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Who Compares To Mother (*Nani Kama Mama*)?

The day was hot, as usual, but Mama Nyabweke and I felt the occasional breeze waft through the open sitting room of her home in Shimo la Udongo, one of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's many squatter settlements. It was mid-afternoon and we were content to sit quietly on the cool cement floor sorting scraps of cloth for her small-scale, informal sewing business. Our morning had been hectic and tiring. We had gone to several markets that morning searching for the pieces of used clothing she altered into children's shorts and women's undergarments.[1]

"*Wifi* (sister-in-law)," Mama Nyabweke called to me as we worked together that afternoon.

"*Bee* (yes)?" I asked.

She smiled and, with a twinkle in her eye, said, "You know, I am very clever, you won't meet many who are as clever as I."

Setting my work aside to give her my full attention, I smiled and said, "Truly," both agreeing with her and urging her to continue.

> *I gave birth to ten children and I've raised them all, it was all my own effort. I don't have any other responsibilities other than taking care of my children. I have helped many people but I never received help from others. When my husband died, they thought I had no strength.... People talk about me. I know many people are jealous of me and they do not like me. They are jealous because I have a good business, I have built my own house, a good house, and because I can feed my large family. No one goes to sleep hungry.*

Mama Nyabweke's story, like those of thousands of other women, illustrates many of the chief characteristics of contemporary mothering and

motherhood in Tanzania, as well as many of the societal changes that have taken place. In the following pages, I examine the experiences of poor women living and working in urban squatter settlements as they relate to perspectives on the work of mothering and motherhood. I explore how increasing numbers of female-headed households, urban poverty and the feminization of poverty have forced a reformulation of motherhood and mothering. My analysis is based on twenty months (1995-97) of ethnographic field research during which time I lived with and came to know many Tanzanian mothers.

Traditionally, mothering was not primarily thought of as an economic activity and, commonly, the difficult work of mothering was undervalued. Nowadays in Tanzania, mothering is even less so about "simple" mother-child relationships. It involves complex strategies that take into consideration traditional ideologies of gender and social organization, current political and economic realities and, above all, cleverness (*ujanja*), as Mama Nyabweke was herself quick to point out. Cleverness is essential for urban living and survival. It is based on wit and intelligence, but just as importantly, it includes elements of cunning and deceit. These constructs show that mothering and motherhood are actively created and learned, rather than naturally determined roles and capabilities. They are conditioned by the context in which they occur and influenced by the agency and subjectivity of the women who mother.

Throughout the world, women struggle to meet the ever-increasing demands of mothering and motherhood. In his review of the meaning of motherhood in mainstream U.S. society, John Gillis (2002) concludes that, "Never have mothers been so burdened by motherhood" (129). While Gillis's analysis focuses on maternity, his statement rings true for many women, especially for contemporary Tanzanian women. All of the mothers I knew worked under exceptionally difficult circumstances in tremendously competitive, and sometimes hostile, environments. Unlike many men who sought only their own survival, women worked to insure the sustenance of their children and grandchildren. In this article, I examine women's experiences of motherhood and explore the ways that the feminization of poverty creates strong connections between mothering and work.

In the North American mainstream, mothering is often assumed to be a natural role determined by the biological processes of reproduction (see Hrdy, 1999; Collier and Yanagisako, 1987). Thus, motherhood seems to be a simple matter: a woman becomes pregnant, gives birth and thereafter is selflessly devoted to the rearing of her children. In this system, the "Good Mother" is defined by intensive and child-centered care giving, nurturing and selflessness. However, mothering and motherhood encompass multiple contradictions. With the spread of new reproductive technologies it can no longer be said that motherhood is established through simple biological processes, if indeed it ever was.[2] Contemporary expectations of work and intensive mothering make pursuing the status of "Good Mother" both principle and ultimately unachievable (Barlow, 2002). It is also a job that is nearly everywhere devalued (Crittenden,

