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**POPULAR CULTURE, FAMILY RELATIONS
AND ISSUES OF EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY: A
STUDY OF YOUTH IN PUMWANI**

BODIL FOLKE FREDERIKSEN

Associate Professor

International Development Studies

Roskilde University P.O. Box 260

DK 4000 Roskilde

Email: bodilff@ruc.dk

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Abstract

This paper deals with young women and men's appropriation of local and global popular culture in Pumwani, a poor Nairobi neighbourhood. Local media articulate Christian ideals of marriage and gender relations, ideals, which in the West would be considered conservative. In a Kenyan context the ideals support the transformation of extended family systems, based on a clear separation of functions between generations and sexes, into 'modern' nuclear families, which are more fluid, and where power may be distributed more equally between sexes and generations. Influential global popular culture narratives, such as the television soap opera, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and several situation comedies, featuring African American stars, also support ideals of equality between the sexes and generations, implicit in the modern love marriage and nuclear family ideal. At the same time they may seem to encourage non-binding love affairs. The role of popular culture in central areas of life is increasing in tandem with a general social transformation, which renders the authority of older generations and also of church and state debatable.

The arguments of the paper are based on group and life history interviews and surveys of work and leisure activities of a group of fairly well educated but mostly out-of-work or self-employed young men and women. Accounts of selected popular culture texts and reception analyses of visual material supplement the sociological approaches. The conclusion of the article is that young women in particular make use of a public sphere, understood as a process of articulation. The discursive spaces opened up by media do not have the barriers, which elsewhere keep women and poor people from taking part in debates on key social and moral questions. In that sense they contribute significantly to the creation of a democratic public sphere.

1.0 Introduction

The paper discusses the role popular culture narratives play among young people in a poor Nairobi setting in their debate on everyday equality and authority. Global media provide powerful narratives, which are used by people in local settings as sounding boards for reflections on how to conduct everyday life and human relations. How do narratives whose outreach is global intertwine with local stories? The narratives under examination are concerned with gender relations, marriage and family life. The community of interpretation consists of young people who have grown up and live in a Nairobi slum. They are well educated in the sense that most have finished more than six years of schooling and many have some or a full secondary education. However, they have little hope of social mobility because of a lack of institutional and economic opportunities. At the same time they have wide horizons and expert knowledge of the way relations of gender and generation are handled in other societies and parts of the world. The opportunities are significantly fewer for young women than for young men although the level of education is similar.

It is argued here that the narratives are important elements in a discursive public sphere, and contribute to young people's negotiations of central life situations. The public sphere in this sense is not so much a space or a level as a process of articulation, involving people, texts, events and institutions. It may be young women watching a soap opera in a private house, people congregating around a pavement newspaper seller, or the flourishing video parlours, which are numerous in African cities. This people's public sphere is attractive because of the relevance and urgency of the themes articulated, and because it is *open*. It is in itself a force

for a greater freedom in everyday life, especially for young women, who have easy access to media borne narratives, but whose access to key political institutions and public spaces in a physical sense is restricted.

Certain popular culture narratives from the US were central in the debate on gender identity, marriage and generation which was going on among young men and women in Pumwani, but everyday discussions had significant input from more localised narratives. They reflected local structures of social organisation and historically validated moral ideals. The local narratives were less vociferous and visible than those with a global outreach were. They were found in newspapers and magazines, in novels and television soaps, in songs and in performance. They were mediated both in private and in the public sphere of institutions and popular culture, and had a central place in the deliberations by youth on the kind of life they would like to lead. The narratives reflect the particular problems, which stem from a situation of social uprooting and transition prevalent in urban areas, which makes obsolete certain ways of life and closes certain opportunities, but opens up others and encourages new forms of social relations.

The role of popular culture in two areas is discussed: Views on and practices of equality and authority in marriage, and secondly between adjacent generations - particularly mothers and daughters. Both relations are asymmetrical, in that authority is unevenly distributed, and they are key arenas for negotiation about issues of equality and greater freedom. In the section on theoretical issues I briefly introduce concerns, which have been at the forefront of the debate on the Globalisation and localisation of popular culture.

In the section on methodology the sampling methods used are explained and Pumwani is introduced, the poor Nairobi neighbourhood, which has been the site of my fieldwork on 'youth culture' - the background to this paper. The area is characteristically 'urban' because it is relatively old, having existed for more than seventy years as an African neighbourhood. It is also densely populated and culturally diverse. Subsequent sections on 'Youth and generation' and on 'Marriage' characterise present discourses and practices of modern urban life in a perspective of social change. Finally in the section on the 'The role of popular culture' I discuss examples of powerful narrative genres, which influence the everyday lives and choices of a group of young people in Pumwani.

