Résumé
J. M. Bujra — Production, propriété, prostitution: la politique du sexe à Atu. L'économie agricole de cette île swahili est basée sur la propriété foncière individuelle et la culture de produits d'exportation. Les femmes n'ont, en principe, pas accès aux instruments du pouvoir économique, mais sont parvenues, en relation conflictuelle avec les hommes, à s'assurer un pouvoir économique propre en émigrant pour se prostituer. Cette émigration, qui intéresse à peu près 50 % de la population féminine, contribue plus à l'économie locale que celle, sensiblement équivalente, des hommes, dans la mesure où les migrantes investissent à Atu dans la construction de maisons où s'installer à leur retour. Il existe une certaine forme de prostitution sur place mais elle reste très différente, aussi bien socialement qu'économiquement, de celle pratiquée au cours de la migration à Mombasa. Le phénomène paraît remonter aux transformations économiques résultant de la suppression de l'esclavage et du déclin du commerce avec l'Arabie. La polygynie synchronique a cédé la place à la polygynie diachronique, en relation avec l'incidence élevée des divorces, d'où la nécessité pour les femmes de posséder leur propre maison, dans un système résidentiel centré sur des groupes féminins. En dépit de la tradition islamique, les ex-prostituées sont assez bien acceptées socialement. On peut arguer que les femmes, réduites à la dépendance économique, cherchent à y échapper en utilisant leur capital sexuel comme arme défensive.

Citer ce document / Cite this document :
doi : 10.3406/cea.1977.2491

Document généré le 02/06/2016
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Production, Property, Prostitution.
‘Sexual Politics’ in Atu

‘There are some women here who don’t want to be married, they don’t want husbands, they prefer to do their “work”.’ (Atu man.)

‘Perhaps Tima has gone to search for men—there are no men here.’ (Atu woman, speaking of another who had migrated to Mombasa.)

‘There is also a sense in which the prostitute’s role is an exaggeration of patriarchal economic conditions where the majority of females are driven to live through some exchange of sexuality for support.’ (Kate Millett, Sexual Politics: 123.)

‘Sexual politics’ is not a subject we usually associate with rural communities, where, it might be supposed, the relationships between the sexes are grounded in time-honoured custom, and where patterns of (male) authority are well-established. What I want to explore here is one instance where male-female relationships are overtly antagonistic, and to suggest that this has its basis in the local political economy and in the dialectical relationship of that economy with broader patterns of changing political and economic power.

My interest here is in ‘sexual politics’, not so much in the sense appropriated by K. Millett, whose arresting study concerns itself mainly with the cultural weapons developed by men to assert male dominance and to denigrate and restrict women to passive and subordinate roles. I am here more concerned with the ‘institutional weapons’ forged by women to enlarge their freedom of social manoeuvre, and with the extent to which these are effective.

Atu,1 with which this study is concerned, is not a populous village,

1. This is a fictional name, as are all names in case histories. In order to protect the identity of the individuals involved here I have purposely obscured the precise location of the village and the specific delineation of the people. The present study arose coincidentally out of research carried out in the area in 1965-66 with a brief return visit in 1967. I am indebted to the University of London for the award to me of a Postgraduate Studentship which made this research possible. My interest at the time was in political factionalism, not in the situation of women,

having only just over a thousand inhabitants. It is one of a group of villages on a remote island lying off the northern coasts of Kenya, and mainly occupied by Swahili-speaking Muslims. The island used to be a prosperous export enclave in the commerce of the Indian Ocean, acting as an entrepôt for ivory, slaves, copra and timber in their passage to Arabia. Now it is a backwater on the extreme periphery of the post-colonial economy. Its communications with the mainstream of that economy are poor indeed, but it nevertheless produces copra, cashew nuts, and some cotton and simsim for the world market. In its way the local peasant economy is highly 'developed', undoubtedly a reflection of its more prosperous past. Private individual ownership over land producing high income export crops is a basic principle of the economy, with consequently quite considerable socio-economic differentiation amongst the population. In the precolonial period when slavery was an on-going institution, the richer men of the village cultivated their land with slave labour, whilst the poorer men had to cultivate for themselves. With the emancipation of the slaves in 1907, slave labour was no longer available. Today the ex-slaves are indistinguishable from other poor men in the village, being by and large subsistence producers with a marginal surplus for sale, and generally indebted to richer farmers in order to cultivate at all. Poor peasants are here poor because they own no land, and exercise only use rights over plots on common land growing annual crops (largely for subsistence). By contrast the rich farmers in the community owe their prosperity to their ownership of land, yielding profitable products such as copra and cashew nuts. With the surplus accruing from such production, the wealthiest of them go into petty commerce, shopkeeping and moneylending.

The women of Atu are in one respect fairly typical of women anywhere, in being more or less effectively excluded from access to the vital economic resources and political positions of their society. In a formal sense women in Atu are mere chattels and dependents of men and men accordingly speak of them in manner of contemptuous dismissal: 'Only men know what is right and sensible.'

Women are not wholly passive recipients in this man-made social context however—they attempt to elbow out an effective sphere of

so the material which I have on this subject emerged by chance rather than by systematic investigation. Some at least of the inadequacies in the analysis which follows should perhaps be attributed to this fact.


3. Since the rest of this essay devotes itself mainly to economic and family patterns, it is perhaps important here to specify the dependent character of the role of women in politics in this area. No political positions of leadership are held by women, and women do not attend political or public meetings. They are significant however when it comes to counting heads in an election, and women can be quite active in recruiting support amongst other women for candidates to whom they are related. See J. M. Bujra, An Anthropological Study of Political Action (London, 1968), Ph. D. thesis.
action for themselves. Although Atu men are formally allowed by Islamic law to take four wives, women who will agree to such an arrangement are very few. If, as L. Tiger and R. Fox affirm, 'polygamy has to do with power rather than sex', then clearly, for women to refuse to cooperate within polygamous unions is also a statement about power relations between the sexes.

Divorce is in fact frequent in Atu, and it is often instigated by, though it cannot be effected by, women. On divorce it is the husband who is forced to seek residence elsewhere, because in Atu it is women who own houses rather than men. Divorced women can and do support themselves for considerable lengths of time, at first by reliance on help from female cohorts and on the meagre earnings which accrue from local occupations open to women; in the last resort by emigration to Mombasa as prostitutes. In this capacity they may earn considerable sums, far exceeding the paltry incomes of male labour migrants (who are mostly forced to accept work as lowly paid unskilled or semi-skilled workers). Sometimes these women are lost to the village altogether; more often however they return home regularly, investing their earnings in building a house in the village, buying gold ornaments, holding public feasts and assisting relatives.

Concerning the activities of women as prostitutes, men are more or less powerless. In some senses the dividing line between sharply demarcated sex roles is obscured in this situation, with women, like men, acting as free sexual agents, independent earners of income, and initiators of economic and social activity. Men express their uneasiness at this state of affairs, with more than a touch of hysterical exaggeration, when they say: 'The women of Atu are nothing but harlots.' And although they roundly condemn such 'harlotry' in principle, in practice there are few men who would refuse an invitation to feast paid for by prostitutes, or a remittance comprising 'illicit earnings' from Mombasa.

Women in this context then, though very far from achieving equal consideration with men, at any rate continually undermine the comfortable self-assurance of unquestioned male chauvinism. In so far as we can describe their activities as rebellious, these women have created certain institutional arrangements with which to back them up.