2001). In and of themselves, such contradictions, wherein mothering is simultaneously lauded and devalued, should prompt us to consider the meanings of mothering and motherhood more closely. What women as mothers do, how they do it and how they define themselves are complex issues that must be untangled and investigated, rather than assumed (see for example, Arendell, 2000; Collins, 1991; Scheper-Hughes, 1992). The tendency to essentialize motherhood is pervasive. "More than any other field of human endeavor, motherhood is like the air we breath. Because it is clear, transparent, and readily available, we often take it for granted." (Abbey, 2003: 9) This may be due, in part, to the fact that we all have mothers. Not only have we lived with and grown to understand (at least somewhat) our own mothers, many of us are ourselves mothers. But, in naturalizing motherhood and mothering we remove them from illumination and divorce them from value and analysis. The difficult and exhaustive work of mothering disappears behind the rhetoric of instinct and emotion.

I encountered similar perspectives about the "naturalness" of mothering in Tanzania. Such views are, in fact, the source for the title of this paper. During the two years that I conducted ethnographic research in the late 1990s, *kanga* (cloth worn by women) printed with the adage "*Nani kama Mama* (Who compares to Mother)" were widely popular gifts purchased for women by their children. The message of the kanga reflected traditional Tanzanian ideologies regarding motherhood, that it is women/mothers who are primarily responsible for the care of children. But it also posed a critical question for consideration in light of the rapid increase in female-headed households and urban poverty. How do mothers living in abject poverty provide for their children?

Tanzania suffered a variety of economic crises in the 1970s and '80s related to such events as the war with Uganda, increased oil prices and drought, to name but a few. These crises were followed by a decade's worth of austerity and structural adjustment measures, imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank as a requirement of debt refinancing, making Tanzania the world's poorest nation according to per capita income in 1995 (Tripp, 1997). The combination of these events has forced women to shoulder increasingly heavy burdens of household maintenance and childrearing, often on their own. Men, in ever growing numbers, are abandoning their responsibilities to their children, and women are picking up the slack. The dislocations brought about by increasing incorporation into a capitalist world system have necessitated the development of new roles for mothers and new ways of mothering. Thus, we must also ask, "Why do mothers stay with their children when men so often leave?"

Many East African groups were traditionally based upon systems of patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence.[3] Marriages were arranged by fathers and secured through the exchange of bridewealth.[4] In these systems women were often denied the right to own or inherit major resources such as land or cattle. Even in the few matrilineal systems, wherein descent is traced

through the mother's line, resources were often handed down from a man to his sister's sons and men controlled access to strategic resources. Women were expected to contribute their labour to production. They were also solely responsible for food preparation, childcare and general household maintenance. Similarly today, the majority of all household work falls to female members. Additionally, the burden of securing adequate household funds is primarily a woman's domain. Mothers are responsible for the health, feeding, clothing and education of household members.

While recognizing the extent of such obligations, the women I knew were eager to have children. This desire was due in part to the fact that, in Tanzania, one must take on dependants of some kind in order to achieve adult status. Women most often do this through mothering. Once a woman has a child she takes on a new status, that of mother. She is thereafter known and referred to as Mama, or Mother of so-and so.[5] While a woman may in one sense lose her individual identity through this transformation, she also achieves increased power, status and authority. Nowadays, becoming a mother often means that a woman must take on the sole responsibility of rearing and providing for her children, and eventually her grandchildren, well into adulthood. To provide for their dependants, women devote their incomes almost entirely to household needs and maintenance. A man's income and labour are, however, his to dispose of as he wishes (see Hansen, 1997).[6]

Because of the increased burdens and insecurities associated with mothering and motherhood, the women with whom I worked were very nostalgic about their idealized notions of kinship and family life in the past. As one divorced mother told me, "The children's father scorns us. Men run from their responsibilities. This is new. In the past it wasn't like that." Women characterized the past as a time when everyone knew their responsibilities and met them. The more clearly demarcated kin roles and supporting system of sanctions enforcing those roles represented greater security to a very insecure, present day urban population. One middle-aged mother who sold pastries on the streets offered this comparison:

> *A long time ago all the men tried to work hard to feed the family. For example, a long time ago, if a woman got divorced she wasn't supposed to take the children, she wasn't allowed to move with the babies because the father used to think the babies were his. But nowadays, the fathers are the first to move from home and leave their families, and behave like* malaya *(prostitutes, promiscuous) outside.*

In giving their interpretations of idealized kin relations of the past, Tanzanian women offered a powerful critique of men and contemporary gender relations. Mothers had greater responsibilities and worked harder than men. As a result, women criticized men for being self-interested, manipulative and irresponsible. Men also accused women of being manipulative and

devious, central components of cleverness (*ujanja*). Yet, more importantly, women defended their duplicity on the basis of mothering and motherhood. They felt justified in taking whatever actions they deemed necessary because they had children to support. To accomplish the complex tasks set out for them, cleverness became a successful (if not quite a good) mother's most important skill.

The Tanzanian government estimates that 23 percent of Tanzanian households are headed by women. In urban areas the rates vary from 21 to 28 percent and in squatter settlements the rates are higher yet. These percentages represent a five percent increase nationwide over the past decade. Additionally, nearly eighteen percent of all Dar es Salaam households fall below the basic needs poverty line of 7,253 Tanzanian shillings (approximately US$10-12) per month (Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Government studies identify education as a major factor influencing household income, and ultimately poverty. Not surprisingly, males are more likely to receive an education and are far more likely to continue past primary school. Yet even when education is held constant, men earn, on average, twice as much as women. Clearly, women and their children are at a much greater risk of poverty. They are also more profoundly affected by structural adjustment programs that drastically reduce, and in some cases eliminate entirely, access to essential social services such as education and health care (see Ngaiza and Koda, 1991; Kabeer, 1994). As a result, women have had to adapt to changing circumstances through the alteration of household structures, adaptive strategies and the definition of motherhood itself.

Mothering today includes not only past concerns with daily childcare and feeding, but more extensive maternal responsibility. While women have always worked to support themselves and their families, the roles and work of mothers have altered tremendously due to urban poverty. Meeting basic daily needs as well as long-term household survival has, in many cases, been placed squarely on the shoulders of women in their roles as mothers. Over the past three decades, their earnings have become absolutely essential to the survival of the majority of Dar es Salaam households (both male and female headed), with little if any help from fathers, husbands or adult sons. To meet these demands they enter into a variety of informal economic sector activities from the sale of cooked food on the streets to sewing. In the West we draw, perhaps inaccurate, distinctions between "working" and "non-working" mothers, but in Dar es Salaam more and more, work is becoming an essential element integral to the definition of mothering. While the work of the women I encountered was based upon traditional gender ideologies and divisions of labour, it is specifically aimed at meeting the demands of urban living. For example, childcare considerations limited women's options and often made their work more difficult. A fish seller clearly defined this issue when she stated, "Even if I thought about changing my business, I couldn't because I have children." Most women needed to opt for work that could be performed simultaneously with

childcare, that was flexible enough to work around children's needs, or could accommodate the presence of children.

The structure of urban households also mirrored this need for flexibility. Ideally, the household was thought of in terms of a large extended family sharing a compound, such as all the sons and unmarried daughters of a patriarch. However, urban land shortages and poverty made it very difficult for urban residents to recreate this ideal. The East African households I studied were extremely fluid; and this fluidity was a key to their survival and success.[7] The sites were dynamic and multidimensional, they were not based solely in kinship, rather economics and politics made up important aspects of household organization (see also Hansen, 1997). The maintenance and establishment of wide social networks were crucial to the survival of poor urban households headed by women. In times of trouble, which occur frequently for those living in poverty, people turned to friends and family for aid rather than governmental and nongovernmental agencies or personal savings. Therefore, a key of mothers' work was establishing social alliances. For such strategies to work, women needed to be clever.

