

Changing Dress and Changing Perceptions: A look at Traditional Muslim Dress in a Small Coastal Town

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SIT Kenya: Swahili Studies and Coastal Cultures
Spring, 2009
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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my ISP advisor, Donna Pido, for all her help in formulating my project beforehand. I would especially like to thank Sarah Hillewaert, who acted as an advisor, cultural guide, informant, and liaison to the people of Lamu, and most importantly a friend, whose invaluable help and guidance made this paper better than I could have hoped. Thank you!

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Abstract

This study took place in the Kenyan coastal town of Lamu. It focused on the cultural clothing of the Muslim women found on the East African coast, clothing known specifically as the buibui, *hijab*, and the ninja. Through interviews and observation it was found that the women use the buibui to express their individual and group identity in the community, including their degree of modernity, their social status, age group, and religiousness. The fashion of the buibui reaches all the residence of Lamu and is an area of tension between the conservative and liberal peoples.

Introduction

The Islamic religion has often been faulted by other cultures, particularly the western world for its strict doctrines and supposed oppression of women. One such area of debate is the practice of veiling and full body coverage by large robes that occurs in many Islamic cultures. One such community is that of the small Kenyan coastal town of Lamu, a place in which the Muslim women all wear the buibui, a long black outer covering over their clothing whenever they leave the house. I have found that the clothing is not simply a tradition that these women abide by because they know nothing else, but something that allows them a certain amount of freedom, anonymity, and comfort in their world while allowing them to express their own individual style and identity through the various forms the buibui takes.

My goal for this project was to find out how the way in which women dress themselves is a reflection of their identity. Coming from the western world, I had been predisposed to view the dress of Muslim women as oppressive and uncomfortable,

confining in every sense of the word. However, after being on the East African coast for a few months, I began to see that this was not the way these women viewed their clothing in the least. Their sentiments about their clothing are no different than that which you might hear from a western woman about her own garments. This project thus seemed that much more salient in that it will hopefully open the eyes of those coming from a western perspective to the reality of the Muslim woman's clothing and the relative freedom and individuality it offers its wearer in this culture.

On my first visit to Lamu, I saw that there were multiple styles of buibui and fairly distinct groups of women, especially when it came to age, that wore different styles. Through some preliminary conversations, I found out that there was a lot going on in the world of Lamu and buibui fashion and that the choices that women made about the clothing they wear outside their homes was most definitely a public presentation of identity, both of an individual and group nature. Upon returning to Lamu, I found that the issues surrounding the buibui reach much farther and touched more people than I thought possible. The clothing women wear, young and old, tell the community something about that woman, and serve to reinforce her placement in the community and how people see her. The women all know this, therefore I found that the buibui a woman wears is most definitely a statement about her view on tradition versus modernity, her piety, social status, and identifies her with an age set.

The Dress of Women in the Islamic Faith

An important place to begin in understanding the dress of women in Lamu is to understand the religious background of Islam. The passage in the Quran that most directly addresses the clothing of the Muslim woman is, "Prophet, enjoin your wives,

your daughters and the wives of true believers to draw their veils close round them. That is more proper so that they may be recognized and not molested” (33.58). More specifically and clearly, other texts that instruct the Muslim on the proper way to dress say that the clothing of a Muslim woman is supposed to cover her whole body except for the face and hands. It should not be transparent and reveal what is underneath, it should not be tight or in any way delineate the curves of the body, especially the parts that are sexually attractive, it should not in any way resemble the clothing of a man, and it should not be attractive so as to not cause men to notice the woman (Chemonges, 117). “The reason for the coverage of a woman is not out of fear of the woman’s misbehavior or mistrust of them but to protect them from the dangers from lecherous and evil men,” (Al-Quradwi, 145). A concession is made for elderly women who are past menopause and the prospect of marriage, women who men have no desire to have sex with (Al-Quradwi, 145). Laying aside their outer garments is for the comfort of these older women only, not an allowance to show off their bodies (Al-Quradwi, 145). The clothing should not resemble the clothing of people of other faiths and it should not be too expensive (Chemonges, 117). “Muslim women in order to safeguard their cultural identity are discouraged from imitating the dress of non-Muslim women,” (Al-Kaysi, 84).

The *hijab* is the covering of the head and neck by a cloth or scarf of some sort and is an important facet to the adornment of Muslim women. According to Islam, the *hijab* is an act of obedience to Allah, it protects the woman from molestation, and is considered to be modesty, righteousness, belief or faith, bashfulness, and purity by screening against the desires of the heart since without the *hijab* it is believed that the heart is more pure when the sight (of the woman) is blocked (Ismail, 7-18). “Clothing should not be

appealing or an attraction in themselves. Obviously this defeats the purpose of the *hijab* if the clothing is so beautiful that it attracts the attention and the desire of the males,” (Pamphlet).

It is also prohibited in Islam to wear clothing that shows a person’s wealth or that are worn in competition to impress others (Al-quradwi, 73). Wearing clothes that demonstrate arrogance and haughtiness is forbidden. Arrogance and pride in any respect are not permitted, however beauty and smartness of appearance do not necessarily imply arrogance (Al-Kaysi, 81). It is acceptable to wish to please Allah and thank him through one’s appearance (Al-Kaysi, 82).

