

The Socio-Economic Life of Fisher Communities Living on the Migingo Island of Lake Victoria

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ABSTRACT

Using a qualitative methodology and a descriptive research design, this study examined the socioeconomic conditions of Migingo Island in 1991. Theories of liberalism and power informed the study through the use of phenomenological techniques, such as focus groups, oral interviews, archived materials, and secondary data. The results show that the socioeconomic dynamics of Migingo Island are related to geopolitical issues, including the territorial conflicts between Kenya and Uganda. The fishing sector fosters economic cooperation, but it also raises challenges related to cleanliness and congestion. The study promotes inclusive approaches that involve local stakeholders in order to guarantee sustainable development in the area. Based on the findings, the study recommended that clear governance and jurisdiction agreements be established to alleviate tensions. Furthermore, investment in basic services like education and healthcare is essential for human development. Involving local stakeholders in community-driven solutions and promoting diplomatic conflict resolution could help foster stability and sustainable development. Addressing these issues is vital for the well-being of Migingo Island and its residents, while also reflecting larger geopolitical concerns.

Keywords: Lake Victoria, Migingo, Nature, Ownership, Socio-Economic

1. INTRODUCTION

Migingo Island, a small island in the middle of Lake Victoria, is the focal point of the territorial conflict involving Kenya and Uganda (Shaka, 2013). Due in large part to its advantageous location and rich fishing grounds, this island has been the center of multiple disputes since the early 1990s (Namukasa et al., 2002). The constant struggle for resources, combined with increased population and disagreements over jurisdiction, have significantly impacted the social and economic landscape of Migingo Island.

Fishing has emerged as a primary industry on the island of Migingo, which has resulted in significant changes to the island's economic structure. Because of the increase in fishing activities near Lake Victoria and the decreasing fish populations in other areas, Migingo has seen a significant influx of fishermen in recent years (Wekesa, 2010). The promise of a thriving fishing industry attracted these fishermen to the town. According to Glaser et al. (2019), this migration not only caused a dramatic alteration in the demographic makeup of the island but also gave rise to a cultural identity that is unique to the community.

Additionally, the island is currently suffering from a governance vacuum as a direct result of the nations close by, most notably Kenya and Uganda, exercising unclear jurisdictional control over it (Rossi, 2018). Migingo is a microcosm reflecting larger geopolitical and territorial tensions in the region, while this ambiguity continues to fuel chronic territorial conflicts. Migingo serves as a microcosm, showing broader geopolitical and territorial tensions in the region. The purpose of this study is to investigate the myriad of factors that have influenced Migingo Island's path since 1991, with the goal of gaining a better understanding of the island's distinctive socioeconomic development.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study was framed within the realms of liberalism and political power theory, two guiding principles that played a pivotal role in shaping the investigative approach. Liberalism, as outlined by Galston (1998), places a

premium on rights protection, private liberty, and minimal government intrusion. It advocates for diversity and tolerance in social life, endorsing a spectrum of personal choices. Economically, liberalism supports free markets by facilitating business transactions with minimal intervention (Galbraith, 2008). On the political front, liberalism aligns with representative democracies, emphasizing decision-making by the people.

In contrast, social constructivist and realist political power theories shed light on the impact of power relations on societal development. According to Kaaristo (2022), power dynamics influence social relationships, norms, and hierarchies. Unequal power relations can lead to disparities in resource allocation and economic influence. Political power, as emphasized by Rose and Miller (1992), determines the capacity of individuals and groups to shape institutions, policies, and governance frameworks. While liberalism champions free speech and tolerance, power theories underscore how power dynamics can shape societal norms and hierarchies.

Examining economic dimensions, liberalism promotes economic freedom and competition, whereas power theories scrutinize how economic power can contribute to inequality and market control. In the realm of governance, liberalism advocates for limited government and participatory democracy, while power theories explore how power disparities may influence political institutions and decision-making processes (Galbraith, 2008).

