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Original Article

Preserving the Collective Memory of the Swahili Culture: An Ethnographic Study of Lamu Island

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Keywords:

Collective Memory,
Swahili Culture,
Getting Lost,
Lamu Island.

The paper is part of the Master of Arts (Fine Art project) titled “Depiction of Cultural Aspects of the Swahili of Lamu Island using a Combination of Natural Plant Pigments as Painting Media” from Kenyatta University. It argues that the collective memory of any culture plays a significant role in historic preservation, restoration, conservation, restitution, and documentation. The Swahili have unique cultural elements, including marriage, music, architecture, woodcrafts, textiles, boat construction, body decoration, dance, and poetry. Many scholars have attributed the decline of the Swahili culture to assimilation, extensive migration, and the removal of artefacts from their sites within Lamu Island. The paper establishes a collective memory of the Swahili culture of Lamu Island. The researchers conducted fieldwork by assessing Swahili culture from archived information at the Lamu Fort Museum. The researchers also utilised a non-probability purposive sampling technique by issuing questionnaires to key informants, including Lamu curators, residents, and Swahili experts. The data was analysed quantitatively into thematic areas of the Swahili culture and interpreted by reflexivity. The paper has concluded by appreciating the collective memory of Swahili culture and noting the need for documentation in various initiatives.

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INTRODUCTION

Globalisation is strengthening global cultural connections and threatening the preservation of culture. As a result, cultures are advanced and lost with minimal documentation, restoration, conservation, restitution, and preservation (Nilson and Thorell 2018 and Kiarie 2024). Kiarie (2024) underscored that preserving culture is a priority in policy-making among countries such as the USA and Japan. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has taken a keen interest in safeguarding culture and historic sites across continents. Kiarie (2024) and Okumu (2016) highlighted innovative approaches for preserving culture, such as digital documentation and education programs in cultural centres. Funkenstein (1989) argued that any history cannot be documented without historical memory, meaningful events, and cultural artworks and experiences of a community. Janson, Simon, and Jacobs, among others (2006), noted that documentation is archived through text, drawing, painting, photography, and videography. Igarrero (2021) added that photography, videography, and artwork are sources of documenting the collective memory of a culture.

Statement of the Problem

The Swahili culture is getting lost due to external influences from Western countries, frequent migration of natives, external culture assimilation, and removal of cultural artefacts (Okumu 2016, Carm 2008, and Karanja 2012). Currently, the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), in collaboration with UNESCO, are safeguarding the Swahili culture along the coastline according to NMK (2023). This study establishes the collective memory of the Swahili culture of Lamu Island. Its intention is to document Swahili culture using a new painting medium in the master of Fine Arts project.

LITERATURE REVIEW**The Collective Memory of Swahili Culture**

Heersmink (2021), Igarrero (2021), and Assmann (1995) build upon the ideas of Halbwachs, which suggest that collective memories are shared cultural thoughts of a community, nation, religion, political group, generation, or family. It contains cultural practices, rituals, traditions, artefacts, and monuments. They added that collective memory is documented through photography, videography, drawing, text, oral literature, and artworks, among others.

East Africa has a wealth of cultures, languages, and traditions that are well documented. For instance, Ugandans are known for vibrant music. Rwandans and Burundians are recognised for drumming and dancing. The Maasai of Kenya are known for their distinctive warriors with body decorations (Giblin 2018 and Culture Kit East Africa 2024). Kung'u (2016), Namunaba (2023), Caplan (2013), and Heathcott (2013) illustrated that Swahili culture is among the unique cosmopolitan cultures along the coastline of Kenya.

Marriage and Weddings

Namunaba (2023), Kiriama, Ballarin, Katana, and Abungu (2008) emphasised that marriage holds a significant role in Swahili culture. Swahili weddings have elaborate ceremonies that incorporate artistic body expressions, henna designs, distinctive fashion styles, embroidered textiles, leso/ khanga fabrics, and woven sitting mats.

Clothing and Textiles

Namunaba (2023) illustrates that Swahili dresses have intricate decoration. Men wear a long white robe called a *kanzu* along with an embroidered cap (*kofia*) when attending the mosque. Swahili women

traditionally wear long black dresses known as *buibui* and *hijab* (Swahili that covers the face). Women also wear *khanga* wraps and sometimes cover their faces for modesty.

