

# 1 *Introduction*

Just around the corner from the noise and congestion of the central bus terminal in Mombasa, there is a maze of narrow streets where shoe polishers, cobblers and other small-scale tradesmen set up stands. Amidst these streets, there is a corner where three roads converge and create a clearing large enough to accommodate a bigger gathering. Anywhere from 10 to more than 100 people, mostly men, gather at this corner, a few sitting on makeshift wooden benches, but most standing. On weekdays, there are always at least a few men present, leaning against the wall of the derelict hotel building behind them. For most of the day they are quiet, as if waiting for something. What they seem to be waiting for is the early evening, when more men congregate as they finish their daily activities. With more people gathered, debate begins about whatever issues occupied the local and national news that day.

Periodically, discussion comes alive. One such day in early March 2014, approximately fifty to sixty men gather by mid-afternoon, eager to discuss events that had taken place the day before at Kasarani Stadium in Nairobi, where the national political party, the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), was holding its delegates' conference. There is a sense of common interest among the men who are here. All seem eager to discuss a violent disruption that had taken place at the party elections as men dressed in black overturned ballot boxes during the live-televised party elections. Discussion indicates the event is up for interpretation. People question who is responsible, and debate why someone might have instigated the violence. One regular participant, a man who identifies as coastal, Muslim and a civic educator, chairs the debate. Even with an acting chair, another man dominates the discussion, fielding questions and comments from others. This man is a self-described political analyst. Others address him in this way. He speaks with a confidence of possessing insider knowledge on the conference events. Other individuals attract attention from the group through charisma or

expertise. Some defend their perspectives by appealing to an assumed common knowledge. Who belongs – within the gathering and within ODM – is called into question. Arguments tend to fall along particular lines, which attribute the violence to individual leaders' and partisan interests. Most suggest powerful individuals in the governing Jubilee Coalition caused the chaotic events, who were seeking to disrupt and discredit ODM as the main opposition party. Others raise the possibility that violence was orchestrated by powerful individuals in ODM who feared the outcome of the elections would disfavour them. Gradually, men leave and discussion shifts focus. The debate remains unresolved.

This gathering parallels similar, often smaller, gatherings for political discussion dotted throughout Mombasa, which materialise on a daily basis in open clearings on the roadside, in informal settlements, in schoolyards and by bus stages. One such gathering forms every evening next to a *matatu* (mini-bus) stage near the Kongowea market. Around 5:00pm, the first individuals to arrive arrange some benches into a square on a piece of unoccupied privately owned land. A woman passes through selling cups of *uje* (porridge) to the men who are seated, and an adjacent small cafe sells groundnuts and spiced Swahili coffee. As participants converge, they begin to discuss issues in the news. One particular week in March 2014, discussion is dominated by conflicting views on government salaries. A government announcement that the president and other key figures will take a pay cut becomes the topic of a more formal debate, which is chaired by a *de facto* speaker. One older man, who identifies with the Luo ethnic group, argues that salaries are too high. Others write off his comment. One man calls him a heckler, and another describes him as 'old' and a 'fool'. These men claim that they have expertise in finance and should have the floor to speak. One asserts, 'Let us talk about this. Ask us and do not Google.'<sup>1</sup> We are here for civic education. This is how we have always done it.'

As discussion progresses, some continue to make soft jibes at others by highlighting their own education or training. The accumulation of discrediting remarks upsets the man who had earlier been written off as a heckler, old and a fool. He stands up and proclaims loudly, 'I am not stupid! [He is] saying I am stupid!' He makes one more attempt to

<sup>1</sup> Referring to the Google.com search platform.

explain his view on the issue of salaries before he walks out, visibly upset and remarking again, 'They are saying I am stupid.'

As this man exits, the chairman tells those who remain, 'We are not here to make noise.' He reasons elected leaders – citing by name the area Governor and Member of Parliament (MP) – could shut the gathering down. A vote is taken about how to proceed. Most raise their hands to support continuing the discussion on more tempered terms. Discussion carries on. Some justify salaries based on the expectation that an MP must give out handouts. Another suggests the problem is the number and cost of government commissions. I am asked about MP salaries in the countries that I originate from.

At 6:50pm one man disrupts the proceedings by bringing out a television set, which had been given to the group so they could watch the evening news. The acting chairman motions for the television to be kept off until exactly 7:00pm. At 7:00pm he formally ends the session, thereby preserving an order to the discussion. As the news broadcast commences, the man who had left returns. He laughs a little as he quietly restates his perspective to me; his sense of affront appears to be abating.

These routine but relatively informal gatherings for political discussion also take place in the increasingly networked world of mobile phones and social media, which has rapidly expanded in Kenya since the early 2000s. One day in April 2014, while waiting for debate to commence at the gathering near Kongowea market, a young man sitting next to me looks up from his phone and makes a comment to me about a female political activist in Mombasa who had been arrested earlier that day.<sup>2</sup> The mobile Facebook interface sharing this news story is still visible on his phone. Earlier that day, Suleiman Shahbal, a businessman and local politician, had posted about this arrest;<sup>3</sup> Shahbal was quickly reposted by others.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Observation at the *bunge* at Karama, 27 April 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Suleiman Shahbal contested for the Mombasa governorship in 2013 and 2017, coming second in number of votes in both.

<sup>4</sup> The post read: 'Mama Ambasa and her team of Municipal Council workers leaders were jailed for one year on Friday. Their crime? Illegal dumping! In reality it is because they led a strike demanding their rights. They had not been paid for months while leaders were gallivanting all over the world in expensive trips at our expense. I applaud their courage. We will help them fight all the way to the Supreme Court to preserve their right to demonstrate. We will not let them rot in Jail. Senator Emma Mbura has offered to pay their fines. I say to you Mama

For the man sitting next to me, Facebook is more than a personal networking tool. In January 2014 he was part of a small group of friends who created a public Facebook group to discuss politics. The Facebook group mimicked the structure of a parliament. Formed first with 200 of their Facebook acquaintances, the group grew to more than 1,000 members within six months. Discussion in this group becomes animated around current affairs and politics, including religious-linked violence, electoral competition and politicians' performances. This online public space seems to break free of the forms of recognition that dominate physical gatherings. A person's physical appearance, verbal eloquence, personal stature, gender, age or other physical and audible identifiers do not necessarily dictate whether or not they attract attention. Individuals can continually revise their online profiles and claim new titles such as princess, prince, *mzee* (elder) or honourable. Who speaks and who is heard become linked to written prose, the frequency of a user's contributions or the ability to provoke controversy. Discussion is still informed by hints of participants' wider positionality. Suspicions are raised in the discussion about participants' political, personal and partisan networks. These suspicions are partially informed by experiences on the ground. Some who speak online also inhabit the same residential areas of the city or participate in the same partisan networks, as friends, acquaintances and competitors.

