

# Women's lives: childhood, adolescence, marriage and motherhood among the Ogiek of Mariashoni (Kenya) and the Kulango of Nassian (Ivory Coast)

ILARIA MICHELI  
University of Trieste

## ABSTRACT

*In traditional rural Africa, women are usually subjected to the males of their families, both in patrilineal and in matrilineal contexts. However, their self-determination and the level of independence they can attain is undoubtedly different in the two types of society, above all due to the different solidarity networks they can either keep alive with their original kinship, or develop in their new reality once they get married. Schooling and education are clearly elements which can help the women's empowerment, but they are not the only one. This paper presents an ethno-linguistic and anthropological analysis of the conditions of women in their childhood, adolescence, marriage and motherhood among the Ogiek of Kenya (patrilineal, Kalenjin) and the Kulango of Ivory Coast (matrilineal, Gur). In the last paragraphs, special attention will be reserved to those resilience strategies against the males' supremacy, which the women in the two contexts have developed in ages of practice and which are, nevertheless, considered acceptable within their traditions and culture.*

## Keywords

*Ivory Coast, Kenya, Motherhood, Rural Africa, Ogiek, Kulango*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When people think about the condition of women in traditional rural Africa, the picture that comes to their mind is usually one of submission, hard work and insecurity. Despite this corresponds to truth in general terms, it is incorrect to say that there is no possibilities for them to ameliorate their situation and emancipate themselves, remaining, however, inside their original cultures.

Aim of this paper is to investigate and bring to light those resilience strategies African women can live out in order to make themselves a little more independent from their male closest relatives without being banned from their society.

In order to demonstrate that resilience is always possible, even though with different results, no matter how bad the starting condition is, two very different case studies will be taken into consideration, the one referring to a patrilineal society of hunters and gatherers (the Ogiek of Kenya) and the other to a matrilineal agricultural society (the Kulango of Ivory Coast).

Three are the starting research questions:

- 1) What is the position of women in traditional rural Africa?
- 2) Does the type of descent affect this position?
- 3) Is it possible for women in rural Africa to rise up against the constraints of their traditional cultures? How?

Since the life of African women is based on their being mothers, it is impossible to think of them without considering their children and all those elements which can affect the wellbeing, the health and the safety of both. For this reason, in order to answer at best to the research questions identified, this paper will focus on all the following aspects: life stages, education, pregnancy, delivery, babies' weaning and nutrition.

## 2. THE OGIEK OF MARIASHONI (KENYA) AND THE KULANGO OF NASSIAN (IVORY COAST): WHO ARE THEY?

The Ogiek of Mariashoni (Kenya) are a group of patrilineal, semi-nomad hunters and gatherers<sup>1</sup>, who speak a Kalenjin (Nilo-Saharan, Satellite-core, Core, Eastern Sudanic, Southern, Nilotic, Southern) language very close to Nandi. According to Ethnologue<sup>2</sup>, the Ogiek population of Kenya and Tanzania is made of 79.000 people and their literacy rate is attested at 20% circa<sup>3</sup>. They

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<sup>1</sup> Nowadays they are becoming more and more sedentary due to the reduction of their original habitat, which is bringing them to switch to agriculture.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/oki>

<sup>3</sup> UN data 2005 and cf Micheli 2014 *Incling*37, p.155 for a detailed description of the

live in the Southwestern escarpment of the Mau forest, in a region which is comprised between the highlands close to Molo and the lowlands close to Lake Nakuru.

Their habitat is the forest, where they live in single households, hosting generally twenty to thirty people, which are placed at some distance from each other (in some cases some hundreds meters, but usually even two or three kilometers).

The Ogiek residence is typically virilocal and usually the old father and his wife (or wives, since the Ogiek admit polygamy) live together in the same household with their sons and, eventually, their sons' spouses with their children until they get old and strong enough to open their own household and move a bit farther. A common Ogiek household does not admit more than twenty/thirty people.

Even though their subsistence is typically based on hunting and gathering, they also practice traditional beekeeping and, according to their oral history, the first Ogiek appeared at the beginning of times in the Mau forest with their dogs and their bees.

As we will see in a while, honey is the source of the most energetic food in the Ogiek nutrition, and it is fundamental above all in the children's diet.

Nowadays, they also elevate cows, goats, sheep and, sometimes, hens, but they usually do not kill their animals for meat, except for the hens.

