Conversational Self-Portraits in Motion: Perceptions of Identity amongst Lamu Islanders: Centering East African Indian Ocean Island Perspectives on Notions of Self

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Conversational Self-Portraits in Motion: Perceptions of Identity amongst Lamu Islanders

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Map of the Lamu Archipelago

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[1] "Lamu Archipelago", 4. February 2023, Sunya IAS: https://www.sunyaias.com/blogs/lamu-archipelago.

Chapter 1: Introduction

View from the Seafront, Lamu Old Town. (*Photo taken by Charlotte Bruns Knight, 2024*)

1.1 Lamu Island

For the sake of coherence, we must perhaps first introduce Lamu island in a more factual manner, by stating that the name Lamu (originally Amu) refers to the port, city and island off the shore of Kenya in the Indian Ocean, situated 150 miles northeast of Mombasa, within the Lamu Archipelago in Lamu District- one of the six districts of Kenya's Coast Province. Lamu is a major island, holding a population of 25,300 people with a Muslim majority.[2] Prior to the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, people of various regions migrated to the island of Lamu. Traders and sailors from the Arabian Peninsula, China, India and South-East Asia travelled across the Indian Ocean to the East African Coast, interacting with the indigenous peoples- these patterns of migration having created a diverse social structure,[3] with the migration of primarily Western expatriates and upcountry Kenyan citizens to Lamu island occurring till date.

To be frank, this is about as much as I knew about Lamu when I first arrived on the island in October 2021, to participate as a research assistant in the Ustadh Mau Digital Archive (UMADA) project,[4] which aimed to digitalise and provide contextualisation of both the collected and written works of renowned Lamu scholar, poet, imam and community leader Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulkadir, commonly known as Ustadh Mau. His private collection consists of written and recorded Ajami poetry- composed in the KiAmu dialect,[5] and written in Arabic script-, cassette recordings of his *khutbas,*[6] documentations of local Lamu history and culture and collected works from his extensive travels. In alignment with the poet's wish, the project has aimed to preserve Ustadh Mau's repository of both manuscripts and audio cassettes, by means of digitisation and archiving, attempting to safeguard the fragile audio tapes and pieces written on paper, which have been composed and compiled over decades, and to furthermore increase wider accessibility of this rich collection, on a local, national and international scale.

Not only did the participation in this project open my eyes to the ways in which knowledge can be produced and worked with in a collaborative manner. It subsequently allowed me to be a guest in Lamu for an extensive time period of eight months, in which I had the highest privilege of meeting various Lamu residents -including Ustadh Mau himself- who invited me to listen and learn, to inquire and discuss- over endless cups of milk tea- the very being

[2] According to the Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics 2022 .https://www.knbs.or.ke/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Kenya-Demographic-and-Health-Survey-2022-Factsheet-Lamu/.
[3] Mark Horton, "Swahili architecture, space and social structure." *Architecture and order*, (2003): 145-165.
[4] More information about the project can be found under: https://www.ascleiden.nl/research/projects/ustadh-mau-digital-archive-umada-maktaba-ya-kidijitali-ya-ustadh-mau
[5] KiAmu is a local variety of KiSwahili, spoken on Lamu and constitutes an old literary language.
[6] Friday sermons

which is Lamu island. In 2023/24, I returned to Lamu for the purpose of conducting my MA research, marking a continuation of my own trajectory of learning. Based in Lamu Town for six months, I was most graciously taken in once more, to further perceive and comprehend some of the rippling motions of change and permanence that weave in and out of the island, producing Lamu's social fabric - mirrored in nature by the rise and descent of the lapping tides.

In fact, we might conceptualise Lamu island as an organism with a semi-permeable membrane that retains its existence and simultaneously has historically always existed in interrelation with the exterior- a place at the very heart of the world. While Lamu is frequently viewed through the lens of the double periphery within academia- as existing at the margins of the Kenyan nation state and the periphery of the Islamic world,[7]- we might re-center Lamu, not as a passive, isolated unit that is overrun by both the national and the global, but textually re-posit it as a fluctuating, yet continuously outlined space that is in constant, grappling interaction with the world- operating in a continuous motion of inhale and exhale.

1.2 A Walk Through Lamu Old Town

In fact, a brief stroll through Lamu Old Town alone may help to notice just a handful of the physical manifestations that strongly index the existence of Lamu-as-a-place-in-the-world. Whilst walking the narrow streets, one might remark upon the various expressions of the influences that have come together over several hundred years from Africa, Arabia, India and Europe, shaping Lamu Old Town's urban architectural structure, in which towering lime and coral stone houses are embedded. Carpentry shops dotted around indicate Lamu's long standing presence of elaborate woodwork crafting- skills that have traditionally been passed down from one generation to the next, within the family unit. You might pass a line of women seated outside, preparing sizzling *bajiya*. Originating in India, these deep fried potatoes first came to the coast with Indian immigrants and are now considered a popular coastal snack. Christian church hymns trickle from a window above, intermingling perhaps with music played from a speaker by a group of *vijana,*[8] who are chatting in Mombasa slang,[9] they might be playing songs sung in KiSwahili by the beloved Tanzanian coastal Bongo[10] singer Mbosso. Captains skillfully attend to their dhow boats,[11] and you will most certainly spot the Lamu

[7] Kai Kresse, "Muslim politics in postcolonial Kenya: negotiating knowledge on the double-periphery." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological institute,* no. 15 (2009): 78.

[8] Youths, frequently refers to young men.

[9] a nonstandard urban vernacular from Mombasa. See: Andrew J. Eisenberg "Hip-Hop and Cultural Citizenship on Kenya's 'Swahili Coast'." *Africa* 82, no. 4 (2012): 559.

[10] Tanzanian pop music originating in the early 2000s.

[11] A group of ships that have been adapted over centuries, used in East African, Arab and Indian waters, characterised by their lateen sail.

symbol- consisting of a five pointed star, encompassed by a crescent moon resembling an eye, which is one of the symbols of identity within the Archipelago,[12] and can be seen painted brightly on some of the ever expanding and retracting white sails of boats visible from the seafront. On aligned stone benches, elderly men dressed in *kanzus,*[13] paired with *kofias,*[14] are holding their *barazas*- meetings to discuss various topics, such as the latest political affairs and the state of the youth. A group of female tourists from Nairobi sporting large sun hats arrive by boat from the airport across the channel. Next to one of the mosques, from which recitations in Arabic can be heard, a group of people are seated in a corner shop, selling everything from nescafe satchels, over fresh milk from the surrounding farms, to plastic kitchen utensils produced in China, as *Kuruluş: Osman,*[15]- a popular Turkish TV series- plays on the tv screen in the background. The group might be chewing miraa- a plant that has been cultivated for centuries in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian peninsula, to be used as a stimulant. You might hear conversations held in various KiSwahili dialects, such as KiAmu and KiBajuni, mixed with English. In the evening, the national Kenyan news are broadcasted in standardised KiSwahili on the town square, bringing together people, as the Kenyan president once again raises eyebrows in the crowd by announcing another increase in taxation. You might cross paths with a group of women hurrying to a wedding, wearing *buibuis,*[16] - layered over sparkling dresses, matched by glamorous makeup. Hands are kissed in greetings, designed as a way to show respect.

[12] This symbol was created over 2000 years ago by boat makers and is thus frequently found on boat vessels. Kalume Kazungu, “Eye of the Dhow,” *Nation*, July 11, 2022, https://nation.africa/kenya/counties/lamu/-eye-of-the-dhow-lamu-s-symbol-of-identity-that-has-existed-for-ages-3875870.

[13] Ankle length robes worn by many coastal Muslim men.

[14] Cylindrical caps embroidered by hand with floral and geometric patterns.

[15] A historical fiction Turkish television series, which tells the story of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, Osman I.

[16] Long, black gowns with a head covering, worn by many Muslim women on the coast.

A walk along the Seafront, Lamu Old Town. (*Photo taken by Ayla Ata, 2023*)

A dhow sail, painted with the Lamu Eye- a symbol of identity within the Lamu Archipelago. (*Photo taken by Charlotte Bruns Knight, 2024*)

Lamu Old Town. (*Photo taken by Ayla Ata, 2023*)

1.3 Research Outline

Now this leads us to wonder, if Lamu island has been subject to influences from without and tinkering from within, what does this mean for conceptualisations of identity? What informs notions of self, individually and collectively, considering Lamu's positionality in the world? What realities and imaginaries feed the construction of identity- are ideas of self, of belonging, of citizenship amongst Lamu residents static, or do we witness patterns of movement within such conceptualisations? In short, this research study attempts a placing at the forefront East African Indian Ocean Island Perspectives on identity, following the leading question: *What informs notions of identity amongst Lamu islanders in contemporary times?*

However, before we delve into the findings of this research study, a Literature Review is first presented, outlining pre-existing framings within academia that pertain to Lamu island, subsequently identifying research gaps, and highlighting the need for a more immersive zooming into Lamu island, in which perspectives put forward by Lamu residents themselves are centred. This section is followed by a detailed account of the Methodology applied in this study, which follows a qualitative, interview-based, co-creation approach and contends with ethical reflections. We finally review the findings in the Research Observations and Discussions and adjacent Analysis sections, in which an attempt is made to textually capture contemporary sentiments in Lamu, utilising expressed reflections on identity to grasp underlying world views and perceptions of positionality- and to document these in an attempt to textually centre Lamu-as-a-place-in-the-world. The emerging picture of identity is captured through a conceptualisation of what is constructed in this paper as *hybrid-identity-making,* which connotes multiplicity, agency and local situatedness, following a multidisciplinary fusing of the term hybridity, taken from postcolonial studies, with the notion of heritage-making from within anthropology, culminating in the final Conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

View from the Seafront. (*Photo taken by Ayla Ata in 2023)*

2.1 Island Studies

Within the field of nissology, commonly known as island studies, there has existed a longstanding discourse dominated by the conquest of mainlanders, and outsiders in general, which is frequently posited at the centre of analysis, at the expense of expressions of island narratives produced by islanders on their own terms.[17] Even outside of the academic field of nissology do we witness a trend of island related online sites and literature being scripted by non-islanders- thus composed by outsiders, who appear to follow in the often racialised tropes spun by explorers, missionaries and traders in the past.[18] We witness a continuous drawing on repertoires marked by exoticism and reductionism, which cast island inhabitants within the myth of the pure island race, portrayed either through a romanticised lens of the noble primordial savage upon which to satisfy a Western longing for fetishised Oriental purity, or framed as passive, lethargic objects that helplessly look on, as globalised forces rampage the island.[19]

Lamu island is not exempted from this phenomenon. Till date, the island is subjected to romanticised descriptions by Western expatriates, who in podcasts frame the island as a coconut paradise stuck in the past, entirely detached from the global economy, where time slows down, where people walk barefoot, spending their days lazily burying their feet in the sand, living in perfect harmony with nature- a place for soul searching, so to say. The primary issue here is the over-production of such a singular narrative, which centres the outsider experience of spiritual journeying across the island- casting it as a romantic backdrop for outsider's experimentations of self- which is done at the expense of the multitude of narratives of islanders, who actively, with agency, grapple with the realities of living within the political world economy. It is this phenomenon upon which Baldacchino mounts his argument,[20] vehemently insisting on the need to re-center islanders in discourse construction within the field. This would allow for a reclaiming of island histories and cultural identities of islanders, particularly in the context of island communities that have been subjected to the colonial experience, which has produced asymmetrical power relations informing the dictation of narrative hegemonies, not only internationally, but also within the space of the intrastate.

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[17] Sarah Nimführ, and Greca N. Meloni, "Decolonial thinking: A critical perspective on positionality and representations in island studies." *Island Studies Journal* 15, no. 2 (2021): 4.

[18] Adam Grydehøj, "A future of island studies." *Island Studies Journal* 12, no. 1 (2017): 6.

[19] Godfrey Baldacchino, "The lure of the island: A spatial analysis of power relations." *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*, no 1 (2012): 55-62.

[20] Godfrey Baldacchino, "Studying islands: On whose terms?: Some epistemological and methodological challenges to the pursuit of island studies." Island Studies Journal, Vol. 3, no. 1 (2008): pp. 37-56.

2.2 Area Studies

In fact, narratives constructed non-internally *about* Lamu island, as opposed to *from within*, must further be placed within a wider contextualisation of its geographic position on the Kenyan coast and its existence as part of the Kenyan nation state. The Kenyan coast at large seems to frequently evoke diverse peoples' images of faraway paradise. This observation is not only made in regards to tourists from abroad, who increasingly flock to and along the coastline. It seems that across the Kenyan mainland, however heterogeneous in its demographic makeup, the perception of the Indian Ocean Rim as distant and peripheral vis-a-vis Nairobi, the political core, holds fast. Conceptualisations of the coast appear to be informed by ambiguity and misinformation, by faraway tales of exotic mystery, in which white beaches are shrouded in murmurs about possessed cats and spirits.[21] Despite the fact that the coastal region, abundant in resources, constitutes a part of the Kenyan nation state, the relationship between Kenyan coastal communities and the Kenyan mainland has commonly been described as marked by complex dynamics characterised as highly ambivalent.[22] We witness a paradox of interconnectivity and divergence, indeed a relationship marked by a coastal-mainland intrastate divide, characterised simultaneously by deep linkages.

Both the geographic coast and mainland of Kenya have a shared history of relative collective struggle against colonial rule- historic figures such as coastal woman dissident Mekatilili wa Menza and upcountry dissidents Jomo Kenyatta and Achien Oneko- who equally resisted British colonial rule and were imprisoned as a result, must be mentioned. In fact, the notion that all Kenyans must stay united in lieu of the high price that was paid for independence is a sentiment that finds reflection in the 1969 song "*Kenya ni nchi ya ajabu*" - Kenya is a unique country-, which is marked by a rhetoric detailing the real and imagined virtues of the Kenyan state in unity, stressing how it is imperative for Kenyans to unite in nation-building post-independence, putting forward the notion of unity as a hallmark of the Kenyan nation state. The song, inspired by his personal experience of the suppression of the Mau Mau rebellion, was written by Enock Ondego, who himself worked and lived on the coast and held upcountry ancestry, dominated the airwaves in the 1960s and 70s and is said to have resonated with many Kenyans across the country at the time.[23]

However, in juxtaposition to such strong feelings of patriotism and unity in the wake of independence, there exists a perception that since Kenya gained independence in 1963, the

[21] Ken Walibora, "Pwani si Kenya: Coastal Consciousness and Contesting Kenyanness." *Illusions of Location Theory: Consequences for Blue Economy in Africa* (2021): 287.
[22] Justin Willis, and George Gona. "Pwani C Kenya? Memory, documents and secessionist politics in coastal Kenya." *African Affairs* 112, no. 446 (2013): 49.
[23] Willis, "Pwani C Kenya?" 52.

coastal region has in fact very much been relegated to the margins of the nation state, resulting in frustrations along the coast towards its upcountry counterparts and the Kenyan government. In fact, East Africa's historically Muslim "Swahili coast" at large is viewed to hold a lengthy trajectory of operating as the conceptual as well as physical periphery for post-colonial Kenya, frequently portrayed as not completely African, and thus by extension, not Kenyan- and is posited as an *Other* as opposed to which non-coastal Christian Kenya may construct its national identity.[24]

The coast has seen the development of a sense of coastal consciousness, interwoven with a multitude of secessionist movements throughout the ages, fuelled by disputes over land ownership following government initiated relocation movements of upcountry people to the coast, perceptions that wealth is held by said upcountry people, that revenues generated through tourism along the coast goes elsewhere, and that both education and health facilities on the coast have been neglected drastically by the state, relative to the mainland.[25] The Kenyan coast remains highly impoverished, politically underrepresented in relation to the mainland until today, despite its abundance of resources and extensive history of operating as a highly influential hub of trade within the Indian Ocean World. These sentiments have found expression in the slogan *Pwani si Kenya* -The coast is not Kenya-, championed by the Mombasa Republican Council in its political movement for coastal autonomy in 2010.[26] While various academic sources from different fields have documented this historically ambivalent relationship between coastal communities and groups on the mainland, identifying a dichotomy of coast and mainland, the question remains where coastal communities stand today in contemporary times, positioned within the wider nation of Kenya.

However, while one may speak of the existence of a coastal consciousness in somewhat abstract terms, it must of course be acknowledged that Kenya's coast spans 1420 kilometres and is home to a vast diversity of peoples and places, whose sociocultural dynamics are evidently shaped by their specific localities. Thus, sweeping claims about the coast are to be avoided and a zooming into one locality is perhaps advisable, leading us to circle back to Lamu island.

2.3 Indian Ocean Studies

In addition to both the long trajectory of outsider narratives dominating island discourse within

[24] Andrew J. Eisenberg, "Hip-Hop and Cultural Citizenship on Kenya's 'Swahili Coast."*Africa*, *82*(4) (2012): 558.
[25] Walibora, "Pwani si Kenya." 289.
[26] Willis, "Pwani C Kenya?" 48.

academia and Western literary culture alike, and the desire for a more nuanced study of a specific locality to allow for deeper immersion, the choice of Lamu island as a locality for study is further motivated by the recognition that smaller East African Indian Ocean islands are in fact vastly understudied across academic fields, their absence being particularly noticeable within Indian Ocean Studies.