2.0 Theoretical and Conceptual Issues

Research concerned with popular culture, particularly in its mass media form, has moved away from intrinsic analyses of the form and content of cultural products, to the complex interplay between production and processes of reception on a global and regional scale. This shift is particularly appropriate when it comes to tracing mass media impact on the everyday life and the interaction of social groups. Situated agency, interpretation and institutional factors are studied in order to highlight cultural appropriation and transformation, and the creation of local cultures. This paradigmatic shift of the balance from production to the active reception of and engagement with popular culture has strengthened the interest in the democratic properties and potentialities of a public sphere.¹

¹ See D. B. Coplan, *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (Johannesburg, 1985) and V. Erlman, *African Stars: Studies in Black South African Performance* (Chicago, 1991). Karin Barber has worked on the production and reception of popular culture in an African context, and collected the most

While much of the theoretical and empirical work concerns the West, some of the most interesting studies of flows of meaning foreground regions in the South. One of the central discussions in works by Hannerz (1989) and Appadurai (1995)² concerns the relative impact of global flows of meaning. Is it the case that hegemonic culture exported from the West to the rest obliterates local culture, as envisaged by the 1970s cultural imperialism school of thought, or do regional centres of cultural production have a prominent role in the localisation and diffusion of meaning? Hannerz describes how peripheral cultures are either being 'saturated' or 'matured' by global cultural flows, and considers the 'maturation' metaphor most appropriate as a term for the complex process. It implies change, and the active answering back by cultures, which are seen as peripheral from the vantagepoint of a Western metropolis.

Appadurai dissolves the notion of global flows into five dynamic 'scapes' - financescapes, ethnoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes - whose relative prominence depends on the regional and local context. These 'scapes' are intertwined in non-systematic even chaotic ways. He stresses that in a situation where 'transgenerational stability of knowledge' can no longer be taken for granted, because of displacement and mobility at all levels, the imagery and narratives stemming from media and global advertising do

significant work in this field: K. Barber, 'Popular Arts in Africa', *African Studies Review*, 30, 3 (1987), pp. 1-78; *Readings in African Popular Culture* (Oxford, 1997); *Audiences in Action. Africa*, 67, 3 (1997). See also B.F. Frederiksen 'Popular Culture in the South: Production and Reception', in B.F. Frederiksen and F. Wilson (Eds.), *Livelihood, Identity and Instability* (Copenhagen, 1997), pp. 167-177.

² U. Hannerz, 'Notes on the Global Ecumene', *Public Culture*, 1, 2 (1989), pp. 66-75; A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Modernity* (Minneapolis and London 1998).

contribute to homogenisation of cultures and desires. The localities which experience the influences are themselves in a flux, because of the disjointed character of the global '-scapes', which makes prediction and systematisation of cultural characteristics an almost impossible task. This paper argues along similar lines that global and local popular culture narratives are interpreted, enjoyed and made use of in a manner that is closely bound up with the social realities prevalent in the particular community of the 'consumers'. This being so, notions of universal meaning have to be modified by notions of 'communities of interpretation' which stress that understandings of texts depend on the social and educational characteristics of groups of readers.³

In the research, I conducted detailed surveys of mass media preferences among groups of young people in Pumwani. The interest was in finding out to which extent Kenyan and African cultural products and genres were holding their own in relation to foreign products. I also studied the institutional factors, which were central in selecting and diffusing streams of popular culture, and those that influenced their reception⁴. The overall picture is one of diversity, but also of characteristic clusters of particular local or global genres. African-American visual culture is extremely popular, and when it comes to music 'soukous' and 'reggae' are both particularly popular with young men, whereas gospel and 'rhythm and blues' are preferred by young women. I have been keen to trace the transformations of meanings, which occur in the processes of reception of both local and

³ See S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980).

⁴ The result of that research is forthcoming in Aguilar, M. *Youth in Africa*, London 2001

foreign products. It is the latter problematic which is addressed in the present paper.

3.0. Methodology

3.1. *The Setting*

Pumwani, in which fieldwork was carried out, is situated in the Eastlands of Nairobi, north of Nairobi River and the industrial area. It is an old neighbourhood, established in the 1920s on Crown land. It is commonly represented as a neighbourhood of traders, casual labourers, thieves and drug takers and young women who are nearly all mothers and some of whom are prostitutes. The population of Pumwani is mixed in terms of ethnicity and religion. Kikuyu and Luo are the majority. Around 80 per cent are Christians, the rest are Muslim. Pumwani has a long history of close association with the Coast and with Swahili culture. It is a poor neighbourhood, but at the same time it is the site of a variety of trade and service activities. The busy Gikomba market is bordering Pumwani. The neighbourhood encompasses a large mosque, several churches, and a number of local NGOs, training centres and schools.

The physical setting is colonial neo-classical buildings, now as during colonial times housing the chief, police, a municipal beer hall and Christian missions. These structures survey bumpy garbage-strewn lanes, square Swahili-type mud houses with rusty corrugated iron roofs, and four storey 'High-rise' blocks - quickly put up campaign housing, erected before the 1992 multiparty election.

3.2. Data collection

The Paper is based on two types of data of which the first is of a sociological nature: Initially a small time study of young men and women's everyday work and leisure activities and routines was carried out, using purposive sampling. This method was also used in the subsequent surveys. The samples are all mixed in terms of religion and ethnicity, but the population of Muslims is slightly underrepresented. A survey of work and leisure activities was then carried out, interviewing 50 young men and 50 young women. 50 per cent were educated to Standard 8 or less, 50 per cent had finished at least two years of secondary education. This was followed up by eight single sex focus group interviews. A more detailed survey of young men's work attitudes and activities was also conducted, using the sampling cuts of 'white collar', 'business', 'jua kali' and 'unemployed'. 25 young men in each group were interviewed. Finally a survey of perceptions and practices of marriage was carried out among a hundred young women. Six life history interviews and participant observation in public places like markets; video parlours and community halls supplemented the surveys and focus group interviews.

