



Seeing life through the eyes of Swahili children of Lamu, Kenya: A visual anthropology approach

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Résumé :

Cette recherche propose une première approche des enfants Swahili dans la ville de Lamu sur l'île de Lamu, au Kenya, à partir d'un aperçu des types d'activités qu'ils mènent et des aspects de la société Swahili qui les concernent plus directement. La culture des enfants Swahili est décrite dans une perspective anthropologique à partir de l'identification des croyances, des pratiques et des valeurs qui constituent la vie des enfants Swahili. L'article inclut des photographies que six jeunes Swahili ont prises et sélectionnées pour cette étude pendant l'été 2011, lesquelles donnent un aperçu personnel de la vie et des expériences des enfants. Les méthodes de recherche collaborative ont été particulièrement fructueuses pour encourager les jeunes à raconter leurs propres histoires en prenant appui sur les explications des photographies qu'ils avaient prises des gens, des endroits et des activités qui sont les plus importants pour eux.

Mots-clés : culture enfantine, anthropologie visuelle, Swahili, Kenya

Abstract :

This research offers a first look at Swahili children in Lamu town on Lamu Island, Kenya by providing an overview of the kinds of activities in which they engage and the aspects of Swahili society that are particularly focused on them. Swahili children's culture is characterized by identifying the beliefs, practices, and values that shape Swahili children's lives, from an anthropological perspective. The paper features photographic images that six Swahili youth produced and selected for this study during the summer of 2011, which provide personal insight into the children's lives and experiences. Collaborative research methods were especially designed to empower the youth to tell their own stories, promoted by explaining the photographs they took of the people, places, and activities that matter to them most.

Keywords : children's culture, visual anthropology

Introduction

This essay highlights the lives of six Swahili youth who live in Lamu, Kenya, with whom I worked during the summer of 2011¹. I gave each participant a digital camera to document his or her life over the course of a week. Their objective was to photograph the people, places and activities that are most important to them. After three one-on-one debriefing interviews with each of the children, in which we discussed the photographs and how they illustrate various aspects of their lives, we worked together to choose six images that best capture each child's unique experience. These images are the ones included in the section "Six Swahili Youth See Themselves", further below.

The Swahili children featured in this study inhabit the coastal strip of East Africa, and belong to a society that has cultivated a unique Islamic civilization from the merger of African, Arab, Persian, and Indian peoples and cultures. The children on whom this chapter focuses live in Lamu town on Lamu Island, the southernmost island in an archipelago located just off the northern coast of Kenya. Lamu is one of a handful of Swahili "stone towns" that have been continuously occupied for over 700 years, and as "the oldest and best-preserved Swahili settlement in East Africa retaining its traditional functions" was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2001 (UNESCO World Heritage List).

Lamu's past is flecked with all of the drama and intrigue one would expect of a place fought over for its well-protected harbor, abundance of fresh water, land suitable first for grazing by the archipelago's likely initial inhabitants and then for planting, and its status as a cosmopolitan urban center (Kusimba 1999). Like other thriving coastal city-states, Lamu enjoyed a "golden age" between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries due to its integration into the vibrant interregional market economy that fueled the trade with Indian Ocean merchants. The Swahili carved out a lucrative niche for themselves as intermediaries in the trade between Africans and foreigners by creating a civilization that welcomed and appealed to all types of visitors.

A focus on hospitality continues to fuel Lamu's tourist industry, though the instability of the market in recent decades has led to economic decline, pushing the majority of Lamu inhabitants into varying levels of impoverishment. Based on 2008/09 data for Kenya, the 2013 Human Development Report states that 19.8% of the Kenyan population suffers from severe poverty and 27.4% of Kenyans are vulnerable to poverty (UNDP, 2013, p. 160). In coastal Kenya, 69.7% of people live in poverty, about twice as many as those in the capital city of Nairobi (Julius & Bawane 2011), where over half the population live in slums (Homeless International). Unlike many communities in the developing world, Lamu's poor live among the wealthy; modest mud and wattle structures lie immediately next to extravagant stone townhouses. The benefit of this arrangement is that the lives of the rich and poor remain highly integrated and interdependent, providing some sense of security for those who continue to depend on wealthy families in century-old patron-client relationships. The downside is that the poor "blend in" to the Lamu landscape and the challenges of daily life become invisible in the patina of exoticism embellished for the sake of visitors. The images and stories that represent the children portrayed in this essay must be understood against this stark economic reality.

My first encounter with Lamu, the Swahili community, and its cultural complexities was in 1987, as an undergraduate exchange student. As part of our Swahili language immersion, each of us spent time every day in the home of a Swahili family so we could hear Swahili spoken in a natural setting and converse with native speakers. My tutor, Zainab, ran a busy household and often left me

alone with her youngest children and the dozens of young nieces and nephews who accompanied their mothers during morning visits to the house or at tea time. The children quickly taught me colloquialisms that expanded my *kiAmu* (the Lamu dialect) and enhanced my ability to engage in everyday conversation. Spending time with them gave me a sense of what life was like for Swahili children in Lamu in the late 1980s.

Over the past twenty-five years and during many visits to Lamu², I have observed Swahili children in a range of settings and have conducted interviews with children, their parents and teachers, to make sure my assumptions about what I thought I was seeing were accurate. The first part of the paper explains the collaborative research methods I designed to empower the youth to tell their own stories, prompted to do so by the photographs they took and shared with me. The second section provides an overview of the kinds of activities in which Swahili children in Lamu engage and the aspects of Swahili society that are particularly focused on children. I characterize Swahili children's culture by identifying the beliefs, practices, and values that shape Swahili children's lives, from an anthropological perspective. The fourth section of the paper features six vignettes based on the one-on-one interviews I conducted with each of the participants and the images they took of themselves during the research period. The final section of the paper examines the children's lives in a broader perspective.

