



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 734602.

Title: Urban Visuality, Mobility, Information and Technology of Images

ISBN: 978-83-955375-4-7

DOI 10.5281/zenodo.4038130

Edited by: Aleksandra Łukaszewicz Alcaraz, Flavia Stara

Scientific reviewer: dr hab. prof. UR Wojciech Walat

Published by: Wydawnictwo Akademii Sztuki w Szczecinie

Language correction: Marlene de Wilde

Visual identification: Anna Witkowska

Graphics and editing: Natalia Janus-Malewska

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Szczecin 2020



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URBAN VISUALITY, MOBILITY, INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY OF IMAGES

Table of Contents

- 9 Aleksandra Lukaszewicz Alcaraz
Urban visuality in intercultural perspective

Part I

**Perceive, inhabit, understand, and transgress urban spaces.
Visual readings between Kenya and Italy**

- 25 Flavia Stara
Images of cities and invisible landscapes
- 43 Stefano Polenta
Image and place. Which relationships?
- 59 Raffaele Tumino
Force of images and critical distance
- 71 Giuseppe Capriotti
**In a savannah of images. Artistic production and public spaces
along the Kenyan Coast**

Part II

**Intercultural perspectives on visual communication in urban settings
in Europe and in Kenya**

- 95 Rosita Deluigi
**Intercultural trespassing: Educational errancy between urban
spaces and relational places**
- 117 Grazyna Czubinska and MA Roman Mazur,
**Visual communication in urban spaces of Berlin for the future
transportation solutions evolving out of TICASS as academic
project supported by the EU**
- 137 Tomáš Pavlíček
**Visual aspects of architectural development of public space
on the chosen urban cases**
- 159 Aurelia Mandziuk-Zajączkowska
**ConTEXTile. Fabric, its functions, meanings, ornaments
as the universal non-verbal language**

Part III

Visuality in education and visual literacy

- 171 Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak
**For whom and what are visual signs in an open urban space.
Their functions of inclusivity and exclusivity**
- 187 Michael Maua
**Rethinking information competency in academic libraries
in Kenya**
- 199 Lidia Marek
**Monuments in urban public spaces as visual messages -
an ethical perspective**
- 217 Aleš Loziak
**The visual (photographic) literacy of an individual in a public
environment**

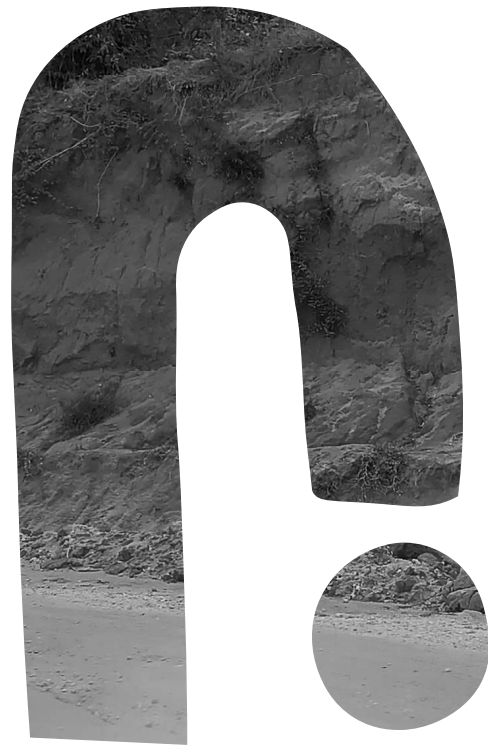
Part IV

Visual urban spaces in social-community life

- 233 Łukasz Skąpski
**Public space in Nairobi. Diagnosis Based on visual messages
of public space**
- 265 Lea Horvat
**Post-socialist readability of socialist mass housing estates:
Examples from ex-Yugoslavia**
- 283 Stephen Muoki
**Imaging AIDS in Kenya: A historical analysis of public and visual
messages on HIV and AIDS epidemic between 2011-2018**

Keywords

tourist art
popular art
African art
Kenyan coast
resort
Tourism



In a Savannah of Images. Artistic Production and Public Spaces along the Kenyan Coast

Giuseppe Capriotti

University in Macerata, Italy
giuseppe.capriotti@unimc.it

Abstract

One of the most interesting aspects of the culture of the Kenyan coast, between Malindi and Mombasa, is the extraordinary production of images that inhabit and invade urban spaces. Most of the shops, restaurants, and hotels are characterized by images created by three types of decorators: the brand painters at the service of Kenya's major companies, who fill the walls of the city with hand-painted advertising; the artists painting hotels and restaurants for western tourists, who mainly realize decorations of high technical expertise with African animals and safari scenes ("tourist art"); those who paint signs, for shops and homes of local people, who produce figures characterized by a language that is more cursive and elementary, but equally effective in communicating the message. The images created by this last category of artists are particularly ephemeral, as they are subject to destruction, depending on the rapid change of destination of some spaces. All these artists tend to sign their works by calling themselves "artists" and leaving the telephone number to be contacted by new customers. Most of them prefer to work for large companies or for European clients, who are able to understand the artistic value of their work.

