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# DRESSING UP: CLOTHING, CLASS AND GENDER IN POST-ABOLITION ZANZIBAR*

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*Pemba Peremba*
*Ukija na winda*, *hutoka na kilemba*
*Ukija na kilemba*, *hutoka na winda*.[1]

(Proceed cautiously in Pemba
If you come wearing a loin cloth, you leave wearing a turban
If you come wearing a turban, you leave wearing a loin cloth.)[2]

DRESS has historically been used as one of the most important and visually immediate markers of class, status and ethnicity in East African coastal society. As one of many forms of expressive culture, clothing practice shaped and gave form to social bodies.[3] Examining transformations in dress and fashion illustrates, however, that boundaries between theoretically distinctive social categories were often vague in practice.

Historically, changing one's class or ethnicity in East Africa was never as easy as changing one's clothes, yet the power of magical clothing to transform poor African freepersons or slaves into Arab or Shirazi sultans served as a common trope in nineteenth-century Swahili oral literature. Several of the stories contained in Edward Steere's *Swahili Tales as Told by the Natives of Zanzibar*, originally published in 1869, have plots which center on a poor and despised character who dons the clothes of the élite and is then recognized

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[1] C. Velten, *Prosa und Poesie der Suaheli* (Berlin, 1907) as cited in H. P. Block, *A Swahili Anthology* (Leiden, 1948), 137; C. H. Sacleux, *Dictionnaire Swahili-Français* (2 vols.) (Paris, 1941), ii, 740.

[2] Pemba is one of the two main islands comprising Zanzibar and the main center of clove production in the isles. All translations from Kiswahili are my own.

[3] For a discussion of such practices elsewhere on the African continent, see Misty Bastian, 'Female "*Alhajis*" and entrepreneurial fashions: flexible identities in south-eastern Nigerian clothing practice' and Deborah James, '"I dress in this fashion": transformations in *Sotho* dress and women's lives in a Sekhukhuneland village, South Africa', both in Hildi Hendrickson (ed.), *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa* (Durham NC, 1996), 97–132 and 34–65; Phyllis M. Martin, 'Contesting clothes in colonial Brazzaville', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xxxv (1994), 401–26; Jonathan Friedman, 'The political economy of elegance: an African cult of beauty', *Culture and History*, vii (1990), 101–25; Donna Klumpp and Corinne Kratz, 'Aesthetics, expertise and ethnicity: Okiek and Maasai perspectives on personal ornament', in T. Spear and R. Waller (eds.), *Being Maasai* (Athens OH, 1993), 195–221; Timothy Burke, *Lifeboy Men, Lux Women* (Durham NC, 1996).

Fig. 1. A male Arab of Zanzibar wearing a *kilemba*, *kanzu*, silk waist scarf, *jambia* and short jacket. Reprinted from Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire*, iii, 1856.

as a sultan. In alternative plots, young élite men are dressed in the clothing of slaves or women and are thus socially and materially disinherited.[4] While few members of the coastal East African underclass held illusions of succeeding in the transformation of their identities to the degree of their fictional counterparts, the importance of dressing up to one's status – be it actual or aspirational – was widely recognized in daily practice.[5]

The turn of the century aphorism *Pemba Peremba*, cited at the head of this article, succinctly depicts the popular understanding that the period from 1890 to 1930 was a time of particular economic flux in the islands of Zanzibar. It also recognizes the importance of dress as a terrain for contesting social relations and articulating new social identities. This 'terse little saying embodying a general truth' captures the social reality that many members of the islands' Omani aristocracy – whose status was publicly marked by a proudly worn turban (*kilemba*, Fig. 1) – were being reduced to poverty during this period, while many of their former slaves – previously clad only in waistcloths (*winda*, Fig. 2) – were rising both in class and status. As the latter changed classes, they also changed their clothes.

[4] See 'Sultani Majinuni', 'Sultan Darai', and 'Kisa cha Kihindi', in Edward Steere, *Swahili Tales as Told by Natives of Zanzibar* (London, 1922).

[5] Margaret Strobel, *Muslim Women of Mombasa* (New Haven CN, 1979); Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot : Revelry, Rebellion and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856–1888* (Portsmouth NH, 1995), 79–174; Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari, *The Customs of the Swahili People*, ed. and trans. James Allen, (Los Angeles, 1981), 148–53, 169–77. Mtoro was originally published as C. Velten, *Desturi za Wasuahili* (Gottingen, 1903).

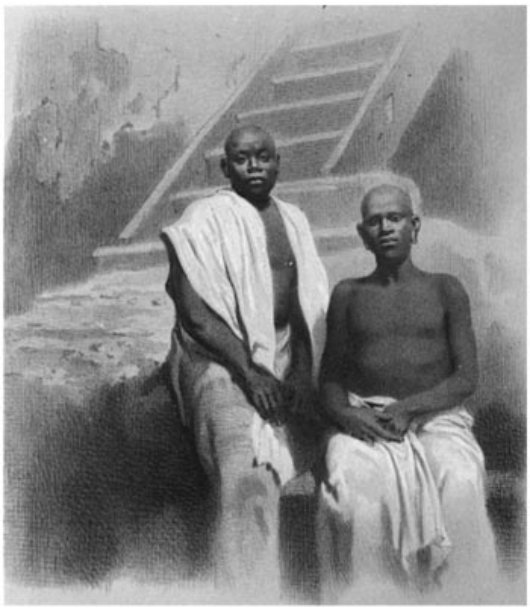

Fig. 2. Male slaves wearing *winda* made of *merikani* cloth. Reprinted from Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire*, iii, 1856.

With the abolition of slavery in Zanzibar[6] in 1897, former slaves began a protracted, multi-generational process of redefining their positions from those of servile 'outsiders' to local residents with vested economic, social and political interests. Through processes roughly similar to those described by Glassman along the Swahili coast in the nineteenth century, former slaves from mainland East Africa asserted their rights as 'citizens' of Zanzibar society by acquiring property and participating in social and religious rituals from which they had previously been marginalized, as well as claiming membership within local ethnic communities.[7] Beginning in the 1910s, former slaves (who accounted for roughly three-fourths of the islands' total population) began identifying themselves as freeborn coastal Swahili. By the early 1920s, only some 12 per cent of the Protectorate's African population were defining themselves as members of the Nyasa, Yao and Manyema ethnic communities, the three principle communities from which Zanzibar's slave populations were drawn.[8] Whereas many in the cohort of recently

[6] Slavery was not uniformly abolished with the passage of a decree. Those born after 1897 were legally free, while those born before 1897 were able to apply for freedom in court, provided they could prove their ability to maintain themselves independent of their masters. As Cooper clearly demonstrated, the goal of British administrators was to adhere to the rhetoric of abolition while simultaneously guaranteeing the continued productivity of the rural clove economy based on slave labor. Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters* (New Haven CN, 1980); Zanzibar National Archives (hereafter ZNA), AB 4/38, Clove Labour, 1898–1926.

[7] Glassman, *Feasts*, 79–176.

[8] ZNA, BA 34/2, *Report of the Zanzibar Native Census* (Zanzibar, 1924); ZNA, BA 34/3, *Report on the Census Enumeration of the Entire Population* (Zanzibar, 1931), While the ethnic category was widely used in Zanzibar in the twentieth century, Sheryl McCurdy has demonstrated that the Manyema ethnicity was itself the product a complex historical

emancipated individuals identified themselves as Swahili, by 1930 they and their children were identifying themselves to census enumerators as indigenous islanders.[9]

Regardless of where they had originally come from, by the 1930s these women and men perceived themselves and each other as Zanzibaris. They had spent the greater part of their adult lives in Zanzibar; they had built their homes, planted their farms and watched both their children and their trees grow to maturity on Zanzibar's rich soil. As former slaves and their descendants increasingly asserted their status as members of local society, they abandoned clothing associated with their mainland heritage and adopted fashions which identified them first as Swahili and later as Zanzibaris.

A further part of this process of emancipation was reflected in the explosion of Zanzibar's urban population as tens of thousands of slaves left the countryside and moved to the town in pursuit of new economic and social options. Between 1890 and 1930, the size of Ng'ambo, Zanzibar's urban African quarter, nearly doubled as new homes and businesses were built by and for recent immigrants from the countryside.[10] Former slaves who remained in the rural areas also increasingly asserted their economic power, not only as laborers,[11] but as small-holder property owners as well. As clove prices plummeted and production costs rose in the early twentieth century, many Arab plantation owners began to sell off sections of their estates. Former slaves took the opportunity presented by such sales to purchase small farms and to establish themselves as peasant producers of the islands' two main export crops, cloves and coconuts.[12] As Cooper and Sheriff have

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creation. Sheryl McCurdy, 'Storm in a tea cup: Islam and identity politics in Tabora and Ujiji, Tanganyika, 1880–1934', Unpublished Ms, 9–15.

[9] The major shifts in ethnic identity reported in Zanzibar's censuses have been a point of concern for generations of scholars. While many of the first generation of emancipated slaves identified themselves as Swahili, by the 1930s the term Swahili was generally regarded in local usage as a euphemism for former slave. This reality was reflected in the census, when the number of individuals returning themselves as Swahili dropped from roughly 34,000, in the 1920s, to 2,000 by 1931. While I give some indication of why this happened below, I am more concerned with what such shifts say about consciousness and how such changes were articulated in daily practice than what a census can tell us about heritage. ZNA, BA 34/3, *1931 Census*; R. R. Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey of the British Colonial Empire* (2 vols.), (London, 1949, 1977), ii, 650–85; A. H. Prins, *The Swahili-Speaking Peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast* (London, 1961).

[10] Oscar Baumann, *Die Insel Zanzibar- Archipel* (Leipzig, 1897); ZNA, AW 2/27, Map of government and private land, Ngambo, 1910; ZNA, AW 2/26, Map of Ng'ambo, 1892.

[11] As Frederick Cooper has demonstrated, although the British who established Zanzibar as a protectorate in 1890 worked diligently to create legal mechanisms intended to keep slaves tied to their masters' clove plantations, slaves made a number of very important advances in the struggle to transform their economic and social positions in the period immediately following abolition, including a reduction in the 'work week' from five days to three, as well as reduction in the amount of work performed on these days. Cooper, *Slaves*, 90–110.

