The Potential of Cultural Festivals to Constructing Cultural Identities: Case of Lamu Cultural Festivals in Kenya

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Abstract

The Lamu Cultural Festival (LCF) plays a crucial role in promoting cultural expression, but its impact on indigenous identities remains under-researched. While the festival, organized by government bodies in collaboration with local groups, attracts a diverse audience, it struggles to maintain focus on the cultural continuity of the indigenous communities. This study examines the influence of the LCF on the cultural identity of indigenous groups and their involvement in the festival's planning. Through key informant interviews and participant observation, the research found that the LCF reinforced ethnic identities among four indigenous groups but failed to foster a unified Lamu cultural identity. The festival has potential for long-term cultural identity development, but this can only be realized with greater participation from indigenous communities in its planning. However, there was minimal involvement from these groups in the decision-making process. The study concludes that while the LCF is vital for preserving indigenous heritage, its short duration and limited community engagement emphasize the need for inclusive planning. To improve the festival's impact, it is recommended that indigenous communities be actively involved in all stages of the planning process to ensure their cultures and values are accurately represented and respected.

Keywords: Cultural Festivals, Cultural Identities, Lamu, Indigenous Groups, Ethnic Identities

Introduction

The increasing interest in festivals worldwide highlights their significant social and economic contributions. However, research on their role in constructing cultural identity remains limited, with most studies focusing on sustainable economic development, motivations for attendance, and stakeholder relevance (Smith and Thompson, 2023). In Africa, cultural festivals have been shown to preserve and promote shared cultural identities, strengthen community ties, and enhance historical continuity among diverse ethnic groups (Akinyemi, 2023; Muriuki, 2022).

Yet, there is a notable gap in understanding how festivals contribute to image-making, place marketing, and their sociocultural impacts, particularly within heterogeneous communities. This research aims to expand the existing body of knowledge on cultural identity in Kenya, where various community cultural festivals have emerged to express cultural values and preserve heritage. Most of these festivals are relatively new, typically lasting just one day, which results in limited peer-reviewed literature on the subject. Thus, there is a pressing need for further investigation into the role of cultural festivals in Kenya.

Historically, the importance of cultural events in identity construction has been overlooked, as festival organizers often prioritized economic and political benefits over cultural significance. However, the growing prominence of these festivals highlights their potential to sustain cultural groups, foster acceptance of particular cultures, generate local pride, and serve as income sources. Quintero (2020) asserts that festivals are crucial for developing group and place identities. Despite this, some critics argue that the cultural essence of these festivals is being diminished and that traditional cultures risk being supplanted by modern popular culture.

This study adopts an anthropological approach, defining cultural identity as a stable frame of reference shared by individuals with common ancestry and historical experiences (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2010). Tajfel and Turner (2019) further elaborate on cultural identity as the conscious identification of group members with shared symbols, meanings, and norms of conduct.

Festivals occurring in specific locales embody unique elements of those places, fostering a strong sense of community. They appeal to diverse interests, including various religious elements, and aim to create a unifying regional identity (Lopez-Sintas & Sanz, 2020). This unification is especially important for small communities, as it can enhance their cultural values and facilitate cultural exchange with other groups.

In conclusion, there is a critical need for research on the impact of cultural festivals in Kenya, particularly in terms of identity construction in diverse communities. By focusing on these elements, this study seeks to illuminate the multifaceted role of festivals in preserving cultural heritage and promoting social cohesion.

Festivals and Cultural Identity

Meanings attached to places and shared by communities serve as powerful sources of identity while events such as festivals also contribute to a sense of sharing and belonging (Harrison and Mclntyre, 2021). Festivals are linked to identity construction as well as to issues of authenticity due to their core values which entail maintaining and disseminating the traditional elements of identity, language, territory, history, common culture and religion (Gonzalez, 2023).

