The intersection of Environment, Demography, Politics, Disease and Health in Contemporary Africa

By

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“Africa's splendor lies in its suffering. The heroism of African past is to be found not in the deeds of kings, but in the struggle of ordinary people against the forces of nature and the cruelty of men.” (John Iliffe, 1989).

This paper is a reaction to an on-going discourse, particularly in the media, but increasing entering the academic arena of Eastern Africa. This discourse centers around the sizing-down of the Africa family and the decline of polygamous practices on the one hand and overpopulation, chronic famines, disease and rampant environmental degradation. In the last seven years of this decade East African press has been flooded with articles venting scary stories of overpopulation and others that decried official neglect of family planning policies and programs. Interestingly the same press carried in adjacent columns contradictory scary stories of mass loss of lives in Eastern Africa as a result of HIV/AIDS, food insecurity and environmental degradation. Suffice it to say that, the above quotation encapsulates the common but misinformed-view that Africans live in harsh environmental conditions and political turmoil. This view draws heavily from the unfavorable media coverage and Western custom of reducing an entire continent to fit into their 24-inch TV screens. Strikingly a new generation in African has been recruited into this manner of conceptualizing Africa.

The journalists who in the process of presenting above views influence public opinion and policy-making decisions seem not to care about these contradictions. Moreover, scholars in the last seven years have continued to consume this journalistic data and consolidate it into authoritative works. Little do they know that Lucifer and Christ cannot share an apartment. A growing body of literature materials focuses on the issues of chronic famines, failure of family planning efforts and the declining size of African family.

Whether extreme duress exists in Africa or not is not so much the center-piece of my focus in this paper. I argue that the current scholarship got it wrong on issues of overpopulation, education, family, famine, and technology in Africa. This paper attempts
to explain the roots of famine in Africa and the intersection between politics and poverty in Africa. It seeks to answer such questions as to what extent is political turmoil grounded in the need to control natural wealth in Eastern Africa? How does famine fit in political and environmental discourse and what is the place of gender in the whole matter?

Drawing examples from Kenya, Malawi, Ethiopia, Uganda, Somalia, Ivory Coast and Sudan the paper examines the changing nature of the African family in terms of size, social environment, and world intellectual backdrop. It is premised on the argument that overpopulation is not at the core of Africa’s predicament, and a rejection of such notions of a fluctuating fertility rate. I further argue that the comparative figures provided to support the claim are not objectively produced within a purely scientific atmosphere. Think of it, in the year 2003 Kenya’s birth rate is said to have fallen considerably, but shot up within a year. What happened the night between 2003 and 2004? Any rational thinker would soundly suspect foul play in those tabulations, and appreciate my conclusion that the figures in question were produced with vested interests geared towards policy-making locally and/or internationally.

Origin of Polygamy in East Africa

One curious development in recently years has been the steady decline of polygamy—the practice of marrying multiple wives. Some scholars have seen impact of technological change, western education, and economic stress as the main causes of this trend as well as sizing-down of the African family to four children per woman. Accordingly these developments are responsible for declining rate of polygamous practices and smaller family sizes in Eastern Africa. Some scholars drawing their inspiration from journalism argue that polygamy and scores of children per woman declined because such practices lost their economic significance from about the 1970s onwards.

These and other notable misconceptions about the African family deserve clarification. This paper argues that contrary to such views, African polygamous practices and bearing of scores of children within a family were not geared towards production. Polygamous practices and bearing scores of children per mother have been seen as attempts to maximize productions within the African family. Nevertheless, dabbling with issues of origins sometimes helps to explain why and how things came to be in the
present state of existence. Polygamy is not as old as the African society itself, but began with outbursts of violence, slave trade and migration and it was during such times of duress that the institution of polygamy along with matrilinity was in earnest appended to the African family.

Although African women featured as rulers and soldiers in the past, armed conflict has been often the domain of men. Wherever they occurred, violent episodes usually left fewer men than women in the societies involved. During the subsequent flight of survivors, greater numbers of women found themselves in foreign localities, with insufficient supply of men to sustain reproduction. The outcome of such a situation was development of matrilineal and polygamous customs as direct responses to gender imbalance and issues of insecurity, reproduction and production. On the one hand there was development of matrilineal families with women as heads and recruited men principally as tools of reproduction, but not of production.

On the other hand or simultaneously surviving men surrounded themselves with scores of women for convenience, security and social unity, but again not as tools of production. Subsequent polygamous practices resulted as a perpetuation of family tradition, but not aimed at maximizing production. In fact polygamous families were able to engage in the custom because of availability of means to do so.

