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Introduction: Crisis in the African Family

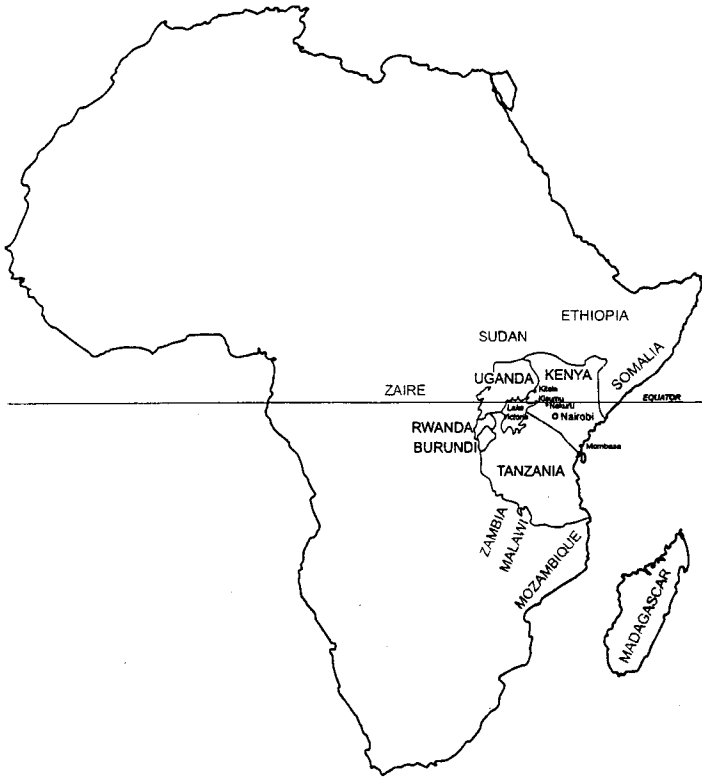
Candice Bradley and Thomas S. Weisner

We are accustomed to hearing that Africa is in crisis. Images of Africa in crisis appear in literature, art, academic writing, and the media. From the Yeats-inspired title of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to articles in the *New York Times*, Africa is described as a "continent in crisis," an "imperiled continent," an "entire continent . . . near the brink of collapse," and perhaps even a "rough beast, its hour come round at last" that "[s]louches towards Bethlehem to be born." Images of African crisis, personified as starving children in deserts and filthy villages, bombard us from the television set accompanied by pleas for donations and the voices of rock stars singing arm in arm. We hear of famine and overpopulation, warfare, ecological degradation, and dreaded diseases. Yet beyond the din of transient media events and academic fashions is a set of very real problems, some enduring, some recurring, and some worsening with time. These problems include public health and food scarcity concerns, high fertility, political instability and civil disorder, lagging economic growth, and loss of infrastructure.

