

## **Abstract**

This paper grapples with the fluidity of intimate relationships, the ordinariness of infidelity, the competing sentiments regarding polygyny, and the resulting high rates of divorce in Peponi, a rural Swahili Muslim fishing village in coastal Tanzania where I spent all of 2004 conducting mixed methods ethnographic fieldwork. Women in Peponi, like many African, and Muslim women, contend with infidelity in their marriages. Today, most women in this community articulate a desire for monogamous, romantic, and companionate marriage, and simultaneously anticipate their husbands will “look outside the marriage.” Some admit they feel jealous or dislike it, but more than half of the women articulate they are accustomed to a lack of fidelity in marriage, stating: “It is our custom;” “It helps the marriage;” “It is normal here for men to have lovers” “This is our way;” and, “The conditions of marriage are difficult.” Women in Peponi argue infidelity is not their greatest provocation. Infidelity, and women’s tolerance of it, must be understood in the context of men’s pursuit of polygyny and the impact it can have on their marriage (Keefe 2015, 2016). Women in Peponi openly discuss their preference for their husband’s infidelity in the form of girlfriends, secret and informal wives, and short term affairs as opposed to their pursuit and achievement of a second or third wife. In fact, polygyny, its threat, and reality, regularly prompt a path to divorce for most women. It is in this context that women prefer and, in their own way, choose infidelity.

## **Biography**

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## **“Looking Outside the Marriage:” Polygyny, Infidelity, and Divorce in Coastal Tanzania**

by

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# **“Looking Outside the Marriage:” Polygyny, Infidelity, and Divorce in Coastal Tanzania**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This article grapples with the ordinariness of infidelity, its relationship to polygyny, and consequences for divorce in Peponi, a rural Swahili Muslim fishing village in coastal Tanzania where I spent all of 2004 conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Women in Peponi, like many African, and Muslim women, contend with infidelity in their marriages (Fusfeld 1988; Gray 2004; Hirsch et al. 2002, 2007, 2009; Ilkharacan 2001; Lary et al. 2004; Middleton 1992; Parikh 2007; Platt 2012; Smith 2007; Stiles and Thompson 2015). Most women in this Swahili community articulate a desire for monogamous, romantic, and companionate marriage (Keefe 2015, 2016), and simultaneously anticipate their husbands will “look outside the marriage” (engage in extramarital intimate relationships), and many will, themselves, engage in extramarital intimate relationships. Women in Peponi argue that men “looking outside the marriage” is not their greatest provocation, and so their tolerance of it must be understood in the context of men’s pursuit of polygyny and the precarious impact it has on marriage (Keefe 2015, 2016). Swahili women’s abhorrence of the practice of polygyny (Keefe 2016) and the resulting high rates of divorce are important factors in their openly-discussed preference for their husband’s infidelity in the form of girlfriends, secret and informal wives, and short term affairs and liaisons (Caplan 1968, Middleton 1992). Dealing with a husband’s pursuit and achievement of a second or third wife is much more difficult for these women to tolerate. In fact, polygyny, its threat and reality, regularly prompt a path to divorce for women. It is in this context that women prefer and, in their own way, choose infidelity.

In the village of Peponi, Islam forms an essential axis on which everyday activities, communications, and transaction turn. Decisions about whom and when to marry; whether to stay married, divorce, or remarry; as well as what behaviors constitute wifely (Thompson 2011) or husbandly behavior (Keefe 2016) are informed by people’s relationship to Islam. It is long established that Muslim identity is central to the ways that Swahili people constitute themselves as persons, and in shaping their relationships over the course of their lives (Middleton 1992). As scholars, such as Katrina Daly Thompson, citing Joan Russell, assert: Islam in East Africa is “not just an intellectual exercise, but a way of life” (Thompson 2011, 428). As others investigating Islam in Africa have done, I focus “on actors rather than institutions and tracing the meanings Islam has for people instead of assuming that Islam always determines their choices and constraints” (Masquelier 2009, 25). Evidence from along the Swahili coasts in Kenya and Tanzania indicate that the role of infidelity—of either men or women—in Swahili Muslim marriage is strong, both historically and contemporarily (Beckmann 2015; Caplan 2015; Gomm 1972; Keefe 2015; Middleton 1992). Middleton’s research in coastal Kenya reveals that in the 1950’s “casual heterosexual love affairs” were condemned if too frequent or indiscrete (Middleton 1992, 120); furthermore, men “often said that every wife ‘runs’ with at least one other man than her husband” (Middleton 1992, 116). Infidelity, and the beliefs and behaviors associated with it, are understudied in anthropology, despite its presence in most cultures (Jankowiak et al. 2002; Macaуда et al. 2011). In the past decade, the role of infidelity has taken a significant place in public health and global health literature because of its clear implications for HIV (Hirsch et al. 2002; Hirsch et al. 2007; Lary et al. 2004; Parikh 2007, Smith 2007). Not unlike marriage and polygyny, infidelity is a highly-gendered social and moral issue. New scripts around marriage, intimate relationships, and sexuality continue to emerge and are constantly renegotiated in response to globalization (Macaуда et al. 2011). As new social constructions of

marriage emerge, infidelity also needs consideration in these new, global, and renegotiated contexts (Hirsch et al. 2002; Macaуда et al. 2011).