### 1.1 Public Discussion and Shared Imaginaries in Mombasa

Reflected in these three spaces of debate, public discussion ebbs and flows as part of everyday routines in Mombasa. Each point where it convenes has particularities. There is the Facebook group, where virtual user profiles allow participants to easily alter how they appear. This contrasts with the gathering in the Central Business District (CBD), where insider knowledge and charisma attract attention. This differs again from the gathering near the market, where discussion is

Emma that we will share this with you 50/50! Let no man think that the people of Mombasa can ever be cowed !' (recorded 28 April 2014 at 8:54 EAT). This post appeared on the public Facebook page for Hon. Suleiman Shahbal on 27 April 2014. It was reposted identically on Mombasa County Government Watch's public Facebook page the same day, with the additional heading, 'MESSAGE FROM Hon. Suleiman Shahbal'.

moderated by a preselected speaker and operates through predictable proceedings. Still, these diverse moments suggest patterns in the topics and practices of public discussion. Across the gatherings, it seems of no consequence for someone to comment on a politician's speech or behaviour. Public discussion easily falls into refrains about protracted grievance and division in relation to the county or national government. This mirrors a wider sense of dissatisfaction in Kenya with the political status quo, as well as an interest in debating the reasons for the current situation (Diepeveen, 2010).

Everyday discussions of politics in Kenya are already phenomena of scholarly interest, particularly amidst the push for multiparty democracy and constitutional change through the 1990s and into the twenty-first century (Diepeveen, 2010, 2019; Gachihi, 2014a, 2014b; Haugerud, 1995; Ogola, 2011). Yet the sheer scope and diversity of spaces of public discussion appear unique to the contemporary moment, with its underpinnings in rising social media access and use. There was a notable shift in the speed and amount of broadband accessible in Kenya in 2009, with Kenya's first connection to international undersea fibre optic cables.<sup>5</sup> By 2013, mobile phone services and internet service providers (ISPs) were being supplied through four mobile operators.<sup>6</sup> As of 2017, Kenya's internet penetration was estimated to be 81.8 per cent (31 March), with 5.5 million Facebook subscribers in 2016 (30 June).<sup>7</sup>

There is a growing number of Kenyan citizen journalists, bloggers and commentators on Twitter, a social media platform that, at the time of fieldwork, allowed for information to be shared through 140-character posts. Often hashtags have been used to link comments to particular issues and have contributed to a wider political commentary (Ogola, 2015; Tully & Ekdale, 2014). In Mombasa, the frequency and diversity of groups, pages and commentary about Mombasa politics on Facebook, as well as the expanding use of Twitter and instant messaging services such as WhatsApp and Telegram, indicated an increasingly vibrant public sphere. Virtual channels expanded when

<sup>5</sup> In 2014, four cables were in operation: TEAMS 5, Seacom, EASSy and the Lower Indian Ocean Network (Lion2).

<sup>6</sup> The four mobile operators and also Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Kenya were Safaricom Kenya, Airtel Networks Kenya, Telkom Kenya (Orange) and Essar Telkom Kenya (Yu).

<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from [www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm](http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm) on 25 August 2017.

and from where people could engage. Information was shared almost instantaneously with individuals connected through networks, as opposed to necessarily occupying the same place. The nature and scope of these diverse and dynamic public discussions seem to make them increasingly challenging to even attempt to grasp.

The diverse moments in Mombasa that give rise to a sense of a public sphere – in other words, something that ‘exists uniquely in, through, and for talk’ (Calhoun, 2002, p. 160) – indicate this to be a varied and dynamic phenomenon. Certain features of public discussion and the communication media through which they take place jar with past practices. What defines liminal spaces is changing. A place or a person that is ‘distant’ or ‘remote’ is now that which is excluded in both networked and physical terms. How the state comes to know the people it seeks to rule is also shifting, as they increasingly have access to data generated through digital footprints. Beyond Kenya, this has brought concerns about new forms of surveillance and control, particularly in states with existing authoritarian tendencies (Gagliardone, 2016; Lamoureaux & Sureau, 2019). Equally, there has been a sense that new forms of digital and networked media have opened up new and uncontrollable means of widespread communication that cannot be pulled back (Bosch, 2016; Castells, 2012; Rotberg & Aker, 2013; Tully & Ekdale, 2014). Citizens have at their disposal an increasingly diverse array of technologies through which to access, contend with and produce information.

The diversity and dynamism of spaces of public discussion contrast with the intractability of certain shared repertoires of difference and commonality in postcolonial Kenyan politics. Debates over citizen–state relations have continually fallen along lines that are based on ethno-regional identities, and clientelist relations, and are zero sum (Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002; Branch, Cheeseman & Gardner, 2010; Cheeseman et al., 2019; Mueller, 2008). Ethnicity has persisted as a defining line in political debates through changes in national leadership (in 2002 and 2013), the governing parties (in 2002) and even the Constitution (in 2010). In 2017, any indication that the 2010 Constitution of Kenya, which introduced a new level of devolved government, might have mitigated the ethnic dimension of political competition seemed to fade with a political impasse following the Supreme Court’s annulment of the presidential election. The two main presidential contenders were the sons of independence leaders;

this brought past divisions and personalised politics to the fore of public debate.<sup>8</sup> The rerun was marked by the sharpening of public debates along personal and ethnic lines. Divisions were eventually resolved through a personal agreement between the two party leaders (Cheeseman et al., 2019). Even media coverage of both sides of the presidential divide linked their positions to ethnicity, and a commitment to electing one of someone's 'own'.<sup>9</sup>

Mombasa County was strongly positioned on one side of the divide. Throughout the 2010s, the Mombasa electorate showed strong support for ODM candidates.<sup>10</sup> National political divisions took on local dimensions, with local identities, histories and narratives pushing or pulling individuals towards the national opposition, ODM. The city is diverse, with one-third of residents in Mombasa identifying with ethnic groups originating from outside of the coastal region, and 40 per cent identifying as Muslims and 60 per cent as Christians in 2013 (Wolf, Muthoka & Ireri, 2013). Ideas of ethnic division have surfaced in campaigns for coastal secession. They divided residents into those

<sup>8</sup> Kamau, J. (2017). Raila Odinga, Uhuru Kenyatta walking in their fathers' steps. *Daily Nation*, 1 November. Retrieved from [www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Raila-Uhuru-walking-fathers-footsteps/1064-4165880-pi0jvs/index.html](http://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Raila-Uhuru-walking-fathers-footsteps/1064-4165880-pi0jvs/index.html) on 25 March 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Mohamed, H. (2017). Kenyan elections: The ethnicity factor. *Al Jazeera*, 6 August. Retrieved from [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/kenyan-elections-ethnicity-factor-170806081143385.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/kenyan-elections-ethnicity-factor-170806081143385.html) on 23 March 2018.

Burke (2017). Kenya election: government accused of 'genocide' against ethnic minorities. *The Guardian*, 27 October. Retrieved from [www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/27/kenya-election-less-than-half-of-those-eligible-thought-to-have-voted](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/27/kenya-election-less-than-half-of-those-eligible-thought-to-have-voted) on 23 March 2018. Kimenyi (2013). Kenya's Elections: Implications of Ethnic Rivalries and International Intervention, Op-ed. *Brookings*, 12 February. Retrieved from [www.brookings.edu/opinions/kenyas-elections-implications-of-ethnic-rivalries-and-international-intervention/](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/kenyas-elections-implications-of-ethnic-rivalries-and-international-intervention/) on 23 March 2018.

In 2013, the ODM gubernatorial candidate, Ali Hassan Joho, was elected as Governor of Mombasa. All ward-level representatives were won by ODM, which also secured four out of six MP positions. Elected posts not secured by ODM candidates, specifically the Senator of Mombasa and MPs for Jomvu and Nyali constituencies, went to individuals contesting with its coalition partner, the Wiper Democratic Movement. ODM again dominated in 2017, with the incumbent Joho elected as governor.