Although polygamy and multiple children symbolized wealth and prestige, the two developments were not tools of production, but rather bye-products of traditional economic prosperity. African men sought more wives and more children as away of social investment not for the purpose of increasing their family labor force or family income. Subsequent economic gains only came as packages of unintended returns of polygamy and multiple children. African families raised large numbers of children in response to the natural urge to have an extra one to feed, extra one to love, and away to keep enjoying the youthfulness of life, but not to have some one to work for the family.

After all by the time the children were old enough to serve, it was too late in many cases for parents to enjoy the child labor services. If one needs labor he secures it now and right away, but one does not have to bank on a baby who will come a year after conception, and then wait for another ten years for that baby to be mature enough to look after kitten or chase away weaver birds and another five years to be old enough to look
after livestock and a garden of yams. On the contrary, a baby brought refreshment to life and the laughter of a toddler marked the highest joy of the African family. Moreover, having children at old age in a polygamous situation allegedly kept aging at bay.

Therefore in Eastern Africa, surplus capital was usually invested in both economic and social arenas. Therefore marrying an extra wife was a way of spending one’s wealth and a way to legitimate helping another unrelated family economically through bride-price and exchange of gifts. Sharing one’s wealth with somebody else produced a sense of satisfaction and self-fulfillment. Thus, polygamy was a give-and-take relationship based on the principle of reciprocity, and its disappearance without an alternative social and economic cushion in part explains the causes of the current economic predicament of Eastern rural Africa.

The above notwithstanding, historically African women have never been passive to such extents that they accepted marriage transactions in which they were not going to be wives but workers. In fact polygamy was acceptable to a woman not only on social grounds, but also on the basis of her hope to derive a better material and sentimental life in the marriage than her parents could provide for her.

It was scholars’ misreading of the intricate intersections between social and economic dimensions of African lives that misled them to the conclusion that the motive behind polygamy was reproduction and production— and all the goodies went to the African man. Those who still hold this view must bear in mind how much an insult it bears not only to Africans but to the intellectual community within which they operate. It is self-insulting for anyone to hold such simplistic notions and expect to be respected as a scholar.

Polygamy is now unacceptable to present African generations, and bearing scores of children is not sensible to many in the continent, but for the sake of historical facts we need to censure the notion that having multiple wives and many children in African families was a means to enhance the family labor conditions, prestige and wealth. The truth is that human society world-over never consciously recruited labor force through marriage and reproduction. That was simply a mistaken view of a particular time, mooted by a particular group of people with an agenda to legitimate a certain action. For want of time and space I will not go into how that happened. Suffice to say that the twin practices
were adaptive mechanisms against disruptive impact of pre-twentieth century slavery, violence, pestilence, famines, infertility, lack of heirs and migration. If the above threats have been removed and the future assured or if large families and rapid population increases pose economic threats to the region, then it is sensible to discard those age-old practices.

**HIV/AIDS and Eastern Africa Demography 1980s to the present**

Nonetheless, if HIV/AIDS, as we are informed in the literature under review, reaches such magnitudes as to threaten Eastern Africa with depopulation, the region might consider checking alternatives from their rich history—back to polygamy and multiply and fill the earth. Scholars have yet to recognize the impact of HIV on reproduction and production processed in Eastern Africa. That epidemic has impacted negatively on agricultural production by taking away the producers or weakening them and turning them into dependents of their own dependents. By the close of 1990s there was limited medical assistance or affordable services to HIV/AIDS patients. From 2000 onwards, however, some Eastern African governments adopted policies of lowering the cost of anti-retroviral drugs. For instance in 2001 Kenyan Government lowered the cost Sh500 ($5) to Sh100 ($1) a month and proposed to provide them free through public clinics to 60,000 patients annually. That proposal materialized three years later as CBO, and NGOS opened their doors to HIV/AIDS patients, but the future is not any brighter yet. The coming of this disease challenged Eastern African official commitment to Family planning polices causing anger and anxiety among western institutions that sponsored or supported family planning programs in the region. East African governments therefore are not to blame for falling enthusiasm in family planning (as Journalistic historians argue) when we consider certain turns of event from the late 1980s. In fact, I am curious about scholars’ concern with family planning as means to tame overpopulation in East Africa at this time of our history. Is family planning still relevant to Africa considering the ongoing loss of life through pandemic famine, HIV/AIDS and other deadly diseases? Are advocates of population control sincere with their famine and pestilence concerns on the one hand and overpopulation on the other? Isn’t that contradictory and comparable to putting Lucifer and Christ in the same apartment?
An examination of what these losses of life portends for the future of Eastern Africa is long overdue and we need to rethink whether we should worry about population growth at a time disease and famine are decimating the population. I am not downgrading family planning program, but as much as rapid population growth might jeopardize our fight against famine, disease and poverty, when these obstacles are supposedly sizing-down regional population, we cannot avoid questioning whether we are doing it right. Moreover, every mentally liberated African—illiterate or literate, privately and confidentially confesses that family planning as we know it does not make sense. Experts more often than not have shied away from the question, “Does family planning mean two to four children or does it leave it to individuals to raise the number of children they can comfortably sustain?

