

# **Residents' Perceptions of Socio-cultural Changes from Tourism in Lamu World Heritage Town, Kenya**

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## **Abstract**

The inscription of Lamu Old Town as a World Heritage Site has led to increase in number of tourists from all over the world. Most tourists to Lamu are generally motivated in culture, nature and heritage. As tourism is regarded as an integral component of economic development strategies in developing nations, the development has induced changes on the economy, traditional values and lifestyles on residents of Lamu World Heritage Town. The primary data analysed in this study was collected through observation and informal conversations with tourist guides and those working in tourism sector. The empirical findings included a wide range of socio-cultural impacts of tourism. The conversations partly focused on local people's daily lives to understand their behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes of these impacts. Therefore, this research highlights the impacts of tourism development on specific residents' perceptions of changes in the economy, lifestyles and values, giving empirical examples from Lamu World Heritage Town. The results showed that tourism development is the major cause of the changes and socio-economic impacts of tourism are stronger and more positive than sociocultural impacts, due to the economic dependence of residents on tourism.

## **1.0 Introduction**

Tourism is now the world's fastest expanding and largest industry in the world (Saayman et al., 2003), and has a considerable impact on local development trends in terms of foreign exchange earnings and job creation (World Tourism Organization, 2000). The industry accounts for approximately 10% of GDP in Western countries and 40% in the developing countries (Sofield et al., 2004: 2). While the gross earnings from tourism are greater in many developing countries, it accounts for a greater proportion of the economy in many developing nations where the industry is one of the few reliable sources of foreign currency, job

opportunities and diversifying away from exporting primary products (World Tourism Organization, 2000). Tourism therefore is particularly important in developing nations and regarded to promote economic development. Kenya is an exemplary case, because income from tourism constitutes the country's second largest source of foreign exchange followed by Agriculture. The Kenya ministry of tourism report states that earnings from tourism industry improved from \$1.19 billion in 2017 to \$1.57 billion in 2018 with a 37 percent increase in the number of international visitor arrivals to 2 million in 2018 from 1.4 million in 2017 (Standard media 7<sup>th</sup> Jan 2019). These earnings from tourism have provided financial support for infrastructure development and conservation of heritage sites.

Heritage tourism is one of the most rapidly growing tourism niches in the world. Interests in cultural tourism, specifically, heritage sites inscribed on the list of World Heritage Sites by UNESCO appeal to international tourists, thus increasing the demand for tourism across the globe (Yang et al., 2010). Although much of tourism in Kenya is nature based, heritage tourism is also increasingly becoming an important niche in Kenyan tourist industry and attracting many tourists. Tourism destinations carrying the elements of cultural heritage constitute one of the key attractions for international travelers and tourists (Bille and Schulze, 2008). The Inscription of Lamu on World Heritage List (WHL) as "the oldest and best-preserved Swahili settlement in East Africa" by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for its cultural, historic and aesthetic value has raised the site's international profile thus attracting tourist/visitors across the globe. Visitors/tourists to Lamu are attracted by the living lifestyles, ancient artifacts and modern art and culture, who consume during their visits and spend time to learn about local history and cultures of the people (Timothy, 2011). The attractions foster tourism development in the area thus directly impacting the local communities.

Although the impact of tourism on both economic growth and employment is clearly positive, the effects are negatively affecting the local social culture (Roselyne, 2010). However, despite the goal of tourism development to improve the quality of life of local people, this goal cannot be achieved without knowing their perceptions on the changes that tourism development brings about. Therefore, this study aims to identify the socio-cultural impacts of tourism development on Lamu Old Town since its recognition as a world heritage site, by examining specific residents' perceptions of their own quality of life. Understanding residents' perceptions may help local decision-making in improving on important and negative issues and support tourism development through promoting particularly positive and important variables.

## **2.0 Methods**

### **2.1 Study site**

Lamu is located on the Indian Ocean along the Northern Coast of Kenya with two constituencies namely Lamu West and Lamu East. Lamu is a County constituted with three Islands (Lamu, Manda and the main land). The study was carried out at Lamu Old Town located in Lamu West constituency on Lamu Island. The town is the headquarters of Lamu County and a part of Lamu Archipelago in Kenya, with urban population of 12,839 (Kenya Census 2009) and can be reached by road 341 kilometers, 35 minutes by air, from Mombasa and by sea. The main economic activities in the county include crop production (coconut), livestock production, fisheries, quarrying and tourism.

