

UCLA

Thinking Gender Papers

Title

Disruptive Discourses: Kenyan Maasai Schoolgirls Make Themselves

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4q5856ck>

Author

Switzer, Heather

Publication Date

2009-02-01

Disruptive Discourses: Kenyan Maasai Schoolgirls Make Themselves

This abridged discussion of Maasai schoolgirls and disruptive discourses comes from my dissertation (in progress), *Making the Maasai Schoolgirl: Developing Modernities on the Margins*, an ethnographic case study of development at the local level that examines an emergent social category in contemporary Kenyan Maasai society: the “schoolgirl.” It is only recently, in the past generation, that Maasai females have attended school in any number, and access remains relatively limited. The dissertation analyzes rural schoolgirls’ narratives of education and development in their daily lives, which are characterized by a contradictory resistance to ‘traditional’ gender norms and social forms. These narratives are embedded in larger questions regarding the transnational intersections of ethnicity, gender, and class in the formation of local identities in marginalized indigenous communities in postcolonial Kenya. The overall project relies on 98 interviews with Maasai schoolgirls ages 10-20 in nine primary government day schools in Kajiado District, Kenya. From this larger work, this short discussion thinks gender by examining the practical effects of two central disruptive discourses--the tensions between mainstream development’s “girl-child” and the Maasai “schoolgirl” and the articulation of futurity and the limits of the aspirational horizon of desire—as they play out within a neoliberal developmentalist discursive regime.

International scholarship and programmatic interventions focused on ‘girls’ education’ are not new to development practice, although they have been amplified and accelerated since the “Education for All” conference in Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990 (Brock-Utne 2000). The associated literatures focus on ascertaining demographic trends and examining the overall benefits of, and constraints to, education for girls in the developing world (see for examples, Floro, et. al 1990; King & Hill 1993; Malhotra, et. al 2003). Particularly in their focus on the timing of demographic events, changes in per capita income, and changes in health and wellbeing, these studies have found that education has an “undeniabl[y]” (King & Hill 1993) positive impact on delayed marriage and sexual debut (Ikamari 2005), fertility (Ikamari 2005; Nekatibeb 2002), infant mortality, maternal mortality, the provision of education for the children of educated women, the ability of women to negotiate sex (Jewkes, et. al. 2002; Wolff, et. al 2000), and reduced vulnerability to HIV infection (Fylkesnes, et. al. 2001; Hargreaves and Bolin 2006). The global consensus is that education is an unmitigated and absolutely essential good for individual females themselves as well as the economic development of the local and national communities in which they live (King and Hill 1993). This consensus is solidified by the United Nations’ unprecedented emphasis on

girls' and women's empowerment and human capital investment as the sine qua non of development broadly writ in the eight Millennium Development Goals.¹

Ethnographic studies of education in developing contexts suggest that the picture is not this unequivocal (Kiluva-Ndunda 2001; Stambach 2000; Varvus 2007). Scholars of this far smaller literature are more ambivalent about the panacean good of the current education-as-development imperative, as these studies illuminate the difficult and contradictory aspects of formal schooling for girls in development contexts, including the high rates of sexual harassment and assault (including rape) in schools and in the context of schooling (Barker & Rich 1992; Bloch, et. al. 1998; Mensch & Lloyd 1998, 2001; Stock 2004; UNICEF 2004), the rising rates of HIV/AIDS among females of schooling age (15-24) (UNAIDS 2005, 2006), gender bias in student, teacher, and parental attitudes against girls' academic abilities (Davidson and Kanyuka 1992; Mensch & Lloyd 1998; Mensch, et. al. 2000), and the ambivalence many communities still have around the "social death" young women face when they pursue schooling (Kanogo 2005; Stambach 2000).

