Wife Inheritance Spurs AIDS Rise in Kenya

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It was the summer of 1990, and Mildred Bwire Auma faced a deadly scenario. Her husband had just succumbed to AIDS. She knew he had infected her. Now her in-laws clamored for her to allow one of her husband's brothers to make her his responsibility, as tradition here has long dictated.

Auma, then 28, could scorn tradition, be driven from her community and face starvation with her three children. Or she could marry a brother-in-law, feed her offspring, protect her property — and pass on the virus.

She chose the brother-in-law. He died of AIDS two years later, but not before infecting two other women. Then they both died.

Another man has since inherited Auma, and when she was recently interviewed, she was nine months pregnant with his child.

She says she knows the child may have the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which causes AIDS. And she knows that the disease will likely kill her inheritor. Just as it will soon kill her. "Because of the customs . . . I had to be inherited," Auma says through a translator. "They would have forced me. I would have been alone, homeless."

Here in western Kenya, the custom known as wife inheritance once held an honorable promise: A community would take care of a widow and her children. She did not remarry. Her husband's family simply took responsibility for her. If a brother-in-law could not care for her, then a cousin or a respected outsider would. The inheritor made sure that the widow and her children were fed, clothed, sheltered, educated, protected, kept.

He could only take on a widow if he had a family. His first wife would accept the arrangement because tradition frowned on his having sexual relations with his inherited one.

The system worked until the inheritors began to shun that taboo. They had sex with the widows and that helped HIV explode throughout central and East Africa.

One out of every eight people afflicted with AIDS lives in sub-Saharan Africa, where in some countries 10 percent of the population is HIV-positive. In some nations, such as Rwanda, the HIV rate in large towns and cities is as high as 25 percent.

Some countries, such as Uganda, have begun to make inroads against the disease, but many others, such as Kenya, have struggled to convince people that some traditions may also be deadly.

Pervasive as it has been, however, AIDS did not kill the tradition of widow inheritance. Men, often seeking to cheat widows out of land, have continued to inherit them. Widows, shackled by poverty, have continued to rely on inheritors to take care of them.

A number of this country's 40-plus tribes embrace the tradition, but it is especially popular among groups that dominate western Kenya. The region has the highest rate of HIV and AIDS in Kenya in part because wife inheritance allows the disease to grow exponentially, says Omondi Magunga, who directs the Kenyan government's efforts to attack AIDS.

An inheritor has his own family. He infects his first wife and the widow he has inherited. Then he dies, and two other men inherit the women he leaves behind. Those men die. And then their widows are inherited.

"It's a terrible cycle," Magunga says. "You will tell [a family] that the husband died of AIDS, and the woman is probably very sick, but they say someone must [inherit] the wife. They say tradition must be followed."

Most widows in places like Busia possess little education, have no property, do not hold jobs and do not have the skills to easily find one. They must choose, one AIDS activist says, "to [be inherited] and be infected and have food, or you starve."

Auma, of course, chose to save herself and her three children. And essential to that effort was saving the three acres of land she had taken over after her husband's death.

After her first inheritor died, her in-laws threatened to kill her if she did not relinquish the property.

She got the deed rewritten in her name, but her in-laws still tried to push her from the property. So when Africanus Auma offered to take her in on his land, within sight of her property, she accepted.

"It was one way for me to stay near the farm," and be protected, she says.
Before she accepted, she told her inheritor that she was sick.

"You are aware of my first husband?" she asked Africanus.

"Yes," he said.

"You are aware of my first inheritor?"

"Yes," he said. "But I still want to take you."

They slaughtered a goat and had a feast. Africanus officially became her new inheritor.
Mildred is not entirely displeased with her decision. Her property is safe, and her children will take it upon her death. It was important for her "to secure something . . . for the children," she says.

The practice of wife inheritance is one reason Busia district, 220 miles west of Kenya's capital, Nairobi, is reeling from AIDS. The infection rate in its towns runs about 30 percent, Magunga says. The rate in Busia's villages is 14 to 16 percent.

It seems there is a grave in nearly every yard in Busia. Empty concrete houses and huts are scattered across the district.

A thriving commercial sex business has made Busia especially vulnerable. The town is often the last stop for truckers who sometimes arrive here after weeks on the road. The fishermen from nearby Lake Victoria also contribute to the prostitutes' trade.

