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W[h]ater You Afraid Of? Fears, Myths and Barriers to Swahili Aquatic Culture

Charlotte Jacqueline Maily
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W[h]ater you afraid of?

Fears, Myths and Barriers to Swahili Aquatic Culture

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SIT: Islamic Studies and Swahili Identity

Spring 2011

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Abstract

The Swahili coast is a section of coastline stretching over 3000 kilometers from Somalia in the north to Mozambique in the south. The region was first occupied by groups of hunter-gather-fisherman but the Bantu migration in 500 B.C. of pastoralists from Northern Cameroon caused an influx of immigrants from the African interior to settle along the Indian Ocean. Upon the arrival of Islam to East Africa through trade with the Arab world in the ninth century, there was a cultural shift and Muslim traditions began to penetrate into the coastal region, starting in the north and moving down to the southern limits. Religious permeation created a strong economic, artistic and aesthetic society by the end of the thirteenth century, mainly around port cities such as Mombasa and Lamu in Kenya and Dar Es Salaam and Zanzibar in Tanzania. Islam became a ruling idea and the Swahili language was adopted as the *lingua-franca* for the East African coast. To many, the Swahilis are known as the *People of the Sea*, and several scholars believe that their marine society has given them a unique advantage in African politics and history over the centuries. While fishing and trade have played essential roles in the development of Swahili culture, aquatic activities, both for exercise and recreation, are deeply rooted in the Swahili lifestyle. Folklore about the sea is still told by elders and the demand for swimming instruction in Mombasa, Kenya emphasizes the cultural ties to the water. This paper analyzes the impact and importance of swimming in Mombasa, Kenya today.

Introduction

The *Periplus of the Erychthraean Sea* is the first written record of the people of the East African coast.¹ The document, a mariner's manual, written in Greek in Alexandria during the first century, describes the economics of trade down the Red Sea and into the Indian Ocean.² Although the chronicle focuses on the details of available trading commodities, it briefly mentions the local people who spoke their own languages, fished and exchanged their goods, both from the coast and the interior, for wares from the classical world. As with any coastal society, it is evident that the sea played a key role in the economic, political, religious and cultural development for the Swahili people.

Just as the sea is essential for trade and interaction with the outside world, it also serves as a natural playground for the youth and a gym for adults. Swimming as a form of recreation and exercise is paramount in Swahili culture and the ability to swim is stressed at a very young age. Many Swahili men consider themselves natural swimmers due to their generational ties with fishing and centuries of life in a coastal environment.³ A group of men in Mombasa swim across the channel on a daily basis and elders believe that the ocean waters have healing powers.⁴ Swahilis stand alone in their love and passion for the water against other African tribal groups due to their location and their interaction with India and the Arab World. The belief that Swahilis are not Africans comes from the theory of *diffusionism* which has been debated for decades.⁵ The influence of exterior cultures not only changed the societal make-up of today, but the cultural mixing has caused the Swahilis to evolve into their role as people of the sea.

¹ Middleton, John. African Merchants of the Indian Ocean: Swahili of the East African Coast. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2004.

² Casson, Lionel. The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text With Introduction, Translation, and Commentary. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989.

³ Ishmael Zulamhusein, Personal Interview, April 19, 2011.

⁴ Ghalib Zahran, Personal Interview, April 8, 2011.

⁵ Mazrui, Alamin M. and Ibrahim Noor Shariff. The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People. New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994.

When people think of swimming, surely the first thing to come to mind is not negative buoyancy. This physical principle, as postulated in *On floating bodies* by Archimedes of Syracuse in 212 B.C., states that “any object, wholly or partially immersed in a fluid, is buoyed up by a force equal to the weight of the fluid displaced by the object.”⁶ While the scientific jargon describing the water displacement seems complicated and nonsensical, simply put, people can float. Some believe that swimming ability is an innate quality for humans, who essentially spend the first nine months of life in a little pool. While much of the world learns how to swim at a young age, some Africans believe that the water is possessed by evil spirits and choose to exercise on land, avoiding the water.⁷ It is well known that Africans, and Kenyans especially, are award-winning long-distance runners; just last month, Kenyans, both male and female, lined the podium in the Boston, London and Belfast Marathons.⁸ Although they excel in land-based sports, only three Africans have ever medaled in swimming events. In 1973, Mr. Ibito won gold in the 100 meter butterfly in the Lagos (Nigeria) Games and Mr. Pedro Limai took home gold in the 50 m freestyle at the Cairo (Egypt) Games in 1991.⁹ The only African ever to qualify for the Olympic Games was Anthony Nesty of Surinam, who championed the 100 m butterfly in the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games.¹⁰ Historically, swimming awards have been taken by North Africans, who come from a significantly different cultural background from their Sub-Saharan competitors. While some may attribute the lack of swimming skill among Sub-Saharan Africans to their land-locked, arid desert climate, scientists have postulated that anthropometric differences between

⁶ "Archimedes' principle." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 14 April 2011.

⁷ Coach Muli, Personal Interview, April 12, 2011.

⁸ Boren, Cindy. "Boston Marathon: Geoffrey Mutai of Kenya runs fastest marathon." *The Washington Post* 18 April 2011: Print.

⁹ Blekkenhorst, Frank. "All African Games." *Sports123*. Web. 24 April 2011. <<http://sports123.com/afg/index.html>>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

African Blacks and Whites have contributed to the apparent lack of success among Black swimmers.

Although the thought of comparing physical differences between Blacks and Whites conjures up memories of racial hierarchy and the foundation of colonialism in Africa, certain differences can be used as possible evidence in favor of swimming deficiency. Research has shown that physiologically, Black Africans have a heavier skeleton and muscle mass, less flexibility in the trunk and ankles, a greater body density, hair that holds more water, and the relative fat distribution that concentrates more subcutaneous fat on the trunk than on the extremities.¹¹ A recent study was conducted in Cameroon to compare anthropometric characteristics, buoyancy and flotation of Black and White swimmers. The researchers found that the buoyancies of whites were better than those of blacks due to trunk-extremity ratios, hydrostatic lift due to body fat, chest circumferences, arm spans and results from the horizontal buoyancy test as first developed by Cazorla et al in 1984.¹² While in the United States, the belief in negative buoyancy is a true barrier to teaching Black children how to swim, very few people have ever heard of the theory on the Swahili Coast. These naturally born swimmers, fisher-folk, and people of the sea, however, cannot be considered “Black.” The racially and culturally mixed Swahili society does not fit the physical trends of negative buoyancy and the people continue to enjoy their aquatic environment. Although the Swahili do not have physical disadvantages that limit their ability to swim, historical traditions of water folklore continue to create mental barriers for participation in aquatic activities.

