

# **Rethinking literacy: A case study exploring women's informal learning in coastal Kenya**

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## **1. Introduction**

Gender inequality in literacy exists in many developing countries. Three of the six goals of the Dakar Framework for Action to achieve Education for All adopted in 2000 have shown concerns with gender and education, especially 'Goal Four', which emphasises women's literacy (UNESCO 2000).

The Kenyan government has implemented several literacy programmes since the 1960s, shifting the focus of basic literacy to functional literacy (Bunyi, 2006). It is clear that at a deeper level village people's attitudes towards literacy are more complex. My fieldwork revealed examples of some illiterate women in Lamu, Kenya cooperating with each other to run community based organisations for micro-credit activities and instead of as well as girls' education. Those who are actively involved in managing women's organisations seem to gain adequate knowledge and skill and can often run effective organisations. Although some of the village women are not literate in a formal literacy/education setting, the women have knowledge of counting, trading, accessing information, and pursue their own learning based on their needs as well as learning methods.

This paper is based on research conducted in Lamu District, Kenya in 2011. The research attempted to explore their informal literacy activities possibly adding strength to the position of these women's voices in their traditional community. In this respect, the paper examines whether power for positive changes to improve through postcolonial feminist theory the women's well-being can emerge from women's informal literacy learning in the process of becoming an *organic intellectual* (Gramsci 1971). To demonstrate grass-roots women's learning activities in relation to community development, three narrative case studies of women in a village will be presented. First, the discourse of women's literacy and development will be discussed in relation to postcolonial feminist theory. Second, the research methods will be described, followed by the presentation of findings via a narrative analysis of interview data. The data will enhance our understanding of some local women's engagement with literacy in their cultural setting and remind us of the significance of people-driven development activities.

## 2. Postcolonial Feminist Theory

This section will introduce postcolonial feminist theory adopted as a research framework.

Postcolonial feminism provides us an opportunity to consider gender, racism and the continuous impact of colonisation.

A postcolonial feminist view is that women's issues have historically been discussed from a view of generalising and universalising, which could lead to a possible misunderstanding of actual situations of women, especially, of colour. Postcolonial theory has prompted scholars to reconsider key aspects of tradition and culture in the everyday lives of women in post-colonial states, such as Kenya. Said (1989) strongly criticises Western scholars' mis-assumptions about Eastern culture, and further points out that citizens in postcolonial states remained with a confused set of characteristics where "the colonized people had fled themselves on one level but ensured that they remained victims of their past on another" (1989, p.207). From a feminist point of view, Spivak's (1985) notes that, subaltern women have been excluded continuously, and are constituted as a marginalized group within civic society. They stay at the lower position in the local power structure, without being uplifted to equal status with men. Spivak's use of the term of subaltern was originally drawn from Gramsci's (1971) concept of an unchangeable class status. "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak, 1988, p.287). On the other hand, Mohanty (1997) criticises Spivak idea of generalization of 'women' and suggests that we should recognise differences in women's subordinate experiences in a diversity of historical, cultural and social contexts. It reminds us to consider the continuing struggles of indigenous peoples for their identity formation in the globalized world, by looking at the impact of the perspectives of colonial thought and patriarchal power (Pierson et al. 1998; Young 2001).

While women have their own views on their unequal social status or cultural practices in their community, some women tend to remain silent due to concerns about their own security in their community. Postcolonial feminists see the parallels between recently decolonized nations and the state of women within patriarchy - both take the perspective of a socially marginalized subgroup in their relationship to the dominant culture. Considering some women's oppressed situation in society, it has been suggested that listening to the voices of silenced women in the third world is vital for the purpose of development (Said 1989; Ashcroft et al. 2000; Connell 2007). If their voices are reflected in development programmes, local women could manage the programmes themselves with their indigenous knowledge. Harding and Norber also support the importance of field-work for attaining actual views of marginalized groups in the Third World, which should contribute to development in policy formulation (2005, p.2011). It is this utility of postcolonial feminism that is most useful in this study as a primary theoretical framework.