The liberal principles of rights protection and private liberty align with the diverse community culture that has emerged on Milingo, shaped by the influx of fishermen seeking prosperity in the island's fishing industry. The emphasis on minimal government intrusion resonates with the governance vacuum experienced in Milingo due to unclear jurisdictional control from neighboring countries (Shaka, 2013). Additionally, liberalism's support for representative democracies finds relevance in the ongoing territorial conflicts, reflecting the struggle for decision-making autonomy by the island's inhabitants. On the other hand, political power theories shed light on the unequal allocation of resources and influence, mirroring the asymmetric power relations at play in the economic dynamics of Milingo.

2.2 Empirical Review

Drifte (2013) investigated the territorial dispute between Japan and China on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. He framed the disagreement within the context of economic interests, domestic circumstances, issues pertaining to national identity, the needs of international law, and historical grievances. The investigation, which used both constructivist and realist methods, covered the years 1972 through 2010, and its goal was to determine the factors that led to the gradual dissolution of the tacit understanding to shelve the disagreement. The case study of the Senkaku incidents that occurred in 2010 and 2012/13 brought to light the intricate interaction of political, military, and economic ramifications for Japan, China, and the greater East Asian area as a whole.

The review conducted by Schultz (2015) looked into the complex relationship that exists between territorial disputes, militarized conflict, and economic integration. According to the findings, there is a circular relationship between territorial disputes and acts of violence, as well as between the effects of conflict on trade and trade's impact on conflict. On the other hand, the research brought to light a lack of understanding of how economic gains contributed to the resolution of disputes and subsequent compliance. It was proposed that borders could be viewed as institutions that not only distributed land but also made collaboration and mutual gains possible, and it urged further research in this field.

Mumbi and Fengting's (2020) study compared Egypt and Kenya in terms of water demand, usage patterns, and levels of stress in the Nile Basin. A comprehensive evaluation of the relevant literature found that both countries were experiencing increasing water withdrawals, shifting patterns of use, and developing stress. The spatial distribution of water stress, which is caused by variables such as population expansion, economic development, and climate change, has exposed vulnerabilities in downstream as well as upstream regions, highlighting the necessity for sustainable water management practices.

Yalew et al. (2021) made important contributions to our understanding of transboundary river governance. Their research showed that political dynamics among riparian countries influenced decision-making processes, which in turn led to unequal resource allocations. According to the findings of the study, there is a significant prevalence of intricate political processes that influence the equitable and sustainable distribution of water across international borders.

Research conducted by Oketch (2018) that focused on the Milingo Island dispute investigated underlying causes and efforts to resolve the conflict, with a particular emphasis on the significance of including grassroots stakeholders. The findings emphasized that the disagreement stretched beyond territorial boundaries and encompassed competition over the resources. In order to find a solution that will hold up over time, the study suggested increasing the participation of local communities in the settlement process.

The study by Atieno and Obara (2023) focused on the disagreement over the line between Kenya and Uganda over Migingo Island. The detrimental consequences for bilateral trade, regional stability, and the socioeconomic livelihood of local residents were underlined by quantitative and qualitative evidence. Options for diplomatic conflict mitigation, such as negotiation and mediation, have evolved as successful tactics for the resolution of conflicts. These studies, taken together, have provided a complete knowledge of territorial disputes and the wider consequences that they have on political, economic, and social dimensions.

III. METHODOLOGY

Phenomenological research was used as the method of investigation for this study. According to Mugenda & Mugenda (2003), the objective of phenomenological research, which is categorized as a qualitative research methodology, is to uncover and identify the essential characteristics of a phenomenon. This methodology allows for the investigation of individuals' day-to-day experiences by forcing the researchers to put aside their previously held opinions regarding the topic being studied. This approach was chosen because of its ability to provide a full examination of the inhabitants of the island by utilizing instruments such as focus groups, observations, and oral interviews. This capacity was a driving factor in the selection process. The use of content analysis was streamlined thanks to this method, which also made it possible to present the findings in a descriptive and thematic manner.

IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

4.1.1 Nationality

The study aimed to ascertain the nationality of the residents on Migingo Island, and the findings are illustrated in Figure 1.

