

UC Santa Barbara

Volume 4, Issue 2 (Fall 2024)

Title

Relationships in Zanzibar: Narratives During the Turn of the Century

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7203k21d>

Journal

The UC Santa Barbara Undergraduate Journal of History, 4(2)

Author

Saville, Leigh

Publication Date

2024-10-01

Peer reviewed

FALL 2024

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF HISTORY

Vol. 4 | No. 2



© **The UCSB Undergraduate Journal of History**
3236 Humanities and Social Sciences Building
The Department of History, Division of Humanities and Fine Arts
The University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, California
93106-9410

Website

<https://undergradjournal.history.ucsb.edu/>

Submissions

Papers can be submitted for publication anytime through our submission portal on our website. Manuscripts must be between 3,500 and 7,500 words long and completed as part of a student's undergraduate coursework at an accredited degree-granting institution. Recent graduates may submit their work so long as it is within 12 months of receiving their degree. The Journal is published twice yearly in Spring and Fall. See the Journal website for more information.

Cover Image:

“UCSB Library,” Credit: Jeff Liang (UC Santa Barbara Photo Assest, 2024).

Editorial Board

Andreas Brey
Kate Erickson
Anna Friedman
Cole Grissom
Valerie Holland
Sherry Huang
Atmika Iyer
Hanna Kawamoto
Danika Kerner
Lauren Ko

Enri Lala
Vanessa Manakova
Jessica Novoa
Benjamin Ortiz
Jacqueline Pucillo
Ela Schulz
Sara Stevens
Chynna Walker
Sophia Yu

Faculty Director

Jarett Henderson

Relationships in Zanzibar: Narratives During the Turn of the Century

*Leigh Saville*¹

Introduction

In the spring of 1907, a British official named Dr. Charlesworth crafted a memorandum to the British Foreign Office where he lamented what he considered “the almost universal prevalence of immorality” in Zanzibar.² Charlesworth bemoaned what he portrayed as married couples having no more than two children and cited the reasons for such low numbers as the ease of divorce and the prevalence of sex.³ These elements were not the only parts of Zanzibari relationships that British colonial officials frequently discussed. Although the sultanate of Oman governed Zanzibar, by 1890 the islands became a protectorate of the British Empire. While the sultan remained, the British colonial government ruled Zanzibar, leading to negotiations about what society should look like. Slavery, while abolished for decades in Britain, was prevalent in Zanzibar, and the colonial government made it clear that abolition, although gradual, was destined for the islands. However, not all forms of slavery received the same treatment. Women enslaved in concubinage were not a prime concern of British officials, and their lack of enthusiasm for the emancipation of concubines was in no small part exacerbated by elite Arab sentiments.

This paper explores the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century discourses surrounding relationships and concubinage in colonial Zanzibar. It considers how ethnicity and status affected narratives about sexual arrangements and highlights unequal representation along gender lines within discourses. This work argues that dominant discourses controlled depictions of Zanzibari relationships and still influence current scholarship, however close examination of archival documents reveals the motives behind such narratives and illuminates the silent voices of Zanzibari women.

Historiography

Although the historiography is replete with discussion about concubinage and sexuality in Africa, there has been no analytical and focused dissection of the narratives that overtook conversations concerning free and forced Zanzibari relationships. This paper aims to fill these gaps and present new

¹ Leigh Saville is a fourth-year history major at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana. She thanks Dr. Elisabeth McMahon for her support and insights. She also thanks the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions on the essay.

² F. Charlesworth, “Inclosure 4 in No. 7: Memorandum by Dr. Charlesworth on the Lack of Increase in the Native Population of Zanzibar,” Essay, In *Part XCV. Further Correspondence Respecting East Africa, April to June 1908*, 30–31, (November 1908), p. 30.

³ Charlesworth, “Inclosure 4 in No. 7,” p. 30.

areas of study for the field. Ann McClintock asserts that gender is not simply a question of sexuality but also encompasses labor and imperial plunder.⁴ I draw upon this framework from McClintock, operating under the premise that “race [for purposes of this paper, ethnicity], class, and gender are not distinct realms of experience.”⁵

Historians Elisabeth McMahon and Elke Stockreiter have produced some of the foremost scholarship concerning relationships in Zanzibar. In “Marrying Beneath Herself: Women, Affect, and Power in Colonial Zanzibar,” McMahon investigates twentieth-century Zanzibari court cases in which elite Arabs brought in their female relations, demanding they divorce their husbands.⁶ McMahon shows how relationships between Arab women and African men fed Arab men’s panic about losing control over the bodies of their female relatives.⁷ This directly correlates to how elite Arabs in Zanzibar sought to influence British views on concubinage to preserve the institution as a form of resistance to losing possession of these women. McMahon also contends that Africanist scholarship legitimated the perspective that African families needed to establish marriage as an economic enterprise, supposing that, unlike their Western counterparts, African women did not marry for love.⁸ The theme of Swahili Zanzibaris, especially women, being devoid of love is an unfortunate yet common component of narratives from both British officials and elite Arabs.