**Origin of Small Families in East Africa**

Some have argued that the about-turn of the African family size in the second half of the 20th century resulted from less dependency on manual family labor as a result of agricultural technological change and modern education, public information, and economic constraints. That being an intriguing assumption, I will argue that the above variables had nothing to do with the sizing down of the African family. The extent of agricultural technology is not worthy much praise in Africa, for many lands have yet to see the blade of the plough. Digging sticks and traditionally manufactured metal tools are still in full use. Tractors and combine harvesters have not been heard of in many places, they have not been seen even on pictures in many parts of Africa. Automated agriculture therefore does not feed the greater African population and as such agricultural technology cannot be associated any how and anywhere with the sizing down of the African family. Likewise western education is not directly linked to preference to smaller families in Africa. The situation is more complex that just meet the eye. To some extent deliberately tailored public information is perhaps a better tool of analysis than the generic term education.

In fact the relationship between family size on one hand and technology and western education on the other tended to follow the principle of more technology and education, more children and more wives if one’s social conditions allowed. Through the 1960s education and technology meant better income suitable for sustaining large
families. That brings me to the point of explaining how and when the East African family began sizing-down. Changes in the size of African families began in the 1970s. The force behind the sizing-down of Kenyan family was the alarmist western intellectual debates over human population in the early 1970s. Paul Erlich in his *Population Bomb* scared the hell out of Africa when he prophesied an impending doom if African governments failed to restrict their population growth rates.

Anjere and Nostrebor—the leading proponents of the views under criticism here—will probably recall with me the mid-1970s conspicuous scenes on the walls of school buildings, billboards, public vehicles, shops, clinics, hospitals and government offices, classroom doors, toilet doors, clubs and so on. These public spaces were furbished with posters bearing such inscriptions as *panga uzazi!* *Panga Uzazi!* Family planning! Family Planning! Birth control and Family planning were advertised in every channel available—print materials, audio and visual channels, walls, doors, mobile equipment, food wrappings and cans.

The *Population Bomb*-scare convinced African governments to adopt policies of scaling-down their national population growth. Between the 1970s and 1980s the message of *panga uzazi* was enshrined into local education system, media, political and public discourses. Family planning became a major focus of Kenya’s newly created twin-ministries of Home Affairs, and Culture and social services. Traditional songs were composed and performed in schools, political rallies and public awareness campaigns aimed to promote that ideology. For Swahili speaking audience, popular songs and Radio programs were heard on the only Radio station, the Voice of Kenya (*Sauti ya Kenya*, Nairobi) and the neighboring Tanzania’s *Umoja wa Maradio Mjini* Dar es Salaam promoting the message of *panga uzazi*. *The Standard* and other dailies frequently carried many colorful images in an effort to propagate the idea that the smaller the family the better. The church, the mosque, the temple and the shrine lied low like and had later to curve new understanding of recreation mission in order to avoid contradictions and irrelevance.

Together with other developments these efforts contributed to East Africans gradual shifts to smaller families. Moreover, emergence of night clubs, exclusively for the pleasure of working men, separated couples for hours and sometime for whole nights
with resultant slowing down of conception rates. The volume of rural-urban migration of male Kenyans leaving their wives at home again contributed to slowing down of conception rates, with smaller families resulting in the process. Independent churches began to undermine polygamy and practicing Christians and began to dislike polygamy. In addition, the gradual weakening of traditional rural-based economy on which polygamy previously rested began in a mute ways to dissuade the practice. We should not underestimate the fact that women available for polygamous marriages also diminished as girls trooped to schools and churches and the school kept the girls for seven to seventeen years before they would become available for marriage. It was not therefore economic constraints or western education that paced out polygamy, but economic change, cultural, Christianity and other shifts in African structure.