Music and Dance

Swahili culture places great importance on poetry, music, and dance (Namunaba, 2023; Kiriama et al., 2008). Swahili *malenga* (poetry) is highly esteemed among the Swahili community, shaping social behaviour. *Taarab* music is a melodic and poetic genre that celebrates the love and affection of Swahili newlywed couples in the Swahili community. *Chakacha* is a lively dance performed during ceremonies and accompanied by musical instruments.

Daily Activities and Religion

Heathcott (2013) and Kung'u (2016) noted that Swahili people historically engaged in trade across East Africa and the Indian Ocean. Other common activities include crafting leather sandals, basket weaving, calligraphy, pottery, and building traditional boats like the *Ngalawa* (outrigger canoe). Swahili artisans are also known for producing *Siwa*, a ceremonial horn made of ivory and brass (Kiriama et al., 2008).

Swahili Cuisine and Perfumes

Swahili cuisine is rich in food spices for cooking *pilau* and *wali* (rice cooked in coconut milk). The food is traditionally served on *sinia* (aluminium plates) (Namunaba 2023 and Kiriama et al. 2008). The Swahili food is sourced from the environment, such as tomatoes, okra, kale, spinach, mangoes, coconuts, and bananas. Swahili women also use jasmine perfumes made from floral scents.

Architecture and Sites

Swahili architecture reflects a blend of local and Arabic influences. Most of Swahili architecture is built using mangrove wood (Namunaba 2023, Kiriama et al. 2008). Swahili homes have distinct elements such as carved ceiling beams, door lintels,

and roof rafters. Wealthy merchants resided in stone towns, while the common population lived in rural settlements.

Furniture and Interiors

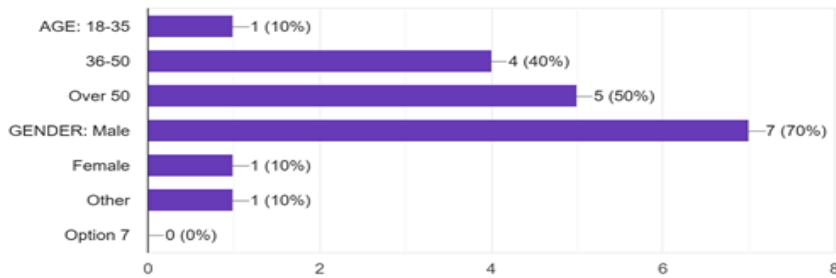
Swahili's interior design has intricately carved wooden doors, chests, windows, and furniture. The Swahili interior design is influenced by Omani artistic designs (Namunaba, 2023 and Kung'u, 2016). Both the exterior and interior of the design of Swahili homes reflect the Islamic religion and Swahili culture.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed ethnographic methodologies to examine the Swahili culture on Lamu Island. The Swahili community has a predominant population of approximately 5,143 people (KNBS, 2019). They represent one of the largest ethnic communities actively practising Swahili culture (Karanja, 2012). The study employed purposive sampling from select key informants, including Swahili scholars and museum experts (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003; Gary, 2009). It sampled 20 key informers within Lamu town because of location convenience. The researcher received 50% of the respondents, and it was justified to ascertain the sample. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) 30% is enough to validate the sampling. The insights into Swahili culture were acquired from books, scholarly journals, and articles from the National Museums of Kenya (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The primary data was collected through questionnaires focused on the key cultural elements of Swahili culture. The researcher took photographs with permission where there was no information on secondary data. The collected data was analysed using Barthel's (1996) key social processes to establish the collective memory of Swahili culture. The researcher identified a recurring key element of Swahili culture and categorised it into a thematic subject. The process is referred to as reflexivity interpretation (Assmann, 1995; Heersmink, 2021).

FINDINGS

Figure 1: The Age Bracket of Respondents.



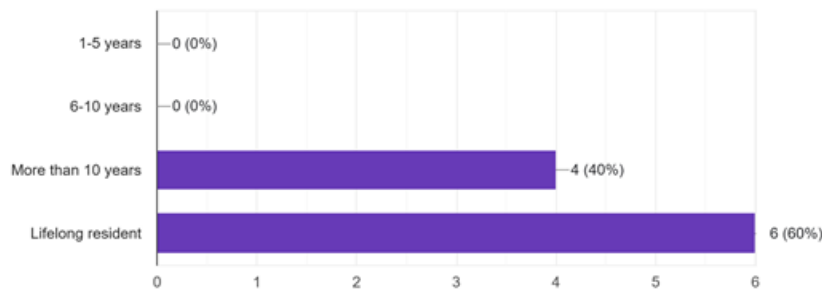
70% of male respondents answered the questionnaires precisely compared to 10% of female and other gender respondents. 50% of the male respondents were above 50 years of age. 40% were aged 36-40. Only 10% were young people aged 18-35.

