

**The Cultural Significance of Widowhood:  
Widow Inheritance and the Position of Luo Widows in the 1989 Kenya Census**

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## **Abstract**

This paper uses 1989 Kenya census data and local studies to explore the cultural context of widowhood among the Luo ethnic group and confront the stereotype that widows are elderly, celibate, nonproductive dependents. This seemingly straightforward analysis is complicated by a discrepancy between the census categories of marital status and their local meaning for Luo women, where most Luo widows are inherited. The paper asks two important questions regarding how the position of Luo widows is captured in the Kenyan 1989 national census. First, how are inherited widows designated by marital status in the census? Most observers assume that a widow who has been inherited will be designated as “married”, although they could be designated as “widowed” according to the emic meaning of marriage. We attempt to answer this question by using information on child orphanage to tease out inherited widows from categories of married and widowed women. Second, how do widows’ demographic and socioeconomic positions compare with married women and how do inherited and current widows’ positions differ? To answer this question, we utilize data on fertility, education, residence, employment, and housing. Our findings suggest that widows’ socioeconomic position is worse than married women’s, while simultaneously they manage their own households and have more resident children to care for. Inherited widows appear to be in a better position than current widows overall, with higher education and labor force participation. Nevertheless, inherited widows have similar levels of inferior housing and more resident children than current widows. This paper hopes to contribute to the literature on the position of widows in sub-Saharan Africa. It also highlights how census categories may not conform to local interpretations of household relationships and structures and therefore may not accurately illuminate the social reality of specific contexts.

## **Introduction**

Feminist researchers have long noted that women are often overlooked: their social and economic contributions are marginalized and their poor positions in health and society are often sidelined to more “mainstream” interest in male authority and welfare. In particular, widows have been a neglected category in studies—including many feminist ones—perhaps because they are believed to be elderly and celibate, cared for by other family members, and contribute little to household production (Potash 1986a).

A closer look at widows in Africa paints a very different picture of these women. As male mortality was and remains higher than in many industrialized countries and age differences between spouses was often large, more women are widowed and at younger ages than their Western counterparts. Social institutions arose to deal with this frequent occurrence, including widow inheritance, where a widow is inherited by one of her husband’s brothers or other close male relative. Inheritance did not offer the same level of companionship and support as marriage did, however, and widows often took on an even larger role in their families’ welfare (Potash 1986b). Young widows, in particular, remained active productively and reproductively: many took over as household heads raising their children, worked their husbands’ land, and continued childbearing.

Appreciation for this expanded view of widowhood has been promoted mostly through ethnographic studies of widows in particular contexts. A merger of these local studies of widowhood with large data sets, such as African censuses, could illuminate a more comprehensive picture of the demographic and socioeconomic position of widows. As noted, widows make up a significant demographic category in sub-Saharan Africa, and their numbers are likely to increase greatly as a result of the continuing HIV/AIDS epidemic (Adetunji and Oni 1999). Therefore, further information on widows is especially relevant to addressing persistent gender inequalities in development and health and will contribute to better informed policymaking with respect to all women in Africa.

This paper is part of a larger project that focuses on widows among the Luo of Kenya, an ethnic group whose social and medical institutions the author has made a subject of study. Using Kenya census data from 1989, we aim to examine patterns of widow residence and childbearing, as well as their socioeconomic characteristics, such as education and employment. At first glance, this analysis of Luo widows appears to be straightforward. Further investigation reveals a discrepancy between the census categories of marital status and their local meaning for Luo women, however. This discrepancy makes a comprehensive investigation of widowhood problematic.

In the Kenya census, marital status categories attempt to draw a simple distinction between those who are currently single, married (monogamous or polygamous), divorced, separated, or widowed. The census does not include questions about widow inheritance. As widow inheritance is such a common practice and maintains a great deal of cultural significance among the Luo, we would like to ascertain how inherited widows are designated by marital status in the census. Most observers assume that a widow who has been inherited will be designated as “married,” where a relationship with the inheritor is thought of as remarriage, and he is her new social and sexual partner

(Adetunji and Oni 1999, Potash 1986a). In contrast, inherited widows could be designated as “widowed,” as inheritors are not exactly new husbands and the relationship is not equivalent to a marital union. Without explicit instructions for enumerators to elaborate on the definition of marital status and how inherited widows should be recorded, the interpretation of marital status is left to the respondent.

The paper asks two important questions regarding how the position of Luo widows is captured in the Kenyan 1989 national census. First, how are inherited widows designated by marital status in the census? Second, how do widows’ demographic and socioeconomic positions compare with married women, and how do inherited and current widows’ positions differ? The first question will be answered by using information on child orphanage to tease out inherited widows from categories of married and widowed women. The second question utilizes data on fertility, education, residence, employment, and housing to compare the new categories of widowed and currently married women.

Implementation of decennial censuses in Kenya is part of a global movement to enumerate national populations and gather aggregate information on economic and social development. Similar census questionnaires and data collection procedures have been adopted in many countries, supported by foreign technical and financial assistance. While national census bureaus have modified questions to reflect their indigenous structures and particular interests, some questions nevertheless remain standard, despite vast differences in local meanings.