The Truth about Famines in Africa

The idea of connecting current African predicaments to land and overpopulation is simply a proverbial dancing with intellectual perfumes, which are two hundred years old. Although nothing came out of the Population Bomb prophecy, the media frizzy that followed in the wake of deadly famines in Africa forced scholars to frantically seek theoretical explanations of the intersection between population and natural catastrophes. Most of them found inspiration in the 18th century writings of French thinker Thomas Malthus, whose models were tailored for European conditions that is in different intellectual, social, temporal, and geographical settings far way from the 21st century Africa. Malthus was not concerned with Africa at the time and neither were other western thinkers. The best we know about their knowledge about Africa is that Europeans were tinker with the idea as African exuberance, where the African man lived in extreme luxury, well endowed by nature and the mirth of his multiple women and troops of children.

An application of such archaic notions present serious obstacles in securing sound understanding of human-land relationship in Africa and in curving sustainable solutions. Things have changed locally and abroad and we need new tools of analysis and we do not have to go back two hundred years to that doubting Thomas Malthus in order to understand contemporary Africa. Rapid population growth might pose national challenges, but the way the Malthusians, Erhlichians and Boserupian theorists present
their understanding of the population relationship with natural resources and national treasuries need to be seriously censured. The proponents of overpopulation are not sincere in their scholarly calculations both in and outside Africa. In fact population expansion has been more of an asset than of a problem to all nations throughout history.

Agricultural technological change is in part to blame for chronic food shortages. It is often blamed for taking away land, labor, capital, expertise and technology that should be expended on food production to reduce famine. Some scholars have succinctly argued that drought does not obviously lead to famine and that famine is inability to get access to the source of food. African land has not been exploited to its full potential to combat famine. Until that is done it is not yet time to give in to despair.

There is little connection between famine and population variables. What Nostrebor dismissed as unlikely explanations—transport, incapacitated administrative organs and corruption—may still hold water in the analysis of endemic famines in Africa. In adequate transportation denies both the victims and their sympathizers ready access to food when a famine strikes. If the population cannot get access to the market or the government cannot access relief food in a timely manner the result is obviously disastrous. I am not sure about what to say under the title corruption because this variable is imbued with political and imperialist interests, and on that account I will leave it out. However, in the case of administrative role as a player in famine discourse, I acknowledge that managing a famine catastrophe is a full ministry, which requires a full infrastructure of expertise, financial and bureaucratic resources. Perhaps it is in this complex arena that corruption finds a niche, but I will still maintain that corruption accusations are usually advanced within very subjective intellectual circumstances.

Unfortunately African governments and societies have not yet recognized famine and drought as worse threats to their territorial sovereignty like terrorism and did epidemics such as rinderpest pandemic (which swept 70% of East African bovines in 1890s, influenza which killed half of the Kenyan youths in the 1910s and the HIV/AIDS, inflections of the post-1980s period. Famines and droughts take away labor resources, animal and vegetation wherewithal and leave the soil eroded and barren. Hence, a perpetual circle of poverty and more famines as the survivors are left too weak to raise enough crops to catch up with the loss left in the trail of the previous famine.
Famines and droughts also leave behind a legacy of strained relationships among victims, those who had food during the lean days and those involved in relief efforts. Such complex situations eventually affect significantly the national treasury and political development, but they do not reach the points of threatening to the rule of law. In the 17th century China under Ming Dynasty a series of famines struck and as the imperial government failed in coordination of relief efforts, peasants ate grass roots and tree barks and finally rebelled one region after another till the Ming dynasty lost complete control and faded from history. External forces allied with rebels to ruin everything that had taken centuries to build.

Along the borders of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia shortages of pastures and water often spark off armed conflicts, which leave dozens of people dead and thousands of livestock stolen and houses destroyed. Another cause of famine has to do with the mental state of our societies (not governments) in Africa. Professor Ngugi wa Thiong’o has made a fitting prescription for that problem in his thesis of *decolonizing the African mind*. Our attitudes towards ourselves, governments and help from the outside has seriously impacted on self-determination spirit of East Africans. The pre-1960s mentality of dependency on colonial regimes transformed itself quickly in the 1960s into an overwhelming reliance on and perception of the government as the society’s granary.

The African society, both learned and illiterate must take into their hands the destiny of their own lives in all fields beginning with the intellectual field, which has been the root cause of current African problems. People who do not have western education and have not been more informed to use Anjere’s words have been marginalized because their form of knowledge is presumably defective, even though it is the foundation on which should start building our knowledge. Marginalizing illiterate people is not only an exhibition of arrogance, but also colonial mentality with a loud cry for intellectual decolonization.

