

Title: Lamu District at the Crossroads: A Narrative of Chronic Trauma and Community Resistance¹

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Abstract: The Kenyan government's plan to build a sea port in Lamu District has been met with a considerable amount of resistance by indigenous residents. The resistance is characterised by two interrelated concerns. The first concern is that the proposed port will destroy the history, heritage, and culture of the District. The second is that the port represents an additional "land grab" by the government who is yet to institute land adjudication. These two concerns have drawn residents together in protest in a manner that signifies their fears. The weight of their protest is tied to the substance of a chronic trauma that reaches back to colonialism and extends forward to the current era of national independence. The chronic trauma is characterised by grounded feelings of displacement, dispossession, and alienation. These feelings are conjured at present by the prospect of a port and its perceived disruption. The situation is made worse by the fact that the government has remained reluctant to engage the residents. This is not a reasonable option. To address the substance of a chronic trauma it is necessary to confront its overall

Introduction

The destruction that European colonialism wrought on African societies resulted in a chronic trauma that has endured into the post-colonial era. The substance of this trauma can be found in the persistent and often violent struggle to re-create and reconfigure the African image and condition. Few issues capture the severity and weight of re-imagining African identity and its relationship to the independent nation-state like the struggle over land reform does.³ It is undoubtedly the most divisive and inflammatory issue that signifies and embodies the chronic trauma caused by colonialism. The consequences of this chronic trauma are permanent and subsequent generations after colonialism are not exempt from its disfigurement.

Kenya like most African nation-states is still mired in the processes and business of land reform. The lack of real progress in addressing the land issue has led to episodic violence and civil unrest. In the aftermath of the 2007 elections Kenya descended into a virtual bloodbath of ethnic-based violence in which the issue of land ownership and land tenure was prominent. When the violence ended more than a thousand people were dead and the nation was left reeling and debased.⁴ It then became clear that if Kenya is to avoid a total meltdown it would have to create the political conditions that will protect the democratic rights of its citizens and couple it to an equitable settlement of land claims stemming from the decades of colonialism. But these are not easy lessons to learn with solutions readymade for implementation. The often conflicting political and economic interests that attend to national development planning and its relationship to land reform are persistent obstacles.⁵

This article is an interdisciplinary case study. It utilises a narrative analysis drawn from interviews to contextualise a growing conflict over land and development in Kenya's Coast Province. Specifically, the focus is on the response of Lamu District residents to the news that the Kenyan government, without community consultation, is going to develop a sea in the District. The port is part of a multi-billion dollar (US) plan the government says is in the national interests of Kenya.⁶ The vast majority of residents disagree vehemently and they are resisting.

The theoretical contention here is that the reaction of the residents must be contextualised in their ongoing fears about losing their history, heritage, and culture.⁷ These fears are structurally tied to the tenuous situation over land ownership. The sea port is suspiciously viewed as a "land grab" by the government and evidence that the political leadership in Nairobi care little for the welfare of Lamu District and its indigenous people. The analysis here enters into this contentious and bitter space to understand the reactions of the residents. The focus is not on the feasibility of the proposed sea port. Rather, it is to contextualise the expressed fears of the residents inside the concept of an ongoing trauma that has its roots in the destabilisation of colonialism. It is argued that the situation is too serious to be ignored. To avoid further political instability and even violence the government must engage the residents in a transparent and democratic manner.

Theorizing the Chronic Trauma of Colonialism

It is usual to expect that when we speak of trauma the reference is to an individual experience. A rape survivor, for example, can be described as having suffered a trauma. The psychiatric diagnosis of such a trauma would normally include disruptive symptoms which may even threaten the health and long-term wellbeing of the victim. These disruptive symptoms may include feelings of loss, sadness, meaninglessness, alienation, forgetfulness, hurt, and anger. The experience may also move the rape victim to believe that life will never be the same no matter what may happen next. This profound loss of meaning cannot be underestimated if the rape victim is to survive in a holistic sense.