Beliefs in mythical and dangerous water creatures can be traced back centuries through oral tradition and written record . From Homer’s account of Odysseus’ struggles through rough and disturbed waters to the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale, people have

¹¹ Ama, P.F.M., and S. Ambassa. "Buoyancy of African Black and European White Males." *American Journal of Human Biology* 9 (1997): 87-92.

¹² Ibid.

grown up listening to stories about the sea to instill fear and awe of the expansive ocean habitat. Among the Swahili community, folklore about the water is limited especially among the youth. Several visits to bookstores and nursery schools proved hopeless in the attempt to find any children's literature on water myths. Within the elderly population, however, people are willing to tell any stories they know about the sea: a place of pleasure, excitement and wonder. In analyzing the role of swimming and water in the Swahili lifestyle, I was able to record these stories of aquatic folklore for future generations.

While folklore and the fear of the water are often the greatest barriers to teaching swimming and enjoying the environment, one of the largest issues in Swahili culture is the ability for women to participate in water sports and activities. In a society with a majority Muslim population, social rules regulate what women can wear, how they can act and what extra curriculums they can partake in.¹³ These restrictions not only exist within the adult population, but also among the female youth who wish to swim and enjoy the ocean environment with their male peers. Recent fashion innovations, such as the *Burqini*, designed by a Lebanese woman named Aheda Zanetti, are marketed as the perfect solution for Muslim women who wish to swim "but are uncomfortable about 'revealing' bathing suits."¹⁴ The suit covers the whole body except the face, the hands, and the feet, while being light enough to enable swimming. These costumes are sold for approximately one-hundred dollars, thus putting yet another barrier to women's participation in aquatic activities. For those who can afford one however, the website for the leader in Muslim swimwear displays photographs of women enjoying everything from windsurfing and jet-skiing to water skiing and simply just splashing around at the beach.¹⁵ While these head to toe suits provide women with swim

¹³ Coach Muli, Personal Interview, April 12, 2011.

¹⁴ "Burqini® Swimwear and Hijood® Sportswear." *Ahiida*. N.p., 2011. Web. 25 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.ahiida.com>>.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

attire that is culturally appropriate, the bulky fabric and street-clothing appearance of the bathing suit has its own disadvantages.

While Muslim specific swimwear has been around for about a decade, the style began to receive publicity in 2009 when a French Muslim convert was denied access to a swimming pool while wearing a *Veilkini*.¹⁶ The pool staff stopped the woman from entering the pool, citing hygiene concerns and rules that restricted swimming while clothed.¹⁷ Deemed “religious segregation” by the woman, the town Mayor, Alain Kelyor, countered that “all this has nothing to do with Islam,” noting that the swimsuit was “not an Islamic swimsuit” and that “that type of suit does not exist in the Koran.”¹⁸ In a public address later that month, French President Nicolas Sarkozy said the burka, and other Muslim coverings, reduced women to servitude and undermined their dignity. He stated that, “we cannot accept to have in our country women who are prisoners behind netting, cut off from all social life, deprived of identity.”¹⁹ Despite how the non-Muslim community feels about women who wear burkas or bui-bui, a traditional Muslim covering donned by many Swahilis, the issues of covering for water activities remains a constant concern for female followers of the Islamic tradition. This paper sets out to analyze the barriers women and female youth in Mombasa face to participation in cultural water activities and competitive swimming.

Swimming is a life skill and as a child I learned how to swim in a pool with the motto, “every parent should teach their child to swim.” While parents stress the importance of knowing how to swim to their children, many adults in the Mombasa area are hesitant themselves to even get in the water, thus relying on the swimming programs in the schools and among private coaches to teach their children. I am a passionate swimmer with years of

¹⁶ “French pool bans 'burkini' swim .” *BBC News*. 12 Aug. 2009.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

experience both as a competitor, instructor and coach. In choosing this topic for my independent study project, it was essential that I be able to do some of my own teaching in order to analyze teaching approaches and swim lesson structure along the coast. In comparison with the highly organized American Red Cross system for aquatic safety, the Kenyan Red Cross does not provide training for swimming instructors and many have learned to teach solely through experience. Through my work with several coaches, I have been able to teach them certain techniques that they have continued to employ with several of their students. Accounts of my encounters with the Mombasa swimming community are detailed later in this paper.

While many people think of water as a refreshing source of fun, safety around the water, both in pools and on the beaches, is always a top concern for parents and public health officials. Although there are several drownings annually in the Mombasa area, and a total of three during the 2010 Christmas holiday period, most people are oblivious to the hazards of the water.²⁰ Ghalib Zahran, a local tour guide at Fort Jesus, noted that he had never heard of a drowning in Old Town but that there was frequent talk of children being pulled into the sea in Kilifi, a town district north of Mombasa.²¹ He stressed that people drown for a variety of reasons including weather, lack of skill and muscle cramping; although he knew common causes for these fatal accidents, he was never taught about safety in the water and as a child always risked swimming at the unsafe, shallow beaches with his friends.²² In 2009, the Crisis Response Development Foundation, a British organization dedicated to establishing safety programs abroad, provided lifeguard training to beach operators at the Jomo Kenyatta Public Beach.²³ They established a rescue center with a first aid kit and water safety equipment,

²⁰ Gerald Bombee, Personal Interview, March 22, 2011.

²¹ Ghalib Zahran, Personal Interview, April 8, 2011.

²² Ibid.

²³ Anwar Aweti, Personal Interview, March 22, 2011.

posted warning signs along the beach and developed an emergency plan for sea rescues.²⁴

Although this program has been in place for almost two years, and the number of local drownings has been reduced, the absence of lifeguards on the beach is unsettling. In my entire month of visiting beaches, public pools and even private resort facilities, I was never able to meet anyone who considered himself a lifeguard or felt he had the skills necessary to save someone in a water related emergency.

Life on the water is paramount to Swahili culture. On a continent where water is considered a precious natural resource, the people of the coast are blessed to have the ability to fish, exercise and swim recreationally. Swimming, a potentially dangerous activity, is an essential skill that needs to be taught to children, but religious barriers within the Muslim community in Mombasa inhibit girls from participating in water related activities. While the society places a high value on swimming knowledge, coaches and instructors who can train the youth in the area are few and have limited official training. In the homes, parents are reluctant to teach their children to swim, but water folklore that used to induce fear in children is no longer told. These stories, as recounted by local elders, detail the importance of water in Swahili culture and the mythical creatures that inhabit the coastal waters. Accounts of the dangers of the sea, the competitive nature of swim coaching, inadequate instructor resources in Mombasa, and Muslim barriers to participation in aquatic activities are key factors that contribute to swimming in Swahili culture and life as a Swahili on the East African coast.

