

Sexuality, AIDS, and the Lures of Modernity: Reflexivity and Morality among Young People in Rural Tanzania

Hansjörg Dilger

An understanding of young people's perceptions of AIDS and their sexuality is an essential precondition for the effective planning of AIDS campaigns in sub-Saharan Africa. In examining how young Luo men and women in Tanzania describe their sexual behavior, I show that cultural conceptions of sexuality, gender, and trust have an important impact on their actions. I also show that these conceptions have been rendered ambiguous by globalization, modernity, and by AIDS campaigns themselves. The values that are imparted to young people from family or peers often conflict with the preventive advice provided by both governmental and non-governmental organizations. However, by critically reflecting upon the ambiguities and inconsistencies in their lives, the young Luo have proven to be self-conscious actors and moral subjects who are actively involved in the process of social change. In the concluding section I suggest how elements of self-critique and self-reflection, as well as the often differing perspectives and dilemmas experienced by young men and women, can be taken into account in order to make future educational campaigns more effective.

Key Words: HIV/AIDS; modernity; AIDS prevention; youth; Tanzania; Luo; morality; sexuality; gender

HANSJÖRG DILGER is a research associate at the Free University of Berlin. He did field work in Tanzania. His research interests include HIV/AIDS, anthropology of family, gender and religion. He is co-chair of the Work Group Medical Anthropology, which is part of the German Anthropological Association.

Address correspondence to Hansjörg Dilger, Freie Universität Berlin, Department for Social Anthropology, Drosselweg 1–3, 14195 Berlin/Germany. E-mail: hansjoerg.dilger@berlin.de

INTRODUCTION

In Africa the group hardest hit by AIDS is the socially and economically productive middle generation. Therefore, prevention campaigns have repeatedly been called upon to focus specifically upon adolescents: young people who are just beginning their sexual experience are especially vulnerable to HIV infection. Yet there have been, until recently, few studies of young people and AIDS in Africa, and those that have been conducted have tended to focus selectively on "risk groups" and, hence, are not representative of the "general population."¹ Additionally, many studies have paid exclusive attention to the situation of women (see Varga 1997:47–51).² A change in the field occurred with a special issue of *Health Transition Review* (1997), which dealt with adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa, and with a UNAIDS (1999) study of youths in seven countries in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. These and other studies conclude that medical knowledge about HIV, about modes of transmission and corresponding preventive measures, is very high among young people. Yet, despite this knowledge, youths often do not consider AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) as personal threats and seldom protect themselves by using condoms. Against the background of rising infection rates, it is this gap between biomedically defined knowledge and actual behavior that increasingly raises doubts about how AIDS campaigns are planned and how preventive information is imparted to target groups.

The most obvious reason for the failure of prevention efforts involves the fact that, in most African countries, they have not been satisfactorily implemented. In Tanzania, where the infection rate is 8.5 percent among male blood donors and 11.8 percent among female blood donors (United Republic of Tanzania 1999), prevention is carried out, with a few regional exceptions, on an irregular basis (mostly among prostitutes and truck drivers). In the region of my research—a rural area on Lake Victoria—condoms are not readily available, and the village population receives only a fragment of its information on HIV through official campaigns. Relatives, friends, schools, media, and religious organizations are the main sources of information. And this information is often problematic, being the product of mutually contradictory strategies of prevention. Programs based on Western conceptions of AIDS and sexuality advise safer sex and the use of condoms but do not discourage sexual activity in itself. Most religious denominations, as well as part

of the local media, on the other hand, reject *every* form of pre- and extramarital sexuality, and criticize the advertising of condoms as an “instigation to immoral behavior” and “unrestrained sexuality.” Thus adolescents in Mara are exposed to different “moral regimes” (Ahlberg 1994:234), or—as Obrist van Eeuwijk and Mlangwa (1997) have termed it—to “competing sexual ideologies.” This has led to confusion rather than to the encouragement of safer and more responsible sexual behavior. Nonetheless the absence of coherent prevention strategies, and the government’s failure to provide them, may not be the only factors that explain why preventive recommendations are not put into action in every day life.

In this article I argue that, in order to make AIDS education more effective, preventive programs aimed at young people must take into account their *own* perspectives and—more concretely—the actual problems and conflicts they confront in their sexual relationships and everyday lives. I refer to a number of studies that emphasize that sexualities in sub-Saharan Africa are shaped by multiple social, cultural, and economic forces that render the experiences of young people increasingly ambiguous and inconsistent. Schoepf (1991:97), for instance, remarked very early in the debate on AIDS in Africa that sexual cultures in the former Zaire—in rural as well as in urban areas—are pluralistic in that they cannot be termed either “traditional” or “modernized.” Setel’s (1999) study on the Chagga in northern Tanzania shows in detail how the sexual lives of young men and women have developed from complex historical, economic, and demographic processes, and how these same processes are described and experienced by the Chagga themselves. Studies that situate the AIDS epidemic within the larger social, cultural, and economic forces at work on global and local levels help to draw a more differentiated picture of pre-colonial and contemporary “African sexualities” (on the debate on an “African sexuality,” see Caldwell, Caldwell, and Quiggin 1989; for critical reviews, see Ahlberg 1994; Heald 1995). However, these studies fall short of examining young people’s experiences with regard to dealing with ambiguities and inconsistencies in sexual encounters as well as in their lives in general.

Drawing on empirical data from rural Tanzania, I argue that one way young people act upon such ambiguities and inconsistencies is by critically reflecting upon them as well as upon their own roles in the production of their sexual and social lives. Among the Luo, young men and women situate themselves within a conflict

that shapes more than their views of AIDS and their sexuality. According to them, their social and moral worlds have been radically changed by the forces of modernization and globalization. And they claim that this change accounts for their changing sexual and social behaviors and, thus, for the rapid spread of AIDS. However, while they complain of social disruption and disintegration, and while they attribute this to increasing modernization, these young people do not consider themselves to be mere victims of processes imposed upon them by external forces. It is important to note that they critically reflect upon their own behavior and that they are conscious of inconsistencies between the information they have received and what they actually do. Highly aware of contradictions in their lives, which they see as problematic within the context of AIDS, these young people search for explanations and actively seek to make sense of their world. Like the women of Dar es Salaam described by Obrist van Eeuwijk (2000:22–25; 40) the young Luo constitute themselves as *moral subjects* and *agents* who do not simply adopt the prevailing values of contemporary society; rather, they are, as Giddens (1992 [1991]:36–45) indicates, conscious actors of social change who reflect upon current social practices in light of the information they receive and who, by communicating and interacting, actively contribute to the management of their own lives.