[12] Many slaves without the financial resources to purchase land also began clearing previously unused land and planting tree crops, which thereby established their 'ownership' of the plots on which their trees were planted. ZNA, AB 36/20, Ground Rents, 1898–1912; *Report of the Department of Agriculture* (Zanzibar, 1910); *Report of the Commission on Agriculture* (Zanzibar, 1923), 15, 17, 21; R. S. Troup, *Report on Clove*

demonstrated, and *Pemba Peremba* pronounced, the increasing economic advancement of these men and women often came at the direct expense of the Omani aristocracy who owned the vast clove plantations on which slaves formerly labored.[13]

From about 1900 to 1930, clothing styles and fashions, as well as class and ethnic identities, were dramatically remade in the isles. Former slaves and their freeborn children began adopting elements of free dress, particularly headcoverings and shoes, which they had formerly been forbidden from wearing, as well as creating new forms of dress as a public and daily expression of their growing autonomy and economic strength. New markets for imported cloth opened up, particularly in town, as consumerism was seized by former slaves as one means of articulating their aspirations of upward social mobility.

Innovations in the use of dress were, however, highly gendered. Poor women not only adopted a wider range of previously 'forbidden' dress than men, but created entirely new fashions which, while leaving room for the expression of relative degrees of wealth through the choice of fabrics, blurred the distinctions of class and ethnicity in male attire which remained largely intact throughout the early twentieth century. Although both men and women understood the fluidity of social categories, they experienced and negotiated them in different ways. Following the thread of gender throughout the islands' intricately woven fabrics of culture and political-economy allows us to unravel the relationship between changes in clothing practice and changing social identities.

## DRESS, CLASS AND ETHNICITY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Travelers to Zanzibar in the nineteenth century regularly remarked on the importance of dress as a marker of class and status differences in society.[14] The fewer and less ornate clothes an individual wore, the lower the status. Slaves in nineteenth-century Zanzibar typically wore clothes which were usually made of the rudest and cheapest cloth. Sources from this period indicate that male and female slaves often wore only one piece of cloth, which men wrapped around their waists (Fig. 2) and women tied under their armpits. At mid-century the quantity, color and quality of male and female cloth was identical. However, as the decades progressed, servile women increasingly sought to differentiate their clothing from that of their male counterparts, first by dying their cloth with locally produced indigo and later

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*Cultivation in the Zanzibar Protectorate* (Zanzibar, 1932), 41; Sir Alan Pim, *Report of the Commission appointed to Consider and Report on the Financial Position and Policy of the Zanzibar Government in Relation to its Economic Resources* (Zanzibar, 1932).

[13] Cooper, *Slaves*, 125–72; Abdul Sheriff, 'The peasantry under imperialism, 1873–1963', in Abdul Sheriff and Ed Ferguson (eds.), *Zanzibar under Colonial Rule* (Athens OH, 1991), 109–40.

[14] Dress was in fact the only way that many of them could distinguish between the Omani and Swahili at this time. C. P. Rigby, *Report on the Zanzibar Dominions* (Bombay, 1861), 8–9; R. F. Burton, *Zanzibar : City, Island and Coast* (2 vols.) (London, 1872), i, 114, 386, 434; Joseph Osgood, *Notes of Travel or Recollections of Majunga, Zanzibar, Muscat, Aden, Mocha and other Eastern Ports* (Salem, 1854), 35; Charles Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire, la géographie et le commerce de l'Afrique orientale* (3 vols.) (Paris, 1856), ii, 78–9; James Christie, *Cholera Epidemics in East Africa* (London, 1876), 308–10.

Fig. 3. Female slave construction workers wearing *kaniki*. Three women in center back are also wearing early *kanga* designs. Reprinted from Vizetelly, *From Cyprus to Zanzibar*, 1901.

in the century by purchasing increasingly colorful block-printed cloths produced in Zanzibar, or when possible, imports from abroad (Fig. 3).[15]

Because over 95 per cent of those who lived in Zanzibar, including slaves, were Muslims, the covering men and women wore on their heads was also a very important marker of class and status. Slave-holders in East Africa prided themselves on converting their slaves to Islam.[16] The importance of maintaining an immediately perceptible distinction between slaves and masters, however, overrode the Islamic prescription for believers to cover their heads: male Muslim slaves were forbidden from wearing head coverings. As Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari explained of Bagamoyo, a part of the sultan's dominion located on the mainland coast opposite Zanzibar, 'A slave was known by his dress, for never in his life did he wear a cap'. He went on to say, 'Female slaves accompanying free women do not wear a veil or a headcloth'.[17]

Evidence from Zanzibar suggests that such prohibitions applied on the isles as well and that, perhaps as a further marker of their low social status, Zanzibar's slaves also kept their heads shaved bare[18] (Figs. 2 and 4). The

[15] The white cloth shown in Fig. 1 was known as *merikani* because it was produced and imported from the United States. Once dyed to deep blue or black these same pieces of cloth became known as *kaniki*, which were worn exclusively by women.

[16] Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven CN, 1977), 215–20; Frederick Cooper, 'Islam and cultural hegemony: the ideology of slaveowners on the East African coast', in Paul Lovejoy (ed.), *The Ideology of Slavery*, (Beverly Hills CA, 1981), 271–307.

[17] Mtoro, *Customs*, 173.

[18] Burton, *Zanzibar*, i, 428; Edward Vizetelly, *From Cyprus to Zanzibar* (London, 1901), 401; Guillain, *Documents*, iii, 3. When shown Fig. 4, as part of a clothing survey conducted in 1995, many elderly island residents immediately identified the woman on

Fig. 4. A *suria* of Seyyid Said wearing a *barakoa* and *shela* accompanied by a young Mnyasa slave attendant. Reprinted from Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire*, iii, 1856.

absence of shoes was yet another immediately visible sign which identified a man or woman as a member of the servile class, as slaves were also forbidden from wearing shoes in the presence of the freeborn.

At the other end of the social hierarchy were members of aristocratic Omani households who wore the most elaborate of headdresses. Omani men were distinguished by a *kilemba*, composed of several yards of cloth elaborately wrapped around the head (Fig. 1). According to contemporary observers, a man of status never left his home without a *kilemba*, while female members of Omani households were never seen in public unless they were completely veiled.[19] In nineteenth-century Zanzibar, the veil of such women involved several elements, including a richly embroidered head covering and a silk brocade which stretched down the back to the knees, called an *ukaya* (Figs. 5 and 6). When going out in public women from Omani households also covered their heads and clothes with a dark cloth, known as a *shela*, usually worn as demonstrated in Fig. 4. A few women of the élite, particularly those with paternal connections with the ruling classes in Mombasa or Lamu, draped the black cover over their heads like a tent when

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the left as a slave by her cloth and her shaven head. This survey consisted of an open-ended, 75-part questionnaire about various forms of women's clothing. With the assistance of Ally Hassan, Zuhura Shamte and Maryam Omar, the questionnaire was administered to 31 individuals from a range of class and ethnic backgrounds, living throughout urban Zanzibar. Respondents ranged in age from 50 to 106. Unless directly quoting a response given by an informant, results from this survey will hereafter be referred to as Zanzibar Clothing Survey, 1995.

[19] Mtoro, *Customs*, 173; Emily Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess from Zanzibar* (New York, 1888; reprinted, New York, 1989), 167–8, 237–8; Guillain, *Documents*, ii, 82–5; Burton, *Zanzibar*, i, 386; Rigby, *Report*, 9.

Fig. 5. Seyyida Salme binti Said (Emily Ruete).
Photo courtesy of the Zanzibar National Archives, AV 1/16.

walking in public. This style of covering was known in Mombasa as the *ramba* and in Lamu as the *shiraa*, but it was infrequently seen in the isles.[20]

Women of the highest classes also wore a silk mask ornately embroidered with gold and silver thread, known as a *barakoa* (the Zanzibar version of the Omani *burqa*), which covered their faces from forehead to mouth, leaving only two holes for the eyes (Figs. 4 and 5). The more elaborate the mask the higher the woman's rank and status in society, as well as within a given family. The lavish embroidery on the *barakoa* of Sultan Seyyid Said's daughter, Seyyida Salme, (Fig. 5) compared to the unadorned *barakoa* of a slave concubine (*suria*) in his harem (Fig. 4) illustrates this quite clearly.[21]

[20] James Holman, *Travels in Madras, Ceylon, Mauritius, Comoros, Zanzibar and Calcutta* (London, 1840), drawings; Ruete, *Memoirs*, 83, 237–8; Guillain, *Documents*, ii, 84–8; Strobel, *Muslim*, 74–6; Zanzibar Clothing Survey, 1995.

[21] Ruete, *Memoirs*, 82–3, 146–7, 237–9; Burton, *Zanzibar*, i, 386; Guillain, *Documents*, ii, 85; ZNA, AV 1/16.

Although Seyyida Salme's mother was also a *suria*, Salme's rank, status and future wealth were determined largely by paternity.[22] As a freeborn child with inheritance rights in her father's vast estate, she was adorned much more elaborately than older but unfree members of her father's family.

However, once accepted into the harems of the el-Busaidi ruling clan, slave concubines were considered junior members of the family and were expected to conform to patterns of behavior indicative of aristocratic Arab status, including veiling and purdah. As Hilal bin Amour, born in 1889 explained, '*Masuria* (pl. of *suria*) were the women of Arab men and they dressed just like Arab women. The only difference was that they were not referred to as ''lady'' or ''wife''''.[23] Recalling her childhood in Seyyid Said's household, Emily Ruete (alias Seyyida Salme) also remembered that *masuria* were required to change their clothing and adopt patterns of dress which marked them as members of the aristocracy:

> 'People of all races lived in these two houses ... but we were permitted to appear in Arab fashion alone. Any newly-arrived Circassian or Abyssinian woman had to exchange her ample robes and fantastic attire within three days for the Arab costume provided for her'.[24]

The important power of dress to signify inclusion within a particular family, class or ethnic group was thus recognized not only by the poorest members of Zanzibar society, but by its wealthiest members as well. By forcing newly acquired slave concubines to abandon the fashions of their homes, the male Omani élite were literally attempting to strip them of their former identities.[25]

Other elements of nineteenth-century Arab women's dress included a long shirt which fell below the knees and tight fitting pants with frills around the bottoms, known as *marinda* (Fig. 5). Lavish numbers of gold and silver anklets, bracelets, chains and earrings were additional markers of a woman's wealth, as the picture of Aziza, the niece of Seyyid Suleiman (the governor of Zanzibar during the reign of Seyyid Said and one of the island's largest holders of human and landed property), graphically illustrates (Fig. 6).