A festival is defined as a period of pleasurable activity or entertainment celebrating a happening, event or community (Mason & Paggiaro, 2012). Getz (2010) defines it as a public themed celebration, showcasing community values and cultures, for the community and by the community while Mason and Paggiaro (2012) simply describes it as a sacred time of celebration. However, Richards (2018) and Yeoman, McMahon-Beattie and Palmer (2019) are more circumspect as they demand for a festival to qualify as a public themed celebration, it should be open to the public, have a theme, take place annually, has a start and end date and include various events that take place in the same location.

In the works of several authors, festivals provide the opportunity for people to come together for a common purpose, therefore enhancing social cohesion and social identity (Getz, 2010). According to Patterson (2023) festivals have the ability to produce the identity of a location by combining time, space and memory. Festivals are also said to have the potential to enable communities to interpret and re-interpret their cultural identity. Festivals provide a great opportunity and space for the conservation of cultural heritage practices, for their re-interpretation and innovation. In order to maintain and protect the identity, traditions deemed as being in danger must be instilled among the locals in a particular community. Hence, one of the main aims of a cultural festival is to celebrate the culture and identity of the people staging the event (Crespi-Vallbona and Richards, 2007).

The process of identity construction through festivals takes place by means of specific cultural practices and other elements at play. This is because a festival provides an arena where local culture is produced and also creates opportunities for shared histories, cultural values which are the factors that distinguish one place from another. After investigating festivals, Cresswell (2020) concluded that a person's sense of identity is solely linked to their attachment to place, meaning that festivals are signifiers of the cultural identities of the spaces in which they occur. Harrison (2021) further state that festivals are a platform for a destination to showcase its rich cultural heritage, local traditions, ethnic backgrounds and cultural landscapes.

Similarly, cultural festivals in particular celebrate both group and place identity (Quintero, 2020) Cultural identity according to Rivas-Drake, Wang and Fuligni (2014) is the degree of membership affiliation with the larger culture while ethnic identity refers to the degree of membership with one's specific ethnic group. Smith and Silva (2019) demonstrate that ethnic identity can be the basis of a cultural identity.

Festival Research

Cultural festivals have developed into a prominent theme of research due to the depth and diversity they possess. As this is the case, most research examines the contribution of festival tourism to sustainable local economic development (Lee & Taylor, 2022). In addition, according to Klein (2023) and Smith and Richards (2021), governments and businesses, residents and festival organizers perceive festivals as a boon to local economies often seeking to maximize economic impacts by attracting as many visitors as possible. Several researchers have investigated the reasons and motivations for people to attend festivals and concluded that social interaction, cultural experience, entertainment, escape and leisure are the reasons that people choose to attend festivals (Bhowmick & Saha, 2023). Gursoy and Kendall (2022) and Cohen and Avieli (2021) have largely conducted research on festivals as vehicles for cultural commodification.

Market segmentation in terms of tourist preferences is important (Patterson, 2023), and demonstrates that successful promotion depends on effective segmentation (Chacko 2020). Past researchers have attempted

to demonstrate the relevance of stakeholders, their role and influence on festival strategy and survival (Hede, 2008; Falk & Haglund, 2022). Limited research has also been conducted on the socio-cultural impacts of festivals on communities. For instance, Fredline and Faulkner (2000), Mihalik (2000) and more recently Dredge and Jenkins (2023) suggest that the way in which events impact upon the quality of life of the local residents is important for the success of a festival. The hosting of an event within a community is influenced by their personal experience and societal values, community attachment, age, identification with the theme and perceptions of participation.

Research on the potential contributions of festivals to cultural identity construction remains limited. Khan (2021) have examined the role of festivals in shaping destination images, concluding that festivals significantly influence how a destination is perceived. Getz (2010) argues that festivals can enhance a community's image, while Boo and Busser (2006) suggest that they may lead to negative changes in a destination's image. Duncan and Matzler (2023) stress that while festivals can improve a destination's image, they can also lead to undesirable concerns if not properly managed.