The self-reflexive voices of young people in Tanzania demonstrate that youths play an active role in creating their sexual and social lives. Therefore I conclude that the integration of their views could be crucial for further prevention campaigns as they offer a promising point for introducing culturally sensitive messages through educational programs. However, one has to be careful not to assume that the integration of young people's views into AIDS programs is *the* solution in the fight against the epidemic. It would not be, for example, advisable to adapt prevention campaigns exclusively to the ideal of abstinence from pre-marital sex—even if the young Luo, in accordance with most religious organizations, choose this as their preferred way of protecting themselves against HIV. The AIDS prevention slogan “say no to sex” is aimed mainly at girls and thus reproduces “traditional” conceptions of a gender-specific sexuality, which entails stricter social norms for female than for male sexuality in most African societies. Furthermore, Dowsett and Aggleton (1999:43) remark that, realistically, young people would never put a call for sexual abstinence into practice; they would simply ignore

it. Yet one shouldn't assume—as is implied in Dowsett and Aggleton's (1999:43; see also Taylor 1990:1027) critique—either that young people's conflicts will simply vanish with increasing modernization or that cultural and religious values will lose their meaning during the process of change. It must be remembered that the values and actions representing different sexual ideologies form a complex web of suggestions and constraints that will continue to shape the sexual cultures of young people. Therefore young people's complex perspectives, critical reflection, and experiences (including those transcending the sphere of sexuality) should be acknowledged by AIDS researchers and education planners and given special attention when planning multi-sectoral AIDS work and prevention campaigns.

After briefly outlining my methodology, I provide an overview of the research setting and of the social and moral context of AIDS in Mara. I then present the views of young Luo with regard to the central issues that emerged in our conversations on sexuality, including "physical pleasure," "money," and "trust." Drawing upon empirical data, as well as upon ethnographic literature on the Kenyan Luo,³ I show that a shift has taken place with regard to values that were formerly central to Luo conceptions of gender, sexuality, and power and that my interview partners critically understood this shift. In the concluding section I make suggestions as to how elements of self-critique and self-reflection can be taken into account with regard to future educational campaigns. I argue that the "language of deceit" and the "belief of darkness," which, according to young people in Mara, have come to dominate their sexual relationships in a negative way, should not be taken as a sign either of growing fatalism or of resignation. By giving expression to the serious concerns associated with the AIDS epidemic, their sexuality, and contemporary life in general, my interview partners' statements play an essential role in their search for "moral guidance and orientation" (cf., Probst 1999:127) within a context of suffering and social disruption. They should thus be interpreted both as (1) an unheard protest against a society that is perceived as becoming increasingly immoral and (2) as a means of verbal action offering young people the possibility of acting in contradictory life situations characterized by a growing gap between values and reality. Not least, however, the interviews must be understood as critical reflections upon AIDS education and, thus, as a way of talking back to the planners of AIDS programs.

METHODOLOGY

In my analysis I refer to 21 interviews and two group discussions with young Luo men and women as well as to numerous informal talks and observations made during several field stays in North-western Tanzania between 1995 and 2000 (altogether 18 months). My fieldwork focused upon young people's perceptions of HIV/AIDS, intergenerational and gender relations within the context of socio-economic change, and, at a later stage, on the life situations of people with HIV/AIDS and their families within the context of rural-urban migration.

"Youth" (Swahili: *ujana*) has a broad meaning among the Luo. A man may be called *kijana* even if he has grown-up children and would be considered an adult in Western cultures. In the same vein, a woman can be regarded as *kijana* long after her marriage and after giving birth to several children. The Luo have no formal age system and no initiation rites to mark different life stages; however, the term *kijana* (young person) is differentiated through marriage, which is regarded as an essential step in a person's social and moral development. For the young people I interviewed it was important to distinguish between someone who was "already married" and someone who was "not yet married," the implication being that the Luo considered marriage to be an integral part of their life planning. Linguistically, this difference consists of using the active voice for males (*ameshaoa/hajaoa*) and the passive voice for females (*ameshaolewa/hajaolewa*). Unmarried youths are more likely than are married persons to engage in changing sexual relationships; consequently, they are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection. It is for this reason that I restrict my analysis to a group of unmarried young men and women (12 males, 9 females, all 17 to 26 years old).

My interview partners were chosen with the help of my research assistant, a 35-year-old man from the Luo community who had been in contact with some of the interviewees before our research began. Half of the interviewees had finished their primary education, the others had completed, or were still attending, secondary school. Those who had already finished their schooling were working as farmers or fishers, or, in the case of most of the young women, they were engaged in some kind of small-scale trade or business. Only one young woman had found a permanent position, and this was in a local church office. All interviewees were connected to one of the local Christian denominations (most were Mennonites or Seventh

Day Adventists), and they emphasized the fact that religion played an important role in their daily lives.

The interviews and group discussions were based on semi-structured, open-ended questionnaires and were, when possible, tape-recorded. They were all conducted in Kiswahili (the national language), within a separate room in the researcher's or interviewees' house (thus ensuring the exclusion of family members and the public). Even though the interviews touched upon sensitive topics such as sexual practices, male as well as female interviewees spoke quite openly about these issues. The women were, however, generally more reluctant to speak than were the men, and some of them were suspicious of us, thinking that we wanted to spy on their private lives. It was only during the course of the interviews that they became convinced that we—as males—had no private interest in them but, rather, were interested in obtaining a general understanding of young Luo. While there were no significant variations in their answers that could be attributed to educational level, there were differences that could be attributed to gender, particularly with regard to the issues of pregnancy and trust. It is also striking to note that, at the start of our conversations, all of our interviewees declared that they regularly used condoms in their sexual relationships. It was only towards the end of the interviews that they became entangled in their own contradictory statements and admitted to having unprotected sexual relations.

