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Women and the Invisible World: an exploration of the relationship between
gendering and spirit possession cults in coastal East Africa.

Swahili society is inarguably gendered. Throughout history and into the present day, men and women have occupied different social spaces, filled different societal roles, and subscribed to different behavioral mores. The implications of this gendering are debatable. In some instances, the existence of ‘complementary and asymmetrical roles’¹ places women at a disadvantage. Women have been and continue to be less able to gain access to education, and are less likely to take part in the formal economy. In the globalized modern world, this is a distinct socio-economic handicap. At the same time, social gendering creates a cultural framework that exists solely for women. The existence of a separate value system enables a kind of freedom of expression, and an acknowledgment of femaleness that is often missing in cultures that strive for unisexuality. In some instances, the strength of the female counterculture has enabled women to defy gender stereotypes in the public sphere.²

¹ Boddy, Janice, “Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 23, 407-434. 1994.

² See Ivaska, Andrew, in *Dar es Salaam: The history of an emerging East African metropolis*, edited by Andrew Burton, James Brennan, and Yusuf Lawi, London: British Institute and James Currey. Tanzania: Mkuki na Nyota.

It is tempting to take a stance on gendering. Women's lib is a hot subject, particularly in its relation to Islam. Western media (and, by extension, the culture-consuming public) harbors an insatiable fascination with the potential oppression of Muslim women.³ Western feminist theory has a history of dismissing gendering as sexist.⁴ Anthropological research in East Africa has reacted in defense of gendering, sometimes venturing toward cultural relativism.⁵ In order to study Swahili women's history, it is necessary to step outside of this debate, to concentrate on a narrative that is not predisposed toward any particular view of the role of women in Islam. We must unlearn our 'pop' knowledge, and gradually reconstruct a picture of gender in Swahili society that is based on facts instead of politics. In doing this, we will help to replace stereotypes with human understanding. A deep and narrow exploration of cultural narratives will serve an expansive function; it will promote a worldview that is

³“Muslim Women Don't See Themselves as Oppressed, Survey Finds.”
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/08/world/middleeast/08women.html>, "Voice for abused women upsets Dubai patriarchy,"
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/23/world/middleeast/23dubai.html?_r=1&scp=12&sq=muslim+women&st=nyt&oref=slogin, "Muslim Women in Yemen, NY Times Blog,"
<http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2006/10/17/muslim-women-in-yemen/?scp=1-b&sq=muslim+women&st=nyt>

⁴ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, *Feminism Without Borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2003. Also, Caplan and Eastman and their 1970s work with gendering on the Swahili coast, which suggests that if women do not do “productive work” they are disadvantaged, but they have since revised this view because for some women, working out of the home leaves them painfully overburdened, Nisula, page 150, footnote 14. She goes on to say that women are all of these things, gender is much more complex than we had supposed, and our conclusions have to do with how we contextualize our “field facts.”

⁵ It is perhaps the anthropologist's responsibility to give voice to a contextualized perspective. This is particularly evident in the debate over female circumcision. See Parker, Melissa, 1999, “Female Circumcision and Cultures of Sexuality,” in Tracy Skelton and Tim Allen (eds) *Culture and Global Change*, London: Routledge. See also Liv Haram's discussion of gendered modernization in Arusha, Haram, Liv, 2004, “Prostitutes' or Modern Women? Negotiating Respectability in Northern Tanzania.” In S. Arnfred (ed.) *Re-Thinking Sexualities in Africa*. Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

increasingly complicated, one that acknowledges the singularity and peculiarity of experience.

