

The New York Times

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2005

Forced to Marry Before Puberty, African Girls Pay Lasting Price

By SHARON LaFRANIERE

CHIKUTU, Malawi — Mapendo Simbeye's problems began early last year when the barren hills along Malawi's northern border with Tanzania rejected his attempts to grow even cassava, the hardiest crop of all. So to feed his wife and five children, he said, he went to his neighbor, Anderson Kalabo, and asked for a loan. Mr. Kalabo gave him 2,000 kwacha, about \$16. The family was fed.

But that created another problem: how could Mr. Simbeye, a penniless farmer, repay Mr. Kalabo?

The answer would shock most outsiders, but in sub-Saharan Africa's rural patriarchies, it is deeply ingrained custom. Mr. Simbeye sent his 11-year-old daughter, Mwaka, a shy first grader, down one mangy hillside and up the next to Mr. Kalabo's hut. There she became a servant to his first wife, and, she said, Mr. Kalabo's new bed partner.

Now 12, Mwaka said her parents never told her she was meant to be the second wife of a man roughly three decades her senior. "They said I had to chase birds from the rice garden," she said, studying the ground outside her mud-brick house. "I didn't know anything about marriage."

Mwaka ran away, and her parents took her back after six months. But a week's journey through Malawi's dry and mountainous north suggests that her escape is the exception. In

remote lands like this, where boys are valued far more than girls, older men prize young wives, fathers covet dowries and mothers are powerless to intervene, many African girls like Mwaka must leap straight from childhood to marriage at a word from their fathers.

Sometimes that word comes years before they reach puberty.

The consequences of these forced marriages are staggering: adolescence and schooling cut short; early pregnancies and hazardous births; adulthood often condemned to subservience. The list has grown to include exposure to H.I.V. at an age when girls do not grasp the risks of AIDS.

Increasingly educators, health officials and even legislators discourage or even forbid these marriages. In Ethiopia, for example, where studies show that in a third of the states girls marry under the age of 15, one state took action in April. Officials said they had annulled as underage the marriages of 56 girls ages 12 to 15, and filed charges against parents of half the girls for forcing them into the unions.

Yet child marriages remain entrenched in rural pockets throughout sub-Saharan Africa, from Ghana to Kenya to Zambia, according to Unicef. Studies show that the average

Continued on Page 26

age of marriage in this region remains among the world's lowest, and the percentage of adolescent mothers the world's highest.

Many rural African communities, steeped in centuries of belief that girls occupy society's lower rungs, are insured to disapproval by the outside world.

"There is a lot of talk, but the value of the girl child is still low," said Seodi White, Malawi's coordinator for the Women in Law in Southern Africa Research Trust. "Society still clings to the education of the boy, and sees the girl as a trading tool. In the north, girls as early as 10 are being traded off for the family to gain. After that, the women become owned and powerless in their husbands' villages."

In villages throughout northern

The rural notion that girls fill society's lower rungs resists almost all efforts at change.