Through the analysis of a sampling of images and of interviews with those who act in the complex artistic situation of the coast, the purpose of this paper is to define the role of "artists," "clients," and "users" in building, within a context made intercultural by tourism, peculiar and typical urban spaces, sometimes halfway between store and market, where the traditional western categories of "inside" and "outside," "domestic," "private," and "public" are redefined.

An Art Historian in Kilifi: Brief Methodological Notes

One of the most impressive aspects of the culture of the Kenyan coast, between Malindi and Mombasa, is the extraordinary production of images that invade and inhabit urban spaces. The coastal area of Kenya is characterised by many urban centres that have existed since the pre-colonial period (Obudho, 2000). In this geographical area most shops, restaurants, hotels and even schools are decorated in a surprising variety of images. The town of Kilifi provides a significant case study, as it is a microcosm of the political, cultural, social, and historical factors acting on the broader region of Kilifi county. Today, this area is in a delicate equilibrium between traditional African culture and growing westernisation, driven by European tourism.

The interest in this phenomenon obliges an expert in Renaissance and Baroque art to revise his usual approach, and turn towards "visual studies" (Mitchell, 1987; Elkins, 2003; Pinotti & Somaini, 2016; Mitchell, 2018), following the methodology proposed by the German scholar Horst Bredekamp (Bredekamp, 2003). Going beyond traditional art history and incorporating Anglo-Saxon "visual studies," the German *Bildwissenschaft* ("image science") analyses different productions of images (not only those with an aesthetic value, but also non-artistic images) and combines the methodologies of numerous disciplines (like art history, history, anthropology, sociology, semiotic, cultural studies, religious studies, visual communication studies, media studies, and so on), to analyse the broad and varied field of the visual world (Pinotti & Somaini, 2009).

This perspective of analysis is useful for understanding images in the coastal area of Kenya, because some pictures are created as traditional "works of art," while others are produced purely to communicate a message, deliver content and persuade the audience, with no aesthetic intent. However, the producers of these pictures still define themselves as "artists" and sign their works as such.

This article is the result of a preliminary survey conducted in 2018 between Malindi and Mombasa, which I hope to better scrutinize in future. For the moment I have decided only to briefly illustrate some typologies of "artists" that I found along the Kenyan coast, then concentrate my analysis on the case of Castro, an artist from Kilifi.

Typologies of artists and images in the Kenyan Coast

According to Jan Vansina, four typologies of art have existed in Africa since 1935 (Vansina, 1999): traditional art, linked to village life and rituals (for instance masks and ceramics); tourist art, which followed the growth of tourism and which is characterised by exotic themes for foreign patrons and bought by tourists as souvenirs; popular art, consisting of murals that decorate urban housing, and sign painting for shops, restaurants, vehicles, and public spaces; academic art, established through academic institutions and schools of art, which are very close to the Western tradition. However, there are other types of artists working along the Kenyan coast, including European artists conducting their own research (Wakhungu-Githuku, 2017); I will concentrate on four typologies of images that I found existing in public spaces. I will deal, in particular, with cases of popular and tourist art, mostly made by artists who have never received formal academic education. These four typologies of artists are: painters for shops and restaurants that serve local people; painters of brands and logos; painters of *matatu* (a local means of transport); painters for westerners. The boundaries of these categories are easy to blur: even though some artists specialise in a specific typology of images, they occasionally produce other typologies when necessary.

Painters for Shops and Restaurants that Serve Local People

The first category of images consists of signs and murals for shops and restaurants that are used by local people. Although the artists who paint these images sometimes use a simple and elementary language, they are very effective in communicating a message. Even if it is difficult to classify this image production, created by popular artists for a popular audience, on the problems of so-called African popular art there are many studies already (Barber, 1987; Jules-Rosette, 1987; Arnoldi, 1987). The images, which are paid for by the business owners, are particularly ephemeral because the buildings they adorn frequently change use as part of Kenya's urban renewal. I met and interviewed two artists who are representative of this production of images: Mohammed, who lives and works in Mnarani, a poor and mostly Muslim suburb of Kilifi,¹ and Safari, who lives and works in Chumani (within

¹ Mohammed Omar Bwana was born in Kilifi in 1982. He is the son of a fish seller and did not receive any art education, having only attended primary school. After the death of his father, he decided to abandon the fish shop and dedicate himself to art, which is now his exclusive job. He lived in Tanzania in a workshop with many other artists working together. In Kilifi he collaborated with Safari and then

Kilifi county).² Mohammed's *naïf* style (Il. 1) is an effect of his lack of formal artistic education and a response to the demands of clients who live in a marginalised suburban area (Mazrui, 2000). Safari, too, produces images for shops, responding to the demands of local people (Il. 2), but he is also able to paint effective pictures for tourists, like those for the "Jawamu Tours & Safaris" office in Mnarani.

