

# Reveal and Conceal: Poetic and Sensory Dimensions in Collaborative Knowledge Production in the Project ‘Talking Mats: Interwoven Histories – Connecting Peoples’ (2023–2025)

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**Abstract:** A collection of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century mats originating from the Lamu Archipelago in northern Kenya – globally unique, as they bear interwoven poems – is today kept in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. The project ‘Talking Mats: Interwoven Histories – Connecting Peoples’ is a joint research project and cooperation between the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, and the National Museums of Kenya, in particular the Lamu Museums and World Heritage Site. This article reflects on the ongoing process of knowledge and exhibition co-production. As a specific kind of collaboration, co-production is often considered an innovative approach in that it integrates multiple perspectives in museum practices. Seven members of the ‘Talking Mats’ team reflect from the artistic, practical and scientific perspectives on their activities, roles and the outcomes of their joint endeavour in co-producing a multi-media and multi-sited exhibition project across boundaries of language, nation states and resources. The aim is to highlight the

experiences, challenges and opportunities of a joint project in relation to postcolonial working methods in ethnological collections and museums, as well as in international museum cooperation.

[*Anthropological Museum Cooperation, Knowledge Co-Production, Community Engagement, Colonial Collections, Swahili Coast, Heritage Research*]

## Introduction

In the rhythmic movement of skilled hands, an ancient craft unfolds, one that bridges past and present, revealing stories through woven patterns while concealing deeper meanings within their intricate designs. Lamu's diverse weaving traditions embody the community's ingenuity in harnessing the available local materials to meet functional needs creatively. Each weave, each fibre, serves a purpose, showcasing the ingenuity and resourcefulness of its artisans. Primarily crafted by women, woven mats known locally as *mikeka* are far more than household items: they are symbols of identity, tradition and social connections, passed down through generations. Whether laid out in homes, used as *mswala* prayer mats, or used on special occasions, these mats embody a heritage of artistry and communal ties in which every frond carries whispers of the past into the present.

The Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin houses a small collection of aesthetically elaborate *mikeka* from the East African Swahili coast dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries. The mats, which come from the Lamu Archipelago in northern Kenya, are unique in the world, not least because written poems are woven into most of them. Twelve mats have inspired this collaborative project, which aims to 'reanimate' these belongings and to re-evaluate the intertwined histories between Germany and the East African coast.

'Mikeka Inayosema na Kutuunganisha' or 'Talking Mats: Interwoven Histories - Connecting Peoples' is a transregional, transdisciplinary cooperation and joint project of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the National Museums of Kenya, Lamu Museums and World Heritage Site. It is funded by 'the Collaborative Museum'. The 'Talking Mats' project aims to advance a deeper understanding of shared histories, integrating both international and local perspectives into heritage research and curation. In this jointly written text, we as an international project team recount and reflect on our experiences in the simultaneous process of co-producing knowledge and co-curating an exhibition at the Lamu Museums. The co-developed narrative on methodological approaches and experiences in an international museum cooperation is guided by the poems woven into the mats; they provide us with orientation and introduce the respective thematic sections. We treat Swahili poetic practice as the epistemological basis for this co-curational work. In this article, from multiple perspectives, a team of seven authors writes and rewrites a moment and process of knowledge exchange in honouring the knowledge and support of more than fifty individuals for this project. We are grateful to all their contributions

and appreciate the collaboration and support from all the colleagues, partners, participants and networks involved.

## 1. Muted Mats: Interwoven Poetry Whispering in Storage Rooms



Fig. 1 Mat 5 (III E 5087). Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken



Fig. 2 First two verses of the poem *Kwanda takupa dalili* as interwoven in Mat 5. Listen to the poem via the following link: [https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Ext\\_Daten/mat\\_III\\_E\\_5087\\_poem.m4a](https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/mat_III_E_5087_poem.m4a)

These are the first two verses of a mat (Mat 5) with a poem of eight verses that talks about the hardships of spatial separation, obviously of two lovers, as can be seen in the mat's following six verses. Metaphorically, these verses allude to the theme of the spatial separation of all these historical mats from their place of origin, not only from where they were produced, but also from a place where they possessed a function and meaning within society.