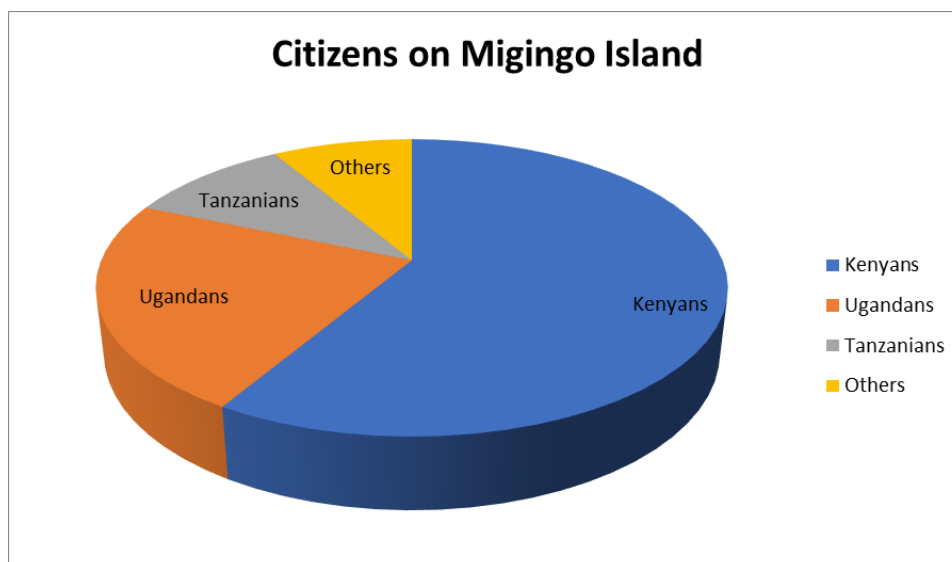


Figure 1
Nationality

According to the findings, 50 percent of the people who responded to the survey on Migingo Island identified themselves as citizens of Kenya. About 20 percent of the people living on the island were citizens of Uganda, while 25 percent of them were inhabitants of Tanzania. The remaining 5% consisted of people hailing from a variety of different countries. The majority of responses were Kenyans due to Migingo Island's proximity to the Kenyan coast in comparison to the other countries. The islands' population is primarily made up of migratory fishermen from the three countries, making them dynamic in nature.

4.1.2 Gender

The study required respondents to indicate their gender. Upon conducting a sex comparison, the findings revealed that the distribution across genders was as follows: 25.6% male and 74.4% female. These results indicate that

the gender distribution of the respondents was not balanced, leading to a potential sex bias in the study. This can be attributed to how the socio economics of the island has changed (Lwenya et al., 2001). Majority of traders, fish processors and service providers are mostly female while boat owners and fishers are male. Gender distribution is summarized in Figure 2.

