

The Bond and the Beautiful!

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ABSTRACT

My Independent Study Project (ISP) research was conducted in Mombasa, Kenya. I initial intention was to focus on Swahili beauty alone and then it led me to a more in depth study. I came upon the idea of women, beauty, and how they come together for beauty processes and how it creates a bond between them. I was aiming to focus on ways females pull together and help each other in order to become beautiful. I also wanted to discover the many traditions which Swahili women use to beautify themselves and what they consider to be beautiful.

INTRODUCTION

As I began to consider a topic for my ISP research, I came upon Swahili beauty: the aspects of it and what steps Swahili women take to become beautiful. While contemplating this topic I was staying with a home stay family, the Bably's, in Mombasa, Kenya. During the stay, I witnessed many sights and ideas that caught my attention for possible ISP topics.

The one scene that really caught my eye was a simple mother-daughter act. It was a normal day for the Bably family; cooking, cleaning, and plaiting hair. I saw my sister Sophia (she is technically my Aunt but is very close to my age so we consider ourselves to be sisters) plait her mother's hair. Plaiting hair is a term that some people use for things like corn rows or other types of braiding. It was a beautiful picture to me because it made the two of them seem very close to each other and bonded. Reasons for this thought were mostly because in order for a person to plait someone else's hair the two people must sit very near to each other. In most cases the person getting their hair done sits in between the legs of the person doing it.

I found this occurrence touching and striking. I'm not quite sure why it hit me like it did but I believe it stems from the fact that I have a very close relationship with my mother. I just found it to be a beautiful thing to see: mother and daughter working together and bonding in such a way. I doubt that Sophia and her mother feel that this is a stunning sight, braiding each other's hair, because to them it is a normal thing. For me though, I was awed. It even made me smile later on in my stay when I saw it for the second and third time.

This act of a daughter braiding a mother's hair gave me the inspiration for my ISP research. It made me want to find out certain research questions such as: Does beautification bring women together? Do they form a bond or friendship from beauty? What is the relevance that friends and family do beauty processes for one another? Besides these questions and ideas, I knew that along the way I would learn about steps women take to become beautiful, why it is important to them to be beautiful, and what they considered beauty to be.

I felt that staying with my home stay family would be a great starting point for my research and from there my work would spider web. I also wanted to start out by interviewing salon keepers in Mombasa. This information, along with book and internet research, was my main forms of obtaining pieces of data.

Before I even began my research, I knew that henna would be a recurring theme in my project and I knew that it would be a major point to look at. I knew this because for everyday I was in Mombasa, I saw at least 10-15 women with henna applied onto their hands and/or feet. I could tell that it was a key part of their culture and of how they decorate themselves. Because of this, I wanted to first obtain background research on henna such as its uses, its history, its traditions, etc. I found this very interesting because it seems very important to many people around the world and is used for many different purposes.

To begin this research, I decided to look up the definition of henna. The word reference online dictionary defines henna as, a reddish brown dye used especially on hair (www.wordreference.com/definition/henna, May 2nd, 2005). This is in principle, the definition of henna, but the functional definition of henna is so much more to many

people and cultures throughout the world. Henna has been practiced for over 5,000 years in India, Africa, and the Middle East (www.earthhenna.com/henna_geography.htm, April 22nd, 2005). Over half of the henna using countries can be found between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. This is for the mere fact that it is most easily grown in these areas (www.sphosting.com/reverendbunny/HaPoC.html, April 28th, 2005).

Egyptians were among the first people to use henna and other natural make-ups (www.salc.wsu.edu, April 27th, 2005). They used henna to stain the fingers and toes of Pharaohs prior to mummification. Although the ancient Egyptians were the first to use henna and natural make-ups, it is believed that henna originated, as an art form, in ancient India. In India it is known as mehndi, not henna, but they are the same product. Some scholars feel that the Moguls introduced mehndi there in the 12th century C.E. (www.hannalei.com/history_of_henna1.htm May 2nd 2005).

Henna is most commonly found in Muslim societies and it is believed to be a purifying and protective decoration (Fuglesang, 130). It is written that the Prophet Muhammad even recognizes henna and its use:

“A woman made a sign from behind a curtain to indicate that she had a letter for the Apostle of Allah. The Prophet closed his hand, saying; I do not know if this is a man’s or a woman’s hand. She said; No, a woman. He said; if you were a woman, you would make a difference to your nails, meaning henna.” (qtd. from www.hennapage.com/henna/encyclopedia/fingernails April 20th, 2005).

Around the globe, each culture that has adopted the use of henna has made their own culturally distinct patterns for henna that are recognizable to the informed eye. Examples of this are: Arabic Swahili have large, bold floral patterns, Moroccan Berber have geometric and linear designs, Hindu use paisleys, vines, and birds, Muslim users will not paint figures because of their religious

beliefs, and the USA uses it for pure aesthetic purposes only. These distinct patterns usually symbolize religious and culturally significant events (www.salc.wsu.edu April 27th, 2005). Events like holidays, pregnancies, births, marriages, Eids, circumcisions etc, are all celebrated with the use of henna in certain cultures. It is also thought to bring luck and enhance beauty ([www.sphosting.com/reverndbunny/ HaPoC.html](http://www.sphosting.com/reverndbunny/HaPoC.html) April 28th, 2005).