My study is most properly situated in this smaller literature. While I do not dispute the practical necessities of education for girls in general and rural Maasai girls in particular, I hope to problematize the seamless rhetoric concerning formal schooling as a neutral public good in order to open up the complex conversation about educational access and attainment in Kenya, as elsewhere, today. Here, I illustrate the ways in which the discursive formation of the 'schoolgirl,' as she is constructed through schoolgirl narrations, distorts the image of "the girl-child," disrupts conventional Maasai gender categories, and creates a marginal agentic space for those girls who attend and persist in school despite the odds. I question, however, the limits of this disruptive discursive formation and material practices. Even as the emerging categories break with 'traditional' gender formations as they have been defined by the mythical monolith of Maasai-ness,² these new categories appear to reify the requirements of a neoliberal subjectivity³ that may work against empowerment for Maasai women. What's more, I highlight the specter of the desire/decline probematique,⁴ in order to point towards the limitations of even marginal agency accompanied by an articulated aspirational horizon when the discourse of individual empowerment meets the materialities of economic decline (Mukundi 2004).

¹ The United Nation's Millennium Development Goals, see <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.

² See Dorothy Hodgson, *Once Intrepid Warriors: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Cultural Politics of Maasai Development* (2001) for an extended historical/anthropological analysis of the myth of the Maasai patriarchal pastoralist and the colonial impact on Maasai gender relations.

³ See Marnina Gonick's examination of the production of the "neoliberal girl subject" in a western context in "Between 'Girl Power' and 'Reviving Ophelia': Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject," (2006).

⁴ See Fran Varvus, *Desire and Decline: Schooling Amid Crisis in Tanzania* (2007) for an extended analysis of what I am calling a *problematique*, or, a particularly intractable and complex matrix of problems.

The education-as-development discourse and the schooling imperative have opened sites of individual negotiation whereby Maasai girls who are in school can actively create new subject positions by resisting the claims conventional gender categories make on them. They do this, primarily, by rejecting the conventional Maasai category “woman” (*enkitok*), rejecting also the simple category “girl” (*entito*), and choosing instead to modify the latter and be “schoolgirls” (there is no equivalent word in Maa). The newly salient schoolgirl category is a sociologically liminal space, an extension and expansion of the cultural notion of *enkanyakuai*,⁵ the period of time between a girl’s circumcision when she remains in her father’s home before going to her husband’s home---the space in which she is a woman, but she is not a wife. Once married, she becomes *esiankikki*—a bride, a wife, a young married woman⁶ and a person with adult status in the community and household, a status further solidified by becoming a mother. Lesorogol’s study of Samburu⁷ schoolgirls reinforces this finding: “Staying in school is the best way for a girl to postpone marriage. Attending school enables girls to extend the normally brief period of transition between social statuses of girl and wife” (2008: 569). Moreover, “marriage, like pregnancy, almost always marks the end of education” (Lesorogol 2008: 569). The social categories, girl, girlfriend, initiate,⁸ woman, and mother are all gendered according to the prevailing understanding of the categories in the microfibers of community life, in history and in the historical present. The schooling imperative has altered the conventional progress across life course as it has been historically and customarily understood prior to schooling demands. Absent the imperative to attend school, these categories have different meanings. Within and against the imperative, which is to say, through contemporary daily life in even the most remote Maasai communities, social categories, and the people who embody them, are variously positioned vis-à-vis education. Schoolgirls live in homesteads populated by girls and women

⁵ This term appears several times in the interview data, at different schools from different girls. However the written source of record for Maasai vocabulary and grammar, Frans Mol’s *Maasai Language and Culture Dictionary* (1996), defines this term as “the returned one”—“it refers to a woman or a wife who returns to her husband’s settlement after having run away from it. The noun is derived from the irregular verb *a-itu*: to return here, of which the pst.t. is *a-nyak-ua*.” Mols’ *Maa* is derived primarily from Il Purko section and dialect, so perhaps the Il Keekonyokie usage is different. It may also be that the girls simply have this word wrong; at least one girl admitted that her “KiMaasai” is not very good, and many worry that school children are rapidly losing vocabulary and sense-making in their mother tongue (Ole Sonkoi, personal communication, 2009). Both Talle (1988) and Payne & Ole Kotikash (2008) use the word *enkabartani* to refer to a new initiate, or a young, circumcised girl who is not yet married.