Originating from the Lamu Archipelago, the twelve *mikeka* currently kept at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin have diverse stories to tell, stories about their creation as much as about their removal from a context of origin and meaning. Most of them were sold or given to the former Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde (today: Ethnologisches Museum) between 1896 and 1907 by Clemens Denhardt (1852–1929) or Joseph Friedrich (ca. 1861–1910).<sup>1</sup> Mat 8, for example, features four Swahili verses written in Ajami (Arabic Script), forming a woven praise poem in honour of Bwana Kisitavu, who was identified as Gustav Denhardt (1856–1917), younger brother of Clemens Denhardt.<sup>2</sup> Clemens and Gustav Denhardt, as well as Joseph Friedrich, are known to have resided in Lamu and Witu in the second half of the 1880s. The Denhardt brothers, for instance, played a significant role in international affairs between local, German and European actors in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Being linked to these actors, the respective trajectories of the *mikeka* bear witness to a strongly interwoven history of German colonial pasts in Witu on the mainland opposite Lamu.

Since becoming part of the museum collections, the *mikeka* have been kept in storage, rather than being on display where they could at least be talked about, even if they were no longer able to speak for themselves. Questions regarding their provenance are shaping the project's discussion about these mats' historical meaning, the extraction

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1 According to the museum's documentation, three *mikeka* (Mat 6, Mat 7, and Mat 9) were shipped from Lamu via Hamburg to the former Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde (today: Ethnologisches Museum) in the late 1890s on behalf of two brothers, Clemens and Gustav Denhardt. In 1902 Clemens Denhardt (1852–1929) sold them to the museum (see: SPK-EM, I/MV 0707, E 24a/1888; SPK-EM, I/MV 0718, E 1412/1897; SPK-EM, I/MV 0723, E 360/1900; SPK-EM, I/MV 0725, E 780/1901). In June 1896, Joseph Friedrich (ca. 1861–1910) visited the museum in Berlin bringing with him ten *mikeka* that he lent for study purposes. Five of these (Mat 2, Mat 4, Mat 5, Mat 10, Mat 11) were added to the collections in 1907 as a donation from Friedrich (see: SPK-EM, I/MV 0716, E 1326/1896; SPK-EM, I/MV 0097, E 1337/1896; SPK-EM, I/MV 0176, E 705/1896; SPK-EM, I/MV 0742, E 2096/1907). Mat 8 is documented as having been donated to the museum by the former Kolonialabteilung des Auswärtigen Amtes. In a handwritten note by Joseph Friedrich dated 12<sup>th</sup> June 1896 he refers to a poem published 1894 in Carl Gotthilf Büttner's 'Anthologie aus der Suaheli-Litteratur' which mentions Gustav Denhardt (1856–1917) and states: 'Diese Matte würde ich auch dem Museum belassen' ['I would let the museum have this mat' (own translation)] (SPK-EM, I/MV 0716, E 705/1896). To learn more about the inclusion of *mikeka* in the museum's collections, access the interactive PDF (introduced later in this contribution) via the following link: [https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Ext\\_Daten/Talking\\_Mats\\_Mikekas-Berlin.pdf](https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/Talking_Mats_Mikekas-Berlin.pdf)

2 See Ivanov 2006.

from their cultural and social contexts, and their insertion into the museum as ‘objects’ rather than as ‘cultural belongings’ (Ivanov et al. 2023).