To gain a better understanding of what gendering means in Swahili society, to explore how the notion of separate spheres manifests itself, and to examine its strengths and failings, this essay will analyze spirit possession practices from a historical perspective. It will trace the social and societal functions of possession rituals from the pre-colonial era into the present day. The role of possession is tied to social gendering. This relationship, and the more general cultural functions of possession practices have been difficult for western scholars to understand. The history of possession in East Africa is therefore the history of anthropological understanding of possession in East Africa; it is impossible to separate the authors' voices from the information. This essay will be a combination of history and historiography. By analyzing the work of several scholars, I will build a working definition of spirit possession on the Swahili coast. I will then analyze the role of possession cults in terms of their relationship to the female sphere, paying specific attention to changes in the role of possession over time. Spirit possession simultaneously serves both a liberating and oppressive function for Swahili women. There are few conclusions to be drawn, other than that human (and inhuman) relationships are beyond our understanding.

Spirit possession generally refers to the inhabitation of a human body by forces from the invisible world. The concept of possession is universal; it traverses cultural, temporal, and geographical boundaries, and exists in some form or other in all of the

global religions.⁶ Janice Boddy defines possession as ‘a broad term referring to an integration of spirit and matter, force or power and corporeal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable.’⁷ On the Swahili coast, spirit possession is part of a healing practice associated with Islam and with women’s religion. Linda Giles sees the Swahili possession ritual as a means of interpreting experience, as a way of engaging with cultural change and of articulating opposing discourses.⁸ The possession ritual is a forum in which women, and sometimes men, can process and interpret social problems. Irregularities and abnormalities, sickness, sadness, and isolation are all understood to be manifestations of the spirit world. Joy, elation, and transcendence can also be the work of internal spirits. The existence of the spirit world enables a definition of the self and the other that is fluid and in constant dialogue with itself.

The invisible world is an organic part of Swahili culture. Spirits are neither concrete nor symbolic. Belief in them does not reflect a brand of fundamentalism, and they are not metaphorical tools for interpreting social reality. The presence of spirits on the Swahili coast reflects a way of seeing and understanding that does not find a natural parallel in modern Western ideologies. Regardless of whether the spirits are real or metaphorical, they have played an active role in the shaping and reshaping of Swahili society. As society has changed, so the nature of spirit possession has changed. It is a participatory social construct, another kind of infrastructure. When seen in terms of its

⁶ Lewis, I.M., *Ecstatic Religion: a study of shamanism and spirit possession*, London and New York, Penguin Books, 1971, page 32.

⁷ Boddy, Janice, “Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol 23 (1994), pp. 407-434.

⁸ Giles, Linda, “Sociocultural Change and Spirit Possession on the Swahili Coast of East Africa,” *Anthropological Quarterly*; April 1995, Vol. 68, Issue 2, pp. 89-106.

history and its larger social functions, the concept of possession is easier to grasp. As usual, a shift in perspective makes the world less exotic.

Spirit possession practices on the Swahili coast probably resulted from a fusion of indigenous African religions with Sufi Islam. The spirit possession ritual has existed in the Zanzibar archipelago for as long as written history has been recorded.⁹ Both the notes of the missionary Pere Anton Horner,¹⁰ and the diaries of Emily Reute, the daughter of the Sultan of Oman and Zanzibar¹¹ describe the possession ceremony in detail, and cite its social and cultural importance. The existence of *waganga*¹² can be traced to a pre-Islamic era, but the possession cult and its ritual is almost certainly located within the Swahili cultural universe. The practice of spirit possession is a manifestation of coastal and Islamic identity, which developed in contrast with the religious practices of the East African interior.¹³ The existence of spirits and their interaction with human beings is therefore a fundamental part of East African Islam. Spirit belief systems developed in tandem with Swahili Islam. Their inclusion in Swahili religion is central, not marginal, to Swahili Muslim identity, despite the fact that the practice of possession rituals exists outside the mosque.

⁹ Nisula, Tapio, *Everyday Spirits and Medical Interventions: ethnographic and historical notes on therapeutic conventions in Zanzibar Town*, Saarijarvi: Gummerus Kirjapaino Oy, 1999.

¹⁰ Alpers, Edward A. “ ‘Ordinary Household Chores’: Ritual and Power in a 19th-Century Swahili Women’s Spirit Possession Cult,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1984), pp. 677-702.

