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‘I Built this House on my Back’: A Historical Perspective on Care and Property in East Africa

‘…the most aggressive prostitution, conducted from windows and stoops, was performed by the most dutiful of daughters. The women who walked the streets were working for their families. It was the women who waited decorously and discreetly in their rooms, peaceful and isolated, deferential and polite, who were in fact entirely out for themselves, eager to disinherit fathers and brothers and to establish themselves as independent heads of households…they believed in independent accumulation.


In this paper, East African history is used to explore care labour, its performance and its recognition. In recent years there has emerged a growing literature on care, and on its meaning, content and quantification (Stewart 2015 forthcoming (a) and (b); Hoskyns and Rai 2007; Rai et al 2014). The ways in which social reproduction might be recognised and compensated is now the subject of academic and policy discussions: what is the scope for recognition of care work by the state (Sepuldeva 2014), the market (Stewart 2011) and in law (Sloane 2012)? The World Bank (2012) has stated that recognising and redistributing the burden of care is ‘smart economics’ because it promotes gender equality but also addresses economic exclusion. International campaigners and human rights policy makers have asserted, in the context of the post 2015 sustainable development goals, that a rights approach should be adopted. Discussions have been organised around the need to recognise, reduce and redistribute care (Elson 2008).

This literature has tended to focus on contemporary manifestations of care work. In this paper our primary aim is to explore the recognition of care labour in historical perspective before reflecting more briefly on the present. We ask: how might using historical material as a source, and thus going back to look for care, cast light on our thinking about care giving and care compensation? What do historical accounts of women’s reproductive labour, for example, tell us when viewed anew through a care lens? How has reproductive labour been rewarded historically? Specifically, what are the connections between care labour and property as a form of compensation?

In this paper, we revisit Luise White’s path-breaking book on prostitution in colonial Nairobi and reread it for care. We focus on two themes. Firstly, we explore the ‘labour forms’ of prostitution in colonial Nairobi uncovered by White and consider them as forms of care labour, focusing on the provision of care and its receipt. Secondly, we look at how the strategies of property accumulation of malaya women in colonial Nairobi facilitated their accumulation of significant ‘bequeathable assets’ (Behrman et al 1985). We argue that this allows us explore the operation of a care-property nexus (Sloane 2013) both upstream and downstream. Upstream, the work of malaya women reproduced male labour cheaply for the colonial state (in their subdued, respectful form of prostitution they were ‘like wives’ (White 1990: 65)). They were important care workers. At the same time, the practice of malaya prostitution enabled women to engage in rapid independent property accumulation. Determined to deny their patrilineal kin and to disinherit fathers, brothers and uncles, propertied women adopted independent kin (‘pseudo-kin’ in Bujraa’s (1975) formulation) to whom they left their accumulated property, often through woman to woman marriages. These new kin were often young women who in
their turn provided care to the malaya woman in old age. We argue that, downstream, the choice to take on new women kin constituted bequest strategies based on care considerations (Behrman 1985; Kalabamu 2006). Malaya women bequested their accumulated property in return for care received. What might these strategies of accumulation and bequesting tell us about care and its compensation historically? This paper thus seeks to understand bequest strategies (Behrman 1985; Arezki et al 2015) and care claims in their historical specificity.

We continue to use insights from a historical perspective to reflect on contemporary connections between care labour and the use of property as a form of compensation. Our focus shifts to an examination of woman to woman marriages. White’s account of the way in which the malaya women used this practice breaks with the mainstream anthropological literature which sees it as a means of addressing infertility: an older ‘husband/woman’ marries a younger ‘wife/woman’ who then provides heirs for the lineage through intercourse with approved male ‘donors’. We review the colonial and post-colonial literature from a care perspective and explore its contemporary use to assess the extent to which the practice is being used, as for the malaya women for the care of older propertied women. To what extent are claims by the care giving ‘wife/women’ being recognised in the plural legal context of Kenya?