

# ‘Idle minds’ and ‘empty stomachs’: youth, violence and religious diversity in coastal Kenya

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## Introduction

During ethnographic research conducted in the coastal Kenyan town of Malindi between August 2016 and September 2017, I noticed that Muslim, Christian and ‘Traditionalist’ religious leaders, politicians and the staff of civil society organizations (CSOs) frequently expressed moral concerns about youth. Leaders associate youth not only with the political violence and ‘violent extremism’ that threaten peaceful ethnic and religious coexistence, but also with other immoralities, such as drug abuse, crime, sexual indecency, and making witchcraft accusations against elders. Concerns focus on unemployed youth, as their supposed ‘idleness’ is thought to leave them susceptible to corrupting influences. This notion is sometimes expressed through the saying ‘an idle mind is the devil’s workshop’, which illustrates how problems ascribed to youth are seen as opposing moral standards preached by older leaders. In response, leaders often aim to incorporate youth in development and peace projects that are sponsored by Western donors, in order to educate, pacify and support them. Yet, leaders often manage to attract youth only by distributing food and money. This idea was reflected by one young man who argued that youth ‘think with their stomachs and pockets’, and that they attend activities only if their material needs are also attended to.

In recent decades, a growing body of scholarship has focused on the presence of unemployed or ‘idle’ youth in African societies. Scholars have stressed how this phenomenon should be understood in relation to the precarious social, economic and political positions youth occupy in societies characterized by political instability, conflict and failed economic liberalization (Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005). In these conditions, it is difficult, if not impossible, for youth to fulfil aspirations, assume adult responsibilities, or sustain themselves in morally desirable ways (Honwana 2012; Mains 2011; Masquelier 2005). In situations of contrasting aspirations and opportunities, youth have resorted to ‘loitering’ practices to kill overabundant time (Wafer 2017; Schielke 2008; Ralph 2008), they have joined revivalist religious movements (Janson 2010; LeBlanc 2000) or participated in protest movements (Honwana 2012; Abbink 2004), or they have drawn on globally circulating youth cultures (Soares 2010; Masquelier 2010; Weiss 2009) to refashion their positions in society in ways

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that often put them or their ways of being religious at odds with older generations. Under such circumstances, youth are often seen as a problematic category, embodying a deviance from the norm or a threat of civil disorder that demands programmatic interventions (King 2018; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Durham 2000).

While this field of scholarship has yielded valuable insights – insights on which this article builds – little work has been done on how contestations around supposedly ‘idle’ youth feature in settings characterized by religious plurality. Consequently, this article aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring how interventions to educate, pacify and support youth intersect with the politics of managing religious coexistence in Malindi. It does so by closely analysing several peace and development projects in Malindi that are sponsored by Western donors. Following international trends after 9/11 (Kundnani and Hayes 2018: 12), Western donors have heavily invested in ‘soft power’ approaches to counter ‘violent extremism’ and ‘radicalization’ by supporting ‘moderate’ religious leaders in Kenya. The availability of Western donor funds has benefited existing organizations and has also fuelled the formation of new CSOs that mobilize religious leaders (*‘viongozi wa dini’*) for peacebuilding work, which often focuses on youth.<sup>1</sup> These developments demonstrate how Malindi should not be taken as a bounded whole or isolated locale, but rather as a setting where influences from different transregional connections play out, a situation that this article investigates by taking a multi-scalar approach (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018).<sup>2</sup> The first part reflects on how religious leaders and CSO officials adjust Western donor policies to the (coastal) Kenyan context. The second part investigates how leaders in Malindi aim to shape youth from various ethnic and religious backgrounds into peaceful and morally upright Kenyan citizens, and how youth respond to these interventions.

Recent work within the anthropology of religion and morality has productively focused on the ethical qualities of everyday speech and action (e.g. Lambek 2010) and on the efforts of people to shape themselves into properly attuned moral individuals (e.g. Mahmood 2005). In this article, however, I understand morality in terms of idealized models of relationships that inform: (1) emotive evaluations (of behaviour, actions, ideas); and (2) motivations and attempts to make actual relationships correspond to imagined ideals (Fiske and Rai 2014). This relational understanding of morality is valuable for my purposes because it underscores the ways in which the moral concerns of elderly leaders in Malindi connect with attempts to organize religious coexistence and generational relations in ways

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<sup>1</sup>I focused on the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC), the Malindi District Cultural Association (MADCA) and two Muslim-led organizations that receive funds via the UK Conflict, Stability and Security Fund to ‘build resilience in civil society’ against ‘violent extremism’. I also made observations in educational settings and interacted with the Kenya Muslim Youth Alliance, Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI), the Malindi Education and Development Association (MEDA), and various youth groups.

<sup>2</sup>Ayşe Çağlar and Nina Glick Schiller developed their multi-scalar approach to analyse the position of migrants in city making and unequal networks of power that connect to regional, national and global institutions. In this article, I demonstrate how such an approach is useful to study initiatives to pacify youth in Malindi.

that leaders consider to be morally appropriate.<sup>3</sup> Elderly leaders often evaluate behaviours associated with 'idle' youth as deviating from ideals of peace and national unity that they wish to uphold. These evaluations subsequently motivate attempts to accommodate youth in morally desirable social constellations via peace and development projects. Within these settings, leaders echo state policies with regard to religion and strongly discourage youth from politicizing religion or ethnicity, which is negatively labelled as 'tribalism' (*ukabila*). Instead, they emphasize that ethnic and religious differences should be subsumed by an overarching national identity. Furthermore, leaders generally refer to different religions as equal, presenting them as alternative moral paths that all support the same ideals of peace, morality and national unity. They generally envision morality as being informed by religion, even if they do not always explicitly frame moral ideals in religious terms. As I show in the conclusion, such reasoning allows elderly leaders to develop a 'moral religiosity' that is shared across religious divides. Within the frame of this moral religiosity, youth who engage in immoral behaviour or cause division along ethnic or religious lines are understood as misinterpreting religion, or as falling outside the category of 'religion' completely.