[22] In the case of Seyyid Said, all of his children, and therefore all of his sons who followed him to the throne were children whose mothers were *suria*. A child's social position and ethnicity followed the father's line. In Zanzibar it was quite common for a slave concubine to have sons and daughters who ranked among the most élite members of society.

[23] Interview with Hilal bin Amour bin Seif, Mwembetanga, 14 July 1995.

[24] Ruete, *Memoirs*, 10.

[25] While concubines could be forced to change their clothes upon arrival, Ruete and others suggest that such women clung tenaciously to other elements of their cultural heritage, as well as their personal memories of childhood. Women of the harem taught the royal children the customs, traditions, languages and stories of their homelands. Ruete, *Memoirs*, 5–13, 22, 43–4, 64–7, 210–13. Respect amongst concubines for the social and cultural traditions of East Africa was also expressed through their participation in female puberty initiation ceremonies, although such participation was sometimes restricted to secret or vicarious involvement through support of slave attendants. Interviews with Fatma binti Baraka, Kisiwandui, 15 Sept. 1991; Bakia binti Juma, Miembeni, 10 July 1992; Amina Seif Othman, Michenzani, 19 July 1995; Adija Saloum Bakari, Miembeni, 3 Aug. 1995.

Fig. 6. Aziza, the niece of the Governor, Seyyid Suleiman. Reprinted from Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire*, iii, 1856.

The male parallel of the Arab woman's jewelry was found in the *jambia*, an ornamental dagger worn stuck in the waist cloth that wealthy Arab men considered the most prized element of their costume; they often had handles made of gold, silver, jewels and ivory (Figs. 1 and 7).[26] Wealthy Omani men also distinguished themselves by the ornateness of the gold and silver embroidery on their floor-length jackets, known as *joho*, and the silk cloths which they tied around their waists (Figs. 1 and 7).

According to observers of nineteenth-century Zanzibar, male Swahili residents of the island typically wore a *kanzu*, or white calico gown reaching to the ankles. As free-born Muslims, they also covered their heads, either with an embroidered cap known as a *kofia*, (Fig. 8) or with an Egyptian-style red fez, known in Zanzibar as a *tarbush*.[27] If he were poor, a Swahili man's clothing would be simpler, and perhaps not necessarily white, but care would be taken to ensure that his legs were covered by his cloth and that his head was covered by a *kofia*[28].

Depending on her financial resources, a Swahili woman either dressed in the simple dark cotton cloth of the poor, known as *kaniki* (Fig. 3), or a piece of imported colored cotton cloth, called *kitambi* (Fig. 9). According to

[26] Ruete, *Memoirs*, 176; Rigby, *Report*, 8.

[27] Osgood, *Notes*, 35–9; Burton, *Zanzibar*, i, 433; Christie, *Cholera*, 309; Charles New, *Life, Wanderings and Labours in Eastern Africa* (London, 1873), 57–8; Sir Charles Eliot, *The East Africa Protectorate* (London, 1905), 32.

[28] Guillain, *Documents*, ii, 88; New, *Life*, 58; Burton, *Zanzibar*, i, 434; J. Ross Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* (New York, 1846), 398.

Fig. 7. A Zanzibar Arab wearing *kilemba*, *joho* and *jambia*. Reprinted from Pearce, *Zanzibar*, 1920.

Fig. 8. A Swahili man of Zanzibar wearing a *kofia* and a poor man's untailored *kanzu*. Reprinted from Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire*, iii, 1856.

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contemporary observers, it was rare to see non-Arab freeborn women veiled in the nineteenth century.[29] Swahili women, however, did often cover their shoulders, arms and bodies when walking in public with an additional piece of cloth which stretched to the ankles. Such a cloth was occasionally accompanied by a cap of similar material (Figs. 9 and 10). In the mid-nineteenth century, if the Swahili woman's outer cloth was dyed dark blue or black, it was known as an *ukaya*. The cloth worn under the *ukaya* often varied little from that worn by female slaves; it was the wearing of this *ukaya* which therefore allowed a casual observer to distinguish a poor free-born woman from a slave woman in mid-century coastal society.[30]

In nineteenth-century Zanzibar, clothing served as an important and visually immediate signifier of class and status difference. As is the case with many of the world's cultures, the clothing of wealthy members of society was far more ornate than that of the working or servile classes. Islam, as the religion of the ruling Omani aristocracy as well as the majority of coastal inhabitants, also contributed additional symbolic markers of status. Free believers, both male and female, were obliged to cover their heads, while slaves, even if they had converted to Islam, were forbidden from wearing a cap or veil, suggesting that the class interests of the dominant members of society overrode religious prescriptions. The bodies of the élite were also elaborately adorned and almost entirely covered, while those of the poor or servile were concealed only to the extent that an individual's social and financial position allowed.

## DRESSING UP: NEW IDENTITIES AND NEW CLOTHES FOR WOMEN

In the immediate post-abolition period, many former slaves began to assert their social and economic autonomy – some by bargaining for reduced labor obligations to their masters, others by establishing themselves as independent peasants and still others by moving to town.[31] These men and women also increasingly began to identify themselves as Swahili, a coastal free-born ethnic community. Swahili reputations for being open and accepting of foreigners and guests, as well as being socially and culturally eclectic, added to the ease with which 'outsiders' could establish their own identities as Swahili.[32] The material and social positions of individual Swahili also varied greatly from coastal town to coastal town as well as within each town from household to household, thus minimizing the material acquisitions necessary

[29] Osgood, *Notes*, 41; Browne, *Etchings*, 397; Burton, *Zanzibar*, i, 434. Guillain, however, argues that by as early as the mid 1840s some Swahili women were covering their heads: Guillain, *Documents*, ii, 84–5.

[30] New, *Life*, 60; Burton, *Zanzibar*, i, 434; Guillain, *Documents*, ii, 78–9, 84–5; Browne, *Etchings*, 397; Osgood, *Notes*, 42; Mtoro, *Customs*, 173–4.

[31] 'J. P. Farler, Notes on labour in Pemba, 1898', 'J. T. Last, The labour question', and 'Rogers to Hill February 26, 1903', in Clove Labour ZNA, AB 4/38; *Report of the Commission of Agriculture* (Zanzibar, 1923); Robert Lyne, *Zanzibar in Contemporary Times* (New York, 1905), 178–87; Cooper, *Slaves*, 90–110.

[32] Similar processes were long at work along the East African coast. James de Vere Allen, *Swahili Origins* (Athens OH, 1993), 240–62; Glassman, *Feasts* 62, 95; Justin Willis, *The Making of the Mijikenda* (Oxford, 1993), 1–113.

Fig. 9. A Swahili family from Mombasa. Reprinted from Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire*, iii, 1856.

for 'passing'[33] (Figs. 9 and 10). As thousands of former slaves began to redefine themselves as Swahili, however, the meaning of being 'Swahili' began to change.

Whereas being identified as Swahili in the nineteenth century generally implied an assertion of freeborn status, by the time of the First World War, Swahili was often used in Zanzibar as a pejorative term or as a euphemism for a former slave. This pejorative usage remains today, as Zanzibar residents will frequently chastise 'bad manners' or 'uncouth behavior' with an expression of contempt made by sucking air through the teeth, known as *kufyonya*, followed by '*We*, *Mswahili we*!' ('Ah, you Swahili you!').

During a twenty-five year period from about 1890 to 1915, however, tens of thousands of men and women whose parents would have identified themselves primarily as Nyasa, Yao or Manyema, struggled to establish their own identities as Swahili, or free, Muslim members of coastal society.[34] Adopting Swahili-style clothing was one means of giving bodily shape to

[33] Osgood, *Notes*, 35–9, 70; Browne, *Etchings*, 335; Christie, *Cholera*, 333; New, *Life*, 56; Charles Guillain, *Documents*, ii, 74–8; Burton, *Zanzibar*, i, 104, 363, 410–14; William Fitzgerald, *Travels on the Coastlands of British East Africa and the Islands of Zanzibar and Pemba* (London, 1898), 549–50; James de Vere Allen, 'Swahili culture reconsidered', *Azania*, xi (1974), 105–37.

[34] Johnson notes under his definition of Swahili, 'the term Swahili is a very elastic one, and in some places is used for any native who wears a *kanzu* or who is a Muhammadan, even only nominally'. Frederick Johnson, *A Standard Swahili-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1939), 442. There is a wealth of evidence from court cases, family property files and other archival data to suggest that by the First World War a major shift had taken place in local usage of the term *mswahili*, or Swahili person, reflecting the recognition that most of those who now identified as Swahili were in fact former slaves.

Fig. 10. Swahili woman of Zanzibar wearing an *ukaya*. Reprinted from Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire*, iii, 1856.

these new identities. In the first decade of the twentieth century the Swahili *kanzu* and *kofia* became the most common items of clothing worn by men in the isles.[35] 'Swahili' women similarly abandoned the dark *kaniki* or cheap *merikani*, those badges of poverty and servility, in favor of the brightly colored *kanga* (colorful, printed cotton cloths sold in pairs), imported from abroad (Fig. 12).[36] The *kanga*, a new form of printed cotton piece good, first began to appear in Zanzibar at the turn of the century – the point at which many former slaves were redefining their ethnic identities and beginning to call themselves Swahili.[37] Abandoning the clothing associated with slave

[35] A. C. Madan, *Swahili-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1903), 130; Johnson, *Standard*, 173; W. H. Ingrams, *Zanzibar: Its History and Its People* (New York, 1931), 221–2, 309; F. B. Pearce, *Zanzibar, the Island Metropolis of Eastern Africa* (London, 1920), 239.