In recent decades the concept of trauma has been extended beyond the individual to include groups of people.⁸ A group may be a nation or it may be groupings of people inside a nation or across nations. The difference between an individual trauma and a group trauma is that in the latter the entire group is affected. A group trauma is, therefore, described as a collective trauma. In a collective trauma the disruption to the socio-political system poses a threat for the entire group. The symptoms are shared throughout the group and are too pronounced to be ignored. It is interesting to note that the disruptive or maladaptive symptoms that present in individual traumas are also found in group traumas. In effect, a group trauma also raises feelings and urgent questions about loss, meaning, and how to cope or even survive. A group trauma is no less a calling into question of reality and the meaning of life than an individual trauma.

There are essentially two types of collective traumas: an acute trauma and a chronic trauma.⁹ An acute trauma is experienced over a relatively short time frame and it is usually described by the sudden and obtrusive manner that it disrupts the routine of a group. Though an acute trauma has implications for the entire group it is mostly understood to be transitional. The assassination of a president or prominent political leader, for example, has implications for the entire nation but it is not permanent in its effect. Life usually returns to normal after a relatively short period as the group comes to terms with the appalling incident. Natural disasters like typhoons or earthquakes also fall into the category of acute traumas.

Chronic traumas on the other hand are not transitional because they grow out of longstanding contradictions in the socio-political system. A chronic trauma calls into question the very foundation upon which a nation is based. Unlike an acute trauma, a chronic trauma is not an isolated event but rather a series of festering events that produce permanent changes. The consequences of a chronic trauma have the added element of being generational in character. In other words, a chronic trauma is not isolated to just one generation but rather its effects carry over to subsequent generations.¹⁰

European colonialism in Africa is a prominent example of a chronic trauma with sweeping socio-political consequences that are permanent and consequential for all generations of Africans subsequent to the establishment of colonies. Colonialism disrupted and destroyed the socio-political structures of African life and replaced it with oppressive alien structures

and value systems. The very meaning of African life was called into question as the socio-political foundations were shifted permanently. Land belonging to Africans was confiscated without compensation and people were moved en masse into inhospitable and infertile land. This removal from ancestral lands disconnected Africans from their livelihoods, religion, and culture. In its place Africans were racialised and artificially lumped together into constructed nation-states. The past and its way of life grew distant except for the collection of memories (collective memory) as Africans were forced to work and pay taxes to support their colonization and subjugation.¹¹

The end of colonialism did not solve the alienation and dispossession suffered. Post-colonial African states have struggled to repossess the past in such a manner that provides a meaningful break. The outcome is that despite the change in political guard the effects of the chronic trauma continue. At stake in the postcolonial era are the same questions about loss, meaning, and how to recreate and reconcile the past. These are existential questions made more complex by new layers of complexity that has been added to the postcolonial condition in an ever changing and globalizing world. Old and new generations of Africans cannot escape the ongoing struggle to come to terms with the massive disruption of colonialism. They are vexed in the struggle to make sense of what has been described as “the ugliness of the past.”¹²

The layers of alienation and dispossession wrought by colonialism and its consequences in the postcolonial era are well documented in the literature.¹³ Inside of the post-colonial Kenyan nation-state the struggle to come to terms with the subjugation of colonialism is a permanent struggle. The wide-reaching consequences of colonialism find Kenyans of all generations seeking to re-create meaning, to re-establish or recover lost identities, and to make sense of the disorder and disruption suffered over generations. Inside of this vexing struggle the issues of land reclamation, land tenure, and land ownership, are unresolved. The vast majority of Kenyans are still seeking to resolve their dispossession and alienation from their land. This unfinished business is a reservoir of collective memory that captures the hardships of subjugation under colonialism and the frustration with the slow and often inefficient and corrupt manner that land claims have been dealt with since independence. This unfinished business also defines the very essence of the chronic trauma suffered by most indigenous Africans in Kenya. It is a suffering that is never too far from the surface of life. The associated feelings of loss and insecurity have socio-political consequences that cannot be ignored because they shape and direct what it means to be an African and a Kenyan in the post-colonial era.

Applying the theoretical concept of trauma to colonialism and postcolonialism is a novel means of understanding the effects in a collective sense and across generations. The strength of the application is in the emphasis on understanding the past and its continuing influence. The past is linked through generations of shared trauma that cannot be ignored or just bypassed. The trauma lies just beneath the surface of everyday life as the events that triggered the trauma are contradictory, festering, and unresolved. The volatility of a chronic trauma cannot be ignored. A concerted sense of confrontation with the ugly past is needed if resolve and redress is to be found. In effect, a chronic trauma will not just go away over time.