¹¹ Ruete, Emily, *Memoires of an Arabian Princess from Zanzibar*, New York: Markus Wiener, 1989.

¹² A broad Swahili term for “healer,” which can include Islamic and non-Islamic practices invoking various elements of the invisible world to interact with various elements of the visible world. See Nisula, *Everyday Spirits and Medical Interventions*, page 80.

¹³ Giles, Linda L., “Spirit Possession on the Swahili Coast: Peripheral Cults or Primary Texts,” (PhD Thesis, Texas, 1989).

Social gendering existed in indigenous Bantu societies, but was cemented into Swahili culture with the society's adaptation to Islam. The version of Islam practiced on the Swahili coast forbids women entry into the mosque, and thereby relegates the religious fulcrum of society to the domain of men. Women's religion in Swahili culture has developed independently of formal male influence. It is practiced outside the mosque and without the guidance of a male Imam. By function of their existing outside of the mosque, female religious practices tend to be more performance-oriented, and more strongly influenced by the Sufi orders of Islam. There is a distinct social element to women's religion on the Swahili coast, and religious practice tends to coincide with practical social events, such as birth, marriage, public celebration, and ritual healing.¹⁴ Spirit possession ceremonies fall into the realm of female religious practice, but possession and participation in the possession ritual is not limited to female adherents. Like the *maulidi* ceremony, spirit possession rituals occupy a social space in which gendered subcultures overlap.

I.M Lewis argued, in the 1960s, that the spirit possession ritual allowed women a voice in an increasingly male-dominated socio-religious structure.¹⁵ His study suggests that spirit possession developed as an alternative religious infrastructure, one in which women held positions of leadership and power. Most *waganga* who perform the possession ceremony are female, and it is primarily women who participate in the healing ritual. The position of *mganga* is a viable career for a woman. By conducting the

¹⁴ Nuotio, Hanni, "The Dance that is not Danced, the Song that is not Sung: Zanzibari Women in the *maulidi* Ritual," from *The Global Worlds of the Swahili: Interfaces of Islam, Identity and Space in 19th and 20th Century East Africa*, Loimeier and Seesemann (eds.), Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006.

¹⁵ Lewis, I.M., "Spirit Possession and Deprivation Cults," *Man*, New Series, Vol. 1, No. 3, (Sept. 1966) pp. 307-329.

ceremonial process of joining or exorcising a spirit and its host, female practitioners are able to earn a living and also occupy a position of distinction in society. The practice of *uganga* remains a viable economic option for spiritually inclined women in present day Swahili culture. Tapio Nisula's fieldwork in urban Zanzibar demonstrates that the orchestration of possession ceremonies provides an important contemporary avenue for female economic independence.¹⁶ Possession rituals exist outside of the formal economy and do not require English language skills or institutional education, both of which are significantly more difficult for girls to obtain. The spirit world and its healing practices have thus existed outside of the realm of public infrastructure since their genesis in Swahili culture. The existence of this alternative discourse, one that is primarily operated by women and to serve the needs of women, through the colonial and post-colonial era, demonstrates the inability of twentieth and twenty-first century governments to incorporate women's culture effectively into the public sphere. It also illustrates the strength of female Swahili ideologies.

The relationship between gendering and empowerment is more complex than socioeconomic statistics suggest. Swahili society was historically, and, in many ways, is still, socially stratified according to race and religion. For a woman, high social status meant increased access to the avenues of power (usually through the help of her husband), and an elevated standard of living, but also adherence to a stricter version of Islam, which required her to live in seclusion and conform to rigid behavioral guidelines. Lower class, or more 'African' women enjoyed greater social freedom, but were limited in their abilities to access money, knowledge, and the avenues of political power. This is,

¹⁶ Nisula, *Everyday Spirits and Medical Interventions*.

