CHAPTER 13

The Servant Problem: African Servants the Making of European Domesticity in Colonial Tanganyika

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Introduction

Maureen Miller was serving as an Administrative Assistant in British colonial Tanganyika Territory when she returned home and found her African houseboy “crouched on the ground in the state of agony, with the African equivalent of a white face, and moaning with pain.” 1 Unable to understand what was wrong with the boy, she rushed him to the hospital and hoped that the doctors would be able to save him:

I worried during the night about him – was he having his appendix removed, how long would he have to be there, and, of course, the consequential wonder, would I have to replace him? – for the smooth running of the household, however small, depended on the servants; the cook could not be expected to do his work, and everything would soon grind to a halt. I wonder if other people lived with the worry that haunted me, of not being able to find where the boy kept the Kerosene, the matches, the washing soap, or to use the charcoal iron he used, or to heat the water for baths or washing clothes, all of which were daily chores accomplished without fail till a crisis occurred.

Miller worried about her houseboy’s welfare when he fell ill, but it appears that she was even more concerned with how his absence would affect her household. Like other women living in the colonies, she was dependent on her domestic servants and feared that she would not manage to get along without them. She did not know how to accomplish several of the daily tasks her servants performed to keep her home in shipshape every day. She did not even know where her servants stored most of the household tools they used to run her home. Miller’s concern that her household would come to a standstill without her head houseboy was a realistic one, and it was a concern shared by

many European employers in Tanganyika. Their servants completely ran their homes. Luckily for Miller and her houseboy, he had only experienced a bout of constipation and was soon back at work.

African domestic servants, who were almost exclusively men, were indispensable to European homes and the larger colonial project. They comprised the single largest occupational group in Tanganyika’s colonial capital, Dar es Salaam, and worked in every European household in the Territory. African men provided the domestic labor that enabled Maureen Miller and other colonial administrators to go to work every day – bathed, fed, well-groomed, and well-rested – to carry out the daily business of running Tanganyika Territory. African men worked as domestic servants in the capital and in other parts of the Territory, mostly for other Africans as well as Asians, but throughout the colonial period male servants grossly outnumbered women in Tanganyika and most African colonies. With the exception of ayah (nanny or child care provider), the vocabulary used to refer to domestic workers was entirely masculine. Employers hired houseboys, garden boys, washermen, and kitchen boys. Cooks were always understood to be men. Employers often called all of their servants “boy” or “boi,” no matter their age. Due to the state’s assumption that domestic servants were all male, official statistics and estimates of domestic workers completely overlooked women until after World War II. In 1949, however, the Labour Department reported that ninety-seven per cent of the 40,000 domestic servants in Tanganyika were men. These African men not only performed the domestic tasks that reproduced European households in Tanganyika, and thus the local colonial administration, they helped to design the routines and rituals of the everyday that defined European domesticity in the colonies and supported the empire.

What people did in their private lives and how they managed their domestic spaces were both personal and political matters. What clothes a person wore, what food they ate, what language they spoke, how they bathed, and how they raised their children were part of “the choreography of the everyday” that

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2 In 1942, the Labor Office estimated that 6,000 men and 1,000 children worked as domestic servants, representing 47 percent (7,000 or 14,770) of the city’s wage-laborers. In addition to working in European households, paid servants worked in Asian and, to a much lesser extent, better-off African households. Tanzania National Archives (TNA) 61/100/A/II/f.95, M.J.B. Molohan, 1942 Labour Office Report, Dar es Salaam Township. Cited in James Brennan, Taifa: Making Nation and Race in Urban Tanzania (Athens, 2012), 76. During my research at the TNA I requested this file several times and never received it. This file appears to be lost.

3 The notable exception being South Africa.