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Navigating Patriarchy: Women's Economic Agency and Social Subordination in Pre-Colonial Mara Society

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Abstract

This paper investigates into the sophisticated dynamics of women's status in pre-colonial Mara society. It explores their roles in managing the household economy, being politically excluded, and adhering to social expectations. By drawing from ethnographic accounts, oral histories, and cultural testimonies, the study uncovers how Mara women held enigmatic positions as crucial economic agents while being systematically subordinated within patriarchal structures. Despite their central roles in household sustenance through crops management, tobacco production, and agricultural labor, their contributions were consistently undervalued, and their social mobility severely restricted. Through examining proverbs, customary practices, and gender-specific taboos, this analysis sheds light on how traditional Mara society maintain gender hierarchies while relying heavily on women's labor for survival. The findings reveal the complex relationship between economic necessity and patriarchal control in shaping women's lived experiences in pre-colonial Mara society.

Keywords: Pre-colonial Mara society, women's status, patriarchal structures, economic agency, domestic management, tribal societies, Northeast India, gender hierarchies

Introduction

The Mara people, belonging to the Sino-Tibeto Burman family of the Mongoloid race (Hingthanzuala, 2015), inhabit the southern regions of Mizoram in what was historically known as "Lakherland" during the British colonial period (Zohra 2013). The arrival of European Christian missionaries, particularly Reginald Arthur Lorrain and his wife Maud Louise Ulander Lorrain in 1907, marked a significant transformation in Mara society (Sanga, 2007). However, understanding women's status in the pre-colonial period requires examining the traditional social structures that governed Mara life before missionary influence.

Early scholarship on Mara society often depicted it as a harmonious and equal society. However, this perspective has largely ignored the experiences of women in a society dominated by men. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the diverse roles and limited status of women in pre-colonial Mara society. It reveals how their economic importance coincided with systematic social subordination.

The analysis focuses on three primary domains of women's experiences, their economic roles as custodians of household resources, their exclusion from political participation and decision-making, and the cultural mechanisms that reinforced their subordinate status. Through this examination, the paper contributes to broader understanding of gender dynamics in traditional Mara society and the complex negotiations between economic agency and patriarchal control.

This study employs qualitative analysis of ethnographic materials, oral histories, and cultural testimonies from Mara communities. The research draws on traditional proverbs, customary practices, and historical accounts to understand the lived experiences of women in pre-colonial Mara society.

The *Sawvâ*: central symbol of women's economic role

The *sawvâ* (a small house constructed for storing unhusked rice and other crops) occupied position of central significance within the domestic economy of traditional Mara society, embodying the critical responsibilities entrusted to women. Far beyond its utilitarian function as a storage facility, the *sawvâ* served as a symbol of sustenance for both individual households and the broader community, with women functioning as its primary custodians (K. Siaza, personal communication, March 7, 2018).

The construction of the *sawvâ* reflected the gendered division of labor characteristic of early Mara society. While men engaged in physically demanding tasks such as procuring and transporting materials like bamboo and leaves from the forest, women assumed pivotal logistical roles, coordinating labor and ensuring the timely availability of materials. However, once the physical structure was completed, the *sawvâ* became exclusively women's responsibility, marking the commencement of their central role in securing family sustenance (K. Beipi, personal communication, March 9, 2018).

Women's daily management of the *sawvâ* required peculiar attention to detail and unwavering vigilance. They were responsible for ensuring that unhusked rice was properly dried, sorted, and stored to prevent spoilage a process involving consistent rituals of exposing grains to sunlight, monitoring their condition, and organizing them within the *sawvâ* to maximize efficiency and prevent contamination (K. Siaza, personal communication, March 7, 2018). The use of specialized storage tools such as *pâh* (bamboo storage containers) enabled women to separate and organize unhusked rice systematically, allowing them to track annual consumption patterns and plan accordingly.

Economic Impact and Food Security

The economic significance of women's *sawvâ* management extended far beyond individual households to encompass community-wide food security. Women's ability to store unhusked rice and other crops effectively determined whether families could survive seasons of scarcity, particularly during lean harvest years (K. Beipi,

personal communication, March 9, 2018). Their foresight in managing these resources positioned them as economic stewards whose decisions directly influenced household well-being and community stability.

The *sawvâ* was responsible for planning and managing the household, which was crucial for both their survival and the overall economy. But despite their economic importance, women did not get the social recognition or decision-making power they deserved. This illustrates that economic necessity did not consistently result in equitable rights for women in traditional Mara society.