Such moral evaluations do not remain uncontested, because youth frequently offer different moral assessments of generational relations in Malindi. For example, youth often accuse elderly leaders of hypocrisy and of enriching themselves at their expense, creating conditions in which it is very difficult for youth to fulfil aspirations or sustain themselves in morally desirable ways (cf. Meinema 2019). Furthermore, some youth draw on hip-hop culture and music to develop alternative 'moral registers' (Schielke 2009: 166–8) with which to evaluate their urban lives, and distance themselves from the moral religiosity espoused by older leaders. For some youth, their critiques give them a reason to assume a sceptical attitude towards religious leaders, and a more general position of indifference towards religion. Yet, youth often refrain from publicly criticizing leaders since open criticism could invite unwanted repercussions, and because participating in socially desired activities allows them to fill their 'stomachs and pockets'. Nevertheless, they often physically express discontent and disinterest during CSO meetings through their body language. These observations complement existing literature on youth and religion in Africa, which has often focused on the ways in which marginalized youth draw on religious revivalist movements in ways that put their ways of being religious at odds with those of older generations (LeBlanc 2000; Abbink 2004; Kagwanja 2004; Janson 2010; Soares 2010; Masquelier 2010). The strategic ways in which youth contest and comply with attempts of elderly leaders to pacify them, however, demonstrate how the intertwining of religion with a distributional politics – which, in the view of youth, primarily benefits elderly leaders – causes some youth in Malindi to distance themselves from religion, rather than drawing inspiration from it (cf. Shorter and Onyancha 1997: 66).

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<sup>3</sup>This relational understanding of morality also aligns with an understanding of concepts such as 'youth' (*vijana*) and 'elders' (*wazee*) as 'social shifters' that I follow here. These concepts are not merely biological categories but historically situated social and cultural constructions that involve the social imagination, through which people position themselves 'in a social landscape of power, rights, expectations, and relations' (Durham 2000: 116).

In this article, I start with a brief introduction to the socio-economic conditions in which anxieties about 'idle' youth in Malindi arise, while noting a striking discrepancy between the concerns of Western donors and those of the leaders who implement peace and development projects in Malindi. In the second section, I explain this discrepancy in relation to the ways in which concerns about 'youth violence' intersect with religion in Kenya. In the third section, I explore how, within CSO settings in Malindi, CSO staff, public officials and religious leaders from various backgrounds collectively aim to shape youth into peaceful and religiously upright Kenyan citizens. Finally, I distinguish three main ways in which youth respond to these interventions. In the conclusion, I reflect on how contestations around the 'idle minds' and 'empty stomachs' of youth enable leaders to develop a moral religiosity that is shared across ethnic and religious divides, and on what this tells us about the organization of religious plurality in Malindi.

## Malindi

Kenya is a Christian-majority country with a significant Muslim minority. Many Kenyan Muslims live in towns on the Swahili coast, where the history of Islam stretches back more than a millennium. In the rural hinterlands around these towns, other coastal populations such as the Mijikenda are often more numerous. In this area, Malindi is a multi-religious town with a significant presence of Islam, Christianity and 'Traditionalism', a term that is widely used in Malindi to refer to indigenous African religious traditions. In and around Malindi, the Giriama are the most populous Mijikenda subgroup. Most Giriama self-identify as either Christians or Traditionalists, while some also self-identify as Muslims (McIntosh 2009).

Under postcolonial conditions, both Mijikenda from various religious backgrounds and Swahili Muslims have frequently complained about their relative marginalization vis-à-vis 'upcountry Christians' in terms of education, economics, land access and political representation (McIntosh 2009; Kresse 2009). Feelings of marginalization intensified when many people from 'upcountry' ('*wabara*') settled in coastal towns to work in business, governmental jobs or tourism, making the coastal populations ('*wapwani*') feel that they were being sidelined even in their own home regions. During my fieldwork, however, nearly everyone complained about the decline of tourism. In the 1980s, Malindi experienced a 'tourist boom' from which many youths profited by providing European tourists with informal tours, souvenirs or (sexual) intimacy. However, tourism also raised moral debates, since religious leaders lamented the increased drug use, alcohol consumption, 'indecent' dress and prostitution that came with it (Peake 1989; Beckerleg 1995).

In the late 1990s, this tourist 'boom' was followed by a 'bust' when politically inspired violent clashes, natural calamities and al-Qaida-related terrorist attacks disrupted coastal tourism. Tourism again came to a near complete stop after 2011, when al-Shabaab conducted violent attacks against Christian and state targets in Kenya (Anderson and McKnight 2014: 15–25). Although Malindi has not seen any major al-Shabaab attacks, the town has been used as a recruiting ground. The disruption to tourism forced many to look for economic alternatives. For youth in Malindi, who mostly lack capital to invest in business or education, few viable options are available. Local fishermen increasingly compete with large

commercial fishing vessels, while agricultural endeavours are precarious due to irregular droughts, and because many urban poor live as squatters on land owned by absent landlords (McIntosh 2009). Many young men have consequently turned to driving or touting public transport minibuses (*matatus*), motorcycle taxis (*boda-bodas*) or three-wheeled *tuk-tuks*. Motorcycles in particular are in such high demand that I heard several stories about Giriama youth who accuse elderly relatives of witchcraft (*uchawi*), after which they kill them or chase them away, so that they can sell their plots of land to buy a motorcycle. Although transportation provides youth with much-needed economic opportunities, this sector has a morally ambivalent reputation, as young drivers are frequently accused of giving girls lifts in exchange for sexual favours. Furthermore, politicians often provide *boda-boda* drivers with food, money and T-shirts during campaigns, causing many to fear that youth are lured by politicians to engage in political violence.

In relation to recent al-Shabaab activity, Western donors currently fund various CSOs in Malindi to promote peaceful interreligious coexistence and to counter 'radicalization' and 'violent extremism'. I noticed that within these programmes, elderly leaders generally locate the threat of political violence and 'violent extremism' in youth, and often associate violence and other immoralities with a lack of religiosity. For example, a Muslim leader made the suggestion that young drug users 'lack religion' (*wanakosa dini*), while a Giriama elder reasoned that youth who accuse elders of witchcraft are 'no Muslim, no Christian, but also no Traditionalist', which implicitly posits that adherence to any religion would restrain youth from behaving in this way. Similarly, during an interfaith dialogue, a Christian pastor spoke about a village north of Malindi where young Christians and Muslims had clashed violently. The pastor argued that these youths are 'thugs' (*wakora*) rather than Muslims or Christians, since no religion permits violence. During another interfaith dialogue, a Muslim leader associated 'radicalization' with a lack of education and knowledge about Islam. Finally, the saying 'an idle mind is the devil's workshop', expressed by both Muslims and Christians, links idleness to demonic influence.<sup>4</sup> Since drug abuse, sexual immorality, political violence and violent extremism are often explained as resulting from idleness, this signifies how youth problems are commonly understood to be in opposition to ('good') religiosity. These observations bring to the fore a striking discrepancy between Western donors and the CSOs they fund in Malindi. Many Western donors see 'radical' religiosity, especially among Muslim youth, as a potential security threat, which they aim to counter by supporting 'moderate' religious leaders (Mwakimako and Willis 2014: 9–10). However, many religious leaders, government officials and CSO officials in Malindi conceptualize a *lack* of religiosity among youth as a threat to peace, 'interfaith harmony' and morality. In the next section, I explain this discrepancy in relation to the ways in which concerns about youth and violence intersect with religion in Kenya.