In Peponi, both men and women expect their partner to have affairs, if given the opportunity. And, indeed, both men and women conduct extramarital affairs, although men are acknowledged to do so more often. Women openly discuss they find infidelity less egregious than polygyny and prefer husbands to take a lover instead of a second wife. A lover, or girlfriend, is not permanent, and while a lover might make some claims on a husband's time and resources, her extended family cannot make claims on her boyfriend in the same way they could on her husband. This is in contrast to the demands a second wife is likely to make on a husband, and the obligations a husband is likely to feel towards a second wife, such as needing to provide for her equally (Keefe 2015). For men, marital love exists; it is real and important to them, but it is not mutually exclusive of the need for other intimate relationships, and most men—in contrast to women—do not aspire to monogamy (Keefe 2015). Everyone in Peponi desires marriage, although not always for the same reason. Asani, a newlywed 20-year-old young man, explained to me about his father, whom the community widely acknowledged as homosexual: “He married my mother when he was young and they have six children together. They are still married. My father has relationships with men in the village, sometimes with married men, sometimes with younger unmarried men. He does not prefer women, but this is not a reason to not get married and have children. This is not a reason to not have a wife.” Regardless of reason, and in Asani's father's case sexual orientation, everyone marries at least once. Marriage is a valued institution, yet the importance of marriage among Swahili Muslims might misleadingly suggest that partnerships are static and stable over time. In fact, they are highly fluid for both men and women, as much research on the Swahili coast has shown (Caplan 1968; Gomm 1972; Hirsch 1998; Landberg 1977; Middleton 1992; Stiles 2005, 2009, 2016; Strobel 1979; Swartz 1991; Thompson 2015). For women, love is a quest that involves romantic demonstrations, usually economic, and is companionate. Women articulate a desire for monogamy that is in reference, or rather opposition, to polygyny, and does not preclude the possibility of intimate relationships outside the marriage. Changes to marriage in the past fifty years reflect inherent paradoxes that conflict with previous research on the Swahili. Men and women's expectations of the institution of marriage, especially in a context of both historical and current high rates of divorce, demonstrate the nature of the institution, its cultural relevance, and its impact on the community.

Research on Islam and sexuality in Africa and beyond reference Islam as not supporting the practice of extramarital affairs and infidelity, but rather claim that Islam supports the practice of polygyny as a sanctioned alternative to extramarital affairs (Oyediran et al. 2010, Zuhur 1991). Gray, in his systematic review of Islam and HIV in Africa determines:

With respect to sexual relationships, 2/2 studies observed higher degrees of polygyny among Muslims, a possible contributor to more lifetime sexual partners (a risk factor for HIV). One study found that Muslim men, but not women, had less extramarital sex; another study that Muslims did not report less casual sex the previous year; and one study that Muslims were less likely to have extramarital partners the previous year (Gray 2004, 1752)

Gańczak et al.'s research with Arab University students mentions 91% of students cite Islam as a reason to avoid extramarital relationships (2007). Francesca's review of AIDS in contemporary Islamic literature explains that only since “about 1990 has the presence of HIV/AIDS in Islamic countries cast light on the fact that the actual sexual behaviour of the population does not always

conform to religious norms” (Francesca 2002, 381). In fact, it is the increase in the number of people with HIV which compelled religious leaders to take a stand on sexual practices they consider deviant, including extramarital sex (Francesca 2002, 381). Further, Francesca’s work demonstrates there is no place in Islam for any kind of sexual relationship other than a relationship based on marriage. “Islam takes a completely prohibitive view of extramarital relationships because their consequences are harmful for people’s health and for civic order” and therefore, uses the crisis of HIV/AIDS to be more explicit and clear on Islamic codes of sexual conduct. Going so far as to state “homosexuality and extra-marital relations are believed to inspire selfish attitudes and antisocial behaviour” (Francesca 2002, 388). Husain, writing about Islam and infertility treatment, presents the current thinking on the use of donor sperm and eggs. She describes any union of gametes outside a marital bond, whether by adultery or in the laboratory, as *‘haram’* (forbidden) (Husain 2000, 124), although she does note “at the time of Muhammad, the local men often had large numbers of wives as well as extramarital relationships” (Husain 2000, 125). And so, what can be determined from this review of Islam and infidelity is that Muslim communities, over time and geography, have varying interpretations of the permissibility of extramarital relationships in Islam.

During my fieldwork in Peponi, I used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and a census with a range of qualitative techniques; including participant observation and in-depth interviews. My central focus was to assess social changes around marriage occurring in Peponi over the past forty years. This also informed my design of a household survey of 350 ever-married men and women, a community census and corresponding map, interviews with twenty-three female entrepreneurs (small restaurant owners in particular), and life history narratives with twenty couples/unions who were married or formerly married. The latter resulted in interviews with twenty-three women and twenty men for a total of forty-three interviews. When I interviewed the parties of three polygynous unions, I interviewed both wives. I worked with a team of research assistants at various stages of research, primarily in collecting quantitative data. I conducted all in-depth interviews with women myself; the in-depth interviews with men were conducted using a combination of techniques. Anthropologists have long noted the ease of conducting same-sex interviews and the difficulties associated with conducting interviews with members of the opposite sex. When I had a strong rapport with a male interviewee, I conducted the entire interview myself. Other interviews, in particular initial ones, were conducted by a research assistant (a twenty-five-year-old Swahili Muslim man from the community), who also assisted me in determining research and interview questions, phrasing, and translation. Based on his interviews, I conducted follow-up interviews myself or with him. Collecting both quantitative and qualitative data enabled me to collect more representative, complete, and meaningful data on marriage, divorce, and polygyny than one method alone would have allowed, while also uniquely enabling me to attend to men’s perspectives (Keefe 2016) in a way that is missing from previous scholarship.