²⁴ Fahkry Mansoor, Personal Interview, April 8, 2011.

Methodology

Cultural analysis of any form requires in depth personal contact with the society under study. For this project, I lived in Mombasa but spent much of my time on the beaches and in the pools in order to observe what I could about Swahili water culture. My first concern about aquatics in Mombasa was safety so I began my study at the Red Cross, where I met with the Regional Director to discuss the organization's efforts in integrated community based disaster relief and its association with foreign organizations that have provided lifeguard training to beach operators. I approached the subject with the American Red Cross bias of water safety instruction, which I had to quickly discount due to differences in the organization of the institution.

In order to analyze swimming instruction and the importance of safe swimming in Mombasa, I agreed to be an instructor at the Aga Khan Secondary school. For three weeks I was able to teach lessons, observe the students and talk to them about their own experiences with the water. In addition to teaching five different children, aged 2 to 16, I helped coach the team at Mombasa Women's Association. In talking to the swimmers and their parents, I was able to gain insight into the swimming culture within the Mombasa community. Through my interactions with children at both institutions, I had the opportunity to survey twenty Muslim women, many of whom were mothers, about their views on swimming and the barriers that religion places on their participation in aquatic activities. Their assistance was very helpful and because they had seen me teaching their children, they trusted me and were willing to discuss their thoughts.

An analysis of water culture in Mombasa would be incomplete without conducting informal interviews with the "native Swahili swimmers," the men who gather each morning to swim across the Mombasa channel and those who enjoy splashing around by the beach at

Fort Jesus. Although these discussions were generally focused on trying to get me to swim with them, their constant passion for the water was evident in the stories they told and the emphasis they put on the importance of water in Swahili culture, referring to it as the “hobby and life of the coastal people.”²⁵

After fruitless attempts to find children’s stories about the water in several Mombasa bookstores, I turned to storytellers to hear their own tales of the coastal waters. Several people at Little Sisters of the Poor, an elderly community in Mombasa, were more than willing to share their elaborate stories with me. I was able to record their folklore in an attempt to keep the limited remains of oral tradition alive.

Setting

Mombasa, Kenya is the coastal headquarters for Swahili society. For centuries the city has served as a key port for trade with the Arab world and much of the economy has relied on fishing. The people are seafolk and rely on the water not only for contact with the outside world but for recreation and exercise. Swahili culture has flourished on the banks of the Indian Ocean and developed into a thriving multi-ethnic group. This environment was essential for my study of water folklore, much of which I was able to collect by talking to members of the older generation. These amiable people were more than willing to share their stories about the water, tales that are not even told to the children today.

One aspect of Swahili society that is unique in Mombasa is the Muslim culture. The city has a very large Muslim population and Islamic law governs much of the education systems within the region. The schools, where many children learn how to swim as part of the curriculum, are generally run with Muslim traditions which I was able to analyze in the

²⁵ Najib Almas, Personal Interview, April 8, 2011.

context of girl's participation in aquatic activities. Public pools in Mombasa allow women to swim and I gathered information regarding women's barriers to swimming through surveys with the patrons. While Lamu, an island off the coast of Kenya, is also home to a large Muslim population, the facilities for public swimming are significantly limited and therefore the study was restricted to the Mombasa region.

While I did not intend to study the socio-economic differences within Mombasa, it was evident that access to swimming education was greatly varied among the different communities in Mombasa. The large population of ex-patriates that reside in Nyali, Mombasa and Diani stress the importance of swimming on their children both for safety and recreational purposes. Children who attend schools where swimming is taught are knowledgeable about the dangers of the water, swimming alone and swimming at night. By accessing this community, I became aware of the competitive atmosphere of the swim-coach culture in Mombasa; instructors will only train certain children and parents wait for months in order to enroll their children in classes with the "best of the best."²⁶ In comparison to children who learned to swim in school, native Swahilis who describe themselves as "natural swimmers" are self-taught, with generally poor technical skills and little fear of the dangers of the coastal waters.

Discussion

Behind the Bui-bui: Does religion keep women from the water?

To any outsider, the wearing of a traditional bui-bui seems cumbersome and restricting let alone excruciating in the midday heat of the Mombasa sun. While many *mzungus* feel like the long black dresses and tight head coverings are repressive, Muslim

²⁶ Savia Abreu, Personal Interview, April 21, 2011.

women believe otherwise. An advocate for Muslim women in Lamu stressed that the “bui-bui does not restrict me. I feel free to do whatever I want. It is a symbol and a tradition of my faith.²⁷” Although her lifestyle has not been restricted by religious dictations on apparel, it was evident that in Mombasa, when it came to participation in water activities, Muslim women found themselves at a crossroads.

The Muslim Women’s community in Mombasa can be divided into three groups, most easily categorized by their generation. The oldest generation and the youngest are significantly more liberal than the current middle-aged generation that is composed of many mothers who struggle to raise their children with strict Muslim values in a developing and western-influenced society. When it comes to religious observances there is also a divide and women have varying opinions on the appropriate apparel for water activities. The Koran states that “the believing women [will] subdue their eyes, and maintain their chastity. They shall not reveal any parts of their bodies, except that which is necessary. They shall cover their chests, and shall not relax this code in the presence of other than their husbands, their fathers, the fathers of their husbands, their sons, the sons of their husbands, their brothers, the sons of their brothers, the sons of their sisters, other women, the male servants or employees whose sexual drive has been nullified, or the children who have not reached puberty.²⁸” While there is much debate about swimwear, the minimum requirement for a woman's dress is that it is lengthened and covers the chest.²⁹ Some women choose to swim in their bui-bui while others choose to wear shorts and t-shirts or traditional swimsuits with leggings to maintain their decency.

Swimming among Muslim women in Mombasa has changed significantly in the past few decades. While discussing the issue with Professor Haider, he noted that “when [he] was

²⁷ Hadija, Muslim Women’s Panel Participant, February 24, 2011.

²⁸ Koran, 24:31.

