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African Homestays and Community Engagement: A Case Study on Reciprocity and Neocolonialism

Michael Wairungu¹, Matt Carotenuto¹, Njau Kibochi¹ (contributor)

Abstract

Do homestays benefit host communities, perpetuate neocolonial relationships, or both? While the St. Lawrence Kenya-Semester Program (KSP) has centered homestays as an essential component of experiential learning and community engagement since 1972, this article flips the script and places homestay families at the center of knowledge production on study abroad. Drawn from 15 years of homestay experiences in Nyeri and Kericho counties, we situate this program as an important case study to analyze host community perceptions of the benefits and challenges of homestays for rural agricultural Kenyan communities and the implications this has for study abroad assessment and community engagement.

Abstract in Swahili

Je, mpango wa wanafunzi wa kigeni kuishi kwenye nyumba za wenyeji husaidia jamii husika au hushadidia mahusiano ya kikoloni mamboleo ama yote mawili? Programu ya Chuo Kikuu cha St. Lawrence ya Kenya (KSP) imeuwekea uzito mpango wa wanafunzi kuishi kwa jamii wenyeji kama kipengele muhimu katika ujifunzaji wao wa kitajriba na mtagusano wao na jamii kutoka mwaka 1972.

¹ ST. LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY, CANTON, NY, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Corresponding author: Matthew Carotenuto, mcarotenuto@stlawu.edu

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Ingawaje, makala haya yamebadilisha mtazamo na kuziona familia zinazohusika katika programu hii kama vituo muhimu vya uzalishaji wa maarifa katika masomo ya ughaibuni. Tukizingatia tajriba ya miaka 15 ya KSP kupeleka wanafunzi kuishi na jamii katika kaunti za Nyeri na Kericho, tunaitazama hii programu kama kifani muhimu cha kuchanganua mitazamo ya jamii wenyeji kuhusu faida na changamoto za wanafunzi kuishi na familia za wakulima vijijini na pia katika kutahini programu za masomo ya ughaibuni na mtagusano wa kijamii.

Keywords:

Kenya, Africa, neocolonial, reciprocity, homestay

*Through hosting, we have planted a seed bed
for the community (Kenyan homestay parent, 2021)*

Introduction

During the long bus journey to the highlands of Kenya's Great Rift Valley, excitement and a sense of adventure permeated the group. Since the trip offered a unique chance for many to visit western Kenya for the first time, the mood on the bus was lighthearted. Participants joked and stared out of the window with a touristic gaze as the lush highlands drew closer. However, as we approached our rural homestay site in Kericho County, the mood shifted from excitement to anxiety. For many study-abroad professionals, this anxious moment when students are about to enter a new community for the first time is a familiar one. However, in May of 2021, the participants were not our typical students from St. Lawrence University in the U.S. Instead, the excitement and anxiety of the moment was felt by Kenyans from Nyeri County, visiting Kericho for the first time.

As key community partners, the participants in this trip were Kenyan homestay parents from two different homestay experiences who have collectively hosted hundreds of foreign students as part of the St. Lawrence-Kenya Semester Program (KSP) from 2006 to 2020. The more experienced host families from the Kikuyu speaking community in Nyeri, traveled to our current rural homestay site in Kipsigis speaking regions of Kericho. Sponsored by a grant through St. Lawrence University, this three-day trip placed host families in a similar intercultural space as our students and provided an important opportunity for parents to process and value their position as teachers of their

own cultures. Assuming the role of both students and collaborators during the trip, our Kenyan partners had the rare opportunity to experience the excitement and shock of intercultural exchange from multiple perspectives. Accompanied by Michael Wairungu and Njau Kibochi, from St. Lawrence's Kenya program campus in Nairobi who participated in and facilitated the trip, the exchange between host communities, and our follow up interviews with all three authors/contributors, served as an important case study to evaluate and critique the culture of reciprocity within one of the longest running U.S. study abroad programs in Africa.

Coming together over a long weekend, homestay families from two culturally and politically distinct Kenyan communities performed the roles of domestic hosts, tourists, and cultural ambassadors for their respective ethnic communities within a Kenyan political milieu. They also shared local expertise and insights with each other and with program staff drawn from their participation in the KSP's week-long rural homestay component. As a key experiential component of the university's nearly fifty-year old abroad program, the rural homestay provides an early moment of cultural immersion to prepare students for their semester in East Africa. The trip was an empowering opportunity for homestay families to reflect on their influential pedagogical roles as cultural brokers for U.S. university students. It also provided an important follow-up research opportunity for St. Lawrence staff and faculty to analyze the challenges of reciprocity and community engagement in African based study abroad. Interpreting this meeting of host communities through the dual lens of study abroad pedagogy and local politics of belonging, illustrates the need for U.S. study abroad programs to reconcile with the historic tensions between neocolonialism and reciprocity in U.S. African relations (Carotenuto & Luongo, 2016; Mathers, 2010).

U.S. public discourse and educational marketing often frames study abroad as an opportunity for discovery and cultural exchange without fully interrogating the neocolonial undertones of the education abroad industry. Scholars argue that contemporary students can still be viewed as colonial and education abroad programs, particularly those in the Global South, must grapple with the connection between intercultural exploration, and the extractive histories of empire (Ogden, 2007). Moreno (2021) shows that encouraging students to see themselves as cultural ambassadors in the Global South may reinforce neocolonial ideas that they are hegemonic "bearers of new

knowledge, rather than learners of equitable exchange” (p.99). To decolonize the study abroad experience, developing a nuanced ethnographic understanding of host communities is a foundational starting point. Developing clear ethics and empathy forms the basis for, as Villarreal Sosa and Lesniewski (2021) argue, “the fostering of sustained relationships of mutual benefit with the communities, organizations, and individuals that students interact with” (p.730).