Study Area

The study was conducted on the Lamu Cultural Festival which is held in Lamu, an Island located off the coast of Kenya some 350 km north of Mombasa. Lamu Island is part of the Lamu archipelago, which is composed of 54 islands, some very small and uninhabited and others large and lush (Lamu Cultural Festival, 2022). The archipelago extends from the Kenya-Somalia border in the north to the Tana River Delta in the south, approximately 2° and 2° 20' south of the Equator (Yassin 2003). Originally known as "Tambwi Ndeo", Lamu Island was renamed Lamu by the Arabs to mean *Laamu* or blame, as the locals blamed themselves for giving the town away (Yassin, 2003). There is no precise age of the town with some literature stating that it is probably older than 1450, while Olali (2004) suggests that it is perhaps older than 1700. The town is built of coral and mangrove timber with influence from the Swahili, Arabic, Persian, Indian and European building styles. It has largely remained frozen in the 18th /19th century conditions with the architecture hardly changing over the centuries (Wishitemi, Spenceley and Wels, 2007; Vansina, 2014).

As early as the 14th century, Lamu was a prosperous trade centre exporting goods like timber, slaves, spices and ivory while importing silks, porcelain, fine furniture and beads across the Indian Ocean. During the favourable monsoon winds, traders and sailors from Persia and India would set sail to the East African coast navigating their dhows during the Kaskazi or north-eastern winds from November to March across the Indian Ocean. Other ships came from China, South East Asia and the Arabian Peninsula carrying gold and spices (Askew, 1999). They would trade it for timber, ivory and slaves with their partners from East Africa. Likewise, the dhows from East Africa would set sail to their trading partners' lands with hides, cowries, tortoise shells and ivory (Bikales, 1989).

Due to the exchange of commodities within the trade networks, an exchange of cultural practices and beliefs also occurred, most notably the Islamic religion (Askew 1999). Currently, the communities in Lamu have become more creolized due to interaction not only with various ethnic groups, but also with other foreigners including Europeans and Americans (Poblete, 2007). The town is Kenya's oldest Muslim town (Hassan, 2021) and the entreport on the Swahili coast (Mwinyihaji, 2023).

Owing to its isolation in the 20th century from modernisation, it has managed to preserve its rich architectural heritage and culture leading to the town being declared as a UNESCO world heritage site in 2001, the same year that the first LCF took place (Omar & Barlow, 2021).

Study Group

The study was conducted on the four indigenous tribes of Lamu who consist of the Bajuni, Sanye, Aweer (Boni) and Orma. The major economic activities of Lamu are tourism, agriculture, fishing (Wiggins, 2010). Interconnecting these economic activities using sustainable approaches can enhance long-term prosperity and community well-being in Lamu (Omar & Barlow, 2022).

Aweer

The Aweer were originally settled between the Juba River in Somalia and the Tana River in Kenya (Okoth-Okombo, 2011). Today most of the Aweer are mixed in semi-permanent villages in Kiunga on the mainland. Others moved to the Lamu Island following natural disasters that wiped out their livestock. Another reason for their move to Lamu Island is the stipulation of a total ban on hunting in 1977 by the government forcing the Aweer to look for other means of survival (Laher & Singioei, 2014). The Aweer were hunter-gatherers after abandoning pastoralism which may have been influenced by environmental, economic and social reasons. Hunting and gathering was more viable and lucrative, enabling them access to varied nutritional resources in a sustainable environment (Harris & Ochieng, 2022). Despite the prohibition in hunting, the Aweer still practise it on small scale for purposes of initiation, food and trophies.

Socio-culturally, each member in the community had a specific role to play. Traditionally life revolved around ritual ceremonies related to hunting. The male in the society were concerned with hunting therefore young boys started their careers very early by being taught how to kill small game and graduation into manhood by killing bigger wild animals (Nunow, 2012). On the other hand, one of the roles of women was to build beehive like houses with relatives usually living near one another (Nunow, 2012). They practised endogamy, only marrying members of the same patrilineage while polygyny is practised where some men have more than one wife (Joshua Project, *n.d**).