Many of those prostitutes infect men who live in Busia. And many of those men infect their wives.

The cycle is fed by denial. Widows afflicted with HIV say they are suffering from malaria, and inheritors often refuse to believe that the widow's husband died of AIDS. Widows and inheritors sometimes will insist that "witchcraft" killed the husband.

Such denial simplified Alice Ayako's decision when Benson Kwendo Amakutwa offered to inherit her last year after AIDS killed her husband. Ayako has three children, two of whom are grown. She does not plead poverty. "I wanted a companion," she says.

During an interview in their hut, Amakutwa and Ayako sit with a chair between them. They do not look at each other. Ayako's eyes are pinned to the floor, and Amakutwa, a muscular man with a ragged mustache and goatee, picks at his fingernails.

"Stephen did not die of AIDS," Ayako blurts out, speaking through a translator. "He was bewitched. He was a village elder, and some people were against him, so I think his death came from witchcraft. I heard that he died of AIDS, but I don't believe."

Amakutwa adds: "I don't believe. No one knows what disease another man has in his body. Only Jesus knows." Amakutwa, who has five children from his wife, says he is still "together" with her. He does not think he is putting her at risk. "I don't think she will be sick," he says.

Traditionally, there are few alternatives for widows in this region: Those who scoff at inheritance usually are banished from their communities.

Dorothy Anyango, coordinator of Women Fighting AIDS in Kenya, knows one widow who refused to marry her brother-in-law and was forced from the community with her children.

The woman never returned. She died and suffered the ultimate insult: She was denied burial in her home village.

The desperate straits of women in western Kenya have compelled Anyango's group, and others, to start programs to help women generate income. "We tell them to make sure they have their own cattle, their own goats," says Nakudi Mugeni, deputy chairwoman of a Busia women's organization. "That way, when they need money, they have something to sell."

Anyango and Mugeni say ignorance is not Busia's problem. People such as Omuko and Amakutwa know AIDS exists. "You get the virus from somebody else when you [have sex] with someone who has that disease," Amakutwa says.

A government survey in 1995 found that 80 percent of Busia's residents knew that AIDS was a fatal disease contracted primarily through sexual contact.

Busia's most popular hotel displays AIDS information booklets. Residents hear about AIDS on the radio. Huge signs around town warn people to protect themselves.

One, along the main road that threads through Busia, reads: "Don't be fooled. AIDS is not witchcraft. AIDS is real. Avoid sex before marriage. Stick to one partner or use a condom."

Sometimes the message gets through.

The Mubweka family experienced the reality of AIDS in the early 1990s, after the disease felled Richard Mubweka — husband, father, government worker. The stout, friendly man began fainting and vomiting blood in October 1993. Six months later he was dead.

Today his grave, with its flat, cracked concrete and brittle wooden cross, lies behind the widow's house. Tall grass has sprouted around the grave, so that it is almost invisible even from a few feet away.

Days before his death, Richard Mubweka, who had three wives told his relatives that he had AIDS. And he said he did not want his wife, Gertrude, inherited.

His family has thus far honored that request. And Gertrude Mubweka, 40, has managed just fine, in large part because she has a steady job and owns property.

Her job as a primary schoolteacher brings in about $80 a month, and Richard left her with 11 acres of land.

The widow lives in a two-room concrete home, where foam stuffing spills out of her couches and chairs. A black briefcase straining with books and papers rests on one chair. A picture of a healthy Richard hangs on a nail in the living room.

Gertrude, gray hair tight on her scalp, is furious at women who give in to inheritance. She equates them to prostitutes and murderers.

"If someone tried to inherit me, I wouldn't accept," says Mubweka, her bright brown eyes turning angry. "I don't want to be a killer of many. If I have been alone since 1994, when don't I keep on?"

Her four older children — ages 19, 18, 17 and 15 — know she has AIDS. She has been open about the disease and has admonished them "to be careful in their choosing of partners. . . . I warn them about the outcome of romance."

Unlike many widows, Mubweka has kept her children in school. Only the 19-year-old, who has finished school, and her 4-year-old son are not in classes.

"Only educating people" will help smother wife inheritance, she says, standing outside her home one morning. "People say [wife inheritance] is from our great-grandfathers, we must do it. It will go away only as the older generation leaves us."

Then she hurries inside. She must head off to school.