Because women's subsistence was by no means insured, even if they did work consistently, women had to rely on a variety of other sources of support. Poverty, therefore encouraged the development of wide social networks of support, including sexual relationships. By having multiple relationships with a variety of men, women were able to gain greater security. Yet at the same time, concerns about money made trust and emotional intimacy impractical and dangerous for men as well as women. The fact that men and women were often in competition for limited resources was inescapable. This fact made *ujanja* (cleverness) a critical skill and conditioned the structure, organization and quality of their relationships. Women believed that since they worked harder for their families than men they were right and justified in cheating others, particularly men, given the opportunity. They believed they had to be clever and live by their wits so their families would survive. As one mother told me:

> *Women have greater responsibilities in the family, they always have. It's possible that the husband does not care, or his work is just to drink beer. That is why women are forced to be cheats. Women are forced to cheat for the sake of feeding their families.*

Cleverness was at the heart of the necessary skills one needed to develop in order to be successful. Women often cited their cleverness at manipulating people and situations to their advantage. Theft, lying, and the manipulation of social ties were imperative to new methods of mothering. This often placed men and women at odds over economic contributions to the household, income distribution, reproductive decision-making and their interpretations of appropriate gender roles. Increased burdens coupled with decreased support systems

lead to antagonism and mistrust. Gender relations were generally hostile as the following words of one single mother illustrate:

> *Men nowadays are liars. They usually want to solve their problem [satiate sexual desire] and forget all about what comes next.... They try to escape their responsibilities and leave their babies without any aid or support. The rates of single mothers are going up these days because men are escaping their responsibilities. They are running away from their responsibilities. They are making love, causing pregnancies and then forgetting about everything. A long time ago all men tried to work hard to feed their families.*

Without trust and the necessary social proscriptions and prescriptions, cleverness became one of the most salient features of urban life. Let me return to Mama Nyabweke's story to further illustrate these points.

Mama Nyabweke was a strong woman and, as she herself loved to point out, incredibly clever. Above all else, she wanted her children to succeed, thereby insuring her own success and good standing in the community. As her story will demonstrate, she was not above theft, lying and utilizing a variety of forms of manipulation on friends, neighbors, business associates, her own children and other family members to achieve the goals she set for her family and household.

She was born in 1948 in the Musoma Region of northwestern Tanzania. In 1970, she married and moved to Dar es Salaam. She was the second wife of Mr. Samson. Over the course of her marriage, Mama Nyabweke had ten children, three girls and seven boys. She described her situation to me in the following way:

> *My husband could not afford to handle the family because he had two wives and two girlfriends. My husband beat me often and he drank a lot, he was coming home drunk every night. I couldn't return to my father because he was dead, so I decided to follow a different route. I began to steal money from my husband each day after he returned home drunk. I also took some of the money he would leave me for household goods. For example, I would say, "Husband, we need a kilo of rice, give me some money." He would give me enough for a kilo, but I would only buy half a kilo and save the rest of the money. Eventually I stole enough money, 700 shillings, to buy a sewing machine. Before I could buy the machine, I had to talk to his friends. If I just bought the machine, he would have refused me or taken it from me. He would have been suspicious about where I got the money, maybe from a boyfriend or something like that. So I told his friends that I would tell the truth about it if my husband promised to let me begin the business and if he would believe me and not get angry.*

She would tell all, but only if she had a guarantee that she could get the

machine. The friends agreed to help her so she told them what she had done. "Then I gave the money to his friends to buy the machine for me, I did not want to give it to my husband because he would have just used the money." She got the machine and began to sew shorts for children that she sold to local shops. Her husband was later transferred to a different city in central Tanzania, but she refused to accompany him because of her business. In 1978, she bought a plot of land to build a house on and also kept this a secret from her husband. She paid for all the children's needs, including school fees, uniforms and equipment with little to no help from her husband. Mama Nyabweke was rightfully proud of her abilities and accomplishments. Had she not been "clever" in the handling of her husband, who was by most accounts a violent and erratic man, she could not have provided for her children as well as she had.