Table 1: The Occupation of Respondents

1	Educator at Lamu Forte Museum and site
2	A painter
3	The curator of the Lamu Fort museums and site
4	Mzee wa mtaa Lamu
5	Assistant curator of Lamu Museums
6	Elder in Lamu Island
7	Founder of Ubunifu Lamu
8	Retired civil servant in charge of the Swahilis' House in Lamu
9	Tausi Lamu Hotel Manager—Lamu Island Entrepreneur
10	Security manager at Lamu Museum and site

The researcher accessed 10 respondents on Lamu Island due to the challenges of dispatching the questionnaire to 20 respondents. All respondents were based and working around the Lamu Forte Museum, including the curator of the Lamu Fort museums and the site.

Figure 2: The Living Period of Respondents in Lamu Island



The researcher found out that 60% of the respondents were lifelong residents of Lamu Island. The 40% had migrated from other geographical regions and they were living in Lamu Island for more than 10 years.

Respondents' Description Regarding the Swahili Culture

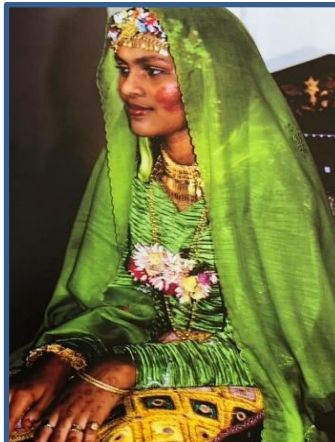
Marriage and Wedding

Figure 3: Marriage Ceremony



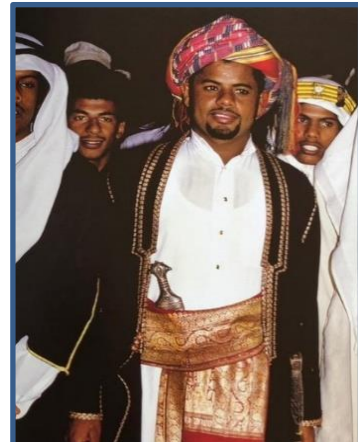
Source: Abungu 2009

Figure 4: Bride



Source: Abungu (2009)

Figure 5: Bridegroom



Source: Abungu (2009)

The Swahili marriage is influenced by Islamic culture. Weddings are family-centred events where two families come together. The marriage starts with a discussion of the dowry and celebrations. The bride is adorned with *henna*, jewellery, and a green wedding dress. The bride enhances her appearance through hair plaiting, skin lightening, and heavy

makeup. Men dress in *Jambia* with daggers and Sultan attire, dressed by Oman and swords. The wedding starts with the Islamic *Nikah* ceremony and ends with a celebration.

Clothing and Textiles

Figure 6: Swahili Women in Colourful Khanga



Source: Ogutu (2025)

Figure 7: Men in Kanzu and Women in Buibui



Source: Abungu (2009)

Figure 8: Men in Kofia and Kikoi



Source: Google photo (2025)

Swahili clothing reflects both cultural identity and Islamic influence. Women wore *kanga* (always in two pieces), *buibui*, *dera*, *abaya*, *hijab*, *kitenge*, and *leso*. The clothing emphasises cultural modesty and the Islamic religion. Men wore *kanzu*, *joho*, *kofia*, *kikoi*, and *shuka* in any ceremony, including

weddings and religious events. These Swahili clothes express Swahili religious beliefs and culture.