The Ogiek social structure is very simple. They have strong clan affiliations, which correspond to territorial delimitations and, in case of quarrels between two or more different households or families, or in emergency cases, it is up to the elders, organized in an egalitarian council, to decide what to do and how to proceed.

When the Ogiek migrate, they usually migrate in groups of maximum 50 peoples (two big households). When the elders are too old to move, they are left behind and, their lives are consequently at stake.

The Kulango of Nassian (Ivory Coast) are a group of matrilineal, sedentary horticulturalists who speak a Gur (Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, North) language very close to Lohron. According to Ethnologue, the Kulango population of Ivory Coast, considering the two dialects in which they divide the language<sup>4</sup>, is made of circa 90.000 people and the literacy rate in L2 is attested around 15-25%<sup>5</sup>.

They live in the North-Eastern territories of the country, on the border with Ghana, in a region which stretches between the towns of Bondoukou and Bouna. Their habitat (the region of Zanzan) is characterized by a green,

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literacy rate divided by sex and age in the region of Mariashoni.

<sup>4</sup> Contrary to this opinion, Micheli 2007:11 speaks of a unique language, with two inter-comprehensible local varieties.

<sup>5</sup> There is a lack of recent data, and the last estimate dates back to 1995.

hilly and wooded savannah and their typical settlement is the village. A common Kulango village can host between 2 or 3 hundreds and 2 or 3 thousands people. In particular, the village of Nassian, where the data for this research were collected, hosted at that time (2006) a population of about 1500 people.

The Kulango residence is typically uxorilocal, but in the villages at the Northern- and Westernmost borders, where they are in contact with Senoufo, Mande (Dyula) or Gur patrilineal societies, both matrilinearity and uxorilocality are often abandoned for the adoption of patrilineal descent and virilocal residence.

The Kulango are agriculturalists who grow yam, manioc, mais, millet, sorghum, plantains, coffee (where possible), rice (where possible) and all kinds of garden products, comprising tubers (carrots and potatoes), onions and vegetables. In the Zanzan region they also grow cashew trees.

Moreover, the region, above all in its Southern territories, is rich in fruit (sweet bananas, avocados, mangos, papayas, ananas, guava and any other kinds of exotic fruits are usually easily found on the market).

Besides farming, the Kulango also elevate goats, sheep and chicken and both meat and fish are common in their diet.

In the Kulango tradition there was also a hunters' association, called *sawalege*, which is now unfortunately disappearing<sup>6</sup>.

The Kulango village is ruled by the elders' council, among which an *anyɔ ɔse* (the village chief) is usually elected, whose role is that of peace-keeper inside the village. The *anyɔ ɔse* is flanked by the *saako tɛse*, the earth priest, who must be a descendant of the village founder<sup>7</sup>.

Both the Ogiek and the Kulango practice clanic and ethnic exogamy.

### 3. LIFE STAGES ACCORDING TO THE OGIEK AND THE KULANGO CULTURES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS IN A WOMAN'S LIFE

In an ethno-linguistic perspective, the analysis of taxonomy is pivotal as a basis for the understanding of a people's system of thought. The idea is that, where there is a multiplication of taxa, there is also an evident specific interest of the speakers in that semantic field. Any new taxa indicate new points of interests and, in the specific case of life-stages, each consequent taxon determines a new set of expectations about the behavior, the tasks, the possibilities of social (inter)action and inclusion and the role and place of a person in his/her society as years go by. The presence or absence of a specific taxon in a specific moment in life, teaches unconsciously to the

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed description of the Kulango *sawalege*, see Micheli 2011.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed description of the Kulango social structure and its terminology, see Micheli 2009.

speaker how to interpret that specific/non specific phase and, eventually, it marks a meaningful passage. Besides the existence/non existence of the taxon, it is interesting also to understand how long in terms of months or years a specific taxon can be used to describe a person. A major length in time corresponds to a more stable role in society (childhood and mature age for example), while a very short length in time usually indicates an abrupt, but very incisive change in this role, and is mainly characteristic of moments like adolescence (if taxonomically expressed) or youth. Table 1 reports the life stages taxa recognized by the Ogiek.

The \* indicates the presence of points of interest and, as it is predictable in any natural societies, it is to be found in correspondence to the most delicate passage between adolescence and maturity.

