



## Examining the Historical Changes in Knowledge, Beliefs and Practices Regarding Sexuality: Conception and Abortion amongst the Luo of Migori, Kenya

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### Abstract

Abortion is not a recent phenomenon. Throughout human history, abortion has been practiced for one reason or another. In the context of traditional African society such as the Luo society, abortion is abhorred because life is regarded as sacred and devoid of human control. Morally, the problem of abortion touches on human life because it entails its destruction and involves risks to the aborting woman. The study sought to examine the changes that have taken place historically which have changed the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and practices regarding sexuality, having children and abortion among the Luo of Migori County. It is assumed that the breakdown of traditional normative order due partly to socio-cultural, economic and moral changes is probably the single most important factor leading to the relative prevalence of abortion in the sub-county. The study used key informants and focus group discussions as methods of data collection using purposive sampling. The key findings included; there is a breakdown in the society where beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives on sexuality, childbearing have completely changed as a result of Christianity, urbanization and mixed marriages between different communities. Above all, there is a lack of cohesion and diminishing knowledge on human preservation.

**Keywords:** *abortion, attitude, beliefs, perspectives, tradition*

## 1.0 Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines unsafe abortion as a procedure for terminating pregnancy, carried out either by persons lacking the necessary skills or in an environment that does not conform to minimal medical standards, or both. According to United Nations Population Fund (UNFP), 515,000 women almost one every minute each year will die worldwide from causes related to pregnancy (UNFP, 1999). 70,000 women each year will die as a result of unsafe abortion, an unknown number will suffer from infection and other adverse health consequences. The recent analysis of August 2013 on unsafe abortion indicated that an estimated 464,690 induced abortions occurred in Kenya in 2012, corresponding to an induced abortion rate of 48 abortions per 1000 women of reproductive age (15-49 years), and an induced abortion ratio of 30 abortions per 100 births in 2012. It is also estimated that 157,762 women received care for complications of induced and spontaneous abortions in health facilities in the same year. Of these, 119,912 were experiencing complications of induced abortions. Based on patient-specific data, women who sought abortion-related care were socially, demographically and economically heterogeneous. They included educated and uneducated women, urban and rural women, Christians, Muslims and women of "other faiths", students, unemployed and employed women as well as married, never married and divorced women. Abortion is not a recent phenomenon (Kegode, 2010). Throughout human history, abortion has been practiced for one reason or another. For instance, in ancient Greece and Rome, abortion was a legal form of birth control without social stigma (Richmond-Abbott, 1992). In fact as evidenced from those societies such as the Chinese and Indians where abortion has been widespread for cultural and legal reasons such as the attempt to terminate the survival of the girl child in preference for the boy child, the whole society has been affected. Among the Nayar of India for example, the cultural practice led to a shortage of brides leading to an institution referred to as polyandry whereby several brothers shared one wife (Aiyappan, 1932). In China, the implementation of the one child legal requirement led to widespread abortion of girl children. There are also societies where there is the boy child preference such as India, Bangladesh and Pakistan where female infanticide is common. In those societies dowry payments make many couples prefer having sons than daughters. These societies have a higher male to female sex ratio. In an ideal world, every pregnancy would be a wanted one and every new born would be healthy. Given that a pregnancy may not be in the interest of a woman's physical, mental and social well-being, it is desirable that abortion be available as a health service when unplanned and unwanted pregnancy occurs (Neubardt & Schulman, 1972).

## **2.0 Problem Statement**

Abortion is an age old practice that has major impact on public health in different human societies, though with varying impacts (Kegode, 2010). In the context of traditional African society such as the Luo society, abortion is abhorred because life is regarded as sacred and devoid of human control. Thus any conceived foetus is supposed to be carried to full term resulting in a live birth. It is for this reason that pregnancy is accompanied by elaborate rituals, prescriptions and proscriptions. Morally, the problem of abortion touches on human life because it entails its destruction and involves risks to the aborting woman. However, more recent studies reveal that older and married women also seek post-abortion care for abortion related complications in public hospitals (Solo, et al., 1999; Wamwana, et al., 2006).

## **3.0 Literature Review**

### **3.1 Abortion in pre-colonial Africa**

Some studies suggest that some ancient and traditional societies tolerated induced abortion although on rare occasions (Shah & Ahman, 2004). The ancient Egyptians are reported to have been the first community in Africa to discover techniques of procuring abortion (ibid). Devereux (1976) suggests that in some African communities abortion was used as a birth control method and unwanted pregnancies resulting from rape, incest and illicit sex were terminated before the first cry a baby makes at birth. This was out of the belief that the first cry the baby makes at birth is what makes it human and social. Among the Akan people of Ghana, induced abortion was allowed if the pregnancy was from rape or illicit sex. The Akan people view a foetus as having no human attributes (ibid). To them human life begins at birth. Among the Samburu of Kenya uncircumcised girls who conceived out of wedlock were forced to terminate their pregnancies because conception out of marriage reduced a girl's chance of marriage and the size of the herd paid as bride wealth. Several studies, however, show that in the majority of pre-colonial African societies, abortion was abhorred and highly stigmatized (Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976; Ndeti, 1978; Parkin, 1978). In many communities children were highly valued as symbols of social status, completeness in one's marital status, wealth, source of labour and social security (Ocholla-Ayayo, 1994). In the Luo community a woman's social status depended on the number of children (especially sons) that she bore. Such a woman was respected by her husband and kinsmen (Muange, 1998). Thus social pressure prevailed upon women to ensure that they carried their pregnancies to full term.