²⁹ Koran, 33:59.

young, Muslim women from these areas used to come out at about six o'clock in the morning to swim across the channel. It was a new venture at the time and men respectfully looked away. They did not want to tarnish their own images, peeping as it were, and let the women enjoy their swimming routines. This went on for about ten years, but today, women in our society do not go swimming.³⁰ For years he has been trying to find funding for a women's indoor pool in Mombasa where aerobic swimming can be done so that women don't become "hippo sized."³¹ The need for social modernization is becoming even more apparent among Muslim women, many of whom suffer from high cholesterol due to their sedentary lifestyles and high calorie diets.³² With diabetes as a growing concern in Mombasa, it is time to reinvent the social world for Muslim women so that it is both "spiritually, mentally and most importantly, physically educative."³³ Although these are the hopes of a public leader, there is little hope that religious barriers will break and allow women the same access to the social life around the water as men.

Twenty women who identified themselves as Muslim were surveyed on their experience with the water and their thoughts on how their religion has restricted their participation in water activities.³⁴ Five of the women were swimmers at Mombasa Women's, which has approximately sixty annual members, half of which are female. The pool is open daily but there is no designated women's-only swim time. Some women noted that there might be more people swimming if they had their own private hour for exercise purposes. Professor Haider reiterated this belief when he said that it was his personal dream to construct a social hall with an indoor pool and exercise equipment for Muslim women in the Mombasa

³⁰ Professor Haider, Personal Interview, April 20, 2011.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Dr. Ruth Gitau, Personal Interview, April 18, 2011.

³³ Professor Haider, Personal Interview, April 20, 2011.

³⁴ The list of interview questions can be found in Appendix one.

community.³⁵ Without these resources, however, many Muslim women are hesitant or often prohibited from exercising in the presence of men, thus making swimming, with its revealing apparel, an even greater issue. The other women surveyed were observers at swim lessons and the swimming gala held at Aga Khan Nursery school. These mothers and caregivers were adamant about teaching their children how to swim and thus produced some bias in the survey regarding importance of teaching safe swimming to the youth.

Surveys found that 60% of Muslim women were taught to swim as children, but only 41% received training from professional instructors (Figure 1). This included lessons as part of nursery, primary and secondary education in addition to private lessons with swim coaches. Women who received non-professional instruction did so by learning on their own or with friends. Those who did not learn how to swim noted that it was not proper in their families for girls to swim, but their brothers knew how and often went to the beach with their friends when they were growing up. Many of the women who did not know how to swim stressed that they wished they had been given the chance when they were younger because they now fear the water and are constantly afraid for their children's safety because they are not able to save them in an emergency situation.

Safety in the water was a main concern for the women interviewed and 55% responded that they prefer swimming at a pool instead of the ocean because there are less safety risks and animals in the water (Figure 2). These safety hazards included shallow water, currents, tidal waves and sharp rocks. One woman noted that she was always concerned about there being sharks in the water and remained hesitant about taking her children to play at the beach. Another advocate for pool swimming stated that she preferred the cleanliness of the pool and the ability to swim for exercise. While a majority of women thought pools were both safer and cleaner for swimming, 40% indicated that they would

³⁵ Professor Haider, Personal Interview, April 20, 2011.

prefer to swim at the beach because of the view it provided (Figure 2). Although the beaches of the Kenyan coast can be described as tropical paradises, they are also the location for the most restrictions to women swimming.

Muslim women face several restrictions to participation in aquatic activities most notably due to their limitations in apparel. A total of 90% of women surveyed admitted that they had encountered instances where they were not allowed to swim due to religious practices (Figure 3). The women had been most restricted at the beach (55%), a public venue where they are most often targeted and feel uncomfortable exposing themselves in order to approach the water. Only five women (25%) had ever not been able to swim in a pool either due to their lack of male accompaniment, appropriate swimming apparel to meet the institutional requirements, or fear of the water (Figure 3). Two women, who were both avid swimmers at Mombasa Women's, noted that they had not been able to participate in school or competitive swimming events when they were younger because girls were not allowed to compete with their male peers and there were no programs for girls in the school. While the women experienced restrictions towards swimming at a variety of venues, they also had different experiences when it came to apparel choices when participating in aquatic activities.

The most popular outfit for swimming among the Muslim women surveyed was a t-shirt and long shorts (35%) that covered the chest and down past the knees (Figure 4). While the women noted that it was bulky and difficult to actually swim in, the conservative costume was advantageous against protecting their skin from the sun. For those surveyed from Mombasa Women's (25%), their suit of choice was a normal swimsuit, which is convenient for exercise swimming despite being more revealing (Figure 4). Three women (15%) noted that they wear a bui-bui to the beach and for swimming (Figure 4). As an observer, this practice is very strange, and the women do not actually swim, but wade into the water. While those women keep fully covered for aquatic activities, an even smaller minority (10%) try to

take a more modest approach to the regular swim costume by pairing it with legging and often a camisole (Figure 4). This creates less drag than the t-shirt style but can also be cumbersome for anything other than recreational swimming. The final three women responded that they do not go swimming and only watch their children swim at lessons and at the beach; their fear of the water and inability to swim prohibits them from participating in water related activities (Figure 4). It is evident that traditional Muslim practices, including covering of the body, hinder women's active involvement in aquatic sports and their prohibited participation instills further fear of the water itself.

Muslim women in the Mombasa community are in desperate need of facilities that would enable them to learn how to swim, both for exercise and safety in the water. When asking many people about why women don't go near the water the answers had nothing to do with religious restrictions, but fear of the water itself. Brothers described their sisters' fears of the ocean and swim coaches noted the Swahili belief that women should not swim past six o'clock in the evening. This fear, however, is fueled by their inability to swim and the lack of swimming education they received as children. Luckily, a current generation of Muslim youth is changing the societal norms and the importance of swimming is stressed upon all children. In their surveys all the mothers agreed that it was important to teach their children how to swim (Figure 5). I was lucky enough to assist in teaching swim lessons and observe the current practices of swim coaches and instructors in the Mombasa swimming community.

Swimming Instructional Practicum: Observation and Analysis

The American Red Cross system for teaching swim lessons breaks down the progression into six levels. In level one, students are taught the basic skills necessary for survival in the water including floating without an emergency device, kicking, and blowing bubbles. Students pass a level upon the satisfactory completion of a certain skill until they reach level six and can successfully swim all four racing strokes: the butterfly, backstroke,

breaststroke and freestyle. In addition to the swimming component of the lessons, the American Red Cross emphasizes instruction on water safety with short stories and little sayings that children can easily remember such as “Look Before you Leap” and “Always ‘Bring a Buddy.’³⁶” Over a period of three weeks, I was able to instruct five children and analyze the instructional methods of Kenyan swim coaches in the Mombasa area.