⁶ *Esiankiki* is used for a married woman, and usually a woman who has not yet given birth, but this is not a fast rule (Payne & Ole Kotikash 2008). I was more than once referred to in this way, even though I am not young, and I have married for over 10 years, but I do not have children.

⁷ Samburu and Maasai are related groups, share a similar version of *Maa*, and other cultural traits. (See Galatay DATE for more information).

⁸ This word is used throughout the anthropological literature on Maasai society, but it was never used by any of my informants in the field. This is likely because I interviewed girls in school--schoolgirls—for whom the category of “initiate” is anathema because it is synonymous with “soon-to-be-married.”

(and boys and men) who have not attended school at all or who have left school without finishing. As the development imperative to attend school increasingly normalizes the schoolgirl category, schoolgirls themselves use their own discursive resources to produce, for themselves, possibilities.

Given space constraints, I have limited an extended illustration of schoolgirl discursive disruptions, focusing only on the repeated rejection of the woman category and an embrace of the schoolgirl category within the context of a developmentalist focus on “the girl-child.” Mainstream development discourse is heavy with reference to the girl-child. The term is used to disaggregate girls’ experience from boys—experiences collapsed and homogenized by the terms ‘children’ or ‘youth.’ Importantly, the term also separates adult women from children. In Maasai communities as in others the world over, women can also be girls in ways men can never be boys. The girl-child formulation foregrounds and emphasizes the double problem of sex/gender and age/generation--these children are girls and these females are children.

The girl-child is the essentialized and eternal victim who is vulnerable by virtue of her age, sex, and the gendering of her possibilities. The participants in my study are girl-children as the discourse defines them. Indeed, the Maasai girl-child, like girls in other marginalized communities, particularly among pastoralists, must face the triple barrier of poverty, gender bias, and household mobility (Leggett 2005) in their quest for schooling. At the same time, I found distinct discursive patterns whereby the schoolgirls in this study repeatedly rejected the woman category in favor of a revised version of being a girl. Whereas girls historically have no power or prestige Maasai society as they are understood to be in transition to a future husband’s home and social status is gained by the passage to womanhood through the emurrata rite and further by the birth of sons (Talle 1988), schoolgirls can stake certain claims in a category that helps to protect them from the conventional exigencies of being female. A representative example of a repeated refrain is one interviewee’s simple answer to my complex question, “right now, do you consider yourself a girl or a woman?” Her answer: “now, I am a student.”

Embedded in this discursive slight of hand is a radical departure from conventional Maasai thinking and ways of being: rejection of the female rite of passage, *e-muratta*. *E-muratta*, for both males and females, is equated with the English word “circumcision,” although the procedure for females is more accurately conveyed by the word “excision.” But neither “excision” nor “circumcision” adequately captures the full sociological and biosocial meaning of the concept of *e-muratta*. There is no association in the Maa meaning of the word with the actual physical circumstance of the procedure. In other words, nothing in the phrasing *e-muratta* refers to or denotes cutting or removal of any kind (Ole Kintalel 2008). Emuratta is a process whereby children become adults, a rite of passage that primarily sociologically changes the person from a thoughtless child into a thoughtful adult, although in the case of females, removal of the clitoris and the *labia majora* is thought to prepare the body to give birth (Talle 2007) and as some schoolgirls explained in the context of critique, female cutting is also designed to “reduce sexual