Moving beyond a transactional relationship with host communities fraught with neocolonial undertones also requires sustained institutional commitment to local partnerships, and an investment in place. St. Lawrence University’s fifty-year-old program in Kenya provides an important case study for sustained engagement in East Africa. However, our research revealed that the impact of the KSP in rural communities is multifaceted. From disrupting dynamics of social class at the community level, to challenging gender relations within the household, the impact of cross-cultural community engagement can yield unintended and sometimes intrusive consequences. By building sustained relationships and involving host communities in regular analysis of the program, our ongoing research reveals new approaches to reciprocity with our Kenyan partners. In encouraging homestay families to see themselves as teachers and collaborators, programs must provide varied and scaffolded approaches to collecting feedback and co-producing knowledge. By giving host communities the time and space to process and reflect on hosting experience, local partners will be better able to embrace the cross-cultural benefits of study abroad. Using the language of our agricultural host communities, we learned that the hosting experience was akin to “planting a seedbed,” which will never reach the harvest season without further cultivation.

Literature Review and Methodology

Study abroad in the Global South is filled with opportunities to encounter diverse social and culture landscapes for U.S. students. Framed broadly through the fashionable lens of global citizenship, scholars have shown that programs still need to actively deconstruct the neocolonial aspects of both program design and marketing (Adkins & Messerly, 2019; Hartman et al., 2020; Moreno, 2021). Critiques of service learning and voluntourism, provide a key primer for debates about reciprocity and community engagement for study abroad programs regardless of duration or pedagogy. From perpetuating neocolonial interactions to bolstering the white savior complex imbedded in the aid industry,

managing student/institutional expectations and community impact requires a significant investment in time and resources (Bandyopadhyay, 2019; Gross, 2015; Larsen, 2015; O'Sullivan & Smaller, 2019; Pierre, 2020).

Work on the impact of study abroad on host communities reveals that programs focus too much on student outcomes and rarely evaluate the full range of local perspectives (Gonzalez, 2021). Since host communities participate for a variety of reasons which can diverge from the pedagogical goals of programs, decentering student-centric evaluation and analyzing how host communities are co-producers of knowledge needs to be embraced more widely throughout the field (Collins, 2019). As Coffman and Prazak (2021) argue in their recent study of service learning in East Africa, programs and students need to move beyond simplistic ideas of “doing good” in their interactions with host communities and continue to refine and reflect on failures as much as success in community engagement.

In many African settings, U.S. programs' relationships with host communities can often be interpreted as transactional, and rife with the power dynamics of international relations. Built from the colonial legacy of missionaries and the racist European “civilizing mission” as the historic drivers of “development,” Western interests and goals have continued to dominate much of the discussion of economic and social change at the local level. In Kenya, development discourse since the 1960s has historically been top down, where the state and donor institutions are seen as decision making patrons, and average citizens as clients who must demonstrate political support to receive tax funded government assistance (Berman et al., 2009; D'Arcy & Cornell, 2016; Kanyinga, 2016; Ochieng' Opalo, 2022). Operating as clientelism within electoral politics since the 1960s, normalized domestic corruption continues to shape Kenyan relations with government institutions at the local and national levels which feeds into a culture of patronage relationships with both state and non-state actors (Blundo et al., 2006).

Since the 1990s, NGOs have increasingly filled a void where Kenyan state institutions fail to reach. However, scholars have argued that the proliferation of thousands of Western backed NGOs throughout the country have perpetuated a colonial patron-client relationship to development and western influence (Amutabi, 2013; Brass, 2016; Hearn, 2007). U.S. based study abroad programs operating within these settings must navigate the complex politics of

development to avoid being lumped into the framework of yet another western institution looking to promote western interests at the local level. For study abroad programs to be seen as partners and not donors within local communities, program faculty and staff need to continually reflect not simply on student experiences, but also the local socio-economic impact of experiential learning on host-communities. Through self-reflection as a transnational research team connected to the St. Lawrence Kenya program for many years, our ongoing research has demonstrated the continued need to decenter our authority and power as program administrators to create spaces for our host-communities to embrace their role as co-producers of the KSP's community based experiential learning (Hartman et al., 2018).

Drawing on our interdisciplinary training in history, anthropology and African studies, data collection for this article involved a variety of methods. First, we analyzed former students' anonymous evaluations of their experiences during the KSP's week-long rural homestay to inform our discussions with homestay parents. Next, we employed direct observations of homestay parents' social interactions during a three-day induction trip that brought together more-experienced hosts from Nyeri and first-time hosts from Kericho in May 2021. This trip could not fully replicate the homestay experience due to public health and safety concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. While hotel rooms replaced homes in the evening, families spent significant time in socially distanced outdoor activities and discussions which replicated much of the intercultural exchange our students experience. After the induction trip, we administered a written survey and conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with more than 50 homestay parents and community members from both Kericho and Nyeri in June 2021. While homestay parents agreed to have their names used within our published findings, we have coded interview subjects only by location and gender to avoid direct attribution of comments made in recorded interviews.

