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# Survival strategies of the elderly in Gwembe Valley, Zambia: Gender, residence and kin networks

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**Abstract.** Fundamental social and material reproductive activities take place in the domestic setting, especially in subsistence societies. For the elderly in these societies, residential arrangements significantly influence their well being because of the redistribution of resources that occurs within the domestic unit. This article examines the critical issue of how the elderly of Zambia's Gwembe Valley organize their residential arrangements. The article also raises the issue of how gender influences elderly men's and women's relationships and support networks with their children and other kin. In the Gwembe Valley men and women employ different strategies in harnessing basic necessities, including their residence, which constitutes the primary setting where people negotiate their needs. Recognition of the variety and subtlety of relationships in the aging process, and the variety of individuals engaged in those relationships, allows for better understanding of the range of support systems and subsistence strategies in non-industrial settings. The analysis presented in this article emerges from the longitudinal Gwembe Tonga Research Project (GTRP) and ethnographic fieldwork carried out in three rural communities during the mid 1990s.

**Keywords:** Africa, Gender, Household economy, Intergenerational relations, Living arrangements

## Introduction

For everyone living in the Gwembe Valley of Zambia's Southern Province, household composition and living arrangements play a vital role in people's subsistence because of the redistribution of resources that occurs in the domestic unit. Most homestead members bring some kind of productive capacity to a homestead, whether agricultural labor and produce, material wealth, cash generating activities, or domestic chores. Through the redistributive processes typical of most domestic groups, members generally benefit from some element of the group's productive energy. In this way, residential arrangements shape and fundamentally influence support for the elderly.

This article examines the critical issue of how the elderly of the Gwembe Valley organize their residential arrangements. The domestic setting forms the locus of fundamental social and material reproductive activity. In the Gwembe Valley, as in other regions of Africa (Peil 1991; Udvardy & Cattell

1992) and elsewhere (Aytac 1998; De Vos 1998; Domingo et al. 1995; Knodel et al. 1995; Lam et al. 1998; Lee et al. 1995) living arrangements influence the ways elderly people harness resources. While extended family and community members often participate in support networks reaching beyond the residential domestic setting, the elderly most often gain access to the majority of their food and basic necessities through their residential arrangements (For a discussion of non-domestic support, see Knodel & Saengtienchai 1999). When a widow lives with a successful farmer son, she will most likely eat better than a widow who lives alone and cannot farm aggressively due to limits on strength and physical abilities.

The domestic setting also becomes the primary stage for elderly people to assert their identity, and call upon obligations that are inherent to their position. Part of identity assertion among Gwembe elders centers on their gender, and the ways that mothers and fathers differ in their relationships to children. Other research on intergenerational residence patterns, particularly where survey methods provide the majority of data, tends to treat elderly men and women as one group (De Vos 1998; Domingo et al. 1995; Lam et al. 1998; Mehta et al. 1995). The story told here points out the different choices and strategies that elderly men and elderly woman employ as they interact in their domestic settings. Consideration of the different ways that aging men and women negotiate support with their children and relatives adds valuable insight on intergenerational relations. Recognition of this variety and subtlety of relationships in the aging process allows us to better understand the range of support systems and subsistence strategies in non-industrial settings – important knowledge when our research provides a foundation for policy and development directed at providing for the growing elderly population of the world. This article thus contributes to the ongoing discussion of aging, residential arrangements, and intergenerational relations in non-western settings.

## Fieldsite and methods

The Gwembe Valley carries the reputation throughout Zambia as a drought prone, isolated and impoverished area. Annual hunger seasons, combined with cyclical droughts, often make subsistence tenuous. Over the past 2 decades droughts and "hunger years" throughout Southern Africa have occurred more frequently, and in 1992–1993 and 1994–1995 two of the worst droughts since the 1920s hit Zambia's Southern Province (Savory 1996). In addition to these aspects of hardship, the Zambian nation has suffered from economic decline since the mid 1970s when copper prices (Zambia's largest export) on the world market dropped, causing an economic crisis throughout

the country. Since that time Zambia's economy has fluctuated intermittently, with a general down trend most recently exacerbated by the World Bank's and IMF's structural adjustment program launched in the early 1990s.

These national level economic conditions affect both urban and rural populations through increased prices for staples like maize (for food and seed), fertilizer and other household supplies, staffing and supplying medical clinics and schools, employment options in all locations and maintenance of infrastructure such as roads and transportation systems. In these austere economic conditions, everyone faces the challenge of daily survival in conditions of increasing scarcity. For the people of the Gwembe Valley, these conditions trigger familiar responses, such as gathering wild foods that satisfy hunger (but not taste preferences), tapping into larger and larger support networks (such as migrants living in areas with better harvests), and trimming down expenses **and** consumers (by discouraging begging from neighbors, eating indoors, and encouraging able family members to migrate out of the area during times of scarcity) (Colson 1979). In these times of hardship, the elderly often find themselves in tenuous positions at the fringe of the productive domestic unit, at risk of being "trimmed out" and receiving less than their basic needs. Given such conditions, the elderly must become key players in their own survival, negotiating their position and rights to valuable resources with relatives and kin.

*Background to research on the Gwembe Tonga*

Many scholars of social change and African studies know of the Gwembe Tonga people due to the research Elizabeth Colson and Thayer Scudder have conducted over the past 40 years (Colson 1960, 1971; Colson & Scudder 1988; Scudder 1962; Scudder & Colson 1978, 1981). Their original research agenda focused on cultural continuity and change in the face of massive upheaval caused by the building of Kariba Dam on the Zambezi River, and subsequent resettlement of approximately 70,000 Gwembe Tonga. In 1956 Colson and Scudder initiated the "before" study of Gwembe Tonga life ways, and in 1962, after resettlement, they returned to their original sites in order to understand the process of change and adaptation. Since that time, Colson and Scudder have returned to these original field sites approximately every three years, and continued systematic data collection on a vast array of socio-cultural, economic, political, religious and demographic information.