feelings.” Long guarded as part of the sacred, *emurrata* for females has come under fire in recent years. Schoolgirls in my study are unanimously not in favor of female cutting, although almost every girl I spoke to was already circumcised or would be within the year. They argued clearly that *e-muratta* is “meaningless.” Their critique is embedded in, in part, widespread Christian, NGO, and national awareness campaigns which emphasize “eradicating FGM,”⁹ but also because the schoolgirls resist the potential progression of life events that proceed from the rite—even when the rite is performed unceremoniously and for reasons that do not necessarily conform to ‘tradition.’ For example, several girls explained that female circumcision “has no meaning” because “nowadays” girls are cut very young¹⁰ for clearly expedient reasons. The reasons the girls give are usually three: 1) their older sisters were being circumcised, so they were too (this reduces costs to the household—the circumciser is hired once and only one celebration needs to be held) or 2) they were circumcised young so that when those who oppose circumcision attempt to prevent circumcision begin to apply pressure on parents, the girls will have already been cut, or, more prominently 3) if they do get pregnant, they will already be circumcised. To be pregnant before circumcision is a taboo for Maasai, and therefore a dangerous circumstance for the girl who is often chased away from her home (Talle 1988; Mol 1996).

Claiming the schoolgirl category—and holding on it—is a survival strategy. And while circumcision status matters because a circumcised girl is more vulnerable to early/forced marriage or “child marriage,” a circumcised schoolgirl has more protection than her uneducated peers at home. Several schoolgirls spoke of needing to earn “high marks” in order to prolong their liminal status. While my analysis thus far have relied on a collage of narrative threads coming from many interviews, I would like to shift my focus to elements of one girl’s narrative, Emily Nashipae¹¹. The story she tells about her pursuit of schooling and its concomitant rejection of expected gendered behaviors illustrates the complex of desires that often shapes the process of neoliberal subjectification as a girl-child becomes a schoolgirl. Of course none of this theoretical talk matters to Nashipae. What matters to her is getting to school and staying there.

Nashipae is a 17 year-old Class 6 (6th grade) student at a peri-urban government primary school in Kajiado District, Kenya. Nashipae’s story, while serious, is not necessarily as extreme as it sounds or

⁹ Female cutting was outlawed by the Kenyan government with the Children's Act, passed by Parliament in 2001. The Children's Act outlaws various forms of violation against children, including female genital cutting for females 18 and younger, but the practice remains widespread. I met some girls who were circumcised in urban clinics, although most had the procedure at home.

¹⁰ Many informants assert that historically *e-muratta* for females was considered a premarital rite performed between the ages of 15 and 18 but has been transformed into a prepubescent one for which girls as young as 10 are cut, in part because of the demands for, and of, schooling (Ole Kintalel, and others).

¹¹ Not her real name.

altogether rare. At the same time, she had the most dramatic story of all the schoolgirls I spoke with. Many of her colleagues came to school from families who worked hard, sacrificed themselves, and withstood criticism for educating their daughters. The characters in Nashipae's story come across as stereotypes in a familiar fiction: greedy patriarch, empathetic but powerless and subservient mother, heroic head master who takes Nashipae in and protect her from her family. Nashipae herself is the heroine and victim, and her telling of her own story both foregrounds her own disruptive desires and her humble fears in the face of such disruption. As I will ultimately conclude, as a girl-child-turned schoolgirl, Nashipae is both captured and rescued, hero and victim, subject and object.

Part of Nashipae's story is excerpted here:

Nashipae's father has one wife¹² and nine children—four girls and five boys. Her sisters are all married; she was the only girl “left at home,” while all of her brothers are in various stages of schooling. One of her brothers attends Makerere University in Uganda. Nashipae explained that her “father never wanted to educate girls, only boys,” so she knew that it was a matter of time before she would “be grown” and be “married off” like her sisters. At home she spent her time herding smallstock and helping her mom cook, clean, fetch water and firewood, and care for small children. She said that she “never wanted to be married” because her sister “was married by an old man and when he died she was left very young so” she “never wanted to get such problems.” She indicated that her parents “do not know the importance of education and only wanted dowry¹³.” Not unlike reports I heard from nearly every other schoolgirl, Nashipae said her parents “usually believe that when I girl gets education she can't go anywhere, only to class 8 or even form 4, get pregnant, and just go home.” In other words, it appears that her parents believe, as the dominant community discourse configures, that investing in a girls' education, through 8th grade (class 8) or high school (form 4) is a wasted investment because a girl can become pregnant at anytime. Once she is pregnant, it is strongly believed that any benefits that may accrue from schooling are lost because she must be married and any assets she might bring accrue to her affinal family.