All artists in this category of images tend to sign their works, calling themselves "artists" and leaving their telephone numbers to be contacted by new customers (Il. 3). This is an effect of the change since 1935, when

the place and role of the artist in the society from artisan to cultural diviner progressively expanded, and artistic production multiplied thanks to new patrons and commissioners (not only the government, but also owners of bars, shops, restaurants, and schools). (Vansina, 1999, p. 582)

The increase in demand for images has created a stable role for artists.



Il. 1 Mohammed, *Fish shop*, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Giuseppe Capriotti and Rosita Deluigi

with Castro. He normally uses images from the Internet as an inspiration for new ideas.

² Safari works as an artist, but to help his family he cultivates corn in his field, where he also grows cannabis for personal use, to help his artistic inspiration.

In some cases, the invasion of images on exterior shop walls, in particular of painted products that one can buy inside, redefines the European categories of "inside" and "outside." These depicted objects virtually transform the shop into a market stall (Il. 4), with the images creating a new and peculiar urban space (peculiar for coastal Kenya), halfway between a store and a market.



Il. 2 Safari, *Fish shop*, Chumani, Kilifi county © Giuseppe Capriotti and Rosita Deluigi

Painters of Brands and Logos

The second category of images is the hand-painted adverts that cover city walls, produced by painters at the service of some of Kenya's major companies. The companies control the image production, selecting painters and telling them which logos to paint. Normally, the artists use a plastic stencil with a pounced drawing (the same method as a medieval *cartone*). The stencil has small holes through which the drawing can be transferred onto the wall (like the ancient technique of *spolvero*). The painters then colour the surfaces that have been outlined by the stencil. The same technique has been used for the advertising of Faida Feed (Capriotti, 2018).

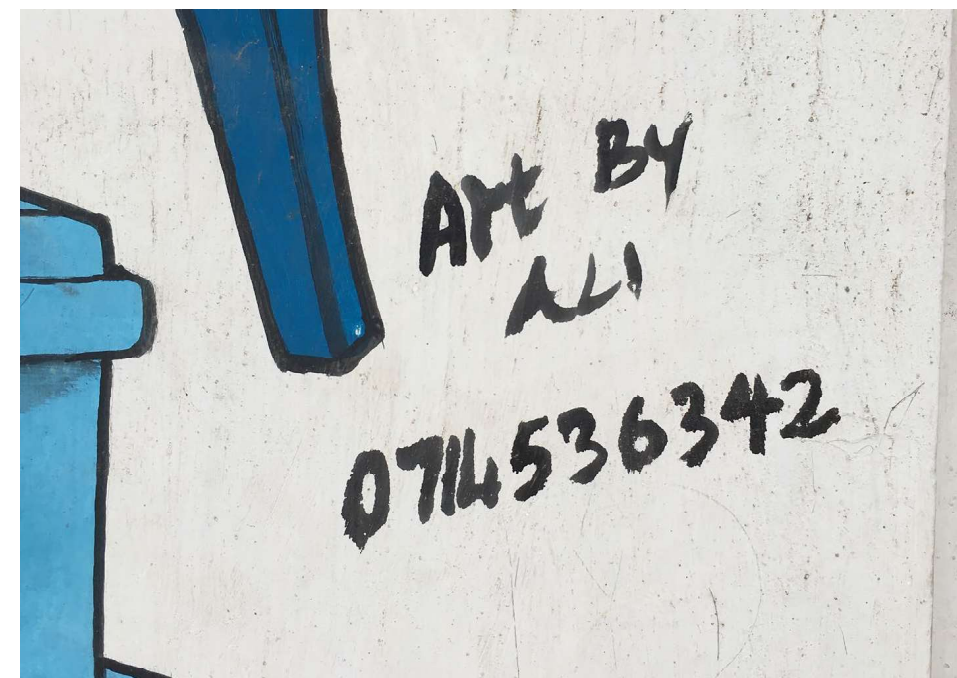
In Kilifi, July 2018, I met Simon Kinuthia (from Nairobi) and Dan (from Mombasa), both brand painters who work for a Kenyan advertising agency named "Up Country Limited."³ I observed them as they painted an advertisement for Tuzo Milk on the wall of a private house in Kilifi (Il. 5). In such cases, the company pays the city government a fee, while the owner of the property needs only give his/her verbal permission for the wall to be used, receiving no money but benefiting from having their wall refurbished and decorated. As we can see, the European border between "public" and "private" space is thus renegotiated: on the wall of a private house, the image creates a public space, the space of an advertisement.

