

# **'If you give me time I can love you':**

## **A Pregnant Researcher among Male Beach Workers on Kenya's Liminal South Coast Beaches**

*Njeri Chege (Independent Researcher)*

### **Abstract**

*In this paper I discuss how while carrying out research among male beach workers in Kenya's touristic South Coast region – in relation to their quest for livelihoods through sexual-economic relationships with visiting white women – I became a participant in the phenomenon I set out to study. The article's contribution is twofold. First, I draw on my interactions with some of the men I met on-site, and in particular my encounter with 'Weston' – a migrant beach worker, his unexpected behaviour towards me as a pregnant emigrant Kenyan researcher, and the ambiguity and awkwardness of our exchange, to tease out and offer insights into the behaviour, practices, and gender ideologies held by male beach workers within the South Coast beaches that I qualify as liminal. Second, I bring out the emotional discomforts I faced in my interactions with some of the men with regard to flirtation; requests to assume a matchmaker role between them and western women in Europe, as well as the help offered by men whose interests I suspected were motivated by beach worker rivalry, or their wish to establish sexual-economic relationships with me. In doing so, I highlight the usefulness of engaging in reflexive analyses of one's fieldwork experiences, interactions, and emotions for the generation of knowledge related to one's research and research environment.*

## Introduction

I met Weston<sup>1</sup> while strolling along Diani beach in Kenya's South Coast region, one sunny morning, in 2011. He hailed me in a way that suggested we were already acquainted, and I stopped to greet him and the man beside him. Weston wore dark sunglasses and was dressed in a combination of red, yellow, and blue *shuka* and *akala* sandals.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, his companion Steven was dressed in dark red *shuka* that were less flashy. I realised that despite the familiarity with which Weston had waved at me, I had never met either of them before. To escape the sudden awkwardness I felt, I requested to see the hand-crafted bangles they were carrying to sell to tourists and we conversed<sup>3</sup> as I went through them. I questioned them about the differences in how they were dressed and Steven attributed it to him being from the Maasai ethnic community and Weston from the Samburu. I asked them how long they had been working on the beach and they responded 'fifteen years' and 'two years', respectively. My questions prompted Weston to ask whether I was a journalist. I told him I was not and offered to tell them about my research as we walked.<sup>4</sup> Rather unexpectedly, Weston declared that he thought I wanted only him to come along with me – it surprised me that he suddenly seemed to want to get rid of his companion.

I affirmed that I was fine walking with the two of them and Weston's tone became flirtatious. 'OK, you want us both! You have liked us both, eh?' he said playfully. I told him

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<sup>1</sup> All research participants' names are pseudonyms or are omitted.

<sup>2</sup> *Shuka* refers to textile draped over the body while *akala* are sandals made from recycled car tyres. They are popular among Maasai and Samburu men.

<sup>3</sup> All conversations and interviews during the fieldwork involved code mixing and/or code switching between Kiswahili and English, as is common in Kenya.

<sup>4</sup> Relationships between male beach workers and elderly western women have been the subject of growing journalistic interest. In a previous article (Chege 2015) I explain that some beach workers were reluctant to participate in my research as a result of their own or other beach workers' bad experiences with journalists who misrepresented them as individuals or as a group.

that I did not 'want them both' or had not 'liked them both', and nonchalantly added that I was simply proposing to tell them about my research, if they were interested. In an increasingly flirtatious tone he insisted that I walk between the two of them. I turned a deaf ear at that and we continued walking along the beach and he finally found his way to my other side. He asked how long I was going to be in Diani, where I was staying, and whether I was there alone.<sup>5</sup> He said that he could come visit me. I took the opportunity to casually tell him that I was not looking for a man; that I had a husband and child at home, and hands on my belly, said 'and another one is on the way'. To my surprise, this did not deter him.

As the three of us walked and conversed, he flirted some more. Conversely, Steven was calm, very down to earth and there were no double meanings to what he said. I was four months pregnant and showing and could not understand Weston's persistence at flirting. I had expected that the combination of my pregnancy bump and my identity as a Kenyan would shield me from such advances. As I will demonstrate in this paper, Weston's behaviour was a manifestation of gender ideologies that are specifically linked to the liminality of the touristic South Coast environment.

In this article, I discuss how while conducting fieldwork<sup>6</sup> among male beach workers in Kenya, in relation to their quest for livelihoods through sexual-economic relationships with visiting white women, as a pregnant black Kenyan researcher, I became a participant, albeit unwilling, in beach workers' quests for livelihoods through sexual-economic relationships. I draw on my interactions with some of the men I met on-site, through spontaneous encounters on the beach, and through assistance provided by Muza, a local beach worker who at the time was in his mid-twenties and eking out a living on tourist-oriented services. I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-one local and migrant male beach workers whose ages ranged from twenty-six to thirty-nine years. In addition, I engaged in participant observation, spontaneous conversations, took fieldnotes, and

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<sup>5</sup> Later on, as I became more familiar with beach workers and their rapport building initiatives, I understood that these were the very questions they asked western tourists on first encounters.

<sup>6</sup> For four months between 2009 and 2011 for my PhD research project.

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conducted interviews with a range of people. For the beach workers I interviewed or spoke with informally, western tourists and the region's beaches (notably Galu and Diani) are sources of livelihood and are perceived as the key to improved standards of living, for them and their dependants.

This paper's contribution is twofold. First, I use my encounters with some of the men and in particular with Weston – a migrant beach worker, his unexpected behaviour towards me as a pregnant emigrant Kenyan researcher and the ambiguity and awkwardness of the ensuing exchange, to tease out and offer insights into the behaviour, practices, and gender ideologies held by male beach workers within the touristic South Coast area that I qualify as liminal. Second, I also highlight the emotional discomfort I experienced in my interactions with some of the men with regard to sexual advances, requests to have me put them in touch with white women I knew in Europe, as well as help offered by men whose interests I sensed were motivated by beach worker rivalry or the wish to establish sexual-economic relationships with me.