This virtual conference on African households, and the African Census Analysis Project more generally, seek to find situations where national census data can be leveraged to better understand residence and family structures. They also seek to uncover cases where anthropological and other local evidence may not be reflected in census data. This paper hopes to contribute to the literature on the position of widows in sub-Saharan Africa. It also highlights how census categories—which may appear quite straightforward to many observers—may not conform to local interpretations of household relationships and structures and therefore may not accurately illuminate the social reality of specific contexts.

## **Background**

A brief description of the Luo social structure and institution of widow inheritance provides a background to understanding the social and economic position of Luo widows. Because we are interested in locating inherited widows from the categories of marital status in the census, the resemblance of widow inheritance to marriage is particularly significant.

The Luo in Kenya are of Nilotic origin and migrated south into Kenya from Egypt and Sudan, via Uganda, over a period from approximately 1500-1800 AD (Ogot 1967). The Luo are one of the largest ethnic groups in Kenya,

numbering approximately three million in 1999 (Daily Nation 2000), and they reside primarily in Nyanza Province in southwestern Kenya.

The Luo social structure shows a gendered division of roles and responsibilities. Luos are patrilineal and patrilocal, such that inheritance and residence is centered on the male lineage, and men are the major decisionmakers and controllers of property and wealth. Upon marriage, husbands and families exchange bride wealth for the reproductive and productive capabilities of women (Cohen and Adhiambo 1989, Okeyo 1980, Ocholla-Ayayo 1976, Ndisi 1974, Blount 1973). Polygamy is also practiced, and 24.3 percent of ever-married Luo women were in polygynous unions in 1989, according to the census.

Regarding reproduction, women are expected to produce many children and births should follow at regular intervals (Shipton 1989, Okeyo 1980). Women especially need sons, to symbolically carry on the male lineage (and thereby afford women higher status) and practically to support them in old age. Women are also valued for their productive capacity, mainly in producing food for their own children and husband (Shipton 1989, Obbo 1986, Hay 1982). The surplus from women's agricultural activities is also needed for other day-to-day expenses, such as clothing and school fees.

Increasingly since colonial times, men have migrated from their rural homes to labor camps and then to cities in search of paid labor (Shipton 1989, Okeyo 1980, Ndisi 1974). Thus, many women are left as "single mothers" to control their husband's estate while he is away; they are also responsible for the family's welfare, especially if remittances from husbands are infrequent.

Among the Luo, widow inheritance, or the levirate, was and continues to be widely practiced.<sup>1</sup> Some months after the death of their spouses, widows are "inherited" by one of their husband's brothers or other close male relative (Kirwen 1979, Ndisi 1974), thus continuing to ensure that women remain under the guardianship of men (Luke 2000). This results in a relationship similar to remarriage, as the inheritor serves as a widow's sole legitimate sexual partner. He functions as a husband in other respects as well; for example, the inheritor stands in for the deceased husband in rituals, including acting the father figure during the marriage of a widow's children. Luo widows are not permitted to formally remarry<sup>2</sup> or take other sexual partners in addition to the inheritor (Potash 1986a, 1986b, Kirwen 1979). Our fieldwork confirmed that widows rarely remarry. Traditionally, all widows were inherited, with only a few women rejecting the practice if they were past menopause and unable to bear more children (Potash 1986b).

The new partnership between the widow and her inheritor is not completely equated with marriage, and both parties maintain few rights and obligations compared to wives and husbands. Luo widows maintain a high degree of autonomy; they have a say in the choice of their inheritor and usually continue to reside in their deceased husbands'

homesteads instead of relocating to the residence of their inheritors (Ndisi 1974). They have no domestic responsibilities toward the inheritor (Potash 1986b).

Luo widows are largely responsible for their family's economic support, and they manage their own households and children, also acting in a manner as "single mothers." This autonomy does not always coincide with financial security, however. With continued rights to farming their husbands' land, many widows work the fields to meet subsistence needs, although they have lost husbands' labor inputs with respect to clearing the fields, plowing, and harvesting. The loss of a spouse decreases a widow's access to cash as well, which is needed for expenses such as children's school fees and land preparation in his absence (Potash 1986b). In addition, many widows we interviewed said that they receive starting capital or cash needed for small businesses from their husbands, and they had to discontinue this work upon their husbands' deaths. Potash concludes that compared to many married women, "widows may have an added problem because they do not have husbands in town who send them cash" (1986b:62).

The inheritor's primary responsibility is to his own wives and sons, and he does not support the widow economically to the same extent as a wife (Potash 1986b, Kirwen 1979). Inheritors may help the widow with plowing or paying for food or school fees, but this is not a formal duty and appears to depend more on individual relations between the couple (Potash 1986b). One of the only obligations of an inheritor is to build a house for the widow if she does not have her own.

As noted, the inheritor is the designated sexual partner of a widow, and the tradition of the levirate holds that any new children sired by the widow and the inheritor take the name of the deceased husband. As women need sons to support them in old age, widows are particularly interested in bearing sons with inheritors if they have not done so with their husbands. In sum, "the levir has few responsibilities to either the widow or her offspring. His role is primarily sexual. He is expected to visit the widow regularly for purposes of sex and procreation" (Potash 1986b:57-8). The established practice of continued childbearing with the inheritor provides the basis for our method of locating inherited women in the census, which is described in detail below. In short, women who have non-father-orphaned children (who are the progeny of the inheritor) can be identified as inherited.