LOCAL SETTING

The research area consists of several widespread villages in the Mara Region, which is located a short distance from the eastern shores of Lake Victoria, not far from the Kenyan border in the north. The area, which is about a two hours' drive from the next large town, is characterized by its isolated location and by its poor infrastructure. During Tanzania's socialist *Ujamaa* phase, the government neglected the area; and since the political and economic opening of the country in the 1980s and 1990s, the region has not received any support from governmental or developmental policy programs. Thus electricity and water, which were introduced by the Mennonite Church, are more accessible to the inhabitants of the tin-roofed brick houses along the dusty main road than they are to the inhabitants of the thatched, mud-clad houses in the surrounding villages. These people

often have to cover distances of two or more kilometers to reach the nearest water tap. The Luo, who settled here in the mid-19th century, live predominantly through agriculture (cassava, maize), fishing, and small-scale trade (e.g., the sale of agricultural surpluses). Cows are kept mainly for the payment of dowries and for slaughtering at funerals; however, they are also kept as a reserve for times of crisis. In order to procure sufficient money to buy clothes or to pay school fees, the Luo are increasingly blending subsistent modes of production with money-earning activities. Some people manage to find jobs in the local hospital or in local government or church offices. However, long periods of drought and a general lack of work and trade opportunities in the region have forced people, particularly members of the younger generation, to migrate to urban centers in search of jobs and alternative life perspectives.

The desolateness of the region is mirrored by the seemingly indifferent attitude of young people toward AIDS. Although AIDS is a serious and visible problem in the area, young people take a rather relaxed stance toward possible HIV infection. Only very few of them actively protect themselves against HIV (or any other STD), and only one young man said that he used a condom when having sexual relations with his girlfriend. Furthermore, he conceded that they used a condom out of fear of an unwanted pregnancy (he and she were, at that time, attending secondary school, and she could have been dismissed if found to be pregnant) rather than out of fear of AIDS. Another young man said that he had given up sex when he was “saved”⁴ and that sexual relations were forbidden until his marriage. However, most of the other interviewees (having admitted that they didn’t use condoms) simply said something like:

AIDS has become normal – like an accident on the road. Some will die, others will take the next bus. However, nobody will give up traveling because of the accidents of others.⁵

This statement makes it very clear that active protection against HIV infection does not play a prominent role in the sexuality of young people. Many young Luo advocate premarital abstinence but admit that, in their everyday lives, they do not adhere to it; indeed, they seem to have come to terms with the possibility of a premature death through AIDS. A comparison with youths of other sub-Saharan Africa countries shows that the young Luo are not alone in adopting this fatalistic stance. Despite the fact that they are well informed with regard to how HIV is transmitted, young people

in South Africa (Leclerc-Madlala 1997; Varga 1997), and elsewhere in Tanzania (Nnko and Pool 1997; Lebashari and Kaaya 1997; Matasha et al. 1998), have unprotected sexual intercourse with varying partners from as early as 12 to 15 years of age. This tendency among young Luo parallels the feeling in urban South Africa, where the hopeful atmosphere characterizing the initial collapse of Apartheid has given way to pessimism. In KwaZulu Natal, the strong presence and visibility of HIV has *not* resulted in an increase in safe sexual practices; rather, it has given rise to an atmosphere of resignation and an acceptance of AIDS-related death. Many young people see AIDS as unavoidable and themselves as a “lost generation,” and it has become almost a “fashion” for them to infect each other with the deadly virus (Leclerc-Madlala 1997).

Although young Luo exhibit no explicit readiness to willfully infect others,⁶ they are resigned and frustrated in the face of Tanzania’s social and political development. Although the peaceful transition to a multiparty system in 1992 evoked great hopes—especially among the rural population—the liberalization of the economy has led to a deterioration of living conditions (Lugalla 1995) and to increased uncertainty about the future. Here, as in other regions of Tanzania and Africa (Mogensen 1995; Setel 1999; Wolf 2001), AIDS—and the human body itself—have become metaphors for the worsening state of society and for the moral corruption of modernity. This sentiment, which is not limited to the elder generation or to religious groups, leads to a correlation between AIDS and the Luos’ failure to adapt to the changing conditions of modernity.

In the following section I describe how my interviewees perceived their changing life situations and how they related these changes to the spread of HIV. Although I focus on their moral perspectives it should be kept in mind that their statements on social change are not socially detached moral constructs but, like their reflections upon sexual encounters (which is the focus of the remainder of this article), are associated with very concrete, often emotionally charged, life experiences. Their experiences of the numerous deaths of relatives and friends, who often return ill from towns or cities, shape adolescents’ images of modernized urban and semi-urban settings that provide a risky and corrupt life. Similarly, while views of the present were often contrasted with views of the pre-colonial past—when there was “no disease,” “no poverty,” and “no inequalities between people”—this does not imply that the “real traditional life”

of the Luo did not contain conflicts. While social memory tends to erase inconsistencies or conflicts, it should not be interpreted merely as an idealization of the past; rather, social memory is a forceful instrument in the moral critique of the present. Social memory is not unchangeable: its content may constantly be contested and recreated. The following presentation of the Luo past should therefore be understood as a form of “constructed memory” (see Connerton 1989; Tonkin 1992; Dilger 1999:47–63).⁷

THE PAST IN THE PRESENT: THE SOCIAL AND MORAL CONTEXT OF AIDS IN MARA

Among the Tonga of Zambia AIDS is often associated with *kahungo*, a disease that is said to result from the breach of taboos and that symbolizes, in the eyes of the local population, the transgression of social and moral boundaries concomitant with the changing life conditions imposed by modernity (Mogensen 1995). Within the moral demographics of the Chagga in Tanzania, AIDS is increasingly interpreted as the outcome of “modernized” lifestyles and is labeled as one of the “many diseases of development” (Setel 1999:196–197, 133). Similarly, when my interviewees in Mara discussed AIDS, they related the spread of the disease to a present shaped by disorder and immoral behavior, and they deplored the loss of social coherence and stability. For the most part, they perceived AIDS as a social and moral category—as a metaphor for the moral breakdown of society, as a symptom of modernity, which is perceived as ill (Dilger 1999).