Coach Muli is a swim coach and responsible for all aquatic activities at the Aga Khan nursery school. In the afternoons she runs one-hour swim lessons for twenty children on average, ranging in ages from 1 ½ to 16 years old. She is known as one of the best coaches in the Mombasa area and many parents rave about her ability to teach young children. As a teenager, she taught herself to swim by sneaking off to the beach and ignoring her parents’ warnings about the safety of the water. Muli describes herself as a risk-taker who “likes swimming, loves swimming” and is so dedicated that, “swimming is within [her].³⁷” She brings her passion for the sport to the pool every time she teaches but the highlights of her swimming instructional abilities are best seen in the miniature, knee-deep nursery pool as kids splash around and show their parents what they have learned that semester in the yearly swim event.

The Aga Khan nursery school annual swimming gala is an hour-long production directed by Coach Muli and performed by all the children from grades one to four. Each class participates in a short water activity that demonstrates teamwork, comfort and ease in the water. Parents line the "kiddie-sized" pool area on benches, with video cameras in hand, as their toddlers compete in games entitled “the sultan of color”, “fishing is fun” and “the treasure hunt for sunken Titanic riches.” While some children are able to put their face in the water, the ultimate skills demonstration takes place among the older groups who participate

³⁶ Red Cross Water Safety Instructor Training Manual, American Red Cross, 2011.

³⁷ Coach Muli, Personal Interview, April 12, 2011.

in an underwater lap, individual medley and freestyle relay. Children, varying in cultural background, wear bathing suits ranging from Speedos to full body coverings on some girls.

The finale, a musical synchronized swimming routine performed by the oldest children is perfectly choreographed and a testament to Muli's ability to coach Mombasa's youth.

Although she is perhaps the best when it comes to teaching children, her lack of official instructional training is evident in her unstructured swim classes that she offers three times a week at the Aga Khan secondary school lap pool.

Each afternoon, about twenty children arrive after school for a one-hour swim lesson with Coach Muli. Although she employs two assistants, they often don't show up or are commonly mistaken for students due to their own inability to swim. The large class sizes are an extreme disadvantage for the children, as many are required to wait on the wall until she can give them attention. Children who are unable to stand in the shallow end of the pool are forced to wear a floatation device either in the form of arm buoys or plastic inner-tubes. These children, who should be practicing putting their face in the water, are restricted to merely floating up and down the pool, becoming reliant on the devices keeping them above the surface. When I had the chance to work with one of the younger children, without her "floaters" on, she was scared of the water and unable to kick because she had not developed muscles strong enough to move across the pool.

Distracted by the younger children, Muli is often unable to give any attention to the older swimmers in her lessons. For several afternoons, I swam with Fatma, age 16, and Ria, age 9. Both girls were good swimmers, very comfortable in the water, but lacking many essential technical skills necessary for their competitive swimming. Often their lessons involve swimming back and forth across the pool with no advice from their coach. When I arrived I quickly taught them some basic drills to improve their strokes and they immediately picked them up and began to improve, noting that swimming was easier when they actually

knew how to do it. While Muli can be an excellent and comforting instructor, she is clearly not prepared to handle the number of children in her lessons and also in a bind when it comes to coaching older children.

When asked about instructing Muslim girls, Muli said that, “it is very hard to coach them due to their religious barriers.³⁸” She noted that by age fourteen girls cannot expose themselves and the “swimming costumes they wear hinder [them] from moving forward in the water.³⁹” I noticed this when coaching Fatma, who wore a swim suit on top of a t-shirt and leggings. This bulky outfit dragged in the water and made it difficult to perfect her arm movements. In terms of their participation in competitive swimming, Muli said that due to the Islamic religion many kids are not able to attend competitions, which are held on the weekends, and she has had promising swimmers expelled from *madrassa* for competing in these weekend events. Her other female swimmers have discontinued their careers in the pool after “being ostracized by the Muslim community.⁴⁰” For Fatma, a teenager who was restricted from competing at her local school for two years because girls were not allowed to swim with their male peers, the desire to keep swimming is there but she fears she will have to “give up swimming after school because it is not appropriate.⁴¹” After years of training these children how to swim, starting from hours in the “kiddie” pool, it is evident that coaches like Muli are torn when it comes to teaching older children how to swim as their culture will eventually prohibit them from doing so.

Across the road from Aga Khan, a swim team assembles each afternoon to practice at the Mombasa Women’s swimming pool. This club team is comprised of children ranging in age from 6 to 22, with older swimmers acting as team captains and assistant coaches. The

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Fatma, Personal Interview, April 13, 2011.

two- hour practice is highly structured and focused on swimming of a competitive nature, with much of the time allocated for laps, drills, kick sets and diving practice. The coaches are members of the Coast Amateur Swimming Association, known as CASA, which oversees and organizes much of the youth competitive swimming in Mombasa. While there is a wonderful network of swim teams in Mombasa, access and availability to basic swim lessons is limited and children often do not receive the instruction they need to develop safe swimming skills.

Water Folklore: Swahili Tales of the Sea

Western culture is permeated with epic accounts of sea monsters, mythical ocean sites and imaginary aquatic beasts. As children, we were told about the Loch Ness monster, a beast that ruled the waters of Scotland, and everyone watched Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* as she found her legs and walked into the human domain. Stories were told about ships disappearing into the mysterious Bermuda Triangle, pirates attacking in the Caribbean waters and the lost city of Atlantis that remains buried in the depths of the sea. While some braved swimming in shark infested waters, most people steered clear after seeing the fictional account of *Jaws*, an oversized great white shark with an unprecedented ability to kill anything in its path. Similar to these western traditions, Swahilis, who have lived on the coast for centuries, have their own tales to ignite fear and curiosity in the mysterious ocean landscape.

In a culture that relies heavily on the fishing industry it is inevitable that the fishermen would have tales of the sea. One of the most common stories is that of the *kitu nusu*, or mermaid. Described as *nusu samaki na nusu mtu sana sana wanawake*,⁴² these female sea creatures who wear only bikinis appear as a bad omen to fishermen at sea.⁴³ When one sees a mermaid, “they must have a strong faith in god or else tragedy will occur” said Agnes

⁴² From Swahili: half fish and half woman.

⁴³ Agnes Changu, Personal Interview, April 19, 2011.

Changu, a Swahili storyteller.⁴⁴ The belief that beautiful women are associated with disaster was highlighted in Julianna Wakesho's story of Swahili water sirens.