however, a theoretical model, whose practical implications have been too nuanced to fit neatly into binary social stratifications. Feminist anthropologists in the late 1970s made an argument to associate ‘African’ culture with the activities that took place in the women’s sphere—social rituals that allowed for more behavioral freedom—, and ‘Muslim’ culture with the stricter mores that governed female behavior in the public sphere.¹⁷ Later scholarship has acknowledged that it is impossible to separate the ‘Muslim’ from the ‘African’ in Swahili female subcultures; the private activities of women are as ‘Muslim’ as their public activities.¹⁸ Women are not considered to be more ‘African’ than men, and it would be a misinterpretation to read ‘African’ cultural practices as feminist, and ‘Islamic’ cultural practices as repressive. To reiterate, the gendering in Swahili culture is organic, as is the fusion of African and Islamic practices. To attempt to separate these elements from the culture as a whole, to distill them as errant, outlying, or backward practices, would be to alter and negate Swahili constructions of identity.

Modern feminist theory has engaged in a dialogue with the idea of a gendered society, the goal of which is to suggest that gendering may not necessarily imply a diminishment of the emotional well being and social status of women.¹⁹ Marc Swartz makes a compelling argument for a revised view of gendered relationships in his article “The Isolation of Men and the Happiness of Women: sources and uses of power in

¹⁷ See Caplan, Pat, 1982, “Gender, Ideology, and Modes of Production on the Coast of East Africa,” *Paideuma* 28: 29-43, and Caplan, Pat, 1989, “Perceptions of Gender Stratification,” *Africa* 59:196-208, and Eastman, Carol, 1984., “*Waungwana na wanawake: Muslim Ethnicity and Sexual Segregation in Coastal Kenya*,” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 5:97-112.

¹⁸ Nisula, *Everyday Spirits and Medical Interventions*, page 152-156.

¹⁹ Bulbeck, Chilla, *Reorienting Western Feminisms*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Swahili marital relationships.”²⁰ Swartz argues that despite the fact that men are recognized to have complete control over everything besides the most domestic household tasks, their primary social responsibility is to please their wives. As a result of this off-centered power dynamic, Swahili women enjoy a certain degree of social freedom without the burden of economic responsibility. While this seems a feeble argument in a global context (considering the freedom that socio-economic independence allows for both men and women), from a localized perspective, acknowledging the difficulties experienced by anyone trying to make a living in sub-Saharan Africa, access to wage labor may not be a valid yardstick for the measurement of personal freedom. The idea that women exert subtle but significant control in domestic relationships also appears in Kelly Askew’s study of *taarab* music and its social functions.²¹

In light of the nuanced nature of gendered power dynamics in Swahili culture, the possession cult may offer insight into a means by which women exert indirect social control. Indeed, the performative nature of the possession ritual embodies Askew’s description of performance as a means of vocalizing dissent.²² Lewis suggests that the act of possession, which often includes a complete rejection of social mores—spirits have been known to remove their clothing, drink alcohol, make lewd gestures, and yell obscenities—is a metaphorical means of defying the restrictions placed upon women in

²⁰ Swartz, Marc J. “The Isolation of Men and the Happiness of Women: sources and uses of power in Swahili marital relationships,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 38 (1): pp. 26-44, 1982.

²¹ Askew, Kelly, “As Plato Duly Warned: Music, Politics and Social Change in Coastal East Africa,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, Volume 76, Number 4, Fall 2003, pp. 609-637.