The structured investigation of oceans as a more general scope of study has come far in the last decades, marked particularly by a resurging interest within the field of history, reflecting in expansive studies of the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Pacific. However, academic mentions of the Indian Ocean have followed a long trajectory of omission, leading us to wonder if this has been due to the fact that for most of its history, the Indian Ocean has been crossed and used by people from its littorals, and not by Europeans.[27] In contrast, James de Vere Allen, by 1969, had already championed conceptualisations highlighting the autonomy and unity of the Indian Ocean World, arguing for the necessity of Indian Ocean Studies as an independent field to deepen academic knowledge on the dynamic links spanning the Indian Ocean.[28] In fact, it is argued that following Chaudhuri's work,[29] historians increasingly furthered their studies of the Indian Ocean. For the most part, they were interested in its "European" period, such as in the dimensions of imperialism.[30] Processes of exchange in which Europeans were not the central actors were widely omitted, reflecting in Michael Pearson's view that it is only with the coming in of external forces into the Indian Ocean that the latter was brought into history.[31] In fact, this notion has only changed in more recent times, reflecting in works concerned with non-European forms of mobility and interaction,[32] and an expansion of the geographical focal point beyond India, which for a long time had been cast as the most prominent centre of the Indian Ocean exchange.[33]

Furthermore, the Indian Ocean has gained more relevance beyond the disciplinary concerns of history. Mirroring the revitalization of area studies and the growing interest in maritime regions, anthropologists as well as academics from cultural, literature, and religious studies have started to engage with the Indian Ocean. The common red thread shared in these

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[27] Shanti Moorthy, and Ashraf Jamal, "Introduction: New conjunctures in maritime imaginaries." *Indian Ocean Studies* (2010): 19-49.

[28] Julia Verne, "The ends of the Indian Ocean: Tracing coastlines in the Tanzanian "hinterland"." *History in Africa* 46 (2019): 363.

[29] Kirti N, Chaudhuri, *Trade and civilisation in the Indian Ocean: an economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750*. (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[30] Julia Verne, and Markus Verne. "Introduction: The Indian Ocean as Aesthetic Space." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37, no. 2 (2017): 314.

[31] Michael N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (Routledge, 2003).

[32] Engseng Ho, *The graves of Tarim: genealogy and mobility across the Indian Ocean*. Vol. 3. (Univ of California Press, 2006); Eleni Roxani, *Like the place of congregation on judgement day: Maritime trade and urban organisation in mediaeval Aden (ca. 1083–1229)* (Princeton University, 2002).

[33] Verne, and Verne, "Introduction: The Indian Ocean." 318.

works is a “bottom-up” approach to understanding the Indian Ocean, characterised by a zooming in on those who live at, with, and from it, as well as on these people’s cosmopolitan entanglements, mobile cultures, or the various ways in which they experience the Indian Ocean.[34]

This shift seems reflected in the growing recognition that when conducting research within the framework of the African continent, there exists a consensus amongst scholars that the conceptualisation of Africa as a mere continental land mass is rather reductive. For example, one finds the use of the African diaspora as a lens through which to view African history. This reflects in the more recent trend amongst historians to position Africa within three major historical contexts: Atlantic Africa, Mediterranean Africa and Indian Ocean Africa.[35] This development can be understood as an attempt to move beyond the perception of the continent as existing in an isolated, insular way. In this perhaps more constructive approach, which enables the recognition of Africa’s long-standing engagement with the world, Braudel and Thornton’s approaches to the Indian Ocean vis-a-vis earlier historians must be highlighted, as they both subvert and expand the prevailing notion of Africa from one that is continent-bound, to another that emphasises quite different historical and cultural connections.[36]

However, Alpers argues that when adopting the more nuanced framework of Indian Ocean Africa, there still exists a lack of recognition of what he terms “the island factor”. In fact, the scholar argues that the islamisation of coastal East Africa was for many centuries restricted to offshore islands, such as those of the Lamu Archipelago, where it became an integral component of defining Kenyan coastal culture and identity.[37] Islands on the East African Indian Ocean Rim have thus been fundamental to the rapid spread of Islam, indexing their longstanding interconnectivity with the Middle East and the subsequent expansion of Islam prior to the emergence of the majority Christian Kenyan nation state. While the role that islands have played within the locality of the East African coast has been considered within academia, Alpers pushes for a more detailed historical analysis of the integral role that islands have played and continue to play over several millennia in the history of Indian Ocean Africa at large. He argues that as islands, they stand apart from each other and from the continent, but as human societies they owe much of their unique character to Africa.[38] Again, we witness a

[34] Verne, “The ends of the Indian Ocean” 368.

[35] Edward A. Alpers, "Recollecting Africa: diasporic memory in the Indian Ocean world." *African studies review* 43, no. 1 (2000): 83-99.

[36] Ingrid Sankey, "Teaching Global History and Geography Using the Indian Ocean as a Unit of Analysis." *Angles. New Perspectives on the Anglophone World* 9 (2019).

[37] Edward A. Alpers, "Indian Ocean Africa: The island factor." *Emergences: Journal for the Study of Media & Composite Cultures* 10, no. 2 (2000): 378.

[38] Edward A. Alpers, and Allen F. Roberts. "What is African studies? Some reflections." *African Issues* 30, no. 2 (2002): 11-18.

characterisation of both connectivity and divergence with and from the mainland, begging the question how people from smaller-scale islands such as Lamu position themselves in terms of self-identification.

In fact, it could be argued that the study of smaller African islands within African Studies may mark an attempt to decolonise the field, as it is an entry point to expand on rigid conceptualisations of the African geobody and also simply because they are under researched, sometimes even not to be found on maps. Smallness and proximity to the mainland specifically seem somehow to become markers of exclusion: In the case of Lamu, the island is so close to the mainland that the scales that most maps use to depict this coast, do not allow for Lamu to be easily discernible as an island at all.[39]This however should not mean that Lamu must simply blend into the continent and be perceived as non-existent. Influenced by its long trading history and location at the interface of East Africa and the Indian Ocean world, the island itself is marked by a diverse social structure, characterised by a high level of ethnic diversity and distinguishable social classes. If we frame Lamu island within the framework of a hub of intensified knowledge exchange and interactions of different peoples, then surely a deeper study of the island holds high potential to generate new knowledge within the field of African Studies.

In fact, Schnepel elaborates on Alpers deploration of the continental perspective that merely mentions islands as an afterthought. He argues for an extension of Alper's recognition of the need to locate all the islands of the Indian Ocean in their relationship to the history of eastern Africa through the lens of Indian Ocean Africa, stating that this gap in scholarship must be filled not only in the field of history.[40] Rather, Schnepel insists on drawing attention to a gap in scholarship with regards to other fields of knowledge as well, such as human geography, social anthropology, the study of political and economic relations, or investigations into the geostrategic and military dimensions of the Indian Ocean world.[41] Thus, Schnepel emphasises the need to consider the island factor within the study of Indian Ocean Africa in an all-embracing interdisciplinary way. According to him, there exists a continuous challenge to look more deeply into the island setting of Indian Ocean Africa, to understand the very places and their inhabitants.

The zooming in on the island setting thus appears to be a promising endeavour to expand our very conceptualisation of the African continent, not only deconstructing the notion of Africa as continent-bound, but also using the study of islands to shed light on Africa's encounter

[39] Burkhard Schnepel, and Edward A. Alpers, eds. *Connectivity in motion: Island hubs in the Indian Ocean world* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 106.
[40] Schnepel, and Alpers, "Connectivity in motion." 102.
[41] Schnepel, and Alpers, "Connectivity in motion" 111.

with the world. In the setting of Indian Ocean Africa, islands exist at the very interface of Africa with the world and thus, as Schnepel argues, are in fact zones of circulation and transformation, making Lamu island an interesting locality of study to investigate perceptions of identity.[42]

2.5 Topicality of Identity

While the thought processes behind the selection of locality of study have been outlined, the next natural step is to clarify the content of study. The choice of case study as a locality is contingent on an identification of a research gap within pre-existing literature within Indian Ocean studies in particular, which must be followed by an overview of the scholarly discussion on the conceptualisation of identity to highlight its relevance and topicality.

Indeed, the study of identity seems to be fraught with obstacles. Rawi et al. identify a trend within academia at large, stating that there has been an increasing focus amongst scholars in the social sciences on positing identity as a variable within wider analyses of different phenomena.[43] In fact, we witness an expansion of scholarly work across different academic fields utilising conceptualisations of identity as an angle from which to approach wider questions in discussions about nation building, and wider global socio political and economic manifestations. This reflects an expansion of definition categories along ethnic, linguistic, national, religious, gender and class dimensions and considerations of their roles in processes of institutional developments. However, the lack of analytical rigour within academia in which to embed the variable of identity has been condemned. There seems to exist an absence of conceptual clarity, leading some scholars to even suggest abandoning the conceptualisation of identity as an analytical tool completely.[44] It thus appears that it has proved somewhat difficult to use identity as a useful variable, given its definitional anarchy, reflecting also within coordination gaps across different academic fields: How can we compare different types of identities? How can we operationalise them? It seems that existing methodological approaches are often either too hard and simplistic or too soft and impressionistic. Yet as Smith emphasises, “Identities are among the most normatively significant and behaviourally consequential aspects of politics.”[45] We thus see an intrinsic link between the identity concept and political manifestations. Motivated by this recognition of the importance of identity as a factor in wider socio-political phenomena, we should perhaps not give up on identity as an analytical tool quite yet.

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[42] Burkhard Schnepel, "Seaborne Empires and Hub Societies: Connectivity in Motion across the Indian Ocean World." *Comparativ: Leipziger Beiträge zur Universalgeschichte und Vergleichenden Gesellschaftsforschung* 28, no. 4 (2018): 112.

[43] Rawi Abdelal, and Yoshiko M. Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston, and Rose McDermott. "Identity as a Variable." *Perspectives on politics* 4, no. 4 (2006): 695-711.

[44] Rogers Brubaker, and Frederick Cooper. "Beyond" identity"." *Theory and society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1-47.

[45] Valentina Otmacic, "Resisting division along ethnic lines: A case study of two communities who challenged discourses of war during the Yugoslav conflict 1991-1995." PhD diss., (University of Bradford, 2019).

While we can conclude that academics are yet to reach consensus on how to render the notions of identity into an analytical concept, with some arguing that such a pursuit is destined to hit a dead end, Amina Mama and Souleymane Bachir Diagne strongly crystallise both the importance and topicality of debating identity in Africa. Amina Mama frames identity in Africa as still being a quest for many, with a framing that appears to draw on a rhetoric that casts identity as a singular, permanent, rigid, total and final marker, both in the context of individual and group identity.[46] However, it has been argued that in reality, individuals and groups function as melting pots for various identities, and are capable of straddling different identity margins in often creative ways.[47]

In contrast to Amina Mama and drawing on Souleymane Bachir Diagne's idea of appropriation, Nyamnjoh adopts such a framework, arguing that Africa is a continent seeking to rise above singularities that conventional and often insensitive notions of identity have sought to impose on the continent and its peoples.[48] He portrays peoples of the continent as individuals and communities that reject to limit and reduce themselves to rigid identity markers, rather opting to draw from different influences in their lives "in order to challenge parochial notions of identification that deplete those they are expected to enhance by denying them the negotiability and creativity that comes from encountering diversity."[49]

This conceptualisation marks the rejection of the simplistic logic of dualism and binary, dichotic thinking, perhaps shattering meta-narratives of modernisation on their continent.[50] While this conceptualisation of identity allows for the acknowledgement of agency and multiplicity within identity construction alike, many threads in academic discussion appear to still follow the self-imposed need to neatly categorise people into ethnicity groups when it comes to framing peoples across the Global South, born from the trajectory commencing during the colonial period, during which constructs of ethnicity, functioning as sub-genres of being human, were invented/ exaggerated by the colonial power to emphasise the lack of humanity of racialized populations, as well as their supposed irrationality and the inability for self reflexive reasoning.[51]

2.6 Ethnicity-as-Identity

[46] Amina Mama, "Challenging subjects: Gender and power in African contexts." *African Sociological Review/Revue Africaine de Sociologie* 5, no. 2 (2001): 64.

[47] Francis B. Nyamnjoh,"Concluding reflections on beyond identities: rethinking power in Africa." *Identity and beyond: rethinking Africanity* (2001): 275.

[48] Nyamnjoh, "Concluding reflections." 274.

[49] Nyamnjoh, "Concluding reflections." 281.

[50] Nyamnjoh, "Concluding reflections."283.

[51] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument." *CR: The new centennial review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 258.

In fact, we witness the evidence underpinning this critique when diving into the field of archeology. For example, it has been pointed out that Archaeologies of the East African Coast have often referred to identity, cast in terms of ethnicity.[52] For a long time, towns along the East African Coast, including Lamu, have been home to multi-ethnic communities, characterised by their long standing influences from India and the Middle East, with immigrants from the Arab world marrying into the local population. Numerous members of these communities, and their descendants, have self-identified and continue to do so, as "Swahili". Nonetheless, archeologists subsequently reacted to the early emphasis on the Arabic origins of some coastal peoples and practices, with a responsive usage of similarly simplistic formulations of ethnicity, this time emphasising the Bantu roots of coastal populations, continuously drawing on historical linguistics.[53]

In what has been an important debate in African archaeology, indigenous origins have been established for coastal groups. Nonetheless, the merging of linguistics and archaeology is argued to have promoted a somewhat primordial approach to identity, linking linguistic development with certain packages of traits and other forms of cultural expressions. While the extent to which features, such as tangible manifestations of culture (e.g. ceramics), language and social networks overlap continues to inform ongoing debates within archeology,[54] Wynne-Jones argues that within the locality of the East African coast, such traits have tended to be treated as aspects of the same single societal entity. As a result, the interactions that individuals and their communities have, which transcend the boundaries of their particular dialect, are poorly accounted for by archaeology that sees the Swahili people – or any group – as a discrete, bounded linguistic entity, coupled with the assumption that this correlates with discrete, bounded cultural manifestations- concluded in the singular unit of "ethnicity".[55] We must wonder if such a lumping together of peoples is helpful to anyone and if it is not an indicator of what Nyamnjoh, as mentioned above, describes in his critique of a colonial obsession with the ethnic categorisation of peoples.

On the contrary, it must however be highlighted that the framing of peoples through the lens of ethnicity does not only occur within Western theoretical abstractions, but informs material realities that shape the daily experiences of individuals. In fact, it has been argued that "ethnicity", although inherited from the colonial past, continues to function as a central embodied

[52] Stephanie Wynne-Jones, ."It's what you do with it that counts: Performed identities in the East African coastal landscape." *Journal of social archaeology* 7, no. 3 (2007): 337.
[53] Derek Nurse, and Thomas J. Hinnebusch, and Gérard Philipson, *Swahili and Sabaki: A linguistic history*. Vol. 121. (Univ. of California Press, 1993).
[54] Ingrid Herbich, "Learning patterns, potter interaction and ceramic style among the Luo of Kenya." *African Archaeological Review* 5, no. 1 (1987): 193-204.
[55] Wynne-Jones, "It's what you do with it." 340.

grammar of self, as well as a key mediator of social, economic, and political relations.[56]In fact, it is argued that ethnic consciousness, highly politicised ethnic group allegiance, and hardening of ethnic group boundaries have not decreased since Kenya gained independence, rather, they have become more pronounced since the second half of the 20th century, as people seek stability, security, and meaning in the face of political shifts like democratisation or decentralisation, as well as uneven urbanisation patterns, socioeconomic disparities, or resource scarcity.[57] We might remember the described coastal-mainland divide, a lens through which perceptions of socioeconomic, religious and political marginalisation amongst peoples of the Kenyan coast vis-a-vis mainland counterparts have in fact been identified to have fuelled entrenchments of an *us* vs *them* rhetoric- mapped onto ethnic lines, positing coastal ethnic groups of Lamu, such as the Bajuni, Sanye, Aweer and Orma vis-a-vis mainland ethnic groups, such as the Gĩkũyũ majority, who are viewed to hegemonically hold the political power within the country. Gediminas identifies this reiteration of ethnicity as a determining vector of identity which acts to entrench inherently colonial grammars of self—what people experience themselves to be and how they vernacularly place themselves within the state's body politics.[58]

While we thus take ethnicity-as-identity as a phenomenon that informs material realities within the Kenyan nation-state today, room should perhaps be given to also further investigate other vectors informing identity formation, as opposed to simply taking the coastal mainland divide as a fixed-in-time framework of analysis, as this may obscure the agency and variety involved in processes of self-identification.

It appears that we are left to wonder, how conceptualisations of identity fare in the context of individuals or communities that are exposed to competing cultural codes or styles, furthermore assuming that socioeconomic and political forces prescribe behaviour and beliefs about self and other and weave cultural realities? In a place like Lamu island, characterised by centuries of distinct migration patterns from both within and outside of what is now Kenya, what can we say about human action and identity that is perhaps inspired by a drawing from multiple repertoires?

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[56] Gabrielle Lynch, *Performances of justice: The politics of truth, justice and reconciliation in Kenya*. (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 507.
[57] Lesutis Gediminas, "Enduring colonial grammars of self: infrastructure, coloniality, ethnicity." *Antipode* 55, no. 6 (2023): 1781-1801.
[58] Gediminas, "Enduring colonial grammars.", 1781-1801.

