



Next-Generation Leaders  
for Global Good

Experience Abroad - Reflection

Bhavana Akilan

KULE Foundation International

Leadership-in-Action Project

Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship

1 September 2024



UNIVERSITY OF  
TORONTO

## **Acknowledgement**

This Leadership-in-Action Project *took a village* to reach fruition.

I extend my deepest sense of gratitude to KULE Foundation International for collaborating with me on this project. My supervisor, Geoffrey Tindyebwa, Director of KULE has been the wind beneath my wings. I thank Geoffrey for meeting with me for countless hours in the last several months to help me at every step of ideation, development, and execution. I am grateful to David Njoroge, Chairman of KULE, and Job Macharia, Manager at Roko 20 Academy, for being my hosts and local guardians.

Last but not the least, I would like to thank Shraddha Prasad, Yvonne Yang, Tanya Udartseva and Tyler Thom for their consistent and ongoing support throughout my Laidlaw journey!

**LiA Project Title:** Championing Local Health in Kenya - An Immersive Cultural Experience to Qualitatively Understand Healthcare Experiences Through Art

**LiA Partner Organization:** KULE Foundation International

**LiA Location:** Murang'a, Kenya

## **Language**

### Initial Thoughts

Being cognizant of the fact that learning the local language is necessary to build meaningful connections with individuals in the community, I started learning Swahili on the Duolingo app. With my learning rate being unsatisfactory, I met with one of my Professors who has worked with such communities before. She mentioned that while preparation is very useful, the best way to learn a language is by living with it. I was afraid that I might not learn enough to interview local residents on my own. I brought this up to my supervisor at the non-profit, who mentioned that he will arrange for someone to be my translator for long conversations that I planned to have with women for the last phase of my project.

### Experience

The day I landed, I felt very discouraged by my lack of knowledge on Swahili. I went online to learn about the history of the language as well as some basic phrases that I wrote down and continued to practice whenever I met a local. When I met and worked with the people of Mukang'u the first two weeks, they were very encouraging of my efforts to learn the language.

They also taught me basic phrases used as greetings in Kikuyu. My attempts served as a great ice breaker and undoubtedly opened up doors in the context of building a rapport with the people.

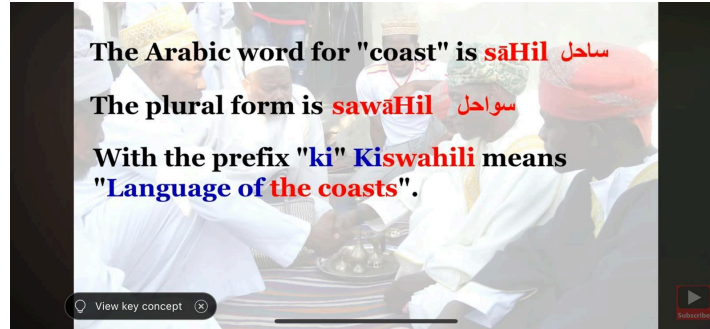
### Challenges

It was my first time learning a language with a grammatical structure and syntax as that of Swahili. Moreover, I was worried about making mistakes or coming across as someone trying to appropriate the culture. Focusing on the values of openness and curiosity helped me overcome my inhibitions.

### Anecdote

In the last phase of my project, I was set to interview women in Mukangu village and Kambirwa village to gain insight into their views on mental health. While I did have someone to translate the questions I had about such a sensitive topic, I wanted to connect personally with each of them. Merely saying “Habari” (greeting in Swahili) and “Wi mwega” (greeting in Kikuyu) instantly made the women happy and bridged the gap between us a little bit.

I learnt that this was not just a one-way attempt. Some students that I met at different schools were curious about the languages I knew and insisted on learning how to greet in Tamil and Hindi (my native languages). Such bidirectional efforts built the foundation for what then blossomed into beautiful relationships.



## Food

### Initial Thoughts

Before traveling to Kenya, I was unsure if I would like the food I might get there, prompting me to pack some instant food and snacks to take with me. I had also read about some local food causing health issues for those not from the region, so I was hesitant at first when it came to trying local cuisines.