## **MARRIAGE: AFRICA AND ANTHROPOLOGY**

What do men and women seek in extramarital affairs and how are they explained or rejected in Swahili discourse? How are women and men’s gendered identities reified, negotiated, or contested through love affairs? In their article on marriage and extramarital sexuality, Comaroff and Roberts (1977) argue that “the ambiguities surrounding the formation of a marriage provide the context in which the nature of heterosexual relationships may be debated” (107). In other words, whether a relationship is construed as extramarital or not depends on cultural conceptions of marriage itself. Questions about when a marriage begins stem in part from what is often

described as the processual nature of marriage in Africa (Bledsoe and Pison 1994; Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; Comaroff and Roberts 1977; Parkin and Nyamwaya 1987; Van de Walle and Meekers 1994). As a process, marriage extends over time and includes multiple exchanges of goods, rights, and responsibilities; therefore, it cannot be clearly defined or marked by any particular event. The legal, political, economic, and social consequences of marriage for women and men are well-documented. In fact, “across the social sciences, marriage has always been a topic of great interest, both because of what it reveals about universal aspects of the human social condition and because of the tremendous diversity of marriage customs that characterize the world’s societies” (Hirsch et al. 2009, 2). Hirsch et al. further argue the necessity to continue our reexamination of marriage because it “is the focus of pragmatic strategies and behavior, and the locus of intense moral scrutiny and social preoccupation (2009, 2).”

Fifty years ago, Evans-Pritchard (1965) posited that in simple societies, there was no such thing as an unmarried woman; companionship was weak and women had little choice in whether they will or will not marry. In 1962, Fortes proclaimed that the topic of marriage was exhausted in anthropological thought given the breadth of kinship studies across sub-Saharan Africa—a widely critiqued and dismissed idea (for example, see Bornean 1996). The prevalence of marriage across the continent of Africa, however, masks its heterogeneity, the historical changes the institution has undergone in local contexts, and the shifts and variations in social roles and statuses of people both within, and outside, of marriage. The re-examination of marriage in Africa since Evans-Pritchard’s and Fortes’ proclamations reveals marriage to be more diverse and more fluid than previously implied (Bledsoe 2002; Cole and Thomas 2009; Cooper 1997; Dyson-Hudson and Meekers 1996; Falen 2008; Griffiths 1997; Hirsch et al. 2009; Jackson 2007; Jankowiak et al. 2005; Masquelier 2009; Parkin and Nyamwaya 1987; Phoofole 2007). Current trends in African marriage “include greater instability of marriage, increasing fluidity and flexibility of sexual relationships, and women’s increasing use of relationships with men to obtain resources and opportunities for furthering their own social and economic ambitions” (Gage and Bledsoe 1994, 148).

## **INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS IN COASTAL TANZANIA: ISLAM AND GENDER**

During my year in Peponi, I was aware of numerous types of relationships (flirtatious friends, boyfriend and girlfriend, sexual friends) and marriages (arranged marriages, kin marriages, love marriages, secret marriages, and polygynous marriages). Intimate relationships—and indeed marriage—among the Swahili is characterized by fluidity, both because of the ordinariness of infidelity and men’s pursuit of polygyny, but also because of the informality of divorce by repudiation (written, but most often verbal) and the ease with which a relationship can transition from married to unmarried and back again between a couple. These types of marriage are not mutually exclusive. I saw examples of the coming together of these various types: an arranged love marriage between kin; a secret polygynous marriage; a love marriage between kin that was not arranged; a love marriage with two children already born prior to the wedding. The type of marriage a couple contracted did not automatically reflect the type, or amount, of satisfaction derived from the marriage; nor was it necessarily a predictor of the duration and trajectory of a marriage.

Strobel effectively summarizes the relationship between women’s status and Islam among Swahili women in Mombasa (1979). She notes Islamic doctrine could have been used to support some rights for women, as has been the case in some Muslim settings, but “[at the] turn of the century religious leaders and respectable Muslims expected a proper woman to be religious,

chaste, and obedient” (Strobel 1979, 56). Furthermore, in Swahili Islamic literature women’s subordinate status is depicted vis-à-vis men:

Men are thought to be endowed with great intelligence and judgment (*akili*) and thus ought to make the decisions that women must obey. Similarly, women are considered weak, easily falling prey to tricksters. Being more subject to earthly desires, women must be protected from themselves, while men must beware these “lascivious temptresses.” These assumptions about female nature have not led to the conclusion that females are “bad” as such, for the literature applauds a certain category of women – “devout and patient wives.” Rather the assumptions support the idea that women must be protected – by legal rights, by a man mediating between her and the outside world (Strobel 1979, 56).

Strobel’s description of women inadvertently speaks to the issue of fidelity/infidelity and affairs; women cannot control their “earthly desires” and men must simultaneously protect women from themselves, and protect themselves from such women. This is in contrast to much of the literature, which depicts extramarital sex as something that “men do because their bodies demand it and women can’t stop them” (Hirsch et al. 2009, p3). I found men incredibly free and relaxed when discussions included extramarital affairs, and not in a boastful way. Women, on the other hand, were more reticent to discuss their own extramarital affairs, and the actual affairs of their husbands. In the survey of 350 ever-married men and women, I asked each man and woman if they ever had an affair since marrying: 19% of men and 3% of women said they had an affair. I suspect the low percentages and outcome of this survey question reflects the sensitivity of this question and the secrecy surrounding lovers and intimate relationships outside of marriage. This speaks to what Hirsch et al. (2009) and Rhine (2016) say about the importance of keeping men’s secrets. While men admit to affairs more than women, it is clear women also engage in affairs.