Matatu Painters

Matatu are small buses that provide one of the most common forms of transport across Kenya. In Mombasa, more than in Kilifi, painted *matatu* have become a popular phenomenon. In Bamburi I met Tonnie Rebel,⁴ who explained to me that each *matatu* in Kenya has a personal name and that its decoration is linked to this. One *matatu* Tonnie had painted was called Zary, the name of the first wife of Diamond, a Tanzanian singer popular in Kenya (Il. 6). The owner of the *matatu* is a fan of Diamond and so he decided to dedicate the depictions on his *matatu* to the singer, the singer's wife and to Tanzania (represented by the colours of the Tanzanian flag). On both sides Tonnie has painted portraits of Diamond with his first wife. The writing "Sumu" (poison, in Swahili) is a memory of the vehicle's former name, before it became Zary. Unsurprisingly, such eye-catching depictions on the *matatu* work as a business strategy, attracting young clients who share the same taste in music. Popular music is indeed very important in the political and cultural life of Kenya (Wafula Wekesa, 2004).

³ <https://www.sortlist.com/advertising/kenya-ke> [Accessed January 24th, 2019]

⁴ Tonnie Rebel (real name Antony Mwangi Kariuki) was born in Nakuru in 1977 and now lives and works in Bamburi. He received an education in art design at secondary school, then started to work in Mombasa in a workshop that specialised in *matatu* art. Later he began to work on his own as a freelancer.



Il. 3 Signature Art by Ali, Malindi, Kilifi county © Giuseppe Capriotti and Rosita Deluigi



Il. 4 Ali, Shop, Malindi, Kilifi county © Giuseppe Capriotti and Rosita Deluigi



Il. 5 Touzo Milk, Kilifi town © Giuseppe Capriotti



Il. 6 Tonnie Rebel, Matatu Zarry, Mombasa © Giuseppe Capriotti

This vivid *matatu* art market has been damaged by the recent Michuki law,⁵ brought in to guarantee the safety of people in the *matatu* and on the street (the law forces people to wear seatbelts and prohibits overcrowding of the vehicle). The law also forbids the playing of music and TVs in *matatu* and bans all art on the outside of the vehicle, except for a simple declaration of the destination. This has created an enormous struggle for *matatu* artists, who risk losing their livelihoods. To promote their work, they have a Facebook page⁶ and a website⁷.

Painters for Westerners (but also for Local Commissioners): The Case of Castro

Next are the artists who decorate resorts and restaurants for Western tourists and produce paintings for the tourist market. In general, these are very skilled painters, able to create high quality decorations thanks to their technical expertise. The subjects of their paintings are African animals, safari scenes, wildlife, and Maasai life.

The case of Castro, a painter from Kilifi, is interesting because today he mostly produces quality decorations for resorts and framed paintings for Western clients, but he has previously made remarkable cycles of paintings for local institutions.⁸ Castro prefers to work for westerners, who recognize the artistic value of his artworks, rather than for local clients, who pay him on an hourly rate or according to the dimensions of the surface to paint. His production of framed paintings for the tourist market could be included in the common phenomenon of "tourist art," on which there is a vivid and on-going debate. Only recently has 'tourist art' started to be considered a relevant and interesting form of artistic production (Jules-Graburn, 1979; Rosette, 1984; Jules-Rosette, 1986; Graburn, 1984), with specific studies also on the Kenyan situation (Mahoney, 2012). Anyway, it is possible to buy Castro's paintings in tourist souvenir shops as well as from his workshop.

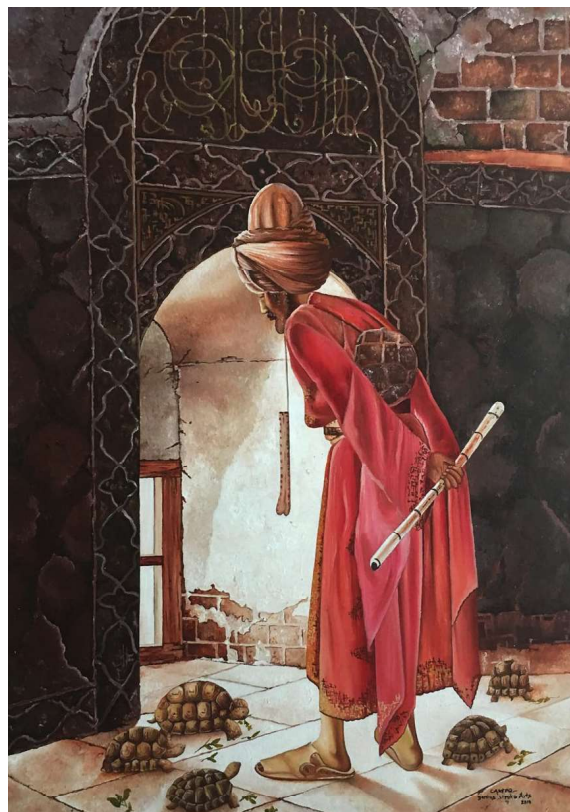
⁵ Cf. <https://www.tuko.co.ke/291425-michuki-traffic-laws-road-rules-kenya.html#291425> [Accessed January 24th, 2019]

⁶ <https://web.facebook.com/matwanaculture/> [Accessed on 24.01.2019]

