Race and Yoga

Breath and Belief: Yoga, Islam, and the Moral Politics of Wellness in Lamu, Kenya

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Abstract

On the Swahili Island of Lamu, Kenya, global wellness discourses intersect with long-standing Islamic traditions of bodily care, ritual purification, and spiritual discipline. This article examines the introduction of yoga as both a development intervention and a spiritual offering in a historically Sufi Muslim community. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork during the Lamu Yoga Festival and beyond, I analyze how yoga is promoted, practiced, and reinterpreted through the intersecting lenses of gender, race, and religion. While yoga is often framed by organizers as a path to empowerment and stress relief, some local participants engage with it selectively, drawing instead on Islamic practices such as *wudhu* (ablution), *salah* (prayer), and *dhikr* (remembrance) as embodied techniques of healing and divine presence. Through attention to everyday encounters, I trace both the appeal and ambivalence of yoga's arrival, theorizing Islamic bodily practices as counter-histories of wellness and situating these frictions within the moral economies of global wellness humanitarianism. Rather than resolving the tensions I discuss, however, I aim to foreground them, following feminist anthropology's call to dwell in complexity. In doing so, I argue that wellness in Lamu is not simply gifted or received; it is interpreted, reframed, and morally negotiated in place.

Keywords: Embodiment; Islam; Swahili coast; Wellness; Yoga Festivals

Introduction

The call to prayer resounds from Lamu Island's many mosques, waking its residents from their sleep. The sound vibrates across the air with an element of insistence: *Allahu Akbar. Come to prayer. Come to success.* Shortly thereafter, the town awakes. Feet shuffle through the dusty streets as men make their way to the mosque for the early morning prayer. This time of year, however, they are joined on the town's narrow alleys by non-locals clasping a yoga mat under their arm. Rather than make their way to the mosque, these tourists are headed for the beach for a sunrise yoga session. As the rising sun casts a golden shimmer over the beach, a line of mostly white, mostly bare, bodies begins to flow through sun salutations. Lithe limbs stretch toward the sky as the rhythmic sound of ocean waves merges with the hum of a crystal bowl. A yoga instructor's voice floats over the scene, inviting participants to "breathe in peace, breathe out love." A few local women clad in black *abaya* (cloaks), some with *niqab* (face covering), walk by with a quick pace – a powerwalk before the start of a busy day, filled with work, household

chores, and Quran reading circles. They pass by silently, eyes cast down, some curious, others disapproving; their chuckles later disrupt the yoga practitioners' silent meditation.

When the beach session ends, participants disperse – some go for an ocean swim, others to smoothie bars, some prepare for sound meditations or chakra workshops. In the afternoon, a small group walks to a nearby school, yoga mats in hand, ready to "give back" by teaching local children a few poses. "We're sharing the gift of yoga," one volunteer explains, "because everyone deserves to feel well."

In early March 2020, the Lamu Yoga Festival was in full swing. Over the course of a week, participants took part in meditation, breathwork, and community outreach, including school visits. Promotional flyers promised transformation: a retreat from the stress of modern life in an island "where time stands still." The festival blends luxury with authenticity, spirituality with service. Founded in 2014, the Lamu Yoga Festival is a globally recognized event that attracts participants from around the world. In 2023, it was honored by *Yoga Journal* as one of the "Top 11 Yoga Festivals Worldwide" (Vandervort 2023). Yet as the call to prayer and the singing bowl reverberate simultaneously, one cannot help but ask: what does it mean to bring yoga – as a secularized, globalized wellness practice – into a space long shaped by Islamic traditions? How do transnational wellness practices like yoga encounter the Islamic ethics and local religious sensibilities that structure everyday life in Lamu? What frictions arise, and what possibilities emerge, when yoga becomes both a developmental offering and a tourist attraction in this coastal Muslim town?

The opening scene from the Lamu Yoga Festival encapsulates the paradoxes at the heart of East Africa's growing wellness tourism economy: the pursuit of inner peace staged in spaces shaped by colonial histories, Islamic ethics, and postcolonial inequalities.[1] Yoga, in this context, circulates not only as a globalized wellness practice but also as a moral and developmental project, where the "gift" of breathwork and bodily awareness is imagined as a form of healing for racialized others and transformation for privileged selves. The tranquil setting – framed by the ocean, impeccable beaches, donkeys, and white-washed coral houses – conceals complex negotiations of power, ethics, and belonging.

In recent years, Kenya has positioned itself not only as a hub for wildlife tourism and humanitarian volunteering, but also as a rising wellness destination. Along the Swahili coast, yoga retreats have proliferated in spaces once known for dhow safaris, offering a new fusion of ethical leisure and spiritual healing. This trend is especially visible in Lamu, an island historically known for its Islamic scholarship and Sufi traditions. Kenya's tourism websites and organizations often present Lamu Island as a place frozen in time: the oldest continuously inhabited Swahili town along East Africa's coast (similar to, but smaller and less "touristy" than, Tanzania's Zanzibar). Lamu Island, however, is shaped by juxtapositions: Lamu Town contrasts sharply with neighboring Shela Town. The former is the island's historically thriving trade center but is currently crowded and dilapidating. The latter was previously a small enclave, economically dependent on Lamu Town, but in recent decades has become a thriving beach town, inhabited by mostly wealthy expats who have renovated ruined houses into beautiful, whitewashed villas.