Stories of pretty women in Swahili water culture are often told by women who fear that their husbands could be lured away and overcome by sexual temptation or the desire for money. In the night, it is said that women will come out of the sea and visit bars to seduce promiscuous men into a one night stand.⁴⁵ The men, unable to control themselves, follow the women home, imagining they are climbing up flights of stairs to a bedroom in the clouds.⁴⁶ The next morning they find themselves stuck at the top of a baobab or palm tree with no recollection of the previous night.⁴⁷ This story is told to prevent men from running off with mysterious women and facing the humiliation of descending a tall tree the next morning. While men may be tempted by the fictional women from the sea, there are also stories of people being lured into the ocean by beautiful women with the promise of riches.

There is the belief among the Swahili people that water spirits control the coastal regions, regulating the success of fishermen and the safety of those who swim at the beaches. As with any evil spirits, they often demand sacrifice in the form of human blood. Many people believe that they set traps filled with money and treasure in order to lure the greedy into their lair.⁴⁸ In Kilifi, there is the belief that each year the spirits carry one child out to sea as "a sacrifice to the water gods."⁴⁹ These stories are often told to account for the disappearance of people who were last seen in the water and to comfort the families of drowning victims who believe that their loved ones were taken to protect the stability of the water.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Julianna Wakesho, Personal Interview, April 19, 2011.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ghalib Zahran, Personal Interview, April 8, 2011.

While some Swahili sea myths are told to keep greedy men away from temptation, others are meant to instill fear in children in the hopes of them practicing safety around the water. The tale of the *Heart of the Monkey* is like most African folklore, a tale that feature crafty animals pitted against each other in a struggle between good and evil. As in Aesop's Fables, the moral of the story is that the good will live happily ever after, as demonstrated by the monkey who triumphs over the devious shark. Although there are many different versions, the most common one is

Long ago, a young monkey lived alone in a huge baobab tree hanging over the sparkling Indian Ocean. One day, a shark swam up to the monkey's tree and the unlikely duo became friends. After sharing fruit the monkey had gathered from nearby trees, the shark invited his friend to come visit his home in the sea. But as the two swam down into the ocean, the shark confessed that he was actually taking the monkey to the Sultan of the Sharks. The Sultan had fallen ill, the shark said, and the healer had prescribed a monkey heart as the only way to save his life. Terrified, the monkey told the shark that he had left his heart hanging back in the tree. The pair returned to the surface and the monkey scampered high up into the baobab. After awhile, when the monkey didn't return, the shark got anxious and yelled up to the monkey, "Have you found your heart yet? Bring it down, so that we can return!" But the monkey replied, "My heart is where it always has been . . . In my CHEST!" "Go away, go find some other foolish monkey!" And to this day, the monkey may go near the water, but he is too smart to be persuaded any closer into the beautiful, but dangerous Indian Ocean.⁵⁰

While this child's tale tells the story of a smart monkey, the underlying message is about the safety of the Indian Ocean. Despite citing the beauty of the ocean landscape, many of the children I taught noted that they would rather swim in a pool than at the beach, where the water is rough and there are dangerous animals. While none of the children had heard the tale of the Monkey, emphasizing the lack of folklore among the youth today, it is evidence of a past generation of Swahilis and their concern for safety around the water.

Swahili water folklore is very different from that of inland Kenya, where water is much scarcer, some children never see the ocean, and most water activities occur in small

⁵⁰ Adapted from Swahili Tales by Edward Steere, LL.D.

lakes and rivers. Water is considered a precious commodity in the desert regions and a common belief among the Masaai is that white people walked out of the sea. Their disillusionment is based on the image that white people have access to water and are so different from them that they are not even able to dwell on land. In the hills of Taita, children are told not to play in the dangerous rivers and their only encounters with water are to fetch it for bathing and cooking.⁵¹ When they do play it is during the dry season in the river beds, building sand structures and squishing around in the moist ground.⁵² Among the Luos of the Kisumu region there are very few beliefs in water spirits and during the rainy season people are excited to swim in the lake speckled environment.⁵³ In Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya located far from the coast line, many people are afraid of water spirits and when they come to swim in Mombasa they are “very superstitious of incidents that have happened on the sea and the presence of water devils.⁵⁴” The Swahili, one of approximately forty ethnic groups in Kenya, are unique in their cultural traditions and beliefs in the sea.

Conclusion

The Swahili people have lived in harmony with the ocean for centuries, using it for natural resources, as a mode of transport and as a playground. Although they consider themselves natural swimmers, the women of the Muslim community in Swahili culture are barred from participation in aquatic activities and their lack of swimming skills makes them afraid of the water. Fortunately, the current generation of Muslim youth are being taught how to swim and recent programs have been instituted within the Mombasa community to promote safe swimming along the coast. Despite these efforts, however, the aquatic

⁵¹ Jhilda Kimbana, Personal Interview, April 19, 2011.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Celestina Molambe, Personal Interview, April 19, 2011.

⁵⁴ Angelica Mugure, Personal Interview, April 19, 2011.

community is still at risk and each week there are stories of children drowning due to lack of supervision in pools or the dangerous ocean waters.

Muslim women make up a very large population in Mombasa and the Swahili diaspora. Currently, this sector of society is at a great risk for health problems as a result of their sedentary lifestyle due in some part to their religious barriers that keep them inside the house. Among the women in my Mombasa homestay family, three rarely left the house, staying inside to watch television and cook for the family. This, paired with a diet consisting of fried foods, is creating a health crisis for these women. While it is difficult to criticize their religious beliefs, it is evident that the Islamic faith directly inhibits their ability to exercise and participate in active aquatic activities. Hopefully the Mombasa community will soon realize this impending disaster and make changes that enable women to pursue healthy lifestyles and enjoy the water-rich Swahili culture.

Recommendations for future study

Writing about swimming in Swahili Muslim society and women's barriers to participation in aquatic activities was a decision that came about from my lifetime passion of swimming. Although I was missing my junior swim season at home, I was convinced that in studying the topic I would be able to reconnect with the sport and share my love for it within the Mombasa community. I was able to teach swim lessons as an independent study practicum which was both informative and rewarding. For anyone interesting in pursuing the subject of Swahili and the water, there are several areas of study that would be interesting.

Fishing and the fishing industry is at the heart of Swahili culture both historically and today. An analysis of water safety and swimming ability among fisherman would provide insight into how these men interact with the water. One approach would be to study the captains of dhows in Lamu to investigate their preparedness for water related emergencies. Additionally, there are several myths about the use of life jackets in Lamu that have contributed to several drowning incidents along the archipelago.

