

# Domestic Labor as Care and Growth in Western Kenya

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**SUMMARY** *Sociological and feminist explorations have tended to see domestic labor as feminized care work linked to the “private” realm of the home. This article explores domestic labor in western Kenya, describing such work as a reproductive and economic project that is carried out strategically through conditions of extreme precarity, as parts of efforts to ensure the growth of the home over time. Analyzing these practices through the lens of care unsettles some core dimensions of the conceptual frameworks commonly used to understand care, in particular assumed contiguities between domestic labor and care work. However, the ethnographic material presented here suggests that broadening our understandings of care can nonetheless provide a useful framework for understanding investments in domestic labor. [care, economics, Kenya, kinship, labor]*

It was 2006 when Beatrice Onyango first invited me into her small, two-roomed house. Beatrice described how she hoped to build a larger house and replace the existing grass roof with more durable corrugated iron. Nowadays, there are far fewer houses with grass roofs in Ramira, the small village in western Kenya where Beatrice lives, and some even boast expensive factory-made tiles. However, a corrugated iron (*-bati*) roof remains an important symbol of individual distinction and development. Although it is becoming increasingly difficult for poorer members of society, building a rural home remains an important life goal for most members of the community, including those who have moved away to other areas for work but who seek to maintain relationships and eventually retire in rural areas.

In the parts of rural, Luo-speaking, western Kenya where I have carried out ethnographic fieldwork of longer and shorter periods, and returned to visit friends over many years, domestic labor is a collective endeavor oriented not simply toward “development” but more widely toward the growth (*medruok*) of the home. Domestic labor encompasses an understanding of growth that ties increment, prosperity, and improvement together, denoted in the Luo verb *-medo*, meaning to add, multiply, and increase, and its related noun, *medruok*, meaning betterment, improvement, and multiplication (Bole Odaga 2005). Growth in this sense is closely linked to concepts of “development,” or *dongruok*. *Dongruok* refers to improvement projects led by the state and nongovernmental

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agencies, as well as forms of self-improvement materialized through personal accumulation (cf. Green 2000). Building a house is thus development, or *don-gruok*, which literally means “progress” in the local Luo language. Often, people talk about development not in Luo but using the Swahili term *maendeleo*. The use of Swahili marks development as something associated with the world outside western Kenya. However, growth (*medruok*) is a broader concept than that of development because it incorporates a sense of fecundity in addition to notions of improvement and progress. For example, when one receives a gift, the appropriate response in Luo is the phrase, *Nyasaye omedore*, which might be translated as “May God bless you,” but which literally means, “May God give you more,” tying God’s blessings into the manifestation of affluence. The opposite of growth is sterility, death, and atrophy, which can be experienced as illness, known as *chira* (e.g., Abe 1981; Geissler and Prince 2010; Ocholla-Ayayo 1976:104; Prince 2007:86–8; Schmidt 2017).<sup>1</sup>

### Domestic Labor and Socioeconomic Growth Through the Lens of Care

Domestic work is heavily gendered in terms of the different kinds of contributions that family members are expected to make but involves both men and women, ideally working in collaboration. Children also contribute their labor. The growth of a home is in equal measure an economic and a reproductive project. Prosperity, or “growth,” is measured in the accumulation of material objects, including those used in house construction and items purchased for use inside the home, and also in the presence of people, animals, and food crops grown in and around the home, through marriage, the birth of children, and the building of new houses and homesteads. Two further significant markers of prosperity are the ability to educate children and young people by paying for school and (for a more privileged few) college and very rarely university fees; and the capacity to properly bury the dead through the organization of funerals, which are immensely expensive and can cripple family budgets.