In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, such mats were crafted as special items that were often purposefully commissioned, including by Europeans, purchased and most importantly exchanged as valuable gifts during rites of passage or to enhance friendly relations with others (see also Ivanov 2006). Like the proverbs on today’s most popular exchange gift, the colourful *kanga*, mats with interwoven poems emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships in these message-bearing presents. These woven mats become meaningful only in practice, when being exchanged during rites of passage, for instance, when they are used in wedding ceremonies for *nikah* in both the mosque and at home, as wedding gifts, or when used during special functions like *Maulidi* to mark the *kinara* position of the recital leaders. Mats with inscriptions were commonly used in religious spaces as gifts for religious scholars and teachers of initiation rites, or as part of bridal dowries, embedding blessings and wishes into the fabric of daily life. Some were also displayed in elite homes as status symbols, paralleling the calligraphy found in carved Swahili door frames. In any case, the mats have to be enlivened in actual relational formations that are negotiated within (ritual) music and dance performances called *ngoma*. These *ngoma* occasions can be considered intergenerational institutions that offer a space to voice one’s concerns and the community an arena to discuss and negotiate critical matters through oral art forms.

Since at least the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, mats with interwoven poetry have no longer been produced along the Swahili coast, likely due to a decline in the demand for expensive, handmade luxury articles. Moreover, the last to be crafted have by now been eaten away by time, the tropical climate and termites. Conversely twelve mats have survived being stored in Berlin, and most of them still look new, as they were kept carefully away from pests and sunlight using a conservation-conscious approach.

Reflecting on the historical *mikeka* and their multi-layered stories, the Imam and poet *ustadh* Mahmoud A. Abdulkadir Mau composed the poem ‘Tuzithamini Turathi’ [‘Let Us Value Cultural Heritage’] in 2024.

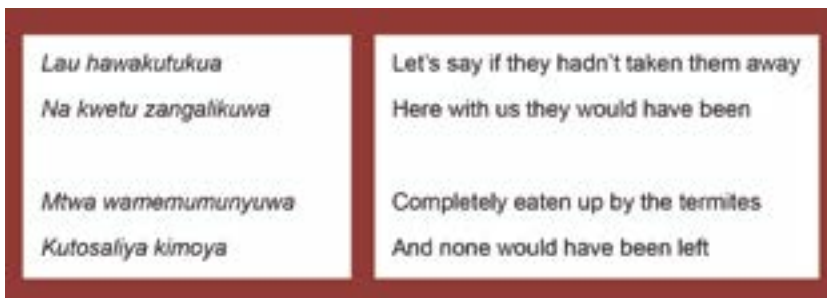


Fig. 3 Two verses from the poem *Tuzithamini Turathi* composed by Imam and poet *ustadh* Mahmoud Abdulkadir Mau for the ‘Talking Mats’ workshop in Lamu (Sept. 2024).

## 2. Talking Mats: Weaving and Interweaving Knowledge During a Workshop in Lamu 2024



Fig. 4 Mat 7 (III E 9509). Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken

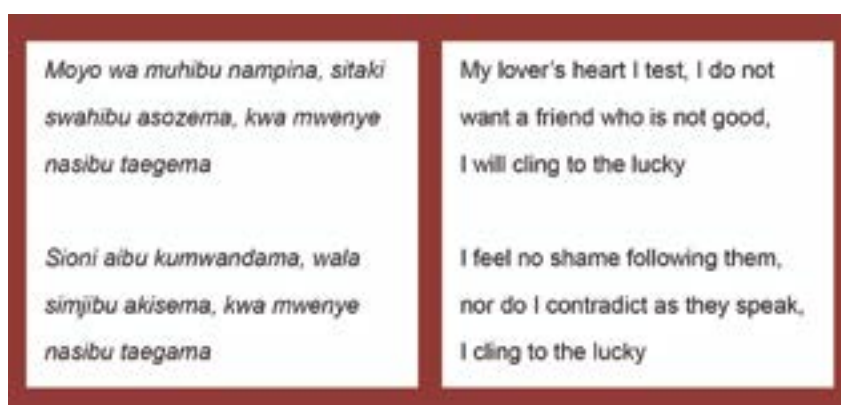


Fig. 5 The poem *Moyo wa muhibu* as interwoven in Mat 7. Listen to the poem via the following link: [https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Ext\\_Daten/mat\\_III\\_E\\_9509\\_poem.m4a](https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/mat_III_E_9509_poem.m4a)

The poem on Mat 7 talks about a person's choice to mingle only with good and lucky people. It alludes to the fact that our choice of coming together in a 'Talking Mats' workshop – bringing with us our multiple perspectives, world views and epistemologies – promises happiness, success and luck for our concerted endeavour.

