



Her Story: The Struggles and Characteristics of the Kilimanjaro Woman

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An Inability to Know

“He went to live with another woman but then would come back here to take money and spend it on alcohol. Sometimes he would threaten to kill me,” Mama Grace says to me in Swahili as her wrinkled, worn hands gently dip a shirt in and out of a soapy bucket. Mama Grace, 52, spent her life selling the vegetables she grew on a small plot of land for a bit of money, taking care of her children, and letting her now-deceased husband take everything from her at his convenience.

Her story is not unique for Tanzanian women. In the Kilimanjaro region women bear the brunt of work: They have to take care of their animals and crops, clean the home, cook for the family, and pay school fees for their children, all the while subservient to their husbands and every other man in their lives. Tanzanian women in this region think of themselves not just as wife and mother, but also as producer, cultivator and laborer.¹

During my 10-week stay at the Women’s Education and Economic Centre (WEECE) in Moshi,² I interviewed 25 women who were, in one way or another, receiving WEECE assistance. These interviews were different from the numerous interviews I had done for my work on the *Justice* newspaper, a Brandeis University student publication. Instead of interviewing people in a setting such as Einstein’s Coffee Shop, I interviewed them in their own homes. During these interviews I was accompanied by a translator.³ Even though none of the women had enough time to sit down for a proper interview, I learned about the complexity of their lives.

1. Marjorie J. Mbilinyi, “The ‘New Woman and Traditional Norms in Tanzania,” *Modern African Studies* 55-72 (1992).

2. The Women’s Education and Economic Centre supports marginalized women and their families in the Kilimanjaro region through micro-finance, legal counseling, vocational training and by setting up community banks. “The Women’s Education and Economic Centre,” last accessed 2010, <http://www.weece.org/>

3. For my methodology I interviewed women with a translator, recorded their stories on a voice recorder and also took notes. I also took photographs of their homes and families.

Speaking to me while taking care of their children and/or tending to the chores of their households, I noticed the many similarities these women shared. None of the women, for example, legally owned their own property. Most did not have an education past the American equivalent of 4th grade. This while their brothers had been afforded the luxury of finishing school. And perhaps more importantly, many of the women I interviewed had experienced domestic violence, acts they attributed to faults of their own.

It was in the spirit of diversity and openness to other cultures that I arrived in Tanzania. Raised in a very liberal home in Chicago, my childhood included exposure to every ethnicity one could imagine. I have celebrated Christmas a week after December 25th with my Serbian Orthodox friend; I have performed traditional Indian dances with my Indian friend; and I have learned tai chi from my elderly Chinese neighbor. When I came to Tanzania I assumed I would be able to get to know these women. What I found instead was that getting to know Tanzanian women was not as easy as getting to know my Chinese neighbor or my Serbian friend.

After the first interviews and giving my first few lessons on women’s rights to the students in the vocational school, I felt confused and even angry about the status of women in this region. I knew that the Tanzanian constitution “prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex...and consolidating laws

and jurisprudence regarding property rights.”⁴ Yet I learned that Tanzanian laws are not being followed in creating gender equity. In the Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania where there is a traditional division of labor by sex and in marriage relationships, traditional values almost always will trump the existing laws.⁵ Upholding traditions was a form of Tanzanian resistance to colonization.

Life for a woman living in the Kilimanjaro region is one of challenges and struggles that I have not experienced in my own life. In this paper I present four portraits: Mama Grace⁶ reveals how the residue of Chagga tradition preserves gender roles; Jenny demonstrates the role of education in maintaining gender norms; Mama Tiffania shows a woman's role in the family; and the final portrait of a Maasai village illustrates the role of men in the struggles women face. Each portrait reveals how traditionalism, education and domestic violence help shape the nature of the Kilimanjaro woman.

Mama Grace: The Residue of Chagga Tradition

Mama Grace picks up a piece of cloth, dips it in her soapy bucket, wrings it, scrubs it, and sets it in another bucket of water. She repeats this again and again. Her behavior as she washes her clothes reminds me of when I do laundry in my dorm. When I do a mundane task such as this, I listen to my iPod, read the *New York Times* or zone out. Unlike Mama Grace I do not, while washing socks, tell a life story full of abuse and inequality. I watch her toil, pounding and scrubbing the fabrics of her daily life, washing and rinsing. This is Mama Grace's story.