Luo people are concerned with supporting the reproduction of children, animals, and food crops partly because it is hoped these investments will bring future economic benefits and because they are good forms of savings and investment (Shipton 1989, 1992, 2007). However, wealth is not simply reckoned in terms of connections to people. More fundamentally, kin work is at heart an everyday economic project, as people struggle to garner all the resources necessary to provide the food, clothing, healthcare, and education that families require, despite the economic challenges that this often entails (e.g., Schmidt 2017). For most people, even the wealthier people that Kenyans call the “working classes” (because they have salaried income), caring for homes and kin is a huge challenge. This article reflects on these forms of domestic labor through the lens of care, a lens that is frequently applied to domestic work in the global north but is rarely used to think about domestic labor in African settings.

Domestic spaces and domestic labor in sub-Saharan Africa are not analogous to those of the global north, nor to each other (Hansen 1992). However, they are “partially connected” (Strathern 1991), particularly through histories of imperialism. I argue that these connections and disjunctions offer a productive window for comparative analysis when it comes to thinking about how care is

associated with the domestic realm. Arguably, the “domestication of care” in Euro-America has naturalized care as an activity that takes place primarily in the home or toward certain groups of needy people (Green and Lawson 2011). In these settings, understandings of care are the product of categorical distinctions between dependency and independence, and between economy and reproduction that characterize modes of thinking both in the social sciences and within popular social organisation in the global north (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Tronto 1993).

A long tradition of Africanist scholarship troubles such distinctions and gives an indication of why care has not been a major tool for thinking about domestic labor on the continent. In sub-Saharan Africa, dependency is often valorized rather than stigmatized (e.g., Ferguson 2013), and it is frequently difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between economic and reproductive activities (e.g., Guyer 1993; Meillassoux 1972; Shipton 1989; 2007). If care has functioned as an analytic tool in settings where domestic labor is assumed to be a private activity that takes place outside of the realm of economics, it is not surprising that care has not been discussed extensively in settings where kin work and economics are viewed as intertwined. What analytical traction might it offer, then, to apply the concept of care to domestic labor in rural western Kenya? This article contributes to this special issue on “unsettled care” by using a micro-ethnographic account of domestic labor as it was undertaken by a family in rural western Kenya over a period of more than a decade. The empirical material not only shows that domestic care work is deeply unsettled, unfinished, and precarious in its own right, I also use the ethnography as leverage to unsettle the concept of care itself. My analysis troubles categorical assumptions that frequently underpin conventional understandings of domestic labor as care work and points to some of the limits of care as an analytic tool. At the same time, the ethnographic material offers scope for thinking about care as an activity that is carried out as a collective enterprise over the course of time through domestic and economic activities aimed at making positive transformations for the future.

### **Theorizing Care**

Domestic labor has been a major topic of feminist and Marxist sociology, analyzed through frameworks that have tended to see domestic labor as care work that is embedded within a hidden private realm; economically and emotionally underpinning a public and predominately male economic sphere. Domestic labor is conceptualized in these (often heteronormative) frameworks as being heavily gendered as women’s work and consisting primarily of the caring duties of providing food and love for husbands and children (Thelen 2015). Literature on the forms of care that are encompassed by domestic labor is in general heavily marked by the political and economic context in which it is written. It responds to the gendered experiences of a capitalist labor market in which women continue to be responsible for most domestic labor even while they are increasingly drawn into paid work (Hochschild 2003). This work also responds to the legacy of political discourses that have maligned positions of dependency (Fraser and Gordon 1994). Finally, this literature reflects the conflation of domestic, private, and unpaid work in many “Western” contexts.

By following caring practices and activities ethnographically, anthropological work on care opens up a different set of orientations. Rather than exploring how care work is shaped by underlying social structures, anthropologists are often drawn to understanding how care practices can produce social distinctions (Brown 2012; Mol 2008) and the ways that practices of care “transcend ... categorical boundaries” (Drotbohm and Alber 2015:14). Others have worked to unpick and trouble the way that ideas of care become linked to certain kinds of positive affective states (e.g., Murphy 2015; Pols 2012; Stevenson 2014; van Dooren 2016). To draw on the terms that orient this special section, a key contribution of anthropological analyses of care has been to use ethnographic insights to unsettle conceptual boundaries that link care to particular people, places, and feelings. This chapter is situated in this tradition and offers a reinterpretation of analyses of domestic labor as care work in the light of a context in which the concepts of home and work have other resonances from those implicit in feminist sociology and a very different set of values are accorded to the productive laboring of care. It shows how the conceptual arrangements that underpin understandings of care work involved in domestic labor described above become unsettled when they travel.