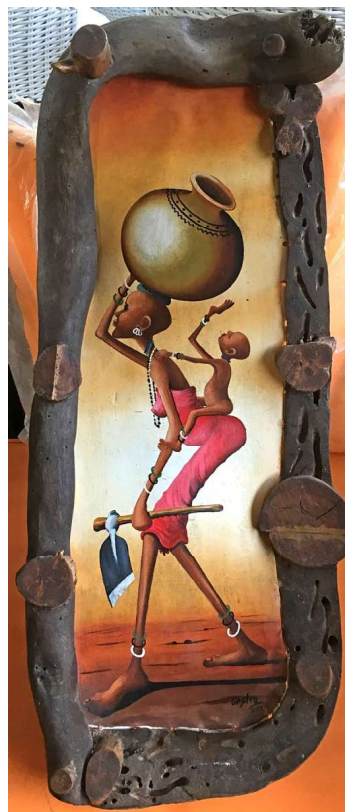
⁷ <http://matatujournal.blogspot.com/> [Accessed on 24.01.2019]

⁸ Castro Osore Khwale was born in Kakamega in 1980 and is the son of an accountant. He studied for only two years at the Department of Arts at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, without finishing the course for economic reasons. Particularly skilled at sketching in his childhood, he started to work as a painter in resorts thanks to European clients and investors in Kenya, who recognised his value. One of them, Leslie Rampinelli, has an extremely rich collection of Castro's paintings.

In his early paintings Castro used the models and atmospheres of the great exponents of international Orientalism and primitivism (respectively Osman Hamdi Bey, il. 7, and Gauguin) or he reproduced the style of artists like Kandinsky and Dalí. He then began to add elements of African culture (animals, trees, characters) to this European grammar. Over time, Castro freed himself from forms of cultural subalternity towards European models to arrive at his own personal style, in which African elements take over (Il. 8). Castro frequently depicts his traditional culture: nostalgic representations of African life with women carrying children on their backs or jars on their heads, and male and female characters with big feet and hands, holding work tools. This art, in which Castro identifies himself as an artist, is characterised by subjects that European clients perceive as exotic: an exoticism created by a Kenyan artist for European customers. There is no doubt that his painting can be considered an effect of globalisation and the connection with Western clients, created through tourism (Mazrui, 2000). Indeed, most of the large tourism enterprises (from which the local painters work)



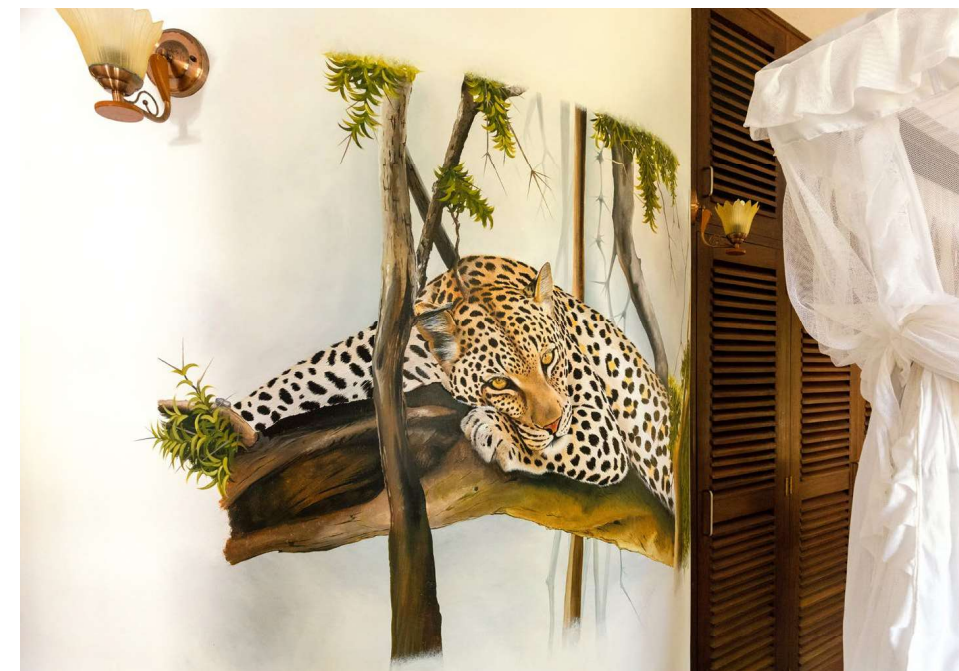
Il. 7 Castro, *The Tortoise Trainer*, copied from Osman Hamdi Bey, Kilifi town, Leslie Rampinelli collection © Giuseppe Capriotti