The central aim of our project is to awaken these muted mats from their sleeping-beauty slumber by engaging in an inter-epistemic dialogue, i.e. through conversation, cooperation and co-curation based on Swahili oral and matricentred epistemologies.<sup>3</sup> From 24<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> September 2024, a three-day workshop was held in Lamu Town, Kenya, organized and conducted by the two cooperating institutions as the key element of the project. The workshop brought together about fifty international stakeholders, mostly from the Swahili-speaking regions of the East African Coast. Local commoners and knowledge-bearers, academic intellectuals and skilful plaiters and weavers from within the Lamu Archipelago and from the nearby mainland – among others Matondoni, Ozi and Kipini – as well as from neighbouring Zanzibar came together to get to know each other and to exchange their knowledge.

In many ways, the workshop acted as a significant moment in the acceleration of knowledge exchange and the pluralization of epistemologies. For those of us who could not follow word for word the unfolding of the contributions, which were mainly in Kiswahili, grasping the significance of that catalytic moment happened further through emotions. Attuning our senses to the energy of the place, we felt the effervescence through the exchanges, which began from the first day. Bringing and weaving together different forms and practices of knowledge challenged a typical academic lecture format. The workshop was designed to be structured in such a way that it allowed various forms of knowledge to coexist and be shared alongside one another. Kicking off the exchange by unpacking the reproductions of the historical mats on textiles and sharing the information available around the Berlin mat collection, the workshop unfolded with recitals of poems presented alongside academic presentations, weaving, singing, storytelling, vivid debating and performing. What we sensed emerging throughout the workshop was the materialization of a knowledge ecosystem with different types of episteme coming together, interweaving and enhancing each other while rallying around shared concerns over the sustainability of Swahili cultural heritage.

Thanks to the intensive exchange during the workshop and the willingness of the artists, essential knowledge about the process of making such mats and their meaning was exchanged, experienced and flourished.

As a historic coastal town shaped by centuries of maritime trade, Lamu has long been a hub of cultural exchange. Its weaving traditions embody this rich heritage,

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3 Like several other Muslim Indian Ocean communities, coastal Swahili-speaking societies are structurally matricentric, meaning that the social organization is built around female-headed families, the 'spirit of shared motherhood' (Amadiume 1987:56) and intergenerational, egalitarian, mimetic and processual theories of knowledge.

blending Indigenous craftsmanship with influences from across the Indian Ocean. The intricate techniques and patterns reflect not only the ingenuity of Lamu's weavers, but also the broader Swahili aesthetic, one that values precision, artistry and the seamless fusion of beauty and function.

Using locally available materials sourced from doum palm, wild date palm, reeds and other natural fibres, artisans create a variety of woven items that serve everyday purposes while preserving ancestral knowledge. Weaving practices vary across the region, with different coastal towns and ethnic groups specializing in distinct techniques and materials. Kipini, for example, remains a key supplier of wild date palm fronds for weaving *mikeka*. Strips cut from doum palm fronds are split into *miyaa* (flexible fibres) for weaving *majambvi* mats or into *ng'ongo* (thicker ones) for utilitarian items like brooms. Straps are plaited, often by women or boys in Muslim schools, and sold by length; men typically sew the plaited straps into the finished *majambvi* mats.

The integration of Islamic calligraphy into various art forms, including textiles and architectural embellishment, underscores its profound significance in both religious and artistic traditions. Regarding the *mikeka*, the script was often integrated into larger symmetrical designs, ensuring aesthetic harmony while maintaining legibility. The process required precision, as the letters had to be carefully woven in sequence without disrupting the mat's structure. Plant-based dyes in dark hues were used to weave the straps into which lighter patterns and inscriptions were interwoven to achieve highlighting.