One may critically ask what can possibly be learnt from the analysis of women's behaviour in one small village in Africa. I would argue simply that in most discussions of development, women—who after all comprise half the population—are often ignored. At best they may be considered as a 'conservative' element, inhibiting and opposing change. This may mean little more than that they have no option but to continue as they have always done. On the other hand, attempts by women to make a radical break with traditional patterns are not always to the

liking of men, and may not even be in their own long-term interests. It is important therefore to consider women's options in and reactions towards their changing environment, and to understand the pressures to which they are subjected.

More specifically, it can be shown that the attempt by women here to gain a measure of economic independence through prostitution is not a unique phenomenon. In all the towns of East Africa (and not of course only there) the economic opportunities available to women who have no formal education or skills are negligible. Even petty commerce, the resort of many women in West Africa, is here effectively in the hands of others. For many women in urban areas, prostitution is the only viable way to get along. I have elsewhere tried to show the background to and consequences of this fact for Nairobi. Women appear to have come to Nairobi for individual reasons but in response to generalised social disturbances. What is perhaps unusual about the case of Atu is that the migration of women from a single area is on such a scale that it cannot be ignored in any analysis of local social organisation. There are probably other areas in Africa of which this is true; the point is that we do not know very much of the rural background to the phenomenon of urban prostitution.

What I shall attempt to do here then is to understand how prostitution is accommodated within the local socio-economic context of Atu, but also to suggest to what extent it is a response, within a wider perspective of historical trends, to the changing politico-economic realities facing this area. Within this framework it would appear that the reaction by women is in its way socially innovative, even whilst it does not achieve genuine independence for them. Operating within the harsh limitations imposed by their sex and economic standing, these women have acted 'to create as much living space as possible'.

5. Internal trade patterns—as opposed to externally directed trade—were ill-developed in the precolonial period. Later, during the colonial period, petty retail trade in Kenya was dominated by Asians and Arabs; see SALIM 1973: 135. Mutiso speaks of oral traditions of Kamba women traders (G. C. MUTISO, Kenya: Politics, Policy and Society, Nairobi, 1975: 250) and in the colonial period Kikuyu women became active retailers of agricultural products. But coastal women have never really practised trade to my knowledge.


7. The earliest women to settle in Nairobi, by contrast, would seem to have been isolated individuals who had more or less irretrievably broken their rural ties by their activities in town and had established themselves permanently there.


Although the broad outlines of my analysis of sexual politics could be
generalised to most of the island’s villages, Atu is said to have the largest
number of women away earning a living as prostitutes. Since my
argument here will be that it is the option of prostitution which is the
key to understanding the character of sexual politics in Atu, we may
start by looking at the extent of the phenomenon there. In 1965 there
were almost half as many women absent from the village as there were
women resident in Atu itself (namely 168 compared with 350). The
number of male migrants away was only fractionally higher than that of
women (172 compared with 276 resident adult men). For both men and
women, Mombasa was the most likely venue of migratory activities,
though a few migrants were also to be found in other East African urban
centres. Mombasa, the main port of Kenya, is over 250 miles away from
Atu, and requires a lengthy journey taking generally two days.

Some of the women who were absent from Atu were married, either
to Atu migrants or to men they had met in Mombasa or elsewhere.
Sixty-three per cent of the women were however unmarried, and the vast
majority of these were divorcees. Most of these women (they numbered
around a hundred) were earning a living as prostitutes. Of those women
at present resident in Atu, 12% had migrated independently in the past,
spending periods of between one year and twenty-five years away.
There were many more women who had visited Mombasa for periods of
less than one year—some of these went merely to visit relatives, but a
certain proportion may be considered ‘failed migrants’.

By and large the migrant labour of men does not contribute sig-
nificantly to the village economy. Most men who migrate are unmarried
or divorced. Occasionally they are accompanied by their wives; very
few men leave wives behind since they say women cannot be trusted to
remain faithful to absent husbands. Consequently men send remittances
to Atu irregularly if at all, and those who are successful labour migrants
often settle permanently away. By contrast the migration of women
to Mombasa is much more Atu-focussed in that prostitutes invest their
income in building and repairing houses in Atu—houses in which they can
live independently during the periods when they are in Atu, and to
which they can retire in their old age.

In Mombasa prostitution is a highly profitable business if a girl is
young and pretty. In 1965 I was told that such a girl might earn
between £50 and £100 or even more per month. An older woman
would earn much less of course—but in spite of this some Atu women
continued to pursue this occupation until they were in their late forties
or early fifties.

10. In 1965 Kenya currency was at par with sterling.
Within Atu itself women may also earn small sums by sleeping with men. Although village people refer to this by the same term (malaya)\(^{11}\) as prostitution in Mombasa, it is a good deal more ambiguously so. There is no defined category of women in Atu who act only or always as prostitutes; 'prostitution' is more in the nature of a temporary phase between marriages for some women. At any one time in Atu there are a high percentage of divorced women, some of whom may make themselves available to men. Adultery is also frequent in Atu, judging from the regularity with which it is given as a reason for divorce. The sexual activities of women within either of these contexts may be described as malaya. This is why it is possible for men to say: 'All the women in Atu are malaya.' At any one time however there are also a handful of women in the village who more openly receive 'customers', and are well known for this. Even such women may at any time marry.

Secondly the status of the 'payment' itself may be ambiguous, since it may be more in the nature of a 'gift' from a man to his lover than a purchase of sexual services. In so far as straightforward payments are made, they are said to be much lower than the rates in Mombasa—estimates ranged from as high as Sh.5 to less than Sh.1.

In Atu, this state of apparent sexual licence of both men and women goes hand in hand with a marked avoidance of the sexes in public and with a constant social emphasis on the dependent state of women. The public arena is solely the preserve of men here, whilst women are restricted largely to the domestic sphere. This is succinctly symbolised on the occasion of public feasts. Whilst men are seated outside and served first with food, women guests are concealed inside the house of the host and must wait until the last man has eaten and gone before they are served.

Similarly prostitution here is hidden and concealed, not openly acknowledged or flaunted publicly. Women going to Mombasa say they go kuiembea tu 'just to walk around', whilst others may say of them that they have gone vivi hivi tu 'just like that'. Whereas men privately speak with contempt or resentment of these activities of women, women's attitudes are either neutral or defiant. There is rarely an occasion when the matter is confronted openly. The activities of prostitutes within Atu itself are however more controversial, because these entail direct competition between women themselves for the sexual attention of particular men.

Some of all this emerges dramatically if we look more closely at the case of one Atu prostitute:

Sometime during July 1967 a girl called Kitina came home to visit her parents. She had been in Mombasa for almost a year, earning her living as a prostitute, and had been highly successful.

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\(^{11}\) Malaya is a 'prostitute'. Kusanya malaya means 'to practise prostitution'.
Kitina was a very pretty, fragile-looking girl. She was only in her early twenties, but this was already her third visit to Mombasa. She had been married off, before puberty, to a visiting teacher from a town more than 150 miles away from Atu. After a time the teacher returned home, taking Kitina with him. She was very unhappy, and it was not long before she ran away, back to her parents in Atu. She was thereupon divorced by her husband. Soon after this she went to Mombasa for the first time, staying for two months and then coming home. During her stay at home she was married by her paternal cousin, Issa. The marriage had not lasted for more than a few months when they quarrelled and Kitina was divorced for the second time. Undaunted she returned to Mombasa, this time staying for four months and pursuing a life of prostitution with success. She came home again for a rest, but agreed instead of returning to Mombasa to remarry her cousin. This time she became pregnant, and remained in Atu until her child was born. The baby died a few months later and soon Kitina had quarrelled again with Issa, forced a divorce and returned to Mombasa.