Today, "Lamu" (as a whole) is increasingly branded as a tranquil sanctuary for global wellness seekers – where yoga meets the sea, the soul, and the Other. Wellness tourism in Lamu draws on both humanitarian and spiritual imaginaries that portray the region as a site of lack, transformation, and pristineness: a place where visitors can heal, serve, and find themselves in

proximity to Islam, simplicity, and timelessness. These imaginaries are not only shaped by market logics but also by deeply racialized and gendered semiotics of moral becoming.

By analyzing the aesthetic and affective discourses of yoga tourism, alongside the everyday interactions between foreign yogis and Lamu residents, this article explores the layered and often fraught encounters between yoga and Islam on the Swahili coast. I examine how yoga is promoted as a tool of health, peace, and empowerment, particularly for Muslim girls, and how local residents interpret, negotiate, or resist these discourses. In doing so, I suggest that "wellness" operates as a mode of soft power, a moral economy, and a site of friction and improvisation. I particularly focus on how bodies are made legible as stressed, closed, or in need of opening and how these framings intersect with, and often obscure, existing Islamic practices of *salah* (prayer), *wudhu* (ablution), and *dhikr* (remembrance), which already offer embodied modes of mindfulness, rhythm, and moral discipline. Rather than casting yoga as either neocolonial imposition or universal good, I ask: what moral and spiritual grammars underwrite these encounters? What kinds of development and care are imagined through breath and posture? And what happens when Sufi traditions of remembrance meet imported breathing techniques in the name of wellness?

Rather than resolving these seeming contradictions, I aim to hold them in productive tension. As Firdose Moonda (2024) reflects in her account of yoga practice in South Africa, such tensions are not unique to Lamu; yoga's promise of healing is never separable from the colonial and racialized histories that shape who belongs in yoga spaces and how their bodies are read. Bringing Moonda's insights into conversation with my ethnography in Lamu allows me to frame ambivalence not as failure, but as an analytic lens: a way of dwelling in the frictions produced when yoga is refracted through racial, religious, and moral terrains.

Methods and Positionality

This article draws on preliminary ethnographic fieldwork conducted primarily on Lamu Island between January and March 2020, with follow-up online research and interviews in 2020-2021.[2] The preliminary fieldwork was part of a subsequent, broader research project examining the intersections of yoga, wellness, and development across multiple sites in Kenya. While the larger study included engagements with yoga-based development projects in Nairobi, this article focuses on the case of Lamu to examine the intimate and embodied dynamics of yoga as both a global wellness practice and a local moral encounter.

I approach this research as a white woman from Belgium who has lived in North America for over two decades; my academic and personal life has intertwined with Kenya for more than twenty years. I first began conducting ethnographic research in Lamu in 2006, building on fieldwork in Kenya that began in 2000. I lived in Lamu continuously for three years between 2007 and 2010, during which I converted to Islam, became fluent in Swahili (and particularly the local Lamu dialect), and carried out research on how young people navigate religious and moral values in contexts of rapid change, particularly through everyday semiotic practices (Hillewaert 2019). More than a decade after first arriving in Lamu, I married into a local Lamu family. During this same period, I was also an avid yoga practitioner, maintaining a daily Ashtanga practice for several years, which inspired my interest in yoga's arrival in Lamu.

Over time, my public presentation when living on Lamu Island shifted from being uncovered, to wearing the headscarf and abaya, and after my marriage, also donning the niqab when moving through town. These practices shaped my positioning in multiple ways, often

intersecting with my racial visibility. For Lamu's Muslim residents, my religious and marital status carried expectations of moral comportment and respectability. For tourists, I was often an object of curiosity: a white foreigner visibly embedded in local life, blurring the familiar and the exotic. For Shela's expatriate residents, I appeared to be a curiosity of another kind; someone who had crossed into religious and social commitments they did not view as necessary or desirable, and which marked a divergence from their own coastal lifestyles. At times, my identity as a yoga practitioner further complicated these perceptions. For some, my personal practice was invisible, tucked into the private sphere of my own rooftop; for others, particularly expats and tourists, my presence in yoga classes sometimes prompted surprise: "Oh, *you* practice yoga?" This layered positionality – Muslim convert, foreign academic, family member, yoga practitioner – shaped my access to spaces and the conversations people chose to have with me. My experience of being read through competing moral and racialized frames thus mirrored some of the very negotiations of boundary-crossing, ambivalence, and care that lie at the heart of this article's analysis.

For this project, my long-term engagement with Lamu and established relationships with local communities and wellness organizers provided an important foundation for participant observation across a variety of settings, including festival events. I attended yoga sessions and wellness workshops, volunteered at events, and spent time in informal social settings with both visitors and local participants. In 2020, however, my in-person research (on which data discussed here draws) was preliminary and exploratory: I focused on observation and casual conversation rather than systematic or formal interviews. As such, my analysis here draws primarily on ethnographic encounters and informal exchanges.