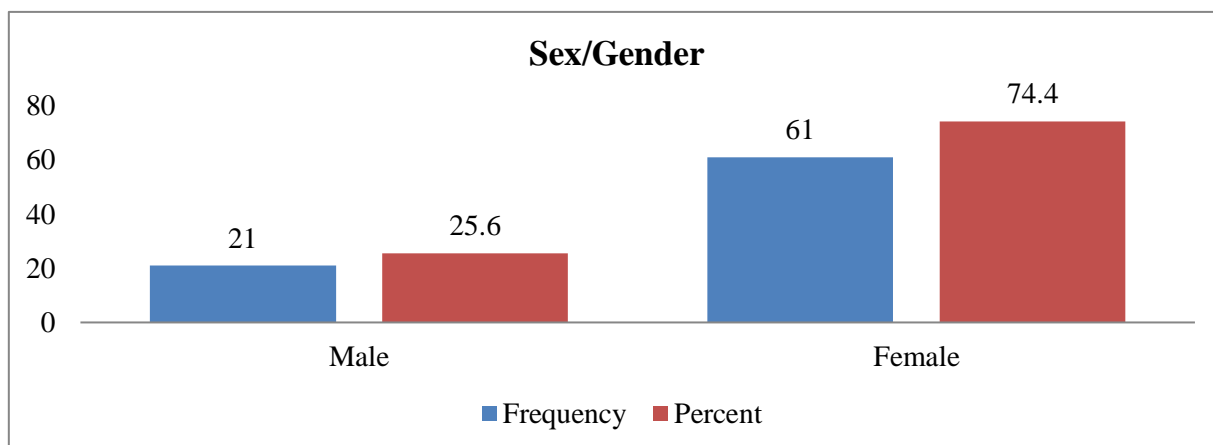


Figure 1
Gender Distribution

4.1.3 Age of the Residents

On Misingo Island, the bulk of the population is comprised of people who are between the ages of 21 and 50 years old. According to the data collected in the field, the typical age of fisherman was found to be thirty-five years old. In most cases, men older than 50 years of age take on the role of boat owners and employ younger men and women to participate in fishing operations. Notable is the fact that a sizeable proportion of the fishermen have made the landing place their permanent home for more than a decade.

4.1.4 Occupation and Educational

The study further examined the occupation and education level of the respondents, aiming to understand the distribution of educational qualifications among the various occupations on the island as shown in Figure 3.

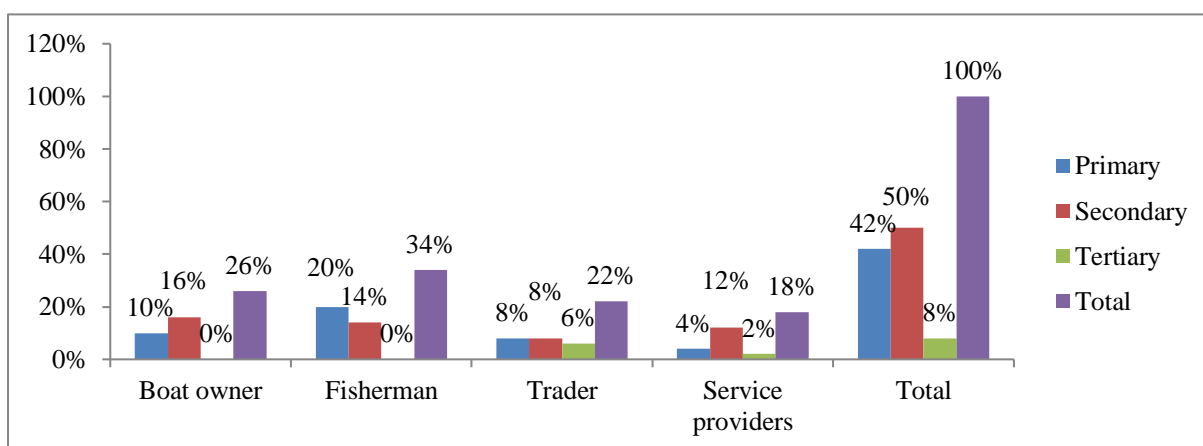


Figure 3
Occupation and Education

The findings revealed that educational attainment of Misingo Island population differs by job group. A remarkable pattern may be found among boat owners, where the majority having completed secondary education (16%), while a sizable portion have only primary education (10%). Fishermen, on the other hand, are more likely to have completed primary school (20%), followed by high school (14%). Traders have a very balanced distribution

between primary (8%), secondary (8%), and tertiary (6%). The educational backgrounds of service providers are diverse, with 12% having completed secondary school and 2% holding tertiary qualifications.

The boat owners provide the boat for fishing. The fishermen can hire the boat on an agreed fee or the boat owner can employ fishermen who are paid as per their agreement. However, according to Mabwire, most of the youthful fishermen do the fishing while women are involved in fish drying and traditional processing and cooking of fish. Mabwire went on to explain that;

There is labor division on the island based on the economic activities on the island. Most fishermen stay on the island for a fortnight and then they go back to their respective homes and then a new group comes in. Most of the fisher folk usually use drugs and alcohol especially bhang in order for them to withstand the night cold in the lake as they fish throughout the night (Respondent G).

