arenas of society. To this end it is also a study of women's resistance and agency. The term agency is here defined as "that determination in a woman to take inventory of her inner strength and capacity, and translate it in to an action or decision that amounts to a solution of her problem".

The main source of data for this study is the personal reflection of Adek in an interview the author personally conducted with her in 2010, to investigate issues relating to gender, nationalism and the body. In explaining these issues, other closely related discourses such as patriarchy and women's cultural subordination and the conflation of gender categories will also be highlighted.

This study is also an attempt to relate to the concept of nego-feminism; that is the feminism of negotiation which, as advanced by Obioma, is uniquely African (Obioma,2004: pp. 376-380). According to Obioma this notion is useful for a number of reasons. Firstly, as opposed to western feminism which is reactive, it is proactive. Secondly, its philosophical base is rooted in the indigenous environment and institutions of Africa. She defines the term indigenous as "whatever the people consider important to their lives, whatever they regard as authentic expression of themselves" (Obioma, 2004: 376-377). Thirdly, African feminism views human life from a total rather than a dichotomous perspective. Thus, for African women the male is not the other as in western feminism. He is part of the human same (Obioma, 2004: 379-380).

The life and times of Sulmena Adek will be discussed in three sections, namely, birth and childhood, marriage and family life in her matrimonial rural home and; lastly family life and economic activities in Nairobi and back to her rural home. At various points

in the discussion Adek's experiences will be fitted into the general arguments of gender development and culture to support or reject some propositions. The final part of this paper will offer concluding remarks on gender and culture as demonstrated by the life of Sulmena Adek Otula.

## 2. Birth and Childhood

Adek was born into the Luo community of Kenya around 1949, specifically, in Ugenya location, Siaya District (presently Siaya County). She was the third born in a family of seven children, but the first of three daughters. As she grew up she realized that her parents were more concerned about her moral behaviour and diligence at domestic chores than they were of her brothers. Adek cites a few examples of the morals she had to adhere to from an early age. One of these was her mother's insistence on her sitting with feet together. Thus, whenever she saw her seated in an unacceptable manner, she harshly reminded her to sit properly. The reprimand was usually accompanied by threats of harsh punishment like pouring hot ash into her cunt if ever again she was found sitting carelessly.

Adek's other lesson was to control her smiles and laughter especially in the presence of strangers. In a feature in the Daily Nation (Friday, Oct 13, 1989: 14), Mbugguss captures this well when she observes that culturally "when girls giggle, it is silly. When boys laugh it is manly. It is dignified. What does this tell us of ourselves as a society?" She questions. It was not necessary to explain to Adek why the morals were important. But as she matured she learnt a simple explanation; they were cultural matters.

Another equally important lesson to Adek was that a girl must never to touch her cunt (except when bathing) as this meant harbouring sexual feelings, "an extremely dangerous thing for a woman". From the age of puberty Adek's whereabouts as opposed to that of her brothers was of such concern to her parents that even a visit to female peers in the neighbourhood would become an issue. Except when she was sent on an errand by one her parents or another responsible adult (uncle, aunt or grandparent), Adek was expected to be in the home and to immediately respond to her parent's call.

The instruction on diligence was more rigorous. From about the age of five years, Adek was taught to babysit and nurse her younger siblings; to fetch water from a nearby pond and to fetch firewood- duties which her brothers did not perform. Her mother operated as the first line authority, and was answerable to her father. Any "moral wrongdoing or display of laziness" seen in Adek automatically led to the conclusion that either her mother was an ineffective social trainer or was colluding with her daughter on the misdemeanour. Adek remembers a number of times when, despite her youth, her father would burst in to a quarrel with her mother because she (Adek) had failed to do something correctly. The usual way of disciplining a child was by whipping and Adek remembers being whipped several times. (See also Ominde, 1987:16,25)