The second type of material is content and reception analysis of selected popular culture narratives, both written and visual, which centre on relations of marriage, gender and generation. Most of the young people whose experience is reflected in the study speak at least three languages: Swahili, English and their mother tongue. A Swahili-English-vernacular mixture called 'Sheng' is the everyday language among youth in the neighbourhood, and not easily understood by the older generation. The languages of interviews, surveys and group discussions were English and Swahili.

3.3. *The People*

Around 80,000 people live in the area, and population density is extremely high: almost 43,000 people per square kilometre. The population is young - more than half are under 25 years. Around 50 per cent have primary education only, and 30 per cent secondary education and above. The ratio of females relative to males having primary schooling is four to five, as against one to two attaining secondary education. A survey carried out in five villages in the area found that around 28 per cent of the population were below the age of 18, 38 per cent were married, 27 per cent were single and the rest were divorced or widowed.⁵

Households are relatively small - the mean size is 2.8 families are generally nuclear and rarely consist of more than two generations living in the same house. Women head around 25 per cent of such households.⁶ In some cases young men have constructed their separate living quarters or 'cubes' in the compound or close neighbourhood. In a sample of a hundred young men and women between the age of 15 and 25, half of who were below 19, nine out of ten stayed with parents or relatives. Poverty and multiple livelihood activities are facts of life, and the overall responsibility for the day-to-day economic survival of the children in this area rests largely with women. 'In our ... life style here ... we are brought up by single mothers',⁷ we were told by a young woman.

⁵ M. H. O. Ordure and F. A. Opondo, *Pumwani Villages Population Census* (Nairobi 1996), p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 9.

⁷ From a group interview of young women, Nairobi October 1998. Fieldwork was conducted in 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999. The research project is part of the Research Programme 'Livelihood, Identity and Organisation in Situations of

The younger generation is marginalised in terms of livelihood and economic activities. As in other African countries under structural adjustment the formal sector, whether state or private, employs very few of large generations of school leavers. Yet young people contribute very actively to a growing informal communication, entertainment and service sector, and to informal trade activities. The survey, which addressed work activities by young men in detail, found that very few described themselves as unemployed. Those who did not name any work activity, in which they were engaged, thought of themselves as 'looking for a job'. The survey on work and leisure activities found that 40 per cent of the young women interviewed were looking for work.

Although young women had dreams of careers in teaching, nursing, journalism, the law, and clerical work, their non-household work was almost entirely restricted to casual activities in small-scale trading or service activities like selling vegetables or working in a hairdressing saloon. The women mostly worked in the close neighbourhood. Only 20 per cent had any further training after school, and most of those had done tailoring, in spite of it being not very useful as a career

Instability' which has been funded by The Danish Council for Development Research. I thank the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Nairobi for welcoming me as a research associate, and the Office of the President for granting me Research Permit. Information gathering and interpretation was undertaken in a team. Isabel Munandi, assisted by Thomas Muinde and Julius Mwaniki carried out the survey and participant observation of Video Parlours. The survey of work and leisure activities was conducted by the above plus David Mita Aluku and George Muoria. Aluku, Muoria, Mwaniki and Muinde carried out a survey of young men's working activities, and of young women's perceptions and practices of marriage and cohabitation. I thank them all for their invaluable help. I designed and assisted in surveys and carried out group and life history interviews and participant observation. I thank Dorothy McCormick, Mary Kinyanjui and Karuti Kanyinga all of the IDS, University of Nairobi, and Professor E. H. N. Njeru from the Department of Sociology for advice and comments on earlier version of the paper: and Kibisu-Kabatesi for the editorial input. I am solely responsible for errors and misinterpretation.

opportunity. The large majority of young men and all young women surveyed thought that women should continue working after getting married, in order 'to contribute to the upkeep of the family'.

Young men had dreams of a similar but wider range of jobs - the most desired livelihood was to own one's own business. Some were training for these jobs, and a few were employed in their desired livelihood. From the time studies undertaken, it seems that young men in the neighbourhood contributed to household work until they married, along with their sisters.⁸ The men would also spend more hours on non-work or leisure activities than young women would. The women too had quite a lot of time on their hands, and had difficulty spending it in profitable ways. The distribution of household and income earning activities along sex lines did not seem to be influenced by the education of the young women. On the other hand group formation tended to reflect educational standard.

4.0. Youth and Generation

Historically a prolonged phase of youth was recognised for men in many societies in East Africa, resulting in separate collectivities of young and older men. Youth for women, on the other hand, was regarded as transitional. Women were expected to marry and bear children soon after puberty and initiation, and young women did not form a collectivity in their own right.⁹ School education

⁸ B.F. Frederiksen, *Work and Leisure among Youth in Pumwani*, Working Paper 1 (Roskilde 1995), p. 5.