Under the influence of modernity and globalization, once unshakable truths have given way to transformations in social relations. Social and moral education among the Luo was once the responsibility of the family (Othieno-Ochieng’ 1973:15; Ocholla-Ayayo 1980:39). Young people say that today they are growing up in a moral vacuum and that their parents, who have been replaced by peers and friends, are no longer able to fulfill their traditional obligations. My interview partners frequently mentioned the role of advanced school education with regard to usurping the family’s responsibility to impart values and lifestyles. However, the disintegration of the family is, according to the youths, related to the “moral decay” of society in general and to the economic conditions of modernity. In the economy of the past, which was mainly based

on agriculture, the redistribution of wealth among the clan families, as well as the principle of reciprocity, was said to have been essential for the reproduction of the social order (cf., Butterman 1979:64). In an increasingly capitalist economy individual success and the accumulation of wealth have gained importance, and they conflict with former ideals. Thus most of my interviewees concurred that the younger generation's longing for a "better" life renders it discontent and, thereby, contributes to social disintegration. However, this longing for material prosperity is not disapproved of in itself; rather, as Setel (1999:59–65) intriguingly argues, it is the "excessive" character of such longing that is the recipient of social contempt. In a similar vein, the young Luo say that their peers have become morally corrupt and no longer want to share their riches with their (clan) families, as tradition demands. One young woman complained that today authority is based exclusively on the possession of money:

The world has been destroyed. Today, young people think that they know more than their parents do and they do not accept their parents' teachings. They are the ones who teach their fathers: *they* have become their fathers and the fathers have become their children. It is *money* that makes young people consider themselves to be more important than their parents. (Tisa,⁸ female, 19; emphases added)

This discourse on money and antisocial behavior focuses specifically on the role of young women in the process of social transformation. Traditionally, upon marriage, Luo women transferred to their husband's lineage and achieved their social and moral status as wives, mothers, and reliable workers on their husband's farms (Butterman 1979:45–46, 61). While this framework of expectations has remained basically the same, the changing personal ambitions of women, as well as the hardship of daily life, has resulted in women taking an active part in earning much-needed money for themselves and their families. The entry of women into small-scale businesses or trade is regarded with ambivalence. Most of the young men and women with whom I talked thought that it was not only acceptable but desirable that women contribute to the family's earnings. However, at the same time, they feared that an excessive "desire for money" leads to the neglect of traditional responsibilities, especially if women earn more money than do their husbands. This threatening reversal of former social hierarchies has led many young men and women to call for a return to the perceived gender roles of the pre-colonial past (Dilger 1999:100–108).

Within the context of AIDS, this discourse on changing gender roles has achieved new meaning. Among the Haya in Western Tanzania men are trying to regain control of women's interests and lives by blaming women's "desire for money" for the spread of AIDS (Weiss 1993). Similarly, my interview partners said that women, whether married or unmarried, are "greedy" for money and, therefore, have fast-changing sexual relationships. Both boys and girls contrast this very negative picture of modern female sexuality with traditional female sexuality. Traditionally, a girl's first sexual encounter was with her husband, and proof of virginity was a "matter of personal pride" as well as a cause of "social rejoicing" for her family (Ominde 1977 [1952]:41-42).⁹ Today, so these young men and women told me, girls have no "dignity" (*heshima*). In their view, girls use sexual relations primarily as a source of income, which they prefer to "heavy" or "honest" work. It is this type of thinking that results in blaming young girls and women—particularly those who work for a salary or who are involved in some kind of itinerant business or trade—for the spread of AIDS (Dilger 1999:111-120).

At this point it must be asked how my interviewees acted with regard to their own sexual lives. On the one hand, they criticized the effect of social change on conceptions of gender, power and sexuality; on the other hand, they are part of a generation that is said to "ignore" Luo cultural norms and that engages in the very sexuality that they supposedly condemn. In the following sections I confine my analysis to issues of sexuality and name the factors that, according to my interview partners, determine how young people conduct their own sexual lives.

SEXUALITY, PREGNANCY, AND PHYSICAL PLEASURE

Protection against HIV being seemingly insignificant for my interview partners, I wondered whether they were similarly indifferent toward pregnancies. Although they initially responded that, as with AIDS, "pregnancy is like an accident," they more often accepted condoms as a means of protecting themselves from pregnancy than from HIV infection. Yet the majority of these young people relied upon a mixture of local methods of contraception (e.g., herbs) and "praying" rather than upon condoms. One young woman who was attending secondary school in Dar es Salaam put it this way:

You know very well that you can become pregnant. What we are doing is praying to God so that he helps us. But every girl knows that she may become pregnant—every time she is doing this act. (Atieno, female, 22)

As neither girls nor boys seemed to take premarital pregnancy very seriously, I questioned them more specifically concerning its social meaning. The response, particularly among the women, indicated anything but indifference. They emphasized that, “in the past,” life was “better because young people didn’t have sexual relations before marriage” and the virginity of girls was carefully safeguarded by their clan families. In accordance with Luo ethnographies, they said that, in the pre-colonial past, an unmarried girl who became pregnant was to be married to an old man “for very few cows” as she had brought “shame” and “disgrace” (*aiibu*) upon her family (cf. Othieno-Ochieng’ 1973:15–16; Ominde 1977 [1952]: 41–42). And even today, they continued, a girl shouldn’t deliver “at home”; that is, before her marriage and before she moves to her husband’s homestead. This is because premarital pregnancies result in family disputes and the pregnant girl might be chased away from her parents’ home. For fear of being labeled a “prostitute” (*malaya*), they added, some girls have abortions or commit suicide.¹⁰

Young men, for their part, rarely feel responsible for a pregnant girlfriend or for their common child. In the majority of the cases they leave their girlfriends, often feeling “contempt” for them because, in their eyes, they are no longer girls of “moral integrity.” Both boys and girls told me that, while some young men pretended to sympathize with their pregnant girlfriends, inwardly they were “proud” to have fathered a child. For young men a child is a sign of “honor” and “fame” (*sifa*) because they have proven themselves to be “real men,” even if they admit this only to their male peers. The following comments from a girl still attending secondary school and two young fishers are representative:

They do not say it, but I see some of the boys: they take it as a matter of pride when they have made a girl pregnant. The boy will show off and say “I have a child.” But when he is with his girlfriend he will pretend to feel sorry for her. (Amini, female, 18)

HD: When does a boy show off and say “I have made a girl pregnant”?

Ba: If he has made a girl pregnant he will see that he is a real man who is doing real work. (Babu, male, 21)

Ma: It is as he says: even if we make a mistake, but we do it this way. But even the parents of the boy do not feel good if they see that their son is having sex.

Condoms are good, but the way young people love pleasure: they say that using condoms is like doing work for nothing. (Manuel, male, 23)

It is interesting to note that, as in Setel's study of the Chagga (Setel 1999:165), "work" is used as a euphemism for sexuality, and the use of condoms is referred to as "work for nothing." These young men and women frequently referred to the "productive" aspect of sexuality, which was described as the essence of sexual pleasure (*furaha*; or *utamu* = sweetness). This often emerged as a central topic in our conversations. Young Luo define sexual relations as an act between two persons of the opposite sex, and many define the "aim" of this act as male ejaculation. Atieno (female, 22) commented that "without the ejaculation of her boyfriend [she] had the feeling of incompleteness" and that, by "withholding the sperm" (i.e., using a condom), it was as though he "made fun of [her]" or even "showed contempt" for her. She said, "the sperm of a man is the aim of making love." Juma (male, 23), who, at the time of the interview, had finished his secondary education and was about to marry, expressed the same view when he referred to the "sweetness" of the "unhindered" ejaculation. Adoyo (female, 18), a young woman who earned money by sewing clothes, stated that "there was no pleasure in making love without the ejaculation of a man."