Marriage, the acts associated with its beginnings, duration, undoing, redoing, and so on, among the Swahili highlights the fluidity, complexity, and nuanced nature of a state of being often described or assumed to be fixed. Even the point at which a marriage ends is ambiguous (Keefe 2015). Women and men move out of, and back into, a single marriage, as well as transition into and out of a series of marriages over their life course. While marriage is a process of multiple stages among the Swahili, they share rather fixed notions about when sexual rights are transferred and seem to have little difficulty in declaring a relationship as legitimate or not. One older man, Mzee Jana, told me of his marriage to his first wife and the many times his wife requested, or demanded, a divorce over their 30+ year marriage. One time they transitioned from marriage, to divorce, to marriage, to divorce so frequently in such a short period of time that in order to be officially married again, Mzee Jana needed to re-negotiate a new marriage contract with her and pay a new *mahari* (bridewealth payment) despite being married fifteen years. He said “Of course I paid it, she’s my wife, the mother of my children. Our *talakas* and disagreements were the result our disagreement about my having a second wife. I did not desire divorce permanently from her, but was trying to reach my goal of a second wife. She was not having it.”

## **LOVE MARRIAGE AND INFIDELITY**

Men have no trouble loving, and easily declaring their love of their wives, while also pursuing intimate relationships outside the marriage. Elsewhere, I discuss how polygyny, in particular, is part of how “being a good Muslim man” is understood in Peponi (Keefe 2015). Men are

typically thwarted in their pursuit of second wives because they cannot afford it, and their first wives seek a divorce when they are able to afford and take a second wife. Men, therefore, must content themselves with *hawara* (lovers) (Keefe 2015).

Omari, a thirty-four-year-old fisherman, is a testament to the complexity of love and infidelity marriage. He said:

I have one wife and not once, *hatasiku moja* (not for one day) have I ever wanted to divorce her. We met here in the village she was my neighbor growing up for a long time. Her character attracted and fascinated and pulled at me and that is why I choose her to marry me.

Omari professes to love his wife, “My wife I love her a lot, again I love her a lot.” He describes his wife as someone he noticed from a young age as beautiful, and loving, and industrious (keeps herself occupied with good tasks to make the house comfortable). “I knew she was the one for me from the time she was a small child, you see she is my cousin.”

Omari, while professing love for his wife, he also acknowledges intimate relationships outside of marriage. He says:

I’ve had girlfriends since marrying, but right now I do not have any. When I have a girlfriend, we meet up when I’m having a problem at home or if she [my wife] is having a problem with me. But it is never anything permanent. I do not want a second wife or third, because life is difficult, plus my wife would not tolerate it for one second. She would *katakata*, (cut me into fine pieces). In my life, I think I will be married just one time, only, but maybe I will have bad luck and my wife and I would divorce, if this happens, I would have to marry again.

Here, Omari differentiates between lovers and a second wife and how differently his wife would respond if he pursued polygyny, stating she would do him physical harm. This is an important distinction in Swahili marriages and one that both women and men make. Extramarital affairs are much preferred, by women, and even women’s responses about infidelity indicate that they expect and accept this feature of Swahili marriage, and much prefer it to polygyny. Omari also mentions how difficult life is, indirectly acknowledging the great cost and expense associated with another wife: a house that needs to be furnished and maintained, eventually children, and the costs of more dependents. Infidelity and love are not mutually exclusive, and some argue lovers are an important part of a happy marriage.

People expect their partner, both men and women, to have affairs if given the opportunity. This is why I often heard from women that their husbands would not permit them to leave the house, or area near to the house, without permission. Women, on the other hand, did not have the ability to restrict their husband’s movements. Women do, however, prefer their husbands take a lover instead of a second wife. A lover, or girlfriend, is not permanent and while a lover might make some claims on a husband’s time and resources, her extended family cannot. This is in contrast to the demands a second wife could potentially make on a husband.

Adult relationships outside of marriage were a preoccupation of Swahili men and women. During my field research, extramarital affairs were frequently the subject of conversation. They came up in gossip sessions, during casual conversations, and in interviews. Eighty-four percent



of men surveyed reported they would be jealous if their wife took a lover. Men explained their jealousy:

- “This is not the way of Islam.”
- “It is not good to know this information.”
- “If I learn it I will divorce her.”
- “No man can keep his respect and not be jealous.”
- “For our religion it is *Kharamu* (forbidden).”
- “I would feel such resentment.”

These sentiments of men contrast quite strongly with Middleton’s findings among Swahili men in Kenya during the 1950’s: “Men often said cynically that husbands encourage their wives to sleep with other men, because their wives will do so in any case, they may then get a ‘return’ on their bride wealth, and they will have reasons for divorce should they later want it” because men could publicly declare men who have extramarital relationships with their wives and receive a payment (1992, 116). Middleton also notes “...the popular belief (at least among men) is that both married and divorced women are always ready for extramarital affairs...” (1992, 116). Men in Peponi do not want their wives to have lovers, but if they do have lovers they do not want to know about it. Further, they explain infidelity for wives is *kharamu*, forbidden by Islam.

Only 28% of women replied they would be jealous. Rather, 57% of women reported they would not be jealous, and elaborated:

- “It is our custom.”
- “It helps the marriage.”
- “It is normal here for men to have lovers.”
- “This is our way.”
- “The conditions of marriage are difficult.”