The growing demand for fish on Migingo Island has led to the emergence of informal traders who capitalize on this demand by establishing trade points. This fishing activity has, in turn, stimulated various industries, including the manufacture of nets and fishing equipment, the construction of boxes or tin cans for packing, and the production of salt, ice, and other preservatives (Cheng & Morgan, 1987). Notably, traders from Tanzania have become prominent in selling ice, arriving on Migingo Island daily before noon. The containers used to store the fish before transportation are placed at the "banda" (the weighing bay), located at the landing bay of Migingo Island, where they undergo weighing.

4.1.5 Recreational facilities

The study sought to find out the recreational facilities on the island. The results are shown in Figure 4.

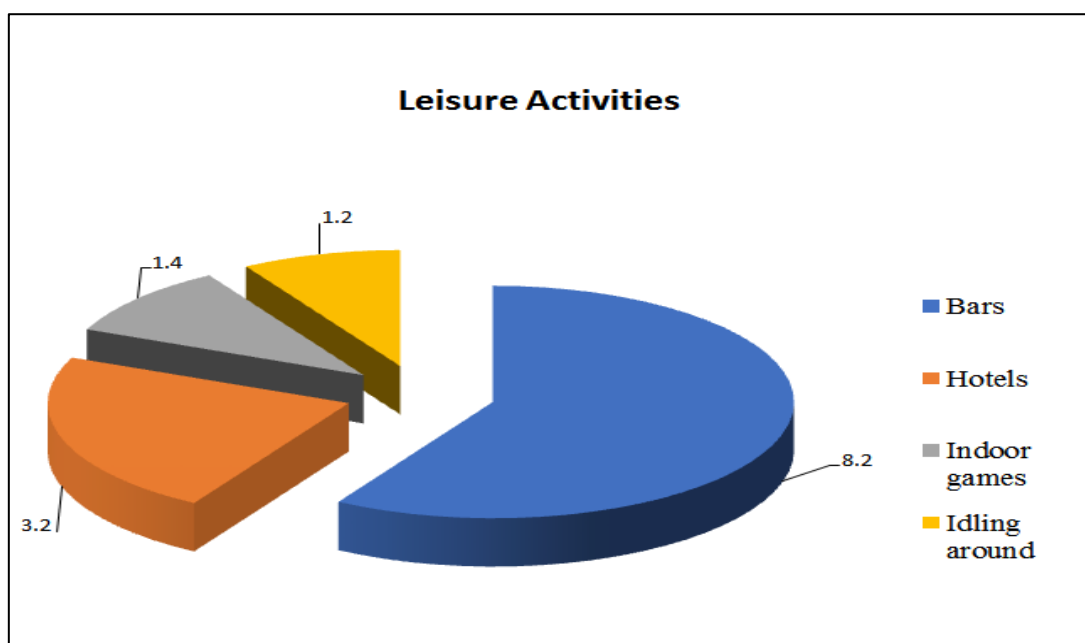


Figure 4
Leisure activities

The study indicated a wide range of leisure preferences among Migingo Island residents. A sizable proportion, 60% of the population, frequents the accessible bars, while 20% prefer hotels and 16% enjoy indoor sports such as pool in their spare time. Furthermore, 4% of the population is said to be idle in their spare time. Unfortunately, the island's pubs have been recognized to encourage immoral activity, leading to a high prevalence of prostitution, particularly among fisherman seeking entertainment during their two-week absences. As a result, there has been an alarming spread of HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) among the islanders, posing hazards to their families back home. Because of the island's poor healthcare facilities, including only one pharmacy, critical ailments must be referred to Migori or Homa Bay County in Kenya. The study also discovered that 60% of the islanders pray in churches, 20% at mosques, and 15% follow traditional beliefs, including boat-cleaning procedures for a successful

catch and protection against accidents or theft while on the lake. The remaining 5%, however, do not attend any religious meetings.