[36] Shaaban Robert, *Wasifu wa Siti binti Saad* (1958, Dar es Salaam, 1991), 22; M. S. Khatib, *Taarab Zanzibar* (Dar es Salaam, 1992), 17–19. *Kangas* were made of Manchester cotton and subsequently printed in Holland. After the First World War, competition developed between the British and the Dutch for control of this lucrative cloth trade in East Africa. Department of Overseas Trade, *Report on the Trade and Commercial Prospects of East Africa*, (London, 1923), 19, as cited in Deborah P. Amory, 'The Kanga cloth and Swahili society: Mke ni Nguo', unpublished Ms, 1985, 21; Elisabeth Linnebuhr, 'Kanga: popular cloths with messages', in Werner Graebner (ed.), *Sokomoko: Popular Culture in East Africa* (Atlanta, 1992), 81–90.

[37] Jeannette Handby, *Kangas: 101 Uses* (Nairobi, 1984), 2–4; Ethel Younghusband, *Glimpses of East Africa and Zanzibar* (London, 1910), 34–5; C. H. Stigand, *The Land of Zinj* (London, 1913), 122; Vizetelly, *Cyprus*, 395; Captain J. E. Craster, *Pemba: The Spice Island of Zanzibar* (London, 1913), 40; Amory, 'Kanga', 21; Linnebuhr, 'Kanga', 87–90. According to Handby and Linnebuhr, the precursor to the *kanga*, known as a *leso*, was invented in Zanzibar in the late 1870s by women who began sewing imported handkerchiefs together to form cloths because handkerchiefs were cheaper to buy than

status and adopting new clothing fashions was thus a highly symbolic act for women seeking to publicly pronounce their new status as free urban women.[38]

During the early years of this century the makers and sellers of *kanga* were making a fortune from women in Zanzibar who were said by many to be busily transforming their identities from those of slaves into 'slaves of fashion'.[39] The reputations of Zanzibari women as highly fashion-conscious buyers engaged in endless displays of conspicuous consumption appear to date from this era. Turn of the century shopkeepers who dealt in *kanga*s revelled in the never-ending marketing opportunities presented by continuously changing color, pattern and design combinations. The quick sales and high profits which accompanied the arrival of a popular new design were occasionally countered, however, by financial loss when a merchant received a bale of *kanga*s which women found unappealing. Women in Zanzibar were known to be 'most particular about colours and patterns', and shopkeepers often complained of their inability to move an unpopular style or, more typically, one whose 'fashion had passed', no matter how low they cut the price.[40]

By and large, however, *kanga* cloths became an extremely important new consumer item, particularly for urban women. As one local historian said, summarizing the views of island men:

'According to a woman there is no such thing as a bad new *kanga*, nor is there a woman who is ever satisfied with the number of *kangas* she has and would say, ''No thank you, I don't need another'''.[41]

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other colorfully printed cloths. Between the turn of the century and the First World War, women in Zanzibar also began to influence Indian traders to stock *kangas* printed with aphorisms and sayings, resembling the *kanga* cloths of today.

[38] Critics and others jealous of the fame of Siti binti Saadi, Zanzibar's most famous early taarab recording star who moved to town in 1911, popularized several songs that focused on her heritage as a poor, rural slave as well as her dress and physical appearance. The words from one such song are: '*Siti binti Saadi*/ when did you become someone?/ You came from the countryside/ wearing only [*kaniki*] the cloth of slaves./ If it wasn't for your voice/ what would you be eating?' Shaaban, *Wasifu*, 22; Khatib, *Taarab*, 17–19.

[39] Vizetelly, *Cyprus*, 395; Craster, *Pemba*, 40; Stigand, *Zinj*, 122; Ingrams, *Zanzibar*, 309–11; Younghusband, *Glimpses*, 34–5. The frequency with which the color and pattern fashions of *kanga* changed and went out of fashion was remarked upon by nearly all contemporary observers. While there are no records which specifically detail *kanga* sales for the early part of the century, in 1929 the *kanga* began being listed as a separate commodity within the category of cotton-piece goods (CPGs) in the records of the department of overseas trade. Prior to 1929, CPGs of all kinds constituted an average of 25 per cent of all textiles imported to Zanzibar, 10 per cent of those to Tanganyika and 8 per cent of textiles imported into Kenya and Uganda. After 1929, the percentage of printed cotton piece goods, of which the *kanga* constituted 90 per cent in the case of Zanzibar, nearly doubled. In Tanganyika, *kangas* constituted only slightly more than 60 per cent of imported printed cotton piece goods, and only 15 per cent in Kenya and Uganda. Report of Overseas Trade, 1923, 19, as cited in Amory, 'Kanga', 34. These figures reflect the relative affluence of people in Zanzibar relative to others in British East Africa as well as the particular cultural tastes of women in different areas. According to these records, even during the depression the demand for *kangas* in Zanzibar remained surprisingly stable. ZNA, AU 2/59, Record of Mudirs' Meetings.

[40] Younghusband, *Glimpses*, 34–5. [41] Nasra, 'Wanawake', unpublished MS, 6.

Fig. 11. Zanzibar countryside *c.* 1910. Photo courtesy of the Zanzibar National Archives. AV 31/2.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, the formerly common *kaniki* was associated almost exclusively with women of poor, rural and slave status. Arafa Salum Ahmed, a town resident born in 1900 whose family owned slaves, made the connections between clothing, class, status and urbanity quite explicitly. When asked who wore *kaniki* she responded,

'Slaves and Swahili people in the countryside because of the work they did ... I *never* wore a *kaniki*! Even our favored household slaves here in town or those in the houses of the sultan did not wear *kaniki*. Those were the clothes of rural slaves. We gave our household slaves *kanga* as demonstrations of their status within our household and to distinguish them from common slaves.'[42]

The majority of Zanzibar's large urban slave population did not hold positions as favored domestics in the homes of the élite; most of them worked out of doors at the docks, customs shed or in public works and construction. With abolition, many of these 'common' urban slaves referred to by Arafa were among the first to go to court to apply for their 'freedom papers'.[43]

[42] Interview with Arafa Salum Ahmed, Malindi, 4 July 1995.

[43] While only some 3 per cent of the Protectorate's estimated slave population applied for their 'freedom papers' the majority of those who did were urban residents, and over 50 per cent were women. Lyne also notes that the majority of town slaves who applied for

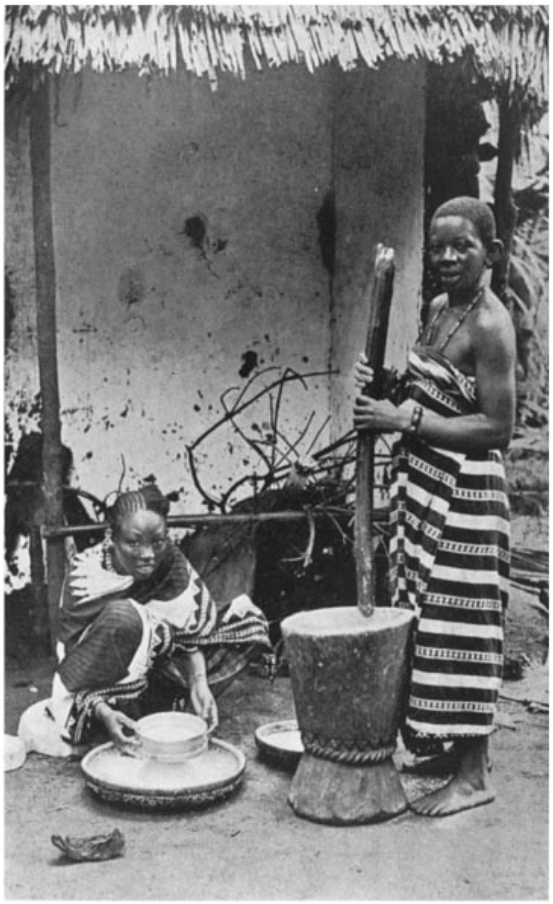

Fig. 12. Swahili women wearing *kanga* and grinding grain. Reprinted from Younghusband, *Glimpses of East Africa*, 1910.

While most slave women employed outside of élite households wore the *kaniki* at the turn of the century (Fig. 3), these women were also at the core of those who adopted the *kanga* over the coming decade as an emblem of growing financial and personal autonomy.[44]

By the time of the First World War, a woman wearing a *kaniki* was immediately seen as someone who was poor, rural and servile, whereas wearing a *kanga* marked a woman as a fashionable, urban Zanzibari with disposable income. As Fatuma Abdalla said when asked about women's preference for *kanga* or *kaniki*: 'It really depended on your financial and

their freedom in court were *vibarua*, a special class of East African slave, usually artisans or skilled laborers, who hired themselves out for wages and returned a portion of their wage to their master. Once these slaves 'obtained their liberty their position was vastly improved, for they at once received double for their labour'. Robert Lyne, *Zanzibar in Contemporary Times* (London, 1905), 183; Henry Stanley Newman, *Banani: The Transition from Slavery to Freedom in Zanzibar and Pemba* (London, 1989), 183.

[44] Zanzibar Clothing Survey, 1995.

social ability (*uwezo*). But here in town the *kanga* ruled!'[45] *Uwezo* is often used by Kiswahili speakers to differentiate the 'haves' from the 'have nots'.[46] *Uwezo* was also a critical determinant not only of clothing style but of living patterns, housing fabrication and leisure activities. Reflecting comments made by several other women Maryam Mohammed responded, 'Everyone in town preferred to wear a *kanga*; the *kanga* was the *epitome* of style in those days!'[47] Although several urban women admitted to wearing *kaniki* while doing household chores as a means of protecting their 'real' clothes, they were insistent that no woman with *uwezo* would dare to step outside her home in a *kaniki*.

