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My Dead Husband's Land

Internews Documentary Spotlights AIDS Widow's Struggle for Her Rights

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(November 29, 2006) An Internews Network documentary premiered Tuesday, November 28 on the South African Broadcasting Corporation's most prestigious documentary television program, *Special Assignment*. *My Dead Husband's Land* tells the story of an HIV-positive widow, Betty Tom, and the transformation of her community on the shores of Lake Victoria in Kenya.

"At Orongo village, women of the Luo ethnic group are using the AIDS epidemic to positively transform their culture, in a fashion as yet unprecedented in Africa. It is a tale of endurance, courage and love," says film director Mia Malan, Senior Health Journalism Advisor for Internews Network.

The film crew visits the home of Betty Tom, whose husband died of AIDS three years ago. Betty is in her mid-twenties – the average age of Orongo's new generation of widows – and was chased off her husband's land after his death because she refused to be inherited. But she has since managed to convince her in-laws that she has the right to own land and choose who she wants to take as her partner. Today Betty lives on the same compound with her in-laws and is the legal owner of her husband's land.

Betty is not alone. Every widow at Orongo, whether HIV-positive or not, now has the right to refuse to be inherited. Moreover, they have defied tradition by starting to write wills so that their children will have legal access to their land in the future.

Today women from all over Kenya and neighboring countries such as Uganda and Tanzania visit Orongo village to learn to advocate effectively for their rights.

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According to Kenya's ministry of health, in Orongo village, on the outskirts of Kisumu in the west of Kenya, one out of four people are HIV-positive. Up to five men die of HIV-related illnesses each week in the district, leaving behind many widows and orphans.

"The men die first," says Florence Gundo, of the Orongo Widows and Orphans Group. "They die because they're in denial of AIDS ... The women acknowledge the virus and go for tests, which makes them live longer."

Photo: Darren Taylor

Betty Tom, a widow at Orongo, prepares a meal for her children.

Culture and its proponents prevent Luo women from inheriting and owning their deceased husbands' land and properties. The widows themselves are deemed property and are often "inherited." They are forced to marry male relatives, usually brothers-in-law, according to an ancient custom known as 'ter'. But the women of Orongo are emerging victorious in a battle against practices they consider oppressive and cruel.



And, remarkably, they put their success down to AIDS, which has revolutionized Luo culture at Orongo. Widows and elders have joined hands to successfully fight the practice of *ter*, arguing that widows with HIV could infect their "inherited" husbands.

A South African viewer was so moved by the film that she decided to send gifts to ten of the women at Orongo village, of whom some are featured in the film, writing in an email to film director Mia Malan, "What an incredible example those women set, for all women and 'humanity' in general!"

My Dead Husband's Land was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The contents are the responsibility of Internews and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, PEPFAR or the United States Government.

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USAID partner, the Health Policy Initiative in Kenya, introduced Internews to the project and provided significant training and capacity building and inheritance rights to Orongo, along with the Kenya Commission on Human Rights. The documentary came about as a result of a collaborative media training of the Health Policy Initiative and Internews on property rights and HIV.

More viewer comments on *My Dead Husband's Land*:

"I have hope in AFRICA. If it takes a nation to create war, then surely it takes a nation to RE-BUILD it. The gender gap will soon be bridged."

"A great show. One of the most insightful & hopeful pieces of journalism I've seen."

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

[Mia Malan](#), Senior Health Journalism Advisor for Internews Network

Comments or inquiries about this story?

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