As Adek's brothers grew up, they too in time acquired the mandate to "guard her against bad behaviour and bad company", as well as to ensure she was a good worker. According to the Luo community these were major attributes of a good girl and were necessary for Adek because "only a good girl gets a husband". It was extremely important for Adek to be well mannered for a good husband to come by because "a girl is a stranger in her home and needs a real home where when she dies she can be buried". Moreover only a hard working and upright girl fetches good dowry, which means additional wealth in the family. The dowry, typically paid in livestock, was a resource for the brothers who would in turn use the same to acquire wives. Thus unlike her brothers, who in their youth spent much of day's morning hours playing (except for occasional interruptions when they were sent on errands) until about midday when they joined the bigger boys in taking livestock to graze, Adek had much less playtime as she was busy during much of the day. The main reason being that she had to be prepared for her future role of servitude in the socially and economically male dominated system. Adek is a typical example of what of Robertson's, study (1987:103) sees as their manipulation by men. It is also reminiscent of the roles of girls in the Luo society of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, when girls reaching puberty already did a considerable amount of domestic work while their male counterparts enjoyed fun and games (Ominde, 1987: 21).

Adek's childhood is also an empirical situation of how, from a very early age, society constructs the sexes, and lays down rules on the dos and don'ts (Kabeer,1999:5). In the process, women in particular, are denied the ownership of their bodies. They are prohibited from touching it 'anyhow' or taking it wherever they want. It is an object to be policed by other members of the family and society, save for the woman who owns it. McFadden vividly captures this form of oppression when she refers to it as policing sexuality; a system maintained through vigilant cultural surveillance, with the result that it mutes sexual memory and instinct (McFadden, 2003:1-2). She also expresses concern over women's collaboration with male patriarchy, (a role played by Adek's mother), describing it as the most debilitating act in suppressing the liberating discourse of sexuality which they (the women) ought to defend (McFadden,2003:3).

In an exclusive discussion on womanhood in colonial Kenya, Kanogo not only confirms Mc Fadden' view but indicates that the culture of policing sexuality has deep roots which go to the pre-colonial past. During that period women's travels were limited to journeys mainly for marriage, trade and other social purposes and all were carefully arranged and strictly controlled by male kin (Kanogo, 2005:6). Essentially women had no agency as they were wards whose whereabouts were carefully policed by their guardians, the men. However, much as Kanogo observes that changes introduced by colonialism allowed women to discover and exploit new spaces, (Kanogo, 2005:6-7), Adek's life in the 1950s appears little different from her pre-colonial counterpart. This position is reiterated by Ominde (1987:30) whose research in the 1950s found that among the Luo, girls were born into a readymade pattern of life and forced to follow this pattern from their earliest childhood. Through the process of traditional education, they were trained to fit into the prevailing culture. A woman's life, therefore, tended to show great conservatism even in the face of considerable penetration of foreign influences such as Christianity and western education (Ominde, 1987:30)..

Adek's life demonstrates this conservatism. She never went to school, and emphasizes the responsibilities she and her sisters had to shoulder as the main reason. These included household tasks such as fetching water, firewood, picking vegetables, cooking for the family and caring for infants. Since the family could not afford money to have cereals pounded at a local mill, Adek and her

sisters had also to use the grinding stone to physically crush the usual mixture of maize, sorghum and dried cassava to make flour for the usual family meal of *ugali*. In addition, they had to do the family washing, which usually meant carrying dirty clothes a long distance to the well. The planting season added work to the already crowded schedule of Adek and her female siblings. Because they had to prepare the land and do the weeding of the crop, their day's work during the planting season began at the farm, typically around four a.m. Adek underlines her explanation by posing the question; where was the time to go to school? Adek's argument on the status of women in education finds consensus in the researches of Sudakasa (1982), Pala (1979) and Hansen (1980) who generally show that the vast majority of women did not go to school in the 1960 and 1970s.