**Table 1**

	FEMALE	MALE
Baby-hood	ngatet (0-5 days)	ngatet (0-3 days)
childhood	laakwet (0-8 y.)	laakwet (0-8 y.)
adolescence/youth	tjebto (8-12* mureret)	wero (8-20*)
maturity	tjebioso (12*-40)	muren (20*-60)
old age	ndasat (40-...)	ngetat (60-...)

If, according to the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child, Art.1, a child is defined as “a person below the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger”, an Ogiek female, who has attained the age of 12 and has done the ritual excision, is possibly a bride (*mureret*) and can start her life as an adult member of her society becoming a *tjebioso*, a married woman.

Until the age of 8 (circa) Ogiek male and female children live together and are free to do what they like, while, as soon as they start being interested in their parents’ occupations, their education implies a physical separation of their worlds and their society’s expectations starts to impose on them a clearer set of acceptable/unacceptable behaviours. In this reality, adolescence merges with youth and is already the period in life where both male and female subjects learn how to become adults.

It is important, however, to note that this stage lasts much longer if the person is a man (*wero*) and is much shorter if the subject is a female (*tjebto*). This means two things:

- 1) The evolution from girl (*tjebto*) to woman (*tjebioso*), around the age of 12, corresponds to a mere biological fact (the first menstruation), which is marked by a true rite of passage (excision). The evolution from boy/young male (*wero*) to man (*muren*), instead, around the age of 20, clearly requires something else than a biological passage, in order to be complete. The boys' evolution envisages a specific training both in the most common male production activities (hunting and beekeeping) and in social interaction (learning how to behave during the adult men's meeting and at the presence of the elders);
- 2) Concerning the women, the Ogiek case offers a clear example of what UNICEF would consider child-marriage.

Some considerations are to be made also about the passage from adult to old age. In this case, there is again a discrepancy in the length of what is considered mature age in men and women and, also in this case, the evolution of women is bound to a chiefly biological factor (menopause), while the evolution of men is bound to a social one (the mental impossibility to remain active in the elders' council).

Table 2 reports the life stages taxa recognized by the Kulango. In this case the length in the period of childhood is extremely different between boys and girls, being much shorter (surprisingly) for male (8 years) than for female (14 years circa). This means that again, concerning the girls, biology, in the form of menstruation, is the only important factor, while concerning the boys, what marks their classificatory passage from childhood (*bii*) to adolescence/youth (*ibum*), is something which has to do with the boys' changes in behavior and activities. It is around the age of 8/10, in fact, that they start following their fathers in the fields and in other male activities, rather than remaining in their households with their mothers and sisters.

**Table 2**

	FEMALE	MALE
Baby-hood	bii (0-14)	bii (0-8)
childhood	bii (0-14)	ibum (8-16)
adolescence/youth	yereyo (14-18*)	heenio (16-24*)
maturity	yere (18*-40)	heen (24*-65)
old age	yegbadio (40-...)	heegbadio (65-...)

The fact that for baby girls and child-girls there is no taxonomic difference (baby girls are always sexless *bĩĩ* until their first menstruation), means that until their biological maturity they are both biologically and socially considered non-important / non-complete.

In the Kulango tradition girls are not excised and the passage from adolescence/youth to maturity is marked only by their marriage, which takes place some years later with respect to the Ogiek one (around 18) and is, therefore, not to be considered a child-marriage at all.

Concerning the passage from adult to old age, the same observations made in the Ogiek case remain true, i.e., the women's passage is marked by the biological event of menopause, while the men's one is marked by their mental impossibility to go on attending the elders' gathering with proficiency.

What emerges from the comparison of the two taxonomies is thus a major degree of maturity, both in biological and mental terms for the kulango girls at the moment of their marriage, which brings, as a consequence, to their major degree of maturity and consciousness at the moment of their first pregnancy, delivery and newborn assistance. This is a fundamental point to keep in mind in the following pages.

#### 4. THE WOMEN'S POSITION IN MARRIAGE IN THE OGIEK AND IN THE KULANGO CONTEXTS

Despite the difference in their type of descent and the fact that Ogiek girls are excised, while Kulango ones are not, the women's position in marriage in the two cultures does not really differ too much.

In this paragraph, anyway, we will try to go through a detailed comparison of the two situations, focussing on the following points:

- a) ethnic exogamy;
- b) possibility for a woman to choose her partner;
- c) possibility for a woman not to get married;
- d) bride-wealth;
- e) infertility;
- f) education.

