The "Last Born" (Muxogosi) and Complementary Filiation in Tiriki, Kenya

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Meyer Fortes in his article, "The First Born" (Fortes 1974), has noted that societies with strong descent systems often give special ritual and social recognition to a firstborn child of either sex. He points out that this recognition is essentially independent of the particular status and accompanying jural and ritual responsibilities.

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generally reserved for the senior surviving son. Fortes links this to the social importance of "parenthood" status for the couple involved irrespective of the social status ascribed to their newborn. In a subsequent publication Fortes notes that this special recognition conferred upon the firstborn in many societies involves special avoidances being placed upon the firstborn vis-à-vis the parents, which are not then applied to the senior surviving child if the firstborn dies, and indeed which stand in contrast to a lack of such avoidances between the parents and all succeeding children they bear. Furthermore, Fortes recounts that in Tallensi "parental attitudes towards their children are split in two—the antagonism to the filial generation being fixed on the firstborn, the love and devotion without which children could not be reared to adulthood, being fixed on the youngest," and these contrasting attitudes find ritualized expression in differing ceremonial roles prescribed to each at their father's funeral (Fortes 1978:134).

Recently, Michael Jackson (1978) pointed out that in many societies throughout the world there is a social stereotyping of the senior son as conventional, restrained, and aloof in contrast to the younger son who is stereotyped as self-motivated, irresponsible, clever, and innovative.

My fieldwork in Tiriki, Kenya, a strongly agnatic society, documents special ritual and jural status and responsibilities for a man's eldest surviving son and heir-apparent but reveals no special recognition or particular social stereotype conferred upon the firstborn per se. To be sure, the birth of a Tiriki couple's first child is a matter of major jural significance, because it is a virtual guarantee that a minimum of one-third of the total bridewealth payments will remain irrevocably with, or will soon be paid to, the bride's family which also thenceforth is free from any liability for the woman's failure to conceive any more children. Similarly, the birth of second and third children each guarantees payment of a remaining third of her bridewealth; and following the birth of the third child the wife at last can expect to be installed in a hut of her own with her own hearth where she cooks for her husband, her children, and herself, instead of merely helping her mother-in-law with the cooking. The Tiriki do, however, have a special referential term, muxogosi, for the last-born child, and they expect and accept a distinctive set of behavioral traits in "last born" people (baxogosi)
that they do not usually condone in others. And some of these behavioral traits are in keeping with the social stereotype Jackson has noted are assigned to the younger son in so many societies (Jackson 1978:355-356).

I shall devote the bulk of this paper to describing, primarily through two case studies, the distinctive social behavior said by the Tiriki to characterize "last born" children. Then I shall briefly demonstrate that these social traits Tiriki "last born" often display to a marked degree in many social contexts are in essence a fusing and exaggeration of behavior expected in Tiriki of a mother's brother towards his sister's children on the one hand, and that expected of a sister's child towards his/her maternal uncle on the other. In conclusion I will point out briefly key features of Tiriki social structure that this behavior may be linked to.

My wife and I spent 16 months in Tiriki in 1954-1956. We first learned of the Tiriki "last-born" syndrome by directly overhearing, observing, and in consequence inquiring about temper tantrums thrown by the youngest daughter of the Tiriki family neighboring the one in whose homestead we resided for nearly a year. We had moved into this homestead in a traditional area of the tribe, where no English was spoken, after being in Tiriki about five months and had taken up residence in the newly built hut of the homestead head's senior son who had just married. Tiriki custom dictates that a senior son reside in a hut especially built for him and his bride adjacent to his father. The son of Joseph, our homestead head, did this for a few weeks, but then, because he was employed off tribe, he found it convenient to move his bride to their work location and thus was delighted to rent his hut to us. The hut was near the edge of Joseph's compound and was located within 50 ft. of his neighbor's main hut, so we could hear as well as see much of what went on there day and night.

One afternoon, shortly after our neighbor's seven-year-old daughter, Aggie, had returned from school, we were startled by her screams, particularly because they were in such contrast to her usual quiet but cheerful manner. We listened with dismay, but we didn't run to interfere because we heard quiet reasoned replies to Aggie's screams from her mother that went on for the 30 minutes or so until

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* This and all other names are pseudonyms. Extraneous details of these biographic sketches also have been fictionalized to protect individuals' anonymity.
Aggie emerged, now quiet but swollen-eyed, and streaked into their banana patch and wasn't seen again until supper time when she reappeared; and we could see through their open doorway that her mother gave her supper, and everyone acted as though nothing had ever been amiss.