### Experience

I had the pleasure of trying various local staples, such as Ugali, Githeri, Chapati, Mukimo, Pilau, Masala Fries, Roasted Corn and many more. As I learnt more about the history of the region, it was interesting to see the Arabic influences on Kenyan food, similar to the former's influences on Indian food. This revelation also led to interesting conversations that I had with the villagers and the students, leading to sharing of cultural knowledge and subsequently transcending cultural barriers.

### Challenges

Since I was not used to this type of food, having them every day for six weeks was not an easy task. I resided in the villages for the entirety of my LiA, where it was customary to add only salt and no spices to food. While it was a major adjustment for me, I reminded myself that this was for a brief period of time and that this was an important cultural experience.

### Anecdote

When I stayed at the house of the non-profit's Chairman, I tried to help out in the kitchen whenever I could. During one such incident, I noticed that they always boiled water in a large utensil whenever they cooked. When asked about it, I was told that this is a common practice in most Kenyan households wherein this water is supposed to help make tea or coffee for unannounced visitors, or be used for other cooking purposes. This conversation shed light on the hospitable nature of this community.

When I was working with some middle-aged men in the villages, I asked them if any of them cooked. Most, if not all, mentioned that women are the ones who cook in Kenyan households. I instantly thought that it was very patriarchal, but held myself back from saying anything, as I wanted to adopt a lens of cultural relativism instead of an ethnocentric one.



## **Event**

### Experience

I had the pleasure of attending a local community event, one where a man's family went to his fiancée's house to discuss the numeration of the "bride prize", money that the man's family has to pay his fiancée's family in order to marry her. The community being staunchly Christian, the event that began with lunch was then followed by a speech by the community Pastor. I was asked to introduce myself, as I was an outsider. Upon hearing that I was 20 and unmarried, I was looked down upon. This was followed with a number of jokes about me possibly marrying one of the men there.

While this experience made me very uncomfortable, I had to be mindful of the fact that "humor" and its extent of acceptance varies from culture to culture. I had to remind myself that it was considered disrespectful to set boundaries in that culture, especially with elders. Thus, I coped with this by opening up to fellow Laidlaw scholars who are dear friends. Through this experience, I learnt the importance of navigating and regulating one's thoughts and feelings in the context of a different culture.

## **People**

### Initial Thoughts

As someone who has not worked with an East African community before, I was unsure about what to expect. When discussing the specifics of my project with the women of the

community on a call with my supervisor at the NGO, I was told about the backgrounds of domestic violence and substance abuse that many women come from. This led to me forming preconceived notions about the people, along the lines of them being reserved and uninterested in conversing.

### Experience

The reality of my experience was entirely different from what I initially thought. The people in the village were extremely welcoming and kind. They also asked questions about me, where I am from, what I do and so on. While I was hesitant to ask the same questions back to them in fear of triggering a fight-or-flight response, I was happy to notice how comfortable they made me feel.

### Challenges

In many settings, I was asked either by the villagers or the students in different schools to give them money, food or an object of mine to help them remember me. It was challenging to navigate this situation. It tapped into my difficulties with saying no to people, as well as the dynamic that existed between us. I discussed this with my supervisor, who told me that a simple sentence “no, this is personal to me” is a simple yet powerful way to subtly set a boundary.

### Anecdote

One interesting interaction with the NGO’s chairman comes to mind. In the first two weeks, we built a bus stop with the locals of Mukangu village. It was made from logs obtained from surrounding areas. After the bus stop was constructed, I asked the Chairman if we would be

painting it. He told me, “there is no need for that”. This brief conversation was a huge privilege check for me. It reinforced the difference between “wants” and “needs”.

Overall, my entire Leadership-in-Action project was extremely enriching and rewarding. While I initially thought that I would be teaching the students or bringing in insights for the villagers, it was me who learnt the most from the countless interactions I had. This was certainly an intense yet extremely beautiful experience that I will remember forever. Asante Sana, Kenya!