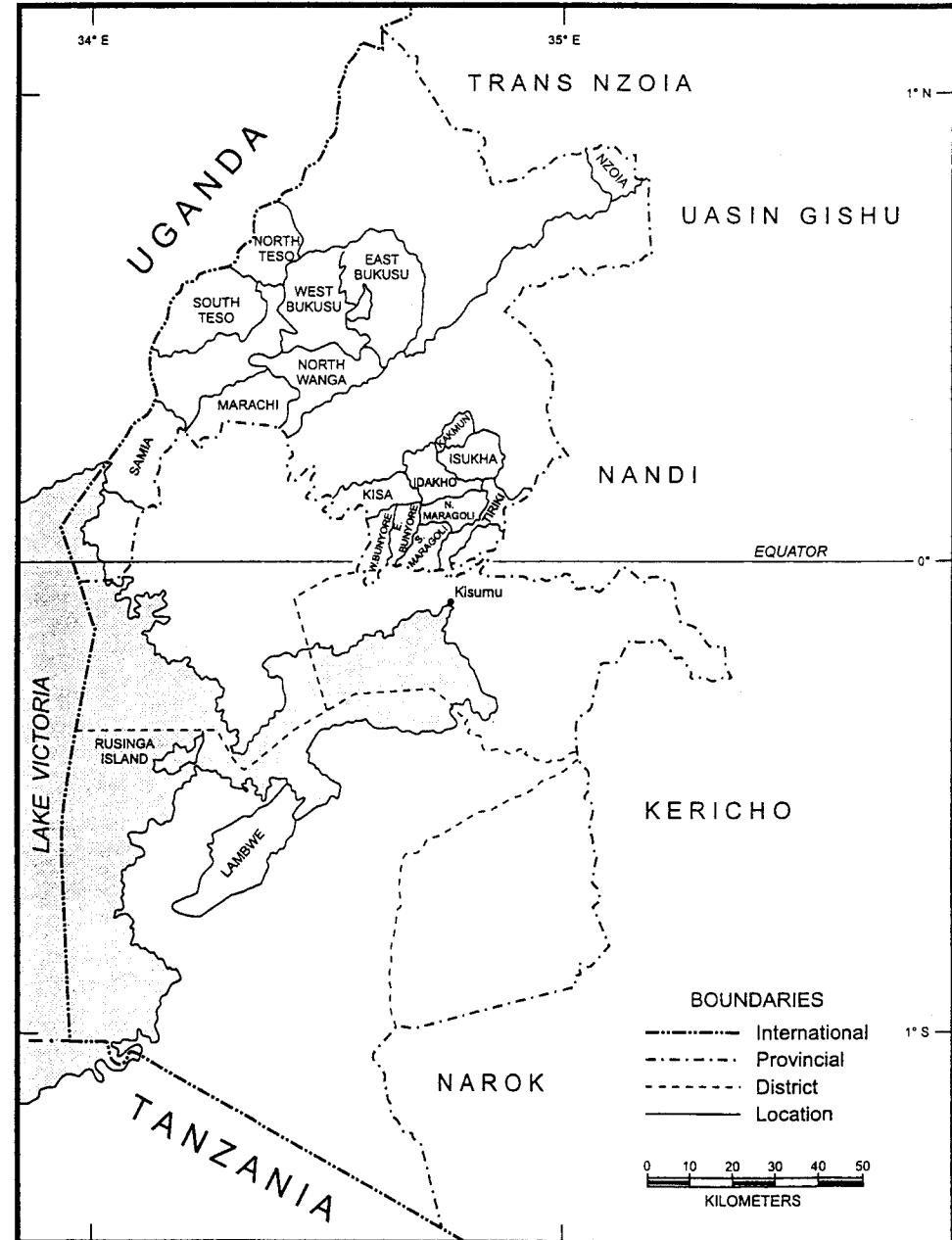
Our focus is the African *family* in crisis. This too is a common media theme. For example, television news segments have covered such topics as overpopulation in Kenya and Zimbabwe, Ugandan AIDS orphans, female circumcision in north Africa, and the explosion of urban street children in Africa's major cities. A recent *New York Times* article described elite Kenyan women who choose to have children but not to marry. Writings on the crisis in the African family, both academic and popular, focus on the disintegration of the multigenerational family, the breakdown of morals, the loss of economic viability, the dispersion of family members, and the loss of values, language, and cultural traditions in the wake of colonialism, modernization, and marginalization.

But the perception of crisis in the African family is not merely one of western imagining. It reflects the concerns and values expressed by Africans themselves in scholarship, film, literature and poetry, the popular media, and political dis-

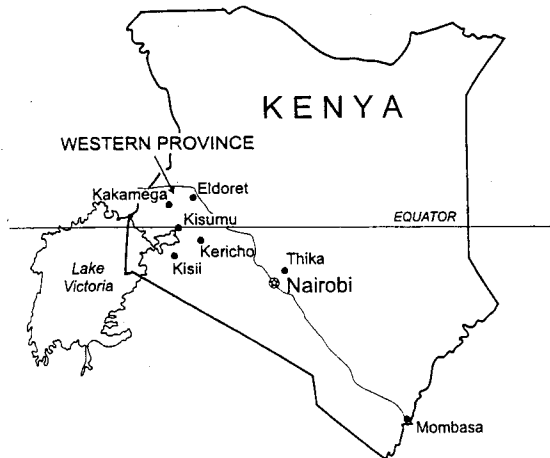
Africa and East Africa



Administrative Units in Western Kenya Described in African Families



Kenya



course at every level of government. There is a broad-based and realistic perception that the African family has changed dramatically, and not necessarily for the better.