In what follows I present a case study of the “growth” of one woman’s rural home over the years since I first met her. I explore domestic labor in this Kenyan community and show that when it is successful, such work enables particular forms of prosperity. Unlike analyses that have highlighted the way in which domestic labor is often gendered as women’s work and is hidden and undervalued economically, this account highlights the collective, cross-gender and quintessentially economic nature of domestic work. The work I describe is the collaborative endeavor of many people and is oriented towards future growth that benefits all members of the family. Although it sometimes involves practices where one person takes on particular caring responsibilities for another, this kind of labor, therefore, exceeds forms of care understood through the dyadic relationship between a care giver and care receiver. This care work is unsettled in part because it is precarious, in part because it is never finished and in part because it is in essence an economic project, and therefore, shaped by wider global, national, and community processes that are themselves unpredictable.

This examination of caring labor, therefore, raises insights for the anthropology of care more widely. Care has typically been located in forms of intimate, affective, or moral relationships. But when care is located in the ongoing economic and domestic work of building a home the “moral experience” of care (Kleinman 2012) shifts from a private, interpersonal relation to a collective endeavor that resists the foreclosure of settled emotional or relational states. Untethered from categorical assumptions that locate care in asymmetrical relations associated primarily with women and the private sphere, care comes into view as more closely aligned with the “good life,” not as utopia but as an activity with transformative potential that can bring new futures into being in ways that (Robbins 2013), in Luo terms, help things to “grow” and “increase”. This perspective resonates with definitions of care that are praxiographic, rather than normative, including Tronto and Fisher frequently cited definition of care as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (1990:40). By

developing an analysis of the care in a broader temporal landscape and in the economic and domestic labor of building a home, I trouble assumed points of contiguity between domestic labor and care work, and underscore the fragility and unsettled nature of care work as it unfolds over time.

### ***K'Onyango (Onyango's Home): Growing a Home 2006–2019***

In the early days that I knew her, although describing her plans for the future was one of Beatrice's favorite topic of conversation, her home had already "grown" somewhat, and she also enjoyed telling the story of how it had "come up" (*-dhi malo*). Beatrice was widowed in 2002 when she was in her late 30s. Recently married into Ramira village, her husband, Onyango, had died while the family was still living in the small grass-roofed house that, as tradition requires, Onyango had built in a single day when he first moved out of his parent's compound to start his own home. Onyango had not had a chance to build a larger permanent home before his death. These years were the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. People in Ramira had become experts in reading the signs of approaching death that characterized the culmination of the long and painful sickness of AIDS. Once they had accepted the inevitable, it was common to preempt death with strategies that would allow a person a respected burial. Onyango had struggled to build a single-roomed house on his plot of land, a home he probably knew that he would be unlikely to live in for long, so that he could be buried as a full man, not just a son, of the village.

With Onyango gone, Beatrice was left with five sons to bring up alone. She had brought the three eldest boys with her when she married Onyango, the products of previous marriages that had taken her to Nairobi and Mombasa before she married in Ramira and they became Onyango's sons. At Onyango's death she found herself *piny kabisa* (Luo/Swahili, "completely down"), living in the tiny grass-roofed house, which symbolized to herself and others her desperate, impoverished situation, and that she was without the strong networks of support that women build over time in their marital homes. Beatrice's relationships with Onyango's family were difficult. I suspected that her in-laws blamed her for bringing illness to Onyango. In addition, Beatrice explained, people thought she would "run away" to begin a new relationship elsewhere.