You know, the sperm is the end of the sweetness. If you come, the feeling of sweetness is greatest because the main aim of making love is to ejaculate whereto it is needed. This is the essence of pleasure itself. (Juma, male, 23)
A girl or a woman feels happier than about anything else in this world when a man ejaculates into her and when she receives the sperm of the man. But if you use a condom you cannot feel good. (Adoyo, female, 18)

Considering how strongly the sexual act is associated with ejaculation, it is not surprising that both men and women object to the use of condoms or to non-penetrative forms of sexuality. But even if both sexes have very similar conceptions of "physical pleasure," which prevail over fears of HIV infection (or any other STD), it is generally the male partner who makes basic decisions in sexual relationships. The male partner not only decides if a couple has sex but he also defines how they have it. My interviewees agreed that a girl could not force her boyfriend to have sex with her if he didn't want to, and only in a very few cases was she able to insist that he use a condom. This overt male dominance was justified as the norm for gender relations among the Luo, and it was held that men earn this right through the money and presents they give to their female companions.

GENDER RELATIONS AND MONEY: "SWEET WORDS" OR
"LANGUAGE OF DECEIT"?

Traditionally, upon marriage Luo women were expected to adapt to the needs and wishes of their husbands' families. Women acquired status within the family and, consequently, the right to participate in family matters only with age and a growing number of children (Butterman 1979:45–46). This social framework has changed somewhat; however, the values that, in the eyes of young Luo men and women, are constitutive of ideal gender relations have not. Both men and women consider hierarchical gender relations to be legitimate. It is a "state desired by nature," part of Luo "tradition" (*mila*), and contained in the teachings of the Bible. In accordance with the subordinate position of women, the Luo emphasize that, in sexual relationships, girls should be "modest" (*-vumilivu*). Furthermore, my female interview partners spoke about their own "weakness" and the "fear of offending their boyfriends" if they refused their requests. Amini (female, 18), who was completing her secondary education, said:

RA:¹¹ Let us suppose that I am your boyfriend. You tell me that we should use a condom because you are afraid of a pregnancy. But when we are in bed I tempt you until we have sex without a condom. Why do things happen like this?

Am: Maybe . . . I do not know what to say. The girl may agree because we girls are very weak. I do not know what to say: maybe if the boys convince us, then we girls become weak . . .

RA: Yes, but maybe we meet and you tell me you are tired. But then I tempt you and you just agree to sleep with me. Why?

Am: Because she is afraid to offend her boyfriend. She is afraid to reject his requests. She agrees so that he doesn't think that she doesn't love him. Furthermore, when you are in bed and you start stroking her then the girl forgets the danger and she becomes confused. She has only sex in mind. Later, when she is ready, she will remember the mistake that she has made.

Other young women spoke about the "pity" (*huruma*) they felt for their boyfriends. Atieno (female, 22) said, "God has created women in a condition of weakness." This weakness, she added, was the reason that girls yielded to the wishes of their male partners even if they themselves had to bear the negative consequences of their acts.

My male interviewees did not talk about feelings of inferiority or of the fear of offending their girlfriends; rather, they described the

strategies they used to convince their girlfriends to agree to their wishes. In their research on Mwanza, Nnko and Pool (1997) used the phrase "discourse of deceit" to refer to the tactics used in male courting rituals. Girls are often astutely aware of their boyfriends' deceptive devices and often "resist" and "delay" sexual encounters and the "deceptive speech" of boys often emerges as a central topic in the discourse on sexual relationships (Nnko and Pool 1997:87–88). Luo boys held similar views and were convinced that girls could easily "be cheated" through the use of "sweet language."

RA: Why do girls so readily agree to the decisions of boys?

Es: It happens because of their sweet words. Maybe they are talking and joking for a long time, I don't know how, but she rejects him. Maybe she says, "I want to use a condom." But then he tells her, "I am going to marry you if you become pregnant." Now the girl has hopes. But often it happens that she becomes pregnant and the boy runs away. (Esra, male, 17)

However, gender relations and the "eloquent rhetoric" ascribed to young men are not the only factors constituting male dominance in sexual decisions. In addition to "sweet language," money and presents also have an important impact on decisions concerning sexuality (see also Nnko and Pool 1997:87). Although my interview partners agreed that presents and money play a key role in sexual relationships, they regarded them ambiguously. In their opinions, presents and money are an accepted and even desirable part of sexual relationships; however, they are viewed negatively if too much importance is ascribed to them. Thus if, for a young woman, money or presents are the "condition" for the start or the continuation of a sexual relationship, then she is deemed "greedy" rather than appropriately "modest." It follows that it is through the "expectations" of girls that sexuality becomes a commodity and that girls are labeled as "prostitutes" (*malaya*). On the other hand, these negative meanings were not ascribed to the *act* of giving presents or money. Young men, in particular, spoke in a very affirmative manner of their role in this economic transfer, and they felt entitled to claim an "equivalent value" for their presents; namely, "unhindered" ejaculation into their female partners:

In these times, you even have to spend money to make love. I cannot spend my money and then ejaculate outside [of the vagina]. (David, male, 23)

Let me say that you have given money to a girl. Now it is up to you, the boy, if you want the condom or not. Because now you will talk about *money* and not about *love*. (Manuel, male, 23; emphases added)

RISK AND TRUST: THE "BELIEF OF DARKNESS"

Another point emerged in our conversations—a point that is essential with regard to understanding sexual relationships and the (non-)use of condoms. The interviewees distinguished between the types of relationships they had. They agreed that it is easier for both sexes to insist upon the use of condoms if a relationship is based on "money"; this is because if it is based on "love" (*mapenzi*), then the use of condoms is inappropriate. However, the final decision always rests with the male partner. My interview partners, including the young women, had a romantic conception of love which took slightly heroic undertones when they said: "It is better that both die than to use a condom." As most of the people I interviewed had stable relationships that they considered to be an important part of their lives (even though some of them, especially the boys, also engaged in short-term sexual encounters), I now turn to a discussion of sexual encounters within these relationships.