Mehndi has different traditions in each culture just as it has different patterns. In India for example, there is a wedding ritual which says the deeper the color the henna is on the skin of the bride, then the longer the love will last between the couple. In Morocco, soldiers going to battle have their wives apply henna to the palm of their right hand for protection and to remind him of her love. Here it is also placed on pregnant mothers to protect the mother and child (www.earthhenna.com/henna_geography.htm April 22nd 2005). Henna is also used during pregnancy for other purposes as well. It is believed that applying henna will lessen the rates of postpartum depression in new mothers. The pregnant women have it applied to their feet for two main reasons. One, it stops them from doing housework because they must let it dry and this in turn allows them to gain their strength back. Reason two is that it helps the women feel pretty again because they haven't seen their feet for months and they want to feel and look beautiful (www.hennapage.com/henna/encyclopedia/pregbirth/postpart.pdf April 20th, 2005).

Henna, *Lawsonia inermis*, is seen as possessing medical purposes as well as aesthetic ones. It has cooling properties, can be used as a coagulant for open

wounds, soothes burns, eases eczema, and when mixed with vinegar and applied to the head, it will help reduce headaches

(www.earthhenna.com/henna_geography.htm April 22nd, 2005). Henna is said to strengthen fingernails and cuticles by binding to the keratin strands in the hands and in turn it deters fungal infections

(www.hennapage.com/henna/encyclopedia/fingernails April 20th, 2005). Besides medical purposes, one of the greatest roles that it plays is in the wedding ceremonies of certain cultures. I will later discuss briefly how it is used in the Swahili wedding and how Swahili women use it on a regular basis.

SETTING

I chose to do my entire ISP in Mombasa. I chose this setting because I believed that Mombasa would give me the most resources for my subject matter. I was informed that in Mombasa there were multiple weddings each week and I felt this would aid me in my research immensely. Another factor for choosing Mombasa was the pure fact that it is a city. In a city setting it is relatively easy to look around and see women who have obviously taken time to decorate themselves and beautify themselves before they even walk out the door. With this fact, studying beauty and women was made easier.

My biggest and most influential reason for choosing Mombasa as my place of research was that I had a home stay family there. Beauty is a topic that starts in the home setting and because I wanted to look at the bonding and cooperation among women, a home setting was exactly what I was looking for. I decided to stay with my home stay family because of these reasons. When staying with a family for basically 24 hours a day, for almost two weeks, one can witness events that regular visitors wouldn't get to see. My viewing of a daughter braiding a mother's hair is one of these events. Had I not been staying with this family, I may not have seen this happening.

During my stay with the Bably family, I didn't do research (i.e. ask questions constantly) the entire time. I felt it was more important, at times, to sit back and soak everything in while just observing. I stayed at the house for most of the days and usually would leave only to do internet research, interview other people outside of the household, or to just relax with my friends. Most of my

time though was spent living and interacting with the family. I found my home setting very useful, resourceful, and enlightening. As I mentioned earlier, beauty starts at the home, therefore, by being at home with the family, I could witness how they prepared themselves for events like funerals or weddings, or just venturing outside. I learned about the times when women get more decorated and when it was alright for them to leave the house in just two kanga. With this setting I definitely discovered that beauty and appearance are important aspects of the Swahili culture and I will talk about this later on.

My working conditions were very relaxed ones. It was just like being at home with my own family. Everything went on as it would normally. We (the women of the household) would get up and prepare breakfast and from then on, preparing meals or cleaning were the main tasks of the day. When we were between chores or even while doing them is when I found it easiest to work and to interview people. The only problem, you could say, with this setting for me was that I found myself not wanting to discuss things relative to my ISP. I wanted to ask other questions on my mind or just let the family go on as normal. I also had to deal with the numerous young children that came in and out of the house. Often times they would want me to play with them or entertain them but I managed to find a balance.

METHODOLOGY

Beginning my research was the hardest part for me. I was unclear as to what I was actually going to be studying and researching so I was unsure of where to start. I couldn't think of things that would be useful in books or even on the internet at first so I decided to just start with an interview from a hairdresser. I interviewed fourteen people. My interviews with salon workers could be considered formal because as I asked them random questions I would then write the answers down. As my research furthered, I began to see patterns and come up with specific questions that I wanted to ask everyone so as to make a comparison. My other ways of acquiring information were just discussing things and ideas with my home stay family and their friends. Most of it was them telling me information about beauty or the conversations just happening to come across beauty and how women beautify themselves and others.

I couldn't find many texts on my subject matter in libraries, but the internet proved to be a somewhat useful resource. Through the internet, I found all of my information on the history and different uses of henna. I didn't use surveys for any of my research but I did use participatory observation. Before my research for ISP began, I had gotten henna done twice and I had also gotten my hair plaited. During my research period I did both of these acts again and viewed others getting them done. You don't know how it actually feels to get your hair plaited by someone and sit that close to them for a good amount of time until you actually do it. You also don't know how it feels to look down at your hands and

feet and see beautiful patterns and symbols on them until you actually get it. That is why I felt that it was important to try these things (and I wanted them as well!).

LITERATURE REVIEW

--*Wedding Customs in Lamu* by Francoise le Guennec-Coppens.