A crisis is an acute change, a turning point most often associated with serious personal concerns and insecurity, illness, ecological damage, and economic or political instability. The perception that Africa is in a crisis may have roots in earlier centuries, perhaps originating partly in what some have described as the pathologizing of African society. However, the consensus both within and outside Africa is that a crisis of development is very real. "Africa in crisis" may be a sensational Euro-American media phenomenon, but it is also a realistic rubric for a broad range of contemporary problems effecting African economy, ecology, politics, and development. It is especially pertinent to discussions of health, gender, children, the elderly, and population—the topics of our book.

We examine changing family life in Africa primarily through focus on western Kenya and eastern Uganda. The issues affecting the family in western Kenya echo throughout the African continent. The various ethnic groups found in western Kenya and discussed in this book include Abaluyia, Kalenjin, Luo, and Gusii; also included are neighboring ethnic groups in central Kenya and eastern Uganda (see maps). The larger region includes the arid Rift Valley to the shores of Lake Victoria and the slopes of Mt. Elgon and is bisected by the Kenya-Uganda border. Although ecologically diverse, it is an area of extremely high population density, with several expanding urban centers. The people living here are primarily farmers, herders, traders, laborers, and urban dwellers, speaking many languages, practicing different religions, and living in a variety of ecological settings with different degrees of industrialization. Western Kenya has much in common with other densely populated regions throughout Africa (although regional and national differences across regions are great) and is a microcosm of the myriad changes affecting the family throughout Africa.

AFRICAN FAMILY IN DECLINE?

Popenoe (1988) outlines one kind of change or family crisis: the idea that families are in "decline" in the industrial West. He argues that family groups are becoming internally deinstitutionalized, carrying out fewer traditional functions, losing power relative to the state, and becoming smaller and more unstable and that the cultural value of familism is weakening in favor of self-fulfillment and egalitarianism (pp. 8–9).

The evidence from our African data are important with regard to family decline. The families and communities studied in our volume are changing, often gaining or losing resources and sharing power with delocalized forces that are part of a wider world system. But the family is not declining in all the senses Popenoe identifies. The African family circumstances described in our study suggest that the institutional structures of Kenyan families are becoming more diverse but are still highly salient; that some functions (support and care for children, care of the

although changing in form and perhaps not as homogeneous or as reliable; that the state affects the economy and polity differently than it directly impinges on the domestic world; and that family life has become more unstable more because of migration and fertility change than a change in the values of familism per se.

Our book focuses on what family change means to Kenyans themselves, what the different manifestations of change are, and what the shape of future resilience and continuity is in the Kenyan family. Our authors have not focused on blame or moral judgments regarding who and what caused or is responsible for family crises, although this topic certainly matters. The consequences and adaptive responses of families are our main focus.

Concerns in Africa about the family have some parallels in the contemporary United States and Europe. In the United States, where a third of the births now occur outside marriage, the issue of family change has been articulated at every level of the social and political structure. For example, during the early 1990s Vice President Dan Quayle called for a return to "family values." Quayle's call underscored a widely held desire to recapture an aspect of United States culture that has changed radically since the 1950s. The imagined tranquillity and quality of life of that era, a remembrance or yearning that is itself contested, is a part of the feeling that contemporary family life is in crisis in comparison.