### **3.2 Attitudes and beliefs about abortion**

In most studies, analysis of abortion focuses on its incidence and ignores social attitudes and beliefs. Older studies report negative attitudes to abortion in Kenya (Mboya, 1938; Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976; Rogo, Orero and Oguttu, 1998). Ethnographic

data indicates that induced pregnancy termination was greatly abhorred in many traditional communities in Africa (Parkin, 1978; Cohen and Odhiambo, 1989). Among the Luo for example, a woman who aborted was viewed as careless and loose in moral behaviour. Such a woman was ridiculed and stigmatized by the community. Traditionally, miscarriage (spontaneous abortion) was viewed as a misfortune and it was believed to be caused by witchcraft and the evil eye. A woman who frequently miscarried was perceived as unclean or having '*chola*' and thus, was not allowed to interact with other people until she was cleansed by a traditional healer using herbs or '*manyasi*'. She could only resume normal social life and sexual relations after cleansing (Mboya, 1938; Ocholla-Ayayo, 1976). In fact she was a subject of sympathy since she was considered not to be personally responsible for her unfortunate condition. On the other hand, abortion was equated to murder or 'spilling' blood or '*puko remo*' and this was considered a taboo. It attracted stigma and ostracization from the community and one had to be cleansed to be accepted back in the community. Traditionally the Luo value the sanctity of life hence spilling blood was considered a bad omen (Mboya, 1938). The killing of any animal and human beings were believed to 'soil' the killer's hands and those of his future generations. In case one killed, the cleansing ceremony was too costly and elaborate. Punishment included banishment into exile and destruction of one's houses and food stores to prevent the curse from afflicting his kinsmen and the community at large. Today similar views about abortion are widely prevalent; it is stigmatized and regarded as morally debasing.

### **3.3 Changes in norms, attitudes and practices**

This section focuses on changes which have occurred in the two community that have made it possible for individuals to engage in sexual relations and hence abortion without feeling guilty. A number of factors have been identified as having brought about changes in norms, attitudes and practices leading to sexual promiscuity and hence abortion in sub-Saharan Africa. In the traditional society, culture provided prescriptions and proscriptions which guided people's behavior and the way they interacted with one another (Sorre and Akong'a, 2009). Initiation rituals and dances for young men and women provided a conducive environment of imparting traditional norms, customs and practices. This also provided informal and formal education that was aimed at equipping young people with life skills. In addition, institutions such as age groups/sets and other peer related groups also socialized young people by assigning them statuses and roles and at the same time providing them with life skills. In the past young unmarried men and women were provided with sexual outlets particularly by the traditional practice of '*wuowo*' which involved the practice of non-penetrative sex (Ocholla-Ayayo: 1976).

In the past seventy years, however, there has been a great impact on Luo culture from urbanization, modern education and other forces of modernization (Muange, 1998). They have contributed to the erosion of traditional norms, attitudes and practices and institutions which regulated sexual behavior. The conservative attitudes towards sexual relations have weakened because people no longer follow traditional norms regarding pre-marital and extramarital sexual relations. Kilbride and Kilbride (1990) argue that the process of delocalization resulted in the imposition of alien sexual practices that led to liberalization of sexual practices and attitudes. Delocalization refers to the process by which local knowledge, beliefs and practices give way to external influences that are not in the culture of the people leading to anomie. According to Kilbride and Kilbride (1990), one of the effects of the delocalization is the increase in pre-marital and extramarital sexual relations due to postponement of marriage without delaying sexual activity and emphasis of sexual relations as a recreational rather than reproductive activity as it were in the traditional society. As a result society has a lax attitude towards sex in which young and old people engage in multiple sexual relations without inhibition. Sorre and Akong'a (2009) note that today, anyone looking for sex can find it anywhere; in mass media, places of work, schools, colleges, at home, internet, vehicles, parks and so on (2009:9). As a result people engage in sexual activities without fear of pregnancy or infection with STI's. The liberalization of sexual attitudes and practices has made it possible to engage in sexual activities hence abortion without any feelings of guilt and fear of pregnancy or infection with sexually transmitted infections. Weak social controls have encouraged people to get involved in indiscriminate sexual relations. Sorre and Akong'a further stress that contemporary society is exposed to sensuous information through the mass media leading to diminished individual and social control mechanisms. Unlike in traditional society that provided options for access to sexuality, today there are many options to sexuality to anyone who is willing but devoid of responsibility. Poverty has also contributed to increased premarital and extramarital resources and hence induced abortion. Many women who lack economic resources are driven into sexual relations with men who have money. These relationships are devoid of individual and mutual responsibility. Poor women succumb to sexual advances of men who are able to provide money and other material resources of those in positions of authority/control. Many of them are not able to negotiate for safe sex practices hence risk of unwanted pregnancies.