As it turns out, her father had arranged her marriage as she predicted. She said, “he wanted to sell me to an old man so that I refused to go there. I came to school and talked to the headmaster about my problem, that my father was to give to me to somebody, and I didn't want that because I want to learn. The headmaster helped me and the following day I came to school. They [her parents] were very harsh to me [after that].” When I followed up with the headmaster, he

¹² Maasai are historically and traditionally polygamous, although monogamy/serial monogamy are increasingly popular, particularly among educated people. Given that Nashipae's parents are not educated and her father is not a young man, it is notable that he has one wife. That he is allegedly interested in “dowry” (she means bride wealth) could indicate that he is a poor man, which might speak to his inability to secure more wives. (see Talle 1988 for discussions of male poverty and marriage among Maasai).

¹³ The use of the word “dowry” is interesting here. Nashipae is very bright and narrated her story in English, almost entirely without translation. Mary, my assistant and translator, sat silently by, transfixed, as was I, by our discussion with Nashipae. Nashipae said this word, “dowry.” What she means to refer to is ‘bride wealth,’ or ‘bride price’, which refers to the goods given to the bride's family over time as a condition of the marriage arrangement. Dowry, on the other hand, are the goods the bride brings with her to her husband's home. It is not clear to me how this word may have come to be a part of her vocabulary.

confirmed her story and filled in some of the details that Nashipae had omitted. He told me that the family's homestead is very far from the school—about 20-30 kilometers south. The morning after she was informed that she would be soon married, Nashipae left the enkang with the goats like she did every day, but instead of herding them toward green leaves and water, she walked with them all the way to the primary school. When she reached the school and found the headmaster to explain her story, she had the goat herd with her in the school compound. By then it was late in the day. He told her to take the goats and go back home so she could not also be punished for taking or losing any of the family's herd. He told her to say nothing to anyone but to rise in the morning before dawn and come back to the school and he would arrange a place for her to board, admit her immediately to the school, and work on getting her the shoes, uniforms and school supplies she would need. According to him, she complied, and the next day she arrived at the school and has not gone back to family's home since. She was 14 at the time.

And from Nashipae's telling, her family was indeed "harsh to her." Once they learned that she was living with a local teacher and attending the school, they followed her. Her father insisted that she would be "removed and give[n] to her husband." I do not know the details of the arrangement that Nashipae's father made. I do not know, for instance, if he had agreed on a one time payment/exchange whereby he would be given cattle and other gifts and the husband would receive Nashipae, essentially a 'modern' arrangement that is more often linked with 'selling daughters' than the 'traditional' arrangement whereby married women gain a certain degree of status within the patriarchal confines of the affinal home and security associated with deepened agnatic ties (Talle 1988). Either way, the father's reputation and potential bride wealth were at stake, not to mention the very idea that the state could override his authority when it came to his daughter's future. But that is precisely what was threatened: "the headmaster said that if [the father] continue to say that [he will remove her] he is going to jail. So that pressure came down." The headmaster also indicated that her family followed her that the father was very angry. I asked about Nashipae's mother, and the head teacher said that she supported Nashipae and wanted her to go to school but "she had no otherwise." In the end, the mzee gave in to the 'pressure' asserted by the headmaster and local elders who gathered to discuss the matter and find a solution without actually involving the police. The family, it seems, has wiped their hands of Nashipae. As she put it, with a few stoic tears in her eyes, "sasa, they removed me from among their children."

