



# Cultural Identity: Kenya and the coast

BY HANNAH WADDILOVE



Lamu Island on Kenya's coast.

## Key points

- Lack of popular knowledge on the coast's long history impedes understanding of contemporary grievances.
- Claims to coastal sovereignty have been used politically but fall prey to divisions among coastal communities.
- Struggles to define coastal cultural identity damage the drive to demand political and economic rights.
- Concerns about economic marginalization are acute for mega-infrastructure projects.
- The failure of coastal representatives has contributed to the region's marginal political status on the national stage.

## Panellists

Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulkadir (Historian)

Stanbuli Abdullahi Nassir (Civil Society/Human Rights Activist)

## Moderator

Billy Kahora (Kwani Trust)

## Introduction

During 2010 and 2011, a secessionist campaign led by a group calling itself the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) dominated debates about coastal politics. As a result of local grievances, the MRC's call for secession attracted a degree of public sympathy on the coast.

---

Debates emerged that portrayed two contrasting images of Kenya: the inclusive nation which embraces the coast, and a distinctive up-country world which is culturally and politically remote from the coast.

On 7 December 2016, the Rift Valley Forum and Kwani Trust hosted a public forum in Mombasa to discuss the place of the Kenyan coast in Kenya's public imagination, and how this has shaped attitudes, media representations, and most importantly, government policy on the coast, including current security strategies, land and infrastructure.

## Background

The widely held notion that the coast is different from up-country Kenya has a long history. From its distinct colonial experience as a separately governed protectorate under the Sultan of Zanzibar, to its unique economic relationship with the Indian Ocean littoral and the Middle East, the coast has a particular history of international cultural and religious exchange.

Today, the meaning of a distinctive coastal world is also manifest in widespread perceptions among populations at the coast of political, economic and identity-based marginalization from the Kenyan nation. As the forum discussion revealed, however, the idea that the coast is different portrays a monolithic image of coastal cultural identity, which conceals the politically active debates over this highly contested question.

## Historical context

The coast's long, distinctive political and economic history is an important source of local pride. Identifying key milestones in that history, however, Stanbuli began by stressing the general lack of knowledge on its details. From coastal human settlement in the first century, to the fifteenth century conquest by the Portuguese, and the Sultan of Zanzibar's nominal rule over the poorly defined Ten-Mile strip. As elsewhere in Kenya, claims to historical knowledge play an important role in the demand for perceived rights. For Stanbuli, the lack of historical awareness was central to the coastal difficulties of organising politically.

On significant historical agreements, Stanbuli highlighted the Sultan of Zanzibar's 1895

agreement with the British colonialists to govern the Ten-Mile strip in return for rents. In most interpretations, the British assurance to protect the property and land rights of the Sultan's subject people meant only those of Arab descent. For Stanbuli, it was the root of contemporary injustices over racial hierarchies and land rights at the coast, at the continued expense of indigenous communities.

The social divisions codified by such agreements highlighted the double bind of marginalization felt in contemporary coastal communities. These intra-community divisions, along racial and ethnic lines, complicate how coastal communities perceive their political marginalization from the world of up-country Kenya.

## 'Pwani si Kenya'

The spirit of coastal autonomy apparent in such historical agreements has also been a prominent and popular focus of coastal politics with regionalist agendas. As Mao explained, the MRC was not the first manifestation of this. Claims of coastal sovereignty, backed by fears of marginalization within the Kenyan state, have emerged at times of anticipated political change, from independence to contemporary elections.

In the years before independence in the 1950s, the Coast People's Party (CPP) sought to protect the coast's special geographical status, while in the early 1990s, the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) expressed specific grievances with regards to the place of Muslims at the coast. While the MRC's use of the phrase *Pwani si Kenya* (the coast is not Kenya) expressed their explicitly secessionist agenda in 2011–2012, Mao argued that it could also be posed as a question of whether the coast is part of Kenya, given developmental marginalization.

The construction of a shared coastal history is at the centre of efforts to unite coastal communities in order to push contemporary political agendas on coastal difference or sovereignty. However, the limited gains of political parties and movements during the coast's post-independence history reflect the difficulty of overcoming the coast's own social divisions to unite as a political bloc against the rest of Kenya.