This contextual background has shown that Luo widows are not passive women who are at the mercy of others to care for them. Indeed, widows have limited autonomy with respect to residence and household management. Inherited widows, in particular, often opt to form new male partnerships and continue childbearing. These choices are constrained, however, by the cultural expectations for production and reproduction placed on Luo women that continue throughout widowhood (Obbo 1986). Consequently, widows are not supported socially and economically to the same extent that married women are in Luo society, including those married women whose husbands are absent due to labor migration. Our findings below show how these cultural aspects of widowhood are reflected in the census data.

## Data and methods

This paper uses data from several sources to examine the situation of widows among the Luo of Kenya. The major portion of the analysis utilizes the 1989 Kenya census, limited to Luos in Nyanza Province, which is the traditional Luo homeland in Kenya. We use variables describing marital status, family relationships, including household headship, and child orphanage, as well as demographic and socioeconomic indicators, including age, education, fertility, employment, residential ownership, and housing materials.

### *Data sources*

In addition to the census data obtained through the African Census and Analysis Project, the author has been involved in several research projects in Nyanza Province, and data collected during these field trips are used for contextual background. The first study is the Kenya Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (KDICP), which was conducted in three waves from 1995-2000 in rural South Nyanza District, a former large district in Nyanza Province.<sup>3</sup> We use data from the third wave, conducted in January-March 2000, which includes a survey of ever-married women of reproductive age with detailed questions about marital status and widow inheritance. We also draw on semi-structured interviews the author conducted during the 2000 fieldwork with rural men and women regarding the traditional practices of marriage and widow inheritance.

The author served as co-principal investigator of the Study of Urban Life (SUL), conducted July-September 2001 in Kisumu, Kenya, the capital of traditional Luoland. This second project focuses on how traditional social institutions among the Luo, particularly marriage and widow inheritance, affect health outcomes, including HIV/AIDS. A qualitative component of the study focused on young widows and the survival strategies they adopt in response to the stigma of AIDS and decline in traditional community support. We use information gleaned from these interviews in this paper as well.

### *Methods for locating inherited widows in the census data*

Our major challenge is to determine how inherited widows were designated by marital status in the 1989 census. A comparison of widowhood status between the census data and local surveys reveals a discrepancy in definitions of marital status. The KDICP study, which sought detailed information on widowhood and inheritance in a rural Luo population, appears to measure *ever-widowhood*, or the total of inherited and uninherited widows. Qualitative evidence suggests that widows in this study continued to report themselves as widows—as opposed to “(re)married”—even if they were inherited,<sup>4</sup> and consequently the level of widowhood (14.2 percent) is quite high compared to other widowhood levels for Luos and other African populations. (See Table 1 for a comparison of measures of widowhood across data sources.) Another local survey undertaken by Potash (1986b) also appears to measure ever-widowhood, where 18 percent of married women in a Luo community were widows. The top panel of

Table 1 shows measures from the 1998 Kenya DHS (NCPD 1999) and 1989 census. These sources find lower figures of widowhood, and these levels are similar to other African populations where *current* widowhood is measured (Adetunji and Oni 1999). Current widows are those women who were never inherited or who are recently widowed and not yet inherited.

There is some question as to how inherited widows are categorized by marital status in the census and other surveys that do not specifically inquire about inheritance. As “inherited widow” was not an available response, these women may have been recorded as widowed or married. In light of the similarities in levels of widowhood between the census and DHS, we believe these surveys measure current widowhood, or uninherited widows only. Inherited widows, therefore, must be designated as married. This leads to our first hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: Inherited widows are recorded as married in the 1989 census. Uninherited widows (never inherited and those not yet inherited) are recorded as current widows.*

The practice of wife inheritance continues to be widespread today, particularly in rural areas (Potash 1986b). The KDICP found that 87 percent of widows were still inherited in the year 2000.<sup>5</sup> As a result, we would expect a high proportion of widows to be inherited in our analysis. This becomes our second hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: The number of inherited widows is a substantial proportion of ever widows.*

We have no information on inheritance decisions made by widows according to the census data. Nevertheless, based on cultural knowledge of Luo widow residence and childbearing, we can locate inherited widows from information on marital status, household headship, child residence, and child orphanage. Following is a description of the analysis undertaken to locate inherited widows in the 1989 census.<sup>6</sup>

A woman must have been married to become a widow. Therefore, in order to locate inherited widows, our analysis concentrates on two groups of women in the census: current widows and currently married women (both of which are age 15 and older). Currently married women (including separated women) are at risk of widowhood and are referred to as “nonwidows” in this paper. Divorced women are left out of the analysis, as they are not at risk of being widowed.<sup>7</sup>

Our main method of locating inherited widows is by examining the orphanhood status of women’s own children. Since information on orphanhood is only recorded for resident children, our method only applies to widows and married women to whom we can link resident children in the household. For the remainder of the paper, we use the term “children” to refer to own resident children and “orphan” to refer to a child whose *father* is no longer alive, unless otherwise noted.

