

**Review of Erin E. Stiles and Katrina Daly Thompson (editors), *Gendered Lives in the Western Indian Ocean: Islam, marriage, and sexuality on the Swahili coast*. Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2015**

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ERIN E. STILES and KATRINA DALY THOMPSON (eds), *Gendered Lives in the Western Indian Ocean: Islam, Marriage and Sexuality on the Swahili Coast*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press (pb \$34.95, 978-0-8214-2187-1), 2015, viii + 406 pp.

This collection of 'chapters' by an all-women group of authors – nine anthropologists, two historians and one language and literature scholar – is the second volume in the 'Indian Ocean Studies Series' published by Ohio University Press and edited by Richard B. Allen.

The title is slightly misleading. Since all contributions in the volume are directed at Kenya and Tanzania between Lamu and Mtwara, and Zanzibar is a particularly prominent focus, it would have been more appropriate to have the sub-title 'Islam, marriage and sexuality on the Swahili coast' as the main title. The range of the coastal continuum studied of societies and networks excludes connections to the North into Somalia and Hadhramaut and to the South into Mozambique and South Africa. At the same time, there is nothing much Oceanic about the research presented, which apart from references to Mayotte and the Comoros does not extend across the sea beyond Zanzibar to other Indian Ocean islands or to India and South Asia. The focus of the volume is clearly on what appears to be a quite old-fashioned anthropological understanding of a unified culture of 'the Swahili', which the book does not set out to question.

Within this framework, the collection contains a number of valuable essays, which are grouped into three thematic sections – one on 'Historical transformations of gender, sexuality and marriage', a second one on 'Contemporary expressions of coastal femininity and womanhood', and a final one on 'Defining masculinity in ritual and marriage'.

A particularly interesting piece in the first section by Elisabeth McMahon draws on rich Quaker archives of 'life histories' collected from ex-slaves in the island of Pemba in 'the emancipatory period' between 1897 and 1909. This material gives insights into the marriage and divorce practices of slaves and ex-slaves, and shows how these were influenced by the livelihood possibilities offered by abolition. While it was difficult for ex-slave men to imitate 'the patriarchy of slave owners', as they desired, ex-slave women were given possibilities for greater freedom through divorce and re-marriage, leading to contestations over the regulation of marriage as grounded in Christian and Islamic understandings.

The second section of the volume contains rich and controversial material on female sexuality, pleasure, danger, and prohibitions, and on the rituals of preparing young women for marriage. An outstanding contribution here is by Katrina Daly Thompson, discussing the socialisation of brides in Zanzibar. Thompson has herself married into the society she studies, and

is therefore able to report from secret rites and practices of initiation. This includes 'language socialisation' through the use of profanity to sexually please husbands, illustrated extensively in the essay. The potential problems in terms of 'research ethics' involved in betraying the secrets of 'the Swahili' are discussed in the introduction, but mostly as regards verification and limitations in possibilities for recording. Problems concerning mutual confidence and the usefulness and impact of research for those participating in it are not discussed, as perhaps they ought to be.

The studies of masculinity and 'Swahili manhood' in the third section of the book are also valuable, including an essay by Erin Stiles on disputes over impotence as a legitimate cause for women's divorce in the Islamic jurisdiction of Zanzibar and one by Linda Giles on 'Spirit Possession and Masculinity in Swahili Society'.

The material that Stiles has at her disposal is limited, but indicates that even if Islamic courts may not grant a woman divorce with reference to her husband's impotence, the initiation of a law suit on such grounds will often make the husband divorce his wife through simple 'repudiation', as he is entitled to. This again, according to Stiles, demonstrates that 'robust sexuality' and 'a wife's sexual fulfilment' are 'viewed as a legal requirement of marriage.'

Linda Giles' article demonstrates the gendered diversity of the Swahili spirit world in wonderful detail, and Muslim and pagan, coastal and interior, Arab and Pemba spirits (as well as numerous sub-species of Somali, Ethiopian, Maasai and Malagasy spirits) are shown to be interacting. The essay discusses how 'the Swahili' see the human body as becoming 'the spirit's body' during possession, and how the sexual implications of spirit possession – being 'climbed on top of' by the spirit – work themselves out differently for men and women, since '[m]ost possessive spirits seem to be conceptualized as male.'

Both the introduction by the editors and the afterword by Susan F. Hirsch argue that the volume is breaking new ground by placing women – and Muslim women's lives in particular – at the centre of Indian Ocean research, where they claim male scholars have been dominant. Also that the book is innovative by paying special attention to female sexualities and 'the micro-level of secrecy' as well as to 'men's perspectives on gender, masculinity and male sexuality.'

While there is truth in this, it must also be noted that several of contributions are based on research that was carried out in the 1980s and 1990s, and from which PhD dissertations and publication have already emerged. Further, though the introduction and afterword cover an extensive ground in terms of existing literature, there is also work, which is not taken into account – especially if the field of the African Indian Ocean coast is extended beyond Kenya and Tanzania – including publications by e.g. Signe Arnfred, Felicitas Becker, Liazzat Bonate, or Goolam Vahed.

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