Adek's childhood, experiences of the family gender division of labour, in the 1950s and 60s is a reflection of De Beauvoir's (1949/1997) conclusions in 1949, which emphasized the extreme levels of the subjugation of the African woman. A girl's childhood was a process of indoctrinating her to accept that the male was superior and that hers was a position of servitude to him. The drudgery of domestic work aside, Adek contends that in those days very few girls went to school. Schools were very far and only boys could walk the distance. She further adds that in those days people joined school at a more mature age than today—generally around ten years. These arguments bring two things to mind. One is that Adek is making an implicit reference to the cultural conflation of gender which sees the female body as weak and the male as strong. Mohanty (1988:65-71) has strongly and logically disagreed with this view, which she also found dominant in gender literature. She shows that such binary divisions are misleading as various other categories exist within each gender, while other social categorizations such as race and class cut across gender boundaries. In other words, Mohanty rejects “weakness to cover the long distance to school” as a general explanation for the failure of girls such as Adek to receive education. At any rate Adek's statement is contradictory on the basis of the division of labour she personally describes, which ideally reveals that women could have greater endurance ability than men.

The second idea which comes to mind is that the woman's body is a handicap. This argument has been advanced by McFadden who states that “in all patriarchal societies, girls are taught consistently, and often violently that their bodies are dirty, nasty, smelly, disgusting, corrupting, ugly and volatile harbingers of disease and immorality (McFadden:2003,p.6).

It is clear to Adek, however, that because they (Adek and sisters) laboured for the family, their brothers had all the time to go to school. She identifies her brothers' main duties as tending livestock and milking cows in the morning and evening. During the planting season when the female family members worked round the clock doing the back breaking hoeing to prepare the land, after which they engaged in planting, weeding and harvesting of the crop, the boys' tasks were limited to the initial work of cutting down trees and/or clearing the land of grass and bush. Adek concludes that given this skewed division of labour, boys, unlike the girls would easily combine their relatively less time consuming tasks with schooling. Ominde (1987:42) confirms that the system of division of labour favoured the Luo boys whose going to school did not disrupt the daily routine of community life.

Adek's childhood leaves little doubt that the oppression of women began at an early age and denied them opportunities for a good future. As Kabeer indicates, the distinctions were built on biological differences between men and women; differences which lead to social constructions that sanctioned what women and men could or could not do. These in turn influenced the distribution of resources which benefited one gender at the expense of the other. (Kabeer, 1999: 7). Adek's experiences of discrimination were to reach a climax in marriage and trade, where Adek learned to employ resistance and agency to surmount her difficulties.

### 3. Adek's Marriage and Life in Buholo

Around the age of fifteen, plans for Adek's marriage to Otula Adwer in the neighbouring location of Buholo began, albeit without Adek's knowledge. An auntie of Otula, married among Adek's natal clan was tasked to get a good, hardworking girl for her nephew, Otula. The search involved a discreet investigation of possible candidates, especially in terms of “good morals”, hard work and the art of welcoming visitors. Adek explains that good morals basically meant being an indoor girl; one who would hardly be seen “walking around lazily” in the company of other girls, or worse still, boys. Hard work referred to garden work alongside other household chores; and welcoming visitors was pegged on the girl's readiness to gladly receive and prepare a meal for guests, especially friends and relatives of her husband. Adek won the heart of Otula's aunt.

As a prelude to her own experiences of the marriage process, Adek revisited what happened in her mother's time as she personally narrated to her. She indicates that at that time, a husband would be identified for a girl (thirteen to sixteen years) who sometimes remained oblivious of the deal. However, arrangements would make for the man to discreetly know his appointed bride and to give consent. The next step to getting the girl's hand in marriage, was obtaining her parents approval. Such consent only came after a thorough investigation in to the man's background by agents of the girl's parents, and their submission of a satisfactory report that the prospective husband's family was decent and respectable, and that there was no blood relationship between the two families. It mattered little, however, whether the prospective husband was hardworking or not.