⁹ Generalisation as sweeping as this one obviously needs modification. For young women's collectivities among the Maasai in East Africa see P. Spencer, *The Maasai of Matapato. A Study of Rituals of Rebellion* (Bloomington, 1988), chapter 10 and p. 205 ff; and for the Luo see A. B. C. Ocholla-Ayayo, *The Spirit of a Nation. An Analysis of Policy, Ethics, and Customary Rules of Conduct for Regulating Fertility Levels in Kenya* (Nairobi, 1991).

among other factors has pushed up the age of marriage, but neither school nor the broader society has defined and institutionalised new roles for young unmarried women in urban areas.¹⁰

In many social groups in Kenya the transition to adulthood would run through a number of phases, which were distinct for the two sexes, and marked by prescribed social practices and rituals. Most ethnic groups practised some form of age group organisation, which cut across lineage and clan formations.¹¹ In addition alternate generations - grandparents and grandchildren - would be seen as morally and socially equivalent, whereas adjacent generations were seen as distinct. Restraint and secrecy were practised between parents and children, especially in matters concerned with sexuality. Relations between age mates and between grandparents and grandchildren on the other hand, would be characterised by familiarity and openness.¹² Among Kikuyu grandparents were reborn as their grandchildren who would be given their names. In other words parents would bear their own parents. In that sense childlessness denies the right of grandparents to be reborn, and it was desirable that a woman have at least four and preferably eight children.¹³ More broadly, in several ethnic groups

¹⁰ For a discussion in the context of Tanzania see Z. Tumbo-Masabo and R. Liljestrom (Eds.), *Chelewa, Chelewa. The Dilemma of Teenage Girls* (Uppsala 1994), p. 51 and 211.

¹¹ See R. A. LeVine, 'The Diffusion of Age Group Organisation in East Africa', *Africa* 32, 2 (1962).

¹² Suzette Heald reports that among the Gusi relations between adjacent generations were characterised by 'formality and restraint', whereas those within a 'single generation' were based on and coloured by 'conjugal sexuality'. S. Heald, 'The Power of Sex: Some Reflections on the Caldwells' 'African Sexuality' Thesis', *Africa* 65, 4 (1995), p. 495. See also Spencer *The Maasai of Matapato*; R. A. LeVine et al *Child Care and Culture. Lessons from Africa* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 63.

¹³ B. Berman and J. Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley. Conflict in Kenya and Africa*. Book Two: *Violence and Ethnicity* (London, 1992), p. 422; J. Davison, *Voices from Mutira: Lives of Rural Kikuyu Women* (Boulder and London, 1989), p. 19; N. Price,

socialisation in key areas of social practice to do with livelihood and sexual reproduction was undertaken by grandparents.

Obviously the idea and practice of youth as a life phase is a social construct in Kenya as elsewhere. Young people invent themselves as individuals and as a group, and in the process they make use of historical and contemporary narratives produced both locally and globally, of what it is like to be young. The invention is shaped by constraints which are not only biological but also influenced by everyday mediations and narratives of the collective memory and living knowledge of key social practices, which occurred in the past. For instance those surrounding the transition from one life phase to the next. These different narratives are associated with varying degrees of authority, some with negative sanctions if they are not taken seriously. Narratives and prescriptions, which were earlier authorised by powerful agents in a cohesive social system, now invite transgression, because the power and legitimacy of authorising agents have been seriously contested. Are the key figure parents and grandparents, or school and religious institutions? Are the real experts perhaps local magazines, or the transmitters of the colourful and appealing narratives of global popular culture?

When I asked in a group interview what constituted the age range of youth, answers varied between from 12 to 25 years and from 18 to 35 years, both for males and females. The notion of youth was relative and context bound, varied with life sphere, and was different for the two genders. From our observation of leisure activities it was clear that young men acted as collectivities and made space for themselves in the public sphere to a

'The Changing Value of Children among the Kikuyu of Central Province, Kenya', *Africa* 66, 3 (1996), p. 412, 423.

larger extent than young women. Women tended to spend a high proportion of their free time at home, 'basking in the sun', reading, listening to the radio, or watching television. Men would move about in the close neighbourhood or more distant parts of the city, and make frequent use of public leisure institutions such as sports fields, video parlours or bars. They would join sports clubs whereas young women, who might be active in sports, only rarely joined associations. While there may be several immediate practical reasons for this - teenage girls mostly had less money to spend and risked sexual harassment in public spaces - part of the explanation may also have to do with the cultural constitution of youth within the two sexes.

Most young people in the neighbourhood were familiar with some version of rules and habits surrounding generation and kinship in spite of being urbanites. Reference to a flexible entity called 'our culture' was frequent in discussions of generation and gender relations. It might refer to African culture in general or to the culture of a specific ethnic or religious group. Quite a few of the young people had spent time in the rural areas, most often in the care of grandmothers. Some had been brought up there, and had only returned to the city after finishing school.

The majority, however, visited the rural areas only rarely. The cutting off of children and youth in relation to the grandparents was experienced as a blurring of generations, and as a crisis of authority or responsibility. Many mothers were not in a position to counsel in areas, which used to be the provenance of grandmothers, nor were the taboos on mothers counselling their daughters in matters of sex left entirely behind.