Contemporary scholarship relies on outdated and incorrect assumptions about relationships in Zanzibar, including concubinage. “British Perceptions of Concubinage and the Patriarchal Arab Household: The Reluctant Abolition of Slavery in Zanzibar, 1890s-1900s” discusses British beliefs on concubinage in relation to the process of abolition. Stockreiter associates the purposeful construction of the patriarchal family with the delayed inclusion of concubines in manumission.⁹ This relates precisely to the underlying motives of various discourses about Zanzibari relationships. Although McMahon and Stockreiter provide links between various identities and the deployment of narratives, they do so in pursuit of other topics. McMahon considers markers of stress among elites with the advent of British colonialism, and Stockreiter surveys perceptions that hindered complete abolition.¹⁰

⁴Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 5-6, <https://www-fulcrum-org.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/epubs/nz806231v?locale=en#page=17>.

⁵McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 5.

⁶Elisabeth McMahon, “Marrying Beneath Herself: Women, Affect, and Power in Colonial Zanzibar,” *Africa Today* 61:4 (2015): p. 27, <https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.61.4.27>.

⁷ McMahon, “Marrying Beneath Herself,” p. 37.

⁸ McMahon, “Marrying Beneath Herself,” p. 36.

⁹ Elke E. Stockreiter, “British Perceptions of Concubinage and the Patriarchal Arab Household: The Reluctant Abolition of Slavery in Zanzibar, 1890s–1900s.” *Slavery & Abolition* 36:4 (2015): p. 722, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039x.2015.1062615>.

¹⁰McMahon, “Marrying Beneath Herself,” p. 27.

In essence, discourses concerning relationships in Zanzibar are limited to their inclusion in the study of other processes. However, works such as these assist in supplanting harmful narratives at the heart of the broader historiography.

Many problematic historiographical representations of Zanzibari relationships persist. These include the aforementioned portrayal of Zanzibari marriages as solely economic endeavors but also extend to the depiction of concubines as secondary wives. Abdul Sheriff's "Suria: Concubine or Secondary Slave Wife?" is a glaring example of such representations. Sheriff argues that Islam acknowledged the reality of "cohabitation with slave women" and explicitly recognized the "status and rights of these women and their offspring."¹¹ This illustration fails to reckon with how laws governing concubinage functioned in practice, and such renderings overlook the fact that concubines were slaves and forced to be sexually accessible. Sheriff further declares that concubinage clearly shows that manumission was built into Islamic slavery and that it provided its own mechanisms for the assimilation of slaves into broader society.¹² On the contrary, I argue that enslavement, no matter the unique situation, reaped no benefits for those who suffered it, which is borne out through consideration of the lives of women who experienced concubinage. Utilization of the terms *suria* and "secondary wife" to denote concubines ignores what these women actually experienced - slavery. Historiographical analysis reveals that literature still contains narratives about Zanzibari relationships that were dominant at the turn of the century. For example, a concubine bearing her master's child and gaining a legally and socially enhanced position often lends itself in literature to brushing off concubinage as not true enslavement. Using a deep examination of prevalent arguments and their origins weighed against the actual realities of the women involved, this paper challenges unfair representations and terms like "secondary wife" within this historiography. Such a revision is necessary, as concubinage in Zanzibar is frequently unrecognized, unlike chattel slavery in the Atlantic world. However, like chattel slavery, concubinage in Zanzibar had social, economic, and familial consequences.

Background

In 1840, Sayyid Saïd bin Sultan relocated the capital of the Omani empire to Zanzibar. The move had a profound effect on the islands, increasing the influence of Arabs on the existing cultures and peoples that resided there. Yet, by the late 1800s, there was increased British presence until finally, in 1890, the Zanzibar islands became a British Protectorate. Although sultans still technically sat at the seat of power, they experienced control and pressure from the British colonial government. At the forefront of

¹¹ Abdul Sheriff, Elizabeth Elbourne, and Gwyn Campbell, "Chapter Four: Suria: Concubine or Secondary Slave Wife?," In *Sex, Power, and Slavery*, 99–120, (Athens (OH): Ohio University Press, 2014), p. 99.

¹² Sheriff, "Chapter Four: Suria," p. 100.

British demands was the abolition of slavery, a process that began before Zanzibar became a protectorate of the empire. However total manumission, achieved in 1898, left out a specific category of enslaved persons. Those designated as concubines would not find respite from the horrors of slavery until 1909. British colonial enterprises in Africa often operated under the assumption that freed slaves would be “idle, mischievous, and even dangerous.”¹³ Despite abolition within their own nation, these claims by officials were subtext for the argument that ending all forms of slavery would destabilize society and the labor force, both lending themselves to a successful economy and, therefore, successful British rule.