This time she did even better and it was almost a year before she came home again. She arrived back in Atu with conspicuous evidence of her success—a matching set of bedroom furniture, transported all the way from Mombasa, which had cost her £50. In addition she herself was dripping with gold—earings, necklaces, bracelets, rings and watch—as well as two golden teeth. She also had an extensive wardrobe of new dresses.

She was not only the attractive young Atu girl to be visiting from Mombasa at that time, and within a few days the whole village was chattering about those goings-on. In particular a series of quarrels was set in motion after certain men of the village visited Kitina and another of the girls and then boasted of the outcome. It was not long before their wives came to hear of this, and they began bitterly to upbraid their husbands and to pour forth verbal abuse on Kitina and her friend for having 'stolen' their husbands.

A small knot of women gathered at Kitina's mother's house, eager to hear the gossip at first hand. Kitina's mother reacted nervously to all the publicity, 'People are saying this and that, and accusing this one and that one...' Kitina sat serene, smiling to herself, and then, in response to a question by one of the women, said defiantly, 'So much talk in Atu, you can't do anything. I shall be glad to go back to Mombasa.' It wasn't true that she had had all the men mentioned—some indeed had come, but not all those. Kitina flashed her two golden teeth, and pressed her hands (bedecked with seven gold rings) together. 'Too much talk here altogether. In Mombasa I don't accept our men [as customers]; my customers are Europeans or Indians. They are willing to pay Sh. 100 a time, but our men want it for Sh. 5.' She would return to Mombasa and not remarry for at least a year, she asserted.

At least one man 'divorced' his wife as a result of these affairs,
but he returned to her a few days later. Kitina toned down her boastful talk and began to organise the building of a house on a plot adjoining that of her parents.

Whilst few Atu prostitutes are as successful or as audacious as Kitina, there is much in this case study that typifies the general pattern. In particular it can be seen here how the option of prostitution makes the divorced state economically tolerable, even profitable, and makes house ownership a viable possibility if it has not been achieved in other ways. In a sense it is the ultimate explanation for sexual politics in that it allows women metaphorically to thumb their noses at men, to choose their time for marriage, and to select their partners in marriage. At the same time it is clear that it puts a premium on youth and physical attractiveness, and a woman with neither will have far less room for manoeuvre.

*Historical Trends: Prosperity and Decline*

In 1922, the Annual Report of Lamu District (of which Atu is a part) noted that both men and women were leaving the area to go to Mombasa. On 21 September 1931, the European District Commissioner visited Atu on a tour of inspection. Upon completion of his visit he noted, in a book which was kept in the Headman’s house, that: ‘They [the Headman and his assistant] complained of a large emigration of the female population to Mombasa, and of the abandonment of many houses and plots in the town [Atu].’ The comment is tantalizingly brief and no further details are given but at least this is written evidence indicating the length of time women have been migrating from Atu. Oral evidence, whilst less reliable, suggests a similar longevity for the phenomenon. Thus an Atu man who had spent many years working away from the village said that in his youth (in the twenties) both men and women went to Mombasa, but not on the same scale that they do now. He remembered that he and thirty or so other men had wanted to send a petition to the Governor demanding that women from their area be prevented from staying in the town unless they had a husband there, but nothing came of it. In the sixties there were elderly women in Atu (and some already deceased) who had spent many years in Mombasa in their youth, and hence it would appear that the labour migration of women has been going on for at least fifty years, and probably began around the end of the First World War. As we shall see, the appearance of this phenomenon coincided with a period in which the area was undergoing serious economic decline.

12. It would be more accurate to say that he ‘repudiated’ his wife, since he did not go through all the formal stages of divorce, and hence was able to return to her without loss of face (this is called *kuregea* ‘to return to’).
14. The notebook has been preserved in the old headman’s house, and I was able to examine it in 1965.
Very little is definitely known of the precolonial history of this area—as Chittick says, 'the sources are meagre, often corrupt, often half-myth'. Only the broad outlines of political history are clear—that the island experienced a succession of alien suzerains, Arab, Portuguese, Zanzibari, and finally British, but in practice enjoyed a good deal of local autonomy owing to the lack of effective communications. It seems probable however that in the days when the island was a node in a commercial network linking the east coast of Africa to Arabia (and to a lesser extent India), the local agricultural economy was merely an adjunct to wider patterns of trading activity. The most important trade goods were slaves and ivory; obversely it was slaves who carried out the bulk of local cultivation. In this kind of mercantile economy men with capital to invest could go in for commerce themselves, or finance others to do so. In addition men found employment as sailors in the Arabian bound dhows or in those engaged in coastal commerce. Thus, directly or indirectly, the people of the island derived their livelihood and their prosperity from trade. When trade declined—as it apparently did during the Portuguese period—, the local economy stagnated; when it revived—as for example during the great era of slave-trading in the 19th century—, the economy enjoyed a phase of plenitude and growth.

With the increasing influence of Britain in the area in the latter decades of the 19th century—and especially with the outlawing of the maritime slave trade from 1873—, the whole raison d'être of traditional trading patterns was destroyed. The final blow came in 1907 when slavery as an institution was abolished, and the slaves either began to cultivate for themselves or to drift away from the area. The colonial period saw a complete refocussing of commercial activity, with the expansion of Mombasa as a port of exit for Ugandan peasant and Kenya settler agricultural produce. The northern coastal region suffered a marked decline. Writing of the first decade of the 20th century, C. H. Stigand commented that: 'Most of [the settlements of the northern coast] seem to be decreasing in population, and most have declined very seriously in point of prosperity in recent years. In the old days they seem to have possessed no industries and their source of wealth must have been derived almost entirely from dealings in slaves. The freeing of slaves has reduced most of the freeborn inhabitants to a sad state of pov-


16. Copra (the product of coconut palm plots on the island), and mangrove poles (cut by slaves from the fringes of the island) were both exported; in addition grain crops, grown on the fertile mainland opposite the island, were undoubtedly sold to provision trading expeditions, if they were not also exported. The main exports were slaves and ivory; imports consisted of cloth, household utensils, beads and firearms, which were traded down the coast and up the Tana River. J. E. G. SUTTON (The East African Coast, Dar Es Salaam, 1966, Historical Association of Tanzania, Paper 1) and N. CHITTICK (1971) both give brief and critical reviews of what is known of coastal history, and of the participation of the coast in Indian Ocean trade. SALIM (1973) has a fascinating and detailed account of the slave-owning economy of the coast.
erty, and moreover those with property and coconut shamba [farms] find it difficult or impossible nowadays to find sufficient labour to attend to the needs of their plantations.\textsuperscript{17} Although Stigand does not make this clear, the net loss of population suffered by the area was Mombasa’s gain, as men went in search of new opportunities. This drift of population was to continue for many years.\textsuperscript{18} Thus whereas in the precolonial period the migration of men as traders and sailors might be considered as a factor contributing to the island’s prosperity, in the post-colonial period migration was an index of its decline.

In the absence of written historical evidence it is not easy to determine the situation in which women found themselves in periods of affluence compared with periods of decline. One is forced back into speculation, informed where possible by contemporary memories of the past. Nevertheless it is clear that at least two features of the era of prosperity must have been influential in determining the condition of women. The first was the fact that this was a slave-owning economy, the second was the maritime nature of that economy.