Others who self-identified as members of the urban working-poor, and thus regular wearers of *kaniki*, suggested that *kaniki* were preferred for work because they were strong, durable and did not show dirt very easily. *Kangas*, however, were their 'dress clothes' and whenever they went 'out about town' or to meet a 'companion' they always changed into a *kanga* first.[48] Women who immigrated to Zanzibar from mainland Tanganyika wore *kaniki* as late as the 1930s, although they suggested that after spending time in 'fashion conscious' urban Zanzibar and acquiring the requisite income they too felt pressed to adopt the *kanga*, at least when going out. A descendant of former slaves who claimed in the years after the First World War to have purchased a new pair of *kanga* every Saturday as an expression of her *uwezo*, explained that the only time she ever wore *kaniki* outside of her home was when she went to visit relatives on the mainland outside of Dar es Salaam. 'They didn't wear *kanga* there. If I wore a different *kanga* every day like I did here in town, people would say, "*Kanga*, *kanga*, *kanga*". She must be a vain, pretentious woman from Zanzibar.'[49] In the early twentieth century, wearing a *kanga*, and particularly having a variety of *kanga*s from which to choose each day, identified the wearer as a woman from Zanzibar town with a relative degree of wealth and freedom as well as a flare for modern fashion, and perhaps a bit of affectation.

Desire to be associated with fashion and 'modernity', as evidenced by the overwhelming popularity of *kangas* sporting central motifs of electric lights, trains, clocks, automobiles and steamships, were much stronger among youth than elders, however. By the 1930s, the clothes worn by women at the turn of the century were 'rapidly passing out of use' although there were still 'a few old women who cleave to fashions of former days'.[50] 'Old women continued to wear the *kaniki*', said Latifuu Ali Marzuk, 'but young women definitely preferred the *kanga*!'[51] Appreciation of style, pattern and color, which found expression among elderly women of mainland origin through tattooing and bodily scarification, were echoed by their Swahili daughters and granddaughters who saw the frequency with which color and design

[45] Interview with Fatuma Abdalla, Uwanja wa Farasi, 16 July 1995.

[46] Garth Andrew Myers, 'Eurocentrism and African urbanization: the case of Zanzibar's other side', *Antipode*, xxvi (1994), 195–215.

[47] Interview with Maryam Mohamed, Mwembetanga, July 20, 1995. Johnson's dictionary from the 1930s similarly identified the *kanga* as 'the common town garment'. Johnson, *Standard*, 172.

[48] Zanzibar Clothing Survey, 1995.

[49] Interview with Amina Seif Othman, Michenzani, 14 July 1995.

[50] Johnson, *Standard*, 492.

[51] Interview with Latifuu Ali Marzuk, Kisimamajongoo, 16 Aug., 1995.

could be changed as a major part of the appeal of *kangas*. Youthful desires 'to keep up with fashion', often gave way to concerns of durability and practicality, however, as these same women aged.[52]

## ISLAM, VEILING AND RESPECTABILITY

The adoption of 'Arab' clothing, as suggested in *Pemba Peremba*, was also a common strategy employed by former slaves, many of whom also claimed Arab ethnicities in lieu of Swahili, as they increasingly asserted their independence during the first three decades of the century.[53] Commenting on the widespread adoption of 'Arab' fashions, including the veil, by women of servile heritage Adija Saloum Bakari explained,

> During the days of slavery one was not allowed to wear certain clothes. These were the clothes of the Arabs. But, after slavery was done away with and the British grabbed political power, the Swahili and others started to wear these clothes. Now you felt like you had become one of the *mabibi* [wealthy, Arab mistresses, ladies]. In the earlier days you couldn't wear such clothes. Only the wealthy Arabs wore them. You could never dress like a mistress. Now, however, you could dress like a lady … No one could stop you.[54]

The association of veiling and purdah with status and property was widespread in pre-colonial Muslim Africa. Research across the continent suggests that the adoption of the veil and increased seclusion on the part of slave women was common within families which aspired to move up the social hierarchy in the post-abolition period.[55] In coastal East Africa as well, the adoption of various forms of the veil by servile women was interpreted as an indication of their increasing empowerment. Explaining the difference between contemporary slaves in a portion of the sultan's dominions along the East African coast and those of the past, Mtoro bin Mwinyi Bakari, whose study was first published in 1903, asserted that slaves no longer did the work that they used to do: they were disobedient as well as disrespectful. In Mtoro's opinion this 'revolution' in slave behavior, when 'slaves began to give themselves airs', could be traced to the actions of several slave owners who broke rank with other members of the urban ruling class and gave their female slaves *ukaya* – veils previously reserved for the free.[56] Reflecting the sentiments of the dominant class, Mtoro observed a distinct correlation between lines of dress which demarcated class and status, and respect for the hierarchies embodied in the dress, themselves.

[52] Zanzibar Clothing Survey, 1995.

[53] The number of individuals who identified themselves as Arabs to census enumerators nearly doubled between 1924 and 1931, from roughly 19,000 to 33,500. ZNA, BA 34/4, *Notes on the Census of the Zanzibar Protectorate*, 1948 (Zanzibar, 1953), 4.

[54] Interview with Adija Saloum Bakari, Miembeni, 3 July 1995.

[55] Sara Mirza and Margaret Strobel, *Three Swahili Women* (Bloomington IN, 1989), 24; Mary Smith, *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Muslim Hausa* (1954; New Haven CN, 1981), 22; Barbara Cooper, 'Reflections on slavery, seclusion, and female labor in the Maradi region of Niger in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', *J. Afr. Hist.* XXXV (1994), 61–78; Judith Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth Century Egypt* (New York, 1985); Arlene MacLeod, 'Hegemonic relations and gender resistance: the new veiling as accommodating protest in Cairo', *Signs*, XVII (1992), 533–7; Stigand, *Zinj*, 122–3.

[56] Mtoro, *Customs*, 173–4.

The fashions of veiling popular in the isles changed significantly over time, although they continued to vary depending on wealth and residence. While prescriptions for veiling in public were followed by only the most élite of women in nineteenth-century Zanzibar, by the first decade of the twentieth century nearly all women in the isles were at least covering their heads and shoulders with a *kanga* when in public (Fig. 11). Covering the head with a *kanga* remained the most common form of veiling practiced by women in the countryside through the 1950s.[57]

Around the turn of the century a new form of veil, known as the *buibui*, also began to appear in Zanzibar[58] (Figs. 13 and 14). According to elderly men and women, it was first worn exclusively by the urban élite – wealthy Omani, Comorian and Arab women of 'mixed blood' – but was later adopted by women of all ethnic and class backgrounds in the isles. Explaining the rapid spread of the *buibui* in the years immediately following the First World War, several informants suggested that the *buibui* was 'the latest thing to hit the town' or that it became the fashion that 'everyone who was anyone' was wearing.[59] European observers resident in the isles made similar assertions, suggesting that by the 1920s all Zanzibari women of 'quality' as well as those who 'aspired' to move beyond the lower classes were wearing the *buibui*.[60] Just as women of the preceding generation seized the ever-changing patterns of the *kanga* as a sign of their transforming identities, the young women born in the first post-emancipation generation equated the adoption of the *buibui* with their families' growing respectability, adherence to Islam, sense of belonging within the island community and wealth.[61] By the late 1920s, complete veiling with the *buibui*, as illustrated in Fig. 14, was near universal in town.

The *buibui* was a form of veil comprised of a long piece of dark silk or cotton cloth sewn in a circle and then tied around the head with a string as illustrated most clearly in Fig. 13. The *buibui* also had a sheer veil, known as an *ukaya*, that could be draped in front of the face as demonstrated by the woman on the right in Fig. 13 or by the women depicted in Fig. 14. Alternatively, the *ukaya* could be left hanging down the back of the head, as worn by the woman on the left in Fig. 13. Although Fig. 14 suggests that the face cloth was opaque, in reality it was made of sheer silk which easily allowed a woman to see where she was going. This style of wearing the *buibui*

[57] According to survey respondents, rural women of wealth followed the veiling fashions of town more closely while very poor women in town or more recent immigrants from the mainland were often content with the simplicity and affordability of the *kanga*.

[58] Only two informants, both well past ninety years of age, had any idea when the *buibui* was first introduced. Both of them dated it to the reign of Seyyid Ali (1902–11). Interviews with Hilal bin Amour Seif, Mwembetanga, 14 July 1995 and Arafa Salum, Malindi, 4 July 1995. The dictionary of A. C. Madan, *English-Swahili Dictionary* (Oxford, 1903), also has an entry for *buibui*, defining it as a kind of large veil covering the entire body and worn by some women in Zanzibar when out of doors. Neither the dictionary of E. Steere, *Handbook of the Swahili Languages as Spoken in Zanzibar* (London, 1870), nor that of L. Krapf, *A Dictionary of the Suahili Language* (New York, 1882), include such a definition.

[59] Interviews with Mwanamvita Mrisho, Kwahani, 16 July 1995; Mauwa binti Khamis, Daraja Bovu, 24 July 1995.

[60] Pearce, *Zanzibar*, 247; Ingrams, *Zanzibar*, 309–11.

[61] Zanzibar Clothing Survey, 1995.

Fig. 13. Women wearing *buibui*, illustrating two veiling fashions. Reprinted from Sheik Muhammed Saleh Abdulla Farsy, *Ada za Harusi katika Unguja*, Dar es Salaam, 1956.

was known as *ghubighubi* from the Kiswahili *ghubika*, to cover from head to foot. According to respondents, *ghubighubi* was *the* way in which the *buibui* was worn between the time when it first became 'fashion', after the First World War, until the late 1950s or early 1960s.[62]

For women who came of age following the First World War, covering themselves from head to foot with a *buibui* was a public demonstration that they were worthy of respect, as well as a reflection of their growing understanding of Islamic prescriptions about modesty in dress and behavior. To paraphrase the answers most frequently given to the question, 'Why did women begin to wear the *buibui* instead of a *kanga* or *ukaya*?' a respondent suggested: 'A *buibui* covered you completely, rather than simply covering your head, and was therefore a sign of respect for yourself, your parents and Islam'. Other suggested explanations were: 'For religious reasons it was best if you covered your body, especially in front of men'; 'Covering yourself in public demonstrated your modesty'; and 'The *buibui* symbolized the fact that you were a woman of dignity, rank and worthy of respect'.[63] Although

[62] Although some women began to abandon the *ghubighubi* style in the 1950s, survey respondents were in consensus that after the 'revolution', in 1964, women were no longer allowed to cover themselves in such a way. Some women suggested that prohibitions on *ghubighubi* were the result of socialist policies intended to bring women out of purdah and make them the equals of men. Other women argued, however, that the new President Karume banned *ghubighubi* out of fear that an enemy intent on assassinating him could hide a weapon, as well as their own identity, under the cover of a *buibui* worn in such a way. Regardless of the reason, after 1964 the *ghubighubi* fashion was no longer worn by women in Zanzibar.