In the course of the fieldwork I experienced socio-emotional discomfort in unexpected ways.<sup>7</sup> During and after the fieldwork, I engaged in reflexivity – understood here as the process of considering how one's research process and the knowledge one generates are shaped by the interplay of one's social, structural and experiential position(s).<sup>8</sup> As some scholars have noted, reflexivity cannot be equated to 'navel-gazing' or 'self-indulgence' (England 1994: 244; Sultana 2007: 376; Parashar 2011: 698). Embracing reflexivity thus implies an acknowledgement of the fact that when conducting social science research, one is indisputably implicated in the research process and is not a detached 'objective observer' (England 1994: 242; Takhar 2009: 33).

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<sup>7</sup> For more on emotions in social science research see Gill Hubbard, Kathryn Backett-Milburn, and Debbie Kemmer (2001), Jun Li (2008), Chamion Caballero and Susie Weller (eds) (2009), and Sari Hokkanen (2017).

<sup>8</sup> Like Frances Maher and Mary Kay Tetreault among others, I consider that gender, race, class, ethnicity, and other personal identity markers are not stand-alone social identifiers, but rather indicate relational positions. I also share the view that knowledge we generate is shaped by changing contextual and relational factors. Hence the need to acknowledge one's specific positions (1993: 118; see also Rosaldo 1993; Finlay 2002; Berger 2015).

In fieldwork, reflexivity encourages self-discovery and can be a means to gaining insights about one's research questions (England 1994: 244). Similarly, it provides a space for the researcher to reflect upon encounters that are or have been emotional during their research, and to use them to generate knowledge (Takhar 2009: 32). More concretely, through reflexivity and seeking to acknowledge and understand my emotions during the research process, I was able to grasp the liminal character of the context and the gender ideologies and relations that are linked to the particularity of the region's beaches as places that bring together socio-economically marginalised local and migrant residents and relatively wealthy visitors. As a mainstay of my research, reflexivity is thus the linchpin of this paper<sup>9</sup>.

### **Who are male beach workers on the Kenyan South Coast?**

East African beaches – more specifically Kenyan and Tanzanian (Zanzibari) beaches – are known for their beach workers, popularly called 'beach boys'. Particularly well documented are the interactions and intimate relationships many of these men seek to have with visiting white women (Peake 1989; Kibicho, 2004; 2009; Tami 2008; Eid Bergan 2011; Hoogenraad 2012; Chege 2014; 2015; 2017; Despres 2017a; 2017b).

On the Kenyan South Coast, male beach workers are primarily adults who are informally self-employed in a range of tourist-oriented jobs. They are not an unvarying group. Among them are local men of Mijikenda ethnicities,<sup>10</sup> the majority of whom were born in the South Coast and have lived there for most of their lives. Then there are those from the North Coast, notably from Mijikenda and non-Mijikenda coastal communities, who migrated to the South Coast. The third category consists of long-range migrants,

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<sup>9</sup> I also experienced power relations which intertwined around class, gender, and ethnicity, and have discussed my position and research relations in an earlier article (Chege 2015). For this reason, I do not elaborate further on the discussion and literature on reflexivity here.

<sup>10</sup> The Mijikenda are comprised of nine ethnic communities considered to be the indigenous inhabitants of the coastal region, namely, Chonyi, Digo, Duruma, Giriama, Jibana, Kauma, Kambe, Rabai and Ribe. Most of the beach workers I met were of Digo ethnicity.

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predominantly of Samburu and Maasai ethnicities, who are from other regions of the country and who migrate seasonally to the coastal region. Most of the local men identify as Muslims, while the migrants tend to identify as Christians<sup>11</sup> (Chege 2014; 2015; 2017: 67).

The large majority of both local and migrant beach workers have attained a low level of formal education — mostly limited to primary school — which is an obstacle to securing employment, since hotels and other formal tourism-related businesses in the region mostly employ more highly-educated Kenyans from other regions of the country (Chege 2014; 2017: 68). Thus excluded from the region's formal employment sector, they have little choice but to try earning their living informally through tourist-oriented jobs. Some are registered with local beach worker-founded occupational associations as safari sellers who organise game viewing trips to national parks and reserves; boat operators who organise boat trips to specific places for viewing of marine life; or curio sellers who sell artisan crafts<sup>12</sup>. A small minority perform dances for guests in hotels. Whether registered or unregistered, beach workers are generally versatile and ready to informally serve tourists in a variety of ways (Chege 2014; 2017).

Alongside these occupations, numerous beach workers also seek to establish sexual-economic relationships with visiting white women. Generally, long-term seasonal sexual-economic relationships are preferred over ephemeral holiday encounters, since from a traditional and contemporary ethno-societal gender perspective, men are positioned as the expected breadwinners and providers, and numerous beach workers support family members – their children, life partners (wives and girlfriends), parents, and younger siblings among other relations (Chege 2015; 2017). Therefore, through these relationships they seek to fulfil these expectations, as well as improve their own and their dependants' standards of living. As an alternative to sexual-economic relationships or parallel to them, some men seek non-sexual economically motivated long-term

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<sup>11</sup> Both adhere to animist beliefs and practices to varying degrees.

<sup>12</sup> These are occupational associations that beach workers were encouraged to form by the government several years earlier, so as to facilitate management of beach workers.

friendships with visiting foreign tourists, who locally are termed 'family friends' (Chege 2014; 2017). Both kinds of relationships also serve as a means to accessing resources and opportunities, such as land and quality education for their children or siblings, which would otherwise be unavailable to them due to structural inequalities in local, national, and global economies (Chege 2017).