The Lamu Yoga Festival

The Lamu Yoga Festival was founded in 2014 by Dutch expatriate Monica Fauth, a longtime resident of Shela town and owner of the boutique hotel *Banana House*. Having hosted yoga sessions at her hotel, Fauth sought to replicate a model she had encountered in other parts of the world: a destination-based yoga festival that combined wellness, community outreach, and tourism. Though the festival's early years were modest in size, the event quickly grew, becoming one of the most prominent yoga festivals on the African continent. In 2016, the festival was promoted as the "number one worthwhile traveling yoga destination," (Lamu Yoga Festival, n.d.) and by 2017 it welcomed 350 participants from 27 countries, offering over 160 workshops. By 2023, *Yoga Journal* named the Lamu Yoga Festival one of the "Top 11 Yoga Festivals Worldwide." (Lamu Yoga Festival, n.d; Vandervort 2023.). These milestones highlight the festival's ascent as a branded global event that inserted Lamu into elite wellness circuits.

The festival draws a largely international clientele with instructors often coming from the US, UK, or mainland Europe. Over time, however, the demographic of both participants and instructors shifted. While tourists remain central to the event, many attendees now travel from Nairobi and the number of Kenyan participants – both expatriate and native – has steadily increased. While some local Lamu youth are invited to volunteer in exchange for free participation, this uptake remains limited.

Despite growing diversity, instructional authority remains overwhelmingly expat or non-Kenyan, reflecting broader asymmetries in the global wellness industry (Jain 2014; Lucia 2020; Putcha 2022). There are exceptions. A small number of local yoga instructors (I know of two), including one trained in a Lamu-based expatriate yoga boutique hotel and subsequently certified

through the Africa Yoga Project, have begun to establish themselves as teachers. These local teachers are often highlighted in promotional materials as markers of community inclusion and empowerment. Notably, both instructors are young men from Shela; to my knowledge, no young Lamu women participate in yoga regularly enough to be trained as instructors. While local women may occasionally join individual classes, participation at this level remains male-dominated.

It is also important to note that "Kenyan participation" in the festival is not evenly distributed across class or geographic lines. Attendance at the Lamu Yoga Festival, whether as participant or instructor, tends to signal a specific classed and cosmopolitan identity commonly associated with urban, upwardly mobile professionals based in Nairobi or coastal enclaves like Watamu. As Archambault (2021; 2022) shows in her work on fitness and bodywork in Mozambique, engagement in practices such as yoga or fitness training often reflects broader temporal and moral investments in self-improvement, discipline, and global belonging. In this context, participation in yoga – and particularly in highly branded festival spaces – signals not simply an interest in health, but also an alignment with elite, transnational lifestyles. The figure of the Kenyan yogi thus complicates simple binaries between "local" and "foreign," pointing instead to classed distinctions within Kenyan society itself.

Festival sponsorship is similarly complex. While the list of sponsors appears to reflect local support, often featuring Kenya-based companies, many of these are either expatriate-owned or heavily embedded in the tourism industry. For example, Watamu Treehouse, a yoga-focused boutique hotel along Kenya's coast and a recurring sponsor, is owned by a white Kenyan and caters largely to international clientele. Other sponsors include regional airline companies that serve the Lamu route, underscoring the festival's integration into broader circuits of mobility, class, and wellness consumption. Though geographically Kenyan, such sponsorship reflects a transnational economy oriented more toward cosmopolitan aspiration than community embeddedness.

Promotion for the festival occurs almost entirely through digital channels with flyers being distributed via social media (especially Instagram and Facebook), yoga-focused websites, and targeted promotional emails. The marketing and success of the Lamu Yoga Festival appears to fit into a broader effort to brand Lamu as a hub for international cultural and spiritual tourism. Indeed, some tourism websites now refer to Lamu as "the island of festivals" (Moon's Camp 2025). Yet this narrative risks obscuring the differing histories and dynamics between different "festival" events on Lamu Island.

Lamu has long been renowned for its annual *Maulid* festival, a 3-day celebration that forms the culmination of a month-long commemoration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). These religious events originally centered around the Riyadha mosque, founded by Habib Swaleh in 1866, the same religious leader who introduced the local community to *maulid* celebrations. The events now are spread out throughout the town and involve several local mosques. Featuring devotional processions, tambourine-accompanied chants, and night-long devotional recitations, the *maulid* remains central to Lamu Town's religious calendar and has attracted pilgrims from across the world for decades.

In 2001, local residents established the Lamu Cultural Festival to build on this legacy and create a much-needed boost to Lamu's tourism industry, establishing a multi-day event that showcases Swahili heritage through food, poetry, dhow races, and henna painting. Rather than an event deeply rooted in Islamic tradition, this festival is explicitly aimed at attracting tourists and

boosting local economy. However, its focus remains the celebration of local cultural and religious traditions.

Both these festivals are organized by local residents and are grounded in Lamu Town. By contrast, the Lamu Yoga Festival is based in Shela town and organized almost entirely by expatriates. This spatial distinction mirrors the cultural and moral imaginaries that shape the island's tourism economy: Shela is positioned as open, relaxed, and spiritually attuned, while Lamu Town is often framed as more conservative, crowded, and traditional. Similar dynamics are evident in newer Shela-based events like the "Shela Hat Contest" and the "Lamu Painters Festival," which are also expatriate-led, albeit open to local participation.