A 4-Phased Visual Anthropology Approach

Phase 1: Participant-Selection & Consent: select potential participants based on recommendations by community adults; meet with each child's parent(s) individually to describe the research objectives, answer questions, obtain parental informed-consent; meet with each child and his/her parent(s) to go over parameters of camera use; obtain participant consent.

Phase 2: Learning to Use the Camera: meet with each participant individually to describe research objectives, ask participants to draw a map of Lamu town to use as a photo site guide, teach participants how to properly operate the camera.

Phase 3: Photo-Taking & Photo-Feedback Loop: each participant takes 20 images at a time; each meets individually with me to download images into my laptop database; each participant has a debriefing interview with me to explain the meaning of the images. Procedure is repeated three times over the course of one week.

Phase 4: Image Selection & Titling: meet with each participant individually to select six images that best represent each child's life; select a word that best characterizes the images and the child's overall experience.

Phase 1: Participant-Selection & Consent

Due to the personal nature of the research and the necessity to include children who would take the project seriously and carry out the research in a responsible manner, I consulted adults in the community with whom I have worked in the past and who could vouch for a particular child's character and maturity-level. It was critical to meet with a parent of each of the potential participants at the very beginning of the project and to ensure that s/he was fully aware of the research objectives and would be available to guide the child in decisions regarding when, where, and with whom to use the camera. It was also critical to ensure that a parent understood the

sensitive nature of the project and to reinforce the requirement that the child use the camera in a respectful way at all times³. Since cameras have been used inappropriately among the Swahili in the past and photographs of women are especially guarded, teaching the children to ask permission before taking photographs of adults was a priority.

My original goal was to select three girls and three boys between the ages of eight and twelve to participate in the study. Although I specified the age preference to my adult Swahili colleagues, the level of responsibility required of participants directed us to two thirteen-year-olds, three twelve-year-olds, and a ten year old. In addition to maturity-level, other criteria for participant selection were the children's location in Lamu town and their family's socio-economic level. In order to gain insight into the lives of children throughout Lamu town, children from five different neighborhoods were selected. To learn more about the impact poverty has on children's lives, children from families at the bottom of the local economic ladder and those whose families are not suffering as much economic hardship were selected. It is important to note that poverty in Lamu is relative; even "wealthy" Swahili families typically do not have savings to draw from when crises occur. Economic security is ultimately dependent upon the collective wealth of nuclear and extended family members, and their ability and willingness to provide financial assistance when needed. The vast majority of Lamu residents struggle to make ends meet on a day-to-day basis. Finding out how that existence impacts the lives of children was one of the questions this study aimed to answer.

After outlining the research to the parents of the participants and obtaining their consent, it was critical to make sure the children with whom I would be working were sincerely interested in the project. After learning that the primary goal of the research was to better understand their experiences from their perspective, and that the research was centered on taking photographs of the most meaningful aspects of their lives, each of the six children enthusiastically agreed to participate in the study.

During this initial meeting with each child and at least one parent, it was also essential to clearly articulate the parameters within which the camera would be used: when, where, and of whom photographs could be taken. For example, all except the parent of one participant (whose father was the school headmaster) forbade their child from bringing the camera to school, where it could easily become a source of distraction. Another rule that was explicitly expressed by parents was that the camera was not to be loaned out to friends or family members, but must stay in the possession of the child at all times. We agreed that it would be fine for the child to instruct his or her friends to take photographs of the participant as directed, and I reinforced the idea that all images were meant to represent the life of the participant alone.

When I was satisfied that everyone understood the study and what it would involve, and obtained consent from at least one parent of the child participant and the participant him/herself, I arranged a time for the participant to meet with me individually to learn how to use the camera.

Phase 2: Learning to Use the Camera

My preliminary investigation into Swahili childhood (2011) inspired me to develop a set of research methods based on visual auto-ethnography that allowed older Swahili children in Lamu to photograph the aspects of their lives that are most meaningful to them. Though the idea of putting cameras into the hands of ethnographic subjects was first developed in the 1970s by Sol Worth and John Adair (1972), this strategy had its rebirth as "photo-voice," a methodology developed

by Caroline Wang (University of Michigan) and Mary Ann Burris (SOAS) in 1992, and which has been used primarily in grassroots social justice-oriented public health and community development research ever since. Studies oriented around giving older children cameras have proliferated in recent years (Montserrat 2009; Trafi-Prats 2009; Jorgenson and Sullivan 2010; Johnson 2011; Johnson, Pfister, and Vindrola-Padros 2012), providing those of us who use visual media as a primary method of inquiry a plethora of models on which to draw.

As a starting place for the children to begin conceptualizing how they might use the camera to represent their lives, I asked them to draw a map of Lamu that included their favorite haunts, the homes of relatives and friends, and places where they frequently spent time such as school and *madrassa*. Finally, I asked each child to keep the map and use it as a guide to what to photograph.

Each child eagerly went about designing the map, some very precisely and others more abstractly, taking on average half an hour to complete it. The participants seemed to enjoy this aspect of the project very much. I believe a follow-up study that further explores map-making among Swahili children would be well received by the children and offer further insight into their lives. Several scholars (Ansell 2009; den Besten 2010; Hemming 2008; Jeffrey 2010) have developed intriguing methods that employ children's map-making that I am interested in tailoring for Lamu children in future research.