In scholarly literature and in international press media, it is not unusual for male beach workers to be referred to as 'prostitutes' or 'commercial sex workers' and/or construed as engaging in 'prostitution' or 'commercial sex work'.<sup>13</sup> Participants in my research did not identify themselves, their lives, or their work through these terms and I choose to respect their self-identifications. Furthermore, the combination of the rigidity, relativity, inconsistencies, and moral connotations that accompany these terms and concepts make them inadequate for the relations and relationships that were the focus of my study. The use of these and other related categorisations that dominate the literature in relation to men who seek tourist-related livelihoods on beaches has also been questioned and rejected in studies conducted by Nicole Tami (2008), Emilie Venables (2009), Mariam Eid Bergan (2011), and Nina Berman (2017).

Therefore, rather than situating these men and the relationships they seek to establish with tourists on the South Coast beaches within the paradigms of prostitution, commercial sex work, or sex tourism, I view them through the concept of 'sexual-economic exchanges' as developed by Paola Tabet (2004). It best illustrates the nuances and complexities of relationships that are based on an exchange of companionship, sexuality, and economic and incorporeal gain (Chege 2017: 66). These and other sexual-economic exchanges or relationships pursued by beach workers need to be understood as liminal; they are shaped on the South Coast beaches which represent liminal spaces where the convergence of affluence, poverty, and stark inequalities in the region serves to shape and motivate the pursuit of a wide range of gender and sexual-economic relations.

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<sup>13</sup> See for example Rose Omondi (2003: 5) and Afrik-News (2009).

## **Reflections on beaches as liminal spaces**

As a concept, liminality has been used to describe and analyse numerous social spaces, ranging from airports, hospital waiting spaces, schools, night clubs, and beaches to sex and tourist-oriented spaces more generally (Ryan and Hall 2001; Coldicutt 2014; Pigott, Hargreaves, Power, and Swann 2016). The term liminal is derived from the Latin word *limen*, whose English equivalent is 'threshold', and can be understood as the space that one has to pass through in order to get to the other side of some place or some state of being. In this paper, I draw on the foundations of this concept as laid out by Arnold Van Gennep (1909) and to a greater extent on the work of Victor Turner (1964; 1969) to show how the touristic South Coast environment, and even more so its beaches and people's behaviour on the beach landscape, may be understood through the combined ideas of tourist destinations, beaches, and life stage transitions as liminal spaces and liminal phases respectively.

Contemporary understandings of the terms liminal and liminality flow from Van Gennep's (1909) founding studies and reflections on rites of passage. He used the concept of liminality to demarcate the transitory period that is part of the three phases initiates go through during childhood to adulthood rites of passage: their separation from their communities, the period of transition they go through, and their re-incorporation as new, mature members of their communities. It is the in-between transitory phase that was the focus of Turner's theorizing. For him, this was/is an ambiguous phase and persons situated within this liminal phase, 'are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial' (Turner 1969: 359). Subsequently, their actions or social practices during this period reflect their marginality in relation to the larger social community from which they are temporarily separated. Turner's reflections on liminality have been extended to not only other social and cultural life course transitions, but also to spaces.



Discussions on the connections between the beach environment, beach tourism, and liminality are not new. Beaches have been considered liminal spaces in the sense that, physically, they represent an ever-changing space between land and sea (Preston-Whyte 2008; Meethan 2012; Coldicutt, 2014). Closely tied to their natural physical characteristics, and as tourist destinations, the liminality of beaches has also been considered from social and cultural perspectives. For instance, Robert Preston-Whyte considers how the intertwining of natural seashore sensations and social elements may contribute to the creation of spaces that appear to be suspended in time. In particular, he discusses beaches as spiritual spaces, surfing spaces, and nudist spaces, showing that the liminal character of these spaces is nevertheless fragile as it can be shattered by natural occurrences or by the actions or behaviour of social actors (2008: 352).

Scholars have also discussed the liminality of beaches in relation to how people's behaviour and social relations tend to deviate from the norm in beach environments around the world (Hoogenraad 2012; Lança, Marques, and Oom do Valle 2014). Henrike Hoogenraad (2012) for example, analyses relationships between local men and foreign women in Zanzibar, which she contextualises and restricts to a Zanzibari beach. Drawing on theories and notions about the beach as a place of play, freedom, and alternative ordering, she describes how the Zanzibari beach comes across as a place of unbridled freedom where everything seems possible, for the local men and the foreign women. She goes on to illustrate how in reality, there is a system of rules and social control on the seemingly free Zanzibari beach.

Ideas on life stage transition phases as liminal periods have also been used to analyse beaches and the behaviour and practices that people adopt on seaside locations (Preston-Whyte 2008; St. John 2008). Richard Coldicutt describes and analyses the practices of Australian 'schoolies', students who have just completed their final high school year, on Australian beaches (2014: 53). These youngsters who are in an in-between phase, in that they have completed their high school education and are about to take their next step in life, spend a week in pre-defined sea-side locations engaging in

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unbridled behaviour that involves excesses of drugs, alcohol, sex, music, and beach-related activity or inactivity (Coldicutt 2014: 52).

Grounded in these geographical and anthropological works, I suggest that where beach workers’ presence on the beaches and/or quest for relationships with visiting western women are concerned, the liminality of the touristic South Coast area can be understood in four ways. First, it can be seen through what the beach represents, that is, the main point of contact and interaction between the region’s inhabitants and visitors to the region. Social inequality<sup>14</sup> is starkly visible through the social landscape and the lifestyles of the struggling local and migrant Kenyan communities, and through those of the socio-economically more privileged visiting or resident Kenyans and westerners (Chege 2014; 2015; 2017; Berman 2017). The former reside in ‘villages’ – that is, neighbourhoods characterised by very basic housing and that lack essential social amenities, while the latter tend to reside in relatively luxurious, high security hotels or gated communities, which shield them from the surrounding poverty. Against this backdrop of significant material and economic disparities, the beach is thus the shared space between the struggling inhabitants of the region and the relatively privileged visiting westerners.