Early on in our research design, we engaged one of the long-serving program's Kenyan support staff, Njau Kibochi, in informal discussions about his experience interacting with students and staff in helping to design and run the rural homestay component for nearly 30 years. Given the depth of his experience and insight, Mr. Kibochi later became our collaborator and research associate. Engaging him as a key contributor to our research project was an essential entry point into recognizing the value of local voices in study abroad

as well as the politics of exclusion which frame local research collaborators as mere assistants and privilege only those with formal academic/professional titles as authors or contributors (Aijazi et al., 2021). Broadly speaking, study abroad programs rely on the locally sourced support staff in their day-to-day operations. However, while faculty rank and titles such as “director” or “Professor” clearly communicate expertise/authority, local support staff within study abroad often do not have the same globally recognized titles, helping to further obscure their essential roles and depth of experience. Mr. Kibochi played an essential role during the data collection process as a collaborator in interviews and analysis of local interpretations of study abroad in the field.

When analyzing our data, we are critical of our role as St. Lawrence administrative insiders and the ways power dynamics with our host communities may have made it challenging for current homestay parents to fully critique the program’s role in their experience. As St. Lawrence staff and faculty from both our home campus in Canton NY and permanent program base in Nairobi, we come from diverse personal backgrounds and have a shared interest and professional training in Kenyan social and cultural issues. Michael Wairungu is a Kenyan anthropologist and currently in charge of administering the rural homestay as part of his duties as one of the directors of the KSP based in Nairobi. Matt Carotenuto is an American alumnus of the KSP, a scholar of Kenyan history and coordinator of the KSP in Canton NY who has also served as a visiting administrative director in Kenya. Mr. Njau Kibochi has worked for the KSP for more than twenty-five years and helps coordinate the rural homestay component as part of his official duties.

While the transnational and transdisciplinary nature of our research team enabled us to ask questions from multiple perspectives, host communities still welcomed us into their homes as both colleagues and researchers. Our research also built on more than a decade of personal relationships where each of us has stayed within the homes of a number of our community partners in both Nyeri and Kericho on several occasions. Drawing on our professional and personal connections we were often able to move beyond the formality of a disconnected outside researcher and talk candidly with homestay parents about our mutually shared goals of improving the homestay experience for both students and host communities. Though removing the power dynamics of our intertwined personal and professional connections would be impossible, we balanced data from current and former homestay communities with selected

community members not directly affiliated with the KSP to be able to gain diverse insights into the expectations and outcomes of our homestay component from an empathetic local perspective (Agar, 1984; Ely, 1991; Emerson et al., 2001).

Historical Background: Institutional history and Investment in Place

In January 1972 St. Lawrence University embarked on a study abroad experiment. Fifteen students and one faculty member spent several weeks in Kenya as part of the university's effort to expand off-campus programs outside of Europe and explore opportunities in the Global South. The success of this initial trip led to the creation of a semester long program in 1974. By 2022, the university now celebrates half a century of institutional history in Kenya, with more than 2,300 students from more than 30 different universities having spent a semester or summer term in East Africa. While examining this history provides St. Lawrence an opportunity for boastful reflection, it is also a critical moment to investigate the long-term impact of the program for both the host institution and its Kenyan partners.

Throughout the 1970s, St. Lawrence operated The Nairobi Semester. Based at a middle-class apartment complex in the then quiet suburb of Westlands, students took classes with faculty from the University of Nairobi, stayed with families in the rural areas of neighboring Kiambu and carried out an internship with a Kenyan organization. Founded by political scientist Peter French, the Nairobi Semester was a loosely structured island program designed for St. Lawrence students to expose them to life in the surrounding areas of Kenya's capital. It was not until the early 1980s, when two recent PhDs in African history with expertise in Kenya took over leadership of the program that it was transformed into a wider East African experience.

Paul Robison, Director of the Program from 1979-1999, was instrumental in transforming the KSP into what it is today and expanding institutional investment and commitment to Kenya. In the early 1980s, the program was rebranded as the Kenya Semester Program (KSP), and it moved its base of operations from Westlands to a rented, five-acre campus in the more distant, and then almost rural suburb of Karen. With permanent Kenyan and American staff running the program, it grew from a focus on encountering Kenya through

the primary lens of experiences in Nairobi to one which sought to have students engage with African communities across the region in more intentional ways. For instance, in the 1980s field components were expanded to expose students to the diversity of Kenyan life, including extended stays exploring pastoralist lifestyles within the Samburu community and Swahili culture and society along the Kenyan coast. By the mid-1990s, an additional component in northern Tanzania was added to expand the program's comparative focus to the wider East Africa region (Lloyd, 2000; Robinson & Brown, 1994).

Today the program reflects the basic structure created during the early 1980s, integrated with the thematic emphasis and professional expertise of the current directors' training in Conservation Biology and Anthropology. In each semester, about 20-25 students are based at St. Lawrence's Nairobi campus with several students drawn from applicants from other colleges. Their time in the Kenyan capital consists of taking a required course in Swahili and two elective courses with Kenyan faculty. Though the program is based in Nairobi, students spend only about half of their time there. Two homestays form key components of the semester, designed to immerse students into Kenyan life in both a rural and urban context. Three extended field components of one week each in Northern Tanzania, Amboseli, and Mombasa are linked with the core course that all students take called "Culture, Environment and Development in East Africa." The last month of the program consists of an independent study where students examine a contemporary issue through internships with local organizations across East Africa. Since 2005, 1-3 summer courses of 3-6 weeks each are also offered annually and taught by either the program directors or by faculty from St. Lawrence's home campus in NY.