During the course of the study, as respondents were interviewed, it became apparent that individuals on Migingo Island are permitted to consume liquor known as 'umpire,' which is legal in Uganda but prohibited in Kenya. This observation underscores the unique socio-legal dynamics of the island, where differing regulations apply to the same substance based on the national context. The situation aligns with the principles of Liberalism, which strongly advocates for individual freedom and autonomy. From a liberal perspective, individuals possess the right to make choices regarding their own lives, including decisions related to alcohol consumption. This encompasses the freedom to engage in responsible drinking and the capacity to make informed choices about alcohol use, guided by personal preferences and values. The respondent further alluded that:

In Uganda, taking liquor is allowed. Uganda exports different types of liquor to the island. Every Wednesday at around eleven o'clock there is usually a Ugandan dance called 'Muriuki performed'. The participants drink, then the young girls and mid age women dance naked to entertain the audience on the Island up to around 4.00 a.m in the morning when everything stops (Respondent A).

Furthermore, the prevailing freedom on the island has resulted in the overt commercialization of cultural activities, leading to economic benefits for the community. This phenomenon serves as a source of employment in a context where alternative economic opportunities are limited (Wearing and Neil, 2009). However, this economic reliance on cultural activities also highlights the widespread issue of prostitution on the island. Notably, Migingo Island only has one private clinic, primarily providing first aid services to the residents. In cases of emergencies beyond the clinic's capacity, individuals are referred to either Muhuru Bay or Migori hospital for further medical attention.

4.2 Economic Activities on Migingo Island

The economic landscape of Migingo Island is prominently shaped by the thriving fishing industry, making a substantial contribution to the island's economy. Beyond direct fishing operations, the industry has sparked auxiliary interests, such as trade activities involving the processing of catches through cutting, cleaning, smoking, drying, or canning fish (Cheng & Morgan, 1987). Notably, Migingo Island has witnessed a transformation from poverty to prosperity, with numerous Ugandans and Kenyans engaged in fishing trade, some holding influential connections with their respective home governments. The presence of a small group of "insiders" (Shively, 2001) in the dispute has allowed the Ugandan government to gather precise information about conditions on the island, influencing decisions favoring their fishermen. Traditionally, trade in Lake Victoria has been closely tied to fishing along its shores and islands (Ochieng', 1974).

The traders, including fishmongers and agents, are involved in diverse trading activities, fostering economic cooperation and creating an environment of peace and tranquility. This aligns with the principles of Adam Smith, who advocates for state cooperation in trade for mutual economic benefits. Harmonious trade is seen as a catalyst for improving living standards and earning more foreign currency for both Kenya and Uganda. In the era of globalization, the need for nations to collaborate with neighbors is emphasized, accelerating the peace-building process based on interdependence principles. This resonates with liberal theory, which advocates for market mechanisms to allocate resources, determine prices, and facilitate economic exchanges, emphasizing that individual freedom and market choices lead to optimal outcomes.

The islanders on Migingo have developed methods to preserve their catch, utilizing both traditional techniques like salting, sun drying, and smoking, as well as modern methods involving the use of ice blocks. Ice blocks are transported daily from the mainland, with fishermen purchasing them from traders. Additionally, firewood for smoking is sourced from Ugandan forests, supplemented at times by the preparation of charcoal (MMUST Conference, 2012). This multifaceted approach to fishing and trade reflects the resilience and adaptability of Migingo Island's economic activities.

The agricultural products on Migingo Island primarily originate from Nyadhiwa and Muhuru Bay. In accordance with the principles of liberalism, citizens enjoy the freedom to exercise their basic rights, including the liberty to choose their trading partners. Kenyan traders arrive on Migingo Island daily, bringing agricultural products and various manufactured goods. Uganda emerges as a significant consumer of Kenyan manufactured products, playing a pivotal role as the primary market for Kenyan goods in the East African region. The traded goods encompass a diverse range, including cereals like millet, sorghum, and maize, prepared foodstuffs, domestic

appliances, sugar, beer, textiles, petroleum products, detergents, and steel. Traders predominantly hail from Kenya, contributing to the dynamic economic exchanges between the two nations.