Second, the beach is also the threshold between the formal and the informal, where employment and business are concerned. It is the place where tourists residing in hospitality establishments of the formal tourism sector are able to access goods and/or services offered by informally self-employed men and women, with a small portion of these goods and services being explicitly or borderline illegal. It is thus a space that brings together people who might otherwise never interact due to their different social positions.

Third, the touristic South Coast area and even more specifically its beaches, can be thought to represent intersectional spaces where tourists, as well as local and migrant

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<sup>14</sup> Here social inequality needs to be understood as a state of unequal distribution of resources and opportunities principally related to employment, income, land, housing, health care and education.

men and women engage in activities, behaviours, or lifestyles that they normally would not in their ordinary everyday home environment. These may include eating out everyday, residing in relatively luxurious accommodations, being attended to by domestic employees, extensive sun-bathing, participation in poverty tourism, intensified alcohol consumption, use (or intensified use) of illicit drugs, intensified sexual activities (that are shaped by stereotypes and essentialisms held by either party), open expressions of sexualities, and engaging in gender roles and relations that conflict with what is construed as socially acceptable.

Fourth, liminality can be viewed through the combination of the life stage transition phase and the seasonal economically motivated presence of migrant beach workers of Samburu and Maasai ethnicities. In both of these gerontocratic communities, young men go through an initiation (including circumcision) and a post-initiation period. The latter period – alternatively known as the ‘morani period’<sup>15</sup> whose duration may range from ten to fifteen years – is traditionally characterised by the men’s separation from their parents’ homes, and their enjoyment of certain social freedoms, notably mobility and sexual exploration (Spencer 2004a: 111; 2004b: 113). As in other Kenyan communities, the role of young Maasai and Samburu men is today no longer tied to defending their communities and family livestock, but to income generation and the perpetuation of gerontocracy. Hence numerous young Maasai and Samburu men situated within the morani period seasonally migrate to the coastal region where they typically expect that they will earn money through tourist-related jobs or relationships, accumulate wealth and then return to marry and settle in their rural homes. During this time, they tackle hardships, work, and save money while supporting family members back home.

I will illustrate these points in the succeeding pages. To begin with, I present and discuss my encounter with Weston and an excerpt of my interview with him, both of which

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<sup>15</sup> Among the Maasai and Samburu, an *olmurani* anglicised into *morani* (young warrior) is a young man who has gone through a traditional circumcision ceremony with members of his age set. For more on contemporary issues concerning the Maasai and Samburu and on their rites of passage see Dorothy Hodgson (1999; 2004) and Paul Spencer (2004a [1965]; 2004b [1988]).

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exemplify some migrant men's aspirations and liminal behaviour in the South Coast beach area. I then connect this exchange to my other field encounters and to instances of emotional discomfort I experienced in the course of my interactions with other beach workers. In doing so, I offer insights into the behaviour, practices, and gender ideologies that highlight different dimensions of the context's liminality.

### **Interview with Weston**

On that very first encounter, Weston spontaneously accepted my request for an interview. Steven left us, following Weston's continuous unsubtle insistence. Weston led me to a beach bar-restaurant where he explained that he was thirty-seven years old and that his presence on the beach only involved selling beaded accessories – bangles, necklaces, and similar items. He said that although unmarried, he had a family; he supported his elder brother and his six nephews and nieces who lived in a small semi-arid town in Samburu district. Like other Samburu and Maasai men I had met previously, he explained that the combination of drought and his parents' financial inability to send him to secondary school when he was younger had motivated his decision to seasonally migrate to the coastal region, fifteen years earlier.

On his family background and livelihood sources, he volunteered that he was an 'orphan', 'the last born' of six siblings, and the youngest of three brothers. He proudly affirmed that he was 'a warrior, a moran' and that during the low tourist season he always returned to his home region, where he engaged in *biashara* (business) in the local market and was involved in livestock trading. His high tourist season earnings from selling crafts to tourists, he said, were irregular but tended to be enough for him live on and to support his dependants.

As he sipped his beer, he did not immediately or directly link his presence on the beach to the search for visiting white women. While other local and migrant men whom I had interviewed or interacted with informally had spoken candidly about their work,

relationships they were in or had been in, or those that they hoped to have, the way Weston went about it struck me as different and I constantly wondered whether he was holding something back. He talked in terms of hoping that God would bless him with wealth so that he could marry a woman from his home region and have children of his own. When I asked if he already knew his future wife he explained that he did not but 'wanted to look for her'. He reiterated that she would be from his home region. It was only towards the end of our interview that Weston explicitly expressed his desire to find a white woman, albeit in an unstable, ambiguous, and confusing way.

After responding to my question about *experiences* with drug consumption in Diani, he abruptly changed the subject and we had a ping-pong like exchange:

[...] Weston (hereafter W): Here people use *unga*, *bhangji*...Me, I smoke *bhangji*<sup>16</sup> and cigarettes. You want the truth, right?

Njeri (hereafter N): Yeah sure.

W: I don't want to lie to you, no stories, me I smoke *bhangji*, cigarettes...and I drink *pombe*. Would you like another one [bottle of water]?

N: No thank you, I'm OK.

W: I like you.

N: Euh...

W: Not love, I like you.

N: Ah, OK.

W: But then sometime if you give me time I can love you.

N: No, no I already explained to you I am not looking for...

W: A man? But then you'll help me?

