Old age in rural Kenya: Gender, the life course and social change

Cattell, Maria G., Ph.D.
Bryn Mawr College, 1989

Copyright ©1990 by Cattell, Maria G. All rights reserved.
This dissertation reports on a two-year field study (1983-1985) of aging and old people among rural Samia, a Luyia subgroup in western Kenya. The research aimed to identify and describe Samia old people's sources of wellbeing under conditions of socioeconomic and cultural change. Several dimensions of wellbeing were investigated: social, economic, physical, subjective. Research focuses included gender differences, intergenerational relationships, and changing life course patterns.

The research, designed within the anthropological tradition of descriptive ethnography, used participant observation, including many informal and topically focused interviews, as its core method. The major formal instrument, developed in the field, was a questionnaire administered to 416 old women and men in four sublocations of Samia.

Theoretical orientations include modernization theory (Cowgill and Holmes 1972); exchange theory, particularly Caldwell's (1982) concept of lifetime intergenerational exchange; and a life course perspective (Riley 1979).

Historical and cultural contexts are described from a cultural dynamics perspective (Herskovits 1958). Interview data and published materials are used to reconstruct the precolonial cultural matrix and its transformations under the colonial regime—transformations shifting power and wealth away from the old and giving new opportunities to the young.
These changes are interpreted as a process of "delocalization" (Pelto 1973) resulting in reduced resource control and role opportunities for the elderly.

The contemporary context for age includes a sociodemographic profile of the Samia, Samia kinship as an exchange system, and changing life course patterns of females and males. Within this socio-cultural-historical framework, definitions of "old" and attitudes toward old age and old people are described. A socioeconomic profile of elderly Samia, their needs and structures of support available to them in a "lifeterm social arena" (Moore 1978) are described in terms of gender and age cohort differences. Old people's subjective assessments of their lives and wellbeing are presented.

Individual lives appear anecdotally within chapters but especially in between-chapter "interludes" and a "postlude." These are descriptive, impressionistic, subjective and, at the same time, examples of common experiences of aging and attitudes of Samia people, young and old, toward old age, old people and social change.

Finally, policy and program recommendations and suggestions for further research focusing on Kenyan (and African) old people within the extended family are discussed.