Weaving itself became a significant part of the workshop, as well as within the collaborative curatorial practice and methods of knowledge-sharing and producing. For example, the workshop program included a women's *baraza* – a Swahili meeting format in which only female workshop participants gathered in a more informal setting to exchange knowledge, including weaving practices, through conversation and the composition of poetry. As non-weaving academic participants in this situation, many of us had the privilege to watch the weaving-making process at play closely while also having a chance to try it out ourselves. Watching the rapid movement of the hands as they criss-crossed the coloured fibres, gradually giving shape and generating complex patterns, felt unfathomable from the sole standpoint of observation. It was only when our weaving teachers placed their hands over ours and physically guided us through the process that we could begin to contemplate the possibility of 'getting the feel' for it.<sup>4</sup> Seeing the way these experts practised their weaving at such a rapid pace, generating mathematical, intricate compositions without following any written rules, reminded us of Ingold's eco-anthropological approach to design. This defends an embodied under-

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<sup>4</sup> According to Ingold, to make something has to do with 'getting the feel' (Ingold 2000:356) of a wider encompassing environment with which a dialogue of mutual affect is engaged. Taking the body as the primary locus of heuristic experience, he argues that it is 'groundedness' in the environment and its interconnectedness with the elements surrounding it that together allow knowledge of the world and skill to be gained through the channel of a sensorial experience.

standing of weaving practice, which he extends to a general understanding of ‘making’ as something that does not rely on the mechanical process of first learning the theory and then applying the rule. Rather, he argues that it is through a processual ‘practical mimesis’ that one acquires the skill of making string bags (Ingold 2000:358).

This understanding of knowledge transfer as corporeal embodiment can be extended to the collaborative working process in which our team has engaged. If starting our work together in the digital sphere might have felt at first like doing collaboration from a handbook, the possibility of coming together in one place and stepping into each other’s shoes turned the collaborative work into a tangible, embodied experience. What the workshop achieved was the opportunity to share a presence and form relationships. The following is a poem that was recited by a participant in the ‘Talking Mats’ workshop and a locally renowned poetess as introductory words on the first day. Her words reflected on the moment of the encounter and the indescribable power of coming together, thus blurring the boundaries that are often created by nation states, language, hierarchies, or knowledge systems, among others.



Fig. 6 Verses from the poem *Kusifu wahusika* (Praising the Participants) that was composed as opening speech by poetess Zuwena Msellem for the ‘Talking Mats’ workshop in Lamu (Sept. 2024).

### 3. Co-curation: A Story Unfolds



Fig. 7 Mat 1 (III Nls 171). Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken

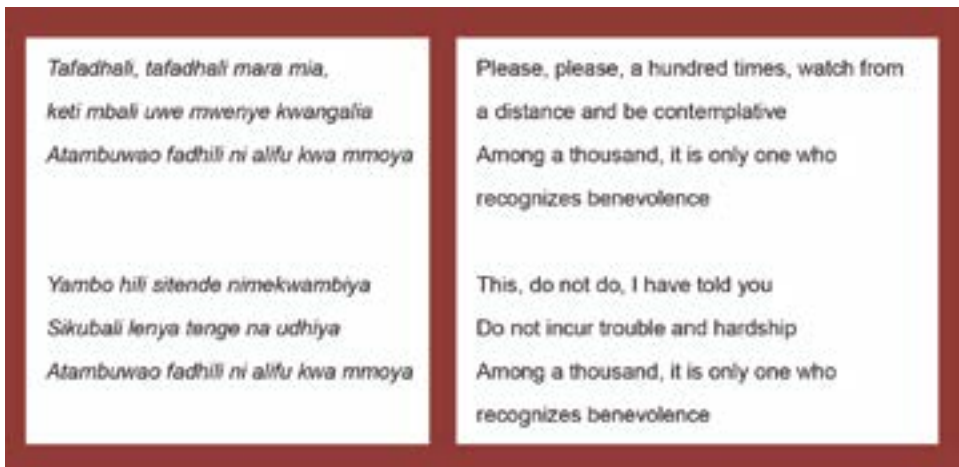


Fig. 8 The poem *Tafadhali tafadhali* as interwoven in Mat 1. Listen to the poem via the following link: [https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Ext\\_Daten/mat\\_III\\_Nls\\_171\\_poem.m4a](https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/mat_III_Nls_171_poem.m4a)