When young female school leavers were asked to describe their relations to their mothers several interwoven problem areas emerged. Mothers were blamed for not spending more time with their children, and for not setting high moral standards:

Our mothers ... are working. They are not even concerned about us ... You don't have time with your mother. All daylong she is out ... She has to struggle as much as she can to see that you are well fed, dressed, educated. We can't blame them 'cause it is their duty. They have to find money legally, and they have to find money illegally.¹⁴

All the same the girls did blame their mothers for split families: 'There is no one to join us together, there is no one to understand the problem', was a comment to which all the young women in the group agreed. The young people would lament the passing of the old days and ways, when parents and grandparents were the undisputed key socialising agents. Many argued that in the urban context the role of parents and grandparents had been partly taken over by teachers and religious authorities. When asked more particularly whether they saw some advantages in being counselled by them rather than members of the family, some said that they felt a greater freedom in discussing for instance sexual matters. However, when they compared such 'freedoms' with what they had heard about the old days there was a yearning for standards of behaviour prescribed and upheld by the older generations, as for instance in this excerpt from a discussion of a public dance hall in the neighbourhood:

What you see now is pathetic. When there was a dance in those days it was supervised by big people who were responsible. What you do, you are being

¹⁴ Group interview with young women, Nairobi October 1998.

seen by people who are responsible and you feel ashamed of yourself. Now those so-called responsible people are the ones who mess up.¹⁵

In our interviews, parents were often described as being caught up in the same problems as their children. Teachers and religious leaders, who were supposed to have taken over part of the parental role, 'are there, but they are not responsible', in the view of one young woman.

5.0 Marriage

Historically marriage in many African societies in Kenya was a process, associated with negotiations between families and ongoing social practices, rather than an event. This is also the case in modern Kenya although the phases are less marked and the involvement of the older generations in many cases comes late, unlike before.

The influence of urbanisation and the move towards nuclear families is reflected in media and academic discussions of marriage in Kenya today. These discussions tell of how uprooting, social transition and instability affect marriage and the family. The following example is from a feature article in the *Daily Nation Weekend Magazine*: 'and they (young people) don't have the patience to undertake the rigorous processes of negotiations, as was the case in the past. Today, they meet in the pub, take some drinks together, then stagger home together as man and wife'.¹⁶ The same sentiment is expressed more soberly by an anthropologist Ocholla-Ayayo: 'At this stage of social change, there is no order

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ 'Marry in haste, repent in...' *Daily Nation*, 7 November, 1997

in marriage, whoever feels that he or she is grown up can get married, whether or not parents or relatives object to such a marriage'.¹⁷ Examination of the question in this urban neighbourhood suggests, however, that the involvement of parents, parents-in-law and community is still central, and in some social groups frequently takes the form of bride wealth negotiations prior to the marriage between the two families and their immediate associates.

The ideal of a love marriage entered between two autonomous individuals without the initial interference of the parental generation has strong appeal for young people. Parents, on the other hand, were anxious; especially about marriages contracted in the city. In the city, full of strangers, 'you risk marrying your sister', as we were told. In urban areas an informal and frequently transitional form of marriage sometimes but not often based on a written or spoken contract between the partners, was widespread among young people. It is dubbed 'come we stay' – 'together' is implied. Young Kenyans' reasons for entering into such unions were no different from the reasons of young Danes or Americans doing the same: a combination of love, sympathy and convenience often heightened by a spirit of independence and resistance against the older generation. Two out of three marriages among young people in Pumwani had this character. What distinguishes this form of marriage from formal marriage is the lack of parental involvement in the early phases of the relationship. Most frequently the young woman would move from her parents to the house or 'cube' of the young man. She would perform the duties of a wife, such as looking after the children, the house and doing the shopping and cooking. She would also be expected to

¹⁷ A. B. C. Ocholla-Ayayo, *The Spirit of a Nation*, p. 84.

contribute to the family income, if possible, but the man would usually be the principal breadwinner.

When asked about advantages of living together in this manner most young women spoke of the economic benefits (it was characterised as 'a business' by one respondent). Also important was the ease of entering into the relationship and the avoidance of unpleasant and shameful public divorce proceedings if it did not work out. Informal marriage also offered more scope for equality and joint decision-making: 'The man loves you more because you may leave him', we were told.

On the other hand only a third of those asked believed that informal marriages would eventually become formalised. The ease with which such unions could be entered into also meant that they were unstable. There was general agreement that informal marriage was characterised by precisely the absence of features which contributed to the strength of formal marriage: security and recognised identity of children even in situations of separation; involvement of community, parents, and parents-in-law. Without this involvement inheritance in the case of the husband's demise would not be ensured.

Formal marriage, according to informants, would mean that the couple would be given social respect from the community: 'You get social respect since you have left one step and ventured into the next'.¹⁸ On the other hand it had its own recurrent problems. Husbands had 'complete mastery over wives', as we were told, 'even abusing you'. Women found it extremely difficult to get out of the relationship, because their parents would or

¹⁸ On the importance of social respect especially for urban women in Kampala see J. A. Ogden, "'Producing" respect: the "proper woman" in postcolonial Kampala', in R. Werbner and T. Ranger (Eds.), *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (London 1996), pp. 165-192.

could not accept them back, once negotiations had been finished and (some) bride wealth paid. Most often women would keep the children in the case of separation in both forms of marriage, but if the children had reached a certain age the father might keep them in the case of divorce in a formal arrangement.

Although a marriage might not be formalised it was still seen as a significant point of transition. When a person described him or herself as married he or she was no longer a youth. A married person would not take part in activities associated with youth. Young men who had helped with domestic work in their family would stop doing so in their new family, when they got married. A 22 year-old father of a six-months old boy, who lived with his wife and had started marriage proceedings, would no longer participate in-group interviews with young people, whereas his elder unmarried brother of 27 was happy to do so.¹⁹ The situation of young women was more ambiguous. In so far as they took part in associational activities at all, having a child was not decisive, but living with a man or having reached a certain stage on the road to formal marriage was. If they engaged in associations it would be with other married women.

