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TALKING ABOUT *POPOBAWA* IN ZANZIBAR

Occult Sex as a Conversational Resource

by Katrina Daly Thompson

Since at least the mid 1960s, people on the islands of Zanzibar have talked about being attacked by a creature called *Popobawa*, “batwing,” who is variously thought of as a djinn, spirit, demon, beast, monster, or an embodied form of witchcraft. Unlike most Zanzibari spirits, *Popobawa* does not possess people nor form long term relationships with them, but rather sexually assaults them and leaves them to tell their story to others, sometimes even demanding that they do so. Too, unlike *majini ya mahaba*, “love spirits,” who typically possess and have sexual intercourse with humans of the opposite gender, *Popobawa* tends to prefer male victims. Reoccurring periodically since the 1960s, *Popobawa* attacks are shrouded by mystery and speculation and thus are a popular subject for conversation and gossip.

Conversations with Tanzanians reveal that talk about *Popobawa* allows them to discuss otherwise taboo topics. As Hasaan, a gay man in his mid 30s, told me, “*Popobawa* is many things together...each person speaks his or her version.”¹ Like the vampire stories Luise White (2000) studied in East and Central Africa, *Popobawa* stories are “elastic,” with different meanings in different times and places and meaning different things to different people. People use conversations about *Popobawa* to discuss topics as diverse as perceived attempts by the Tanzanian government to distract its people from real concerns, poverty in certain suburbs of Dar es Salaam, deception by shamans, Muslims who have lapsed in their practice of Islam, and sexuality. It is the latter that I will focus on here.

Research on spirit possession, along the Swahili coast and elsewhere, is filled with examples of possessed people transgressing cultural boundaries, particularly with regard to female sex roles. For example, although a Digo woman is expected to speak politely to her father-in-law, while possessed by a spirit she

1. Interview, 4 August 2009, Stonetown, Unguja. All names of participants have been changed.

may lash out at him (Gomm 1975). Both Swahili and Digo women are expected to welcome their husband’s sexual advances, but a woman possessed by a spirit may kick her husband out of bed (Gomm 1975) or be “unable” to have sex with him because of “frigidity” (Caplan 1975: 113, 117). Among Malagasy speakers in Mayotte, a woman is expected to be sexually faithful to her husband, but if a spirit causes her infidelity, she will be forgiven (Lambek 1980). In Zanzibar, all women are expected to marry, but if a male spirit possesses and marries a woman, he may forbid or discourage her from marrying a human man (Purpura 1997). In accordance with the Qur’an, Zanzibari Muslims refrain from alcohol, but those possessed by Christian *kibuki* spirits from Madagascar are expected to drink brandy during possession events and may even do so regularly (Larsen 2008). *Kibuki* spirits also forbid those they possess from covering their heads and wearing black, thus preventing possessed women from wearing the Islamic *buibui* that most Zanzibari women wear in public (Larsen 2008). Spirits can also change conversational norms: public flirtation is frowned upon, but during *kibuki* rituals “the

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spirits flirt with and express a wish to initiate sexual relationships with the people present” (Larsen 2008: 69).

Even outside of or after possession events or supernatural experiences, *talk* about the supernatural allows the same sorts of transgression to occur. Lambek, writing about spirit possession on the island of Mayotte, argues that “possession can usefully be viewed as a system of communication,” especially between husbands and wives (Lambek 1980: 318-319). I extend this argument to show that the system of communication created by possession extends beyond the limited timeframe in which a spirit is present; even after a possessory spirit or an attacking djinn like *Popobawa* leaves, talk about these experiences allows participants to

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communicate transgressive messages, crossing not only the boundaries of culturally appropriate talk, but also gender roles.