For a small liberal arts college in upstate New York, St. Lawrence's deep connection to Kenya represents a rare and sustained investment in place. The university purchased its five-acre Nairobi campus in the mid-1990s and maintains an all-African staff of three directors and fourteen other support staff on a permanent basis. With a budget of more than \$800,000 per year spent in East Africa, the program's first commitment to reciprocity is through our direct financial obligations in supporting 17 permanent East African staff members and dozens of other community partners throughout the region rather than relying on imported labor and expertise from abroad.

Beyond the direct financial impact of the program in Kenya, St. Lawrence made a commitment early on to foster additional educational opportunities for Kenyan students. In the early 1980s, in response to a proposal by then Director Paul Robinson, the university started offering an annual full scholarship for one Kenyan student to complete an undergraduate degree at St. Lawrence's main campus in Canton, NY. By 1984, the university doubled this commitment to two scholarships per year, generally one male and one female student from different Kenyan communities. By the early 1990s, the University began sponsoring a Swahili teaching fellowship that allowed a Kenyan graduate student to come and teach at St. Lawrence' on a two-year rotating basis. While a full institutional historical assessment is beyond the scope of this article, placing the rural homestay component within a larger and sustained investment in place is essential to examine the interconnected nature of the KSP to our various host communities in Kenya.

Homestay Design

The rural homestay component is strategically designed as students' initiation into a semester-long study in East Africa. Historically, the program has moved between different rural agricultural communities every 3-5 years to avoid hosting fatigue and engage with different cultural environments. Since 2006, the KSP has operated in four different homestay sites in Bomet, Meru, Nyeri and Kericho counties. The component has traditionally been 7-10 days in length and students are placed individually with host families for an immersive cultural experience during just the second week of the semester. Through participant observation, students learn about rural economic and social life which prepares them to contextualize Kenyan agricultural life within diverse East African experiences under the theme of the core-course "Culture, Environment and Development."

In order to set up a successful framework, the director in-charge of rural homestays (in collaboration with other program staff) identifies a Kenyan community where agriculture is a primary industry. The process for selecting a particular community involves an assessment of security, local health facilities, and most importantly connections with community leaders outside of formal structures of governance. Working with community members and not formal state actors, avoids the program playing into local politics of patronage and

perceptions that representatives of local government are the gatekeepers of “development,” and interactions with outsiders (Cheeseman et al., 2016).

Upon identifying the host community, the director reaches out to a local expert seeking his/her help in selecting appropriate host families. In this role, the local expert often becomes the paid homestay coordinator, and the liaison between the host community, the director, and the study abroad program at large. The coordinator’s recruitment of host families is guided by a number of factors that aim to net middle-class families by local standards. Often drawn from the ranks of local primary and secondary school teachers, these middle-class families have the space to accommodate a visitor in their house and the intercultural interest to serve as teachers and guides for our students. The KSP prefers to place students in homes with children roughly the same age to encourage peer to peer interactions and cross-cultural exchange which is seen by many of our families as a shared benefit.

St. Lawrence does provide a modest stipend per family for hosting as well as two paid coordinators and a smaller stipend for two reserve families in case of emergency. This payment is roughly equivalent to a month’s salary for the average primary school teacher and is designed as an honorarium for host families to compensate them for their time and expertise. The payment also ensures that host families do not incur any financial challenges in hosting, but it is not enough to make financial gain the primary motivation. Second, to enhance reciprocity, the KSP donates approximately \$1,000 every semester to support one or two educational projects within the hosting community. Over time, the program has varied its approach of making these donations in order to benefit multiple primary and secondary school projects and to distinguish itself from typical donor organizations. Current projects are identified through the local coordinator after discussing with the host community and school administrators. The KSP has historically taken a hands-off approach to these donations to encourage local ownership in the program’s efforts to be seen as a partner and not a prescriptive “donor” in the community.

Beyond financial concerns, the KSP has used U.S. student and institutional needs to assess the viability of the homestay setting. For instance, the program requires that each family provide a private room for students and requires that at least one member of the family is fluent in English. Through a purely cultural lens, this model can be seen as a form of neocolonial

acculturation where island/hybrid programs like the KSP have the power to dictate the terms of participation based on foreign notions of cultural sensitivity and risk management (Mohajeri & Dwyer, 2005). However, since the rural homestay comes during only the second week of the program, requiring students to have the necessary linguistic skills and cultural preparation, would drastically limit the applicant pool for the program. To address this gap, the KSP challenges students to think about their privilege and the need to adapt to diverse cultural environments to avoid feeding into the mentality and practice of “the colonial student” (Ogden, 2007).

After the homestay coordinator identifies an initial pool of families, program staff visit each home to meet families and assess the viability of the placement. A few weeks later, the families are invited for several induction meetings to discuss various issues which include: i) programs’ expectations of the hosting process; ii) anticipated mutual benefits such as cultural exchange, international relationships and the program’s plan for a donation to educational projects identified by the community; iii) to sensitize them that they are professors of their own cultures; iv) how to address emergent challenges during hosting, and; v) respond to any questions or anxieties that they may have.

After establishing the hosting framework, the director and local coordinator then reviews the individual student profiles and matches them with host families. Program staff then conduct several orientation seminars with the students before and after they arrive in Kenya to discuss the social and academic expectations of the homestay. Thereafter, the students are “dropped” to their individual homes where they spend the week with their host families, while two program staff stay in the general location to monitor their progress through local coordinators and address any concerns. At the end of the week, students return to the KSP’s Nairobi campus where they engage in a series of individual and group discussions to reflect on their homestay with regard to personal and academic growth.