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<sup>4</sup>The saying has Biblical origins, as Proverbs 16.27 states that 'idle hands are the devil's workshop'. Another variation ('an idle brain is the devil's shop/workhouse') is included in an old collection of British proverbs, making it likely that it was introduced to Kenya during colonial times (Bohn 1888: 106).

## Youth, violence and religion in Kenya

Concerns about youth as forming potentially violent threats to peace have long figured in Kenyan political imaginations. Anthropologist Naomi van Stapele (2016: 314) argues that such worries should be understood in relation to wider political contestations for resources and state power within Kenya's patriarchal political system, which generally privileges men over women, and wealthy/older men over young men (cf. Lonsdale 1992). As women are frequently seen as dependent on men and excluded from political spheres, concerns about 'youth violence' often focus on men, and particularly those from marginalized urban localities where relatively large numbers of 'idle' young men are thought to reside (van Stapele 2016: 309; Rasmussen 2010: 314). In relation to the challenge that poor urban men may pose to political elites, van Stapele (2016: 314) argues that youth are often imagined as 'dangerous criminals' and a 'public threat to safety'. Van Stapele argues that such generational imaginaries serve to legitimize the concentration of power in a small male and ageing elite, and to exclude poor urban men from dominant conceptions of Kenyan nationhood and citizenship, which leaves them exposed to systematic state violence to suppress them.

Besides intersecting with class, locality and gender, concerns about 'youth violence' also have religious dimensions. Although Kenya's 2010 constitution states that 'there shall be no state religion', scholars have often pointed to the prominence of Christianity in Kenyan law, politics and public debates (Ambani and Ahaya 2015). Especially since the 1990s, politicians have increasingly relied on Christian forms and practices to build support and legitimacy, for example by televising church visits and attending church fundraising events as patrons (Deacon *et al.* 2017: 150–3). Given Christian predominance in Kenyan public life and politics, it is perhaps unsurprising that marginalized youth have sometimes expressed discontent through movements inspired by religions other than Christianity (Mazrui 1994). For example, during the 1990s, the Mungiki movement, which grew among marginalized Kikuyu youth, advocated a return to Kikuyu traditionalism and a generational change of power, while gaining a notorious reputation for violence (Rasmussen 2010).

When many Mungiki groups ceased to exist after violent government crackdowns in the early 2010s, state concerns about 'youth violence' shifted their focus to al-Shabaab (van Stapele 2016: 304). Building on a history of marginalization and frustration under postcolonial conditions, in recent decades a segment of Kenyan Muslims has expressed discontent in the form of fiery Islamist discourses that explicitly reject the Kenyan state and the Christian predominance they associate with it (Mwakimako and Willis 2014; Chome 2019). Although many Muslims who advance such critiques do not promote or condone violence, al-Shabaab has also found support among a minority of Kenyan Muslims. While particularly popular among young Muslims with limited prospects for the future, any public expression of Islamist critiques – including those that are non-violent – can invoke serious security risks, because counterterrorism measures by the Kenyan state have involved the often arbitrary use of violence, the profiling of Muslim communities, and extrajudicial killings (MUHURI and Open Society Justice Initiative 2013).

Kenyan political scientist Peter Kagwanja (2004) argues that, since the 1990s, concerns about 'youth violence' in Kenya – and Africa more widely – have



sparked considerable academic attention. Kagwanja describes how discourses about ‘youth in Africa’ frequently construct a ‘Manichean dichotomy’ that emphasizes either ‘emancipatory’ or violent ‘apocalyptic’ aspects of youth political mobilization, as youth may take ‘recourse to religion’ (Kagwanja 2004: 84; Abbink 2004: 20). In a recent article, Elizabeth King (2018: 135) demonstrates that dichotomous conceptions of youth as either ‘peacemakers’ or ‘troublemakers’ have also found their way into international development policies implemented in Kenya. King (2018: 136) argues that international donors and the Kenyan government both consider involving youth in education, employment, development and peacebuilding as crucial in keeping them from political violence, criminal gangs and al-Shabaab recruitment.

These policy concerns coincide with wider donor policy shifts since the end of the authoritarian Moi regime (1978–2002), in which Western donors have increasingly moved from human rights and good governance themes to focus on peacebuilding and ‘countering violent extremism’ instead. Scholars have observed how donor policies to ‘counter violent extremism’ in Kenya often conceive ‘radical’ religious beliefs among Muslim youth in particular as a threat to their strategic and security interests, which they aim to curb by supporting peace and development projects led by ‘moderate’ religious leaders (Mwakimako and Willis 2014: 9–10).<sup>5</sup> Although Muslim organizations continue to benefit from donor support under these policy shifts, scholars have noted that this ‘securitization of aid’ has put Muslim CSOs in a vulnerable position. On the one hand, Muslim CSOs that cooperate with Western donors risk angering Muslims who are critical of the state or Western ‘meddling’ in Muslim affairs (Khalil and Zeuthen 2016). On the other hand, the Kenyan government increasingly scrutinizes CSOs as part of its counterterrorism measures, and has used anti-terrorism legislation to freeze accounts of several prominent CSOs that criticize excessive state violence (Mazrui *et al.* 2018: 27). In these conditions, it has become crucial for Muslim organizations to actively dissociate Islam from the ‘violent extremism’ they are supposed to counter. For example, I noticed that in Malindi two local Muslim CSOs that receive funds via the UK Conflict, Stability and Security Fund to ‘build resilience’ against ‘violent extremism’ often avoid addressing violent extremism altogether, as they fear that openly addressing it would bring about security risks or further stigmatization of Islam. Instead, these two Muslim CSOs try to counter violent extremism by promoting peace during interfaith dialogues, and by providing youth with peace education and entrepreneurship training. In this way, they aim to uphold the idea that Islam is essentially a peaceful

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<sup>5</sup>In my forthcoming PhD thesis, I analyse how several Western donors that fund programmes to ‘counter violent extremism’ in Kenya, such as the UK Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, USAID and the European Union, no longer explicitly mention that they focus on countering *Islamic* violent extremism, although they work exclusively in areas with significant Muslim populations. Western donor policies often conceive ‘violent extremism’ as an ideological problem that is connected to ‘radically illiberal and undemocratic ideologies’ (BRICS 2016; cf. USAID 2014: 3; European Union 2017: 4), which they aim to counter by strengthening ‘moderate’ religious leaders. By combining an ideological focus with an emphasis on Islam, Western donor policies to ‘counter violent extremism’ in Kenya arguably continue to carry a tacit distinction between ‘moderate’ Muslims who hold liberal values and require support, and ‘radical’ Muslims who follow ‘extremist’ interpretations of Islam and need to be countered.