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who are identified as *wapwani*, people of the Coast, and those labelled as outsiders (Willis & Chome, 2014), sometimes further separating *wapwani* into Arab, Swahili and Mijikenda (Willis & Gona, 2013). Ethno-regional differences have been complicated by divisions along financial and business lines (Willis & Chome, 2014, p. 122). Key businessmen have been suspected to fund politicians and drive local competition. Religious differences have further shaped the terms of political discourse in Mombasa. There has been a shared sense of marginalisation among Kenyan Muslims by a national government premised upon Christian law and by national politicians professing to be practising Christians (Kresse, 2018; Mwakimako & Willis, 2014). Kenya's participation in a global 'war on terrorism' and its offensive in Somalia since 2011 have reinforced religious disadvantage (Lind et al., 2015; Prestholdt, 2011). Conversely, attacks by Al Shabaab within Kenya have fed murmurings of disadvantage locally among Christians.

In practice, public life in Kenya cannot be reduced to static ethno-regional, religious and financial divides. Taking ethnicity as an example, John Lonsdale's (1994) concept of moral ethnicity or Stephen Ndegwa's (1997) discussion of dual citizenship highlight how ethnicity functions in multiple ways in Kenya, as the basis for collective responsibility and inter-group competition. The politicisation of ethnicity is the result of efforts and structures to make it so. This can be dated to the British colonial state's attempts to order people and territory, the organisation of colonial resistance around district and cultural lines (Anderson, 2005), and post-independence efforts by President Jomo Kenyatta's government to establish legitimacy (Muigai, 2004). In independent Kenya, to be Luo, Luhya or Mijikenda, or Christian or Muslim, seems unavoidable in political debates. Whether scholarly or popular literature, it has become almost impossible not to mention identity-based divisions when writing about Kenyan politics. This has given rise to a situation where discussion of political differences in Kenya does not easily progress without mention of the politicisation of ethnicity (e.g., Bedasso, 2017; Cheeseman & Larmer, 2015; Cheeseman et al., 2019; Gadjanova, 2017; Lynch, 2006, 2011).<sup>11</sup> Amidst such constancy, we must ask, why do such political repertoires

<sup>11</sup> This narrative is repeated in the media sector; see, for example, Nyambura, Z. (2017). In Kenya, politics split on ethnic divide. *DW*, 26 October. Retrieved from <http://p.dw.com/p/2X6Ta> on 27 March 2018.

dominate? Are there any opportunities amidst the diverse and changing spaces of public debate in Kenya to shift how people make sense of political difference?

This book interrogates the potential for change in shared imaginaries through public talk in Mombasa. It goes to the places where politics is discussed in everyday life: ‘publics’ where discussion occurs among strangers in everyday life, where people articulate and contest forms of belonging and attempt to persuade others of their views. The people’s parliaments depicted at the beginning of this book are an opportunity to explore the significance of public discussion in varied spaces. Gatherings claiming the name of *bunge* (parliament) materialise daily in a variety of forms. This includes youth parliaments, which usually have defined membership, convened through SMS messages, and meet in social halls and conference venues. More ubiquitous and informal than the youth parliaments, people’s parliaments take the form of ‘street parliaments’. Here, men routinely gather at street corners, bus stages and shoe polishers to discuss issues of shared concern; often they discuss government and partisan politics, but sometimes religion, business and culture. Participants range in age from their late twenties to sixties, and include those who are unemployed, retired and employed. Even more amorphous are the groups on social media, whose founders also claim the name of a people’s or youth parliament and seek to create a space for open debate and dialogue about public concerns from Mombasa. This dynamism and diversity of public discussion in Mombasa add to the puzzle of collective imaginaries in Kenya. Why, if public debate is active, varied and open, do there not appear to be obvious changes in the terms of debate?

## 1.2 Conceptualising Publics from Africa

There are two broad approaches in Africanist political scholarship to making sense of everyday politics on the continent, which seek to avoid subjecting publics in Africa to normative expectations from elsewhere. Some scholars operate within the framework of African political thought to develop emic conceptualisations of politics. Others begin descriptively, aiming to appreciate forms of everyday politics in their own right, avoiding normative questions. Practically, scholars cut across these two agendas; theory unavoidably emerges from ‘plain empirical realities’ (Said, 1983, p. 5). Still, distinguishing between the

two helps to map out the knowledge landscape to which this book contributes, and locate an opportunity within these two approaches to bring descriptive scholarship into conversation with normative theory in order to better understand when and how publics might disrupt past shared imaginaries in Kenya.

### *1.2.1 Publics in African Political Thought*

Concerned to break away from western-based political ideas, Africanist scholars have sought to construct political concepts from African histories and intellectual traditions. While the boundaries and substance of African political thought remain a source of debate,<sup>12</sup> broadly, scholars conceptualising the nature and significance of public talk in Africa have been guided by two aims: first, revealing public talk for what it is on the continent and, second, explaining how it came to be this way. Looking from within Africa, the boundaries of the political thought expand to give greater scope to consider the entangling of politics with popular culture (Barber, 1997, 2018), and invisible and spiritual worlds (Ellis & ter Haar, 2004). Histories are invoked to explain the distinctiveness of publics. The colonial legacy looms large, with attention to how it shaped dominant mentalities of rule, and why and how they continue to be reproduced through ongoing public performance. The intractability of forms of rule, similar to the situation identified in Kenya, is a central theme.

Ideas of publics in Africa begin with Peter Ekeh, who, before the translation of Habermas' work into English, examined the nature of public life in postcolonial Africa. He argues the colonial experience is necessary to explain its configuration (1975). Ekeh identifies a disjuncture between the moral foundations of a 'public' and a 'private' realm on the continent, resulting in two publics defined by distinct moralities: one civic and one primordial. This duality, he

<sup>12</sup> What exactly constitutes African political thought, and its boundaries, is debated. Scholars interpret this differently: whether it refers to being an African in the skill of political philosophy, or to be concerned with realities of places on the continent (Tangwa, 2017), or to engage with concepts that are deemed to have come from 'African' history (Masolo, 2017). The constructed nature of the idea of Africa itself contributes to this ambiguity. What exactly are the boundaries and tenets of African political thought are unclear. Further, arguably, a 'pure' African political thought is an elusive endeavour given the global interconnectedness in training of academics.

argues, was rooted in colonial structures, which were reproduced through transitions to independence.

Ekeh has been a reference point for subsequent conceptualisations of a public sphere from Africa. Eghosa E. Osaghae (2006) traces Ekeh's bifurcated public sphere through structural adjustment, democratisation and globalisation in the 1980s and 1990s. Browne Onuoha (2014) is more reserved about the continued explanatory power of Ekeh's bifurcated public sphere, identifying how the moralities of the civic and primordial publics entwine over time, affected by external factors. Olatunde Bayo Lawuyi (2012) suggests a changed divide in the Nigerian postcolonial state, dividing it into sceptical and moral publics, each with distinct relationships to the state and citizen. Wale Adebani (2017) brings Ekeh's work in conversation with Foucault's governmentality to make sense of how mentalities of rule become entrenched, again explaining later divisions in public life through contradictions of colonialism.