[63] Zanzibar Clothing Survey, 1995.

Fig. 14. Zanzibari women wearing *buibui* in the *ghubighubi* style and *marinda*. Photo courtesy of the Zanzibar National Archives. AV 31/33.

few of the mothers of women born in the 1910s wore the *buibui*, they gave *buibui*s to their daughters as evidence that their children were 'becoming more educated about Islam'[64] and that 'masters could no longer stop [them] from asserting [their] respectability'.[65]

During this same period the number of adherents to Sufism, particularly the Qadiriyya brotherhood, expanded dramatically in Zanzibar. New forms of Islamic ritual and practice centered around *tariqa* spread widely as former slaves made new claims to the importance of religious practice and piety as the basis for spiritual standing and equality.[66] Unlike the Ibadhi and Shafi schools, which dominated Zanzibar during the nineteenth century, status within the Sufi brotherhoods was based on religious devotion rather than on heritage or on study with the most prestigious scholars. The egalitarian nature of *tariqa* doctrine and practice in East Africa was reflected in the relatively large number of individuals from marginal backgrounds who rose to leadership positions within the brotherhoods as well as the open participation of women in many sufi religious rituals. The spread of veiling amongst women of the urban working-poor proclaimed their equality before God as well as their right to act as respectable adherents of the Prophet's call for modesty amongst both women and men. The *buibui* also symbolized women's growing identities as Muslim Zanzibaris; it was worn by all young

[64] Interview with Fatuma Abdalla, Uwanja wa Farasi, 16 July 1995.
[65] Interview with Adija Saloum Bakari, Miembeni, 3 July 1995.

women regardless of class or ethnic background.[67] When asked to explain why so many young women of her generation adopted the *buibui* while those of her mother's generation did not, one woman explained, 'Because we had the opportunity to read and study we understood the meaning of the Qur'an. God will forgive them, our elders did not have such opportunities'.[68] As the *tariqa*, many of which had their roots in the isles, spread throughout East Africa, it appears as though the *buibui* followed in their wake.[69]

While the *buibui* reflected a growing ideology of spiritual equality amongst East African Muslims, it nonetheless allowed Zanzibari women a freedom to express and debate hierarchies rooted in more material basis. The range of imported fabrics which were fashioned into *buibuis* during this period was extensive and each had a name, often conveying the particular qualities of the cloth. Women of property displayed their wealth by purchasing fine black silks from which their *buibuis* were made. The majority of the islands' women, however, typically wore *buibuis* crafted from imported cottons, though here again the quality of the cotton, its rarity on the local market or the fineness of the silk used for the *ukaya* worn in front of the face were viewed as important displays of consumerism.[70] Women often saved over considerable periods of time in order to purchase a higher grade fabric, as an individual's public presentation of self-worth was literally wrapped in the choice of *buibui* cloth.[71]

[66] August Nimtz, *Islam and Politics in East Africa* (Minneapolis, 1980), 56. This form of Islam spread widely throughout East Africa during the period between the two World Wars. Nimtz, *Islam*, 3–15, 55–86; John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, 1979), 208–16. [67] Zanzibar Clothing Survey, 1995.

[68] Interview with BiMkubwa Stadi, Kisimamajongoo, 8 Aug. 1995.

[69] One of the most important branches of the Qadiriyya in East Africa was founded by Sheikh Uways bin Mohammed who first came to Zanzibar from Somalia in 1884 and initiated many adherents into the brotherhood. Students of his are widely credited with spreading the Qadiriyya throughout mainland Tanzania. Nimtz, *Islam*, 57–60. Several sources from the mainland coast credit the arrival of the *buibui* to the efforts of Hadhrami sheriffs, many of whom were also involved in the Qadiriyya brotherhoods. Allen in fact argues that the *buibui* was imported into East Africa by men from Shihir. I have found no evidence to substantiate this claim. Available evidence also seems to indicate that the type of veil worn by women in Yemen at this time was distinctly different than the *buibui*. The Yemeni veil, although black, consisted of two or three separate pieces, whereas the *buibui* was constructed as a one piece garment. I would argue that the spread of the *buibui* was not solely the work of the sheriffs, but was part of a larger process of the spread of Sufi Islam which was occurring during these same years. Additionally, there were very few women from the Hadhramout or Shihir who came to live in East Africa. While male immigrants from these two areas resident in Zanzibar numbered in the thousands by the 1920s, few of them brought women from their homelands with them. It is therefore even less likely that male immigrants could have had such a dramatic impact on the fashions of women in Zanzibar. Written and oral sources suggest that many of these men married local women, and what is in fact more likely is that many of these women changed their ethnicity after marriage. As Shelswell-White articulated in a colonial report he authored, '... as their women rarely emigrate, Hadhramis who settle in the islands mostly marry local women ... so that a large proportion of those included in the census returns as Hadhramis were by no means of pure stock'. ZNA, AB 12/133, G. H. Shelswell-White, 'Notes on the Hadhrami and Shihiri community in Zanzibar', 1935; *1924 Census*; James Allen in Mtoro, *Customs*, 299, n. 8. [70] Zanzibar Clothing Survey, 1995. [71] *Ibid.*

While *buibui* fabrics were widely read as public statements of wealth, a number of women suggested that *buibuis* were not infrequently used to conceal poverty or less than respectable intentions as well. As Salma Halfa told me, 'If you put on your *buibui* no one will know what kind of clothes you have on underneath. Maybe your clothes are ripped or badly worn, but once you put on your *buibui* you appear clean and beautiful'.[72] The cover of a *buibui* could also be used to disguise a wearer's identity. The veil could allow a woman to go to a party uninvited, go to meet a lover, enter a house known for selling alcohol or engage in other publicly uncondoned behavior without fear of being noticed or word getting back to her parents or husband.[73]

Like the adoption of the *kanga* by the preceding generation, the wearing of the *buibui* during its early years was associated with *uwezo*, social and economic ability.[74] If wearing the *buibui* acted as a public expression of *uwezo*, however, it appears as though nearly every young woman who came of age in the 1920s and 1930s in urban Zanzibar had such ability. Although few of the mothers or grandmothers of survey respondents adopted the *buibui* – 'each generation has its fashions', explained Fatuma Abdalla[75] – 96 per cent of the women interviewed who were born in Zanzibar after the First World War wore the *ghubighubi* style in their youth. A family's relative sense of 'belonging' within the urban citizenry was nonetheless reflected in the age at which their daughters first began to wear the *buibui*.[76]

Shemsa Mohammed said the following regarding young Arab women:

> 'A woman started wearing a *buibui* when still quite young [between seven and ten years of age] because that was the style in those days. At the same time, you gained a certain respectability if you wore a *buibui*. As a child you were sewn a *buibui* when you were still small. It would have a very big hem underneath that you would let down as you grew. Each time the hem got let down you felt like you were growing into a woman, like you too were becoming a woman like your mother.'[77]

Other women made similar connections between the *buibui* and adulthood, although for those old enough to remember slavery the assertion was that a woman who donned a *buibui* was making a political statement about her own status as a social adult, rather than her perpetual status as a legal minor under slavery. Adija Saloum Bakari vividly recalled the different associations that she and her mother made with wearing the *buibui*:

[72] Interview with Salma Halfa, Kisimamajongoo, 29 June 1995.

[73] Additional precautions were sometimes taken, such as purchasing a special pair of cheap shoes which were switched mid-journey for one's regular shoes when out on illicit excursions. Zanzibar Clothing Survey, 1995. There are also numerous tales of men hiding their identities under the cover of women's veils in order to effect escapes. One such tale is that told by Emily Ruete of Seyyid Barghash's use of the veil to escape from house-arrest during his dispute with Seyyid Majid. Ruete, *Memoirs*, 237–9.

[74] Zanzibar Clothing Survey, 1995.

[75] Interview with Fatuma Abdalla, Uwanja wa Farasi, 16 July 1995.

[76] Zanzibar Clothing Survey, 1995. Women from wealthy, Arab or high-status family backgrounds were typically given their first *buibui* by their mothers when they were between the ages of seven and ten. Women born in Ng'ambo whose parents were of the laboring classes generally received their first *buibui* at puberty, or roughly age 14, while those born outside of the isles or in the countryside were often only given a *buibui* by their husbands as part of their marriage trousseau.

[77] Interview with Shemsa Mohammed, Kisimamajongoo, 29 June 1995.

'Women of the Arab aristocracy were the first to wear the *buibui*. Slaves were forbidden from wearing the *buibui*. Only the Arab ladies were allowed to wear it. I remember my mother telling me how she and her friends went out and bought cloth and began wearing *buibui* after the end of slavery and how she felt like an adult, like a real lady after she put on her *buibui* ... When I reached puberty my mother had a *buibui* made for me. I saw myself as beautiful. Suddenly, I felt the happiness of being a woman, a grown adult woman. If I went out naked [without a *buibui*] people would say, ''She is not a woman, that one''.'[78]

Adija's remarks clearly illustrate the powerful implications that veiling with a *buibui* had in transforming a woman's own self-perception as well as others' perceptions of her. While women who came of age during the late 1920s often equated their own adoption of the *buibui* with signs of physical maturation, women of earlier generations perceived the increasing prevalence of veiling as symbolic of their own development as autonomous social adults.