religion, which, like Christianity, contributes to peace, morality and national unity.<sup>6</sup>

It is in this context that we can understand the earlier observed discrepancy between the motivations of Western donors and Malindi-based leaders to engage youth in peace and development projects. Within these programmes, Muslims and Traditionalists strive to cooperate with Christians as equals, by arguing that their religions are essentially peaceful and, like Christianity, support civil ideals of peace, morality and national unity. In order to strengthen such claims, they associate immorality, political violence and ‘violent extremism’ not with the ‘radical’ religiosity of particular religious groups, but rather with a general lack of morality among ‘idle’ youth, to which various religions offer the solution. This conceptualization allows elderly leaders to tap into anxieties about ‘youth violence’ common in both donor policies and Kenyan political imaginations, and to assume public roles as guardians of peace and national unity, towards which different religions offer alternative but equal moral paths. These observations highlight how projects that aim to ‘build peace’ and ‘counter violent extremism’ in Malindi are shaped by influences on multiple scales, which are negotiated, ignored and adjusted by elderly leaders as they accommodate them to the coastal Kenyan context. Next, I explore how these dynamics play out in Malindi.

### Contesting ‘idle minds’ and ‘empty stomachs’

In January 2017, a young CSO volunteer invited me to attend a youth convention for peace in Malindi, organized by the CSO Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI). Upon arrival at the venue, I recognized several youths from the Malindi Youth Development Group (MYDG), who often participate in CSO projects, while they tested a PA system by loudly playing hip-hop music. After an opening prayer, the MUHURI staff shared that they had invited various guests to address the youth. They also emphasized that all participants would receive ‘chai, lunch and transport’. As I saw about a hundred youngsters attending the meeting, I asked my friend what role food and transport money plays in the motivation of youth to attend. He replied: ‘They just think with their stomachs and pockets. They are not here to get knowledge. They need something tangible. If they get some food, some money, some snacks, they will come.’

The first speaker was a representative of the National Commission for Integration and Cohesion (NCIC), which was established after the 2007–08 outbreak of post-election violence. The representative explained that the NCIC aimed to ensure that the upcoming general elections in August 2017 would

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<sup>6</sup>During my fieldwork, I noticed that Giriama Traditionalists in Malindi similarly align their religion with ideals of peace and national unity. Since 2003, Giriama elders in Malindi have organized themselves in MADCA to promote Giriama ‘culture’ and ‘traditional religion’ (*dini ya jadi*). This is relevant because Muslims, Christians and (post)colonial state actors have long denigrated Giriama Traditionalism as backward, idolatrous and possibly connected to witchcraft, political opposition and violence (McIntosh 2009: 215; Mitsanze and Giles 2013). Giriama elders wish to counter such stigmatizing associations by participating in peace and development projects and by promoting national unity during public events.



remain peaceful. She stressed that, as Kenyan citizens, youth have to uphold national values of peace, human rights, loyalty, integrity, justice, equality and unity. She also emphasized that youth should avoid hate speech that highlights 'tribal' identities, as it has the potential to disrupt peace. Finally, she mentioned that the NCIC was watching youth, that WhatsApp messages would be monitored, and that any distribution of provocative content would be punishable by a three-year prison sentence.

Then, a local consultant, recognizable as a Muslim by his cap, spoke about violent extremism. His lecture contained two main points. First, he defined violent extremists as people who mobilize ethnic or religious identities for political ends, and mentioned al-Shabaab, Mungiki and the coastal secessionist movement the Mombasa Republican Council as examples. Second, he emphasized that these groups misuse and misinterpret religion, as religion requires people to maintain peace and unity, instead of causing division. The third speaker represented the Independent Electoral and Boundary Commission, which administers and oversees elections in Kenya. The representative noted that youth, not elders, were the main participants in earlier outbreaks of political violence in Kenya. He argued that, this time, youth should not be tempted by cash handouts from divisive politicians to engage in violence, but should take responsibility by promoting peace instead.

Over the course of these lectures, I noticed how the young people there looked increasingly bored, with many busy on their phones, and some even appearing to be asleep. The youth only became active again during lunch. While eating lunch, my friend complained that the meeting was boring and not properly organized: 'Even the food is not well cooked! And now after the break, people will be sleeping more, because that is the natural reaction of the body after eating a lot.'

After lunch, the young people got the opportunity to raise topics that they were interested in. However, the government representatives who had spoken earlier had already left, leaving youth to address the remaining MUHURI staff. They mainly complained about the lack of economic opportunities in Malindi, and they did so without referring to ethnic or religious identities, in line with earlier received instructions. After this session, a national government representative arrived and delivered another lecture about the importance of keeping the peace during elections. Finally, a MUHURI staff member invited the young people to become peace ambassadors, since 'idleness is the devil's workshop' and leaves youth vulnerable to being 'used' (*wanatumiwa*) by divisive others. After a closing prayer, the youths received a 'transport fee' of 300 shillings (Ksh), similar to the amount many make in a day of informal economic activities.

In various ways, this MUHURI peace meeting was typical of CSO meetings that aim to 'build peace' or 'counter violent extremism' in Malindi. In many meetings, the threat of political violence and 'violent extremism' is primarily located in youth, since elders fear that their idleness leaves them vulnerable to being 'used' by divisive others. Furthermore, CSO meetings generally privilege elderly authority, because CSO officials, government representatives and religious leaders talk the most and constantly emphasize the moral responsibility of youth in maintaining the peace and unity. Youth also receive material rewards for their participation. Finally, leaders often associate violent extremism or political violence not so much with the 'radical' religiosity of particular religious groups, but rather with a misinterpretation or lack of religion, since all religions are envisioned as supporting peace,



FIGURE 1 The entrance of Upweoni Primary.

morality and national unity. This reasoning implies that when religion is interpreted in the ways that elderly leaders envision, a strengthening of religiosity rather than religious moderation is seen as a solution to the threat of violence and immorality.

CSOs in Malindi implement this moral project to educate and pacify youth not only through CSO meetings and dialogues but also in educational settings. For example, one local CSO that receives UK funding to ‘build resilience’ against violent extremism provides peace education in various primary and secondary schools and madrasas in Malindi. When I followed this organization, I noticed that many schools instructed their students through signs and murals. For example, Khairat Girls, a private Muslim secondary school, has written the school’s mission and vision on its walls. The mission of Khairat Girls is ‘to provide learners with competitive desired qualities that will enable them to be morally, spiritually, and socially upright members of the community’, while its vision is ‘to relate religion and leadership in order to nurture girls in becoming future leaders in society’.