A week or so later, much the same thing happened again; but this time Aggie's father, rather than her mother, was home, and after a few minutes she emerged from the door of her hut, quickly followed by her father. Then, as we peered from the doorway of our hut, the tantrum continued in the courtyard before our eyes. We couldn't understand what Aggie was saying along with her screaming, foot stamping, and arm-flailing, which was punctuated by moments when she would lie on the ground, either on her back or one side, and kick frantically in the air. James, her father, occasionally tried to lay a restraining hand on her which she always brushed aside, and he also continuously mumbled words of condolence, repeating her name again and again and suggesting things would be better soon. After perhaps 20 minutes, the exhausted girl's screams and thrashings subsided into deep sobs, and as before she finally pulled herself together enough to run out of sight through the banana patch, again returning an hour or so later for supper, to act and be treated by her family as though nothing had happened.

That evening we asked our Tiriki cook, who had seen it all also, what had been going on. He shrugged and muttered one word, "muxogosi." He was from another village in Tiriki to be sure, but usually he delighted so much in learning and telling us about the local gossip that we were surprised and puzzled he showed so little interest in the incident. His offhand replies to our queries about what muxogosi meant were extremely terse and completely baffling to us; he didn't speak English and wasn't inclined at all to elaborate the matter in simple Tiriki that we could understand; he simply muttered, "You know, Aggie's mother's belly is closed; she no longer bleeds every month."

Several weeks later Aggie threw another tantrum when only her father was present; we restrained our impulse to intervene, but the next day we approached Aggie's father, expressed our concern and sympathy, and asked him if there was any long-standing problem. He smiled, clearly amused and probably a bit pleased by our concern, and replied, "No, there is no problem; Aggie just does that
sometimes." We asked again what the trouble had been, adding
that we had never seen such behavior by anyone else under any cir­
cumstances in Tiriki. He replied that it was really nothing, that
yesterday she had become angry because she wanted a piece of sugar
cane that had been purchased by her mother several days earlier at
the market, and that someone else had taken it and eaten it while
she was at school. When we asked him about the time before when
we had overheard her tantrums, he couldn't remember what had
caused her to get angry. James then apologized to us for all the com­
motion, saying he hoped it hadn't disturbed us too much; he
mumbled that he regretted he could do nothing about it, but that
when she got like that all you could do was wait for her to calm
down. My wife told him that where she came from, although she
never would, some people might slap a child on the cheek who be­
haved like that or even pour a bucket of cold water on her to shock her
into calming down; then later on one would really try to find out
what was bothering the child and do something to correct it. James
recoiled in dismay at the suggestion of such brutal intervention, say­
ing no Tiriki would ever do that. Then he told us there was no prob­
lem about Aggie; she was simply a "muxogosi." We asked him to ex­
plain what "muxogosi" was, expecting to hear she was epileptic, or
some such. He said that's what the Tiriki called a woman's last
child, that is, the child who "closed the womb" (wigaga inda). Then
he told us that all last-born people (the plural is baxogosiy)
have a
tendency to become inconsolably angry when something doesn't go
the way they really want it. Usually last-born people are very friend­
ly and generous, but sometimes when they want something, even a
very simple thing, and cannot get it they sulk, pout (dunya), and
when young, may become terribly enraged as we had seen with Ag­
gie. He then asked us if it was not also that way in America. We
replied that sometimes youngest children, but more often, only
children, want things their own way a lot, having been fussed over
by their parents too much, and that it was thought best either to ig­
nore or actively punish such behavior whenever it occurred. James
looked incredulous and said, "Of course in Tiriki we punish other
children who start to behave that way, and they stop, but it would
do no good to punish a last child; they would simply get more upset
and never stop!"

During the next year we got to know Aggie quite well; although
usually rather quiet, she had a normal number of friends among her
peer group and generally got along with them very smoothly; but we noted that her contemporaries almost never crossed her, preferring to leave her when their desires clashed, which wasn't often, rather than dispute with her. Also, we noticed that both adults and older children were strikingly circumspect about ordering her around. Generally, Tiriki have no compunctions about bossing their juniors, and unless they get an immediate show of deference, dire verbal threats follow which virtually always do achieve at least a show of compliance from juniors; with Aggie, however, usually adults and older children took no notice when she sometimes greeted their commands either with quiet indifference or sullen noncompliance.