This book mainly discussed weddings which is evident from the title. The information would have been more useful if I were doing my independent study project on Swahili weddings and the traditions that go along with them. I did, however, find some relevant facts. It gave me detailed descriptions of how the bride gets prepared for her wedding day, who helps her get prepared, and the roles of different family members in the whole wedding process. Because the topic of my ISP isn't completely dealing with Swahili beauty (I wanted to focus on how women bond because of the beautification process) I didn't find the book as useful as it could have been. Coppens did mention however, ways in which beauty and the wedding rituals are social events and how women help the bride become a "new woman" and these points tie into my research.

--*Veils and Videos: female youth culture on the Kenyan Coast* by Minou Fuglesang

This book was a bit more useful and relevant for my ISP topic. It talks about how the women get decorated and what steps they take. It discusses the roles of beautifying for weddings and how beauty is a major part of women's lives. In the book, Fuglesang, mentions bonding and how friendships are a very important thing whether they are between school girls who are in the same grade or whether they are married women who are *jirani* (neighbors in Kiswahili). *Veils and Videos* mentions more ideas and thoughts on why the women need beauty and what it does for them. It definitely relates more to my topic of women and bonding with beauty.

--*Promises and Possibilities: Images of Islam in America* from 'Saudi Aramco World magazine. September/October 2004 issue

I looked through many past issues of this specific magazine but none of them really dealt with what I needed. I read this article because I thought that it might have something, but I only found one quote on henna and why a woman believes it to be beautiful. Other than this one quote, which I didn't even use for my paper, the magazine was not helpful for this project.

BIASES AND ASSUMPTIONS

Previous to starting my research for this project, I knew that my main source of information would be from women. I was glad for this fact because I thought that I would feel more comfortable interviewing and interacting with women because of the simple fact that I am a woman. It was a lot more comforting to me throughout my research period and all of the women were very nice and cooperative.

The bias or assumption that I had for my ISP research was that everyone I talked to would know exactly what I meant when I asked, “So, how do women come together for beauty and how does beauty form a bond between them?” I assumed that they would see the bond exactly as I did, but that wasn’t quite the case. To most women here, the mother daughter scene that I viewed which inspired my research would just be a normal, not a second look, action. They wouldn’t consider that a bond, they would consider it a daughter plaiting her mother’s hair so that it is out of her face and so she doesn’t have to deal with it. They would consider it as the norm. They would think, “Why go to a salon when the woman’s daughter can easily do it for free?” This is where our thoughts differed.

I realized that most of my interviewees didn’t see this “bond” that I saw, but I learned to work around that and finally found out how to get the information that I wanted and needed. They told me about other ways in which women work together and why they work together to look beautiful.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

What is Beauty?

The basis of my research stems from the idea of beauty. Therefore to understand what I was researching, I needed to define beauty and to discover what women thought beauty was exactly. The book, *Veils and Videos*, claims that “beauty is central to the concept of womanhood...” (Fuglesang, 126). Beauty can also be defined as: an assemblage or graces or properties pleasing to the eye, the ear, the intellect, the aesthetic faculty, or the moral sense; a particular grace, feature, ornament, or excellence. Anything beautiful, as, the beauties of nature; a beautiful person, especially a beautiful woman; prevailing style or taste, rage, or fashion (www.brainydictionary.com April 28th, 2005).

This may be the “official” definition but to every single person on earth, beauty is something different. As they say, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. This is true for any culture, race, or ethnicity the world over. When the question of “What is beauty, and what makes up a beautiful woman?” was asked, I received some different answers. People told me descriptions such as: “fat but not too fat, straight hair, fare skinned and no pimples, medium height, and short nails”. Others responded with things like: “beauty is natural” or that, “beauty depends on the person because some people look better with short hair while others look better with longer hair.” Most responses were of the physical aspect, which was expected, such as, how a woman talks and walks, how she dresses and how she fixes herself up. I did get a few responses that were more of the mental and moral description. These replies were generally things such as good behavior to others, “know how to talk in a good way”, helpful, hardworking, and good inside and out. My home stay sister, Sophia, told me a Kiswahili quote regarding goodness on the inside:

“*Uzuri wa bure*”. This means, “beautiful for nothing”, or more simply put, a person wastes their beauty if he or she isn’t a good person because in order to be beautiful it must be in your personality as well as in your physicality.

How to become Beautiful

I figured that in order to discover how to become beautiful, I should go straight to the source; beauty salons. When I asked salon keepers and workers what types of services were provided at their shops, most gave me about the same answer: hairdressing, plaiting, cut, blow dry, up do’s, coloring, perm, relaxing, waxing, threading, bleaching, and henna. The most obvious way to become beautiful or decorated to me is unquestionably henna and piko (henna is the reddish brown dye, while piko is the dark black dye used). When I initially look at a Muslim woman, it is one of the first things that I notice. This probably is because the rest of their body is covered so they look uniform, but the henna allows them to express themselves and look different from one another.