Music and Dance

Figure 9: Women Dancing Men,



Source: Ogutu (2025)

Figure 10: Playing Swahili Musical Instrument



Source: Ogutu (2025)

Figure 11: Men Dancing Ngoma Dance,

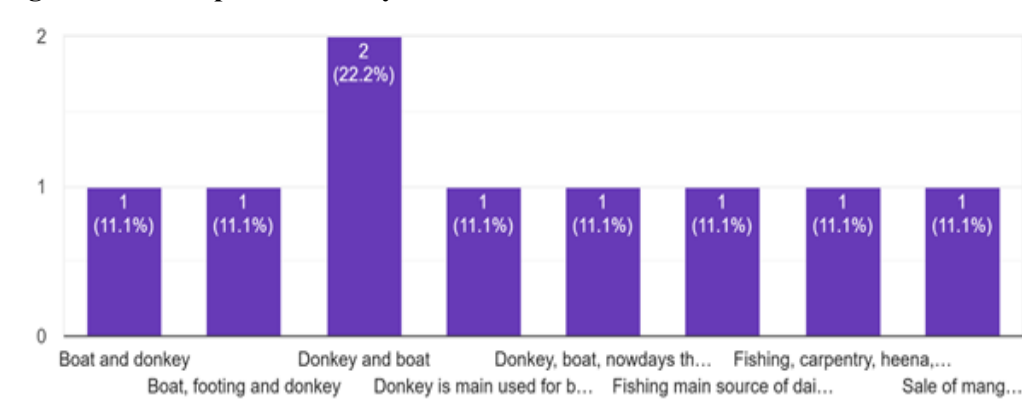


Source: Ogutu (2025)

Music and dance are key cultural expressions of Swahili celebrations. *Msondo* drumming is performed by both men and women. *Goma la Barani* and *Kirumbizi* (stick dancing) are performed exclusively by men. Women perform *vugo*,

lelemama, and *chama*, especially during weddings. These performances are accompanied by drumming and Qur'an recitation. Men and women have separate dances meant for socialisation. The bar graph below shows transport and daily activities.




Figure 12: Transport and Daily Activities



Donkeys are the main mode of transport system for carrying goods and people on the streets of the old town. Walking is also common among residents. Boats, dhows, and fibre boats travel between the island and the mainland. The economy is largely

tourism, where visitors visit historical sites, old architecture, and beaches. Fishing is another major economic activity among the Swahili residents.

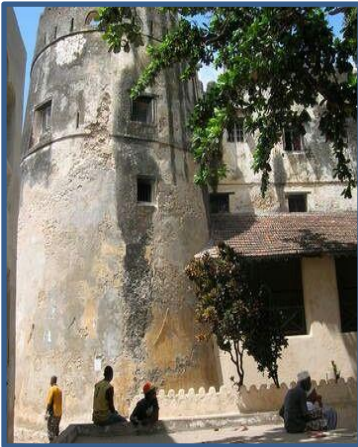
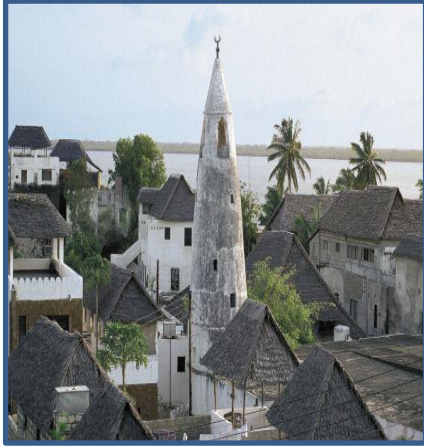

Cuisine and Perfume

Figure 13: Swahili Breakfast	Figure 14: Coffee	Figure 15: Swahili Food
		
Source: Google photo (2025)	Source: Google photo (2025)	Source: Google photo (2025)

Swahili culture is rich in food, cuisine, and perfumes. The common dishes of Swahili include *pilau*, *biryani*, goat meat soup, *biringanya*, seafood, and coconut-based meals in the open air. The food is typically eaten by hand. Udi (a fragrant perfume)

and jasmine are used by married women. Udi is used for personal and romantic appeal at night.

Site and Architecture

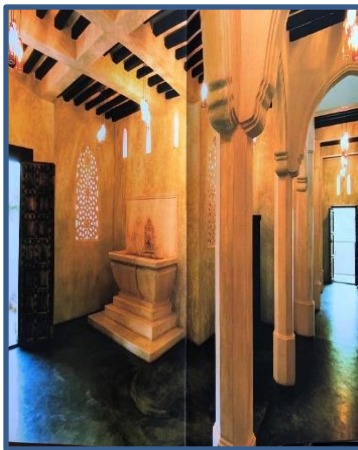
Figure 16: Lamu Forte	Figure 17: Mosque	Figure 18: Lamu Island
		
Source: Google photo (2024)	Source: Google photo (2024)	Source: Google photo (2024)

Swahili architecture is significantly shaped by the influences of Islamic, Indian, and Arabic styles. The architecture is characterised by coral stone and mangrove wood. Swahili houses feature intricate carved window and door designs. The old architecture is often located in historic areas like Lamu Island, Matondoni, and the Takwa ruins. The

Lamu Fort and Shela beaches are notable landmarks on Lamu Island. Swahili architecture is significantly shaped by the influences of Islamic, Indian, and Arabic styles.