There are many sentiments in the world that portray Islam as a backwards religion, and one that oppresses its subjects, especially women. “So many bad ideas have been advanced against Muslim women’s dress by the nominal and ignorant Muslims with intentions to safeguard their own desires and also by non-Muslim orientalist intending to blackmail Islam with a view that dress is oppressive and therefore against their human rights,” (Chemonges, 113). It is extremely important to realize the difference between religion and culture. What the religion of Islam says about the clothing of women I have described above. Much of what will be discussed in following sections comes from the culture of the Swahili and the East African coast, some of which adheres to the religious guidelines, and some of which does not.

Lamu and the History of the Buibui

Lamu is a small port city on the coast of Kenya. It is described as a quiet town, which has been spared the disruption of its society by western influence despite the prevalent tourist industry (Ghaidan, xiii). The town seems to adhere to the old traditional

ways of life and is much as it was a century ago (Ghaidan, xiii). It is a town with one car, narrow streets that sometimes prevent passing and donkeys that roam the alleys seemingly of their own accord. People are very friendly to the visitor, however they are also very reserved in some cases, wanting to be left alone while simultaneously wondering what it is he/she are doing. Lamu is a town where everyone knows everyone else and their business, it is almost impossible not to run into people you know on a daily and sometimes hourly basis. It is “a complex, urban society, where power, wealth, prestige and ideas are unevenly distributed along lines of kinship, age, sex, and ethnic origin as well as increasingly education and occupation,” (Fuglesang, 6). For the most part, it is a fairly conservative Muslim town. Tourist are tolerated for their economic income but are scorned by the more conservative for what the locals see as moral inferiority (Fuglesang, 6). The shamelessness of female visitors who walk the streets ‘half naked’, showing their legs and bare shoulders has elicited strong reactions (Fuglesang, 6). Official signs have been posted by authorities encouraging tourists to pay respect to local culture and clothing norms; however in my experience those signs are either not seen or for the most part ignored.

While the tourists tend to walk around in whatever they want, when in public the women of Lamu are dressed in a buibui and *hijab*. The buibui is the culturally accepted form of covering in Lamu for the Muslim woman. It is important to note that the buibui is a cultural invention and not Islamic law, however many people, especially in Lamu, now see and treat the buibui as religion. Before WWII when women seldom left the house, when they did, they would travel under a *shiraa*: a tent-like enclosure made from poles at either end with colorful fabric called kanga attached to form walls (Romero,

214). Under the *shiraa* the woman was completely hidden from view. This form of travel was used at the time only by the high class women who needed their servants, usually older women, to hold the poles and walk the *shiraa* to the desired location (Romero, 214). Eventually, the lower class developed their own *shiraa*, one which could be operated by one person, and therefore required no servants, an invention that now allowed the lower class women mobility (Romero, 214). After WWII, women of all classes were less constrained in their movements than they had been in the past and many times no longer used the *shiraa* (Romero, 214). Married women wore long robes with silk scarves on their heads, and slowly they became less confined to the home and started joining their Indian counterparts in outside employment (Romero, 214). Women who went to Mombasa were even more influenced by the more open society found in the larger city (Romero, 214).

In the 19th century, the Swahili decided to make the buibui. They chose the black fabric because at the time it was very affordable. In Lamu I have observed three main styles of buibui. Up until the 20th century, the style of the buibui is what I will refer to as the “Swahili” style, meaning the traditional and first style. This buibui is one continuous piece of fabric that is tied to the head under the chin, therefore covering the head. There is a flap of fabric in front that the woman holds closed as she walks, and can hold over her face if she chooses to. The Swahili style is very loose and concealing when worn properly. In the last 10-15 years, a new style has arisen all over the coast. This style, which I will refer to as a “cut” buibui, is more tailored. It has sleeves, no top covering, and looks very much like a long, black, closed front dress. These are worn with a scarf on the head wrapped as a *hijab*. The third and most recent style that has appeared in

Lamu and elsewhere along the coast is what I will call the “open” buibui. It is very similar to the cut buibui; however the front is open and held together with buttons. This buibui has the tendency to flap open when a woman walks, revealing the clothing she is wearing underneath. Both the cut and the open buibui can be found with various degrees of adornment, from none to the most complicated and colorful array of beading, sequins, fake diamonds and embroidery. In connection with the style, the adornment, and the newness of the fashion of the buibui, the prices range anywhere from 1,000 Ksh up to 12-15,000 Ksh. The last piece of fashion that can be found in Lamu is the ninja. This is a piece of black fabric that is sewn to tie around the back of the head and cover the face, leaving a slit for the eyes and is worn over a *hijab*. This is the most recent fashion to come to Lamu, and I have been told by various women here that it comes from the fashions in the Arab world.

Methodology: Lamu and the Challenges for the Researcher

Lamu was the perfect sight for the research I wanted to do with its unique composition of strong traditional conservatism and at the same time prevalent tourist industry and a youth population who seems to be as liberal as their counterparts in the larger cities. However the nature of the small town, coupled with the conservative nature of many people and bad experiences with researchers in the past meant that it was difficult to know who would be willing to talk with me and who would not. There are many people in this town who do not want to talk to researchers and want nothing to do with anything of that nature. I also found that men in this community are on a whole much more accessible and willing to talk than women which provided an interesting and unexpected data sample.