²² Askew, Kelly, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Swahili society.²³ While possession rituals may serve as a kind of release for the sick in heart and head, the idea that they are a performative means of social protest has since been overturned by the dominant scholarship. The most direct contradiction of Lewis's theory came from Edward Alpers in his 1984 study, " 'Ordinary Household Chores': Ritual and Power in a 19th century Swahili Women's Spirit Possession Cult."²⁴ Alpers argued that instead of a means of protesting oppression, the cults in fact served an oppressive function; by isolating female culture and female religious practice, they relegated women to a universalized second-class status. Alpers based his argument on the notion that the Islamicization of Zanzibari society under the Busaidi dynasty cemented social hierarchies that disempowered the majority of Swahili working class men. These men, in turn, disempowered their women by heightening the distinction between domestic and non-domestic labor. Essentially, the restructuring of society along increasingly racial and religious lines, coupled with the implementation of Sharia's law in Zanzibar town legalized women's lower class status and relegated their religious practice to the margins. Linda Giles revisits the relationship between possession cults, gendered culture, and female marginalization in "Possession cults on the Swahili Coast: A re-examination of theories of marginality."²⁵ Giles argues that separation does not imply marginality, and that, furthermore, possession cults are not separate at all; they are an intrinsic part of Swahili society and Swahili cultural imagination. Her argument echoes Swartz's study, and suggests that the status of women in East Africa cannot be

²³ Lewis, "Spirit Possession and Deprivation Cults."

²⁴ Alpers, "Ordinary Household Chores."

²⁵ Giles, "Possession cults on the Swahili Coast"

measured in terms of western feminist or post-feminist ideologies. Swahili gender is a different kind of animal; it must be examined in context.

If gender and spirit possession are not, as Giles suggests, directly linked, then they certainly occupy overlapping social spaces. How else can one account for the disproportionate levels of female participation in cult activities? The breakdown of Swahili society into an overlapping system of subcultures provides one model for understanding the relationship between spirit possession and the female sphere. As a fusion culture, or a borderland, the Swahili universe invariably contains numerous and conflicting subgroups; the self is constantly redefined in relation to the other, whether that breakdown is racial, religious, geographic, economic, gendered, or through any of the other countless lenses that Swahili peoples use to describe themselves. The particularities of spirits' identities, and the ability of a human body to house numerous spirits may illustrate a means by which Swahili culture accommodates the constant presence of competing 'others.' Kjersti Larsen gives an in-depth study of the relationship between spirit possession and Swahili conceptions of identity in her PhD dissertation, *Where Humans and Spirits Meet: Incorporating Difference and Experiencing Otherness in Zanzibar Town*.²⁶ Larsen suggests that the incorporation of alien personalities in the form of spirits into Zanzibari peoples' identities, is a way of incorporating the often conflicting elements of the cultures that contribute to the Swahili social imagination. Spirit possession allows women and men to conceive of their own bodies as host to many competing influences.

²⁶ Larsen, K. 1995, *Where Humans and Spirits Meet: Incorporating Difference and Experiencing Otherness in Zanzibar Town*, PhD dissertation, University of Oslo.

Both Linda Giles²⁷ and Michael Lambek,²⁸ see possession cults as symbolic systems in Swahili cultural understanding; they are a means by which cultural constructs are drawn, understood, and articulated. It is not the function of these constructs that is important, but rather their meaning. The presence of spirits, and the social constructions and interpersonal relationships that surround them are part of the means by which Swahili peoples draw connections between one another and their environments.

Giles further explores this concept in an article that traces the changing manifestations of spirit identities in accordance with various stages in coastal East African history.²⁹ The rise of different types of spirits, including the incorporation of European spirits during the colonial era, suggests that spirit possession may indeed be a social construct that helps people to delineate notions of self and other. The role of possession in society has changed over the course of Swahili history. Cult participation has followed more urbane trends in societal development. Economic prosperity increases the instance of possession, which makes sense, since the spirits often require the ceremonial consumption of luxury goods. Urbanization and increased means of social organization often lead to a rise in cult participation.³⁰ Possession cults serve a practical, as well as spiritual function in East African coastal communities. They are places where women and men meet to communally process the complex and heterogeneous realities of a constantly changing society.

²⁷ Giles, Linda L., "Spirit Possession on the Swahili Coast: Peripheral Cults or Primary Texts," (PhD Thesis, Texas, 1989).