The recent promotion of Lamu as "the island of festivals" thus folds together events with profoundly different histories, organizers, and audiences. Long-standing religious and cultural celebrations like the *maulid* and the Lamu Cultural Festival are locally rooted, while newer events such as the Lamu Yoga Festival, the Shela Hat Contest, and the Lamu Painters Festival emerge largely from expatriate initiatives. These newer festivals do more than attract visitors: they recast Lamu's spaces, bodies, and soundscapes into marketable symbols of authenticity and spiritual possibility – gestures of care that, as Didier Fassin (2012) reminds us, rarely unsettle the hierarchies on which they depend. The following scene, drawn from a rooftop yoga session during the Lamu Yoga Festival, illustrates how these dynamics materialize in practice.

Branding Lamu

We sat cross-legged on our mats, in the shade of the thatched roof of a Shela boutique hotel. Around me, a semicircle of bodies mirrored the instructor's posture – eyes closed, hands resting gently on knees, palms turned skyward. The breeze that cooled the rooftop carried the scent of salt and woodsmoke, mingling with the distant sound of a donkey neighing somewhere in town. "Let's close together," the instructor's voice called softly, "With three *Oms*. Take a deep breath."

We inhaled, chests rising toward the sky, "Oooommmmm…" The low collective hum vibrated outward, rounding and fading into silence. In the pause between our *Oms*, another sound rose, not from within the circle, but from the town itself: *Allahu akbar…* The *adhan*, the call to prayer, expanded into the sky, its melodic rhythm weaving through the still air. I felt a flicker of tension move through me. As a Muslim who had lived in Lamu for some time, I was acutely aware of the cultural expectation to fall silent in respect of the *adhan*; one listens, responds, stills oneself. Around me, the others inhaled again, unperturbed, "OOOOMMM…" Their voices lifted, fuller this time, a swell rising to meet the *adhan* mid-air, overlapping, blurring.

I remained quiet, listening, my lips silently repeating and responding to the phrases of the call to prayer, as I had learned here, in this town. The others prepared for the next *Om*. "OOOOMM…", their hum surged once more, intertwining with the *adhan* but passing through it, as if the call to prayer were just another sound in the landscape, a beautiful backdrop, perhaps, to the peace they sought. Sitting among them, I felt briefly apart – not opposed, but inhabiting a different soundscape, a different axis of reverence.

The call inside the circle and the call beyond it did not cancel each other, but neither fully resolved. I wondered how the others heard it, whether the *adhan* registered for them as part of the island's atmosphere, a sonic emblem of the "ancient culture" promised in festival brochures, another texture in the marketed spiritual landscape. For them, it seemed, the *Om* was the closure. For me, the *adhan* was the call. The instructor pressed her palms together at her heart:

"*Namaste*." Around me, participants slowly opened their eyes, stretching their necks, softly smiling. The call to prayer faded into silence. For a moment, the island's layered spiritual histories felt mapped across sound – heard but heard differently.

The sound of *Om* resonating from a rooftop yoga class and the call to prayer echoing from the next-door mosque may emerge in the same moment, but they did not arise from the same world. Their convergence, however, was not a coincidence, but a curated resonance – one that reflects the island's transformation into a spiritual brand. In that moment of overlap, what was for me a call to prayer was, for others, the ambiance of authenticity, another texture in the retreat experience. This layering of spiritual sound and tourist meaning exemplifies how wellness in Lamu is not just practiced; it is staged. It is no accident that yoga sessions are timed with the setting sun, that photographs capture minarets in the background, or that festival brochures evoke an untouched past. These scenes frame Lamu not just as a location for wellness, but as its spiritual and moral source.

This branding was made explicit during a conversation I had over lunch at Peponi Hotel in Shela. My lunch companion, an expat yoga practitioner who had long resided in Shela, explained her vision, "Lamu should be the wellness destination of Eastern Africa. My dream is to turn this island into the Bali of Africa."[3] Peponi – Swahili for "paradise" – seemed almost emblematic of the vision she described. Once a crumbling settlement, Shela has now been transformed into a luxury enclave where property is largely owned by expats. Whitewashed villas and oceanfront yoga decks contrast sharply with the aging stone homes, economic precarity, and infrastructural decay of nearby Lamu Town. Though geographically close, Shela and Lamu often appear in touristic imaginaries as different worlds: one relaxed, spiritual, and open; the other crowded, conservative, and traditional.

This spatial and moral differentiation is central to the branding of the Lamu Yoga Festival. Promotional materials describe Lamu as "truely [ibid] magical" place, without "cars, just plenty of donkeys, cats and boats." "Without the stress and rush of modern life," promotions claim, "it's easy to feel a million miles away" (Lamu Yoga Retreats. n.d.) Photographs depict white bodies in yoga postures, traditional dhow boats in the background, and Muslim schoolgirls in white veils, symbolically folded into a narrative of serenity and simplicity. One article describes Muslim girls' veils as "elegantly flowing with the wind," their presence aestheticized, but their subjectivity seemingly absent (Marijn 2020). The story, however, does not end with beauty. Media reports on the Lamu Yoga Festival and its success often present images of yoga on the beach alongside photos of festival participants teaching yoga to local children or distributing sanitary pads to schoolgirls. This framing – yoga as both luxury and gift – reflects a broader humanitarian impulse at the heart of wellness tourism (Voigt and Pforr 2014; Yeoman 2008).