### **3. Women's Literacy and Development**

Since many people understand that literacy is an important component in development, a large number of international organisations and donor agencies over the last sixty years have invested in literacy projects for human resource development under different concepts with a variety of aims. Several scholars discussed the concept of literacy and the impact of literacy on development from personal to community levels in different socio-cultural contexts (Chambers 1983, McGivney and Murray 1991, Wagner 1993, Street 1993, 2001, Robinson-Pant 2001, 2004, Papen 2005, UNESCO 2005). In relation to national development, it has been believed that literacy can promote modernisation as well as the democratisation of countries (Wagner 1993). To prepare a literacy learner with skills and knowledge to find decent employment, production-oriented functional literacy was widely adopted. In addition, literacy also became a tool to contribute to community development (Chambers 1983, Burkey 1993). There were strong objectives to integrate adult literacy into community-based development programmes such as agriculture, water and sanitation.

By criticising top-down literacy programmes, where a learner ought to acquire writing and reading skills, thus contributing to a country's economic development, Freire (1985) argues that reading and writing are technical skills that can be used to criticise social structures which had been 'man-made' and hence, could be 'women can be use reading and writing skills to challenge these structure. Assumptions were formed that literate women would have lower child mortality rates, and improvement in child nutrition (Bown 1990, LeVine et al., 1991, Rao and Robinson-Pant 2006), therefore women-targeted literacy programmes became popular. The programmes with the integration of empowerment and income-generation activities (Bown 1990, Carmen 1996). Bown (1990) also illustrated that there would be a positive effect of literate mothers on children's schooling. According to Rao and Robinson-Pant (2006), women's reproductive role as a good mother was highly emphasised in development, which failed to listen to actual individual woman's views on literacy. On the one hand, Egbo (2000) looked at the personal impact of literacy on women and she focused on one's self-esteem to bring about a better life. To access voices of local people in the Third World, Basu et al. (2008) and Robinson-Pant (2008) have both described the importance of ethnographic research to capture the actual opinions of local people in the Third World. In her argument, Robinson-Pant (2008) stated that results of ethnographic research can influence the literacy discourse and practices of development organisations involved in implementing literacy programmes. Professional development evaluators and staff developers can also use this approach to understand needs in a specific community as well as experiences, viewpoints and goals of people.

However, one can wonder if literacy is more about the process of 'conscientization' (Freire 1973) and 'reading the world' (Freire and Macedo 1987). If so, one can wonder if illiterate women cannot or do not gain conscientization, self-reliance or problem solving skills without the help of formal literacy classes. Do women, who have not attended a literacy centre or have

very little experience of formal education, have less knowledge or less opportunity to improve their well-being? There is no doubt that literacy means more than 3Rs (Reading, wRiting, aRithmetics), hence adult learners can acquire social skills or knowledge to bring about a positive changes to reduce poverty. Yet who defines poverty and in what sense? Therefore while international organizations such as UNESCO have been a key influence on the notion of literacy in *formal* literacy programmes, it is crucial to acknowledge women's informal learning or literacy processes. Alternatively, previous research on women's contribution to community development highlights literate females' facilitative role in the Maasai women's group which empowers illiterate women to plan activities for the promotion of girls' education and the eradication of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) (Takayanagi 2011). Furthermore, there is capacity within a small community for some women to challenge their lack of participation by developing their sense of agency and contributing to development from within (Takayanagi 2011). Research should also consider capacity and power that illiterate people already have, and how they apply their informal knowledge to improve their well-being. Besides, Fals-Borda (1987) asserts that local people in the Third World have a capacity to organise and to produce knowledge based on their socio-cultural settings and values to become critical learners who can enact social change. Some people decide how to deal with or overcome social oppression rather than be controlled by it. Hence, non-literate people engage with the learning process actively.

The concept of 'Organic Intellectual' was originally developed by Antonio Gramsci, who also introduced the term 'subaltern'. Critical adult educators such as Freire have taken up Gramsci's implication for informal adult learning. Here, women's informal learning is vital for development, in connection with the *organic intellectual*. Gramsci (1971) observed the role and power of intellectuals as having a central position in social change. Also, one of the ways to observe the power of informal knowledge is Gramsci's (1971) concept of organic intellectuals. Internal organic intellectuals can be viewed as individual members of the powerless groups whose conscience and expertise has been raised through active struggle. As for those intellectuals coming from outside the community, they are expected to be committed participants and learners organically integrated in the process that leads to militancy rather than detachment (Hall & Kassam, 1985, p.3797). For him, 'intellectuals' and 'academics' are not to be reserved in a tiny, elite and privileged group of people. An organic intellectual is just as likely to be as an illiterate villager as a PhD holder. Organic intellectuals are rooted strongly in their community, working to retain links with their community issues and experiences. Intellectual actions are a significant aspect of human existence. He warns that "All men (*sic*) are intellectuals... but not all men (*sic*) have in society the function of intellectuals" (Gramsci 1971, p.9). This suggests that organic intellectuals occur in each social class and are classified by organising the ideology and interests of each class.

