

CHAPTER EIGHT

“NECESSITY REMOVES RESTRICTIONS”: SWAHILI MUSLIM WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines factors that facilitate the increased participation of Swahili Muslim women in the public sphere, specifically in political leadership, in Mombasa, Kenya. The quest to make an entrance into leadership in the public sphere requires a thorough questioning of the ‘truth’ claims, by which the Swahili community functions. This chapter gives a brief background of the Swahili in general and their involvement in the politics of Mombasa. It focuses on the means that Swahili Muslim women have used in order to reclaim their opportunity of participating in the public sphere, especially in Mombasa. Like elsewhere in the world, the public sphere is not a neutral arena for social actors; it is a highly contested terrain, demanding the deployment of strategies and tactics of involvement in political competition.

The prospects of empowering Swahili Muslim women are being questioned along Islamic doctrinal and cultural grounds. Muslim women amongst the Swahili are forced by necessity to confront and contest interpretations of religious texts deemed responsible for reinforcing patriarchal structures and male-dominated religious forms of authority. Because of entrenched unequal forms of education, most Swahili Muslim women lack resources on how to debate, mobilize and lobby their way into leadership positions outside the home. Most significantly, they are few in political leadership. Recently, in a few instances, Swahili Muslim women have been visible in higher managerial ranks in large corporations and women’s organizations.¹ However, to a large extent, the aspirations

¹ Examples include a former Coast Provincial Medical Director who was a Swahili Muslim woman; others include senior managers in co-operative organizations such as banks and parastatals.

and potentials of Swahili Muslim women to engage in what comprises leadership in the public sphere, notably the wielding of political power and authority, have yet to be realized.

CONCEPTUAL THEORIZATION AND KEY TERMS

The notion of a 'public sphere' has been a subject of debate for many scholars since the eighteenth century.² Implicit in the concept 'public sphere' is the separation of formal structures of religious and political authority from the space of household and kin, especially in European societies. More appropriate to the present discussion, which is centred in a Muslim society, is the approach of Eisenstadt and Schluchter.³ According to these scholars, the 'public sphere' is conceptualized as an arena where culture is created, contested and in flux for both traditional and modern societies. Furthermore, societies and civilizations do not develop autonomously but through a continuous interaction between the cultural codes of these societies and their exposure to new internal and external challenges.

In the context of this discussion, the phrase 'public sphere' refers to an arena or social space where meanings of social issues are articulated, shared and negotiated: that which takes place in the public sphere may possibly influence political action. The public sphere, here, will serve as a general social horizon of experience in which everything that is actually or seemingly relevant for all members of society is integrated. This chapter is concerned only with political leadership as a visible marker of Swahili Muslim women's participation in the wider public sphere.

Swahili Muslims have been continuously exposed to new internal and external challenges and have developed rich cultural interpretations and practices. The participation of Swahili women has not always been confined to domestic life. Swahili Muslim women have actively participated in political leadership in their cultural milieu. However, during the last century, Swahili Muslim women's visibility in political leadership has been declining.

We hold that Swahili Muslim women are venturing into the public sphere out of necessity. The concept of 'necessity' is generated by Swahili

² Hoexter M., S. N. Eisenstadt & N. Levtzion (eds.), *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, Albany: State University of New York, 2002, page 2.

³ Eisenstadt, S. N. & W. Schluchter, 'Introduction: Paths to Modernities—A Comparative View', *Daedalus* 127:3, 1998, pages 1–18.