The town features a historic centre with Swahili architecture creating emphasis on the importance of social structure in the creation of the urban forms. The town also maintains a close-knit and conservative society, which serves as a major centre for Swahili culture. The town features narrow corridors and huge stone buildings with attractively curved doors, influenced by distinctive integration of Swahili, Arabic, Persian, Indian and European building styles. The unique Swahili architecture, culture, spatial organization and heritage have turned the city of Lamu into a major tourist attraction. Lamu Old Town is inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2001 and forms one of the most crucial components of heritage tourism in Kenya. The inscription of the Old Town in UNESCO world heritage list has led to increase in number of tourists travelling to this destination.

### **Brief history**

Lamu Town is the oldest continually inhabited town and originally the Swahili (*are an ethnic and cultural group inhabiting East Africa*) settlements along the coastal East Africa. It is believed to have been established in 1377 with most of the population being Muslims. An Arab traveler (Abu-al-Mahasini) first visited the town in 1441 and in 1505 the Portuguese invaded Lamu and started controlling trade along the coast of the Indian Ocean (Trillo 2002, pg. 566). In 1652, Oman assisted Lamu to resist Portuguese control (Jackson 2009, pg. 89). Lamu was later governed as a republic under a council of elders known as the *Yumbe* who ruled from a palace in the town. A ruin of the palace still exists to date. During this period, Lamu became a centre of poetry, politics, arts, and crafts as well as trade. Many of the buildings were constructed during this period in a distinct classical style (Trillo 2002, pg. 555). In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lamu came under the political influence of the sultan of Zanzibar. The Germans

claimed Witu land in 1885 and opened a post office in Lamu to facilitate communication within the German protectorate in the sultanate (McIntyre & McIntyre 2013, pg. 22). It was the first post office to be established on the East African coast; which is now a museum (The German Post Office Museum) under the management of National Museums of Kenya. In 1890, Lamu and Kenya fell under British colonial rule and in 1963, Kenya gained political independence.

## **2.2 Data collection**

The researcher adopted ethnographic approach methods which included observation and informal conversations with tourist guides and those working in tourism sector. During informal conversations, the researcher gathered many interesting information about tourism including its effects in the economy, culture and social life on the community. The conversations partly focused on specific local people's daily lives to understand their behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes of these impacts. The conversations took place in Lamu World Heritage Town and Shella village between October and December 2018, and the researcher resided in Lamu during this period. The informal discussions were conducted in a comfortable atmosphere by having a conversation with my respondents in order to get detailed information about their experience and observations.

## **3.0 Empirical Results**

Residents' perception and attitudes towards the impacts of tourism are likely to be an important planning consideration in the successful development, marketing and operation of tourism products (Fredline and Faulkner, 2000). According to Ap and Cromtop, 1993, the level of support from the host community diminishes if a host community perceives tourism effects to be negative thus making positive resident perception of tourism development critical for their sustainability. People's perceptions are important because their attitudes towards tourism play a big role in their participation in tourism and benefits accruing to the community. An assessment of local people's daily lives was given attention during the study to understand their behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes of these impacts. Tourists guides and those working in tourism business sectors were asked about their opinions and perceptions of tourism development in Lamu Old Town. From the conversations, it was found that tourism development is the major cause for change in residents' economy, lifestyles and values. The results showed socio-economic impacts of tourism are stronger and more positive than sociocultural impacts, due to the economic dependence of residents on tourism.

The following sections discuss some of the local socio-cultural impacts of tourism in Lamu and how these impacts have influenced residents' perspectives. The impacts were identified through observations and informal conversations with the residents. The respondents identified the following changes of tourism development in Lamu.

### **3.1 The Socio-cultural Impact of Tourism**

The socio-cultural impacts of tourism in Lamu were reported to have mainly resulted from the effects of tourism development and the presence of the tourists. These impacts included;

#### **3.1.1 Changes in labour market**

Since its recognition as a World Heritage Site in 2001, the tourism sector in Lamu has experienced a significant growth leading to transformation of daily life for the locals. Tourism has direct, indirect and induced impacts on Lamu's economy (WTTC, 2012a). Economically, tourism has brought development through revenue and income generation, job creation, and poverty reduction. Income level since tourism became one of the most important components of the economy in Lamu Old Town, it has raised residents' income thus improving their life. The ways that tourism can complement existing livelihood activities emerged when talking with specific residents of Lamu Old Town. For those running restaurants, curio shops, operating in boat/dhow business and tour guiding, tourism is the major income source for their families. Youth in Lamu have engaged in boat business by taking tourists for water touristic activities like dhow trips, snorkelling, fishing, and to watch sunrise and sunset at Manda Island.