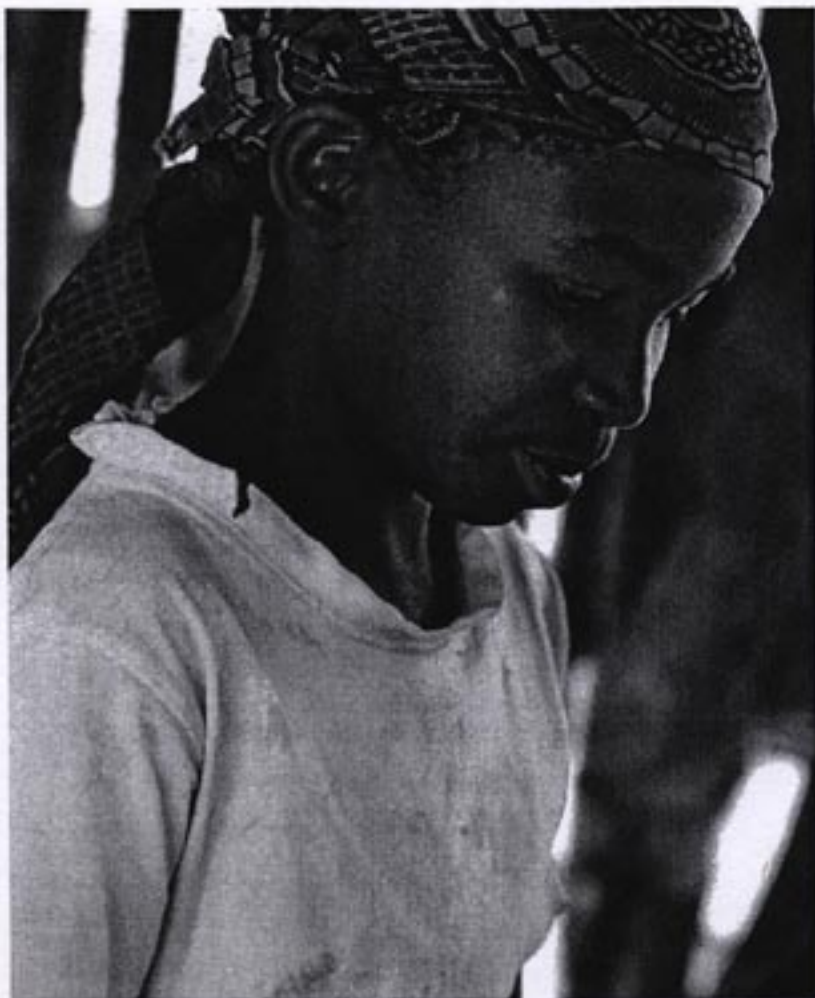
Malawi, girls are often married at or before puberty to whomever their fathers choose, sometimes to husbands as much as half a century older. Many of those same girls later choose lifelong misery over divorce because custom decrees that children in patriarchal tribes belong to the father.

In interviews, fathers and daughters here unapologetically explained the rationales for forced, intergenerational unions.

Unes Nyambi, of the village of Wiliro, said she was betrothed as a child so her parents could finance her brother's choice of a bride. Now about 17, she has two children, the oldest nearly 5, and a husband who guesses he is 70. "Just because of these two children, I can not leave him," she said.

Beatrice Kitamula, 19, was forced to marry her wealthy neighbor, now 63, five years ago because her father owed another man a cow. "I was the sacrifice," Ms. Kitamula said, holding back tears. She likened her husband's comfortable compound of red brick houses in Ngana village to a penitentiary. "When you are in prison," she said, "you have no rights."

In tiny Sele, Lyson Morenga, a widower, financed his re-marriage two years ago by giving his daughter Rachel, then 12, to a 50-year-old ac-



Mwaka Simbeye's father married her off at age 11 to repay a \$16 loan. She ran away, and her parents took her back after six months.

quaintance in exchange for a black bull, according to his new in-laws. Mr. Morenga delivered the bull to his new wife's family as a partial payment, said his wife's uncle, Stewart Simkonda. Mr. Simkonda said Mr. Morenga had promised to deliver a larger payment after the impending marriage of Rachel's younger sister.

Malawi government officials say they try hard to protect girls like Rachel. Legislation before Parliament would raise the minimum age for marriage to 18, the legal age in most countries. Currently, marriages of Malawian girls from 15 to 18 are legal with the parents' consent. Women's rights advocates say they welcome the proposal, even though its effect would be limited because many marriages here, like much of the sub-Saharan region, take place under traditional customs, not civil law.

The government trained about 230 volunteers last year in ways to protect children, especially girls. Volunteers for Malawi's Human Rights Commission, Roman Catholic Church workers and police victim-protection units also try to intervene.

In Iponga village, for example, Mbohesha Mbisa averted a forced marriage to her uncle at age 13 last year by walking a half-mile to the local police station, where officers persuaded her father to drop his plans to use her to replace her deceased aunt as a wife and mother.

"I was really scared, but I wanted to protect myself," said Mbohesha, now in the sixth grade.

Still, Malawi officials say that this region's growing poverty, worsened by AIDS and recent crop-killing drought, has put even more young girls at risk of forced marriage.