Alongside Ekeh, Achille Mbembe (2001) provides a second basis from which to conceptualise publics in Africa, one that again ties contemporary forms to a colonial legacy, but focuses on the role of public performance. For Mbembe, postcolonial rule has become defined by scarcity, uncertainty and inertia. It is reproduced through performances of conviviality between rulers and the masses. As rulers put themselves on show, and as these performances are internalised and ridiculed by subjects, both subjects and rulers become powerless to challenge the master code. Mikael Karlström (2003) accepts Mbembe's focus on public performance as the place where rule is reproduced but challenges the disabling nature of Mbembe's conceptualisation. He suggests that ordinary people gain leverage in their ridiculing by mobilising local discourses. Karlström argues that some of the limits in Mbembe's view lie in his use of Bakhtin's ideas about carnival and power, and also argues that a more contextualised view of Bakhtin allows for the recognition of the power of ridiculing publics in Africa.

Theophile Ambadiang (2010) also builds from Mbembe and explores dynamics of conviviality in public discussion in Africa. His historical situation of these dynamics extends before colonialism to the history of *palabra* on the continent, a form of collective decision-making that he explains was aimed at ensuring the most people possible were informed and involved in decision-making. Ambadiang (2010, p. 18) determines that a public sphere arose where agreement was possible, but when distrust could remain between those who agree.

Ambadiang is not alone in situating postcolonial publics in precolonial institutions. From the 1970s onwards, anthropological scholarship has examined how oral traditions across Africa contributed to shared forms of knowledge in precolonial and colonial societies (Bloch, 1975, Comaroff, 1975; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997; Furniss & Gunner, 1995; McAllister, 1988; Parkin, 1984; Werbner, 1977). A recurring image in scholarship has been the palaver<sup>13</sup> tree, linked to the term *palabra*, noted earlier. Generally, the palaver tree refers to public and semi-public discussion aimed at governance, conflict resolution and consensus, usually from within a 'hut' or under a tree (Bidima, 2013; Hagensen, 2014, p. 34; Kamga & Dong'aroga, 2005, p. 150; Ndue, 1994, p. 46). In pursuit of an 'intellectual history from below' (Hunter, 2015, p. 6), everyday experiences and publications have become the basis for examining contributions to shared political languages. The likes of Karin Barber (2012), James Brennan (2015), Emma Hunter (2015), John Lonsdale (2000) and Derek Peterson (2004) trace histories within and around different polities. Ethnographic detail about past practices of oral tradition, later combined with written publications, reveal how shared imaginaries were produced through public interactions and discussions, constructing some grand narratives to the neglect of other ideas.

### 1.2.2 Empirically Oriented Studies of Publics in Africa

Attempts to conceptualise African forms of public talk blur into the second approach to publics on the continent, which privileges empirical description over normative ideas. Critical of the analytical potential of normative Anglo-American ideas about publics, a 2012 special issue of *Politique Africaine* (Banégas, Brisset-Foucault & Cutolo, 2012) argued for descriptive work on public discussion in Africa. This call has been reflected in an effort among some scholars to explore how public talk relates to processes of subjectification, and dynamics between authority and resistance, without explicitly engaging normative questions (Banégas, Brisset-Foucault & Cutolo, 2012; Brisset-Foucault, 2013a, 2013b, 2019; Ndjio 2005; Rasmussen & Omanga, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> 'Palaver' has roots in the Spanish '*palabra*' (meaning 'word') (Bidima, 2013, p. 15).

Florence Brisset-Foucault argues that avoiding normative debates avoids the risk of casting out aspects of public talk that might appear undemocratic. This provides a fuller picture of the contribution of publics to politics, showing how they inform the stabilisation of and challenges to rule, and do so in ways that are both open and silencing (Brisset-Foucault, 2019, pp. 244, 249). She argues ‘The ebimeeza [a form of people’s parliament in Uganda], as with other “participatory” forms of political engagement, need to be looked at with great ethnographic care and reinserted into their varied and composite historicities, however much they may be the product of transnational models and network’ (2019, p. 249).

Privileging empirical study raises dilemmas about the place of Africanist scholarship in theory construction. A focus on actually existing publics has, to some degree, served to limit the potential for Africanist ideas and experiences of publics to speak to the wider study of politics. Through descriptive studies, the idea of the public sphere has been stretched to a degree that it seems to reflect Harri Englund’s postulation that, even beyond African Studies,

The academic debate on the public sphere has expanded the notion’s remit virtually beyond recognition, with the sources and sites of deliberation identified not only in religion but in a wide range of other domains. Critical has been the move from a normative standpoint to a descriptive one. (2011, p. 10)

For Englund, such conceptual variation is not a primary issue. The edited volume that follows from his comments seeks to provide historical and ethnographic analyses, and avoids attempts to refine or converse with ‘abstract and often Eurocentric theorizing’ (Englund, 2011, p. 11).

Others have sought to bring descriptive work into conversation with conceptually oriented scholarship by engaging with African and European ideas. This book shares this agenda. Much of this scholarship explores cultural and religious solidarities, specifically forms of popular culture, and how they come to be shared, contested and changed. Unlike ‘publics’ where the focus tends to be on talk or text, popular culture is more expansive in the forms of expression that give rise to shared genres (Barber, 2018, p. 2). Also, given their interest in concrete art forms, these studies give particular heed to the medium, paralleling this book’s interest in talk through digital photos, videos and text, as

well as speech. Looking to the colonial period, the medium of print has attracted attention for its role in debates over rule, nation building and belonging (Hunter, Peterson & Newell, 2016). Print feeds into other forms of public communication, for example, Duncan Omanga's study in Eldoret, Kenya that shows how face-to-face discussion of current affairs organises around a newspaper vendor and the headlines of the day (Omanga, 2016). Also, in looking to religious and popular solidarities, scholars capture space to explore how different shared discourses feed into political narratives. Religious leadership and theologies provide alternative versions of moral authority that inform the legitimacy and boundaries of rule (Parsitau, 2008, p. 29). Narratives of the mystique and the invisible are employed to make sense of disorder in urban environments (De Boeck, 2015, p. 3). Politics, therefore, involves more than making sense of a common physical world. It is connected to people's beliefs and experiences about shared immaterial worlds (Ellis & ter Haar, 2004).

Within scholarship linking descriptive and conceptual work from African experiences (Barber, 2018), I single out a few studies that closely parallel this book's interest in publics and political repertoires, and inform this book's navigation of the dynamics of the people's parliaments. First, also with a focus in Mombasa, Kai Kresse (2018) aims to rethink the world from ideas constituted through Muslim publics. In examining intellectual practice in Mombasa, he explains that he seeks to

[operate] on a relatively underdetermined descriptive level that provides us with the opportunity to employ the same kind of basic analytical vocabulary for different kinds of intellectual traditions and knowledge-oriented practices – thus avoiding double standard and other kinds of established conceptual prejudice that still plague studies of other cultures in the humanities and social sciences. (Kresse, 2018, p. 14)

Kresse draws on analytical tools from western scholarship when useful, including Michael Lambek's view of ordinary ethics, and Nelson Goodman's 'world making' as a basic human activity involving creative processes that constitute meaning (2018, p. 34). These concepts illuminate how ideas circulated through different local media 'that were "Islamic" in their self-understanding' (Kresse, 2018, p. 199). Kresse's study provides another window into public life in Mombasa, unpacking religiously organised publics. By interrogating more

politically minded and religiously diverse gatherings in Mombasa, this book considers how publics organised along different premises interweave and diverge within the city.