Common discourses surrounded free and forced relationships. Ethnicity, class, and other motives derived from identity impacted the creation of narratives. The relative freeness of divorce across all, but especially lower and middle classes, became fodder for British criticisms about the moral health of the population. Elements of religion and gender marked divorce proceedings. The quickest method of divorce performed by men consisted of declaring *talaka* (“I renounce you”) at least three times in front of witnesses.¹⁴ If a husband failed to maintain his wife through clothing, food, or other needs she could go to a *kadi*, a judge, and present her grounds for divorce.¹⁵ Customarily, whichever party initiated proceedings paid the entire dowry back, however, men frequently failed to, and women often overpaid to escape a marriage.¹⁶ Sunni law also allowed women to claim divorce if her husband was malformed or impotent and therefore could not engage in sexual activities.¹⁷ Polygyny was a practice in Zanzibar; however, men could not have more than four wives, and each wife could have her own household if she wished.¹⁸ A man needed a solid economic standing to accumulate and provide for multiple wives. Ease of divorce, especially among women, and marriages with multiple partners fueled British criticisms of Zanzibaris as immoral and grossly sexually available.

Relationships also were part of the institution of slavery in Zanzibar. Under Islamic law, the male owner of a female slave retained legal sexual access to her; therefore, any unmarried female slave of a male owner was a potential concubine.¹⁹ Concubinage was extremely prevalent within the islands and

¹³Ahmad Alawad Sikainga, *Slaves into workers: Emancipation and Labor in Colonial Sudan*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), p. 37.

¹⁴W. H. Ingrams, “Native Tribes of Zanzibar: Chapter XX,” In *Zanzibar: Its History and Its People*, 227–45, (Frank Cass & Co., 1931), p. 237.

¹⁵ Ingrams, “Native Tribes of Zanzibar,” p. 237.

¹⁶ Ingrams, “Native Tribes of Zanzibar,” p. 237.

¹⁷ Ingrams, “Native Tribes of Zanzibar,” p. 237.

¹⁸ Ingrams, “Native Tribes of Zanzibar” p. 238.

¹⁹ Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 30.

condoned by free men and free women alike, though women could not own concubines.²⁰ Debates about the status of concubines often contain the argument that, unlike others, if a concubine bore her master a child, she could not be sold and she could become free after her owner died.²¹ Concubines who achieved such status received the title of *umm al-walad*. Yet concubines were slaves, with owners having the right to their labor and to have sex with them.²² Women who did not bear children for their owners could be forced to perform manual labor in fields, and even if a concubine had a child there was no guarantee that her rights under law would translate to reality. Like married women, the children of a concubine did not belong to her. If an owner chose not to recognize the child of a concubine, they would not inherit, and when a child died masters often sold the mothers.²³ Unlike wives, concubines could not go to court to seek divorce from an abusive spouse.²⁴

Orientalist discourses painted concubines as containing sexual prowess and lounging in luxury.²⁵ However, a picture of harems and indulgent lifestyles was far from the truth. Even in harems, men could regulate the reproduction of the concubines within them. This meant that masters could use concubines to produce children and decide when and if a child was to be born, consequently manipulating sexuality as a means of controlling power and inheritance.²⁶ Men from a range of backgrounds, ethnicities, and social classes owned concubines. The popular image of concubines only somewhat resembled reality for those of the sultan, and even then, illustrations overlooked their enslavement, heartbreak, and disempowerment. By examining documents from those who engaged in various discourses, we can uncover competing desires that existed during this time of drastic change in Zanzibari society and reveal the stories of the women who were in the relationships.

British Narratives

Although the British worked closely with Arab elites in Zanzibar, their government ruled the islands, and ultimately, British discourses looked down upon Zanzibari culture. British views on Zanzibar were largely prescribed to Orientalism, and Swahili Zanzibaris were often characterized as uncivilized. The deployment of a discourse that promulgated Zanzibar as inferior to the West was directly tied to British desires to secure power in the region. By exhibiting Zanzibaris as lacking morals, British officials

²⁰ Stockreiter, “British Perceptions of Concubinage,” p. 724.

²¹ Stockreiter, “British Perceptions of Concubinage,” p. 723.

²² Stockreiter, “British Perceptions of Concubinage,” p. 723.

²³ Elisabeth McMahon, “‘Siendi’ (I Won’t Go): Concubines’ Activism in the Abolition of Slavery in the Zanzibar Protectorate.” *Slavery & Abolition* 41:2 (2019): p. 397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039x.2019.1624340>.

²⁴ McMahon, “‘Siendi’ (I Won’t Go),” p. 397.

²⁵ McMahon, “‘Siendi’ (I Won’t Go),” p. 396.