A desire to return to traditional values is a theme also found in Africa and reflects a perception that life was better before the present—before colonialism, incorporation into the capitalist world-economy, and development. This nostalgia for the past is a centerpiece of many African novels (e.g., *Things Fall Apart*) and a component of several papers in this volume. For example, Nasimiyu (this volume) argues that women's usufruct rights to land were better protected and food sources were more secure in precolonial Bungoma (also see Håkansson and Levine, Kilbride and Kilbride, and Cattell, this volume). Ocholla-Ayayo (this volume) shows that Kenyans believe sexual mores have deteriorated over time. Whyte and Whyte and Kariuki (this volume) argue that prior nutritional regimes were better than present ones, due to more resilience and a wider range of naturally occurring foods.

However, we urge caution when evaluating informants' memories of a better past, for example, a time when women were better treated, adolescent sexuality was better guarded within the cultural context (Ocholla-Ayayo, this volume, Kilbride and Kilbride, this volume) or in-laws and elders were properly honored (Bradley, this volume, Cattell, this volume). Although we have empirical evidence that Kenyans believe things have gotten worse, we must look elsewhere for confirmation, if it is available at all. In other words, the perception of "breakdown"—the loss of traditions, values, and culture—and also the changes that have actually occurred, are valuable data. But memories and reminiscences occur in the present and should not be mistaken for the realities of the past.

Such reminiscences may not be quite veridical about the past, but they can help defend the predictability of life (Marris, 1975, p. 3). Defending the predictability of life involves comparing current circumstances to an idealized and internalized

they are primordial, emotionally-salient experiences from childhood and earlier adult life and reinforced by contemporary cultural practice. Family ideals may not be attainable and ideals and practices are changing, but they remain culturally and psychologically important to the imagined cultural careers of contemporary Kenyans. There are prototypical cultural models for creating and sustaining family life which continue to have a force in contemporary Kenyan communities.

Hence our data suggest that a unidimensional image of the African family as “breaking down” is unsupported. Many studies in this volume (e.g., Weisner, Akong’a, Håkansson and LeVine, Munroe and Munroe, Wandibba, Edwards) suggest significant continuity and adaptive resilience in the face of contemporary changes. These include continuity in psychological themes around family (Akong’a; Weisner), gender (Munroe and Munroe, Håkansson and LeVine, and Nasimiya), and the elderly. Our evidence suggests that Kenyan family adaptation is an ongoing struggle, a historically continuous cultural project to create a meaningful, sustainable, and coherent pattern of everyday life. Our authors often report that similar adaptive struggles took place in the past. Thus, rather than breakdown, we see selective crises that arise when, for a variety of reasons, family members can no longer effectively engage in the shared adaptive project, tied to primordial, defended cultural models of family life experienced in the past and partially reinforced in the present, that is the heart of family life.

CULTURE, FAMILIES, HOUSEHOLDS

Our authors speak of cultures, tribes, and different local communities in Kenya. But were there in the past, and are there today, cultures, or tribes, or communities in Kenya, or were there only colonial and/or locally-defined groups in shifting, historically variable configurations? We and our authors accept the importance and relevance of cultural communities without overly reifying them. We believe that cultures and tribes are useful as analytical categories and real in the world of Kenyan families and communities. It has long been recognized in anthropology, including work in Africa (Southall, 1970), that the extent of homogeneity in a cultural community, or human population, is an empirical question, not inherent in the use of culture or tribe as category. Brightman’s (1995, p. 541) review of the criticisms of the culture concept in anthropology makes this point:

Neither in earlier disciplinary history nor as deployed in recent anthropological writing does the culture concept consistently exhibit the attributes of ahistoricism, totalization, holism, legalism, and coherence with which its critics selectively reconstitute it. These [critics’ conceptions of culture] are invented images of culture, both arbitrary and partial with respect to a much more diverse and versatile field of definition and use.

Our evidence suggests that there is substantial local homogeneity within the various cultural communities studied in our volume, as well as many common features shared among them. Sub-Saharan Africa and Kenya include meaningfully different human populations, or “interactional networks within which mating and

other communicative processes tend to be concentrated” (LeVine et al., 1994, p. 12). Populations share a local ecology, symbol systems for encoding that ecology, and social organizations and cultural rules for adapting to it.