2.7 Heritage-as-Identity

A further avenue to consider identity is through the lens of heritage. In fact, it appears that across definitions and fields, conceptualisations of heritage are also perceived as intrinsically interlinked with notions of identity. Indeed, within anthropology, discussions about expressions of heritage are commonly discussed in the context of identity groups, and in debates about heritage conservation, heritage is frequently viewed as something that is cognitively constructed, as an external expression of identity. However, while the linking of ideas about identity and heritage may feel very organic, the expansiveness of both terms makes it difficult to escape the abstract.[59]

We do however encounter a rather concrete conceptualisation of heritage-as-identity in the case of Lamu island, as Lamu Old Town, which holds approximately 15.000 residents, was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2001 under Criteria II, IV, and VI. In its statement of Outstanding Universal Value, UNESCO declares that: “Lamu Old Town is the oldest and best-preserved Swahili settlement in East Africa, retaining its traditional functions. Built-in coral stone and mangrove timber, the town is characterised by the simplicity of structural form features such as inner courtyards, verandas, and elaborately carved wooden doors. Lamu has hosted major Muslim religious festivals since the 19th century and has become a significant centre for the study of Islamic and Swahili cultures.”[60]

Yet in arguing for a more expansive heritage conceptualisation, the effects of the global politics of power are considered by Gentry et al., who state that instead of taking an understanding of heritage as a given, there exists a hegemonic discourse about heritage, which acts to constitute the way we think, talk and write about heritage, and naturalises the practice of promoting a certain set of Western elite cultural values as being universally applicable, indexing a consideration of global power structures in place.[61] Consequently, this discourse validates a set of practices and performances, which populates both popular and expert constructions of heritage and undermines alternative and subaltern ideas about heritage, and subsequently, conceptualisations of identity. In fact, Gentry et al. argue that definitions of heritage that focus on material and monumental forms of “old” and aesthetically pleasing, tangible heritage is a traditional Western approach that serves the promotion of a hegemonic consensual view of both the past and the present.[62]

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[59] Brian Graham, and Peter Howard, "Heritage and identity." in *The Routledge Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, ed Brian Graham (Routledge, 2016). 1-15.
[60] UNESCO World Heritage Convention, “Lamu Old Town.” https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1055/.
[61] Kynan Gentry, and Laurajane Smith, "Critical heritage studies and the legacies of the late-twentieth century heritage canon." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, no. 11 (2019): 1148-1168.
[62] Gentry, and Smith, "Critical heritage studies.” 1148-1168.

In consideration of the frequent interlinking of heritage and identity, and the dominant ideas that posit tangible heritage at the forefront of discussions about identity, it may be beneficial to investigate the perceptions that Lamu residents hold themselves, to elicit if conceptualisations of identity follow such thinking, or if perhaps other priorities inform notions of self, indexing a different conceptualisation of identity altogether.

2.7 Motivation for Research

Following this outline of framings identified in different fields of academia that pertain to Lamu island, it can thus be concluded that a more nuanced academic investigation of Lamu promises to be a fruitful endeavour, positing at the forefront East African Indian Ocean Island narratives. The topicality of identity particularly within the African setting has been highlighted, acknowledging both the struggle for conceptual clarity and the interrelation of the identity concept with debates surrounding ethnicity and heritage, across a variety of academic fields, as illustrated within the Literature Review. A descriptive investigation of ideas about identity as put forward by Lamu islanders themselves is therefore viewed as multifunctional in its purpose, constituting a contribution to the expansive debate on conceptualisations of identity, that permeates numerous academic fields.

Not only can such a study be placed in juxtaposition with a dominant discourse found in the field of nissology, it may also mark an extension of previous academic work conducted within the field of Indian Ocean Studies and African Studies alike, by centering a smaller island located at the Indian Ocean Rim, subsequently moving away from a fixation of Africa as continent bound. In addition, whilst Lamu island has for decades been viewed through the lens of the mainland-coast dichotomy within Area Studies, viewed as having shaped regional identities, this conceptualisation should perhaps also be re-investigated in recent times, as the fixating of locality with one rigid theoretical paradigm may lead us to overlook current transformative processes, that might exacerbate, expand or retract pre-existing framings found within academia. We may thus conclude that the study of Lamu island may generate knowledge relevant to a wide array of academic fields, indexing potential interdisciplinary value.

Chapter 3: Methodological Framework

View from the Seafront. (*Photo taken by Ayla Ata, 2023*)

3.1 Reflections on Positionality

> The speech about the 'other' annihilates, erases*: "No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the coloniser, the speak subject, and you are now at the centre of my talk." (bell hooks, 1990)*

When embarking on a research project, it is of vital importance to engage with the structure of the production of knowledge at large. While research should ideally be designed to generate new knowledge, the positionality of the researcher constitutes an unsurmountable baseline, given that the subjectivity of the researcher will inevitably shape their research process. No individual thinks within a vacuum, we are all coloured by the sets of knowledge that we have absorbed in our lives. In this context, Ndlovu-Gatsheni subsequently invites us to take a step back by first considering the politics of knowledge and the African struggles for epistemic freedom.[63]

It appears that a radical reconsideration of one's own epistemological and ontological tools that inform the selection of theoretical frameworks, methodologies, content and concepts guiding research is advisable, in order to ensure a recognition of one's own lens as a researcher. While the goal here is not to achieve a position of neutrality-as this is arguably not possible- an attempt should be made to come to a halt and radically question the way in which one is embedded within a certain structure and how it continues to inform one's own thinking.

The first step to do so is perhaps to acknowledge that the knowledge production at universities continues to be normatively Eurocentric and neo-Enlightenment in nature . Ndlovu-Gatsheni elaborates on the concept of the epistemic line, which is defined as the imperial line of reasoning that reduces some human beings to a subhuman category of possessing no knowledge, determining them as a-historical "others" that have been relegated to a sphere of tabula rasa, of mere marginal nothingness. This clear cut line constitutes the Western disqualification of peoples outside of the West from holding any epistemic and ontological virtue, disabling the right and ability to think, theorise and perceive the world

[63] Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "The dynamics of epistemological decolonisation in the 21st century: Towards epistemic freedom." *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 40, no. 1 (2018).

unencumbered by Eurocentrism.[64] The perpetuation of this epistemic line maintains a neat geopolitical division of the world, in which the West is equated with reason and sense, and the Rest is deemed irrational and sense-less. Complementary to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Hountondji's outline of the academic traditions within the field of African Studies illustrates the existence of this epistemic line, specifically within this field. Hountondji confronts us with the long trajectory of writing about Africa from the outside, and the gearing of the investigation of subjects towards what is deemed of interest to a Western audience, indicating an intellectually extractive tradition[65]- strongly mirrored in some of the sentiments expressed to me by various Lamu residents about the practice of research.

A consideration of the continuous reproduction of what Samir Amin labels "one of the great ideological deformations of our time"- namely Eurocentrism[66]- is necessary. We speak not only of colonial mapping in terms of geography, but furthermore, as elaborated on by wa Thiong'o,[67] of the continuous positioning of Europe at the centre of *everything,* as the rational subject that alone possesses a mouthpiece to produce knowledge- about itself and other regions and peoples, which in contrast only exist peripherally as static objects *in relation* to the centre, possessing no knowledge of their own whatsoever. This depiction of the world by the West is fundamental for its colonial practices and its perpetuation of epistemic hegemony, positioning itself as the universal norm of being, and claiming for itself the production of knowledge. It is within this positioning of Europe as the universal norm of being that I have been educated, and although I believe myself to be capable of critical thought, my personal lens is inescapably tinted by what I have absorbed, informing my individual perception of what constitutes common sense and what does not.

These somewhat abstract reflections lead me to reconsider my own capabilities as a researcher. While again I am by no means attempting to achieve a position from which to claim neutrality, as this would be delusional, I must understand how to engage with the Western hegemonic production of knowledge, and be cognizant that I myself carry it with me in my own research. In other terms, I must acknowledge that I live in what Ndlovu-Gatsheni terms the age of epistemic crisis.[68] Thus, if I am to conduct research of any fashion, I must engage with this said crisis and as Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues, rethink-thinking. What is my position-if I hold one at

[64] Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and decolonization* (Routledge, 2018).
[65] Paulin J. Hountondji, "Knowledge of Africa, knowledge by Africans: Two perspectives on African studies." *RCCS Annual Review. A selection from the Portuguese journal revista crítica de ciências sociais* 1 (2009).
[66] Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (NYU Press, 1989).
[67] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "Decolonising the mind." *Diogenes* 46, no. 184 (1998): 101-104.
[68] Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "The dynamics of epistemological decolonisation in the 21st century: Towards epistemic freedom." *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 40, no. 1 (2018).

all- in the need for epistemic freedom, in the pursuit to restore to African peoples a central position within human history and knowledge, as independent actors?

To break down this theoretical exercise and ensure that these reflections are not simply projected from within the walls of university onto the field of human realities, I attempted to first get a glimpse into perceptions held by Lamu islanders about the increasing phenomenon of researchers flocking to Lamu from afar, following the grand academic "re-discovery" of Lamu and subsequent identification of neat little research gaps to be filled by *a muzungu*[69] with notebook in tow- such as myself.

Thus, before embarking on the somewhat peculiar exercise of inquiring after people's ideas about identity in Lamu- an island 6,655 km away from my own hometown in Germany- I attempted to first research perceptions held about the very tradition of research on the island. An acquaintance of mine from Lamu once made a keen observation, commenting on the irony of the fact that individuals traverse wide distances to come to Lamu, for the sole purpose of writing extensive books and papers, specifically about knowledge reservoirs encapsulated in local libraries and collections on the island, which, according to him, remain mostly untouched by the local population. In this case, the commentator was lamenting the fact that the majority of Lamu residents, in his opinion, were not showing enough interest in the vast knowledge reservoirs at hand, which, in his words " after all, document our own history and culture, and thus form the baseline of our very existence, our identity".

Some people I spoke to applauded demonstrations of effort made by individual researchers, stating that they believed it to be a good thing for people, irrespective of origin, to further document, in written form, the knowledge systems, the histories, the developments that shape Lamu's being -for the sake of safekeeping, awareness raising and information sharing.

Others labelled research as an act of blatant knowledge extraction, of which the researcher capitalises- acquiring personal gains, such as the furtherment of their own career. Again others expressed frustration at the fact that researchers increasingly swoop into Lamu, poking around in the *struggles of the locals*, determined to capture the *problems that the traditional fisherman is faced with in contemporary times*, only to then return back home with their findings - and *do nothing,* the research findings thus not being translated into any practical implementation of action. Another point of lamentation was expressed to me upon sharing my own intentions for research- I was met with a pained grimace and asked: *"Oh, you are here to research about Lamu? Please be aware of your privilege..you hold the pen and the power to*

[69] White person

speak about and for others. Be careful." This statement was followed by a speech, in which research was equated with responsibility, and reflections on the inescapability of positionality were made.

A further manifestation of the aforementioned dynamics of research, deeply embedded within the long-standing trajectory of anthropological research in particular, appears in the perception of the ethnographic field site as a bounded and discrete unit. It is this imagined and thus theoretically produced unit that the researcher latches onto, within which their interactive intellectual wandering takes place, and from which the researcher then detaches, to return home and produce- creating a strange demarcation, a clear-cut separation between a field site where ethnographic work takes place interactively with the subjects of research, and the academic setting, where field data is written up within the paradigms of Western theoretical discourse. Instead of recognising that researcher and research participants form an interdependent world, the sustained assumption is that the researcher is the quintessence of mobility, making them the omnipotent seer, moving in and out of the constructed ethnographic field unit. The people in the field however, are assumed to retain a status of immobility, restricted to and existing only in the setting in which they are studied.[70] This demarcation thus bars the very recognition of individuals as mobile, leading us once again to the Western hegemonic portrayal of peoples as marginal static objects in relation to a centre characterised as mobile and fluid- we recall this problematic identified within the field of nissology, in which outsider subject speaks about insider object.

3.2 The Method of Co-Creation

This problematic dichotomy of the mobile researcher vs the immobile researchee from whom knowledge is extracted is reflected in the quote with which this chapter opens. Following the above reflections and considering critical perceptions of Lamu residents, a step is taken to consider new methodologies that have been developed, which specifically aim to grapple with the challenge of research as an extractive practice- put forward as holding potential to provide a *lösungsansatz*. One such attempt is encapsulated in the method of co-creation.

In her article on how the digitalisation of our environment affects the field of qualitative study of societies, de Bruijn successfully identifies the emerging possibilities for new forms of collaboration and alternative forms of writing in research, which are argued to hold a high potential to deepen research and expand publication.[71] While acknowledging that

[70] Parin A. Dossa, "Reconstruction of the ethnographic field sites: Mediating identities: Case study of a Bohra Muslim woman in Lamu (Kenya)." In *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Pergamon, 1997): 505-515.
[71] Mirjam de Bruijn, *Digitalization and the field of African studies* (Oxford: African Books Collective, 2019), 10.

methodologies and theories that reflect the moving of research into the digital space need expanding, de Brujn thematizes the trend of research participants in fact taking on the role of co-creators in the context of increasing citizen journalism, informing researchers about the field by sharing their analyses. This holds a potential for academics to shift from working on Africa to working with Africa, which could subsequently mark a paradigm shift that may help break down the epistemic line, in which joint, de-hierarchical knowledge production is facilitated. This may constitute an avenue to decolonise knowledge production at large.

In fact, I can strongly resonate with the described potential benefits that come with the implementation of co-creation as a basis for knowledge production, resulting both in the production of qualitative work and higher levels of accessibility to knowledge. When I first came to Lamu in 2021, I worked in the capacity of a research assistant within the framework of the Ustadh Mau Digitalisation Archive project, working on the digitisation and conservation of Swahili Ajami poetry, captured both textually and audibly. In this context, I have witnessed the perks of a collaborative approach to research, not only working with a team of researchers from the Kenyan coast, but also working closely with the Lamu scholar, poet and imam Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulkadir, whose library we aimed to digitise. The resulting collaboration of varying perceptions facilitated in-depth discussions about different methodologies and ways to contextualise, research and archive expressions of identity and heritage.

3.3 Research Design

I place my previous experiences within the building of my methodological framework, as I intend to draw on my experiences in the UMADA project for my own research. I wish to approach my research from an angle of co-creation in order to attempt a research study that acts as an open, participatory canvas for the projection of different perceptions of Lamu residents that exist in dialogue with one another. I have attempted to place myself into a more humble position of a vehicle that ties into each other different narratives that were shared with me, casting myself within the use of the descriptive I, to reference my own positionality within.

In terms of Research Design, a descriptive, qualitative design was deemed the logical choice, as it is characterised as a practical design that is appropriate for researchers working in the field of their studied location, allowing for an examination of participants' perceptions and experiences related to the specific phenomenon. However, description alone may come with the fallacy of amplifying preconceived notions held by the researcher. Rather than describing a phenomenon to artificially substantiate a preconceived theoretical framework, a more bottom-up, circular approach was used. Data was thus not collected with an intent of the

solidification of a pre-selected conceptual framework.

In fact, the research process has thus consisted of information and ideas shuttling in-between myself and different informants across an established acquaintance network, who also dialogically position themselves in response to each other. Instead of curating a standardised, immovable list of questions to ask every informant, ideas expressed by informant A were anonymously plaited into the following interview with informant B, carrying information from A and B into C. Reactions from B and C were again plaited back into subsequent interviews with informant A.

This led to a fluid triangulation of insight, whilst maintaining the confidentiality of all participants, between different poles of information, allowing for an interdependent, co-creational, mobile and consistent cross-referencing and re-negotiation of information and ideas, followed by proofreading and suggestions for editing by a number of participants involved. This canvas of a research paper follows this weaving in and out of own observations, plated into a dialogical structure of informants building off of each other's ideas, thus attempting to frame researcher and informants as the mobile, interactive subjects that they are and avoid the trajectory of forcing data sets into a preconceived Western theoretical framework. While this design does not and cannot alleviate all ills witnessed within the structuration of global knowledge production at large, it is my sincere hope that the selected approach may showcase an effort made in the right direction. All participants gave verbal consent after being informed about the outlines of research and have been kept anonymous under pseudonyms, unless consent was given to use the name.

3.4 Data Collection

While an engagement with pre-existing secondary literature on the external framing of Lamu island was provided to identify framings in place that pertain to Lamu Island and Identity, the main data collected during the actual fieldwork on the ground followed a trajectory of primary data collection through the medium of interviews, conducted in both English and Swahili, which laid the groundwork for a co-creation approach to centre perceptions of Lamu islanders. A total of 25 interviews with fifteen different individuals were conducted across different age groups, occupations, classes, and gender, to ensure a multiplicity of perceptions on the island. Mirroring the demographic make-up of the island, the majority of informants self-identified as Muslim, Swahili people. This simultaneously defines the scope of this thesis, as Christian Kenyan, Western expatriate and other perspectives are not centred in this paper. This follows the active

choice to zoom in on the Muslim majority on the island, in consideration of its minority status within the majority Christian Kenyan nation state.