Like many other hunter-gatherer communities, the Aweer lacked a central political authority; instead they had two headmen who wielded authority side by side at the same time (Prins, 2021). The government no longer recognizes the double headman ship; they have been brought under the jurisdiction of minor officials (Prins, 2021). Concerning their religion, the Aweer believed in a supreme being and held forests in great importance as the tress represented their ancestors. In the 1950's the Aweer converted collectively to Islam. As a result, some rites have been modified to fit Islam but there are some aspects of their traditional religion still practised (Faulkner, 2006).

Bajuni

They are believed to have migrated from a place in the North called Shungwaya which could not yet be traced. The reasons for migration vary from pressure from the Orma and other indigenous groups in Shungwaya to internal squabbles (Mwaniki, 2022).

From Shungwaya, the Bajuni settled on the mainland, but were forced to migrate *en masse* to the Islands by the constant Orma invasions (Omar & Soud, 2021). The roles of men and women were clearly defined

with men being in charge of business, preparing nets, fishing and making boats. The women took care of their homes, household chores, agriculture, weaving baskets and selling cowries (Mwaniki, 2022).

Socio-culturally, the Bajuni practised endogamy which is a custom of marrying within a specific, social cultural or indigenous group in accordance with the custom marrying in their extended families (Gardner & Bushra, 2004). A wealth of song and poetry abounds today among the Bajuni with the songs referring frequently to the period before their displacement from their original settlement, Shungwaya (Prins, 2021). Politically, the Bajuni had no central government and no ruling family as evidenced by tradition (Nurse, 2007). They were ruled by the Sultan of Zanzibar who managed his subjects through a *Murdir* (an Islamic leader) (Laher & Singioei, 2014). Although all Bajuni have been Muslim from at least the 8th century, ancestral worship is practised within the orthodox Islamic frame of reference (Middleton, 2004)

Sanye

They are considered to have the oldest history in Lamu and are also the least in number ranging from 1000 to 2000 (Hassan, 2022). They were also originally settled in Shungwaya before moving to the Tana River banks referred to as Iwizoon. In due course, they spread out to the surrounding forests (Mwita, 2023). Similar to the Nguni speakers in South Africa, their dialect is also characterized by click sounds (Ngugi, 2023). Traditionally, the Sanye are hunter-gathers who were well known for their prowess in hunting coming from their knowledge of archery and extraordinarily powerful bows which they used as weapons. With the total ban on hunting by the government, they have been forced to adopt agronomy (Mwita, 2023).

Socio-culturally, the Sanye have retained their traditional culture trying as much as possible to shun modern lifestyles. Their authority system consisted of a council of elders with the oldest men assuming the roles as the governing body and a traditional practitioner as the medium of ancestral spirits. Compared to their pastoral and agricultural neighbors, they tended to be far less rigid and hierarchical (Mwaniki, 2022).

The Sanye traditionally believed in a supreme being and revered spirits, seeking their intervention when facing difficult decisions. Although Islam has largely replaced their traditional beliefs, some practices still involve offerings to ancestors, which are made at sacred sites under specific circumstances (Mwita, 2023).

Orma

They are eastern Cushitic speakers who are remnants of the once peaceful 'Galla People' of Ethiopia in Northern Kenya. They claim to have migrated from Shungwaya on account of famine. They are currently settled in the rich area of the Tana River Delta where they pursue an interesting semi-nomadic pastoral lifestyle (Abdi, 2022). Cattle are a very significant element in their culture and they mainly keep a distinct breed, the long-horned Zebu cattle which are among the finest in Africa (Mwangi, 2023). Traditionally, an Orma man had one wife. In recent times, since the adoption of Islam, polygyny is allowed. Like in other indigenous communities' gender determines the statuses and roles played by community members. Women are housekeepers assisted by adolescent girls while the men and boys are entrusted with herding livestock (Kariuki, 2023).