We have organized our family studies of adaptation and change around five topics: economy, human development, gender and fertility, the elderly, and health. Although all the papers focus on one or more of these topics, there is no single unifying theoretical perspective. The authors have diverse views on theory and method. Theoretical perspectives articulated in the papers include ecological, psychoanalytic, ecocultural, historical materialist, symbolic, feminist, and modernization or delocalization. Most papers use a multimethod approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Ethnography combines with comparative and cross-cultural, demographic, psychological, historiographic, and public health survey methodologies. With authors coming from Africa, Europe, and North America, these perspectives and methods represent different traditions through which social scientists come to understand the same or similar problems.

Likewise, units of analysis vary. Some authors, for example, measure data for individuals, while others also collect data from units they call “households” or “families.” Clearly, households and families are constituted differently and would call for different methods. In western Kenya, for example, a household is easily defined as “those who share a cooking pot.” This definition can accommodate two women living with children, a Logoli grandmother living with three grandchildren and an unmarried pregnant daughter, or a multigenerational household consisting of parents, their sons and cowives, their biological children, and any number of foster children, all of whom eat from the same pot. To collect data on *families* related by blood and marriage in contemporary Kenya requires a research design including travel to other regions and cities, locating kin who remain part of the family estate but live elsewhere in the country. “Household” and “family” would then overlap but remain analytically distinct as units for analysis and conceptualization.

Most recent publications about the problems at issue in this book focus on households. This is because “family” has ceased to be a viable unit for *economic* research. This shift to studying households is primarily due to the very perception that there is a crisis of the family throughout the contemporary world. The concept of “household” has taken root, replacing the notion of family that was used over the previous 150 years (Wallerstein, 1974). In the United States up to the 1950s, households and families were still synonymous for the majority of domestic units census takers encountered. These were spoken of by demographers as “true families.” But for the last forty years the proportion of households containing “true families” has declined. Eventually, the concept of “family” was no longer identifiable as a group of people living in a house.

In addition, the notion of family became tainted with evolutionist or developmentalist assumptions, namely, that the nuclear family was the most modern or advanced family form (Smith & Wallerstein, 1992). But families are often not constituted in this nuclear way—not in the United States or in Africa. This encour-

aged feminists, anthropologists, and political scientists to use the term “household” instead (see, for example, Netting, Wilk, & Arnould, 1984).

But something is lost in the transition from studying families to households. As a unit of analysis, “household” nearly always implies economic and political variables and relations. For example, a household is commonly defined as an institution with fluid boundaries, where people pool income, allocate tasks, make decisions, and reproduce class and ethnic relations (Smith & Wallerstein, 1992). Household, in this economic sense, is also used as a unit of analysis in several papers in this volume.

However, our deeper concern with “family” emphasizes not only the “household” as a coresidential, economic unit but also the family as a complex institution that binds together individual households. The family in Africa in this wider view is connected by blood, marriage, adoption, and *shared cultural, economic, and psychosocial tools for adaptation*. The role of families in social support, moral judgments, and economic exchanges and as the unit carrying important values and practices being used by communities today is clear in many of the studies in our volume. Furthermore, our African colleagues talk of families in these ways. The notion of a crisis in the African *family*, where African values and traditions are reproduced and transmitted, is one that is very real to them and to the communities we studied.

The African family can be seen from a variety of perspectives and levels of analysis, but always as an intergenerational, multilocal, psychosocial community linked to local, national, and global economies and polities. Although many chapters in this book make such linkages to different levels, we do not lose sight of the family as the center of our interest. European interests, the Kenyan state, the world economic order—these matter to the contemporary, partially delocalized African family, but they do not in any sense replace the importance of the family in the actions and thoughts and feelings of Kenyans themselves.