Balancing the modern and the ancient

Few places in Kenya exemplify the struggle between the ugly past and the will to survive like Lamu District does. It has over many centuries been a central place of intercultural, socio-political, and economic exchanges on Africa's east coast. These exchanges are evident in the mix of cultures and languages, religious practices, architectural and artistic influences, and the fusion of cuisine derived from local as well Arabian, Indian, Chinese, and European influences. In a very distinct manner, Lamu District embodies a sense of cosmopolitan presence and history. It is likely that this unique mix of history and layered heritage explains why Lamu District was largely unaffected by the devastating post-electoral violence that crippled Kenya in late 2007 and early 2008.¹⁴

Lamu District is a series of Islands found along the east coast of Kenya. It is a district inside of Kenya's Cape Province and it is described as comprising of 6.166.7 square kilometers with a total population of around eighty thousand people. The vast majority of residents are Sunni Muslims with smaller communities of Christians and Animists also present. The major ethnic groups are Bajuni, Pokomo, and Arabs, with smaller numbers of Mijikenda, Taita, and Somalis. There are also Kikuyu from mainland Kenya who were placed into settlement schemes by the Kenyan government from 1976 onwards. Finally, there are white Kenyans, Europeans, Americans, Israelis, and Arabs who live on Lamu Island. Many of these residents are part of the tourism industry in Lamu District while others live there seasonally. The majority of the indigenous residents are rural with a small minority of residents, around ten thousand, live in the towns of Lamu, Mpeketoni, Mkunumbi, Witu, Hindi, Kiunga, Faza, Siyu, Pandaguo, among a few others. The Swahili settlements in Lamu District are among the oldest on the eastern coast of Africa reaching back to 14th century.¹⁵

Lamu town is recognized by the Kenyan government as the oldest living town in Kenya. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site with a port that is said to be a thousand years old. Lamu town with its narrow streets and its centuries old houses represents a continuous entry and exit point for trade, cultural, religious, and political discourse into the wider District.¹⁶ An outsider will be struck by the layers of living history and heritage on display. In Lamu town donkeys ferry goods and people and cars are totally absent. Lamu District is, however, not caught in a time warp far removed from urban life in metropolitan centres like Johannesburg or Kuala Lumpur, for example.

A close evaluation will reveal a more nuanced relationship between the modern and the ancient. In-between the islands that make up the District you will find tourists and locals being transported on traditional dhow boats that rely on seasonal winds. These dhows, and the fishing lifestyle they sustain, were introduced by the Arabs hundreds years ago. But even as fishermen still use dhows they also use other motorized boats to fish and to transport people and goods. In the Lamu town square you can buy traditional herbs and medicines from the hawkers who ply their trade in front of a modern coffee house serving cappuccinos and offering broadband and WiFi hotspots.

Elsewhere in Lamu District the modern conveniences of cell phones are never absent even in the remote rural areas where indigenous people eke out a living. An interview with a rural Ngini leader, in particular, impressed the presence of old and new influences on the lifestyle of indigenous people. The leader was busy describing the struggle to find food and explained that at times it was necessary to eat leaves because there was nothing else available. Just before he could continue his thoughts a cell phone rang and he reached into his pocket to retrieve a basic Nokia phone, he looked at the number, but did not take the call. The rest of the interview consisted of him painstakingly describing trapping methods that were handed down from his ancestors and are still used daily throughout his community.¹⁷

The relationship and inherent tension between balancing ways of old living with modern influences is in essence what Lamu District is about. People are proud of their unique way of life and want to extend what they have held onto, and recovered or recreated, into the future. “We are not turning our back on modern society. That would be stupid. We just want our way of life to be guarded and we want to promote change like that. It must not destroy us and our culture. That is not progress it is just stupid,” a youth activist said in a recorded interview.¹⁸ The words of this young woman captured the concern with finding a means toward holistic and sustainable development. It is an ongoing concern that has drawn residents together over time and it is a public discourse that embodies the symptoms of a chronic trauma.