Both the young men and women agreed that HIV infection results from immoral behavior and that risk depends upon an individual's character. Condoms are associated with immorality and promiscuity, and girls (in particular) are suspected of having a "bad character" (*tabia mbaya*)—or even of being infected with HIV (which, again, implies bad character)—if they want to use a condom. For this reason, the use of condoms is a highly sensitive issue, with "trust" (*kuamini*) playing a significant role in stable relationships. However, girls admit that this trust may be misleading and that, even though they may agree to have unprotected sex with their boyfriends, they are afraid of contracting an HIV infection. On the other hand, they are just as afraid of arousing their boyfriends' suspicions that they might be "prostitutes," which would be the result of asking for a condom. Women find it impossible to address these issues with their partners, thus leaving it to the latter to bring them up. Rebecca (female, 22), who worked in one of the local offices and who was, at the time

of our interview, in what she perceived to be a stable relationship,¹² said:

I trust only one man and I will continue to trust him. If he thinks that we should use a condom it is good. Even if he thinks that we should do it without a condom: I cannot refuse this. We trust each other and he is the person I rely on.

The young men I spoke to had their own strategies for developing trust and protecting themselves against HIV infection. Included among these was the “observation” of prospective girlfriends’ physical health and, in particular, their moral behavior. Many boys said that they “had seen” that their partners had no other relationships, either locally or in neighboring villages. Tembo (male, 21) said that he fell in love with his girlfriend while they were attending the same secondary school because he “saw” that her character was “different.” Unlike the other schoolgirls, she didn’t “move around”¹³ and she didn’t want any money from him:

I trusted her because of her character. We were in the same school and she was somehow different from her friends. *They* want money from you and then you go with them. But my girlfriend wanted no money. She said that she loved me with her heart. (emphasis added).

Apart from observing the lifestyles of their prospective partners, many of the boys carried out “investigations” (*kuchunguza*: to look carefully; to spy) among their male peers. They relied upon each other’s opinions regarding the moral character of any given girl, and they exchanged information concerning sexual experiences.¹⁴ Many young men told me that “trust and love are the best protection against HIV.” Yet some of them were aware that they put their “trust in love” over their “trust in health.” Some boys called their readiness to trust a “belief of darkness” (*imani ya giza*), or a “deceptive belief” (*imani ya uongo*)¹⁵. Juma (male, 23) shared these doubts; yet, paradoxically, “trust” was his primary criterion for protecting himself against HIV, and he called for a “microscope for testing trust” without even mentioning the medical testing facilities at the local hospital:

Ju: The trust we have is based on our words. If we had a microscope for mutually testing our trust then we could have certainty. But the trust we talk about: often you cannot be certain and it is not real.

RA: Do you want to say that this is a wrong belief?

Ju: Yes, here I agree. You sleep with a girl and then she tells you "You are the only one." But one day you meet her with another boy. This is a deceptive belief and it is not real.

INCONSISTENCIES AND SELF-REFLECTION

In examining how young Luo conceived of AIDS and contemporary life, it becomes clear that they are highly critical of modernization and, in particular, of the role their own generation plays in it. Luo society, as young men and women understand it to have been in pre-colonial times (and as it is described in ethnographic texts), has vanished. The "bitterness of money," as it is termed by the Luo in Kenya (Shipton 1989), has, in their view, led to a loss of social stability and harmony. While age and gender were the categories through which power was attained in the past, today, they say, it is money that entitles one to make all-important decisions concerning one's family and society. Yet even though most of my interviewees condemned money as the root of an increasingly immoral society, unlike the Chagga in the Kilimanjaro region (Setel 1999:58; 61), they did not see external forces as being the main problem. In describing themselves as a generation striving for individual profit—an endeavor that goes against the traditional moral principles of the Luo—they conceded that they themselves played a crucial role in the process of adapting to modernity. It is obvious that these young people are facing a dilemma. They want to profit from the gains offered by modernity but, at the same time, negate these gains by contending that they lead to a general moral breakdown.

With regard to sexuality these dilemmas have become even more concrete (and more threatening) within the context of AIDS. While young people blame their own "modernized" lifestyles for the spread of AIDS, and while they call for a "restoration of morality," most of them have premarital sexual relationships beginning at an early age and, thus, are themselves the rebellious youths whom they blame for the negative changes consequent upon modernization. If one takes a closer look at the *form* of young people's sexual relationships, however, it becomes clear that their ideas about sexuality are shaped as much by traditional values as by "modern," or "Western," values. The central role of ejaculation in sexual relations is derived from conceptions of fertility and reproduction—not only the fertility of women but also that of men—both of which play a central role in many regions of Africa (e.g., Luig 1997; Talle 1995:75;

Varga 1997:55). The use of condoms conflicts with these conceptions of fertility; therefore, it is not surprising that both sexes have strong aversions to “safer” sexual practices (Taylor 1990; Mnyika, Kvale, Klepp 1995; Setel 1996:1176; Lugalla 1998:9).

However, even if both girls and boys have similar conceptions of fertility and physical pleasure, this does not mean that there is equity in sexual matters. While my young interviewees—both boys *and* girls—complained that gender differences have become increasingly blurred in contemporary Tanzania, their statements on their sexual lives prove the contrary: namely, that sexual decisions continue to be strongly defined by the male perspective. Thus sexual encounters must be seen within the context of gender relations, which both sexes represent as hierarchically slanted in favor of the male perspective. This is so even if money and presents are increasingly described as a girl’s “condition” for agreeing to sexual relationships.

It is through the “commoditization” of the sexual encounter, allegedly caused by girls’ “excessive” desires, that presents, money, and sexual relationships become morally ambiguous. If, on the one hand, sexuality is primarily conceived of as a commodity, then this leaves room for both sexes to address the use of condoms. However, if, on the other hand, a relationship is defined by its “moral value,” then people play down the risk of infection. In most cases the border between these types of relationship is not clearly drawn, and both girls and boys have trouble finding meaningful positions vis-à-vis the sexual encounter. Young women find it particularly troubling to cope with the various expectations and moral standards to which they feel exposed. They have accepted the fact that “modern” girls are to have boyfriends, who, from an early age, are expected to take care of their emotional and material needs. As Atieno (female, 22) put it:

You know, a girl like me, I have come here for school vacations. If I started some small scale trade, like selling bananas, the other girls would mock me. They would say: “This girl has attended secondary school. Now she comes here selling bananas. She is really backward!