Once satisfied, the girl's parents asked the groom for dowry payment, after which a traditional wedding date was fixed. It was then that the parents of the girl informed, persuaded, or even coerced her to be ready for the wedding. Cases of coercion were rare but occurred when for personal reasons, the intended bride rejected the man. But since by then the dowry had already been accepted by the girl's parents, the woman's objection was inconsequential and the wedding proceeded as arranged. Song, dance and beer drinking were key events during the marriage ceremony.

However, not all marriages were initiated through a wedding as there were instances when the nuptials just eloped. Adek offers two explanations that might have triggered this situation. One, some girls resisted an attempt to force them in to a given union by running off with another man. Two, a man might escape with his intended bride because he lacks the resources to fulfil the required basic pre-wedding dowry payment.

On the first night of the marriage the woman's virginity had to be proven. So a chosen aunt of the groom gave the couple a white sheet which had to be returned with a blood stain as proof that the girl was a virgin. A report on the contrary meant not only heavy payment in a specified number of livestock from the girl's people, but also great shame for her clan. No special demands were

made of the man. De Beauvoir's idea of woman "being for the other" is again implicit in this context. The process of marriage in the 1940s (when Adek's mother married) reveals how women in some African communities like the Luo were constructed as objects for the creation of wealth and pleasure of others, the men. To this end, their purity had to be ensured to guard against disease and filth. The male's being was not questioned but rather accepted as the model and glorified body. (Mboya, undated).

These practices of the earlier years had considerably changed by the time Adek was getting married. The role of the go-between still existed, but the would be bride and groom got to know each other and enjoyed a period of courtship. Thus Otula's aunt introduced him to Adek, and the two "liked each other". Adek carefully avoided using the words falling in love, because in her system of socialization this was immoral. The payment of dowry still had a special significance, and Adek boasts of a dowry payment of eleven cattle and a number of goats, after which a grand wedding was organized in her honour. Equally, it was still of value for a woman to be married as a virgin, and such was a source of pride and respect for a wife especially in the eyes of her husband. However, loss of virginity before marriage no longer attracted the kind of shame and punishment it did in the preceding years.

Research by Zenebe and Flemmen (2008:171) in Ethiopia and by Abu-Lughod (1990:43-44), among the Bedoin women in Egypt indicate that as experienced by Adek, arranged marriages continue to exist in many African cultures. But while according to Adek resistance to the arrangements was uncommon, Zenebe and Flemmen (2008:171) show a number of circumstances and a variety of strategies girls employed in resisting some of the marriages. A notable one is that Bedoin women would successfully collude against an oppressive marriage arrangement. This fact challenges the generalized view of McFadden's (2003:3) that women do not cooperate to liberate themselves against male oppression. The contextual differences, as Mohanty (1988) has ably argued, reveal the danger of the hegemonic discourses which see women as a singular group.

In 1966 Otula got employment in Nairobi as a messenger with the Elliots bread company. But, while he departed for the city, Adek had to remain behind in their rural home of Buholo, where, despite her being pregnant, she had to work together with her mother-in-law on the family farm, cultivating maize, millet and cassava. Okeyo confirms this when she indicates that "in addition to their nurturing and reproductive roles, Luo women perform important agricultural tasks. They are responsible for much of the sowing, weeding, harvesting, and almost all storage and processing of agricultural and animal products". (Okeyo, 1979:338)

Adek gave birth to her first child in the same year (1966). The news not only brought her great joy, but an elevated social status. Adek's response to the question of how she felt about the baby is an expression of ultimate fulfilment.

When a woman marries and procreates she attains not only self actualization; she earns the respect of the clan too. Giving birth is the consummation of a new marriage between a woman and her husband's clan. Conflicts in the marriage or critical decisions pertaining, for example, to marital separation can no longer be unilaterally taken by either husband or wife. The clan must be involved.