Resident children may be linked to women who are household heads as well as spouses of household heads, and we analyze the orphanhood status of these women in turn. First, household headship is an important characteristic of inherited widows. According to custom, most Luo widows continue to live in their husband's homestead and do not reside with the inheritor. This is revealed in the data, which show that almost 88 percent of current widows are household heads (see Table 2). Thus, many of the uninherited widows we locate should be household heads.

Analysis of the orphanhood status of all own resident children is carried out for both widow and nonwidow household heads. Nonwidows who have at least one resident child who is orphaned are likely to be inherited, as these children were born to the union of the woman and her late husband. If nonwidows have additional children who are not orphaned, these are likely to be the progeny of the inheritor. If all children have living fathers, these nonwidows are likely to be married household heads whose husbands have migrated.<sup>8</sup>

Although our hypothesis states that no currently widowed women will be inherited, we nevertheless check the orphanhood status of the children of women designated as widow household heads. Widows who have at least one resident child who is not orphaned are likely to be inherited. Any children born from the union with the deceased husband will be recorded as orphaned at the time of the census. Thus, if all children are orphaned, we assume the widow has not been inherited because she has not continued childbearing with the inheritor. If all children or at least one child has a living father, then we assume they are likely to be the progeny of the inheritor.

Our second analysis of own resident children involves resident spouses of monogamous male household heads in order to include widows who have moved into the households of their inheritors. Because children are designated as sons or daughters of the household head and not of the household head's spouse, we must limit our analysis to resident spouses; because children cannot be linked to a particular wife in the household, we must also limit the examination to spouses of monogamous male household heads. In this way, we ensure that resident children of the household head are also the children of the resident spouse. This may not be the case, however, if one of a man's wives has died (either a polygamous wife or a former wife) and the present wife/widow is taking care of her children; the present spouse would appear as the mother of the resident children. Therefore, we limit this analysis further to households that have non-mother-orphaned resident children. Analysis of the orphanhood status of the children of these female spouses is similar to nonwidows: those with at least one resident child who is orphaned are likely to be inherited. These women reside with men who have no present spouse other than the widow.

Several assumptions accompany our method of using child orphanage to locate inherited widows in the census data. First, we assume that a widow was married to the deceased father of her children. If she was not married to him, she was never at risk of widowhood, although she will be designated as an inherited widow in our analysis. This assumption leads to a possible small overestimate in the number of inherited widows. Second, we assume that all inherited women have own resident surviving children. This is surely a strong limitation, as older inherited women may no longer have children at home, particularly since many sons migrate in search of wage labor (Potash 1986b).

In addition, very young inherited women may not have begun childbearing. Third, all inherited widows have sired children with their inheritors and only with inheritors, and these children are alive. Again, this is a strong limitation. Older inherited women may be passed childbearing age and will bear no more children; younger inherited women may not have begun childbearing with the inheritor.<sup>9</sup> Fourth, we assume all inheritor fathers are alive. If this were not the case, the census figure on current widows would be an underestimate, and our calculation of inherited widows would be an underestimate as well. The last three assumptions could lead to large underestimates of the number of inherited widows in the census data.

#### *Methods for comparing widows and other groups of women*

The second part of our study examines the characteristics of widows (inherited and current) and married women. First, we compare figures on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of widows with those of currently married women using chi-squared tests. Here, the women found to be inherited widows are added to the women designated as current widows in the census to give a measure of ever-widowhood. This comparison allows us to assess the position of women once they have become widowed, regardless of inheritance. In an effort to compare more similar groups, we then narrow the categories of widowed and married women to include only those who are household heads with resident children. This is akin to looking at the characteristics of “single mothers”, i.e., those women who are caring for a family in the absence of a male head.<sup>10</sup> Here, inherited widows who were located from the category of resident spouses of monogamous male household heads are not included, as they are not considered household heads themselves.

A second set of comparisons uses the same characteristics but contrasts our newly constructed category of inherited widows with those designated as current widows in the census. Again, in an effort to examine the positions of more similar groups, we make the same comparison including only those widows who are household heads with resident children. This is also akin to comparing groups of single mothers.

### **Findings**

#### *Locating inherited widows in the census data*

The results of our attempts to locate inherited widows are found in Table 3. Column 1 examines the orphanhood status of resident children in households headed by currently married women. Of all the “married” or nonwidow household heads, 13.0 percent have children who are all orphaned, and therefore they may be labeled as inherited. This is a situation where all children were sired by the deceased husband and no more children have been born with the present “husband” or inheritor. Another 2.1 percent of nonwidows have a combination of children who are and are not orphaned. Here, a woman may have had children before widowhood and continued childbearing with the “husband” or inheritor. In total, 15.1 percent of nonwidows (787 women) are inherited widows. This result confirms our first hypothesis that inherited widows are recorded as married in the census data.

Column 2 reveals the orphanhood status of resident children of widow household heads. Inherited widows are those with at least one child not orphaned. Of all widows, 8.3 percent have a combination of children who are and are not orphaned. This is a situation where a widow had children before widowhood and also bore children after widowhood, the progeny of the inheritor. Another 8.1 percent have all children not orphaned. This is a situation where a nulliparous woman was widowed and all the resident children are those of the inheritor. In total, 16.4 percent of widows (201 women) are inherited under these conditions. This result fails to support our first hypothesis where we suggest that current widows are only those uninherited. Here, we have located inherited widows among the category of current widows.