²⁸ Lambek, M. 1981. *Human Spirits: a cultural account of trance in Mayotte*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁹ Giles, "Sociocultural Change and Spirit Possession on the Swahili Coast of East Africa."

³⁰ Ibid.

The multifaceted nature of the spirit possession ritual, and the tendency of possession cults to fill different social functions at different times suggest that the relationship between gender and possession is situational. The invisible world provides a framework through which to view emotional health, but beyond that, the role of spirits in a woman's life is individualized. The gendered nature of the possession cult is advantageous to women in that the healing process is female-centric, and through that process its relationship to female culture is reinforced. Acknowledgement of a spirit can be a liberating experience for a woman, but it is unlikely that membership within a cult will significantly change the practical aspects of her life. Although the ritual is a communal event, possession itself is a personal experience. Possession cults have not significantly challenged the dominant structures of society,³¹ nor have they enforced patriarchy by moving women to the margins.

To get a closer look at the role that possession plays in a Swahili woman's life, I interviewed my friend Mirfat, an 18-year-old resident of N'gambo. I knew that Mirfat had a spirit because in early 2008, we attended a ritual together, and she went into trance. Mirfat's description of how she came to have the spirit, through being ill 'in the head,' despite being discharged from the hospital as healthy, coincided with Nisula's fieldwork,³² suggesting that the spirit world provides an alternative means of understanding pain and suffering. Mirfat's illness happened at a time when she was under significant social pressure regarding a marriage proposal from a Zanzibari man living in

³¹ Gower, Rebecca & Stephen Salm, 'Swahili Women since the 19th Century: Theoretical and Empirical Considerations on Gender and Identity Construction,' *Africa Today* 43/3 (1996), 251-268.

³² Telephone Interview with Mirfat Munthir, April 27, 2008, Transcribed and Translated from Swahili by Lizzy Brooks, April 27, 2008.

London.³³ It is possible that her illness was a result of emotional stress, and that the discourse of possession enabled her to disentangle herself from a web of difficult feelings. It provided her with a coherent way of explaining her unhappiness, and connected her with a community who continue to provide support, even after the initial bout of illness has passed.³⁴

Gendering and the discourses of spirit possession overlap in many ways, but neither social construct sheds much light on the mysteries of the other. We can examine possession through the lens of gender and conclude that the invisible world plays a significant role in Swahili women's culture. We can also examine gender through the lens of possession. Swahili women may best express their emotional trauma through metaphysical narratives. Ultimately, spirit possession is just a way of seeing. To call it the product of gendering, a discourse of protest, or a kind of group therapy is to lose sight of the larger picture. Regardless of whether we believe in the spirits, their social function in East Africa is very real. They are a means by which women understand an internal, female world. The study of spirits and spirit possession gives insight into the changing nature of Swahili women's conceptions of self. The overall coherence of the spirit narrative suggests that the fundamental tenets of Swahili female identity have changed relatively little.

³³ Interview with Maryam China and Mirfat Munthir in Nungwi, Zanzibar, February 10, 2008. Transcribed and translated from Swahili by Lizzy Brooks, April 28, 2008.

³⁴ Telephone Interview with Mirfat Munthir, April 27, 2008, Transcribed and Translated from Swahili by Lizzy Brooks, April 27, 2008.

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Interviews:

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Me: Mirfat, I have a question about spirits.

Mirfat: About what?

Me: About spirits, like Kibuki spirits.

Mirfat: Ala.

Me: Do you remember when the Comorian people came to visit and you danced? Was that because of a spirit?

Mirfat: Yeah.

Me: Was it a Kibuki spirit?

Mirfat: Yeah, Kibuki.

Me: Okay, Kibuki. Do you have one?

Mirfat: Me, yeah, I have a Kibuki.

Me: You have one.

Mirfat: Don't you know, the day before yesterday I just went to get some dawa.

Me: Yeah, your mom told me. So, when did you begin to have this spirit?