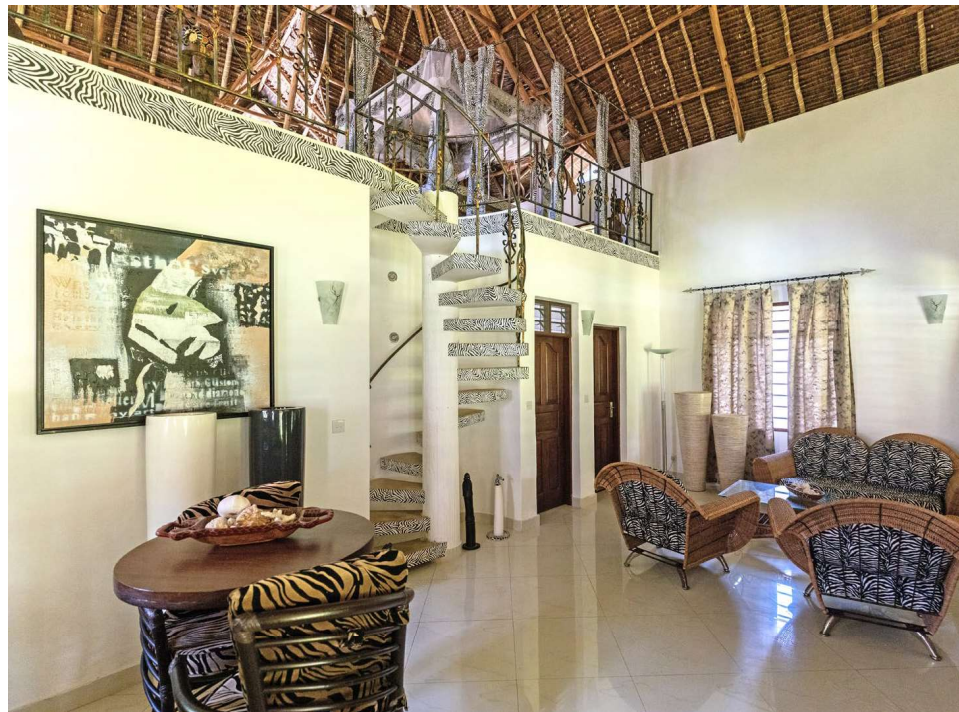
Il. 8 Castro, *Maasai woman*, Kilifi town, author collection © Giuseppe Capriotti



Il. 9 Castro, *Zebra house*, Maison Müge, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak



Il. 10 Castro, *Leopard house*, Maison Müge, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak



Il. 11 Castro, *Zebra house*, Maison Müge, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak



Il. 12 Castro, *Antelope house*, Maison Müge, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak

are owned, managed, and controlled by foreign or national interests with little participation by indigenous people (Sindiga, 2000). In any case, as Sidney Littlefield Kasfir stated, the encounter with the Western world, like every form of contact between cultures, caused transformations in artistic production and in the meaning that each society gives to art. Nevertheless, the new art system is always the effect of a negotiation, not an imposition, generating original and unexpected results (Kasfir, 2007). Castro's art is a response to the demands of Western customers, but done in a personal manner, which he has found through years of individual research.

As an example of the decorations that Castro creates for resorts, I propose the case of the Maison Müge, a resort owned by a Swiss couple in Kilifi. Each room or small apartment of the resort is dedicated to an African animal (elephant, zebra, leopard, antelope, dolphin, pelican, swan). The 'zebra house' and the 'leopard house' are decorated with hide patterns of their respective animals painted on some architectural elements and furniture, while the bedroom in each house contains a large and superb depiction of the animal (Il. 9-11). The 'antelope house' is also unusual thanks to a mural showing antelopes galloping across a savannah populated by wild animals like elephant, rhinos, lions, and buffalo (Il. 12); in the same room the seatback of a sofa is decorated with the "big five" of Africa in a savannah landscape, in which the artist has incorporated the natural lines of the wood. The iconography of this cycle was chosen by the owners of the resort, who asked the artist to produce some sketches as proposals, from which they selected the final pieces. Castro used photographs as a source of inspiration, comparing these with his observations of live animals to make the composition effective.

In addition to his pictures for westerners, Castro also paints for local commissioners. In Kilifi he created two interesting cycles of paintings on the walls of different schools. In both cases, the commissioner gave the artist a written story, which the painter developed into the cycles by mixing images and writing. Both cycles are dedicated to the protection of the sexuality of the female schoolchildren and thus reveal the position of girls in the society of coastal Kenya (Mitullah, W.V. 2000).

The first cycle has been painted in the "youth friendly corner" of the MTG, a sports school for girls. The cycle consists of two paintings and depicts the problems of prostitution and HIV. The first painting is presented as a comic with Swahili writing in speech bubbles (Il. 13). It is dialectically divided in two parts: on the left, the natural African world (with trees in the background), on the right, the wealthy, westernized world (a street with cars, bars, and a nightclub). On the right a black man in Western clothes (with a tie and an iPhone), is trying to seduce two young schoolgirls with money. His sexual proposal is made explicit in the Swahili writing in his speech bubble: "I love you so much beautiful girl. Take this money you'll use for shopping and here is my phone contact so that you can call me." On the other side two girls are refusing his approach, saying: "We have principles! We don't want to have sex" and "I'm delaying sex because I am at an age when I cannot support

myself. To achieve my life goals, I don't want your money." In the other mural there is a hospital scene, with a smiling doctor administering an HIV test on the finger of a young girl (Il. 14). The writing on the label underlines the importance of HIV testing.⁹