## GENDER, ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

During the first three decades of the twentieth century formerly strict divisions between the clothing of the female élite of 'Arab' households and those of the urban poor began to give way as 'Swahili' women increasingly began to adopt certain forms of dress associated with women of the aristocracy, while women of the élite also abandoned other elements of their nineteenth-century costume, such as the *barakoa* in favor of the *buibui*. Changes in the clothing styles of male members of the islands' communities were far less extensive, however. By the turn of the century, the *kanzu* and the *kofia* became the most common items of clothing for men living in Zanzibar.[79] Unlike Swahili women, however, Swahili men neither incorporated elements of male Omani dress into their costume, nor created new fashions like the *buibui*.

While former slaves of both genders redefined their social identities over time, women and men articulated these changes in different ways. Among the élite as well, there were gendered differences in expression of social position. The costume of the male members of the Arab ruling class, remained largely static over the course of more than a century, as a comparison of Fig. 1 from the 1840s, Fig. 7 from the 1920s and pictures of the sultans who ruled in the 1960s reveal. Explaining the reasons behind gendered innovations in dress is difficult, yet the relative mutability or fastness of fashion possibly reflects the gendered ways in which ethnicity was experienced, as well as the gendered means by which access to property and political authority were achieved in the isles.

Gendered understandings of ethnicity as a fluid and mutable category had deep social and historical roots. The very fact that ethnicity was reckoned

[78] Interview with Adija Saloum Bakari, Miembeni, 3 July 1995. Bibi Adija was born during the First World War and estimated that her mother was in her late twenties or early thirties at the time of her birth.

[79] Bi Kaje Mwenye Matano in Mirza, *Three*, 27; Pearce, *Zanzibar*, 239; Ingrams, *Zanzibar*, 221–2, 309; ZNA, AV 27; ZNA, AV 22; ZNA, AV 7; F. B. Wilson Picture Collection, housed in the Zanzibar Peace Museum.

patrilineally in Zanzibar would presumably suggest that men invested ethnicity with a much greater sense of permanency than women. A male child who grew up identifying as a Manyema would have children who were also identified at birth as Manyema; the children of a male Arab were similarly defined as Arab. A female Manyema, however, could give birth to a child who was Manyema, Swahili, Zaramo, Shihiri or Arab, or to a number of children each of whom had a different ethnicity, all of them different from her own.

Inter-ethnic relationships resulting in the birth of children were common in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Zanzibar. The most prominent example of the process can be found in the household of Seyyid Said, Zanzibar's first sultan. Seyyid Said is reputed to have fathered more than one hundred children with over seventy-five different women. Although some of these women came from as far away as contemporary Ethiopia and Central Asia, their children were identified as Omani Arabs and they became the core of the islands' 'Arab' ruling class.[80]

Women of all class and ethnic backgrounds also frequently had children with more than one father over the course of their lifespans, thus further increasing the likelihood that when they imagined their own biological families it would be in multi-ethnic terms.[81] The experience of a single woman giving birth to a number of children who 'belonged' to a range of ethnic categories could have conceivably empowered Zanzibaris to recognize the importance of social process, rather than mere biology, in determining such identities. Such a recognition may have been stronger among the poor and socially marginal, however, as women of wealth and status were strongly discouraged from having children with men 'below their rank',[82] while children of the male élite presumably had little reason to refuse the privileges they inherited at birth.

The procreative powers of island women provided them with the opportunity to transform not only the ethnic identity of their children but their children's class position as well. Islamic law combined with local practice to guarantee all children, regardless of their mother's status, equal rights of inheritance in their father's estate. By having a child with a man of wealth and property, a poor or slave woman could provide her child with access to

[80] Ruete, *Memoirs*, 7; Sheik Abdalla Saleh Farsi, *Seyyid Said bin Sultan* (New Delhi, n.d.), 12–14; W. H. Ingrams, *Chronology and Genealogies of Zanzibar Rulers* (Zanzibar, 1926); Burton, *Zanzibar*, i, 463–7. Free women from propertied families also often gave birth to children with several different fathers over the course of the lives. Amur bin Nasur, whose uncle was a prominent member of Seyyid Majid's administration (1856–70) and whose father was a plantation owner in Pangani, was the fourth child born by his mother, with three different fathers. 'Habari za Amur bin Nasur', in C. G. Buttner (ed.), *Anthologie aus der Suaheli-Literatur* (Berlin, 1894), 147–75.

[81] The parents of 50 per cent of the women interviewed in 1995 were of different ethnic backgrounds. Various forms of census and interview data also suggest that the percentage of women who married more than one man over the course of their life was well over 60 per cent. ZNA, DJ 1/ Marriage, birth and death registries; ZNA, AP 28/ Idadi ya Koo; Buttner, *Anthologie*, 147–54.

[82] ZNA, AB 10/108: Rusoona binti Tamim; ZNA, AB 10/116 Surias of the late Seyyid Ali; ZNA, AB 10/200 Royal Marriages Decree.

important economic and social resources. Evidence of women from marginal backgrounds giving birth to children with propertied men, thus granting the children a share in the estate and gaining economic and social usufruct for themselves, is abundant. As one poor woman said of her own marriage at the age of fifteen to a man of seventy who owned a stone home in town as well as several clove plantations in the countryside, 'If I had children with him they would inherit his property'.[83] Although such decisions, particularly for young women, were often initiated by fathers or masters and only later in the life-cycle by women themselves, it appears as though the power of women's fecundity to effect social mobility was widely recognized throughout Zanzibar society.

There is a strong correlation in the census data between control of property and identity as a member of one of Zanzibar's indigenous ethnic communities. Perhaps the fact that women's procreative powers provided them with a gendered means for gaining access to property helps to further explain why large numbers of women, some 22 per cent, began claiming status as indigenous islanders in the 1910s and 1920s – at least a decade before men.[84] A variety of evidence seems to suggest that women who found it in their interests to do so claimed the class and ethnic status of their husbands or children. While such options were also theoretically available to men, in actual practice it was rare for a man to marry or have children with a woman who ranked above him in the social hierarchy.[85] Women's procreative powers gave them potential though limited access to wealth and status which men had to achieve through other means.

The differential access which men and women had to formal structures of political power was also deeply connected to their understandings of race and ethnicity as social categories. Men's access to political franchise in colonial Zanzibar was generated, articulated and organized through 'ethnic associations' defined by the state in very static and bounded terms. The only means by which a man could gain access to the formal channels of political power during the colonial period was by joining the Arab Association, the Indian National Association or the Ismailia, Goan, Hindu, Parsee, Shirazi or African associations.[86] By the 1930s and 1940s, many men who were disenfranchised solely on the basis of ethnicity (i.e. they were identified by

[83] Interview with Amina Seif Othman, Michenzani, 14 July 1995; ZNA, HC 3/549 Noor binti Ali *v.* Ali bin Omor; ZNA, HC 3/335 Fatma binti Mohamed *v.* Shariff Mohammed; ZNA, HC 3/319 Jena binti Manji *v.* Hassam Alibhai; ZNA, HC 3/840 Fatma and Marriam Bakheresa *v.* Hemed bin Said; ZNA, HC 8/60 Shariffa binti Barghash *v.* the government; ZNA, HC 8/100 Tufaha binti Nusura *v.* Azan bin Suleiman; ZNA, HC 8/86 Mgeni binti Salim *v.* Seif bin Mahomed; ZNA, AP 28/46, Idadi yo Koo, Ng'ambo; ZNA, AP 28/2 Idadi ya Koo, Fuoni. [84] *1924 Census*, 8.

[85] Browne, *Etchings*, 402; Burton, *Zanzibar*, i, 393–4; Randall Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent* (Cambridge, 1987), 195; ZNA, AB 10/200 Royal Marriages Decree.

[86] Michael Lofchie, *Zanzibar: Background to Revolution* (Princeton NJ, 1965); Anthony Clayton, *The Zanzibar Revolution and Its Aftermath* (Hamden, 1981); Laura Fair, 'Pastimes and politics: a social history of Zanzibar's Ng'ambo community, 1890–1950' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1994); William Cunningham Bissell, 'Colonial constructions: historicizing debates on civil society in Africa', unpublished Ms.

the state as African) began to demand re-classification as 'Arab', or at least 'non-Native' so that they too could have access to the formal structures and benefits of state politics.[87]

Members of the Comorian Association were the first to successfully appeal to the state for reclassification, in the 1930s. These men did not abandon their Comorian heritage, but claimed that the manners, style of life and educational achievements of their community warranted their removal from the status of 'native'.[88] Collective associations based on 'ethnicity' were upheld to men as *the* model of successful economic and political advancement. In the 1930s and 1940s, tens of thousands of men previously defined as African began to identify themselves as Shirazi, descended from ancient male ancestors in Persia (and therefore 'Arab'), and campaigned for political recognition from the state.[89]

Until the late 1940s, only men were allowed formal membership in these ethnic–political associations. This does not mean, however, that women were not also involved in efforts to affect perceptions of individual and communal standing. As 'Shirazi' and 'Arab' men appealed to the Legislative Council, elected association officers and distributed membership cards in an effort to be reclassified, women donned the *buibui* and increasingly withdrew from mixed-sex public spaces.[90] Growing numbers of women born in urban Zanzibar began practicing *purdah* during these decades.

While 'African' men and women played on discourses of ethnicity in order

[87] *1931 Census*; ZNA, AB 8/87 Report of the Committee Appointed to Advise on Matters Relating to Native Administration, 1932–39; Ibuni Saleh, *A Short History of the Comorians in Zanzibar* (Dar es Salaam, 1936); Pearce, *Zanzibar*, 214; Prins, *Swahili-Speaking*, 11.

[88] ZNA, BA 16/40, Debates of the Legislative Council, 6 March 1931, appendix, 47–49; Ibuni, *History*, 13; ZNA, AB 8/87, Native Administration, 1932–39. Rather than request that the state confer the honor of reclassification, many propertied 'Africans' took personal initiative in this process and began identifying themselves to members of the colonial administration as Arabs. Between the 1924 census and that of 1931 the number of persons identifying themselves as 'Arab' nearly doubled, from roughly 18,800 to 33,400. 'Notes on the Census of 1948', 4.