N: Yeah, I'm not looking for a man. I already explained that to you.

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<sup>16</sup> *Unga* is a Kiswahili word whose literal meaning is flour. In the coastal region where drug use is rampant, it is popularly used to refer to heroin. *Bhangji* (from the Hindi word *bhang*) refers to cannabis. *Pombe* refers to beer or alcoholic drinks in general.

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W: But you'll help me? You'll help me?

N: What do you mean by 'help' you?

W: You can help me accordingly. I'll give you my picture and my e-mail address and then you'll find me a woman over there.

N: Why don't you do it here?

W: I'd like you to find me one.

N: Eh, Why?

W: So that I can come there and be closer to you.

N: Aaah, no.

W: Why not?

N: [laughter] Anyway, seriously, why don't you find one here?

W: OK then, let's go out there and you find me one.

N: You mean here on the beach?

W: Yeah.

N: I take it you're telling me that it's hard here?

W: Very hard, that's why over there would be perfect.

N: So you are also looking for *wazungu* women?<sup>17</sup>

W: No. I told you it's you I want.

N: Oh, put an end to that story. I already explained I'm here to work.

W: [laughter] So you just came to enjoy me [mock me].

N: I'm not enjoying you [mocking you]. I already told you I'm not after relationships, I'm here to work.

W: OK then ask your questions, time is moving fast and time is money.

[...]

N: OK, I'll ask you a question that you might find annoying.

W: What do you mean? I'm the one who agreed to this interview, so ask.

N: Why do you want a *mzungu* woman?

W: Is that what you call a lousy question? That's a very good question. I want money. [...]

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<sup>17</sup> *Wazungu* (singular *mzungu*) is a Kiswahili word whose loose meaning is white people.

### **Social inequality and sex as currency**

Men-initiated flirting is quite common in Kenyan society, it was therefore not the flirting that I found disconcerting, but rather Weston's persistence at it with my visibly pregnant self. In Kenyan society, pregnant women are generally regarded with respectful distance and are not considered flirtation candidates. Hence, with Weston's behaviour deviating from that norm, I resorted to the assumption that he was simply flirting for humour. However, the way he went about it became uncomfortably ambiguous. As a result, I questioned my assumption several times, and consistently pointed out to him my lack of interest and unavailability. A particularly confusing moment for me was when in response to my asking him to 'put an end to that story' he laughed. And in his response 'So you just came to enjoy me [mock me]', I sensed an accusation, disappointment, and a trace of anger that was followed by his sudden impatience to leave.

How can one explain the fact that Weston did not hesitate to make advances at me, despite my being visibly pregnant? I would attribute it to three interconnected factors. First, local and migrant men pursue tourist-related livelihoods on the beach within a climate of fierce rivalry and competition when seeking to establish contact and rapport with visitors. Second, the prevalence of poverty and social inequalities intersects with rivalry and competition opening up possibilities for the pursuit of a range of gender and sexual relations as livelihood strategies. Such sexual-economic relationships include those that from a general Kenyan society-wide point of view are taboo, notably, overt multi-partner heterosexual sexual relations, homosexual relations, and younger man – older woman companionship among many other possibilities. It is here that I also situate my visibly pregnant self and Weston's advances.<sup>18</sup> Third, on the beach landscape, sex is perceived as the main currency between those who are socio-economically privileged and those who are not.

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<sup>18</sup> Weston's geographical distance and separation from his home region may also have contributed to his seemingly unusual behaviour and proposition.

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To illustrate my point as well as to generate a better understanding of gender roles and relations that are specific to this South Coast social environment, it is worth considering a related assumption held by other beach workers I interacted with. A week before meeting Weston, I learnt from Daudi, a seasonal local beach worker, who worked as a waiter-cum- animator at a holiday resort, that he presumed the existence of a sexual relationship between Muza (my facilitator) and me. This unsettled me since I never expected that what I had perceived to be cordial, respectful relations between Muza and me could be interpreted otherwise. Daudi implicitly reiterated this assumption several times in the course of our interview, and at each instance I felt increasingly annoyed and was tempted to set the record straight. However, after some inner struggles I chose to give priority to the interview.

After the interview, with my annoyance adequately controlled by my desire to remain professional, I asked him why he assumed Muza and I had anything other than a friendly professional relationship. He replied: ‘Here, when we see a woman like you [not poor, highly educated, and living abroad] in the company of a man like him [poor, undereducated, and living locally], then we know that the only thing that he could be giving you is sex’. Later, when I reflected upon his response, I felt relieved as I came to understand that Daudi’s insinuations were based on his and others’ identification of a power gap between Muza and me, and their subsequent need to make this imbalanced relationship fit into the liminal beach environment. Much later I also understood his insinuations as tactical.

In Diani and Galu, the informal and formal supply of tourist related goods and services visibly outweighs tourists' demand for them, and beach workers outnumber by far the few tourists who do venture out of their hotels and onto the beach unaccompanied by hotel personnel (principally animators). As a result, rivalry and competition in establishing contact with foreign visitors, be it for regular business or for personal relationships is rampant among both local and migrant beach workers, but also between beach workers and hotel personnel, such as animators, porters, and waiters, who are formally employed



in the numerous beach-front hotels. This can be understood in the manner Weston 'got rid' of Steven.

It may also be understood in the way Daudi persistently suggested that my work relationship with Muza involved sexual relations – which was an indirect way through which he sought to know whether I was sexually involved with Muza, so as to determine whether I was available to be won over for a sexual-economic relationship. I deduce this from Daudi's persistence, certainly, but more so from the way he repeatedly stole glances at Muza and his friend (who stood together on the beach, at a distance, waiting for me), as if to make sure that he was not being overheard. I also see it in the spontaneous way Daudi insisted on giving me all his contact details (postal address, e-mail address, and mobile phone number) while proposing to arrange a meeting between me and an acquaintance of his, and insisting that he was available to accompany me to the meeting on whatever day or time I chose to call him. This is a manifestation of the competition and backstabbing rivalry beach workers resort to in their search for tourist-oriented livelihoods.