### **3.4 Changes in attitudes and practices that influence abortion**

There are a number of changes which have occurred in the last seven decades that have brought about changes in norms, attitudes and practices that make it possible for individuals to procure abortion without the consequence of feeling guilty. In many traditional African societies culture was the source of prescriptions and which guided

people's behavior and how they interacted with one another (Sorre and , 2009). Cultural ideals, beliefs and practices have been observed to support the perpetuation of promiscuity and unsafe abortion. In many African societies initiation rituals and dances for boys and girls provided an environment of imparting formal and informal education and life training skills. In addition, institutions such as age sets and other peer related common groups helped to re-socialize young people by providing them with appropriate life-skills, status and roles. Peer-related groups also served as a check on individual behavior. A number of factors have been identified as being responsible to sexual promiscuity and hence abortion in sub Saharan Africa. Ocholla-Ayayo (1997) has identified the following practices as being responsible for promiscuity: levirate marriage, divorce, separation and widowhood among married people, sexual liberalization due to breakdown of traditional norms, weak conjugal bonds (especially in polygynous marriages) and few sanctions against premarital and extramarital sex.

**i) Expressions of love and companionship**

Nowadays many people engage in sexual relations as a way of expressing their 'love' and companionship. Such relationships lack reciprocity and individual responsibility.

**ii) Adolescent sexuality**

Today, to many young men and women sexual intercourse is the ultimate goal of any boy-girl relationship – it is perceived as the only way of expressing love and care. Sorre and Akong'a (2009) note that many young men compete to have sex and impregnate young girls as a way of demonstrating their heroism among peers.

Girls who decline their boyfriends' sexual advances lose them or are 'dumped'. The fear of losing a partner and perceived disapproval by peers forces many young girls and women to yield to their partner's sexual demands.

**iii) Adolescents and contraceptives**

Studies have shown that among adolescents and young relationships the use of contraception including condoms is rare or minimal (Magadi et al., 2000; Oindo, 2002). (Where) condoms and other forms of contraception are used in the initial stages of the relationship but they stop using them once they begin trusting one another (Sorre and Akong'a, 2004). Many young men believe that girls who insist on using condoms do not trust them.

**iv) Adolescent sexuality**

Nyamongo (1997) observes that adolescents tend to take risks through reckless sexual behavior/activities in spite of their knowledge of the risks

involved and contraception (to avoid/protect against the repercussions). He further argues that due to the fact that adolescents undergo biological, psychological and social changes they experiment sexual activity with multiple partners.

Adolescent engage in risky sexual behavior because of peer pressure, economic need, unmet need for contraception, lack of knowledge and social attitude and practices about sexuality.

v) **Culture of silence**

Sorre and Akong'a (2009) argue that the culture of silence has contributed to promiscuity. Unlike in the traditional society people today do not share their social, economic, emotional and psychological problems. This situation has led to unfulfilled sexual desires and frustration hence rapid increase in incidents of rape, extramarital sex, incest, abortion, pedophilia among others. Very few people have come out to publicly discuss the issue of abortion. People pay attention when fatalities occur and they soon go back to their cocoons.

The culture of silence is manifested both at individual and group levels-people do not want to talk about their own reckless behavior and neither does society strongly condemn irresponsible behavior such as promiscuity and induced abortions. The society is silent about how individuals behave.

## 4.0 Methodology

### 4.1 Study Area

The research was conducted in Migori District, Nyanza Province, Kenya. The district neighbours Tanzania to the South, and is surrounded by Kehancha, Kisii, Suba and Homa Bay Districts. Migori district is served with one major town known as Migori town. The percentage of urban population stands at 10.4 with net migrants at 1.2 males and 4.4 females (Central Bureau of Statistics & Ministry of Health, 2004).

### 4.2 Sources and Methods of Data collection

The following sources of data collection were used in this study; secondary data, informal interviews with key informants, case studies, participant and direct observation during focus group discussions, and hospital visits.

## 5.0 Findings

### 5.1 Sexual patterns of the Luo in the past which inhibited or camouflaged abortion

Attempts were made in this study to investigate cultural, social and economic circumstances within which the Luo of Migori District practised their sexuality in the past to the point that there appears to have been no abortion. Most old women and men interviewed during the study pointed out that premarital virginity was important in marriage and for fertility. It was seen as a sign of purity that forced a man to treat his wife with honour and respect. A traditional Luo woman who was not found a virgin (*gi giringre*) at the time of marriage would live with the stigma, of being gossiped (whispered) about by her co-wives. Her virginity, or lack of it, would even come up during the marriage of her daughters. The sages maintained that the Luo girls were traditionally expected to remain chaste although this is no longer the case. The girls who were virgin at marriage brought pride and joy to their families, especially, their mothers. Their husbands also prided in the fact that their wives were virgins at marriage. There were some norms of behaviour considered sex offences which elicited punishment. For example, if a Luo eloped with a girl that he calls a sister (*nyamin gilmare*), that is of one grandfather, and he goes to a faraway land, the family of this man will not want to see him. It would be difficult for his brothers to refer to the girl as their in-law. The mother of that girl cannot be a true mother-in-law within the meaning of '*maro*' as she would be classified as her own mother. Such marriage was therefore considered incestuous and a resulting pregnancy would not be permitted to mature, or if it did, the child was later killed secretly.