In 1994 I joined Colson's and Scudder's Gwembe Tonga Research Project (GTRP) as part of the "next generation" who would increasingly manage the project as Colson and Scudder began the process of retirement. I went to Zambia in the spring of 1994 and settled in Sinafala village to begin approximately 18 months of anthropological research on support systems for the


*Figure 1.* Southern Provice, Zambia.

elderly among the Gwembe Tonga people (Cliggett 1997). I made my home base in Sinfala village, located along the lakeshore in Gwembe central. I chose Mazulu village, at the north end of the Gwembe Valley, as a comparison site. I also conducted extensive interviews in two migration destinations for Gwembe villagers: Chikanta, a frontier farming area on the plateau northeast of the Gwembe Valley, and Lusaka, the capital of Zambia and the primary migration destination for those people seeking wage employment (Figure 1).

The data and analysis presented in this article comes from 92 individuals, aged 55 or older, in three different research sites. Lusaka, my urban research site, had no permanently resident elderly people; Zambians attribute the small population of elderly people living in urban areas to the high cost of urban life, and the lack of institutional support for seniors in the absence of kin networks. When a man or woman reaches their senior years they typically return to home villages or establish new farms in frontier land, abandoning their urban home. Although I worked with Gwembe villagers in Lusaka, this population constituted the children of elderly people living elsewhere.

The Gwembe central village, Sinafala, housed 45 of the 92 elderly people with whom I worked intensively. In 1994–1995 Sinafala had a total population of approximately 500 people. Mazulu village, with a 1994–1995 population of approximately 400 people, housed another 37 of my study

group. The frontier farming region northeast of the valley became a popular migration destination for many Gwembe people in the 1980s, including children of many aging villagers. In 1994–1995, I found ten elders living in Chikanta; these aging men and women had left Sinafala village, or retired from urban centers where they had wage employment, to settle with relatives in the frontier. The migrant destination of Chikanta poses challenges for identifying a "total population" because the region covers a vast area, and the residents represent migrants from many areas of the country. However, our GTRP data shows that in 1994–1995 approximately 150 migrants from Sinafala, or descendents of those migrants, lived in the Chikanta region. In all three sites, the group of elders with whom I worked constituted the total population of people aged 55 or older.

The methods of data collection that I employed included extensive open-ended interviews, focused discussions on resource access, support networks and gift exchanges, and surveys to collect detailed information about family members, residence patterns and frequency of contact with non resident kin. I interviewed all 92 elderly people, in their homesteads, and also interviewed most of their children, both in the village and, in the case of migrant children, in their homes in town or other rural areas. With the help of my research assistant, I conducted most of these interviews in Citonga, the local language all Gwembe Tonga people speak.

In addition to the formal data collection techniques I used, I also observed the ebb and flow of daily life. I lived in a homestead with a man and his three wives, and their thirteen resident children. Sharing meals with this family and other villagers offered a multitude of opportunities to witness village life in action, including many moments of resource distribution, a primary aspect of my research agenda. In the sections that follow, I present components of my formal data, but I also contextualize this information with more vivid stories of how elders and family members negotiate their relationships and resource access.

## Daily life in Tonga homesteads

The village social environment consists of numerous ways to group people. The concept of "village" itself is subject to multiple interpretations. The British colonial legacy throughout central Africa superimposed a political organization of chiefs and village headmen that was not indigenous to Tonga society (Colson 1960; Vail 1989). However, "neighborhoods" based on groupings of related families and collective ritual activities, predated colonial transformations, and have persisted to the present (Colson 1960). Villages, originally identified and created by colonial authorities, are smaller group-

ings than neighborhoods, and generally consist of multiple homesteads of related families. As contemporary social and political groupings, villages play a roll in daily life, particularly for conflict resolution through "traditional courts" overseen by headmen, and in the soccer teams that each village prides. Villages are also the most immediate social environment beyond the homestead, often consisting of close relatives, within which individuals interact.

Another important social grouping for Gwembe Tonga is the matrilineal clan, and the subsidiary matrilineages that comprise the clan.[1] Through the matrilineal kinship system people know their "proper family," a concept that plays an important role in who elderly people turn to for assistance. Exogenous marriage systems lead to heterogeneous family groups; men should marry women from different clans, and a man should not marry two women of the same matrilineage.

These heterogeneous families usually live in a "homestead", defined as a cluster of houses in which an extended family lives. The term homestead, which in Citonga also means village, captures the layered and interwoven levels of people in each of those separate structures. The social composition of a homestead typically includes a married man, his wives – occasionally as many as nine, their children – some of whom may be married sons with wives and children, perhaps an elderly mother if the man is young enough to still have a mother living, often an unmarried or divorced sister of the senior man, and in many cases other matrilineal kin of the man, such as a sister's son or daughter, or mother's sister. Each adult has her or his own house, although the senior man may simply use his wives' houses unless he has decided to have an "office", both as a symbol of his importance and as a guesthouse for visitors. In general, each wife has a house, each married son has his own house, and an elderly mother would have her own house, as would any other adult relatives. Children typically sleep in their mother's or another adult's house, or in a boy's or girl's group house. As a result of these arrangements, one large homestead may have 20 buildings.