After discussing the map and how to use it for ideas on what to photograph, we went over how to operate the digital camera. Participants used Olympus T-10 model cameras, which have a 3 x optical zoom and take images that are 10 mega-pixels. The camera is powered by two AA batteries and has a stability feature that reduces the chance of taking blurry photos. Each child practiced turning on and off the camera, zooming in and out to get close-up and far-away shots, and erasing images. This last task became more important to participants when they learned that the camera only holds twenty images and that they would need to return to download the images to my laptop when the camera was full. During the tutorial, each child learned the importance of reviewing each image for quality and erasing those that were unwanted so that each of the twenty images they kept accurately captured important aspects of their lives in an aesthetically pleasing way (See Images 1-3).

Phase 3: Photo-Taking & Photo-Feedback Loop

Meeting with the children to download the images and review the photos that they took gave them an opportunity to tell me about their everyday experiences, and the joys and frustrations that punctuate their lives. As the children spoke about the images, I made note of which photos had the most power to evoke narratives. As Wendy Luttrell (2010) explains, "Unlike a chronology - 'I did this, then this, then that' - narratives communicate a point of view and aim to accomplish particular purposes - for example, to entertain, inform, impress or dispute" (225). In this case, the children used their photographs to help them tell me stories about who they were and what they cared about. I created a desktop folder for each child's images and gave each photograph a title to help me remember the details.

The photographs acted as prompts for personal narratives that revealed thoughts and feelings that would have been difficult for the children to express otherwise. As Swahili children are typically shy around adults, it would have taken much longer for the participants to warm up to me had they not had the images to focus on. With each interview, the children became better storytellers

and more detailed in their explanations of what the images meant to them. I refer to this phase of the research as a loop because our conversations about their images helped participants identify important aspects of their lives they had not yet documented, and gave them ideas of what to photograph next.

One of the most surprising aspects of the photo-feedback phase of the research was how quickly the children learned to take high-quality images with the cameras. I was anticipating that the first feedback session would entail revisiting some of the operating procedures, including keeping the camera stable and being attentive about good lighting. I discovered that the large LCD screen allowed the children to get a good look at their subjects in the frame, and the easy to use erase feature enabled them to erase low-quality images as they went. I had three cameras in circulation among the children until the very end of the project, when one of the children destroyed a camera by inadvertently submersing it in seawater. Except for that minor snafu and replacing the batteries in each camera a couple of times, the camera's easy operation and low cost (\$50 each) made it a perfect fit for children's use.

Phase 4: Image Selection

At the third and final interview, after each participant had downloaded his or her last round of images and told me about them, we reviewed all sixty images and I asked the child to select six that would make the best representatives of his or her life. To make this process easier, I prompted each child to select one image to represent an important person, one to represent an important place, and one to represent a thing or activity of importance. I then encouraged the child to select three other images that she or he believed to be essential for the collection. In every case, I admired how definitive the children were about their final selections and the concise way in which each was able to articulate the reason behind their decisions.

I developed the idea to title each child's photo-vignette with a phrase (e.g., "Life is hard,") after reading about Crivello, Camfield and Woodhead's (2009) multi-method research on children's wellbeing. I selected these titles based on how the children completed the phrase "life is..." when I asked them to do so, as well as on how often they used a particular word during our conversations. For example, Halma often referred to her life as "hard" (*magumu*), while Ali had difficulty completing the phrase with a single word, but frequently used the adjective "beautiful" (*nzuri*) to describe the subjects of his photographs.

Throughout the research, I was mindful of the power differential between the child participants and me with regard to my authority as an adult, my economic status as a foreigner, and my social status as a teacher. Luttrell (2010) warns adult researchers to be forthcoming about how they draw conclusions about their child subjects and whose voice is actually being presented. In this case, the children and I collaborated in selecting the group of images that serve to represent them in the section below. Would they have selected the same set for their parents, for their friends, or for themselves? It is safe to assume that they would not have. As Luttrell's research suggests, children tell different stories about the photographs they take depending upon the audience, and I assume my various positions as an authority figure and an outsider had an impact on the children's selection of images, though the level and nature of my influence probably varied by child. After the novelty of the camera wore off a bit, and the children became more familiar with the methods of the project (e.g., image-taking, downloading, debriefing, selection), they were more mindful of taking images that accurately represented them rather than taking photos just for fun or to impress their

friends, neighbors, and relatives.

The Life of Swahili Babies

The images that illustrate the following sections, which provide an anthropological overview of Swahili childhood, are photographs that I have taken over the past two and a half decades of conducting research in Lamu. Though I have turned my attention to children's culture in particular only recently, first in my study of children's expressive art (a chapter in *The Swahili Art of Life*, forthcoming), then in my initial examination of Swahili children's lives (2011), and now in the study presented here, Swahili ritual activities that center around children have been an ongoing interest of mine, and the following sections are based on interviews I have conducted with Swahili men and women from Lamu on these rituals.

An infant brought into the world as a member of Swahili society has a blissful beginning. As it is true in Islamic societies around the world, mothers and new babies enjoy a lengthy post-delivery period of secluded rest and nurturing that allows them to get to know each other and bond (Lancy 2008). The forty-days seclusion for Swahili women also allows new mothers to protect their newborns against jealousy (*wivu*) and ill will (*hasida*) known to summon the evil eye, which the envious direct toward people with the intention of causing illness, misfortune, and even death (Gearhart and Abdulrehman, 2012). To avert such malevolence against their newborns, Swahili mothers draw anti-hex markings with black kohl on the foreheads of their infants until they begin teething and have reached an age at which they are less vulnerable to spiritual attack. Until then, Swahili infants are believed to be particularly susceptible to the evil eye, especially at night, when owls are believed to swoop into homes and carry infants away. It is common to see babies' wrists, ankles, and necks adorned with jewelry made with seeds and/or beads that are red and white or red and black – colors believed to ward off evil (El Zein, 1974). Amulets (*hirizi*) with protective Qur'anic verses also serve this purpose (See Images 4-6 & Images 7-8).