For Nashipae, such sacrifice and loss is *in* the past but of the future. She has suffered in this way, she says, "because I know one day, one time, I will become a very big person." Her aspirational horizon¹⁴ begins now and includes "reading [studying] hard" and "be[ing] careful [to not get pregnant] so that I can make my vision to be a doctor." This notion of future 'vision' is part of the disruptive discourse that makes the schoolgirl subjectivity possible. As one schoolgirl explained, "they [those who have not gone to school] don't see because they are not learned, so they don't see anything which is ahead of them, all they see is those things like to look after [livestock] and when you come to school your mind opens up and you can see ahead." I was told repeatedly that those who have not gone to school do "nothing" at home, despite the fact that schoolgirls could also list the daily labor required of those at home—and of

¹⁴ Arjun Appadurai asserts that the "capacity to aspire" is crucial if marginalized peoples are to mobilize themselves and "change the dynamics of consensus in their social worlds." The capacity to aspire is a "navigational capacity" and the horizon of aspirations, while brittle, has productive power. See "The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition" from *Culture and Public Action* (2004).

themselves when they are at home on weekends. But this labor is not seen as work, but “just” “looking after [livestock].”¹⁵ Unremunerated work that does not require formal education to acquire or do is not considered ‘anything’ productive by most of the schoolgirls we talked to. They see those who have not gone to school, and their mothers and sister in particular, as always “under the father” unless, as they see it, they have access to paid labor and control over their earnings.

Schoolgirls see themselves as having more freedom, autonomy and a perceived sense of agency because they are in school. As opposed to “doing nothing” at home, schoolgirls see themselves as producers, actively producing for themselves a future that those not in school not only do not have the capacity to produce, but are actively prevented from producing by the limits of the social category “wife.” And to that it’s possible to add a refined designation: “uneducated wife.” Those who are in school, Emily and others explained, make their own futures from patchwork story lines woven from school textbooks, sermons, and everyday talk, even if the aspirations they articulate are grandiose and unlikely. Emily sees herself as a doctor, “leading her people.” Another young woman, two years younger than Emily and at another more remote school, told me about her plan to be a pilot (when other children pushed rocks through the dirt to play ‘driver,’ she climbed a tree to the top to drive her plane); another explained that as the president of Kenya she would support all tribes, because “in Kenya we are many and not from just one community.” I met several would-be lawyers, doctors, and even a few more presidents. All the primary school girls I talked to have little to guarantee their graduation to high school, much less two-year colleges, and even more distantly, four-year universities and the post-graduate education required to realize many of their dreams, but they nonetheless have settled on images of themselves carved by and against the prevailing sentiment of what is normal and expected or even possible.

Fran Varvus’ study of schooling, *Desire and Decline: Schooling Amid Crisis in Tanzania*, is her attempt to understand “why faith in schooling endures, particularly in these parts of the world where social and political-economic problems seem most intractable” (2007:3). Ultimately, her conclusions are clear: “In the absence of a concomitant restructuring of national and international development priorities, schooling can transform very few lives (2007:5). The desire/decline problematique, Varvus argues, “lies at the heart” of the postcolonial condition, whereby “global faith” (Rist 2003) in developmentalism’s promises is configured by—and simultaneously shapes—macrostructural forces that are largely implicit, hidden, and normalized in everyday life in the development zone. Material poverty, for example, is taken as ‘normal’ (if undesired) for the schoolgirls in this study. Getting a job and earning money is, then, a fundamental, commonsensical goal and the number one reason stated for why education is important in their lives now and, as many specified, for their ‘future[s].’ The desire for education is steeped in a deep need to have a better life, complete with ‘knowledge’ that can only be attained in school and the material

¹⁵ Lesorogol (2008) found the same sentiment among Samburu schoolgirls.

things that do indeed make life easier: a secure place to live, enough food to eat and clothes to wear, access to health care, clean water and so on. As Varvus points out, this desire is productive, in both constructive and dangerous ways:

“...The desire for schooling and the life of an ‘educated person’ is not the mere expression of an oftentimes unrealistic goal; it also becomes an engine for action. In some cases, the action is counterproductive because it can put young women at greater risk of contracting HAV/AIDS by having sex with men who pay for girls’ schooling in return; in other instances, the desire for schooling for one’s children may bring communities together to oppose policies likely to compound the effects of economic decline” (19).