CULTURE, FAMILY, AND ECONOMY

Hence, our focus on the family and regional communities of Western Kenya does not suggest lack of acknowledgment of the world system in which it exists. As Moore comments regarding how community studies in Africa relate to a global perspective in anthropology itself: “The global political-economy is in sight, even from the food gardens of the most peripheral settlements. Intense local study is a method of investigation, not a definition of the anthropological problem” (1993, p. 4).

In this respect the evidence from the studies in this book supports the notion that colonization had many of its effects “from the bottom up, through the remaking of the inhabited environment” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992, p. 67), as well as through the state and the economy and formal ideologies, and that domestic life was central in the remaking of the local environment.

Western Kenya and eastern Uganda share with other African countries a history punctuated by the colonial experience. In essence, the economic history of Af-

rica over the last several hundred years was dominated by the process of incorporation into the capitalist world economy. The colonial and postcolonial periods may be viewed as two phases of incorporation and capitalist intrusion. Thus, when scholars write about economic change in Africa they almost invariably make these factors central in the analysis.

The authors writing about the economics of family change in this volume have both the global and the local system in sight. For example, Kilbride and Kilbride explore changing family life in East Africa using the concept “delocalization” as a centerpiece. Delocalization is similar to Appadurai’s (1991) term “deterritorialization,” and perhaps also to the world-systems theory concept of “peripheralization.” Western Kenya may be thought of as a delocalized, or peripheralized, landscape. This is a place in which some men and women, perhaps identifying as Abaluyia or Luo or Kalenjin, travel back and forth from their city homes to the rural homes where they hope to be buried someday. Western Kenya is delocalized in the sense that it has become for many a kind of bedroom community for Kenya’s major cities. It is a labor market and food-producing region, with inextricable links to the wider world. These links are made by people who travel back and forth and through radio, television, newspapers, commodities, sexually transmitted diseases, and family planning information. Yet it is also a place that is economically, politically, and culturally often very distant in experience, in family practices and customs, and in locally meaningful systems of social participation.

Of course, western Kenya was never isolated and unconnected to other ethnic groups and places, before or after colonial influence. The region was settled during the Bantu diaspora of preceding centuries, and some men and women can remember, as young children, the first settlement of their current lineage lands. Trade and intermarriage was extensive with groups in Uganda and all the way to the coast. But the sheer scale of the colonial and postcolonial eras, the asymmetry of the impact, the comprehensiveness of it in every domain of life, makes this delocalization of a different order of magnitude and force in the life of the region.

Our authors find that local variations in access to resources affect how resources are allocated within the household (de Wolf, M. Whyte). Resource allocation decision making is also affected by changing access to education, women’s status, and polygyny (Ssenyonga). Wandibba compares the economic and domestic roles of children across two generations, providing new ethnographic data on children’s local knowledge of their ecology. Super and Harkness provide some of the most detailed cross-sectional data currently available on two different patterns of community response to modernization in Kokwet and provide evidence for these at both the family and individual child and mother levels. Younger, better educated, and Christian-affiliated families have more access to cash and school fees for their children, and their children are less likely to be found away from their homes doing subsistence tasks. However, infant and child health measures were unaffected by modernity. Younger and more educated women bear children earlier and with smaller birth intervals and these greater risks to health offset any gains from better education or access to health care.

Several authors in this volume evaluate change in Africa during the colonial and postcolonial period using a modernization, or westernization, perspective. By the term “modernization,” these authors do not refer to a simplistic modernization theory. Modernization theory, in which states are thought of as either modern or modernizing, has been critiqued by most disciplines. World-system theorists, for example, argue that societies do not necessarily proceed teleologically toward modernization, but rather argue that, in a single world-system, peripheral areas may be marginalized. As such, they fail to develop in the ways expected by modernization theory, instead becoming labor and raw material supplying regions for core areas and states. This follows from Frank’s (1966) notion of the “development of underdevelopment.” However, when the authors in this book use the term “modernization,” they mean the intrusion of capital and its infrastructure, as well as the ways in which the relations of capitalism are reproduced (e.g., media, national education), and recognize that many parts of Kenya are underdeveloped or marginalized relative to core cities such as Nairobi and countries such as England or the United States.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, AGING, AND CHANGING FAMILY VALUES