Referring to point a), even though ethnic exogamy is admitted in both societies, the Ogiek consider it the best option, because they usually give out their girls to richer groups (Nandi or Maasai) and the marriage of one's daughter represents just a good way for a man to establish solid political and commercial networks with more powerful neighbors.

In the Kulango case, on the contrary, an inter-ethnic marriage with neighboring people is not so common, first of all due to the fact that the Kulango usually do not need powerful commercial partners, and, moreover, many of their neighbors are patrilineal and a mixing in the type of descent is a delicate issue, which sometimes can bring to tense relationships, even though a solution is always possible (and traces of the mechanisms enacted are to be found in the kinship terminology of the language<sup>8</sup>).

Marriage is in the Ogiek tradition a powerful tool to grant a clan political and commercial strong partners. Due to this reason, the Ogiek girls cannot either refuse a partner, once the pact for the marriage has been sealed by her father, or decide not to get married and remain in her original clan. Moreover, she is usually married far away from her natal household and, therefore, her ties with her original family get loose.

On the contrary, Kulango girls can either refuse a partner they do not like and decide not to get married and remain in their original family. This is possible, as it happens in many matrilineal society, because in the Kulango tradition a girl who gets pregnant before marriage is not blamed, but appreciated (in this way she demonstrates, in fact, to be fertile), being her own brother *de facto* her children's social father. For the same reason, the option of divorce, which would be inconceivable in the Ogiek, patrilineal society, is always possible in the Kulango context.

Giving out a daughter for marriage, both in the Ogiek and in the Kulango traditions, is not that expensive. Even though in the Ogiek society the bride's dowry represents a must, it implies a relatively small expense for the few cooking pots and kitchen tools needed to start a new house, together with the girl's personal belongings (goat skins to be used as blankets, clothes, jewelry etc.). The house is built by the couple, once the bride joins her husband's compound. The man's task in house building is only the cutting and placing of the hut's sustaining posts, while the straw coverage is all made by the woman.

In the Kulango tradition, where the preferred place of residence is uxorilocal, the bride remains usually to live next to her original family. It is very common that, once a girl has been promised to a man, the couple live together for some years before the marriage ceremony is really performed. During these years the couple can have children and the husband has to work in his *fiancée's* family fields in order to put aside the bride-wealth he has to give her family in order to "buy" her. The total amount of the bride-wealth is decided at the moment of the promise by the elder women of the two families.

If infertility is usually a stigma in all African societies, it is surprisingly lesser so in the Ogiek tradition. In case of infertility, the Ogiek have in fact a custom which provides for a marriage between women. If a married *tiebjoso* is

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<sup>8</sup> For more information about this point see Micheli 2009.



barren, she can ritually “marry” a girl who eventually has got pregnant before her excision. In this way, both the barren old woman and the young outcast girl find a new place and a new role in their society. Once the marriage between the two women has been celebrated, the barren woman can choose a young man inside her husband’s lineage, who will be allowed to have sex with the girl. All the children generated by the young couple will be classificatorily considered as the true children of the older couple, and their social mother will thus be the barren woman<sup>9</sup>.

In both the Ogiek and the Kulango contexts the education of children is always up to the mother until their curiosity begins to attract them towards the adults’ activities (around 5 or 6 years old). From that moment on, the boys start to follow their fathers and uncles either in the forest for hunting in the Ogiek case, or in the field for farming in the Kulango one, while the girls remain at home and start doing the same things their mothers do: fetching water, collecting wood for the kitchen, doing a little gardening and taking care of their younger brothers.

Concerning the level of autonomy a woman can have once married, two indicators have been considered as meaningful:

- a) possibility to manage money for one’s own purposes without asking the male permission;
- b) possibility to refuse sex to the husband.

The situation is very different in the two contexts. While the Ogiek woman do not have any possibilities to manage even a little pocket money for their own purposes, and are not allowed to refuse sex to their husbands, the Kulango women are in a much better condition.

Thanks to the fact that the Kulango live in a very fertile land and their mode of production allows them to yield a reasonable surplus, one of their women’s task is selling this surplus on the market. The money they earn from the selling of yam, manioc, plantain or cereals, which are fruit of the men’s work, is reserved to the men, but what the women can earn selling the products of their gardens (tomatoes, potatoes, onions etc.) remains in their own pocket and they can use it as they like.