Similarly, at the main entrance of Upweoni Primary, a large public primary school, a mural states that ‘Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge’ and exhorts pupils to ‘Listen to advice. Accept instruction and in the end you will be wise’ (Figure 1). We also see an image that depicts a girl refusing money from an older man, accompanied by the text: ‘Do not accept favours.’ This image resembles a larger mural at Holy Ghost Mission, a Catholic-supported public primary school (Figure 2). This painting encourages students to avoid favours, love letters, drugs, secluded places and bad company, which are important ways in which youth can ‘change life’ (*badilika uishi*) to ‘avoid AIDS’ (*epuka*



FIGURE 2 Mural at Holy Ghost Mission Primary.

*ukimwi*). At Upweoni Primary, I also found a sign (Figure 3) that instructs students to put ‘God first’, while another indicates an ‘English-speaking zone’, signalling the imposition of English as a language of instruction and national integration (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1986: 10–12). Together with accompanying texts, images in murals arguably perform a mimetic function, presenting youth with ideals and anti-ideals of desired bodily behaviour that students should either imitate or avoid. The idea is that youth should wear neat uniforms, adopt calm and friendly behaviour, and speak English. Furthermore, youth should not be distracted by immoral others who offer immediate gratification of bodily desires through favours, drugs or love letters. Idealized bodily behaviour is also connected with future rewards, as youth are promised that they will become ‘wise’ or ‘future leaders of society’. The prospect of gratification, however, remains closely tied to the acceptance of the authority of elders and religious leaders in the present, since students are required to ‘listen to instruction’ and put ‘God first’.

Many public schools – and private Muslim or Christian schools – also subscribe to messages of peace and national unity by cooperating with CSOs, some of which send religious leaders to instruct students within school compounds. For example,



FIGURE 3 Instructional signs at Upweoni Primary.

during peace education at Khairat Girls, Muslim girls were instructed to share generously, refrain from backbiting, embrace an overarching national identity, and refer to their elders in cases of conflict or disagreement. After each session, girls received milk and biscuits, while their teacher, who acts as ‘patron’, received Ksh 500. During peace education at Upweoni Primary, Muslim and Christian teachers and CSO staff instructed students from various ethnic and religious backgrounds to share poems, songs and stories about peace. Performing students were rewarded with milk and biscuits, while teachers received a ‘transport fee’ of Ksh 1,000. These observations demonstrate that efforts to build peace and national unity, which regularly involve religious leaders, are often closely entangled with the distribution of donor funds and food, which often primarily benefits elderly ‘patrons’ of youth.

I made similar observations when I followed the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC) to Karima Primary, where CICC implements a Dialogue and Action Project (DAP) to promote peaceful interreligious coexistence, protect children’s rights and counter sexual abuse. CICC does this by forming committees of religious leaders, CSO staff and government officials to handle cases of sexual abuse, while Muslim, Christian and Traditionalist leaders provide guidance to ‘peace clubs’ in various schools.<sup>7</sup> Within Malindi town, CICC selected Karima Primary to be included in the programme because of student pregnancies and students dropping out of school to engage with tourists on the beach. During peace

<sup>7</sup>In Malindi, CICC cooperates with MADCA (see note 6) to include representatives of ‘Traditionalism’ within their interfaith cooperation.



club meetings, children were taught to support one another, be role models, correct the mistakes of other children, respect freedom of worship and stay in school. Children also told me that having peace (*kuwa na amani*) means loving and helping one another (*kupendana, kusaidiana*) regardless of ethnic or religious differences. Children also consistently used the peace club as a platform to request material support, for example by asking me to help students with school fees.

CICC also sends Muslim and Christian clerics to various schools to provide 'pastoral programme instruction', which complements classes in either Christian religious education (CRE) or Islamic religious education (IRE). It is notable that there is no recognition for indigenous African religious traditions in Kenya's official curriculum (Chidongo 2012: 223–4). As many public schools originated as mission schools, Kenyan Muslims have at times been apprehensive about the Christian character of public education, with debates focusing on public schools that do not provide IRE or accept students wearing headscarves (Maina 2003). Despite these institutional imbalances, the interreligious cooperation within CICC illustrates how many Muslim, Christian and Traditionalist leaders and school officials, as well as Kenya's educational policy, see schools as important settings where children should be shaped into peaceful, moral and religiously upright Kenyan citizens.

The office of CICC-Malindi is located at the Catholic Institute, where various Catholic organizations are situated. There, I found that the mission of Malindi's Catholic secondary school is 'to reduce the level of illiteracy, early marriages, radicalization, hard substance abuse and poverty in society by educating and empowering our young generation to be vibrant, focal and indispensable people to improve our country in all spheres of life'. When I asked a Catholic teacher about this mission statement, she expressed worries about drug abuse and idleness among youth in Malindi, and stated that many young people 'do not identify with any religion'. She argued that not identifying with a religion leaves youth vulnerable to recruitment by divisive politicians or youth gangs, or engagement with tourists on the beach. The teacher explained that the Catholic school instructs students to become economically self-sufficient, and to 'identify with a religion, not necessarily the Catholic one, but a religion which has God as the Supreme Being'. This again signifies how the strengthening of religious belief, rather than the moderation of religious 'radicalism', is conceptualized as a solution to the threat of violence and immorality.

Based on these observations, I conclude that, in Malindi, CSOs, religious leaders, state representatives and educational institutions collectively aim to shape youth into morally and religiously upright community members and Kenyan citizens. Yet, they also fear that the 'idle minds' and 'empty stomachs' of youth leave the latter susceptible to immorality and divisive others who may tempt them with bodily pleasure or material rewards. In what follows, I highlight three potentially overlapping ways in which youth relate to the concerns of elderly leaders.

### **Appropriating the dominant discourse to access support**

Many youths in Malindi organize themselves in 'youth groups', which are frequently mobilized by CSOs to participate in development and peace projects. For



FIGURE 4 The front of the T-shirt distributed by MYDG.

example, MYDG was founded after its Christian and Muslim members received vocational skills training from the Malindi Education and Development Association (MEDA), a prominent Malindi-based CSO with Muslim leadership. When I joined MYDG's weekly meetings, I was told that it had earlier received funding to participate in a USAID project on conflict mitigation (USAID 2013). MYDG's chairman complained that it was difficult to keep members actively involved after donor wells dried up, as members no longer received regular material benefits from group activities. MYDG still has reasons not to disband, because there are occasional opportunities to get 'chai, lunch and transport' at CSO meetings, such as the MUHURI youth convention discussed above.