Of course there are variations on the composition of homesteads. In the case of elderly women who live alone, a homestead can simply consist of a single wattle and dab shelter. Although Tonga men often claim they want to marry many wives, it is relatively uncommon for a man to have more than three wives simultaneously. Most homesteads in the villages where I worked during 1994–1995 consisted of a man with between one and three wives, their children, and often a nephew, niece, and other related children, and possibly one of the man's widowed sisters. With this kind of composition, most homesteads included between seven and fifteen people, at least five of whom were above age eighteen. However, people aged 55 and older were

more likely to live in smaller homesteads, unless they had moved in with a relative's family. The majority (73%) of the elderly population with whom I worked during 1994–1995 lived in homesteads with no more than four adults and four children.

In these residential social groupings the most basic elements of survival are played out in daily life (see Weismantel 1988 for a South American parallel). Food is not produced and consumed at the homestead level, but within a house. That is, each wife grows food for her children and her husband. Yet, the blur of exchange between wives and other homestead members is a fluid process between individuals and groups. In addition to the fields of their husbands for which they are responsible, wives have their own gardens and fields, where they and their children and matrilineal relatives will plant, weed, scare birds and harvest. Upon returning to the homestead in the evening, each wife, or one of her daughters, prepares and cooks both *nsima* (grain meal porridge) and an accompanying sauce, on her own fire.

The three stone hearth on which women cook is both a kitchen, and a symbol of a woman's membership in the homestead. Women rarely share a cooking fire, so that each homestead has as many hearths as there are wives and other adult women. A woman should not approach another co-wife's fire while food is being cooked for fear that the trespasser will be accused of witchcraft or using dangerous medicines against the other woman.

Once wives or their daughters prepare the meals, men and boys cluster around the area near a man's gathering place, *igobelo*,[2] or his grain bin, to eat the dishes served by all the wives. Women frequently sit together, near but not with the men, and taste each other's cuisine, feeding the young children from the bowls of various food. Although wives prepare food separately, they often taste what the other cooked. Even during cooking, co-wives, daughters and daughters-in-law often share and exchange their resources. A wife who just sold an ox to buy grain may give a dish of maize meal to her co-wife who has none. Or a daughter-in-law who just received a jar of cooking oil from her husband may give a small portion to the elderly grandmother cooking a small dish of wild greens on her own fire. It is clear that inclination towards self-interest and tendencies of cooperation are intertwined within the homestead (Dwyer & Bruce 1988; Netting et al. 1984; Wilk 1989, 1991).

Children supplement the family's diet by bringing fish, birds, or field rats from the surrounding bush. Although children frequently provide substance for the sauces in the family pot – particularly fish during their brief season of plenty – they do not always share the products of their labor. In the homestead where I ate regularly, one giggly five year old girl roasted a field rat she had caught that afternoon, and proceeded to scoot into the shadows beyond the fire light, away from the crowd of her brothers and sisters, to eat the critter

gleefully.[3] Teenage boys often arrived in the homestead in the late afternoon, before others had returned from the fields, to roast and devour birds they had hit using their slingshots. Although Tonga adults spoke to me about "bush animals" that can be used for food, I only ever saw children actually making use of the resource. Perhaps these sources of food demand nibble bodies and quick hands, characteristics that the senior population of the villages no longer have.

Young boys also milk cattle, when their families are fortunate enough to have them. Even though the boys do not own the cattle, if they milk the herds they have rights to the product.[4] By selling the milk, boys can generate a small income to buy school supplies. Milk is also a favored sauce for *nsima*, and the guidelines for regulating its consumption were never clear to me. On a few occasions I heard a boy refusing to bring out milk to one of his mothers, but at other times, a boy would spontaneously disappear into his house only to emerge with a quarter liter of sour milk for everyone in the family to enjoy.[5]

Homesteads have a complex system of regulating consumption and production activities. Production and consumption are also highly attuned to the composition of the group. The immediacy of daily life is played out in the homestead yards; children lick from the pots as meals are prepared; old women cook grains from their own kitchen garden over their own fire and then share with grandchildren; daughters-in-law borrow food from a neighbor and then serve a dish to an old woman, and a man sometimes returns from working on the road in a food relief program with a bucket of maize for all his wives to share. In addition, when free from the duties of herding cattle, sons may mold bricks and build their father a new office, and daughters carry buckets of water home after they return from weeding in their mother's fields near the lake. While weaving baskets to exchange for a dish of meali meal, old women look after their grandchildren until the mothers return from the monthly visit by the government vaccine program.

Understanding basic survival for Gwembe villagers begins with the vast assortment of production options, both social and material, that individuals bring to the homestead. For the elderly, often physically limited in their mobility and self-sufficiency, residence becomes the most critical variable influencing well-being.

## Elders's residential choices

Men and women had very different living situations. Most men (89%), but only a quarter of the women, lived with a spouse, reflecting the high rate of widowhood among older women and the necessity for women to make other choices (Table 1). Only one man, but half the women (51%) lived with or

*Table 1.* Residence by gender and living arrangement, total elderly sample (age 55+ in Sinafala, Mazulu, Chikanta)

| Sex | Total sample | Married living w/ spouse | With or near a son | Alone | With or near a brother | With a sister | With a grandson | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Women | 65 | 16 (25%) | 33 (51%) | 5 (8%) | 5 (8%) | 4 (6%) | 2 (3%) | |
| Men | 27 | 24 (89%) | 1 (4%) | 0 | 0 | 1 (4%) | 0 | 1 (4%) |

near a married son. Specifically, twenty-six women (40%) lived in a married son's homestead, and 7 women who headed their own homesteads lived near a married son's homestead. The other 49% of the women lived in various situations – alone (no men lived alone), or with or near a brother, sister or grandson. Although children who have migrated out of the immediate vicinity (to rural areas nearby and afar, as well as towns) play a roll in village and family life through their return visits, they are a variable left out of this discussion of elder's well-being because they do not provide substantial inputs for survival on a regular basis (Cliggett 2000; also see Knodel & Saengtienchai 1999 for a discussion of living near but not "with" children).