While there are myriads reasons for the chronic famines in East Africa, local attitudes and consumption patterns in part explain the occurrence of famine. Before the 1960s Western education taught Kenyans that anything African—crops, tools, soil and ideas— was defective. Planting and consuming maize, beans and wheat have been viewed as better economic practices than growing and consuming that plethora of
indigenous crops, which are better suited to the East African environment. Cultivation of newly introduced crops, which are not well-adapted to local conditions accounts for frequency of famines due to crop failure. In addition to irregularities in production, consumption pattern presents another problem and indirectly leads to famine.

Consumption patterns in Nairobi, for example, present an interesting study. Nairobians prefer to take their breakfast comprising of pasteurized milk-tea and manufactured bread, which items are associated with “progressiveness” (maendeleo) if not civilization. Although inexpensive and readily available, Nairobians will rarely consider for their breakfast such locally produced traditional foodstuffs (still nutritious) as sweet potatoes, ugali, or porridge made of ground wimbi, maize, millet, and sorghum flour.

Such expensive lifestyles in the cities drain resources, which could help famine-stricken rural homes, where these progressive Nairobians have come from. Even consumption of parts of an animal such as the head, the hooves and intestines, all rich in minerals needed in the body are churned-down as food for the poor. In fact the maxim hata matumbo ni nyama (even intestines are in the class of meat) was coined by meat shop proprietor to convince Nairobians to buy and consume intestines. The same stigma is also attached to the nutritious and readily available kales and collard greens better known as sukuma wiki—pushes the week.

Folks from western Kenya and Rift valley provinces have relatively liberated themselves from that kind of mental colonialism, but at the cost of some ridicule by fellow urbanites. Through such patterns of consumption much individual African wealth is squandered in local cities and abroad. All these great and small things add up and in very mute ways translate into the weakening of African national treasuries and no doubt affect the frequency of famines. Any change from mental captivity and dependency on outside help will reduce the frequency of famines and attendant problems. It is striking to find that what East Africans do not expect Westerners to consume is ironically treasured in Europe, Canada, USA and developed nations of Asia. Little do we ask ourselves why Westerners import cowpeas, green peas, millet, sorghum, yams, arrow roots, and cassava from Africa? Ironically the local wealthy Americans and European cherish these inexpensive and healthy foodstuffs, but less respected in Eastern Africa. Some also
treasure in their diet wild East African herbs such one called terere in Eastern and central provinces of Kenya, where terere is only food for the extremely distressed individuals. Who came with the idea that these foodstuffs are less important than wheat, rice, maize, barley and beans?

After the White Man’s burden was lifted in the mid-twentieth century, a black man’s burden set in and now some one will have to convince East Africans to consume both imported goods and their own products in order to scale-down unnecessary systemic shortages that give famine its current face.

Nostrebor seems to present unbalanced view of famine and its place in Africa. We should not lose sight of the fact that famines are natural occurrences and they affect periodically all societies world-wide within particularly environmental niches. There is very little connection between the frequency of famine and population increase. Think of it. Before the colonial period many Kenya and Malawian ethnic groups (not tribes please) were driven to their present-day homelands by droughts and famines. At that time famines did not occur because of overpopulation or mismanagement. Moreover, during the colonial era many Malawians and Kenyans were ejected from their localities or killed by famines under the watchful eyes of Imperial Britain. Such did not happen because of overpopulation or corruption because Imperial administrations were not supposed to be corrupt. Thus, our inability to explain pre-colonial and colonial famines in terms of population relationships to natural resources provides comparative tools, with which to argue that post-independence famines are not a result of land, demographic conditions and bureaucratic failures, but rather of media populism, African attitudes and inevitable natural forces.

With regard to Nostrebor’s concern with land shortages and their implications on famines, one can see some kind of irony somewhere. If land is not sufficient in Malawi and Kenya, how far will family planning solve the problem? We know that Nostrebor is not saying —funga uzazi—that reproduction should stop immediately. That means if we leave reproduction to go on, then at some point in the future population will eventually overwhelm the land. What are our alternatives when that point is reached?

We need a new intellectual perfume fit for current demographic circumcision dance. Issues of human-land ratios, famine and overpopulation are more complex than
they appear and unwell-thought out theoretical diagnoses and prescriptive solutions will only complicate the matter. This will create a scenario where the solution will be part of the problem. Curving out unworkable models in Eastern Africa will backfire and consume the entire human society. That is, to say that some one will pick up a model from Eastern Africa and try it at home only to exclaim like General Benidicto Mussolini when he tried something at a battle in Somalia —“Hoops! An African shoe doesn’t fit an Italian!”