Fig. 9 Mat 2 (III E 12790). Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken



Fig. 10 The poem *Yambo hili* as interwoven in Mat 2. Listen to the poem via the following link: [https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Ext\\_Daten/mat\\_III\\_E\\_12790\\_poem.m4a](https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/mat_III_E_12790_poem.m4a)

These are poems on two mats (Mat 1 and 2) which talk to each other. We are lucky to have found them both in the Ethnologisches Museum. While the ‘Talking Mats’ workshop in September 2024 made it possible to come together in one place, we then had to leave each other and continue our dialogue and co-curatorial work from a dis-

tance. Regular online meetings made it possible to slowly but surely negotiate, develop and co-curate our envisioned ‘Talking Mats’ exhibition in four venues of the National Museums of Kenya, Lamu Museums and World Heritage Site, in Lamu town.

In the Swahili practice of plaiting, strips of fibre are never interwoven as single strands, but are always woven in pairs. If one strip becomes too thin, it is reinforced by adding a second. This dimension of relationality and of things working in pairs is reflected throughout Swahili knowledge practices and is also enacted in poetry, as composing a poem is never done for one’s own sake, but rather to communicate with others. We understand the collaborative practice we engaged in to resemble weaving or composing call-and-response poetry. Just as no single strand will weave itself very far, so the elaboration of our narrative can only take place through the interweaving of different strands of knowledge. Just as immersing oneself in a sensory environment is essential to learning a skill, we recognize that a shared presence is pivotal in the process of weaving our strings of knowledge together so that they can become a texture.

The co-curatorial process, which began with set meetings and spontaneous discussions while we were all on site in Lamu, continued as weekly online meetings thereafter. Finding a regular time slot that worked for all of us, despite different time zones and respective institutional agendas, felt like an early success. The designated weekly virtual meeting quickly became our safe space in which to gather and coexist, not only to continue the shared curatorial discussions, but also, and more importantly, to strengthen the relationships we had started to build in Lamu. The few months following the workshop thus became a phase of experimentation, of trial and error, so as to figure out shared tools and methods for our collaborative work. The results reflect the process of both becoming a team and co-producing knowledge in multi-layered partnerships. For instance, while imagining displays of the reproductions of the *mikeka* on textiles within the respective venues of the Lamu Museums, exhibition re-arrangements were considered, as was unfolding the storyline while building upon existing narratives. In doing so, a unique kaleidoscope of individually and jointly co-authored texts emerged from pluri-vocal conversations and shared learnings within the ‘Talking Mats’ trajectory.

The exhibition that opened on 7<sup>th</sup> August 2025 is dedicated to the *mikeka* and the interwoven histories of East Africa. Presented in the following four venues of the Lamu Museums, the exhibition explores divergent and related themes: the German Post Office Museum highlights the interwoven historical encounters; Lamu Fort focuses on the creation and meaning of *mikeka* today; the Swahili House Museum reveals the pervasive role of *mikeka* in ceremonial and everyday life; and the Lamu Museum addresses orality and poetry in social and trade relations.

As such, the exhibition deals in particular with German-East African relations from a local matricentred point of view that is characterized by inclusiveness, multilingualism, trans-culturalism, Indian Ocean aesthetics, competition and community commitment. The story is told around mats that were woven by Swahili-speaking peo-

ples, primarily women, in order to serve as meaningful artefacts in a mother-focused Muslim maritime society that is receptive to foreigners who show a readiness to adapt their ways. In this regard, the exhibition builds on emic perspectives and endogenous knowledge practices that focus on human relationships, gift-exchange and reciprocity – all that is embedded in these mats' role and use during rites of passage and according to life stages. Following the idea of creation by combining two things, the exhibition project challenges not only state borders, but also conceptions of time, history and ideas of communities as homogeneous. It works towards a concerted reappraisal of the colonial past as a shared history through collaboration, co-curation and inter-epistemic dialogue: 'Tuzithamini tarikhi na turathi zetu' [Let us Value our Historical Past and Heritage].<sup>5</sup>