Most interviews were carried out in series at different times. All interviews were semi-structured in nature, oftentimes occurring spontaneously within my own acquaintance networks in Lamu, which allowed for both an organic unfolding of interactive, interdependent discussions while simultaneously allowing for interview participants to steer the discussions in directions of their choosing. 23 out of the 25 were individual interviews that allowed for in-depth individual reflections on perceptions of identity, that included longer elaborations, giving room for more detailed accounts of personal narratives. Two out of 25 interviews consisted of focus group discussions which added to the dialogical dimension and further highlighted occurrences of consensus and divergence in perceptions.

3.5 Overview of Informants

In the following chapters, I interlace conversations with a set of informants with which I held conversations in Lamu. For the sake of coherence, a brief overview is provided of ten individual Lamu residents, who feature in more detail, in the chronological order in which they appear in the text, and who are all referred to under pseudonyms, with the exception of Ustadh Mau.

Mahmoud Ahmed Abulkadir (Ustadh Mau)[72]

- A renowned Muslim Lamu elder, scholar, poet, imam, baker and community leader commonly known as Ustadh Mau, born in 1952. *Mtu wa watu*.[73] A human library, with an excellent sense of humour. His private collection consists of written and recorded Ajami poetry (composed in the KiAmu dialect, and written in Arabic script), his documentations of local Lamu history and culture, collected works from his extensive travels and cassette recordings of his khutbas (Friday sermons), which have been delivered since 1986 from Pwani Mosque on Lamu island.[74]

Maheer

- A young Muslim man in his mid-twenties, a father, a sailor, a dhow captain, an adventurer,

[72] Some of his works and further contextualisation can be found in: Ustadh Mahmoud Mau, *In this fragile world: Swahili poetry of commitment by Ustadh Mahmoud Mau* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).
[73] A man of the people.
[74] Pwani Mosque is the oldest remaining mosque on Lamu island.

from Mbwajumali, Pate[75] and raised in Lamu, working in construction in Shela[76].

Gĩchuhĩ

- A young Christian man in his late twenties, born and raised in Lamu, with family land in Mpeketoni[77], working in hospitality in Lamu.

Naz

- An ambitious young Muslim woman in her early twenties, raised in between Lamu, Pate and Mombasa, working in aviation, a fashion icon, always sporting a Palestine bracelet.

Faisal

- A Muslim man in his mid-thirties, father of two, known for his active involvement in many community projects on Lamu island, founder of various charities for the disadvantaged and the orphaned, working for the Lamu radio station.

Suale

- A Muslim man in his thirties from a prestigious family background, a father, with family ties in Oman, restaurant and property owner, always seen wearing the *kofia*[78] his grandfather passed down to him.

Sameer

- A Muslim man in his early thirties, a father, who grew up between Lamu and Pate, who's family runs a restaurant business.

Munib

- A Muslim man in his thirties, from Siyu, Pate, whose love for political and theological debate follows an extensive family line of scholars and politicians. A true intellectual.

Saida

- A chatty young Muslim woman in her early twenties, a mother, working as a shopkeeper.

Aisha

- An elderly Muslim woman, academically accomplished, working on projects to uplift the community, particularly the youth.

[75] Pate is an island within the Lamu Archipelago.
[76] A town on Lamu island.
[77] A town in Lamu County, on the coast, 26.3 km away from Lamu.
[78] Cylindrical cap embroidered by hand with floral and geometric patterns, worn by many coastal Muslim men..

Chapter 4: Findings: “Differentiation”

A motorbike ride into town. (*Photo taken by Charlotte Bruns Knight, 2024*)

4.1 An Introductory Vignette: Conversations with Ustadh Mau

"*Hodi hodi?*[79] *Asalaam aleykum Ustadh.*"
"*Aleykum salaam Sophia, karibu*."

I realise quickly upon being invited to step inside, that the room is in fact not as small as assumed upon first glance. Rather, the space is simply taken over by the overpowering presence of paper. -Books, notepads, loose sheets, manuscripts-, make up overflowing, wobbly-looking stacks of knowledge, towering up high towards the ceiling, the bookshelves providing the structure for paper waterfalls to cascade down to the floor. Rustling through heaps of sheets covering the ground, Ustadh gestures for me to sit down on a *mkeka*[80]mat, settling himself opposite me, into a nest of paper. After a series of pleasant exchanges, inquiring back and forth about our respective families' well-being, Ustadh promptly informs me about the history of the old Swahili style lime house -one of his homes- that encompasses his private *maktaba*- his library. It is located on the second floor, and consists of his written and recorded Ajami poetry[81], cassette recordings of his *khutbas*[82], documentations of local Lamu history and collected works from his extensive travels. He begins in KiSwahili:

"*Babu yangu, my grandfather, bought this house in 1920 I think. By that time the money was rupees, not shillings. For 120 rupees, he bought this house. The father of my father, his name was Abdulkadir, he came from India when he was fourteen years old. First he arrived in Zanzibar and then he went to Dar es Salaam, after finally settling in Lamu. He was an engineer, a mechanic, he was the engineer for the boat of the District Commissioner. And then my grandfather on my mother's side, he originally was from Yemen. His name was Babegger. And the mother of my mother, she was Bajuni, so maybe looking just at my DNA, you cannot identify, but personally I will write that I am mswahili. Some of my brothers, they decided to write Kenyan Indian, others write Kenyan Arab to identify themselves. Mimi nilishikilia (...) niliamua…mimi ni mswahili*[83]*. I decided I am mswahili. Because KiSwahili is my language."*

I recall that Ustadh is known for writing his poetry in KiAmu, a local variety of KiSwahili, spoken

[79] Like "knock, knock"- to announce one's presence.
[80] A woven mat.
[81] For more detail see: Alamin Mazrui, *Swahili beyond the boundaries: Literature, language, and identity* no. 85 (Ohio University Press, 2007).
[82] Friday sermons.
[83] "m" connotes a singular person; mswahili= a singular Swahili person. "wa" connotes people, plural: waswahili= Swahili people.

in Lamu, which is an old literary language.[84] Upon looking around his *maktaba*, I see some of his Ajami poetry manuscripts, composed in KiAmu and written down in Arabic script.

"Ndiyo-yes, KiAmu is from us, from here, it is ours. And there in India for example, we do not have any communication with the community which my grandfather came from, we do not know a single person there. So mimi ni mswahili- I am mswahili. And Lamu-the neighbouring islands, this is where the waswahili originate. Here is the place I was raised, my culture is here. Everything for me is here in Lamu."

Ustadh hands me a *kipepeo*[85] fan- it is hot today- and proceeds to interlace his family histories -marked by the rather recent intergenerational, migratory traversing of time and space- with reflections on the notion of self, of identity, on the claiming of place. Continuing in this vein, our conversation turns to the subject matter of land.

"*Lamu people, they used to have mashamba*[86] *on the coastal mainland, not far from the archipelago. For example, Mpeketoni*[87] *was an area of farms there of Lamu people and they put their cows there and grew crops. These mashambas belonged to Lamu people officially, according to government documents, even my mother owned a shamba there, because she was born in Mapenya, in Mpeketoni area.*

Ustadh dives into a historical account of government resettlement schemes, initiated under the alleged need to increase economic agricultural production within the project of nation-building, following Kenya's Independence. This subsequently caused the dispossession of land -and ways of life- for many Lamu families.

"*Kenyatta-the first president of Kenya- started to bring Gĩkũyũ families to settle them there. Watu wa bara..yes, Christian Kenyans from the mainland. Serikali- the government- under Gĩkũyũ president Kenyatta- at that time, paid money to some owners of the land as compensation and then settled these Gĩkũyũ people there. Some got that compensation money, those who knew how to follow to get the money. But my mother, she was not aware of the bureaucratic procedures, and little information was provided to the Lamu people, the farmers, so she lost her big shamba in that area. In places like Mpeketoni, Gĩkũyũ farmers settled and*

[84] Andrey Zhukov, "Old Swahili-Arabic script and the development of Swahili literary language." *Sudanic Africa* 15 (2004): 5.
[85] A round, woven fan made out of palm leaf.
[86] farms.
[87] A town in Lamu County, on the coast, 26,3 km away from Lamu.

then entered all governance structures of Lamu County. Even the assistant chief in this local Swahili area suddenly was a Gĩkũyũ, they started like that and then all the government officers were Gĩkũyũ, on all levels of administrative and political representation. This is what made (Lamu) people feel like we are strangers, we are strange in our country, this is not our country, this is what caused the sentiment Pwani si Kenya- the coast is not Kenya."

Ustadh pauses.

"If Kenyatta had been wise enough, we could have lived peacefully without any problem, if only he had made the people of the coastal area feel that we are in our country, we are recognised as the indigenous of this place, but he really ignored us. So this experience shaped ideas about identity, people of Lamu were made to feel like second-class citizens in their own region. Identity and land are deeply connected. It is connected to livelihoods, family structures, ways of being. This dispossession, this marginalisation, ndiyo, hii ni sababu kubwa-this is a main reason- this marginalisation- for why people feel their identity to be threatened by loss. "

Ustadh asks me about individuals of Turkish background, living in Germany, referencing the fact that minority groups all over the world may experience a need to strengthen group identity when shaped by a collective perception of experiencing marginalisation.

I ask if the younger generations of Lamu feel the same way.

"You will receive different answers and opinions, depending on age of course. I know things shaped by my age as mzee-as an elder now. For example, my children, they may have different ideas because they grew up in a different world than me. There are some intermarriages now, between watu wa Lamu-people of Lamu, and watu wa bara-people of the mainland. But people still talk about it. But the problem now is the erasure of our history. I have tried to raise awareness about our history in some of my poems, comparing hali ya pwani-the situation of the coast, including Lamu island- to hali ya Palestine-the situation of Palestine.

Ustadh proceeds to read me an extract of his poem. As I listen, recall seeing a Palestinian flag attached to the front of a bodaboda[88] by the young owner of the bike, who had carried me into town that same morning for my meeting with Ustadh:

[88] Motorbike taxi.

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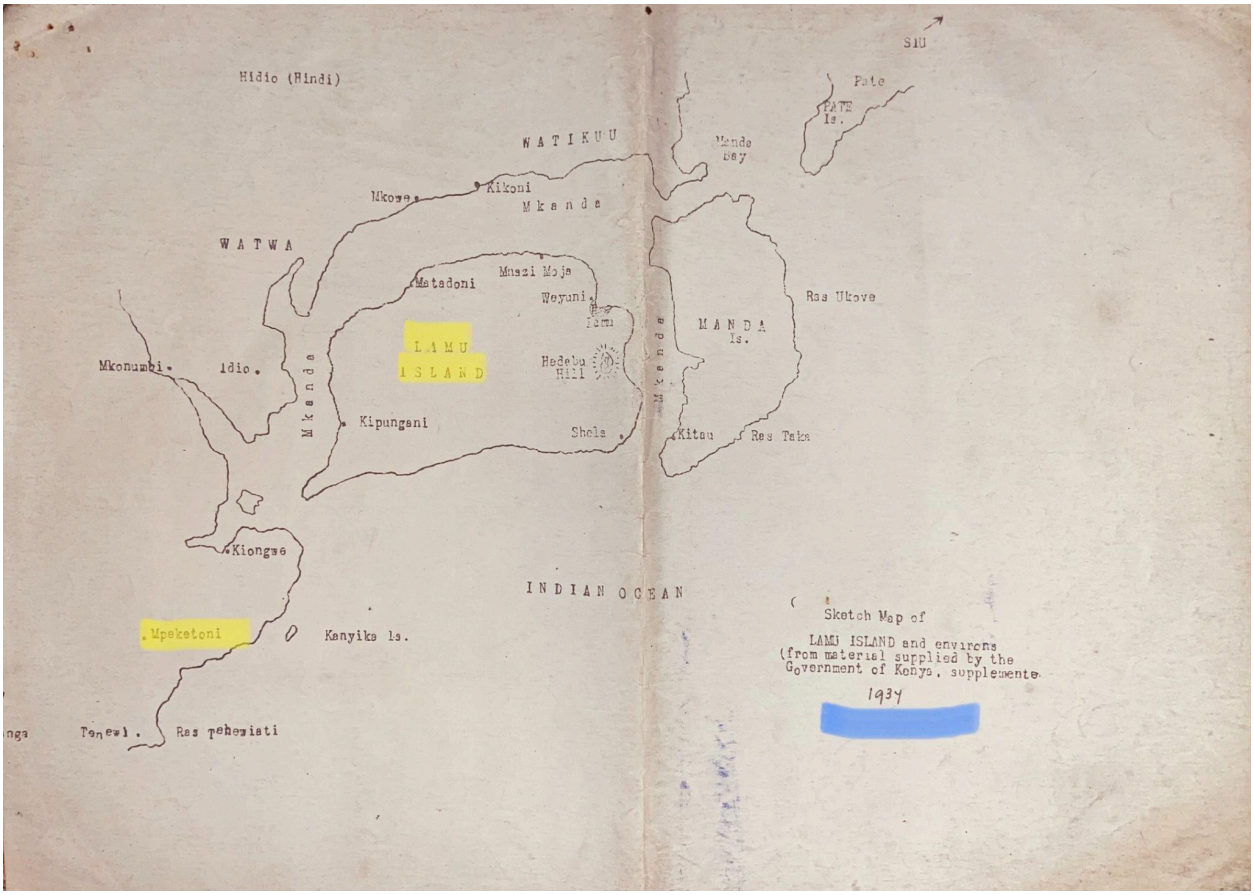
236.	Ndio kituo cha dini kwenye mkoa wa pwani. Hata nchi za jirani Lamu waizingatia.	It is the citadel of the religion on the whole of the East Coast.[16] Even the neighbouring countries think and talk about Lamu.
237.	Jumla ya kusifika hata imeitwa Makka. Wageni wengi hufika maulidini wakaya.	To crown its praises, it has even been called Mecca. Many pilgrims come here to attend the Maulidi celebrations.
238.	Na mambo haya mazuri kuna viumbe mashari kabisa hawakukiri. Wataka kutufutia!	And for all these beautiful things[17], there are evil beings, who have not accepted this situation. They are bent on wiping us out!
239.	Wamefanya na ghadhabu wataka kuyaharibu. Hutafuta kisababu ya dini kutuvundia.	They are in great temper, and want to destroy all we have. They are looking for an opportunity or excuse to break up our religion.
240.	Na mipango kama hini yalifanyika zamani. Na huko Palastini ndiko ilikoanzia.	And such a plan was drawn up long ago. And it was over there in Palestine that it all began.
241.	Mayahudi waliona nchi hiyo imefana. Mitukufu lake jina sifaze zimeenea.	The Jews saw that this land was prosperous. Its name was time honoured, and its fame a household word.
242.	Wakaanza taratibu kwa kuwaghuri Warabu. Pesa nyingi za ajabu wakawa huzitumia.	They began gently[18] by beguiling the Arabs. Staggering amounts of money were poured into the area.
243.	Wakanunua piloti, kwa malukuki ya noti. Wakazimwaya senti aridhi kununulia.	They bought plots of land, with bundles of notes. They poured in millions of cents to buy land for themselves.
244.	Wakisa kufanikiwa, ziwanda kuvinunuwa, wenyewe weliwatowa, wao wakajikalia!	When they succeeded in this venture, and had bought up all the factories, they then drove the inhabitants away and settled there themselves!
245.	Na tokea siku hizo, [illegible] ni hizozo, na mingi mno mikazo ya kuwadhili raia.	And from that day onwards, there has raged a quarrel, and several other oppressive acts aimed at subjugating the Palestinians.
246.	Na sisi sasa twaona	

Dispossession, erasure, loss. These words keep resurfacing, placed in juxtaposition with the word Ustadh continuously circles back to: awareness. Providing an example of the erasure of

Lamu history that he speaks of, Ustadh refers back to the case of Mpeketoni.

"Kwa mfano, for example, returning back to the history of Mpeketoni, they now started to create the idea that Mpeketoni area came by this name when Kenyatta came to this area the first time, untruthfully saying that there was nohousenohomenopeoplenoculture there, just a big tree-a mpeketo- so Kenyatta stopped under that tree with his car and then he took a tea under that tree. This is the story, the <u>narrative,</u> they constructed and now teach in school, it is written in school books. They teach it but I have a map where it is written, in 1934, that Mpeketoni was there, published in an old magazine. But the new generation can be made to believe that the story they teach in school is true, that Mpeketoni came with Kenyatta drinking tea under that tree."

Ustadh reaches for the magazine in reference, showing me the respective map. Indeed it is written, *Mpeketoni 1934*, three decades before Kenyatta came to power:



I refer to Lamu's extensive history of *wageni* -guests/outsiders- coming to Lamu, which reflects in the demographic make-up of the island, of which Ustadh Mau's family is a prime example, and is further touched upon in the context of the mentioned re-settlement schemes. I inquire what determines waSwahili membership.

"Religion transcends ancestry. What makes this community agree is our religion. If you are Muslim, if your father is a Christian Luo from Kisumu -there on the mainland- for example, if you move here and you are Muslim, you and your children will be part of the waSwahili community. The big issue is not the tribe- you can be indigenous Bajuni, or come from outside-, the big issue is the matter of religion.

As I descend down the steps back into the present, leaving the library, my head is spinning with

-religion, land, language, political representation, historical narratives, age, migration, space and place

a myriad of components that seem to coincide and grapple with one another in the locality of Lamu, informing imaginaries of belonging and translocal affiliation, shaping negations of citizenship within a nation state and claims to space.