In addition to protecting infants with markings and charms, the Swahili of Lamu perform rituals that celebrate the life of a new baby and welcome him/her into the family. Two of these ceremonies occur when the newborn is just seven days old: the child's naming ceremony and the ceremony that involves showing the baby around her/his new household, known in Swahili as *kutoa mtoto ukumbi* (to put the child in an interior courtyard). Naming a Swahili child is a fairly serious affair that may involve consultation with family elders, religious leaders, the midwife who assisted in the baby's delivery, and others who have a vested interest in the child's future success. A child might be named after a deceased relative or after someone who offered blessings for the baby while still in the womb. The welcoming ceremony also occurs on the baby's seventh day of life and involves taking the infant around to each room of the house, where the names of the family members who reside in each room are shared and their relationship to the infant explained. A goat or cow (depending on the family's economic status) is often sacrificed on these occasions and the meat served in accompaniment with a dish made of kidney beans and grated coconut, representing the red-white pairing that offers the child spiritual protection against evil⁴.

For male Swahili infants, the seventh day of life also involves circumcision (*tahiri*), an event that physically purifies the child as a Muslim (*tahiri* comes from the Arabic word *tawahara*, or purification) and welcomes him into the Islamic community. Like the other ceremonies celebrated on this day, a goat or cow is typically sacrificed and a feast prepared for close relatives and friends. It is also a Swahili custom to invite seven children to recite appropriate passages of the Qur'an and/

or to recite *maulidi*⁵ prayers and then partake in the feast. The common reference to the number seven in Swahili ritual stems from the reoccurrence of the number in the *Qur'an* (Sahibzada 1999) [See Images 9-10].

Learning Gender

A Swahili child's experience is largely shaped by his/her sex and the culturally prescribed gender roles that accompany it. A child's first education is based on "chore curriculum", as Lancy (2008) refers to it, which introduces boys and girls to a broad range of gender-specific skills they are required to fully develop before they reach adulthood. Wenger's (2008) description of how gender roles are defined by work among the Giriama of Kaloleni, 200 miles south of Lamu in the coastal hinterland, ring true among the Swahili as well: "*work* is an embedded phenomenon that is tightly woven into community life... (and) appears to be linked to fundamental dimensions of the experience of being male or female" (304-305). Swahili boys frequently accompany their fathers on fishing expeditions, to the farm, or the shop, and are expected to assist in a wide variety of work considered to be male tasks. When boys reach the age of five or so, they are regularly sent by foot or by donkey on errands around town to deliver and receive items and messages, an activity that requires them to interact with a variety of different people in various settings. Although girls are more likely than boys to over-hear adult female conversation that includes the latest gossip, boys, as the go-betweens among families and neighbors, are the eyes and ears of the family and are responsible for keeping female relatives apprised of important goings on beyond the walls of the family home.

The life of Swahili girls is characterized by indoor activities, often in the company of other small children and under the supervision of older female relatives. Family weddings are highlights of Swahili girlhood between the age of seven and twelve, as these events entail dressing up and having make-up and henna applied like mini-brides. When I first visited Lamu in the late 1980s, I was invited to a mock-wedding celebration for a seven-year-old mini-bride⁶, to which all of her young cousins were invited. Special wedding dishes were prepared and wedding songs were sung for the little bride - all to give the children a taste of what was in store for them as adults. As a Swahili bride's virginity signifies the virtue of her entire family, being celebrated as a virgin bride is a pinnacle moment of a young Swahili woman's life. This mock "showing of the bride" ceremony allowed the girl, her mother, and other female relatives to relish the rewards of the achievement in advance (See Images 11-12 & 13-15).

Going to School in Lamu

Before British colonial intervention in Kenya in the early twentieth century, education among the Swahili consisted solely of Islamic training in Arabic and was compulsory for boys and girls until they were able to read the entire *Qur'an* (in sections, over time) by rote memory. When I first visited Lamu in the late 1980s, it was rare to find women older than thirty who had been educated past eighth grade. Even at that time, some parents refused to send their daughters to government schools for fear they would be converted to Christianity, sexually assaulted by male teachers, or have opportunities to interact with male age mates in unsupervised settings. Though a family's social status remains largely dependent upon the virginity of their daughters at marriage (typically verified immediately after consummation of the marriage by a female relative of the groom), the vast majority of contemporary Swahili elders approve of girls' secular education. This is true as

long as it is accompanied by rigorous Islamic education – believed to provide the moral foundation for any well-respected Swahili girl who will one day be responsible for the religious training of her own children.

In 2003, the Kenyan government abolished tuition for primary education, which allowed many of the poorer Swahili families in Lamu to send their children to school for the first time. Though many families still struggle to cover the costs of their children’s school uniforms, books, and exams, there has been a steady increase in the number of children attending primary and secondary school in Lamu since the Free Primary Education policy was implemented. In Coast Province, primary school attendance rose from 29,031 in 2002 to 53,005 in 2009 representing an increase of 82.58% (KCPE Exam Results). Girls in Lamu are actually performing better academically than are their male counterparts at the high school level. Lamu Girls Secondary School, where 450 girls are being educated, was ranked second out of all the secondary schools in Lamu District for having the highest Kenya National exam scores in 2010. Also in 2010, 40/110 graduating seniors qualified for higher education courses (The Schools Project). Thus, even as the social pressures for girls to marry upon graduation from high school remain significant, the option to pursue further education or training is becoming more common among young Swahili women in Lamu.

