Book review: Muslim women in Mombasa

Seidman, Ann

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Boston University
Book Review:

**Muslim Women in Mombasa, 1890-1975**, by Margaret Strobel (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979, 258 p., $19.50)

Margaret Strobel, director of Women's Studies and Associate Professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago, has here made a valuable contribution to the growing literature on women and development through a penetrating analysis of the relationship between sex, ethnicity, and class formation. She focuses her study on Muslim women during the nine decades in which British imperialism transformed Mombasa, Kenya, from a “slave-based satellite in Zanzibar's commercial network to the major port in East Africa.” (p. 218)

Strobel employs two methods to explore her subject. First, she examines available documents to discover the impact on women of the interaction of British colonialism with pre-colonial economic and cultural relationships. Mainly written by men, most fail to analyze the manifold factors affecting the lives of women. Strobel does a creditable detective job of revealing the contradictory consequences. By abolishing slavery, undercutting the economic basis of the non-Asian pre-colonial upper class, and introducing secular education, the British to some extent lessened the domination of Mombasa male elders over women. Simultaneously, however, Mombasa's growth as a port offered increased wage labor opportunities for males, but marginalized women's status, reducing their participation in former production roles while excluding them from direct participation in the new jobs created. Secular education and new mass media stimulate elite women to organize women's groups concerned with community issues, but did not generate criticism of their society's attitudes towards sexual inequality or class
stratification. A few women obtained secretarial jobs outside the home, but experienced job and wage discrimination imposed by 'capitalist patriarchy.'

Strobel also interviewed almost 50 women, some old enough to have lived through most of the period, to gain added insight through an analysis of how the complex Muslim wedding ceremonies reflected these contradictory changes. She concludes that, in the female subculture arising from Muslim sex segregation, the stigma of slavery declined, but class differences and hierarchical distinctions persisted. These reflected the imposition of new patterns of ethnic and economic stratification by colonialism and neo-colonialism.

One might, in a lengthier review, criticize details of this revealing study. Overall, however, Strobel has helped to achieve what she notes as the necessary "refinement of theory through further studies of the colonial economic system that take account of preexisting economic and cultural relations between men and women in a given society." (p. 155) Written in readable style, Muslim Women in Mombasa will be of interest to general readers, as well as providing detailed information that offers useful theoretical insights for college level courses dealing with the impact of the development process on the fabric of society.

by Ann Seidman
Professor, International Development and Social Change Program, Clark University