Even though the KSP invests significant time and resources in preparing host families and addressing any concerns prior and during the homestay, the program’s focus and assessment of benefits afterward has historically skewed heavily toward students. For example, while students formally evaluate their homestay experience and even recommend how the homestay can be improved, the same anonymous written evaluation has not traditionally been

administered to host families. In the words of a recent homestay mother, the experience always leaves host families feeling the hosting process is incomplete. Metaphorically, she compared this with that of a calf that is momentarily invited by a farmer (during milking) to induce lactation but grabbed away as soon as the milk starts flowing smoothly. Such an imbalanced approach to program assessment, though unintentional, contributes to the characteristic subjugation of local voices in study abroad and left many families feeling that the hosting experience was incomplete (Nyeri Host Mother 7, Nyeri, June 11, 2021).

Impact and Imposition of Intercultural Exchange

Many Kenyans who have not travelled outside their home regions usually have a “single story” narrative about cultural difference which can promote ethnocentrism and stereotyping of difference domestically and internationally (Adichie, 2009). While deconstructing popular representations of Africa and challenging stereotypes is a central pedagogical goal of African Studies in and out of the classroom, the focus of intercultural exchange is often on the problems of western adaptation to African environments with little or no reflection on how African host communities view the social benefits of these interactions (Keim & Somerville, 2018). In the following section, we interrogate local perceptions of the benefits and impositions of intercultural exchange from the host communities’ standpoint. From demystifying racial difference, to challenging gendered and social hierarchies within communities, host families reflect on the impacts and impositions of hosting American students through a Kenyan world view which may diverge from the pedagogical goals of a U.S. study abroad program.

Despite the many orientation sessions that we conduct with host families, Kenyans often express similar anxieties about hosting U.S. students. Referred ubiquitously to U.S. students as “mzungu/wazungu” in Swahili, this racialized vernacular term has historically associated westerners with whiteness, wealth, and social prestige (Bruner, 2001; Grain et al., 2019; Gross, 2015). As the interview exchange below demonstrates, Kenyan anxieties over hosting an outsider are reflected through local assumptions of whiteness steeped in the colonial legacy:

Interviewer 1: When you started imagining whether a foreigner can fit with the facilities that you have, may be madam you can also jump in and tell us, it seems like there were some worries, or questions?

Kericho Homestay Mother 1: First of all, we were somehow excited, but at the same time we almost feared because these are rural environment and you can imagine hosting a foreigner and especially a 'mzungu.' With us, maybe, we had that fear of a mzungu from US. And you can see what we have. Maybe we do not have enough facilities. For example, we thought that those people who have maybe a big house for example, sanitation, for example, for example us we do not have toilets and bathrooms inside our nini [our house]. We just came to this place a few years ago. So, maybe we have not done so much. But, so we thought that visitor, that student would not accept us the way we are, but we appreciated later on that he was able to accept us the way we are. (Kericho Host Father 1, Kericho Host Mother 1 Kericho, June 11, 2021)

Some of the sentiments expressed by the host mother above reflect the racial attitudes that many rural Kenyans have toward a monolithic whiteness associated with U.S. Students generally. Through hosting U.S. students from diverse socio-economic and cultural background, homestay communities begin to complicate their ideas of U.S. students. In a written survey of host families administered between the induction trip and follow up interviews, multiple participants expressed surprise on our students' ability to adapt to local cultures and shared that they used their own personal experience to dispel a monolithic idea of American fragility and wealth with their neighbors (Survey with host families in Nyeri and Kericho, May 2021).

Even though Kenya gained its political independence from Britain in 1963, western/white lifestyles are still romanticized in sections of Kenyan society despite the brutal legacy of colonialism and racial violence (Shadle, 2015). Consequently, deconstructing the stereotypical imaginary of the U.S. as a "promised land," was a theme the families often reflected on in the conclusion of hosting as explained below:

Kericho Homestay Mother 2: I think it made me understand better about the Americans. You know at first we used to think... about America as a place where there is a lot of money in fact another man was telling me another time... when as you walk along the road, you step on money [laughter] so we used to have that mentality that there is a lot of money in America. We didn't know that it was a lot of hard work in order to get that amount of money... So even those parents used to have such

mentality and also handling a mzungu was so unique... So I think eeh that one brought us a lot of changes, it changed a lot in our expectations we had a lot in our minds but thereafter, we came to learn that eeh Americans are, eeh we are all human beings! Just like us, they are human beings like us and they eat like us, they sleep like us so [laughter]. (Kericho Homestay Mother 2 and Kericho Homestay Father 2, Kericho, June 9, 2021)

The rural homestay, unlike in a classroom setting, allows a more interactive and egalitarian pedagogy where the students and host families learn from each other through doing and sharing experience. Even though students are taught that they should try to adapt to the local customs, comparative discussions and cross-cultural exchange are often initiated by host families to learn more about the student's home environment. In this context, both parents and students become co-constructors of knowledge while appreciating each other's cultural differences and similarities. In Kericho, for example, a host father reported how he was introduced to American food by his host son and in the process the student challenged the gendered division of labor. In the following exchange, the homestay father speaks fondly of being "forced" to enter the kitchen by his son:

Interviewer 2: Did he change the way you lived as a family or the way your kids interacted?