Column 3 in Table 3 shows the orphanhood status of children of resident spouses of monogamous male household heads. In this case, inherited widows are designated by the same conditions as the “married” women (nonwidows) above, where at least one child is orphaned. Of all of these spouses, 0.7 percent have children who are all orphaned, and 1.1 percent have at least one child orphaned. In total, 1.8 percent of these spouses (124 women) may be recorded as inherited.

In total, our analysis located 1112 inherited widows, which is 30.7 percent of all widows. This level is much lower than we expected in our second hypothesis. We expected the proportion of inherited widows would approach 87 percent, which was found in the KDICP data. This finding could result from the limitations of the analysis. Our analysis did not include women who are neither household heads nor resident spouses of monogamous men. For example, if an inherited widow lives with a monogamous man and he is therefore designated as polygamous in the census,<sup>11</sup> this widow will not be included in our analysis and cannot be added to the group of inherited women. We believe these cases are relatively rare, however, and we have located most of the potentially inherited widows based on their household headship and resident spouse status. A greater number of inherited widows were not located because they have no resident children or no additional children with the inheritor.

In sum, our findings support and reject our first hypothesis with respect to how inherited widows are designated in the census. In confirmation of the hypothesis, we found inherited widows among those designated as married. These women can be added to the number of current widows to indicate the level of ever-widowhood. Contrary to our hypothesis, we did find inherited widows among the group of women who are designated as current widows. Thus, widowhood in the census is not a true measure of current widowhood, but is an overestimate.<sup>12</sup>

Together, these findings suggest that there is no systematic labeling of widows according to marital status in the census. In other words, inherited widows are not specified as always “widowed” nor are they specified as always “married.” This finding, combined with the fact that our analysis was limited, such that we could not locate all women who are inherited using our method of child orphanhood, suggests that the cultural category of inherited widow is not accurately obtained by analyzing census data.

Our findings also have implications for measuring ever-widowhood. Overall, our analysis locates 1112 women who may be labeled inherited widows. We can also add these women to the number of current widows in the census for a measure of ever-widowhood. Returning to Table 1, the bottom panel shows the figures for ever-widowhood, which are higher than the corresponding figures for current widowhood. Surprisingly, the census figure for widows as a percent of women of reproductive age reveals that one in six women are widows (15.5 percent). This is a large figure compared to the common assumption that widowhood is relatively rare.

Comparing the findings on ever-widowed between the 1989 census and the 2000 KDICP study, we see that the KDICP figure of 14.2 percent is more than double the census figure of 7.0 percent. Limiting the census data to rural South Nyanza only, the level of ever-widowhood remains at 7.0 percent (not shown). The difference in these levels between the two surveys may be the case for several reasons. First, the KDICP data were collected 11 years after the census data. During this time period, the AIDS epidemic intensified significantly, with male infection rates initially higher than female (Adetunji and Oni 1999, NASCOP 1998). As a result, excess deaths among men, many of whom are married, would lead to higher levels of female widowhood, which would be reflected in the 2000 data. Second, as we have acknowledged, our measures are most likely underestimates of ever-widowhood.

#### *Comparisons of widow characteristics*

Table 4 shows the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of ever-widowed women (current and inherited) compared to currently married women. Columns 1 and 2 refer to all women; columns 3 and 4 limit the investigation to those women who are household heads with resident children, referred to as “single mothers.”

With respect to age, widows are significantly older than married women. Nevertheless, widows are still relatively young, with almost 34 percent under age 50, and almost 44 percent of single mother widows under age 50. Widows are significantly less educated and less likely to be living in urban areas than are married women; this holds for the comparison between single mothers as well.

Widows appear to have higher fertility than currently married women based on the findings for number of children ever born: 7.3 children ever born on average for widows and 5.2 for married women. This difference is found among single mothers as well, with widows having higher numbers of children ever born. These results are mostly likely due to the fact that widows are generally older and have been exposed to the risk of pregnancy for a longer period of their lives. We would expect *uninherited* widows to have lower completed fertility than married women, however, because women who were widowed at a young age have interrupted their reproductive life span by the death of their spouses. *Inherited* widows' completed fertility may approach that of married women, particularly if they were inherited soon after the death of their husbands and immediately commenced further childbearing. In order to control for the effects of age as well as education on children ever born, we completed a regression analysis

(not shown) and found that widows had 0.3 less children ever born than currently married women, a statistically significant result, as expected.

Significantly more widows (58.0 percent) have resident children in their households than currently married women (29.5 percent), widows with 1.4 resident children on average and married women with 1.0 child. Widows' children are also older than married women's children. Widows' sons are 18.6 years on average and daughters are 14.1 years. Married women's sons average 10.7 years and daughters 8.9 years. With respect to single mothers, widow single mothers have fewer resident children, with 2.3 on average compared to 3.2 children for married women single mothers.