In contrast, only 50% of the 549 students at Lamu Boys Secondary School in 2010 were receiving passing marks on their coursework, a situation linked to the plethora of outside activities in which young men are involved. Though Swahili girls are responsible for assisting their mothers with domestic responsibilities, Swahili boys – especially eldest sons – are often obligated to help their fathers perform the economic activities that financially sustain the family. Even on a school day, boys can be seen leading donkey caravans, delivering milk, taking produce to the town market, and catching worms for their fathers’ fishing trips.

International NGOs in Lamu such as “The Girl Child Project” funded by The Lamu Educational Development Foundation Trust (LEDFT) that provide scholarships for girls to attend primary and secondary school are also enhancing the likelihood that girls from poorer families in Lamu receive an education. Overall, however, the ratio of boys to girls enrolled in secondary schools still favors boys (56.67%) over girls (43.33%) in Coast Province (Release of the 2009 KCPE Exam Results by the Minister of Education, Sam Ongeru, Dec. 29, 2009 <http://www.examsCouncil.or.ke/>) though the gender gap is closing.

Though the majority of children in Kenya attend a government school, which is also the case for students in Lamu, four of the six participants of this research attended private schools. Two attended Ama Primary School, which targets orphaned children yet is open to any student with financial need, and two attended Stone Town Academy. The tuition at Stone Town Academy is between 2,500 and 4,000 Ksh (\$27.00 – \$43.00) per term depending on the grade level. For the average Lamu family, such fees constitute a major financial burden. Even though the school offers scholarships and payment plans for families struggling financially, only a small number of families are willing and/or able to pool their resources to afford it.

Regardless of where a student attends school, however, Lamu school children are kept very busy with secular school classes during the week (8:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.; 2:00–4:00 p.m.) and Islamic classes (*madrassa*) Saturday and Sunday (8:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.; 2:00–4:00 p.m.) with extra tutoring sessions in the evening. Children whose parents can afford the extra fees work with a private tutor two to three hours every day: two hours typically devoted to school work in English and Swahili,

and one hour devoted to learning Arabic and reading and memorizing the *Qur'an*. For students whose parents cannot afford private tutoring, free study sessions allow students to help each other learn, and free Islamic classes are available. Thus, when classes are in session, the average Swahili child studies from 8:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. with a two-hour break over lunch.

One of the trends in private primary and secondary education in Kenya today is the "Islamic Integrated Education Programme (IIEP)," which integrates Islamic teaching into the secular curriculum so that students do not have to attend separate *madrasa* for their religious studies in the evenings. My research with children indicates that rushing between school and *madrasa* makes Swahili children's lives extremely hectic, a situation abated by the new curriculum. As the Manager of Stone Town Academy explained, "We are a Muslim community and some people look at school as a place where children learn to go against Islam. Lamu people have thought that secular school detracts from Islam. We want to show that school is a place where one can learn both Islam and secular subjects. When you combine the two and have an integrated system, the children do very well compared to when children attend *madrasa* after school and they are exhausted and cannot put energy into their studies".

In Lamu, the integrated curriculum was first established in 2003 at Swaafa Mosque and then at Stone Town Academy in 2006. Stone Town Academy employs the integrated curriculum for classes up to standard five (fifth grade) and is moving toward integration at all levels. The various Islamic studies that are now integrated into the curriculum at Stone Town Academy include: the study of *Qur'anic* texts (*Qur'an*), history of the Prophet Muhammad (*Seyra*), practical Islamic teachings (*Tawhed*), moral behavior (*Akhlaq*), and Arabic. The language of instruction at Stone Town is English and students have Swahili language and Arabic classes daily. Students are required to speak in English while on school grounds and are allowed to speak Swahili only on Fridays.

As is evident in the 2011 schedule of classes at Stone Town Academy (below), Islamic religious education (IRE) features prominently in the daily curriculum along with Math, English, Science (Sci), Social Science (S/S), and Swahili (Kisw). Both IRE and CRE (Christian Religious Education) are subjects tested on the KCPE (Kenya Certificate of Primary Education) & KCSE (Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education) national exams. At Stone Town Academy, Religious Education (RE), a course that focuses on preparing students for the national exams, is offered to both Muslim and Christian students (See Image 16).

One negative consequence of the integrated system is that creative arts (C/A) are not taught as frequently as they were under the former curriculum. According to the schedule of classes being taught under the integrated curriculum at Stone Town Academy, art class is now only offered twice a week. It is ironic that the arts have been relegated to "early childhood development" and taught primarily in pre-school since the integrated curriculum itself was initially put into motion by a push for early childhood education.

Former Deputy Director of the Kenya Institute of Education suggested the impetus for revamping the curriculum so that religious studies were integrated into secular education was a recommendation by the National Centre for Early Childhood Education (NACECE), which "realized...children especially among the pre-dominantly Islamic religion were missing out in the area of Early Childhood Development experiences..." (Manani 2007: 6-7). Other research explains that the curriculum grew out of a process of integration that began in 1986, when a group of Muslim leaders approached the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) for financial support to establish the Madarasa Resource Centre Early

Childhood Development programme (Mwaura 2006).