With tourism as one of the main industries in Kenya, a topic for further investigation would be the safety among the beaches and resorts most frequented by *mzungus*. This analysis could lead to a study in tourist beach culture including the tourist sex industry which is prevalent at the public beaches in Mombasa, especially Jomo Kenyatta "Pirates" Public Beach.

Although I only focused on the water related folklore of the Swahili people, there was clearly a lot to be analyzed and an in-depth comparison of water folklore from different regions in Kenya could be pursued. It was evident that people from Kisumu, Nairobi and Mombasa all had different views on the water due to their accessibility, climate and cultural traditions. Comparing folklore could result in several "non-traditional" Independent Study Projects. One potential project could be the writing and publication of a compilation of Swahili and non-Swahili Kenyan water folklore, of which there is a lack in the Mombasa area. The writing and illustration of a children's book or coloring book could be used in water safety instruction classes in the primary schools in conjunction with the swim classes taught there. These stories would be similar in format to those written by the Red Cross in the Water Safety Instructors Manual.

It is evident that the Mombasa community lacks well-trained swimming instructors and coaches. The development of a teaching manual, complete with videos and diagrams, in Swahili, would be extremely useful for the swimming community along the coast.

Appendix 1: Interview questions for Muslim Women on barriers to participation in aquatic activities

1. Were you taught to swim as a child? If so, did you receive professional instruction?
2. Were there ever instances when you were unable to participate in water related activities because your religion prohibited it?
3. When you participate in aquatic activities, what types of clothing do you wear?
4. Do you prefer to swim at the beach or in a pool?
5. Do you think it is important to teach your children how to swim?

Note: These questions were asked to twenty women who identified as Muslim. Some were swimmers at Mombasa Women's and others were mothers of Aga Khan students. All remained anonymous and thus their names do not appear in the list of interviewed below.

Appendix 2: List of interviews conducted

Anwar Aweti, Red Cross Regional Manager. 22 March 2011.

Gerald Bombee, Red Cross Coastal Supervisor. 22 March 2011.

Fakhry Mansoor, Crisis Response Development Foundation Regional Coordinator for Maritime Community Projects. 8 April 2011.

Ghalib Zahran, Local Fort Jesus Guide. 8 April 2011.

Najib “Carlos” Almas, Local Coach and Guide. 8 April 2011.

Suleiman Mahrads, CASA and Mombasa Triathlon. 11 April 2011.

George Aftar, Pool Supervisor, Mombasa Women’s. 12 April 2011.

Daniel Malare, Coach and Instructor, Mombasa Women’s. 12 April 2011.

Coach Muli, Aga Khan Nursery School and Swim Instructor. 12 April 2011.

Fatma, Age 16, Lesson Participant. 13 April 2011.

Ria, Age 9, Lesson Participant. 13 April 2011.

Mohamed Ninas, Student at Aga Khan Secondary School. 15 April 2011.

Dr. Ruth Gitau, Barriers to Muslim Women’s Health. 18 April 2011.

Azim, Age 9, Lesson Participant. 19 April 2011.

Angelica Mugure, Age 19, Volunteer at Little Sisters of the Poor. 19 April 2011.

Jhilda Kimbana, Taita Native and Mother of two. 19 April 2011.

Ismael Zulamhusein, Age 85, Mombasa Native. 19 April 2011.

Celestina Molambe, Age 53, Kisumu Native. 19 April 2011.

Agnes Changu, Age 57, Mombasa Native and Storyteller. 19 April 2011.

Julianna Wakesho, Age 68, Mombasa Native and Storyteller. 19 April 2011.

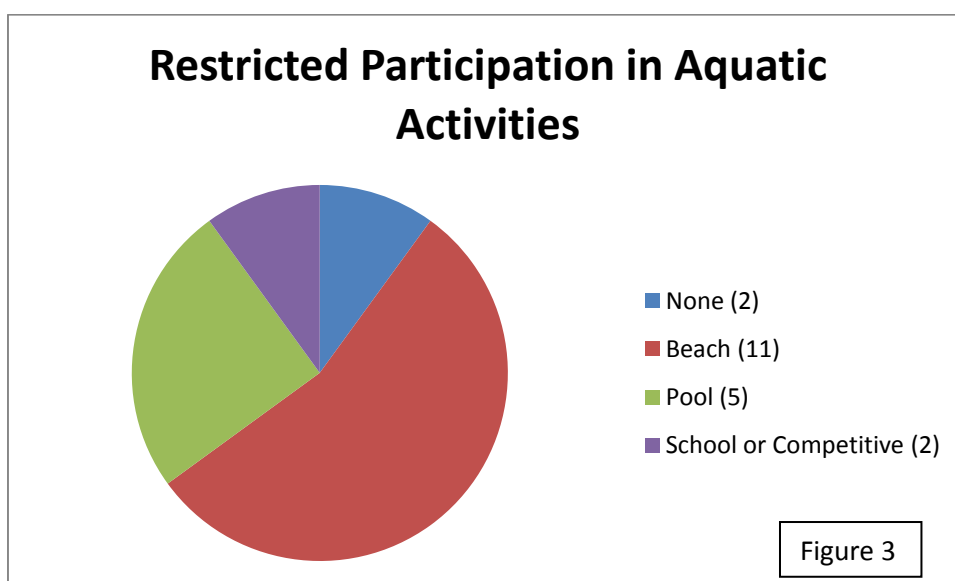
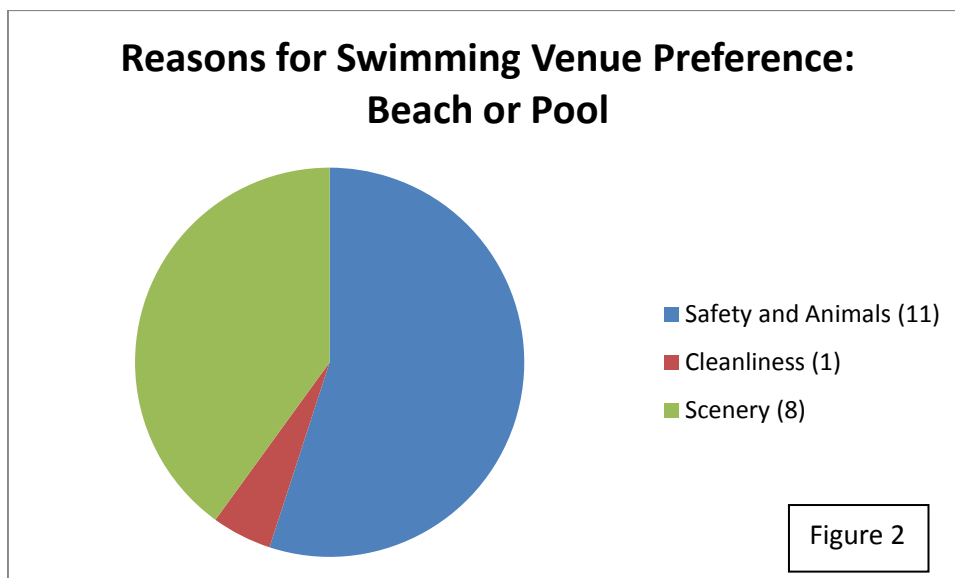
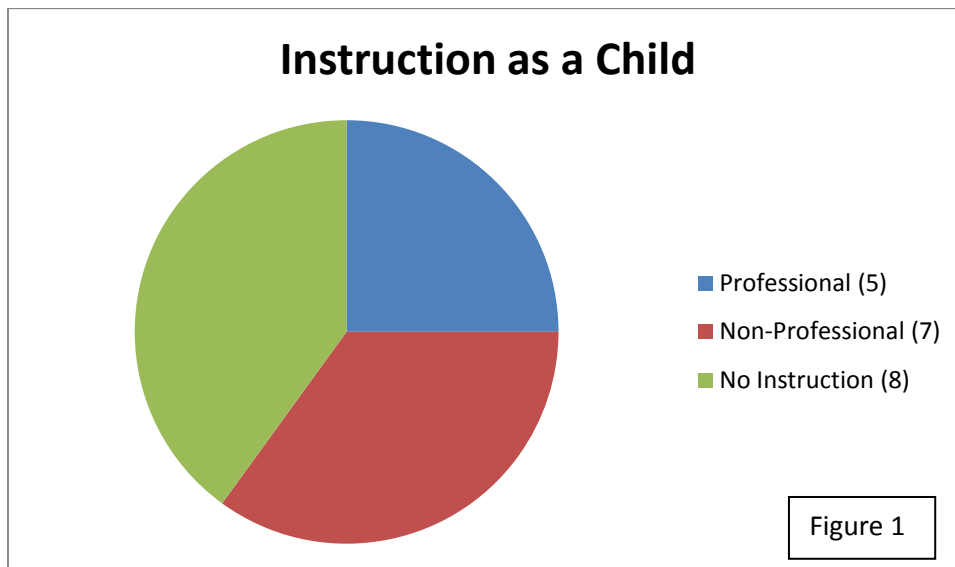
Professor Haider, The Swahili: People of the Sea. 8 March and 20 April 2011