Mama Grace was born in the Chagga village of Marangu, just outside of Moshi, and she completed only primary education. She didn't have much money, so she did what most women in that position do: she got married. “Economically, politically and symbolically,” marriage has always been a part of initiation into womanhood for Chagga women.⁷ Women could not obtain property without a husband because of the patrilineal society; marriage made this possible.

Mama Grace and her husband Alex had two boys and five girls; one of those girls died. The family spent some time in Arusha, a large city, before returning to Moshi.

4. “Securing Women's Interests within Land Tenure Reforms: Recent Debates in Tanzania,” *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 149 (2003): accessed November 3, 2010.

5. “Economic and Property Rights of Women,” *Annual Review of Population Law*, 130 (1990): accessed October 29, 2010.

6. Mama is how a Tanzanian woman is addressed if she is older or in a position of authority. Mama can be attached to a last name, but it is typically attached to a first name.

7. Karen Porter, “Gender and Education in Tanzanian Schools,” *African Studies Review* (2003)

“We stayed in peace, until one day Alex and his parents started bringing conflict,” Grace tells me.

Alex left Grace and went to live with another woman, and Grace had to take care of the children and the land. Divorce is frowned upon, thus Grace began to build a new home on the land while still married to Alex. One day, he returned and said he was back to live with Grace. Chagga households were traditionally polygamous before Christian missionaries came and taught people to live monogamously. Each wife in a polygamous union was given her own homestead with her own field that she was to tend. She normally brought her own cattle and goats, as women still do as part of a dowry, that she could control. The land was ultimately in a man's control, but because he had many wives, his focus was not always on one specific wife and he felt power.⁸ I find irony in this and have trouble believing that polygamy could be more liberating for women. Grace had no control in this situation.

“His family told him to take the house from me and the children and to leave me again,” Grace explains.

Alex began to beat Grace and take the food she prepared for the children for himself. He constantly referred to Grace as a witch and continued to beat her.

Based on the World Health Organization Study of Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women, 32.9 percent of Tanzanian women living in an urban setting were physically abused and 46.7 percent of women living in a rural community in Tanzania, very similar to the Kilimanjaro region, were physically abused. Women have an increased likelihood of being abused if they are unable to bear children, have more than five children, have less than a primary level of education, if they have a partner who does not contribute financially, or if their partner has other partners. Also, according to the study, these percentages are high because of the “strict patriarchal family structure.”⁹

8. R.E. Downs, Donna O. Kerner, Stephen P. Reyna, *The Political Economy of African Famines* (Langhorne, Pennsylvania: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1993), 263-266.

9. Connie Mitchell, *Intimate Partner Violence: A Health-Based Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. 2009), 72.

▼ “His family told him to take the house from me and the children and to leave me again,” Grace explains.

After enduring abuse, Grace went to the head of Alex's home village. She expected to be helped, but instead the leader sided with Alex's story and believed his refusal. This was because Grace, as a woman, was only a part of the household and Alex was seen as the head of that household. Also, Alex's actions were probably seen as typical for how a man should run his household.

Soon after, Alex became an alcoholic. The alcoholism heightened his abusive tendencies. I knew alcoholism was a problem in Tanzania. I felt the pervasiveness of it with every step I took to work in the morning, my sandals stepping on small, empty plastic packets of Konyagi alcohol.

When Alex was at the peak of his alcohol problem, one year after Grace tried to report him, he surrounded the home with firewood and threatened to burn down the house. Grace was inside with the children. She talked him out of burning down the modest home she had built but was ultimately powerless as a woman. The chief of the village would not listen to her.

Alex even tried to sell the house and told Grace he would leave her and the children with nothing. At this point I ask Grace when she went to WEECE for help. I had seen several WEECE counseling sessions, and my supervisor had explained that Grace had received counseling. WEECE provides legal support to women in situations such as Grace's that typically would not be disputed in a court. Grace went to WEECE during the time Alex tried to sell their home. Grace explained that the situation turned into an ongoing battle between the legal advisors and WEECE, who argued that the land was a family plot. In the midst of these battles, Grace's husband became sick with liver disease caused by alcohol. He died soon after.

Grace's sigh of relief as she says this makes me think that nothing would have changed had Alex lived. I think that Grace also feels that way. Perhaps Grace's skepticism is because the law is not exactly on her side. The Marriage Act of 1971 is a declaration against spousal battery, but it does not prohibit it nor does it state any punishment. This is based on traditional customs, which aid in subordinating women. When husbands abuse their wives, it is seen as punishment the women deserve.¹⁰ Since traditional customs stand directly in the way of the legal system and political progression, for Grace, the death of her husband was beneficial for her future.

