CHRISTIAN SALVATION AND LUO TRADITION:
ARGUMENTS OF FAITH IN A TIME OF DEATH
IN WESTERN KENYA

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Introduction

Nyanza Luos could face extinction in six years due to AIDS, two leaders said yesterday... A one-day seminar opened by Provincial Commissioner Joseph Kaguthi was told that wife inheritance and certain traditional norms were critical factors contributing to the high AIDS toll among the Luo population.


The crisis is not Terruok (fornication) or Chode (adultery) but Golo chola (ritual cleansing) and Rit (family guardianship). Here there is no salvation, no wealth, no education, no foreign or non-Luo origin, no westernisation. Marriage had been sealed by bridewealth and ritually consummated on the nuptial night; and now, a husband is lost, wife and children are left behind, ritual cleansing is the answer. Any unorthodox alternative ok kony (will not do).2


Widow cleansing has turned out to be the most abused and scoffed at ritual and yet it was the most elaborate and solemn ritual among the Luo (ibid.: 12).

The challenge of AIDS is shaping arguments about faith and between faiths among Luo people in western Kenya, as it has engendered an acute search for meaning and scrutiny of beliefs and practices. At the same time, faith is central to people’s engagements with and responses to...
The AIDS epidemic. Many of the tensions about AIDS in public debates and in everyday lives are shaped by people’s commitment to different faiths. A core area of concern is the practice of widow guardianship or ‘inheritance’, in which a widow must sleep with another man in order to ‘cleanse’ the death of her husband and ‘open the way’ for future familial well-being and growth. Widow inheritance is a focal practice of ritual regeneration within what has become known as ‘Luo tradition’, and, in the age of AIDS, traditionalists regard it as being central to family as well as community survival. Yet for others, in particular ‘Saved’ or ‘born-again’ Christians, widow inheritance is a ‘backward’ or ‘heathen’ practice and the pernicious root of the AIDS epidemic among Luo people. This paper begins from the heated debates between Saved Christians and traditionalists about widow inheritance in order to examine the complex relationships between tradition, Salvation and AIDS in western Kenya.

‘The land is dying’: arguments about AIDS and about faith

Western Kenya, the homeland of the Luo, is currently suffering an epidemic of AIDS that developed in the late 1980s and took hold in the 1990s. My fieldwork, which centred on a village I call Uhero in central Nyanza province, was deeply shaped by people’s experience of AIDS, as here almost every extended family had lost loved ones or was nursing sick relatives, and people spent their weekends attending funerals. This experience of suffering, on both a personal and community level, is often referred to as ‘the death of today’. Many Luo regard it as the outcome of a longer history of ‘confusion’ in social relations, gender roles and morality. There is a strong nostalgia both for the loss of Luo traditional morality, engendered by labour migration and conversion to Christianity during the early decades of the twentieth century, and for the heyday of modernisation and upward mobility, the 1950s through to the 1970s. The latter period is remembered as an era of new opportunities, of free education and urban employment. Labour migration also sustained rural households struggling to survive on the produce of

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3 At the time of my fieldwork, which took place from 2000 to 2002, UNAIDS and Kenyan government figures suggest that 22% of adults in western Kenya were HIV-positive, probably a conservative figure; by the end of 2001, 1.5 million people had died of AIDS in Kenya (KNACP 1998; UNAIDS 2003).