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Land and Rural Folk: Social Meaning of Land and Its Implications on Land Sub-Division in Kenya

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Abstract

Rural life and land in developing countries are inseparable. The value attached to land is so strong to extent that everyone wants to own land. The appetite for land has resulted in uncontrolled and untenable land sub-divisions in most parts of Kenya a phenomenon that is currently driving most households into a state of food insecurity and misery. However, how social value attached to land is influencing land sub-division in rural areas remains scanty in the scholarly domain. This paper explores the social meaning that people in Nyamira North Sub County, Kenya attach to land and how such social meaning influences land sub-division. Based on the findings, the paper gives policy recommendations on how to slow down the practice of land sub-division to foster sustainable rural development.

Keywords: Land, Social meaning of land, Land sub-division

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1. Introduction

In most parts of the developing world, land is a fundamental commodity that ensures rural livelihood. People attach a lot of significance to land (Auya *et al.*, 2021; Tafira, 2015). This research note is concerned with the analysis of social meaning that people in rural Kenya make out of land and how the social meaning influences land sub-division in the remote areas. A lot has been written on land. These authors have written on the centrality of land in livelihoods of rural dwellers, women's access and ownership rights of land, land and human rights and land sub-division's effect on agricultural productivity (Dery, 2015; Gilbert, 2017; Kimeu and Maneno, 2017; and Limo, 2016). However, these studies have not documented how social meaning(s) has resulted in land sub-division, a practice that has largely contributed to declining land acreages held by households rural Kenya. In this study, I was document the social meaning that people in Nyamira North Sub-County Kenya derive from land and how such social meaning has influenced intense land sub-division in the sub-county. The study contributes to the literature on land in two ways. First, the study analyzes social meaning of land, and secondly, how social meaning of land influences land sub-division.

The literature on land has had an international documentation but pays little regard to social meaning of land. Njunge (2020) noted that African culture has depicted land as an essential commodity defining peoples' living context. Njunge argued that in the context of African culture, one is nothing without land because land provides people a place to build houses and help a man to secure future for his children. Gilbert (2017) noted

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that land is central in cultural preservation in communities. Gilbert argues that land rights assume special importance for Indigenous peoples, without access to their land Indigenous cultures are in danger of extinguishment. That land is a source of cultural identity. According to Kymlicka (1995), survival of community's culture depends on protection of ancestral land. A central land as reported by Kymlicka, is strongly linked to the culture of a community and it's only through protection of the land that culture can be preserved. On land sub-division, Limo (2016) documents that land sub-division is instigated by cultural, financial and social factors. From this literature, there exists gaps on the social meaning that rural communities with limited land derive from land and how such social meaning has influenced land sub division in Nyamira North Sub County, thus need for this research.

2. Methods

The study was conducted between July and November 2019 in Nyamira North Sub-County Kenya. Choosing the study area was informed by available evidence that it is among the leading sub-counties in Kenya with pronounced cases of land sub-division that has resulted in household food insecurity (Mbula, 2018; and Kipkemboi, 2019). The study area is predominantly rural in which land is central to households' livelihoods. A systematic sampling technique was used to obtain a sample of 379 households from a target 37,699 households in the study area. The methods of data collection were questionnaire, focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Since the researcher is indigenes from the community, responses given from FGDs were translated from Ekegusii language to English while household heads who were unable to read and write were assisted by the researchers to fill.

Focus group discussions and key informant interviews were conducted in places preferred by research participants including churches, offices, homes, and restaurants. Data collected was analyzed descriptively (for quantitative data) and thematically (for qualitative data).

3. Results and Discussion

This section is divided into three subsections. First, demographic data for the respondents in this study are presented. After this results and discussion of two key questions, namely, what is the social meaning of land, and how has the social meaning of land influenced land sub-division in the study area.

3.1. Demographic Information of Respondents

The study begins by giving information about the respondents namely gender, age, and educational level.