4.2 Observations and Discussions

According to Ustadh Mau, what indexes membership within the waswahili identity group is religion, rather than ethnic affiliation or ancestry, thus framing waswahili membership as a more open identity bracket that encompasses diverse family histories of migration, that cannot simply be labelled as a fixed, rigid ethnic group, posing to be based on supposed inherent traits. Upon talking to other individuals, it became apparent that conceptualisations of ethnicity are indeed much more fluid. Rather than solely self-identifying as a Bajuni person for example, the same person may refer to themselves also as a *mwenyeji* (a person who is originally from Lamu), as a *mwarabu* (an Arab person), as a *muislamu* (A Muslim person), a *mcoasti* (a coastal person) and a *mswahili* (a Swahili person). It has been argued that notions of ethnic fluidity, mirrored in the more varied terminology drawn upon, stems from Lamu Town's continuous incorporation of different groups of outsiders—from Oman, Yemen, Shiraz, India, and Portugal—and partly based on residents' own shifting identifications throughout coastal history,[89] thus marking Lamu as a place-in-the-world that is sustained, yet has a history of constant change in its internal diversity, resulting in a selective straddling of nuance shaped by the desire to place emphasis.

In fact, in the case of Ustadh Mau, when expressing a sense of connection to Lamu island, ethnic self-affiliation as a concrete label was mentioned, but not directly centred. Rather, we see an identity conceptualisation marked by active choice, that differs amongst a generation of brothers, who by identifying as Indian-Kenyan or Arab-Kenyan reference ancestry from outside of Kenya, whilst simultaneously connoting being Kenyan. In contrast, Ustadh Mau himself self-identifies as first and foremost mswahili, stating also that whilst speaking from within the country, thoughts of self-identification do not follow a trajectory of "feeling Kenyan"- rather drawing on a perception of being treated as a secondary citizen vis-a-vis the Kenyan government. We must note Ustadh's choice of words, his framing of *choosing* to label himself as mswahili, claiming space in Lamu, not on the basis of tracing ancestral roots as having originated from Lamu, but rather by means of identifying as a Muslim man, born and raised in Lamu and viewing the KiAmu dialect in particular as a reference to the locality of Lamu and as a strong identity marker of self.

Another factor shaping self-identification appears to be determined by location within the Archipelago that ties into ethnic lines. However, we witness once more that the desire to make the connection between location, ethnicity and subsequent identity as a given, is not set in stone, with individual perceptions varying across informants. As Ustadh informs me:

[89] Sarah Hillewaert, *Morality at the Margins: youth, language, and Islam in coastal Kenya* (Fordham University Press, 2019).

"*Within current governance structures, it is not appreciated when people write that they are mswahili. I do not know why. They want people to write that they are mbajuni- to make it an easy ethnic label. Many will write Bajuni instead of Swahili, but people from Siyu for example, they do not view themselves as ethnically Bajuni. Kwa sababu, because Bajunis are the people from other towns in Pate, such as Kizingitini, Mbwajumali, these are Bajuni- but other groups in Pate, they do not agree that they are Bajunis. The indigenous of Lamu also, do not count themselves as Bajuni. My last born son, when he went to get his ID card, he said I am mswahili, but he was told that because he is from Lamu, he has to write that he is Bajuni. But he said my father told me I am Swahili. They had to call me and when I went to attend their meeting, they saw me and they knew me, so they agreed, he is the son of Ustadh Mau, who is mswahili.. So eventually they agreed to write that he is a Swahili. But of course, some people like to emphasise..wanapenda kujiita..they like to call themselves Bajuni, to emphasise location on the Archipelago, an affiliation with other places, not Lamu. But many others say, well my general language is KiSwahili, my culture, my customs are those of Swahili, there is little difference between all of us..we are Muslims, we live here..we are waswahili*."

The different identity markers thus again appear to allow for individual placements of emphasis. For some informants, being Bajuni and speaking the KiBajuni dialect is a matter of pride. For example, when I first arrived in Lamu, a Bajuni family was eager to show me a collection of poetry written in KiBajuni. However, dhow captain Maheer, told me that whilst the Bajuni label does technically apply to him, his family coming from Mbwajumali in Pate, he does not believe that this label can encompass his entire identity, indexing a conceptualisation of identity as multifaceted and fluid.

"*First and foremost, I am a proud Muslim. Yes, I am from Mbwajumali, according to my ancestry I am Bajuni, but I am more than that."*

What follows is a description of a life that is marked by ideas of movement and return.

"Many people will fail to say where I am from, they cannot put me in a box. I know some KiArabu, Arabic. My language is KiSwahili. I know the KiBajuni dialect..I speak the language depending on the person I interact with. I speak Sheng ya Mombasa, Mombasa slang[90]*.*

[90] a nonstandard urban vernacular from Mombasa. See: Andrew J. Eisenberg "Hip-Hop and Cultural Citizenship on Kenya's 'Swahili Coast'." *Africa* 82, no. 4 (2012): 559.

Sometimes I speak Lamu slang. Right now you see, my friends that have come from Mombasa to visit me..I talk to them in Mombasa slang..I am happy to see them, also I get the chance to speak the Mombasa way. I move around..I can go to Mombasa, to Zanzibar."

Linguistic code switching is the norm, rather than the exception. Again, we see the ability to straddle differentiation. The conversation turns more personal, moving even further away from ethnicity-as-identity thinking completely. Maheer speaks of his dhow.

"*Sophie, I love my dhow, it allows me to go anywhere..I can wake up tomorrow and sail away. But home? Home is in Lamu. If I am here in Lamu I am free, I am free with everything I feel happy. I know the surroundings, I know every person, everyone knows me, nacheka na kila mtu kwa njia..I make jokes with everyone on the street. I can feel happy to speak Mombasa sheng, but Lamu is home, where I truly feel happy. Sometimes when I am in Mombasa I miss Lamu."*

When asked what it is about Lamu that he misses when away, he says:

"*Me and the beach...I can just go and relax, watch the ocean, fish, go to the shamba..yaani mambo mengi, lots of things… I have my spots..diving. Mombasa also has beaches of course, but I do not feel as comfortable..but here, I can take the boat and go anywhere, because I am comfortable, i can go anywhere, all around the Archipelago, I know everything…I like to use the tanga*[91]*, if I'm in Mombasa and I go to the beach, I feel like I miss my dhow…I feel connected to my dhow, it gives me the feeling I can go anywhere, I can go fishing at night, cook on the boat..I feel a sense of home. That is me. Doing those things. I am in my element, I am in control, Alhamdulillah*[92]*. I like sailing, Sophie. It's like I'm free with everything. Also my family is here in Lamu, my Grandma…. I go to see my Grandma and I sing, she will sing with me..then we clap together...my Grandma, she is here and I feel like I am happy when I am with her, in a way I cannot explain...it's just a feeling. Family is important..just being with my Grandma..helas… I feel okay. So I like the freedom, I can go anywhere, but at the end of the day Sophie, the boy can leave the island, but the island cannot leave the boy. At the end of the day, Lamu is where I feel peace, I know everyone, I know everything."*

[91] Sail.
[92] Praise be to God.

Gĩchuhĩ, another male individual in his twenties, who equally expresses pride in being born and raised in Lamu, and knowing the island like the back of his hand, reflects on the conceptualisation of ethnicity-as-identity. Gĩchuhĩ states:

"Sure, I am Gĩkũyũ..but telling someone I am Gĩkũyũ..will not make them truly know who I am as a person, it cannot hold my identity." He tells me that his claim to being *mcoasti*[93], as someone who is Christian and holds upcountry ancestry, has been contested throughout his life, by individuals in Lamu. On the other hand, during his experience at boarding school on the mainland, his ability to speak KiAmu and being a good swimmer- led to an immediate perception of him as indeed being from the coast- marking him out as the only *mcoasti* in the school. "*It depends on who you talk with, they will make their own assumptions- but I know I can enjoy my Gĩkũyũ food and cook coastal food the next day..I enjoy both- I am both. My family is settled and rooted in Mpeketoni and I was born here in Lamu..Both are my homes."*

A young woman in her early twenties, Naz, mentions her Bajuni heritage frequently to me. On a walk along the beach in Manda[94], she turns to me and says: "*Sophie, you know this is actually Bajuni land right?*" Her beaded bracelet weaving a Palestinian flag glimmers in the sunlight. She declares it gives her joy to walk on her land, however, this sentiment is accompanied by the bitter aftertaste of seeing this land increasingly being bought up primarily by upcountry Kenyan elites and expatriates from abroad, mirrored in the expansion of luxury resorts and private villas along the seafront of Shela and Manda in particular. Naz herself has shared with me her experiences of Islamophobia, tribalism and racism whilst having worked in one of the expat-owned hotels- experiences that are not uncommon.

Naz too has lived, worked and studied in various places, in Mbwajumali on Pate island, in Mombasa, Nairobi and on Lamu island. She too switches between locations and different dialects and slangs. Yet the desire to be in Lamu however, is frequently expressed, Lamu being described to me in her words as an entirely unique place, that makes one feel a connection as a young person to the past- one's walking, sometimes in sneakers and sometimes in slippers, in jeans, in *buibui*, through a town marked by its ancient architecture, while holding an iphone, being something special.

Leaving the island to search for economic and educational opportunities in Mombasa and Nairobi, or travelling there for business ventures, such as stocking up on products for sale

[93] A person from the coast.
[94] Manda is an island within the Lamu Archipelago.

amongst the many shop owners in Lamu, is common. Many young people I spoke to expressed a desire to leave the island for such purposes- at least for a while. Yet simultaneously, such statements were frequently followed across age groups by a statement along the lines of: "*But Sophie, people always end up coming back to Lamu. Even you, you came to Lamu once, and now you have returned*." The fast life and anonymity of bigger cities is frequently remarked upon as unappealing; we recall Maheer's description of Lamu as a peaceful place, where one is known, where one exists embedded within a network. While leaving the island is common for residents, if by boat to traverse the waters along the coastline, to cross the channel towards the Kenyan mainland, or to hop over to other islands within the Archipelago, the idea of returning is a recurrent theme across interviews. There exists the idea that one's absence on the island is noted. I am told and witnessed myself that: "*If you have returned to Lamu from a trip, you will be welcomed back to the island the moment you step off the boat onto the jetty, people call out to you."*

Upon asking another young man, a community worker called Faisal, who self-identifies first and foremost as Muslim, and then refers to himself as mswahili, the theme of network is mirrored to me again. Direct references to ethnicity affiliation are not made. Faisal exclaims:

"*From my point of view, identity, it can defined by where you came from..that's how you can self-identify, because even if I want to know more about you, I have to follow…yaani consider your clan or the family, where you came from…we all come from somewhere, for example the place of birth, in my case I was born and raised in Lamu, I am from Lamu..there are many who share my name…but I am the one with that name from this island..I have travelled to different places, but Lamu, it is home…when I finished my studies, I came back to Lamu to look for a job. Many young people choose to leave, because they think that they can find better opportunities there..in Mombasa..or maybe Nairobi but..here…I know everyone, and that is an advantage. I studied near Nairobi and then came back.. in my mind, I said I can find a job in Lamu, I can work in Lamu, I know many places, people..it would be difficult for me to find work in Mombasa..I world not know where to start..it would be hard..even in Nairobi I tried…to get a job to support myself but I didn't manage. My network here is my advantage. I have many friends, I see people frequently, it's easy. You can go to the beach, it is calm and quiet, you do not have to even pay money for transport like in Mombasa..I can easily walk from (Lamu) Old Town to Shela. I know the panya routes[95]. Some people think Lamu is too small, but I don't have the*

[95] panya=rat; panya routes=the narrow, discrete backstreets in town.

need to get out. Sometimes, I travel for business or personal reasons but don't feel the need to leave. Let me give an example."

What follows is a recount of his family history that indicates the connectivity for him between himself and the desire to own land and property on the island. Faisal continues:

"We used to have a family house here, but my mother..she got some issues, so she wanted to sell it to a friend but i stood up and said I don't want that because Lamu is my home, this is the place of my identity, of myself…We are three (siblings), so she asked us our thoughts.. I said no it's not good, I'm away studying, but I want to come back home. I advised her and said if you want to sell this house, make sure you go and buy another house here in Lamu at least, so you own a place on the island. I was young at the time, so she couldn't listen to me, and many in the family voted to sell…so she sold. I realised then that I have to get my own house here, so whilst I was in school, I managed to get some savings, I bought my own plot and then I built my house This shows my attachment to Lamu. I sacrificed a lot to build my own house here..but now I can feel at peace."

4.2 Analysis

Place can be defined as a framed space that is meaningful to a person or group over time, a presence that comes into being through human experience, perception, imaginings and within which a sense of being in the world can develop.[96] An inquiry into informants responses to the notion of identity leads us to note that Lamu as a place within which one claims membership, within which one creates a notion of self, is one marked by internal difference. Indeed, it has been elicited that in reaction to being asked about ideas that pertain to identity, informants may highlight an ethnic labelling with an attached sense of pride, discard it, draw on a variety of labels that index religion and ancestry, combine ethnic self-labelling with the broader identity bracket of "waswahili", or not mention ethnicity in direct terms at all- a clear countering of the notion that across the board, a singular, rigid fixing of identity-within ethnicity as the baseline for self-identification processes in Lamu is the norm.

We note a fluid shifting between differentiated terms denoting identity, and clear thought patterns behind the selection of labels were voiced, following a logic of agency and choice, we witness a high level of nuanced terminology that enables for an expression of differentiation. In

[96] Therese Thornton, Tobias Loetscher, Mark J. Yates, and Michael ER Nicholls. "The highs and lows of the interaction between word meaning and space." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 39, no. 4 (2013): 964.

fact, we see the ability across informants to switch between and claim multiple nuanced identity terms, dialects and slangs. We witness a straddling of different codes, mirrored once again in the occurrence of reconciling the drawing on more than one location as denoting a sense of home. We gain a growing sense that identity construction in Lamu does not follow a logic of given singularity, but rather follows a swimming through streams of multiplicity, so to say.

In fact, we can perhaps conclude that Lamu island- whilst it retains itself, is characterised by internal diversity that requires what Kai Kresse, in his analysis of Mombasa, calls a "knowledge of difference" amongst residents,[97] which perhaps is what in turn creates the very unifying characteristic amongst residents of Lamu, who in a continuous manner engage in a selective, fluid straddling of nuance- holding a knowledge of difference that connotes a subsequent claiming of place. This knowledge of difference within place and the navigation of it in daily life is encapsulated in the postcolonial term hybridity. It must be noted that historically, the term is viewed as highly problematic, as within the colonial context, the term was often held against the waswahili people and their culture. "It was not uncommon in colonialist discourse to find the Swahili described as a mongrel people of African and Arab descent and statements that in its disposition this "mutation" encapsulated not the best but the worst of the racially determined cultural attributes of its dual parentage."[98]

Yet in postcolonial discourse, hybridity has been reclaimed to connote the possession of an advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of different codes and subsequent ability to negotiate difference by means of code switching and drawing on different repertoires, here within the own construction of identity.[99] Indeed, according to Bhabha, hybridity involves the struggle against Western hegemonically dichotic thinking that acts to define the identity of the other within a unitary, essentializing framework, - for example through a rigid ethnicity-as-identity lens- in contexts where cultural and linguistic practices, as well as histories and epistemologies are marked by plurality.[100] Hybridity, therefore, counteracts essentialism that defines culture and identity as fixed. We witness a model of ethnic fluidity and racial indeterminacy shaped by migrational history on the island, informing a knowledge of difference that allows for hybrid identity constructions of the individual that stands in stark contrast with traditional European identity conceptualisations as fixated on categorising human difference on the basis of origin.

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[97] Kai Kresse, "Muslim politics in postcolonial Kenya: negotiating knowledge on the double-periphery." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological institute* 15 (2009): 76-94.

[98] Peninah Mutonga, "Adaptation of Swahili Architecture and Identity." *AFRICA HABITAT REVIEW*, *13*(1), (2019): 1638.

[99] Andreas Ackermann,"Cultural hybridity: Between metaphor and empiricism." *Conceptualising cultural hybridization: A transdisciplinary approach* (2012): 8.

[100] Homi K. Bhabha, "Culture's in between." In *Multicultural states* (London: Routledge, 2013): 29-36.

In addition, this knowledge to navigate difference within Lamu as a place and subsequent claiming of this place through the very act of "knowing" how to navigate it, can be further coupled with the idea of claiming the island by "knowing" it in terms of physical space. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the majority of informants elaborated quite cohesively on the felt connection to Lamu island in a more personal way, referring to a strong feeling of home on the island, marked by a perception that the island is unique and more intimate vis-a-vis bigger cities, by referring to the leisurely activities that Lamu island specifically has to offer, including the beaches, the narrow alleys and the sea itself- all of which someone who has spent a significant amount of time in Lamu will be more likely to have a deeper knowledge of and take pleasure in being cognizant of how to navigate- and is viewed as coming with a sense of ease, a feeling of peace- a feeling of claiming place by knowing it well, coupled with expressions of the importance of land ownership on the island- the keeping of one foot in the place that takes note of one's absence.