By the time I met her in 2006, Beatrice was selling pharmaceuticals at the evening market in the village, an enterprise that brought in a small but steady flow of cash. The small gardens that surrounded her house were flourishing. With the help of her sons she had planted maize, beans, millet, and sorghum, which provided food for the family. She also grew cotton for sale. The two older boys were involved in intermittent wage labor, and the younger three children were all at school; they had exercise books and uniforms. Although not wealthy as indicated by the fact that she was still living in a grass-roofed house, albeit one with two rooms, Beatrice had recently managed to build a *simba*, a house where her older teenage sons could sleep and which would become the house of her eldest son and his wife once he decided to marry. "We are getting somewhere," she told me.

Beatrice had a few goats, including one on loan from a women's group of which she was a member, which she would return after it produced a kid for

her. She had also developed a mutually supportive relationship with her late husband's classificatory brother, Edward, who had "inherited" (*-tero*, literally "taken") her (cf. Geissler and Prince 2010:261–294). Edward lived in his own home and farmed his own gardens. He brought Beatrice produce from this plot and gave her rides on the back of his bicycle when she wanted to go into town. He provided her with companionship and sexual intimacy. So it was that Beatrice's position in the village did not seem so precarious by the time I came to know her, in either economic or social terms.

Four years later, when I carried out a second period of long fieldwork in Kenya, Beatrice proudly welcomed me into a newly built large house with a corrugated iron roof. But things were hard. Her middle son, Otieno, had developed a form of psychosis and had been spending time in and out of hospital, his condition seemingly untreatable. His manic episodes were causing problems at home because he was unpredictable and sometimes damaged people's property. His treatment was costing the family a fortune in medical bills and medicines. Three years later, Otieno was much better and was working as a laborer helping to thatch the roof of a house when he pushed his hand deep into a bundle of grass and was bitten by a snake. I was in my office in the United Kingdom when Jack, Beatrice's youngest son, telephoned me to tell me the sad news. There was no anti-venom at the district hospital in the nearby town. Otieno had died on the floor of a pharmacy in the town center as they sought help. Although the family had been investing in their home, they were still relatively poor by the standards of the community. There was no latrine in their compound, and they collected water from a pond that was also used by people rearing cattle. Nonetheless, with the help of their extended family, they managed to raise the equivalent of thousands of pounds for Otieno's funeral. Sitting under lamplight with Beatrice and Jack, when I managed to visit a few months later, Beatrice was withdrawn as Jack described on her behalf the depths of her grief and the bittersweet pride that the family felt that they had at least been able to organize a decent funeral.

During my most recent visit to see Beatrice and her family in 2018, their homestead was completely transformed. Following a domestic argument, the family had sold a plot of land that was rightfully owned by her second born son Bernard—he had decided to try and seek inheritance from his biological father and had renounced his claim to the plot. With the proceeds of the sale, they had built two shops at the edge of the compound, on the road into the nearby town. From one, Beatrice was selling various low-cost domestic items. Next door, Jack had set himself up as an agent for *mpesa*, the mobile phone banking and money transfer system that now extends across most of Kenya. Jack's mood was buoyant as his friends passed by to greet him, charge their phones, and pass time sitting in front of his small shop. "Business is the way forward," he evangelized, as he drew attention to the trajectory of improvement made possible by his investments. "It has not been easy. To start with Safaricom [the owners of *Mpesa*] you need a float of 40,000Ksh [approx. £300].<sup>2</sup> I really had to struggle to find those funds. But when you are having business is when you can get something."

The further sale of a second parcel of land had enabled the family to build a row of five small one-roomed rental properties on the side of their compound. The rooms had electricity that could be topped up with tokens in a pre-paid

meter. Beatrice's own house had a small solar panel that charged a battery used to provide light in the evenings, and they had tapped into the water supply main that ran along the road, so there was no need any longer to trek with barrels to the pond to collect water. They were proud of their success, and Jack was trying to save money to go to university to study pharmacy. He told me how important it was that the family was seen to be successful after selling part of their land, explaining that people would laugh at them if they just "ate" the proceeds of the sale. He wanted people to see that they had "really done something" with the money so that the products of their business acumen and labors would be visible to those who lived around them.