On the other hand, currently, the Kenyan government is preparing for a new adult education curriculum aiming at certificate-oriented learning. The formal literacy centres will most likely offer primary school education for adult learners to sit for the Kenyan Certificate for Primary Education. Income generating activity will be specifically included in the literacy centre's activity.

District education officers pay more attention to the KCPE. One of the education officers said:

“They (adult literacy learners) can produce their certificate at work, they had no certificate in their life. It promotes their job.”

It seems that the result of KCPE will help adult learners find employment. On the other hand, interviews with village women in Lamu District demonstrated that they can act as organic intellectuals to seek solutions for family or community issues through learning together. One of the women’s leaders in the village expressed that literacy means:

“(you) rely on yourself, (you) can read/write, (literacy) gives them a relief. (People) get experience, how to solve domestic issues, experience in solving domestic issues, issues on education, fundraising to push a child to school.”

The women’s practical learning activities also can be defined as some literacy to understand their world (community) and to generate initiatives in their traditional community. Therefore, literacy from the village women’s perspective can be interpreted as the process of learning to read one’s own world and develop the ability to solve problems and to control and improve one’s well-being. This discussion will highlight scope for another side of the standpoint of literacy discourses.

#### **4. Methodology**

The fieldwork for this study was conducted between May 18<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011 in Lamu District in Kenya. The reason for the selection of the research site in Kenya is that the author was able to stay in their community without any conditions since she had conducted fieldwork in their community between 2007-2009<sup>1</sup>. As a result of this experience, the author became interested in investigating the relationship between women’s informal education activities and their contribution to community development.

Lamu is one of the oldest Swahili settlements and its town is a UNESCO World Heritage site. According to District Education Officers, Lamu has become ‘cosmopolitan’ due to migration from other provinces. It has attracted the international aid community as well as local hotels to implement educational projects in the island. The majority of the people in Lamu are Muslims. The major industries are fishery for males and weaving mats and baskets for females. The researcher has observed that a woman manages all the house work by herself: preparation of meals, milking, fetching water and fire wood, washing clothes, taking care of children.

In the restricted gender role women play at home or in their community, in strengthening

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1 The project was called as “Comparative Study on Education and Society in Africa: New Development Emerging from Field Work (2005-2008: Project Leader, Prof. Nobuhide SAWAMURA)” funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science.

their own agency, women explore ways to contribute to social change. Hence, based on ethnographical data, this study will look at the role women have in improving their well being through informal literacy activities.

The process of data collection was undertaken by ethnographic research with semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and observation that looked at women's informal learning/literacy activities and their impact on improving well-being in the community. Primary research participants were recruited through community-based women's groups. Throughout the fieldwork, research participants were cooperative and eager to discuss their learning and community development activities. Due to time constraints and the limited financial resources, 11 village women (including women's leaders) and 7 government-related officers were interviewed. While all of the interviewees illuminated various informal literacy learning activities, three narratives of village women are presented in this paper.

## **5. Results and Analysis**

Implications of three local women's informal literacy activities are explored below. The study's findings show that Asma, Shaista and Maraika (not their real names) attempted to bring about social change in the male-dominated traditional community. Their learning experience showed that some local uneducated/semi-literate women have a capacity to seek solutions through women's groups and learning together. Drawing from the data presented below, the researcher conducted that women's learning process in their everyday life can be analysed through 'praxis' and explore what kind of literacy they practically apply to their real village life from a perspective of postcolonial feminist theory. Narrative analysis applied here provides the scope for village women to create a space where women's voices are heard. Riessman states that in social sciences, "narrative analysis refers to a family of approaches to diverse kinds of texts, which have in common a stories form" (2005, p.1). Narrative analysis covers examination of the story that people use to understand their lives and the world around them (Bryman 2004). Narrative analysis is often employed to examine lives and events of people. Narrative analysis works well in the broader theoretical framework of post colonial feminism as it focuses upon language as being not merely a technical device for establishing meaning, but is deeply and subjectively constitutive of reality (Riessman 1993; Czaniawska 1997), thus, opening a space for local women to speak from.