In many parts of Africa one is accustomed to find women bearing the burden of all but the heaviest agricultural work, but in Atu women do not cultivate at all. Only an economy with an effective surplus can without detriment withdraw half the active population from production.\textsuperscript{19} Thus it would seem probable that this phenomenon is a legacy of a slave-owning and trading economy where the women of slave-owners were in effect living evidence of conspicuous consumption. Not everyone in Atu was a slave-owner of course—oral history suggests that around half the freeborn families in the village owned slaves, but a general prosperity may have prevailed to enable even families without slaves to subsist on male labour alone. Contemporary memory portrays this as a period when only slave women went out openly, whilst freeborn women remained modestly indoors, and spent their hours ‘plaiting each other’s hair’. For slave women, of course, the situation was somewhat different, and some of these women were certainly engaged in agriculture. Even in this case however, it is said that female slaves were more likely to be occupied in domestic tasks than in cultivation.

It is clear that in such an economy freeborn women were utterly

\textsuperscript{17} C. H. Stigand, \textit{The Land of Zinzj} (London, 1966): 149. This book was originally published in 1913 and was based on several years of travel in East Africa. Stigand describes the small settlements of freed slaves which were set up on the mainland after emancipation (p. 171).

\textsuperscript{18} See, e.g. \textsc{Salim} 1973: 194, who notes that in 1933, ‘The population of Lamu District was estimated at about 17 per cent less than at the end of the war.’

\textsuperscript{19} Drawing on the work of Greenberg (1946), Lewis notes that: ‘In some Hausa areas women have discontinued their traditional farming duties on the conversion of their menfolk to Islam.’ (I. M. Lewis, ed., \textit{Islam in Tropical Africa}. Oxford, 1966: 50.) Although the people described here are also Muslims, I do not think this is the explanation for women not cultivating. The potentiality for withholding female labour must already exist within the scope of an economy: Islam merely symbolises in the ideological sphere what is possible in the realm of reality.
dependent on the prosperity of male relatives. With the onset of economic decline then, it would be surprising if the situation of these women did not suffer drastically. One did not have here the phenomenon found in so many other parts of East and Central Africa, where, when men absented themselves as labour migrants, women were left to cultivate. Since women here did not cultivate at all, the consequence of a large exodus of males was a contraction of the local economy. Without slave labour, mainland agriculture (always dangerous at the best of times due to the incursions of Somali raiders) was often abandoned. With the emigration of men to Mombasa, the area of Atu farms, where land is individually owned and where trees are grown, diminished quite markedly, with many acres reverting to bush. The men who left were not only potential (or in some cases actual) husbands; they were also vital providers of the necessities of life. It seems likely then that this was the context within which women also began to migrate in search of economic security.

One may also surmise that in a maritime milieu, some women would have followed along the paths trodden by men even in the precolonial period. Certainly in the main ports of East Africa and Arabia, where small communities of people from this area were to be found, there were women as well as men. Most of these probably came as wives or daughters, but there may have been others who arrived independently or who were abandoned there to fend for themselves as best they could. It could thus be that the contemporary migration of women is merely a new and expanded version of an old pattern.

**Mombasa**

Whilst the northern coast of Kenya suffered a serious economic recession in the first few decades of the century, Mombasa was experiencing a phase of rapid growth. With the building of the Uganda railway with its terminus in Mombasa, and the development of the port of Kilindini, the town enjoyed a period of commercial prosperity which led to a marked expansion in its male population. Although East African operations in the First World War had only a marginal effect on the coast, they nevertheless served to accentuate a process already under way—namely the disproportionate growth of Mombasa relative to other coastal centres. There was an influx into the town of men attracted by economic opportunities—Asian and Arab traders, Indian labourers indentured to build the railway, upcountry and coastal peoples in search of work. Moreover this disproportionate growth of Mombasa was to

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20. One might have anticipated that ex-slave women at least would have cultivated for themselves after emancipation. This however does not appear to have happened. Except for isolated individuals, ex-slave women now became as dependent on male labour as were freeborn women.

21. For details of this period see Salim 1973: 155.
continue between the wars, and to be further advanced by the activity of the Second World War, when boom conditions were experienced by local commercial and business interests. It is hardly surprising that in this context the services of prostitutes found a ready market.

The Atu women who migrated to Mombasa at this period were well placed to take advantage of this demand. Firstly, they were strangers in the city, and hence to some extent able to disregard the restrictive rules placed upon local Muslim women. At the same time, they were able to capitalise upon local male sexual preferences, which put a premium on fairness of skin and straightness of hair. (The people of the northern coast are very mixed, ranging from those who are very light-skinned and ‘Arab'-featured, to those who are dark-skinned and more African in appearance.) The demand for sexual services was in fact so great that Atu prostitutes were able to operate a discriminatory pricing system so as to obtain the highest rewards from those with the most money, and on the whole to avoid the poorest (i.e. African) customers. They tended to operate from particular locations of the town—especially Mwembe Tayari, Majengo and Makadara. All these were older locations in which they were amongst fellow Muslims of a similar cultural background—people who would be likely to come to their aid if trouble arose. They did not parade themselves openly but generally operated through pimps who searched for customers and brought them to the woman’s house. Very often the pimps were homosexual males: they took their cut, and were influential with, but did not directly control the women concerned.22

The halcyon days for Atu prostitutes in Mombasa were during and just after the Second World War, when the port was full of British soldiers and sailors, and business was excellent. In those days, it is said, Atu prostitutes earned vast amounts, and expended a good deal of their income on financing grand weddings and public feasts: ‘Nowadays the Navy [i.e. the Royal Navy] has gone, and weddings are not what they used to be.’ One old lady, now in Atu, but who had been in Mombasa during this period, was said to have become so prosperous that she wore pure gold ornaments on her shoes. There was of course another side to the story of this period. An elderly woman remembered that the British soldiers (‘Johnnies’) used to go around beating up prostitutes, and that they had knocked out the teeth of one Atu woman, and raped other women who were not prostitutes.

In Mombasa today prostitutes from the coast are under pressure of competition from upcountry African women who have moved into the town in increasing numbers, and who operate more directly and audaciously. Meanwhile the traditional customers of coastal prostitutes

22. Writing of the period around the late fifties, Wilson commented that: ‘Organised intimidation, graft, gangsterism, protection money and so on—the evils which are usually associated with prostitution—simply did not exist in Mombasa.’ (G. M. WILSON, ‘A Study of Prostitution in Mombasa’, in ‘Mombasa Social Survey’, unpubl. ms., no date.) In general Wilson’s account tallies with that I have given here.
(Europeans and Asians) have declined in numbers. In spite of this, Atu women are still loath to take African customers. In 1965, they charged the highest prices to Europeans (Sh.40 to Sh.60, or even more for a whole night), and rather less to Arabs and Asians (Sh.20 to Sh.40). When they were forced to accept African customers the price was even less (Sh.5 to Sh.10). By and large however they avoid African customers, even those who offer a large amount of money. Nevertheless the pressure of competition has led to younger prostitutes more openly frequenting places where they are likely to find potential customers, such as dance halls and bars. Some of them learn a few words of English and they may even drink alcohol—a very shocking thing in the eyes of local Muslims.

If in the early decades of the century women migrated to Mombasa as a reaction to the decline of an economy within which they were mere dependents, one may reasonably ask whether the same factors operate today to perpetuate this pattern of migration. I think it can be argued that this is indeed the case, as we can see if we considered contemporary configurations of production and property in Atu.