Also invoking a language of publics, Charles Hirschkind (2006) explores the creative power of public talk, starting from Hannah Arendt's conceptualisation of the political. Similar to Kresse, he is interested in the production and contestation of Islamic religious communities, though in Egypt. He determines Islamic counterpublics have emerged through debate and argumentation, mediated through cultural artefacts like cassette tapes. From here, he argues the existence of a form of democratic political participation that is quite distinct from formal rights and democratic cultures (2006, p. 5).

Parallel inquiries to this book are found in studies of shared cultures and lived experiences, where attention remains on how people relate to one another as part of a public and realise shared solidarities. Among these, Birgit Meyer, in her study of film in Ghana, provides a definition of shared imaginaries that is useful to my purposes here. I share Meyer's understanding of shared imaginaries that they can be understood 'as interlaced sets of collective representations around particular issues – such as the nation, ethnicity, the city, the family, sickness and well-being, the divine, the occult, and so on – that underpin the moral and intellectual schemes and sensory modes that govern people's ways of being in the world and that thereby "make" this world' (Meyer, 2015, p. 14).

Kelly Askew, looking within coastal Tanzania, makes a strong case that the study of shared imaginaries must take into account bottom up initiative and innovation. Exploring the performances that give rise to musical genres in Tanzania, she conditions Benedict Anderson's (1989) notion of imagined communities, arguing that it varies in its form and contestation across cultural contexts. She argues that music shows how imagined communities draw power and inspiration from the bottom up, rather than top-down framing (Askew, 2002, p. 270).

Finally, as mentioned earlier, studies looking historically at publics and shared imaginaries are a source of insight into linkages between African-based empirics and ideas. Among these, Derek Peterson's (2012) study of the mid-twentieth-century East African Revival is useful for how it explores linkages between the emergence of non-dominant shared imaginaries and communication media. Forms of solidarity within the Revival emerged through the postal system, and

the autobiography and its readership, providing for a shared identity tied to movement and pilgrimage. Peterson draws out how the Revival's discourses disrupted the order and discipline promoted both by nation-building efforts and by the British colonial state. Through this, Peterson provides evidence of the production of imaginaries that diverged from dominant colonial and postcolonial forms of rule.

### 1.3 An Arendtian Approach to Publics

Studies of political, popular and religious publics in Africa open up the contours of places where shared imaginaries are formed and contested. They affirm an expansive view of publics, rooted in everyday interactions. Also, they contribute a language and a framework for talking about the relationship between shared imaginaries and technologies of communication, which are aimed at illuminating rather than judging practices against external normative theories about participatory politics. Specifically, they provide insight into the intractability of some shared imaginaries on the continent, grounded in prior forms of rule and ongoing performances.

Still, scholarship has left open questions about when and how shared imaginaries might be disrupted, the area of inquiry that motivates this book's examination of publics in Kenya. Looking to explore the potential for changed imaginaries through publics, this book finds relevant insight from those working from Hannah Arendt's political thought.<sup>14</sup> The potential begins with Arendt's distinct position within western scholarship on publics. The tendency in western scholarship has been to discuss publics with reference to competing visions of democracy (Willems, 2012). This tendency has become all the more pronounced with a political agenda by western states to 'democratise' the African continent in the early 1990s. The 'public sphere' was one in a series of conceptual offerings to explain struggles with realising democratic visions, as opposed to engaging seriously with either the implications of unequal global relations or the complex histories of democracy in the west.

<sup>14</sup> Arendt's is not the only attempt to avoid looking for an ideal public in relation to democracy. Michael Warner also argues a view of publics that assumes they are always limited and contradictory in practice (Warner, 1992, p. 397).

Arendt focuses attention on the possibilities of publics as places of new beginnings and change in collective imaginaries. Arendt's ideas about publics are tied to her positionality within European political and academic life. Her political study was motivated by a desire to make sense of the world she was living in (Canovan, 1978, pp. 17, 23). The world that Arendt observed and experienced was one she saw to be facing destructive realities, which she clustered under the heading 'totalitarianism'. A Jew born in Germany, Arendt resided in Germany until 1933, when she fled to France. She remained in France until 1941 when she again fled, this time to the United States.<sup>15</sup> She viewed the world, and the rise and fall of Nazism and Stalinism, from her vantage as an outcast of a particular kind. Her commitment was 'as a rebel and a revolutionary' to pariahs (Pitkin, 1998, p. 131). A desire to explain what totalitarianism threatened and how it had come about runs through her lectures and writings (Canovan, 1992, p. 7).

This is not the first application of Arendt's political thought to studying publics in Africa. As already mentioned, Hirschkind's study of Islamic counterpublics works from Arendt's view of politics (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 8). Lee (2011) has also argued strongly that there is a place for Arendt within postcolonial thought. Still, there has been little attention to her work in relation to contemporary politics on the African continent. This lack is accompanied by an uncomfortable ambivalence among postcolonial and Africanist scholars about Arendt's inquiry into Africa in her work (King & Stone, 2008), which appears to quickly dismiss both the politics and horrors experienced on the African continent (Dossa, 1980; Norton, 1995).

The next section explains how this book navigates this ambivalence to argue an approach to working with Arendt to explore publics in Mombasa, building from Seyla Benhabib's and Hanna Pitkin's revisions to Arendt's work on publics. I follow Benhabib when she asserts, 'What we need is not only a reinterpretation of Hannah Arendt's thought but a *revision* of it as well; for if we are to think "with Arendt against Arendt", we must leave behind the pieties of textual analyses and ask ourselves Arendtian questions and be ready to provide non-Arendtian answers' (Benhabib, 2000, p. 198).

<sup>15</sup> Mbembe (2001) has noted the potential to draw parallels between efforts to rebuild history between Jews in Europe and African thinkers, as both operated from their own positions of powerlessness and prejudice.

### 1.3.1 *Challenges to Arendt*

Even as they critique Arendt's application of her ideas about publics, scholars have tended to affirm Arendt's basic insights into the nature and value of publics (Benhabib, 2000, p. 166; Pitkin, 1998, p. 278). Her view of publics is rooted in her inquiry into the value of political action. Action involves reflexive public talk for its own sake. Arendt's political action, or publics – I will use the two interchangeably to refer to Arendt's depiction of public discussion – is how people distinguish themselves and become part of a public world (Arendt, 1958a, p. 176). Publics are valuable because of their potential to realise new beginnings, enabling change in the terms through which people relate to one another (Arendt, 1958a, p. 184). In other words, reflexive public talk gives rise to shared bases of understanding (Peterson, 2004, pp. 6–7), political languages (Hunter, 2015, p. 9) or repertoires of debate.

Arendt links the creative power of publics to two conditions: publicity and plurality. Publicity refers to the world that we live in and the scope of who participates in discussion and debate. We all share the same 'public' physical and built world (Arendt, 1958a, p. 52). Publicity also describes a way of being in a specific moment. Something 'that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody' (Arendt, 1958a, p. 50). Plurality refers to the context in which people exist: each person in the world is unique, which necessitates the creation of a common intangible world that enables people to relate to and live with one another (Arendt, 1958a, pp. 7–8). Also, plurality refers to features of discussion: equality and distinction (Arendt, 1958a, pp. 175–6). If everyone had the same perspective, there would be no need for people to negotiate and debate how to relate to one another. Further, because everyone is different, each time strangers convene, the possible expressions that might arise are always new, unique to that configuration of individuals.