### **Asma:**

*Asma is 37 years old. She did not go to school, but learnt Quran, basic mathematics, reading and writing at Madrasa. She attended a literacy centre for two years. A literacy teacher was from the village and it was free of cost. She can write Arabic and can write basic things in Swahili. She has been a secretary of a community-based women's group for three years. She collects money from members and gives money to the chairperson of the women's group.*

*She has a small business, selling clothes on door-to-door visits in the village. She obtains new information, knowledge, and advice from her friends, family and husband. Old women taught her how to settle down with a husband. She took a loan through the women's group and built a house. She believes she can access loans easily if there is a problem in her family. Also, the group helps her obtain new information through other women's groups.*

Lastly, I asked about her view of the future in Lamu. She replied:

“more tourists visit Lamu, and people can find an employment from hotels, and the village will expand with better houses.”

As Spivak (1988) and Mohanty (1997) expressed the importance of women's voices, her voice was heard to reflect her literacy or learning process. She has gained basic literacy skills through the literacy centre and Madrasa. Mostly, she approaches knowledge, information and advice orally from people in the village, but not from written materials. This form of learning process is different that in formal education settings. Asma expects she can rely on other women for advice and receives loans from a women's group to overcome problems. Through a community-based women's group, Asma and other women discuss issues to find a solution (Fals-Boda 1987). While Gramsci (1971) indicated that organic intellectuals take a central position in social change, Asma attempts to bring about a positive change into her everyday life through solidarity. A loan (micro-finance) was used to improve her life condition, but it was for an immediate and short-term solution. Asma could be advised to utilise a loan to establish income-generating activities or other long-term responses to the improvement of her life condition.

Asma's expectations towards the future in her village indicate that she pays more attention to economic and infrastructure development. Socials sectors such as education and health development are not necessarily prioritised.

#### **Shaista:**

*Shaista is 55 years old, and she weaves mats at home. She attended adult education, but did not gain anything. She has been a member of a women's group for 10 years. The women's group has organised poultry raising and vegetable gardens. She had a loan (micro finance) from KWFT (Kenya Women Finance Trust) to build her house. Another house has been leased out to the women's group. She learnt how to do calculations with money from the women's group. She believes that people cannot do anything without cooperation. She seeks advice and information from educated women, her family and the women's group. She learnt how to make baskets and about herbal medicine from her mother. Village people visit her to have herbal medicine prescribed.*

Lastly, I asked her view of the future in Lamu. She replied:

“I want to see the village becomes beautiful, more shops and food is enough, problems reduced. Children build a house and visitors buy baskets.”

Shaista is illiterate in formal education as she did not attain literacy skills. However, through her women’s group, by cooperating with each other, she finds a space to speak out her opinion (Spivak 1988; Mohanty 1997). Shaista has gained more practical skills based on her needs through a women’s group, rather than a literacy centre. As Fals-Boda (1987) asserts, she recognises the significance of cooperation and solidarity. This cooperative learning contributes to improving the well-being of her family and community. These things have been gained not through literacy classes or formal education, but through informal learning and also orality. Shaista learnt or inherited the skills of craft making and the use of herbal medicine from her mother.

#### **Maraika:**

*Maraika is 48 years old. She did not attend a formal school, yet went to Madrasa. She also participated in adult education for a year and learnt Swahili and Maths. She can write her name only, but she forgot how to write words. She weaves mats at home. She has been a member of a women’s group for five years. The group had a loan to manage poultry raising, and it was successful at the time. She obtains knowledge from her mother, husband and children.*

Lastly, I asked her view of the future in Lamu. She replied:

“I want to see that children are educated, find a job and build a block house with electricity, a water tank and a shop. I hope the village has more water wells, solar power, and televisions.”

If there are serious issues at home, she prays to god and asks for help from neighbours, friends and her husband’s family.

Although Maraika attended a literacy centre, she relapsed into illiteracy. On the other hand, she keeps skills and knowledge she gained from her mother and others practically. She seems to recognise the benefit of education, bringing about a job opportunity. Her view can be optimistic as Puchner (2003) emphasises that socio-economic development cannot be guaranteed by providing only education to people.



## 6. Discussion

With voices of these women, the author has displayed the three stories in their way of informal literacy and its impact on their everyday life.