This, together with the indisputable force which derives from the fact that the Kulango are matrilineal and the married couple live close to the woman’s relatives, which brings to a strong network of female kinship solidarity, leads to a very high degree of independence and autonomy in the Kulango women’s world, where all the women met during the field-research (in August 2006)

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<sup>9</sup> This information has been collected by the author among the Ogiek of Mariashoni during her field research in January-February 2014. It is to be noticed that, concerning this kind of marriage between women had not been documented for the Ogiek in any other articles before.

affirm to have also the very rare possibility to refuse sex to their partners whenever they are not in the mood to have it.

## 5. PREGNANCY AND DELIVERY IN THE OGIEK AND IN THE KULANGO TRADITIONS

All the issues related to pregnancy and delivery (average age of the women at their first delivery, special care or reduction of the women’s tasks during pregnancy, place and modalities of the women’s delivery, assistance during delivery etc.) are synthesized in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

Also in this case, the \* indicates the points of interest which will be consequently discussed.

### *Pregnancy*

**Table 3**

	OGIEK	KULANGO
Average age at first pregnancy*	14 -*	16 +
Attitude towards the father	Father immediately informed – sex avoided	Father immediately informed – sex allowed
Women’s tasks reduced	Never	Never
Special care in women’s diet*	Only rarely admitted*	Only rarely admitted
Medical assistance	Tjemosiànik*	No special word (yεε)

The average age at first pregnancy is very low in both the Ogiek and the Kulango traditions. It is to be noticed that the WHO considers as “adolescent pregnancy” a pregnancy in which the mother is between 15 and 20. In the Ogiek case, where girls can get married and have their first baby before 14, we should thus speak of “child pregnancy”. This is undoubtedly a very dangerous and risky situation both for the mothers and their babies.

According to the WHO in fact: “Early childbearing increases the risks for both mothers and their newborns. In low- and middle-income countries, babies born to mothers under 20 years of age face a 50% higher risk of being still born or dying in the first few weeks versus those born to mothers aged 20-29. The younger the mother, the greater the risk to the baby. Newborns

born to adolescent mothers are also more likely to have low birth weight, with the risk of long-term effects”<sup>10</sup>.

Another negative element is that in both traditions special care in pregnant women’s diet is only rarely admitted and in both cases it is reserved to the mother’s craving in late pregnancy. Also concerning this point the situation is worst in the Ogiek context, because the Ogiek diet, as we will see in paragraph 7, is generally much poorer than the Kulango one and, therefore, during pregnancy the need for a mother’s diet improvement would be higher.

Concerning the medical assistance for pregnant mothers, in both traditions the option of professional nurses or midwives is not contemplated. The fact that in the Ogiek language there is a special word for the Traditional Birth Attendant indicates at the same time two things: 1) the Ogiek recognize the necessity of assist their women during delivery, and this is good; 2) the presence of a specific person appointed to perform this role could indicate either that in the Ogiek society the natural solidarity networks among women of the kinship are not sufficiently strong to grant for the presence of the woman’s closest female relatives at the moment of delivery, or that the type of residence (single households placed at quite a distance from each other) do not allow these networks to develop in a meaningful way.

### *Delivery*

**Table 4**

	OGIEK	KULANGO
Location	in the couple’s hut	in the woman’s matrilineage
Assistance	tjemosiànik	old women of the matrilineage
Father is...	outside, not necessarily present	outside, not necessarily present
In case of problems who can decide?*	the tjemosiànik / the father*	the women
Ritual performance	Yes	Yes

What is important to underline here is that in the two traditions, the social capital on which women can trust in that very awkward moment in life which

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs364/en/>

is delivery, is very different, being much richer in the Kulango (matrilineal) case, and much poorer in the Ogiek (patrilineal) context. Being surrounded by the solidarity and affection of all the women of the family and being sure that, in case of need, these women can decide what to do in order to make things evolve in a good way, put the mothers in a better temperament and make them feel more at ease and protected.

In the Ogiek case, on the contrary, the women are left alone in the hands of the specialist, the *tjemosiànik*, who, despite her recognized role as TBA, cannot eventually take a decision, like, for example, referring the woman to the HC in case of need, if the husband is not around, and this is a true problem, given that, according to the Ogiek tradition, the father cannot be present at his child's birth.