Before the end of our fieldwork we could watch a group of children for a while and fairly quickly make a judgment about which, if any, of the children present were baxogosi; and subsequent genealogical inquiry usually substantiated our judgment. Our Tiriki informants' explanations for why last born were different from other people sounded as though they had been inspired by a neo-Freudian text. We asked both men and women, young and old; many of course simply shrugged and ventured no opinion, but those who did almost always offered one or another, and often all three, of the following opinions: (1) because of being the child that closed the mother's womb; (2) because of the relatively protracted maternal care the child received; (3) because of their very late weaning in contrast to other siblings.

Our knowledge of the muxogosi complex as a lifelong behavioral syndrome we owe principally to Mr. Luke Awebi, whom we came to know in the following manner.

During the first few weeks of our fieldwork in Tiriki, the tribal chief was very concerned about our physical safety because Mau Mau was in full swing, and Mau Mau detainees, some of whom escaped from time to time, were incarcerated not far from Tiriki. Consequently, within the first week of our stay in Tiriki he assigned a very congenial middle-aged man, Luke Awebi, to be our personal guide and bodyguard. An unemployed ex-primary school teacher, we found Luke's limited command of English, although of some aid to us during the early days of our research, far from fluent enough to obviate or inhibit the need we felt to learn the vernacular ourselves. From the very beginning he seemed to us the very antithesis of a bodyguard, being spindle-legged, a bit over age, and rather retiring in manner, but as a guide, his quiet humor, which as
we better learned the language we found was delightfully spicy in spite of his soft manner, and the generally good terms he was on with nearly everybody in the tribe made him a pleasure and generally a great help to have around.

Very soon it became patently clear that the chief had not assigned Luke to us actually to be our bodyguard as well as guide, but rather to be the scapegoat between him and the colonial administration, if anything should happen to us or if we should do or say anything to bring his tribal administration to discredit. Although not generally a suspicious lot, most Tiriki learn early in life to look after their own best interests with care, and we came to feel that few, if any, other middle-aged Tiriki men would have been willing to take us on as their personal responsibility. But Luke, it developed, was as unusually gullible as he was guileless, and so far as we ever could tell he took the position, which paid him nothing in salary or official perks, without giving all these considerations a thought, simply because he had little else to do at the time.

Luke, together with his three youngest children, lived almost entirely off his wife's labor, that is, off her subsistence farming efforts on his land and a small surplus she grew and sold at a local market for cash. In this regard Luke and his wife were like the majority of Tiriki middle-aged couples; but we eventually found out that Luke, by local standards, had once been wealthy; and his children, like him, had all received some education in mission schools. His eldest son, who was married and had a couple of young children, made a reasonable income as a local shopkeeper, and he paid for the school fees of his three young school-aged siblings as well as his father's poll tax. Two other sons, still unmarried, worked off tribe near Nairobi, one as a domestic servant, and the other as a laborer on a European farm. A grown daughter was away, married to a man in a neighboring tribe.

From the beginning Luke was very easygoing about his assignment as our bodyguard and guide; he quickly perceived we didn't have any such expectation of him, and for the first few months of our stay in Tiriki we seldom saw him more than once a week. After we moved to Joseph's homestead, however, we began to see a lot of Luke because he lived in the same village and was a neighbor. Once we had enough command of the vernacular to be able to use it when talking with him, Luke became one of our principal informants in matters of tribal traditions and history; and we also saw a lot of him
informally at local gatherings and goings on. One day we heard a
neighbor address Luke in loud tones at the marketplace where all
could hear as “A utoka,” which means “lorry,” or “car” in the Tiriki
vernacular. We noticed he responded with a shy smile and a friendly
return greeting; later we embarrassed him by asking him how he
had gotten that nickname. He replied sheepishly that Tiriki have a
way of nicknaming people for things that happen in their lives, and
that this referred to a lorry he had owned long ago and had lost later
through “bad luck” (ixabi indamanu).
We were intrigued by the thought that Luke had once been
wealthy enough to own a lorry, but it didn’t seem tactful to question
him further about it then. Later Luke told us, in a manner that was
tantalizingly cryptic and devoid of any note of bitterness or self-pity,
that once he had been a wealthy man, but that he had lost
everything through bad luck; people had cheated him, actually
cheated him many times, he asserted; but it didn’t matter he said in
conclusion, because his health was good and so was his family’s.
Others in the neighborhood quickly and readily affirmed that
Luke had indeed once been wealthy and lost all; no one, however,
seemed interested in telling us stories, either malicious or factual,
about Luke’s fall from fortune; they simply noted and commented
in one way or another that he was generous to a fault, that he was
willing to trust anybody with anything he had that they asked for,
and that people had simply “eaten up” his wealth. But no one
treated Luke like a fool; no one ever seemed to spurn his modest re­
quests for favors, or find lame excuses to deflect them, as Tiriki
characteristically do with requests from individuals who have gotten
reputations as fools or reprobates.
One day, when we were attending a preparation meeting for an
elaborate Tiriki Christian wedding, we saw for the first time the
other side of Luke’s easygoing personality. He expressed quiet an­
noyance at where some others at the meeting (most of whom were
his neighbors, but not his kinsmen) suggested he should be seated at
the wedding feast. When others persisted in asserting that he
couldn’t be seated nearer the head of the table because others with
closer kin connections to the bride and groom would completely fill
those places, Luke suddenly rose, his lower lip protruding almost
grotesquely in a pout, and stalked from the meeting. The others
shrugged and quickly agreed that the close kin of the bridal couple
should be told informally in advance that Luke would be seated
amongst them because he was a neighbor, a church elder, and had insisted on it; and since everyone knew that Luke was a *muxogosi* those displaced would understand and agree to it. By then we had already learned about “*baxogosi*” from our experiences with little Aggie in our neighbor’s compound, but we hadn’t yet gathered Luke’s genealogy and had no idea until then that he was a *muxogosi*, nor any inkling that the special social attributes of a *muxogosi* were considered to endure for life!