But in Lamu, mindfulness is not a foreign gift. The island's Islamic tradition, particularly its Sufi roots, has long cultivated spiritual practices centered on breath, rhythm, purification, and stillness.[4] To offer mindfulness in the form of yoga is to overlook, or render invisible, these already-present forms of spiritual discipline. And yet, this erasure is often part of the appeal. The image of Lamu as both peaceful and in need of healing allows tourists to experience spiritual retreat while affirming their role in uplifting others (Voigt and Pforr 2014). This logic of giving – of bringing wellness to the "still-closed" or "not-yet-open" Muslim body – echoes older colonial discourses of civilizing and improving.[5] Yet it also reflects a modern humanitarian ethics shaped by global yoga culture: the idea that breath, flexibility, and peace can be taught, gifted, and used as tools of development.

Yoga as Development: Care, Cleanliness, and the Gendered Politics of Gifting

At a secondary school on the outskirts of Lamu Town, yoga mats are spread out on the dusty floor of a concrete courtyard. It is hot and the students – mostly teenage girls in white headscarves – fidget and laugh as the visiting instructor leads them through a series of gentle stretches. A few girls follow easily; others glance at each other, hesitant, uncertain whether to bow, stretch, or giggle. "Let's try again," she says gently, smiling. "Breathe in, breathe out. Like the ocean." A volunteer takes a photo – veiled girls sitting cross-legged, hands on their knees, eyes closed. Outside, the heat presses in and the call to prayer begins to rise from the nearby mosque. The yoga instructor pauses, unsure for a moment, then continues her guided meditation. She subsequently presses her palms together, ending the session. "*Namaste*," she says. "It just means, 'The light in me honors the light in you.'"

After the session, as mats are being rolled up and sandals located, the volunteers begin handing out small, floral-printed tote bags. Inside the bags are reusable sanitary pads donated by festival attendees. "So you don't have to miss school anymore," one explains cheerfully. A girl holds hers awkwardly, unsure what to do with it. Another glances sideways, seemingly uncomfortable. The gesture is meant to empower, to offer dignity.

Later, the volunteers reflect over fresh juice at an oceanside café. "It was amazing," one says. "You could feel them calming down, just opening up." Another states that "it's so cool to share this with them." Another adds, "And it's important we're doing more than yoga. Like, giving back, you know?" The moment feels good, wholesome. And yet, under the surface, layers of asymmetry are at play: between those who teach and those who are taught; between developmental imaginaries and the everyday realities of schooling in coastal Kenya. For these young girls, the yoga session may blur into other NGO-led activities such as nutrition workshops or film screenings. But for these participants in the yoga festival, it marks a high point in their trip, a moment of meaningful connection. Yet, what is being shared here, and who benefits?

The logic is both humanitarian and hygienic: it identifies bodily discomfort, menstrual shame, or infrastructural lack as gaps demanding intervention. This very framing then relies on an imagined absence – of resources, of bodily knowledge, of care. The above-described scene is then shaped by intimacy, generosity, and asymmetry (Mostafanezhad 2014). As Chris Bobel (2019) shows in her analysis of menstrual health interventions across the Global South, these programs often depict girls' bodies as lacking hygiene, confidence, and control, thereby calling forth development solutions grounded in Northern ideals of bodily self-management and liberal empowerment. She terms this a "managed femininity": a model where empowerment is equated with bodily control and visibility, disconnected from the cultural or religious frameworks through which care already occurs. In this framing, the veiled Muslim girl so often aestheticized in festival promotions becomes the imagined beneficiary of moral and physical repair. Wellness here is then not neutral care; it is a civilizing gesture, one that shapes Muslim femininity into legible forms of hygiene, confidence, and openness.

Embodied Wellness, Religious Erasure, and Moral Hierarchies

The encounter described in the vignette above – between visiting yoga practitioners and Lamu school girls – serves as a microcosm for the broader dynamics at the heart of this article.

These moments of physical instruction, moral uplift, and material giving encapsulate the logics of what I consider *embodied development*: interventions that target the body not only as a site of stress and healing but also as an object of pedagogical and moral transformation. The gesture of teaching girls to "breathe in and out like the ocean" or offering sanitary pads to enable their educational access is not simply about health or hygiene – it is also a moral project, premised on assumptions about bodily needs, care, and lack. While Rumya Putcha (2022) describes how brown women's bodies become sites of salvific intervention through what she terms "somatic Orientalism," my focus is on how the body itself becomes the terrain for development, reframed through yoga's logics of breath, flow, and empowerment.