That being said, with the help of contacts I had a report with from our previous visit to the island, I was able to set up interviews with people who were very helpful. In structuring my interview pool, I tried to get both men and women of different ages, social class, and degree of conservatism and religiousness. I interviewed individually five different men and seven women and had one group discussion with a group of five young men. My interviews were informal and took the form of a conversation. For a complete list of all interviewees and all categorical information I have, see appendix A.

The Buibui of the Women of Lamu: A Collection of Case Studies

As I conducted my research, I began to see that there were different categories that my informants generally seemed to fall into, though each individual always had some opinions that did not necessarily fit into the category I assigned them in hindsight, however in an effort to organize and analyze my data, categorizing my informants was a necessity. Therefore the reader should take note that though I do ‘label’ my informants based on age, social class, and degree of conservatism, none of them fit the category perfectly seeing as they are individuals, each with their own unique perspective and opinions. I, however, believe that the labeling I have assigned represents the large percentage of the opinions of the informant. I have found that the clothing choices and opinions about the buibui depend largely on these categories and serves as an expression of identity for most women. The clearest way to outline this is with a series of case studies, each of which features a woman from a different ‘category’ and with different views about the buibui. It should be noted that all informant’s names have been changed in order to protect the subjects and grant anonymity.

Zelma: Traditionalism and Conservatism

Zelma is a working woman from a high class family in her mid forties and provided the most conservative and traditional views and practices of the women I interviewed. She chooses to wear the Swahili style buibui whenever she leaves the house. “I like wearing the Swahili style because it’s not like a dress, you can’t see shape underneath and it’s not expensive...Swahili makes me bigger and more unrecognizable. It is Islamic.” She told me that a woman should own 3 or 4 buibui so that she can wear a clean one everyday, but not own too many as to be in excess. When asked about the newer cut style, Zelma said that many women wear it because they believe it is more comfortable and allows women who are working and going to school more mobility and ease when carrying bags or books. The cut style allows you more movement and freedom in that you do not have to hold it closed as you do with the Swahili style. This, she said, is why you see a higher percent of women wearing the newer style. Personally, she continues to wear the Swahili style “because I do not want to lose the culture of Swahili because it was the first one.”

I then proceeded to ask her about the decoration that is seen on the new cut style. She said that the designs were to make the buibui attractive, and she does not like that. It is compulsory to wear the buibui; therefore it should be simple and natural, not adorned. The beading and decoration, she said, was to create more styles and fashions so women would buy more. She expressed adamantly to me that these fashions were a big problem in Lamu. Girls and women were focused on having the newest fashions and spending way too much money on the latest buibui. Zelma informed me that a little while ago, she did not specify when, there was a parents meeting to discuss the problems with the new

buibui. They talked about how the decorations were un-Islamic and were making people poor since women were spending all their money on buibui. The parents apparently banded together and demanded that the buibui suppliers for Lamu bring back the simpler and cheaper designs since Lamu as a whole is a poorer community than larger cities like Mombasa. The expense of buibui is especially a problem when the woman works, and needs to leave the home daily. She therefore needs more than one buibui in order to be clean everyday, an extremely important virtue in Islam, one that Zelma was adamant about. When women were not leaving the house as much, it is not as great a financial burden to have an expensive buibui since the woman may only have one or two. “I think one of the reasons we put on buibui is to make you not feel bad about the inner wear, not to recognize if you are rich or poor, make all people common.” They are also to make the woman feel comfortable being around men and they combat vanity.

We then turned our discussion to the younger generation, her views on their fashion habits, and why Zelma thought it was that younger women are dressing in the newer styles. She told me that in Lamu, there was a strong sense that having an un-tailored and unadorned buibui was the best and most respectable thing to wear, however she said that some women do what they want and cannot be controlled and choose to go with the fashion trends and not the words of their parents. There is apparently great concern among the older women in Lamu, especially the mothers, over the way the buibui is being worn. Zelma stressed the need to take care of the children and teach them Islamic values. She thought that the greatest thing influencing the women of Lamu was media and other cultures. She was of the opinion that tourists do have an influence, but not a large one and due to the strong nature of the community and the traditional values it

would be impossible for a Muslim woman to stop wearing the buibui all together here, so instead she will “wear it differently”, i.e. the cut style, tailored to be smaller and fitted. “In my time, you study here for primary and secondary school and by the time you are in university you have strong Islamic values. Now in secondary school they go out a lot and start to copy what they see in other cities, internet, TV, books—it causes headache for parents. Some (girls) pretend to be good here and then go back to other ways, there’s no (parental) control at university.” This causes tension between the generations. “I don’t know if they see meaning of buibui, the meaning is privacy, to give self value and respect. When you put it on like that it’s like selling yourself. Even men do not respect them, they just play with them.”

I told Zelma that I wanted to get a buibui, and I would love her help in purchasing it. She decided to give me one of hers that she never wears. It was a cut style buibui, and completely un-tailored with a little bit of embroidery on the bottom and the sleeves. I put it on, and felt like it was massive on me, however Zelma said that it looked good a fit well, telling me that the looseness of the buibui was the way it should fit. An interesting note is that I walked home in the buibui, and was greeted in Swahili by an elderly woman in a Swahili style buibui. I got the impression from this woman that she would not have talked to me had I not been wearing the buibui.