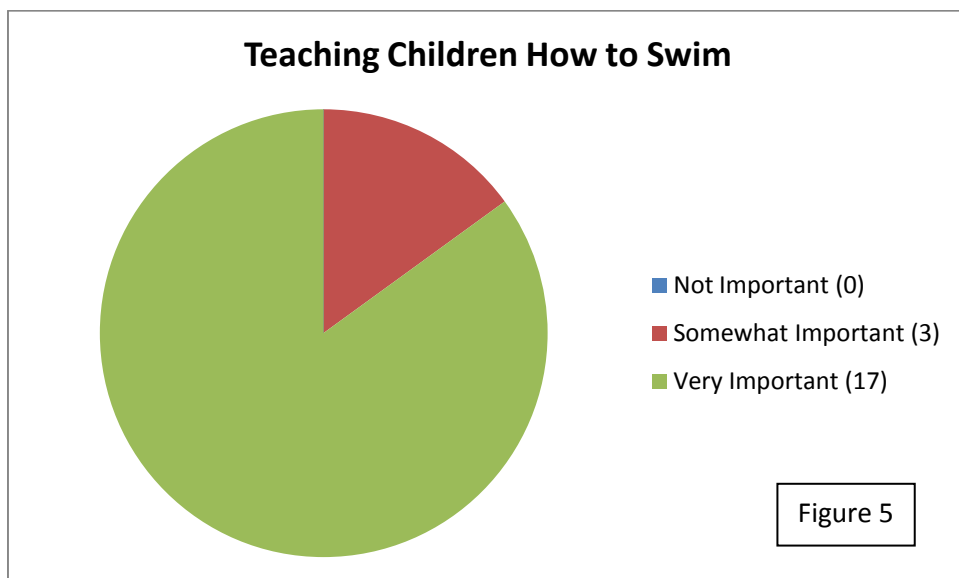
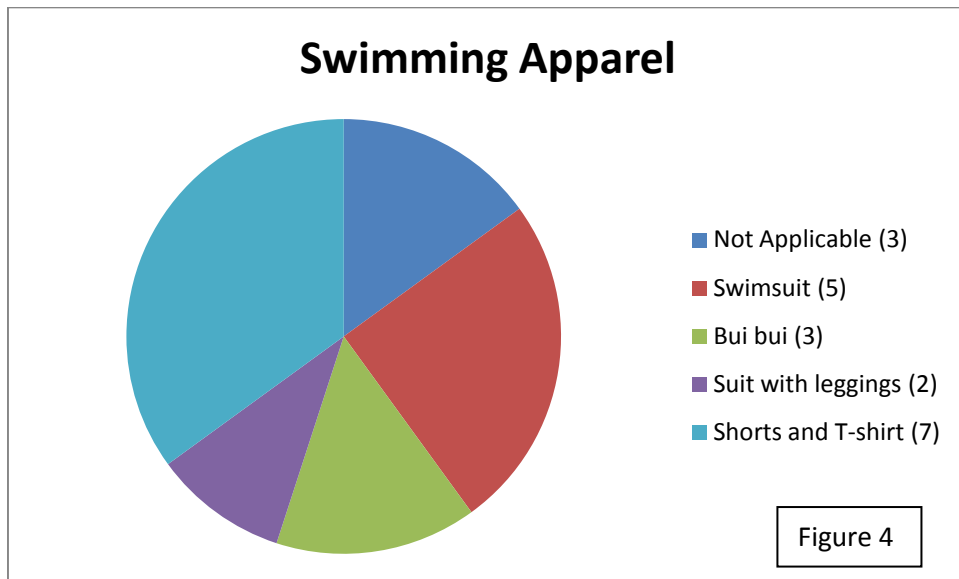
Lolita, Age 4, Lesson Participant. 21 April 2011.

Savannah, Age 2, Lesson Participant. 21 April 2011.

Savia Abreu, Mother of two swimmers at Aga Khan. 21 April 2011.

Appendix 3: Graphical Analysis of Survey Data





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