In practice, Arendt recognises the publicity and plurality of publics are limited, sometimes necessarily so. Boundaries ensure that publics are not superseded by other activities that occupy people's daily activities (Zerilli, 1995, p. 179). They counter the inherent boundlessness and unpredictability of publics (Owens, 2007; Arendt, 1958a, p. 191); for example, laws can provide structure through which new beginnings that are initiated in publics might be translated into something more lasting (Arendt, 1972, p. 80). Also, a physical and built world provides

the space for publics (Arendt, 2005, p. 199). It provides the common and durable objects around which to bring distinct perspectives to bear. This is where an individual imagines the perspectives of others and obtains an expanded mindset. Publics require individuals to engage in a particular mental activity, judgement, where they are able to consider the views of others. David Marshall explains Arendt's view of judgement in the following way:

Judging does not aim at the elision of differences of opinion. Rather, it aims at a sharpening of the powers of perception by constantly attending to what distinguishes a particularity from all those other particulars that share predicates with it. (Marshall, 2010, p. 385)

### 1.3.1.1 Necessity in Public

Arendt faces increasing challenges when she makes claims about publics in practice: where they take place and what threatens them. I focus on two areas of revision to Arendt's work: first, her view of necessity as incompatible with publics, and second, her dismissal of politics in Africa.

Arendt's view that necessity was a problem for publics arises from her tendency to make distinctions between human activities and their proper place.<sup>16</sup> Arendt distinguishes political action within two triads: action, work, labour; and public, private, social.<sup>17</sup> While action is about engaging as distinct individuals, labour is activity aimed at maintaining human life and addressing people's biological needs (Arendt, 1958a, p. 7). In work, people make the fabricated world in which we live and act. Work involves making objects that add to a physical artifice that supports people's activities, from buildings and roads to legal codes (Arendt, 1958a, pp. 88, 126). Arendt determines that each activity has a proper place in the world. Public is the place of political action. It is in public that people reveal who they are as distinct individuals in relation to others. Arendt contrasts this with what she

<sup>16</sup> Benhabib identifies two methodological approaches in Arendt's work: phenomenological essentialism, influenced by Heidegger and Husserl, and a fragmentary methodology, inspired by Walter Benjamin. Benhabib suggests the latter opens up scope for plurality and interpretation in scholarship as it aims to look for insights from the past that help to make sense of one's situation (Benhabib, 2000, p. 173).

<sup>17</sup> For further discussion of Arendt's distinction between work, labour and action see Helleloid (2014), Pitkin (1995), Villa (1992) and Wolin (1977).

determines are private affairs that should be kept out of the glare of public life (Arendt, 1958a, p. 72).

The social refers to a blurring of the distinctions between public and private. Broadly, Arendt used the social to refer to a situation in which ‘a collectivity of people who – for whatever reason – conduct themselves in such a way that they cannot control or even intentionally influence the large-scale consequences of their activities’ (Pitkin, 1998, p. 16). This sort of situation appears to be the antithesis of publics; it takes away individuals’ ability to act as agents and to present themselves in new and different ways. The presence of economic concerns in public forms one of Arendt’s key contentions with the social. For Arendt, economic concerns emphasise how people are the same rather than directing them to engage as distinct. When necessity becomes the subject of publics, it deters people from expressing their differences. As a result, Arendt determines social exclusion is not political (Benhabib, 2000, p. 152). She defends a narrow view of the subject matter appropriate to political talk.

Subsequent studies challenge Arendt’s conclusions about welfare (Ince, 2016; Klein, 2014; Owens, 2012; Pitkin, 1998). Benhabib and Pitkin have provided two of the more extensive studies that provide a revised relationship between economic concerns and publics (Benhabib, 2000; Pitkin, 1998). Benhabib uses Arendt’s definition of what is distinct about publics as a basis for considering alternative conclusions. She argues the problem with the social is an attitudinal orientation that directs people away from open and free public talk, and not welfare concerns per se (Benhabib, 2000, p. 141). Pitkin invokes the notion of justice as a collective concern to explain when and how economic concerns can support or close down publics. She determines, ‘In deciding the perennial political question, “what shall we do?” we are inevitably deciding at the same time both what each of us will get, and who we, as a community, will be’ (1998, p. 280). There could be a danger if material concerns are not transformed into collective questions of justice, but they are not necessarily detracting from the public. These distinctions are useful in avoiding writing off Mombasa’s people’s parliaments as non-political, simply because they unfold where men are idle and unemployed, and often materially insecure.

### 1.3.1.2 Arendt's Representation of Colonial Africa

The second revision to Arendt's view of publics of relevance here concerns her incomplete and at times factually incorrect representations of history. Observing the horrors of Fascism in Europe, Arendt was concerned not to write history as if such an outcome was inevitable (Benhabib, 1990, p. 185; Benhabib, 1994, pp. 120–1). Also, following Walter Benjamin, she displays an interest to dig for treasures in the past rather than present factual truths. This approach helped Arendt to avoid normalising particular trajectories and draw out hidden meanings. However, it also necessitates consideration about what to take from her historical conclusions.

Specifically, this requires confronting inaccuracies and biases in Arendt's view of Africa. On one side, Arendt helped to illuminate how imperialism was harmful to politics, including elements later reflected in totalitarianism within Europe (Mantena, 2010, p. 89). Public life in the colonies was organised according to a principle of race and into a bureaucratic system based on an unquestioned deference to those more senior (Pitkin, 1998, p. 85). This combination facilitated the conscious use of violence as an instrument to subjugate people (Mantena, 2010, p. 88), and arguably destroyed the capacity of both the colonised and colonisers to act as distinct individuals (Bernasconi, 2008).<sup>18</sup>

On the other side, Arendt seemed to excuse racism, taking it to be the result of 'a horrifying experience of something alien beyond imagination or comprehension' experienced by the European colonisers (Bernasconi, 2008, p. 60). She isolated racism to a product of the colonial encounter, rather than something more fundamental to western European thought. For her, the lack of an obvious civilised world in Africa meant publics were not present, and the horrors of imperialism were not as extreme as that in Europe. Her perspective on politics in Africa was limited from multiple sides: her own pariah status as a stateless Jew, her aim to make sense of totalitarianism in Europe and her racial prejudice, tendencies shared by her white contemporaries. When considering how Arendt presented and judged events, it is necessary to consider how her own prejudice obscured her view of Africa, in her relative disregard for imperial violence, and for the presence of publics themselves.

<sup>18</sup> Some scholars have commended Arendt among white European analysts of Fascism for at least bringing imperialism into the scope of analysis (Lee, 2008), though acknowledging that her insights are less exceptional in the context of her non-white/European contemporaries, including Fanon, Du Bois and Césaire (Bernasconi, 2008).

### 1.3.2 *Revising Arendt*

Arendtian scholarship does not arrive at a decisive view of what to take from Arendt's insights into publics, but it does provide guides for how to navigate working with what Arendt saw as valuable in publics, while diverging from her application of her ideas to history. Benhabib describes this interpretation of Arendt's work as a conversation: 'Every interpretation is a conversation, with all the joys and dangers that conversations usually involve: misunderstandings as well as ellipses, innuendos as well as surfeits of meaning' (Benhabib, 2000, p. xlviii). Taking into account the revisions to Arendt's view of economic concerns and the politics of Africa explicated earlier, I propose three starting points for inquiring into Mombasa's people's parliaments.