First of all, this ethnographic research methodology along with postcolonial feminist theory contributed to opening up a space for women to speak of their learning and community development experiences. As Spivak (1985,1988) said, some women's voices are not recognised in the decision making process in society, and these women tend to locate themselves in a lower position or choose to be silent in society. Through a narrative approach, these women's processes of learning and community development activities were addressed from the women's perspectives.

As Carmen (1996) argues, "we all remain orates under the (literate) skin - literacy cannot fully replace the pre-existing oral order" (p.100). Through "orality", the traditional African way of recording and communication, people, transfer knowledge on traditional, cultural, and modern practices such as craft making and micro-finance activities verbally.

The study's findings show that Asma, Shaista and Maraika have been trying to bring about social change in their community. Their learning experience showed that some local uneducated women have a capacity to seek solutions through collaborative learning, approaching women's groups. While Haraway (1991) insisted that the subordinated people could act to bring about a positive change to improve their status, through togetherness and collectively among village women, the women's efforts to improve their well-being should be noted. Her voice indicates that she is aware of the traditional patriarchy system that men control resources and make decisions on the utilization of the resources.

A person regardless of age or gender continues to learn in whatever place or opportunity is available. The women represented above clearly demonstrate that their learning approach is different from formal literacy where expected learning outcomes with a teaching methodology are designed beforehand. Many village women are too busy to attend the scheduled adult literacy classes conducted by an instructor to 'study' a set of adult literacy curriculum of Swahili, English, mathematics and small-scale business imposed by the government. Technical skills of writing and reading contribute to manage finance and new information, for example, yet, with limited 'literacy' skills, these women have engaged in the process of learning to improve their well-being. This enables them to act in developing their economic prospects by themselves and contribute to their community. Literacy has multiple meanings and aspects to play a role in human development. For instance, Nussbaum (2004) shows that literacy is linked to the ability of women to meet, exchange information and work collaboratively for bringing about network and solidarity. In the case of these women, they engage in collaborative work and solidarity without the formal literacy of writing and reading. As Freire (1970) states, literacy is about 'reading the world' and the interviewed women appear to read the world very clearly, that is their environment, tradition, and the role they play in the community. They maximise their life experience and knowledge to stay in their culture while improving their well-being little

by little at their own pace. Also, the women's experience highlights the fact that they initiate social action collaboratively to bring about a change into their home and community and the women have now seen the positive changes taking place through their action. Asma, Shaista and Maraika have a strong agency in managing risks of their own family's well-being and protecting their own security within their capacity (Mohanty, 2003).

The three women had been in a disadvantaged situation in terms of access to formal 'literacy', however, they find their own way to overcome this difficulty. They know where to access knowledge, advice or skills in their community. The women gained social skills of empowerment and self-confidence through community based women's groups. One of the women actually attained a basic numeracy skill, while two other women acquired skills of poultry raising and corroborative learning through informal learning. For Freire (1970), literacy ought to encourage learners to be critical thinkers, and it should be the problem solving type of education. As Freire (1970) and Gramsci (1971) claim, people need to become aware of social and political injustice through the continuous process of critical thinking and acting upon solving community problems. The three women discussed in this paper seem to be engaging in this process.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper introduced preliminary findings of the fieldwork to challenge the current notion of literacy, and shed some light on the literacy classes to be implemented by the government in Lamu District. The actual application of women's formal literacy skills of reading and writing in their everyday life should be investigated further. This research reaffirms that at a deeper level these communities' attitudes towards literacy are complex and the meaning of literacy differs from people to people and region to region.

The use of this ethnographic research method provided the grounds for discussion between the researcher and the women. This method could not only benefit researchers but also practitioners who promote community based planning of education and development programmes.

A new adult education curriculum aiming at certificate-oriented learning implemented by the government will be most likely primary school education for adult learners to sit for the Kenyan Certificate for Primary Education. Income generating activity will be specifically included in the literacy centre's activity. This government shift in the adult literacy programme could create more distance between actual village women's needs and their existing practices of learning. Village women can manage their informal literacy/learning by themselves. They require a particular skill and knowledge at a specific time in their space to improve their everyday life. This informal learning or literacy should be part of education and development strategies in Kenya.

Literacy, which the village women engage as part of their every day life based on their needs and space, conflicts with what the formal adult literacy programme is going to offer to

literacy learners. It will be essential to follow up the process of literacy acquisition of women in Kenya continuously. Furthermore, it can be explored how the formal adult literacy programme can coordinate with village women's actual needs and assist to improve existing practices.

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