Clearly, gender differences influence residential preference. Even though men may be in their 60s, truly elderly given Zambia's life expectancy of 49 years, they are most often married and living with at least one wife. Widowed or divorced women most often live with or near a married son. In the following sections I will discuss the different preferences that men and women have for their living arrangements. Rather than depend on children for support, a man wants at least one significantly younger wife who will continue to work for him, and he wants to head his own homestead. Women prefer to live with adult sons when they become widowed, and in many cases a woman will divorce a husband in order to live with a son, particularly if the husband is quite aged himself and cannot assist her with tasks that typically fall to men.

### *Living the good life*

The gendered division of labor among the Tonga, the dynamics of power relations within the homestead, and instances of personal preference influence the variation in residential arrangements of the elderly. When I asked why an old woman prefers to live with a son rather than a daughter, the almost unanimous answer was "a son can build a house for you." Indeed, male labor within Tonga society is largely centered on building structures, including

grain bins, fences to protect gardens from invading cattle and hippos, and living shelters both in the homesteads and the gardens, and on the heavy work of clearing fields and plowing. A husband usually performs the men's work in a homestead until a son is old and strong enough to take over the responsibility. In the absence of a husband or a son, a woman's brother or sister's son may fulfill some of these needs.

The matrilineal system of the Tonga is challenged by their bride price system (*lobola*) in which young men pay cattle to their wives' families, transferring rights to female labor from one man to another through the payment of lineage property. This system encourages reliance on sons rather than daughters for support in old age. Both men and women agreed that it is improper to live with a married daughter because the parents have "already eaten that man's cattle," despite the fact that the matrilineal identity will be passed through those daughters. The bride price system underscores the exchange between families; once a woman marries, the rights to her labor transfer from her father and natal family, to her husband and his family, who paid for it with *lobola*. So just as an aging mother would not live with her married daughter, for whom she no longer has legal rights to labor, she can easily live with her married son; in this arrangement a mother has rights to the labors of her son, and to the labor of her daughter-in-law for whom her matrilineage gave cattle.

One successful young man who had completed secondary school and teachers training described to me how his mother influenced his first marriage. During secondary school, Lazwell's mother encouraged him to marry a woman from the village with whom he had relations for some time, saying that she needed a daughter-in-law to help her with daily work while he was schooling. Despite the risk of expulsion from school due to marriage (school regulations prohibit students from marrying or becoming pregnant), Lazwell married the woman, partly to satisfy his mother's pleading. He then sought a position at a secondary school in town where he was able to conceal the illegal marriage, leaving his wife behind in the care of his mother. With access to both a son and his wife, an old woman benefits from the availability of male labor, and she can lighten her own load of drawing water, pounding grain, collecting firewood and cooking, due to the efforts of her daughter-in-law.

For older men, the story differs somewhat. While children grow up within the homestead, respecting their father as the homestead head and power holder, and providing labor in his fields, cattle kraal and home, they do not share a common matrilineal identity with him. A man is an outsider within his own homestead because of the matrilineal kinship system that emphasizes ties to mothers and their families. The matrilineage (*mukowa*), in addition to shaping property ownership through time and generations, plays a powerful

role in individual, family and kinship identity; primary identity in Gwembe families derives from links to mothers and their relatives. For this reason, unless a man has brought his own kin (clan members) from sisters or his mother to live in his homestead, he is the only member of his clan in the homestead.

Recognition of the man's patrilineal line, the *lutundu*, helps to mediate a man's alienation in his own homestead. All children carry identity with their father's lineage, and this link provides the basis by which a father claims the labor of his daughters and sons. However, this patrifocal nuclear group lacks the strong source of identity that the matrilineage carries. As a true clan identity, the matrilineage links living members to long deceased ancestors, while the patrifocul group survives only three generations; a man, his children and their children constitute part of his *lutundu*, but the link ends there.[6] Children respect their mothers as parents and elders within the homestead, but children also draw their primary kinship identity from their mothers. Women can use this link of identity as a powerful tool when issues of loyalty and personal preferences surface.

Men must find some other path than kinship to provide for themselves as they age. As is the case throughout most of the world, Gwembe men choose marriage as the best possible option for "old age security." Once a man has paid *lobola* for his wives, he has the legal rights to their labor and they are obliged to fulfill the role of wife for him, although these days women often begin working for their husbands before the marriage payments have been made. In the Tonga gendered division of labor, women and their children provide the bulk of domestic labor, household chores of cooking, cleaning and drawing water, as well as field chores of breaking hard soil with hoes, planting, weeding and harvesting. Absence of a wife to do these chores marginalizes a man within his home and the community. Boys usually learn how to cook for themselves so they can survive at boarding school or if they live alone in town. But a man prefers, whenever possible, to have a woman do these tasks because "women's work" demeans a man, while having a wife bestows status. A man with a woman looking after him indicates his good fortune, while the community pities a man when he must care for himself. A man with wives working in his fields can produce more, ensuring food security and increasing the possibility of surplus.

Under these circumstances, a wise man will marry younger women as he ages in order to guarantee that they survive until he dies. The complementary roles of men and women form the basis of a functional homestead. A man with one wife has at least her labor, in addition to his own. If that wife has children living within the homestead, the aging man benefits from his sons' strength for male activities of building and plowing, and he benefits from

his daughters for their female work, but more importantly from their bride price. A man with many daughters of differing ages has a guaranteed income well into his 50s and 60s. Power in the homestead and respect within the community comes with bride price payments in cattle. The more wives and children a man has, the more he can improve his position at home and among his peers. Indeed, many men speak of their primary goal as establishing and then maintaining social standing within the community. Young men often told me that their dreams for the future consisted mainly of having many daughters so that they could "eat their cattle" (collect cattle from bride price), and they desired herds of at least 30 cattle. When a young man amasses cattle, he increases his ability to marry more, and younger wives as he ages. Old age security for men begins with increasing the dependents who will ultimately provide him with more wealth. Women married to such a man benefit from his wealth and the respect he receives. In particular, an elderly woman still married to a husband with younger wives to perform the heaviest labor, may have a relatively good situation. If a woman has a decent husband who allows her to slow her activities in accordance with her physical ability, she may enjoy the security that marriage provides, yet also benefit from assistance given by her adult sons and young daughters.