Adek's argument illustrates Anfred's (2002:1-3) proposition that De Beauvoir's idea of the subjection of women which classifies motherhood as an attribute of their enslavement certainly falls out of place among some African communities. The case lends support to Anfred's finding that in the African set up, motherhood enjoys a unique position of power (Anfred 2002:1-3). Amadiume (1997:146) concurs by submitting that contrary to her western counterpart, who views motherhood as enslavement, the African woman's power is based on that logic. Mohanty (1984/97) adds that mothering in the African sense is not limited to the biological fact but comes with an elevated social status. This means that in most African communities, motherhood tips the gender balance in power relations in favour of the woman, while in the west the opposite is the case. However, the International Family Planning Digest cautions that it must not be assumed that women in developing countries, especially Africa achieve their status mainly from their roles as mothers, and that they are economically non-productive (International Family Planning Digest, 1975:10). This, the Digest asserts, would be an oversimplification of reality as "Africa is the region of female farming par excellence". The typical African woman thinks of herself as a cultivator or a trader as well as a wife and mother (International Family Planning Digest, 1975:10). As will be shown later, these descriptions befit Adek.

About a year after Adek's husband settled in Nairobi she felt "it was time to join him. However her in-laws, were reluctant to release her, arguing that Nairobi "was not a good place for a wife because it ruined women's morals". Implicit in this statement is the fact that only women's morals got ruined. Hake during his research in the 1970s, indeed, found that Nairobi women had come to be reputed as prostitutes regardless of whether they did alternative work for a living (Hake, 1977: 66). Yet the male migrant workers who lived in Nairobi as "bachelors" and who Hake found to practice concubinage remained "men of high moral standing". They visited their wives living in the rural areas when they needed them, or if they were not married, went back there when their time to get a wife was ripe (Hake, 1977: 66). Thus, Adek's protection from the ruinous Nairobi, as she herself put it, is another manifestation of the patriarchal tendency to judge women negatively and to control their bodies. This fact, as noted earlier, has been recognized by scholars such as De Beauvoir (1949/1997) and Kabeer (1999:16-17) as one of the defining characteristics of gender relations, where power is vested in the hands of the male.

Adek was determined to leave home to unite with her husband in Nairobi, but with the support of the very in-laws who already stood in her way. Deep inside she was convinced that the problem was not Nairobi's ability to taint her character, but her in-laws' difficulty to dispense with a "worker", echoing her relegation to the role of the family househelp since the time she got married. She missed her husband, but dared not say so, as it would mean she liked sex. McFadden (2003:5) is in agreement with Adek on the fact that culturally "a good woman does not ask for sex". Adek further emphasizes that culturally sex was only useful to a woman as a means of procreation. According to Okeke the legitimisation of such social norms as tradition, in spite of their oppressive elements, made them too difficult to revoke, hence denying women important rights. (Okeke, 2000:50). Adek invoked the need for another baby as a last resort in her quest to leave for the city and obtained the consent of her in-laws. Nniamaka's negotiation in African feminism, rather than the confrontation found in western feminism is well demonstrated in this case (Nniamaka, op.cit:376-379).

The marriage of Adek to Otula is a typical example of gender relations in the context of African families; a major characteristic of which is unequal power relations between men and women. It is noteworthy that Adek's qualifications to be Otula's wife were such as to make her a servant of Otula and the family. Otula's payment of dowry was in recognition of this fact. Although motherhood granted Adek some voice in the system, it was the use of her agency that enabled her to navigate around existing walls of subjugation to join her husband in Nairobi.

#### 4. Adek's Life in Nairobi

Sometime around late 1967 Adek left home for Nairobi. The journey by train from Kisumu to Nairobi was a most exhilarating experience, and Adek believed it was a sign of better things to come. Reaching Nairobi was even more exciting; "the town was big and had electric lights!" says Adek. However, arrival at the house where her husband lived in Bondeni estate in a shared single room without electricity, dampened Adek's joy. The single shared room was a colonial policy to cater for male migrant labourers in Nairobi as "bachelors" as a means to control the influx of Africans in to the town (Hake, 1977:66-67). This colonial legacy survived in to the post-independence era, and was a useful survival strategy for very lowly paid workers or job seekers struggling to survive by casual jobs (Hake, 1977:66-67).