The figure of the ethical volunteer-tourist, who seeks not only to experience but to transform (both themselves and the "Other") through the act of giving, is central to this wellness tourism imaginary. Scholars have shown how this figure is shaped by neoliberal discourses of self-making and moral responsibility, where acts of care are closely tied to the cultivation of a virtuous self (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011; Mostafanezhad 2013; Vrasti 2013). And these dynamics closely resonate with what Fassin (2012) calls *humanitarian reason*, in which suffering bodies elicit ethical obligations without unsettling the very structures that sustain inequality. In the case of Lamu Island, these include the racialized and classed hierarchies of the (yoga) tourism economy, exemplified by expatriate ownership, spatial differentiation, and forms of yoga humanitarianism that mirror the logics of ethical voluntourism (Mostafanezhad 2013).

What is distinctive about wellness interventions, and yoga in particular, however, is that they often sidestep traditional development discourses of disease or poverty in favor of a vocabulary of stress, trauma, and healing. The bodies imagined here are not sick but stressed, blocked, or in need of release. This stress discourse, imported via wellness cultures from the Global North, renders local Islamic understandings of the self as cultivated through practices like *dhikr*, *wudhu*, or communal prayer either invisible or insufficient. Even when these traditions have long addressed the very needs now targeted by yoga – calm, balance, release – they are rarely recognized as such within the wellness-development frame. Instead, relaxation is re-signified through the language of breathwork, mindfulness, and heart-opening flows.

Instructions to close one's eyes during meditation, for instance (met with hesitation by some students who equated it with Christian prayer), marks a subtle but potent moment of epistemological friction (Tsing 2005). It highlights the quiet secularism of global wellness culture, which often repackages spiritual practice in non-religious terms ("*Namaste* just means 'light'") while simultaneously effacing the deeply religious roots of yoga itself and the existing Islamic spiritual frameworks of its recipients. This is not just a matter of misunderstanding; it is a form of religious erasure, one that replaces Sufi invocations with sun salutations and positions breathwork as the universal antidote to a diagnosed condition: modern stress.

At the same time, the embodied format of these encounters – the yoga class, the sanitary pad distribution, the smoothie reflection – creates what Saba Mahmood (2005) termed an *ethical formation*: a cultivation of moral subjectivity through disciplined bodily practice. Yet unlike Mahmood's pious women in Cairo, whose self-fashioning was embedded in a shared Islamic cosmology, the ethical formation at play here is more fractured, stitched together from fragments of global wellness, humanitarian care, and neoliberal self-responsibility.

Yet anthropological work on everyday ethics urges us to move beyond abstract critiques and to attend to the situational ways in which people navigate moral life (Das 2006; Hillewaert 2019; Lambek 2010). Rather than straightforwardly neocolonial, encounters between yoga-practicing volunteers and Lamu participants are filled with ambiguities, hesitations, and

improvisations. In these spaces of interaction – between a chanted mantra and a whispered *dua* (prayer), between a yoga pose and a prayer mat – ethical subjectivities are negotiated. Yoga's globalization is not a one-way flow, and the story is thus more complex than this.

Counter-Histories of Wellness: Amina's Narrative

Not all girls experience moments like the classroom yoga session as imposed instruction. For Amina,[6] a young woman from Lamu, yoga is neither unfamiliar nor all-encompassing. In a conversation following a yoga class, she reflected on how she encountered yoga through a youth-empowerment workshop. As she recounted her experience, she emphasized that she found some of the stretches useful, especially during her period. "There's one pose that really helps," she explained, "It's the only thing that works for the pain."

Yet for Amina, the stress relief and spiritual healing often associated with yoga came from elsewhere. "When I feel anxious or overwhelmed, I don't do stretches like those. I do *wudhu* (ablution)," she said, "The water cools me down, helps me reset. Then I pray. That's when I feel calm. That's when I can breathe." She spoke of *salah* – the prayer itself – as a sequence that engages the entire body: standing, bowing, prostrating, pausing. Each movement, she noted, was deliberate, rooted in rhythm and reverence, "Yoga helps my physical body. But prayer helps my heart." What others might call mindfulness, she framed as *taqwa* – God-consciousness. "It's not about emptying my mind," she said, "It's about filling it – with remembrance. With *dhikr*." Quoting from Surah ar-Rahman – *Which of your Lord's signs will you deny?* – she described a spirituality grounded not in detachment, but in attention: to the sea, the sky, her breath, the presence of Allah in all of it.

Amina's account is not one of rejection, but of selective engagement. She didn't deny yoga's utility; she simply refused its universality. In doing so, her account invites a rethinking of the spiritual hierarchies embedded in global wellness discourse. Amina offered these Islamic somatic practices as counter-histories of wellness; not in opposition to yoga, but as embodied traditions that are often invisibilized or overwritten in global wellness discourses. Her body wasn't stressed, closed, or in need of awakening – it was already practicing peace.

In the Islamic tradition of the Swahili coast, *dhikr* (remembrance) and *wudhu* (ablution) are not simply symbolic acts; they are deeply somatic practices. *Dhikr*, often involving repetitive breath work, rhythmic chanting of divine names, and gentle rocking or swaying, constitutes a form of embodied meditation, long preceding the arrival of globalized yoga. It is a spiritual technology rooted in community, sound, and breath, offering not just spiritual clarity but also somatic regulation.