*First hours after delivery*

**Table 5**

	OGIEK	KULANGO
The baby is breastfed	immediately	immediately
Cordon is cut...*	with a not sterilized blade ( <i>róotwet</i> )*	with a sterilized blade
Placenta is...	ritually buried	ritually buried
The mother is...	ritually washed	initially left at her ease
The baby is...*	ritually washed*	ritually washed

Concerning what is done in the first hours after delivery, the two traditions seem to be rather similar. However, two observations have to be made referring to a couple of details which are very important for the health and safety of the newborn babies.

First of all, due principally to the different economic conditions of people in the two contexts and to the difficulty to find the right tools easily on the market, it is not a surprise that in the Ogiek context the umbilical cord is cut with a common knife (*róotwet*), while the Kulango use always a new, sealed razor blade for this purpose. The risk does not lay, of course, in the fact that the blade used by the Ogiek is not a new one, but rather in that it is not sterilized in any ways, either with boiled water, disinfectant agents, or with fire.

The second very risky practice in the Ogiek tradition is that the ritual washing of the baby does not provide only for the baby's body washing, but also for his stomach cleansing. The Ogiek think, indeed, that when a baby is

born, his stomach is still full of a dangerous liquid, and that he/she must get rid of it as soon as possible because otherwise he/she can smother. Therefore, immediately after birth and before breastfeeding, the *tjemosiànik* makes the baby ingest some (not previously boiled) water. According to the *tjemosiànik* this makes him/her defecate and “free” her/himself from the dangerous liquid, but they do not recognize that it can also bring dangerous bacteria or even worms in his/her still very delicate body, which he/she cannot reasonably endure with his/her still inexistent immune system<sup>11</sup>.

## 6. NEWBORN CARE

Table 6 reports some indicators about the practices bound to the care of newborn babies, which can affect their well-being, both in terms of health and sociality, and are, therefore, of the outmost importance.

**Table 6**

	OGIEK	KULANGO
First time out of the hut	at least one week	3 / 4 days according to gender
The father meets the baby*	1 / 3 months after birth*	few hours after birth
The baby is given a name*	when the father meets him/her*	when he/she first gets out of the hut*
Breastfeeding lasts	even more than 2 years	up to 2 years
Medical assistance	Tjemosiànik*	No special word (yere)

Of the four indicators considered, three refer to facts which tell us much about the process of socialization of the babies. The data collected show without any doubt that the slower the process, the higher the recognized risk of infant mortality. It is not a surprise, in fact, that in a richer and socially stronger society, as, in our case, the Kulango one, the process lasts just three or four days, after which the baby is given a name and is officially introduced

<sup>11</sup> This practice is very common in all pastoralist tribes for example in the region of South Omo (Ethiopia), where both Hamar and Daasanach do a similar ritual cleansing of the newborn babies's stomach with coffee or liquified butter – from the author's still unpublished field-notes (August 2016).

to his/her village community, while in a poorer and more unstable society, like the Ogiek one, the process can last even three months, during which not even the father can see his child.

The idea, in both cultures, is that until the baby gets out of the hut and the ceremony of the name-giving has taken place, the baby is not yet to be considered as a “true” human being. He/she is still something in-between this world and the otherworld, and has not yet decided if to remain and live in this world or if to go back from where he/she comes from.

Usually, this period has the same length of the average period in which the infant mortality rate is higher, and, therefore, it is not surprising that it is longer in the Ogiek context than in the Kulango one.

What is, however, quite worrying in the Ogiek case, is the quasi complete absence of the father in the first month(s)<sup>12</sup> of his child’s life. This brings not only to looser affection ties between the baby and his/her father, but also puts the baby in a more risky condition. The more the father thinks of it as a not yet “true” human being, the lesser he will eventually decide to spend his money to bring him/her to the hospital or to the HC if needed, and, therefore, given that the mother cannot autonomously make this kind of decision, the more he/she risks not to be promptly treated in case of emergency.

What is extremely positive in both cultures, as it is very common in Africa, is instead the fact that breastfeeding is practiced until the mother gets pregnant again, what usually happens at least two years later with respect to the birth of the last baby.

This is central, above all in contexts in which education and environmental conditions do not grant a balanced nutritional practice and/or food is poor or not sufficient.