First, Arendt retains a degree of ambivalence in the task of the historian and political thinker; she describes her work as storytelling rather than identifying systematic truth. She looked to the past for how it might help to bring meaning to political events. This approach leaves room for plurality in interpretation. Arendt's political thought is not about applying a pre-existing method to political material, but investigating politics from one's positionality and situation (Canovan, 1974, p. 3). Pluralism in the study of politics also permeates Africanist approaches to publics, as scholars have explored different normative and empirical premises for thinking about what exists, is possible and is valuable. The legacies of colonialism, and the ways it is reproduced, point to the importance of taking into account the particularities of the past in different places.

Second, this book is open to overlap between welfare and publics. This includes examining possibilities for publics within working class and popular culture, which did not enter Arendt's purview (Wolin, 1994, p. 300). I adopt Pitkin's view of when and how economic and social concerns could become political, taking into account questions of justice. Pitkin suggests three explanations – all interdependent – to consider when interrogating what factors in modern life might threaten publics: institutions, people's character and ideas (Pitkin, 1998, pp. 258–83). In Mombasa, such analytical openness about necessity in public is crucial in order to avoid writing off instances of everyday public talk. Wealthier classes tend to be hidden behind walls, guards and gated communities, while those relatively less well off often are more likely engage in public debate in streets, markets and cafes. Hirschkind, though not explicitly, also revises Arendt's notion of the

political, concluding that ordinary people can affect change in cultural patterns based on their concerns for public welfare and labour relations (2006, p. 206). More generally, Africanist empirical scholarship argues the importance of exploring publics among the least privileged (Askew, 2002, p. 12), in popular culture and through bottom-up processes, which include those who often experience material insecurity.

Third, I recognise what insights Arendt did make into the nature of colonial rule, while also seeking to move beyond her neglect of horrors and the potential for political action in Africa. I retain what Arendt valued about publics, but take a critical eye to how she approached this within the colonised and postcolonial worlds. This involves holding up Arendt's conclusions against critical studies that unpack the legacies of colonial rule, and value the experiences of those disempowered through the colonial experience. It involves beginning empirically with what exists in Mombasa, without necessarily assuming any set of conditions will result in the same threats and possibilities over time and place.

#### 1.4 Studying Publics on the Street and Online

To capture publics as they exist in Mombasa, this book is based on thick description of everyday forms of public talk (Geertz, 1994). It traces the stories of the people who participated, and observed moments of public discussion. Nine months of fieldwork were conducted in 2013 and 2014, with follow up in 2017. I was a regular participant observer in street parliaments, civil society meetings and government forums.<sup>19</sup> Observations on social media focused on public Facebook groups and pages, with some supplementary analysis of relevant Twitter handles.<sup>20</sup> By the end of the decade, WhatsApp was another popular space for public discussion (Omanga, 2019); however,

<sup>19</sup> Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for the School of the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Cambridge, on 7 August 2013.

<sup>20</sup> I began to observe MYS's public Facebook group regularly after I was invited to join the group by the conveners, who were aware of my interest as a researcher. I also reviewed Facebook activity from other public Mombasa-focused groups and pages, including Members of Parliament, its Governor and Senator, Mombasa County Government Watch, Mombasa Youth Assembly, Bunge La Wananchi Wazalendo Kongowea Karama (BUWWAKKO), Activista Mombasa, Kwacha Afrika, the National Youth Bunge Association, Pwani-Toa Donge Lako and Pwani Empowerment Network.

in the early 2010s Facebook was still more accessible in Mombasa, particularly for political discussion with strangers. For each gathering, I noted events, protocols and preoccupations that informed public discussion. Participants would translate proceedings, helping me to keep pace with the discussion, which were often in Kiswahili mixed with English, as well as giving some insight into the meanings that were being ascribed in the debate. Observations were aimed at taking into account the context, tone of address and verbal and non-verbal cues through which people engaged. I examined moments of discussion, and then stepped back to investigate their context, and participants' experiences and motivations.

Online activity brought distinct methodological challenges. Each person, including myself, encountered discussion through a personalised interface. To account for the constant flux of what appeared on Facebook, I made PDF records of groups and pages at specific points in time. This allowed me to keep a record of posts that were altered or deleted. Social media also brought ethical considerations (Boyd & Crawford, 2012, pp. 671–3). It enabled access to information that individuals might unintentionally have made publicly available (Humphreys, 2013, p. 23). To avoid using potentially sensitive information, I observed public groups and pages. Private communications through SMS and online messaging were treated with the same confidentiality as face-to-face correspondence, and were only taken into account when the individual was aware of my interest as a researcher. Unless a profile was for a public figure (e.g. a public-facing profile for an elected representative) or anonymised, user names were removed and pseudonyms used.

Participant observation was accompanied by in-depth interviews to gain insight into people's experiences and perceptions. I conducted 165 semi-structured interviews with participants from the people's parliaments, and members of civil society, political parties and the county and national governments, plus further unstructured interviews, resulting in more than 200 semi-structured and informal interviews.<sup>21</sup> Interviews were mainly conducted in English, with limited Kiswahili. In a few cases where interviewees preferred to conduct the interview fully in Kiswahili, an acquaintance of the interviewee, usually from one

<sup>21</sup> A table listing interviewees by number, with dates and locations of interviews is provided in the Appendix.

of the people's parliaments, would translate. Most often consent was done verbally, and then recorded.<sup>22</sup> Interviewees were selected through observations and snowballing. I sought interviews with participants across ethnic identities, places of origin, religious affiliations, age, gender and partisan lines. I also took care to follow up with individuals separately. Among the twenty-nine elected and nominated government officials interviewed, twenty-two were aware of the people's parliaments, and twelve had attended a street parliament at least once.<sup>23</sup>

### 1.4.1 Positionality and the Research Endeavour

My research placed me squarely within the spaces and networks I sought to understand. Immediately this invokes questions about the effect this had on the phenomena of study and analytical insights. These questions are not easily resolved, though they are continually grappled with in scholarship (Elish & Boyd, 2018; Merriam, et al., 2001; Van Maanen, 2011). Addressing them is crucial to interpreting the content and contribution of this book.

As a female Caucasian researcher in male dominated spaces in coastal Kenya, my positionality engaged multiple forms of hierarchy and difference. From one perspective, my positionality facilitated access. Few tended to question the presence of the *mzungu* (white person or European) at civil society forums. Often a token *mzungu* would be present as a representative of a foreign donor. Equally, my presence and physical identity were causes of concern and suspicion. What sort of *mzungu* cared about informal political conversations? What sort of woman participated in public discussions?

My conspicuousness was an asset and a challenge. It facilitated the research endeavour. My presence drew attention to entrenched norms as it disrupted them. Also, it necessitated constant reflexivity. Most often, I was perceived through an economic divide, and viewed as a potential source of financial resource because I was foreign and white. Some interviewees would request money, and I became cautious in interpreting the motivation behind interviewees' emphasis on financial need. My interest in local politics was also perplexing to some. This

<sup>22</sup> Early on interviewees indicated they were more comfortable with verbal rather than written consent.