Furthermore, it is evident that the sense of connection to the island does not however come at the expense of only looking inward or connoting staticity. The claiming of Lamu island by possessing a knowledge of place and physical space, and interconnecting this knowledge with an idea of self- as someone from the island- is coupled with the normalcy of mobility. In fact, the mobility of residents across sea and land, to the mainland and other islands of the Archipelago, and the notion of return to Lamu- indexes a type of local cosmopolitan outlook within the region, a society where movement is the norm. Again, we see a deconstruction of a binary logic that would dichotically position the local and non-local. Instead, we see a network of mobility that is structured around the notion of a homeland -Lamu island. What comes with this mobility is perhaps a higher awareness of the very structure of region, of nation- or rather, Lamu island as existing within a region which holds a specific positionality within the nation.

Indeed, it it has been pointed out that within Indian Ocean Studies, certain conceptualisations of coastal identity fall into the trap of following a rather romanticised notion of coastal hybridity, as an easy melting-pot of cultural influences, in which the context of a long and complex history of settlement, unequal commercial and political relations shaping local understandings of tensions over land, status, wealth, go unacknowledged.[101] It is thus deemed necessary to investigate Lamu's positionality within wider national structures and how this positionality further connects to processes of identity construction.

[101] Kai Kresse, "Muslim politics in postcolonial Kenya: negotiating knowledge on the double-periphery." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological institute* 15 (2009): 79.

Chapter 5: Findings:“Collectivity”

School children in Shela, Lamu. (*Photo taken by Charlotte Bruns Knight, 2024)*

5.1 Observations and Discussions

In fact, while we again see differentiation between Ustadh Mau and Naz- Ustadh Mau for example does not utilise the Bajuni label but Naz actively does-, shared sentiments that indicate a thinking within the cost-mainland dichotomy are in fact expressed by both, in fact directly referenced upon inquiring about own ideas about identity- both refer to land dispossession. Perceived marginalisation within the nation state is stated to have a direct effect on identity- in the sense that identity is viewed as something that is under threat. Ustadh Mau and Naz are not the only individuals who promptly touch upon perceptions of threat in reaction to the mention of the word "identity". Across all age groups, the majority of informants who self-identify as waSwahili, linked the concept of identity with a perception of threat, viewed to affect identity placement into a resolute, yet mobile localism that indexes awareness of and engagement with the national and transnational.

While the terms "threat" and "marginalisation" were almost never directly used, neither in English nor in KiSwahili, when asked about what identity means to the individual, the majority of informants pointed towards socio political developments that were viewed to impede on or negatively affect the ability to maintain identity- the following sections outline experiences of land loss (loss of physical space), a perceived loss of control over social norms (loss of place) and a view that educational structures are driving to the margins certain knowledge reproduction (loss of knowledge)- three avenues within which collective experiences of identity loss are located by informants.

a) The Scramble over Lamu Land

As a result of following Ustadh Mau's advice to inquire amongst younger generations about what informs notions of identity in Lamu, and if perceptions of collective marginalisation hold fast in contemporary times, I find myself seated in a room filled with tobacco smoke, graced with the stimulating company of a group of male waswahili acquaintances in their early thirties- Munib, Suale and Sameer- seated in a circular formation. The group is wearing *kofias* paired with casual shirts and jeans and can primarily be described as highly interested in Kenyan politics, specifically its effects on Lamu residents- and as very humorous.

Upon repeating Ustadh's reflections, I am first presented with a pot of milk tea and then met with the enthusiastic head-nodding of all three individuals. Immediately I am told about the advisability of posting about the fate of Palestine on social media, also as a means to raise awareness about the structural marginalisation that is said to be happening in Lamu "to wake up the youth"- a modern day mirroring of Ustadh's manuscript writing on paper perhaps. The group

of men are eager to explain to me that Ustadh's recount of historical injustices of land grabbing are not a matter of the past, following Kenya's independence- but are happening again in the here and now, framing contemporary land grabbing as marking a repetition within the collective experience of many waswahili Lamu residents today.

Complimentary to Ustadh Mau's family history shaped by migration, the group tells me that the trajectory of diverse peoples moving to the island is by no means a new phenomenon and is viewed as entirely normalised, Suale stating that:

"Lamu island is only densely populated in one space, so there is room for expansion, room for new settlement and so forth, that's why so many foreigners have come and are still moving here, finding cheap land in a place where the population is small…rural urban migration started way back, so people have always moved here, intermarrying and living together. The town has always attracted strangers, it has been a local metropolis, a pivot of activity."

Sameer agrees:

"Ndiyo, yes, it is good to interact with different communities, foreigners can all come, mainlanders, to visit, even to buy land. Open your shops here, contribute to our economy, it is a good thing!."

In fact, this sentiment was frequently expressed across interviews, I recall Faisal, who had explained the advantage he sees in living and working within the Lamu network, which he characterises as diverse, had spoken on the same matter in similar tones:

"It is important to keep our Muslim identity strong, but this strength also..it comes from interacting with different people. Lamu is mainly occupied by waswahili…and Arabs..But we have a history of welcoming others. The majority population is waswahili..yaani Muslims... but we do have other people..we all live here together. Yes, I have friends who are Muslim, Christian, older people, younger people…I have no problem with that, as long as we respect each other, we can all live here together. Exposure to other people is good, you can learn a lot if someone tells you about something that before..you had no idea about it. You think about it in a negative way maybe, but if you get the knowledge about it, you can actually reflect and draw your own conclusion, see the good and bad. It makes you not ignorant. I can say one thing, I normally do this with different people I interact with…I learn their language, some KiGiriama,

some Somali, some KiKuyu..We normally do this…When friends who have their own customs that are not mine, they have a wedding, they invite me and I attend…I see their cultural dances…that jumping and I see oh, this is something new for me..their procedures of marriage, they explain to me, I get more knowledge about it…and it makes me to build my network strong. In the end, we all depend on each other."

In alignment with this thought pattern, Munib now cuts: "*Sophie, can I ask you one thing? What did you notice when you first came to Lamu?"*

After thinking for a moment, I comment on Lamu's hospitality. His eyes light up-

"Exactly, hospitality is what we do best here. It is a defining feature of what it means to be from Lamu. And in theory this continues. Yaani…Even upcountry people are welcome to settle, I have no issue with them coming here. However, things have changed that make people from here more suspicious, people nowadays come with those bad attitudes. History is repeating itself. Sophie I am not being tribalistic…but some from upcountry..they come with bad attitudes…You can let them work on your land, or even give them a plot..but some have bad attitude..they want more..they grab land."

I ask for clarification. The land resettlement schemes of the 70s following independence are promptly mentioned to me again. It is explained to me that since independence, land in Lamu County has been categorised as belonging to the Kenyan Government and that land allocations to local individuals, like those that occurred in upcountry Kenya, did not take place. The organisation SaveLAmu- a local organisation based on Lamu that describes itself as aiming to raise awareness on the environmental, social and political challenges facing the peoples and environs of Lamu- states that: "*Because of this situation, the indigenous communities of Lamu County are unjustly considered squatters on land held by the government. In contrast the predominantly Gĩkũyũ Christian settler communities were allocated farmland with title deeds, while the indigenous populations remained land insecure."*[102] Interestingly, the map that Ustadh showed me is referred to once more, as Munib adds:

[102] Mohamed Athman and Hadija Ernst, "Supporting Diverse Communities to Respond to LAPSSET with One Voice" Namati, February 10, 2016, https://namati.org/news-stories/lamu-case-study/

"You know those places like Mpeketoni, Kiongwe..all farms of Lamu people originally..you see those places are so close from here, you just cross over from Kipungani, it's not far..now very few indigenous Lamu people have farms there now…the way of life there has already been wiped out."

I recall that Ustadh, whilst further explaining the map to me, had told me "*just the names alone indicate the Swahili origin"*-as his fingers traced over the map, he had pointed out: "*This is a Swahili village…Kiongwe, another one, Mokowe is here, Idiyo has also disappeared, and Mpeketoni was also a Swahili village, but it has been taken over."*

Suale speaks:

"*This history..what happened there in Mpeketoni..people of Lamu kind of accepted it..what was there to do…but the past is repeating itself. Now it is happening here in Lamu. Even closer to us. Because of LAPSSET, the land value has really increased."*

Kenya's ministry of industrialisation has identified Lamu as a site for a mega economic zone, where a number of sub-varieties – free port, industrial zone, special economic zone and resort city which will serve as terminals for the Lamu Port Southern Sudan Ethiopia Transport Corridor Project (LAPSSET), the largest infrastructure project undertaken by Kenya since its independence in 1963. It is estimated that by 2030, Lamu District's coastline will have been transformed into Kenya's main commercial marine hub.[103] According to SaveLamu, since the introduction of the project, the price of land has multiplied, which is viewed to have further escalated the situation, making the work to defend communities' land rights even harder.[104]

Sameer interjects:

"*People in Lamu now scramble for land documentation to make sure there is no doubt about ownership and the land cannot be taken by someone from outside Lamu, who may try to claim it. But you can make sure you have the documents for your land and someone might come in with that same documented claim..a fake one…, money can buy you anything in Kenya*

[103] Lindsay Bremner, "Folded ocean: The spatial transformation of the Indian Ocean world." *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 10, no. 1 (2014): 18-45.
[104] Mohamed Athman and Hadija Ernst, "Supporting Diverse Communities to Respond to LAPSSET with One Voice" Namati, February 10, 2016, https://namati.org/news-stories/lamu-case-study/

-including title deeds. If that gets taken to court..you can imagine who will win..it is about money and contacts.."

Under Kenya's new Constitution, former Government land is to be re-categorised as Public Land (under the trusteeship of the County Government) or Community Land under the National Land Commission- an entity specifically mandated to issue titles and investigate illegal or questionable land allocations. According to SaveLamu, "*This process has been stalled by the central government and there appears to be little political will to make it viable."*[105]Upon referencing this statement, Suale agrees:

Yes, now it is happening here, in Lamu itself. See the people of Shela[106]*? Sophie, you want to know about identity? They find themselves in an identity crisis-why? Because they have sold all their land, enticed by those middlemen who broker deals for Kenyan politicians and mainlanders with money and expats from abroad. Yes, Shela people have chosen to sell, but they are tempted by those large lump sum offers. They may lack legal counselling and awareness of what they are doing. You may receive your ten million shillings, but that money will disappear quickly and then what? You have no land, you have nothing to pass down to your family, your way of life shifts completely. We can call it "The Scramble for Shela"-land is leaving our hands."*

I am shown yet another map, this time on the individual's phone, on which every plot of land along Shela's seafront is marked out into neat parcels of land that has either already been sold, or is undergoing the process of being sold.

b) The Loss of Control over Lamu Space

The phrasing "*Coming to Lamu with bad attitudes*" keeps ringing in my head. I reflect on the choice of words. A week later, I spoke again with Munib individually. When I ask him to elaborate on this conceptualisation of "*bad attitudes*", it appears that a sense of threat does not only stem from anxieties over physical land ownership, but goes even deeper. What follows is a comparison of *wageni*[107] of the past and *wageni* of the present. I am told that it is primarily two aspects that have changed: The behaviour of newcomers, and the sheer number of them in contemporary times.

[105] Mohamed Athman and Hadija Ernst, "Supporting Diverse Communities to Respond to LAPSSET with One Voice" Namati, February 10, 2016, https://namati.org/news-stories/lamu-case-study/
[106] Shela is a town on Lamu island.
[107] foreigners/guests/newcomers

In fact, the influx of tourism is predicted to further increase. It has been stated that the tourism sector in Lamu County has grown from 50 percent to 85 percent from 2020 to 2022, despite issues of insecurity and Covid 19 challenges. In spite of existing anxieties amongst islanders, the County Integrated Development Plan 2023-2027 is clear in its aim to further this trend, which is highlighted in the phrases such as the want to strive for "the outcome of a vibrant tourism sector with increased earnings", looking into "untapped tourism potentials within the county" and the "conservation of unique cultural landscape and resources for the sake of the expansion of the tourism sector", and the "need to boost the tourism experience".[108]

This increase of tourism, which is predicted to further grow, is coupled with the increasing influx of mainland and foreign newcomers, particularly due to the increase in land value stemming from transnational development projects, such as the construction of the LAPSETT corridor. As stated by Mwenje, curator of the Lamu Fort Museum:" *Mega infrastructural developments earmarked for development within the precincts of the adjacent mainland coastline also pose a threat to the integrity of the old town*."[109] This threat is expressed amongst informants not solely in terms of the infringement on physical space, but is interconnected with the connotation of a subsequent influx of jobseekers. Another resident in her mid twenties, a young mother, Aisha, refers to these newcomers relocating to Lamu:

"*This massive influx of foreign and upcountry people.. our population is small..so just with the port coming into operation, more than 1000 new job opportunities will come in..these jobs will be given to upcountry people and foreigners…not Lamu people. It is already happening. Outsiders in numbers will be more than our own population of people, who are already here, who claim Lamu based on having been here, who have places of worship and graves here..have been here for long. They are estimating once Lamu Port will be fully operational..by 2030..the population will reach three million…that will be a new town entirely, a new way of life. So how are we supposed to maintain our existence, our traditions, values..yaani ways of life..?*

The perception seems to be that people from outside no longer are absorbed into existing ways of life, that there exists a loss of control of the public sphere by the waswahili majority on the island, which we must keep in mind holds a positionality of being a minority group within the nation-state. Mainland newcomers, Western expatriates and tourists, who are increasingly

[108] Council of Governors: Lamu County Integrated Development Plan 2023-2027, https://maarifa.cog.go.ke/sites/default/files/2024-06/LAMU%20CIDP-2023-2027.pdf

[109] Mohammed Ali Mwenje, and Salim Mohammed Bunu. "Case Study: Lamu Old Town." *Reshaping Urban Conservation: The Historic Urban Landscape Approach in Action* (2019): 313.

visiting or moving to Lamu, are viewed to no longer show sufficient respect towards hegemonic notions of how to appear and behave in the public sphere. For example, both mainland Christians from the Gĩkũyũ ethnicity and Western tourists are viewed as a threat to an Islamic lifestyle that informs notions of *heshima*,[110] feeding an anxiety that the majority "outsiders" increasingly control public space and the behaviours within it.

Indeed, I recall walking along the seafront of Old Town one evening, noticing that the stone benches open to the public, traditionally used by Muslim elders to hold their *barazas*[111], were being frequented by a mixed group of young people, men and women, loudly playing music on the usually quiet seafront and openly drinking alcohol in public, placing their feet on the benches, without removing their shoes- the acquaintances I am walking with respond to the scene with disapproving tutting. The main point of disapproval seems to be what is perceived as the blatant "disrespect" of rules viewed to govern the public sphere- physically symbolised by the public stone benches- upon which the consumption of alcoholic beverages by men and women and the non-removal of shoes would not have occurred in the past.

Similarly, on a walk through Shela[112], a white female tourist sporting a neon yellow bikini, is engrossed in one of the placards hanging all over the island, for all intents and purposes studying the humbly formulated request to kindly not walk around in the nude and display a certain level of modesty in terms of dressing. After a few minutes, she adjusts the woven *kikapu*[113] basket on her arm, disapprovingly shaking her head, muttering about her rights as a woman, and proceeds to march into Shela town, seemingly unwilling to be compromised in her white feminist stance. Upon repeating this observation, Munib tells me:

"My father, when he was younger, maybe thirty years ago- once encountered a tourist who was immodestly dressed, walking around Lamu, yaani in the public sphere. My father rushed home to fetch her a kikoi cloth, and gifted it to her, politely explaining to her…not to shame her, but to let her know, to inform her..yaani she did not know..that we love visitors in Lamu, but that we appreciate being respected..it's good to respect the public space..yaani to have heshima...respect. She used the kikoi[114] *and went to tell her other friends..they went and bought more kikois..yaani they understood. Now..there are just so many..so many tourists..so many newcomers."*

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[110] respectability.
[111] Meetings for discussions.
[112] A town on Lamu island.
[113] Woven handbasket.
[114] A traditional rectangle of woven cloth, mostly worn by coastal men but multifunctional in its usage.

According to Hillewaert, notions of morality amongst waswahili Lamu islanders in particular are viewed as inherently interconnected with notions of Lamu identity. She perceives that Lamu residents distinguish themselves as being more respectable than mainland and Euro-American newcomers.[115] Their growing presence appears to create anxiety over a loss of control of social space, indeed a loss of *heshima* followed by an enabling of challenging and redefining claims to moral personhood and status.

Negotiations over claims to space seem to be taking place particularly in the adjacent, newer neighbourhoods around Old Town. For example, the construction of new bars in these areas are a point of contention for some. As Mwenje states: "*Lamu Town has experienced an inordinate population increase resulting from an influx of immigrant job seekers. The ensuing high demand for housing has resulted in the development of informal settlements around the old town, which now impacts negatively on the character and attributes of the town.*"[116] Indeed, a common sentiment across informants was the perception that these newer neighbourhoods lack *heshima*.