The reality of working across countries and institutions according to various logics means that doubts along the way can punctuate the process. Listening to each other and hearing each other are the main aspects of building a relationship of trust. In the process of building a common understanding of the project and fostering a trusting exchange, the transnational team simultaneously worked towards a specific goal: a co-curated exhibition that should reach an audience in Lamu. So, while the moments of silence between meetings might have felt destabilizing, the regular meetings became even more moments of sheer connection, in which we felt we were in this together, active and contributing to the process; we had become a team, creating a space for learning with each other, and discovering new ways and forms of working together.

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5 See poem by *ustadh* Mahmoud A. Abdulkadir Mau, 2024.

#### 4. Challenges and Hopes for the Future



Fig. 11 Mat 10 (III E 12788). Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken



Fig. 12 The poem *Sikutaharaki kwa mapaji* as interwoven in Mat 10. Listen to the poem via the following link: [https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Ext\\_Daten/mat\\_III\\_E\\_12788\\_poem.m4a](https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/mat_III_E_12788_poem.m4a)

This poem (Mat 10) alludes to unequal relationships, endured hardships and the hope for a better future. Thus, in this section we address examples of challenging issues within our project and exchanges such as how to think about the issue of meaningful restitution and the future of historical collections.

The often emotive and controversial topic of restitution was directly addressed in a key presentation and subsequent discussions during the workshop, highlighting the negative effects of the acquisition and relocation of artefacts since the arrival of the Portuguese and other European powers from the late 15<sup>th</sup>-century onwards. While the motives for these acquisitions evolved over time, from spoils for treasure hunters and sources of wealth for European rulers to objects of curiosity for academics and amateur researchers, the artefacts increasingly became prized by collectors and were later acquired for scientific purposes towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century.

Despite this evolution, the evidence suggests that many artefacts continued to be obtained through unfair negotiations and, in some cases, by force, particularly given the power imbalance between colonists and local communities. Regarding the mats in question, the exact motives and contexts behind their removal and/or acquisition by the Denhardt brothers or Joseph Friedrich remain uncertain. However, given that one of these mats was obviously dedicated to Gustav Denhardt, it is believed that they might have been acquired through local contacts, particularly with the renowned craftsman Muhamadi Kijumwa.<sup>6</sup>

While the issue of restitution often provokes strong emotions, the workshop highlighted how many of these mats have been carefully preserved over time, gaining new meanings for both the people of Lamu and the German institutions that house them. Their historical journey has added layers of significance to these artefacts.

Our inter-epistemic collaborative project is an attempt to find new, meaningful understandings and ways of restitution. While only reproductions of the mats have returned to Lamu so far, we hope that this transdisciplinary project has sparked the enlivening of meaningful message-bearing woven mats and the knowledge of their production. This is more important to us than seeing what is left of the historical mats return physically to the tropics, as we understand restitution as more than ‘just the geographic reorganization of collections’ (Rassool 2022:60). The ‘restitution’ of cultural belongings embedded in relational performative contexts, such as the *mikeka*, cannot be limited to objectified things: it must re-actualize these epistemologies, relationships, and material, embodied and evocative meanings in order to restore their *hadhi*, their value, status and dignity. The ‘translocal circuits of learning and exchange’, like the sharing of knowledge, ontologies and caring practices as experienced in this museum cooperation, may strengthen and repair relations and guide us to ‘more care-*full* global museum practices’ (Warren 2025:7). The project with the components described here is

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<sup>6</sup> Muhammad bin Abubakar bin Omar al-Bakary (1855–1945), born in Lamu, was gifted with exceptional intellect, character and artistic ability. His remarkable talents earned him the nickname Kijumwa, meaning ‘one born with innate genius’. He was a scribe, calligrapher, poet, musician and master woodcarver, whose legacy resonates across East Africa and beyond. Among his most enduring artistic achievements is the ornately carved entrance door of the German Post Office in Lamu, commissioned in 1892 by Gustav Denhardt, his close friend and patron (Abou Egl 1983).

a first attempt in this direction, which, in the sense of a ‘restitution’ based on reciprocity, must be further pursued.