Through my research, I discovered that in order to be beautiful in some people’s eyes’, you must go to a salon to get the work done. Waxing, threading, and bleaching are all very popular things in Mombasa and they are best done in a salon. There are creams and over the counter products for most of the beautifying processes but my research has shown me that most females believe a person will look their best only if they go to a professional. Because of this fact, it is very costly to become beautiful year after year. Henna for example can be applied on some women every week if they so desired and if they had the money. They could also apply bleaching cream to their entire body as long

as they had the funds to do so. I was told that most women only bleach their face and arms but on occasion a well off person will bleach their entire body. These processes of beautification are only for the physical aspect of beauty, not the mental, and this is an important fact for one to remember. I believe that it may be quite expensive to beautify oneself on the outside if they so desired, but becoming beautiful on the inside is just a matter of deciding to make a change in your attitude and morals and sticking to it.

Why Women get Decorated

The statement, “women should be dedicated to embodying and creating beauty” comes from Fuglesang’s book, *Veils and Videos*. I’m not sure that each and every woman on earth would totally agree with this bold declaration, but women do have reasons to vie for beautification. Each person has his or her own reasoning for wanting to decorate their bodies. It could be that a person wants to impress a lover or friend, or maybe they just want to look and feel good for their own satisfaction. I was informed that it is important to look “smart”, as Kenyans would say, because you want to attract other people and you don’t want people to talk bad about you. Whatever the reason may be, taking time to look beautiful and get decorated is in all cultures and “...throughout history people have always been interested in their physical appearances. A lot of this interest was focused on the altering of their own appearance” (www.salc.wsu.edu April 27th, 2005). The reasons people the world over do this are different from one another, but they are still reasons to take time out of the day to go through beautification processes.

For example, my reasoning for getting henna done during my stay in Kenya is a bit different than the reasons that most Kenyan women get it applied on themselves. My

reasoning was purely for the fact that I enjoyed the looks of it, I wanted to see what it looked like on me, and I wanted to try something cultural. These are the reasons for some women getting henna applied but not all; my research has shown me other reasons why women decorate themselves with henna as well. Motives for applying henna onto someone's body in the Swahili culture are for things like celebrations (weddings, birthdays, Eids, Maulids), a wife's husband returning home from a long trip, to bring good luck, and pure tradition.

These reasons are the basic reasoning for any type of decoration and/or beautification, not only henna. For these occasions, women will also apply heavy make ups, wear strong perfumes, show off their jewelry collection, and wear their hair in an elaborate fashion. Who this beautification is for, is another question in itself. Some feel that beautification is purely for your husband, your male relatives, or other women (Fuglesang, 140). Others may disagree and argue that it is merely self gratifying to look beautiful and that by making yourself beautiful, you become more confident with yourself and are more comfortable around others. Another sort of reason for decorating is jealousy and competition. In the Islamic culture, which is predominant on the Kenyan coast, the concept of multiple wives is permissible. This fact results in women vying for the love and affection of their husband. The wives believe that if they look the best and are the most attractive then the other wives will see that she is the one loved the most by the communal husband and this will make them jealous. I consider this reason to beautify as not one of the better reasons, but in the Swahili culture this occurrence can happen.

Decoration and beautification are very pleasing and attractive to the eye. When a person views these decorations, they are only seeing the after product and the beauty. They aren't seeing the time and effort that went into the beautification process. Through interviews and staying with my home stay family I learned first hand that sometimes these processes can take hours and even days. My participation in the beautification process, as mentioned earlier, consisted of getting my hair plaited and getting henna applied. Both of these actions took over an hour each time. They never took more than two or two and a half hours but I never received elaborate decorations such like a bride would receive which can take several days.

Time is considered well spent though, when it is done for decorating purposes. In order to get henna applied, women put off their housework and other daily routines. After it is applied, they will try to put off tasks like laundry or washing the dishes because these actions will spoil the henna sooner and it won't stay on as long. Matters that don't deal with a female's beauty are often times put on the back burners until a later and more convenient time. After I received henna I felt the same way. I didn't want to ruin the beautiful work of art that was just put on me by doing my laundry. My braids also took up time. They usually took between one to two hours, depending on the style. In this time I was unable to do housework or school work and my sister couldn't do any either. We both sat and used those hours for pure beauty and bonding purposes.

When my sister first plaited my hair (*kusonga* in Kiswahili) I felt bad that it took up so much of her time. Nonetheless, I could tell that she didn't care. She had asked the first time if I wanted it done and was very willing to do it again the next couple of times that I asked. While eating lunch with the neighbor of my home stay family, she

explained reasoning for this: She put in plain words that they [Swahili women] have complicated lives and as a result, will spend time decorating themselves with things like henna and plaiting. She described how there are times when her husband tells her to do a chore but she says that she is too tired and then she turns around and sits for two hours while she decorates a friend with henna (Ilham Abedi 5/5).

I have discovered that becoming beautified through henna or *kusonga* takes discipline. For each activity a person must sit still in the same place for times ranging from thirty minutes to five hours, it all depends on what they are getting done. Beauty deals with, "...excellence and perfection and with self control" (Fuglesang, 129). I can testify this first hand. It takes discipline because at times it hurts, especially getting hair plaited. It isn't that it is excruciatingly painful, but rather, it is just uncomfortable. "Achieving beauty perfection...means submitting the body to pain, discipline and endurance" (Fuglesang, 130). I guess this really does mean that beauty is pain.