A few months' life in Nairobi confirmed to Adek that her husband was merely struggling. His wage of Shs 159.00 a month could not make ends meet, a position which again Hake confirms in his Nairobi study which shows that a salary of Shs 250.00 was below the cost of living index (Hake, 1977:66-67). Adek was faced with difficult choices; either to go back to her matrimonial rural home and earn a living from the farm or remain in Nairobi but engage in a kind income generating activity to supplement her husband's meagre wage. Reminding herself of the difficult life she experienced during her short stay with in-laws back in there in Buholo, Adek opted for the latter.

She decided to look for a job and duly informed her husband. He did not like the idea because a woman's going out to work was not only manifestation of the husband's irresponsibility, but the working women themselves were generally characterized as prostitutes. For these reasons, the man not only hesitated, but even sought to know who had misled his wife into believing that being an employed woman in Nairobi was a good thing. Adek carefully negotiated her way out of this predicament by urging her husband to understand that they had a problem, and that he only needed to swallow his pride and let her take up a paid job. Adek's plea worked, and through connections with female friends already doing domestic work, Adek secured a job as an ayah in a European house in the up market residential area of Upperhill.

The situation in which Adek and the husband found themselves echoes the findings of Zenebe and Flemmen (2008:173) who have established that in Ethiopia, women's position in gender and sexual relations is characterized by their relative lack of power compared with the men. They also concur with Foucault (1997:292) in his argument that "in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance (violent resistance, flight, deception and generally strategies capable of reversing the situation)" because if such did not exist, there would be no power relation at all. Zenebe and Flemmen conclude that a major result of this conception of power relations is the recognition of one party as the subject capable of acting. Thus, the action of the hegemonic power attracts a different response from the subject. In the present context, the attempt by Adek's husband to prevent her from taking a wage job led to her conciliation with him, finally winning his support.

Adek's experience of the difficult life in Nairobi also fits with the findings of Gordon that serious cultural dislocations caused by colonialism largely to the disadvantage of women lasted into the post-colonial era (Gordon, 1996: 256). While men were more easily integrated in to the colonial money economy, for example through education and wage employment, women were often ignored. Because of the low wage system, when women went to towns they were unable to have a share of their husband's income. At the same time they were unable to find jobs of their own and often had to find alternative means of support, not only for themselves but their children as well (Gordon, 1996:255-257). Adek's search for a source of income to rescue the family from want must be seen in this regard.

But Adek's life as a domestic worker was not easy as she felt overworked and under-paid, her monthly salary being a paltry shillings 80/-. Put together with her husband's salary of shillings 159/-, their total earning of about shillings 239/- was, still far below the average cost of living in Nairobi which Adek. Moreover, any small mistake Adek made along the line of duty often elicited racist insults from her employers both male and female. Insults such as 'stupid woman', 'foolish African (woman)' or 'you poor woman you cannot understand complex things' became familiar references to Adek. Yuval-Davis (2006:195) has aptly described this situation as the intersectionality of oppressions; that is oppression built around multiple forms of marginalities. Intersectionality conflates certain identities who acquire a hegemonic position and separates them from others who take the position of the subjects.

Intersectionality of oppression as evidenced here is also in line with Mohanty's (1988:66-67) and Gordon's (1996:249) proposition that to view the women of the world as a homogeneous category of the weak and powerless, struggling against the oppression of the strong and powerful males is to ignore the complexities involved in oppression itself. In this case, for example, the two women involved are positioned differently in terms of race and class. These positioning supersede feminine unity, making the upper class European woman an ally of her husband and children in the oppression of the low class black woman.