Politically the Orma were ruled by a chief (*hayu*) assisted by two junior chiefs from the two exogamous sections (moieties). Members of the same age group or *gada* did selection of the two chiefs whose main role was to preside over assemblies. Currently, the government nominates chiefs and this has eliminated the *Gada* system (Abdi, 2022). Their original religion included a belief in a creator associated with the sky

and the existence of spirits associated with nature (Kamau, 2022). The majority of the Orma have converted to Islam with only a countable number being traditional believers (Amin, 2023).

Despite trade interactions, the four indigenous communities have preserved their unique cultural identities and traditional religions, continuing to practice ancestral beliefs alongside Islam and Christianity. While they have adopted Swahili and integrated into the government's authority structure, their resilience highlights the strength of their cultural heritage amidst change. These communities exemplify the significance of maintaining one's roots in a rapidly evolving world.

After settling in Lamu from their original settlements, the Lamu Cultural Festival has provided an opportunity to strengthen these distinct identities by means of particular cultural activities despite the influence and adoption of Islam. This is evident in the composition of the teams in the various festival items with the distinct indigenous groups competing against each other.

Methodology

An ethnographic approach was followed in this research as it focuses on the social systems and cultural heritage of the indigenous communities of Lamu. The ethnographic approach is a qualitative research method mainly used in anthropology and social sciences. It includes immersive observation and participation within a community or culture to appreciate their social practices, beliefs, and interactions. The approach describes the way of life of a people by making sense of the inherent meanings of gestures, displays, symbols, songs and everything that has meaning in that culture (Smith, 2022). The method aims at giving an in-depth understanding of human behaviors as expressed in different cultures (Cresswell, 2020). A combination of qualitative research methods was used.

Participant observation was used where the researchers immersed themselves in the communities and took part in some of the festival items. This enabled the researchers to observe the people in their undisturbed, non-staged state (Johnson, 2023). Participant observation was the obvious method since the object of the study was a festival. This was aided by photography in support of the research findings. Participant observation followed by in-depth interviews enabled the researchers to observe and understand the different cultural values and practices of the indigenous groups of Lamu. This method was supplemented by open-ended in-depth interviews carried out both in individual and group context. The subjects were selected for their expert knowledge of festival items (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2005; Ochieng, 2023).

Focus group interviews were conducted with the men, women and children taking part in the festival items. A list of themes was prepared in advance where discussions about their involvement, their diverse opinions on different issues and their representation in the festival items took place (Johnson, 2023).

Discussion themes were prepared to guide the researchers and any uncertainties were clarified by follow-up questions. Benefits of using this method is that the researchers gain the participant's trust and therefore gets a deeper understanding of their activities and values (Taylor, 2022). The interviews were also conducted with the different stakeholders and sponsors to acquire information on their roles in the festival, the processes and challenges related to constructing an identity through festivals.

The Lamu Cultural Festival

The Lamu Cultural Festival (LCF) was created as a vehicle to bring indigenous communities of Lamu together with the aim of constructing a Lamu cultural identity. The Lamu Cultural Festival was founded by the Lamu Cultural Promotion Group in 2001 to create another tourism season which also coincided with the declaration of Lamu as a UNESCO world heritage site. The other main reason for initiating the Lamu Cultural Festival was to have another annual event other than the Maulidi festival which even though had been running for over a century, it was religious and lacked the element of culture in it. The LCF was to be a celebration of both the past and the future focusing on the beliefs and traditions of the indigenous communities of Lamu (Lamu Cultural Promotion Group; Lamu, *n.d**).

The objectives of the festival were: To revitalize and promote the Lamu culture and traditions (identity); To enhance the Lamu community's understanding, value and appreciation of its cultural heritage; To promote dialogue between different cultures and civilizations; To lay a strong cultural foundation to the present and future youths so that they will inherit a strong and stable cultural set-up; To enhance the Lamu tourism industry (Lamu Cultural Promotion Group).