As a local discursive formation nested in the macro-generated education-as-development imperative, this desire produces possibilities and constraints and thus makes certain subjectivities possible. The schoolgirl is the heroine to the girl-child’s victim. Nashipae heroically walks close to 30 kilometers through the bush to a distant school, leaving her family behind in pursuit of the “one day, one time” dream of being a “big person.” But even has her schoolgirl status frees her of some gendered expectations; she remains a girl-child because she is still vulnerable. Ironically, her schoolgirl subjectivity extends her social role as a “child” and not a “woman,” thus freeing her of the responsibilities incumbent upon women, but nonetheless reaffirming the fundamental lack of agency which attends to the girl-child category. Moreover, because the schoolgirl category relies on a neoliberal discursive regime to make sense—she is someone who can break the bonds of tradition in order to pursue her own autonomous dreams and take her own independent place as a producer and consumer in the future developed world—as possible effect is the reification of the schoolgirl category such that it is ultimately emptied of its emancipatory potential by the pre-packaging required for its mainstreaming.

Arjun Appadurai offers another way of thinking through the contradictions of agency and voice enacted by engagements with modernity. His notion of “terms of recognition” (building on Charles Taylor’s formulation of recognition) is meant to “highlight the conditions and constraints under which the poor [and extension the excluded and marginalized] negotiate the very norms that frame their lives” (2004: 66). . Although, he argues, “the poor” have both a “deeply ambivalent” relationship with, and a “fairly deep moral attachment” to, the “norms of the societies in which they live,” even those that “directly support their own degradation,” poor people are “neither simple dupes nor secret revolutionaries. They are survivors. And what they often seek strategically (even without a theory to dress it up) is to optimize the terms of trade between recognition and redistribution in their immediate, local lives. Their ideas about optimization may not be perfect, but do we have a better optima to offer to them” (2004: 65)? In the light of this idea, it is possible to argue that Maasai schoolgirls are likewise strategically hedging their bets, pitting one social category against another in an effort to find the most room for maneuver. In this way they are using cultural codes once used to define them in limiting ways to define themselves in

liberating ways. According to Appadurai, discussions of culture and *the cultural* matter for development and poverty reduction because “it is in culture that ideas of the future, as much as those about the past, are embedded and nurtured” (59). Futurity, often embodied by aspirations, is a critical element in development discourse, because it is in the near or distant future that development—in Maa the closest translation is *enkibeleyenyet* or “new changes”—will be known. The capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004), is, therefore an integral condition of possibility for future change. In this study, recognizing the productive salience of Maasai schoolgirls’ aspirational horizons is crucial to understanding how such a capacity has the power to create discursive spaces and thus open ground for agency. At the same time, however, the aspirations the schoolgirls articulate display the characteristics of the neoliberal frame around development as an aspiration. In other words, as the vulnerable ‘girl-child’ aspires to be the agentic “schoolgirl” she risks losing as much as she hopes to gain.

A central contradiction of postcoloniality, as an extension and transformation of the colonial experience, is a paradox: the constraints of the condition open up new possibilities for individuals. Maasai schoolgirls, like others in the global south, will, as they continually have, “negotiate their way into a world of their own making” within a framework of ambivalence and contestation (Macamo 2005). The ideational questions at the heart of this analysis—*Who is a girl? A woman? Who can she be?*—are central to the material concerns of development debates occurring in Maasai communities at this moment, with particular reference to access to educational access, attainment, and applicability. These are more than ‘mere’ theoretical questions about identity but rather, the struggle to form them and answer them evinces the productive power of discourse to frame possible subject positions (and a resistance to these frames), close off others, and produce ‘new’ social ‘facts.’ “Culture, moreover, is a legitimate, even necessary, terrain of struggle, a site of injustice in its own right and deeply imbricated with economic inequality. Properly conceived, struggles for recognition can aid the redistribution of power and wealth and promote interaction and cooperation across gulfs of difference” (Fraser 2000). The discursive production of the Maasai schoolgirl provides both a recognitional and redistributive field in which agency, resistance, and dialectic in are play. This play has real, material consequences that are gendered.