



The Changing Definition of “Womanhood” in Meru, Tanzania

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Introduction

For over a century now, women’s rights movements have been at the forefront of activism in the global west. With this in mind, the same cannot be said about the eastern part of the world: more specifically, Tanzania. While women have been advocating for equal rights and opportunity throughout all of history, the changing definition of “womanhood,” in Africa, has caught the attention of others in recent decades. That being said, compared to the global west, Tanzanian women have an entirely different mindset on what it means to be a woman. Furthermore, it is both relevant and essential to compare the history of the western, women’s rights movement and Tanzanian women’s movement. This comparison can be made by looking at the historical accounts of American feminists and first-hand accounts of Christian women living in Meru, Tanzania. Looking beyond the feminist perspective, I will also look at the similarity between women’s experiences, upbringings, and careers.



Abstract

How has the history of the western feminist movement impacted the meaning of “womanhood” in Meru, Tanzania? For over a century women’s rights have been at the forefront of social transformation, globally. But the definition of feminism differs from place to place. The changing definition of “womanhood,” in Tanzania, is one that has recently caught the attention of experts. The Tanzanian social structure is changing, and progress is being made. Even so, there are still some norms that westerners struggle to understand. With the Lutheran church dominating, women have an entirely different idea of what it means to “be a woman.” I have utilized the transcripts produced by Dr. Beth Ann Williams from her time spent in Meru, Tanzania and have found numerous themes that are consistently mentioned across interviews. These reoccurring themes are worth looking into further and act as the foundation for the research I conducted and am presenting at the symposium.

Methods

Most of my research materials were collected by Dr. Beth Ann Williams from her time spent in Meru, Tanzania. While in Tanzania, she conducted dozens of interviews with people in the community asking about day-to-day life, the role the church plays in society, and so much more. I have worked to filter through the interview transcripts compiled by Dr. Williams: analyzing the information presented, categorizing what is said, and identifying common themes. By categorizing the information, I am able to collect qualitative data to use for my research. In addition to using my mentor’s research, I have also looked at a variety of peer-reviewed sources pertaining to the research I am doing. By gathering information from external sources, in addition to the interview transcripts, I have been able to gain a better understanding of the history of Tanzania, the current way society is structured, and the role women generally play in Tanzanian society.