Zelma was very passionate about a lot of what we talked about, especially when talking about the fashions of the younger generation and the tendency to tailor the buibui to be tighter. She emphasized the religious aspects of clothing and how the way these younger women were wearing the buibui was not in accordance with their religion. She herself did not seem to care about fashion and I have never seen her wearing anything but

the Swahili style buibui. Zelma's sentiments about the fashions of the younger generations were echoed in many other conversations I had, and I therefore believe that she represents an adequate example of the feelings of the majority older women in Lamu, who are the only ones still wearing the Swahili style.

Beti: Modernism and Conservatism

Beti is a young, educated, working woman of around thirty. She has a more modern perspective in that she wears the cut buibui, however she is still more conservative than a lot of women her age since she does not tailor her buibui at all, and wears very simple and plain styles. Beti likes the Swahili style; she thinks it is good because it does not expose any part of the body, but the new styles are freer. The Swahili style used to be more likeable and applicable because it fit the lifestyle when women were not so involved in the community, when they were housewives. Now the modern styles fit the modern life. Beti said that she saw no problem with the new styles because they are in accordance with Islamic law of covering everything but the face and hands. They are also safer than the traditional style because the arms are free, therefore it is easier for a woman to run, carry a child or swim if she needs to, like in the event that a boat capsizes or she needs to flee from a pursuer or a fire. The black color, she said, was chosen because it was not an attractive color, and it stays looking clean for longer, an important factor with the sandy and dirty roads in Lamu.

She then went on to say what I had observed for myself; there is a big divide in Lamu with what style a woman wears according to her age. The older women tend to wear the Swahili style, while the teenagers tend to wear the cut and open styles and tailor them to be tighter. Beti said this was because teenage girls want to expose parts of their

bodies even though the religion doesn't allow this, however with the increasingly globalized world, she believes that it is harder for some of the young women to cope with being Muslim and the requirements of the buibui lifestyle, and therefore they rebel by tightening them in a fashion that they know the older generation does not approve of. Most of the teenagers wear the buibui with decorations, which serve to draw attention to themselves. The purpose of the buibui, she stressed, was to conceal oneself and not call attention. The buibui should be simple and flexible. Beti said, "When you see a girl wearing the tight or open style you question her morals." When you wear the open style, you are asking for attention and to be the center of interest. Some women who wear the open buibui wear them in a way that is decent and presentable and are simply going with the fashion but not compromising their morals. However, she told me that some girls wear 'bad' clothing underneath their buibui. 'Bad' clothing is skirts or dresses that are short, tight pants or short shorts. This, Beti said, sends a bad message to men. These women in particular, she thought, have a personal conflict within themselves about being Muslim and not wanting to accept it. There are women who do wear the new styles, but also don a long scarf or a kanga to use as a *hijab*. Beti said that many times these women do this to either hide their breasts, for many times it is larger women who wear these *hijabs*, or they do it to be particularly religious. "Young ladies with long scarves are decent ladies."

Beti went on to say that she believes the parents of a girl play a large role in the style of clothing she wears. If the parents are strict, usually the buibui she is allowed to wear is not particularly attractive or fashionable and is not the open or transparent style, which is the newest fashion though not yet very prevalent in Lamu. When the parents are

not very strict, the girls tend to wear buibui that are so tight they are more like dresses than coverings. However, even with the negative sentiments surrounding the new and tailored styles, according to Beti, there isn't anything being done to actively discourage it.

On the notion of social class and the differences in dress, Beti said that there is a definite difference between the materials and patterns you see upper class women wear as opposed to lower class women. There are some buibui that are very expensive, have a lot of beads, glitter, and embroidery and some women buy these in order to showcase their wealth and fashion sense. However, sometimes this great show of ornamentation on the buibui is a turn off for the wealthy. This may be because many times the high class and wealthy families are also the more religious and conservative, and therefore tend to consider the great decoration to be un-Islamic. Beti said that it is possible to identify someone as belonging to a high social class based on her buibui; however there are some wealthy people who choose to buy the simple and less expensive buibui for perhaps religious reasons or simply personal preference. Therefore, a simple buibui does not necessarily mean the woman is poor; however it does seem to suggest a more conservative leaning. It is more economic to have simpler and cheaper buibui; therefore you can have more, especially for the working woman who needs to wear a clean buibui everyday, such as Beti. Yet for women who hardly ever go out, they may only need one or two buibui, so buying more expensive buibui is financially fine for them. Beti believes that if you go for the expensive and ornamented buibui, you have lost the meaning of buibui.

Miriam and Amina: Fashionable but Respectful

Miriam, who is in her mid thirties, and Amina, who is in her late twenties, are both women who wear what are considered fashionable buibui, but wear them in a way that is respectful to the culture and religion. Miriam does not work, comes from a high class family, was raised traditionally and was not allowed out often. However, before she was married she loved to wear the open buibui all the time with her *hijab* tied loosely showing her hair curled underneath, which is a direct breach of Islamic doctrine. Despite this religious violation, it is a fashionable modern practice of young girls. After marriage, her husband insisted that she wear the Swahili style buibui when she was out on her own, but she could wear the open and cut style when she was out with him. When a woman gets married, she become her husband's responsibility and it is encumbered upon him to regulate her dress and decide what degree of concealment he wants his wife to abide by. The wife is supposed to listen to him, though this is not always the case. The first time her husband agreed she could wear the cut style was when she had her first baby; she could not walk while holding the baby and hold the Swahili style buibui closed, therefore it was more concealing for her to wear the newer cut but closed version. Her current husband does not want her to wear the Swahili style buibui. Miriam likes the cut style because it does cover everything and you don't have to worry about it falling open. The bad part, she says, is when girls tailor the new styles excessively.

