Aspirations and sex: Coming of age in western Kenya in a context of HIV
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Prologue

One warm night in August 2005, in a small Kenyan fishing village called Dhonam (mouth of the lake), a village of Winam (head of the lake), loud music was being played outside. New to the village, my boyfriend Sven, my research assistant Petronella, and I sat in our room, wondering if the music was from a disco matanga (funeral disco or party), curious why no one had told us about it. A disco matanga is usual organized by the family of the deceased, and held the nights before and after the burial. The musical entertainment is meant to give comfort to the bereaved left behind, because at night it is cold and people feel sad.

We were already in bed, around 10 p.m., when two male youngsters, Onyango (17 years old) and his best friend and stepbrother Joel (18 years old), came by to take us to the disco matanga. We dressed, and Onyango informed us that there were actually three disco matangas happening that night; the one we were going to was for the mother of one of the local fishermen. When we arrived at the large homestead (a typical Luo compound, where the lineage members of the husband of the deceased wife lived in a number of huts), we recognized many of the people from the local fishing beach. We also met some of the young people who played a significant role in my research. While observing the disco matanga, I paid special attention to how young men and women interacted, what their concerns were, what they talked about, the kind of clothes they were wearing, and their age. My intention was to observe the behaviour of young people and to understand why public health workers active in the field described these funeral discos as ‘risk situations’ for young people to become infected with HIV. Some parents warned their children, especially their daughters, not to go to these events. According to Adhis, a 20-year-old young woman, those young women who go to disco matangas want to “sell their bodies”. Nevertheless, many young women of Winam, along with many young men, attended disco matangas.

When we entered the compound of the deceased person’s husband’s family, we greeted the middle-aged women who were cooking behind one of the many huts. There was a lot of laughter among them, and many appeared drunk. As we ventured further into the homestead, we noticed some young people standing and sitting under a mango tree. Opposite them was a big tent, with chairs and tables and lit petroleum lamps. We chose a spot in the back, under the trees and close to the huts, where we could observe everything. There was a lot to take in: a group of girls, 10 to 12 years old, sitting silently
by a hut opposite us; a drunken man talking to some children; the smell of bhang (marijuana) wafting out from the back of a hut; drunken young men dancing in the tent; other youth standing outside, talking in groups. More and more people came, mostly young men, who were followed by some older women who joined in the dancing. More young women arrived soon after: they stood in the dark corner, in groups of three or four, dressed in close-fitting trousers and tops, attracting attention with the clear lines of their bodies.

Some of the young women, who appeared to be between 15 and 18 years old, were serving tea and mandazi (East African fried bread) in the tent to the visitors. The visitors were friends and relatives of the deceased person who travelled in from outside Winam to attend the funeral. A group of men brought containers of chang’aa (a locally brewed, illegal, strong spirit) into the tent for the local guests. A bit later, the visitors were served ugali (boiled maize flour) and other food.

The presence of our young guide, Onyango, who had identified the disco matanga guests for us, telling us who was who and which girls were from which schools, helped us meet many people that night. He first introduced us to a very tall young man named Rambo, a 23-year-old teacher. Another tall young man of 19, Otieno, visited with us; he, his almost 17-year-old sister Atieno, and his 16-year-old brother Enoka were already good friends of ours. The three of them had studied in town, close to Nairobi, but due to financial necessity Otieno—supported his mother and siblings—had become a fisherman.

Onyango then called out to a young woman standing behind us, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, and talking sheng (slang) with three young men. She was talking loudly, and had been dancing a lot. When she came to greet us, Onyango introduced her as Awuor; Joel ignored her, continuing to talk with a schoolmate instead. Onyango later informed us that she used to be Joel’s girlfriend, and that he had broken up with her the week before, when he found her dancing with another young man at another disco matanga. Awuor had finished primary school but like Otieno and his siblings, did not have the means to continue her education. Onyango then pointed out Ariet, who was parading around the grounds with another young woman, seeking the attention of the young men. Ariet had dated both Rambo and Steve, one of Onyango’s younger nephews, but Onyango was hesitant to talk with her: she had so many boyfriends, he said, that he was afraid of getting beaten up for talking to her.