Production and Property

In the agricultural economy of present-day Atu, women play only a very minor part. In particular the work of cultivation is considered to be unquestionably a male activity. Women's attitudes on this question can be summed up by one who pointed at her genitals and said: 'We women cultivate here: that is enough.' On the other hand it should be pointed out that apart from their domestic and reproductive activities women do play a significant ancillary role to male production, whether as family labour or for payment. They help in the transport of produce from the farms to the village, they weave strips of matting which are later sewn into sacks for the transport of produce, they make roofing materials for houses and they do some basic processing of crops—sorting cotton, removing tamarind seeds from their sticky shells, drying and grinding maize and so on. Men may also carry out these tasks, but they generally do so only if they are old or sick or temporarily unable to cultivate for some reason.

A woman who has to rely on these activities for her sole subsistence—however—that is, one who is not fed and provided for by a father or a husband—will find herself in extremely strained circumstances. In 1965 a woman could earn about Sh.1 per day from such activities, and with this she might just survive, though at the most meagre level. We shall see the significance of this characteristic of women's work in Atu when we come later to consider the question of divorce.

Since Muslim law does not exclude women from inheriting land, one

23. Racial stereotypes and attitudes are another legacy of the slave owning era: see Bujra 1968.
would expect to find some women owning land even if they did not cultivate it themselves. In the apportionment of inheritable property women heirs receive one share in relation to every two shares allotted to equivalent male heirs. Nevertheless whilst 31.5% of Atu men were landowners in 1965, only 5.4% of women (that is, 19 women) were similarly placed. (In addition there were four absentee women owners.)

In understanding the reason for these figures we have to recognise that a whole series of *de facto* accommodations to local social reality intervene here between Muslim theory and social practice. In particular it is argued that in any distribution of inheritable property, ‘women take houses whilst men inherit land’. The reasons given for this (by both sexes) are twofold. Firstly, since women do not themselves cultivate, they can only effectively use land if they can obtain male labour to work on it. Secondly, it is said that ‘it is important for a woman to have a house’. Why this is so we shall see presently—the point I wish to make here is that where there is a house to be inherited, male heirs generally waive their rights to a share of it.

Consequently, if a woman inherits land she will often simply sell her share to the male heirs. If they are unable or unwilling to purchase her share (or if, as sometimes happens, a woman is the sole heir), then she must find some way of cultivating the land or it will simply revert to bush. This is in fact what seems to happen in many cases. Thus three of the women have land which boasts only a few ancient coconut palms, and is otherwise indistinguishable from the surrounding bush. Unless legal claims are activated and some rehabilitation carried out, such plots may enter the pool of common land, free for all on which to grow annual crops. Mere legal ownership of land is less important than the ability to invest capital to make it productive. Few women in Atu have access to the sums required.

When a woman does not sell out to male heirs she must organise male labour to work on her land. For about three quarters of the women landowners a son, a brother or a husband fulfils this role. The ambiguities of such a situation are obvious however—it is very easy for the relationship between owner and cultivator to be transposed into one where the cultivator, rather than being an ‘employee’, simply becomes responsible for maintaining the owner. Ownership thus becomes translated into dependency, and in time even the legal differentiation of roles may be forgotten. This is especially so since male relatives are in any case potential heirs of the female owner, and their cultivation of the land gives them a strong *de facto* claim to its ultimate ownership.

On the other hand a woman who has no call on such male labour

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24 Thus a certain woman in Atu accused someone else of encroaching on land which she said she had inherited from her father. When the old men of the town got together to discuss the case, they upheld her claim, although with some doubts—the piece of land in question had not been cultivated within living memory.
is in an even more difficult position, for it is not easy to employ labour in Atu. With the end of slavery men no longer wished to cultivate for others, and with ready availability of common land, they might scrape a subsistence living without doing so. Most labour here then is family labour, and even this might be grudgingly given—a son prefers to cultivate on his own account rather than work for his parents. In 1965 only 5.8% of the adult male population were working as paid agricultural labourers. Wages were in the order of Sh.3 to Sh.5 per day, and although this is a fairly small sum by local standards, few women could afford to pay it regularly in addition to finding the capital required for running the farm. Seasonal temporary labour might be more within their means—when it is readily available. Only four of the women landowners in fact employed labour, and most of them had come to an arrangement whereby they shared the profits with the labourer rather than paying him a wage.

Considering all these problems it is not surprising that women are not eager to inherit land; nor are they quick to invest earnings from prostitution in buying land. On the other hand, it is only ex-prostitutes who are likely to have sufficient money with which to purchase land: all the three women who have bought land here are ex-prostitutes, each having spent many years in Mombasa. One of these worked her farm by employing temporary labourers, whilst a second ‘employed’ her grand-daughter’s husband on a shared profits basis. The land of the third was cultivated by a husband whom she had married after her retirement to Atu (see the case of Mwana Amina ‘K’, below). What may happen however when an ex-prostitute buys land illustrates the common dilemma of women landowners.

Maryam Kingi spent twenty years in Mombasa and made a lot of money. In addition to building a house in Atu she also purchased land, but land which required a good deal of work and investment before it could be made profitable. She came to an arrangement with her brother whereby he would cultivate the land for her. After a few years however he ‘persuaded’ her to give it to him outright (people in the village say that he ‘appropriated’ it). Now he merely provides her with food.

It can thus be seen that, given certain ideological imperatives (and in particular that women do not cultivate) women in Atu have limited access to the productive resources of their economy, and are generally dependent on men for the basic needs of life. And if, instead of owning farms, women own houses, it has to be emphasised that (since the renting of living space never takes place here) houses, unlike land, are not

25. One must always keep in mind the net population decline in the area.
26. This may be better understood in the context of family instability (see following section).
So why then is it ‘important for a woman to have a house’?

'Serial Polygyny' and the Ownership of Houses

In spite of the fact that in 1965 there were almost as many women absent from Atu as men, there existed a marked demographic imbalance between the sexes in the village, with 1.2 adult women to every adult male. Lowie has argued that ‘polygyny is the obvious mode of readjustment to a preponderance of women’, but in Atu in 1965 there were only two polygynous marriages out of 186 extant unions. In general this is a ‘solution’ which Atu women are not prepared to accept—when a man suggests taking a second spouse their response is usually, ‘first divorce me’. Women say that they cannot share a husband with another woman. In the only two cases extant, the women concerned insisted on living in separate houses, thus creating an extra financial burden for their husbands.

This being so, it is evident that at any one time many women in Atu will be without husbands. In fact in 1965, 40% of the women were divorcees or widows, whilst an additional 6% were unmarried girls. (This should be compared to 19% of males divorced or widowed, and an additional 12% of men as yet unmarried.)

If polygamy is rare in Atu however, what is sometimes described as ‘serial polygyny’ is the common pattern here. Roughly two thirds of the marriages contracted in Atu end in divorce, most in the early phase of marriage, but some after many years of living together. The majority of Atu adults have therefore been married more than once, and there are some who have married and remarried innumerable times. Since Atu people are Muslims it is men who divorce women; women cannot divorce men. To effect a divorce is relatively easy for man: he simply finds two men to bear witness that he has three times told his wife, ‘I divorce you.’ Although an aggrieved wife has no such easy recourse, women in Atu will rarely endure a marital situation in which...

27. A house may be sold and, depending upon its mode of construction and state of repair, may fetch anything from £10-£100. But there was no real market here for houses, and only one house was sold in 1965 (the transaction was between two men). Women occasionally use their houses as security for loans and there was one case in 1965 where an ex-slave woman asked a rich farmer to take her house on her death in lieu of paying her funeral expenses. Ownership of a house can thus at least give a woman credit-worthiness.