10. "Tanzania: AFROL Gender Profiles" US Department of State, CIA, *Mundo negro*, accessed November 6, 2010, http://www.afrol.com/Categories/Women/profiles/tanzania_women.htm

Grace is now part of a village community bank¹¹ at WEECE where she saves money to keep the small bit of land she has, and to take care of her children and grandchildren.

Many of the women in Grace's village community bank (or "VICOBA") have dealt with abuse similar to hers. In a study conducted in Moshi, 21 percent of the women reported being physically abused in the past 12 months. The majority of those women (48 percent) were Chagga.¹² This number is similar to the percentage of abuse reported in the women's lifetimes, which suggests that women stay with their partners after being abused. The study also suggested that women who were taking non-traditional roles (working for a bit of money), received more abuse. "Men's increased contributions to the household are associated with decreased violence against their wives."¹³ Grace had no choice but to try to provide an income for her family in Alex's absence, but this could have been threatening to his masculinity.

In the past few years, Chagga women like Grace have been garnering more domestic power in their agricultural and household economic ventures. Traditionally, Chagga women are expected to care for the crops and provide sustenance in the family while the men provide substantial monetary support. These roles are becoming more intertwined in Tanzania's current economy. Much of the crops Grace grows are for her family, but she also is selling them to make an income for her family. As more and more women develop their own economic unions like VICOBA's, men feel increasingly emasculated. These men escalate their "expressions of power" through the use of violence.

"Chagga men always do like that," Grace says.

Negative aspects of Chagga tradition are residual in Grace's life and in the lives of many women like her.

"Chagga men never care about the family. Only the women care for the fees, food, everything," she tells me as she drapes the last of her laundry over the swinging clothing line.

11. Village community banks are groups of women from similar areas. They share a metal box that they use as their bank. The small scale banking system is a way the women can achieve some financial independence without men. WEECE.org, accessed November 6, 2010, http://weece.org/microloans_microfinance.html

12. A study approved by the Harvard School of Public Health; by the Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Centre Research and Ethical Clearance Committee, by the National Institute for Medical Research and the United Republic of Tanzania conducted in Moshi, "Gender Inequality and Intimate Partner Violence among Women in Moshi, Tanzania" *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 31(2005): accessed November 6, 2010.

13. "Gender Inequality and Intimate Partner Violence among Women in Moshi, Tanzania" *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 40-501(2005): accessed November 6, 2010.

Jenny: The Role of Education in Maintaining Gender Roles

My supervisor had mentioned once in passing that Jenny would be a great person to interview. Since Jenny and I had become friends, I thought I would interview her on the spur of the moment at a time when both of us were free. Our interview happened on a normal day after class. This was the only interview for which I did not need a translator.

“*Sawa* (OK) class. Now open Word and type a short story about a *simba* (lion),” I say to my class of girls. Before the students’ fingers even touch their keyboards, Jenny strolls in humming an unfamiliar tune and yells, “Put the computers away. We will go to sewing now.”

Jenny is a fantastic teacher, at times tough but still always laughing with her students. Her relationship to some students is that of friendship. I learned on my first day that she was once a student at WEECE’s vocational school for girls who could not go to “normal” school, due to economic reasons or family apathy toward education. However, I have yet to learn why. Jenny’s interruption piqued my interest. I admired her teaching abilities but did not understand where she received her skills. If she had attended a vocational school, there was no way she could have gone to a teacher’s college. Teacher’s college requires secondary schooling (or high school). I decide that today I would try to hear Jenny’s story.

“How did you end up at WEECE?” I ask her during the girls’ recess.

Jenny laughs the loud, cackling laugh that has become so familiar to me. After joking around and avoiding the question, Jenny looks me in the eye and her lips tighten up.

“My father was not good.” She laughs again, this time nervously. She then tells me her father decided to leave her family when she was just 14.

“He didn’t come one day again,” she says.

At the time, she was living in Marangu¹⁴ with her younger sister and older brother. Jenny’s mother could not afford to pay for her school fees. Jenny had to stop attending school. She struggled to help her mother tend to the animals and crops for several years until she met her husband, nephew to the director of WEECE. He told her about WEECE’s vocational school. Soon after, Jenny became a student there.