On a different occasion I was involved in similar competition but did not recognise it as such at the time. A few days after the interview with Daudi, Muza's aforementioned friend covertly tried to get me to have him as my facilitator, in place of Muza. He did so by explaining (in Muza's absence) that since the previous year, Muza had taken to using *unga*, was 'out of control', was incurring significant debts due to his addiction, and also owed him some money. It was distressing to learn that Muza, who had always been critical of *unga* users and their wastage of badly needed financial resources, had fallen prey to it. According to his friend, the compensation I had offered the two of them two days earlier (for their help with my research) was all spent on *unga* by Muza. He was asking me to intervene to get Muza to repay his share of the compensation. However, he insisted that I do not mention the drug issue to Muza, because it would be known that he was my source. I was uncomfortable with the tension between the two men (which both of them were trying hard to conceal), the weight of things that 'should not be mentioned', and the possibility that I could be unintentionally contributing to Muza's self-destruction.

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While what was related by Muza's friend may have been true, later it dawned on me that this was also a manifestation of beach worker rivalry, since alongside the friend's disclosures of Muza's alleged addiction, he had emphasized his own qualities (that he neither smoked, consumed alcohol, nor took drugs of any kind). Similar tactics are used by beach workers to discredit fellow beach worker colleagues who are in budding relationships with foreign women visitors. It is in reference to such rivalry and competition for western tourists that Weston admitted that it was 'very hard' for him to befriend a white woman on the beach and explained that it would be 'perfect' if I initiated a relationship for him 'over there' (in Europe). Weston saw in the combination of my transnational mobility and perceived economic or financial ease, the opportunity to initiate a connection that could be of benefit to him, in the long-term.

As a Kenyan woman residing in France and studying in Switzerland, I was in all likelihood thought to be a good candidate for livelihood-oriented sexual-economic relationships and/or *family friend* relationships, as it was assumed that I would measure up financially. Weston's first option, it seems, was to try his luck with me, and when this proved unfruitful, he opted to try doing so through me. It is for this reason that when I declined his proposal to get into a sexual-economic relationship with him (which he presented as an amorous relationship when he said 'But then sometime if you give me time I can love you'), he moved on to asking me to act as a matchmaker for him and any white women I may know back in Europe.

From the aforementioned relative scarcity of tourists and the consequent rivalry and competition among beach workers, it follows that for men in pursuit of these relationships, the civil status or family situation of a woman identified as suitable is not a factor that is accorded much consideration, if any. When rapport is established and the visiting women do turn out to be married or living with a partner, it in no way constitutes an impediment to men's hopes or intentions of establishing long-term sexual-economic relationships with them. Quite the contrary, relationships with married western women or

those in marital relationships are considered by some beach workers as being particularly exciting and adventurous.

That a woman's family or marital status is of little significance to beach workers in search of sexual-economic relationships with western tourists became clear to me through my post-fieldwork communication with Muza. On returning to France after my first fieldwork period, he sent me an SMS saying that he missed me in a manner that did not match the professional relationship that we had maintained throughout the fieldwork. I felt irritated, when it dawned on me that he had been looking forward to a long distance sentimental-economic relationship, in much the same way he would have with a white tourist. This was a disconcerting revelation for me at the time, since we had had what I perceived to be a friendly professional relationship; he had met members of my family including my daughter and was aware of the existence of my partner back in France. Although I was certain I had not said anything or behaved in a way that could explain the attempted change of course, I nevertheless found myself going through fieldwork conversations for anything I may have said that could have been misinterpreted. It did not occur to me at the time that this was in all likelihood planned on his part.

Through my interactions with beach workers I could appreciate the desperation that characterised their daily lives. I therefore communicated to Muza, in what I hoped was a calm yet firm way, that I did not wish to see our respectful work relationship turned into something it was not. He apologised. I felt relieved and reassured. However, two weeks later I found myself questioning his intentions when he sent me an e-mail with a personal affliction story as an indirect way of asking for money – a strategy that I knew about through my interactions with beach workers. I saw in his communication that I was (going to become) the *mzungu* woman that I was not. I was afraid that responding in the desired way to a first plight story would lead to a Pandora's box of plight stories and endless remittances. I thus decided to put our communication on hold, uncomfortably taking comfort in the fact that I had remunerated him fairly during and at the end of the fieldwork.

### **Intertwining of the economic and cultural rites of passage**

Coming back to Weston, his presence in the South Coast region as a migrant Samburu man is neither new nor unique. Since the 1980s, young Samburu and Maasai men have been seasonally migrating to urban or peri-urban areas within the country for paid work, motivated by the hope of earning money and accumulating wealth, which would enable them to pay bride wealth, marry, and start families in their home regions. Hence, their migration to the South Coast is characterized by a combination of cultural underpinnings and economic motivations (Meiu 2011; Chege 2014: 175-180; 2015; 2017:77).

The periods spent in the South Coast and on its liminal beaches, far away from the men's remote home regions, mark a temporary break from their home region lifestyles, their communities' and society's everyday rules of conduct and gender roles and relations. They are times of experimentation with paid ethnicised-gendered-racialised work (nightguarding, dancing, hairdressing, and beadwork), sexual conquest (interracial and intergenerational), and subsequent inverted gender relations as well as illicit drug use and over consumption of alcohol among others. Weston's efforts to draw me into a sexual-economic relationship, his and other migrant and local men's quests for sexual-economic relations with foreign women, and their indulgence in alcohol,<sup>19</sup> *bhangji*, and cigarettes can be understood as explorations within this liminal period and place, where the usual rules of conduct related to appropriate intergenerational gender relations and behaviour are set aside.