How Women Help Each Other to become Beautiful

As I mentioned earlier, my main motivation and purpose of this study was to discover ways in which women are brought together by beauty and how they work collectively to beautify each other. With this thought in mind, it is interesting to think about how other animals groom each other and "beautify" one other. Primates are the best example of this because they are closely related to humans and it is well known that they groom each other daily. Primate grooming is done for hours a day on a daily basis. It is performed for hygienic reasons such as getting rid of parasites and cleaning wounds. It also plays a social role in primate's lives. Grooming is seen in most primate species, in

and out of captivity. This act of grooming creates and strengthens relationships between the primates. I believe this relationship creator and strengthener is also found in humans.

It has been said that in captivity, related and non-related, primates will groom one another and they have no prejudices. This is similar to how a salon will do a relative's hair in an exquisite manner and then they will turn around and do the same style for a complete stranger. Studies have also shown that if a primate doesn't receive enough social interaction with others, then they will often times become crazy and dangerous. This proves that social interaction plays a major part in healthy emotional development of the primates. Social interaction is also the key to healthy emotional development in humans. (www.oregonprimaterescue.com/behavior April 28th, 2005).

The point I am trying to make by mentioning these facts about primates is that beauty (or grooming) is best done in pairs. I know many people who enjoy getting their hair played with by another person as opposed to those few who don't enjoy it. It is a good feeling to be helped by others and to then help them back in return. Swahili women help each other get decorated day in and day out through henna, plaiting, lending clothes, or simply telling a friend what color they look best in. Many people will even take time out of their busy day to help someone with something. In my home stay research, I witnessed this numerous times. My sister decorated our neighbor's feet and hands with henna because she had asked her to do it. She didn't have a specific reason or event for getting the henna done; she just wanted to decorate for her husband. Mamake Khadija (our neighbor whose real name is Ilham Abedi) told me that when your husband sees you all decorated, he just wants to be alone with you (5/5). A few days later, this very same neighbor was telling me about her day and how hectic it had been. I had asked why it

was hectic and she explained that she had gone to work and had returned only to make supper and then she was immediately going to her auntie's house. Her aunt had asked if she could apply henna onto her because she doesn't like to go to salons as she feels she is too old. Mamake Khadija naturally agreed.

Most neighbors, friends, and relations will not turn down requests because they like to keep peace and as long as it is possible to assist each other, they will do all that's feasible. It is a reciprocity idea where "today it's you, tomorrow it's her" (Sophia Ali 4/25). The relationship and bond that friends and neighbors possess is a very important one, especially for women, because "...women have their own life and have genuine relationships only with other women. Side by side with the world of men has been created a real sub-group, still very closed" (Coppens, 55). These relationships are maintained through visiting each other regularly. These visits give the women breaks from their daily routines and get them out of the house (Fuglesang, 86). My stay with the Bably family showed me that visiting really is an everyday event. Each day at least one person would say, "Hodi!" at the door and someone inside the house would yell, "Karibu" to let them in. It was fun to see visitors come and go. Sometimes they were friends and other times they were relatives. Either way they were welcomed with open arms.

The reciprocity concept and idea of helping each other also maintains their relationships. Many times during my home stay I participated in this concept. If, for example, Sophia plaited my hair, then I would buy her a candy bar or let her bring my walkman to school to listen to music. I couldn't repay her by doing her hair because I don't know how, but I found other ways of doing it. I found this concept in my research

as well. Many of the salon keepers and women, who are able to apply henna, do it for family and friends who don't have that talent, for free or for a very low cost. This was the case for most interviewees. It was also a common occurrence for the decorator to go to a neighbor or friend whenever they wanted decorated. I found an interesting occurrence related to this. I found that most decorators or hair beauticians didn't get the services that they provided done on themselves. Most henna decorators rarely got henna and most women who plaited hair kept theirs straight. I asked Sophia why she didn't get her hair done and she said because she is just too lazy. Some henna decorators told me that because they do it so often to other people they don't want to get it done on themselves (Najma Mwinyi 4/26). This is understandable because they are around henna and hair all day and probably the last thing that they want to do is sit and get it done for their own pleasure.

I would deduce that most henna decorators and anyone who can plait hair does it for their family members very regularly. I saw this happen in my home stay family and in some of the interviews that I conducted it was also mentioned. Family members are usually the main people to go to when assistance is needed. Often time's sisters help sisters or mothers and daughters help each other get prepared for an event or celebration. Friends are also a great source for this type of help. Hair, nails, clothes, and make up can be done by family and friends if it is wanted. Before attending a wedding I sat and watched a sister quickly fix her sister's hair so that we would be on time. There was no arguing when she helped the other one and there was no mention of how much it would cost, it was simply understood that the one sister was going to help out the other one.

A true friend has this basic understanding like a sister as well. A real friend is the one who helps you out any time you need it (Atfa Noor 5/3). They leave their husbands, kids, and household chores at home in order to come to the friend's house to help them get decorated and become beautiful. Friends also provide advice on where to go for beauty services, what style to try next and other things of this manner. Interviewees told me that some of them heard about the salon they now go to by word of mouth. Salon keepers supported this by telling me that most of their customers are recommended there by other, previous customers.