Later we learned from Luke and others that he was the youngest and only male among eight siblings, and that this plethora of sisters was the source of his former wealth. The Tiriki say it bodes well for a team in a football match, or for a hunting expedition, if the first man to score a point or kill an animal has a daughter for his first child. That’s because it is good luck (*ixabi indahi*), they explained, if a man’s first born is a daughter; for then he will get cattle from her bridewealth with which to pay the bridewealth for this first son’s wife. Be that as it may, all Tiriki who knew Luke and talked to us about his former wealth held the view that only a *muxogosi* or a fool would have let such good fortune slip away completely, as he had. Several of his neighbors finally told us the story of Luke’s economic demise.

After his father died some men of the village invited Luke to form a producer’s cooperative with them to transport Tiriki produce to the nearest railhead about 30 miles away and sell it there. They persuaded him to sell nearly all the cattle he had inherited from his sisters’ marriages to purchase an old lorry from an Indian dealer at the railhead town. Within a year the lorry had to be sold back to the dealer to cover the payment of accumulated repair bills; and that was the end of both the producers’ co-op and Luke’s legacy! Luke still had a fair standard of living, however, by Tiriki standards, because his father had used some of his wealth to pay for Luke’s getting a good schooling by the standards of the time; and Luke had been able to get a position in the mission school system, teaching grades one and two, which paid him a good salary. He proved to be an excellent schoolteacher, much beloved by his students, and as generous in devoting extra time to his teaching as in meeting requests and demands of people in other contexts. The missionaries were delighted, and when they established a new senior primary boarding school for girls they selected him to be one of the teachers. This was his undoing. A fair proportion of the students were well
past puberty in their middle teens; at the end of the first year a scandal erupted when it was discovered that several of the girls were pregnant. Tiriki believe that if a woman in labor does not reveal the identity of her impregnator she may die in childbirth; all the girls while in labor named Luke! He was fired from the mission school system and stripped of his positions of authority in the church which the missionaries controlled at that time. Paternity suit payments consumed the little that remained of his former wealth.

Happily, Tiriki Christians, unlike the European missionaries, take a pragmatic rather than a moralistic view towards such matters, and Luke suffered neither ostracism nor disgrace in the local community, only poverty! After about a decade, indeed, just a few years before we knew him, local Tiriki Christians finally successfully interceded for Luke with the missionaries; they convinced them he was reformed, and the missionaries gave him a job teaching first and second grades in the local mission school. But that job too proved to be short-lived.

After we got to know Luke well he confirmed all these stories and supplied us with the sequel to his final mission employment. He found the Tiriki language more compatible than English when talking to us about such things. In translation his words were approximately as follows: “Most pupils in that school were young, too young; but there was one girl who was older, very nice, with lovely firm breasts. She got pregnant and had a baby; I was the father. Since then the missionaries have refused me.” Then he chuckled and said softly, “It was too difficult; I could not help myself!”