All across Lamu District the weighing of what has been lost and the threat of further losses is balanced against the determination to recover and to hold onto what is meaningful. This struggle is an inevitable outcome of colonial disruption made worse by the inability of the Kenyan state to provide redress or even to seemingly appreciate the substance of anxiety and fears expressed by the residents. The government is not seen as a positive agent for change but rather a conspiratorial force bent on self-enrichment through outright theft and corruption. “People here don’t trust the Kenyan government in Nairobi. We know they only want for themselves what they can get from Lamu. It has been so from when Kenya became independent in 1963,” a retired resident in Siyu said in an interview.¹⁹

In these terms it would be a grave mistake to describe the residents of Lamu District as opposed to modern changes or development. It is not as if they shun the modern in favour of the ancient. Rather, the truth is more likely to be found in the manner that its people have integrated change into their unique identity. It is a self-determining struggle that is being waged against a chronic trauma that is never too far from the interactive surface. Simultaneously, the needs of the residents are not unlike those of people living elsewhere in Kenya. In interviews the lament over the deteriorating infrastructure was often mentioned. “We need schools, a university, and a good hospital for our people. These will create jobs too. How are our children supposed to develop and make something? They have nothing for the future,” Muhammad Sui a District fisherman said.²⁰

Sui’s comment captures the struggle of the residents. They are aware that there is a need for developmental advances. But they see such change as necessarily invested in the sustainable development of the District. For most sustainable development is about preserving Lamu District and adding value in a manner that does not disrupt their way of

life. These conditions are made known in any conversation about the future. Ignoring the substance beneath these feelings and thinking is not a plausible option and may even be disastrous for socio-political stability in the District.

Scrambling for land in Lamu District

The unfinished business of land ownership and land adjudication is undoubtedly one of, if not the most, contentious fault lines in Kenya's postcolonial history. Since gaining independence in 1963, successive governments have ostensibly failed to find meaningful and long term solutions to the problem of land. Kenya is also not unlike many other African states in its failure to provide redress to communities who have been alienated from their land or who historically occupy tracts of land yet have no ownership or tenure rights. Land disputes often degenerate into violence and thus pose a constant threat. In this exacting and inflammable scenario, successive Kenyan leaders have over time used land as a bargaining tool to increase their influence or simply to reward political and/or ethnic patronage. In effect, land reform in Kenya is characteristically unbalanced and consequentially corrupt.²¹

Very few people in Lamu District own the land they occupy. Consequently, very few have legal rights over the property they occupy. People who have lived and worked land over centuries are considered nothing more than squatters on the land they occupy. This situation is the source of great anxiety and instability among the residents. The volatility of the situation is made worse by the fact that there are rich and politically connected individuals who have become owners of large tracts of land despite not living in Lamu District. Some of these landowners are Kenyan but others are not. Whatever their nationality or residence status may be there are too many instances that attest to what is described as "land grabbing" and the outcome has not been good for indigenous residents.

In Shela Island which sits adjacent to Lamu town there are expensive beach resorts and holiday homes that belong to wealthy foreigners who have been provided with title deeds and ownership documents. Not far from Shela there are islands which are being advertised for sale to wealthy foreigners. In either case, the Kenyan government has not acted in the interests of securing land rights for the indigenous residents. Instead, to oversee the further expansion of the tourist market in Shela and Lamu the government expanded the Manda Air Strip without any concern or recompense for the indigenous people who were displaced.

The burden of being landless was expressed in an impromptu encounter with a man at a roadside eatery on the way to Witu. He introduced himself as an 'indigenous Lamu man' and asked that his words be recorded. The man then started to speak loudly in a deeply emotional manner that conveyed his frustration and anger over the land issue:

"You are welcome here in Lamu but tell the truth about Lamu when you are at home. Lamu is our paradise and those government thieves in Nairobi want to steal it from us. I am an indigenous Lamu man who has never left here. The Kikuyus and other foreigners who have been placed here by the government now own my land and I am a squatter on the land. The same land my father and his father and his father

worked for food. We are worse off under those bastards. We do not recognize them. They only steal from us and keep us poor. Lamu does not belong to Kenya and we will take it back. We were better off under the British. At least in the 1800s Lamu was a happy place with good economy and people lived good. 1963 brought nothing for Lamu. We are not important to those who rule over Kenya today. They ignore us and steal our land and want to remove us because they fear Islam and our culture. We want our land back. Tell that to your people because it is the truth.”²²

It was a startling conversation that was echoed by several community leaders in recorded interviews. The shared anxiety and alienation is a striking feature of the complaint against the actions of the Kenyan government. The weight given to land and the need to establish rights over land describes the contours of a chronic trauma. The fears expressed combines with the unfinished business of land ownership and land tenure. The central place of land as a place of permanent belonging is dislodged by the uncertainty of losing all the land and, thereby, losing everything else.