Zanzibar, like other places along the Swahili coast, is a Muslim culture where fairly strict sex segregation is practiced. Heterosexual marriage is one of the few realms in which men and women come together and the marital relationship is therefore both idealized and subject to elaborate societal expectations, especially with regard to sex. Whereas traditionally specialist sex instructors known as *somo* or *kungwi* were contracted to teach young women about

sexuality beginning at puberty (Mutch 2008; Strobel 1975a), today it is common for a group of women, friends of the bride's mother, to co-instruct the bride during wedding preparations, adding to the role of weddings as one of few events which offer women "a chance for gossip, discussion and entertainment" (Strobel 1975a, 37). I observed that female sex instructors joke around and laugh raucously while co-constructing the "lesson" they offer a new bride and that women vie to take part in the conversation. Participating in sex instruction is one of the few contexts in which Zanzibari women may talk about sex freely, albeit without self-disclosure of their own sexual practices (see Pichler 2007). Yet, according to Zanzibari values, even during sex instruction, references to sex must not be explicit, concealed through such "implicit ways (*njia ya ndani*)" (Larsen 2008: 114) as euphemism and innuendo.

Although people believe that both men and women should enjoy sex (Caplan 1975), the emphasis of sex instruction is on how a woman should please her husband rather than on her own sexual pleasure. Moreover, men do not receive any formal instruction on how to please their wives sexually. Thus, although providing

sex instruction may be fun for women, Swahili discourse on sexuality naturalizes a definition of sex that serves the interest of men rather than women (see Cameron 2001).

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The conversation I discuss here took place at a shop in Unguja's capital, Stonetown, where I interviewed two Muslim women, whom I will call Amina and Zulekha. Both are married and in their 30s. We spoke in the shop where Amina worked, while Zulekha periodically stepped out to check on her own shop next door. Although initially Amina seemed shy, she became very talkative about *Popobawa* and eventually *ruhani*, another type of sexual spirit.

Our conversation begins with a discussion of what *Popobawa* is.

KATRINA: What have you heard about *Popobawa*?

ZULEKHA: From what I've heard about *Popobawa*, I think it's witchcraft, from what I've heard. Some say it's a beast like a demon. He comes, especially at night, not during the day. When he comes he attacks people, whether it's a man or a woman. He has sex with them [*Anafanya nao mapenzi.*] At night. Now that's what I myself have heard.

Following Zulekha, Amina adds other interpretations: *Popobawa* may be a djinn or the work of a witch. While *Popobawa's* identity is open to speculation, the women agree with the dominant feature of the *Popobawa* myth: he has sex with his victims, both male and female. Of interest here is how, over the course of our conversation, the terms Zulekha and Amina use to discuss sex shift from polite, somewhat euphemistic terms, discussed in the abstract, to more literal terms discussed in reference to the speaker but marked by nervous laughter, to eventually a personal disclosure of occult sex.

In Zulekha's comments quoted above, she uses the Swahili expression *kufanya mapenzi*, "to make love," a widespread euphemism for sex and one that is considered respectable



Traditional Zanzibari marital bed, Palace Museum, Stonetown, Zanzibar

in conversation. However, perhaps because the reference to "love" in *kufanya mapenzi* seems inappropriate for the violent actions of *Popobawa*, more people use the term *kuingilia*, "to penetrate." For example, Amina begins

telling us about her sister's neighbor who was attacked by *Popobawa* but managed to fight him off despite being pregnant. Seemingly surprised that *Popobawa* would attack a pregnant woman, Zulekha interrupts her,

asking “So he was— *Popobawa* was wanting to penetrate [*amuingilie*] her while she was—, eh?”² In her response, Amina takes up Zulekha’s use of the term *-ingilia*, with a false start using the related verb *-ingia*, “enter”:

AMINA: Yes, while she was pregnant, yeah. That’s how it was, I saw this woman with my own eyes. Yes.

KATRINA: And she said he looked like a person?

AMINA: Yeah, she said he looked like a person, a man. And also when he enters [*anapoingia*]-I’ve heard about people who when he penetrates [*anapowaingilia*] them in their homes, it’s like he comes with an odor.

Like *kufanya mapenzi*, *kuingilia*, “to penetrate,” is a common Swahili term used for sexual intercourse. However, whereas *kufanya mapenzi* is a more holistic reference to sex, *kuingilia* specifically refers to penetrative sex. Although a bit graphic, it is a polite term used, for example, in Swahili news headlines and

2. *Kwa hivyo alikuwa popobawa alikuwa anataka amuingilie wakati naye-, eh?*

in discussions of appropriate sexual behavior within Islamic marriage.