The preceding brief sketches of Aggie and Luke illustrate social behavioral traits that Tiriki expect and condone in basogosi but do not tolerate in other Tiriki in everyday situations. Briefly summarized these traits are: (1) relative indifference to the admonitions and commands both of peers and normal Tiriki authority figures; (2) great personal generosity together with striking personal providence; (3) a propensity to expect special favors and to become enraged when they are not met or provided. The first of the traits is very much in keeping with the stereotyping of the younger son as “irresponsible,” which Jackson found was prevalent in so many societies; but the contrast that the Tiriki muxogosi syndrome generates between the youngest and all more senior siblings does not at first blush fit so neatly with Jackson’s observations about the general nature of senior and junior son stereotypic contrasts.
Jackson’s scholarly treatment of these contrasts is subtle and complex; one of his main points, as I interpret it, is that a structural basis for birth order social stereotyping is the inherent tension between the “cultural” imposition of social roles, which usually falls particularly heavily upon the first born, and the expression of individuals’ “biogenetic” tendencies which is generally more encouraged in junior children (Jackson 1978). Regardless of whether one accepts Jackson’s thesis and thus feels the need to view the Tiriki muxogosi syndrome as a special variant of the principle Jackson is promulgating, considerable illumination of Tiriki last-born practices can be achieved by remembering Tiriki explanations for baxogosi behavior, by reviewing how Tiriki women traditionally achieve social status almost entirely through motherhood, by briefly examining Tiriki explanations for ascribed interaction between mothers’ brothers and sisters’ children, and by noting salient features of this interaction.

As noted earlier Tiriki attribute the special behavioral traits of baxogosi to the distinctive relationship they have as infants with their mothers—especially to its protracted nature. On a number of occasions we suggested to several different Tiriki that perhaps the special behavior of baxogosi was caused, or at least encouraged, by people’s expecting such behavior of them and refraining from reprimanding them severely as they would others behaving in that manner, but Tiriki inevitably rejected our (symbolic interactionist and behavior-mod) suggestions as meaningless.

Tiriki women remain jural minors throughout their lives. A woman’s status in her husband’s family, and in the community at large, is directly dependent on her bearing a large number of children. When a woman marries, she can expect neither fields to farm on her own, nor her own cooking hearth, until she has borne her husband at least three children; most Tiriki women aspire to raise a minimum of six, and ten or more live-born children is in fact not uncommon for a Tiriki woman over the span of her reproductive years and is much praised and admired. Thus, a woman achieves status in strongly patrilineal, male-chauvinist Tiriki principally by bearing and mothering a lot of children for her husband and his clan.

It is in this context that the Tiriki view the “last born” as being
particularly the mother’s child. In conclusion, I would like to point out that this association is amplified and extended to the mother’s people symbolically in the following manner.

Tiriki folk sociology links a special closeness characteristic of maternal uncles with their sisters’ children to the continuing sense of gratitude that brothers feel towards their sisters for having brought through their marriages the bridewealth the brothers themselves then use for the acquisition of their own wives (Sangree 1965:52-59, 1966:15-19). The Tiriki say this is the reason for their great generosity towards their sisters’ children particularly their willingness to meet sisters’ children’s often whimsical and capricious demands for loans of personal property and other special favors. This special relationship is further recognized and partially reciprocated ritually through particular duties carried out by sisters’ sons at their mothers’ brothers’ funerals which include removal of the protruding cap of the centerpost of the mother’s brother’s hut, thereby signalling the laying to rest and departure of his ghost.

Maternal uncles are expected to be, and indeed generally are, generous to a fault with their sister’s children, who in turn are allowed to be capriciously demanding. Thus, it can be seen that the behavior ascribed to baxogosi in effect is a caricature both of behavior expected of maternal uncles towards their sisters’ children and the reciprocal behavior expected of sisters’ children towards their maternal uncles.

From the above we can see that the major role of the mother in the character formation of her children, implied for the Tiriki by the muxogosi syndrome, is extended to her brother and thus to her kin group through the behavioral attributes ascribed to baxogosi. Thus, from the mother’s point of view the muxogosi syndrome symbolically enhances her sense of identification not only with her children but also with her natal kin group and clan, the only kin group and clan in which a woman is ever fully accepted as a member. And for the society at large it re-enforces individuals’ matrilateral links that complement their agnatic ties of clanship.

1 In no way do I mean to imply that Tiriki fathers, therefore, eschew interest in or involvement with baxogosi; this is not at all the case as we have seen with Aggie and her father, James.
REFERENCES