“We are nothing without our lands and even if they give us a little and take most of it we will still be very small and we will get smaller as foreigners from outside come to take away of culture. We are at the last place. We cannot fail to win our land back from the government and all their rich friends like the Chinese and Omanis,” a businessman explained.²³ This sense of urgent defiance explains why there is such a swell of local protest actions to stop the government from advancing its plan to build a sea port in Lamu District.

Organizing resistance

On the morning of December 14, 2010, the Harakati Okoa Lamu Forum convened a scheduled meeting at its offices in old Lamu town. The meeting was organized by the Lamu Environmental Protection and Conservation Group (LEPAC), a community-based activist group that seeks to protect the environmental integrity of the islands that make up the Lamu District. The meeting room was packed to capacity with stakeholders drawn from Lamu District and other areas in the Coast Province of Kenya, and beyond. Among the 60 or so attendees were community elders, indigenous leaders, political leaders, gender activists, political and environmental activists, youth leaders, religious leaders, and students. The organizations they represented included: Kenya Marine Forum; Lamu Beach Management Unit; Council of Elders; Lamu Youth Alliance; Riadha Academy; Kililana Farmers; Lamu Conservation and Development Network, among others.²⁴

The purpose of the Forum was to discuss the Kenyan government’s plan to build a port on the island of Manda Bay which is a part of Lamu District and is the neighbouring island to Lamu Island. The members of the LEPAC had invited a delegation from Natural Justice South Africa and the Centre for Minority Rights (CEMIRIDE) and Inuka Kenya Trust which are Kenyan human rights non-governmental organizations, to discuss the efficacy of a Bio-Cultural Protocol (BCP). A BCP was being considered as an instrument to demonstrate to

the government and the global community that the residents were concerned about the influence a proposed sea port would have on their heritage, culture and the environment.

The planned port is part of the touted Lamu Southern Sudan Ethiopia (LAPSSET) corridor. The LAPSSET corridor is described by the government as a flagship project in its strategic development plan entitled, "Kenya Vision 2030". The proposed corridor will link the port at Lamu with Ethiopia and Southern Sudan and the Eastern and Northern parts of mainland Kenya. The LAPSSET includes plans to build a new road and rail network, an oil refinery and pipeline, an airport, and develop several upscale resorts for tourism revenue. In effect, the Kenyan government believes that the LAPSSET corridor will help move Kenya toward an industrializing middle-income nation.²⁵

After about an hour long presentation on the make-up of a BCP and its role in presenting socio-cultural, political, and environmental concerns, the audience was given an opportunity to speak. The audience participation described a very emotional, frustrated, and fearful community. The vast majority, all except for two younger men, disagreed vehemently with the Kenyan government's plans. The government was described as being secretive about its plans. "We learn what we know from hearsay and newspapers. We have not been consulted. The government is disenfranchising my people. They know we disagree. How can they not? They want our land and care little for our indigenous way of life. We stand in opposition to this planned dispossession because we must," a retired school teacher and local historian Mohammed Ali Baddi complained. "They are hiding something. They want to steal our land from under our noses and without any compensation for the hundreds of years and more we have lived in Lamu. We are being forced to disappear," a youth leader added.

An elderly man who was introduced as an academic and professor of marine biology rose with authority to tease out the elements of frustration over land ownership and the threat that the LAPSETT posed to the history and heritage of Lamu District:

"The Kenyan government does not care about Lamu and its people. They are corrupt and they only want to make money here. They are absent in our lives but they steal our land and sell it to foreigners and bring people from up-country and give them title to land here where we have lived for centuries without owning our own land. We are then squatters on our own land and these foreigners and up-land people are landowners in the land of our ancestors. Now they want to build a port in Lamu. They say it is in all our interests. All Kenyans. But it is in the interests of the indigenous people of Lamu who are ignored. If they want our land for the port they will just take it. We have no rights to the land. Our culture will not survive LAPSETT. This is ethnic-genocide being practiced by the leaders in Nairobi. We will disappear as our numbers grow smaller and the foreigners take over our political lives and our economic lives. Lamu will disappear. Our land is already disappearing."²⁶

The professor's words were applauded and subsequent speakers echoed the broad themes of his argument.