Bonds that Beauty Creates

Many women friends discuss beauty and beauty processes during their leisure time. High school girls in between classes will tell each other secrets on how to get rid of pimples or where they got their hair done last Friday night. It seems to me that beauty is a way women can cooperate and work together for each other. This bonding is evident in a salon's customers. When a customer walks into a new salon for the first time they will still, no doubt, have a long conversation with the stylist. It doesn't matter if they are complete strangers because there is just something about someone else beautifying you that allows for a person open up.

Many beauticians that I interviewed said that they have customers that come to their salon on a regular basis. These regular customers began as strangers but now are considered friends or acquaintances. In most cases they revealed to me that they are close enough to invite them to family functions and celebrations like birthdays and weddings. They learn things about each other like their family history, their social life,

etc. In my opinion, it is a requirement for a beautician to be gregarious and personable because it makes a person's time spent in the salon that much more enjoyable.

I feel that the fact that beauticians work in a social environment and can interact with others is a reason why some take up this trade, along with the detail that they have a talent. During my home stay, I went with my younger sister to where she gets her hair braided every week. While there, I asked the stylist why she enjoyed doing what she did, and she said that it is because of the fact that she can talk to her customers, make friends with new people, and meet people from different places (Mariam Ali 4/23). During the hair appointment, she showed this statement to be true. The entire process took about an hour and throughout it all, she continually talked to me or my other sister who came along with us. Another stylist that I interviewed said that the reason most beauticians converse with their customers is to help them feel relaxed and so that they come back (Sabira Anwar 4/22). This is very true because most people do not want to sit in a salon for thirty minutes to three hours, depending on what they are getting done, with someone who isn't friendly and doesn't make them feel comfortable.

I was part of another "bonding" experience during my research period as well. It was while I was staying with my home stay family, and I had asked my sister, Sophia, to braid my hair. She naturally said, "Yes", because as Mamake Khadija told me, "Sophia never says no". As she began, children from around the neighborhood would walk by and sit down with us because we were on the front baraza (porch). Sometimes the child would just sit and talk but then other times a girl would sit close and help hold my hair for me. Then when I attempted to plait my little sister's hair, everyone came around very close and watched me. If I hadn't been doing her hair on the front porch of the house,

they wouldn't have sat as close or paid as much attention. By me beautifying my sister made the other children interested and they were curious to see what I was doing.

The Times they are a Changin'

A friend braiding another friend's hair at her house or a woman decorating her next door neighbor with henna used to be a much more common occurrence. Prior to starting my research I noticed that Mombasa and other neighboring communities had an abundance of salons on each street. Here in Mombasa, I can say that on most streets there is at least one salon. I was told that this was not always the case because in the past, there was not nearly as many. I decided to look into the reason for this and to see what salon keepers would tell me and what other women thought about it.

Everyone I talked to agreed that salons were a new development and that just recently they had become a more common happening. Some grounds for more salons being opened are that people's finances are low so they decide to stop wasting their talents of braiding or henna artistry and open up a shop. I would deduce that money is the main motive behind the abundance of salons, but the salons only stay open because their services are needed and wanted. More and more women are becoming conscious of their physical appearance and becoming more particular with it as well. As a result they go to a salon to get the best services and products available. My home stay mother, for example, went to a salon before her wedding because her parents wanted her to look perfect. She believes that many other people feel this way also. Women want to look special and unique and it is an internal competition to be the most beautiful.

Another reason why so many salons can stay open with so much other competition is because the customers all have different tastes. I found out that certain salons usually cater to a particular group of women. For example, the owner of Doris Hairdressing and Beauty Salon, Sabira Anwar (4/22), told me that most of her clientele are Asians. During our conversation she told me which salons in the area are the ones that Arabs mostly use, which are the predominantly Asian salons, and the salons that Africans frequent most often. I found this very interesting. For this reason many salons are needed to accommodate for each women's hair type.

Westernization and development was a point made to justify the plethora of salons nowadays. I was told that people on the coast are attempting more and more to follow western habits instead of their cultural ways because they see people from up country with new hair styles and then they want it (Saida Balahmar 4/29). The new generation of women is focusing on contemporary ideas and "mzungu" customs instead of the old Swahili ways (Atfa Noor 5/3). In addition to westernization, time and schedules add to this loss of tradition. Along with westernization, time and schedules goes hand in hand. People of today are becoming more caught up with their own lives and careers and it is making it harder for them to assist their neighbors, families, and friends. More and more people are becoming educated and getting professions; this results in them being absent in the home. It also causes other people who once depended on those individuals for beauty services to go elsewhere.

The Importance of Appearance

The amount of salons operating in Mombasa tells me a few things about the women and men here. One of thing that it tells me is that appearance is very important, as I briefly mentioned earlier. Why else would so many salons be able to stay in business if people did not care what they looked like? Not only do the salons tell me that appearance is valued but furthermore by interacting with the citizens, I have learned this.

An example of this appearance importance is the Swahili bui bui. Bui bui's in my opinion are very clean, neat, and fashionable items. I know that this is not meant to be their purpose, but the women that wear them keep them this way. My home stay sister informed me that you should always keep your bui bui cleaned and ironed. This idea of wearing clean clothes that are freshly ironed was brought to light during my first stay with my home stay family, the Bably's. I consider myself to be a pretty neat and tidy college student but on the average, most American college students don't wash their clothes on a weekly basis or iron them regularly, if ever. I was told by the Bably's that laundry and ironing were done everyday in their house and that I should put my dirty clothes out every night. I listened to their instructions and put my clothes in the 'dirty pile' regularly.