Kericho Host Father 3: ...Thursday was American dish so he told us these are the things that he wanted to be brought because we had said he was the one now to cook the American food and we were going to eat that day...Each one had a role, I was given a role I was slicing potatoes French fries (laughter) and he was giving marks "good dad, almost" everybody was given a role even the Mother she had a role and at the end of it, it was so enjoyable.....It was an experience because he changed most of the things. Two, even time management, in our culture you find most of the fathers normally come late maybe because of other issues but you see we were keeping time, if supper is 7, we have to be there before 7 all of us I think, he changed the whole pattern. Just as you were saying, he changed the whole pattern including even the pattern time, the time when we have to arrive at home, the closeness, he changed a number of

things so it was beneficial. (Kericho Homestay Father and Mother 3, June 7, 2021)

While families like the one above sometimes joke about student challenges to patriarchy, these small acts of cultural exchange can unintentionally subvert established gendered hierarchies. Many parents reported that after hosting American students, male members of the family were more likely to enter the kitchen and engage in what they would see as domestic “women’s work.” However, while some may see this as a positive outcome, it is indicative of the unintended cultural impositions of homestay experiences which need to be more closely monitored and studied by study abroad programs.

Moving Ahead: Global Connections and Local Mobility

Families in both Nyeri and Kericho spoke at length about the important connections they made with their American “sons” and “daughters.” Performing these kinship ties is an important part of the hosting process, with students and parents affectionately switching to local vernacular when referring to baba yangu (my dad) or through adopted Kikuyu and Kipsigis names assigned to students. Extending throughout local networks, families embraced their new international extended families with pride as one homestay mother in Kericho stated, “even the community knows that I have a white boy called Kibet.” (Kericho Homestay Mother 6, Kericho, June 10, 2021).

While kinship is remembered with fondness, some families felt disappointed that many students did not keep up the same level of communication/connection in the months and years after the homestay week was over. With pictures of students often displayed prominently alongside other family members in family homes, host parents spoke about the long-term benefit of these ties in reference to their children and their reputation in the community. As several parents noted, after hosting a “mzungu” the community viewed them as “moving ahead,” suggesting a more nuanced link to local notions of class and prestige associated with connections to whiteness and an American foreigner in ways which can unintentionally reinforce neocolonial ideas at the local level.

The kinship relationships forged during hosting was often most impactful through the relationships between our students and host siblings. During our interviews with host parents, several of them reported that their children “got inspired” by our students to work hard in school in order to join university and travel abroad like them. While it is difficult to authenticate such claims, such inspiration is possible since many families in Kenya are deeply invested in the education of their children, and regard pursuing university education abroad as a culmination of success:

Kericho Homestay Father 2: You know when we first received the first student, that was when Betsy and Brian were in High School. You know this program helped us to break that barrier of just saying let me go to school, I pass exams, I go to University, and start working. Now it also assisted us with these children that they opened their minds, that you can go to a computer, look for scholarship, look for applying schools across the globe, seek ways of financing yourself, means and ways... our girl transformed in reading, in fact she improved her grades in form four unlike when she was in form one, form two, form three. Betsy used to tell me that Baba I will go also to be hosted by Wazungus, yah [laughter]. (Kericho Homestay Father and Mother 2, Kericho, June 9, 2021)

The social relationships developed during hosting are not limited to students and their host families. Instead, they also form between host families. Many families did not initially know each other before the KSP and those who did, reported deeper bonds of friendship through the shared experience of hosting. In both Nyeri and Kericho, the host parents formed welfare groups not only to keep them together after the hosting week, but also to explore other socio-economic support networks afterwards. For instance, we were told by one of the host coordinators in Nyeri that they had organized a prayer meeting to support a host parent who had been admitted in a hospital. In Kericho, they organized a thanksgiving and farewell ceremony for one of them who had been promoted at her place of work and transferred to a neighboring district. During this event, the host parents awarded their departing colleague several gifts further performing their newly found sense of community.

From an economic point of view, parents reported that hosting benefited them in two main ways. For the families that produce much of their needs from their farms, they were able to save some of the hosting stipend to invest locally.

Nyeri families, for example, reported that they created a savings cooperative where they loan each other money for home improvement projects. At the end of every year, they also receive dividends from their annual savings. While the KSP does not encourage the parents to alter their homes for the purposes of hosting, it is clear that investments in household improvements are a local priority. In Nyeri, for example, one homestay mother, proudly reported how she installed an in-house shower, constructed water drainages around the house, and planted a grass lawn in her compound. According to her, the various changes were forms of development and enhanced her social mobility in the eyes of her neighbors. When we asked her about the immediate neighbors' reactions, she said that they expressed positive envy and "got inspired" to start improving their homes:

Interviewer 2: Anyway, having hosted five students, are there key lessons that you would share with us? Lessons that maybe lead to change in your family? Change to the community? What do you think was the impact?

Nyeri Homestay Mother 1: It's good, even to be of that status. So I will never go back there. (laughter) and belittling myself, so I keep the standards. Yeah, and I wish Steve and I could have a vehicle and then go with the Mzungu. And there it is. Then, we used to, do you see my toilet there? Yes. It's where we used to go for bathing. It was easy to take the water in the basin and clean yourself because we are used to that. So in fact, it has raised the standard also.

Interviewer 3: What about the neighbors? When you say that they see you as somebody of higher status. Is it something good? Or does it lead to jealousy, a lot of competition? What do you think? How would you interpret it?