Pregnancies out of wedlock, which the Luo considered a calamity, was unheard of since traditionally such a girl was referred to as having a 'broken leg' or 'a cripple'. Such girls could only be married by elderly men looking for a woman with proven fertility or who could cover their shame. Such a marriage was a favour. No



young man could marry such a woman because she was 'a cow to milk', *dher chak* according to a sage during the interview. The youth of old could never attempt to have sex with a girl that they intended to marry. They reserved great respect for each other and things were done in the open. Such were the social and cultural practices embodied in sex offences and taboos which ensured order. FGD participants agreed that, in the Luo traditional society, brides were expected to be virgins and pre-marital sex was not permitted. These rules were supported by sanctions that included payment to the family of the girl who was violated and in the case of marriage, either return of the bride found not to be a virgin or reduced bridewealth at marriage. Most of the respondents, however, felt that the traditional norms restricting premarital and extramarital sex are no longer applicable. The FGD participants went a step further to say that the socio-cultural and economic changes which have taken place in the last thirty years or so have deprived Luo community of their moral or institutional barriers to premarital and extramarital sex. The sages decried the incidences of premarital sex by young people, as well as the adolescent pregnancies that follow. They say that since abortion is not legal in Kenya, many girls and wayward married women who try to end their pregnancies subsequently go to hospitals with complications. This fact was corroborated by the District Medical Officer of Health. The sages say they are dubbed "walking corpses by the youth over whom the old people have no power", husbands blame wives and wives blame husbands for lack of authority over youth. With this kind of situation, redefinition is really needed so that the good cultural practices can be re-invented in order to contain the situation. From the FGDs and key informant interviews held during the study, it came out that the Luo had no single word for abortion-instead there were references to it which were all in the negative and harsh, for example, *golo ich* (removing the pregnancy), *toyo ich* (smashing the pregnancy), *ketho ich* (destroying the pregnancy), *ich mawuok* (pregnancy that is coming out) and *ich maa'* (pregnancy that is spilling out).

These references were 'heavy' (not readily and easily talked about) in the mouths of respondents just like the word sex. Meaning it was a dreaded thing held with a lot of awe in society. This is partly because abortion was equated with death and as a result reference to abortion was done in low tones. It was also believed that spontaneous abortion particularly was a curse, bad omen, misfortune or due to immorality especially of the husband and not the wife. According to the respondents, traditionally promiscuity among the married women especially the ones pregnant was unheard of-not accepted /allowed in the society. Husbands were, however, advised not to engage in sex during their wife's pregnancy. In fact, the prohibition of sex with pregnant wives must have been one of the reasons why polygyny was encouraged to enable men to avoid extramarital sex. It was also believed that a man who slept with his pregnant wife after sex with a widow who had not been ritually cleansed (having

*chola*) would cause his wife to experience a miscarriage. A husband engaging in extramarital sex during this period may also 'collect dirt' (STIs) from such endeavours and thus infect the pregnant woman subsequently causing miscarriage. Thus, although extramarital sex for men was not frowned on, it was not recommended. 'Anne Yongo', born in 1943, a *nyamrerwa* - traditional birth attendant (TBA) had this to say on abortion during a key informant interview.

It is '*rariw*'- something growing in the uterus abnormally presenting like fibroid-'*kelo liet e ich*' – making the uterus hot thus making a pregnant woman feel like being in labour even as early as two months into pregnancy. If the pregnancy survives to full term, then there is breech birth a condition where a child presents with limbs not the head during delivery. This has caused the death of many women at child birth or if in hospital such women undergo caesarian section (CS). This should not be the case because if *rariw* is detected early during pregnancy, there was medicine for it and was curable by herbs.

Anne has treated so many women suffering from this condition (*rariw*) during pregnancy and says the number of women presenting this condition are many unlike in the past. Asked what brings *rariw* to an expected mother, she had this to say;

*Rariw* is caused by prolonged use of contraceptives such as pills, coil and so many others since women who had used such devices before are the ones who visit her at home presenting such problems. In young women, if *rariw* was suspected, herbs were sprinkled outside the women and some boiled and given to the mother to take a glass in the morning and in the evening. This was done to immobilize the effect of *rariw*.

From Anne's explanation *rariw*, which causes spontaneous abortion, can be treated by herbs effectively. Michael Bala Onjiko, born in 1946, supports Anne. He is a specialist in medicinal herbs. He is in possession of a certificate on The African Traditional Herbs and has a chemist/clinic where he dispenses traditional medicine (herbs) to his clients. This certificate bears the signature and letter head of the Director of Research International Research Foundation. According to Bala, abortion was caused by menstrual disorder known in Dholuo as *sigete* which brings about adnominal pains during menstruation. If the condition if not treated, a woman might not get pregnant, but if she does get pregnant, it causes spontaneous abortion. He further said that the condition is still there today and is treated with anti-biotics in hospitals/clinics or by use of herbs which is boiled in *agulu* (pot) and taken orally.

Some herbs are mixed with bathing water and used to wash away external 'dirt' which was believed to be the cause of *sigete*. Meaning there was external and internal cleansing of *sigete* using herbs. Apparently school girls of long ago who had menstrual disorders attributed to *sigete* preferred not to be treated since it was believed that it was difficult to become pregnant with the condition. Many girls, therefore, persevered the abdominal pains every month in order to keep pregnancy at bay. A woman key informant had this to say;

*Tuo mar Sigete kotejno olokore rariw* the disease called *sigete* is what develops into '*rariw*' which later causes spontaneous abortion.

Another key informant had this to say;

*Sigete* is caused by engaging in sexual intercourse when having monthly period a practice which was condoned a long ago since penetration was not allowed when boys visited girls in sleeping huts known as *siwindhe* in an old grandmothers house. If *sigete* was not treated, such woman later was presented with *rariw* during pregnancy which then caused spontaneous abortion if left untreated.