The two younger men who disagreed with the opinions expressed cautioned the audience to be practical. One of the men said, "This port is a reality. We are wasting time thinking about opposition. We must ask the government to include us and to help us to benefit from what it will bring." The other man spoke about the fear of losing the history, heritage, and culture: "Everything must change in this life. Change is not always bad and we cannot just be scared of change. It is not true that we have changed already here. There are so many foreigners and resorts and a lot of us work for this foreigners. They brought jobs when we were not in jobs. The port can be the same. The world is changing and so Lamu must change or left behind we will be. This is a fact and we must learn it."

The audience respected the two dissenting opinions but conceded very little oppositional ground even while the inevitability of the LAPSETT seemed to a foregone conclusion. The discussion turned to matters of sustainable development. "We need to be present there when they plan. They won't talk to us but they talk all the time to the Chinese and the Chinese will be ready to make money for the greedy politicians. We must demand an answer. Why won't they tell us what they are planning? What is China's interest in Lamu and what will they do for us?" an imam complained.

A middle-aged businessman subsequently rose and added the following detail to the imam's observations:

"China wants to be in Lamu because it is central to its plans to expand into eastern Africa and the regions around here. They also want our fish. There is also oil out there. A port will be a hub for selling Chinese products. It will also be where oil from this area will be exported for China. The greedy politicians in Nairobi want this development. They won't worry about the damage to the environment from dredging that must happen. They won't worry that the port will steal all the fish with industrial fishing by the Chinese. It will kill off the hundred years of fishing by indigenous Lamu people. It is money that talks in Nairobi and China knows that well. It is a terrible situation we are facing and I worry every night about my life and my children. What will happen to us and to all the Lamu people if the Kenyan government just does what it pleases? This is not in our best interests; it is in their pocket interests."²⁷

The Coast People's Forum, an influential community activist group that is calling for an engagement between the people of Lamu District and the Kenyan government, agrees with the majority sentiment expressed at the Forum above. Their overall contention is that the LAPSETT corridor poses a threat to the overall integrity of Lamu District. They also note that the government has been less than democratic in ignoring the residents. In a statement released in Mombasa on December 2, 2010, they argued in part:

"Lamu people have not been given any information or nor involved on the port project. The negative implications and impact of this port project on Lamu people are enormous – their maritime economy and environment will be destroyed, all their land will be taken by outsiders, their culture will disappear, and Lamu as a people are likely to eventually disappear."²⁸

The statement went further to demand that the government repossess land that has been illegally acquired in Lamu District. It also called on the government to include residents in a land adjudication process. The statement seemingly accepts the inevitability of the port and called on government to train indigenous residents for jobs associated with the port and to pay a percentage of the port's income to the residents.

These demands align with the Fort Zahidi Mngumi Declaration of early 2009 where District residents demanded "accessible" information on the LAPSETT corridor. The Declaration lamented that residents were being treated as "second class citizens" and that land rights were being ignored. Moreover, the Declaration noted that the LAPSETT was being advanced without an "environmental and social impact assessment." The inevitability of the port was accepted and government was similarly asked to train residents for jobs and to share port revenue with the residents.²⁹

As of this writing the government has continued to stonewall the residents by ignoring their call to be included and by providing very little information on the LAPSETT. Except for a few media articles in Kenyan newspapers the residents of Lamu District are in the dark. This lack of information and engagement continues to be a source of tense anxiety. Community organisations like LEPAC and the Hidaba Self Help Group, among others, are doubling their resistance. LEPAC in particular is proceeding with the compilation of a BCP and have been making their concerns known to international media outlets as well as foreign embassies in Kenya.

Their resistance has even netted support from non-residents and foreign owners of resorts who want to preserve the District. This is an unusual meeting of interests given the ongoing tension over land. A variety of resistance and planning workshops are being planned by community groups. A major intention is to make the situation known to a global audience which includes indigenous and environmental rights organisations.³⁰ "If the government won't listen to us then the African Union and the United Nations must be told. The international community will be shocked into standing by us," a school teacher said in an informal interview in Lamu.³¹

Conclusion: Where to from here?