Several teachers with whom I spoke in Lamu expressed dismay that the national exam-oriented curricula pervasive in Kenya is focused on teaching students the material they will be tested on rather than on helping them develop a liberal arts-oriented knowledge base that includes art and music. The enthusiasm with which the children who participated in this research created images that document their lives demonstrates their desire for tapping into their artistic talents. Though the average Lamu student spends twelve hours per day studying during the school week, time for exploring their creativity does occur during the one three-week and two five-week breaks in April, August, and December respectively. It is not until school adjourns for these recesses that Swahili children have time to devote to play (See Images 17-18 & Images 19-20).

The Art of Play

Swahili children's culture, once characterized by a variety of games, songs and story-telling, has deteriorated somewhat over the past two decades due to new expectations that children attend school starting at the age of three or four years old (much earlier than the age of seven, which is stipulated in the *Qur'an* as the age to begin formal education) and focus their free time on schoolwork when classes are in session. Moreover, playtime at school is more structured than it used to be and Swahili children have fewer opportunities to cultivate and use their imagination.

But when Swahili children have the chance, they are extremely creative in the ways in which they entertain themselves, largely without direct adult supervision or "management" as Lancy (2008) refers to it. As in most societies around the world, the gender roles that Swahili children learn from a very young age determine the kinds of play in which they engage (Montgomery 2009). Examples include girls setting up pretend houses in which they play with "babies" and "dishes," and boys building miniature "cars" to drive and "ships" to sail (See Images 21-23, 26-28 and 29-30).

Six Swahili Youth See Themselves

The following section features six vignettes based on the individual interviews I conducted with six Swahili children of Lamu in the summer of 2011. These narratives describe what the children told me about the sixty images each of them produced during a one-week period when they used a digital camera to document their lives. Each vignette features six photographs taken by the child whose life is described in the accompanying narrative. Each child selected the six images in one-on-one consultation with me. The photographs represent some of the people, places, and things that mean the most to the children. The names of the children have been changed to protect their privacy.

Halma: "Life is hard"

Thirteen-year-old Halma sits cross-legged on the ground as she grinds hot peppers (*pilipili*) to accompany the fritters (*bajia*) her mother and aunt are frying in the passageway between the houses. Just half an hour ago she was fast asleep on the tightly-woven *usutu* bed, under which her little brother Hasani still hangs peacefully in a soft cotton piece of cloth (*leso*). It is Sunday, so Halma did not have to get up with the sun, which from Lamu's location two degrees south of the equator rises quickly each day at six o'clock. Now seven-thirty, the sun is already blistering. Halma watches for soapy water to flow by the open drain outside the door, signaling that the neighbors

have been forced awake by their sweaty nightclothes and are showering. Soon the neighbor boys will be sent to fetch breakfast and will come for the flavorful chickpea flour patties (*bajia*) that her mother is busy preparing (See Images 31-33).

As she rises to answer her mother's call for the peppers, Halma peeks to see that Hasani is still sleeping and grabs a scarf to cover her head. A few moments later, Halma is perched in her usual spot on the front stoop (*baraza*) of Karim's shop. She quickly wraps up a handful of the silver dollar-sized disks in a piece of newspaper and exchanges it for twenty shillings (twenty-two cents). She is late; a line of neighborhood boys is eager to collect the food and return home for their morning tea.

If Halma is lucky, there will be enough *bajia* left over to satisfy her own hunger. In the last few days, her father has not come by the house with the mangos and fish he typically contributes to the family diet. Hopefully, neither he nor his new wife is sick again, and nothing else has gone wrong. Halma needs a new headscarf and book bag for school (she is in the fourth grade) and her mother certainly cannot afford to buy them (See Images 34-36).

When the *bajia* are gone, Halma slowly rounds the corner. She can hear Hasani giggle as he chases after his older siblings, his cousins, and the neighbor kids. "Halma!" they scream, "Come and play with us!"

Omari: "Life is busy"

A hush falls over the classroom as the teacher squeaks out a Swahili proverb across the blackboard. Omari thinks he knows what it means, but hesitates as his desk partner's hand shoots up confidently beside him. As one of his classmates works out the saying aloud, Omari's mind wanders to the Mala soccer field, where later that afternoon his team, the "Red Socks," will face off against "Typical Hits." Ten-year-old Omari ranks second among his forty-two-member class in Swahili, and though he usually likes to impress his favorite teacher, his thoughts are squarely focused on the upcoming match. Omari's team has won the last several games and he wants to keep up their reputation as the team to beat (See Images 37-39).

At last the ringer sounds the bell and the boys rush out of the fourth grade classroom and onto the school grounds to enjoy their break. Omari heads over to the crowd hovering around Ama Babu, who busily distributes warm mashed cassava (*muhogo*) in small plastic bags that the boys quickly suck clean. A noisy circle in a far corner of the compound catches Omari's attention and he walks over to see legs flying as boys perform aerial cartwheels and flips. Only one more class period and then home to change clothes and off to the soccer field for the game (See Images 40-42 & 43-45).

Though he thinks not of it now, Omari will ultimately change clothes yet again after soccer for his evening *Qur'an* lessons from seven to eight, sit down for a late dinner, and then crawl into bed by nine. After he awakens for *Fajri* prayers before five the next morning, he will complete his schoolwork quietly in his room before joining his mother and his four siblings for breakfast. By seven o'clock sharp, Omari will leave the house for school, dressed in a neatly pressed white shirt and black trousers. And another day and another soccer match will be on the horizon.