However, a man's character and his access to resources fundamentally influence the quality of life for an aging woman still married to her husband. One elderly woman told me that she divorced her husband in order to go and live with her son "because I didn't want to work for anyone any more." Other women spoke about the "ease of life" with no husband, and said "once you are old, that is when you rest."

Marriage does not guarantee security, however. If a man has wealth, an aging wife might benefit from it. But if a man struggles to support himself and his wives and children, an older wife might be more disadvantaged than if she were living with a son. At the end of the dry season in 1996 a woman in her early 60s died while still married and living with her husband. The husband also had a second and younger wife. Village rumors suggested that this old woman had starved to death because her husband loved his other wife too much. In addition to the current hunger season, the drought of 1995–1996 had been severe, and everyone struggled to find food; people predicted that "the older ones won't survive this hunger." Indeed, the week before she died, Matilda had gone from house to house asking for food. According to neighbors, some people gave, and some people didn't, but many people said that while she was out begging, her husband and co-wife were in the gardens eating. During her funeral, villagers sang songs accusing the husband of starving her, a means of social sanction and commentary using humiliation and public denouncement.

The residential arrangements described above represent the "best options" for the village elderly. For men of any age, marriage is the only good option for acquiring necessary labor and wealth; for aging women, marriage also offers benefits, particularly when her husband adheres to the Tonga norms of support. In contrast to the relatively easy choice of marriage for men, women must more often make real choices between a variety of options in order to create a secure living arrangement in which to age. When a husband begins to avoid responsibility, or when he admonishes an aging wife for her decreasing productivity, or if she simply becomes a widow, residence with or near a married son is a secure and, in some ways, ideal residential arrangement. Living with a married son may provide an old woman the first opportunity in her life when she is not working for someone else and enjoys a rest.

## Living in the margins

### *Elderly women and "proper family"*

What happens to aging individuals, especially women, as their life circumstances and living arrangements change, as when a spouse dies, or children migrate? Women almost always outlive their husbands. In some cases a widow has no son living nearby who will provide her with a home. In the event that a man does outlive his wife, and is unable to remarry, he must find some alternative place to spend his last years. Of the 16 aging women who were not married or living with or near a married son, five (8% of the total 65 women) were heading their own homestead near no relations of any kind, five women (8%) were living with or near a brother; four women (6%) were living with sisters (two "pairs" of women), and two women (3%) were living with grandsons. Of the two men who were no longer married, one man was a leper whose previous wives had divorced him due to his disease; he was living with his sister. The oldest man in the sample, whose wife died four years earlier, lived with his sister's daughter, who herself was part of my sample and lived with her married son (refer to Table 1).

The most vulnerable position for an elderly woman occurs when she has no close adult matrikin, such as a son, brother or classificatory father, living in the village.[7] Even a sister can provide a sense of emotional security at the least, and sometimes material security if she has children in the area or has some property. An old woman who lives alone in her homestead, even with small children, becomes vulnerable to theft of what few possessions she has, especially chickens or small livestock. In 1994, the year before my arrival, someone stole most of Lutinda's small heard of cattle, and all of her chickens. Although the community mobilized to locate the thieves, they never formally

accused anyone. However, local gossip attributed the theft to Lutinda's young nephews, her brother's sons, from a neighboring village. People believed the young men took advantage of her solitary living situation, and also wanted to act out their own changing ideas of inheritance systems.[8] Until recently, Tonga property passed from an individual to her or his matrilineal heirs – most often a sibling, or a sister's children. Over the past decade attitudes about inheritance have been changing, with children increasingly demanding access to their father's property upon his death, and putting matrilineal relatives, particularly elderly women, in a difficult position.

In addition to the risk of theft, a woman or man with no matrilineal relatives in the village faces problems associated with a limited or non-existent formal network; these social support systems become especially important during times of need. When I asked these women whom they turned to when they needed assistance they often responded, "I have no proper family here." People employ the technique of "begging," *kulomba*, or as I prefer to call it "pleading", as a standard means for acquiring necessities, and at times luxuries.[9] This pleading mobilizes assistance from members of the community, usually in the form of food handouts, but sometimes cash or material goods, such as an old shirt or women's waistcloth. But the practice most often targets kin; "proper family" answer requests for assistance more often than non-relatives.

Proper family resembles a kindred (Ferraro 1992: 185); each individual has a unique network of relatives who they call "proper family" and they can include people through a variety of relationships. While the kindred includes a bilateral social network, "proper family" emphasizes maternal ties, although a person's "proper family" sometimes embraces marriage links and paternal connections. Women's children, especially sons, constitute the most obvious members of proper family. This category also includes brothers of "one womb," *ndali omwe*.[10]

For the purposes of pleading, Gwembe people often ignore sisters, despite the shared matrilineal identity. Like mothers who hesitate to depend on a daughter for the needs of daily living, sisters usually do not depend on each other. Women say that a husband becomes enraged when his wife's relatives come pleading for assistance too often. Nevertheless, wives do receive family visitors, and visitors expect hosts to feed them while visiting. But upon departure a visitor calling on sisters might not have as large a bundle as someone mobilizing a fraternal link because men's rights over land gives them substantial rights to the grain harvest (Cliggett, in press; Colson 1999, 2000). Even in women's fields a husband can claim rights to the harvest if he plowed or provided seed. Women, who usually do not have a large supply of their own grain, do not have the freedom to give away food belonging to their husband.