One key informant had this to say;

Long ago it was the pride of the girl not to be pregnant before being married as this would fetch the parents a lot of cows which was a source of wealth. *Chon nyiri nok mak ich aoyaya, nyako ne ndhu tedo nyako masilili* (Long ago girls wanted to be married as virgins) therefore the issue of spontaneous abortion was not there since girls never wanted to engage in sex before marriage lest they broke their virginity thus losing dignity and denying their parents a lamp sum dowry and honour.

The sages interviewed unanimously agreed that they achieved morality in society by doing the following for girls to uphold their virginity (*masilili*) until they were married: they were given sex education mainly through 'the *siwindhe* stories' (stories told in a house belonging to an old woman who is past bearing age-menopause or widowed). This woman was known as *pim* or *dani* (grandmother). Luo stories taught commonly held beliefs and taboos. The youth listened to the teaching of their fathers, mothers and grandparents, who also passed on to them the folklore of the people. Traditionally, the Luo stories were recited in *siwindhe*. Here, then, in the presence of an old woman who could talk freely about all the subjects, Luo girls and boys of over ten years gathered to sleep (*siwindhe* for girls and boys in *simba*) and to be taught the ways and beliefs of their society.

Apart from *siwindhe*, education took place at *e duol* (open fireplace). This was mainly the place for male members of the society where they sat in the evening as they waited for the evening meals. All boys aged ten and above were supposed to attend since they were not to be with their mothers. This was also the opportunity for mothers to teach girls as they prepared evening meals. Boys and girls received education, on their way to the water points such as rivers, springs and the lake, market or *shamba* and as they herded animals. Herding was the boys' domain. The sages concurred that activities performed in the society were done in groups thus providing opportunity to handle or mount ad hoc classes on the way to the market or river or as they herded animals. Girls and boys never walked alone. For example, one would call one's friend to join one to go and fetch water, firewood or to the herding field. Everybody was a teacher especially the adults since they continued sharing their experiences with the young as they performed their daily chores. The education was aimed at having constructing an upright society, therefore, the emphasis was on respect, responsibility and integrity. Acts such as irresponsible sex were shunned and not condoned. Pregnancy before marriage was unheard of and therefore there was no need for abortion. If a girl became pregnant, she was treated as an outcast and married off to a very useless old man as third, fourth or so wife with very few or no cows at all as bride wealth. The sages further said that even though sex among the youth was not allowed, there was room to practise it but with caution. One had this to say:

The boys slept in *simba* (their own hut) and were allowed to visit girls in *siwindhe* after bribing the old woman (grandmother) with goodies such as tobacco. During such visits the boys would have non-penetrating sex with girls without the grandmothers raising the alarm. This kind of sex was known as *wuowo* and would not make one pregnant since there was no penetration as all ended on the girls' thighs.

Apart from sex education and teachings on traditional values and norms of the Luo community which prevented pregnancy, men in the FGD also talked about '*jasigu*' (an enemy) to be the cause of abortion. They explained that *jasigu* is a condition which prevented pregnancy from taking place but if it did take place spontaneous abortion followed as expressed in the following:

*Jasigu tamo dhako* (women) *ich, ich chwer kendo kethore* 'the enemy' prevents women from becoming pregnant, but if they do then the pregnancy fails through spontaneous abortion. The evil spirit was considered the enemy to human beings.

During the FGD, the participants kept on talking about *dhako* (married woman) being pregnant and not girls. This means pregnancy among girls was out of the question. It was *dhako* (a married woman) who suffered from *jasigu*, a condition which was easily treated with *yadh agulu* (herbs cooked in a pot) and *yadh amadha* (herbs smashed and mixed with water) taken orally usually in the morning and evening until a pregnancy takes place and the baby is born. The herbs were administered by herbalists (men and women) who were the chosen few in society because it was a specialized area of knowledge known to only a few people. The herbalist if a woman was referred to as *Nyamrerwa* or *ajuoga*. For example, Angelina Nyangweso, born in 1952, specializes in women's reproductive health. She got the knowledge on how to use various herbs from her paternal grandmother who was also a herbalist. When she became old, she identified her grandchild Angelina whom she loved most and spat on her hands (*on'gudho lwete olawo*). This was a sign of blessing and handing over her powers and knowledge in herbs to her. This is because for one to possess such knowledge and powers, one requires to be possessed with *juogi* (roving spirits of the good dead saints). 'Saints' are drawn from family/community members who led a dignified life while on earth. When possessed with *juogi*, one is able to communicate with them to help in identifying the kind of herbs from whichever tree or forest which can be used in treatment of various ailments. Using *juogi*, the herbalist can help revert barrenness or abortion from taking place by communicating the impending danger or directing her to the right herbs to be used. *Juogi* communicates with the herbalist in dreams or through *puga* (closed gourd). When she shakes *puga*, the *puga* talks in a language only understood by the herbalist. Angelina has the powers of *umo ich* (stopping foetus from further growth until the time desired). This service of *umo ich* helped the women especially those whose husbands were out in towns and were left at home and accidentally became pregnant to be able to stop the development of the foetus until they visited their husbands or the husbands came home and reunited sexually thus stamping their fatherhood. After the reunion, the wife visits such *nyamrerwa* to *elo ich* (let the foetus grow) saving the wife from being accused of adultery which was not encouraged at all but would happen due to prolonged separation as a result of rural-urban migration. Even though *umo ich* was a mechanism of mystifying the incidence of children born out of wedlock and legitimizing them, so that husbands would not find out, it was a lesser evil or preferred to having such children aborted.