---

## Cultural identity and misunderstandings

Efforts to harness claims to coastal autonomy invariably seek to project an inclusive sense of coastal peoples, including Africans, Arabs and Asians. However, as the contributions from the panellists and the audience made clear, there is a lively and politically charged debate about what constitutes coastal identity and who its members are—whether it is a Swahili culture, an Islamic one, or based around the dynamics and traditions of fluid ethnic groups.

Both panellists stressed and recognized the social and political importance of understanding ‘who coastal people are’ but lamented what they referred to as the death of culture in most coastal communities. The perception that Lamu more actively invested in its culture reflected both the long-established traditions around festivals but also the imperatives of maintaining these for tourism.

In seeking to play a role in the public debate on awareness of cultural identity, Mao’s 2000 poem *Uzinduzi* (Awareness) provided some reflections:

‘...it is true that the coast people live like foreigners here... many don’t value us... let’s ask ourselves why this is so and find ways to solve this.’

The place of the coast in the wider Kenyan public imagination, argued Mao, reproduces stereotypes of coastal people as lazy and ‘living an easy life’. The danger, Mao argued, is that ‘when something is told over and over, no matter how false, it becomes a reality.’ The self-perception of coastal people is that they are ‘divided and suffering’, and that they do not wish to be engulfed into the idea of a Kenyan national culture that has been perceived as oppressive.

## Development marginalization

Claims of political and economic marginalization can be found across Kenya. At the coast, however, the uniquely long struggle for definition of cultural identity appears intricately connected to the region’s struggle for economic access to public and private resources. Complaints of economic marginalisation have long dominated coastal politics, including claims that up-country people

have better economic resource access and that the government does not invest in coastal people.

Panellists expressed similar concerns, giving examples of closed-down factories such as the Ramisi sugar factory in Kwale and the cashew nut factory in Kilifi. Stanbuli drew a distinction between economic investments that create jobs and mega-infrastructure projects, such as the standard gauge railway (SGR) from Mombasa to Nairobi. Such major projects, he argued, do not benefit coastal people and can be dismissed as ‘doing politics’—potentially a reference to the major corruption scandals connected to the SGR.

The controversial Lamu Port project, an integral part of the Lamu Port and Lamu–Southern Sudan–Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET), was an example given by Mao. In contrast to the alleged compensation provided to *miraa* (khat) farmers from Meru when the UK banned the substance, he argued, Lamu residents have so far been given no compensation for their displacement and land. The anticipated inward migration into Lamu from up-country Kenyans was another source of local concern.

## Coast and the state

The panellists’ contributions also underlined the level of marginalization and mistrust between ‘coastals’ and the state’s administration and security arms. Both are perceived as being run by—and for—up-country Kenyans. Such claims are acute with regards to the former provincial administration. As Mao argued, there has only been one Swahili administrator in Lamu since independence and all other local field officials have been from elsewhere.

Questions from the audience on security and how the panellists viewed the problem at the coast elicited responses further highlighting the extent of mistrust. Misinformation surrounding what caused and what happened during the Mpeketoni attack in June 2014, for example, has added to perceptions that the government is exaggerating Lamu’s security threat to damage the local economy. The conduct of the police was said to be particularly poor, including accusations of taking bribes to release criminals. Stanbuli, however, emphasised that a ‘frustrated person can be misused’ and will be likely to express their frustrations in dangerous

---

and destabilizing forms—for example, by joining radical Islamist groups such as al-Shabaab.

For Stanbuli, the failed role of the coast’s political, religious and intellectual representatives were most to blame for coastal people’s lack of political and economic status within the Kenyan state. He blamed ‘the Big Five’, in which he included religious leaders, politicians, elders, intellectuals and elites who, he claimed, were benefiting

from the status quo and doing a poor job as interlocutors or guardians of their communities. Responding to questions from members of the audience on whether devolution could play a role were not endorsed, the panellists said they did not see county governments as a solution. For Stanbuli, until coast people know their history and their identity, they cannot fight effectively for their political and economic rights.



## Credits

‘Cultural Identity: Kenya and the coast’ is the record of an event held on 7 December 2016 by the Rift Valley Forum in partnership with Kwani Trust. It is available for free download from [www.riftvalley.net](http://www.riftvalley.net). Cover image © Amina Abdulkadir.

The Rift Valley Institute works in Eastern and Central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development.

Copyright © Rift Valley Institute 2017. This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).