While many informants connect this loss of *heshima* with the influx of newcomers who maintain their "disrespectful" ways and are viewed by some to corrupt the local youth with their behaviour, some informants placed this perceived trend within attitudes towards education. Sameer spoke to me about the drug abuse that is rampant in Lamu, framing drug abuse as one of the main factors that leads to identity loss on an intergenerational scale. He states that drug abuse is commonly followed by a descent into poverty and is an intergenerational curse, as parents who use drugs may subsequently fail to raise their children well and "ensure that they have a knowledge of themselves". He points to Wiyoni[117], saying:

"In areas such as these, parents can chew miraa the whole night, in the morning they sleep, so they don't send children to school. So many children no longer go to madrassa,[118] a place to build identity. Lamu Old Town is different, children here are sent to madrasa and it shows: It is quiet at night, people still respect each other..but those other places.. There is noise, no respect for neighbours..children grow up without respect.

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[115] Sarah Hillewaert, "Identity and belonging on the contemporary Swahili coast: the case of Lamu." In *The Swahili World* (London: Routledge, 2017) 604.

[116] Mwenje, "Case Study: Lamu" 314.

[117] One of the newer neighbourhoods adjacent to Lamu Old Town, frequently equated with a perception of moral decay.

[118] concerned with moral training, the madrasa promotes the spirit of Islam. Structural Muslim educational institutions or schools that offer Islamic and other subjects, including primary and secondary level education.

c) The Marginalisation of Knowledge

Across interviews, a recurrent theme was the notion that knowledge is the key to developing a "strong identity". Specifically, access to the knowledge system that is taught in *madrasa* schools was frequently mentioned as constituting the precursor to "having good behaviour" and *heshima,* defining what Lamu identity should look like, according to many informants. Maheer too mentions the value of sending your child to secular school and *madrasa*, as both constitute safe spaces for the child:

"*If there is structure (for the child), the passing down of ideas of home, belonging, good values- by going to madrasa, these problems (loss of heshima) might not come. Let's say if I'm your son..I wake up with you, nimeamka with you..you arrange my meal you make sure nimeenda I go to school, nikiingia once I enter school there is no way I can do anything bad, it's a safe space and when I come out I go directly to home and then you make sure I go to madrasa it's also safe, the home is safe, at eight after madrasa you come home, there is no way you can lose your way."*

Upon asking him how he intends to raise his son, he says:

"I want him to grow with a strong character, a strong identity, yes I want him to be free but I correct him when he does wrong and make sure he goes to madrasa."

Like Sameer, he also quotes rampant drug abuse as a factor hindering the attendance of *madrasa.* In addition to the impact of drug use, various parents across that I spoke to voiced concern over how the current Kenyan Secular Education System is structured, viewed by some as pushing other sets of knowledge-both the knowledge taught in *madrasa* schools and local knowledge that is passed down by means of oral storytelling- to the margins, leading to collective identity loss within the local community as a unit.

Ustadh Mau has already made us aware of hegemonic narratives that wipe out local history within school books used in secular education today. Other informants added that in their experience, the history of Kenya leading up to independence is written through the lens of the Gĩkũyũ lead MauMau rebellion- mentions of the freedom fighter Mekatilili wa Menza[119] for example- a Giriama coastal woman- are omitted entirely. It is these mentions that pertain to

[119] Celia Nyamweru, "Mekatilili, Giriama hero." *Kenya Past and Present* 42 (2015): 20-28.

knowledge production within the country that find reflection in a conversation with Naz, who finished her secondary education in 2018.

Naz is sitting on a balcony, her body posture upright, a straightforward list of four points and pen in hand, her Palestine bracelet coming into view once more. I had asked her what came to mind when reflecting back on her experiences as a student within the Kenyan secular school system, in terms of how it impacts identity construction. Her answers are clear and straight to the point, she informs me of both tangible and intangible aspects that shaped her daily life at school and indicate the continuous existence of colonial structures maintained under the Kenyan government in place, that drive to the margins other sets of knowledge.

“First, I must mention publishers. When we look into publishers in this context, we are looking into who publishes school books for Kenyan students and teachers. So we are seeing who participates in the decision making of what is printed in school books- knowledge for Kenyan teachers to teach and knowledge for Kenyan youth to absorb. The answer to the question of “who” is a simple one- because all my school books were published by one publishing house, namely Macmillan Publishers- a British publishing house based in London. It's surprising given how young I am, the education I encountered, years after colonisation…yaani you'd expect to have African..or even local, coastal publishers.”

She refers to the fact that Kenyan publishers exist, that the structure in place must be changed to allow for the production of knowledge to be in the hands of those who consume it, commencing on a national level. Let us continue with Naz’s list. Moving onto her second point, she reflects on the role of language use in education.

“Every subject is taught in English, except the Kiswahili classes. The ex-colonial language is alive and kicking. Growing up in a community where we are supposed to speak our mother tongue..but then have an education system in English…this continues to impact our social life in Kenya, our beliefs about the hierarchy of languages…Yes, to be honest, I was confused. I was taught that one language is better than the other.”

In his work, the Gĩkũyũ Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o critically reflects on language use in both the classroom setting and in literature. He speaks of the psychological violence of the classroom that came with the advent of colonial education, stating “the language of my

education was no longer the language of my culture."[120] To him, the choice of language marks a cornerstone for people's definition of self in relation to the natural and social environment and the rejection of a colonial language thus marks both an act of decolonising the mind and a subjective reclamation of the African self and collective vis-a-vis the deeply entrenched experiences of alienation caused by the bastardisation of African cultures in the colonial context The continuous domination of the English language within Kenyan education is viewed to constitute a domination of the mental universe of peoples. By making the coloniser's language the language of education, a distortion of African consciousness takes place, as reality is obscured and a certain perception of reality is forced. [121]

Naz refers to Tanzania:

"KiSwahili is the language of instruction in schools there..In Kenya, only the subject KiSwahili is taught in KiSwahili..the rest in English..and then there is also the matter of our dialects of course..and then add the publishers being English..we need change. Our government is continuing this imitation of the British, the ones who colonised us."

Reflecting wa Thion'go, we recall Ustadh Mau's emphasis on the need to also safeguard vernacular languages and dialects as a marker of identity expression. This idea is substantiated when we return to our discussion with Ustadh Mau, the mention of speaking and writing in the KiAmu dialect with an equation of self is noteworthy. Such a framing of the KiAmu dialect as a strong identity marker, and the commitment to actively writing and publishing poetry in the dialect, in Arabic script, must be placed within the wider linguistic history of the country.

Standard KiSwahili was imposed nationally after independence in 1963, following the colonially enforced standardisation of KiSwahili, which entailed the shift from Arabic to Roman script and removal of phonological features that index the Arabic influence on the language, to make the language more "African[122]- we witness political acts with an embedded framing that "Arab", which is subsequently equated with a Muslim identity, is nor reconcilable with a claim to African -and thus Kenyan identity- a tension field informed by Islamophobic connotations that can still be felt within the majority Christian Kenyan nation today. I myself often received remarks from both non-locals and locals that my mostly Standard KiSwahili language skills

[120] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind : the Politics of Language in African Literature*. (London : Portsmouth, 1986.), 131.
[121] wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 137.
[122] Sarah Hillewaert, "Writing with an accent: Orthographic practice, emblems, and traces on Facebook." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2015): 195-214.

sound “proper” and that I should be careful to not let local dialects, such as KiAmu or KiBajuni “corrupt my pure KiSwahili”.

Thus, Ustadh Mau’s commitment to KiAmu, in a political setting in which the KiAmu dialect and its people hegemonically are stigmatised as “backward” within the nation, is significant- constituting perhaps an act of subjective reclamation. We witness an interweaving of the dialect with a notion of self, indexing indeed a construction of identity that nods towards being embedded within the local situatedness of Lamu, that is simultaneously paired with an outlook onto and experience with the wider Kenyan nation state. We thus identify a testament to the intertwinedness of national politics and localised identity construction. Policy making, here in the context of state-initiated language policies, which act to consolidate hegemonic portrayals of identity groups within a multilingual nation, thus produces a reactionary process of self-identification which is externalised by the act of reclaiming the written word- in Arabic script, and in KiAmu- an active drawing on the local vis-a-vis the national, the state. However, it is not only the language medium that is commented upon, Naz points out that the main issue pertains to the very content that is taught within secular education. Naz moves onto the third point on her list:

“Let me talk about storytelling. When raising me, my Dad tried to make sure that he would pass on the stories that he was told every day growing up. But this common form of passing on knowledge of values and history via means of storytelling, which transcends across different cultures in Kenya, finds no place of expression in the Kenyan education system. There are no lessons on culture that expand on the telling of traditional stories and knowledges..yaani..we need cultural lessons.”

I ask her to elaborate. She touches upon her perception of identity loss due to the striving towards “Westernisation”.

“When I talk of culture classes, I mean the traditions we have grown up with..it would be best to bring in the instance of my Dad each night telling me stories..we would sit and eat and tell stories passed on to him by his forefathers..I think this applies to the whole of Africa as a traditional, main means of passing on information and knowledge..this should be reflected in school..that’s maybe our fastest way of grasping knowledge..knowing about local history, our values. I think I would have schools in different regions in the country have traditional lessons in their curriculum, that give time to study your culture, beliefs, background..these are dying, it's all

dying..everyone struggles..everyone is just competing about who knows more English, who knows more stuff about the West, who lives a more Western style life, whose apartment looks more Western.."

The relegation of non-Eurocentric means of knowledge transmission that encompass sets of knowledge to the home setting is evident. However, Naz's next point highlights how attempts to teach culture and other knowledge forms outside of the school setting are further pushed to the margins due to the imposition of time constraints. She proceeds to her fourth point.

"I went to school six days a week, with long hours spent in the classroom every day. Most of my time was consumed by class hours. This posed an obstacle to attending madrasa school to learn about my own religion. My parents wanted me to go to madrasa to receive other forms of knowledge rooted in my religion, but skipping classes on Saturdays often meant being failed by teachers or receiving some kind of punishment at school. The school teachers would sometimes schedule the exams on Saturdays..you can't miss exams..and fail..so how can you go to madrasa? Such time scheduling..these strict measures..curb madrasa or church going students from going, of course. And time for stories at home..Yaani my Dad made time but it was hard..after a long day at school, and homework"

Naz expands on this, explaining that Kenyan parents are confronted with the struggle of wanting to pass on specific sets of knowledge to their children, such as religious education and through means of oral storytelling, but making time for this comes with the risk of the child failing at school, affecting their future opportunities.

"I think the government after independence felt like we have to catch up..catch up with other countries..This belief exists that sees going to madrasa as backward..yaani..The government mostly ignored the education we can gain from temples churches, madrasa..In those places you are encouraged to look for knowledge openly..not just restrict minds to the Quran, yaani religious studies..We used to have maths and science classes in madrasa too, but taught in Arabic and KiSwahili..Now parents face this pressure to choose..Now there is this mentality..secular education is more important..your child will have job security..The idea is that secular school is the only knowledge you need…is so closed minded, you are not encouraged to expand on other subjects..other knowledge..this is difficult for parents to navigate..For parents it is either you pick secular education in which you are promised a prosperous life in the

future and drop your traditions..or stick with traditions and end up in poverty, with the stigma that your child is uneducated. I do strongly believe, the people need moral values more than the seriousness from school..For our elders..it was about gaining wisdom from our forefathers in the traditional systems that fit with our daily life..our culture…Unfortunately..that is getting lost..now we are stuck with let us chase the riches through education."

She smiles and adds:

"I myself dropped out of madrasa for these reasons. Later on I rejoined to complete my madrasa..I did graduate, Alhamdulillah..Wish I had not stopped in the first place. In madrasa we would have time to spend with other kids..visit orphanages..interact with all groups in society…Madrasa felt more reflective of daily life..I really felt that as a child..I did already have these feelings long ago..but I lacked the words to express..but there was nothing I could do about it at the time."

5.2 Analysis

In the previous chapter, it was concluded that the claiming of Lamu as a place is interconnected with the idea of possessing an intimate knowledge of the island's physicality. Whilst mobility is the norm for many islanders, this interconnectivity is further mirrored perhaps in the expressed desire to "keep one foot in Lamu" and own property and land on the island. We witness a perception of historic repetition amongst informers within the collective experience of land loss- which infringes on the desire to own tangible land on the island- and is again noted to be interconnected with notions of self tied into the desire for control over the physicality of space. However, not only is the weakening grip of residents on Lamu land vis-a-vis perceived "outsiders" framed as a matter of history repeating itself (we recall the Mpeketoni case study), but viewed as a further closing in of exteriority into the island itself, thus as an occurrence of an acceleration of an already known phenomenon, informing a notion of threat to the very existence of self within physical space.

Furthermore, this notion of the closing in of threat is however not just expressed within the sphere of tangibility, but is paralleled within the more intangible notion of space. In fact, a sense of loss is also perceived in terms of feeling unable to claim Lamu space by holding the ability to maintain hegemonic norms of perceived morality as a vector of identity (*heshima)*, and a grappling with the perceived prediction of becoming a minority group, not only within the nation-state, but now within Lamu itself was vividly described. Indeed, we see a tension field

emerge, between two poles: between the desire to express hospitality (viewed as a vector of identity) yet maintain control of normative respectability within social space (viewed as a vector of identity). Thus, on the one hand, we see a tying together of hospitality, openness towards newcomers, a history of diverse migration and co-existence into a notion of self. On the other hand, such openness assumes a certain level of absorption into pre-existing hegemonic notions about respectability, and should not come at the cost of a decaying of hegemonic social norms that inform expectations about conduct of the individual within the public space.

Finally, the anxiety of further loss of *heshima* and alternative sets of knowledge that inform identity is also connected by many informants to the national structure of the Kenyan education system, that is viewed to create yet another tension field, between two poles: Attending secular education is normatively underpinned by a notion of success, of "being educated", not attending is viewed to strongly bar future job opportunities, whilst attending *madrasa* and receiving knowledge via means of oral storytelling is posited as less valuable nationally, yet in the locality of Lamu is perceived as driving loss of locally specific and religious knowledge.

While a picture was painted that posits fluid, hybrid identity construction amongst informants, switching in-between linguistic codes and identity labels as opposed to a singular, rigid drawing on identity-as-ethnicity, a collective perception of infringement on the ability to maintain notions of identity was expressed and directly interwoven into reflections on identity. The existing internal diversity, in terms of ancestry, dialects and the local cosmopolitan outlook that seems to be retained, is viewed to be in the process of drastic inflation. While the straddling of local and non-local appears facilitated through the normalcy of mobility, there now exists a perceived increase in penetration of the national and international into Lamu space, projected onto peoples and policies coming to the island in contemporary times.

It is noteworthy that the collective experiences encompassed in the keyword "threat" seem to be mapped out onto a sense of affiliation expressed towards Turkish migrant groups in Germany and Palestinians vis-a-vis the state of Israel- experiencing the nation state from a positionality of existing as a Muslim minority, as a group of people experiencing marginalisation by the state, citing experiences of Islamophobia, dispossession of land, disappearance of social norms, of knowledge, erasure of local history, and effects of certain language policies. It thus appears that it is the recognition of and relation to experiences of marginalisation that form a point of translocal identity affiliation that transcends intergenerationality, as can be seen in the case of Ustadh and Naz. Thus, we identify a third layer, an awareness of local situatedness not only vis-a-vis the national level of statehood, experienced through policy making, but a level of

translocal affiliation that exceeds the national level- individually expressed through poems, social media posts, verbal mentions, flags and bracelets.

Chapter 6: Findings: “Agency”

Lamu Old Town at Night. (*Photo taken by Charlotte Bruns Knight, 2024*)

6.1 Observations and Discussions

While perceptions of threat have been located as informing notions of self amongst many Lamu islanders, this chapter places a focus on how individuals choose to navigate perceptions of identity loss-indexing a drawing on an identity concept informed by an awareness of local situatedness. Lamu islanders can by no means be framed as static, helpless victims in the face of national and international externalities shaping experiences on the island. Rather, what comes to the forefront is the awareness of Lamu's island positionality within the world, which takes on an image of adaptability and a striving for a balance between permanence- a desire to retain vectors of self- and be accepting of change- the embracing of external influences.

I bump into Suale along the seafront. He invites me into his restaurant for a cup of tea. As we sit down he takes off his *kofia*, which he has padded on the inside with tissue paper. In response to my puzzled look, he laughs and explains to me that sweat can cause discoloration of the fabric, hence the tissue padding for protection, to avoid the forehead from touching the *kofia*. "*My grandfather passed this kofia down to me so..I have to take good care of it*". We fall into our usual dynamic of discussion, I pose a question and receive an answer embedded within a lengthy elaboration. Suale speaks of the inevitability of change.

"The first step, before we go into preserving our own customs, our own local identity, it is to accept the change..for example right now, you cannot identify anymore as an indigenous person from Lamu person through their kofia…everyone is wearing a Lamu style kofia now, it is open to any Muslim, from anywhere…but back then you would see someone wearing a specific type of kofia, you would know they are from Lamu, you would see a different kofia and yaani…you would know this person is from Zanzibar…it acted as an identity marker, but with time, fashion exposure and availability of things from different cultures..it has led to.. people embracing, yaani dress codes from other cultures..In Lamu itself there have been so many cultures that have been lost with time…that is part of our history. A recent example…the use of boats..the dhows came from Mozambique but we have blended the Mozambique style with a Lamu touch and now have great boats..which have become a part of Lamu identity today now..so we accept that things change..ideas about what is identity changes. In the next 50 years, our dhows will be in the books about Lamu's past...we need to teach the new generation about the importance of accepting new cultures, changes, but still also retaining yourself…balance..most of us, we kind of want to live in the "current" world, the Western world,

we end up despising our own, hating our own culture..we need to love our own while still embracing other cultures..”