The foodstuffs and shop items are double the price compared to their respective prices on Kenya's mainland business centers. Aisha while interrogated by this study posited that:

Half a liter Mineral water bottle was being sold at one hundred shillings on the island while the same quantity was been sold at fifty shillings on the main lands of Muhuru. There is high circulation of money because of the fishing industry. The prices of consumables fluctuate, as they are not regulated. The owners of hotels and kiosks enjoy the monopoly. The bargaining power of the fishermen it was very low as they think is a waste of time and they have enough money (Respondent C).

Aisha's sentiments were supported by Otieno who informed this study that:

There are several retail shops on the island which are run by individuals in Migingo. Traders have established shops on the island that serve the islanders with consumables coming from Kenyan beaches which are nearer to the island is (Respondent E).

Additionally, another respondent confirmed to the study that the currency in use on Migingo Island is the Kenyan shilling. This is primarily due to the majority of residents being Kenyan, and the absence of banks on the island for currency conversion among the different East African countries (KNA/PC/3/77). Long-term residents who have spent over fourteen years on Migingo Island own rental houses that prove to be lucrative (Respondent I). The rental houses, functioning as guest rooms, consistently remain occupied as fishermen operate on a fortnightly basis. Upon the arrival of a new group of fishermen, they often engage friends to reserve rooms for them prior to their arrival (Respondent I). This aligns with Ochieng's perspective, emphasizing that economic and commercial activities flourish in an atmosphere of peace (Ochieng', 1993). However, the lack of an official declaration of Migingo Island's location results in the absence of taxation on goods brought to the islanders. Environmental laws remain lax, and fishing operations continue without stringent regulations (Ochieng, 1993).

The laxity in environmental laws is attributed to the failure of any East African state to recognize the necessity of moving in that direction. According to a former councillor in Homa Bay, the wealth found on Migingo Island serves as a compelling reason to stay on the island regardless of the prevailing situation (Respondent C). This sentiment is echoed by Ross, who notes that reports circulated indicating that the island's surroundings yield fishermen three to four times more fish in a day than what their shoreline-based counterparts earn in a month (Ross, 2017). The diplomatic clash has spurred development in the transport sector, as an increasing number of people aspire to live and trade on Migingo Island. This shift has facilitated the transition from traditional sailing boats to water choppers and water buses (See Plate 1).



Plate 1
Water bus on Lake Victoria

In addition to providing human food, fish and their by-products play a crucial role in various industries. The fish wastes generated by the canneries are utilized to produce fishmeal, glue, oil, and fertilizers. Fish is a versatile resource used in the manufacturing of soap, margarine, paints, ink, linoleum, wax, and ambergris, which are essential components in cosmetics and perfumes (Cheng & Morgan, 1987). The significance of the Nile-perch extends beyond its fillets; the plant also generates frames (skeletons), fish maws (bladders), fish oil, and skins for diverse markets. As discussed with another respondent, one respondent highlighted that, due to a decline in quality, even the frames (skeletons) of Nile Perch from the island, which were previously sold, processed, and consumed locally, are now being processed into fish meal in Nairobi (Respondent F, 2018). This transformation can be attributed to the existence of a ready market at the national level.

4.3 Challenges

4.3.1 Population Growth

The reputation of Migingo Island as a lucrative fishing ground has led to rapid population growth, transforming the islet into a micro slum. Overcrowded mabati structures compromise hygiene conditions, with minimal space between houses. The limited infrastructure includes only five toilets serving the entire population of over a thousand residents, with fees attached for their usage to cover maintenance costs. The study uncovered significant challenges on Migingo Island, notably the inadequate usage of available pit latrine facilities by long-term residents. The accumulation of human refuse, domestic waste, and empty drinking water bottles has led to a severe degradation of hygiene conditions on the island. Moreover, it was revealed that individuals lacking the financial means to pay for toilet usage resort to using the lake. The limited number of toilets to accommodate the burgeoning population has compelled some islanders to seek hidden areas to address their basic sanitary needs, further exacerbating the challenges related to sanitation and waste management on Migingo Island. From the preceding findings, a respondent interviewed by the study retorted that:

The hygiene situation on Migingo Island is still wanting. To correct this, there is cleaning of the whole of Migingo Island every Monday morning since 2016 (Respondent A, 2018).