Every year different stakeholders and sponsors are involved in the planning process of the LCF. These include the Lamu County Government who are the main partner, National Museums of Kenya, the Lamu Tourist Association, Lamu Conservation Trust, Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife and Kenya Tourism Board. The LCF is usually organized to coincide with the high tides of the sea which are a favorable condition for dhow sailing races. It was clear that the indigenous communities were neither consulted nor involved in the planning of the events, which contradicts the festival's objectives, and the perspectives found in the literature regarding community involvement and inclusion (Getz, 2010).

Relation of Activities to the Construction of a Lamu Cultural Identity

The dhow race, which is originally a Bajuni practice, was one of the main items accommodated in the LCF. Each dhow was composed of a captain and crew members all from the same indigenous group. The donkey race that is the other main attraction at the festival was also represented on indigenous group context. The two activities are icons of Lamu, but by the fact that the communities participate in indigenous group context, the role they play in bringing the four indigenous communities together is ambiguous (Lamu Conservation Trust, 2021).

Each of the four indigenous groups performed their traditional dances at the festival celebrating their pasts. These dances played a considerable role in the fostering of cultural identities as they were strongly based on tradition with social, political, economic, religious and recreational meanings. Another common practice among the four ethnic groups is storytelling and poetry which were presented at the festival. This served to inform the youth of their respective indigenous groups' histories. Traditional handicrafts and skills that were showcased, contributed to the demonstration of their differences.

Hence, distinction between the four indigenous groups as well as other communities that participated in the festival was evident. The displays were done separately with the four indigenous groups showcasing their arts and crafts separate from the other communities (Laher & Singioei, 2014). These practices led towards sustaining the respective cultural traditions and identities.

Swimming and the Bao game, which are Bajuni social activities, were also included in the festival items. Other communities have learnt and somehow adopted these practices, but the Bajuni remain the masters. The Swahili bridal show, although not part of any of the four indigenous groups' cultural activities, was also included in the festival. The Bajuni have completely adopted this practice, with other members of the rest of the indigenous communities also in the process of gradually adopting it. These can be seen as a well-structured attempt to contribute towards the creation of a Lamu identity. It is evident that the Bajuni cultural activities were more dominant beating the purpose of the aim of the LCF to bring the four indigenous communities to unite and attempt to construct a Lamu identity (Ahmed, 2023).

Motivations for Indigenous Communities Members' Participation in the Festival

Motivation is the driving force towards choosing different types of activities that the participants prefer to take part in (Williams & Soutar 2021), Participants in the festival items from the different indigenous groups were interviewed on the reasons why they took part in the festival items. Among the reasons for participation are:

Social identification. It is the reason why people identify with and act in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2019). It is how people relate to others. A festival serves as a platform for binding community members together and creating a sense of belonging and social identity among the community members. Members from the different indigenous groups participated in the donkey race, a practice that existed even before the introduction of the LCF. The race therefore serves as a binding factor as the different groups are drawn together, creating a sense of belonging.

Individual and collective pride. Cultural festivals play a big role in both individual and collective pride, contributing towards a sense of community (Ngugi, 2022). Individuals and groups participating in the festival items took pride in representing their indigenous groups. They also get a feeling of attachment and belonging to their ethnic group when they participate in festival items individually like in the swimming and donkey competition and in group context like in the traditional

Education. Communities are empowered to identify problems and are assisted with information on how to manage their environment. At the Lamu Cultural Festival, the Lamu Conservation Trust (LCT), a community-based programme, educates the residences of Lamu on sustainable practices to conserve ecology through proper methods of waste disposal. Together with the Lamu County Council, the LCT addresses the public gatherings at the town square during the festival period. Themes addressed include their roles in the preservation and conservation of their individual cultural heritage and social environments. One of the lectures given at the annual LCF focused on the impacts of the proposed Lamu port and on the traditional homes of the indigenous communities (Lamu Conservation Trust).