²⁶ Pierce, *The Imperial Harem*, p. 41.

validated their presence and emphasized the need for the empire to continue its colonial activities, which included condoning slavery. Themes of concubines as privileged and unique from other enslaved people justified the continuation of this enslavement in Zanzibar at a time when the British public held strong abolitionist sentiments. British officials believed slavery was the bedrock of societal and economic stability; therefore, in the face of abolition, officials turned a “blind eye,” denying the existence of slavery and resorted to euphemisms like *suria* or secondary wife to describe the practice.²⁷

In the early twentieth century, Godfrey Dale, the Archdeacon of Zanzibar, wrote a book describing the customs of Zanzibar and the work of his mission, including its challenges. Dale made his views on the people of Zanzibar apparent by boldly stating that the “moral condition of the town is very low.”²⁸ Dale drew evidence for this assertion based on how “easy” divorce was and that it would be “difficult to find any married couples that had been faithful to one another for any length of time.”²⁹ Missionaries operated in Zanzibar, and throughout history, missionaries have actively supported colonial efforts by promoting Western culture. By painting Zanzibar as in dire need of saviorism, Dale promoted the necessity for missionary work and encouraged the larger colonial project. By publishing this narrative in a public book, Dale demonstrates how colonial actors spread this narrative to a broader audience – specifically the greater British population. Dale, of course, was far from the only British official to hold these views. British colonial officials also expressed that Zanzibar was not fit to govern itself by using this discourse about immorality to draw larger implications. This included blaming Swahilis and other Zanzibaris for the population decrease, which was the result of “individual independence” causing “almost general immorality” amongst “the slaves and freed slaves.”³⁰ One colonial official went as far as to say that “the whole affair is summed up in the excessive and improper use of the sexual act.”³¹ In deploying the tale that divorce and freer sex caused fewer Zanzibaris to have children, the British asserted that the population was not disciplined enough to sustain its numbers.

The purposeful application of this discourse was not something that went unnoticed. Further proof of British intent unveils itself through an argument recorded by the Foreign Office. The dispute was between Theodore Burt, the Secretary of the Friends Industrial Mission, a Quaker missionary, and Basil Cave. Cave served as the Consul-General while Arthur Hardinge was away from the islands, and later replaced him in the role. The disagreement sparked from Burt taking issue with statements

²⁷ Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers*, p. 38.

²⁸ Godfrey Dale, *Peoples of Zanzibar, Their Customs and Religious Beliefs*, (Westminster: The Universities’ Mission to Central Africa, 1920), p. 17, *HathiTrust Digital Library*.

²⁹ Dale, *The Peoples of Zanzibar*, p. 17.

³⁰ J.T. Last, “Inclosure 2 in No. 7: Notes by Mr. Last on the Decrease of the Population of the Island of Zanzibar,” In *Part XCV. Further Correspondence Respecting East Africa, April to June 1908, Confidential Print: Africa, 1834-1966*, (November 1908), p. 28.

³¹ Last, “Inclosure 2 in No. 7,” p. 28.

made by J.P. Farler and published by the Foreign Office. The Quaker took exception to assertions by Farler about the “immorality” in Zanzibar, feeling that the statements were “injurious” to mission work, and “so absolutely at variance with the facts.”³² Burttt angrily wrote to Cave saying that, “In spite of Pemba being now ‘one huge brothel,’ as Mr. Farler says, he can only report 166 convictions for adultery during the year. Formerly I was constantly being applied to by men for medicine for diseases caused by immorality. I have not now one-tenth of the number of these cases I then had: this applies to fully a year before the arrival of the Government doctor in the island.”³³ By refuting statements about immorality made by colonial officials, Burttt called into question the entire discourse and threatened the narrative and its objectives. Such a bold attack required an equally forceful defense. Cave readily supplied this, retorting: “I very much wish that I could agree with you that the moral condition of the people is better than it was six years ago; unfortunately, my own experience, and that of the Executive officers of the Administration, who are, I think, in a better position to form an opinion on the subject than anyone else, has led me to an exactly opposite conclusion, and one that has been repeatedly confirmed by native evidence.”³⁴ Although, at first glance, the heated debate may appear to be a petty squabble between two professionals, the exchange reveals how crucial this discourse about relationships in Zanzibar was to achieving British aims on the islands. Good sexual health and strong relationships damaged British arguments about the necessity of their presence and indicated that the British were not needed for society to function in Zanzibar. Perhaps more importantly, challenging descriptions of Zanzibaris as immoral cast doubt upon the need for slavery to continue, as “moral” slaves did not need masters and could be socially and economically competent on their own.

An interesting duality existed in British colonial narratives about Zanzibar. The discourse was often based along ethnic and class lines, with non-elites regarded as immoral and higher social circles, such as elite Arabs, painted as more controlled. In his book *Zanzibar and Contemporary Times*, Robert Lyne wrote that Arab boys stayed home with concubines given to them by their fathers, while Swahili youths “exercised no restraint upon themselves” and that none was “imposed upon them by their parents.”³⁵ In this statement, the member of the Zanzibar government service connects immorality to lack of ability to parent children, further implying that British colonialism was necessary to look after the population. The official went further, expressing that “intense love between a man and a wife,”

³² Theodore Burttt, “Inclosure 1 in No. 23: Mr. T. Burttt to Mr. Cave,” Part LXXIII, *Correspondence Respecting East Africa, April to June 1903*, (November 1904), p. 47.

³³ Burttt, “Inclosure 1 in No. 23,” p. 48.