In one sense it is not surprising that marriage was decisive. The life style associated with youth or adolescence, particularly for young men - roaming around, availing oneself of work and leisure opportunities as they offer themselves - was obviously not easy to reconcile with the responsibilities and more routine bound practices of married life. On the other hand, the transition from youth to adulthood in an urban

¹⁹ His position was not without tensions. Their mother blamed her older son because he wasted his time by associating with young people.

slum in terms of work and living quarters, when observed from the outside, was a gradual one, somewhat in contradiction to the abrupt shift in self-definition which was common.

When discussing questions of marriage and children in focus groups the young women tended not to make distinctions along the lines of ethnicity, but they did make distinctions along the lines of religion. They told that early marriage and childbearing were encouraged. Mothers tended to regard their daughters as being grown up very early, and much too early from the point of view of the girls: 'Parents feel that when a daughter is through Standard 8 she can do anything, she can engage in anything. They expect their daughters to marry at an early age, fourteen or sixteen. It is as if you are fully-grown up, go on your way!'

Many of the young women were mothers before they reached the age of eighteen. Some women told that there was a certain pressure on proving fertility from the social surroundings, surprisingly not least from peer groups. Some of the informants, particularly those who were young, argued that there was no stigma attached to being a young, single mother, and it might even be an advantage, when entering into a formal marriage that a young woman already had one or two children. Others, however, hotly disputed their understanding of the moral climate of the neighbourhood. From what we were told by the young women the Mosque encouraged early marriage but was against premarital sexual relations. There was consensus in one of the women's groups interviewed, which consisted of both Christians and Muslims, that Muslim girls 'are not expected to aim high'. The majority of the young women wished to have between two and four children.

It may be the case that the social importance of marriage for young women is increasing in tandem with the narrowing of other life perspectives or career possibilities. Sexuality, reproduction and marriage were obviously an area fraught with contradictions. Pressure from the state, from schools, the Church and parents is on avoiding premarital sex. At the same time adults who should serve as models are not always thought to be worthy of emulation. Fathers might be absent, and mothers might continue having children with different men, although their daughters were grown up.

6.0. The Role of Popular Culture

Undoubtedly popular culture images and narratives influence values and life perspectives of the young people in Pumwani. Current representations of love, romance and marriage in music, visual and printed media are of great interest to young people here as elsewhere. The depiction of sexual relations in global genres and by transnational stars is much debated, but so are local discourses on love, marriage and family relations. As in the West, marketing and advertising, which target youth, contribute to constituting teenagers as a group. The process is reinforced by popular culture messages, which invest youth with a special magic, arising out of the coupling of sexuality, consumption and style. Exposure to the media's representation of particularly Western youth styles and gender relations seems to pull in the direction of free and early sex, and a young audience on the look-out for innovation and new life styles may interpret the shows as linking free sexual practices with desired consumption goods.

The popular situational comedy *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* celebrates equality between the sexes, an easy-going life style and implies a close connection between certain

dressing and communication styles, and success in non-binding love affairs. Such narratives together with the high incidence of school education for girls, compared to that of their mothers, and young women's desire to work outside the home, contribute to a greater symmetry between the sexes. The nuclear family is gaining ground as an ideal, with its implication of fairly equitable relations between spouses, and between generations.

Local media overwhelmingly reflect Christian ideals, which in a Western setting would be considered conservative. In Kenya the ideals support the transformation of extended family systems, based on a clear separation of authority and functions between sexes and generations, into 'modern' nuclear families, which are more fluid, and where power may be distributed more equally. This transformation is occurring with varying intensity in different parts of Kenya, but is noticeable in urban areas. Editorials and features in newspapers and magazines, as well as global narratives, pull in the direction of the love marriage and the nuclear family. Local narratives stress the importance of parental involvement, and the dangers and immorality of pre-marital sex. The 'Western' character of the nuclear family is rarely debated. On the other hand cohabitation – the 'come-we-stay' relationship - is often described as a Western import, as in this extract from a feature in *Daily Nation's Weekend Magazine*: L. Mungai, who sees cohabitation as "marriage by the backdoor," says that it is an unhealthy development that started in the West and laments that it has earned a place in our society today'. Another feature article, "Why I'm afraid of come we stay", from the pen of the regular columnist 'The Urbanite' (Gakiha Weru), expresses the anxieties of marrying in the city:

Again, the Urbanite is not exactly sure whether having a 'live in' is such a hot idea after all. First he is scared of the prospect of a 'stranger' walking in his house to stay there for the rest of her days'. A 'stranger' because people you are meeting for the first time when they are 30 years old are strangers whichever way you look at it.²⁰

Both articles cited advise young people to get married 'straight away', and before they begin living together.

Life style magazines proliferate. Some appear irregularly, but mostly the following are for sale from pavement book sellers in Nairobi and the other big towns in Kenya: *Parents*, *Family Mirror*, *Spouses*, *Character*, *True Love* and *Baby Times*. They all have glossy covers, often featuring happy, healthy, two-child nuclear families. They are not cheap (Ksh.60 to 100 or approximately one US dollar), but are bought and circulate freely. Some are explicitly Christian in orientation; others are so more indirectly.