It nonetheless seems Weston was not comfortable admitting in an outright manner that his presence in the region was linked to the desire to establish sexual-economic relationships. This is perhaps because he did not wish to be identified as a 'Mombasa Moran', which exposes Maasai and Samburu men identified as such to heavy moral

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<sup>19</sup> Weston drank beer as we interviewed that morning and seemed to have already consumed some form of alcohol before our meeting.

criticism from their peers, community members, and Kenyan public at large (Meiu 2011: 443-447). As a result, he used flirting as a way in and out of the subject. Asking me to put him in touch with a *mzungu* woman I knew in Europe while flirting, was also a way in and out of an uncomfortable conversation. With the rejection he got to his request he also fell back to flirting to save face. The face saving can also be seen in the way he took charge of actively putting me at ease with regard to the last question I asked ('Why do you want a *mzungu* woman?'). It seemed important for him that our interview should not end with me thinking that he was disappointed by the 'double rejection'. This he achieved by stating that he willingly consented to the interview, insisting that I ask the question, stating that it was 'a very good question', and answering it in a straightforward way ('I want money').

While Weston's and other Samburu and Maasai men's seasonal movement to the South Coast and their seemingly unrestrained behaviour may be understood as corresponding to the traditional cultural in-between phase discussed by Turner (1969: 359), it above all needs to be understood as characterising a contemporary liminal phase, where the cultural and the economic are dynamically intertwined. Their mobility needs to be understood as being motivated by the socio-economic marginalisation of young men and women from both communities. Furthermore, it is worth noting that for numerous men who move on to become junior elders through their fulfilment of certain socio-cultural expectations notably through marriage and procreation, this temporary phase evolves into a permanent one, as the men opt to continue working in the coastal region on a seasonal basis, because the money earned through tourist-related jobs represents a significant source of income for their households (Chege 2014; 2015).

### **Containing 'our women', taking advantage of 'their women'**

The South Coast beaches are a predominantly male terrain. Female beach workers whom one is likely to spot on certain parts of the beach are often non-Mijikenda entrepreneurs from other parts of the country. Some of them sell crafts or textile at fixed spots along

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beach access roads, while others offer massage services to tourists in small shacks built somewhat out of sight.<sup>20</sup> Local women or female beach workers, who dare to stroll on the beach unaccompanied, are more often than not assumed to be potentially promiscuous or already involved in sex work.

The presence of local or upcountry women and their work on the beach is generally controlled through popular local discourses alluding to their deviant sexualities. These discourses are instigated by a range of social actors, and strongest among them are male beach workers. Local women are simply not expected to go to the beach, be it for leisure or work, and most refrain from doing so. For example, when I once asked Muza about the women working in the shacks that stood in a somewhat secluded part of the beach in Galu, he said 'Our women [Digo, and Mijikenda more generally] don't come to the beach'. He went on to explain that the women working in the shacks as masseuse were migrants from upcountry.

On a different occasion, another local beach worker explained that male beach workers choose not to 'set up' fellow Digo women with western male tourists and rather opt for non-Mijikenda women from up country. The reason for this, he said, was that first, Digo women were generally very uncomfortable with white men's eyes. Second, he pointed out the clash between Islam and *wazungu's* consumption of pork food products, and this he said, would be a problem for Digo women should they emigrate abroad. Lastly, he attributed it to Digo women being too far out in their villages, hence not readily available on the beach when opportunities arose.

On the beach, the intersection of my gender, perceived geographical origins, and non-Mijikenda ethnicity played a significant part in defining my expected roles and relations on the beach landscape (Chege 2015). On two occasions I was offered massage jobs on the basis of being a non-Mijikenda woman on the beach. While sitting at a makeshift beach bar that was a regular meeting point for Muza and other men, a man whom I was unacquainted with arrived and announced that a *mzungu* man wanted massage services.

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<sup>20</sup> In the region, 'massage', more so 'special massage', is in many cases a euphemism for sexual services.

He had come to offer the job to a masseuse who was usually present at the beach bar, but she had just left. Since I was the only woman present, one of the beach workers turned towards me and asked whether I could perform massage; he was unaware of my research. I lightly said no while another man who was familiar with my research hastily and somewhat embarrassed simultaneously explained in Kidigo<sup>21</sup> that I was not there for beach work. On the second occasion when a different go-between person was told that I did not do beach work, he rhetorically retorted 'Why else would a woman be on the beach?' These incidents offer insights into the expected ethnicised-gendered division of labour on the beach, and the corresponding stereotypes embedded in the requests and remark.

Through local and long-range male beach workers' discourses, the South Coast and its beach context are construed as a polluting environment that corrupts women's moral standards. For example, a local Digo beach worker told me that if his wife ever expressed a desire to work on the beach then he would 'release her' (divorce), implying that her presence on the beach would inevitably involve having sex with male tourists. Similarly, Abraham, a Samburu migrant, told me that he preferred to have his wife live in his remote Samburu home area because when women came to the South Coast they 'misbehaved with tourists'. It would be useful to contextualise the meanings assigned to women's presence and movement on the beach landscape in relation to the local gender norms, which in the South Coast need to be understood as intertwinings of ethnic and religious gender norms.

The South Coast and the Coastal region at large are predominantly Islamic. Socio-cultural values related to decent dressing, modest conduct, and appropriate gender relations generally structure gender and social relations and are generated from a combination of interpretations of Islamic teachings and multi-ethnic customs. Women who are dressed in short (above the knee) and body moulding clothing are generally perceived to be either tourists from Nairobi, or upcountry migrants, who are generally perceived as seeking

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<sup>21</sup> I do not speak Kidigo but depending on the context can understand it.

