

BOOK REVIEW

Sarah Hillewaert. *Morality at the Margins: Youth, Language, and Islam in Coastal Kenya*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2020. 302 pp. Appendix: Note on Language. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$34.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-0823286508.

In *Morality at the Margins*, anthropologist Sarah Hillewaert writes with admirable ethnographic detail, linguistic prowess, and perceptiveness about the “process of moral self-positioning” (xii) that Muslim youth in the Old Town of Lamu undergo daily. This self-positioning occurs against the backdrop of changing political and economic circumstances in the Lamu archipelago, which was once an important node connecting Indian Ocean trade networks between East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Persian Gulf. The economic prosperity, claimed Arab genealogy, and Muslim identity of coastal elites (*waungwana*) in Lamu enabled a rigid social hierarchy that distinguished them from non-Muslim mainland African newcomers, local non-elites, and enslaved persons—all disparagingly referred to as *washenzi* (barbarians). Hillewaert explains that the *waungwana* articulated their sense of supremacy in terms of *heshima* (respectability) and *ustaarabu* (Arab civility).


Historically, local vocabularies of respectability in Lamu further signified piety, hospitality, and cosmopolitanism and contributed to “a previously hegemonic ideology of morality, civility, and social status” (xix). Yet, through an expert use of sketches, vignettes, dialogues, and interlude poems in local dialects and standard kiSwahili, Hillewaert shows that signs of moral rectitude are highly relational. What once signified the cultural superiority, or *heshima*, of Lamu elites—such as men’s leisure time, use of “soft” vernacular speech, women’s seclusion, and the subtle intricacies of hand greetings—now connote the archipelago’s traditionalism and obstinate attitude toward change (9). Inhabitants of Lamu indeed appear to idealize “the past as stable and harmonious” (53), yet Hillewaert shows that this form of nostalgia is not merely a longing for bygone days (216–18). Rather, it is also a way of establishing new terms of belonging in contemporary Lamu in the context of increased political and economic marginalization (54).

The discourse on marginalization in Lamu dates back to the archipelago's incorporation into the largely Christian represented government of the Republic of Kenya that formed on the mainland after independence in 1963 (4). Beginning in the late 1990s, the global War on Terror and its proponents further aggravated coast-mainland relations by inspiring a conflation of conservative coastal Muslim values and modes of dress with violent extremism (233). For *baraza*-sitting elders in Lamu today, economic and social marginalization manifests in the idleness, sex tourism, and drug use of dreadlock-wearing “beach boys.” Other indicators of moral crisis are the daring sartorial choices and spatial transgressions of young Muslim women, the intermixing of the genders, and increasing mainland African investment and settlement in Lamu Town. Hillewaert explains that elders in Lamu signify the deviant practices of the “dotcom” generation as symptomatic of youth enslavement to ideals of Western modernity (38) and a sign of the moral putrefaction of an island community that once “smelled like Jasmine” (49).

Yet the book helps salvage the integrity of the beach boys—and youth generally—when the author portrays them as “cultural brokers” who use the tools of their trade to simultaneously charm tourists and provide for their families in a flailing island economy (xiv). Far from neglecting Islam, these youth embody and display Muslim ethics in their daily life, through attendance at Friday prayers and fasting during Ramadan. Similarly, progressive young Muslim women who volunteer at a local aid organization re-interpret their “work” and newfound place in the public sphere as fulfilling a moral imperative for community development (155). Language, Hillewaert emphasizes, plays an integral role in the moral self-positioning of these youth in Lamu's various social contexts. “*Vijana*,” or youth, learn to code switch to Islamic greetings and the local dialect when addressing a meeting of elders about the ills of internal divisions that contribute to Lamu's underdevelopment. Meanwhile, when female and male youth volunteer at the same aid organization, they employ the English language and don accompanying material signs of western modernity—cool sunglasses and sneakers—when speaking of pathways to development among their peers.

In the midst of this rich discussion on youth, language, and moral signification in contemporary Lamu, the question of race loomed in the background without receiving explicit analysis. One wonders if there is a way to write more directly about how race and racialized symbols such as the pan-African accoutrements adopted by the Rasta beach boys function as material signifiers of respectability or lack thereof in Lamu? Gesturing to the changing nature of social hierarchies in this historic Swahili town, this book opens up an important discussion on the role of language and materiality in both signifying and complicating social inequities in a conservative Muslim society, while also highlighting new expressions of moral belonging among youth in Lamu. Moreover, the *heshima*, or respect, that Hillewaert shows her host

community and interlocutors makes this work a model for ethical engagement with ethnographic research subjects.

Kimberly T. Wortmann 
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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Gearhart, Rebecca. 2005. "Ngoma Memories: How Ritual Music and Dance Shaped the Northern Kenya Coast." *African Studies Review* 48 (3): 21–47. doi: [10.1353/arw.2006.0016](https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2006.0016).
- Smart, Devin. 2018. "'Safariland': Tourism, Development and the Marketing of Kenya in the Post-Colonial World." *African Studies Review* 61 (2): 134–57. doi: [10.1017/asr.2017.133](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.133).