Fig. 13 Mat 11 (III E 12789). Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken



Fig. 14 The poem *Bahati ni shada la pumbao* as interwoven in Mat 11. Listen to the poem via the following link: [https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Ext\\_Daten/mat\\_III\\_E\\_12789\\_poem.m4a](https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/mat_III_E_12789_poem.m4a)

## 5. By Way of Conclusion, an Open End...

We chose the verses of Mat 11 to begin our open conclusion, as in this poem the last lines of each triplet have not yet been clearly identified nor interpreted. For us, this is an invitation to continue the collaborative research done with Swahili ethnographic items that are held in European museums.

The logic of institutional structures and project-funding are shaping the frameworks for collaborative endeavours. The expectation set by the institution to produce results whilst still finding ourselves in a process may feel like a contradictory movement. Thus, the central result we can present so far is that which alludes to our projects' credo, namely that our 'Talking Mats' story is our process, one of co-production, joint achievements and learning how to engage meaningfully with each other.

Openness and unresolvedness – the 'right to opacity' (Glissant 1997) – may be regarded as an aesthetics of decolonizing processes that counter Western epistemologies and museological practices of unambiguity. For the future we wish for more time: to continue weaving together the threads we have picked up, and to be playful and experimental in finding sustainable, equitable and consistent methods to incorporate the voices expressed in the workshop into the further development of this inclusive project.

## Acknowledgements

Our heartfelt thanks go to the National Museums of Kenya, Lamu Museums and World Heritage Site, and the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, for their support and commitment to this cooperation. Our cooperation is carried out within the framework of 'the Collaborative Museum', a joint initiative of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. We gratefully acknowledge the institutional support, shared expertise and collegial engagement that have enabled the development and completion of this work. We cordially thank all partners and participants of the 'Talking Mats' workshop that took place in September 2024. Special thanks go to mat-weavers, poets and interpreters, scientists and researchers, community members and dignitaries for their support and enriching contributions to the project.

## Glossary of Terms

*baraza* (semi-public meeting place and format for informal discussions)

*hadhi* (value, status and dignity)

*kanga* (also: *leso* is a colourful cloth worn by women and bearing a printed saying or proverb)

*kinara* (a mosque model stand, decorated with jasmine flowers and positioned in front of the recital leader)

*majambvi* (sg. *jambvi*, rectangular coarse mats made from doum palm fibres)

*mkeka* (pl. *mikeka*, wild date-palm fibre mats)

*nikah* (solemnizing a marriage in the mosque or at home)

*miyaa* (flexible doum palm fibres for weaving)

*ng'ongo* (thicker doum palm fibres)

*ngoma* (drum, music and dance performances)

*Maulidi* (celebration [month] of Prophet Mohammed's birthday)

*mswala* (prayer mat)

*ustadh* (title for a Muslim scholar)

To explore further the terminology related to the handicraft of plaiting in Lamu's diverse weaving traditions, access the 'Talking Mats' glossary via the following link: [https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Ext\\_Daten/Talking\\_Mats\\_Glossary.pdf](https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/Talking_Mats_Glossary.pdf) [Date of Release: August 2025]. We hope that this document will evolve further, and we welcome contributions in the form of visuals (photos, illustrations) or texts.

## Mikeka Collection

For further exploration of the *mikeka* hosted at the Ethnologisches Museum – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz access the interactive pdf file via the following link: [https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Ext\\_Daten/Talking\\_Mats\\_Mikekas-Berlin.pdf](https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/Talking_Mats_Mikekas-Berlin.pdf) [Date of Release: July 2025]. The interactive pdf was conceptualized as a tool for the workshop in September 2024 and was further developed for the 2025 exhibition (see article by Cristina Navarro, this issue).

## Archives

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ethnologisches Museum (SMB-PK, EM) [The Archives of the Ethnologisches Museum, State Museums of Berlin]

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