Family cohesion. People participate in a festival for a need to belong and to represent their families (Getz, 2010). At the Lamu Cultural Festival, during the Swahili bridal show, women from the same family usually make up girls from their families for the bridal ceremony by dressing them in wedding attire and henna painting.

Enjoyment, escape from routine, relaxing. Since a festival is a public themed celebration for the public, it provides the community members with an opportunity to socialize. People take time off their normal schedules in order to participate in the festival items (Van Zyl, 2002). Escape from the daily routine was

noted among the youth and the children who were excited to interact with visitors at the island. On the other hand, the adults were happy to escape from the mainland and seek socialization with others who have the same cultural interests.

Revitalizing ethnic culture. Through performances like dances and poetry, arts and crafts, communities are able to conserve and revive their cultural practices and values. This is in agreement with Chacko (2020), who assert that the celebration of tradition and culture through reviving old traditions, together with living culture revitalizes ethnic culture.

Stakeholders and Sponsors

Incorporating stakeholders in the planning process of a festival is a prerequisite for a successful festival combined with community satisfaction (Reid & Arcodia 2002). Arcodia and Robb (2020) remark that for the success of a major event, several stakeholders from different sectors including government, community, corporate and non-profit sectors come together. The stakeholders in these sectors are all interconnected, which directly or indirectly influences the planning process of the event.

Lamu Cultural Promotional Group (LCPG) is a non-political community-based organization whose mandate is the conservation and promotion of the indigenous tangible and intangible cultures. It outsources funds from other stakeholders and donors, recruit participants for the festival items and creates succession strategies.

Lamu Tourist Association (LTA) is an umbrella organization made up of Lamu's independent tourism businesses whose aim is to raise Lamu's profile ensuring that tourism developments and practices are culturally sensitive and sustainable and to protect Lamu's world heritage status. LTA supports the LCF in kind by organizing and providing accommodation for the festival participants (Lamu Cultural Promotional Group; Lamu Museum).

Kenya Tourism Board (KTB) is a state corporation whose role is to market Kenya as a tourism destination. It provides detailed information on the festival and an introduction to the different cultures in Lamu and the variety of activities to expect at the LCF. The National Museums of Kenya (NMK) aims to interpret the heritage of Kenya to stimulate appreciation and learning. Lamu Museum, which is part of the NMK, plays a major role in the planning of the LCF by providing institutional support and facilities for the festival items. The town square, the fort and the *Mwanaarafa* building are utilized for the festival at no cost (Ondicho, 2003; Horng and Tsai, 2010).

The Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife is in charge of all matters pertaining to tourism nationwide with a mandate to formulate tourism policy and planning. With the LCF the Ministry provides grants, markets the festival and initiates collaboration with other sponsors. Media plays a key role in the festival as a means of broadcasting and advertising festivals and events. The annual LCF primarily utilizes social media as its main advertising platform, with channels such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp (Thome, 2014). These platforms also create archives that organizers can reference in future, aiding in the planning and execution of successful festivals that foster a cohesive Lamu identity.

Lamu County Government is a vital and irreplaceable government body that makes the decision whether and when the festival will take place (Smith, 2021). It provides infrastructural support by the renovation of buildings, signage of sites and cleaning up the seafront to improve visual aesthetics for the festival. Another

major role the county government plays is to deploy the Kenya Defense Forces to provide security to both tourists and the local communities at the festival (Lamu County Government, *n.d**).

Lamu Conservation Trust (LCT) is a non-governmental organization that endeavors to conserve indigenous cultures, wildlife and marine ecologies of Lamu eco-region. The LCT empowers the communities by educating them on conserving their indigenous cultures through balancing the social and economic needs of the communities. The LCT is very valuable to LCF as it provides cash grants and sponsorships towards the festival activities (Lamu Conservation Trust *n.d**).