The most popular local magazine is the monthly *Parents*, which combines advice on health, marriage, sexuality and child rearing with romantic fiction - a mixture of features, which is found with small variations in all the magazines. All magazines carry attractive advertisements for home and children-related consumption goods. The prototype family represented and discussed in the magazines is urban, nuclear and middle class. All magazines stress the importance of fidelity in marriage.

The most prominent narrative genre in the popular magazines is the documentary, called 'real life', 'real life experience' or 'true confession'. The 'true confession' -

²⁰ 'Living Together is it Worth the Trouble?' and 'Why I'm Afraid of "come we stay"' *Daily Nation*, 2 May 1997, p. 1 and 3.

a supposedly documentary narrative illustrating areas of concern to the readership, takes the form of an engrossing everyday drama, but is at the same time highly didactic and prescriptive. In these narratives all the most pressing concerns of marriage and love relationships are debated: polygyny in a situation where husbands and wives straddle between poor urban and equally poor rural areas; divorce and widowhood and especially the problematic role of in-laws in situations of crisis; sugar daddies; unemployment; unfaithfulness and teen-age pregnancy. In the March 1998 issue of *Parents* we find a six-page story of a young woman whose life was ruined by an early pregnancy: 'Wolf in SheepSkin: Cheated into Motherhood at 19'. According to the story the solution for this young woman as for many young people in East Africa these years was to be 'born again', namely to enter into one of the charismatic churches which are flourishing all over Kenya.

Sometimes the events are narrated in the first person singular without a mediator between the reader and the person supposed to have lived through the experience. This is the case in the 'Real Life' stories in *Family Mirror*: 'My in-laws chased me away when my husband died', 'Bitterness held me hostage for years' and 'Quarrels with my wife "chased" me from home'. Black and white snapshots, ostensibly portraying the protagonists of the narratives accompany the stories. Frequently, however, a named reporter tells stories and seemingly real life names are used, as in the case of, 'Neglected by polygamous dad: His death could not reconcile us'. The subheading goes, 'Onyango-Sirawa, 23, started his life in a happy family which was to be disrupted when his father became polygamous and neglected him and his first wife who was his mother ... He narrates his bitter experience to Mwaura Muigana'. The presence of the reporter does not change the

enunciation of the text - it is usually in the first person singular. The beginning of the above story runs as follows:

Childhood memories take me back to Kariobangi Estate in Nairobi where we lived. My mother, a qualified but unemployed secretary, was hawking greens at the estate. My father, also jobless, was literally surviving in the city. The walk to and from Nairobi's Industrial Area to seek casual labour was only too familiar to him.

This particular terse and factual narrative style echoes the style of English language popular fiction, which is widely read in Kenya. Meja Mwangi is the best-known writer of realistic urban low life stories, and his style has been trend-setting for a generation of young authors in East Africa. Book length 'True Life' confessions are extremely popular in Kenya. One account - *My Life in Crime* - has sold more than 100,000 copies.

Why are the local narratives presented as raw slices of real life? Their semi-documentary style is a rhetorical device, insisting on authenticity, recognition and relevance. The colloquial character of the written stories minimises the distance to the audience.

Young people in the city have to navigate in a situation where the 'transgenerational stability of knowledge' cannot be taken for granted, to use Appadurai's words. The outcome of the mixture of conservative Christian ideals, stressing fidelity in marriage, the historically validated ideals of respect and avoidance practices between generations, and the easy going gender relations relayed by global genres, is illustrated in the following account by a young woman of her own situation. She is representative of a marginalised but very large group of young urban educated women in Africa, caught between

their high ambitions and expert knowledge of the world and their poverty and lack of prospects:

You have to wear like Fresh Prince; if you don't catch Jordan you are 'mshao' (bushy/of the farm). You must look like Toni Braxton. You must force yourself to look like that. That is the stealing part of it. You must steal to get the blocks (platform shoes). The American youth are more independent. We try to copy that but we can't. We are not so rich. What they were doing in front of their fathers. It wasn't in our culture. That's freedom, we don't have it. That's why we escape from our homes. We want that freedom by force.²¹

This particular 20-year old woman had recently finished secondary school, did not have a job, but would like to be a lawyer. What she will be is probably a mother. The cultural heroes and objects of identification she talked about are all African Americans and household names among young people in the slum. Toni Braxton is a beautiful and sexy soul and pop singer, Michael Jordan is the trend-setting basketball player and film star, Fresh Prince is the attractive and easy going rap singer, comedian and film star whose real name is Will Smith. All are rich and globally popular. Each of them is associated with particular dress codes, hairstyles, music and use of language, which have been marketed commercially to young people in Pumwani and elsewhere to good effect.

Let me focus on some of the desires and contradictions highlighted in the statement. What freedom is she after, what does 'our culture' mean? What is it that she cannot reconcile with the expectations of the older generation? From where and to where does she wish to escape? And what does 'by force' mean? Several forms of desire are

²¹ Group interview with young women, Nairobi October 1998

expressed: The most obvious one is a wish to identify with a particular hegemonic (in terms of popular culture) metropolitan culture. Black American popular culture in the form of vocabulary, music, styles and social relations including gender relations is generally popular, also among youth in the West. Young people in Pumwani expressed pride in being black. Many would follow the developments of African-American popular culture keenly, and would also feel that have an edge on white youth in terms of shared race, as they see it, and thus a particularly easy access to shared visual styles.