In Amina’s first use of *-ingia-*, the verb root of both *-ingia* “enter” and *-ingilia* “penetrate,” her false start suggests her hesitancy to use the more graphic term. However, she corrects herself and switches to *-ingilia*, having been given permission by Zulekha’s previous use of the term. By using the term in an abstract way, to refer to unspecified people, Amina is able to discuss a rather graphic sex act in a polite context. Yet a few moments later, when she introduces herself as a topic of conversation, her hesitancy returns, and her words are marked by laughter. (Each pulse of laughter is symbolized by the @ symbol.)

AMINA: Here in the city I haven’t heard of him [attacking anyone]. [...] Inside the other parts of town [*sehemu za ng’ambo ng’ambo*] is where it happens a lot. But me, where I am [*kwangu*] @he hasn’t @entered [*hajaingia*] @I can say, eeh?

Here Amina introduces a double meaning that allows her to avoid explicitly stating what she means: *Popobawa* has not penetrated her.

Amina’s claim that she herself has not been attacked by *Popobawa* is one I heard from many participants. People were keen to have me know that they don’t speak from personal experience of *Popobawa*; having been sexually penetrated by a demon is not information one would want to disclose in conversation.

Her use of the locative possessive form *kwangu* can mean either “where I am” (for example, at my home) or “to/for/at me,” which allows her final sentence to mean both “he hasn’t entered my home” and “he hasn’t entered me.” Perhaps because the latter meaning is considered too direct for conversation, Amina laughs nervously.

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would want to disclose in conversation. Amina goes on to explain that even when people are attacked by *Popobawa*, they do not openly disclose this information. Having learned from other sources that some victims believe that telling their stories will prevent future attacks, I ask Amina and Zulekha, “If a person is attacked, does s/he like to tell people or is it shameful?”

AMINA: Attacked?

KATRINA: Yeah.

AMINA: Aah, actually it’s not often, in other words, to hear something like, “I’ve been attacked.” Maybe “I did him [*nilimfanya*],” maybe “you-know-what [*kitendo fulani*].” It’s not often. More often, a person, you’ll hear him/her, “I’ve been attacked, but he didn’t have time to do you-know-what.”

Yeah. I’ve never heard a person saying something like “I’ve been attacked, he had time,” like “to do you-know-what [*kitu fulani*] to me.” No way!

Kuvamiwa, “to be attacked,” is a term many others use to talk about *Popobawa*,

yet Amina initially seems surprised when I introduce the word into our conversation, rather than taking up the two terms she and Zulekha had previously used for *Popobawa*’s activity: *kufanya mapenzi* and *kuingilia*. In her response, she initially claims that most people don’t talk about being attacked. Yet she goes on to give a hypothetical example of reported speech that begins with “I’ve been attacked, but...” and goes on to allude to *Popobawa*’s interest in *kitendo fulani*, “a certain act,” or *kitu fulani*, “a certain thing” (both of which I translate above as “you-know-what”), more euphemistic references to sex. By introducing this term into our conversation, Amina brings the conversation back around to sex, albeit using indirect language. Moreover, she adds to the sense that knowledge of *Popobawa* is built up piecemeal through bits and pieces of (overheard) conversations, and she suggests that the truth about *Popobawa* attacks is unattainable precisely because those who are attacked won’t admit that *Popobawa* successfully did “you-know-what” to them.

Zulekha makes similar claims, interpreting them in light of the value Tanzanians place on discretion:

ZULEKHA: We here, Tanzanians in general, we like to conceal secrets. We are not open. To say something openly like “I’ve actually been penetrated,” a person conceals. S/he thinks, “Ah! Should I say anything? No way!” S/he conceals. It’s just like someone being raped but s/he conceals: “Ah, should I say that I’ve been raped? As long as I’m not injured, I don’t say anything.” Unless s/he is seen, then s/he will speak. Yeah, that’s how it is. Now it may be that people have had [*Popobawa* attacks] happen to them, but many conceal it. They don’t like to be—to be open.

Both the hypothetical reported speech Amina uses as examples and Zulekha’s metalinguistic commentary on Tanzanian conversational practices relate to what Larsen has described as a Zanzibari “ethics of concealment” (2008: 51). According to Zanzibari ideals, both men and women should avoid public conversations about “conduct that is considered unchaste” (2008: 51), such as sexual transgressions, as well as talk about their thoughts and feelings, such as sexual desire.

