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26/5/85 Interview with Mwahadia and Subira at the former's house.

Mwahadia was the ex-wife of Mohamed, and Subira was one of their daughters. All three were major characters in my 1997 book African Voices, African Lives. We began by discussing Subira's marital career. She had a daughter who is now 7. Then she got married in Baleni village for three years and had a daughter who is now 6. She got divorced, stayed with her father, visited her mother. She had another daughter (outside of wedlock) who died at 9 months. At this time she had been married in Bweni for 1 year and was now pregnant by her husband but the marriage was looking uncertain. This conversation was not recorded, reconstructed from notes

Subira. I never manage to wean my children - I always get pregnant again immediately

Pat. Who helped you when you gave birth?

Subira. My mother, mother's sister, mother's mother. I had no problems, 'safari nzuri'. I don't want to bear my children in hospital - I'm afraid.

Mwahadia. People help you when you are giving birth at home. They don't allow relatives in hospital, and we like to be massaged with oil when we are in labour, but most nurses don't do that. If you are pregnant you shouldn't quarrel with people or you'll have a difficult delivery.

Pat. Do you rest during pregnancy?

S. Not really, we carry on as before.

Mwahadia. I hardly made it home in time to have her (S). You do rest after the birth for 40 days, you don't do hard work. After you've given birth you get pepper coffee, then porridge with pepper. It gets rid of the bad things (uchafu) in your stomach. And every day we use very hot water - it helps you to feel better after birth.

Pat. Do people need more food if they are pregnant?

Mwahadia. Not really - they may not feel like eating, or else they may want particular foods.

Mwahadia has moved next to the big marsh (tanda) - she is sharing a hut with Subira but plans to build her own. The coconuts here belong to her son Mikidadi. She is having bush cut down by a Mnyamwezi man. Subira cultivated a bush field this year. Last year she did not cultivate because she was pregnant with her third child - a boy who died. She had to go to the district hospital in Kilindoni to have a drip because of anaemia.

Subira's husband came briefly - he had felled some coconuts for Mwahadia. Then he left.

Last year when he came to betroth ('kuposa') Subira's husband cleared bush for Mwahadia - he himself had no wife at that time. She in turn helped him by planting rice for him. This year she cultivated meadow land (dawe) which she got from her ex-husband Mohammed's side.

Subira said she didn't want him back - she is his 5th wife and he has divorced them all. She says she feels sleepy all the times (she is now 5 mos. pregnant) and can't work much - she doesn't even feel like plaiting.

Mwahadia cooks some fish and then rice.

Subira. Give her some kinyumbani

Pat. What is that?

Mwajuma. It is a sort of hors d'oeuvres of the kitoweo which the husband gets while he is waiting for his meal.

Pat. Who needs more food - men or women?

Mwajuma. Men do. Because they don't cook as we do. We nibble while cooking so we've already had some when the meal time comes. Besides, if you don't give your husband enough, he'll quarrel with you.

Pat. What do you feed children?

A. Whatever is there. You start giving them uji (gruel) at 40 days, very thin, then when it can sit up, rice, and after that, any food.

Pat. How much food do you produce yourselves?

Mwajuma. We need to buy about 4 months of food from the shop - otherwise we eat what we grow.

Subira's two little girls pretend to pound with sticks. Subira says one of them already knows how to do it, and that one day she (S) was late back, the child tried to start cooking. Mwahadia's children have gone to stay with their father. Her son Athman says he won't come and live 'in the bush' but Hedaya plans to come and live with her mother.

Mwahadia's fertility history

She was married in Zanzibar for 4 years - had no children. Then

1. Daughter born dead
 2. Mikidadi - now living in Dar.
 3. Fatuma (divorced, has 1 daughter and 2 sons plus a son who died - a twin)
 4. Subira
 5. Omari - died as an adult at sea
 6. Hadija - married in Zanzibar. She has one daughter and one son, none lost
 7. Twin daughters. Koko (who lives with her father) and Patrisha (my namesake) who died at 40 days.
 8. Miscarriage at 3 months
 9. Athman. Now at school in Standard 5 (he got no new clothes for Id as she had no money and his father Mohamed told him to go and buy his own.)
 10. Hedaya.
 11. Girl born prematurely at 7 months (1976) who died.
- Thus currently alive are 2 sons and 5 daughters.

