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Ngecha: A Kenyan village in a time of rapid social change

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Naomi Muthoni, one of the pioneering women of Ngecha.


The University of Nairobi in 1970.

After Independence in 1963, Nairobi became a thriving, commercial capital city of about 300,000 people in 1970.

Many University of Nairobi students had been schooled in quiet, selective boarding secondary schools in rural areas.

Tigoni House was the headquarters of the Child Development Research Unit, near Ngecha.
Many large homesteads contained both traditional, round, mud-and-wattle houses and modern wooden square types.

Most Ngecha women still expressed the strong desire to bear at least six to eight children.

Children ran off to preschool or primary after breakfast.

The qualities for children that mothers considered “good” versus “changeworthy” were changing under the influence of schooling and new aspirations for economic success.
The nursery school teacher often led circle games and songs with the large, multi-aged group of children not yet old enough or financially able to go to primary school.

Ngecha schools in 1968-1973 did not have a strong success rate of sending children on to upper levels of secondary school and university education.

During the day, women milked, cut fuel, and gathered fodder for the cow.

Many women tried to raise extra cash as entrepreneurs.

Children were socialized to traditional values of hard work and responsibility through chores. Many girls aged 6-10 years served as nurses to their younger siblings. Boys would also do the job if no girl of the right age was available.

Children helped with all of the agricultural tasks of weeding and harvesting. Here they help dry pyrethrum, a cash crop.
Care of livestock was traditionally a boy’s job. Gikuyu folk tales often revolved around wild and domestic animals with distinctive characters. Proverbs and stories conveyed a different set of moral messages than was emphasized by the textbooks used in school.

Girls learned the skills of cooperation through years of working closely together with their mothers and sisters.

Girls carried water barrels using a tumpline.

Boys did not carry water female-style with a tumpline, but instead found other strategies.

Girls had most time to play and socialize in the late afternoon.

Boys had various “toys” to play with, often ones they made.
The mother prepared the evening meal, usually consisting of mashed vegetables, as the older children headed home.

In the evening the fathers also arrived home. Many of the younger fathers were becoming more involved with their young children as a result of changing household arrangements that brought them into more intimate contact with nuclear family.

Relations between the sexes were changing as young people gained more autonomy from parental control and were more likely to live in nuclear households.

Unemployment of the young men was beginning to be a serious social problem.

Young people interviewed at the University were of mixed opinion as to how to show proper respect and understanding to their aging parents, but all agreed that these were still important values in the family.

People desired to grow old in their own homes, adequately provided for by their offspring.
Economic, technological, and social changes were affecting the quality of life for older people in Ngecha in both positive and negative ways.

Many elders in the more remote areas of Ngecha location held more traditional values of marriage, religion, dress, and child rearing.

Yet Ngecha also contained some older men who had been path breakers in attending school at the mission schools starting around 1910.

Marriages of elderly people often evidenced a warm and equitable companionship.

Respected elder men (and sometimes women) participated in council meetings to discuss village affairs, but the old kiama of former times no longer functioned as before.

Older women hoped and expected to stay actively involved with their grandchildren as long as their health permitted.
Grandfathers also enjoyed time with their grandchildren.

However, old men who had young wives and many children still to educate found this to be a burden.

Some women who were part of the original study in 1968 to 1973 participated in a focus group discussion led by Professor Kimani (far right).

Since Ngecha does not have access to much running water, bore holes provide a common source of water. Water is often brought by donkey carts for a small fee.

Most houses today are built with iron sheet roofing and timber walls, but in the background is seen a rarer, more expensive house built of stone walls and tile roofing.

Families keep cows to produce milk for sale. They usually do not have enough land to pasture them and so raise them with zero-grazing.
Today the community is best known as the thriving center of the Ngecha Arts Association. Shine Tani was born in Ngecha in 1967.

Beatrice Njoki Kimemia, born in Ngecha in 1972, is one of the few known women painters of Kenya.

“House” (with Todd Shaffer) also lives and paints in Ngecha, seeking to portray current life.

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