Similarly, *wudhu* is more than hygiene; it is a ritualized care for the body performed multiple times daily. Its slow, repetitive motions – the washing of hands, face, feet – can be seen as daily rituals of mindfulness, discipline, and reconnection. *Salah*, the five-times-daily prayer, further enacts a cyclical choreography of the body – stretching, bowing, prostrating, pausing – all synchronized to breath and divine time. *Sujud* – placing one's forehead on the ground in prostration – is a form of physical and mental grounding. These acts train the body to feel, to pause, to realign, not with self-optimization, but with divine presence. These practices are then not simply religious; they are deeply physical, sensory, and attuned to emotional states.

But these rich somatic lineages are rarely recognized within the wellness industry's frames. Instead, the body in Lamu is rendered through a secularized discourse of stress, trauma, and flexibility. *Namaste* is translated as "not religious," while girls who resist closing their eyes

during meditation are gently corrected or subtly pathologized as misinformed or oppressed. In these moments, Islam's deeply embodied practices are either invisibilized or treated as incompatible with "healing" – an erasure that reflects broader racial and religious hierarchies embedded in the global wellness movement.

The racialization of wellness plays a crucial role here. The normative wellness subject is imagined as white, affluent, flexible, and spiritually curious, but not (too) religious (Dutta 2014; Lucia 2020). By contrast, the Muslim body, especially when racialized as Black or visibly veiled, is often cast as rigid, oppressed, or in need of liberation (Abu-Lughod 2014; Ahmed 2004). Yoga, then, is not only offered as healing, but as awakening: a way to free the veiled, contained, or suffering body from tradition. This framing ignores how Islamic traditions have long offered their own pathways to ease, connection, and transcendence, just through a different spiritual grammar.

To trace *dhikr* and *wudhu* as counter-histories of wellness is not to romanticize them, nor to reject the appeal of yoga for some young women in Lamu. Rather, it is to interrupt the narrative that healing must arrive from elsewhere, that the body must be taught how to breathe, bend, or be. It is to ask: what other forms of knowledge have long dwelled in these bodies, these rituals, these coastlines? And what does it mean to lose sight of them in the rush to "relax"?

Reframing Wellness from the Minbar: An Imam's Advocacy for the Body

Amina's reflections invite us to take seriously the embodied grammar of Islamic spiritual life: how purification, prayer, and remembrance structure well-being in ways often ignored by global wellness discourses. But she is not the only one in Lamu to interpret yoga through an Islamic moral lens. That work is also being done, perhaps more unexpectedly, by a local imam.

Known for his thoughtful *khutbahs* (sermons) and early morning swims in the ocean, Ustadh Yusuf[7] has become an unlikely voice in favor of yoga – not for spiritual alignment, but for physical and mental well-being. In conversations, he explained that yoga's breathing techniques and stretches could complement Islamic ethics of bodily care. He underlined that yoga can be a tool for managing stress, improving blood circulation, and encouraging mindfulness, especially for youth. "We need to talk about health in our sermons," he said, "About the body, not just the soul."

He saw no contradiction between practicing yoga and his religious duties. For him, it is simply another way to care for the body that God has entrusted to him. Like Amina, the imam then didn't reject yoga outright. Rather, he reframed it, removing its spiritual connotations and situating it within a broader Islamic ethic of bodily stewardship. His position disrupts both global assumptions about Islam as inherently resistant to wellness, and local concerns that see yoga as necessarily oppositional to Islamic propriety.

And yet, his position was far from uncontested. Other religious leaders in Lamu have expressed concern about public yoga sessions, particularly their mixed-gender format, the dress of participants, and their performance in highly visible, secularized settings. For them, yoga is not simply movement; it is a moral scene, one that stages the body in ways that risk immodesty and the erosion of public virtue.

In many Muslim-majority settings, yoga's global spread has prompted theological and ethical debates. Some Islamic scholars reject it as *haram* (impermissible), citing its historical associations with Hindu philosophy, while others distinguish between yoga as religious practice and as physical exercise, sometimes permitting the latter under specific conditions (e.g., not at

sunrise). These debates circulate widely through *fatwas*, websites, and essays in both Arabic and English (Amini and Ouassini 2020; Ernst 2005; Hatley 2007). The divergent positions among imams in Lamu reflect but are not reducible to these larger debates. My focus here, however, is not on these formal rulings, but rather on how ethical orientations are lived and negotiated in practice.

The imam's efforts reveal this kind of negotiation, one shaped not by receiving or resisting wellness from the outside, but by seeking to reframe it from within. He is not alone in seeing health as a religious imperative. But his willingness to publicly endorse a practice so symbolically loaded places him at the center of a local moral debate. His authority as a male religious leader grants him the right to reinterpret, but that same authority is scrutinized through the gendered lens of community propriety. The imam can advocate for yoga's health benefits, but he cannot undo how the practice is framed and felt by others, especially those for whom modesty is moral, communal, and embodied.