14. Marangu is a small, rural village near Mount Kilimanjaro. It is almost all Chagga people, who cultivate coffee and bananas. United Nations Environment Programme-WO, “Kilimanjaro National Park, Tanzania,” *The Encyclopedia of Earth* 115 (2009): accessed November 14, 2010

She excelled at sewing. Jenny adorns herself in beautifully self-made clothes sewn from scraps from the vocational school. Her outfits are always brightly colored, with traditional Tanzanian flair. To me, someone who habitually wears jeans and muted colors,

Jenny’s clothing seems gaudy. They embody her curves just as much as they embody who Jenny really is: sometimes loud and creative but also deeply traditional.

“Dada, do you want to know how I learned English? From you. People like you who come here,” she says. I am puzzled. *People like me* are usually students from the west, who come here for a brief time to volunteer or go on safari. At WEECE, visiting teachers are encouraged to speak English all the time and to make sure the students are also speaking English. Jenny listens carefully to the visiting co-teachers and also strikes up conversations with them frequently.

Jenny’s English is not perfect since she is learning it from very temporary relationships. Every time she means to say “me too” or “me also” she says “even me.” As we pass a small bar blasting Celine Dion from the radio she tells me, “Even me. I like this song so much.” Her English is impressive for someone who has not completed secondary school. Most Tanzanian women I have met in Moshi do not speak English. Chagga families believe that educated women are harder to control, and if the women are “out of control” they are not desirable for marriage. Older Chagga men and women believe that schooling contributes to a girl’s moral decline.¹⁵

Schools in this area teach about “foreign things,” for instance, illustrating American ways of life through media such as literature and film. This is threatening to a patriarchal society dependent on maintaining tradition. I have studied feminism and issues with patriarchal systems in my own studies at Brandeis University. A

15. Amy Stambach, *Lessons from Mount Kilimanjaro: Schooling, community and gender in East Africa* (Routledge, New York 2000), 7-15.

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better knowledge of these systems could change the status quo.¹⁶

In addition to its threat to tradition, education is simply too expensive for most, making English a privilege. Parents must pay school fees for their children each semester, whether their children go to a government or private school. During my time in Moshi, students had a monthlong break in order for their parents to save up enough money for the next term. Children also help out around the house and farms, which allows parents to focus on pulling together funds for school while their children do more chores.

Jenny tells me that she pays her younger sister's school fees. Her sister is in secondary school, form six (or junior year of high school). She cares for Jenny's young children and cooks for the family when she is not in school.

"I like so much to help because I got no opportunity to go to secondary school because the exam, but my father did not help me. He left. I don't like something like that, so this time I will help my sister because I didn't get opportunity," Jenny says to me with her head held high. Aside from financial issues, Jenny tells me that she is doubtful that her father would even let her go to school, even if he paid for her brother. In the Kilimanjaro region, schooling is a way of maintaining the social differences between men and women. Girls traditionally stay home and help their mothers do house chores while their brothers are in school. Elders believe that this is positive, maintaining what they consider a dying culture. There has been more recent discourse from Chagga people that sees education for girls as positive for Chagga culture.¹⁷

Those in favor of girls' education, such as younger college educated girls,¹⁸ argue that education furthers development for the Chagga people by giving girls job skills. Most educated girls, though, leave confining Chagga villages for larger cities where tribal tradition is much less apparent. This is why girls' education is seen less in the more rural Kilimanjaro region than in urban areas. Jenny wants to change that.

"It is so important we have this school. It is giving the girls more voices than before," Jenny says as she watches the students playing netball in the distance.

Mama Tiffania: A Woman's Duty to Her Family

Mama Tiffania Kanjo's skin is so dark I can barely see her eyes. Her smile, although a bit hidden, is clear if you look closely. It reminds me of a smile on a bronze statue. There is no change in color between her lips and her skin. When I first arrive at her gate, she hugs me and then leads me into her muddy plot of land. Her children and the neighbor's children run around me in circles. We step into her home. Her living room has cement floors, wooden couches with a thin purple covering, and matching accent pillows that have embroidered roses. A holy cross hangs by her door. My living room at home in Chicago has hardwood floors and burgundy couches. Tiffania's living room has dirt on the walls and floor but still seems clean in its emptiness. My living room, clean from the chemicals and machines used on it, feels more cluttered with bulky wooden furniture and shelves of large books. Her living room is not similar to mine at all, but I feel at home in it.