³⁴ Basil S. Cave, “Inclosure 3 in No. 23: Mr. Cave to Mr. T. Burttt.” *Correspondence Respecting East Africa, April to June 1903*, (November 1904), p. 50.

³⁵ Robert Lyne, “Chapter XIX. The People,” Essay, In *Zanzibar in Contemporary Times*, (Darf Publishers, 1987), p. 235.

such as that capable of Europeans, Swahili Zanzibaris had no capacity for.³⁶ Discourse depicting non-Arab Zanzibaris as lacking morals and, therefore, love led to notions that they were subhuman. However, although lower classes, especially non-Arabs, were distinctively attacked, higher social classes were not always protected. This duality is shown when colonial officials lambasted the sultan for what they believed was disreputable behavior. In reporting about the sultan and his administration, a British official snapped that, “His Highness does not make up by any private virtues for what he lacks of capacity properly to fulfill his public duties.”³⁷ The official, J.W. Clarke, went on to criticize an attempted divorce of the sultan, and his habit of having his personnel bring beautiful girls they found to the palace.³⁸ Even Lyne, who previously disparaged Swahili Zanzibaris in comparison to Arabs, chided an Arab doctor for taking a fifteen-year-old concubine when he was over seventy.³⁹

The larger British colonial discourse had a complex relationship with Arabs of high social status. While discourse usually created negative depictions of the lower classes and non-Arabs, Arab elites and their relationships were not always free from criticism, yet officials treated them with less condemnation. This is particularly displayed through the practice of concubinage. Arthur Hardinge, the British Consul General to Zanzibar, wrote to the Earl of Kimberly, recounting the travels of Mr. Donald Mackenzie around Zanzibar. Hardinge commented that Mackenzie believed that even if slavery was abolished, concubinage “would have to be retained” as it was an essential feature of Arab domestic life and family.⁴⁰ Hardinge wrote that he strongly agreed with Mackenzie, yet in the same letter also called the practice “disturbing.”⁴¹ While governing Zanzibar, people in the British government formed many of their opinions of concubinage from interactions with the sultan, and wealthier members of society. Despite any personal disgust an official had for concubinage, depictions from the sultan and other elites about the necessity of concubinage to the social fabric were not lost on them nor the wish for Zanzibar to remain a successful protectorate serving British interests. Reviling harems and concubines did not assist in keeping stability on the islands, or so the British believed, and therefore discourse soon adapted to fit this goal. Using Arab elites and the sultan for much of their

³⁶ Lyne, “Chapter XIX. The People,” p. 236.

³⁷ A.W. Clarke, “Inclosure in No. 15: Report by Mr. Clarke on His Mission to Zanzibar,” In *Correspondence Relating to the Attitude Assumed by the Sultan of Zanzibar with Regard to the Administration of Zanzibar, Confidential Print: Africa, 1834-1966*, (January 1907), p. 32.

³⁸ Clarke, “Inclosure in No. 15,” p. 32.

³⁹ Lyne, “Chapter XIX. The People,” p. 220.

⁴⁰ Arthur Hardinge, “No. 80: Mr. A. Hardinge to the Earl of Kimberly,” In *Part XLI. Further Correspondence Respecting East Africa, April to June 1895, Confidential Print: Africa, 1834-1966*, (January 1896), p. 82.

⁴¹ Hardinge, “No. 80,” p. 82.

evidence, the larger discourse of British officials soon portrayed concubines as women who lived in absolute comfort, even though they were enslaved, and most concubines were not part of such spaces.

Elite Arab Discourse

When ethnically Arab Zanzibaris, who inhabited the highest circles of society, experienced British imposition, there was an immediate struggle for control. The British protectorate threatened elite Arab power not only by taking over governance but also through limitations on and abolition of slavery. As previously discussed, this is a topic Elisabeth McMahon meticulously addresses in “Marrying Beneath Herself: Women, Affect, and Power in Colonial Zanzibar.” This work speaks to how, when confronted with the loss of authority, elite Arabs, especially men, focused on control of female bodies to cope with lessening power. The setting that McMahon describes perfectly corresponds to understanding the position of Salamah bint Saïd.

Initially published in 1888, the memoir of Saïd, also known as Emily Ruete, is an invaluable source in understanding discourse produced by elite Arabs concerning free and forced relationships during this period.⁴² The daughter of Sayyid Saïd bin Sultan, the ruler who moved the capital of Oman to Zanzibar, Ruete would later flee the islands after she became pregnant and married a German man. The author published *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess* in Europe during increased British activity in Zanzibar and when Orientalism existed as a mainstream discipline. The author represents the agenda of elite Arabs to push back on Orientalist views of their culture as less than, and the East as weaker compared to the formidable West. In her book Ruete addresses the “...disproof in the fiction as the Eastern woman’s ‘inferiority.’”⁴³ One of the ways Emily Ruete combats British and orientalist narratives is through her defense of relationships in Zanzibar. In *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, Ruete defends the ease of divorce in Zanzibar, stating that: “A couple unacquainted before marriage sometimes find[s] agreement difficult or impossible, and the Mahometan rule of easy divorce hence proves undoubtedly beneficial.”⁴⁴ The author cements her argument by declaring that “Surely it is better that a pair radically differing in opinions and character should separate peacefully, than be chained together for their whole lives...”⁴⁵ By refuting British discourse on Zanzibari marital customs, Ruete supports elite Arabs from attacks on their power, revealing their practices to be sensible and wise, alluding that elite Arabs are worthy of leading the islands.