Women view lovers as a part of life and something that can even help keep a marriage together. Extramarital affairs were a common topic of conversation, gossip, and joking. Just as men joked with me, asking if I would become their wife (Keefe 2015) they also teased me about becoming their lover, especially once they learned I was married. Usually the jokes started with the question, “*Una mpenzi?*” or “*Una hawara*” (“do you have a lover?”), and then unfolded into men listing reasons why I should select them as my lover: “I will build you a beautiful house.” “Am I good looking, or what?” “I have things to give.” “Don’t you want me?” “I could be useful to you.” In response, I would tease back and ask: “How will you take care of me? I have very expensive needs.” This joking would inevitably result in the man claiming: “But, you can take care of me!” The fact that I was already married mattered not at all, “Divorce is easy!” they would remind me. Often, I was treated like a man in these conversations because men would tell me I could send my husband a written *talaka* allowing us to be married— something Swahili women do not have the possibility of doing. My husband Dan spent the last 4 months of my year of fieldwork in Peponi. Before he arrived people, women especially, would tease me, “Are you worried he will choose a second wife?” or, the ever popular, “Tell Daniel I’m a good lover, I’d make a good second wife.” When Dan arrived in Peponi the teasing continued with frequent comments about his ability to have more wives in Peponi. People played with the rules, knowing he is not Muslim, and that *Wazungu* do not permit polygyny. No problem, he can become Muslim. Women loved to try and get a rise out of me on this topic. Knowing Dan did not speak Swahili they would shout for all to hear, “Hey Daniel (which they pronounced DanYell),

wouldn't I make a nice second wife?" Loud belly laughs from everyone in earshot would ensue. Sometimes women would hop on the back of his bicycle, a bold move as only a wife, relative, or lover rides on the back of a man's bicycle.

This teasing came from men and women, married and unmarried alike. In this context, women were quite open about the possibility of extramarital intimate relationships. The literature and the predominant conversation in Peponi focused on men's infidelity; however, women in Peponi also participate in relationships outside the marriage. Recently, in a chapter analyzing the songs of Swahili women, Pat Caplan reflects over her extended career on Mafia Island: "I could see that women had many problems in their lives, such as lack of choice in marriage and bearing more children than they wanted; I also saw that they were disadvantaged in relation to men in terms of divorce, polygyny, and inheritance...they also exercised a considerable degree of agency and were able to analyze themselves and their social relations, even make fun of them, through their songs. So, women's situation—their gender and sexuality, their marriages and affairs—was complex" (2015, 98). Many of the songs Caplan documented describe the extramarital activities of women (2015, 104). Young women, girls, are not only taught about sex and how to please their husbands, but also how to please themselves, including having extramarital affairs (Caplan 2015, 100). In an analysis of the songs Swahili women on Mafia Island sing, Caplan notes many songs openly describe extramarital relations, for example: "My mortar is in good condition and I will pound it as and when I like, even if I go outside to do so." [My vagina is ok, so I will use it as I like] or, "If I eat fish, I will spit out the bones, so that I may get profit again." [If a woman commits adultery and keeps quiet, she can do it all over again.] (Caplan 2015, 96). While men do not like the idea of women's infidelity, in Peponi, women do engage in extramarital intimate relationships. As noted elsewhere, in diverse cultural contexts, the frustration for men occurs when women do not keep their affair secret. Hirsch et al. point out that if indiscretions are kept secret there is no infraction (Hirsch et al. 2009). Elsewhere I have written about Dotto and Fatuma, as their relationship was tumultuous and illustrative of how both men and women view the fluidity of intimate relationships (Keefe 2015). Fatuma specifically used infidelity to push Dotto into a divorce. In a rural village, it is difficult to keep relationships outside the marriage a secret, but there is an expectation of discreteness. Dotto and Fatuma's infidelities were discussed by people in the village because in the end neither attempted to keep their affairs a secret. Even before the relationship truly deteriorated they were aware of the infidelities on both sides. It was not until Fatuma became deliberately indiscrete, flaunting her lover that Dotto, and his parents, felt their dignity was compromised, and while Dotto also pursued lovers, he did not want to divorce his wife.

Women and their husbands say they abstain from sexual intercourse with each other during pregnancy and, presumably, for two years following the birth of a child. Polygyny could enable men access to other legitimate partners while a wife is pregnant or nursing; however, I was only able to find one example of a man who is married to two wives where both wives were still of childbearing age. This polygynous union was a secret marriage, and the first wife did not know about it. Although both men and women claim extramarital affairs are formally prohibited by Islam, men I spoke with openly claimed there is an exception and they have a right to take lovers if "needs" could not be met by their wives for one reason or another. Men reference when women withhold sex because of problems in the relationship as an appropriate time to seek a lover. Women also recognized men's sexual needs as something distinct from their own. More than just a means to a biological end, lovers are also a source of social honor and prestige for men (Hirsch et al. 2009).

In Peponi, couples have fewer options and must find creative ways to keep affairs secret. Above all, one should never reveal their affairs in a way that makes them undeniable. In other words, they should not be caught in the act, specifically, by two or more witnesses whose testimony would make the affair irrefutable. Affairs may operate in a secret realm of social interaction, but they are governed by implicit rules of conduct that protect the honor of men and women. Kibabu, a twenty-year-old young man, made an insightful observation when discussing Dotto and Fatuma's situation: "If a man starts cheating on his wife it's likely that the wife will begin to also, so if you want a faithful wife, you must be faithful also. That is it. You can't expect a wife to remain inside the marriage if you do not. These problems will mean divorce eventually." If you do not desire divorce, discretion is critical.