A bit later, we were surprised to run into our friend Lucy, who we knew from our visits to Yeshica, an HIV/AIDS prevention project for youth in Winam; there she was at
the *disco matanga*, dancing with three young men. She was wearing a Yeshica t-shirt, still proud of the affiliation. Lucy told us her news: she would no longer be working at the hotel in Dhonam. She had new plans to move to the nearby town of Bondo and take a course in tailoring, while staying at her aunt’s place. Lucy seemed to be very happy, as she did not want to stay in Winam and preferred living in town. After finishing secondary school, she had been engaged to her mathematics teacher (who was known for having many girlfriends), who also served as the church leader for the Youth Group at the Anglican Church at Dhonam, but her uncle, her caretaker after the deaths of her parents, had discouraged the marriage. She had hoped marrying a teacher would be a way of moving out of the village to town but it had not worked out as she had wished. The tailoring course in Bondo town, she hoped, could give her new opportunities to find work or a boyfriend in town.

Themes were rapidly emerging: thwarted schooling, crisscrossed lines of dating and relationships, and hopes for a future elsewhere. We listened to the youth around us, as they spoke of propositions and cautionary tales. One of Joel’s friends said: “I am looking for a girl to go home with” (youngsters speak about each other as ‘boys’ and ‘girls’), and Joel responded by advising his friend to think about books instead, since school was resuming soon. His friend retorted: “Everyone sleeps around, even those at colleges, universities, and churches... even the Catholic father is a prostitute”. Meanwhile, in one of the dark corners, young men were talking to a young woman who was lying on her back, on the ground. Some were flirting, while one told her “there is no lodging here”. Rambo was studying the girls and young women by the hut, looking at each closely, and then pointing out one young woman to Onyango. Petronella overheard part of their exchange:

Rambo: I am scared of pursuing that girl: what if I find out she is one of my students?

Onyango: It doesn’t matter, no one will know.

Rambo: They (the Teachers Service Commission and the school) are very strict. If they find out, I will be suspended and interdicted. Many people have been interdicted and those who have impregnated girls have been taken to court and half of their salary goes to the support of the child. Sometimes, the parents insist that they marry and maybe they are not compatible.

This bit of conversation reflects the complexity of the situation in which young people live: the weekly *disco matangas* are the perfect occasion for finding dating partners—and having a partner is not just enjoyable, but can also, as this study shows, improve a
person’s prospects—but the matter is fraught with complications. Young people are tempted to engage in sexual relations and see virtually everyone around them doing so, including those who should be their positive role models, such as teachers, priests, and other adults in the community. There is a clear gender bias as young women are expected to abstain from sex while young men’s sexual activities are normalized.

A bit later, we came across Enoka, younger brother to Otieno and Atieno, and Onyango’s friend. Enoka greeted us and we could see from his reaction that he did not expect to meet us here. Unlike some of the older youth we had encountered that evening, Enoka had dropped out of primary school, and had started to earn his living at only 14 years of age. Instead of going to school, he spent his mornings hanging around the fishing beaches, and helping the fishermen empty their boats. Omosh, a 16-year-old orphan who also had dropped out of primary school, then came over to greet us. We knew him as the younger brother of Ochien’g, one of the youngsters we already followed closely. Omosh is a fisherman but he is also a musician from a local band and now and then performs in Kisumu.

Omosh, who was clearly drunk, asked Onyango about a young woman he had seen earlier who was “smoking a cigarette like a man”; Omosh reported that she also “drinks like a man”, and that he had seen her at a bar with men who had misused her—when she was drunk, the men would take turns having sex with her out on the grass nearby. Omosh commented that she is “new” to Dhonam, and that she had recently come to visit her sister, who is married and lives in Dhonam. Tonight she was out with her sister’s brother-in-law, one among the men who was having sex with her. We could see after she returned to the party that she was drunk and her hair was mussed; some young men were trying to touch her and a fight almost broke out. She was quarrelling with them, and one of the men pulled her away.

The air was now filled with smoke and we could smell bhang. Enoka’s friend and some young men in reggae attire were rolling up joints and openly smoking them. A man who had ‘passed out’ was carried by some men and placed on the grass to sleep. One of our older female neighbours was also drunk by now, had fallen down, and was helped to stand back up. Girls and young women joined the young men dancing in the tent; most of the young men were drunk by now. Two young men started quarrelling with each other over a young woman, and were using offensive language. Each wanted to be the young woman’s boyfriend, and they started to fight. Suddenly the music
stopped, everyone walked out of the tent, apparently to see what was happening between the young men. Others started fighting.