The increase in tourist number since the inscription of the town as a WHS in 2001, created an opportunity for the locals to start-up businesses, and these entrepreneurial activities have optimised the employment structure in Lamu. Tourism has also brought in developments as the locals have sold out their land to tourism companies to develop the tourism industry. Many hotels have been put up and created job opportunities for the locals who work in the hotels and others self-employed as tourist guides. The hotels also sources for their goods and services (including labour) locally. The locals directly sell furniture and food to hotels and unskilled locals are employed in the hotels as cleaners, gardeners and security guards thus making them earn an income. Women in Lamu Old Town are not left behind in sharing the benefits brought in as a result of tourism. The main activity undertaken by women is the production of handicraft for the tourist market who sell the products to tourist from the curio shops. The production and sale of handicrafts (mainly baskets, hats and mats) is mobilised through Matondoni Women's Group (MWG), a local women group. Selling of handicrafts is a mean of earning an income

for local women in Lamu to improve their livelihood. Therefore, tourism has created an impact on Lamu's labour market, with many residents gaining over 80% of their income from the industry.

The tourism enterprises in Lamu have contribute to national income through taxes, further generating revenues for both the national and county governments. Tax revenues in Lamu includes air, road and sea travels, business taxes and income taxes from jobs. The Kenya ministry of tourism report states that earnings from tourism industry across the country improved from \$1.19 billion in 2017 to \$1. 57 billion in 2018. (Standard media 7th Jan 2019). The revenues collected by the local government from business permits have improved the public utilities such as street lighting, litter control, and local transport infrastructure. The roads and airport have been upgraded by the national government making it easy to access the place.

However, beside its benefits, tourism has also affected the economy of Lamu residents thus affecting the livelihood. Although tourism creates employment, these jobs are seasonal thus leading to under-employment or unemployment during low seasons. For the case of Lamu, tourist guides and those employed in hotels reported that the seasonality of tourism plays a part in their income. During peak tourism season, income tends to increase whilst during low seasons, income decrease. Tourist guides reported that they earn more during peak seasons as they can take more than one tour trip a day whilst during low seasons, they earn less by taking one tour trip or can go without an income. Likewise, some employees in hotels reported that they earn low pay as compared to what other sectors pay and during low seasons, they lose their jobs thus affecting their income.

Tourism in Lamu has led to greater demand for goods and services by business enterprises thus increasing their prices and in return increases the cost of living. The recent demand for land in Lamu by tourism businesses such has hoteliers have caused the prices of land to go up and even some locals selling off their houses thus increasing the price of accommodation in the area. Although tourism development has improved the living standards of the locals, it was reported that the locals do not directly benefit from the profits made by business owners. One of the workers in one of the hotels, reported that most of the hotels in Lamu are privately owned by foreigners and the profits made are exported out of the community thus contributing less in developing the area. Due to the demand in infrastructure development by the locals, the

government is forced to generate more revenue by increasing taxes on tourism enterprises thus increasing the cost of living.

### **3.1.2 Impacts on population**

The creation of employment from tourism development has led to increase in population in Lamu. People from other parts of Kenya majority being Mijikenda (Giriamas) have migrated to Lamu in search of jobs. It was observed that majority of these immigrants are unskilled personnel who mainly work as gardeners, waiters and security guards in hotels and restaurants. During low season, people migrate to other towns to look for jobs thus reducing in population.

### **3.1.3 Impacts on culture, individual and family**

Experiencing different cultural practices enriches experiences, broadens horizons, and increases insight and appreciation for different approaches to living (Kreag 2001). For the case of Lamu, tourism has offered residents opportunities to meet interesting people, make friendships, learn about the world, and expose themselves to new perspectives. The locals view tourism as an opportunity for them to see another life and experience another culture. Youth who work as beach boys interact with tourist with an aim of getting married and go to abroad. Their wish is to travel to abroad to make money.

Since its recognition as a WHS site, Lamu residents have benefited from the status and the development of tourism thus changing residents' attitudes toward work. Before tourism development, people used to migrate in search for job in major cities (Mombasa and Nairobi). Almost every person talked to have a family member who left for work in these cities. Today, people are now being employed locally in hotels and tourism businesses and are said to be closer with their families. On the other hand, majority of tourist who visit Lamu are much interested in experiencing the local culture and history and they provide opportunities to support preservation of historical artefacts and architecture. According to officials at Lamu Museum and Lamu Marine Conservation Trust, their preservation and conservation programs are supported by tourist who visited and loved Lamu. The support comes in form of project funding for cultural activities.