Clothing isn't the only way that families in Mombasa keep themselves looking fresh and neat. Each time I would go out with Sophia or another female member of the Bably family, they would first shower, fix their hair, apply make up, put on jewelry, and of course, wear perfumes. Meanwhile, I would grab my shoes and be ready to leave the house, but before we could, they would spray perfumes on me and apply make up to my face as well. It showed me that looking beautiful and fresh was very important to them.

This idea of looking fresh and clean was also made apparent in my three week stay in Lamu. In Lamu, I was assigned a Kiswahili tutor who met with me for a few hours each day. At the end of my stay, I asked if I could photograph her and her family. She agreed, but before I could take the picture the family members showered and changed into new clothes. I realized that they wanted to look their best for the photograph because in the Swahili culture appearance is important.

Weddings and the Swahili Kupamba

I have discovered through my research and through my stay in the Kenyan coast that weddings are a very, very major event. In the past, Swahili weddings could last up to two weeks, if not more. Of course this depended on the family's financial status and choice of wedding style. Nowadays weddings are not quite as long, but they are still very elaborate. I was fortunate enough to attend two Swahili weddings during my stay in Kenya. The part of the wedding ceremony that I attended is called the Kupamba. This section of the wedding ceremony is strictly for women and no men are allowed into the venue. A Kupamba usually lasts around two hours. The first two hours are spent by female guests dancing, eating, and talking. After about two hours of this, the bride enters the venue where the Kupamba is taking place and walks down an aisle in a beautiful gown, heavily decorated with henna, makeup, and jewelry. After walking down the aisle, she is seated in a special chair and then immediately everyone exits and the Kupamba is over.

The Kupamba can be described as a public display of the bride. It is also a local fashion show for the women who attend because it is the place where every woman wants

to show off herself, her beauty, and impress other women. It is an unwritten rule that women who attend the Kupamba must wear only new dresses (Fuglesang, 110). At the Kupamba, women are wearing their best outfits, their shiniest jewelry, and are adorned with henna. It is quite the sight to see because just moments before, these women all looked very uniform because of their bui bui's and inside the Kupamba they are showing off their unique styles.

Weddings are one place, in my opinion, that females can display and show off their status in life and their own personal style. Here at the Kupamba, they are exposed to the judgment of other women and therefore they want to look perfect in order to impress (Coppens, 55). From my observations, the wedding ceremony is one of the few places, besides her own home, that a woman can act like herself and look how she wants to look. I would consider the dancing that takes place at a Kupamba to be sexual and sensual but at the same time very tasteful. Only at the two Kupamba that I have attended have I seen women act as they were and feeling so free. In my eyes, they looked the most uninhibited and at ease. This shows me that here at the Kupamba, women are really themselves; without restrictions.

Weddings and marriages are considered to be the business of women because their honor is at stake. It is very important that a family's daughter have a beautiful wedding ceremony and look beautiful as well. The female relatives are the main individuals who make this happen. Because all men, excluding the groom, are banned from the wedding ceremonies, it becomes a mere formality for them (Coppens, 54). Women take weddings very seriously however and much time is spent in planning a

wedding and preparing a bride; but discussing Swahili weddings could be an entire new ISP on its own.

Weddings are a place where women again come together because of beauty. As I have seen thus far, a wedding is the only major event that women are all together, wearing whatever they choose, and dancing and having a great time just being themselves. This one day of beauty, the Kupamba, brings the beautified and decorated women all together in one place so that they can view another woman, the bride, who is even more elaborately decorated and beautified. The beauty of these women was not a single person task. Most of them had their henna done by an expert or their hair styled by a beautician. Others had their friends or family members help decide what dress to wear and if they didn't have the matching jewelry for that particular outfit, then that friend would lend her hers. Women come together and lend a hand for weddings, especially when it is dealing with the matters of beauty (Coppens, 55).

Through my research, I uncovered unique ways that beauty ties women together at weddings. One way is through clothing. After attending the Kupamba and seeing a few ceremonies on video cassettes, I noticed that some women were wearing the same dress. In my experience when something like that happened to someone I knew, they would be embarrassed and try to avoid the other person with the matching dress. It wasn't the case in these situations. The women would be dancing next to each other or sitting and talking with each other. I asked my "family" why the women did this and they explained that usually sisters or good friends do this. My home stay mother, Jabu, described how it shows unity between the women wearing the matching dresses. She said it is like, "I love you so much, let us wear together", in reference to the matching

dresses. At her wedding, close friends and relatives were shown the pattern and material that people who knew the bridal party well were to wear and if they chose, they could have it made. It was a way to show who was very near to the bride and her family. I like this idea of showing unity by wearing matching dresses especially because it is with someone that you love and are close to.

The other unique way of showing how close you are with someone at a wedding is through henna usage. I was told that the closer you are with the bride and her family, the more ornate and elaborate your henna will be. This statement was supported by multiple women explaining to me that they only get henna for a wedding if they were close friends or family of the bride or groom. This makes sense because getting an elaborate decoration such as henna takes time, effort, and money. If a person was not very close with the wedding party, then they wouldn't make the effort. On the other hand, a person very close to the wedding party is very excited and happy for this event and therefore will want to express this excitement through an intricate ornamentation such as henna.