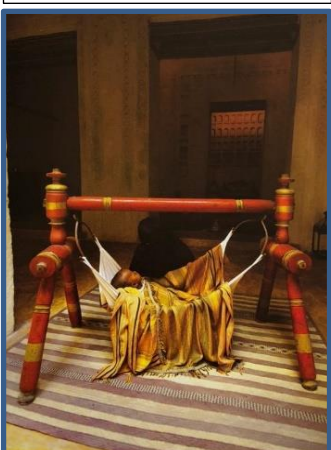
Furniture and Interior

Figure 19: Swahili Interior



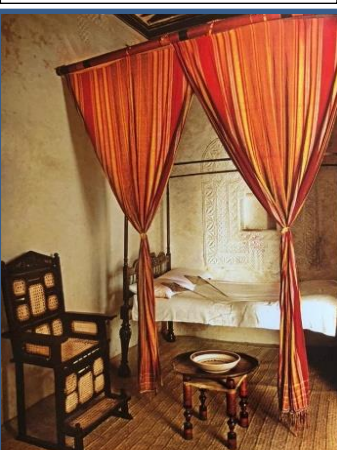
Source: Abungu (2009)

Figure 20: Baby Swing



Source: Abungu (2009)

Figure 21: Swahili Interior



Source: Abungu (2009)

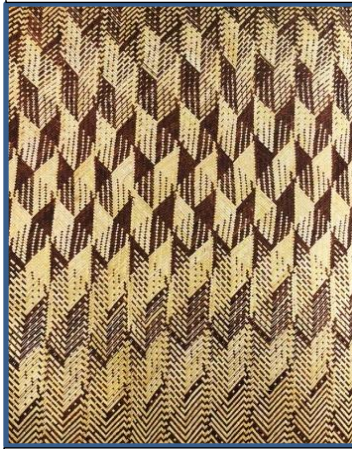
Swahili interior includes furniture such as *Kitanda Pilipili*, *Ushutu*, *Kiti cha Enzi*, and *Kiti cha Jeru* (beds, tables, and chairs). The furniture is carved wooden designs made from mangrove wood. The Swahili homes are divided into functional spaces such as a prayer area, *barazani* (sitting room), kitchen, and bedroom. Doors and windows of the Swahili houses are uniquely styled with geometrical

designs. The complex design of the furniture reflects the owner's financial status and religious beliefs.

Respondents' Description of the Visual Element of the Swahili Culture

Symbols, Patterns, or Motifs Found in the Swahili Culture of Lamu Island

Figure 22: Mat Design



Source: Abungu (2009)

Figure 23: Door Design



Source: Abungu (2009)

Figure 24: Door Symbols



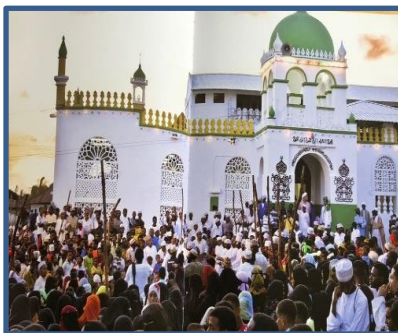
Source: Abungu (2009)

Swahili artistic symbols and patterns are deeply rooted in Islamic and Swahili architectural designs. Common motifs include the moon, star, floral designs, fruit shapes, diamond/*Kasashafa* patterns, and the Lamu eye. These designs appear in dress codes, *kofias* (Islamic caps), dhow motifs, carved doors, plasterwork, and other decorative elements.

Respondents' Comments Regarding Key Festival Events, or Ceremonies of Swahili Culture

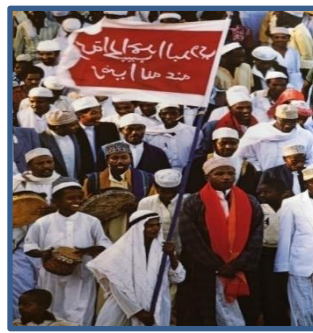
Maulid, Yoga, the Lamu Cultural Festival, the Shella Dhow Race, Ramadhani, Eid, and New Year.