Another way men and women indicated an intimate relationship was the use of kinship terms used as euphemisms for lovers by men and women. When women, or men, wanted to refer to their lovers they would use the term *kaka* (big brother) or *binamu* (cousin). In fact, men and women who teased and pursued me and Dan, either in jest, seriousness, or hopefulness, called me *binamu* (cousin), *dada* (sister), *shangazi* (father's sister), or *shemeji* (sister-in-law). When confronted by men asking if I would be their lover, I would politely decline the offer by saying that I was married. They would respond: "*Binamu*, your husband is so far away," or, "*Shemeji*, don't you need a 'second husband?'" These substitutions of kinship terminology were forms of indirect speech, but they were also symbolic of the common role of caretaker played by older brothers, husbands, and lovers. I also noted how this took place between Swahili men and women in Peponi. Sofiya, a twenty-two-year-old woman who lived near me, was unmarried and adamant that she did not have a boyfriend, and never had a boyfriend or lover. She was embarrassed by the question and, to be honest, I did not believe her. Her behavior towards men and her knowing flirtatious banter with them told me she knew more than she wanted to admit. A few months later I found my research assistant's youngest son, Aibu (twenty-three), lingering around my house chatting with Sofiya, who was frequently over. Initially, he carried some type of message for me from his mother: "She is feeling ill and cannot work tomorrow," or "She wants to start early tomorrow because there is a wedding in the afternoon." Eventually, he stopped having messages for me and would chat with Sofiya exclusively. I suspected meeting to chat at my house, in the courtyard was a plan and a way to be discreet about their flirtation. Aibu would regularly refer to Sofiya: "I will see you later *shemeji* (sister-in-law)." Calling her *shemeji* gave her a false kin relationship and connection to him which initially confused me. But I heard these false kin relation terms used frequently between men and women in a flirtatious way. It was after hearing Aibu call Sofiya *shemeji* that I suspected their relationship to be sexual. In fact, less than a year after departing Tanzania I received an email from her brother telling me she had a baby. I asked him who the father of her child is and if they intended to get married. He was able to tell me the name of the father, Aibu, but said: "Sofiya does not talk about it [a wedding], and won't answer any questions. They are not engaged."

Married women I spoke with cited a myriad of reasons for having affairs. Some women stated they liked their lovers because: "he pleases me," and they were less attracted to their husbands. Other women, such as Fatuma, had affairs out of jealousy, or revenge for their husbands' own marital transgressions. Women explained they are selective in who they chose as boyfriends or lovers. In particular, many discussed the importance of finding a man who protected their privacy, who showed them respect and affection through gifts and support, and who helped them smooth out problems, or meet financial needs. Women also perceived gifts as evidence of men's dedication, respect, and love, and of their own power to divert men's affection and resources to themselves. Most of the adult married women I spoke with who previously had—or were

currently involved in—extramarital affairs, chose their lovers freely. Others, however, sought relationships with men out of necessity to feed their children, pay school fees, or purchase other essentials when a husband failed to provide. It is important to stress some of the similarities between love affairs and marriage in terms of gender roles, expectations, and rules of social networking. Like marriage, love affairs entail support and exchange. Women offer their lovers cooked food, treats, and other small gifts while men support their lovers by giving them money, clothes or food, and in some cases, lodging. Furthermore, through their jobs, connections, and even family networks, lovers help their boyfriends and girlfriends get jobs, a new house, a cheap deal on roofing materials, or a loan, without disclosing their relationship.

While not officially sanctioned, both premarital and extramarital liaisons were a prominent part of social life among the people in Peponi. Most people do not like to discuss the subject and might even feel shame that it is highlighted here as an element of life; nonetheless, nonmarital relationships are an important aspect of how men and women navigate contemporary challenges to daily survival, conjugal life, and cultural prestige. For youth, premarital sexuality held possibilities for individual expression and freedom from parental authority. As youth continue to struggle between their interests in exploring premarital heterosexual relationships and their dedication to their parents, the symbolic significance of virginity wanes. On an overt level, extramarital relationships are perceived as subversive acts that threaten the sanctity of marriage, yet in their covert existence they are not without their own set of rules and mores. The same issues of shame and honor that drive parents to marry daughters to men of different social rank in order to avoid premarital pregnancy sometimes motivate men and women to have affairs, rather than avoid them. These issues also govern conduct within extramarital relationships. Ties of mutual dependence among men and women in extramarital affairs mirror that of marital relationships, re-emphasizing cultural notions of gender and sexuality. At the same time, some women's agency in creating and sustaining extramarital affairs challenges cultural stereotypes of dependent and subservient women. In short, extramarital relationships should be understood not in opposition to marriage—the lawless, anything-goes sexual sphere of interaction— but as an informal arena of exchange, dependence, and mutual assistance in which men and women meet a variety of specific needs and desires that have not been fulfilled in marriage.

## **POLYGYNOUS FEARS AND DIVORCE**

The fear, threat, and/or reality of polygyny is the most frequent explanation for wanting a divorce among women, and concomitantly, is one of the most frequent desires men profess to achieve in their lifetime. My survey data reveal that all second wives are in their second, third, or fourth marriage, and no women entered a polygynous marriage as their first marriage. In addition, they acknowledge they entered into a polygynous union as a second wife because they felt they had run out of options. If given a choice, they would prefer not to be in a polygynous union, and they hold out hope that the first wife will pursue a divorce. Although most husbands never have more than one wife at a time in this village, men tirelessly boast, brag, and plot toward this end. They invoke Islamic doctrines when discussing their desires and justification for multiple wives. In Peponi, men argue the practice is part of their rights and privileges as Muslims. In contrast to scholarship on Islam and Africa that presents polygyny as a tradition declining in the face of modernization, my research demonstrates that male desire for polygyny is still strong, and it argues that men's desires reveal local perceptions of both the dynamic and enduring values of Islam as well as quintessential signs of masculinity, success, and modernity in this Swahili Muslim community (Keefe 2015). Polygyny is difficult for men to achieve: systemic poverty and a lack of industry and jobs make accumulating the necessary resources for *mahari*

payments, weddings, and maintaining two separate households extremely difficult. Second, a myriad of kin obligations further divide men's meager resources. And finally, when men do find the resources available to marry a second wife, their current wives often thwart their polygynous plans. This research highlights the gendered expectations of marriage, particularly men's desire for polygyny and women's aversion to the practice. Men and women readily discuss their relationship plans and preferences. Women are known to initiate a divorce if they suspect their husband is making moves to acquire a second wife. The actual number of men with multiple wives is quite low (Keefe 2015), and despite the various obstacles men encounter to achieve polygyny, women's role is undoubtedly a large factor.