<sup>23</sup> In 2013, there were thirty elected and fifteen nominated Ward Representatives, six MPs, the Senator, the Women's Representative and the County Governor.

confusion indicated common sense ways of interpreting others' presence in these discussions. Also, it sparked rumours among some that I was a spy, rumours that were never fully refuted even as participants increasingly welcomed my contribution in discussions.<sup>24</sup> Assumptions about my interests and knowledge affected what was discussed. I was often questioned about the trial of President Uhuru Kenyatta and Deputy President William Ruto at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in early observations at a street parliament by the Splendid Hotel in the CBD. At other times, participants would switch into English to enable me to more fully take part. This affected what was said and who could participate. Equally, it indicated participants' desire to be inclusive, and the ease of some in switching between languages.<sup>25</sup> Linguistic code-switching and changing topics of discussion when I participated cannot be taken as fully representative of the gathering's content, but do indicate some of the ways in which the gatherings adapted to participants.

My attempt to overcome suspicions had varied effects. I sought to work through established acquaintances, who would vouch for my interest as a researcher, unprompted. At the street parliaments in the CBD, a younger male participant regularly assisted me by explaining my research interests to new interviewees in Kiswahili. He also helped me to access members of the County Government, for example, locating phone numbers. Efforts to build rapport brought greater access and deeper understanding of others' perspectives. They also evolved how I was viewed and what I was told. Some participants viewed me through the partisan position of my acquaintances. Some sought to relate to me in a more casual and familiar way, referring to me as 'young girl' or 'pretty girl' in English, Kiswahili and vernacular.

Acknowledging these dynamics, the most I could achieve through fieldwork was a critical awareness of my positionality, and constant reflections on how my vantage shaped my findings. I take this as a key

<sup>24</sup> The ways that rumours could linger became evident in conversations with participants a few years later in 2017.

<sup>25</sup> While English and Swahili are Kenya's official languages, Kenya has more than 60 languages and dialects. Linguistic code-switching is a common feature of multi-ethnic urban areas in Kenya, built into everyday social and economic processes. Githiora (2002, 2018) explores these practices of merging and code-switching in urban Kenya more fully in his study of the development of Sheng.

feature of participatory and constructivist research, one that should not be met with acquiescence but with resolve to continually be more critical and more reflexive. Each observer and participant can play a role in bringing insights into our political world (Lewis, 1973). This book is an effort to bring out one set of insights concerning the potential of publics in Mombasa, premised upon a dynamic research process in which an outsider disrupted everyday public discussions.

#### *1.4.2 Purpose and Structure of the Book*

The problematic at the heart of this book is when, why and how public discussion can provide for changes in shared imaginaries in Kenya. Taking a reflective view on how I was integrated into Mombasa's people's parliaments, this book draws out competing and constraining factors – material, social, cultural and political – through which public discussion has taken place, focusing on the early 2010s. This introduction has set out a conceptual framework through which to interrogate publics as they exist in Mombasa and explore their creative possibilities. By revising Arendt's thought to be more open to publics in ordinary places and postcolonial contexts, this book is positioned to avoid making quick assumptions about what are preferred characteristics or outcomes of publics. Working from this framework, Chapter 2 provides the historical antecedents of publics in the 2010s, making possible a consideration of continuity and change. Structures to facilitate public discussion in Mombasa have been built up through waves of foreign occupation and the transition to independence. This has given shape to experiences and memories of citizen-state relations, resource distribution and the organisation of land understood in terms of religion, ethnicity, place of origin and race.

Part II examines the characteristics of discussion across the people's parliaments. Chapter 3 interrogates the form and scope of public discussion in the streets, while Chapter 4 compares this with gatherings convened in civil society and on Facebook. They show how open and plural discussion took on particular characteristics through everyday expectations and routines, which were distinct to different places of discussion. They argue that, while limited, the conditions for open and plural discussion were evident across diverse gatherings. The only clear exception was an overly

fabricated gathering in civil society, where hierarchy and formalised protocol sought to remove unpredictability.

Having established the conditions that make the people's parliaments open and plural, Part III examines the context that makes them possible. Chapter 5 begins with material insecurity. The presence of material insecurities in public discussion is constant, whether it helps to inform where discussion unfolds, or what is discussed and how it is argued. Following Benhabib's and Piktin's revisions to Arendt, the precarious state of idleness that accompanies material insecurity is shown to be a source of dynamism, even as it also constitutes a distraction.

Chapters 6 and 7 look at the spatial dimensions of publics, both conditions on land use and on the use of space on Facebook. Two important additions to understanding the possibilities of publics emerge through these chapters. First, ambiguity around land occupation has enabled the street parliaments to convene on public and privately owned land. Second, on Facebook, experiences have not matched the actual conditions of ownership over digital infrastructure and space.

Part IV focuses on the outcome of concern: the potential for changes to terms of debate. It examines the presence and reproduction of pre-existing shared political repertoires through public discussion. Chapter 8 juxtaposes the instrumental and personalised nature of electoral politics in Mombasa with public discussion, showing how publics and electoral politics have a tense, but mutually constitutive relationship. The intrigues of electoral competition sparked interest in public discussion and made it seem relevant to citizens' lives, while at the same time sharpening the contours of debate. A key conclusion in this chapter concerns the unintended effects of efforts to limit electoral competition in public discussion. Debate faltered, while electoral competition continued to bring division among participants.

Chapter 9 looks at how acts of physical violence relate to public discussion. During the early 2010s, Mombasa experienced a period of physical and public violence, with clashes between Muslim youth and security forces, and between street hawkers and the County Government. Violence was silencing in many ways, bringing fear about threats to life and livelihood. Yet, even though violence and the fear of violence were highly incompatible with active speech,

they did not simply silence debate. Over time and in virtual spaces, as people were distanced from the immediate threat of violence, discussion materialised. Violence became a shared concern motivating discussion.

Chapter 10 helps to explain the persistence of familiar terms of debate by shifting attention to the individual, and their mindset and experience as a spectator in public discussion. It argues that the participant's mindset has played a critical role in realising publics and in limiting change in the terms of debate. Participants shared an interest in discussion, and actively interpreted what was shared. At the same time, how they responded to others' perspectives tended to reproduce the familiar. Conditions informing participants' critical thought limited their willingness and ability either to think critically or to imagine a common experience.

The concluding chapter considers the implications of this book for thinking about the future of publics in Kenya and for the study of publics. It emphasises how potential change through public discussion is more precarious than ever. Change does not neatly follow from intentional efforts to alter the terms of debate in specific ways. Features that might seem to contradict normative visions suddenly become crucial to the very power of publics; for instance, material insecurity or instrumental politics appear intrinsic to the nature and power of public discussion. Further, social media bring challenges bound up with their distinct affordances. Also, the conclusion reflects on the implications of this book for engagement with Arendtian scholarship on publics. In considering Arendt in a context far from her immediate concerns, this book argues that it becomes possible to see Arendt's own work differently and arrive at novel insights into the limits and application of her ideas.

The picture of the future of publics presented here might seem fatalistic in its implications. Even efforts to create a change in shared imaginaries threaten the very possibility of such change to take place. Yet, my intention is not to leave with a sense of fatalism. Rather, hope in Mombasa is counterintuitively found in the dynamism of public discussion that comes from its overlap with material concerns and instrumental politics. This study turns common sense concerns about the presence and problems of collective imaginaries in Kenya upside down. What might be a source of inequality or exclusion might be what animates and drives public discussion.

What equalises or opens up public discussion might frustrate its dynamism and potentiality.

This book now turns to the moments of public talk in Mombasa. It begins with the artifice upon which these moments unfold: Mombasa's spatial, political, social and cultural configurations that have built up over time.