Furthermore, MYDG also helps MEDA in renting out chairs and a PA system. These items are used during social gatherings and funerals, but also during political rallies and CSO meetings, providing MYDG and MEDA with opportunities to benefit indirectly from donor and campaign funds flowing into town. I noticed similar tactics among other youth groups. For example, the youth group Tosha ('Enough') wrote a business plan during an entrepreneurship training session that aimed to 'counter violent extremism', and they used this to acquire funds via the Affirmative Action Fund that is patronized by a local politician. Tosha invested these funds in tents and chairs, allowing the group to benefit from future interactions with CSOs and politicians.

The ways in which youth groups engage leaders often imply that youth literally incorporate peace messages propagated by elderly leaders in their dress, bodily behaviour and activities. For example, as part of the previously mentioned USAID project, MYDG recorded hip-hop songs for peace which it sold on CD, and it distributed T-shirts with peace messages. The front of the T-shirt



features the text '*Amani Pwani, Amani Kenya*', which could be translated as 'Peace on the Coast, Peace in Kenya' (Figure 4). This slogan emphasizes not only peace but also that the coast is part of Kenya, negating separatist claims made by the Mombasa Republican Council, which argues that the coast is not Kenya ('*Pwani si Kenya*') (USAID 2013: 30). In the middle of the design, we see two men who are about to shake each other's hands. Simultaneously, their other hands put away what many Kenyans would call 'traditional weapons' – a bow and arrows, a machete and a club. In the centre, there is a white dove, a Christian symbol that represents the peace that is attained when people shake off their 'traditional' inclinations to fight each other. The back of the T-shirt features the slogan 'Choose peace, stop violence', emphasizing youths' responsibility to maintain peace.

On another occasion, the Shella For Change Youth Group (SFCYG) cooperated with other youth groups to invite 'peace-loving leaders' and larger CSOs to financially contribute to a 'peace walk' as part of their 'peace activism' surrounding the 2017 elections. The event included a procession during which youth walked through town with banners that stressed peace and national unity. Subsequently, various (aspiring) politicians, CSO representatives and religious leaders who contributed to the event addressed youth on the beach, where meals, water, soda and entertainment were provided. Such events exemplify how youth actively mobilize themselves as an audience for 'peace-loving' leaders, which allows them access to the food, money and drinks distributed at these events.

Sometimes, youth also deliberately confirm negative stereotypes that leaders have about them, arguably to remind elders of their moral obligation to support them, since they always combine such reasoning with demands for material support. For example, during an interfaith dialogue organized by the CSO Initiatives for Change, I noticed how a representative of the Malindi Youth Peace Network (MYPN) mostly remained quiet, including when a religious leader associated young 'thugs' with violence. When he was finally given the chance to speak, the MYPN representative argued that youth should be involved in 'peace forums' to 'bring us the message' (*tuletee ujumbe*) and that they should be given employment. The young man reasoned that this is necessary because youth are 'used by politicians' (*tunatumiwa sana na wanasisasa*) for political violence since there is 'nothing to do' (*hakuna kitu kufanya*), thus confirming the stereotype that 'idle' youth are easily mobilized for violence. Similarly, in another meeting on peace and security organized by the National Crime Research Centre, one youth implicitly threatened that young people will join al-Shabaab, arguing that they will 'go to Somalia' (*tunaenda Somalia*) if they are not given jobs soon.

These observations demonstrate how youth in Malindi actively organize themselves to be incorporated in development and peace projects, in ways that do not challenge the moral ideals and evaluations of religious leaders, state representatives or CSO officials. Rather, many youth appropriate the dominant discourse on peace and national unity, which allows them access to food, money and opportunities distributed in these settings. In some cases, youth also confirm negative stereotypes that leaders have about them to 'hold polite society to ransom' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005: 28). In these cases, youth from various religious backgrounds warn leaders that if they fail to meet their moral responsibility to support them, they may be tempted to get involved

with divisive or violent others such as al-Shabaab to fulfil their economic needs. These dynamics demonstrate how attempts of leaders to morally instruct youth within peace projects often become closely entangled with the politics of distributing donor funds.

### Silent criticism

It is important to stress, however, that outward compliance does not necessarily mean that youth agree with dominant political imaginations (Haugerud 1995: 103). Outside the context of public meetings, and only after I interacted with them extensively, young people also criticized religious leaders, politicians and CSO officials. For example, after an interfaith dialogue, a young man shared that he was once fired from his job as a hospital clerk, only to see his position taken up by others with connections to a local politician. Although he filed complaints at the labour office and with other politicians, he explained: 'If you don't know someone up there ... you are nowhere.' Consequently, he argued that 'the reason that youth in the coast are more violent is not because of drugs or that they are not well educated; it is because they are undermined.' On a different occasion, after another peace walk, a young Muslim criticized CSO staff and politicians for using project funds for their own benefit, because they use peace walks merely as 'income-generating activities'.

Youth also criticize religious leaders. Take, for example, Joseph, a young man who sometimes volunteers for an EU-funded 'Conflict Prevention' programme.<sup>8</sup> Although he grew up a Christian, Joseph shared that he does not go to church except when they host parties. When I asked why, Joseph explained that 'his mind is not into it', because churches 'don't deliver what they promise'. Joseph also pointed to the hypocrisy of church leaders, as he alleged that they often violate the moral principles they themselves preach: 'You will find them preaching morals, but they are the most promiscuous people out there. They wreck marriages, they destroy children. And the youth groups, they use them for their promiscuity.'

Another example is Rashid, a young Muslim who often displays his piety by wearing a *kanzu* (Muslim dress) and *kofia* (Muslim cap). Rashid took me to various *maskani*, informal meeting places where youth socialize, discuss their worries and relax (cf. Weiss 2009: 120). Rashid explained that some youth consume drugs and alcohol in the seclusion offered by *maskani*, because they fear social judgement and police interference if they do so openly. At the *maskani*, Rashid told me that he had grown increasingly dissatisfied with CSOs in Malindi, because peace meetings and interfaith dialogues are often attended by the same religious leaders who use projects for their own economic or political interests. For example, Rashid accused Muslim leaders of using project funds to gain political support by building or extending patron–client relations. This is not a far-fetched accusation, since several CSO leaders in Malindi are also (aspiring) politicians. Rashid similarly accused Muslim leaders of using Ramadan as a

<sup>8</sup>See <[https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/horn-africa/kenya/conflict-prevention-peace-and-economic-opportunities-youth\\_fr](https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/horn-africa/kenya/conflict-prevention-peace-and-economic-opportunities-youth_fr)>.