Tabia, a divorced woman I initially interviewed because of the small business she runs with her thrice divorced mother, told me about her ex-husband, Amani:

I thought we understood each other. His *hawara*, that was fine, this is to be expected, but he was still a good husband, a good man. Another wife? No. Never. Not possible. I was not ok with a second wife in our relationship. His business is good, but he does not have the kind of money and resources for a second wife. Another house! Ha! How would he do that? Not to mention all the things and money a second wife would need. He cannot afford two. Besides, if he wants to have sex with *wake tofauti tofauti* (many different women), that's fine, I did not complain. But those women do not have any say over my life, and I do not have to share the important things with them. A wife, another wife, is a serious challenge and I did not want that. I see what it does to others. He did not want a divorce, but after time he could not resist the second wife. So, we are divorced now. He does not help with our four children. He's busy with his new wife and their children. So, I have my *hoteli*, and I support myself and my children, my mother and I work hard together. It was an easy decision; I was not going to take part in a marriage like that [polygynous].

Tabia willingly tolerated Amani's *hawara*, and was not threatened by his need for many intimate relationships with *wake tofauti tofauti* outside the marriage. Polygyny, however, was not acceptable to her, and crossed a line. Her ex-husband was unable to resist the lure of polygyny. Tabia is likely right, that his income and resources would not have adequately provided for two wives and two households. Tabia is an example of a Swahili woman who harnessed the income earning potential of a small business, a *hoteli* (small restaurant), to create options outside of marriage. Along with other small businesses, the burgeoning of *hotelis* in Peponi demonstrates women's increased ability to support themselves independent of husbands (Keefe 2016). Financial freedom dramatically impacts their outlook on marriage and relationships. While most men continue to aspire to have multiple wives, women detest the notion and, like Fatuma, are willing to perform their adultery publicly so as to attain a divorce. Married women view the entrepreneurship of women like Tabia and Fatuma as a viable and practical option in the event their husband takes a second wife. Women plan for the future and strategize about how they will respond to an unloving husband, or a second wife, in ways they previously could not. Thus, women's ability to earn money, primarily through informal entrepreneurial work, affords them new options with significant consequences for (re)marriage (Keefe 2016).

Women found sharing a husband with a second wife much less bearable than doing so with his casual lovers. Lovers and girlfriends have little, if any, status in the community: they are fleeting, temporary, a short-term expenditure with few, if any, rights or hold on the man. Furthermore,

while lovers entail some costs they do not require the expense necessary to acquire and maintain a second wife. Although some West and South African women reportedly perceive benefits to having a co-wife, such as the reduction of one's workload or the friendship of a co-wife with whom one can bond and share gossip (Bowen 1964; Madhavan 2002; Ware 1979), women in Peponi never told me about any benefits to polygyny, and fought the possibility of a second wife when confronted with it. Those Peponi women who have not experienced polygyny are wary of the institution and the effect it may have on their lives, and those who have had a co-wife expressed only negative remarks about polygyny. There were few women who, when presented with a polygynous marriage, did not immediately seek a divorce.

A newly married young man, Asani, was quite open with me, and likely other people in his life about his infidelity and his desire for additional wives once he attains a more stable financial status (Keefe 2015). The very fact that he has girlfriends, but cannot afford another wife at this point in time, raises the question: what is the difference between girlfriends and wives? Extramarital affairs approximate polygyny, allowing men to feel they are achieving parts of the ultimate goal as a modern Muslim man. Girlfriends and lovers require gifts and financial support, but these expenditures are much smaller than those required by a wife, making extramarital affairs a viable simulation of polygyny in the eyes of men. Girlfriends and lovers are valued by men for the short-term feelings of love (which they may not be getting from their wives). Lovers earn them respect from other men for having multiple women depend on them; they confer the status of a man who cares for, and is cared for by, more than one woman; they even allow a man to imagine a life in the future as modern, virtuous, and successful. Asani's case illustrates, however, that despite his relative economic success, polygyny is not an easy accomplishment and infidelity and girlfriends are a second, but desirable, alternative.

In the 1960s and 1970s, anthropologists working among the Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania reported that women had few options after a divorce—they could immediately remarry, return to a father's household (if he would have her), or do sex work (Gomm 1972; Landberg 1977; Middleton 1992; Mirza and Strobel 1989; Strobel 1979). In the past women remarried rapidly (Caplan 1968; Gomm 1972; Landberg 1977; Middleton 1992; Mirza and Strobel 1989; Strobel 1979). In the late 1960s, Landberg described Swahili women's options after a divorce: "With few exceptions, a woman has scant resources to support herself independently. A number of women cite this as a reason for remarriage" (Landberg 1977, 217). Today, however, women consider their options, such as informal entrepreneurial work (Keefe 2016), and more often than not, women choose to retain the status of a divorced woman, rather than remarry.