Another feature of the British narrative about relationships in Zanzibar was contempt for the relative freedom of sex and the existence of polygyny. Many Europeans were horrified at the more

⁴² Emily Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, 2nd ed., (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1907).

⁴³ Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, p. 123.

⁴⁴ Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, p. 122.

⁴⁵ Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, p. 122.

casual nature of sexual relations and the practice of men marrying multiple women in the East. Europeans, specifically the British, utilized such customs to fuel imagery of the East as immoral and, therefore, debilitated by lust. In her book, Emily Ruete defends her culture from such accusations by placing women in relationships at the center of stable family life. The author maintains that “While a fashionable Englishwoman is expected to look into the nursery once every twenty-four hours, and a Frenchwoman sends her offspring to the country, where they are taken charge of by strangers, the Arabian woman tends to hers with minute care and circumstance, scarcely letting them out of her sight so long as they require motherly love and tutelage.”⁴⁶ Ruete goes even further by directly asserting that “Intense love, deep respect, are her reward; her relations with her little ones compensate her for the detriments of polygamy.”⁴⁷ By connecting impeccable virtues to those in polygamous relationships, Ruete opposes the orientalist vision of Arab sexual decadency and portrays such traits as washing away any possible detriments obtained from polygyny. Therefore, Ruete is not only associating the relationships in her culture with qualities counter to Orientalism but also advocating against any need to change these relationships.

In her quest to portray relationships in Zanzibar as fit for European society, Ruete addresses concubinage in the islands. A child of the sultan, Ruete was not born from a wife but conceived by one of his many concubines. Viewing concubinage in the opulence of the palace of the sultan undoubtedly affected the perception and agenda of Ruete towards enslavement. The princess declares that “Slaves at the beginning, motherhood insures them emancipation.”⁴⁸ This statement is so inaccurate that even Ruete admits later that, “In rare cases cruel masters will sell them after the child’s death...”⁴⁹ The author grossly downplays the reality of forced sex slavery, and Ruete sums up her overly rosy perception of concubinage by declaring that, “[the raising of children] lies entirely in the mother’s hands, be she a regular wife or an acquired slave, and therein she is most fortunate.”⁵⁰ Enslaved women used for sex were certainly not among the lucky, and even the very mother of Ruete had to rely upon the inheritance of her child, as the sultan left his concubines little when he died.⁵¹ Emily Ruete also exhibits how historical discourse can still influence academic writing in the present day.

In *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, on multiple occasions, Ruete uses the term “secondary wife” to refer to concubines. Such phrasing deliberately gave the bondage a more positive connotation. In addition, using “secondary wife” as a synonym implied that concubines were somehow removed from slavery and its horrors, therefore helping to perpetuate the narrative that concubinage should not be

⁴⁶ Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, p. 120.

⁴⁷ Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, p. 120.

⁴⁸ Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, p. 117.

⁴⁹ Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, p. 117.

⁵⁰ Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, p. 120.

⁵¹ Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, p. 110.

outlawed. Ruete even boldly declares that concubines are different from slaves remarking that: “Of course none but wealthy men can afford to purchase secondary wives.”⁵² Not only does Ruete again employ the phrase “secondary wife” but she also creates the illusion that only rich men bought concubines. In truth, unlike wives, these enslaved women were held by all classes in Zanzibar. As mentioned, such images of concubines as “secondary wives” disastrously permeate scholarly writing to this day. Abdul Sheriff and his illusions of concubines (or as he calls them *surias*), as somehow a positive exception to other forms of slavery, are detrimental to the historical record. Scholars who continue to use this construction not only damage the accuracy of history but also rely on a discourse created in part to affirm British abstention from ending concubinage.

Emily Ruete and her representation of concubinage was clearly biased by her upbringing, but also assembled with the aim for her book to reach European audiences, and more importantly to impact British ideas on the matter. By illustrating concubines as only owned by men of wealth, Ruete encourages the British portrait of concubines as living in splendor and embarking on sexual escapades, a far cry from slavery. When referring to concubines as “secondary wives” Ruete makes it easier for the British to justify the practice as different, and therefore themselves not accountable to ban it, unlike slavery. In making concubinage more palatable, Ruete supports and helps to protect the British government from ire towards the continued existence of enslavement, despite promises to end it. In exchange, Ruete and other elite Arabs continued the practice and carried on their argument that concubinage was a necessary element of Zanzibari society. Therefore, elite Arabs were able to hold power over female bodies in response to a loss of control due to British rule.