There are universal problems facing all families and cultural communities in raising children. LeVine et al. (1994, p. 12) for instance, argue that four adaptive needs—subsistence, reproduction, communication, and social regulation—shape human child care and that these are always socially and culturally organized. Each of these adaptive problems are represented in our chapters, in sections covering economics, fertility, health, aging, or cultural values and development. Our authors write about changing systems of social support for children and the elderly and women (Abbott, Bradley, Cattell, Sangree, Kilbride, Håkansson and LeVine, Ssenyonga, Nasimiya, Munroe and Munroe, Weisner), moral judgments (Edwards), health and survival for children (Ocholla-Ayayo, Whyte, Whyte and Kariuki), and parental strategies for responding to modernity (Super and Harkness, Wandibba, de Wolf).

The adaptive challenge facing families and communities everywhere is to provide a daily routine of life for children that is relatively stable and sustainable in a local ecology, provides for subsistence needs, is meaningful and appropriate within the communities’ moral worlds, and is congruent with the resources parents and children have available to them. “Sustaining” a daily routine means adapting it to a local ecology and the family resource base. That is, it refers to survival, work, wealth, and resources. To sustain a routine means dealing with the resources and constraints available and perceived in the world. It requires an assessment of class, gender, and power and the ecology surrounding the family and community. A “meaningful” routine is one that has moral and cultural significance and value for family members—a routine of cultural activities that meets at least some valued cultural goals. It is also a routine of life that is interpretable within some shared cultural developmental model in a community.

Many of our studies argue for a continuing, coherent set of moral ideals and cultural models—albeit, of course, changing constantly because of delocalization—guiding African families in this adaptive project of organizing their parenting practices and daily routines of life. There are many examples of an interesting mix of cultural coherence, continuity, and change with regard to cultural models of family life in our volume. The continuity in our studies of family life derives in part from the importance of locally situated family practices that still encode (in symbols, practices, beliefs, and institutions) useful ways to deal with some of the universal adaptive problems facing families.

Edwards finds that there are changes in moral reasoning and judgments across the generations—but not a different moral world. Munroe and Munroe present evidence for a culture complex of gender socialization that continues to reproduce gender-determined child rearing patterns and parenting roles. Abbott compares parenting beliefs between Kikuyu and Appalachian communities and clearly finds central tendencies and continuities in each group. Weisner finds continuity in shared caretaking of children and in notions of social support, including sibling caretaking within a culture complex encouraging its continued modified practice. Akong’a argues that core cultural values are crucial to psychosocial adaptation in Kenya and outlines some of these core institutionalized values concerns. Håkansson and LeVine show continuity in men’s and women’s life course strategies and life goals among the Gusii, as well as contemporary changes in Gusii women’s and men’s strategies as men and women age. Both women and men jockey for power and resources, with women relying on their children if they can and with men increasingly isolated if they cannot take additional wives. S. LeVine has summarized how change has accentuated this *prior* cultural and psychological pattern among Gusii:

[I]t would appear that these women, like most others of their age group in Gusii society, are bound to live psychologically and physically isolated lives—alone, for the most part, with their children.... [W]omen seemed to be condemned to rather solitary lives in which they pursued their daily activities alone for the most part, with little opportunity to meet with others in neutral circumstances. If a lack of trust was always a feature of Gusii culture, the contemporary social and economic situation has further emphasized this characteristic. (1979, pp. 369–370)

Whereas change can produce an exaggeration of previous cultural practices, more often it produced syncretism, active strategic manipulation of the old and the new, and community heterogeneity. Whiting (1996, pp. 29–30), for example, has shown how contemporary Kikuyu mothers still valued the social behaviors of obedience, respect for elders, generosity, and good-heartedness. At the same time, more modern Kikuyu mothers valued cleverness, confidence, inquisitiveness, and bravery or boldness in their children, social behaviors they perceived might help them in school and the new state and economy. They expressed ambivalence about such values as cleverness or boldness, recognizing the difficulty of combining these behaviors with obedience.

