

Abstract

This study presents a descriptive analysis of the system of production and reproduction among the pastoral Maasai in Kenya, with special reference to the penetration of the market economy and its effects on gender relations and the economic status of women. It describes the structural and ideological basis of gender organization in Maasai society and points to processes of change affecting both female and male roles.

Traditionally, Maasai women have enjoyed a great deal of autonomy in domestic affairs and in indigenous system of production and reproduction. This relative female independence has been based on their occupancy of the "house" as a property-holding unit of central importance within the agnatic lineage structure.

It is argued here that the transformation of the Maasai society as it has evolved during the last hundred years has had adverse effects on female control of livestock property. The role of the house as a managerial system and as an institution mediating rights to livestock has been undermined. As livestock increasingly becomes converted into cash, pastoral families are getting involved in fields of interaction and spheres of operation which give precedence to male activity. Women as a group are losing out because they are now finding themselves estranged from the pastoral pursuit which is the basis of their economic role and social identity as Maasai women.