Nyeri Homestay Mother 1: Yeah, I think since I started this small, small developments, in a positive way, you know, Jealousy, I think it is two ways. You could, you could envy me in a very positive way. Yes. And or negative. But for my neighbors, I think it is a positive way. Because it will go round, you find now they trim their fences. And in fact, they almost look uniform. Yeah. So, for me, it is quite a change. (Nyeri, June 11, 2021)

Refracting discussions about mobility through Kenyan development discourse reveals that rural areas are often seen as sites of stagnation and competition. With many Kenyans using the language of “hustling” to reflect everyday efforts to “move ahead,” hosting can be seen as a part of an entrepreneurial “hustle” and a new way to access social mobility in local communities (Mwaura, 2017; Thieme et al., 2021). One might view this simply as Kenyans exploiting the neocolonial benefits of associating with Wazungu in order to socially elevate themselves over their immediate neighbors. However, we argue that we should neither passively embrace parents’ interpretations of social disruption as positive impact to the host community nor overtly dismiss them. Imposing outside social values on these communities to try and regulate community relationships would be equally disruptive. What these class debates tell us though, is that study abroad programs need to investigate and understand the nuanced social changes induced by their presence to operate in a more ethical and pedagogically empathetic way (Hartman et al., 2018).

Towards a Local Version of Study Abroad

Reflecting back on the May 2021 induction trip between Kipsigis and Kikuyu speaking families, a local interpretation of study abroad emerges. By visiting family homes, local development projects and sharing thoughts over meals, families recognized both the diversity and similarities of rural agricultural communities separated by linguistic and political divides. As one parent recalled fondly, when Kikuyu families first arrived at the home of the Kipsigis speaking coordinator, they were:

Welcomed with sweet Kipsigis lyrics, shy smiles and a heavy lunch preceded by Mursik (fermented milk). In song and dance, gifts from Nyeri were presented. Unexpectedly, the host parents had theirs which were received with great joy. Introductions, group activities consumed our time fast such that we could not finish our real ‘BBI’ meeting. (Nyeri Homestay Father 2--Nyeri Parents Survey, Nyeri, May, 2021)

Analyzing this through Kenyan politics of belonging, the meeting of these homestay families was both a performance of ethno-political identity as well as an exchange between study abroad practitioners. Without an intimate understanding of the historic and political context of the gathering, one might see this as simply as an exchange of two rural Kenyan communities with similar socio-economic interests. However, host communities’ reactions and

interpretations of the exchange within a Kenyan historical context reveals that domestic biases and stereotypes can impact the ways host communities interact with both U.S. students and the KSP's diverse African faculty and staff who represent several different ethno-linguistic communities.

Historically, Kenyan politics has often been shaped by regional voting blocs based on ethnic categories. Since independence in 1963, Kenya's four presidents have all come from the two home regions of our host families, which have often been on opposite sides of the political spectrum (Branch, 2011; Lynch, 2011). In Kenya's current political landscape, families interpreted their meeting within the political language of President Uhuru Kenyatta's "Building Bridges Initiative," (BBI) and ongoing efforts to forge new political alliances in the run up to the 2022 elections where Kikuyu and Kipsigis speaking communities are assumed to be political adversaries (Onguny, 2020). Thus, the meeting offered an important chance for Kenyans to interact with those they perceive as politically and culturally different.

Jokes and humor about the meeting of our host parents as the "real BBI" was meant to diffuse any underlying political tension and create a space for open dialogue and shared identities as Kenyans and not simply members of ethnic communities. One homestay father, a Kipsigis speaker from Kericho, was one of several parents to remark how the trip helped demystify ethnic difference and see beyond monolithic political categories both within Kenya and among U.S. students. For instance, even though Kipsigis are one of the seven sub-groups that make up the larger Kalenjin community, many host parents from Nyeri first used the labels Kipsigis and Kalenjin interchangeably and failed to view the complex diversity of a politicized ethnic landscape. However, as the meeting progressed parents from both regions began to appreciate both the idea of local diversity and the similarities between Kipsigis and Kikuyu culture. One homestay couple, for example, were born and raised in Kericho but lived and worked in Nyeri for many years. According to them, while the cultures of the two communities differ in various ways, they also have many similarities. Just as U.S. students often move from emphasizing difference to similarities throughout a semester on the KSP, the trip offered host communities a similar chance to demystify cultural difference:

Interviewer 1: And you know we just wanted to hear from you, people who have lived in Nyeri. When some of the parents whom we have met said, “oh Kikuyus are so good.”

Kericho Homestay Mother 6: Kikuyus are good people. They are very welcoming. In fact, because all the time we were there we could make friends and they could be coming even to bring us food, milk from the reserve and then vegetables... We have interacted so much with Kikuyu and had good time with them. I think people from around they have not gone far. So, born in Kericho, schooled in Kericho, and then is not like us where we went there and stayed some time.