Respecting this “ethics of concealment,” Amina and Zulekha perform Zanzibari conversational ideals both by using euphemisms to discuss sex between *Popobawa* and his victims, as well as by not individuating those about whom they’ve heard stories. Moreover, their references to how others talk about *Popobawa* sexual assaults suggest that others also perform these ideals, both by using euphemistic language and by denying their own involvement in a shameful event.

After an extensive conversation about *Popobawa*, our talk turns to other djinns that have sex with human beings. The women began telling me about *ruhani*, heterosexual demons that possess people of the opposite gender and can have sex with them. To my surprise, Amina makes an intensely personal disclosure:

AMINA: Even I have had those problems.

KATRINA: What was it like?

AMINA: I was sleeping at night. First I was feeling like every few days I get a fever, again and again. I go to the hospital, I’m checked for malaria, I don’t have malaria. I

go home. I stay. Sometimes the fever returns. I go to the hospital, I’m checked for malaria, I don’t have malaria. I go home. When I get home and I’m sleeping at night with my husband, but I’m sleeping at night, I feel like it’s my husband with whom I’m doing the act [*tendo*].

KATRINA: Mmh.

AMINA: Yeah. I’m doing the act with him. Moreover, you feel pleasure even greater than when you do it with your husband. @@@@

ZULEKHA: He is—you mean greater? Than him?

AMINA: Yeah! So, when you finish and you wake up suddenly from sleep you look at your husband and he’s asleep.

ZULEKHA: (H)³

AMINA: You just remain in a state of surprise. Especially, like we women of Zanzibar, when we sleep we like—You have gotten a talker! @I will speak @

here! @@@@. [...] Now on some of the days, I mean, it does this act [*hiki kitendo*] to me while I am asleep but not completely.

Amina’s story of the *ruhani* spirit has several interesting features. She begins the story with the first person “I,” using repetition to illustrate the frustrating nature of her experience. She mentions sleeping with her husband but then clarifies that she really means sleeping, not “sleeping with” as a euphemism for sex. In contrast to her husband, with whom she does “the act,” using an active verb with herself as the agent, the spirit does “this act” to her while she is sleeping, without her permission. She also uses slightly different terms to refer to these acts. With her husband, the act is *tendo*, while with the spirit the act is *kitendo*, a diminutive form—the same one she used earlier in our conversation to describe the euphemisms others use for *Popobawa* sexual assaults. But, volunteering information about her own feelings, Amina switches to the second person “you” even though clearly describing her own experience. In doing so she reveals intensely personal information that could bring shame to her husband without violating

3. (H) signifies a sharp intake of breath, a Swahili conversational device used to indicate one is listening and interested in the topic.

Zanzibari conversational ideals. In the final turn quoted above, Amina realizes that she is revealing more information than I've actually asked for and makes a joke about herself: "You have gotten a talker!" Both here and when critiquing her husband's ability to please her sexually, she laughs. Brottman argues that "humor is often utilized as an acceptable social outlet for those frustrations, tensions and hostilities that have no other means of release" (2002: 412); here, Amina laughs precisely at the moment she realizes she has revealed her frustrations, violating the norms of Zanzibari conversations and expectations of women.

Writing about women on the Swahili coast in the 1970s, Strobel remarked that "the paucity of written documents enhances the significance of oral evidence" (1975b: 4). Today much more has been written about Swahili women, but discourse on sexuality is still primarily oral. Moreover, as a heavily circumscribed topic and one that is restricted to the private domain, sexuality is a topic difficult to research. As Strobel found with interviews about women's associations in Mombasa, approaching sexuality through conversations about *Popobawa* provides "something relatively impersonal to discuss in

our early interviews but a topic that interested and excited the women" (1975b: 5). But occult sex is not merely a conversational resource for the researcher. It also allows the sexually dispossessed—in this case, heterosexual women desiring more equitable sexual relationships with their husbands—not only opportunities to discuss conversational norms but also to violate them. Just as socially deprived groups are more likely to experience spirit possession, so too are they more likely to talk about it.

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