Women's economic contributions extended beyond *sawvâ* management to encompass significant agricultural labor. While men engaged in the initial clearing of land for shifting cultivation (jhum), women participated actively in subsequent cultivation activities. During the practice of *lyu arei* (communal work rotation), women carried all necessary items to the fields, including clothing, tools, and prepared food, while also managing small vegetable gardens near their homes. (K. Siaza, personal communication, March 7, 2018).

The seasonal nature of agricultural work created particularly intensive periods for women. After the completion of fieldwork, while men engaged in hunting activities, women faced their busiest season of the year, collecting and stockpiling firewood for the rainy season and weaving clothing for family members. Additional cultivation areas called *liary* were typically managed by women to ensure continuous supplies of fresh vegetables and prevent scarcity.

Social status and cultural subordination

The subordinate status of women in pre-colonial Mara society was reinforced through cultural expressions that openly devalued female intelligence and capabilities. Traditional sayings such as *"cha-ia luh lei, chanô lôh lei"* (crabs do not have heads, neither do women have intelligence) and *"chanô sona khih hawka zoh vei"* (the wisdom of women will not go beyond the village gate) systematically undermined women's intellectual capacity and social worth (Hlychho, 2013).

These metaphorical expressions served as powerful devices for maintaining gender hierarchies by naturalizing female inferiority. The saying *"chanô dô nao"* (easily deceivable women) positioned women as inherently vulnerable to manipulation, while *"Dawhkiah chhie ky vei, chanô chhie ky vei"* (spoiled baskets have some use, as unattractive women would have men who would want to marry her) reduced women's value to their potential usefulness to men (Fachhai, 2009).

Women's subordinate status was also particularly evident in marriage and divorce practices. Wives could be divorced by their husbands at any time, while men could remarry as they pleased, but women faced the opposite situation and had to bear extreme or brutal consequences (Hlychho, 2013). The idea of adultery *(aphei)* was applied unevenly, while women were always said to have committed adultery when involved with married men and bear the condemnation of the society silently, men could not be accused of adultery under the same circumstances.

These double standards showed deeper patriarchal beliefs about women's sexuality and moral responsibility. Women who cheated were seen as the worst offenders, while men who did the same thing were not criticize or punished the same way.

The patriarchal structure of pre-colonial Mara society was perhaps most clearly evident in inheritance practices. Women had no rights to inherit property, even in the absence of male heirs in their families (Chawngthu, 2013). Chieftainship and property were always inherited through paternal descent, with clan lineage computed exclusively through male lines (Parry, 1932)

This exclusion from inheritance rights positioned women as perpetually dependent on male relatives, unable to accumulate independent economic resources despite their central roles in household economic management. The contradiction between women's economic responsibilities and their legal exclusion from property ownership illustrates the complex dynamics of patriarchal control in traditional Mara society.

Political exclusion and decision-making

Women's exclusion from political participation was comprehensive and institutionalized in pre-colonial Mara society. The traditional system of chieftainship, based on hereditary succession through primogeniture, was exclusively male (Parry, 1932). Women were routinely excluded from meetings between chiefs and elders concerning important community issues, with their absence justified by the same proverbs that questioned their intelligence and judgement.

The belief that women lacked the intellectual capacity for political decision-making was deeply embedded in cultural assumptions. The saying that "crabs do not have heads, neither do women have intelligence" was specifically invoked to bar women from expressing ideas and thoughts in political contexts. This systematic exclusion meant that women had no voice in community governance despite their fundamental roles in community survival and prosperity.

Even in families, women were often left out of important decisions. Men made all the major family decisions, and women were expected to stay quiet about things that mattered. This pattern also applied to decisions about their own children's marriages and futures. Women's opinions were never asked for or taken into account.

The institutionalized nature of this exclusion meant that patriarchal authority was reproduced not only in formal political structures but also in the most intimate family relationships. Women's economic indispensability did not translate into decision-making authority even in areas where their expertise and daily involvement were most evident.

Religious and ritual restrictions

Traditional Mara religion, centered on appeasing evil spirits while acknowledging a creator deity known as *Khazohpa* or *Pachhâhpa* (Sanga, 2007), steadily excluded women from full religious participation. Women were prohibited from taking active parts in sacrificial ceremonies, particularly during pregnancy or menstruation, when they were considered unclean.

The belief that women's participation would contaminate religious ceremonies resulted in their exclusion from eating sacrificial meat and participating in ritual activities (Parry, 1932). Whereas fathers of households served

as priests during ritual sacrifices, women were relegated to serving roles, providing tobacco and rice beer to male participants.