## **DIVORCE AND POLYGyny**

It can be argued that polygyny, the reality of men's desire for it, and the fear and frustration it incites in women have real consequences in Peponi as it is among the most frequent reasons given for the cause of divorce. Men's pursuit of polygyny, and women's resistance to the practice, fuels a cycle of divorce in this community of Swahili Muslims (Keefe 2015). Today, women prefer divorce to polygyny and imagine an independent life, in which they can provide for themselves and their children. The effect of women's informal entrepreneurial activities has transformed women's options, within and outside of marriage. This new era of entrepreneurship solidifies women's agency within marriage, and their ability to finance life outside the parameters of marriage empowers them to act on a desire for a divorce. Opposition to polygyny is a frequent topic among Swahili women, regardless of the age of the woman, her relationship to, or her years of experience with, polygyny. The discussion in the literature on polygyny in

Africa generally posits women's attitudes toward polygyny as competitive or collaborative (Madhavan 2002); forced into this dichotomy, women of Peponi would certainly be described as competitive, and in most cases, I would describe it as even more extreme than competitive because women will work to avoid the state of polygyny by seeking or threatening a divorce if they suspect their husband to be taking a second wife. My research demonstrates that women in polygynous unions do compete for the husband's resources and attention (Keefe 2015); however, the relationship between co-wives is mostly nonexistent because they avoid each other, speak of each other with disdain, and have no real cause to interact with each other, as husbands are required to maintain them in separate households.

I have written about Hidaya, the second wife of Mzee Issa, elsewhere (Keefe 2015) but not about what brought her to a polygynous union. Second wives and polygynous unions which endure are rare, so Hidaya's story is worth elaborating here; she is a forty-year-old woman and has two adult children (who both live in Uganda, the home country of their father) and three grandchildren (two of whom live with her and Mzee Issa). She divorced from her first husband a little over ten years ago because he wanted more children and she experienced secondary infertility and was unable to get pregnant again. She was disappointed to divorce, but did not blame him—she also would like more children. After the divorce, she returned to her home village (a neighboring village to Peponi). Shortly after returning, she opened a *hoteli* and met Mzee Issa when he came to her village on business. She was very happy to marry him, despite his marital status, because she saw him as a smart, kind, and fun man. She said, "I wasn't looking for a man that was already married. It was not my first choice to be a second wife. But my situation [being infertile] made me feel like I didn't have a lot of choice. Really, I felt lucky that such a good man wanted me." The fact that Mzee Issa did not want any more children made it a perfect match in her view. Hidaya is among few women in the village who are a second wife. Given how vocal most women are about their fear of, and hatred for polygyny I did not expect to encounter any women who were happy in their situation as a second wife. Hidaya acknowledges the difficulties between her husband and his first wife, but is not bothered by it, as it is clear to her that despite being a second wife, she is the preferred wife.

Women in Peponi, like Tabia and Fatuma, devised coping strategies for their abhorrence of polygyny. First, most women undeniably articulate their preference for monogamous, even romantic, relationships with their husbands. Second, they make every effort to block polygynous unions (Keefe 2010). And, failing the first two options, they seek divorce through any means possible to escape a polygynous marriage. In all Swahili communities, divorce is accepted as a normal part of most marriages and an individual's relationship life cycle (Caplan 1995; Fair 2001; Landberg 1977; Middleton 1992; Mirza and Strobel 1989; Stiles 2002). In a context where legal forms of divorce are largely absent, misunderstood, or hidden, I observed divorce unfold exclusively through informal negotiations. In Peponi, it is less a legal process and more a process that invokes an array of social structures: kinship, community, work, and even the supernatural realms. Acts of divorce are almost exclusively done by verbal or written repudiation. Residents of Peponi view repudiation to be official and binding, yet differentiate it from what they identify as official legal mechanisms, such as those documented by Erin Stiles (2009) in Zanzibar. Though Tanga is a recognized Muslim center in East Africa, sharia courts do not have a presence there or anywhere else in mainland Tanzania (see Stiles 2005 and 2009 for analysis of Islamic courts in Zanzibar). Peponi does technically have access to the Tanzanian state judge-magistrate, who is scheduled to come once a month and can issue a divorce; however, in my year in Peponi, he showed up only five times. Even when women are aware of the options for a mediated divorce provided by the traveling judge, the logistics and fees prove to be unaffordable

(approximately US \$20 in 2004) or are deemed not worth the hassle. Historically, repudiation is a form of divorce common in all Muslim cultures, and historical and contemporary evidence indicate high rates of divorce among the Swahili. In 1968, in the same community where my research was conducted, Landberg's census and marital history data indicate that nearly fifty percent of marriages ended in divorce (1977), and my 2004 research found that this percentage had not changed. Approaches to understanding marriage and marital instability among the Swahili have varied, but what is unequivocal is that divorce is common.

## **CONCLUSION**

Swahili men and women value the institution of marriage unequivocally, yet the importance of marriage among Swahili Muslims might misleadingly suggest partnerships are static, stable entities. In fact, they are highly fluid for both men and women and have long been characterized by serial monogamy, men's aspirations for polygyny, and high levels of divorce (Caplan 1968, 1984; Gomm 1972; Hirsch 1998; Landberg 1977; Middleton 1992; Stiles 2005, 2009; Strobel 1979; Swartz 1982). In Peponi, men argue the practice of polygyny is part of their rights and privileges as Muslims. Women, in contrast, find the practice of polygyny to be directly at odds with their romantic, monogamous, love-based hopes for marriage. These contradictory expectations reflect broader changes in the national political economy of Tanzania and engagement with modern and global ideas about love and monogamy. Research from around the world, and Africa in particular, demonstrates increasing desire for romantic, love-based relationships and marriage (Cole and Thomas 2009; Padilla et al. 2007). In Africa, there is evidence of the entanglement of affect and exchange that reveals the pronounced gender inequality within marriage (Cole and Thomas 2009; Hunter 2009; Smith 2009). Swahili women seek and desire a marriage based on love, monogamy, and romance. Men typically offer women their desired romance and love in courtship and in marriage, but this does not deter them from their primary goal of polygyny, and their second-best option, infidelity.



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# GENDER, DEVELOPMENT, AND GLOBALIZATION PROGRAM

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