Angelina says that when she started to practise, abortion was not common since women consulted her for herbs from time to time. Besides, herbs were in plenty unlike today where bushes and forests are being depleted and as such getting herbs sometimes become difficult. Apart from depletion of herbs, land adjudication has also restricted free movement to bushes and fields which requires permission

from the owners. Apart from the scarcity of herbs, she faces, the challenge of having to deal with *tuoche mag chode* (diseases caused by promiscuity /adultery /sexuality like sexually transmitted infections (STIs) which were not common before. According to the key informant, STIs are the main causes of spontaneous abortion. The spread of STIs is blamed on men as the main culprits of unfaithfulness when their wives are pregnant, a practice which was not allowed in the past since men were allowed to seek sexual pleasure from other women through polygyny, thus leaving the pregnant woman alone after *togo tie nyalhi* (a period after the first trimester when the foetus was fully formed). Apart from *tuoche mag chode*, there was *tieko kwer maok nikare* (not following Luo customs and traditions to the letter). Men in the FGD were in agreement with the sentiments of key informants that following customs and traditions to the letter especially those related to sex has been neglected thus causing *chira* (disease where one becomes thin and later dies) or spontaneous abortion if a pregnant woman is affected. In the FGD, the participants born in 1933 and 1914 strongly condemned the neglect of tradition and customs. They said that when a woman was pregnant, the man was not expected to move anyhow lest he brought home *yamo marach* (bad germs/ bacteria/virus) or *ogoyo dhako gi tipo marach* (disturb the woman emotionally /psychologically), which could cause spontaneous abortion. A man was not allowed to sleep with a woman who had *chola* (one whose husband had died and not yet cleansed through remarriage), or sleep in a younger brother's homestead because he was like a father to the younger brother. In short, traditions and customs had to be followed during pregnancy by the members of the homestead to avoid bad omen. A male respondent in a FGD had this to add:

*Terruok gi ng'ama rembu ok owinjore sana sana kaen gi tuo* (having sexual intercourse with one whose blood does not rhyme with yours especially when infected) is not good because this causes spontaneous abortion. At times it could lead to chronic illness where a woman continuously bleeds until the foetus remains *chogo* (bone) in the uterus which eventually kills the woman if not well treated with herbs.

Good eating habits were observed when a woman was pregnant as a customary and traditional practice. This came out during FGDs and interviews with opinion leaders. *Nyamrerwa* Angelina blames the use of yellow cooking fat for the *rariw*, which she says is a very common ailment in young girls/women unlike before. She said 'salad' (liquid) oil in frying vegetables is better if not milk or ghee from cow's milk. If used it does not 'settle' in the uterus thus allowing *rariw* which, according to her, are 'fatty deposits in the uterus which make the uterus generate a lot of 'heat' thus causing infertility or spontaneous abortion. Other than using salad oil, women these days eat such foods as eggs, bananas and chips which fatten the foetus thus

causing breech births or having overweight babies that result in caesarian section if one is lucky to deliver in a hospital or clinic. Lack of such facilities during birth in the past led to death of the baby or mother especially if the pregnant woman did not receive antenatal care of an experienced mid wife or herbalist. Levirate, which is referred to as wife inheritance, as a tradition prevented unwanted pregnancies among young widows. When a husband died, the brother took over the wife and the homestead. However, an older brother was not allowed to move into a younger brother's home as observed earlier. This tradition provided continuity of the late husband's home and the children born out of such arrangements took the deceased name and identified with him. The widow's *shamba* continued being cultivated, her house was thatched, and her bed was made warm and thus never missed much despite the loss of a husband. It was not therefore an oppressive system which took advantage of helpless, women's sexuality as argued by feminists. Informants indicated that the practice was not based on sexual needs alone but on the need by the widow and her children to receive economic welfare and also authority.

Compensatory sexual patterns also applied where a man who could not sire children allowed his wife and a cousin to discreetly get children on his behalf. There was, therefore, a distinction between the pater and the genitor among the Luo, with an emphasis on the pater for the welfare of all those involved. In a Luo homestead, there was one main gate used by the man and his male counterparts. At the back of every woman's hut/house there was, however, a small gate called 'rot' which was not regularly used by male guests as it was considered private. The gate could, however, be used by the woman owner of the house to sneak in a man to satisfy her sexual desires. This is partly why the male owner of the compound on entering his compound, especially at night, used the main gate and before entry had to make some noise to let the wives/wife know that he was coming. Intruders would then use the 'rot' to leave without being noticed. He would whistle, ask where his stool is, and inquire why calves were left to eat plants near the gate, and so on. This was like turning a blind eye to adultery implying that if a pregnancy resulted, it was not scandalized as it was partly planned for. According to a discussant, the levirate could only take place after a *jakowiny* (a confused man of no fixed abode) had *chodo kola* (sex after the death of the man) had been performed. This ritual 'sex' was considered as a cleansing and 'dirty' which could only be performed by non-Luo called *jamwa* who in most cases was more or less *raura* (less sane) or *jakowiny* who could be given traditional brew (*busaa/otia*) and induced into sex under the stupor of alcohol.