Adek's weapon against the ill-treatment was silence. Even so, she realized that she could not work under such difficult circumstances for long. According to the researches of Hay (1976:87-1560 and Okeyo (1979:339) Luo women had a culture of trade since pre-colonial times. Adek witnessed and was inspired by this culture, particularly as she saw her mother market her surplus produce to obtain money to satisfy some family needs. She designed a strategy to save at least shillings 5/- a month to launch a small enterprise in the near future.

Nonetheless, back at the house in Bondeni, Adek's money had enabled the family to purchase goods it, previously could not afford. The family was also able to pay the full rent of Shs 30.00 per month for their Bondeni accommodation and released the

sub-tenant to seek alternative housing. The husband's opposition that had greeted Adek's decision to get a job disappeared altogether, being replaced by appreciation and cooperation. He listened with empathy whenever Adek narrated her ordeals at the workplace, and encouraged her to proceed with the intended plan of going into trade. The element of race and class unity is again evident.

On the one hand, Adek's work lends credence to Mohanty's criticism against generalizations like "all African women are dependent on the males", and that if they engage in any economic activity at all, it is prostitution as has been suggested, for example, by Cutrufelli (1983:13,33). This is because Adek's work demonstrates that some husbands and wives as in Nairobi, became economically interdependent. Further still, it shows that what women do for a livelihood depends on their choice and that while some women worked as prostitutes others like Adek chose domestic work. On the other hand, Adek's constant brainstorming to find another source of income where life for her would be bearable speaks to McFadden, who suggests, concerning agency, that "it has to be everything that we have not began to say and do as women who know that our lives can be different, if only we have the courage to step out of the cages of cultural practices and values that not only oppress us, but also presume to dictate the terms of our freedom".

By the end of 1969 Adek had shillings 180/-, and was ready to quit her job as an ayah to begin trade. Her intention was to first acquire a position in the Gikomba open air market, which had been established in 1962 at the junction of Pumwani and Quarry Roads in the neighbourhood of Bondeni Estate. Officially called Pumwani Market, it later came to be popularly known as Gikomba (GPC Meeting 9/2/62 and Social Services and Housing Committee (SSHC) Meeting 12/3/1962 CCN Minute Books, NCC/CR Archives). Thus, with the help of a woman neighbour (in possession of literacy skills), Adek submitted an application to the City Council of Nairobi authorities asking for a site in the new market. She soon realized, however, that it was not that easy, to obtain a trading site/premises in Nairobi. "The corruption in the City Council corridors was such that without knowing somebody to influence the issuance process in ones favour, you got nowhere" says Adek. Being a woman simply made the situation worse as priority went to male applicants believed to be "heads of households". Adek laments.

Once again Adek found herself at the intersection of oppressions- being needy and a woman. This situation resonates with what Kabeer (1999:21) calls *gender intensified disadvantage*- referring to "the fact that in any given category of disadvantaged groups in society, women by and large, suffer from all the disadvantages of the men of their class but in an intensified form as a result of direct gender discrimination in the allocation of resources and responsibilities" (Kabeer, 1999:21-22).

As before Adek used her agency to seek a solution to her problem. Early in 1970 she persuaded her husband to tactfully work through the difficult processes at City Hall to acquire a site in his own name because "as a man his chances of succeeding were higher". The strategy was successful and Adek immediately quit her job to launch the sale of vegetables.

But Adek's struggles in a male world were not over yet. She had to contend with intense competition especially from the males whose aggressiveness she could not march. This again resounds the association of the woman with the customary private domain of the family, or to some people an association of the woman's body with filth and disease (McFadden,2003:6) as seen earlier, making a woman unfit to handle food. This is in spite of the fact that culturally, the whole responsibility of preparing and cooking food for families falls on women!