"This practice has been there for a long time, but it is getting worse now because there is desperation," said Penston Kilembe, Malawi's director of social welfare services. "It is particularly prevalent in communities that have been hard hit by famine. Households that can no longer fend for themselves opt to sell off their children to wealthier households."

"The gains which were made in addressing early marriages are being lost," said Andrina Mchiela, principal secretary for the Ministry of Gender.

children to wealthier households."

"The gains which were made in addressing early marriages are being lost," said Andrina Mchiela, principal secretary for the Ministry of Gender.

Women's rights advocates want to abolish marriage payments, or lobolo, saying they create a financial incentive for parents to marry off their daughters. But even the advocates describe the tradition as politically untouchable.

In its most benign form, lobolo is a token of appreciation from the groom's family to the bride's. At its most egregious, it turns girls into the human equivalent of cattle. In much of northern Malawi, lobolo negotiations are typically all-male discussions of down payments, installments, settlements and the occasional refund for a wife who runs off.

Jimmy Mwanyongo, a 45-year-old village headman in Karonga, explained the marriage of his daughter Edah much as he might any commercial transaction. Several years ago, he said, sitting on a straw mat in his six-room house, he promised to care for his neighbor's two cows.

Instead, he sold the cows to educate his adopted son. When the neighbor, Ridein Simfukwe, lost his wife a year later in 2002, Mr. Mwanyongo said he felt obliged to offer his daughter as a replacement. "Because I had sold the two cows, I had no choice," he said.

Edah was 17, doe-eyed and voluptuous. Even with an illegitimate son, her neighbors and relatives say, she had her pick of suitors. Mr. Simfukwe was 63, with nine grown children and a flock of grandchildren.

Mr. Simfukwe said he considered Edah a bit young for him. But "her father decided that although I am old, I am the right person."

"I think it was a tribute to my character," he said. "Edah was willing. I didn't tie ropes around her neck

and drag her."

Edah said her father did everything but that. For nine months, she said, she held out until "I thought I would die of sorrow."

"My father refused to allow me to eat," she said. "He chased me from the house. He said, 'Go find somewhere where you can sleep!' He said, 'Go to your husband! If you don't want to go there, I will whip you to



The New York Times

In Chikutu, the patriarchy permits marriage of girls to settle debts.

death!"

Her mother, Tabu Harawa, sided with her daughter, to no avail. "I told him, 'It is like you are killing her,'" she said. "It was shameful."

She said, "If it happens again, I will divorce him."

Now 20, Edah has an 11-month-old girl and is racked by fears for her future. "My husband is old," she said, sitting on the porch of her tiny thatched hut. "He may die soon. Most likely he leave me with more chil-

dren. So where will I go?"

Her life, she suggested, is about as free as that of the two prized oxen her father now hooks up to his wooden cart for springtime plowing. "I am like a slave," she said.

Some of Edah's neighbors pity her. Others joke that she has married her own grandfather. Their reaction is one hint that even the most traditional Africans are starting to frown on marriages of young women to old men, as Edah's mother said, "for the sake of cows."

Mwaka Simbeye has her fellow villagers in Chikutu to thank for her return to her parents' home after her sojourn in her neighbor's hut. Now back in the second grade, she is still young enough to be charmed by a simple game of toss. Her body remains that of a child's.