Omari's hectic schedule still leaves time for him to play with his best friend, his two cats, and his

newborn baby cousin, each of whom became a subject of Omari's photographs.

Amina: "Life is fun"

Amina makes the most of her responsibility to look after the children of her older sister and brother, all of whom live together in their mother's house. Since their father's death, Amina's older siblings have been working together to pool their resources and are scraping by with intermittent revenue from the two clothing shops they manage off Lamu town's main throughway. When Amina is not in school or *madrasa*, she is charged with looking after her nieces and nephews, who never seem to run out of energy or have enough food in their bellies! (See Images 43-45)

Amina is also quite focused on her girlfriends, who helped her find beautiful backdrops around Lamu town for self-portraits and group shots they took of each other with the camera. On weekend afternoons and during school holidays, Amina likes to watch Indian movies, play hopscotch in the alley outside her house, and otherwise amuse herself by teasing her friends and relatives, and sharing funny stories. Though things are not easy, Amina feels supported by her family, her neighbors, and her friends--all of whom use humor to overcome obstacles and make life more pleasant (See Images 46-48).

Ali: "Life is beautiful"

Ali takes a dove out of its cage as it coos. He strokes the feathers and admires how lovely it looks. While normally a soft-spoken young man, Ali is animated by the chance to discuss the doves he raises and the animals he helps care for on his grandfather's farm. In retrospect, Ali suggests that he earns a bit of money selling the doves; money he is free to spend as he chooses.

Ali is now learning to milk his grandfather's cows and is proud that he plays a more important role at the farm. He points out the photo he took of a four-hundred-year-old mango (*maembe*) tree that grows there and giggles when sharing that he and his twin brother usually eat so many mangos when visiting the farm that they get diarrhea (See Images 49-51).

It is difficult for Ali to decide which is more important in his life: soccer or *madrasa*. He chooses *madrasa* to be safe and illustrates the choice with a photo that his mother took of him on his way to classes at the Swaafa mosque. This photo is quickly followed by one depicting Ali with a soccer trophy that his team "Reagan" (after U.S. President Ronald Reagan) won last year.

Ali meekly mentions that if he had more time with the camera, he would have taken some shots of his friends swimming at the beach and fishing off the main jetty - two of his other favorite pastimes. Ali's affinity for the sea explains how the first camera he used for the project was destroyed by salt water, after he jumped in before remembering to take it out of his pocket. Since he does not want to remind me of the incident, he quickly changes the subject to how he used the camera to document "traditional" things such as an old well, a door to the Riyadhha mosque that his father carved, his sister's braided hair, and roofs made of palmetto-frond (See Images 52-54).

Ali is a keen observer and a bit of a romantic. He takes his photography seriously and uses the camera as an outlet of artistic expression. Ali certainly has an eye for beauty, as his images of sunsets, rainbows, coconut groves, and island wildlife (snails, donkeys, cats) demonstrate. When I take notice of this, Ali smiles and tells me that he is learning to carve like his father.

Esha: “Life is important”

Though just twelve years old, Esha is responsible for helping her father and grandmother care for her two younger sisters and little brother while her mother works during the week at a job on the mainland. Esha says she likes school but admits to being a bit slow when it comes to completing her homework because she thinks too deeply about everything – at least that is what her mom tells her. This is especially true of Esha’s concern about the planet, a topic on which she wishes more people were focused. Esha explains that a poor environment causes disease and a healthy environment that has plants and flowers brings rain. That is why Esha made such an effort to photograph the plants and flowers that are growing in Lamu. “If you just look for them, you’ll find them,” she asserts (See Images 55-57 & 58-60).

Besides her siblings, her parents and her grandma, Esha counts as important the guard dogs that keep watch over the family compound and her best friend, who Esha describes as “good” because she passes her exams and exhibits respectful behavior.

Mohammad: “Life is challenging”

Mohammad quickens his pace so he is not late for class. Since his father became headmaster of his new school, the stakes are higher than ever. Mohammad has to try and set a good example for the other students and work hard so that he can go to college like his older brother. He breaks into a jog and uses a short cut to save time. He has exams this week and next, and needs to get to school to cram a bit before school starts (See Images 61-63).

Mohammad does not often have time to think about his old life in Matondoni, where his mother and siblings still live. Though only an hour’s journey by donkey, the sleepy village seems light years away from Lamu, which has dependable electricity, better schools and clinics, and most importantly – organized soccer!

The only thing Mohammad’s new life lacks is enough time to do everything demanded by his busy schedule. After exams at school, Mohammad will run home to change clothes for *madrasa*, where another exam awaits him. Then he will rush home to change into his “Green Mamba” uniform and head to the game. Tonight his team plays “Hard Target,” the team that has a fifteen-year old coach. His own coach has taken him under his wing and taught him everything he knows about soccer. Since Mohammad did not have the chance to play soccer in Matondoni, he has some catching up to do. And when he doesn’t have his nose in a book, Mohammad can be found practicing his dribbling (See Images 64-66).

The Children’s Lives in Larger Perspective

The complicated family lives of these six children suggest that Swahili children in Lamu often deal with a host of adult-sized issues. Girls are typically burdened with taking care of younger siblings and neighbors, a reality that is demonstrated by the three girls’ photographs of the children they watch over daily. Boys are freer to focus on schoolwork and leisure activities, though many are also involved with family income-generating activities. Though none of the boys who participated in this research are required to assist in their family’s subsistence, it is not uncommon for male youth in Lamu to help their families make ends meet. The children’s narratives illustrate that like adults, children’s lives are largely shaped by the gender-stratified nature of Swahili society, a reality also

observed by other scholars who have worked with Swahili children elsewhere in coastal East Africa (Berinstein and Magalhaes 2009).