Religious taboos extended beyond formal ceremonies to encompass everyday activities and social interactions. Although there were many practices considered unclean for women, one example was walking beneath drying women's inner garments. It was also regarded as ana (taboo) for a woman or a dog to approach men during the wrestling match called *'Châpia'*. The belief was that their presence would cause the men to lose stamina and become unfit to compete against their opponents (K. Chakhu, personal communication, January 11, 2021). The comparison of women with dogs in this context both being equally prohibited from the wrestling area clearly illustrated women's degraded status in pre-colonial Mara society.

These taboos served as means of social control that limited women's mobility and participation in community activities. The absence of equivalent taboos affecting men revealed the gendered nature of these restrictions and their function in maintaining male dominance.

The domestic web: chako, pachô, and tobacco production

In traditional Mara society, women played a crucial role in managing the home, especially in a place called the *chako.* (Nolai, personal communication, January 13, 2021). It was the heart of the household, where women, mostly wives and daughters-in-law, spent their days cooking, weaving, and preparing all kinds of food. (S. T. Das, 1986). The *chako* was not just a practical space, it held deep cultural significance, representing the women's responsibilities in running the household. The *pachô*, a raised area above the *chako* used for storing firewood and smoking meat, was also mostly run by women. (Parry, 1936) They were the key to keeping food fresh and managing resources.

Beyond practicality, preserving food and ensuring long-term sustenance within the family was a symbol of authority in a particular space *chako*. Women's skill in managing the *chako* and *pachô* was highly valued and reflected her worth and abilities within the family. The roles of women in the *chako* were pivotal to the household's sustenance, as they made decisions concerning food storage and rationing. These responsibilities were indispensable to the family's survival during periods of scarcity. Women not only ensured adequate food supplies for daily consumption but also diligently preserved grain for future planting and stored excess for times of need. (Sidei, personal communication, January 9, 2023).

Women also played a vital role in tobacco production, which was a major economic and social activity. They grew tobacco in cleared forest areas or near homes, carefully dried it, and processed it into products like *karaoti* (nicotine water) and *châhnamei* (cigarettes) (Nolai, personal communication, January 13, 2021). These products were not just for personal use, they were also used to host guests and foster social interactions.

The social significance of tobacco skills extended to courtship and marriage practices. Every woman was expected to acquire skill in rolling and smoking tobacco, with their beauty and suitability for marriage closely associated with this ability. Men would assess potential wives during courtship by observing their tobacco-rolling abilities, with incompetence potentially leading to rejection (Itei, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

The Burden of Perfection

The case of Mrs. Dawkei illustrates the extreme pressures faced by women in traditional Mara society. Overwhelmed by domestic and agricultural responsibilities while caring for multiple children, including a newborn, Dawkei succumbed to exhaustion while tending a fire for smoking meat. When the fire spread and destroyed her dwelling, the community responded with condemnation rather than sympathy, holding her accountable for negligence and subjecting her to social isolation, divorce, and separation from her children (A. Thleiki, personal communication, January 9, 2023).

This tragic story shows how women's hard work was both needed and not respected, and even small mistakes could have huge social problems. The fact that Dawkei did not get support from the community is really different from how male achievements are celebrated, which shows how society judge people differently based on their gender.

Conclusion

The examination of women's status in pre-colonial Mara society reveals the complex negotiations between economic necessity and patriarchal control that characterize many traditional societies. In traditional Mara society, women played a vital role as food guardians, household managers, and agricultural contributors. Their skills and labor were crucial for the survival and well-being of their communities.

Despite the economic importance, traditional societies also had strict social rules that limited women's power in the home, kept them out of politics, and judged them harshly. These rules, like insulting sayings, religious beliefs, and unfair marriage practices, showed how societies tried to keep men in charge by making women seem weaker. However, women's labor was the cornerstone of their survival.

The pre-colonial Mara society sheds light on the paradoxical nature of women's status in traditional patriarchal societies. In these societies, women's economic agency and social vulnerability coexist in complex ways. Despite their economic importance, women were systematically excluded from inheritance rights and political participation. This highlights the persistence of gender hierarchies even in contexts where women's work was economically critical.

As modern tribal societies face changes from modernization, education, and outside influences, it's important to understand how women's status has changed over time. This helps us create interventions that build on women's traditional strengths while addressing the challenges they still face in moving up the social ladder and getting the recognition and protection they deserve. The Mara people before colonization show us that women have always been important economically, even when society did not always recognize or protect them from the harsh consequences of impossible expectations.

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