With respect to the quality of housing materials, widows generally have inferior houses to married women. Widows are significantly more likely to have homes with thatched roofs, mud walls, and mud or wooden floors. Widows are also more likely to own their homes, whether they have constructed them or have inherited them, and are less likely to rent. Our observations conclude that rented houses are more likely to be permanent, well-made structures. Similar findings are reported for single mothers in Table 4: single mother widows are significantly more likely to have inferior wall and floor materials than single mother married women and are more likely to own their homes and not rent.

All women report high levels of employment, mostly in farm work, but there are significant differences between categories of women. With respect to widows, over 75 percent and over 81 percent of single mother widows are working. Married women and single mother married women are slightly more likely to be working than their widowed counterparts and more likely to be engaged in wage labor.

Turning to Table 5, we find the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of current widows compared to inherited widows. Recall that current widows are those who were never inherited or not yet inherited. Columns 1 and 2 refer to all widows; columns 3 and 4 limit the investigation to those women who are household heads with resident children, referred to as "single mothers."

Inherited widows are quite different than current widows. Inherited widows are significantly younger, more educated, and more likely to be living in urban areas than current widows. The significant differences for age and residence hold for the comparison between widow single mothers as well.

Inherited widows appear to have significantly higher fertility than current widows based on the findings for number of children ever born, although this difference does not hold for single mother widows. Inherited widows have 7.7 children ever born on average and current widows have 7.1 children. Controlling for the effects of age and education on children ever born, we completed a regression analysis (not shown) and found that inherited widows

had 1.0 more child than current widows, a statistically significant result. This result was expected, because the inherited widows we located had all continued childbearing with the inheritor.

Significantly more inherited widows (88.9 percent) have resident children in their households than current widows (44.4 percent), inherited widows with 2.4 resident children on average and current widows with 1.0 child. For single mother widows, inherited women continue to have significantly more resident children, with 2.7 children on average and current widows have 2.2 resident children on average.

Both categories of widows appear to have similar proportions with quality housing materials. Approximately one-third of inherited and current widows have solid roofs, and a little more than 10 percent have cement or tile flooring; these levels are similar for single mother widows as well. There is only a marginally significant difference in wall materials among single mother widows, with inherited widows more likely to have quality wall materials than current widows. Inherited widows are significantly more likely to rent their homes and less likely to own them, with similar findings for single mother widows. Overall, the findings on housing materials suggests that there is little difference in economic status between current and inherited widows, again confirming the perception that inheritors do not provide much additional economic support to inherited widows.

All widows report high levels of employment, mostly in farm work. Over 81 percent of both all inherited widows and single mother inherited widows are working, with 14.1 and 15.0 percent in wage labor, respectively. These levels are significantly higher than those for current widows, where fewer women are working (only 73.1 percent of widows and 80.4 percent of single mothers) and fewer in wage work (9.5 percent of current widows and 11.2 percent of single mothers).

## **Conclusions**

This paper has focused on two major inconsistencies in our thinking on widows and their categorization in censuses: First, we found that African widows, specifically those of the Luo ethnic group, do not fit the standard census definitions of marital status. We found that inherited widows are not systematically designated as married or widowed in the census, which can lead to false estimates of current and ever widowhood. As a student of Luo culture and its relationship to health outcomes, I have found that emic perceptions of disease and the body do not always conform to Western medical diagnoses and social designations. This paper concludes that Luo perceptions of marriage and its various forms are not always captured accurately by national census questions as well.

Second, our analysis demonstrated that widows do not always conform to the stereotypical image of elderly, celibate, nonproductive dependents. Luo widows are often young, independent family managers and providers with more resident children to care for than married women. This autonomy is coupled with less support from attendant men, however, which appears to translate into lower economic status, as widows are concentrated in lower-income

farm work and have poorer housing than married women. In particular, inherited widows have an attendant male in the inheritor, although he does not appear to offer much in terms of economic support, and his main contribution is to fulfill the widow's cultural expectation to continue childbearing. Current widows have no formal form of male support. Consequently, widows signify a large proportion of women who may be socially and economically neglected.

We also concentrate on "single" mothers with resident children, whether married or widowed. Widowed single mothers, and particularly uninherited widow single mothers, do not receive the same level of social and economic support from a male partner as married women with resident children. These households may be particularly vulnerable and deserve further policy and program attention.

A few final words about the present situation for widows in Luoland are warranted. The 1989 census data were collected at a time when the HIV/AIDS crisis was in its early stages. Recent ethnographic work that we completed in 2000-1 has pointed to the likely *increase* in widowhood as a result of the epidemic. Our work has also uncovered conflict among the Luo over the cultural necessity of inheritance and heightened perceptions that the practice is dangerous, particularly for men. It is widely believed that widows are infected with AIDS (because their husbands may have died of the disease) (Ntozi 1997), and therefore potential inheritors are rejecting the practice. Widows also fear contracting AIDS from inheritors who "move around" with too many women (Luke 2001). This would lead to a likely *decrease* in widow inheritance.