‘harvest season’ by using some of the collected funds and goods to be distributed as *zakat* – a mandatory charitable contribution for the poor that is one of the five pillars of Islam – for their personal or political benefit. In relation to these accusations, Rashid argued that Muslim leaders ‘used to preach from their heart, but now they preach from their stomachs’. Here, we see that both Joseph and Rashid criticize religious leaders for not adhering to their own moral standards. Yet, while Joseph indicates that he has become largely indifferent to church activities, Rashid continues to adhere to Islamic ideals of piety.

From these criticisms, it becomes clear that youth frequently offer moral evaluations of peace programmes in Malindi that differ from those of elderly leaders. While leaders fear that youth’s ‘idleness’ leaves them susceptible to immorality and violence, which necessitates their involvement in peace and development projects, youth argue that leaders are immoral because they use donor funds for their own benefit and do not provide youth with sufficient economic opportunities. Despite their frustrations, and whether they have become indifferent to religion or not, both Joseph and Rashid continue to work and volunteer for peace and development projects funded by Western donors, since they are unable to find alternative ways of sustaining themselves.

### Showing bodily disinterest and discontent

Although youth sometimes criticize leaders in private conversations, the articulation of critique during public meetings is rare – not only because this may invite repercussions from those with a political following or greater access to the repressive powers of the state, but also because it would involve biting a hand that feeds. Nevertheless, youth in Malindi have developed various bodily tactics to express indifference and/or discontent towards elderly leaders. This was clearly visible during the MUHURI youth convention described above, when youth demonstrated their disinterest in the moralizing talk of leaders by sleeping or using their phones.

After the MUHURI youth convention, I approached a young Giriama man known by his artist name ‘Teja’ who had been relatively outspoken during discussions and wore dreadlocks and a T-shirt indicating his love of hip-hop. In Kenya, hip-hop is sometimes denoted as ‘secular music’, since it is often (but not always) produced and enjoyed outside the context of religious practice, and it is regularly associated with immorality (Ntarangwi 2016). In his songs, Teja raps about smoking *bhangi* (marijuana) and the harshness of street life. Dreadlocks are also morally ambivalent, since they are associated with rebellion and seen as an indicator of Mungiki membership by police in Nairobi (Ntarangwi 2016: 126–7; Rasmussen 2010: 309). During my fieldwork, Teja introduced me to an extensive network of musicians, which largely but not exclusively consists of young Giriama men, who run several recording studios, organize concerts, and frequently share each other’s music videos via social media.

During our conversations, Teja often complained about the lack of economic opportunities in Malindi, but he also indicated his readiness ‘to do business with politicians’ by selling his voter cards to aspiring politicians, because he refused ‘to beg for food, or beg for money’, signalling his reluctance to place

himself in a position of dependency. Teja also indicated a preference for ‘hustling’ as a musician over employment, getting educated, or becoming a Muslim or a Christian. Instead, he inverted stereotypes about the idleness of unemployed youth by arguing that rebellious youth have more active brains than the employed:

Most rebellious people are jobless. Their brain is very good ... A musician is very free. His brain is free, his life is free ... If you are employed, you can't even enjoy life. There is no time. On Saturday, you are drinking with your friends, on Sunday you go to church. It is easy to be governed by people. Muslims also don't think for themselves ... They are slaves in their brains, they are not free because of the system. If you go to school ... you waste most of your life schooling. And there will be a lot of stress ... After university, you never get a job ... This is mental slavery.

Here, Teja explicitly rejects Christianity, Islam and education as forms of ‘mental slavery’, since they demand discipline and obedience without providing opportunities to enjoy or progress in life (cf. Di Nunzio 2017). However, during the MUHURI youth convention, Teja did not voice such criticism, arguably because it could easily be seen as ‘inciting’ or as a form of ‘hate speech’. Nevertheless, like other hip-hop musicians in Malindi, Teja consciously engages in bodily practices that many leaders consider to be morally ambivalent, such as making hip-hop music, smoking *bhangi*, wearing dreadlocks, and *not* striving to be religious, employed or educated.

The popularity of hip-hop, alcohol and drugs reveals how many youths in Malindi prefer a search for bodily pleasure, ‘hustling’ opportunities, ‘street credibility’ and/or stress relief to attempts to progress in life by conforming to the moral ideals of elderly leaders (Beckerleg 1995; Mose 2013). In these dynamics, hip-hop music and culture provide young people such as Teja with alternative moral registers through which they evaluate their lives in the ‘ghetto’ and distance themselves from the moral judgements of leaders. For example, Teja and other musicians never describe themselves as ‘idle’; rather, they take pride in the inventive ways in which they ‘hustle’ and work hard (*kufanya bidii*) to improvise livelihoods, even if this means that they sometimes have to engage in activities that are seen as immoral by themselves or others (cf. Meinema 2019; Di Nunzio 2017: 91). Furthermore, since Teja consciously opposes dominant conceptions of religious morality, I argue that his bodily behaviour can also be explained as a form of ‘unruly politics’, through which people who fall or place themselves outside dominant expectations of morality and civility express discontent by ‘making trouble’ instead of through explicit political claims (Kaulingfreks 2016). Although ‘troublemaking’ is often understood as senseless and immoral, it can nevertheless be conceptualized as meaningful political action, because it challenges the status quo and makes visible those not sufficiently represented through formal politics.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how, in Malindi, CSOs, state representatives and religious leaders from various religious backgrounds collectively aim to shape youth into moral, peaceful and religiously upright community members and Kenyan citizens. They do so via peace and development projects that are

funded by Western donors, who often conceptualize ‘radical’ religiosity, especially of Muslim youth, as a security threat. Leaders adjust this policy to the context of Malindi, and they express fears that ‘idle’ youth are susceptible to immorality and may disrupt peace by politicizing ethnic or religious identities. Endorsing an understanding of religion as positive, leaders commonly imagine all religions to align with civil ideals of peace, morality and national unity. Following this reasoning, immoral behaviour and behaviour that causes division along ethnic or religious lines are understood to be due to a lack of religiosity. Consequently, in marked contrast to Western donors, leaders do not see religion as a potential cause of behaviour that violates these ideals.

As violent extremism, political violence and other immoralities feared by religious leaders are commonly associated with idle youth instead of particular religious groups, leaders from different religious backgrounds are able to work together across ethnic and religious boundaries and in various public settings, such as schools and CSOs. Here, a parallel can be made with John Lonsdale’s conceptualization of the ambivalence of ethnicity (Lonsdale 1992). Understood as a shared moral and conceptual framework for lived sociality and mutual obligation, Lonsdale argues that ‘moral ethnicity’ can provide a basis for responsible political rule that possibly extends beyond particular ethnic groups. Lonsdale distinguishes ‘moral ethnicity’ from ‘political tribalism’, understood as the exclusivist and competitive political mobilization of ethnic identities. Similarly, in Malindi, a strong public emphasis on ‘moral religiosity’ does not necessarily go together with religious exclusivism, since it is commonly understood to align with civil ideals of peace, morality and national unity. This enables leaders to develop moral frameworks that are shared across ethnic and religious divides.