Kericho Homestay Father 6: Another thing, there are slight differences in how we live but we are almost the same. Like we rear cattle, they rear cattle; we plant tea, they plant tea; we plant maize and they plant maize. So, there is a small difference but similarly they are just like us. (Kericho Homestay Father 6, Kericho, June 9, 2021)

Placed in the context of domestic tourism, a rural gathering of Kikuyu and Kipsigis speaking communities was a rare event. When middle class families travel domestically for pleasure, destinations tend to be Nairobi and the Kenyan coast, with few having the opportunity to visit and live in different rural communities (Odiara Kihima, 2015). As these families met, toured the area, and exchanged ideas over a long weekend, local political difference faded away and friendships formed. Reflecting on this trip a month later, many parents noted how these types of exchanges could even help lower tensions and avoid a return of political violence during the 2022 elections. As one homestay father argued:

Yes, this now will bring that tension down... Formerly we knew Kikuyus are bad people, that if you stage war with Kikuyu they are not people who fight with you but they are people who come and kill you secretly...that is what is in our mind. But when we came, we saw that these Kikuyus are good people, they are people who are hardworking... Coming together is an advantage to the community. (Kericho Homestay Father 7, Kericho, June 8, 2021)

When addressing the issue of political violence that had impacted the region in 2007-2008, another Kericho homestay father linked the importance of

intercultural exchanges between Kenyans with the same significance of U.S. student interactions with the broader Kericho community:

I saw it is a very nice step that if you can have the European people, white people coming to stay at our village and are just seeing what we do, seeing what we eat, just becoming a normal child. I see it is going to break kabisa (totally) the tribal mentality. Because even those who have been fighting here will now see themselves to be fools because here these are white people who have...come down to our normal life and here we are poor people, struggling people, fighting over dirt (Kericho Homestay Father 8, June 8, 2021).

In response to the induction trip overall, families from both communities praised the encounter as an important chance to embrace diversity and see themselves as cultural tourists seeking “authenticity” in the same vein as our students (Bruner, 2001; Ntarangwi, 2000). The trip was also an affirmation of host families’ “value” and contribution to the program. However, reflecting on the feeling of “being valued” gave us pause and insight at the same time. At first, the sentiments made us reflect on our historic interactions with host communities and wonder where did we “under-value” their contributions. But throughout the induction trip and our follow up interviews, we realized that these expressions of “value” were an important Kenyan comment about the forgotten voices in how we process study abroad experiences as scholars and educators and fail to provide opportunities for host communities to develop the same intercultural skills we challenge our students to hone.

The Challenge of Reciprocity

Amplifying local voices and developing collaborative, and mutually beneficial relationships with host communities is an important step in addressing the challenge of reciprocity in African based study abroad. However, as scholars suggested nearly two decades ago, analysis of the export industry of higher education in the U.S. points to a continued “urgency of adopting more equitable models of reciprocity” (Coffman & Brennan, 2003, p. 139). While the St. Lawrence Kenya program does not adopt a formal service-learning approach, we have historically strived towards many of the financial, and social ethics of what scholars call “Fair Trade Learning” (Hartman et al., 2012). In reflecting on our long-term engagement with East Africa, St. Lawrence does provide an important case study on long-term institutional investment in people,

relationships, and place. However, what our research uncovered is that our institutional relationships can feel one sided if we fail to involve host communities in the entirety of the pedagogical process. As Fair Trade Learning principles suggest, our 2021 research has helped the KSP reimagine as Hartman (2015) argues the “explicit dual purposes in our work, serving community and serving students simultaneously, and explicitly not privileging students over community” (pg. 225).

Using the analogy of a scaffolded student research project, we have identified some key steps in study abroad pedagogy missing in many relationships with our host communities in Kenya. At the “proposal stage” programs like the KSP often work closely with host communities to identify and evaluate the structures and expectations of their collaboration. During the hosting period or “data collection” phase, the KSP and others also work together to ensure the experience goes smoothly for both students and hosts. However, where many programs like the KSP are lacking are in the “analytical/drafting” phase of the scaffolded assignment. Just like we ask our students to reflect on their experiences in writing and oral communication, programs often fall short in providing the space for host communities to process and reflect on their own experiences.

Beginning in the 2021-2022 year, the KSP has begun to internalize these lessons. With plans to bring Kericho parents for an exchange in Nyeri and invite homestay siblings for a weekend intercultural event at our campus in Nairobi, we are exploring models for sustainably cultivating capstone experiences for our host families. Exchanges like the 2021 induction trip can be seen as costly investments for programs to incur, but providing opportunities for intercultural exchange and professional development for host-communities should be as important as they are for full time study abroad faculty and staff.

While the KSP represents a small portion of the more than 13,000 U.S. students studying abroad annually in sub-Saharan Africa (prior to the pandemic), cultivating institutional reciprocity remains a key step towards decolonizing the study abroad industry in U.S. higher education (Open Doors, 2020). Collaborations with host communities need to take on the same level of intentionality and investment in time, resources, and feedback as the scaffolded student project. By involving our long-term homestay families in more intentional evaluation and cultural analysis of their experience separately from

students, our Kenyan partners were able to more fully envision their role as co-teachers and collaborators. In this way, the induction trip and our follow up research has become part of the KSP's commitment to professional development for both our own faculty/staff as well as our Kenyan partners.

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Author Biography

Michael Wairungu is Assistant Professor of African Studies and Assistant Director for Student Life and Academic Instruction at the St. Lawrence Kenya Semester Program based in Nairobi. He is an Anthropologist by training and specializes in urban youth cultures, study abroad and Swahili pedagogy.

Matt Carotenuto is Professor of History and Hanson Associate Dean of International and Intercultural Studies at St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY. His research and published work have focused on identity politics and social history in Kenya.

Njau Kibochi has worked for the St. Lawrence Kenya program in Nairobi since 1996 and is currently the Senior Driver and Head Mechanic. As a Research Associate and contributor to this article, he drew on his nearly thirty years of experience working with students in field courses and homestay settings throughout East Africa.