Despite arrangements such as the use of *rot*, careless sex not only brought unwanted pregnancies but also death of the man (husband). A discussant said:

A man having an affair with your wife which is not sanctioned is not supposed to move near you in death bed. If he did you died earlier than

anticipated. Upon your death, such a man should not see your corpse or move near the grave-if he does the corpse 'swells' and 'weeps' and he can even die also.

The above belief and scenario is grave and therefore promiscuity was avoided as it was likely to result in pregnancy, abortion or death of either the adulterer or the husband of the woman involved. Penalty on girls who became pregnant was harsh and unbearable. A discussant in a FGD (men) had this to say:

If a girl became pregnant, investigations were carried out to establish the one who made her pregnant. If it was discovered that it was her *owadgi* (cousin) the two (the girl and cousin) were buried alive *e pundo* (anti hill hole) facing each other. They were left to die. In some cases they were chased away (exiled) from the village to a distant land never to return.

A girl in the village was in most cases impregnated by a cousin or a relative since the Luo stayed according to clans where everybody was related in one way or the other. In some cases such pregnancies were left to full term then the girl was sent to *kane mage* (the maternal grandmother's place) where she would give birth and the child killed secretly. This act was performed by an old woman *mosea e pachoria* who was past menopause. She simply placed *balatago* (broken cooking pot) tied with herbs on the head invoking names of spirits of death. This was done in the absence of the mother of the child who would be sent for an 'errand' to give room for this to happen. Some of the punishments meted to culprits of pregnancy included 'tying' (folding) the pregnant woman and the man responsible for the pregnancy with a rope. The rope was then tied to a big stone known as *nyapong* then they were thrown in the lake especially if it was incest. The girl was alternatively forced to marry a useless old man with or without property. The other alternative was for the girl and the man (if not related) to be forced to marry each other without ceremony such as *riso* (Luo wedding). If not the boy/man was forced to pay as fine a calf and a heifer. The latter applied to breaking of virginity (woman's) even if there was no pregnancy. The participants were in agreement that sex was prohibited among the unmarried. Girls who became pregnant out of wedlock could not get the honour of being married as *mikai / mikayi* first wife, since being *mikai* meant unlimited privileges and honour in the society.

If a girl became pregnant with a would-be suitor before marriage, such pregnancy was 'covered' (*umo-tweyo*) using herbs by experts such as herbalist. She was also protected with charms as marriage negotiations and arrangements were done quickly at early stages. Immediately upon marriage, the pregnancy was 'untied',



uncovered' and left to progress to full term. According to discussants *nyathi monywol ich simba* (a child born out of wedlock) especially the boy child, never survived in cases where such mothers got married with them. Upon arrival in that homestead, an old woman was consulted to perform certain rituals on the child. The child born out of wedlock was named *kimirwa* (does not belong to us) and was not allowed to live since it was believed he would usurp the blessings of these children born after him. As such the mother was sent to the river or on some errand which would make her stay from the child for some time. The old lady took a sweet potato and 'broke it' on the head of the child. This immediately caused the death of such a child. But if the child was of age, the 'father' would call such a child in his *abila* (hut), undress himself and show his private part to the child without uttering a word. With that the child would suffer from *chira* (a wasting disease), a condition where he becomes thin then eventually passes on. Considering all these calamities nobody would think of unwanted pregnancy.

Traditional musicians, according to one key informant, sang songs which had teachings to the society shunning unbecoming behaviour such as irresponsible sex, immorality, abortion in society through lyrics while playing *nyatiti* (eight stringed instrument), *orutu* (one stringed instrument), *ohangla* (a combination of traditional instruments). One such musician, the late Oguta Bobo, once sang *nyathi agweng' wiye ogawore gi leche* (A child born out of wedlock especially from a local boy/man has a head covered with veins), a sign of ill health. Another lyric says *nyako motoyo ije onego sirkal negi en bende onego dhano* (a girl who has aborted should be killed by the government because she has also killed). Apart from sex education on how to handle sexual matters taught to the youth and knowledge on reproductive health by herbalists, there are several factors that inhibited abortion among the Luo of Migori District. The discussants expressed their views by saying that the unborn child was considered a person and was taken care of from conception to adulthood. In fact, abortion was considered as abusing the right of the unborn child. Pregnant women were not supposed to engage in sex throughout pregnancy. This was to stop after the father had finished *tego tie nyathi* (strengthening the foetus legs). The reason given by respondents for this practice was that unrestricted and uncontrolled sex created a lot of 'heat' in the womb which would then *chwako nyathi oko* (heating the baby) thus causing miscarriage (*kiro nyathi*). If there was no abortion caused, such a baby risked dying during delivery because he/she was born with a slippery body which made it impossible for the birth attendants to hold firmly as it came out of the birth canal. Such babies may fall down and die. Women whose babies who were slippery at birth were shunned and ridiculed by others if information leaked from the TBAs. As such, the respondents said, sex was highly restricted and controlled during pregnancy to avoid loss of life. One could only have sex with the would-be father of the child. The would-be father was not supposed to be adulterous during the nine months of

pregnancy lest *ogoyo dhako gi tipo marach* (he 'beats' wife with 'bad shadow') which could cause abortion according to Anne a TBA in Migori. Restricted and controlled sex was also meant to minimize contracting diseases such as STIs during pregnancy although if detected early *manyasi* could be used to treat such patients. Unfortunately, according to Anne (Migori) and Angelina (Sori), these experts are now few and some lack proper knowledge of handling such cases. There are 'quacks' claiming to know yet they know very little and at times do administer wrong herbs. For example, Anne (Migori) said:

A good herbalist is that one who goes to the field/forest to collect herbs on demand and as per the patient's problem not that one who stocks medicine in his/her house to give all on request. This is because ailments are unique just like individuals are. What you see out there are people masquerading as herbalists to make money to eke out a living.