Miriam is very fashionable however not excessive. She owns four buibui, all fairly nice but only one is really expensive, about 6-7,000 Ksh, which she wears on special occasions such as weddings, Eid, or when walking with her husband at night. She sees the different fashions of buibui like any other clothing fashion in the world; people

make money off of the new fashions, and women want to be in fashion, which she does not see as a bad thing.

Miriam also mentioned that some girls wear disrespectful clothing underneath their buibui. She has seen a girl wearing a buibui and ninja, but with hot pants underneath. They wear the buibui because they have to, but do not really understand or appreciate it. She also believes that parents are giving their girls buibui too early. In this culture, as soon as a girl puts on a buibui, it is a sign of maturity and marriage-ability. You wear the buibui because you have something to hide since you have reached puberty. Miriam and her husband have refused to give their daughter, who is around ten years old, a buibui even though she is asking for one because all of her friends are wearing them. This, I believe, points to the younger generation seeing the buibui not as a cultural requirement of concealment, but as the trend of their peers, as fashion.

Amina is the most fashion conscious woman I interviewed, though she is also fairly religious. She owns somewhere between ten and twelve buibui, all very nice and in style, and always matches her buibui with her *hijab* and many time what she is wearing underneath as well. She says she wears the cut style because it is comfortable for work, and because it is youthful and attractive. The Swahili style is more difficult because you have to hold it, and it is also plain and the 'old style'. Amina thinks the open style is not comfortable because you have to hold it closed when you walk so that people do not see the clothing underneath, because it is not ok, in her opinion, to walk with the buibui blowing open.

When talking about the tailoring of the buibui, Amina said that it made sense to get them tailored when they are first bought. All the buibui come in one size, so you

need to get them taken in to make it the right size. Amina believes that it makes one more comfortable and feel smarter if the buibui is tighter. She, however, agreed with all the previous women, that it was a problem when they are too tight, that this defeated the purpose of the buibui, yet she acknowledged this as the growing fashion among the younger generation. She believes that girls who tighten their buibui too much care more about fashion than they do about religion. The young, she said, will always go for the latest fashion, which is usually the most expensive, with the hopes of having what no one else has, in an attempt to be the first and only one with a certain buibui.

Fatia and Mara: Youthfulness and Modernity

Fatia and Mara are both young women in their late teens and early twenties. Both wear either the cut or open buibui all the time. When talking with Mara about the Swahili buibui, she told me that young women do not wear it because, “It is for mamas.” She said that you only wear the Swahili style if you are old, or after you are married and are with a group of women who all wear the Swahili style in order to fit in. She stressed that the new styles were all about fashion and modernity and that the young women wore them in order to express this.

Fatia is the most liberal and rebellious woman I interviewed. She hates the buibui, she sees nothing good about it. She told me she wears it because she has to in Lamu, because if she did not she would lose all respect in the community. Out of the different styles of buibui, she dislikes the Swahili style the most because, “It’s for grandmothers.” Since she does have to wear a buibui here, she likes the open style the best, a simple design, and she likes to tailor them to be tight. She does this to, “show off my shape.” Fatia says that men like it and comment about it, however she does not like it

when they do this and does not tighten her buibui for them. She tightens her buibui, she says, because she feels like a ‘coat hanger’ if she leaves them un-tailored. She also said that she will wear a scarf on her head, but it is her decision if she does all the time, and sometimes she does not. She dislikes wearing the *hijab* because it is hot and not modern or fashionable in her opinion. Underneath her buibui, she wears whatever she wants; usually pants, sometimes short skirts. She likes them because they are fashionable and modern. I asked her if people ever said anything to her about the way she dressed, and she said usually not. Occasionally if she is wearing an open buibui with pants, and it is blowing open people will tell her to hold it closed, but she does not care what they think. Her mother, who is from the Congo, which Fatia seemed to feel conveyed progressiveness and liberalism, likes pants and wears them, and therefore does not care if Fatia wears jeans.

Fatia seemed to care about fashion of the western world, meaning jeans and skirts, while the fashion world of the buibui she seemed to care much less about. She personally does not spend a lot of money on her own buibui, and sees the wearing of the newest buibui as a show case for wealth and a competition between women that she did not want any part of. She considered herself to be more modern in her thinking than the other women of Lamu because she had travelled to other area where they are still Muslim but do not wear the buibui, such as the Congo. She said, “I am Muslim, but I don’t care about the religion, I wear what I want anyway.”