But as quickly as events had deteriorated, things turned around. The visitors—those who had travelled from other villages and towns to attend the funeral—had a “chairman”, or a leader who spoke for the group. He asked everyone to come back in the tent, to behave well, and to respect the home of the host. Reminding everyone why they had been brought together, the death of one of the women in the village, he asked people not to fight with one another. The music came back on, dancing resumed, the tunes switched from reggae to benga (local Dholuo music), and everyone thronged the dance floor. Then, after an hour, the music stopped, and everyone sat down.

The chairman announced that it was time to make contributions. Two men sat by a table in the middle of the tent, and on the table was a bowl; the men had a book in which to write. The chairman explained that he would call one person at a time to give money, and asked others to add something small on top of it, as the music played. This kind of dance, in which money was collected, is called seyi. The chairman also noted the visitors’ group had brought some young women, and in order to dance with them, one needed to pay 50 Kenyan shillings (60 eurocents). We left when the harambee (fundraising) was starting: walking out of the compound, we saw that the older relatives and friends of the bereaved family were eating together, happily. Arriving home around 2 a.m., we knew it would take a long time to fully understand all we had seen, but we were convinced that the disco matanga was an important nexus of many things: death and life, support and sanction, and risk and hope.

This event, early in our field research, encapsulates many of the key issues at stake in the struggle to reduce the level of HIV infection in Kenya. In just a few hours, we witnessed the strong pull of desire between young men and women, who want to find a one-night lover, a life-long partner, a mate. We overheard the castigation and shaming that happens when people transgress gendered norms. We saw the exchange of money for a dance with a pretty young woman. We listened as young people told us of their limited opportunities, their stunted school careers, and their hopes and aspirations to leave the village. This dissertation unravels these many aspects of the disco matanga: how youth try to creatively manage the risk of HIV in their lives, how they enjoy their lives while constantly being reminded of the ubiquity of death, and how they wrestle with conflicts with authorities—those adults they see at night cheating on their wives or approaching primary schoolgirls, who can, during the day, expel them from school or
physically punish them for going on a date. The disco matanga also demonstrates the uphill struggle of rural families who have to bear the high costs of such an event while their sources of income are shrinking further. Funerals are a big drain on the whole community’s resources, since everybody in the village contributes through the harambees, and most of the funds leave the community, going to the matatu (public minibus) drivers who bring the deceased back from town for an absurdly high price, or to the businessmen who supercharge the party with a modern sound- and light-system. Accumulating resources is not possible in this context and consequently many youths aim to leave the village and move to town. At least for this, the disco matanga with its urban visitors is the perfect occasion: social skills can be practiced that might serve at some point in the future.

1 Throughout this dissertation, I use pseudonyms for the places (except the cities as Kisumu, Nairobi and Mombasa) and for the people of my research study in order to protect their privacy (see Chapter 2). Winam consists of more than 80 villages and is one of the communities that constitute Bondo District, in central Nyanza Province, located in Western Kenya. Winam touches Lake Victoria towards the east and has several fishing beaches (see Chapter 1 and 3).

2 In this dissertation, when I talk about ‘young people’ or ‘young men’ and ‘young women’, I refer to people approximately 16 years old and older. I also use the terms ‘youth’ and ‘youngsters’. When I refer to boys and girls, on the other hand, I am referring to people under the age of 16. I make this distinction throughout this dissertation, although the youngsters with whom I worked did not make such a distinction. They usually talked about ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ for those who were not married yet; once they were married, women were named after their natal residence, for instance Nyaralego (daughter of Alego) or after one of their children, for instance MinAkinyi (mother of Akinyi). Married men were often referred to by their proper name, or when older, with a term of respect, ‘mzee’.

3 Many ‘Luo people’ are polygamous. A Luo homestead (dala) at the time of my fieldwork usually consisted of two generations (before usually up to three generations but due to land scarcity, this was no longer the case): that of the husband and the mother(s) and their offspring. Thus, the homestead is composed of the house (ot) of the male head (wuon dala, the owner of the homestead), and several matrifocal (jokamiyo, people of one mother) units, close to the fields. It may also consist of the bachelor huts (simba) of their sons who have not yet formed their own homestead (see also Chapter 3).

4 In this account of the disco matanga, I combined my field observations from three different disco matangas that were spread over time in the months between August 2005 and November 2005.

5 The exchange rate was 80 Kenyan shilling (KES) per 1 euro during the time of my fieldwork. I use this exchange rate throughout this dissertation.