### Imagined Futures

Luo people in Kenya describe domestic labor using the generic word for work, *tich*, usually with the qualifying adjective *tek*, meaning "hard." As the description of Beatrice Onyango's home shows, domestic labor is indeed hard work, requiring combinations of business acumen and bodily labor within a context of enormous unpredictability; people become sick, relationships break down; hard earned cash must be spent on hospital bills and funerals. Despite all of this, Beatrice and her sons have remained committed to a vision of prosperity in which their home grows and they become more secure economically. I have suggested that these are forms of care work that seek to propel families towards better futures. They are activities that center care work within webs of relations rather than interpersonal dyads.

Rural economies have transformed immeasurably in Kenya over recent years as they have elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. Economic strategies have diversified, but the focus of domestic labor remains the material and reproductive growth of a home, which should ideally multiply over time. In these settings, care work is an open endeavor involving a range of participants who seek out new opportunities in changing economic circumstances. When they were younger, Beatrice's sons were sent to fetch water. They also helped to cook and care for the few animals in the home. Now they mostly earn a living from wage labor in nearby urban areas, sometimes staying away but sending money home to their mother, and investing in livestock or building materials that they store in the safety of the home where they hope to one day marry and have children. They, too, have experienced misfortune; they have been robbed of their earnings, and some of their relationships have failed. Care work, then, is deeply unpredictable. It is never settled, or done, but is an ongoing activity that moves through better and worse times, underscored by aspiration as much as through concrete, everyday activity.

In a 2018 article, Elisabeth Cooper writes about orphaned children in a community not far from the one that is described here. Cooper points to a form of kinning through which orphaned children engage with imaginations of the familial care that they hope to participate in should they manage to build relationships with estranged kin with whom they "share blood." This understanding of kinship forces a reinterpretation of the ways in which everyday practices of caring labor are involved in the production of relatedness. In Cooper's ethnography, rather than being *made* through everyday practices of care giving

and sharing food, kinship is established precisely in conditions where such caring labor has been absent, and children have been separated from siblings and other relatives, usually due to the death of their parents. Cooper's analysis is useful because it reminds us that understandings of a good life are not only practical undertakings but also involve imaginative projections that organize and enlist caring labor with the anticipation of producing something better, or different, for the future. In the case study that I have presented and in Luo-speaking western Kenya more generally, ideological dimensions of kinship feed into popular teleological narratives about development and prosperity (cf. Ferguson 1999). People remain committed to forms of care work that help them realize their dreams.

In feminist analyses, attention is drawn to the way that care, as domestic labor, is undervalued. As Maria Puig de la Belacasa, writes,

from a feminist standpoint, care is a signifier of devalued ordinary labors that are crucial for getting us through the day. From this perspective domestic labors are labors of care, not reproductive natural mediations but productive doings that support liveable relationalities (2011:93).

The ethnography presented in this short article, where practices of domestic labor are not devalued or hidden forms of care but are at the heart of economic and relational prosperity, helps us to rethink relationships between domestic labor and care work. This micro-ethnographic account can be read as a critique of a gendered lens that draws on a Euro-American sense of "housework" as marking the boundaries of what counts as domestic caring labor, rather than starting ethnographically from an understanding of the different activities linked to domestic spaces that are part of people's attempts to maintain, improve, and care for their homes and their families. Housework in western Kenya is not simply about cooking, cleaning, and looking after children; it is a form of care work that is attentive to the reproductive potential of people, animals, and plant crops, which is underpinned by understandings of prosperity where material and reproductive wealth are combined. It stands as an example of the ways in which following practices ethnographically can unsettle the boundaries around what we consider care to be, the ways in which it is undertaken, and the motivations of those engaged in it.

## Notes

1. During the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has been particularly severe in western Kenya, *chira* came to be coterminous with the bodily wasting of individuals and, for many, a sense that the reproductive potential of the Luo community itself was dying (see Geissler and Prince 2010).

2. A considerable sum in local terms, equivalent to, or a little more than, the cost of an imported Chinese motorbike.

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