While Fatia offers a very strong opinion about the buibui, when it comes to the women of Lamu it should be noted that in my experience and observation she is in the minority when it comes to her sentiments. However, she is one extreme on the scale of

conservatism to liberalism of Muslim dress that I have found in Lamu. It is therefore important to share her views, for while few women may share all of them or to the same degree, her sentiments of desire for modernity and to fit in with the rest of the world is echoed in the female youth of Lamu in more subtle ways such as modernizing the buibui and treating it as a fashion no different than other world fashions.

The Men of Lamu and Buibui

Going into this research, I was expecting the men to have very different views from the women on the topic of concealing the body and the buibui, especially the young men. I found however, that almost all of the men were just as or more conservative than the women I talked to. Almost all of the men I talked with expressed reservations about the new styles, saying they did not think that the buibui should be so tight. Ali, a high class man in his thirties said that he personally has no problem with the open buibui, but does not think they should be made too tight because it is not Islamic. Muhammad, another high class man of around the same age said that he enjoys looking at women in tight and cut buibui, however he would not want to marry a girl who wears one. He wants a respectable girl for a wife, and seemed to associate tight buibui with low morals. Muhammad also explained that if he were to buy a buibui for a wife, girlfriend, or daughter, he would buy a loose one, because he would not want other people looking at her. These thoughts are also present in the lower class men. Omari, a young man who works on the waterfront told me that men like to look at girls in tight buibui, but they would not want their sisters or mothers wearing them. They know it is not Islamic to dress in tight and revealing clothing, and not Islamic to look at women sexually, and even though this still happens, the men know this should not and those that are more religious

should try to not act in this manner. He also talked about the decoration that is present on many of the newer buibui. Most of the time, the ornaments are on the chest and back of the buibui, in areas that are sexually appealing. Omari said that the ornaments are there to draw the eye, especially when they are put on those areas, and that is not good, as it is non-Islamic. He referred to these adorned and tight styles throughout our interview as, “shit buibui” which makes his opinion of them perfectly clear. The men also recognized the age differences in which style the women wear, repeating the sentiments that the Swahili style is worn by the older women, while the newer styles are worn by the younger generation.

In my interviews with women and my own personal experience, it was evident that men sometimes make comments about what women are wearing when they walk down the street. Some of the women (Fatia) suggested that men like the tighter buibui and the comments are to show their approval. Omari suggested otherwise. He said, “If I see a girl with an inappropriate buibui, sometimes I tell her nicely it’s not okay, other times you make comments about her shape or the way she walks which may sound nice but it’s not. It is to make fun of her.” It seems that the men, while they enjoy looking at these women, they do not see them as serious marriage material. So while these girls may be trying to attract attention, they are attracting flirtatious and somewhat negative attention to themselves from the men, perhaps unbeknownst to them. Abdul, a low class middle aged man, said that women tighten their buibui to show their figure to get more attention for their own self interest. He said that most men do not like this because it attracts other people to see the woman’s figure. Abdul expressed sentiments that the community, especially the older generation, was not positive about the changes in the

buibui. He differentiated between those who have carefully studied the Quran and those who had not, stating that the more religiously educated family will not let their daughter dress in a improper way, while those who are not well versed in the Quran do not control their daughters and let them follow the fashions because their girls tell them these styles are what everyone is wearing and that's the way it is. However he said that there are many that follow the fashions even when they do know the Quran well and that one cannot automatically assume that if a girl is fashionable she is not religious.

The men all brought up the issue of the cost of the buibui. Like men from many other cultures, men in Lamu all recognized the fashion associated with the buibui, however did not really understand why it was so important to women and commented about the frivolous nature of the women and their focus on clothing and fashion. As Ali told me, "Women are women, you know, they like to show off." Many of the men said that women are too caught up in fashion and spend way too much money on the buibui. Omari talked about how this can cause tension between husbands and wives because of the financial strain that buying expensive buibui can put on a family. He also explained how impractical it seemed to him to buy expensive buibui because they devalue too quickly. He explained that when a buibui first comes out, it may cost somewhere around 12,000 Ksh, but the next month when it is not longer the newest fashion it will go for 6,000 Ksh, then the next month for 3,000 Ksh, and on down. Men however also contribute to perpetuating the styles of buibui. Many times it is the man who buys the buibui for his wife or girlfriend, and wanting to please this woman, he will buy an expensive buibui, one that is fashionable, to show his affection for the woman, even if he personally does not understand the appeal of the fashion. The men all recognize the

importance the fashion has in the lives of Lamu women and what a nice buibui can symbolize.

The Ninja: Expression of Religious Modesty or an Enabler of Deviant Activity?

The face veil, known as the ninja, is the subject of some debate among the people of Lamu. The covering of the face is not required in Islam, however many young women in this community have taken to wearing the ninja to conceal their identity more completely. While one might think that this would please the more conservative community of Lamu, I have found that most people do not like the ninja because they cannot tell who people are. All of my informants said that the ninja is sometimes used by women do things they are not supposed to, such as meeting with boyfriends and sneaking to places they should not be. This is of great concern in the community, especially the older generation of mothers and fathers (Zelma). All of the men, young and old, conservative and liberal, adamantly dislike the ninja. The thought of their wives, sisters, or daughters sneaking around to have illicit sexual interactions bothered them greatly and they blamed the ninja for enabling this activity (Ali).