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sexual-economic encounters with western tourists. On the beach, the sight of western women in swim-suits is not necessarily considered shocking by the local communities, since they are understood as being culturally different. The sight of Kenyan women in swim-suits is also generally accommodated based on the assumption or knowledge that they are not local women, and they are generally considered to be from Nairobi and on holiday.

The beach is nevertheless perceived as holding the potential to lure local women into immorality, which serves to legitimise men's control. Even for non-Muslim migrants like Abraham (aforementioned) and other upcountry men and women migrants, a Christian-ethnic version of such gender norms operates. Concretely this translates into men being most visible in public spaces through the work they perform and the leisure activities they engage in, and women choosing and/or being expected to invest themselves in economic and leisure activities that do not expose them to the gaze of men with whom they do not share marital or family ties.<sup>22</sup>

## **Conclusion**

During and after my fieldwork, I engaged in reflexive analyses of my experiences and interactions with beach workers, which enabled me to generate specific knowledge on my research and research environment. In particular, by connecting my experience and exchange with Weston to those I had with Muza, Daudi, and other beach workers I was able to gradually grasp the liminal character of the touristic South Coast area. I came to understand that although Weston's behaviour with me as a pregnant woman could have been considered inappropriate within the larger Kenyan society, it was not particularly shocking within the South Coast beach environment where the convergence of affluence, poverty, and stark inequalities serves to shape and motivate the pursuit of a wider range of gender roles, relations, and sexual-economic relationships. I was also able to

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<sup>22</sup> This view is also shared by Tami (2008).



understand his behaviour as resulting from migrant beach workers' geographical and ritualistic separation from their home regions and communities.

As illustrated through accounts of my experiences and exchanges with Weston, Muza, and Daudi, being visibly pregnant and/or a black Kenyan researcher – as opposed to being a white western female tourist – did not make me 'uninteresting' for men seeking to establish sexual-economic relationships. By reflexively analysing my fieldwork experiences over a period of time, I was able to see that within the liminal South Coast beach space, 'race', ethnicity, skin colour, nationality, and civil or family status were not rigid factors of consideration in the men's choices of potential transnational 'partners' or 'friends'. A person's perceived economic well-being and spatial power – that is, her/his ability to physically and virtually move across transnational borders with relative freedom and ease, which is linked to one's socio-economic position and technological know-how – were the main criteria (Chege 2015: 472).

While it was emotionally unsettling to be confronted with beach workers' persistent assumptions about my sexual availability, I was able to gradually understand these personal research experiences as being a reflection of the gender practices and ideologies that were/are in circulation within the liminal coastal area. Rather than let Daudi's insinuations 'roll off my back', I chose to find out from him the basis of his assumption. Doing so put me on the track towards understanding and subsequently generating knowledge on beach workers' strategies, 'race'-ethnicity-class-gender relations on the beach landscape, as well as sex and gender ideologies held by male beach workers in the region. This underscores the importance of engaging in reflexivity that acknowledges the significance of a researcher's emotions in the research process. It also highlights the epistemological value of emotions in the generation of knowledge (Hubbard et al. 2001; Takhar 2001; Li 2008; Hokkanen 2017).

It is necessary to underscore the shared characteristic of the liminality experienced by long-range migrant Samburu and Maasai men and local Mijikenda men. All are members of communities whose members have been excluded from economic, employment, and

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educational opportunities within the local and national economies, through political dynamics and national and international economic policies. In this sense, their presence on the beach is economically motivated and their status on the beach and beyond can thus be described as one of marginality.

Both local and migrant beach workers' behaviours and practices in the touristic beach context need to be understood in relation to the gender ideology and expectations of men as providers and breadwinners. As elsewhere in the country,<sup>23</sup> migrant and local men in the South Coast seek to fulfil their expected manly roles and responsibilities. However, the prevalence of unemployment, poverty, and inequalities is such that many fail to live up to their families' and communities' expectations. This undoubtedly generates feelings of inadequacy, disempowerment, loss of masculine pride, and self-esteem. In the liminal beach environment, subsequent attempts at salvaging male pride and self-esteem translate into some men exercising discursive and spatial control over women. This, as I have illustrated, is manifested in the range of meanings assigned to different women's presence and movement on the beach landscape, which are hinged on their perceived social class, ethnicity, skin colour, place of origin, and their status as migrants or non-migrants. Women's perceived or presumed sexual availability is central to these meanings.

Lastly, I went to the South Coast with the simple idea that through the participants' identification of me as a Kenyan researcher, and later as a pregnant Kenyan researcher, I would be able to interact with them in a relatively predictable way. Instead I found myself in an environment whose liminal character allowed for the pursuit of relationships that generally are taboo or are pursued covertly within the larger Kenyan society. Subsequently, participants' strategic interactions with me generated socio-emotional discomforts, and resistance from me. In retrospect, my emotions, the choices I made (not to flirt along or feign interest in their advances, among others) and the emphasis I put on qualifying my relations and my presence there as 'my work', underscore my unconscious attempts at resisting the liminality of the research context.

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<sup>23</sup> See for example Silberschmidt 2001; Amuyunzu-Nyamongo and Francis 2006; Izugbara 2015a, 2015b.

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## **About the Author**

Njeri Chege earned her PhD in Social Sciences at the University of Lausanne. Her academic background is in Gender Studies (CEU, Budapest) and Development Studies (IHEID, Geneva), and her interests include North-South relations, social inequality and inclusion, marginal livelihoods and social nonconformity, gender relations and masculinity. She can be contacted via e-mail at [njeriche@gmail.com](mailto:njeriche@gmail.com)

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