But even if premarital sexuality is common among young women, they continue to be confronted with the very strict moral values prevalent among both the Luo in particular and in Tanzanian society in general. This becomes acutely obvious in the case of unwanted pregnancy. A girl who becomes pregnant before being married is not

only said to have brought "shame" on her family but she may also be expelled from school. Thus for many girls on Lake Victoria, as well as in other regions of Tanzania (Matasha et al. 1998:579–580; Nnko and Pool 1997:89), the fear of pregnancy is much more concrete than is the fear of HIV infection. Young women, even though they are aware that their partners' promises to marry them if they become pregnant are rarely kept and that unprotected sex may have drastic consequences for their future, often do not have the courage to openly discuss their fears. Most of them have accepted the fact that their male partners make the basic decisions and, through fear that their boyfriends might suspect them of being immoral, most are anxious to comply with the image of being "modest" and "not too experienced." Thus it is usually after their sexual encounters that girls reflect upon their behavior, and it is then that they become aware of having made a "mistake."

My male interview partners, too, at times took a rather distanced and doubting stance on their own statements and acts. They themselves mistrusted the rhetorical skills and "strong persuasive powers" ascribed to boys. They were highly aware that, in the case of pregnancy, they could not fulfill their promises of marriage, even if, according to Luo tradition, they were bound to do so. Accepting the actual material conditions within which they lived, many admitted that their "sweet words" were simply a "language of deceit." Despite this critical reflection upon their own role in the sexual encounter, they continued to adhere to cultural conceptions relating ideals of "masculinity," "honor," and "fame" to a man's proven potency. Furthermore, most of them continued to depend upon the advice they received from their (male) peers instead of addressing sexual matters with their girlfriends. This practice echoes the fact that, until today, a successful marriage among the Luo was considered to be a social, rather than an individual, affair (Othieno-Ochieng' 1973:14–29; Dilger 1999:70–77).

Considering these various dilemmas, it is understandable that young Luo ground their approach to HIV protection in a notion of "trust" based on romantic-heroic conceptions of "love." Within a context of instability and uncertainty, trust and love have replaced communication on health as the crucial elements of a sexual encounter (cf., Ahlberg 1994:234–235; Varga 1997:54–55). However, some of these young people admit that their strategies are not adequate protection against the threat of HIV and are increasingly critical of their own acts. They refer to their trust as

a “belief of darkness” (superstition) and to their love as a “love of lies.”

PERSPECTIVES

Modernity, globalization, and religious pluralism represent and produce cultural variety and differences, which render the ideas and convictions of young men and women increasingly ambiguous and inconsistent (Liljeström et al. 1998). In the previous sections, I argued that the lives and sexuality of young people in Mara have to be situated within a dilemma that is both caused and reinforced by the conflicting ideologies and values prevalent in contemporary Tanzania—ideologies and values that are exacerbated by varying AIDS campaigns. As the advice of the family often differs from the advice of peers, which differs from the advice of AIDS organizations, which differs from the advice of religious organizations, and so on, young men and women have a difficult time finding their way. However, while young people say that it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to meet their society’s as well as their own expectations, they do not regard themselves as mere “victims” or passive recipients of socially produced dilemmas. On the contrary, they are self-reflective, self-critical, and self-conscious actors (even though some of their statements are fatalistic).

As self-reflection does not necessarily lead to behavioral change, it is important to question what the experiences of these young people imply for the planning of future AIDS prevention campaigns. Farmer, Lindenbaum, and Delvecchio Good (1993) have argued that the spread of AIDS and the risk of becoming infected with HIV is essentially bound to structural forces such as poverty, class, and gender differences. In this view, women’s vulnerability to HIV infection can only be effectively reduced by addressing these forces (rather than by making prevention programs more “culturally appropriate”) (395–396). While it is certainly true that the weak economic position of women contributes to their vulnerability to AIDS, I believe that concentrating exclusively on women and their economic empowerment poses two basic difficulties.

First, this type of campaign runs the risk of reducing female sexuality to economics (thus negating the emotional involvement of women in sexual encounters); second, it may emphasize the powerlessness of women. As Dowsett and Aggleton (1999:51) have

put it: "Young women are not, by definition, merely 'vulnerable,' they are actively engaged in the production of their sexual cultures, albeit with fewer culturally approved ways of controlling their own bodies and exploring their own desires than men."¹⁶ The young Luo women whom I interviewed are not simply victims whose actions are determined by their economic status or, as Weiss (1993) and Parkin (1978) imply, whose lives are controlled by the very conservative rhetoric of male-centered discourses on gender and sexuality. On the contrary, they play an active part not only in the production of these discourses but also in reflecting upon their life situations and upon the values that shape them (even though they admit that their possibilities of acting are limited). By taking a critical stance toward how sexuality is lived in contemporary Tanzania, these young women identify themselves, in the sense meant by Foucault and Giddens (cf., Obrist van Eeuwijk 2000:136), as *reflective actors* and, above all, as *moral subjects*. It is at least as important for them to be morally accepted persons as it is for them to make decisions regarding sexual encounters. And, as is exemplified by those girls with a high school education and/or those who are financially secure, their longing for moral integrity will not simply disappear with their social and economic empowerment.

In emphasizing the relevance of local moral values I refer to earlier studies, which argue that, in order to understanding sexual cultures, one must pay close attention to sexual moralities (Taylor 1990; Ahlberg 1994). These may vary greatly according to one's marital status as, through marriage, sexuality becomes more embedded in lineage and clan life (Heald 1995). However, the case of the young Luo differs from those of the people discussed in these previous studies. There is more than one dominant type of local morality that is relevant to their views and behaviors: there is that modeled on the notion of "romantic love" (Ahlberg 1994), and there is that modeled on a cosmology that situates the moral person and his or her sexuality within a web of reciprocal social relations (Taylor 1990:1026). Yet, while it may be possible for the outsider to distinguish between different types of moral knowledge (be they referred to as "regimes" or "ideologies"), they can all be relevant for the same young man or woman at the same time and within the same context. Thus, when it comes to their sexual relationships, what is at stake for the young Luo are not only issues of love and pleasure, deceit and trust, but also issues of gender, honor, shame, economics, and, not least, protection against a deadly disease. How young people come

to terms with ambiguities and inconsistencies in their sexual lives is a topic for further research. By not measuring sexual behavior exclusively according to the biomedical paradigm some of the gaps between actual sexual behavior and what medical information we have regarding the spread of HIV may be closed.