Our studies of aging and generational differences, like the work on parenting and social support for children, show considerable ambivalence among elderly, as well as their children and siblings, about their circumstances. Elderly are dependent on children's earnings from cash in ways never anticipated. The elderly are being put to work caring for children and continuing to manage family farms and herds, at a time in life when their cultural ideals were to sit quietly and receive respect and recognition. This is hard logistically and physically for elders. It is also difficult and unexpected socially, since elders' roles and interpersonal expectations are changed. It is also a struggle emotionally—there is a sense among elders in Western Kenya that they have been “betrayed” or denied something they thought would be theirs by their children and siblings, since they are not receiving the honor and respect they deserve.

Men's and women's circumstances are often very different, as is clear from the chapters by Ssenyonga, Håkansson and Levine, and Cattell. Elders' experiences of delocalization is profound, but often they are actually collaborating in family persistence and continuity for their children and grandchildren! The theme of remembrance is also especially relevant for the elderly: Have the elderly not always experienced loss and recalled the past and its promises in idealized ways?

Taken together, these studies vividly capture many of the concerns driving the ecocultural adaptations of Kenyan families. In the face of sometimes overwhelming difficulties, parents are struggling to achieve such a sustainable and meaningful routine of everyday life for their children, their elders, and themselves. It is this human adaptive project in family life that is a focus of our volume.

CONCLUSION

The moral and cultural concerns of families in the current crisis of delocalization in western Kenya are hardly local in the sense of being limited to that part of the world. That is, these are not “East African problems.” These problems are recognizable in varying forms everywhere. Kilbride and Kilbride compare concerns with child abuse, infanticide, and elder neglect and abuse in Kenya with North America, for instance. The impossible demands placed on some women in Kenya, especially those with no husband or an absent one, to provide for their children with inadequate resources is a problem found throughout the world, and evidence for this comes from a number of the studies.

The intergenerational study of family change at the local community level is, in our view, a key to understanding family adaptation and is a theme of the fieldwork and design of many of the studies in this volume. It is not the only important way, but it is an essential complement to surveys, historical and political economic studies, or other approaches. These chapters suggest new hypotheses and longitudinal studies at every turn: What will be the cultural model and expectations for social support in the current generation of Western Kenyans? How will local behavioral adaptations for HIV and sexual conduct finally emerge in these communities? How will the parents now viewing their own elderly generation view aging and its rights and obligations? How will the fertility decline now under way

in the region be reflected in changing gender roles and economic obligations? How will the different strategies for economic adaptation across families within cultural groups discovered by the authors in our volume affect their children's life course into the next generation?

The family adaptive project vividly seen in these studies is shared by families everywhere: to sustain a way of life for kin that has cultural and emotional meaning. The Kenyan communities our authors have studied are trying to achieve this in the face of often desperate economic, sociohistorical, demographic, and political circumstances. The diversity and complexity of how families have adapted shows continuity, delocalization, fragmentation, and loss. The extent to which families are succeeding offers some hope and should be counted as a real achievement of contemporary Kenyan communities.

NOTE

A note on terminology and maps: We used standard Kenya spelling of basic terms (such as Luyia and Abaluyia). However, Abaluyia communities vary in spelling and usage of some terms. Authors' usage was followed in those circumstances, and so some terms and phrases will differ slightly in spelling across chapters. All the western Kenya communities described in the volume are shown on the detailed map of administrative units. These include communities where extensive fieldwork was done (such as Samia and Maragoli) or communities where comparative data are presented (such as Nzoia and Teso). Communities outside western Kenya are near other centers shown on the Kenya map (such as Gusii near Kisii Town, Kikuyu near Thika, Gisu near the Kenya–Uganda border, Kokwet south of Kericho, and so on).

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