Nearly all pregnant women took herbs from the onset to the end of pregnancy, for different purposes such as treating *mbaha* (rushes on the unborn fetus), or protecting the mother from 'bad eyes'. At times these were worn by the mother in form of *ris* (bracelet on the wrist and the ankle), while other herbs were taken to 'wash' the womb from impurities which might cause spontaneous abortion. All these herbs and charms were available from genuine herbalists. Tough and stiff rules and regulations surrounding unwanted pregnancy inhibited abortion Adolescent boys were allowed to take part in *ong'ora* (secret visit to *siwindhe* grandmother's hut) and upon reaching there would only engage in non-penetrating sex known as *wuowo* (sex on the girls thighs to avoid penetration) which could lead to pregnancy. One of the key informants said if pregnancy occurred from such visits, those involved were jeered at and punished severely by the society. Such a child if born suffered from *chira* and signs were that the head never grew hair and veins crisscrossed the head which was a shame to all. *Chira* was dreaded. Otherwise, society equated abortion with death, as such nobody thought of such an act. Even today, with liberalization of sex, abortion is still done in private since nobody would want to be associated with it, continued the sage. He further said that even the laws of the land today permit abortion only when the life of the mother is in danger which means life is revered. A headteacher in Migori born in 1952 remarked;

It was taboo especially for the unmarried who aborted to get married in future for people said *nyar ng'ane manyocha ogolo iye cha itero kanye?* (the daughters of so and so who aborted, where do you take such)? Men were discouraged from such girls considering that girls never had space to be buried at their father's homestead if they died before

marriage or in divorce. If it happens, the burial site is outside the fence of the homestead – *etie chiel oko*, since it was a bad omen to other upcoming girls for it was believed she would come back in the form of bad/evil spirit and haunt the girls not to be married or stay without giving babies. Besides *migogo*, as they were referred to, had no fabulous burial especially if she was *odhi oduogo* (ago come back girl) – one who was once married and came back to her father's homestead.

In the Daily Nation of Saturday, December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006 the writer referred to children born out of incest as 'children of a lesser God'. These were to be lynched by mobs for they were a disgrace to society. Such penalties inhibited abortion at all costs. Also the fear of being haunted by the aborted child made it impossible to abort. Apart from being haunted such persons might not sire any children at all. A respondent called Mary Ochieng' had this to say during interview:

Do you know Mama Atieno? Do you know why she is mad? This lady at one time when her daughter Atieno became pregnant in form three third term felt devastated and decided to have Atieno procure on abortion. She did this to have her daughter proceed with education since she was a promising girl who was always top of her class in a provincial school. She quickly and quietly made arrangements in a nearby private clinic to make it done. Atieno never made it, she died. Mama Atieno says that she is always being visited by Atieno and her baby every time she is alone.

She has, therefore, become the talk of the village and nobody wants to associate with her. Pregnant women were prohibited from taking alcohol. This was made possible, according to a pastor, by making alcohol available only after good harvest and taken in the afternoon in the presence of all the villagers invited. Nobody would serve such a woman with alcohol today. Rigorous breast feeding of an infant was a practice which prevented mothers from becoming pregnant soon after birth. This, according to a respondent, was a form of family planning which was reliable and cost nothing. The nursing mother was fed well to ensure continued supply of breast milk. There were cases where children could come back from grazing fields and order their mother's to sit down so that they could breastfeed. As long as this was done consistently such a woman stayed for as long as three or more years before resuming her monthly periods. Fear of being ejected from the matrimonial home made many women, especially those who kept on losing pregnancies or children, seek help from all corners to make them have children. A respondent who is now over seventy years and married in 1955 had this to say;

I lost my first born when I was six months pregnant as a result of a disease called *ningu* – which ‘ate my thighs’ because I was never on *manyasi*. Thereafter I conceived a second time. This time the baby girl came out at eight months – it was a still birth after experiencing pain in the lower abdomen – *e piny iya* despite using *manyasi*. This time round my co-wives started abusing me that my ‘stomach’ (womb) was rotten. I decided to go back home and confided in my mother. *Aywak ne mama ni ichamo dhok to koro iyanya in iya otop, dwama yadh agulu* – I cried to my mother that how can you enjoy wealth from my husband yet I am being abused that I have a rotten ‘stomach’. Get me herbs to be boiled in a pot. My mother immediately went to a *nyamrerwa* who immediately put me on treatment. From then I became pregnant and this time the pregnancy survived to full term. I am now a proud mother of six children after losing children to miscarriage and risking being divorced.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

From the findings presented in chapter four, it came out clearly that among the Luo of Migori district, there was no abortion but, if it did occur, it was by accident, curse or as a result of being bewitched. In fact, abortion as known by Luo is not the abortion as it is known today. There was no one word for abortion in mother tongue. What was close to the word abortion was what is called miscarriage or spontaneous abortion which was attributed to mainly 'bad omen' or failure to observe some cultural, social and economic practices in society such as none violence, prescribed nutrition etc.

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