

**Gendered Relationships and Localized Islam: The Meaning of Marriage(s) and Divorce(s) among the Swahili of coastal Tanzania**

This paper incorporates methods and theory from the field of demographic anthropology to address marriage and divorce in the context of the dynamic relationship between Islam, gender and culture among Muslims on the Swahili coast of Tanzania. A crucial aspect of understanding these processes is to explore the complex and multidimensional nature of relationships between men and women in Swahili society. Historically, the Swahili people are recognized for their high divorce rates; indeed, divorce and multiple marriages over the life-course are described as the typical experience (Gomm 1972, Landberg 1986, Middleton 1992, Strobel 1986). There are, however, no accounts of how divorce, as a process, impacts the lives of both men and women in Swahili communities. This paper is based on one year of demographic anthropology fieldwork in a rural Muslim Swahili fishing village on the coast of Northern Tanzania and it provides a nuanced understanding of current perceptions of divorce in relation to the ideals and norms of marriage.

Between 1915 and 1950, in Swahili communities in Kenya, one in two first marriages ended in divorce (Strobel 1979: 88). In the late 1960's, in a rural Muslim fishing village in Tanzania, census and marital history data indicate that the divorce rate was nearly 50% (Landberg, 1977). In 2004, this researcher conducted a year long anthropological demography inquiry into divorce in the same rural Muslim fishing village and determined (through census and survey data collection) that divorce rates remain high at 47%. Approaches to understanding marriage and marital instability among the Swahili have varied, but what is unequivocal is that divorce is common. To

date, divorce has been analyzed as an attribute of women only, while the experiences of men have been ignored (Gomm 1972, Landberg 1986, Strobel 1979). The structural ramifications and overall significance of marriage can only be assessed with reference to the full range of gender relations and experiences. This paper examines divorce from a gendered perspective and clarifies cultural models and meanings of marriage and divorce among Swahili women and men. What it means to be a Muslim, and how Islamic doctrine is interpreted, is vital to understanding gender identities within marriage and divorce in this community. Furthermore, it is clear that gender identities and social relations have multiple meanings and realities for women and men. There are many acceptable ways to be a good woman/wife or man/husband. The premise of this research is that marriage and divorce are not isolated events and being a divorced person is not as stigmatized as previously described in the literature. In-depth interviews, and survey data, equally demonstrate that men and women have dramatically different perceptions of how their life course – in terms of relationships – will be.

Muslim women were described in earlier research as having little, if any, agency in the divorce process and as having scant resources to support themselves independently after a divorce and this is referred to as the primary reason for remarriage and sex work among Swahili women. Changing gender relationships in other parts of Tanzania have been noted and Christian women have expressed reluctance to marry, or they are more likely to dissolve marriages that they are unhappy in (Setel 2000, Stambach 1999). While Christians in Tanzania do not have a history of high divorce rates these findings have linked these changes to women's assertion of more control over their life course. Similar to Christian women in Tanzania Muslim women are increasingly asserting more control

over their life course. This research demonstrates that for Muslim Swahili women along the coast multiple marriages over the life course and high divorce rates are still common, however, what women are doing after a divorce has changed. The primary finding of this research is that Swahili women do have options outside of marriage and that divorce has consequences for both men and women (economically, socially, and politically within their communities) that need to be explored.