It was also observed that tourism opportunities have caused harm to Lamu's culture. Tourists have brought diverse values to the community thus influencing the culture and social life. The traditional way of doing things is slowly changing because the young generation is not interested to learn the traditional practices (i.e woodcarving, fishing, music and dances,

basketry, cookery, etc) which they view as time consuming but instead adopt new western practices brought as a result of tourism. Traditional ceremonies are performed in annual cultural festival just to please tourists and not as a rite of passage to the young generation for them to learn the culture. The intension of traditional making of things has also changed. For instance, weaving baskets and making hats and mats is a longstanding cultural practice for women in Lamu. Traditionally, women made handicrafts for their homes such as mats for visitors and baskets for storing food. But due to the demand of this items by tourists, the handicrafts are now a supplementary source of income for many poor households in Lamu thus losing their original purpose.

Lamu residents are also trying to adopt the western culture and abandoning their own culture (way of dressing, language, eating habits and tourist behaviours). For instance, due to the nature of their work, tourist guides are required to learn western languages like Italian, English, Chinese, Arabic and German in order to easily conduct their tours. To be more competitive in the tourist industry labour market (in hotels), one is required to at least learn a foreign language in order to easily secure a job. This requirement has made most youth in Lamu to learn at least one of the western languages (mostly German and Italian) in addition to English and losing interest to learn their native language (*ki Amu*). People's values and norms have also changed to various level. The interaction with tourists, the locals mostly youth tend to copy some behaviours brought in as a result of tourism activities such as night dhow sleep and night drinking parties in hotels. Illegal activities like use of drugs and underage drinking is becoming a nuisance to the community as youth are indulging into these activities. One of the beach boys narrated that they are forced to use drugs for them to get 'high' so that they can sexually perform well to satisfy the tourist. The demand for drugs has led to increase of drug smuggling into the community.

The traditional art of cooking and building technique is also influenced by Asian and Arabic techniques. Traditionally, the locals used to cook cassava, fish and yams by boiling or using coconut, but due to influence from tourists from these countries, the locals are now cooking food with spices and adopted other foods like chapati and rice. The technique of building houses with carvings on doors and walls is also copied from Asia and Arabic style. The adoption of tourist behaviours and increase of tourist facilities has changed the trajectory of life in Lamu. The local customs such as 'keeping pure' for girls and marrying within the community is affected. For instance, female youth do not consider the importance of cultural

norms like 'keeping pure' (girls are required not to engage into sex until marriage). Young girls have indulged into prostitution to please tourist for financial gains and hope to be married and taken to abroad. Marrying non-local mate and mostly a foreigner may create family stress as one is required to maintain the religious and cultural believes of the community. Lamu is dominated by Muslims and a person intending to marry a mate is expected to be a Muslim or be ready to convert to Islam.

On the other hand, the increased tourists demand to Lamu has forced changes in the physical structure of the community. A tourist guide reported that the locals have sold off their family houses to western investors who instead modified the houses and converted them to hotels and guest houses for tourists. Prime land along the beach is also sold for development of tourist facilities thus changing the social and cultural set up.

### 3.2 Conclusion

Interactions between residents and tourists in Lamu has both positively and negatively impacted the community. Tourism development has brought in opportunities for the locals and at the same time put restrictions on individuals.

#### Summary of the impacts

Respondents identified the following changes as the most positive and the most negative impacts of tourism development in Lamu.

<b>Changes in labour market</b>	
<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
Increased Income	Low income during low seasons
Employment creation (new jobs)	Seasonal jobs or unemployment
Increased demand for goods and services	Increasing the cost of living
Revenue generation	Increased taxes
Infrastructure development	Increase in prices and inflation
Increase in land value	Increase cost of housing
<b>Impacts on population</b>	
Immigration due to availability of jobs	Immigration due to unemployment
New type of jobs in tourism	Unskilled jobs

<b>Impacts on culture, individual and family</b>	
New culture experience	Loss of cultural practises
Preservation of the heritage	Disappearance of local habits and traditions
New diverse values	Change in behaviour (prostitution, Alcoholism and drug abuse)
Language skills	Local language suppressed
Revival of local arts, crafts, and cultural events	Commercialisation of culture
Increase in land and house value	Change in physical structure, social and cultural set up.

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