Abdella Bujra of the Nairobi based Development Management Policy Forum (DMPF) argues that the Kenyan government has a history of ignoring the needs Lamu District. Bujra, a lifelong resident of Lamu District, is not convinced that the LAPSETT corridor will ever come to fruition: "The government is dependent on funding from the Chinese but the situation in east Africa is uncertain and the Chinese may be reluctant to enter. But the main issue is still land. It is an issue that has stood since the time the British seized Lamu. Unless the issue of land is resolved then it matters little if the Chinese build the port or not," he said in a meeting to discuss the prospects for Lamu District.³²

Bujra's argument underscores the need to address the land issue. It is an argument that underscores the chronic trauma still present in Lamu District. Left unresolved the land issue will continue to conjure fears of subjugation, alienation, and dispossession. These

grounded fears are as much a part of life now as they were in the era of colonialism. Unless the issue of land ownership and land tenure is addressed the chronic trauma will only grow more intense. The uncertainty over the future will be worsened and residents' lives will be thrown into further disarray. This is an untenable situation that may lead to volatile instability and politicized violence. To avoid this it is necessary to confront the situation if a meaningful measure of resolve is to be achieved. To ignore the situation is not a reasonable option.

The constructive way forward is to set up a strategic planning commission consisting of government officials and community leaders from Lamu District to engage over the issue of land and the LAPSETT corridor. Such a commission must have statutory powers to influence the government's development policy. It must also provide an open and accessible forum for engagement of the various stakeholders. Furthermore, such a commission must also engage a broad spectrum of residents to comprehensively address the fears and concerns of all residents. Testimony must be drawn and resolution sought if there is to be significant progress. The overall purpose must be to find a transparent and democratic means toward holistic people-centred development that is sustainable. The failure to institute a transparent and democratic engagement will undoubtedly fuel a threatening deterioration in the socio-political conditions present Lamu District. Such deterioration cannot be seen to be in the interests of the residents or the government.

¹ This article is based on field research conducted in Nairobi and Lamu District in the months of November and December 2010.

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- ¹⁶ UNESCO. Lamu Town. UNESCO.Org [Online]. Available at: <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1055>> [Accessed on January 12, 2010].
- ¹⁷ Interview took place in Lamu District (Siyu) on December 9, 2010. The interviewee's name was withheld by request.
- ¹⁸ Interview took place in Lamu District (Lamu town) on December 8, 2010. The interviewee's name was withheld by request.
- ¹⁹ Interview took place in Lamu District (Siyu) on December 9, 2010. The interviewee's name was withheld by request.
- ²⁰ Interview in Lamu District (Lamu town) on December 13, 2010.
- ²¹ Anassi, P. 2004. *Corruption in Africa: The Kenyan Experience*. Victoria, BC, Canada: Trafford Publishing.
- ²² Informal interview took place in Lamu District on the outskirts of Witu on December 10, 2010.
- ²³ Informal interview took place in Lamu town on December 12, 2010. The interviewee's name was withheld by request.
- ²⁴ Author was invited to attend by LEPAC. All comments at the Forum were recorded by the author.
- ²⁵ Kihara, G. 2009. Lamu Port Set to be a Growth Catalyst. *The East African* [Online] 15 June. Available at: <<http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/business/-/2560/610676/-/5k1t16z/-/index.html%5D>> [Accessed on January 6, 2011].
- ²⁶ Author recorded comments on December 14, 2010. Name withheld by request.
- ²⁷ Author recorded comments on December 14, 2010. Name withheld by request.
- ²⁸ See: Statement for Press Conference. Coast People's Forum. December 2, 2010.
- ²⁹ See: Recommendations and Resolutions of a Consultative Meeting held at Lamu Fort. Fort Zahidi Mngumi declaration. March 25 – 26 2009.
- ³⁰ The World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) has invited LEPAC to join efforts in conducting a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) in Lamu District.
- ³¹ Interview in Lamu District (Lamu town) on December 17, 2010.
- ³² The meeting took place in Lamu District (Shela) on December 17, 2010.