Before this interview, I had seen Tiffania at village community bank meetings, but my supervisor had told me that I was interviewing her regarding her reasons for legal counseling from WEECE. Tiffania starts by telling me her background.

She was born in the Kilimanjaro region as one of 10 children, seven of whom had died in childhood. In 2009, 61 of 1,000 children under the age of five died in Tanzania.¹⁹ A significant cause of these mortality rates is HIV and AIDS. Access to primary healthcare is the greatest factor. According to the World Bank, this includes lack of immunization, sanitation, and access to clean water and nutrition. Tiffania's family did not have much money, and at best only had access to a medical dispensary (a small clinic that might have nurses).

Still, Tiffania was fortunate enough to attend primary and secondary school and to find a low-paying job at a hospital. She only worked for three years because her ultimate goal was to own property. As a woman, she could not do that on her own. The Village Land Act of 1999 prohibits the application of customary law if it denies women access to property ownership, but there is rarely implementation of the act, especially since it presumes spousal co-ownership.²⁰

16. Amy Stambach, *Lessons from Mount Kilimanjaro: Schooling, community and gender in East Africa* (Routledge, New York 2000), 20.

17. Stambach

18. Amy Stambach, *Lessons from Mount Kilimanjaro: Schooling, community and gender in East Africa* (Routledge, New York 2000), 100-120.

19. "The World Bank: Health," last modified 2010, <http://data.worldbank.org/topic/health>.

20. "Rights and Reality *United Nations Human Settlements Programme*, 31(2002): accessed November 6, 2010.

Tiffania had a boyfriend at the time, Mussa, and the two of them decided to settle on a piece of land and build a house there. After construction finished, she decided to marry Mussa. The two lived happily until her elder sister and father came to visit and decided to stay. Tiffania and her husband had three children at this point.

Children are valued as loved ones, but they are also valued as economic assets.²¹ It is not unusual that Tiffania's family felt that her home was for them. Mothers are often congratulated when their daughters are born "for bringing wealth into the home." This is especially true of a family's view toward the youngest daughter.

"The whole family used to come [to the house] and stay before I got married. But after the marriage they continued coming, but they saw the lifestyle changing," Tiffania says to me in Swahili. Her elder sister then started fighting with Tiffania and her husband and claimed that the house belonged to her and the rest of the family because Tiffania had started building the home before she was married and belonged to a man and his family. I ask Tiffania if it was legal for her to build the home with her husband before they were married.

She tells me, "You can buy, but now you see the culture. The family thought it was impossible for the girl to buy the land. They thought that means it belongs to them."

This is due, in part, to the tradition of dowry. This perpetuates the view of women as property who, in turn, cannot own their own property.²² Since daughters are ultimately sold from their homes, families feel as if a daughter – and her possessions – belongs to the family until she is given to her husband.

Tiffania tells me that the family kept trying to chase Mussa, the children and her out of their home.

At this point, our interview is interrupted by a bit of chaos: her husband has just come in quietly and sat down and the roosters are now crowing louder than ever. I cannot imagine the conflict between Tiffania and her family in addition to this much daily chaos. I nervously click my pen because of the surrounding disorder.

WEECE helped Tiffania write a letter to her sister explaining that her plot was a family plot, and that she could not leave it, but her family only responded negatively.

"I respect God in my life, which is to obey my parents, my relatives and other people. I am the witness to my marriage. So I did nothing wrong," says Tiffania, who believes strongly in Chagga traditions.

Her sister has stopped visiting and so have her parents.

"I wanted to bring harmony. I wish my sister a good health," Tiffania wrote in the letter. Now, her younger brother, only 23 years old, feels that he is in charge of Tiffania as the man in the family. He has been trying to live in Tiffania's home and threatens to kill her husband regularly. When Tiffania tells me this, I look around the modest house and am baffled by all the sadness that hangs over it. At the small VICOBA meetings, Tiffania had never shown signs of her dark cloud that is just down the dirt path from WEECE. At the meetings she smiles, puts her small earnings in the metal box, and briefly talks about her plans to someday buy a car so that it will be easier to carry her vegetables.

A Maasai Village: Gender Roles Among the Maasai

I spent most of my time with the Chagga in Tanzania.