Also from this point of view, the Kulango are placed in a better position with respect to the Ogiek. Even though both environments are relatively more fertile than many others in Africa, and could therefore offer good conditions both for farming and herding, the mode of production of the two people considered influences very much their real possibilities in terms of ingredients used in the preparation of their food.

The first observation is that until very few years ago, the Ogiek of the Mau forest did not have clay pots and used just vegetal containers which could not be used for cooking. Therefore, they were used only to have raw or smoked food. Moreover, they have just started to introduce a bit of horticulture in their practices and therefore, the introduction in their diet of vegetables and cereals is quite new.

Table 7 resumes the most common food eaten in the two contexts.

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<sup>12</sup> According to the women met during the field-research, today this period usually lasts only one month, while in ancient times it could last 3 or even four months.

**Table 7**

	OGIEK	KULANGO
Honey	Yes, always	Very rare, beekeeping is not practiced
Fruit and vegetables	Fruit + tubers and roots	Vegetables and tubers only
Cereals	Rarely*	Yes
Meat and fish	Rarely*	Yes

Even though many Ogiek in the last century have started herding cows and sheep<sup>13</sup>, they use their animals just as a good to be exchanged with neighboring peoples or to buy their brides. Very rarely they use them as a source of meat and only on very important or ritual occasions. On the contrary, they used to eat the meat of the game they could hunt, but, due to the reduction of the forest cover, it is getting more and more difficult for the Ogiek to have good hunts and get enough meat from their hunting.

On the contrary, the Kulango use to elevate mostly hens and goats and these, together with small rats, bats, rabbits, snakes and monkeys are very commonly found in their dishes.

The Mau forest represents the major water castle of Kenya. This is a very positive factor for the Ogiek nutrition. This means, indeed, that their territory is rich in clean water coming from the many springs diffused all around the forest, while the Kulango have usually to walk some km before reaching a good (and clean) river, above all during the dry season.

In both cultures, the kitchen represents the place in which the women are more free to express themselves and make autonomous decisions. Therefore, where good projects on malnutrition are conducted, women are principally involved in education programs aimed at teaching them how to use at best all the ingredients their environment is rich in, even though these are not traditionally eaten.

One example for all is based on the author's experience among the Kulango of the Ivory Coast<sup>14</sup>, where in the last 30 years many plantations of acajou to be sold on the French market were opened. The Kulango, who did not know that the apple of acajou is an edible fruit, used to throw the apples away without considering that an apple of acajou has a concentration of vitamin C ten times superior than that of an orange.

<sup>13</sup> Huntingford 1927 and 1931.

<sup>14</sup> Experience witnessed during the field-research in July-August 2002.

Therefore, the sisters of the catholic mission of Nassian decided to promote a very practical educative intervention with the aim of teaching to the women how to use the apples in their food preparations. The Sisters, thus, took three months' time in order to visit all the villages of the region doing a two or three days cooking course in each location and, as a result, the malnutrition rates in the children population diminished quite evidently<sup>15</sup>.

## 7. SUMMING UP THE CONDITION OF WOMEN IN A MATRILINEAL AGRICULTURAL AND IN A PATRILINEAL HUNTING AND GATHERING SOCIETY IN AFRICA

Summing up, from the comparison of the two traditions, it results clear that, despite the similarities in the women's tasks and roles, always relegated to the private, household dimension, the condition of women in a matrilineal agricultural society are significantly better than that of women in a patrilineal hunting and gathering one.

The most important factors, which influence the women's condition in natural societies are, in fact, strictly connected with the solidarity networks internal and external to the women's nuclear family and to the social capital on which they can trust.

In the Ogiek patrilineal, hunting and gathering society, due both to the marriage preferences, which bring the girls, once married, to break the ties with their original family, and to the type of residence, the single household, which oblige them to live in a very poor network of mutual assistance with their neighbors, the women can rely on a semi-inexistent social capital. Moreover, in this kind of society, the women represent a good to be exchanged on the market, and for the families, the earlier a daughter gets married, the earlier the family can earn money or seal an important political pact with richer and more powerful neighbors (Maasai or Nandi), who, in case of emergency, can lend a helping hand. For this reason, the girls very often get married in a very young age and the risks bound to adolescent pregnancies are much higher in this kind of situations than in the other context analyzed for this study.