28. This demographic imbalance is marked in all except one of the villages on the island, and is presumably related to past patterns of migration and emigration of males.


30. According to the register of marriages and divorces kept in the District offices since 1951, 59.7% of marriages contracted and registered by Atu men between that date and 1957 had ended in divorce by 1965. Although there is a legal obligation to register marriages, not all do so, and very short-term marriages are unlikely to be registered. Nevertheless the figures are indicative.
they feel they have been wronged. Such a woman will simply ask to be divorced—and for most men such a demand could not be refused without masculine loss of face. Alternatively the wife may make life so uncomfortable for her husband by being uncooperative or avoiding his sexual advances that in the end he finds he can do nothing else but divorce her.81

After divorce it is rare for a husband to claim any children of the marriage. In general the children stay with the wife and she brings them up as best she can. Occasionally men contribute to the maintenance of their children by earlier marriages, but this is by no means a general rule: women say that men ‘discard’ their children. The net effect however is more paradoxical; namely that many men find themselves supporting the young children of their wives’ previous marriage (or marriages). Almost a third (31.7%) of those married couples who have young children living with them have children of the wife’s earlier marriages as well as their own.82 (By contrast only six men—4.6%—have living with them their children by preceding marriages.) There are of course in addition many divorced women temporarily without husbands who have young children to support.

Men blame women, and women men, for the frequency of divorce in Atu. Generally people attribute marital discord to adultery. Thus one man said: ‘The wives of this place are always after men: it is their habit’, whilst another asserted that he did not like the mentality of Atu women: ‘Behind your back they are always looking at other men and going after them.’ Women however have a different story to tell: ‘Men are never satisfied with one wife; they are always on the lookout for someone else.’ And naturally if a wife comes to hear of this she tells her husband, “divorce me”.’ Whatever the truth of the matter, the fact that for men alternative spouses exist in abundance must surely influence attitudes to marriage.

Next to accusations of adultery, quarrels with in-laws are probably the most frequent cause of divorce in Atu. This is one of the consequences of the fact that it is women who own houses here rather than men (86.5% of Atu’s houses are in fact owned by women). There are three ways by which women may obtain houses. Firstly, as we have seen, they may inherit a house (generally from their mother or other

31. The customary bridewealth payment (mahari) is here £12, and it is promised on the occasion of marriage. In very few cases it is actually paid however. In only 16% of registered divorces had the total sum been paid to the woman; in most cases nothing was paid. To some extent this is explained by the fact that many women voluntarily forfeit the payment in demanding the divorce. An additional payment, for the costs of the wedding, is more generally made, but in second marriages this is rarely more than £5.

32. This does not mean that the other 68.3% of marriages with small children were necessarily more stable. Earlier marriages (of either husband or wife) may not have been productive of children, or the children may have died or be already grown up. In addition the children of some of these men’s earlier marriages are living with their mothers.
female relative, but occasionally from a male kinsman). Secondly, they may build a house—but since building requires capital it is generally only prostitutes who are able to build houses. The third way of obtaining a house is by gift—usually from the husband. The husband builds a house which he then gives to his wife. He will usually do this only if the marriage seems to be more or less established.

The rule that women rather than men own houses has two effects. It means that when a man marries he has to move out of his mother’s house and into that of his wife or her mother (or some other female affinal). More than half (54.3%) of the married men in Atu are therefore living with their affinal kin. Similarly, when a man divorces his wife he is the one who has to move out and generally he returns to the house of his mother or his sister. Households in Atu are thus typically composed of a core of permanently settled women with their children, plus isolated and temporarily settled men.

One can see, as it were, two centripetal tendencies at work here. Ideally a man would like to be in firm control of a group consisting of his wife and children, and later his daughters and their husbands. In such a situation he is not threatened by his wife’s ownership of the house and may even give her a house he has built. It is a different proposition however, for a man to marry into a house where he is faced with a strong and united group of female affines, the most formidable of which is probably his mother-in-law. This situation is fraught with potential friction.

Although strong and stable male-focused households are to some extent a function of one stage in the life cycle of domestic groups, they can only occur if marriages persist in spite of the built-in factors precipitating discord. Landownership is to a large extent the key to effective male control, since it is the product of the land which allows a man to organise and provide for his family with authority. It is notable for example that all the males who themselves own houses (13.5% of the house-owners) also own land, and in general a man with land is likely to establish his own household rather than live in with his wife's relatives.

If land is the ultimate security for men, women put their trust in the close knit group of mother, sisters, grandmother and daughters, if possible all residing under one roof. The symbol of the woman’s ideal is therefore a house where she can live together with her female kin. A woman who has neither house nor co-residing female kin will always work towards achieving this end, because without one and/or the other she has no security. On the other hand the co-residence of loyally united groups of related women presents a threat to the stability of the marriages of the individual women involved.

The effect of marital instability on parent-child relationships is very evident in Atu. Mothers and daughters are in general very close and mutually supportive. In addition they may live in the same household throughout their lives. The relationship of a mother with her sons is
more ambivalent: there may be hostility between sons and their mother's husbands, and in any case sons leave home when they marry. A father has more tenuous relationships with both sons and daughters in a broken marriage, and this is undoubtedly the reason why sons prefer to cultivate for themselves rather than for their fathers.

**Sexual Politics in Atu: Divorce and the Option of Prostitution**

Although women in Atu depend very markedly on the economic activities of men in order to live, this does not make them submissive or acquiescent marriage partners. On the contrary they are defiant, quick to take offence, and very ready to demand to be divorced. One can only explain this paradox in terms of women being able to fall back on alternative arrangements, which may, at least temporarily, substitute for the economic security of marriage. To some extent these are to be found in women's work, although as we have seen, such work produces only a meagre income. In addition the existence of groups of co-resident female kin now comes into its own as a mechanism for mutual aid—although ironically what this often means in practice is that a divorced woman merely transfers her dependence from her own husband to the husband of her kinswoman. This transfer is, however, mediated through the institution of female ownership of houses.

But in the last analysis, it is almost certainly the possibility of earning a viable living as a prostitute which allows women to reject unsatisfactory marital situations. At the same time, the fact that women may exploit their sexuality for gain, and thereby earn a certain measure of freedom from male control, is an ever-present threat to marital stability. Thus it is within the context of marital relations that the option of prostitution must be considered.

Up until their first marriage young women are restricted and subject to the control of their parents. (It is perhaps ironical that it is women rather than men who uphold and enforce these restrictions on unmarried girls.) Although these days many young girls find ways of escaping these restraints, it is unheard of for an unmarried girl independently to leave Atu for Mombasa. Prostitutes are without exception women who have already been married:

In 1965 Mwanahawa was living in her mother's house with her mother, her grandmother, her mother's husband, and two young brothers (one by her mother's present husband, one by a third marriage of her mother's). She was married to a man named Somoebwana, but the marriage was very unstable. Twice, whilst Mwanahawa was pregnant, she and her husband quarrelled and he left. (Her only explanation for this was that 'Men here are very stupid!') He returned to her after the birth of the child and the marriage continued, though shakily. After several more months however, Mwanahawa was finally divorced. A year
later she had left for Mombasa, leaving her small child with her mother. 'Now she accepts any man', commented her mother with resignation.