The other cycle is on a wall that joins the classrooms of "Mnarani Pry Scholl" secondary school, again in Kilifi. In this case the paintings thematise the problem of rape, telling in five murals the story of a girl raped by a *boda boda* (a motorbike driver). Again, the images are accompanied by writing, sometimes in comic strip bubbles. As declared in writing above the first painting, the image shows "A girl being raped at an age under 18" (Il. 15): the girl is crying on the right saying "Boda boda, why have you done this to me?" whereas on the left the driver, with his belt still unfastened, says: "You are very beautiful. Stop crying. Don't I usually carry you for free?" At this moment a red arrow (used in all the images to indicate the direction of reading) shows where to continue the cycle in the following image, where an introductory heading says: "I am the solution" (Il. 16). In this picture things to do and not to do are shown in images and words: "Don't shower so that you have evidence / Don't wash the clothes as they are evidence / Store the clothes of evidence using newspaper but not nylon paper." Crosses and ticks help to reinforce what should be done in case of rape. In the following picture we have three scenes with letters to indicate the sequence of events (Il. 17). Writing is used to clarify the meaning of each episode: a) "Go to the hospital nearby"; b) "Go to the CREAW office for help"; c) "Report to the police station and fill out P3 receipt."¹⁰ The following episode suggests the girl "get advice from an expert" to receive psychological help: in the image the girl is talking to a counsellor (Il. 18). The final picture is divided into two episodes: "The accused being arrested" and "Going to court for case hearing" (Il. 19). In this last episode, in particular on the face of the *boda boda* driver, some of the colour has been lost. We don't know if this is a simple problem of conservation, or the lack of colour is due to scratches, perhaps done by observers who wanted to punish the guilty criminal and carried out their retribution on the image. This vandalism of images should be studied in greater depth as part of the anthropology of images: the image could have a magic value (Gombrich, 1948), in substituting the real presence of depicted person and in bringing what is absent into the present (Vernant, 1983; Auge, 1988). Here the observers have substituted the image of the criminal for the body of the criminal; they have damaged the image to punish the real person, as it happens in a series of similar phenomena (Freedberg, 2009, pp. 557-625).

⁹ "Importance of testing / Live without worries / Your health, your life / Be a good role model to the community."

¹⁰ The CREAW is an office that helps girls (as also specified on the label of the officer with the writing "Officer of cooperation of CREAW"; the P3 receipt is a report to fill in for the police.



Il. 13 Castro, Cycle at the "youth friendly corner" of the MTG, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak



Il. 14 Castro, Cycle at the "youth friendly corner" of the MTG, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak



Il. 15 Castro, Cycle at the "Mnarani Pry Scholl" secondary school, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak



Il. 17 Castro, Cycle at the "Mnarani Pry Scholl" secondary school, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak



Il. 16 Castro, Cycle at the "Mnarani Pry Scholl" secondary school, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak



Il. 18 Castro, Cycle at the "Mnarani Pry Scholl" secondary school, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak

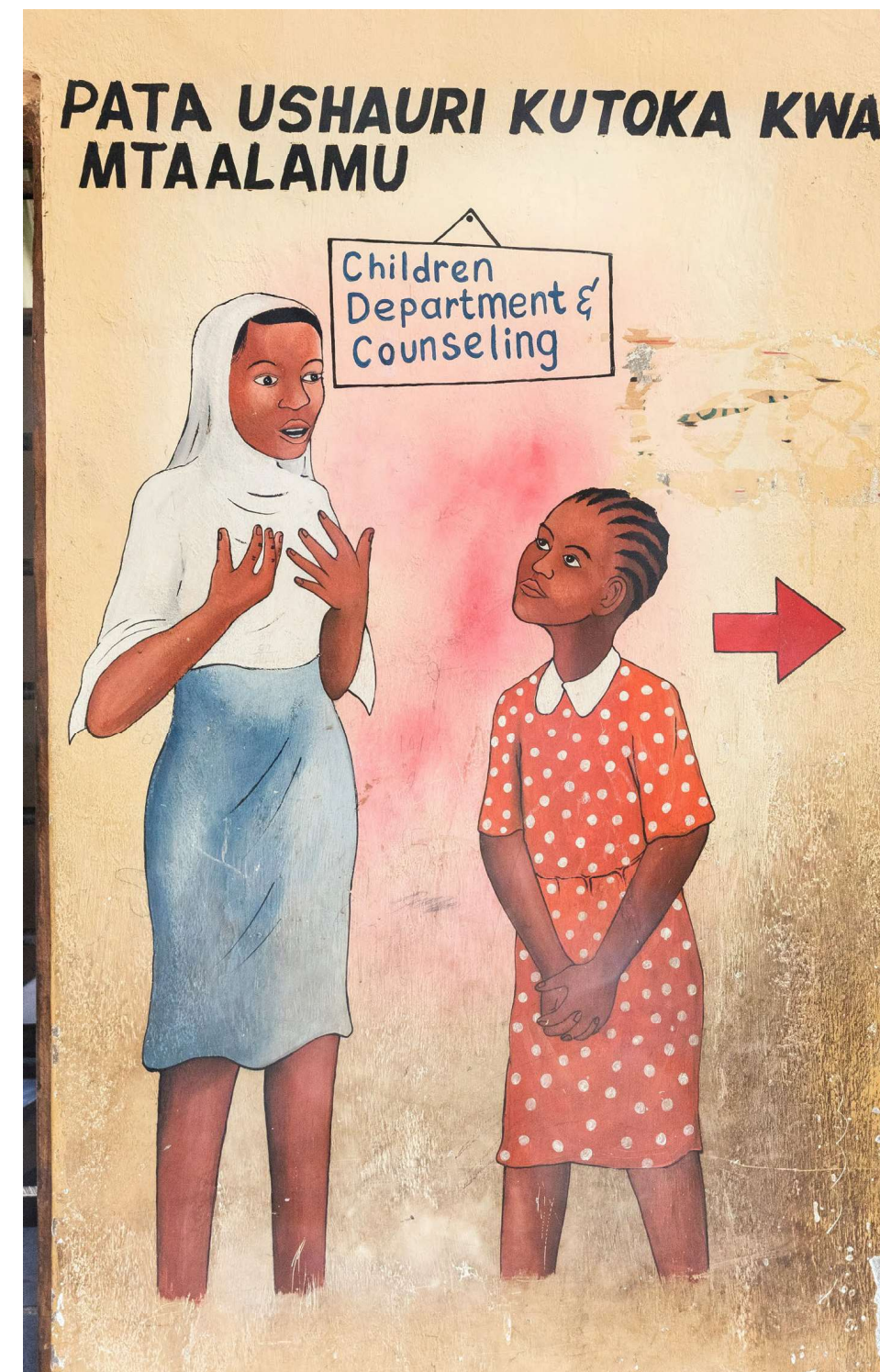
In the public space of two schools in Kilifi, these two cycles have been commissioned and produced to raise a new sensibility and drive behaviour change in the female observers. Given the ability of these images to modify a pre-existing reality, they could be approached using categories proposed by Horst Bredekamp in *Theorie des Bildakts* (Bredekamp, 2010). In these cases, we can talk about the "performativity" of images: they are pictures that perform a real action on those who look at them; they are pictures whose strength depends on how they were made by the artist. Using a style entirely distinct from his tourist art, Castro creates an audience-appropriate language, easily understandable (also thanks to the Swahili words), to produce a real effect on the female observer, to convince her to protect her sexuality.

Provisional conclusions

Through the analysis of a sample of images and thanks to interviews with those who act within the complex artistic situation of the Kenyan coast, I can propose some provisional conclusions.

I have pinpointed peculiar and typical urban spaces, sometimes halfway between a store and a market, where the traditional western categories of "inside" and "outside" are redefined (as in the depictions on the walls of shop entrances). I have also identified peculiar urban spaces in which the traditional Western categories of "domestic," "private" and "public" are redefined, thanks to the negotiation between company, government and building owner (as in the case of the Tuzo Milk logos).

In addition I have tried to define the roles of "artists" and "commissioners" within a context made intercultural by tourism, and in some cases I have also identified the position of the "users" of the images: the target audience of the school cycles are the girls who must learn how to protect their sexuality; sometimes these observers can become active, in this case reacting directly to the surface of the painting and damaging the image of the criminal's face.



Il. 19 Castro, Cycle at the "Mnarani Pry Scholl" secondary school, Mnarani, Kilifi town
© Aleš Loziak

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- Il. 2 Safari, *Fish shop*, Chumani, Kilifi county © Giuseppe Capriotti and Rosita Deluigi
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- Il. 4 Ali, *Shop*, Malindi, Kilifi county © Giuseppe Capriotti and Rosita Deluigi
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- Il. 10 Castro, *Leopard house*, Maison Müge, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak
- Il. 11 Castro, *Zebra house*, Maison Müge, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak
- Il. 12 Castro, *Antelope house*, Maison Müge, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak
- Il. 13 Castro, Cycle at the "youth friendly corner" of the MTG, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak
- Il. 14 Castro, Cycle at the "youth friendly corner" of the MTG, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak
- Il. 15 Castro, Cycle at the "Mnarani Pry Scholl" secondary school, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak
- Il. 16 Castro, Cycle at the "Mnarani Pry Scholl" secondary school, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak
- Il. 17 Castro, Cycle at the "Mnarani Pry Scholl" secondary school, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak
- Il. 18 Castro, Cycle at the "Mnarani Pry Scholl" secondary school, Mnarani, Kilifi town © Aleš Loziak
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