While women do use the ninja for this purpose, it is more likely that girls wear it, or at least will say they wear it, in an attempt to be more concealed and hide their identity for religious reasons. Some girls wear the ninja to hide their identity so as not to be bothered by men (Zelma). Some wear it in order to keep the sun off their faces to keep their complexions fairer, something that is desirable and considered beautiful in this culture (Zelma). Others wear it when they are going out and have make-up on (Amina). “When I am like that, (wearing make-up) I am not myself, and I cannot walk like that,” (Zelma). Others wear because it has become a fashion in Lamu for younger women.

Beti wears the ninja when she goes out in public; however she was not brought up in Lamu, and never wore the veil before she came here. After coming to Lamu, “All my friends put it on, and I got caught up in it.” Even now that she has started wearing the ninja here, when she travels somewhere else, Beti does not wear it. Like the other clothing in Lamu, while the ninja comes from a religious origin, it can be and is worn for fashionable purposes as well.

Analysis-The Public Presentation of Self: An Expression of Identity

The clothing a person chooses to wear is always seen by other people and whether it is consciously or unconsciously done, it is a public presentation of self. The buibui is no exception and is perhaps an even stronger statement of identity than clothing in other cultures. Women in this community are traditionally not supposed to be wandering about out of the house, they are not supposed to interact with men, and they are not supposed to stand out in any way. Yet with the continuously changing, globalizing and ever modernizing world, more and more women in Lamu are working, leaving the house on a regular basis, and wearing clothing that distinguishes them from their peers. On many occasions in my interviews, different people would tell me it is all about fashion, having what no one else has and being the first to have a new fashion, a commonality all over the world. However not all women in Lamu are focused on this. These discrepancies are the focus of my research. I have found that what women wear is an expression of identity, specifically of age, modernity, social class, and religiousness.

To begin with, both young and old, men and women alike, see the differences between the old women and the young in the styles they are wearing, and associate the Swahili style buibui with culture, tradition and older women. Many old women wear the

Swahili style despite its complications in maneuvering and the limitations of the cut, in order to preserve the tradition and keep the culture alive, even when faced with the practicality of the newer cut style (Beti). The young women, especially the teenage girls also associate the Swahili style with those attributes, except they use those arguments for reasons not to wear it, and prefer to wear the newer styles that more closely resemble dresses and coats. They see them as more modern and fashionable as well as more practical for the working woman. The working woman is also a modern identity; therefore associating the cut buibui with that identity reinforces the modernity of both, the clothing and the professional woman. The style of buibui is a marker of generation in Lamu, of trying to hold onto tradition or move into modernity.

Among the new styles, there are various levels of expense that one can spend on a buibui, and usually those that live in Lamu can tell how expensive an adorned buibui is. The way in which someone is wearing the buibui, how tight it is, how tightly one has tied the *hijab* and whether one is letting the flaps of the open buibui fly open when she walks is also telling. Conservative people tend to associate tight buibui, loose *hijabs* and open buibui with girls who are less religious and have a lower standard of morals. The girls know they are seen this way, however they insist that it is the fashionable way to wear their clothing in this manner, that it is the modern way to wear the buibui. I believe that while a great deal of the reason for wearing the buibui tight is because it is in fashion, I also believe that since the younger generation is aware of how their elders feel about the trend, and their efforts to preserve the tradition of Lamu, a certain amount of the tailoring and tightening of the buibui is a subtle but rebellious statement to the older generation that the world is modernizing and that they, the youth, are modernizing with or without

the approval of their elders. Like the youth in many cultures, even if the older generation is disapproving of the trends, the younger people tend to continue with them regardless. I find that it is the same case in Lamu and the buibui.

Conclusions

Everyone in Lamu is aware of the different stigmas that are assigned to the different styles of buibui, the way they are worn, the way the older and conservative generation feels, and the way the youth feels. Therefore I must conclude that the choices women make of what type of buibui they wear and how they wear it are conscious choices and a declaration of identity. Women in this small conservative town have very little room to express themselves and their individual identity, especially publically. The buibui, which was traditionally supposed to make everyone equal and the same, so no woman could be differentiated from another, has been modernized and turned into a forum for self expression and individuality, much like clothing is in other cultures in the world. Women use the buibui to subtly express something about themselves to those around them, whether it is modernity by wearing the cut and open styles, tradition by wearing the Swahili style, religiousness by wearing the buibui loose, or fashion and perhaps a bit of rebellion by wearing it tight.

This hidden side to the intricate world of fashion in Lamu highlights the complicated nature of the culture and the subtle facets of fashion for the individual that have been introduced by the industry and perpetuated by the consumers for their own gain. The old styles are still available and cheaper than the new styles, therefore there is some element that the women of Lamu see as more important than money, something that in this small town is not abundant. The emotional value they get out of these

decorated buibui is more important to them than the monetary value. They now have a mode for individual expression in public, a forum for expressing modernity, traditionalism, wealth, and progressiveness, and they have embraced it. The women who choose to continue wearing the Swahili style have done so to embrace their identity as traditionalists and see greater value in that than the newer more practical styles. I believe that it is important, especially for the western reader, to see that these women are not oppressed or forced into wearing these buibui, but choose to do so, and have quite a bit of freedom of expression within their own cultural norms. The way in which they express themselves through clothing in Lamu is reflective of the way women all over the world use clothing to communicate identity within their own cultural ideology. Perhaps it is time that people begin to look at Islam and the doctrines about dress within the context of the specific culture and not in opposition with their own.