Nyadebe added that, the Ugandan security forces make the announcement by five o'clock and they ensure that each and every person has left his/her house to do the cleaning. They do the supervision; unfortunately, those who do not comply are handled mercilessly. This causes water and environmental pollution. This has sharply affected the marine life.

4.3.2 Lack of learning institution

Despite the overarching goal of education to foster literacy for human development (UNESCO, 2013), Migingo Island lacks a single learning institution. As per the insights shared by Ongaro, the sub-chief of Migingo Island in Kenya expressed a desire to establish an Early Childhood Development Centre (ECDE) in 2011, but the classes failed to materialize (Ongaro, O.I, 2018). This vision aimed to address the perspectives of Bannon and Collier, who argued that natural resources, despite their wealth, can paradoxically weaken governments, diminishing their capacity to resolve social conflicts and provide essential public goods such as health and education (Bannon and Collier, 2003). According to Ongaro, the classes were halted by the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) because raising the Kenyan flag twice a week, as mandated by the constitution for any Kenyan school, was deemed objectionable. This move contradicted the principles of Hyman (1975), who emphasized that all children should have access to early education and free primary education. The UPDF's oversight on Kenya's sovereign right to raise its flag aligns with power theory, acknowledging that those in power wield influence over norms, values, and cultural practices, thereby shaping social life and impacting individual perceptions and choices.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, the overlapping territorial claims of Kenya and Uganda have a significant impact on the socio-economic environment of Migingo Island, which is intricately influenced by the island's one-of-a-kind geopolitical predicament. Significant demographic shifts as well as the development of a community culture that is uniquely their own have been brought about as a direct result of the economic activities that are predominantly oriented around fishing on the island. A vacuum in governance has been established as a result of the absence of clear jurisdictional control exercised by neighboring countries, which has contributed to ongoing territorial tensions. The research, which

was based on liberalism and theories of political power, sheds light on the ways in which power dynamics and individual rights influence the socio-economic dynamics of the island.

Not only has the fishing industry, a key economic driver, contributed to the islanders' ability to make a living for themselves, but it has also been instrumental in fostering trade and economic cooperation between Kenya and Uganda. This is consistent with the tenets of liberalism, which place an emphasis on the role of market mechanisms in the allocation of resources and the conduct of economic transactions. However, the report also highlighted concerns, such as overpopulation, issues with cleanliness, and the negative impact that informal leisure activities have had on the well-being of island residents.

On top of that, there are obstacles to human growth on the island of Migingo due to the absence of official educational institutions and the restricted availability of healthcare facilities. The study emphasizes the relevance of incorporating grassroots stakeholders in dispute resolution and development projects, highlighting the necessity of finding solutions to these problems that are both community-driven and open to the participation of all members of the community.

In light of these difficulties, Migingo Island continues to be a microcosm of larger geopolitical issues. This is because the island reflects the intricacies of managing transboundary resources as well as the socio-economic ramifications for the communities who are involved. It is essential to pursue diplomatic means of conflict resolution in order to promote both stability and sustainable development. Some examples of diplomatic means of conflict resolution include negotiation, conversation, mediation, and arbitration. Understanding the island's socioeconomic dynamics gives vital insights for policymakers, local communities, and regional leaders working towards enduring solutions in Migingo and related places as the island continues to change.

5.2 Recommendations

Migingo Island's socio-economic challenges, influenced by overlapping territorial claims between Kenya and Uganda, necessitate critical recommendations. Clear governance and jurisdiction agreements should be established to alleviate tensions. Investment in basic services like education and healthcare is essential for human development. Involving local stakeholders in community-driven solutions and promoting diplomatic conflict resolution will help foster stability and sustainable development. Addressing these issues is vital for the well-being of Migingo Island and its residents, while also reflecting larger geopolitical concerns.

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