In this sense, the imam's position mirrors the broader tensions yoga provokes in Lamu. It is not simply about breath or posture, but about visibility, ethics, and the contested terrain of care. Even for those who recognize yoga's physical benefits, its association with secularized spirituality, gender intermingling, and exposure creates discomfort. These frictions do not signal a simple cultural rejection. Rather, they highlight the negotiation of boundaries: between inside and outside, health and morality, bodily care and spiritual propriety. The imam's position opens space for what we might call Islamic wellness – a discourse that affirms care of the self as a religious duty, while insisting that such care remain embedded within local norms of modesty, respect, and ethical comportment. The debates around yoga in Lamu are then not just about yoga. They are about who gets to define wellness, who gets to care for the body, and how morality is to be maintained in public life. They reveal an ongoing struggle not just over practice, but over interpretation – of Islam, of health, of modernity itself.

Of course, these disputes over bodily care, modesty, and public morality are not unique to Lamu. They are situated within broader global structures where race, gender, and religion shape the moral imaginaries of wellness itself. The frictions encountered by Amina, the imam, and the wider community reveal how care practices are never neutral; they are entangled in power, visibility, and historical hierarchies. Fully understanding the politics of yoga in Lamu, then, requires an ethical attunement: a sensitivity to the historical, moral, and spiritual worlds within which practices of breath, movement, and healing are already embedded.

The frictions outlined here resonate with broader patterns in yoga's global circulation. As Moonda (2024) shows in her contemplations on practicing yoga as a Muslim of South Asian descent in post-apartheid South Africa, yoga is refracted through colonial and racial histories, where even embodied belonging is fraught. Her account highlights the struggles of practicing in spaces where one's racialized body is simultaneously marked as inside and outside. At the same time, however, Indigenous scholars and practitioners such as Jessica Barudin (2021; 2024) emphasize the possibility of re-embedding yoga within First Nations philosophies of health and care. Here, yoga is not only a site of tension but also of creative uptake: a practice selectively drawn upon and reframed through local epistemologies. These cases underline that yoga is never universal; it is continually reframed through the specific historical and moral terrains in which it is practiced.

Conclusion: Between Critique and Care

The neocolonial entanglements of yoga's arrival in Lamu are undeniable. They surface in the racialized tropes of uplift, in the moral economies of giving, in the ease with which spiritual practices are stripped of history to fit global wellness markets. Yet these critiques cannot and should not erase the real desires and needs expressed by local participants – especially young women – for movement, strength, breath, and community.

It is true that opportunities for girls and women in Lamu to engage in physical activity are limited. Gendered norms of modesty, restricted public space, and the absence of female-only facilities often mean that young women have few venues to explore physical exercise. In this context, a yoga class, however globalized, however entangled, may also feel like an opening, a liberation, a reprieve. Girls laugh as they learn to balance. They stretch, sweat, giggle, ask questions. Some enjoy the challenge of new postures; others find solace in simply moving without judgment.

Yet acknowledging these benefits should not require abandoning critique. Instead, this article sought to hold these experiences in tension: to see yoga in Lamu as both an instrument of soft power and a potential space of joy; to consider practicing yoga as a place where bodily sovereignty might be enacted, even if temporarily, even as it is entangled in larger structures of racialized humanitarianism, gendered care, and spiritual displacement.

In this piece, I did not aim to resolve these tensions, but rather tried to make them visible. It is precisely in these in-between spaces – where critique meets care, and global flows meet local aspirations – that new forms of subjectivity emerge. Here, a young Muslim girl might refuse *namaste* even as she returns each week to stretch and sweat alongside her friends. Here, she might laugh at the idea of meditation but stay just long enough to feel a moment of calm in her own breath. These moments, however small, matter.

And so, the task becomes one of ethical attunement: to consider how we can speak about power while simultaneously recognizing possibility; to recognize the potential of embodied intervention without romanticizing it or reducing it to harm; and to trace the afterlives of empire without foreclosing the agency of those who move, resist, and rest in its shadows.

Notes

[1] Firdose Moonda (2024) shares similar contemplations about practicing yoga as a Muslim of South Asian descent in post-apartheid South Africa.

[2] Research was approved by the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board. During the January-March 2020 preliminary research period, no formal interviews were conducted and no identifying information was collected; participants provided verbal consent to informal conversations. Any quotes referenced are based on fieldnotes taken by the author. During the online research phase in 2020-2021, all participants provided either signed or verbal consent prior to conducting formal interviews.

[3] Interestingly, Bali's tourism industry has long been criticized for historically intertwined with Dutch colonialism, with the colonial administration having promoted the island as an idyllic paradise and a living museum (see, for example, Picard 1996; Vickers 1989).

[4] Here, I reference the fact that Sufi Islamic traditions have always focused on spirituality and meditative practices. Lamu island has historically been renowned to cultivate mindfulness mainly through dhikr (remembrance) and devotional recitation. For more on Sufism in Eastern Africa, see, for example, Bang 2014. For a detailed analysis of Islamic practices in Lamu, including *maulid* celebrations, see El Zein 1974).

[5] This echoes Rumya Putcha's (2022) analysis of Indian classical dance and yoga in transnational circuits, where she highlights how global wellness practices often map racialized women's bodies as both spiritually resonant and in need of moral rescue, a dynamic she terms *cartographies of salvation*.
[6] Pseudonym.
[7] Pseudonym.

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