July 15, 2017
Wednesday at Saints Church meeting with Alice Mathenge
Fully transcribed
BA: I want to know some more about you I want to know when you were born where are you from about your family?
Alice: when I was born I was born on 4 April 1948. My home... I reside a bit of times in Nairobi but my home is in Nyuseru. Yet it is in the center of Kenya it is maybe 10 miles from Nairobi. I was just there yesterday that's why did you Tuesday Wednesday because I had a meeting on Monday.
BA: When did you come to know the Lord?
Alice: I was born in a Christian family where there were very few Christians. I went to school in a Christian school but you know that very personal relationship... it started in high school that I had my encounter with the Lord it came gradually, mine was gradual but I remember when things just changed.
BA: So how did you come to be a member here at All Saints?
A: You know I was educated in the rural area, got married in the rural area. But I was working and my husband was working so that's how we ended up here- we came here for work, for both of us. Then he passed away in 1996. So I'm still here and actually retired and then I am here and there maybe you have not heard that that people in Kenya they live in two places and that is the normal thing. And I have five children, five of them are very young they are all grown now and I have grandchildren.
BA: So you're involved here at the Anglican church in the mothers union?
A: Yes I was yes I am a member of the mothers union I joined in 1990 at All Saints Cathedral and I joined as a member and I've continued.
BA: Why did you join?
A: When you come to this place in Nairobi you sort of want a place to belong... in the church. Being an Anglican, I went to the Anglican church and said I'm coming from this church and I can't be a member. They give me a member. You get your own member your own membership number.
BA: What kind of activities what does it mean to be a member? what are you doing to be a member?
A: First of all I'm buried here. I'm a bit involved in the church the mothers union. Doesn't involve everyone for everything in the mothers union. I read the objectives. They have five objectives, based on the family and having been brought up in the church I had known about them. So I didn't get lost. I mean when I came to the mothers union I had my place. When I came in it was interesting I came in 1981 and 1983 they made me their secretary. I don't know why I served until 1988 and what time I became the treasurer in 1990. I was getting better and better. You want to know our objectives I have them here. (looking at the page- Alice to make a copy)
We are here for all saints catholic but we relate to the mothers in other dioceses- we communion together we relate especially with the Anglican because Mary Sumner was the one who founded the union, trying to help the wives of pastors who were young and raising children and she has gone through a few problems therefore she began to start the union. You go anywhere in the world and you will get the mothers union and happily so all the time.
BA: Are you in communication with other dioceses around the world?
A: Yes we are, but the leadership the pastor will help to quite a bit... the pastor is the wife of the bishop- she has more opportunities to go and visit the others, and then she comes... We join the world-wide Day of prayer for women. You know they make one booklet this time we are praying for rain... we pray we are praying for that particular season or learning about their churches and their strengths... sometimes we go for retreats, we go for seminars especially now with in Kenya our mothers are involved in these seminars, like this August we visited Embu in eastern Kenya for a week, we are waiting to hear what are we going to discuss there.
So we do fellowship, women from all over Kenya members will come to that retreat.
BA: What about this church here? Do you meet on a regular basis?
A: We meet once a month and if there is something that needs to be done we are informed in the church and we do it. See one of our objectives is that this will tell you about us we need to pray for our children and wherever our children married. Right now we have the challenge of that homosexuality that had come. We say we we made our stand even if Obama comes we will still have no... objective there is how can we maintain our fellowship of Christians united by prayer and fellowship. So then we have how we do in fellowship we pray quite a bit. It's part of us we pray for the nation we meet together to encourage one another especially with all these things that are coming. You find even that some of our children especially the girls sometimes they get pregnant early it is to console the mothers that are has been committed. But we do not force out of the church we discourage abortion and you know that even in the church especially the fathers they want to do a lot of talking not talking about that for us we want to come out and that way we bring her back it's one of the challenges we have we have a strong role in convincing the young people before they get married even both boys and girls for the church.
In view of the church we are mothers then we are involved in the objectives I am involved in the ministry of prayer here for many years the pastors have given me the honor to have someone pray, to organize the people (?). We have a Kenya house of prayer and I'm very

Image Descriptions

The images you see here are examples of what the interview transcripts and spreadsheet of interview data looks like. With dozens of interviews to get through, it was extremely important that my research group and I focus on condensing the information into the spreadsheet that is easy to understand.



Results

While I do not have any sort of affirmative results yet, my preliminary results are very telling. To start, I have found a wide variety of common themes that exist across multiple interviews that I have analyzed. For example, women with greater amounts of education tend to have more progressive views on the role women play in society. Additionally, women who have the opportunity to travel to places outside of Tanzania (like the United States) have a more progressive outlook on a woman’s place in society, as well. At this point I have not seen any type of correlation between the age of the interviewee and their perspective of a woman’s role in society, but this could change as I continue to analyze the interview documents.



I have only looked at and thoroughly analyzed the interview transcripts compiled by Dr. William thus far. That being said, I do not have any definitive information on the changing definition of womanhood in Tanzania and how it compares to the changes that occurred in the United States during the rise of the woman’s rights movement in the early 20th century. Nonetheless, the preliminary results that I have gathered from analyzing the interviews leave me optimistic that there are, in fact, similarities between the two movements I am comparing. I will have more complete results once I have the opportunity to analyze American interviews as well.

Next Steps

I plan to illustrate my research in a way that is informative, creative, and easy to understand. Using a digital media platform, like Adobe Illustrator, I will take the information I gathered from Dr. Williams’ interviews and the information collected from additional sources and use it to illustrate the overlaps between the American women’s rights movement and Tanzanian women’s movement. I plan to create a portfolio of approximately fifteen works consisting of digital illustrations (4 works), hand lettered pieces (6 works), and brainstorming pages (5 works). This final phase of my research project will creatively depict the conclusions I have drawn and present my research in a way that is engaging for a more general audience.

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