As all my informants asserted, when a husband is around, a wife is not the "owner of the homestead."

During my field work, other proper family included mother's sister's sons, and even a co-wife's son, and in one instance, the "classificatory father" (see endnote number 6) of the woman. However, these instances of broadened kinship links make use of a highly flexible category, and thus cannot be considered as dependable options. The identification of "proper family" and how and when people call on it changes over the life course. When co-wives live together in the same homestead with their children and husband, co-wives call each others' children "daughter" and "son"; at that time children also call all co-wives "mother." Upon adulthood and establishment of an independent homestead, co-wives and the group of children lose that intimacy, and call only their own children by the terms son and daughter. The rare act of calling on an elderly co-wife's son for assistance demonstrates the array of possibilities that an old woman can mobilize on her own behalf. Individual action, such as choosing support networks and mobilizing assistance from relatives, can be highly personalized, taking into account the social and material factors in people's lives (Bourdieu 1977). The individualized process of identifying "proper family," or the kindred, often depends as much on the personalities of those involved as on obligations inherent in the actual kinship relationships.

Although Gwembe people usually view brothers as proper family for the purposes of pleading, living within a brother's homestead is less than ideal for an elderly woman. Unlike his mother, a brother considers his elderly sister more of a guest, and she has few rights to the labor and resources of the homestead. A brother sees his sister as a guest because the sibling relationship represents a horizontal link within the same generation, whereas parent child relationships move vertically, with the parent holding the position of seniority. An old woman has very little claim to assistance from her brother's wives, nor from her brother himself. Yet if she possesses any strength and physical ability, her brother will often expect her to work in his fields, just as his wives do. Although she may work for her brother, he usually views the assistance he gives her as a handout, and the community pities her. One villager commenting on an old woman living with her brother who had very little control over her food supply and no money for new cloths or luxuries like soap, suggested "when you live like that, it is just better to be dead."

Tonga custom prohibits living with a married daughter. Women speak of the possibility as a taboo: "You can't eat with the son in law, you have already eaten his cattle;" "If you live with a son in law, his family will become jealous because he is caring for you, and not his own family." The Tonga justly fear jealousy, as it often forms the basis for threats of witchcraft, a

very real aspect of village life. Colson (2000) has described cases where men have been accused of using witchcraft on both wives and sons because of a son's tendency to give more gifts to his mother than his father, indicating the reality of jealousy and the importance of egalitarian resource sharing. If a mother lived with her married daughter, her son in law's family could accuse her of using witchcraft to redirect the son's resources away from his own clan. Alternatively, if an old woman fell ill while living with her married daughter, the daughter and her mother could accuse the son-in-law's family of making her sick through witchcraft because they felt jealous of the attention she got from the son-in-law.

Given these circumstances, women do their best to find other residential options. Even if they feel emotionally close to their daughters, and those daughters bring them plates of food everyday, an older woman is more likely to live with a brother, if she has one, than to move to the homestead of her married daughter.

Despite this strong belief against living with daughters, one woman out of the 65 I interviewed did indeed live with her married daughter. When I asked why she lived in this arrangement, Luwazo offered: "I have no family. My husband died. I have no brothers. I am an old woman; there is no one to care for me." When I pushed specifically on how it is possible that she can live with her daughter when everyone else says that it is not allowed, Luwazo told me that her son-in-law is a good man, "he won't beat me." Luwazo's daughter and husband live in Chikanta, the frontier farming area to which Gwembe people began migrating in the 1980s. Luwazo became widowed in 1958, and joined her daughter and son-in-law in 1987 after shifting between various clansmen's (her "classificatory fathers' ") homesteads in the home village. Perhaps within the migrant community people tolerate variations on traditional and normative behavior. It is also possible that once outside of the home village, the threat of witchcraft decreases; at least distance can buffer the immediate fear. Indeed, Scudder and Habarad (1991) speculate that migrants to Chikanta often move in order to protect themselves from such threats.

*The ambivalence of grandsons and rescue by daughters*

In some instances a woman whose best hope may lie in a daughter may live with a grandson, which maintains the image of normative behavior while allowing the daughter to play a significant role in caring for her aging mother. Another residential arrangement involving a daughter developed in Chikanta towards the end of 1996, just prior to the end of my eighteen months of fieldwork. On my last visit to the frontier region, I discovered that Sala, an old woman who had lived in an isolated homestead in Sinafala, had just moved to

Chikanta at the urging of her daughter, and had taken up residence with one of her daughter's sons. Sala had matrilineal family in Sinafala, including men she called "grandson" who gave her much help in building her house and other structures, and in plowing her fields.[11] However, during the extreme drought, when she had little or no harvest from her gardens, and after losing most of her chickens and goats to theft, Sala chose to follow her daughter to better land and rains, giving up her small homestead in Sinafala where she had lived for all of her adult life. However, unlike Luwazo, Sala became a formal member of her grandson's homestead, not her daughter's, thus maintaining the image of normative behavior. Yet, it was clear to me that Sala's daughter controlled this arrangement, not her grandson. In effect, Sala's daughter facilitated and oversaw the situation, and should any problems arise within the grandson's homestead, her daughter would take responsibility for settling them.