Halma's job selling food that her mother and aunt make is typically performed by Lamu boys, who are considered less vulnerable to unwanted attention outside the home. Halma's relatives are able to keep a watchful eye on her just around the corner from the shop where she sells *bajia*. Like other Swahili girls, Halma's sphere of activity consists of a very tight circle around her family home, and unless she is going back and forth to school or is in the company of adult relatives or family friends, she is considered to be up to mischief. The money Ali makes raising doves could be used to buy food for his family if they were in a dire financial situation. And the odd jobs he does at his grandfather's farm just for fun could easily turn into duties if his grandfather was to fall ill or he could not afford to pay the laborer who works there.

Half of the children who participated in this research live in female-headed households, a reality captured in a survey that suggests women head nearly a quarter of all households in Lamu (Kenya Integrated Household Survey, 2005-06). Of the women who head the households of the children who participated in this research, one is a widow, and two are divorced, reflecting the larger population in which 23% of women who head their household are widowed and 30% are divorced (Kenya Integrated Household Survey, 2005-06).

Rare is the case of Mohammad, who lives with his father in Lamu while his mother remains in Matondoni. It is noteworthy that Esha spends the majority of her time at home with her grandmother and father, since her mother is at work on the mainland during the workweek. When taken together, only one of the children in the sample has both parents at home full-time.

Since the instability of the nuclear family came up as a major obstacle only for Halma, whose livelihood is exceptionally precarious as a result, it seems that other family members fill in as surrogate parents for many Lamu children. This is obvious in the life of Omari, whose big brother is an important authority figure, Amina, whose adult siblings live in the house and offer her guidance, Halma, whose maternal aunt is a mother figure, Esha, whose grandmother fills in for her mother, and Mohammad, who is looked after by the female relatives in the household in which he and his father are staying.

Conclusion

The Swahili of Lamu have created a society that revolves around protecting their children from spiritual and physical harm, providing them with religious and secular education, and preparing them for their future as parents and breadwinners. The framework in which children are raised to meet the expectations of Swahili adulthood is characterized by well-defined gender roles that shape the identity of boys and girls, and define the parameters of their daily lives from a young age. It is within this gender-stratified operating principle that labor is divided, the work routine is established, and the rights and responsibilities of family members are allocated.

Even children who grow up in families that are considered wealthy by Lamu standards are often responsible for performing household duties that go beyond the weekly "chores" for which many American children earn an allowance (e.g. taking out the garbage). This study reveals that a major role for young Swahili girls in Lamu is looking after younger siblings, relatives, and neighbors, work referred to as "babysitting" in America, but that does not earn the girls personal spending money

as is typical in the U.S. Though Berinstein and Magalhaes (2009) suggest Swahili children often engage in unstructured and spontaneous play outside the influence of adults, this study suggests that older children often guide and supervise the playtime activities of their younger siblings and neighbors. This certainly came across in the interviews I had with Halma, Amina, and Esha, who spent quite a bit of time coordinating the playtime activities of the young children in their care.

Better understanding the hectic schedules Swahili children negotiate daily makes the light-hearted photographs taken by the six children who participated in this study a bit confusing. Though Swahili children navigate very busy lives, playtime features prominently in the way the participants have represented themselves photographically. Since the children took photographs primarily when they were “off duty,” it is not surprising that many of their images capture themselves and their playmates relaxing in their home environments, playing hopscotch, or at the soccer fields. This reality makes the images that Halma took working and that Omari and Mohammad took at school even more significant, as they obviously made an effort to portray themselves in settings less conducive to photo taking.

For future research on Swahili children in Lamu, I hope to continue to fine-tune the methods I developed for this study and to broaden the sample of participants so that a greater number of children have the opportunity to document their experiences photographically. I plan to work collaboratively with the children on writing captions for selected images and to install a photography exhibit at the Lamu Museum featuring children’s photographs and maps. It would be interesting to explore the ways in which these images might be used to spark public discussion about the education system, the role children play in the family, and the ways they are engaged in the local economy. Allowing children to document their own lives is a powerful tool of expression. It will be exciting to discover how seeing life through the eyes of Swahili children in Lamu will lead to hearing more of what they have to say (See Image 67).

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Notes

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2 My Ph.D. dissertation (University of Florida, 1998) and publications that followed are focused on competitive ritual music and dance (ngoma) among the Swahili of Lamu (2000, 2005). More recent research in Lamu concerns children (2011), healthcare (2012, 2013), and migrant laborers (2013). I am currently working on a manuscript devoted to Swahili expressive arts, including children's arts.

3 The informed-consent protocol was developed in consultation with the Illinois Wesleyan University Institutional Review Board.

4 Islamic societies throughout Africa serve red, white and black colored foods at child naming ceremonies. For example, the Fulani serve millet cakes and grilled meat (red), milk and bread (white), and black tea. (<http://www.jamtan.com/jamtan/fulani.cfm?chap=0&linksPage=279>) and the Wolof present the child with kola nuts (black), cotton (white), and millet (red) (Hodari 2009).

5 Events that feature the recitation of verses that praise the birth (*maulid* in Arabic) of the Prophet Muhammad (known collectively as "maulidi" in Swahili) are believed to be spiritually powerful ceremonies that bring many blessings to the host and his/her family (see Gearhart 2000).

6 Since I have never observed nor heard of such an elaborate children's mock wedding at any other time during my various visits to Lamu, I believe such parties were fairly rare, even among the Lamu elite.