This is a pattern of events which is often repeated in Atu. Occasionally a divorce may even be forced by the woman running away to Mombasa, as happened in the following instance:

Ali Mohamed was married to a girl, Zamzam, of whom he was inordinately fond. She however was cool towards the marriage. She became involved with another man and asked Ali for a divorce which he refused to give her. Finding that she was trapped in an unhappy marriage, Zamzam ran away to Mombasa, where after a while she became a prostitute. Ali was thereby forced to divorce her.

The option of prostitution is not however equally open to all women who are unhappily married. One factor which clearly influences the incidence of migratory activities amongst women is their fertility. Women with several small children cannot so easily leave for Mombasa as those with none or only one or two. The fertility rate in this district as a whole appears, however, to be very low, whilst at the same time the mortality rate for children in their first year is very high. Thus although people in Atu do not use contraceptive devices (such not being locally available, and in any case regarded as sinful), the number of women who have very large families is not as great as might be expected, and many have very few or even none at all.

A woman with one or two small children will generally leave them behind at first if she intends to earn her living independently in Mombasa. Very young children would be a hindrance to this goal, and would necessitate her employing someone to look after them whilst she works. After settling down however, she is likely to fetch older children so that they can go to school in Mombasa. Some children are however left permanently in Atu. In 1965 there were twelve women in Atu taking care of their daughters' children, and one caring for her sister's daughter's child. Altogether there were seventeen children involved, eight of whom were illegitimate. One woman had two daughters working as prostitutes in Mombasa; she meanwhile cared for the two illegitimate children of one of them and the legitimate child of the other (born before her mother left for Mombasa). If a woman conceives in Mombasa she generally comes home to bear her child and will leave it in Atu at least whilst it is small:

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33. Low fertility rates may be a reflection of the incidence of venereal disease, but this is by no means certain. With regard to infant mortality: during the period March 1965 to January 1966, when I kept my own records of Atu births and deaths, 36 children were born whilst 26 died.
Timalale was married briefly, quarrelled with her husband and was divorced. She then went to Mombasa where she became a successful prostitute. In 1964 she already had one illegitimate child who was about four years old and whom she kept with her in Mombasa, employing another woman to look after her whilst she worked. Then she again became pregnant and returned to Atu to bear her child. She stayed with her mother's sister, herself a retired prostitute. Tima's own mother was in Mombasa. A few months after the apparently half-Chinese baby was born she returned to Mombasa. During 1965 the child became desperately ill and died. Timalale arrived too late, when the baby was already dead. Her grief was overwhelming, but other women were critical: 'It's not proper to cry so much [because it implies that one questions God's will]. Why does she cry so? Even now she is pregnant again.' Timalale stayed on in Atu to await the birth of her third illegitimate child. After it was born, in October, she became determined to return with it to Mombasa. She said she could not think of leaving it behind after what had happened to her other child. But by December she had set off again for Mombasa, and the child remained with her mother (who had by this time herself returned to live in Atu).

This case exemplifies the way in which the close knit female kin group can operate as an instrument of mutual support within the context of migratory activities. It also raises the issue of illegitimacy. It cannot be denied that there is a certain stigma of shamefulness attached to illegitimacy here. Children born out of wedlock are referred to as wana haramu 'forbidden children', and this is a term of abuse, even if rarely used openly. But certain social mechanisms exist to obscure the harsh reality of a child with 'no father'. Such a child may be called 'the son/ daughter of "Abdallah"', or it will be given a name implying that it in fact has a legitimate father. Illegitimate children take their social status from their mothers and may inherit from them.

Of the children under fifteen in Atu, 6.2% were illegitimate—more than half of these would appear to be the products of prostitution in Mombasa, whilst some of the others seem to have been born of 'prostitution' within the village context. Considering the extent to which women migrate here, the degree of illegitimacy does not seem to be very high, even granted that some of the children of prostitutes are with their mothers in Mombasa. Men say that prostitutes do not use contraceptives, and it is rare for their customers to do so. Timalale at least said that she did not do anything to prevent conception, and no woman in Atu would think of aborting a child. Children, even when illegitimate, are welcome. Nevertheless, many of the women who have stayed for long periods in Mombasa would seem to be relatively infertile. Of eighteen women who had spent more than ten years in Mombasa but who were now more or less 'retired' in Atu (the majority being past child-bearing age), five had no living child, four had only one, and only
three had more than three children. There were, moreover, only three with illegitimate children. Most of the children born to these women appear to be the products of their earliest marriages in Atu, rather than of their life as prostitutes. This cannot be satisfactorily explained, although it is possible that venereal disease has affected the fertility of these women.

The incidence of labour migratory activities amongst Atu women is influenced by a further factor: namely local wealth differentials. One might reasonably have anticipated that it would be women in the most distressed economic circumstances who would be most likely to leave the village, but this is not so. Although economic straits may in some cases propel women into prostitution in Atu itself, migration to Mombasa requires financial resources to which poorer women may not have access. The journey takes at least two days, and in 1965 cost about Sh.30. Although most people have some relatives in Mombasa with whom they can stay initially, a person needs a little money to keep her or himself going until he settles down and begins earning an adequate income. In the case of prostitution it seems likely that some expenditure on attractive dresses and cosmetics would greatly improve a woman's chances of success. It is difficult for the poorest women in Atu to obtain enough cash for such expenses. A woman from a rather better-off family however may have been able to save a little money from working at women's tasks. She may have jewellery she can pawn or sell. She is almost certainly in a position to borrow money from other women (or men) for the journey.

On the other hand the daughters or sisters of the richest men in the village are least likely to migrate. Generally these women are married to men of equivalent economic status, and such marriages have a better chance of stability. Their husbands can afford to adequately feed, clothe and house their wives and children, so that quarrels at least over such matters are less likely to arise. These men are thus more likely to be in firm control of their dependent womenfolk and to attempt action against those who 'shamefully' go their own way. Even here however they are not always successful, since other than economic factors come into play to propel some women into earning a living by prostitution:

Rukiya Zuberi came from a well-off family in Atu, and her brother was also a religious officiant in the Friday mosque. In 1965, she was already married to her fourth husband although she was still in her mid-twenties. In her first marriage she had borne a child which died. Rukiya's second marriage was to a man who worked away from Atu, and who visited her infrequently. She lived in her elder sister's house, their mother being long since dead. She

34 Assigning a cash value to all production here (i.e. including production for subsistence) we find that at one extreme 4% of the adult male population had incomes of £600 and over per annum, whilst at the other end of the economic hierarchy, one third of the male population had incomes of less than £50 per annum.
became pregnant, but was divorced after a quarrel in which she accused her husband of adultery. The child was born a few months later. Rukiya's third marriage was a 'secret' affair with a man of the village, and it lasted only a week.

At this point Rukiya attempted to go to Mombasa, leaving her small child with her sister. She got only as far as the next town, however, when her brother caught up with her and forced her ignominious return. Not long after this she was married to a man from another village, but she herself continued to live in Atu with her sister, and so she rarely saw her husband. In 1965, she was visibly chafing at this situation and claiming that her husband did not support her properly. ('If you want anything from a man in this place you have to take him by the ear.') She had also heard tales that her husband had taken another wife.

By 1967, Rukiya had long since been divorced, and this time had succeeded in reaching Mombasa, where she was said to be living, 'any old way' (vivi hivi tu, here a euphemism for prostitution).

In another case, the daughter of one of Atu's richest men was forced into a marriage with her cousin. Neither she nor her cousin wished for the union, and the young man divorced his wife after five days. She thereupon ran away to Mombasa and stayed there for six months working as a prostitute. In the end her father sent his son to Mombasa to fetch her back. She agreed to come, and a more acceptable marriage was arranged for her, though to a man of considerably lesser standing.