This is a sentiment I have heard expressed by many informants, I recall a previous discussion with Faisal who had told me:

“Back in the day, you could never see an old person wearing trousers..you would see a kikoi or kanzu..but with time it has been embraced, been accepted..but yaani this does not mean we threw away kikois, kanzu…did not stop loving them, they are still our comfort zone for our men here, when we want to feel formal, need to feel cultural, we will put them on..not a Western suit maybe. As much as we need to embrace, we also need to retain..Lamu as one of the most cultural towns, rich in history, the culture is so vast…apart from us embracing other cultures, there are now so many people outside who are embracing Lamu culture, it's not just a one way thing..we exist in the world, the world visits us too.”

Suale continues, adding another layer connoting the need for action to achieve said balance.

“I think we need to have a cultural centre in Lamu where things are taught.. Not just where you come and see functions or events..Right now if someone comes to Lamu just for two weeks and there are no any events then they will not see the stick dance[123], the donkey races..just the beach. But if we had a cultural centre where we have events every once in a week..for the people to be taught..not just for the tourists there are even so many people from Lamu who do not know how to dance the stick dance, many people think its violent but its a dance it's supposed to be entertaining for participants and spectators..We need to have a centre where the practices, the ways of life are taught every day..Also for tourist..they can spend two hours..not just to go and see but to live it learn it..I believe we can maintain and share our identity by understanding that it comes from the lived experience..culture is lived. Once you live something you experience it you know how it feels and then you can be informed and can either accept it or not..Our identity is not just old artefacts collecting dust...or buildings..UNESCO heritage status is not enough..just maintaining these buildings in Old Town..imagine you first come to Lamu, you receive a leso[124], maybe you're taught to paint henna, maybe..you learn to cook a few traditional dishes..little glimpses..you learn about different utensils…do it practically

[123] Goma dance, which involves men standing with walking canes and dancing to rhythmic drum beatings. For more detail see: Rebecca Gearhart, "Ngoma memories: how ritual music and dance shaped the northern Kenya coast." *African Studies Review* 48, no. 3 (2005): 21-47.

[124] A common attire among East African women, made of waxed cotton.

not just sit and told this is this and this and this…but see how objects are functional, see how they operates ..I believe we learn more when we do things..rather than when we just see or hear..you reach deeper level of understanding. So yes those are one of the things we need to do ..to make sure our identity is maintained and accepted and then embraced by other people but also our own people, our youth."

An elderly mswahili woman, Saida, who uses the terms identity and culture interchangeably, emphasises to me the conceptualisation of identity construction and preservation as constituting an act of *doing*, an act of *making*:

"Yes we see identity loss..Most now want to follow the Western culture, this leads to identity loss..this comes with not going to madrassa..but also..women especially are carriers of our cultural identity, as the main caregivers in the home..Women need to actively be trained to stick to their culture..practise good parenting, strong faith.. Many people now experience identity loss because there is no balance, they do not maintain..themselves.. They forget the value of their own culture and prioritise the imitation of other cultures..yes we must do better as a society to teach our values but I think..talking about cultural identity is not enough…It needs to actively be practised..only then can you own your identity truthfully..Cultural identity is a matter of daily living..we can compare it to learning how to swim..Yes, cultural identity is like swimming: If you are taught how to swim only through words, you will think you know how to do it, but in reality you won't fully come to own the ability to swim. You have to get in the water and practise it, do it…Yes, cultural identity is preserved through daily living! It must be practised, learning by participating!

She provides an example of practised identity in the home setting, referring to the holding of Tarawih prayers[125] at night during Ramadan, which is structured as a group prayer, which children learn by joining in and actively participating. I am promptly invited to attend this prayer in her own home, so "I learn it by doing it". In fact, the idea of identity being best maintained by the act of living it consciously is voiced strongly across informants. The desire seems to be not for museums with static exhibits, but rather for the construction of a cultural centre, that mirrors the conceptualisation of the identity in Lamu as a matter of daily living. Informants identified the need to safeguard not just the material manifestations, such as cultural artefacts and

[125] Sunnah prayers involve reading long portions of the Quran, and performing up to 20 rakahs (cycles of prostrations required in Islamic prayer), performed only in the Islamic month of Ramadan.

architectural structures in place- but rather, Lamu's way of life, which includes its extensive repertoire of performed oral poetry, cuisine, local dialect KiAmu and daily customs, such as locally specific greetings, the stick dance, henna painting, codes of dress and other extensive social norms, mentioned by informants. In order to ensure the passing on of cultural identity to new generations and facilitate the sharing of ways of life with foreigners on the island, the opening of a cultural centre was proposed.

Conclusively, the majority of informants expressed that factors perceived to cause identity loss should be framed and dealt with as a societal issue to allow for a variety of perspectives shaped by occupation, age and gender to be heard. Providing space for different types of events within the construction of a cultural centre was viewed as an idea to help stimulate discussions about factors perceived to cause the erosion of communal identity and to facilitate fruitful solution-oriented dialogue to generate the identification of preservation initiatives. These would be community based, bottom-up approaches that mirror the existing needs of residents in the pursuit of safeguarding Lamu's way of life. It was believed that such community dialogue holds high potential for enhancing local empowerment vis-a-vis external preservation initiatives that focus primarily on the maintenance of architectural manifestations of culture, as seen within the UNESCO heritage framework. Furthermore, most informants portrayed identity to be fluid and ever changing, characterising identity as something that must follow both a balance of preserving certain traditions and a simultaneous embracing of change brought by the inevitable engagement with external cultural influences. Various informants expressed there to be a necessity to bring together peoples across age groups to facilitate intergenerational dialogue that may thematise the adaptability demonstrated by the youth, which is needed as Lamu exists in a globalised world-, and the extensive knowledge of local history and ways of life championed by elders in the community- here Ustadh Mau and his writing of Ajami poetry, written in KiAmu in Arabic script, and efforts to create awareness of local experiences vis-a-vis the state was frequently referenced as a prime example of an individual who should be consulted more. This again mirrors the perception of threat on an intergenerational scale.

6.2 Analysis

It is evident that informants in Lamu viewed identity as needing to be kept alive by taking on an active approach towards it. Interestingly, upon mentioning The UNESCO Heritage status of Old Town in Lamu, I was mostly met with shrugs and sentiments following a more inclusive conceptualisation of heritage, with identity-as-heritage argued to encompass not only the

external, tangible forms. Rather, we witness a more open conceptualisation of identity, as it was recognised by informants that the sole focus on the material manifestations of heritage that are frequently placed at the forefront in discussions about heritage preservation fails to encompass the more intangible aspects of identity expressions- a notion of identity as *lived*.

Furthermore, identity was not viewed as existing within a vacuum of stacicity, as fixed through time. Indeed, we established in the previous chapter that informants across age groups held a high level of awareness of political, economic and religious national structures that impact life in Lamu. It is the collective perception of threat that seems to feed the conceptualisation of needing to actively construct identity by living it in daily life, finding a balance between accepting change, but doing so not at the expense of total identity loss. In fact, the idea of taking action rather than viewing existing ideas about identity as given, as static, mirrors the conceptualisation of identity as being located within heritage-*making*, as put forward by the Dutch anthropologist Witte, who explores the intersection of race and the dynamics of heritage and belonging in the context of 'African heritage' initiatives led by young Afro-Dutch people of Caribbean and Ghanaian descent.[126]

Here, the point of overlap and subsequent possibility for application to the Lamu context lies in the encompassed aspect of reflecting on existence of self as well as navigating presumed negative, cultural differences projected onto the coast and collective experiences of intersectional marginalisation, the quest for identity becoming an overt and often highly reflexive effort at self-definition and self-realisation, at both individual and collective levels. Witte, similarly to Lamu informants, rejects the idea that “roots” and “heritage” as a foundation for identity are innate and unchanging aspects, but instead presents them as projects, an enterprise of self-construction and the formation of a collective identity as an *act*. Identity is thus presented as a construct subject to ongoing processes of reinvention in specific social and political contexts. We can thus place this heritage-*making* concept in the context of minority groups existing in wider society, characterising heritage-*making* as a dynamic process of negotiation for the purpose of self-identification, arising from a questioning of belonging that is shaped by socio-political forces as becomes apparent in the Lamu setting. It appears that heritage-making here is construed as holding a certain level of fluidity impacted by material realities. We thus may draw on this conceptualisation, in our focus on perceptions of identity, using the term *identity-making* to connote agency and reflexiveness in reaction to a consciousness of Lamu’s positionality within the nation-state and wider world.

[126] Marleen Witte, "Black citizenship, Afropolitan critiques: vernacular heritage‐making and the negotiation of race in the Netherlands." *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* 27, no. 4 (2019): 670.

However, this term identity-making is perhaps in need of expansion as a concept to encapsulate this analysis, attempting a circling back to Chapter 4. as, in the Lamu setting, the act of making identity for the purpose of permanent retention of self vis-a-vis externalities is coupled with a concept of openness towards influences from outside as an accepted reality. In fact, informants did not call for a closing off of the island vis-a-vis foreigners and mainland Kenyans. Rather, the call for action follows a straddling of differences once more, the idea being that Lamu must find a balance of permanence and change-a straddling of both- and does not only hold a positionality of absorption of externalities, but interacts with the world, and gives back to the world.

Indeed, we return to an idea of hybridity, the efficient drawing on a variety of codes, putting forward an extended conceptualisation, namely *hybrid identity-making*: We subsequently may posit Lamu island as a "third space"- a concept that is interwoven with that of hybridity- According to Bhaba, the third space is conceived as a liminal, in-between space where the established hegemonic and normalising practices, such as the imposition of Standard KiSwahili as the norm, the declared superior, are challenged, re-articulated, and negotiated-[127] a space that is fluid, shifting, and political, informed by the normalcy of mobility, following an underpinned local cosmopolitan outlook, straddling local, national and international repertoires that feed imaginaries of identity. We witness a desire neither to isolate nor to dissolve- but an inflation of straddling differences. This reflects once more in the ability to switch between linguistic codes, and the drawing on different clothing codes, the combination of jeans under *buibuis* paired with a Palestine bracelet, switching between kanzus and shirts- a claiming of local and translocal expressions -not at the expense of one another- constituting thus a resistance to polarisation, binaries, labels, and unitary identities through acts of hybridity- imaginaries for identity drawing on the local, national and transnational, embracing but retaining.

As perhaps illustrated so well in the case of Naz, we witness a switching between locations and different dialects and slangs, paralleled by a more physical embodiment that follows a switching in between-and mixing of codes: namely through the means of fashion. Whilst in Lamu and Mombasa Old Town, she prefers to wear a *buibiu*, layered over jeans, or *deras*[128]*,* on Pate island she will step outside the house in dresses matched with hijabs and sandals, in Nairobi she will pair jeans with blouses and sneakers. Irrespective of location, the black, white, red and green beads that make up her bracelet, arranged to weave a Palestinian flag, is a daily item of wear. We recall Lamu as being described to me in her words as an

[127] Homi K. Bhabha, "Culture's in between." In *Multicultural states* (London: Routledge, 2013): 29-36.
[128] Thin, loose cotton dress.

entirely unique place, that makes one feel a connection as a young person to the past- one's walking, sometimes in sneakers and sometimes in slippers, in jeans, in *buibui*, through a town marked by its ancient architecture, while holding an iphone- something truly special.

Conclusion

Dhow Sail. (*Photo taken by Charlotte Bruns Knight, 2024*)

7. Conclusion

This thesis paper has acted as a canvas for conversation- a dialogical weaving of experiences, observations and knowledge, culminating in a descriptive exploration of self-portraits of people in motion, indeed a placing at the forefront perceptions of identity, of self, amongst Lamu residents. The aim was to apply a bottom-up approach, to ensure a colouring in of the identity concept by perspectives held by Lamu islanders. In pursuit of gaining an understanding of what informs notions of identity within the setting of Lamu island today, attempted by tying together observations, and discussions with informants, multiple strands of thought were identified as informing conceptualisations of identity.

First of all, we gained a sense that identity construction in Lamu does not follow a logic of given singularity, but rather follows a swimming through streams of multiplicity: As touched upon in the Literature Review, we indeed see a shattering of the conceptualisation of the singular identity, as put forward by Nyamnjoh- a logic that does in fact not follow parochial notions of identification that may bar the recognition of negotiability and the fluid straddling of difference. Rather, we encountered terminology that enables for an expression of differentiation, indexed by the ability across informants to switch between and claim multiple nuanced identity terms, dialects and slangs. Indeed, it was found that informants varied in their usage of labels: ethnically self-labelling with an attached sense of pride, rejecting such labels entirely, drawing on a variety of labels that index religion and ancestry, combining ethnic self-labelling with the broader identity bracket of “waswahili”, or not mentioning ethnicity in direct terms at all- a clear countering of the notion that across the board, a singular, rigid fixing of identity-within ethnicity as the baseline for self-identification processes in Lamu is the norm.

In fact, a unifying characteristic amongst residents of Lamu appeared to be the continuous engagement in a selective, fluid straddling of nuance- holding a knowledge of difference that connotes a subsequent claiming of place, coupled with the idea of claiming the island by “knowing” it in terms of physical space. The majority of informants elaborated quite cohesively on the felt connection to Lamu island in a more personal way, referring to a strong feeling of home on the island interlinked with the importance of land ownership on the island- the keeping of one foot in the place that takes note of one’s absence, which however was paired with the normalcy of mobility, across sea and land, to the mainland and other islands of the Archipelago, and the notion of return to Lamu- indexing a type of local cosmopolitan outlook within the region, a society where movement is the norm, a network of mobility that is structured around the notion of a homeland -Lamu island.

Secondly, identity was interlaced with an awareness of the local situatedness within the wider region, as collective experiences of marginalisation continue to be interconnected with the idea of self amongst informants. The notion of the closing in of threat is however not just expressed within the sphere of tangibility, but is paralleled within the more intangible notion of space. In fact, a sense of loss is also perceived in terms of feeling unable to claim Lamu space by holding the ability to maintain hegemonic norms of perceived morality as a vector of identity (*heshima)*, and a grappling with the perceived prediction of becoming a minority group, not only within the nation-state, but now within Lamu itself, was vividly described. The mainland- coastal divide as mentioned in the Literature Review continues to inform notions of identity, hardening identity-as-ethnicity thinking to an extent, as the perception is expressed that history is repeating itself, following a rhetoric of us vs them vis-a-vis upcountry groups understood through the fixed lens of ethnicity. However, it appears that this conceptualisation of a divide can be misleading, we do not witness an static, isolated existence on one side of the divide, but rather a perceived closing in of exteriority into the island itself, a drastic acceleration of an already known phenomenon, informing a notion of threat to the very existence of self within the remains of physical space.

Furthermore, while the mainland-coast divide as a lens to understand regional identity construction remains useful, as it illustrates the lived realities of marginalisation within the nation-state, this framework may come with the fallacy of barring the recognition of agency, hybridity and individuality from within. Indeed, in order to aim for narrative constructions from within Lamu, it must perhaps be acknowledged that the binary cannot account for the in-betweenness and fluidity in which identity construction takes place, and is too deterministic as a model. Existing within the postcolonial world, it seems that Lamu identity is perceived to be informed not fully by birth, nor fully shaped by choice- political realities inform constructions of self, we witness a strong interrelation of identity with politics, with experiences of state- but these are frequently grappled with through a hybrid straddling of local and translocal influences, through code-switching, through negotiation.

Thirdly, coupled with hybridity, informants showcased a high awareness of the balancing act of fusing permanence and change, portraying it as the very nature of identity construction, the very history of Lamu as it has always been, identity being framed as an enterprise of self-construction and the formation of an identity being an act that requires active *making*. The recognition that Lamu island in contemporary times is experiencing a lack of balance, experienced as a threat to identity, is translated into the recognition that there exists a need to counteract this imbalance within Lamu society, focusing on ways to ensure preservation of

existing, intangible vectors of identity through *doing, living, sharing* and *participating*, indexing a perception of identity not only through the lens of tangible heritage, but rather putting forward a multidisciplinary conceptualisation of identity, as following a daily, lived process of hybrid identity-making.

In conclusion, this thesis paper has aimed to produce knowledge about Lamu from within, attempting to facilitate a re-centering of islanders in discourse construction. Given the topicality of identity within the African context, permeating a vast variety of academic fields, as highlighted in the Literature Review, an investigation into identity construction from within the particularities of Lamu's local situatedness provides a new approach to the identity concept. Lamu as as-a-place-in-the-world, helps us to deconstruct binary thinking across different spheres of being- and exposes the ever changing murkiness, the multiplicity, the hybridity, the in-betweenness of identity, the instability of it- indeed the difficulty to render the identity concept into an analytical unit. However, this should not be cause for despair, nor for the abandonment of the concept. In fact, investigations into the specific positionalities of peoples, their realities, their identities- especially their very own conceptualisations of identity, forms the baseline for the deconstruction of hegemonic discourse construction about the *other,* opening a window into narratives of self, which is detrimental to enabling a wider range of contributions to larger debates about nation building and cultural preservation, as minority groups within postcolonial nations, shaped by the particularities of their positionalities, may offer new angles to approaching identity and subsequently generate new viewpoints.

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