The year before last (1983) Mwahadia went to Zanzibar to help her daughter with her second pregnancy as the first had been very difficult and she didn't want to have the baby in Kanga. She couldn't get a place in a boat here – she thought that her ex-husband Mohamed made it difficult for her. She had to go to Kilindoni and get on a steamer. She took Hedaya with her to Zanzibar and left Athman at home. She stayed 6 weeks and then went to stay in Dar with Mikidadi for a month.

She remembers my namesake (somo) "a nice clever child". Subira used to carry her

and Fatuma would carry Koko but Patrisha was the one who got all the attention.

Pat. Why didn't you get married again?

Mwahadia. I was engaged to that Kombo in Baleni for a long time. But he got killed by a spirit (shaitani). One night he went outside and saw a hippo - he came in to look for his gun. He couldn't find it. When he came back it had gone. But it was a jinn. He got sick, went to Dar, died and his body was flown back.

Pat. So will you marry again?

Mwahadia. Who will take on the children of someone else? I have my children to think about- but I'd like to.

Pat. Could you live with a co-wife?

Mwahadia. Yes, even with two of them! But it's hard. The husband only takes the kitoweo to the place where he sleeps. Men want 2 or 3 wives these days. Yes, I'd like to get married but noone has come forward.

Subira: My husband refused to buy clothes for my children. But they were the ones who guarded our field - it was my food as well as his.

Pat. So is it better to have a husband or not?

Subira. It is better to have one because you can't afford food like flour (dona). But if you can't get anything from your husband, it is better that you manage on your own. Look at my husband, he gives me nothing. I got kitoweo for free today - I gave some rice to that man yesterday. I manage well on my own.

Their relationship is a mixture of closeness and quarrelling - they are very alike. Mwahadia cooks but asks Subira what to do (since it is her house and her kitoweo), but later it is Mwahadia who decides how much to dish up.

Pat. Will you give your children to your mother if you re-marry?

Subira. No she likes going about now to Zanzibar and Dar to visit her children. Besides, I like to have them here with me.

Mwahadia's daily routine.

Get up, get the fire going. Clean teeth, wash face. Drink tea with rice from the day before. Go to the field to 4 p.m.. Don't eat at midday. Cook. Pound rice. I fetch wood in the evening but not every day. I need 3 buckets of water daily (water is very near). Subira washes the dishes. At the moment she and S. cook together - later they may cook separately when Subira has her own place.

Pat. When do you rest?

Mwahadia. Only after the evening meal, but then I usually go to sleep. If I need to rest I take a day off. Now the field work is slackening off a bit, I want to start cutting raffia. I want to send some to my daughter in Zanzibar when her father goes there.

Pat. Do you think it is better to be a male or a female?

Mwahadia. They are different. We work harder and get old quickly. Sometimes people who are quite young already look old. It depends more on your constitution than work. Look at me - I still look young (she does).

Pat. What is women's work?

Mwahadia. It is manifold - in the house, in the field - planting, weeding, harvesting.

Pat. And men's work?

Mwahadia. All he does is ask if food is ready!

Pat. So is life easier for men? Mwahadia. Yes

Subira. I cultivated cassava myself - about an acre, but I haven't used it all. I paid 400/- to have the field prepared.

Pat. Where do you get that kind of money?

Subira. I get it from here and there (laughs) from men. Do you think if you aren't clever (mjanja) you'll get anything?

Mwahadia. See, now I've eaten, I start plaiting raffia. A person can't sit doing nothing. I make an average of 8 mats a year for which I get 200/- each, and if I make prayer mats (misala) I get the same price.

Pat. What about men?

Mwahadia. Oh they have nothing to do - they play cards for hours on end - or they chase after women, and even then they don't always pay. But I won't be deceived by a husband again about other women - or over money, claiming every evening he has no money and he's said he's not been working and you know he's been felling coconuts. I won't put up with that.

Subira talks about visiting the Mafia Island Lodge in Utende - she was offered beer but refused it and they all laughed.

Pat. Who did you go with?

Subira. A man. Mikidadi gets drunk a lot now - he has no shame, he doesn't hide it. It is because of the work he does in hotels with Europeans. When I went to the Lodge I went sea fishing - I was scared stiff.

Pat. Did you get your mahari from your husbands?

Mwahadia and Subira. Yes, we did (both)

Pat. What about coconuts?

Mwahadia. He got them, not me, and I wanted to buy a cow, but he refused.