A similar arrangement existed in Sinafala where the oldest woman in the village, Malala, lived with one of her daughter's sons, Mister. In Tonga naming systems, people often call women in reference to their children – they say "mother of" and usually add the oldest child's name. BinaMister, that is, the mother of Mister, lived within a ten minute walk of Mister's homestead, in the homestead of one of her other sons. Mister's "other mother" (meaning mother's sister), BinaFosten, lived in the homestead just below with her own son Fosten (Figure 2). Another married daughter lived in a neighboring village, but she played a minimal role in caring for her mother, in part because she lived close to an hour's walk away. Thus, Malala had two daughters (both widows living with married sons) in the immediate vicinity, and indeed those daughters helped support Malala as much, if not more, than Mister and his two wives. BinaFosten brought firewood to Malala every few days so that she could keep a fire going in her small wattle and daub hut. BinaMister brought vegetables from her garden every so often. They also brought small dishes of cooked nsima and relish every few days.

In contrast to the attention given by her daughters, the grandsons expressed much more ambivalence about their grandmother. During one of my visits with Malala we sat next to her house in the garden of bullrush millet that she had planted during the rainy season of 1994–1995. Mister had decided that he would clear an even larger area just in the same vicinity as Malala's garden. Throughout our conversation, Malala turned to Mister and made comments about the trees he was cutting, and threatening him with what she would do, should one of those trees fall on her millet and crush it. Mister's response was sarcastic chuckles, and teasing pleas for some of her tobacco. This grandmother-grandson relationship represents a common form of "joking-relations," as research throughout Africa supports (Colson 1951; Murdock

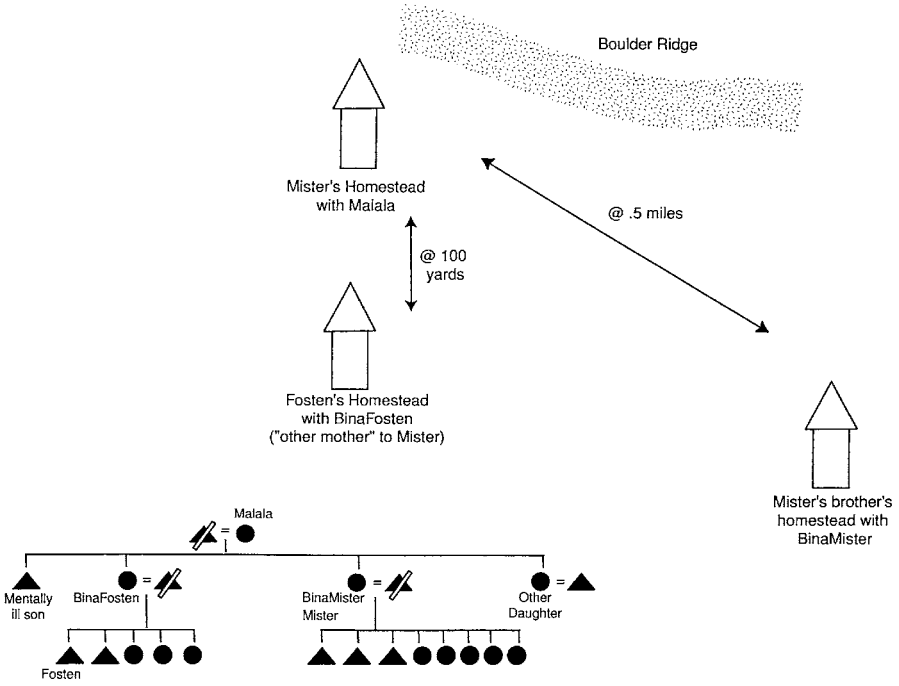


*Figure 2.* Homestead Map of Sinafala Section with kinship chart for Malala.

1959; Stucki 1995). Yet, despite the joviality of their exchange, Mister, as well as his "cousin" Fosten, frequently veered from the norm of "respect for elders."

Fosten, the extremely active and vocal leader of the local Seventh Day Adventist church, rarely visited his grandmother or gave her assistance (although the meals his mother brought to Malala came from Fosten's food supplies). However, he did make a trip to her hut one day. On one of my trips out of the village I left a 2.5 liter jug of water for Malala. Malala already had such a jug from which she drank and bathed, but it was broken, so that at most it could contain a liter and a half. One of Mister's wives had the responsibility of bringing water to Malala, but she thought it a great burden, and Malala received water perhaps once a week if she was lucky. Malala described bribing some of Mister's young children to collect water for her by giving them a treat when she had something (when I gave her gifts of sugar she could then use that to entice the children into helping her). According to the gossip, about an hour after my departure from the village, leaving the new jug with Malala, Fosten arrived at her doorstep and took the jug back to his own homestead. Malala, in her early 80s, almost blind and physically frail,

could not defend her rights to the jug. Fosten added the jug to his collection of property in his Christian homestead.

A few months later, deep into the drought of 1994–1995 when it was clear that rainy season fields would yield no grain, Malala experienced another crisis instigated by a grandson. Without any warning, or words to his mothers or brothers, Mister packed up his homestead, including both wives and all the children, and moved to their gardens on the lakeshore. During intensive weeding and bird scaring periods, and especially in hunger years, villagers commonly move to their gardens. People often erect a temporary shelter in order to sleep in the fields at night to scare away hippos and intruding cattle. However, when a man has two wives, and dependents in the village homestead, one wife usually remains behind to keep house. This time, Mister's nuclear family abandoned the whole homestead, and Malala with it. Because BinaFosten and BinaMister were also living at their river gardens, no one knew of this abandonment for three days or more. Malala ate nothing, and drank the few drops of water left in her cracked jug. BinaMister describes meeting with her sister, BinaFosten, to decide how to manage the situation, once word got out. BinaMister, because she had a particularly successful garden from which she ate even during the hunger, went to rescue her mother from the abandoned homestead. BinaMister carried the few possessions Malala owned, while Malala struggled the few miles to BinaMister's garden. According to BinaMister, a 40 minute journey took Malala close to five hours. When I found Malala at her daughter's garden a week after the abandonment, Malala appeared cleaner and more animated, mobile and clear headed, than I had seen her in 16 months, due to the improvement in food and access to water that BinaMister's presence mobilized. In this case, residence with a daughter raised her quality of living significantly and saved her from starvation induced by a grandson's abandonment.