Mirfat: To have the spirit? 2007.

Me: How did you know that you had a spirit? Were you ill/did you have pain?

Mirfat: Yes, I was ill/I had pain. I was ill for an entire month.

Me: In what way were you sick? In your body, like your stomach, or in your head?

Mirfat: In my head.

Me: So, did you go to the hospital? Or, did you go to a mganga first?

Mirfat: I went to the hospital.

Me: What did they say?

Mirfat: They checked me for everything. But mama knew that it was Kibuki, so then we went to see about the Kibuki.

Me: So, now you go to get dawa how often, like once a month?

Mirfat: I go for dawa from time to time. When I go, I sleep over there. I wake up and I'm okay.

Me: Are there many other women who have Kibuki?

Mirfat: Yeah, of course.

Me: Who? Anyone that I know?

Mirfat: Yeah, Shara has one.

Me: Really?

Mirfat: Also, Hadidja. Do you remember Hadidja, mama's friend?

Me: Yeah I know her.

Mirfat: When you come back, you'll see her. She has one too.

Me: So, it's like a normal thing?

Mirfat: Yeah. And you, you want one?

Me: Haha, maybe. But maybe I'm a little scared. Were you scared when you first knew that you had one?

Mirfat: Yeah, I was scared.

Me: Are you still scared?

Mirfat: No, I'm not scared anymore. Now I do dawa.

Me: Cool, thanks for explaining this to me.

Mirfat: You probably have one. Don't you remember how much the Kibuki people liked you? (when we went to a ritual in February). That's probably because you have one.

Me: Yeah, maybe I've got a spirit.

Mirfat: Well, yeah, when you get here in July, we'll see about it.

Me: Okay, another question, do your friends know that you have a Kibuki?

Mirfat: Some of them know, but not many.

Me: Your close friends only.

Mirfat: Yeah.

Interview with Maryam China and Mirfat Munthir in Nungwi, Zanzibar, February 10, 2008. Transcribed and translated from Swahili by Lizzy Brooks, April 28, 2008.

Me: I've heard that it's difficult to find work if you're a woman here in Zanzibar. Do you think that a woman needs a man?

Maryam: They don't want to get a man; they want women to work. They want [the woman and the man] to help each other in life.

Me: Both to work?

Maryam: Yes, people want for both to work to help each other. If you don't have work, the man will look down on you. And work, to get it, is difficult for women here in Unguja.

Me: Why?

Maryam: They don't give us work. The reason will be that you didn't study, maybe because you've been working in the garden, you've been carrying water. They don't want to study, those people.

Me: But, you can't get work in a hotel?

Maryam: I'm going to tell you an example about a hotel. At a hotel or a restaurant, you can be in the kitchen. Do you remember, I told you that I used to work in a kitchen. But, they wanted me to know English. I could cook, but I couldn't do anything else.

Me: So, to work with guests, you have to know English.

Maryam: Yeah, if you know English, you can be a waiter.

Me: But still that's not great work. Can you get enough money to live doing that?

Maryam: No, it's okay. Other people will help you out also. You can also rest and people will help you out.

Me: Was it different in the past?

Maryam: In the past? In the past, the money was good. It was small, but you could use a small amount of money to get everything that you needed. Now if you take ten thousand to the market, you still can't get all of the ingredients that you need. Remember yesterday, we took ten thousand, we went to the market, we had to go get more cash to buy meat and fish.

Me: I know. I remember. But, I see that there aren't as many men as women around here. It seems like lots of men have gone to Europe, or someplace else to find work.

Maryam: Yeah, they go to London. They're running away from the problem.

Me: What is the problem?

Maryam: Problem means—

Me: No, I understand the word, I am asking what is the problem. Can you describe it?

Maryam: The problem. The problem is that there is no work. People sit around outside. They smoke cigarettes. They smoke pot. They get drunk.

Me: Like when we were riding here on the dolla dolla, we passed lots of men just sitting around, hanging out by the side of the road.