Figure 25: Swahili Celebration



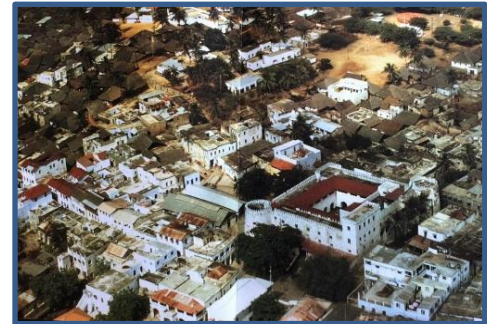
Source: Abungu (2009)

Figure 26: Maulid Celebration



Source: Abungu (2009)

Figure 27: Eid Celebration



Source: Abungu (2009)

Respondents' Comments Regarding the Swahili Culture

The Swahili culture of Lamu Island is rich and recognised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

However, it faces significant threats from modern influences. The younger generations are showing a lack of interest in Swahili culture and traditions such as music, dance, and marriage customs. There is a

strong call to preserve and promote Swahili culture for future generations.

DISCUSSION

Demography of Lamu Island

The study found that 70% of insights into Swahili culture are held by older men aged over 50. They are key lifelong residents of Lamu Island and some who have lived on Lamu Island for over 10 years. The study also revealed that 10% of younger people aged 18 to 35 and women across age groups had limited insights regarding the Swahili of Lamu Island. Therefore, this poses a serious threat to the continuity of Swahili culture for the next generation. It also disadvantages shared memories that shape the Swahili culture.

Marriage and Wedding

Swahili marriage is a family affair deeply embedded in religious beliefs, and it reinforces Islamic religious bonds. The Swahili wedding ceremonies are characterised by an elaborate Islamic ceremony known as Nikah. The ceremony reflects the couple's commitment to the Islamic legal and moral frameworks of Islam. Women beautified themselves with body bleaching and *henna* decoration. They plait their hair (*kusuka*) and clothe themselves with intricate textiles like *leso*/khanga. The Swahili bride dresses in green and jewellery to symbolise fertility and purity. The groom wears Omani attire with a dagger (*Jambia*). The sword signifies the masculine responsibility of protecting the household. The Swahili marriage is an intersection of the Islamic religion and their artistic expression.

Clothing and Textiles

Namunaba (2023) illustrated that Swahili dresses are symbolic of the Islamic religion. The clothing has an intricate decorative design meant for aesthetic purposes and religious affiliation. The Swahili men wear the kanzu, a long white robe, and the *kofia* (an embroidered cap). The clothes are put on when attending the mosque and other special

events such as weddings. Men wear a *joho* (a decorative overcoat), *kikoi* (a wrapped cloth), and *shuka* to signify social status. The Swahili women also wear *dera*, *abaya*, *kanga*, *leso*, and *kitenge* (bright colours and patterns of cloth worn by a woman). The *buibui* and *hijab* (a long black gown) are worn in public and religious spaces. The Swahili women's clothing reflects the principles of Islamic femininity and modesty.

Music and Dance

Music and dance are deeply embedded in the social fabric of Swahili ceremonies. The Swahili *malenga* (poetry) is an artistic expression through which social values are taught in the Swahili community. *Taarab* is slow music performed in Swahili gatherings such as weddings. *Chakacha*, *vugo*, *lelemama*, and *chama* are performed in wedding ceremonies. The dances are danced by Swahili women swaying their backs. Men dance *Ngoma la Barani* and *Kirumbizi* (stick dancing). Children recite the Qur'an to reflect the Islamic religion. Swahili music and dance are sensitive dances among the Swahili community. The dances are performed to express social emotions and celebrate the Swahili culture.

Transport and Daily Activities

The trade was a central activity across East Africa and the Indian Ocean. It assisted in transmitting slaves' goods, travellers, and other cultural practices. The trades include weaving leather sandals, basketry, and writing calligraphy. They traded with *Siwa*, a ceremonial artistic instrument made from ivory and brass. The Swahili people constructed *Ngalawa* (distinctive outrigger dhows) and fibre boats that linked other Lamu islands and the mainland. Donkeys remain a primary mode of transportation on Lamu Island. They move goods and people through narrow streets in the old town. Walking is also prevalent among Lamu residents in the old town. Many visitors visit the island to experience historical sites, architecture, beaches, ancient mosques, coral stone houses, and carved

doors. Tourism is a central economic activity, and fishing remains the main source of income for the residents of Lamu.