The host community is the backbone of a cultural festival; with no host community there would be no festival (Getz, 2010). The distinct indigenous groups in Lamu come together to participate in the festival items, to observe and learn local traditions and history. All categories (children, youth, the elderly) take part in the various festival items. Women of all age groups participate in the Swahili bridal ceremony, the traditional dances and henna painting. Young men and boys take part in the swimming competitions. The dhow competition and the donkey race are for the young and strong men, while the Bao game is reserved for the older men. Storytelling and poetry is a forte for the elderly, who have years of knowledge regarding their origins and histories of the various indigenous groups. These are used as a tool for the indigenous groups to understand, value and appreciate their cultural heritage (Van Zyl and Botha, 2004).

The Bao game, the dhow and donkey race which have been adopted by the four indigenous groups as cultural icons of Lamu, clearly serve as a binding factor. The different indigenous groups see the festivals as an opportunity to strengthen and retain their cultural identities.

The Extent to Which Cultural Identity Has Been Established

An event qualifies as a festival if it has the following: a public themed celebration, is public, for the public and with a series of performances celebrating the community (Mair & Laing, 2020). Therefore, the LCF qualifies as a festival as it is a celebration of both the past and the future focusing on the beliefs and traditions of the indigenous communities of Lamu.

Among the objectives of the LCF is to promote Lamu culture and traditions (identity). The festival has however not been able to achieve this as it has brought the individuals from the distinct indigenous groups together. The festival has provided an opportunity for the ethnic groups to showcase their distinct cultural values and practices and even revive distinct ethnic identities. This coincide with the views of (Mwende 2022; Ahmed, 2023) who assert that where several cultural groups are in contact with each other, the distinct indigenous groups tend to cluster themselves in their distinct groups allowing them to reclaim and celebrate their inimitable identities even amongst boarder social changes. These researchers contribute to understanding how festivals function as dynamic cultural spaces where individual identities are both preserved and celebrated.

The LCF's other objective was to promote dialogue among the different cultural groups. The festival provides a unique opportunity for the communities to promote ethnic understanding by celebrating local cultures and traditions. The coming together of the distinct indigenous groups during the festival provides a platform for the various communities to learn about other cultures. This is achieved through the elders educating the youth about their history, through dances, crafts and oral performances.

The LCF also intended to lay a strong foundation for the present and future youth to inherit a strong and stable cultural set up. Even though the festival has been successful in creating an interest among the youth in the context of their own respective cultural practices and values, it has failed in creating a Lamu cultural identity. The youth are learning about their respective histories and also acquainting themselves with their respective indigenous skills, promoting ethnic identity.

Conclusions

The persistence of the four indigenous communities in Lamu demonstrates their exceptional ability to preserve cultural identities and traditional beliefs despite external pressures. The Lamu Cultural Festival plays a significant role in celebrating this heritage, providing a platform for these communities to express their unique cultural practices and foster unity through shared activities. Their ability to maintain ancestral traditions alongside adopted religions highlights the enduring importance of cultural roots in a rapidly evolving world. This suggests that cultural heritage can thrive even in the face of globalization and societal integration.

However, while the Lamu Cultural Festival has the potential to promote a unified Lamu culture, it cannot achieve this on its own. Despite its longstanding history, the brief duration of the festival, only four days each year, limits opportunities for deep interaction among the diverse indigenous groups. As a result, the festival's short timeframe may hinder the development of a cohesive Lamu cultural identity.

Recommendations

To cultivate a unified Lamu identity, further research is needed to explore the process of acculturation and how it could help in the creation of a singular cultural identity. More sustained engagement beyond the festival is crucial to allow for meaningful connections between the diverse groups in Lamu.

Additionally, involving indigenous communities in the planning of cultural festivals is essential for their success. In the case of the Lamu Cultural Festival, greater participation from these groups is needed. Organizers should prioritize identifying and incorporating the cultures and values of the various indigenous communities in every stage of planning. Understanding and respecting this cultural diversity is key to ensuring that the festival is meaningful for all involved.

Ultimately, the LCF should be viewed as a platform for cultural exchange, where communities can share and learn from each other's traditions. This ongoing process can contribute to the development of a cohesive Lamu cultural identity over time.

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