[89] The Shirazi Association, formed in Pemba island in the late 1930s had as one of its principle goals promoting smallholder peasant access to the benefits of the Clove Growers Association, including credit and marketing opportunities. The growth of the Shirazi Association on Zanzibar island was much more closely linked to demands for access to rationed goods during the Second World War. In both cases individuals defined as 'African' resented that access to material items like credit, food and *kanga* could be reserved by the state for 'Arabs'. ZNA, AB 12/2 Shirazi Association; ZNA, AK 17/70 Rationing; ZNA, AU 2/59 Records of Mudirs Meetings, 1944–57; Fair, 'Pastimes and politics', 236–55; Chizuko Tominaga and Abdul Sheriff, 'The ambiguity of Shirazi ethnicity in the history and politics of Zanzibar', unpublished Ms.

[90] Beginning in the late 1930s, it became increasingly rare for women in Zanzibar to be seen working out of doors or even going to shop in the public food market. Leisure activities also became increasingly segregated by sex, as women moved previously public *ngoma* performances indoors or behind a fence and men became more involved in football clubs in which women took only marginal interest. Interviews with Abdulrahman Othman, Jang'ombe, 14 June 1991; Mohamed Ali, Malindi, 29 June 1992; Nasra Mohamed Hilal, Malindi, 25 Oct. 1992; Amina Aboud, Vikokotoni, 23 Dec. 1991; Bakia binti Juma, Miembeni, 10 July 1992.

to bring about political empowerment, the importance of gender and ethnicity as bases for political power in colonial Zanzibar exacerbated the tenacity with which 'Arab' men clung to the ethnic identities they were given at birth, as well as the clothing which marked them as inheritors of such privilege. The *kilemba*, *joho*, and *jambia* of the nineteenth-century male costume remained widely popular among the enfranchised élite until the time of the revolution in 1964. On the other hand, the near abandonment by women of the *barakoa* in the early years of the twentieth century provided a striking visual reminder of women's status on the margins of Arab privilege, particularly after the establishment of colonial rule. While all women of the aristocracy wore *barakoa* in the nineteenth century, informants born after the First World War typically identified the two wives of Sultan Khalifa (1911–60) as the only women ever seen in a *barakoa*.[91]

The doubly marginal status of many female members of aristocratic households as both women and slaves, combined with contestation of patriarchal control over their bodies and persons, might provide clues for understanding why nineteenth-century élite female attire was nearly abandoned in the twentieth century while that of the male aristocracy was not. Referring to the abilities of poor women to travel freely in public, any time of the day or receive guests outside of their immediate families without the encumbrance of being veiled, Emily Ruete remarked, 'I must say that ladies of higher rank often envy their poorer sisters on account of their advantages …'[92]

Evidence regarding other aspects of aristocratic women's personal, social and cultural lives suggests that struggles around patriarchal definitions of appropriate female behavior were quite widespread within élite households. European observers regularly remarked on the 'unruly', 'demanding' and 'contentious' behavior of such women, especially *suria*.[93] Rebelling against patriarchal limits on social and sexual freedom was not unique to *suria*, however, as Ruete's own affair with a German merchant and subsequent premarital pregnancy attest. Throughout her memoirs Ruete cites numerous examples of women escaping the walls which were intended to confine them, including her father's Persian wife, Shesade, who hunted and rode on horseback, unveiled and in broad daylight, and was apparently just as open about her extra-marital affairs.[94] If nineteenth-century élite women found *purdah* confining, it is perhaps not surprising that at least some women sought to abandon elements which they found unduly restrictive in the twentieth century.[95]

[91] Although several elderly Arab respondents, born at or before the turn of the century, recalled their grandmothers or great-grandmothers wearing a *barakoa*, by the turn of the century 'only the very, very wealthy wore them, because they were far beyond the means of most women'. Interviews with Hilal bin Amour bin Seif, Mwembetanga, 14 July 1995; Ghaniya Said, Malindi, 14 July 1995; Nunu Salum, Kisiwandui, 18 July 1995.

[92] Ruete, *Memoirs*, 146.

[93] Burton, *Zanzibar*, i, 463, 467–8; Rigby, *Report*, 9; Browne, *Etchings*, 402.

[94] Ruete, *Memoirs*, 42–4, 223–48; Farsi, *Seyyid Said*, 13; Hollis, 'Supplement'; Sir John Gray, 'Memoirs of an Arabian princess', *Tanganyika Notes and Records* (1954), 49–70.

[95] Files in the Zanzibar archives recount numerous turbulent episodes between the British administration and female members of the royal family who asserted their

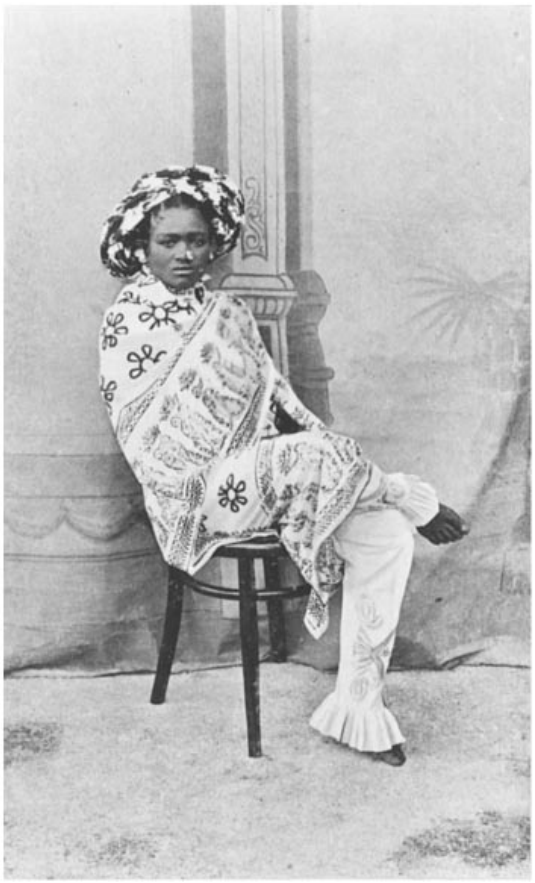

Fig. 15. Swahili woman of Zanzibar wearing *kilemba*, *kanga* and *marinda*. Reprinted from Younghusband, *Glimpses of East Africa*, 1910.

The struggles of female members of the old élite to break free of restrictions on their personal and social lives continued well into the twentieth century. With the abolition of slavery, *masuria*, their 'Arab' daughters and slaves of mainland origin began to participate in some of the same dance associations – a practice which was largely unheard of in the preceding century. Discussing *mkinda*, a new form of female puberty initiation which emerged in Zanzibar in the early twentieth century,[96] one

autonomy by marrying against the wishes of their families, having children after the death, or exile, of their masters and engaging in other 'public behaviour' which Europeans found 'patently offensive'. ZNA, AB 10/116 Surias of the late Seyyid Ali bin Said; ZNA, AB 10/108 Rusoona binti Tamim, ex-Sultan's concubine; ZNA, AB 10/215; Seyyida Sheriffa binti Bargash bin Said and Seyyida Aliya binti Bargash; ZNA, AB 10/200, Royal Marriages Decree.

[96] Laura Fair, 'Identity, difference and dance: female initiation in Zanzibar, 1890–1930', *Frontiers: a Journal of Women Studies*, XVII (1996), 146–72.

participant remarked, 'Pure Arabs (*Waarabu hasa*) did not dance ... but many of those so-so Arabs (*Waarabu wa hivihivi*) joined'. Explaining the rise of a daughter of Sultan Ali bin Hamoud's *suria* to the leadership of one such dance association she continued, 'Some *suria* had their daughters initiated ... They were free now and their masters/husbands [*mabwana*] could no longer stop them'.[97] Women of aristocratic households not only asserted their own autonomy through participation in such associations, they also helped to undermine formerly strict divisions in attire between themselves and the urban poor. During dance performances élite women encouraged the servile to copy 'Arab' fashions by loaning them gold and buying them *marinda*, *vilemba* and parasols – which formerly served as exclusive symbols of political authority (Fig. 15). 'Oh, they really dressed us up!' said one poor member of a *mkinda* association. Perhaps Arab women's status on the margins of twentieth-century economic and political privilege gave them less incentive to police previously important cultural boundaries.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout history and across the globe men and women have consciously manipulated their material world in order to fabricate their identities physically and to differentiate themselves from others. In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Zanzibar, consumption served to display subjectivity. Customary practices combined with material inequalities to distinguish visually members of the islands' nineteenth-century aristocracy from the majority slave population. Veils, *vilemba*, *barakoa* and *joho* immediately identified a wearer as a member of the élite while simultaneously 'naturalizing' this position. In a region where most residents were Muslims, the simple dress of many slaves served as 'proof' of their servility. Covering their heads and bodies was one of the first public demonstrations that formerly servile men and women made of their freedom in the post-abolition era. In adopting clothing styles formerly reserved for members of the freeborn or élite, newly emancipated slaves asserted their right to be seen and treated as cultured adults worthy of respect.

That women were much more improvisational in their transformations of dress than men was a reflection of their gendered abilities to cross the intimate boundaries of class and ethnicity in the nineteenth century as well as their gendered inabilities to articulate their interests within the realm of colonial political structures. Class distinctions between women became far less reticent in the twentieth century and were given visual expression in the widespread adoption of the *buibui* by women of all economic and social backgrounds. The economic and political privileges inherent in being born a male Arab remained, however, and help to explain why men of this class clung to the clothing that marked them out as members of the enfranchised élite.

## SUMMARY

Between 1890 and 1930 former slaves in the isles of Zanzibar transformed their social identities from those of servile 'outsiders' to local residents with vested social, economic and political interests. Clothing served as one important and

[97] Interview with Adija Saloum Bakari, Miembeni, 3 Aug. 1995.

visually immediate means of articulating these changes of identity. Intrigued by the power of drawings and photographs to act as historical sources, the author utilizes such evidence as an integral part of the discussion and text. She also uses more traditional forms of evidence to illustrate the ways in which clothing fashions mirrored not only changes in class position but also ethnic transformations and gender relations.