Cuisine and Perfumes

Swahili cuisines, foods, and olfactory perfumes have been Swahili culture for many years. Swahili cuisine and food are served during communal feasts, religious festivals, and family gatherings. Dishes such as *pilau* and *wali* rice are served on *sinia* (large round aluminium trays) and eaten by hand. The foods and perfumes are noted to reinforce social bonds in families. The Swahili food is drawn from natural plants in the environment, vegetables such as tomatoes, kale, spinach, and pepper. In some cases, seafood like *Kamba* is served alongside biryani, *biringanya* (eggplant-based meals), and goat meat soup. Swahili women love distinct perfumes to enhance their beauty in social circles. The *Udi* perfume is used among married women during the night hours. *Udi* is composed of oud wood and floral. Floral perfumes from jasmine and rose fragments are common among Swahili women to please their men.

Site and Architecture

The Swahili architectural style developed over centuries due to interactions of merchants and settlers from Arabia. The Swahili houses were constructed using local materials, such as coral stone and mangrove wood. The materials create a beautiful carved ceiling beam, ornate door lintels, and roof rafters. Swahili houses have geometric and floral designs on arched windows and decorative plasterwork. The architectural design of Swahili houses conveys social status in the Swahili community. For instance, wealthy families lived in urban coastal settlements built from coral limestone. Lower-income families lived in houses with thatched roofs made from local materials. Matondoni, Lamu Forte, and Shela Beach are examples of Swahili architecture and sites.

Furniture and Interiors

Swahili furniture and interiors are borrowed from Oman and the Arabs. The furniture and interior express religious devotion and economic status. Swahili's interior features intricately carved wooden doors, chests, windows, and furniture. The furniture and interior walls feature design motifs that include floral and geometric patterns. The carved wooden furniture includes the *Kitanda cha Pilipili* (special bed meant for procreation), *Ushutu* (bed for nursing pregnancy), *Kiti cha Enzi* (a chair meant for elders), and *Kiti cha Jeru* (a smaller, detailed chair for the guest). Swahili interiors include spaces known as *barani* or *barazani* (a sitting room near the entrance for receiving guests), prayer areas, cooking spaces, and sleeping spaces. Every part of the space is furnished with carved beds, low tables, and stools. The arrangement of the Swahili interior shows the communal living and social life of the Swahili people.

Symbols, Patterns, or Motifs are Most Commonly Used in the Swahili Culture.

Patterns and motifs of the Swahili people are deeply rooted in Swahili religion. They carry the spiritual, social, and cultural ideals of the Swahili community. They are embedded in everyday objects, items, clothing, and architecture. The crescent moon and star are associated with the Islamic religion. They are seen in the architecture, furniture, utensils, and ceremonial attire of the Imam. Floral and fruit-shaped motifs are common features of Swahili designs. Floral designs celebrate the environmental nature and divine creation of God. The design appears on carved doors, plaster friezes, textiles, *kangas* and *kofias* (Islamic caps worn by Swahili men), and ceramics. The diamond pattern *Kasashafa* is a geometric shape that signifies the protection of life to seafarers. The patterns are seen on carved wooden furniture, doors, and plasterwork. The Lamu eye is an artistic design of a moon on a circle seen on the tail of boats. It is believed to offer spiritual protection at sea. The

Lamu eye appears in household items and ornaments such as necklaces.

CONCLUSION

The study expresses growing concern about the erosion of the Swahili culture. It has established distinctive collective memories of the Swahili culture, such as transport, music, dance, clothing, and marriage. UNESCO, the National Museum of Kenya, scholars, and other international agencies need to support the documentation of the Swahili culture. Therefore, the researcher has initiated an artistic documentation of Swahili culture by using natural plants of Lamu Island as a painting medium.

Recommendation

There is a need for policymakers to support cultural documentation initiatives to create comprehensive archives of Swahili culture, such as music, dance, clothing, transport, and marriage. Cultural institutions should facilitate the innovative process of documenting Swahili culture in well-organised documentation.

Acknowledgment

I sincerely thank Mrs. Khadija Issa Twahir, the Chief Librarian of the National Museums of Kenya, Lamu Fort Museum. She supported the fieldwork study on Lamu Island. I achieved objective one with her overwhelming support of research logistics, good accommodation, and the well-being of the Swahili people of Lamu Island.

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