What represents the true key element which places the Kulango women in a much more favorable position is thus their social capital. In the Kulango matrilineal society, in fact, the solidarity network between a married woman and her original family/female relatives are never broken. Most of the times, for example, at the moment of delivery, a Kulango woman goes back to her mother's house and there she gives birth to her child, surrounded by the love and affection of her own kin. In case of emergency during delivery, the

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<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately I do not have true statistics.



women of the family can take decision on what to do, be it simply calling a TBA or even referring the mother to the nearest health facility, no matter the money needed: if the husband does not have the possibility to pay, the costs will be covered by the women's matrilineage.

Thanks to the kind of residence (the village) also the social capital a woman can build during her life with her husband is much higher and, in this dimension, the rule of diffuse reciprocity among neighbors is something very much practiced, which represents an additional positive point.

Last but not least, in the village dimension also the possibility to invest in associative projects dedicated to women and find a fertile ground is much higher than in a region where women's associations are not the rule and the kind of residence invalidates any attempts made both by the official institutions (schools and governmental health facilities for example) and the local or foreign NGOs dedicated to the women's empowerment on the field.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS: IS RESILIENCE REALLY ALWAYS POSSIBLE WITHOUT BEING OUTCAST FROM ONE'S TRADITIONAL SOCIETY?

Even though education is always the best and most incisive way to empower women in traditional societies, because schooling and education are the most complete tools to improve not only the women's self-consciousness, but also their possibility of self-determination, the two case-studies analyzed for this paper demonstrate that resilience is a phenomenon which can also grow internally to a specific tradition and in harmony with its core values.

Generally speaking, the most effective solution for a woman who wants to emancipate herself from the males of her kin, both in a matrilineal society, like the Kulango of Ivory Coast, and in a patrilineal context, as the Ogiek of Kenya, is finding a way not to get married and at the same time a way to earn a living by herself.

In order to attain both things, a great deal of courage is necessary, because a single woman in a traditional world is always something odd, but this does not mean that she is automatically excluded from her society.

In each one of the two cultures examined in this paper, the author could find at least one effective resilience strategy for women's emancipation, which allow them to obtain a reasonable degree of independence and to remain, at the same time, inside their culture.

Again, things seem to be easier in the Kulango matrilineal context, than in the Ogiek patrilineal one. In the Kulango tradition, indeed, thanks to the fact that children always belong to their mother's lineage and will inherit from their maternal uncle, the social role of the children's biological fathers is in fact non existent and, therefore, pregnancies outside or before marriage are neither stigmatized nor blamed. Fertility is always a value in itself and a

woman who demonstrates to be fertile before being married gains prestige. In this kind of situation, above all in those regions where the Kulango matrilineal culture borders the Senoufo or Djimini patrilineal one, women often choose not to get married at all, going on having children, which increase their maternal lineage number, and they spend their life in a reasonable peace, surrounded by the love and affection of their original kin and avoiding the possible jealousy and misunderstandings which could characterize their life in another village, where they would possibly be obliged to live with their husbands and co-wives. Moreover, it must be said that in a matrilineal society the respect a man has for her mother and sisters is much higher than that he has for his wife or wives.

If in the Kulango society agamy can thus be an easy personal choice on the part of the girl, in the Ogiek society the girl must in a way “arrange” things with her original family in order to have the possibility to follow this path.

As we have seen in paragraph 3, the Ogiek girls must be excised before getting married and a girl who has not undergone excision is destined to become the wife of a barren older woman, because no man would agree on marrying her. Anyway, during the field research in Mariashoni in January-February 2013 and 2014, some of the younger girls, and specifically those who had studied and attained a college degree, explained to me that, in order to let them study in peace, avoiding the social pressure of getting married as soon as possible, their parents decided not to let them be excised until the end of their education.

Even though finally, after the school, most of these girls had come back to their traditional role of wives and mothers, some of them could autonomously decide to abandon their traditional world, the forest, and move to town, where they could either find a job and live their life as single career women (just one case), or being excised later and get married to an educated man in town, in order to ameliorate their conditions and, in perspective, the conditions of their offsprings.

In conclusion, the two case studies presented in this paper demonstrate two very concrete things:

- 1) the condition of women in matrilineal, agricultural societies in Africa is usually better than that of women in patrilineal Hunting and gathering societies, above all thanks to much richer and more stable solidarity networks with their original kin and the village dimension they are integrated in;
- 2) resilience is, however, always possible and, in both traditions the best choice for a woman who wants to get really emancipated from her male relatives seems to be agamy.

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