However, the Maasai are also an integral part of the

Kilimanjaro region. The Maasai live in rural communities outside of the cities. They dress in traditional robes and are self-sufficient. The Chagga do not practice traditionally, live in cities, and usually look down upon the Maasai. Today, the Maasai represent reminders of a "primitive" lifestyle that is embarrassing to non-Maasai Tanzanians. The Maasai maintain traditions they brought down to Tanzania and Kenya from northern Africa in the 17th century.²³ To fully understand the characteristics of the majority of women in the Kilimanjaro region, one must look at the Maasai.

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21. Marjorie J. Mbilinyi, "The State of Women in Tanzania," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (1972)

22. *United Nations Human Settlements Programme*.

23. "Once Intrepid Warrior," *Econometrica*, 771(2009): accessed November 6, 2010. 40

“Welcome to our home. Feel comfortable. Take pictures. Be free,” says a watchman of the *boma*.²⁴ His red *shuka*²⁵ hangs on him in an almost regal fashion, as he grips his spear at his side. Another man walks over and greets us as well. One of the men pets my loose, curly hair, tied back in a bun, and says, “Your skin is a little like ours, but your hair is strange. Not like a *mzungu*²⁶ but not like an *mbongo*.²⁷ My father can offer your father 10 cows for marriage.”

▼ “Your skin is a little like ours, but your hair is strange. Not like a *mzungu* but not like an *mbongo*. My father can offer your father 10 cows for marriage.”

I am taken off guard. My father would most certainly not accept cows for anything. He, like myself, grew up in Chicago and knows little about caring for cows.

This is not the first time that a man in Tanzania has offered me livestock in exchange for my hand in marriage, but this man pet my head in a way an elementary school bully would give another child a noogie. Members of the Chagga²⁸ with whom I am living would not usually touch me. I typically would be more offended, but I have been trying to keep an open mind throughout my time here.

Like the Chagga, marriages are started with the offering of a dowry. After that initial step, a large part of the marriage is about pleasing the

wife’s father. The husband presents him with alcohol at the ceremony and numerous other gifts. Maasai traditionally believe that marriage symbolizes “the transfer of a woman as a possession from her father who reared her, to her husband who rules her.”²⁹

Another large part of these weddings is the focus on the wife’s beauty. Her husband and her mother-in-law both take turns shaving her head and adorning her in jewelry and vivid fabrics. I have seen these festooned women on the glossy pages of National Geographic before but never in person.

24. A *boma* is a plot of land with several huts that the Maasai live in. Each hut is home to a different wife. The huts are small and round and made from mud.

25. A *shuka* is a traditional red robe Maasai men wear.

26. *Mzungu* is a term for a white person or westerner. It literally translates to a traveler.

27. *Mbongo* is the Tanzanian term for a native Tanzanian.

28. The Chagga are from the southern slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. Lack of adequate farm land is forcing Chagga youth to seek work away from the *kihamba* (family homestead). Public show of affection through bodily contact between the sexes is considered highly inappropriate. Traditionally, men and women were socially segregated. <http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Tajikistan-to-Zimbabwe/Chagga.html>

29. “Once Intrepid Warrior,” *Econometrica*, 771(2009): accessed November 6, 2010.

My two American friends with whom I am traveling and I are led into the center of the circle surrounded by mud huts. The men are chatting away at us in clear English. The women are not chatting. The women emerge from the huts in bright colors and huge, circular beaded collars. They smile at us but do not say much. They just stand in a line smiling at us. This feels like the beauty pageants I loathe for objectifying women.

The men invite me to join in the dance, but I continue to snap photographs in awe at the performance, adjusting my lens frequently to capture every small leap. I can only resist for so long. They finally manage to drag me into the dance circle. Wearing a grey hoodie bearing the name of my high school soccer team, I feel uneasy amidst the beautiful women adorned in bright fabrics and beads.

When the dancing stops, two men tour us around the *boma*. The women who follow behind them are quiet.

At one point these women did have a stronger voice. During the 19th century, Maasai women had an active voice in trade with neighboring tribes and in local political groups. Early European travelers in the 1880s wrote about the freedom of the Maasai women that they did not see in their own cultures. Maasai women chatted in the travelers’ camps and had open sexual relationships with multiple men – both European and Maasai. Still, Maasai society was patriarchal. Gender roles became more distinct when Tanzania was colonized by Great Britain. Maasai men began to think it was inappropriate for the women to engage in meetings with the British, since they were all men. British colonizers also expressed their “concerns” over women not remaining in domestic domains.³⁰ Westernization aided in further oppressing the Maasai women. This *boma* is an exemplar of their oppression.