Lastly, when Ruete defends Zanzibari relationships against Orientalist and British perspectives and reimagines what concubinage is, she does so distinctly for ethnic Arabs. In her quest to influence British discourse on Zanzibari free and forced relationships, Ruete protects ethnically Arab relationships by disparaging non-Arab, usually ethnically African, ones. The author, like the British, harbors a very apparent prejudice for Swahilis and other Africans. Ruete labels formerly enslaved non-Arab Zanzibaris as “grown-up liberated infants” and “tramps,” echoing European and British depictions.⁵³ Although British officials would at times voice snide opinions about Arabs, they were much more consistent and blistering in their racist criticism of Swahilis and other Africans. Ruete and other Arab elites played upon this duality. The author utilizes existing racism against Africans in Zanzibar, to uplift Arabs and combat British criticisms of their relationships. This tactic is visible when Ruete says that “...a good Arab would think he was dishonoring himself did he [beat his wife]...With the Negroes the matter stands differently...I have often interfered and made peace between a pair lustily

⁵² Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, p. 117.

⁵³ Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, p. 167.

belaboring each other.”⁵⁴ Ruete attempts a more favorable image of Arab relationships by tearing down non-Arab ones and fuels British views of Africans as uncivilized and uncontrolled sexually.

Uncovering the stories of Zanzibari women

Very few primary accounts from women exist concerning relationships in Zanzibar, especially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The main exception is Emily Ruete, and her memoir speaks mainly to those of the elite upper class. The question remains, what of Zanzibari women? What about their narratives? Many of the primary sources available are produced by men, while many of the discourses take aim at women. Although Zanzibari men also experienced negative portrayals, for women there was a special viciousness that came with the discourses. Women in Zanzibar had more sexual and marital freedom, a space contrary to Western gender norms, which was unacceptable. Moreover, women became prey for narratives on and struggles over their bodies when the process of slow abolition began. Scholarship needs to take an active role in examining sources to find traces of where Zanzibari women asserted their own discourse. This can especially be found in official documents where women made their mark by standing up for themselves and fighting for their relationships, bodies, and freedom. Zanzibari women revealing their own truths is also visible in cultural productions.

In 1897, a debate erupted between Arthur Hardinge, the British Consul General to Zanzibar, and Theodore Burt. The cause of the strife was an enslaved girl named Hamida, who lived with her mistress in Ole.⁵⁵ The brother of her mistress, a man named Masoud, had previously made sexual advances upon Hamida. Despite finding such actions disturbing and despising the sexual attention of Masoud, as an enslaved woman Hamida was in no position to easily defend herself. The situation took an especially lecherous turn when Masoud implored his sister, Binti Abdulrahim, to make Hamida his regular concubine.⁵⁶ Binti Abdulrahim rejected Masoud, referencing the intense dislike the girl had for him. Hamida would later appeal to a *wali*, a legal guardian, for protection, after hearing that Masoud intended to kidnap her.⁵⁷ Heated letters were passed between the Quaker and the Consul General concerning whether Hamida prevailed in receiving sanctuary from the *Wali*. Burt declared that Hamida “...suffer[ed] terribly” and that “no redress came from the Wali.”⁵⁸ Hardinge, for his part, claimed that upon his own investigation, he received “satisfactory” explanations from the *Wali*, and

⁵⁴ Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, p. 118.

⁵⁵ Arthur Hardinge, “No. 61,” *Part LII. Further Correspondence Respecting East Africa, January to March 1898*, (June 1899), p. 59.

⁵⁶ Hardinge, “No. 61,” p. 59.

⁵⁷ Hardinge, “No. 61,” p. 59.

⁵⁸ Hardinge, “No. 61,” p. 59.

said the *Wali* even disregarded witnesses brought by Masoud.⁵⁹ Hardinge also stated that Hamida herself told him that since her complaint she was “free from any further molestation.”⁶⁰

Historian Elisabeth McMahon utilizes the documents about Hamida in a forthcoming book chapter entitled: “Hamida’s Radical Refusal: Enslaved Girlhood and Concubinage in Colonial Zanzibar.” McMahon points to Hamida “...questioning her forced position of sexual slavery,” and contends that “Her challenge raised the specter that consent was a central tenant of concubinage in Islamic society.”⁶¹ The historian skillfully dissects the case and in parts of the chapter addresses the individual narrative of Hamida buried within colonial letters.

Although there are many facets to explore in this case, what is most important about the correspondence is that Hamida said no. The girl took charge and action over her own personhood and bodily autonomy, not only going against the societal expectations for women and slaves at the time but also hitting back at discourses that painted concubines as advantaged or part of the family. In addition, the refusal of her mistress, Binti Abdulrahim, to let her brother have Hamida, citing the wish of Hamida to not be his concubine, speaks to women in Zanzibari society having a contrasting vision of what concubinage really entailed. To deny the desire of her brother, particularly in a patriarchal society, indicates that Abdulrahim associated serious consequences with concubinage. This shows that Zanzibari women had a vastly different discourse about their own relationships and sexual experiences, far disparate from those of British officials and Arab elites.