The Henna Party

As I mentioned earlier, henna plays a considerable part in the Swahili culture, this is especially evident during wedding ceremonies. Before I started my research, I had heard a few words and descriptions about the event known as a henna party. From my first impression, it sounded like it was before a bride consummated her marriage and was geared toward the bride's unmarried friends and relatives. At this party, from what I first understood, the bride's friends and relatives were all with her and helped get her

decorated with henna by each applying a portion onto her body. I learned that this party has changed greatly, just like so many other Swahili traditions.

One woman described how this party worked in the past. She said that the female friends and relatives of the bride came to the bride's home a short period of time before the wedding. These guests weren't asked to come; they just knew that it was time for the bride to be decorated. First they would apply liwa onto the bride's skin. The liwa is a cream to help smooth, soften, and brighten the skin. Then they each would apply henna to her as well. During this event, there was music, dancing, and eating (Tima Maalim 4/25).

The major changes of this party are that now the bride is already decorated when this event takes place. She, the bride, just sits and watches her friends as they dance and talk. Instead of this party taking place at the bride's home, it is now usually in a hall of some sort. I also found out that currently, the bride is most commonly decorated in a salon. This is probably because family or friends of the bride don't have time to help decorate her or that the bride's parents want her to look perfect and believe that the only way for this to happen is if she goes to a salon.

Most salons that I interviewed, told me that they do decorate brides and that it is a common thing. I was surprised when one salon employee explained that they provide rental wedding dresses, shoes, crowns, veils, etc for wedding ceremonies. They also do hair, henna, and make up (4/22). This salon is a one stop shop for a bride. This takes away from the family and friend bond that the old ways used to create but when looking at it in a positive light, it creates a bond between the stylist and bride. A relationship of some sort would have to be built if the bride got all of her beauty processes done in one

shop. I would estimate that in order for her to get all of the services provided, she would have to be in the salon nearly all day. Prior to this day, she would've had to visit the shop frequently in order to make all of the necessary arrangements. Conversation and discussions would have to occur in that long of time and a relationship would ultimately form.

CONCLUSIONS

My study and research on Swahili beauty processes, women, and how those processes bring women together has shown me many things. I have seen ways in which women work together to help each other get beautified and decorated even if they have to take time out of their daily routines. I have also witnessed family and friends doing favors for one another without a thought of repayment because they know that when the time comes for them to need help, the other person will be there for them.

Beauty, at first, seemed to me like a very superficial topic and concept, but once I delved into the true meaning of beauty I saw it in a different light. Beauty doesn't necessarily mean the woman walking down the street who makes everyone's head turn. Beauty is also on the inside and it is a result of cooperation and teamwork. Not too many beautiful women can say that they got that way on their own. The women may have natural beauty but along the way somewhere, they were most likely helped by relatives, family, or in most cases a beauty salon. They were presumably helped by relatives, family, or in most cases a beauty salon.

In the Swahili culture, beauty and appearance are highly valued. Because of this fact, women want to always look their best. This is epitomized at the wedding and the celebrations surrounding a wedding. Here is an event that women have taken extra time to decorate themselves for. It is an event where there are only women present so no one can say that the women are getting beautified for their husbands because no males are present. It can be said that they are getting decorated for themselves and for the other female guests. It is one place that brings out the beauty in all women, not only because

they look great physically, but also because here they can act naturally and openly without any borders.

A wedding is just one example of when women are bonded through beauty. Something as simple as a woman applying henna to her neighbors feet and hands or a daughter plaiting her mother's hair are ways as well. These processes are what initiated my research and because of them, I found other numerous beauty practices that allow for Swahili women to create relationships through. I hope that the traditional beauty processes of the Swahili are not eventually erased or forgotten because of development and westernization. It is a great thing that women can unite with each other and socialize in such a manner as beauty allows them to do. I am glad that beauty can unite people and create bonds such as between a beautician and her customer, but I am most impressed with the bond it creates between friends and family. Family and friends are especially important because, "the family functions as a social security system, caring for the divorced, the old, and the sick, and the less fortunate family members" (Fuglesang, 83). In a world that is quickly changing, it is a wonderful feeling to know that a person can always rely on his or her family and friends when they need a helping hand.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study could be further expanded by researching for a longer amount of time and also by going to other areas instead of just one central location. With this study a person could try to research the customer's point of view more, for example, because in my study I only interviewed the salon keeper. A researcher could ask questions to the customer during or after her services were rendered to see what they thought and felt.

My research could be incorporated into many other branches of study. Other topics that I came upon, that I felt would be very interesting to study, were things involving henna or Swahili weddings. I believe whole ISP's could be written on both of these topics. It was interesting for me to find out about all of the ways different cultures use henna. It would be appealing to look at all the history and traditions surrounding Swahili usage of henna and piko.

An additional question that I was curious about throughout my whole stay on the Kenyan coast was why some women choose to wear the njira and others don't. It would be worth while to look into this and see what the motives are for the women wearing them and why the other women don't wear them. One could research the history, origin, and purpose of them in certain areas.

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---Interviews listed as "Continuous" are listed as such because they were members of the family that I stayed with. My information from them was on a daily basis.---