Such moral religiosity allows CSOs in Malindi to fulfil the desire of Western donors to mobilize religious leaders for peacebuilding work. Yet, it also transforms Western policy aims, because CSOs in Malindi generally do not follow Western distinctions between ‘radical’ and ‘moderate’ religion. Instead of encouraging ‘moderate’ ways of being religious, as Western donors envision, religious leaders in Malindi seek to strengthen the religiosity of youth, because they conceptualize religion as a solution to violence, rather than as a possible contributor to it. Furthermore, the attempts of religious leaders to morally instruct youth in peace and development programmes frequently become closely entangled with distributional politics, which more often characterize modes of political governance in Kenya. These dynamics demonstrate how the management of religious coexistence in Malindi is shaped by influences on multiple scales, which play out in complex and ambivalent ways as they are adjusted to the coastal Kenyan context within Malindi-based peace and development programmes (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018).

It is also interesting to analyse how the moral religiosity developed by elderly leaders in Malindi connects with the relational conceptualization of morality that was outlined at the start of this article, which understands morality in terms of idealized models of relationships. Following the moral religiosity that is imagined by elderly leaders, youth are ideally required to overcome ethnic and religious differences by emphasizing an overarching national identity, and to subordinate themselves to the moral and political authority of older leaders. These idealized models of relationships subsequently inform moral evaluations of supposedly ‘idle’ youth as immoral and potentially violent; they also inform

the persistent attempts of leaders to guide youth towards behaviour that aligns with civil ideals of peace, morality and national unity through peace and development projects. The ways in which youth respond to elderly leaders' attempts to pacify them demonstrate, however, that young people do not necessarily agree with the moral frameworks that are imposed on them. First, many youths strategically incorporate peace messages imparted by religious leaders and CSOs into their dress, activities and socio-economic organization in ways that allow access to material support. Furthermore, youth also criticize religious leaders in private settings for being hypocritical and using project funds selfishly; for some, this provides a reason to assume a sceptical attitude towards leaders, and a more general position of religious indifference. Some youth also draw on hip-hop to develop alternative moral registers through which they evaluate their activities, and they display disinterest towards the moral religiosity propagated by elderly leaders through their dress, bodily postures and behaviour. Such behaviour arguably functions as a form of 'unruly politics', because it allows for the expression of discontent without explicitly making sensitive political claims. While earlier research on youth and religion in Africa has mainly focused on the ways in which marginalized youth engage with religious revivalist movements to reposition themselves in society, these observations demonstrate how religion has lost credibility in the eyes of many unemployed youth in Malindi, leading some to criticize religion altogether rather than to draw inspiration from it.

Finally, CSO efforts to build peace and 'counter violent extremism' in Malindi often depend strongly on imaginations of 'idle' youth as forming possibly violent threats to peace. Such imaginations not only conceal patterns of state violence against poor urban youth and their continuous subordination in neo-patrimonial politics, but also leave widely experienced feelings of exclusion, discontent and marginalization among coastal populations and youth more generally unaddressed. Instead, such feelings are pushed under the surface of public interactions that primarily stress peace, morality and national unity, even while they have informed lingering tensions and earlier violence along ethnic and religious lines in coastal Kenya. While elderly leaders aim to manage frustrations by distributing donor funds, youth complain that leaders use funds selfishly and fail to alleviate significantly the economic and political challenges they face in their daily lives. This shows how, despite the stated aim of Western donors and religious leaders to support supposedly 'idle' youth, in the eyes of many youth themselves, peace and development projects remain entangled with distributional politics, which continue to privilege elderly leaders over poor urban youth (cf. Ralph 2008: 24; Di Nunzio 2017).

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## Abstract

This article analyses how concerns about youth and violence intersect with the politics of managing religious coexistence in the coastal Kenyan town of

Malindi. During extensive ethnographic research, I noticed that Muslim, Christian and 'Traditionalist' leaders, politicians and NGO officials often fear that the 'idleness' of young people leaves them susceptible to various immoralities, including political violence and 'violent extremism', that threaten peaceful ethnic and religious coexistence. The article explores how these concerns motivate leaders' attempts to incorporate youth in development and peace projects, and how youth respond to these interventions. These projects are funded by Western donors, who often see 'radical' religiosity, especially among Muslim youth, as a security threat. Yet, leaders in Malindi accommodate donor policies to the (coastal) Kenyan context, and tend to understand immoralities and violence as resulting from a lack of religiosity among youth. The article argues that perceptions of 'idle youth' as potentially violent threats to peaceful religious coexistence and morality allow leaders to develop a 'moral religiosity' that is shared across religious divides. However, the ways in which youth strategically resist or comply with interventions to pacify them demonstrate that they do not necessarily agree with dominant moral and political constellations.

### **Résumé**

Cet article analyse la manière dont les préoccupations au sujet de la jeunesse et de la violence se recoupent avec la politique de gestion de la coexistence religieuse à Malindi, ville côtière du Kenya. Dans le cadre d'une vaste étude ethnographique, l'auteur a pu observer que les chefs musulmans, chrétiens et « traditionalistes », les politiciens et les responsables d'ONG craignent souvent que « l'oisiveté » des jeunes les expose à des immoralités diverses, y compris à une violence politique et à un « extrémisme violent » qui menacent la coexistence pacifique ethnique et religieuse. Cet article explore en quoi ces inquiétudes motivent les tentatives par ces leaders d'incorporer la jeunesse dans les projets de développement et de paix, et comment les jeunes réagissent à ces interventions. Ces projets sont financés par des bailleurs de fonds occidentaux qui voient souvent la « radicalité » religieuse, notamment chez les jeunes musulmans, comme une menace à la sécurité. À Malindi cependant, les leaders adaptent les politiques des bailleurs de fonds au contexte kényan (côtier) et tendent à comprendre les immoralités et la violence comme la résultante d'un manque de religiosité chez les jeunes. L'article soutient que le fait d'imaginer les « jeunes oisifs » comme des menaces potentiellement violentes pour la coexistence pacifique religieuse et la moralité autorise les leaders à développer une « religiosité morale » qui est partagée au-delà des clivages religieux. Cependant, la manière dont les jeunes résistent ou se conforment stratégiquement aux interventions visant à les pacifier démontre qu'ils ne sont pas nécessairement d'accord avec les constellations morales et politiques dominantes.