Different types of cultural values do not simply vanish with the improvement of material conditions. Thus young people need a forum within which to articulate their needs and problems and to work out solutions to the conflicts they experience. AIDS prevention efforts that focus exclusively on structural issues cannot address these needs. The main lesson to be learned from the young people of Mara is that AIDS education is crucial to AIDS prevention as it carries the potential of opening up a space within which young people can express themselves. As Mogensen (1997) has argued with regard to AIDS in Zambia, it is not so much the disease (*kahungo*) itself that should be of interest to AIDS program planners; rather, it is the fact that people are actively engaged in the process of producing an understanding of AIDS and the world in which they live. According to Mogensen, it is this dynamic that should be at the center of AIDS education. For instance, Mogensen points out that, in participatory community theater, the actors use the spectators' concepts as starting points and develop solutions to daily problems by involving the audience (438). Similarly, my study of young Luo shows that it is not the *exact* content of their reflections that should be placed at the center of AIDS programs. This is because objects of reflection are subject to change (Giddens 1999:38) and can vary over time and locality, and from individual to individual. Instead of employing a static concept of culture, AIDS education should be addressing the conflicted and complex nature of the situations experienced by young people. Most of the young Luo are aware of inconsistencies and ambiguities, and that their behavior may have serious consequences. What they lack is the opportunity to articulate these dilemmas and to work out strategies to address them. Thus, while structural issues (e.g., the reduction of poverty) must be addressed in order to make preventive efforts more effective, the complexity of culturally shaped experiences must also be integrated into future AIDS campaigns.

This article should not be misunderstood as a critique of studies that relate the spread of AIDS in Africa to issues of poverty and "female gender" (e.g., Farmer, Lindenbaum, Delvecchio Good 1993; Lugalla 1998). On the contrary, I believe that, by focusing on how the

roles of men and women in sexual encounters are culturally mediated, these studies could lead to a more differentiated view of what is happening. Bujra (2000) rightly remarks that "risk" is bound to "gender" and that, as gender categories are socially, economically, and politically determined, it does not affect all members of a society in the same way. However, the fact that prevention campaigns focus upon women and girls leads to the neglect of male perspectives. Young men, who consider an STD infection to be a sign of "honor" and "masculinity," and who boast of it in front of their male peers (Mziray 1998:153, 163), are also exposed to pressures that put them at risk of contracting HIV infection. The readiness of young men to engage in risky behavior puts their female partners at risk. It follows that prevention campaigns that take into account the needs of young men can also have positive outcomes for young women.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Ute Luig, Jochen Seebode, Angelika Wolf, Heike Wildemann, Doro Braun, and the anonymous reviewers of *Medical Anthropology* for their helpful and inspiring comments and remarks on earlier versions of this article. I would also like to thank the Commission for Science and Technology in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, for its grant of a research permit. Fieldwork was conducted over 18 months in rural and urban areas of Tanzania (Dar es Salaam and Mara Region on Lake Victoria). The last two field stays in 1999 and 2000 were funded by the German Research Council (DFG) at the Free University of Berlin in conjunction with a research project on living with HIV/AIDS in rural and urban Tanzania. I would like to thank the DFG for generously supporting my research.

NOTES

1. The term "risk group" (as opposed to "general population") is still applied in AIDS campaigns, although this conceptual dichotomy may result in the stigmatization of infected persons. It is also problematic because the majority of a population does not consider itself to be at risk of HIV infection. This critique is especially valid for sub-Saharan Africa where the infection rates are very high and where the risk of infection cannot be reduced to isolated social milieux.

2. Another critique, which cannot be considered in this article, is the focus on heterosexuality in societies outside of North America and Europe. Especially in the literature on Africa, same-sex relationships constitute a neglected topic. However, even within these contexts sexuality must be thought of in a more differentiated manner than has been the case until now (Dowsett and Aggleton 1999:43).
3. In Tanzania the Luo represent a very small part of the population and are only marginally mentioned in ethnographic texts. Therefore in my analysis I refer to a few selective works from the vast body of literature on the Kenyan Luo.
4. Term for members of the Pentecostal Churches who expect from their adherents a high degree of moral integrity, especially with regard to their sexual behavior.
5. The image of the accident is associated with HIV infection and relates to modern life, which the Luo describe as "fast." As the fast pace of modernity is imbued with a sense of immorality, the accident becomes a symbol for potentially failing to adapt to modernity (Dilger 2000).
6. However, during my last stay in Mara (2000), the village population discussed the behavior of a man who had sexual relations with young girls even though the local hospital had informed him that he was HIV+. It was quite obvious that he willfully infected his girlfriends and that the longing "not to die alone" was gaining ground.
7. Furthermore, I am aware that dichotomizing "tradition" and "modernity" is problematic. However, the opposition between "tradition" and "modernity" is drawn by the Luo themselves. I use these terms in this analysis as emic categories.
8. All names are fictitious.
9. The issue of virginity is discussed in a similarly idealized way among other Tanzanian ethnic groups. However, there is growing proof that such memories are the result of an idealized cultural construction. Setel (1999:46–50) shows that, contrary to Chagga views, there were different types of socially accepted pre- and extramarital sexual relations in the pre-colonial past (albeit with a strong contempt for pregnancies that resulted from these relations). Haram (1995:37–38) contends that it is not premarital sexuality in itself that is condemned in the Arusha region; rather, what is crucial is *how* sexual relations occur: today sexuality has a place in public discourse and is no longer confined by secrecy and strong social taboos (see also Setel 1999:102–103).
10. In the literature on Tanzania I could find no direct relation between suicide and premarital pregnancy. However, research from Mwanza showed that 14 percent of the girls who visited a primary school had already been pregnant and that 30 percent of these pregnancies had ended with abortions (Matasha et al. 1998:575).
11. RA = research assistant. During the first phase of the research, he asked most of the questions.
12. Three years after this interview Rebecca told me that her boyfriend of that time, to whom she had become engaged, had married another woman.
13. "Moving around" as a metaphor for "having sex," and the moral values attached to it, is described in Dilger (2000:175–176).
14. I cannot say for certain if this discourse on former sexual partners plays a role among girls as, unlike in our conversations with boys, it did not emerge as a significant topic.
15. The term *imani ya giza* (*giza*: 'darkness', implying 'ignorance' and 'uncivilized state') bears strong reference to Christian notions of superstition.
16. That girls can be very active in the determination of their sexual lives is also shown by Wimberley (1995), who argues that girls in Uganda use "salvation" (*vis-à-vis*

the Pentecostal Church) as a means of rejecting sexual offers. Interestingly, men and boys respect this strategy and do not push a saved girl to have sex with them once she has refused to do so.

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