Recommendations for Further Study

This is a very interesting subject that if I had more time I would have liked to pursue further. This could be done by gathering more interviews, especially from more young girls. They are the hardest group to get into contact with in Lamu, and going through an organization like the Red Cross in Lamu, which many young girls work with, may be the best way to make these contacts. I attempted to set up a discussion with a group of young women, however the various times I attempted to have the meeting, for one reason or another it never happened. Had I more time, I would try to orchestrate that. Another area which I did not have time to pursue in depth would be talking to the store owners who sell the buibui as well as those who tailor them. I believe I would get much of the same information as from my other informants, which is one of the reasons I did

not focus on this informant group, preferring to focus on more first hand accounts of the people who buy and wear the clothing. However they may offer to strengthen the argument and offer a new angle on the issue that a longer paper would benefit from.

To expand the topic, I would recommend also looking at the girls who are not wearing buibui yet, and see how their perceptions of the clothing are changing and how they see the buibui. This may be difficult if one does not speak good Swahili or have a translator if the girls are young enough that they have not yet learned English proficiently in school. There is also the aspect of the clothing women choose to wear underneath their buibui, a topic that originally interested me and that I intended to include in my paper, however I soon found that this would be too much to cover in this short time frame and could be an entirely separate paper. In a similar vein, looking at the clothing women wear to weddings is also very informative since this is a space where women do not wear the buibui and go all out to look good and have the nicest outfit. This could again be its own paper. It would also be a good extension to really study the influences of outside culture on the clothing, how the media and tourists affect the opinion of people. My informants touched on this some, however again due to time and page length limits, I chose not to focus on this aspect. In all, I believe that looking at female expression of identity through the lens of material objects, namely clothing, is a way to get at the ideology of women and sheds light on the Muslim world in a way that many westerners would find surprising and enlightening. For these reasons, I believe that further research should be done on this topic.

Appendix A: List of Interviews

Abdul: Male, Age-late thirties/early forties, low social class, conservative, April 16, 2009

Ali: Male, Age-mid thirties, high social class, moderate, April 14, 2009

Amina: Female, Age-29, mid/high social class, works, very fashion oriented as well as religious, moderate, April 21, 2009
Cut style buibui, tailored slightly

Beti: Female, Age-late twenties/early thirties, working woman, conservative, April 21, 2009
Cut style buibui, un-tailored, and ninja

Fatia: Female, Age-19, low social class, very liberal, April, 16, 2009
Cut and open style buibui, tailored very tight

Marie: Female, Age-27, long term resident but not local, liberal, April 13, 2009
Cut and open style buibui, tailored slightly

Mara: Female, Age-early/mid twenties, mid to high social class, moderate/liberal, April 19, 2009
Cut and open style buibui, tailored

Miriam: Female, Age-mid thirties, high social class, progressive, does not work, April 19, 2009
Cut style buibui, tailored slightly

Muhammad: Male, Age-late twenties/early thirties, high social class, conservative, April 14, 2009

Omari: Male, Age-mid twenties, low social class, mid range conservative, April 17, 2009

Saied: Male, Age-around 75, religious leader, conservative, April 15, 2009

Zelma: Female, Age-46, high social class, works, conservative, April 12, 2009
Swahili style buibui

Group discussion-consisting of five low class men in their twenties, all work on the waterfront, one conservative, two moderate, two liberal, April 18, 2009

Appendix B: Additional Information

Others Who Wear the Buibui

In the course of my research I found that there were two other groups of people in Lamu outside of the women that wear the buibui, however they were slightly outside the focus of my paper, but are interesting and should be noted none the less. One group is the transvestites. This population is not talked about in Lamu, however they are tolerated here more than in other areas (Romero, 210). They use the buibui, *hijab*, and *ninja* to attend the women's celebration at weddings or to go to the women's section during Maulidi festival, though they are not always invited (Romero, 210). The other group that wears the buibui upon occasion is the prostitutes. They are non-Muslim women who use the buibui to not be recognized when going from place to place, and as a business asset by using the buibui to go to bars and attract men who want to "taste the forbidden Swahili woman," (Saied). Men will apparently choose the woman in the buibui because he believes, and she lets him, that she is a Swahili woman and is therefore seen as more exotic (Saied).

The Wearing of the Swahili Style Buibui

Another interesting thing that I observed but did not pursue in depth but that may serve for a point of further research is the way in which women wear the Swahili style buibui. The correct way to wear it is to hold the flap up to the eyes, so one is completely covered, however the majority of women I saw were letting the flap fall down to their chests or even below that, exposing the upper part of their bodies, including their breasts. This to me seemed in direct opposition to the reasons many women gave for wearing the

Swahili style, mainly to conceal the body to a greater extent. One man gave me a reason why women let this buibui fly open. He said that the women who let it fall open are wearing the Swahili style buibui for the sake of preservation of culture, and not because it offers greater concealment (Saied). Whether or not this is true, the way in which these women let their buibui fall open is in direct opposition to their sentiments that the open buibui reveal too much. I did not get the chance to really develop this, however it is an interesting observation to note, and may be the subject of further research in the future.

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