The young woman's account further suggests that following the dominant style, even if it means stealing, are both the precondition of freedom and the very symbol of it. The style is a sign of readiness to enter into love affairs and articulates desires, which can only with difficulty be encompassed in the parental home, thus the need to 'escape from our homes'. The desired freedom is associated with wealth on the one hand, and with ambivalent attitudes to parents' control on the other. The young woman's, 'What they were doing in front of their fathers. It wasn't in our culture', refers to explicit sexual episodes represented in situation-comedies and other visual material, and indicates the tensions between older and new forms of socialisation. The young woman is aware of older rules within her social group, which prescribed, that reference to sexual matters should be avoided in the joint presence of adjacent generations.

Relating to the parents' generation as to age mates or equals, which is what modern Kenyan youth are advised to do in face-to-face counselling and popular magazines is fraught with anxiety. 'Freedom' is enacted away from parents and the parents' generation, in a space outside home together with age mates. If this is so in a modern urban neighbourhood it is nothing new. In earlier time

the space of freedom and sexual experiment removed from the homestead was part of the youth phase for certain ethnic groups. According to LeVine, 'the dialectic between parental control in the home and freedom among siblings and friends outside ... (was) fundamental to intergenerational avoidance as a model of moral order'.²² In the case of this young women violations of rules governing private behaviour (sexuality) and public behaviour (stealing) were seen as necessary evils in her process of identification with the local modernity: 'We want that freedom by force'.

In interviews about the role of mothers and the adjacent generation in general, I asked about female role models. When none were forthcoming, I suggested mothers, teachers, sportswomen and female politicians. The young women would frequently mention media figures. A woman who is consistently admired by the young women Pumwani is Stephanie, the matriarch from the American soap opera, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, which is shown regularly on Kenyan television. She is a mother and a wife, and the centre of her complicated and unruly family. Many thought that she is 'too secretive', and perhaps 'not even Christian'. On the other hand she clearly spends her life trying to keep the family together. An important attraction of the show was that family problems and conflicts were endlessly articulated and discussed. Not only by members of her nuclear family, but also between cousins, adopted children, false uncles and dubious aunts and mistresses. Hers is an extended family system on a generous scale, similar to family structures found in the slum, although very different from the orderly nuclear family propagated by the local magazines. The contradictions and confusions in this kin group made it open and accessible to young people, who

²² LeVine, *ChildCare and Culture*, p. 266.

themselves often have to negotiate complicated family relations which include stepparents and brothers and sisters of different orders.

The result of the mixture of ideals, pressures and expectations relayed from foreign and local media was on the one hand that several girls saw 'free sex' or 'love affairs' as the biggest problem subverting their efforts to have a good life. They also liked the popularity of the foreign shows to the high incidence of rape in the neighbourhood. On the other hand they regarded engaging in love affairs as a strategy for getting married, which might entail handing over the (economic) responsibility to a man.

In a sense young men were expected by young women to step into the void, which has been created by the breakdown of older forms of socialisation. Yet they seemed unwilling to do so until they saw themselves as being established in life in terms of education, a job and a place to live. When asked whether the young women were not complaining because of the absence of male support, the men said that, 'they complain, but there is not much they can do'. In justification of their reluctance to be tied down by family obligations in a situation of poverty, one young man argued that men have responsibilities towards larger collectivities than just the family: 'African men - we are expected to come out shining'. To come out shining does not include early marriage or being responsible for children begotten with several women.

7.0. Conclusion

Ordering of relations between sexes and generations undergoes constant change. In the poor neighbourhood described, a moral order in this area survives, however,

as social memory, as scattered practices, particularly important in relation to reproductive strategies, and most of all with poor urban youth, as an absence and a yearning. Admonishment or negative sanctions against those who too blatantly break with distinctions between age groups and other avoidance practices, indicates loss, as does the confusion and anger among young women concerning the lives of their mothers.

Poor families have less opportunities of substituting old orders with new ones, because of a situation of instability and lack of material and non-material resources. Popular culture discourses on relations between sexes and generations enter into complex dialogues with differently situated youth, and reinforce certain older ideals while destabilising others.

All young people in this Nairobi neighbourhood have the chance of engaging with popular culture. The intensification of information streams, the increasing presence of local and regional products and activities, and the transformation of those from the dominant global circuits, mean that it is not true to speak of Western popular culture as dominant. The popular culture 'mix', which is predominant, has a distinct African continental, East African regional and Kenyan national flavour. Foreign genres and depiction of social relations are domesticated and drawn on, together with familiar local narratives. Young people and particularly young women make use of the popular culture discourses. The discursive spaces opened up by the narratives are relatively free from the barriers which otherwise keep out women and the poor. In that sense the new media contribute significantly to the establishment of a democratic public sphere.

In popular culture women's issues are taken seriously, and in different ways the narratives press for new forms

of family life, in which both men and women have authority. The local genres reflect a particular urban culture of poverty, in which women more than men are the keys to everyday change. Global romance and soap operas also emphasise women's agency. International organisations and NGOs are courting grandmothers, mothers and daughters, in recognition of their changing but central roles in keeping together the social fabric. Their roles are debated among themselves and in dialogue with global and local media. Young women's possibilities of social betterment remain, however, severely limited because of narrowing economic possibilities and lingering social memories about the proper place of women.