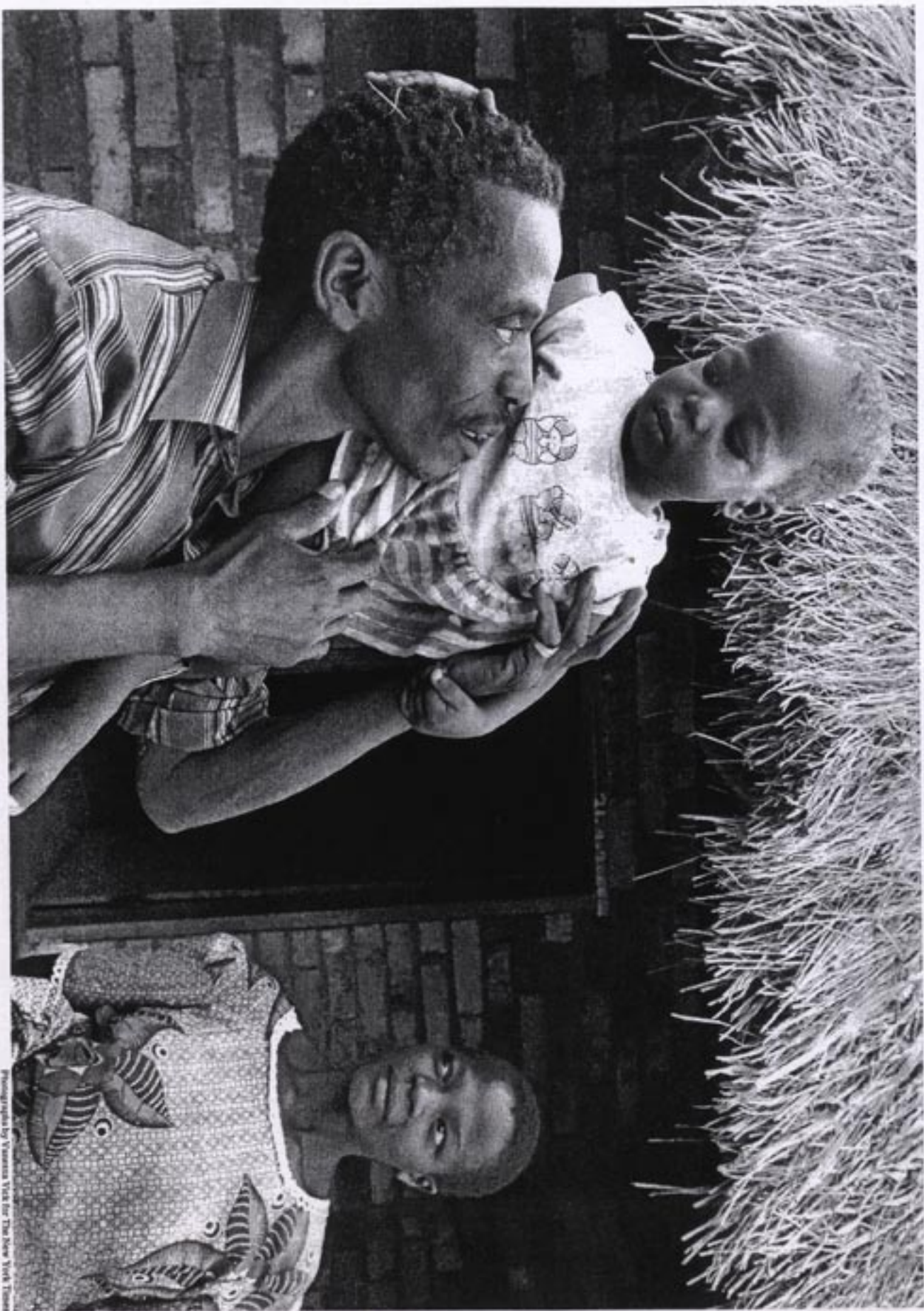
At Mr. Kalabo's, she said in a barely audible whisper, "I had to do all the household chores. Washing the plates, cleaning the house, fetching water, collecting firewood, cooking when the first wife wasn't around."

Her father, Mapendo Simbeye, who repaid his \$16 debt with Mwaka, said he took her back after hearing that the police could arrest him. In a clearing that serves as the village social center, he said he underestimated her, adding, "My daughter is worth more than 2,000 kwacha."

"I did it out of ignorance," he said. "I had five kids, no money and no food. Then Mr. Kalabo wanted the money back so I thought of selling the daughter. I didn't know I was abusing her."

Mwaka's mother, Tighezge Simkonda, looks like an older version of her daughter and is no less shy. "I did object," she said softly, glancing nervously at her husband chatting nearby. "I said, 'My daughter is very young.'"

"But the control is with the man," she said. "The daughters belong to the man."



When she was only 14, Beatrice Kiamula, now 19, was married to Elias Shola, now 63, at left with their daughter, Twisire, 2, to settle her father's debt. "I was the sacrifice," she said.

Photographs by Vanessa York for The New York Times