Nevertheless, Luos stress that adherence to cultural traditions is strong and widows in particular are under great social pressure to find an inheritor. As a result, widows appear to search for a man to undertake the sexual ritual involved in inheritance, which socially designates them as inherited, but then widows wish to have no further contact with the inheritor. This leads to a situation where widows may be inherited in name but do not receive the limited traditional support they are entitled to from inheritors. Personal observation finds that many widows are fleeing the stigma of AIDS and migrating to urban centers to search for new social and economic opportunities, which they find scarce and unrewarding.

Analysis of the 1999 Kenya decennial census data will shed light on the increasing proportions of widows stemming from these changes, particularly if fewer women are inherited and levels of current and ever widowhood change dramatically. The 1999 census can also uncover recent patterns of widow residence and childbearing as well as economic and social indicators of their welfare, which may fall even further for the large number of widows who remain uninherited. Much attention is already being paid to AIDS orphans; further study of the effects of the epidemic on the situation of their caretakers—often widowed mothers—can contribute to better understanding of the effects of the AIDS crisis on families. Nevertheless, smaller, more in-depth studies on widows and their survival strategies are needed to gain a sharper picture of the localized impact of the epidemic.

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<sup>1</sup> Potash makes the distinction between the levirate and widow inheritance, claiming that Luos do not practice inheritance. She states that “Luo widows are not inherited; it is the woman who chooses a consort” (1986:45). We continue to use the term “widow inheritance,” however, as it is widely employed by Luos in the press, publications, and conversation.

<sup>2</sup> Kirwen (1979) cites the Luo Law Panel, which writes that a Luo widow may also return to her father’s home to remarry. This option requires the return of bridewealth to the deceased husband’s family and a separation of ties to his family, which is not seen as a realistic option.

<sup>3</sup> Since the time of this fieldwork, South Nyanza District has been divided into several districts.

<sup>4</sup> It is very unlikely that widows designate themselves as “currently married” to the deceased husband.

<sup>5</sup> Widows are usually inherited shortly after the death of the husband up to several years later. Potash (1986b) found that widows choose an inheritor usually about one year after the husband’s death. Analysis of the KDICP data finds that the average time between widowhood and inheritance is 1.7 years.

<sup>6</sup> Widows’ relations with inheritors vary in duration. Many widows we spoke to explained that their relationships lasted only a few days, others years. Potash (1986b) records similar findings. Our designation of “inherited” widow applies to women who were ever inherited.

<sup>7</sup> There are few divorced women among the Luo (Potash 1986b, 1978), and they make up only 0.6 percent of ever-married women in the 1989 census.

<sup>8</sup> Some female household heads have male spouses resident in the household. Of married women household heads, 1.2 percent have a resident spouse. It is likely that these spouses are usually residing outside the household (for example, as migrant workers), but were home during the census enumeration period. Of widow household heads, 0.5 percent have spouses. These men are likely to be inheritors.

<sup>9</sup> Moreover, further childbearing by inherited widows does not appear to be independent of the sex of previously born children. As Potash notes, “apparently the absence of sons is a factor encouraging further procreation” (1986b:58), as widows need sons for old-age security. Thus, inherited widows without sons are more likely to continue childbearing with the inheritor. Further analysis of the sex composition of previously born children could test this hypothesis.

<sup>10</sup> As noted, it is possible for female widow and married household heads to have a resident spouse. In our analyses of widows and currently married female household heads with resident children, none of the respondents had a spouse present in the household, however.

<sup>11</sup> Several monogamous men in the KDICP study appeared to designate themselves as polygynous due to their additional relationship with an inherited widow.

<sup>12</sup> Current widowhood in other studies, such as the DHS, could also overestimate current widowhood if inherited women are designated as presently widowed.

Table 1. Measures of Luo widowhood, various data sources

Data source	Widows as % of women $\geq 15$	Widows as % of women 15-49	Widows as % of ever-married women $\geq 15$	Widows as % of ever-married women 15-49
Current widowhood				
1989 Kenya census	9.5 (N=28,475)	3.4 (N=22,524)	11.6 (N=23,393)	4.4 (N=17,584)
1998 Kenya DHS <sup>^</sup>		3.7 (N= 7881)		
Ever-widowhood				
1989 Kenya census	13.4 (N=28,475)	5.4 (N=22,524)	15.5 (N=23,393)	7.0 (N=17,584)
2000 KDICP*				14.2 (N=592)
1975 Potash study <sup>+</sup>				18.0 (N=~255)

<sup>^</sup>all Kenyan women

\*rural South Nyanza District only

<sup>+</sup>see Potash (1986b)

Table 2. Relationship of current Luo widows to household heads, Kenya 1989 census

Relationship to HH head	Percent
Self	87.7
Daughter	1.1
Mother	3.9
Other relative	6.5
Unrelated	0.8
N=2709	

Table 3. Orphanhood status\* of resident children of Luo women, Kenya 1989 census

	Non-widow HH heads (1)	Widow HH heads (2)	Spouses of HH heads (3)
All children orphaned	678 (13.0%)	1022 (83.6%)	50 (0.7%)
At least one child orphaned and one not orphaned	109 (2.1%)	102 (8.3%)	74 (1.1%)
All children not orphaned	4409 (84.9%)	99 (8.1%)	6605 (98.2%)
N	5196 (100%)	1223 (100%)	6729 (100%)
<i>Inherited widows</i> <sup>^</sup>	787 (15.1 %)	201 (16.4%)	124 (1.8%)