Like Hamida, few other women came through the woodwork to assert their own stories. In an 1899 report about the effect of the decree abolishing the legal status of slavery, British Commissioner for Pemba J.P. Farler submitted his findings to Brigadier General of Zanzibar Lloyd Mathews. In the report, Farler notes that forty-two concubines attempted to secure their freedom with the proclamation, despite the 1897 decree recognizing concubinage.⁶² Twenty-eight of the women succeeded in arguing for their liberty. Although it is easy to overlook details such as this, these inclusions are vital to uncovering the stories of women in Zanzibar. By taking bold initiative to fight to leave their masters, these women and their decision refute characterizations that concubines were happy where they were.

⁵⁹ Arthur Hardinge, “Inclosure 5 in No. 61: Sir A. Hardinge to Mr. T. Burt,” *Part LII. Further Correspondence Respecting East Africa*, January to March 1898, (June 1899), p. 63.

⁶⁰ Hardinge, “Inclosure 5 in No. 61,” p. 63.

⁶¹ Elisabeth McMahon, “Hamida’s Radical Refusal: Enslaved Girlhood and Concubinage in Colonial Zanzibar,” In *African Girlhood*, edited by Marla Jaksch and Cymone Fourshey, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), pp. 1-2.

⁶² J.P. Farler, “Inclosure 2 in No. 1: Commissioner Farler to Sir Ll. Mathews,” *East Africa. Confidential*, (1900), p. 13.

A civil appeal from 1931 also features a woman taking back control after experiencing a prior forced relationship. Although this case is out of the period this paper considers, the facts of the case pertain to events during the turn of the century in Zanzibar. In the case, the appellant Bahati binti Serenge sues a man named Mohamed bin Musabin Shirazi over ownership of a shamba. While on the surface presenting as a land dispute, the deeper battle was between Serenge and her former owner, a man named Abdulla bin Amir, who sold the shamba her late husband left her.⁶³ Serenge alleges that she previously inherited the shamba from her now-dead husband Songoro and that bin Amir asked Serenge if he could look after it.⁶⁴ Serenge states that she agreed, and leased the shamba, depositing the money to bin Amir for safekeeping.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, bin Amir declares that the shamba belonged to him the entire time and that he could rightfully sell it to bin Musabin Shirazi. In the end, Serenge lost the case, and her subsequent appeal was also denied.

This is not simply a case of a woman attempting to assert control back over her property. Serenge was the former concubine of bin Amir, and she previously bore him a child who died.⁶⁶ *Civil Appeal No. 15* displays the dynamics between a concubine and her master and desires outside of the forced relationship. The story of Serenge challenges the illusion of concubines and their children as cared for. Her former owner, bin Amir, used Serenge for her body and fertility and terminated any appearance of responsibility to her after the child died. Perhaps more significantly, the case shows Serenge and her identity outside of a forced relationship. She had economic pursuits and goals pertaining to the shamba and participated in a consensual marriage. Serenge was not a sexual woman in luxury, but one who built her own destiny and took charge to make her own choices about her relationships.

Serenge gives one of many glimpses in official documents of concubines and their experiences with love. In a 1902 slavery report, Farler mentions concubines applying for their freedom, hoping to make use of possible loopholes in the 1897 decree. Of course, this is a testament to the determination of these women to not be in sexual slavery, but Farler introduces another interesting note. The Commissioner of Pemba remarks that “...in almost every case of a suria applying for freedom, there is a man, other than the husband, in the background.”⁶⁷ The report illuminates how women actively sought their own happiness through chosen partnerships and fiercely fought against pressures and forced situations. Through going to court, these concubines prove that women utilized intelligent legal maneuvers to make themselves available to participate in free relationships. Such initiative details

⁶³ *Civil Appeal No. 15* (His Highness the Sultan’s Court for Zanzibar 1931): p. 6.

⁶⁴ *Civil Appeal No.15*, p. 6.

⁶⁵ *Civil Appeal No. 15*, p. 6.

⁶⁶ *Civil Appeal No. 15*, p. 6.

⁶⁷ J.P. Farler, “Inclosure 3 in No. 26: Slavery Report for 1902 by Mr. Farler,” *Part LXXIII. Further Correspondence Respecting East Africa, April to June 1903*, (November 1904), p. 109.

discourse that showcased Zanzibaris as ignorant, only interested in sexual pleasure, and incapable of serious marital commitments.

Concluding Thoughts

Discourses about Zanzibari relationships in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the product of various agendas. British colonial officials sought to cement hegemony and territorial control over the islands. Arab elites scrambled to find other places to consolidate power. Identity markers such as ethnicity, class, and gender all impacted characterizations about relationships in Zanzibar. However, central to this work is attention to discrepancies in current historiography, and traces of discourse by Zanzibari women. Through detailed attention and study of what the narratives were and why they arose, scholars can distinguish narratives with motives that they themselves may promulgate. This pursuit is necessary to try to create a more genuine historical record of Zanzibar and to address colonial influence within existing academia.