The community condemned Mister's behavior, claiming that he was wrong to leave Malala alone in his homestead with no food and water. However, Mister suffered no sanctions or reprimands other than the stories that circulated. As Colson and Scudder indicate (1981), Tonga eventually distrust the oldest old for fear that with their continued life, they rob children in a homestead of their health and well being. Despite people's criticism of Mister's behavior, they seemed to tolerate and understand his situation; he had four young children to feed and protect. In a community living with frequent scarcity and appropriate conditions for belief in a "limited good" (Foster 1965), the continued existence of Malala means an unjust distribution of resources. Supporting a woman who has already lived 80 years robs resources from children who still have a full life to live. Perhaps this is why BinaMister, also an old woman, living alone in her garden, could care for her

very old mother. Two old women living on their own, and feeding themselves, do not present a threat to the youngsters of any homestead.

## Conclusion

The stories of Malala, Sala, and their residential arrangements, emphasize two points: residence is fluid, and individual action, within the limits set by gender roles and age structure, forms the heart of homestead composition. Some children decide to leave their grandparent's homestead to live with their father who gives them more food to eat. An old woman may decide to visit a relative, and stay for a few months, because the area has harvested green maize, while her own son's field has burnt in the sun. A man abandoning his old and frail grandmother acts on a similar choice. All of these examples illustrate how individuals make decisions for their own benefit. During resource scarcity, people make choices to trim down their expenditures, and increase their own access to necessities.

Homestead composition and residential arrangements comprise the "cornerstone" of daily life. Individuals act in reference to social groups, and material limitations in their surroundings. People's actions shape group dynamics, but at the same time individual action responds to group dynamics. The range of options available for individuals to play out their choices and behavior link to the resources available to them, resources that are both social and material. It is much more likely that an old woman with a loyal son, and his wife within shouting distance, can harness small surpluses of food or labor than a widow living alone in an isolated one-house homestead. The options for such a solo individual, must, according to cultural and social forces, include a broader support net than those who can command their choices from their own doorstep.

In the scholarly endeavor to understand support systems for the elderly, we must certainly recognize the important role that residence plays. We must also recognize that "the elderly" we speak of are not a single group, but a collection of individuals, some with similar characteristics and strategies, but others with different preferences and options available to them. Gender differences are but one important distinguishing feature of the group we identify as "the elderly." As we develop research methods for studying the aging process in non-industrialized settings, and ultimately policies based on data collected through those methods, we need to make room for the range of elderly experiences, including giving due attention to the differences between old men, and old women and the active strategies they employ in their relationships with each other, and their communities.

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## Notes

1. In Gwembe Central people identify 12 matrilineal clans (*bukowa*). However, in Gwembe South people identify 16 clans. Although the populations in both areas are Tonga, the differences in kinship, among other things, point to the great variability between regions within the Gwembe.
2. A homestead head sometimes has a fire, *igobelo*, which he sits around with family, including wives, and visitors on cold winter evenings. At these local gathering points, people will discuss daily events, sing songs, tell stories and laugh, but never cook. A man with an *igobelo* in his own *munzi*, usually a middle aged man with many dependents, is respected by his neighbors who are drawn to his fire, rather than create an *igobelo* of their own.
3. There is a distinction between field rats and house rats in Zambia (see Musambachine 1994). There are 3 types of field rats that are considered good to eat. By being "field" animals they are considered wild, like any other wild game that people hunt. House or village rats, however, are considered dirty because they rely on human settlements for

their survival – eating from pots and grain bins; they are considered something like a parasite, and are not edible by Zambian standards.

4. For a discussion of cattle ownership and the increasingly frequent conflicts over cattle, see Cliggett in press, and Colson 2000.
5. Children living in a homestead call all of their father's wives "mother".
6. Tonga kinship systems are highly complex. For more detail about men's *lutundu* see Colson (1962: 72–77).
7. I use the term "classificatory father" to mean the man who inherited the spirit of the father of an individual. When a person dies, kin inherit their property, as well as the "spirit", or as Colson and Scudder call it, "shade." Upon inheriting the spirit of the deceased, the inheritor takes on responsibility for "pouring beer" annually in honor of (or to "feed") the spirit, and the responsibility for the children of the deceased, thus a child can go to a father or "classificatory father" for assistance in times of need. For more discussion of these spirits ("shades") and spirit (shade) inheritance, see Colson (1960), Scudder (1962) and Colson (1971).
8. Inheritance of property has traditionally followed the Tonga matrilineal lines. However, there have been increasing numbers of "cases" where children try to claim their father's property, rather than let it go to his siblings. In the case of Lutinda, she inherited her brother's cattle upon his death, but his children were vocal with their disapproval at the time, although they never took their complaints to court. The theft of this cattle took place approximately 6 years after the death of Lutinda's brother, and village rumors suggested it was her nephews finally acting on their words.
9. "Pleading" captures the nature of "arguing your case" which Tonga people are famous for. Their highly developed skills in presenting their case, and pleading on their own behalf for assistance of all kinds has been noticed and remarked upon since the first explorers encountered Gwembe residents in the 19th century. See Colson (1960) and Scudder (1962).
10. One womb, *ndali omwe*, literally refers to siblings from one mother, as opposed to "siblings" from a mother's sister, what western society would call maternal cousins.
11. Tonga kinship system considers the children of sisters to be your own children, and the children of your sister's daughters to be your own grandchildren. Thus, Sala's "grandson" was the son of Sala's sister's daughter.

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