These examples of attempts by well-off men to assert male authority over women may be compared to the case of an elderly man in less fortunate economic circumstances whose daughter had been many years in Mombasa. He came to tell his female neighbours that he had received some money from his daughter. After he had left one of them said disparagingly: 'His daughter has no husband, she is a prostitute. But of course, if she sends him money, he is happy.'

Sexual Politics in Atu: Social Acceptance and Economic Security

Although no one in Atu would argue that prostitution is anything but sinful, returned prostitutes are by no means social outcasts. On the contrary they receive a surprising degree of social acceptance, as the following case indicates:

Hawa Loo had spent twenty years in Mombasa, having gone there initially after she was divorced by her first husband. In Mombasa she remarried, but was again divorced and has since worked as a prostitute. She has never borne a child herself. Several years ago her sister died in Atu, leaving one child who later became ill with polio. Hawa took the boy to Mombasa where he was successfully treated, and she has looked after him ever since.
In 1965 he was eleven years old and she came back with him to Atu so that he could be circumcised. From her savings Hawa provided a huge feast to celebrate the boy's circumcision. She spent something like £50, and the feast was attended by around one hundred women, and double that number of men—including all the most important men of the town, and some from other villages.

This was not an isolated case—during this same year the mother of Timalale, whose case was described above, also gave a public feast to celebrate the circumcision of two of her illegitimate children and four other boys, the sons of relatives. Again a vast amount of money was spent (by local standards) and all the locally important men were present. In inviting such men to feasts, and in securing their willing attendance, such women maintained their good public standing, irrespective of what men said about them behind their backs.

Nor are such women unacceptable as marriage partners, though on the whole returned prostitutes, unless they are still quite young, do not often remarry. Of eighteen women who had spent more than ten years in Mombasa, only two were married in 1965, although a further two entered into brief marriages in the course of the year. This is to be understood more in terms of their age and the fact that they are mostly past child bearing however, than in terms of any particular stigma attached to their past activities. It could also be that in so far as these women have savings and security they prefer their independence to the married state. Where they do marry it would appear to be more for expediency than for any other motive, and to relate to the fact that women do not cultivate. One woman described it as 'marrying for food'. In one exceptional case however, the retired prostitute who remarried had invested her earnings in land:

Mwana Amina 'K' is an elderly woman who has never borne a child. She spent several years in Mombasa and is believed to have earned quite large sums of money there. She is also rumoured to have pocketed for herself money collected for a dance society which operated in the town many years ago. She bought a piece of land, which, though not very large, is fairly profitable. Mwana Amina then married a man of the ex-slave category who, like her, had no living close relatives. She herself was a freeborn woman, so that such a match, in local eyes, was most unfortunate. To impute motives here would be speculative, but in effect, Mwana Amina, by marrying a man with no wealth of his own, and of inferior status, ensured herself labour for her farm and continued control over its products.

Although some women settle permanently in Mombasa—they may marry or live with their grown up children there—the goal of those who return must be to guarantee a comfortable old age for themselves.
in the village. The two most important aspects of this are ensuring the support of kin and building a house if they do not already own one. Thus 11.5% of Atu’s houses are owned by women at present away, and all but four of those women who have long-term migrancy experience own their own houses (three of the exceptions are still living in houses belonging to their mothers which they will presumably inherit). One woman has even built two houses.

Returned prostitutes also use their savings to help relatives—help which may, in the future, be reciprocated. Most of this effort of course goes into supporting and maintaining their own close female kin and their children. They are generally enthusiastic about sending their children to secular schools in the hope that they may better themselves (partly this is a reflection of their stay in Mombasa, where schools have been established for much longer, and are taken for granted, whereas in Atu there is still religious antipathy to the government school on the island). They may pay fees for the children of other women relatives, and can generally be relied upon to assist in the case of illness. One had paid for her brother’s wedding. The case of Hawa, above, and of Timalale’s mother, provide instances of support to kinsfolk—support which could stand them in good stead in the future.

Cases where returned prostitutes have invested savings in directly productive assets are more rare. But three of these women had bought land, in spite of the problems already noted. One of these had in addition built a water tank, from which she sold water, whilst another had opened a small shop with her savings (she was the only woman in the village to attempt shopkeeping).

There was one returned migrant whose case is the exception that proves the general rule that women who earn money from prostitution use it to ensure themselves security in old age:

Batuli Dhee had spent more than 25 years in Mombasa and had been a highly successful prostitute, by repute very popular with Europeans. It was said—with what truth I do not know—that Batuli’s mother had also been a prostitute in Mombasa and had died there. Batuli spent all her earnings on good living and conspicuous consumption, and returned to Atu more or less penniless. She had never borne a child and had no living close relatives. Since she had built no house she had nowhere to live. In 1965 she was around seventy years of age and was occupying a semi-derelict house belonging to a woman living in Nairobi to whom she was very distantly related. In order to live she had to go round with a bowl into which charitable people would put food. People regarded her with pity—but pity mixed with contempt at her lack of foresight.

Kitina said of the life of a prostitute: ‘When you are young and pretty you do well, but when you are old you may end up begging, like Batuli Dhee.’
It will now be clear that in relation to the situation of Atu women, prostitution is simply one of an inter-related set of social facts, the most important of which are the economic dependency of women, female house-ownership, marriage residence rules and marital instability. My argument here has been that the labour migration of women must be seen within the socio-economic context of production and property relations within the village, but also as a response to general historical trends of economic decline affecting the area of which Atu is a part.

Equally importantly I have been trying to illustrate the fact that without equivalent access to productive resources, and without active participation in the productive processes of their economy, women cannot gain an equal footing with men. They are forced back to utilising their sexuality as their sole resource. The option of prostitution, and the mechanisms which women have developed to make this option viable, certainly allow them to be defiant in relation to men, to reject submission within an unhappy marriage and to refuse the status of second wife. But in the long run their actions are defensive rather than offensive. They threaten the authority of men but do not suggest any radical alternatives to women's dependency here. And as Millett comments: 'To be a rebel is not to be a revolutionary. It is more often but a way of spinning one's wheels deeper in the sand.'

35. It has been suggested that female-centred kin groups are generally 'of a predominantly defensive nature' (R. Morpeth and P. Langton, 'Contemporary Matriarchies: Women Alone—Independent or Incomplete?', Cambridge Anthropology I (3), Apr. 1974: 35). In this analysis I have tried to show that such groups are more than this, in that they also threaten marital instability and provide support for alternative arrangements. But in a more general sense, women's responses here may indeed realistically be seen as a defensive reaction to their deprived and dependent economic and social status.

à l'économie locale que celle, sensiblement équivalente, des hommes, dans la mesure où les migrantes investissent à Atu dans la construction de maisons où s'installer à leur retour. Il existe une certaine forme de prostitution sur place mais elle reste très différente, aussi bien socialement qu'économiquement, de celle pratiquée au cours de la migration à Mombasa. Le phénomène paraît remonter aux transformations économiques résultant de la suppression de l'esclavage et du déclin du commerce avec l'Arabie. La polygynie synchronique a cédé la place à la polygynie diachronique, en relation avec l'incidence élevée des divorces, d'où la nécessité pour les femmes de posséder leur propre maison, dans un système résidentiel centré sur des groupes féminins. En dépit de la tradition islamique, les ex-prostituées sont assez bien acceptées socialement. On peut arguer que les femmes, réduites à la dépendance économique, cherchent à y échapper en utilisant leur capital sexuel comme arme défensive.