Maryam: Yeah. And how it works, if one of them can get money, they go to London. They go there to look for life.

Me: But women can't go to London?

Maryam: No, they go. Other ones go. If they can take care of themselves with their own money, they go there on their own money. I'd like to go, but I have no money. I would go to find work. Some other women have a bad mindset. They complain that life here is bad. They give up and smoke crack.

Me: Are there many people who smoke crack?

Maryam: Yes, lots of women. They have a rotten understanding.

Me: In town or in the country?

Maryam: In town.

Me: In Michenzani, or where?

Maryam: Oh, you know some of them. Do you know Asha? She smokes crack. Me, I don't smoke crack. Ask something else.

Me: Okay, so if someone gets a boyfriend then, are the two of them able to be together, or does the guy have to leave to find work someplace else? So, Mirfat, if you get a boyfriend, do you want a boyfriend who works here, or a boyfriend who works someplace else, like who travels to London or someplace in Europe?

Mirfat: Anywhere, as long as he's got some money.

Me: So you want a boyfriend who's got money?

Mirfat: Yeah, someone who works so he can help me.

Me: Where does Boo (her boyfriend) work?

Mirfat: He sells music.

Me: What about the first guy who wanted to marry you. How come he wanted to marry you before even having seen you?

Maryam: He wanted to mess up her life.

Mirfat: He lived here in the past. He saw me when I was younger. He wanted a wife from here.

Me: So, he wanted a Zanzibari wife to come live with him in London?

Maryam: Yes, someone had shown him a picture and he chose her from the picture. He looked at one and then another and then another. He said no, I want a girl with nice hair, light skin, a nice body. So, someone gave him a picture of [Mirfat] and he said I want this one.

Me: So, did you think it might be a good idea, because he probably has money and he might be able to give you a nicer life?

Maryam: He said that it would be good and Mirfat thought that it would be good, because if she went to London, she might be able to help me and Saide (the youngest daughter), but, it was bad luck and she didn't go.

Me: Well, I'm glad you didn't go.

Mirfat: How come?

Me: Because you're still so young.

Maryam: Yeah, she was still too young.

Me: Yeah, and also maybe it's better if you can decide who you marry, I mean, to choose someone who understands you.

Mirfat: I'm hungry.

Me: So, let's go get some food.

Maryam: I'm not going. Wait, wait, I'm not finished telling you about this. Zanzibari women, if they come here to get work at Nungwi, or if they go to an office to get work,

they're not given it, not often. People from Dar es Salaam, though, if they come here and look for work, they're given it.

Me: Why aren't Zanzibari people able to get work?

Maryam: Well, some people can get work—this isn't true for everyone, but most of the time, the hotels want people from Dar es Salaam. And what's more, I went to try to get work, and I had to use money first.

Me: You had to use money first?

Maryam: Yeah, I had to pay to get work.

Me: But, I don't understand why.

Maryam: Okay, for example, let's say I came to your office and I wanted to work there. I said, Eliza, I'd like to work in this office. You write down my name, my address, I live in Kisma Djongo'o, etc. The second day you call me back, I have to go talk to you again. The third time I come back, another interview. So, all this time I'm traveling back and forth, and what am I supposed to do? I have no husband and two children. I have to buy water. I have to buy this thing and that thing. So then, the boss says, Okay, if you want this job, bring me a little bit of money. So, I put this money in my purse and I went to work.

Me: But still he didn't give you work?

Maryam: No, he still didn't give me work. He was a liar!

Me: So, he was able to do that because you needed it. Because he was in a position of power.

Maryam: I went to work, I told him, I would like to do a job. I can work and I want to work here. I can pay you once I've worked. He told me, I don't want it. I told him, well I don't have any money. I had to leave. There are other kinds of work that you can do at a hotel even if you don't speak English. You can work in the garden. You can clean. But, those jobs aren't good. They harass you.