A tall, slender woman accompanies the Maasai men. Each hut is home to a different wife and her children. The leader of the *boma* rotates to each hut each night based on which wife he feels like sleeping with. The Maasai are traditionally polygamous. The number of wives ranges from two to 16. This stems from a tradition that yearns for “quantity over quality” as a sign of success.³¹ For example, it does not matter how strong or healthy a cow is in Maasai tradition. A Maasai guardsman I met in town once told me that Maasai would rather have 10 cows than one strong healthy cow. In Tanzania, polygamy is legal with the consent of the first wife. Most Maasai women are married off at a young age for the dowry her family will receive. She does not have a choice whether to be involved in a polygamous relationship.

30. “Once Intrepid Warrior,” *Econometrica*, 771(2009): accessed November 6, 2010. 60-66

31. “Once Intrepid Warrior,” *Econometrica*, 771(2009): accessed November 6, 2010. 200

As we sit down in a hut a woman grabs my hand to prevent me from bumping into walls in the blackness surrounding me. There is only one small window. They cannot have large windows because of the hyenas and large cats in the area that pose a threat. The huts are dark and hot on the inside but are sturdily built of mud and cow dung by the women who inhabit them. The tour ends as the sun begins to disappear in the vast savannah.

“Please look at what the women made. We need some money,” one of the men tells us. We are then escorted around the *boma* to tables covered in beaded jewelry, belts, bags and other Maasai crafts. The women stand behind the adorned tables and just say, “*Karibu*” (welcome) over and over again. The women cook, clean, and build the homes, and they also make a product that provides an income for their family. In addition to these tasks, the women care for the cattle. The man will eat the best part of the meat if an animal is slaughtered. In addition to husbands being more valued than wives, wives are also said to be less important to Maasai men than their cattle. For instance, if a family is asked how many children they have, girls are not included in that response. Another typical question would be how many cows a family owns. Cows and sons are accounted for, while women are not.³² Observing the gentle treatment of cows in Maasai land and dehumanizing treatment of women is ironic for me. My college-educated, outspoken mother is always ranting about the mistreatment of cows in our American farming industry. Maasai women are rarely educated, work domestically, are quiet and most certainly do not have cattle mistreatment to rant about.

The Maasai women are there as part of the show but nothing more. The sun finally disappears and we must return to our campsite. I buy a necklace and get back into our car. Staring out the window, I see the men calling after us, thanking us in English, animated and alive. The women, blending into the scenery like a watercolor painting, simply smile and wave goodbye, their hands calloused and worn.

The Dance Circle: A Hopeful Symbol of Friendship

Women’s singing voices floated over the WEECE gates. Upon entering, my eyes widened to see a line of women, most of whom I had interviewed, singing and dancing in circles, all wrapped in *kangas* (brightly patterned fabrics). The song the women sang as they followed each other in a circle was one I had heard many times here, and had become part of the soundtrack to my experience. In English, the lyrics are: “The mother, like a mother animal, carries everything on her back. She carries the work, the children, the house, the heart, me. Everything.” In the Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania women do, in fact, carry everything.

I felt a part of something that had so recently seemed so distant and unfamiliar. Singing a song that made my heart pound with emotion put me in a position where I thought I could really connect with the women I was trying to help. The song’s meaning at this point still had to be explained to me, and I was trying to understand the women. There is a sense of camaraderie between these women that is beautiful. At WEECE, in their path to empowerment, they are uniting with women so that they can help each other. Part of me believes that these women know how essential they are to their society and that the hardships they face are unjust. Another part of me believes that the Kilimanjaro women will never live without these struggles.

I am reminded of that feeling as I look around the circle. I see Tiffania’s premature wrinkles set under her dark eyes; I see Jenny’s chipped nails. The work is more than physical.

Women in the Kilimanjaro region live in a society in which their voices are seldom heard as much as they are in my own country, and their rights are not always upheld. In my own society, women face similar issues, such as abuse. Yet, as soon I began conducting my interviews, it struck me how common women’s struggles were here in the Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania.

In the dance circle, I did not feel these struggles.

▼ The huts are dark and hot on the inside but are sturdily built of mud and cow dung by the women who inhabit them. The tour ends as the sun begins to disappear in the vast savannah.

32. “Gender Differences in Competition,” *Econometrica*, 77(2009); accessed November 6, 2010.