Adek tried to solve her problem in various of ways. Initially, she tried to excel in neatness, ensuring as much as possible that her food was clean and more attractive than of her neighbours. She also decided to employ a young man to assist her and most of the time, remained in the background as a supervisor. She discovered that this was the catch as her business saw a major increase in the number of customers. From a salary of Shs. 80 as an ayah in the late 1960s, Adek's profit earnings in 1985 hit an average of Shs. 200.00 a day. During the 1980s she began selling dried fish as well. Adek's monthly average earnings rose above Shs. 300.00 a day which in a month translated to more than Shs. 8000, more than double her husband's salary. It became manifest to Adek that the public domain was a male world and for a woman to attain success, for example in trade, she to incorporate the males.

In addition to her hard work in trade, the 1970s and 80s were also Adek's biologically reproductive years. Her living children at the time of the interview were eight. With the proceeds from trade complementing her husband's wage, the couple comfortably fed the family and educated children. Besides, in the mid 1980s Adek and her husband were able to acquire a plot and construct a house in Dandora phase four, Nairobi. Before the end of the 1990s a semi-permanent family house was also completed in their home in Buholo.

Even so, the culture of male dominance persisted in Adek's life. Her husband believed it was his cultural right to control the enterprise finances. As the enterprise grew, so were his demands to be in charge of the profits. Attempts by Adek to resist Adwer's advances led him to invoke the sanctity of culture, according to which he was the head of the house and the rightful manager of all household finances. When in 2006 he retired from his job, his push to manage Adek's finances turned violent. Adwer's action can be positioned within the findings of Kabeer that it is common for males to resort to culture to justify certain forms of the gender division of roles, responsibilities and privileges which serve their interests (Kabeer, 1999:7).

In Adwer's view Adek's resistance was disobedience. To counteract her growing rebellion, he took another wife whom he squeezed in to the same house where his family resided. With a co-wife and an uncompromising husband, quarrels in the house increased. The positioning of Adek in the polygynous arrangement seems to differ markedly from the finding of Gordon whose view of polygyny (a man's right to have more than one wife) as a cultural practice originating in pre-colonial Africa, is that it was not a sign of women's low status as the Europeans understood it. Rather it was an indication of the centrality of women in the economic well-being of the family (Gordon, 1996:253). Since accumulation of wealth depended on family labour, acquiring women was part and parcel of ensuring family prosperity (Gordon, 1996:253). However, according to Adek, Adwer's marriage to a second wife, much as it was customary, was meant to both humble and humiliate her. It was meant to permanently tame her "rebelliousness". For about a year Adek struggled to live under the difficult circumstances, mainly to see her last born through

secondary school. In 2007, Adek relocated from Nairobi to their Buholo rural home; a response which according Foucault (1997:292) is yet another form of resistance.

When i visited Adek in her rural home in 2010, She was a farmer. Her life and economic activities in Nairobi had to come to an abrupt end because she rejected her husband's hegemony over the product of her labour.

## 5. Conclusion

The focus of this discussion has been on selected episodes from the life and times of Sulmena Adek Otula as a point of reference in explaining some issues of gender, nationalism and the body. It can be concluded that in Adek's time, especially among the Luo:

- Female exploitation in the social realm, coupled with a denial of opportunities in the public sphere institutionalized and elevated male power at the expense of female authority.
- This power was manifested in the private through female exploitation and the control of their bodies by the males. A major element of this control was the restriction of the female within the private domain.
- In an attempt to liberate themselves women used their agency and resistance to carve out for themselves new niches in the public realm. But attempts to operate in this arena sometimes brought them in to circumstances of multiple oppressions, consisting for example, of race, gender and class.
- Through their agency, however, the women carefully negotiated their way round the barriers of oppression to achieve their goals. Even so, the persistence of males to maintain their hegemonic status quo, which in instances like Adek's led to the meting of violence against women led to their humiliation and loss of psyche in continuing with a preferred line of production such as trade.

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