\* Orphan refers to a child whose father is deceased

<sup>^</sup> Total of shaded cells in column

Table 4. Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of Luo widows and currently married Luo women, Kenya 1989 census

Characteristic	All women		Household heads with resident children	
	Widows (current and inherited) (%) (1)	Currently married (%) (2)	Widows (current and inherited) (%) (3)	Currently married (%) (4)
Age				
15-19	0.5	8.1 ***	0.0	2.1 ***
20-29	5.4	35.3	6.1	30.3
30-39	10.0	24.2	12.8	30.6
40-49	17.9	15.2	25.0	19.8
50-59	24.6	10.1	29.0	11.2
60-69	22.2	4.8	17.2	4.3
70-79	13.2	1.8	6.6	1.4
80+	6.1	0.5	3.4	0.5
Education				
None	85.0	48.0 ***	81.2	52.4 ***
Primary	13.3	43.2	17.2	39.4
Secondary	1.2	8.1	1.5	7.6
University	0.6	0.7	0.2	0.6

Residence						
Rural	94.6	90.4	***	94.9	93.1	*
Urban (Kisumu)	5.4	9.6		5.1	6.9	
Number of children ever born						
0	4.2	7.5	***	0.9	0.6	***
1-3	11.6	27.4		7.6	19.5	
4-6	22.5	24.7		23.9	32.1	
7-9	30.0	20.4		34.1	28.9	
10+	31.6	20.0		33.5	19.0	
Number of resident children						
0	42.0	70.3	***	N/A	N/A	
1-3	44.8	18.3		79.3	60.2	***
4-6	11.6	9.9		18.4	34.8	
7-9	1.4	1.4		2.1	4.7	
10+	0.2	0.1		0.2	0.3	
Roof material						
Solid	31.6	35.4	***	31.2	32.4	
Thatched	68.4	64.6		68.8	67.6	
Wall material						
Stone/brick	4.2	7.6	***	3.1	6.3	***
Mud combination	95.8	92.4		96.9	93.7	
Floor material						
Cement/tile	11.2	17.2	***	11.0	14.8	**
Earth/wood	88.8	82.8		89.0	85.2	
Tenure						
Own/constructed	95.0	89.4	***	95.6	91.9	***
Own/inherited	1.4	1.0		1.6	1.1	
Rent	3.6	9.6		2.8	7.0	
Employment						
Wage work	10.9	14.6	***	12.2	17.5	***
Farm work	64.8	63.0		67.0	67.1	
Not working	24.3	22.4		18.8	15.4	
N	3621	19,640		1223	5165	

+p<.10; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; p<0.001; chi-square test

Table 5. Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of current Luo widows and inherited Luo widows, Kenya 1989 census

Characteristic	All widows			Widow household heads with resident children	
	Current widows (%) (1)	Inherited widows (%) (2)		Current widows (%) (3)	Inherited widows (%) (4)
<b>Age</b>					
15-19	0.5	0.6	***	0.0	0.4 +
20-29	4.0	8.6		5.5	7.1
30-39	7.3	16.0		11.6	14.8
40-49	14.6	25.4		24.7	25.1
50-59	24.0	26.1		30.1	27.0
60-69	24.9	16.1		18.0	17.6
70-79	16.9	4.8		7.0	5.4
80+	7.7	2.4		3.0	2.7
<b>Education</b>					
None	87.4	79.3	***	82.3	80.9
Primary	11.3	17.9		16.2	16.7
Secondary	0.8	2.1		1.4	1.6
University	0.5	0.7		0.1	0.8
<b>Residence</b>					
Rural	95.1	93.3	*	95.2	93.3 +
Urban (Kisumu)	4.9	6.7		4.8	6.7
<b>Number of children ever born</b>					
0	5.6	1.1	***	0.9	1.1
1-3	12.6	9.5		7.5	9.4
4-6	21.8	24.1		23.4	23.9
7-9	28.5	33.5		33.6	34.2
10+	31.5	31.7		34.6	31.4
<b>Number of resident children</b>					
0	55.6	11.1	***	N/A	N/A
1-3	36.1	64.4		82.5	72.5 ***
4-6	7.4	21.0		15.8	23.6
7-9	0.7	3.1		1.6	3.5
10+	0.2	0.4		0.2	0.4
<b>Roof material</b>					
Solid	30.8	33.5		31.1	34.0
Thatched	69.2	66.5		68.9	66.0

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Wall material					
Stone/brick	3.9	4.9		2.3	4.6 +
Mud combination	96.1	95.1		97.0	95.4
Floor material					
Cement/tile	11.3	10.9		11.0	10.7
Earth/wood	88.7	89.1		89.0	89.3
Tenure					
Own/constructed	95.9	93.1 ***		95.9	93.0 **
Own/inherited	1.3	1.4		1.7	1.6
Rent	2.7	5.4		2.5	5.3
Employment					
Wage work	9.5	14.1 ***		11.2	15.0 *
Farm work	63.6	67.4		69.3	66.7
Not working	26.9	18.5		19.6	18.3
N	2509	1112		1022	988

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+p<.10; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; p<0.001; chi-square test