Gender	Male	296
	Female	83
Age	18-27	8
	21-30	27
	31-40	65
	41-50	102
	51-60	106
	61 and above	76
Education level	None	16
	Primary	241
	Secondary	93
	College	18
	University	11
Total		379
<i>Source: Field Data (2019)</i>		

From Table 1, 296 (78%) of respondents were male while 83 (22%) of respondents were female implying that majority of respondents were male. In terms of age, 30 (8%) were aged between 18 and 27 years, 65 (17%) were in age bracket of 28-37, 102 (27%) were aged between 38-47, 106 (28%) were in age bracket of 48-57 whereas 76 (20%) of respondents were 58 years and above. With regard to educational level, 16 (4%) had no formal education, 241 (64%) had primary education, 93 (25%) had secondary education, 18(5%) had college education while 11 (3%) were university graduates.

3.2. Social Meaning of Land to Respondents

The study began investigating the social meaning(s) of land that respondents attach to land. Responses are given in Table 2.

Social Meaning of Land to Respondents	Frequency	Percentages
Continuity of Generation	102	27
Living Space	152	40
Collective Identity and Wellbeing	81	21
Cultural Fulfillment	27	7
Source of Pres	11	3
Others	6	2
Total	379	100

Source: Field Data (2019)

As depicted in Table 2, land has various social meanings to the people of Nyamira North Sub County. The findings indicated that 102 (27%) of respondents reported that land ensures continuity of generation, 152 (40%) land provides a living space, 81 (21%) were of the opinion that land provides collective identity and wellbeing, 27 (7%) land provides an avenue for cultural fulfillment, 11 (3%) is a source of prestige while 6 (2%) attributed land to "other" social meanings. Based on this data, it is evident that land has various social meanings and that no single social meaning is common to all respondents because none of the responses reached a 50% mark.

However, most (40%) respondents were of the view that land means a living space. That land provides a site that people call home and a place where people live. The study established a desire for living space is attributed to private land tenure. The finding was confirmed by focus group discussions where participants reported that the need for a place to call home has necessitated individual land ownership and that people derive a sense of belonging and independence from this typology of the land tenure system. This finding agrees with Kimeu and Maneno (2017) who established that land provides living space for people.

Continuity of generation (27%) was another social meaning that respondents derive from land. This is because continuity of family lineage is a fundamental aspect for people in the study area. The study revealed that parents in the study area would love their children to carry on with the family lineage because that is what defines their belief systems. This is because ancestral land is associated with continued relationships and associations with the ancestors of the present and past occupant members. During a focus group discussion, a participant noted that:

Ancestral land is critical in the continuity of generation. It is the only way that the family origin and future prospects depend. Ancestral land provides continuity of associations with ancestors.

(Male, 73 years)

The sentiments of the 73 years old focus group participant illustrate how ancestral land is treasured in the context of continuity of generation in the study area. Such social meaning of land is likely to influence land sub-division and generational land inheritance since residents need a continued relationship with ancestors leading to reduced land sizes and household food insecurity.

The study also established that collective identity and wellbeing (21%) is among the social meaning derived from land by residents in the study area. Since people have the same origin, family lineage, and practice the same culture, they intend to live in their original land. This is the surest way of the continuity of their ways. The residents of the area of study tend to attach utmost significance to their ancestral land because it is the only way they can ensure continuity of their culture and it is easy for them to be identified with the place. This emerged during focus group discussions where participants agreed the need for collective recognition and wellbeing has necessitated intensified land sub-division and inheritance since some residents of the study area are unwilling to move to settle in other parts of the country. This finding agrees with Delville (2000) who established that land is intimately related to the holders' identity which is paramount to belonging.

Fulfilment of some cultural practices (7% response) occurs on land. Land is among the most important sites where cultural practices are undertaken. The example given by respondents and focus group discussion participants is burial. According to the culture of respondents, it is a requirement that the dead is buried at home and most preferably at the ancestral land. This was said to ensure continuity with generation even after death as the deceased joins ancestors. Due to this, land is an important burial site for the residents of the study area. During a group discussion, a participant reported that:

According to Abagusii culture, the dead should be buried at home even though a person dies in America, Nairobi or anywhere. The body must be transported home for burial. Burying the dead at home provides a connection of the deceased with the ancestors.