Clearly in Dar es Salaam, as exemplified by Mama Nyabweke's story, the household was not a "haven in a heartless world" as it is often portrayed in the West. *Ujanja* (cleverness) played a major role in defining the structure and organization of the household. It was the primary means of coping with urban poverty, abandonment and expectations. For women, *ujanja* was also a necessary skill as mothering became increasingly demanding and bound to work. Thus, rather than a naturally determined category or role, mothering and motherhood are positions of power—limited though they may be—and extensive knowledge. The economic realities of profound poverty bind mothering and work, making the act of mothering essential to survival on many levels.

Both proper and improper behaviour was justified under the rubric of mothering and women challenged gender asymmetry by manipulating past beliefs of mother love. Mama Nyabweke summarized her own experiences in the following manner, "Life is hard, but I have seen a lot of troubles in my life so it's all the same to me. I don't have any responsibilities other than taking care of my children." Tanzanian mothers did what they had to do to support their children. Always in the forefront of their minds they carried with them the knowledge that there were many who depended upon them. While they may not have thrived, they did get by. And so, "*Nani kama Mama*?" is, in the end, simply a rhetorical question: *no one* can compare to Mother.

[1]See Schalge (2002) for a more thorough investigation of women's informal sector labour in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
[2]Contemporary research on new reproductive technologies and assisted reproduction demonstrate the complexity of biological reproduction and maternity (see for example Rapp, 1999; Saunders, 2002).
[3]A system of social organization wherein children trace their descent through the father's line only and post-marital residence is with the groom's family. Thus, a mother is not a member of her child's kin group and contact with the mother's kin is limited.

[4]Gifts passed from the groom's family to the bride's family to compensate them for the loss of her, and to strengthen affinial ties.
[5]I often did not know the given names of many women, nor did others when I asked.
[6]Sons also contribute only minimal amounts, especially in comparison with the contributions of daughters. This is true particularly as children grow up, daughters' contributions often increase with age as sons' decrease.
[7]I utilize an expanded version of the functional definition of household used by the census bureau; that is, according to what it provides people. In the Tanzanian census, household was defined according to who ate and slept together. I consider households as sites for the organization of labour, education and socialization, meeting members' basic needs (i.e., food, shelter, physical and social protection). Additionally they serve as centers for social activities including the formulation of basic social units (e.g., kin groups and social networks).

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Errata:

Our apologies to Rhonda Shaw, whose article "Anecdotal Theory, Morality and Inappropriate Breastfeeding," published in Volume 6, No. 1 of the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* (Spring/Summer 2004), appeared with errors in the first paragraph of the article on page 124. The corrected paragraph appears below:

It may appear, on first view, that breastfeeding and the law have very little to do with one another. On the contrary, it is because women's breasts, and the functions they perform, are potentially disruptive of dominant patriarchal norms and discourses, that the breastfeeding body is felt to be in such need of moral scrutiny and regulation. Even where no legislation exists to regulate or delimit infant feeding practices, the law finds a way to put breastfeeding in its place. A recent incident in the state parliament of Victoria in Australia, 2003, where a female Member of Parliament (MP) was removed for breastfeeding her eleven-day-old infant, illustrates my point.[1] On this particular occasion, the female MP's maternal breastfeeding body was viewed as contravening the limits of autonomous, unitary political citizenship, and her baby was deemed "a stranger" in the house. Both mother and infant were asked to leave the parliamentary chamber. Here, the legitimate legal-political model of self is clearly determined by its autonomy and separateness from the bodies of others, rather than as a mode of embodied being that acts and exists in relation to others.

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[1]This incident was reported in the Australian newspapers, *The Age* and *The Australian*, on 28 February, 2003.