(Man, 73 years)

The views of the 73 years old focus group participant illustrate how ancestral land is fundamental in fulfilling cultural rite, burial. The centrality of ancestral land to the culture of residents has greatly influenced the generational land sub-division and inheritance. The finding of land as a place for the fulfillment of culture concurs with Kymlicka (1995) who argues that the survival of a community's culture depends on the protection of ancestral land. It also agrees with Olum *et al.* (2017) and Dery (2015) who argues that communities have historically used land to perform various cultural activities and rituals among them burial.

The study also established that land is a source of prestige (3%). The size of land owned by a household head influences his social status in society. The study established that household heads with large land acreage are more respected than those with small parcels of land. Traditionally, this determined the number of wives an individual could marry because household heads with large tracts of land were presumed to be wealthy and able to take care of their families. However, with the continued land sub-division and generational inheritance, this is fading away because available land sizes are not vast enough to guarantee such high status. During a focus group discussion, a participant noted that:

Men with large tracts of land in this sub-county are respected and accorded high esteem than those with small parcels of land.

(Male, 77 years)

The thoughts of the 77-year-old man shows how land in the study area is associated with class and position in society. Men with enormous land are held with high status than those in possession of small land. The finding concurs with the work of Tafira (2015) who argues that land defines the social status and class position of people in society.

Based on the findings on social meaning that respondents attach to land, it is evident that the respondents derive a number of social meanings from land including continuity of generation, living space, collective identity and wellbeing, cultural fulfillment, and source of prestige among other meanings. However, of all these meanings, living space (40%) profoundly emerged as the major social meaning that people in the study area attach to land.

3.3. How Social Meaning of Land has Influenced Land Sub-division in the Study Area

From the findings on the social meaning of land to respondents as shown in Table 2, there is evidence that people derive various meanings from land. The study established that people perceive land as an avenue for continuity of their generation, living space, collective identity and wellbeing, cultural fulfillment, and source

of prestige among other social meanings. These social meanings show the significance people in the study area attach to land hence households are obliged to sub-divide land for children to realize the social meanings reported above.

Based on the findings in Table 2, the study sought to investigate how the social meanings of land have influenced land sub-division in the study area. The respondents were asked whether the social meanings have influenced land sub-division the responses were as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Social Meanings of Land and Land Sub-division in the Study Area		
Have Social Meanings of Land Influenced Land Sub-division in the Study Area?	Frequency	Percentages
Yes	202	53
No	177	47
Total	379	100
<i>Source: Field Data (2019)</i>		

As shown in Table 3, 202 (53%) of respondents reported that social meanings of land have influenced land sub-division while 177 (47%) said that the social meanings of land have not influenced land sub-division in the study area. Based on the data, most respondents (53%) argued that land sub-division in the study area is attributed to social meanings that respondents attach to land. That desire for living space, continuity of generation, collective identity, fulfillment of culture, and source of prestige have greatly influenced land sub-division in the area.

On the other hand, 47% of respondents reported that social meanings of land have not influenced land sub-division in the study area. Instead, they all reported that land sub-division has influenced the need for livelihood and independence. That land sub-division enables children to establish their families/homes and to be independent, a finding that featured during focus group discussions. In addition, some households may need land either to grow food for consumption or pursue commercial interests like selling or infrastructural development such as real estate. The finding was also confirmed by a land officer during a key informant interview. Thus, alteration of structures in society has resulted to change in that nowadays culture is not the only factor influencing land sub-division in the study area instead need for livelihood and independence are to some extent (47%) influencing the practice.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings on social meaning that respondents attach to land, it is evident that the respondents derive a number of social meanings from land including continuity of generation, living space, collective identity and wellbeing, cultural fulfillment, and source of prestige among other meanings. However, of all these meanings, living space profoundly emerged as the major social meaning that people in the study area attach to land.

Although social meanings of land have influenced land sub-division, it emerged that the need for livelihood and independence have a hand in land sub-division in the area. Grown-up children need to eke out a living from land, especially food, and require land to establish their homes.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in this paper.

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